Collection of short fuses | Creative writing

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A Collection of Short Fuses:
Creative Writing

by
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The Man Who Blew Himself Up

Several years ago, I happened to see a man on TV who blew himself up for a living. Literally. He traveled around the country—to county fairs, demolition derbies, tractor pulls and the like—and for a few bucks, he would entertain audiences by climbing into a wooden box and blowing himself up with some dynamite. The dynamite was strategically placed so while the box was blown to pieces, the man survived for the next performance. The only aftereffect was a ringing in his ears and temporary loss of hearing. His ambition was to someday blow himself up at halftime at the Superbowl.

It was a perilous way to make a living, and I kept hoping the reporter would ask him one question: What drives a man to blow himself up? The reporter never asked the question, but I never forgot the man who blew himself up.

Back then, I was living in Montana, a place where people often blew themselves up in obscure ways—alcohol, drugs, barroom brawls, hunting accidents, bad love affairs, bad marriages. I was going to graduate school, but when my wife learned she was pregnant, I knew that my $4,500 teaching assistantship wasn't going to cut it. There were no jobs in Montana, so we moved to Los Angeles. It was
then that I began to realize just how close to the edge we all live.

The summer of 1987, L.A. was a swirling vat of exhaust fumes, pit bulls, and freeway gunfire. People were blowing up left and right. The freeway shootings were the worst. Every time you left the house, you knew you could be next. You told yourself there was nothing to worry about during rush hour--after all, somebody would have to be pretty stupid to shoot you in broad daylight when traffic is moving at five miles per hour--but then again, if somebody was thinking about shooting you from their car, you couldn’t count on them being rational enough to holster that weapon just because their getaway route wasn’t clear. These people were dealing with the stress of traffic jams, smog, unpaid bills, hungry kids, God knows what else. Fuses were short, and with every fender-bender, someone exploded.

Against this backdrop, my wife and I spent several months dealing with job changes, noisy neighbors, ineffectual landlords, automobile problems, and inflated prices for just about everything. And as if that weren’t enough, the 6.0 Whittier-Narrows earthquake shook us out of bed one morning that fall for good measure.

On the bright side, we had not been attacked by any pit bulls, gang members, or freeway gunmen.
Matters were made worse by the fact that my wife was having a difficult pregnancy. She is diabetic, and on several occasions, she had to be rushed to the hospital to be revived after a severe insulin reaction. As the baby’s due date got closer, my wife’s health got worse. She ended up spending seven weeks in the UCLA Medical Center before the doctor finally delivered our daughter.

But the stress did not end with the delivery. My wife needed time to recover. I was still learning one new job and working a second on weekends. We had the added responsibility of a new baby. The obnoxious neighbors and hapless landlords were still there. And then there were the hospital bills. Despite good medical insurance, we owed thousands. It was a difficult time, and my wife and I found ourselves arguing constantly. Neither of us was doing what we wanted to do with our lives, and we were beginning to blame each other.

We came close to separating before finally seeing a counselor. One of the things we learned was that we were both depressed, and that depressed people tend to repel each other. Suddenly, we began to see some patterns. Relationships cause stress. Stress depresses people. Depressed people don’t like each other. In other words, living with other people isn’t easy. But living alone is no fun either. So what do you do?
You can always get a couple of sticks of dynamite.

Before we reached that point, my wife and I made some decisions. We realized that we were spread too thin, and that we had been reacting to everything and everybody without any kind of a plan. We decided to concentrate on the things that are important to us. And we decided to stay together no matter what. With all the things going on around us, we didn’t need to be fighting each other.

Those decisions were not earth-shattering. Quite the contrary. But they gave us some peace of mind and a solid base from which to work. In recent months, the stress has been reduced, the depression is lifting, and someday in the foreseeable future we fully expect to begin liking each other again.

I tell you all this not because I think ours is an extraordinary story. In fact, I don’t think we were under any more stress than most people. And that’s what worries me. Most people are living under too much stress—too many people are living on the edge.

You don’t have to look far to see the results. Take Sheila Epker of Mendon, Illinois, for example. On January 4, she drowned her eldest daughter in the bath tub, shot and killed her other three children, then killed herself. Nobody knows why. She just snapped. Then there’s Melvin Warren of Chicago. On January 5, police found him in the
middle of the street, naked, standing over the dead body of a seven-year-old boy, also naked. Melvin allegedly strangled the boy to death because he thought the boy was possessed by the devil.

The constant stress affects global relationships in the same way it affects individuals. We have been collectively driven to the edge by religious fanatics and political demagogues, by world hunger and weapons sales. Entire nations snap, and nobody knows why. It's a wonder we've survived as long as we have.

It's taken a while, but I'm beginning to understand the man who blew himself up. And he frightens me more than the Sheila Epkers and Melvin Warrens of the world. He frightens me because every time he blows himself up for the people in the stands, he is performing a terrifying ritual. It's a ritual we should all pay attention to, because he is acting out in a few moments what we are slowly but surely doing to ourselves with things like toxic waste, acid rain, oil spills, and holes in the ozone. And when I see the man walk away from the explosion, I want to grab him and shake him and tell him to listen to me, LISTEN TO ME! Stop what you're doing before it's too late. But my pleas fall on deaf ears—as do the pleas of millions of other people in this world—and I fear that twentieth century man is going to be known as The Man Who Blew Himself Up.

--January 1989
Mona

Mona sat on the front steps with her son, Mark, waiting for her ex-husband to arrive. Tom was late, and Mona hoped he would show up before the other kids got back from the park. She didn’t want them to see their brother leaving home. She did not know how they’d react. She did not know how she would react either.

When Mona told the other children that Mark would be going to live with their father, the two girls had cried. Mona didn’t think they really understood what was going on--they were still too young--but they had cried nonetheless. The two youngest boys didn’t seem to care one way or the other, but the third boy, Billy, who was already showing signs of taking after Mark, said he wanted to go too. That scared Mona. Would they all want to go eventually? Would they all leave her? She had a vision of herself lying helpless, a string of little juvenile delinquents emanating from her womb, branching out to shoplift, skip school, smoke cigarettes, wreck cars. Would it happen to each of her children when they reached Mark’s age? Maybe it would all happen at once: One Big Catastrophe. Her kids would all skip school on the same day. They’d each steal a car and load it up with cartons
of cigarettes and whatever else they could steal from K-Mart. Then they'd hot rod around town until they collided in a five-car pile up right in front of the house. Mona would watch the pool of leaking gasoline expand until it reached their smoldering cigarettes and exploded into a gigantic, blinding fireball. That’d teach them.

But Mona immediately felt guilty. It would be my fault if that happened, she thought. I don’t want all my children dead, and I don’t want them to leave me. I can’t let that happen. I’ve got to get tough.

Just then, Mrs. Crawford peeked out from behind her curtains in the house across the street. Mark gave her the finger, but the elderly woman kept looking as if she hadn’t been spotted. Mona reached for Mark’s arm.

"Cut that out, Mark," she said.

"I can’t help it," he said. "I’m sick of her." He made one final gesture to the woman.

"Ignore her," said Mona, but the truth was that Mona was sick of her, too. When the police brought Mark home after he had wrecked the car, Mrs. Crawford was the first one to come out and ask the officer what was going on, then she stood next to the police car and filled in the other neighbors as they gathered around. It was Mrs. Crawford who took it upon herself to call the police if there was an
argument or if there was loud music or if there was any problem at all. "I thought there might be trouble," she’d say. The police got tired of Mrs. Crawford, but they also got to know Mark’s name. That didn’t help Mark any. It got to the point where they’d come around to talk to Mark if a window had been broken or a bike stolen or a car vandalized; once, they even questioned him about a burglary. Mona stood by and steamed whenever the police came for Mark—and while she steamed, she could look out the front door and see Mrs. Crawford staring out from behind her curtains.

Mona stood up and glared across the street for a moment, then she ran toward Mrs. Crawford’s house and stopped in the middle of the street. Mrs. Crawford was still looking out her window when Mona raised her arm, gave Mrs. Crawford the finger, and started screaming.

"Fuck you!" yelled Mona. Mrs. Crawford disappeared. "Fuck you!" Mona yelled again. "Fuck you and all you Goddamn nosy neighbors. Try minding your own Goddamn business for once in your boring fucking lives!"

Mona spun around in the middle of the street, challenging anyone to come near her, but the houses up and down the street were silent. She wanted to yell some more, but Mark was at her side.

"You all right, Mom?"
Mona breathed deep for a moment, trying to calm down. "I’m all right," she said. "I’ve just had it."

"It’s okay," said Mark, then he added: "I just didn’t know you had that in you."

Mark guided Mona back to the front steps where they both sat now. Mark was chipping away the peeling black paint of the handrail, and Mona was about to tell him to stop when she decided it didn’t matter. The rail needed new paint. So did the porch. So did the whole damn house. Maybe someday she’d get siding; until then, it didn’t matter.

Mona watched Mark for a while. He appeared to be calm, and Mona was glad that he was not yet self-conscious. To him, leaving was probably the start of a new adventure. He knew, of course, that this move was not short-term: he was going to live with his father. But Mona doubted that he had thought it through to the realization that, at the age of fifteen, he was leaving his home, his family, his friends, his mother—probably for good. Maybe he would be able to come back when he finished high school. Mona had thought about that and she hoped it might happen. But at the same time, she hoped he’d go on to college...a good job...something better. Ideally, he would do it all, and Mona would witness her son’s triumphant return—probably still in cap and gown, maybe in
a new car. The neighbors would clamor around, patting Mark on the back, boasting that they always knew he was a good kid, that they always knew he'd be a success. But Mark would ignore them, fight his way through the crowd to Mona and whisk her away. All this while Mrs. Crawford watched jealously from behind her curtains. It could turn out that way, thought Mona, but it was unlikely. She had to be realistic. He'd be back to visit, but probably not to stay. Mona turned to Mark.

"Anything on your mind?" she asked.

"Not really," he said.

Mona nodded and told herself it was better this way. In another month, the phone calls would start and he'd be homesick, crying. She'd feel helpless--what could she do over the phone? But she'd find some way to deal with that later. For now, it was better this way.

"Did you get everything packed?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "David Noonan has my ball glove, but I'll send for it later."

"How'd he get your glove?"

"In a poker game. He said he'd let me buy it back when I get some money."

Mona looked at the grocery sack of belongings between her and her son. The top of the bag was open, clothes folded and stacked to the brim. The sandwich sat on top,
square, weighing down a shirt still wrapped in cellophane. Mona knew Mark had intentionally put the new shirt on top, and she felt guilty for not buying him a suitcase. She had thought about it, but never got around to it. She knew she could have found one at a garage sale for a few dollars. She felt sorry for Mark for a moment, then she found herself getting angry. He’s getting a chance to start over, she thought, why the hell should I feel sorry for him. I’d give anything for the chance to start over. To hell with him; let his father take care of him for a while. They’ll probably buy a suitcase at the first stop anyway.

But Mona caught herself. It’s not his fault, she thought. He doesn’t know what’s going on. There’s no reason to be angry at him. His father will buy him a suitcase, she told herself; his father will take care of him.

Mona reached over and rubbed Mark’s back.

"What’s the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Here comes your father."

Tom drove up in a late model Chevrolet. A company car. Susan sat on the passenger’s side holding their baby. She got out first but remained between her open door and the car. Mona noticed Susan’s tan and guessed that Susan had been lying by the motel pool. Tom shut off the
engine. At least he has some consideration, thought Mona.

