

Reptiles and Amphibians

On the night Lydia disappeared, I'd been her caretaker for less than a month. And ought to impose a limit as to how much of the actual blame is mine. After all, Lydia took care of herself for eighty-two years before I ever came along. Certainly my little three week foray into her life wasn't the tipping point that landed her naked in the streets of Iowa City at three in the morning. That said, the truth is I'm ashamed of the person I became during the time I cared for Lydia. For my contribution to the tragedy that night I am truly sorry.

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I'd arrived in Iowa City a month earlier, right after my boyfriend Seth dumped me to renew his vows with his wife. Moving out of state seemed the first step to mending my broken heart. Why Iowa City? Mostly, because it wasn't Florida, which is where I'd been living up until then. I needed to be able to live somewhere where I could leave my apartment without running into Seth or his wife. Our little country town had one grocery store, one bar, one post office and six churches. I could count on running into either Seth or his wife (and on really bad days - both of them) six out of seven days a week. And so one night I came up with a brilliant plan to show Seth how over him I was. I would simply disappear. I'd give up my apartment, quit my job, pack my stuff up, and move as far away as I could without even saying goodbye. I relished the thought of him showing up at my door to finally declare his unconditional love, only to learn that I had left the state for somewhere wonderful and exotic like Nashville or Atlanta.

After coming up with this plan, I drank a fifth of Jim Beam and trolled Craigslist looking for ideas. That's when I saw the ad.

WANTED: Responsible adult female to provide companionship for former beauty pageant winner/widow. Must be good conversationalist and unafraid of reptiles, amphibians and arachnids. Top dollar available for the right candidate.

I was so drunk when I called her that I spent most of the hour we were on the phone regaling her with a tale of a recent plumbing debacle. I'd clogged the main pipe in the front yard by shaving my never before trimmed pubic area in a last ditch attempt to salvage my relationship with Seth, which had by then lost altitude and was plummeting to earth despite every attempt I made to level it off. The widow apparently liked the story and deemed me a "good conversationalist" because next thing I knew she'd offered me a five hundred bucks a week cash plus room and board to take care of what she called "her dead husband's menagerie" and also keep her company. I told her I'd be there in two days.

Driving out of Florida and continuing all the way up north, I actually felt smug. Finally, Seth would know I didn't care at all. And that would be the thing that would make him want me again. For the entire eighteen-hour drive, I felt like I was finally in control. And then, I arrived in Iowa City and it was pretty like a postcard with a big blue sky and a gentle May breeze. Lydia, the widow, greeted me on the porch of her Queen Anne clapboard house and for three whole days, and for the first time since New Years Eve when I'd first slept with Seth in the coat closet at the hotel where our company party was held, I had a sense of peace.

Lydia was lovely. She had shoulder length white hair that she wore pinned up in the day and loose in the evenings. Her tailored clothes were camel colored and creme, like her whole purpose in life was to sooth and blend. She said the secret to her figure –

at five foot nine, she was a slim size six – was the three mile walk up to Oakland Cemetery, where she went every day to visit her husband’s grave.

I don’t know why Lydia advertised for a good conversationalist. What she really wanted was a good listener. Each day as we walked to and from the cemetery she chirped out story after story about herself and her dead husband. He’d been a big deal in the reptilian world and the head of some department at the University of Iowa. They met when she was 18 years old, just a week after she’d been crowned Miss Alabama. He was all brains, she was all beauty. They balanced, just like the black and white circle drawing she pointed out on the sign of the karate studio we passed every day as we trudged up the hill.

“Ying and yang?” I supplied.

“Whatever dear.” she said, which was her response to most of the things I said.

Those early days with Lydia reminded me of the long summer afternoons I’d spent as a child with Popi, my Italian grandfather and the lone ethnic highlight on my otherwise lily-white genetic head. Popi believed that a man walked around with a hole in his chest until he found the one woman God meant for him. She alone carried his missing piece. *It’s in the bible*, he used to say. *God made Eve out of Adam’s rib. Until the Adam in every man finds his Eve, there’s a hole where the rib was.* There was no doubt that Lydia was the keeper of her dead husband’s rib.

During that first week with Lydia, I basked in the relief of being 1000 miles away from Seth. Life was so simply once the option to park outside his house with binoculars was taken off the table. I didn’t even mind feeding the snakes and iguanas and tarantulas that were lined up in glass cases along the walls of the dining room. Although not

exactly cute pets, the animals represented the remnants of Lydia's husband's years of research at the University, and they were the only children the couple would ever have.

