**Slash**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

He reached down and stroked her cheek gently.

She sighed softly in her sleep, and he smiled. Still smiling, he took the straight razor and ran it caressingly down that same cheek, along the same path he had just stroked, pressing down gently.

It left a clean red line, but then the line broadened, and the blood began to run down across her cheek, down to her mouth and nose, and she blinked and woke up, startled.

He dropped the razor to the floor, out of her sight.

“Hey, you’re bleeding!” he said.

“What?” She sat up and groped for the drawer of her bedside table.

“Let me get a towel,” he said. He ran to the bathroom and pulled one of the little white guest towels from the bar, and glanced back to see her staring into her hand mirror, astonished, her eyes widening, her lips pulling apart. Her free hand flew to her face, smacked wetly into the blood, and he was there beside her again, with the towel.

She put it delicately to the wound, and a small wordless noise leapt from her lips, a tiny sound of pain and terror, like something a kitten might make.

“What happened?” he asked, as he helped her dab at the slash with the towel.

The cloth was mostly red already.

“I don’t know,” she said, staring at the mirror. “I don’t know!”

“Was there a piece of glass in the bed or something?”

“I don’t know,” she said again, baffled. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“How bad is it? Do you think we need to see a doctor?”

Gingerly, she prodded her cheek, wincing slightly as her fingers made contact. He watched the fingertips press, saw the indentations they made, saw fresh blood spill out, red and new — it was only when he saw the new bleeding that he could tell that the blood on the towel had already started to dry, had already discolored.

His fingers pressed his own cheek in sympathy; he felt the hardness of bone, the soft hollow below, and from the corner of his eye he could see his knuckles as a pinkish blur.

“Maybe I’d better drive you to the emergency room,” he said.

She took her hand away and looked at her fingertips, at the vivid redness. “Yes,” she said unsteadily, “I think that might be a good idea.”

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The cut was clean and not deep, and the doctor didn’t bother stitching it up beyond a few butterfly sutures. “Head wounds always bleed like crazy,” he said, as he applied the bandages. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you,” she said, in a tenuous whisper.

“How’d it happen?”

“We don’t know,” the husband said. “We were hoping maybe you could tell us.”

“Me?” The doctor glanced up at the husband, threw him a grin. “Well, I don’t know — how can you not know what happened? It’s fresh, not more than, oh, two hours old, at the outside — very clean, so it was something sharp, a good knife or a straight razor, maybe.”

“It happened in bed,” the husband said.

The doctor looked up at him questioningly.

“I just woke up this morning, and there it was,” she said. “We thought... we thought maybe something was in the bed.”

The doctor eyed the bandage critically. “Can’t imagine what,” he said. “Broken bedsprings I’ve seen; never saw one could do a slash like that, though. Maybe mirror glass, if it broke right, but I didn’t see any bits of glass, and there usually are some.”

He considered, and said, “Beats me.”

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As they waited at the light he turned and looked at her, at the long white bandage that covered her cheek, and he wondered why he had done it.

He didn’t hate her.

He wasn’t completely sure whether he loved her or not, he hadn’t been sure for years, but he knew he didn’t hate her.

Slashing someone with a razor, though — wasn’t that hateful? Wasn’t that a horrible, vicious, depraved thing to do?

He didn’t feel vicious or depraved. He didn’t feel any hate, or any of the bitter satisfaction he had felt on those occasions when he had taken a successful revenge on someone he hated.

Instead he felt a sort of calm pride, and a certain excitement, a feeling of power. He had done it, and he had gotten away with it, and she was still there, his handiwork just beneath that bandage, carved into the living flesh of her face. She hadn’t fled; the possibility that he had been responsible for the wound never seemed to have occurred to her.

But then, why should it? Why would he have even contemplated such a thing?

He didn’t know the answer to that himself. In fact, he had hardly contemplated it at all; he had simply done it, on a whim, on a sudden impulse. He had held the razor, and he had seen her face, and he had drawn that red line, with no more thought than a child might give to trying out a bit of chalk.

How was it possible that he could do that?

The light turned green, and he transferred his foot from the brake to the accelerator.

He wondered whether the cut would leave a scar, and if so, what it would look like. Surely, a cut like that would scar! He tried to imagine her with a scar down her cheek, and could not quite picture it.

Well, he would see it soon enough. He found himself looking forward to it.

For an instant, revulsion set in. He might have just permanently disfigured his wife, a woman who had done him no real harm, who claimed to love him and might well mean it. She gave him affection, she cared for him, she helped him in a thousand little ways, and he had repaid her with a slash down the side of her face. What was wrong with him? Had he gone mad? Had he become some sort of monster? Was he a sociopath who had just been fooling himself all these years, pretending to care about other people?

Then the revulsion passed. He turned into their street and guided the car toward their driveway.

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He hurried to the bedroom while she was in the kitchen, dropping her purse on the breakfast table. He had to find the razor, clean it, and put it away. He couldn’t let her see it, or she might realize what had happened.

He couldn’t allow her to know he had done it deliberately. She would want to know why, and he couldn’t tell her — after all, he didn’t know himself. She would be astonished, and hurt. She would be frightened of him. She would want him to see a psychiatrist. She might even leave him. He didn’t want that. He wanted her to stay, to go on as before. If she realized what he had done, she could not possibly fail to respond somehow.

She wouldn’t go to the police, though. He knew her well enough to be sure of that.

He looked down at the razor in his hand, at the faint red smear on the blade, and wondered whether he really did know her that well. He thought he did, but then, he had just discovered he didn’t even know himself. He had never thought he was the someone who could slash a woman’s face with a straight razor for no reason at all.

He turned and headed for the bathroom. He needed to clean the razor and put it away. He needed to clean it very thoroughly, very carefully. He wanted it sharp and clean, no nicks, no possibility of infection.

After all, though he didn’t know why, he knew that sooner or later he was going to use it on her again.

*end*