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# LOWLANDS

*Patrick J. Murphy*

While Carey, her sixteen-year-old daughter, sat silent on the living room sofa, Marion stood and waited until the foghorn sounding out at sea had finished. Marion felt she no longer knew what was happening between the two of them. Her daughter had been fine for awhile. No more outbreaks. None of that nasty sullenness she hated so much. And now this. All on account of one bag of what she had thought was garbage.

They lived in a trailer park, in a narrow canyon the river had carved, on the edge of a harbor no longer used. Every night the fog slipped in beneath the trestled road joining the higher banks on either side like water filling a pot. Marion always knew that for her the night would be dark, starless and damp.

She imagined living in the more affluent parts of town, higher, out of the fog, enjoying the sunlight only money could buy.

"Where's that bag?" Carey had asked.

Marion had no idea. "What bag?"

Carey's face had darkened, growing shadowed, framed between her long, dark undisciplined hair.

Marion knew the look. "Don't start with me." She remembered the bag, now, filled with scraps of paper, old homework graded and handed back, empty envelopes, notes. It looked like trash brought home from school and nothing more. She threw it out with the rest.

"Where's my bag?" Carey's voice slid over into that nasal, irritating whine. "Where's my stuff?"

If the girl would ever help around the house, Marion thought, pick up after herself, do the least bit of housework, things like this wouldn't happen. What kind of

bag was it?" She was trying to be reasonable.

"Oh God!" Carey seemed near to tears. "You threw it away. You're always throwing away my stuff. I can't ever have anything."

Marion turned away. There was no talking to her, now, she knew. The girl would sulk for days, darker than the nights. "Don't be ridiculous." She walked to the window.

The fog rolled down upon her. Like a quiet thunderstorm in white. Small tendrils approached first, blowing wisps, then veils blurring her vision momentarily, then the thickness came and the lights in the distance dimmed and blurred, shifting as if under water. The warehouse and the road to the docks grew to little more than dark outlines. The few boats remaining in the harbor, their masts usually visible from where she stood, had already vanished.

She turned to her daughter. "It's going to be chilly tonight." She was just making conversation, testing the mood. It was always cold where they were.

Carey didn't answer. Her head was half hidden, pressed against her knees. The one eye Marion could see was large and dark and wet, surrounded by knots of dull black hair.

She looked like pictures Marion had seen of crazy people, the bound inmates of institutions, and she wondered, not for the first time, if her daughter were unbalanced. She imagined the men coming in the ambulance, the struggle and the shrieks.

"What was so important in the bag?"

"Why do we always have to do this? Why do you always have to pretend?"

Marion turned away. What could she do? The child's responses never matched the questions. "You could answer me."

Carey looked up at her. "You bitch." She said the words quietly.

Marion went for a walk, wishing she could leave forever. She imagined herself hurrying up the narrow winding road to the higher plain, then away from the ocean for good. She saw herself walking inland on a broad sunny highway across level ground.

She followed the shore to the mouth of the harbor and stopped beneath the trestle to see the road high overhead.

"That's where the rich people live," Marion had said to Carey years ago.

Carey's steps were small. Her legs were chubby. Already, at that young age there seemed a distance between them. The girl pulled away and ran along the beach, playing tag with the sheets of water sliding up the sand, then slipping back as the next wave gathered in a curl of gray.

Marion was tired and sat on one of the logs cluttering the beach. The wind was cold. Out at sea and lying along the horizon, the bank of fog was a visible thickness moving towards them. "Be careful!" she shouted to the child, but knew there wasn't anything to worry about. Carey was too cautious. Her shoes were hardly ever wet, her run for safety always premature.

The wall of fog grew larger. The ocean darkened.

