

Jacqueline Holland

### Sunday Roast

Margaret slid the tin of biscuits into the oven next to the roast, wiped her floured hands on her apron, and glanced at the announcement in the *Kansas City Star* again before dismissing it as radical. She felt a tremendous amount of relief that dinner was already in the oven. Chores seemed to stack up like a precarious pile of dishes these days giving her less and less time to herself. As a single chime escaped the grandfather clock, Margaret brought the kitchen timer, shaped like a rooster, into the den where she relaxed onto the plaid sofa. She placed the timer on the coffee table, setting it for 25 minutes to remind her to rescue the biscuits. She had learned how to shave time off even the simplest tasks without sacrificing a perfectly polished table or a sparkling sink so that the seconds saved could be hers. Sunday afternoon was her oasis.

Under the *Life* magazines fanned out on the coffee table lay *The Feminine Mystique*. Urgency demanded that she be a fast reader, though she would have preferred to savor each line. More to the point, if Don caught her reading the book, he would have her head. But she knew that to catch her, he'd actually have to pay attention and there was little chance of that. She leafed through the pages until she found where she had left off – Chapter Two, “The Happy Housewife Hero.” She read a few pages, nodding unconsciously as if in conversation. *That’s exactly it*, she thought. *I’m trying to be everyone’s hero.*

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Don cruised into the den with a beer in hand, flicked on the television, and plunked down in his worn recliner that was losing its plushness at the same rate Don was losing his hair.

“Hey, baby,” he said. “Mind if I watch the game?” It wasn’t as much a question as a reminder. He’d been talking about “the game” every day for a week. Margaret had no doubt that in Don’s estimation it would be the greatest game ever. They were calling it the Super Bowl and wasn’t that a clever name, Don wanted to know.

Margaret half-grinned and shifted on the couch concealing the book in her lap. Tuba strangulations bellowed from the TV set as a marching band strutted across the football field and announcers hyped the game. Twenty minutes for the biscuits.

“It’s a sunny, 72 degree day here in Los Angeles,” the sportscaster said. “A beautiful day for football and the first championship game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Green Bay Packers. Welcome to the 1967 Super Bowl.” The camera panned to Vince Lombardi on the Packers’ sidelines, all business.

The pomp and circumstance seemed grander to Margaret than a presidential inauguration.

“Sure is a lot of fanfare, huh?” she said.

“Sure is,” Don said. “Sure is.”

It wasn’t hard for Margaret to tear herself away, and she settled back into reading about her struggle as a heroic housewife. One has to assume a little risk, Margaret thought, but she flattened the book in her lap just in case. The first chapter had so absorbed Margaret in the library the day before that while the children giggled through story hour, she nearly wept. Barbara, her neighbor and most outspoken friend, had

suggested Margaret check it out. Barbara had gone to a women's college on the East Coast with the author and what a little fireball she was, Barbara said. The book had been published four years before, in 1963, and Margaret was disappointed that she was only finding it now. The boredom, a heavy malaise that had arrested her recently, was *something* – something hard to name – and she wasn't the only woman to feel it. She thought all women found satisfaction in child rearing, cooking, and cleaning. She thought the emptiness was her cross to bear.

Don was such a good provider. She didn't like to complain. He spent every day on the road driving the same monotonous route between Kansas City and Wichita, delivering fertilizer to Agway in the summer and rock salt in the winter. Yet she ached when he would hurry off to work – a day of open road, music on the radio, and his own thoughts free to wander all afternoon. Margaret imagined he had little awareness of how much effort she put into running their family. She could barely earn half his salary, so she knew it made sense for her to stay home. She had wanted to stay home, to be a good wife and mother, like her own mother.

“There's my man,” Don said. “Look at him. Dawson's gonna bring Kansas City a championship.”

Just before kickoff, the teams came charging onto the field in time to watch 4,000 pigeons, released from the field, alight into the air, swirling and flapping, confused as to why they were there.

Margaret continued reading about how recent magazines had created a new perception of women as brainless. “*This new image seems to require increasing mindlessness, increasing emphasis on things: two cars, two TV's, two fireplaces.*”

Margaret's gaze drifted from the television, her eyes scanning the room and taking in the assorted things that made up her life; She felt at once comforted and bothered by them. Her children were no exception. She hoped Lizzie and Albert were still playing on the swing set in the backyard, but she hadn't the motivation to check.

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"Goddamn that McGee," Don said. The Packers quarterback had just thrown a perfect spiral to McGee who ran it in for the first touchdown. "Dawson's gonna get us back in the game. Don't worry, baby. It's only the first quarter."

Margaret was not worried.

She continued to read on the sofa, her page-turning hardly registering in the den that rumbled like a stadium. The kitchen timer buzzed, jarring Margaret who nearly ripped the page she was reading while trying to turn off the rooster gadget. The timer often jammed and Don hated when it wouldn't stop buzzing. He had bought it for her for no special reason at one of the roadside shops along his route, and she used it when cooking everything to show her appreciation. It was a gift she bet he regretted.

