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The Husband

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Extract

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1

A man begins dying at the moment of his birth. Most people live in denial of Death's patient courtship until, late in life and deep in sickness, they become aware of him sitting bedside.

Eventually, Mitchell Rafferty would be able to cite the minute that he began to recognize the inevitability of his death: Monday, May 14, 11:43 in the morning—three weeks short of his twenty-eighth birthday.

Until then, he had rarely thought of dying. A born optimist, charmed by nature's beauty and amused by humanity, he had no cause or inclination to wonder when and how his mortality would be proven.

When the call came, he was on his knees.

Thirty flats of red and purple impatiens remained to be planted. The flowers produced no fragrance, but the fertile smell of the soil pleased him.

His clients, these particular homeowners, liked saturated colors: red, purple, deep yellow, hot pink. They would not accept white blooms or pastels.

Mitch understood them. Raised poor, they had built a successful business by working hard and taking risks. To them, life was intense, and saturated colors reflected the truth of nature's vehemence.

This apparently ordinary but in fact momentous morning, the California sun was a buttery ball. The sky had a basted sheen.

Pleasantly warm, not searing, the day nevertheless left a greasy sweat on Ignatius Barnes. His brow glistened. His chin dripped.

At work in the same bed of flowers, ten feet from Mitch, Iggy looked boiled. From May until July, his skin responded to the sun not with melanin but with a fierce blush. For one-sixth of the year, before he finally tanned, he appeared to be perpetually embarrassed.

Iggy did not possess an understanding of symmetry and harmony in landscape design, and he couldn't be trusted to trim roses properly. He was a hard worker, however, and good if not intellectually bracing company.

"You hear what happened to Ralph Gandhi?" Iggy asked.

"Who's Ralph Gandhi?"

"Mickey's brother."

"Mickey Gandhi? I don't know him, either."

"Sure you do," Iggy said. "Mickey, he hangs out sometimes at Rolling Thunder."

Rolling Thunder was a surfers' bar.

"I haven't been there in years," Mitch said.

"Years? Are you serious?"

"Entirely."

"I thought you still dropped in sometimes."

"So I've really been missed, huh?"

"I'll admit, nobody's named a bar stool after you. What—did you find someplace better than Rolling Thunder?"

"Remember coming to my wedding three years ago?" Mitch asked.

"Sure. You had great seafood tacos, but the band was woofy."

"They weren't woofy."

"Man, they had *tambourines*."

"We were on a budget. At least they didn't have an accordion."

"Because playing an accordion exceeded their skill level."

Mitch troweled a cavity in the loose soil. "They didn't have finger bells, either."

Wiping his brow with one forearm, Iggy complained: "I must have Eskimo genes. I break a sweat at fifty degrees."

Mitch said, "I don't do bars anymore. I do marriage."

"Yeah, but can't you do marriage *and* Rolling Thunder?"

"I'd just rather be home than anywhere else."

"Oh, boss, that's sad," said Iggy.

"It's not sad. It's the best."

"If you put a lion in a zoo three years, six years, he never forgets what freedom was like."

Planting purple impatiens, Mitch said, "How would you know? You ever asked a lion?"

"I don't have to ask one. I *am* a lion."

"You're a hopeless boardhead."

"And proud of it. I'm glad you found Holly. She's a great lady. But *I've* got my freedom."

"Good for you, Iggy. And what do you do with it?"

"Do with what?"

"Your freedom. What do you do with your freedom?"

"Anything I want."

"Like, for example?"

"Anything. Like, if I want sausage pizza for dinner, I don't have to ask anyone what *she* wants."

"Radical."

"If I want to go to Rolling Thunder for a few beers, there's nobody to bitch at me."

"Holly doesn't bitch."

"I can get beer-slammed every night if I want, and nobody's gonna be calling to ask when am I coming home."

Mitch began to whistle "Born Free."

"Some wahine comes on to me," Iggy said, "I'm free to rock and roll."

"They're coming on to you all the time—are they?—those sexy wahines?"

"Women are bold these days, boss. They see what they want, they just take it."

Mitch said, "Iggy, the last time you got laid, John Kerry thought he was going to be president."

"That's not so long ago."

"So what happened to Ralph?"

"Ralph who?"

"Mickey Gandhi's brother."

"Oh, yeah. An iguana bit off his nose."

"Nasty."

"Some fully macking ten-footers were breaking, so Ralph and some guys went night-riding at the Wedge."

The Wedge was a famous surfing spot at the end of the Balboa Peninsula, in Newport Beach.

Iggy said, "They packed coolers full of submarine sandwiches and beer, and one of them brought Ming."

"Ming?"

"That's the iguana."

"So it was a pet?"

"Ming, he'd always been sweet before."

"I'd expect iguanas to be moody."

"No, they're affectionate. What happened was some wanker, not even a surfer, just a wannabe tag-along, slipped Ming a quarter-dose of meth in a piece of salami."

"Reptiles on speed," Mitch said, "is a bad idea."

