

# Complicated Game

by Michael K. White

Peggy woke up in the bedroom smelling burned pumpkin and she instantly knew her husband Tim had remained unconscious and insensible on the couch again and let the candle burn down. She and Lennon had watched him the previous night take control of the jack-o'lantern carving with his sniffy officious air, braying about how he knew knives and that he carved faces in pumpkins for a living one summer in Wisconsin and the upshot of it all was Lennon crying and Tim carving a faultless, soulless jack-o'lantern by himself and falling sleep (*passing out*) with the candle burning.

It was a bayberry scented candle like the kind they used to light when they made love, but they didn't make love anymore under any circumstances so the candles were used for other things. The smell of the scented wax however, involuntarily triggered her faint desire and she was angry with her body for betraying her like this. As an academic she knew that her body was responding to a smell which her subconscious associated with lovemaking. What galled her was that she apparently had so little control of what her body instinctively reacted to as opposed to what her mind told her body to ignore.

Tim just lay there sleeping, his jack-o'lantern burned black and stinking and shrunken and shriveled like a melted mask, the cheery smile from the night before now charred, sinister and toothless. It was just like him to act so irresponsibly. They had a four-year-old son but that didn't matter to Tim. All he did was work at his unexciting and unimpressive job as a cook ("chef" he'd correct, irritated) take his Zoloft and lay on the couch watching TV and smoking weed (when he could beg it.) She tolerated the weed smoking because it at least calmed him down. She had borne his manic depression long enough and had been secretly making plans for her escape for a long time now.

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Her plan started out as just a fantasy. Soon after they were married she started fantasizing how she would leave him. It would be a huge dramatic gesture and she would just shut him down. He thought he knew so much but he didn't know her. That was one thing she had decided before they ever got married. She would never allow him to really know her. It was her secret and she cherished and nurtured it. She only married him because she was pregnant anyway and all her friends from upstate New York were married and had babies. She never really realized what having a child meant until of course she had one. She didn't like being a mother. She didn't like it one bit at all. But she would be damned if she would see him with Lennon when she could take him to her mother's and dress him in decent clothes and show him to her friends from upstate.

Lennon, a flinchy, wet eyed boy was told that his daddy was a very sick and dangerous man and that mommy needed to take him to grandma's house in upstate New York. Lennon loved his daddy but his mother assured him that he couldn't trust his daddy because he took anti-psychotics and smoked marijuana and was abusive when he was drunk. Lennon wasn't sure what she meant by all this but even at four he knew the sky falling when he saw it.

Peggy Skaff knew that she had to move fast because Tim would be awake by ten and in a disoriented and angry stupor. She decided to take nothing, only Lennon with her. That meant she would have to get him at day care. Thank God her neighbor Jeannie, a fat, jolly woman who cleaned classrooms at night had a kid Lennon's age in daycare. Lennon spent a lot of time at Jeannie's thank god, leave she and Tim free to pursue their paths of mutual antipathy. Well, why go get him at all when she knew she could just call on Jeannie and Jeannie would do it for her. She reached for the phone and her brief case fell open. Tim had broken the lock when he borrowed it to go on a job interview. At least that's what he said he did, but how do you break a brief case latch going on an interview. And she thought she could smell marijuana in the case too. The restraining orders were all lined up in her briefcase and her

mother's attorney assured her that if a desperate and out of control Tim lunged at her or swore at her they would not only relieve him of all his rights but put him in prison for the rest of his life. Which is what he deserved for not being the kind of man she thought he was.

She had gone through this morning drill for the past week now. Her open-end plane ticket allowed her the luxury of deciding which time to go. To flee. Thank God her mother had Means. And Tim had none. Peggy knew that money was the only thing now that would release her from this horrible horrible mistake. She should never have gotten pregnant from this mongrel. Her mother had been right. She was from better stock than he, and sure enough it was true. She hadn't wanted to believe it but now she did. They had made a beautiful child and he grew older and more aware all she wanted to do was take him away from the coarse influence of his father.