"What you got cooking out there, baby?"

"Oh, a nice roast and some biscuits for dinner," she said. "A warm meal for a cold day."

"You better hold them warm awhile cause this game's gonna take all afternoon."

He flashed her a smile.

“I will, honey. Don’t worry,” she said. She rose to go to the kitchen, a safe place of solace where everything was just so and easy to manage, a place where everything had its proper shelf or cabinet, and a place that was starting to feel claustrophobic to Margaret.

“Get me a beer while you’re out there, will you baby?”

“Sure,” Margaret said, moving more slowly.

She removed the biscuits from the oven just as they were beginning to golden and set them on a rack to cool. A strong draft sent the curtains fluttering, and she glanced outside to see branches bending violently in the wind. Margaret was surprised to see Lizzie and Albert still swinging away despite the weather. She had forgotten they were out there. She thought about calling them to come inside, then decided to leave them be. Pulling a beer from the fridge, Margaret elected to read a page or two before bringing the beer to Don.

*“Love and children and home are good, but they are not the whole world, even if most of the words now written for women pretend they are.”*

“Jesus Christ! Did our defense even show up today?” Don yelled. The Chiefs had tied it up in the second quarter, only for their gain to be eclipsed by another Packer touchdown minutes later. “Margaret, are you coming?”

Margaret rushed in with his beer. Don grabbed the bottle from her with more force than he had intended, and she stumbled a little before regaining her balance. Margaret disliked leaving Don alone when he was this angry, though she was eager to flee at the same time. She slipped back into the kitchen and set her book on the table. Margaret set about concentrating on the words despite the noise of the game and Don’s

cursing at the TV assaulting her from the living room. She flipped back to the first chapter to find the line that had captured her attention in the library and reread it several times. *“Is this all?”* Friedan wrote. The question resonated with Margaret once she was able to absorb it. *“Is this all?”* Margaret read again. She repeated the line aloud as more a statement than a question: “Is this all?”

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At halftime, Don’s team was down 14-10, which could have been worse had Mercer’s foot not secured a field goal. Don wandered into the kitchen to stretch and was surprised to see Margaret reading instead of cooking. She imagined he wouldn’t care, as long as dinner would be ready when the game ended.

“Everything OK?” he asked. He grabbed another beer from the fridge to help him through the third quarter.

“Yes, fine,” Margaret said. She had the book open, flat on the table.

The fluttering curtains drew Don’s gaze outside where he saw the children, red-faced, pumping higher and higher on the swings.

“Why are the kids still outside?” Don asked. “It’s a goddamn windstorm out there.” Don put his beer can on the counter and threw open the door. “Lizzie! Albert! Get in here!”

The children scampered in, flying past Don who hovered large in the doorway, and fought for their mother’s lap. Margaret laid her book aside to shoo the children into their own kitchen chairs while she poured them some apple juice. Their cheeks were

flushed, their bodies cold. Albert's frozen little hands clutched the juice glass. Margaret put Lizzie's glass on the table and the little girl took big, quick gulps.

"Can we have animal crackers?" Lizzie asked, breathless.

"Animal crackers!" Albert said.

Margaret sat down again, her eyes wandering around the kitchen. "No, it's too close to dinner," she said. "You'll spoil your appetite."

"But I'm hungry," Lizzie said.

"Hungry," Albert mimicked.

"Your mother said no," Don said.

Lizzie swallowed the last of the juice. "Did you see us swinging?" she asked. "We went so high we almost went over the top. The swing set came out of the ground!"

Margaret had asked Don to cement the swing set when they first got it, so it wouldn't tip. She didn't dare look at him. Don grabbed his beer and headed back to the den.

"Mummy, we want to have a snack," Lizzie tried.

"I said no."

"Lizzie pushed me real high," Albert said. "Did you see me, Mummy?"

Children have so many questions that if you answered one, Margaret thought, the flow would go on like a river flooding its banks. She returned to her book, letting the questions bounce off of her like she was a tight-lipped suspect in an interrogation.

Margaret had never been questioned by the police, of course, but she was certain that if she ever were to be, she could meet any battery of questions with silence.

Albert was swinging his legs under the table, waiting for his mother to answer, when Lizzie startled him. “Quit kicking me,” she said. When she leaned over to shove him, his juice spilled into a puddle that trickled off the table. They were both instantly quiet and looked to their mother.

“That’s it,” Margaret said. “Outside.”

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Margaret walked through the den on her way upstairs, but Don convinced her to rejoin him, told her she could read while he watched the game. The noise at least allowed Margaret to sigh heavily undetected in front of Don, which gave her some satisfaction.

“What are you reading?”

Margaret held the book less protectively.

“Oh, just a book about domestic topics,” she said. “I’m learning a lot.” It wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Here we go,” he said as the third quarter got under way. “We’re only four points down and we’re gonna make ‘em up right now with a big play. Big play.” How Don could be so invested in the outcome of a game, men running with a ball, Margaret could not understand.

