

The Other Man

My sister's husband likes to walk shirtless around the house. He has this habit ever since he married Marcia. It's not often that I show up in their home. My nephew is a baby like my son, only eight months, and began to crawl a month ago.

"How is business, Silvio?" He asks me, mixing oats, banana and yogurt in a yellow pot, which looks like the baby's.

"It is good. But it's a bit difficult to work with my father. He makes a lot of demands and wants perfection. Sometimes I wish I could give up everything," I admit.

My wife went out with my sister for a stroll and they took the babies with the nannies. It's the Saturday date. Usually they go around the block, stop at every shopping window, flowerbed and playground until the children get tired and need to rest. Then they choose a coffee shop and use the time to have a coffee and a muffin while the helpers distract the children with tiny pieces of chocolate cake. I don't know what they talk about. My wife is a bit jealous of my sister, even though she doesn't admit it. I think they fantasize about the ideal husband.

"Marcia tells me you were promoted," Sergio continues, doing a few push-ups before starting to eat. He has a defined belly and muscles in his legs.

"That's true. It happens when you work with your own father," I say, lowering the stakes.

"I see," he says, bending over.

"Patricia complained I don't take care of myself. Now, with the baby, it is even harder. What about you? Are you still working at the gym?" I ask, a bit dizzy just from looking at the exercises being performed in front of me.

Sergio is only twenty-five but has been working at the gym in the Community Center in the last five. He started there the same year he began to study physiotherapy.

"Thank God. I love the energy of the exercises. I want to have another son just to take him with me to work. It is fast-paced environment, but it's worth it. You should come by," Sergio says, smiling an open smile and making me feel a bit embarrassed.

I don't feel at ease close to other men, especially the attractive ones. I know Sergio must capture a lot of gazes, from both sexes. I'm more invisible, I have white arms, and shirt marks on my skin.

“I don’t know if I can,” I say, shyly.

“In the beginning it’s like so. My clients are ashamed of their own bodies, and consider themselves ugly. But men need courage. Women do it, and exercise like crazy. You should see your wife. She tries hard,” he affirms, wiping the sweat with a face cloth.

“Really?” I say, looking for something to read and distract me from the presence of the body of another men. Soon he goes away into the apartment and says he will have a shower.

The bowl with the oats stays empty in the living room, along with many other vitamin bottles he had fuelled on minutes ago. The apartment looks like an exercise room, with equipment left in between children’s toys.

I’m not used to participating in the intimacy of a man. Raised by women, my father only knew how to be gentle when he was yelling. The kind man never existed, and that’s why I feel a bit feminine, different from other men, more athletic, virile.

“What are you reading?” Sergio asks me, already cleaned, with a jogger’s t-shirt and a pullover of the same color.

“Nonsense,” I say, placing the tome of pages against the wall. “I don’t like sweating,” I add, feeling oppressed in his presence. “Do you like reading?”

But Sergio is already at the kitchen, now preparing a green juice, which seems to be the afternoon snack. He offers me some. “I need to study. I have a test Monday at the university,” he says, smiling.

“I just came to accompany Patricia. I am trying to spend more time with her, despite the baby. You know how it is,” I say, emphasizing the phrase.

But there is no answer. There is nothing that unites us, not even the chance in our lives. There is nothing else to do in these moments. It’s when I recall his father, who had died when he was an adolescent.

“I’m sorry to ask you this, but don’t you miss your father?” I ask, interrupting Sergio from his studies, a thick book with many pictures.

The life of the other man is an incognito. The envy of the other’s body acts as a cement to my vitality. It suffocates.

“Why, do you miss yours?” He asks, without answering.

“I feel a bit tired when I’m near my dad,” I confess.

“Yes. My father died young. I don’t know very well what I missed when I was small. Now that I am a father, I see how important it is to be close to the child. Give warmth, a sense of direction. Who knows, man, I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about these things. I was very sad when he died. But it’s been a long time,” he explains.

Silence lets the emptiness occupy the space. I turn the television on, in a low volume. Perhaps I should have waited my wife at home. But now it is late. When she arrives in the apartment, followed by my sister and smiling, I feel a great relief. My marriage, for many reasons, is my protection against other men.

When I say goodbye to my brother-in-law with a handshake, I feel like hugging him. Perhaps it is his vitality, or the strength to overcome his father’s death, what impressed me so much. I don’t know why his presence sharpens my curiosity. I walk into the elevator and I hear the crying of my son. I look for similarities.

“Do you think he looks like me?” I ask Patricia, who is happy after meeting with her friend.

“Sure dear. He’s just like you,” she says, caressing his head slowly.

The strangest thing is that I don’t know what that means.