

In Olden Times

Devon's sitting over there with a bag of ice between his hands because he's the poor bastard who grabbed the hot potato out of the microwave.

Lilly had zapped it for five minutes. The microwave dinged and Devon reached in and grabbed the thing, his right palm and fingers burning against the hot potato skin. He shrieked and yanked his hand out of the microwave, but for some reason he didn't let go of the potato right away. Then he tossed it up, but his left hand cut through the air to where the potato was falling, getting beneath it out of instinct maybe. So Devon grabbed the potato again, this time with his non-scalded hand until it, too, was scalded, and he shrieked a second time before letting the thing thud to the linoleum. He darted to the sink like a madman and ran cool water over his pulsing hands. Lilly said, "Oh my," and scooted to the freezer to fill a bag with ice.

When he'd suggested Trivial Pursuit ten minutes ago, Lilly groaned and said, "Not that again. You always win at that. Let's think. Let's think of another game." They were three drinks in then. And then it just hit her. "Wait, you guys," she said, "you guys, isn't hot potato a game? Wouldn't that have been a game once? Some game played for kicks in olden times?"

After Devon had scalded both hands and Lilly had given him the bag of ice, she helped him to his place on the couch and then went back into the kitchen to freshen her drink. She was about to step over the potato but instead she dangled a bare toe over it, and then she gently touched toe to potato. And she said, "It's warm now. Let's try this, you guys. Circle up. But not you, Devon dear, poor dear. Watch how it goes this time." And Lilly passed the potato to Marcus, who passed to Krystal, who passed to Peter, who passed back to Lilly, and Lilly was about to pass to Marcus again, but she held out the warm potato and said, "Wait, how do we do this? How do we play this?"

And now Devon's still sitting. And Lilly has her phone out searching for games, telling the others how to play Hunt the Thimble, and Krystal and Peter are leaning into each other like loves do, and Lilly and Marcus are standing close to each other like nervous loves-in-the-making, and Devon sees it now, sees clearly for the first time that he's got no chance with Lilly. And he's got nothing against Marcus, just feels foolish, is all. And Lilly says, "You start,

dear Devon. We don't have a thimble, so find something else to hide for us. Hide that potato. And we'll come back in five minutes and look for it."

The others leave the room, and Devon gets up from the couch. He thinks about hiding the leaking bag of ice beneath a cushion, but he's not mad at her either, so he sets the bag on the coffee table. And then he puts on his jacket, grabs the potato, and leaves the house. Walking the sidewalk home, he cradles the potato in his hands, not hot or cold now, but pulsing from this movement all the same.

Derek Updegraff is the author of the fiction collection *The Butcher's Tale and Other Stories* (2016) and the poetry collection *Paintings That Look Like Things* (2017), both from Stephen F. Austin State University Press. His short stories, poems, and translations appear here and there. He currently teaches in Riverside, CA.