

Dennis McFadden

The Shamrock Saloon

Teddy Fitzgerald was a rich kid. His father had invented a new hybrid of rose, though Pags never knew, and never cared, whether horticulture was the reason for his wealth, or a hobby he was able to indulge because of it. All he knew was that Teddy was rich and loud, particularly when drinking and showing off for friends, exactly the conditions under which he approached Pags that evening some twenty years before.

Pags was waiting for a friend under the streetlight in front of the Shamrock Saloon on Main Street in Greenwich, a quiet little village in upstate New York. Teddy came up behind him and walloped him on the back, hard, knocking Pags into the street. It was so unexpected and flagrant — though Teddy was born obnoxious, Pags had never seen him openly belligerent — that his first reaction was that Teddy, obviously hammered, must have tripped on the uneven sidewalk and tumbled into him accidentally. He was soon disabused of that notion. Teddy was all over him, apologizing loudly, profusely, all the while shoving Pags backwards. Pags juked away and headed for the door of the Shamrock Saloon. *Whatsa matter, Pagano, you don't want to accept my apology?* Teddy shouted, his friends milling about the sidewalk, half ashamed, half amused, entirely incredulous. Maybe it had been a dare, Pags thought later, maybe a bet to pick a fight with the first person he saw; maybe he hadn't been singled out at all, except by fate.

Teddy was a year behind him, taller, handsomer, a linebacker; Pags was a second-baseman, a scrawny one at that, his nose too small for his face and hair like a crop of withered weeds. Pags fled into the bar. Even though his mind told him this was the moral high ground, that he was right not to get drawn in, not to retaliate physically, not to be baited into an ungodly street brawl (one he was bound to lose) by a rich, drunken punk, his gut nevertheless called him a coward—not only that night, but every single time the memory resurfaced.

His humiliation was mitigated a week later by the grander fate that awaited Teddy. According to eyewitnesses, a young lady was granting sexual favors to her boyfriend in the front seat of his car, visible only to a trucker passing by high in the cab of his semi.

The trucker, understandably distracted, failed to see Teddy in his blue Monte Carlo stopped at the light. The resulting collision sent Teddy into the middle of the intersection where another tractor-trailer on the crossing highway squashed his Monte Carlo like a bug. Teddy's funeral featured a closed casket.

Though he was gone, Teddy's name lived on. For years Pags's friends, whether conceding to him on his choice of which game to watch, which bar to go to, how to play this hitter or that, acquiesced with the expressed fear of being *Fitzgeralded* if they didn't.

Twenty years later, Pags and his wife went to a cook-out. Every year Freddie Matson and his wife, Carol, hosted one for his office, Matson Insurance, where Stacy worked. Pags had managed to avoid the last two—or the first two, as far as they were concerned, Stacy having worked there for three years now — but this year he'd acquiesced. It was time he got to know his wife's boss a little better.

Freddie called the place his "camp": a sprawling white house with green shutters, tucked among the maples above a bend in the Battenkill, a wrap-around, screened-in porch, manicured landscape, surround-sound in every room, a 60-inch flat-screen, a walk-in shower the size of a small room. Pags recognized disingenuous, backhanded boasting when he heard it, but it had the desired effect on Freddie's guests: *Man, if this is your camp, I'd hate to see what your house looks like. Man, I sure could get used to roughing it here.*

Pags said nothing. He watched the face of his wife, Stacy, glowing with excitement. Glowing with pride. Almost as if in ownership.

A beautiful August afternoon, bright sun, green grass, deep pools of shade from the trees by the lazy, low, rocky stream. Down across the lawn, six or seven kids were kicking a soccer ball around — an abomination. Pags would sooner watch paint dry than watch a game of soccer. In fact, he often did watch paint dry, or lacquer anyway, on his bats, the baseball bats he crafted in the workshop out behind his house. If it didn't involve a baseball, bat and glove, it wasn't a sport. He recognized April, Matson's kid, but not the others. He didn't know many of the people there, though Stacy knew them all, employees of Matson Insurance and their families, a well-dressed, buttoned-down breed that was alien to Pags and his blue collar. Stacy was an administrative

assistant. Pags was a carpenter. He'd designed his own business cards: *Al Pagano, Cabinetmaker / Baseball Bat Maker*.

On the patio, Freddie was manning the grill, steaks on fire, smoke and sizzle and bluster. Freddie was a cliché, tall, dark and handsome, artful, black wavy hair, close-set black eyes full of light. His wife, Carol, stood beside him, a tall woman, tall as her husband but wider, a certain equine proportion to her long face. He'd known her much longer than he'd known Freddie; she and Pags had gone to school together. Stacy gave Carol a hug, standing high on her tiptoes to do so, then circumspectly shook Freddie's hand, smiling as though at an inside joke.

