

Compatible

Richard Rein Smith

An abstract graphic design featuring a vibrant green background. Overlaid on this background are several thick, bright blue lines that form a complex, geometric pattern. The lines include horizontal, vertical, and diagonal segments, as well as a curved section on the left side. A prominent feature is a large, upward-pointing triangle formed by the intersection of several lines. The overall composition is clean and modern.

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Richard R. Smith has been writing SF since 1949, "except for the year that I spent climbing up and down hills in Korea." Former office manager for a construction company, and a chess enthusiast, he now writes full time and adds, "My main ambition in life is to write SF for the next forty years!"

compatible

by ... Richard R. Smith

There are many ways—murder included—in which husbands can settle certain problems. This was even more drastic!

GEORGE stood by the fireplace, his features twisted into a grimace. "It's hell, I tell you. A living hell."

I sipped my drink and tried to think of a subtle way to change the subject. I didn't like to hear a person's personal problems and every time I visited George, he invariably complained about Helen. If it had been anyone else, I might have thought it wasn't entirely Helen's fault, but George and I had been roommates in college and I knew him like a brother. He was a person who got along with almost everyone. Intelligent, easy-going and likeable.

He lifted his glass and glared at me as if I were the guilty party. "She's a worry-wart," he continued. "A hypochondriac, a neurotic, an escapist, and a communist." He studied the ceiling thoughtfully. "And sometimes I think she's a little crazy."

I tried to calm him, "Don't worry about it. If things get worse, get a divorce."

"Divorce, ha! She wouldn't give me a divorce if—"

The door opened.

Helen smiled half-heartedly, her pale face quickly resuming its unhappy expression as if it tired her facial muscles when she smiled. "Hello, Ed. Nice to see you again."

"Hello, Helen." I glanced at George and noticed he had closed his eyes as if the sight of his wife was unbearable. His lower lip was white where he gripped it with his teeth and I silently hoped he wouldn't draw blood.

Helen sank into a chair and raised her skirt to reveal her right leg. "Did George tell you about my legs?" she inquired. She stroked the leg affectionately. "Arthritis. George grafted a new one on for me. Feels ten times better."

My face blanched. The idea of replacing body parts from Banks didn't nauseate me. If a man is in an automobile accident and loses an arm, and that arm can be replaced, I think that's marvelous. What sickened me were the people who actually *enjoyed* having a part of their body replaced with a part from a criminal or corpse.

"No." I sat down. My knees were weak. I felt short of breath. "George didn't tell me. I—"

She interrupted with details of the operation. The details and list of her other ailments lasted half an hour, during which George drank steadily and I waited for a lull so I could glance at my watch and say something about being late for an appointment.

I saw George several times during the next few weeks. Never at his house. I didn't visit him on my own initiative because Helen, as I had seen during my last visit, had passed from the stage of being unpleasant and reached the stage of being unbearable. I didn't want to be around her or listen to her, and George must have realized my feelings because he didn't invite me to his house for some time.

But both of us had a habit of stopping at a club on the outskirts of town and we met there often. Each time we met, George complained. Each time, he seemed to drink more and complain more.

I worried about his job. He was a surgeon—one of the best—and a surgeon needs good nerves and steady hands when he performs delicate operations.

I urged him to get a divorce, but he said he didn't want one. "I love Helen," he said one time. "Well, I don't exactly love *Helen*, but I love her body. It's like the old saying about marrying a girl because she's pretty is like picking a rose by looking at the stem. We're all different, you know, and we all have different tastes. When I first saw Helen—Well, she's just right for me. To me, she looks as good as Marilyn Monroe looks to the average man. I like having her around. I'd be lost without her, but at the same time, she's changed so damned much, she makes me sick."

And there it was. He still wanted Helen but she had changed into a personality that he hated. Over a period of years, she had changed into a morbid hypochondriac, an unpleasant woman who enjoyed—more than anything else—such things as having one of her legs replaced and sampling the latest pills and drugs. George said he had tried to get her to see a psychiatrist but she refused. And you can't have a person committed to a mental institution because they have an unpleasant personality!

It seemed as if there was no solution to his problem.

Then, late one evening, I received a phone call from George. "Come over and have a few drinks," he said. "We'll have a party! Helen's changed. You should see her!"

I was interested in his problem, so I went.

Helen greeted me at the door and I had the surprise of my life. At one time, she had been beautiful, but she had faded during the past few years. By staying indoors, she had grown pale, listless. As her personality changed, it had also changed her features, and her eyes had developed a sleepy, lifeless look, and deep lines had formed on her face.

But the Helen who greeted me that night was not like that. Her face had a healthy flush, her eyes sparkled and she seemed vibrant, bubbling ... just like the Helen I had known so long ago.

George and I had a good time that night. He laughed and joked for the first time in months. We drank, talked, played chess, and then drank and talked some more.

Every now and then, Helen would float by, a gorgeous creature, laughing at George's jokes, mixing our drinks, and smiling at George as if he were the most wonderful man in the world.

When I couldn't bear it any longer, I whispered, "What happened?"

George drained his glass and shouted across the room, "Come here, Helen!"

She came.

George said, "Promise not to tell anyone? It's very important."

I couldn't imagine his reason for asking me that, but I said, "I promise."

"Well," George explained, "I can't take all the credit. I'm a fairly good surgeon, but Lucas had the hardest job. We did it together. Do you know Lucas? He's an electrical engineer ... *a genius*. He designed that electronic calculator at—"

"Show him," Helen interrupted. "*Show him!*" She was giggling,

laughing, almost jumping up and down with joy. I thought: *She's her old self again, cheerful, bubbling over ...*

George said, "I finally realized what she needed more than anything else ..."

He raised Helen's soft brown hair and opened a small panel in the back of her head. In the recess was a maze of tubes and electrical wiring.

"She needed a new head," George said.

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