

1984

Expressions 1984

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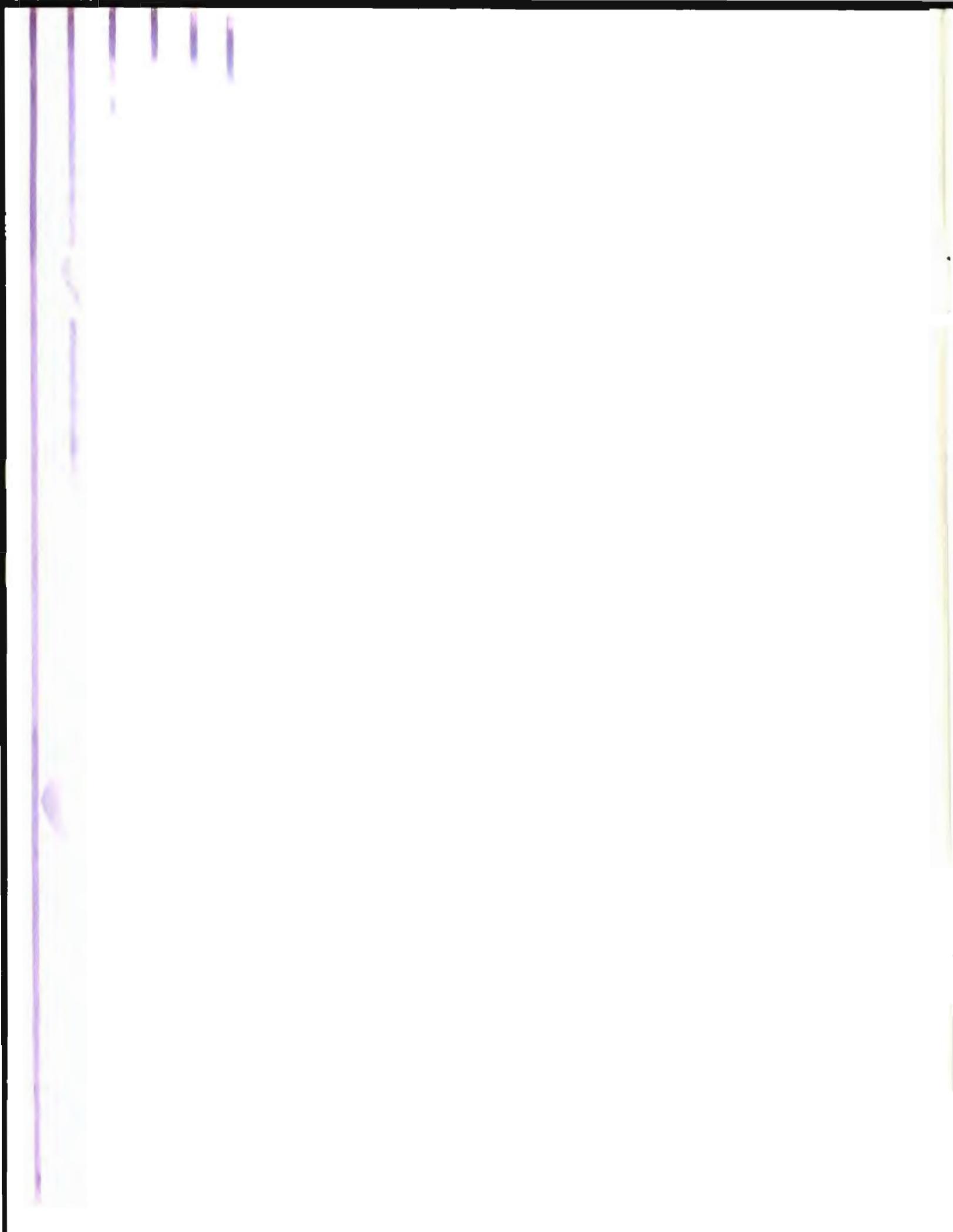
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John Billy White



Expressions



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Fish Belly White

She hated those pants. They were really the only thing he ever wore that she hated -- maybe because they were total artifice -- unnatural fiber. A cheat. She was sure that was part of the reason. But there was more to it -- they were an ugly white -- a non color, really, so much that they would not go with color. Once she said, Twain called it 'fish belly white.' And no matter what was worn with them, it looked wrong, too. For they took what was right and made it wrong.

And they bagged.

She told him this -- nicely: Warren Harding is known as a terribly neat president but a snappy dresser!?

"Well, you are such a charming dresser, patrician really and always so appropriately dressed for a judge. You know you are a judge like Warren Harding was a president -- you both look like what you do."

Only privately she said, "Unlike Harding, this judge was good at what he did. At the courthouse he is the judges' judge, you know. Every morning at least one member of the bench will come walking through his chambers with a legal problem that they want to talk to him about.

She kept telling him:

"The way you dress makes me so proud to work for you because you look like a judge -- like you were ordered up from central casting. So really, when you wear those pants, it's just not you, you know."

And then she told him -- not nicely:

"Take the awful ugly things off and burn them. You look terrible in that color!"

It did no good.

I guess when you work for a person for a very long time you feel that you can take certain liberties with expression. At any rate, she had been his secretary for twenty years.

They brought her back from the prison where she was being held before going to court. She knew she would kill herself if she stayed one day more, so she begged to come back to the psychiatric ward at the hospital. Only this time it was the county one. "There is," she said, "a difference between the rich and the poor." She said it was big time on a low budget.