As though they'd never hugged before, thought Pags.

"How do you like your steak?" Freddie shouted, even though Pags was two feet away.

Pags shouted back, "Like my women — thick and tender and smothered in onions."

Freddie laughed, too long and too hard. Carol chuckled. Stacy smiled.

On a table beneath a canopy sat a glistening bowl of shrimp sweating on ice, along with other assorted, unidentifiable hors d'oeuvres — not a chip, dip or peanut to be seen. Pags took a Yuengling from the sea of ice in a large gleaming tub, a cornucopia of bottles and cans. After he'd judged that pleasantries enough had been exchanged, he asked Freddie if he minded if he took the 60-inch flat-screen for a spin, explaining that the Mets were on, as if that were all the explanation needed. Freddie was gracious. He called his daughter away from her soccer game on the lawn and told her to fetch the remote for Mr. Pagano.

The living room was dim, cool and quiet, an oasis from the party blaze. Pags sank into a couch so plush he feared he might go under. Looking up as April handed him the remote, he was surprised by the frown, by the look of naked disgust in the big brown teenage eyes.

"What?" he said. "What'd I do?"

"Like you don't know," she said, turning on her heel, stomping back outside, leaving him grateful that he and Stacy had never had kids.

"Soccer's not a real game!" he shouted after her.

Having had too much to drink, he let Stacy drive home that night. They'd stayed late, well past dark, and were among the last to leave. Pags and his Yuenglings had stayed mostly in the living room watching baseball, mostly alone. Stacy'd been content to

let him be. He supposed she'd been happy enough just to get him there in the first place—the last two years he'd dismissed it out of hand — and she was certainly used to having a reclusive husband by now, all the hours he spent by himself in his workshop. Still, he was mildly surprised there was not even so much as a hint of reproach all afternoon, or all the way home.

The countryside flickered by in the headlights, the woods, the odd farmhouse, the cornfields turning crisp and brown. “You know, you can use cruise-control here,” Pags said.

“I don't like cruise-control.”

“It's a good idea when you've been drinking. Keeps you from speeding.”

“It doesn't feel like you're really driving if you use cruise-control.”

He thought about it for a moment. “It doesn't feel like you're really washing clothes if you don't take 'em down to the creek and beat 'em on a rock, does it?”

“Wise-ass,” she said, not sparing him a glance.

They passed the mill on the river at the outskirts of Greenwich, headlights skimming the white foam on the water, and he told her to slow down where the streetlamps commenced, and the speed limit dropped, and the cops often waited in ambush. She said nothing, though her jaw might have tensed, whether with added focus, or annoyance at his backseat driving he couldn't say. On Main, they drove by the Shamrock Saloon, now a non-descript, beat-up old bar in a hundred-year-old building that had once been a grand hotel. Pags had spent many an hour there, the scene of his first legal beer, the place where many a game was celebrated, or lamented, or replayed, a solitary getaway just as often—only a fifteen-minute walk from his house on John Street. But he could never see the place without thinking of Teddy Fitzgerald and what happened there twenty years before.

“What's that song,” she said, “you know the one, something about waltzing with the man in the moon, something like that? Oh, what is it?”

“You have to give me a little more to go on, Stace.”

“It's running through my mind . . . *waltz with the man in the moon* . . . *across the floor of the Shamrock Saloon* . . . something like that. It was by . . . oh, what was the name of that band?” She tried humming an uncertain tune.

“Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?” Pags said. “Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

She took a lot of kidding for her memory. She squeezed the wheel in frustration, stamping her foot at that damned, recalcitrant factoid that refused to be coaxed from her brain — one in a long line of lost memories. It never helped.

Pags watched her driving. He normally drove, seldom saw her behind the wheel. He studied her. A small woman, spine stiff and straight, scarcely touching the back of the seat, she squinted straight ahead through her thick glasses. She drove clenched, two-handed.

He can still see her driving that night, in the ambient glow of the headlights, humming in distress, driving so earnestly, so sincerely, as if the fate of the world depended on it.

It was the last time he saw her drive. Had he known what would happen, he would have said something. Done something. Touched her knee. Something. Protected her.

