

Origins of Sacrifice

For more than an hour, Leslie waited tensely for her husband to arrive home from work. She jostled their fussy newborn as the teenaged sitter watched her pace. Maybe Jim had forgotten that he had promised to take Leslie out—just a few hours away from the mewling child, the toe-curling pain of breast feeding, the smell of sour milk and dirty diapers.

Maybe he was holed-up in a meeting or on a conference call and couldn't get away. Maybe he was working too closely with his secretary, or holding the hand of a distraught client at a bar, or joining a co-worker for Dewar's on the rocks before going home to his shapeless wife who was always full of tears.

But suddenly, there he was, pulling up in the driveway. Jim walked up the sidewalk slack-shouldered, dragging his briefcase like an anvil. Leslie thrust the baby into the sitter's arms and threw open the door, as anxious and grateful as a full-bladder puppy. He hugged her and placed apologetic kisses on the curve of her neck. "Ready?" he asked. Leslie was happy that he had not wanted to sit a minute first, or change his clothes or glance at the paper.

She scurried off like a sixteen-year-old escaping the farm in a beat-up Mustang. It was so good to be out, Leslie hardly minded at all when "dinner and a movie" turned out to be Wendy's and the latest Nicholas Cage.

"We'll get dessert after," Jim consoled.

The movie didn't end until almost eleven. Leslie was full from the greasy burger and buttery popcorn, but her mouth still watered for something more. The smooth, sweet, creamy taste of a promise remembered.

“You look nice,” Jim said.

He hadn't told her she looked nice when they had started out on their date. Or even as they stood in the shambling ticket line. Instead, he said it now, in the dark as they drove home, not even taking his eyes off the road. Leslie put her hand on her stomach—a habit from nine months of pregnancy—to point out, in case he hadn't noticed, that she was slimmer now. Minus a whole six pounds, eight ounces.

In the darkness, Leslie stared hard at the side of Jim's face. He was handsome as ever, the lights from oncoming traffic painting a ribbon of light across his deep-set eyes and friendly brow. She marveled at how she had arrived at the other end of childbirth a stranger even to herself. But he was unchanged since the baby, except more plugged into work. He kept promising her that if he played his cards right, he'd be up for a promotion. Then they could think about a bigger house.

Jim steered with one hand into the quiet evening, preoccupied with important things. Leslie stared jealously at how easy driving was--like an extension of breathing. Because she had been put on bed rest—and then had a C-section—Leslie hadn't been able to drive for months. She tried to remember that feeling of absolute, one-handed control.

“I liked the movie,” Leslie said, and he laughed amiably. They both knew she had hated the movie, all those cars crashing and buildings exploding. But she had liked the act of pushing money across the counter at the concession stand, sitting in a theater full of strangers, being out on a week night.

Jim yawned deeply, and Leslie took it personally. Did he have to make such a big show of being tired? Had he forgotten all about the promised dessert? She closed her eyes and imagined tiramisu. A lemon curd tart topped with glazed berries. A frothy espresso and

candlelight. Warm Baileys even though she was still breast feeding. Maybe she expected too much. It served her right for getting her hopes up. She should have been satisfied with the Frosty.

Anyways, Leslie told herself, it was better to get back home and check on the baby and the new sitter. Jim had to get up early. Plus, there would be feedings every two or three hours. She needed rest more than she needed empty calories.

"I didn't get the promotion," Jim said, almost to himself.

Leslie exhaled sadly and reached for her husband's hand. She held it tenderly, giving him permission to end the night now, to head home. Jim gave her a grateful glance, but Leslie didn't return it. Instead, she watched the headlights swallow the white lines in the road.