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SOMETHING ABOUT LOVE

ALIX OHLIN

Lewis Dark lost his wife in a fire. Less than a year later he was living with Vicky, who was divorced and had primary custody of three children, aged four, seven, and ten.

People said—sometimes to his face—that she was taking advantage of him in his state of grief, that she was after his money, which he made selling high-end espresso machines to restaurants. People said she didn't even try to control the children, who ran and shouted through the rooms of his now-crowded home. It was true they were noisy, but Lewis liked noise. It drowned things out, and he wanted to be drowned.

People didn't know that he had pursued Vicky, not the other way around. He was driving home from work one day when he saw a woman standing at a bus stop, crying. Traffic was heavy and he edged alongside her, registering the scrunched spasms of her face. It had rained earlier in the day and she leaned on a long rolled-up umbrella as if it were a cane. To cruise slowly past a stranger crying seemed to him heartless. At the next light, he turned and circled around the block, but by the time he made it back the bus had ferried her away.

The next day he drove past the bus stop again, at the same time, but she wasn't there. He spent his days in the car, driving from one restaurant to the next, taking meetings and arranging demonstrations of the Mostro Dolce, which was a sleek steel behemoth retailing for twenty-five thousand dollars. The machine's espresso was so good it spoke for itself, Lewis always said, but he spoke anyway, to earn his keep. He'd make a single espresso for the restaurant owner and point out the velvety *crema* at its surface. He talked about authenticity and depth of flavor. And then he would point at himself, with a self-deprecating smile, and tell the owner that the machine was idiotproof: "I just made you a world-class espresso, and I am an idiot."

The owner would laugh a little.

"Trust me," Lewis would say. "I really am."

The crying woman at the bus stop roosted in his thoughts. She was not an especially attractive woman—thirties, wan—dressed in a bulky cable-knit cardigan and jeans. He took to driving past the bus stop at different times of day, sometimes going far out of his way to do so. It was weeks before he saw her again and, at first, he wasn't sure it was the same woman. She was wearing a flowered dress and vaping. Only her hair, blond and curly, was the same as he recalled. When he pulled up in front of the bus stop and rolled down the window, strawberry vapor wafted into the car.

"Excuse me," he said, "do you need a lift?"

The woman did not make eye contact. She lifted her mouth to the sky and exhaled fruit.

"I'm not a psychopath," he said, wondering, as he spoke, whether this was something a psychopath would say.

She ignored him, and he flushed.

"Sorry," he said, and rolled up the window. He sat in the car with his hands shaking on the steering wheel. The light turned red and stayed red for ages. He was about to press the gas when there

was a tap on the passenger-side window and the woman slid in beside him.

“You don’t look dangerous. Your car smells like coffee,” she said.

“It’s espresso,” he said.

“Well,” she said, “tell me all about it. Who are you? What’s your story? Tell me everything. And don’t lie—I always know when someone’s lying.” This turned out to be true. He once saw her reduce a store manager to tears as he admitted that an item had been mistagged.

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They moved in together two months later. Vicky was not at all the dowdy, depressed woman he had first imagined. She was the kind of woman of whom friends said, “She’s a force of nature.” She started him on kombucha and took him off dairy. She was stricter with him than she was with her children, whose autonomy she stoutly defended. “They’re free to make their own mistakes,” she often said when they refused to go to bed at a reasonable hour. He didn’t want to admit that he’d seen her at the bus stop weeks before they met, for fear of seeming like a stalker, and so he could never ask her what she’d been crying about. It was all right, he thought, not to know everything about a person. To save a little mystery for later.

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Vicky worked as a waitress, but her passion was podcasting. She wanted to be the Beyoncé of podcasting, or the Kim Kardashian. She converted the garden shed in his backyard into a recording studio, and she spent hours back there working on her programs. She had several different podcasts: one was about cooking, one about

celebrity crushes. The most successful one was called *My Terrible Family*, in which she interviewed people about their awful childhoods. A steady stream of guests tromped through the backyard to share their stories. Lewis tried to listen to her podcasts, to support her—he played them as he was driving around in the car—but there was something strange about Vicky’s recorded voice, how it varied in tone and pitch depending on which podcast she was hosting, as if she were a different person each time. Every episode of *My Terrible Family* opened with a monologue that was intimate in the extreme. Once she told a long explicit story about how bad the sex had been with her ex-husband. “Do you think he’ll mind?” Lewis asked her.

“Mind?” Vicky burst out laughing. “Mind!” she repeated, with a disbelief that verged on affection. “You don’t know him.” She walked out of the room, still laughing.