Tom got out of the car and smiled, but Mona thought he looked tense, nervous—the way he looked every time he had come to visit the kids since the divorce. What bothered Mona the most was that her ex-husband never looked her in the eyes when he came. It was as if by being spineless, Tom made himself blameless, and Mona despised him for it. Even now, as he approached the front steps in his white polo shirt and white shorts, he did not acknowledge Mona. He was smiling at Mark.

"Hello, Mark," said Tom. Then, in Mona’s direction, "Hello, Mona."

"Hello, Tom," Mona answered. "Have you put on some weight?"

Tom looked down and patted his stomach. "No, I don’t think so."

"It must be those clothes then," said Mona. "You shouldn’t wear white."

Tom turned to Mark.

"Did you get everything packed?"

"Yeah, I’m all set," said Mark. He grabbed the grocery sack and stood up.

Tom looked uncomfortable but tried to sound enthusiastic: "Well, I had the car checked over and she’s A-Okay; all gassed up and ready to go."
Fuck the car, thought Mona; I hope it breaks down and you have to walk forty miles in a hail storm to get help.

Tom reached for the grocery bag. "Here," he said, "let me put that in the car." Mark handed his father the bag and Tom stepped quickly to the car where he fumbled with the key to the trunk.

Mona glared at her ex-husband. He thinks this is going to be so easy, she thought. He thinks he can just take this kid and drive him off and everything will be fine. But he’ll find out soon enough; he’ll finally learn what it’s like to be a parent. And then when he sees that he can’t handle it and Mark is in trouble again, he’ll call me and say, "I was wrong, it isn’t easy. What should I do?" And I’ll tell him to go to hell.

But Mona didn’t really want Tom to fail and she knew it. She wanted Mark to have a chance. She stood up next to her son.

"Well, give me a hug," she said.

Mark stepped closer and put his arms around his mother. Mona held his head to her shoulder.

"Be good," she said.

"Don’t worry."

Mona felt Mark release his hug, and she let go, too. She knew he did not like to be embarrassed. Mark stepped back.
"I’m sorry I messed up," he said.

"It’s okay," said Mona. She reached out and pushed the hair from his face, but she let her fingers linger at his temple where the hair still felt as soft and fine as it did when Mark was a baby. Mark looked down, but did not pull away.

Tom, who had been waiting by the trunk of the car, rejoined them at the steps and put his arm across Mark’s shoulders.

"Ready to get on the road?" he asked.

Mark nodded and headed toward the car. He got in the rear door and Susan got back in the car with the baby. Tom lingered at the steps and spoke to Mona.

"I’ll have him call when we get there," he said.

"Thanks," said Mona.

"Didn’t you have a suitcase for him?" asked Tom.

Mona stared at him. "I don’t travel much," she said. Tom turned and looked Mona in the eyes for the first time since their divorce. "I’m sorry," he said.

"I don’t need your pity," said Mona, but she had seen his eyes, seen a man who would live with guilt for the rest of his life, and she knew she would no longer be able to blame him.

"I know," said Tom. "I’m just sorry." He turned and went to the car.

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Mona waved until the car turned the corner, then she went into the house. It was completely silent. She sat on the couch, wrapped her arms across her chest, and rocked herself. He’s gone, she thought. In three years, he’ll be a man. There would be future visits, she knew that. He would be back. But not to stay. Never to stay.

Then Mona started crying. It didn’t seem fair. She had done her part, tried to be a good mother, but she had lost her son. It just didn’t seem fair. And what made her think he would come back in a cap and gown or a new car? Why not a tailored suit and a limousine? Why not shining armor and a white stallion? It was foolish to even think it....Why should her son come back at all?

Mona cried again, harder now, and thought of what she could realistically hope for. Maybe his father would keep him in school and someday he’d get a job and learn to take care of himself and come visit his mother once in a while. That’s about all you can hope for, she told herself. But it didn’t seem like much, not much at all--not enough to keep somebody going.

Mona cried until she remembered that there was no time. The other children would be home soon and there was no time. She had to make dinner, she had to keep going.

Mona got up and found her purse, then she started to walk to the A & P to get something for dinner. But as she
left the house, she was Mrs. Crawford again, looking out from behind her curtains across the street. Mona’s first impulse was to ignore the woman, but then Mona stopped, and marched across the street up to Mrs. Crawford’s door.

Mona rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. She rang again, then pounded on the door. Finally, the old woman came to the door and opened it a crack, leaving the chain lock in place.

"What do you want?" asked Mrs. Crawford.
"You know that my son left today," stated Mona.
"It’s probably for the best," said Mrs. Crawford.
"That’s really not any business of yours, now is it?" said Mona.

Mrs. Crawford squinted hard at Mona. "What do you want?" she repeated.

Mona stared back at Mrs. Crawford and moved her face in close to the old woman’s face.

"I’ll tell you what I want," said Mona. "I want you to stay away from my kids. Leave them alone. Mind your own God damn business. If you ever interfere in our lives again, I’ll break this door in and I’ll get you."

Mrs. Crawford slammed the door shut.

"Do you understand?" Mona yelled. "I’ll get you! You’re not going to take my children away from me. You’re not!"
Mona stepped away from Mrs. Crawford’s door and looked up and down the street again. It looked quiet, but Mona knew that looks could be deceiving. I’ve got to get tough, she told herself. They’re not going to take my children away.

She stood there for a few moments, letting her new resolve sink in, then she walked down the street to the A & P. And when she got home, her other children were there waiting for her.
Uninvited Guests

For a brief moment in the middle of a hectic wedding day, Carl Peterson had a chance to enjoy his new status. He stood next to his bride in the center of the wedding party, waiting for the photographer to focus. The afternoon sunlight filtered into the church and danced on the pale yellow satin of the bridesmaids' dresses. Carl saw the guests waiting outside the church doors; the buzz of their voices drifted up to the altar and filled the gaps between the quiet laughter of the attendants. Standing among friends in a tranquil pose, Carl felt he had finally found his niche. He gave his bride an affectionate squeeze.

The photographer looked up from his camera. "Okay, everybody. The light's a little tricky in here, but I think we're ready. Now I want you to look right at me and pretend like your feet don't really hurt."

After the photographs, the organist started playing and the waiting guests crowded around the church entrance. "Here they come!"

The young bride and groom dashed through the arch of the church door and were caught in a shower of rice and birdseed. A silver limousine covered with flowers of...
bright tissue paper waited at the curb. Carl opened the
car door, and his bride had one foot in the sedan when a
voice from the back of the crowd froze everyone.

"Wait a minute!"

Faces turned. A stray handful of rice scattered
across the pavement. The photographer emerged from the
crowd.

"I didn't get any of that on film."

* * *

When they finally got in the limousine the newlyweds
smiled at each other. They waved to the wedding guests,
waved to the camera, then fell back in the seat as the car
pulled away from the curb.

Carl put his arm around his wife. "I love you,
Kathy," he said.

"I love you, too," said Kathy. "This is the happiest
day of my life." She laid her head against Carl's chest.

A line of cars followed the limousine as it wove
through Evanston toward Lake Shore Drive. Horns were
blaring, but the newlyweds didn't look back. Instead, Carl
struggled to find the right words for the occasion. He
wanted to tell Kathy how lucky he was to have found her, to
be beginning the kind of life his friends could only dream
about, but the words didn't seem like enough. He
instinctively took Kathy's hand and sat in silence.
"How are you doing, Dear?" asked Kathy. "Are you ready to face the throngs at the reception?"

"I'm doing fine," said Carl. "But I felt kind of stupid running out of the church a second time for the photographer. Some of those people actually scraped handfuls of rice off the sidewalk to throw again."

"I thought it was kind of funny," said Kathy.

"I guess so," said Carl. "I just wish we didn't have to deal with other people on our wedding day. I'm happier when it's just you and me--like right now."

"If you think you're happy now, just wait until tonight."

Carl smiled and squeezed Kathy's hand. "My mother would have liked you," he said. "I sure wish she was here to see this day. It would have made her very happy."

"She knew you made it to law school. You made her proud."

"I know," said Carl. "Still, I wish you had met her. Someday I'll have to take you down to St. Louis and show you the old neighborhood. And there's a little place called 'The Sand Bar' on River Road just outside of town. Mom used to take me there when she wanted to go for a drive. They make the best fried chicken around. We'd take our dinner and eat down by the river, watching the barges go by."
"The Sand Bar' in St. Louis..." Kathy smiled, "...sounds wonderful. Do they have valet parking?"

Carl laughed. "Last time I was there, they were finally putting in a gravel parking lot. Other than that, you just park on the side of the road. But I know you'll like it." Carl leaned toward Kathy and kissed her.

"Enough of this stuff, Mrs. Peterson. How are you doing? What's on your mind?"

Kathy sighed. "I just hope everything goes okay today. Mom and I spent six months planning this reception."

"Don't worry," said Carl. "What could go wrong?"

Kathy leaned against Carl again, and they fell back into a comfortable silence.

The limousine left the residential area, turned south on Lake Shore Drive, and picked up speed. The procession of cars followed as the sedan raced along Lake Michigan. Only the photographer broke formation for a few blocks to snap shots of the wedding couple in their limousine with the Lake in the background. He got back in line with the rest of the cars when they merged with traffic from a Cubs game. Fifteen minutes later, the procession pulled up in front of the Drake Hotel.

* * *

The elegance of the Gold Coast Room overwhelmed each
of the guests as they entered the reception. The cream colored walls and subdued gold molding of the old ballroom enveloped the wedding party and buoyed the circles of conversation. Twenty foot arches of latticed leaded glass allowed glimpses of bold skyline framed by drapes of dark green velvet. The perimeter of the room was lined with forty potted palms spaced every ten feet. More palms were placed throughout the ballroom, two to each side of the dozen ornate green and gold columns. In the center of the room, a twelve piece band took its place near the black marble dance floor.

The ballroom was nearly full as dinner time approached. Carl, a bit overwhelmed by his own wedding celebration, tried to relax as he and Kathy moved from table to table chatting with the guests. She was better at making the transition from intimate moment to group gathering, so Carl held back, shaking hands when introduced, admiring his wife's social aplomb. Carl kept an eye out for anybody he might know, but most of the people he talked to were friends of Kathy's parents.

An athletic-looking man in his early forties approached Carl and Kathy between conversations. The man kissed Kathy and shook Carl's hand.

"Dave Riner," said the man. He handed Carl a business card. "I hope you kids will be very happy."
"Dave Riner," repeated Carl. "You use to pitch for the Sox."

"That's right," said Riner.

"We're glad you could be here, Mr. Riner," said Kathy.

"Oh, I wouldn't have missed this for the world," said Riner. "Your father's done a lot of favors for me over the years. He's a heck of a lawyer. And I want you kids to know that Dave Riner is a friend." Riner pointed to the business card Carl was holding. "I'm in commercial real estate now, but if you two are ever in the market for a house, give me a call; I may be able to help out."

"That's very nice of you," said Kathy.

Riner turned to Carl. "So, what will you be doing at the firm, Carl?"

"What?" asked Carl.

"What's Kathy's father got planned for you at the firm?" repeated Riner. "Are you going to be in taxes, mergers, escrow?"

"Oh," said Carl. "I'm not going to work for my father-in-law. I plan to start a little practice out in DeKalb."

"Hey, that's rich," laughed Riner. "I like a guy with a sense of humor."

Carl was a little flustered, but laughed. "I'm not kidding though. DeKalb's a nice little town...a good place
to start a family."

Riner stopped laughing. He looked embarrassed. "Oh, I see. Well, that sounds real nice."

