

Estranged Images

Jack Everett

She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever remembered seeing, and by some luck, or fate, I was married to her. I had always been perplexed by how attractive she was. Her brown tresses flowing over her shoulders, her inviting eyes, her soft lips, her fair skin, her charming wit, her gentle affections, everything about her made me love her. At least that was how it was. Now she was so unhappy, depressed. Her laughing had ceased, her affection had diminished. Her beauty remained, but the sadness was apparent on her face, like crying, but without the tears. It hadn't always been that way. Her depression had started a little over two years ago, and I never understood why. At first I tried to talk to her about it, but her responses were minimal. She let me know that it wasn't anything that I had done to cause her depression, but at the same time she wouldn't say anything else about it. I wanted to make her happy again, and I had tried, but to no avail. After the depression set in the affection in our marriage died, and oh how badly I wanted it to return. The two of us owned a restaurant. We lived in an apartment above it.

Her father had moved in with us three months ago, gray haired, overweight, a drinker, probably a womanizer in his younger days, a gambler too, maybe. I didn't like him and I don't think my wife did either. Before he had moved in she had never talked about him. When we were engaged it was clear to me that there was no reason to ask his permission to marry. I had met him then, of course, every time my wife apologizing for his rudeness. His wife had died years ago, at least as far as I knew, my wife never talked about her mother. His pension had run out, and he had no retirement, he had no choice but to come to us. I told him that I would pay for an apartment for him, thinking to myself I could stash him away in some other state, but he was being evicted, and needed a place that night. It seemed we had no choice but to let him stay with us, and he had demanded. I was in the process of securing an apartment for him, somewhere out of site. For now, however, he was living with us, in one of our spare bedrooms, hardly stashed away, but for the most part I managed to avoid him.

I suppose I could have quickly found another place for him, but he was always so difficult for me to deal with, and my wife was too depressed to argue with him. I didn't want him to move in, certainly. I didn't even want to see him. The very sight of him bothered me. I had never known him well, and his violent temper and drinking soon became apparent. I wouldn't let him drink in our home, of course, but that didn't stop his temper. He was angry, drunk or sober, if he could even be called sober when he wasn't intoxicated. Sometimes I'd hear

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yelling come from his room, for no apparent reason, something on the TV bothered him, I guess. I avoided him as much as possible, and my wife seemed to do the same. I never saw them speak to each other, and I don't think they were ever alone together.

He'd disappear every day, off to a dive, I supposed. He was gone for hours at a time. I always hoped he wouldn't come back, that he'd get lost, or arrested. While he was gone I always felt better. He would come back, though, smelling of alcohol. Usually he'd go to his room, and at least I wouldn't have to deal with him. I'd always see him when he got back, and he'd always curse something as he walked to his room, sometimes directed at me, sometimes at himself. I tried to ignore him, I pretended to ignore him, but it always bothered me.

The restaurant we own is Asian. Odd, because we are both white. It was an investment really. We owned it, but the restaurant was managed our chief chef. He was Chinese, old, balding, grayed, amazing at gourmet, and short as is common in Asia. Our restaurant had started out American, gourmet hamburgers, steak, and fish, no different from any other American restaurant. Struggling for the first year the Chef had shown up offering his services. We thought, immediately, that we should change our menu. So it was, the Chef was hired, and our restaurant flourished. From then on the Chef managed the restaurant, we simply collected the revenue. He'd manage the hiring and firing of cooks and servers. I never even knew any of our employees. I trusted the Chef. I don't know why. It had worked out, though, and my wife and I were wealthy. I suppose that is why my father-in-law had demanded to move in with us, to tap in on that wealth, I hadn't let him, though.

A Chinese garden is built on our property next to the restaurant. Originally it was meant for the guests of our restaurant, a place for them to meditate, but we kept it to ourselves. I'd go there for hours a day. My wife would too, though, now we never went there together, always alone. Sometimes I'd sit, sometimes I'd stand, always I'd wonder. I didn't understand my wife's personality, why she had become so unaffectionate.

