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Fiction

Mr. Wess and the Stainless Steel Cookware Party

20 pages

Tynce Daugherty
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Short Story
Approx. 5,500 words

Mr. Wess and the Stainless Steel Cookware Party

"Know what yall ladies can do with one of these here things when you get'un with it?" the salesman asked, passing a white baking dish beneath their popped eyes. He drew it back, flipping the lid of the garbage can open, like a shocked mouth, with his rapid toe. "Throw it out!" he said. "Cause you can't get it clean." Then he let it drop two feet from his hand, plopping the lid shut and brushing his hands with flat finesse.

Miss Dilmer coughed into a curled hand and refolded her arms beneath her collapsed bosom, turning as she heard shuffling in the doorway behind her.

Mr. Wess leaned in the doorway, wallowing a wad of tobacco from side to side in his ruddy cheeks, as his eyes riveted on the salesman. Jangling change in the pockets of his bib overalls, he scanned the semicircle where Tynce's new wife craned her frail neck toward the display of stainless steel cookware on the white stove.

Her lank black hair, whacked even from ear to ear, emphasized the wanness of her face. She swallowed and sat back

in the splat back chair stationed against the neutral wainscoting. Miss Dassy, on her right, perpetually swung an elastic-stockinged leg to the rhythm of the porch swing's squeak, wafting on the dusk through the hall.

The fragrance of fried ham lingered from Miss Dilmer's early supper - just in case - and blended with the honeysuckle outside the open window.

"Know what else?" the salesman picked up, flashing Miss Dilmer's black iron skillet with a flourish. "If you got a old man you want to get shed of, this here's the ticket. These things'll kill you dead! Look a-here!" he demonstrated as he turned to the stove, wasting two matches before the gas whooshed beneath the seasoned pan - Miss Dilmer, knowing her own stove, had risen, adjusted the knob and sat again, screwing her mouth to a rick-rack circle.

Mr. Wess scrubbed his feet on the plank floor and lay into the other side of the doorway, his pale blue eyes penetrating the back of the salesman, whose apron was tied in a dainty bow.

"Awrighty..., now I fried up a plain lil ole piece of sidemeat, just like you ladies pro'bly done ever morning since you been married. Right? Right!" he said, turning toward them and sporting it semicircular with a dash. Then he dumped the contents into the gaping garbage can and, with a deft swipe, scoured the bottom with Miss Dilmer's bleached dishrag, flapping it at them to exhibit the nasty stain.

A wave of "Oh, my's!" washed along the semicircle, over Mr. Wess's grunt.

"Pure ole irony rust," said the salesman. "That's what you're getting when you cook in one of these things. Know what you can do with it?"

They all looked at the garbage can before he flipped the lever and released it, steam escaping around the clapped lid.

"Yessiree!" he said, brushing his hands again, leaning his prissy backside into the yellow gingham curtain concealing the lower cupboard. "That's what you don't have to put up with no more, not since we come out with our new, 1965, scientific, stainless steel cookware."

He turned to the stove, cluttered with dazzling stainless steel pots, clamped with shimmering lids. One bobbed and he spun it, sealing it against the steam. The vapors of stewing apples shuddered like a hushed child.

"All your vitamins goes right up in the steam," he admonished.

On Tynce's wife's left, Miss Alma nodded agreement, her brown spit curls, like inverted question marks, creeping on her transparent temples. Her ears gleamed like porcelain cuphandles.

"Now lessee," the salesman said. "Rice oughta be about done."

He peeked over the top of the stove, on confidential tiptoes, and removed a lid on the rear. Turning it in the untampered glare of the bare bulb above, he exhibited its brilliance, expertly, without glancing back.

"Yep," he said, proudly. "Now all you do is to take a reg'lar plate...a plain ole plate," he said, stalling as he scooted to the screened pie safe, lid in hand, grabbed a blue Currier & Ives plate, and rushed back to the pot daring to steam. He dumped the rice in a cake, balancing it on one hand for them to admire through a wreath of steam.

Coarse "ahs!" emitted from the crescent of ladies.

"See anything on the bottom of the pot?" he asked at the pinnacle of the "ahs," extending the pot with the other hand for them to inspect.