She was cuffed and shackled in the cage car. The deputies were embarrassed when they did that to her, but the warden made them before they left. She is tiny and thin. The men are big. The moon is perching over Des Moines' spectacular skyscraper as they near the city. One of its beams skips across her cuffs.

The car eases up to the buildings and stops. There is a kind of finality in the stopping of the car, leaving her with a feeling of desperation. The men are profoundly relieved. She is escorted into the building, to the admitting desk. They leave her.

"We have just a few questions that you should answer. Do you know what day it is?"

"Wednesday."

"Thank you."

"Isn't it Wednesday?"

"Actually, it's Sunday."

Damn, she wonders, what happened to Wednesday. She suppresses her embarrassment and stands there on the concrete floor to be examined.

"We're going to keep you here for awhile. Would you just follow the nurse?"

The ward is drab, masterfully done in ugly whites -- uncertain colors. There is a central area with straight benches in parallel rows in the day room and phalanged cubicles off of it. There is probably eight cubicles. They are all alike. She keeps getting into the wrong one. A man's. Three different times she does that when he is trying to lie down.

She wonders what he thinks of her. Probably nothing for this place is no stadium of mental action. That is for certain. Her room has a metal cot. The window is screened.

People are crazy in here.

One man keeps hitting people. He's fair, with soft skin, soft and flaxen hair. His shirt is stained under the armpits. She wonders if he will ever hit her.

Another man is coarse-haired, bristle-cheeked; with flat fingers. The cords at the back of his neck are sensuous and taut. He has a friend -- the hitter. He has perfected his look -- his graceful, cross-legged pose. A betrayal! They are together.

There is a young girl here coming off drugs. Inexplicably, she despises her.

"You goddamn shitbrain. Goddamn you." she screams at her.

In the background the girl's radio is playing, "Hot Child in the City."

She races across the hall to her room to get away from the girl.

There is a stain on the floor, hemorrhaging purple-red. A cleaning woman mops across it. The mop hits the floor, "Thwack, thwack."

"We just can't get it out. We've tried everything," the cleaning woman tells her.

"I know, like . . . like the blood has dried, but it's still there . . . Oh, God, don't think of that.

She doesn't like her doctor. He doesn't care that she cries and his glasses are dark-tinted. His eyes are almost impenetrable.

"I will be taking you off all medication. I want to see how you do," he tells her.

She thinks, "Good for him. He can chalk up another statistical figure on his failure chart." She feels like part of an experiment, a ritual act of sacrifice.

"God, he's pitiless -- but I guess I'm pitiful enough for both of us. I'd feel better if I could see his eyes, though," she tells herself.

She is pacing constantly and cannot bear to be alone

when she is not sleeping – even in that crowded place. She begs the nurse to walk with her.

"I can't do it now," she says through a wax smile. "I don't have time. By the way, I knew your daughter. A lovely girl. Apparently you have done something right." And now her face contorts into what reminds her of a freshly carved and terribly happy pumpkin.

Her mother comes to visit one day. "A half hour," the nurse orders. Ten minutes is spent staring at the floor because her mother wants to cry and she can't stand that. The time is up; they embrace; her mother turns to leave, "God, Mom, don't look back." But she does – a wisp of a woman and she is crying.

She can't sleep. She lies on her back, turns to her side, back on her back. She tries to concentrate on something – a roach scurries across the floor. She looks at the ceiling – her lucidity amazes her. What troubles her most is her mind. She is certain that she will be driven into the crevice of insanity. Forever catatonic.

She's had her hair pinned up for weeks. She did that because she felt, well, she was scared she couldn't do it the night before. Just couldn't. So to be sure she had it up for two weeks. "I know," she thought to herself, "that's crazy and people are looking at me walking around with my hair in curlers for days. But that's okay since everybody here is teetering on madness."

Fall greets her the day she leaves. September opening her arms. Fall always hangs in there with her. She understands it better now, though. Dr. MacManus told her almost a year later, "The season, Kathy, the return of it, surrounding any traumatic event is to be reckoned with. The sights, sounds, smells, within the ambit of that time of year are memory ticklers for the emotionally ill. It is well to know this so you can take precautions."

She could have used that information earlier. Knowing that helps now, though.

She walks into the courtroom. Her lawyer comes in. He has on ankle boots. They need polish. She wishes he had worn those the night at the jail when she hired him. She would never have done it. Another lawyer is sitting on the other side of him. They visit about Little League while they wait. The teams, you know.

Others are there, too. Three or four women from the clerk's office whom she knew – acquaintances because she had worked at the courthouse so long. Two of them are privately dubbed "Red Rose" and "Snow White." I suppose it all has to do with color. Today there are courthouse voyeurs – here for what pleasure this sort of thing creates for them.

The sentencing judge calls her up to the bench. He is a stranger to this district. Well, as Judge Holliday, the chief judge said, "We all know Kathy so we will just have to bring in an outside judge to try the case." So

he did. And the judge from Winterest intones the sentence: "It is the order and judgement of this court that the defendant shall be committed to the Women's Reformatory for the rest of her natural life . . .

He finishes.

The guard walks with her from the courtroom to this little holding room to wait transport back to prison.

He comes in.

"May I see you?" he asks.

"All right." God, there is so little to say.

He comes closer to her. She has never seen tears in his eyes except the time that he went to surgery to have his kidney removed.

He comes closer and he's reaching for her. "You're looking better than I expected you would."

"Well, you know . . ."

Suddenly his eyes drop toward the floor. "Jesus Christ, I've got on those goddamn pants you hate!"

