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A Stain in His Shirt

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I married a man twenty-seven years older than me after finding another woman's panties underneath my ass in the bed where we had just finished making love.

"Whose are these?" I ask holding the hot pink g-strings over his head.

"H-m-m-m," he moans, in the midst of a love spasm. He rolls off me and onto his back.

"Where'd these come from?" I ask again. I knew they weren't mine. I wore bikini's not g-strings.

He lifts his head off the pillow, cracks open one blue eye, "Looks like a g-string," he says flopping back onto the pillow, eyes shut, his breath still heavy, chest rising and falling from the quickening of his pulse.

I'm awed by his sensitivity, the way he succumbs to his feelings. I was raised to keep a veil over mine, probably something passed down to me through my Lebanese genes.

"I know what they are but who do they belong to?"

He sighs and rolls over on his side, towards me. I see the faded swallow tattoo, leftover from World War II on his left shoulder. "Come here," he demands, reaching out, scooping me into his body. I fit perfectly. I've never felt so secure in a man's arms. His smooth hot chest presses hard against my breast. Fitting his lips on top of mine, he whispers, "I don't know" into my mouth. I inhale the words, his breath, him. He has the power to satisfy me over and over again. I throw the g-strings over the bed like a dirty snout

rag. "I have no idea who they belong to." he says again, tickling my neck with his wet kisses. He makes me laugh. I believe him.

Maybe they were left over from his past. Maybe these panties had been hanging around in the bottom of the laundry basket like an old sock you never throw away in case you find the other one, which you almost never do, but that single sock hangs around forever in the bottom of the basket, waiting for its mate. I don't want to do that. I don't want to hang around forever, waiting for my mate.

Maybe that's the explanation on the panties. Maybe they'd been sitting in the bottom of his laundry basket for a long time. Perhaps they clung to our clean sheets from static electricity and wound up in our bed, instead of in the trash where they belonged.

I was innocent then, blind sighted by youth, gender and a fierce Catholic upbringing. Love and attachment came hand in hand with orgasm and I was rebounding from an earth shaking one; I didn't want to spoil it with questions.

He didn't know whose high-heeled sandals were underneath the bed either when I found them unexpectedly, upon my return from New York where I was studying acting for six weeks. I'd been working in production for a few years before that and suffered from an eternal desire to be closer to the camera. He was about as close to the camera as you could get. He called the shots. I wanted to be near him, to look through the lens, to see what he saw. I didn't want to be in the background wrangling actors and animals. I wanted to become a director. That's what I told people. That's what I told myself. He told me to study acting to prepare. He gave me permission. I was hooked after my first class. I

discovered what I really wanted was to have someone wrangle me, to look through the lens, at me. I wanted to act.

I went to New York to claim this passion. This was in the early stages, long before I became suspicious before I started searching for things to confirm my anxious feelings. Before I knew that he was afraid of being abandoned and always had to have a back up, in case. I knew the sandals weren't his. I think they belonged to the woman he shot the video of while I was away in New York. He claimed it was a 'professional' collaboration. He shot her masturbating in the bathtub. He called it experimental. She called it "Goddess." She was the woman every man wanted. This is the concept that she had of herself. That's why she had sex with other women's men, including her sister's husband. The title was fitting and he was helping her realize it. She was an old friend. He had a lot of women who were friends. That's what he said and I believed him.

I didn't find the video; he showed it to me. Or rather, they showed it to me.

We're in bed eating Hagen Daz coffee ice cream out of the carton. "The Big Sleep" is on our new television. The phone rings. It's on his side of the bed. He answers it. I hear a woman's voice on the other end of the line, even though he holds it close to his ear, even with the set on.

He listens. Makes plans for the morning and hangs up, taking a big bite of ice cream.

"Who was that?" I ask.

"Maria," he says fishing for another spoonful out of the carton.

“What did she want?” I ask.

“She’s coming over in the morning,” he says mouth full.

“Yeah? What for?” I ask tugging at the carton. “C’mon. Give me some.” We’d been hanging out with her a lot lately. She’d become my friend too.

“She wants to see the video we made. I want you to see it too,” he says feeding me a big spoonful of rich creamy coffee ice cream.

“What video?” I ask getting an instant headache from eating too fast. “You made a video with her? When?” I hold my eye shut. It hurts from the cold. “While I was in New York?”

“Yep. What’ll you see it, it came out great.”

“What’s it about?” I ask grabbing the carton out of his hands.

“You’ll see,” he says. “Hey, give that back to me.” He leans and sucks the ice cream from my lips.

