

Seeing Things

By Rick Maloy

The chatter of metal in the lock got Tommy to lower the binoculars and eyeball the door.

Barbara Jean shouldered into their tiny apartment, bag of groceries in her arm, trails of sweat glittering on her neck and blotchy, round face. Key clamped in her teeth, she squatted for a second bag, showing all of her flowery tramp-stamp and an inch of butt crack. She hipped the door shut and ran in a hunch toward the kitchen counter. One of the collapsing bags didn't make it. "Shit!" Cans of soup bumbled across the floor, stopping under the leg-platform of his wheelchair. "God almighty, Tommy, smells like something's dead in here. Thought you was gonna wash while I was out."

"I like when you do it."

Eyes closed tight, she wet a sponge at the sink and slid it around her face and neck. "Thought Swainsboro was hot in August," she said, tossing the sponge into the sink, "but this damn Atlanta...I mean to tell ya."

"Wanna peek, Barbara Jean? She's looking real good this morning." He stretched the binoculars to his wife, but kept the strap around his neck.

"Watch a whore tease a fool? I'll pass, thank you." Flip-flops slapped on her shuffle to the window. Dropping into a crouch, she hopped like a frog after the runaway cans. Along with another flash of tattoo, a bit of stomach squeezed from under her bare-midriff top, hiding her belt buckle under the flap. "And if you think I'm doing anything because you're all lathered up now, you are slap-dead wrong. I gotta get to work."

Frowning, he wiggled a finger at her. "Should you be wearing stuff like that anymore?"

"Like what?" She stood, cradled the cans under her small breasts, and scanned the windows across the street.

"Don't need to be advertising the goods any more is what I'm saying."

Slow, hip-throwing steps brought her next to him. "I'm eighteen. This is how we dress. Don't like it? Tough shit." She pinched at the shoulder of his Harley Davidson tee-shirt. "Where'd this come from?"

"Beau brought it yesterday. Pretty awesome, huh?"

"Damn near kill your fool self on a bike, and that jerkoff brings this?"

"Barbara Jean," he said, raising an open hand, "lay off Beau. Tired of telling you."

"Biggest asshole on God's earth."

"Says he didn't do it. That's it."

"He's a fuckin' liar."

"Move on, girl."

"Videos don't show up on the Internet by magic, moron."

"Last time. Not talking about this. Y'hear me?"

"Piece o' shit used his camera phone. Who else could've sent it?"

"Even if you were right, it's past. Leave it go."

She shook her head. "Perfect for each other, you two. Couple of brain-dead scarecrows."

He laughed. "Maybe so." One hand brought the glasses back to his eyes. The other slipped through her legs from behind, clamping her thigh to the side of the wheelchair. He dropped the binoculars onto his chest. "Now that we got that over with..." His open hand pumped a foot above his lap. "Think you might go get that sponge?"

"Knew this was coming," she said, twisting her hips. "Told you. I gotta get ready for work."

"Won't take long. I guarantee it." His free hand undid the top of his cutoff jeans. "C'mon now...BJ," he said, grinning at her.

"You promised to stop calling me that." She nodded toward the window. "And that slut's the one got you like this. Get her to do you."

"Hush now." Both his arms hugged her leg; gave it a firm shake. "Talk like that's what sends men to other women over time." His rocking arms swayed her hips. "C'mon now. Nothing wrong with a poor cripple asking his wife for a relaxing afternoon." He loosened his grip. "How about you free up them hands, too," he said, raising his chin at the cans.

She scanned the room, closed her eyes, and sighed.

"Careful!" he said as soup cans bombed onto his lap.

Shade down, she positioned herself in front of him in the semi-dark. "You best be quick like you said."

"Aw, ain't you getting naked for me?"

"And don't talk."

Thumps on the apartment door woke him. The doorknob rattled. "It's me, Tommy. Open up."

"Hang on, Beau." He lolled his head; rubbed sleep-stiffness out of his neck.

"Dude, let's go," Beau said, banging harder. "Smells like someone pissed on a fire out here."

He wheeled backward after turning the deadbolt.

