

Collected Short Stories: Volume I
by
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Heathcliff

Saturday morning, the forest ranger in the pea-green uniform sauntered into Ryan's Diner as she did most workdays. She took a stool at the counter away from the other customers and sat staring at her raggedy fingernails. Seventeen year old Shawn Mariano, who worked weekends during high school and an occasional evening shift when one of the regular waiters called out sick, eyeballed the woman. Flaxen hair fell down over her forehead in tight, curlicue ringlets. The nose was broad and fleshy but not offensively so; the lips, thick and shapeless, eased quite naturally into an earthy, ever-so-slightly vulgar smile. The alabaster skin, perhaps her most disarming feature, was flawless with a translucent sheen. Strikingly beautiful or physically repulsive – which was it? Maybe a little of both.

"This one's yours," Trudy Falcone, a forty year old brunette who normally worked the counter and booths near the front entrance, muttered under her breath and disappeared abruptly into the kitchen. The twosome, Trudy and the ranger, had exchanged words earlier in the week and the waitress, who had a reputation for being a foulmouthed, practical jokester, came away on the short end of the stick. Since the verbal altercation, she treated the ranger like she had a terminal case of leprosy.

The day of the incident, the lithe blond ate breakfast quietly enough. But then as she was paying the tab she whispered something in Trudy's ear causing the waitress to alternately flush scarlet then blanch a ghostlike chalky white. Still trembling noticeably, Trudy got the woman's change and laid it on the counter. The forest ranger leisurely sipped at her coffee for a good ten minutes longer before scooping the money up, every penny, leaving no tip. "Stinking bitch!" Trudy hissed once the ranger was out of earshot. "Rotten, scummy whore!"

When one of the other girls tried to comfort her, Trudy ran off and barricaded herself in the bathroom. It was never made clear what the blond-haired ranger with the squat nose and platinum, Shirley Temple curls said or why the normally staid, middle-aged waitress blew a mental gasket.

"Can I help you?" Shawn asked.

"Cup of coffee and breakfast special."

"How do you want your eggs?"

"Over easy. Whole wheat toast." She raised her eyes but only slightly, never quite making eye contact. Shawn scribbled the order down and went off to get the coffee.

The diner was three-quarters full with townies and local merchants. They could get raucous and rowdy even this early in the morning, but when the food came the ranger ignored the local yokels, eating hunched over her plate. Ten minutes later, she paid her bill, swept all the loose change off the counter and disappeared out the door like a mirage.

"That weirdo gone?" Trudy had emerged from hiding. Shawn shook his head up and down. "What did Mrs. Rockefeller leave for a tip?"

"What she always leaves," Shawn replied.

"It figures."

“Do you think she’s attractive?”

“Her?” The heavysset waitress gawked at him as though the teenage boy had lost his mind. “That woman’s ugly as sin!”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit extreme?”

Trudy’s lips twitched derisively. “If you’re into dykes or the unisex, Peter Pan look, she’s the real deal.”

The following Saturday morning the blonde forest ranger shuffled into the diner and eased down on a stool. As if on cue, Trudy ran off to make small talk with a waitress working the main dining room. “Coffee black. Eggs over easy and whole wheat toast,” Shawn said, repeating from memory her previous order.

She tilted her head to one side and studied him with a humorless expression. “Yeah, that’ll do.”

He went off to retrieve the coffee. “You’re with the forestry department?” Shawn arranged a napkin and place setting on the counter.

“Down in Pemberton.”

“What do you do exactly?”

Her eyes grazed his face like he was an inanimate object, part of the Ryan’s Diner bucolic décor. The ranger sipped at the hot liquid tentatively then added a spoonful of sugar. “Keep tabs on Mother Nature.” The terse reply wasn’t intended as a joke. Shawn didn’t know what to make of the odd creature.

When the food arrived, the girl never looked up. She ate with a focused intensity, pushed the plate away as soon as she was finished and reached for her wallet. “The Pemberton Wild Life Preserve,” she said when Shawn returned with the change, “that’s where I work. There’s a slatted walkway that extends three hundred feet out into the wetlands sanctuary with beaver dams, turtles, fox and small game, if you ever care to visit.” She swept the change off the counter and disappeared back out into the dusky, early morning light.

No, Shawn didn’t think he would care to visit. Not now, not ever. The woman unnerved him. The way she talked in that flat-as-a-pancake, gravelly monotone made his skin crawl. Her pretty-ugly face never offered up a shred of emotional warmth or human sympathy. As long as that woman was caretaker of the Pemberton Nature Preserve, he wouldn’t be visiting any time soon.

“I seen you commiserating with Pearl,” Hugh Duffy, the short order chef remarked when Shawn took a break around ten o’clock after the breakfast crowd had petered away. In response to the boy’s blank expression, Hugh added, “The knuckle-dragging Forest Ranger.”

“Where do you know her from?”

“Went to high school together.” Hugh sprinkled a generous dusting of paprika on a pile of home fries simmering on the grille. “Pearl’s father ran off when she was just a kid. Family lived in a ramshackle, sardine can of a house over by the railroad tracks - just her and the old lady. The mother dropped dead a few years back, so now Pearl resides there all by her lonesome.” The cook cracked a couple of eggs onto the grille and reached for a slab of Canadian ham.

“What was she like in high school?” Shawn asked.

“Same as now... kept to herself. Didn’t hardly talk to no one, which was no great loss.” He chuckled evilly. “I don’t think the girl ever owned a bar of soap. Her junior year, as I remember, they sent her home one day, cause she smelled like a sanitation truck in late August.”

