

Better

by Victoria Lancelotta

My father-in-law is drunk. This is something only my husband and I know: the old man does not stagger or flail, he is not vacant; neither too-friendly nor hostile to the woman who shows us to a table and sets down three bundles of silverware wrapped in paper napkins before disappearing behind a counter.

We know he's drunk because he always is, in that low-grade way of the long-term alcoholic. Low-grade, like a fever—on a day like today he is just feverish enough. He prefers rye—an odd, old-fashioned preference—but drinks vodka on the days we take him out. This is some combination of cunning and vestigial thoughtfulness: the smell of vodka disappears into the drugstore aftershave he pats on in his bathroom at home, hands trembling.

The woman who seated us returns with three oversized plastic cups of water bunched against her apron and I see that she is not a woman at all, she is maybe eighteen, or twenty, almost pretty and young enough that for a moment her worn face takes me by surprise until I remember where I am—this is a neighborhood I used to know well, the streets and houses and the girls in them, girls who are flawless at twelve, bruised at fifteen and ruined at thirty. I smile at her and she smiles back, spreads three laminated menus on the table and touches my shoulder. “You let me know when you're ready to order.”

The menus are sticky, cloudy in spots and smeared. “Raymond,” I say, “can you read the menu or do you need one of us to help you out?”

“Dad?” Michael leans across the table and grasps his father's narrow wrist. “Do you know what you want to eat?”

“Chicken,” the old man says. “and a beer. Some bread.” He shakes Michael's hand free and feels across the table, knocking into one of the glasses. Water splashes, an ice chip skitters to the floor. “Where's the peanuts?” he says.

“How about a sandwich?” I say. “Chicken parmigiana? I don't know if they have peanuts.” We're careful where we take him; the list of what's risky is long—steps and stemmed glasses; candlelight; carpets and upholstery and linens; daily specials that might run out; a back door, a liquor license—and so we end up in places like this one, with plastic cutlery and paper napkins, a stack of Xeroxed to-go menus and a Styrofoam cup with TIPS marked on it next to the cash register. It's safe—safer—this way.

“Sandwich?” Raymond says. There is a slight but visible tremor in his neck and he steadies himself, focuses on me with an effort before turning to his son. “She must be extraordinary in the bedroom,” he says, his enunciation careful, precise, “otherwise, you'll have to explain the appeal. The appeal,” he says, “escapes me at this moment in time.”

“Jesus, Dad,” Michael says. He scrapes his chair backward, rubs a hand over his face. He is a patient man, usually, forbearing and stoic, but he hates these storefront eateries with their uneven floors and pocked tables and exhausted staff, hates every minute that he is obligated to spend in them, hates that they are what his father is left with even if the old man is beyond caring, or noticing. “Can we get through one goddamned lunch without this? Can we try, for once—”

“Michael,” I say to him—our waitress is coming back, pen in hand—“It's okay,” I say, my voice low, and turn my attention back to her, to this girl who will pocket the pile of bills and coins we leave her gratefully, whose beauty was ground out of her before it could open, could bloom.

“I think we need a few more minutes,” I say to her, “but maybe a soda for my father-in-law and when we're ready I'll just come up to the counter with the order?”

She nods. “Absolutely,” she says, “you take all the time you need,” and there again is her hand on my shoulder, easy, familiar; she touches me as though she knows me. “I'll be right back with a soda for you,” she says to Raymond, who does not acknowledge her presence at all.

"Thanks," Michael says to her. I reach for one of his hands but he shifts away from me. He would never admit it, but still: in places like this he hates me as well.

"Dad," he says, "They've got subs and sandwiches. There's egg plates—" he glances at a menu, "tuna salad, chicken salad—the usual. What do you want?"

"God rest your mother's soul," he says. "God rest her beautiful soul, and Deirdre's." He jerks his chair in staccato scrapes so that he can look at me without moving his neck at all. "Those two are in the great embrace of light and everlasting—" he hesitates, his eyes glassy-bright, "everlasting grace." The waitress returns with his drink, a paper-tipped straw bobbing at the top. She places it an inch from his splayed fingers. "Right there, on the left, sir," she says, as though it is the most natural thing for her to direct a customer's attention to something right in front of him, and my heart cracks. This girl has not yet given up on grace.

