

Another Supper

by Susan Scutti

The man was older and had never found a wife. Years of accumulated pain had short-circuited his instincts so that the first time he met the woman, he doubted her. Each time he spoke to her, he felt himself responding, but he wouldn't allow himself to please her. He was too afraid to be kind in a way that could possibly win her.

The woman's brown eyes were wide and soft for the man; she told a friend she thought he was similar to her in soul ways. She watched herself with the man, and, later, padding about her apartment with her cell phone stuffed in the pocket of her robe, blamed herself for the fact that the electric current shut down between them. She, too, had lived in urban solitude for years and now she acted eccentrically, wary of any attention coming her way. Even after months of knowing him, she could barely speak, so she just stared into the horizon of his eyes as if waiting for some sun to rise and warm her.

A stranger approached her one night while she was out after work, flattered and cajoled her with drinks from the bar. To destroy her frustrated desire, the woman became involved with him. "He's . . . nice," she told her friends; behind her back, they said the new man wasn't really right for her and would never last. Dutifully, though, she went out with the new man, she listened to his conversation, his concerns. She worked hard to feel, to feel. And, the new man must have taken away a small piece of the woman's pain. When the original man called her, her voice sounded new; now, she had the tone of someone who is desired.

And now the original man knew he had to please her if he wanted to win her and take from her what she could give.

Shortly after this, he visited her office and, seeing him unexpectedly, the woman's glance fell from his eyes to her desk and landed on a photo of the new man. He saw her painful smile, pitying him as she looked up at him to speak. In response to this, feelings of

inadequacy and cruelty rose within him, compelling the man to flirt instead with the woman's assistant. In front of her, he asked the assistant to have a drink with him after work. The assistant looked back and forth between the man and woman she'd introduced to one another months before, then quickly obliged.

Silently, the woman watched the man and her assistant humiliate her; she lifted the photo of the new man from her desk, carefully looked at the image beneath the glass. Clearing her throat, she turned away.

The man saw the woman smile and turn her face. As she turned, strands of her straight, long hair fell across her cheek, dividing her face into a pattern of shapes. Each shape was similar, though different in color. Her blushing complexion showed more pink in places than in others. As he watched her turn her face, he listened to the sound of her clearing her throat and he felt himself breathing. He felt the weight of his eyelids and the dryness of his mouth as he watched the strands of her straight, long hair fall across her cheek, dividing her face into a pattern of shapes, which were similar, though different in color. As the man watched the woman, he felt the give of soft carpet beneath the soles of his handsome shoes and he felt the heat of blood in his face. His breath moved in and out of his lungs and he watched strands of hair fall across the woman's face. He heard the small sound of her clearing her throat as a dull pain began to spread outward from his solar plexus; the woman smiled and turned and hair fell across her cheek.

That night, the wounded man and the assistant got drunk and things went farther than he had intended.

Afterwards, he felt remorse in a way he never had before. The assistant was not only married but also a mother and the man had always thought of her as "good." Can a good woman be so easily led astray? He felt dazed by it all: his guilt, her guilt, the enormous amount of ugliness inside both men and women.

After his night drinking with the assistant, the man avoided people; his fear of himself had grown so large. The assistant called him but he didn't answer the phone; her messages signaled his

answering machine like airplanes waiting to land. Carefully, he erased her voice without listening to a single one.

During this same period, he remembered the woman's pained, sweet eyes and he longed to see her face. Finally, after weeks passed and the memory of the night with the assistant faded, he visited her office. He lingered at her desk, staring down at her hands which were as pale as crumbled pieces of Greek statuary. Seeing her again after he had tried to hurt her (yet ended up wounding only himself), he knew that he could give to her now, kind at last.

As she looked up into his eyes, the man felt that the woman sensed something different about him; he believed she understood that all that was hard inside of him had softened. And seeing this, he felt how she wanted him yet pushed him away, her inner nature roughened by fear. Staring into one another's gaze, the faces of man and woman were like mirror images: Both had a deep line of pain centered between the eyes.

Her mouth fell slack when she heard the man say, "Would you like to go get supper somewhere together?" Yet, before she answered, the married assistant walked past the man and, unconsciously, he responded to her. The woman, the woman who was as beautiful as a broken Greek statue, stiffened and when her eyes returned to the man's, she wordlessly shook her head "No."

