

# Tangled Webs

*Robert Hiles*

At our first place in Tucson there was a beleaguered cactus in front and a guy who looked like a B. Kliban cartoon in the other upstairs apartment. His potato head had a top curl of red hair and ears that stuck out at odd angles. He stretched athletic t-shirts over his paunch and stood with one fist punched into his pear butt when he pounded on the door for us to "turn down that record player!"

A big wad of keys jangled on his belt. His girlfriend was crippled. She walked on braces and had one of those homely faces which beg for sympathy, though she probably didn't want any. Except perhaps on the nights there was screaming and things crashing and she'd thump on the door at three in the morning for me to call the police or an ambulance.

She'd stand there on the landing, lurching forward on her braces, her shortness all in her legs, her head too big for her body, her teeth too large for her face.

"He's overdosed," she'd pant, or "we've had an accident, call an ambulance." It seemed she should wave her arms, but her disability limited her panic. "Call an ambulance, please." Behind her, through their open door, two pea green sneakers pointed at the ceiling.

He usually came to before the ambulance ever arrived. I could tell by the sobs of "you cheating whore," "you rotten bastard," "you stupid bitch." When the attendants pounded on the door she'd cry "I was scared, I didn't know, I was scared."

When I went back to bed those nights—after peeking around the curtain to make sure the ambulance arrived—Elizabeth would twist uncomfortably and mumble, "They should at least get a phone if they're going to act like that."

Every time it happened, every night he carried her struggling

up the narrow stairs or there were shouts of infidelity and callousness, Elizabeth would squirm away from my arm and sleep curled up, her elbows and knees off the bed.

Some fun. Maybe it reminded her of home. The memories blotting out the reality. It was almost as if she was programmed for the worst. I'd lie on the outer edge of the bed, afraid to get too close. Better not to touch than to have a caress met with indifference.

Elizabeth always went to bed early. She got up early too. I'd pretend I was sleeping and watch her dress in the golden shadows before dawn. A skirt, blouse, jacket. Smart, low-heel pumps. A black ribbon in her long, gorgeous blonde hair. Her hair tumbled nearly to her waist, and would have tumbled further if it hadn't been for her mother. When Elizabeth was eight her mother flew into a rage about something, a gas burner left on or her husband's latest infidelity, whatever. It was common, and before it was over she had submerged one daughter in the bathwater until she fainted, then held skinny, screaming Elizabeth over the toilet bowl and lopped off her hair.

I watched Elizabeth brush her hair five mornings a week, using the brushes I bought her for Christmas. Then I'd hear her click out the door and along the sidewalk by the cactus. Her car purred in the parking lot beneath the bedroom window, then whisked into traffic and was gone.

Myself, I drove a clunker, only wore jeans, and didn't sleep until the birds mocked the dawn. In my work, I set my own hours. I owned one house that I rented out, and I was fixing up another. I also wrote. So it didn't matter if I stood in front of the refrigerator in the middle of the night, wearing sweat pants, eating yogurt, trying to decipher the spastic groans that seeped through the ventilation fan from next door.

I seldom missed them and Elizabeth seldom missed me. It used to be she'd wake at my every turn. That was a long time ago, however, before she took her job to heart, before she became like one of those, well. . . .

One night she must have had to pee or get a drink or something. She had stumbled half-eyed into the kitchen and there I was, pressing my ear on a glass against the wall. I heard faint echoes of "you dirty bastard," "you rotten whore," interspersed with various grunts and groans.

Elizabeth must have watched for several minutes without me knowing it. She was sneaky that way, always wanting to know if I was regular, or where I banked, or if my father ever beat me. Looking back, I can imagine how she would have stood there,

breathing hard through her slender nose, her arms folded across her short, pink bathrobe. She'd push blonde hair behind her ears with an automatic hand. Her nostrils would flare and her eyes harden.

"You're really sick." You could tell she meant it by the quiet way she said it.

I started and she walked away, not even caring if the neighbors were talking about us. She probably thought I was perverted, but hell, how could I be? I was in my own kitchen, and writers need to know all sorts of stuff. Elizabeth said I used writing as an excuse. I thought about all that.

