

THE WEB

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My whole body was tired as if I had played three sets of tennis. It was just one of those miserable Mondays when everything goes wrong in the firm. The boss, Mr. McFerson, had chewed me out for losing the Jones account and my secretary had just lost her boyfriend, so she was either crying or going to the bathroom. Even my partner, "Big" Jim Crawford, was bothered about something, but he wouldn't say what. I guessed that it was his wife. She's a real bitch, you know the kind that nags and nags about anything. She's really lucky that Jim puts up with her, but I think I understand how he can. I was pretty sure that Jim had something going with another woman, because he was too content to be just living with Martha.

When Jim dropped me off at the house that night I felt much better, just knowing that Ruth would be waiting for me. Ruth was just great. She wasn't beautiful but she really cared for me, and I was crazy about her. I walked up the short path to our ranch house, and opened the door. "Ruth", I yelled. There was no answer, but I thought she might be in the kitchen with the radio on. She really liked those radio talk programs. On my way to the kitchen I saw a man's scarf on the couch, and picked it up. It looked like Jim's. I wondered when he had left it here. He hadn't come over for a week at least. When I got to our small kitchen there was Ruth just as I had expected. She rushed to me and gave me a powerful hug, "How was your day?" I didn't even go into it. When I asked her about the scarf, she said that Jim had come over on a Saturday to see me, but I was out on some business. I told her that Jim knew I was working that day and would have pursued the point, but I could tell she was becoming irritated. Ruth was very cold the rest of the night and she seemed quite tense. She read her regular romance novel, but as I watched her she seemed to be thinking more than reading, because she flipped the pages randomly. I worried about her, but was afraid she would get mad if I questioned her. I can't say that the scarf didn't bother me, but I shrugged it off until later on.

In the morning she was very polite, but still cold. I felt more assured and asked her what was the matter. She wouldn't answer. To get off the subject I asked her about Tommy and whether he had written her any more letters concerning his disgust with school.

Tommy was a problem in the family and that's why I had sent him to Culver, a military academy which was supposed to straighten out messed-up kids. He was a big boy for a twelve-year-old, and I think that was half his problem. Tommy had always been able to beat up everyone in his age group at school, so he just naturally fell into a street gang. At first he was complained about by teachers and neighbors, and I just told them that he was still immature and young. But when he was arrested for street fighting, I threw in the towel. Tommy said he would run away if I sent him to Culver, but he hadn't yet, and I supposed that the school was helping him. He had been there two months and had written only to Ruth. Ruth never answered this question either, so I stormed out of the house and waited in the chilling winter air for Jim. My head ached with questions. What was Ruth hiding and Why?

Jim's Cadillac pulled to a sliding stop on the icy street which reflected the red from the rising sun. "Hop in", he said. "Boy do you look mean this morning." I told him what had happened, and asked why he was at the house Saturday. A look of concern came over Jim's usual smiling face, and he told me that he needed to borrow some tools. He knew that I was on business, but a faucet was leaking and the repairman wouldn't come on a Saturday. I controlled what was burning inside of me, and was determined to resolve this one way or the other. If Jim was making love to Ruth I would kill him. I silently swore it right in front of his devious face. His smiles seemed plastic. Was he playing with my wife? I didn't say a word after that.

When I got into the office, I sat down behind my desk and almost felt nauseous. My plan of resolving the riddle slowly came to mind, and then I prepared myself to execute it. I called Ruth and told her that I wouldn't be coming home tonight, due to a business meeting out of town. I almost broke down and begged her to help me, but I realized that if my fears were true, she would just deny it. The day wore on and I became more and more agitated. The office had a gun in the safe which I withdrew and checked over. It seemed ironic that the steel smelled so clean and well oiled, but in actuality it reeked of death. I told Jim that I wasn't going home tonight, and wouldn't need a ride. It was a usual occurrence, so we didn't discuss it further.

After work I walked to the nearest bar, a place called "The Little Darker." It was a strange name and the small, saw-dust covered room fit it. It was a fine hangout for those who wanted to feel hatred or

self-pity. The fat man at the bar was more of a bouncer than a bartender, but sufficed if you like very dry martinis. He made them without measuring the gin, and then quite ceremoniously dipped his index finger in the drink to mix what vermouth he had dropped into the glass. This process went on until I became quite drunk and I thought it was about time to find the answer to the question.

I stumbled into the cold air, and it refreshed me more than anything. I flagged my hands and was picked up by an old dented cab. "Where to?" the slumped driver asked. I told him the address and began to prepare myself for the coming moment. The trip was quiet, but the noises of a crowd of thoughts were ringing in my head. When we pulled up to my street, I saw big Jim's Cadillac parked in my driveway. Was that it? Maybe he was just over to get his scarf. I told the driver to stop, and I walked over to the side of the house. The dark bedroom window was directly to my right and I nudged closer toward it. I felt as sober as I had ever felt. Frustrated energy was ready to burst through my system. I peered into the slightly frosted window and saw Ruth. She was bent over and caressing a person in the bed. The shock of my fears was before me and for a moment stunned me; then anger replaced it.

I ran to the front door and burst in. I pulled out the gun and pointed it toward the coming bedroom. The door was open and all I could see was Ruth bent over a person. I fired the gun until it was empty into the jerking body in front of me. Ruth rushed up to get in the way of the fire and I would have killed her, but the gun was empty. She was shrieking something and then I was tackled. I turned around and it was Jim. He yelled that I had shot my son. He kept saying my son.

Well that's the whole story as well as I can remember it. I peered into the glassy eyes of Mr. Bottomly, and then focused on the cell bars that surrounded us. He shook his head and said, "It's bad." He asked me why Ruth had been so upset the night before. I thought for a moment about how this all wouldn't have happened if I had been more of a father to Tommy, or if Ruth hadn't kept quiet about Tommy running away from Culver that Saturday and staying with Big Jim until that night.