

1982

Refraction

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Recommended Citation

Houston, Pam (1982) "Refraction," *Exile*: Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol29/iss2/9>

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Refraction

She closed the heavy door and stepped out into the deserted predawn. They had been sitting in darkness for hours, and the harsh streetlight made her wince. She walked calmly, confidently through a part of town that even scared her in the daytime. Rape would be so minor and unimportant after everything that had happened. A million thoughts of the night streamed through her head. She couldn't put them in any order, but she knew if she did they would scare her to death. She wanted to run back inside and hold him again. She panicked. What if he needed her now? What if he called sometime when she wasn't home. What if he asked her a question she couldn't answer. What if she ever pushed too hard? What if she wasn't available enough.

She was walking parallel to Fairmount Park and stopped to steady herself on a park bench. A sleet storm had fallen on the park. The grass, trees and benches were encased in hard shiny glass fingers. The yellow-white streetlights lit up the frozen scene casting a steadily frighening glow. The reality of the park gave way to some kind of demonic fairyland. It made her think of being frozen in hell. She pulled the sweater he had given her closer to her body and realized she was losing the feeling in her fingers. She put her hands inside her jeans hoping to warm them, but her body was cold and clammy under her clothes. She pulled them out quickly and stared at them.

She was sitting in her well lit living room grading a handfull of Freshman compositions when she saw the large dark figure pause by her mailbox. She drained her coffee, rose and went to the window just in time to see the figure disappear around the first bend in the lane. He was running. Slightly unravelled, she called Court, her new English sheepdog to her side. He padded down the stairs and came towards her, tail wagging and massive tongue hanging from his mouth. She was getting used to being out in the country alone, but it was slow going. After four years in a dormitory where privacy was at best a rare privilege and quiet nonexistant, and then a summer in the city with John, a Virginia country cottage at the end of a 1/2 mile dirt road was a little more than an adjustment.

She mulled over going to check the mailbox. Normally she wouldn't have hesitated but these last few weeks had been so draining. She hadn't expected graduate school to be quite as much work as it was, and when she finally ended the drawnout engagement with John she hadn't expected to meet . . . him. She glanced toward the

window. With more than a little effort, and with Court in hand she made her way out the door and down the driveway. Once at the mailbox she put her hand inside; her fingers closing around a small square envelope. She slipped the envelope in her pocket, turned and dashed towards the house, sending Court into a barking frenzy; certainly scaring off anyone who could be lurking around her house.

Once back inside the safety of the cottage, she sat at the coffee table and removed the letter from her pocket. The envelope was yellow, and the sender had sketched a black omega on the back. She opened the envelope and unfolded the letter.

Jamie:

You have been invited . . .
To play dictionary
Room 5--The Haunted Mansion
Alberto Giocometti

They sat in his apartment. It was near dawn, but neither of them realized it. They had been reading all night. She was struggling with Crime and Punishment, he with Marxist theory.

"America Sucks" he said.

"I love it" she said.

"How can you?" he said.

"We promised to stay away from politics" she said.

"Let's leave" he said.

"School?" she asked.

"America" he said.

"Mexico's warm" she said.

"Canada's closer" he said "and then I can show you Detroit."

"How can you get more American than Detroit?" she asked.

"Shut up and pack." he said.

It was eleven fifteen on a Friday in August when she finally snapped. John was lying in her living room easy chair snoring contentedly after one of her famous lasagne dinners. A handful of half dead roses drooped tiredly in a vase on a corner table. The card had been knocked to the floor nearby. The cat purred and blinked its eyes on top of the television which was recapping the evenings sports highlights. The Yankees had stretched their winning streak at home to fifteen games. The dishes were done, the dog had been walked, and Jamie knew she couldn't take one more minute of it. She went into the bedroom, brushed her hair, changed her sweatshirt to a sweater, grabbed her purse and turned out the light. She stopped in the living room, removed her spare money from the flatware, and walked through the kitchen. She looked over her shoulder at snoring John and hesitated for a moment, pondering whether or not to leave a note. She decided against it, and shut the door behind her, leaving her fiance, her apartment, her dog, her cat, and all her belongings emphatically behind.

