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**Body English**

**By**

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"Ready?" asked Liz.

Tom Shea had been lost in thought, and the question from his wife startled him.

"Sure," he lied. He doubted if anyone was ever really ready for a funeral like this. Not when the deceased was your friend's wife, and you were to blame for her death.

Tom closed the book he hadn't really been reading. He stumbled out from the den, got his keys, and went out to the car. Liz got in, and they drove to Henry's place in silence.

Henry sat on the couch in his living room, staring at nothing.

"Henry?" Liz said, her voice soft.

"Yes?" He looked up, his eyes swollen and red.

"It's time to go," she said.

"Oh," was all he said. He rose from the couch as if going to his own execution. When he left, Tom noticed Henry hadn't even locked the door.

They rode in silence to the cemetery. Tom was glad to be driving, so he wouldn't need an excuse not to look at Henry. They parked and walked over to the solemn-looking minister.

The mourners, many of them colleagues of Tom and Henry, trickled in, offering their condolences. When they spoke to Tom, he made small talk, and agreed what a terrible tragedy it was.

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When Henry had remarried at 58, it put the small college community into shock. His new, young wife Terry drank too much, flirted too much, and wore clothes considered too revealing.

Then Tom and Liz began to have problems. Liz wanted Tom to take a better paying position at another college. Tom felt that would be deserting Henry, who had pulled strings to get Tom his current position.

One night they had got into a bad argument. Liz accused Tom of encouraging Terry, and he had been nasty in turn. She had stormed off, leaving him alone. He mooned about the place, feeling sorry for himself, and started drinking.

Two hours later, Tom's doorbell rang. It was Terry, and she had followed him in. When she found out Liz was gone, she had smiled and poured herself a drink. Tom had another as well. They each had several more. Before long, they were necking on the couch. Then things went further.

The next morning, Tom was hung over and ashamed. When Liz returned, she took his abashed behavior for contrition.

One rainy afternoon when Liz was out grocery shopping, Terry showed up again, drunk and wet from the rain. Tom only let her in when she threatened to scream on his doorstep.

She'd marched over to the liquor cabinet and poured herself a drink. She'd said nothing. Tom could still vividly remember what had happened.

"Do you think it's a good idea to be drinking this early?"

"I think it's a great idea," she snarled.

"Terrific. What are you doing here?"

"I just came over for a little company. I wanted to see my old friend Tommy. I thought maybe he could help me out of these wet clothes."

"What happened before was an accident, a mistake. It never should have happened, and it's not going to happen again."

"Is that so?" She took a large swallow of scotch. "Why don't you have a drink? You're much more fun when you drink."

"You're not. You better leave."

"I'll go when I'm damned good and ready," she slammed her drink on the bar. "Oh, look at what you've done. You made me spill my drink, you naughty boy. I better make another one."

"Take the whole bottle. Enjoy it. But go."

"What's the matter? Don't feel like it today? Don't feel like cheating with your friend's wife to pay back the mousey little shrew?"

"Shut up, just shut up!"

"Come on, I can keep a secret. Is Tommy-boy afraid of his wife? Afraid little Lizzie will cry?"

"Get out of here," Tom said, advancing on her.

"Or what?" she snapped. "You going to beat me up? Or tell Henry? Fat chance. You know how jealous he gets. We wouldn't want poor Tommy to lose his job now, would we?"

Terry's smile was pure malice.

"Can't we forget this ever happened?"

"Right. Tommy's had his fun, and now he feels all sorry. What I want doesn't matter, you're all through with me. Well maybe I'm not through with you."

"Don't do anything stupid."

"I already have!" she screamed. "I come to this rathole town and find there's no real men. I'm on a short leash with a husband who goes crazy every time a man tries to talk to me. I thought you might be good for some laughs, but you turn out to be a bastard just like the rest of them. I hate you! I hate you all!"

Terry hurled her drink against the wall, where it exploded in a shower of glass. She stormed out, slamming the door behind her. Tom shook as he cleaned up the mess.

Soon after, the police had pulled Terry's body from the twisted wreck of her car. Tom was horrified when he realized how relieved he was.

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When the service ended, Henry stayed behind after everyone else had left. Tom and Liz waited by the car, letting him grieve and say goodbye in private.

"He's taking it hard," she said.

"Yeah," said Tom. "But then, so would I if anything happened to you."

Liz looked up and half-smiled. She hugged him, and they clung to each other. Tom felt a surge of hope that things might actually work out. He had come so close to losing it all.

Henry came back with the look of a man given in to total despair. On the way back he just stared out the window.

"Henry?" Liz said. "Do you want to stay with us? We could fix up the extra room, and you wouldn't have to be alone."

"No, thank you. I... I need to be by myself for awhile."

"Are you sure? You might be better off with us, just for a day or two."

"No, that's alright, I'll be fine."

"You know, if there's anything you need..."

"I know. Thank you. You've both been so good to me, I don't know what I would have done without you."

