

TRUE IN THE WORLD

by

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We all knew who she was before she met him. We lived with her in literally the same room, sharing what was called a “suite” in Naardecker Hall. She was the superstar of our art history class. Her paper on the Pre-Raphaelites was so good that our professor, who wasn’t even that big of a creeper, said she should look into having it published. We all thought she’d go to grad school, but then she decided to take a year and work at the gallery and then...well, you know she almost passed him up, right? She told us she was going to swipe past him but then her screen froze. She sent us his picture. His head looked kind of big and his ears stuck out like they were trying to pick up messages from space, but we could tell he took care of himself. We told her to toss him a line, just to see what would happen.

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He got right back to her. Most men didn’t respond so quickly. This gave her pause, but then we agreed that maybe this was the kind of man who made the most of his opportunities.

Bobby wants to take her home right now. She shouldn’t die there in the hospital. He wants her to come home. If she dies, she should die in the house where they lived together. Moving her will be expensive, so will the equipment, Bobby understands all of this. He won’t be stopped or have anyone stand in his way. She is his wife. She should be allowed to die in their home.

It was just coffee the first time they hung out. Bobby talked about his family, his apartment, his job, almost anything he could put a ‘his’ in front of. She was distracted. The woman who managed the gallery had been stringing her along with the promise of a better position, all the while making her run errands like a personal assistant, which she wasn’t. She felt bad about not giving his life story her full attention and agreed to see him again.

On their second date, the waiter spilled some wine on her, then was kind of rude about it. Bobby let the kid have it, right in front of the whole dining room. Normally, she would've found that sort of thing mortifying but on that occasion, having maybe been overserved, it seemed chivalrous. She never drank much in school, though that could've been because of the cheap, gross stuff they had at parties. Even the kids with money didn't really know what they were doing when it came to alcohol.

We thought this meant Bobby cared about what she'd worn and had given thought to what kind of night he wanted them to have. We assured her that was something to be respected. We were all becoming weirdly certain about this man that even she barely knew.

On the ride back to her apartment, she told him how much she liked the book she'd been reading. And though he'd never had heard of Dante Rossetti and never read any poetry, she felt he really listened to her. She relayed some of his questions. She certainly made it sound like he was interested in what she was saying. She offered to give him her copy when she was done reading it. And so, they began sharing things.

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The doctors are against moving her, but they can't stop him, not legally. He understands their objections. But he can't watch her die there. And on the slim, slim, very fucking slim chance that she does wake up; he wants her to find herself surrounded by the things of the life they were building. The hospital staff keeps talking about costs, like it always has to come down to money. They keep trying to empathize or sympathize with him but don't seem to hear him. His wife's coming home. She'll be cared for there. He'll see to it.

Bobby made good money and seemed to enjoy spending it on her. He took her to all the best restaurants, where the appetizers cost as much as a whole meal would at the places we all used to go together. At first, this made it awkward for her, but he always put her at ease. He got her drinking cocktails, expensive ones, then bottles of wine that cost more than the meal itself. She soon came to enjoy this new life, which seemed so much like the kind of life we imagined was being lived by those rich bitches we went to school with.

At first, she was low-key about them hooking up. Then one morning, we all woke up to two long messages like she wanted it to be the morning news. They went back to his place after dinner. Sitting next to each other on the couch, they talked more about poetry and art, and she found he knew a surprising amount. Then came one of those comfortable pauses which, in the absence of anything else, invites everything to begin. He took his time kissing her and getting her undressed and then making love to her, which made him seem even more like a man than all those quickie boys we'd known. Afterwards lying in his humongous king-sized, he told her he didn't ever want to be apart. She liked knowing it had meant so much to him. More and more, he was proving to be the kind of man we all thought she wanted.

The stuff Bobby orders from the medical supply company arrives in a trickle rather than all at once. He wants to call the rental company and blast them over the phone but knows it won't do any good. If he did his job that Goddamned carelessly, he wouldn't have it for very long.

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His work's a hell of a lot harder than making sure some fucking bed and hoses and shit get delivered on time, that's for sure. His numbers have been down this quarter, but he's still close to making his marks. He could play the sick spouse card like others in his department but won't. He's not that kind of guy. Once she's home, he'll be back on his fucking game. He's sure of it.

When they finally come to install the bed, they assure him it's the best one on the market. The best is all that will do for her: the best catheters, the best ventricular drain, the best chest vibration device, the best tach, the best bed pad, the best IV stand. The best home health aid company will be coming twice a day, sending, he's been assured, their best nurses.

