



# Who Is Afraid of a Widow

by Shan Xiaoming

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I was barely twenty when I first met my husband. He was sitting just opposite me in a small restaurant where I was eating a bowl of noodles. I had just broken up with my boyfriend who said that we had to split because his parents thought our eight characters did not match. Can anyone believe such bullshit? Can anyone believe a man would break up with his girlfriend because of such bullshit? Tears kept dripping down into the bowl as I ate the noodles from it.

A middle-aged man, sitting opposite me, looked curiously at me. I did not pay any attention to him, completely absorbed by my sadness. When I finished my noodles, I reached my pocket to get my wallet but found it was gone. The man must have understood what had happened to me as I looked around desperately. He slipped a ten yuan note over the table.

For the first time, I took a close look at him. He was a stocky, compact man in his late forties, with a broad, flat plate of a face, along with deep-set eyes and heavy eyebrows. His hair was the razor-cut military style, leaving his head exposed, the tendons in his neck prominent.

I looked at him suspiciously, refusing to take the money, which made him nervous, his hands tapping on the table, his eyes flitting around. But soon after, he calmed down, smiled and fixed his eyes, brimming with emotion, on mine. Just as I was wondering why he was doing this to me, his hand crept across the table toward mine and quite out of my expectation he gently clutched my wrist. Exactly at the moment his hand touched mine, something shivered up my calves and my wariness instantly relaxed.

Everything went at such lightening speed that when I was holding the marriage certificate I felt a little bit dazed. Though I was mostly happy at that time, at the deepest level there was a shimmer of apprehension: I hardly knew the man I had just got married with.

Problems soon began to reveal themselves. One of the biggest was that my husband loved drinking so much! Almost every night when he returned home, he was dead drunk, his head lolled, his face purple, his eyes bulged and bloodshot. What I could not put up with was that whenever he was drunk, he could not help beating me.

For a long time I had the imperative to say to him that I wanted to have a divorce, but fear logjam the sentences in my throat before they ever reached open air. I knew very well what would follow such a proposal; whenever I made even the vaguest hint of it, I never failed to see his muscles bunching up, his fists ready to slam.

Shortly after the marriage, my son was born. One winter night, when I got back from work, I found my son was locked outside on the balcony and crying bitterly there while my husband was sound asleep in the bed. I woke him up and asked him what happened. He said the boy had been crying all the time, making him impossible to sleep. I argued angrily with him, saying he was coldhearted to throw him out in the bitter coldness of winter; he might catch cold and get killed. He became very impatient and upset. Grabbing a nearby cup, he threw it across the room. The cup hit me right on the head and broke into pieces. Immediately blood started to

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trickle down my head. For the first time, I shouted to him that I wanted to have a divorce. On hearing the word “divorce”, my husband stalked to the kitchen and came out with a knife. He pressed the blade against my throat, asking me if I still wanted to have a divorce. In a shaky voice, I said NO.

I myself could endure everything, but I could not put my son, who was my only solace, to any danger. The incidence made me more determined than ever to end our tumultuous relationship. I moved out with my boy resolutely the next day. If I could not have a divorce with him, I could at least stay away from him.

In the years that followed, I had a very hard life. I had to do many different jobs, earning pathetic salaries. Having no permanent place to live, my son and I frequently had to move from one place to another. Sometimes I thought of my husband. If only he did not drink so much; if only he were a little bit nicer to me and my son, we would be living happily together. But I never lingered on such thoughts for too long a time. I knew very well that it was simply impossible; my husband was not that type. Every time, I strangled the thought off with a light sigh and planned to ask for a divorce when my boy was older. After that, he and I would go separate ways and would never meet again, the past a memory that I would never try to memorize.

Fate was, however, ineluctable. Two years after I moved out, one day, when I was walking in the street, I ran into a neighbor of mine. When I asked her how my husband was, she became very surprised, arching dramatically her eyebrows. She said, “Don’t you know that your husband has been dead for almost a year. I thought you had already known that.”

As if struck by a thunderbolt, I felt suddenly paralyzed and cold. Though I hated my husband for some reasons, I had never wished him such a tragic and early death. It must be the drinking. Corroborating my guessing, my neighbor said, “He drank too much that day. When he fell down under the table, people merely thought that he was drunk again. But, he never got up.”

