

# Early Stories

By

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# The Mentor

Charles Nestor Thompson was having a difficult time. On his way to the university that morning, he had a flat tire; the spare was also flat. His wife had told him the night before that she was leaving him, and his girlfriend, who was carrying his child, was treating him rather coldly. He hadn't heard from his son in over a year. Charles Jr. had joined the Peace Corps after completing his master's degree in philosophy and was now somewhere near the equator. Charles hadn't received a letter from him since the attempted coup. His thirteen year old daughter, Delores Hazel Thompson, had disappeared two weeks ago with a colleague of his, a middle aged professor of Russian literature. The FBI traced them to the Kingdom by the Sea Motel in Atlantic City, but they had checked out the day before. The students in Charles' contemporary American novel class were three weeks ahead of him. On top of all this, Charles' gout was acting up and it was difficult for him to stand on his feet. Things were bad.

Presently, he was standing in front of his contemporary American novel class, shifting painfully from foot to foot, trying to explain to the class why the papers they had handed in a month and a half ago were still not marked.

"I am, ahh..., trying to give them all the attention they deserve. And I must tell you, ahh..., that they, ahh..., have, that is to say, the ones I have read so far, umm..., have been worth the attention I have given..."

Alice Jackson, the thirty-seven year old housewife in the first row, was staring at his shoes, yawning and tapping her pen on the blank first page of her notebook.

"I promise you that I will have them done in the next, ahh..., two weeks."

Little Tommy Turner was sitting in the back of the room with an obnoxious smirk on his bearded face, nodding his head. His girlfriend, Shari Sandlovitz (small tits, nice ass, dirty feet), was reading a note that the little smart-ass had scribbled on her notebook. She was grinning.

In the middle of the room, a hand went up. It was attached to Roberta Silverspoon.

"Yes Roberta?"

"Can you tell us if the final is going to be cumulative?"

"Well, it won't be cumulative, as you would call it."

Roberta's gum snapped. "But I think it might be helpful, ah..., if you were familiar with everything we, ahh..., have covered."

Roberta frowned and went snap! chomp chomp. "Will it be multiple choice or essays?" she asked. "It will be essays, Roberta," Charles answered.

Snap!

"How many? Will it be three out of five or four out of seven?"

"I haven't decided yet. When I do, Roberta, I promise that you'll be the first to know. Ahh..., are there any more relevant questions? Good. I'll see you on Thursday when we discuss that, ahh..., truly gargantuan tour de force, Updike's *The Centaur*. And then on Tuesday next, that campus favorite, at least back in those halcyon days of the early seventies, Grendal. Have a beautiful Wednesday."

As he gathered his books of the table in front of him, he felt his bowels suddenly harden and he knew instantly that little Tommy Turner was approaching him. Charles looked up and there stood Tommy. He wore sneakers with cracks in the rubber toe pieces and there were holes in the knees of his jeans. Jim Morrison peered enigmatically out of his black T-shirt. A button on the strap of his frayed knapsack said QUESTION AUTHORITY.

"Yes Tommy?"

"I was wondering if you would be interested in doing an independent study next semester." Charles noticed that Shari was standing next to Tommy. She was so quiet he hadn't even noticed her. She was smiling.

"I don't know. I'm ahh..., going to be very busy next semester." He started for the door. Tommy and the smiling shadow followed him. Charles felt another inch of bowel petrify.

"What have you got in mind?"

"Well, I haven't really decided.

I mean, ah..., I haven't written up a proposal yet, but I would like to do something with modern American writers. Vonnegut, Kosinski, maybe, ah..., Nabokov."

"Sounds interesting. Of course, you should come up with some sort of idea, some sort of slant."

They were walking down the hallway. Charles had to get into the restroom and away from Tommy. Shari was smiling.

"I think they have a lot in common, stylistically and thematically." Another inch of stone.

"Well, ah..., maybe, but you're going to have trouble with Kosinski."

They stopped in front of the men's room. Charles was leaning slightly forward because of the brick embedded in his abdomen. This put most of his considerable weight on the balls of his feet, which were flaming from his gout. Shari was smiling. Charles was dizzy.

"He is kind of weird. Did you know that if he hadn't missed a plane, he would have been in the same house as Roman Polanski's wife was when she was murdered?"

"No, I hadn't heard that." Roman Polanski made Charles think of Delores Hazel, somewhere in North America (he hoped), in a Ramada Inn with his former chess partner. The

brick in his stomach did a flip flop and he leaned against the door of the men's room. Shari smiled and whispered something in Tommy's ear.

"Well," Tommy said. "We'd like to stay and chat some more, but we really have to be going." Shari made a sound. She giggled.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

As Charles watched them walk out through the glass doors, he noticed that Shari was looking back at him, smiling. He then fell into the restroom, trying to keep both his feet and his stomach off the floor. Sitting in the stall, he read the message on the door in front of him:

**"To be is to do" ...Shakespeare**

**"To do is to be" ...Durkheim**

**"Do be do be do" ...Sinatra**

He leaned over until his head was resting on the door. When his body regained its flexibility, he went over to the sink and washed his hands. He looked at himself in the mirror to see if anything had changed. Nothing had.

He was a round man, but also very solid. He looked something like a panda, but his jowls and sandy gray mustache made his face look more like the Cowardly Lion's in The Wizard of Oz.

