



Troubled Women

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Down in the Dirt Chapbook
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The origin of the world's trouble is women's association with snakes.

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“Beautiful Monster”

The airmen in the barracks frequently fielded calls from strange girls. One would prove strange, indeed.

“Joe’s pool parlor, Eightball speaking.”

There was silence, then a laugh.

“Is Jake there?”

“Who?”

“Jake Kraker.”

He knew immediately she had a hidden agenda, but he only thought he knew what it was.

“He ain’t here. But I am.”

“Silly. I know you’re there.”

“What’s your name?”

“Mercy-Grace. With a hyphen.”

She neither laughed, nor reacted to his.

“What’s yours?”

“Sam.”

“Ah. Samael.”

“No. Samuel. Want to get together?”

“You’re fast!”

“Well, the telephone is a rapid means of communication.”

This exchange, they both laughed, a little.

“But it’s not the only one.” she countered. Her voice had grown soft and sleek.

“Or the best one.” he added, to encourage that voice. But she didn’t respond.

“Come on. Let’s get together.”

“Tonight?”

“Now who’s fast?”

“Tonight?”

“Sure. You bet.”

“But, Sam. What if I’m a monster?”

“I’ll bet you’re not. I’ll bet you’re beautiful.” He soon learned there was more than one kind of ugly.

It was a cold Sunday evening, late enough to be dark in the Northwest, but early enough for the young and clueless, so he agreed to meet her at the snack bar just inside the main gate. He beat her there because his bus trip was shorter. He sat near a window so he could watch

her exit her bus. She was wearing a long coat and a scarf, and for a moment he was apprehensive.

I could pretend not to be here.

But he went outside to meet her. As soon as she saw him, she pulled off her scarf, to reveal her beautiful face and blonde hair.

“Wow!”

“Wow, yourself.” The telephone hadn’t changed her voice, like he’d been told it did his.

“You look as beautiful as you sounded.”

“You, more. I mean, you, too.”

Inside, she removed her coat and revealed a matching, nearly matchless figure. They took the next bus to the barracks. On the other side of the perimeter fence just outside the barracks building were tall trees, bare, with whitish bark, and he imagined he heard a howl from there, and saw shadows without substance.

“Wolf?!”

“You are?” Her smile showed sweetly wicked.

“No.” He drew out the word.

They slipped into his room near the hall end door. He had learned some sweet words and ways.

“Wait. You have something on your cheek. Ooh! It was a kiss. I had to get it off there.”

She looked pleased.

“Oops! There’s another one [at the corner of her mouth].”

He progressed slowly, but steadily, kissing and uncovering, until they both occupied the one-man cot. She looked even more beautiful naked. Her skin shone white, her hair was the blonde-step before white, her eyes were bright-light blue. She showed curves in places where other girls didn’t even have places.

He didn’t forget the most loving words he knew (natural to a potential procreator). Just at the moment of sweet surrender, he whispered,

“You’re beautiful.”

“I’m ugly.”

“No, you’re beautiful.”

He won the argument—temporarily.

Afterwards, they rushed to dress, then hurried out to the bus stop, and after she got on, and in front of the driver and passengers, she suddenly beseeched,

“Oh, Sam! Come home with me!”

“I c-c-can’t. I gotta go to work tomorrow.!”

The door closed, the bus pulled away, and he walked back to his room,

experiencing the least-thrilling anti-climax in the History-of-Let-Down.

He couldn't wait for her to call him again. He sought her out. She had told him approximately where she lived, so he rode shotgun and his roommate, Buddy, drove, while they searched and asked. They ended up on a gravel hill that looked like it had migrated from the Appalachians (to the western slope of the Rockies). Atop the hill stood an unpainted shack, from under which he expected to be rushed by a pack of hounds. Instead, a sullen-looking teenage boy strode out on the porch, after shutting the door behind him.

"Whadda you wont?"

"Is Mercy home?"

"No."

"I'm Sam. She told me to visit her."

"She ain't here."

