

Caught

“Who is it?” Beecher asks. “Who? You know, don’t you?”

He’s caught me coming out of the bathroom in my big sister Mary’s apartment. His thick body blocks me from getting back to the living room where people already make joyful second-martini sounds. Since Mary’s divorce, everyone drops in after work—to cheer her up, they say. I come in for the free drink. Never before did I see Beecher here.

I could tell him, snappishly, “Go home and ask Tiny. She knows.”

But a mix of distrust and good manners, deeply instilled, keeps me wary, non-confrontational among people, especially men. I copy-cat sophisticates so no one will know the real dumb me. During lunch hours, I hide out in the public library, but take a tipsy step into the social world after 5:00.

In fact, it’s not much fun being a twenty-year old girl in New York in 1969. Middle-aged men want to show off a pretty blonde acquisition to headwaiters. So I get top-chef food on dates with them. The young guys are expecting that pizza in the Village entitles them to sex. No way. This isn’t the life I want.

However, I smile at Beecher’s necktie and rest a hand on his abs. I’ve seen smart women keep men a bit apart from them with that move. “I know he’s a man here in the city who she fell for. I’ve never met him. He’s no one your friends would know.”

Beecher exhales in relief. My palm on the abs feels that. His dread had focused on the idea that Tiny, my next-older sister, has shamed him among his Greenwich, Connecticut, social set. Made him ridiculous by getting pregnant via some neighbor with whom Beecher rides the commuter trains every day. Tiny is his wife. His.

“I’ll take you to Marconi’s for supper.” As he declares that, Beecher grips my right shoulder and steers me to the bedroom where women have dumped coats and purses. “No need for goodbyes. Grab your duds. After Marconi’s, it’s straight home to your place.”

“No. No thanks. I already have a date.” That’s a lie, and it fails.

“Beecher Tiff is your date. Family first, and all that. I’m staying at your place tonight. I won’t go home before Tiny’s at least apologized. Shown a modicum of shame.”

We’re outside on the sidewalk. Beecher’s taken hold of my left hand, tight. What’s a girl supposed to do? Scream? Fling herself down on the concrete of Greenwich Village, NYC, creating a big scene?

It’s summer now. We’re wandering, aimless, through Central Park, Beech still gripping my hand. I’m used to this restraint, like a dog gets used to his boring leash, I suppose. Or maybe it’s how a mom feels, forever held back by her anxious toddler.

“Did Tiny call you yet about taking baby Joe?” I ask Beech because Tiny’s pressured me, kind of frantic. “She wants it in the divorce deal—that you’ll care for little Joe.”

“I don’t take her calls. My secretary refuses them. They’re all collect, of course.”

Tiny’s moved to an artist’s colony beside Lake Chapala, somewhere in Mexico, waiting out the divorce. Our father’s paying her rent, but her ex-lover recommended the location. He expects she’ll fall for another guy in that pretty vicinity, thus freeing him from her broken-hearted reproaches.

“She’s such a puppy dog. She’ll chase balls all her life,” ex-lover says, ogling me as he works on the portrait Dad’s commissioned at big cost. That’s how Tiny met this scumbo, the society portrait painter. Posing for her image in oils.

Mondays, she'd come into town for her portrait session. Afterward, she bought me lunch at a place on Madison, near where I work as a steno in a giant food firm. She'd catch every eye, entering the narrow restaurant with her golden hair tousled, her blue eyes shining like star sapphires. "Oh, you have to be in love," she'd tell me, going on and on about the wonders of it all. The ecstasy. Trust. How love makes life sparkle with joy. At nearby tables, lower echelon business men on lunch hour craned their necks to hear lovely woman bare her heart. Yes, Tiny had loved this artist.

Beech hasn't answered, so I make a bold wrist swivel that takes my hand out of his. "Hey, we have to help her. I could hardly understand her phone call last night. Drunk, in a despairing phase." I note a pinch of irritation at the corners of Beech's thick mouth. "You listening?"