Beau angled his face around the edge of the door, eased inside the apartment, and clicked the lock behind him. After a quick look around, his eyes fixed on the bedroom door. "Ever take those binoculars off, Tommy Boy?"

"She picked up some lunch shifts, superman. You're safe."

"You're an asshole. You know that? She doesn't scare me." Beau breezed past him to the open window. "Get your morning show today, horn dog?"

"You're talking to a hunter, son. What do you think?"

"That is one fine specimen." Peering at the windows across the street, Beau reached backwards. "Gimme."

"She's dressed and gone. Been watching other stuff for almost an hour."

"Awesome. Any got tits like her?"

Tommy laughed. "Nothing like that. Been looking at clouds, folks at the bus stop, things like that. Do it most of the day."

"See," Beau said, shaking his head, "life isn't fair. Here I am, stuck at college, drinking beer, snagging pussy, and you get to watch people at a bus stop all day. Just not right."

"Kinda fun, actually. Try to figure out who they are, where they're going...you know..."

"Want me to kill you? I would." Beau poked his chin at the rifle case propped in the corner. "Peg one through your head right now if you want. Only have to ask."

"I'll let you know."

Beau sat on the sill and pointed to the cast. "Speaking of killing, gonna be hunting season right after you're out of that thing. Make sure your Uncle Wendell knows you, me, and Deacon are coming again this year."

"Yeah, well... We'll see."

"What's that mean?"

"Have to talk to Barbara Jean first," he said, turning his gaze out the window.

"You nuts? Isn't gonna be a Barbara Jean."

He shifted in the wheelchair; flipped his eyes between Beau and his fiddling fingers. "Been thinking. I may just hang around awhile longer."

"You gotta be shittin' me," Beau said, rocking onto his feet. "Something happen I don't know about? She knocked up for sure this time?"

"No, there ain't no baby."

"Then you're still free, dude. Stick to the plan. Soon as you're walking, your first steps are out that door."

"To go where? Back to Swainsboro? Live with my momma? Stock shelves at the Family Dollar?" He wrinkled his nose, shook his head.

"Stay here in Atlanta with me and Deacon. Live in the dorm with us. Nobody would care."

"She's sticking by me, Beau. Lost the baby, had to quit school and get a job because of the accident, but she's still here. And it ain't easy what she has to do."

Beau paced a two-step line, head shaking. "Who the hell have I been listening to for the past three months, going on and on about how she trapped you with that baby?" He stopped and leaned in. "Wasn't that you? Sure as hell looked like you?"

"I never said that. You did. Maybe I just never said you was wrong."

"No difference in my mind. And when she said she lost it, wasn't it you who said you were free to leave now, and that's what you were going to do? At least until that old bastard laid your bike over."

"I owe her, Beau. And people can change."

"Dude, you're losing your mind in this dump. We're not talking about your momma. This is the girl in the Internet video."

He gripped the wheels and rolled a few inches toward Beau. "That was before. She's a wife now. My wife."

Hands raised, Beau turned his back and wandered to window.

"I think maybe we could be a family, Beau."

"You and her." Beau glanced back over his shoulder. "A family."

He nodded.

"They change your medication since yesterday?"

"How about we change the subject? Talk about your bike or something."

Beau moseyed to the table. He spun a chair backwards and flopped onto the plastic seat. "What about you?" he said, his arms hanging over the backrest. "You gonna ride again when you're healed?"

"On what, butthead? Got hardly nothing from the insurance, and Barbara Jean's kinda tight with the bucks." He shook his head. "You know we ain't even got a phone, so there sure as hell ain't no Harley in

the budget.”

“Budget.” Beau covered his face. “See, this is what I’m talking about. Nineteen-year-olds don’t have budgets. It’s a fucking joke.” He gripped the back of the chair, leaned a grin toward Tommy. “Know what else is kinda funny? The way it’s ‘Barbara Jean’ all the time now. No more BJ.” He snorted. “If there was ever someone born to a name. She could—”

“Shut up, Beau.”

“C’mon, Tommy. Even the girls talk about her like that.”

