

Second Place – Short Story

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Swaying

The rain fell steadily upon the windshield as she pulled the car into open spot directly in front of the door. The wipers swished as the headlights illuminated the door and reflected against the window. The car idled and the wipers continued to sweep away the collecting water. As she turned the ring on her finger, he appeared in the room window and gave a slight wave. She paused, caught up with the "here-and-now" of the place, the moment, held her breath. In what seemed like an instant, she was at the motel door, under the awning, holding the makeshift umbrella of a magazine down at her side.

She wore a vibrant green dress that flattered and accentuated her femininity. She spent the morning deliberating between a few choices while her husband was in the shower. She wore it boldly as she maneuvered her morning routines, making breakfast, preparing lunches, flowing from stove to table to refrigerator, gliding across the kitchen with elegance and ease as if in a ballroom. Her husband was preoccupied with the usual routine of morning paper, fried eggs with bacon, and strong coffee.

As she stood in the doorway to the room, he noticed. "You look amazing! Come in out of the rain," he said as he held the door open.

The room itself was underlit by a singular lamp on a nightstand in the corner. Shadows bloomed across the walls and ceiling, only momentarily scared away by flashes of lightning. Jazz played over the stereo, serenading with deliberate improvised movements across the full gamut of frets and keys. She entered the room as he retrieved two glasses of wine. After handing her one, he raised his own glass to clink and cheers. She looked around as they sipped their wine, and she could feel herself tighten up inside, her legs stiffen at the knees. *We both know that I shouldn't be here.* He tilted his head as his glass departed his lips. *But I am here. At any moment I could walk out the door and get back in my car and drive away. But I am here.* She sipped her wine. He lowered his glass and gave a slight smile.

His look turned curious as he set down the glass. He moved closer to her and took her own glass, setting it down next to his. His right arm wrapped around her waist; his hand placed flat against her back. She raised her arms to rest on his shoulders, her hands interlocked behind his neck, and they swayed to the rhythm of the jazz as the sound wafted over them, bathing them in orchestrated wildness. *But why am I here? Because of a discussion about a painting? Because of a chat and laughter over coffee? Because we have similar tastes? Did you*

awaken something in me, or were you merely present when I awoke?
She chuckled to herself. *I don't even like wine.*

He pulled her closer as they swayed, each chin resting on the other's shoulder. She closed her eyes as the refrain "I could be anywhere" echoed in her head, bounced off the walls, filled the crescendo of the music. *Am I expecting an answer from you? Will it arrive in the next movement, or another glass? Will it suddenly present itself when we're lying upon ruffled sheets, interlaced with each other? No. It will still remain distant, ever wanting, whether it's this moment or the next. Whether a month or a year from now. Whether I'm home awaiting his return, or we're checking in to our beachside room. Whether we're out for an anniversary, or a birthday, or another Saturday night, I'll still be waiting. I'll always be waiting.*

They swayed in front of the window, the small lamp illuminating their gliding shadows, serenaded by the driving piano, bass, and drums. Their ghostly reflection projected against the window was ever present to her as rain dropped like marbles against the awning, water cascading over the edge. In the reflection, she could see their lips move but could hear nothing. He looked into her eyes as he leaned forward and gently pressed his lips to hers. As if on cue in some romantic façade, lightning flashed and clapped and all went bright white for a

moment, for an infinite second. Then the world came to and retook form and shape. She was still in the idling car, headlights beaming against him in the open door. She sat staring, vulnerable and relieved. He stood in the light, arm braced against the frame, glass of wine in hand, curious and confused. The rain thudded atop the car, violently echoing throughout the cab. She faced him from the driver's seat, still rotating the ring around her finger, full of resolve. His gaze broke as he looked downward, peering at the ground for a moment, then raised it again with exasperation and inquisitiveness.

The headlight beams expanded into illuminated spheres as the car reversed out of the parking spot. They rotated to the right as the car faced toward the exit. He stood in the now darkened doorway, dampened by the mist of the rain, and stared at the red dots of taillights growing faint as they hovered above the road, floating off into the distance.

Darrell's Café hummed and swayed with the rhythm of the usual early evening gathering of families having a night out; of workers relaxing in the close of the day or gearing up for their graveyard shift; of new couples on the brink of new beginnings, or old lovers content in their ways. In some way they all swayed to the low din of constant chatter, the clink of spoon to mug,

the scrape of knife & fork against platter, the interjecting belts from waitresses of short orders ricocheting off the tabletops through the rectangular window and into the kitchen. The waitresses pirouetted between tables like seasoned dancers, twirling through the In & Out doors of the kitchen, revealing the refreshing reward of homecooked recipes to patient patrons. With smooth slight of hand they displaced the empty platters and mugs while wiping down tables and chairs, and cheerfully welcomed newcomers to "sit where ya'd like." Amid short intervals they waited in the wings, folded silverware, picked up stories where they'd left off an hour ago, and conveyed the day's news as they'd heard it while refilling coffee and tea.