My nose began to prickle; tears welled in my eyes. My hatred for him dissolved on the spot. I wiped my eyes with my sleeves and asked, “Can I go back and have a look.”

“Go back?” My neighbor’ eyes widened. She became very nervous, her face going tight. She looked around suspiciously and said in a very low voice, “No, you can’t. Your husband’s ex-wife, and her husband and her son she has with your husband are living in it. You are going to fight when you go back.”

I stared for several seconds, uncomprehending. It was all a jumble. I had never heard of these people before. It was until several minutes later that the fact my husband had an ex-wife and a son before he got married with me finally sank in. My scalp tightened and a feeling of being betrayed surged up in me while my nose turned stuffy.

“What?” I finally said, shoving my chin out. I felt my heart twisted like a wrung dishrag. My neighbor, realizing that she had divulged too much to me, forced herself to smile which looked constipated and then quickly said Bye to me and left.

I did not know how I got back home that day. At night, I did not get a wink of sleep. I was plagued by alternative waves of sadness and anger. At one time, I could hardly believe that I had become a widow; the past

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unreeled itself through my mind, like a film played backward! As if something tore at my heart, I could not help mumbling to the pillows, "I am now a young widow; my son is now fatherless." At another time, I felt duped, duped by the one I had trusted most. I had never got a whiff of it. That was sheer deceiving. I hated my husband for what a terrible wrong he had done to me and my hatred for him then naturally detoured towards his ex-wife and her family. What a right did they have to move to my husband's apartment? How unaccountable the whole thing was.

When it started to bright up outside, I got up from bed with a decision: I was going back to have a look. I would not believe a word of what my neighbor said unless I saw it with my own eyes.

When I was again standing in front of the apartment where I had lived together with my husband for two years, I felt a slight contraction in my chest. Things turned foggy before me. I took a deep breath and then knocked lightly on the door, which opened almost immediately. In front of me, I saw a young man, looking very much like my husband whose face had already seared itself into my head: the pouty lips, hard eyes and prominent cheekbones. I felt choked: He was my husband's son, my step son. I was even longing to touch his young and square face.

The young man, whose bland face revealed nothing, however, was not as excited as I was. Seeing me, he furrowed his brow and scratched the back of his head using his index finger and asked who I was looking for. I did not know what I should say to him for a moment, and then I told him my husband's name. He stretched his eyes wide and stared at me for a solid minute and then, cocked his chin and called loudly, "Mom, someone was looking for my dad."

No sooner had he finished his sentence than I saw a squat woman with thatch-like hair clapping toward the door in chunky heels while cracking watermelon seeds. She stopped at the door and looked at me with a pair of bulging eyes shooting eerie flashes, her face mottled with an emotion that I found difficult to fathom.

"I want to see my husband," I said, between shivers.

"You must be Zhang Xiuying." Her eyes were narrowed to short curves, squinting at me. I nodded my head. "I want to see my husband," I repeated.

"Your husband is dead," she said, spitting watermelon seeds into one of her palms. Her voice was brattish, exasperated and sounding irritated.

My stomach gurgled and turned. I drew a deep breath, held it as though swimming underwater. "Where is my husband?" I myself could hear my voice was hinged and creaky.

"Your husband is dead." Flicking a finger backwards, she stepped aside to let me see on the wall behind her, facing the door, my husband's picture in black frame.

Though I had prepared for this, I, nevertheless, felt a stabbing sensation shooting through my groin. I could hardly contain my sadness. The floor seemed to be swaying under me. The goddamn tears were flooding over me. I held to the door frame, so that I would not fall down.

"Why are you here?" the woman asked with an acidic sharpness. Her

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eyes stared at me like a pair of tiny daggers.

I felt a tingle of chagrin. How came she had the temerity to ask me such a question. "Why are you here?" I countered, louder than I meant to. I felt that my temper was about to flare.

"Why?" she echoed, the tiny lines of her forehead drawing together. She then let out a laugh that sounded more like a belch. "How ridiculous. I am here to take care of my son," she said. Crinkling her brows, she asked, "Where have you been all these years?"

I felt disgusted. "I don't have the responsibility to tell you anything," I shouted to her; indignation added to my volume.