"That's okay. I've gotten used to the color."

Paint Brush



strikes quickly
violently marking
the virgin white
marring forever
while
beautifying



Aunt Carolyn's Water Bed

I was so excited when Mommy and Daddy told me that I was going to spend the weekend with Aunt Carolyn and Uncle Jim. I especially liked Aunt Carolyn, probably because she was so young and pretty and she was always so much fun! She had just recently been married and I hadn't a chance to meet Uncle Jim.

From the moment I walked in the door, Aunt Carolyn gave me ice cream, popcorn and lots of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She even let me sleep with her in the big, jiggly water bed! That was the part that I enjoyed the most. It was like sleeping on a big water pillow that never let me sink. The warm and fluffy blankets cuddled around my face; it was almost like sleeping in a big fluffy cloud, floating toward heaven.

Uncle Jim didn't come home until the last night I was there. When I heard his big truck pull into the driveway, I waited anxiously for him by the entrance. On her vanity, Aunt Carolyn kept a big picture of them as they posed in front of the altar. When he came in and slammed the door, he didn't look like the same man that Aunt Carolyn had married. He wore a long beard and his face looked old and hard.

I was going to tell him hello, but I realized he was angry. He didn't even look at me when he stepped on my foot. I didn't say a word. Aunt Carolyn started to speak but Uncle Jim wouldn't let her.

"Jim!" exclaimed Aunt Carolyn.

"Damn you, woman!! What in the hell are you . . ."

"Jim, Please. Listen to me, please, Jim." pleaded Aunt Carolyn.

"trying to prove? You must think you are a . . ." Uncle Jim continued yelling at Aunt Carolyn, not listening to her. Finally, she walked up to him and touched his arm gently. Uncle Jim whirled around, grabbed her suddenly and started shaking her as if she were my Raggedy Ann. He shoved her and Aunt Carolyn wearily crumpled to the floor, crying.

"Get up, you slut!" demanded Uncle Jim. Slowly, awkwardly, she obeyed. She sat down on the nearest chair holding her shoulder. Uncle Jim didn't scream anymore. He just talked real loud to her, pointing his

finger while saying things I didn't understand. I was so afraid that he was going to kill Aunt Carolyn, but I couldn't move. I wanted to yell at him, but I was afraid.

"Why is he doing this? Why is he so mean? What happened to Uncle Jim to make him hate Aunt Carolyn so?" Questions spun through my mind.

Tears were dripping down Aunt Carolyn's cheeks as she sat staring at the floor. Suddenly, Uncle Jim slapped her across the face because she wouldn't talk to him. He kept on hitting her, and she just let him. She didn't move, she didn't say a word. She just sat there.

Uncle Jim screamed, "Why aren't you talking now?" She sat silently. "Huh? Why not?"

Aunt Carolyn lifted her head and looked at me. I started to cry because I could see the sorrow in her eyes. It was as if she was telling me that she was sorry that I had to be there to see all this happening. But Aunt Carolyn didn't have to apologize. It wasn't her fault, and I hated Uncle Jim for hurting her! Turning, he saw me for the first time. His big bushy eyebrows raised and he smiled. He even chuckled a bit, but I didn't trust him. I didn't know what he was going to do. I crept over to Aunt Carolyn and she hugged me tightly. Uncle Jim stormed out of the house slamming the door behind him and screeched away in his big truck.

When I felt sure that Uncle Jim was gone, I asked Aunt Carolyn, "Can I sleep with you in your big jiggly water bed Aunt Carolyn?"

"Of course you can," she answered.

I climbed up into what I thought was a big water pillow the night before, but it was different. I was slowly sinking. And the earlier warmth was stone cold. The blankets were rugged like wool and scratched my face. They reminded me of Uncle Jim's face when he looked at me for the first time; hard and cold. Aunt Carolyn hadn't come to bed yet and I was in the jiggly water bed all by myself; like sleeping on a huge rock in the ocean. Trapped, lost, and alone, I clung to the rock while the raging water continued to crash over me, drowning me in the cold, violent waves.



Black Monsters

I turn on the lights
And creep down the wide, sturdy steps
Of Grandma's basement
Where I have left my teddy bear
I need him for bedtime

As I reach the bottom step
The monsters who sleep all day
Behind the huge furnace
Begin to stir
They silently flex their wide
Bat-like arms
And stretch their fluid
Black bodies

