

At Least There Will Be Plenty Implied

by M. F. Sullivan

At thirty-one, there came a December afternoon when Susan found herself draped in a stiff wooden chair, staring into her glass of straight whiskey and trying very hard to find a way to kill her husband. The dining room she inhabited was dusty because they hadn't entertained in a month at least and she just couldn't manage to give a damn. She couldn't give a damn about anything anymore. It was all so tedious and she just wanted it to stop, would do anything for it to stop.

How had it gone on this long? It seemed like yesterday he had put his foot down and demanded she quit singing in the club since they were married. But by now it was seven years. Each one of them had sickened her more than the last. She would never get back into it now. All those dreams had been swept away, just because of jealousy.

When, in the first year together she had whined of boredom day in and out, tossed and turned all night for want of something to do with her days, he suggested she go to college. "You're a smart girl," he'd said as he put on his tie for a cocktail party one evening. "Don't you want to educate yourself? You told me you dropped out of high school."

"Miles helped me get my GED," she said, maybe too quickly, maybe too stiffly, but she was never really in the business of self-censorship with Lewis after quitting. She wanted him to know that her boss had done wonderful things for her, and had never tried to take it anyplace closer than business. She wanted him to know that Miles was a good man, even if he didn't seem like it, even if he was generally exploitative, a drug addict with anger issues—but he had been a good boss, and a great person, and she missed him.

"That's the easy stuff," rebuffed Lewis, crossing his arms and managing in the process to look like one of those tacky gnome

garden statues. "Come on, let's get you into Boston University, maybe, I love Massachusetts. Or we could go to some place abroad. What about England? If you could study anything, what would you study?"

"I don't know."

"When you were a little kid, what did you want to be as an adult?"

Her smile dripped with malice. "A singer, like my mother."

"Well, what about composition? You could be a composer."

"I don't know," she said. She didn't care for the idea. Writing wasn't the art that had clutched her, it was singing, acting, dancing. Arts of her body. She had agreed to think about it, and after much consideration decided no art was worth going to school for. They could be practiced on their own time, hours spent pouring over them. The only thing arts schooling brought was a network, and Susan had access to a very powerful one through Lewis, so she had no need.

What did that leave? The only thing that leapt out at her was psychology. She felt so different from other people, so isolated—perhaps it would help if she understood them a little better. Perhaps, if she could not walk in the footsteps of her mother, she might walk in the footsteps of her true father.

So, like a good little girl, she'd gone off to school again, and it was actually quite exciting at first. She learned all kinds of things, and not just about the human mind. Latin was on her roster for two years, and Greek for two years after. The abnormal psychology course she took had seemed like a love letter to her family tree and there were days she found her self trying not to laugh as she thought of various relatives, herself among them. There were also literary study classes which she cherished, film classes, philosophy, a brilliant array of information given to her, hers for the taking. In the end, she couldn't pick what she wanted to study, and double majored in psychology and philosophy with a minor in classical civilization.

And then suddenly she was wearing a ridiculous cap, and being handed a piece of paper, and there she was on a stage for the first

time in four years, and she faltered briefly as she was rushed off of it, trying to have just an extra second of the view, of that sea of faces disappearing past the lights.

And then Lewis took her out to dinner, and then she went home, and then she was bored again. And so he said, "Go back. Get a doctorate."

But she simply couldn't. After the graduation ceremony, something in her brain changed. She felt so hollow. It was like she was floating somewhere just behind herself all the time. And she began to spend every day wishing, praying, that her husband would die. It had been three years since graduation, now, and as he shuffled past her dining room seat, smiling all the way, she peered at him from between parted fingers. He was never going to die. He was going to live forever just to spite her. Eighty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty, because he knew that all she wanted was for him to give up. Because deep down, he hated her as much as she hated him. Every grin made her want to vomit, even as she returned them. They always got bad around this time of the year, laden with the Hollywood happiness of a good Christian man who failed to see how tedious the season of death was. Why he so reveled in it, she could never understand. His family hadn't come to see him in years. It was just them. It was always just them.

She chain-smoked while he hauled cardboard boxes from the basement with strength that should have faded a decade ago. He was going to ask her to knead his bread dough-back tonight, and she was going to puke. When he winked, she showed her teeth, then turned her attention to the brandy snifter, kissing its rim, suckling the edge of the glass for comfort. The dust from the boxes amplified the smell of age which permeated the house, that odor which followed her like a ghost even when she escaped on the occasional errand, the odd party attended by herself.

Of course, all her old friends were gone now. What she had were his friends, and friends of his friends. They were fine people, too, but how often she missed Anita and her brother, how often she wondered after Miles. It was such a lonely thing, this, but she just

had to convince herself it would be worth the payoff. Once Lewis was dead, she might get at least a little of his money, and money wouldn't buy her happiness, but it would certainly buy her freedom. Freedom from further dependence, freedom from labor, freedom from uncertainty.

The ladder screeched across the linoleum and cut through her so violently that she actually felt her temple throb. Seven years was quite an investment. What if it turned into eight? Nine? God, *ten*? As it stood, seven was uncomfortably close to ten. Each day increased the urgent need to get herself out but make a return on her investment, and the way she saw it, there was only one sensible way to do that. The question was not what to do, but rather how to do it.