"Indeed, you don't have the responsibility." The woman gave out a low, scornful chuckle. "And I did not have the responsibility to take care of anything after my, oh no, your husband died, either. While you were enjoying your free and easy life somewhere in the world, I had to work myself out to arrange everything for your husband's funeral, and then take care of his son. What responsibility do you have, then, let me ask," she said gruffly.

She was such a bitch that I felt like giving a slap to her, right there on her face. "I did not hide anywhere and my life was not free and easy," I said, tucking my hair behind my ears. "Why did not you people tell me about my husband's death? You could always give my parents a call and they could pass me the message."

She rolled her eyes and hmmmphed. "So what," she said, her voice creaking like an over-rosined bow. "You would never come back. You dumped your husband without qualms when you no longer needed him. If you think you can come back and sponge off your dead husband again, I can tell you that you have done your calculation on a wrong abacus." As soon as she was finished, she turned around and pushed inside her son and then slammed the door shut in my face.

I felt so wronged and enraged, a hot blush rising into my face. I pounded frantically on the door; I wanted desperately to drag her out to tell her that what she said was not true at all. But the door stood in front of me like a huge mountain, refusing to budge and threatening to crush me at any minute.

Back at home, I cried many days. I missed my husband so much. If only he were still alive, he could prove everything and I would not be insulted by his ex-wife. At the same time, I was terribly aggravated with the realization that my husband's ex-wife and her family were living in my husband's apartment while his lawful wife and son had to move from one place to another, without a proper place to live.

I had to get back my husband's apartment. My son and I were the only lawful proprietors of my husband's apartment. However, the thought of going back to face the grouchy woman made me shudder. It was such an excruciatingly annoying task that I circled and dithered around it for quite a long time. But I did not have a choice, did I? A few days later, I was again on my way to my husband's apartment.

I hobbled along, my mind full of the anticipation of what a tantrum the woman was going to throw, making my knees literally threaten to buckle. Finally I got to my destination. I knocked on the door while my heart was beating violently inside. Soon after, the door opened and my husband's

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ex-wife came out.

“Why are you here again,” she asked, stony faced and raising a warning eyebrow.

“You know why I am here; I want to move back.”

She immediately grew tense and aroused; her eyes turned triangular. She suddenly waved one of her hands in the air as if to swat the idea out of the air. Curling her upper lip, she shouted, “How shameless you are. When your husband was sick and needed you most, why did not you move back.”

I took a deep breath to calm down. “I think I can move back any time I want. This is my husband’s apartment, isn’t it?” I put extra stress on the word “My”.

“Don’t give me that crap!” the woman cut in. “You think you can take away everything from your husband when he is dead. You are wrong. Your husband still has another son. His son is living in it,” she said with unmitigated rage, her spit flying about.

My heart was beating frantically and my face burned with shame. True, her son also had the right to live in the apartment. I had not expected her to make use of such a pretext.

In a scream, the woman continued, “What a woman you are.” A fat contemptuous smile stretched her lips as she shook her head. “I wonder why you got married with your husband in the first place. You married him only to get hold of everything he had.”

I was on the point of blacking out. “That is not true,” I shouted to her, very much stung. “When I got married with him, I did not want to get anything from him. I demanded the apartment because I have the right to. I have got to take care of his son, too.” Anger was surging in my chest, making my voice quivery.

“Liar, no one would believe a word you say. Go away, I don’t want to see you again,” she said in a rusty croak.

I stood there motionlessly. My neck felt tight with blood, my face pulsing. I opened my mouth but no word came out.

When the woman saw I was not moving, she became immensely impatient. She stomped her feet and howled, “Go away! Scram!” Suddenly, her shoulders pulling back and her spine straightening, she stepped forward and pushed my shoulders with her two hands. I was so shocked by the force and ferocity that I nearly stumbled down on the ground. I steadied myself and looked straight at her, eyeball to eyeball. “You just wait and see. I will find a way to make you people move out of this place,” I shouted to her as I was stepping backwards. I knew very well that I was not her match in this sort of verbal and physical skirmish.

She waved like she was shooing flies, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “Please go head. Who is afraid of a widow.”

Her word “widow” stung me to the heart and reverberated in my head for a long time after I got back home. It was the first time that someone called me a widow. I felt uncomfortable and unaccustomed about my new role. No one would gauge a widow’s feelings; everyone tended to

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bully a widow, to treat a widow like a sheep that they can kick and a dumb ass that they can flog anytime they want to.

