

Courage

Sitting in the chair, she sips her coffee and the memory of that day floods back, almost instantly. Again. It was not something that she'd expected, ever. Who would have thought it would, or even could, happen to me? She recalls how sick she felt, initially, and immediately suppresses the thought, pushing it to the black reaches of her memory, safely locked away. She closes her eyes and, almost against her will, *his* image forms, only now more slowly than before. But, there was time when she could see nothing else. She frowns, shakes her head, but so slightly no one nearby would notice.

Why do I keep punishing myself? Why?

At first, she hadn't fully realize what was happening – she, a happily married woman, with a loving husband and two great kids. Gratefully, almost mindlessly sometimes, she commuted every day, thinking only of the normal – even banal – things that afflict all workers. She'd read a book, educate herself, maybe talk briefly with other commuters – Mind if I sit there? Brrr, sure cold, eh? God, theses trains get stuffy, hmmm? – the usual stuff; occasionally, she'd doze, turn her mind off, dream of dreams.

Bleakly, she realizes that ignorance truly is bliss, because that day she'd looked into the depths of her soul and had found another person, one with wild abandon and urgent desires. It was a revelation so profound that she'd stood, immobile, at the shopping mall for fifteen minutes, oblivious to the staring eyes, muttered epithets and glancing blows.

It was as though her universe had stopped and time had ceased to exist....

Taking her usual lunch hour on that day, she'd gone to the bank to make a withdrawal. The queue was long, so she had time to let her eyes wander, study people's faces, think about Christmas just around the corner, hum a tune, exchange pleasantries with the person behind or in front – until she saw *him* for the first time. With a sharp intake of breath, she looked away quickly, unwilling to believe that such beauty – there *was* no other word suitable – could exist. Her startled inspiration

must have been loud because the person in front turned to look at her quizzically, but she ignored that. Moments later, she began shaking as though cold; a film of sweat popped out on her forehead, and for a few moments, she felt she might even throw up. Weakly, she said, "I need air." And the sea of people parted as though she were a leper, letting her through to finally stumble through the main door of the mall, where she stood for those fifteen minutes, looking back through the dark glass, trying to catch a second glimpse of heaven.

She was rescued from her torment by Carmine, who whacked her on the back and who practically shouted in her ear, "Hey, Barbie-girl, time's wasting, ol' girl. Back to the grindstone for us." Not waiting for any reply, Carmine sauntered on with a brief, backward wave.

She forced her eyes away from the glass to look at Carmine's back. Right then, she hated Carmine more than ever, but was grateful also – grateful to escape, even for a few moments, the unbearably exquisite anguish that she knew, dimly, was upon her for the rest of her life.

Her mind wanders to the train home, remembering how she tried to put *him* out of her thoughts.

Furiously, she read her book, but it was the same line over and over again until she knew it by heart. Useless. She put the book into her briefcase and gazed out upon the wet cityscape, the backyards of rundown tenements, the abandoned houses, the gathering gloom, until it was her own face in the window that gradually seemed to change into an imperfect rendition of the perfection that she now knew existed. She closed her eyes, head bowed, but *his* image glowed in her mind until the train pulled into her station stop.

At home, she saw that Mike was surprised, pleased and not a little puzzled by her effusive attentiveness that evening; she made a point of ensuring the children had their baths and helped them with their homework. When it came time, she put them to bed, and knew, from the squeals and giggles, that he could hear it all as he watched the news on TV. And when she nuzzled up beside him on the couch, and kissed him, just like they used to, he said: "Mmmm, you must've had a good day."

"Oh, not bad – just the usual," she said, and wondered if she was lying. Pushing that thought aside, she continued

quickly, "So, how about a few TV shows you like? It's almost nine, there's one of your favorites on...." Most of the time, she got to choose, and now he looked vaguely unsettled. Was it her tone, or her vagueness? She couldn't tell.

On impulse, she rose and went to the kitchen, calling out, "Want a tea? I'm making a coffee." She didn't look back.

"Sure, doll. Thanks." His tone was appreciative, even slightly surprised. Once again, however, he joked, "How *can* you drink it? God, I abhor that stuff."

While the water came to boil, from the back of the cupboard she got the brandy. As she poured, she called again, "I'm having a brandy also; want one?" Gulping it down, almost choking, she poured another for herself.

"Hey, you *must've* had a good day. Why not? Thanks." And he laughed, but she wasn't sure whether that was in response to the canned laughter in the background.

She finished pouring his drink then set both glasses on the coffee table just as the kettle squawked.

