

Accomplice

There was really nothing else to do. He had no other choice. He could pretend it didn't happen, but that wasn't going to help. And why not? Because it definitely did happen and he definitely did have to accept it. He wiped his hands on his pants and shook his head in disbelief, hoping to wake up from a dream. He blinked his eyes violently, as if forcing himself from hallucinations. But right in front of him, at a distance too close to be coincidence, the dead woman smiled pleasantly.

“Thank you for killing me,” she said. “I’ve been waiting a long time. Wasn’t able to do it myself.”

“Oh no?” he asked reluctantly.

“But you knew all that,” she continued. “You don’t think I’ve been making love to you all these months just for the fun of it, do you?”

“I wasn’t thinking anything,” Jason replied. He pulled a matchbook from his pocket and struck a match. There was a slight rasp and then the hiss of something burning. He didn’t know why he did it.

“I’m not a fart,” the woman said. “You can’t burn me away.” Then she thought twice about chastising Jason after services rendered. She became polite and deferential, almost caring. She inquired was her corpse beginning to smell?

“Get up!” Jason insisted, shaking out the burning match. “You can’t be dead if you’re talking to me. I didn’t kill you.”

“Search your heart,” the woman said.

“Well, yes,” Jason admitted, “I did wish it. I did wish you were dead. You were ruining my life. I had to break it off.”

“Break it off?” the woman repeated.

“You know what I mean,” Jason answered. “It wasn’t anything personal. But my wife will kill both of us.”

“Too late for that,” the woman corrected.

“Will kill me,” Jason said. He looked at the woman with acceptance for the first time in his life, the last time in hers. She was middle-aged, wearing a dowdy dress that buttoned up the side, an unattractive blouse, too much make-up, although thank God for that, Jason thought,

considering the circumstances. “You always wore so much make-up,” he said.

“I thought you liked it,” the woman said. “Here, I’ll rub it off. Is that better?” But the action tore the flesh from her cheek, exposing teeth.

“No,” Jason said, looking away.

The woman ate the dislodged flesh. “I have some news for you,” she said. “It’s about the way you killed me.”

“How did I do it?” Jason asked. He remembered nothing, except that it must have happened only moments before.

“It’s odd you don’t remember,” the woman said.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“But I believe you. You were terribly gentle about it. You waited for me to fall asleep and then when we were spooning you locked your arm around my windpipe and slowly closed it in on itself. I hardly sighed.”

“But now you can talk,” Jason observed, sticking strictly to the facts, which contradicted vocal exhalations.

“Yes,” the woman said, “I can talk. For the first time really. I was never much good at it before. Too afraid. Too concerned about

distracting anyone from more important things, mostly themselves.” She became pensive and began twirling her long hair with her finger until clumps of it came out. The woman laughed at this change. She offered a long strand to Jason as a keepsake.

“No, thank you,” he declined.

“Will you remember me at all?”

“I’m not sure.”

“That’s too bad,” the woman said.

“I’m not afraid,” Jason announced, although what he was talking about was not particularly clear.

“That’s good anyway,” the woman encouraged. She wanted to thank him one more time, but her soul was flying away. Jason studied her fixed smile and finally closed her eyes with his hand.

“This world is a purgatory,” he said, but it was her voice in his throat. He was alarmed to hear it there.