“Trudy can’t stand her.”

Hugh flipped the eggs and checked the ham which was browning nicely. “Don’t know nothing about that,” he returned, “but I do know the woman’s got a wicked, homicidal temper.” He shifted the eggs to a plate and spread a generous dollop of butter on two slices of cinnamon raisin toast. Stacking the toast together, he cut at a diagonal. “You’ll want to steer clear of that wild woman,” the cook cautioned. “Nothing good can come of it.”

“Thanks,” Shawn mumbled weakly and went back to his position at the counter.

Before his shift ended, Shawn stopped by the kitchen. “What’s Pearl’s last name?”

Hugh looked up from the hot surface. “Singleton. Pearl Singleton.”

“Did she have a boy friend in high school?”

The cook rolled his eyes and made a dramatic flourish with the chrome spatula. “Couple guys asked her out, but she wouldn’t have anything to do with the opposite sex. Probably a lesbian, judging by the woman’s edgy disposition around guys.”

Shawn rubbed his jaw. “You think she’s good looking?”

Hugh paused to rub the sweat from his face with the front of his soiled apron. “Pearl Singleton’s no Marilyn Monroe, but, yeah, she’s wicked cute in a slutty sort of way.” The cook’s head bobbed up and down and he smirked at his clever choice of words. “Not that it does us horny heathens any good.”

The next day it snowed all morning well into the afternoon. “Your father’s working late,” Mrs. Mariano announced as Shawn came through the front door. “Maybe you could tidy things up so he doesn’t have to kill himself when he gets home tonight.”

“Okay.”

“It’s quite cold. Don’t go back outside like that.” She pointed to his flimsy jacket. “Always dress in layers.”

Shawn went to his room and draped a sweatshirt over a cotton shirt. Back in the foyer, he pulled his warmest winter coat from the hall closet. “Much better!” His mother shook her head approvingly.

Out in the shed, he primed the Ariens two-stage snow blower, adjusted the choke and press down on the electric starter button. The engine coughed, sputtered, belched, burped spastically and gave up the ghost. He primed the engine a second time with more gasoline and the bright orange machine fired up. Backing the snow blower out of the shed, Shawn cut a path toward the driveway hurling the heavy snow thirty feet across the lawn in a shimmering arc.

Always dress in layers during the winter months. He was perfectly warm despite temperatures hovering in the low twenties. Mrs. Mariano had dozens of clever maxims and cautionary injunctions.

You’ll have plenty of time for you-know-what with you-know-who when you’re finished with college. That was another one of her favorite dictums. You-know-what was an unambiguous euphemism for sex, lechery, debauchery, lust, wanton depravity, lewd and

lascivious behavior. Shawn was unclear if his mother was speaking from personal experience or idle speculation. Every so often, he heard the bedsprings creaking unnaturally loud two doors over. There were never any accompanying noises, only the rhythmic rasping of the queen-size mattress. Kachunk. Kachunk. Kachunk. Kachunk. Kachunk. No groans, moans, whimper, sighs or passionate terms of endearment. In the morning his parents didn't look or act any different.

The previous July, a friend from the varsity baseball team fixed Shawn up on a blind date with his seventeen year-old cousin. After the movie let out, they grabbed something to eat and, later still, went parking in the woods. The girl was passably pretty. She let him touch her privates. She had bad breath, a god awful, garlicky halitosis, such that every time she moaned in ecstasy, Shawn thought he might pass out from the stench.

At the top of the driveway, the snow blower busted a shear bolt on a scrap of lumber buried in a knee-high snowdrift. Trudging back to the shed, Shawn located a pair of pliers and a replacement bolt. Standing the snow blower on its side, he wiggled the broken pin from the auger shaft and inched the new one through the mating holes. He had to remove his gloves while tightening the nut and his frostbitten hands were burning. Putting his gloves back on, he brushed the snow off his pants, fired up the engine again and made the first pass down the length of the driveway.

Just before he left work earlier in the day, Trudy cornered him over by the cash register. "That obnoxious forest ranger's got no class, no social graces."

"Okay," Shawn muttered. The waitress was pathologically obsessed.

"Come back here fifty years from now," Trudy was pointing at the stool that Pearl Singleton had been warming with her derriere seven hours earlier, "and she'll be sitting there wrinkled as a dried up prune and drooling into her home fries."

Since the same could be said about any of the customers who frequented Ryan's Diner, the gratuitous remark made no sense. Pearl Singleton never knew her father, grew up in grinding poverty and witnessed a mother die young. Social graces - it was miracle enough she crawled out of bed each morning. Of course, that wasn't what Trudy wanted to hear. "What you got against her anyway?"

"She's a hateful, vindictive bitch!" The middle-aged woman's chest heaved with rage. "What else you need to know?"

"Nothing," he said meekly. Whatever unspeakable atrocity Pearl had committed, Trudy wasn't going to spill the beans.

The woman in the pea-green uniform was loutish and low class. But she was pretty as hell. Shawn would give a hundred blind dates with teenage babes suffering from chronic halitosis and loose morals for one romantic romp with Pearl Singleton. But that wasn't going to happen. She had that 'settled' look of a twenty-something with a full-time job, domestic obligations and grownup responsibilities. About the time Shawn would be even remotely in a position to do you-know-what with you-know-who, Pearl Singleton would have slipped inelegantly away into her early thirties.

A large truck with a V-shaped plow rumbled onto the street just as Shawn finished his final pass with the snow blower. Wheeling the machine back to the shed, he grabbed a shovel to clear away the icy debris that the plow left barricading the front of the driveway.