"Not a dab," said Miss Dassie, looking at Miss Dilmer for confirmation.

She nodded absolutely, but retained her stern skepticism with her brown squirrel eyes.

"I bet you'd find yourself scouring it out before you knowed it," erupted Mr. Wess, pulling back and leaning through the doorway with a tanned papery hand, spotted as with water, pressed against each side.

"Not a chance," said the salesman, taking a ready rag and wiping it twice in a circle. It gleamed like company silver.

The ladies turned to Mr. Wess and glared at him.

"Well, it just looks to me like if we been a-making out with the old kind for this long, we can make out a while longer," Mr. Wess said, drawling the statement out with his eyes after he had finished speaking.

"Glad you brung that up," said the salesman. "Gover'munt statistics shows that people that's bought this stuff lives twice as long as them that don't, sir."

"Well, I been eating Ma's cornbread out've a 'orn pan going on sixty years and ain't had nary ailment 'cepting a bunion on my big toe."

A wry, smug smile crept outward from his horse lips, dimpling his creased cheeks.

The salesman laughed, and the ladies chuckled alternately as they roved disregarding stares his way and resumed their collective focus on the spectacle in the austere kitchen.

"Now lessee how the meatloaf's coming along," the salesman said, turning back to the stove and peeking beneath the clamped lid, following a complacent counterclockwise spin. The steam rose to his swarthy face and shot through his slick, black hair. "I swannee! That do smell ready! Don't it, ladies?"

They leaned forward and inhaled.

"Yep," he said, busying himself with shuffling and shaking, apron strings fluttering on his tight posterior.

"We'll just leave this'un in the pot to keep it good and hot," he said, grasping the handle and passing along the

semicircle, ignoring Mr. Wess in the door.

"See how pretty and smooth it is?" he said.

"Ain't brown," said Miss Dilmer; as it reached her, she grasped his wrist.

"Oh!" he said. "But you wouldn't want it to be. Ain't good for you."

"What about biscuits?" asked Mr. Wess.

"Oh!" he said. "I'm glad you brung that up. All you got to do is to put'em right down in a little butter in this special nine-by-nine, stainless steel skillet and pop the lid on, take it off in five or six minutes, and turn'em over, and let'em brown on the other side. And you got you the best danged biscuits you ever set..."

"Fried biscuits!" Mr. Wess stated flatly.

The ladies glanced him again with their heavy disregard.

He turned and moped off down the hall toward the squeak of the porch swing.

The night breeze, in synchrony with the lazy porch swing, blew droplets of his tobacco juice to the concrete steps as he spat off the porch into the dusty hydrangeas.

"Your corn come up yet, Mr. Wess?" asked Hat, who sat beside the screen door creaking to.

"Done and been a-pegging! Green as a gourd," said Mr. Wess, looking out.

"You don't say!" said Hat. "Mine's up, but it's mighty yeller. Reckon I'm gonna go on and fertilize it come Monday morning."

"If yall boys'ud plant it fur apart, yall wouldn't need to go all out on fertilizer."

"Yall ain't took nary turn in the kitchen, yet. Is you?" he asked, surveying the silhouettes of double heads in the porch swing.

Tynce's hair resembled feathers ruffled on the crown; the backdrop of violet sky held it rising and falling as his feet scraped across the floor.

"Nope," he said. "Smells mighty good, though."

"They set the table, yet?" asked Hoke, reared back in the swing beside Tynce.

"Ain't a-fixing to, the best've my estimation!" said Mr. Wess, leaning on the porch post and peering out, as though he were looking for something suspicious in the corner sinking into the mellow dusk.

"How come?" asked Hat, lost in the dark of the porch wall where he rocked back in a straight chair.

"I tell you how come: that err big-shot cookpot peddler's showing off. Ain't no hand to cook, best I can tell," said Mr. Wess. "Come out here from Valdosta to get him some pocket money, I expect."

"Well, weren't we s'posed to eat supper here?" asked Hoke, braking the swing with his foot.

"That's what Lawanda told me," said Tynce in a squeaky voice.

Mr. Wess laughed - more of a mocking chuckle that caught on the breeze and carried down the deep-rutted lane and through the woods. "Boy, your old lady's ready to clean out your pockets in there! He's got her ready to buy up the whole set."

