



Also by Ann Beattie

Distortions
Chilly Scenes of Winter
Secrets and Surprises
Falling in Place
The Burning House
Love Always
Where You'll Find Me
Picturing Will
What Was Mine
Another You
My Life, Starring Dara Falcon
Park City
Perfect Recall
The Doctor's House
Follies
Walks with Men



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THE
NEW

YORKER

STORIES

A Platonic Relationship

When Ellen was told that she would be hired as a music teacher at the high school, she decided that it did not mean that she would have to look like the other people on the faculty. She would tuck her hair neatly behind her ears, instead of letting it fall free, schoolgirlishly. She had met some of the teachers when she went for her interview, and they all seemed to look like what she was trying to get away from—suburbanites at a shopping center. Casual and airy, the fashion magazines would call it. *At least*, that's what they would have called it back when she still read them, when she lived in Chevy Chase and wore her hair long, falling free, the way it had fallen in her high-school graduation picture. "Your lovely face," her mother used to say, "and all covered by hair." Her graduation picture was still on display in her parents' house, next to a picture of her on her first birthday.

It didn't matter how Ellen looked now; the students laughed at her behind her back. They laughed behind all the teachers' backs. They don't like me, Ellen thought, and she didn't want to go to school. She forced herself to go, because she needed the job. She had worked hard to get away from her lawyer husband and almost-paid-for house. She had doggedly taken night classes at Georgetown University for two years, leaving the dishes after dinner and always expecting a fight. Her husband loaded them into the dishwasher—no fight. Finally, when she was ready to leave, she had to start the fight herself. There is a better world, she told him. "Teaching at the high school?" he asked. In the end, though, he had helped her find a place to live—an older house, on a side street off Florida Avenue, with splintery floors that had to be covered with rugs, and walls that needed to be repapered but that she never repapered. He hadn't made trouble for her. Instead, he made her look silly. He made her say that teaching high school was a better world. She saw the foolishness of her statement, however, and after she left him she began to read great numbers of newspapers and magazines, and then more and more radical newspapers and magazines. She had dinner with her husband several months after she had left him, at their old house. During dinner, she stated several ideas of importance, without citing her source. He listened carefully, crossing his knees and nodding attentively—the pose he always assumed with his clients. The only time during the evening she had thought he might start a fight was when she told him she was living with a man—a student, twelve years younger than she. An odd expression came across his face. In retrospect, she realized that he must have been truly puzzled. She quickly told him that the relationship was platonic.

What Ellen told him was the truth. The man, Sam, was a junior at George Washington University. He had been rooming with her sister and brother-in-law, but friction had developed between the two men. Her sister must have expected it. Her sister's husband was very athletic, a pro-football fan who wore a Redskins T-shirt to bed instead of a pajama top, and who had a football autographed by Bill Kilmer on their mantel. Sam was not frail, but one sensed at once that he would always be gentle. It was his calmness that did that. She invited him to move in after her sister explained the situation; he could help a bit with her rent. Also, although she did not want her husband to know it, she had discovered that she was a little afraid of being alone at night.

When Sam moved in in September, she almost sympathized with her brother-in-law. Sam wasn't obnoxious, but he was strange. She had to pay attention to him, whether she wanted to or not. He was so quiet that she was always conscious of his presence; he never went out, so she felt obliged to offer him coffee or dinner, although he almost always refused. He was also eccentric. Her husband had been

eccentric. Often in the evenings he had polished the brass snaps of his briefcase, rubbing them to high shine, then triumphantly opening and closing them, and then rubbing a little more to remove his thumbprints. Then he would drop the filthy cloth on the sofa, which was upholstered with pale French linen that he himself had selected.

Sam's strange ways were different. Once, he got up in the night to investigate a noise, and Ellen lying in her room, suddenly realized that he was walking all over the house in the dark, without turning on any lights. It was just mice, he finally announced outside her door, saying it so matter-of-factly that she wasn't even upset by the news. He kept cases of beer in his room. He bought more cases than he drank—more than most people would ever consider drinking over quite a long period. When he did have a beer, he would take one bottle from the case and put it in the refrigerator and wait for it to get cold, and then drink it. If he wanted more, he would go and get another bottle, put it in the refrigerator, wait another hour, and then drink that. One night, Sam asked her if she would like a beer. To be polite, she said yes. He went to his room and took out a bottle and put it in the refrigerator. "It will be cold in a while," he said quietly. Then he sat in a chair across from her and drank his beer and read a magazine. She felt obliged to wait there in the living room until the beer was cold.

