

FLAMINGO ROAD

Arly Carshone stooped to straighten the pink plastic flamingos that stood one-legged on each side of the walk to the only trailer, visible from the road. A low white picket fence, the kind sold at Big Mart stores, penned in the birds. Arly liked the look of the fence and the birds, thought they lent a certain artful elegance to the place. For him the trailer was everything—home, office, his anchor in the busy world that flew past on the four lane interstate headed toward Lubbock. The world gave little notice of his quiet sanctuary. A traveler would have to be coming off the interstate onto Farm Road 1187 to see the faded pink sign with a few letters missing.

Car hon's trailer Court

Vac n y

Arly shared the doublewide with his wife, Clara. Though at times he felt the need to escape the confining space. This evening as the sun began to set, Arly walked out the door, down the steps, past the flightless flamingos, and over to the dirt road encircling the small trailer park.

As he strolled the perimeter of the park, he thought about Clara. Although they were both now middle-aged, there had been an earlier time when she spoke to him with sweetness in her words. "Honey, please get the cake pans from the top shelf." Or,

"You're such a sweetheart to help me." And they'd talked and dreamed about building a future and a family together.

She lost the tenderness in her voice when they lost the baby a few years ago—and now there were no such sweetness or dreams to link them. She'd been at odds with the world . . . and with him.

Shrugging his shoulders, Arly tried to relax, put his mind at ease. As he took a deep breath, he smelled the plowed ground from the nearby field, then, with a shift of the breeze, the rust from farm implements in a ditch. Gravel crunched under his feet. He sighed, scraping his fingers through his beard.

He couldn't get Clara off his mind. Over the clack of her knitting needles, she scolded him. "Fix the faucet. Can't you see the drip?" "Go to the store. Isn't it plain as the nose on your face we need bread?" Her words sawed through the unspoken raw feelings between them. They lived their lives side by side but in precarious balance. Each day, Arly watched as the thin, fraying strands of their bond continued to unravel.

He felt the pressure from her commands, but her constant knitting weighed on him more. Blue yarn—always blue—slithered over the couch and snaked through her blue-veined hands. It snaked onto the fencing needles, click, clickity, click, clack. Like her words there was sharpness, a parry and thrust. It was as if she were obsessed with the yarn, forced to do its bidding. Her blue produce—booties, sweaters and blankets—she gave to the poor, casting them away as something despised.

Arly struggled to be kind and considerate. Though when he felt more tense than usual, he found himself remembering the first time he had seen her with knitting needles.

She'd started a blue blanket for their three-month-old son. Then one night they put their healthy baby to bed only to find him dead in his crib the next morning.

"Sudden infant death syndrome," the doctor said. But Clara finished the blanket before giving it away. Since that time, he hadn't seen her for more than an hour or two, without the needles in her hands. Her obsession made him feel adrift, cut-off from her.

Arly began to grow a beard the day the baby died. He thought it masked his pain. Looking into the mirror, he did not have to face his own suffering and feelings of vulnerability—or reveal it to Clara and the world beyond their trailer.

Today was their twentieth wedding anniversary. Clara continued her verbal assaults without mentioning the day. At other times when he'd tried to talk about the baby's death, Clara shushed him saying, "Stop. I'm counting." She still counted stitches—except when giving orders or passing out reprimands. Her knitting had become a wall between them he couldn't scale.

As he walked, he noticed the many vacant lots. Only now and then did someone knock on their door asking to rent a space in the park. Clara executed the lease procedures without dropping a stitch.

Arly winced as he thought back to that very afternoon. He'd returned from an errand and she railed at him because he'd bought the wrong-size light bulb. Called him a laggard, as if he were absent-minded and lazy. Now, as he walked in the gentle part of the evening, his breath came easier. He felt the pressure let up a bit as Clara slipped from his mind, as he became engrossed looking over the trailers of the various families in the park he managed.

Of the tenants, the Martins and the Cantwells liked their trailers situated in the far corners of the park. As for the Ferrells, they lived at the back under the only cluster of trees. These families seemed to prefer the recesses, away from the highway.

He thought of the Browns as he passed the vacant spot where their trailer once sat. They'd appeared to be such a happy couple. Yet, the young man and woman and their three children left for no apparent reason—glaring strangely at Arly through their windshield as they drove by the office. The youngest held her hands up to her eyes as if she were looking through binoculars. The perimeter of the lot space where their trailer sat had overgrown with weeds.