I thought about how much I hated arguing with her too. It made my head buzz and stomach churn, like those modern poetry classes I took in college and didn't understand. I always felt I was in the wrong room, and kept checking my schedule, all through the semester. I got the same unsettled feeling whenever I argued with Elizabeth; it gnawed, as if there was something I was supposed to know, but didn't.

Maybe she just argued for the sake of it, just to get an adrenalin rush. I don't know, but we were usually too angry after we argued to even talk. She said she knew one day I'd hurt her. How can you argue with a mind like that? I even thought about going in the bedroom and teaching her a lesson, but I didn't. I just swept the broken glass from the linoleum.

One day, it must have been March, the Kliban character and the girl were gone. Perhaps they were sucked into some other world when the cartoon axis shifted. I don't know. All I remember is coming home from collecting rents and they weren't there.

The house I owned was a big two-story with a weak porch and bad plumbing. It was a bargain, and I did most of the repairs myself, dividing it into four apartments, covering the holes with paneling, increasing the property value \$15,000. I planned to make a killing.

When I came home that day I was pretty stoned from smoking a joint I found in one of my tenant's apartments. She was a nurse and sort of pretty. She had green eyes and red hair, freckles and large breasts. She smiled a lot, but there was something melancholy about it, as if she cried every time she made love. She worked the intensive care unit at University Hospital, about five blocks away, and you would have thought she'd be more callous.

The day I found the joint I also found a picture she had stuck away at the bottom of a trunk, beneath her winter clothes and scrap

books. In the picture she wore her nurse's hat, white stockings, a garter, and nothing else. She was sitting backwards on a kitchen chair in a spot of sunshine. It was probably taken by her old boyfriend, a real ass who burned all the clothes she left at his apartment when she moved. The picture made me itch inside. I had a copy made and got the original back just before she got home.

She knew I was excited to see her, but nothing much came of it. I figured she was the kind who would want the rent lowered or the deposit back, or she'd call, depressed, in the middle of the night. I thought about evicting her, but the rental market was tight.

When I got home Elizabeth was waiting, excited and half drunk. Her make-up was mussed. Her hair was tousled. She said she'd just been promoted to assistant director for development at Video-Tech. She designed advanced communications systems. Systems so instant there's no time for tempered replies, for second thoughts.

"Hey, that's great," I said, and she jumped all over me for not being excited enough. I hated it when she drank because, more than usual, she heard what she wanted, not what was said.

I think Elizabeth was respected, but not too popular at work. The other women could see she was obsessed with success, which means they thought she was a bitch. The guys probably felt threatened by this attractive, intelligent woman, but wanted to screw her anyway.

When the promotion was made formal the next Friday, I met her at a bar near downtown. It was cool and smoky inside, and French doors opened on an enclosed courtyard with a fountain. There were vines on the walls, a gay bartender, and wicker everywhere.

There were also about two dozen people she worked with out on the patio. They lounged about the fountain with their ties loosened and their vests unbuttoned. Never had I seen so many guys who went to the same barber and tailor, and so many women with short, tortured hair and smiles. What really pissed me off though, was that they were younger and doing better than me, and I was just 29.

I sat quietly, picking at the hem of my jeans and drinking beer. Maybe I was pouting a little too. It wasn't often Elizabeth invited me out with her friends. She kept looking as if she expected me to do something stupid. Then someone said something and she laughed, tossing back her head, her long hair shimmering in the late day sun that reached the courtyard.

I felt wretched, as if they all knew the punchline and I hadn't even heard the joke. But there was consolation. I was consoled by the fact that one day they'd all be dead too.

We were the up-and-comers. Especially Elizabeth. She even looked the part, buying a new wardrobe of tailored suits and cutting her hair short, despite my protests. I used to love the way it fanned over the pillow, like a golden nimbus, when we made love.

"You don't have to take care of it," she told me.

"I know that," I said, walking around her, "but who'd you let cut it, your mother?"

"You're sick," she sneered.

"I'm sorry. Your hair really does look nice." She just couldn't take a joke.

I don't think she believed me. She went to the bathroom. She may have cried. I don't know.

That night she cleaned out her closet and threw away all of her old clothes, including her jeans and denim cut-offs. The cut-offs that had just enough room for me to slip my hand up the leg.

