

The Other Woman

By Helen J. Dixon

Karen Hobbs sits in front of her bedroom mirror, peering at her reflection. She isn't merely looking outwardly, though, but inside as well. Being the other woman is the falsest mask I wear, she thinks. I don't feel like the second woman in my lover's life, but the best. When we're together, there are no others in the time-space continuum. He's all to me, my very being. How did I know that this relationship would blossom as it did? When we connected, it was as two people, who shared a common loneliness, a common desire for intense experiences of all sorts. We were attached emotionally, as well as physically. I am the sheath to his sword—we fit well together. When I'm held in his arms, I feel safe; as certain of his love for me as I am about my love for him. Spiritually we connect on a plane closer to Heaven than any union consecrated by man. My love is true, bounded only by the time we steal to express it.

She shifts in her seat, averting her gaze from the glass. This was the time to be honest with herself, to remove the mask. All that flowery stuff sounds wonderful, but the reality is much more prosaic. She is a woman who is standing by a man who doesn't belong to her; a woman who has a respect and faithfulness to an unfaithful man. While she believes he feels a special sort of love for her, Karen is completely aware of the fact he will never be hers. All his wonderful concern ends when they're not together. When he's with his wife, she's sure she is the farthest thing from his mind. At night, when she tosses and turns, longing for his voice, his touch, she wonders if he is doing the same, or is he rather making love to his wife as is expected. Karen gets up from the vanity, walks to her bed talking aloud to herself, as if saying her thoughts will make them disappear. "There are time when I feel the need simply to share an unexpectedly pleasant or unpleasant moment or thought with the man who fills my life. I reach for the phone to call him, sometimes even going so far as to dial the numbers, only to realize I have no such rights to him. Then the anger increases and the ire is not directed at him, but to me. I have then such a sense of self-loathing because I am wasting love's opportunities, hoping daily for permanence only to discover, being a mistress allows no such thing. It's like being a temp employee—you will do a wonderful job, but you realize that it's not a permanent assignment, that the boss is eventually going to toss you out when the employee returns from whatever leave of absence they've taken."

She sits in the center of the bed. The self-talk did not have the desired effect, because another voice starts a further discourse in her head.

Yet you stay, the voice says. You stay because though you know the lover is wrong, you so believe the love is right. While you hate being at the relentless disposal of your married lover's demands, you love the feeling he gives you when he is with you, however infrequent, however brief. In those moments, you are the only people in the world who understands the other. He knows your every thought and desire at that instant, and you, of course, know his, having spent all your waking hours wondering about them; taking the pain-staking time to discover what he

needs and finding new and exciting ways to deliver them. Not only sexually, but also in those mundane areas where you share things far away from the bedroom. His love of sports, your love of nature. His need to be wanted and desired, your reciprocal need to be protected and admired. The mutual laughter and enjoyment fill the space you encompass and for the time being, you are content.

Karen, aware that all this is true, falls against the mattress. She puts her hands over her ears, trying to stop the taunting of her inner voice. However, it is relentless and continues its observations.

The real world always intrudes. He'll receive a call on his cell and as hard as you try not to let it, it spoils the moment. You attempt to conceal your irritation that you can't even have an uninterrupted moment in your fantasy world. He'll return to you, but it's spoiled. Even in your own place, you can't pretend your his one and only. You feel cheapened, disgraced and then you don't even want him to touch you anymore. But outwardly, you show no signs of my distress. Outwardly, you remain the dedicated mistress, the loving lover and sharer of secrets. You kiss him sweetly as he walks out the door saying he'll call you when he can, knowing it may be weeks before you hear from him, even longer before you will meet again. You stand there, kissing your fingertips in farewell, concealing your unhappiness with a fool's smile—the smile all mistresses wear to the public. When the door is closed, you go to your empty bedroom and, wrapping yourself in the towel he's left on the floor, agonizing about remaining in a relationship which is unfulfilling, hating yourself all the more for your lack of backbone. If you had any spine, you would never answer another one of his calls.

And as suddenly as the need to reflect appeared, Karen stops hearing the voice. The mask falls snugly back into place and she drifts off, dreaming of a life with a man who will never be free.

The End

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