

The Drink Beforehand

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“It makes me feel like a whore if we don’t at least have a drink beforehand,” Pauline explained early on.

He had shrugged and rolled his eyes in resentful acceptance of this stipulation, wisely choosing not to mention what he was thinking—that having a drink beforehand made her no more or less of a whore, if that’s how she thought about it.

He wasn’t even sure he liked her.

They had been meeting once a fortnight for a few months and hadn’t spent enough time together for him to decide one way or the other. Not that it mattered, anyway. She too was married, equally as panicked by the thought of exposure, and she made it clear from the start that she wasn’t looking for some sort of whirlwind romance, or for any emotional attachment whatsoever, which suited him just fine.

When he thought about it, it could barely be classed as an affair at all. It was more a succession of one-evening stands which just happened to be with the same woman.

He was sitting in the lobby of a mid-range hotel on the other side of town, pretending to read a newspaper while he waited for her. The hotel had been his suggestion as a meeting place, a bland establishment near the airport where he and his wife had themselves stayed once before an early flight to Mauritius.

He had been bored for the duration of that holiday, he now remembered, stuck on a small island resort with nothing to do other than drink and lie in the sun. They had spent the week fighting over nothing in particular, over everything in general, and both vowed with raised voices on the flight home that they would never, ever go on holiday together again. He blamed her for choosing Mauritius, and she blamed him for everything else. The following year they had traveled to Spain and things had been easier, but he suspected this was due to the fact that they had gone with friends and didn't have to spend too much time alone together.

Pauline was late.

He felt exposed and uneasy sitting there in the lobby and decided to insist in the future that they meet in the room. He raised the newspaper higher and, trying somehow to blend into the décor of the lobby, cursed her for making him wait like this. He acknowledged the slight thrill he was getting from

acting like some sort of undercover agent, but refused to enjoy the sensation.

A friend had told him once that an affair should last for no longer than four months, the reasoning being that after this period of time the initial thrill would begin to wear off, thus making it less enjoyable, while the chances of becoming complacent and getting caught would begin to increase. He tried to figure out exactly how long he had been seeing Pauline. It was about five months, roughly, and his friend's logic was beginning to seem sound.

It wasn't his first affair, after all, and as he sat there thinking back over previous involvements he acknowledged that most had continued for too long, becoming too complicated and emotionally draining for his liking.

Generally, however, they faded quickly, ending with him thanking God that he had seen sense and hadn't been caught, that things could go on with his wife the way they had been, even though he knew that this was the main reason he had started having affairs in the first place.

After each one finished, the guilt would weigh heavily on him for a period. Thoughts of coming clean and confessing would harass his conscience, his mind becoming convinced

that he did in fact love his wife. Finally, after a few weeks of torment, when he realized that he couldn't be sure even of this, he would decide to keep quiet and the guilt would gradually lift.

He was paranoid about getting caught and overly cautious about arrangements, making sure he always had an alibi, picking a hotel that was frequented only by tired, unobservant and uninterested travelers, and now—his latest precaution—hiding behind a newspaper in the corner of the lobby.

He still felt small, primal pangs of jealousy when he thought about the possibility of his wife being involved in similar clandestine dalliances. He had no reason to think she was, but used these feelings to justify his own transgressions nonetheless, his faux-wounded pride acting as a balance on the scales to his own guilt.

On those rare occasions when he felt the guilt creeping in he now found comfort in telling himself that everyone did it, that there was no real harm in it so long as he didn't get caught, but for the most part he could compartmentalize things enough so that he rarely thought about the affairs. Helped by the purely carnal nature of the current one, he had so far managed to evade any troubling emotions.

But at times like this, hiding in the corner of a hotel lobby when his wife thought he was playing poker with friends, it was difficult not to think about it. He silently cursed Pauline again for making him wait there in the first place, for being late and allowing his mind to think about what he was doing.

“It makes me feel like a whore if we don’t at least have a drink beforehand.”

If it made her feel like a whore, he decided, that was *her* problem.

He eyed the revolving doors of the hotel, hoping to see Pauline walk through each time they turned. He watched business men in suits, small attaché luggage in hand, tourists in brightly colored clothes weighed down with suitcases. She was later than usual, and it was eating into their time.

Susan would be home late after visiting her mother, but the later he himself got back the more chance there would be of suspicions being raised. He hoped she would be asleep when he finally did get home; though their sex-life had taken a sharp nose-dive in recent times, there was always the chance that tonight, of all nights, she would have the urge. He wasn’t as young as he used to be, and he worried that any lack of interest

could raise suspicions. Added to this was his fear that he might act differently in the bedroom somehow, setting off alarm bells in his wife's mind. As a result he tried to seem as un-exciting and un-adventurous as possible in that department. He wondered now if it was worth it.

He continued to stare at the revolving doors, deciding to give Pauline ten more minutes before he left and called the whole thing off. He was beginning to sweat.

When he saw her finally, he began to stand for a brief moment, intent on cutting her off before she reached the bar. It took only this moment for him to realize—suddenly, as if the realization itself was stabbing him in the chest—that the familiar face coming through the revolving doors was not that of Pauline, but that of his wife.

It was Susan. In the hotel. Walking through the doors and making a beeline for the bar. He was frozen still as she walked past, no more than ten feet away from him, so close that he could see the sulking look of anger on her face. He was sure she would see him there, despite his efforts at camouflage, but she walked straight past, the click-clack of her heels disappearing into the bar.

