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The Spartan

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Hazel Heckman
Anderson Island
Wa. 98303

THE SPARTAN

As she waited in her room for the breakfast gong that bright April morning, Vivian Housel came across the name of Barbara Vance as she glanced down the column of death notices in her morning paper. She was not unduly surprised by the notice. Perhaps, these days, she looked subconsciously for the name among the daily notices, knowing (as she did) that Barbara's name, sooner than later, would appear there. Still, the sight of it in bold blackface gave her a turn.

Vivian did not, as did many of the women at Templeton Home, turn immediately to the death notices in the paper, as one entering a crowded room will look about instinctively for a familiar face. She read the paper methodically, as she

did all things, beginning with the front page and working her way through to the back before folding the paper neatly and putting it out into the hall for the cleaning woman. Because the notices appeared beyond the sports and want-ads, (neither of which held interest for her) Vivian scanned that page last.

At meal time at Templeton where Vivian made her home now, one of the two dining girls, a pretty, soft-spoken black, gentle with the old people, as, Vivian had observed, were most members of her race employed there, walked up and down the corridor beating with a felted hammer on a musical gong to summon the ladies to the dining room. No matter how she tried to prepare herself, and for all its musicality, Vivian always started slightly at the initial stroke of the gong, beginning, as it usually did, just outside her door next the foyer.

At the first notes, doors all up and down the corridor opened and the ladies emerged, to greet each other with little cries; as though it had been days or weeks, Vivian reflected, instead of a few hours since they had last met. Having exchanged first name greetings, they made their way by twos and threes to the closed door of the dining room, where they stood about in groups, chatting, until Mrs. Stillman, the tall, well-groomed matron, came from her quarters to lead the way into the dining room. Having no desire to join them, Vivian waited inside her room with her door closed until she surmised that Mrs. Stillman had put in an appearance.

Waiting, Vivian could hear the voices of the ladies blending together, laughing and talking, planning their days and weeks, it occurred to her as though they had all of their lives before them instead of a limited span, less than a decade in many cases. Their talk reminded Vivian ever so little of the remembered chatter of the wives of her late husband's associates, come together for some auxiliary affair, a babel that had made her feel somehow a trifle embarrassed for her sex.

When she had voiced some such thought to her husband, Arthur once he had said as though surprised by her statement, "I rather like the sound." He had added, smiling slightly, "It seems to me that you do rather a disservice at times, Vivian to belittle your gender as you do."

"But I don't mean to belittle my gender," she protested, surprised in her turn. "I only wonder why, enmasse, they have to sound so trivial"

He asked, still smiling, but with the sly twinkle he contrived when he hoped to catch her out, "What do they talk about?"

"Well," she said, "their children, for one subject."

"Are children trivial?"

Vivian did not remember, now, how the conversation had ended, she had simply ended it, she supposed, because she knew that in the long run she would be bested. There were

"quicktongued" women she knew who won out in such small bouts with their husbands. There were also women whose husbands agreed with whatever they said, simply to be agreeable, or for lack of interest. Vivian did not admire those women, or their husbands, much.

It had occurred to Vivian that Arthur used the same technique in court, the silent, courteous, attentive waiting, and then the sharp incisive comeback, the shrewd and often sardonic rebuttal. It was largely this very practice, she thought, that made him so successful in his profession, so deferred-to, so almost-feared among his colleagues. Arthur Housel had been dead for more than a decade now, but Vivian had still not learned to live very well without him.

The pre-meal talk among the Templeton residents (one of the women assigned to Vivian's table habitually called them "inmates") consisted generally of such topics as conjecture, at breakfast, concerning whether there would be eggs or cereal. Helpings from the kitchen, on the theory she supposed that the residents, being elderly and mostly sedentary, did not require much, were small. Some of the ladies complained of this. One woman (Vivian declined to think of her as a lady) lingered after the others had left the dining room, to clean up the leftovers. The others at Vivian's table found this amusing. Vivian, to whom food meant little, found the habit pathetic, and slightly revolting.

