

"The suggestiveness of true poetry . . . is the aura round a bright clear centre. You cannot have the aura alone."

Each age searches for truth in its own way; however, our age must be careful that in its attempt to strip man naked of the filth and corruption which surrounds him, it does not at the same time destroy all the good in man—leaving nothing but an empty void as the end result.

The Suburbanites

Russ Durbin

IT WAS colder inside the car than outside when Jim slid out. He made no attempt to kiss her. "See you tonight," he said, and walked toward the train. Janet scooted over behind the wheel and backed the station wagon viciously out of the parking space, her mind still busy with the events of the previous evening.

It had all started when Mrs. Applegate phoned to say she didn't feel well and wouldn't be in that afternoon. That meant Janet had to do the marketing, the cleaning and the cooking alone—and with the Blakes and the Carsons coming to dinner. She'd have to cancel a three o'clock appointment at the beauty shop which she'd really needed; then the butcher had been late in sending the roast. She had dropped everything to rush to the five-fifty-seven for Jim, and he hadn't been on it. Back at the house, she managed to get everything under control, but her guests arrived before she got the curlers out of her hair. Trixie Blake just smiled and said, "Janet, how cute! Just like a girl space cadet." She had never been very fond of Trixie anyway.

When the Carsons arrived, they had a stranger with them named Marian Todd, an old friend of Janie's who had dropped by late in the afternoon. Janie said, "I called about six but you weren't in, Janet, but I knew you wouldn't mind." She laughed, "Marian eats hardly anything at all."

Janet looked at the girl and thought: Just men. Marian was a sultry brunette with languorous eyes, a gorgeous figure and a full mouth. She wore a dress that was beautifully cut an inch too low. "I hope you're not too angry," she said in her best Julie London voice. Then she sank into a deep chair and crossed long, lovely legs. Jack Blake's eyes bulged.

It was almost eight, and the roast was drying, by the time Jim arrived. She could tell by the subdued astonishment in his eyes that he had completely forgotten about the Carsons and the Blakes. He explained that he had been delayed at the office, but Janet detected the Martinis on his breath when she kissed him. He'd certainly been in a great hurry to get home.

It turned out to be one of those nights. Halfway through dinner the lights had gone out, and it had taken Jim, never one of the world's great mechanics, half an hour in the cellar to replace a faulty fuse. And when she had tried to help him, he snapped, "What the hell do you think I am, a magician?"

Of course, there hadn't been a candle in the house. And dinner had been ruined.

Marian Todd, it was soon evident, approved highly of Jim. Her eyes left him only occasionally, and she laughed throatily at every limp witticism he uttered. Janet could understand it since Blake was a bore and Carson was a bit pear-shaped. And Jim, damn him, still looked like the halfback and college class president he had once been.

There were drinks after dinner, of course, and Trixie had found the stack of new records for the stereo. Politely enough Jim asked Marian to dance, and after thirty seconds Janet bitterly admitted they were something to watch, all right.

Jim returned to her, a silly fixed smile on his face. She surrendered because she knew he wasn't the world's best dancer.

"Tired?" Jim asked her.

"Of quite a few things," Janet replied.

* * *

When the evening finally ended, it developed the Blakes had to pick up their children over in Weston Village and were unable to take the Carsons, and Marian Todd, home when their car developed engine trouble. Jim volunteered to drive the Carsons, and Marian Todd, home. Marian, it turned out, lived three miles the other side of the Carsons in Boonville. They all left in high spirits while Janet attacked the mountainous stacks of dishes.

Jim finally got home an hour and a half after Janet had calculated he should have. There was a smear of lipstick on the side of his mouth. Janet was sitting up in bed, a book on her lap. "Well, have a pleasant trip?"

"Wonderful," he said, putting clothes in his closet.

"What is Marian's place like?" she asked in a tight little voice.

"Huh?" he said, turning to her. The lipstick was like a neon light. "I don't know. I just dropped her off in front of her house."

"You're getting a little old for that, aren't you? I mean, parking in front of a girl's house? Look at your face."

He glanced in the mirror, wiped away the stain with a tissue, and said, "Janie Carson was acting silly. She insisted on paying me with a kiss for the taxi ride."

"And Miss Todd's ride was quite a bit longer, so the fare, I imagine—"

"Look, Miss Suspicion of the Year," Jim said. "I took them all home and had a flat on the way back from Boonville. The lousy jack broke, and I had to walk a mile to Moran's and have them come back with me to change the tire. Let's not make one of your silly productions of this."

"Jim Johnston, if you think for one minute I believe—"

"Look, stupid. You going to keep this up forever? I've had a rugged day, and I'm sure not going to listen to you yackety-yack for the rest of the night. You want to talk, you talk to yourself." And he picked up a blanket and went into the living room.

Oh, it had been a wonderful evening, all right. She whipped the car into the driveway and was delighted at the sound of the bumper ripping the side of the garage door.

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On the train, Jim tried to read the morning paper, but all he saw were the events of the preceding evening. What the hell had happened, anyway?

It started in the afternoon, when old Wilson had called him into the office about the Bodacker account. Jim had worked hard on that one, and it had seemed to him that this was a particularly good advertising layout. But not to the Bodackers. They needed a new one right away. He made the change, working furiously, and was surprised to find that he had missed his usual train. He called Janet, but there was no answer. Probably she had already left to meet his train. He ran to the station, just in time to miss the six-thirty-four. Oh, boy! He walked into the station bar with bitterness in his heart. Sometimes things just piled up.