Obviously, they would never move out of the apartment by themselves. There was only one way for me to get them out: to file a lawsuit. I got myself a lawyer. After listening to my description of the case, my lawyer said, "The apartment probably has to be divided between you and your husband's elder son if your husband did not say otherwise in his will."

I was sure that my husband did not have a will. "But how can we divide it? Slice it in half?" I asked.

"No, you can't slice it, can you," my lawyer said, smiling a little. "Either you give a sum of money to them and you move back, or they give you a sum of money and they continue to live in the apartment."

My lawyer's words deflated me all at once. "I don't have any money to give," I sighed, thinking I would never be able to get back my husband's apartment. A violent sob buckled in my chest, my eyes stinging.

"Then, let's make them pay you a sum of money," my lawyer quickly suggested.

"It is not easy to make them pay, either" I said glumly, "but I hope they will do that." I held my hands together in a prayer pose beneath my chin.

I walked out of my lawyer's office with a heart that was weighed down as if by a millstone. I knew very well that no matter how hard I had prayed, they would never give back the apartment or give me any money as compensation. I was really muddled head to delude myself to think I had a chance to get back my husband's apartment or any compensation.

Then a few days later, my lawyer gave me a call.

"I assume that you have never expected this." I could hear excitement in his voice. "You can move back to the apartment and don't have to pay them anything."

My heart started to jump wildly while my mind was a complete blank. "What happened," I asked.

"I have dug out the agreement of your husband's divorce with his ex-wife. It shows that your husband had already given an apartment to her and his elder son when they divorced. She does not have any right to claim this apartment. You just wait and see. I am sure I can help you get back your husband's apartment at the court."

I could hardly believe my ears. A ray of hope emerged in my mind. I felt a rush of elation.

The day of court trial soon arrived. When I met my lawyer at the court, I whispered to him that I was nervous.

"Take it easy," he said. "The judge will definitely rule that you have the apartment."

It was till the last minute that my husband's ex-wife shambled in. She sat down opposite me. When my eyes met hers, I saw resentment in her eyes and her cheeks bulging. She kept squirming on the chair, as if itchy

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with hemorrhoids.

As soon as the court trial started, the judge asked my husband's ex-wife if she had been allocated an apartment. She shook her head and said no.

My heart began to thump. It was such a blatant lie. My lawyer stood up right away and showed the judge the document.

"I have already sold it," the woman said lackadaisically after the judge let her have a look at the document. She then wrapped her arms around her torso, her face impassive.

"How much did you get?" the judge asked. His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Not much. I have used the money to pay for his funeral and some of his debts. Now there isn't one single coin left," the woman said.

I was shocked. Since she had sold the other apartment and used the money on my husband, she then had the right to divide the apartment with me. She was so cunning. She was indeed a complete cunt. Everything inside me pulled tight. I shared a look with my lawyer, who furrowed his brows thoughtfully.

"Dear Judge, no matter what she did to the apartment or how much she got from it, she has to move out," my lawyer stood up and objected.

"Move out? Where shall we move? We have no other place to move to. If you insist we move out, we can then only move to the street and live there." The Woman then took a handkerchief from one of her pockets and started to dab her eyes.

My numb mind couldn't take in a word of what people said afterwards in the court as their voices hummed in my ears. Oh, I kept thinking miserably, why was it so hard for me to get back my husband's apartment?

The judge did not make a decision that day. I was in low spirits as I walked out of the court with my lawyer. Sensing my depression, my lawyer comforted me by saying that it was too early to predict anything. He said that even though she had done her trick nice and easy and left no trail, the truth would be finally revealed after careful investigation. He advised me to be patient, biding my time.

I awaited with trepidation for the court to make the final decision while my lawyer was doing "careful investigation", as he put it. A month later, I was notified to go back to the court. Different from the first time I came to the place, I felt hopeless and sad. I was quite sure that I was going to lose my husband's apartment.

But when I met my lawyer at the gate, the expressions of confidence on his face fazed me. He winked at me quizzically as if he had some secrets to tell me.

As soon as the court trial started, my lawyer asked the woman when she sold the apartment. The woman paused for a while before she said, "About two years ago."

