Lonely

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

The cabin had been a place full of people when he was a boy. It had always been a place of joy. She never saw it that way, but she went with me because I loved the place so much. Now that she is gone it seems that it is just empty.

It seems crazy that to escape loneliness by being alone, but it seemed to help him. To be lonely when surrounded by people talking to one another, or couples walking hand in hand, is infinitely worse than just sitting with your own thoughts, watching the ripples on the lake or hearing the birds twitter.

He had provisions for weeks. That meant days of rising and eating, sitting and walking, shitting and washing – just functioning. Somehow that seemed like this was life without her. It had no purpose anymore, but it went on.

People talk about suicide, but he simply lacked the will to even do that. He swam out into the lake once. It was freezing cold and he thought that his life might just ebb away, but instead he swam ashore and sat in front of the fire for the rest of the day.

It seemed like months, but it was only just over a week in when his loneliness ended.

He was out walking by the lake. It had been raining and the ground was slippery. He heard some groaning – the first human voice that he had heard for a while. He found himself hoping that it would be some other sound so and not to break his solace, but as he came to the rocks he saw immediately what had happened.

There was a young man lying on the ground, his head among the rocks. There was a canoe just pulled out of the water – an old Indian style made of thin plywood. It was full of water – clearly it had been leaking badly. The young man had been pulling it ashore and the prow had broken off in his hands so that he had fallen backwards. Clearly his head had struck a rock. He was barely conscious.

Although I\he wanted no part of this, there is a human instinct to give aid. He knelt down beside the young man and checked his head. He had a huge mess of blond curls, and he put his hand amongst them. They were natural curls like my wife – thick and soft.

He found himself looking up at the treetops imaging that the hair was hers but feeling for injury. There was no blood but a massive goose-egg bruise. He had little knowledge of such things, but it was clear that the man was concussed.

Then he looked down and he saw her. There is no other way to describe it. Yes, this was a young man, his face dirty and with wispy whiskers, but it seemed so much like her that it seemed no accident that here he was – cradling the head of what seemed to be the only other person in the world, almost uncannily in the image of his lost wife.

“Rebecca.” He just said her name.

Her eyes opened, but they seemed blank. Her full lips uttered another moan.

She was light enough for him to carry – slim and pale under the dirty clothes.

The cabin was warm. It was nearing dusk and the fire had been going all day. He laid her out on the bed and took off the soiled clothes. It was hardest to remove the underpants but only because of what was underneath. It seemed to break the spell. He put a cloth over the offending anatomy. In all other respects this could be her. The body was pale and soft and not bony. The chest was flat, but Rebecca was never big-breasted.

The face could be hers too, if it were not for those whiskers. But then again, Rebecca did have problems with those errant facial hairs that could pop up. She had something for that sort of thing. In the cabinet in the bathroom. He found it. He smeared it on her face.

The eyes fluttered, and a hand went up. They compound might have burnt a little. He gently too her hands to restrain them … but in a loving way, he told himself. She had never approved of such actions by him, not even in a state similar to this. But this was not his doing. This is the way he had found her. He had rescued her.

There was hair on the body to. A razor would fix all of that. But for now, he knelt by her, watching her thrash a little, still unconscious and weak. The hair would need to be washed. He could do that when the depilation compound had been gently scraped from the face along with the dermal layer so that he could stroke the face of Rebecca once again.

“Oh Rebecca,” he said aloud. “Why were you taken from my so cruelly? Have you been returned to me so that I can live? With you in my life again I will not ever think of taking my own life again.”

He found a silk scarf to tenderly fasten her hands to the bedstead to get at the armpits with the razor and finish on the face. He used a little compound under the eyebrows too. He was frightened that plucking might hurt her, but she needed those eyebrows as her remembered them – the angled arch that was both beautiful and powerful at the same time. That was Rebecca as he remembered her.

He dressed her in one of her nighties and crept under the covers beside her. Her pulse and heartbeat were strong, and she moved and made noises, but she was still unconscious. He was starting to get worried. Was she seriously hurt? But it seemed to him that the greater worry was that she might not wake up to be the Rebecca that he needed.

He held her close, and fell asleep.

He was woken by her talking. The eyes flickered and words came out. Something about the canoe. Her brain was operating. She just needed to wake up. But not just yet.

He carried her into the living area. He washed her hair and then dressed her in something nice – a dress. He blow-dried her hair as he had watched her do it many times, with volume in the front. He applied a little lipstick and mascara. Then he sat her is the easy chair and decided that he was able to leave her for a while.

He looked back at her from the door. She was as he remembered, but different. She looked so peaceful. She was not racked with pain and frustration as he remembered Rebecca’s last days with him. She seemed to be sleeping happily.