The first Tuesday in March, the teaching staff at Brandenburg High School took a professional day; students got to sleep late and do as they pleased. Shawn rose early and was moving briskly in the direction of the front door when Mrs. Mariano flagged him down. "Where're you off to this early in the morning?"

"Down the Cape to a nature preserve."

Mrs. Mariano turned to her husband who had just entered the room with a newspaper tucked under his arm. "In this weather, your son's on his way to Cape Cod so he can visit a nature preserve."

Mr. Mariano shrugged and glanced out the bow window. "The sun's shining and it's not really that cold out."

"You see how he's dressed," his wife was not to be denied, "with that flimsy coat and no hat or gloves?"

"If it makes you happy," Shawn countered, "I'll go back upstairs and grab some extra clothing." He disappeared and returned a moment later with a woolen sweater and stocking cap.

"What's down the Cape?"

"I already told you. There's a wilderness preserve with a three hundred foot walkway that extends out into the wetlands."

"Who are you going with?"

"Nobody. I'm driving down alone."

"To look at trees and soggy marsh in the middle of winter?"

"The winter is over."

"How much money you got?"

"I got a full tank of gas and plenty of money."

Mrs. Mariano looked for support from her husband, but he was already curled up on the sofa perusing the sports section. "In case of emergency, do you at least have your cell phone?"

"Yes I have it."

"Show it to me."

Shawn fished his cell phone from a back pocket and held it up in the air. "I'll see you later this afternoon." He fled out the door before his mother could mount a rebuttal.

Shawn located Pemberton State Forest three miles before the Bourne Bridge spanning the Cape Cod Canal in Buzzards Bay. He followed a ribbon of asphalt another three-quarters of a mile until he reached a rustic parking lot then picked his way down a gravel path to a swampy bog. The air smelled of pine and acrid clay. The sun was shining but the temperature hadn't drifted much above freezing. Remnants of the last wintry storm were evident in the murky wooded areas where snow and ice still lingered embedded in a spongy mat of decaying leaves and coppery pine needles. Only a small handful of diehard birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts were out on the narrow walkway that snaked into the chilly bog. A burst of frigid air cuffed his cheek as Shawn pulled his collar up around his neck.

"Should have brought a warmer coat." On a granite outcropping near a rough-hewn cedar bench, Pearl was leaning against a leafless oak. She wore her wide-brimmed ranger's hat and dark green winter jacket over her forestry uniform.

Shawn smiled. "Who's in charge of tours?"

Pearl climbed down from the rocky ridge. "I can take you out on the bog, if you like." The stony-faced woman didn't seem any friendlier, just less remote. She moved off in the

direction of the pressure-treated walkway leading out into the open wetlands. The harsh winter had beaten down all of the bright flowers and delicate plant life but Pearl pointed out some of the more robust species. “This rust-colored grass is called broomsedge. It grows all over the eastern United States in narrow clumps that can reach upwards of forty inches. In the summer, the young plants don’t look anything like this.”

“How’s that?”

“They’re bright green,” Pearl explained. Further along she pointed out some bishop’s weed, which was in the carrot family even though the leaves were quite flat and broad. Although the delicate ferns had, for the most part, died away by early winter, there were six species – maidenhair, ostrich, sensitive, cinnamon and royal – that Pearl could identify on sight and point out to visitors during the sultry summer months. They were halfway out in the water now. She indicated a woody pile of debris eighty feet away. “A family of beavers lives underneath all those muddy branches.” There was nothing to be seen. Either the beavers were resting comfortably, hibernating or foraging elsewhere. “Sometimes I come out here, especially in the spring, and watch them going about their business.”

Back on dry land, Pearl said, “Are you in a hurry to get back?”

Shawn glanced at his watch. It was still early, but a fast-moving bank of clouds had scudded across the sky obliterating the sun and carrying off much of the late morning warmth. “What did you have in mind?”

Pearl lead the way down a gravel path to the bottom of a ravine then headed up a steep incline. When they reached the summit of the ridge, a huge wooden structure about a mile away and still higher up came into view. “That’s the fire tower. In the dry, late summer I pretty much live in that rooftop villa.” She struck out across the rock-strewn ground. Fifteen minutes later they reached their destination. “It’s raining,” Shawn noted. He wished he had brought his sweater. The temperature plummeted ten degrees as soon as the thickening clouds arrived.

A set of stairs lead to the upper level, which stood comfortably above most of the surrounding treetops. The door was secured with a thick security bolt. Pearl selected a brass key from a chain fastened to her belt and undid the lock. But for the spitting clouds, from their vantage point they would have been able to see all the way to the Cape Cod Canal and beyond.

“What’s that?” Shawn pointed at a transparent disk fastened to a table in the far corner of the room. A topographical map of the Cape region was laid out across the flat face of the device with two sighting apertures mounted above the map on opposite sides of the ring.

“It’s an Osborne Fire Finder. Rangers use it during the dry summer months to estimate distance to suspected fires so we can call in a smoke report.” Pearl grabbed the circular rim and rotated it back and forth then bent down and squinted into an eyepiece fixed on a vertical rod. “You adjust the rods until you can peek through the nearer sighting hole and view the crosshair as it aligns with the fire. The degrees on the graduated ring tell the exact location.” She stepped aside. “Here, see for yourself.”

Shawn placed his eye up alongside the viewfinder, shifting the sighting mechanism right-to-left along the horizon. “Yeah, I get it. Very clever!” Suddenly the heavens opened up in a torrential downpour. Rain pounded the fire tower roof, pummeling the shingles but the inside remained relatively dry. “What are you doing?”