With some difficulty, he got to his car and collapsed in the front seat. He didn't want to go home; his wife would only ignore him. Besides, she was leaving for San Francisco in the morning and probably wouldn't even say goodbye. Charles didn't want to face that. Slowly his head sunk into the car seat and his thoughts gradually gave up the ghost. He last remembered seeing them flee to the Shades below.

Charles awoke to discover that dawn's bloody fingers had already caressed the sky. There was a pine tree shaped air freshener dangling before his eyes. The bottom of the steering wheel was slicing into his left kidney. Sometime during the night, a spider had spun webs in both his eyes. Charles sat up and tried to remove them with his knuckles. He swallowed and tasted a cesspool. He should have gone home last night. After all, it was his house.

He crawled out of the car and looked down at himself. The crease in his pants had been replaced by a jagged vein with many tributaries. The cuffs of his corduroy jacket were at his elbows, making the sleeves pile up around his biceps.

Charles straightened himself out as best he could and started toward the Language and Literature building. The gout that had been in his left foot was gone, but it had traveled over to his right foot, making him walk with a pronounced limp. His left hand was grasping his kidney, which expanded and contracted with every step.

He entered the building as inconspicuously as possible through a side door. He made it safely to his office and locked the door so that no one would know he was there. He sat down at his desk and leaned forward with his face in his hands. The pile of papers beneath his elbows decided to shift and his elbows slid off the desk while his executive chair rolled backwards, ejecting him. The edge of the desk hit his forehead and Charles was suddenly on his knees as more and more papers plummeted from his desk and piled up around him. When the blizzard finally stopped, Charles sat Indian style on the floor and pulled out the gallon jug of Carlo Rossi burgundy. From the half full jug, he filled his coffee mug to the brim and took a sip. He swirled the wine around in his mouth to mask the foul taste and picked up one of the papers with the intention of reading it. The student's name on the cover sheet made his pelvis solidify, so he dropped it and picked up another one. It was Roberta Silverspoon's.

Invisible Man, by Ralph Ellison, is a Contemporary American Novel about a young black man who is searching to discover the true definition of his own personal identity, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, and so on and so forth.

By three o'clock that afternoon he had finished the bottle of wine and had graded all the papers, except for little Tommy Turner's. Then, Dr. Charles Nestor Thompson, associate professor of English at the Empire State University, pulled himself up off the floor of his office, kicked a pile of papers out of his way, opened the door of his office, and snuck out of the building.

Charles drove downtown rather recklessly, but, luckily, the other cars missed him.

He parked his car in front of his girlfriend's house and bound up the stairs. He couldn't bound because his knees were sore from the fall he had taken in his office, so he staggered instead. He reached the front door, took a deep breath and pushed the button under the name "Evita Perrier."

Nothing happened.

He rang the bell again.

Still no answer.

Charles was beginning to worry. Evita knew he was coming, as he did every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Maybe she hadn't waited for him. Maybe she had left town without telling him. Finally, he heard the chain being released and the door opened, revealing Evita. Her thin blond hair was wet and she was wearing a light blue bathrobe. Charles had been expecting those tight, sexy shorts with the zippers on the sides.

"Charlie, what are you doing here?" "Oh...well, I thought I'd drop in since it is Wednesday."

"That it is," she said thoughtfully. "Well are you going to stand there stuttering like a fool, or are you coming in?"

"Oh," Charles grunted, following Evita into the living room.

"I've got to get dressed and then get up to the library to do some work. Make yourself comfortable."

Charles sat down on the couch while Evita went into the bedroom. He was disappointed. He didn't want to be comfortable, he wanted to make mad, passionate love in the afternoon. He saw right away that this was not to be. "I thought maybe we could talk about a few things," he said.

"What?"

"I said I thought we might talk about a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like what we're going to do."

"We're not going to do anything. In two months I graduate and then I'm going to leave."

"What about the baby?"

"Never mind about the baby."

"Do you know where you're going to go?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you anywhere near this child. The last thing you need is a kid and the last thing a kid needs is you."

"I have a twenty-five year old son and a thirteen year old daughter," Charles said defensively.

"And you've done a wonderful job with them, haven't you. Do you know where either of them is? You know, sometimes I wonder if you can tell the difference between those

sophomoric books you teach and real life. You'd be better off if you just watched TV. You'd still be screwed up, but at least you'd be harmless. Maybe you should see a doctor?"

"Oh stop it already," Charles muttered, trying to sound angry.

"Or better yet," Evita continued, "a critic." Charles gave up. "Look, Charlie, I'd love to talk to you some more about this, but I have to get some work done. Would you be a darling and give me a lift up to school? Please?"

Charles nodded his head and stared across the room at the blank TV screen.

"Well, let's go!"

"You mean right now? I thought we were going to..."

"I haven't got time for that anymore. I have to study so I can graduate and get out of here. Let's get going now, we're wasting time."

"Oh."

