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Behind the Shades

Cover Page Footnote

Art: "That Night" by Jackie Felix

BEHIND THE SHADES

by Nancy L. Cook

I.

Angela was wearing sunglasses when she walked off the elevator on the third floor of the District Court Building. The glasses were the dark, opaque kind that almost cover your face. Her reckless bangs fell down over the tops of the big round lenses.

Sheila was waiting for her in the hallway outside the courtroom. Kenny and his lawyer hadn't arrived yet, which was no surprise; it was still early. Sheila was there because she wanted to go over a few last minute details with Angie before the hearing. That's how she liked to do things, get there early and be prepared for anything.

When she saw the sunglasses, Sheila's heart clenched. She knew something had happened. She wasn't concerned about it hurting the case; Lou Martineau was not the kind of judge who would drag out a divorce if violence was involved, and this case had already had more than its share of cold compresses and stitches, late-night calls to the police and wrecked household goods. A facial bruise would definitely get the divorce pushed through, no matter what devices Al Michaelman had up his sleeve to stretch out his hourly fees. Still, Sheila hated the fact that Kenny somehow always managed to insert himself into Angie's life, that he could physically molest her even in spite of the court order to stay away from his wife.

Angie smiled and said hi as she came up to Sheila. Without waiting to see what Sheila might say, she slipped off her coat and slumped down on a bench along the wall. She was wearing black slacks and a soft, plum-colored sweater, a mock Angora or Mohair. Plum was what Angie always wore. The sweater was a little too low-cut for court, the slacks were on the close-fitting side. It was not the way Angie would have dressed had she been meeting Sheila at the law office.

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"You can't wear those into the courtroom, you know," Sheila said to Angie, referring to the sunglasses.

Angela opened up the purse on her lap and withdrew a pack of Salem Lights. She pulled a cigarette from the pack but didn't make a move to light it.

"Let me at least see," said Sheila.

Angie dropped the cigarettes back in her purse and pulled off her glasses. The bloated skin around her invisible left eye was red and purple, almost as if it had been painted. A thin, bright red line cut across her dark brow. Her right eye, like a thin disk of blue mica set in red-streaked white marble, confronted Sheila. Below it was another bright slash line.

Sheila sat down on the bench beside her client. "My God, Angela, what happened this time?"

"You know what happened. He hit me."

"I know, I can see that. I'm sorry, Angie, I am. But how? How did he get to you?"

"It's a long story," said Angela. "Aren't you getting tired of these long stories?"

"It's okay," said Sheila. "I need to know. I can't help you, if I don't know."

"It was so stupid, I don't know how to tell you."

"Just tell me what happened," said Sheila.

Angela pulled at her bangs. "Well, I was at the grocery store, and when I came out, he was there. I saw him sitting there, just waiting for me. I don't know how long he'd been following me. Anyway, I went right up to him and told him to leave me alone."

"Angie, why do you even talk to him?"

"I want him to understand that he can't do this to me. He can't follow me around. I told him I was going to call the police."

"And what did he say?"

"He said this is public property, the police can't do anything to me on public property. 'They can if you don't leave me alone,' I told him. 'I ain't bothering you,' he said. 'I was just minding my own business.' 'Well, see that you keep it that way,' I said to him, and I just walked away."

"But he followed me, Sheila. I knew he would. As soon as I got home, I ran up to the apartment and locked the door."

"Did you call the police?" Sheila asked.

"No, I didn't get a chance to. I was so upset. I didn't even take the groceries out of the car, I just ran like hell up the stairs to the apartment. But he came right after me, and he started beating on the door and yelling for me. I told him to go away, but he wouldn't go. Anyway, I know I shouldn't have done it, but I opened the door. I just couldn't stand to listen to him screaming and I knew he wouldn't stop until I talked to him."

"Angela, that's what the restraining order is for."

"I know, but you don't know him, Sheila. The man does not give up. The police could scare him off for a little while, but he'd come back. I know he would."

Sheila looked doubtful.

Angie shrugged. "Anyway, he came in, and we got in a fight. He wants me back and I told him flatly, no, and he lost it and he just started hammering on me. I sure wish he'd get rid of that stupid high school ring. Anyways, it only lasted a minute, then he left."

"Oh, Angie, I'm sorry, I really am. But you just can't let him in. You can't."

"I know, I know," said Angie.

Sheila sighed. "Well, maybe it will be over with after today," she said. "The judge will decide the property division and sign the divorce decree and you'll be able to move out of this city. You still planning to do that?"