One night, her husband came to the house to talk about their divorce—or so he said. Sam was there and offered him a beer. "It will be cold in a while," he said as he put it in the refrigerator. Sam made no move to leave the living room. Her husband seemed incapacitated by Sam's silent presence. Sam acted as if they were his guests, as if he owned the house. He wasn't authoritarian—in fact, he usually didn't speak unless he was spoken to—but he was more comfortable than they were, and that night his offer of cigarettes and beer seemed calculated to put them at ease. As soon as her husband found out that Sam planned to become a lawyer, he seemed to take an interest in him. She liked Sam because she had convinced herself that his ways were more tolerable than her husband's. It became a pleasant evening. Sam brought cashews from his room to go with the beer. They discussed politics. She and her husband told Sam that they were going to get divorced. Sam nodded. Her husband had her to dinner once more before the divorce was final, and he invited Sam, too. Sam came along. They had a pleasant evening.

Things began to go smoothly at her house because of Sam. By Christmas, they were good friends. Sometimes she thought back to the early days of her marriage and remembered how disillusioned she had felt. Her husband had thrown his socks on the bedroom floor at night, and left his pajamas on the bathroom floor in the morning. Sam was like that sometimes. She found clothes scattered on the floor when she cleaned his room—socks and shirts, usually. She noticed that he did not sleep in pajamas. Things bother you less as you get older, she thought.

Ellen cleaned Sam's room because she knew he was studying hard to get into law school; he didn't have time to be fussy. She hadn't intended to pick up after a man again, but it was different this time. Sam was very appreciative when she cleaned. The first time she did it, he brought her flowers the next day, and he thanked her several times, saying that she didn't have to do it. That was it—she knew she didn't have to. But when he thanked her she became more enthusiastic about it, and after a while she began to wax his room as well as dust it; she Windexed the windows, and picked up the little pieces of lint the vacuum had missed. And, in spite of being so busy, Sam did nice things for her. On her birthday, he surprised her with a blue bathrobe. When she was depressed, he cheered her up by saying that any student would like a teacher as pretty as she. She was flattered that he thought her pretty. She began to lighten her hair a little.

He helped her organize her school programs. He had a good ear and he seemed to care about music. Before the Christmas concert for the parents, he suggested that the Hallelujah Chorus be followed by Dunstable's "Sancta Maria." The Christmas program was a triumph; Sam was there, third row center.

and he applauded loudly. He believed she could do anything. After the concert, there was a picture in the newspaper of her conducting the singers. She was wearing a long dress that Sam had told her was particularly becoming to her. Sam cut out the picture and tucked it in his mirror. She carefully removed it whenever she cleaned the glass, and then replaced it in the same spot.

As time went on, Sam began to put a six-pack of beer in the refrigerator instead of a bottle at a time. They stayed up late at night on the weekends, talking. He wore the pajamas she had given him; she wore her blue bathrobe. He told her that her hair looked more becoming around her face; she should let it fall free. She protested; she was too old. "How old are you?" he asked, and she told him she was thirty-two. She rearranged her hair. She bought him a sweater-vest to keep him warm. But the colors were too wild, he said, laughing, when he opened the box. No, she insisted—he looked good in bright colors, and anyway the predominant color was navy blue. He wore the sweater-vest so long that finally she had to remind him that it needed to be dry-cleaned. She took it with her one morning when she dropped off her clothes.

Then they began talking almost every night, until very late. She got up in the mornings without enough rest, and rubbed one finger across the dark, puffy circles under her eyes. She asked him how his studies were coming; she was worried that he was not paying enough attention to his schoolwork. He told her everything was all right. "I'm way ahead of the game," he said. But she knew something was wrong. She offered to have his professor to dinner—the one who would write him a recommendation to law school—but Sam refused. It wouldn't be any trouble, she told him. No, he didn't want to impose on her. When she said again that she wanted to do it, he told her to forget it; he didn't care about law school anymore. That night, they stayed up even later. The next day, when she tried to lead the Junior Chorus, she could hardly get out more than a few phrases of "The Impossible Dream" without yawning. The class laughed, and because she hadn't had enough sleep she became angry with them. That night, she told Sam how embarrassed she was about losing her temper, and he reassured her. They drank several beers. She expected Sam to go into his room and get another six-pack, but he didn't rise. "I'm not happy," Sam said to her. She said that he had been working too hard. He waved the thought away. Then perhaps the textbooks were at fault, or his professors weren't communicating their enthusiasm to the class. He shook his head. He told her he hadn't looked at a book for weeks. She became upset. Didn't he want to become a lawyer? Didn't he want to help poor people? He reminded her that most of the newspapers and magazines she subscribed to pointed out that the country was so messed up that no one could help. They were right, he said. It was useless. The important thing was to know when to give up.