"Remember – I take milk, no sugar, doll. No sugar, just milk." Now, there was just a hint of exasperation. Or, was it resignation?

"Okay, okay – don't let me *ever* forget, right?" As she went back to the kitchen she thought: Why did those simple things escape me? She shook her head, willing the instructions into her long-term memory. Again.

When she set the hot drinks onto the coffee-table, he said, "I had a good day too."

She looked at him. "Oh?" She lifted her brandy glass and took in a small amount now, swirling it around her mouth, luxuriating in the taste and aroma.

"Yeah – I managed to write another chapter." He sipped on the brandy, then swirled it around in his glass, a pensive look to his face. But, his eyes were on the TV. "It ain't so hot, though...." He stopped, then cast a sidelong glance at her. It was quick, but she noticed.

"Do you want me to read it?" She put the glass down, and sat back further into the couch, half-turning towards him.

"Well, I dunno ... you tell me." He took some more brandy. He watched the TV and grunted at some of the jokes.

"Why do you think it's not so hot?" Now, she took her eyes off him and watched the TV also. Why can't he ask me

outright to just *read* it? Why do I always have to *prod* him to ask me to read?

"I dunno ... it's not *too* bad. I think. But, well, you know, I often let too many unnecessary words get in the way of telling the story right, you know...." His voice trailed off. The TV program droned on. Then, he threw another glance. "Maybe you could look it over on the train?"

Finally! she thought. Stifling an exasperated tone, she patted the back of his hand, and said, "You know I'm happy to do that, Mike. Anytime. You know that, *don't* you?" Despite herself, a slight edge crept in. To cover her lapse, she leaned forward, picked up her glass and took another long swallow, part of which spilled down one side of her mouth. "Mmmm ... oops ... hand me a tissue, would you?" She extended her other hand.

"Sure, doll." Mike rose, found a box of tissues on the kitchen counter, and placed it on her lap. "Sorry, doll ... it's just that, well, you know I don't have a lot of confidence about my writing ... and I know you think I'm a bit of a woosy ... so, well, you know ... well, okay, thanks." Now, he gave her arm a slight squeeze, as though to encourage her, but instead it simply caused her to feel even more exasperated. With the matter settled in his mind, he went back to the TV show.

Her eyes did likewise, but her mind was back in the bank earlier that day. What am I going to do? I love Mike, don't I? *Don't I?* She pushed herself back even deeper into the soft leather of the couch, letting her head come to rest on the high back; Mike was leaning forward, now more engrossed in the drivel. She looked at him, surveyed the three-quarter view through half-closed eyes. What does he *really* think of me? He says he loves me, almost every day. But, do I love him still? And, as much I used to, when we were first married? Her thoughts went to the children: Sam, the image of his dad, now ten, and Serena, only eight but going on eighteen it seemed, the way she goes on and the things that she says. How can I give them up? How can I walk away from ten happy years of marriage? Well, we've had our squabbles; nothing is ever smooth all the time, of course, but still....

Her parents – now both dead – had been against the marriage, of course. Warned her against marrying anybody who didn't have a steady job. Like writers. Nothing will ever

come of it. That's what Dad had said, while her mother just nodded in unison. And, as much as she didn't wanted to admit it, they were right – up till now anyway, in the sense that Mike had never held down a real paying job – part-time work, mostly – but spent most of the time trying to establish a career – if you can call it that – as a professional writer. However: all the while looking after the house, the children and their schooling, most of the time ... in short, a dependable househusband. So ... what? So, it was her law degree that had kept them going, while Mike continued to send his work out to publisher after publisher to receive mostly rejections. Oh, he'd had some success with magazine articles and a children's book, but the recognition he was looking for just didn't come.

She closed her eyes fully, shutting out all the light, immersing herself within herself and almost immediately, *his* face flooded her being and she felt a sudden panic at the thought of not seeing him ever again. Miserably, ridiculously, the words of an old hit tune, from years ago, intruded, telling her she was *Torn Between Two Lovers, Living Like A Fool...*

Savagely, she shook her head and opened her eyes. Mike was still engulfed in the sitcom. She watched him, as he smiled now and again, drinking his brandy; once, he turned, grinning at her, pointing at the banal antics, and winked. She half-smiled and extended her hand, to hold his arm, which he then patted, as though absently, and then went back to the TV. She moved closer beside him, allowing her head to rest on his shoulder, feeling now a want and a need to please, and to be pleased, to assure and to be assured.

She murmured, "Mike, hold me...."