"I can't wait," said Angela. "The sooner, the better."

II.

Kenny Clinton was not the type to be scared of a court order. One time Angie had seen him make pulp out of three guys because they had been hassling her in a bar. Three big guys. Kenny had gone out in the alley with the bunch of them and had picked them off one by one. If he wanted to see her, he would find a way to do it, no matter what some judge said.

He had looked pretty good sitting behind the wheel of the old Mustang. Like maybe he'd stopped drinking. There was some color in his cheeks—a warm color, not that rubbed,

shiny alcohol red. Just the same, he looked awfully sad, older, maybe sorry.

Angie went up to him, meaning to just say hello and be nice, but when Kenny saw her, his face got dark, almost as if a cloud had passed over it. Angie knew that look. She'd seen it sometimes before when her friends would drop by uninvited or when she'd made Kenny late for work. So she quick changed her mind about trying to be agreeable. She scowled and told Kenny in no uncertain terms to leave her alone or she'd have the police after him. Kenny wasn't afraid of the threats, but at least he knew Angie was still mad at him.

She wasn't surprised that he followed her home, but she thought he'd just stay in the parking lot and keep an eye on the apartment. He'd always done that, even before they were married. He was so jealous, so insanely jealous. That's what most of their fights were about, like the time he found her writing a birthday card to an old boyfriend. He'd broken her wrist that time.

Angie didn't care if Kenny sat in the parking lot all night, or for the rest of his life for that matter, as long as he didn't bother her. She was going out for dinner that night, and she

meant to have a good time. She planned to wear the green leather skirt her brother had given her, the one Kenny said looked like a whore's get-up. She'd give Kenny something to be jealous about if he was so determined to get all worked up. He didn't have to know it was her friend Carole she was going to see.

But things took a different turn. Kenny got out of his car, and started to come after her. Angie got to the top of the stairs before him, but she barely got the door locked before he was there, beating

on it and yelling like he was some kind of junkie in need of a fix. The door between them didn't offer much protection; Kenny's mouth was practically as strong as his fists. Angela crouched in the bedroom next to the phone and listened as Kenny yelled repeatedly into the cheap wood. "I just want to talk to you for a second!" Next it was, "Don't act like you don't



"That Night," by Jackie Felix

hear me Angela. You might as well open the door, I ain't going away until you talk to me."

Angie ignored him for a while; she wasn't stupid enough to open the door when he was like that. But he went on and on, in that low-pitched, feverish voice; it was like those nights when he would get Angie to massage his back and then wouldn't let her stop. He'd hold her ankles under his armpits and say, "more, yeah more, more," over and over again until she wished she could strangle him with her numb hands. Angie hated that voice.

Just then he threw her completely off guard; he started to cry. He was begging her to just come to the door. He said she didn't even have to let him in, if she'd just open it up so he could tell her something, so that he didn't have to scream it for all the neighbors to hear.

Sooner or later someone was bound to call the police, Angie knew that. She wanted Kenny to stop, but having him arrested wasn't going to help. The cops scared her almost as much as Kenny did, with their fat, heavy, leather belts and shined-up shoes and nosy questions. Plus squad cars always drew a crowd, and she didn't need any more attention or pity. She gave in. But before opening the door, she put the phone on the floor between the bedroom and the hallway where she knew she could get to it if she had to.

"You can come in," Angela told Kenny as she turned the deadbolt, "but don't come any further than the vestibule." She stepped back a few feet to give him room to close the door. "Just say what you got to say and then leave," she said. "And for God's sake, stop that bawling. You're not a baby any more."

III.

Kenny's lawyer was soft looking. He had jowls and wore a rumpled light blue suit that didn't fit very well over his paunch, and he smelled like cigars. He looked old enough to be Sheila's father, although no one would have mistaken them for relations. Sheila looked refined in her black silk and gold jewelry; she reminded Angie of people on TV soap operas. A big diamond, practically the size of a sugar cube, gleamed on her left hand. Angie remembered Kenny telling her that he was going to buy her a ring like that, but he hadn't.

Sheila stood up when Al Michaelman came down the hall, but Angie preferred to act like she didn't see him. She slipped her sunglasses back on and started to thumb through a USA Today that somebody had left on the bench. Michaelman combined the worst traits lawyers generally had; he thought he

was smart enough to be a professor and he acted like he was getting paid as much as a doctor. But unless Kenny was dealing chemicals again, Michaelman couldn't possibly be getting rich off this case. Angela was paying Sheila next to nothing for her time. She asked Sheila once what she got out of all this, and Sheila had just smiled politely and said, "Women have to help each other."