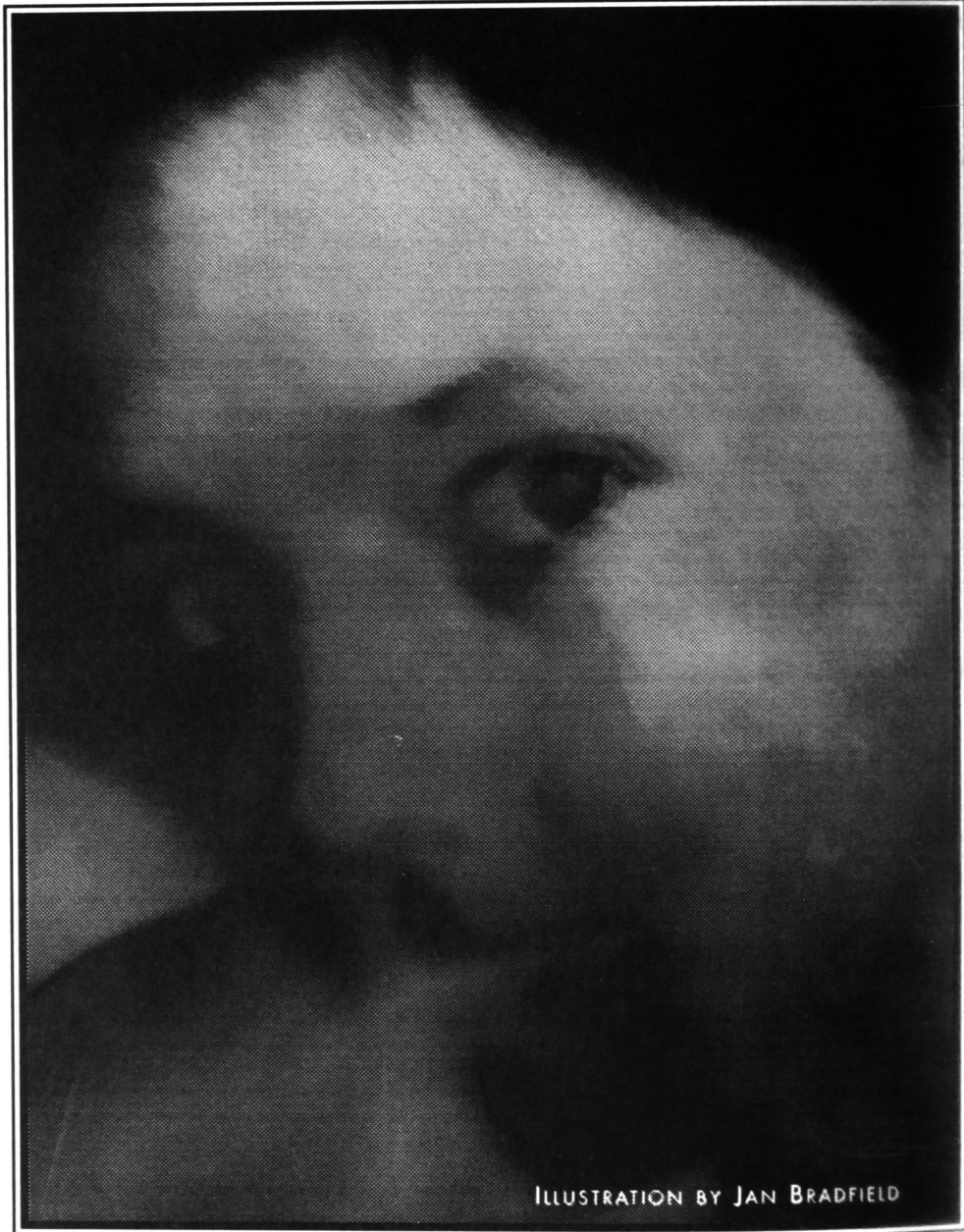


ILLUSTRATION BY JAN BRADFIELD

The surface grew more wrinkled and opaque. There was no sunset down below, no reddened sky, merely the fog suddenly nearer, a dimness, and then the wind growing colder.

"Come on!" Marion stood and pulled her sweater tighter around her.

"Why?"

"Because it's late." She held out her hand.

Carey pulled back. "Why?"

"The fog." Marion pointed. The white bank had darkened, seeming now nearly solid and only yards away.

"So?" But there was uncertainty in her voice.

"You remember the story I used to tell you?"

Carey's face changed, growing tighter, more wary.

"There are monsters in the fog. Remember?"

Marion saw her husband as he had been before she had thrown him out, his slender form kneeling next to the child, his hands smoothing her wispy hair. He had never liked the story. "The invisible monsters hiding in the fog."

"It was just a game!" Carey's voice was loud.

"They'd sneak through a window. They'd wrap themselves around you."

"Quit!"

"And the next morning, when the fog went out, the little girl was gone. All gone." She opened her arms out wide, releasing.

Carey stopped moving. She waited silently, as if enduring.

"All gone." Marion looked at the first tendrils of white reaching out. She waited until Carey's fingers found hers.

When Marion got back from her walk, Carey was shut up in her room, her closed door a silent accusation.

What am I going to do? For a moment, Marion felt lost, without guidance. No one had ever told her how to raise children. She had no feeling for the task. She had never had a normal childhood herself and wasn't sure she could provide one for others.

Alone, without guidance. She looked around. The room had become a mess. Carey had scattered newspapers across the coffee table. An empty glass sat on the floor by the couch.

Why can't she ever pick up after herself? Was it every other generation, some sort of recessive gene?

Marion's mother had been a slob, too, a hard, uncaring woman, her speech blurred constantly by alcohol.

She let the house go. The sink was filled with dirty dishes, spilling over to the counters, flooding onto the table and the floor.

"She's sick," her father said. "She just doesn't know what she's doing."

Marion remembered one night when she had come home late from school. They were living in Portland. There wasn't snow yet, but the ground was soggy. Droplets of moisture blew in the wind.

She tried the door. She looked through the window and saw her mother sitting in her nightgown on the couch. She rang the doorbell and waited. Her mother never moved. She tried the back door and then returned to the front. She went to the window and knocked. Her mother lifted her drink to her lips and turned, as if she just then noticed her daughter was home. She smiled and raised her drink in greeting, but remained seated on the couch.

Marion wondered if her daughter, too, would grow up to be like that, drunk and sloppy and disgusting. She had done everything she could think of to prevent it, but now felt helpless. It was all going wrong. She picked up the newspapers and piled them in a stack. She took the glass to the kitchen and put it with the rest in a sink of soapy water.