"Finally my parents sent me to a psychiatrist" he said. They were sitting in semi-darkness, one corner of the room illuminated by the glare from the streetlight across the road. "Yeah, the shrink told me I had Quadrophenia."

"Quadrophenia?"

"Yeah, four personalities, or something like that . . . I didn't want to go back to the shrink so I went out and bought the album."

She raised her eyes. She wanted to hug him, to hold him like she used to hold John when he had nightmares, but this wasn't John, and now the nightmare surrounded her.

"My parents never found out what my sister was doing to me...it would have killed them. It was her only screw-up they thought she was perfect."

"Oh" she said.

"That's why I can't make love to you . . . it wouldn't be right. I only screw girls to get back at my sister."

She closed her eyes for a few moments and let the blackness swamp her senses. She had to keep telling herself that life was going to have to go on as usual tomorrow. She would get up and go to work as if none of this was really happening.

"And my parents won't tell me who my real parents are. And you see it always erupts into this big huge argument . . . but I can't help feeling like I've got to know . . . Jamie are you comfortable knowing all this?"

It was grey, stark and windy on the Western shore of Lake St. Clair, ten miles north of the mouth of the Detroit River. They sat on the docks of the Gross Point Yacht Club. He was smoking, and she was throwing paintchips from the end of the dock into the silvery shimmering waters of the lake. All around them rose the masts of the most luxurious yachts on the lake, possibly in the whole Great Lakes system. She was wearing her wool fisherman's sweater, he had on his khakis and his boat-shoes.

"I want to take you to my house" he said. She didn't look at him. She had known it was coming. She looked up towards the yacht clubs Belfrey Tower. It stood tall and dark against the grey sky. Sea gulls swarmed around the tower, and the knots that were coming with increasing regularity, that had become part of her daily routine crept back into her stomach.

"It will be good . . . you'll understand where I'm coming from. You'll see why I'm so messed up. He grinned gloomily. She smiled at him and ran her hand around his neck in an attempt at reassurance. "I mean I don't think it would be terrible, and it would help, a lot, to have you there."

She kicked at the dock under her feet without conviction. Her mother had told her how many times; "Never get involved with someone who has more problems than you do." Again, she hadn't listened, and here she was in Gross Point, Michigan with knots in her stomach.

John and Jamie sat facing each other across a candle lit table high above New York City. She glanced down at her plate where the remains of a steak, a piece of parsley, and a potato skin stared back at her. She turned her eyes out the window and saw the shiny silver leaves of the Chrysler building bright against the summer sky. John had been stirring his coffee for several minutes.

"John, I'm sorry. I wish I could explain it but I can't. Maybe I'm scared, maybe I'm selfish, maybe I'm masochistic, but I need some time alone; a few weeks, a few months. Just let me go down there and spend sometime without you."

He folded his fingers together. The pain stretched across his face like an open sore. She felt the tears rising in the back of her nose. It didn't even make much difference whether or not she cried.

"It'll be the end, you know," he said "If you go down there alone, when we're like this."

"No, not necessarily, you know that's not what I want. I can't go at all unless you promise you'll give me some time." Her eyes searched his face.

"I can't promise you anything." He was trying hard to be hard.

"Then I can't go." she said, somewhat convincingly. He appeared somewhat satisfied and asked the waiter for the check.

She turned out the light with a sigh. He had blown her off, bigtime, but she had asked for it. She loved abuse. Obviously the decisions she had made in the last few weeks showed that she'd rather be abused than treated well. The streetlight shown in off the street, picking up the metal frame that still, for one reason or another, held John's picture. The pictures would have to come down soon, but for now they helped her to handle her guilt, and let her believe, if only half-heartedly that all the things she had done were no more than a wild dream fantasy that she would wake up from, call successful John, and go on with her uncomplicated, consistant life.

So where was he tonight? There were several possibilities. He could be reasserting his freedom and male dominance by raping one of the girls who were "always looking for it" down at the co-op. He could be blind drunk up on campus looking for someone to knock his head off and put him out of his misery. He could be tripping and then there was no telling where he was. In his room? Out in the rain? In jail? She rolled over, worried, but strangely not angry. The nice thing about dating a lunatic . . . you learned not to expect much.