Kathy cut in. "I think it will be nice for a while. It's not too far from Chicago, and Carl can always join Daddy's firm later."

Kathy was pulled away by one of her bridesmaids. Carl stood alone with Dave Riner for a long moment. Riner finally spoke.

"Well, listen Carl, it was nice meeting you and I certainly wish you and Kathy all the best. I'll let you get back to making the rounds." Riner shook Carl's hand again, started to walk away, but turned to Carl once more. "Say, you know Carl, I just realized that I gave you my last business card. Would you mind if I took it back until I have some more printed up?"

"Sure," said Carl. He handed Riner the card.

Riner took the card and walked away.

Carl set out to find Kathy, and he found her talking to a group of Republican party members that wanted her father to run for office. As Carl took his place at Kathy's side, there was a commotion near the ballroom entrance. Everyone turned to see what was going on, but all Carl could see was a toppling palm tree. A moment later a hotel employee informed Carl and Kathy that there
was a problem.

"Who are they?" asked Kathy.

"They said they're here to see 'Pete'," said the employee.

Carl looked across the room. Three young men stood near the entrance, dwarfed by the towering columns, partly hidden by a potted palm. Carl recognized them right away: Albert Bodge, Paul David Mudd, and Duck O'Connell.

Kathy looked at Carl. "Do you know them, Carl?"

"It's okay," Carl answered; "they're old friends."

Carl excused himself and headed toward the three uninvited guests. People at tables near the door, already grumbling about the seating arrangements, eyed the potential crashers suspiciously.

Albert Bodge was the only one wearing a suit: a light brown corduroy suit with a hanger crease on each pant leg. Under one arm he held a box wrapped in plain white tissue paper. Paul David Mudd had on a sport jacket, and while his tie was a conservative stripe, it was also a bit too wide and tied too short. Between the bottom of his tie and his silver "Show Me" belt buckle, a handful of bare gut hung out. Duck O'Connell didn't even have a jacket, but he did have a handpainted floral tie. He also had a two-quart bottle of RC cola in his hand.

Carl's smile broadened as he approached his old
friends. "What the hell are you clowns doing here?"

Paul David shook Carl's hand. "We were up in our penthouse suite when we heard there was a party going on. We came down to liven things up."

Carl laughed. Albert told the real story in a measured drawl: "Naw, when we heard old Pete was getting married we just decided we weren't gonna miss it, so we hopped in the car and drove up this morning. We wanted to come to the church, but it seems like I get lost everytime I leave Missoure. We ended up getting here too late for the wedding."

Carl was a little embarrassed. "Well, I really appreciate it guys. I'm sorry I didn't get an invitation to you, but..."

Paul David cut him off. "Hell, don't worry about it, Pete. We ain't seen you in so long you couldn't have found us anyhow."

Albert held out the wedding present. "Before I forget, where can I put this?"

"You guys didn't have to get us anything," said Carl. "Never mind about that. I am getting tired of holding it though."

"I'll take care of it," said Carl. He took the present and handed it to one of the hotel employees. The employee took it across the room to a table full of gifts.
Carl turned back to his friends.

Duck took a sip of his RC and looked around the room. "Say Pete, this is a pretty nice place. Her old man own this joint, or what?"

They all laughed. Carl turned and offered his friends a view of the ballroom. "No, he doesn't own it. He's putting us up here until we leave for our honeymoon though. Not bad, huh?"

Duck looked around the room. "You know, I've been out to that new Executive Inn out by the airport back home..."

"...yeah, I've been there, too..." said Paul David.

"...but it ain't near as nice as this. It's a lot newer than this place, but not near as nice."

The four friends looked around the Gold Coast Room for a moment. Paul David broke the silence.

"I got sick the last time I went to that Executive Inn."

"Whose fault was that, moron?" said Duck.

"It was that damn cheap liquor they serve," said Paul David.

"Like hell," said Duck. "You just can't handle your liquor no matter where you go."

"Give me that RC bottle and I'll show you who can hold their liquor."

Paul David and Duck started scuffling over the RC
bottle. Paul David had a grip on it for a moment, but Duck yanked it away. Paul David fell backward into another palm tree. The tree swayed threateningly. Several people at a nearby table covered their heads and braced for the crash. Albert caught the tree just in time. He turned to Duck and Paul David.

"Cut that out, you two. You're acting like a couple of damn fools. We're at a wedding!"

Paul David and Duck straightened up.

"Sorry about that, Pete," said Albert. "So where's the little lady anyway?"

Carl turned just in time to see Kathy approaching.

"Here she comes now."

Carl took Kathy's arm as she joined the group. "Guys, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Peterson. Sweetheart, these are some old friends from St. Louis. This is Albert..."

Albert wiped his palm on his jacket then took Kathy's hand. "You certainly look lovely," said Albert. "I should have washed my hands."

"I'm sure there was no need," said Kathy. She managed a nervous smile while withdrawing her hand.

"...and this is Duck..." said Carl.

"Hello Buck," said Kathy.

"Duck!" said Duck, a little too loud.

Kathy quickly crouched down and looked around.
Several guests standing nearby also ducked and covered their heads, fearing another falling palm tree.

Carl helped Kathy up. "No, that’s his name, dear; 'Duck'.'"

Kathy stood up. "Oh, of course," she said. Duck smiled and nodded.

"...and this is Paul David..." said Carl.

"Nice to meet you," said Kathy.

Paul David sucked in his gut. He took Kathy’s hand, bent at the waist, and gave her a wet kiss on the knuckles. Duck started laughing. "Pete’s a lucky bum," said Paul David. Duck belched. Albert elbowed Duck in the ribs.

"Ow!" yelled Duck.

"Where are your manners?" asked Albert.

"Excuse me," said Duck. "I didn’t mean anything by it."

Kathy smiled, but Carl felt uneasy. He knew Kathy well enough to know that this was not her best smile.

"Carl, can I speak to you for a moment--about dinner?"

"Sure," said Carl. "Excuse us, guys."

"Okay ’Carl’," said Duck.

Kathy led Carl past several tables before she stopped. "We’re almost ready for dinner," she said.

Carl waved to someone who raised a glass to him.
"That’s fine, Dear."

"What are you going to do about your friends?"

Carl looked at Kathy. She was not smiling at all now. He was not sure what to make of her tone. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"There’s no place for them to sit, for one thing. And Buck..."

"...Duck..."

"...whatever...he doesn’t even have a jacket. I mean, look at them!"

"But they just drove clear across the state of Illinois because they heard I was getting married."

"But they weren’t invited."

Carl drew his breath. It’s okay, he told himself, she just doesn’t understand. He spoke in a patient tone: "Sweetheart, these are the guys I grew up with. I’m sure they thought it would be okay if they showed up... They can sit at the bar; they won’t mind. I’ll pay for the extra dinners."

"...with our money."

Carl raised his voice. "Okay, we’ll pay for their dinners—but I’m not telling them to leave."

"I knew something like this would happen," said Kathy. "Mother and I spent months preparing for this day, but you don’t care. Go ahead, do whatever you want."
Kathy turned away from Carl, but he grabbed her arm. Kathy glared at him. Carl would not let go. Several thoughts ran through his mind: If you’re going to be like that, he thought, I’ll tell them to leave. Then I’ll leave with them.

A ridiculous thought, Carl realized. The thing to do is to lay down the law. In this case, what I say goes. It occurred to him that such an assertion might cause a scene, and suddenly, he was aware of turned heads and hushed tones. He released his wife’s arm.

Kathy’s father stepped in before any more could be said. He draped a heavy arm around each of the newlyweds and smiled a reassuring smile that allowed the guests to resume their conversations. Kathy explained the situation. Her father turned to Carl. "Son, you take care of your friends any way you see fit," he said; "meanwhile, I’d be honored to escort the bride to the head table."

Kathy gathered her composure, took her father’s extended arm, and, regaining her smile, strolled away from Carl.

Carl watched Kathy walk away. The guests in the immediate area continued their conversations, pretending not to see the groom standing alone. Carl was still upset with Kathy, but he was also beginning to resent the fact that his old friends had dropped in, forcing him to choose between them and his wife on his wedding day. Carl made
his way back to the ballroom entrance.

His friends had been watching. Albert spoke first. "Listen Pete, we don’t want to make any trouble."

"What trouble?" asked Duck. "We ain’t causing any problem, are we, Pete?"

"Listen guys," Carl said, "it’s not that she doesn’t like you. You just have to understand...things are a little different up here....I screwed up when I didn’t invite you and now there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s very important that everything goes right today..."

Paul David cut Carl off. "We understand, Pete. We screwed up by dropping in uninvited."

Carl felt bad and started to say something, but Paul David continued.

"Next time you’re in St. Louis with your bride, you look us up. We’ll get together then."

Carl walked out of the ballroom with Paul David, Duck, and Albert. He apologized for the misunderstanding and, again, blamed himself for the whole thing. When the four men stepped outside to say goodbye, none of them saw the photographer follow them to the door, nor did they see him snap a shot of the groom shaking hands with three old friends in front of the Drake.

Duck looked out across Lake Shore Drive at Lake Michigan. "So that’s the Lake," he said.
"Yeah, that’s it," said Carl.

"I’ve always wanted to see the Great Lakes," said Duck; "that’s really something."

Carl watched as his friends stared in awe at the endless blue lake dotted with tiny sailboats.

Duck turned back to Carl. "Okay, enough of that. Where are the bars?"

Carl pointed west. "Rush Street is about six or seven blocks that way."

"Sounds good to me," said Duck.

Paul David got a glint in his eye. "Why don’t you come with us, Pete? We’ll show them people on Rush Street how to party."

Albert looked at Paul David. "Did anybody ever tell you you’re a bad influence? This man just got married."

"Married," said Duck, mulling over the word. Then suddenly, he raised his RC bottle. "Here’s to us and to old times and to old acquaintance."

Duck drank and passed the bottle around. Carl choked after he drank. "Wow. What the hell have you got in there?"

Duck smiled. "One part RC, one part Old Grandad."

Carl turned to Albert and Paul David. "You guys better keep an eye on him."

"Don’t worry about him," said Albert. "You’d better
get back to your wedding though."

"Yeah, I guess so," said Carl. Carl went over to the doorman and slipped him a twenty. "Have one of the limos take these guys over to Rush Street," he said. The doorman went to the curb and signaled for a limousine.

"You don’t have to do that," said Albert. "It’s only a few blocks."

"Let him do it," said Duck. "It ain’t gonna hurt us to ride in a limousine."

The limousine pulled up and Albert, Paul David, and Duck piled in.

"You guys have a good time," said Carl. Duck held the RC bottle out the window. "Have you ever known us not to have a good time?" he yelled.

The limousine pulled away.

* * *

The next day, the newlyweds opened presents at Kathy’s parents’ house. Several of the bridesmaids were on hand to record gifts and share in the fun. Carl opened a few packages, but for the most part, he kept his eye on the Cubs game. He watched Kathy open presents between innings.

The large family room was cluttered with empty boxes from Marshall Fields and Carson Pirie Scott. Colorful wrapping paper and loose ribbon were scattered everywhere. Carl got a garbage bag and started collecting the used
wrapping paper. One of the bridesmaids handed him a box wrapped in plain white tissue.

"Here, Carl, open this one," she said; "there's no card on it." She turned back to the circle around Kathy.

Carl tore the tissue off the present and opened it. It was a photo album. Carl flipped the album open and was surprised to see old black and white photographs...several pictures of boys on a camping trip...two boys in baseball uniforms posed with crossed bats...three boys with burr haircuts holding a string of fish...a group of Cub Scouts gathered around a Den Mother...pictures that Carl had never seen, but pictures that he knew.