Sam didn't believe him, but the boy appeared intractable, so he and Buddy slid into the car quickly, slammed the doors, and drove away. At the bottom of the hill, the car hesitated, even shuddered briefly, not from mechanical deficiency, but because Buddy jumped slightly when he heard the howl, or yowl, from the direction of the cabin.

"What was that?"

"I don't know. Sounded like hell."

Buddy shot him a quick glance: "What in hell was that whole thing?"

"I don't know." *She sounded a little like that in my room.*

But the pull was strong, and when he discovered she'd left her number in his mind, he called her. When he asked for Mercy-Grace, a familiar voice said,

"She ain't here."

"Who are you?"

Silence.

"Are you her brother?"

"No."

"Are you her husband?"

"No."

"Are you her father?"

"No."

"Are you her mother?"

"No." (No change in tone.)

He had swallowed all the negativity he could stomach, so he hung up, and semi-forgot her, for a while.

One morning, on break from the squadron, he detected a non-stop buzz in the cafeteria.

“What’s ever’body talkin’ about?” he asked Angela, a civil servant he’d agreed to meet there.

“You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“The police found one of our airmen dead in a shack near here.”

“What happened? What’d he do?”

“Nothing. The paper said two witches were fighting over him.”

Crazy Ray leaned over from the next table, and said,

“Must be nice. Two women fightin’ over your body.”

Angela turned and looked at him and said,

“They were fighting over his soul.”

At that, Sam felt his own soul start to leave his body. He jumped up.

“I gotta go!”

His new girl friend looked puzzled, almost startled.

The next spring, Angela invited Sam to Green Mountain Resort. After an amble down the hill from civilization, she sat on the bank, removed her shoes and stockings, and dangled her feet in the Green River.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“No. As long as you wash the germs downstream.”

She smiled.

Just then, he heard a thrashing in the brush across the narrow stream. His first thought upon seeing the emerging object—a bear!

Angela jumped up and grabbed him, then winced in pain from her bare feet on the sharp rocks. She pleaded, putting her hand in front of Sam’s mesmerized face,

“Sam! Don’t look!”

As he brushed Angela’s hand away, the “bear” exposed itself—Mercy-Grace!—in a black robe and hood she shed in one motion. *She’s grown darker!*

“Samael! Samael! Samael!” she chanted—or pleaded.

Angela screamed. “She’s invoking Satan!”

Not me! Not me!

Walking backwards slowly, she disappeared quickly.

Her robe and hood!

He considered crossing over, but declined to, fearing what he might not find.

As they were ascending the hill, Sam related, confessed his part in the story Angela was already familiar with.

She appeared pensive.

“Okay?” he asked.

“Sure.” She tried to smile again. “Dirt washes downstream, too.”

“Major Obstacle”

“Hey, Mick! Wanna go to the Club Saturday night? Might be some girls there!”

“Sure. I bet they are.”

“Are what?”

“Some girls there.” *I hope she’s there.*

He couldn’t get over how his best friend and barracks mate, Buddy, had parked his 1955 Chevy on the previous Saturday night when they’d gone to the USO Club downtown. Buddy had turned the car’s wheels inward. Outside the car, Mick stopped briefly.

“Keeps the car from rollin’ straight down the hill!” Buddy smiled.

“Won’t it still roll down crooked?”

Buddy, a little bit older, and a lot more experienced, warned,

“Now don’t you go fallin’ in love tonight!”

But he couldn’t help it. He saw her. She looked as young as him, but she acted older. From behind the food table, she had asked,

“May I offer you something?”

She had smiled to the top of her teeth. Her eyes had smiled, too, but from their black depth. Her nose was neither short nor long, neither broad nor narrow. Her hair was long and black and lustrous. Her brown hands looked soft enough to hold, her smooth brown face seemed covered with unclaimed kisses. For a few moments, Mick left the ugly world and resided, without thought, without feeling, without movement, in a heaven-here. He didn’t see her again that night. *She must have left early.*

This night, he bypassed the tables, and headed directly for the dance floor. She glided up to his left side, and asked,

“Would you like to dance?”

“I have two left feet.”