Sheila smiled now in Angie's direction before making a move toward Michaelman. She went up to him and held out her hand; Michaelman barely touched the tips of Sheila's fingers with his. Sheila then asked if Kenny had signed the papers yet, and Al replied no, Kenny was still "concerned" about a few things.

"Is he really going to contest Angela's keeping her mother's furniture?" she asked in a friendly way.

"Appears that way," Al said, without looking at her as he talked. Angie wanted to slap his fat face. He had that attitude like Kenny sometimes got, mostly when she tried to talk to him about the divorce. When Kenny got that way, though, Angie would at least tell him off; but Sheila continued to speak to this man as if he was being as polite and familiar as she was. Angie laid the newspaper aside; she got up and started down the hall towards the bathroom.

"Angie, excuse me, where are you going?" Sheila called to her.

"Just going down to the ladies' room to freshen up my face," Angie said, looking back over her shoulder at Sheila.

Sheila seemed to want to peer through Angie's sunglasses to make eye contact. She nodded and looked almost amused, but something in the tilt of her chin and the slant of her eyebrows made Angie think she was sad, and maybe in need of a friend.

IV.

The clerk had already called the case when Kenny swaggered into the courtroom. Kenny could rarely resist making an entrance. Angie was seated at the counsel table, on the far left, next to Sheila. She didn't turn when Kenny strode up to the front to make his apologies to the judge for the traffic which he claimed had made him late. Angie had taken off the sunglasses, but because of the way she was sitting, it was quite possible that neither Kenny nor his lawyer could see the condition of her face.

Kenny was dressed just right for the occasion. Pressed gray shirt and striped tie, shirt tucked neatly into clean, but

noticeably worn, chino pants. His hair was slicked back off his forehead and he was freshly shaven. He had an aura of self-possession that ordinarily comes only with legitimate hard work. Kenny shook hands with his lawyer and they exchanged a few words before Kenny sat down. The judge was patient with him.

Once Kenny got settled, the judge called on Sheila to tell him what the status of the case was. Sheila explained that they had almost reached a divorce settlement, and that the only hang-up was this minor matter about the furniture, and that if Mr. Clinton was still contesting that issue, she'd like to make an argument on it today. Negotiations had come to a standstill, and it was in the best interests of the parties to have the court decide the issue so they could get the divorce finalized.

Sheila didn't mention the latest assault against her client. It was better to get the divorce decree signed first, without aggravating Kenny. If he felt he was being blamed for something, he'd make trouble in whatever way he could, to prove he still had control. Most likely he'd make some other petty challenge to the proposed divorce decree; he'd already

The idea that Angie would get into a bed with Kenny after all that had happened engulfed Sheila with revulsion.

haggled repeatedly over the division of record albums and had refused to discuss anything at all until Angie had agreed to give him the dog she had trained, the dog he now regularly asked Angie to care for. His violation of the restraining order could be addressed after the decree was signed. No doubt the judge was anticipating the issue of the renewed violence; from where he was sitting, he couldn't help but see Angie's battered face.

The judge asked Sheila if the property settlement was the only issue involved in the divorce. "Basically, yes," Sheila told him.

"What I mean," said the judge, "is that there aren't any children of the marriage. Is that correct?"

"Oh, correct," said Sheila. The judge gave Kenny's lawyer a chance to talk then. When Sheila sat down she leaned over and assured Angie that everything would be over soon.

Al shuffled a few papers around on the podium, stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled them out again, and "ahemmed" and coughed a little before he got started. Just like his client, he liked to make sure he was the center of attention.

Finally he spoke. "Judge, I'm surprised Ms. Manning tells you that property division is the only issue left. Perhaps

she hasn't had a chance to speak to her client about this yet." He looked over at Sheila. "It seems there is a custody issue that's going to need resolution."

Sheila's only visible response was to raise her eyes, but she sensed treachery. Michaelman turned back to face the judge. "I learned about it just early this morning, Your Honor. Mr. Clinton and I spoke about it over the phone. As I understand it, Judge, Mrs. Clinton is pregnant with her husband's child."

Sheila stiffened. There was a moment of hesitation before the judge spoke. "Is that right, Ms. Manning?" the judge asked her. "Is your client pregnant?"

