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My Mistake

I was unhappy with my job and with my life. To distract myself I developed a relationship with one of the women in my office. Her name was Lena Radwitz. I enjoyed her company because she was young and pretty and could entertain me with her wit and charm. I bought her gifts and took her out to clubs where people no different from ourselves danced the entire night. I met all of her friends, and in less than a week we had developed an identity as a couple. Soon we were lovers. I became intimate with every aspect of her life and learned the details of her past. Her apartment became a second home. We were spending all of our time together, and at one point she told me that she had fallen in love. I pretended not to hear, or at least not to realize that she was serious. In the following weeks I continued to see her. But the relationship had changed. The emphasis of her concerns had shifted. No longer content to live simply in the present, she was planning now for the future. For our 'life together.' When she expressed her desire that I meet her family I demurred, complaining that the time was not yet right. In truth, I was beginning to grow weary of her, of her limitless attentions and boundless solicitude. She was beginning to encroach on my privacy with terrifying insistence, suggesting ways in which I could improve myself and giving me books to read. Fearful of what would ensue should I refuse, I took them and read the first page and the last page and gave them back. When I finally allowed her into my apartment she immediately began to 'tidy up.' She chided me for living like a slob. I realized one day that I was almost never out of her sight. She watched over me and detected anything out of the ordinary in my behaviour. If I appeared depressed, or angry, the questions would begin. What's wrong? Is there something bothering you? Can we talk about it? I could see that I had made a hideous mistake. I was annoyed, but I was also afraid. I did not want to talk about myself, about 'us,' or about my feelings, with

anyone. I did not want to have to explain myself. Somehow I had to find a way to distance myself from her so that we would gradually drift apart.

I began to avoid her whenever possible. I was abrupt with her. Even, on occasion, rude. I made up excuses to ensure that we would spend less time together. I told her that I had other acquaintances whom I had been neglecting. I said there were activities in which I wished to engage with my male friends. Clients were making greater demands on my time. I arranged our evenings so that we were almost always out with other couples, almost never alone. Let me state that I still enjoyed her company and could derive a great deal of pleasure from her conversation, but only as long as she refrained from asking me impertinent questions or discussing personal matters. The presence of other people seemed to inhibit somewhat her curiosity about me. We could drink and chat, but I could ensure that the conversation never extended beyond trivialities. In this way I learned to manipulate our relationship until the time we spent alone together was devoted almost exclusively to sex. There would be no words spoken. I would leave when it was over. It was a perfect arrangement. But she was not satisfied, and she let me know it. I had changed, she said. She accused me of being aloof, cold, and impersonal. She suspected me of loving someone else. Shocked, I replied that this was not true. If she wished to break off with me then so be it. But I refused to admit to something that had no basis in fact. She was a sensitive person. Delicate of feature as well as temperament. I honestly believe that I could have spared myself and her the trouble that followed and let her go. But, as I reasoned at the time, why should I deprive myself of the pleasures she afforded when she was so ready to bestow them? Why would I do something so foolish, when I had determined in my wisdom that it required no commitment on my part. And, finally, why should I once again descend alone into that hellish routine that was my life? I admit there was a weakness in me, and that I softened toward her. The threat no longer seemed quite so imminent, the sense of foreboding was perhaps momentarily dispelled. I saw she was unhappy and I got drunk one night and told her that I loved her and wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with her. She said that she would never leave me. I stayed with her that night and in the morning when I returned to my apartment I was astonished by what I had done. My words constituted nothing less than a proposal of marriage. I could see that at

the very least she would want me to move in with her. I wandered about, unable to concentrate, and was at one point violently ill. I had known nothing like this ever, in my whole life: this blinding terror, this physical repugnance at my own thoughtless actions. I suffered an agony of regret, and a hundred times started to phone her to explain that I had been mistaken. There was no love. I had been using her. A hundred different explanations whirled about in my head as I struggled to devise that single perfect sentence that would extricate me from this appalling predicament into which I had so foolishly blundered. When the phone rang I answered it automatically, my mind elsewhere. I told her that I was not feeling well and that I was trying to get some rest. However, I would meet her at her place later on. She said that the next few weeks would be very busy. After all, there were arrangements to be made. Yes, yes, I said, I know. I hung up before she could tell me how much she loved me.