Arly let the unpleasant memory go, and as he approached the Ferrells, his paced slowed. As usual, sights and sounds of the other families drew him in. Some of them never bothered to close their drapes. This allowed him to enter, unknown, into their lives.

He hadn't meant to pry. But he felt a strong need to see human beings responding to one another. His eyes seldom lingered as he passed the Cantwells or the Martins, for it made his heart sink to see their rancor toward one another. They were so different from the Ferrells.

At that moment, Arly's thoughts overpowered him and he sat down. When he looked up he realized he'd settled on a stump across the road from the Ferrell trailer. He lit his pipe, watching as the young man and his wife laughed at something on TV. The woman looked at the husband as if to say, "Isn't that too funny?"

Many families had come and gone from the park, and over the years on his daily walks, Arly developed the ability to read lips, eyes and gestures.

A while later, Mrs. Ferrell disappeared, then returned with their baby in his blue pajamas. She rocked him as she talked with her husband. Arly knew their pet names for each other, and other things he thought might be known only to the couple themselves. Something about the pair, the way they were with each other, soothed him. There were times during the day, when Arly's wife snapped at him, he held the image of the Ferrells in his mind.

The night felt peaceful, tranquil. Arly sat on the stump gazing into the Ferrell's trailer longer than he intended. What he saw next stunned him. Mr. Ferrell leapt from his chair, turned down the TV, then picked up the phone. He listened a few seconds, and then he slammed the receiver back into the cradle, stalked over to the window and jerked the drapes shut.

They knew. Crawling numbness spread beneath his skin. He rubbed one arm and then the other. Arly slumped as if he'd been socked in the stomach. He felt his body cave in around his gut. He staggered to his feet. For an instant he wanted to go knock on the door and explain things. But he knew they'd think he was crazy if he told them the truth—how what he really wanted was to be like them. It was impossible. In his mind he heard a door slam.

Stumbling, he turned back toward home when he heard the crunch of tires on the gravel behind him.

It took a moment for him to adjust to the flashing red and blue lights atop the police car.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Why I . . . I've been out for a walk. What can I do for you, Officer?"

"Look, fella, some folks been watchin' you. Say you been sittin' out here for twenty minutes or more peering into that trailer over there—the one you were walking away from when I pulled up. Hey . . . you on something?"

"On something? Why, no, I just smoke this Prince Albert. I didn't mean any harm. Only sat on that stump there to rest and catch my breath. It's the halfway mark on the road around to my trailer. I like to get out and walk—stretch my legs a little in the evening."

"Get in the car, mister. I'm takin' you home. Gotta wife? Arly nodded dumbly. How does she feel about this winda' peekin'? Any more calls on you and I'll—"

"Look, officer—"

"Get in the car."

Arly felt the blood drain from his face as they pulled up in front of his trailer. The policeman motioned Arly out of the car, and took hold a firm hold on Arly's forearm as if he might try to bolt.

It was then, on the way up the walk, Arly noticed the flamingos adrift in their sea of grass, off balance, as if they were about to drown in the tall green blades. Arly rubbed his eyes, as the officer knocked hard on the door.

"Ma'am, I've brought your husband home. You better start keepin' him in at night, or he's liable to get in a heap of trouble. I don't want any more complaints on him, you hear me?" The officer turned on his heel and stomped out the door and down the steps. Arly reached out a hand to steady himself on the kitchen counter. Clara stared at him, speechless. His wife's usually stoic face flinched.

"I'm sorry, Clara; this is all a mistake," he mumbled, moving toward the darkness of their cramped bedroom. He dropped into bed in his clothes, and felt himself float off as if pulled by a strong current to fall into a ragged sleep.

The next morning, sunlight coming in the window caused Arly to blink awake. He still felt dazed, but without the awful numbness that had crept up his arms the night before. He lay staring at the ceiling, trying to recall the dream he was having but it began fading, slipping away as easily as sand through an hour glass. There was a message—but what? He looked over at his wife who lay sleeping, no doubt dreaming dreams of her own. Arly knew his dream had to do with Clara, and what she needed to begin to live again.

