

Twine

On Sunday night, Still Life with Child came home from his weekend up north and saw the red light blinking on the answering machine. He didn't think anything of it. It was probably the Object of his Affections calling. She called each and every night. He carried the Child's dead sleeping weight up the stairs and delivered her to her Winnie the Pooh sheets. He pulled off her grubby blue sneakers, leaving her jeans and sweatshirt attached. He placed the pink Sleeping Beauty comforter over her and tucked her in. As he kissed her forehead, Child murmured and rolled over, denying him a fond gaze at her rosebud cheeks.

He unloaded the duffel bags from the car, leaving the fast food wrappers and bags in their disorder to be picked up Later. When he had put the bags in the dining room, where they would sit for days, he went into the kitchen to unload the dishwasher and listen to the phone messages. The first message was a telemarketer asking him to subscribe to another newspaper he didn't have time to read. The message after that was, indeed, the Object of his Affections inviting him to brunch next Sunday with her mostly gay, city friends. He wondered what family function or previous engagement he could drum up to get him out of going to the brunch. Every weekend, she called with an invitation to do something he couldn't stomach. Parties with her obnoxious friends in Jersey City, a birthday lunch for her sister.

Object of his Affections was a wonderful girlfriend. If only she would be content as his girlfriend. The way he wanted a girlfriend to be. There was a time when the Object of his Affections would have been a perfect female specimen for him. Seven years earlier, before he had made a four-year judgement error. When he took another woman at face value and was burned on the ride from the courthouse to the airport with

the turn of the head and her mouth speaking the words “I think I just made the biggest mistake of my life”.

He knew that he should not complain: Object was vivacious and witty. And he could hear her biological clock ticking over the telephone wires. This unsettled him. It wasn't anything she said specifically. It was more in the way that she spoke to him every night. Her chatty conversation, the Domestic Goddess airs she put on while over at his house making dinner on Tuesday nights. Despite her manicured fingernails, coiffed hair, and expensive shoes (with matching handbags), she had Wannabe Mommy written all over her. He knew she would give up her high-tech job in the city in one half of a second if he presented a ring.

It was the next message that sent a dose of adrenaline to his abdula oblongata. He was holding his breath while his ex-wife's sister addressed him by his full name. She said that Second Wife was not going to be able to pick up Child tonight after CCD, and that he would need to keep Child for a few days. Second Wife had been brought to the hospital on Saturday afternoon. The doctors wanted her to stay for a few days. Second Wife's sister did not mention why she had been admitted to the hospital, in fact, she left no details at all. No hospital name. No number to reach her.

Second Wife had a way of making herself the center of attention. Either she was running low on money or...anti-depressants. Still Life with Child lit a cigarette and came up with a probable scenario. He could imagine the phone call she had made to the Psychiatric Ward, since her therapist's answering service was not getting back to her. He could imagine them asking her if anyone could bring her in, that she should not be alone. In his mind, Second Wife had called her sister. From the bottom of Jersey, Second Wife's sister had raced up to save her. He wondered if his name had been brought up as

next of kin (obviously not) or if she had named him as the reason she was so sad that afternoon.

He hadn't known about Second Wife's chemical imbalance until she had become pregnant with their first child and she had to stop taking the prescriptions she kept in her side of the medicine cabinet that he had never opened until the test had come back positive. The pregnancy alone was a shock to him as she had told him she was unable to have children as the result of a complication in her teenage years. Once she came off of the anti-depressants, the mood stabilizers and the tranquilizers, Still Life began to witness yet another dimension to her personality. He saw a side of her that was consistently reminiscent to the personality that had emerged on their post nuptial drive to Kennedy Airport. Another surprise came through that year's IRS's tax audit. He found out that since she had taken out all of the money on her 401K ten years prior, and not paid taxes on it, she owed the government in excess of ninety-thousand dollars. Now that the divorce had finally gone through, and the judge had not seemed to care about the lie of infertility, the prescriptions or the debt to the IRS, Still Life with Child was only awarded forty percent custody, but forced to pay for the upkeep of the Child the other sixty. Plus alimony for his mostly unemployed ex-wife.

For the past six months, Second Wife had been making passes at him. He was not surprised. Alimony was coming to an end. Each time he came to bring the Child's forgotten shoes or snow boots, or simply to drop her off after every other weekend at his house, Second Wife had been wearing black lace slippers or revealing nightgowns. She sent Child upstairs so that she could talk to Daddy. As he sat uncomfortably on the couch, she

placed her well-manicured hand on his, and asked him *HOW* he was. She told him how great he looked (which he knew was a lie since he had gained 20 lbs while trying to quit smoking) and what a nice shirt he was wearing. Where did he get it? For a second time, she offered him something to drink, only to be refused a second time. If Still Life wasn't standing and calling to Child to come say Good-bye, by now, Second Wife would start in with the questions. What had happened to their relationship? What had been so wrong with it? Why couldn't they have worked it out? He would have liked to show her the thirty-page divorce document they had both received on the last day with the judge, but instead, he practiced keeping his mouth shut. Still Life would stand up, calling louder to Child than he needed, and as Child scampered down the stairs from her room, in her stockingfeet, he would walk briskly to the door to be hugged and kissed by his little red haired person, his laughing lump of love, his sweet and pretty princess, and leave.