Ellen was restless that night and slept very little. When she left in the morning, she saw that her door was closed. He was not even going through the pretense of going to classes. She would have to do something to help him. He should stay in school. Why should he quit now? Ellen had trouble concentrating that day. Everything the students did irritated her—even the usual requests for pop and their favorites. She kept control of herself, though. It was not right to yell at them. She let one of the students in Junior Chorus—a girl named Alison, who was taking piano lessons—play the piano, while she sat on her stool, looking out over the blur of faces, joining without enthusiasm in the singing of "Swanee River." Teaching had become meaningless to her. Let her husband vacuum those pastel rug squares in their old house; let someone else teach these students. She knew that "Swanee River" was a trivial, silly song, and she wanted three o'clock to come as badly as the students did. When the bell finally rang, she left at once. She bought pastries at a delicatessen, selecting cherry tarts and éclairs. She planned to have a good dinner, and then a discussion in which she would be firm with Sam. She must make him care again. But when she got home Sam wasn't there. He didn't come home until ten o'clock, after she had eaten. She was very relieved when he came in.

"I was at your husband's," he said.

Was this a joke?

~~“No. He called when you were teaching. He wanted to ask you about some paper. We started talking about law school. He was disappointed that I’d decided not to go. He asked me to come over.”~~

Had he been talked into going to law school?

“No. But your husband is a very nice man. He offered to write me a recommendation.”

“Take it!” she said.

“No, it’s not worth the hassle. It’s not worth all those years of study, competing with punks. What for?”

What was there better to do?

“See the country.”

“See the country!” she repeated.

“Get a motorcycle. Go out to the Coast. It’s warm there. I’m sick of the cold.”

There was nothing she could say. She decided that she was like a mother whose son has just told her he wants to design clothes. Couldn’t he do something *serious*? Couldn’t he be an architect? But she couldn’t say this to him. If he had to go West, couldn’t he at least buy a car? He told her it had to be a motorcycle. He wanted to feel the handlebars get warm as he got farther west. She went into the kitchen and got the box of pastries. On the way back to the living room, she clicked the thermostat up two degrees. They drank coffee and ate the éclairs and little tarts. It was a celebration; he was going to do what he was going to do. She said she would go with him on the weekend to look for a motorcycle.

On Monday he left. Just like that, he was gone. He left all his things in his room. After a few days, she realized that it would be practical to store his things in the attic and use his room for a study, but she couldn’t touch anything. She continued to take care of the room, but not every day. Sometimes when she felt lonely, she would go in there and look at all his books in the bookcase. Other times, she would clean the house thoroughly at night, with a burst of energy, as if to make ready for his return. One night after she cleaned, she took some bottles of beer to put in the refrigerator, so they would be cold when she came home from work. She did not lose her temper anymore, but her programs were no longer innovative. Alison’s piano playing guided the Junior Chorus through the world, sad and weary, through the winter and into the spring.

One night, her husband called (he was her ex-husband now). He was still trying to track down the safe-deposit box where his mother had placed her jewelry. Quite a lot of old pieces were there; there were a few diamonds and some good jade. His mother was old; he didn’t want to disturb her, or make her think of dying, and he was embarrassed to let her know he’d misplaced her instructions. She said she would look for the paper and call him back, and he asked if he could come and look with her. She said that would be all right. He came that night, and she offered him a beer. They looked through his file and found nothing. “The paper has to be somewhere,” he said, full of professional assurance. “The paper has to be somewhere.” She gestured hopelessly at the rooms of the house; it wasn’t in the bathroom or the kitchen or the living room, and it certainly wasn’t in Sam’s room. He asked how Sam was doing, and she told him she hadn’t heard from him. Every day she expected some word from him, but none had come. She didn’t tell him that—just that she hadn’t heard. She drank several beers, as she did every night. They sat together in the living room, drinking beer. She asked if he would like something to eat, and fixed sandwiches. He said he would go, so she could get up in the morning. She gestured at the rooms of the house. He stayed, and slept in her bed.

In the morning, Ellen called the school and said she had a cold. “Everybody is sick,” the switchboard operator told her. “It’s the change in the weather.” She and her husband took a drive and went to a nice restaurant for lunch. After lunch, they went to his house and hunted for the paper. They couldn’t find it. He fixed her dinner, and she stayed at his house that night. In the morning, he dropped

her off at school on his way to work.

~~A girl in Junior Chorus came up to talk to her after class. Shyly, the girl told her she played the piano. Could she also play the piano for the chorus sometime? Alison played very well, the girl said quickly; she didn't want Alison to stop playing, but could she try sometime, too? She could read music well, and she knew some classics and some Gilbert and Sullivan and a lot of popular songs, too. She mentioned some of them. Ellen watched the girl leave, blushing with nervousness at having spoken to the teacher and proud that she would be allowed to play the piano at the next meeting. She was a tall girl, with brown hair that had been cut too short; her glasses, which were harlequin-shaped, looked more like something the girl's mother would wear. Ellen wondered if Sam had a girlfriend. If the girlfriend had brown hair, did it get tangled in the wind on the motorcycle? Sam would have been proud of her—the way she put the new pianist at ease, feigning interest in the girl's talent, thanking her for volunteering. The next afternoon, she thought of Sam again. He would have found it funny that the brown-haired girl also chose to play "Swanee River."~~

Her husband came to her house after work, and they had dinner. She had a postcard from Sam. She showed it to him—a picture of the Santa Monica Freeway, clogged with cars. The message read, "The small speck between the red and the yellow car is me, doing 110. Love, Sam." There were no specks between cars, which were themselves only specks in the picture, but Ellen looked and smiled anyway.