He had a bucket and he returned to where the canoe lay. It appeared even more rotten than he remembered. He bailed out enough water out of it to refloat and to push it out into the lake and then he waited and watched it sink. As it disappeared it seemed that the last the gift that he had received was affirmed. What canoe? What young man? Rebecca had been returned to him from heaven. His wife was back.

He smiled. The sun shone through the trees and its light danced on the waters of the lake.

As he arrived back at the cabin he saw her standing on the porch, in her dress. She was steading herself on the railing and looking at her smooth arms with puzzlement.

“Awake at last Rebecca?” he called out. “I was getting worried about you. You hit your head.”

As he drew closer he could see from her eyes that she did not recognize him. The gift of her was incomplete. He needed to reconnect with her. He was ready to do that. It reminded him of their first meeting when she had looked at him just like this – Do I know you? Do I want to?

“You must be starving. I will make us some pancakes.” He simply kissed her on the forehead and walked past her into the cabin.

“Where am I?” The voice was not hers.

“What is wrong with your voice, Rebecca?” he said. It was not contrived but genuine shock.

She cleared her throat. She followed him inside and saw the mirror by the door. It was Rebecca’s only improvement to the place. If somebody came calling, she would check herself before opening the door.

“Who am I?”

“You are Rebecca, my wife.”

Her right hand shot down to her crotch. It seemed an unsurprising and even instinctive move. The night before he had taped down the offending genitals with Sleek tape, but they were still there.”

“I am not a woman,” she said. But the voice was more like hers, but a whisper.

“We’re going to fix that remember,” he said. “We are going to do that very soon. Now close the door. We need to get the fire started and warm this place up a bit. Maybe put on a sweater in the meantime. Although you do look great in that dress.”

She looked back at the mirror. Her hands went up to her face, and to her hair. She took a step back to see more. She was confused, but pretty.

“How am I dressed like this?” she said. The voice seemed to have gone up an octave.

“You were in a bit of trance this morning,” he said. “I guess hair and makeup and automatic for you.”

“I guess so,” she said. She felt her hair. She pulled a lock towards her nose and smelt it. He could see that she liked the perfume.

“Are you alright, Sweetheart?”

“Is this a dream?” she said.

“I like to think so,” he smiled. “You and me, alone up here, a cool spring morning with the sun up and now … pancakes.” The first ladle of batter hit the pan.

“And I am Rebecca? And you are my husband?”

He put down the spatula and walked over to her. He took her into his arms and hugged her gently. She did not recoil or resist. She was still finding her feet.

“I am your husband, and you are my wife. And we are hopelessly in love … deliriously happy. Tell me that you feel that way too.”

He held her away from him and smiled, begging for a response. She just smiled. Maybe it was a smile of uncertainty, but to him it said it all – It was a miracle and Rebecca had returned.

She found a large cardigan to wear. She looked at herself in the mirror again. Then as he laid the table for two she walked to the bedroom and looked at everything that was Rebecca’s – the clothes, the dressing table, the toiletries. It was like she was looking for some clue as to how this had come to be.

“Breakfast!” he called out.

When she sat, she flicked out the skirts of her dress as if it were natural. He noticed.

“I think that I may have knocked some things out of my head,” she said. “Maybe we should go to the doctor and have a checkup. I seem a bit disoriented at the moment.” She did not even know his name, this man who said that he was her husband, and who clearly loved her, and knew her.

“If you like. After breakfast, My Love.”

My Love. Those words warmed her. Had anybody ever said those words to her. Not her mother. Not her father. Not any girl she had ever known. She looked up from her plate and saw the look in his eyes. She smiled.

“I will clean up,” she said when they had finished.

“That’s good,” he said. “We need more firewood. I will take the pushcart into the forest to gather some.”

The sink overlooked the lake. As she washed the dishes and the pan and the mugs from which they had sipped coffee together, she hummed a little tune. She had been reborn into a new world. A woman’s life had been snuffed out and somehow she had dropped into her body, or a body that could become hers.

She heard the sound of a vehicle outside.

As she went to the door, she checked herself in the mirror. She was pretty. Not perfect, but pretty.

A car had pulled up and a rather angry and unpleasant looking woman had stepped out and was standing there.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“I’m Rebecca,” she said.

“Really? I’m Rebecca too. This idiot’s ex-wife. Here to get him to sign these damned divorce documents so that I can be rid of him. Where is he? Get him out here to sign.”

The End

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*Erin’s seed: A man has been staying in an isolated cabin is dealing with some demons when someone injured shows up, suffering from amnesia. The lonely guy convinces the amnesiac that he is his wife. It really starts working out well even when the amnesiac begins recovering his memory...”*