

The Perils of Adultery

By Owen Baillie

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Daniella Colloti swiped her thumb down the phone screen and scrolled through the messages again. *Bastard*, she thought. *Bastard, bastard, bastard*. She was beyond wondering how or why. Only one thing could appease her burning heart. Killing him.

He'd fallen asleep on the couch the night before, so she'd crept into the study and sent the texts to herself from his phone. She'd checked before, but this was the first time she'd discovered saved messages, and her heart had simultaneously ached and angered. She didn't know the woman and didn't care. Even if she hadn't found them, he still deserved his fate. Just another part of many confirming Vince was a lying, cheating bastard of a man.

She'd sacrificed her dreams to satisfy him in marriage, to fit into his outdated, chauvinist ideal of a wife. She spent most days at home, cooking his favourite meals, keeping the place clean. She politely declined offers from friends for lunch or shopping. Having children was a dream, and she had often begged him for them to try, but had long ago given up. In the beginning, she thought that pleasing him would fortify his love and he would loosen his control. Instead, it had only driven him further away, her loneliness and the neglect braking down her state of mind until she spent frequent times in tears, wondering what had become of her life.

His biggest failing had been a promise to look after her and end the abusive life she'd suffered under her step-father's rule. *Lies. All lies. You never intended to save me Vince*. Instead, she thought, touching a bruise on her cheek, he had drafted her into more of the same. Although it only ever happened when he was drunk and angry, she had assured herself watching her mother beaten with sickening regularity that she would never be a victim. *I've failed myself, too*.

Daniella put the phone down and took a sip of wine. It was nearly time. She'd mustered the courage, unified it with anger and disgust and self-

loathing. For a long time she had imagined unleashing her fury. The idea had evolved until all it required were minor details. She undertook detailed searches of late and uncovered more than she had imagined. This night was simply the accumulation of his long term betrayal.

Vince would be home soon and her plan would roll into action. *Could she actually go ahead?* It wasn't the notion of killing him, rather the idea of getting caught. She'd planned it well though, scrutinizing every detail with diligent clarity, from the buying of materials under various names and credit cards, to the story she would tell the police and his family. His clothes, car, her alibi; she considered numerous actions and responses for each matter. Daniela swallowed down the wine and went through a final check.

Vince Colloti grimaced as he jerked the handbrake on. He was sore down there, tender after a colossal performance, perhaps his best ever. Had he ever picked up such a beautiful girl with so little effort? He didn't think so, and there had been a long list of them.

He eased out of the car and walked towards the house, avoiding the excavation work on the driveway. The concrete labourers were pouring tomorrow, and by the same time the following night, he might get his car into the garage.

"Hi."

Daniella stood up on the front porch. He frowned, wondering why she was up so late.

He had spent a couple of hours with some work colleagues at a local bar, and had expected to be home by eight, but he hadn't anticipated meeting Stephanie, an Italian Goddess who had turned eight o'clock into eleven. Going home had quickly been forgotten. Now he had to face reality and a wife he didn't really love anymore. Her parents were loaded though and Vince had been eyeing off their inheritance for a long time.

He arrived at the stairs and looked up at her. She stood smiling, a champagne glass in each hand. *What now?* He wanted only for bed, to end the night as he had left the hotel room.

Her dark blonde hair, normally pulled back in a tie, curled around her shoulders. He glanced at the bruise on her cheek and pushed away shame. He never meant to hit her. It usually happened at a point in an argument when his temper just got away. He supposed it wasn't so bad because he only did it now and then. She always fell back into line afterwards and tried harder to please him. She had once been attractive enough to turn heads, but since he put a ring on her finger, she seemed to care less about her appearance. Truth be told, he

didn't really care though. He was barely at home, and he seemed to be able to find what he needed elsewhere.

"Hi," he said, suppressing a wince as he put a foot on the second step. He felt his stomach contract at the sight of her black lace gown. Coupled with the champagne, it meant only one thing. How was he going to get out of this?