"Naw," said Tynce. "She ain't the kind. Buys her shoes a size biggern her feet in case they was to grow some more. She's the savingest lil ole woman you ever seen."

"Yeh," said Hat. "I heared that before. Miss Dassie used to be the same-very way when we first got married. Now, come Saturday, she's a-hankering to get to the gro' chrey store."

"They shore change," Mr. Wess said, musing into the gathering darkness.

"You wouldn't be a-knowing," said Hoke.

"You ain't got to own no autoMOBILE to know what kind of gas milage one gets," said Mr. Wess, still denying them his face.

The stillness encased the solemn breathing on the porch as the breeze brought the aroma of food through the hall. Now and then a lid clanked, thwarted only by the hoot of an owl and the ladies' scattering laughter. The busy buzz of mosquitoes brought on a volley of clapping, like random BB shots.

"I ain't innerstid!" Mr. Wess said, spitting again as the hall light flicked and the shadow of his swollen belly spread over the clean swept yard.

He looked speculatively back at the empty hall.

With a slow hand climbing up the swing chain, Hoke cleared his throat and spoke.

"Tamp's been dead bettern four years, and they ain't nobody'd blame you and Miss Dilmer if yall was to figger on a-courting."

"I wouldn't have her on a Christmas tree!" Mr. Wess stated.

"Now, look a-here," Hat said, clanking his chair to the floor. "You could do a whole lot worser. They ain't a cleaner lil ole woman in Duran County."

"I ain't said they was nothing 'ticular wrong with her," Mr. Wess drawled. "I just ain't got no use for nary woman. I got Ma to wait on me."

"MA ain't gonna live forever," stated Hat. "Then what you gonna do?"

"I'll bach, if it comes to it," mumbled Mr. Wess decidedly.

"How's Miss Thelma getting on, nowadays?" asked Tynce, his flaxen face jutted.

"Still bothered by that ole rheumatiz in her right arm," said Mr. Wess. "I set in and bought her a bunch of britches stretchers last week to help out on her 'orning."

"Well, they ain't no house big enough for no two women," said Hoke.

"That's the Lord's truth!" Tynce said, leaving the swing to peer through the screen door.

Mr. Wess watched him, his drooped face long and profound. "Got you worried up, huh? Boy, you best just go on and get your money roll out and get over with it. That lil ole wife of yourn's about bought everlast one of them new-fangled cookpots."

"Naw," Tynce said. "She ain't the wasteful kind."

"Well, Miss Alma shore is," said Hoke, rising from the flailing porch swing to look through the door; his pocketed fists looked like tumors on his lean thighs.

"Hell, I'm starved plum to death," said Hat, rising also. "We eat supper ever night at six sharp. Why, I'm gener'ly done asleep by this time. What time you got, Mr. Wess?"

"Lemme see," said Mr. Wess, wedging between them in the block of hall light as he removed his pocket watch and peered at it, held it away, brought it near, and said, "Half past seven."

"Half past seven!" repeated Hat.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of yall, but I'm about ready to eat," said Hoke.

"Getting scared, boys?" teased Mr. Wess.

"Hongrey," said Hat. "Pure-D hongrey's what we are."

"Well, come on, boys. I'll get yall in. But don't expect nothing but some raked-out pots."

Mr. Wess entered through the screen door, decorated with a tuft of cotton to discourage houseflies, and the others shuffled behind him up the airy hall.

"Now, ladies," said the salesman. "We're about done. Weren't that easy as falling off a log backards? See, yall could done be a-setting around on the front porch by now. Cooks itself. You could put you on a pot roast middle of the day and let it go till supper and it'd cook itself. In fact, the more you lift the lid the worser it'll turn out."

"Jim," stammered Miss Dassie. "I got a question for you."

"Ask away," the salesman said.

"What if you was to not put no water in a pot of fresh acre peas, say, but that little dab you put in them froze english peas. Wouldn't they scorch to the bottom?"

"Nope," said Jim. "The steam takes care of it. Remember, you ain't a-boiling no more. Yall a-steaming. And what does that do for yall?"

