



Little Lies

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It all started out innocently enough. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Well, true—but not the whole truth. I also didn't want her thinking badly of me. Also true, but to be honest, I didn't want to admit that I was that petty, that shallow, that brutal. My self-image was at stake. I'm a nice guy—really—sensitive, compassionate. Always have been. Ask anyone.

“Does this dress smell sour to you?” she'd asked.

A sharp, vinegar-like aroma of stale sweat wafted over to me. My nose cringed in automatic defense. “Uh, no. I don't smell anything.”

“Hmm.” She sniffed her left pit again, then shrugged, taking my word over her own better judgment.

Was I really going to let her go out in public reeking of *eau de horse piss*? I opened my mouth to say something—what, I don’t know. I’d already made my pronouncement and didn’t know how to take it back.

She glanced at her watch and picked up her bag. “We’d better scoot; we’re going to be late.” Onward to the big gala fundraiser for the hospital. The mayor would be there, the bigwigs and uppity-ups, all the high-society folks she’d been courting for her new business.

No, stop—change your dress—It stinks—you were right. The corollary, of course, was that I was wrong. Or stupid. Or worse, didn’t have the balls to tell the truth. A coward. My throat closed up, choking off my confession, the admission that I was one sorry son of a bitch, a spineless wimp too chicken to answer a simple question.

My brain flooded with justifications—we didn’t have time for her to choose another dress, and the shoes that went with it, and maybe even a different purse. She’d have to transfer her wallet and keys and all her female stuff—lipstick, emergency tampon, and whatnot. It would turn into a big hairy deal and then we’d really be late. And it was important, so important, that we be on time.

As I held the door for her, I caught another whiff of the acrid miasma surrounding her. Oh, God—how could I let her embarrass herself like that in front of her clients and potential customers? The back-stabbing gossip-mongers would have a field-day. A snide little quip for everyone to chuckle over might even appear in the paper. She’d be ruined.

I stood there like a lummoX as she clicked down the walkway on her shiny high-heels to the car. She turned, frowned. “What’s wrong?”

I couldn't find my voice. No words came. My brain was stuck somehow, the defensive limbic lobe overriding the rational neo-cortex. "Uhhh . . ."

She looked at her watch again and started to get that exasperated look on her face. I hated that look. It always made me feel like a blithering idiot—which was how I already felt. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I pulled the locked door closed behind me. "The look" disappeared and she stepped around the car to get in the passenger side.

As I trudged down the walk, I thought, maybe there'd be so many people there, they wouldn't be able to tell that the stench was coming from her. Maybe there'd be so many perfumes and colognes, nobody would notice. Maybe they'd all be so drunk they couldn't smell a skunk in a shower stall. Maybe a meteor would hit and wipe out the human race and I wouldn't have to worry about it.

She was already buckling up by the time I slid behind the steering wheel. In the confines of the car, her "fragrance," if you could call it that, was overpowering. She smelled like the cross between battery acid and something dead. How could she not know? Were people really so desensitized to their own scent that they simply tuned out those particular pheromones?

"Uh, sweetheart, um . . ."

"What!" she snapped, checking her supply of business cards. She was one of those people who charged through life without reservation, impatient with wishy-washy dorks like me. For her it was all-or-nothing, one hundred percent, full steam ahead and damn the torpedoes. I admired that about her. I wished I were more like that, not so tied up in doubt and indecision and second-guessing myself.

"About your dress, maybe it is, um, a little rank after all."

She lifted an elbow and tucked her nose. "Why didn't you say so before?"

Why, indeed? In retrospect, I guess it was a habit of hiding, of saying what I thought she wanted to hear instead of what I actually thought. And it wasn't just for her—it stretched back to early childhood, of course—doesn't everything? So I had a critical father and a judgmental mother, and older siblings I could never keep up with. A belief that I was never good enough; that everyone else was better, smarter, stronger; that their needs came before my own—always—and that their opinions were always more right than mine. Wah, wah—grow up.

But I'd learned to keep my head down, keep my mouth shut, and try to become invisible. If that failed, just do what they said and be agreeable. Don't rock the boat, don't make a scene. Be nice. It was a survival technique and it worked.

Sure, I might seethe with resentment sometimes, get headaches and ulcers, grind my teeth (so my dentist says), get tired a lot (chronic fatigue, my doctor once diagnosed), get depressed every now and then—but so what? Who was I to complain? Nobody. I was a nobody. My thoughts, my opinions—my life—didn't matter. Just don't offend anyone, and by all means avoid confrontation, and maybe I wouldn't be punished—or worse, be discovered for the worthless piece of crap I knew in my heart-of-hearts that I was. And saying someone stank was offensive, so the automatic protective mechanism kicked in and I denied it. Standard operating procedure, a lifelong pattern, a simple reflex.

However, at the time I had no ready answer and my wife wasn't willing to wait for me to dredge one up. I don't blame her—it could have taken months. And in fact, it did take months, and groups, and professional counseling—later.

“Just go. It's too late to do anything about it now.” She fumed as I started the car and pulled out. “Thanks for making me feel self-conscious,” she said biting. She stewed a bit more. “Here I am, trying to appear self-confident and successful.” Her voice quavered.

Oh, jeez—here come the waterworks. I felt like a real jerk.

“My big opportunity.” She dug in her black spangled clutch for a hanky and wiped her eyes. Seeing the mascara on the fabric, she set her jaw. “Turn around. I’m not going.”

“Aw, baby,” I said, flicking on the turn signal. “You can change and, um, we’ll just be a little late, that’s all.”

She glared at her watch. “They’re already seating; the program starts in twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Shut up! Don’t say another word.”

I clamped my teeth together and wheeled the car around.

She started intermittent quaking, little jerks as she tried to suppress sobs. “I worked for two months,” she said spastically, “to get an invi-vi-tation.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. But really, so what if we’re a few min—”

Whack! She hit me, backhand knuckles to my shoulder.

ROAR! It triggered an eruption of rage. I floored the gas pedal. The car surged.

I heard her gasp beside me. I didn’t care. Something inside me had snapped. Enough!

“Slow down!” she shrieked.

I kept my foot jammed to the floorboard. The sedan sped faster and faster. Past our home and beyond. The motor revved higher. The vibration added to the thrilling pressure of acceleration. Mailboxes and bushes flashed by.

“Please . . .” She sounded weak, like a deflated balloon.

I didn’t care! I saw the corner of a building, a brick building. I aimed for it.

SMASH! Glass shattered. Metal crumpled. So loud. So hard, the impact. Bodies wrenched, slammed, twisted. The world spun, screeching. So loud.

* * *

I'll never walk again, confined as I am to a wheelchair, my back broken in two places. My darling wife was dead before the car stopped moving. And all because of a little fib, the straw that broke the camel's back of decades of little white lies piling up one by one, little denials, little betrayals of my own inner truths. Tiny resentments had gotten stuffed and stored, more and more, pressure building, just waiting to explode. My whole life had been spent seeking everyone's approval instead of standing on my own two feet—which I can't do now in any event—literally. How symbolic is that?

But really, I didn't mean to kill her, despite the verdict of vehicular homicide. After all, I'm a nice guy. Always have been. Ask anyone.

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