The two ladies sat at a four-top near the entrance with perfect view of patrons and purveyors. The waitress stood next to the table between them as she scratched the pencil on her order pad: 2 cinnamon rolls, 2 coffees.

"Will this be all for you ladies?" the waitress asked with a smile.

Carol peeked across the table, but she kept her gaze to the table-top, leaning against folded arms.

"That'll be it. Thanks." Carol stated, returning a grin.

"Alright. I'll be right back with your order."

The waitress slid the order pad into her apron's front pocket and turned seamlessly around to the nearby eight-top and began stacking plates and silverware. As she carried them toward the kitchen she passed by another table and a faint "Can I get y'all some more coffee?" could be heard.

Across from Carol, she shifted her weight in the chair, turning her lower half sideways and dangling her left leg over her right knee. Her gaze maneuvered from the table to the rolled silverware in her hand and up toward Carol. She smiled and took in a sigh, rolling her finger across the napkin covered silverware, and shook her head slightly. Carol smiled in return. "You know it's all a bunch of crap, isn't it?" Carol interjected.

She jolted a bit and looked up toward Carol, who was looking directly at her while leaning forward with her elbow on the table, chin resting on her hand.

"I mean, we have all these things to say even though we aren't in the moment. We've heard them all before. Hell, we've probably even said them. I know I have," Carol declared.

Hearing this, she sat upright in the chair, arms folded across her middle, and looked at Carol inquisitively.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You know, we say things like, 'Boys will be boys.', or 'Once a cheater, always a cheater.', or 'It's always darkest before the dawn'. You know, stuff like that."

She sat and listened as Carol continued.

"They're all well and good as far as sayings go, but they don't mean a thing if you're the one in the dark, or if you're not a 'boy'."

"Oh. I see what you mean. But folks mean well, I think." she replied

"Of course, they mean well. Except the busybodies, people like Sharon Carter who flat out enjoy other people's suffering."

Carol huffed. She raised her eyebrows with a grin at the mention of Sharon Carter.

Carol continued, "That woman...the nerve! She doesn't even try to hide it. Glee just exudes from her anytime she hears about failure or misery. I can see her eyes now." Carol said with a shudder at the recollection.

The sight of this made her chuckle as she unfolded her arms and unrolled her silverware. The waitress returned with a tray held high by her left hand.

"Alright, ladies. Here's your coffee...and your cinnamon rolls. Do y'all need anything else?"

Carol looked up toward her and smiled. "We're all set. Thank you."

"Well, y'all just let me know if you need anything. Take your time." She casually laid the check between them as she swiveled to the four-top to her right, stacked dishes and silverware onto the tray, and carried it high back toward the kitchen. Carol began to cut her first bite of cinnamon roll. Across the table, she shifted her legs back out to the side and set her gaze toward the tiled floor.

"Did you ever come here as a kid?" Carol asked as she forked the bite of cinnamon roll.

She shook her head.

"We would come here all the time. They had an order window right over there," she pointed to the corner with her knife, "and we'd buy fresh baked bread or dinner rolls. And, of course, cinnamon rolls for Sunday." Carol took her bite as if on cue, closed her eyes, and briefly held her arms in a semi-self-hug. "They still taste just as good!" Carol finished her bite and picked up her coffee. She took a sip. Peering over the rim she noticed her swirling her coffee with her spoon, her gaze still fixated on the tile floor.

"When did you start using cream?", Carol asked.

She flinched slightly at the sight of herself stirring her coffee. She clinked the spoon dry of coffee drops and set it on the saucer. The coffee was still whirling as she picked it up, took a sip, and gently returned it to the table.

"Honey, do you want to talk about it?" Carol asked as she extended her hand, palm-up across the table.

She shook her head and took in a sigh. "I don't know. Yes...and no..." She gave a tearful grin as she reached over and squeezed Carol's hand. After the moment, both hands retreated, Carol's to slicing her cinnamon roll and hers to the spoon ladling her coffee.