"Thank you," Michael says, his face stiff—he hates, too, her kindness—and she waves him off, the universal gesture: *Of course, my pleasure, no problem.*

"The problem, as I see it," his father says, "is one of decorum. Of decency, which I recall from some days and years ago. That young lady," he says, gesturing vaguely toward the counter, where our waitress has gone to begin preparing our trays, "who is properly neither young nor a lady, and who would be more appropriately employed in the privacy of a gentleman's quarters, is at present a walking affront to the memories of those who have gone, more modestly, before her."

We have only been sitting here for five minutes. Less. My father-in-law's hands shake, his throat pulses. His thirst must be enormous. "Do you think my son is aware of the magnitude of his compromise?" he says to me, this man whose floors I have mopped, whose linens I have washed. "Do you think he understands the enormity of his loss?" I don't speak, and in the silence that follows I smooth the napkin in my lap and wait for Michael to say whatever it

is a husband should, in such a circumstance. I could wait for this until the walls crumble around us.

* * *

My husband's first wife died on a bathroom floor. She died in cotton underpants and an old oxford shirt, the underwear hers and the shirt his, paint-spattered, blood-soaked, the paint dry and the blood not, legs and arms bare, splayed on a mint green rug on a white tile floor, twenty-three years old. A beauty, a painter, her parents' only child with long pale hair and a scar by her lip from a bicycle accident when she was a little girl, with a silver band on her finger and a cellophane-wrapped lemon candy in the shirt's breast pocket.

She died with the water running in the sink, with her head tilted back over a folded towel on the lip of the tub, with a mostly full can of root beer on the vanity, with a pile of Michael's laundry in the corner by her foot. Her foot was bare, her feet and legs tanned, like the rest of her. This was August, a Monday morning in August ten years ago, this was in their first and only house together, a duplex on a wide sunny street with cracking sidewalks and smallish trees.

She took tranquilizers, just enough to calm herself, not enough to vomit back up. She cut on the vertical, three deep gashes in each narrow wrist, three inches long, parallel and evenly spaced. She meant it.

What kind of man tells his second wife such details?

My husband, who was still her husband when he kissed her goodbye and left for work that lazy August morning, decided to come home for lunch, and this was when he found her, not in the tiny spare room she used as a studio but in the bathroom, on the floor like that, not quite dead yet, not quite, not yet, and because she was still alive he believed that what he did—the call to 911, the towels pressed to her cooling arms, the mouth-to-mouth—might make a difference. Might save her. Might keep her. He did not consider the possibility that someone unhappy enough to do such a thing might not want to be saved, be kept.

What he did—the call, the towels, the breathing—was not even close to making a difference, though what he did was right. The doctors told him this last, thinking it might bring him comfort. I cannot imagine anyone who would take comfort in that, in knowing that the right thing was useless.

So that afternoon he left the hospital with his dead wife's, his first wife's, shirt and underwear in a sealed plastic bag inside a larger paper one, with her wedding ring perched on the tip of his smallest finger, with the phone number of a support group on a card in his pocket. He did not go back to work—he would never, in fact, go back to that particular job—and he did not go back to their house, his house, that duplex, the front door of which he had left not only unlocked but open. He sat on a wooden bench some few yards away from the emergency room doors and waited in the melting August light for his father to arrive, and when the older man pulled up in his dark blue sedan he got into the car wordlessly. They drove in silence back to the apartment where his father—a drunk even then, a widower himself—lived alone. The elevator often stalled between floors, so they walked the five flights up, stopping on the landings so his father could rest. Once inside Michael—I suppose was at that point he was no longer, really, her husband—sat at the small kitchen table and placed the bag of clothes in front of him. His father filled two tumblers with rye and set them on the table, lowered himself into a chair by his son. “Listen to me carefully,” he said. “You will come to understand why it was better for this to happen now—better now than later. Before there was an opportunity for a profound variety of attachment.”

The old man, even then.

For the next few weeks he slept on his father's sofa. He slept from dusk until mid-morning, when bright daylight burned its way through the thin woven curtains, and in the early afternoon, when the sun had passed, he slept again. During his waking hours he listened to—or did not listen to—his father's unending recitation of his mother's virtues. She had died of a stroke, after thirty years of marriage—enough time for countless virtues to be made apparent.

