

# CLIMATE CHANGE

**KERRY  
DONOGHUE**

**Saturday, June 14**

When you were little, a Saturday drive to the zoo usually clocked in at two excruciating hours. But today, with you strapped in an ambulance, it's a four-hour ordeal.

"Is it nice out?" you ask from the stretcher.

"Just about there," Eustace, your wife, calls from the front seat.

The ambulance strains up the long driveway, past the zoo, to the backlot of the animal hospital. This is the second time Dr. Ramirez has sent you here to be weighed since his office scales max out at 300 pounds. You imagine all four Goodyears popping like roundnose bullets.

"And no polar bears today, right?"

"I promise," Eustace says. "Just in and out. Then we'll celebrate the good news."

Last month, while flipping through the mail, you noticed a flyer from the World Wildlife Fund. On it, a polar bear clung to a small ice chunk under the headline: *My home is melting*. That damn bear is all you think about these days.

The ambulance doors open with a searing kick of sunshine, a harsh reminder that you can't handle any wattage stronger than the bulbs in your living room. You used to be the guy sporting brand new Oakleys every summer, an expert boatsman dodging mosquito squalls on the annual bass fishing trip. But you haven't walked unassisted since the accident two years ago. How could you? At your last weigh-in, you'd tottered in at 507 pounds.

Six paramedics shuffle into position: one at your head, two gripping either side of the stretcher, one avoiding the split skin on the soles of your feet, and two more anxious outside the doors in case you torpedo forward. You feel bad for these men, pinioned to the Missouri humidity by your giant body.

“Ready?” They squat as low as adult men can. “Lift.”

If you haven’t lost seventy-five pounds by now, Dr. Ramirez can’t sign off on your gastric bypass next week. And you’re serious about dropping the 174 pounds you’ve packed on since getting T-boned. Sure, you were never a tiny guy—your enthusiasm for proper crispy snoot sandwiches in St. Louis guaranteed that—but back then, your weight was always a big-boned 238.

Still, it was surprisingly easy to get this huge. The first fifty pounds settled in when you were laid up in the hospital bed the doctor had installed in the living room. For six slow months, you lay in front of the TV, waiting for bones to set and sutures to heal, a process that left you doughy and reeking. And that was fine—you and Eustace were so grateful you hadn’t died, you’d even clasped hands with that weird hospital chaplain and prayed together.

But by the time Dr. Ramirez approved your bed exercises, guilt had already started contaminating you and Eustace. With you bedridden and unable to work, she shouldered all the grocery shopping and cooking, the housecleaning, the neverending medication pick-ups, the car insurance and medical bill battles. You had become accustomed to whiling away the boredom with pre-made snacks from grocery outlets, cheap treats that kept you distracted while she fretted about your daily care. Eventually, your mouth just grew used to the sense of duty and accomplishment associated with finishing a box of chocolate Krispy Kremes, the ease of dunking tortilla chips in queso fundido, all the wonderful foods you could balance on your chest between bites. Before you knew it, you needed two male nurses under your shoulders in order to stand up. The rest of the weight simply piled on, something you hardly noticed, like Parmesan melting on spaghetti.

“Grab it,” the guy near your head says. But it’s too late. The sheet across your waist slips away and exposes the crusty lymphedema on your

left shin, as pitted as a moldy orange peel.

Eustace yanks the sheet back over your waist. "No one saw anything."

Ron and the other veterinary technicians have already propped open both doors for your gurney. At least they're not snickering like that jerk from your first weigh-in.

"Hi, Ron," you say. "This better be the last time I see you."

"I hope so too, pal."

A shriek—from a rhino? a gorilla?—swells down the hall as they wheel you into the cool concrete room. Half of it is caged off with those stalls you saw on field trips to the farm, while a scratched steel scale dominates the rest. It reeks of stomped grass and hooves. Over the past three months, you've been vigilant about your exercises, rolling your legs inward to remind your quads they still have a purpose, pointing and flexing your toes to reinvigorate your dissolved calf muscles. You're lighter, you can feel it.

"All right, load him up."

