

Perfidy

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I can't remember making it home. I haven't been drinking or anything. I just can't conjure the drive. Aging? Nah. Raging hormones, more like, coursing adrenaline and sweaty palms.

The car's headlights are off as I turn into our driveway and creep up to the garage, killing the engine before she'll hear it.

In the rear view mirror, I check my steely eyes, still as blue as when I was a kid; no worse for wear. Hair needs cutting, I see, and run my hand through my dark, disheveled curls. The gray, like a stroke from a whitewash paintbrush, ices my temples. I reach for my rarely used briefcase then open the car door. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Walking up our path, I crack my neck then stop at the bottom of the steps. The front door looms above me and I sigh. What words should come out of my mouth to appease Lily this time? What verse to stop her barking or her white, doughy hand from coming up and slapping my face, leaving the sting of her wedding ring imprint hot on my face? I envision Lily's fists dug into her ample hips, as I tell her I had to work late again. There was a blackout in the building, so phones were dead. Yeah. I couldn't call home, my cell was dead too, or I had a flat tire—I haven't used that one yet.

As I'm mulling over this last white or black lie, our neighbour appears walking his empty garbage bins back up to his garage. So focused on rolling up the driveway in blackness, I hadn't seen Fred by the road. He calls over to me, "Hey Joe! Just getting in?"

"You know it, Fred. Had a flat tire on the 401. It was a bitch to get help."

"Really? You'd think those tow truck vultures would have been fighting over you."

“Yeah,” I say, a little flat. Maybe it wasn’t the best excuse. “Plus, I had to work late.”

“Cute secretaries, huh? Yeah, sure you were working late!” Fred laughs, and in that instant, I can’t stand him. What the fuck does he know about work anyway, freelancing as a greeting card artist from home? Fred, the homebody. So particular about mowing his friggin’ lawn; armed with goggles, protective earmuffs, and steel-toed boots. And in those shorts Lily checks out from the window every Saturday morning—“Look how fit he is, Joe. You should get out there,” or “Look how sweet, Joe,”—when Fred walks his little ones to school.

Fred’s putting his clean, wheeled garbage bins away, as mine still sit overturned by the roadside. The streetlights amplify that deadbeat husband, Joe, has forgotten to pick them up, yet again. Had I come home ten minutes later, I would have found my old, dirty bent-out-of-shape bins in army formation against my paint-chipped garage. Do-gooder Fred. Fred and his blooming gardens, clean gutters, and shiny mailbox. Well, damn you Fred. “No. No secretaries, Fred.”

“Well, that’s a shame. Is the boss putting you through the wringer then?”

Another miss.

I contemplate answering this fruitless attempt at my truth, but perhaps Good Old Fred has delivered me the perfect line. “Yeah, something like that,” I say. My observation of Fred lingers, my simulated truth forming.

“Geez, that’s the shits, man,” he says, like he’s actually concerned.

“Tell me about it,” I say, picturing my mild-mannered boss grinning at this. He cut out early today, so I could too.

“Hey, you wanna beer in the backyard?” Fred asks. “You look as though you need to let off some steam.”

I look down at my brogues and notice one shoe untied, not tugged tight enough in my haste an hour ago, and then I look back up at Fred, unsure how to answer his invitation. I blink a couple times. “Sorry?” I’m stalling, wondering if a quick call from Fred’s house would promote an invite for Lily. With liquor applied and Fred’s effusiveness, Lily could be subdued. Then she’ll hear my half-baked, imagined plight with Ross Boss at work, because Fred’s curiosity and meddling will get the better of him. He’ll bring it up, all right. Lily will match Fred’s sympathy, of course, and it will show up on her face—a good wife’s concern. That’s when I’ll grasp her chubby, garlicky fingers and tell her that I didn’t want to distress her, my love, as I rub my thumb over her wedding ring. Perfect.

“A beer,” Fred repeats deliberately. “Do you want to join me for a beer in the back?”

“Sure Fred, sure. That sounds great.” And just like that, Good Old Fred has provided me with some degree of freedom. I bend down to tie my lace, as Fred’s garage door closes then I walk down to retrieve our own sorry-ass bins, peeved to find papers stuck at the bottom of my blue box. I walk them back to the garage and place them neatly away, regiment-worthy, Fred-worthy. I hope Lily doesn’t come out, just yet.

“Meet you out back!” Fred calls over.

Not bothering to change out of my suit, I pick up my step and join him at his side yard, following him down his Hosta-lined pathway. Somewhere ahead, I hear water trickling as though a brook flowed nearby; one doesn’t. I notice Fred’s fresh haircut, bristling blond hairs neatly army-buzzed above his orange polo shirt and tanned neck. Chimes tinkle beneath a large tree in the corner by our yard, the maple that drops its damn leaves all over my lawn each October.

“Fred, can I use your phone to call Lily? My cell phone’s dead.”

“Sure, Joe, I have a cordless on the deck,”—which he does, right beside a tropical plant; its red blooms cascade all over the green wrought-iron table. Fred slides the screen door open and steps inside. I wonder where Debbie and the kids are.

