

The Lady Who Wanted Her Husband to Die
Y York

"I wanted to die, or he should die. Somebody should die and put an end to this sorry excuse for a marriage. I guess I wasn't thinking very clearly, but dying seemed easier and more desirable than divorce and division of property which seemed insurmountable; plus, in divorce you still have to deal with relatives and in-laws, but if you die you don't, or if he dies, relatives and in-laws are nice to me. I think I am even thinking of death, when the police call from the hospital and tell me about the accident, that he's in critical condition. Unconscious.

If he dies I'm going to feel so bad. Don't you dare die.

He doesn't. I rehearse my speech about how we should take the opportunity of his not dying to split up. He's looking out of the window when I walk into the room; I sit on his bed. We stare at each other for a moment and then he says, who are you?

The doctor walks me out of the room to explain this particular type of amnesia - Language and a general personality are intact. Specific knowledge and skills are gone; personal history is gone and I can take him home day in two days.

While I'm in the hall, someone tells him that I'm his wife. He looks horrified.

He's a stranger in our house. He's visibly relieved when I take him to the guest room, tell him I'm down the hall.

He's careful with his questions. He asks about items of clothing, our separate offices, all those books in office, the photo albums "That's your older brother; that's your sister. You're the youngest. That's your mother. She died when you were fourteen." He receives the 25-year-old news like a fresh blow. This is not going to be a picnic.

He naps a lot. I think it's to avoid me.

He doesn't ask, and I don't offer the fundamentals of our crumbling marriage.

Our old routine is shot; the new routine has about it an unprecedented courteousness. I stop working, come out of my office to fix him meals, breakfast and lunch even; dinners using recipes from the 60-Minute Gourmet instead of sandwiches. He brings me steaming coffee to my desk, just like I like it. Still, we keep a healthy distance. I stay in my office, and he spends the day in his rereading those books.

I awake to some sound. He's sitting in the living room, face in hands, trying to muffle sobs. I hold him as he shakes, mumble something sympathetic, "hey, hey, it's okay." He calms down in spite of my bedside manner, his breathing evens, then deepens, and inevitably comfort turns to passion. Passion puts out sadness and fear. This feels like infidelity with a familiar stranger who's got all the right moves. It's fun. We're still so courteous.

He moves into our bedroom.

In the ensuing months, every moment is a new discovery. For both of us. For me, it's like starting from scratch with the advantage of knowing how dreadfully things can go awry.

He may never get his memory back, and that's fine because now this is our memory and this is better.

The company he was freelancing for sends a check. He isn't owed any money. I think it's a mistake. I look at the check stub, it's an hourly amount for work completed this month. I guess he hasn't been in there rereading books ... It's possible, I suppose, that a portion of his memory returned, just enough to enable him to understand his job, but not enough to remember anything about our marriage. It is also highly unlikely.

I'm furious and embarrassed. Every time I looked at him thinking, boy if you only knew, he did. He should have told me he got his memory back. Of course, then I'd still be thinking of death instead of planning candle light dinners.

I reseal the check in its envelope. Then I check the refrigerator, make sure I've got everything I need for 60-minute coq au van."