“And one right one?”

As they moved into the music, he caught a glimpse of her figure, but holding her revealed its true lushness. As the rhythm swung her away from him, he couldn’t fill his eyes enough, nor could he fold her back into his arms soon enough.

At the end of the evening, she offered him a ride back to the Base, and as they passed through the gate, the A. P. saluted, and said something.

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Good Evening, Sir.’”

“Are you...*an officer?*”

“No, my husband is. He’s a Major, a Navigator in 124’s.”

“Where is he?”

She smiled. “In Alaska. On a one-year TDY.”

“Oh.” He suddenly remembered to ask about the delicious smell he’d noticed in her car. He elevated his inquiry to the formal level:

“What is that lovely aroma?”

She laughed. “Dates.” she said.

“What?”

“Dates I prepared for the food table at the Club. I put in sugar and spice and everything nice.”

“Meanwhile, back at the oasis, the A-rabs were eating their dates.”

“Don’t say that. My mother was Arabic. She showed me how to prepare the dates.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. By the way, what’s your name?”

“Michael Wayne McMickle. They call me Mick. But I don’t like it.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ll call you Michael. Or Wayne-o.”

“What?”

“*Bueno* is a Spanish word. My father was Mexican. That’s where my husband found me—down on the Mexico border, working at the snack bar in the Airfield coffee shop. He plucked me out of poverty.”

Mick didn’t respond, so, to redeem his feelings, she added,

“I know why you don’t like ‘Mick;’ they called me ‘Spick.’”

“Who did?”

“The other officers’ wives.”

“You heard them?”

“I overheard them.”

As he was exiting her car, he said,

“May I call you?”

“No. I’ll call you.”

A few days later, as he sat talking to a pilot taking a routine training flight, the Sergeant said,

“I’ll take over, Airman. You got a call.”

He handed the earphones to the Sergeant, then walked back to the desk, sat down, and picked up the phone.

“Airman McMickle. Sir.”

A sultry voice asked,

“Would you like a date?”

“I said, ‘would you like a date?’”

“What?”

“Oh. Yeah. I sure would.”

“Okay. I’ll pick you up at six. Okay?”

“Yes. Okay. Bye.”

That evening, they went to her house.

She took his hand and led him past the piano to the bedroom, stopping to retrieve something from a bowl atop the piano.

“Here.” she said, coming so close they almost touched, and inserting something sweet and spicy between his lips.

“Now,” she said, “feed me one.”

In the bedroom, she stood facing away from him and took off her blouse. Then she turned toward him and wriggled out of her skirt. She was wearing only a bra and panties and a garter belt holding up sheer stockings. She kicked off two shoes in two directions, then removed her bra in one quick motion.

“My God-ess!”

She smiled both sweetly and wickedly. Then she sat on the bed and slowly rolled down her stockings from one cocked leg at a time.

Mick rushed forward and jumped on her, and they fell together on the bed.

Afterward, Mick asked,

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“Edwina. But they call me Eddy.”

“Why?”

“It’s short for ‘whirlpool’.”

The next time they met, she said,

“Let’s go to a motel. It’ll be fun.”

So they did. Mick paid the \$5.00 (plus tax), and they fell onto the bed, and onto each other. The second time around, Mike flew solo. She excused herself,

“I was filled full, I mean fulfilled, the first time.”

Then she laughed, but Mike didn’t get the joke.

Late one afternoon, she picked him up and drove straight to the park, then started climbing over the seat.

“It’s still light out!”

“You work better in the dark?”

Of course, a policeman came, and ordered them to move along, but after he left, she insisted they finish.

Just as she drove through the gate, she exclaimed,

“Oh, Mick! Do you love it?” (She almost said “me.”)

At the barracks, he said,

“He’s too old for you!”

“And I’m too old for you.”

“But I love you!”

“And I love you.” she said quietly. “But I love him, too. So I have to choose.”

“Don’t.”

“He rescued me. He’s returning tomorrow.”

Mick blurted out,

“I’ll always love you!”

and ran crying from the car, like a teenage girl.