The windshield wipers smeared the scarce snow flakes across the windshield elongating the scenery in front of her. The cold breeze that came in the window even when it was rolled up (ever since she had broken in with a coat hanger) hit her left cheek. She held on to its familiarity. He was reciting stories of his childhood as they drove past familiar sights.

"See that department store-window? I tackled a dummy in there when I was 4½. My mother was crying so hard they had to carry her out of the store."

She heard with half an ear, and smiled, but she was concentrating on keeping a blank mind. Too many things had happened in the last 24 hours . . . well actually the last few weeks of her life, and if she thought now . . . well she just knew she couldn't think. The abrupt end of the engagement, the scenes, the screaming, the crying, the slums, the seagulls . . . did she really want to know?

"See that corner? I got arrested on that corner. I stole those two big flags. That's the police station".

She didn't want to know. She turned on the radio. She wanted to shout, to scream, to let some of the pressure out of her body. She drummed the steering wheel with her fingers. Acid Rock . . . sixties . . . screams.

"See that building? My father's office is on the very top of that building."

The building was made out of reflecting glass, and she watched the car stretch and slither past, getting disfigured in the reflection by the windows.

"Hey! That was a red light." he called.

"Sorry."

"Hey, are you alright? You nervous about meeting my folks?" She shrugged. "Well don't worry about it."

"Okay" she said.

"I wonder if my sister will be there." he said. "If she is she'll really check you out . . . and she's pretty nice looking. It should be interesting."

"Let's not talk about it" she said.

Knots was the name she gave to the feeling she got in her stomach whenever he pulled something on her. Her doctor called it an ulcer, but he wasn't sure, and actually, she didn't think he'd been around long enough to give her an ulcer. The knots had just crawled back in, and she was trying to think of something to say, to make everything okay, to make the knots go away--at least for a few hours--at least until the next crisis.

"I care about you more than the job, more than my folks, more than anything...I swear I do," he said. She looked at him, expressionless. "I swear I don't want you to get screwed up like me. That would be the worst thing that could happen. Why do you want anything to do with me anyway? You'll be out of here in a year, and then what? This whole thing could affect your reputation. Why would you want to take that risk for a psycho like me?"

"So what are you saying?" she asked.

"I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Oh shit. The voice inside her head exploded. She closed her eyes and the knots pulled tighter.

"You don't understand Jamie; you can't understand. It's just too much pressure...God it just..." he broke off. She sensed that he was losing control and pulled herself together one more time.

They sat on the roof of his apartment building drinking Heineken. The first real snow had fallen overnight, but the sun was bright and warm. They had taken off their coats, and he needed his sunglasses, (even in December.)

"What do you want to do today?" he asked her.

"If I could do anything today" she said, "I'd like to go skiing."

"I'd like to see you ski." he said.

"Yeah, you would," she said "it's the one thing I really do well."

"Come on" he said.

"Really."

"You and John used to ski a lot?" he asked.

"Yeah. All the time. He really taught me most of what I know."

"You miss it? he asked.

"Skiing? No. I'll probably get some in this winter."

"You miss John?" he asked.

She squinted at the sun. "I can't tell yet. I don't think so...I had to do what I had to do."

"I'm sorry I don't ski." he said.

"Come on," she said.

"Really. You probably don't notice, but I try . . . I really do try to . . ."

"I don't want to hear it" she cut him off. "I know you do, and I appreciate it, but you don't have to. The last thing I want is a replacement."

"You havn't got one." he said.

"No shit" she said, and they laughed together.

She opened her eyes just in time to see the hulking figure in the survival jacket catch his foot on her dressing table's stool and crash, face first, to the carpeted floor of her bedroom. The clock said 2:58. She noted with some concern that he had neglected to put his hands in front of his face and body before he hit the floor. He wasn't moving. She slipped her bathrobe on and squatted next to him. She didn't see any blood, and he was breathing. Now wide awake, she went to her closet, got a blanket and pillow, threw the blanket over him, shoved the pillow under his head, and went back to bed. She stared at the ceiling wondering what was in his system and where he had been. In less than a minute he started to snore.

They sat together at the top of the brand new open air ampitheatre in the Renaissance Center in Detroit. It was well past midnight, but the lights of the five cylindrical buildings still glimmered off the glassy grey surface of the Detroit River. Clouds bounced the urban glow back down on the city giving the blackness a Christmas time light, although it was only early November.