Charles had been wandering around downtown forever and it was only ten thirty. He had dropped Evita off at the University library and then returned to the city to walk the streets and collect his thoughts. He tried to understand what was happening to him. Only a few weeks ago he had a wife, a lover, two children and another on the way. Now, it seemed as if they were all deserting him. It didn't seem, they were deserting him, he thought. Now night had fallen and he felt even more lonely. His hangover had come on about two hours ago. What he needed was another drink. He was looking for a bar when, in the silence of the city going to sleep, he heard a steady thumping. At first he thought it was his own heartbeat and the end was near, but then he noticed that it was coming from straight ahead down Main street. He walked on down a few blocks and then stopped at a corner. To the left, about a mile up the road, was the Conglomerated Power and Light Company, a huge floodlit structure with its flashing red sign hovering above, sure to be visible for at least fifteen miles in every direction. Between Charles and the power company was darkness and thumping. He began walking up the street. There were no streetlights and he tripped several times on broken pieces of pavement. The pale moonlight shining through some sickly, twisted trees

cast eerie shadows on him. A dog in the depths of a junkyard across the street was howling pathetically. Charles noticed that the thumping was getting louder. He must be getting close. A building was approaching him on the same side of the street. It appeared to be a warehouse, but it had an illuminated sign hanging in front. When he got close enough, the sign read, REVELATION.

Charles pulled the door open and stepped inside. A large form with monstrous hands approached him.

"There's a three dollar cover, Pop." Charles paid the man and then cast his eyes on the surroundings. To the left was a bar, to the right was a stage. A cute girl with a ponytail on top of her head, and wearing mis-matched, hand-me-down clothes, was singing about the ending of the western world. She was flanked by two guitarists. One of them kept making strange, painful faces as he squeezed out notes, while the other just stood there pulling his head in and out, looking pretty much like a turtle. A third guitarist was far over on the left, wearing a suit and tie. He had long blond hair without a curl or wave the switched from side to side in front of his eyes every time he shook his head. He looked like a sheep dog.

Charles was fascinated by the band, but he still needed a drink. He made his way through the crowd and ordered a double scotch at the bar. The warm, smoky taste of the scotch felt good and helped to steady his shaking hands. He turned again to the band. The girl was exciting. She had a tambourine around her neck and was pulling on her ponytail, whining that she was sorry. Charles sympathized with her and he felt felt an old passion surge within him. She reminded him of a playmate he had as a child. They had started playing jacks on his front stoop and ended up playing doctor in her basement. All she needed was a little plaid skirt. Charles finished his drink and ordered another. Now the band was playing a loud fast song about orgasmic electrocution. Some of the dancers were reaching up and trying to touch the woman-child singer. Bouncers appeared from out of nowhere and beat them down one by one, as if performing a sacrificial ritual.

A familiar figure came out of the darkness toward Charles. It was little Tommy Turner and his shadow, Shari. She was smiling. Charles was numb.

"Professor Thompson, what are you doing here?" Charles nodded and held up his glass.

Thirty minutes later, Charles was sitting on the floor of Tommy and Shari's apartment with a bottle of Gallo sangria in front of him. He was trying to figure out how to operate the Aladin's Lamp in his hand. In his day, they had just smoked ordinary joints and pipes. The bowl in the center of the lamp contained a mixture of hash and grass. Tommy and Shari were nestled on some pillows across the room.

"I think he needs an extra set of hands," Tommy said. Shari crawled over to him and took the lamp. She was smiling. Tommy gave instructions: "Toke...Toke...Toke."

Just when Charles thought his lungs were full, Shari, kneeling before him with her head just above his, slid her finger of the little hole in the side of the lamp. Charles' chest jumped and he tasted the oily smoke. His throat burned as he exhaled, so he instinctively reached for the wine bottle and up-ended it over his mouth.

Shari sat down next to Charles as he leaned back against the sofa. She was smiling. Charles was feeling the impact of the hash all over his body. His thighs and fingertips were tingling.

Shari spoke. "Want another hit?" Charles nodded eagerly and they repeated the ritual, Shari kneeling in front of him, Tommy coaching from across the room. Charles knew what to expect this time and there was no violent reaction. Afterwards, Shari again sat down next to him.

Charles' mind was tumbling forward, head over heels. Tommy was across the room, sitting against the wall with his eyes closed, slowly moving his head from side to side. The black light above him made his white T-shirt glow. As Charles lost consciousness, he saw little Tommy Turner fade into a poster on the wall, and felt Shari embracing him.

When Charles awoke the next morning his head did not hurt. Nothing hurt. The first thing he saw was little Tommy Turner lying on the floor across the room, snoring with his eyes closed and his mouth open. The itchy blanket over Charles' naked body made him feel like a baby. Shari was lying next to him under the blanket were here bare legs entwined with his own. She was smiling in her sleep. Charles had no idea how this had come about, but he saw that it was good. He thought about his children, born and unborn, his wife, his mistress.

They had all abandoned him. That did not bother him; there was nothing he could do to prevent it. A strange odyssey, like in the novels he lectured on, had carried him to where he now believed he belonged. Little Tommy Turner no longer made his bowels harden. Charles knew that he was an obnoxious little bastard, but he also felt a closeness to him. Tommy and Shari had not abandoned him. And with that, Dr. Charles Nestor Thompson, associate professor of English at the Empire State University, realized that his nightmare had only just begun.

# One Dare Not Sound

**I**n January, the city was sealed under sheets of ice and snow. Frigid winds whipped up streets and avenues lined with cars that moaned and then silently died. I awoke late, that morning being Sunday, and lay in bed for another hour; there was little else to do and I was not quite ready to face another day. I smoked a few cigarettes and looked up at the ceiling. Virgil was clawing at the bottom of the bedroom door, wanting to be fed or let outside. He squeaked and cooed a few times and I could see his paws probing underneath the door. He went away for five minutes, maybe ten, or maybe twenty, I'm not quite sure, and then came back. I wanted to be left alone. I turned over, away from the door, and studied the dingy patterns in the wall for, perhaps, another five minute until I heard him in the kitchen tearing apart the garbage. Virgil knew me well.