"Keeps the vitamins in," they chimed in unison, giggling like school girls.

"Now you got the notion," Jim laughed. "Lessee how it eats. What yall say?"

"Yeh," said Miss Alma, rising as she tugged her belt from beneath her large breasts to her waist. It slid back again.

"I'll try it out," said Miss Dilmer, rising energetically as she patted the neat coils of braids on top of her

head.

"I'm starved to death," said Miss Dassie. "Come on, Sugar," she said, turning to tug Tynce's bride from the chair.

"Got'em eating out've his hand," mumbled Mr. Wess. "They ain't give yall a thought," he added, looking back at the antsy line along the hall wall.

In the hall crowded with doily-topped tables and lace-trimmed chair cushions, Mr. Wess's frayed straw hat, impaled on an existing nail, appeared odd.

He stepped forward and hooked his thumbs on the galluses of his overalls.

"Ain't yall forgotten about somebody?" he asked.

The ladies turned from the table spread with oilcloth, where they had been cawing like crows stealing pecans.

"Yall come on," said Miss Dassie, with her mouth cooling a hot apple wedge. "They's a-plenty."

"Yeh, get on in here and get yall a plate out've the safe over there," said Miss Alma, dipping with regularity from the shiney pots.

Miss Dilmer marched to the pie safe and began dealing plates from a stack, like cards from a deck. She thrust the final one at Mr. Wess's tight paunch, grimacing at his smirking face.

Tynce's wife swiftly ladeled food to her plate, breaking in line to scoop portions from each pot. Then she turned to Tynce and offered it to him, as though in atonement. He beamed.

"Better get your money roll out, boy. Or pin it down with a safepin," hissed Mr. Wess, trailing behind.

After all plates were filled and the bottoms of the pots were exposed, Wess, who had scraped the bottoms, turned and looked slowly about the kitchen, waiting, shifting from broganed foot to foot.

"Whereabouts we s'posed to eat at?" he asked.

They all stopped eating where they sat or stood along the wall.

"See if you can't clean up this table, Mister, so we can set down to supper like white folks," he commanded the salesman.

"I was just a-fixing to," Jim responded, turning from the stove he scrubbed.

"But you ain't et," said Miss Dilmer, with a fork of meatloaf hovering near her mouth.

"Oh!" Jim said. "I ain't hungry. Yall go on." And he began stacking pots and pans in the dishpan.

"You, a lil ole bitty thing, needs to eat ever chance you get," said Miss Dassie.

"Yeh," said Miss Alma, with her mouth full. "You don't want to lose your strength. Now do you?"

"No'um," he said.

"Weren't nothing left," said Miss Dilmer, eyeing Mr.

Wess accusingly, whose heaped plate barely made it to the table top as he pulled up a chair.

The ladies at his back chatted about who took what to Big Meeting on first Sunday - no, none of those present were responsible for the flopped egg custard - and general improvements to be made on Jim's recipes, as the men joined Mr. Wess, elbowing up to the table and digging in.

Mr. Wess watched the efficient clean-up from beneath hooded eyes as he ate rapidly but critically, separating carrots from peas. After he finished, he took his starched, white handkerchief and wiped it across his mouth, then his hands, still pressed in hot folds, and leaned forward to replace it in his hip pocket.

"I bet you make a pretty good living a-peddling. Don't you?"

"You talking to me?" asked Jim, turning his professional smile on Mr. Wess.

Mr. Wess nodded, bearing down on him with his eyes.

"Not all that good," he said, drying his hands and turning to face the front row audience of men. "We aim to please our customers first."

"You mean to tell us you're giving them cookpots away?" Mr. Wess laughed, and the other three men joined him, eyeing the perplexed salesman.

"I didn't think so," Mr. Wess answered for him. "Well, what you get for'em, all told?"

"Well, you'd be surprized..."

"All told?" repeated Mr. Wess, with unction.

"Well, the same set at Sears and Roebuck - if you could even get'em - would cost you..." Jim said, holding the counter backwards and looking up as if the total were scribbled on the ceiling.

"We ain't innerstid in no Sears and Roebuck prices! What's yourn?" said Mr. Wess.

Tynce nodded and paused from his eating.

