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Envy is Ignorance

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THE WAITER'S TATTOO SAID 'Envy Is Ignorance'. "No," I replied, "No, it's a deadly sin."

He smiled and gave me a roll, but there wasn't time to tell him the whole story, though I've told it to my children so often that they can recite it from the first line.

I was a quivering mass of insecurities in my 20s, eager to please anyone who looked like the father who didn't give a rat's ass, kept from an early grave by manic energy and an inborn capacity for locating the closest emergency exit. I'd planned to marry at 27, and I did. To a good man, as it turned out, a lawyer. He lived on Guam and so did I — both conditions that wouldn't endure but embracing impermanence wasn't something I'd master for a very long time. So those days seemed like forever.

Kate worked in 'the' law firm. The one my husband joined. She was many of the things — at the time I thought everything — I wasn't. Mostly the confidence she brought into a room. It's a confidence I have come to associate with prep school, that sense that everyone's looking at her and that's as it should be. Yes, in retrospect there was a certain 'preppiness' to her, though at the time I just thought she had things together. She did have most things well in hand: a matching husband who knew how to work a room; two babies who knew not to cry, drool, or drip snot in public; a house, real furniture doubtless bought new, silverware that matched (something I've still not managed to achieve) and my scruffy old beloved even though she was smart.

The envy crept up on me. I was just curious at first, sniffing around for the flaw, observing with intense disinterest the community's embrace. Expat lawyers have a built-in radar for detecting their own. With me the 'blip blip' meant 'foreign object approaching.' But she slipped underneath into the welcoming smiles

of senior and junior partners alike. She was, truly, in. And as I realised that I was not and never would be, the envy got its first toehold.

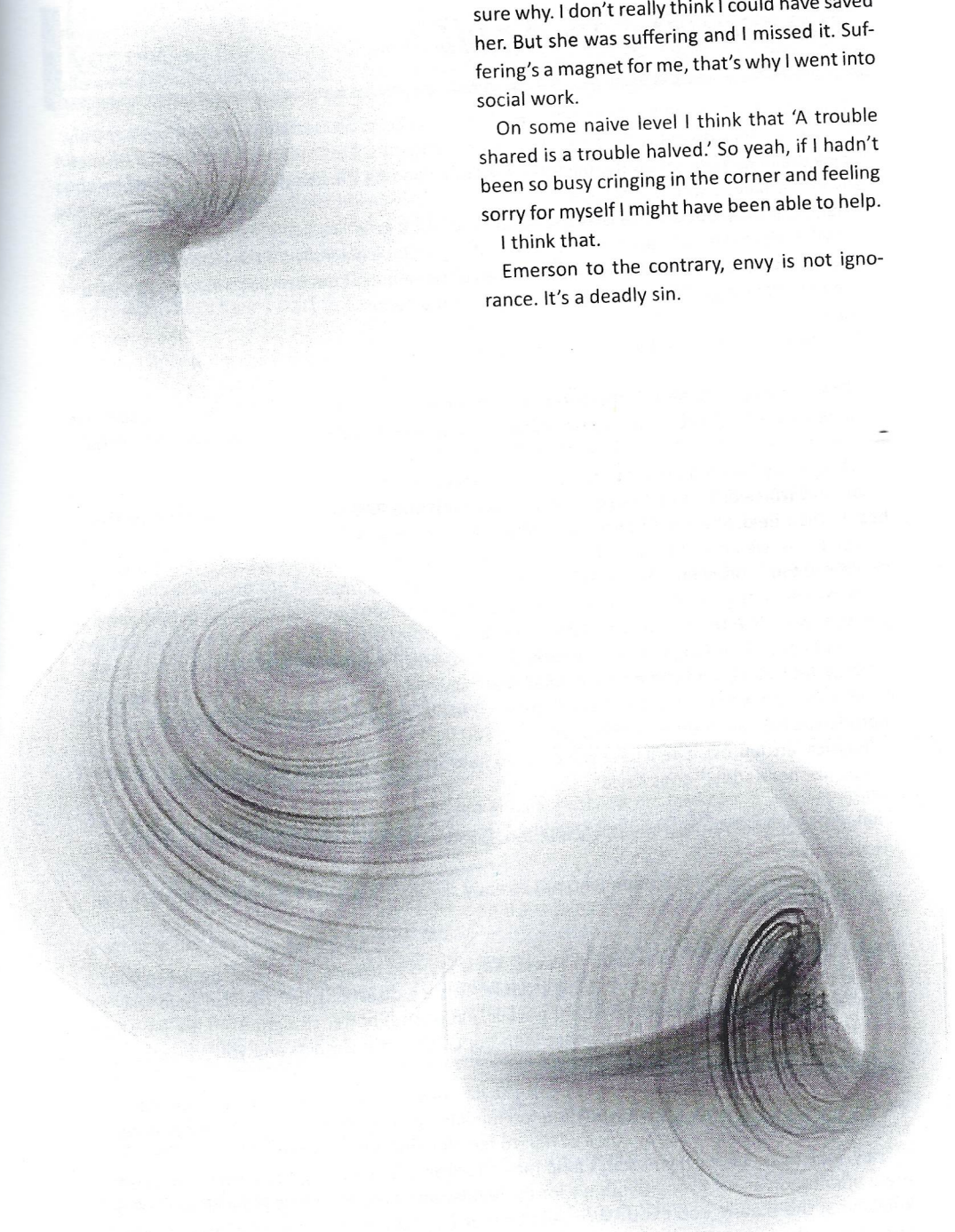
In time I couldn't meet her smiling eyes. I'd say something banal about the bouncing babies: "Oh my, have her eyes changed colour?" Remembering little old me, crying in the bathroom stall when the inevitable drops of blood signalled another failure of our meek attempts at reproduction. That was probably the crux of the matter, though the husband didn't help. Charming and all, he never did remember my name.

Years passed. My own babies came. We moved away. Lacking anything to draw us together, with loads to push us apart, I forgot about Kate. Rumours of her divorce trickled out from Guam, triggering a brief image of perfection marred. She left the law firm, went out on her own to do divorce work. Hers had been 'acrimonious', we heard, with a nasty custody dispute that spun out for years. I couldn't figure out why she wanted to keep revisiting divorce. You'd think she'd have run like hell. As it turned out, she should have.

Friday August 12th 1989 was the middle of Guam's rainy season — clothes and shoes full of mildew, streets slippery with coral oil, smells magnified by heat and moisture, nerves frayed knowing that it will go on and on. Always prompt, at ten minutes to nine Kate walked up the courthouse steps for the fourth hearing in a custody dispute almost as ugly as her own.

Turns out the woman's husband was waiting in a dark corner of the parking garage, smoking cigarettes (seven) with his new hunting rifle in hand. He was a good shot — hit her right in the back of the head with a bullet that killed her instantly. Kate's children went to her ex and my green-eyed envy turned into guilt.

Guilt tinged with a hint of sadness. I'm not



sure why. I don't really think I could have saved her. But she was suffering and I missed it. Suffering's a magnet for me, that's why I went into social work.

On some naive level I think that 'A trouble shared is a trouble halved.' So yeah, if I hadn't been so busy cringing in the corner and feeling sorry for myself I might have been able to help.

I think that.

Emerson to the contrary, envy is not ignorance. It's a deadly sin.