A musky undercurrent eddies toward the scale, along with the stinging realization that you haven't had a bowel movement this week, even though you've been choking down bowls of steamed spinach during dinner. Is this one more diabetes complication? Entire afternoons have been lost scouring the Internet about dialysis and blindness and amputation. Without the surgery, you'll be fused to that bed forever.

"Eustace!"

"What, honey?"

At thirty-seven, she's way too young to be caught in the crossfire of obligation and frustration. You've watched her become quite knowledgeable about the contents of your bedpan, swabbing washcloths between your layers and smelling fungal odors that no amount of Nystatin can cover up, her face looking more pummeled each month. If only you could treat her to a cruise in the Bahamas to thank her for stepping into this role of caregiver forty years too early. Eustace would love doing her crosswords on the sand, taking breaks to paddleboard across the jade-colored waves, her hair sun-blasted blonde. But if she goes on vacation, there won't be anyone to wash you.

"Will you hold my hand?" you ask.

She pats your wrist and crosses her fingers. "Four thirty-two."

Should you ask about getting to a toilet? You imagine having to squat over an outdoor pit like the elephants. But now you're on the scale and the technicians have stepped away, leaving you heaped in front of everyone, anxious and tangled in your white sheets like a fallen emperor. The numbers fly: 193, 247, 313.

"Good drive up?" Ron asks.

"Slow." Your stomach gurgles. All these people as witness. One of them could easily put this on YouTube.

"June's been hotter than blazes this year."

Sweat pours down from your armpits. "Never felt one like this before."

"Hope it doesn't keep up. Can't imagine we'd make it through." Ron studies the scale. "Okay, looks like we're at four twenty-one."

Exhaling, you pump your fist and then realize that new shrieking sound is not a hyena, but your wife weeping as she delivers hugs to everyone around you.

### **Sunday, June 15**

The surgery date is now on the kitchen calendar lassoed in red ink: June 19. This Thursday, at eleven in the morning, Dr. Ramirez will partition off the worst part of you. For now, though, it's time to make up for the two years spent acting like the whole world was your trough. You've promised Eustace that you'll be good—all dino kale, fourteen glasses of water, no more Squirt—but it's hard monitoring every single thing that goes down the hatch. What about celebrating the time you broke off one corner of the butter cake instead of eating the entire pan? People always discount your brain because of your girth. But tonight, you'll prove you've finally changed.

With Eustace out running errands, you maneuver toward the kitchen on your motorized wheelchair. Nailed above the entryway is your prized possession: the mount of a fifty-nine pound flathead you'd caught nightfishing at the river three years ago. Mud-colored with whiskers six inches long, the catfish gapes from the wall, the shock of being caught imprinted in his expression. Never before have you felt so proud of yourself, so strong. You named him Steve.

“Things are changing around here, buddy,” you say as you motor under him. “Wait until you get a load of the new me.”

In the kitchen, you peer at the chicken you’ve been roasting, the carrots and onions and sweet potatoes bubbling in the pan. You take it out and grab a stick of margarine from the refrigerator, smearing the bird so it gleams. That’ll keep the juices in tight. But maybe you should check to make sure. You run your finger along its heat-crinkled skin and can’t help but twist off a greasy piece.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

Salt and melted butter—a comfort so primal that you stuff the chicken skin in even deeper, your knuckles knocking against your wisdom teeth, filling yourself so air can’t ruin the ecstasy of this moment.

Maybe just one more bite, you think, and keep thinking, until the whole chicken is stripped to the pale white meat.

Eustace returns home and eyes the kitchen table: two goblets of cucumber water, a bowl of carrots, paper towels folded like fans. “What’s all this?”

“Something to thank you for taking care of me.”

She wraps her arms around your neck, avoiding the hump that’s developed on your back. It’s the first time she’s hugged you in months.

“And you took the skin off. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks.” Flushed, you carve the chicken.

She pours vinaigrette over her spinach salad, not even bothering to ration out her serving. “Maybe this is a good time to tell you I’ve been thinking of something important, too.”

“Oh yeah? Are you extending your family leave?”

“No. But I stopped off at the disability office today.”

“How come?”

“It’s been two years—you know my leave runs out soon. But now that the surgery’s happening, I can get back to work.”

