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The Other World

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It was a good day for fishing.

Everything was peaceful and quiet here. The air was clear and crisp and there was the smell of pine trees and the odor of pipe tobacco. A brook ran close by, clear and fresh and brilliant in the noon-day sun. The brook made a sound like music, a gentle, endless, rushing symphony. Trout leaped from the gem-like waters, twisting and flipping in majestic defiance.

"Frank!"

The crisp air faded, the smell of pine trees vanished, the symphony of the brook became silent, the leaping trout disintegrated.

"Frank!"

Everything was gone. He looked about at the dingy living room with the dirty papered walls. The coils of spring penetrated the threadbare cloth of the couch, and pressed against his body uncomfortably.

"Frank, are you deaf?"

"Yes, yes, I hear you," Frank said wearily.

"Come out here, this instant."

Frank put the evening paper down on the couch, stood up and stretched, and tunked his cold pipe in the glass ash tray as he slumped out to the kitchen.

His wife turned on him, the spoon she held in her hand dripping juice on the cracked, linoleum floor. "You want supper?" she asked. Her eyes were like cold blue buttons. "Go out and chop some wood for the stove."

"All right," Frank said.

"All right," she repeated bitterly. "Is that all you got to say? Ain't you ever got anything to say? I'm tired of being treated like a robot. You just sit around and read your damned paper and you never talk. It ain't human, I tell you."
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Some things a man just can't get used to, Frank thought absently. He had been married to her for twenty-five years and that razor tongue of hers still annoyed him.

"I want you to stay home this weekend for a change" she said. "You've been out with Bill Schippers every week-end for the past ten years. This time you're gonna stay home for a change."

"We're going fishing, Liz", Frank half turned and glanced at her. "The hell you are," she said decisively. "It's about time it entered your thick skull that you married me and not Bill Schippers. I've got to have someone around here before I blow my stack."

Frank hesitated in the doorway between the kitchen and woodshed. His wife returned his gaze with angry, cold eyes. Without a word he went into the woodshed and grabbed the long, wooden handle of a heavy, double-bladed axe.

He stepped out into the small back yard, into the brisk late autumn afternoon. In the center of a fenced-in backyard was a pile of logs. Frank selected a good-sized log from the pile and swung the axe over his shoulder.

Listlessly, he chopped until the fatigue come up into his arms like an intravenous injection of lead. Frank leaned on the axe handle and rubbed his arm across his wet forehead. He stared out at the late afternoon sky that showed in thin slivers of deepening blue between the dead, black trees and the unpainted houses.

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Everything was gone. "Yes," Frank said, the irritation slipping out in his voice. "What is it?"

"You chopping down a forest or something?"

"I'll be right there," he said. He sighed wearily, took a firm grip on the axe and began methodically to chop. In the glinting rays of a dying sun, the blade of the axe flashed. Up. Down. Up. Down. Chips of wood flew before the powerful bite of the axe blade.

"Frank!"

Her screeching cry plucked at his nerves. A sudden glow of savage power pumped into his arm and back muscles and his face took on a look of grim concentration. He redoubled his efforts. It did not take long to finish the job, and as Frank walked from the back yard into the woodshed, the axe clenched tightly in his hands, his wife opened the kitchen door and stood there facing him.

"I don't see how you can be so slow and still move," she lamented. "Shake the lead if you want your supper sometime tonight. Me, I don't give a damn."

"I'll get the wood," Frank said, and turned to go back into the yard.

"Oh, my god," she said derisively, "you can't carry wood in here with that axe in your hand."

Frank looked at the axe in his tightly clenched fists.

"If you'd keep your pea-sized brain on what you're doing and not be dreaming and reading your damned paper all the time you might have amounted to something. Instead, look at you. You'll be working in that paper mill for the rest of your life, and it's your own damned fault."

Frank felt something tighten inside of him, like the last turn of a key winding an old grandfather clock before the mainspring thwangs and crashes through the glass panel in front of the pendulum. A sudden prickle ran up his spine and the hairs on the back of his neck bristled. "Liz," he said, his voice quavering. "I've decided that I'm gonna go fishing with Bill Schippers this week-end. And there ain't you nor anybody gonna stop me."
"Oh, and are you now?" She put her hands on her hips and her button eyes glittered with fire.

"Yes," Frank said, and his voice sounded loud and unnatural in his ears. He noticed helplessly that the axe was vibrating from the trembling in his hands and arms. "All of our marriage I've been listening to you prattle and bitch and I'm fed up with it. Do you hear," he screamed. "I'm fed up."

"Don't you talk to me like that, you gutless bastard. Don't you dare talk to me like---" Her face paled, and a look of amazement congealed there as the blade of the axe split the top of her head open.

Frank stepped over the spurting stream of red and the still, upright handle of the axe. He walked dazedly into the kitchen. He sniffed the cold stew that set in a pot on the dead stove. Gingerly, he tasted it. "Needs to be warmed up," he said to himself absently. He moved ponderously into the living room and sat down on the couch.

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SALESMAN'S BLUES

housewife (happy old tigersnarl)  
with your teeth and eyes wrapped in hair  
and love in your bedroom only  
why ruin this morning with dripdrop  
sighs mourning  
someone else's rainbow?

John Murphy

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