

Fearful Symmetry

Later, Sally couldn't remember whether it was she or Larry who had started it all. It certainly could have been her husband—such a good person, what with his pro bono work and such—who had suggested inviting the widower for dinner. But she was a good person, too. Devastated though she had been at the sudden loss of her best friend, she'd known very well what Sven must have been going through. How he would appreciate a good meal and some support. At least a good meal.

It was two weeks after the funeral when Sven finally came. With his lapis-blue eyes and his cropped hair still hinting at blond through the grey, he was as Nordic looking as his name, and had always had, or so Sally had concluded from things Carla had said, a certain Nordic reserve about him. He was the opposite, really, of his passionate, vaguely Mediterranean wife. Indeed, though nearly retired now from his fashion shoe business, he arrived in jacket and tie. After a handshake with Larry and generic hug for Sally, he presented his hostess-gift of wine.

“Come on in the living room,” Larry said, just touching Sven's elbow. “Got the wood stove going and everything.”

Once they were seated around the coffee table set with hors d'oeuvres, Larry busied himself with the wine, pouring identical red levels into the three glasses. They raised their drinks, sipped, nodded approval.

“So how are you doing, Sven? Really.”

No beating around the bush for Sally. That was part of what Carla had always said she liked about her friend. Something of a poet, who had had several of her Africa poems published

in literary magazines years ago, Carla had always been the more oblique of the two. In fact, it was their complementary perspectives, Sally thought, that had allowed them to bond so closely. And to get to the heart of whatever they found themselves discussing during their regular morning walks and coffees. Religion, décor, health, children, politics, fashion, age, mothers, living with the other's spouse, living with the other—they'd broached just about every subject, from the mundane to the scandalous, they could think of.

"Fine," Sven replied to her question. "Considering. Mistoffelees is...."

"I'm sure," Sally offered. "They're very sensitive, cats. That's why Carla...." Her throat seized, the corners of her eyes burned. She managed to pass the bacon-wrapped water chestnuts and the cheese board to the two men, then coughed. "... why she always had them. From childhood, I think she said. Must be a comfort. For you, I mean. Misty."

"He is. He is. Kind of a ghost of her."

She didn't dare respond, but it didn't matter: Larry was already off on a safer tack.

"Have the kids left yet? Didn't even think to include them."

"Oh, yes. Becky just flew back. They've got their lives. Know I'll land on my feet."

"Like Misty," Larry offered, brightly.

"There you go," Sven said. "Just like Misty."

They sipped their drinks, talked of the future that young people face these days. When Sally excused herself to the kitchen, she could hear the rumble of the two men's voices back in the living room. She worked as quietly as she could, but still had trouble making out exactly what they were saying. Probably nothing too important, she thought: despite her close relationship with Carla, the couples themselves had never done much together socially. Larry knew nothing of the Lindgrens other than the little Sally had happened to tell him. And being, as

a lawyer as well as by nature, a discrete man, he was not one to betray whatever insider knowledge he might have picked up. Nor, she suspected, was Sven. They'd be starting from scratch.

In the dining room, talk moved from the salmon glaze, to Sven's progress selling the last of his stores, to a bribery case much in the news and about which Larry had some insights. As Sally gradually withdrew from the conversation, she became more and more aware of Carla's absence, if not deliberate exclusion, from it.

"Excuse me, Sven," she interjected at one point, under cover of offering more wine, "but I'm curious: what's going to happen with the poems? Carla's poems."

Sven hesitated briefly, then nodded as he spoke. "Yeah. Whole room of them, too. Not to mention her computer."

"They should be preserved. Shouldn't they?"

"Well, yes, Sally, I suppose they should," he replied, his voice rising, as if in surprise. "Becky's the one, though, would know about that. I was never..."

That interested. From things Carla had said, Sally knew very well what Sven hesitated to admit, perhaps even to himself. How sad, she had always thought, that Carla could share her writing with a daughter thousands of miles away, and a friend blocks away, but not with a husband right across the room. She—Sally—had always tried to make up for that, regularly expressing interest in the poems, if more than she came by naturally. This wasn't, she thought, disingenuous; it was what friendship was all about.

"Maybe I could help," she said.

"Oh, I wouldn't..."

“I mean, at some point. We did talk about her work, you know. And she read some of it to me. When we were together. I’d think the children, at least, should have it, and their children. Maybe even get some of it published she hadn’t gotten around to? Very good, really. I mean I’m no....”