"Jamie."

"Huh?"

"I want you to know something."

"Huh."

"Well, no matter what happens, I wouldn't kill you."

She smiled, he didn't.

"I mean it," he said.

"I appreciate that," she said.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" He was shouting now. She fought back her fear. "I've never cared about anyone before. I don't know how the hell to do it. I'll just keep hurting you. I might really hurt you. They say they don't know what I'll do--that I'm dangerous. How can I expect you to deal with me? You've got your own life to worry about. I won't drag you down with me." He was pacing now, and smoking heavily. His voice had not quieted, and for a second a picture of John standing outside with his hand cupped to the wall flashed through her mind.

"And what about John?" he seemed to read her mind. "You just don't throw something like that away for someone who's just going to abuse you way past your limit. Dammit I care about you and I don't

want to hurt you, and I will and then you'll hate me."

"No" she said softly, shaking her head in the darkness.

"What do you mean no?" he almost shrieked. "Why are you even sitting here taking this? Are you just gonna sit there? Why don't you yell at me? Why don't you knock some sense into my head?"

"I can't," she managed. Her head was spinning and she felt something warm rising in the back of her throat. The knots in her stomach were growing tighter and tighter. She could feel her insides suffocating.

"You can't? Well why don't you get up and walk out of here? Or can't you do that either? I can't see you anymore. Could you please get up and walk out of here?" He faced her wide eyes and set face for the first time. Something insanelly steadfast in her pride wouldn't let her cry. She couldn't have moved if she wanted to. She didn't have the power of speech or motion; she could only stare at him; at once pushing him back crashing, unconscious against the wall, and begging him to come to her and hide his face in her chest until his breathing leveled and he slept.

She was maddening him, but she couldn't help herself. Her thoughts took no order. She couldn't have recited her own name and address.

Then he broke, like a fever and crumpled on the floor in a bulky heap. She closed her eyes . . . , it was over. Cautiously she got to her feet, knelt beside him, and encircled him with her arms.

She opened the large wooden door to his apartment building tentatively. It was an old stone farmhouse that some entreprenuring farmer had converted into apartments in the sixties, before the town had spread out that far. It gave her the creeps in the daytime, and now, just before midnight it was positively evil looking. In what had been converted into the lobby, a boy she recognized from the bookstore sat wrapped in a blanket, huddled over a typewriter.

"Hi" he said, "We've lost the damn heat again; next thing you know it'll be the electricity." He motioned to the desk lamp which lit up the area of his work and sent shadows over his face.

"I'm looking for room five," she said.

"Five?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Second floor" he pointed towards the stairs, "he's up there."

"Thanks" she said. As she turned she felt the young man's eyes looking after her.

"What do you think about this whole thing?" he asked.

"What whole thing?" she looked up from her writing.

"This . . . do you think its worth it?"

"Yeah I think it's worth it," she said.

"Why?"

"Because I can't think of anything else that's more worth it," she said.

"Oh okay Ursula, I think it's wonderful when you talk romantic," he said.

"I don't care what you think," she said.

"Oh okay Gudren, then I don't care either."

She faced him smiling. "I'm not Ursula, and I'm not Gudren . . . and you're not Birkin, and you're not Gerald." She pulled her copy of Women in Love off her bookshelf and tossed it at his head.

"I'm not?" He looked crushed.

"No you're not. And you're not Stephen Dedalus either. She threw her copy of Portrait of an Artist at him, a little harder than the last. Her blood was pumping. And you're not the invisible man, you're not Dick Diver. One by one she picked the books, mostly paperbacks, off her shelf and sailed them at his head. Release. And you're not Kurtz, and you're not Arthur Dimmesdale, and you're not Ahab (the bulky copy of Moby Dick flew through the air) especially not Ahab! And you're not Thoreau, and you haven't seen through the transparent eyeball, and even though you'd really like to be you're not Roquentin either. She glanced through the shelves for more ammunition and then at him. They broke up simultaneously, he buried under the fictional characters he thought he wanted to be, she breathing hard, for once, relaxed.