“Don’t do this.”

“She is what she,” Beau said, stabbing a finger at him. “Every day you stay with her is one less happy day in your life, and you know it.”

He glared at Beau before turning his face to the window. “Don’t come around no more.”

“What? You’re being stupid. This is me, Tommy.”

“No. It’s different now, but you won’t listen.”

“Bullshit. You need someone to wipe your ass, so all of a sudden she’s a wife, instead of a video...,” Beau’s eyes flicked at him, “...performer.”

“Godammit, are you retarded?”

“Dude,” Beau said, jumping to his feet, “let’s get you out of here before it’s too late. C’mon. Pack your shit. Right now. We’ll leave her a note and take the hell off.”

“You gotta let people have a fresh start, Beau.” He slapped both palms on the armrests of the wheelchair. “Got six more weeks in this thing, and I’m gonna use them to give her a chance.” He folded his arms. “And I see how you’re gonna be. You’re the one making me choose, and I’m choosing my wife.” He shifted in the seat. “I ain’t kidding. Don’t come here no more.”

The folding chair snapped flat when Beau kicked it across the room. He stomped to the door but didn’t open it. “Tommy,” he said, without turning, “I never told you this because I have no idea if she’s right, or if she just doesn’t like BJ...which I know she doesn’t...but my sister, Marlene, she said BJ was never pregnant. Said her tits never got bigger like they should’ve. Said BJ was just getting fatter because she’s a damn farm animal, and you’re a total fool, falling for such an old trick. Said even though BJ’s been bent over every tailgate in Emanuel County, she picked you as the daddy because you’re the idiot, martyr type. Easy pickins for a sneaky bitch wanting to get away from a bad life.”

“And that’s Marlene talking?”

“My hand to God.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re mad. It ain’t right.” He rubbed his face with both hands.
“Besides, I gotta deal with what is, not... You take care of yourself.”

“Tommy, I’ll never say ‘told you so.’ Don’t be too prideful to call when this blows up.”

The door clicked shut.

* * *

Shuffling feet and wheezy breaths got louder in the hall outside the apartment. Whoever it was stopped in front of their door. At the first knock, Tommy popped his wheelchair away from the window and blocked Barbara Jean’s path from the sink. “I got it,” he said.

Dressed in her waitress uniform, she dried her hands on the company apron and drifted along beside him. “If it’s that piece o’ shit, Beau, don’t even think of asking him in here.” Gaze trained on the door, she smoothed her hands over her hair and across her backside. “I won’t have him in my place.”

His eyes closed. “It ain’t Beau.”

More knocks.

“And this is my place, too,” he said in a rough whisper, finger poking at her face. “Y’aint telling me who my friends are gonna be. Not now. Not ever.”

A third round of raps, firmer this time. “Please open up,” a man said. “I can hear you talking in there.”

He rolled toward the door

“Hey, moron,” she whispered, “gimme them binoculars.” Her finger swung toward the window.
“Might be that whore’s boyfriend or daddy, come over here to knock your fucking teeth out.”

After a quick peek at the knob, he lifted the strap over his head and handed them to her.

She trotted into the bedroom.

Finishing the glide to the door, he opened it to fat man with shaggy gray hair. Had on a light gray suit. The man held a briefcase in one hand and a business card in the other. Dark circles hung under the arms of his jacket.

“Do you know your elevator’s out of order?”

Tommy smiled. “You come up four flights to tell me that?”

The man set his briefcase on the cracked tiles in the hallway and snaked a large handkerchief from his inside breast pocket. He dabbed his face and flabby neck before stuffing the soggy rag back in his pocket. A puzzled look grew on his face. “Don’t you remember me, Mr. Pickett?”

“Should I?”

Inching his feet closer to the inside of the apartment, the man pushed the business card at him. “I visited your hospital room. Remember now? Ansel Baldrige, Attorney at Law?”

Hands clasped in his lap, Tommy bounced his chin at the card. “Got more than a dozen of them things when I was in there. Didn’t pay heed to none of them. Got no use for lawyers.”

