And They Shall Be One Flesh

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THE AFTERNOON sun flowed gently through the polished windows. Its warmth crept into the deep plush carpet. It silhouetted the angular figure nestled in the window seat. Waves of dark brown hair outlined the sharp profile of the face. A large photo album rested on the lap of the woman.

Ruth’s eyes darted from one glossy picture to another. Her mind began reaching back into the recorded moments. A shy girl in pigtails and braces stared back at her invitingly. As the pages turned, the pigtails changed to pageboys and then to curls beneath a veil of white. A tall dark man stood beside her with a half-kiltered grin. The picture was exactly five years old.

Five years. Five years of love and togetherness. Of triumph and failures. The shiny squares recorded that history. There was one on the beach, taken during their vacation of ’69. And one where Johan had put the lampshade on his head while trying to change a lightbulb.

A smile crept over the proud face. The downcast eyes were wet with tears. Her fingers traced the outlines of the two-dimensional figures. For nearly five years they had been the only two people in the world.

The pages turned, disclosing a small wrinkled infant. The tiny hands were clenched. The eyes screwed tightly shut, avoiding the harsh world. Ruth’s hands quickly riffled through the last two pages and shut the cover. Unwinding herself, she stretched her legs, feeling the blood running
back into them. Hot needles reproached her for daydreaming so long. She placed the album in its proper place on the shelf and hurried to the kitchen.

The kitchen was mixed in a collage of smells. There were salty odors from the corned-beef and acrid odors of sauerkraut. Bending down, Ruth's hands grasped the yellow colander and set it in the porcelain sink. The strips from the long orange carrots made patterns in the bottom of the strainer. Tristé was Johan's favorite. Its preparation was long and involved. Ruth had started the sauces for it days in advance. But the extra work didn't matter, not today.

Ruth glanced at the clock. Three thirty! Her hands began fumbling over one another. Her weight shifted first to the left and then to the right. Carelessly she peeled the skin from her thumb, and the blood began mixing with the patchwork of peels. She turned on the faucet, and let the cold water rush over the cut. It tingled, making the nerves jump and twitch.

A sound floated down from the upstairs bedroom. Not soft and questing, but strident and demanding. It was time for a feeding, and it was time now.

Ruth finished paring the rest of the carrots. Her hands became more uncoordinated and finally lapsed in frustration. She turned to go upstairs, then stopped. Her tense hand reached for her stomach and clutched it.

Ruth started up the winding stairs. Her eyes fixed themselves on the baby's door now visible from the landing. She hurried by, ignoring the pleas issuing from inside. She entered her own room and pulled the Bible out of the dresser drawer. The mere act of opening it calmed her. Her hands stopped twitching. Her mouth relaxed back into its soft lines. Her hand no longer clutched helplessly at her abdomen. She placed the book back in the drawer and serenely went to her child.

She pushed the pin through the soft whiteness of the diaper. The rubber pants clung to the chubby legs. Sounds of tires, crunching in the drive, drifted up the stairs. She turned to leave and, then remembering, bent down to pick
up the baby. Racing down the steps, she plunked the child down on the living room carpet.

“Ruth?” Johan’s cheerful tenor broke through the house.

“Hi Honey.” Ruth’s arms twined themselves about his neck and squeezed, refusing to relent.

“Hey, wait a minute, I’m not back from the war. What’s so special about today?” His voice belied the twinkle in his dark brown eyes.

Ruth slowly disentangled herself from Johan’s neck. Stepping back, she searched the rugged face. “What’s so special about today? Johan you couldn’t’ve. Not today!”

A broad grin crept across his face. From behind his back, a dozen long stem American Beauties appeared. The house began to echo the deep throated laughter. “Of course I couldn’t’ve. God’s own angels couldn’t’ve, not the way you’ve been hinting for the past three weeks. Where’s Seth? I work all day to supply his little bottom with britches, and he can’t even give a yelp at my return?” Johan turned to go into the living room to inspect the day’s growth of his son.

“Johan, he’s fine. He’s playing quietly, let’s not disturb him. Come. Help me with the triste.” Ruth grabbed his hand and began pulling him to the kitchen. Their hands were one. The long slender fingers merged with the short stubby strength of Johan’s. A faint hum began to swell into a full yell. The baby’s cry protested his desertion. The two hands broke apart, and Johan quickly stepped to the child.

“There, there. What is it you should think, that we have deserted you? Come now, is it that you are hungry? Maybe Mama will have something for you. Ruth? Have you fed Seth yet? I think he’s hungry.”

“You think he’s hungry? And why is it you think he’s hungry? You think maybe I don’t feed him all day? I think I should know if he’s hungry. Did you think maybe he’s spoiled? Always demanding attention. Why not leave him cry, maybe he’ll decide that maybe, just once, he might be able to amuse himself without having everybody else do it for him.”
“Ruth, he’s just a baby. Of course he wants attention. He’ll outgrow it.”

