

The Wife's Friend

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My dog was dying when I returned with him to Los Angeles after the holidays. His death was not imminent, but despite my efforts inevitable. This was my excuse. The man's wife was dying of a brain tumor, and he could not divorce her. This was his excuse.

I met the man doing a favor for an acquaintance. I called the number, introduced myself, and told the woman on the phone I had a package from her daughter in New York.

"Come on over," she said, and gave me directions. Her blunt assumption that she could dispose of my time irritated me, but her place was not far.

Husband and wife lived on the second floor of one of those square buildings that, in Los Angeles, are referred to as Spanish bungalows. The number on the door was missing. Inside the apartment the television was on, and I had to knock several times before the wife came to the door. Introductions were brief. I handed over the package, and was invited to sit down. The woman showed me a photo album of the recent wedding of their younger daughter who lived a few blocks away. The apartment was a cluttered mess; it depressed me. I stayed out of courtesy. The husband went on watching television, and the wife resumed folding laundry.

"I recovered from surgery in time for the wedding," the wife said.

"The young lady does not care about your surgery," snapped the husband. He was slender and fit with dark skin and an abrasive sexuality that I mistook for confidence.

I told the wife I would never have guessed she had been ill, based on the wedding pictures, and she told me that along with the tumor they had removed part of her brain.

"She wasn't very nice before they removed part of her brain," the husband said.

"I wasn't very smart either. I married you," she said. She told me that a year had passed and, to the doctors' surprise, the tumor had not returned.

The display of animosity between the couple had galvanized me. I complimented the wife on her appearance. Except for her slow movements, nothing indicated what she had been through. She told me her daughter had

started teaching yoga at a nearby studio and invited me to attend her class. I excused myself and promised the wife I would meet her the following week to try yoga.

I was in between writing assignments and not actively seeking one. Screenwriting was a sporadic but lucrative career. I had savings. My job was my dog. He had come back from several surgeries that had left him without the adrenal gland, the spleen, a mammary gland, and his testicles. I was convinced the outer shell was all he needed to contain his spirited soul and go on living. A severe anemia had recently ended our long walks in the pristine and desolate streets of the city. I took him to every specialist, agreed to all kinds of tests, tried every treatment, but nobody could determine the cause of the disease or how to cure it. But the dog was alive, as was my belief in his resilience.

I needed exercise and I had time to kill. The yoga class became a routine, as did my visits to the couple's apartment. My dog was invited to come along. The wife was crazy about him, the dog enjoyed the diversion, and the husband tolerated the animal because my presence relieved him from interacting with his wife. He never took part in our conversations, and I listened, preoccupied, to the wife's endless commentaries on celebrity gossip. We guarded our solitude in each other's company, or so it seemed.

Sometimes the husband returned from a run dripping with sweat, and removed his T-shirt as he made his way across the living room. I should have looked away, but I did not.

"You can wait to get undressed until you're in the bathroom," the wife said.

He did not reply, and I glanced at his youthful body. Vanity and a considerable effort had gone into its upkeep. He did not need an audience; he was his own audience.

Somebody once said that Los Angeles is a great place to live if you happen to be an orange. Seasons blend into one another, blurring the years. The only reminders of the passage of time were my aging dog and the appearance on my hands of dark spots. Another spring slipped into summer.

She said, "The tumor is back. I'm having surgery again." She sounded resigned.

She said, "Here goes another part of my brain."

"You'll become even nicer," the husband said without malice.

I told her what one always says, with the optimism one uses when speaking of someone else's illness.

My visits became more frequent. One night we rented a movie, and I sat nestled between the couple on the couch. Halfway through the movie the wife

excused herself to go to sleep. I got up to leave, but she begged me to finish watching with her husband.

The movie had been long over when I pushed him off of me and managed to sit up before she appeared in the doorway.

"You're still here," she said.

"I must have fallen asleep," I said, and crossed my arms to cover my unbuttoned shirt. The husband turned off the television and threw a blanket over me.