“Lager okay?” he asks, reappearing at the door with two glasses, two tall cans. I nod.
“G’ahead, call Lily.”

I smile my thanks, place my briefcase down then pick up the cordless and dial our number, careful to keep the phone tight to my ear should Fred hear any of Lily’s blasting. She answers politely, but of course, she sees Fred’s number calling.

“Lily, it’s-me-I’m-just-next-door-having-a-beer-with-Fred,” I say, with machine gun efficiency, so as to not give her a chance to detonate. I look to Fred to cue him, as Lily asks me where the hell I have been and when was I gonna get my pathetic ass home, but Fred just gives me an idiotic smile. I dip my chin and raise my eyebrows at him—still nothing. I clear my throat and say something that might provoke Fred to an invitation for Lily. “I’m not sure where Deb is, hon,” I say, though Lily hasn’t asked, still holding the phone real tight to my ear, my other hand’s upturned toward Fred.

“Oh,” he says, “They’ve gone to her mother’s for the weekend.”

And? And? My hand’s like a conductor’s, gesturing for a louder chorus. And? For the love of God, Fred!

Lily’s castigating again, and my mind scrambles for something to pacify to her, but I can’t think with all the noise in my ear, so I do what I probably shouldn’t. I hold the phone up. Fred hears her screeching. He’s poured the beer into the glasses and is now handing me one, his eyes

set on the barking phone. Fred's brows rise and he just gawks at me, then he brings his glass up to clink mine and lifts it to his lips.

You God damn moron, Fred!

I return the phone to my ear just as Lily asks if I've heard her, if I was still on the phone. She goes on and on about me being dead on the side of the road.

"I had some problems at work, Lil," I say, rolling my eyes and shaking my head at the complete ineptitude of Dead Head Fred. He laughs, thinking the rolled eyes are for Lily. Jackass.

Then, the line goes dead. This isn't good. She's really pissed now, and even if Fred goes over there, in his Ralph Lauren friggin' flagged shorts and drags her over here with his Freddy charm, ole Lil is steaming. She just might let loose a bit of her Lil-ness on him.

Bingo.

"She hung up," I say, lifting up the cordless again as proof. "Well, Fred, I don't think I can even finish this beer." Then, I take a big first sip to claim it with my germs and then I cough into my left sleeve, for good measure. It's then I notice my ring, *the ring*, is missing from my fourth finger. I place my glass and the phone down and I stand up, thrusting my hands into my jacket pockets. *Where the fuck is it?*

"Hey you! Sit your butt right back down," Fred commands. He stands up and puts his beer down on the table. "I'll go get her."

I finally feel the ring loose in my right pant pocket and I let out a Bilbo Baggins breath of relief. "Thanks, Fred," I say, and sit back down. Fred's already skipped off the deck, and is heading over to my house, with his tanned, hairy legs, ready to impress, de-stress my wife. The ring slips back onto its home too easily. I take another sip of beer. Fred really does have good

taste in beer, I think, and I check the can: *This is great beer*, it announces, and it is. I let myself relax and scan Fred's manicured oasis: the concrete frog by the fake, babbling brook, goofy birdhouses everywhere, and well-placed stepping-stones to guide you to each friggin' vista that Fred wants you to gush over.

Then, I hear Fred's laughter, and then Lily's. My God, he has talent; I give him that. Then I take the position, tie loosened, head in hands, defeated shoulders, and I hear Lily come thudding up the deck steps behind me, and there it is: I'm an old man again, back into my uncomfortable skin, battered and worn without bruising. Then, on my back, I feel a hand, rubbing then patting me, and I wonder if Lily's been into the wine.

"There, there, Joe, it can't be all that bad," says Fred. I snap my head up to find it's his hand on my back, his five o'clock GQ shadow smiling down at me, showering me in Freddy Glow.

Lily's plonked herself down on his chair opposite mine and levels her dark beady eyes upon me; her ebony hair is pinned back. She's ready for battle. "What can't be so bad?" she asks, in a rather clipped fashion, not releasing her glare.

"Old Joe here's had an awful day by the looks of things, Lily," Fred's massages my shoulders briefly. "He was just about to tell me all about it, but your doting husband wanted to make sure you were present to hear it too. Ain't that right, Joe?" Fred grabs his glass off the table and takes a mouthful of beer. There's a twinkle's in his eyes. That bastard's enjoying this. Then he steps into the house. "White or red, Lily?"

My wife finally stops glowering at me and looks to Fred. Transformed, she sweetly replies, "Oh, white please, Fred. Thank you."

I'm waiting for the mini-blast while Fred's inside, but none comes. The scowling resumes. Fred returns and hands Lily her wine in a fancy glass, crystal or something, which Lily sips more lady-like than usual and places on the table. Then Fred pulls over another chair to form a circle of inquisition around me.

I twirl the wedding band around my finger, thinking of where I'd been earlier, how I had felt a million years younger only an hour ago and then I force it out of my head, putting my mind, instead, into the false world I've created; that Fred created.

"Well, it was like this," I say, as Fred and Lily both cross their arms.