"Well, you got the twelve piece set here," he said, nodding toward the tidy stack of gleaming pots.

"I ain't accounting but six cookpots," said Mr. Wess. "But then I ain't never been all that handy at rithmetic, neither. Yall count six, boys?"

They mumbled six.

"Well, I meant with the lids," explained Jim, lifting one to the light.

"So you got to pay extra for the lids," said Mr. Wess, winking at Tynce, who paled in the incandescence of the light over the table.

"Not exactly," said Jim. "Lessee," he said, lifting the manual in front of his face.

Mr. Wess nudged Hat.

"Of course, you got a double boiler throwed in by putting one pot on top of another'un," said Jim, still reading behind

the manual.

"So that's just one pot," said Mr. Wess, grinning.
"Leaves five to total up."

"That ain't how we sell'em, Mister," said Jim, lowering the manual; then seeing the face, hid again behind it.

The front row remained rankling and waiting as the background rose and fell in the bug-circling kitchen.

"What yall reckon they worth, boys?" asked Mr. Wess.

"All told?" asked Hat.

"Yeh?" said Mr. Wess.

"A good set like that oughta run you about, say, twenty-five to thirty dollars, in that neighborhood. Wouldn't yall say?" asked Hoke.

The manual dropped from the pale, glistening face and rose again, like a shield.

"I'd say in that neighborhood," said Tynce, brightening.

"You come up on it yet, Mister Cookpot Salesman?" asked Mr. Wess.

"Fellows," said Jim, lowering the manual. "Yall ain't talking about no dimestore aluminum, here. This is genuine stainless steel. Last you a hundred years!"

"Yall planning on living that long, boys?" asked Mr. Wess.

They laughed - all except Tynce who looked back at his bride.

"Listen here," said Jim, untying his apron. "You got a life-time GARantee on this stuff...uh...cookware set. If

a handle breaks off, you get another'un free for the rest of your natural-born days. Then them grandyounguns of yours gets'em for free."

"I didn't think it'd tear up," chided Wess.

"Well," Jim said, tossing the apron to the linoleumed counter. "I meant if it was to."

"But it could?" asked Mr. Wess.

"I doubt it!" he said admantly, banging a pot on the counter.

A hush swarmed on the room, but the ladies resumed their conversations as the men began talking again.

"Free handles, huh?" said Hoke.

"Yeh," said Jim, advancing toward them with a mirroring pot bottom. "Show me sommers you can beat that!"

"What about if somebody was to break in and steal one?" asked Mr. Wess.

"Well, now that ain't hardly likely. Now is it?" asked Jim.

"Naw," said Hat. "They ain't nobody around this part of Georgia that sorry."

"I forgot to mention something, I think," said Jim. "Did I tell yall, yall get a free, bonus stainless steel vegetable grinder in the bargain?"

"No," said Hat.

"Well, you do," said Jim, dragging a cardboard box with bold, black print from beneath the table and, one by

one, placing each gleaming cupshaped section in a circle. He stationed and snapped the rotary grinder to the table top. "Extra blades for carrots and onions and celery and cucumbers and apples. You name it, and it'll grind it. Make the best dang coldslaw you ever set your teeth into.

"Aunt Dilmer, you got a little cabbage I could get hold of?" he called over their heads.

"Look in the bottom of the frigidaire, Son," she answered and went on talking to Alma.

He turned to the refrigerator and came back with a head of cabbage, skillfully cleaving it into quarters. At once, he placed a bowl beneath the spout and turned the handle on the wedge-shaped grinder, stuffed with cabbage. Green shreds spilled into the bowl. He dumped it smartly onto the table and slid the bowl away.

"Now, all you got to do is snap off the old cabbage grinder and snap on the tater slicer and you got a mess of tater chips for supper, quick as a wink."

And quick as a wink, one of Miss Dilmer's new red potatoes shot through in uniform slices to the yellow-checked oil cloth.

"And onions," he said. "Watch this. Yall could do it your ownselfs, fellows."

The onion mushed through and heaped on top of the potato slices.

"Yall ever tried to cut up a carrot?" he asked.

"Huh uh," Hoke said, his slack black eyes immobile, fixed.

