

The Accident

From the chair at the computer workstation in his study he could gaze out into the grove of birch trees that began almost within arms' reach of the picture window she had so resisted his installing in the room. "It's a waste of good money," he could still hear the cold analysis in her voice, "You're hardly ever in that room during the day when it's light outside, and I don't think that you'll get much of a view when you're at your usual late night work."

He'd gotten a bit angry, as he recalled, something that had never happened much earlier in their marriage, yet of late seemed to have become a constant in his ... their ... emotional existence. But, he reflected, he'd done a good job of keeping his feelings from her. For a long time he'd thought that he withheld himself like that because he loved her, but he'd begun to realize that the true cause of his reticence was a deep-seated fear that he would become like his parents ... yelling ... screaming ... ugly. They, too, had loved one another, very deeply, he was sure. But, when he searched his mind for images of his childhood, he had little recollection of any tenderness or warmth or, especially, affection between them.

So he'd given in, as was usually the case. Then, one morning, after she'd put on a neatly pressed uniform and driven off to work, he'd torn out the old combination window and installed a used unit he'd purchased at a warehouse which sold "recycled" building materials. When she'd come home around supertime and trailed the mess into the study there had been an explosion, of course, followed by her storming off to another part of the house where she had silently sulked for hours. He'd spent the evening cleaning up the debris from his project and then putting a coat of clear sealer on the window casement. After that he'd written for awhile, then gone for a walk. He'd finally fallen asleep on the couch, and had only been vaguely aware of her eating breakfast in the TV room the next morning. Later was the sound of the garage door closing ... in a few days the entire affair had been forgotten, or, at least, became something not mentioned. In time, a couple of weeks, as was the typical cycle, she'd commented upon how nice a view the window afforded of her bird feeder in the backyard, and had gently accepted from him that the window hadn't really cost very much money.

He looked out at the pile of lumber and plastic barrels that he was supposed to transform into a compost bin ... the pale gray of the dry wood and faded color of the barrels indicating that this was another project he'd somehow neglected to get around to doing. The things that necessitated his interest ... roof tiles, broken dishwasher, malfunctioning thermostat ... to all these he attended fairly promptly. Everything else ... well, more and more they seemed to not attract his attention. She'd stopped saying anything directly to him, there were no more, "When are you going to ..." Instead, now, if he heard anything at all, it was usually, "If you'd ever ..."

Leaning back in the fancy office chair that she'd surprised him with for his birthday several years early, he loosened his belt a bit to make himself more comfortable. He shouldn't have eaten lunch, he hadn't really been very hungry and the chicken baking in the oven was sure to prove to be more than enough food to provide him with his daily sustenance. He'd gone to the freezer to get ice for the pitcher of tea he'd brewed and ... well, there it was, all neatly wrapped in foil and labeled with a felt marker. The frozen pizza had been too attractive, and ...

"... getting a bit pudgy there, you know." How he hated when she poked at his stomach and sounded so much like her mother. Yea, he weighed twenty ... okay, thirty, if he must admit the truth to himself ... pounds more than he had when he'd gone off to do his military service. But she'd also gained at least the equivalence, when you considered her small size and frame, and he could easily think of a

dozen times when he had wanted so furiously to poke her and return the insult. But he hadn't, or, at least, he'd tried not to. He'd just eaten more ... and begun the process his father had practiced so perfectly, one of slowly, but inexorably, becoming a very, very large man.

He looked at the picture of his son perched atop the computer monitor. He and his college friend seemed so happy, as they stood astride the ice-covered rocks their broad smiles proclaiming clearly that they felt truly "on top of the world." She was still bothered that the two of them were more than "room-mates," and, although she felt no less for her son, would never discuss the issue or remain in the room if the two of them became the least bit demonstrative with one another.

He had to admit to himself, he been bothered when the boy had informed him of the feelings he'd discovered within himself. But that had been for only the briefest of moments, and, he allowed himself a flush of self-pride, he had immediately hugged the boy to him, as he had so often throughout the years, and whispered into his ear, "All that's important is that you can love ... and do ... that's what counts." They didn't write to one another nearly as often as they should, but short phone conversations and little notes via the internet ... usually involving some sort of a request to "send money" ... all kept the two of them in close enough contact to be able to sense when the other needed more.

He looked out the window again. It was getting dark ... she was late. Probably had stayed to help the evening shift get accustomed to an unanticipated increase in work load ... or she'd stopped on the way home to go shopping. How she loved to do that, he chuckled to himself, taking the time to look at every item, constantly searching for a "bargain," a prize she could bring home to display like a trophy in the living room hutch. He resisted a familiar urge to mentally inventory the contents of the case, knowing already that the first shelf alone contained far more than the value of any picture window or new computer toy he might happen to purchase. That, too, he never said to her.

