

How the Weaver's Wife Killed the Motorcycle Man

Behind a ripped screen, Leah the weaver stared out the doorway of her sandy house. Layers of heat peeled off the asphalt and rose up into the sky over the I-40. Her wife was not home from work at the restaurant, and Leah had finished her weaving for the day.

She heard a buzzing sound and watched a motorcycle man come down the highway, his two tires purring over the road. She saw his white shirt against the orange hills behind him, his brown hair and blue sunglasses. As he passed, Leah saw him turn his head toward her in the doorway in her green and yellow dress. The motorcycle man struck a pothole he did not see, spun off his bike, and skipped across the road like something much lighter than a man. His motorcycle squealed against the asphalt and thudded into the ditch. The man came to rest a little past her driveway.

Leah ran out to the man and pulled him from the road. Her wife, Billie, would not be home until much later, and they had only one car. The man was not awake, but he did breathe. Leah took him into the house. His skin was peeled back in places, some patches lumped up like ground meat, and crisscrossed with cuts deep and wide everywhere else. She cleaned the small stones and grit out of the mess of his skin, applied peroxide to the scrapes, and wrapped him in a blanket. It was one she'd woven herself, the threads knitted so tight they weren't individually visible.

A few hours later, the motorcycle man woke up and saw Leah sitting beside him. "Bring me liquor," he said. "And a mirror." Leah brought them. She checked her watch. It would still be many hours before Billie was home. "Where's my bike?" the man asked.

"It went into the ditch when you fell. I brought it back to the house after I took care of you. It's outside."

He nodded and held up the mirror. Leah watched him take it and look at his chest, sides, arms, and face. "Why did you get me out of the road?" he asked. "Look at me! No amount of money in the world is going to make me look right again. Goddamn you. At least if you had left me, a truck may have hit me and killed me in my sleep."

"I'm sorry," Leah said, "I didn't know what else to do."

He took another drink and stared at her, tracing with his eyes the patterns of her dress. The green and yellow lines wrapped around her hips, unspooled up her sides, and crossed over her breasts.

"I'll let you sleep," she said. "We'll get you to a hospital when Billie gets home." Leah left the living room, went quietly out the kitchen door, and stood outside wondering what to do.

She watched through the kitchen window until the motorcycle man passed out again. Then she came back into the living room. Her loom was the biggest thing in here, its bars and weights empty after this morning. She moved very quietly, grabbed the edge of the blanket, and tugged him across the smooth floor. When she had him lying against the bottom of the loom, Leah the weaver touched his skin with her cool fingers. Her nails picked around his wounds until she found a ragged thread of skin. She worked this out, careful not to wake him, and pulled and pulled, until she had a coil of it looped around her finger. The skin was heavier than thread, slicker, and beaded with his blood. She unthreaded his skin and spooled it onto the hooks of her loom, worked it over the bars and stretched it tight.

The motorcycle man was purple without his skin and smelled of meat, but he didn't wake up, only moaned. Leah's fingers worked quickly. She picked at the knotted and broken clumps of skin, smoothed them out, and threaded them across. Leah was used to weaving large blankets and rugs. The skin of a man was a small job, and it only took her a little over an hour to make it whole again. She even took out all his blemishes, moles on his back, an old scar over his ear, a birthmark shaped like a hand. She pulled the skin off the loom and laid it over his body. After looking at him, she thought it would be best if she started with his feet. Leah sat over him with her needle and stitched quickly and cleanly, tucking the seams deep and out of sight between his fingers, behind his knees, and in the creases of his arms. When she finished, she tucked the last thread of skin under his armpit and stitched it down so it wouldn't come loose. He started to awaken.

"What are you doing to me?" he sat up.

Leah picked up the mirror and threw it at him. "Look," she said.

The motorcycle man tilted the mirror at his face, down his neck and chest, all the way down to his thighs. His clothes were in a dirty pile beside him. The wood of the loom was dark with moisture, and Leah's hands were black from blood.

"I'm perfect," he said. "Look at my skin. It's beautiful."

Leah nodded, even smiled. "It's the best work I've ever done."

"Christ, it's so soft. Touch it," he said.

Leah shook her head. "I know what it feels like."

"I said, touch it."

Leah reached out slowly and touched his face. The motorcycle man grabbed her hand and pulled her into his lap. He rolled over and pinned her under him. Leah hit him, tried to shove him away, but she couldn't. She screamed, but Billie wouldn't be home for hours.

Billie got out of the car in her black slacks and white shirt. Her apron hung low, filled with change and soggy coasters. She hadn't made much money, but she had a phone number from a man who wanted to buy a blanket from Leah. He would pay one hundred and fifty dollars. He would pay them as soon as it was done.

The door was double-locked and the chain was on. Billie stood at the doorway and called for Leah to open it. Leah let her in and wrapped her arms around Billie's neck. She let her body hang from Billie's shoulders and, sobbing, told her everything. Billie listened, staring the whole time at the dirty loom and the bloody blanket on the floor.

