

The Ordeal

A nice, middle-aged man with a decent job at a small Midwestern university stood outside of his house one early evening in the soft spring rain, peeing into his evergreen shrubs. Although he stood under the eaves, occasional drops of pooled rainwater struck the back of his neck as he urinated; he did not mind it. He was feeling flushed from a mixture of cocktails and emotion, and the cool night air and precipitation cleared his head. A light party was carrying on in the nice man's house, and the sound of it briefly crescendoed, a musical blend of laughter and scraping chairs, clinking forks, audible even over the patter of raindrops on his roof. It was an altogether pleasant sound, cheery and inviting; but when it reached the man's ears, he frowned slightly, and his urine stream wavered.

The nice man had excused himself under the pretense of letting the dog out to the bathroom. Indeed, the dog needed to be let out, but so did the man, and not just to piss. Now, as the man shook himself off, the dog snuffled around happily in the gloaming, almost out of sight, a black shaggy form in the tenuous twilight, shrouded by rain and wisps of fog. To the man, the dog might have been Monster Grendel, emerging from the swamp.

He was a writer, the man. Or, at least, he wrote. He supposed there was a difference, and although he could not really define it clearly in his head, he knew on some level what that difference was, and he aspired to be the one, and not just do the other. His decent job was teaching writing classes, but he did not think this truly made him a writer. Whatever he was, he had the writer's voice inside his head, and at times it would switch itself on, of its own accord, narrating his life to him. It was in the on position tonight, as it usually was when he felt tense.

The warm light of the party glowed invitingly from the house, but still the man stood in the cool night air. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder at the dog, to be sure it wasn't running into the woods, then turned towards the large windows that faced the living room. No one inside seemed to be bothered by his absence, as they sat at his sofas and tables, or leaned against his hearth, eating and drinking, smiling and talking. He saw his wife's pretty face erupt into a laugh, dimly heard her voice rise above the thrum of mingled conversations, and the writer's voice spoke inside his brain, uninvited. "What is this bitter cup before me now, pressed to my lips..."

Across from the man's wife, on his most comfortable loveseat, sat Denver and his wife. The man shook his head and had to look away for a moment, but not before he saw Denver smile, perfect white teeth splashing across a boyishly handsome face. "Denver," the man (and not his writer's voice) said to himself; "of course his name is Denver." His wife had insisted on inviting this couple ("He wants me to go into business with him. We *have* to invite him.") The nice man did not remind his wife that Denver was a city in Colorado, and Colorado was the state where she had been travelling for work, when she had made her mistake. He was fairly certain she was aware of the connection, however circuitous, but he knew she would never be the one to point it out. This was perhaps out of some sense of marital self-preservation, or perhaps merely to save face. But maybe, just maybe, he was beginning to reason to himself, this couple had been invited here tonight as the subtlest of jabs at him.

He would never know for certain. But the nice man could see, through the rain-beaded windows, that his wife smiled when Denver smiled, laughed when he laughed, took a drink of her cocktail when he sipped at his. He could imagine, almost, that his wife's body and face, in fact her very eyes, were connected to identical points on Denver's body by a series of taut

wires. They moved in synchrony. Denver's wife probably didn't notice this at all, but the nice man did. He felt an aching in his belly, not on a conscious level, but the voice seized upon it instantly, comparing it to the pulse of a rotten tooth. His pretty wife had been floating through the evening, buoyed up by every compliment and friendly hug, becoming even more attractive, it seemed, as more guests arrived. It caused a near-physical pain in him, to see how easily she worked the room, how she was adored. The nice man was nearly afraid to admit it, but didn't he long to be adored that way? To be loved, to have the party guests look *him* in the eyes while they told their stories...but they always seemed to stare at hers. And she stared back at them, and of this he was keenly aware. "This cup...this cruelest mixture of jealousy and envy, blended so thoroughly that I can no longer tell them apart? Is this mine to drink?"

"The Indians would call this an 'Ordeal,'" the voice continued, as he stepped from under the eave and into the rain. The nice man squatted down and whistled softly to the dog, whom he could almost no longer see; he trilled his whistle, slapped his knee. "They would stay out in the elements overnight, to test themselves, or to prove themselves, or to commune with spirits. Or maybe to face down old enemies, who had at last formally called them out." The dog was young and stubborn, enjoying itself too much in the gathering darkness, but it had not yet made a move for the edge of the forest, so the man gave up on summoning it. "To seek escape was really no option at all," he spoke, sotto voce, in the direction of the dog. "Escape meant exile and slow death in the wilderness, forever an outcast."

