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One Flesh

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Strange how years melt the images stored in a brain and rework them into something comfortable. In my mind, Gayle is still on our bed with moonlight lace marking her stomach and legs as the moonlight squeezes through darkness and frilly curtains. My name is moving behind her lips, ready to escape. Her book lies face-down on the nightstand, a page folded under the wrong way—typical of a carelessness that would grate on my sensitivities, were it coming from anyone else. Her face has that smile, that come-hither pout, that same seductive invitation that haunted me in 1976.

"You with us, or what?" Calfield said. Old man humor.

"Huh? What?" I asked intelligently.

"Paul?"

"I'm here."

"So? I want an opinion. What's that notorious brain of yours think about the November Plan?"

"Sorry. Guess I faded out for a second. Go over that last bit again, will you?"

"I suppose. What's the last thing you heard?"

"The Iowa thing."

"No trouble at all. Anyone mind if we repeat the last 25 minutes of the presentation for Paul?"

You see how the morning went. My head was more air than brain, and the dear old ulcer was having a go at my stomach, so I left early, around one, for the Steel Bridge. Gayle's naked ghost flashed again—enticing, troubling. I shut my mind, fixing on the car in front: I must think of other things.

At the mailbox I sorted through bills. Paragon Cable, claiming to have no record of my last two payments, was prophesying my return to commercial television.

Two willows, both ancient, one slightly withered from a bout with insects, stood guard like whispering spirits over the front of my house. Ivy had swarmed over its clapboard surface until the screen door resembled a mouth in a green face, with broken steps for teeth. The door led onto a huge stoop, a remnant of better days when neighbors stopped to argue Woodrow Wilson's politics.

The inner door, next to the stoop's wicker swing, was buried in deep shade, though it was midday. The familiar dimness was no comfort today. Depressed, distracted, and urgently needing the reassurance of my own, personal stuff, I fumbled with the key.

Something felt wrong—out of place. A miserable and chilling unease settled across my shoulders, and the hair on my neck raised itself in primeval defiance. There was a smell in the air.

The door, unlocked, swung silently in at my touch. I hesitated. The shadows in the living room were deep enough to have names of their own. I felt for the lights. The switch was in the up position. And why were the blinds pulled? I opened them every morning for the plants. Always had.

Where was the dog?

"Maxie?" A soft noise from the floor. I sucked in and stood still as death and as quiet but for my hammering heart that demanded to be let out. There!... and there again! From across the room? No. The hallway? Someone in the bathroom or a bedroom? Should I raise the blinds? No... why silhouette myself? I crossed the living room, noiseless as an insect, and stopped at the entrance to the hall.

The dog ignored my whispered summons as he moved through a tiny beam of light from a window, momentarily visible. He wasn't following me. "Thanks a bunch, Max."

In the hall, I lost my cool and any notion of stealth. The floorboards were of the creaky persuasion, so I hugged the wall as I crept along. The mistake came in neglecting the thermostat, which jutted two inches directly out from the plaster. It had often scraped a shoulder in careless moments.
Now it met my cheekbone in the dark; not hard enough to hurt, but enough that a yelp escaped my lips. The shuffling that had been going on behind the nearest bedroom door ceased. Bedsprings sang out and then were silent.

A thousand detective, police, and gangster movies, old and new, raced through my mind, as I searched for a useful strategy. Useless. I was too frightened to think clearly. Uncharacteristic of me. Thinking was what I did best. It was acting that most often failed me. I now considered them both treasonous deserters.

Should I run for the front door or slam into the room and dive, growling, for the startled intruder’s throat? I knew dogs had success with that approach, and since mine wasn’t helping...

"Husband."

"Who’s—who’s that?" came my oddly pitched answer.

"You know."

It sounded like...her but it couldn’t be. How well I knew it. I leaned hard against the wall, determined to control my breathing. I toed the door open and edged slowly around it.

On the bed was a shape, blacker than the surrounding shadows. And it was moving.

"Don’t pretend you don’t know me." No, the voice was different, somehow—slurred and too deep. Of course, death might do that.

"Why so dark in here?"

"I don’t like bright things. Bright things bother me."

"Yeah? What about living things?"

She—It—came closer. I tried backing out the door and realized my feet were somehow locked in place.

"Oh. I’d rather you didn’t leave just now, Darling" (a thoroughly troubling emphasis, I thought); “we have things to discuss."

That smell! “Why?” I pulled at my shoes. Stuck to the floor and stiff as concrete. “Who the hell are you?”

"You know."

I shook my head, slowly, back and forth, then faster. “I don’t! No, no I don’t.” But that voice was so much like...

"It was all wrong, Pauly—"

"Don’t call me that!” She was sounding just like...

"Wrong the way I died—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!” The way she said my name, it was just like...

"You weren’t very nice, were you, watching me like that? But how you do love to observe and analyze. Well, you observed and analyzed me to death, didn’t you? With your precious, deductive mind. Weighing every option, every possibility. Why are you shaking your head, Pauly? Am I upsetting you?"