During his waking hours he considered his own dead wife, and he became furious with her, not for the commission of the act itself so much as the timing of it: they had been married barely a year, and because of this he would have a paucity of stories to tell about her virtues, about her. During his waking hours he felt himself rotting from the inside.

At some point, during this time, he became the man I would marry.

What kind of woman marries such a man?

* * *

"I wouldn't even bother with that," Michael says. I'm wrapping what's left of his father's lunch, which is most of it.

"What are you talking about?" I say. "This is a lot of food. It's enough for dinner, at least." I glance up toward the hall to the restrooms, where Raymond has gone to drink from the flask he carries when he's forced to leave his apartment. "He's so thin, Michael. I think since we saw him last—"

"Jesus, Sue, I know," Michael says. "I know he's thin, I know he doesn't eat, I know. You can't force him."

"I'm not forcing him, I'm just making sure he has something if he wants it." A Styrofoam carton of potato salad, one of green beans, a turkey sub with a few bites gone. I wrap the sub in foil and pack everything into a white paper bag. "If he gets hungry, he'll have it."

"Has it not occurred to you yet that he doesn't want it?" Michael says—what he means is *he doesn't want it from you*—and gets up to collect his father from the restroom. We've played this scene before: at some point during lunch Raymond excuses himself to the restroom and doesn't come back, won't come back until Michael goes to get him. *One of these days I'm just going to leave him there*, Michael sometimes says, and I let him think I believe he means it.

The two of them come out of the restroom and I stand, collect Raymond's soda and the bag with his food. Michael has a hand under his father's elbow, a rudder, and the old man moves forward steadily, spine straight and chin out. A stranger would imagine him to be nothing more than frail.

I'm thinking this, relieved that we've got through as well as we have, when they pass the counter where our waitress is sorting silverware and Raymond reaches into a pocket for a handful of change and tosses it in her direction. The smile on her face freezes as coins skitter and bounce across the counter, to the floor at her feet, and she looks up, confused. "To keep you in the manner to which you are accustomed," Raymond says, melting into laughter, and Michael tightens his grip, moves them forward faster. "Meet us at the car, Susan," he says, but I hesitate—she is looking at me, our waitress, the corners of her mouth trembling, and all at once I see that I was wrong: there is nothing left in her to save. Here is her life, in its entirety, and we are no more nor less of an insult than anyone else.

"Susan, come *on*," Michael says, and I push through the door ahead of them.

* * *

He slept on his father's sofa and listened to the old man's stories and drank the old man's rye and his grief shrank and hardened, became a throbbing clot. It burned to the touch and so he stopped touching it. It refused to heal and so he stopped nursing it. It took root, a live thing, an infection, *his*.

He left his father's apartment for one of his own and slept in a bed but did not always wake in it, waking instead sometimes standing in the bathroom, the clean empty bathroom, gasping, choking on what he was sure was his dead wife's blood. He worked for a custom cabinet maker and sometimes coughed out his own blood, the sawdust and particulate matter in the shop abrading his sinuses, his throat. His palms calloused, his hair grayed along the nape and behind his ears, his shoulders broadened, his waist thickened. His wife remained twenty-three and blonde and tanned, remained perfect, remained dead. His heart, traitorous, continued to beat. Time continued to pass, months of it, years, and he began to feel a strange ache that he eventually came to understand was loneliness.

It was at this point that I met him, that I began to love him, the ruins of him. I was ready to save him. I was not ready to see that he didn't want saving. And so when he showed me his heart, the hollow yaw of it, I refused to see. Blind, I began digging at a stranger's grave.

* * *

We have to load the old man into the back of the car for the drive to his apartment. I open the rear door so he can drop backward onto the seat and Michael helps him lift and bend and swivel his legs into the foot well, then pulls the seat belt to and secures it. Even with both of us it takes some minutes—he is slight, Raymond, but leaden. Michael pulls out of the parking place and into traffic and already his father is slumped, eyes closed, mouth open, anchored by the seat belt. His breath rattles gently, and by the high thin sound I can tell his teeth have come loose, have opened up a thin whistling space between plate and wet pink gums.

“Do you want me to wake him?” I say. Michael looks straight ahead, his hands light on the wheel.