The next week there was another postcard—a scowling Indian—which had been mailed to her husband. Sam thanked him for the talk they had before he left. He closed with some advice: "Come West. It's warm and it's beautiful. How do you know until you try? Peace, Sam."

Later that week, while they were on their way to buy groceries, a couple on a motorcycle came out of nowhere and swerved in front of their car, going much too fast.

"Crazy son of a bitch!" her husband said, hitting the brakes.

The girl on the motorcycle looked back, probably to assure herself that they really had got through safely. The girl was smiling. Actually, the girl was too far away for Ellen to see her expression clearly, but she was certain that she saw a smile.

"Crazy son of a bitch," her husband was saying. Ellen closed her eyes and remembered being in the motorcycle shop with Sam, looking at the machines.

"I want one that will do a hundred with no sweat," Sam had said to the salesman.

"All of these will do a hundred easy," the salesman said, smiling at them.

"This one, then," Sam told him, tapping the handlebars of the one he stood by.

He paid for most of it with cash. She hadn't taken any rent money from him for a long time, so he had a lot of cash. He wrote a check to cover the rest of it. The salesman was surprised, counting the bills.

"Do you have streamers?" Sam had asked.

"Streamers?"

"Isn't that what they're called? The things kids have on their bikes?"

The salesman smiled. "We don't carry them. Guess you'd have to go to a bicycle shop."

"I guess I will," Sam said. "I've got to go in style."

Ellen looked at her husband. How can I be so unsympathetic to him, she wondered. She was angry. She should have asked Sam why she felt that way toward her husband sometimes. He would have explained it all to her, patiently, in a late-night talk. There had been no return address on the postcards. Someday he would send his address, and she could still ask him. She could tell him about the new girl who could have played anything she wanted and who selected "Swanee River." In the car, with her eyes closed, she smiled, and ahead of them—miles ahead of them now—so did the girl on the motorcycle.

Fancy Flights

Silas is afraid of the vacuum cleaner. He stands, looking out the bedroom door, growling at it. He also growls when small children are around. The dog is afraid of them, and they are afraid of him because he growls. His growling always gets him in trouble; nobody thinks he is entitled to growl. The dog is also afraid of a lot of music. “One Little Story That the Crow Told Me” by the New Lost City Ramblers raises his hackles. Bob Dylan’s “Positively Fourth Street” brings bared teeth and a drooping tail. Sometimes he keeps his teeth bared even through the quiet intervals. If the dog had his way, all small children would disappear, and a lot of musicians would sound their last notes. If the dog had his way, he would get Dylan by the leg in a dark alley. Maybe they could take a trip—Michael and the dog—to a recording studio or a concert hall, wherever Dylan was playing, and wait for him to come out. Then Silas could get him. Thoughts like these (“fancy flights,” his foreman called them) were responsible for Michael’s no longer having a job.

He had worked in a furniture factory in Ashford, Connecticut. Sometimes when his lathe was churning and grinding, he would start laughing. Everyone was aware of his laughter, but nobody did anything about it. He smoked hash in the parking lot in back of the factory during his break. Toward the end of his shift, he often had to choke back hysteria. One night, the foreman told him a Little Moron joke that was so funny Michael almost fell down laughing. After that, several people who worked there stopped by to tell him jokes, and every time he nearly laughed himself sick. Anybody there who spoke to him made him beam, and if they told a joke, or even if they said they had “a good one,” he began to laugh right away. Every day he smoked as much hash as he could stand. He wore a hairnet—everyone had to wear a hairnet, after a woman had her face yanked down to within a fraction of an inch of a blade when a machine caught her hair—and half the time he forgot to take it off after he finished work. He’d find out he was still wearing it in the morning when he woke up. He thought that was pretty funny; he might be somebody’s wife, with pink curlers under the net and a cigarette dangling out of his mouth.