"I ain't," said Hat, torn by trying to read Mr. Wess and his immutable attraction to the glittering display.

"Well, look a-here," said Jim, already back from Miss Dilmer's refrigerator. And the orange shreds mounded the heap, like shred clay on a hilltop.

"I swannee to goodness!" said Tynce.

"Listen here," said Jim. "Did I tell yall about the hostess gift?"

"Huh uh," Tynce said; his bubblegum pink lips worked hungrily as he, kneading his hands, scooted forward.

Jim clapped both hands over the base of the grinder, solemn as an undertaker, delivering his collective message.

"I hate to tell yall," he drawled. "But this'un just goes to the ones that throws a party for me. Miss Dilmer over yonder'll get one. But I'll let yall see it."

With aplomb, he dragged another box from beneath the table, as they leaned over to see.

From the box, he removed one, two, three, four, five, six stainless steel knives, the last whacking through the mound of vegetables and parting them in a valley.

"We can't buy them offn you?" Hat asked, reaching to touch the blade of the cleaver.

"Nope," Jim said. "Fraid not, fellows. Them's just for the ones that throws me a party."

Carefully, he slid them back between sleeves of styrofoam and placed them in the box, slipping it beneath the table.

Hat looked crestfallen.

"But!" Jim said, holding a finger in front of his zealous cretinous face. "With the twelve stainless steel cookware set, you get another bonus prize. That's the good part! Guess what it is?"

They leaned famished faces toward him.

"Yall ever seen how coffee stains messes up a'luminum coffeepot? Yall ever tasted it when it come out bitter as JUInine?"

They nodded.

"Well, look at this," he said, magically producing a sleek stainless steel percolator. It grew irridescent in the light above the center of the table.

Tynce, Hat, and Hoke touched it gingerly and exclaimed.

"Now, wouldn't you fellows say a hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-five cents ain't all that much to be a-asking for a set like this, plus two bonus gifts: a handy-dandy vegetable grinder and a coffee perkerlater that ain't never gonna brew up no bitter coffee."

"Don't sound like too much to me," said Hat, with a self-deprecatory chuckle.

"I ain't got nothing on me but a check," Hoke said wistfully.

"We could shore us it, just setting up housekeeping with what Mommer divided with us. Got mending on nearly

bout ever cookpot in the kitchen," said Tynce. "Reckon yall could let me have it on time till my roastinears gets made?"

"Shore," said Jim, slapping him on the shoulder.

Mr. Wess, who had remained reared back on the heels of the chair, chuckled softly.

They looked at him.

"You oughta go on and get your Ma a set while he's here," said Hoke.

"Naw," said Mr. Wess. "Yall go on, boys. I'm afeared I might disfurnish yall. Besides, you can't never tell, I mought up and decide to throw a party or something."

"Yeh," said Hat. "If we done that we could get us a set of them knives, too."

"Me and Alma's been a-planning on having a fishfry, anyhow," said Hoke.

"We'll come," said Tynce.

"Let me get that down," said Jim, writing rapidly on a blank pad. "Next week I got a opening, I think."

"I'll take it," said Hat, throwing his hand out.

"Now, let me get yalles orders down before I get mixed up again," said Jim, switching pads and scribbling numbers.

"You ain't got none I can take home with me tonight?" asked Hat, as disappointed as a child, empty-handed, at Christmas.

"Nope," said Jim, writing. "But they'll come in the mail long about three or four weeks. Give'em time to get

from the factory out yonder in Chicargo. Yall know how fur that is from Georgia," he said, looking up with a compatible wink.

"Yeh," said Tynce. "We'll just have to wait."

"Let me just get yalles taxes and shipping charges figgered up. Give me a minute," said Jim.

Tynce reached forward and fondled the percolator, drawing his hand back as Mr. Wess wiped the smudges away with his handkerchief.

"Yeh; you boys is natural smart!" Mr. Wess said. "Ain't everday yall get the chance to get shed of two-hundred and fifty dollars you grubbed out in the fields. Next time the Watkin man comes by, I'm a-sending him to yalles house to unload his roach poison on. Gonna tell him to throw in some 'niller flavoring for a bonus. I'll tell him if he don't see ary sign of yall at the clothesline to go on."