“For God's sake, why?” he says. “So he can shower you with a little more love? You in the mood for that, Susan? Because I'm not. I'm about finished for the day, I think.” He glances at the rearview. Raymond's head lolls, bounces. The seat belt has caught his shirt, bunched the collar up toward an ear. His undershirt is grayed. Before he was a drunk he was a professor of history. Which area, I'd asked Michael once, years ago when I still asked questions, and he'd looked at me with pity: as though the answer mattered.

“I don't want him to choke,” I say, and Michael laughs, mirthless. “When he chokes it won't be in the back of our car,” he says. He taps the brakes, flashes his lights at the car in front of us. “I hate this road,” he says. “Goddamn.”

It's a city street, two-way, one lane of metered parking and one of traffic in each direction, lights at every block, sidewalks, bus stop benches, the concrete pocked and cracking, the wood warped and peeling. Raymond's breath catches in his throat and he starts; his teeth click back into place.

History: he was a professor and a husband, then a professor and a widower, then a widower and a drunk.

"I should have taken the highway," Michael says.

"Faster this way," I tell him.

"He's in no hurry."

Intersections, crosswalks, this neighborhood is still full of pedestrians, old women wheeling canvas grocery totes, younger ones in housecoats and cardigans, men with newspapers rolled and clamped under frayed jacket sleeves. Teenagers, girls in too-small shirts and boys in too-large pants, smoking, shouting, in and out of the storefronts, the Baskin-Robbins and Epstein's Drug, the Park Avenue HiFi Palace, napkins and flyers and promotional circulars spinning, shredding at their feet. I know this place. I know it the way only someone who's tried to forget can know a place.

"How is he with his meds?" I ask Michael.

"What?"

"Does he have enough?" Heart disease—dilated cardiomyopathy. This will get him well before the cirrhosis does.

"Shit," Michael says. He rubs a hand over his face, eyes the rearview again—he's hoping to look and see that somehow, there is nothing in the back seat but sweet empty space; I know him the way I know these streets. Raymond's slipped lower under the shoulder harness and there's a bubble of saliva on his lips, quivering. "I have no idea," Michael says. "He was supposed to get a refill last week, I think—can you—"

"I'll check when we get him home." It is my job, keeping track of the prescriptions, and has been for some time now. The diuretics, the beta-blockers, the multivitamins. The blood pressure monitor, the laundry and groceries, fragrance-free detergent and high-fiber cereals, salt-free seasonings, anti-bacterial wipes and disinfectant sprays: the procurement and maintenance of these things, too, my job. Medication, nutrition, hygiene; clean folded towels, cases of PediaLyte and Ensure, cellophaned three-packs of Ivory soap. No mouthwash, no cough syrup, no acetaminophen.

We stop for a red light and there's a rustle from the back seat, Raymond pulling himself straighter. "I see you've decided on the scenic route," he says. His eyes are bleary, his skin papery, dull.

"Did they deliver your refill, Dad?" Michael speaks to the rearview mirror. I keep my eye on the traffic light, counting seconds.

"When I was a young man a friend and I would come, on occasion, to this area," Raymond says, "for what we liked to call excursions." The windows are closed and his breath fills the car, denture adhesive, weak mint. The light changes; bent men in threadbare pants climb back onto the sidewalks. My own father died before I could speak. "We would come with pockets full of cash and clean handkerchiefs," he says, turning his head from side to side as Michael eases the car forward.

"Your pills, Dad," he says again, his voice louder, tensing, "the refill—"

"Sectral," I say. "I think that's the one." Three more blocks, then the turn, the cross-town acceleration.

"We would come for a dose of what we liked to call fuckery," Raymond says, "from the kind of girls I'm sure you have not encountered, Michael, but whom your wife could perhaps explain to you, seeing as how she is familiar with our immediate environs."

"Don't," I say, low enough that Raymond won't hear but it's unnecessary: Michael does not respond, just drives, chasing yellow lights until the traffic thins and he can swing the car onto the smooth new blacktop, the bypass. My father is dead and my mother is tight in a senior housing complex she can just barely afford. I see her twice a year, on her birthday and the day after Christmas, when she sets aside the presents I bring and works crossword puzzles while I sit in the armchair I remember from our front room when I was a little girl. When it is time for bingo, or Wheel of Fortune in the sun room, she marks her place in the crossword book with her pen and stands, accepts my kiss on her cheek. She is finished with family, what's left of it.