He had already been somebody’s husband, but he and his wife were separated. He was also separated from his daughter, but she looked so much like his wife that he thought of them as one. Toward the end, he had sometimes got confused and talked baby talk to his wife and complained about his life to his four-and-a-half-year-old daughter. His wife wrote to his grandmother about the way he was acting, and the old woman sent him a hundred dollars and told him to “buy a psychiatrist,” as if they were shirts. Instead, he bought his daughter a pink plastic bunny that held a bar of soap and floated in the bath. The bunny had blue eyebrows and a blue nose and an amazed look, probably because its stomach was soap. He had bought her the bunny because he was not ungenerous, and he spent the rest on Fontina cheese for his wife and hash for himself. They had a nice family gathering—his daughter nose-to-nose with the bunny, his wife eating the cheese, he smoking hash. His wife said that his smoking had killed her red-veined maranta. “How can you keep smoking something that kills a plant?” she kept asking. Actually, he was glad to see the maranta dead. It was a creepy plant. It looked as if its veins had blood in them. Smoke hadn’t killed the plant, though. A curse that his friend Carlos put on it at his request did it. It died in six days: the leaves turned brown at the tips and bare branches unfolded in the daytime, and soon it fell over the rim of the pot, where it hung until it turned completely brown.

Plant dead, wife gone, Michael still has his dog and his grandmother, and she can be counted on for

words of encouragement, mail-order delicacies, and money. Now that they are alone together, he devotes most of his time to Silas, and takes better care of him than ever before. He gives Silas Milk Bones so that his teeth will be clean. He always has good intentions, but before he knows it he has smoked some hash and put on “One Little Story That the Crow Told Me,” and there is Silas listening to the music, with his clean, white teeth bared.

Michael is living in a house that belongs to some friends named Prudence and Richard. They have gone to Manila. Michael doesn't have to pay any rent—just the heat and electricity bills. Since he never turns a light on, the bill will be small. And on nights when he smokes hash he turns the heat down to fifty-five. He does this gradually—smoke for an hour, turn it from seventy to sixty-five, smoke another hour and put it down to fifty-five. Prudence, he discovers, is interested in acupuncture. There is a picture in one of her books of a man with his face contorted with agony, with a long, thin spike in his back. No. He must be imagining that. Usually Michael doesn't look at the books that are lying around. He goes through Prudence's and Richard's bureau drawers. Richard wears size thirty-two Jockey shorts. Prudence has a little blue barrette for her hair. Michael has even unwrapped some of the food in the freezer. Fish. He thinks about defrosting it and eating it, but then he forgets. He usually eats two cans of Campbell's Vegetarian Vegetable soup for lunch and four Chunky Pecan candy bars for dinner. If he is awake in time for breakfast, he smokes hash.

One evening, the phone rings. Silas gets there first, as usual, but he can't answer it. Poor old Silas. Michael lets him out the door before he answers the phone. He notices that Ray has come calling. Ray is a female German shepherd, named by the next-door neighbor's children. Silas tries to mount Ray.

“Richard?” says the voice on the telephone.

“Yeah. Hi,” Michael says.

“Is this Richard?”

“Right.”

“It doesn't sound like you, Richard.”

“You sound funny, too. What's new?”

“What? You really sound screwed up tonight, Richard.”

“Are you in a bad mood or something?” Michael counters.

“Well, I might be surprised that we haven't talked for months, and I call and you just mutter.”

“It's the connection.”

“Richard, this doesn't *sound* like you.”

“This is Richard's mother. I forgot to say that.”

“What are you so hostile about, Richard? Are you all right?”

“Of course I am.”

“O.K. This is weird. I called to find out what Prudence was going to do about California.”

“She's going to go,” Michael says.

“You're kidding me.”

“No.”

“Oh—I guess I picked the wrong time to call. Why don't I call you back tomorrow?”

“O.K.,” Michael says. “Bye.”

Prudence left exact directions about how to take care of her plants. Michael has it down pretty well by now, but sometimes he just splashes some water on them. These plants moderately damp, those quite damp, some every third day—what does it matter? A few have died, but a few have new leaves. Sometimes Michael feels guilty and he hovers over them, wondering what you do for a plant that is supposed to be moderately dry but is soaking wet. In addition to watering the plants, he tries to do a few other things that will be appreciated. He has rubbed some oil into Prudence's big iron frying pan.

and has let it sit on the stove. Once, Silas went out and rolled in cow dung and then came in and rolled on the kitchen floor, and Michael was very conscientious about washing that. The same day, he found some chalk in the kitchen cabinet and drew a hopscotch court on the floor and jumped around a little bit. Sometimes he squirts Silas with some of Prudence's Réplique, just to make Silas mad. Silas is the kind of dog who would be offended if a homosexual approached him. Michael thinks of the dog as a displaced person. He is aware that he and the dog get into a lot of clichéd situations—man with dog curled at his side, sitting by fire; dog accepts food from man's hand, licks hand when food is gone. Prudence was reluctant to let the big dog stay in the house. Silas won her over, though. Making full use of another cliché at the time, Silas curled around her feet and beat his tail on the rug.

"Where's Richard?" Sam asks.

"Richard and Prudence went to Manila."

"Manila? Who are you?"

"I lost my job. I'm watching the house for them."

"Lost your job—"

"Yeah. I don't mind. Who wants to spend his life watching out that his machine doesn't get him?"

