Rerun

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“God, Joe's a great guy!” said the boy as he watched the stocky male figure slowly mount the staircase. The figure paused at the upstairs landing and burped gently before it entered a darkened door.

“What do you think of my old man now?” said the young man to the girl sitting at the other end of the cotton-soft yellow sofa. The girl, dark haired and small-boned, looked up from a wooden bowl containing pink ice cream but did not answer the young man. The late movie had begun, an old Cary Grant rerun, and the house was silent except for the crackling voices on the television set. The young man and girl watched the black and white figures, the old plot about the newspaper reporter and woman editor who fight and fall in love in spite of being mismatched. Both sets of actors looked tired tonight, the film scratchy from use and the young couple worn from the long drive from a university to his home. The only movement in the room was the scooping of the melting pink stuff from the dark wooden vessels.

“Well, maybe you didn't get too good an impression of Joe tonight. He's always so tired after these trips, then the kids are all over him. It drives Joe nuts and he has to have a couple of drinks to relax. But he liked you, I just know it. My dad knows class when he sees it. Even if he didn't say much to you, he was watching you whenever you weren't looking. Poor Joe, I guess he's just too old to have five kids, especially from the cradle to college age. He married Ruth when he was thirty-five and she was twenty-one. Fifteen years diff' and it's sure hard on him. Poor Joe. But I bet you liked him. Everybody loves Joe!”

The girl said nothing. By this time she had finished with the bowl and had set it carefully on the thick carpet beside the sofa. She looked very small now, her weight pushing deeper into the yellow cushion. The television voices crackled and fuzzy figures moved across the screen. Cary Grant was chasing after the woman editor down a dark Chicago street. The boy yawned and wiped his watering
eyes. He was becoming sleepy. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving and the
girl had ridden to his home with him to be with his family. Driving
up to the huge pillared mansion, parking beside one of the family's
five shiny cars, the girl remembered the stories of hardship the boy
had told her about his family during the two years they had been
friends. The boy's attractive mother moved the girl into a soft
carpeted bedroom with a white crucifix above the twin bed. Ruth,
the mother of the young man and four younger children, looked young
and nervous. She helped the girl unpack and seemed confused as to
where the girl's belongings should be placed.

"Ruth is sure some looker, you gotta admit that. Some of the
guys can't believe she's my mother, always teasing her about being
my sister instead. It's funny. You should'a seen her before the opera-
tion, she sure looked better. Poor Joe almost died when the docs
told him she had to be cut up. She was on the table for five hours
and Joe sat and sweated. Now it's even worse. Joe told me one night
when he was really boozing that Ruth won't, well, she won't let him
see her without any clothes on, on account of the scar and she won't
let him do stuff married people do. You know, bedroom stuff. If she
had another kid it might kill her and Joe won't practice birth control
because he's such a good Catholic. Poor Joe. Maybe that's why he
drinks too much, being so lonely and all."

The girl looked at the young man and smiled a strange smile. The
boy leaned over and rested his head on her shoulder. He was tired.
The young man's breathing grew heavy and stayed that way through
two commercials and three other chases through Chicago. The girl
moved her shoulder, muscles tiring under the boy's weight. The form
moved but did not waken. Looking down upon the young man's face,
the girl saw the unmarked image of a young man, her young man.
Absent were the lines of sagging contours, non-existent the marks of
time. The lean, hard body could somehow not be likened to the hairy
and squatty father. An especially loud commercial came over the
television and the boy woke up.

"Whew, am I tired. Must've fallen asleep for a second. I had
this dream about Joe. It was really great. In the dream Joe gave me
all his shirts and I told you he has them made just for him at Brooks'
in New York. Sometimes he actually gives me one of the old ones. I
almost hate to wear the things, they're so beautiful," said the young
man between yawns. A big story had broken in the movie and Cary
Grant and the woman editor were answering endless telephones in a
pressroom. The girl pushed a path out of the cushions and took the
empty bowls into the nearby kitchen. Returning, she found the young
man preparing a drink at the hidden bar behind a false bookshelf.

"Want one?" he asked. The girl shook her head and slumped into
the warm cushion she had left for a moment.
"Just like Ruth. Hates to drink, too, but I know you won’t mind if I have a little nightcap. I guess I’m sort of like Joe, getting all wound up after a nasty day. When we’re married we’ll have cocktails every night when I get home and the kids will be quiet kids. It’ll be great, shirts from Brooks’ and a home just like this one. You gotta promise me that you won’t be mean to me like Ruth is to Joe. No wonder he drinks. It won’t be like that with us, will it?”

The boy was watching her and when her lips formed the word “no” he reached over and patted her brown hair.

"Do you have any aspirin?” the girl asked. “I’ve got this lousy headache.”

"Yeah, sure, in the kitchen by the sink,” he said. “Help yourself.”

The girl was stiff from sitting so still and she walked slowly into the white kitchen. Turning on the tap to let the water cool, she found the aspirin bottle and removed two white wafers from the powdery insides. Searching for a glass she noticed two brown palm leaves resting on the refrigerator, two dried slivers left over from a spring Sunday long ago. Finding and filling a milk glass with icy water, the dark young girl turned off the water. It was very quiet in the kitchen. The television voices were muffled and the girl stood alone, a glass of water in one hand and two pills in the other. She was lifting the pills to her mouth when she heard two new sounds. Above in the parents’ room she heard the heavy snore of a drunken man and the crying of a woman. Joe, the father, slept an alcoholic dream and Ruth, the mother, wept alone.

“What’s taking you so long out there? The movie’s almost over!” called the young man, Joe, Jr. The girl started, dropping the aspirins into the sink. The girl replaced the glass and washed the cure down the drain. Her head still hurt as she walked back into the dreaded room. She was just in time to see Cary Grant kiss the woman editor and end the rerun.