

The Silent Couple

Pierre Courtois

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Every day, weather permitting, I walk with my husband amongst the linden trees surrounding the town square. We are both rheumatic, so he leans on his cane while I, by force of habit, clasp his arm, though my hand trembles as I touch him.

Today, though autumn sun shines on the church and offices, the school and Town Hall of the square, my husband, Mr. Mezange, wears a wool overcoat, and I have on my hat with the white ribbon. We have always lived here; we have always walked here. On rare occasions, we visit the seashore and the South, but we always return and on sunny days, we always walk. My husband expects it, and I am a dutiful wife. I do not speak to him anymore, nor he to me, but still I tread in his path, still I am darkened by his shadow.

We sit down now, as we often do, upon a bench on the sunlit side of the square, an old crippled couple who watch the passersby, people and pets, but we never break the silence that separates us.

My husband is a man of means, though some call him a miserly wretch. But no matter, I am totally devoted to his needs. Daily, I move dutifully from the kitchen to the laundry readying lunch or dinner at the hours he expects his meals. I spare nothing to keep his linen clean, but still I will not speak to him.

Mr. Mezange is six years older than I. Stoop-shouldered, shrunken, crippled with gout, he leans on his cane and takes small steps as we stroll. How harmless he seems now, this quiet old man, but still I will not say a word to him, not when we walk, not at home, not through the long silent evenings of the past two years. There is nothing left to say. Habit sustains me in my automatic and punctual routines, and whether it is a nice day and we go outside or it rains and we stay within, taking our meals together, he is alone whether I am with him or not.

Our lips are sealed to one another. The only communication that ever passes between us comes from the happenstance of our eyes meeting, and this we both avoid. I have studied my own ash-gray eyes in the glass and see the resignation and melancholy and fear within their depths. They are the eyes of a sick woman, and they are ringed by the dark shadows that come from many sleepless nights.

But my husband's eyes are different. Two sharp creases between his brows pinch his face with cruelty. Underneath the reddish lids, small circles gleam in the center of his pupils, almost as if his eyes were cut from metal. They, too, are round from sleeplessness, and they seem both frightening and frightened. Except by accident, it has been two years since I have looked him in the eye. At table, I avoid sitting opposite him, and when we are walking or now while we rest upon this bench, I never turn my head toward him.

Why do we never speak? Because if I opened my mouth, his eyes would watch me, and I would remember. And so my lips are sealed, and so are his. It is a pact of silence, and though we never agreed to it aloud, it is a vow we will not dishonor.

Two years ago, we took a trip to the South. Mr. Mezange was in one of his rare generous moods. I never objected to a change of scene, so we agreed to spend two weeks on the shores of the Mediterranean.

My husband, normally penurious, was in a decidedly frivolous mood. He actually wanted to visit a gambling casino. I went along, of course, but soon saw it was a disastrous mistake. He lost a great deal of money and his temper grew ugly. I stood behind him at the table and tried what I could do in timid whispers to calm him, but to no avail. He was furious, the more so because one of his neighbors at the table was a well-to-do woman in stylish clothes and expensive jewelry who played with a vengeance and was greatly favored by luck.

My husband's steely eyes stayed fixed upon her.

When we left the casino just before daybreak, it was at the same time as the wealthy woman.

Our path led us down a deserted road cloaked in wavering pale shadows. The woman walked several paces

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ahead of us. Suddenly, without warning or a hint to me of what was in his heart, Mr. Mezange dashed forwards and threw himself upon her. I uttered one cry of dismay and horror, but already he had his scarf in her mouth, gagging her, and his hands clutched her neck, squeezing it with all his strength.

For a second, I thought of running, but then my husband grasped me by the arm and whispered, "Quick! Help me! Her money!" I stood there, rooted to the spot, till he saw I was incapable of motion, and then, releasing me, he stooped down and with great difficulty wrenched her bag from hands clutched tight in the agony of death.

While I watched, frozen in a state of wordless, mindless complicity, he dragged his victim across the road and tumbled her body into a muddy ditch. Claspings his fingers so tight about my arm I felt his nails digging into my flesh, he tugged me away, half–pushing, half–pulling me into our hotel and up to our room, where we stayed just long enough to pack and pay our bill. We caught the first train home . . . and ever since silence weighs on us like a tombstone. Time and again, I have yearned to lift its crushing weight from my conscience, but out of fear and out of that duty which habit accustomed me to, I have never betrayed my husband.

Neither of us learned the aftermath of his dreadful crime, yet none of its details grow dim—I still see her bulging eyes, the blood spurting from her nose, crimson in the pale shadows of dawn. My nightmares never go away, and yet my lips are sealed to the world and especially to him.

The autumn air is chilly. Mr. Mezange hunches over and pulls his collar high. I spy this from the corner of my eye, for I do not turn my head toward him. I face the road, and so I see the car that slows and stops in front of our bench. The driver emerges and goes to the fountain for some water.

My God, there is a woman sitting in the car . . . she is alone . . . she reads . . . her head is down, but through the open window, light strikes her face in high relief. I know her face. A haunting resemblance? The ghostly image of remembrance?

No.

The chill I feel is more than the breath of October. This is no phantom likeness; it is she. I am not mistaken, for look! my husband glances up, and he, too, is startled. His hand tightens on the handle of his cane.

She stops reading as her chauffeur returns to the car, and now she sits up straight and leans towards the open window of her door. Her head is at the window. She knows! She has recognized her assailant, a man who thought he murdered her . . . and his silent accomplice.

All my strength is gone. My heart races, but I cannot bear to hear her incriminating voice; I must be the first to speak, but how? There are no words, there have been no words for two long years. And now for the first time in all that silent interval, I turn my head and look into my husband's eyes; and he knows, yes, I will speak, I will tell his victim, "Yes, an accomplice, but an unwilling one, robbed of volition by the horror of what my husband did." No more will I keep his secret, no more will I be the dutifully obedient wife, I am without pity—and now, see! His eyes, oh! the fear in them, the pleading! They are not my husband's eyes, I do not recognize them, they are the pain–filled eyes of some wounded animal.

But I have waited too long. The woman speaks first, before I have a chance to unburden my soul.

"Pardon, sir, madame . . . is it far before we reach the chateau at Civray? My chauffeur must have taken the wrong road."

Two years of silence, and all for what? At last I am able to speak, because words are not within my husband's power, and I tell her, "We don't know. We don't live around here." And that is all.

The car starts up again and quickly chugs off into the distance.

My husband and I get up and retrace our way homeward, taking slow steps, in no hurry to return to the solitude of our home, where we will not look into one another's eyes nor will we talk about that ultimate betrayal, that moment of triumph and capitulation that leads us back forever and forever to our house of silence.