Pearl was moving around the perimeter of the small room closing the shutters. “A stiff breeze is kicking up from the north over that hillock. It’s blowing the rain at an angle. Got to close things up before we get thoroughly drenched.”

“What about the other visitors?”

“There were only two carloads before you arrived, and I saw them heading for the parking lot when we were out on the water.” She didn’t seem particularly concerned with the weather or much of anything else for that matter.

Five minutes later, they were huddled together on the wooden floor with the relentless rain lashing the fire tower. The room would have been pitch-black but for small chinks in the shutters. “What’s the matter?” Pearl reached out and touched him on the shoulder. Shawn was trembling all over.

“I’m cold, that’s all.”

Always dress in layers during the winter months! He was thinking about the plump, woolen sweater he cavalierly tossed on the back seat of the Audi.

“Get in the sleeping bag,” Pearl barked gruffly.

“What are you talking about?”

“Over there in the far corner. I keep a down-filled sleeping bag for situations like this.” Pearl rose and located the sleeping bag beside the small table with the Osborne Fire Finder, unfurled it in the middle of the room and pulled back the flap. “Get in,” she ordered.

“What about you?” he protested through chattering teeth.

“I’m toasty warm. You’re the one who’s gonna end up with hypothermia.”

Shawn was too cold to argue. He crawled into the sleeping bag and pulled the zipper up tight. “This is so embarrassing!”

“Really?” Through the darkness he could just barely see Pearl Singleton’s beautiful-ugly smile – a smile that was half leer, half grimace. Stripping off her heavy jacket, she loosened the zipper and crawled in beside him. “How’s that?”

There was no immediate reply. Five minutes later, he said, “I’m warm now. Actually, it’s too hot.” The rain, which had let up, was still coming down in a fitful pitter-patter. He wasn’t shivering anymore and had regained his composure.

“You’re okay, then?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

He felt her shifting around in the tight confines of the bag to face him. She put a hand on his chest and kissed his cheek. “I had my tubes tied.”

“What?”

“When my mother passed away a few years back, I went to the free clinic and had my fallopian tubes surgically tied off so I wouldn’t get pregnant.” Pearl Singleton had told him about a carrot that didn’t look very much like an edible carrot. She identified six species of wetland ferns that favored different degrees of light and shade. She showed him where the beavers lived and how to operate an Osborne Fire Finder. And now this. Shawn felt her hand caressing his cheek with no great sense of urgency.

Shawn awoke buck naked. Lying next to him in the cozy warmth of the down sleeping bag, Pearl Singleton was also in a similar state of undress. It was six o’clock at night and the sun, which had reemerged after the violent storm, was quickly losing its strength and fading to dusk. “We ought to leave,” Pearl said, “before it gets totally dark.”

Shawn could smell her body, a sour, musky-sweet odor that affected him like caffeine. “You had words with an older woman who normally works the counter at the diner a few weeks back.”

“Oh, that one.” Her tone was abruptly dismissive.

Shawn reached out and fondled her smallish breasts, but she pushed his hand away. “What was that all about?”

Pearl snaked her calf around his leg pulling his body closer. He could feel the bristly pubic hair scratching his thigh. She leaned forward so that her lips brushed against his ear. “Every morning when I stopped by the diner for breakfast she’d greet me with ‘Good morning, Heathcliff!’, ‘How’s Miss Heathcliff doing today?’ or some similar, smart-alecky wisecrack.

“I wasn’t familiar with the Victorian writer, Emily Bronte, but an elderly lady behind the reference desk over at the public library got me a copy of *Wuthering Heights* from the stacks. I went home and read it from cover to cover.” She paused to collect her thoughts. A frosty stream of air puffed from her lips like cigarette smoke when she said, “I hadn’t cried since my mother passed away three years ago last August, but I lay on my bed and wept like a baby thinking what a dirty bit of nastiness that waitress laid on me.

“The next time I stopped by Ryan’s Diner for breakfast, I held off until I was ready to pay the check. Then I told that woman in a saccharine-sweet, little-girl voice that we have three distinct species of pine siskins living in the Pemberton Nature Reserve. Each bird feeds off a different variety of pine tree and their beaks are shaped differently to extract seeds from the cones.

“I told her that I recently found a full-grown siskin with a broken wing curled up under a tree. The accident must have just happened, because the injured bird was still warm and bright eyed.” Pearl ran a tongue over her top lip. “The bird was defenseless against predators and the frigid temperatures. Either way it was going to die a miserable death so, to put the injured bird out of its misery, I grabbed it up in both hands and snapped its neck, twisting in opposite directions.” Pearl nuzzled his ear with her lips. “I told the wise-ass waitress at Ryan’s Diner that the next time she made another Heathcliff crack I was going to come around her side of the counter and wring her scrawny neck just like the pine siskin.”

Retribution. That’s what Pearl handed Trudy. It was just another word for payback – a fair and impartial reckoning of accounts. Trudy thought she could mock the woman with her malicious banter, but the spunky blonde – in typical Heathcliff fashion - gave as good as she got.

Pearl crawled out of the sleeping bag, ran nimbly about collecting her clothes and dressing as quickly as she could. She didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed. When they were both dressed, they left the tower and headed back in the direction of the parking area. “I want to see you again,” Shawn said when they reached the walkway leading out onto the water. The temperature was brisk but dry and, without the gnawing, bone-chilling dampness, the cold no longer bothered him in the least.

“What happened up in the fire tower was something to be cherished, but you shouldn’t go reading anything more into it.”