They passed a cart full of fresh flowers standing vivid and sharp in the cold air. She let her eyes wander over to the roses. If John were here...

"You want some flowers?" he asked her.

"They're beautiful," she answered carefully.

"Too bad," "Gotta buy cigarettes" he said, childlike. She chuckled with him. She had had enough flowers in the last four years to last a lifetime. They always died in a couple of days anyway.

Jamie was climbing the stairs to his apartment when two teenage boys passed her on the stairs. When she got to his door they were there listening.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"You here to see him?" the taller one asked.

"Why?" she said.

"Is he in there?"

"I don't know, why?" she asked.

"Knock on his door," the tall one said.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Knock on the door" the tall boy grabbed Jamie's arm. She knocked. "Tell him who it is."

"Hello," she managed shakily, "it's me."

"F___off!" came the response behind the door. The tall boy dropped her arm.

"You heard him, she said, turning and running down the fluorescent blue stairwell.

When they arrived at the house the knots were worse than ever, but she was trying not to think at all. It was almost working. They entered the old stone farmhouse, walked through a room containing many antiques, and entered a den where a man sat watching the football game. The man, a balding executive-type with a pleasant face and small hands looked up, surprised.

"Well, well, what a surprise." He almost smiled as he looked from his son to Jamie and back again. The older man stuck out his hand in greeting, but his son hugged him in an awkward moment that caught them both off guard.

"How are you Dad?"

"I'm great son how are you?"

"Good Dad, this is my friend Jamie," she took his hand with all the warmth she could muster.

"Well son, tell me what you're doing in Detroit."

"I don't know Dad, we just . . ."

She looked from one man to the other. Son, Dad, Son, Dad, it was as though they were constantly reminding each other they were father and son.

"You've just missed your sister . . . she went back east this morning. She'll be sick when she hears," his voice trailed off. Jamie let out her breath. "So Jamie, is that your little Japanese car out there?"

"Yes sir, it's mine," Jamie found her voice, "sorry about that." Jamie wasn't sure what he did for a living, but with a thirty room stone mansion with two Chevrolet's in the driveway, she figured he had something to do with the American Auto Industry.

"That's Okay. Some of my best friends drive foreign cars," he chuckled, "well, maybe not my best friends." He chuckled again. Obviously an old cocktail party joke.

"Kelly came down to see me last night," he said. "The girl I was screwing before you."

"Oh," she closed her eyes.

"Sorry, that didn't come out right."

"No" she said, "so what happened?"

"She told me she missed my laugh . . . so I laughed at her" he said.

"You're a shit" she said. He looked mildly amused. He moved on top of her.

"You jealous?"

"No" She giggled.

"Why not?"

"Cause she's ugly," she said.

"And you're beautiful."

"F___you."

"And so well mannered . . . and you look so beautiful first thing in the morning." He picked up a piece of her tangled hair mockingly.

After spending two months arguing with him over Dostoyevsky in an upper level Russian Lit course Jamie had finally been introduced to him at a party in his apartment building. They small talked about sailing in the Bahamas for a few minutes before he suggested a trip to the roof of the building, and she accepted. He was drunk and she was sober. When they arrived at the roof he sent a group of pot smoking undergraduates home to bed, and she was impressed. Then he started telling her about epiphanies, lighting fireworks and breaking glass, and a paper he had just finished on the Hades episode in Ulysses, and she decided she wanted him. When she left in the morning she didn't expect to hear from him again, until four o'clock the next morning when he showed up at her cottage. She didn't even think she had told him her last name.

"You came!" he said, his eyes lighting up without smiling.

"Yeah. I tried to write a paper, but it didn't work out. Fiction and reality...too heavy for me." She sat down and looked around the apartment. Jimi Hendrix stared at her from behind his guitar on the North wall of the room. Three large bongos, in rainbow colors adorned a table below him. A massive stereo system with monster speakers occupied the East wall. The room was full of Salvation Army type furniture, tapestries, and a handmade bed that folded out of the South wall. Half living spider plants hung in front of the curtainless windows. The bathroom and kitchen were off to the right.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

"It's--uh--comfortable looking," she said.

"That's a compliment. Not the greatest part of town, but I guess you can't have everything."

"Nice stereo," she said.