Proof. They had nothing to hide. Except, for her sandals, underneath the bed. Maybe they weren’t hers. I never did find out. I threw them in the trash where they belonged. Poured them into the dumpster across the street, listening to the sound of cans clanking, bottles breaking against the rusty metal, shattering into splinters of glass that fell on top of those sandals that didn’t belong to anyone in the bottom of the dumpster, soaking in soggy garbage from the dinner they ruined the night before.

I’m sitting on the edge of our bed, on top of the Margaret Cavigga quilt we bought together on Robertson Boulevard to help make his cozy home in the mountains of Malibu

into our cozy home in the mountains of Malibu when I moved in with him after a year of sleeping there almost every night. I didn't mind that everything in the house, all the early American furniture, the antiques, everything belonged to him. He was generous. He shared his inheritance with me and I easily adopted it. I didn't mind looking at the sepia toned photographs of generations of his ancestors on the wall opposite our bed every day. I was looking for an identity. I made his ancestors mine, filled myself with him, shot his life into my empty veins hoping his WASP blood would give me a stronger sense of self. A self I had all but disappeared from.

“What's Lebanese?” the white-skinned, blonde haired, freckled faced kids at my Catholic school in Flint Michigan asked, making fun of the sound of the word. L-E-B-A-N-E-S-E. What manner of 'nese' was this, not Chinese, nor Japanese, words they had heard before, people they associated with these words, people with yellowish skin, straight shiny black hair and slanted eyes but Lebanese? What was the Leba of the nese? It sounded like some thick goopy white sticky substance that you drink. I didn't know what it was but it was different and that was enough to make me not want to know. I wanted to be like the others, white Irish Catholic, Anglo-Saxon, anything but Lebanese.

“Give me back my shirt, you idiot,” my older brother said when he found me in the bathroom in front of the mirror with his yellow shirt buttoned up to my chin, my face peeking out at the image of myself, long yellow sleeves swinging back and forth over my shoulders like the long blonde braids that my next door neighbor had. I didn't want to be dark in a world of light.

Maria, dressed in white, sits on my left, legs crossed Indian style. She's Mexican American. Maria Yolanda. He's on my right, fiddling with the controls on the gigantic television set that we've just bought. The coarse threads of her waist length blue-black hair, brush across my arm when she tosses it over her shoulder. I remember this because it raised my flesh. I watch it sway like seaweed in an ocean of colors and patterns as it lands and settles on our quilt. My hair's short, cut in a boyish bob. I can't throw it over my shoulder. I pull it down over my face and chew on it. She leans forward, anticipating herself. Her hair is now on my leg. I move a little closer to him. The hair falls off my leg. An image of her riding bareback on a large chestnut-colored horse appears superimposed over the opening shot of a mountain. The mountain fades and she comes into full focus. The camera chases her galloping into the wind, her hair like ribbons of rich black satin, trails behind her, the long sleeves of her white gown fill with air becoming wings, she flies over the rocky plain before pulling back on the reins close to the horse's mouth, she's in control, he's her obedient servant, they come to a slow and graceful halt. She swings her bare leg over the horse's back and dismounts, sliding down the sweaty-hot red t body of her sexy beast, like a parting lover. She probably has sex with the horse, I think.

She moves closer to me on the bed, closer to her image. I feel hemmed in by these two people on either side of me, trapped as if I could die and nobody would notice. I want to ride. I want to hide. I feel my cheeks red like the horse, burning hot. I'm jealous of the beauty shots, the proximity, jealous of his focus on her. I want to be the object of his focus. I want to be in front of his camera, not watching her. His strong beautiful hands

work the controls, adjusting the color, brightness and contrast. He's a master. His eyes are captivated by what he sees. I love watching his voyeuristic involvement with images. It turns me on. He turns me on.

I stare at the pieces of patchwork in the quilt, admiring how thoughtfully they're stitched together, more often than at the television set where she's just finished running barefoot through the backlit grassy knoll, in her long white, see-through gown at sunset and is now standing half naked, gown off the shoulders falling over her tiny waist where she holds it with her graceful hand for a breath, her breasts larger than mine round and firm like grapefruits, large dark chocolate kissed nipples shrinking in anticipation of the hot bath. She's had implants. My breasts are oranges, almost, but at least they're real. My nipples are small, more like milk chocolate. The gown slides further down her wide feminine hips and I become painfully aware of my own narrow hips barely holding my pants up, the bones sinking into the mattress as she steps into the claw foot bathtub in her Topanga Canyon home where she will make love to herself, in front of the camera, in front of my boyfriend, hiding behind his lens, in front of me, here, now, on the television set that we just bought to make his house into our home. I try to keep an open mind. I look at the T.V. I look at him looking at the screen as though he were looking at a Ruben painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. He loves women. He loves light. He loves capturing them together, on film. I love him for the things he loves. He's not looking at me. He's looking at her, making her beautiful. I want his gaze on me. I want to appear. I can't look at myself. I can't look at her looking at herself. I look at our quilt. I want to crawl under it.