“This is it, baby. Dawson’s going long. I can feel it. Throw it man, throw it!” Margaret jumped when Don shouted while edging off his seat, ready to pounce on the TV. She guessed the ball was thrown because Don was now on his feet yelling “Interception!? Interception? What the fuck just happened?” Margaret wasn’t about to



explain it to him, but she guessed the Packers had intercepted the ball, plain and simple. No mystery there. His boy Dawson wasn't playing so well.

She went to check on the roast.

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Margaret picked up the newspaper and flipped to the home and garden section to reread the announcement she had spotted that morning. A group called NOW was looking for women to join a grassroots movement that had started in Washington, D.C. Her stomach felt funny and Margaret realized that simply reading the ad in her own kitchen made her nervous. The organizer, the very woman whose book she was reading, seemed to be casting the net wide if she were looking for such women in Kansas City, Margaret thought. Of all the women in her neighborhood, she could only picture Barbara joining such a group. Margaret admired their energy, but she worried that *feminist* would be a tricky label to have in her neck of the woods.

Margaret made her own little wager. If the Packers scored one more touchdown, she would attend the local meeting and see what this NOW group was all about.

In the living room, at the end of the third, it was 28-10. Packers.

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Don's mood had softened, Margaret noticed, if only subtly. He was less crazed in his anger, and she wondered if he might be beginning to accept his team's fate. But such reprieves were often short-lived.

"Great, now the fucking TV is gonna give me trouble? On the biggest afternoon of football?"

Margaret looked up to see static blotting out the field. She couldn't say she was disappointed, but the incessant screech of the static was more annoying than the crowd and commentators. The wind wreaked havoc on the flimsy roof antenna. While he fiddled roughly with the rabbit ears, Margaret tried for a smooth exit to the kitchen.

She could hear the juices in the pan bubbling in the oven but didn't bother to see if the roast was done. The roast—everything—felt insignificant, Margaret thought. Instead, she returned to reading, letting the roast burn until smoke filled the kitchen and it began seeping into the den. She let it cook until she imagined the roast like a burnt, black log left in the wake of a forest fire.

"What the hell's all the smoke?" Don yelled from the den. The thought of his house burning down couldn't be worrying him too much, because he didn't even bother to get up, Margaret thought.

When the smoke got too thick, she propped the door open, despite the cold Kansas air that curled in, and picked up reading the end of Chapter Two. "*A baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman's full capacity.*"

Margaret remained unfazed by the frigid air and heavy smoke as she sat at the kitchen table plowing through one page after the next. The temperature in the kitchen was nearing that of outside. Had she cared, Margaret would have noticed that her breath was visible indoors. Despite the air, the smoke detector sounded and sent Don stomping into the kitchen. He had just installed the newfangled device and Margaret could tell it was going to be another thing to irritate Don whenever it served its purpose.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked.

“I’ve burned the roast,” Margaret said without looking up. “But everything’s fine.”

“Everything’s fine? Everything doesn’t look fine! For Christ’s sake you’re reading while the kitchen is on fire. You didn’t even shut off the goddamn oven!” He opened the oven door to free the roast and after fiddling with the too-small oven mitts, he threw them down and grabbed the roast with his bare hands. The roast now had a rich charcoal patina, a smoldering hot crust, and before Don could heave it onto the counter, he let go and it tumbled across the kitchen floor. It came to rest under the Formica table, at Margaret’s feet.

“The kitchen isn’t on fire, Don. It’s just a little smoke.”

“Where are the kids?” he asked.

“Outside again,” Margaret said. “They’re fine.”

Don paced around fanning the air like someone guiding a plane up to the gate. When Margaret made no effort to calm him, Don’s face reddened and he maneuvered the roast with his feet like a soccer ball, kicking it out the kitchen door where it rolled down the back stairs into the yard. He watched the wind take it another couple of feet. Inside,

the smoke began to thin and he closed the kitchen door, looking at Margaret, who continued to read undeterred, as if she were a stranger.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Don said. He headed back to the den with another beer, shaking his head.

Outside, Lizzie and Albert stopped swinging to study the runaway roast. Lizzie’s Mary Jane’s hit the grass first, and she regarded the charred meat with a reticent foot.

“Eat it?” Albert asked.

“No, stupid,” Lizzie said.

The children kicked it back and forth, the roast gathering dry grass as it rolled through the backyard until it resembled a dense tumbleweed. So intrigued were they with their amusing new ball, that Lizzie and Albert kicked it down the street and over the railroad tracks. When they tired, the children found themselves wandering through an unfamiliar neighborhood, the wind shrieking through dead trees. Lizzie hadn’t the faintest idea how to get them home.

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The fourth quarter provided little hope for the Chiefs. A fifth and final touchdown by the Packers enraged Don who watched his team collapse on what had promised to be the greatest day of football. The TV reception was still struggling, but Don had lost the motivation to try and fix it. There was nothing left to watch. Final score: 35-10. Packers.