Ow! Grab it hard and squeeze it! had been Stacy's exclamation when Pags, crossing his legs, had cracked his shin on a crosspiece under the restaurant table on one of their early dates. *Grab it hard and squeeze it* had since become their esoteric motto, with varying inflections, although the it in question never again referred to a shin. After they got home from Freddie Matson's cookout on the Battenkill, Pags, beer-weary, sleepy, went straight to bed. When Stacy soon joined him, sans her usual pajamas, he was not surprised when her arm came across his chest, and she breathed into his ear, "Want me to grab it hard and squeeze it?"

On another early date, around the time their motto was born, she'd stood in the soft light of her bedroom, posing in a meager nightie, and said, "I've been told I have a statuesque body," smiling, glowing with pride. Pags agreed. She had a lovely, classically proportioned figure, small, eager breasts, firm, shapely bottom, though her gorgeous body was not entirely at peace with her slightly funny face, thick glasses, overbite, and straight, brown, ordinary hair. But her announcement of it, her need for affirmation, her insecurity, made him feel sad and protective. It was the moment he knew he would marry her.

This night, after the cook-out, after she'd coaxed and teased, after they'd made love, the normal time for easy sleep, she still was reluctant to give up the day.

"I was talking to Freddie today while you were inside." Not a newflash. "I was telling him what a great carpenter you are. He's thinking about having some work done."

“He could use it. His jowls are starting to sag.”

She sighed, wiggled away an inch. “You know, this is why I can never talk to you.”

Pags countered with a sigh of his own. “What kind of work?”

“A new bathroom. I told him you’d give him a price.”

“Where? At his camp or at his house?”

“At his house. Though he’s thinking about redoing the kitchen in the camp, too.”

Pags thought about it for a moment. “He really does have too much fucking money.”

“So why don’t we take some of it off his hands?”

“I like that idea. A heist. An inside job. You can be my man on the inside.”

“Better — overcharge him. He’ll hire you no matter what price you give him.”

“What makes you think so?”

“He has to keep me happy. I’m the one that holds that place together.”

“Little ol’ Stacy Pagano holds Matson Insurance together?”

“He can’t do without me.”

“You sound awfully cock-sure.”

A Stacy giggle. “Trust me,” she said.

Those two words caused a lightness in his belly, a bubble that floated quickly up to his head, bringing dizziness. *In Stace We Trust*. The little girl beside him, naked and statuesque, boldly trying her wings, flying blind without her glasses.

She wanted to invite the Matsons to dinner, to repay their hospitality. Pags just bet she did. He wasn’t surprised. What did surprise him a bit was her wanting to invite her mother too, at the same time, for the same dinner, in the same house.

“What?” Stacy said. “She can help me in the kitchen.”

“The last time you and Betty were both in the kitchen together,” Pags said, “it was an iron cage death match.”

“It was not.”

“You were in tears.”

“I was not.”

“At the least you were whimpering and sucking your thumb.”

“Maybe a little bit,” she said. “Wise-ass.”

It was complicated. Stacy had been a daddy’s girl, she and her mother constantly vying for her father’s affections, and ever since his death at the age of only fifty, the mother-daughter relation-

ship had been, without its anchor, free-floating and ill-defined. Pags liked to think of his wife and his mother-in-law as *free spirits*, although *whack-jobs* was a fair-enough alternate description.

John Moore had been a big, barrel-chested man with a booming voice he employed to good effect as manager of the Witches, Pags's over-25 baseball team back in the day. A handsome man despite his coke-bottle-bottom glasses (Stacy had inherited his eyesight), he'd been well regarded in the community right up until his untimely death. Afterwards, not as much.

He'd owned a small construction company, and one of his backhoes had turned on him, with tragic results. Sudden, sad and shocking, but another shock lay in store after they'd rushed him to the hospital: There they'd discovered he was wearing women's underwear. Silk panties, pale yellow.

Betty claimed to have no knowledge of her husband's hidden sartorial proclivities; she was as shocked and surprised as everyone else. Stacy, though, was never quite sure if she believed her. Word had spread like a kindergarten cold, as small-town word is wont to do, to lasting effect on his father-in-law's reputation. He became a punch-line.

Don't get your panties in a bunch! wasn't a new exclamation by any means, but the fresh addendum, *Like John Moore did*, certainly was — followed by the glances down the bar at the Shamrock Saloon to see if Pags, whom they'd forgotten was there, had overheard. He had. Other times, hushed whispers and snickers by a gaggle of drinking men, followed by the casual, unobtrusive glances Pags's way, betrayed the subject of their amusement. Pags reacted to these incidents with a mental shrug. Boys will be boys. Although, as in his father-in-law's case, maybe not always.