"Meth Ming was a whole different animal from clean-and-sober Ming," Iggy confirmed.

Putting down his trowel, sitting back on the heels of his work shoes, Mitch said, "So now Ralph Gandhi is noseless?"

"Ming didn't eat the nose. He just bit it off and spit it out."

"Maybe he didn't like Indian food."

"They had a big cooler full of ice water and beer. They put the nose in the cooler and rushed it to the hospital."

"Did they take Ralph, too?"

"They had to take Ralph. It was his nose."

"Well," Mitch said, "we *are* talking about boardheads."

"They said it was kinda blue when they fished it out of the ice water, but a plastic surgeon sewed it back on, and now it's not blue anymore."

"What happened to Ming?"

"He crashed. He was totally amped-out for a day. Now he's his old self."

"That's good. It's probably hard to find a clinic that'll do iguana rehab."

Mitch got to his feet and retrieved three dozen empty plastic plant pots. He carried them to his extended-bed pickup.

The truck stood at the curb, in the shade of an Indian laurel. Although the neighborhood had been built-out only five years earlier, the big tree

had already lifted the sidewalk. Eventually the insistent roots would block lawn drains and invade the sewer system.

The developer's decision to save one hundred dollars by not installing a root barrier would produce tens of thousands in repair work for plumbers, landscapers, and concrete contractors.

When Mitch planted an Indian laurel, he always used a root barrier. He didn't need to make future work for himself. Green growing Nature would keep him busy.

The street lay silent, without traffic. Not the barest breath of a breeze stirred the trees.

From a block away, on the farther side of the street, a man and a dog approached. The dog, a retriever, spent less time walking than it did sniffing messages left by others of its kind.

The stillness pooled so deep that Mitch almost believed he could hear the panting of the distant canine.

Golden: the sun and the dog, the air and the promise of the day, the beautiful houses behind deep lawns.

Mitch Rafferty could not afford a home in this neighborhood. He was satisfied just to be able to work here.

You could love great art but have no desire to live in a museum.

He noticed a damaged sprinkler head where lawn met sidewalk. He got his tools from the

truck and knelt on the grass, taking a break from the impatiens.

His cell phone rang. He unclipped it from his belt, flipped it open. The time was displayed—11:43—but no caller's number showed on the screen. He took the call anyway.

"Big Green," he said, which was the name he'd given his two-man business nine years ago, though he no longer remembered why.

"Mitch, I love you," Holly said.

"Hey, sweetie."

"Whatever happens, I love you."

She cried out in pain. A clatter and crash suggested a struggle.

Alarmed, Mitch rose to his feet. "Holly?"

Some guy said something, some guy who now had the phone. Mitch didn't hear the words because he was focused on the background noise.

Holly squealed. He'd never heard such a sound from her, such fear.

"*Sonofabitch,*" she said, and was silenced by a sharp crack, as though she'd been slapped.

The stranger on the phone said, "You hear me, Rafferty?"

"Holly? Where's Holly?"

Now the guy was talking away from the phone, not to Mitch: "Don't be stupid. Stay on the floor."

Another man spoke in the background, his words unclear.

The one with the phone said, "She gets up, *punch* her. You want to lose some teeth, honey?"

She was with two men. One of them had hit her. *Hit* her.

Mitch couldn't get his mind around the situation. Reality suddenly seemed as slippery as the narrative of a nightmare.

A meth-crazed iguana was more real than this.

Near the house, Iggy planted impatiens. Sweating, red from the sun, as solid as ever.

"That's better, honey. That's a good girl."

Mitch couldn't draw breath. A great weight pressed on his lungs. He tried to speak but couldn't find his voice, didn't know what to say. Here in bright sun, he felt casketed, buried alive.

"We have your wife," said the guy on the phone.

Mitch heard himself ask, "Why?"

"Why do you think, asshole?"

Mitch didn't know why. He didn't want to know. He didn't want to reason through to an answer because every possible answer would be a horror.

"I'm planting flowers."

"What's wrong with you, Rafferty?"

"That's what I do. Plant flowers. Repair sprinklers."

"Are you buzzed or something?"

"I'm just a gardener."

"So we have your wife. You get her back for two million cash."

Mitch knew it wasn't a joke. If it were a joke, Holly would have to be in on it, but her sense of humor was not cruel.

"You've made a mistake."

"You hear what I said? Two million."

"Man, you aren't listening. I'm a *gardener*."

"We know."

"I have like eleven thousand bucks in the bank."

"We know."

Brimming with fear and confusion, Mitch had no room for anger. Compelled to clarify, perhaps more for himself than for the caller, he said, "I just run a little two-man operation."

"You've got until midnight Wednesday. Sixty hours. We'll be in touch about the details."

Mitch was sweating. "This is nuts. Where would I get two million bucks?"

"You'll find a way."

The stranger's voice was hard, implacable. In a movie, Death might sound like this.

"It isn't possible," Mitch said.

"You want to hear her scream again?"

"No. Don't."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes."

"Really love her?"

