



## **Wife With Knife**

**By**

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Rafe was a drunk when I married him but he wasn't famous; fame came later, after his third one-man show. Suddenly everyone loved him. The students, of course, he'd been at the Institute for years so I was used to young girls phoning and fawning, but after *The Times* review it was society women and gallery owners and rock stars; my best friend Pamela was in there too, the snake, and I was sick of it. Every day when I came home from work there were letters and phone messages saying *O you're so wonderful/ come speak to our university/ come accept our prizes*. I should have been happy for Rafe but I wasn't. The man hadn't changed. He was still a miser and a pessimist; he still had bad breath and athlete's foot and terrible table manners and I was still the frump chopping onions by the sink who got beat up twice a year. I guess I was jealous. So one night I stupidly reminded him that I too was an artist and had had my own one-woman show before I'd met him and Rafe put down his glass and stared at me and I knew what was coming.

"Every painter's wife thinks they can paint" followed by "If you really wanted to paint, you would be painting every day" followed by "I couldn't stand to be married to another painter" followed by "I couldn't stand to be married to a bad painter" followed by, "Which is what you are and always will be," and pretty soon I was going at him with the knife and he was coming at me with the kitchen chair. While I was being treated in Emergency it occurred to me that I was as bad for Rafe as he was for me and I would do us both a favor if I would just get out. So I moved into a neighbor's barn where there was no toilet and I had to shit on newspapers but it wasn't as bad as it sounds. I set up an easel and started to paint. A jazz guitarist moved in with me for a while and there were a few other men but nothing until the next year when I met Ashford Faught, the Scottish poet.

Ash wasn't as famous as Rafe and he didn't have Rafe's beauty, but he had one of those long faces, like a collie's, that I've always liked, and a virginal pink and white body, like a young girl's, and a marvelous voice, full of choked passion. He was very attentive, very well-educated, wonderful manners. He said, Come live with me, and I thought No, I can't do that, but when I heard Rafe had moved in with Pamela I packed my things and flew to Edinburgh.

Ash had a little cottage by the coast and we should have been happy there but we weren't. It was cold and grey by the water and we were cold and gray too, like characters out of an old Bergman movie; the sex was good but everything we said was wrong. I had never lived with a poet before, and the silence was disconcerting; I couldn't whistle or yell or dance to the radio when he was writing and the smell of turpentine gave Ash migraines so I could only work when he was gone.

He was gone a lot. He had two daughters in London and a young son in Glasgow and a mother in Dumfries. One Sunday he set off to see his mother and said he'd be back around nine. So nine came. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. At one, I decided to read his journals.

Ash's journals were these leather bound jobs with his initials in gold on the cover and inside they were "attended the symphony, enjoyed the Mahler especially," "just finished Keats' letters," all that crap, and the real life was recorded on little scraps of paper that were stuck in helter-skelter. I realized that Ashford Faught was a man who shook his journals out over a wastepaper basket on December 31<sup>st</sup> of every year so all that was left was this pristine record for his biographers to admire and be bored by.

Piecing the paper scraps together, I learned that Ash had been seeing three other women since he'd met me; two of them had fallen by the wayside but one remained and her name was Bettina. And you know, he'd even made a list with Bettina's name on one side and mine on the other and under Bettina he'd put "owns house in London" and under mine he'd put "was married to Rafe McAteer."

After I stopped screaming, I went straight to Ash's address book and found Bettina--it was four am now--and I called and she answered and I said, "Hello, is Ashford Faught there, please," and she said, "Well yes, actually, he is," and I said, "May I speak to him, please?" and she said, "Just a minute," and then Ash was on and I said, "Hello Ash, it's me," and he said, "My god is anything wrong?" and I said, "No, nothing's wrong I just wondered when you were coming home," and he said, "I'll leave right now if you

want,” and I said, “Fine, if that will be convenient,” and he said, “Well actually it would be more convenient to come around eight tomorrow morning.”

So we hung up and I went around figuring out ways to set his cottage on fire but instead I called Rafe and I said, “Honey, I just realized I’m once again in a place I don’t want to be,” and he said, “Then get out,” and I said, “Where would I go,” and he said, “Come home to me,” and I said, “But you’re with Pamela,” and he said, “She doesn’t need to know,” and I said, “God you’re a rat,” and he said, “You like rats,” and I had to agree. “I’ve started to paint again,” I added but Rafe had dropped the phone by then and I could hear the Shostakovich he liked to listen to when he was working and I could imagine him standing in his studio with his bourbon in one hand and his paint brush in the other and I wondered if he was still painting those hideous portraits of me.

I sat by the door and when Ash crept in at eight the next morning, I asked him to choose, and he said he already had, he was just letting Bettina down easy because she was high strung and he didn’t want to hurt her and why didn’t we, the two of us, go off to The Highlands and be alone together. So we got in the car and drove up to The Highlands and it was awful there and I said, “You know, I really miss our walks along the beach, let’s head back,” and Ash said, “Right,” so we headed back and we were in the cottage lying side by side on the bed, not making love, we were both too exhausted, when we heard a key in the lock and Bettina walked in. She looked at me and I looked at her and Ash threw his hands up and screamed something and ran out the door and out to the beach.

“What did he say?” I asked Bettina.

“I can’t cope,” she repeated.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” I said.

“What a good idea,” she said.

We talked and it turned out Bettina had helped Ash move in and they had painted the cottage together and discussed getting married. “I’m actually surprised you’re even here,” she said. She looked at me. “What was it like,” she asked, “being married to Rafe McAteer? Weren’t you his muse?”

I was damned if I was going to respond to that, so I waited. She waited too. After a while she said, “Ash is deeply divided.”

Well in a situation like that someone has to win and when Ash came back it looked like I was winning but it still didn't feel right, he was so pathetic, so after another few days of me being quiet and him having migraines I finally said, "Listen: why don't you go spend a week with Bettina and then decide," and he said, very quickly, "All right," and he got packed right away and I went to my friend Kiki's in London and she had this marvelous flat right by the South Kensington stop with huge windows and you could see the gardens and the guard horses and Kiki was in the theater there and soon I was meeting actors and musicians and dancers and after a week or two I began seeing Jean Paul so I didn't go back to Ash again, nor did I ever go back to Rafe though I wanted to and almost did after he divorced Pamela, but by then he'd met the little waitress from Thailand and begun having the children he'd always said he didn't want, so it was too late. It hurts to think of the way he died, and I still argue with his ghost when I'm alone in my studio, furious that he wouldn't stop working long enough to go see a doctor and get the thing cut out.

Last week I went to his retrospective at the Met, like everyone else, and I stood there, like everyone else, while the docent stopped by his most famous painting and raved on and on about the color, the composition, the use of space and light. I waited for her to point out the almost imperceptible drop of red on the tip of the knife. But she said nothing. No one ever has. The critics have missed it, the collectors have missed it, the biographers have missed it too. I'm beginning to think I'm the only person in the world who knows it's there, though for the life of me I'm still not sure if it's Rafe's blood or mine.