“So you do want to go back?”

“Of course. Don’t you?”

Thinking back to your thirteen-hour days bent over in the sun as a cement mason, you realize you don’t miss it at all.

She forks a tomato. "I think we should start interviewing nurses for you."

"But you already take care of me. No one else will know how to do it right." Before the accident, Eustace worked as a neonatal intensive care nurse and you didn't see each other as much. After her usual Wednesday night happy hours, she'd come home with salacious stories about which doctors were hooking up, which nurses were bulimic. This whole life outside you. Having her home has made things less lonely.

"We need the money and the insurance," she says.

"Well, we can talk about it."

"I set up two interviews for tomorrow afternoon."

A WhiteCastle Crave Case is the only thing that could calm you right now. "This is way too soon, Eustace. I can't believe you're doing this to me."

Eustace stops eating and stares you down. "Really? Are we going to play that game?"

"You tell me."

She flings her napkin on top of her dinner. "Eat your carrots."

### **Monday, June 16**

It's too hot to sleep. Dinner was a bust, leaving things awkward with Eustace. And you've been up the entire night, fixating on worst-case scenarios: Eustace initiating an affair with one of the ortho surgeons. Or her slipping up after Trivia Night and kissing some lounge act in from Branson for the weekend. Losing her would hurt worse than getting T-boned, so you distract yourself by brainstorming ways to apologize. You glance at her. Since the accident, Eustace has been sleeping on the couch next to you in the living room. Maybe, if you scooch to the side of the bed and nudge her, she'll want to do it. It's been two years since you've been naked together, your longest dry spell yet. "We'd estimate a year recovery, but it could take longer," the doctors had said. And so, for the first time in your relationship, you both abstained.

Throughout these tough times, Eustace has maintained her skinny little figure. In fact, she's never weighed more than 132 pounds throughout your entire marriage. It's a discipline you should admire. But honestly, it's

irritating that she can inhale an entire order of toasted ravioli whenever she wants.

Other than that, though, you've been going through this together, each of you feeling cooped up and dealing with the mid-day crankies, avoiding chocolate, clipping new recipes that use quinoa. She hasn't had any extra time for her girlfriends or Zumba or getting her hair cut, which is even longer than normal now and cascades unruly down her back. It's a sexy new look for her. She's come through for you during this ordeal, despite everything. But what happens to you when she's back out there?

Stretching as far as you can, forearm aching with the effort, you poke her shoulder and then rest your palm against the cool bars of your bed. "Eustace?"

In sickness and in health, you'd whispered under the ivy trellis at your wedding. But after the accident and all the weight gain, things looked and smelled different. Like the chapped apron of skin she'll have to raise with her forearms in order to dig out your erection.

"Sweetie?"

Jolting awake, she reaches for the bedpan.

"No, I don't need to go," you say.

She falls back against her pillow. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"Yes." Able to reach her arm now, you rub the smooth divot of her elbow. "Know any way to fix it?"

"I'm still pissed about what you said earlier."

"I know, but maybe I can make it up to you. Besides, when was the last time we did it?" You know exactly when: three days before the accident, on the couch, during the fourth inning of the Cardinals game.

Her uncertainty hangs like a meat hook. "I don't know. It's been so long."

"I think I can do it if you help me."

"But I put lotion on my hands."

"Can you wash your hands?"

She sighs. "Hold on."

While you wait, you pray everything down there will cooperate. And smell okay.

Eustace returns and kneels at your side. She didn't use any mouth-wash, but you push past the gluey stink of her breath, inching your fingers into her long brown hair, twisting the strands around your fingers. You shift your hand down and press against the front of her pajama bottoms. She's never been so quiet, but you still remember some of the moves she likes, and, after a while, she pulls down her pants. She's apparently stopped shaving. How long has that been going on?

You peek to see if she's pretending, but her eyes are shut and you pray she's envisioning Johnny Depp instead of her jiggling blob of a husband. This infidelity makes you soften, but she deserves the fantasy. Eustace tugs harder. Imagine yourself mustachioed, captain of a galleon you've overtaken, her perfect C-cups cresting in a corset dress. You paw inside her Wells Fargo T-shirt. That seems to help since she moans a little, hopefully not just for show, and leans to lift the apron of your stomach.