“So now you think you know more than his own mother? Maybe he should have a new mother. One that understands him better, one that cares for him better?” The tears welled up behind the eyelids and threatened to plummet down the fair cheeks. Quickly turning, Ruth raced up the stairs.

Johan looked after her in bewilderment. “Now what do you suppose brought that all on, little Seth? Be happy you are a man, women have too many problems.” He settled Seth in the playpen and found a little pink and white horse for him to play with. “Now you be good, and I’ll go see if I can get us some grub.”

“Attend to him, listen to what he says; never defy him, for he will not pardon your offence, since I am manifest in him.” The words from the Bible dried her tears and put courage in her soul. The Bible had always been important in her life. But its importance seemed to grow even more since the baby had been born. She needed it to console her, to give her strength to accept her life. She heard the slow tread of footsteps in the hall. Her eyes glued themselves to the turning knob. She shoved the Bible back in its place. His bulk in the doorway stopped her thoughts.

“Ruth, what is it? Why is it you get so upset when I mention anything about Seth anymore?”

“It’s been a long day. I’ve waited so impatiently for you to get home. I’m really sorry, I wanted everything to go right. Let’s go down and have dinner.”

The dishes were done, and Seth was tucked safely in bed. The living room glowed with the soft light of candles.

“It’s been a good five years, don’t you think?” Ruth’s voice was soft and low. She was quite sure what the answer would be.

“It has. But the next five years are sure to be better.”

She snuggled closer to his warmth, resting her head on his shoulder. Their hands intertwined, and peace descended on the livingroom.
“Bedtime?” Johan’s eyes looked laughingly down into hers.

“Just a minute, I want to get the roses and take them up with us.”

With the vase in her one hand and the other around Johan’s waist, they ascended the circular stairs.

“Shall we check on Seth?”

“No, he’s all right. Com’on let’s go to bed.” Impatiently, she hurried to the bedroom.

She placed the vase on the dresser and began preparing for bed. Johan came up from behind and kissed the nape of her neck gently.

“Love me?” His voice vibrated in the room.

“You think that I should love you? How could your own mother love a face like that?”

Their laughter tinkled. The baby’s strident cry cut the air. Ruth stared at the dresser drawer and then left the room.

Ruth stood over the crib for a long time.

“You really didn’t need anything did you? You always seem to know when to cry to keep me away from Johan, don’t you? You’re just a little intruder, but you refuse to go away. It’s not going to work. Johan loves me, he loves me, and there’s nothing you can do about it!”

By the time Ruth came back to the bedroom, Johan had snuggled into his side of the bed. The mood had been shattered. There was nothing left but to sleep. Ruth flicked off the switch and ushered in the total darkness. Crawling between the sheets, her own body relaxed. Her tensions drained into the firm mattress. There was nothing left but sleep.

The next morning shone brightly. Breakfast had been eaten and cleaned up an hour ago. Ruth meditated over a cup of hot coffee, watching the baby crawl about the floor.

“Time for work, little one. You be good while I go get the lemon oil to polish.”

She poured the thick yellow liquid onto the soft white cloth. It soaked in and left an oily stain. Her arm made
brisk circular motions on the coffee table. The rich cherry wood began taking on a sheen that reflected the long brown hair dancing on its surface. The baby began fussing.

"Be still, little one. There's no need to set up a commotion. You don't need anything."

The baby continued, ignoring the instructions from his mother. The circular strokes became jerky, short. Ruth could taste the acrid bile raising to her lips. She dropped her cloth on the table, glanced at the baby and turned to mount the stairs.

The baby quit fussing. His big blue eyes followed the slim legs up their circular path.

Ruth's hand slid along the smooth bannister. She came to the turn and her fingers grasped harder, turning her body along the hall.

The little hands and knees carried the baby toward the table. His eyes became hypnotized by the dancing yellow liquid. The sun careened off the surface and made the little bubbles fluorescent.

Ruth slid out the dresser drawer and pulled out the worn book.

The baby's chubby fingers reached for the yellow fluid. Their tiny tips felt along the grooves in the glass.

Long slender fingers flipped the thin sheets and finally stopped. The tension flowed from them into the book.

The baby tipped the bottle, the stinging liquid flowed from the bottle into the sucking mouth.

Ruth began to read. "You must bring the very finest and first of what the land bears, into the house of the Eternal, your God. You must not boil a kid in its mother's milk."

The tiny hands clenched. The yellow liquid stung the lining of the small stomach. The bottle and fallen to the floor. Its oily substance stained the plush green carpet in an ever widening circle.

The tension drained out of Ruth's body. She felt relaxed, subdued. She replaced the book and began her way back down the circular stairs.