

## The Beer in the Garage

I lit another cigarette. I wondered if I shut the stove off. The news said a house can blow up because someone left the stove on. I thought back to when I had my first cigarette, as a girl. Betsy stole one out of her mother's purse. We smoked it behind the school. We coughed until we almost vomited. I missed those days when cigarette smoke, or whisky still burned instead of soothed. When Paul would put in effort into our relationship. When he would come home every night.

The moonlight makes the curtains look like ghosts. I had long since given up on being scared of the dark. There were many other things that I couldn't see that were much worse. Maybe not frightening, but definitely concerning. I blew smoke at the window, it peeled away and curled back onto itself like a transparent banana. Perhaps this was all in my mind. Martha had to go away because of her hysteria. It made perfect sense for Paul to have an apartment in the city. Those long nights at the office or out with clients, then the long commute, it really was too much to ask of anyone. When he did come home he seemed to be happy to see me. He kissed me on the forehead, we used to make love, he said he enjoyed the dinners I made for him. I wished that I could just know what he was thinking. When I looked into his eyes they seem to go forever. Even their color was a mystery. Some days, they were as green as limes, but others they were darker like ivy leaves. I've tried dressing him in different clothes, different colors patterns, I've read that can effect eye color, but those eyes seem to be whatever color they want. I wish I knew what color his eyes were.

I stubbed out the end of the cigarette in the crystal ashtray beside the bed. It's much past two. There is no chance he was coming home. I pulled the covers to my chin, and tried to

pretend that I wasn't upset. That there wasn't another woman. That things would get better. That Paul wanted to have a family with me. That everything would be okay.

I was never exactly sure what Paul did. He wore a suit and worked in an sky scraper. He had a very pretty secretary. They all did. It was as if ugly girls didn't exist in the city. I'm sure they did but they must keep them in the back, answering phones or in the mail room. They would want something nice for the men coming in to do business to look at. They spent all that money on art and nice furniture for their lobby, it would be a shame to have some homely girl sitting in front of it. I used to visit him at work all the time. I would bring him lunch, or I would just stop in if I were shopping. I stopped my unannounced visits after showing one day just after lunch.

They had been celebrating a big sale. They must have been drinking all day. When I got there the pretty girl in the lobby brought me back to Paul's office. Everyone cheered when I walked in. They were sitting around smoking and drinking whiskey out of the glasses I had picked out for him when he got his promotion. Peter's office was bigger than most of the others on their floor. I knew he was people's boss but he never told me much about work. He said I wouldn't understand.

“We did it damnit! We got the account!” The shouting came from behind me, it was Derek Smith, I don't know if he was an equal to Paul, or below him, we had him and his wife, Lydia, over for dinner a few times. I had made fish and we used the good china.

He swatted my rear end as he walked past me. Everyone stopped cheering, stopped breathing. Paul had seen. I looked straight down. Derek must have realized what he did. He started apologizing tremendously. I told him it was fine. I was so embarrassed. He started

apologizing like a mad man to Paul. Paul didn't say a word. He just walked up to him and punched him in the face. Derek's nose started pouring blood. A few of the girls rushed in and gave him some cocktail napkins and tried to wipe up the blood before it got onto his shirt and tie. It was a nice tie, a bright orange.

Paul grabbed me rough by the arm and walked me to the elevator. He slammed the down button. When the door opened he pushed me inside and told me we would talk about it later. We never did. I don't know what happened to Derek, I never saw him or Lydia after that. I would only go to the office if Peter asked me to drop something off or pick something up for him. I never went past the lobby.

We bought our house the day Paul got promoted. He had an idea it was going to happen. He told me to look around at areas to get an idea of what I wanted. Where I wanted to have a family. When we started dating he taught me how to drive. He had a old Dodge Coronet and I would drive it around his parents driveway when we visited them. I was pretty good. I liked driving. It made me feel like I could go anywhere. Anywhere with a road, of course. I imagined driving through the country, kids in the backseat, the windows down, rows of wheat flying past. Paul was impressed enough with my driving that he would let me take the car to run errands on Sundays when he was home from work. I would always take the longest route, within reason, so I could pretend that I was flying down that country road a little longer before I got home and had to go back to being in the house, cleaning, cooking, reading. When we got our house we also bought another car so that I wouldn't have to borrow his and I wouldn't be stuck home when he didn't come home for a couple of days, because of work. I kept the Coronet because I was used to it, Paul drove the new de Ville.