The men were staring at her. Indeed, her enthusiasm had gotten a little ahead of her. It was left that daughter Becky would be the one to deal with the poetry. When the time came.

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Over the next few days, Larry mentioned on two different occasions that having Sven over had been a very nice thing to do, but for Sally nice, even very nice, set a pretty low bar. One meal and two hours of mostly small talk could not have been that helpful to a man who had just lost his mate of almost forty years—something vascular in the head, apparently, that she may have harbored since birth, and that had just suddenly blown one morning there in the garage. And the evening certainly hadn’t been that helpful to Sally herself, not that she, or even Larry, should be thinking of it in terms of her benefit. But the reality was that one evening’s commiseration was going to do precious little about all those empty mornings now stretching ahead of her into the indefinite future. Larry off to his office at 8:15 sharp, breakfast dishes cleared, bed made, what, exactly, was she to do? Carla was what she did in the morning, had done in the morning for close to twenty years. Who was there now to discuss all those topics with, those topics grown even more pressing in retrospect? Who was there now to tell how worried she was about Jason, their grandson who might be autistic; about daughter Sandy’s ex back on the scene; about her palpitations on hills? Larry? Should be Larry, obviously. Should always have been Larry. She could start walking, if not mornings, then evenings and weekends,

with her husband. Going for coffee with him. Talking. But it wouldn't be the same talking. Wouldn't be getting back on a bicycle.

So when, one afternoon about a week later, Sven telephoned, Sally was thrilled. It wasn't Carla calling, of course, but, thanks to the miracle of Caller ID, it was close. He wanted to thank them once again for dinner, he said, and ask if possibly she and Larry could look after Mistoffelees for a few days while he went to a meeting in New York. Business. He would leave out the food and kitty litter, he said, and all they would have to do was check in periodically. Every couple of days would be fine—cats don't need much.

“Oh, no, Sven. We'll bring him over to our house. He can't be left again.”

It was only going to be for four days, and Larry was fine with that. He even seemed to take a fancy to the big grey Maine Coon once he was settled in. Sleeping much of the time, the cat would occasionally get up on the couch next to one of them in the evening and, after a few turns in place, curl down against the nearest leg. He'd often been on the scene when Sally sat with Carla out on Carla's patio or in her kitchen, but sticking close, as was only natural, to his mistress. Now that Sally had full access to him, she could stroke the thick, soft fur, scratch under the offered chin as much as she liked. At night, the cat would even jump up on their bed, find her feline way to the pillows in the dark and settle down between their heads. Sally could hardly wait for the brush of fur, the tickle of whiskers, against her cheek, the deep, throaty thrum lulling her into sleep like a prayer. Maybe Misty really was the ghost of her friend, she thought. There really was that karma thing Carla used to write about.

One night after Sally and Larry had gotten into bed, Larry bunched up his pillow and turned on his bedside lamp: he'd just thought of something and needed to write it down. Sally rolled away from the light, but just as she was starting to drift off, he nudged her.

“What?”

“Cat’s eyes.”

“Cat’s eyes.”

“There.”

He was pointing beyond the foot of the bed to the bottom of the doorway where two bright green spots glowed in the darkness.

“Remember in England? Cat’s eyes in the road? See the center line in the fog?”

“Huh.” She was too tired for conversation.

But not for memory: Tyger, burning bright. Carla had brought the book into the kitchen from somewhere and, still standing, read to her. Fearful symmetry.

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Time, Sally knew, heals, but when, exactly? Three weeks later she was still missing her friend just as much as ever. Maybe more. As the name, Carla, the notion, Carla, gradually disappeared from conversation, whether with Larry or at the supermarket or yoga, the void they left became all the more obvious. She tried walking on her own—exercise, after all, was what they had always said their walks were for—but the landmarks she necessarily passed, like the coffee shop and some of the houses they liked to critique, just confirmed her loss. There were other friends she could call, of course, but, having never before rung them up just out of the blue, the prospect put her off. How would she ever convince them they weren’t, as they in fact would be, replacements?

She dialed the Lindgren number.

“Oh, Sally, how good of you to call. People forget so soon.”

“Not me, Sven. And I don’t mean to bother but I... Well, I was wondering how you’re doing, of course... but about the poems. If Becky...”

“Hasn’t said a thing. And I don’t want to bug her. You know how it is with young people.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway, if she’s not, and you’re not—I’m assuming—doing anything with them, I was thinking maybe I could look through them sometime. You know, sort of organize them? I don’t know, maybe it’s none of my—”

“No, no. That’s a wonderful offer, Sally. Be fine. If you’ve got the time.”

