

THE BATTERED WIFE

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Halfway through the afternoon it began to rain, almost laughably hard, and they retreated under the canvas awning of the bric-à-brac stall.

“You should leave him,” said Sylvia, over the syncopated drumming of the rain. “You should pack everything up, take the kids and walk out. You could always come to Tunbridge Wells and stay with us until you find somewhere else to go.”

“How can I?” said Lily. “And why *should* I? Poppy’s only just started at Elm Trees, she’d be so upset if we had to move, and Jamie keeps wetting the bed as it is. Apart from that, damn it, Sylvia, half of that house belongs to me, and I’ve spent three years decorating it exactly the way I want it.”

“But you can’t go on the way you are, Lily. One day he’s going to kill you.”

Lily didn’t know what to say. She knew that Sylvia was right. It was a gloomy wet afternoon in late September but she was wearing dark glasses to conceal her two bruised eyes. Two nights ago Stephen had come home in one of his moods. He had been drinking, although he wasn’t incoherently drunk, like he sometimes was. She had cooked him a chicken-and-tomato casserole, one of his favourites, but for some arcane reason he had interpreted this as mockery.

“What? You think I’m some kind of a peasant, all I ever want to eat is chicken-and-tomato casserole?”

He had dropped the Le Creuset casserole on the kitchen floor, cracking the tiles and splashing her ankles with scalding red sauce, and then he had punched her, once, on the bridge of the nose.

“Me – I would have called the police,” said Sylvia.

“Oh, yes. And then Stephen would tell them that he’s suffering from stress at work and how sorry he is and how he’ll never ever lay another finger on me.”

“At least see a counsellor, Lily. Please.”

Lightning crackled behind the horse-chestnuts that bordered the village green, followed by an indigestive grumble of thunder. Children scurried in the rain between the tents, screaming.

Sylvia said, “Why does it *always* rain whenever we hold a fête? You would have thought that God was all in favour of us raising money for a donkey sanctuary. His son went everywhere by donkey.”

But Lily wasn’t really listening. She was frowning at a woman who was sheltering under the cake stall opposite. The woman was wearing a grey knitted hat and a grey three-quarter-length raincoat, and she had a pale, drained face, with tightly-pursed lips. She had a small grey Bedlington terrier with her, which repeatedly shook itself.

What Lily found unsettling was the way that the woman was staring at her, unblinking. She turned her head away for a few seconds, but when she looked back the woman was still staring at her.

“Do you see that woman?” she asked Sylvia.

“What woman?”

“*That* woman – the one in the grey raincoat, with the dog – next to the cake stall.”

“What about her?”

“She’s staring at me. She’s been staring at me for the past few minutes.”

Sylvia pulled a face. “Perhaps she knows you.”

“Well, I certainly don’t know her. And look. She’s *still* staring at me.”

There was another rumble of thunder, but it was much further away now and the rain was easing off. After a few minutes, Lily and Sylvia stepped out from under the awning, and soon the aisles between the tents were crowded again. Lily tried to see if the woman in the grey hat and the grey raincoat was still standing at the cake stall, but she had vanished.

Before she picked up Poppy from Elm Trees, Lily parked on a double yellow line in the High Street to buy pork chops and runner beans and a fresh loaf of bread. She went into the off-licence, too, and bought two bottles of merlot on special offer.

Stephen usually drank merlot, and she thought that if she showed him that she didn’t disapprove of his drinking, so long as he did it in moderation, he might not feel that she was judging him so much. “You’re always *judging* me. Just because you’re a solicitor’s daughter. Who the *hell* do you think you are?”

She was waiting at the counter in the off-licence when she turned towards the window to make sure that there were no traffic wardens around. Standing outside the window, peering in at her, was the woman in the grey hat and the grey raincoat, with her Bedlington terrier beside her.

Lily was about to go outside and ask her what she wanted when the assistant took her bottles of merlot from her and said, “Afternoon, madam. Like to put your card in?”

By the time she had paid and stepped out of the off-licence, the woman had gone. She looked up and down the High Street, but there was no sign of her.

She put Poppy and Jamie to bed early that evening and read them a story, *Chris Cross in Snappyland*, about a boy who kept losing his temper until he was taken away by monsters who could all shout much louder than he could.

“Mummy,” said Poppy, as Lily tucked her in. “We’re not going to go away, are we?”

“Of course not, sweetie.”

“But daddy is always shouting and makes you cry. I don’t like it when he shouts and makes you cry.”

“Daddy has a lot of worry at work. Sometimes it makes him cross like Chris Cross in Snappyland. He doesn’t really mean it.”

“I heard you tell daddy that you were going to take us away.”

“Well, that’s because *I* get cross, too. But I don’t mean it, either.”

“That lady said you mustn’t take us away.”

“Lady? What lady?”