The next morning, Mick saw her standing at the perimeter fence, watching a C-124 taxi up. He ran outside and grabbed her arm, but she pulled away and pushed through the gate past the A. P. Mick ran after her, and grabbed her arm again, but this time, when she jerked away from him, he stumbled, and fell under the moving wheel.

Telegram

Dear Mrs. McMickle:

I regret to inform you of the death of your son, Michael. He was killed on the flight line this morning, trying to save an innocent life. You can be proud of him. He will be awarded the Good Conduct Medal.

Cpt. I. M. Yeoman, Cmdr. (Acting)
Flt A, Grp 123 MATS

“Welcome to America”

Plain Jane couldn't get a date, so she started a dating service. Dwayne was her first client.

He was escorted into Jane's office (really, her home) by a shape-ly young lady wearing green tights under a short skirt.

Yummy! I'd like to date her? if she's legal, he prudently added, not really meaning it.

“I'm here to see Jane. About a date.”

“I know. You're Dwayne?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. You're her daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Home from school?”

“Yes. I just finished my first semester at the University. This is my friend, Glonda.”

Two eighteens beat a thirty-six any day. He snorted.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah.”

“Are you ready, Glonda?”

“Where y'all goin'?”

“Out for a walk.”

“Can I come, too?”

“No.”

“But I wanna come, too.” He whined a bit, for effect.

“You miss the point. My mother is expecting you.”

As the girls were leaving, Jane appeared. Her tangled, dull-colored hair was un-combable because it grew in all directions. Her outline was un-discernable under clothes that could never fit her. Her muddy eyes were deep-set in a mask of misshapen brown clay. Actually, Dwayne had already met her at a Singles Club, and had heard she was the last survivor of a previously-prominent family.

Wonder if she'll get any of the family fortune?

She served him refreshments and conversation.

This is a date for her!

“Well,” he asked suddenly, “you got any good-lookin' chicks

for me?”

Jane winced, then reached for a metal box nearby. She pulled out a 3x5 card.

“Do you mind a ‘Millie’?”

“Anything but a ‘Willy’!” Snort. “Her name’s Millie?”

“Her name is Victoria, Vickie. A ‘Millie’ is a British immigrant.”

“Oh. Is she built—uh, attractive?”

Just like a man. “Here’s her picture.”

Just like her daughter! “She’s good-lookin’: short, blonde, and built.”

“I am thinking something obscene.”

“Well, girls should be obscene and not heard.” Snort, snort.

“Pig.” *Gorgeous pig.* Like any woman, she would willingly have shattered her delicate psyche on the hard physique of an attractive man, and Dwayne was that. He was slender, yet showed muscular definition all around. His face was tanned and smooth, his green eyes bright and clear. He smiled without trying to, showing a perfect set of white, even teeth. His cropped, blond hair served as halo to his sculpted physiognomy.

KNOCK, KNOCK!

Miss Yummy’s back!

But no, it was Victoria, Vickie.

She looks better’n her picture.

After intros, Dwayne started to leave, but Jane said, “Wait.”

Some imperceptible signal between the two prompted Vickie to accompany Jane into another room, but they soon emerged, smiling.

“Dwayne, do you dance?”

“Yep. Right on the bottoms of my feet. And sometimes on the top of yours.” he added, for effect.

Vickie moved close to him. “I think I can guide you.”

“Slide me, baby.” he countered.

“Oh, Dwayne!” Jane interjected.

“Well, you see my point.”

“Yeah, I see your point. It’s on the top of your head.” *Your point is toward your prey. Dog!*

Outside, Dwayne asked for directions to Vickie’s apartment, but she said, “Better let me call you. I sorta promised another guy.”

Dwayne turned away abruptly and strode to his car. On the way

home, he thought about what he'd like to do to her.

At midnight, his phone rang.

Brrriinnnggg!

The sound of the telephone erased his loneliness.

"hello."

"Are you there?"

The Brit.! Date Breaker!

"Dwayne?"

"yes."

"I can't sleep."

The bastard took, and didn't leave her enough to sleep on.