"Does that hurt?" she asks.

"No, but can you get your knee off my stomach?"

"Sorry."

"And watch my bad leg."

She's really dry, so she spits in her hand before mashing you back in, and you're Johnny Depp again, a pirate, a bad boy, tan, ripped, it's you she wants, you, your heart could just explode, and then there you are.

"I'm back, huh?" you wheeze.

Eustace pecks you on the cheek before hurrying to the shower, the moment a thin dribble down her thigh.

You are giddy. Sure, the sex this morning lacked the fire you'd had in the past, but it's a good reminder of the man who once went downtown on her in the mudroom during the ugly Christmas sweater party.

Now, with just three hours before the interviews, you're back on track pointing and flexing your toes the requisite thirty times during *Maury*. He's of course preparing to announce paternity results. One woman, one cross-eyed baby, five potential fathers. Two of them are brothers. Isn't it like announcing to the whole world that you're a big whore? It confuses you, but scares you, too. One of your greatest fears is that Eustace will invite a



film crew to shame you into losing weight on TV.

A girl, seventeen, wails as she discovers the young man hopping across the set is not her daughter's father.

"It's okay," she sobs. "I got ideas about who it could be."

"I'm heading out for a quick errand," Eustace says. "Are you good here?"

"Yeah." You smile at her, admiring her backside as she passes. "And so was this morning."

She grabs the car keys. "I'll be home for the interviews."

"Don't rush," you say, trying to sound casual.

In the hushing silence that follows, you consider the entry table photos: a black and white wedding shot of you dipping her on the dance floor. You weighed 224 on your wedding day. Another one, Eustace laughing in waders as she helps you hold up Steve. You stare at his smooth yellowed skin, the clear, round eyes, remembering how you'd felt hoisting him up in front of your buddies. In fact, you stare for so long, you almost don't realize Eustace has left without honking twice.

With only fifteen minutes before the first interview, Eustace still hasn't returned. Confident she must've come to her senses and canceled the meetings, you settle into your afternoon TV lineup.

"Hi, honey," she says, hurrying in from the back door. She's got a bounce in her step and a cropped hairdo. The curls are gone, all of them. Her hair barely skims her ears.

You mute the TV. "What have you done?"

"I needed a fresh start."

"It's awful."

"I like it." She fusses with it in the mirror, fluffing it so it looks fuller.

"It feels more like me."

"You look totally different."

"You'll get used to it." The doorbell rings and she peeks through the front windows. "The first guy is here. Can you please be nice?"

You snap the sheets tighter around your body and focus on Steve.

Eustace returns with a young man—shaved head, at least two mermaid

tats, arms like fire hydrants.

"Hey," he says. "I'm Brian."

"Brian, you're jacked. How much can you bench?"

"Thanks. Probably about one twenty."

"So, with me over four hundred pounds, there's no way you'd be able to lift me if I fell?"

Brian glances at Eustace. "Well, I was under the impression that the position is for a bed-bound patient?"

"If you do your job right, I won't be forever."

Eustace blushes. "I'm sorry, Brian. What my husband is trying to say is that—"

"Wait a second. If Brian here doesn't understand English, we have a bigger problem."

"I clearly understand English, sir, but—"

"You're just dumb then?"

Brian stands to shake Eustace's hand. "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but this isn't the right fit for me."

You smile. One down.

"Let me walk you out," she says. When they reach the living room, her voice drops. "It's just that he's in a tough spot and feeling vulnerable right now."

"I'm fat," you yell, "but my ears aren't. Stop talking about me like I don't exist."

The front door shuts and you brace yourself for a lecture. Instead, Eustace walks in with a stout woman.

"Hi there," she says. "I'm Rosabelle."

"Super. Regale us with something fascinating about yourself, Rosabelle."

Eustace glares at you.

Rosabelle smiles. "I'm originally from Arkansas. Moved out here three years ago since the burbs have a good job market for my profession."

"Because of all the fatsos?"

