

Static

Can Ruin the Finest Radio Program
When It Comes Between a Boy and Girl—
Can It Destroy Love, Too?

By
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Jimmy came into the room. "Ye gods, fishballs again..." A quick anger swelled in Judy.

IN FISHBALLS," Judy was saying, "you get a lot of vitamins for a small cost. I read it on a billboard."

The jubilant June moon threw a spot of blue near the rim of the lily pool, and a frog tested his E-string methodically. And Judy saw herself in the future and a ruffled apron, frying fishballs for Jimmy. For a minute she forgot she was one half of the ways and means committee trying to figure how two can live more cheaply than one. Because there would be only Jimmy's salary after Judy gave the dean a headache by handing in her resignation. Not that she considered herself indispensable as his secretary, but she knew how the dean hated a break in his office machinery.

"And so—" she tried to get back to the business at hand, "—so, we'll have 'em often."

"Listen, kid," said Jimmy, "your hair is red with the moonlight through it."

Judy pushed a lock of the red-by-moonlight hair behind an ear. "You haven't heard a thing I've been saying."

"Fishballs," he proved. "And billboards. We'll have 'em often."

He appeared to like the idea, and kissed her nose.

"Now our assets," he said, getting practical. "There's Uncle Mac's collection of ash trays. Ours whenever we say since the doctor made the old boy quit tobacco. Think what we'll save, kid, not needing to buy ash trays."

Judy thought, and kissed Jimmy's chin.

"How many ash trays, Jimmy?"

"Seventeen," he figured.

"Seventeen ash trays," Judy decided, "ought to give us a start."

"What we ought to do—" Jimmy leaned forward, elbows on his knees—"what we ought to do is wait a year. I've got nothing to my name but three suits of clothes and a laundry bill."

"And a diploma tied with orange ribbon," Judy reminded.

"Plus a job starting Monday as an extra in the Calhoun Chemical lab at the minimum a month." His hands pushed restlessly through his hair.

Judy leaned back into the shadows. The thought of waiting a year for Jimmy sent the world spinning.

"We'll make a bigger splash, waiting a year—" She forced her voice lightly past the tightening in her throat—"If a splash is what you want."

"Listen—" Jimmy pushed away a quiver of moonbeam that moved between them—"Listen, you little dumbbell—"

THE china-faced clock above the kitchen stove pointed to seven minutes past six. And Judy, having buttoned herself into a practical apron, set the wire basket of fishballs into the bubbling deep fat and thought about the bills which had come in the morning mail. The twelfth set of bills, and they had been married only eleven months and three weeks.

It had been a bad day at 7 Greentree Terrace in spite of early robins and roses and sunshine outside. For one thing it had taken impatient hours to clean up after last night's party. The kind of party she hated.

"Oh, darling, we hadn't a thing in the world to do so we've gotten up a crowd. And we know you and Jimmy must be bored—" Bored!

Judy, wearing old gloves, had been setting out a border of petunias. Jimmy, on the stepladder, was putting a coat of green paint on the window shutters. "Claudia brought some Parmesan. Maybe we can scrape up some crackers—"

And before the five small rooms were able to draw a deep free breath again Judy had scraped together practically everything on the emergency shelf, and Jimmy had rounded up the equivalent of half the butcher's bill, for neither of them were expert at bridge. "Darling, we'll play for just the tiniest stakes. Makes it more exciting—"

Judy tested a fishball and stirred the carrots into the cream sauce. Jimmy's salary simply wasn't elastic enough. Groceries were always more than they had allowed for; and, having planned

their expenditures in July they forgot to allow for the winter's fuel. Then, too, nobody could have foreseen such contingencies as the waterpipe's bursting under the pantry, or the country club dues. It seemed that everyone on the Terrace belonged to the country club.

Then there were the endless payments on the little house which the agent had persuaded them to buy at so much a month and "in twelve years, my good people, you will have something to show for your money." There were the endless payments on the furniture which the furniture company's interior decoration expert had declared to be exactly the right thing for 7 Greentree Terrace.

The Queen Anne chairs and the early American tables were lovely—and expensive. The handwoven rugs in their own front bedroom and the Jacobean beds were simple in design—and elaborately priced. The furniture company's chairs and tables and beds, really. Nothing in the house belonged to them except the kitchen stove which, since Jimmy had worked for Calhoun Chemical five days before his marriage, he had been in line to receive as a wedding gift. That only and the stuff wedged into the small back bedroom were their own. The gold-on-oak dresser, the chest with ornate drawer knobs and a great double bed, which pieces Judy had lately inherited from great-aunt Agatha.

JUDY arranged the fishballs on a platter with sprigs of parsley, and Jimmy, pulling off his coat, came into the room.

"Ye gods, fishballs and mashed potatoes again flavored with brine."

