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Angel of the Morning

Bruce Colbert

Roger and Melissa were the kind of bohemian couple that was popular at the better parties which tended to attract the more conventional types like corporate lawyers, bankers and famous architects with the larger firms.

You could easily notice them most nights silhouetted against those sandblasted exposed brick walls of Victorian era townhouse living rooms all over Chicago in those days. Melissa was a very pretty woman too, with the best haircut in town, actually she went to New York for it, and big blue eyes that looked at you so intently.

Since she was an interior designer and therefore thought to be artistic, she had the various hosts' unspoken permission to wear those Forties and early Fifties flamboyant outfits you find in the better, more sought after resale shops with names like Nostalgia, or Garbo's. But in truth, she usually found them at yard sales in rural Wisconsin where they spent summers at her father's old vacation gingerbread home on Lake Delavan.

Several friends who joined them on those steamy Midwest weekends had said jokingly that she held the undisputed record for consecutive purchases, and at the height of this summer feeding frenzy, she had been seen by a lawyer friend who was a vice president with Continental Bank buying at least one item, sometimes two, of clothing she found in the various boxes piled akimbo on rickety card tables, every fourteen seconds. He claimed he had consulted his watch.

"Dammit, I was there," he insisted to me one evening, "she bought a broken cane, a paperback by what's his name! Doctor Spock, two sweaters with holes, a pair of old ski boots, a Twister board game, and two glass jars, in less than a minute."

"Tell me, what does she do with that junk?"

I laughed, "You should see her basement."

"I can just imagine."

Melissa favored older frame houses on the backstreets of Baraboo, the former summer headquarters town of the great Barnum and Bailey circus, and a short drive from her lake house that emptied long forgotten contents of their attics after several generations. Tiny ladies hats from the Depression, worn saddle shoes, high school majorette uniforms, or a varsity letter sweater, none of it escaped her practiced eye.

At one elegant Christmas party on Lake Shore Drive thrown by the neo Bauhaus German designer Helmut Gottfried who brazenly had both his wife and the much younger woman he was constantly seen with around town seated across from each other, Melissa celebrated by sporting white polished marching band cowboy boots circa 1960 with gold

tassels while other women wore red Prada pumps, or some other designer high heeled black boot. She was that rare breed of woman who could look magical in an old matted fur jacket with fox heads draped around her neck and trailing down her back, an empty eye socket here and there, worn with a sense of panache. No one else dared.

Her husband, a human rights lawyer in a long list of ill-paying causes, always wore what he had been married in, a black velvet sports coat, a kind of velour, with large lapels which fit his hippie sensibilities, now thirty years past, and vintage granny glasses that slid down his ample nose as he sipped his drink.

They had a daughter, Flower, who had been delivered at home by black midwife whom Melissa knew from her old neighborhood, and she was still breast-feeding the child who had just turned three, to the horror of her woman friends, and the amusement of the men.

At the home birthing three of her girlfriends and Roger surrounded the bed, and one girlfriend from Los Angeles kept saying, repeatedly, "Oh my God," until Roger finally turned and told her to please shut up. Never a dull moment.

Her daughter referred to her breasts as 'other side,' and whenever I would visit them for drinks at their Chicago apartment in one of her father's old buildings, I would tease the child unmercifully.

Sitting in their living room with a scotch, I would feint a move toward Melissa, and call out, 'my other side,' and hearing that, the child would bolt from whatever room she was in, and pounce on her mother's lap grabbing a breast out of her sweater, and start suckling loudly, keeping her tiny squinted eyes focused on me should I made any untoward move.

Melissa always laughed at this. Ignoring it all. Roger was deep in conversation explaining to a curious couple a high profile Satanic ritual case involving children he was prosecuting for a state child welfare agency. A fierce and successful litigator in court, over the years he had grown enamored of the sound of his own voice.

"The children were given blood at breakfast almost like orange juice, I'm not kidding," he was telling an architect whose work favored Mies van de Rohe, and a notorious drunk though a fine pianist, one who often played their baby grand piano passing out with his head resting on the keys by the end of the night.