"Go back to sleep," he said.

"It's too late to be driving home," the wife said.

I mumbled an excuse, shook the dog from his dream, put on his leash, and left.

The variation on the routine was that now the husband came to my apartment after work—sometimes even during his lunch hour—and when we were finished he went home where I would later join him and his wife. We did not talk much. We had nothing in common but a craving for desire and a need for diversion. Danger and obstacles provided us with both.

I was the wife's friend, and I waited with the husband and daughter in the hospital for her surgery to be over. It took eight hours. The doctors said the operation was successful. Recovery was fast and painless. In less than a week she was back home. Her motor skills impaired, she moved even slower, and slept most of the time. The husband and I abandoned precautions. Recklessness ignited excitement. We did not have to wait to be alone in my apartment, but only for his wife to go to sleep.

She was no longer able to drive, and I accompanied her to the various doctors. The daughter was in the late term of her pregnancy, and the mother wanted to spare her any hardships. The daughter was willing to be spared.

I did research, asked questions, questioned answers, and evaluated options. I learned that metastasis beyond the central nervous system is extremely rare in tumors originating in the brain. I learned that Glioblastoma Multiforme is the most aggressive type of primary brain tumor. I learned that there is no cure, only palliative measures. I learned that death from a primary brain tumor involves no physical pain. I learned that progressive memory, personality, and neurological deficits free patients from emotional suffering. I learned about empathy without affection, desire without love, and ruthlessness without remorse. I learned the worst and the best in me.

"Sweet child," the wife said, caressing the same hand that had earlier grasped her husband's naked back.

We were waiting in the reception area of the neurologist's office. She now introduced me as her daughter from New York. After all, she did have a daughter my age who lived in New York, and the daughter's work had kept her there.

I had been in charge of managing this woman's health for several months. The family was glad to delegate. I had her trust and gratitude, but absolution was not my motive. I felt no guilt. She was better off with me in her life, of this I was sure. The dynamics of the marriage did not interest me. It was their history, not mine. But my behavior was a source of fascination to me. I studied the fluctuations in my moods and feelings with the same attention I brought to the articles in medical journals detailing developments in the research on brain tumors.

The looming death of my dog made the immutable days longer. I would have done anything to get through them. That I occupied them with someone else's death was a coincidence. The wife's pleasure in the dog's company, and the dog's pleasure in her attention was an added benefit; the husband was the other.

Curled on the bed next to her, the dog shared her exhaustion, and I overheard her speaking to him in the silly way reserved for animals and children.

"You're a great help," the husband said. He was watching me put my clothes back on in what had been their daughter's room.

"It's incidental," I said.

"It makes no difference," he said.

"It makes all the difference," I said.

At night I drove home along the boulevards I had walked with my dog when my dog could walk. Houses too big for the lots they occupied were lined up, almost touching. Grandeur alone could not explain their disproportionate sizes. Their proximity defied the isolation imposed by the vast expanse and anomalous topography of the city. Human sounds could be heard from the bedrooms of adjoining houses.

Adequate home care became increasingly hard, and the wife had to be moved to a hospice. Her confusion made the transition painless for her. The birth of the daughter's son afforded the family a reprieve. Desire languished between the husband and me as constraints diminished. He had his calls forwarded to my number whenever he spent the night.

When the phone rang in my apartment a little after 3:00 a.m., we got dressed, and drove to the hospice in no rush.

The wife was no longer conscious when we arrived.

"She waited for you," the nurse said.

I stood by the bed and touched her arm. She was panting and moaning faintly. Then her breathing stopped.

"She is gone," the nurse said, feeling her pulse.

I turned around, and I was alone in the room.

Two days after her death, my dog was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. The oncologist suggested we try a cycle of chemotherapy, but the prognosis was grim. It proved a futile effort. I rarely left his side. Our intimacy tolerated few intrusions. He waited for me to leave the room to die. ❧