Vince had committed his first affair before they were married, and they had continued without guilt. Housewives, businesswomen, and single girls fed his insatiable appetite. After one or two rendezvous', he usually moved on. Perhaps Stephanie would change that.

"How was it?" Daniella said. Her eyes narrowed, and she seemed to repress a grin. For just a moment, Vince felt the air catch in his throat. *Keep walking*. Then he smelt the Champagne on her breath, and decided it was nothing and that she might be tipsy.

"Just me and the guys," he said. "I'm glad to be home though. Sorry I'm so late." He kissed her on the cheek, and they went inside.

On the dining table sat burning candles in a holder, and dinner places set for two. An open bottle of champagne protruded from an ice bucket.

"What's all of this? A celebration? Did I miss an anniversary?"

"No. I have some news."

His throat felt dry. "News? What news?"

She set the glasses on the table, drank the remaining Champagne from her own, and poured a refill. "I'm pregnant."

Vince felt his stomach drop. "What? But-" He had to sit down. The muscles in his legs went limp. He lurched to the chair and fell into it. "How long?"

"Seven weeks."

Seven weeks, he thought, turning his mind back as he ran both hands through his curly hair. Their sex life was extinct. That was half the problem. He got a hard on just looking at a woman. When did they last do it? He couldn't

remember. "Seven weeks?"

"After Rochelle's and Glen's wedding. The night you were really drunk and hit your head on the door coming inside."

"I don't remember. Weren't you on the pill?"

"It's not one hundred percent Vince. You know that." She went to the couch with both glasses, and sat beside him. "Please," she said, handing him one.

Vince took the glass and sipped, lost in thought. How had this happened? They had agreed to wait until their early thirties to have children. He still had four years. *Not any more, buck.* "When did you find out?"

"Today. But I've suspected for weeks. I had an appointment with Dr. McDonald. He did a test."

Vince sipped at the wine, running possibilities through his mind. He wasn't ready for a family. A baby probably meant more time at home.

Then a thought occurred to him so suddenly that he fumbled the glass. He swallowed the last half down, and said, "What about an abortion?"

Daniella bit her bottom lip. "I'll pretend you didn't say that."

Vince looked away. Her expression had changed. It wasn't often she got angry, but when she did, he knew to shut up. Maybe it had been the wrong thing to say. He needed to think. "Look honey, can we talk about this in the morning? I can barely keep my eyes open."

She nodded. "I think that would be better."

Vince stood, kissed her on the forehead, then tilted her chin, and smiled. Her mouth curled at the edges. He thought maybe he should kiss her but she might smell the woman. He let her head drop. "Goodnight," he said, wondering how he was going to make this go away.

He walked towards the bedroom with his eyes closed. Two hours of sex had left his muscles fatigued, and he knew the body released a sleep inducing substance after orgasm. He *was* tired, but he also wanted to stall conversation on the pregnancy until he'd given it some thought. He wouldn't have been more

surprised if Daniella had told him she was a serial killer.

A flicker of doubt remained though. He couldn't recall having sex that night, and she was on the pill. It didn't make sense. He'd make her get a second opinion tomorrow, and if that was positive, he'd have to sell the abortion alternative.

Vince undid his tie and belt, then threw them onto the floor. He slipped off his watch, then bent to untie his shoes, and kicked them off, groaning at a cramp in his lower back. He began removing his pants, but spotted the cozy waves of the bed, and the temptation to lie down was too great.

He fell into the soft covers and smiled. From the kitchen came the faint clattering of Daniella putting away tableware. A weak inner voice told him to get out there and help, but he doubted he'd make it off the bed if the room was on fire.

Something pressed against his thigh. He reached down and felt for it. His cigarettes and lighter. An almost empty lighter, he reminded himself, noting to get a new one tomorrow. He managed to get the cigarettes out, but the lighter found a hidden corner. After a second, he rolled over; deciding it wasn't worth the effort. A minute later, he was asleep.

