

from *Choke Box: A Fem-Noir* (2019): “Composition Axe”

An experiment. I type six simple words:

“Everything my husband writes becomes true.”

My assignment?

Verify this claim. For my children. The Board. Myself.

Even though it may be impossible.

But I will no longer deny, I can no longer deny:

What my husband writes on the page, now takes place near my person.

Wherever he is, Ed doesn’t need to write a word.

Can you hear him?

He’s laughing.

Let me explain:

Not long after my husband began to write his book (from the first, he called it a “memoir”), I noticed an eerie correlation between scenes taking shape in his papers and odd incidents that began to occur in our home—as though Ed’s solitary work at his desk upstairs was directly influencing our downstairs behavior. The effects were subtle at first. The cat went missing. Then my Volvo’s transmission died. Later, the IRS showed up for an audit. Nothing unusual or extraordinary. Each event on its own merits was merely “inconvenient.” Cats stray, after all. Cars die. Is it surprising that I at first believed that the sudden abundance of ill-timed events in our lives was no more uncommon than a hair clot in a bath drain? A temporary obstruction that—with the right tools, a bit of patience—was entirely resolvable? I’ll admit I was slow on the uptake. It took me much too long to see the connection between my husband’s work and our daily troubles, and, by then, as with most things in marriage, it was much too late to stop what was happening from spiraling out of control.

For once I think my mother was right: the most dangerous place a woman can be is in the

so-called “safety” of her home. The statistics don’t prove her wrong.

I’m aware that my “explanation” (the Review Board at Buffalo Psychiatric has pressed me to call it a “confession”) won’t satisfy the committee of six that is responsible for overseeing the small discretionary movements I once controlled myself. They’re a humorless lot—huddled and scoliotic in their mismatched plastic chairs. Yet for all their oily cynicism, they’ve never ignored me, never lied to me. Never even raised their voices during our weekly meetings. True, they’re hard to fathom, to get a rise out of. But at least—at the very *least*—they are reliable. That’s more than I can say of my family. Certainly of Ed.

At night, when the hall lights dim (they never go fully dark here), and my most morbid thoughts surge against the rising chemical swell of my last Dixie-cup dosage, I fear I’ve come to find the Board’s unflagging equilibrium so soothing that I must have changed as irrevocably as they accuse. After all, they don’t nag or bicker. They don’t lash out. They don’t even roll their eyes at my (admittedly) snide assessments of their limitations: the ill-fitting suits, the mottled, over-fluoresced skin, the predictable short-sightedness in vision as much as intellect. To them, I’m just one case among so many others, and they’ve heard enough lies and exhortations—from small fibs to outright rants—to make them stony and steadfast, as if rigor mortis were a condition they’ve become as accustomed to sporting as the tweed coats with patched elbows they all like to wear. Under any other circumstances, I might have respected their dour commitment. (I have a helpless and embarrassing admiration for authority figures.) But when someone like me comes along—educated, devoted, and, truly, still somewhat naïve after all that has happened—it’s evident they’re at a loss. They’ve already decided that *my* behavior is an act.

My story? A desperate woman’s fabrication.

“You’ve read the statistics on domestic violence?” anonymous Board Member 4 asks, for instance, referring to the pamphlet he’d given me at our last “progress” hearing. When I nod but then go on to explain (once again, I might add) that I did not kill my husband of ten years—that Ed simply disappeared—he sighs a great breathy chortle that shakes phlegm from his jowls. His meaning is clear: I remain a source of great disappointment to him. If only I’d admit what I’ve done, he’d finally be happy: they’d *all* be happy.

What he really means is that they all could go home.

Board Member 6 chimes in. His hair is short, his glasses large. He wears woolen trousers even in the unbearable summer heat.

“Do you miss your husband?” Beneath his question is a subtext with which I’ve become all

too familiar.

“Of course,” I retort. “We were a happy family. At least,” I said, “until Ed started writing that book.”

“And then?”

“And then,” I say, “it was as if Ed had left us.”

“You mean,” he says, his eyes on my file “that he *died*.” With greater emphasis now: “That you *killed* him.”

He levies this insult without once looking up from his notes.

“I mean,” I say more firmly, “that he *disappeared*.”

I get flustered. Anyone but a murderer would in the face of such blunt accusations.

Fortunately, my counselor steps in on my behalf.

“As the Board well knows,” she says politely in her light, carefully childlike voice, “Edward Tamlin hasn’t yet been located.”

“True enough,” #4 jumps back in, his fleshy nose quivering over my file. “But that’s precisely why we’re here.”

With a unified nod, they break for lunch, naturally without consulting me. They will decide my fate in the town nearby over seared mahi mahi and pinot noir or a ribeye steak and a nice rioja. But I already know what their verdict will be. I can see it in my counselor Celeste’s face: Celeste—such a sweet girl—who has, from the first, fought for me harder than anyone else. Even my own family.

It was at her request that I began to write what she calls my “counter-memoir.” I resisted at first. I’d had enough of authors and books, the queer energy that Ed’s work had led to. But with Celeste’s encouragement—not to mention the pen and paper she regularly smuggled into my room during her consultations—I relented. Ed, after all, was no longer around to correct his book about our marriage and his life before we met. And while the memoir he wrote—incomplete at the time of his disappearance—will never see the light of day as long as I refuse to sign the release forms Celeste delivered to me, I also learned long ago that lawyers have a nasty habit of worming their way through even the tiniest loopholes. They’d never allow an alleged murderess like me to stand in the way of their share of a profit. So here I am: composing myself. Steeling myself against a book that has changed the shape of my family: a memoir that took Ed away, sent my children down state. A book that managed to get me locked up without cause. (“Civil commitment,” Celeste corrects in the margins.) All that before it’s even in print.

At the time of this writing, my motives aren't yet wholly clear to myself. Naturally, I'd like my side of this story to be heard. I'll even admit I crave recognition for my efforts on behalf of my children, my brother. Even my husband. But I've learned enough in the past year to know that airing one's dirty laundry on a line doesn't make it any cleaner: it just elevates its altitude. And, really, what good is that?

What I truly desire is what all mothers desire: for my children to understand me. For my children to one day realize the full extent of what occurred in our home. How I was led astray by love. Done in by betrayal. And—finally—ruined by the peculiar “factors” (what else can I call them?) that altered my admittedly incomplete understanding of natural laws. Not to mention, my relations with Ed.

Perhaps—if I'm lucky, if I get this story straight—my memory of those missing six seconds that brought me here will return. I'll finally know what went down at our farmhouse. And maybe? What the future holds for me too.

Of course the cynic in me whispers something much different. More dire. A warning that even now is hard to write down, as I just now have, since it once was so easy for me to have faith—to *believe*—in the simple life I was living:

Women, don't trust the men in your lives.

And trust the women even less.