I had wearied of teasing Flower as did my wife Belle who sat stone faced in the living room rolling her eyes in mild disgust at my adolescent behavior, and I soon dropped the charade anyway.

"Being married to Melissa is like living in a tornado," Roger told the assembled guests as he returned from one of the vacant rooms in the apartment they were curenovating with what looked like a handful of painted wooden slats he'd torn off some wall and then threw on the glow in the their fireplace.

“They probably have toxic lead paint on them,” Belle said to him sarcastically as he stoked the fire with a tool Melissa had gotten at an estate close out somewhere, looking like a shovel but with no scoop.

“Pine scented lead,” Roger sang out, “for the season,” and started laughing. He was always quick in conversation, and rarely missed a comment in the room.

He was a fine man in many ways, and he had helped me sort out a painful child custody any payment.

Melissa sighed loudly at the banter, shaking her head, a woman full of contradictions. On the one hand, she was the first true macrobiotic cook I’d ever met, who actually grew her own sprouts in their Provencalkitchen where she had a huge restaurant stove alight with eight gas burners, but there were so many disconnects along the way. She smoked, for instance, usually in secret, begging friends for cigarettes. Roger was a chain-smoker much like Belle, who had upped it to nearly two packs a day.

One weekend the past summer when we had gone out on the lake in her father’s boat driven by an eager Roger who tried to light a cigarette as we cruised the shore. Melissa stood up in the rocking boat and took it out of his mouth and along with the full pack of Marlboros threw them into the water. Roger just smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

The boat was something out of a Fred Astaire film, a thirteen foot antique Chris Craft cruiser which seated five or six with a prow of beautifully polished teak, and a glass windscreen, a very fast boat, smooth running and elegant with polished brass fittings. It was unusual to see Roger at the helm.

Her father never hid his dislike for Roger, and he would regularly embarrass him at parties, so only the old man’s absence allowed him to play boat captain. Mercifully her father rarely came to the lake place, and if he did, he never stayed overnight. He’d generally drank a beer or two, directed a barrage of insults at Roger, and left before sunset in his sleek Cadillac.

Later when Roger was tying the boat to the dock Melissa ran up to my wife who was about to step inside the house, and begged, “Quick, give me a cigarette, I’ll smoke it in the kitchen before he comes.” I watched her standing near the kitchen window puffing, cutting a loaf of fresh bread, and stealthily glancing out at Roger who had decided to spend a few minutes hosing off the boat,

I remember a potluck dinner for somebody’s birthday, and a gourmet chief friend of mine had brought his signature lamb and escarole hot salad. Asking for wooden forks to toss it, she pointed to a stone vase with a half dozen of them. As he hurriedly grabbed a pair, his was the last dish for the back garden feast, and was about to plunge them into the large salad bowl, he looked at horror at black and white tufts of cat hair sticking to both

forks, as her cat Mister Big rubbed affectionately against his outstretched arms. This was a man who couldn't sleep at night knowing there might be one dirty dish in his sink.

I happened to be standing in her large kitchen painted a deep blue and yellow like Monet's in France and saw the absolute look of disbelief on his face.

He turned to me as her sheep dog jumped up on his leg, smelling the lamb, and said in a deadpanned voice, "Your friend is very colorful!"

Melissa had been to Giverny several times, and on one afternoon visit to a docent's surprise she had been measuring the kitchen dimensions, crawling along the stone floor. Her dream was to duplicate Monet's French country kitchen in her Chicago home.

She spoke a sort of usable French and had lived in postwar France with her parents; her father had been with the OSS then, and had some reason to remain long after the Germans left Paris, where they had lived for four or five years. She loved French culture, and she could be close to fluent if she paid attention to what she was saying in the language, which of course she didn't.

Then there was the pig story. Roger who was a big drinker had once won a live pig, a joke, at law association charity raffle, and had brought the thing home.

