

Choice and No Choice

Every day, I see you. There is a painful ambivalence to this, because, although the sight of you once made my heart stutter and my breath rasp, the moment now brings a queasy guilt and a surge of hot shame.

Time was, it was easy. Out of nowhere, our paths crossed, recrossed and quickly tangled into a tight knot. There was no pressure to like each other, or even to work out whether one day, we might. All that mattered was that we were two professionals with complex and complementary skills, an unusual pairing, but the only that would get the job done.

Being so highly valued, there was no question of status or power differentials between us. We were truly equal, but your last minute triumph in the boardroom pipped me at the post and gave you some nominal authority over me. And there it was, an unholy confluence of mutual admiration, professional dedication, long hours, and difficult work that no-one else really understood. Intelligence, shared interests, an intimate rollercoaster of disappointment and success. Private celebrations, just pizza and a beer, but always late in the evening, only ever the two of us.

Honestly, we had no choice but to fall in love.

So we did, and our affair was intense and ferocious, spiced as it was with secrecy and concealment. My husband, your wife, our colleagues? Nice enough people, but what could they possibly know, or understand, about what went on between us? We were unique and special, a power couple creating never-before-seen breakthroughs, saving the world.

Until the inevitable cracks appeared. I hardly even know what changed, but one day, your laugh grated on me, your misunderstanding of my main point was obtuse, you corrected me twice in front of a junior. Our celebrations became less frequent, more easily postponed, more quickly over.

At the same time, something uncomfortable crept into my marriage. Without knowing what he was sensing, my husband sensed something had changed. He became clingy, possessive, his casual curiosity about my work evolving into a prying sort of interference. The more I batted him back, the worse it became, until I had to admit to myself that although nothing had been said or revealed, my feelings for you had leaked into my real life in a way that could only end in disaster for all of us.

So I broke it off. You, once so authoritative and so powerful, became petty, hostile and almost threatening, your own marriage either wilfully blind or not worth saving. Ultimately, my days became so miserable that I left the job, hoping that some better part of you would accept it was over between us and agree to let me go.

Things improved for a while. I worked on my marriage and hauled it back to something tolerable. I took a dull, safe job and thought about having a baby. But the contamination I had introduced was difficult to eradicate, a stain that had seeped deep into the fabric of my marriage, the fault entirely mine.

Some while later I heard you were fired for some sexual transgression which also cost you your marriage, a painful insight that what we did was not triggered by my charms, but was a pattern of

unpleasant behaviour which more than one woman, almost certainly my inferior (but even so, more discerning), had rejected.

Soon after, you began appearing on my driveway, where I shopped, where I met friends. Sometimes you approached and we talked in a brief, awkward way before I could escape. More often, you loitered at a distance, watching. Then the calls began, late at night, early in the morning. Never text messages, always calls, always anonymous, always silent.

My life became a series of heart-stopping horrors, plagued by a stalker I could not tackle without bringing down my own house. Once, I called you with a desperate question: **Why do you come here, when you know I've got troubles enough? Why do you call me, when you know I can't answer the phone?**

And you only shrugged down the line and said, I want to, so why not? What are you going to do about it? Questions to which I, losing my grip on to my marriage, my job, all that was normal and precious, none of which I truly deserved, had no answer.

Lyric taken from *The Weakness in Me* (1981) by Joan Armatrading