

Wife Swap

Lydia Graystone

University of Essex

Abstract

This is a short story written by the author

Keywords: Short story, creative writing.

Story

It was the first day of spring today. One of those really bright, dazzling days, when it seems like the sunlight is trying to force its way through your eyes and into your head. I didn't wake up until past noon, so I didn't have a chance to get used to it. My husband just threw open the curtains when he brought me breakfast, and the sun hit him like a sonata as he informed me that it was a beautiful day. It wasn't nearly as beautiful as he is – six foot tall and broad of breast with hair of gold. I married a prince. He is beautiful, and his mother's blood runs through him like a river.

He said there was a little bird's nest in the rafters of the kitchen porch. I went to look for it later, when I felt more awake. Not to touch – you can't touch a baby bird, or its mother won't want it any more. I was just hoping that maybe the sight of them could choke up all the feelings caught in my throat like mangled worms. But the nest was gone. Nothing young ever lingers here too long, because my husband is his mother's son.

It's just like me to sleep through something like that. I used to think that once I woke up I'd never go back to bed again – I wanted to travel the world on foot just because I had feet. I suppose, in the depths of my drowsy mind, I thought when I woke up it would all be the same. I'd still be the lithe, light girl I was before, picking flowers and riding my pony and dreaming of my prince. But I awoke, and my flesh is tough as mutton, my joints stiff and slow. I creak. I am still beautiful, and my husband loves me so, but what was once flesh and blood and bone is now porcelain and dust, and I am so very tired.

*

‘For heaven’s sake, Charles,’ sniffed Lucille. ‘I can’t imagine what you’re dithering about. Simply take the damned thing off her and have done with it.’

‘Come now, mother,’ said Charles uncomfortably. ‘She says it helps her.’

‘Writing helps no woman,’ declared Lucille, brandishing her Bloody Mary like a weapon. She was reclining upon her favourite chaise longue, her thin body snapped tightly into a Chanel suit and containing, as usual, far more alcohol than sustenance. ‘What man wants to marry a girl who picks up a pen and records it every time he falls short?’ she continued. ‘Far too obvious. If you want to destroy your husband, you have to be subtle about it.’

‘She doesn’t want to destroy me!’ exclaimed Charles. ‘She’s just... going through a tough time at the moment, and this little project helps her work things through. Anyway, what if she turns out to have real talent? You won’t be so quick to dismiss her writing if she turns out to be the next Emily Dickinson.’

‘Emily Dickinson!’ snorted Lucille. ‘The woman was miserable! Never married, of course. You can always tell.’

‘Well, she wore enough white.’

‘Don’t be pert, Charles. You know I can’t abide it when you’re pert. Anyway,’ said Lucille expansively, gesturing for the maid to bring her more vodka, ‘I’ve taken a look at this ridiculous little diary, and it’s nothing but nonsense. The girl’s wasting her time rambling on about springtime and princes and I don’t know what else. She’s got two infants to care for!’

‘Now, be fair, mother,’ said Charles, frowning. ‘She’s only been out of her coma for six weeks.’

‘That’s nothing!’ declared Lucille. ‘I was in a coma once, and it didn’t do me any harm. Nothing but a two week nap! I woke up at three PM on my fourteenth birthday, just in time for the party.’

‘I don’t think that’s right.’

‘Well, people were tougher back then. Nobody ever sat around moping about how hard it is to be young, rich and happily married. Do you know, Charles, I’m not sure if we shouldn’t take Little Miss Dreary down to a different ward in the hospital, if you know what I mean.’

'I know exactly what you mean, mother, and I won't hear of it. It was eclampsia, not schizophrenia. Just because it's taking her a bit of time to recover does not mean she's crazy.'

'I'm not so sure, Charles. She married you, didn't she?' With that, Lucille burst into a loud cackle of laughter, and refused to stop until Charles changed the subject entirely.

*

All I ever hear any more is crying, and I know why it is, too. The babies don't like it here. They don't want to be trapped here in this big, empty place, where they scream and scream for their mother but she never comes. Their cries just clang loudly against the ceiling, then rebound back down and slap them in the face.

Their mother never comes because she is gone, and I am here in her place. I think perhaps I was her, a long time ago, because Charles asks me 'Where's the girl I used to know?' and I know it's not me, because he always looks so sad. I know what he wants. He wants me to get up and put on a clean gown and smile and kiss him and care for the babies. He wants the sweet, pregnant girl who fell asleep. Sometimes in the night I think I should pretend that I am she, but then dawn comes, and I can barely lift my head.