Before we bought our house we lived in Queens, which was nice, but it was so crowded and dangerous. The couple who lived across the hall had been robbed at gun point on two different occasions. Paul required me to always keep the doors locked while he was gone, and I was forbidden to answer the door for anyone. He told me that policemen were okay but to make absolutely sure that they were who they said they were. Paul was always looking out for my safety.

The apartment was small. There was a bedroom in which Paul and I could not walk past each other in. Paul insisted on a large bed. I was fine with cuddling but he preferred some space when he slept. The closet was just big enough for my dresses and clothes. Luckily Paul only had a few suits at that point, so he didn't require too much space. The kitchen was this awful pureed green pea color. We considered changing it, painting or putting wallpaper up, but this was a time where we didn't have as much money. Also we saw the whole situation as very temporary. Paul was very sure that he was going to get that promotion. I hated that kitchen. It was so small it felt like I was constantly bumping my elbows into the walls while I was stirring or cutting something. Across from the sink and the stove was a counter and beyond that was the living room.

We had a big record player and radio combo and a small black and white television set. Paul very much enjoyed music and the radio programs. I didn't care for it as much, I always read while we sat on our brown sofa and Paul put on his programs at night. He would put his arm around me and play with my hair, or rub my leg. Even as he touched me I could tell his mind was elsewhere. At first I believed it was because he was engrossed in his programs but often there was times where I would hear one of the jokes or hear something interesting that would pull my attention away from my book or magazine and Paul would had missed it. He said that he

had “zoned out.” When he was like that it seemed that he was touching me out of restlessness instead of affection. All that stroking and tangling must have been exhausting because we rarely made love when we lived in that Queens apartment. We weren't ready for kids just yet, but when I would get urges, the kind husbands and wives have earned the right to act on, he would participate half heartedly, if at all. Most times he would simply refuse because of a headache or exhaustion. He did work very hard. He would roll over in a huff and go to sleep. I would have a cigarette. Most times he was snoring by the time I had finished smoking. I'd shuffle into place, on my side of the bed, and fall asleep.

The apartment was on the fifth floor of a seven story walk up. One of those old brick buildings. The Sup lived on the ground floor. A lovely old man with a terribly mean wife. He would always greet me when I walked in, was always quick to come up to our room when the toilet or sink were on the fritz. I think he liked me because I was pretty.

I never thought that I was particularly good looking. When I was in high school I went on a lot of dates, boys were always calling my house asking for me. My mother would tell them that I wasn't taking calls. I always tried to beat her to the phone. As I got older she was more comfortable with me talking to boys. I supposed she was ready for me to get married, give her grandchildren. She had started knitting baby blankets for “No one in particular,” she would say. My mother was always to point out my flaws though. I was the only girl, I had two brothers, both older. Since I was a young girl I remembered her constantly picking, prodding, clipping, buttoning, making all sorts of adjustments to my appearance. Many times she would immediately undo a change she had made just moments before. It used to exhaust me. When I was a girl I would cry and fight when my mother tried to put me in some uncomfortable outfit. She would slap my face and tell me that I was lucky to have clothes. I stopped fighting, more

because of the thought that there were little girls who had to wear the same dirty thing day after day than because my mother's slaps particularly hurt.

I had met Paul at a bar-b-q party at a mutual friend's house. I was there with my parents, and he with his. His family had just moved to the area. He had been away with the war, in Korea, and had just come home. He was working for another family friend or something. We weren't introduced or anything, he just walked up to me and started talking. I liked the way he talked. He wasn't as thick headed as most of the guys who would take me out. He wasn't bookish either. He spoke with a certain lightness, it was almost feminine.

He got me a drink. He was so handsome. His hair was neatly parted. His eyes were bright green that day and his suit looked nice, but not overwhelming. His shoes were shined but they looked like they have gotten plenty of use. We talked all night. When he walked me home he didn't try to kiss me. I liked that. He just told me to sleep well, turned and walked away.

