

Compounding her restlessness, Renee heard Kyle roll off the couch, cough, then choke on his own vomit. Come morning, the whiskey, coffee and whatever he had managed to eat earlier in the evening would be caked to Kyle's face; like a bad dog, he would get his nose rubbed in the mess, but that hardly seemed severe enough. Although she knew Kyle would be unconscious and unable to assist himself, Renee had left a wastebasket beside Kyle in the hopes that he would have the presence of mind to use if the need arose. She couldn't bring herself to rise and clean the filth, so the rug would just have to accept the abuse.

The retching was a warning shot. Renee had been lying in bed, considering an escape into the night. If Thompson's minion had not been guarding the door against her escape, Renee would have fled the house, but mortar was hardening on the bricks and Thompson was towering over the house. In chill of her ex-husband's shadow, Renee wanted someone with whom to huddle. She was afraid to look outside, a glowing yellow eye was sure to be waiting at the window, legs straddling the street, writing down notes on truck-sized legal pads. Thompson was suddenly everywhere in Renee's life. He might be lying beside her if she were brave enough to open her eyes and check. She was reminded of their marriage bed, the lying side by side without sleeping or touching. In those days, when Renee felt she could stand guard no longer, she would retire to the guest room on the second floor. It was

hot year-round and the dust was often choking, but Renee would fall immediately into a fitful dream state, waking a few hours later, irritable, muscles sore, her teeth vibrating from clenched jaws grinding.

Thompson had trained his body to rise at the same time each day, regardless of what had transpired the night before, and Renee would find him when she came downstairs, the skies dark and the lone desk lamp lighting the study. Once, she stopped to speak with him. Thompson's eyes were yellow in the dim light.

"Aren't you tired?" asked Renee. "We were up until three. What time is it now? Six?"

"Yes, I'm tired, but I got up at five as always. My body is trained, my mind is trained. I don't have to be there. What has come before is of little consequence."

Always eager to return to the conversation he was having with himself, Thompson stared at Renee until she became uncomfortable. She let him be and went to find a book to read. As Thompson snorted her books, she kept her selections private, her trips to the library conducted under the guise of domestic errands. The silence of deep readers filled the house.

Renee's work at the university had started well enough, but soon she realized defending her dissertation had been the last act of independence. She'd saddled herself with a literary husband, both Ph.D. and wedding ring coming in the same month. Dr. Lehman greeted Renee on her first day as an assistant professor.

“Good morning, Dr. Thompson.”

“Oh, I’ve kept my maiden name, Dr. Lehman.”

“I see,” said Dr. Lehman. “How is Burt anyway? I haven’t seen him since the night of that party. When was that? Eight months ago?”

“It’s been almost a year.”

“My how time flies!”

Dr. Lehman had a way of punctuating her sentences that caused one’s head to nod automatically. Renee would have agreed to most anything.

“Burt’s doing well. He’s adjusting to the new house.”

“New house? New job, new husband! New everything! It must be thrilling.”

“It’s been fun.”

“Yes, a change in the writer’s environment. It must be difficult for him.”

“Actually, he took right to it. I could hardly get him out of the house when we went to see it. He wanted to move right in.”

“So he’s working on another book?”

“As always.”

“To be married to a writer... It must be wonderful.”

Dr. Lehman, might have enjoyed Thompson, but Renee was already wearing thin at the edges. They’d only been married for a few weeks! He was always touching her, holding

her hand in restaurants, touching her knee during a movie, wrapping his arms around her (on the street of all places) and kissing her in front of people. Though Thompson didn't have dentures, Renee was afraid his teeth would suddenly slip out of his mouth and into hers. When he clambered on top of her, he slashed and groped her. He grunted. Renee felt his bristly hairs on her chest. They rubbed off, slithering like worms on her skin until she could slip off to the shower and wash them down the drain.

Within a year, Renee left the university to work on her own book.

“Oh, Renee, we will miss you terribly!”

Dr. Lehman tried to hide a smile as she accepted Renee's resignation letter.

“I'm sure Burt must keep you busy though. Tough to keep up with a man like that I imagine.”

“Actually, I'm going to work on my own book.”

“Oh, how wonderful! I'm sure Burt will be able to help you with that, dear.”

Without the job and Thompson constantly pressing up against her, the fear of writing got worse. Thompson was like a machine, pounding out pages - five o'clock in the morning, every morning, tapping away in the study. Renee would listen from the kitchen, waiting for a pause, a breath or two then more typing, a pace a stenographer would find impressive.

Without the distraction of papers and students, Renee thought she would regain her

private dialogue, but the words never came. When Renee tried to write, she was all too present. She could feel every hair on her head. She jumped at the slightest noise. Her fingers hesitated above the keys or held a pen poised a fine millimeter above the paper. She bought a computer, at great expense, which gathered dust. Thompson, of course, had no problem continuing his work.

“How do you do it?” asked Renee.

“Do what?”

“Write.”

“To write, one must write. Although I admit, it is more than it seems. However, there is the writing that must be done, so you sit down and you do it. Sometimes, it’s grand.”

It was never grand for Renee. It wasn’t even jolly. It was painful. She didn’t know what to do with herself for half the day, sitting mute and still, pretending she was writing. Two months later Renee stopped sleeping.

They were lying in bed one night when Thompson rolled over to Renee and touched her arm. She hardened, but he didn’t seem to notice and began stroking her shoulder.

“You’re not sleeping,” said Thompson.

“Yes, I am.”

“Really? You’re rather alert for being asleep.”

Renee didn't respond and hoped he would either get it over with or roll over.

"Not going well is it?"

"What?"

"The writing. It's bothering you."

"Oh, I don't know. It seems to be moving along just fine."

"Listen, I'm just trying to..."

"Alright! Alright! Alright! If you have to know, Burt, it's not going at all. I sit and I try to think of a word, just one word to put down and I can't do it."

"I had that problem when I was your age."

Thompson sounded like her father. His hand had worked its way down to her hip and it made her cringe. He was old enough to be her father. Trying to let the genie out of the bottle, Thompson rubbed her hip, but Renee was iced up, a ghostly harbor in the arctic. He rubbed harder.

"I spend entire days sitting in front of the computer. Sometimes I don't even bother to turn it on."

"Well, it usually works better when the machine is turned on."

Renee shifted herself so that Thompson would stop rubbing, but he worked his hands back.

"What did you do to get around it?"

“Me? There is no way around it. I wrote. There’s no magic potion or incantation. There’s no Faustian bargain to be won. You just do it... Or, you don’t.”

Thompson was putting a curse on Renee’s hips. ‘Don’t do it. Don’t do it,’ he rubbed, smoothing it into her skin. Thompson pushed Renee onto her back and moved on top of her. By fucking, a husband always believes he is helping, but instead of calming Renee’s nerves, each stroke drove Thompson’s curse deeper into her body. Later, when he was snoring beside her, Renee felt wet with him, the worms crawling on her skin.

Twenty years later, with Thompson’s Great Eye outside the bedroom window, the worms made their return. The computer had been replaced (it was hardly more expensive than a microwave oven) and the replacement gathered dust. Renee did not find sleep until dawn, and then only with teeth clenched and fists knotted beneath the sheets.