I got out of bed, put on the robe Nancy had given me, and stormed into the kitchen. Virgil, aware of what was coming, dodged me and ran into the dining room. The top of the brown paper bag was torn and several muddy coffee filters had oozed onto the floor. I cursed Virgil and then got to cleaning up the mess, putting everything in a fresh garbage bag. I didn't feel like making real coffee for just myself, so I put the water on and threw a spoon of instant into a cup. I left the kitchen to wash up. When I returned, the water was boiling. I poured it over the crystals in the cup and added the last remains of a quart container of milk. The empty container would give me a reason to leave the house.

I sat down in the dining room and lit a cigarette. At an earlier time, instant coffee would have nauseated me, but now I just swallowed it and clenched my teeth.

Against the wall facing me were the empty cardboard boxes. Nancy had left for Los Angeles three weeks ago and I still hadn't gotten around to packing up the things that she

couldn't take on the plane. I had recently received a card from her with her new address, some place called "Los Feliz." The Happiness. Now I had to go through the apartment and try to separate our possessions. Mostly records and books. Everything else, she told me not to worry about.

Her new address. Her records, my books, her books, my records. Everything used to be ours. Her leaving was a simple change of pronouns.

Virgil was pulling at my robe. I pushed him aside and then got up and filled his bowl. He pounced on it greedily.

I gulped down the bitter remains of my coffee and went into the living room, turning on the radio before sitting down on the sofa. Nancy and I had held one another on that sofa many times last winter after midnight walks through the snow in the park. WMHT, the public station, came on with a sexy European voice pleading for money. An anonymous caller had just challenged the station, she said, and they had to raise a thousand dollars in ten minutes. The caller would then donate another thousand dollars. I looked out the window at nothing in particular and wondered what would happen in they just missed. I supposed the bastard wouldn't pay.

Yes, I did realize the many hours of listening pleasure, of fine programming, the Boston Symphony, Live from Lincoln Center, and I even, God help me, I even enjoyed the Boston Pops. Finally, with an icy shiver of guilt, I got up and switched to another station. I tried the college station: snobby esoteric jazz, the MOR station: Barry Manilow and 1001 strings, the top 40 station: acne, and finally settled on the new wave station. They were playing a live recording of a local I frequently went to see. I had first seen them a few years earlier when a friend of mine won free passes, but couldn't go that night. Nancy and I were in college at the time, first dating. I couldn't believe that she actually coaxed me out on the dance floor. It turned out to be pretty good. The song, which I was now hearing again on the radio, was perfect for dancing, a solid thrusting beat and a nice little guitar riff that lifted you up and carried you around in circles.

When the song ended, I started spinning the dial again, trying to find something worth listening to. During the past few weeks of hibernation I had discovered a method to radio scanning. Keep track of how long you spend away from each station so that you don't accidentally miss something good. An obnoxious commercial is more acceptable than a lousy

song. The best of all is a beer commercial with Leon Redbone. Still, sometimes it's very difficult to find something and I can get very impatient. After about an hour and a half I gave up and turned off the radio.

I walked through the dining room into the kitchen. Virgil was lying on the floor. I knelt down and started petting him, scratching his chin and neck the way he liked it. He was almost full grown now and was becoming aloof with age. When Nancy and I had first brought him home as a kitten, he kept us awake for several nights by crying for us to come out of our bedroom and hold him. Now, he seemed to need me less and less.

I got up and walked into the living room. Then I walked back into the kitchen and petted Virgil some more. "Who needs her," I said, startled by the sound of my own voice. "We got us." Virgil yawned and rolled over. I walked into the living room and turned on the radio. The commercial stations were playing crap and the public station was squealing Stravinsky. Hell of a way to raise money I thought as I turned off the radio. I sat on the sofa and stared out the window. I got up and went over to the bookshelf for something to read, but the only books I hadn't read belonged to Nancy. They belonged in the boxes in the dining room which belonged in the hands of the UPS man. I didn't know why I was still holding on to her books; I didn't want to read them. I tried the radio again. Nothing.

I lay down on the sofa and began thinking about Nancy. On that day, I had driven her down to catch a flight out of New York. Kennedy Airport, a swelling bureaucratic mass on Long Island, was as confusing as ever. I had to drive around the service highway three times to find the correct parking lot for the correct terminal. Nancy was very quiet, looking afraid to open her mouth, as if anything she could say would hurt me. I had known all along that sooner or later we would probably part. Those were thoughts I had always tried to avoid. We had met when we were students and didn't have to think about the future very much. Now the future had come and there was no way to avoid it. I reached over several times and she gently squeezed my hand.

We checked her luggage in and I walked her to the gate. That was my last chance to talk her into staying, but I couldn't say anything. If the roles were reversed, I would have left and nothing she could say would make me stay. Her career was much too important to her. Now, I felt as if something had been stolen away from me. I was weak and helpless. There had been other women before Nancy, but when they left, or I left them, they never seemed to

keep a piece of me. This time the earth seemed to shift under my feet and I was struggling to keep my balance.

I looked around the room at the walls we had spackled and painted and the woodwork we had stripped and re-stained. The constant sight of Nancy's ghost was draining me of any feeling of strength. Slowly, my mind relaxed and I drifted off into a restless sleep.

