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THURSDAY MORNING

Beneath a white plaster ceiling, stretched out on a soft blue sofa, lay Marcia, thirty, blonde haired, blue eyed, beautiful bodied wife of one, mother of none, fourth of four. That was how she thought the little paragraph after her name in *Who's Not Who* should look. Fourth of four Morley sisters, one of the blonde haired, blue eyed, (no one seemed to notice she had grey eyes), laughing girls, the popular girls, the ones that were good to be seen with, fun to be with. The sisters with the smiling face, teasing eyes---a face which Cynthia and Sharon and Beth came to naturally but which Marcia had to struggle to put on. Yet her outside had covered up her inside so well that no one ever knew how bored she was or how much she just wanted to talk to someone---not laugh or play word games, just talk---to let out her inside. But no one cared to talk, not over clamoring voices and the deafening beat of a band. And then her sisters had married, moved away, leaving her to be a Morley girl when she was no longer just a girl.

Pictures paraded before her, floating in and out of her mind. Parties, tense laughter, tight little groups of people speaking but not

talking, spilling beer with wide smiles and worried eyes. And the times when there was some quiet, wanting to say, "Don't touch me, don't kiss me, just hold me. Talk to me and hold me."

But Gavin had rescued her, Gavin who sat next to her in the second grade, Gavin with glasses who always answered questions correctly and when it was her turn, pencilled the answers on his desk so she could see. All of a sudden, after ten years he appeared, or perhaps she just noticed him again, her dark and handsome prince of peace and quiet. The candlelit dinners at corner tables in small restaurants, evenings at home talking, watching television, small parties, gentle words, the revelation of fears and feelings, coaxed her inside out and she fell in love. And so five years ago she married Gavin Stewart and only death could part them now. Death, it scared her to think about it. But at least it was far away. So far away. She wondered if death were boring.

She sat up on the sofa, hearing heavy steps on the front porch. The chimes rang out their five note signal---Some---one's---at---the---door. Rising slowly, smoothing over her creased cotton shift, she glided to the door.

"Who is it?" she called, hesitating, then pulling the curtains back from the window beside the door.

It was Ben the Best Man.

THURSDAY NOON

Facing himself in the mirror above the malt mixer, he realized how much he disliked eating alone, hunched over a narrow counter, sitting on a backless stool, staring at his own reflection. His eyes were magnified by his lenses and stared back at him large and dull, his face full, colorless. Suddenly he felt old. He wiped the corners of his mouth and crumpled up the white paper, tossing it among the little lumps of scrambled egg on his plate. Reaching into his pocket, he hid two dimes under the saucer. Marcia made him feel young. Was it her face, her figure?

Turning on the stool, he slid off its small round seat and walked to the cashier desk guarding the entrance. A large woman with graying hair and bulging breasts snatched his check and rapidly punched out a special code on rows of black buttons. He studied her---the cropped hair. The red hands with thick fingers and large knuckles, the loose flesh on her arms. Marcia would never look like that. Marcia was a Morley.

"There's yer change," the cashier gestured toward some coins in a small round tray attached to the cash register. He pocketed the coins quickly, hesitating at the counter.

"Anything else?" the cashier questioned brusquely.

"Well, well, maybe this," he picked up a chocolate mint wrapped in green and silver foil and dropped two pennies on a green plastic square on the counter, moving quickly away from the large lady toward the door.

He had married a Morley. A Morley. He still wondered at it. But he had Ben to thank.

"Oh, I don't think so. I don't think it would work," he protested.

"Look, I know her sister real well, don't I?"

"It didn't work out too well for both of you."

"That's not the point. I've seen enough of Marcia to know she's different from the others."

"Hell if she is." He remembered searching Ben's cherubic face, looking for a hint of sincerity in his friend's eyes.

But his boyhood friend was right---she was different. Behind the Morley facade lived another person, romantic, sentimental, serious---someone like himself. He still wondered if he had actually uncovered all that was hidden there, veiled by the Morley visage for so long.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON

"Hello, Ben," She stared at the short man standing before her, his face still round, childlike. "Come on in. Gavin's not here, he's at a teacher's conference in Chicago." She felt awkward, nervous.

"That's too bad," he said. "I was just driving through and thought I'd drop by."

She quietly closed the door after him and followed him into the living room.

"Still the same," he commented, inspecting the room about him. "I always liked this chair." He patted the seat of the big red stuffed chair and sat down, stretching his legs out before him.

"You know, I could really use some coffee."

"Fine. You relax while I fix it."

In the kitchen her fingers trembled and she spilled the brown powder onto the saucer. Her nerves seemed to be vibrating at an ultra-high frequency---it was just a cup of coffee, a cup of coffee for a friend. No reason to be nervous. A bad cup could not spoil a friendship. But he scared her, he always had. She felt transparent and so he scared her.