It happened suddenly, it seemed. One day. Her depression had lasted for so long. I remember before, of course. I can see myself holding her hand, laughing with her, talking, embracing, making love, but those are only images. I can't remember the emotions, the feelings of those days. Certainly we had feelings for each other then, but they had long been forgotten. I shouldn't have forgotten so quickly, it hadn't been that long, I wished I could remember. I'd look at photographs of our wedding sometimes. She looks happy when I first glance at them, but the longer I study them the more sadness I see. It's my imagination I'm sure, mixing the present with the past. I always do this alone. I've never let my

wife see me look at, and long for, the past. I wonder, sometimes, if she does the same without my knowing. I hope so, I doubt it.

She stopped laughing, my wife, because of the depression, and shortly after I stopped as well. I thought it irreverent to find humor or joy in anything if I couldn't share it with my wife. I loved her. Always. I prayed that I could understand my wife's suffering, that I could know why she had so suddenly changed. I was sure it was something, some event, that caused it, but I didn't know what.

Sometimes I'd watch her, when she was alone in the garden. My eyes following as she walked along the asymmetric paths. She looked so sad. She looked so beautiful. She'd brush her hands over some of the flowers, reach the tree branches. I'd wonder what she was thinking about. When I spent time in there I thought about her. I didn't know if she thought about me. It was probably best if she didn't. Sometimes she'd see me watching her through the front gate. I'd slowly move away, acting as if I just happened to walk by and glance in.

One day, while my father-in-law was away I saw my wife standing in the garden. She stood still, her eyes looking down into space. She was so beautiful. Her depression seemed particularly severe that moment. I couldn't leave her alone. I opened the garden's gate and walked in. We both stood in the garden. The most peaceful place I could think of. I was afraid. After the onset of her depression she had resisted almost all affection from anyone, from me. I wanted to hold her in my arms. As I came near to her I slid my arm around her shoulder, gently, she didn't pull away as she had done in the past. Instead she let me hold her. I looked at her face, she didn't look back. A blanket was folded on a stone bench nearby. I guided her over to it, and with my free hand I managed to unfold it and lay it on the walkway nearby, folding it in half to form a cushion. I directed her down onto it and we lay on the makeshift mattress together. We'd done this before, of course, before the depression. Sometimes we'd spend the whole night in the garden, staring up at the stars, talking about them, talking about the heavens. I'd say that heaven couldn't be among the stars, because we were always there. Those were the happiest moments of my life. This was the happiest I'd been for a long time, lying there, with my arms around her. I don't know if she felt any better, but I was glad to be there with her. I loved her. I never felt the same depression that she did, I didn't, but sometimes when I couldn't touch her I felt so alone. I didn't feel so alone now.

Even when depressed her face was so pretty. I never told her that. I remembered there had been a time that I would tell her how pretty she was every chance I had, slip it into even the most un-seeming conversations. She'd laugh when I did this. She'd tell me how funny I was. We'd kiss. We didn't talk anymore. I was afraid to say anything to her. For fear of I don't know what. We

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still slept in the same bed. It was strange though. Always back to back. She'd always go to bed before me. Always asleep, or at least pretending to be asleep when I got into bed. I'd imagine that her eyes were open, staring into the blackness. I hadn't seen her with her eyes closed. Sometimes I wondered if she slept at all. She was always gone when I awoke. I'd walk down to the kitchen and she would be making breakfast, every day. She'd serve me at one of the dining room tables, before the restaurant opened. She'd always done that, and I loved her for it. I loved her especially because she continued to do it even when so depressed. Sometimes she'd sit across from me watching as I ate, sometimes she'd leave. She never ate with me, though. I wished she would, I wished she'd talk with me. I wondered if she would cry sometimes, when she was alone. I never saw her cry. At nights I wanted so badly to turn over and hold her. I had tried a few times after the depression had set in. She seemed cold, not physically, but so unresponsive. I had given up on that, but every night I thought about how much I wanted to hold her, how much I wanted to make love to her. She was so beautiful.

As we laid there I stroked her hair. I wanted so badly to kiss her, but I wasn't sure how she'd react. It had been too long since we kissed. It had been so long since I had had my arms around her. I didn't know how much affection she could take for the moment. I loved her. Always. I was afraid to think about how she felt about me. Certainly she didn't dislike me. In all her despair I knew she didn't blame me for it, for her depression, but that didn't mean her feelings for me hadn't died. I hoped that, at least, she knew how much I cared about her. If only I could tell her. If only she'd respond to it.