"Sure thing, doll." As he put his arm around her, he looked down, his rugged face crinkling into the broad grin that had first attracted her to him. "C'mon 'ere, let me see if I can make your good day even better still..." As he gave a squeeze, he flipped the TV off, and then stood up, pulling her with him to their bedroom. For the next hour, their passionate and almost frenzied activity surprised and delighted both. Finally, exhausted, sweaty and contented, Mike fell asleep, one hand resting on his chest, the other on her breast. But she stayed awake, mutely aware of the enormity of her dilemma, staring at eternity. Poor Mike, she thought; poor me, also. She turned her head to see his face in the gloom, at peace, a soft snore

pulsing rhythmically. She turned back to the window, looking through to the cloudless starry night. Follow your star, they say. But, which star? Mike's a great father, a good man, a more than adequate lover – so why change? Why destroy everything that's been so good for so long? She felt the tears welling and quietly brushed them away with a tissue. But, where's the enduring passion, the timeless spark? As she watched, the clock moved past two a.m., and she just knew she had to find out....

In the days that followed, she went to the bank as often as she could, hoping as only a woman does. For two days, he wasn't there, but on the third day, they came face to face at the same teller station, a hope that she wanted and yet dreaded. Presenting a quickly scrawled cheque, she mumbled her need for "Cash, please – make it twenties." and tried to look at him and not look at him at the same time. He smiled professionally, and her legs went to jelly. He pushed the money across and when their fingertips met, for an instant, she heard somebody saying, "You have a great smile." and then realized she'd said it. His smile now widened to include his grey eyes and he said, "Why, thank you...." and then inclined his head, and raised his eyebrows, as though to invite further comment.

With an effort, she then asked, "Care to join me for a coffee one morning?" (Breathlessly, she was amazed that she was actually saying that.) Turning, for a moment, to indicate a close-by coffee shop, she dropped the money. Feeling all eyes upon her, she flushed scarlet, and scrambled to pick up the notes.

He lent forward, "Umm, okay down there?"

Pushing the bills anywhere into her bag, she said, "Ooooh, yes, ah, thanks, er...." and finally dared to look directly at him. "Still okay for coffee, then?" She tried her best smile.

He laughed. "Sure, why not? Tomorrow?"

Thrilled, her smile widened. "That's great; I'm usually here at eight." She turned, as though to go, but stopped and blurted out: "You *do* like coffee, er, don't you?"

His eyes crinkled at the edges, and one eyebrow arched a fraction. "It's my favorite." He paused a moment. "I guess it's yours also?" His lips parted to reveal very white teeth, through which his tongue – pink, moist – now protruded a fraction.

Breathing heavily now, she nodded, still smiling and tried to saunter away, nonchalantly, as though she was in complete control of the situation and herself.

The rest of the afternoon was a haze of client and management meetings that now meant nothing. Nothing mattered except the thought of what would happen the next morning and, at precisely five p.m. she locked her office door and was – for the first time in the eight years she'd worked at the firm – almost the first junior partner out the door, to the elevator and then the train. It was only when she was firmly seated that she realized she'd forgotten to remove her wedding rings before going to the bank....

She looked at her hand: Damn, damn, damn! The big diamonds shone accusingly. *He* must have noticed. She bit her lip and then noticed the man opposite looking at her with what was obviously unfeigned amusement. Mentally, she cursed herself and the oaf opposite, tossed her head back and then gratefully remembered the chapter she'd promised Mike she would read. With some relief, and just a touch of guilt, she got it out from her briefcase and started to read, oblivious now to all around her.

She was so engrossed in Mike's words that she almost didn't hear the intercom announcement about her station stop, and barely got through the door to the platform; her trailing briefcase and arm were caught momentarily, and a hard yank was needed to get them free, sending the door – and herself, briefly – into confused oscillations. Hurrying to her car, she got in and let it idle for a few minutes while she collected her thoughts, staring vacantly into the growing night. With a sigh, she put the car into drive and pointed herself home, letting the car do its thing while she let her thoughts take over. It was only two kilometers from the station but time enough for her to wonder why Mike had said that the chapter was bad. It wasn't just bad: it was the very worst she'd ever read. Her mood soured further as she pondered how on earth she was going to be able to tell him.

She needn't have worried because when she crossed the threshold of the front door, Mike and the children grabbed her and all four began to whirl and dance around the living room. Mike was beaming at her, humming loudly while the children shrieked happily between them.

Suddenly, Mike swept her around very quickly, off her feet – her shoes scattering – and then brought her to rest in his arms, looking down at her surprised expression: “I’m published, doll – I’m really published at last!”