It was one of those Vietnamese potbellied pigs, exotic and popular among celebrities, and the animal weighed nearly forty pounds when he dragged in the side kitchen door with a rope tied around its hairy neck. Cloven hooped and snorting, it seemed a strange choice for a pet, except perhaps if you lived in the Mekong Delta.

They named it Antigone, and it slept and lived in a large cardboard box in their mock French kitchen, and though it did go out into the yard, the creature was never completely house trained, often using the box. Its leavings had that faint farm animal scent and were generous.

One evening during Christmas week eight of us were having dinner there, all seated around her glass topped table in the fine old oak paneled dining room, the house had been built in 1911. For an instant, I felt something push against my leg, and I thought that Belle had kicked me for some offhand remark I'd made in the conversation. I stopped speaking but the pushing continued.

I looked down and saw the grey wet snout of Antigone and felt her hairy back. I squeezed a handful of skin, and she let out a loud piercing squeal and darted through the revolving door into the kitchen squealing all the while.

"Oh Jack," Melissa gently scolded me, "you must be gentle with her, she frightens easily," and got up from the table to comfort the scared pig. Everyone around the table just laughed.

Animals never bothered Melissa in the least, for she also kept two dogs, an English sheepdog and a black Lab, two cats, and a ferret. The ferret lived in a cage only occasionally cleaned in the middle bedroom, but turned to the wall in case they had overnight guests which they often did, usually out of town architects.

To say Melissa loved animals was an understatement for she also kept a large wire cage hidden in a tiny alcove of boxwoods in the backyard from the prying eyes of nosier neighbors where three prize French hens laid fresh blue shelled eggs for her table. She learned from Roger that three of these exotic chickens would be considered pets under city ordinances, more would be illegal and constitute a barnyard.

Her chickens generally free range had the run of the yard during the day, and were looked safely in the cages at night.

Tragedy struck one afternoon as her neighbor's pit bull had forced two planks off their back fence with eighty pounds of brute strength and had pushed through and slaughtered the whole flock. Melissa had just returned from work in time to see the dog, its mouth covered in blood and feathers escape through the fence hole.

She didn't even go around the block but climbed over the fence and yelled for her neighbor to come out right away. Screamed would be a better word for it as her neighbor Joyce stepped fearfully out on the back porch only to see a bloody dog at her feet.

"You've got two options, you're a business school professor, so you'll figure this out quickly: "Either prepare yourself for a lawsuit which will be filed in two days, or get your ass up to LeCrosse, Wisconsin, this week, and bring me back three French chicks from the breeder, to replace what that Goddamn beast killed."

"I'm sorry," Joyce said, "he's a sweet dog with the children, really."

"I'm a forgiving person, but you do one or the other, talk to your husband when he gets home. Then you better call me by ten tonight. You got it!" and then she walked past the tearful neighbor whose toddler had pushed open the door and was hanging on her legs as Melissa stormed past, down their driveway, and out into the street.

The stories about Melissa were legion among friends and left strangers open mouthed and shaking their heads, and you could always overhear her name spoken amidst laughter at parties.

One Monday she was driving to a interior design meeting at a big hotel downtown, and being late everywhere she was speeding down a busy LaSalle Street threading her way in and out of traffic in her dented Saab. She was spotted by a cop and pulled over. He walked over to her car window which she rolled down slowly with its broken handle intending to ticket her, a big smile on his coarse face.

As he looked inside the window, he realized in ten years of police work he'd never seen a sight quite like this. She had been breast feeding Flower in her arms while steering, and at the same time putting on her panty hose which was knotted at her knees. She had her makeup kit and hand mirror balanced on the steering wheel and a mascara brush in one hand. In the backseat were her adopted daughter and two of her school two friends she was dropping off to catch the train, and two large dogs who were barking loudly.

Upon seeing this menagerie, the tough Chicago cop just shook his head and said, "Lady, you got a whole lot more problems than I do! Slow down!" And with that warning, he turned and walked back to own his car leaving Melissa to search for the ignition key she had dropped in her nervousness on the floor that had bounced under the driver's seat.