The idea that Angie would get into a bed with Kenny after all that had happened engulfed Sheila with revulsion. She felt betrayed, almost as if she had been the victim of Kenny's aggression. In the silent courtroom, everyone but Angela was now watching her, and Sheila had to work to contain her reaction. She looked questioningly at Angie, but apparently Angie, like Sheila, did not want her feelings to show. So Sheila focused her attention on the judge. She stood up. "I'm sorry, Your Honor," she said, "this is the first I've heard of it."

The judge turned to Angie, and asked kindly, "Can you clarify this for us, Ms. Clinton?"

"Yes," said Angie. "I'm pregnant."

"And is it your husband's child?"

"Yes, it's his," she said.

"Well, that sort of changes the status of things, doesn't it?" the judge said sympathetically. He paused, observing each face before him in turn. "I suppose you'll need time to talk," he said to the two lawyers. "I don't think I have any choice but to continue this matter."

Sheila knew the hearing had gotten out of her control. She checked the backs of her hands as if they might be of some use to her, as if they might offer some instruction. The big diamond on her ring finger looked awkward and cheap in the dull courtroom glare. She began to pluck at the edges of the documents piled neatly on the table in front of her, then quickly started to gather them together.

Angie grabbed suddenly at Sheila's sleeve. "I don't want him to have anything to do with this baby!" she burst out. "It's my baby. He is not getting my baby."

Angie's voice startled Sheila. It had the timbre of an animal suddenly caged, frightened and desperate. Sheila sat down.

"It isn't quite that simple, I'm afraid," the judge was saying to Angie, his calm unaffected. "But you can talk it over with your lawyer."

Sheila had reached for Angie's hand. She was no longer struggling for composure. "It's okay, Angie," she whispered. "We'll talk about it. I just wish you had told me. You should have told me."

V.

The damn divorce proceedings had taken so long. Kenny had been out of the house for almost two years, except for a few weeks here and there. The last time Angie had let him spend the night, she'd sworn it would never happen again. He'd forced a pistol barrel up her anus, and told her it was loaded. Told her she'd better do what he wanted her to do. Angie was sure he was lying about the gun being loaded, but she was scared to death of him anyway. And he wasn't even really drunk at the time. He hadn't done any serious damage that night, not enough to send her to the hospital anyway, but there was the awful humiliation of it. That was the night she'd gotten pregnant.

Angie didn't know why she'd let Kenny back into the house in the first place. Lots of times he'd come over when he didn't have any place else to go. He was supposed to be living at his father's, but that didn't always work out since he and his father hated each other. He could go to his sister's, but she would kick him out if he didn't contribute to the upkeep. He didn't like it there much anyway, because Darla had three kids and she and her oldest daughter were always fighting about something.

The night Kenny had gotten Angie pregnant, it was raining and cold, and Angie was feeling depressed. She'd been in Sheila's office that afternoon, going over the proposed divorce decree again, sitting in Sheila's plushy mauve chairs and not being able to smoke. For some reason, she'd come home wanting to cry. She'd been sitting at the kitchen counter lighting up one Salem after another for about two hours when Kenny showed up at the door.

He was carrying a couple of T-bones and a bottle of Chardonnay, his attempt to apologize for the hell he'd been putting her through. The cork was already pulled loose from the dripping-wet wine bottle. It seemed almost like Kenny had known Angie had been sitting there missing his bad jokes and the smell of English Leather.

Sometimes he could be so nice. At times, in fact, Angie believed he could change. He wanted to change, she could see that; he just didn't know how to go about it. He was always so sorry after he'd hurt her; he'd try to make it up to her by doing

all the grocery shopping and the housework, or taking her to dinner theaters which he hated, and of course promising it wouldn't happen again.

There were times when Angie really believed him, when she was convinced that anyone who loved her so much couldn't possibly hurt her for no good reason. Even when she could see that Kenny wasn't going to stop beating her up no matter what she did, there still were times when Angie felt terrible about the divorce. It felt like she was abandoning him, like they'd been stranded on the roof of some burning building for years and that Kenny would die in the flames if somehow Angie learned how to fly. And then there were times, like that night, when she just plain needed him.

VI.

Now that they were back in the hallway, Angela could hide behind her dark glasses again. She had calmed down long enough after her outburst in court to let Sheila tell the judge that Kenny had violated the restraining order. The judge set a date the following week for yet another hearing. He told Kenny that in the meanwhile he was to keep away from Angela and that if he heard anything to the contrary, he'd personally see to it that Kenny got put away for a good long time.