I wanted it all to disappear. I knew this deceit could not continue and attempted to persuade myself that she would be reasonable. Yet I had no trouble foreseeing the vexation I would cause myself should I reveal to her my true feelings. Make no mistake, I thought she was a wonderful person. She had many delightful qualities that someone would cherish in a wife. But I did not love her. I did not want to marry her. It was this I had to say.

But, forgive me, I did not say it. I merely avoided her. I missed our engagement that evening and she called to tell me how disappointed she was. I said that something had come up and I was busy. It was an excuse I soon grew accustomed to using. I spent more time away from the office. At first she accepted my behaviour with her customary lightness of heart. She said that I was afraid of marriage because I thought I would lose the last of my freedom. Or that I was afraid she would turn into a bitch and hound me to death. But it would not be like that at all, she said, smiling, touching my face. She would be the best wife! Marriage was not bondage, she said.

When a month passed and I did not alter my strategy, she grew more determined to make me see reason. I finally said to her over the phone that I had no wish to continue our relationship. I was fed up. It was over. But it was too late for such words to make any difference. She continued to call me. She declared I had no idea what I was doing, and that I didn't mean what I said. She laughed at me as if I were a foolish schoolboy. I had to get a new unlisted

number. Then one evening I discovered her in the corridor outside my apartment. Someone from the building had recognized her and let her in. She flew at me, muttering endearments and recriminations in the same breath. Clearly, she was deranged.

She pestered me without respite. At the office she would not leave me alone. I complained to her superiors and had her reprimanded. I even took her aside and tried to explain my error. I never loved her, I said. There was no point in what she was doing. But she persisted in approaching me whenever she saw an opportunity. She had nobody to help her through this. That much was plain. I tried to ignore her. I refused to acknowledge her when she spoke to me. Then I began receiving cryptic messages in her handwriting: teasing, erotic, and vaguely threatening notes describing some of our nights together. I could not imagine what she hoped to accomplish by all this. I called the police but quickly hung up when they asked for my name.

It was clear to me that no words of protest or apology would suffice. She was making me pay for my crime and would do so until I stopped her. I knew what was coming. I wanted to get on with my life. I had to do something to make sure that she would never come near me again.

With no clear plan in mind I went over to her apartment. She let me in without hesitation, acting as if nothing were wrong. As if I still went there every day. After all that had happened she seemed genuinely pleased to see me, and not in the least surprised.

I asked if she felt all right.

'What would you like to drink?' she said.

For a moment I felt myself succumbing to what I had most feared. I would ask her forgiveness and crawl into the warmth of her embrace. But at the same time the implied intimacy of her chatter was infuriating. I finally understood that if I failed to act I would never be rid of her. She would see me dead. I decided to beat her up.

I had to move quickly, before anything could be said or done that would mitigate my resolve. I went up to her as she poured the drinks and struck her across the cheek as hard as I could. She uttered a small whimper and fell to the floor. I pulled her up and struck her again and again. After each blow I could see that she was trying to speak, but I struck her before the words formed on her lips. It was over very quickly. She offered no resistance at all. The struggle resulted in very little noise. One lamp had overturned and

smashed on the floor, and she had cried out once. But I felt certain that nobody had heard us. When I left she was lying on the floor between the coffee table and the television. There was some blood, but not much. She was alive; even before I was gone she was making sounds. She seemed to be unhurt except for a few bruises, but I did not look very closely. To make sure of my escape I used the stairs and left the building through a security exit.

