

Lost Woman

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Ms. Dowdy had things to do. She had been rushing all morning, a poisoned smile poised carefully on her glossed lips. Her hair had been the first priority of the morning; pinned back and curled slightly at the ears, it sat prettily on her head as if it were her own royal crown. Her sister, Mrs. Jexton, observed the blank expression on her face with apprehension. It was so utterly devoid of emotion that Mrs. Jexton was beginning to feel concerned. She watched carefully as her sister walked quickly towards their mother, Mrs. Dowdy, with whom she compared two pieces of lace. Mrs. Jexton watched the interaction with sharp eyes and a small frown, searching for a small tremor or a hint of a slump in her sister's physique, but found absolutely nothing out of the ordinary in her movements.

Ms. Dowdy, finding her lace query satisfied, left her mother for some other task. All around her women hurried, carrying with them all manner of delicate objects. One held a large bouquet of fragile, soft roses. Another carried a tray of small sandwiches, cut precisely into uniform squares. Still another, assisted by two others, carried a large creamy white dress. A simple cut with simple design, the material was so proudly expensive and rich, and unlike others of its kind, that the woman rushing about the room could only stop and stare. Ms. Dowdy's smile did not waver for a moment, even with the sickening scent of jealousy wafting inconspicuously through the room. Mrs. Jexton observed with a frown; certain that something was not quite right.

As the women resumed their business, Ms. Dowdy, Mrs. Jexton, and Mrs. Dowdy followed the women with the dress. They entered a small private room, pretty in pink and white and adorned with delicate blossoms. On the walls stretched large mirrors, shining and reflecting the little company. Then Ms. Dowdy began to undress, slow and controlled, as though the

movements were not performed by her but by some master puppeteer holding the strings from the sky. As soon as she was finished, Ms. Dowdy was offered the dress. Assisted by the ladies, she stepped into the silky tresses, and with a sharp intake of breath it was fully buttoned and secured. The woman around her gasped and exclaimed, as free with their compliments as they were with the quiet, jealous glances they exchanged behind Ms. Dowdy's averted eyes.

Kisses were exchanged, and quick alterations performed, before the ladies trailed out of the small room to leave Ms. Dowdy to finish getting ready. With her family gone, she took a moment to stare sternly at herself in the mirror, soft smile intact, to search for imperfections. She glanced over her silken face and unassuming smile and found perfect, practiced beauty. She glanced at her dress, stretched so tight over her ribs and chest that she had to breathe slightly shallower than usual; perfection. She raised her eyes to search her hair, certain it would complete the picture. But there, on the nape of Ms. Dowdy's left shoulder, curled a small piece of hair, completely out of place. A shudder ripped through her, violent and disconcerting, and she found herself shocked at it. Deciding to ignore her strange reaction, however, she picked up a small ebony pin from a dresser and set about to fix it.

As she picked at the little piece of hair, she found herself inexplicably angry at it. Something coiled and twisted in her stomach as she watched the strand of hair, and without the ability to stop, she began to pull. She looked in the mirror in shock as dainty fingers dragged the hair out of its bun until it stuck up on the top of her head. With practiced poise, the fingers reached back into her hair, no longer with thought of pinning it back but only with malicious intent. Her eyes widened and narrowed with disgust as, strand by strand, her bun was picked and pulled apart until the pieces resembled snakes.

She was no longer confused. She hated her hair as she had never hated anything before. The very thought of it made her sick. Bile bubbled up her throat and she gagged at the reminder of her body, so visceral and inescapable as it was. She clawed at her face until it was pink and streaked, and her eyes bugged like the pale unseeing eyes of a deformed corpse. Seized by sudden shudders she convulsed on her chair, tears streaming down her eyes without a hint of sadness. No, Ms. Dowdy was not sad. She was furious. She shook and shuddered, and her teeth chattered and clenched. All at once she began to scream, a terrible bone chilling scream that ripped from her throat like it was clawing its way out on bony wings. She thrashed on her chair as a woman possessed, limbs flung and crashing carelessly into everything that surrounded her. There remained no regard of safety or even humanity, only that deformed body seizing and the inescapable screaming. Its eyes were fixed on the mirror, enraptured in its own horror, and it smiled at itself—a true smile, with raw bloodied lips.

When Mrs. Jexton heard the scream, she knew instantly that her sister had begun to break. Followed by a flurry of ladies, she rushed into the small changing room and took hold of Ms. Dowdy's shoulders as she thrashed and shook in the chair. The ladies streamed into the room until every single one of them were standing shoulder to shoulder in the space, calmly watching Ms. Dowdy convulse. Mrs. Jaxton motioned to three of them and they moved forward, armed with compacts and brushes, and set about painting Ms. Dowdy's face. Two women held her arms to her sides and two others held her legs while she thrashed under their grasp. More women set about combing back her hair, pinning each piece back until it settled into its former beauty.

Soon, Ms. Dowdy was fitted back together, section by section. By the time everything was put into place she could barely move, twitching softly in utter exhaustion. She had been

reduced to a child crying for her mother, unable to articulate even the simplest of things. The light hurt her eyes and her bones ached from beneath tissue and thinly stretched skin. She whimpered and curled into herself as tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes like some kind of perfunctory service. Mrs. Jexton and Mrs. Dowdy knelt before her and clutched her hands. They talked softly to her like they might talk to a child after a tantrum, reassuring her. Ms. Dowdy babbled like a baby pleading, sobbing, imploring the women to help her escape. The women laughed softly. They told her that she was being silly, that she was overreacting. Their faces were painted in amusement and soft compassion, but their eyes shone with a different emotion. A heavy guilt settled in each of their guts and looking at Ms. Dowdy they felt only pity. They were disgusted at themselves, completely, for dimming her rage, for putting her back together. Slowly, she regained composure and became perfect once more; smiling self-consciously and saying she didn't know what came over her. Her eyes betrayed no emotion, and her words were apologetic. The woman hated her for it.

Mrs. Jexton smiled. The beast was dead, and her duty had been done. Ms. Dowdy would live a good life, an expensive life in a beautiful home where everything would be perfect. Her sister, the one she remembered as a child who ran gayly down grassy fields and argued with her father over dinner, could not survive this life. So, the exorcism was complete, and only beauty remained. Beauty had always been better anyway.

“I do.”

The words were spoken, and the audience collapsed into applause. The blushing bride gazed lovingly into her husband's eyes, alight with joy. All around her in the audience, the women laughed and smiled, overjoyed for their friend the new Mrs. Smith. Only the most observant could see the grief written on their faces as they mourned the woman Ms. Dowdy.