"Stop!” I blasted. It was all I could think to do. I couldn’t think. That voice! “Stop!”

"—sitting there like that...you just watched as I—"

She stroked my hair with goblin fingers. "Would you like me to tell you a secret, husband?" A wet gurgle. "When you make love with someone, your souls are joined."

"Why won’t you shut up?" I ground at my ears, desperate for silence. My knees buckled and I fell against the door, sliding down.

"You knew it was my heart, dear one. You knew, and you chose to watch. What makes a man so coldly clinical that even his wife’s dying moments become bugs for microscopic study?"

"I didn’t. I didn’t know anything."

"No good lying, Pauly. No one’s around to hear."

I groaned. My ulcer felt diseased, cancerous. She edged closer, and her eyes took shape in the gloom. They were open wide and looked stiff. Cloudy plastic. Her mouth was moving, and I could see why she slurred. The bottom lip was strangely hung. Bent somehow. A tooth protruded through the tissue. The hands were twisted as well. Fingers and nails broken, dirt-jammed.

"You waited and watched—"

"Uh uh."

"Yes, Pauly. You waited, a minute only, and you wondered about things.”
"I didn’t."

"Not long. Just long enough to ask yourself if you were truly happy with me as your wife. I saw it in your eyes as I begged my heart to keep beating and begged you for help. You hesitated. My husband!"

"No!" I shoved my fisted hand hard into my stomach to stop the thing with rat teeth from gnawing its way out.

"We were making love when I died, and you weren’t even sure you wanted me?" She stroked my hair with goblin fingers. "Would you like me to tell you a secret, husband?"

"Huh?" What the heck was this about?

Somehow I had stood and was now shouting a final defense against the reality of Nightmare. "How could you know what we were doing? I was alone with her! I was making love to my wife, not to...not..." My teeth and fists were clenched. "No one but the doctor knew what we were doing! No one!" Well, no one, my cowardly mind responded, but the doctor, and the coroner, and maybe the coroner’s bowling buddies.

"It is me, Pauly."

"You, huh?" I was enraged. "Alright, so what the hell did ‘we’ have for breakfast that last morning?" Now that was smart—I couldn’t remember, myself. I searched in the dark for something to slam into her face. The monster face. A dresser was closest and on it the outline of an antique kerosene lantern.

"Cold pizza."

The breath froze in my throat. What had she said? We had gone to the cinema the night before. And then out to...

"Cold pizza, Pauly. You remember."

I did. It was she. And now I badly wanted a case of terminal amnesia. Now I shut my mouth and eyes and asked God to wake me up from the worst nightmare anyone could ever have. My face and hands met in resignation.

"Why?" I asked, knowing full well why. This horror was mine, and she was right: I had earned it.
A knowledge of the empty coldness of my life spread through me, and I wanted to die.

Gayle leaned over me, clumsily. A rotting doll with hinged limbs and twisting talons. Preparing to rip the muscles from my arms and face, I thought. Only what I deserved. Let it come. Let it happen.

"Do it! Kill me, I don’t care!" I wept. "Oh God, let me die!"

"You’re not dying. Oh, no, you’re living. We both are." As she knelt down, I inhaled the stench of her and retched.

"You’ll have me again. Won’t you like that? Don’t you want to wrap your legs around mine and make love like newlyweds?" My head was shaking No! No! No!—but stupidly, like a drunk’s.

A revulsion was growing in the pit of my stomach that had little to do with ulcers or smells.

"Then you should be happy. This will be better than sex could ever be. This is a chance almost no one ever, ever gets."

I tried to focus. "A chance?" I was fading fast. Her face swam in my vision. "What are you saying?"

"We’ll be together from now on. One. You can have me back." She ran a finger across my cheek and left a moist, reeking trail. My stomach moved.

"I don’t want you back!" I sobbed. "Damn you! Let me die!"

"But I’ll be fine, you’ll see." Her voice was shrinking, growing, as if her dead throat was finally drying up. "And we’ll be close, closer than before. One."

"What do you mean, One! One! One!?" Pictures formed in my head. Ugly pictures of sharing space in a coffin with a living corpse.

"Like before, Pauly, but even better: The two shall be made ‘completely’ One." And then she lunged, pantherlike. Her jelly arms were around my neck, and I inhaled the smell of the grave into my lungs. It was the last breath I took. Something else was filling my chest and stomach.

I was sucked beneath water and all became grey and silent. For a long time I hung there, still and bloated as a dead fish. And then I was out. And things were different.

"Honey," I said, "you made me spill it! You’re wandering again."

"It’s not my fault," I answered. "I’m writing, and ‘someone’ keeps making my hand do other stuff."

"That ‘someone’ just wants a drink of tomato juice."

"That’s what I mean: you know I hate tomato juice. And it hates my ulcer. Now we’ve spilled it on the notebook."

"Just drink it for me, Pauly?" I asked.

I patted my left hand and smiled dutifully into the mirror across the room.

"Yeah, okay." The things we do for love.