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SUSPICION

By Maris Morton

2 512 words

Kath waited inside the door until she heard the squeak and click of the front gate, then peered cautiously out to establish the direction he was taking. Under her breath she counted slowly to twenty, then set out after him, checking that the keys were in her pocket before pulling the door shut behind her.

The last breath of the afternoon's sea breeze, bearing the faint astringent scent of the Norfolk pines and peppermint trees that towered over the street, was pleasant on her face. The daylight was fading fast, but his pale yellow shirt was clearly visible as he moved along the shadowy pavement. She could hear the plod of his size-elevens, too, and congratulated herself that she'd remembered to change into soft-soled shoes.

He hadn't taken his car, and that narrowed it down. It had to be someone living close by for him to have set out on foot. Roger wasn't a man who enjoyed exercise.

Was it one of their neighbours who had lured her husband from the strait and narrow? It seemed likely, unless it was someone he'd met through his work. He was too bloody lazy to have gone out hunting! In her head Kath ran through the women who lived in this part of the suburb. Which of them was single, reasonably attractive and lived within walking distance?

She could think of two, but both of them lived in the other direction. Unless the devious bastard was deliberately setting out to lead her astray ...

Kath had read enough thrillers to know how to follow someone. She was enjoying herself, padding quietly through the dusk after her husband, sticking close to the fences in case he looked around. If he stopped she could duck into a gateway, or simply stand still. In this light, and short-sighted as he was, he wouldn't recognise her in the grey hoodie; she'd only bought it this morning, just for this, so he wouldn't recognise her in it.

Finding out who it was that Roger was shagging was the first thing.

Since she'd realised something was going on she'd been imagining acts of vicious retribution, of hacking and burning, humiliation and pain, recognizing that though these fantasies were satisfying enough, they were in reality quite impractical.

There'd be plenty of time to decide what she'd actually do once she knew who it was. That would be the time to start planning properly.

Roger stopped, and she shrank into the shadows. He looked both ways as if he was going to cross the road, which was unexpected because there was nothing on the other side along here except the railway line. Where in hell was he going? She backed silently into a gateway and stood still, hoping the people in the house didn't look out and wonder what she was up to, hanging about their front gate.

Shit! He was going across to the station. She could see him clearly, zig-zagging through the gate, crossing the lines and ambling along the island platform in the bright sea of lights. She watched him buy a ticket from the vending machine then pace up and down the platform, occasionally stopping and rocking up and down on his heels in the way it irritated the hell out of her. Still on his own. It didn't look like he was planning on meeting her here, then. Kath sighed, disappointed. This wasn't going to be as easy as she'd hoped. If it wasn't someone local, it could be anyone, anywhere in the city. The only thing she could learn now was which

way he was heading: down the line to Fremantle, or up towards the city.

A train came in, paused for a few minutes and pulled out again, leaving the platform empty of Roger. He must have got on the train, then, and it was carrying him in the direction of Perth.

Bloody hell.

Well, there was no point hanging around here any longer. She breathed in a great lungful of the freshening air and headed for home, frustrated and fuming.

When she let herself into the house Bonnie came to meet her, wagging her tail and smiling. Kath stooped to pat her head: somebody still loved her, even if it was only a dog. Some consolation!

In the kitchen she found her glass and poured a generous Scotch. She'd been expecting Roger to head out again tonight so she hadn't done anything about dinner. This was the fifth Thursday in a row he'd done the disappearing act. He never said where he was going and she didn't ask. They didn't talk to each other much these days.

She knew it was another woman because he always had a shower and shave before he went out, and put on clean clothes. Besides, when he came home she could smell something on him; not perfume exactly, but something alien. Lying in bed beside him there was no mistaking it. The first time it happened she'd lain awake for hours trying to puzzle it out, but she knew no more now that she'd known then. After the second time, she'd pulled the clothes he'd been wearing out of the laundry basket and inspected every inch for signs of lipstick, perfume, even sniffed his underpants for traces of semen; but there was nothing, only that elusive aroma clinging to the fabric: not always exactly the same, but always there. It was frustrating, to say the least.

She'd tried quizzing the kids, in case he'd said something to one of them. He got on well with the boys, often giving them a hand with jobs around their homes at the weekends.

She didn't like that much, if she was honest. Boys ought to be closer to their mothers.

Her glass was empty and she refilled it. She wouldn't bother with a meal. She hardly ever did these days. Roger made his own arrangements for lunch during the week when he was at work. Probably stuffed himself at one of the cafes near his office, so he was never that hungry at night and if all she offered was a sandwich he didn't complain. Just as well.

He'd be retiring in a year or so. Hanging around the house all day, bugger it. Expecting her to feed him, wait on him hand and bloody foot. That prospect didn't bear thinking about, and she put it out of her mind: sufficient unto the day; she'd cross that bridge when she came to it ...

She turned the TV on and settled down to enjoy the game show.

When the news came on she got up and freshened her drink. While she was on her feet she went to the front door and looked out: no sign of Roger, not that she thought there would be. These Thursdays went till late. The mystery woman must have something. Kath went back to the TV. Bonnie settled down on the couch, watching her with reproachful brown eyes, hoping for a walk. No chance.

It was so *bloody* unfair! Tears of self-pity clouded Kath's vision and she stopped pretending she was watching the TV.

It was so *rotten* bloody unfair! Just because she'd lost interest in sex since the Change Roger had to go off chasing it like a demented billy-goat.

When she'd confided her worry to her friend Dilys, Dilys had raised an eyebrow. 'Well,' she'd said, 'Roger's still an attractive man, Kath.' Attractive? That old goat? She'd thought so, once, but now...? This new woman must be blind. At that thought she giggled. Blind, lame and ugly. That's what she'd have to be. A blind, one-legged woman with bad breath. That thought made her feel better. She emptied the glass and sat looking at it. Would she get another? Sometimes she thought she drank a bit too much, but ... what the hell! Time

enough to give up when she was in her grave.

