

The Kirby

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[A housewife buys a new vacuum and, to her surprise, it does a bit more than just cleaning.]

The Kirby

The new vacuum arrived on a cloudy Tuesday afternoon. It certainly brightened Penny's day as she watched the delivery man unbox the silver, sleek looking thing on her living room floor. She plugged it in immediately and heard the machine purr to life; the superb suction the Kirby possessed sent her into a tizzy. Penny liked things clean.

The Kirby's predecessor had died shortly before a long-planned dinner party—this was a key factor in the former vacuum's relocation to the rubbish bin versus the repair shop. It would be the last time she had to drag the rugs into the backyard to beat the dust from them with a wicker racket. She had carefully picked the new vacuum from a catalog because of its name brand and supposed 'artificial intelligence'. The write up said it practically hunted out the dirt for you. What a marvelous invention! Of course, she knew her husband would balk at the cost of it...but she deserved something nice every once in a while. Besides, her husband was easy to mollify with a finger of gin, or two of whiskey.

With her Kirby in hand, the new week breezed by in a peaceful bliss. She was so pleased with the cleaning capabilities of the vacuum, that she found herself suctioning the carpets twice a day. Surely she tracked in dirt from running errands between these cleanings? And her husband, ever the Neanderthal, didn't even bother to take off his shoes when he returned home from the office in the evening—often bringing in wet autumn leaves, or smears of mud. If she mentioned these slights to him, it was like she had committed a cardinal sin. Did she not understand how stressful his job was? The pressure he was under from his overbearing boss? No, she did not understand...or care for that matter. Lately their marriage was marred with unnecessary arguments and the occasional bout of violence when Jim came home late, angry, and drunk. But she pushed these awful thoughts from her mind as the quiet of normal business hours at home absorbed her time.

Early on, she decided the Kirby was too attractive to lock away in the cleaning closet. Instead, she carved out a nook in the kitchen by moving a drying rack and potted snake plant to another location. With its solid steel base, thin articulating handle, and patterned dust bag, the vacuum was handsome against the parquet flooring. One of her neighborhood friends had commented on how nice it looked when she was over for afternoon tea. Penny had beamed with pride as her friend admired it with a tinge of jealousy in her voice. She had even memorized the specifications from the manual, and could spout them on demand even though she didn't fully understand all the technical wording.

It was good, and healthy, for her to have an escape from the emotionally frigid evenings when her husband was home and she mostly kept her words to herself. Jim would complain about the world of corporate insurance, wolf down dinner without even noticing what he consumed, and then have a malty, amber colored slosh for dessert. She beared it, as women often do, and then unfurled her frustration on the house come morning in a whirlwind of cleaning products. She scrubbed the skin off the bathtub; dried plates so furiously that the gold rims transferred to the drying cloths; attacked Jim's stained button downs like a lion sucking the last drop of blood off of its paw after a kill. And now, she had the vacuum to complete her rigid cleaning routine.

It was indeed a smart machine. One feature not mentioned in the catalog was its ability to carry on working without her. Penny found she could push the vacuum in one direction and then

simply let go of the handle. The Kirby would continue to move in that direction with no further effort on her part. It carried on till the wall, then came straight back to her like a boomerang. She put the record player on, and danced while the vinyl spun in endless circles, and the Kirby made the rugs look refreshed. This sense of order brought much happiness into the home for Penny—at least, in the short term.

The following month she bought the accessory pack that complemented her vacuum. While she had the sought-after ability to suck things out from every nook of the house now, the cost had been an awful indulgence. She had used most of the cash in the checking account. Though, in all fairness, Jim’s paycheck would replenish it in a couple days after the deposit went through; she had made sure of that before conducting her purchase. And the Kirby certainly needed its companion pieces to be whole.

But...Jim wouldn’t see it that way. Before he even opened the screen that evening, she trembled slightly at the determined sound of his shoes on the front porch; she knew that stride well enough to know what was about to walk through the door. In the kitchen, she tossed the salad again—making it dizzy with uniformity—as Jim entered the foyer and slammed the door behind him. She listened carefully as he put his briefcase down. She poured his favorite ice-cold sweet tea into tall glasses as he unbuttoned and removed his gray suit coat. Penny stomached her grimace well enough to show her teeth in a semblance of a smile as he strode to the dining table, and to her surprise, said nothing as he sat down.

“Nice day at work, honey?” she said through her forced smile whilst placing the glass on a coaster in front of him.

“What’s for dinner?” he grunted and took a slug of the tea. A bit dribbled down from the corner of his mouth.

“Well, we still had meatloaf leftover from last night, so I reheated that and made a lovely salad.”

He looked up at her; though his left eyelid seemed to slump a bit back over the blue eye underneath.

“Leftovers? Are you kidding me?”

“Well, I...”

“I slave all day at that high-rise hell and come home to leftovers? What did you do all day? Oh wait, I know. Spent my money is what you did.”

As Jim stood up, he shoved the chair back, causing it to topple over into the bowl of cat food.

“God, damn it Penny,” he said as he eyed the spilled kibble and then his wife. “So what did you buy this time? A dress? Shoes?”

Penny knelt and brushed some of the cat food into her hand.

“No, no Jim. Just things to clean with. That’s all I swear!”

Jim looked around, guffawed at the Kirby in the corner, then ran his hand across the spice rack, causing the jars to jump to their deaths. Turmeric and paprika and pepper tumbled to the floor in a jambalaya of spilled color. Penny’s eyes welled with tears.