I dash into their lair
Grab my teddy bear
And race for the stairs

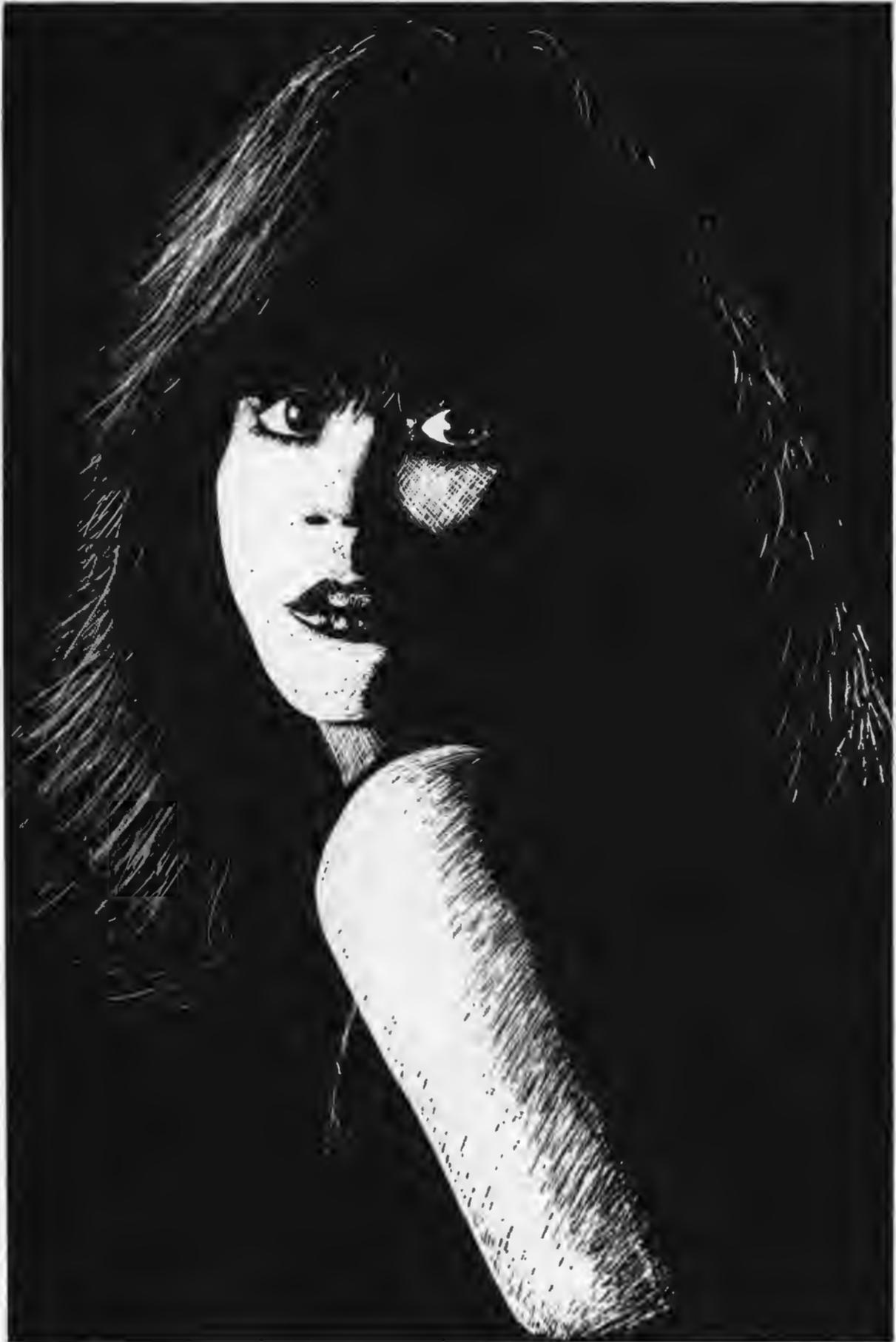
They pursue me
Gliding through the air
Like graceful dancers
Dressed in evil

I pound up the stairs
My heart beating and my body cold
While they float easily behind me

I feel the air move as they
Reach for my thin shoulders
Waving their arms
And long fingernails

I can't look back
If I stumble they will have me
And I will become one of them

I reach the landing
Burst into the kitchen
And slam the door with a
Bang!



The Broken Heart

Is it true people can live with a broken heart?" my seven year old son, Kenny, asked the other day.

"A broken heart?" I repeated. "Do you mean a person who has suffered a heart attack?"

"No, Mom. It's like when your gerbil or your grandma dies," he clarified.

"Oh," I laughed. "You mean when you've lost someone you love very much."

"Yeah, that's it," Kenny agreed.

"When people say they have a broken heart, they don't mean that their heart is really broken. They mean their feelings are hurt very badly. No one dies from hurt feelings," I explained. "Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he said as he turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going to finish watching Lassie," he said.

I sat alone in the kitchen remembering my first broken heart. In October of my senior year in high school, I was as deeply in love as any adolescent could be. I had been going steady with Mike for two years. He had graduated, joined the Air Force, and was ordered to go to Texas for basic training the fifth of October. The night before he left, we went to a drive-in movie. We cuddled all night, cherishing our last hours together. A sadness fell over us when the movie ended, and we realized only minutes remained before my mother's midnight curfew.

"What do you think would happen if you got home late tonight?" Mike asked.

"You know my mom. She's so strict, she'd probably ground me for a week," I grumbled. Mike started the car and we rolled slowly out of the drive-in.

"To hell with her," I blurted out, breaking the silence. "It's our last night together. Let's go get a coke."

"Are you sure?" Mike questioned.

"Yeah, let's do it," I demanded. Mike paused thoughtfully a moment, taking a drag from his cigarette.

"Look, this is the last thing your mom is going to remember about me for six months. I think we would be better off if she had fond memories of me," Mike suggested. "Like, I'm such a gentleman and all that stuff."

"Who cares what she thinks!" I shouted. "I get so tired of obeying all her stupid rules!"

"I know, but we have a future to protect. How would you like it if she wouldn't let you go out with me when I get home on leave?" he asked.

"Oh, she wouldn't dare. Would she?" I gasped.

"She might," Mike warned as he turned the corner and headed down my street.

"We're almost home!" I cringed. "I can't believe that I won't see you again for six months. It just isn't right. Why did you have to go and join the Air Force anyway?" I demanded angrily as I burst into tears. We turned into the driveway and parked.

"Don't get mad at me," Mike said softly, pulling me close and kissing me. "I feel the same way. If you were only one year older, you'd be coming with me."