There were so many stories, they just sort of happened to her, like the time a guest German violinist with Sir Georg Solti's symphony orchestra came to one of Melissa's parties, and loving dogs, bent down to pet her black Lab which viciously fastened its teeth to the end of the man's nose, drawing blood and howls.

She didn't like rules. Without fail right before New Year's, she would send her frustrated lawyer husband down to city traffic court to reduce the thousand dollars worth of tickets she got each year. The woman parked absolutely everywhere around the city with a reckless abandon.

She was generous, and even with the craziness in everything she did she was among our most interesting and genuine friends.

The divorce and the other madness came later, and her erratic behavior may have just been too much for Roger.

"I sometimes think I'm just too much for Roger," she told me once, being serious for a change.

At the time, I said, "Nah," and thought of them as an unusual and refreshing couple unlike any other I knew, certainly not like Belle and me, who were careful not to say things we thought aloud.

Before moving into the large old home her father bought for them, they lived in one of his older, half rundown buildings free on the top floor.

Below them two floors down was a woman with a small daughter who was probably eight or nine as I remember. The woman was a crack addict, and had a string of questionable characters coming through her life, some staying for a few nights, others an afternoon. The young girl would spend hours in the yard or on the building stoop, and finally Melissa had her come up to their apartment and would feed her, let her bathe, watch television, and started buying her school clothes, and helping her with her homework. She asked the mother if the girl could sleep over, they had a guest bedroom, and the drug addled mother said she didn't care, go ahead. This went on for perhaps a

year until the woman was hospitalized for a drug overdose of what was thought to be heroin, and asked, no, told, Melissa, to take the child. "Go ahead, adopt her, I don't care, I'll sign the papers."

And then one day the mother didn't come back to the apartment, the child sat there alone for two days, and finally Melissa knocked on the door, and took her up to their apartment, and the little girl, Candy, moved in for good. They heard nothing from the mother again, and Roger who knew his way around child abandonment and custody cases somehow arranged for an adoption, and so they had two daughters, Candy and Flower.

Melissa asked Belle if we wouldn't help her get Candy into the grammar school at Francis Parker, a well regarded private school that Belle had loved as a child and now served as an alumni secretary, or something, I wasn't quite sure. And Belle pushed until she was accepted.

There was a vague Pygmalion sort of quality to all of this as I watched Melissa with both tenderness and cunning, bring the little homeless waif back from the brink of disaster. The pigs and the ferrets and the chickens and the lateness paled with this.

When Melissa and Roger finally moved into the house, we were invited for dinner one weekday evening at seven, and I had been late at the office and Belle almost neurotic about lateness of a minute, made me speed along the lakefront to get there on time, twenty miles over the speed limit, a magnet for cops.

When we finally turned into Melissa's street and approached their house she was backing her vintage Saab out of the driveway, and said to us that she was heading to the grocery store for groceries for dinner. Groceries?

Roger stood on the porch with his cognac smiling in quiet resignation and shaking his head, and invited us in for a drink, and a wait.

"Right on time, I see," he said smiling, "we should be eating around ten," and started laughing motioning us in the door.

I looked at Belle who gave me her sheepish 'I know, I know' look. I was usually prompt, a lesson I learned from the army but she was almost neurotic on time.

This was the same Melissa who showed up almost an hour late for her own birthday party as we sat around a Chinatown restaurant, ordering yet another drink and pot sticker plate, looking at the clock. You never hurried with her.

"Well, at least that gives us three hours for drinks," I said to Belle as we went in the door.

Inside I noticed Antigone was gone, and Roger told us finally he found a farmer in Indiana who raised this breed as a hobby, and he drove the pig there two days ago.

I asked him when we were alone, “What were you thinking when you brought that pig home?”

“Thinking? why would I be thinking anything?, I’d won it!” he said nonchalantly dismissing the question.

“But a pig, in a house? c’mon!,” I pressed him..

“We go with the flow here, Jack, that’s the way it works.”

