

The Tryst

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Smiling, she tightened the sash on her white cotton robe, then stooped to pick up her clothes, hastily dropped to the floor the night before and threw them on the bed. I pulled up my pants, also on the floor, and smiled back as I tightened my belt. The Saturday morning after a cozy night with my new girlfriend, who I'll call Daisy, was off to a great start. She lived in a small house in a small country town in Indiana. We were both employed by a large national company and met at a regional work event in early 1992. The weekend before, our first time overnight together, we spent it at my place in Chicago.

Daisy, framed by the bedroom door, said, "I'll make coffee."

At that moment, we heard knocking on the front door, soft and rhythmic, like a metronome.

Daisy put her index finger to her lips, "Shh."

The force and tempo of the blows rapidly increased, like hammer strikes on a two-by-four, the sound reverberating throughout the house.

"Daisy. It's me. Let me in," boomed a baritone voice.

"Oh shit," she said, "I thought this might happen."

"Who is it?"

"It's my ex-fiancée," her voice an octave higher.

"Your what?" my voice two octaves higher.

"Daisy," came a shout after a savage strike on the door.

Daisy's eyebrows shot upward. A tremor ripped through me.

"I'd better let him in, or he'll break the door down."

"Where's your backdoor?"

“I don’t have one.”

“Where do you want one?”

Her face twitched, letting me know that my habit of using humor to help me cope with life’s setbacks was not working. She closed the bedroom door.

An ugly feeling crept over me as I realized what was about to go down. I was the other man about to be caught in her bedroom by her jealous ex-fiancée. I sat down on the bed and squeezed my hands to stop them from shaking.

As I heard the front door deadbolt being unlatched, a knot grew in my stomach. I put my ear to the door and heard soft talking, but I could not make out words. Their voices jumped to shouting. Then I heard Daisy say, “No. Don’t go in there.”

I scurried back to the bed and the door swung open. Framed in the doorway was a thick, squared headed man, hair slicked back and sporting a greasy mustache, who I’ll call Clem. His skin had a discolored crustiness, like the bark on smoked meat. A pack of cigarettes bulged from the pocket of his t-shirt, which rode up from his waist, exposing a hairy chubby stomach. An odd match for Daisy, a petite woman with shoulder length auburn hair. He moved toward me.

Daisy stepped into the bedroom, “Clem stop.”

I popped off the bed and it squeaked, drawing his attention to the pile of Daisy’s clothes.

“What are you doing messing around with my fiancée?”

In one voice, Daisy and I spoke an obvious lie: “We didn’t do anything.”

“Bullshit,” Clem shouted.

“I thought you two were broken up,” I said.

“We’re not,” Clem said, his face a match about to ignite.

A few feet apart, Clem's eyes sliced me to ribbons, his hands down but balled into fists, which he squeezed tighter with each word.

Daisy, red-faced, said, "Clem, you need to leave. Now!" Her voice cracking but loud.

To my surprise, I remained calm. Voice monotone, volume modulated and steady, "It seems you two have something to talk about."

"You stay out of it," his voice pinched, muscles tensed as he reared back preparing to pounce.

"I'm calling the Sheriff," Daisy yelled and ran from the bedroom to the kitchen phone.

Clem stomped after her but before he exited the bedroom, he said, "I've got a gun," then stepped out of the bedroom slamming the door.

A boiling mad redneck with a gun! I imagined this talking brisket running to his pickup truck featuring a proudly affixed "I DRINK BEER" bumper sticker. From the gun rack mounted in the cab, he'd decide which rifle to shoot me with. I envisioned my lifeless body, split and drained of entrails, shucked into the bed of the pickup like a deer carcass.

Trapped in the bedroom with no way out, a prisoner of this gun toting emotionally wounded cornfed yokel, I paced the floor. I heard them talking through the door. I had to figure out how to leave the bedroom and save Daisy, with nobody getting hurt. The yelling got so fierce each word felt like a punch on the door. I grabbed the lamp off the nightstand; it did not have enough heft to knock him out. I pulled one of the legs on the nightstand, hoping to break it off to use as a club; it wouldn't budge. *Coat hanger*, I thought. From the closet I took a blouse off its hangar and, perhaps to gain some feeling of control, folded it neatly and placed it on the pillow on the bed.

As I untwisted the hook from the hangar, to create a jagged wire to poke Clem in the eye, the yelling stopped. My first thought: *Did he hit her?* I put my ear to the door. Whimpering. It was Clem. Having been dumped more than once myself, even though still in his crosshairs, I felt sorry for him. I stopped fashioning my weapon and sat down on the bed.

After a time, Daisy returned to the bedroom and sat next to me.

“He’s gone. I told him I’d talk to him later,” she said.

Although I had already decided to head back to Chicago, I told her it was up to her if she wanted me to stay for the rest of the weekend. She smoked a cigarette, pretending to think the situation through, then she smashed the lit end into an ashtray.

“You better go home,” she said without a hint of regret.

I should have packed up and left without a word. But a strange sense of bravado for surviving Clem made me curious, so I asked Daisy how she met him.

“His ex-wife is going to marry my ex-husband.”

The flat landscape between Indiana and Chicago never looked better.