The Templeton ladies numbered 80, not counting those upstairs in the infirmary, who had their own dining room; and they sat eight at a table. The seating arrangement, planned by the matron, took into consideration the desires of friends who wished to be seated together. Vivian, who, following five years residence, had little more than speaking acquaintance with most of the others, had made no such request. Of the eight at Vivian's table, the two Misses Hargity, retired teachers, a Mrs. Benton, who had been a corsetiere, and Mrs. Ludmiller, who had been in real estate, were all baseball fans and talked endlessly of plays and players. The remaining three talked principally of their families. Vivian, who found both subjects tiresome, ate in relative silence, excused herself, and returned to her quarters.

Save for the daily walk she took about the spacious ground, observing carefully the Mensendieck system of posture, shoulders squared and buttocks tucked under, and an occasional trip downtown by trolley, Vivian spent most of the day in her room. As she always had, she read a great deal. She wrote letters to editors and to authors concerning articles or points of view with which she agrees or disagreed, sometimes to senators or representatives, and, more rarely, a visitor. When, as was the custom, one of the Templeton board members knocked at her door to ask how things were going, Vivian replied simply that she had no complaints. She rarely invited the inquirer to enter.

Vivian had chosen Templeton, an endowed home once owned by a well-to-do Seattle family, after almost a year of investigation, and for several reasons. The place offered privacy, accessibility to a well-stocked library, care when and if she needed care, and a certain good taste that she found essential. According to the agreement, that she found fair enough, Templeton residents willed the bulk of their estates to the Home in return for lifelong care and security. Vivian found the agreement altogether satisfactory. She had known women (and men as well) to contract illness so protracted as to use up their entire substance, throwing them upon the bounty of relatives. She would die by her own hand, she thought rather than come to any such inpassé.

Some of the Templeton residents boasted of having disposed of considerable portions of their assets to friends and relatives prior to signing the agreement. Vivian had done no such thing. Even her diamond brooch, presented to her by Arthur on the occasion of their 25th wedding anniversary, and of considerable value, had been dutifully listed among her holdings.

Slightly younger than many of the Templeton residents, Vivian enjoyed good health, and she never took chances. If the weather were inclement, the sidewalks slippery, she remained inside. If she contracted a head cold, she went to bed and stayed there until she was essentially rid of the symptoms.

Nor quite trusting either the skill or the discretion of the staff doctor, an elderly man to whom many of the others unburdened their woes, she made semi-annual visits to her (and Arthur's) family physician, Dr. Dykestra, for check-ups, paying his modest fee from the annuity she had been allowed to keep for her current use. Vivian had, so far, declined to sign up for Medicare.

For all the impersonal professionalism of their relationship, it might be said that, Dr. Dykestra was about her closest friend. He was the one person in the area (she had not seen her sister in years) who called Vivian by her given name. She thought sometimes, not altogether comfortably, that Dr. Dykestra knew more about her than did any other living person; certainly more than she would have wanted anyone to know if she could have helped herself.

The doctor rarely spoke to Vivian of the past during her visits, nor alluded to it, save casually. But it was all there, she thought, seeing the heap of large, square cards on his desk during her visits, a case history record compiled throughout years of home and office calls. She had thought a time or two of asking what disposition would be made of the cards at her death, or at his own. She would like to delete not only the material she guessed to be on the cards but the certain knowledge from the doctor's mind as well. How much Dr. Dykestra knew of the Barbara Vance affair, Vivian could

only conjecture.

The account of Barbara Vance's death in the Times was both brief and perfunctory. Once, a death had been newsworthy. Now, Vivian understood, one paid by the inch, as one paid for advertising for an obituary. Listed among Vivian's own instructions, filed in the office safe at Templeton, was a request that her death go unreported in the papers.

She read the Vance story through, noting with some surprise that Barbara's age was listed as only 55. Survivors named were a brother and a sister, both of whom lived in Brooklyn, New York. Barbara's memberships; Business and Professional Women, Soroptimists, The League of Women Voters, the Presbyterian church, were mentioned. Services, the story concluded, would be announced by Lang and Dennison.