The stillness of the backyard seemed unnatural ... in his mind it was still filled with the crashing energy of little children. He noticed she'd cleaned out the bird feeder, and that a new suet ball was hanging from the rusted frame of the old swing set tucked against the line of sumac bushes which divided their yard from the neighbor's. Summer or winter, she took care of the little creatures that flitted back and forth from the yard to the woods. Never fussy or overly involved, she was simply and matter-of-factly their friend ...

... they had begun as friends. Not really good friends, he knew that now. But, then again, then they were young and hadn't yet learned to be friends ... or lovers. A lot of years had gone by, and they'd become good at living together, excellent at being parents ... superb at hiding from one another. Things were missing ... hadn't gone as they should ... as he wanted ... as he needed. He'd just begun to accept that ... barely. And in the admission he'd made to himself he had found answers he didn't want to discover. Now ... now he hurt because he had no choice but to reach inside his own soul and ask the questions that went with those answers.

Did he love her? He didn't, at least, not as he should. But the problem was that he couldn't even feel that. There was no emptiness or void within him ... there was just nothing. He knew that the space had to be filled, he didn't have a clue as to how it was to be done. He'd tried to talk with her ... and failed. Now he was tired, that's all of which he was sure, and ... and he had to move from where he was. Soon.

She had to know ... she must. Is she feeling as I? He wondered ... but, and he had just learned to accept this, they were so very different. What did she want? Need? Did she know ... did he?

He looked at the line of birch trees, noticing the small saplings that he had planted the year before in an effort to provide an increased feeling of privacy to the backyard. They'll look good in ten or twelve years, he thought, at least this lot will look somewhat like the land did before the developers began to take over the world. As he watched the bark of the trees suddenly glowed brightly, illuminated by the headlamps of a car turning into the driveway in the front of the house. Too early for shopping, she must have had to work a little late. There was a brief flash of blue to the light, and he mused to himself, damn, changing headlamps on her car is a real pain in the ... I'll have to do it after supper, he thought, just in case she gets called back to work during the night.

He was already walking through the living room towards the front of the house when the outside lights were activated by the motion sensor located above the garage doors. Enjoying the spicy aroma wafting from the kitchen, he took a last glance to make sure the room was tidied up and opened the front door to greet her.

"How'd he take it, Sarge ... is he going to be okay?" The concern in the young rookie's voice was genuine, his professional experience as of the moment so brief that he hadn't yet succumbed to the inevitable deadening of emotion that would cause most of the human tragedy to become nothing more than a series of cryptic radio transmissions and abbreviated paragraphs in a watch report.

"Yea ... I think so." The gray haired veteran replied wearily, "You never know how they'll react. Thirty-two years, I still can't tell you what they'll do."

"What did he ... ahh ... I mean, when you told him ... what did he say?"

"He asked me if she'd suffered. You'll find out that one's a fairly common reaction, by the way."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him it had been quick, that she never had a chance to feel much of anything as far as I could tell, that ..."

"... you lied to him?"

The tired old cop sighed loudly, "Yea ... yea, I lied. We're the only two who know ... you and me. The paramedics were too late. You'll lie, too ... call it the second lesson you've learned tonight."

"What was the first?"

The sergeant looked at the blood staining the front of his young partner's uniform, in spots still moist and glistening in the soft glow from the cruiser's dashboard lights, "The first was when you held her and told her she was going to be okay ... that everything was going to be okay."

"Oh," the young man followed his friends gaze to the front of his shirt, "Oh. What's ... um ... what's he doing now?"

"That's kind of odd ... I told you how this is. When I was done telling him he only said one thing to me, that's all ..."

"What was that?" "He walked over to a hutch in the living room and said, 'I loved her, you know, for a long, long time I loved her.' Then he walked into the back room ... I followed him 'cause I was worried for a second, but it looks like it's some sort of a study or workspace ... and he sat down and began to

stare out the window, looking at an old bird feeder in the back yard. That's all ... nothing else. I checked the room ... you know, just in case ... then I left. He's still in there, just looking out that window."

"Did he say anything else? Anything?"

"Na ... not a word. Not one."

"What'a we do now?"

"Well," he rubbed his forehead and lifted his cap to push his gray hair back in place, "One of the neighbors is coming over in a few minutes, so I guess it'll be okay for us to take off. Desk sergeant says his son is flying home ... should be in early in the morning."

"What then?"

The officer checked his watch, "We'll stop at the station to get you a new shirt, then run a patrol around back of the mall. There've been a lot of kids hanging around behind the dumpsters smoking weed and making a lot of noise ... Cap'n says he wants to shut the scene down before it gets nasty. Then we can take a break ... m'be get a bite at that new Mexican place over on 23rd and Fleet. After that, well, I guess ..."

"... no, Sarge ...no ... I meant, what about him?"

"I don't know. He'll hurt, I guess. That's how it is ... how it always is."

He flipped on the cruiser's headlamps and put the vehicle into reverse. As they backed out of the driveway his last impression was one of how pretty the birch trees were when the headlamp beams delineated them from the blackness of the night sky.