



CROSSING OVER





Curse of a Lonely Heart

In college, I had been attracted to my roommate, Peter Townsend. But after fifteen years of marriage to Amanda, my thoughts of Peter had faded, until I heard a rumor that he would interview for Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University where I was a professor of botany. I called to invite him to our house for a dinner while he was in town. I told Amanda.

“Goddamn it, Tony. I don’t like him.”

“You could try,” I said. There were a few minutes at my twentieth college reunion when I thought Amanda could never get enough of Peter.

“You made a move. He turned you down,” I said.

“I’ve never ‘made a move’ on any man.”

“That’s a little disingenuous,” I said. I was surprised at my anger. We had so little between us. And I truly didn’t care if she slept with every man she met, as long as she was confidential.

“Only if you grill. We can eat outside,” Amanda said.

“Do a sit-down dinner,” I said. Amanda was a proud cook of exacting proportions, frequently adjusted temperatures, and rigid freshness. Peter deserved the best.

She finally agreed and insisted we invite another faculty couple, Ester (in social science) and Henry (in molecular biology), and Amanda’s sister Madeleine, who was to balance the table as Peter’s dinner partner. Madeleine was in library science, thirty-five years old and never married. She was attractive but with a porcelain-figurine look to her face and a frightened-rabbit personality that I did not think was Peter’s taste. But I said nothing to Amanda.

We gathered together on a Thursday night. I had insisted that Peter be presented as the honored guest, and he fit easily into the role as if he expected nothing less. The dinner was below Amanda’s usual standards for excellence—

she complained she lacked time during the week--and she glared frequently at Peter as if her failures were his fault.

Ester started the dinner conversation. "Why would you be interested in a chair here?" she said.

"Opportunity," Peter said.

"Not to improve negotiations at home? That's how you medical doctors squeeze those high clinical salaries, isn't it?"

"Peter is not that kind of faculty," I said.

"How would you know, Tony? The department here is close to broke. The previous chair left under a cloud of harassment accusations."

"The department has an excellent reputation," I said.

Amanda came in from the kitchen wearing oven mitts and carrying a hot ceramic dish filled with a bubbling parsnip puree.

"Are you considering other positions?" Amanda asked Peter.

"As they come up," Peter said.

For the next two courses the conversation came in spurts and we drank wine in the silences. But just before dessert, Madeline told a story about her schnauzer falling into the bathtub, and Ester expressed concern about the poor quality of students applying for admission this year. Even Amanda seemed warmed to chatty—at least a little--and told of her recent trip to the Bahamas with her boss, the university Chancellor, for a conference. Henry, silent throughout with his own thoughts, finally said yes when asked if he wanted another piece of flourless chocolate cake.

After dinner we straggled to the living room. I directed Peter to our most comfortable overstuffed chair. Amanda, Madeleine and I sat in side chairs, and Ester and Henry took the sofa near the fire, seating that honored Peter at the heart of a half circle. Two open bottles of red wine were on the coffee table, and there was a plate of marzipan that Amanda had beaten and molded into bananas, grapes and lemons. A shaded floor lamp in the corner and the flames from the log fire gave us a low intensity but pleasing light. We were all smiling.

“I can’t believe you’re not married,” murmured Ester to Peter, swaying on the sofa as if in a lifeboat, her cheeks flushed. In the last hour she’d stared at Peter continuously, ignoring Henry. Peter rarely looked at her.

“Are you gay?” Ester finally asked Peter.

Peter turned his head and stared. “Not that I’ve yet realized,” he finally said good-naturedly. In college, nude, he had been a dream of a man. I remembered after a shower, water running over his defined figure, his abdominal muscles without a trace of fat. He was still a man’s man.

“You’re attracted to men but never act?” Ester persisted. She was a woman who clung to girlish guile as she approached middle age.

“Not at all,” said Peter

“Every man has gay thoughts,” Amanda said.

Her authoritative tone irritated me, and I glared at her to be quiet. “Not true,” I said--I was sure Peter’s thoughts were heterosexual. Amanda and I often disagreed in our unusual times of discussion. For the most part, we spent our time in the house in separate rooms. We had settled into a marriage with rare intimacy, and I had a circle of friends she didn’t ask about.

“What do you think, Peter?” Amanda asked. “Every man has a touch of gay?”

I could tell the teasing about masculinity had begun to irritate Peter, and he was trying not to show it.

“I know the pain of love lost,” Peter said. “I will never marry again.”

“Undoubtedly with gay thoughts,” Ester said. Her probing had been a flirt that fell flat. Peter seemed unaware.

“A woman trifled with my affections,” Peter said. “I have not recovered.”

“It’s so easy to blame it on the woman,” Amanda said.

“She made mistakes,” Peter said, “but I never blamed her.”