Carl closed the album and looked up at Kathy. She and her friends were admiring a bride and groom that had been etched on a crystal serving tray. One of the bridesmaids turned to Carl.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Carl nodded yes. The bridesmaid looked at the album on Carl's lap. "What have you got there, Carl?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Carl, and the bridesmaid turned away. "Just a photo album," said Carl, and he slipped it under the couch.
Barry met Mike and Diane at a place called the Rocking Horse—a bar in a mall near the center of the Missoula Valley. There was a forest fire burning just south of town that night, and from the mall parking lot they could see smoke pouring out over Missoula. The city itself was not threatened, but homes on Blue Mountain were in danger.

The crowd inside the bar was a mix of local singles under 30 and college kids from the university. The centerpiece of the place was a large wooden rocking horse that had been suspended over the stage. The rest of the bar had been decorated with antique toys. Barry looked around and knew that he was out of place, but he didn’t care. He had closed a big real estate deal that afternoon, and now he wanted to celebrate. He sat down with Mike and Diane, ordered champagne for them, and struck up a conversation. As they talked, Barry observed Diane closely.

Diane Ryan was a very pretty, delicate-looking woman, small in stature, very trim, and very feminine. But she also had a sharp edge to her, and her fragile, feminine appearance belied a strong personality that rivaled her husband’s in confidence. After listening to the two of
them for a few minutes, there was no doubt in Barry’s mind that she was the more intelligent of the two.

They drank to Barry’s most recent deal, then Diane turned to Barry.

"I understand you’re going to work on me tonight," she said.

Barry shot a look at Mike. Mike just shrugged as if to say, You said it, not me.

Barry took a deep, fatherly, disarming breath and tried to reassure Diane.

"Now nobody’s going to make you do anything you don’t want to do, Diane," said Barry. "All I want to do tonight is to answer any questions you might have and reassure you about Mike’s decision. Then hopefully, we can have a little fun and celebrate."

"Good luck," said Mike. "I’ve been reassuring her all day."

"Don’t talk about me in the third person," said Diane. "I’m sitting right here."

"I didn’t mean anything by it, Babe," said Mike. He put an arm around her and gave her a little hug. "Don’t you think you’re being a little oversensitive today? Nobody’s trying to railroad you. But this is a great opportunity."

"It certainly is," said Barry. "Why are you worried,
Diane?"

"The whole thing bothers me," she said. "Going to Los Angeles; selling some poor Montana rancher's property to some wealthy movie producer; it sounds like a scam to me. I'd rather see Mike stay here and take the bar exam again."

Mike rolled his eyes and looked exasperated. Barry raised a hand to calm him, then turned to Diane.

"I can reassure you, Diane, that there is no scam going on here," said Barry. "I've paid above market rates for the property I've bought in the Bitterroot Valley. And my clients are people who first of all appreciate the natural beauty of the area, and secondly, look upon their purchase as an investment. They have a vested interest in preserving the beauty of the area."

Barry paused for a moment and pulled out a huge ring of keys. He set it on the table.

"Finally," he said, "I want you to know that my business is reputable. I sell more Montana property than all the other brokers in the state combined. Each of these keys represents a client. They trust me with the keys to their houses, and I intend to maintain that trust."

Barry put the keys away.

"There are no losers in this deal," he continued. "Mike will be helping me provide a service, and if he does as well as I think he will, he will be compensated quite
well—at least as well as any Missoula attorney."

"I don’t like it," said Diane.

Mike lost his temper. "What’s not to like?" he asked.

"For starters, most of the buyers are from out of state," said Diane. "Doesn’t that bother you?"

"Not really," said Mike.

"Have you thought about the time you’re going to have to put in on this job?" asked Diane. "Or about the travel? And you don’t know anything about big real estate transactions. I just don’t think you know what you’re getting into."

"I’m a big boy," said Mike. "I can handle it."

"Are you prepared to work 60 or 80 hours a week if you have to?" asked Diane. "Will you be willing to travel whenever necessary? Do you really want to give up on the idea of being an attorney? Do you really want to leave Montana?"

"I only know one thing," said Mike. "This is what I want to do and I’m going to do it."

While Mike and Diane talked, Barry watched and listened. Their conversation had a familiar ring to it. He had heard similar arguments from his wife years ago, and he knew that at the core of Diane’s questions was one fear: The fear that she might lose Mike.

After Mike’s final comment, Diane turned to Barry.
"Are you married?" she asked.

"Very much so," said Barry.

"Happily?" asked Diane.

Barry hesitated. "We’ve had our ups and downs. But I’ve known my wife for a long time and I can honestly say that we still surprise each other."

"Now, tell me this," said Diane. "What’s more important to you, your business or your marriage?"

"Come on, Babe," said Mike. "Mellow out."

"No, that’s all right," said Barry. "If my work ever becomes more important to me than my marriage, I hope to burn in hell."

"That’s the place for people who put their career ahead of their marriage," said Diane. With that, she got up and went to the ladies room. Barry and Mike watched the people on the dance floor.

"You know," said Mike. "I love her, but she sure can be a pain in the ass."

"She means well," said Barry. "Believe me, I’ve seen it before. They start to feel you slipping away, they feel threatened, so they’ll do anything to keep you in their grasp. Your job is to keep her happy as best you can."

"I really don’t need this," said Mike. "Did you ever feel like just starting over from scratch?"

"She may be feeling a little insecure," said Barry.

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"After all, while you were in law school, she knew that you needed her. Now that you’re going to work, she may not be so sure anymore."

"That’s true," said Mike. "I never looked at it that way."

Barry had had similar disputes with his wife when he was younger. He remembered her reproaching him for being so quiet, for being distracted, for not wanting to go to movies, for not laughing at her jokes. She took Barry’s independence as a threat to their marriage, but if she had been trying to save their marriage, she had gone about it all wrong.

"Have you ever fooled around on your wife?" asked Mike.

"Tried," said Barry.

"What do you mean, ‘Tried’?"

"I’ve propositioned a few women," said Barry, "but no self-respecting woman would ever take me up on it."

"Maybe someday you’ll find a woman who has no self respect," said Mike.

"That’s what I’m afraid of," said Barry.

At that moment, a group of young girls entered the Rocking Horse. There were five of them, and they took a table next to the dance floor. They ordered drinks, and they soon had dance partners. Barry and Mike watched the
girls dance.

There was one young girl in particular that caught their attention. Unlike the other girls, she did not dance at first. Instead, she made her way through the bar, stopping here and there to talk and laugh with the people she knew. She was a very pretty and buxom nineteen-year-old with long, wavy auburn hair. She was wearing a black dress, and she appeared to be already slightly intoxicated. She turned down dance partners until finally, when she was ready, she danced several dances, each with a different partner. When she was finished, she returned to her table.

"Look at her," said Barry. "She’s like a little girl with a book of matches, lighting fires everywhere she goes."

"She’s definitely hot," said Mike.

"She’s a sexual pyromaniac," said Barry.

"Yeah," said Mike. "But if she plays with me, she’s the one that’s gonna get burned."

Barry stood up.

"Where are you going?" asked Mike.

"There are two types of clients that are always easy to sell," said Barry. "There are some that come running at you, ready to buy. If you want to make that sale, you’d better get out in front of them or they’ll run right by"
you. Then there are the ones that bring up the rear. They’ve been let down by everybody else, and all you have to do is come along and hold their hand."

"Yeah, so, where are you going?" asked Mike.

"I’ve just spotted a runner," said Barry.

Barry walked across the bar to the girl’s table. He touched her on the arm, and she turned to look at him.

"Sorry," she said. "I’m all danced out for now."

"I don’t want to dance," said Barry. "I just want to ask you a question."

The girl looked at him again, a little more closely.

"What’s the question?" she asked.

"If you had just made $50,000," said Barry, "What would you do to celebrate?"

The girl laughed. "I don’t know," she said. "I guess I’d buy a car."

Barry looked around him and laughed, too. "That’s a nice idea," he said, "but they don’t sell cars here."

Another girl at the table took Barry’s cue. "How about a round of drinks for everybody?" she suggested.

"Now you’re talking," said Barry.

He signaled to a waitress, and when she approached, he gave her instructions.

"Take a bottle of champagne to every table in the bar and put it on my tab," he said.
The waitress left to get the champagne. Barry turned back to the girl with the auburn hair.

"Thanks for your help," he said. Then he started walking back to his table.

"Hey, wait a minute," said the girl. Barry stopped, and the girl got up and walked over to him. "You didn’t give me a chance to say thank you."

"If you really want to thank me, come have a drink with me and my friends."

"I’d like that," said the girl. She followed Barry to his table where they found Mike and Diane in the middle of an argument.

"I can do anything if I’m motivated," said Mike.

"Like pass the bar exam?" asked Diane, sarcastic.

Barry and the girl sat down.

"Excuse me, you two," said Barry. "We have a guest."

Mike and Diane stopped arguing and looked at the girl.

"This is Mike and Diane," said Barry. "And I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name."

"It’s Lucy," said the girl.

Barry picked up the champagne and poured Lucy a glass. Mike said hello, but Diane didn’t say anything. After a moment, she turned to Mike and picked up where they had left off.

"I’m sorry," said Diane. "I shouldn’t have said that
about the bar exam."

"It doesn’t matter," said Mike. "I know I can pass it if I want to. But if you don’t think I can, maybe that says something about us."

"Are you studying to be a bartender?" asked Lucy.
Mike and Barry laughed.

"No, he’s studying to be a lawyer," said Diane.

"Oh," said Lucy. "I thought maybe I was stupid or something. I didn’t think you had to take an exam to be a bartender."

"So what makes you think you can sell real estate?" Diane said to Mike.

"Like I said, I can do anything if I’m motivated," said Mike.

"The problem with that is that people have to do things even when they aren’t motivated," said Diane. She turned to Barry. "Wouldn’t you agree?"

"Don’t worry," said Barry. "If he goes to work for me, I’ll keep him motivated."


"It can’t buy happiness," said Lucy.

"But it can buy damn near everything else," said Mike. Mike and Lucy laughed. Barry grinned.

"You can joke if you want to," Diane said to Mike.
She turned to Barry again. "If Mike is going to reach his potential, he needs to be encouraged and pushed along. It’s nice to say you can do anything if you’re motivated, but what do you do when you’re not motivated? That’s when you need something more than money to keep you going. You need something you believe in."

Barry was listening to Diane, but he was aware that Mike and Lucy were not.

"Are you listening to me?" Diane asked Mike.

"Yeah, I’m listening," said Mike. "But it’s not like I haven’t heard it before."

"Do you two always get along this well?" asked Lucy.

"Only since we got married," said Mike.

"Well, if that’s how you feel, maybe you should go to Los Angeles by yourself," said Diane.

"I am going to Los Angeles," said Mike. "Whether you come with me or not."

"You’re going to Los Angeles?" asked Lucy. "I was there once. I think I was twelve. We went to Disneyland and Universal Studios and..."

"When was this?" asked Diane. "Last summer?"

"No," said Lucy, firmly. "I said it was when I was twelve."

There was a moment of silence at the table.

"Tell me," Lucy finally said, addressing no one in
particular, "Is it true what they say? That people stop having sex after they get married?"

Barry, Mike and Diane were all silent for a moment.

"Let's just say that the Eskimos come to our place when they want to cool off," said Mike.

Diane glared at Mike.

"What about you?" Lucy asked Barry. "How's your sex life?"