She stroked Leah's head. "Shh," she said. "Shh. It's going to be okay. I'll fix it," though she wasn't sure anything she could do would fix it. Billie left Leah on the couch and went into their bedroom. She opened her dresser drawer and lifted a stack of magazines. Inside, lying next to empty thread-spools and band-aids, was an old eight-shot .22 revolver. She picked it up, always heavier than she remembered, loaded it, slipped it into her apron, and walked back into the living room.

Leah was pulling the loom apart, throwing the pieces out into the yard. Billie pulled her over to the couch and made her sit. She held her for a few minutes, squeezing her shoulders almost to bruises. Billie kissed her forehead. She picked up Leah's wrist and checked her watch. It was almost six o'clock. "I'll be back later," Billie said. "Go lie down."

Billie drove her brown Buick down the highway. There were thin bars of clouds lined up in the sky, and patches of sunlight flickered across the bulge of the gun in her lap. She kept the radio off and drove fast. Seven miles later, she came to the mechanic's shop. When she pulled in, he was reaching up for the garage door. He stood with the edge balanced across his shoulders and watched her step out of the car.

"Sorry, ma'am. We're closed." Grease smudged the corners of his eyes, the wrinkles there making tiny white stars.

"I'm looking for the motorcycle man," Billie said. "He busted up his bike on the 40. Did he come

by here?"

"Oh. Him. I asked another customer to give him a ride into Garings. I don't work on bikes, so I sent him to my cousin's shop." He nodded. "I don't work on bikes," he said again.

"Tell me how to get there," Billie said. The man told her. Billie thanked him and bought a two dollar Powerade out of his vending machine. It wasn't cold. She got back into the car and headed toward Garings.

She found the bike shop, all tin and rust on the corner of an intersection in the middle of town. Traffic was thick in four directions. Several men sat on their bikes outside and talked, the engines off. They watched her, a tall slit sliding across their sunglasses on her way to the door. The sun was going down, and the cement lot in front of the bike shop was filled with golden light. Next to the door, a wrecked motorcycle was propped against the building. The side facing her was scraped of all paint and webbed with scratches. The light had settled inside them and flared like an ache.

The motorcycle man was inside leaning over the counter and talking with the owner. The man didn't say much back to him, just nodded and shuffled things on his desk, picking papers up and setting them back down. She didn't have to see the torn clothes to know it was him. She could always recognize Leah's work. Billie walked up to him and waited until he noticed her.

"Ryan's Steakhouse?" the man grinned, noticing the logo on her shirt. "They any good?"

"They're shit," said Billie.

He laughed. "That attitude's not going to bring in the tips."

"You hurt my wife, Leah the weaver."

The motorcycle man stopped smiling. He looked around the shop for help, but no one moved to help him.

"She's taking apart her loom right now," Billie said.

"I'm sorry."

"A man was going to pay us one hundred and fifty dollars for one of her blankets."

The motorcycle man got his wallet, pulled two new hundreds out of it, and handed them to Billie.

She put them in her apron.

“I'm sorry,” he said again.

Billie nodded. “I believe you.” She put her hand in her apron, pulled out the .22, and put it right against his forehead. There weren't any lines running across his brow. She shot him. The motorcycle man fell backward onto the floor, his legs and arms thrashing. Billie lowered her arm and fired again. She slowly cocked the gun and fired again. The tin building echoed the shots. The concrete split underneath him, his body stretched across the long cracks. Billie emptied the whole chamber, not realizing it until the ringing in her ears faded and she could hear the dull clicks of the hammer tapping empty shells.

People started to stream into the building. From cars still running outside at the stoplight came whole families, mothers and fathers and children. The bikers left their bikes and came in with their leather and sunglasses. People came with sacks of groceries from the store across the street. The bike shop mechanics sat down their tools and came over, too. They all floated around Billie who stood with her gun pointed at the dead motorcycle man on the floor. Voices swept around the room.

“Who is that?” they said.

“That's the weaver's wife,” they answered.

“And who is he?”

“That's the motorcycle man who killed the governor's son.”

“But we loved the governor's son,” said the people.

“We all loved the governor's son,” they said back. “That's why she did it. To get him back for killing the governor's son.”

“No!” said Billie. “I killed him because he hurt Leah.”

“She was the only one brave enough,” they said.

Billie put the gun away. She grabbed the people closest to her and shook them. “No. I killed him because he hurt Leah. My wife, Leah the weaver. I don't even know the governor's son.”

But the people weren't listening to her. Now that they knew why she did it, they turned and

thanked her in one endless voice. They flowed back outside like a river, breaking apart and going into the coffee shops, the gas stations, and the supermarkets to tell everyone how the weaver's wife had killed the motorcycle man.

“You don't understand.” Billie said, but they had all left her there alone in the bike shop. “He hurt Leah. She'll never weave anything again.” But no one paid her any attention. Billie went back to her car, got in, and started to cry. Now she knew what Leah had known when she tore the loom apart and threw it in the yard. There would be no way to fix this.