

THE GIRL I MARRIED

Jonathan Espinoza flipped the keys in his hand with the ring secured on one finger so they would make a full circle around. He automatically caught the one he wanted and smiled with satisfaction. He'd been practicing that move like an actor practices twirling a gun for a big movie scene.

He was whistling as he went up to the front door of his two-story house, ready to relax for the evening. His wife, Jeanette, would probably have dinner on the table with his robe and slippers ready.

He snorted.

His wife of eight months was anything but a domesticated, likable and loving woman, and she had never had dinner, robe and slippers ready when he got home from work. That was a bit too much pampering in his mind, so he never brought up how much he'd like it. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. He doubted Jeanette would pamper him like she had when they were dating.

He pushed the key in the knob and was surprised to feel that it wasn't locked, to begin with. He pushed open the door and called out,

"Jeanette? You here?"

Jonathan was used to her not responding to him. Since the day they got married, he'd noticed changes in her but wasn't sure what happened to cause them. It was as though the first week of marriage was enough for her and after that, she was just going through the motions.

Her odd behavior set off alarms in his head. He was at a loss what to do about it though. He'd fallen in love with her the first time he met her in the bar in Calhoun. When he saw her dancing in the midst of all those other people, it was like she was a diamond shining among coal. The circling lights above them moved all around the floor and when they lit up her beautiful face, he felt a sharp tingle slide through him. He knew he had to have her.

But he didn't just want her body, he wanted to know all about her. He felt the urge to sweep her off her feet and treat her like a princess. She had no family, she said, so she was walked down the aisle by his own father, who also admired Jeanette. Jonathan's whole family was happy with his choice.

A few days after they married, Jeanette began her odd behavior. She continued to cook and clean, but it was as if she was no longer interested in being with Jonathan. In any sense. She spoke to him briefly throughout the evening after he got home from work and made plans for her weekends that didn't involve him, like taking a dancing class or going to yoga.

When they were dating, she went to church with him every Sunday. Now she had no interest in going to church and their friends started asking about her.

Jonathan could recall several arguments they'd had because she didn't see the hurtful way she was treating him and other people.

He remembered their very first argument ever. It happened exactly one week after they married. They'd argued every week since then, perhaps twice a week, about something petty and small. He couldn't seem to reason with her.

He was fairly certain it had started with him asking her if she wanted to go to dinner to celebrate their first week together as a married couple.

She'd practically had a meltdown, saying he was too needy and clingy.

It left him confused. He'd always thought getting married meant you would have that one person to hold and love for the rest of your life. The piece of paper and the ceremony made Jeanette's attitude change completely. He'd had his loving wife for about a week. After the argument, she never treated him the same.

But he knew he wasn't asking for too much. They'd barely made it through the wedding night, she was so nervous to share her body with him. Since then, in the last eight months, he could count how many times she'd allowed him to be intimate with her.

It frustrated him when he thought about it. He'd expected so much more from the way she'd treated him during their dating. She'd shared her body with him then willingly and freely. Why had she been so nervous that first night of their marriage? As if it would be any different.

It was as though she had switched to a different personality.

Jonathan sighed, standing in the foyer, looking around the house. He got no response from Jeanette when he called out to her. He walked to the garage door and opened it to see if her car was in there. It wasn't. She wasn't home.

Reluctantly feeling a heavy sense of relief, Jonathan closed the garage door and went straight to the kitchen. He opened the small cabinet above the refrigerator and reached to the back of the compartment hidden behind it.

He felt around with his hand a few times before hitting the glass bottle with his fingertips. Satisfied, he rolled the bottle with his fingers until it was flush with his palm so he could pick it up. He brought the bottle of whiskey down and set it on the counter.

He hadn't dared let Jeanette know he had liquor in the house. It wouldn't be there if she knew about it. In other words, she would drink it. She would devour it like it was water and she'd just walked through a desert.

That was another thing he didn't know about Jeanette when he married her. She was an avid drinker. He couldn't remember for the life of him when she'd had more than a glass of wine or a mixed drink with dinner. But after they married, he found she was very fond of drinking to the point of passing out on the bed.

She'd hidden her true self well.

Her behavior had an effect on Jonathan. He lived his life walking on eggshells, worried about when she would be angry next and what complaint she would have. She wasn't necessarily complaining about him. She was just complaining for the sake of it. Sometimes it was about him, sometimes it wasn't. The negativity that flowed from her mouth was astounding.

He sighed, taking the bottle in hand, grabbing a 20-ounce Coke from the fridge and heading into the basement. He'd taken to hiding out there. Something about it made him feel safe and comfortable. Why it was that way was a mystery. What could possibly make him think the basement was safe from Jeanette?

The basement was nothing special. He'd managed to grab an old couch from a friend and placed it against one of the walls, setting a 46-inch tv on the other side so he could sit back and watch tv whenever he wanted. In peace.