Daniella checked the clock again. Ten minutes since Vince had ratified her plan. The sleeping pills would be working. She crept to the bedroom door, and peered in. He lay sprawled on the bed, still wearing his suit pants. She went back into the kitchen and threw down another glass of wine.

The pregnancy had been a lie. She had concocted the story for two reasons. Firstly, to gauge Vince's reaction as a final confirmation of his punishment, although, if he had done handstands and preached his eternal faith, it wouldn't have changed her mind. Secondly, she needed an excuse to feed him the pills. Anything else might have appeared suspicious.

She had suppressed tears several times, focusing on her anger. Smelling the other woman on him and imagining them together broke her heart. It had never been so real before. What had she done to deserve it? She had loved him completely, doing everything to make him happy. Had she pushed him away with her sexual aversion? Had she hidden her femininity too much? Sure, there was room for more sex, but if he had showed more interest, her libido would have returned.

Perhaps she should try again.

No, another inner voice commanded. He'd had every opportunity. She spent enough time blaming herself. She wasn't at fault. It was Vince, and she had more evidence of a moral crime than would be needed to convict a person in a court of law.

Tonight had been the final piece. Through a friend, she had contacted a private investigation agency, and organized the services of a female prostitute. Now he would learn the measure of her vengeance.

From the kitchen drawer, she removed a pocket-sized tape recorder, and activated it, pressing the tiny speaker to her ear. With a buzzing tone came a conversation she'd had with the prostitute earlier that night. The woman's voice

was low, professional, a hint of Italian. She gave details of her investigation, first the pick-up at the bar, then the confessions, and finally the sex in a nearby hotel room. Then she played pieces of a conversation between her and Vince, confirming each of the allegations, along with his confessions of other adulteries for most of their marriage. *Arrogant bastard*, she thought, putting the recorder into her pocket.

From the laundry hamper, she took a pair of old jeans and a sweater, slipping them on over the lace gown as her pulse began to gallop. She crept downstairs into the garage, and went to the back of the station wagon, dropping the tailgate to reveal a new shovel and a long, rectangle object covered by a faded purple sheet. Using the garage door to access the driveway would be like inviting the neighbors to watch, so she took the shovel and hurried upstairs. Then she slipped through a side doorway and rushed back to the site with a sickening block in her stomach.

For a long moment, she stood enfolded in darkness, caught in selecting the right location to begin. She decided on the darkest spot, then attacked the centre of the driveway as though digging a hole that would save her life, heaping the pliable soil alongside in a neat pile. She worked to a plan, taking thirty minutes to carve her outline, feeling for the width and length using the tool as a measure. The occasional twin yellow eyes of a car passed, causing her to squat behind the pile until the darkness had camouflaged her again. Once she expected the beams reveal her, the whirring noise of the engine slowing as the bottom of the driveway glowed golden. It dropped a gear though, and hummed past, leaving curled into a ball as she swallowed her fear.

Her fingers and hands cramped, but she persisted, goading herself with images of Vince and his sexual circus. After an hour and a quarter, she stepped back to mop the sweat on her brow, satisfied with the depth.

She crept back along the sideway, and slipped inside, checking on Vince again before throwing down two shots of whiskey to fortify her courage. Then she went downstairs to the wagon, and removed the faded purple sheet. A long pine casket filled three quarters of the wagon's breadth, hiding in the shadows like the monster it would hold.

To determine the plausibility of getting it to the front yard, she had tried carrying it from the funeral parlor to her car without assistance. She had failed at first, until working out that carrying it by the gold handle on the end ensured success.

With her back straining, she lowered it onto the floor, then dragged it in intervals across the concrete, grimacing at the screeching sound. She hauled it backwards up the carpeted stairs, stopping three times to renew her strength. She went through the house, grating it against the tiles, then along the sideway with several hand-jarring thumps and onto the front lawn. A minute later, she pressed the casket down with her foot, squeezing it into the hole as dirt tumbled onto the floor.

Too perfect. Time to get Vince.

