

Comforting Respect

Bill was spending too much time working out at the gym, Linda thought to herself. What could he possibly be doing over there?

She just knew that he was up to no good. Her days at her job were growing shorter and shorter, yet Bill was not around. When he returned from the club, it was time for the children to come home. That was when he disappeared into his attic, to run the computer in his search for employment. He was distancing himself from her ever more as the days passed, and she did not see why.

He seemed different somehow. He was more energetic than before. Perhaps he was getting over the whole divorce nightmare and zeroing in on a job. Still, he was just different. Not only was he avoiding her, he was doing it without hostility. What little emotion he showed before now seemed to have evaporated. It was as if the walls she put up were just plain ignored, instead of retaliated against.

One morning she stayed home, just to see when he left the house.

“Bill, I want to go to lunch!” she heatedly demanded as he descended from the chilly attic. “What are you doing up there?”

Friday’s restaurant had many seats available, for Bill and Linda arrived there well before the youthful lunch crowds. They chose a booth in the middle of the establishment, across from the empty bar.

For a few moments, they said little to each other, surveying the menu. Bill looked at his wife and suggested, in a compromising tone, “How about fajitas?”

Linda blew some smoke from her lips and took a long drag off her cigarette. “I might want the Daniel’s chicken,” she responded unemotionally.

Bill set down his menu, and now the two were eye to eye.

“So what have you been doing at that club?” she questioned quietly, not releasing him from her incessant gaze.

“You know, the steak looks good today,” Bill responded evasively, for she had asked him this question, and he had told her that he was exercising, way too many times before.

Linda flipped some ashes from her cigarette into a golden glass ashtray and then looked back up at her shifty spouse. “You’re screwing around on me, aren’t you?” she accused, blinking in her critical judgment.

Bill’s face flushed in immediate anger, not appreciating his wife’s attempt to trap him into a fight.

“Well if I was, so what?” He retaliated with directed malice in his voice, disrupting their private rendezvous. “Seems to me last Christmas you threw my ass out into the street. Who would blame me if I was?”

Bill and Jamie had been talking quite a bit at the club. It was nothing that Bill felt he needed to hide; the discussions remained casual.

Days after their brief encounter on the cycle, Bill caught her as she finished a run on one of the gym’s grueling treadmills.

“So you are only a year younger than me?” she established.

“Because of my age, I usually go for the low-impact equipment; my bones don’t like the pounding.” Bill told her.

“I know what you mean!” Jamie replied, her warm smile turning serious. “Lately my back has just been killing me! I’m going to see a doctor about it.”

Bill looked over her thin, tight figure, and then glanced quickly at the treadmill she had been running upon, its display lights now going dim. He recalled something an aerobics trainer once told him, many years ago in a previous period of attempted weight loss.

“You should change to the bicycle machines, that way your feet don’t have to hammer on anything like when you are on this treadmill,” Bill explained. “If we were in our twenties, it might be different. But to us, running on these things is just so difficult on the body; every time I do that, my knees ache for days!”

She fell into an attentive stare, her dark eyes open boldly, focused more on Bill than what he was saying.

“If you stay on the machines where your feet stay planted, it’s much better on the bones.” Bill continued, feeling the heat from her gaze, yet remaining cool.

“That’s smart,” Jamie acknowledged, breaking from her glare, wondering how she could alter their discussions to become more personal, although the growing pain in her back distracted her efforts.

Two days later, he found her on a bicycle machine, exercising next to a girlfriend on the adjacent station, who Bill had not yet seen with Jamie.

“The doctor told me not to use the treadmill,” Jamie declared. “It’s just like you said!” She smiled gleefully, looking at Bill, and his confidence started to bloom.

“So I hear your boy might be going downstate?” she continued, “That’s what my son tells me.”

“It looks promising,” Bill acknowledged. “But he’s got to get the grades up first, and stop with his detentions!”

Jamie hesitated, glancing once at her friend, who seemed pre-occupied with the controls on her station.

“If he makes it, maybe I can come with you.” Jamie suggested after her pause. “Although my son has some knee issues, it might be good for him to see it.”

Bill thought about it a moment, wondering if he could manipulate the hotel room arrangements to his favor, if this became the case.

“I hope you can make it,” he declared.

Bill eventually left the two girls to their workouts.

“He seems shy,” Jamie’s sister, Janet, voiced her observation from her cycle station. She was well aware that Jamie preferred her men a bit more aggressive, and appreciated them chasing her.

“It’s a nice change of pace,” Jamie defended.

Janet shook back her long, golden-red, straightened hair.

She seemed worried. “So when are you going to tell him about your husband?” she asked.

Jamie frowned, and then slowly eased into a calculating grin.

“I’m sure Bill will hear about it sooner or later,” Jamie assumed. “It serves that husband of mine right though, don’t you think?”

Janet just shook her head. She knew that it might be trouble if her own husband saw what Jamie was doing, for they had all known each other a long time, and he would talk.