Whatever gets you through the night, was Pags's philosophy.

Stacy was more high-strung, not so equanimous. How much the revelation about her father might have tipped her already teetering equilibrium, her already precarious temperament, Pags couldn't judge. Though he did worry.

Once, in bed, she'd said, "You don't think he was gay, do you?" She was nestled onto his shoulder. They hadn't been talking about her father, but he knew who she meant.

"Not usually," he said. "He usually seemed pretty grumpy to me."

She gave him a shove. "You asshole."

"What's the difference? So what if he was?"

“So what?”

“Yeah. So what? If it made him happy. Live and let live.”

He was of course aiming to put her mind at ease. The thought of two men having sex utterly repulsed Pags, made him queasy, but he was open-minded enough to not think about it. To live and let live.

“But it didn’t,” she said after a while. “It didn’t make him happy.”

When Betty arrived, well in advance of the Matsons, she hugged her daughter and greeted Pags with a kiss on the mouth — not a romantic kiss by any means, a quick peck, but still enough to unnerve both Pags and Stacy, a custom of her mother’s that always had. Once he’d suggested to Stacy that he might slip her a little tongue to cure her of the habit, but Stacy had failed to see the humor, and Pags wondered if maybe she thought it might not cure Betty, only encourage her.

“You’re wearing that?” was the first thing she said to Stacy upon entering the house. Stacy was wearing tight white shorts, moderately high heels, a hot pink blouse. Betty, a slender woman, still attractive on the verge of her senior years, wore a navy cocktail dress and a necklace of what appeared to be miniature sea shells, overdressed as usual, wearing too much make-up as usual. Pags could still taste the lipstick.

“Yes, I’m wearing this,” Stacy said. “Are you wearing that?”

“Are you going to change?”

“No. I am not going to change.”

“Stay as sweet as you are,” Pags offered.

“I thought you said your boss was coming,” Betty said.

Pags stayed out of it. In his clean blue jeans and dressiest Mets tee shirt, he didn’t think either of them was particularly appropriately dressed.

When the women went to the kitchen to continue their bickering, he went upstairs to the spare bedroom, the guest room that seldom saw a guest. The second TV was there, a cheap little set; it was where he went to watch baseball when Stacy was watching *American Idol* or some other equally inane reality fare on the flat-screen (much smaller than the Matson’s) down in the living room. He’d squeezed in a comfortable, albeit somewhat battered, easy chair, though usually he stretched out on the bed. Sunlight through the window fell across the ancient varnish of the sill, across the room a cluster of dust mites floated, and for a while it was quiet. There were heaps of pillows and cushions, ex-

cess blankets and bedspreads, a comfortable clutter. The window overlooked the little front yard on John Street. Betty's car, a big black Jeep, was parked two feet from the curb. He considered retreating for a while to his workshop in the converted garage out back before the Matsons arrived, but he knew he'd start working if he did, and he'd only get dirty again.

Not with company coming. Not with such special company coming. Pags was anxious to see how Freddie and his wife interacted together in captivity.

When he finally heard a car door slam out front, he went to the window. Stacy hurried outside to greet them on the walk, before they were out of their SUV, a white Cadillac Escalade, giving Carol a perfunctory hug, all but ignoring Freddie and his Cheshire Cat grin — a little too pointedly ignoring him, thought Pags. Chattering happily, she led them up the little walk toward the house. Freddie looked tipsy already. Pags couldn't hear the words, could only see the smiles, on the faces of Freddie and Stacy, at least. Carol, a step behind them, was not smiling, nor looking at Stacy — upon whom her husband's eyes were glued — but was looking instead at the house, searching the front windows for signs of life.

Pags stepped back. Not until they'd disappeared under his view, and he heard the front door rattle, heard Stacy's animated introductions to her mother, the commotion in the hallway, did the street-side rear door of the Escalade open.

April emerged, having concluded that she'd been abandoned.

Stacy called up the stairs, "They're here!" but he lingered at the window, watching the girl. April glanced at the front of the house, as her mother had, but without curiosity, without expectation, with only a glower of dread, a touch of familiar disgust. Then she turned her attention back to the phone in her hand, her thumbs commencing their earnest busyness.

After the first wave or two of banal chatter had passed at dinner, Freddie said, "So, Stacy tells me you make bats."

Pags's mouth was full of potato salad. "Yes," he said. "*Baseball* bats. Not the kind that hang around caves."

"Since when do you care about bats, pops?" said April, twiddling her fork in her cole slaw, staring at her phone beside her plate.