Not wanting to appear as if she actually did have the time, and still afraid she might be seen as intruding, she made herself wait forty-eight hours before setting up a visit. But when she finally did arrive at the Lindgren front door, Sven welcomed her warmly. He was dressed casually now in sweater and jeans, and ushered her in with an offer of coffee and an almond pastry he said he had recently discovered at their local bakery.

“No thank you, really, Sven. I’m here on business.” She knew that wasn’t exactly what she was here on, but whatever it was, she didn’t think it should involve coffee and pastry, his offering it or her taking it.

The rejection seemed to leave Sven at a loss. She forged ahead. “And I guess, as many times as I’ve been here, I don’t know where she... where the poems would actually be.”

He led her past the living room, down a hall to the back of the house and into a small study, which Carla, despite numerous show-and-tells, had never shown Sally before. Floor-to-ceiling book shelves lined two of the walls. A large plain worktable, on which lay a lap top computer, a hodge-podge of folders and papers, pencils and pens, filled much of the center of the room. A wooden filing cabinet, topped with a vase of dead flowers, stood in the corner next to a

roll-top desk. Framed by the one window's drapes, the pool, now covered for the season, was in full view.

Sven let her take in her surroundings for a minute, and then began, "I started looking at them that night after dinner at your place, but, I don't know...."

"Yes, a challenge, all right. If you could just show me in the computer?"

He pulled out for her the one chair drawn up to the table, brought in another one, and sat down beside her. With a few keystrokes he came to a WRITING folder, then a POEMS folder within it. Another click and document titles filled the screen. Sally recognized some as they scrolled past.

"So," Sven said, standing and moving his chair back against the wall, "guess I'll leave you to it. If you need me...."

She turned to thank him, but he was already gone, leaving her alone. In Carla Lindgren's room. As close to Carla as she'd been since their last meeting. And amazingly, though reminders like the walking itinerary and the coffee shop, the unbidden memories and remembered dreams, had only aggravated her sense of loss, this arrival into her friend's sanctum seemed to have left loss behind.

Carla had no doubt shown Sally those poems, but only those poems, which she had wanted her to see. On certain themes, it must have been, in certain styles and moods she thought appropriate. Might there be thoughts here no one else, including her, dear friend though she was, was meant to see? Ruminations about her husband, perhaps, her three children, some long- or not so long-ago lover, even about herself and her friend Sally, that were best left to decompose with their moldering pages, their obsolescing chips?

NATURE, though, seemed a safe enough category. She took a blank folder from the desk and labeled it with one of the markers. Then there could be AFRICA, PAINTING/ARTISTS, maybe RELATIONSHIPS, maybe even LOVE/MARRIAGE. Those were all categories she seemed to remember, and that would give her some handle on the disorder. Funny that Carla hadn't done anything like that herself; maybe, oblivious of that time bomb in her head, she'd been planning to organize things in the future. Or more likely, knowing her, she'd been planning not to, cherishing what little disorder life with Sven had left her.

While she was working on the labels, papers at one corner of the table suddenly came to life: Misty. She scratched invitingly under the folder she was holding. Low and on the hunt, placing each paw exactly, the cat advanced. When he had drawn close enough, she reached out and touched his back. Slowly he relaxed, settled, began to purr beneath her strokes. Before long he was stretched out beside her, dozing.

It was the glare off the computer screen that next interrupted her: sunlight, streaming in through a topmost pane, was reflecting directly into her eyes. She went over to the window and pulled the drapes nearly together. Heavy drapes for a study, she had thought on first entering the room, but, she now realized, necessary at certain times of day. No doubt over the years Carla had sensed that glare, had stood to close those drapes, just the way she was doing now. Had lingered for a moment first, just as she was now lingering, to acknowledge an outside world about to be denied.

Seated again, she realized that over an hour and a half had already passed. She gathered the remaining loose papers together, piled up her folders next to the computer, gave Misty a farewell pat, and went out into the hall.

“Sven!” she called. “Done for today I think!”

There was no answer, nor was there when she called again from the foot of the stairs. Out on the front porch, she saw that the car that had been parked in front of one of the garage doors was gone.

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Part way through her third visit, two weeks later, Sally stepped out into the hall and called Sven. A minute later he came hurrying down the stairs.

“Just wondering if any coffee is still on offer.”

“It is, it is,” he replied, brushing his hands together. “And I got us another treat, too. Just in case.”

Us. The two of them that would be. Or was it now, or still, the three of them?