Each day, it seemed to him, she relived the death, her words tied-up, tangled in yarn like an umbilical cord—lost in the chasm between them. Still, unable to free herself, she lived in the past. No hope for the future. Meanwhile, he stood on the other side, waiting. Both of them waiting. A feeling of urgency flooded over him. He knew he must not wait. He had to act. That was the message.

To get her to put her knitting down. That would be the first step. Though, how could he take away the only defense she had to fend off grief? There had to be something else to take its place. And as he searched his mind a fragment of the dream returned to him: a little boy, a child of a young couple new to the park.

Clara stirred and would soon awake. Arly slipped out to the kitchen, made some coffee filling two mugs, and returned to the bedroom. "Here, Hon." He offered her the cup with a smile. A bewildered look flickered, but faded. Her features softened. She sat up taking the cup.

"Well, you're up early. Why?"

"Because I've decided this is the best time of day to get out and welcome the new family. Besides, I want you to come with me. The husband came alone, but now his wife and child are with him. We can stop by and say 'hello'... welcome them"

Clara looked away from him a frown creasing her brow.

As soon as she walked into the living room, Arly watched Clara pick up her knitting basket. The yarn was in her hands almost before he knew it. He spoke to her gently as he bent to remove the yarn and put it back in the basket. "I really mean it, Clara. I want you to come with me to welcome the new family. We'll walk together to their trailer. It is only a short way." He realized his tone sounded almost pleading.

The young couple answered their knock and welcomed Arly and Clara into the trailer. A little boy, a toddler, peeked out from behind his daddy's leg. Watching Clara with the child, Arly felt almost happy. Smiling, Clara knelt down to the child and offered him soft bunny, a toy, one she'd taken from her pocket. The child returned her smile as he reached for the toy. Then he released his grip on his father's trousers and toddled the two steps to Clara. In no time at all, the little boy sat on her lap playing with the bunny. When they stood to go, Clara's face glowed as she held the child, the little one's arm around her neck.

Eventually Arly began to see small changes in his wife. At times she spoke to him with a hint of sweetness. And there were times now when the knitting lay untouched on the sofa for hours at a time. One day Arly asked Clara if she'd help him work in their bit of yard. He watched as she, laughing, bent to straighten the flamingos which had fallen over. Arly wondered at this, wondered at her words. "I remember when we made the trip

to town to buy these. It was right after we first moved here. They're still pretty but getting a little faded now."

In that moment being out in the warm glow of the sun, Arly felt his old love slowly coming back to him. Breathing in the fresh air he felt a lightness come over him.

Over supper he suggested they could invite the new family over for a weekend cook-out. Clara flew off to the grocery and returned with what she wanted to prepare to accompany the burgers. Included were a few jars of baby food.

That evening, as they were saying their goodbyes, Clara pressed a large bag of the blue knitting into Tommy's mother's hands. "Here's a few things I thought Tommy could use."

The following morning, Arly awakened to hear music coming from the kitchen radio. He recognized an old melody. Couldn't recall the song's name, but the tune brought a kind of relief. He let out a long slow breath.

As they sat side by side at the table sipping coffee Clara said, "Arly, Honey, I've been thinking. Let's take a drive. The day is so pretty. We could wander a little." The Clara he knew spoke—the one from all those years ago—her voice sweet. Arly's reply caught in his throat, but he managed to nod his approval.

He stood and walked to the bedroom explaining he needed to change from his slippers to shoes; and he wanted to find a better shirt for their outing. When he returned, his eyes searched, half-expecting to find the knitting in her hands. Instead, she sat gazing out the window, her hands resting in her lap.

"The new folks came by. They wanted to know if I'd baby-sit their little boy. Three days a week. I'm so tickled. His mother got a part-time job at Kroger's. I can be a big help, don't you think?"

"Yes, I sure do, Sweetheart."

"He's already come by for a cookie this morning. I asked his mother if it was alright if Tommy called me 'Auntie Clara'." She said yes, that would be nice. Clara smiled her eyes warm. In that moment, Arly felt a weight lift as he straightened his shoulders.

Later, after their drive, they sat outside on the steps as the day cooled. He talked about putting in a glider swing, one with a canopy in their bit of yard, and getting the sign to the entrance fixed.

Then Clara asked, "But, Arly, the flamingos. . . where are. . . have you . . . ?"

"I put them away. They earned a rest. We'll get a new pair in the spring."

Clara smiled. He took her hand and they watched the evening come on, together.