The ex-husband, Stan, was a chestnut-haired Pole who had been a plumber before a back injury put him out of work. He subsisted on disability checks and defaulted on his alimony, but lavished his children—he came to pick them up on Wednesdays from Lewis’s house—with a tenderness that was almost embarrassing to watch. He caressed their cheeks with his fingers, and sometimes he wept. “I missed you, my darlings,” he would say, grabbing at their hands. The children ran from him, laughing, and Lewis was never sure whether they were being cruel or whether it was a game. Or both. Stan was friendly to Lewis, whom he thanked for putting “such a nice roof over the kids’ heads.” He was friendly to Vicky too; never said a bad word about her. “I am happy,” he told Lewis gravely, the day they met, “that she met a rich man.”

Lewis had never thought of himself as rich—the restaurateurs he saw at work were so much flashier, with their Rolexes and sports cars—but in comparison to Vicky and Stan, who had lived lives

of struggle and want, he knew that he was. He enjoyed bringing home toys for the children, and buying them the particular brands of shoes they believed were crucial to their social success. In return, they seemed to like him. The youngest, Hanna, hung on him, sometimes clinging to his calves as he walked, shrieking with pleasure. The ten-year-old, Jarek, asked for help with homework, or money for lunch. “Thank God,” he said drily one day, “there’s finally a grown-up around here.”

Lewis could see what he meant. Vicky *was* like a child at times: bossy, impetuous. He understood why his friends, who were long-settled in their marriages and routines, couldn’t see her appeal. But Lewis liked everything about Vicky—her weird opinions and fearless enthusiasms; how she brought him bee-pollen tea before bed, swearing it would cure all his ailments; how she kissed her children goodnight and then blew on their hair, so that the wind would carry them to sleep.

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One night when he was having a beer with his friend Brian, Lewis ran into Stan, who was sitting at the bar staring at an empty shot glass. He looked so lonely that Lewis invited him over to the table. Brian was an investigator for the government—he always called himself an investigator, though really he was a data analyst, combing through documents for patterns that might indicate tax corruption—and he shook Stan’s hand with a quizzical look.

Stan sat down, muttering thanks. “It’s a bad night,” he said. “My wedding anniversary.”

“Oh,” Lewis said.

“Too awkward to say? Sorry,” Stan said. “I hope you know, I am happy for you and Vicky. She and I—it wasn’t good.”

“But you can still be sad.”

“Yes,” Stan said, his eyes watering. “I can still be sad.” Lewis went to the bar and bought him another drink, and when he came back, Stan and Brian were talking about women. Brian was married to Aviva, whom he’d met at camp when they were both fourteen years old. He’d never been with anyone else.

“You regret this?” Stan said.

“Never,” said Brian. He sat back in his chair, rubbing his chest. “Oh, we have our issues. I don’t make the bed the way she likes. She talks too much in the morning. She’s always trying to tell me her dreams. *What do you think it means?* It doesn’t mean anything, it’s a fucking dream, it’s your brain having a garage sale, getting rid of stuff it doesn’t need. But you know what”—here he pointed a finger at Stan—“that’s life right there. That’s life.” He was drunk.

Stan nodded slowly. “I often dream about my mother,” he said. “She’s been dead a long time, but I loved her very much.”

“My friend,” Brian said, “you’re missing the point.”

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After that night, Stan began joining them regularly. It was a strange friendship, but Lewis welcomed it. Brian grated on him, always leaning forward precisely twenty minutes into the conversation to ask, in a meaningful tone, how he was. With Stan there, the conversations shifted. Stan was a philosophical person. You’d ask him how his day had gone and he’d respond with some thoughts on the meaning of life. He didn’t follow politics or sports. Once he reached into the pocket of his shirt and unfolded a piece of paper on which he’d written a poem. He read it to Lewis and Brian, but it was in Polish. Nonetheless, they praised its musicality.

Lewis had worried that Vicky wouldn’t approve, but she only

waved her hand and said, “Go with God.” The children loved that he was friends with Stan. “The dads are going out!” they said, and began to call Wednesdays “Dads’ Night.” Usually, they called him Lewis, not Dad, so hearing this made Lewis feel warm, a warmth that was part shame, because it did not yet seem deserved.

Stan told him and Brian details of his marriage to Vicky that would have bothered Lewis if he hadn’t already heard them on the podcast. He talked about their sex life, about explosive fights they’d had. “Are you saying you were abusive?” Brian asked, sitting up straight in his chair. He was always on the alert for malfeasance. Stan shook his head.