"Would you like to visit my flat?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." *What's in it for me?*

"Don't be cross."

After he had guided her through the directions, he dressed, and as he walked to the car, he wondered again.

What's in it for me?

The ride over was slow, due to the drizzle and his unfamiliarity with the area, and he asked aloud at the stoplights,

What's in it for me?

He knocked on the right door, and, upon opening it, she stepped back and asked,

"How do I look?"

Then he knew he had her. And why he had come.

"You look good."

She was wearing the dress she'd worn on her first date of the evening. It nearly reached her feet, but was slit far up both sides. Her legs were solid yet shapely, and her derriere showed firm and prominently through her dress. Her large breasts were enough exposed to paint a full mental picture for Dwayne. After closing the door, she confessed,

"I drank an awful lot."

"You can drink yourself awake."

"Want a drink?"

"Naw. Show me your place."

"Alright." She walked toward some frames on the wall. "This is my sister. We used to live together."

“Did she go back?”

“Oh, no. She lives up one.”

When asked why they didn’t live together anymore, she answered simply,

“I love my sister.”

Another frame held a motto:

“Tanker pilots do it longer.”

Do what longer? He honestly didn’t know.

He held her as they walked toward the couch, and held her after they sat down. He allowed her to slip into semi-sleep, and after a while, gingerly laid her down. She pulled the front panel of her dress between her legs, then turned onto her stomach, and cradled the pillow. He patted her until she began to snore, copped a quick feel, then boldly squeezed her bottom, getting his hands full.

Standing above her, listening to the score of Lawrence of Arabia, with its haunting desert theme, then its “English Garden” music drawing Lawrence home, he spied her wallet on the table across the room.

He edged toward his quarry, unfolded it with a flip of the little finger of his left hand, and extracted the bills with the last two fingers of his right hand.

He couldn’t resist stopping to caress her again, then with rapid motion emptied his energy onto a prominent part of her anatomy.

At the door, he turned and said softly,

“Welcome to America.”

He nursed a headache until three o’clock Sunday afternoon. That evening, at the Associated Singles Society come-together, he starred in a panel discussion of personal accountability. Afterwards, he treated the panelists to soft drinks.

“The Eyes Have It”

Harry was grieving. His wife had left him—again—and although he wasn’t seeing things this time, he was hearing things. He had just heard a big fight next door, and he hadn’t even noticed anyone moving into the apartment. Oh well—it was quiet now.

Harry drifted. Then it came again—loud and violent sounds! He rushed to the peephole he hadn’t dared use for a while. He looked into a room where a man was assaulting a woman. She was screaming and trying to get away, but.... Harry rushed back to bed, put a pillow under his head and another one over his eyes, then pulled the bed covers over the top pillow. He pressed the corners of the pillows against his ears.

Harry thought back to the time he’d discovered that some previous tenant had worked eyeholes into the wall, affording a narrow view of the neighbors’ bedroom. Two cute girls lived there at the time and he watched them—repeatedly—until one night they turned into two guys! Right in front of his eyes! He had expressed his shock to his wife—who tried to hide her disgust, and her disappointment in him. She left him soon after, but he had tolled her back.

“After all,” he reminded her through the screen on her Mother’s front door, “Before we got married, you said I needed ‘correction’, and that you’d ‘undertake it’ after I ‘submitted’.” “Come on home.” he pleaded.

Harry’s wife arched her eyes—from right to top, from top to left—tracing the top half of a half-circle. Rennie Gay’s coarse black hair was cut short and neat, almost boyish in conception, but the rest of her features, facial and corporeal, insured no one would mistake her for a boy. Not only was her mouth way too wide and her lips way too full, but her body was undeniably female: she showed shapely calves (since their wedding, Harry had glimpsed only flashes of her thighs, so he had to rely on lust recollected in fantasy); her hips were well-rounded, and were weighed in Harry’s hands as often as he could manage it. Her breasts were womanly enough to require a bra, albeit not an oversize one. Her dark, shaded eyes were, to Harry, “raven-

ous,” and sultry with promise, a promise he thought he detected in those eyes right now. He approached her with arms rounded, mouth open, tongue out, until she pushed him back, and said,

“Oh, Harry! You suffer from eye-magination. You need help.”