So two years after Antigone abruptly left Melissa so did Roger He came home one night and announced he was leaving, to move in with Vivian Rivas his Dominican lawyer deputy. He told her the years of her madness had just worn him down, Other interested friends simply said it was more about Vivian’s legs who was fifteen years young than him.

He packed his bags, told Flower he’d see her on weekends, and left. Melissa went into a deep period of painful depression then, though when you talked with her you never know it hidden in her girlishly cheerful conversation, but it was there all the same.

“I drove him away, having another child in the house, it was too much for him, I know,” she’d lament when we were together.

“We didn’t have enough money, I spent too much all the time, the trips” she drifted on. It had been her fault that he left, she reckoned.

“My father was a bastard to him,” and that was a lot to swallow.

“Everybody knows your father’s half crazy,” I told her. And there were always the rumors that he was Candy’s father, since he had let the mother live there for years for next to nothing, and they had been friends. She had been an Appalachian Scotch-Irish beauty with apple-checks, blond hair before the drugs made her look worn and haggard at forty. When Roger was half drunk and Melissa was out of earshot, he sometimes crossed the line and called Candy her sister.

Melissa would come over to our apartment for dinner once a month, or more often sometimes, and we’d all sit around trying to change the subject from Roger’s leaving to architecture or fine art where she’d always had a keen interest but nothing kept him out of conversation for long.

He was starting to be seen regularly around Chicago in their old restaurants haunts, mostly either dives, or dirt cheap Vietnamese places Melissa had discovered but at parties too. Him in the black velour jacket next to Arela in a short skirt, or shiny leather pants. But unlike most couples who divide old friends Roger bore the brunt of most wives who could only see a middle aged man getting a bit fat with some sexy Latina, lawyer or not, so he was dropped from most lists. Of course, for Roger who appeared to the casual

observer too madly in love with this young woman to care who did or didn't invite him to their dinners, or Christmas parties, the bliss lasted unabated for maybe a year.

Coming home a day early from a meeting with the governor in downstate Illinois, he arrived late at night, and silently let himself in Arela's apartment and the bedroom they shared. As he bent down to kiss the head covered in a blanket he saw with horror it wasn't her, but a man asleep next to her. He turned on the light waking them and began yelling, making threats though he wasn't by nature a violent man. Finally almost hoarse with shouting curses, he walked over to both naked sitting up in the bed with the covers draped around them like a Roman toga, and spit on the bed several times, before charging out slamming doors behind him and knocking over tables in his angry wake.

Friends said he was suicidal after the incident, and took to leaving his law office early unless reluctantly forced to go to court, and he spent his evenings drunk in a string of neighborhood bars. On the surface always affable, the bartenders called him, Counselor, and brought him their legal woes, like DUIs, beatings of girlfriends, car burglaries and such. He patiently listened to each tale, and offered some kind of workable solution, generally the right one. So invariable he got a lot of free drinks.

The next time we visited Melissa she told us that she had felt so sorry for him, he had become so pathetic, and that she installed him in the studio attic apartment that had been created for extra income in the old house before they bought it. She told me to go up and talk to him, and so I did.

Climbing to the third floor I went down a short hallway and found the small wooden door she said and knocked.

"Who is it?" he said, in tone like he was instructing a jury.

"It's Jack. How are you?" I said through the closed door.

"Come in, it's open."

So I opened the door and walked into the room. He was seated at the small desk that he taken from his Amish parents home in the Pennsylvania farm country, and had a glass and a bottle of Jack Daniels in front of him.

Almost giddy he came over and gave me a firm handshake and then a bear hug, and started laughing.

"Good to see you," he told me. "and as you can see around you, things have changed."

I pulled a chair up to the desk and sat down.

"You look good," I said, lying to him.

“Do I? he said, “that seems strange, I’m better than I was, a lot better.”

“I rent this from Melissa, it’s OK with her, I can come and go, and I see a lot of Flower.”

“You’re getting back together then?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think so. I was pretty bad when she let me use this. But you know the story.”

“Her father’s seen me, and he’s starting all over again. I don’t care.”

“I was on the edge when I came here, she couldn’t have turned me away.”