“Why did you get you tubes tied?” Shawn demanded softly.

The brim of her hat was pulled down over Pearl’s hazel-flecked eyes. “I had a lousy life... wouldn’t wish that wretchedness on my worst enemy.” She smiled bleakly. “Maybe that scummy wisecracking waitress, but no one else.”

“I want to see you again,” he repeated. “We could do something normal... Catch a movie or go out to eat.”

“Do something normal,” she picked up on the first part of his remark. “I don’t know that I’m a terribly normal person.” Lifting up on her toes she kissed his cheek. “Get in your car before we freeze to death. I’ll follow you out to the main road.”

Ten minutes later Shawn pulled up to the gas pumps at a Dairy Mart. In the store he handed the clerk a twenty dollar bill. “Pump three.” When the tank was full, he climbed back in the car and dialed a number on his cell phone.

“Where exactly are you?” His father spoke in a controlled monotone. Shawn could hear his mother sobbing loudly in the background.

“I’m still down the Cape. Be home in half an hour.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m perfectly fine.”

“You went to a nature preserve?”

“That’s right?”

“Where else did you go?”

“Nowhere.”

“So you’ve been in the forest communing with nature since ten o’clock this morning?” His father sounded more confused than angry.

“I got caught in the rainstorm and had to take shelter.”

“Your mother wanted to call the police and file a missing person’s report, but I talked her out of that.” There was a tense pause. “We will need to talk when you get home.” Mr. Mariano hung up the phone.

Well, that went relatively well! Shawn blew out his cheeks, massaged his face with his hands and went back in the store. A dozen hot dogs were rotating in slow motion on a self-serve electric grill near the soda dispenser. “How much are the jumbo, all-beef franks?”

“Two bucks each,” the clerk replied. He looked sleepy, bored as hell.

Shawn bought a drink and a hot dog which he slathered with mustard and relish. Wolfing it down in less than a minute, he bought another. The dark-haired youth behind the counter watched him eat with sleepy disinterest. “How’s your day going?”

Shawn washed the spicy meat down with a gulp of cherry Coke. “Actually, pretty good.” He wasn’t about to tell the fellow that he had just made love in a fire tower three miles down the road. It didn’t seem appropriate. “How about you?”

“I’m off-duty in twenty minutes.” The youth tossed a crumpled lottery ticket into the trash. “Quite a rainstorm we had earlier today.”

“Yeah, that was a doozy!” Back in the car, Shawn flicked the heater on high. The sign for Interstate 195 West loomed directly ahead as he depressed the directional.

A medley of comforting odors percolated through the small restaurant when Pearl Singleton wandered into Ryan’s Diner and plopped down on a stool at the counter. The sugary scent of hickory-smoked bacon bubbling on the grill merged with that of glistening maple syrup slathered over stacks of silver dollar pancakes. The paprika, caramelized onions, thyme,

rosemary and basil emanating from the home fries and specialty omelets steaming on the grill hung in the air like a viscous, redolent fog. The forest ranger in the pea-green uniform placed her broad-brimmed hat on the stool next to her but thought better of it and balanced it on the topmost peg of the mahogany coat rack over by the pastry display.

Shawn Mariano approached. “Coffee?” She nodded once. He filled a mug and placed it on the counter. “Eggs over easy, home fries and whole wheat toast?” She responded in the affirmative with another head shake plus an unintelligible grunt.

He poured a small tumbler of ice water and pushed it alongside the place setting. “I’m in love with you,” he announced bleakly.

“What’d you say?” She never even bothered to raise her head.

“Let me place your order.” The boy went off to the kitchen. When he came back, he said, “It doesn’t matter to me that you can’t have children. Couples can always adopt.”

“Oh, Gawd!” she moaned.

“I want to see you again, but a real date this time. We could catch a movie or go out to a restaurant like normal people.”

“You already dropped that line on me down in Pemberton when we were getting ready to go our separate ways.” She laughed abrasively making an obscene snorting noise through her nose. “You’re a senior in high school, and I’m old enough to be your freakin’ mother.”

Shawn pointed in the direction of the kitchen where the short-order chef was cooking up the breakfasts. “Hugh says he went to high school with you, and he’s only six years older than me.” “My mother wants to meet you,” he said shifting gears.

Pearl put her fork down and stared at the yolk bleeding out onto the plate. “And why would that be?”

“I told my parents about us when I got home.”

“There is no us, Shawn,” she spoke purposefully weighing each word like a heavy stone. “You’re delusional.”

“What happened last week in the fire tower was a figment of my imagination?”

“You can’t blame me,” she bristled, “for acts of God and natural disasters.”

He went to retrieve the coffee pot and warmed her cup. “Did you see what just happened a moment ago?” Pearl stared at him dully. “You called me by my name. You said, ‘There is no us, Shawn’.”

There were tears in his eyes. “That’s the first time,” he blubbered, “you ever spoke my name.”

When the boy was gone, an older gent with a poorly-constructed set of false teeth and grizzled beard leaned across the counter. The man shook a gnarled finger menacingly at Pearl. “I don’t know what you did to that poor boy, but you got to be one sadistic son-of-a-bitch!”

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Just Like Dostoyevsky

The mason arrived late in the afternoon. He went to the jumbled pile of red bricks, snatched up a brick in his left hand and began tapping at the crusted mortar with an odd-looking hammer - too short to pound nail with, too narrowly-constructed and lightweight for any other, practical use. Tap. Tap. Tap. Broken cement and sand flew in every direction. Sylvia Mandelstam's twelve year-old daughter, Becky, tanned legs askew, was sitting on an undamaged section of the wall talking non-stop. Lean and wiry with a tuft of curly, brown hair skittering out from under a shapeless brown cap, the mason never lifted his eyes. Finishing the first brick, he knelt down and retrieved another.