She returned to her station and, paper in hand, gazed out the window. It being a cloudy day after a snowy night, she hadn't had to pull the drapes, and as she waited she watched the storm's last, delinquent snowflakes rocking down.

Plows are our only hope
in the democracy of winter,
booming among the roofs,
moving tons of memories
while you sleep.

While we sleep.

Sven returned with a loaded tray—two coffees, a basket of scones, cream and sugar, butter and jam. He pushed Misty off the extra chair and pulled it over beside her.

“Trying to get organized up there.”

“Like me. But how do you mean?”

“To move. I can't stay here.”

“No. Of course you can't. She's everywhere.”

Sven handed her one of the coffees. They added their cream, their sugar, stirred.

“She’d be pleased, you know,” Sven said, gesturing toward the neat stack of folders with his cup.

“You think? I still wonder if I should be reading them.”

“Oh, she was very fond of you, Sally. She’d have wanted you to know her thoughts.”

“She must have shared them with you.” She meant the poems, to give him the benefit of the doubt, then suddenly realized he might think she meant the thoughts.

But he didn’t. “Hardly. Not that she ever kept them from me, but I was never sure I understood the ones she showed me. She knew that. Too shoe salesman. Too male, maybe.”

“Male? It’s not about male.”

He offered her a scone, prepared one with jam for himself. “Hard to know what it’s about, isn’t it?”

“Anyway, I certainly don’t understand all the ones I’ve read either.”

“That may be, but you don’t have to regret it.”

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Sometimes after a session, Sally brought a folder home with her, to study lines she hadn’t understood, or transcribe handwritten poems into the master file she was creating on her own computer. Although she wasn’t concealing from Larry how much time she was spending at the Lindgren house, it was only when he came up to her one weekend in the kitchen, and asked her about some strange paperwork he had come across in the front hall closet, that she told him what she was doing.

“Very admirable,” he said, presenting to her the folder he had found.

“You don’t mind? And I don’t know about admirable; I just feel someone should do it.”

Of course she wasn't just feeling that. In fact, that was only one very small corner of what she was feeling. The rest, all the rest, was Carla herself. And it was not only in Carla's study, she had come to realize, in Carla's scrawled and reworked words, in the touch of Carla's pens and pencils, in the reenactment of Carla's routines, that she felt her. It was within herself.

She waved the thought away with the folder. "Did you read any of them?"

"No. No I didn't."

"Now that's admirable. I'll bet most people..." She began leafing through the papers.

"Here, listen to this one:

You never learned
how simply sandals pass
through sand and water,
how they wait in pairs
beside the door."

He stood there, expectant, vulnerable, for him, then finally let out a long, "Okaaay."

"Isn't that kind of nice though? How something as simple as sandals, a doorway, pairs.... It's from back when she did Peace Corps."

"Yes, I guess it is nice. Like I say, admirable—to preserve it, I mean."

It was unclear to Sally just what, if anything, was admirable in all of this, but at least he didn't seem to resent—or maybe just hadn't yet realized—the depth of her involvement.

Probably just glad she had something to do.

Though for how long would she have something to do? She'd drawn things out as much as she could, but now could see she would be finished in just a few more visits. After that, if it was a question of getting the collection printed up in some more or less permanent form, she could do that from home. She'd have no excuse for going back.

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The morning Sally was finishing up with the collection—all of two months after she had started—Sven brought in coffee and pastry as had become his habit. He seemed more quiet than usual, preoccupied with Misty and the cream pitcher. And, able to think only about this being her last day, she was quiet as well. Despite her usual reluctance to beat around bushes, she was imagining that, until she announced that she was done, she wouldn't have to be.

But reluctance always has its way. “Looks like I'm about finished up here, Sven. Can probably do the rest at home.”

“Oh?”

“Afraid so. I mean, I think so. Then I can get it all printed up. I've been looking into that a little. On line.”

He put the cat down on the floor and leaned toward her. “Can I tell you something?”

She raised her eyebrows in reply.

“Your being here? Brings her back. For me.”

Now they were tightening in a frown.

He noticed. “Is that so awful?”

“No, no. It's....” Tears were welling in her eyes. She'd all but forgotten about tears.

Sven moved closer, put his arms around her. She embraced him back, trying to contain the shudders. Gradually they eased. When they had stopped altogether she rubbed her cheeks against his shoulder to dry them. Then, raising her head to speak, she saw Mistoffelees back up on the table, sitting tall in the shaft of sunlight streaming between the drapes. He was staring straight at her, his eyes incandescent, infernos of green fire.