She might have run two miles, her heart thumped so fast. Vince had left the bedroom light on, which fitted perfectly into their routine. She stood over him for a long moment, watching his chest rise and fall, imagining him sliding between the fleshes of a hundred women. Those thoughts made her scowl, strengthening her impetus.

The bastard was heavy. She stopped twice before reaching the side door, brushing clammy hair from her face, resting her arms, which now felt full of lead. Sweat gathered at her lower back and upper chest, clinging to her T-shirt like plastic wrap, but the idea of failing spurred her on, producing unfathomed strength. She was careful navigating the dark sideway, then over a series of wooden steps, and across dense ground cover. It would do no good killing him yet; he had to learn of his demise first.

They reached the hole as the clock ticked past one o'clock, almost two hours since she'd fed him the stimulus. The last of her energy faded, but she was anxious to finish, so she positioned him in the casket before returning to her wagon for one final item.

A small plastic jar with a white lid, which she unscrewed until it hung loose on the top. Daniella placed it at Vince's feet so that the slightest movement might knock it free.

That was it.

She stood over him shaking, her limbs groaning. *Put the lid on, D, put the lid on, and fill in the hole.*

She couldn't though. Doubt gripped her in a freeze.

Her lay the man she had married, the husband who would give her children, the person with whom she was supposed to grow old. She had taken a vow before God to live with him through good times and bad, to struggle through sickness and health.

Shouldn't she at least give him the opportunity to change?

His pale upper body looked radiant beside the inky backdrop. She saw a mark on his chest, then another, until she counted four dark cuts. *Fingernails. How many times?* It came to her then, the number of enquires she'd made about scratches on his arms and shoulders and back, and she gasped, the numbers tallying in her mind like the temperature on a hot summer day. Was that the vow they had taken before God? Had Vince obeyed his promise? This was no longer the man she had married all those years ago.

She pressed her eyes shut, summoning courage from the place where women held it secret from men. She pushed the lid onto the casket, and fastened it, concentrating on the latches to avoid mutinous thoughts of what lived beneath. She took the shovel and mined a plate of soil, pitching it over the hole, then two more, until it disguised the wooden top. The pile shrunk, and the ground above the casket swelled into a long, obvious bulge. She patted it down with the flat of the shovel until the soil blended like sugar into tea.

For a long time, she stood looking at her work. Tears threatened, but she laughed them off by contemplating the lunacy of her emotions. Then she went inside to burn his clothes.

Darkness greeted Vince when he woke, pushing aside the sweet memory of his dream, giving way to a thumping headache across the rear of his head. The dream had involved Stephanie, and their exploits in the hotel room. He would call her tomorrow and set up another meeting.

He shut his eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but after a minute, he realized it wouldn't work. He looked for the clock, but found only darkness.

He blinked twice, and then felt it. *Something wasn't right.*

Hi listened, and realized the silence. The room was empty of sounds.

He tried sitting up, but couldn't move. From the neck down, there was no feeling, as though he were simply a head, with a brain and thoughts. It took him a moment of struggle to confirm it.

What had happened? What if he'd had a stroke in the night?

He lay still for a moment, breathing heavy, lips trembling, eyes combing the darkness.

He tried again and found he could move, just a little bit, his right arm.

With intense concentration, he tried lifting it, beginning with his shoulder, where the feeling was strongest, willing the sensation into his hand and fingers. All he achieved was a tremble in his elbow, although that was something. He remembered falling asleep with his pants on, leaving a lighter in his pocket. He needed that.

Breaking the silence, a faint voice called out. He froze, pushing his eyes wide open, his body like a statue. Did he hear right? Was it a voice? There was silence, then he heard it again, mingled with a growing rumble that reminded him of machinery.

"Hey!" He screamed. "Hey, Somebody! Here!" The sound was dead, flat, lifeless. He felt tears, and shook his head to stop them. "Easy does it, man, easy

does it now." He tried breathing slow and deep, and it worked, allowing him to focus.

He felt a tingle of sensation in the big toe of his right foot. *It's coming good. The paralysis is lifting.* For a second, he thought he might be okay, but then he felt the prickle of something crawling over the toe.