Angie had been so uptight during the hearing, she'd almost missed what Michaelman said about her being pregnant. She hadn't even been able to look at anyone in the courtroom. Usually, Angie felt comforted by Sheila's presence; being around Sheila reminded her of sleeping on the floor of her mother's bedroom when she was little. But there was nothing cozy about being near Sheila in a courtroom. It was as if there was a little play going on in there, everybody acting a part. Angela didn't know anything about acting, certainly not like this crowd did, and she wasn't interested in learning the script either. Even Kenny seemed to go along with it, although he was nothing more than an extra in this little show, same as Angie was. Of course, Kenny thought he could bluff his way through it. He thought he could bluff his way through anything.

It was just like Kenny to have told his lawyer about the baby. They'd promised each other not to say anything, and Angela had kept her part of the bargain. She never should have said anything to Kenny in the first place; she'd only told him to be mean. He insinuated to her a few weeks ago that she'd enjoyed their last sex together; it was as if he'd completely

forgotten the rough and cruel way he'd treated her. And he was so cocky, thinking he could talk her into it again.

"You bastard," she'd told him, "you know I hated it, every minute of it. But of course I'm the one who has to pay for it, like always. I'm the one who has to get pregnant." That had shut him up for a while, but of course Angie had been right; she was the one paying for it.

"You bastard, you know I hated it, every minute of it. I'm the one who has to pay for it, like always. I'm the one who has to get pregnant."

Angie thought she was beginning to lose it again. Kenny had brushed up against her as he was leaving the courtroom, coming up from behind and catching her off guard. "I'm sorry, baby," he whispered to her. "Look, I'll help you with this baby, I really will. I know I was--"

"Get out of my life," she hissed at him. He'd looked for a second like he might cry, but then Sheila's sharp heels came within hearing distance, and Kenny straightened up. He strode down the hall to the elevator where his lawyer stood waiting for him.

Now Angela needed a cigarette badly. She fumbled in her purse for her lighter, but before she could put her hands on it, Sheila was in front of her holding out a book of matches, a souvenir from an expensive uptown Italian restaurant.

"I guess I really messed up," Angie said after she lit up. She supposed that Sheila was mad with her because she had been the cause of her embarrassment in court. Sheila hated surprises. But more than that, Sheila was probably feeling let down because Angie hadn't let her in on her secret.

"It's all right," said Sheila. "I have to admit, I was a bit shocked by the news, but I can deal with it. We'll work something out. There are options."

There had been an easy solution to the problem, Angie knew that. She could have gotten an abortion. Still could, in fact. Probably that's what Sheila meant when she said there were "options." But Sheila would never push it.

Angie had a hard time thinking about abortion. It had crossed her mind more than once that Kenny might actually make a good father if he could learn to control his temper. Maybe a kid would be the thing to make him grow up.

"Look, Sheila," she began, "if you're thinking I should get rid of this baby . . . well, I don't know, I grew up in a religious family--"

"I didn't mean to suggest that, Angie. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression," said Sheila. She put her warm hand on Angela's arm. "Anyway, we don't have to decide today how to handle this. The important thing is that you feel safe. Do you feel safe?"

"Yeah," said Angie. "I don't think he'll bother me for a while. I think the judge scared him off. I mean at least until the hearing next week."

"Good. That was my impression, too. But look, if you have any trouble, call me. Right away, okay?"

"I will."

"Maybe I can think up a way to expedite this. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure we would have gotten the decree signed today anyway. Kenny seems intent on dragging this out as long as he can." She picked up Angie's coat from the bench and held it out for her.

"Yeah, he is," said Angie. She watched with some curiosity as Sheila's perfectly manicured fingers handled the padded shoulders of her worn-out coat. From behind her dark glasses, Angie could see Sheila's face, busy with thought and concern. For a moment Angie envisioned Sheila in a white nurse's uniform, imagined the coat to be a warm soft blanket.

"Kenny," said Angela, "it's incredible the way he does it. But he always seems to get his way." She put out her cigarette and faced Sheila again. "Don't ever get married, Sheila," she said.

Sheila didn't say anything, but she grasped the shoulders of the coat a little more firmly and pulled the coat in toward her chest. She stared at Angela, at the glasses she wore to hide the ugly red and purple damage to her eyes. It made Angie nervous. Angie shifted her own gaze toward the wall. Then she removed her glasses and stuck them in her purse. She reached for her coat. "Well, maybe it's different for you," she said.

* * *