"Well I'd certainly like to know more about it. Piques my interest, you could say."

"It's called making conversation, dear," said Carol.

"So," Freddie said, looking at Pags, "wooden bats, I take it.

I'm sure aluminum bats are anathema to a purist like yourself."

"Anathema?" Pags said. "Is that anything like an enema?"

A titter of laughter, even a reluctant snicker from April, though Betty's was the rowdiest. "A baseball bat up the old wazoo!"

Pags went to the living room and fetched a bat, one of the three mounted over the mantel of the faux fireplace. "Impressive," said Freddie, holding the thing in his hands, turning it, feeling the sheen. "How do you get this . . . this intricate design like this?"

"It's a laminated bat," Pags said. "Those are alternating pieces of maple and ash."

"I'd hate to hit a ball with it," Freddie said. "It's too pretty."

"Let me see it," said Carol.

From hand to hand the bat went around the table, touched, admired, reverently examined. Pags felt a swell of pride. For a moment he allowed himself to believe they might actually realize the extent of the effort that had gone into the crafting of the thing, the hours, the sweat, the frustration, the love.

The bat made its way back to Freddie. "I gotta hand it to you," he said, and he did, making a show of handing the bat back to Pags. No one laughed, which Freddie took as a sign to turn serious. He sipped his wine, a gulp. "I like baseball. Never played much when I was a kid, but I used to watch it sometimes. Got too busy though, I guess."

"You can never be too busy," Pags said. "That's the beauty of it. There's always time. It's the only sport where there's no clock. It's timeless."

"I'll say," Stacy said. "Some of those games seem to take forever."

"Oh, my God," Betty said. "We sat through so many of them when John was managing the Witches. They seemed endless."

"Endless. Timeless. Is there a difference?" Carol said.

"Whoa," said Freddie, "Carol from out of left field—no pun intended—deep question, blow my mind." He made a *ka-boom* sound, his fingers miming an explosion from his head.

"There is a difference," said Pags. "The game's over when the last man's out. That's when the timelessness ends."

"My God," Freddie said. "I don't know if I can wrap my mind around that concept."

"You're drunk, Freddie," said Carol.

Freddie cocked his head. "I don't know if I can wrap that concept around my mind."

April said, "You're drunk, pops."

"How could this have happened?" Freddie, center stage. Pags was watching Stacy, the anticipatory smile, waiting for the next gem to fall from Freddie's mouth, when he noticed Carol watching him watch her, watching, in fact, in much the same, sly manner. They made eye contact, a meaningful glance, though Pags had no idea what the meaning was.

They'd been friends since — what? Seventh grade? Sixth? Somewhere around then. He remembered the first time he'd really noticed her, in ninth grade English, Mrs. Strock quizzing them about the reading assignment, *Ivanhoe*. Pags wondered who Carol was talking about, this *bree-on du-bwah gil-bare* character, when Mrs. Strock had pointed out, delightedly, that of all her students, only Carol was properly pronouncing the French name of Brian DuBois-Gilbert. Carol had taken no end of teasing from the boys after that, lame, French-themed teasing, from French fries to French kissing to French ticklers, but Pags had been impressed. Senior year, they'd been on the prom committee together. Conversations about their dads, whose drinking and cluelessness they had in common to endure. Dating problems. Lettuce in the teeth, gravy on the lap. She taught him a new word: halitosis. Never romantically involved, he and Carol. Never the closest of friends, but more than mere acquaintances.

Now here they sat, years on, around an unlikely table amid unlikely companions, sharing a secret moment, and somehow it all came around again for Pags, this timelessness thing.

Freddie said, "I may be drunk, but I know what I like. I know a beauty when I see it." He looked at Stacy. "How much do you want for that bat, Pags?"

"Now what the heck would you do with that bat, Freddie?" Pags said.

Freddie said, "When we were kids, we used to toss rocks in the air and see how far we could knock 'em." Looking at Pags, pausing, grinning. "You'd probably kill me."

"Oh, not for that," Pags said. This was met with titters by the three ladies at the table, titters that weren't quite sure of themselves, couldn't quite gain their footing.

April looked up from her phone, glaring at Pags with a meaningful frown.

For dessert, Betty served her famous cupcakes, to the usual heaps of praise. Pags couldn't help it: Every time he saw Betty taking her bow in the spotlight, he couldn't help but picture her wearing men's underwear, gaudy, polka-dot boxer shorts, under

her perky cocktail dress. It was a recurring image, and he wondered sometimes if he should share it with his wife, if it might be therapeutic to her, but thus far he'd resisted. The jury was still out on Stacy's stability.