“She was standing outside the playground today and she called me. She said, *Poppy*. Then she said your mummy mustn’t leave your daddy.”

Lily stared at her. “What did this lady look like?”

“She had a grey woolly hat and a grey raincoat and she had a dog that looked like a dirty lamb.”

“And that was all she said? She didn’t tell you what her name was, or how she knew what your name was?”

Poppy shook her head. “The bell went and I had to go inside.”

Stephen still hadn't come home by ten-fifteen. Lily stood in the living-room with a glass of merlot in her hand, almost motionless, looking at herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece as if she were someone that she didn't recognise. A thirty-five-year-old woman with blonde, short-cropped hair, and two black eyes that were now turning rainbow-colored, as if she were wearing a pierrette's mask.

She didn't know whether to start supper or not. It was so late now that she herself had lost her appetite, and she didn't know what state Stephen would be in when he eventually arrived home.

She was still standing in front of the mirror when the doorbell chimed. She went into the hallway to answer it. Through the green-and-yellow stained-glass window in the front door she could see a dark distorted shape.

"Who is it?" she called out.

There was a moment's pause, but then a woman's voice said, "*Don't open the door. There's no need to. But don't take the children away.*"

"What?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

She unfastened the latch and threw the door open wide. In the porch stood the woman in the grey hat and the grey raincoat, her face as grey as newspaper. As soon as she saw Lily, she screamed out, "*Don't take the children away! Not tonight! Something terrible will happen if you do!*"

Terrified, Lily slammed the door shut. After she had done so, she stood in the hallway quaking. From upstairs, she heard Poppy calling out, "Mummy! Mummy! Jamie's wet the bed!"

She approached the front door again. The light in the porch was shining through the stained-glass window, but she couldn't see the shape of the woman any more. She slid the security chain into place, and then she opened the door a little way.

The woman had disappeared. All she could see were streetlights flickering through the trees, and all she could hear was the muffled sound of traffic.

She switched off the lights in the living-room and she was just about to go upstairs to run a bath when the front door burst open with a deafening crash.

"Lily! Lily? Where the eff are you?"

She went through to the hallway. Stephen was leaning against the open door, his hair sticking up like a schoolboy's, his tie crooked. She could smell alcohol and regurgitated curry.

"Stephen," she said.

"Oh, you recognise me! You know who I am! That makes a change!"

He took three stumbling steps forward, lost his balance, and almost collided with her.

"Get away from me," she told him.

"Get *away* from you? That's not what you said on our wedding-night, you bitch!"

"Stephen, you're drunk and you stink. Go upstairs and take a shower and go to bed."

Stephen stood in the hallway, swaying. He had a faraway look in his eyes, and he was smiling.

"Stephen," she repeated, and it was then that he slapped her so hard that she bounced against the wall, knocking her head and jarring her shoulder.

She fell to the floor, but Stephen gripped the front of her dress, tearing it wide open. He dragged her onto her feet and slapped her again and again.

“*You know what you are?*” he kept yelling at her. “*You know what you are?*”

Both Poppy and Jamie were crying as she bundled them into her Meriva. She heaved the big blue travelling bag into the back and slammed the door.

As she climbed into the driver’s seat, Stephen reappeared in the porch.

“Lily!” he shrieked at her. “You’re not taking my kids, Lily! You’re not going anywhere, you bitch!”

He staggered down the front steps towards them. Lily turned the key in the ignition and revved the engine. Poppy was screaming now and Jamie was crying in a high, panicky whistle.

Stephen banged his fist on the Meriva’s rear window, and Lily put her foot down so that it hurtled out of the driveway in a spray of pea-shingle.

There was a deep, clumsy thump, and Lily saw a body tumbling in the air in front of her. It turned over and over before it hit the road, but immediately, another car ran over it and its arms flew up and its hands clapped together, *smack!* as if it were applauding.

Shaking with shock, Lily climbed out of the driver’s seat and stepped out into the road. The woman in the grey woolly hat and the grey raincoat was lying on her back, staring up at her blind-eyed.

Lily turned around. A small crowd had already gathered and the driver of the second car was phoning for an ambulance. Standing next to her front gate, however, was the same woman, in her grey hat and her grey raincoat, with her Bedlington terrier on its lead.

Lily walked across to her. The woman’s image appeared to *ripple*, as if she were seeing her through running water.

“*You’re dead,*” Lily whispered. “*That’s you, lying in the road. You’re dead.*”

“I did try to warn you, Lily,” the woman told her. “You should have walked out over a year ago, when he first started to hit you. But you were too frightened of being on your own. And – secretly – you *enjoy* being his victim, don’t you? It makes you feel wanted. You should have stayed. Because *now* look what you’ve done.”

Lily said, “I’m so sorry.” But the woman turned around and walked away, leaving her dog standing on the pavement. As she turned the corner, and disappeared from sight, Lily called out, “*I’m so, so sorry!*”