

## **The Idea of A Big Blue Diamond** **by Lis Jakobsen**

Martin wanted to talk about the meteorite that landed on some guy in Ukraine. Ellie didn't want to hear about it. It was nearly eight o'clock when she hauled herself through the front door, dragging a crammed briefcase. If she had wanted to talk, it would've been about what a huge donkey pie hole her boss was. Her husband never wanted to hear about it.

Instead, he was poised to use the fate of the unknown bus driver, the fireball lottery winner from somewhere near Kiev, to fuel another meditation on the imminent end of the world.

"Even you can't ignore or smartass your way through this warning sign." He rapped the table with his knuckles as if nailing a summons to the door. "Not this time."

Two red gel capsules lolled on the floor by a plaid slipper. Here we go. Don't say a thing. She dropped her briefcase at the kitchen threshold and kicked off her punishing shoes. Maybe it was the relief that visited her shoulders and feet, with its surge of transient lightness. Don't say a word. Tonight of all nights. Focus, focus, focus, Ellie. Maybe it was the dryness at the back of her throat that needed slaking words to stop her from losing her nerve.

Or maybe she blurted it out because she was just a congenital smartass. "How 'bout that. If it isn't Ukraine's turn to be the epicentre of calamity tonight."

His head snapped up, sending a cloud of cigarette smoke roiling toward her.

Sit down and for God's sake, shut up. But there was too much skidding momentum now. "Should we alert Chicken Little? About her awesome vindication?"

He mashed the cigarette in the ashtray.

"Cluckety-cluck, if she wasn't right about this darned end of the world thing." She raised her bent arms, fisted her hands and tucked them in her armpits. "And starting in Kiev of all places." She flapped her arms like a wing-clipped hen celebrating victory.

"Don't!" He put a hand on his forehead, screwed up his face and whispered, "Just don't."

But her lungs felt seared by years of second-hand smoke and an unnamable heat that made her rush on. She stretched her neck and jutted her chin back and forth. "And bonus: No more Chicken Kiev!" She pumped her wings and hurled a scorched sound from her throat. "Bah-gawk! Bah-gawk! Bah-G-a-w-k!"

The last squawk rasped their ears, clawed at the paint, taxed the last of the drywall's patience and finally infuriated the studs underneath. Its force and the inrush of silence that followed

made the room sag with exhaustion. She dropped her arms and let them hang limp at her sides.

He shook his head, the way you did when other people's brats squalled through a restaurant brunch. "Are you done now?"

The set of his mouth signaled she'd torn their flimsy truce, brokered by a détente whose code neither understood, but knew when they saw it. "You want to hear this or not?"

"Sorry, my bad." She crossed the kitchen. "Please go ahead." Her eyes—fixed on the floor in a practiced impersonation of remorse—avoided the yellowed walls and nearly amber ceiling.

When they bought the house—how many years ago was it now? —the small kitchen with its compact whiteness felt like a clamshell, the talk fluid, receding and renewing over long hours. He offered plans to go back to teaching, maybe in the fall. She countered with a flare of pride in her salary, money that could support two until he was ready. They'd sat close at the table, the current nudging them until their temples nearly touched.

Now she imagined another kitchen table. But the anonymous meteorite victim wasn't foremost in her thoughts. It was his wife—let's call her Ludmilla—as she sat digesting the news. No doubt there was shock, given the circumstances of her husband's demise. But was she grieving? Relieved? Maybe both. Had his warmth, curled around her every night, compensated for his steady vodka intake or the way he slurped his borscht?

Yes, Ludmilla, I feel for you and send sisterly consolation and a tip of the hat to your conflicted feelings. When it all comes down to it: you still have to watch a man eat his eggs.

Ellie watched the movement of Martin's jaw, flocked with a week's growth. "Climate change. Dwindling species. The scourging of natural beauty until the world is one big dustpan. And now— raining meteorites." The stubble scraped the air as he spoke.

She thought about razors.