"Jesus!" He waited for the feeling to repeat, hoping he was imagining it.

He heard the voice again, closer now, and he listened, ignoring what might be happening down below.

Then it was above him.

"Hey," he screamed, "Help me! I'm here! Help me!" The ground rumbled and he realized something was majorly wrong. *I'm not in bed.*

He lay gasping, a wild heartbeat in his ears. There were tiny pinpricks throughout his lower body, the feeling returning in parts of his legs and feet, and he could move the fingers of his right hand like blades of grass in the barest summer breeze.

The lighter in his pocket.

He urged his hand back towards his waist and finally it obeyed. He felt for the fabric of his suit pants, dragging his fingers along the edge of his leg, noticing a strange substance brush his skin.

Tiny hairs touched the back of his hand.

He screamed, twitching, seeking to relieve the dreadful sensation. He pawed for the pocket, sliding along the wool, then his hand slipped inside, and he wriggled his fingers in search of the cold metal, his face knotted, lips trembling.

His fingertips found the lighter, clutching it as though it was his ticket to survival, an end to all the anguish. He yanked it free, but fumbled, losing it with poor senses.

The grumble that made him think of heavy machinery was louder now, and he shook. His hand shuffled for the lighter again, fighting the mysterious substance, and then it came to him as he felt it dig beneath his fingernails.

Dirt.

At that instant, a thought of such horror formed in his mind that he choked. His fingers touched a soft ball of velvet, and what felt like a thousand tiny legs. He shrieked again, snatching his hand away.

The lighter. It would save him.

He tried again, against the picture in his mind of something crawling near his hand, feeling the hair on his body prickle, groping for his life.

Then he had it; that smooth rectangle of cold metal he'd never dreamed might be of such importance.

This time he was careful, opening the catch with his thumb and clutching it between white-knuckled fingers.

Raising it, he ran his thumb over the wheel, once, twice, three times, with only a tiny burst of spark.

The fourth evolved into an orange flame, illuminating everything around him, and what he saw made the skin of his testicles tingle.

He screamed repeatedly, until the air expired, until all that came out was a breathless squeal. The flame quivered in his hand, and then it was darting about as he sought to protect himself.

He lay in a rectangular wooden box, perhaps a coffin; the walls six inches from his body on all sides. He stared at the creatures climbing the walls at the end of the coffin with a frozen expression.

To the left of his feet lay a glass jar of tiny black spiders. A lid had spilled onto the floor, and the spiders had escaped, running up and down the walls and over the roof, the white dots on their backs barely perceptible on those approaching the flame. *Whitetails.* He knew their venom caused necrosis. They crawled over each foot, searching for a soft place to dig their fangs.

He tried to move, shadows from the disappearing flame dancing over the spiders as they climbed towards him from every direction. The lighter trembled and the flame wheezed again, as though a harsh wind struck it, and then burned its final bead of gas, giving way to darkness as several crawled up his neck and

over his chin, and in that final moment, he wondered how she knew.

Standing on the porch in the pale grey light of pre-dawn, Daniella held a cup of steaming coffee, watching the men make final preparations to the driveway. A large concrete truck backed across the lawn, almost colliding with the rock fence that obscured their front yard from view. She wondered how the workman heard each other over the blare of the truck.

Her wristwatch read five minutes past seven, and by now, she expected he might be awake and screaming. She wondered if he would have enough feeling yet to kick over the jar of spiders, or perhaps the vibration of the truck had done it for her.

A workman yelled to the driver, and fresh grey concrete poured from the drum like a giant cake mix, spreading across the dirt foundations in a lava-like torrent. Only when the barrel was empty and the slab of concrete setting did she relax, the tenseness in her shoulders dissipating, her mouth taut in suppression of a smile. Her eyes narrowed to a point in the center of the driveway and she thought, *you stupid, stupid man.*

She closed her eyes, imagining his terror as the sleeping tablets and muscle relaxant wore off. If only she had seen his face. That may have been worth the heartache.

The End

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