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PHILLIPS**

LABORS

Fiction

Lydia asks for a warm-up on her coffee and a bottle of Heinz. As our waitress, name-tagged Kinney, retreats to the kitchen, Lydia shakes her head and rubs her lips together, smearing what's left of the fig-colored matte across her creased, thin lips. "How tacky," she mutters and reaches into her pocketbook.

"What is?" I ask and push my eggs to the side of the plate. I ordered them scrambled, but they came out over easy. I set a butter knife between them and my unbuttered toast to dam the yolk from leaking everywhere.

"That tattoo on our waitress!" Lydia rummages through the pill bottles, tissues, nasal spray, loose change, sugar-free lemon drops, dental floss, and broken Capri Menthol Lights in her purse until she finds a tube of lipstick. There's no cap on it. She picks off the lint and loose tobacco from the stick, inspects it, and slides it around her mouth. She pops her lips.

"I didn't notice," I reply and bite into my toast.

"Why anybody'd want to mark her body up like that—" Lydia's words slip under the noise of the restaurant like dust under a bed. My wife of eleven years and a three-month trial separation sits across the table from me, her black hair cutting straight across her jawline, and wears a violet dress with a hem that steals up her thighs and reveals a web of veins and her hopeless attempt to save our marriage. "Oh, by the way, I finally had the carpet cleaned. They weren't quite able to get that one spot up, though. So, I just put the ficus over it."

The week after I moved out, Lydia called me at the university.

"You're going to kill me," she had whispered shamefully. "I spilled a little wine on the carpet last night."

I imagined her sitting on the floor, legs tucked beneath her, while she held the phone between her chin and shoulder and scrubbed the carpet with a sponge and hydrogen peroxide. Her voice was low and soggy with tears.

"I wandered into the cellar and found a bottle of '85. You always said that was a good year in Napa. So, I gave it a try."

I had asked her what yard it was, but she couldn't remember.

"Check the bottle," I said.

She told me that she had broken it.

"You know how silly I get when I drink," she said and sniffed.

I dropped my pen onto the stack of papers I was grading. She breathed, mouth-open, into the phone.

"Lace?" she asked, after a moment or two of silence.

"Yes?"

"When are you coming home?"

"I don't know."

After that, Lydia called once a week. At the end of each conversation,

she always asked the same questions. *When are you coming home? When are you coming back? When will I see you again?* For some time, I never answered these questions. Two weeks ago, though, I told her that home was an upstairs in Grant Park with appliances and a sofa-sleeper, but then yesterday when she finished telling me about a Pampered Chef party and her new chicken de-boner, she didn't ask when I was coming home. Instead, she asked if I would meet her for brunch at The Furnace out in Buckhead.

"Who does brunch?" I had asked.

"We will," she replied. "I haven't seen you in so long."

I check my watch. It's nine-thirty. I have a class at eleven.

"Speaking of the ficus," Lydia says, gulps down her coffee, and then continues. "Chaucer used it as a litterbox the other day."

"You let him into my office?"

"Well, I was in there and he's just so upset all the time now—he really does miss you—and I was there, but I fell asleep in the chair. Besides, it's not really yours anymore."

I take a bite out of my toast.

She smiles at me, but then looks around the restaurant. "Where's our waitress? I need a refill and I want you to see her tattoo, that ugly thing."

I open a pack of jam and dig out a glob with my knife.

"How's work?" she asks.

"Fine," I say and spread the jam on my toast.

"Any interesting students this semester?"

"Interesting, yes. But any of them that are interested in the Labours of Hercules or the Argonauts?"

"No." Lydia smiles and slides her fingers around the rim of her coffee mug. "What about your birthday? How was it?"

"Standard, as birthday's go." I set my knife and toast on my plate. I suck the jam off of my thumb.

"Did you do anything?"

"I had dinner."

"By yourself?"

"I never eat alone."

"Oh." She says this like a hiccup and drops her hands to her lap and fiddles with her napkin, then continues, "Did you have a cake?"

"A piñata, too."

The waitress approaches the table with a coffee pot and the ketchup. Kinney blinks nervously as she sets the ketchup on the table and empties the coffee into the mugs. As she extends her arm over the table, she reveals the infamous tattoo. A beastly, black Ibis clutches a log with its talons. *Threskiornis spinicollis* is written within the wood grain and in the bird's beak, there is a toad. Two awkward, limp legs hang from the black sickle of its mouth.

“How is everything?” she asks.

“Wonderful,” I reply.

“Can I get you folks anything else?”

“No. No. Nothing,” Lydia barks.

Kinney nods and blinks some more before wandering to another table. Her jeans mold her backside into the shape of a peach and her hair falls in red-orange ringlets against the pale and freckled slope of her shoulder.

“You don’t have to stare at her like that.” Lydia rips open four *Sweet’n’Lows* and dumps them into her coffee and stirs them with her knife. The metal pings against the ceramic cup. I fold my hands together and rest my lips on the ledge of my thumbs. Lydia clears her throat.

“You know, I talked to Audrey,” she says and smacks her hand on the bottom of the ketchup bottle before dumping it all over her hash browns. She used to do the same thing with her pack of Capri Menthol Lights every Tuesday night when we stopped at Butler’s Beverage and Tobacco World after counseling. “I was asleep when she called. She seemed awfully upset,” Lydia continues and then sips her coffee. The lump of her thyroid bobs like an Adam’s apple when she swallows.

