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# Tranquility

by Mary Soon Lee

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Tuesday, February 11

I took a dose of Lonely last night. I didn't plan to, but when I dropped Martin off at the airport he looked so excited about the trip, and then so tender as he hugged me good-bye. And I, I hugged him back, and tried to sound sincere when I said I'd miss him, but inside I felt nothing except a twinge of envy.

How can Martin still be excited about traveling? The household computer says this is his sixty-seventh business trip since we got married.

How can he still be interested in me?

Driving home along the freeway, I took a strip of Tranquility pills out of my purse. I had the foil torn when the idiot in front of me slowed down for no reason. The pill shot out of my fingers as I braked, and landed on the floor in front of the passenger seat.

Scrambling to reach the pill while driving, trying not to cause an accident, I had a sudden picture of myself in twenty years time, gray-haired and wrinkled, still popping Tranquility. A sixty year-old addict who never even managed to have children, but no matter, because nothing can touch her while she floats on her little yellow pill-shaped island of calm contentment.

You need a prescription to get the Joy pills or the Libido pills, and none of the negative mood-switchers have ever been legalized. But the doctors and the therapists and the talk-show hosts all swear by Tranquility. Mom bought me my first strip, a few months after I married Martin, when he was away on a business trip. I'd mentioned on the phone that I was feeling vaguely depressed, and the next morning Interflora delivered a bunch of carnations and a gift-wrapped strip of six Tranquility pills.

My ex-therapist told me it's not a sign of failure to take Tranquility. But that's what it seemed to me, driving along 511 last night. So I left the yellow pill lying on the car floor, and drove into the east side of downtown where the hookers and the pushers hang out. For three hundred dollars I bought what the man called the Complete Negative Cuisine, double-doses of each of five banned mood-switchers.

There's been so much bad publicity about the Negatives that I didn't dare take one while I was driving. But as soon as I got back to our apartment, I dry-swallowed the pair of Lonelys, and put on a Blues CD.

Slowly, slowly an ache lodged inside me as I listened to Louis Armstrong. Sadness swelled behind each sound of the trumpet, the notes rising and falling around me like rain on an empty street. It was the night my first date stood me up; it was the year no one remembered my birthday. A coffee-mug Martin had left on the bookshelves said *he's gone, gone*.

The music haunted me, filled me? I switched it off, reached for the TV remote control.

*We're together*, mocked the sitcom family as they stared out of the screen at me, sitting by myself on the sofa. Canned laughter followed me into the kitchen as I hunted for a drink. I had a glass of whiskey, then another. I don't like whiskey, but the heat chased through me, taking the edge off my mood until it settled into me, a muted whisper of aloneness, sweet as the moment when the hero rides off into the sunset, leaving the girl behind.

I turned off the TV, and stared out the window. The crescent moon coasted across the sky. I cried for the first time in years, because of the moon, because I'd never realized how beautiful it was, because there was no one to watch it with me.

At 1 AM, I lay down in our double-bed, my head buried in a shirt that still smelled faintly of Martin.

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Wednesday, February 12

Lonely is fine for an experiment, I don't regret taking it. But when the dose wore off, nothing had changed. I was still stuck in the apartment like an expensive accessory, waiting for Martin to return. By early this afternoon I had browsed through every single store in a dozen virtual malls, and every one of them bored me.

I felt washed out, the world a flat and empty expanse of grayness. Normally I'd pop a Tranquility, just like Martin tells me to do, and wait for the color to return. But today I picked up the Negative Cuisine, and considered the four remaining packets: Righteous Fury, Envy, Grief, and Fear.

Grief seemed too similar to Lonely, so I put that one aside, and Fear scared me even without sampling it, so I put that one aside as well.

Righteous Fury or Envy? The Fury came in a red packet, the Envy in a green one. In the end I popped the Envy just because I liked the shade of vivid green. I waited impatiently, watching the clock, but nothing happened. After half an hour, I gave up and decided to take a walk outside.

Opening the coat-closet, I saw one of Martin's sports jackets lying on the floor. Typical of him, expecting me to tidy up. He says he has more important things to do, but I could have had, too. Just before our wedding, my company offered me a promotion, but only if I moved to Atlanta.

Martin said he'd understand completely if I accepted the promotion, but that he didn't think it would be fair to either of us to have a long-distance marriage, and he couldn't move at the moment?maybe in a year or two. And so I turned down the promotion. Then once we were married, Martin complained about how much time I spent working. A few months later, I quit my job altogether.

On the way to the airport this Monday, he called me his Lady of Leisure, and said he wished he could be a kept man. I *hate* it when he does that. Martin may play the innocent, but he'd never seriously consider trading places.

I picked his sports jacket off the closet floor, and threw it into a trash can. Grabbing my brown coat, I left the apartment.

The park was almost empty, probably because other people had better things to do than wander around on an overcast afternoon. For a while I watched a young man throwing sticks for a Labrador. I prefer cats to dogs, but the longer I stood there, the more I wanted the Labrador with its non-stop enthusiasm. I wanted to be the one it ran to, its tongue lolling out, its nose shining wetly.

