

HOME OWNER

When Cat told Buddy she wanted to have a serious conversation, he knew right away that he was in trouble. Quickly, he drank a beer and downed a couple of pills before she started in on him.

“Look, Buddy,” she said. “I’m turning twenty-five in a month. I want to leave Chicago and go back home to Indiana. I’m going to buy a house and get pregnant. I want a family. At least two children, maybe more. And I want to live near my mother. She can help with kids.”

“Definitely. We can think about it. Maybe in a year or two,” he said.

“No, Buddy. I told you from day one I wanted a family. How long have we been together? Three years, Buddy. Three years. You are out of time. We are moving now.”

“Well, I...”

“I’m going with or without you. You can sit here and make up your mind. When I come home from my date, I want an answer,” she said.

“Babe, you know you can’t go on dates if you’re pregnant. Only freaks like pregnant women. What would we do for money?”

“Like, you could get a job,” she said.

“What kind of job. The only thing I’m good at is hustling.”

“I guess you’ll have to figure it out, Bud,” she said.

“Who’s going to hire an ex-con? And what about drug screens? What do you want me to do, Babe?”

“I would like you to plant the seed. Then you can either stay for the harvest or we can split. And if you don’t want to plant the seed, I’ll find someone else who will. But I’d rather it be you,” she said. “Now, I have to go get my hair done for the date. When I get home, I want your answer.”

“Fuck it, Babe. I hate it when you pressure me like that. You know I can’t take pressure.”

“Where’s my coat. I’m going. I’ll see you later. Love you,” she said, bending to kiss him.

“Love you, too. But fuck it, Babe,” he said.

She was out the door. This was not the first time they had had the serious conversation. Maybe she meant it this time. Bud got another beer. He would play a video game to settle his nerves.

When Cat returned, she was tired and went straight to bed. The conversation continued the next morning.

“That was my last date, Buddy,” Cat said.

Buddy took a hard swallow of his morning beer.

“Babe! What do you mean. Why?”

“I’m going to get tested, and if I don’t have a disease, I’m going to make sure I stay clean before I get pregnant,” she said.

“You can still go down on dates. Babe, we’ll need the money.”

“No, Buddy. That’s over. No more dates. I’m going to stop taking birth control pills. I’m going home right away. I’m going to buy a house before you spend all the money we have. By the way, I’ve moved most of the money into another account in my name. I’ve left you enough until the end of the month.”

“Babe...”

“What are you going to do, Buddy?”

“Fuck it, Babe. Fuck it. I guess I’ll go with you. I’ll have to think up an enterprise that will work in Indiana. But, fuck, Babe. This is very stressful for me. I feel an asthma attack coming on.”

Cat fetched his inhaler from the bedroom, then got suitcases down from the top of the closet while Buddy watched. She packed in earnest. Buddy could see that she did mean it this time. What the hell was he going to do?

“I have a bad fucking headache,” he pouted. Maybe if she saw how ill he was, she would change her mind.

“ Whatever,” she said.

When that didn’t work, he texted Pete to see if he would go in business with him again. They had done pretty well in the past. But Pete was satisfied with his job in Housekeeping at a nursing home. Go figure. With a sigh, Buddy roused himself and put on some clothing over his boxers. While Cat packed, he left the apartment and took the car. He drove to the costume shop. Trying on the different masks, he decided to buy the clown one. The eye slits were big enough. Even more importantly, the bulbous clown nose had large nostril holes. That would help prevent an asthma attack, which was always a possibility. He guessed he would have to go into business by himself.

Next, he thought of a way to get Cat off his back. He filled the gas tank, then stopped at her favorite bakery and bought pastries for the trip. Feeling good about himself, he returned to the apartment.

But all she said was “Thanks, Bud.”

That disappointed him. He felt unappreciated. Didn’t she realize the sacrifice he was prepared to make for her? Truth be told, he had no interest in living in a house in Indiana with a bunch of kids. What did he know about kids. Fuck. He didn’t even like them. On the other hand, he didn’t want Cat to find another guy. He didn’t want to be alone. How unfair Cat was. She left him without a choice.