I'm not sure Charles can be trusted. He's too close to his mother. I saw her in here last week when she thought I was asleep, going through my things. I didn't open my eyes but I knew it was her, because of her smell. It's always the same. She thinks she can conceal it with perfume, but I can sniff it out. She reeks of blood. I talked to Charles – I begged him not to let her near the babies, because I know what she is. I know what she's got planned.

I don't think they're mine. I don't remember giving birth. He brings them to me and tries to make me hold them, feed them, but I can't, because if there ever was a drop of milk inside me it went sour long ago, and now it's curdled into a lump at the pit of my stomach. Still, I can't stand the thought of her caring for them, because I know her. I've seen her kind long ago, before I was cursed. Rail thin, because her prey doesn't come around often, she feeds them up with sweets from the kitchen and coos over their chubby little arms and legs as though she truly loves them, but she's just waiting until they're fat enough to toss into her cauldron so she can gobble them up like chocolates. She thinks I don't know because I mostly stay in bed, but the truth is that sometimes when I'm not too tired I creep over to the window and look down into the garden. That's where she's building her

cauldron, and every day she adds to it – stirring the water, stoking the fire, sprinkling salt and pepper to taste. She’s going to eat them.

There isn’t much time.

*

‘Monothematic delusions? Well, what does that mean?’

‘Good Lord, Charles, what do you think it means?’ snorted Lucille. ‘The girl’s gone round the twist.’

Charles shot his mother a glare and turned away from her, pressing the telephone to his ear. ‘Yes... yes... I – no, wait, the seizures have stopped! It – oh. I see. And... and how serious is that? ... I see.’

The conversation continued in this vein for twelve minutes. During the fourth, Charles decided to vacate the room to avoid having to listen to his mother’s comments. When he returned, she was apparently immersed in an episode of *Wife Swap* and full of injured claims that she would never eavesdrop upon a private conversation, especially one involving her own son.

‘Yes, of course, mother,’ said Charles wearily. ‘Look, it’s obvious you want to know. Doctor Kleinman says she’s suffering from brain damage.’

‘Well, I could have told you that,’ said Lucille. ‘She married you, didn’t she?’

‘Mother, now is not the time!’

‘Oh Charles, don’t be such a bore,’ said Lucille airily. ‘It’s nothing to worry about. Brain damage is such a dramatic term. Just make sure she keeps popping those pills and stop worrying about it. It’s ageing you, dear. You’re far too stressed. Niles says you haven’t been to the country club in weeks.’

‘You can tell Niles that I’m a little busy at the moment,’ said Charles. ‘Listen, Doctor Kleinman’s on vacation at the moment, but he’ll be coming around for her next Thursday, and I think that maybe we should move the babies away from her room – you know she needs her sleep. So if you could make sure you’re –’

‘For heaven’s sake, Charles. I’m not going to schedule my life around that little chit. Those revolting builders say my Jacuzzi will be ready tomorrow, and I’m damn well going to use it. Now, have you seen this programme? It’s simply dreadful. The gentleman on the left is going to have to do his own laundry in a moment. Can you imagine?’

*

She's got him. She's got Charles. He's not who I thought he was. Oh, he's still just as tall and as handsome, and he says he loves me, but I know he's not what he was. She always carries a goblet of blood in her hands and I suppose it must be his. She's drained him dry of everything he was, and now it's nothing but her green ogre blood that pumps him forward and all he can do is say yes, yes, yes, to every word she says.

She's got the babies. It feels like weeks since I've seen them now, and I know why. It's because they're dead. Her cauldron's been boiling over for nights. I know when she cooked them, because I heard these ghastly plopping noises from the garden, and I haven't heard them cry since. I think she must be taking her time as she eats them, maybe only crunching a bone or two each day. I still hear her cauldron and I can't sleep the way I used to because it's always bubbling viciously beneath my window.

She put it there for a reason. I know I'm next. She wants to see me boiled alive, and as far as I can tell there's only one escape. I don't mind. I'm not sure if I was ever supposed to wake up anyway.

*

Rose put down her biro. She got out of bed. Clad only in the sweaty, stained nightgown she had worn ever since the troubled childbirth, she quietly unlatched the bedroom door and made her slow, dreamy way down the stairs. Everyone was asleep.

Rose let herself out of the back door and, with a little skip in her step, moved forward. Without so much as a backward glance, she stripped, climbed into the Jacuzzi, ducked her head underwater, and held herself there.

It was going, she thought hazily before the darkness met her, to be a very deep sleep.

©Lydia Graystone. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY).