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Lina

There had been a time, long ago, when the condition of being wanted, desired, had troubled her. The nature of men's desire for her had nothing to do with popularity's mainstream appeal; she'd never been popular, with either sex. Men wanted her for other things, it seemed, usually to star in some dark, mordant, sometimes mordantly funny, fantasy of their own. They saw something in her – a kink, a twist, a controlled recklessness. Once sparked, their interest in her rapidly turned to obsession. It'd seemed to her almost a sickness; she'd never courted or sought it and she'd thought, for a time, that she only wanted to be left alone. Now she was simply matter of fact about it: the smallest nuances of desire were transparently, boringly obvious to her.

Sometimes, however, it still had the capacity to surprise her. As it did that day, more than a year ago, when she ran into Peter in the lift for the first time without knowing who he was. The attraction had been instant, mutual, a little bewildering; he'd looked at her with grave, puzzled eyes all the way up to their floor, where awkward introductions were exchanged.

She'd resented his entry, ascribing it, correctly, to the jobs-for-the-boys principle that still prevailed, ever so subtly, at the bank; she'd been prepared for a long, dirty bout of political infighting between the two of them. What she hadn't expected was the complication of a sexual undercurrent, so strong that it seemed to suck the air out of any room they were in.

What made Peter so dangerous, of course, was that he was essentially a male counterpart of herself. She wasn't stupid enough to discount the potency of narcissism. He

could, as everyone liked to tell him, usually within five minutes of meeting him, have been a film star; he bore an uncanny resemblance to one of the best known American film actors of the day. Like her, he had the reflexive self-regard, the unconscious assumption of entitlement that good looks conferred, though, in his case, he'd become careless, perhaps even a little ashamed, of his appearance. To most people, he gave the impression of restrained control: he said little, as a rule, and he'd retained the don's habit, acquired through five years of teaching economics at Oxford, of crisp summary, of listening, patiently, to half-baked arguments before demolishing them summarily. To Lina, that control hinted at something else, something he wanted kept hidden: a capacity for sublimated, intense feeling, or a sexual fetish, or (perhaps mundanely) a bad temper. Whatever it was, she recognised in him someone similarly skilled in dissimulation, capable of leading various lives simultaneously.

They skirted each other, warily, in the beginning. *Common sense, rationality*: Lina repeated the words to herself like a mantra. It worked, up to a point. On their second business trip to Jakarta (one of Lina's favourite places before democracy ruined it) the plane hit an air pocket and plunged ten thousand feet. Seatbeltless, she flew, levitated, out of her seat and smacked her head on the overhead locker. Around her, babies wailed; passengers picked themselves off the aisle; coffee stains marked the cabin walls. Peter, belted (naturally) a row behind, leaned over the headrest. "Are you all right?" She nodded. He touched her eyebrow: "You're bleeding." The familiarity of the gesture startled them both. She went to the bathroom to clean up.

In Jakarta, they were plunged straight into client meetings. She was the one who usually did the talking, the

buttering up; Peter, a product specialist, was not especially good with clients. He couldn't do the gladhanding, the social frod, except with a stiffness that quite took the fun out of it. The meetings failed to whiz along with Lina's customary energy; freefalling in a tin can had shaken her more than she cared to admit. It was with relief that she gravitated to the hotel bar in the evening.

Peter was there. It seemed rude to avoid him. He was more silent than usual, and she had plenty of opportunity to observe his profile in the mirror over the bar. She couldn't decide whether his silence was a way of trying to appear mysterious, or whether he was simply a gigantic bore who had nothing to say anyway. She was about to go up to bed when he turned to her and said, "You know, you're unnervingly beautiful."

She had to laugh; it was such a direct, untrue remark. Whatever it was that she had, she knew she was not conventionally beautiful. "You're unnerving me."

"I find it hard to believe anything could unnerve you." Eyes steady, unblinking, on her face; it was she who had to look away first.

"Look," she said, "this is a mistake." She did warn him, after all.

"Aren't you tired," he said, "of leading the invariably safe life?"

He was married, she remembered, even as he leaned forward to kiss her. (Like many good-looking men, he had a nondescript wife whose face Lina could never remember, who looked after the two children and did the expat wife circuit with a kind of exhausted diligence.) The tension between them was paradoxically having a narcotic effect on her; she felt drugged, unable to exercise her usual clear-headedness. They went up to her room.

Never get into anything you can't control. She'd ignored

her own maxim in Peter's case. It was too sudden, too much. In public, they were punctilious to a degree with each other, but in every other way they were reckless – lunchtime trysts in obscure and not so obscure hotels, where they ran the risk of running into people that they knew; gropings in the lift; dirty phonecalls from Peter to her across the hallway that separated their offices. At meetings, she was conscious of his studiously averted gaze, the way he was ferociously willing himself *not* to look at, touch, her. As she'd guessed, beneath his formality was a voyeur, a fellow-experimenter willing to go to lengths that surprised even herself. A British politician died from autoerotic self-inflicted asphyxiation and the newspapers had a field day; Peter said, suddenly confessional, that that could have been him. She didn't care to pursue the subject; she was not, in truth, into any kind of *ism*; it struck her as a kind of mental slavery.