When I woke up, the sun was going down and I heard Virgil crunching his food on the kitchen floor. I got up and put water on for coffee. Then I remembered the empty milk container.

It was a bit warmer outside than it had been for weeks. I trudged down the crusty, slushy sidewalk down State Street, by the park, enjoying the fresh air. A car came along side and matched my pace. I looked over and saw man in his early thirties behind the wheel, looking me up and down. I turned away and the car drove ahead down the street, and disappeared. He came up behind me again on the next block and looked into my eyes this time. A chill raised the hairs on the back of my neck. I gave him the finger and he disappeared for good.

I continued on past the rows of brownstones and the odd looking trees with shriveled brown leaves iced over. The leaves in this city cling to the trees from fall into winter and don't come floating down until early spring. At Lark Street I turned right and walked past all the arty shops and cafes. For some reason, traffic on Lark Street is usually heavy. That night, however, the street was empty and quiet. I stopped in front of the pub where they served the best coffee in town and considered going inside. I decided against it and walked a few doors further to the donut shop. Where the pub was dark and intimate, the donut shop was bright and public. And since it had recently opened, the shop contained no memories for me.

There were a few couples sitting at the tables and some older men sitting at the counter, killing time. I went to the far end of the counter, away from everyone else. The waitress came over to take my order. Her face was very pretty. Dark brown hair came pouring down from under her cap and framed her face. She smiled warmly at me revealing her perfect white teeth. I asked her for a cup of coffee. When she turned around and walked to the coffee machine, I noticed how teasing her uniform was. It was just snug enough to reveal that there was something fine underneath without revealing anything. I could just barely detect a cute

little ass twitching beneath it. She set the cup down in front of me and smiled and said "thank you" out of the corner of my mouth while lighting a cigarette.

I drank my coffee slowly and followed her with my eyes as she ran back and forth behind the counter. I was careful to be discreet; I didn't want to be caught staring. In a way she reminded me of the women I used to see before I met Nancy. Not really how she looked, but the way she walked.

I rationalized my behavior by telling myself that I, unlike the man in the car, was keeping my thoughts to myself. The rationalization didn't work very well and I began to feel guilty. My thoughts seemed to be stealing something private from her, the way the man's eyes had reached out and grabbed at me. Besides, even if I could somehow get her to come home with me, which I probably couldn't, it wouldn't be exactly what I wanted. I wasn't sure what I wanted. I ordered another cup of coffee to keep me away from the apartment a few minutes longer, to give me time to think, and to look at the waitress some more.

I had almost finished my second cup when a young man in an expensive looking ski jacket came in and sat down at the counter. He obviously knew my waitress and the two of them began to talk. I turned my head to get a piece of their conversation. The waitress broke my heart with her Long Island twang. A nasally Brooklyn accent with a dash of suburbia. The quality of her speech, one profanity after another, indicated that she spent very little time thinking about anything, including what her friend was saying. I finished my coffee, paid the check, and left, wondering how in hell she had kept me there so long.

It was dark outside and a light snow had begun to fall. I walked up the road through the park above the lake. I stopped for a moment and looked down the hill onto the ice. There were some skaters out in the middle, gliding backwards and forward into casual spins, marking out their own invisible boundaries. On the edge of the lake I saw several small children with their parents, out for, perhaps, the very first time with the skates they got for Christmas.

Something stupid came to me from a rather pompous lecture I had heard as a freshman in college. "When Socrates goes home at night, he is not alone. He is by himself." Either Plato or Aristotle said that, I can't remember which. Of course it's in a dialogue somewhere where the great philosopher picks a moron to argue with so he can prove a point. Not that I

would do much better against the likes of Plato or Aristotle, but the answer had always been clear to me. Socrates was arrogant and madly in love with himself. He was his only friend.

This was not the blinding revelation that it had been meant to be for centuries. "Easier said than done" has killed more proverbs than I can think of. I tried to forget the whole damn thing and just watch the skaters. Some of the children were daring, going off on their own, falling down and getting up again, while others were frightened, clinging to their parent's legs.

Again, I thought about Nancy. What had she taken from me? Why had this never happened before? There had been others before her. Lots of them. One right after another. Always somebody to take somebody else's place. Right now, there was no one to take Nancy's place. Standing above that frozen lake, I felt abandoned and cold.

I shivered and started walking again, haunted by either Plato or Aristotle. A man came by pulling a little boy in a light blue snow suit and a matching ski mask on a sled. The little boy, thinking he was scary in his ski mask, yelled "Boo!" as he slid by. I bellowed back at him and cackled like a mad scientist, waving his arms awkwardly above my head, my feet sliding and slipping on the slushy ground. He thought I was funny and giggled hysterically. I stood there laughing for a few minutes and then clumsily started walking home to Virgil. Slowly.

# All Mixings are Blessed

The phone rang on a Saturday afternoon in June while Sam was folding his laundry. He was trying to decide what to do with three orphan socks. One was white with blue stripes around the top, one was white with yellow stripes around the top, and one was white with blue and yellow stripes around the top. They were all almost brand new, so he couldn't throw them away without feeling guilty. Finally, he tossed all of them in a drawer. On the way into the living room he decided that he would wear them with long pants and nobody would know the difference.

"Hello."

"Hi, Sam." The voice made Sam forget about his socks.