Our new house was in a very nice area. Everyone's husband worked in the city but they all had different jobs. When there were parties, the men would form groups around the back yard and the women who weren't helping to prepare something were in their own big group in the middle of it all. It was like grade school all over again. Paul always seemed to be paired off with Francesco Mercurio. They liked the same things, art, food, wine, music. The other men talked of their cars, sports, God knows what else. The other men made crude jokes at their wives' expense. Paul and Frankie would chuckle quietly to themselves at those jokes, the way some of the unrefined women did.

It was Memorial Day, the first major outing of the summer. I was excited to wear the new dress I had bought myself when there was still snow on the ground. The party was at the

Wilson's, Beatrice and Richard, they had just put in a new pool and all of the kids were excited to go swimming for the first time of that summer. They had three kids of their own. It seemed that everyone was having kids. Everyone's kids were getting bigger. I brought over the potato salad. Somehow people had taken a liking to it, so I was designated as the potato salad maker.

We had gotten there early, Paul helped Beatrice's husband bring out a tub of ice to the garage, to be filled with beer. I stayed in the kitchen with Beatrice and chatted with her.

“Yeah, I wasn't too keen on the idea, pools can be so dangerous. You always hear about a child falling in and drowning when their parents aren't looking. But little Dicky is almost five and we have gotten all of the kids swimming lessons. Plus it makes them so happy.”

“Absolutely. All the kids are going to love it. Is he five already? Wow the times flies.”

“But what's new with you? Should we be expecting your kids splashing around sometime soon?”

“I sure hope so. We've been trying but Paul works so much. He isn't home that often. I also read that stress isn't good for fertility, and he works so hard, he must be under a lot of stress.”

“Oh yeah Richard is home less and less. The biggest mistake was letting him get that apartment in the city. I suppose he just slept in his office before that.”

“Yeah Paul has an apartment also. He works very hard.”

Paul and Richard walked in, “Uh, oh the hens are a clucking. What you guys talking about?” Richard walked around the counter and put his arm around Bea's waist nestling his face in her neck. She giggle.

“Oh stop it you! We were just talking about the pool.”

“Yeah? It's pretty incredible, 10,000 gallons. We got the slide and the diving board for the

kids. Swimming lessons for all of them of course.”

“Congrats, it sure does look refreshing,” Paul was looking out the window at the pool. I wanted him to put his arm around me.

“Richard dear, maybe you and Paul could start bring out some of the chips and things, I see a bunch of cars pulling up.”

“Sure, Paul, you grab the dip, I got the chips, then we'll grab beers. Ha!”

Paul didn't say anything just grabbed the dip and followed Richard out into the yard. He smiled at me, but it was one of his pained smiles that I saw much too often. I lit another cigarette.

Everyone arrived and the groups as usual formed themselves. I sat on the edge of the pool with a lot of the girls with out feet dangling in the water. Every now and then we would have to yell at one of the kids for splashing us too much. It was hot. The kids seemed to never leave the pool. Little Brennan Nelson had to dry off for a while, he was so cold his lips were turning blue. He was a skinny little thing.

We had been drinking daiquiris all day. The men were drinking beer or their liquor. Before that day I never understood how they could just drink that stuff by the glass. It was more tolerable when it was ice cold, but I would get much too dizzy much too quick, and often sick. Paul drank whisky at the office and with the guys. That or beer. When we were home he preferred wine. Frankie had recommended many wines, him being Italian and all. I liked drinking wine with Paul, he would get giddy and chatty. It was one of the few times where I would feel like I knew him. I felt like he was acting like himself.

The daiquiris were pretty strong. I decided I would switched to beer. It wouldn't be right to get too loose this early in the afternoon. A lady shouldn't get sick ever, but especially before



dinner.

From across the yard I saw Paul and Frankie go into the garage. I hadn't noticed until it was too late. I was going to yell to them to grab me one. I stood up and walked over to the garage. The grass felt itchy on my ankles. Loose blades stuck to my wet feet. The Smith kids ran past me and nearly knocked me over. Before I could say anything their mother scolded them. She was a good lady.

The garage had a back door that led to the backyard. I opened the door. Paul and Frankie had not noticed me right away. Frankie did first, Paul was facing away from the door. They were kissing. Not in the way that Frankie kissed everyone, on both cheeks, he was Italian. But kissing the way Paul and I seldom did. They stood speechless. I walked over to the aluminum basin that held all of the beer and pulled one out for myself. Then I walked out.

