

COLD FEET

flash fiction

Tonight, like the nine or ten thousand nights before it, he waits until she is almost asleep and puts his feet on her.

The first time, it was March and they had been married a week. She had just found the warm seam of the bed, that exact place, and was sliding under when two blocks of ice came across the sheets and pressed flat to the backs of her knees.

She came up out of sleep fast enough to knock the headboard.

"What — what is that, what are you doing —"

"My feet are cold."

"Those aren't feet. Those are off a corpse. Get them off me."

"They warm up faster on you."

"On — that's not — find a sock. People have socks for this."

"Socks don't work. You work." And he said it like the most ordinary fact in the world, like he was telling her where the kitchen was, and he left them there, against the warm backs of her knees, and she lay rigid and furious in the dark and felt them, slowly, slowly, stop being cold. Felt the cold leave him and come into her and become, somewhere in the middle, just warmth, just theirs, with no border on it anymore.

She did not say anything. She filed it under things she would not let him win.

He won it every night for forty years. Through two apartments and the house and the other house. Through the babies, when she had no warmth to spare and gave it anyway. Through the year of the bad news and the year after it, when he put his feet on her and she let him and neither of them said out loud that this was how each one knew the other was still there. The complaint wore down to one word — "feet" — and then to nothing. Just the shifting over. The making of room.

Tonight she feels the mattress dip, feels him find her in the dark the way he has found her ten thousand times, and here they come, his feet, still somehow cold after all these years, a man with the circulation of a stone.

She doesn't come up out of the dark anymore. She just moves her legs apart and lets them in.

"Cold," she says.

"I know," he says, glad, and does not move them.