The Chef had built our garden for us. It was his idea anyway, though others participated in the construction. We had acquired the building next to our restaurant, had it torn down and a garden built in its place. The Chef had never set foot in it once it was built. As I mentioned customers had been allowed in at first, but I never liked that. It was only a short time until we closed it to the public. Only my wife and I would spend time in it. Gardener's too, of course, but they never seemed to be there when we were. I know the Chef had intended it for us, it was never meant to attract business. Before her depression, my wife and I spent most of our time together there. This is where we'd laugh, and talk, and make love sometimes. We'd walk along the paths holding hands, even dancing sometimes, to music that existed only in our minds. Of course those are all images now, the feelings forgotten.

As I lay on the floor of the garden with my wife I saw her looking up at the sun shining through the tree branches, its rays split by the leaves, and the shadows dancing on her face. She looked peaceful, almost, though sad. I wished I could light her face up. We stayed there for hours, the sky changed from blue, to yellow, to orange, to red, to a sheet of stars faint above the city. I always like the garden

best at night. It was most peaceful then. Quiet. The busy sounds of the street retired.

I held her hand in mine, tracing my thumb along the curves. I watched her eyes as she looked up. I wanted to believe that she was at least a little happy. Then her father returned. I looked from my wife's beautiful face to see him in the garden's gate. He was angry, drunk. He walked in shouting at us. I hated the man. He'd never set foot in the garden before. I'd never let him. I felt no movement from my wife, though I knew her will shuddered. Perhaps she hated him as much as me, perhaps more. He walked into the garden only a few yards away from us, holding an empty bottle. He shouted at us, asking if there was any vodka in the house. We didn't have any. I told him so. This made him angrier. He told me to go to the liquor store and get some. I felt my wife leave my arms, she was as far away from her father as the garden would allow. That moment with my wife was over. I hated him, even more, for ruining that moment. The only moment I had had for a long time.

I got up and started to leave to get his liquor. I wouldn't get it for him, not really. I didn't even know where to buy vodka. As I was about to leave he told me I better get four bottles so it would last a while. I doubted four bottles would last that long for him. I started toward the door. I hated the idea of leaving my wife. I certainly wouldn't leave while he was still in the garden. As I stood by the door, my body language motioned for him to leave. I waited for him to leave. Suddenly he changed his mind; he told me that he'd better get the vodka. He must have realized that I didn't know anything about alcohol. I was happy to see him turn around and stumble toward the gate. I looked from him to my wife. She was expressionless. I could only imagine what she felt. Did she hate him? Was she angry that he had walked in at that moment too? Years ago I might have known what she was thinking. I wanted to kiss her. How would she react? I walked closer to her. She was looking at her father. I looked back at him as he was walking away. I told my wife that I wished he was dead. She didn't respond.

As her father approached the gate the Chef stepped into view. Strange, because I thought the restaurant had closed a few hours earlier. I supposed he had stayed late for something. He spoke to my wife's father. Gentle voiced. Her father didn't yell at him. The Chef told him he would get him something to drink. My father-in-law seemed somewhat satisfied and followed the Chef. They headed out of the garden and into the restaurant.

I wanted to put my arms around my wife again and hold her. She did not react so favorably, her father's fault. I was angry. If he hadn't arrived, I could have held her forever. I knew she wanted to be left alone. In that moment I realized that the reason she was so unaffectionate and depressed was because of her father. I didn't know why exactly. I wished even more that he was dead. He

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must have done something when she was young, something that was buried deep in her mind, something that had emerged into her subconscious when the depression began. His presence at our apartment would only make things worse. Leaving the garden I decided to find out where, exactly, the Chef had taken him. I'd tell my father-in-law that his stay with us was over. I'd put him up in a hotel until I could find a permanent residence for him, somewhere far away from here.

I took my time finding them, trying to decide what, exactly, to say to him, how, exactly, the act. Past the dining room, I heard the sizzle and cracking of something cooking on the stove. I found them in the kitchen, the Chef, my wife's father, and one of the cooks. As I stepped into the kitchen my eyes widened.

