After a six-hour drive north from Toronto, John Hampton arrived at the family home of his departed wife, Grace, and her daughter Candy, both dead six days. The house was dark. His sister-in-law, Ruth, greeted him in a nightgown and robe, and knee-length woolen socks. She led him toward an attic room. He hadn't seen her in more than four years.

"Henrietta's in the bedroom attached to yours. You'll have to share the loo. You know her, don't you? Candy's roommate?"

"I don't think so. I didn't see Candy often."

"Oh, you'd remember. Tall, slim girl. Round face. Crystal-blue eyes. Black hair cut in a pageboy. Unusual, so you can't forget."

"Is she nice?"

"You don't even have to talk to her if you don't want to. People call her Henri. I don't like her much. She's silent in a standoffish way. Definitely not shy. And I don't think she was happy about saying a few words in memory of Candy at the funeral when I asked her. I think she almost said no."

"An adventure in the attic," John said.

"She won't bother you."

"Especially if she doesn't talk."

"Roger will be coming to the vigil and the funeral," Ruth said. "I'm so sorry."
Roger was Grace's first husband, father to Candy, and a lawyer--general law--whom Grace had left during their first year of marriage, three months pregnant, for good schools and a life in the city.

Ruth went back to bed.

The attic air was frigid, fed through cracks under the eaves. Exhausted, John lay down on the single bed to await the slow coming of sleep, the corpses of Grace and Candy brought to Barrow and awaiting burial invading his thoughts. He felt the generations of dead that still occupied this austere, two-story, insulation-deficient frame farm house, as the living impatiently survived the bitter, long-winter cold to see the sun and its yearned-for relief in the spring.

At 2:24 AM, someone stood in the door that separated the two bedrooms. Henrietta! She wore a flannel nightgown with a hem that came to just above prominent knees. She stood motionless; her arms by her sides making her look awkward, as if they were hastily attached as replacements.

"What are you doing?" he said, throwing back the covers and sitting on the edge of the bed. "Are you all right?"

She began to walk slowly, her arms angled out purposelessly in front of her, her glazed eyes staring straight ahead. She was asleep. She turned toward the hall, quickly out of sight. He slipped on his untied shoes and followed her. Without holding onto anything, she started to descend the stairs that led to the garage . . . twenty narrow, steep steps to the first landing. He rushed to her, taking her elbow and gently leading her back to her room and bed. She did not wake and he returned to bed. But two hours later a

An Original Story by William H. Coles

www.storyinliteraryfiction.com
crash of glass and metal followed by a moan came from her room. She'd knocked over a lamp. John rushed to her, tried to help her, but she pushed him away.

"Where am I?" she said with fear.

"In the attic at Ruth's. Candy's aunt. I'm John Hampton."

She understood and calmed a little. He guided her back to bed and pulled up a chair, determined to watch at least for a while until he was sure she was asleep again. But she remained awake, agitated at times.

"I'm worried," she said, "about the eulogy."

"You'll do fine," he said.

"I'm not worried about performance. I speak well before others. It's what to say."

"What about Candy at school?"

"Students don't seem to know her as you would expect. And many didn't seem to care."

"There must be things about her past you could use."

"I didn't like her," she said. "There were times I stayed with a friend rather than go back to the room where she'd be."

"Think of adjectives."

"Self-centered, mean, lazy, directionless." She smiled with self-deprecation.

"Selfish, and not too bright."

"We need to think about it a little more." He smiled.

"She used recreational drugs. I think to addiction. The papers didn't say, but I think that's what killed her."

"Grace died on the way to the hospital to see her before she died. A friend was
"How can I find positives in that scenario?"

"Why do it then?"

"I promised. Ruth really wanted testimonials the family could cherish. How could I turn her down? The family didn't feel competent to do it right. I didn't know it would be impossible."

"You didn’t know her well enough. Ruth is the most understanding of the lot of them. Talk to her again."

"It's a matter of integrity; of my word."

"It's not a moral issue. You just can't find the right material."

"I'll think about it," Henri said.

He suggested they get some sleep.

Henrietta was waiting for breakfast in the living room with four family members when John descended from the attic the next morning. She stood when he introduced himself. She said nothing but nodded her head slightly with servant civility so pronounced that he actually waited for any hint of a curtsey. She retreated to a sofa picking up a magazine from a side table, never looking back. She looked tired, and she gave no sign that she recalled her sleepwalking, or their conversation.

At the table, Henrietta sat next to Jason, Ruth's youngest son.

"Do you like your school?" she asked Jason.

"Not much."

"Where do you go?"
"Barrow High."

"You like it at Hursthaven?" John asked Henri.

