

THE PROFESSOR
MEETS HIS FORMER
STUDENT FOR
LUNCH

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After twenty-five years, of course, they both had changed. The problem was that he could see her so much more clearly than he could see himself.

She still had the same large black eyes, the same dimpled smile. But the face had widened, the skin had coarsened, the thick, black, shining hair was now close-cropped and gray.

And from being petite, she had become squat, thick around the middle, her small breasts just barely protruding beyond her belly.

"Not so beautiful anymore," she said, looking straight into his eyes with an amused smile.

"You were very beautiful."

"You were very handsome."

"I've missed you all these years."

She blushed under her gray, wrinkled skin.

"Let's not get sentimental," she said. "I'm married, you know."

"I had hoped that for you."

"He's a postman." She laughed. "A good man. We have two boys."

"I'm glad."

She looked at him skeptically. "And you?"

The waiter came to the table and took their orders. They were sitting in the garden of a medieval

convent, now a restaurant and inn. It was summer but still cool in the shade of old trees.

"I married again," he said. "Four years . . . after you came back here. She died a few months ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said.

They gave the professor's second wife a moment of silence.

"So why did you come here?" she asked. "After all these years."

"I wanted to find out what happened to you. I wanted to reassure myself that you were OK."

"I'm OK," she said. "I was always OK."

"I was afraid you wouldn't be."

"You flatter yourself."

The waiter came to pour their wine, and they toasted.

"To the two of us twenty-five years ago," he said, lifting his glass.

"To the two of us now," she countered, clinking against his.

He nodded, suddenly, palpably, aware of the chasm between them.

"What I did was wrong," he said. "I know that now. I knew it then, but not as clearly."

"I was an adult. You didn't owe me anything."

"I wasn't ready to give you what you had a right to expect. That was the thing. I needed you. My wife had just broken up our marriage. I needed a beautiful young woman to adore me. But it was too soon for me to plunge back into marriage."

"Too soon?" she said. "I waited six years."

"Even so. It was over ten years before I was ready to get married again."

She laughed. "I should have delayed my dissertation."

"I'm glad you got your degree," he said quickly. "For whatever reason."

"I did it just to extend my student visa. For no other reason. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I knew that."

"Then why did you use me?"

"I loved you. I really did."

"You took an innocent student, just the first young, willing, beautiful body, and used it to prop up your pitifully smashed little ego."

"I loved you," he insisted. "I cared about you. You weren't just any willing body. I loved you more than I've loved anyone, before or since."

"But not enough to marry me."

"Not then. I wasn't ready."

"After six years?"

"You have to remember," he begged, "that when we started our affair I was just separated, not even divorced. And I had children in school –"

Their food came, suspending the conflict in midair.

"*Bon appetit*," she said, with what looked like a friendly smile.

"*Bon appetit*," he repeated.

They ate for a bit in uncomfortable silence.

"Were you hoping I wasn't married?" she finally asked. "And still beautiful?"

"I always hoped that I hadn't ruined your life."

"No, I wouldn't have let you do that. But you put me through a lot of pain."

"I'm sorry. I've always regretted it." He laughed. "My one indiscretion."

"But this trip, after your second wife just died. Were you lonely? Were you hoping . . . for something more?"

He stared at her for a moment, wondering whether, now that it was impossible, he should tell her the truth.

"Yes," he finally said. "I had hopes. But I realized there wasn't much chance."

"That I would still be attractive?"

"That you wouldn't be married. That you would still want me."

"Thank you for being honest about that."

They finished their meals and ordered coffee, apparently out of things to say.

Then she said, "I want to tell you what it was like for me the day you brought me to the airport."

He nodded, knowing that he was in for it now.

"For six years I had thought of nothing but marrying you, of having your children, of taking care of you in your old age."

"I'm sorry I did that to you. I've always been sorry."

"Stop saying you're sorry!" she almost hissed. "You don't regret for a minute that you had six years of love from a beautiful young woman. You took my

innocence, you took my youth, and you look back on it with pleasure!"

"Yes, I look back on it with pleasure," he admitted, "but also with guilt." He was glowing red, wondering why he had come all this way just to subject himself to this.

The coffee came, offering him a brief respite. But she was not to be put off.

"Even up to the gate I had a bit of hope," she said. "Do you remember? I asked if you would write to me. You said of course you would. Come to see me? Of course you would. I could tell from your voice it was lies. Lies!"

"I meant to – " he began.

"I could tell you were shoveling me off, glad to be rid of me! I could tell! It was in your voice, in your eyes. You were glad I could no longer stay, glad the six years were over."

"That's not true!" he protested.

"Of course it's true! The problem was you had never been free. You went straight from your first wife to me. You'd already become bored with me, you wanted others. But you couldn't be free to have them until I was gone."

"You've believed that all this time?"

"I knew it the day I left."

"But it isn't true!" he said weakly, knowing how weak he sounded, that the weakness condemned him, but unable to muster up anything more.

"That's why my love for you turned to anger,

pure anger," she continued. "By the time I got here, I wished I had no memory of you!"

"That was probably good for you."

She laughed. "Yes, it would have been. It would have been good for me."

Suddenly she was crying. She held out her hand for him, and he took it. She pulled it towards her and kissed it.

The waiter came with the check. They both straightened up. As the professor paid, she took a handkerchief out of her pocketbook and daubed her eyes.

"You were my youth," she said when the waiter had left. "I had put you so far behind me. Why did you have to come here?"

"I'm sorry," was all he could say. "I'm so terribly sorry."