"And now, are we just going to shrug about a massive boulder—straight out of the final frontier—obliterating a man? Will we treat this as a mere exclamation point in our thick book of denial?" Visibly pleased with his analogy, he paused to lick his lips, bracketed at the corners with dried coffee.

She thought about eggs.

At this table, through their courtship and new marriage, there'd been scrambles, omelets and soufflés, made and eaten with equal passion. And games of strip Scrabble where she learned to ease her panties off early in the game and drop them on the floor, causing distraction and

certain victory. In between he told her there was a Japanese word, *tsundoko*, a name for the habit of buying of books you never read. She'd allowed him the points.

They talked about names for the two children they'd wanted. But since the world was ending there was no point in further debate about whether the name Lenore was too burdensome for a child. Or Esther too biblical, a definite taunt now that the Horsemen of the Apocalypse were currying their chargers. Getting ready to saddle up.

She opened the curtain, faded from her efforts to wash away the smoke sallow, hoisted up the window, drew a breath and sloped toward a chair across from him. There was a cinder of hope that this meteorite thing would inspire a less mind-numbing Jeremiad than the one about the three-clawed lobster caught off Herring Cove, Nova Scotia a couple of months back. Martin had ridden a galloping filibuster about the third appendage and its implications for certain doom.

Weeks later, patches of it still replayed in her ears. "Toxins making lobsters—and next, all ocean life—morph into the unknowable . . . all grace gone."

While he'd called down the saints, cursing them for ignoring crustacean prayers, she swept and washed the floor. When the broom caught a truant red capsule, she picked it up and stored it in her pocket. "Sure. Sure. Soon we'll finally be wiped out by a global tsunami or done in by our profound moral decay."

Her finger traced the barbiturate's hard gelatin casing. "But just think of all those tasty extra lobster claws we could be noshing on while we're waiting for the end. Even though it might suck if there's no butter after the cows all meet the big farmer in the sky."

"Please, El, I wish you'd take this seriously."

"So do I." She put the mop and broom away. Rubbed the small of her back. "Wish I would."

That wasn't true. Mostly she'd hoped to remind him about food. It was Martin's job to buy groceries and look after the cooking. He hadn't made dinner in a long time. Or any meal, for that matter.

Tonight was no exception. No simmering pots steaming up the windows. No bottle of wine airing on the counter. The ashtray held a day's worth of butts and the sink was dotted with Italian coffee cups tarred with espresso dregs.

A reliable resignation began at her feet and worked its way up, settling in her mouth like a lozenge. She turned to gauge him. How stoned was he? Judging by the early shimmer in his eyes, she guessed he had about fifteen lucid minutes left. After that, his observations about the road to oblivion would start to blur. Borderline incoherence would arrive in less than an hour. She figured he'd still be sitting upright though.

Satisfied her timing was right, she held up the espresso pot. It had gone tepid. “Do you want the last of the coffee?”

Of course he did. He had a never-ending thirst for it. He always gave the cup a delicate little slurp when he finished. Hey Ludmilla, are you there? Did that kind of swig make you grit your teeth too?

With her back to him, she warmed the coffee in the microwave and stirred an Inderal tablet into the cup. She watched him drink it in two gulps. Good. The Inderal would prevent vomiting if she waited an hour.

Martin was saying more about the meteorite—maybe how Ludmilla’s husband was squashed like a bug or flattened like a beret. But her attention was out the window at his half-finished birdhouse in the backyard.

She turned away as it swiveled on its post. Its boney frame, eroded by six unpainted winters, made her shiver and feel a bit lightheaded. There’d been no time to eat lunch. Maybe he’d managed a trip to the grocery store that day, at least to buy some bread.

“So get this.” His gaze followed her as she foraged through the shelves. When the meteorite hit, it left a whopping eight-foot-deep crater.”

She heard the creak of the birdhouse as an evening breeze picked up.

“But here’s the amazing part.”

As if a man killed by a meteorite wasn’t amazing enough.