"I stole it from a fraternity."

"Uh-huh. So who's Alberto Giocometti?"

"He's a sculptor - - Italian, or Swedish - - I'm not sure," he said.

"Oh."

"Did you like the Omega? I picked it 'cause it looked like a horseshoe . . . you said you were into horseshoes."

"Yeah, I am," she said.

"You came," he said again.

"Mm-hmm," she said.

"It was a dare, you know. I dared you to come here." he said.

"You invited me to play 'dictionary'," she said.

"There's no such game," he said laughing. "Joke's on you."

She opened the door and walked into her bedroom. It was a quarter past three and he still hadn't moved. His survival jacket was twisted around his body, but his head faced the floor. She set her briefcase on the desk. Wind blew in through the curtains, slamming the door behind her. He stirred and sat up, running his hand through his hair and adjusting his jacket.

"Hi," he said, and giggled.

"Hi," she said.

"So aren't you gonna ask me what happened last night?" he asked.

"I'm sure you'll tell me anyway."

"I was at this party. It was great - - you would have loved it. I kept meaning to call you. Well, I drank pretty much. They kept asking me who I was, and I wouldn't tell them. I kept telling them I was a product of their imagination; their attempt to order a disorderly universe. This guy at the party was into it. He kicked the wall and said that the pain in his foot proved that the wall was there. You following this?"

"Sure," she said.

"So I put my fist through the window and told them it didn't hurt, and that proved . . . well . . . you get it." He looked down at his right hand. Blood caked into globs across his knuckles.

"What did they say?" she asked.

"They told me to walk through the plate glass door."

"Did you?"

"No, are you kidding? Then they threw me out in the back yard, so I made a campfire with their woodpile. It was big."

"And what did they do then?" she asked.

"They called the fire department. Oh, and they came out to look for me. I was already in the hills above their house, sitting in a pine tree, watching it burn. It was a beautiful fire. I wish you coulda been there. You would have loved it."

"Do you know that fountain has three hundred and twenty-four different water and light patterns?" he asked her.

"It's beautiful."

"I used to hang around and talk to the builders."

She had never been in Detroit before, but his overwhelming feeling of home had transmitted to her, and she looked at the lights of the city with an over-appropriate sense of warmth.

"Thanks for bringing me here," she said.

"Thanks for coming with me," he said.

"Sure."
"It feels so good here."
"What does?"
"Everything."
"Everything." The snow was getting heavier, and he moved closer to her.

He rolled away from her and faced the wall, hugging his pillow. She traced the freckles on his back.

"You wanna talk about it?" she asked.

"What? No."

"It's supposed to be fun, you know," she said.

"Sorry." She put her arm across his shoulder and molded her body against his back. "Will you just leave me alone?" She pulled away tiredly and turned back towards her side of the bed. She wanted to sleep. It had been so long since she had slept. Without warning, a picture of John entered her mind. What was he doing? Where was he now? She closed her eyes, wanting to fall deep into unconsciousness, but her mind refused. It swept over her like a tidal wave. Memories --one following another. Everything before it went bad. The dinners, the vacations, sailing, skiing, the mountains, the love -- God, the real, unselfish, ignorant love . . . and the roses. She wanted roses tonight, badly.

The sky was lightening, and the moon was setting. It hung over the mountains to the West, glowing almost burgundy.

"The moon's still full," she said.

"Maybe that's my problem." He turned to her and touched her arm, hesitating, awkwardly. She didn't feel like taking it. "You sleeping?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, as the moon started to fall behind the hills.

"Something's f_____ up," he said. She turned away from the moon, back to him.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, don't you think I should know by now whether or not I'm in love with you?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Well, I think I should know and I don't," he said.

"Why do you think you have to know now?" she asked.

"Well, I've had plenty of time."

"Oh," she said. He didn't ask her if she was in love with him.

"Shit, Jamie."

"What?"

"I've got to . . . nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing!" His voice hit like anger. It was getting light in the room. She watched him turn back to the wall. She stared at the fine blonde hairs that covered his back. "If I tell you . . . Jamie, I can't tell you."

"Okay," she said.

"Dammit, Jamie, I've been lying so long I don't even know when I'm telling the truth anymore."

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

Pam Houston