Amused by how effective the pills must be to make me want the man's dog, I continued along the path. A woman laughed ahead of me, and then a second laugh, higher, childish, heartbreaking. I turned away, I did turn away, I did. I knew I wasn't ready.

But I could still hear them: the child's voice rising in question, and the woman answering. I walked away, faster and faster. Not mine, the child wasn't mine to have. However much I wanted it, I couldn't make it mine. A boy, a girl, the doctor wouldn't tell me which it was. The tests said I was fine, Martin was fine, but after my first miscarriage, I never got pregnant again, and they refused to recommend me as an adoptive parent. ?Too needy? said the social worker, as if only those women who didn't really want children should have them.

I got back to the apartment without making a scene, but I can't stand how I feel. I swallowed two Tranquilities an hour ago, but they don't seem to have worked. I'm going to take a couple of Martin's sleeping tablets.

\* \* \* \*

Thursday, February 13

I slept until noon, and woke feeling as if I'd been trampled on all night long. The Fear, Fury, and Grief beckoned to me from the bedside table, but today I am going to be strong. If I had seen that child yesterday, I'm not sure what I would have done.

I took Martin's sports jacket out of the trash and sent it to be dry-cleaned.

I should flush the remaining pills down the toilet. I will. I will do so.

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Friday, February 14

Martin phoned this morning to wish me Happy Valentine's Day. He said he missed me, and I think he meant it. He waited a while after he'd said it, and so finally, feeling guilty, I told him how lonely I'd been on Monday night, without explaining why.

Martin murmured reassurances, and promised he'd be home in time for lunch on Sunday. I made an excuse to cut the phone-call short.

Maybe we ought to get a divorce, but I can't summon up the energy. I guess I still like Martin, but love him? No. Not for a long time. Maybe if I had bought Joy and Libido from the pusher, they would have held us together.

But I don't think so.

Kelly dropped in this afternoon. She wanted to show off her dress, the latest Digidap, which heats, cools, and massages the wearer while actively adapting her figure to any of a dozen profiles. Kelly thought her boyfriend would like the big-busted style; I thought it made Kelly look like a freak, but I didn't say so.

'We're going out tonight,' said Kelly. 'Valentine date. He's hired a sailboat and crew to take us round the lake.'

'Good for you,' I said as brightly as I could manage. I knew Martin was busy, and he had remembered to phone, but would it really have been too much effort to send me roses? I tried to hold onto that anger, but by the time Kelly left it had faded into a background grayness. I reached for my strip of Tranquility automatically, but instead I pulled the Righteous Fury out of my purse.

I had meant to get rid of the remaining Negatives, but in the end I had only flushed the Fear away. I fished the Grief out of my purse as well. The man had sold me double-doses of both, but what if I broke one of the pills, and took only a tiny bit? Surely that couldn't have much effect, just enough to drive away the gray.

I crumbled the Righteous Fury over the coffee-table, and swallowed a pinch of the red powder.

The walls seemed to shrink in on me. I needed to move, to stretch. I paced the apartment, my cheeks burning. Martin's mess infuriated me: the dust from his shaving all over the bathroom counter, a dirty sock wedged under an armchair, his moldering collection of nineteenth-century books.

I tore the first chapter from one of his books, piled the sheets in the sink, and lit the pyre with a match. The dance of the flames fascinated me, but it didn't last long enough. I tore out chapter two, burned it, burned the rest of the book, page by page, coughing as the kitchen filled with smoke.

I grabbed more of Martin's books, ripped out pages, hurled the remains onto the floor along with everything else of his I could find?clothes, photos, stupid plastic windup toys he'd collected as a boy. The toys cracked when I stamped on them, momentarily satisfying. But I didn't want to break Martin's toys, I wanted to break *him*, to snap his spine like a plastic toy.

No, not quite: I wanted something slower, something longer. And then it came to me, such a simple idea. I would buy more Fear, mix the powder into Martin's meals, only a little at first, so that he didn't realize what was happening, and I could watch him coming apart, piece by piece.

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Saturday, February 15

It took me half an hour to get out of bed this morning, last night's anger drowned in a sea of gray. I told myself I ought to get dressed, and go and buy the Fear, but the longer I lay there, the worse the plan seemed. I didn't want to hurt Martin, I just wanted him to understand.

The day stretched ahead of me like a prison sentence, empty of purpose. To drive away the gray, I swallowed the Grief and what remained of the Fury. But nothing changed, nothing changed, except that I saw my whole future marching toward me, day after endless day.

Martin never understands. He tells me that he's happy, how lucky we both are, how I should be happy too. How can he be happy? Doesn't he even see what's missing, *who's* missing?all those times I went to the fertility clinic, and Martin said not to waste money, nothing's wrong with you.

Nothing's wrong with me, but I hate him.

Nothing's wrong, because now I know how to make Martin remember, how to make him understand what it's like to wake up to an empty future.

I'm feeling calmer now. I took three strips of Tranquilys and the rest of Martin's sleeping tablets. It shouldn't take long.

**The End**

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