Sylvia watched from the upstairs bedroom window for a while then went into the den to edit term papers. An hour later when she looked, he was standing in the same position chipping away only now a small pile of clean bricks lay neatly stacked to the right of where the truck had crashed through the wall the previous month. Becky was still straddling the wall carrying on an intense monologue. "Strange!" Sylvia muttered.

An oil truck caused the damage. As the driver rounded the turn off Hope Street, the left front tire blew out; the errant truck with its full load of number ten heating oil as added ballast careened onto the property, raking the wall, right-to-left, for a distance of thirty feet. The insurance company settled within days. Sylvia got the mason's telephone number from a small line ad in the Providence Journal:

*Mason and general handyman;
no job too small;
call Danny O'Rourke at*

"Fixing the wall's no problem," the middle-aged man said in an amiable tone tinged with Irish brogue, "Late afternoons and weekends. Five hundred dollars. Everything."

The insurance company settled for fifteen hundred. "Yes, that seems fair enough."

Irish brogue. From an etymological standpoint, Sylvia understood the term to have several distinctly dissimilar meanings: a heavy shoe of untanned leather, formerly worn in Scotland and Ireland; a strong oxford shoe, usually with ornamental perforations and wing tips. She glanced at Danny O'Rourke's steel-toed construction boots. "When can you start?"

Tap. Tap. Tap. Chip. Chip. Chip.

By 7:30 the light was fading. In the yard, the monotonous, brittle sound of a snare drum solo gone slightly haywire drifted through the window. Sylvia pushed the heap of papers aside. Two hours he'd been at it without a break and after a full day's work elsewhere. Becky was in the den doing homework. Sylvia went downstairs and out the front door into the muggy, July warmth. "If you'd rather purchase new brick," she said approaching from the flagstone walkway, "I'll be happy to kick in the extra money."

The hand holding the hammer drop to his side, and he looked up with clear, brown eyes. "New brick won't match weathered." The chin was broad, Gaelic - cheeks wide, sloping toward a generous mouth. "No need to waste good brick. Another day or two, I'll have these cleaned up like new." He dropped the brick in his hand onto the soft ground. "I usually deal with the husbands," he said, collecting his tools.

"How's that?"

"When it comes to estimates and repairs."

Sylvia smiled and teased a crimson ladybug off the sleeve of her blouse. "The husbands," she repeated with a watery smile, as though the term held some exclusive, hidden meaning. "Even if he were still here," she said sardonically, "my ex-husband wouldn't understand what you're doing anymore than I do."

The mason did not react. His expression remained neutral, noncommittal.

Sylvia's ex-husband, Jason, had always been an incessant talker, a shameless self-promoter. When he bailed out of the marriage, he took with him the entire Coltrane collection - 25 CD's, including several hard-to-find, bootlegged European tapes - plus the white noise of his arrogance. After publishing several clever articles on post-modern, French literature, Jason ran off with a leggy, blonde coed. Now he held a full professorship at Rutgers where, academic rumor had it, he traded the blonde for a more supple-minded philosophy major a scant seven years older than his daughter.

Even in her prime, Sylvia could never keep track of her husband's dalliances. Short and plump hers was a muted, understated attractiveness. The legs were still shapely, but hadn't always been. She had to work at it.

"Your daughter, Becky, said you teach."

"Russian literature, at Brown."

He tossed his hammer - a double flip, end over end - and caught the handle effortlessly. An involuntary gesture, she had seen him do it a dozen times or more while he was working at the bricks. "Ever been to Russia?"

"Last year. An academic seminar in Moscow."

"Like it?"

"Yes, very much so," she lied effortlessly. "A thoroughly enjoyable experience."

Moscow airport. Bleak and dismal with atrocious lighting and Spartan furnishings. At the far end of the arrivals gate, a trio of frumpy babushkas dressed in white smocks were washing the floor. One woman with a nose like an onion leaned on a long-handled pole, a 12-inch T tacked to the end. A second woman fished a rag from a pail of filthy water, wrung the excess back into the bucket and hurled the limp cloth onto the floor.

Splat! With no great sense of urgency, the woman with the pole began pushing the mess back and forth redistributing the muck in a broad arc. Smoking an unfiltered cigarette, the third woman, presumably the crew chief, showed no interest in either the arriving foreigners or her workmates. They took a brief rest, chatted, gazed dully at the empty Aeroflot planes resting on the rutted tarmac and scratched their shapeless rumps before proceeding to the next patch of grimy floor.

Welcome to Moscow!

"Danny's nice," Becky shuffled into her mother's bedroom later that night as she was preparing for bed. A lithe version of Sylvia, Becky was often mistaken for an Israeli sabra; the olive skin and chiseled nose were patently Mediterranean. "Nice and available."

"You want me to marry a brick layer?"

"Date a few months then decide. Where's the harm in it?"

Sylvia brushed the fine, dark hair out of the girl's eyes. The faint outline of a training bra was visible beneath the summer-weight, cotton blouse. Not much flesh to support. If Becky was anything like her mother, another year or two, the meager mounds - more like hillocks - would need more than a flimsy training bra to hold them in check. Her daughter's lack of curves offered

little solace; it was the potential for curves that kicked Sylvia's maternal anguish into high gear. "What did you and Mr. O'Rourke talk about?"