"God, I don't want you to go," I whispered. Mike tilted his head and slowly reached for my lips for one last, long, passionate, goodbye kiss.

"Mommy!" Kenny shrieked, shattering my daydream.

"What?!" I snapped.

"The T.V. won't stop flip flopping," he whined.

"Okay, I'm coming," I said regretfully, sipping my last drop of coffee and shaking the memories from my head.



The Phone Call

"I can't stand these kids one more minute!" he shouted desperately into the phone.

"What's wrong?" I asked calmly.

"Everything!" The house is a mess, the towel rack fell off the bathroom wall, the laundry is piled as high as the washer, and as soon as I get home from work I have four hungry boys asking how soon supper will be ready. I never have a chance to sit down!" he exploded.

"Can't you tell the kids to have a snack after school so they can wait until 6:30 for supper?" I suggested.

"They do have a snack at 3:30 but that doesn't stop them from being hungry two hours later. Then as soon as supper dishes are done, they want a bedtime snack." His voice sounded panicky.

"I realize that, Mike," I said. "I fixed all the meals for sixteen years. Being gone for two months hasn't made me forget the kitchen is always in use."

"It's not just the meals. The kitchen is always a mess -- crumbs on the table, dirty dishes in the sink, and clean dishes in the dishwasher to put away. I never get it all done!" He was almost in tears. "I go to get groceries and forget what things we already have and what we need. I end up with four cans of applesauce and no green beans. The kids won't eat any vegetables except green beans. I'm so sick of hamburger and green beans."

"Why don't you try fixing peas or corn?" I suggested.

"They won't eat it! I would just end up throwing most of it out!" he yelled.

"I know, but at least you can eat something different," I commented. "The boys didn't eat vegetables when I was home, but I kept serving a variety because I couldn't stand eating the same thing every day."

"Don't tell me what you did!" he snapped. "You're not here now and I just have to cope the best I can."

"After sixteen years of experience I just thought . . ."

"I don't give a damn what you did for all those years! If you cared about us, you'd still be here. You just turned your back and ran away. Do you have any idea what a shock it was when you dumped this whole mess on me? I have an important job and I can't even go to work in the morning without worrying about getting the kids to school and finding someone to watch them until I

get home." He was very bitter.

"Tell me about it!" I lost my temper. "I couldn't walk across the street without making arrangements for the kids! I couldn't work because one of them was always sick or had a dental appointment!" I shouted. "you went through life without worrying about anyone but yourself. Now you see what life was like for me, and in two months you can't take it!"

"When the hell do I get to rest!" he screamed. "On weekends there are ten loads of laundry and I have to iron all those cotton shirts you bought me and the kids. The kitchen floor has to be washed. I have to clean the bathroom and change the sheets on the beds. The kids bug me all day Saturday to take them roller skating or shopping at the mall. On Sunday I have to take them to church, wash their hair, and get groceries."

"I always enjoyed the weekends, too." I couldn't resist one smart remark.

"I can't go on anymore," he repeated.

"Do you want me to come home?" I asked.

"Yes," he sounded relieved.

"I'll come if you really can't handle it," I told him, "but pack your bags and be ready to leave when I get there." Silence. "Do you want me to come tonight?" I asked.

"But . . ." he hesitated.

"I said I'll come home. I can handle the kids. I've done it before, but I won't come home with you there." I was very firm and cold.

He was quiet. I could hear his breathing as I waited. After several minutes, he spoke, "You don't have to come. I can manage it."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "You sounded pretty frustrated ten minutes ago."

"It's been a rotten day," he said. "The kids really drove me crazy."

"If you can make it, then I won't come home. We agreed I could have three months leave of absence, and I want the entire time.

"I'll make it." He was in control. "That doesn't mean I'll like it, but I can get through it."

"Okay," I said, "if you change your mind, call me."

"Goodbye," he said quietly and hung up.

Winter Chill

Nancy's head throbbed as she slowly woke up. The pillow seemed unfamiliar, and she was afraid she wasn't in her own bed. With her eyes still closed, she tried to remember what had happened the night before. When the mattress shifted and someone groaned next to her, she knew she was at Jerry's.

Opening her eyes, she saw the plain beige walls, the white sheets tacked over the windows, and Jerry's clothes scattered on the wood floor. As she turned her head, she saw the half-full champagne glass sitting on the scratched night table next to her. She remembered drinking champagne and eating dinner in Jerry's sparsely furnished living room. He'd been especially charming—brought her a bouquet of daisies, opened every door for her, and filled her glass as soon as it was empty. Yes, he was charming all right. With a grimace she carefully lifted the blanket and slipped out of the warm bed. The bare floor was cold on her feet, and she shivered as she silently searched for a robe and tiptoed out of the room.

Jerry's tiny kitchen was cluttered with dirty dishes from the night before. The chicken cooked in wine, which had smelled so tempting last night, smelled stale this morning. Nancy's stomach did a little flip. At least the dried rice and shriveled asparagus didn't smell. She found the coffee and filled the pot with water. Coffee and two aspirin would relieve her headache. She hugged herself for warmth as she walked down the hall to find the thermostat.

Finally with the aspirin working its way into her system, the apartment warming up, and a cup of hot coffee in her hands, she curled up on the sofa to think about Jerry's proposal. She couldn't help smiling—a man had proposed to her. It wasn't the right man, but at least she had a choice. She could get married if she wanted to, but she was glad she hadn't given him an answer yet.

