

STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

It was not particularly late when the flashing neon motel sign caught my attention—maybe ten or ten-thirty—but we had just driven for twelve hours straight across Wyoming and Utah, into the Nevada desert, and I was exhausted. We were returning from a visit with my in-laws, my first time at their home in Laramie. I had only met them once before, on our wedding day. I had looked forward to this visit, curious to see where Ron had grown up. My in-laws had been warm and welcoming, nonjudgmental, and boringly provincial.

During the long drive west on I-80, Ron had spent countless hours telling stories about his boyhood: about how his loathing for hunting disappointed his father; about the financial difficulties of his family when a Wal-Mart opened up near their sporting goods store; about how his love of reading and indifference to sports made him a loner in high school. I was savoring this newfound intimacy with my husband, when he added, “I wish you weren’t so condescending towards my folks.” The comment stung, but had enough truth to it that I didn’t say anything in my defense. We drove the next hundred miles in uncomfortable silence. It was my turn behind the wheel. Somewhere past Salt Lake City, Ron started dozing off. Soon weariness overtook me. I made an abrupt decision, turned onto the exit ramp, and pulled into the motel parking lot.

“How about it?” I asked Ron, nudging him awake. “Let’s stop here for the night.”

“I don’t know,” he hesitated, rubbing his eyes. The one-story motel by the side of the highway looked dilapidated and seedy. In the uneven illumination of the flashing neon, alternating red and green, paint of unidentifiable color was peeling, and the window screens were shredded. Broken glass littered the driveway near the half dozen or so parked cars. Despite misgivings, we were in the middle of nowhere, with no idea how much farther we would have to

drive to find more appealing accommodations. “Oh, come on,” I said. “I can’t go on anymore. I’m beat. Look.” I gestured at the other cars. “How bad can it be just for one night?”

Inside the overheated office, a thin woman with a bored expression and shellacked blond hair leaned on her elbows behind the counter. Her purple fingernails, even longer than mine, clacked together as we inquired about a room. “Sure, sure,” she said, shoving a form toward us. A slight odor, sickly sweet, wafted into our faces. Insecticide? Blue toilet bowl cleaner?

We staggered into our room, hauling our suitcases. Ron switched on the light, revealing an overhead fixture suspended from the ceiling, sprinkled with dead bugs. Even in its heyday in the 1950s, this place must have been tacky, with acoustic spray ceilings and yellow-speckled Formica furniture. In the intervening decades since, it had not aged gracefully. Assorted stains decorated the red-flocked wallpaper and threadbare bed linens. At least it didn’t reek of alcohol, cigarette smoke, urine, or worse. When I walked over to the bed and plunked my suitcase down, the carpet sucked at my shoes as if it were covered with an invisible layer of chewing gum. I laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?” asked Ron.

“This. The whole place,” I said, gesturing with my hand.

“Well, I for one don’t think it’s funny,” Ron replied. “This place is such a dump.”

I was bent over my suitcase, with my back to Ron, having just broken one of my fingernails on the stubborn latch. “Oh, come on, stop being so grumpy. It’s perfectly fine. Besides, it’s all we can afford.”

By way of an answer, Ron let out a “humph” and stomped into the bathroom. I wished I had simply agreed with him instead of getting so defensive about this crummy motel.

I shrugged my shoulders, too tired to care. After slipping into my nightgown, I switched off the overhead light and lay down on the bed. It let out a groan. Light from the neon sign in front of the motel penetrated through the flimsy curtains, alternating red-green, giving an eerie quality to the semidarkness. Sounds of running water came from the bathroom. I pummeled the pillow, as if giving it CPR would somehow resuscitate its lifeless form, then spent several more minutes squirming around, trying to get comfortable. The bedside clock counted off the minutes with tedious monotony.

Ron emerged from the bathroom in boxer shorts and a T-shirt, his usual sleeping attire. His trim physique was briefly silhouetted before he switched off the bathroom light, but the expression on his face was obscured in shadow. A surge of sexual desire ambushed me. When Ron flopped down beside me on the bed, we instantly rolled into each other, unable to fight the pull of gravity from the sagging middle of the mattress. I laughed again.

