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The Best Man

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THE BEST MAN

- Heather Johnson '73

TUESDAY MORNING

She was standing naked in front of the long mirror on the back of the bathroom door. The bathtub drain was making a loud gurgling noise as it sucked up the last grey suds. She was still attractive. Her skin was tight and smooth, her breasts full and firm. Her long hair, streaked Basic Blonde, was thick, curling loosely over her shoulders, over her breasts, and down her back. It made her feel young. She turned around, sizing up her thighs and buttocks---too heavy. But at least she had no stretch marks yet.

Not yet. But Gavin wanted children.

"Why don't you want children anymore?" Gavin had asked her the day after she had found him punching out her little white pills, dropping them into the toilet. "When we married you wanted them."

"That was five years ago."

"You even said you loved them."

"I still do and that's the problem---I could never neglect them."

"I really don't understand you."

"No, you don't."

She pulled a velour towel from the rack beside the door and rubbed the soft cloth over her body and then wrapped it in a turban around her head. She studied her face in the mirror---the large grey eyes, the short turned-up nose, and her thin turned-down mouth. No lines yet.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON

A fog was enveloping her in the big red stuffed chair. The smell strong in her nostrils, the smoke hot in her throat. She drew in her breath and held it.

Glasses of champagne and little roasted sausages---that was her wedding. Talking and dancing and sweating in her long white dress. Parading down the aisle with her thin arm in her father's thick one, and laughing when she saw little Ben the Best Man, standing stiff in his rented suit, grinning at the dressed-up guests.

She coughed and exhaled and tried to raise herself from the large chair, but sank back into the red softness, remembering that Gavin was gone and the windows could stay closed this once.

TUESDAY NIGHT

Gavin hated the small motel room, he hated its smallness and he

hated its sterility. It was too clean, too neat, He had tried to divert himself with the television but it only sputtered and buzzed when he turned it on, lining itself vertically every few seconds. The Gibson Bible seemed to offer his only other entertainment. Just for fun he thought he might write Marcia on the motel crested paper. He took two sheets from under the Bible and had written "Dearest Marcia, I...when the blue went white and so he crumpled up the papers and tossed them on top of the red Bible.

It was all Marcia's idea, his coming to Chicago. He detested cities. They overwhelmed him, buried him in their busy-ness, crushed him with their pushing crowds and piled-up traffic. Once, along one of the swarming streets, he came upon a tall stone church and retreated inside, momentarily refreshed in the cool and still darkness until he noticed the large crucifix suspended above the altar, Christ's twisted body life-size and nailed to the wood, painted with blood, pained with death. He felt uncomfortable, challenged by this grotesque figure, and so he yielded himself up to the pressing pedestrians outside.

He propped his feet upon the double bed, sitting back in one of the orange leather-look chairs. For five days he would have to bear Urbana, and those five days were going to be like five years.

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Her head full, foggy. It was already one o'clock. A sound sleep---no snoring, no breakfast to make, no apologies to make for just wanting to sleep. Slowly she slipped on a gold velvetine robe which lay in a heap under the bedside table and stepped lightly down the stairs, almost floating, it seemed, into the kitchen. Maybe some coffee would clear her head. But leaning against the counter after her first sip of the freeze-dried concoction, she reconsidered her earlier condemnation of Mrs. Olson and her good cup of coffee---a bad brew might possibly break up a marriage. Thank God Gavin liked tea. She poured the dark liquid into the stainless steel sink and watched it form thin brown puddles which moved amoeba-like toward the disposal, now and then rushing into little streams on the silver, merging with other dark drops along the way.

Wednesday afternoons were always a bore. Walking over to the front closet, she took out the hoover from its hiding place and sat on the living room carpet to attach the long silver throat to the wide mouth. Soon she was chasing small puff balls into the corners of the room, realizing that the air blower was in reverse, but not wishing to switch it to Inhale. She blew them about the room for a while, grasping the metallic tube in both hands, charging at them without success. At last, she brought the wide nozzle up to her face, her hair flying out behind her. And then with her foot she tapped a switch on the silver and grey cylindrical body and the humming and

the blowing stopped. Wednesday afternoons were still a bore---and so was every other afternoon.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

His second night in Chicago. The few beers inbibed downstairs in the motel bar---The Red Lion---had done little to alleviate the sterility of his room or warm the chill of Chicago, the human coldness of the city. Some of the others on the conference had gone on an afternoon architectural tour of the city, but he could think of nothing less desirable than tramping around the Loop---or wherever---to look at old buildings, even if they were of the Chicago school. Willingly he would forego the pleasures of the city---of being blown off Michigan Avenue, crushed on State Street, or of wearing out his heels in the museums.

He missed sitting in his red easy chair at 610 Bartram Street, quiet Bartram Street, puffing cherry tobacco in his pipe, working out the Daily News crosswords, watching television. He actually liked television; it was not just an escape from thinking, it was a great guessing game; he could always guess the outcome of a weekly episode within the first five minutes---or rather, the first ten, because of the commercials. But Marcia did not share his feeling about television. TV bored her.

"TV bores me," she had announced one night in the middle of the Monday night shows.

"A lot of things seem to bore you."

"A lot of things do. It's this damn town---it's too quiet, too nice, too small. And there's nothing to do."

"Well, you could work."

"And that's not boring? I'm not going to slave over a typewriter or stand all day behind a counter getting varicose veins if I don't have to. And I hate Women's Clubs, church groups, Girl Scouts and all those other dull organizations. There's really nothing I can do that I want to do."

Gavin could not answer her then---quietness and smallness and niceness---all these were what made life worth living. His teaching occupied him, but did not capture his undying devotion or dedication. Still, the profession was a source of great satisfaction; he enjoyed sitting at a large desk in front of four or five straight rows, his word unchallenged, his instructions followed, his knowledge unequalled. Marcia urged him to try for a principalship, but he was really too comfortable in the classroom to want to bother with untold administrative problems.