She wore them the time we went to Disneyworld, about four years ago, right after she graduated from college. We rode the little train that goes around the park that night. The last seat of the last car of the next-to-last train. It was cool and black and like being on the edge of a ferris wheel, circling all those bright colors and laughter. We were the only passengers, and I knelt in front of her and we made love, chugging slowly around the edge of fantasy.

After she cleaned out the closet, I dug the cut-offs out of the trash bin.

It wasn't long after that we unplugged our phone and moved to a duplex in the foothills. We bought a second TV and got the super cable hook-up with remote control. I suggested a trip, mentioned marriage. She talked about a satellite dish.

We'd sit for hours without talking.

Things were going good though. I even published a story and made an offer on another house. I was writing every day too, using the spare bedroom for an office. The picture of Joyce was on the wall, the dictionary, atlas, and almanac beside the blue typewriter.

The house was single-story, connected bedroom to bedroom, and sat on a rise on the western edge of town. The ceilings were low and the beams exposed, the curtain rods looked like Indian spears, and one living room wall was panelled with rough-hewn wood. The driveway wound through scrubland. There were mountains behind us, and in front we could see the city, stretching to distant peaks. The duplex was surrounded by saguaros, prickly pears, and creosote bushes that had tiny yellow blossoms in the summer.

Under the glowing desert moon, which looked like a child's night light, the landscape looked extra-terrestrial. Odd spiny arms



and fuzzy blobs stood in stark relief against the night sky. Javalinas—mild-tempered wild pigs—rooted among the shadows. There were owls in the distance. Coyotes chased jackrabbits through the brush.

That's when the neighbors fought. At night.

Her name was Marian. She was beautiful. Dark, Madonna hair and eyes. Firm, high breasts. Soft, fine hair on her forearms. She wore peach string bikini underwear, and I always meant to steal a pair from the washline.

His name was Lane. Shaggy dark hair and a bandit's moustache. A cashew-shaped scar on his chin.

We had just moved in and I was sitting by the back door, watching the sun set in an orange corona behind the mountains. A blue Rambler crunched up to their door and when they got out I said howdy. Lane nodded. He didn't offer to shake hands.

I think Marian was a reporter. Lane, I'm sure, played saxophone. We could hear the tortured instrument. O O O O that Shakespherian Rag—It's so elegant. So intelligent.

That's the same sound Marian made when she came. O O O O. Four times. Never more. But for every cry of O O O O, three feet from our bed, there were cries of "you fucking worm, you should die. You'll pay for this! I swear Lane, you'll pay!"

It was a regular performance. At first, we thought they were just rehearsing. A grotesque young George and Martha.

Sometimes things whacked against the wall, but it didn't wake me. I was already listening, hands folded under my head, eyes blinking at the shadows the lace curtains made on the ceiling.

Were they throwing plates, vases, books? Squishing grapefruit into each other's face? Once, I threw a pillow at Elizabeth. Another time I put her over my knee, lifted her skirt, and spanked her. She seemed to enjoy it until she gave it some thought. Then she verbally brutalized me for being violent.

"It's erotic," I told her, "I sort of enjoy it."

"Someday you'll enjoy beating me too," she said, then rolled over to end the argument. I went to the bathroom that night and sat on the edge of the cold, hard tub, wondering what had happened.

I still didn't think I had changed. I did the same things she used to love, except now she said I didn't know the difference between childish and childlike.

Once she laughed when I ate a carnation off a restaurant table. The other night she shuddered when I asked the waiter to bring ice for my Beaujolais.

Do you have to suck the bottom of the Eegee's cup? Do you have to sing so loud? One night she kicked me out of bed for wearing a

Spiderman mask. When she started reading *Forbes* and *Town and Country*, I picked up the subscriptions to *Rolling Stone*, *Cosmo*, and *Mad*.

There was another crack against the wall and it chased the thoughts. Elizabeth twisted on the bed beside me.

She groaned and whispered, "Those jerks. Why do people like that even stay together? It's disgusting."

Lane boomed, "You goddamn bitch."

I always hoped for something different, with a little more class. Elizabeth and I didn't yell and swear. We'd thrust and parry, sneak and strike. The morons, however, seldom delivered.