Having finished reading, Vivian smoothed the paper in her lap and sat staring out through the window into the past, as onto a spent garden.

The Barbara Vance episode had taken place when Vivian and Arthur, less than a year apart in age, were in their middle 50's. Vivian had had no inkling, at least none that she recognized as such, that anything was amiss between them. Following the death of their only child, Lydia, in a school bus accident, Vivian and Arthur had continued, on the surface, as though the child had never existed. It had seemed to Vivian the least agonizing for both.

During the first traumatic weeks of bereavement, Vivian had put away all of the photographs and had cleared the house of every toy and of every shred of the child's clothing. Lydia's name was rarely mentioned between them. Because Arthur had insisted, Vivian had undergone psychiatric therapy. She had, for Arthur's sake, grieved inwardly, wept alone, and gone downhill generally. Dr. Dykestra, genuinely concerned, had cajoled, prescribed, and scolded. She had lost a great deal of weight, which she had never regained. She had, for a time, lost her pride of appearance.

It was some time during the Summer following Lydia's death that Arthur had begun staying in town fairly frequently of nights. That summer he had organized a firm of which he was senior partner. This, Vivian understood, kept him of necessity, away a good deal. He always called Vivian and he was invariably solicitous. He urged Vivian to go out and to "eat a good dinner," and not to wait up for him.

Vivian pretended not to mind, and she tried to fill her time profitably. She made herself a plan of reading, and she followed the schedule faithfully. She listed Shakespeare's plays (of which Arthur owned a complete set) in alphabetical order, and read them all. She did volunteer work at the hospital with which Dr. Dykestra was connected. Frequently, when Arthur came home at one or two in the morning, he found her still reading.

Then, he seemed perturbed. He asked whether she had eaten "a good dinner," and apologized for his lateness. Vivian assured him that she had not minded his lateness. She asked, genuinely-interested, how his day had gone. She was, without fail, happy to see him.

Vivian could close her eyes, now, and remember every detail of Barbara Vance's visit, from the sound of the doorbell on that late, rainy afternoon, and her own response, to the sight of the pale, obviously distraught but pretty young stranger who stood on the little roofed portico, out of the rain.

Supposing the woman to be a solicitor of some sort, Vivian was rather annoyed at the interruption. At Arthur's request, she has invited as guests for the evening a district jurist and his wife and daughter. Arthur would be bringing them from town. Vivian had been arranging the centerpiece, a dozen roses sent out by Arthur, when the doorbell rang.

"Are you Mrs. Housel?" the younger woman asked following an awkward moment of silence between them.

Vivian acknowledged, a trifle impatiently, that she was.

"My name is Barbara Vance. I would like to talk to you, if I may." Seeing, obviously, that Vivian seemed about to decline, she added in a stronger tone, "It's about Mr. Housel."

"What about Mr. Housel?"

"I've come to ask you to give him a divorce. I'm expecting his child."

Vivian marveled, afterward, at her own outward calm. She wondered even more, at the fact that she had not for a moment doubted the authenticity of the statement. It had come to her all at once, as a missing piece will suddenly drop into place, that here might be an answer, not only to Arthur's frequent absences but also to certain of his moods that had puzzled her of late, his irritation, his restlessness, his over-solicitude.

The story of the expected child, it occurred to her after a moment, might be a trick. But she never, even briefly, doubted the relationship. Vivian remembered that she had been able to listen rationally, even with a certain outwardly-detached courtesy, after she had asked Barbara Vance inside. She informed Barbara that she was expecting guests shortly. Inwardly, she recalled, there had been waves of shock as painful as those occasioned by the news of Lydia's death. In a sense, perhaps, they had been an aftermath of that. Vivian felt all at once completely bereft.

She heard the story through in the library, where a fire crackled comfortably in the fireplace and where the air smelled of the fresh hyacinths she had forced in a pot on the mantel. Vivian could never bear the heavy fragrance of hyacinths

afterward. She did not ask Barbara Vance to be seated; nor did she seat herself. There may have been, she reflected, an unconscious cruelty in having kept Barbara standing. The woman looked ill. In the soft light through the white lampshades Vivian could see all too clearly that a child was expected.