"Have some more champagne," said Barry.

Barry poured himself another glass, but Lucy's question had reminded him that he and his wife were worlds' apart. He felt that he had dug himself into a hole where he was surrounded by sheer walls and it was dark and cold most of the time. He had climbed down without stopping to think that someday, he might want to get back out. And all he had with him was a rope that wasn't long enough. He could toss it up, but it would only come right back to him. All he could do was look up and watch the sunlit clouds pass overhead and imagine the warm breezes that no longer reached him. He had dug himself in so deep that he could never hope to connect with those above him, and he realized now that no matter what he did, he was destined to be alone in the hole he had dug--now, and for the rest of his life.

Barry felt desperate and alone with that vision, and
as he saw himself futilely tossing the rope up and watching it come back down, he became frightened and saw himself discarding the rope and scratching and clawing at the sheer walls, desperately trying to escape, until he was so anxious and desperate that he began to yell for someone to help me, help me, HELP ME!

"What are you doing?" someone asked him. It was Lucy. Barry had knocked over his champagne and he was clutching at Lucy's arm. She looked startled, and Barry's eyes were wide and frightened.

"What is it?" asked Lucy. Mike and Diane were also staring at Barry. Barry stared back, still grasping Lucy's arm, still terrified. He wanted to tell them that he needed help, that he was in a hole, that he didn't want to be alone. But he could not voice his fears, not here, not now. He stared back at them for a long time, then looked down at his hand gripping Lucy's arm, and finally he said, "Do you want to dance?"

She shrugged. "Why not?"

On the dance floor, Barry concentrated on connecting with Lucy. It was now very important to him to connect with somebody. And Lucy looked very appealing. Her eyes were dark and slightly glazed, heavy-lidded from the champagne, but still sparkling with youth. She looked at Barry while they danced and she smiled and seemed to like
him. She danced very seductively—as much for every other guy in the bar as for him—but she was dancing with him, and smiling at him, and he knew that he had her for the moment. If the next dance were a slow dance, he would hold her against him and feel her next to him and he would make the connection that he sought. She would be his, and at least for one night he would not be alone.

Barry smiled and hoped and waited for the next dance, but it turned out to be faster than the first. They continued to dance, but he saw her slipping away from him as the dance went on. She looked at him less and smiled at him less. When it was over, they returned to their table. Mike had ordered more champagne, and he was filling glasses while Diane looked on silently. The mood did not look good, and Barry began to question whether more champagne was appropriate.

"Maybe we should slow down on the champagne," said Barry.

"It's a celebration," said Mike. "So let's celebrate." He raised his glass to toast the others. Mike and Lucy joined him. Diane remained apart.

Mike drained his glass. "I'm ready for some dancing now," he said. "Diane, would you care to join me?"

Diane glared at him.

"No," said Mike. "I thought not." Mike turned to
Lucy. "How about you?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. They headed back out to the dance floor, leaving Barry and Diane alone. A moment later, the band started playing a slow song.

"How are you doing?" asked Barry.

"How do you think?"

"I'm sorry if I've come between you and Mike with this job offer," said Barry.

"This isn't entirely your fault," said Diane.

"Although you didn't help much."

"Are things really that bad?" asked Barry.

Diane looked at him. "What he said about our love life—it's pretty much true. He's always in the mood and I seldom am. Sometimes I give in just to be close to him, but it's not working." She turned and watched Mike dancing with Lucy.

"You're afraid of losing him, aren't you?" said Barry.

"Maybe," said Diane.

"Can I give you some advice?" asked Barry. "Don't hold on too tight or you'll chase him away."

Diane turned on Barry, angry. "Does it look like I've got him on a short leash?"

"Yes," said Barry. "It looks like you've got him by the collar."

They sat in silence for a moment.
"Can I ask you something else?" asked Barry. Diane looked at him but said nothing. Barry went ahead with his question.

"Why don't you like me?" he asked.

"Why does it matter to you?" asked Diane.

"Everybody wants to be liked," said Barry.

"Well you can't have your cake and eat it too," said Diane.

"What do you mean?" asked Barry.

"You can do what you want," said Diane. "Just don't expect everybody to like it."

Barry was silent.

"Now can I ask you a question?" said Diane.

Barry nodded.

"Does your wife like you?" asked Diane.

"No," said Barry. "Something went wrong a long time ago and instead of fixing it, we let it go--partly out of ignorance, partly out of my own stupidity. It's like we had a horse that got injured, and instead of taking it to a vet and getting it fixed, we kept on riding it. If we had taken care of the injury right away, the horse might be fine today. But instead, we limped along on a broken leg, the wound got infected, and the infection spread throughout the body. Now it would take major surgery and years of recuperation to save it. You start to wonder if it's worth
the time and the trouble, or if it would just be better to put the thing out of its misery."

"Then why don’t you?" asked Diane.

"That’s the $60,000 question," said Barry.

"So you just keep limping along?" said Diane.

"I guess so," said Barry.

"That’s pathetic," said Diane.

The dance ended and Mike and Lucy returned to the table.

"I think it’s time to really celebrate," said Mike.

"One of Lucy’s friends slipped us a joint on the dance floor."

"A what?" asked Diane.

"Some pot," said Mike.

"You’re kidding," said Diane.

"I don’t think I’ve smoked pot in ten years," said Barry.

"So how about it?" said Mike. "Shall we go out to your car?"

"Why not?" said Barry.

Barry got up to go with Mike and Lucy, but Diane stayed in her seat. They all stopped and looked at her.

"Are you coming?" asked Mike.

Diane looked back at them. "Why not," she said sarcastically. Then she got up and followed them out to
In the parking lot, Barry and Lucy got in the front seat of the car, Mike and Diane got in the back. Mike lit the joint and started to pass it around. Diane took her turns, but she sat back in her seat, detached from the others, while Mike leaned forward to be closer to Lucy and Barry. From where they were parked, they could see the orange-yellow glow of the fire south of town.

"I heard they evacuated all the homes up on Blue Mountain," said Lucy.

"Yeah," said Mike. "That must be one hell of a fire."

"Lot of property at risk," said Barry.

"They’ve been making fire lines," said Mike, "but I hear it’s pretty windy and the fire keeps spreading."

"Fires burn hundreds of thousands of acres every year," said Diane. "In the past, the fires just burned out of control until they burned themselves out. New forests eventually grew where the old ones had been. Now, we fight the fires to protect our homes, but nature often destroys what man has built, and man is forced to start over from scratch."

Diane paused for a moment. The others turned and looked at her.

"This is not necessarily a bad thing," she told them.
They were all silent for a moment.

"I'm supposed to be selling some property for some clients that live up there," said Barry. "Looks like property values are going to be going down."

"There are supposed to be some pretty nice houses up there, too," said Lucy.

"There's an old horse ranch up there," said Diane. "It's in the valley on the other side of Blue Mountain. It's abandoned now, but when I was little, my parents used to take me over there to go horseback riding. Then I heard that the owner went crazy. He set the horses free, locked himself in his house and set it on fire. That was fifteen years ago. They say the horses are still running wild up there."

The others listened to Diane, but did not respond. Finally, Lucy spoke.

"Hey, I've got an idea," she said. "Let's go see the fire."

"Don't be stupid," said Diane.

"I wouldn't mind seeing it," said Mike.

"It would certainly be something to talk about," said Barry.

"You're all crazy," said Diane.

"No," said Lucy. "We don't have to drive right up to it. We can just go look at it from a distance. All you
can see from here is smoke, but I bet if we went up to the top of Blue Mountain, we could see the fire."

"You won’t be able to get up there," said Diane. "The police and firemen will be everywhere. They won’t let you up."

"They will if you live up there," said Barry.

"You don’t live up there," said Mike.

"No," said Barry, "but I know someone who does." He pulled out his ring of keys and smiled at the others, then he started the car and headed south toward Blue Mountain.

* * *

At the base of the mountain, they crossed the Bitterroot River, and came to a barricade. There were two sheriff’s deputies there, and Barry told them that he was going up to check on a client’s property. One of the deputies checked Barry’s identification, then let him pass.

The road made a steep climb for a while, then leveled off well beneath the crest of the hill. Above them, over the crest and to the west, they could see the sky lit dark orange, aglow from the fire that was burning in the narrow valley on the other side of the hill. Below them and to the east was the Missoula Valley and the lights of the city.

As they drove, they passed long driveways every hundred yards or so that led down the hill to homes looking
out over the valley. There was lots of activity. The police and firemen were everywhere, and many homeowners were busy hosing down the roofs of their houses, hoping to ward off the fire. Far beneath them, at the bottom of the hill, was the Bitterroot River, running cold and fast, making sure that the fire would never reach the city.

Barry followed the road for two or three miles, climbing steadily, getting closer to the crest of the hill. The sky was still orange and darkened by smoke. Near the top of the hill, the road made a sharp bend to the left, and as Barry turned the corner, he slammed on the brakes. A huge, dark object with wide, frightened eyes had rushed out of the trees and into the road. It tumbled to the ground in front of Barry's car, then got up and scrambled frantically off the road.

"Did you see that?" asked Barry.

"What the hell was it?" asked Mike.

"It was a horse," said Diane.

"A horse?" said Mike.

"Yes," said Diane. "And it was injured, poor thing."

"That was weird," said Lucy. "Where do you suppose it was going?"

"Toward the river," said Diane.

"I don't think it knows where it's going," said Barry.

"I don't think it matters," said Mike. "Because
wherever it's going, it ain't gonna make it."

They proceeded up the mountain. The sky was slowly getting brighter, and at the point where the road reached the crest and headed down the other side, they pulled off to one side. Lots of other people were there watching the fire—most of them homeowners, but there were also a few forest service employees and more sheriff’s deputies.

Barry got out of the car with the others. The fire was now in plain view on the other side of the narrow valley, bright, but still more than a mile away. It extended the length of the valley, and it had rendered the entire mountain to the west a glowing mass.

They watched as the fire worked its way down the opposing hill. It seemed to be moving at a snail’s pace, deceptively close to burning itself out, but still spreading.

As it worked its way down the hill, it burned trees from the tops down, then moved from the lower branches of one cindered tree to the top of the next and starting the process again, slowly making its way down the steep hill.

There was a steady breeze blowing from the west, blowing over the fire and blowing warm gusts of air to the crest where they stood. Their faces were the same dark, sooty orange as the sky.

"It doesn’t look real," said Barry.
"It looks like it’s going to die out," said Mike. "Look at what it did to that mountain," said Lucy. They were all silent for a moment.

"Over there is where the horse ranch used to be," Diane told them, indicating a smoldering mound halfway up the opposing hill, in the wake of the fire. The fire itself was near the bottom of the hill, closing in on the narrow valley.

"Let’s get closer," said Lucy.

"That’s the stupidest idea I’ve heard tonight," said Diane. "And believe me, I’ve heard some stupid ones."

"What are you worried about?" asked Lucy.

"Look, we were crazy to come this far," said Diane. "That fire could pick up again at any moment. Right now, it’s shielded from the wind, but once it hits the valley and starts up Blue Mountain, the wind is going to be behind it. It could be up here in a matter of minutes."

"I think it’s about to die out," said Lucy. "And I want to see it up close before it stops."

Diane looked at Lucy. "You know, you might be nice to look at," she said, "but you’re about as stupid as they come."

"Don’t talk to me like that," said Lucy.

Mike stepped between them.

"Relax, you two," he said.
"She can’t talk to me like that," said Lucy.

Mike looked at Diane. "That really wasn’t a very nice thing to say, Diane," he said.

