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Back and Forth

Adam Brown

Her husband was sitting in front of the television, his feet resting heavily on the coffee table her mother had left to them the year before. It bore marks and stains from decades of hosting guests, invited and uninvited, forgotten and remembered. With an annoyed shake of her head, the woman shifted her husband's feet with her arm as she removed the soaked coasters and bowl of congealed pasta from the worn surface.

Feminism's done wonders for you, he commented without diverting his eyes from the screen, although he was neither watching nor listening.

The woman was silent as she threw the plastic coaster in the bin and put the bowl in the sink. Her husband shifted his weight slightly on the couch and took a silver coin from his pocket, holding it up in the flickering light and staring at its indentations.

The Arnolds want us to go around for dinner tonight, the woman said in a tone that hovered ambivalently between a statement and a question.

The man leaned forward on the couch to stretch the ache in his back, which appeared with precise reliability every time he sat still for more than two hours, ever since the accident at the site. Scratching the serrated rim of the coin briefly with his cracked fingernail, he placed it on the table, sliding it to and fro across the surface.

— nothing fancy, she said. Just a few people coming over, she said. His wife paused and looked at the back in the adjoining room. I guess she means it'll just be two of the neighbours from down the road.

It might be the new arrivals from James Street, the man said. The ones with the kid.

The Arnolds wouldn't invite Muslims on a Friday night, his wife replied — and besides, she said a few, and that means two.

The man didn't answer. He stopped sliding the coin and twisted his back to the left.

That means two, the woman repeated in a disapproving tone, more to herself than anyone else.
The man began sliding the coin back and forth across the table’s surface again, listening to the groaning sound it made and the disgruntled repetitions of the crows on the fence outside.

A few can mean more than two, he said off-handedly as close-up images of a disaster scene from some far-off country faded from the screen. If she meant two, she would have said a couple of people were coming over. A couple means two.

Your couple of kids turned into four.

And your few hours at the shops means a whole day.

Who wants to go shopping these days? Wearing a towel is the only way to get a fair price!

No store would let you in wearing a towel!

The man straightened his back and let himself fall back against the musty sofa while his wife went back to dusting her favourite frame, skipping over the others. The woman had bought the picture of the two geese during their first holiday together. She’d walked through the market in the warm sunshine that day. Her husband shifted his weight painfully again. He picked up the remote, looked at it, then put it down.

His wife skimmed the duster across a panning shot of three corpses lying twisted on the earth of one Middle Eastern country or another. If one wants to refer to more than two people, they say several. Several means three or more.

So can a few. A couple means two, her husband grunted as she picked up the newspapers, some receipts, and the local TAFE guide, placing them on the bench. The woman recorded the cost of last week’s car service and read the comments regarding the several repairs outstanding, which would likely be attended to the following year. Putting down her pen and lighting a cigarette, she commented with feigned surprise that she was unaware of her husband’s Hebrew origins.

The man did not reply, deciding not to mention he had already obtained two weeks pay in advance to pay for her mandibulotomy. The woman chose not to elaborate on how many problems his decision to scale down their health insurance had caused.

A couple could mean more than two, she mused.

The man turned and looked at her for the first time since she’d returned home. No idea at all. He turned away again, holding the silver coin up to his eye line again. Just like the rest.

Well, how much is a few?

A couple.