He shows the doctors at the hospital the bill, so they can see how much he wants her home. They can't stop him; legally they can't. And now, finally they agree that it's okay for him to bring her home. She would still receive better care in the hospital they tell him -- those fucking cheapskates.

She texted us about their first real fight. That was how we learned they were getting married, which was weird. It was about money, she said. He claimed the hall was too expensive. He wasn't made of money. She had no idea how

hard he had to work to get it, no conception of what it was like, the pressure he was under. He yelled and yelled until she broke down in tears (crying emoji), then he slammed the door and left. She cried, curled up on the living room floor. We didn't need a picture; we all remembered what that looked like. She would tell Bobby he was right when he came home. She was sorry. She didn't know. We didn't say anything, just worried, on a different thread, that she didn't sound like herself.

The next day, we learned that when Bobby came back, he held her and whispered that he was sorry over and over (happy emoji). She said it was like he was going to cry (crying emoji). Bobby said it was all happening so fast, he just needed to deal with the stress better. We wondered if he really wanted to get married. Of course he did, she said. It was just a lot for him to take. There were things about his past and his family that were being triggered by all of this. We wanted to know what that meant but didn't feel right prying. Plus she reminded us about all of his stress at his work. We thought we understood. We tried to anyway. We all promised to talk more, not just about the wedding but about everything.

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Between the new bed and all the machines, there's barely space for anything else in their bedroom. He squeezes a daybed next to the window. It's narrow and there's a draft but he tries sleeping there anyway. In the end, it's the constant noise that drives him to the living room couch.

It's not like waking up next to her, not even in the same room as her, not at all like he'd hoped, but at least she's the first person he sees each day. It makes it all feel like something's been made right again. Maybe if he'd explained it like that, the people at the hospital would've relented earlier. But no.

Once they saw he wouldn't allow them to kill her, robbing him blind became their plan. Those cocksucking leeches wanted to keep her there so that they could bleed him dry. He'd been too emotional, too easy to read. He'd won out in the end, though.

Good morning sweetie bean, he says opening the blinds for her. She looks beautiful when the sunlight hits her face. An ache inside, something plunging and definite, makes him so glad to have her there. He wants to tell

her everything. He wants to finish all the plans they never got to, but he can't be late for work. The nurse waits for him to leave before going into the bedroom.

Something had happened at work. When she tried to ask him about it he punched a hole in the wall on his way to the bathroom. When she texted the picture of the cracked, chalky hole, it scared us.

She waited a couple of days, then went to him. By the time she was done explaining, she was in tears (crying emoji). She didn't want it to be like that. She didn't want him to feel bad. He took her in his arms, saying it was all about work. He hadn't meant to scare her. Promising not to punch any more walls, Bobby made love to her that night. She said it was as tender as anyone had ever treated her and that she came more times than she could count. This, she texted, could not be the same man putting holes in the drywall.

22 He hates to talk to the nurses in such a curt fashion but wants to make sure she's getting the absolute best care possible. It can't be all just checking machines and switching out tubes and emptying bags. When he asks if she's comfortable, he deserves more than a half-bored: *I guess.*

She's still in there, inside her body and needs to always be treated that way. She's still a human being he tells them, raising his voice a little, merely to emphasize his point. They deal with him in a calm and courteous fashion, well used, he figures to people who lash out occasionally because they are overwrought. When you care so much about one person, it can be hard to be kind to others.

When it came to him not wanting to have kids right away, we understood. None of us were even in a serious relationship at that point. Bobby didn't want to rush. And he was right, why throw away the chance to travel and lead the good life while they were still young.

Looking back, he talked about traveling a lot, but they never did any. He always wanted to hold off until this or that work project was seen through to the end. They'd go to Europe next summer, Bobby promised. Then, they'd spend time looking at places to rent, taking the virtual tours. The debates

about the merits of each one sometimes got so heated, in a fun way, she said, that it never felt like they weren't going. He always stopped short of booking anything. It was like he was afraid to commit to doing anything too far in advance. We knew guys who treated their whole life that way, so it didn't seem odd to us at the time.

He sits in the room with her for hours, talking. Wishes he hadn't worked so hard, so many hours, so many weekends. He missed her every late night at the office, missed her every day he got up before she woke and got back when she was asleep. He should've told her how much he missed her at the time, but it seemed like that was small consolation for him not being around. He wanted to change but time got away from him. I'm here with you now, he says, hoping she can hear him.

He's gotten so used to the sound of the machines now, he barely notices them. Except for the one that's helping her breathe. It's the one whose sound most reminds him of how close she is to death. When he looks at the plug going from it to the outlet and thinks about what those doctors wanted to do to her, he curses them. She's still my wife, he howls in a voice choked by tears of rage.

