

CAPRICCIO

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He held his cigarette in his right hand, occasionally using it as an extension to his fingers, whenever he wished to emphasize a point, which was in his wife's mind too often. She hated cigarette smoke. As soon as he lit up, her sinuses filled with what she pictured as a combination of oatmeal and Elmer's Glue. Even when he was not smoking, the odor lingered about him, in his clothes, on his breath, and on the tips of his fingers; only this smell was well established, settled in and occupying his space. Their home was littered with half full or overflowing ash trays that filled each room with this dry, pervasive stench. She never seemed to be able to escape it, even when they went out visiting or to a party, as they were now, the first thing he did upon crossing the threshold was to light a cigarette and fill the air with his trademark, his cologne.

She watched him as he gesticulated an ash onto his pants, and a thought into the discussion. Once again his mind was entirely engaged with the ideas of the conversation. Not the people or what they were specifically saying, but with that kernel of thought shrouded in their words. His brow was knitted in tension as he sought to control his responses, to keep from losing his audience in a wave of complexity, but his eyes showed a keen excitement at having some forum for the exchange and pronouncing of ideas. She knew only too well exactly what was happening inside his head, having seen that same expression on his face many times. He had a passion for engaging in an intellectual discussion, and would begin one with whomever he was with, on whatever level was required. Most often it was, as now, at a cocktail party, or at some semi-formal gathering. One could almost hear the little gears clicking, she thought, and the motors revving. Was that ozone she smelled—no he had lit another cigarette.

She had lost track as to exactly what the discussion was dealing with some time ago. Not that it was boring; they were never boring. On the contrary, they tended to be lively and fresh; let's see, provocative? Yes, that was it, they were provocative. He always approached every subject with a new twist, and sought to keep the debates continuing for as long as possible by expanding them onto any one of a hundred possible tangents. That was what he called them, debates. Which in his

mind resembled something of a mental gymnastic free-for-all. In her mind these little talks resembled a verbal street fight between a leather togged gang and the local assistant librarian, who was armed only with, an amazing memory for statements made five minutes earlier that contradicted what the same speaker was saying now. No, it was not that they were boring, it was just that she had grown accustomed to this form of gladiatorial combat. She had reached a level of catharsis, purged of the evils that created a need for these debates; she had nothing to say.

She was amazed that no one else heard the little popping and clicking sounds that were coming from under his dark brown hair. She watched him as he tipped his head back to drain the last drops of bourbon from his glass. The sharp features of his profile and that full head of hair took on an aura, almost a halo affect, as his head was framed in the light of the lamp from the end of the couch. You shouldn't, was what she thought, as he turned to her, holding out his glass and flashing that please-run-off-and-fetch-me-some-more smile. Or at least run-off-and-fetch-your-own. "The same thing?", she asked, he nodded yes, then turned his attention back to the discussion. She took up the glass and rose with the burdening knowledge that more would add a great deal to his passion when they arrived home, but very little to his performance. But she could tell by the volume and pitch of his voice that his mental governor was losing control, and that soon he would expand the conversation beyond the interest and ability of this audience of mixed intellects. The debate would be over, and he, not really being the type for light social talk, would need something to entertain himself.

As she weaved her way through the other guests, answering this person's query about her children, and asking that one about their own, she realized that she was really not the type for this banter either. When one really thought about it, the same questions were always asked by the same or similar people about the same or similar subjects. It occurred to her that it was quite easy to fill up an evening, a great deal of time in fact, covering territory that was well known. I suppose, she thought, that people are just trying to fill up all those empty moments in their lives that are so particularly embarrassing when in public. Someone should really write a book of etiquette that said it was perfectly acceptable at a gathering for occasional moments when the air was filled only with the rather attractive sound of ice tinkling against glass, or perhaps a warming sigh. Rather than embarrassing,

these moments should be considered as signifying relaxed reflection, of enjoyment. That is unlikely though, she concluded, since these gatherings were meant to fill up time; though by the next morning the time seemed to have slipped away, empty.