Before she went to bed, she opened the door to her daughter's room and peered inside. Carey lay amid tangled sheets. Her hair was a dark cloud around her face. Her mouth hung open, her breathing was loud. In her arms, still clutched tightly to her neck, her pale white teddy bear lay with a half surprised, happy expression. Marion watched her for a few minutes, filled with an emotion she couldn't name, one composed of longing and regret and a gentle, ineffable sadness. Then she closed the door.

The next morning she went to work without seeing

her daughter at all. She had waited for a few minutes by the breakfast table, then grabbed her keys. A morning without a scene, she thought.

The trip up the narrow road from the harbor to the heights above felt like a reprieve. The sun was hot, there, the view extensive. Far below, at the cliff's edge, the ocean lay in seeming calm, the motion of the waves merely wrinkles on its dull surface.

She worked at Small Surprises boutique, a store selling gifts and collectibles. There were greeting cards, small statues of dwarfs and trolls, sweaters, bracelets and rings, designer boxes, custom bird cages and unique pillows. The sun slanted through the front window, past the orderly displays, and gleamed on the clean, hardwood floor. She smiled at the customers. She felt pleasure wrapping something small and fragile in its cushioned, velvet box.

At lunch, while the other clerks went out to a local restaurant, she walked along the bluff and looked down at the ocean below and wondered if she would ever be happy. So many things had gone wrong in her life, as if she were cursed somehow. She imagined a clean, sunny home, a loving husband who understood her moods and quirks, a big yard in which one could sit in the evening and watch the unobscured stars. Was that asking too much? Was that so impossible? The sea below was wrinkled and seemed faintly mocking.

The fog had filled the harbor and was reaching further up the river by the time her work was done. Marion drove carefully back, dropping reluctantly into the thick whiteness. She was tired. Her mood worsened. There was nothing before her but the evening.

She didn't notice at first that the trailer was still dark. When she turned on the lights, she knew already Carey wasn't home. She checked her daughter's room, just in case, then started supper.

She knew where the girl was. With that guy. Walter. On his motorcycle. He had been hanging around for months. At strange hours of the night, Marion heard the sound of his mufflers in the distance, rather mournful, like the passing of trains. He made her nervous. She wanted him to go away.

"I don't see what you see in him, anyway."

Carey, as usual, had been silent. Another conversation that hadn't happened.

They never talked anymore. Marion tried to remember if they ever had. They were two strangers, forced to live in the same small place. Something was missing, some essential part had failed, but that seemed to be true with everyone she loved.

"I don't want you here anymore," she had finally told her husband. Difficult decisions had to be made. No one else would do it.

He was slender, with brown hair and a beard that never grew completely in. He laughed too much and too loudly and seemed always confused, his bafflement the expression she most remembered.

"That's it? You just don't want me around?"

"You know very well. You don't belong here. You never have."

"You need to get help, you know." His voice was calm and reasonable, but the words, she knew, were meant to hurt. It was all her fault. Now and always. She wasn't quite right. She needed care. They'd had this conversation before.

"I don't love you. Maybe I never did. That's all there is to it. You're trying to make it into some great drama."

She was poised and confident and already she felt much better. It was a necessary cleansing, long overdue. He was nearly on his way, another nasty chore she could cross off her list.

"And what about my little girl? What about her?" His

expression then was something she didn't want to remember, a mixture of hurt and what seemed to be fear.

An unsuitable man. So critical and judgmental. He had never fit in, always in the way, somehow never quite meshing with the life she wanted to live. But he had truly loved his daughter. How proud would he be of his little girl now? He would be astonished, horrified at the changes. He would try and blame it all on her again. What have you done? How did you ruin my baby? But his opinions had never really counted. He had been just another in a long series of defective items life had sold her.

When supper had been ready for hours and Carey still wasn't back, Marion decided to ground the girl for good this time. No more leniency. The girl would simply have to learn. She would have to live with things as they were, as they should be. She just didn't appreciate what she had, a good home, clean surroundings, an orderly life.

When it was late and Carey still hadn't returned, Marion found it hard to think. There was no sense in getting mad, she told herself, but her mind felt stuffed and immobile. The trailer seemed too large. Where could she be? What could the girl be doing?

She walked to her daughter's room and turned on the lights. At first glance, everything seemed as it always had, in a deplorable condition. The bed wasn't made. There were clothes strewn across the floor. Homework lay scattered across her tiny desk. Then Marion noticed

the absences. The picture of Carey's father, kept near the head of the bed, was gone, as was the teddy bear. The closet, too, looked emptier.

She's left, she thought, but found herself still listening for the sound of a motorcycle, dropping down to the harbor. It's silly. What's she going to do, out in the world? She remembered seeing Carey asleep just the night before, wrapped in the sheets, and clutching her stuffed animal.

"What's she going to do?" she asked herself again. It was insane, irrational. All on account of one bag of garbage left lying around, nothing more than old homework assignments, some notes, a few letters from her father. It just didn't make any sense. It wasn't reasonable. Marion watched her hands picking up the dirty clothes, a shirt, a pair of socks. We don't need these, anymore, she thought, and decided to throw them away.