It was an odd site. The Chef and cook were preparing a rice dinner on the stove. And my father-in-law was inside the oven. It was an industrial oven, of course, necessary for the volume served at our restaurant, taller than a man. The racks had been removed to allow him room to stand. The oven's door was open, and no restraints held my father-in-law inside. He stood there by his own will.

I could see that he was being baked, slowly, the heat enveloping his whole body. Yet he was completely unaware that anything unusual was happening. He seemed happy, cheerful even, laughing. I despised him for having a moment of cheer. The Chef had used some kind of drug, a sedative, I guessed, to make him unaware of the pain his body must have been feeling.

Across from him, on the stove the Chef was cooking some rice. I stepped closer, and the smell of herbs and spices was amazing. Despite the horror of the situation my mouth watered. I could feel the heat from the oven. I turned to my father-in-law. He looked at me, inviting, friendly. He liked the smell of the herbs as well. He told the Chef how he was excited for the dinner to be finished. The Chef and cook did not respond to him, they simply continued cooking, their backs to him, as if they didn't see him, as if he wasn't really there. The cook was Asian as well, someone the Chef had hired. I didn't recognize him. He was young, and taller than the Chef. Both were resolute as they worked.

As my father baked I wondered if I should stop the Chef. Certainly I could pull him out of there. The heat was not so unbearable that I couldn't take a few seconds to pull him out. Certainly I could ask the Chef what the hell he was doing. Instead I took a few steps back, and froze, shocked, staring. He wasn't feeling any pain whatsoever, I could tell. I wondered what it was that the Chef knew. He had no reservations about baking this man. Maybe my wife had said something to the Chef. I'd never seen them speak. Maybe he was a sadist. I doubted I would ever know. I didn't stop him. My vision went narrow. I was motionless. Time didn't advance.

After what may have been hours my father-in-law's knees collapsed and he fell to the ground tumbling out of the oven. He let out a cry and suddenly time

caught up to me. I looked at his body crumpled on the ground. His hair and clothes had burned and melted away. How much time had passed? His naked body was tanned from the heat. The smell wasn't so great now. No amount of herbs could cover up the dry smell of his body. The Chef and cook had finished cooking, and were dishing the rice onto plates. I couldn't smell the sweet spices anymore, I couldn't smell anything.

He was breathing. Still alive. Gasping for air. I didn't know how long it had been. The Chef and cook had disappeared into the dining room.

I saw that my wife was in the kitchen entrance. I looked at her. For the first time in what must have been forever I saw emotion on her face, though the exact emotion I wasn't sure. Horror is what most people would have felt at the site of her father lying there. I wasn't sure that was what she was feeling. She looked at me, her expression telling. My heart shattered. I was expressionless, emotionless, in a haze.

The police arrived shortly. I didn't know who had called them. My wife I guessed, maybe someone else. It didn't matter. Paramedics came in to treat my father-in-law. He wasn't dead. I didn't think he would die. He would suffer, though, for the rest of his life. The police handcuffed me as I watched the paramedics move his naked and burnt body onto a stretcher, a breathing mask on his face. I was escorted into the dining room. My wife followed. The Chef and cook were in the dining room, handcuffed as well. Two dinners set up on one of the tables.

I looked at my wife, so beautiful. She wasn't happy with me. She knew that I hadn't done this, but she also knew I hadn't stopped it. I hadn't said anything. I had only watched.

I knew I wasn't going to prison. It was the Chef who had done it and he would take the blame. He'd confess, too. I knew that. I had rarely spoken with the Chef. I couldn't even remember having a conversation with him. He'd go away. No one would ever know that only a little while earlier I had told my wife that I wished her father was dead. I still felt that he deserved to die, but I would never say that out loud again.

My wife followed as the police escorted us out of the restaurant. Oh how much I wanted to touch her. I knew, though, if I did, she would feel cold, dead, or at least that is how I'd feel to her. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her and that I didn't mean it. She stopped at the entrance, watching me as the police sat me down in the back of a squad car. The Chef and cook in another car.

As we drove away I wasn't worried. Everything would be alright as far as the law was concerned. I kept looking back at my wife. Standing in the entranceway, her arms folded. Nothing would be alright as far as she was

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concerned. I looked back until we rounded a corner. I knew that I would never hold her in my arms again.