"Hi, Jenny. How's the bride to be?"

"Not bad." There was silence.

"What can I do for you?" Sam asked.

"Are you doing anything tonight?"

"Well, I was planning on getting roaring drunk with Barbara to celebrate your marriage."

"Oh," she said. She continued nervously, "can I come over for a while?"

Sam was a bit surprised. "If you want to," he said slowly, "but shouldn't you be with Kevin tonight?"

"We're going out to dinner and then calling it a night. We want to get plenty of sleep for tomorrow. All those horrible pictures and everything."

"Good idea," Sam said. "If you want to come over later on, that's fine." Something was wrong.

"What time?"

"About ten, ten-thirty."

"I thought you're supposed to be getting plenty of sleep tonight."

"Stuff it. You know I'm not going sleep at all," Jennifer said.

"All right, all right. I'm just trying to help."

"Yeah, that's what you're good at." Her voice was spiteful.

"Okay, Jenny, relax. We'll talk about whatever's bothering you tonight and we'll get everything straightened out once and for all so we can all live happily ever after. All right?"

"All right," she answered.

"Now smile."

"I am smiling," she said.

"No you're not. I can tell."

"I am too."

"No you're not. Now, smile or else."

"Or else what?" Her voice suddenly became lively, the way it always did when she gave Sam a hard time.

"Now you're smiling," Sam said. "I'll talk to you tonight. Say goodbye, Jenny."

"Goodbye, Jenny." Sam was now certain that she was smiling.

"Goodbye, Jennifer".

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Sam watched a pigeon swoop down into the gutter near the sidewalk cafe where he and Barbara were having dinner. The pigeon was looking for something to eat, but an afternoon shower had swept the streets clean of anything edible. All that remained was a black oily mush.

"Sam," Barbara said, "I know you're not in love with me, but I'm at least better looking than that filthy bird."

"I know," Sam said, staring into his plate. "Everybody needs a little filth now and then, though."

Sam was still thinking about that afternoon. After getting off the phone with Jennifer, he had called Barbara and told her that there was a change in plans and could he buy her dinner instead. Something had come up. Barbara had guessed that it was Jennifer.

"How'd you guess?" he had asked. "I used a Vulcan mind meld," Barbara had said. "How do you think I guessed? When you cancel out on me for important reasons, you don't feel guilty. When you cancel out on me for Jennifer, you buy me dinner."

"But I promise you it's the last time."

"It better be. She's going to have to learn to do without you."

Sam had let it go at that. Barbara very often had some very harsh things to say about Jennifer and they always hurt Sam, probably because he knew that Barbara's criticisms were, to a large extent, true.

Later that afternoon, he drove through the rain to Barbara's apartment. She greeted him at the door with a warm smile and a cold bottle of beer. She wore a short white skirt and a

plaid blouse and her face was lightly made up. He kissed her on the cheek and thanked her for the beer. "What treatment I get," he said, "I should come here more often."

"Tell me about it," Barbara mumbled as she led him into her living room. She put on an Arlo Guthrie album and they sat for about a half hour drinking beer and talking about the radio commercials Sam had been producing and the costumes Barbara was designing for the summer theater at the university.

"You've given up performing?" Barbara asked.

"Not by choice," Sam answered. "A matter of economics. Radio ads pay very well."

After they finished their beer, they left her apartment and walked a few blocks to the Italian restaurant next to the park. The rain shower had just ended and the air smelled fresh and clean with a slight fragrance of earth and blossoms.

Now, during dinner, they both fell silent, occasionally looking at each other. Barbara had a concerned look on her face, her eyes seemed to be searching for something beneath Sam's casual air. She had known Sam for four years and knew how to read his gestures very well. The only time Sam acted casual and easygoing was when he didn't feel that way.

Sam tore a piece of bread off the loaf in the center of the table and tossed it to the pigeon in the gutter. The bird hopped over to it and picked it up. A car pulled into the curb, sending the pigeon fluttering away over the imposing oak trees that surrounded the park. Sam could see the bread hanging from its beak, silhouetted against the sinking sun.

When they finished their meal, they ordered another carafe of wine and sipped it slowly, quietly. Barbara made several attempts at conversation, but Sam just shrugged and said yes and no absent-mindedly.

Later, they walked through the park, across the open field and through a grove of dogwood trees. Barbara took off her sandals and walked barefoot on the damp grass. They stopped for a moment while Barbara picked some sprigs of blossoms from the dogwoods.

As they walked along the edge of the lake, passing some young boys with pails and fishing rods, Barbara tried to break through to Sam. "What's wrong?" she asked, slipping her arm through his.

"I don't know. It's Jennifer, I guess."

"I wouldn't have known," Barbara said sarcastically. She started to pull her arm away from his, but, surprisingly, he resisted. Faintly. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

Sam thought for a moment and then said, "Maybe. I'm not sure how I feel. I think I always knew this would happen. She feels more secure with Kevin. She can push him around all she wants.

"You wouldn't let her get away with that."

"No," Sam agreed, "I'd push back, like I always do. Jennifer and I are very much alike."

"Yeah," Barbara said, "you both do whatever you think you can get away with."

In the past, Sam had frequently been very callous to Barbara. Every time he said he was sorry, with that earnest look on his face, Barbara, against her better judgment, forgave him and was willing to forget the canceled dinner dates and other broken promises.

