

Three Wives

by Gary Moshimer

The heart attack felt like the time Alison stabbed me with knitting needles. It made me want to see her. She was the fun wife, the first of three.

I was morbid and full of regret — my drinking had driven them away, no kids in the wake. I decided to visit all of them, in reverse order.

I showed up at Jane's door on a Monday morning. Luckily her husband still worked.

"What do you want?" She opened the door a crack. Her eye was violet, nestled in fat, moving backwards into her.

"I had a heart attack. A real scare."

"And you want what?"

"A pie?"

Jane was known for her pies.

"You want me to bake you a pie."

"A cherry pie."

She looked me up and down. I was a sight, down to one-thirty. My skin sagged. I looked like a deflated balloon. The doctor said I'd probably live, if I quit smoking and took my medicine. I wasn't supposed to eat pie. Especially the way Jane made it, with the butter crust that melted in your mouth, filled your veins.

She sighed and said, "Fine. But then you take it and leave, before Bill gets home."

"Okay."

She let me sit in the kitchen and watch her. She was the kind to wear aprons all the time. She made her pies here and sent them to a shack on the boardwalk. She had more of the soft white skin on her upper arms that reminded me of dough. I used to tell her she was the softest thing I'd ever held, but people like me, insecure, squeeze things too hard. You find a way to hurt them.

I watched her rolling pin carefully, with a certain dread. It was not the old one, with my blood soaked in.

She had wanted to start her own bakery, but I siphoned the money away. I always thought I could win her more. One good night in Atlantic City and all the pies in the world, her chubby face on a billboard.

She didn't give me time for the pie to cool. I had to carry it out wearing oven mitts. I recognized them. I'd put them on one night to punch her.

I placed the pie on the passenger seat and headed for Marci's.

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Marci was a photographer. She'd had a good business before I met her, at a friend's wedding. Because I was cleaned up and dressed, I had a certain charm. I had some charm back then, especially after three drinks. After six I'd become an asshole, put out cigarettes in empty glasses, prop my chin on women's shoulders. Marci was taking the pictures at the reception and kept coming back to me. She said it was a study. She liked my look, like a character in a movie. She captured my decline from charming to derelict, my true self emerging, drunk and tipping over, crawling on hands and knees. She made a coffee table book of me. By then we were living together.

I took the book to a bar and a lonely woman sat next to me and helped me page through it. "Wow," she said. "Are you some actor? Are these stills from a movie?" A lot of them were black-and-white, and the range of my expressions alarmed me, like I'd never truly seen myself, like I was a big fake, a ghost passing through with little consequence to anyone. I told the woman the movie was about some loser's life, and she wondered if she could rent it, and I said it never made it past the first couple screenings. Then I went home with her. She said I looked like Bogart.

When I got home, Marci had locked me out. I broke the window to her studio and threw myself in. I turned on all the high powered lamps and sat in the big wing chair with the purple velvet that looked like a throne. I made myself sweat, my pores bleeding gin. I lit a cigarette and burned the place down.

Now I found Marci in a new studio next to her house. I stood on the lawn and called to her.

"Jesus fucking Christ," she said.

And I could have been him, with my withered bones and sandals. "Can you take my picture? I'm probably dying, so this will be the last of the series."

Like Jane, she did it to get rid of me. She used a black backdrop so my tee shirt looked cleaner, my teeth less yellow. In one I gazed longingly out the window. Another had me lying on the floor in a sunbeam, arms at my sides, eyes closed. I got the cherry pie and ate the whole thing like a pig while she snapped away, circling me. "Make sure you make these black-and-white," I said, "with just the cherry goop in color."

"I'll make them into post cards and send them to you," she said.

* * *

Which left me Alison. Dear Alison, the one I truly loved. We were young, with the same yellow hair. Mine was healthy then, not the sickly yellow-gray of now, brittle with nicotine. Hers she wrapped around me. She captured me, like a spider mummifying its prey.

Passion, spontaneity, mischief: those were Alison's gifts. Our fights were like play, our binges games. Hurt could be healed with soft kisses, marks erased with the caress of a tender thumb. The serious pain was unborn, coiled and waiting, like the worm at the bottom of a bottle.

I pulled off at a rest stop now, on the way to Alison's house, and put the seat back, lifted my shirt to see the scars, prominent between bulging ribs. They were her grandmother's knitting needles. I loved her so. I still do. And wasn't she sending me the same message, with these aching wounds?

But I found her in bad shape, cancer of the pancreas, refusing treatment.

"It kills you anyway," she said, sitting with me on her porch swing. "I wanted to keep this hair."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"I knew you'd come."

She wanted me to stay to the end. She wrapped her silver hair around me and hummed our old song. She peeked at me inside the cocoon and said I didn't look so good. I said I felt fine, better than fine. We were shells of who we used to be. She touched my lips.

"Is that blood?"

"Cherry pie."

"What? Now I'm hungry, all of a sudden. I haven't been hungry in a long time."

She unwound me. She punched my shoulder. "I think I want a pie." She looked excited. I knew this look. The film on her eyes parted to let a little spark through. "A whole pie, yes. But not just any pie. One from that place at the shore."

"Now?"

"Take me now, before it's too late. Take me, take me." She tried to bounce. She poked my ribs with her sharp bones.

She told me to drive faster, time is short. I got the apple pie, she wanted the cherry. The sun was setting. We sat in the sand and ate with plastic forks. I couldn't believe I was eating another pie. And I still felt empty, deserted inside like this stretch of beach because she would leave me again and this time for good. She gobbled her pie like she was starving, and said she was full, satisfied that I was back.

"I shouldn't have left," I said.

"Didn't I try to kill you?"

"At least I knew I was alive."

We left our pie tins to the seagulls and went to the photo-booth on the boardwalk. We kissed with the pie still on our faces. We were a mess. She kissed my face all over. "I'm sorry I hurt you," she said.

The clouds were moving quickly across the sky. She cried, saying that time was speeding up just for her. "We've done the cycle, Ray. Good to bad and back to good."

"Dying is not good".

"That's not what I'm talking about."

The wind picked up. She had trouble standing. I lifted her. She was light, empty. I carried her down the beach, destination unknown. The sand shifted over my footprints.

“We'll get you help, honey. We will.”

I walked until my heart skipped. The light disappeared over the horizon and a billion stars exploded.