"You mean you sold it soon after your husband's death? I mean, your ex-

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husband,” my lawyer quickly followed up.

“What can I do? I needed the money for his funeral and his son.” She took out her handkerchief again.

“No. You sold it so that you can claim your ex-husband’s other apartment,” my lawyer snapped.

“No, it’s not true,” the woman stood up and said. I watched her face twitch and gray a little.

“How can it not be true? You sold your apartment only several weeks ago, shortly after we filed the lawsuit.”

The woman was struck dumb and plopped down on the seat while she mumbled something that no one could understand. The judge looked very much concerned. He turned to my lawyer and asked him if he had any proof. My lawyer went up to the judge and handed him a piece of paper which the lawyer studied carefully for a long time. When he finally lifted his head from the paper, I knew from the expressions on his face that I was going to win back the apartment.

Exactly as I had foreseen, when the court concluded, the judge announced that my husband’s apartment should be given to me and my son. I felt overjoyed and excited when I heard the announcement, but my joy and excitement ceased abruptly when I turned around to see my husband’s ex-wife’s face, which was distorted by discontent and anger. A sense of apprehension suddenly started to grow within me. I had a premonition, or an intuition that my husband’s ex-wife wasn’t going to let me off so lightly. My gut feel was telling me that she would do everything possible to keep the apartment.

I went back to my husband’s apartment with my lawyer four days later, so as not to seem pathetically eager to get back the apartment. When my husband’s ex-wife opened the door and saw me, a wolfish glint lighted up her eyes and the look that leaped to her face was savage. A stalwart man, weighing at least two hundred kilos, stood beside her. The top of his coat was unbuttoned to reveal a roll of flesh at the base of his neck. Needless to say, he must be her husband.

Before I was able to say anything, vicious words started to tumble out of the woman’s mouth. “You are such a bitch. As soon as your husband died, you are going to throw your step son out to live in the street. You are the most coldhearted step mother I had ever seen.”

How came the whole thing was reversed now? I felt a kind of inflated balloon in my chest but I restrained my temper. “If you did not sell the other apartment, he definitely needs not go to live at any other place,” I tried to reason with her, panting shallowly.

The woman made clucking sounds with her tongue and the roof of her mouth. “How dare you mention it, as if I totally don’t know what a kind of person your husband was. He had squandered so much money, drinking and gambling. If we did not sell the apartment, what did you expect us to do with his huge debt?”

She told the lie as if she’d scripted it. She was such a wily old bastard! “So make it up,” I said. “Make the story as sad as you can. Impress me.”

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I waved my hands in the air, irritated. I could hardly contain myself. I'd had my fill of her slick act.

"Alright, let me impress you." Her husband, who had been watching dumbly from the side all the time, suddenly stepped forward and stood in between his wife and me, the muscles around his glittering eyes tense. I was frightened and wondered what he was going to do. Suddenly, he stretched forward his arm and gripped my hair. A jolt of pain shot through my body. I shrieked and raised my arms in self-defense but it was of no use. My hair was entwined in his fingers. The more I struggled, the tighter his grip was. In a quick crazy moment, I jerked my head violently and tackled him around the waist and push him down onto the ground. I fell down on the ground with him. While I was falling, I did not forget to grip his hair. We two rolled on the ground, pulling each other's hair like a couple of professional wrestlers. Beside us, the woman tried to help her husband by hitting me with her feet, while my lawyer, astounded by what was happening in front of him, stood there, dumbfounded and slack-jawed for the initial few seconds and then started to pull us apart desperately.

Finally, my lawyer pulled us apart. I got up from the ground, gasping hard for breath. I felt as though my head was going to explode. My jaws ached, my knee throbbed, and my coccyx was on fire. With trembling fingers, I brushed my hair away from my face and slapped my clothes while I said to them, still winded, "Whatever your excuse is, you have to move out."

"We will never move out," they said in unison. The woman waved her hands in the air, her nostrils flared; the man banged his fist on the door, bands standing out in his neck. Then they went inside and banged the door shut in front of us.

My lawyer and I had to leave. Sitting in my lawyer's car, the pains suddenly resurfaced and became unbearable. I started to cry hysterically. Heavens, why was everyone so hard on a widow. What I had done to deserve all these. My lawyer, with one of his hands on the wheel, kept patting on my shoulder with his other hand, saying that I did not have to be so sad; that since the court had already made the decision I would definitely get back my apartment.