Bright green exit signs blur by. This car can move.

"While you get him settled I can check the medicine cabinet," I say to Michael, who drives, drives, and I am almost ready to press the radio on when I hear a choke and gurgle from the back seat and there is Raymond, eyes closed and mouth open, a thin brown bile pooling behind his teeth, under his tongue and finally spilling over his chin and I lurch over the seat back with the clutch of napkins I've been holding all along. He hiccups and more comes and when the napkins are sopped I use the front of his shirt.

"Jesus," Michael says, "Dad—"

"Just drive," I tell him, "he's fine, just go," I say, and it is true: this, right now, is what has come to pass for fine. I drop the napkins to the floor and press his shirt to his chin, to his slack lips, whispering the usual nonsense: it's all right, it's okay, we'll be home soon, soon, soon. He jerks his head away from my hands, from me, draws back so that his eyes can focus and his gaze is clear as the vodka in his flask. "What you do," he says, "means nothing. You know that, don't you?"

Michael exits the bypass and I brace myself against the back of my seat. Bypass—cities, hearts.

"Of course I know," I say to Raymond. He allows himself a smile and lets his head fall back.

"Michael," he says, "tell your wife she can sit back down. Tell your wife I am quite through with her services. Such as they are." His eyes are cold, lucid, steel. He looks at me and all he sees is who I am not.

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I am not a second wife anyone would imagine. There is nothing of the prize in me—I am not some golden thing, newly forged, barely breathing. When I met my husband I was already thirty years old, worn smooth in some places, worn rough in others, imperfect and kind.

Thirty—seven years luckier, then, than she had been. Deirdre.

The yellow hair, the green rug, the white shirt and white tile, and the blood an exclamation over all of it—he told me this at a patio bar, fizzy drinks on the table and a basket of popcorn, in the soft sweet

dusk of early summer. He presented all this to me, a gift I didn't want wrapped in twilight and tonic, muscle and skin. We were barely more than strangers, or had been, before.

When he finished the story, he drained his glass and reached for my hand. I had to fight not to pull it away. At the table next to us three boys in baseball caps high-fived one another, clinked their beer bottles together and chanted something unintelligible.

"I don't ever want you to think I wasn't honest with you," he said, and I nodded, dizzy, struck dumb. "It's important that I tell you everything," he said, and I nodded, a puppet, an idiot girl I had never been. Everything—I didn't know his mother's name, or his father's birthday; I didn't know his face in sleep.

Everything—she was everything. She was bright as noon, bright as blood. He squeezed my hand, leaned over and said "And I don't want you to think I kept anything from you, because I didn't. I won't. I can't be with you if you don't know."

I finished my drink and he stood, lifted me by the hand to lead me between the tables and the boys in baseball caps kept on, drinking and laughing in the fading pink light, oblivious to death slipping by them.

* * *

Raymond's apartment is dark, too warm; it smells of living things. The walls are thin, the paint scuffed and stained and cracking. The far wall vibrates with music coming from the neighbor's stereo. The couch is the same one Michael slept on, some dozen years ago.

We put Raymond there, on the couch, and stand for a moment, breathing.

"I don't think we should just leave," I say. Yeast, I'm breathing; mildew. Bath towels are piled on the kitchen table. How long since I've been in this place? Two weeks? Not quite?

"I am fully cognizant of your words," Raymond says. I look down: everything about him is skewed, sideways, one shoulder high and cramped-looking. His eyes flutter open. "You are not the first woman to express *thought* in this place."

“Leave her alone, Dad,” Michael says. “For Christ's sake.” He makes a move toward the kitchen area—tiled floor, shrunken appliances lined against the wall—and stops. He has no idea what there is to be done.

“Here,” I say. I hand over the bag of leftovers. “Why don't you see if anything in the fridge needs throwing out? And whatever he needs—if you make a list—I can get to the store tomorrow.” On the couch Raymond tugs at a pants pocket, curses. The flask is caught on a seam. “Bring him some ginger ale, if there's any, or some juice,” I say to Michael. “You do the kitchen and I'll take care of the bathroom, all right?” He does not respond, only shakes his head. The counter—what there is of it—is covered with dishes, plastic cups and take-out bags. “The ginger ale,” I say again, softly, and he looks at me as though he has never seen me before.