“What’s so funny now?” Ron asked irritably.

This set me off into a fit of laughter. I just couldn’t stop myself. Then Ron joined in, laughing uncontrollably, with a few snorts thrown in. This sound startled me. We were still recently enough married that some of his habits, as yet unfamiliar to me, took me by surprise. On each such occasion, I reacted with mixed emotions—delight at discovering something unexpected and endearing about my new mate, and misgivings about what else I didn’t know about this man, this partial stranger.

The laughter palpably eased the tension between us, and I felt my body relax. I was so tired that, despite the bed’s lumps and sags, I was soon drifting off to sleep. I was almost there when I was startled awake by voices, a man’s and a woman’s, and a slamming door.

They were in the room next to ours. Their voices were audible, although they were speaking at normal conversational volume. I couldn't help but listen to snatches of their conversation as they undressed. Their bed made the same protesting noises ours had. The adjacent room must have been a mirror image of ours, with the heads of the beds pressed up against the common thin wall. Our heads and those of our next-door neighbors were probably less than a foot apart. There was no way to avoid eavesdropping, except to cover my ears.

I glanced over at Ron and was surprised to find him sound asleep, somehow oblivious to the nearby voices. Soon, the conversation in the next room became truncated to passionate expletives, and certain words came through loud and clear ("Oh Murray!" "Oh Honeybunch!"). Then the heavy breathing began. I was not amused. I was embarrassed. As the passion escalated, there was no escape. Then the bed in the next room slammed into the wall and Ron sat bolt upright.

"What's going on?" he demanded, awake but confused. The rhythmic thumping of the bed answered his question. Once again, I couldn't help myself, dissolving into laughter. That started Ron off. We tried to stifle our hilarity, but the more we tried to stop, the more we laughed. Apparently, Murray and Honeybunch didn't hear us or were just too preoccupied to notice.

Their lovemaking reminded me of a musical composition. The baseline was provided by the rhythmic thumping of the bed against the wall. The bedsprings joined in with their syncopated squeaking. And above it all, carrying the melody in two-part harmony, her soprano and his baritone, were the cries of Honeybunch and the groans of Murray, building in pitch and frequency to a rousing crescendo. Finally, the concert was over and silence descended.

"Should we applaud?" asked Ron.

“Shhh,” I said. “They might hear you.”

“So what?” he responded.

I stroked the side of Ron’s face playfully. “Hey, remember when we used to make love every night?” I felt his body tense.

Ron removed my hand from his face. “What? You want to play ‘Thump the bed against the wall’ and entertain our neighbors?”

I tucked my hand defensively under my armpit. “No, I mean, I was just remembering our honeymoon and how romantic it was.”

“Damn it, Laura, the honeymoon is over. Give me a break.”

“That’s not the point, Ron. I just want to feel that special closeness.”

By way of an answer, Ron rolled over with his back toward me. I was tired of my emotions yo-yoing between extremes of hilarity and resentment. Heck, I was just plain tired. Exhausted.

Sleep was not to be. Almost immediately, Murray and Honeybunch began talking, and snatches of their conversation came through the wall with intermittent clarity.

“Oh, Murray, I love you so much.”

“You are so beautiful, Honeybunch.”

“Murray, I want to be with you all the time.”

“I want to be with you, too.”

“I can hardly wait until we can spend every moment together.”

“Mmm. Me too.”

“That’s going to happen soon, isn’t it, Murray?”

“Yes, baby, it’s going to happen soon.”

“Soon we’re going to get married, right? You’re going to get a divorce, right?”

“Yes, darling, I already told you that.”

“When are you going to get a divorce, Murray? When is it going to happen?” The pitch of Honeybunch’s voice edged upward.

“I told you, Honeybunch. As soon as I tell my wife about us, I’ll ask her for a divorce.”

“I thought you already told your wife about me—about us.” Honeybunch’s voice was getting shrill.

“It’s okay, darling. I love you. I’ll take care of you. You’re the only one for me. Forever.”

“When are you going to tell your wife?”

“I promise I’ll tell her.”

“Yes, but when?”

“I said, I promise I’ll tell her.” Murray sounded irritated.