"I'm trained to help the morbidly obese live a more comfortable lifestyle."

“Of course,” you say. “And what if that person is not morbidly obese but happily so?”

“I haven’t found that to be true in anyone who’s bed-bound.”

You instantly hate her face.

“What sorts of clients have you cared for in the past?” Eustace asks.

“Truthfully, older women,” she says. “But I’ve made real connections with many of my former patients. Sometimes people just need emotional support to achieve a physical goal.”

“That’s lovely,” Eustace says.

“No, it’s not. I’m a man.”

“And what about you?” Rosabelle asks. “How did you get in this predicament?”

“Car accident.” Eustace is spinning away in Rosabelle’s allure. You can’t lose her. “I got T-boned by my wife on her way home from work one night.”

Eustace drops her head into her hands. You’ve never said it out loud before, but it’s the truth. You’d had a few with Ren and Davey at the bar. Mostly light beers, though, so you were fine to drive. Maybe a little buzzed, but nothing unsafe. It was almost midnight in June, the road still slick with oil and the lingering puddles of the thunderstorm, but you’d gunned it to make the light. Eustace happened to be the first car in the turn lane, hurrying home after a long shift at work. Your yellow had turned red as you barreled through the intersection. Eustace was just as quick on her green.

“An accident.” Eustace dabs her eyes with a sleeve.

Rosabelle nods. “I’m sure.”

“Well, you’ve made my wife cry, so it looks like we’re done here.” You extend your hand, feeling dirty that you sold out your wife. But at least it worked. Besides, nothing has happened to Eustace after the accident—it’s not like she got fat. You can always apologize to her later. “Thank you for your time today. Eustace will see you out.”

Rosabelle stands, but studies you. “No matter who you select as your caretaker, I hope you get assistance with your self-loathing.”

“You’re hired,” Eustace says.

You flap your arms. “What? No! I don’t like her.”

"Everything she said is true," Eustace says. "I can't be your caretaker forever. I need to have my own life again. Maybe I'm making it worse for you."

"But I need you here, Eustace."

Eustace shakes her head. "Rosabelle, can you start tomorrow morning at eight?"

"I think that could be worked out."

A steaming beef burrito floats across the television screen, all cheddar cheese and sour cream, only two dollars. Defeated, you shut your eyes, pointing and flexing until the commercial is over, wishing you could still fit in the jeep.

Once Rosabelle got a grand tour of the house and finally left, Eustace iced you out, saying she was going on a walk. Something about needing to "clear the energy." Well, she's not the only one.

"I've been stuffed away in this house and invisible long enough," you say to Steve as you motor to the doorway. Eustace thinks she can just desert you after all she's put you through, but you're not that weak. Now, staring down the thirty-foot walkway, you're ready to take control. You heave your body off the wheelchair. You will get the mail.

Instead of your usual slippers, you managed to slide on your Velcro slip-ons with the help of Grandpa's old tortoise shell shoehorn. Each shoe is fifteen inches long, so if you put one in front of the other and employ positive visualization, you'll only have to move your feet twenty-one times to get to the mailbox.

After lodging a rolled up *Outdoor Life* magazine between the screen door and the lock, you step down onto the cracked concrete, shuffling off your first step. Breathy and soaked, you've made it eight steps out of the house on your own—remember that. Catch your breath, even though your thighs burn like you just hustled up the riverbank. Thighs ablaze. Left foot, right, kneecaps quaking, your muscles vaguely recalling the motion of walking.

"Enjoying the sun today?" your neighbor, Stan, hollers from his driveway as he soaps his Deville. You've seen him, a man in his seventies,

pumping his toothpick arms every morning during his pre-breakfast walk in light blue tear-away pants and a sleeveless Alice Cooper T-shirt.

You waggle your fingers in a sort of wave. By the time you touch the sun-warmed mailbox, sweat has waterfalled over the collar of your T-shirt.

“You doing okay?”

As your tongue lolls in your mouth, the oak trees spin to the left.

Squinting into the wide sky, you wonder if this is the great blue expanse you’ve heard about. You look for Grammy Louise or your cousin Rutherford who died of meningitis in the seventh grade.