I wasn't as enraged as I thought I would be. I was no longer dizzy. I had heard, countless times, about women discovering their husbands cheating on them. I always thought it would have been one of those pretty girls in his office. I was almost relieved it was Francesco. He was much younger than us. I never questioned why he wasn't married. I always assumed his strange tastes had to do with him being Italian, they were such a strange people to begin with. They're Catholics so I cannot blame this deviation on his upbringing.

They didn't emerge from the garage until after I had retaken my place with the other women who were now standing around a vegetable platter. No one had noticed what had happened. I had put on my best smile and forced myself to be more active in the conversation. There was no need to share this embarrassment with all of these people.

We left early but we weren't the first. There seemed to be this unspoken agreement that we didn't want our friends to find out about this. They were mostly my friends. Besides Frankie,

I don't think that the other men we spent time with particularly cared for Paul. I don't blame them, Paul made little effort to be liked.

We didn't speak in the car. I still felt exposed to the world. I wished I was driving. I would have driven into the Wilson's new pool. Or a tree. There were no cliffs near us so that was out of the question. As we drove I imagined the car speeding up and hitting the various things we passed. Telephone pole. Tree. Tree. House that was not too far set from the road. Telephone pole. Mail box. I found myself even running down the people walking on the sidewalk. Why should they get to live out their lives in happiness? I would never have that. No matter how things between Paul and I ended up I would always remember this day. That kiss existed. Who knows what else they had done.

I threw up on the floor mat. The mix of visualized gore, motion sickness, and the thought of my husband being intimate with a small hairy Italian man was too much for a stomach full of daiquiri and celery sticks. Paul didn't say anything. I assume he noticed, but he didn't hit me or even yell at me for making a mess.

When we got home I went right up to our room, my room. Paul took his time. He must have been cleaning up the car. I hope he got the chucks that had gotten on the dash, not just the pool on the floor. I didn't change out of my dress. I just went under the covers. I had washed them that morning. He had not touched them yet. They were clean.

Paul walked up the stairs slowly. I had lit a cigarette.

“Listen, baby, I don't know what you thought you saw, but it's not what it looks like.” I just stared at him. I knew what I saw. I have perfect eyesight. They only stopped kissing after I had walked in. “Regardless, I don't need you fueling the rumor mill. Don't go crying to all of those women. They all talk. We can get a divorce. I will stay in the city. I didn't want it to happen

this way but now we have to deal with it.”

It sounded so rehearsed. He must have thought of this while listening to his radio programs. Or while he lay next to Frankie or some other queer late at night. How did he want to tell me about this? When? I didn't care about these answers. I just hated him.

He went into the closet and pulled out a suit. He looked at me once more. Then he walked out of the room. I listened to the front door close and his car start. Then I cried.

In the following weeks when people asked me where Paul was, about how they haven't seen him in a while I told them that he was working on something very hard in the city. I smirked at that little joke I told only for my enjoyment. I barely slept. Mostly I sat in bed smoking and watching the curtains wave around like ghosts.

Paul was still paying for all of my expenses. I was never much of a shopper but I took this new found time apart from him to spoil myself. I filled the closet with all kinds of dresses, gowns, it made me happy to buy all of those outfits that I had hated to wear as a child. I also made the kitchen just the way I wanted. I put in a new beautiful gas oven. The salesman reminded me to make sure the oven was totally off. A gas leak could be deadly, it could make the house explode. I remember hearing about that on the news, I told him. I had the kitchen professionally painted. The checks never bounced. I filled each room with boxes of clothes. Things I would never wear.

I never totally turned off that new stove. I liked the idea that it all could go at any moment. The life I had always wanted. I was thankful that Paul never got me pregnant. That would have complicated things tremendously.

The divorce papers were served to me in the middle of the afternoon. A man in a suit rang

the doorbell. I answered the door for anyone. The process would start the following week.

I went out shopping. I decided that I wanted some new bathing suits. They weren't on sale, summer was winding down but they were still very expensive. I got a dozen. I saw the smoke before I even turned onto our road. It was massive. The smoke seemed to fill the entire sky, to block out the sun. The fire department was there vainly trying to put it out. All the neighbors were standing in their yards watching as all of our things burn ferociously. I stopped at a stop sign that was just down the block from where our house was. I turned around and started driving into the country. It wasn't long before I was driving full throttle down some farm road, the windows down, corn fields blurring on each side of me.