

No One's Husband

Since I work for the telephone company I know for a fact that my wife makes no calls to anyone, and that she would have to go to rather great lengths to communicate by phone with any suspicious party without my notice. I keep tabs on calls to and from the library of a small college for girls who failed to get into better, rural colleges, but have ended up in city college, caged against the ruin surrounding them. She works at this library but she is not a librarian. There is some kind of certificate she doesn't have. She did not go to college.

She's weaving a rug out of fabric strips when I get home, near the fireplace in our bare apartment. I didn't know she knew how to do that. She wants to know what have I got there in my arms, when she can see for herself it's firewood I picked up and a bottle.

She regards me as I slump in the wheelchair she found one day on her way home from work, unattended, unclaimed, next to trash bins. I wasn't even dirty! She had vouched for it; she'd directed the thing home through the gray slush the snowplows leave on the sidewalks. I remember one time there was a scare but then her period came and in exultant relief we spun each other around the sloped hardwood floors like fools in an asylum.

There is no dinner. I could wait an hour for her to bake me a potato. Of course, I wait. She asks me about my day, tells me about her day: we are legally married, you see. My day was Just fine. She's been working on the rug—she had seen similar rugs and just figured out her own method—and her toothache is better. I

know that when I make her sit under the light and let me take a look, it won't look better.

I pour more of the whiskey into a glass votive with the candle wax scraped out—these are our Drinking Cups. What some people will just throw away! We found maybe ten intact votive glasses with used-up tea candles stuck to the bottoms, but things break and we have maybe three or four left.

She wants to know am I trying to get her drunk. I'm feeding the fire, which smokes neatly up through the open flue I finally fixed. I tell her that I am. That tooth, I say, needs to go. When whiskey doesn't cover the smell of rot in the breath, that's dangerous. She is scared, asking when I turned into a dentist. I tell her she should be scared of that tooth, that it could kill her. I say I am absolutely serious.

With her head on my lap and her hands crossed under her back I angle the lamp to see the fucker. I'm going to have to pull it out, but I have a pair of optical pliers that are plastic-coated, so she won't feel cold metal against the tooth. I'm going to have to tie her feet down too, but right now I'm just looking. Her breath is bad, bad. I want a drink, but need to finish with this.

She has her eyes closed and she trusts me. I have the pliers, boiled, and clean hands, a box of cheap tampons that don't come with the applicators, all the strings cut off. The tooth gives way like a carrot from the furrow. This is what I tell her in a low, steady voice. I've never picked a carrot but these country expressions amuse us. There is less blood than you might think, a single shriek of pain.

It is hard to imagine that she would trust another man as much as she trusts me. But she wouldn't need to trust him to betray me. I take one tampon out and tuck

in another, holding her in my lap by the fire. I don't know what to do about my suspicions. If I found out...I think I would kill her. I have to feed the fire so I lift her carefully onto the ground, and she's curled there like a shrimp, her face pallid and shrimp colored. At least she doesn't have a fever.

Before I leave in the morning for work at the telephone company I check her temperature and leave her sleeping. All day I'm out doing rewiring with Mack, and the work keeps me from worrying about her. I come home with an armful of bright colored wires Mack and I cut out to put in new ones. Technically I ought to return these at the company because of the copper threaded core. Mack doesn't care that I take them. I think I will weave him a hanging basket for food like the one I made for our place. Surely his groceries are better off hanging than in the pantry or out on the counter; he lives in the city just as we do. I think he has a wife but I don't know for sure. Most men don't, these days.

She is not home.

She is not home. The fire is out, and the bed is unmade. No lights. My heart is hammering and I don't have any way to find out where she is. We don't speak to our neighbors and they don't speak to us. Up on the roof, I stare through my binoculars with the cracked left lens at the expressway and the trash city it shelters. No movement. Some kids playing on the slag-heap out past the mine. It is getting too dark. In the distance, the refinery gleams cold white and fluorescent. The sky is bruise-colored and striped with the coal smoke that streams from a stand of pipes on a factory roof already slipping into the camouflage of night.

There is no note. Here is her comb, here are her mittens, here is her purse, empty aside from crumpled bits of paper I strain to read. Some are lists in her miniscule, angular hand, most are library slips, but there is a piece of cardboard—thin, like from a pack of cigarettes—with this code printed as though by a machine: 886 21 ST B. Twenty first street? Floor? If it's an address, it's not in this city. I would know, and I do know.

I don't want to leave but head for the college and argue with the guards at the gate until they agree to have one accompany me to the library, which is closed, and I encounter only blank eyed girls in tartan capes watching me call her name. None of them know her, or anything.

Immediately outside the gate, I notice a yellow envelope marked in red ink EMERGENCY. Inside there is money meant for an emergency, meant to be mine. I can't walk on the pedestrian route crying like this, so I go out of my way to skirt the village under the expressway. She could be there, I think. She could be dead. She could be fooling with needles like she was when we met, but she chose me.

I let myself into the telephone company building and try to look calm and purposeful in front of the scarce night staff. There have been no calls to the apartment or from it, and the calls made to the library were rerouted to the main office. The numbers all look innocent. Even the 8's and 6's and 2's and 1's. No calls made from the public phone near our building provoke my sense of disaster.

From a dark desk I call the apartment. No answer. Perversely, I dial various permutations of the four numbers from the scrap. When a woman answers, I pretend to be confirming the connection to her line. She is grateful. She doesn't

know what service I am claiming to provide—there is none—but she thanks me and calls me Mister.

At home, I make a fire, finish the whiskey, think about different kinds of foods. Think about her. What kind of man she might be with. Someone who can give her more of what I can give, or better. Someone she admires. Someone she can use. Someone who probably thinks it is hideous that her tooth was pulled in such a manner, to say nothing of having a rotten tooth. Who tells her she was never meant to be poor, live in this shit city, marry some employee of said shit city, use wheelchairs as furniture.

I can imagine her saying And where would I meet somebody like that? Or, What would somebody like that want with me? She doesn't understand that she is beautiful, and that beautiful girls get told how out of place they are among ugliness by people who claim to have a sense of this world given by some less squalid vantage point, one they can offer at whatever price.

I would know and I do know.

I start making a basket for Mack. I tell myself if she comes back I'll kill her. I tell myself if she comes back I'll use the money I found for something as totally useless as my love—roses—perishable yet inedible, of dubious beauty and no worth. A dozen would not feed even the fire.