

A SIMPLE MARRIAGE

Weekends Hassan arrived home shortly after ten P.M. He dropped his briefcase by the stairs in the front hall and called for his children and wife, and they sat and said grace for the food that had been ready in the oven since six. After that, no one spoke. They were done by ten-twenty and the children were tucked into bed and kissed on the cheek. Hassan showered, and after dealing with the children Jillian returned to the kitchen for the dishes. Her husband would be asleep by time she was done and she would enter the room silently and slip into bed beside him. Sometime during the night, he would cross an arm over, so that he held her by the crest of her hip. This is when she felt closest to him, and she would stay awake until she felt his hand at her side.

Their three children attended the local day school and Hassan was a bank manager in Boston, about a twenty-minute drive outside of town. On the ride in he would sing along to old cassette tapes. When he arrived for work he would wait in the parking lot until the song had ended and smoke a cigarillo he had bought from the Syrian bazaar in the cultural district. The smell reminded him of his father, his coarse hands as they stroked the back of the young boy's neck in church, his foreign shoes. He worked the majority of Hassan's life as a roller in the city cigar factory, which gave his hands a sweet bitter smell and stained his nails a dark umber. When machines were made that could roll and package the cigars, the company fired the workers. Hassan's father died

four years later at the age of fifty-seven, from a stroke, or maybe a heart attack. The loft passed to Hassan, who sold it after marrying and moved into a quiet suburb along the Charles River.

That morning, the last Saturday of October, Hassan was dressed and out the door by six-thirty. It was his and Jillian's fifteenth wedding anniversary, and he had requested the day off. Jillian did not know this. The children would spend that night with some family friends up the road, and Hassan had promised to come home early to spend an evening with his wife. When he left that morning, he hadn't a clue where he was going.

Jillian made breakfast each morning, eggs with milk and toast and sometimes sausage or bacon. On weekdays the bus stopped at the corner at seven-thirty, and Jillian waited with her children until they had boarded and been brought behind some maple trees at the end of the road. She took her time walking back, saying to herself all the things she would do that day. She would wait just inside the door and take in the quiet of the house for a couple minutes before getting to work.

That morning, Jillian served eggs with milk and toast with honey. She walked the children to the friends' house up the road and returned and sat alone in the living room until her coffee had grown cold. Then she sat in the dining room until noon, looking over the bills for that month.

Most days, she kept in the living room a basket of clothes, which she would fold over the course of the day. Between folding and cleaning, Jillian would read from *Anna Karenina* up until a dozen or so pages from the end, and then turn back the pages and start again. At thirty-seven, Jillian intended never to finish.

Today, there was no laundry. Jillian had finished folding the night before, while Hassan was sleeping. She would spend the day walking down the street of brick-faced shops a few blocks down from where they lived, looking for a proper anniversary gift. It didn't take much to please Hassan, and Jillian knew the trip wouldn't take more than an hour. She settled on a maple-colored wool scarf, because autumn was fast approaching, and had it boxed and wrapped in sun red wrapping paper. Then she spent the next few hours sitting in the park watching the children play with their parents and babysitters. She came home and did what laundry she had left, and sat listening to the hum of the washing machine and then the dryer. As she waited, she picked up and read the final chapter of *Anna Karenina*.

Hassan had been driving for maybe twenty minutes before he came to the house of a co-worker named Juliette. He sat parked out front for an hour or so, talking into the car mirror and smoking. Then he rang the doorbell, and Juliette came out and let him

in. The house was brightly lit, with bouquets of roses and lilacs on nearly every surface.

Juliette had just returned from her honeymoon.

The two talked in the dining room for some time, and when they were through talking they sat together and watched the presents piled in the corner. One guest had bought an immersion blender, another a crib. The most expensive gift was from Hassan—a small, delicately crafted Turkish rug that lay at the door of the house.

Hassan and Juliette headed to the back room of the house, a room filled with light and comfort, and a little more than an hour later Hassan and Juliette shared a cup of tea and Hassan made his way to the front door to leave. On his way out, Hassan stopped to observe the rug. It was not as soft as it once was, and barely as colorful. There was something about the sight of it that made his stomach churn. Juliette closed the door, and a few minutes into his drive Hassan pulled over at the side of the road and vomited behind a juniper bush.

Hassan arrived late that night looking tired and slightly older than usual. He met Jillian in the kitchen and informed her that it had been a long day at work, and that he needed a shower.

Jillian had prepared food in the dining room. Their table was long and could fit at least eight seats, so that night she took all the chairs but two and pulled them into the kitchen. The others she had set on the wide parts of the table, so they could be as close

as two people could sit. She lit candles and prepared a soft red tablecloth, and made roasted chicken with potatoes and peach cobbler for dessert.

Hassan took his time showering, and when he had finished he took his time getting dressed. He put on some jeans and a t-shirt and sweatshirt and went to meet his wife in the dining room. Everything was exquisite: the candlelight, the food, the warmth. The only thing missing was his wife.

He called for Jillian. He waited briefly more than a minute and then, without saying grace, started with the chicken and potatoes his wife had prepared. He ate for maybe twenty minutes, until he had his full. Then he left the table and got undressed and into bed.

Next morning, he woke up without his wife. He called out for her, and again she did not answer. He got dressed for work and organized his briefcase, and then went into the kitchen for some leftovers. The children were still with friends, so there would be no family this morning. On his way out, he stopped at the front door. Hung around the inner knob, in a loosely crafted bow, was a maple-colored wool scarf. Because Hassan could not bring himself to touch it, he stayed home that day.