"Where were you working?"

"Factory."

Sam doesn't have anything else to say. He was the man on the telephone, and he would like to know why Michael pretended to be Richard on the phone, but he sort of likes Michael and sees that it was a joke.

"That was pretty funny when we talked on the phone," he says. "At least I'm glad to hear she's not in California."

"It's not a bad place," Michael says.

"She has a husband in California. She's better off with Richard."

"I see."

"What do you do here?" Sam asks. "Just watch out for burglars?"

"Water the plants. Stuff like that."

"You really got me good on the phone," Sam says.

"Yeah. Not many people have called."

"You have anything to drink here?" Sam asks.

"I drank all their liquor."

"Like to go out for a beer?" Sam asks.

"Sure."

Sam and Michael go to a bar Michael knows called Happy Jack's. It's a strange place, with "Heavenly Wave" on the jukebox, along with Tammy Wynette's "Too Far Gone."

"I wouldn't mind passing an evening in the sweet arms of Tammy Wynette, even if she is a redneck," Sam says.

The barmaid puts their empty beer bottles on her tray and walks away.

"She's got big legs," Michael says.

"But she's got nice soft arms," Sam says. "Like Tammy Wynette."

As they talk, Tammy is singing about love and barrooms.

"What do you do?" Michael asks Sam.

"I'm a shoe salesman."

"That doesn't sound like much fun."

"You didn't ask me what I did for fun. You asked me what my job was."

"What do you do for fun?" Michael asks.

“Listen to Tammy Wynette records,” Sam says.

“You think about Tammy Wynette a lot.”

“I once went out with a girl who looked like Tammy Wynette,” Sam says. “She wore a nice low-cut blouse, with white ruffles, and black high-heel shoes.”

Michael rubs his hand across his mouth.

“She had downy arms. You know what I mean. They weren’t really hairy,” Sam says.

“Excuse me,” Michael says.

In the bathroom, Michael hopes that Happy Jack isn’t drunk anywhere in the bar. When he gets drunk he likes to go into the bathroom and start fights. After a customer has had his face bashed in by Happy Jack, his partners usually explain to the customer that he is crazy. Today, nobody is in the bathroom except an old guy at the washbasin, who isn’t washing, though. He is standing there looking in the mirror. Then he sighs deeply.

Michael returns to their table. “What do you say we go back to the house?” he says to Sam.

“Have they got any Tammy Wynette records?”

“I don’t know. They might,” Michael says.

“O.K.,” Sam says.

“How come you wanted to be a shoe salesman?” Michael asks him in the car.

“Are you out of your mind?” Sam says. “I didn’t want to be a shoe salesman.”

Michael calls his wife—a mistake. Mary Anne is having trouble in the day-care center. The child wants to quit and stay home and watch television. Since Michael isn’t doing anything, his wife says maybe he could stay home while she works and let Mary Anne have her way, since her maladjustment is obviously caused by Michael’s walking out on them when he *knew* the child adored him.

“You just want me to move back,” Michael says. “You still like me.”

“I don’t like you at all. I never make any attempt to get in touch with you, but if you call you’ll have to hear what I have to say.”

“I just called to say hello, and you started in.”

“Well, what did you call for, Michael?”

“I was lonesome.”

“I see. You walk out on your wife and daughter, then call because you’re lonesome.”

“Silas ran away.”

“I certainly hope he comes back, since he means so much to you.”

“He does,” Michael says. “I really love that dog.”

“What about Mary Anne?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to care, but what you just said didn’t make any impression on me.”

“Are you in some sensitivity group, or something?”

“No.”

“Well, before you hang up, could you think about the situation for a minute and advise me about how to handle it? If I leave her at the day-care center, she has a fit and I have to leave work and get her.”

“If I had a car I could go get her.”

“That isn’t very practical, is it? You don’t have a car.”

“You wouldn’t have one if your father hadn’t given it to you.”

“That seems a bit off the subject.”

“I wouldn’t drive a car if I had one. I’m through with machines.”

“Michael, I guess I really don’t feel like talking to you tonight.”

“One thing you could do would be to give her calcium. It’s a natural tranquilizer.”

“O.K. Thanks very much for the advice. I hope it didn’t tax you too much.”

~~“You’re very sarcastic to me. How do you expect me to be understanding when all I get sarcasm?”~~

“I don’t really *expect* it.”

“You punch words when you talk.”

“Are you stoned, Michael?”

“No, I’m just lonesome. Just sitting around.”

“Where are you living?”

“In a house.”

“How can you afford that? Your grandmother?”

“I don’t want to talk about how I live. Can we change the subject?”

“Can we hang up instead, Michael?”

“Sure,” Michael says. “Good night, baby.”