“Oh, that is so male. *She* made the mistakes!” Ester said.

“Don’t presume what you don’t know,” Peter said.

“Tell us the details. Let us decide about love and affection,” Amanda said.

“What man knows the meaning of love?” Ester said.

“I want to hear,” Madeleine said.

Henry looked interested too. He was the kind of guy who would fantasize himself in freeze-frame poses with Peter's woman.

"Well, let me take a break and I'll tell you," Peter said. He went up the stairs to the second floor bathroom while we huddled around the wine.

"That was rude," Madeleine whispered to Amanda. She could not suppress a dreamy adolescent gaze when looking at Peter.

"Grow up, Maddie," Amanda said. "He's a monster."

"I think he's a good guy," Henry said.

"Shut up, Henry," Ester said. "He's a fucking sexist."

Henry stared at the fingers of his right hand that he splayed for no reason. He'd repeated the gesture frequently since we'd left the dining room. "That's not fair, honey."

"You've got a rock for a brain," Ester said. She filled her wine glass.

"Look," I said, "Peter is our guest. It's not fair to put him on the spot."

"Loosen up, Tony," Ester replied.

Peter came down the stairs and sat again near the center point of our half circle, sinking down in the soft chair. Everyone could see he was eager to tell his tale.

He began . . .

The third year after I was appointed full professor in psychiatry, a medical school student, I'll call her Cathy, came to do research. Her project was clinical fluff, some idea that hypnosis at age regression levels could be used to pinpoint triggers of recurrent depression. Cathy saw patients in all faculty practices, but she spent more time with me than anyone else. Looking back on it, there was probably an unrecognized attraction from the very beginning. I found her competent and always available, and was careful to treat her no better or worse than any other student.

She was a small girl with light brown hair, a round face with slightly pinched features, and penetrating pale blue eyes. Her lopsided smile, more right than left-- quickly became endearing--one of her best features. She was a runner

with a svelte figure and dressed in professional silk blouses and colorful skirts with provocative hemlines.

As was routine after students completed a service rotation, she was invited to the annual department outdoor barbecue. In a social setting, I found her animated intelligence charming, and since she was technically no longer a student, I asked her for a date. She asked about my divorce--I'd been a bachelor for fourteen years, and she thought my maturity attractive.

In a few weeks we couldn't bear to be away from each other. It was a mutual attraction of a lifetime. At the end of internship, she accepted a pediatric residency in New Haven. I, of course, could not move from my position at the University in D.C., and we vowed to spend every weekend together until she could finish her two years of training. As it turned out, she could rarely leave her clinical responsibilities, and I traveled to her. In the second year, our weekends together became more infrequent. I would arrive ungreeted at the airport and take a taxi to sit alone in her cramped apartment on a bone crunching futon. When she finally left the hospital, she was too exhausted to make love.

In two years she managed only two trips to Washington, but I did take her to New York or Boston a few times. She began to talk of a formal wedding. In public, she referred to us as engaged and wore a plain gold ring when we went out that disappeared by the time we settled back in our hotel room.

But in truth, there were times when I felt like a stranger. My lifelong policy had always been honesty, and I told Cathy of the strain of traveling so far for so few unpredictable hours of watching her sleep. And I always added--repeatedly--how much I needed her. We can work it out, she said.

Just before we broke up, it was late autumn and the leaves were off the trees. The only flight available for the weekend made two stops and was two hours late. It was past eleven when we got to her apartment complex.

Cathy slowed in the lot with reserved parking. A van with dark tinted-windows crowded into her space between two smaller cars.

She parked on the street and I rolled my suitcase to the apartment and carried it up three flights of stairs. I went to shower. Cathy slipped into a tee shirt and shorts and turned to making her dinner. I had eaten during a layover.

She made a sandwich for herself and was eating at the metal-topped kitchen table when I sat across from her in my underwear to have a glass of wine. We heard a knock on the door, and Cathy put down her sandwich.

“Don’t answer it,” Cathy whispered, signaling me to be quiet.

A man’s hoarse voice called her name, and the knocking got faster and louder.

I got my pants from the closet and fumbled in my hurry to get them on.

“Go away,” Cathy called out.

The man began pounding the door.

“Cathy!” he yelled. The pounding increased.

“He’ll go away,” she said softly.

She seemed to be right. Footsteps retreated down the wooden floors of the hallway. She released her grip on my arm and I led her into the living room. She collapsed into an overstuffed chair, her limbs shaking.

I sat on the sofa opposite to her. My breathing began to slow.

“You know him?” I asked.

“I’ve seen him once,” she said.

I was about to ask for details when the two hooked prongs of a tire iron splintered through the upper panel of the door. My gaze locked on hers in disbelief.

“Caaa---thy,” the attacker moaned. Then after another blow, “I know he’s in there.”