She heard the younger woman's low-voiced and stumbling account of lunches with Arthur, of evenings together, of trips out of town. Barbara, it seemed, had served as some kind of secretary to a law firm, not Arthur's.

"We never meant this to happen, believe me. I never wanted to hurt you, or Arthur. I love him too much. We love each other."

"Be good enough," Vivian broke in to say, "not to refer to my husband by his given name." To hear the name bandied about on the other woman's lips put the interview on an unbearable plane, as though two animals contended for the same morsel.

"I think you had better go now," Vivian told Barbara, closing in on an all but incoherent torrent of apologetic and at the same time defensive histrionics. "Mr. Housel is bringing guests."

Barbara said a thing, then, that still haunted Vivian. "I wonder," she said, "if you really know Arthur."

Vivian led the way out. "I'll talk to my husband," she said. She spoke the words as though Barbara were a trades-

woman come to discuss a recarpeting job or a new refrigerator.

Barbara murmured, barely audibly, "I'm sorry," and the interview was over.

Vivian leaned against the closed door, hearing the retreating footsteps on the walk, listening to the beat of rain against the windows. She heard, numbly the waiting cab depart, and went back to the dining room to finish the roses. As she took the flowers, one by one, from the bed of greens and tissue, she strove to think how she might approach Arthur; and then how she was to get through the evening with relative strangers.

The fact that she had not once doubted the story continued to amaze her; as did the fact that she had gone on loving Arthur. She had felt suddenly old, she recalled, her image of herself as a cherished companion shattered. How did one meet that kind of rejection? When she heard Arthur's car, she hastened into the bedroom and glanced at her reflection in the mirror. The face that looked back at her was the face of a stranger.

Confronted with the revelation of Barbara Vance's visit after the guests had departed, Arthur had admitted the relationship. He did not ask Vivian for forgiveness. He merely apologized for Barbara's visit, as though that were the whole of it. When Vivian asked, "Do you want a divorce?" he replied, almost explosively, "Of course not." Vivian had thought often

that she could not have borne it (or remained with him) had he groveled.

Vivian wanted to ask, "Are you positive this is your child?" and "Do you love the mother?" The words cried out to be said. But she could not say them. She feared the answers too much.

The evenings away had continued for a while, but not the nights. Arthur called, as always. He remained solicitous. He urged Vivian to "eat a good dinner" and not to "wait up." Vivian, that late Summer, began THE GOLDEN BOUGH, and read the books consecutively, volume by volume. In September, Arthur's evenings away abruptly ended. He had gotten the firm in order, he said. He talked about his work at home. If he were obliged to entertain a client, he took him to lunch. Sometimes he called Vivian and asked her to come into town and have dinner with a couple. She always went.

The following Spring he went to Europe on business and Vivian accompanied him. They visited Mexico, Canada, and The Virgin Islands, places she had always wanted to see. The name of Barbara Vance was never mentioned between them.

But there were times, now, when Vivian was absorbed by thoughts of the child. The infant, if it had been born, and survived, she reckoned, would have been put out for adoption. There was no mention in the obituary of a surviving child, or of a lost one. Obviously, Barbara had never married. Had the

baby been boy or girl? Did the child in any way resemble Arthur?

From time to time down the years, Vivian found herself calculating the child's age. He (or she) would have been long since grown, of course. The trolley to town passed a college campus where students got on and off. Vivian scanned their faces.

Informed by Dr. Dykestra, following Arthur's retirement because of a prolonged illness, that nothing more could be done for him, Vivian was stricken with grief and apprehension. During one of his frequent periods of hospitalization under the care of specialists Dr. Dykestra had consulted, she went home and sat for hours in the darkness, not thinking to turn on the lights, trying to adjust to the worsening forecast.

When Arthur came home, he moved restlessly and weakly about the house. He read. He stared from the windows. He telephoned the office (that still bore his name) on the pretense that he still held the reins. Even after he was forced to take to his bed in almost constant and inalleivative pain, he talked alternately of plans for going back to work, for expanding his practice when he was "well again," and of building a house in a better climate, blaming the weather for his illness. Vivian went along with the farce.