“Sweet Jesus,” he whispered to no one.

He was outside within seconds, his mind reeling. She hadn't seen him, at least, but she was *there*. At the hotel.

He tried to think of a way out but soon came to the conclusion that there wasn't one. She must have gone to confront him and catch him in the act. She had headed straight for the bar—she must have known about the ritual pre-affair drink.

After speeding back across town and arriving home he tried to call Pauline but got no answer. He thought briefly about calling his wife on the pretence of seeing how her mother was, but he didn't see the point now—it would only make things worse.

He poured whisky into a large glass, poured himself onto the sofa, and waited for his wife to return home, hoping that he could talk himself out of trouble when she did, but resigned to the fact that this was unlikely. She wasn't an idiot, a fact which at that moment seemed highly regrettable. He waited.

He could hear his own heartbeat, his head thumping as his mind filled with the likely consequences of his situation.

He would tell her he loved her, of course—there was no point in turning truthful now, he decided, not when the stakes were so high. He would tell her he was sorry, which was true, and that it would never happen again, that this was the first time, a mistake. He would beg. He would even cry.

But he knew that when it came to it she would leave him.

Oddly, it wasn't the thought of this that scared him most. It was the legal battle, the scorn of her family, and of his own, the dividing up of friends, which would inevitably be in her favor, finding somewhere to live, money... It wasn't losing her that was making him tremble as he sat there in their living room, but the inconvenience that went along with it.

He poured another drink and continued to wait.

He was on his third large whisky when the phone rang. He took a deep breath and steeled himself before picking it up, expecting to hear his wife's voice and surprised to hear Pauline's. At least he could get this out of the way now, he thought, before his wife got home. He would tell Pauline that it was over, that the game was up, that he wouldn't be seeing her again.

He decided to keep the conversation brief—and it was, but it went somewhat differently than he had expected. It was Pauline who did the talking. She apologized in hushed tones for standing him up and for calling him at home, and went on to explain that it was over, that it was *she* who wouldn't be seeing *him* again. He wasn't really listening to the details, but gathered that she had been struck by a sudden and profound revelation about the way she was leading her life. It was over, thank you, and goodbye.

The call lasted for less than thirty seconds. He was glad of this, and relieved too that the affair was now officially finished. Still, an irrational pride reared its head briefly. He had wanted to end things on his terms, and he felt foolish now that the opposite had happened.

He was into his fourth drink, still no word from his wife. He wondered if she was still at the hotel, waiting to catch him with the other woman. He pictured her in the lobby, sitting in the corner just like he had been earlier, lying in wait behind a newspaper. For the first time that night he suddenly felt sorry for her. She would be crying, maybe, seething with anger and hurt, waiting for him to emerge from the elevator with some whore on his arm, her life shattered.

He was drunk now, his emotions in a state of turmoil, his initial reactions of self-preservation fighting it out with feelings of guilt and shame.

The phone began to ring and snapped him out of his stupor. He didn't know what to expect, but he tried to ready himself for it. He answered the call with a sheepish "hello?"

"Hi honey, how was poker?"

Of all the things he was expecting to hear her say, that hadn't been one of them. Her voice sounded chirpy; he had expected to hear sobs or screams. Maybe she was toying with him, he thought, a woman scorned...

He didn't know how to respond, but decided to go along with it. She deserved that at least, to have things play out the way she wanted, to inflict as much shame and embarrassment on him as she could—to catch him in the lie.

"It was good," he said. "I won."

He waited for her to lunge for the kill; he waited for the screaming and sobbing.

“Good, good,” she replied, still no hint of anger, of sarcasm even, of anything.

“Listen,” she continued, “Mom’s not feeling too well. I think I’m going to stay with her for the night, just to make sure she’s okay.”

He was confused. More confused, he thought, as he sat there on their sofa, than he had ever been in his life. This was not how he had expected to be confronted. She was toying with him. He hadn’t known she had this in her. He felt uneasy. He felt like throwing up.

“There are some leftovers in the fridge if you’re hungry. I’ll be back early tomorrow, so I’ll see you then, okay?”

“Okay,” was the muted response that limped out of his mouth.

“Night sweetheart... love you,” she said before hanging up.

He tried to preserve that last sentence in his mind—its inflection, its tone. He was stunned. He had no idea what had just happened. Maybe it was the whisky, but he was almost

certain that he had heard nothing more than genuine affection in her voice.

It was then, as he poured his fifth glass of whisky, that all of the questions that had been tormenting him for the previous few hours—how she had found out, how much she knew, how she would react—disappeared and were replaced with new questions, questions which in turn were answered almost instantly, like the bursting of a dam.

It was her heels. She never wore high heels. And the dress—she had been wearing a dress. He hadn't noticed it at the time. And that look on her face as he had watched her walk right past him from behind the newspaper, that look that he had taken as a sulking anger... It hadn't been anger at all, but a sultry look of excitement, of anticipation. She had been wearing make-up, too. How had he not noticed all of this at the time? He felt winded. She hadn't seen him there in the corner, he now realized, because she hadn't been looking for him.

“Sweet... fucking... Jesus,” he whispered in disbelief, downing his drink and pouring yet another.

He stayed there drinking, his brain struggling to cope with what was happening, suspended in what felt like a strange

and alternate reality, until he could drink no more and finally stumbled to bed.

As he succumbed to drunken exhaustion, he wondered whether his wife—like his mistress—felt like a whore if she didn't have a drink beforehand.