

## THE NEW WIFE

The old wife was there at the beginning. She wears her hair in an outdated style, she is trapped in her black-and-white life between the pages of a book that hasn't been opened for years. A small, glossy photo with a serrated white edge, a date in black, one crumpled corner. She looks so young.

The new wife is much older, of course. They live in a house that is new to both of them and their faces are tanned most of the year from the things they do, the places they go. The old wife loved the beach and shook sand out of her hair on holidays. She loved to swim too, to become a tiny dot looking back at the shore. One night she swam away.

The old wife was there even before the first child and she was the one who placed her in his arms, all three of them touching. It was early morning; breakfast trays rattled and autumn trees blazed against a cold blue sky. He doesn't think much about the weather now, but the old wife brings it with her every time. Hot sun on the top of his head, the *clock* of the windshield wipers on a drive to the airport. The sweat between her breasts and the smell of melting asphalt through a wide open window. For some reason he thinks of a summer night, dense and humid, filled with the sound of insects. He stands with one hand on the refrigerator, the floor almost cool beneath his feet, and the old wife sits in a circle of light at the kitchen table and that light gleams on her hair, so exactly the colour of the hair of the second child, standing at her shoulder. She is astonished, the old wife, and she tells the child that she didn't know that about sea otters, that she thinks it wonderful that she has lived so long, not knowing, while he in such a short time has come upon this fact. They are talking to each other in a circle of light and neither one turns their gleaming head at the sound of the refrigerator door opening.

The new wife was a widow whose husband was in the same line of work; she came with her own car. He had met her a number of times over the years and he thinks of that sometimes with mild surprise, watching her put on lipstick in the little mirror in their front hall. Or when she holds his arm for balance as she reaches to untie a golf shoe. She has known him only as the successful man he is, unlike the old wife who tied his tie before his first job interview, who washed his sweat-stained shirt. Who held his forehead more than once, in his youth, while he retched over a toilet bowl.

Sometimes the old wife sat in a chair by the window all day, holding a baby and watching the falling snow. Coming home in the early dark he saw their haloed shapes and paused with one hand on the car door, something happening in his chest. There was also a time when the old wife

sat by the window all day with a glass in her hand, but that was another thing entirely.

The old wife had a temper; sometimes she yelled and cried and threw things, because sometimes there were things that mattered that much. Once when he came home late he realized that he had forgotten some occasion, some event. All three of them standing facing him, winter coats and boots on, like a wall he had to break through.

The new wife has a lot to say about this and that, but she doesn't have to say it all to him. She had a life already, has hobbies and routines, a network of friends. At first he made an effort to keep them straight, to show an interest, and found that it wasn't actually much of an effort. That he was - not interested maybe, but involved. She is remarkably even-tempered, and hums in the mornings as she opens all the curtains. If she has moments of darkness he has yet to see one, and even the occasional spats within her group are quickly resolved.

After the old wife swam away he hired housekeepers, even when the children had gone. He worked hard in those years to expand his business, to spread his name, to become known as a man who got things done. And he felt as if he was expanding too, as if he could be the man he was, as if he could do anything at all. He did all that and still made sure that his children didn't suffer for it. He applauded at sporting events, took pictures at graduations, gave advice. As adults they seem to be neither more nor less confused or unhappy than the children of people he knows.

The old wife had the best of the children; he believes that. Oh, the sleepless nights, the mess and the worry, but also those times when only she would do. The feeling of tiny hands clasping at the back of her neck. She said once that she felt as if her job was done, but he didn't understand what she meant.

For the new wife, his children are already the people they have become, the bold outlines on a plain white ground. The man with the trim beard, the soft stomach and the red sports car. The sharp-tongued daughter whose hair is suddenly half grey. It's not surprising; she's old enough to have children of her own almost grown. But he wonders if the old wife would have gone that way too. Wonders, sometimes, what the third child would have been like.

The new wife raises funds for things, good things, and he occasionally finds himself in a straw boater and striped jacket, selling raffle tickets. She is always packing up boxes for rummage sales and he jokes sometimes that she is giving away his old life, that what his children didn't take, she is getting rid of. He jokes sometimes that she is paring them down, that she won't be satisfied until they're left with only a mat for sleeping and eating, that he should never have taken her to Japan that time. In Tokyo the new wife bought silky, shimmering things in rich colours that didn't suit her at all. They billowed when she turned before the mirror, and he wondered what she saw. The old wife would have hated the city, but she would have loved the mist on the green hills. The dainty knees of the children walking with satchels strapped to their backs.

There is not much left of the old wife. Her name inside the front cover of a few books, a

flicker in the way his children laugh or move their heads, as sudden and startling as the sting of a wasp. The book the photograph fell from was an old geometry text and as he slots it into the box he remembers learning that when a line is continued on into the infinite to the right, it returns again from the left. There are things that nag at him now, little details he finds himself trying to remember, things the old wife would know. The name of the woman with the gap in her teeth, the colour of the upholstery in their first car. The look on his daughter's face on the morning of her sixth birthday, when she opened the back door and saw the red bicycle, sunlight sparking off its spokes.

That humid night, much later, he asked the old wife what it was about sea otters. She was almost asleep; Nothing, she said, it was nothing. But what, he said, and she said it was just something the boy had read in a book. But *what*, he said and his voice got louder because at that moment it was something he had to know. And she gave a huge sigh and shifted her body; it was dark, but he could tell she wasn't looking at him. She told him that sea otters ate while floating on their backs, that they could use their stomachs as a table or as a hard surface to crack open something with a shell. That they did this, as the boy had explained, because they spent most of their life in water, and hardly ever came to land.

Now you tell me, the old wife said out of the dark. You tell me which thing came first.