I'm eight years old. It's Halloween. I'm standing on my Aunt Pat's lawn with a bunch of kids from the neighborhood about to approach her house for Trick or Treat. I love my Aunt Pat. She talks to me about things that matter, she makes time for me even though she's busy with eight kids. We sit at her kitchen table. She asks me questions about myself. She drinks coffee and smokes Parliament cigarettes. She's my father's baby sister. One of the kids makes a crack about her husband cheating on her. I don't know who it is because we're all hiding behind masks. I hear, "My mom says she feels sorry for Mrs. Perry." "Why?" says another mask. "Cuz her husband's got a girlfriend. My mom says he's got lot's of girlfriends." I love my Uncle too. He's tall and handsome. He has blue eyes and an approving smile. His eyes twinkle when I ski down the hill exactly the way he shows me to. He smiles at me, putting the tiller in my hand, he lets me sail our small sunfish. He takes me under his wing and teaches me how to do the things I want to do, the things my father teaches my brothers to do. I've disappeared somewhere inside my costume, behind the mask. I can't feel my body. I'm a costume and mask. I lift the mask up on top of my head and pinch my cheek. I can't feel it but I can see myself doing it. I'm floating above myself, watching all the costumes and masks on the lawn in front of my favorite aunt's house. I slap my face. Same thing. I can't bring myself back into my body.

I'm sure Maria feels her body, so does he. I feel my body when I'm with him in bed. I can't feel it now, not with them on the bed. I can see myself between them though. I see myself underneath the covers.

**“I can’t believe you did that,” I say. I’m in the kitchen, sitting in a director’s chair with his name on it.**

“What,” he says, adjusting the lighting on my face. He’s making me beautiful now.

“ I can’t believe you watched that.”

“What?” he says tying an apron around his neck.

“That,” I say. “Her doing that in the tub. It was gross.”

“It wasn’t gross. It was art,” he claims. “ Besides, I didn’t watch it,” he says, chopping an onion with his new Japanese knife. “I filmed it.”

The onion is strong. I can’t keep my eyes from watering.

“Yeah, and I suppose you came right home after you wrapped.”

He was making a film, that’s it, he tells me, throwing the chopped onion in the iron skillet. I don’t believe him. “You have a valley mentality,” he says. The onion sizzles in the hot olive oil filling the air with a pungent scent. I begin to think there’s something wrong with me. I’m begrudging a man his art. I have deep seeded trust issues. If I didn’t before, I do now. I’m hung up. I don’t know what I am anymore. I’m twenty-six years old, trying to fit into the fast moving world that my fifty-three year old lover inhabits. I want to fit in. I want him to make me appear. I want him to love me. I want to love myself.

Everything I needed to know about his inability to be faithful was there from the start. I ignored it because there were so many things to love about him. I wanted to be carefree like him. I wanted to believe in the rightness of our being together.

“You should come over for dinner sometime, I’ll make you Chicken Archduc,” he whispers to me, between takes, on the set of the film where we first met. I’m the luckiest girl in the whole world. The director’s paying attention to me, a lowly production assistant. I’m up close, about as close as you can get. I was tired of wrangling ducks in my rowboat on the lake, feeding them so they’d stop quacking whenever I heard the word, “Rolling,” over my walkie-talkie. I wanted to be where the action was. I wanted to be near him, the director.

My little wooden rowboat is filled with plastic bags full of pieces of white bread. Every duck on the lake follows me, rowing away from the house where the rest of the crew and cast are shooting. I’m the Pied Piper. I don’t have an anchor so I have to keep rowing even when I’m far enough away so that we don’t drift back to the house where the boat and I both want to be. The only connection I have with the film on this day is through the voice of the 2<sup>nd</sup> assistant director over the walkie-talkie, not even the 1<sup>st</sup>. “Janet, are you ready? Everything under control?” I throw a handful of bread on the lake and the entire flock floats over to it quacking and squawking, fighting to get there first. I throw in another handful in the other direction and they turn and float towards it, same thing. I’m not the best duck wrangler. A few dominant birds get most of the bread leaving the others quacking at me. A mallard is perched in the bow pecking pieces of crust out of the bag. Another one lands on the bow. I take the oar out of the lock to wave it at them.