Smiling, Mr. Baldrige fluttered the card between two fingers. “Then I’d be correct in assuming you’re not already represented by counsel in the matter of your devastating traffic accident?”

“If you mean do I have a lawyer, no.” His glance dropped to the man’s knees, now pressing against the cast, before rising back to his face. “And I don’t need one. The old guy’s insurance company’s taking good care of me. Paying the medical bills and such.”

The attorney tipped his head back and chuckled. “Ah, would that we were all so innocent.” He shook the card again. “Please, may I come in? I’m going to make you a very wealthy man, Mr. Pickett. Ah,” he said, his attention shifting to something behind Tommy, “and if this lovely woman is your wife, my timing couldn’t be better. This involves her as well.”

“Let Mr. Baldrige pass, Tommy.”

He gawked at his wife’s extended greeting hand.

“Barbara Jean Pickett,” she said, pumping the lawyer’s hand. “Couldn’t help but hear, the place being small like it is.” She backed into the room. “Have a seat,” she said, pointing to a chair at the card table. Her nose crinkled as she sat. “We ain’t got much. Just starting out.”

The smiling lawyer dropped into the chair and swung his case onto the table. “Well, Mrs. Pickett, it’s going to take a little time, but I can assure you that the injuries your husband suffered, combined with the burdens they’ve placed upon you, are going to make your futures supremely more comfortable.”

“Sir, you’re wasting your time,” Tommy said, joining them at the table. “Already told you, got no use for lawyers. That old man didn’t whack into me on purpose. Leave him be.”

“Jails are for people who do things on purpose, Mr. Pickett. Civil courts and insurance exist to help repair the shattered lives of innocent victims like yourselves.” The lawyer squinted inside his stuffed briefcase and pulled out a manila folder. He referred to scribbled notes on the inside cover. “And eighty-three-year-old Dr. Conrad Fletcher of Buckhead and Lake Oconee, Georgia, carries a delightful amount of it.” He loosened his tie; mopped his face with the handkerchief he’d fished from his jacket. “Good lord, no air conditioning? How do you stand this? Mrs. Pickett, may I trouble you for some water.”

“Where are my manners?” She sprang from the table. “Some fine waitress I am.”

“In the interests of my survival,” the lawyer said toward the sink, “is there another way for us to

discuss this without my having to climb up here?”

“You can call my cell,” she said over the rush of the running water. “Number’s...” She shot a peek at Tommy, then giggled. “Where’s my head at? I meant to say at my job. You can call me at my job at TGI—”

“Hold it,” Tommy said. “You got a phone, Barbara Jean?”

The lawyer leaned over a yellow pad, ballpoint at the ready. “Sorry, Mrs. Pickett, I missed that.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Baldrige,” Tommy said, pushing the pen flat onto the paper and holding it there. “Barbara Jean, you got a phone?”

Eyebrows raised, she placed a glass of water in front of the lawyer. “This ain’t the time, honey. Now let this man finish his business.”

His gaze never left her. He slid the ballpoint from the lawyer’s hand and flipped it onto the man’s belly. “Business is finished. I got your card if I ever change my mind, sir. You best be leaving now.”

“Perhaps another time would be better. This heat. I’m not feeling very well.” The sound of papers being crammed into a briefcase mixed with the lawyer’s words. “I’ll see myself out.” He paused at the open door. “Perhaps one of you could just call my—”

“Get out!” He spun the wheelchair and rushed at Mr. Baldrige’s startled face. After the lawyer slammed the door, Tommy faced back into the room, blocking the exit.

She stood near the sink, arms folded, chin raised.

“When’d you get a phone?” he said. “And why ain’t I supposed to know about it?”

“Don’t talk to me like that. Like I’m under arrest or something.”

He shrugged. “Simple questions.”

“If you must know, my manager, Slade, he give it to me. Says I’m his best girl, and any extra shifts that open up can be mine, but he’s gotta to be able to reach me. And he’s paying, so what do you care for?”

“Give it here,” he said, open hand outstretched.

She shifted her weight to the other foot and continued staring at him.