Sam and Carlos are visiting Michael. Carlos’s father owns a plastics plant in Bridgeport. Carlos can roll a joint in fifteen seconds, which is admirable to Michael’s way of thinking. But Carlos can be drag, too. Right now he is talking to Michael about a job Michael could have in his father’s plant.

“No more factories, Carlos,” Michael says. “If everybody stopped working, the machines would stop, too.”

“I don’t see what’s so bad about it,” Carlos says. “You work the machines for a few hours, then you leave with your money.”

“If I ask my grandmother for money she sends it.”

“But will she *keep* sending money?” Sam asks.

“You think I’m going to ask her?”

“I’ll bet you wouldn’t mind working someplace in the South, where the women look like Tammy Wynette.”

“North, South—what’s the difference?”

“What do you mean, ‘What’s the difference?’ Women in the South must look something like Tammy Wynette, and women up North look like mill rats.”

Carlos always has very powerful grass, which Michael enjoys. Carlos claims that he puts a spell on the grass to make it stronger.

“Why don’t you put a curse on your father’s machines?” Michael says now.

“What for?” Carlos asks.

“Why don’t you change all the machines into Tammy Wynettes?” Sam asks. “Everybody would wake up in the morning and there would be a hundred Tammy Wynettes.”

Sam realizes that he has smoked too much. The next step, he thinks now, is to stop smoking.

“What do you do?” Carlos asks Sam.

“I sell shoes.” Sam notices that he has answered very sanely. “Before that, I was a math major at Antioch.”

“Put a curse on that factory, Carlos,” Michael says.

Carlos sighs. Everybody smokes his grass and pays no attention to what he says and then they want him to put curses on things all the time.

“What if I put a curse on you?” Carlos asks.

“I’m already cursed,” Michael says. “That’s what my grandmother says in her letters—that I was such a blessing to the family, but I myself am cursed with ill luck.”

“Change me into George Jones,” Sam says.

Carlos stares at them as he rolls a joint. He isn’t putting a curse on them, but he is considering

He firmly believes that he is responsible for his godfather's getting intestinal cancer. But he isn't really a magician. He would like his curses to be reliable and perfect, like a machine.

Michael's grandmother has sent him a present—five pounds of shelled pecans. A booklet included with the package says that they are “Burstin’ with wholesome Southern goodness.” They're the first thing he has eaten for a day and a half, so he eats a lot of them. He thinks that he is eating in too much of a hurry, and he smokes some hash to calm down. Then he eats some more pecans. He listens to Albinoni. He picks out a seed from a pouch of grass that is lying under the couch and buries it in one of Prudence's plants. He will have to remember to have Carlos say a few words over it; Carlos is just so humble when he says he can't bless things. He rummages through the grass and finds another seed and plants it in another pot. They'll never grow, he thinks sadly. Albinoni always depresses him. He turns the record off and then is depressed that there is no music playing. He looks over the records, trying to decide. It is hard to decide. He lights his pipe again. Finally, he decides—not on a record but what to eat: Chunky Pecans. He has no Chunky Pecans, but he can just walk down the road to the store and buy some. He counts his change: eighty cents, including the dime he found in Prudence's underwear drawer. He can buy five Chunky Pecans for that. He feels better when he realizes he can have the Chunky Pecans and he relaxes, lighting his pipe. All his clothes are dirty, so he has begun wearing things that Richard left behind. Today he has on a black shirt that is too tight for him, with a rhinestone-studded peacock on the front. He looks at his sparkling chest and dozes off. When he awakens, he decides to go look for Silas. He sprays deodorant under his arms without taking off the shirt and walks outside, carrying his pipe. A big mistake. If the police stopped to question him and found him with that. . . . He goes back to the house, puts the pipe on a table, and goes out again. Thinking about Silas being lost makes him very sad. He knows it's not a good idea to go marching around town in a peacock shirt weeping, but he can't help it. He sees an old lady walking her dog.

“Hello, little dog,” he says, stopping to stroke it.

“It's female,” the old woman says. The old woman has on an incredible amount of makeup; her eyes are circled with blue—bright blue under the eyes, as well as on top.

“Hello, girl,” he says, stroking the dog. “She's thirteen,” the old woman says. “The vet says she won't live to see fourteen.”

Michael thinks of Silas, who is four.

“He's right, I know,” the old woman says.

Michael walks back around the corner and sees Silas on the front lawn. Silas charges him, jumps over him, barking and running in circles. “Where have you been?” Michael asks the dog. Silas barks. “Hello, Silas. Where have you *been*?” Michael asks. Silas squirms on his back, panting. When Michael stoops to pat him, Silas lunges, pawing the rhinestone-studded shirt and breaking the threads. Rhinestones fall all over the lawn.

Inside, Silas sniffs the rug, runs in and out of rooms. “You old dog,” Michael says. He feeds Silas a pecan. Panting, Silas curls up at his feet. Michael pulls the pouch of grass out from under the couch and stuffs a big wad in his pipe. “Good old Silas,” Michael says, lighting his pipe. He gets happier and happier as he smokes, but at the height of his happiness he falls asleep. He sleeps until Silas's barking awakens him. Someone is at the door. His wife is standing there.