A condition of her return was that Harry seek “professional” help.

“Mother said to send you to a woman doctor. Women are realists. She’ll straighten you out.” “Men are stupid.” his wife added.

Harry thought *She said that once before to me*. He began to recall an encounter with her when they were dating. She had stood him against the bathroom lavatory counter and practiced manual dexterity on him. She thought he was through, and he thought so, too, until she bent over to retrieve her skirt. She was wearing a matching set of dark green bra and panties. Harry urged her into the bedroom. It was so good, he didn’t want it to end. Afterwards, she had said with a note of disgust (not sexual, intellectual), “Men are stupid!” Although he was articulate enough to explain then, he didn’t. Now he thought *Didn’t she know men are hardwired to be stimulated, archetypally, to reproduce the species? Didn’t she realize she was calling God stupid?*

Well, now here he was, being escorted into the Doctor’s office, and he couldn’t believe his eyes! The Doctor looked like a porn queen, and appeared to him to act like one. She wiggled over to her desk, gestured for him to sit on the couch, and then she seated herself on a chair directly in front of him. She was wearing a dark-green micro-mini skirt, *and dark green panties*. When the Doctor crossed her legs, Harry popped his cork. He didn’t remember much after that moment, and he blamed it on the medicine the Doctors (“the real Doctors”) gave him at the hospital where he stayed until his wife’s mother came to get him out, “strictly for the sake of my daughter.” He tried to explain, really so his wife might come back to him, that the Psychiatrist had showed him the back of her hand, then brought it forward, as an invitation. He had accepted without so much as an *RSVP*, but when he put his hand between....well, that’s the last he remembered.... Remarkably, under her mother’s influence, his wife did return, although she was almost not there.

[WHAT HARRY DIDN'T SEE

The Doctor who tried to talk to Harry hadn't worn green in years, if ever. She was a Nun, a Professor at his wife's *Alma Mater*, with also a private practice, and had been his wife's close friend and personal advisor at University. Actually, she was clad in a totally unrevealing Nun's habit (she had remained an active member of her Order), and, although Harry couldn't see it, owned the body of an ugly old man, as well as his face: wrinkled, dour, peering through half-spectacles, like a British Justice in the condemnation mode. One would have expected her to place a doily on top of her head. It's true, she had lifted her long, black skirt slightly as she sat down, behind her desk, during the preliminaries, but the rest of the scenario Harry had misperceived.]

"Now she's gone again, this time just because I was trying to see what was going on! It might have been serious! Called me a 'Peeping Harry!'"

But he had been right, because now the noise level rose again, and he knew he had to do something! He threw on some pants, pulled a shirt over his head, and rushed on bare feet through his front door, across the hall, up to his neighbor's front door. He pounded on it. "Stop!" He was surprised when the door rocked open.

He stepped in, looked around, and saw the apartment was empty—no people, no furniture—except for a small square on the wall of the bedroom. It wasn't quite covering two peepholes. It was the back of a mirror.

The hearing was brief, the results conclusive. Harry was led out of the court room by heavy hands, all the while looking to his wife for rescue.

WHAT HARRY DID SEE

Harry screamed horribly as he peered with round, frightened eyes through the small pane in the large heavy door, but his scream only blended into the myriad of horrific noises in the Ward. Just outside the door, Harry's wife stood, talking on the phone.

"Hello, Sister?"

"Yes, Sister."

"Oh, yeah. He's in for good."

"Okay. Okay. Who do we work on now? Mother? Okay. Then *you* can be my Mommy. Okay, Mommy? Okay?"

“Time Matters”

Barb thought, “Beautiful!” The morning sun was melting the snow, and the air felt fresh but warmish through the bathroom window. She smiled as she recalled their song, “What a Difference a Day Makes.” Sunday’s overcast had perpetuated her gloom of spirit. Today’s clear sky lifted her from the abyss of despair, to the rim of hope.