"Just remember," Barbara continued, "a person can stand only so much before they tell you to go to hell."

Sam didn't quite understand what Barbara was saying, or, at least he chose to ignore it. "I guess you're right. Maybe sooner or later Jennifer and I wouldn't be able to stand each other. We seem to spend most of our time trying to get at each other, one way or another. Well," he said with a chuckle, "I guess this is the end and she has the last word."

"Let's hope so," Barbara said with annoyance. "I'm tired of hearing about her."

"You're always asking about her."

"What the hell else can I do? Every time I see you, you go on and on about either how great things are or how rotten things are."

"You always seem to want to know," Sam said.

"You always have to tell me. I wish you spent half as much time worrying about me. Tell me, when you're with her, do you start carrying on about me?"

"I don't have to. You're my best friend and we get along just fine."

"Terrific," she said, jerking her arm loose from his. They both stopped walking. "Just what I wanted to hear. I'm sorry I'm so boring."

"You're not boring," Sam said impatiently. "What have I done now?"

"Never mind," Barbara said with exasperation. "It's me, Sam, not you. Sometimes I expect too much."

Sam was not exactly sure what Barbara was talking about, so he wisely shut up. Thought of what Barbara might say always made him feel uncomfortable.

Tossing her dogwood blossoms into the lake, she said "walk me home now so you can go wait for Jennifer. I'm tired."

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The doorbell rang at ten fifteen while Sam was in the kitchen finishing up last week's dishes. He dried his hands and then walked down the hallway to let Jennifer in.

"Come on in, old girl. You look nice tonight." She wore faded jeans, beat up sneakers and an old flannel shirt.

Jennifer looked down at her clothes and said, "you need glasses."

"No I don't," Sam said. "You always look nice, even when you're dressed like that. Like the girl next door. Can I get you anything? I was just about to make myself some coffee."

"That would be fine." She noiselessly followed him into the kitchen. As he was setting up the coffee maker, Sam kept glancing over at Jennifer, who just stood there looking at him with no expression on her face. She didn't say anything.

"There," Sam finally said, "it'll be a few minutes before this is ready. Why don't we go into the living room so you sit quietly in a chair, rather than looking so awkward standing up."

As Sam walked past her, she poked him in the ribs and said "creep. You like to keep me off balance, don't you?"

"It's either that or you've got me off balance. What do you expect me to do?"

They walked into the living room. Jennifer sat down on the couch while Sam sat down in the easy chair across the room next to the sealed-up fireplace. "You're going to sit all the way over there?" Jennifer asked.

"What difference does it make?"

"No difference," she said casually. She looked over to the guitar leaning against the wall next to the stereo.

"Why don't you play it?" Sam suggested. He grinned and added, "it'll be the last time you get to sing me a passionate love song and not feel guilty."

"Very funny. I always feel guilty."

"Just trying to lighten things up a bit. I've been walking on eggs since you got here. What's going on? I'm the one you can talk to, remember?"

"Let's just wait till the coffee's ready."

"Suit yourself."

There was nothing new about this awkwardness. Over the last year there had been many moments like this. Most of them were in this room. The first one had been when Jennifer had come to dinner for the first time. Sam cooked an elaborate dinner to impress her, since she had told him she couldn't cook. Sam was very nervous that day.

They were both now sitting quietly waiting for the coffee. Sam looked at the mantel he was sitting next to, which he used for a bookshelf. The Great Gatsby caught his eye. He thought of the first time Jennifer had been in this room and remembered the scene in the novel where Gatsby and Daisy, his lost love, meet at Nick's cottage. A clock falls from the mantel and Gatsby catches it just before it crashes to the floor. With all the tension in the room, Sam realized that very little had changed in the last two years.

The coffee maker started gurgling in the kitchen. "Stay here, I'll get it," Sam ordered as he rushed out of the room.

He stood in the kitchen smoking a cigarette, flicking ashes into the sink while he waited for the coffee to stop dripping from the filter into the pot. He heard the opening chords to "Here Comes the Sun" being played on the guitar in the living room. "How many sugars, two?" he called.

"One and a half, it's not good for me." The playing stopped.

"A lot of things aren't good for you," Sam mumbled to himself.

He put the milk and sugar into two cups and added a shot of whiskey to one of them for himself. When he returned to the living room, the guitar was back against the wall. Just as well, he thought. The evening was already depressing enough.

As he set her cup down on the coffee table in front of her, Jennifer shifted over on the couch, meaning that he should sit down next to her. "What the hell," he said sarcastically, "I'll give you a thrill." He sat down next to her.

"So," Jennifer said, "you're coming tomorrow with Barbara?"

"Yeah," said Sam. He lit another cigarette. "If she's still talking to me in the morning."

"Why wouldn't she be?"

"We had a little fight tonight, that's all." Sam didn't really feel like talking or even thinking about Barbara. The things that Barbara had left unsaid made Sam feel uncomfortable. Indeed, Sam and Jennifer were very much alike.

"It'll blow over," Jennifer said. "She's a good friend."

"Yeah," he said, exhaling smoke and shaking his head. He held back a chuckle and said, "nice of you to tell me. I wouldn't have known. Interesting that all of a sudden you approve of her." He paused to take another long pull on his cigarette. He felt bad about what he had just said. "I'm sorry, Jenny, that was kind of nasty, but you're driving me crazy. What the hell are you doing here?"

