

SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED

Gary cradled a Johnny Walker Red on ice. The place was beginning to fill up. Most of the tables were occupied. A few vacant stools ringed the crescent bar where he sat. Above the cash register, a lighted Budweiser sign rotated lethargically in an endless cycle. Tonight would be the time for the final action. Each time before, when he had picked up the phone and dialed Carol's number to tell her that it was over between them, he couldn't. Just as the words started to come out, his throat tightened, his will weakened. Gary, is anything wrong? she would ask, her tone apprehensive. Did she suspect? He would regain control, make an excuse for the break in his voice, and that would be it. He had come that close. Relief and yet no relief.

The tightening of the bond. He had seen it coming. It was a natural thing, he guessed. Neither had dated anyone else since they settled on each other during that summer three years ago. She had been 19, still living with her parents, Gary seven years older. Then his job took him out of town. He drove back once every week or two for their Ramada Inn Weekend, as she called it. They had been married in every way but on paper. Now she wanted that, too. You couldn't blame her. Total commitment. Gary felt his freedom slipping away. The feeling had become more intense lately. He couldn't keep letting things be drawn out. He had to regain control before it was too late to go back to his past life.

His life before had brought him to places like this. It had been routine. The clink of glasses and the sound of mechanical laughter brought him back again. Elton John blared from the jukebox.

"Hey, Zeke, how'd it go last night, doll?"

The female bartender's voice caused Gary to look that way. She spoke to some guy who had just come in. He had a mustache and wore a green sport coat over a patterned body shirt open at the neck, from which dangled a medallion on a thin gold chain. His shoes were white loafers, and he held another kind of shoe in his hand. It was red and looked like a woman's high-heeled patent leather pump.

Zeke gave a sheepish grin. "Don't ask, Shirley." They leaned close together and talked for a moment. At intervals one of them would laugh. Then the guy passed the shoe to the her and she put it beneath the counter, all the while nodding her head with a knowing smile. The guy left, looking as if a burden had been lifted.

Another guy, a couple of stools down, made a remark to Shirley about the shoe. She put the finishing touches on a marguerita, set it on a barmaid's tray, and came over and positioned herself between Gary and the guy. She wore luminous pink lipstick that only vaguely followed the outline of her lips.

"I swear, I thought Zeke could do better than that." Her voice reminded him of the chalkboard-fingernail thing. She shook her head. "He made me promise not to tell." After only a slight hesitation, she began, "You know Sheeba?"

The story was, so she said, that Zeke had been in the previous night and picked up this "Sheeba." Shirley had been working then and said that Zeke and Sheeba had been sitting next to each other at the bar and he evidently asked her to meet him outside after allowing him a tactful moment to depart alone. He paid and left. Then she smoked half a cigarette and paid and left.

Shirley said she understood why Zeke didn't care to be seen leaving with her. "She's a real hippo," she said, no beauty contestant herself, Gary observed. "I hope he didn't let her get on top," the guy guffawed, looking over at Gary with a lewd smirk. Gary smiled back indulgently.

Anyway, Shirley said, he took her back to his apartment, got her blouse off in the living room ("God, what a sight *that* must have been!"), then got her half-way down the hall, where she passed out and he had to ease her onto the floor. Zeke knew she was married and got panicky when he thought she might have croaked from mixing too much booze and a heart condition or something, and finding himself not strong enough to move her. He dressed her hastily and rushed a couple of doors down and recruited two buddies to help. Together they managed to heft Sheeba into Zeke's car and drive back to where she had left her own wheels in the lounge parking lot. There they dragged her into her car and left.

Zeke became deeply worried. He didn't know whether she were dead or just sleeping it off. When he got back to his apartment and found the shoe, he was terrified at the thought of this evidence proving she had been there. He paced the floor, drank coffee and waited. Then he drove back to where they'd left her, and thank God, saw that her car was gone. Sheeba called him the next day and wanted to come over for her shoe. He said no way and told her he would drop it off at the lounge and she could pick it up there.

They both had a good laugh over the story and Gary chuckled with them briefly, though it added to his discomfort. He gazed limply through the haze of cigarette smoke and noticed a younger guy with his stool swung around putting the hustle on a barmaid. He recognized the procedure easily, because he had done it himself on innumerable occasions. Back then it was an endless gambol of cruising the bars looking for another "score." That old game you got locked into. It always ended with sex, at least that was the goal. You had a role and you played it. Later

perhaps you would see each other out somewhere and deliberately avoid meeting the other's eyes, not only because you had forgotten the name, but also because of the tacit understanding that it was only a one night stand. Anything more was too permanent for either of you. Or if the eyes did meet, they would say it for you: There is nothing here to continue. It had always seemed odd to him that you could rarely maintain an acquaintanceship and acknowledge this other fact at the same time.

He looked around and saw older men alone in the place, yet at the moment he felt the oldest of all. The guy who had listened to the story about Zeke was now talking at an almost nonstop clip to a barmaid. He looked middle-aged, not unpleasant looking, with rough, heavy features, and almost bald. He laughed bawdily now and then at what he imagined to be his own witticisms. As time passed, his voice grew louder, thicker.