Other than those two items of luxury, Jonathan was surrounded by cardboard boxes, three large freezers that had come with the place and only one worked that also had boxes and totes piled on them, various tools and lawn equipment, and other things people kept in their basements because they weren't really needed but were wanted.

He didn't hide the liquor down there because Jeanette's prying little fingers would probably find it. He had no doubt she went through his stuff when he wasn't home. He wouldn't be surprised if she put hidden cameras in his office.

Jonathan dropped himself on the couch and stretched his legs out over the two cushions beside him. He grabbed the remote from the tote in front of him and clicked on the tv. He'd set three totes side by side in front of the couch to form a coffee table and covered them with a heavy blanket. He wasn't completely without class, after all.

He swung his legs back down, opened the bottles and set them on the tote, noticing that his feeling of depression had lifted somewhat. He hadn't even taken a drink. It was something about the basement that did that to him every time.

Flipping through the channels and drinking whiskey and Coke, Jonathan slowly felt his brain lifting as the alcohol took effect. Where was Jeanette? He hadn't heard footsteps upstairs at all since he got home. It was nearly an hour before he started wondering.

His head was beginning to spin. Pushing himself to his feet, he crossed to the wooden stairs and stared up at the basement door, which stood open.

Irritated, he forced himself to go up and look through the house to see if she'd snuck in. Maybe she was sleeping upstairs. The first thing he did, though, was look in the garage for her car. Even in his drunken state, he knew he wouldn't find her in the house if her car wasn't there. She was wherever the car was at.

He pulled open the door to the garage. It was empty. Slamming it, he began to feel angry.

Eight months. Eight months and his only solace in this marriage was to go to the basement and pretty much hide out from his new wife.

Anger coursed through him as he retreated to his basement.

"I shouldn't have to live like this." He stomped down the stairs, grumbling to himself. "I feel like a child being forced into timeout every day when I get home from work. And I'm working all day! This is such a bunch of crap."

Jonathan dropped himself on the couch like he had the last time. Once again, as soon as he sat on the couch, he began to feel better. He laid his head back and stared at the ceiling. What was he going to do? This was no life. It wasn't the life he wanted, that was for sure. He'd pictured things so differently with Jeanette. They'd made so many plans.

Every single one of them disappeared when they got married. She didn't want children now. She wanted to get a job modeling for a local retail store. She'd never mentioned anything like that when they were dating. She didn't want to go camping, hiking or do any of the outdoor activities they'd

planned for. Their honeymoon was a bust when she suddenly said she didn't want to go on a cruise. A cruise that had been paid for by his parents.

Eight months. How long would he have to suffer? Giving her attention now only seemed to irritate her. Trying to talk to her about the tension in their marriage didn't work, either. She denied that she'd changed.

What did she want from him? Why couldn't she just be the Jeanette she was before they got married?

He closed his eyes, a soft tear sliding from each of his eyes, sliding down to his ears, getting his hair wet on its way.

What had he done wrong to make her fall out of love with him? What made him suddenly not good enough for her?

A warm feeling slid through him, a peaceful feeling, as if he'd been touched by someone who loved him. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, so strange was the feeling.

He lifted his head and looked around the room as if someone might have come in. As if Jeanette had come in. The Jeanette he loved and wanted.

He was alone in the room. He sat forward, scanning as much of the room as he could see. The light from the television made some places bright at one point while other areas were left in the dark. That shifted as the scene changed.

He narrowed his eyes, looking at the three large rectangular freezers lined up along the wall. It was as if he was taken by the hand and guided to the one on the far left. He couldn't help himself when he got up and walked to it.

His heart was pounding but his head was confused. Why was he feeling anxious? Suddenly the freezer was important to him? It was broken. It had month's worth of junk piled up on top of it and he and Jeanette made a life together and gathered things.

It felt like his arms were being lifted by someone else, as if he was a puppet in the hands of a puppeteer. He began to take the boxes down. He set them on the ground behind him as he cleared the lid of the freezer.

Once all the boxes were off, he found himself on the edge of his nerves. His hand was shaking when he put it on the handle of the freezer.

A second warm feeling passed through him, once again as if he had been touched by the hand of a loved one. Was a spirit guiding him?

Thinking that a friendly spirit might be trying to tell him something made Jonathan feel better. For some, it may have been a scary thought. But Jonathan had many conversations with Jeanette about his belief in the spirit world and that there was something to the "life after death" theory.

Someone wanted him to look in the freezer. It was very important.

He wondered what he would find when he lifted the lid. Trying to stay as calm as he could, he gripped the handle and pulled up.

Jonathan stumbled back from the freezer when he saw what was inside. Tripping over his feet, he landed hard on his behind, catching himself with the palms of his hands before he could slam his tailbone into the hard basement floor.

There was no way. It couldn't be real. It couldn't possibly be happening.