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She told us the day after it happened. She didn't even know what she'd done wrong. First, she sent a picture of the hole in the garage wall. It looked just like the one outside the en-suite bathroom. (Shocked-face emojis all around.) When she confronted him about it, his face turned red and his eyes burned with a hate that none of us could imagine. He took hold of her with a grip like he wanted to break bones. He was scaring me, she said. She asked him to let her go.

Then she told us how the knuckles on the back of his hand rapped across her lips, stunning her so much she quit crying immediately. (There are no emojis.) She claimed that he looked shocked himself. Tears came to his eyes. He begged for forgiveness. He didn't even offer an excuse, just wailed like a baby. She took his head and held it to her chest. He promised never again, just as he'd done about the wall. She held him tighter. We didn't know what to say or think.

Her lips still stung, she texted, but this little boy who'd cried in her arms didn't seem like he could be the same man who'd just done that. Something was wrong. We agreed and weren't sure what exactly to say.

On the other thread, we planned her escape and how best to present it to her. She'd have to pack her things and come stay with one of us for a while, until she figured out the rest. She'd do it while Bobby was at work. We all agreed it was a good idea, but no one seemed willing to step up. It was too big a conversation. Maybe we were all trying to work up the nerve to confront her, maybe we all thought someone else would do it.

Could you show me how to do that the way you do it, he asks the nurse. I mean gently like you, he says when she hesitates to say yes. She nods, waves him over. She shows him how to use the sponge, down his own wife's back. The fact that he's never done this before bothers Bobby. Lightly, lightly, she keeps telling him, you're not scrubbing her down. She lets him finish without saying a word. This gives him great satisfaction. The more things he can learn to do on his own, the further back he can cut the nurses' hours.

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Finally, one by one we called and presented her with a different version of the same plan. All of our calls went to voicemail. She texted the group claiming she needed to stay. He needed her. You guys don't understand, she said.

It didn't take long for things to go back almost to the way they had been, or so she claimed -- except that wasn't how it seemed to us. She started dropping out of the chat for literally days on end, then she'd send messages late at night that didn't sound like her, full of spelling mistakes. Sometimes her texts were just letters and numbers and symbols in thick blocks crawling down our screens, random keyboard vomit that made us all a little sick when we read it.

The last solid string of messages we got from her started the day she got pulled over for a DUI. When he came to pick her up at the police station, she said she was going to try something new with him. The next day she described how, once they got home, she'd slammed the bedroom door shut behind her after stomping her way through the house. It was meant to

frighten him. A second later, he burst in on her. Where the fuck're you going, he asked. I'm not done talking to you. She'd fallen into a squatting position next to the bed. He grabbed her hair and pulled her up, lifting her off the ground. We didn't want to think about how much that hurt.

You're still drunk, Bobby roared, letting her slide down the wall. You don't get to take the car out ever again, unless you get some fucking help. She typed his words in all caps, then told us he was right; she needed help; she was the problem. We disagreed.

We didn't hear from her again, until it was too late.

He reads to her from a book of poetry she kept at her bedside. He remembers it was her favorite book. She'd said so on one of their first dates. She'd often told him that he surprised her with the things he recalled her saying.

He would've liked to read more if he'd had the time – strictly non-fiction. There's so much to learn about the world, he could never understand why the public indulged certain writers in their fantasies. Stories were fine for kids but adults should read about what's true in the world.

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Looking at the block of knives, she gave thought to picking one up to defend herself from his latest onslaught. She wiped the trickle of blood from under her nose, a crimson smear on the back of her wrist. A real advantage of drinking vodka was that when Bobby hit her, it didn't seem to hurt as bad; whereas no matter how much wine she drank, he could still make her head ring.

We had no idea what this all meant and said we were going to call the police. She begged us not to and went on about how it was her problem. We should've done more but she totally cut us off.

They let me go today, he tells her. They don't think my mind is on my work, the bastards. How could it be, he yells. He wants so badly to smash something but he can't, he won't, not there in front of her. He feels along the wall next to the en-suite, where the hole had been patched. Bobby doesn't even remember what he was so angry about, only that she'd been so scared of him.

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Washing down one sleeping pill after another with vodka, she hoped she'd get sick and make a huge mess for him to clean up. He could beat her corpse all he wanted; she wasn't coming back to help him.

She didn't want that to be her last thought. She staggered over to her bed and picked up her phone from the nightstand. Reading our messages that begged her to let us help, to get out of that house, to call the police, she didn't want her last thought to be of him. PLEASE ANSWER YOUR PHONE, one of us had written, maybe it was me. Then, she closed her eyes.