

Claire Beeli

## His Wife

The woman did not cry when her husband told her he was leaving.

No. She was a woman with a hard mother, a good mother, one who taught her to never become a wretch. A hard mother who taught her that men had hearts, but that they were different from women's; they were colder, and better for shaping, like biscuit dough. She showed the woman, then a girl, how to hold the dough, how to warm it enough to bend but not enough to stick, and then she showed the girl the wretches, the abandoned women. The ghoulish, vacant wanderers. She showed her them as a warning to never join them.

Her husband told her, stone-faced, at the table. The one she'd bought after they first married, stumbling around a furniture store drunk on love. The table's corners hadn't seemed so sharp, its colors so dull, when they'd bought it, but as she stared at it now she thought it might cut her if she ran her hand over it.

"Kate?"

"Yes?"

"I asked about the children."

"What about them?"

"Would you mind taking care of them? I'll need time to adjust. I can start taking them on the weekends later, of course, but none of us are ready for that yet—I don't think."

"You don't think," she whispered. Her head felt light, like there was nothing left inside it but a trapped wind, screaming at itself.

"Hm?" he asked, not hearing her.

"I'll take the children 'till you're back."

He sighed, the mole on his chin bobbing downwards. He closed his eyes, laying a hand over hers. Her guardian, her steward.

“I’m not coming back.”

“Of course you aren’t,” she agreed. Placid.

He sighed again, mole bobbing. Strange. His sighs had always annoyed her, but now all she could muster was a muted, fuzzy memory of the feeling.

All of her memories, but for the hazy warnings of her mother, were of him. His hands to hold her, to hold the children. His smile to lighten her, his touch to ground her, to support her, to contain her. As if she would collapse and splatter if he wasn’t there to give her shape.

“Goodbye, dear,” he said.

“Goodbye. Call me when you’re done.”

He cast her one more pitying look and shut the door behind him.

She sat at the table for a while longer, running her hand over its grainy edges. She felt the seam of where her fingers met her palms, the dips between each, skimmed the creases over the table’s rough borders. She had a plate before her, but no food; she tapped her wedding ring on the ceramic. She enjoyed the sound it made, like a wind chime.

“Mother?”

*Right.*

The woman stood, and she took care of the children. She cooked and cleaned for them. She did the laundry, separating darks from lights, lights from darks, and most of the time, she did not leave the gas on, or forget where she’d left the children, or let the bath overflow.

Her husband called once, to tell her that he would provide for her. She didn’t know what that meant. He was gone. What could he give her but him?

She took the children to school, and back. She fed the dog. Walked it.

She walked it every day. Even birthdays, even her own. She didn’t realize it was her thirty-seventh birthday until her mother called her. After she hung up the phone, settling it in its stand like a massive weight, she couldn’t remember any of what she’d said.

All she could remember was what she hadn't said: her husband was leaving. That her daughter, her *strong* daughter, would be another wretch drowning in unmade biscuits.

She walked the dog in the park on her thirty-seventh birthday while the children were at school and after the laundry was done. Water hung hot in the air.

Strangers watched her. The dog was aggressive, lunging at children, snapping at them until the woman could pull him back. She'd always figured that dogs learned their emotions from their masters, and his aggression must have come from her husband. She knew he'd always resented the children, deep down, and here the dog was, barking and reaching, living proof of it. His influence, his house, his children, his wife.

A stranger passed close to her on the path, his unseasonable coat brushing her leg. He had a young, pretty girl on his arm, with a curving figure and flashing white smile. A mole bobbed on his chin.

*Him.*

The stranger also had a dog, the woman realized, and a house, and children, and a wife.

She turned on her heel and followed, the dog protesting for a moment before following. It was still morning, the sun not quite high enough to permeate the tree layer, and his face passed in and out of shadow. It twisted in the dark, becoming monstrous, wicked; it broadened, strengthened in the light, becoming joyful, steadfast. The girl's never slipped out of sunlight.

The woman watched them. She did not care when the dog snapped again, when the woman it had snapped tried to shout at her. She did not care when the sun rose enough to summon beads of sweat, enough to signal it was time to pick up the children. She did not care when her cell phone buzzed, like a giant rainforest insect, in her pocket. She followed them, ignoring her pounding heart, watching. Dragging the dog through bare streets, through residential neighborhoods, emptier and farther away from the park, the city center.

Not once did they look back.

Not even as they entered the small, fine house, tastefully decorated, her husband holding the door open for the girl, the girl smiling broadly back at him. Not even as their wriggling brown puppy greeted them, unaware of the woman only feet behind, staring into their home.

The door swung shut on its own. Her heart stuttered.

The woman stared at it. It was dark red wood, embedded with a stately gold knocker and elegant handle. Gently swooping letters stood out on its surface, marking the address. She ran her hand along it, feeling the smoothness of the newly-sanded wood, the gloss of the varnish. She could nearly see her reflection in its shine, a funhouse mirror distorted version.

Inside, he laughed. A deep chuckle that vibrated through the soft door and shook her until her heart was loose, rattling around in her chest.

All of the saved-up emotion of the past months flowed from her at once. She clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sobs racking her body, contracting the muscles in her abdomen, and the burning in her throat. Her eyes welled up, spilling over, unable to contain themselves. Her teeth clamped down on the muffling palm. She didn't feel it, only the dizziness in her head, the heaviness inside her ribs.

Her dog barked and the woman startled back to reality, as if waking from a dream. She sniffed and turned away from the door, ashamed, to take deep breaths, clearing the hot knot of feeling in her throat.

The woman walked her dog home.

She let in her children, who had been waiting some hours for her. She unlocked the door by moonlight.

She cooked them a meal, the best she'd made in months, with fresh tomato sauce and cut herbs and ropes of starchy pasta. She sang them a song, put them to bed. She did her laundry, separating darks from lights, colors, and reds. She fed the dog and sat at the table until he snored, too, and the whole world except for her was asleep.

She sat on the short end of the table. She'd never realized how direct the seat's view was into the side window of the dining room.

She could see the stars. The woman watched them from the head of her table, until she, too, fell asleep where she sat.