With his heart slamming in his chest, Jonathan scrambled back to his feet and looked in the freezer once again, gripping the cold sides of the box, every muscle tense.

He was looking into the face of his wife.

"Oh my God," he said, his voice trembling.

He reached in and grabbed Jeanette, lifting her up to him. A rotten stench rose from her body and he dropped her back down again. Looking closer, he could see she wasn't recently dead. She was beginning to decompose.

He frowned, confusion sliding through him. His wife... she was lying dead in a basement freezer, but he'd only seen her that morning as he left for work.

Her car wasn't in the driveway.

Scanning the body of his dead wife, logic started to put possible pieces together in his mind.

This wasn't Jeanette. That is, it wasn't the woman he'd married.

Was it the woman he'd dated? He ran his eyes down over her body, recognizing the outfit she was wearing. The jeans had a small rip in the knee. He remembered when she'd gotten that rip. She was with him when it happened, snagging it on a piece of fence that was sticking out in the community garden behind his apartment.

They'd moved into the house at the same time as getting married. They'd planned it that way and, as far as Jonathan thought, it had come off perfectly.

But here she was, in the clothes she'd worn that day in the garden. They'd been picking pea pods and green beans to take home and make with a stew.

Chills covered him from head to toe.

After they'd eaten, she'd gone back to her apartment. The two friends she had helping her get ready were waiting there to "get her through her last night as a free woman".

A smile came to his face remembering that.

He gazed at the corpse in the freezer, his mind webbing together the clues from the last eight months that he wasn't with the same woman at all.

This was Jeanette. But then, who was this woman he had been living with for the past eight months? She was the exact mirror image of the woman he'd dated and fallen in love with.

"This can't be happening," he thought. "If that woman killed Jeanette, why would she put her in here? Why doesn't it smell worse than it does?"

He closed the lid, his mind in a fog. It was difficult to think straight. Perhaps she covered the body with Lyme. Would that have any other effect? The woman looked well-preserved to him. It could have just been the freezer.

With a sudden jolt of memory, Jonathan thought about how all three freezers were working when he and Jeanette moved into the house.

While he was thinking, Jeanette came storming towards him with a knife in her hand. He saw her in the last second before it would have been too late. Jonathan firmly grabbed her wrist and moved it around until the knife fell far away. They fought on the floor until he grabbed an empty bottle of wine next to him and hit her hard on the head.

She laid unconscious while blood was dripping from her head. His heart slammed in his chest as he thought about how he ended up in this situation.

He called the police and sat next to the body and started to cry. Looking at the face of the woman he lived with, he thought about the eight months of torture he'd just gone through, the life that had been taken from him and replaced by this shrew, the life of happiness he would never have with the woman he loved.

The police came sooner than he expected. They took Jonathan to the police station for questioning. Officer Brown put him in a small room and started with questions. It was a standard room for the examination like the ones you see in the movies. A big mirror on one wall, a table in the center, and two chairs on the opposite sides of the table. One for the suspect and one for the interrogating officer.

After hours of sitting in the small room, waiting for someone to explain what is going to happen with him, Officer Brown entered the room. With a serious look on his face, he spoke without hesitation.

"The woman whom you lived with is called Rachel Burns. She has multiple records on drug dealing, violence, and disruption of law and order. She is your wife's twin sister."

Officer's words blew Jonathan's mind. He couldn't believe what he just heard. Jeanette never mentioned having a sister or any family at all.

The officer continued, "Doctors separated the sisters and put them in different orphanages. A strange thing to do to twins but there were extenuating circumstances, I guess. Neither of the sisters knew about the other. Rachel grew up angry and turned to a life of crime early. She has an extensive juvenile record, theft and other petty crimes. Always looking for ways to pull a ruse to get some money."

Jonathan twisted in the seat, uncomfortably. How could he never have known?

"She must have seen your wife one day and discovered that she had a twin sister. The fact that she had a successful twin sister seemed like a perfect opportunity to pull her last and best stunt. It appears she may have come to your house while you weren't there. Your wife let her in. I'm sure she was shocked to learn she had a twin. I'm willing to bet she just wanted to get to know her sister and bond with her."

The officer's voice was sympathetic. Jonathan picked at his fingernails, not wanting to hear any of it but knowing he had to listen.

“At some point, while Jeanette turned her back from Rachel, it appears from initial findings Jeanette was hit with something blunt, very forcefully. Rachel seems to have grabbed a knife and stabbed Jeanette several times in the back. When she was done, she put her sister in the freezer and started playing the role of your wife. It was a long jump from her petty crimes. But it was her biggest performance, I’m quite sure.”

Jonathan left the station in disbelief, heartbroken, trying to forget what had happened. He just wanted to move on. But there would never be a day he would not think of the tragedy that occurred in his life, and to his beautiful wife, knowing he would never see her again.

(Inspired by a true event. A woman killed her sister and kept her in a freezer for 19 years until a family member found her.)