Gary could never picture himself in this man's role, but there was one (at least) in every bar. It was as if some men had to come to a bar to prove something to themselves. Not necessarily to pick up a woman, but to be close to where that sort of thing did happen. Perhaps the loudest "talkers" were the ones who had never made the scene when they were younger and so wondered what it was they had missed. And they wanted, impossibly, to pull it back and have another go at it. But, Gary thought, there's a different mindset about it when you're younger. It was a new adventure then. You weren't aware at the time that it was merely a stage you'd pass through. That it would end. He suddenly wondered if he were realizing this for the first time himself. These unsure, unglamorous feelings were not a part of this scene before.

Absently, he ambled over to the cigarette vendor and inserted the money. He looked down at the illuminated packs staring back at him. Which brand had he used to smoke when he was out like this? It had never been an addiction, just a crutch. A role. He rarely inhaled. Salem?

Winston? Marlboro, he concluded. In the hard box. He punched the button, hunched down, felt in the tray. Nothing. He pressed the button several times. Still nothing. Shirley the bartender was returning from the women's room. He got her attention and asked if the machine were out of order. She said it had been working fine until now. Did he put in the correct amount? she asked, extending a finger with its extra long nail and tapping on the price label.

Gary reddened, realizing the price had gone up. She smiled patronizingly and moved away. "Reading the directions helps, doll," she said in the grating voice.

He put in the correct amount and got his Marlboros in the hard box. On the way back to his stool, a well-endowed woman in a low cut black dress passed, wafting fragrance. He remembered all those times. For a lingering instant, he longed to take her down, slip his hand behind and unhook the brassiere and take in what she had. With chagrin he realized there might not be too many brassieres left to unhook, considering the liberated fashion trend nowadays. In the wake of some silly twisted quote bursting through from his subconscious ("Cry Havoc! And let slip the bras of war!"), it hit him broadside, as abrupt as a cold chill: Nowadays! Damn, had it been that long? Were things rushing by that quickly, changing so fast that he couldn't keep up with them? He was annoyed, half-frightened, picturing himself grown old and suddenly realizing that so many things he had wanted to be a part of had slipped by unnoticed, and that it was too late to go back then.

The stool beside him squeaked. He looked to his right. New arrivals. Two young women, a blonde and a brunette. Pretty. The blonde caught his gaze and smiled. At the instant he started to smile back, he realized he was wearing his eyeglasses. Before, he had always put on his contact lenses before going out, though he never wore them as comfortably as he did glasses. The old vanity about his looks returning. Slowly, since meeting Carol, the former preoccupation

over his appearance, his desirability, had eroded. Now he rarely wore his contact lenses at all, rarely even thought of them. He felt out of place. Without acknowledging the woman, he quickly looked away. He fumbled in his pocket and placed a dollar bill down on the counter next to a matchbook cover that read "Join us for happy hour every night."

An unfamiliar panic quickened his steps. Outside he got into his car and let the window down briefly to catch a few breaths of the fresh night air. He heard the gravel crunch and looked to his left. A grizzled old man approaching the lounge was squinting at him. The man saw that Gary was looking back and grinned and inclined his head as if in recognition. Gary quickly disengaged his eyes when the man turned and stumbled his way.

"Hey there," the man said in a coarse voice as he approached. He coughed raggedly. "How you been, buddy?"

Gary sighed. "Fine." He inserted the key into the ignition and stared blankly ahead, then sagged in his seat to await the inevitable.

"Yeah, I thought I recognized you. I seen you around here lots 'a times before." He said the words as if they had been rehearsed.

Gary gave a weak smile, faintly embarrassed. "That is my first time here," he said truthfully.

The man had come up beside the driver's window. In the bright sickly cast of yellow light, Gary saw that it was a derelict with a gray-stubbled beard. He wore dirt-smearred white trousers and a drab blue shirt that was the color of his eyes. He grinned widely through discolored teeth.

"Oh, well, you sure do look like him, though." Then quickly, "Say, you wouldn't have some change you could lend me, would you?" He made a supplicating gesture with his hands. "I don't get paid till tomorrow and I wanted to get me a tin of Copenhagen."

Gary looked into the filmy eyes, at the face wrinkled with age and creased with the effort of living. The harsh of reality assailing the soft of dreams. He felt a palpable sinking sensation and drew his eyes away. "I'm sorry," he said in a tone more impatient than he meant. "I don't have any change on me." He immediately regretted the lie, but found, irrationally, that he was unable to renege on what he had said. Irritated with himself, he turned the ignition over and heard the old man mutter turning away, "Thanks anyway, young fella, you have a nice day," as he backed up the car and pulled away into the deepening night.

He climbed the stairs to his apartment and pushed the key into the door lock and applied pressure, but it wouldn't twist. His stomach was churning, the scotch having remained unsettled. He jiggled it with exasperation, cursing under his breath. The key was made from the original and had never worked properly. Finally the lock snapped home and he pushed the door open. He flicked the hall light on and passed into the dimness of the bedroom, flopping into the easy chair by the window. He lifted the phone and dialed Carol's number station-to-station. The shriek of a whistle drew his eyes out the window and down to the river bay across the road. Lights shimmered back from a lone tug pushing its load, straining slowly against the bleak night current. Three rings. He cleared his throat. His palms were moist and he was gripping the phone tightly. God, he thought, yesterday comes so suddenly.

"Hello," said the familiar voice.

"Hi, Babe," he said, his voice relaxing a bit. END