"She's everything to me."

How peculiar, that he should be sweating yet feel so cold.

"If she's everything to you," said the stranger, "then you'll find a way."

"There *isn't* a way."

"If you go to the cops, we'll cut her fingers off one by one, and cauterize them as we go. We'll cut her tongue out. And her eyes. Then we'll leave her alone to die as fast or slow as she wants."

The stranger spoke without menace, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if he were not making a threat but were instead merely explaining the details of his business model.

Mitchell Rafferty had no experience of such men. He might as well have been talking to a visitor from the far end of the galaxy.

He could not speak because suddenly it seemed that he might so easily, unwittingly say the wrong thing and ensure Holly's death sooner rather than later.

The kidnapper said, "Just so you'll know we're serious . . ."

After a silence, Mitch asked, "What?"

"See that guy across the street?"

Mitch turned and saw a single pedestrian, the man walking the slow dog. They had progressed half a block.

The sunny day had a porcelain glaze. Rifle fire shattered the stillness, and the dogwalker went down, shot in the head.

"Midnight Wednesday," said the man on the phone. "We're damn serious."

2

The dog stood as if on point: one forepaw raised, tail extended but motionless, nose lifted to seek a scent.

In truth, the golden retriever had not spotted the shooter. It halted in midstep, startled by its master's collapse, frozen by confusion.

Directly across the street from the dog, Mitch likewise stood paralyzed. The kidnapper terminated the call, but Mitch still held the cell phone to his ear.

Superstition promised that as long as the street remained still, as long as neither he nor the dog moved, the violence might be undone and time rewound, the bullet recalled to the barrel.

Reason trumped magical thinking. He crossed the street, first haltingly, then at a run.

If the fallen man was wounded, something might be done to save him.

As Mitch approached, the dog favored him

with a single wag of its tail.

A glance at the victim dispelled any hope that first aid might sustain him until paramedics arrived. A significant portion of his skull was gone.

Having no familiarity with real violence, only with the edited-analyzed-excused-and-defanged variety provided by TV news, and with the cartoon violence in movies, Mitch was rendered impotent by this horror. More than fear, shock immobilized him.

More than shock, a sudden awareness of previously unsensed dimensions transfixed him. He was akin to a rat in a sealed maze, for the first time looking up from the familiar passageways and seeing a world beyond the glass lid, forms and figures, mysterious movement.

Lying on the sidewalk near its master, the golden retriever trembled, whimpered.

Mitch sensed that he was in the company of someone other than the dog, and felt watched, but more than watched. Studied. Attended. *Pursued*.

His heart was a thundering herd, hooves on stone.

He surveyed the day but saw no gunman. The rifle could have been fired from any house, from any rooftop or window, or from behind a parked car.

Anyway, the presence he sensed was not that of the shooter. He did not feel watched from a distance, but from an intimate vantage point. He felt as if someone *loomed* over him.

Hardly more than half a minute had passed since the dogwalker had been killed.

The crack of the rifle had not brought anyone out of any of the beautiful houses. In this neighborhood, a gunshot would be perceived as a slammed door, dismissed even as it echoed.

Across the street, at the client's house, Iggy Barnes had risen from his knees to his feet. He didn't appear to be alarmed, merely puzzled, as if he, too, had heard a door and didn't understand the meaning of the fallen man, the grieving dog.

Midnight Wednesday. Sixty hours. Time on fire, minutes burning. Mitch couldn't afford to let hours turn to ashes while he was tied up with a police investigation.

On the sidewalk, a column of marching ants changed course, crawling toward the feast within the cratered skull.

In a mostly clear sky, a rare cloud drifted across the sun. The day paled. Shadows faded.

Chilled, Mitch turned from the corpse, stepped off the curb, halted.

He and Iggy couldn't just load the unplanted impatiens into the truck and drive away. They might not be able to do so before someone came along and saw the dead man. Their indifference to the victim and their flight would suggest guilt even to the most unworldly passerby, and certainly to the police.

The cell phone, folded shut, remained in Mitch's hand. He looked upon it with dread.

If you go to the cops, we'll cut her fingers off one by one . . .

The kidnappers would expect him to summon the authorities or to wait for someone else to do so. Forbidden, however, was any mention of Holly or of kidnapping, or of the fact that the dogwalker had been murdered as an example to Mitch.

Indeed, his unknown adversaries might have put him in this predicament specifically to test his ability to keep his mouth shut at the moment when he was in the most severe state of shock and most likely to lose his self-control.

He opened the phone. The screen brightened with an image of colorful fish in dark water.

After keying in 9 and 1, Mitch hesitated, but then entered the final digit.

Iggy dropped his trowel, moved toward the street.

Only when the police operator answered on the second ring did Mitch realize that from the moment he'd seen the dead man's shattered head, his breathing had been desperate, ragged, raw. For a moment, words wouldn't come, and then they *blew* out of him in a rough voice he barely recognized.

"A man's been shot. I'm dead. I mean, he's dead. He's been shot, and he's dead."