The truth of the matter was that Roger was holding up much better than she was. It wasn't so much what she saw when she looked in the bathroom mirror; the light in there was kind. She coped with the lethal mirror at the hairdresser's by refusing to put her glasses on. No, it was those unexpected glimpses in shop windows, on CCTVs in shops, reflections in glass doors, that were so appalling. In those she looked about a thousand: wrinkled neck, saggy eyes, sour lines around her mouth. The hairdresser could do her damndest, but nothing could alter the sad fact that she was old and ugly. At that thought tears flooded into her eyes.

What would she do if Roger left her? Until five weeks ago the possibility hadn't entered her head. It was unthinkable. But what if...?

She shut her mind against this notion. Roger would never have the guts. Besides, he was too comfortable. And how could he explain it to the boys?

That made her feel a bit better and she went and filled her glass. She was worrying over nothing. If he had indeed got another woman — and she was still certain he had— it was bound to be some fly-by-night affair. No floozy could tempt Roger to break the habit of their marriage.

She settled on the couch. Bonnie came and rested her head against her knee, and idly she stroked the dog's velvet head. She told herself to relax, not to worry, it would all turn out all right, she was panicking about nothing.

She was starting to doze off when out of nowhere a picture of Roger came into her head. Roger naked, lamplight glowing on his skin. He was having sex with somebody whose face was hidden in his shadow. She could see the long curve of Roger's back, flexing in the familiar lazy rhythm; hear him groan as he collapsed on the damp body of that other woman, a woman with ample flesh, her dimpled hands clasping his back... Suddenly, she was

overwhelmed by a terrible feeling of loss, and began to weep as if she'd never stop.

Roger stayed on the train when it stopped in the city and then travelled on to Mt Lawley. Leaving the station, he trudged up the ramp to street level, then paused among the shadows along Railway Parade while he waited for a break in the traffic. It was almost dark now, with the headlights of the cars hurrying past dazzling.

Across at last, he headed for Victoria's place. Her lights were on, painting bright patches on the asphalt pavement. Rhomboids. That was the word for those shapes.

The others were arriving, emerging one by one out of the shadows, nodding a greeting, filing in through the open door, passing to the room at the back where the action would be, making themselves comfortable while they waited.

Victoria wasn't quite ready, fiddling with the gear set out on the table. After a few minutes she looked up, sweeping her gaze around the room, checking that they were all there and paying attention.

'All here? Shut the door, will you?'

Someone at the back got up and went to close the front door, making sure it latched properly: they didn't want anybody wandering in from the street.

'Now then,' Victoria said. 'I hope you're all excited...?' She beamed around at them and they all nodded and grinned back. She went on. 'Tonight we're going to try something more ambitious.' She paused, her hands still busy with the things on the table. 'Something a bit more exotic than anything we've tried so far.' The men shifted in their chairs.

Roger was watching her with rapt attention, trying yet again to fathom the quality that made Victoria so compelling. Every week he tried to analyse what it was, and every week he failed to find the words to define that elusive quality. Was it confidence, born of skill and experience? Was it her obvious enjoyment of what she was doing? But there seemed to him

that there was more to it than that: Victoria held the keys to a mysterious kingdom that everyone in this room yearned to enter.

‘We’ve already explored some of the refinements the French have brought to the art,’ she was saying. ‘I thought tonight you might like to be introduced to some of the ...’ she gave them a conspiratorial smile ‘... mysteries of the Orient.’ She straightened, and spread her hands in a gesture of welcome. ‘Tonight we’re going to sample some of the sensual pleasures that have been developed over centuries of Indian civilization.’

The fellow next to Roger leaned over and muttered into his ear: ‘Is she talking about the Kama Sutra?’

Victoria must have heard him, because she wagged a cautionary finger before going on. ‘India has a complex culture going back centuries; it’s a place of infinite variety. Think about the snowy peaks of the Himalayas ...’ she gestured with her hands, imitating high peaks, and they could imagine mountains rising, like breasts, from the fertile plains; ‘... the humid heat of Kerala ...’ she wiped imaginary sweat from her brow ‘...and everything between. All of it rousing to the senses. You must have seen pictures of those ancient temple sculptures...’

‘And the Kama Sutra,’ the fellow muttered again, louder this time; some of the others snickered.

Victoria sighed, and paused, glancing around at them all. ‘But you fine fellows haven’t come her to hear me give you a geography lesson. I’m sure you’re all eager to get going.’ There was a murmur of agreement. ‘Well, then; let’s get down to business.’

The murmur was louder this time, and Victoria smiled as her hands moved over the objects in front of her, almost as if she was blessing them. She looked up and scanned the men lined up in front of her.

‘Roger, can you come up? You haven’t had a turn yet, have you?’

Roger got to his feet and crossed to her side, feeling elated and a touch nervous.

Victoria gave him an encouraging smile.

‘We’re going to start with the basics,’ she said. ‘To achieve the true depth of flavour we’re going to roast and grind our spices before we do anything else, just as an Indian housewife would.’ She set a small steel pan on the stovetop and turned on the heat. ‘This will be *garam masala*: we need that for a Kashmiri Roghan Josh. It’s a combination of black cumin, black peppercorns, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.’ As she spoke she measured these into individual small saucers. ‘We need to roast each separately.’ She tipped the contents of one of the saucers into the hot pan and they all watched as if hypnotized as a faint smoke haze rose and the aroma began to percolate around the room. ‘Then I’ll show you how to make a vegetable curry, a spicy rice dish, and ...’ she rolled her eyes ‘...a truly sumptuous dessert.’