"I've talked about it so much already. And thought about it even more if that's possible. Everyone says, 'don't rush' or 'take your time' or 'make sure you're ready to move forward.' Well, I *am* ready to move forward. At least it *feels* like I'm ready. I *want* to be ready. And it isn't 'letting bygones-be-bygones' or 'forgive and forget;' it is beyond that. What happened, happened, and I can't change it. Neither can he. It will always...be." She paused and repositioned herself fully toward Carol. She placed both elbows on the table, hands toward her face, and her finger points touching at the pinnacle, pressed against her mouth as if in prayer. She continued, "And it isn't

about blaming him or blaming myself. I mean we're both at fault."

At this, Carol set down her fork with a loud clink and began to lean into her rebuttal, but she held up her hand.

"I don't mean we're *equally* at fault. He did it, after all, and I can't take ownership of it. Certainly not! But I'm at fault for being passive, for fighting in the wrong way. I'd speak when it was better to be quiet, and when it was time to speak, I'd let it drift by in silence. When it was time to embrace, I'd push him away and still yearn for closeness amid the distance." She shook her head. "I have so much of it backward. And now it seems all that is before me is the same-old, same-old: file for divorce or live like it never happened. Or, even, go out and show *him* what it's like." She shifted and leaned against her arm propped up on the table and took a sip of coffee. Carol nodded and took more bites of cinnamon roll.

"Well," Carol began as she finished her bite and dabbed her mouth with her napkin, "The timing seems right to buck the trend of 'same-old, same-old' considering the way things are going right now."

She nodded and smiled weakly in agreement. "Yeah, you might be right. But what would that mean?"

"I'm not sure, exactly, but you've never been one to follow suit, not as long as I've known you. I bet you'll figure something out." Carol said with a smile.

She sliced off her first bite of cinnamon roll which was, surprisingly, still warm. They ate and drank in a few moments of silence. She looked at Carol and stated, "You know, I've been thinking a lot about when I was younger, about me and my sister. It seems like we were at it all the time, pestering each other over petty stuff, always trying to get the upper hand, always back-and-forth. You can't even untangle it because trying to figure out 'who started it' is itself a non-starter. Mother would reassure us that 'it's just what sisters do' and that later in life we would come to appreciate one another, even depend on each other. Well, that seemed flat out crazy right in the thick of it. And it didn't do much at all to stop it."

She paused and took another sip of coffee while she stared out into the bustle of the restaurant. She continued, "But I've been thinking just what it would've been like to not participate; to forego any entitlement of 'getting even' or being resentful. But, instead, to say, 'You know, what you did hurt, and I don't like it. But I'm going to be your sister in *this* way, a way outside of revenge or resentment.' Of course, that'd be a

different hurt altogether. And I know that's beyond any expectation for teenage girls. Still, I do wonder..."

She sliced off another small bite of cinnamon roll. Carol's knife and fork clinked against her empty plate.

"Well, that definitely would have gone against the flow." Carol said.

"Oh, for sure. But it doesn't help to have epiphanies thirty years after the fact. Then again, understanding your past can help you navigate the present."

"Ooh, that's deep!" Carol said with a chuckle.

"Well, I think I read it somewhere." she stated with a grin. Carol sipped some more coffee. "So, what else are you trying to navigate, besides the obvious?"

She shifted in her seat as she smoothed some hair behind her ear. Her face began to beam with a sheepish grin. "I met someone."

Carol's eyes ballooned with a sense of shock. "What?!" Her mug thudded against the table. "You...met someone?!"

The waitress eased close by. "How're you ladies doing? Want some more coffee?"

"Yeah, you'd better fill it up." Carol stated without removing her glance from across the table. The waitress topped off both mugs with fresh coffee, then continued traversing between patrons.

Her face reddened amid Carol's peering. She giggled, "No, no, it's nothing like that." She took in a sigh. "When I found out about it, I just wanted to be gone. I didn't want to be home or away from home, just...gone. Well, that isn't exactly possible, so I went to the museum. I thought it was the next best thing, some place to be quiet, to be pensive, to get lost."

Carol waited.

She continued, "So, I'm walking through the exhibits, not really looking for anything, or at anything, and I come to a painting I've seen, I don't know, at least a dozen times before...but this time I see it in a different way. I don't even remember the artist. It's one of those big panoramic landscape paintings. It had a shoreline and big ocean waves, large looming black-gray clouds, and a tiny little boat out in the middle of the sea." She gestured with her hands some approximation of the painting's size and scale. Carol waited.

She continued, "And some meaning just hits home: the largeness of this world with all its aggressive mystery, the gigantic waves and clouds and mountains which overshadow us all the time,

and the realization that we can't possibly do anything about them. So, we just look the other way. We avert our focus down to the ground and just barely take in what's immediately in front of us. I couldn't help but think how empty that little boat must be, how very few people venture out into the monstrous waters. I couldn't help but think that it's time for me to get out into the boat. I need to stop staring at the ground, stop standing on the shore, and get out amid the waves, so to speak." She paused for a sip of coffee and stared for a moment across the café.