She thought again about last night. Jerry had presented the daisies to her with a little bow. While she was putting them in water, he had complimented her mother, telling her she looked more like Nancy's sister than her mother. On the way out to the car he had put his arm around Nancy and told her she looked terrific.

Would he think she looked terrific this morning—wearing his warm grey terry robe and nursing a hangover? She had always been average, she thought. Her auburn hair was her only unusual feature—long and thick and rich. Lately she'd been seeing the lines in her forehead and the crowsfeet around her eyes. Crowsfeet. What an ugly word. The corners of her mouth were beginning to turn down a little, too. Sometimes when she looked in the mirror, she was surprised by the sadness in her eyes. Her posture was bad—slouched shoulders and a protruding stomach. She knew she should stand up straight and get some

exercise, but it seemed like so much effort. Living at home and coping with mother took a lot out of her. Mother never let her forget that her sister, Ellen, was married and had a family. "Ellen has a husband to support her. She doesn't have to live off her parents. She's doing what I raised both of you to do. She's a wife and mother." Sweet little Ellen. And Ellen's husband had a good job, they lived in a nice home, and Ellen spent her time doing needlepoint and volunteer work. Nancy shook her head.

After pouring another cup of coffee, she looked around the living room—beige walls, beige carpet, a brown naugahyde sofa and two cheap, uncomfortable chairs. Jerry was accustomed to better, but his former wife got the house and furniture, so he was starting over. When he talked about marriage, he promised her that in a year they would have a small contemporary house with lots of trees around it. That sounded wonderful—a home of her own, away from polishing mother's silver and washing mother's windows. He wanted two children, preferably a boy and a girl. They would live happily ever after, just like in the fairy tales.

When he asked her to spend the night, she resisted. Her mother would scream at her and call her a tramp. But dizzy from the champagne and lulled by Jerry's promises, she agreed.

His kisses and touch had been tender. His movements were gentle and he'd taken as much time to excite her as he could before his own excitement forced him to conclusion. The touch of his smooth hands had felt good on her bare skin and his kisses were pleasant. If only she'd been able to respond to the messages her body was receiving. If only her brain would quit working—quit thinking about Stan and comparing. Stan with his firm athletic body, Jerry with a premature middle-age spread. Stan's hands knowing and captivating, Jerry's tentative and fumbling. Stan's kisses bewitching and Jerry's pleading.

Angry with herself, Nancy went back to the windowless kitchen, found the detergent and turned on the hot water. She wanted to marry Jerry, but her memories of Stan seemed too clear even after all these years. Slowly washing the dishes, she remembered her time with him. She'd been fresh out of college, with an entry level job in the State Development Commission, typing promotional material and occasionally getting an opportunity to do some writing. The job was a stepping stone toward traveling nation-wide representing the state to businesses which might locate in Minnesota. She had a tiny apartment and considered herself a young woman on the way up.

Four years ago she'd met Stan on the statehouse steps on the first warm, sunny spring day after a brutal winter. Happy to be without a winter coat and bursting with energy, she'd run up the steps and straight into

Stan's chest. They'd both laughed through her apologies, and she tingled when he took her arm to steady her. With an easy smile he told her his name and asked her to meet him for a drink after work. Surprising herself, she agreed immediately. They met at The Viking, a noisy downtown bar that attracted the young working crowd. They couldn't hear each other over the din and Nancy was delighted when he suggested they go to Maria's, a small Italian restaurant. They ate rigatoni and drank red wine at a dim candlelit corner table. Stan told her about his childhood in northern Iowa, but Nancy could barely concentrate on his words. Instead, she focused on his brown eyes, his tousled brown hair and the firm lips as they moved. She would bring herself back to his description of the University of Iowa and then drift off, thinking about his strong-looking shoulders and large hands with neatly trimmed nails.

When he walked her to her car, he put his arms around her and kissed her goodnight. He seemed so sure of himself. Nancy's heart beat rapidly and her knees began to shake. She realized later that she hadn't kissed him back or put her arms around him. She just let herself be kissed. After he said he would call the next day and walked away, Nancy sat in her car several minutes before she felt calm enough to drive.

They began to see each other regularly and for the first time in her life, Nancy was half of a couple. She remembered the Sunday afternoon they strolled around Lake Harriet and then sprawled on a blanket to listen to the band concert. The time they saw *Romeo and Juliet* at the Guthrie Theatre and he had said she would always be the only woman for him. After that he called her Juliet and she clung to him, believing his words. There was the rainy afternoon they went to the Art Institute; the lusty Pre-Columbian art reminded him that he hadn't made love to her that day. They hugged and giggled all the way home. She could almost feel Stan rubbing her back, moving his hands down to her soft round bottom and squeezing the sensitive skin. Telling her he loved the graceful curve of her back and kissing her shoulders. His hands, his lips . . .

Nancy shook herself out of her reverie. How could she marry Jerry when she thought about Stan every day? And what would she do if she married Jerry and Stan came back? What if they had children and Stan came back? She would miss Jerry's friendship, but she couldn't marry him. Sadly, she rinsed the plain white Corolle plates and set them aside to drain.

Ignoring the greasy pots and pans, she walked back into the living room and was surprised to see that it was snowing. The snow was just covering the cars parked below and dusting the evergreens in the woods beyond. With a start she remembered that it had been snowing

when Stan had said they were through. It had been a wet, bone-chilling snow, one that froze on the streets that night while Nancy curled into a ball under the blankets and cried.