He asked if anybody wanted to see his workshop. Much to his surprise, April was the only taker. Freddie said he was allergic to sawdust and manual labor. Stacy pointed out that he never wanted her or her mother to set foot in there.

"Not *unattended*," Pags responded. "It's okay on a guided tour. If I let you in there by yourself, I'd never be able to find my table saw again."

When Pags, Yuengling in hand, ushered in April and switched on the light — it was windowless except for the three small panes in the garage door that never opened anymore — she said, "Wow," though by no means in an exclamatory manner. She looked around the room, sniffed the aroma of lacquer (like the smell of bourbon, Pags had always thought), and added, "What a mess."

"But an impressive mess," he said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh, sure." She kicked through the heaps of sawdust on the floor, the wood scraps, the abandoned pieces of bats here and there. "Don't you ever sweep up?"

"I tried it once. Didn't like it."

"It just gets dirty again," she said.

"Exactly."

"You spend a lot of time in here." Not really a question.

"Yeah," he said. "Me and Joe DiMaggio and some of the boys."

She crossed to the lathe and stood touching the cool metal, her other hand still clutching her phone. Standing with her back to him, she said, "You know my dad and your wife are doing it, don't you?"

She didn't turn. He shook his head as he might at a marauding mosquito. He took a long drink from his brown bottle, saying nothing. She was tall for fifteen, well on her way to her parents' height, but her shoulders, bare skin above her wide-necked shirt, touched by a fringe of brown hair, were slumped. Pags said nothing.

She finally turned around. Face lowered, big brown eyes peeking up, her mother's eyes. "Did you hear what I said?"

"What makes you think so?" he said.

"I've heard him on the phone. I've seen them with my eyes."

"Seen them doing it?"

A sour look crossed her face. Adults. "Not *doing* it."

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“Does your mom know?”

The slumping shoulders shrugged. “I don’t know. We don’t talk.”

Pags took another slug, staring at the girl who was growing more impatient by the second. Her face had gone red. “So?” she said.

His turn to shrug. “So, what do you want me to do about it?”

“*Stop it,*” she said, angry, stamping her flip-flop in the sawdust. “Make them *stop* it.”

“Easy,” he said. “Easy. Don’t get your panties in a bunch.” And when she looked at him, a bit horrified, he added, “Like John Moore did.”

A week later, a crisp morning smelling of fall, Pags knocked on the door of the Matson’s house on the outskirts of Greenwich, a modern, sprawling house, not quite a mansion though it had that aspiration. Across the valley just a hint of color was beginning to touch the trees, a distant farm, sun gleaming on a silo. He’d called to say he’d be out to estimate the bathroom job. Carol greeted him with a smile that tried to mean it, and there was tension, tension that normally might have been excused simply by virtue of the fact that it was probably the first time they’d ever actually been alone together in all the years they’d known each other. He held his tape in a clammy fist. When she asked if he’d like coffee, he asked if she knew about Stacy and Freddie.

“No,” she said. “Yes.”

She sat on the edge of the easy chair near the fireplace. He leaned back on the sofa as if settling in to watch a game. The cat came to kibbitz, a fat calico called Zsa Zsa, and Carol tried to call her away, but she snaked around Pags’s ankles, jumped up to his lap. Pags neither removed, nor petted her, despite the escalating rumble of purr.

He told Carol what April had said. Both Pags and Carol had suspected. They were fairly sure. They couldn’t be entirely certain.

Now what? They could not simply meet, declare their suspicions, then go their separate ways. Spy work, the gathering of evidence, proof, was considered and dismissed. Confrontation was the only way to go. Rip the Band-Aid off. Go bold or go home. She and Pags should confront them at the same time, Carol decided, together, so alibis and denials could not be considered and concocted and coordinated. They could meet for dinner again. So Pags could give them his price, they could say. They could spring their trap then.

“Now let’s think this through for a minute,” Pags said. “What if they’re innocent? What if it’s only some serious type of a flirting thing?”

“I will not tolerate that either. One way or other, it has to end.”

He picked Zsa Zsa up and put her on the floor. She jumped back up again. “It’s the other that worries me,” he said.

Wally’s was a venerable restaurant on Main, across the street from the Shamrock Saloon. When he told her they were going to meet the Matsons there, Stacy was excited. “Oh, goody!” she said, hopping, actually hopping, actually clapping her hands, “goody!” and he was touched by her childish delight, feeling villainous for luring the little girl to a favorite place only to ambush her there. Then he remembered: Wally’s had fallen out of favor the last few times they’d gone. She hadn’t liked it. Musty-smelling. Poor service. Overpriced. Disappointing food.