“Girl, if you plan on ever getting outta here, you best give me that phone.”

Her face went blank. She backed to the kitchen counter, felt for her purse. After some muffled clunks inside it, her hand came out holding the phone. She took small steps toward him; let out a squeaky giggle. “Here, for all the good it’ll do you. Like giving a fiddle to a snake.” She underhanded it from about five feet and backed behind the card table.

“Think I’m some kinda idiot, do you?” He flipped the phone open and powered up after a single

glance. "Uncle Wendell brings a damn satellite phone when we go hunting. Half the kids in our high school had phones. for godsake. I seen and used plenty of these." He worked some keys, "So, let's see who you been talking to."

"This is stupid. Y'ain't gonna know them numbers. Give it back."

"This here one ends in 00. That's probably the restaurant. And this one's your momma. Damn witch didn't even show up at the wedding. Why you talking to her?" He tilted his head, wiggled the phone at her. "Who's 6642? Lots of those."

"I ain't putting up with this." She held out her hand, but stayed behind the table. "I want my phone back. Now."

His attention returned to the display. "How about we just highlight one, push 'send,' and see who picks up." He pressed the phone to his ear, settled back, and smiled.

"You got no right," she said, dashing around the table.

Stiff-arms and roll-aways held her off. He switched the phone to his far away hand every time she circled the wheelchair.

The sound of ringing made her even crazier. "Slade!"

"Hey, baby girl," a man's voice said.

Tommy clamped a hand over the mouthpiece, hunched forward, and held the speaker near his ear.

"Slade, don't!"

Fists and slaps bounced off Tommy's head and shoulders.

"Missing my dick?" the man said.

Tommy snapped the phone shut. "You want it?" he said, shoving it through her flapping arms and twisting it into her chin. "Here."

She snatched it with two hands and rocked onto her heels. Fingers wiped where the phone jabbed her. "Have you arrested...fuckin' moron." Checking her fingertips, she shuffled backward to her purse. "So, now you know."

"How long?"

The phone vibrated. "Shit," she said, then turned it off and set it on the counter.

"I asked you a question."

"I'm glad, really." She covered her eyes, let out a deep breath. "Tommy, I'm sorry. You got every right to be mad. But I want you to know, this ain't just a fooling around thing. I'm in love with Slade." Her eyes met his. "I'm sorry. I really am."

Unblinking, he let his head roll side to side.

“Well?” she said, eyes wide. “Say something, for crissake.”

“Were you pregnant?”

“Moron,” she whispered. “What’s that got to do...?” Open hands held high, she took a step toward her purse. “Look, I know we need to talk, but I gotta go to work. We’ll sort this out later.”

“Wrong.” A snake-strike of the wheelchair spooked her into a corner. “We’ll sort it out now.”

“What are you doing?” she said, eyes darting around the room. “Said I’m sorry. Saying any more would only be hurtful. Where’s the good in that? C’mon now. Let me by.” She moved to get around him.

“Said no!” He spun the cast into her leg, making it buckle.

“God damn.” She grabbed just above her knee, face crumpled by pain. “Alright,” she said, teeth showing. “Alright, big man, you wanna do this? Let’s do it.” Wedged between two walls, she leaned forward and shimmied her shoulders. “So what do you really wanna know? Boy like you who just loves his binoculars must want lots of details. You wanna know where we do it? How often? What positions? Is he better’n you? Is he bigger’n you? Do I swallow? Does he make me bark like a dog?” She pressed a finger to her cheek, swept her eyes across the ceiling. “Let’s see, I miss anything?”

“Were you pregnant?”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ. Like talking to Forest Gump.”

“Listen good, BJ,” he said, pushing himself tall in the chair. “I’m serious now. You listening?”

She glared; rubbed her leg.

“I already know the answer, but you’re gonna tell me.” He raised one finger. “And here’s the important part. If you don’t tell me the truth, first time, you’re going outta here with a sheet over your face.”