"I don't," she said.

The sputtering of bacon grease crescendoed as Ruth added more rashers for new diners coming in from outside through the front door.

"I'm sorry about Candy," Henri said to Jason. "Were you close?"

"Naw," Jason said. He was large, about sixteen, and spoke slowly with a lisp.

"What will you miss most about her?" Henri asked. Jason continued eating. John doubted Jason even remembered the last time he saw Candy, who rarely came this far north and when she did she stayed with her father, Roger, and not the family.

"I'm giving a eulogy at the funeral. What do you think I should say?" Henri asked.

John didn't wait to listen to Jason's response. Henri was doing for Candy's eulogy what he needed to do for Grace. What in the name of God could he say that was good about a wife who had just spurned him? Ten days before her death, she had confessed to him a four-year affair with her boss at the university. She was moving out to live with her lover. John was shocked and angry and quickly despised her for her deceit . . . for her dishonesty. His emotions frightened him by their magnitude, emotions that suppressed caring she was gone. He did not care in the least! He never spoke to her again, and moved to a hotel so he could dull the humiliation of her abandonment.

And Grace's family and friends might carry his words to their graves. The family did not approve of Grace's first divorce and her contact with family had been limited to letters to Ruth on the holidays.

An Original Story by William H. Coles

www.storyinliteraryfiction.com
When John tuned back into conversations at the table, he admired Henri's determined interviews with family members. Once, her blue eyes locked on his, glittering with a porcelain luster and incandescence in stark contrast to the statuesque immobility of her features appropriate for the gravity of the moment. Her facial features had a unique appeal of incongruity that was magnetically attractive. And she was obviously smart.

"Was she your favorite cousin?" Henri asked a young man in coveralls. He shrugged.

Henri left the table to sit in the living room and read, legs crossed, her head bent in concentration.

"I'll go over the list for the vigil with you if you like," Ruth called to John as he stood after half-finishing servings of flapjacks buttered and flavored with maple syrup, and bacon and sausage.

"Thanks," he said with real gratitude. He would know few; he was married to Grace for twelve years, but he met the family only twice, and had never visited here at the family home.

"There are pictures and memorabilia in the living room," Ruth said. "Upstairs in the guest bedroom too. Take anything you fancy. She would have wanted you to have them."

After breakfast, hidden away in the sewing room where a horizontal rug loom dominated the center of the room, convenient to hide comfortably in an easy chair near the window, he reviewed, as chief librarian, two books for presentation at the Library Society meeting next week. But his mind skated without direction. He had to pretend
grief, having not experienced it, and never let the family know that Grace and he were no longer soul mates, or even friends, when she died.

He went to bathe and dress for the visit to the funeral home where the vigil would he held, and to reluctantly pay the bill for Grace's interment. She had no entitlements as an adulterer in his mind. But he had no choice; Ruth and her siblings, with few financial resources, had convinced Roger of his commitment to Candy’s burial, and after pointing out the mounting expenses for the vigil, presumed John’s responsibility for Grace’s burial. Their thoughts were just and he could not refuse.

On return from the funeral home, after dinner, and before bed, John looked at pictures and mementos as Ruth had suggested. There were photos of Grace alone before marriage, and with Roger, her first husband, and Candy, their only child. And there were many photos of Grace with John, mostly on vacation to the Galapagos, Machu Picchu, the Outback, the Great Wall, the Lake District. On a mantel over the fireplace, photos of Grace’s graduation, summa cum laude, and of her with her fellow psychology department faculty members at the university were displayed. Her lover was there, but he was not standing close to Grace. One five by seven showed Grace in a circle of children at Toronto Children's where she methodically volunteered and donated. She was generous. But the memories irritated him, reminded him of her deception and his humiliation. He would never take mementoes of Grace to haunt him, and he left them untouched for Ruth and the family.

The vigil was at the funeral home. Both caskets were displayed, exactly the same in color and make so it was impossible to know which was Grace's and which was Candy's

An Original Story by William H. Coles
unless you went up close and read the engraved brass plates on the ends. Grace's family and friends had, as tradition dictated, baked and cooked, peeled and chopped, sweetened and salted relentlessly to contain their grief.

The room was crowded, overheated, and loud, as family greeted friends and acquaintances, almost all of whom they had not seen for many winters. John saw Henrietta standing alone. She had on a plaid wool skirt with a thin black belt and an off-white blouse with a collar that buttoned down the front. She looked expensively au courant in a traditional way. John overheard her talking to Roger, Candy's father.

"Did you see her often?" Henrietta asked Roger.

"Once or twice a year. She came to visit. Always in summer," he said.

"Candy was so accomplished. What were you most proud of?"