Two Martinis made him feel a little better, and he got on the seven-o-five train in a calmer mood, basking in the pleasant thought of how nice it would be to spend a quiet evening alone with Janet. She'd understand about missing the train. Besides, there was a good ballgame on television.

It stunned him a little when he opened the door and found the Carsons and the Blakes and that raven-haired man-eater there. He had completely forgotten that Janet had told him they were coming.

He had tried to be supergracious to everyone, trying to make up to Janet for his lateness. He'd even been nice to that phony *femme fatale* the Carsons had dragged along.

Certainly, it hadn't been his fault the light had gone out, but he'd been ashamed that he'd forgotten once again just where the fuse box was hidden in the cellar. Janet hadn't been much help either. She just bawled him out. Fortunately, he'd kept his temper in check, soothing her with, "Don't worry, darling. I'll have everything ship-shape in a moment."

When Trixie had started the record player, that had been the crusher. He was dead on his feet after a brutal day, and all he wanted to do was talk to Janet and tell her about the foul-up at the office. But no, that would never do. He had to dance with what's-her-name. Of course, she was a good dancer, but— He had noticed Janet blinking her eyes, and he asked her solicitously, "Tired, baby?" She gave him some short, enigmatic reply that he was too tired to attempt to figure out. And then, on top of everything else, Carsons' car broke down and he had to take them home. Janie Carson had

had one too many, that was for sure, and he was unable to defend himself from her slobbery smacker when she got out. On the contrary, Miss What's-Her-Name hadn't had enough to drink. She had invited him in, but he'd excused himself because of the hour. Then the flat tire. Oh, boy!

Janet had certainly been in a fine mood when he got home, all those biting comments of hers that were anything but subtle. Janet had dramatically pointed at the lipstick, and shouted, "Look at the lipstick on your ugly face! Where have you been for the last four hours, you wolf!"

Jim knew he had carefully explained about the kiss and the flat tire, but Janet hadn't listened. Instead, she screamed, "That's a lie, Jim! You were with that Todd woman in her apartment, drinking and drinking and—"

"Darling," he'd begun. "you know you're being a bit silly. I'd like to apologize for being late this evening, hon. It was one of those things that couldn't be helped. I—"

"You're a lout!" Janet had screamed. "A rake and a liar."

He had held up his hand placatingly and smiled, he remembered. "Darling, the neighbors."

Her voice had been shrill. "Jim Johnston, you beast, I'm going to Reno in the morning. I'm going to call Mother and—"

He had known then that there was no understanding between them. He remembered he had said, "Darling, you're upset. I'm sure you've had a hard day, and I know it was mainly my fault. Now, go to sleep, and I'll use the sofa so I won't disturb you."

And he had taken a blanket and gone to sleep on that damned sofa.

Jim shrugged and opened the paper again. Maybe she'd feel better today. Maybe some flowers—

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He got off the five-fifty-seven feeling fine. The car was in the customary place and Janet was in it. He opened the door and slid in. "Hi, baby."

He hesitated, wondering whether or not he should take a chance and kiss her. The result was amazing. Her arms went around his neck, and she murmured, "Jim! I'm so glad to see you! Have a good day?"

He took a deep breath, then grinned. "I wanted to tell you last night. I was late because I had to make a big change in the Bodacker account layout. Old Wilson called me in today and harumphed for a while before telling me there'd be a five-hundred-dollar-bonus in my next check. Nice?"

He was quite sure she hadn't heard him. "Yes, that's nice," she said in a dreamy voice. He looked at her. "Jim, the flowers. It was sweet. I never dreamed that you'd remember."

Oh my God, he thought. Remember remember what? He smiled modestly, and said, "Well, I—" letting his voice trail off.

"The anniversary of the day we met! It was at that party of the Powells and—" her voice trailed off too. He began to breathe again.

Her arm was linked with his now. "And I stopped at Moran's for gas today, and he told me all about the trouble you had last night. You poor lamb, why didn't you tell me?"

He knew enough to kill his smile. "About last night, I was tired and grumpy. I'm sorry."

"Jim," Janet said. "Let's forget all about last night."

"That suits me fine." He looked at his image in the rearview mirror and raised his eyebrows. Sometimes, you just didn't know what the hell was going on in a woman's mind.

THE FINALE

Dying in a grand leap before the pain
Of falling surged from the earth again,
The soul rising beyond thighs tight with strain
And the doll topples. . . .

Worn point shoes lying fallow in a drawer
Bear rosined witness to once-spotlit wear
While once pink ribbons whiten year by year,
Fade as she watches.

He* too fell, already mad, as his wife
Pitying from the wings, on his behalf
Prayed for his death whose dancing was his life
Before his madness. . . .

Unfeeling, childlike, immortal thighs
As ivories unguided, flesh could rise
Thoughtward, without the wounded falcon's cries.
Such is God's mercy.

Yet her heart, polished as a hussar heel,
Beats homage to the challenge of a smile
From her constant companion, to whose will
She once submitted.

Her eyes dance with young Vienna couples
And sometime swans on Sunday promenades
With Chopin and Liszt, music and love's wiles.
Tempus fugisset.

BILL McPHERSON

* Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950), Russian ballet dancer.