But all too soon, I began to slip back into that terrible place in my head. The "what if" place. What if Seth acted so distant because he was frightened by his love for me? What if he'd stopped coming over because he loved me so much that it hurt to be with me? Each night I wrote him long letters and posted them under "missed connections" on craigslist.

Meanwhile, it turned out Lydia had a disease called Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, which caused her nervous system to malfunction and send constant pain signals to the brain, even though in principle nothing was really hurt. To deal with the pain, Lydia took more pills than Elvis after back surgery. Pain pills, pills for depression, pills for anxiety, pills for sleeping. Part of my caretaking duties, along with feeding live mice and grasshoppers to the reptilian menagerie in the dining room, was to keep track of the pills.

I gave it my best shot. I went out and bought five of those weekly pill organizers. Each morning, afternoon and evening, I brought Lydia her pills on a little silver butter dish along with a goblet of orange juice. She was paying me an awful lot and I wanted her to get her money's worth.

Things started to fall apart around the time I started missing Seth so badly that I felt like I had balls of mercury running through my veins, collecting in my chest, and causing a metallic taste in my mouth. At first, it was just an Ambien here and there. I needed the sleep. I'd been waking up at three a.m. every night, my broken heart sounding an alarm that only I could hear.

The pain killer thing was more bad luck than anything else. What happened was, the Ambien made me a little doopey in the mornings and one day an aggressive snake bit me when I was too slow lowering the live white mouse into the cage. Lydia assured me that her husband had personally removed all of the venom glands from the entire menagerie but that didn't change the fact that the bite stung like a bitch and my whole hand swelled up. So later that day, when it was time for her afternoon fix, I helped myself to an Oxy.

There's a pain that can shoot through you every time you think about something stupid you said or try to pinpoint the exact moment you crossed over from an object of desire to one of loathing. Carrying the memory of a love you lost has a weight to it. What I hadn't known until the snakebite was that the painkillers killed that kind of pain too.

Day by day, as I sank deeper into exploration of the Oxy and the Ambien and eventually the Zanex, it became harder to track Widow's schedule. Then the Oxy ended up disappearing. (Someone else must have been dipping into that clear orange bottle because there's no way I went through that many.) This presented a big problem. I mean, sure, Lydia was careless in the way rich, pretty woman are, but she at least knew how many pills she got at what time. I needed a solution so I started supplementing the missing Oxy with one of the other types of pills, doubling her up on Xanax during the day and Ambien at night.

The thing nobody tells you about Ambien is that it can make you do some weird shit like sleep walking and sleep eating and sleep talking. Not in me, but in Lydia. One night I found her in the kitchen, eyes wide open, eating Kool Whip out of the container

with a giant serving spoon. Between slurps, she spoke to me at length about her husband's nose hair and eyebrows. But then next day she had zero recollection of our encounter. I should have paid more attention to that event. It should have been a warning.

On the night she disappeared, I gave her three Ambien -- her normal dose of one pill plus two more to replace the Oxy and the Xanax, which by then was also gone. And just so you don't think I'm a total shit, I'll tell you, giving her all three Ambiens meant I ended up without any, because those three pills were the last in the house.

I was lying in bed wondering what over the counter drugs I could buy to replace all the pills I'd taken when I heard the front door slam. Lydia! I ran to her room. The bed was empty and her pajamas lay in a heap on the floor. I went from room to room, floor to floor. Nothing. In the dining room, the empty aquariums and cages lay overturned and askew. Where ever she'd gone she'd was taking the menagerie with her. I dressed quickly and headed out, pausing for only a second at the door. Where does an eighty-two year old widow go with her dead husband's snakes, lizards and spiders in the middle of the night? Only one place.

The leaves in the trees sounded like rain and there was enough moonlight that I could make out the headstones and the shapes of the statues. I tried to remember the spot she'd shown me. But in the dark of the night, the cemetery was suddenly unfamiliar.

Then I saw her. The naked widow in the graveyard. Her hair was wild and she had only one remaining snake with her -- wrapped around her left arm and over her bare shoulder. Under the full moon, she was some kind of porcelain skinned Eve, crazed with grief, trying to return to her garden after a lifetime of banishment. Looking for her

Adam. Looking to give back the rib. Looking to make peace with even the serpent who'd duped her. I could see she was carrying it. That weight. The same I'd been carrying only heavier. The burden of her lover's missing piece. There was a paradise somewhere close by. She'd felt it once and now she just wanted to go back. But how? When your paradise resides in another person and that person leaves, what can you do but stand naked and vulnerable, before them. Imploring. Don't leave me this way. And then when there is no answer, finally and once and for all, collapse.

THE END.