Carol waited a moment longer, then stated, "You know, people don't usually get into boats alone, unless they know what they're doing. Even the best sailors know it's time to dock during a storm."

Another pause.

"Well, go on. You said you met someone?" Carol urged.

"So. There was a man behind me, off to the right. I didn't see him at all, so it startled me when I heard him whisper. He said, 'breathtaking', or something like that. I don't know. For whatever reason I just turned around and said, 'Is that all?!' Just like that, 'Is that all?!' Well, he kind of jolted, obviously a little jarred, and said, 'Excuse me?' Well, I just began talking about what was on my mind in the moment, what I just shared with you—the big waves, the empty boat, the urge to

get off the shore. And he just listened. He responded a little, then listened some more. Before I knew it, we were walking together, stopping at different pieces, discussing our thoughts. We ended up getting coffee at the café next to the museum. I didn't get home until after midnight."

"Did Frank say anything?" Carol asked curiously.

"No. Not one word. He didn't say anything, he didn't ask any questions. Nothing."

"Well, did you get his name? Have you seen him again?"

"He has a residency with the university. He's mainly doing research, but he has a few lectures scheduled. He's staying at the Daylight Inn while they finish setting up his on-campus housing."

"You know where he's staying?" Carol gulped.

She giggled, "He *told* me where he's staying, but I haven't been there. Not yet anyway."

"Not yet?!" Carol exclaimed.

"He asked me over for drinks on Thursday, and...I think I might go." She watched for Carol's reaction, taking in a deep breath. Carol stared for a moment, then lowered her gaze while stirring her coffee.

"So," Carol began after a few snippets of silence, "you've considered *not* going, then?"

"Yeah, I've considered it. But how does one even consider such things? Just a few weeks ago I only considered which dinner to make or which shirts to iron or if we wanted to get out of the house on Saturday night. And now there's this new thing, this *real* thing, and I must consider it, too. I can't pretend I wasn't being prepared for what Frank did. It isn't some aberration or glitch, but a true reflection. Well, a reflection, at least. You know, in some strange way, I think I understand him better because of it. I am beginning to see the larger picture, not trying to gloss over anything, but letting it be *real*. Not that I prefer it this way, but I'm not pretending to be blind anymore, either." With this, she took the last sip of coffee and set her empty cup down on the saucer. She removed the napkin from her lap and laid it gently across the top of the cup. The waitress stopped by with a coffee pot in hand.

"Can I freshen up your coffee for you ladies?"

She shook her head and the waitress looked at Carol.

"Oh, none for me. Thanks." She took her last sip as well and returned the cup to her saucer, "It's probably about that time anyway."

The waitress smiled and pivoted toward the newly seated couple surveying the menu at the next four-top.

The two ladies each retrieved a tip from their pocketbook. They stood up and scooted their chairs back into place. Their banter over who would pick up the check lilted in with the hum of the café. Carol emerged triumphant toward the register while she removed their coats from the coatrack near the door. The waitress returned with coffee and waters for the new patrons. She swiveled and stacked the used dishes and cups on her tray, lifted it high above her head, and checked on other patrons as she headed back toward the kitchen. Donning their coats, the ladies pushed the door open to exit, stepping out into the building bustle of the sidewalk. The slight chime of the doorway bell stood for a moment above the café chatter, then subsided into the gentle murmurs that came to an abrupt halt as the door closed. Out on the sidewalk, they stood in the muted illumination of neatly spaced streetlamps, observing across the street the landscape of trees, silhouetted by a mixture of night blue sky and streetlamp, punctuated by the faint brightness of the strongest stars.

"Look, if you need to get away for a few days, you're welcome to come stay at our place. Tom won't mind. We'd love the company," Carol stated as she finished buttoning her coat.

"Thanks. I appreciate it. But I think it might be best to stay in my own bed." she stated as she cinched the belt on her coat. "But I'll consider it." she stated with a slight smile. Carol nodded her head. The trees swayed more noticeably as the breeze picked up. The ladies shivered a bit. "Oh, that's brisk!" she exclaimed.

"They say a storm is coming through toward the end of the week, heavy rain for several days." Carol informed.

"Oh. Well, all the more reason to stay home, then. I'd hate to get caught out in it." she replied.

The two women walked down the sidewalk and followed the curve to the rear parking lot. She thanked Carol for the coffee and the cinnamon roll as they hugged. Other night patrons continued up and down the sidewalk, hugging their coats a little tighter, attempting not to sway too much in the increasing breeze.