"Oh, please," said Diane in disgust. She was about to argue with Mike when Lucy reached around him, grabbed Diane’s purse and threw it down the hill.

"You little bitch," said Diane.

Mike was still between them, but the two women started grabbing and swinging at each other. Mike and Barry managed to separate them, then Mike took Lucy back to the car while Barry took Diane to look for her purse.

Barry and Diane walked sidehill among the pines, canvassing back and forth twenty yards downhill from the car, looking for the purse. Diane was in tears.

"What did I do?" she asked. "Why is he taking her side?"

"He’s just had too much to drink," said Barry.

"I don’t know why I came up here. This is just stupid." She cried some more. Barry put his arm around her and tried to comfort her.

"Listen," he said. "I don’t know if it makes any difference, but I’m sorry about the way things have turned out tonight."

Diane stopped crying and looked up at him.

"Forget it," she said. She turned away to start
looking for her purse again, but Barry held her arm.

"No, I mean it," said Barry. "I'm really sorry."

Diane stared at Barry for moment. He face was aglow from the orange sky, and she looked soft and innocent. Barry stared back at her for a long moment without saying anything. Diane finally spoke.

"What?" she asked.

Barry was quiet for a moment, then said, "Just this," and he slowly pulled her toward him to kiss her.

"What are you doing?" Diane yelled. She pulled away. "Are you a complete idiot or what?"

"Sorry," he said. "I thought..."

"Just help me find my purse and let's get out of here." Diane turned away and started looking for her purse. "What a fucking nightmare," she said.

Barry stood there feeling like an idiot for a moment, then he looked down at the ground. He was standing on the strap of Diane's purse. He picked up the purse, called to Diane, and they headed back up the hill to the car.

When they got to the car, they found Mike in the back seat and Lucy in the front. Barry knew they could not have seen him try to kiss Diane, but he felt very guilty nonetheless. Neither he nor Diane said anything when they got in the car. He was surprised that Mike and Lucy were also silent, and their silence struck him as strange. He
felt even more uncomfortable when he looked in the rearview mirror and saw Mike wink at him.

Barry started the car and took one last look at the western horizon. It was two a.m., and the sky was the dull, glowing orange of late sunset. By the time Barry turned the car around and headed down the east side of Blue Mountain, the fire had reached the bottom of the valley behind them and was starting its way up the west side of the mountain.

They drove back down the hill in silence until they came to the bend where they had seen the horse. They turned the corner slowly, and as they did, they heard a gun shot. Barry stopped the car, and there, fifty yards off the road, they saw a sheriff’s deputy standing over the dead horse. The deputy put his gun in his holster, got in his car, and pulled away, then Barry pulled down off the road into a driveway and parked the car. There was a huge house at the end of the drive, and in front of them, between the car and the house, was the body of the horse.

They got out of the car and walked down to where the horse was. They stood around it for a few moments, just looking at it. Barry noticed that Diane was crying quietly to herself, but he said nothing. He looked instead at the horse, and although he could not empathize as closely as he thought Diane must have been, the sight of the dead horse
frightened him, and he felt more alone than ever.

Behind them, the sky was slowly getting brighter. They could no longer feel the breeze they had felt on the crest, but Barry had the familiar feeling that warm air was passing overhead, just beyond his reach. It was then that he noticed the house.

"Hey, this is one of the houses I’m supposed to sell," he said.

It was a huge, modern structure, with cantilevered wings and decks telescoping out from a massive central building. It was a complicated and meticulously structured building, constructed of wood, but not having the least in common with its wooded surroundings. It had an ominous look to it.

"Wow, check it out," said Lucy. "It looks like something out of the movies."

Before anyone could stop her, she was running down the drive toward the building.

Barry took two steps after her. "Where are you going?" he yelled. But she kept running.

Mike started down the drive, too. "Come on," he said. "We’d better go get her."

Mike and Barry both looked at Diane.

"I’ll wait here," she said. "But you’d better hurry."

Mike and Barry headed down the drive toward the house.
"Nice house, huh?" said Barry.
"Yeah," said Mike. "Where are the owners?"
"they’re out of town," said Barry.
"Do you think the fire will get this place?" asked Mike.

Barry looked behind them. The sky was brighter, but not yet threatening. "No," he said. "The firemen will stay up here all night to protect these places."

Mike looked back over his shoulder, then at Barry. "I’ll tell you what I’d like to do tonight. I’d like to boff that little number," he said, indicating Lucy. "She’s hot."

"That’ll do wonders for your marriage," said Barry.
"Who gives a damn about marriage?" said Mike. "I want sex."

"Don’t blow things with Diane," said Barry. "She’s a good person. Why don’t you go back and talk to her? I’ll get Lucy."

"Yeah, I bet you will," said Mike.
"What’s that supposed to mean?" asked Barry.
"This girl is ready to go," said Mike. "While you and Diane were looking for the purse up there, we weren’t just making small talk in the car."

Barry said nothing.

At the house, Lucy was no where to be found. Mike and
Barry split up, each circling around opposite sides. At the back of the house, Barry found Lucy hitting a door with an axe. Mike was standing there watching her. Barry ran up and took the axe from her.

"What are you doing?" he yelled.

"I wanted to get in," said Lucy.

Barry looked at Mike. "Why didn't you stop her?"

Mike shrugged. "She was just having fun," he said.

"Haven't you ever wanted to bust down a door with an axe?" asked Lucy.

Barry looked at the axe in his hand. The sky overhead was burning brighter.

"Go ahead," said Lucy. "Give it a swing."

"Yeah, go ahead," said Mike. He and Lucy were both laughing. Barry froze for a moment. He looked down at the lights in the valley below him, then up at the sky glowing orange overhead. Thoughts flashed through his mind and burned inside him. He recalled bitter fights with his wife, and now he saw her, sitting at home, alone, waiting for the phone to ring while he was away on business. And he saw himself again, digging a hole, digging himself in deeper and deeper. And he saw the dead horse. It was a terrible, lonely life he had built, and at that moment, he hated his life, and he hated himself.

Mike and Lucy still screamed, "Do it. DO IT!" Barry
looked at them, then raised the axe over his head and swung at the door. The axe took a chink out of the heavy wooden door, but the door did not budge. Barry swung again and again, but still the door stood. He swung wildly and frantically, until finally, with his last swing, the axe handle broke, and the head flew off into the woods.

"Great," said Lucy. "Now how are we going to get in."

She and Mike started to slink away.

"Wait," said Barry, collecting himself. The others turned and looked at him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the huge ring of keys. "I have the key," he said. Then Mike and Lucy looked on as Barry found the right key and opened the door.

Inside, the house was cavernous, most of it under one central room that looked out over the valley. The high, dark ceilings looked down on furnishings that seemed spartan and unimaginative. Mike and Lucy moved through the room, knocking things over, banging on the walls, but actually doing little damage. There was nothing there to break. All the little things--the things that define a home and give it its character--had been removed. There were no photos, no paintings, no artwork or knickknacks or personal memorabilia of any kind.

Mike and Lucy moved off to another part of the house, but Barry stayed in the huge, central room. He walked
around, looking for anything that would tell him something about the place or its inhabitants. Then, over a massive stone fireplace, he found one large painting. It was a painting of the inside of the house as seen from approximately where he stood, only facing east, encompassing the infrastructure of the building itself, the massive door that Barry had just opened, and the huge picture windows that made up the east wall of the house. In the background, through the windows, was the Missoula Valley, very small and far away.

Barry took the painting off the wall and held it up to the actual view. Both seemed artificial, both lacked emotion. It was his worst fear: You get inside, and there’s nothing worth having. He put the painting down and went to find Mike and Lucy.

He walked quickly through the house looking for them, but could not find them until he heard noises coming from the garage. He walked in, and found them on a workbench, Lucy with her black dress hiked up above her waist, Mike with his pants down around his ankles. Mike had one hand on one of Lucy’s breasts, the other hand between her legs as he prepared to enter her. He was oblivious to Barry’s presence, but Lucy looked at Barry and smiled.

Then Barry heard Diane coming through the house. He turned and tried to get to her before she got to the
garage, but he was too late. Diane entered the garage door.

"The fire's at the crest of the hill," she yelled. Then she saw Mike and Lucy on the workbench.

"What are you doing..." she started to ask, but her voice trailed off. Mike slowly pulled away from Lucy and started pulling up his pants. He had a cocky, arrogant air about him that said, What are you going to do about it? Lucy remained seated on the workbench. She pushed her dress down and smoothed it over her legs, then sat there, swinging her legs back and forth, smirking and waiting to see what would happen.

"Aren't you even going to say anything?" Diane asked Mike.

"What did you say about the fire?" Barry asked.

"There's not much to say," said Mike.

Barry opened the garage door. The sky was bright yellow and the fire was now over the crest of the hill and coming down toward the road. The wind was blowing hot and hard in his face, sparks and ashes were landing in the front yard. Small fires were starting everywhere. A group of firemen was moving down the drive, coming to protect the house. Barry turned and yelled into the garage.

"Come on, we've got to get out of here," he said.

Mike fastened his pants, and started to walk past
Diane out of the garage. Diane watched him go by, then she lunged at him, swinging wildly. Mike grabbed her by her wrists.

"Calm down," he said. "It's no big deal."

Barry ran to them and tried to usher them out of the garage and up the hill toward the car. Diane continued to struggle with Mike as they moved. Sparks and ashes were falling all around them, igniting more fires. Finally, Diane broke free of Mike's grasp.

"Don't touch me," she yelled. "I never want you to touch me again."

Mike shoved her away. "Fine," he said. "You just made my life much simpler."

Diane looked at Mike in horror, fire falling all around her. Two firemen ran past them. One of them turned to Barry.

"Are you the owner?" he asked.

"No," said Barry. "He's out of town. I'm the realtor."

"Well unless you want to lend a hand, you'd better clear out," said the fireman. Then he headed toward the house.

Diane had stopped, so Barry grabbed her arm, trying to pull her toward the car. But she pulled away and ran wildly down the hill, past the house, toward the river.
Barry and Mike both started after her, but just then, there was an explosion. They looked around to see a fireball twenty feet high rising in the front yard. Then they saw Lucy, dancing around in front of the fire, holding a gas can.

"What the hell’s she doing?" asked Mike.

"She’s got a gas can!" said Barry. "She’s pouring gasoline on the fires."

One of the firemen ran toward Lucy.

"Go get her," Barry yelled at Mike. "I’ll go after Diane."

Mike ran to get Lucy, and the last thing Barry saw before entering the woods was Mike leading Lucy back to the garage.

When he got to the trees, Barry could hear Diane far ahead of him, running wildly, breaking branches, still crying. He ran after her, yelling her name, but he got no answer. Barry ran frantically, trying to catch up to Diane before she got to the river. He ran, whipped by branches and brush, stumbling and falling against rocks, getting up and stumbling again, running forward until suddenly, he was out of the woods and tumbling down the steep river bank into the fast moving water on the river’s edge.

The water was ice cold, and Barry was completely immersed for a moment. He gathered himself and stood up,
still stumbling. The water was only knee deep, but it was moving fast. He balanced himself and looked around, and there, a few feet from him, was Diane, kneeling in the freezing water, crying.

Barry waded over to her and helped her to the shore. They sat there for a while, Diane clinging to him, Barry holding her, trying to calm her. Far above them, the firemen protected the houses and arranged to get Mike and Lucy down off the mountain, but Barry and Diane were not thinking of them. They just sat at the edge of the river for a while, then they got up and walked downstream to the bridge that would take them across the river and away from the fire.
PERVERTS ANONYMOUS

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SAM, age 30
JOANN, Sam’s wife
DR. BOKO, a psychiatrist
GRETA, Dr. Boko’s assistant

TIME: 1980’s

PLACE: A group meeting room at Dr. Boko’s office.