Judy refrained from reminding him that a year ago he was enthusiastic about the idea. "We've got to cut down after last night's caviar."

"Did we have to have caviar?"

A quick anger swelled in Judy. She counted fifteen. "You can't feed a country club crowd ice cream and chocolate cake."

"I'd like to know why you can't."

Judy poured the top milk into a pitcher. Her husband was being dumb and sarcastic because something new and big was gnawing at his sense of responsibility. Judy searched around in her mind. Of course. The mortgage.

She stole a glance at Jimmy. His eyes were tired. Around his mouth were queer new lines that seemed to reach over the table and fasten themselves in her throat.

She refilled his cup and moved toward him a plate of thin slices of white fruit cake. "Dessert, Jimmy?"

Jimmy swallowed the coffee and, ignoring the cake, pushed back his chair.

"The interest on the mortgage is due the eighteenth."



It was the mortgage! And he was putting it to her as if she were the person who had invented mortgages. Judy put down her cup with a quick clink of sound. Maybe he did feel that it was all her fault. He had suggested waiting a year.

"The roof over the bedroom is leaking again," she said. "And the statement from the furniture company had a note in red ink at the bottom."

"Well," said Jimmy. "Know any more local items?"

"They won't do anything about the roof until a payment has been made on the new water line under the pantry."

"And by that time the plaster in the bedroom will be falling off in hunks, I suppose?"

"I suppose," said Judy.

Jimmy jerked to his feet and flung his napkin on a chair. "I'm sick of this. Get your hat and let's go to a show."

In the living room, while Judy pulled on her hat at the Queen Anne mirror, Jimmy went through the bills. "Listen," he held a thumb flattened against the furniture company's statement, "what I'd like to know is why did you have to buy all this fancy junk? Why couldn't you have picked sensible Grand Rapids stuff?"

Judy turned to face him. Anger tore at her. How could she ever have imagined that he loved her!

"Why didn't I buy Grand Rapids things?" She was surprised at the high sharpness of her voice. She snatched up a miniature ivory elephant marching on the edge of a disk that would hold, with management, the ash of one cigarette. "These museum pieces of your Uncle Mac's," she pointed out. "These are the reason we had to get this kind of furniture. You can't set hand-carved ivory on a table that you put together yourself and finish off with two coats of red enamel. We had to get tables that wouldn't embarrass the seventeen ash trays. And sofas and rugs and lamps to go with the tables—"

"And bills to go with the rest of our natural lives," Jimmy finished bitterly.

THEY walked down to the suburb's one picture house and got in at the middle of a sugary drama. A Mickey Mouse followed, then a newsreel and some advertising slides. The butcher, the baker and the furniture company urged the citizenry to accept the merchandise which they were practically giving away. Finkelheimer's new, bigger and better Coffee House also had a slide. Judy remembered the old Finkelheimer's on College Avenue. Only six tables in what had been a front parlor. They had had dinner there in the old days—often. Jimmy had loved her then.

She pressed a slender shoulder toward him in the dimness of the theatre, wondering if he remembered, wishing he would say something the way he used to. Just any one of those little things. It would take only a word from him to bring back the old happiness between them. She put out a groping hand to his, and suddenly his shoulder pressed toward her. Finkelheimer's was promising old-fashioned food with modern service. Baked kraut dinner, thirty-five cents. Judy's heart swelled with hope.

"That Finkelheimer," said Jimmy, "is biting off a big hunk. But he'll make money. Some fellows get all the breaks."

"Others," Judy jerked back her hand and the screen blurred, "get married."

The next morning after Judy's husband finished his oatmeal and eggs and the morning paper he banged out the front door without even the pretense of kissing his wife. Judy didn't weep or throw things. She decided that since Jimmy felt that way about it so did she. Going upstairs, she folded her clothes into her traveling bag and scribbled a note, propping it against Jimmy's hair brush. It was very dramatic, she thought bitterly. The girl in the picture last night had left a note.

Jimmy—

You can tell the country club people I've gone for a visit to relatives. There are three jars of caviar in the kitchen cupboard and the power bill should be paid by the tenth. You had better remember to wear your rubbers when it rains. Judy.

She called a taxi and went across town to her old room at Mrs. Perry's.

A STIFF-LEGGED lamb in a framed motto looked down at Judy when she opened her eyes the next morning. She used to call the lamb Pete and talk to him about Jimmy.

And now she sat up suddenly. "Listen, Pete, men are ten times weaker than women. Vacillating creatures. Moved by the scent of lilacs. Or codfish. Aunt Agy used to say 'When poverty comes in the door love flies out the window.' The same thing holds with bills. Maybe Aunt Agy was pretty smart when she died an old maid, Petie..."