Her big eyes danced between him and the door. “Alright,” she said, shoulders sagging, “I wasn’t. But I swear,” she said, pushing her palms at him, “I didn’t know that when I told you. I was six days late. Never was late before, so I figured, you know, I was that way.”

“I ain’t stupid. There was others. Why me?”

She winced and massaged her leg. “Dammit, this really hurts. What’d you do that for?”

He backed up; bobbed his head toward the fridge. “Probably should put some ice on it...and answer my question,” he said as she limped by.

“I dunno... Always something decent about you. Quiet, serious. Figured you’d stand up if need be.” Smiling, she dumped ice cubes onto a dishtowel. “And then you was so sweet to me about the baby. Nicest

anyone's ever been. Guess I didn't want that to stop. Next thing I knew, I was at my own wedding. Shocked shit outta me to wake up as Mrs. Pickett, I promise you."

"Why'd you stay?"

"Where was I gonna go?" She winced with each step. "And then good things started to happen. I got into beauty school down here. You got the job at the dealership. Thought maybe being married was lucky or something. Then you wiped out, and that was that."

"I'm gonna be fine again. You couldn't wait?"

She sat; rested the ice bag on her leg. "Why we talking about this? Ain't like we love each other...or ever did. I'm not ready to be a wife, yours or anybody's. And tending to you taught me I sure as hell ain't in any hurry to be a momma."

"When you going?"

She shrugged. "Thought this was gonna happen after you was on your feet." Her nose wrinkled. "You know, I could still stay till then if you want. Feel like I owe you something. He don't have to know you found out."

"What about the phone thing just now?"

"I'll figure something." She peeked under the towel, then at him. "So, you want me to?"

"Just leave me the phone," he said, shaking his head. "I'll take it from there."

"Ain't mine to give."

He couldn't stop the laugh.

Her gaze dropped to the floor next to him. "I say something funny?"

"Can you go to this guy tonight? For good, I mean?"

"Pretty sure."

"Leave the phone with me. When you come for your stuff tomorrow, it'll be on the table. I won't be here."

She looked from him, to her phone, then back. "I suppose." Gimpy steps took her toward the counter. "Where you gonna go?"

"That don't concern you."

She tossed the towel in the sink, continued to the counter and her purse. "Catch," she said, flipping the phone to him. Shuffling steps brought next to his cast. "Guess this is it then," she said, both hands stroking the plaster.

He nodded.

"You gonna divorce me?" she said. "Or do I do it?"

"Me."

"Okay. Well..." She backed toward the bedroom, tapped a finger to the side of her chin. "Gotta put makeup on this and get some clothes for tonight." Only a minute or two passed before she came out carrying a stuffed tote bag. "Just want you to know," she said, her hand on the knob, "I'm suing that old man for busting you up. Mr. Baldrige says I can, even if you won't."

"Oh, man," he said, head flopping against the back of the chair, "I really am a moron. Was you who called him."

"Slade, actually. Said it'd be stupid not to. I forget what he called it, but I get money because we couldn't fuck... You and me, I mean." She shrugged and smiled. "Kinda funny if you think about it."

He stared at her.

"Maybe not... Well, take care of yourself, Tommy. Hope things work out good for you, too."

Once he couldn't hear her steps in the hall or the stairwell anymore, he rolled into bedroom. Through the open closet door, he saw the binoculars tucked at the back of the top shelf.

"Damn her."

He scooted into the other room; stripped the case off his rifle; snapped on the scope. Parked alongside the window, he laid the barrel on the sill and rolled the adjustment wheel. Blurry turned to clear as she crossed the street to the bus stop, starting a new life. Her head drifted in and out of the crosshairs, and then she paused.

"Blam." Puff of steam from her hair. Forward lurch. Burst of wet red onto the sidewalk. He continued to track her.

She hopped onto the curb.

"Blam." Bulls-eye into the tramp stamp dropped her to her knees. Face-first pitch onto the bench.

She sat, spread both arms across the top slat, and yawned.

"Blam." A shot exploded into her gaping mouth.

The gun sight dropped to the slow rise and fall of her round belly. An arriving bus shielded her, stopping only briefly before confirming she was gone.