While she finished packing his things as well as hers, Buddy drank beer and stewed. He hated it when she sprang things on him. Surprises always stressed him out.

“So, like, when did you the fuck decide to quit working and go back home,” he said, belligerently.

“When? When? I’ve been telling you every day for the past two weeks. You haven’t been listening.”

“You should have made sure I was paying attention. You know I don’t pay attention when I’m high. Babe, the trouble with you is you take no account of my feelings. You’re fucking all about you all the time.”

Cat was holding an object in her hand. He didn’t see what it was. She raced toward him.

“Ow! Ow! You hurt me. Stop,” he shrieked.

She turned and packed the object.

“Look. I’m bleeding! You hurt me,” he blubbered.

She went to the kitchen. He heard the sound of the refrigerator door opening. Then she came to the room and threw an ice-pack at him.

“If you come with me, I don’t want to hear any fucking complaints,” she said sternly.

“You could have just said so. You didn’t have to hit me,” he said.

“Sometimes, it’s the only way to get your attention. Just don’t make me lose it again,” she said.

After that, the drive to southern Indiana was relatively peaceful. Buddy ate the pastries and dozed while Cat did the driving. The scenery changed from urban to suburban to rural, then from flat to hilly. The earth sparkled greenly from newly sown crops. Cat stated that spring was the best time to look for a house. And if she were to get pregnant in June, they would have a March baby. It would be warming up by the time it was old enough to go outside. Bud did not respond.

They would be staying with Cat's mother in her trailer for a couple of nights, until Cat found them a rental while they house-hunted. Her mom was a quiet woman, happy if she had a beer, a cigarette, and the Home Shopping Network on tv. She was okay, but the trailer was cramped. Two days after they arrived, Cat found a monthly rental that was vacant. They moved in.

"I need some more money," Buddy said. "I'm out of weed and pills. Also, we're low on alcohol."

"We need our money for a house. If you want to get high, you'll have to pay for it yourself," she said.

"Babe. I'll crash," he said.

"That's not my problem," she said.

Buddy tried contacting his friends in Indiana. Maybe they could give him a loan. They were all broke. Many were working at shit jobs. A couple were in jail. Others had left town. Desperate, he phoned his brothers. He should have known better. Clearly, Buddy would have to work. Without a business partner, it was high risk. There was no choice. He wouldn't say anything to Cat. What would happen would happen. It was karma. If it went bad, she would be sorry.

Taking the car late at night, Buddy drove to the other side of town and parked in an unlit area. As he neared a convenience store, he put on the clown mask. Even with the wider nostril holes, he had to stop every few feet and lift mask to catch his breathe. He could see through the window that the store was empty. The only person was a nigger girl behind the counter. Although he probably wouldn't use it, he had brought his hand gun. Entering the store, he pulled down the mask and took out the gun.

The nigger girl did not look surprised. Almost, it seemed like she had been waiting for him. The corners of her mouth turned up in slight smile. She knew what to do without being told. While she was getting the cash, Buddy began having breathing difficulties. He fidgeted with the mask. Suddenly, it slipped. The nigger girl starred right at him. Fuck. She had seen his face. Grabbing the cash, he ran out of the store.

Rushing to the car, Buddy listened for the sound of sirens. Cops. Strangely, he heard nothing. Could it be that the nigger girl did not call 911? Or push a panic button, if the store had one? Or were the cops just slow to come. He drove to the rental, stopping first to get what he needed.

He fell asleep right away. But after a couple of hours, he was wide awake, lying in bed next to Cat, with racing thoughts. The nigger girl had seen him. Did she remember what he looked like after a quick glance? What did her smile mean? Did she describe him to the cops? Was a warrant out for him right now?

What a dumb-ass mistake he had made, letting the mask slip. Now he had to find out what the nigger girl was going to do, even if it was another dumb-ass mistake. It was better to know what was going to happen even if finding out fucked everything up. Luckily, Cat hadn't asked how he got the money for the weed and beer. He would have to deal with the nigger girl without Cat knowing.