Poison was obvious. Poison was the weapon used by a little girl also desperate to escape her situation. But this was not a man whose death would be overlooked, not the way her father's had been. One autopsy, and it would be over for her. Intentional suicide was not something anyone could see Lewis doing.

Accidental suicide, though. Why, that could happen to anyone. Maybe she could get him to trip down the stairs. Fix that threadbare monstrosity in the hall so that his foot would catch. Then...whoops.

After he affixed that ear-flap hat upon his head, the back door shut after him. She killed her cigarette, imagining how nice it would be to flee. There would never be a way back into singing for her, but acting? Now that was a possibility. She could cut back smoking to help her voice. And the men—oh, the men. Sure, there were men now, but she was tired of sneaking like a teenager tiptoeing around daddy. It was hard to enjoy lovers when she knew she'd have to come home to Lewis and spend every night repulsed by his mere hand on her arm. Never mind the sight of him naked! She hated her own bed anymore.

But the bed—it gave her an idea. She thought of how close she'd come to ending *The Baby*, so dangerously close, waking up out of a trance that afternoon just in time. She thought of all the big, fat pillows on the king-sized bed upstairs, most of them uncomfortably firm and fantastic for her purposes. How about the acid green one

with the silver thread embroidered by his dead first wife? They wouldn't investigate that too hard. He was old; his heart stopped. These things happen.

Glass left behind, she ascended the stairs. A sneer overcame her while passing the portrait upon the landing wall. It was a shame: the black dress she'd worn had been so flattering, accentuating all the right curves. Her hair, too, had been perfect, piled upon her head in a mahogany crown. And the artist had done such a fine job of capturing the acidic glint of her gaze. But Lewis' presence made her image impossible to appreciate. All she could see was his ashen hair, and teeth which weren't white as they were depicted. Her nose wrinkled as she imagined them, yellow as his nicotine-stained fingers.

The world's loudest pillow sat neglected on his armchair in the corner of their bedroom. She turned it over in her hands, then pressed it to her face. Wouldn't he be able to turn his head? This sort of thing always worked in movies, but with her luck, the pressure would wake him. Then he'd have her at the end of his antique shotgun until the cops came.

She dropped the pillow with a snort. As she passed the bed en route to the bathroom, the window rattled. There he was, knocking, waving, that stupid smile wrinkling his face further. She headed into the master bathroom without returning his greeting, intent on the orange bottle with her name on it.

She'd always heard it was ill-advised to take a barbiturate after drinking. Something about respiratory issues—but the chemists who determined that had never met her husband. Dealing with him, the risk was worth it. One ruby pill on top of a glass of liquor and everything was easy street. One of these days his relentless cheer might drive her to take one too many, but he'd get her to the hospital before her heart stopped, she was sure.

She froze while shaking a pill into her palm, inspiration delivering a cold slap to the back of her skull. The plastic of the bottle glowed like a holy artifact. Respiratory depression. A believable accident.

Lips parted, she pressed the bottle to her breast. She could grind a few up. Put them in his drink. When he was out, she'd give the pills some gentle assistance until his breathing stopped, and then, no, officer, she didn't realize he'd been taking her Seconal. If only she'd known.

Amazing that it hadn't come to her before. Why pick poison or a pillow when it could be a bit of both?

Her first genuine smile in a month was the one she shared with her reflection. Three of the blood-red pills would be enough to put him out. Amazing stuff, modern medicine. A carol infectious as the plague crossed her lips while she made her way down to the kitchen, and she didn't even mind.

One cabinet at a time, she peered over their staples. Something to cover the flavor. Liquor? Maybe. Soup didn't seem strong enough. Hot chocolate, though. He did love it, and he liked it thick, and so bitter it was practically a melted block of baking chocolate. He'd come in later, cheeks splotched pink with cold, and she could greet him with a nice warm drink. Wasn't she a sweet little wife?

As her fingers curled around the container of powdered cocoa, there came a muted shout. The clatter of the shutting cabinet door muffled the thump of a landing body, but the scrape of the ladder arcing down the siding got her attention just fine. Her pulse leapt.

Awestruck, she wandered through the back door to stand in her leopard print slippers upon a top step already dusted snow-free. A tangle of red lights swayed in the wind like a noose, waving to the ladder upon the ground beneath it, to the man prostrate a few feet away. He cried her name, his tone urgent as an alarm clock, the two syllables hissing from his lips with little more than rare pause for breath between, or the occasional plea for help that would go unheard by anyone but her. Susan had always liked the idea of living in the country, and now she realized why.

He looked like a stranger there. Was a stranger, maybe had always been a stranger. She had done such a good job of pretending she knew him that she even convinced herself. Had forgotten that she could never really know anyone. Had forgotten she was the kind

of person who could see a scene like this and think the thoughts she did. His glass marble eyes found hers, their almond shape contorting with the pain scribbled across his brow. Again, his mouth moved in request for help, but she couldn't hear it. She couldn't hear the whistle of the wind, either, or the beat of her own heart.

Suddenly, she felt more like herself than she had in years. Fingers tensing around the cocoa, she assumed the glimmering showgirl's smile she'd given him that first time all those years ago. She thought about saying something. Anything. But her feet were getting cold, and she needed to practice her tears, so she decided to go back inside to enjoy the quiet of her house.