He stood up stiffly, and turned back towards the house. Although he had been outside for only about ten minutes, there was little natural light left. His home would have seemed bright and merry to a stranger. The man could not go back inside, though; not yet. He saw his sullen teenage son emerge from the basement, saw him take in the party with a quick and jaundiced look, then make his way languidly towards the kitchen. He ignored a few innocent greetings

with practiced gloominess, head down, focused only on the refrigerator. They'd argued earlier in the day, before the party, the man and his son. Worse today than they had ever done so in the past, had even raised fists towards one another.

Now, as he stood in the sog, watching his son from the outside looking in, he had a sudden recollection, a moment from when the boy could have been no more than a year old. He had held this smiling child up in the air above his head, the boy's impossibly blue eyes framed by a bright blue sky, a smile of pure joy on his tiny face. Yet today this teenager had threatened to run away, to move in with his (much) older girlfriend, to drop out of school..."This greasy-haired Absalom of mine," said the voice. "You fucking beloved little rebel. What would you have me do? How can I put down your rebellion without destroying you." He watched the boy stand with his head in the fridge, letting the cold air out, an act which the boy knew would aggravate his father. Still the man continued to stand in the cool night breeze, spits of water on his face.

The house belonged to the man, but he dared not go back in. Not yet. And especially not since Gloria had shown up. The last guest to arrive, in fact. He had been on the verge of breathing a sigh of relief; perhaps she would take the advice he had stutteringly mumbled in her ear between faculty meetings the day before. Perhaps she would avoid this one small, insignificant get-together, at least this time. But no. His doorbell had rung at a quarter to six, a full 45 minutes after the listed start time, and he had stiffened imperceptibly in his chair, knowing immediately that it was her finger on the button. Somehow, the ugly-sounding chime, some nameless tune, had sounded even uglier, or perhaps the tightness in his gut had only made it seem that way. But the writer's voice had whispered (with excess melodrama) to him that it was the unholy trumpet of some fallen angel messenger, announcing her arrival. When he had opened the door for her and her date, he'd had to reach back through the darkest chambers of

shameful memory in his mind in order to find what passed as a good thought of Gloria. At last, he had been able to force what he hoped was a believable smile.

The writer's voice had bordered on a babble ("Loose ends turn into nooses, and loose lips sink careers, and...") and so it went, but always half-articulate, never quite the ravings of a madman. Sidelong glances reassured the nice man that his pretty wife still had no idea, but Gloria's subtle smirks in his directions were both playful and taunting. Whether she intended to ruin him at one stroke that evening, or just quietly punish his careless heart with the threat of it, the effect on him was the same. Paranoia, or something close to it, increased in him to the point where he was now certain she could see the fasciculations of muscle in his neck. In one swooping motion he had stood up from his sunken-in position on the couch, set his drink down with one hand, and grabbed for the dog's collar with the other. A circus act of desperation, but somehow carried out with perfection, and the plastic smile of a performer.

He was out the door in seconds, so quickly, in fact, that he thought he had been able to pretend he did not hear Gloria's voice chasing after him, rife with inflection that only he would be able to discern as scorn. "Oh, the dog! Yes, let the dog out! But hurry back, you just...," and he did not hear the rest. He felt her words whiz and snap over his head like bullets, felt as though he had dodged them physically, and as the raindrops had greeted his flushed face, he was thankful for the escape.

Now, however, it was beginning to seem less and less an escape, and simply more of the agonized temporizing of which only the guilty-hearted are capable. Not an escape, but a reprieve. He could no longer tell Ordeal from escape, anyhow. He had now been outside the house, and in the rain too, for at least 20 minutes. The dog had brushed by his side, smearing some mud on the hem of his pants in the process, and now hunched at the door, ready to

scratch his request for entry. This would surely bring attention to the dog and, by default, to him. He was already quite damp and starting to shiver, but he could see them all in there. His pretty wife, who he knew would surely laugh even more loudly at Denver's clever conversation, once she noticed the nice man's reappearance. His son, who had not budged from his perch on a kitchen stool, clearly waiting for the battle to be rejoined, like a Lakota warrior, staking his sash to the ground. Gloria, resplendent in far too much makeup, too little clothing, ready with some godforsaken trump card up her sleeve ("she's not wearing any sleeves," said the voice), ready to make her play.

The nice man's teeth began to chatter, and he wondered if he could not just stay outside for the rest of the evening, at least until the party faded out, as parties do. Or could he go back inside, mumble generic pleasantries, dodge them all with vagaries; become a wallflower? Would they buy it, would they just ignore him? He glanced once more in the direction of the woods, and had the wild, brief thought of walking into them and just keep on walking, away from his life. The dog began to scratch at the door. His Ordeal, it seemed, would not wait one more night.