While Second Wife sowed her wild, mentally-ill oats, provoking Still Life himself to think desperate thoughts, Child was the reason he trudged through. She reminded him every day that God still existed. Child brought him love, a deep, sweet experience of comradery and completeness that he can never remember feeling with his father or his mother. His parents had long since passed on, but he remembered back to when he was twelve and his father would drink at the dinner table. He remembered hating dinner with his eight siblings, his drunken Irish Catholic father and his co-dependent, Italian Catholic mother. He remembered sitting to the right of his father, within swinging distance. Still Life wondered why his mother hadn't hindered his father when he started the slapping and kicking. There was never a fair fight. Still Life had never been much of a fighter, anyway.

Still Life was brought out of his cigarette-smoking reverie when Skippy the dog came into the kitchen, and paced in front of him with his Collie nails clicking on the hard wood floor. Still Life went out to the screened-in mud room and opened the door to let his senile dog out. He turned his self-pity toward the dog. Poor old Skippy. Another burden placed on Still Life.

After his mother passed away from emphysema six years ago, Still Life took regular trips to visit his father, who was living in North Carolina. His father had kept his cancer a secret until the last months, and one day, before Still Life knew of his imminent death, the two of them were playing golf. His father had looked thoughtful and serious when he had told him that if anything were to happen to him, he wanted Still Life to take Skippy the dog. Still Life and his father were both over their rowdy drinking days. Out of the eight other children, Still Life's lifestyle most resembled his father's.

Occasionally, Skippy went into the yard and, forgetting how to find his way back to the mud room door, just kept walking out past the bushes, perhaps following the scent of another dog. Too often Still Life had to run out into the night with a flashlight, leaving sleeping Child alone in his house, to find Skippy trotting along a tertiary road towards the main thoroughfare. Tonight, Skippy came back in, slower than usual, and stood looking at Still Life for his Treat, which he was obligingly given.

Still Life turned out the kitchen lights, walked through the dining room with the duffel bags, and after turning the lights off in the living room, made his way up the carpeted stairs.

Tomorrow he would face the illness of Second Wife. Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise. The encroaching tick-tick-tick of Object of his Affections' ovarian timebomb had to be stopped. How to leave the relationship that, for all intents and purposes, was nearly perfect, without inducing mascara stained tears from Object of his Affections? It would sound like an age old cliché if he used spoken words from his dried up heart. After all, he did still love her in the technical sense. He simply...didn't want to marry her in the near or not so near future. Perhaps never was when he would be ready. It was more accurate than two years or six months.

The future she was proposing was what he had had in mind before Second Wife. That had not materialized, and instead he was presented with a sullen wife with a mean streak and a small child to take care of. He had put the old ideas of a happy traditional family life away, into spaces in his ancient, dusty dreamlife that still chided him of how wrong he had once been. Object too closely resembled what he had thought he had in the first place. He felt it was a crapshoot whether she was harboring similar bombshells. Second wife had been witty and vivacious at one point, too. She had been pretty and full of plans, shiny fingernails and regular trips to the hair salon and of course an undisclosed maxed out Visa bill that had been turned over to his name in the divorce. No, although Object looked the part he had been looking for, he had proven to himself that his decision making was too flawed; he would pay for his mistakes until someone with bulging eyes and furry ears dropped an Acme anvil on Second Wife's head.

His therapist had warned him about the inevitability of Second Wife's mental illness progressing and as she wasn't able to be consistent with her medication, Still Life could win full custody of Child. Taking care of Child one hundred percent of the time would give him sixty percent more fulfillment than the usual forty percent he currently

held. Child would give him a cushion against the outside world, against the impending probability of marriage and childbirth with the Object of his Affections. He would simply ignore the possible ways it could work and insist that he was now going to be a full time Daddy to his Child and had no energy nor time to also be Mr. Someday Husband to Object. He hoped she would back down before that point. He hoped there would be no tears or...well, he hoped he could do it in silence or vague but polite telephone messages left while at she was at work rather than creating a *We have to talk* scenario.

And what about the other women out there who would magnetically smell his unmarriedness? Well, Child would prevent anyone who didn't want Insta-Family from becoming too interested and thereby, too intimate with him. A few stories about the sordid events of his past life with Second Wife would take care of the rest. Perhaps that day was here. Second Wife, after all this time, had finally come to be useful to him.