THE CURTAIN RISES: At centerstage, there is a circle of folding chairs. At stage right, there is a door labeled "Private" which leads to Dr. Boko’s private office. At stage left there is a doorway leading to a hallway. There is a table near the doorway at stage left. A coffee machine and doughnuts are on the table.

AT RISE: There is no one on stage. SAM and JOANN enter through the door at stage left. They stand with the door ajar, looking into the room. SAM is carrying a large grocery sack.

SAM
Are you sure this is the place?

JOANN
This is where Greta said to come, and...

(stands aside to reveal Dr. Boko’s nameplate on the door)

...it says "Dr. Boko" on the door. This must be the place.

SAM
But there’s nobody here.

JOANN
They’ll be here. Now I’ve got to go, Sam. I’m going to be late for Senator Braintree’s fundraiser.
(turns to exit)
I’ll pick you up in a couple of hours.

SAM
You sure are spending a lot of time on this campaign. All I ever hear is, "Senator Brauntree this," and "Senator Brauntree that."

JOANN
I don’t spend that much time on the campaign, Sam, but it’s interesting that you think so. I heard that the sense of time is the first thing that goes when you have a sick mind.

SAM
There you go again, insulting me.

JOANN
Well, what do you want me to do? You quit your job so we could spend more time together, so I think, "Fine," until I find out that "more time together" means never getting out of bed. We go to a banquet for the mayor, and what do you do? You proposition the mayor’s wife, for Christ’s sake. And then there’s that thing.

JOANN reaches for the sack
SAM is holding. SAM pulls it away holding it just out of reach.

SAM
Why don’t we just forget this?

JOANN
You said you’d go through with it, Sam.

SAM
But this is stupid. I don’t need a psychiatrist.

JOANN
This isn’t just any psychiatrist, Sam. This is Dr. Boko. He’s world famous. You’re lucky he agreed to see you.

SAM
I know, I know. I read the brochure. I know all about Dr. Boko, and I know all about his stupid group.

JOANN
It’s not a stupid group. Perverts Anonymous is one of the most successful groups of its kind.
SAM
Perverts Anonymous. That's great. I can't believe I agreed to do this.

JOANN
Some people wait years to get into this group. If it wasn't for Greta, you'd still be on the waiting list.

SAM
There's a waiting list for Pervert's Anonymous? The only thing that could possibly be worse than being in the group is being on the list of perverts waiting to get in. Remind me to thank this Greta person—if she shows up.

JOANN
She'll be here. And you should be glad you're going to get to meet her. She's a very intelligent woman.

SAM
That's just what I need to straighten out my life: another intelligent woman.

JOANN
She'll be here, and so will Dr. Boko, and so will the rest of the group.

You mean the perverts.

SAM
Whatever.

JOANN
The perverts of Perverts Anonymous. What a wonderful name. And speaking of names, what the hell kind of a name is "Dr. Boko"?

SAM
I don't know, but you agreed to see him; you're not going to back out now.

JOANN
But I've changed my mind. I'm not a pervert.

Sam, we've been through all this before. I'm not going to stand here and argue with you and miss this rally for Senator Brauntree. Either you see Dr. Boko like you agreed to do or we're through.
SAM
That sounds like an ultimatum.

JOANN
Call it what you like, but I’ll tell you one thing: You need help. All you can think about is sex.

SAM
That’s not true.

JOANN
No? Should we ask Wanda Wanderlust for a second opinion?

JOANN reaches for SAM’s grocery sack again. SAM pulls it away.

SAM
Wanda Wanderlust meant nothing to me. She was a whim.

JOANN
A whim?

JOANN quickly lunges and grabs the grocery sack from SAM. JOANN then removes a deflated inflatable doll from the sack.

JOANN
I’ve never heard of an "inflatable whim."

SAM retrieves the doll and the sack from JOANN.

SAM
Okay, okay. It was a dumb idea. But give me a break; you can’t call me a pervert just because of a stupid doll.

JOANN
It’s not just the doll, Sam. You quit your job, you’ve lost your friends, and now you’re ruining our marriage, and it’s all because you’re obsessed with sex.

(pause)
You can’t go on like this. Don’t you think about the future anymore? Don’t you have any ambitions?

(pause)
I don’t know what’s going on, Sam, but that doll was the last straw.
SAM

(adamant)
You can say what you want about me and Wanda Wanderlust...

SAM holds up the doll. GRETA enters from the door at stage right, carrying a clipboard.

...but I'm not a pervert.

GRETA

Can I help you?
(sees JOANN)
JoAnn, is that you?

JOANN

Greta?!

JOANN and GRETA hug.

JOANN

It's so good to see you. What's it been? Five, Six years?

GRETA

Oh, I know. Isn't it terrible. But Dr. Boko keeps me so busy... I never seem to have time to keep in touch with old friends. You're not exactly easy to catch either. I hear you've been campaigning all over the state for Senator Brauntree.

JOANN

Yes, but it's a lot of fun. I wouldn't have it any other way. I love election year. It's exciting work. And I'll tell you a secret: It'll be even more exciting in two years; Senator Brauntree is thinking of running for president.

During the rest of JOANN's speech, SAM silently mocks her word for word from "the thrill of the primaries..." to "every woman's dream."

JOANN

Think of it: the thrill of the primaries, the drama of the convention, the heated fall debates, the election day countdown, and then, Inaugural Day. Every woman's dream. I get chills just thinking about it.
GRETA
(not quite sure how to take JoAnn’s lust for politics)
It sounds wonderful.

JOANN
As a matter of fact, there’s a fundraiser tonight.

GRETA
You mean you’re not staying?

JOANN
No, I was just dropping off Sam.

(SAM steps forward)
That’s me.

JOANN
Oh, I’m sorry. Greta, this is my husband, Sam. Sam, this is Greta.

GRETA
(extends her hand)
Nice to meet you, Sam. I’m Dr. Boko’s assistant.

SAM
(attempts to hide the doll while shaking GRETA’s hand)
My pleasure.

GRETA
Well, we’re glad you decided to come to us, Sam. We think you’ll enjoy the group sessions.

JOANN
Actually, I think Sam has changed his mind, Greta.

SAM
(to JoAnn while staring at GRETA)
No! I mean, I have my reservations, but I think we should give this a try, JoAnn.

JOANN
But you just said...

SAM
(laughs for GRETA’s benefit)
Oh, I was a little concerned about bringing in this thing...
(SAM holds up the doll, then puts it back in the sack) ...but that wouldn’t keep me from going to the meeting.
I'd probably look pretty foolish bringing in an inflatable doll though, wouldn't I?

GRETA is about to answer when LANCE and MAGGIE enter from stage left carrying sacks identical to SAM's. LANCE and MAGGIE walk past GRETA to the circle of chairs where they seat themselves.

GRETA
You needn't worry. This is novelty night. Everybody will be bringing something.

SOUND: offstage at stage left, there is a loud noise as if something heavy has been dropped. HOWARD enters from stage left.

GRETA
What was that?

HOWARD
I left something out in the hall. Do you think it will be safe there?

GRETA
I guess so....

HOWARD walks past GRETA to LANCE and MAGGIE. The three of them then move to the coffee and doughnuts where they pour coffee and feign conversation while GRETA talks with SAM and JOANN.

GRETA
(to Sam)
So you will be staying?

SAM
Absolutely.

GRETA
It's too bad you can't stay, JoAnn.
SAM
Yeah, but she’s got that fundraiser. Can’t raise funds without a fundraiser, right Dear? You’d better get going or you’ll be late.

JOANN
Actually, I’d like to stay; I didn’t think I was allowed to.

GRETA
Dr. Boko would love to have you.

JOANN
In that case, I will stay. I’d love to meet Dr. Boko. Can I use your phone?

GRETA
You can use the one in my office. It’s right across the hall.

JOANN
Let me call to tell them I’m not coming. I’ll be right back.
(exit)

SAM
So, you’re Dr. Boko’s assistant.

GRETA
That’s right. And you’re JoAnn’s husband.

SAM
That’s right.

GRETA
(looks at the doll)
Then this must be Wanda Wanderlust.

How did you know?

SAM
I spoke to JoAnn on the phone.

GRETA
And she told you about my doll?

SAM
Yes.

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Wanda Wonderful?

What?

The doll. Is it Wanderlust or Wonderful?

Oh, it’s Wanderlust.

Thank you.

Why don’t you have a seat with the others, Sam. Dr. Boko will be out shortly.

Okay.

I’m not really a pervert, you know.

No?

I wanted to spend more time with JoAnn, now she thinks I’m a pervert. Since when is it wrong to want to spend time with your wife?

But JoAnn said you quit your job because you were obsessed with sex.

It was a stupid job.

What did you do?

I was the city manager.

That doesn’t sound like a stupid job. That sounds pretty important.
SAM
All I know is that I was spending sixty hours a week on that job, and JoAnn was traveling all over the state working on this campaign. We never saw each other. It wasn’t right. All I wanted was to spend a week in bed with her. But she wouldn’t do it.

GRETA
Is that when you started propositioning other women?

SAM
She told you about that, too?

GRETA
Yes. She said you propositioned several women, including complete strangers, the wives of several friends, and even the mayor’s wife. Is that true?

SAM
Well, it wasn’t exactly a proposition.

GRETA
What was it then?

SAM
I just told them, "We could really get to know each other if we spent a week in bed."

GRETA
That sounds like a proposition to me.

SAM
None of them took me up on it.

GRETA
So you bought an inflatable doll?

SAM
It was on sale.
  (pause)
What would you say?

GRETA
About what?

SAM
If I said, "We could really get to know each other if we spent a week in bed"?
GRETA
I'd say that line tells me all I need to know about you.

SAM
It might be fun.

GRETA
What would JoAnn say?

SAM
I already asked her. She said no.

GRETA
No, I mean about you asking me.

SAM
I don’t know.

GRETA
Well, maybe you should ask her. Here she comes.

JOANN enters.

JOANN
Have you two had a chance to get acquainted?

SAM
We were just getting started.

JOANN
What do you think, Greta? Will Dr. Boko be able to help us?

The door marked "Private" at stage right begins to open.

GRETA
We’ll soon find out.

Enter Dr. BOKO from stage right. He is about 50 years old, heavy set, and he speaks with an Austrian accent. He walks to one of the empty chairs in the circle and sits down. GRETA gets up and moves to the circle also. SAM and JOANN remain at stage left.
DR. BOKO
Good evening, everybody.

GRETA
Doctor, we have a new member with us tonight. Come on over, Sam.

SAM moves to the circle.

DR. BOKO
Glad you could join us, Sam. Have a seat.

SAM sits down. He puts his grocery sack under his chair as LANCE and MAGGIE have done.

DR. BOKO
Sam, this is Maggie, Howard, and Lance. Everybody, this is Sam.

SAM
Nice to meet you.

MAGGIE
(to Dr. Boko)
Is he a pervert or a researcher?

DR. BOKO
He's here to listen to your experiences and perhaps to share some of his with us.

HOWARD
Sounds like another pervert.

MAGGIE
(to Sam)
Welcome to Perverts Anonymous.

HOWARD
He's not a fudgepacker, is he, Doc?

DR. BOKO
No--I mean, it doesn't matter what he is. We're all human beings, after all.