For the first time in weeks I did not dread going into work. That touch of vanity in her nature that I had always detested would never allow her to appear before those who knew her at anything less than her best. I felt confident she would not be there. And I was right. I expected her to phone sometime during the day to explain that she was not feeling well and would not be in for a few days. Or maybe she would resign her position. I was ready for anything. But no word came from her all day. Always, they said, she always phoned if she was ill. Without fail. Soon it was all around the office that something had happened to her. Someone had phoned her apartment and got no answer. They asked me if I knew where she could be, or if something had happened. Despite our recent difficulties most people clung to the idea of us being together. And they believed me when I said that she had appeared to be fine but had seemed a bit depressed lately. About what? That I did not know. Later that week when her apartment was searched they found traces of blood together with evidence of a struggle. But there was no sign of her. No note. I thought perhaps I would receive a letter from her, full of bitterness and acrimony, from some far-off exotic location. But there was nothing. Not a word. She was now being treated as a missing person, possibly a kidnap victim. The incident was blindly linked in the media to several other similar ones that had occurred in recent months. When the police questioned me I told them only that she was prone to strange moods and sudden, erratic impulses. Like what? Well, for instance, there had been occasions when for no apparent reason she had left a restaurant without paying the bill, even though she had plenty of money with her. Later she claimed to recall nothing. They wrote all this down. Her family came to see me and questioned me about our relationship. We were to be married, were we not? No, I said. We were never that serious about each other. What about her letters? Her mother showed me one in which Lena claimed that I had promised to buy her a ring. Lies, I said. The poor girl suffered from delusions. She had misunderstood my intentions. I am afraid that

I offended her family. Her mother yelled at me, insufferable accusations. Her Lena was a wonderful girl! She was nothing like what I had told the police she was! I shrugged. The next day I noticed that I was being followed, my activities monitored. A slight figure, wearing black, always at a distance. It was now two weeks since the disappearance. I was angered by this new development. There was no reason for anyone to follow me. I went out that night. It was foggy, but I could see the person was there, trailing me. I turned a corner and waited in an unlit doorway. I recognized her as she went by, and I grabbed her arm. She was a friend of Lena's named Marie. I had always liked her. Thought her attractive. But now I was angry. I demanded to know what she was up to, why she was watching me. She smiled at having been discovered, but it was a smile full of scorn. She knew everything, she said. She knew what had really happened and she was going to take her information to the police. I said that she could do whatever she wished. It would just be another story to confuse the issue. She claimed Lena had phoned her after it happened. She had rushed over to her apartment, but it was already too late. Lena had gone. She asked me why I did such a horrible thing. And to Lena of all people. Why would I have beaten such a sweet girl? She had never harmed anyone in her entire life. I kept my eyes on her and asked what she hoped to accomplish by following me. It seemed that she knew more about the incident than I did. Why not go to the police now? She said that she was gathering evidence against me and would turn it over to the police when she was ready. When the time came, there would be no doubt concerning what had taken place in Lena's apartment that night. No one would be able to argue with her. She would offer up proof that I was a monster. I had to laugh. I told her that she could save herself a great deal of trouble by giving the police whatever information she had right now. Tonight. I had no intention of doing anything to incriminate myself. Following me like this was pointless. I could call the police myself and have her detained for harassment. There was a brief silence as we stared defiantly into each others' eyes. It was a moment I will never forget as long as I live, a moment of almost erotic intensity. The lamplight cast a soft glow across her cheek. When I released her arm she asked venomously if I now intended to strike her as I had struck Lena. Repeatedly. In the face. Until the blood came. Clearly, she was trying to provoke me. Was it possible we were being observed? I thought for a moment about what I should do next, but my anger had evaporated. I could see I

had nothing to fear from her. I merely laughed, and as I did so her hand flew up and stuck me across the face with such force that I stumbled backward. She said something else to me, an insult, and then fled down the street. I got something to eat and then went back to my apartment. The following week two boys playing on the embankment in the park discovered a woman's body washed up on the rocks. I read about it in the newspaper: 'The body of Lena Radwitz, 25, was found early today...Miss Radwitz had been the subject of an extensive search in the three weeks since her disappearance on the night of....' Nobody phoned me. I had to make some inquiries on my own to find out if the inquest had found evidence of murder. Later I was called upon to give a statement. Nobody questioned me further, and I stopped worrying about whether or not I was being followed. Nothing else was said or done to me. I went to the funeral and observed the proceedings from a discreet distance. I suppose it was the least I could do.