I had almost given up any hope of getting back my husband's apartment when one day, about a month later, my lawyer called to tell me that he had requested compulsory execution for me and that the court was going to force them to move out.

I pinched my thigh to make sure I was not experiencing acouasm. I ouches as I felt a sharp pain at my thigh and then my ouch was turned into convulsive sobs. My lawyer became panic at the other end of the line, asking me what was wrong. I told him nothing was wrong; I was simply too happy.

The day when I was going to get back my husband's apartment finally arrived. When I got to the place, my lawyer had already arrived, beckoning at me beside the door. I was just about to go up to join him when I saw some people were busy packing things into boxes inside the apartment while other people, who must be my husband's ex-wife's family members and relatives, were arguing with them, and some were even trying to intercept them.

My stomach shrank and my scalp became numb. I knew an altercation

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or even a scuffle was imminent. I flinched and had the impulse to swing around and take flight but it was too late. My husband's ex-wife saw me, and rushed towards me madly from the apartment, the expressions on her face suggesting unmistakably that she wanted to bite me and scratch me.

"Bitch," she started to blast curses when one of her relatives stopped her and restrained her theatrically by the arms. Her eyes radiated a steely light, her hands clenched into fists. The vein in her forehead throbbed like it might burst.

I knew at such a critical moment I had to keep a low profile. So I opted to practice restraint. Keeping my face blank, I stood there, absorbing her insults and letting her fume at me in silence, though from time to time, I had to take a deep breath and tried hard to refrain from trembling.

My insouciance only incensed her more. "Don't play dumb. You are the most wicked bitch I have ever seen." She spit to the ground and stamped her feet. "How can you be so cold-blooded to throw your step son to live on the street. You are trying to kill him. What a callous mind you have!" She then coughed as if she was going to spit on me; I could hear phlegm swirling in her throat. I scooted back. She leaned towards me and grasped my arm.

I got really angry this time. I pulled hard my arm out of her grasp. "Don't push me," I told her, lowering my voice into a growl, "If you want to ask anything, ask my lawyer." I felt a rush of angry words rise in my throat but I knew it was not yet the time for me to give vent to my anger. I told myself that I should not give her a handle of any sort.

By this time, many neighbors had come out to see what was happening. Seeing the neighbors gathering up, the woman seemed to have gained new momentum. "I will ask no one but you," she shouted to me. Anger inflamed her eyes. She suddenly turned around to her son, who had been trailing behind her all the time, and pushed him toward me. "You just follow her. Wherever she goes, you go." Her son blinked spastically like there was sand in his eyes; his mouth spread sideways and his chin trembled like he was fixing to cry.

My lawyer came to my rescue. He gave me a hint with his eyes. Taking his hint, I turned around and was about to follow him to go out. The woman veered suddenly toward me, emitting a cry of guttural rage and grabbed me by the arm again while shouting to her son, "Don't let her go." I jabbed hard and twisted free and then walked hurriedly away from her. She and her son followed me closely. Her broad hips and short legs swayed as though she were stamping and crushing something.

I went out of the building with my lawyer. The breeze cooled me down a little, though my face still felt bloated and a buzzing went on in my ears. I sneezed as cold sweat was running down my back while my armpits were clammy. My lawyer suggested that I have a rest in his car. I quickly got into his car and shut up all the doors and windows.

By this time, my husband's ex-wife and the neighbors had all followed me to the outside. From the car, I could see she was blubbering and shouting something with both fists thrust upward into the air. Some of her neighbors circled around her and from time to time drew appreciative sighs, or muffled giggles with varying degrees of commiseration while others went up to the car and boldly craned their necks to gawk me, their expressions a combination of disgust and distrust.

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I had finally got back my husband's apartment. I would have loved the taste of this moment but it only soured my mouth. Though I appeared composed, sitting inside the car, I was actually ill at ease. An amalgam of loneliness and grief overwhelmed me. Never had I been so heartbroken and so full of misery. My eyes ached and my head swelled with a shooting migraine. Gulping hard back tears, I looked off into the distance and slowly curled up into myself, in a despairing effort to blot out the hustle and bustle of the world, no matter how temporarily.

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