Judy determined to go out to the college today to see what luck there might be in getting back her old job. No danger of running into any of the country club crowd out there. And as for her old acquaintances lifting their eyebrows—let them!

At the end of two wee's her shoes were worn almost as thin as her nerves. The dean's new secretary was very sorry but the dean couldn't use Judy. Neither, it began to appear, could any one else.

And then on a dark morning when the rain beat with a threat of November in its lashing against her window Judy borrowed Mrs. Perry's morning paper and came upon Finkelheimer's ad.

Wanted: A Dishwasher. References. Apply at once.

Judy got out the flowery letter which the dean had given her last year, and told Pete it didn't make a whole lot of difference whether the dishes you washed were blue china or glazed crockery.

MR. FINKELHEIMER was a roly-poly man with a mole on his chin.

"You have experiences?"

"Three times a day," said Judy, "though I've never washed them in bulk."

Mr. Finkelheimer bowed himself to the dean's letter. Apparently he liked the choice of words. "So," he peeked at Judy over his spectacles, "you would like to wash my dishes, yes?"

"Not especially," said Judy. "But I have to eat."

"Hired," said Mr. Finkelheimer. "Always I like them honest. Then they do not carry home with them from the stockroom half a ham." He rubbed his pink hands together and turned her over to Eva.

Eva, who chewed gum methodically on one jaw, gave Judy a smock with Finkelheimer chain-stitched on the collar and a word picture of the future.

"You got to get pretty fast, see, between twelve and half past one. Lunch crowd, see? After two things slack and you can eat. This is Wednesday. Wednesday we get a choice of knuckles and kraut or mutton stew." Eva shifted her gum in the direction of a door at the end of the kitchen. "Stockroom," she explained. "Everything in there from canned lobster to soap chips, see?"

Judy said she saw and thank-you. She escaped under the pretext of looking up the soap chips.

The stockroom was cold after the lights and blended smells of the kitchen. A single electric bulb swung over a cluttered desk set among barrels and packing boxes and crates. Judy thought suddenly of spiders, started, and the door swung away from her hand with a challenging click.

Nice, she thought, if I'm locked in here. She tried the knob impatiently and it turned with a useless twist. What would Mr. Finkelheimer think if he found her locked up with his hams?

A VOICE from among the packing boxes startled her. "Guess somebody forgot to turn the night latch on the other side."

Judy whirled. "Jimmy!"

"Well, see who's here!" He tried to be casual as he came around the boxes. "Is this a coincidence? Or just one of those things—"

"It's carelessness," said Judy, "if some one forgot to turn the night latch." She, too, tried to be casual—and had to sit down on a convenient packing box.

"I'm stockroom boy," Jimmy offered in a conversational tone. "I unpack the herring and order the correct lengths of sausages."

"I," said Judy, "play nursemaid to the crockery."

Jimmy talked about the popularity of Finkelheimer's sausages. Surprising at this time of year. Judy said Mr. Finkelheimer had a nice place now. Surprising how many people ate here.

The stockroom was chill, but a deeper cold began to creep through Judy. Here were two strangers making light talk to fill in a gap of time. Judy doubled her icy fingers in the wide pockets of her smock. All the time she had been at Mrs. Perry's she had hoped blindly that he would come. That this wasn't the end. Ridiculous. From now on she would be guided by intelligent reasoning.

Wind cried mournfully around the window. Rain swept in a blast against the glass. A wretched day. People would be sick. Colds and sore throats.

"Jimmy"—impulse brought out the words before intelligent reasoning could throttle them—"did you wear your rubbers?"

"No," said Jimmy. He took a quick step forward and his strong arms were around her. "Kid... Kid... You little dumbbell..."

Briny tears crept away from Judy's lashes and soaked into Jimmy's collar. He was calling her a dumbbell. He was saying he had to have her to remind him about rubbers and things. He loved her. A big-winged fly buzzed in the window, the herring asserted their presence in the room; and Judy knew this was a very beautiful moment.

Jimmy hated tears on the screen. She tried to steady her voice. "Why didn't you tell me—that night—that Calhoun Chemical had let the extras off?"

His lips twisted into a grin. "Couldn't get around to it."

"I was a fool, Jimmy."

"I was the fool."

"You weren't!"

"I was!" He reached into a pocket and pulled out a red cotton handkerchief to blot up her tears. "I suppose I ought to tell you, kid—"

"The furniture company had to take the stuff?"

He nodded. "And the club membership expired. And Uncle Mac went back to black cigars so he came for his ash trays. There's not much left at 7 Greentree but the mortgage."

"There's the kitchen stove," said Judy. "And the silver pie servers we got for wedding gifts and Aunt Agy's golden oak things."

"Poor kid," said Jimmy. He kissed Judy's nose.

"Poor Aunt Agy," said Judy and kissed Jimmy's chin.