"The man's no talker. Hardly said two words. Reminds me of that character in the Carson McCullers story."

"Which one?"

Becky took an emery board from her mother's night table and began shaping a nail. "The deaf mute."

Sylvia frowned. "I think you're blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction."

Becky smirked, a conspiratorial gesture. "Danny's never been married. I told him you were divorced."

Sylvia felt her face flush hot. "Must I remind you, Mr. O'Rourke is here to repair the wall. And from what little you've learned, it's clear we have absolutely nothing in common."

"Daddy's Jewish; he teaches at the university. Lot of good that did!"

"Touché," Sylvia replied and kissed her daughter lightly on the cheek. "I can assure you I will, not now or ever, go out with Mr. Danny O'Rourke."

The next afternoon the mason did not return. She had paid him half the money in advance as an act of good faith. Hadn't bothered to sign a formal contract or work out the fine details - cost of labor, materials, etc. An act of good faith? More like a colossal act of stupidity! When would she stop behaving like some ditsy divorcée and more like what she really was: a single mother, head-of-household?

Another day and no sign of Mr. O'Rourke. On Friday the battered pickup with the blown muffler pulled up in front of the house. The mason went directly to the busted wall and began cleaning and stacking bricks, lingering even later into the dusky light until all the bricks - even the damaged ones - were tidied and properly stacked.

The next day he arrived before 9 a.m. and began mixing mortar in a crusted wheelbarrow.

"Gonna be a scorcher." Sylvia came out to greet him. "Temperature's in the nineties."

The mason worked the gray sludge in a figure eight pattern with a garden hoe. "Threw in some lime," he said, indicating a bag of white powder in the rear of the truck, "so the mortar wouldn't set up too fast." He dumped a shovelful of fine sand into the soggy mix. "I'll rebuild the far column first, run a line and fill everything in between."

Other tools lay on the ground, odd-looking tools she hadn't noticed before: a long mahogany-colored level with a curved, yellow bubble, trowels, small wooden blocks, string and a strange-looking tool that resembled a twisted piece of scrap metal. "That," he saw her gawking at the bent rod, "is used for tooling joints. Keep moisture off." He threw the hoe aside and began working the thickening mass with a short-handled, pointed shovel. "In winter, frozen water can crack mortar. So much for your newly-repaired wall."

Nine thirty and it was already insufferably hot. "Yes, I see," Sylvia said and retreated to the inconspicuous safety of her front porch.

Pushkin. Gogol. Turgenev. Tolstoy. Dostoyevsky. Solzhenitsyn. On the second day in Moscow, the insanity began. They were driving down the main thoroughfare, the Kremlin with its spiraling domes visible out the right hand window. A policeman waving a wooden nightstick

pulled them over. The Russian driver got out of the car. After a short conversation, he returned and they continued on their way. "What was that all about?" Sylvia asked the interpreter, Marina.

"Today is Friday," Marina said gruffly and withdrew into a wall of silence. She was a tall, stylish woman in her late twenties with thick lips and close-cropped hair.

They sped through Pushkin Square, past the Bolshoi Ballet, Lubyenka Prison. After a moment, Sylvia said, "I know what day of the week it is. Why did the policeman stop the car?"

As though locked in mutually exclusive conversations, Marina repeated, "Today's Friday, last day before weekend." They passed several government ministries and a public housing unit built with forced labor, prison conscripts, during the Stalin era. "The Russian government pays poorly. This is how the police get their vodka money. By shaking down drivers on their way home from work. A few rubles here; a few rubles there."

"And if you refuse to pay?"

Marina only gave her a dirty look and stared out the window at the crater-like pot holes and grimy snow. "Today is Friday," she repeated grimly.

On Monday afternoon, Danny O'Rourke began filling in the smashed-out portion. With the column trued-up, the work went much quicker now. "My father's a big cheat," Becky Mandelstam said. "A whoremongering asshole."

The mason wrapped one end of the discolored masonry twine around a maple corner block then stretched the line sixty feet to the far end of the brick wall where he fastened it tautly to a second, hardwood block. With the guide line in place, he came back to where the young girl was standing. "I don't know that your mother would much appreciate your sharing that information."

She stared impudently at his jutting jaw. "I'm not gossiping," she protested. "My father's infidelity is common knowledge; it all came out in court during the divorce settlement."

In lieu of a response, Danny slathered mortar on the underside of a brick and tamped it into place on the broken wall. Reaching down with the sharp edge of the trowel, he trimmed the excess cement bulging from the wet joint; the pasty mortar fell noiselessly to the ground. Edging closer, Becky fingered the white, linen twine. At first she thought his features coarse, common. But now, she noticed something terribly appealing, strong and forthright, about his brown eyes and Irish chin. "I study body language. Yours is very calm, earthy."

The mason removed his cap momentarily to wipe his forehead. A film of sweat was developing on his freckled cheeks. One of the bricks was touching the string. With the butt of his trowel, he tapped it back a fraction of an inch. "Earthy," he repeated, reaching for the 48-inch level.

"I think you and my mother could be very - " She waved an hand theatrically in the air.

"Incompatible," Danny offered. "A Jewish, college professor and an uneducated, Irish brick layer." He patted her playfully on the head with a gritty hand. "There're a half dozen words for what you're trying to say and I wouldn't repeat any of them in mixed company."

When Sylvia returned home from work on Wednesday afternoon, the wall was finished. Becky wandered into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of milk. She was wearing a halter top

and cut-off jeans. "If you won't go out with Danny O'Rourke, at least invite him over for a home-cooked meal."

