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SALVAGE EFFORTS

"I'M GOING TO CHANGE INTO my overalls now," I said, heading for the bedroom.

When you're married to a god, you have to watch what you say.

"What an intriguing idea," he said. He pointed at me.

The next instant I lay on the ground, flatter than I was comfortable being, without the power of vision, and incapable of independent motion. My sense of touch had changed. I was aware of myself as a multitude of threads interwoven, with acres of thready skin.

When he picked me up and put me on, I sensed him as a series of textures and varying temperatures, moisture differences and body oils and sweat, skin and hair and heat. There was an excitation in just lying against him -- perhaps the presence of his god power. I could tell as I touched him that he wore no other clothes than me. Half of me lay against much of him, conscious of many differences in his finite acre; and half of me lay open to the air, which was different from one height to the next, full of touches/ tastes I normally didn't perceive at all.

Even while I gave myself up to all these strange and wonderful sensations, to this new relationship with my husband that involved an intimacy we had never shared before, in my core (wherever that was in this body) anger grew, starting as a sullen ember of heat, flaring higher as minutes passed and I remained in this shape without having been asked, without the power to ask to change back.

Had I known before I married the man that he was a god, I would have thought longer and harder about my answer to his proposal.

Though I couldn't move, I was conscious of motion; I knew my husband walked and sat with me wrapped around him. We went somewhere in the car: I could feel the vinyl upholstery slick against parts of me, though at first I didn't know what it was.

This wasn't nice, wearing me in public as though I were slave or adornment. Where was he wearing me? Who would see us? What was my husband saying about it?

Usually I liked his sense of humor -- when I could hear it to appreciate it. He had a mean streak, though.

From reading myths, one gets the feeling this is a chronic problem with gods.

Perhaps he was even now telling someone the truth about me. I wouldn't put it past him. None of his beer buddies would believe it, but my husband would laugh, knowing he had handed over an unruly secret that, if believed, could hurt both of us.

A hand that felt different from my husband's in texture, composition, and

temperature slapped some part of me for which I had no name.

Someone I couldn't see, someone to whom I didn't know whether I had ever been introduced, had touched me. Anger spread through my every thread. The touch was not unpleasant or invasive or harmful, but nevertheless, it was a violation. My husband shouldn't have put me in this position.

Yet what could I do?

Well, what could I do?

I unmeshed my threads. Anger gave me the power of fray. I let myself go over and over again.

I don't know how long this orgy of disintegration lasted. It frightened me while I was in the midst of it -- what if I could never recollect myself again? As connections unraveled I grew farther away from myself. Thoughts and intentions fragmented.

Let him stand there naked, wherever he is, I thought while I still could. It wasn't much of a revenge -- he had talked himself out of much worse situations, and nakedness didn't bother him. It was what was in my power, the best and worst that I could do.

Near the end I understood this was a decision I might never recover from, but I couldn't reverse it.

I wasn't sure I wanted to.

There were many tastes and textures on the floor, where more and more of me piled.

Before I could make sense of these new tastes, I lost track of myself and subsided into some lower state of consciousness where thoughts traveled through me without ever rubbing together.

I OPENED EYES, and thought how strange that was. Light and shadow mixed and sorted into some kind of view. I blinked. Eyelids! It took time for me to understand what I was looking at. Intense dark squares and rectangles with colors in them, scattered over a light yellow background. Our bedroom wall, impressionist prints tacked up, all our favorites. Whenever we got tired of one, my husband could change it by willing it to be something else.

I lay on our bed, aware of the sheets above and below me in all their myriad threads, warm but unalive.

The bed dipped as my husband sat beside me. His face was pale. "What got into you?" he said, his voice hoarse. "I had to re-create you from next to nothing! It was almost beyond me!"

Despair flooded me. If he had indeed created me, how was I ever going to

escape  
his control?

Was I even myself? What if he had put me back together but had forgotten some important pieces, or left out things he had never liked?

