

The Hairpin

I snuggle closer, fluffing the pillow, eager for that moment when your arm gently nestles under my drowsy head and our breathing calms. My favorite time. A chance to talk. A chance to maybe laugh at tedious moments over the last few days, now blessedly behind us in this serene, naked darkness. To inhale. A blending of spirits. Of hope. Of ... trust.

But then I feel it. A hairpin. Now unearthed from its pillowed environment. Your eyes are closed as I pluck it silently from the sheet, then slide it carefully into my hair with my thumb and forefinger. After a slow caress, I curl my arm over your warm chest. Your breathing's shallow, then deepens as you slip easily into sleep within a few moments. I smile. Sadly.

I'd wanted to hear about your graduate students' presentations during these last few days. I always ask about your work, though you rarely concern yourself with mine. At the beginning of our relationship, I tried to nudge you towards even the tiniest of inquiries, but after all these years, I rarely assume any such interest will ever emerge. I'll be certain to ask about the evaluations on Sunday, however.

There's always a bit more time on Sundays. Sundays and Thursdays have been our days for over two years now. Sometimes we meet first at the Alpine Restaurant, which is anything but Alpine in either cuisine or location we often joke. On our non-days as I call them, I'll occasionally have dinner there by myself, imagining long conversations, our hands clasped across the table in the sputtering candlelight, or out in the darkening parking lot as the streetlamps eerily flicker with purple tongues. I'm a notch above Hitchcock's Miss Lonely Heart ... but only a tiny one.

I get up to use the bathroom, first glancing in the mirror to smooth back my unruly hair, alive with December static. The long hairpin glitters like burnt gold in my hair. It isn't mine. I already know this, of course, even before this stark confirmation is revealed by my wobbly reflection above your sink.

I don't think this is the same woman as the last time. She's moved. Out of state. Unless she's moved back. But somehow, I doubt this. Unless the job transfer fell through. So maybe. But she used several small tortoise shell combs to sweep back her kinky short hair. That hair was

everywhere. Like a wirehaired terrier marking its territory, shedding furry clumps all over your comforter.

Another woman left tiny black plastic clips lined up by twos like miniature soldiers in your medicine chest. These clips have been gone now for several months as well. I close my eyes momentarily, finish in the bathroom and, my feet dragging slightly, walk back to the bedroom.

Your snoring has gotten louder in my brief absence. Sitting on the bed, I pull on my underwear, sweater and jeans, pick up my socks and boots, and then move out into the hallway. Unbidden, rumbling about in my head are my girlfriends' blissful revelations that their husbands no longer want THAT, thank goodness. We're grandmothers, they always chuckle. What woman our age still wants THAT, for heaven's sake, they laugh. Who needs THAT?

Well, this woman does. After so many years of young widowhood, with no time for myself while desperately earning a living for my family, and then later discovering that there were few respectable men available, none even remotely interested in dating a longtime widow. Probably too self-sufficient, they'd scoff -- forget doing THAT with her.

Once you're a single woman older than fifty-five, you've regrettably cratered into a dismal demographic. Single men, whether never married, newly widowed, or divorced, are graciously included within social circles by married women everywhere. But there's an unwritten code among those married women to refrain from inviting single woman friends over for dinner, drinks, or an enjoyable evening when their own spouse is in attendance. On the other hand, we're unanimously proclaimed the perfect organizer for charity raffles, church fundraisers, book clubs, Tupperware parties and the like. Need three dozen chocolate cupcakes by this afternoon? No problem!

And so, we humiliate ourselves. We have no choice. Not really. Are we that desperate? Well, apparently. One craves that warmth ... that strength, that deep resonance ... an older, unattached man, willing to sleep with a widow rather than her younger, smooth-fleshed, vibrant replacement. A man who when he whispers, 'I love you', or 'you're beautiful', treasures those words beyond that split second of ecstasy during which they've been recklessly unleashed into the night.

As I lace up my boots, sitting on the kitchen stool, I take a moment to push the hairpin tightly into my hair. Next time I'm here I'll bring one of my own small black pins, leave it for her under "our" pillow. And so, this tawdry game will commence once again. As I pull my coat

from the closet, I see your cellphone charging on the adjacent table. Mysteriously, as if on cue, a text silently flashes from Sharon L: “See you again Friday! Can’t wait!” the text reads.

This one’s new. There was a Sharon R. a few years back. Sharon’s an older name. Like mine. Maybe she’s as old as I am. New to this game. Probably newly widowed. Thinks this brilliant man has just dropped out of heaven, the perfect match for her aching heart. If that’s the case we’ll both be sharing with yet a third, younger one in a few weeks, my dearest Sharon L. But maybe you already know this. And if you don’t, you’ll learn soon enough.

I find a scrap of unused paper and stub of a pencil and scribble a quick note: “Sorry had to leave without saying good-bye. How does Alpine sound next Sunday?”

As always, I draw a heart border encircling my three-letter name at the bottom of my message.