Now, not wanting to look at the snow, Nancy swung around and headed back into the kitchen. She turned on the hot water, added soap and began scrubbing a greasy casserole. She didn't want to think about the rest of the time with Stan, but her thoughts wouldn't be still. In early September he had casually mentioned that he had two little girls. They were two and four and lived with their mother in Pittsburg. Their names were Sarah and Anna and they were both blonde with brown eyes. He missed them and was going back to Pittsburgh to be near them. He wanted to give them piggy back rides, push them on the swings in the park, and take them to the zoo. Nancy was surprised, but happy to hear about the children.

"Why haven't you mentioned them before?"

Stan walked over to the window and looked out, "Your knowing about them raises some questions I haven't wanted to answer, but I want you to go to Pittsburg with me. So you have to know."

"Know what?"

"I'm not divorced."

Staring at Stan's back, Nancy wanted to fill the silence but there were no words.

"We're separated and I've asked her to file for a divorce. She doesn't want to. She wants us to see a marriage counselor and work on getting back together. I've told her it won't work." He turned to Nancy, pushed her hair back and kissed her lightly on the neck, "Come with me," he whispered. Nancy hesitated only a moment.

The warm, enchanted days of summer were gone, and the chill of autumn had set in when they arrived in Pittsburgh. They found a one-bedroom apartment with worn furniture and carpet. Even though it was clean, the dark colors and small windows made it seem dirty and dreary. The double bed sagged in the middle, and for the first time they had trouble sleeping together. When Stan brought Anna and Sarah to meet her, they both sat on his lap clinging to him, refusing to speak to her. They wouldn't eat the spaghetti she cooked and then cried because they were hungry. Anna, the four-year-old, said Nancy's long hair made her look like a witch. Nancy bit her lip to hide her disappointment, and Stan took the girls to McDonalds.

After that she spent lonely weekends reading and watching TV while Stan visited his kids. When he tried to bring them back to the apartment again, Anna insisted that Nancy was indeed a witch and would bake them in the oven. They both cried until Stan gave up.

Nancy's English major and short work record didn't impress personnel managers, and she settled for a job

in a typing pool for four dollars an hour. The long hours of sitting made her shoulders ache, and when she asked Stan to rub her back, he was busy watching TV or too sleepy. He began to spend time away from the apartment. He said he was working late, having a beer with the boys, or babysitting while his wife went out. Nancy blamed his absences on the dreary apartment and blamed his preoccupation on his worries about money. It seemed like most of Stan's paycheck went to his wife. There was always something—Sarah had a cold and needed to see a doctor, Anna needed new boots and a coat, the furnace needed repair. Nancy searched the want ads for a better job and interviewed during her lunch hour whenever she found something promising. If only they could afford a nicer apartment and evenings out together, she was sure Stan would return to his old self.

Nancy's parents called occasionally. Her dad complained about the raw winter wind and the hazards of driving on ice. Her mother reported that Ellen was chairman of the Charity Ball and the granddaughters were starting dancing lessons. They wanted to know how Stan's divorce was coming along. Was she coming home for Christmas?

She was sad after their calls. It would be nice to go home for a few days. Stan would probably spend Christmas day with his kids, and it would be another lonely day for her. But where would she get the money and how would she get the time off from work? She would think about that later. For now, she would get in bed and read for awhile until Stan came home. About eleven o'clock she turned the light off, snuggled into the middle of the bed and went to sleep, alone.

She woke up feeling rested and decided that if Stan was busy that Sunday afternoon, she'd go to the Carnegie Museum instead of sitting around the apartment. Then she wondered where he was. He usually slept late on Sunday and she didn't remember him getting in bed with her last night. She was just stepping out of bed when the phone rang. It was Stan. He wanted her to know he was okay. He wouldn't answer any questions over the phone. He would be there to see her later this afternoon. Goodbye. Feeling angry she dressed and drove across town to the museum. Wandering down the wide corridors looking at the stuffed animals and rock exhibits cheered her. She needed to get out like this more often. In the spring she and Stan would be happier, maybe she'd have a better job, they could stroll in the parks, sail on the river, and drink wine in outdoor cafes.

It was starting to snow when she arrived at the apartment and Stan was waiting for her, slouched in a chair drinking a beer. He told her in a low voice that he was going back to live with his children and their mother. After that she only heard pieces of what he said,

sorry...never wanted to hurt you...kids need father...mistake to ask you to come here...love children...miss them...suitcase packed...I still love you.

"You still love me," Nancy mumbled, "but you're going back to her?"

"I'm doing it because I love my kids. I have to live with them, take care of them. Please understand. We're going to a marriage counselor. I don't know if we can work things out, but I've got to try." He gulped his beer, went into the bedroom and picked up his suitcase.

"Were you with her last night?"

"Yes."

Nancy heard the door close softly. Through the window she watched him get in his car and drive away. She curled up in a big comfortable chair and numbly watched the snow fall until dark. It was then that the tears started and the winter chill permeated her body.

She cried as she packed her car with her clothes, dishes and TV and drove to Minneapolis. She didn't expect to hear from Stan immediately, but she was sure that he would call in a few weeks and ask her to come back. Through her sadness she tried to convince herself that by spring they would be back together, he'd have his divorce, and they would be married. After all, he did say he still loved her.

It didn't work out that way, Nancy thought as she fixed herself a piece of toast with butter and lots of strawberry jam. She had called him every few days at his office and he always sounded happy to hear her voice. He talked about the kids and the weather. He was getting along okay, coping, he said. He worked a lot and spent his time at home with Sarah and Anna. As the months went by, she called less often.