Tom gripped the steering wheel, fighting to hold back guilty tears. Henry went into his house, moving slowly.

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Tom took Henry's classes as well as his own that week, trying to bury himself in work. He came home on Friday tired, but beginning to forgive himself.

"Hi there," Liz greeted him. "Hope you didn't have any big plans for tomorrow."

"Why, what's up?"

"Henry asked us to come over and go through Terry's things. He couldn't bear to do it. He'll even cook supper for us, something special. Says he needs the company."

All the guilt Tom had tried to forget came flooding back. He got no sleep that night.

The next day in Henry's house, Tom was tormented by every piece of Terry's clothing, everything that had once belonged to her. When they got to the bedroom, Tom almost broke down. While packing clothes into a box for Goodwill, he spied a red leather-bound diary, and panicked. What if Terry had written about that night? He would lose Liz, his job, everything.

"Hey, hon?" He tried to keep his voice casual, but to him it sounded strained and artificial. "We're almost done in here. Why don't I finish up, and you start on the bathroom."

"Good idea," Liz agreed. As soon as she left, Tom snatched at the book. He scanned the pages, looking for any damning passages. He didn't hear Liz come back in.

"Have you seen the..." she stopped as he snapped the book shut, flushing a guilty crimson.

"What is that?" she said, stepping closer. "A diary?"

He nodded, the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. Liz looked at him, her lips forming a thin line.

"Give it to me." She held out her hand. He could think of no way to refuse, and handed over his destruction. Then he could not believe his luck when she dropped the diary in the bag for trash.

"I don't think anyone needs to read this, especially now. You should be ashamed of yourself." She took the bag and left the room. Tom's knees wobbled, and he almost cried with relief as he leaned on the dresser for support.

It took all afternoon to remove everything. When they finished, Henry seemed in good spirits.

"I really can't thank you two enough," he said. "You've done so much." Henry looked straight at Tom when he spoke. "I've already made dinner, so you might as well stay and relax. I know you've been working hard."

"Well..." said Liz.

"Please don't go. Stay and have some wine. I... I could use the company."

"Of course we'll stay," said Liz, with a glance at Tom. "Do you need any help in the kitchen?"

"No, no, I'm all done. Just have a seat."

Henry returned with three crystal wine glasses filled with a ruby liquid.

"A toast," Henry said dramatically. "To the immortal Bard. Like another, I have loved not wisely, but too well."

Tom and Liz felt uncomfortable, but drank because Henry did. There was an odd, unpleasant flavor to the wine, which surprised Tom, because Henry's taste was usually so good.

"What is this, anyway?" he asked.

"A Merlot. It'll go well with the lamb."

"I'm surprised at you," said Tom. "Not letting a good red breathe first."

Henry looked at him. "Oh, I let it breathe, all right. Wanted to make sure it was just right for my very special friends. It is all right isn't it?"

"Sure," Tom lied. Liz smiled and made polite chatter, so Tom sat back and sipped some more, accepting the bitter taste as part of his punishment. He refused to hurt Henry's feelings tonight.

After dinner, Henry pleaded with them to sit for awhile and talk before going home. He made a fire in the fireplace, and as it grew dark outside, they sat and watched it crackle, talking only of safe subjects. Tom felt his head getting fuzzy, and wondered how he could get drunk on so little wine. He felt sleepy, and saw Liz curled up in a corner of the couch.

It took effort for Tom to turn back to Henry. No one had spoken for awhile. He tried to move, but a fog had settled in his brain, and it was just too hard to rise. Henry swam into view, staring at him.

"How are you feeling?" Henry's voice was muffled, as if he were talking in a tunnel.

"Sleepy," slurred Tom. "Liz too."

"Must be the wine," Henry snickered.

Tom tried to shake his head to clear the cobwebs, but found he couldn't. Henry's face got more blurry.

"Should go."

"Go?" Henry echoed. "Oh, no, you're going to stay. My little party's just starting."

He reached out and slapped Tom hard. Tom was shocked, and the blow cleared his head somewhat. He still couldn't move, despite the pain.

"You bastard!" Henry hissed, his face close. "You and my wife. I get you this job, give you my friendship, and you sneak behind my back. She was all I had! How happy you must have been when she hit that tree. You thought you were free and clear, didn't you? Did you see her diary today? Did you read it?"

"All because of you. The drinking, the accident. Well, you killed her, and I've got another surprise for you."

Henry laughed, and the only movement from Tom was a flicker of his eyes.

"You were so concerned for me, and all the while I was preparing my surprise. I thought you were catching on when you mentioned letting the wine breathe. Bitter, wasn't it? But everything worked well. You can feel absolutely everything I do, but you can't lift a finger. We have quite a time ahead of us."

Henry kept laughing as a tiny tear squeezed out of Tom's eye and rolled down the immobile face. Henry brought out the knife and gently caressed Tom's cheek.

**The End**