“Oh, Murray, please, *please* tell her.” Honeybunch was crying now.

“Shhh, baby. I told you I would. I’ll take care of everything. Come on, now, just be patient.”

“I am being patient,” Honeybunch shrieked. I startled at her vehemence.

“I told you I would,” Murray snapped.

“Now! I want you to tell her now! I’m tired of waiting.”

Escalation. Heated argument. Volume cranked way up. Beyond the point of no return.

And so it went, back and forth, on and on, tears and tantrums, placating, shrieking, pleading. I felt as if we had become unwilling participants in a soap opera. Ron and I squirmed and tossed in the bed, repeatedly jamming elbows and knees into each other.

Out of the blue, Ron tossed off the covers and hissed in the semidarkness, “You want grumpy? I’ll give you grumpy. This place SUCKS!”

“Well, it’s not *my* fault!” I responded.

“Well, who else’s fault is it?” he snapped. “You just had to polish your nails this morning.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, dear, if we had left when I wanted to, we could have made it to Reno and had a decent place to stay.” Ron’s voice was harsh with sarcasm.

“Well dear,” I said, mimicking his tone of voice, “if you weren’t so cheap, we could have flown.”

Ron’s sharp intake of breath was audible. “That was way out of line,” he said.

“Well, you’re the one who’s always complaining about wasting money,” I persisted.

“You knew goddamn well when you married me that teachers don’t make much money,” he argued. “I’m telling you to get off it right now about the money. I’m doing the best that I can.”

I retorted, “Why can’t you be more assertive? Getting passed over for that promotion and not even demanding an explanation? That’s your best?”

“I said I’m doing the best that I can!” Ron threw his hands up in the air. “That’s just not good enough for you, is it? Look at you, Miss Nose in the Air. Nothing I do is ever good enough for you or your big shot lawyer father. Why did you even marry me in the first place?”

The question triggered the memory of my dad’s reaction when I announced my engagement to Ron: “I’m sure he’s smart enough, but he lacks ambition. Don’t let your hormones cloud your judgment.” At the time, I dismissed my dad’s advice; now it haunted me.

I avoided making eye contact and lowered my chin, brushing a loose strand of hair off my face. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I’m just so horribly exhausted. Let’s forget about it, okay? Besides, I don’t want to put our private lives on public display, like Murray and Honeybunch over there. Please, let’s not argue anymore.”

Ron replied, “Why? You think we’re any different from that scumbag and his airhead girlfriend?”

“What?” I exclaimed. “What are you saying! Are you really comparing us to them? Don’t be absurd.”

Now it was my turn to roll over and turn my back. I just couldn’t think straight anymore. What had gotten into us? Where had this hostility come from? We were used to keeping our feelings under control. It seemed as though our neighbors in the night were contaminating our marriage with their slimy relationship. Were Ron and I as deluded as they were? I hadn’t been married long enough to know when an argument was just a normal part of a relationship or when it was a genuine threat to the survival of the marriage. It was like coming to the abrupt end of a street, not knowing if I was about to step off a curb or a cliff.

Honeybunch and Murray were still at it. After who knows how much time had passed, Honeybunch spent her wrath and was again accepting Murray’s reassurances of his love and honorable intentions. They were making up. Then they were making love again. Loudly. With abandon.

And then it was over. Finally, at long last, maybe we would get some sleep.

I was savoring the bliss of the quiet, almost falling over the edge of consciousness into a deep sleep, when I heard the sound. It was barely audible, the faintest whisper, but I stiffened

and became instantly alert. I heard the tremulous, plaintive voice of Honeybunch say, “Murray, when are you going to tell your wife about us?”

Ron sat up abruptly, pounded his fist against the wall, and yelled at the top of his lungs, “For God’s sake, Murray, tell your wife already!”

We heard a door slam and a few moments later, the sound of a car driving off. Silence descended, and no more was heard from Murray or Honeybunch.

“Now, that’s being assertive,” I joked. “My hero.”

Ron mumbled, “Really, Laura, do you think this little episode changes anything?” and promptly fell asleep.

So here I am, lying awake in this crummy motel, knowing we will make it through this endless night, but wondering if we will make it through a lifetime.