Carefully she poured the hot water into the cup and carried it in to him, commanding her fingers to be still all the way. She dropped onto the sofa, clasping her hands together. They were cold, moist.

"I usually don't make coffee for Gavin. I hope it's all right."

"Not bad. A little weak, but it's okay. How is Gavin?"

"Fine."

"And Beth?"

"Fine. She had a new baby boy just last month."

"And you?"

"Fine, really." She fingered a green throw pillow, looking down. He leaned forward in the red chair, his elbows on his knees, a cigarette in one hand. She liked to look at his hands, large, hairy, strong. She looked at him. His eyes dark, intent, looking at her, through her. Her stomach suddenly felt tight, empty.

"I'm fine, too," he said.

"We haven't seen you much since you moved."

"I'm afraid I got caught up in the business world of the city, but now I'm sick of it all so I'm planning to go out West next week. I figure it's not too late to try something different since I'm unattached. I've bought a trailer, put all my stuff in it, and am ready to take off any time now."

"What are you going to do out there---farm?"

"I don't know, really. Run a store in the mountains, work on a ranch. I don't know. It's all an adventure."

"It sounds exciting," she said enthusiastically. "There's just nothing to do here."

"You feel it too? I wondered when you would." His words made her uneasy. He was drinking his coffee, observing her, setting his cup down. He flicked some ashes from his cigarette and she watched the black flecks speckle the enameled tray.

"Have you been smoking?" he asked after a while.

"Yes, a little."

"I can smell it."

"I'm really bored." She explained, pinching the small pillow.

"Is it Gavin?"

"I'm just bored. I feel as though I know this place, every corner, every piece of dust, every crack in the sidewalk, every knot in all the trees. It's all so familiar. Gavin likes it here, though. He knows the town and they respect him because he teaches their kids. He's very comfortable here, very happy and comfortable."

Ben squashed the butt of his cigarette in the tray on the coffee table.

"What you need is a vacation, to get away for a few weeks. Travel."

"We don't have the money to go anywhere special. We have money, of course, but we don't save it. I mean, I don't save it. I can't help myself -- I love to buy things, records, clothes. It's the one thing I really enjoy doing."

He was tapping his fingers on his knees. She went on.

"I don't even have the desire to go out anymore. I don't feel like looking at the same faces, houses, trees. I go to some parties still and faculty wives' meetings and stuff but it's all so dull. And I have no hobbies to occupy me---I don't even cook."

Ben slapped his hands on his knees.

"You know, it's a really nice day. I think you should show me these tiresome cracks in the sidewalk, the knotty trees and horrible houses. I wouldn't even mind running into one of your neighbors---even that Mr. Gleason, the one that looks like a troll, if I remember right."

She smiled. "Yes, he and his wife still live in that house on the corner. And Mrs. Gleason is as nosy as ever."

She rose from the sofa, brushing past Ben as he got up from the red chair, detecting the strong scent of men's cologne seasoned with the stale smoke of his cigarette. She pulled a cardigan from a coat hook behind the door and stepped onto the porch, Ben behind her shutting the door.

It was a nice day, the trees waved red and gold against baby blue and she could feel the cool air coloring her cheeks. She tilted her head back, watching the moving leaves, listening to them, walking in silence until she stumbled, her foot caught in a hole in the sidewalk. He took her arm.

"I thought you knew the cracks in the concrete better than that."

She clasped his arm. "I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention to them."

They paraded down the street, pointing at Mr. Gleason's old white house, kicking at the piles of leaves lining the street, tightrope walking on the curb all the way back to the front walk. For a moment she saw herself in the old neighborhood, playing with her sisters, jumping into leaves, reraking them into piles, and then shaping them into forts. All of a sudden she felt very young.

They brushed their shoes on the brown bristled mat before coming in and then collapsed, laughing on the sofa.

"That was nice," she rubbed her hands together. "A little chilly, though."

"I think some music would help you forget the cold." He got up and searched through the row of albums on a book shelf. "I always liked this one. Beth and I used to play it all the time."

She watched him remove the disc from its cover, his fingers delicately balancing it, his thumb in the center hole, his fingers on the rim. His hand strong, yet delicate. He fitted the record on a silver projection and turned the knob to reject. The record dropped down, the needle arm rose and descended gently on the rim. The first slow notes of a song filled the room, its regular rhythms, heavy beat and lyrical melody familiar, strong, sparking in her almost forgotten feelings, pictures of parties, young friends, the family.

"This really takes me back," he said after as he sat down next to her.

"I haven't played this for ages," she closed her eyes.

"You know, I always liked being with you Morleys," he said quietly. "I always had a good time."

The music swelled to a climax, now racing, strong, then soft, falling to the final drawn-out note.

"Again?" He rose and picked up the needle, placing it on the first band. He sank into the sofa beside her and his arm was touching hers.