She finally reached her goal, poured his drink, and began once again to thread her way through the guests, more carefully this time, so as not to spill the liquor. Someone she knew she should remember from somewhere stopped her and introduced her to her escort. He was tall, blond headed and rugged looking; very attractive she thought. She talked and joked with them for awhile, then excused herself and headed towards her husband. Upon reaching the room he was in, she realized that the discussion had ended much sooner than she thought it would. Most of the participants were paired up in small talk or roaming about searching for new faces. Her husband was sitting off in a corner in an overstuffed chair, seemingly swallowed by its rounded wings and arms. In front of him, on an ottoman, was sitting a young woman who was carefully rolling a joint. Every time she saw her husband readying to smoke grass she was a little taken aback, not being attracted to it herself. She was well aware that it had recently received the status of indifference at these suburban gatherings, and she didn't think it any more harmful than alcohol; but it was just part of her middle class up-bringing that always made her feel negatively towards the use of marijuana. Since her husband did not use either alcohol or grass with frequency, the grass much less, she was not upset by his actions, just surprised. He was sitting there in that misbegotten renovation of a chair with such a funny smirk on his face, that she wondered whether he was ogling his conversation partner or anticipating the pot. The young woman, she had gathered when introduced earlier in the evening, was a new employee of the host. A recent graduate of a local university, who had an excess of energy and was lacking a foundation garment. She had thought at the time, that what that girl needed was a couple of kids under her belt to sort of knock that "I've got a career" wind from her rosy cheeks. Oh well, she shrugged, he won't be needing the booze. She turned from the room and began milling among the other guests. Spending a short time discussing with the host and hostess a new print they had bought, and a little more time with her husband's accountant listening to the attributes of a new chemical manure he was using on his lawn. She finally ended up standing outside a large room that was being used by several couples for dancing. The lights in the room were low and the music inviting; it was a slow

melodic piece with a jazz or blues influence. As she stood listening, the sensual strains seemed to permeate through her skull, removing the awareness of all that was going on around her. The music made her body feel as though it were floating and yet something deep within was touched with a mournful melancholy. It felt as though something had reached into her chest; had touched a thing that only a woman has, and grasped it. She felt lonely, and isolated, as if she were the only woman in a room filled with alien creatures. Behind her breast there was a terrible tightness; she felt as though her heart would not withstand the strain, then much more quickly than when it had begun, the pressure eased, and eased, until that thing within her was released and was free. At this freedom her body began to move, it would not have been noticed by the casual observer, she was simply swaying with the rhythm. It suddenly occurred to her that someone behind her had said something to her. "What," she said as she turned. It was the tall blond fellow. "I said, you surprise me, I would not have taken you for a straight bourbon drinker." "Oh, I'm not," she answered, "this was for my husband, but I don't think he'll need it now." She set the drink on a nearby console and resumed watching the dancers. The tall blond nodded and then turned his attention to the room from which the music was coming. After a short while he turned back to her and asked if she would like to dance. "I would like that very much." They moved into the room and began to dance, occasionally talking, acquainting themselves with one another, but mostly they quietly danced. Soon her mind began again to tune itself once more to the mood of the music, and to that thing loose inside her. It seemed to her that the sound was penetrating her entire being, not violating, or controlling her will, but awakening something primal, something disguised but very important. She felt her skin come alive with a tingling sensitivity, and her muscles contracting and relaxing ever so slightly, occasional rushes of excitement. She looked up at the tall blond to respond to a question and was struck by his handsomeness. She felt the solid musculature of his back beneath her hand, and the firmness and control of his hand around hers. The tempo of the song increased, and so did the blood pulsing through her arteries. Within her there was a struggle of restraint and propriety against an intensifying excitement. The threatening feeling of isolation had evolved into one of personal solitude, as though she were dancing alone, and the force that moved and affected her was the music itself. She maneuvered him so that they were dancing closer, so that she could feel the warmth and solidness of his full front,