"Did she mention the photos? Boyfriend had cameras going. He and his wife enjoy watching his collection. It turns them on. He contacted me to suggest I might buy Tiny's negatives for \$10,000. Wow, does Tiny have good taste in cuckoldry?"

He breaks a twig off a flowering shrub and snaps it into little pieces. "I'm seriously thinking of taking the job in Houston. You know where that is? Far, far from Connecticut and NYC. The bank's opening a branch down there, and offered it to me. Tiny's shame won't tag along. God, why would she suppose I'd take her bastard baby?"

I ride the subway home. Beech is going to dinner at The Chambord with suburban friends, and the lure of lobster absinthe had almost caught me. Now, my stomach wants nothing. Someone must take Tiny's child. Someone has to give Tiny a chance to recover.

I call Mary, and put it to her. She already has two kids. Why not one more? Because— Mary explains—her second husband may be right around the corner, any day now. But no man

wants a woman with three children, one of them not yet toilet trained. “Tiny’s already found a new boyfriend. A fellow drunk. She sent me a photo. Cute watercolor artist guy. Let him help her.”

I phone Dad, who’s polishing his sterling wine buckets. His volume comes across uneven. He must be holding the receiver clamped between shoulder and head. I hear, “Stop giving Tiny hints that this family backs her.” I hear the water spray on and off over the silver. “She’s a disgrace. I’ll send enough to keep her in Mexico permanently.”

“What about the pig who seduced her? Tiny’s the victim. And the baby...”

“I do not want to discuss this.” He hangs up.

What about me? Am I going to help Tiny? Hey, I’m scratching for the rent money most months. Let’s think. If I can I get Dad to lend me his beach house over the winter...yes. I can probably pick up some typing-at-home work. And I’ll be free of this city. Free of men. Free of mimicking sophistication. My life reorganizes in my mind. Maybe—just maybe....

I put through a call to Tiny. A smile is rising inside me, heart feeling optimistic.

Tiny’s current boyfriend answers. “Oh hell. It’s you.”

“I’m calling my sister. Okay? Can you get her for me?”

“How now? Maybe yesterday? Today’s too late.”

His words hit like a cannonball to my heart. Tiny’s dead.

“The water lilies.” He chokes up. “Everyone knows you can’t go into the lake where lilies spread. They pull you down. I looked around for her and the kid this morning. The whole village looked, and we found them. Baby strapped on her back. Her eyes staring up through the water.”

He’s crying. A bottle clinks against a glass. “You’ll have to send money for the wrap up.”

I'm not crying. I'm angry, hugely angry. I'm going to make the foul portrait painter pay. Make Dad pay. Get some revenge for Tiny. Starting now. If I can find enough courage.

Beech reaches across the restaurant table, grabs my hand in both of his, rubs my fingers. "Please come," he says. "You're the only person I can really talk to. We trust each other, don't we? I won't accept the Houston bank job without you."

We've touched on this several times. I've told him my talents don't include being a big-time banker's wife. Not even a banker's secretary, because I only fake shorthand at the food company. Right now, I just want to eat my trout meunière. "We're friends, Beech. I don't know why, but let's leave it there."

With my free hand, I fork my soufflé potatoes onto his plate. "Eat. You've lost so much that suit droops on you."

His brown eyes phase into a warm glow. He lets my hand loose, but keeps glancing over at me as he eats—like making sure I won't disappear. Is that love?

He says, "Tiny didn't especially like me. It took me a while to catch on. All she needed was a rich fiancé, and marital escape from your family. But we're friends already, you and me."

Those words are true. Bunched together, they make a nice bouquet—a future without anger or fakery every day. Rich fiancé. Goodbye to Dad and Mary. Goodbye to New York, with one solid, trustable friend. What more could I want?

"A dog," I say, imagining a shelter-mutt to love. "We could get a dog in Houston. Maybe a little house instead of an apartment."

"Say, we could go Texan."

We laugh, tentative, tossing out ideas. A horse. A Stetson hat. A pick-up truck. An oil well. Beech catches my hand again and kisses the knuckles one by one.