The next day, Cat dragged him along while she and this real estate person she had hooked up with went from house to house. It was clear to him that Cat was being cleverly guided from less expensive to more expensive residences. He could not see the difference between carpet or hardwood floors, laminate or granite counter tops, single or double-paned windows. His only preference was for a two car garage, as if the day would ever come that they would own two cars. Meanwhile, he was distracted by his worries. It annoyed Cat that she could not get an opinion out of him.

Finally, the long day was over. Buddy wanted nothing more than to veg and watch tv, but he told Cat that he had a job to do.

“Whatever,” she said. She was probably not acting interested because he had acted uninterested in house-hunting. But that was a good thing. The less she knew the better.

Again, he drove across town and parked in the same unlit spot. He cautiously approached the convenience store. He could see through the window that the nigger girl was working the cash register, just as she had been the night before. Withdrawing to a place where he could watch her unseen, he waited. A long time went by. Finally, another staff person took over the cash register. The nigger girl disappeared through a door in the back. A few minutes later, she came out of the store wearing a jacket. She walked briskly, and he followed. There was a bus stop ahead. That was where she going. Buddy raced back to get his car. Just in time, he drove up behind the bus she had boarded. Several stops later, she got off the bus. Buddy parked again and followed her. After he saw where she lived, he retraced his steps. He drove back to the rental. There was nothing more he could do that night.

The next day, Cat planned to revisit several houses she was considering for a second viewing. This after talking for hours about the pros and cons of each one. Buddy listened wearily, unable to believe there was so much to say about a damn house.

“Babe, I don’t know. Whatever you choose is fine with me. I can’t go with you today. I have to work,” he said.

“Okay, I guess,” she said.

Now that he knew where the nigger girl lived and something about her schedule, Buddy's plan was to secretly arrange encounters with her. He had to find out if she recognized him. Maybe all she knew was that a white guy had robbed the store. Hopefully, the cameras only had views of the clown mask. He had to find out.

He plotted ways to cross paths with her. First, he took the bus he knew she took to work. Since he did not know the exact time she got on, he stayed on for several circuits. Finally, he saw her. She entered the bus and walked up the aisle. He was sitting in front, where she could not miss him. She glanced at him without seeming to react. When she got off at the store, he got off at the next stop. He waited for her shift to be over. Then he walked toward the store so that she would pass him going in the opposite direction. Again, she did not seem to react. Back in his car, he drove to her house, arriving before her. He stood on the opposite side of the street. This time, she hurried into her house without seeming to see him.

All in all, the signs were hopeful. He arranged several other encounters around town without incident. Then he took the risk of going into the convenience store, browsing the aisles, and making a purchase. He looked straight at her while she counted out change. She looked back at him and blinked. The slight smile was back. What did that mean? Did she smile at every customer or just at him?

That night, Cat was excited. She was going to place a bid on a house. But that wasn't all.

“I thought I would have to wait several months after stopping birth control pills for my hormones to get back to normal. I’ve done some research, and it turns out that some women are actually more fertile right after they stop. We’ve got to start fucking right away,” she said.

“Aw, Babe, you know it won’t work unless I’m totally into it. It helps if I have Benzies. Can you give me some money for them?” He asked.

She dug in her purse and fished out a couple of bills.

“Back soon,” he promised, heading for the car.

After picking up the pills, he immediately swallowed a couple. Instead of returning to the rental, he thought he would go to the convenience store. Just to pick up some beer. He had been realizing that the nigger girl was hot. He hadn’t thought so at first, but she had grown on him. The cat and mouse game he had been into with her had excited him. He wondered if her smile meant that she was into him. He imagined her taking her uniform off, right in the store when saw him through the window, approaching. He imagined her undressing, not being able to wait. They would fuck right there, behind the counter. Never mind if anyone saw. He was getting hard thinking about it.

The gun and the clown mask were still in the car. This time, the mask would not slip. He would go around the counter holding his gun. She would lie on the floor. He would get on top of her

and fuck her while holding the gun to her head. She wouldn't protest. She would know that this is what he had to do.

Then he would wait. He would smoke a cigarette while the sirens grew louder. In prison, he would join Storm Front. He would get more tattoos.

He knew Cat would be fucking furious.