“It’s just a little fall. Everything’s going to be a-okay.” A trembling wrinkled hand blocks the sun and your view. “Can I help you up?”

You push against the gravel until you’re upright, albeit winded. There’s asphalt. Signs for Piccolo Court and Tenth Avenue—your street. People staring. Stan and a few neighbors come closer, their faces scrunched with worry, eyes like spotlights. Everyone is focused on you.

“We can call for help, sir,” the widow from across the street says.

You sniff for gasoline first and then listen for an ambulance. Have you been hit or did you just fall? Hopefully you’ve been hit so you’d have an excuse to be splayed in the street. Flexing what’s left of your weakened calf muscles, you check for sensation.

“Come on, now,” Stan says. “Got to try.”

“Am I okay? Tell me where I’m bleeding!” Pressing your chin and forehead, you study each finger for wounds.

“You seem all right,” he says. “No blood. You just need to get up.”

“It’ll take me some time.”

“Eddie, can you call for an ambulance?”

The question socks you into clarity. You imagine Eustace’s beautiful face, her eyes elongated funhouse mirrors when she sees her fat pathetic husband beached in a gutter, so big that a Volkswagen has to swerve into a different lane just to drive around him. You imagine how you’d look on television right now—like a monstrous dollop of sweat pants and shame, you sad babyman. A wail sounds from your mouth, detonating so deep in you it’s surprising. Someone rubs your back slowly, light circles that are warm,

reassuring. The attention makes you feel like a real person now, not just another fatso. Completely loved, you really let the tears fall.

"It's okay, honey."

"I'm embarrassed," you say.

"Don't be, you're with good people. Are you in pain?"

"Yes."

They coo over you, these kind people who rushed to your aid without any judgment, neighbors you've never even waved to before. Piled against the curb with gravel clinging to your palms, you relax into their love, all muddy and sweaty, just as Eustace dashes across the driveway.

"What happened, honey? Are you okay?"

Such relief. You bawl, and as your face purples and the hiccups sputter out, her long arms wrap around you, protecting you. For the moment, it's just you and her cocooned together, as it should be.

When they finally stuff you onto your wheelchair and guide you back inside the house, all the humiliation, rage, and vulnerability has emptied you out, cutting down to the raw edges of your hunger.

"Do we have any cookies?" you ask.

"C'mon, now's not the time."

"But I want some, Eustace."

"Stop it. You don't need them."

"Get them for me. I've been through enough." As you rattle the table, you overturn cooking magazines, knocking bariatric pamphlets and hospital forms to the floor.

Sighing, Eustace yanks down the pink and white frosted circus cookies she keeps stashed for herself in the top cupboard.

Each bite feels like a long hug.

#### **Thursday, June 19**

"Thanks anyway, Rosabelle." You hang up and lean back.

The Thursday morning light halves you, your shoulders cool in the darkness of dawn, your legs casting a fluorescent white glow as light sears through the living room window. Dust twirls, rising from the carpet, the

curtains, and your body, stale flakes that you've already breathed and processed countless times today, every day for the past two years. But after your fall the other day, you were able to persuade Eustace to roll your bed closer to the entryway, giving you a different outlook on the room. She'd even added two pillows. From your new dent in the mattress, you can see the calendar, a thick black X slashing the red circle around today's date.

"Eustace!" you call from your pillows.

"What?" she asks, leaning in from the kitchen, her hair frizzy from washing dishes.

"My leg. I can't move it."

"Did you try?"

"Yes," you lie. "But I need help."

She sighs. "Just give me five minutes to finish these pans."

You hear her banging the roasting pan in the sink while she scrubs, water splashing onto the floor and countertops, which she'll have to wipe down. Your leg feels like it's getting singed.

"Eustace, my leg is burning."

She hurls the pan in the sink and, hands soaked, comes over, grabbing behind your knee to adjust your leg. Soapy water spills down your thigh.

"There," she huffs. "You happy?"

The sheets, damp with dishwater, feel cool against the sweaty width of your legs. Heaped atop the pillows, your wife within eyesight, you stare at Steve. Under his wide, watchful eye, you smile and take a long sip from your Coke.