Once they made love, late at night, on the floor of her office, the place empty except for a junior officer toiling down the corridor. She had to bury her face in Peter's shoulder to stop herself bursting out laughing at the tackiness of the whole enterprise. Peter, whose sense of humour was not especially active, watched her convulsions wonderingly.

The nondescript wife went back to Australia for a visit. Reluctantly, Lina agreed to accompany Peter back to his rented house in District 10; as a rule, she didn't frequent the homes of her married lovers. The nondescript wife's taste in interior decoration ran to English chintz, stuffed cushions and porcelain animals. Lina was apt to confuse taste with character; the awfulness of the furnishings relieved any incipient stirrings of conscience. In the dusk, they lit candles, Peter saying, with a small boy's glee, "I *always* wanted to do that." With mock ceremony, he

brought out some vintage wine. "Tell me about yourself. You never talk about yourself." "I don't like talking about myself." "For someone as self-obsessed as you, I find that odd." He might be obsessed with her, but that didn't preclude a clinical dissection of her faults.

She said, dryly, "What do you want to know?"

"Your daughter, for instance. How did she come about?"

She began to laugh. "The usual way. A colossal mistake on my part." For some reason, she found herself telling him about Steve, the past suddenly taking on flesh again. In the flickering candlelight, his fingers traced the contours of her face. She was surprised to find her cheeks suddenly wet, herself in the grip of a maudlin, overwhelming sense of loss. *Bloody wine*, she thought. Peter, mistaking her mood, drew her in: "Oh, my dear." She caught the note of tenderness, stray, unexpected, in his voice; she allowed herself a moment of wild fantasy, herself married to Peter, living in the house with the English chintz. She was slipping.

Partly to make up for that moment of weakness, on the way to lunch the next day, she pulled the car into a shaded layby. Engine running, she began to undo her skirt. "Lina, for God's sake." His resistance was token, feeble. Cars whizzed past them at a hundred kilometres an hour. Nothing restored Lina's humour better than a judicious flexing of her power.

He'd had affairs before – he admitted this, matter of factly – but not like this, he said, never like this.

Lina never went into an affair without mentally sizing up the exits she could use if things turned sour, but she'd been shoddy in this case. An accumulation of incidents brought this home to her. An innocent lunch with a male ex-colleague became fraught when she ran into Peter at the entrance to the restaurant. He was icy, already

convinced of her betrayal; the ex-colleague was flummoxed by Peter's rudeness. One Sunday night, Peter called her in a rage, demanding to know where she'd been all day. As she'd spent the day, as it happened, platonically, with an old boyfriend, she refused to tell him. His voice barrelled down the line, apoplectically loud. She hung up. He was becoming imprudent, walking past her office more often than was required, checking on her. He had always been something of a control freak, wanting to know where his staff were, where every file and memo was. Now he was applying these techniques to her. He wanted to know she was always available, where she was at all times. The clerks were beginning to gossip. Lina hated being the object of prurient speculation.

"You're getting careless," she told him, not without contempt.

"I think about you," he said, by way of apology, "all the time."

She sensed him hovering on the verge of a declaration; she didn't want to hear it.

The weeks passed; he continued to be wifeless. At least, he showed no inclination to return home at all, and his sporadic mentions of the nondescript wife ceased entirely. "We are not separated," he told Lina, coldly; she didn't investigate further, having got the assurance she wanted. Peter, married, was paradoxically safer than Peter untethered.

Returning home from the gym one night, she found Peter slumped in his car outside her house. She watched him for a few minutes in the rearview mirror; in the reflection from the streetlamps, his face, eyes closed, looked cratered. She got out of the car.

"I don't appreciate being followed."

He opened his eyes. "The safe life," he said, "is looking

more and more attractive.”

“Then go back to it.”

He looked at her with something approaching hatred. “You know I can’t.”

Against her better judgment, she went back with him to the house with the chintz. It was a mess, overflowing ashtrays, empty pizza boxes stacked in a corner, newspapers and books strewn everywhere. It was a house, plainly, without a woman. He made a token attempt to clean up. He brought out the wine again, lit the candles, but it was not the same; his mood was brittle, his eyes, on her, mistrustful. *I should leave*, Lina thought, but she found herself hijacked by an unexpected sense of pity. For him, naturally.

Two a.m. She’d fallen asleep without realising it. The candles were gutted. Peter breathed, heavily, at her side, his arm slack across her waist. She disentangled him, gently, and began pulling on her clothes.

“Do you have to go?” His voice, looping out of the dark, startled her.

“Yes. Sorry.”

“Your daughter’s asleep. She won’t know.”