Peggy wasn't sure when she would just take off. It was delicious really knowing that she could just collect Lennon from daycare any time she wanted and drive to the airport and catch the next plane to New York. She hadn't yet but she might. Today.

Tim is not able to defend himself. He is still reeling from his dream, which has jolted him awake in a sweaty panic. It is a dream he had dreamed before and the dream is always the same.

After the fire the basement is wet and blackened; only shapes and shadows. The walls are charred and soppy with ash and the smell is overpowering. Ozone and charcoal, death and birth, primal smells and the atavistic visions they trigger float past and around him like effortless steel.

The floors are covered with debris like the bottom of the ocean. A thunderstorm begins outside and the quality of light darkens and sharpens dramatically as it tends to do in dreams. And as always in dreams the room itself changes. Fish now litter the floor, some flopping crazily, their hysterical eyes shine unblinking into the night sky through a jagged hole in the ceiling which closes

itself up and clouds the eyes of the gasping fish. Freakishly big tadpoles slither in and out of the corners through the burnt muck and a newt with yellow eyes stands guard over melted piles of furniture.

The dream is always the same. Room after room telescoped and compressed at the same time, light and darkness shifting unmercifully, first it was day then it was night, no pattern or reason but a continual shift of emphasis. Tim bending down and picking up burned artifacts shoving them into pockets and moving on. Looking for something but not exactly sure what. It is the basement but the ceiling looks directly into the sky. Clouds pass quickly and car horns grow louder past tense carried into present tense. It is the house he had grown up in but it wasn't. Heat and light and car noises and coffee smell and then he is awake, adrift.

"Don't touch me." Peggy hissed her defenses up. Tim just looked confused and hurt. He reached out to her so she would hug him but was surprised to see her recoil. He knew he shouldn't be surprised, but his gesture was genuine and her reaction seemed out of all proportion. He felt he was reaching out to her but she was holding him back, literally now, with both arms.

"You stink. Go take a shower." She said flatly, turning to leave. "I need you to pick up Lennon from daycare." She said.

"Okay," Tim replied a trace of friendliness still in his voice. He looked at her. His wife. His. Wife. She stood framed in the doorway. Her nearly forty-year-old body was beginning to take on the bony tone of an old crone and he could see instantly how she would age. Not to flesh but to bone, becoming more and more lean and severe. Her frizzy hair would get thinner and thinner.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" she demanded.

"I just. I just love you."

She frowned and slapped her purse as if looking for something. Her tone had softened a little but she wasn't giving an inch. That's how it was lately with them. Tim tried to understand but

since he had gotten on the Zoloft things like that just didn't seem worth pursuing. He was dimly aware that he should, but he just couldn't summon the ambivalence.

"Just don't forget Lennon," She said sadly and without another word she walked out apartment number nine. It had scary ghost vibes and Tim had been flashing heavily since they had moved in five months ago. He just couldn't get the hang of the place, coming from the east and all. People talked different and he pitched his bravado too high here. When he used his normal East Coast braggadocio; the kind he had won Peggy with, the people here looked at him like he was crazy. Like he was yelling at them or something.

All of Peggy's friends were fucking phonies and he hated them all. His son was tuning into a mommy coddled sissy and witnessed his daily debasing by his wife who had looked him so prettily in the eyes in Las Vegas and promised to love cherish and, well not obey that's for sure. For damn sure.

He allowed himself a wry chuckle. Just once in defiance of his medication. The pills were great, no doubt about it. He didn't cry anymore but he didn't laugh either. He tried to make himself laugh, just to spite the medication but it was like trying to breathe underwater. Maybe he just wouldn't take that fucking pill today. Maybe he would wrest control of his life back from the brink. Maybe he would stand up like a man and make everything right one by one. He knew he could if he could just concentrate. It was all before him and maybe today he would just choose not to take that fucking pill. Not to surrender control of his mind and his emotions.

Or maybe tomorrow.