“One time only, she slap me and I punch a wall,” he said. “Still, it was very bad. Kids say, why is there a hole here? I say there is a plumbing problem, but it’s fixed. We hang a picture over it.” The picture now hung in Lewis’s living room. It was a watercolor Vicky had made of a bowl of fruit, washed-out apples and oranges floating against a dark background, as if in space. Stan was crying again. He told the story of how he hurt his back falling down a flight of stairs at work, fracturing two vertebrae, and how the doctors said the pain would never go away. It was such a woeful story that it sobered them up. When he saw their sad looks, Stan grimaced as if their pity were worse than anything else that had happened to him. “Now I don’t work, I cannot pick up my little boy. I am less a man.”

“You’re still a man,” Lewis said.

“I said *less*,” Stan answered.

When the evening ended they stood up and shook hands gravely. This was a formality instituted by Stan and which they now all three observed. Lewis thought he and Brian both could learn from Stan. Despite his sorrow, he maintained certain graces.

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At home, Vicky was just coming in from the backyard. She'd been recording the celebrity podcast, in which people recounted real or near encounters with the famous.

"How was it?" Lewis asked her.

She rubbed her eyes. "Ridiculous. This guy I met, he wanted to tell a story about being pulled over by a cop who looked like Erik Estrada. I tried to tell him, this isn't about people who *look like* celebrities. It's about *real* celebrities. I mean, it's not that hard to understand, is it?"

"You met this guy where?"

"On the bus. So then he tells a story about meeting Boris Johnson at a bar in New York. I go, Who is Boris Johnson? He goes, He's a British politician." She said *British politician* like a swear. "I say, Once again, guy, this is a show about *real celebrities*. Then he storms out."

"Weren't we talking about getting you a car?"

"You know, I don't mind the bus. It's a cross section of humanity, and I can fall asleep if I'm tired."

"A lease is pretty affordable, car-wise."

"Oh, Lewis," she said, leaning across the bed and kissing him. "You are too much."

At night Vicky turned her back to him and faced the wall. She slept deeply and well. He often sat up in the dark, not reading or watching TV so as not to disturb her. He could have gone into another room, but her presence soothed him, even when he himself couldn't sleep, her nighttime smell of strawberry and light sweat. Sometimes he put a hand, very gently, on the small of her back. Once she'd turned over and asked him what he was doing. He answered honestly—knowing she'd detect any lie—that he was making sure she was breathing. Vicky nodded and went back to sleep. She didn't mind being watched over. She let him study her,

and all through the night he quietly attended to the slope of her shoulders, the pump of her heart and lungs.

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It was Lewis Stan called from the hospital. He was in the car, on a high after selling three Mostro Dolces to a restaurateur planning to open a minichain of steak houses. The restaurateur had insisted they sample the grappa he'd brought back from Italy, and Lewis knew better than to say no. The restaurateur poured shots and chanted numbers: the exact temperature to which a grill should be heated, the perfect climate to grow grapes, the number of minutes that pizza dough should rest. He believed food was all numbers. Lewis said that Vicky would love to interview him for her podcast. "Her what?" the restaurateur said, and Lewis dropped it. Now he was sitting in his car, drinking a Slushie and sobering up.

On the phone Stan's voice was even more somber than usual. It took a while for Lewis to understand what he was saying. "Was there an accident?" Lewis said. His heart was beating too fast, and his ears felt clogged.

"No accident," Stan said. "Sad to say. You please come to the hospital."

"I can't," Lewis said. "I can't drive right now."

"Okay," Stan said.

"Can you call Vicky?"

"Vicky?" Stan said. "Vicky!" It was the exact same tone in which Vicky had said "Mind!"—an impossible astonishment garnished with love.

Lewis gave in. "I'm on my way," he said. When he looked in the rearview mirror, he noticed his eyes were bloodshot; his lips were blue from the Slushie. He looked like the site of an accident himself. He drove carefully along side streets, already regretting his actions.

The hospital was west of downtown, in a seedy area populated with check-cashing stores and methadone clinics. One time Vicky had told him about walking through that neighborhood with her kids, on the way to the hospital—the youngest had had an appointment with a doctor there. There were people hanging around the entryways and street corners and when they saw Vicky coming they called out “Kids! Kids!” so that everyone would stop doing drugs as the young ones passed by. Today he didn’t see anybody doing drugs; it was rainy and he couldn’t make out much of anything through the whirl of his wiper blades. He texted Vicky to say he’d be home late. *Picking Stan up from the hospital.* When he went inside, he couldn’t remember Stan’s last name.

“He’s Polish,” he told the receptionist, who rolled her eyes.