“Yes, she will.” Lina had a rule, admittedly meaningless, that she would not stay overnight at a lover’s. She could not imagine herself explaining to Wen Shan where she had been, and she couldn’t lie.

“I don’t understand,” Peter said, reverting to the precise, academic tone that Lina particularly disliked, “why you feel you need to maintain this façade of moral rectitude in front of your daughter. She’s not stupid.”

Lina shook her hair out from the collar of her blouse. “It’s none of your business, how I choose to conduct my relationship with my daughter.”

“It’s your specialty, isn’t it,” Peter said, “walking out

on people.”

“It’s better if we don’t continue this.”

“This conversation, or this affair?”

She shrugged, and slung her bag on her shoulder.

“Time’s running out for you, Lina. You don’t think you can lead this sort of merry go round forever, do you? Age is catching up, even for you. What do you think you’ll be like at fifty? A pathetic, raddled figure, propping up bars, scaring off all the men within a fifty yard radius.” Sounding, momentarily, more Australian than ever, the vowels getting flatter and more elongated, the voice more nasal. Usually, he managed a sort of fluctuating estuary British/transatlantic accent. Lina had never particularly liked the Australian voice.

He’d come up to her and was kissing her again, even as he spoke. Sugarcoated viciousness: that was *his* specialty. His mouth probing, insistent, at her mouth, the hollow at the base of her neck. Lina closed her eyes. Being with Peter was like being swept into an undertow; after a while, you wanted to stop battling the current. With an effort, she pulled away, and slapped him across the face. The ring on her finger, an intricate silverwork design, nicked him across the cheek. A thin line of blood foamed up across the skin. He stared at her. “I should hit you,” he said, tonelessly.

The affair dragged on for another month, Peter alternating between bouts of abject grovelling and bouts of slashing viciousness. The thought occurred to her that Peter was, ironically, right; she was too *old* for this sort of thing. She was thirty-six. For the first time, she began to wonder about her future.

The merger with the Germans was announced at the annual Christmas party. Dead silence; everyone present was mentally calculating what this meant for himself. At the dessert buffet table, Lina ran into Peter, newly reunited

with the nondescript wife. "Shannon, I believe you've met Lina." The wife inclined her head, without enthusiasm. Lina said, "Peter, a word."

"I want to know whether I have a future in the new regime."

He said, with stultifying formality, "I can give you no such assurances."

She began to walk away.

"Lina," he said, in a quite different tone of voice.

"Don't," she said. There were some things she was not prepared to do to salvage her career.

The next day, mulling over some discrepancies in client accounts at her desk, the thought came to her that it would be easy, too easy, to rifle through these accounts. The controls at the bank were notoriously lax, and there had already been one or two minor scandals, which had affected the price the Germans were willing to pay for the acquisition. Her mind, which liked puzzles, deconstructing problems and financial wizardry, worked rapidly: she saw how it could be done, the labyrinth of offshore accounts through which money could flow, smooth as butter. She'd once worked on an anti-moneylaundering project for the bank, and the ingenious techniques had remained lodged in her memory. That was how it'd started, almost as a lark. An intellectual game. As a girl, she'd played chess, one of the few girls to do so, and it'd trained her to think several moves ahead.

A month later, she was retrenched. "I'm very sorry," the managing director told her. He wore an air of puzzlement; he'd been her champion from her very first day; he knew her worth. He would have fought to keep her, except that his own job was on the line. Furthermore, though he didn't say so, but which Lina heard anyway, Peter was the one who'd recommended her retrenchment.

He'd made a few trenchant remarks about deteriorating performance, more in sorrow than in anger, it seemed. He was gambling that she wouldn't reveal their affair. He was right: Lina would rather die than have her private life made public.

She had three weeks left in the bank. She went to work.

Wen Shan

"You have to know *something*."

The police were insistent on this point. In their experience, people didn't vanish without leaving a residue, a gunpowder trail that could be analysed and made to yield results. They urged me to *think*. Travel brochures lying around the house? Unaccounted movements in bank accounts? Changes in my mother's demeanour?

I thought of my mother's hand on my head that morning, when she dropped me off at school.

I thought of the day, a week ago, when my mother said, casually, "Oh, by the way, I've transferred the house into your name." The house, once my grandparents, then my mother's, now mine. I couldn't think of anything to say, except, "Oh." My mother sighed; she'd always considered me an idiot about money. She seemed on the verge of saying something, then changed her mind. Instead, she'd given me an envelope containing the papers for the transfer. Naturally, I hadn't looked inside.

I thought of the night, some months ago, when I'd got up to get a drink and met Peter Holbrooke in the kitchen. I knew who he was; he had been to the house once to pick my mother up. He was by the sink, rinsing a glass. He wore nothing except a towel round his waist. He stopped in mid-rinse. "So you're the daughter," he said, more curious than anything else. He seemed in no hurry to