“Janet, can you get it under control? We’re almost there.”

I grab the walkie-talkie dropping the oar into the water.

“I’m working on it,” I say, walkie-talkie in one hand retrieving the oar with the other. I wave it at the ducks and they flap their wings, feathers flying, shit covering the bow, the ducks in the water, closest to the boat start quacking and flapping, spraying me with water. The sound is deafening. The two ducks fly off the bow leaving me in a storm of feathers.

“Rolling,” I hear. “Keep em quiet.”

“Right,” I say throwing the whole bag of bread into the water.

That’s my job.

I had never heard of Chicken Archduc before. Being the hungry learner that I was, I wanted to know more. I could never get close enough to the source in my family. It was too large and my mother was exhausted. She never wore an apron but she cooked all of our meals. Maybe it was the checkered apron from Williams Sonoma that he wore beneath his ski jacket, in preparation for the dinner he was going to make for the crew when we wrapped that evening, at the house on Malibu Lake, or the black rubber Norwegian fisherman’s hat he wore on rainy days, or perhaps it was the way he waved his hand effeminately in the air when he was setting up a shot, that drew me so feverishly to him. Or, maybe it was simply our proximity to the Panavision camera at long last that turned me on. Nonetheless, I felt the urge for Chicken Archduc, pulling at my insides. I imagined him serving me the plump tender meat, swimming in luscious creamy sauce, at his house, by candlelight, with his apron on. My mouth was melting. I wanted to taste it. I wanted to taste it, badly. In fact, I could think of nothing else but Chicken Archduc. I don’t imagine the line producer, felt quite the same pull for Chicken Archduc when I heard him ask her to

dinner a few days later. Okay, I was a little disappointed at the degradation of my special invitation when I heard him ask her too but I also thought it was cute that a man could be so proud of his cooking. Besides, she was overweight and had a fat ass. My ass was cute. My father always told me so.

This man I was falling in love with, was the same age as my father, exactly. Though he seemed more like my mother with his nurturing ways, his apron, his gentle hands patting olive oil and spice on the body of a chicken with all the care and tenderness of a mother's touch on a baby's bottom. He cooked. He took care of me. Nobody had ever shown an interest in taking care of me before. I was lost in the middle of six kids. I took care of them. I was my mother's production assistant, never her star. When she had her sixth child, another girl at last, I was twelve. Mom put her in my bedroom so that I could take care of her when she woke up banging her head on the crib in the middle of the night.

I couldn't resist him when he walked into my office for the first time, clearing his throat, to get my attention, in that unassuming way that endeared so many to him. He was holding a Brooks Brothers button down, pin striped Oxford shirt in his hand. But that's not the only thing that got my attention. I looked up and saw the sweetness in his blue eyes, set back just far enough behind his ruddy high cheekbones to make his gaze polite. I was smitten. Ultimately though, it was the smooth bare chest beneath his ski jacket that nailed me. I love men without hair on their chests. It's so pure and uncomplicated. So different from my father and my four brothers who have five o'clock shadow's even when

they shave. He was a man of power asking for my help. That was the only route I knew how to take to get to my own power.

“Do you know how to get the stain out of this,” he asked, showing me the pocket on his shirt, soaked in black ink from the pen he put into it, without the cap. I was soaked myself, in the sweat of my own body heat. I had to peel off my jacket. Just being near him made me hot. He was irresistible. He needed me. He was the real thing, a genuine WASP, an ARYAN man. His ancestors had been in this country for sixteen generations, mine for only three. I still felt the immigrant status of my being, the ties with a country I didn’t understand. I was ethnic before it was fashionable. I could have a child with this man and she wouldn’t have to suffer ethnicity. She wouldn’t have to tolerate people like Coleen Beauclaire, white as pastry flour, asking questions I couldn’t answer when we stood in line waiting to change classes. “Why is your skin so dark?”

Anesthetized by raw animal instinct, I took the shirt out of his hands and washed it in the sink but not before smelling it. That’s when the pheromones leaped out of his shirt and into my skin, transporting me into his world and the heat between us generated a steam that propelled us forward, like a freight train we moved into the future along the winding tracks of a life, together. The stain never did come out of his shirt.