Nancy wiped off the white Formica counter tops and looked around at the clean kitchen. Looked nice. Jerry would be pleased. Even mother would approve. Mother, who was fond of saying that Stan had only used her. She had been a summer plaything. Nancy didn't believe that, but he couldn't have loved her as much as she loved him. She wouldn't have left him for any reason. Mother had also said she was a fool. That Stan wouldn't leave his kids. It looked more and more as if she were right. Nancy was tired of being alone and lonely, tired of sleeping alone in a cold bed and praying for the impossible.

She felt tears forming in her eyes but refused to let them come, Jerry didn't have magic hands that made her tingle, but he was here and he wanted her. She heard him moving around in the bedroom. Probably looking for his grey terry robe, she thought.

Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her hair, put on her biggest smile, and headed down the hall to tell him the news.

So Sorry



so sorry

people mulling around
mumbling closely fit words
that slur together

so sorry

faces torn and distraught
scream those
same syllable

so sorry

relatives and friends
unable to believe --
and numbness saturates.

so sorry

seemingly says it all.



Bo

"I've known Bo all his life, until last January that is, when he took off to compete four or five others for the sexual favors of some hot bitch. That's Bo though, dumb and impulsive, with his brains, if any, in his crotch. I don't quite know how to categorize him. He was definitely one of a kind.

Bo had no shame, doing what he wanted, when and where he wanted, with no regard for authority. I don't think I ever saw him eat with a knife and a fork, he rarely bathed, never shaved or got his hair cut, and was a chronic masturbator playing with himself shamelessly whenever and wherever he pleased, not caring who might be around or who might walk in on him. He also slobbered a lot.

God, he really sounds gross as I reread this but he really wasn't all that bad. He never smoked, drank, cussed, or took drugs. I don't think anyone who knew Bo disliked him. In fact he was quite sociable; always eager to join any activity. He was definitely an outdoor type, preferring hunting, frisbee, or even just running to the T.V. or going to a movie or a bar.

He was a good listener for the most part, listening intently and never interrupting when you spoke. He did seem to space off to somewhere else at times and would, on occasion turn and walk away, leaving you there in midsentence, talking to yourself.

Bo never voted or went to church. He never talked about either. I suspect he was apathetic towards both.

He also never talked about his family, never seeing them again after leaving home. He never knew his father. I suspect now that he's gone, I'll never see him again.

I know that Bo must sound like a pretty poor excuse for a human being, and indeed he was, but

He sure was a damn fine dog.

Life

As I walked by the sea today, I heard the wild lonely cry of the gull and I understood its song. I heard the pulsating ebb and flow of the sea, the whispering of my heart, and the wind. Each in its own way spoke the rhythm common to all things, time, and places. The pattern of days and night, the passage of seasons, the pendulum of birth and death. They spoke of life.



Elevator Going Where

As the elevator stopped, I realized that it didn't stop on a floor, but between the 14th and 13th levels. I then noticed that it was 5:23 p.m. and the only people in the building were probably just me and this little old lady sharing the elevator.

As I turned toward the solutions for our dilemma, she pulled a crowbar out of one of the shopping bags. Walking slowly towards me, she explained.

"I should have left this at home, but I thought I might come across someone with car trouble. Now look what I've done. I've sunk the elevator to the bottom floor and now we can't move.

At first I wanted to die laughing. I thought she was joking, but when I saw the seriousness on her face, I knew she really believed what she had said. I thought to myself,

"Oh, great, here I am, trapped in an elevator, no one around for three days except some senile old woman."

So I told the lady.

"No ma'am, we're not on the ground floor. Somehow we got stuck between the 13th and 14th floor. We're going to have to think of a way to get out."

"You mean it's not my fault," she said. "Well that's a relief, but that means we'll be in here for three days. Who will feed Henry? Who will feed Luther and Benny and my kittens? Oh, gracious, I have to find a way out."

And she began poking and pushing buttons with no success at all. So it did seem like we were going to spend a very long three days together, if we could survive three days that is. And wouldn't you know just then my stomach had to start gurgling. So I told my little companion that I was going to take a little nap. And I did.

I woke up around 7:30 to see granny knitting away, apparently she had her knitting with her too. So I asked what she was knitting.

"Oh, I'm knitting a sweater for one of my kittens. Would you like to see their pictures?"

"Sure," I said, "why not, I have nothing better to do."

And soon she started showing me pictures of cats and dogs and children and grandchildren. This went on for at least a half hour, so I leaned back and started spacing off when I noticed a window in the elevator.

Immediately I told Emily . . . that was her name, Emily, that I wanted her to help boost me up and I would pry open the window with the crowbar, climb up the ropes and see if I couldn't find a way out and bring back some help.

She agreed and after several futile attempts to reach the window, we finally did. Getting out of the window was no problem, it was climbing up to the 14th floor that was scary. I almost thought starving to death was better.

Slowly and gradually, I began pulling myself up as my companion watched and prayed. At last I came to a door that looked easy to open, so I grabbed it and pulled; losing my balance.

I began falling, falling, and falling. Down, down, down I went screaming and hearing my echoes all the way down until there was a loud thump. . .

I woke up in my office after falling out of my chair. I patted the floor for reassurance. It was only a dream. I left my office and walked towards the elevator. Relieved.

Beside the elevator was a little old lady. She had a shopping bag and was just getting on the elevator, so I kept walking and took the stairs instead.





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