“I’m sorry,” I say and tear the corner off of my napkin. “It was late.”

“Wallace,” she says and sets her coffee on the table. She brings her napkin to her mouth and dabs the corner of her lips. “At first I didn’t want this. I thought there was a way to prevent it. I thought that if I could just get you back for just a few hours, we could talk things through.”

I poke my eggs with my fork and say, “I don’t know about that.”

“If you had just told me—”

“—who wants to tell their wife *that*?” I say and drop the paper onto the table and lean back against the booth.

Lydia exhales slowly and shifts in her seat. Her thighs whine against the upholstery when she moves.

“I don’t want to talk about your sister,” I say. “I mean, I didn’t intend to talk about Audrey—”

“What’s wrong with your eggs?” she asks staring into the blackness of her coffee.

“What’s wrong with your coffee?”

“Nothing. It just needs to cool down.”

“Is everything all right over here?” Kinney pops over to our table.

“Yes, fine. Everything’s fine,” I say and cross my arms.

“His eggs aren’t right.” Lydia interjects.

“No, they’re fine.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Kinney asks, her smile disappears and her eyes widen.

“Nothing—just not cooked quite right. They’re fine, though. I’m really just not that hungry.”

Kinney reaches for my plate and there’s the black bird again. Its eyes are like smooth, carved granite against Kinney’s pale skin. “I’m so sorry

about that—I'll have them make you some more.”

“No, no—you don't have to.”

“It's all right. It's all right.” Kinney says and breaks into a smile. “I'll be right back.”

She removes the plate from the table and removes herself to the kitchen.

“I didn't ask her to do that.”

Lydia blows the steam from her coffee. “Why wouldn't she? Your eggs weren't right.”

I drop my hands to my lap and exhale.

“You look disgusted, Lace. That's the problem. *That's* the problem right there.”

“What is?”

She slurps her coffee and then removes a Capri from her purse and presses it between her lips. The stick is creased in the middle and some of the tobacco streams out of the end. When she holds a light to it, the shredded pieces curl and glow orange. She inhales and pulls the cigarette from her mouth, letting it dangle between the V of her fingers. She purses her fig lips and blows the smoke towards the dull, yellow light above our table.

“That's exactly it,” she says and taps her cigarette into the ashtray. “Exactly.”

“Whhhat? What are you talking about?”

“You're never satisfied.” She clears her throat. She tucks an arm beneath the small ledge of her breasts. Then she takes a drag. “Do you remember when we went down to Jackson when we were first dating?”

“No.”

“We were lost,” she says. “We were lost in your old Jeep. You had just moved here for grad school and were trying to be the next—oh, I don't know!—Yeats or Stevens or something and we went down to try to find some old cemetery that my great-grandparents were buried in and it got dark before we found it so we tried to head back to the city. And we ended up on some state highway that ran between two pastures and you said you were tired and we stopped on the side of the road and lay with our backs on the warm hood—remember?”

I shake my head.

“No?—well, we smoked that blunt we had been saving for the cemetery and looked at the stars. I was auditing that astronomy course at Georgia Perimeter and I pointed out *Aquila*, the eagle. But, you said you couldn't see it and I kept tracing it and tracing it and you laid there, real quiet for a long time.”

I recline against the back of the booth. I cross my arms as the smoke ascends towards the lamp. Blue orbs drag towards the edge of my vision. I close my eyes.

“You told me there was no such thing as constellations, that people are always trying to see things where there wasn't anything at all. That we're always just projecting our own lives onto things.”

I open my eyes. She smiles and rolls the cigarette between her thumb and index so that the smoke ribbons. She bites her lip.

“You said that everything was just a symbol, that there was nothing real except symbols, that we were—”

“—that we were all just metaphors for something else and metaphors cannot understand what they represent and that’s why we’d never understand anything, not any god, not love, not anything...nothing...at all.”

Somewhere in the restaurant, a fork clangs against the tile floor. Then, a laugh bursts out of Lydia. “Typical Lace! Never—ever!—satisfied.” She takes one last drag on her Capri before she stubs it out in the ashtray. She lifts her gaze to me. Her eyes, those sticky honey-colored globes, catch the light and she stares, just stares at me.

“Here you go!—scrambled, just like you wanted,” Kinney says, reaching her tattooed arm across the table and setting the plate in front of me.

“Thank you,” I say. “They’re fine, just fine.”

“Enjoy,” Kinney says with a smile and several blinks and then, she flutters away.

Lydia lifts her coffee cup to her mouth, tilts her head back, and drains the cup.

“I’m done,” she says.

“You haven’t even eaten any of your hash browns.”

“I’ve had my fill.” She pushes herself from the booth, tugging the hem of her lavender dress down. She throws her purse over her shoulder and walks out of The Furnace.

A few tables back, Kinney is taking orders from a young couple. The young man has his hand on the woman’s, twirling a ring around her finger. Kinney scribbles something on her notepad, nods, and starts to walk away. I raise two fingers in the air. “Miss?”

“Yes sir?” she says, stopping at my table.

“Have you ever heard of the Stymphalian birds?”

Her smile dwindles and she tucks her pen behind her ear. “I’m sorry?”

“It was the sixth labor of Hercules,” I say.

She forces a smile and looks down at her notepad. “Are you ready for your check?”