As she struggled into her girdle, she determined to lose weight: *Eat right? Yes! Exercise? Why, yes!* She was just five feet tall and plumpish. Her bland face was pink and round, her light blues eyes set in flesh-sockets, her blonde hair thin and fine. Her smile showed more pink gums than teeth. Her small plump hands were vigorous with the brushes: hair, tooth, and nail.

“I feel great!!” Barb nearly sang. “It’s over!! At last!!” The three-year sentence for Bill’s death had been served. Now she could love his memory, and stop loving him.

When Barb entered the Java Shop, where she’d worked for years, Alice said, “Wha’?”, then smiled. “You feel better, Hon?” Barb smiled back but said nothing.

Bill had died on his sixtieth birthday, before they could celebrate it. Her mother had warned her against marrying a man twice her age, but Barb loved him! And then, they had had twenty good years together, and three fine children. Now, at forty-three, with the kids on their feet, she could start to live again.

She was scouring the spare coffee urn when Bill walked in, and smiled broadly at her! *It couldn’t be!* This was the Bill of his first-wedding pictures. He was tall and slim, though not skinny. His blond hair, cut short, complemented his fair, friendly face. He had bushy, bronze-tinted eyebrows, but only fuzz for a beard, and longish blond hair on his forearms. His smile was a set of matched pearls, as yet un-yellowed by age or nicotine. Could this be an unknown son? She quickly realized this Bill-boy was the newest member of the City Public Service crew that coffeed there every morning. They didn’t choose her booth this time, but she hung

around until she heard them call his name: Billy! She found excuses to pass by them, to look and listen. After half an hour they left. She stared through the large window after them as their oversized truck rocked and rumbled out of the parking lot.

The rest of her shift, she functioned as an automaton. Alice talked to her, but Barb heard only sounds. She drifted through that evening at home, unaware she was not conscious. Her attention was turned inward: Dare she hope for happiness again? In her optimistic moments, she felt twenty years younger.

The next few mornings were duplicates of the first one: his offered his wide smile to her, with now a “Good Morning!” added. The Friday morning fog didn’t dampen her spirits, nor narrow his greeting. She did experience a brief negative twinge when she realized she wouldn’t see him again this week.

But she immediately perked up and began to smile foolishly when she overheard the older men ribbing Bill, with remarks like, “Hey, Bud, looks like you made a conquest.”

“Yeah, you might be coming in here for lunch, too!”

“We better keep an eye on him, guys. He might overeat!”

After these several jibes trailed off, there came a voice, his voice, but at that exact moment, the cash register rang, and she couldn’t hear his reply. Actually, he had said nothing, only grunted in derision.

That Saturday morning, Barb’s heart spilled over into her mother-in-law’s ears. (Barb’s own mother had already been refined by death into pure soul). “Mamaw” was the typical Grandmother: large and round, full of smiles and advice (but only when asked for it).

“Whatta I do, Mamaw?”

Mamaw smiled. “Well, daughter,” she said, “you can live, or you can love.”

“What?”

“One smothers the other.”

Late Sunday evening, Barb called Mamaw.

“Mamaw, did Bill have any other children?”

“You know his first wife couldn’t have children.”

“I mean...you know.”

“No. My son loved only three women in his life.”

“Three?”

“Yes. He loved his mother, too.”

On Monday morning, Barb went fishing—but with the wrong bait. She invited her young, pretty daughter to breakfast at the Java Shop. She explained, “I want you to meet somebody.”

Her daughter, Trinket, recalled her mother’s youthful appearance: short, but symmetrically built, with all the female attributes firmly in place. Her face, though round, was not yet plump. When she was introduced to Bill, she smiled more broadly than her Mother remembered her ever doing, and her small nose wrinkled. She appeared as excited over Bill as her mother was.

Trinket left before the C. P. S. crew did, so Barb was sole witness to more ribbing of Bill. It wound up with the Crew Chief’s remark:

“Well, Bill, it looks like you’re gonna be a shack-pappy.”