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Carol didn’t waste time. After drinks arrived, before they ordered—she told the waiter they’d need more time, and Pags, stomach roiling, muttered, *I’ll say* — she fixed Freddie in a cool gaze, then Stacy, then back to Freddie. “Pags and I have been talking,” she said. “As a matter of fact, the whole town has been talking. Word is that you two are having an affair.”

In one instant the world changed. Stacy wiping whiskey sour from her chin with her crimson napkin, Freddie taking deep breaths, his eyes scanning the horizon for escape routes, weathering Carol’s withering glare. Stacy’s face red, blistering red, and radiant, her eyes growing bigger behind her thick glasses, looking at Pags, filled with shock, filled with hurt, filled with betrayal — whether at betraying, at having been betrayed, he couldn’t say.

“Well,” Carol said. “I guess that answers that.”

Freddie reached for Stacy’s hand, gripped it as she tried to pull away, a fresh bout of panic on her face. “No,” Freddie said, “it’s not an affair. It might have started that way, a fling, but — we couldn’t help it, we fell in love.”

“Wait —” said Stacy.

“We’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you,” said Freddie.

“Sluts,” Carol said.

“We want to be together,” said Freddie. “It’s as simple as that.”

“There’s nothing simple about it!” said Stacy, standing, her red face awash behind her lenses. With a muffled sob, she fled across the room and out the door. Through the window they saw her hesitate. Freddie hurried after her.

They watched him take her hand, saw her pull it away, saw heated words they couldn’t hear, saw Stacy walk off briskly down Main toward her home on John, her pretty little bottom bouncing on her high, high heels.

Across the street, beyond Freddie, was the Shamrock Saloon. Freddie watched her walk away. Then he looked through the window for a moment at Pags and Carol inside, his face a glowing red shadow, a glower completely without conviction, and he too went off, in the opposite direction, toward where he’d parked the Escalade.

A moment of silence as they stared at the street.

Pags said, “Where the hell’s the waiter?” and Carol said, “I’m famished,” and they came this close to laughing.

After the waiter had approached the table like the captain of the bomb squad approaching an abandoned suitcase, they ordered, scallops for him, a steak, rare, for her, and damned if they didn’t eat, and drink, Merlot for her, Yuengling for him, and they talked about what would come next. Speculation, of course. Carol did not seem to envision a future with Freddie, although Pags wasn’t so sure about his with Stacy. His thoughts were skittery and jumbled. The scallops in his stomach felt as though they were dancing a polka.

After a while they were left with nothing but the Shamrock Saloon across the street, which they stared at, in silence, for some time.

“What was that guy’s name?” Carol finally said.

“Who? Teddy Fitzgerald?”

“Yes,” she said. “That was it — Fitzgeralded.”

Stacy was home when he got there. He could hear sad little sounds behind the closed bedroom door, but he didn’t knock, he didn’t call. Nor was he quiet; he made sure she knew he was home as he went to the spare bedroom and turned on the little TV. She should be the one to come to him. He waited and waited, watching the late game from the coast, the Dodgers and Padres, San Diego desperately needing a win, and for a while

it was timeless, there was no clock, there was nothing bearing down. Stacy never came. When the game was over, he decided to go to sleep, let her fret, see what the fresh light of a new day would bring, but it was he who fretted and tossed and could not sleep.

After a while he arose in the dim glow from the streetlight out front, and walked across the hall, and tapped on the bedroom door that was still closed. He tapped and called her name softly a few times before she answered: "Go away."

Pags, having taken the first step, already feeling aggrieved, took umbrage. "Me go away?" he said, albeit still softly. "You really think I'm the one who should go away?"

"Just go away," she said. The sniffles had not subsided. "All of you."

He did, back to the spare room, this time to sleep and let her stew. Though it was he who stewed. Again. Sleep still wouldn't come. When finally it nearly had, it was nipped in the bud by a bellow from outside the window.

"Stacy!" was the bellow. "Staa-cee!" Freddie, drunk in the street. "Stacy! I gotta talk to you! Stacy! Please!" More than a little bit slurred: *Sta-shee. Schta-see. Schta-shee*. Now and then he nearly got it right: *Stay — see!*

Pags went to the window. "Freddie — shut the fuck up."

"Pags," said Freddie, down by the hedge. "Pags," he said, searching the front of the house, unable to see Pags in the darkened window, "we never meant to hurt you. Or Carol."

