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Solitaire

Gordon Black
Denison University

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“Solitaire”

Nancy is alone in the steamroom. She is sitting on the cedar bench, her elbows resting on the top of her knees, her hands gripping the wet strands of her sweaty hair. She has turned the setting up nearly as high as it will go and she listens to the powerful hiss of the steam escaping from the vents beneath her.

Jim is standing in front of the meat section in the Safeway grocery store trying to figure out the difference between hamburger and ground chuck. He examines them closely. They look the same. He tries to remember what his wife used to buy. He notices that the ground chuck is more expensive and reasons that it must be better quality meat. He picks the hamburger. “I have ketchup at home,” he says outloud.

Nancy is lying on her back, enjoying the heat and the solitude. She enjoys the smell of the sweat, the slippery, almost greasy, feeling of the hot wall tiles as she rubs her hand across them.

Jim likes foods that are instant, or as close to instant as possible. When he examines labels he is not looking at the ingredients. He is looking for the cooking time. Things like “heat and serve,” and “just add boiling water” mean a lot to him. “Ready to eat” is his favorite.

There is a group of retarded men swimming in the pool near the steamroom. The water is cold. Three of them decide to go and warm up. They have been in the steamroom before and they begin to giggle as they shuffle across the slippery pool tiles towards the door.

So far in his grocery cart Jim has three cans of chili, a jar of Ragu, a box of macaroni, a loaf of rye bread, a package of hamburger, and a twelve-pack of beer. He notices that the other shoppers, all of whom seem to be women, have full, or nearly full, carts, with things like fresh vegetables, flour, eggs, butter, chicken. He pushes his cart down the aisle.

Nancy is almost asleep when the door burst open and three retarded men come in and sit across from her. She sits up and smiles nervously. She notices that the scrotum of one of the men is hanging partially out of the bottom of his swim trunks. She puts her knees together and begins rubbing her legs. “Hi,” she says.

Jim decides he has enough groceries and pushes his cart into a check-out line. There is a middle-aged woman reading *People Magazine*. She has a nice tan and wears horn rimmed glasses. Her upper half is quite attractive. She seems thin, but he notices that her hips and thighs are unusually large, as if all of her weight is being pulled downward by gravity and is stuck between her knees and her waist. She looks up from the magazine. “Hi,” Jim says.

Nancy knows that she has been in the steamroom too long, and that it is time for her to go, but she doesn’t want the three men to think that she is leaving because of them. She remembers what her husband had told her the time he made her go camping with him. “Snakes won’t bother you if you don’t bother them.” She closes her eyes and tries to concentrate on the sound of the steam. She can feel her body beginning to revolt at the heat. Her thoughts come and go in quick flashes.

Driving home Jim feels a sense of accomplishment. His groceries are stacked nearly in three bags and sit on the back seat like obedient children. The radio is tuned to a country and western station and he sings along with the music.

Two more retarded men enter the steamroom. One of them is very obese. His swim trunks are old and look dirty. He sits next to Nancy and smiles, his teeth brown. One of the men begins to hum. She can't quite make out the tune. The obese man moans, stands and starts to leave.

Jim is going a little too fast when he makes the turn in to his driveway and one of the bags tips over, spilling its contents onto the dirty, carpeted backseat floor. He turns off the radio, stops the car, and contorts his body over the seat to see what has spilled. He curses.

The obese man is holding the steamroom door shut so no one can leave. He is flicking the lights on and off, on and off. He is laughing and having a good time. Nancy has shut the steam off but the room is still very hot. It is time for her to go. The four retarded men are yelling at the fat man, calling him something sounding like Pete, and this makes him more excited and he flashes the lights on and off even faster and laughs even harder. "Just ignore him," Nancy says. "Just ignore him and he'll go away."

Inside, Jim begins to unpack his groceries. He takes out a box of Arm and Hammer baking soda, opens it, and puts it in the rear of his refrigerator. He laughs, and says "this is great." He puts the rest of the groceries away and grabs himself two beers and the loaf of rye bread. He goes in to the living room, turns on the television and sits in one of the two folding chairs in the otherwise empty room. He drinks the beer and nibbles the bread. Love Boat is on.

Nancy is standing on the inside of the metal door trying to reason with the retarded fat man outside. "Please let us out," she says, "Please." She pushes on the door to see if he's still holding it shut. It won't budge. She steps back and slams her shoulder against the door. The obese man has taken a few steps back, deciding to let the people out, and he is laughing as the door hits him in the face. His nose begins to bleed.

Jim is in the bathroom urinating. He is too tired to stand so he is sitting on the toilet, his pants down around his ankles. He stares at the empty bathtub with its solitary shampoo bottle and thin peice of yellow soap half way down the drain. He begins thinking of the woman in the grocery store with the big hips. He imagines her large thighs spread wide, a small mound of pubic hair barely visible beneath a thick roll of fat. He decides to masturbate but finds that his penis is unresponsive, and hangs between his legs limp and uninterested.

Nancy is alone in the shower room. Too tired to stand she sits, limp and exhausted, on the tile floor, letting the cool shower water fall gently over her hot red shoulders.

Gordon Black