Bitch, whore, bastard, scum, worm.

"What about the \$600 from when we moved in?" he screamed.

There were the usual sobs, the heaving, the gasped cries, then the smack of a calloused palm against a finely boned cheek.

I could feel Elizabeth tremble.

"My mother paid the deposit. It's my apartment!"

"Goddamn your mother, bitch!"

"Get out of the apartment, now!"

Another smack, a shriek, and Elizabeth doubled up as if she had been whapped in the stomach. I touched her shoulder and she shivered away. I whispered that I loved her, I was sorry, that I'd never treat her like that. She curled into a ball and I returned to the edge of the bed. Doors slammed. There was a scraping sound in the next bathroom. Then all was silent, except for Elizabeth's breathing and the perking of my heart. I was excited and sick. I looked at Elizabeth's back and thought of rescuing Marian.

Had he jabbed the dagger between her ribs, finding the heart and lungs like an expert? Was she lying on the cool bathroom tiles, her dark hair spread out, blood trickling from her mouth?

How I preferred the squeaky warning of the bedsprings followed by the O O O O that sparkled through me. How I preferred physical contact to physical violence. But the last time I touched Elizabeth she said "You can make love to me if you want, but don't mind if I don't participate." I had almost forgotten the exquisite pain of pleasure. We had become water. Totally indifferent, always seeking the easiest path. Elizabeth and I, we needed a flood, like the floods that rush over smooth rocks in the Rincon Mountains and fill clear pools.

Elizabeth,  
I dream of  
your pink self  
moist before my tongue

the softest touch of  
 moss  
 on a baby's fingers.  
 You  
 around me  
 around you  
 tumbling  
 into a mirror pool.  
 Rocks smooth  
 from thousands of rains  
 from lovers  
 fitted perfectly into niches.

It was still in the typewriter when she came home with the newspaper folded under her arm like a riding crop. She put the paper and her keys on the desk and leaned over the machine, reading while she unbuttoned her jacket and stepped from her shoes. At first there was a hint of the forgotten smile on her lips. Then the color drained from her face. I wasn't sure why, but I knew I had screwed up, the way a cat knows fear. She watched the news in silence, ate something frozen for dinner, and said yes and no to my questions. She was in bed by 7:10.

I sat in the living room until the last light had been sucked into the west. Then I gently opened the bedroom door, stepped across the darkness, and sat on the edge of the bed. She was sitting up, I could tell by her breathing. I reached my hand out for her. She shirked away.

In the darkness I could hear her dry lips briefly stick before she said, quietly, as if she didn't want the neighbors to hear, "This is the last straw. You know that's not us. You're sick. I don't want what you've written for others. I don't want the sordid details flung in my face."

"Who was it, the nurse? I don't even want to know. How could you? Don't blame me for being cold about this. . . ."

"But it's. . . ."

". . . I want you to move out. I've had enough."

". . . a fiction. . . ."

"I want you out!"

". . . it's all a dream. . . ."

"Out!"

Like a warped record on a bad stereo, the voice dragged out in an ether dream. A mournful saxophone rag in a tiled subway



corridor. Love becomes hate becomes loneliness becomes longing.

Seven months later.

There's another beleaguered cactus in front of my city apartment. But I return to higher ground.

It's warm tonight. The soft breeze blowing up from Mexico carries the yip of coyotes down from the shadow mountains.

City lights reach up to the stars. Stars glow through the branches of the creosote bush that shrouds the rock where I sit, smoking. The branches are webbed with spidery weavings. They glow in the night.

The night smells like—nothing.

The bedroom light is on in Lane and Marian's apartment. Somehow, they manage. . .

O O O O

. . . but to each his own.

What shall I do? What shall I ever do?

I'll wait.

Elizabeth will be home soon. She'll walk into the bedroom, step from her slip, slide between cool sheets. The bed is beneath the window. Tonight the blue moon will pour over her as she twists into a cocoon.

And I'll wait in this creosote womb, smoking, patiently, watching the black widows weave their traps, just as Arachne wove her doom. I've counted a dozen. A dozen fat, black oblongs, each with eight slender legs, weaving and spinning, branch to branch, a dozen tangled webs.

By morning, there will be only one.□