The familiar notes floated through her head, recharging her, submerging her in its mellifluous emotion. She could feel him next to her, hear his breathing. She slowly slipped off her shoes, one and then the other, and surrendered her person to the music, to its rushing flow of notes, its racing throb of rhythms, fervent, pulsating, fluid, rising and then sinking, softly, into a harmonic close. Embraced and stirred by the sounds, the propelling, engaging sounds of an almost forgotten song, she was no longer bored.

SATURDAY MORNING

No one had answered. He tried ten, eleven times to call her but no one had picked up the phone on the other end. He had wanted to tell her when to expect him, tell her how stimulating the conference had turned out to be. Maybe she was at a neighbor's---she was not at the Gleason's though; maybe at a friend's, at a meeting, at a movie, maybe---maybe she was even dead. He pressed his foot harder down on the long black pedal. He should have asked Mrs. Gleason to stop at their house to see if everything were all right. He had just assumed that she had been visiting a friend, especially since Mr. Gleason had seen her alive yesterday, walking up and down Bartram Street with Ben.

He turned off the motorway and maneuvered his car up the curved road to the overpass. So Ben had come after all. Out of the blue Ben had called him last week, talking about some plans to go out West and wanting to say good - bye to them this week. When he had mentioned his trip to Chicago, Ben had seemed disappointed. But he must have decided to drop by anyway.

Ignoring the SLOW: SCHOOL AHEAD warning near the junior high school, his school, he travelled past familiar frame houses, narrow oak shaded streets, past the Gleasons, the Schmidts, the Parkinsons, the car screaming to a stop before their small house on the corner.

The door was ajar and he pushed it open, walking in, calling her name softly then louder. Standing silent in the doorway, he listened for an answer in the stillness.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

They had just pulled out of the filling station, merging again into the slow flow of vehicles. The low sun stared at them, eye-level, and they squinted back. Marcia flipped down their visors; and in the mirror of the one before her she could see the heaps of dresses and coats in the back seat, the heads of wire hangers poking out in all directions. There had been too many to pack. Stuffed into her one suitcase were a few paperbacks, some cosmetics, some silver (part of a wedding present) and several knives and tools for Ben. But she had really only cared about the clothes.

She looked over at Ben, his dark eyes intent on the road, his strong hands relaxed on the wheel. She felt exhilarated, alive. She contemplated the other cars creeping down the same wide band of concrete, all trying to catch the sun before it went down.

"It's strange to think that none of the people in these cars know about us," she said aloud. "If they only knew, just think how much they'd envy us! I bet they'd abandon their routine-ridden lives in no time for ours." She laughed, glancing at a green station wagon in front of them, three small children signalling through the large back window with their hands, their faces contorted with laughter.

Ben smiled. "Look at those little clowns. I remember doing stunts like that." He lifted one hand from the wheel and waved. They returned his acknowledgement squirming with delight and then scrambled over the back seat, ducking behind it.

"I really like kids," he went on. "I look forward to having my own sometime."

"I'm afraid I've never looked forward to subjecting myself to child-bearing---however cute or clownlike they may turn out to be."

"I thought you liked them."

"I still like them---but I think I would always begrudge them my time, among other things."

"I see," and Ben accelerated, propelling them past the long green wagon.

Flat fields and white frame farmhouses flashed past them like moving pictures projected by the sun on the window; and she sat in her front row seat, watching the scenes from behind the transparent screen

"I don't think I've ever been quite so happy," she commented. "And I don't care about anyone else in the world but us."

She looked at him; he was still squinting, his almost seraphic face luminous in the falling light.

He glanced at her. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm just looking at you," she answered. "And you?"

"I was thinking of you and me twenty-five years from now, when we are remembering today. I see myself, my hair half silver, relaxing in a reclining chair, indulging in a manhattan, following football or something on TV with you next to me and you'll be well, I guess we'll have a party then."

"Yes," she said excitedly. "And we'll be thinking about how all the guests covet our happiness."

"Yes," he spoke thoughtfully and reached down to switch on the radio, twisting the dials, selecting a station between the static, sputtering interludes.

The soft tones floated away with the bold billboards and painted barns, a sentimental soundtrack for her windshield movie. She peered into the mirror on the visor, straightening her hair. Her large eyes gleamed, animated. She touched her cheek. Still soft, smooth. She smiled.



"I'm so happy," she said, "and I feel so excited that I think I must be very much in love with you." She flipped up the visor and turned to look at him again, her face bright with expectation; he stared at the road and then grinned back at her in the grey light.

Soon the film on the windshield darkened, its regular scenes obscured by the growing blackness; she watched Ben reach down to twist the knob on the radio and then closed her eyes. Resting her head against the low back of her seat, she listened to the soft notes of the new soundtrack.