

Darlene Cah
Before and After

Tanya stuffs a handful of Cheetos in her mouth and chews. A puff of orange powder escapes her lips. Before she swallows, she sifts through a bowl of peanuts on the coffee table and pops two like she's taking a painkiller.

"I eat because I'm bored," she says, "I'm bored because I'm depressed. I'm depressed because I'm fat. I'm fat because I eat."

Freakin' genius, she thinks. Smarter than that pompous shrink her husband sent her to. She makes it sound like a joke, trying to keep this from blowing up into another fight. But he doesn't get it, her beanpole husband. Seth, with his flimsy shorts, an iPod strapped to his arm ready for another run. He just looks at her where she is stretched out on the couch. No real expression, but she notices a tiny flutter of his left cheek. Her ass spills over squashing the cushions. Her breasts, like sagging birthday balloons bounce on her belly as she laughs. She started the binge a year ago. He went raw. She went junk. She figures they're heading for divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable culinary differences.

"Why don't you come with me? I'll make it a walk day," he says.

When did he get so damn condescending? Tanya tosses another peanut into the air and catches it lizard-like with her tongue. She flips through TV channels until she comes to a documentary showing some plastic surgeon to the stars tightening the skin of some anorexic socialite.

"I'm good," she says.

Hell, she's getting exercise. How many reps is she doing from bowl to mouth? This is damn near aerobic.

Seth shakes his head.

"You're killing yourself, Tanya."

"And you could get hit by a truck running in the dark."

"It's not the same."

Tanya shrugs.

"Dead is dead, either way."

She watches Seth brace against the wall and stretch his quads. All muscle. Looks like his leg could snap right off.

She's read the workout journal he keeps on the nightstand next to his BPA-free plastic bottle of distilled water. He jogs in the morning before going to the hospital. Does a half hour on the treadmill at the gym at lunch. Runs before bed every night. Play golf, she told him once. Isn't that a job requirement of up-and-coming-hot-shot dermatologists? Just like having a Barbie Doll wife who doesn't load up her plate at the hospital holiday buffet.

The peanut bowl is nearly empty, crumbs among blood-brown papery skins. The surgeon on TV is touching the socialite's face, preparing for the

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first cut.

Tanya looks at another face. Hers. Her wedding picture hangs on the wall next to the flat screen. An eleven-by-seventeen window into the past. She's all cheekbones and clavicles. No cleavage to speak of. She starved herself to get into that dress. And when she succumbed to the fries or pizza, she puked till her throat burned raw. No wonder she wasn't smiling in the photo. At the reception, she heard her mother yell over the music to her cousin. She's nervous, her mother had said, what with Seth going to medical school, and the burden on Tanya to support them on an administrative assistant's salary. Fuck that! She was hungry. She wanted to knock the happy couple off the top of that cake and dive in face first.

Tanya frees her hair from her ponytail and sits up, allowing Seth a glimpse into the neckline of her satin robe. She hopes he caught the scent of lavender she sprayed on her neck after her shower or noticed the swing of her hair, still dark and silky, not a strand of gray. She mutes the TV where the surgeon is separating skin from tissue.

"Why don't you skip your run, and watch this with me," she says.

He cuts cancer off of people. He should love this show.

"I'll open a bottle of wine; get some cheese and crackers, like we used to do."

She fingers the collar of her robe and slides her hand down to the belt. For a second she feels him lean toward her. She blinks. Then that look flutters across Seth's face again. Like he's out to dinner and someone orders rare filet mignon.

"I have a race next week. None of that's on my diet."

He double-knots his running shoes, plugs his ears with music, and takes off into the night.

Tanya wads the Cheetos bag and tosses it into the empty peanut bowl then turns the volume up on the TV. The surgeon is now on a talk show. He is all teeth, mouth enunciating every word, but his eyes are fixed. He holds up a "before" picture of the socialite. The camera fades to a live shot of her sitting next to him. The music swells and the audience applauds and whistles. The woman's smile is stretched across her shiny face. Tanya smiles back, a wide orange grin, cheeks plumped and puffed, eyes practically shut as she opens a bag of chocolate Kisses.