“Hello, Elsa,” he says. She can't possibly hear him above Silas's barking. Michael leads the barking dog into the bedroom and closes the door. He walks back to the door. Elsa has come into the house and shut the door behind her.

“Hi, Elsa,” he says.

“Hi. I've come for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“May I come in? Is this your house? This can't be your house. Where did you get all the furniture?”

“I'm staying here while some friends are out of town.”

“Did you break into somebody's house?”

“I'm watching the place for my friends.”

“What's the matter with you? You look horrible.”

“I'm not too clean. I forgot to take a shower.”

“I don't mean that. I mean your face. What's wrong with you?”

“How did you find me?”

“Carlos.”

“Carlos wouldn't talk.”

“He did, Michael. But let's argue at home. I've come to get you and make you come home and share the responsibility for Mary Anne.”

“I don't want to come home.”

“I don't care. If you don't come home, we'll move in here.”

“Silas will kill you.”

“I know the dog doesn't like me, but he certainly won't kill me.”

“I'm supposed to watch these people's house.”

“You can come back and check on it.”

“I don't want to come with you.”

“You look sick, Michael. Have you been sick?”

“I'm not leaving with you, Elsa.”

“O.K. We'll come back.”

“What do you want me back for?”

“To help me take care of that child. She drives me crazy. Get the dog and come on.”

Michael lets Silas out of the bedroom. He picks up his bag of grass and his pipe and what's left of the bag of pecans, and follows Elsa to the door.

“Pecans?” Elsa asks.

“My grandmother sent them to me.”

“Isn't that nice. You don't look well, Michael. Do you have a job?”

“No. I don't have a job.”

“Carlos can get you a job, you know.”

“I'm not working in any factory.”

“I'm not asking you to work right away. I just want you in the house during the day with Mary Anne.”

“I don't want to hang around with her.”

“Well, you can fake it. She's your daughter.”

“I know. That doesn't make any impression on me.”

“I realize that.”

“Maybe she isn't mine,” Michael says.

“Do you want to drive, or shall I?” Elsa asks.

Elsa drives. She turns on the radio.

“If you don't love me, why do you want me back?” Michael asks.

“Why do you keep talking about love? I explained to you that I couldn't take care of that child alone anymore.”

“You want me back because you love me. Mary Anne isn't that much trouble to you.”

“I don't care what you think as long as you're there.”

“I can just walk out again, you know.”

“You’ve only walked out twice in seven years.”

“The next time, I won’t get in touch with Carlos.”

“Carlos was trying to help.”

“Carlos is evil. He goes around putting curses on things.”

“Well, he’s your friend, not mine.”

“Then why did he talk?”

“I asked him where you were.”

“I was on the verge of picking up a barmaid,” Michael says.

“I don’t know how I could help loving you,” Elsa says.

“Where are we going, Daddy?”

“To water plants.”

“Where are the plants?”

“Not far from here.”

“Where’s Mommy?”

“Getting her hair cut. She told you that.”

“Why does she want her hair cut?”

“I can’t figure her out. I don’t understand your mother.”

Elsa has gone with a friend to get her hair done. Michael has the car. He is tired of being cooped up watching daytime television with Mary Anne, so he’s going to Prudence and Richard’s even though he just watered the plants yesterday. Silas is with them, in the back seat. Michael looks at him lovingly in the rearview mirror.

“Where are we going?”

“We just started the ride. Try to enjoy it.”

Mary Anne must have heard Elsa tell him not to take the car; she doesn’t seem to be enjoying herself.

“What time is it?” Mary Anne asks.

“Three o’clock.”

“That’s what time school lets out.”

“What about it?” Michael asks.

He shouldn’t have snapped at her. She was just talking to talk. Since all talk is just a lot of garbage anyway, he shouldn’t have discouraged her. He reaches over and pats her knee. She doesn’t smile, as he hoped she would. She is sort of like her mother.

“Are you going to get a haircut, too?” she asks.

“Daddy doesn’t have to get a haircut, because he isn’t trying to get a job.”

Mary Anne looks out the window.

“Your great-grandma sends Daddy enough money for him to stay alive. Daddy doesn’t want to work.”

“Mommy has a job,” Mary Anne says. His wife is an apprentice bookbinder.

“And you don’t have to get your hair cut, either,” he says.

“I want it cut.”

He reaches over to pat her knee again. “Don’t you want long hair, like Daddy?”

“Yes,” she says.

“You just said you wanted it cut.”

Mary Anne looks out the window.

“Can you see all the plants through that window?” Michael says, pulling up in front of the house.

He is surprised when he opens the door to see Richard there.

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