“Go away,” Cathy said. “I’ll call the police.” But her last few words were buried in a crash of iron on wood.

Cathy turned off the floor lamp in the living room, as if a dim light might slow him down.

“Get knives,” I whispered as we backed into the kitchen. She opened drawers and found a bread knife the length of a rat; she pointed to a small paring knife for me that would have been useless. Cathy’s look had shifted from scared to terrified.

We retreated to the bedroom; the explosive sounds followed. Whap, groan, whap, whap. I wondered if the attacker had a gun.

“He’s going to kill us,” I said.

“Dear God,” she said. I locked the bedroom door, twisting the pouty-lip dime-sized center circle in the handle.

Cathy cowered on the bed, her knifepoint straight up. I searched in her closet for a gun, or an axe, or even a ski pole. I came up with a metal clothes hanger and unwound the wire; maybe I could blind him.

The pounding got faster again. Cathy dialed 911 on the bedside phone. “We’re being attacked,” she screamed. She had to repeat the address twice. I wedged the back of a chair under the bedroom door handle and pulled Cathy off the bed and as far away from the door as possible. We crouched, weapons ready.

The attacker crashed into the apartment, bumping against the living room furniture. He started with his tire iron on the bedroom door; Cathy was wheezing. In less than a minute, he was through the door, shoving the chair barrier aside easily with one arm. I couldn’t see his face in the dark.

“Get in the bathroom,” I yelled to Cathy.

We clambered to the bathroom--no bigger than a hall closet. I flipped the light switch as Cathy climbed over the toilet into the tub so I could get the door closed. I pushed the center lock-pin in the door handle. The attacker’s tire iron splintered the door panel and came within inches of my face. I stumbled, knocking Cathy down.

The attacker kicked out the door panel and reached in and twisted the door handle from the inside. When the door opened, he froze and stared first at me and then at Cathy. He was almost six feet tall with narrow shoulders and a beginning potbelly. He looked about thirty. He wore glasses, a tee shirt and tan cotton pants. His scruffy running shoes had untied laces, and he wore a wide belt that held an automatic pistol.

Cathy had one leg over the edge of the tub; he stared at her thigh. She pointed the knife at him, twisting the shower curtain to cover herself. I gripped the showerhead with one hand and waved my clothes hanger.

He rested the curve of his tire iron on the bathroom tiles and we had a few seconds to think. He was now strangely subdued.

“So this is the boyfriend?” he said, looking to me as if I were some inferior cut of beef just served in an overpriced restaurant.

“Fiancé,” said Cathy.

“I should kill him,” the attacker said. His voice was breathy and mean.

He backed into the bedroom pointing the pistol at me with his right hand and holding the tire iron with his left. Cathy sobbed. “Get out,” she said. Then, this guy, whose name turned out to be Kyle, sat on the bed and wept, moaning.

I let out a giddy laugh when I realized I wouldn’t die. Cathy walked to the bed and tried to take the gun from Kyle, who pushed her away.

Two cops arrived and asked questions to Cathy and Kyle--because of their youth--as if they were betrothed and I were the stranger. I tried to maintain a dignity, but I was fighting humiliation at being ignored as some elderly nobody.

After ten minutes the man cop arrested Kyle taking him to the station and the woman cop stayed behind to write the formal report. I pretended disinterest.

Cathy told her story. She had met Kyle on a rare night off when she was lonely and went to a party for singles. They talked for a few minutes. “You’re everything I ever wanted in a woman,” Kyle had said. At that point, she told him she was engaged and to leave her alone. After the party Kyle became more determined, and he started calling her five, six times a day. As the cop finished writing, I stared at Cathy in disbelief. Why hadn’t she been honest enough to tell me? The cop finally left.

The door to the apartment was useless. Cathy found a sheet, and by using lots of thumbtacks, we covered the holes in the door. Then I backed the sofa and tilted it on end so that it blocked most of the opening.

We got in bed and propped pillows against the headboard. We sat in silence.

“Who really is this Kyle?” I finally asked. She was still breathing fast. He was a computer programmer whose hobby was making kites in the shapes of dragons, snakes and carnivorous dinosaurs. That was all she knew.

“You dated?” I asked.

“Never,” she said. “I didn’t lie. He was at one party.”

Despite her denial, the thought of Kyle and Cathy as a couple overwhelmed me. Women went to singles parties to pick up guys, right? I sulked.

“Forget him. I’ve wanted to see you so much,” she said.

“Look. I’m angry. Okay? I mean, I come to visit my fiancée, and her boyfriend tears down the door and wants to kill me.”

“He *isn’t* my boyfriend. Can’t you just hold me?” she said.

I flushed. “I didn’t diddle with other girls.”

She began crying.