“You didn’t have to do that, Jim!” she yelled—fearful but fed up as well.

Jim lurched at her with a meaty palm, but she slid backwards out of reach. He took a step toward her, but the slippery leather sole of his loafer landed on one of the spice jars, and he slipped. His head hit the flooring with a solid thud that silenced the room. Jim muttered a muted

curse word as he rubbed at his sore spots. Penny stood up on her shaky legs and retreated to the safety of the sink—at least it was on the other side of the kitchen.

What happened next, both horrified, and intrigued her, for the Kirby turned itself on; its bright dirt-finding light bulb illuminated the parquet. It was not plugged in; the long brown cord wrapped neatly around its side. Its handle flexed at the base, and the thing moved forward. Jim turned towards the sound and his eyes grew large as marbles, as he looked from the vacuum to his wife and back again.

“What the hell is going...” Jim’s words cut short as the vacuum approached him. Meticulously, and before Penny could grasp the gravity of its next actions, it sucked the length of Jim’s striped tie into itself and purred even louder.

Jim’s hands flew out, trying to push the Kirby away, but it didn’t budge. His face reddened as he gasped for air, his legs flailing wildly on the ground. The air in the kitchen filled with the scent of dried spices as he writhed—like the mixing of a fragrant stew. Penny felt the urge to run, but her body would not move. Fear parched her throat, and she coughed uncontrollably in the cloud that filled the room. Jim pummeled the vacuum’s metal casing with a fist, but it inched closer—if that was even possible. His gasping softened. His movements eased and then ceased altogether. For another minute, the Kirby held its ground with his tie firmly wrapped around its roller brush. The thought occurred to Penny that perhaps it had jammed or broken, but she dare not move yet. And as particles settled, the air cleared a bit.

Penny drew a sharp inhale, when swiftly the vacuum reversed itself a few feet—letting Jim’s ripped and crumpled tie slide out from its mouth like an unwanted treat. It sat there on the floor for a few seconds, then flashed its light bulb, lowered itself, and started vacuuming up the seasoning mess on the ground.

She looked at Jim; he was definitely dead. Her chest still felt tight with anxiety, but something else had rooted there as well. Relief? It was hard to put a finger on it...but she felt lighter.

“Kirby?” she squeaked out hesitantly, not sure of what would happen but needing to do or say something.

The vacuum turned itself off and faced her with its light bulb glowing.

“Thank you for cleaning up. You’re doing a swell job.”

Kirby flashed its bulb at her again, and the purring resumed. A guilty pang of delight rippled through Penny and her heartbeat slowed. She could admit it now—she was glad Jim was dead. Whilst keeping her eye on the vacuum, just in case, she turned the sink on and rinsed the turmeric from her hands as best she could. The skin around her fingernails glowed in an electric yellow stain. She dried her hands on her blue apron and took a deep breath. Dare she say it...she felt love for the vacuum; it had protected her; saved her from a beating. A warmth spread inside her. Could she say that the thing was her friend?

Just as quick as it had started, Kirby finished clearing up the chaos, then rotated and hummed down the hallway. Penny stepped over her husband’s limp arm and followed the humming as it turned into the den and then halted by a wing-back chair. It flashed its light and moved back and forth a few times...maybe motioning towards something? She wasn’t sure. It did it again, but this time bumped into the chair, nudging it a couple inches. Ah. She took the hint and backed the chair into the wall. The slight mismatch of the wooden floorboards revealed what the vacuum was trying to show her: the door to the crawl space. Yes, yes, this will do, she thought.

Jim was not a petite man, but between the dual efforts of Kirby pulling backwards with Jim's collar buried in its rotating brush, and Penny driving forward his thick legs like a wheelbarrow, they could drag the body to the opening in the floor. The vacuum hushed itself and rolled backwards—seemingly to observe Penny. The air felt icy, but sweat ran down her neck and into her bosom. She knelt beside her husband's body, and honestly, at first, she felt compelled to say a prayer. How silly! Instead, she gathered a shoulder in one hand and a hip in the other and with one great effort pushed Jim into the hole. He dropped a few feet, landing prone in a cloud of dirt.

She leaned back against the full bookshelf, feeling proud at having been able to move that fat body, but now came the problem of the body itself. It would smell, and soon. She clicked down the hallway in her slingbacks, with Kirby purring right behind her, and examined the contents of her cleaning closet. Borax, bleach, ammonia...no, no, no. Her fingers rifled through the shelves. Murphy's oil soap, lemon oil wood polish, Brasso, baking soda. And then, yes, there was the answer. She used it mainly for cleaning the cast-iron pans, or unclogging drains. It had miraculous dissolving powers; perfect for the job at hand.

Triumphantly, she carried the tin of flakes to the den and sprinkled all the lye onto the backside of Jim in the crawl space. The hatch door she moved back into place, and Kirby vacuumed the entire area so it looked undisturbed after the wingback resumed its normal place. It was done.

The meat loaf was cold, and the table was still coated with a fine layer of pepper and paprika, when she sat down to eat. With her knife and fork, she cut the loaf into pieces and savored a bite. It was delicious.

Kirby had gone to sleep in his corner after she had laid a nice jazz record into the player and gently patted his dust bag. Such a busy evening for a vacuum that normally clocks out at five. She took another bite, then drank down Jim's glass of iced tea. Penny smiled at Kirby. What a good vacuum he was.