

THE WIFE

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X feels himself waking up. The birds aren't even singing yet. But it's not unusual. He hasn't slept through to the alarm for weeks. Maybe months. Can't cross the six o'clock threshold in the morning. As long as those birds are singing, then he feels better about waking early. At least they're intending to sing soon—a few chirrups for the earliest illumination of the sky.

His wife has no such problems. The alarm always rouses her from the deepest reaches of sleep—hauls her out on a long metal cable, like a leviathan with a hook through her cheek, sighing on entry into this flat world where she's nothing more exotic than a worn-out woman in a bed. Sleeping beside X and his blinking eyes, as he looks to the curtains for suggestions of light.

He turns onto his right side and slides his hand across her, but his arm crosses the mattress and not her body. A cool emptiness, like she hasn't slept there at all. She must have gone to the toilet. He rolls onto his back again.

He wishes he had at least dreamed, or had dreams he could remember. Because then he'd have something to mull over other than the Store—the Purgatory, as he sometimes calls his second-hand bookstore, and, sometimes more optimistically, his Business. Oftentimes he thinks of it as the Monster, because it swallows all of his time and, in the end, will leave nothing but a pile of bones with a picked-clean, bleached skull deposited on top. On the doorstep. Along with the uncollected mail.

He wants to stop thinking about it. About bills and boxes of books. X asks himself over and over: how many times can a man think about the same thing? How many times, the same thing! Boxes of books. Bills.

But he hasn't heard the toilet flush. She still hasn't returned. Was she ill, and he didn't notice? Why hasn't she woken him? She isn't the kind of

woman to suffer in silence. Pain is there to be shared—that's more her way of thinking. If she has a stomach ache or period pain, she kicks him and asks him to get her a hot water bottle. Put a pot of chamomile on for her. If she has a headache, she has him fetch a glass of water and a Panadeine. And what other explanation could there be?

X hesitates as to whether he should get out of bed. He may have been awake for fifteen minutes already, but he's always tired. That's the thing about waking too early: he needs the sleep. He wishes he could find a method for seducing sleep's fickle embrace. A way to romance dreams back into his empty skull. But he pushes off the covers and drags his legs out.

Before he opens the bedroom door, he has a terrible image of his wife lying in the hallway, crumpled down into the carpet by some sudden stroke of death. Aneurism or heart attack. He opens the bedroom door, and she's not in the hall. He goes into the toilet and relieves his full bladder, then has a strange idea about human bodies as he does so. We're so quick to make them disappear. Put them into a hole. Or turn them into smoke, like a magician's illusion. Get them out of the way. But what if we had different cultural ideas and left them where they fell? Drying out like flies on a window sill. He flushes, and lets this strange idea gurgle away as well.

She might be in the loungeroom. Maybe she had some bad dreams (which would be a first, but is still theoretically possible), and she went out and turned on the television, thinking *Best not to disturb X*, since she knows he hasn't been sleeping well.

He washes his hands and face in the bathroom basin. Tells the reflection in the mirror that it needs to shave. Get a hair cut. Trim nasal hairs, ear hair. The reflection responds with a tired exhalation, as though one of them were responsible for the long lack of sleep but it's not obvious who.

Again he pauses at a door. Beyond it, in the lounge, will be his wife. The mystery will have a mundane explanation. It will be an incidental thing he'll never think about again. A call in the middle of the night, from her sister, who is breaking up with her husband, and needs his wife to talk to about it all. Maybe the sister will want to come and stay with them for a few weeks, and she'll have to bring her yelling, running, throwing boys. He is almost angry as he steps into the empty, lifeless lounge.

She's not in the kitchen either. The fluorescent light she insists always stay on, because it takes more power to turn it on than it does to run it for eight hours (which he doesn't believe, but who knows?—maybe ...) is turned off.

The only other room is being used as a storeroom for all the books he can't fit into the store, and there is no way she'd be in there. Yet she has to be. He goes there feeling like he has a head full of bees. What can he be expecting now? It can't still be reasonable, can it? But she isn't there. Just the same old bookshelves filled with books, on every wall. The same towers of books in the middle of the room, surrounded by the same boxes of books. And nowhere can he find his wife.

He goes back to the kitchen and finds no evidence of the risotto they made last night. Usually there would be the big frying pan, crusted with rice, mushroom and parmesan remnants, soaking in water. There would be the plates and cutlery. Instead, he finds MacDonald's wrappers, and pizza boxes, and the curry-stained clear plastic containers they give him at the Indian restaurant. None of her soy milk containers in the fridge. In the lounge, no pictures of her in the usual frames. There aren't many pictures of anyone. Just old family photographs covered in dust. And the photo of his wife he keeps in his wallet—that isn't there either.

He goes to the bedroom and switches on the light. He hesitates in front of the wardrobe she uses for her many dresses for various occasions, her work shirts for the Department of Defence, her pants and skirts on hangers, and at the bottom, the shoes. Racks of shoes. Like she were a human centipede. Inside the wardrobe now are boxes of books. Books and more books. And nothing of his wife. Nothing at all.

No wedding ring on his finger. Not even a mark.

He could fall to the floor, to begin writhing. He could close his eyes and start screaming. Because that's what mad people do. But he walks out of the bedroom and to his kitchen to make breakfast—wondering, along the way, when he lost his mind. Has he been insane before, and the wife is part of that, and now somehow he's come out of it? Or is he insane now? He doesn't feel it. He doesn't hear her talking to him. He just has memories of a woman who was here until just last night, when they made risotto,

ate, watched a 1962 Orson Welles film called *The Trial*, and went to bed, having already conked out on the couch two-thirds of the way through.

On his way out, he pauses in the stairwell of his apartment block and knocks on Veronica's door. She knows X and his wife well enough to call them both by name. But Veronica isn't home. X walks up to another door of neighbours he doesn't know by name: they'll be able to tell him at least if they've seen him with the woman who lives in his apartment.

One of the two girls who lives at number nine answers the door in her bathrobe, still more asleep than awake. She has breasts so large that no matter how innocent the conversation, there is always a hint of pornography in the air. She doesn't say anything. She watches him—waiting.

'Hello there. Good morning,' he says, bobbing his head. He wishes he could point out the gaping part in her bathrobe without appearing lewd. 'Sorry to disturb.'

She doesn't move. Blinks a long sleepy blink.

'I was just wondering ...' He puts his pinkie in his ear and wiggles it around—a nervous habit that drives his wife crazy. He closes his eyes to avoid distraction. 'Have you seen a woman come and go at any point over the last few months you've been living here? I mean entering and leaving my apartment.'

She moves back a centimetre.

'No—I don't mean that!' he says. 'As if I would! You have to go to hotels, don't you? Or the other kind of place ... I'm getting sidetracked here. I mean, you might have thought she's my wife. Which is what she is.'

She's not blinking now. She's not looking all that sleepy any more, either. 'You know I'm married, don't you?' he says. 'Have you seen my wife?'

She closes the door.

(end of excerpt)