“Did you screw?” I asked.

“What a terrible thing to say,” interrupted Amanda.

“Chauvinist. You hadn’t even committed,” Ester said.

“What did she say?” I asked.

She said: “Of course not.” She turned away from me. And we fell into silence.

The electric clock on the night table had an irritating drone and a click as the second hand staggered around the iridescent dial. I kept at least eighteen inches between us.

I stayed silent, my breathing strained. I listened to the night-sounds of the normal people living around us. Bath water running. A toilet flush. A yell in the parking lot. A car starting up. I felt as if I didn’t belong.

At one point she touched me gently on the side of my face and I moved farther away. At six thirty, first light slipped into the room under the window shade. Cathy got up to make coffee.

In the daylight, the sofa propped on end against the door looked ridiculous, and the sheet we had tacked up barely covered the opening and was so transparent I could see the apartment door across the hall.

I told Cathy I would leave that afternoon. A day early.

“I’m afraid,” she said. “I can’t get the door fixed until Monday.”

Without a word, I went out back to a trash heap behind the complex and picked out a set of mismatched boards. Then, using some nails I found in her utility closet and with a rock I retrieved from the edge of the parking lot, I nailed

a barrier over the door, board-by-board, inch-by-inch. She could go in and out through the window to the iron fire escape.

“Can’t you just love me?” she asked.

I had no conversation in me. I turned away and quickly packed. When I left for the airport by taxi, Cathy stayed in the bedroom behind the closed door.

Years later, she married a doctor.

I never saw her again.

We sat in silence for a while. Amanda was the first to speak.

“You should have believed her. She loved you.”

“She should have told me about Kyle,” Peter said. “She had some deep-seated reason for not telling me. It was a matter of trust.”

“Why don’t you look into yourself for all that deep-seated crap,” Ester said. “You rejected her. You ought to be jailed.” Ester threw a closed fist into the air.

“You were a jerk,” Amanda said.

“She sacrificed so much for you,” Ester said, her voice rippling in anger. “This Cathy. She’s a saint.”

“I’ll agree she wasn’t evil,” said Peter. “But she made a mistake going to that party, and she couldn’t admit to it.”

“There is nothing more precious than a woman’s love,” Madeleine said softly.

Henry looked up in disgust to where the ceiling met the wall. Ester squeezed her lids shut to avoid looking at Madeleine whose moist eyes glinted in sympathy for Peter.

“Don’t tell us you never dated other women,” Ester said. “All those years.”

“My only liaisons were necessities of my profession. They were hardly dates.”

“You’re unbelievable,” Amanda said.

Peter flushed. He stood and walked to the door. I stood to dissuade him, but Amanda pulled me back down and shushed me. The silence was hostile. Peter said nothing, putting on his coat and closing the front door without looking back.

I looked around. Everyone, except Madeline, seemed relieved he was gone.

“We should have been a little more gracious to him,” Madeleine said to Amanda. “He has so much more depth than I imagined.”

“He’s an asshole,” Amanda said

“I thought him sensitive,” I said.

Ester put her glass on the coffee table with a thud. “That’s what I’ve never liked about you, Tony,” she said. “The way you treat women.”

Amanda laughed.

“Don’t turn on me,” I said. “Peter’s a good friend. He was right to question that girl’s feelings for him.”

“What he did to the girl was inexcusable,” Ester said. Madeleine frowned.

“She made the choice. He was the one always going to her. He sacrificed.” My voice was loud. “No one should tolerate her deceit.”

“You’re obnoxious, Tony,” Ester said. “I’ve always thought that. I’m glad the wine let me say it.”

“Is that what you think?” I asked Amanda. “I’m out of line here?”

She paused. “You’re wrong, Tony,” she said.

I stood. I would not be insulted in my own home. I climbed the stairs and shut the door to my room. I stood in the dark, listening as the guests argued for a while, then said their goodbyes. I took off my clothes without turning on the light and left them rumped on a chair. I went to bed in my underwear and stared at the ceiling.

An hour later, Amanda opened the door to my room. She sat down gingerly on the edge of my single bed near the foot and looked to the dark window. She was quiet for many minutes.

“We’re sad, you and I,” she finally said.

“Speak for yourself,” I said. I wondered at the sincerity of her coming to me like this. She was very close to my leg. There was a blanket between us, but I could feel her presence. She laid the palm of her hand above my knee, her fingers spread slightly apart, but when I didn’t respond she took it away. I could see only the indistinct outline of the side of her face in the dark. I stayed quiet.

After a few more minutes, she left. She closed the door with extended gentleness so no sound was made.

Sleep had still not come when the morning light seeped through the window under the shade. The bed covers had slipped off. I was still on my back, my hands on my chest with fingers interlaced, my feet touching. I was alone.