"Did he see you in that outfit?" Sylvia asked.

"It's the middle of summer! You expect me to wear wool skirts?"

Sylvia shook her finger in her daughter's face. "You're not a child anymore. As a woman's body matures, even respectable men - "

"Oh, mother! Get a life!"

At three a.m., Becky came to her mother's bedroom and shook her awake. "You cried out in your sleep."

"Just a bad dream. A nightmare."

Jason, with an entourage of fawning, half-baked coeds, had returned to the misogynous scene of the crime, parading past Sylvia as though she were the nebulous figure, the one dreamed. No justice, no belated comeuppance.

Sylvia pulled her daughter down on the mattress next to her. "I'm okay now," she said and nuzzled the girl's bare arm with her cheek. Becky would stay with her mother for the rest of the night and, for that small blessing, Sylvia was thankful. There would be no more hurtful, humiliating dreams with her child close at hand.

"Got A-minus on a social studies test," Becky said, fluffing the spare pillow. "Missed the capitol of South Dakota."

Sylvia could smell the avocado shampoo Becky favored. Reaching out, she fingered a strand of silky, black hair. "Not a name that readily springs to mind."

A light breeze stirred the wandering Jew in a macramé hanger by the open window. She had all three varieties - tradescantia albiflora, tradescantia fluminensis and zebrina pendula - scattered throughout the upper level. In recent years, she filled the house with a profusion of house plants - feathery ferns, philodendrons, coleus and African violets so delicate and turgid with vitality that the brittle leaves snapped and fell away at the slightest hint of pressure.

Arranging her home as though it were a Zen garden, Sylvia favored a bare minimum of furniture. In the living room was a settee strategically placed near the bay window, a small bookcase and upright piano, separated by huge gobs of empty space. On each end table, exactly five - no less no more - National Geographic magazines, fanned discreetly in a semicircle. The magazines were not intended for reading. "A consultant from Perkins Institute for the Blind," Jason observed a week before he deserted the marriage, "couldn't have done a better job."

The capitol of South Dakota. Had she forgotten; had she ever bothered to learn the capitol of South Dakota? Or was this the beginning of Alzheimer's disease? Multi-infarct dementia?

"What's it feel like to make love?" Becky asked.

Sylvia was drifting back to sleep. The loose tether of her daughter's precious voice drew her back. "First time it hurts; afterwards it's nice."

"Oh, I see."

At twelve, she didn't see anything. And what was the capitol of South Dakota? Sioux Falls? Pierre? Boise? Helena? Cheyenne? Rapid City?

"Danny O'Rourke never damaged a single brick," Becky said.

Again, Sylvia felt the tug on the gossamer string of her fading consciousness and opened her drooping eyelids. "What are we talking about now?"

“The mason. He cleaned and stacked two hundred and thirty-five bricks and never chipped a single one! I know because, after he left, I counted them.”

“How do you figure it?” Sylvia’s brain was on automatic pilot. She wasn’t quite sure what she was saying anymore. Nor did she care. It was enough to have Becky in the warm bed next to her.

“It’s all in the wrist, the angle the blade strikes stone.”

Boise. Helena. Bismark. Cheyenne. Fargo. Broken hymens. Labia majora. Vulva. Bartholin glands. Chip, chip, chip. Tap, tap, tap. Tradescantia albiflora, tradescantia fluminensis, zebrina pendula. Unctuous, annoying ex-husbands.

And the capitol of South Dakota is ...

Sylvia called Danny O’Rourke at home the following evening. “You did a nice job.”

“Been at it for the better part of twenty years,” he said in his dull, lumpy voice. “Ought to be good at something by now.”

“About your money ...”

“Catch you one night after work.” There was no great urgency in his voice. With a queer sense of well-being, Sylvia hung up the phone.

On Thursday around six, Danny O’Rourke showed up. Sylvia brought him into the kitchen and gave him the remainder of the money. He folded the bills without bothering to count and stuffed them into his pocket. “Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. O’Rourke.”

“You have to ask an Irishman if he’d like a cup of tea?” He smiled at his own joke and promptly sat down at the table. Becky padded quietly into the room and leaned up against the dishwasher.

“Where’re you from?” Sylvia asked.

“Glendalough. In the Wicklow Mountains of eastern Ireland. Beautiful country. Not much steady work, though, for someone like myself. Saint Kevin founded a monastery in Glendalough in the 6th century.”

“I’m not familiar with Saint Kevin,” she said with a faint smile.

“Ah!” He caught the subtle humor. “No, I should be surprised if you were.”

She brought him his tea which he sweetened with sugar. “Never married?” The question was gratuitous. She already knew the answer.

“Never had the misfortune.” He continued to drink his tea in silence, the face dusted with grayish film - cement or sand - the curly brown hair drifting out from under the shaggy cap. “Not being much of a talker,... it’s a bit of an affliction with me,” he said. “Don’t know what to say when I’m around people such as yourself.” He sipped at the tea, draining the last of it from the mug. “All I can do is mend walls.”

“If people could mend walls as easily as they make mindless chatter, there’d be no need for people such as you.”

“Never thought of it that way,” he said rising to his feet. His legs were thin and slightly bowed.

“One question before you go,” Sylvia said. “The section of wall you repaired looks fine, just as it did before the accident. But now the undamaged portion somehow looks different.”

“While I rebuilt the wall, your daughter tooled the joints,” he replied, “from one end to the other. That’s why it looks spanking new.” He was at the door now. “Like I said, I ain’t much good with people, but I do a passable job with mortar and stone.”

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