Bill defended his rep, “What, with that old woman?”

“No, dumb ass, with her daughter!”

After the silence, Barb screamed, then ran crying through the front door and was never seen alive again. She had chosen love.

“Appointment in Gold”

Jennifer’s eyes had stopped crying, but her heart was still churning out tears.

“I should be over it by now.” she told Jerry. “After all, it’s been four years!”

Jennifer: The “girl with the skinny legs and a college education,” Jerry had often, and falsely, given as his ideal girl for marriage. The truth is, he wasn’t suited for marriage and he knew it. He also knew that most men aren’t and don’t know it. “Women’s Liberation” would have worked as “Women’s Revelation,” he often said—in unmixed company.

Anyway, this was their first date, the first between these two ex-marrieds, and Jerry wasn't disappointed. Besides her shapely (not skinny) legs, she had a shapely everything-else, and Jerry, uncharacteristically, had even noticed the girl's face. How could he not have? He had sat and gazed at it the long time it took her to compose herself. He would have attempted to "comfort" her, but his intent would have been too obvious, and he might have lost control. (A crying woman always strongly moved him.) At any rate, her face was cute, even if presently flushed and puffy. Her brown eyes and long eyelashes matched her freckles, in color, anyhow. Her brown hair was cut short, and appeared to be naturally curly. Her hands were slender, though not long, and Jerry wondered what they'd feel like on his face. Their mutual, married friend had told Jerry,

"She said to be sure to give you her phone number if you asked for it."

Now, after a party-dance at the Wide-Angle Singles Hut, then the customary dessert at The Java Shop, they were sipping coffee: "My only bad vice, except for advice." Jerry had confessed, hoping the way to this girl's heart was through her funny bone.

"Continue." he urged softly.

"What? Oh. Well, there was this guy in High School who liked me a lot, but I wouldn't have anything to do with 'im. Jer', he was a nerd. He not only acted it, he looked it. He had straight hair that went ever which-a-way, thick glasses held together by tape, I think, and a pocket full o' pens. He even carried a slide-rule, or somethin'. And a pocket calculator, no less. Actually, I did date him a couple o'times, but I cut all that off when he asked me to marry him after we graduated. I thought he was crazy. I sure treated 'im like he was." She stopped.

"That's the whole story?"

"Oh, no. I was in control, so I started datin' a jock. He was good-lookin', and he had a hot car, and boy could he dance!"

"But what happened four years ago?"

"Well, it was our Tenth High School Reunion, and Mr. Nerd was there, with his gorgeous wife...."

"I believe they call that a Trophy wife." Jerry interrupted. He added, "Had he changed?"

"He sure had. He had a neat crew cut, and the glasses were

gone. He wore an expensive suit, and he didn't "lope" like he used to. He walked with "dignity." Is that the right word?"

"Yes." [Maybe direct deception was the right route.]

"Yeah, and she wasn't his only trophy. Some of us went with them after the main party to their trophy house. I was shocked! It seems he had gotten an accounting degree and became a C. P. A.. He musta had some big accounts! And they were so gracious! He didn't even hint that he remembered the old days. I asked to use the bathroom, and Jerry, I couldn't believe my eyes! All the faucets were gold! And this was the guest bathroom! I cried and cried. I couldn't stop crying! I bet I used a half a roll o' toilet tissue dryin' my eyes."

After a long silence, Jerry said, "God, that must have been awful!" [Perhaps sympathy would work.] "By the way, what happened to the handsome jock, the good dancer with the hot car?"

She sighed. "I married 'im." She paused. "I still go to see 'im once a month—in the penitentiary."

Unexpectedly, her physiognomy was suddenly transformed. With a seductive look, and a matching voice, she declared: "You know, Jerry, you look a lot like my husband used to." Then she crossed her legs, not immodestly but not demurely, either, and asked, "You wanna come over for a few drinks?"

When Jerry later related the story to the guys at work, one of them asked, "Well, did you go?"

"Shoot, no!" Jerry said, and laughed. "I ain't no jailbird."

Troubled Women

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