Roger hesitated. He seemed lost for an answer. "I don't want to talk about it," he said.

Henrietta leaned toward him slightly. "I'm so sorry."

“You’re not family.”

“I didn't mean to pry." 

"You're giving the eulogy tomorrow, aren't you," he said.

"Ruth asked me."

"I wasn't asked."

“Why?"

"This family doesn't like me. We’ve barely spoken for two decades,” Roger said.

“They took Grace’s side. She left me when she was pregnant with Candy. Did you know that?"

Henri stayed silent.

“Without a thought of anyone but herself,” he continued.

“Did you seek reconciliation?”

Roger’s eyes were hard. “On my knees, for Christ’s sake. And years later. I begged her not to marry him.” He waved his hand toward John.

Henrietta expressed condolences and walked to join others. A few minutes later she approached John.

"How's it going?" John asked.

"It's going miserably. It's as if Candy touched no one's memory."

“What did Roger say? At least he seemed to have some caring for Candy."

"I didn't see it."

“You’ll find something to work with."

“I’m having doubts."

John smiled and changed the subject. "Do you find vigils unsettling?" he asked.

"This is my first. It's more social than I expected."

"Lacking a certain gravitas of respect for those departed?"

She smiled. "I guess there is a caring. The industry of the preparation and consumption seems to block thinking about the reality of the day."

"Did you expect tears?"

"Maybe reflection in silence. A reverence in stance. A control of motion." She was mature to three times her age, as if she'd been too intellectually busy to have a childhood.

"You're religious then?"
"In my own way," she said.

Ruth approached. "You two surviving under the eaves?" she asked.

"Is there anything I can do to help," Henri said.

Ruth replied that she could use some help with clean up. "And again thank you both for saying a few words tomorrow," she said. "It must be hard having been so close to Candy and Grace for so long. But it will mean so much to the family."

Henrietta's glance to John conveyed her growing lack of enthusiasm at being trapped by her impulsive acceptance to speak. "Is it time to start picking up empties?" she asked.

"You could start bringing in plates and glasses from the entrance hall. Put them in the kitchen."

Henri walked away.

A few minutes later John left to return to the farm to read in his secluded spot in the sewing room. He went to bed just before nine.

His room was especially dark this night, the light from the single dormer window almost extinguished by low-lying, dark, snow-impregnated clouds. Chilling wind gusts swiped against the side of the house, disturbing him with their crisply tactile, inhuman echoes.

Henri shook his shoulder to awaken him just before midnight. He sat up with his feet on the floor, pulling the covers over his lap. She'd pulled a chair up to within a few feet of him.

"You were sobbing and moaning," she said leaning slightly toward him, concern in her eyes. "Are you all right?"

An Original Story by William H. Coles

www.storyinliteraryfiction.com
He was unaware of what he dreamt while he slept. The cover of his pillow was wet, his throat tight when he tried to speak.

"Is it about your wife?"

"Definitely not!" he said.

"Why do you say that? You loved her?"

“Married twelve years. Our marriage changed over that time.”

Even in the dark shadows he could see concern in Henri's eyes, definitely not just curiosity.

He took deep breaths to relax his chest and his extremities. "In the early days, we traveled worldwide together. And we thought the same about a lot of things . . . we could talk late into the night . . . thinking together."

"It sounds idyllic."

"It wasn't perfect. She was busy with her teaching and lecturing, and we were often apart. And she worried about Candy, who lived a while with her former husband, then went to school in Ottawa, and almost never visited Grace."

"Candy rarely spoke of her mother while we were roommates," Henri said.

“It bothered Grace at first. Later, she didn’t seem to care as much.”

"Do you still love her?"

"Grace had an affair with her chair at the college for four years before she confessed. It hurt me."

"Were you able to forgive?"

"I don't know. It hasn’t been long. But I think so, at times at least."

"But you didn't love her at the end?"
He closed his eyes. He was calmer now than when he awoke, although his soul ached with an almost burn to it. After a few minutes it eased. "No," he said.

"Was it the deception?" Henri asked.

John thought for a few seconds. "It was discovering she didn't love me . . . when I never doubted her love."

"Because she loved another didn't mean she didn't love you."

He hesitated. "No. It was gone. She didn't love me."

"Does that mean you can't grieve her death? The good times?"

"What's to grieve?"

"Will you be able to speak tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll think of something. Mention her promotions. Her publications. Her charitable works."

"But you're angry."

"Anyone would be angry, their wives leaving them for other men."

A barn owl screeched behind the house. Faint

"You loved her once."

"Yes. I did. But it faded, even before she left."

"It seems her need for change would never go away. Almost inevitable."