Eventually they worked it out. Stan was on the second floor, in a room with three other men. He had an IV, but no signs of injury. As Lewis walked in, his phone beeped with a text from Vicky. *Don’t bring him here,* it said.

Stan was pale, reclined. Reddish-brown chest hair sprouted above his hospital gown. He acknowledged Lewis with a grave nod, like a dignitary. “I had no one else,” he said.

Lewis would have liked to sit down, but there was no chair. The other men in the room were silent, eyes closed, medicated or comatose. “What happened?” he said.

Stan said, “I took pills. Not the first time. This, you know, is why Vicky left me. She said bad for the kids. I agree with her.”

Lewis had a hard time absorbing this information. Vicky hadn’t told him anything about it, nor had she ever mentioned it on her podcast. Stan’s tone was resigned and impartial, an observer to his own behavior. “I have some problems,” he said simply.

“We all have problems,” Lewis said. Anger welled in him, thickened his voice. “You have children.”

“True, true,” Stan said.

Lewis had the urge to punch him. He looked around the room as if searching for a weapon. There was nothing on the walls, the floor was dirty, it was not a good hospital, it was a hospital for people who couldn't afford to be in the hospital and ought to do anything to avoid it.

"You know my wife died," he said to Stan.

Stan nodded. "Vicky told me."

"She was on vacation with her sister, in the Bahamas. They got a deal on a vacation package. A cheap hotel without proper fire exits. Her sister was downstairs in the bar. She made it out. My wife didn't."

"I am sorry," Stan said.

Lewis stepped closer to Stan. He could see large black pores on Stan's nose, streaks of grey in his eyebrows. He didn't talk about how he and Gabrielle had fought on the way to the airport, how he'd felt abandoned and she'd said he was controlling, how they'd made up on the phone later—this was why her sister was downstairs in the bar, giving them some privacy—as he told her how he missed her and her body, and her breath came ragged and heavy and beautiful in his ear, and how she said abruptly, "I should go, something's going on here," and he didn't hear anything from her the rest of the night, only waking to the news the following morning, and he hated almost more than anything the fact that he had slept through the hours of her death. He said to Stan, "You are an asshole."

Stan nodded. "I am an asshole," he agreed.

There was no fighting with him. A nurse came and disconnected the IV. Stan signed some forms and was released. These seemingly simple actions took hours to accomplish and it was midnight by the time they pulled up to Stan's apartment. Lewis' drunkenness had dissipated, leaving behind a strangely giddy mood. Sometimes he felt this way, when especially sleep-deprived. A sort of buoyancy set

in, an exigent positivity about the world. He followed Stan inside and drew out a chair for him, like a host. “You should have something to eat,” he said. Stan, meek and docile, agreed, and Lewis found a can of soup to microwave. On the yellowing refrigerator Stan’s kids smiled gamely in school photos, their hands positioned on weirdly staged props—a steering wheel, a tree branch. They had Stan’s reddish-brown hair but Vicky’s small upturned nose and round eyes. It must be weird, he thought, to see parts of yourself replicated in another person. Like catching a glimpse of your future, a ghost haunting you in advance.

“I want to give you something,” Stan said behind him. “As thanks.” From a bookshelf in the living room he pulled a thin blue paperback. It was in Polish. On the back, there was an old black and white picture of Stan, reedy and windswept, standing on a bridge in a peacoat. His legs were crossed at the ankle and his crooked smile, half a grimace, was recognizably the same.

“These are your poems? I wish I could read them.”

“Just take,” Stan said. “Please. I think I will sleep now.” He staggered to the couch, where he evidently slept, and lay down with his hands beneath his cheek like a child. Lewis found a blanket and laid it over him. Stan was already asleep, his breath deep and regular. Apparently, like Vicky, he was a good sleeper. Their marital nights must have been peaceful, Lewis thought. He found himself imagining them in bed, young and undisturbedly asleep, and the thought was pleasant to him. Picturesque. For a while he sat next to Stan and listened to him snore, and then he went home, thinking of Vicky crying at the bus stop, probably after a night like this one.

His house was quiet and full of people. He turned on a lamp in the living room and opened his laptop. He tapped at the keyboard, putting Stan’s poems into an online translation program. The results were fractured and metaphysical. Something about a moon and a

garbage truck. Something about love. Something about a woman in an apartment building, cooking, and he wondered if this was Stan's mother, back when she was alive. A clown pulled on his shoes and danced. It wasn't clear to Lewis whether this image was happy or sad, what it was supposed to mean. Maybe a clown dancing was an expression in Polish, like a fat lady singing. Lewis found he preferred not to know. He was not the slightest bit tired. He was awake and alive. He was going to stay up all night.