The bedroom is spotless, the bed covered in a white chenille spread, pillow shams fluffed, needlepoint bolster centered in front of them. A flimsy dresser with a crocheted runner over the scarred top, a heavy armoire, a straight-backed chair. This room does not change, has not since I first saw it. It is the bedroom of a husband, a sober man; one who is grieving or ready to grieve. It is the room of a man I do not know. The only sign of Raymond is the carpet, plush and deep green but worn in a narrow path from the doorway to the bathroom: cigarette burns, torn and matted pile, stains.

The bathroom is where I find what I expect. It's a small room, a rectangle with a toilet and bathtub, a built-in vanity along the short side and plastic shelves screwed into the plaster next to an oversized mirror. The floor is slick; there are stacks of magazines and old academic journals piled along the side of the tub, bloated and warped, some sopping, some only damp and curled along the edges. Condensation runs down the sides of the toilet tank, disinfectant fumes burn my sinuses. I flip a switch and the fan sputters into life. The vanity is covered: sodden napkins, plastic cups and cutlery, used razor cartridges, the blades thick with rust. On a shelf by the mirror is a row of women's perfumes, the bottles old-fashioned, glass heavy and faceted and golden, capped with

stoppers meant to look like birds and ribbons, a thick layer of dust on their shoulders. Black plastic combs, three for 99 cents, eye drops, ear drops, Poli-Dent. Gauze pads, Ben-Gay. No orange plastic pill bottles, no prescription inserts or pharmacy envelopes. I kneel to look under the sink when he appears in the doorway.

"Can I be of some assistance?" he says. He is wavering, just balanced, gripping onto the door frame. It is filthy, the paint along the jamb a greasy brown.

"Raymond, your medication," I say. "Your pills, from the doctor, from the pharmacy—where are they?"

"Perhaps you can be of some assistance to me, then, seeing as to how your husband has recused himself from the situation at hand."

"What are you talking about?" I say.

"Right there, where you are, is a good place to look. Your husband. My son. It seems he has decided his presence might be better appreciated elsewhere."

"Did he go to the grocery store, Raymond?"

"Under there," he says, gesturing at the door beneath the sink. He lowers himself onto the lip of the bathtub, braces his feet against a pile of magazines and he's close enough that I can see how bloodless his lips are, how opaque his eyes. "I keep all my medication under there." I pull at the vanity door and it swings wide, loose on its hinges. The cabinet is filled, bottles of bourbon and Scotch, none full, crowded all the way to the rear wall, tilted under the pipes, wedged into a pile of towels, and in a corner the pills, a jumble of bottles and wadded pharmaceutical inserts. Months' worth, every bottle labeled and sealed and full to the top.

"Raymond," I say, "I don't understand—haven't you—"

"You do understand," he says. "You are in possession of more insight than my son." He reaches toward me and in the instant it takes me to know what he wants I understand what he means.

"You'll die," I say, and he smiles, his hand still extended. It is mottled and gray and gaunt, as though the skin itself were exhausted.

“Susan,” he says. It is the first time he's ever called me by name. “Please, dear girl, my medication,” and I pick a bottle at random from the hoard and hand it over to him. He unscrews the cap and drinks and hands the bottle back to me to hold. “I am asking that you stay with him,” he says. “This will eventually come to seem impossible, but I am asking you all the same. In the meantime—until such time as we both know will transpire—I am going to dispose of these pills at their regularly scheduled intervals. You will not tell him this.” He extends his hand again and when I offer the bottle he curls his hand over mine, hard-knotted and cold. “He will love you as much as he can and it will not be enough. Nonetheless. I am asking that you stay.” He eases the bottle from my grasp and sets it on the floor, takes my hand again. “I don't know if you deserve better than him. I suspect you don't. But then again, I have encountered very few in this life who deserve better than—” he pauses, searching. “better than. Just that.”

When he begins to shudder I move next to him, guide him so his shoulder is against the wall, brace my arms on either side of him. He shakes; his breath smells sweet, too sweet, turned fruit. It is the only sound in the apartment, this rattle and rasp. I hold him while his heart goes about the business of using itself up, not nearly fast enough. When he quiets I help him lift the bottle to his lips, and when he is finished I drink from it myself. There are no ghosts here. I hold him and we wait for his son to come back to us.