Secretly, she visited hospital wards, read medical books, talked to nurses, in order to learn as much as possible about the care she would need eventually to give him. Because

of his restlessness, she slept on a cot beside his bed. At a sound, she was instantly awake, immediately attentive.

"Promise me, Vivian," he begged in a moment of acceptance "that I won't have to die in a hospital."

"Of course, Arthur."

"I want to die at home. With you beside me."

"Let's not talk of dying."

He said contrite, "I shouldn't have asked that. Do whatever you have to do."

"I want to take care of you, Arthur."

"You must take care of yourself."

To watch him bear, and attempt to conceal, the burden of the pain, the loss of his faculties, was the most difficult. Vivian never broke, not even when she was alone. Although sometimes she awoke from an unpeopled dream to find her pillow wet, her chest heaving. She was still tormented by the dream at times.

Vivian was to see Barbara Vance once more, following Arthur's death. The encounter occurred some two years after Vivian had taken up residence at Templeton. She had gone into town one morning to do some errands; and finding herself in the vicinity of Dr. Dykestra's office, decided to drop by and have her blood pressure checked. She had had a letter from his office saying she was past due for a visit.

Dr. Dykestra's waiting room, normally filled,

was vacant. "The doctor has a patient now," the girl at the desk informed Vivian. "Just be seated. It won't be long now." She opened a file and extracted Vivian's record. "Are you still at Templeton, Mrs. Housel?"

"Yes," said Vivian.

"How do you like it there?"

"I have no complaints," Vivian told her. She seated herself and took up a magazine to discourage further exchange.

When the door to the doctor's private quarters opened, she involuntarily looked up.

Although 20 years had passed since she had seen Barbara Vance, and although Barbara had changed vastly in appearance, Vivian knew her at once. Her hair was white, her face ashen, with a yellowish tinge. Her illness would have been apparent, even to a casual observer.

The eyes of the two women met, and held. Vivian saw recognition growing. Barbara's pale lips moved.

Gripped by an almost panic, Vivian dropped her eyes to the magazine page. Her heart pounded. Her hands inside the doeskin gloves felt moist and nerveless. She waited, stiff and tense; and heard, presently, the slow, retreating footsteps as she had heard them on the long-ago night of Barbara's visit. The door opened and closed. Audible steps died away on the corridor tiles. She heard the elevator stop and resume its

descent.

She was only aware that her name had been called when the girl said, close-by, "I guess you didn't hear me, Mrs. Housel. The doctor will see you now,"

When Dr. Dykestra had shaken Vivian's hand, he indicated a chair and sat down opposite. But he did not at once take up the file the girl had placed before him. He asked quietly, "Did you recognize my patient, Vivian? You look as though you had."

She nodded.

He said, "A terminal case."

When Vivian became conscious of the breakfast gong, the beater was already some distance away down the corridor. The gong had obviously been sounding for some time. The hall was filled with the customary babel of voices. She could hear them through the open transom.

Down in the street at the end of the lawn, a trolley went by, throwing sparks from the current wire. From across the river came the hoarse blast of an industrial whistle calling employees to the morning shift.

These were sounds, it occurred to Vivian, that she would hear each morning to the end of her life, the trolley, the whistle, the gong, the chattering voices. The thought of

breakfast did not interest her. But if she were to remain here in her room, someone would knock presently to inquire if she were all right. Watchful solicitude, unfortunately, was a consideration for which you paid at Templeton.

As she almost invariably did when a familiar name appeared among the death notices, Vivian reached, unthinking, for her sewing shears and snipped out the sparse obituary.

Realizing all at once that she had no use for the piece, she crumpled it in her fingers and gave a moment's thought to its disposal.

But, then, recalling the matron's obvious displeasure over latecomers to the dining room, she arose and crossed to the bureau. Taking up her hairbrush, remnants of the notice still clenched in her left hand, and facing the mirror directly in the morning sunlight, she saw to her bewilderment that she had been weeping.

