

Skandalon

By Mark Rittmann

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"Hello?" Carl spoke in a whisper.

"Reverend Johnson, this is Officer Bradley of the Bloomington Police Department. We've received a call on a domestic disturbance requesting your assistance."

"Who called?" Carl's feet are cold. He rubs his right foot against the leg of his pajamas.

"Mary Walters of 11319 Pennbrook." Mary usually dropped these bombs during the weekly bible study. Carl told her to phone the police the next time Jim became violent.

"I'll need some time to get dressed." Carl's sinuses throb. He presses his fingers against the bridge of his nose and squints his eyes. A patrol unit will pick you up in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be ready."

Carl hangs up the phone. Why do these things always happen in the middle of the night? He flips the switch to start the coffee brewing and pads down the hall to his bedroom to change.

The patrol car doesn't arrive until after 3:00 a.m.. Carl has called Mary to tell her he'd be right over and to survey the damage. Gentle tears fall into the mouthpiece and travel over the line to Carl. Jim's outburst had frightened the children but Mary has calmed them and put them back to bed. They were sleeping now. Her wrist was sore but otherwise she was all right. "You don't have to come Pastor."

The ride over is peaceful. Carl sits in the back seat of the patrol car, behind the wire barrier, closes his eyes and listens to the music of the night. Two days of heavy snow muffle the sounds that penetrate the car. Only the bass notes are heard. Neither officer speaks so Carl uses the time to prepare himself.

Mary greets them at the door and ushers them into a room with plastic covered furniture. Her hair is pulled back off her forehead by a pastel blue scarf. A deep bruise frames her left cheekbone. A small amount of dried blood adorns the base of her left ear. She appears fragile to Carl. Small bruises are visible on her right wrist. There was no comeliness about her. Mary sits on the sofa next to Pastor Johnson while the patrolman scribbles in his notebook. "Had your husband been drinking, ma'am?"

Mary covers her mouth to keep the words from spilling out. "You're not going to arrest him, are you?"

"He's committed a crime, Mary," Pastor Johnson says.

"It's just when he drinks," Mary says. She closes her eyes and massages her left temple, moving, stretching her neck, rubbing it with her left hand. Pastor Johnson's words come in graceful cadence. "It has to stop, Mary. Jim's arrest will force him into treatment."

Mary continues to massage her temple, distracted. She pulls her robe tight across her bosom and leans forward quickly drawing her knees upward. "O God," she says.

Carl catches her as she falls. She drops into his arms like a rag doll and he cradles her as the Madonna had cradled the body of Jesus. Her color pales. Her mouth opens as if to speak, her tongue a petulant member. Her eyes roll backward. Her neck stiffens and her arms, still clenching her robe, become rigid. "Mary?"

A sub-dural hematoma.

* * *

Carl climbs into bed, lying on his stomach. He always starts the night on his stomach. He can't fall

asleep on his back, although he awakes each morning in that position. At some point during the night an irresistible force moves him onto his back. Something like that must happen. Things we cannot control take over.

Janice sits crossed leg in bed and drew deep on her cigarette. The ash casts a red glare on her face. Carl's feet are cold. It must be fifty degrees in the house. Maybe he was getting old.

"What did he hit her with?"

"His hands, I think." Carl closes his eyes and sees his father's hands.

"How come she put up with it?"

"She loved him."

"She was afraid of him!" Janice is getting angry.

"She loved him. She is afraid of him. She is afraid of being without him. I wish you wouldn't smoke in the bedroom." The smoke stings in his nostrils and Carl pinches them together to escape the pain.

Janice crushes her cigarette out and crawls under the quilt. "Creep," she says. She kisses Carl's cheek and rolls onto her side with her back toward him. She quickly falls asleep. Carl fears sleep. Night visitors trouble him. Disjointed dreams haunt him like repressed memories.

Janice sleeps undisturbed, as Carl works to identify the demons in their bedroom. Someone is crouching in the corner by the closet and Carl briefly panics. His heart races and he has trouble catching his breath. It is only a shadow. Janice has placed a hanging plant in the window. He laughs ruefully at his childish fear but takes note of it. Some fears never go away. Some children never grow up. He climbs quietly out of bed and heads towards the kitchen. A double scotch would help him sleep.

* * *

ICU consists of eight rooms arrayed in a semi-circle around an oasis of light. Monitors record the economy of each patient and release on demand, a ticker tape of each commodity. Carl checks in with a slender black man at the nurse's desk. "Just five minutes, Pastor." The nurse speaks softly. "She hasn't regained consciousness."

"I understand," Carl says. "Thank you. I just want to pray with her."

Mary's room is at the top of the arc in front of the nurses' station. Hidden fixtures diffuse the light upwards. Eight stories above the street vertical blinds shield her from inquisitive strangers. Carl can smell the antiseptic they have used to clean the room and to sterilize Mary, a pungent, ungodly odor bereft of life.

"Mary?" Carl's words are supplication. Her head is wrapped in gauze. Her eyes remain closed. The rhythmic pump of the ventilator forces air into her lungs, its translucent blue tubing taped to her mouth, forcing submission. Two IV bags drip magic into her left arm. The blood has been cleansed from her ear. The bruises on her face and arm have yellowed and blackened and Carl winces in empathy, remembering. Carefully lifting her hand, Pastor Johnson closes his eyes and prays in concert with the ventilator.

