

The Other Woman

(A woman, Erica, sits in a chair. She is agitated, chewing a cuticle, tapping her foot, etc.)

ERICA

I don't blame you for not talking to me. How could you?

Silence. Like those places where they punish people for years by not talking to them. Where is that? Solzhenhytsin, maybe. *Papillon*? I don't remember, but it seems like the perfect punishment, it really does.

I...just want you to know—I didn't do it out of lust. I didn't do it because I thought he was more attractive than you. He wasn't, I don't think. I didn't want a better lover, either. I...like what we have...there, in that area. I mean, of course, it's natural that maybe, with familiarity, we might feel a little...disconnected sometimes, but...

(Reacting to a look from him.)

No! No, I don't really mean to be saying that. That's not what this is about. It's not about you, in any way. It's about me, and my panic. Panic. That's all this is, really.

(Stifles a sob.)

So stupid, really. I...heard my voice on the answering machine. Yesterday. I wasn't sure when you were getting back, so I called, left a message. I never do that. Do you realize that? In eight years of marriage that's the first time I've *ever* left a message on our home phone. I'll leave it on your cell if I have to, or text-message—God bless technology—but never... Have you ever noticed that?

(She waits for a response.)

No. Not yet. Don't speak to me yet. Of course not yet. Silence. What *is* that? I keep seeing Steve McQueen, but I'm sure that's not right. But I am curious if you ever noticed that. It's because I hate my voice. On tape, anyway. I hate the way it sounds on tape. Everybody says that, but I... God, do I hate it. When I hear myself speak, as I'm actually speaking, I'm so sure that I sound, what's the word? *Suave*, except, I don't think they let women have suave. Maybe...oh fuck, what does it matter? *Urbane*, maybe. Intelligent. But that voice, that fucking...abomination on the answering machine, it's all phony breathiness. Pretentious. Like some twelve year-old doing a really bad Zsa Zsa Gabor imitation. I...loathe it. And I can't ever believe the person speaking has any kind of remote connection to me. And I want to believe that it's just the technology distorting me, but any time I've asked people if I really sound like that they always say yes, and any time any of my friends has ever asked me if they really sound like their voice on tape, it

always sounds like them to me. So everyone in the world is completely deluded on this subject, and I should take some comfort in that but I can't, because very few of those fucking people actually sound as ridiculous as I do.

So I...pretend. I *pretend* very, very hard, and I never, ever leave a message where I will have to hear it myself. But yesterday, what the hell, it's been years and I was in a good mood and I guess I just threw caution to the winds, and... And I came home, and I thought there might be a message from you, and I kind of forgot about my own, and...

I burst into tears. Isn't that stupid? I sat here at this table with my bottle of Shiraz, still in the liquor store bag—to celebrate your return—and I cried and cried. And then I ran out of the apartment. I don't remember a lot about doing that, but I must have, because how else would I have gotten to Midtown? Isn't that crazy? Just...*propelled* out of my apartment, running like a madwoman, twenty-some blocks downtown, just to get away from my own stupid voice. I came to my senses, then, for a moment, in front of the spring fashion display at Lord and Taylor, and I almost laughed about how ridiculous it all was.

But then I...happened to see my reflection in the window. And...you're not going to believe this, but it happened *again*. (*Half laughing, half crying*.) Do you have a mirror face? You know, the face that you look at in the mirror in the morning, and you actually find...pleasing? You tilt it just right and a shadow falls across your cheekbone, or you smile a certain way, with the right kind of lipstick and the little crease in the corner of your mouth makes you look sly and dangerous. That's the face I convince myself I'm wearing all the time, but then you know there are these times, these terrible times, that I catch sight of myself when I haven't prepared for it and I don't *recognize* myself. My mouth is open a little and my eyes are glassy and it makes me look vacant and stupid, and there's this little double-chin that I swear I never see at home.

And that's what happened yesterday. I caught myself out of the corner of my eye and I knew it was me because it had on my earrings and my jacket, but at the same time I was like "who is this ugly, slack-jawed, pig-necked woman walking next to me?" I think I screamed.

Propelled again, fleeing from my reflection, and I thought I was wandering aimlessly, but my body must have had some kind of plan, and before I knew it I was walking into the doors of the Milford Plaza, of all places.

I wandered around in the lobby for a while, just making a big circle around the potted plants and the old guys reading their papers and the Japanese families testing their cameras, and then the elevator dinged, and my body walked over like it knew it was my elevator, and it waited. And then the elevator opened, and there was this man. And he looked at me.

And his eyes sort of...flashed. And I think he even...gasp'd a little. And I knew he was seeing my mirror face. The one I wanted everyone to see.

I started talking. I don't know about what. Some bullshit. A monologue of some kind. You see, I wanted to see if he...reacted to my voice. If that flash went out of his eyes. It didn't. They flashed harder. *He* thought I had a pretty face. And a pretty voice. And I realized...I still had that fucking bottle in my hand, and I said the only sentence that would come into my mind: "Do you like...Shiraz?"

(Long silence.)

I could learn to live this way, I think. You sitting there, watching me...drag my log around the gulag, or whatever. I could... Oh, Jesus Christ, say something! Sure, I "cheated," I had an "affair." Huh. Isn't it strange how those little, cliché words can't begin to describe the enormity—or the utter insignificance—of what I've done. But what about you? Yes, you.

(She strides over to the answering machine and punches a button.)

ERICA'S VOICE

"Hello. Keith. I got your message, and I'm so glad you're getting in tonight, but you know you never gave me a time, tsk, tsk. But I'm taking it on faith it will be early enough that we can...have some time together, so I'm trying like crazy to clear off this desk and get out of here. And...I don't mind telling you I have a little surprise for you. That's ri-i-ght. Oh, all right, I'll tell you. I stopped at Sixth St. Spirits this morning on the way to the office, and they just happened to have...a 1993 Ponte-Neuf Shiraz. Now, I don't want to hear a word about the price. There are sometimes you just have to...you know. Anyway. *Ciao, mi amore*. Tonight."

(She clicks the machine off.)

ERICA

Who *is* that woman? Who *is* that woman you've been having breakfast with? Who *is* that woman you've been making love to for all these years?

I don't want you to see her anymore. I don't...want you to see her anymore. Is that too much to ask?

(She stares off, desolate, as the lights fade.)