She looked directly at him and said, "you know why I'm here. Come on, you're an intuitive sonovabitch. Tell me."

"I don't know, Jenny. I honestly don't know."

Jennifer looked down for a moment and then stood up. She walked over to the sealed-up fireplace. "Neither do I."

Sam wished he had put more whiskey in his coffee. It was going to be a long, frustrating night. Sam and Jennifer had always seemed to be very close to one another. Sam had never understood anyone or had been understood by anyone as well as Jennifer. They could never keep secrets from one another. This led to expectations of more than friendship that weren't all that far-fetched. Things never seemed to work out. She had been talking about marriage with Kevin since before she met Sam, but there were many times when she felt very unsatisfied with him. Sometimes for reasons which Sam understood with alarming accuracy. This only made matters worse.

"Okay, Jenny," Sam said. "Come over here and sit down, kick off your shoes and tell me what's happening. Relax. You know by now that I don't bite."

A grin crept over Jennifer's face. She jumped over to the couch, kicked off her sneakers and positioned herself Indian style on the couch facing Sam.

"I said relax, not go to pieces."

"I am relaxed."

"You just like to keep me off balance," Sam said.

"It's you or me, brother," she replied.

"I'm a lot of things, but I'm not your brother."

"Oh, I see. You don't mind dreaming about fornication, but you draw the line at incest."

"Wait a minute," Sam interrupted, "we're supposed to be doing you, not me."

"What's the difference?"

"There's one very big difference. You're getting married tomorrow and you're here with me right now, instead of with Kevin, where you belong. I've got nothing to explain. You've got a lot to explain."

"Good point," Jennifer said, shifting awkwardly about. "You've started to get a tan. Have you been out in the sun?"

Sam gave up. She would eventually get to the point. "A little," he said. "You could use some sun. Look how pale you are. Pasty."

"I'm not pasty," she said indignantly. "I'm Irish. I have milky white skin, soft as satin."

"Oh, I see."

"Besides, I don't tan. I just get freckles."

"I know," Sam said, "you look cute with freckles on your nose. Like the girl next door."

Jennifer was ignoring his remarks. "But you tan well," she continued, "and your hair is getting lighter. It looks nice this way."

"Thank you. Nice of you to say so."

"It's true. I've always loved your hair. You have beautiful eyes too."

Sam got up and walked into the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm getting a drink," he said. He asked her if she wanted anything and she said no and thanked him. He put some ice in a glass and poured scotch over it. He took a sip and then topped off the glass. He took a deep breath and returned to the living room.

Sam sat in the chair next to the sealed-up fireplace, sipping his drink. He lit a cigarette. Jennifer was looking down at her empty coffee cup. She was still sitting Indian style with her hands grasping her ankles. To Sam, her sadness revealed a soft beauty. He reflected on this for several minutes and then finally disturbed the silence by asking her what she wanted from him.

"I want you to tell me that you're happy for me and you think I'm doing the right thing."

"I'm happy for you and I think you're doing the right thing."

"That doesn't sound very convincing."

"Well, what am I supposed to say. You don't sound very convincing. I've never been able to convince you of anything you didn't really believe yourself. Much to my dismay," he added. He got up set his drink down on the mantel above the sealed-up fireplace, and sat down next to Jennifer. "Look, he said, "it's the night before and you're just getting a little nervous. The whole thing would never have come this far if you didn't want it to. You're one of the few people I know who usually gets what you want. If you really didn't want to get married, this wouldn't be the night before your wedding. I'd have seen to that."

"Sammy knows me best," Jennifer said with a smile.

"Sammy only knows what you already know."

Sam looked at Jennifer. Slowly, a nervous look crept over her face and she had to look down. "It's just that sometimes, when I see you, I feel like I'm making a terrible mistake."

"Well," Sam said, a little embarrassed, "I did try."

"And other times," Jennifer continued, "I want to break your neck."

"You know you've done the same to me."

"Of course."

"Okay," Sam said. "This is your last chance. Do you want to dump Kevin and marry me instead?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because Kevin asked me first."

Sam looked at her and saw a mischievous smile. "That knocked a bit of the wind out of me. You're still doing it, aren't you? A line here and there for me to remember forever."

"Everyone wants to be remembered."

"Don't worry," Sam said, "I couldn't possibly forget. Just don't come around here tomorrow night telling me that you changed your mind. I can't take all this excitement. I need some emotional peace and quiet."

Jennifer was smiling and she almost looked happy. "Thanks," she said. She leaned over and kissed Sam on the cheek. It was the kind of kiss that she had been giving Sam in the last few weeks, perfunctory, extremely polite, like a small showing of generosity. It always annoyed Sam, but he never said anything. "We will remain friends, won't we?" Jennifer asked.

"Be realistic," Sam said. "We were never friends. Acquaintances, adversaries, lovers, but never friends. We don't know how. It wouldn't work."

"That sounds so awful!"

"It's the truth."

"I guess you're right," Jennifer said.

Sam picked up Jennifer's hand and kissed it. "Of course I'm right," he said softly. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep. You have a wedding to go to tomorrow."

"Are you throwing me out?"

"I want you to leave while we're both still smiling. It usually doesn't last very long."

Jennifer put on her sneakers and Sam walked her to the door. When he returned to the living room, he took his drink off the mantel above the sealed-up fireplace and sipped it. He sat down with his guitar and played "Here Comes the Sun." A cool breeze blew in from the street and the house was still.