The conversation meandered a lot, going nowhere, really, and it sounded like something out of Kafka novel, with him talking to me from some alien world, or death, and I started to fidget in discomfort, and I guess, sorrow. He seemed so sad.

His doctor friend Steve on whose couch he slept for two weeks told me later that when Roger first knocked on his door he was suicidal.

“You’ve been through a lot,” was all I could think to say.

“I didn’t know what I’d do to myself after Arela.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She was evil, manipulating...” he started, then drifted off in midsentence.

“Maybe you can make things work again, we miss the crazy times we had with you two.”

“I don’t think so.”

Then a kind of silence seemed to come over both of us, and we didn’t speak for a while as he looked out the tiny window, pain written on his face under the conjured plastic grin.

I got up, told him goodbye, and made some awkward attempt to plan a lunch for the both of us which neither wanted, and left.

He stayed in the attic two or possibly three months and then found a studio in a downtown artists loft building, and I didn’t see him again for a long time.

In the meantime, Melissa had one or two men she was briefly involved with, all charming, but they were around for a few weeks, and then gone.

The next I heard they had divorced, and six more months passed, and we rarely saw Melissa except at someone’s holiday party.

The divorce was uncontested by her, or I should say ignored, she just let it happen because she was a woman who heard what she wanted to hear.

At an art opening the two ran into each other, and she asked him to do something, give her some money for one of Flower's classes, ballet, or something.

He shouted at her, with the whole gallery, looking on, "We're divorced, don't you read your stupid mail?"

"Pay that Russian bitch out of your own pocket, I'm out of it, understand?"

That might have been the worst of it at the end of the marriage, I don't know.

Maybe four months later, at one of those tedious architecture dinners I sat next to Pilar Cabot, Melissa's old Northwestern friend from Caracas, and she told me they were both back together again.

"You know he thinks he's a gardener, Hah!" she said, her black eyes looking up at the ceiling in mock disbelief, "and he convinced Melissa he'd redo her yard this Spring as a favor.

"Well, it didn't take long before he wormed his way back in," she said not without a little venom.

"I told her, as friend, her oldest friend, throw him out! He's a worthless."

"Well, it's not for us to judge," I uttered, looking down at the table.

"He's a fool, look what he did to her!" Pilar hissed, and added a few damning words in Spanish I didn't understand.

"That person he was with," she insisted, and moved closer to me lowering her voice to a whisper. "People who know her, other lawyers tell me, 'that if she weren't a lawyer, she'd be a street walker!'"

I couldn't help but chuckle, and looked around the table to see if anybody had seen me, and had overheard the conversation.

"Have you seen her?" she asked.

"No."

"Well, I have, and she looks like a 'puta,' disgusting," she told me as her husband tapped her arm, and she turned her attention to him.

It wasn't long before Roger found another woman friend around his bar crowd called 'the Naughty Kitty,' for her infamous Halloween cat costume with a hole cut out of the rear showing her bare buttocks. She had worn it for several years to both shock and amusement at better downtown restaurants on that particular night and had earned her the nickname.

Probably Serbian or maybe from the Ukraine, no one seemed to know, but she had that hard attractive Slavic face, with a desperate look in the eyes. I met her once when he invited me after work for a drink, and I didn't like her.

She seemed too calculating, and struck me as the kind of woman who ordered the most expensive item on the menu at dinner, whether she like it, or not. Sex was something you used to get what you wanted, not a new philosophy to many.

Before long she drove him to distraction, and since he refused to spend large amounts of money entertaining her, she just disappeared into another raucous Chicago bar crowd. His last two companions were younger sisters of married friends, and he seemed more to function as an escort than a lover. Then he went back to Melissa.

We had dinner several times with them, and things seemed alright in their new relationship which wasn't a marriage anymore since they'd been divorced, and it sort of took on an LA spin in Midwest surroundings, bringing smiles to the faces of the more conventional couples we knew, always a ready topic of conversation over evening cocktails. But four years had passed, and the subject was less interesting, so it got dropped.