"Get out of here. I'll call the cops."

"Pags, I can't. I love her. I love your wife."

He was about to say, *Well, she doesn't love you*, but he couldn't. He realized he couldn't. He went back to bed. He listened to the bellows and bawls for a while, heard an angry neighbor yell, and sooner than he expected, he heard other voices, gruff, mean, then opened his eyes to the red light flashing on the bedroom ceiling, listened to the cops take Freddie away, then the quiet.

Had Stacy even heard him? Not a sound from the hallway. Now the nighttime quiet, heavy and thick, filled his head. He was adrift in a toxic brew of tedium, sleep clawing at him. Not much later, he heard her whisper in the doorway. "Pags? Was that Freddie?"

"Your mother wears boxer shorts," he said, wide awake, but in a dream.

She came closer. "Do you hate me?"

"No," he said. Then added, "I don't think so."

"Do you know how sorry I am?"

"I don't think so."

"Can you forgive me?"

Later, afterwards, he wasn't sure if he responded as he did because he meant it, or simply because of the flow: "I don't think so," he said.

Later, afterwards, he'd have given anything to take those four words back.

She sat on the edge of the bed. Her back stiff and straight, clenched as though she were driving. He rolled away, toward the window. She said, "What are we going to do?"

"I don't *know* what I'm going to do. I don't know what *you're* going to do." He didn't know if there was a *we* any longer. He heard another snuffle. He thought he'd thought it through before. He thought he'd allowed for this possibility or that: If it wasn't true, fine, he could forgive her flirtatiousness, if it was true, not so fine, he could forgive her infidelity, eventually, but the price would be higher. Now it didn't seem so simple.

He said, "Do you love him?"

She didn't answer. He felt her shrug. He waited. Another soft snuffle.

It was not a no. It was far from a no. Which, in Pags's mind, was a deal-breaker, at least for now, at this minute, in the middle of this night in this odd little room where the streetlight glowed on the ceiling, and the bed was softer than it ought to be, and sleep was only an illusion, something that refused to come to his rescue.

He fell into a trance-like state, wanting only to sleep. She began to talk, and talked for a while, softly, trying to remember, asking Pags to help her, where was that place they went that weekend, not long after they were married, the place where they saw all those ducks — or were they geese? — on that pond out in the middle of nowhere. Oh, where was it? It was a staging area, it was spectacular, like something on the Nature Channel, the way they all took flight in perfect formation, even their wings flapping in unison, sun glittering on feathers, and the squabbling racket — oh, where the heck was it? When was it? Did he remember?

But he didn't answer, wanting only sleep, wanting only for it to be over.

At some point he sensed her leave, the sound of it no louder than her sigh.

Almost there. He awoke again when a car started, but only barely. He waited for it to pull away. And waited. But he fell asleep, finally, before it did. It never occurred to him.

It honestly never did.

He wasn't the one who found her. Next morning was bright. A knock on the door, an uproar. She'd rigged a vacuum hose from the tailpipe of her old clunker to the passenger-side window, stuffed towels in around it for a seal.

She'd taken off her glasses and put them on the dusty dashboard.

Limp as a rag doll. Relaxed at last behind the wheel.

*

Whenever he comes across Carol, less frequently now, at the Price Chopper, or at the mall in Saratoga, she invariably says to him some variation of this: "Isn't it amazing, this power you seem to have? Look at Freddie — he ended up Fitzgeralded, too." She's speaking of her ex-husband's decline, his slide into all-out alcoholism, the loss of his business and his esteem. His pitiful, whiny existence. Pags caught him once, drunk, after he'd broken into the house, searching for a picture, an artifact, a souvenir, anything that Stacy might have touched.

Carol never mentions her. At the funeral she paid her respects, gave Pags a hug, and by now, she must feel he's moved on, gotten through it. She probably wonders if he's seeing other women yet, maybe someone special, and must feel that surely he is. She might wonder if he's still enamored of his silly baseball bats.

What she has no way of knowing is that Pags's passion has lost a yard off its fastball. The days he spends crafting his bats, the hours he spends watching his games, seeing the ball leave the bat and soar in a majestic white arc over the green, pristine ball field, are no longer timeless. Stacy is there with them now, with Joltin' Joe, the Splendid Splinter, Stan the Man, and all the boys of summer.

The timelessness has been lost in her presence, the girl he couldn't protect, the girl who loved too much, there with him, waltzing with the man in the moon, slipping away, yawning, bored, itchy, anxious.