I lay without speaking for some time, exploring myself. If anything was gone, I couldn't tell.

I would never be able to tell.

He touched my cheek. I could feel his hand's warmth, but gone was the ability to sense intimately the whorls on his fingertips, the sweat and fear that touched his palm. "Eva," he said, "what happened?"

"I agreed to love and honor you," I said, "not to be your clothes."

"It was just a joke!"

"It stopped being funny when someone else touched -- scratch that! I didn't think it was funny from the first. You made me powerless."

He sat for a while, gazing toward the wall. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"You never do."

"I promise never to do it again," he said.

I sighed.

That night he went out. I wanted him to. He had stayed by me for several hours, just touching me, occasionally apologizing until I told him to stop that, it was all right, I knew he hadn't intended to hurt me.

After he left, I lay and thought about being thread, being cloth, finally let myself appreciate how different and strange that had been. Before I knew my husband, I had never felt anything like this. And I used to thrive on novelty.

I rose and got a suitcase down from an upper closet shelf and set it open on the bed. I pulled out my dresser drawers and took underwear and socks out, one pair at a time, placing them in the suitcase. The cloth tingled against my hand; I felt as though we were related.

I didn't want to have this attitude toward clothes. I wanted them to go back to just being things I could wear without thinking about it. Perhaps this uncomfortable association would fade. Though my affinity for cats hadn't changed since the night that my husband...

...and I still felt an unreasoning terror every time I heard a chainsaw start ....

I took my red silk blouse out of the closet and stroked it over my forearm.

Smooth and slippery as water. It wouldn't pack well -- it would wrinkle. I folded it in half, then sat on the bed holding it in my lap, resting my hands on fabric.

Did I really want to leave?

He was always sorry afterward.

This time I had come so close to self-destruction. Could I stay with my husband and survive?

I stroked the blouse, brought it up to touch the silk against my cheek. So soft, so almost not there. So much more intense a feeling in its touch, now that I had been there.

My husband would never turn me into clothes again; he had promised. But there would be something else. And something else after that.

I folded up the blouse and put it in the suitcase, then reached into the closet for my favorite comfortable cotton dress.

He came into the room. "What are you doing, Eva?"

I sat down next to my open suitcase. "I don't know," I said.

"Are you leaving?"

"I don't know."

"You're the best wife I ever had," he said. "I don't want to lose you. I hate being between wives; it's hard to find a good one."

This was another thing I had learned only after we married. My husband was more than three thousand years old, and he hadn't spent many years in a single state.

I gave up thoughts of jealousy early in our relationship. A waste of energy. Anyway, I could tell that for the present, he was devoted to me.

"For better or for worse doesn't mean what it used to," he said, sitting down beside me.

"Did you treat your other wives the way you treat me?"

"Some of them," he said, "liked it."

"Those were different times," I said.

"Yes."

"Women like that are probably still around. I'm not one of them."

"How can we work this out?" he asked.

When I went to work on Monday it was all I could do to keep it together. I

kept

wanting to laugh. They're very serious at the law firm where I'm the receptionist, and I knew laughing would get me in trouble. But I couldn't help it.

I managed the morning. I managed my lunch break, even sitting there with Rhoda and eating yogurt and bananas and oranges together. I laughed, but I held it together. It was in the afternoon when I lost it.

Mr. Gill was a dissatisfied client who had come in several times to give me a hard time. I was the one who kept sending him bills, and he didn't see why he should pay his lawyer when the judgment had gone against him.

He wasn't physically threatening, but he was always verbally abusive. The partners had told me to call witnesses and cops the next time he came in, but this afternoon I was laughing too hard. He yelled at me and called me names, and I laughed.

Then I pointed at him.

There's no way he can pay us back in his present state, but he gives the office some much needed color. People stop to smell him. I wonder if he likes that.

I'm starting to appreciate my husband's sense of humor more.