Sam and Serena shrieked louder, jumping around even more, over the couch, falling over cushions, shouting “Daddy’s published! Daddy’s published!” until Mike shouted: “Can it! Hey, you guys ... STOP!” He put her down, and pulled both of the children to him. “Now, listen – that’s enough, okay. Let’s just play it cool, now...” He pointed to their chairs. “Go sit down now and let me and Mummy talk.” His extended finger stayed until they seated themselves and then he looked at her, still standing, open-mouthed, her face a mixture of confused emotions.

His eyes twinkled. “Now, don’t upset, okay, doll? This is the best news I’ve – we’ve – had since we got married.”

“Wha ... what’s ... happened? What’ve you done? I mean....”

Mike stretched out on the leather couch and patted the seat. “C’mon over here.” He was smiling hugely as she sat beside him. “Remember the manuscript I sent out two years ago ... the fantasy thriller ... you know, that one you liked so much?”

She nodded. “Yes, but, every publisher you sent it ... I mean, who replied ... said thanks, but no thanks, bummer off....”

“Sure, sure ... that’s right. But look at this.” He reached into his shirt pocket and handed her a letter. As she started to read, Mike continued. “Seems like this publisher got the manuscript and just shoved it onto their slush pile, like hundreds of others, and, for whatever reason, just forgot about it, or something – “misfiled” is the word used in that letter, but who knows, really? Anyway, the important thing is that it’s been ‘found’, but more importantly, the business was bought out by another, just recently, and that letter was signed by the new owner – not just one of the agents – and *she* likes it, er, the manuscript, that is.”

She finished reading and looked up. “Fifteen thousand dollars?”

He leaned back, looking at the ceiling, and cupped his head with both hands behind his head. “Yeah, how about that? It’s a dream come true, doll – a fifteen grand advance, with a

contract for two sequels, and possible movie rights to boot." He brought his gaze back to her face, which was now brimming with tears. "Hey, doll, don't cry ... it's okay, I think maybe – just maybe – we've finally made it." He leaned over and pulled her to him. "Here, have good cry on my shoulder, if you wish...." As he spoke, he stroked her lush, black hair.

Serena joined in. "Mummy, don' cry, don' cry. Please!"

Sam sat on the floor, patting her on her knee. He smiled, but his eyes were troubled.

She pulled her head from Mike's shoulder and gazed, for a long time, at each of them while Mike dabbed at her face where the tears had streaked. Finally, she said, "Thanks, guys ... and gal, thanks."

"No, doll. Not for you to thank us! It's for me to thank you – and the kids too – for sticking with me through all these years." He shook his head. "Sometimes – no – *often*, I wondered why you didn't just leave me, all the heartache I caused, you doin' all the hard yakka to keep us goin' while I seemed to be goin' nowhere." He looked at her. "Thanks for having the courage to stick with me, babe! For believin' in *me*." He kissed her and looked – searchingly and gratefully – into her eyes. "Thanks for choosin' to love me, doll, 'cos I'll *always* love you." He paused, his eyes sparkling. "Umm, despite the fact that I hate coffee!"

As he grinned, she burst into tears again and he folded her into his arms.

Her hand now shakes with the effort of holding the empty cup, so she puts it down, and remembers how Mike had hated coffee. No: "I *abhor* coffee." That's what he'd nearly always said, throughout his life. She sighs and closes her eyes, and again *his* face is there: that smile, those once-in-a-lifetime eyes, that beauteous image that she cannot forget for these past forty years.

"Well, dear, what are we reading today?" It was Gwen, her nurse, silently at her side. Without waiting for an answer, Gwen picks up the book on the coffee table. "Oh, yes, that's the last one in the series your dear, departed husband wrote. Jolly good read, eh, Mrs Goodman?"

Gwen's effusiveness and affability annoys her, but she says, "Yes, thank you."

"I just loved all of his books, you know. No question, Mr Goodman was a great writer." She holds the book, turning it around, reading the covers, then skimming through the pages the way people do. "You give up a lot to be a writer. You know, that's what my Albert says, and he should know because he's been trying all his life, and so far, he's got nowhere. Well ... perhaps not just *nowhere*, but you'd know about what you have to give up better than me, I'm sure, Mrs Goodman."

Gwen's voice groans on, but she blots it out of her consciousness as she blinks, and her watery eyes are now fuller as she fights to stop the tears but not the memory of how much she had wanted to have more....

"What's that you said, Mrs Goodman?" Gwen bends over her, unlocking the wheelchair brake.

"I *said*: I want more coffee."

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