"I don't want anyone to know she wasn't living with me at the end. Her new lover was driving her to the hospital; they'd heard Candy was close to death. Her lover's blood alcohol was .15. Think about the folly. She'd be alive today if she'd been faithful, stayed to rediscover what we'd had."
"What will you say at the funeral? How can you avoid the circumstances? You don't love her the way you did when you married."

"Those early years were good," he said. He feels a rush of deep sadness never before experienced, a flood released after these eight days since the accident. He has an unbound urge to weep. He squeezes his eyes shut and sets his jaw until his anguish eases enough so he can speak.

"Is it always there or does it come in waves?" Henri asked.

He lay back down on the bed, turning his pillow with the wet side down. A minute passed and his chest seemed to regain control of his breathing.

"It just came on," he said staring into the darkness that obscured the details of the ceiling.

"It's not easy to forgive," Henri said.

‘I am the resurrection and the life,' saith the Lord; 'he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die,' John 1:25-26

The one room church had a single steeple and oak pews. The congregation shivered in coats and gloves with cold unrelieved by the single electric heater in the back. To the front right a minister spoke from a raised pulpit. Nine choir members sat in metal folding chairs to the left, an upright piano against the wall behind them. After the gathering, with the coffins placed end to end in front of the congregation, and the greetings complete, Henri was introduced to speak. She ignored the podium, standing between the two
coffins. With assuredness, she negotiated through Candy's short, checkered life. She enhanced memories of the family she had so doggedly sought that revealed the good in Candy’s life no one had ever seen before. Henri swerved away from Candy's lack of connection to others by choosing the few people she'd had ties to, and making those tenuous ties seem to be remarkable accomplishments for Candy. Throughout, her poignant gaze gave every mourner the sense of profundity in her words. She painted Candy’s valiant struggle against life's fears that all humans face, the temptations, the needs. “Candy didn’t evade life’s inexplicable perils. She never shunned her responsibilities even when faced with injustice and impossible choices. Candy became a Joan of Arc for her own survival.”

Her words were tasteful and truthful—though never addressing the negatives—and beautifully rendered. John wished he could have led a standing applause.

John followed. Henri's position between the coffins had been so effective he chose not to mount the pulpit and stood in front of the congregation as she did although with more distance from the caskets. He breathed slowly and deeply. He paced his beginning with silence, looking out over family and childhood friends of Grace, whom she had never really nurtured.

Anger surged as he thought of her treatment of him and others, anger that constricted his thinking to her betrayal. He lost control of his thoughts and feelings and fought to regain them. God, he couldn't let his aggrieved anger corrode his opportunity to make the family proud, give them the satisfaction of kindred respect. The effectiveness of his silent pause was waning. "We have gathered . . ." he began, and he searched for the forgiveness that had released his grief last night. And it was there. Grace was who
she was and she could not help herself, always moving on and searching. She had loved him. And he forgave her.

He spoke from the depth of grief for the woman he had loved for years, not the woman he'd lost eight days ago. He spoke of their intellectual compatibilities. He described discovering nature together, and how it would have never happened without Grace. He spoke about Grace's need to mold her thinking to address the hard metaphysical questions of life, how she searched for answers in science and social work. “‘Why are we here? What is our purpose? How you answer forms the essence of who you are,’ she’d say, always with kind advice and direction. And she would work hard for long hours rather than ask someone to do something for her.” Then, with intimate expression, John explained how humor surprised Grace, warming her to others. He could see every mind before him following his thoughts, see them appreciating the severity of the loss of Grace. Never did he let the anger misdirect his thoughts from an ever-present pride of having Grace in their existence. He ended with his head down, exhausted from his effort, and he absorbed the depth of the silence inside the church that told him of the emotions he had stirred.

He moved slowly to sit on the front row next to Henri. Out of view of others, she took his hand and squeezed it gently without looking at him. He felt a lasting peace and thanked God for strength to overcome his weaknesses.

After the service and goodbyes, John was standing at his car, packed and ready for the drive to Toronto. He saw Henri about to get into a white Honda on the passenger side across the parking lot. She stopped when she saw him, stood still looking at him, and he
at her, for many seconds. His heart ached. She was going back to Ottawa with a friend of the family.

Her gaze mesmerized him. How lucky the man would be if Henri ever decided to marry.

She waved. She smiled. He lost sight of her as she got in the car. Faintly, he heard the door close.

The Honda carrying Henri turned onto the highway disappearing in a couple of minutes into the spurned intensity of the persistent storm. John did not move; snow layered his world, spotting the velvet collar of his Chesterfield; cold penetrated his clothes as if spring might never arrive.