partially resting her head on his shoulder. As they danced she could feel her dress and bra slide slightly across her skin, wherever their bodies touched, and the awareness of this movement of fabric made her skin all the more sensitive. She pulled their bodies closer so that she could feel this tiny friction across her stomach and the tops of her thighs. She wondered what it would be like to make love to this healthy young man. She felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck raise as she considered the possibilities. Why couldn't she have an affair with him, or any other as far as that went? After all, what percentage of those young women she had noticed her husband mentally disrobing had he actually made a play for? No that wasn't fair, he looked but was too timid to touch. But why not she? Many of her friends had. They never came out and admitted as much, but when talking or joking about men, they always had that certain facial expression. You knew they could say a great deal more, and they didn't seem to look too ashamed at the knowledge. A life-time with one man had always seemed enough, but still, what would it be like with another man. "So many do," she said, "why not me?" The tall blond looked at her with a puzzled expression, "I'm sorry, what did you say?" "Oh nothing, nothing at all. I was just thinking aloud." She felt her skin tingle with excitement after this response, and pressed herself even more firmly against him. She wondered if his thoughts were running in a similar vein, then suddenly she was struck by this thought. What was he thinking? Throughout all of this he had acted naturally, in one sense almost too naturally. She felt that he had behaved the perfect gentleman, and after all, she had done some things that must have seemed to be quite a come on. At the same moment she realized that none of it had been a come on, none of it was immoral, amoral, improper, or un-American. She was not seeking an affair. Rather it had been more of a personal moment of sensuous pleasure, gained more through her mind than their companionship. He would not even have had to be here for this to happen, she thought. Oh yes, she would have been able to rationalize such an encounter with him very easily, while they had been dancing, but that was not what she was after. It was not exactly the sort of experience that one discussed with their Republican committeeman, or even one's husband, but perhaps she misjudged him, her husband that is. The music ended and together they moved off to the side of the dance floor. She felt giddy and light-headed, as though she had been birthed again—as though she was passing quickly through her youth. At one point she caught herself hunching her shoulders forward,

allowing more of her cleavage to his view, she forcibly reminded herself of her age. As the topics for general conversation appeared to be running out, he thanked her for the dance and excused himself to go seek his partner for the evening. He had not once mentioned the woman's name, and try as she might, she still could not recall it.

She found herself once more seeking out her husband, returning to him, locating him exactly where she had left him, half swallowed in the overstuffed armchair. The young woman was still sitting on the ottoman, only now she was the one who was doing all the talking, punctuating the air with her finger. Her husband's countenance showed signs of mild disgust, in fact she could tell that he was bored senseless. Upon seeing his wife, his thick dark eyebrows arched up in anticipatory relief. As she walked over to them her husband rose and introduced the young woman, then he bid an enthusiastic but polite farewell and ushered his wife out of the room. "That young woman," he said as they almost were out of earshot, "is an indefatigable talker, something of a bore actually." "Oh really," she smiled, "I sort of felt she reminded me of you in certain ways, when you were younger that is." He laughed and responded, "Well in that case perhaps there is hope for her, but she really ought to wear a bra, she's much too big to go around like that."

It occurred to her, as he was helping her into her coat, that she really had nothing to fear from this or any other healthy young woman. What she and her husband had was a mutually comfortable relationship. Neither one felt awkward or embarrassed with the other. It was true their life together was only occasionally exciting. But it was a very gratifying life together. Besides more than enough surprises came one's way in life. She had nothing to fear from that young woman, and he had nothing to fear from tall, handsome, young, blond males; or that thing disguised within her, in fact he had much to be gained by that.

They said their goodbyes to the host and hostess and headed out the door for their car; he puffing ecstatically on a cigarette, she deeply inhaling the fresh night air.