

Breach of Faith

by Gary Earl Ross

You love your wife and would never do anything to hurt her. In thirteen years of marriage you've never been unfaithful, never done more than glance at another woman. Until tonight. Tonight you got lucky. Oh God, how you got lucky! You went to Images, that new upscale bar in the business district, for a quick drink after your late Friday meeting. You were with a couple of your associates, celebrating your company's latest triumph--discreet men who backed off and drifted away when they recognized the come-on. In fact, they knew what was happening before you did. They could see that Elena wanted you and they gave her the room to hunt.

Elena. Dark hair and a coppery radiance. A restless heat that seared any man near her perimeter. Huge almond eyes that almost shot hooks into your soul. She was a stranger to you, and when she asked you to buy her a drink, her sultry voice was like a razor through your central nervous system. Perhaps it was the pulsing of the music or your second martini or the tendrils of her perfume encircling you and pulling you closer, but before long you were hers, to do with as she liked. Heart moving in triple time, you followed her red Maserati to an elegant condo on the outskirts of town. Candles. Another couple cocktails. Slow music, slow dancing. Then she was all over you, and for the next two hours you experienced the most incredible sex of your life, sex that until then had existed for you only in your fantasies. She did everything--with you, for you, to you--and you performed in ways you would have thought impossible. At last, as casually as you had come together, you and Elena parted, with neither promise nor expectation of ever meeting again.

Ah, Elena!

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But now you are home, in the front hall you repainted just two months ago. Now you are home, climbing the stairs softly to avoid waking Gloria. After other nights out, you usually tumble into bed after a quick trip to the john and a cursory brushing of teeth. Tonight, however, you tiptoe in sock feet, easing the bathroom door shut behind you. Filling the tub might cause Gloria to stir, but you must wash Elena off your body. So you stand at the sink, giving yourself a painstakingly thorough chicken shower. The term amuses you. After all, you are a chicken. You are scared Gloria will sense what has happened. She will smell Elena, a kaleidoscope of scents--perfume, soaps, powders, and bodily fluids. She will smell Elena and know. You are terrified that your indiscretion will cost you your home and your family and your standing in the community. You scrub your chest and genitals and brush your teeth until your gums bleed. You gargle longer than you've ever been able to stand it, almost drinking the Listerine, because the taste of Elena is so deep in your throat. Finally, you are ready for bed and crawl between the sheets with such careful precision that your movements never penetrate Gloria's slumber. But you yourself cannot sleep. Memory of this wonderful night intrudes upon your ability to relax. Every time you close your eyes, Elena's face hovers above yours, forcing you to smile at her in the dark.

The next morning, as you sip your coffee, you notice a strange odor. At first you think it is the coffee and set down your cup. But the smell persists, intensifying with each inhalation, until it conjures images of your head between Elena's legs. With a shudder, you realize it is your mustache. Excusing yourself, you hurry upstairs and slip into the bathroom. Last night's Palmolive has failed you, so you ransack the bathroom cupboard until you locate the hotel-sized bar of Irish Spring you picked up from a Holiday Inn last year. After tearing off the wrapper and lathering your mustache, you plunge your face into a hot washcloth. Smoothing your mustache with your fingers, you are relieved you caught the

problem before Gloria had a chance to kiss you. God, how could you have explained the smell of another woman's secrets on your face?

Or on your hands, for that matter, because now you smell your fingertips. The fingers on your right hand smell like vaginal secretions, the ones on your left like armpit and hair gel. You reach for the Irish Spring again, scrubbing and nearly scalding your hands as clouds of steam carry the overpowering scent of the soap to the four corners of the bathroom. Hands red and tingling, you return to breakfast. Today is Saturday and no one expects you to hop into the tub before you've finished your bacon and scrambled eggs. But the first chance you get, you are back in the bathroom, forcing the last slivers of Irish Spring into your skin and soaking in the hottest tub you can stand.

By lunchtime your mustache has begun to smell again, as have your fingers, which now feel sticky. Trying to sound casual, you announce to your wife and children that it's time you shaved off your mustache. Gloria and your daughter exchange puzzled looks, but your son ignores you, his jaws working on a ham sandwich and his eyes working on the World Wrestling Federation on the kitchen portable. Finally, Gloria shrugs off your proclamation: "It's your mustache." Before her words die in the air, you are back in the bathroom, so lathered you look like Santa Claus and scraping away with your Trac II. After washing and drying your face, you do not notice the dots of blood in the washcloth and towel. Nor do you feel the burning of your face. Your attention has been drawn to another smell--Elena's body cream, and it seems to be trapped in your chest hairs. You pull off your T-shirt and tear it into thin strips which you carefully flush down the toilet. Then you scrub as if the washcloth were sandpaper and your chest a block of wood. But even after you have donned a new T-shirt, Elena's scent remains.

"Are you all right?" Gloria asks when at last you come downstairs again.

"Never better," you say feebly.

Desperate now to steer clear of Gloria and the kids until you are clean, you volunteer to cut the grass. Outside, your troubles seem to increase geometrically. The heat of the sun makes your body feel Elena's heat in its every pore. Now your spine is beginning to feel the flutter of fingertips, the glide of her knuckles. The bead of perspiration trailing down your inner thigh feels like that dribble of her saliva. Against your will you are erect, and the pressure inside your jeans closely resembles her exquisite palm. Your calves can feel her toenails, and your sphincter tightens involuntarily at more than the memory of her finger. The rush of the wind and the chirping of birds fill your ears with pants of ecstasy. By now you are sweating heavily, and Elena is oozing in and out of you, soaking your bones and stinging your eyes. Your clinging T-shirt becomes huge breasts flattened against your chest, a sweaty sheet against your back. The lining of your mouth is permeated with the taste of her lipstick, her cocktails, the fruit cocktail she had eaten for lunch. In the garage, shaking, you pour gasoline into your lawn mower, spilling it all over your hands. On impulse, you wash your hands in it, working it between the hairs and into the skin, into the palms and under the fingernails. But gasoline fails to diminish the slightest residue of Elena; one of your pinkies even smells like her pasty-sweet earwax. Determined now, you douse your body with gasoline, rubbing and scrubbing through your clothes. But nothing helps. Nothing. Everywhere are the smells, the sounds, the sensations. Unable to tolerate any more, you reach toward the barbecue supplies for a box of matches.

Maybe now you'll be free.

Much later, you are conscious of voices and machinery and unbelievable pain. Somewhere there is weeping, and you recognize it as Gloria's. You realize you are bandaged and strapped down. But

that doesn't matter because you have finally gotten Elena off you, out of your system. It never happened; she never happened. Now you can go on with your life. Behind the bandages covering your face, you smile--and a corner of a gauze strip falls into your mouth. Your tongue touches it, tastes it, and you know with agonizing clarity that it isn't gauze but another tongue, Elena's tongue, that is in your mouth as she is in your being, and with your arms restrained at your sides, you are powerless to get it out.