"Heavenly Father, baptized into Christ, Mary belongs to you. It is to you we look for help. I commend her to your care and trust in your providence. In your hands are mercy and great blessing. I thank you for the doctors, nurses, and technicians that bring their skills to Mary's need. Relieve the pressure inside her skull. Restore her to good health. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen."

Carl stands silently listening to the rhythmic sounds of modern medicine: the pump-swoosh of Mary's mechanical lungs, the soft beep of the monitor and the hushed distant voices of compassion. Tiny beads of sweat layer the back of Mary's hand and he traces a cross in the mist. Carl leans to whisper in her ear and smells the moisture clinging to her body, healing fluids beseeching him. "May God not forsake you, Mary." Then he departs.

* * *

The temperature has dropped twenty degrees since sunset. Carl waits in the cafeteria for his car to warm up. Trapped by the cold, the exhaust from the idling automobiles struggle a few meters upward, like the prayers of the faithful, before fleeing horizontally.

Hospitals are places of suffering. Sepulchers made sacred by passion. The first time Carl visited with his father it was like entering a Church. People spoke in hushed, almost reverent, voices. He walked in silence behind his father who followed a painted red line leading from the information desk to the elevators and then to ward 4E where his mother had been laid to rest.

His dad was a big man, 6 feet 5 inches tall and over 235 pounds. He placed a poinsettia on his wife's bedside table. "Carl's with me, Beth. Come say hello to your mother, Carl." His father turned to make room but Carl didn't move. "Come here, boy, say hello to your mom."

"She can't hear you dad."

"Of course she can hear me." His father leaned over his mother's bed and stroked her forehead. "I spoke to the foreman today, Beth. He said I'd be rehired after the first of the year. Things are bad right now; no one's hiring. Things will get better, darling, I promise."

Carl's mother was unresponsive. A tear stained his father's face. "I'm sorry Beth." His remorse

seemed genuine. That irritated Carl. "O God," his father said, "forgive me." For years Carl listened for an answer.

Carl pulls his Bonneville into his driveway, turns off the ignition and waits until the cold reaches him. Sunday is the fourth Sunday in Advent. The four weeks before Christmas are a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. It looks beyond the birth of the Christ child to his second coming in judgment. Most people will miss the double theme. Advent has become a time of grace; of preparation for the gifts of Christmas. Judgment is forgotten.

The cold reaches inside his overcoat and bites his teats. Carl is satisfied. The night sky is clear, the North Star visible almost directly over his house.

* * *

Carl is awake and sitting at the kitchen table when the phone rings. He lifts the receiver on the third ring.

"Johnson residence."

"Pastor, this is Jim Walters."

Carl stands facing the kitchen window. The view from the kitchen window is one of the reasons he and Janice bought this house. In early July, when they had first visited with their agent, they had stood on the sun drenched tile in awe of the flower garden on the other side; a lush landscape with multiple greens and the fresh rainbow colors of creation. Now snow is blowing up against the fence. "Where are you, Jim?"

"How's Mary?"

"She's in intensive care."

"Will she be all right?"

"I don't know Jim. She's unconscious."

The phone falls silent. In the background Carl can hear traffic sounds, heavy sounds like those of buses and trucks. "Where are you, Jim?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Tell me where and I'll come and get you."

"I didn't mean to hurt her."

"That's why you hit her?"

"I was drunk."

"That's no excuse, Jim. You fractured her skull. She could die." Jim begins to cry. His remorse seems

genuine. "I don't know what happened. I lost control. I was drunk. She made me mad and I hit her."

"You hit her more than once."

"Oh God, tell me she'll be okay."

"I don't know if she'll be okay. I pray to God she will be." Carl was cold. He rubs his right foot against his flannel pajamas. The traffic sounds have ceased and Carl hears muffled, shuffling sounds. "Jim, where are you?" There is a long pause. For a moment Carl believes Jim is going to tell him where he can be found. Jim hangs up the phone.

Carl is still holding the receiver when Janice speaks. "Who was on the phone?"

"Janice...God, you startled me."

"Who was it?" She stands in the hall not more than two feet from him, clearly agitated. Carl has seen this face before.

"Jim Walters." Carl replaces the phone in its cradle.

"Where is he?"

"He didn't say. Somewhere downtown I'd guess."

"What did he say?"

"What?" The interrogation upset Carl.

"What did he have to say for himself? Why did he hit her?"

"He said he didn't mean to. He lost control. He was drunk."

"Right. Did you tell him that's no excuse?"

"Yes I did. Why are you getting so angry?"

"Why shouldn't I get angry? The bastard beats his wife into a coma and calls here looking for absolution. It's not that God damned easy."

"He wasn't looking for absolution."

"Like hell he wasn't. I'll bet you gave it to him, too."

"No, I didn't. He didn't ask. Why are you getting angry at me?"

"But if he had asked?"

Carl doesn't answer. "What do you want me to say, Janice?"

Janice folds her arms across her breast and looks away from Carl. "I don't want you to say anything." She leaves him standing by the phone.

* * *

Carl sips his drink and reviews his notes. His night visitors have returned. The images have been more coherent than at other times. In the past, they had climaxed with a bloody crucifixion of an unidentified figure. This time he managed to get a better view of the victim.

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Carl reads his notes. He hadn't been able to identify the woman but he felt he knew her, or would know her if his dream had allowed him to get closer. He is frustrated, anxious. He reads his notes searching for something that will tie it all together. He weeps in fear he'll never understand. He weeps at the thought he might.

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