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Louise

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LOUISE

Otto hesitantly lowered his bulk into the old bulgy armchair facing the TV, glanced nervously toward the kitchen where Ada was clearing away the supper dishes, then proceeded to seek refuge behind the evening newspaper. From over the din of dishpans and china, Ada called, "I thought you was goin' up to see poor Benny."

Otto squirmed uncomfortably, "I don't know what good I can do. You said yourself he won't see nobody."

Ada confronted him, dish towel in one hand, a large wooden spoon in the other, which was presently pointed at Otto. "Yes, but you happen to be his best friend, remember? After playing pinochle with a man every night for eleven years you just don't ignore him when he needs comforting. How would you feel if it had been me instead of Benny's wife? You'd expect your best friend to stand by you, that's what you'd do."

Ada turned toward the kitchen, "I got a nice sandwich ready. He ain't the kind to fix himself something to eat."

Otto resignedly grunted himself out of his chair, shoved his pudgy feet into his worn felt slippers, and cast a resentful glance at Ada's retreating figure.

Otto plodded down the hall. It seemed just like every other night, same old worn spots in the ugly flowered carpeting, same smells and same noises. From behind each dingy brown door, life was going on as usual. Here was the Johnson's apartment; the radio blared and the smell of fried pork chops filled the air. The O'Deas were having boiled dinner; Otto loved boiled dinner, he'd ask Ada to fix some soon. From Pierce's apartment Otto heard the usual arguing. Joe and Marie Pierce had moved in a few months ago; there were never any cooking smells from their apartment. They both worked and ate all their meals out. Makowskis had their door slightly ajar and little Sammy bolted out with his toy pistol. "Put 'em up Mr. Klein," but Otto didn't feel like playing a rustler tonight.

Herman Makowski appeared at the door. "Hi Otto. You're going up to see Benny as usual, Huh?"

"Yeah, Ada thought maybe he'd see me. You know, on accounta we been friends for so long."

"Sure, I'll bet he'll be glad to see you. It's awful, ain't it? Real unexpected. Poor devil," Herman bit his lower lip and shook his massive head. "Tell him, Otto, that we are all here to give him a helping hand any time."

"O.K. Herman, I'll tell him. I'll let you know how he's taking it."

Otto turned, and clinging heavily to the bannister, slowly climbed the creaking stairs. The fourth floor had an atmosphere of gloom and sorrow. The lights seemed dimmer than usual; the mud colored walls seemed more oppressive than ever. Otto almost turned back, but Benny needed him . . . what would he say to Benny? Talk about the shop? How everyone was talking about . . . about what? Well, he'd think of something to say to comfort poor Benny.

When he reached Benny's door, he stopped and listened. He heard a muffled sob. Otto was embarrassed. A man just doesn't cry regardless of what happens. He stood there uneasily for a moment then tapped on the door. "Benny, are you there? Benny, it's me, Otto. Otto, your old friend has come to see you." Otto scratched his head and put his ear to the door. Finally there was a sound of a chair scraping and then heavy footsteps . . . the door opened slowly. Benny stood there dejectedly. His arms hung limply at his sides; his head bent down; he looked at the floor. "Come in, Otto" . . . his voice was thick and choked. He returned to the table, sat down, put his head in his arms and began to sob.

Otto paused in the doorway and nervously glanced around the usually neat tiny apartment. Benny's lunch pail was still on the table, his work boots were in the middle of the floor, and his work clothes were thrown carelessly over a chair. There wasn't a sign that Benny had eaten all day. Course Benny couldn't even make a cup of coffee. He was really lost without Louise. What would he do now without a wife to look after him? "Hey, Benny, come on old pal, you just got to straighten up. Look, I brought you a nice liverwurst on rye. I'll make you a cup of coffee . . . we'll both have a cup of coffee, how's that?" Otto fumbled around in the small neat kitchen, found the coffee, filled the percolator, lit the gas stove, and got two cups and saucers.

Benny raised his head, wiped his eyes on his sleeve. He looked gaunt and hollow-eyed sitting there in his underwear and old pants. "Otto, what am I going to do without her?" Otto didn't know what to say so he rattled the spoons, and got out the cream and sugar. Well, it would do Benny good to talk about her, relieves the mind; Ada said that when her brother Louie lost his wife. "Just think of it, Otto, for eleven years we were together. Every night I'd come home and she

would have my clothes laid out, my dinner on the table, and the paper all ready for me to read. She knew I liked onion rolls and made 'em fresh for me every day. Every night was something good for supper. After supper, I'd read the paper 'til you'd come up, and remember how little and quiet she was sitting there knitting sox for me while you and me played cards. I wonder if she got tired of knitting. Do you think I shoulda got her a TV? Do you think that, Otto?"

"Don't think about it Benny. She was always welcome to watch TV with Ada."

Benny wasn't listening. He was unburdening himself. "And after the card game we'd have a can of beer. You were nice to bring beer, Otto. Louise always said that. She'd say, 'That Otto, he is a good friend to bring us beer.' On Friday night I'd give her grocery money and she'd go over to the A & P on Saturday to do our shopping. She liked that, Otto. Louise really enjoyed it. She liked to get out once-in-a-while. On Sundays we'd walk over to State Street and look in all the big store windows, or we'd go over to the lake and I'd buy her some peanuts . . . she seemed to enjoy it, Otto . . . she . . ." Tears trickled down the unshaved cheeks.

Otto groped for words of comfort but they wouldn't come. "I think the coffee is done," he mumbled. He poured the strong black coffee and pushed the cup in front of Benny. "Come on, Benny, this coffee will make you feel better. Here, this sandwich is real good. Come on pal, you gotta eat. Keep up the old strength." Otto laughed feebly.

Benny looked up and glanced around as though he were in a dream. He slowly stirred his coffee, then threw down the spoon. Shaking his head and covering his face with his big bony hands he sobbed, "Why, why Otto, for God's sake, tell me, why would Louise want to run away with another man?"