

Residuals

by Phillis Ideal

I walked into the party and there he was - animated, charming, imposing—talking to a woman.

I knew that posture. The slight lean in, the softened eyes, the calibrated smile. He was setting the stage, presenting himself as a catch—an attentive one at that: chiseled jaw, a mop of soft brown hair, an ease that passed for sincerity, humor that made people feel chosen— all punctuated by his academic ease.

He was writing down the women's phone number and didn't see me approach.

He slipped the torn paper into his jacket pocket, touching her lightly on the arm and said, "I'll call you soon. We'll have that drink. I'm anxious to get to know you."

In that moment, all that I had believed to be true was a lie.

I had been with him the night before and nearly every other day for the past two years.

My heart raced. I couldn't swallow. Heat rose under my skin, sharp and disorienting. I wanted to disappear—to fold inward, to dissolve—but instead of leaving, I walked toward him.

I made a scene. Enough that we left the party.

Outside, the air felt thin. He was furious at being caught. I was shaking, words breaking apart as I tried to hold onto something solid. The argument escalated quickly as if it had always been waiting. When he hit me, it felt shocking and inevitable.

I ended up in the hospital.

We never saw each other again.

On my computer, I look at his face—lined now, after 40 years, but otherwise, unchanged. Time had thinned him, not softened him. I recognized him immediately.

For a moment, nothing happens. Then, the past loosens.

Details I had packed away with care rise without permission. Not all at once—never all at once—but in fragments: the angle of his smile, certainty in his voice, the way I learned, slowly, to doubt my own instincts. The night of the party comes last, assembling itself piece by piece, like something that knows exactly how it ends.

Images fall in sequence, each one sharpened beyond memory, leading—again—to the same conclusion.

I sit longer than I mean to. The room is quiet except for the low hum of the computer.

The notification remains open on the screen.

An online dating site has just informed me that we are a 95% match—predicted to be a successful relationship.

I don't laugh. I don't close the page. My cursor hovers over his name.