“The news yesterday reported that afterwards they found a large blue stone beside the crater. Looked like some kind of diamond.” He lit a cigarette with the artificial steadiness of a veteran barfly at the wheel. “Unearthly.” The lighter fell out of his hand and clattered on the table. “That’s the word one witness used to describe the blue. Unearthly.” This time it sounded more like “un-early.”

She gave up searching the fridge, straightened her back and shut the door. “Yeah, well. The latest news reports today said it was a gas explosion.”

A clumsy attempt to brush ashes off his chest left comet-like streaks on his t-shirt. “Just another one of their lullaby cover-ups.”

She found a half bagel in the breadbox. Not too moldy. She could cut that away and put the rest in the toaster. There was a blob of peanut butter left at the bottom of a jar.

“And that unearthly blue stone?” She got a knife from the drawer. “Turned out to be melted glass from the fire after the explosion shattered windows at the scene.”

He looked at her in a way he hadn't in a long time. “When we first met, the idea—just the idea—of a big blue diamond. Think about it now for me, El.” He ran a hand through his hair, the new grey strands more pewter in the uncurtained light. “Just the idea of a token of beauty from a universe on a warning mission? It would've been enough to feed us for days—as long as we had enough wine.”

The rumble in her stomach was strong enough by then to bullhorn into her ears. If she'd heard him, she'd have winced at this sort of cheesy aria, the kind she used to find so romantic. She finished her sandwich in three bites, glanced down every few minutes at her watch and mined her own thoughts.

There was a time in the early days when she hung on everything he said. She was in sudden possession of poetry, dance steps she hadn't known she'd wanted to learn, food and wine she hadn't known the names of. He'd cooked for her—lavishly.

Almost forgotten was the awkward, but promising rough draft of his novel, achieved with her input and urging. “A small miracle,” he said. Ellie wasn't sure if he'd meant her or the manuscript.

Miracles seemed plentiful then, including a keepsake from their first year, still wrapped in tissue paper and kept tucked in a drawer. “I was doing the laundry and noticed you only had one strapless bra,” he said one day when she arrived home shortly after they'd moved in together. “So I went out and got you another one.”

Though the need for strapless lingerie had been overestimated, she knew she'd never throw that token away.

From the beginning, she'd known about the drugs. In those days, they had a much looser hold on him. But smart women, stupid women and all the middle brows in between have one thing in common: They're so sure their own intoxication can save a man from himself.

Right, Ludmilla? Hadn't it all seemed so manageable?

Then ten years went by.

Last Tuesday, she said, “Guess that means you're off the hook for taking the cat to the vet to get her shots, which by the way, were due three months ago.” That was after an extended account of the plastic bag Armageddon that was going to smother us all. “And, for my part, here's a solemn pledge. The International Adopt an Oak Sapling Fund? Not getting another red cent from me.

“Not funny, Ellie.”

Neither was living with a drug addict.

Junkies boiled everything out of you—all of it. They gobbled up all your compassion. Zombie-feasted on your time.

You sat with them at the shrink’s office. Drove them to rehab. Sought the consolation of friends until it finally ran out. You put a pillow under their head and covered them with a blanket when they passed out on the kitchen floor. Went without deep sleep for years because they thudded and stumbled at all hours of the night. Washed the piss from their clothes. You did this until sympathy for their suffering dribbled away, leaving only a parched sense of duty.

An hour had passed. His eyes were getting droopy.

She opened a cupboard, took out a tetra pak of orange juice and poured it into a small glass. Perfect, it was at room temperature. From her pocket she took an envelope that held the powder harvested from fifteen red Seconal capsules. She dumped it in, stirred the juice.

Some time after he drained the glass, things started to slow down faster. His speech became softly muddled. His words, like his body, swayed like underwater reeds in the current.

She caught him as he tilted from the chair. Lots of practice over the years meant there was no trouble easing him gently to the floor.

She emptied the ashtray, scrubbed the cups and juice glass, made a fresh pot of espresso and listened to its burble as it rose to meet the creak of the birdhouse. She chatted with Ludmilla as she washed the walls. The two of them would put the pillow and blanket away before the 911 call in the morning.