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loretta and the green bird

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Well, I got through the Winter. Spring was a long time coming, but the narrow, suffocating Winter is done with, and I can breathe again. Not much though. Not very often. If I should breathe now, she would lay down her crocheting and glance around the room with her thin dry lips pursed—annoyed at my breathing. It’s so hard, so maddening not to be able to breathe deeply. But how much worse in the Winter Time! How much worse when she never moves about, just always sits there crocheting in the grey light, looking at my feet. Strange she can tell when I breathe deeply, by watching my feet. But she can. Yes, she can. But that’s in the Cold Season. It’s Spring now, and in the Bright Season she moves about sometimes—looks out of the window; reaches over and adjusts the doily under the pink petuniaed table lamp; clears her throat, or perhaps coughs hackingly three times. Yes, any minute now she’ll lay down her silver, hooky little tools, look over at the ugly, green parakeet in the cage beside her, and bunch up her dry lips and go: “Pchup-pchup.” Then—then, as she does this, I’ll breathe—oh deeply—oh deeply breathe. Perhaps twice! Twice fill my chest to bursting! Can I wait? Yes, it won’t be long. She’s done two rows since I came in. Soon. She’s still watching my feet, but soon she’ll stop click-clacking her hard, hooky needles, and look up at the dirty green bird and say: “Pchup-pchup.” Then—then.

Loretta and I were married twenty-five years ago, in the Spring. There was color in her skin, then. She had a soft, white waist for me
to hold. Her hair was bright, moist gold, and I buried my face in it. Pallid, fish-belly white flesh did not hang jiggling from her arms when she raised them, nor were her breasts dead and withering. She was warm and pink, that Spring. I looked at her and thought of love. Looked at her and was impassioned—not for her only, but for the world. I looked at her and thought: “This is my fulfillment. In loving her I will grow stronger than any other man. I will love this girl so much that I will alter all the world. I can do no other thing but possess her—love her always utterly!”

She huddles like a flabby grey falcon in her overstuffed chair, and she watches my feet as she click-clacks her hard hooks. When? When can I breathe? You have done five rows since I came in and sat down. When, dear huddling grey Loretta with dead breasts? When will you turn your sharp, glistening face to the green vermin bird and say: “Pchup-pchup”? Ah, at last. Thank God! Her cold hard fingers falter. She carefully lays the hard hooks in her lap. She makes preliminary pchuping movements with her lips. Oh hurry! Oh soon! I suffocate! She takes the dry bread from her apron pocket—snips off a few crumbs with her cold, spikey fingers. And now—she turns! Her filmy eyes are off my feet and I breathe great gulps of air. I feel the bruising pressure in my chest. I breathe! I live!

Our pretty, white old farmhouse is almost at the top of a mile-long, slowly sloping hill. At the bottom of the hill is the little college town where I was born, raised, and schooled. Loretta’s family moved there when she was a Senior in college. She majored in Home Economics, and I majored in Biology. We graduated together twenty-five years ago. One month after our graduation I married soft pink Loretta in the old, oak-beamed campus Chapel with sunshine making window-shaped patterns on the people, our loving friends, watching us. How happy; how proud. How we all breathed deeply under the glowing brown beams, the strong, burnished beams in the Bright Season. How my lovely wife and I, and all our loving friends breathed full deep, unafraid—and lived.

And as my tranquil wife and I drove in our new automobile up the gentle hill to our pretty, white farmhouse at the top, I thought in the sun: “Loretta will stay at the top of the hill and wait each morning as I descend into the town to teach Biology at the school. She will wait there till I come home in the late afternoon; wait there till I come and hold her in the afternoon. We will say happy things, and say sad things, and solve problems, and love each other in the night.”

But she could not love me. To her all love was only frightful,
furtive movements in the night, and she would not love me. I was an understanding man—enlightened. I was kind, gentle—but she would not love me. And if it were only that, the Winters would not be so narrow, grey, and suffocating. But she hates me for thinking of the furtive movements. Her bright young eyes have grown filmy through the years from staring deadly, withering accusations at me as she sits and clacks her hooky needles.

With her eyes on my feet again, she has taken up her needles. No—the scissors now. Snip—snip, snip. The cold, tempered blades neatly snip the stray threads. What are you working on, Loretta? Oh, I see. You are putting a stiff little pink edge on a pillow slip. How many sparkling white, pink-edged pillow slips have you made in twenty-five years, Loretta? How many hundreds of neatly folded, pink-edged pillow slips have you crammed into every drawer in our stifling grey farmhouse? I think those must be the pillow slips you slip around our hard, bricky little pillows every Monday and Friday morning at twenty-three minutes after eight. Am I right? Ah, I shall remember that tonight when we carefully lie down in bed and neatly—both together—pull the pink-edged sheets up over us, and lay our heads on our hard little pink-edged pillows. And for thirty minutes you will lie there in the dark turned toward me, sending waves of suffocating hate and accusation at me from your filmy eyes. Then you will cough hackingly three times, snort your nose, and turn over. And I will breathe hackingly three times, and breathe, and breathe, and breathe.

She feeds the filthy green bird again. Now. Now I could go. Get up, go out. But what is the use? Loretta is a fog which clings—a sooty smoke which follows everywhere. But it is Spring—it is the Light Season now. Perhaps the bright sun will disperse the fog. Perhaps the living breeze could blow away the choking smoke! But no. For I have waited every year at Spring Time; and no, it doesn't happen. And yet—if I should get up, go out—could she truly follow me even into that bright live world outside in the cool air? No, not in Spring, surely not. Oh quick, before she stops feeding the bird—get up! Now turn, quickly! And go out. Yes. Yes! I can do it. Down the grey hall quickly; through the kitchen. The door—is she behind me? The door—oh do not look behind! Through the door. Close it tightly. Now out the path into the road. Ahh, the sunshine—I breathe! Faster, Run. Run to the town. Oh will this be the time? It might be. It might be! Oh God, let this be the season when I escape the awful woman with the green bird. Oh do not let me be pulled up out of the town in the night to the hard grey click-snip woman with the green bird!