"I think Melissa is seeing someone, they went to Indiana together to hunt antiques, so Pilar told me," my wife blurted out to me one evening. "He's this Italian guy, a contractor, she met on one of the jobs."

"What does she know?"

Pilar was difficult and headstrong but she was right. I liked her Latin reasoning most of the time which was generally and some times embarrassingly direct. She never forgave a single soul who crossed her in life.

She refused to speak Spanish to her daughters, or teach them the language, which most of our friends thought unusual. But it had grown out of an incident when she and her husband had lived in briefly New York.

With Christmas approaching one year she had taken her daughters to the famous FAO Schwartz toy store to romp among the three floors of marvelous and pricey toys. As she brought her daughters hand-in-hand inside the store, asking a clerk where the doll section was, the clerk, a woman in her mid-forties rudely said, "That's fine! 'I'll take the children from here to dolls! You can wait here."

The suggestion clearly that she was some short dark, heavily accented, Hispanic nanny. The children light in complexion favored her husband who came from an old Boston family, second or third cousins to the Henry Cabot Lodges, and pasty white in appearance.

She never forgot the incident, and it colored the way she lived her life in many ways.

But she proved to be more of a sage than I reasoned because Melissa asked Roger to leave, which he refused to do, and she threatened to call the police. The whole saga was had a soap opera quality.

It seemed she had been with him at a jazz club we all liked, and some man at the bar had the waiter hand her a note. Roger tore it out of her hand, and it read, "You are so beautiful." Immediately he got up to look for the man he asked the waiter to point out, but he had already left the club.

For two weeks afterward Melissa tried to get Roger out but without success, and she was reluctant to call the police. Then one day after work some workman delivered a dozen roses to the door, and Roger answered it. Looking at the card he saw the same message as the jazz club and threw the bouquet against the wall as hard as he could, and then trampled them underfoot as Melissa looked on.

"Who gave you these goddamn flowers? tell me? he yelled at her in the hallway as he picked them off the floor, and tore them to bits, throwing them against the wall.

Two days later he called me at my office, and asked me: "Who's she been seeing? who is it?"

I told him I didn't know a thing about it, didn't have the slightest idea of what he was talking about."

"She went away for weekend, looking for showroom antiques?, who'd she go with? Then ask Belle, she'd know?"

I told him neither Belle nor I knew anything about Melissa's antique huntingtrips to Indiana, or anywhere else, and I didn't know about any men involved, and that was the truth, I didn't.

"I'll find him," he said, "Goodbye," and hung up the phone.

"You two-faced bitch," he yelled at her, and stormed out the door. That was the last night he stayed in the house except to pack up his clothes, and he moved temporarily to a friend's couch before he could find a room, or a studio apartment somewhere.

Our more cynical friends believed that Melissa had waited patiently the past four years to inflict the same kind of pain he had with her, but knowing her I never thought that possible, it seemed just the ebb and flow of life.

Whenever you had been around them, you could feel an unnatural tension you couldn't quite describe but it was there nevertheless. He took to drinking more, and locking himself up in their den at night, and the reconciliation may have been nothing more than a truce.

I think they both tried to make it work again, but didn't have the words for the emotions they needed, and so going unsaid, they just died.

Eventually a man did appear in her life and the Italian contractor took on a face and a name, and he proved to be an entertaining dinner companion. He loved to cook and was good at it, he made his own flavored herb olive oils, and corked two hundred bottles of cabernet and merlot in his basement each year from grapes he bought at wholesale fruit markets in the city. His merlot had won a silver medal.

He had bad habits too, as we all do, and that shortened their time together as random women came in and out of his life, never meaning very much to him.

Neither Roger nor Melissa had nothing to prove to each other staying together, and I always felt she was the stronger of the two. She tried to make it work.

But I wondered though at the end, did she lie awake next to Roger in bed loathing the sound of his breathing, and planning her final revenge?

I don't know, it's possible, I think that same thing sometimes when I'm in bed next to my wife and I can hear the rhythm of her breath in sleep. I think about that a lot.