HOWARD
(to Sam)
"Sexually maladjusted" human beings.
GRETA
Sam’s wife is also with us tonight, doctor. She’d like to sit in.

DR. BOKO
Wonderful.

JOANN moves to the circle.

JOANN
Hello, my name is JoAnn.

HOWARD
Va-va-va-voom.

JOANN
(stops short of the circle and stares at Howard)
I can see that it’s going to be easy to tell the doctors from the patients.

DR. BOKO
(stands)
Please excuse Howard. I’m Dr. Boko. It’s nice to have you with us, JoAnn. Please have a seat.

JOANN sits next to Sam.

DR. BOKO
(sits)
Okay, let’s settle down and get started.
(pause)

During the meeting, GRETA takes notes on her clipboard.

DR. BOKO
Sam, JoAnn, one of the things we stress here is the importance of admitting your problem. Each of these people has a problem, but they’re trying to deal with it. Why don’t we begin tonight by telling Sam and JoAnn a little about ourselves, then maybe we can hear from them. Howard, why don’t you start?

HOWARD
Okay.
(he stands)
My name is Howard, and I’m a pervert. I’m here because of my wife. I was spending a lot of money on girlie magazines...
SAM
What magazines were you getting?

HOWARD

DR. BOKO
We get the idea, Howard. Go on.

HOWARD
Anyway, the old lady was getting pretty pissed about all these magazines coming in—she’s from a very religious family—and she finally got so fed up that she canceled my subscriptions and told all the publishers that I was deceased.

MAGGIE
Wishful thinking.

HOWARD
Anyway, nobody would send me magazines anymore. But that didn’t stop me. I renewed my subscriptions using her brother’s name, but somehow, things got screwed up and the magazines ended up at her brother’s house.

(pause)

SAM
What’s so bad about that?

HOWARD
My wife’s brother is a priest.

JOANN
Your wife must have been furious.

HOWARD
No. She never found out.

SAM
You mean the priest never told?

HOWARD
No, he kept his mouth shut. He also kept all the magazines. Never even paid me for the damn things.

DR. BOKO
Thank you, Howard.
HOWARD
And I thought priests were supposed to be honest.

DR. BOKO
(more adamant)
Thank you, Howard.

HOWARD sits down and Dr. BOKO leads the group in a light smattering of applause.

DR. BOKO
Maggie? How about you next?

MAGGIE
(stands)
My name is Maggie and I’m a pervert. Five years ago, I never would’ve admitted that I had a problem. I liked to date men and they liked to date me. I especially liked young men...early twenties, late teens...the younger, the better. But my daughter wanted me to slow down, stop seeing so many men. She was very concerned about my self-esteem.

(pause)
When my daughter found out about one particularly wild date, she finally spoke her mind. She told me that even though promiscuity is the norm nowadays and the double-standard is a thing of the past, no man is going to respect a woman that lets him give her a pearl necklace on the first date. After hearing those words from my daughter, I decided to join Perverts Anonymous for her sake.

MAGGIE sits down. DR. BOKO again leads the group in applause, this time more enthusiastic.

DR. BOKO
Thank you, Maggie. That’s a wonderful, heartwarming story.

JOANN
I don’t understand. A pearl necklace is a rather expensive gift for the first date, but why come to Perverts Anonymous? Couldn’t you just return the necklace?

HOWARD
(laughs)
LANCE
(also laughing)
Yeah, Maggie. Why didn’t you return the necklace?

MAGGIE
It wasn’t the kind you can return.

JOANN
But if they were good pearls, any reputable jeweler would take them back.

MAGGIE
They weren’t that kind of pearls.

JOANN
What other kind is there?

HOWARD
Well, there’s the kind you get from oysters, and then there’s the kind you get when you put a hot beef injector between the yaboos.

JOANN
What?

HOWARD
Or the kind you get when you take a throbbing gila monster into the tetons.

JOANN
I don’t understand.

GRETA
He means that Maggie’s date ejaculated between her breasts.

HOWARD
Oh, Greta. You make titty-fucking sound so vulgar.

SAM
(to Maggie)
It’s nice that your daughter cared enough to say something.

HOWARD
Yeah, but tell him the rest, Maggie.

MAGGIE
(reluctantly)
I happened to be dating my daughter’s boyfriend at the time.
HOWARD
And he gave you a pearl necklace, huh? Last time, you said
he gave you a golden shower.

MAGGIE
Did I?

HOWARD
Yeah. So which was it? A pearl necklace or a golden
shower?

LANCE
I thought it was a hot lunch in the shower.

HOWARD
Greta, check your notes. Which was it?

GRETA starts flipping back
through her notes.

DR. BOKO
Nevermind, Greta, it doesn’t matter.

MAGGIE
That’s right. Pearl necklace, golden shower, hot lunch,
what’s the difference?

HOWARD
It would make a difference to me.

GRETA
Oh, leave her alone, Howard.

HOWARD
Okay, but I’ll tell you one thing: Maggie’s daughter was
right: I know I could never respect a woman that let me
give her a pearl necklace on the first date.

LANCE
That wouldn’t stop you from doing it though.

HOWARD
No, I just wouldn’t respect her, that’s all.

DR. BOKO
(impatient)
Okay, let’s proceed, shall we? Lance, what about you?
LANCE
I don’t know. I guess I could still respect her...it would depend on the woman...

DR. BOKO
No, no, no, Lance. I mean, tell us about yourself.

LANCE
Oh, sorry. (stands) My trouble started...

DR. BOKO
Ah, ah...Remember, Lance, the first step is to admit your problem.

LANCE
Sorry.
(clears throat)
My name is Lance, and I’m a pervert. I guess my trouble started back in Sister Veronica’s second grade class at St. Elmo’s. All the girls wore white cotton blouses and little navy blue uniforms. There was one girl in particular, Debbie Powell, a blond-haired, blue-eyed vixen whose uniform was always freshly dry-cleaned and pressed. One day, at recess, I just couldn’t stand it anymore. Debbie Powell was in the back of the room getting something out of her locker, and her uniform was beckoning me: "Lance," it said; "Lance, come touch me. I’m yours." I made my move. I snuck up behind Debbie, reached out, and touched the hem of her skirt. It felt wonderful—that little swatch of navy blue wool—but before I could really enjoy it, Sister Veronica was trying to beat me to death with an eraser. I had to stand against the fence during recess all that week, but I’ll tell you what: standing there, watching all the girls in their uniforms whispering and pointing, just made me worse. I popped my first woody while I was standing against that fence, and I’ve been fighting a losing battle ever since.

LANCE sits down. Everyone is silent for a moment, then they applaud.

SAM
That doesn’t sound so bad to me.

JOANN
What are you talking about? That was disgusting.

SAM
I mean, it’s natural for kids to be curious at that age, isn’t it?
LANCE
Yeah, but the problem is that I still like little navy blue uniforms. I’m no child molester, but I’ve sure spent a lot of cash getting short hookers to dress up like school girls.

HOWARD
He’s still got a thing for chain-link fences, too.

LANCE
Yeah, the whole experience left some scars.

HOWARD pats LANCE on the back to console him.

HOWARD
That’s one of the saddest stories I’ve ever heard.

JOANN
Pathetic is a better word for it.

MAGGIE
I’ll second that.

DR. BOKO
Now, now, let’s try to be understanding. Lance is exactly the kind of person that can benefit from out little group. (pause) We all have natural urges, natural desires...the question is, What do we do about them?

MAGGIE
Well, in Lance’s case, he’d better keep them to himself or he’ll end up in jail.

DR. BOKO
Okay, sometimes we need to curb our appetites. Is that always true?

HOWARD
I don’t think so. Sometimes you need to go with the flow.

DR. BOKO
Okay...

SAM
But how do you know when to hold back and when to let yourself go?
DR. BOKO

It all depends...

HOWARD

...on your particular perversion.

DR. BOKO

In Lance's case, it might not be prudent for him to act upon his impulses. It might be more fruitful to concentrate on the reasons behind his fixation. In other cases, not acting upon your impulses might be unhealthy.

LANCE

So what do you do?

DR. BOKO

Well, you have to use your judgment. Is your impulse a good healthy one, or is it perverse in some way? Obviously, someone has led you to believe your impulses may be perverse or you wouldn't be here tonight.

LANCE

(pulls his grocery sack out from under his chair)
If I wasn't a pervert, I wouldn't own this thing either.

What's that?

DR. BOKO

GRETA

It's novelty night, Doctor.

DR. BOKO

Heavens! I completely forgot about novelty night. Okay, let's see what you've got. Did everybody bring their favorite novelty?

MAGGIE nods and pulls her grocery sack out from under her chair.

JOANN

I don't understand, Doctor. What's the purpose of novelty night?

DR. BOKO

This is just a little lesson in self-denial. Everyone was to bring in something that they or their friends consider perverse. I'll keep it for a week, and next time, we'll see how they got along without it. Sam, since this is your first week, you're excused.
JOANN
No, Sam brought something, too. Go ahead, Sam.

SAM gets out his grocery sack.

DR. BOKO
Okay. Lance, what did you bring?

LANCE
(pulls an inflatable doll out of the bag. The doll is wearing a navy blue school girl’s uniform.)
An inflatable doll.

DR. BOKO
That looks like a very nice doll, too, Lance.

LANCE
Her name is Naughty Nancy. I made the uniform myself.

LANCE gives the doll to GRETA.

LANCE
Be good to her.

GRETA
I’ll treat her like a sister.

DR. BOKO
Very good. Maggie?

MAGGIE
(pulls a doll out of her bag)
I brought an inflatable doll, too. An inflatable man.

JOANN
I didn’t know they made inflatable men.

MAGGIE
Sure they do. Would you like me to blow him up for you?

JOANN
No, no. Please don’t trouble yourself.

MAGGIE
No trouble at all.
(MAGGIE begins to blow up the doll)
DR. BOKO
That won’t be necessary, Maggie. Does your doll have a name?

MAGGIE
His name is Rod Tool.

MAGGIE gives the doll to Greta.

MAGGIE
Keep him away from Naughty Nancy. Rod is clean and I want to keep him that way.

LANCE
Are you saying your doll is too good for my doll?

MAGGIE
I’m just saying that there’s no telling where Naughty Nancy has been or when you last cleansed her...

LANCE
I scrub Nancy after every use!

GRETA
Don’t worry; not only will I keep the dolls from getting together, I’ll guarantee that they don’t even get inflated while under my custody.

DR. BOKO
Okay.
(pause)
Sam, what have you got?

SAM
I’ve got an inflatable doll, too. Wanda Wanderlust.

HOWARD
Wanda Wanderlust? Wow. I’m impressed.

LANCE
Yeah, she’s the top of the line.

MAGGIE
Way to go, Sam.

JOANN
This is wonderful: My husband wins the respect and admiration of the other perverts on his first night at pervert school. This must be how Mrs. da Vinci felt after
Leonardo’s first day in art class. (pause) Tell them the rest, Sam. Tell them what you do with your doll.

SAM
They don’t care what I do with it.

HOWARD
That bad, huh, Sam?

SAM
No, it’s not that bad.

HOWARD
Well, what is it then?

SAM
I don’t do anything with it. I just talk to it.

MAGGIE
You just talk to it?

While SAM answers, LANCE leans over and closely examines SAM’s doll.

SAM
That’s right.

HOWARD
You mean that’s virgin vinyl?

SAM
I guess so.

LANCE
(pointing at Sam’s doll)
He’s telling the truth. The safety seal hasn’t been broken.

SAM
Is that a crime?

HOWARD
Hey, don’t get uptight, Sam. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.

SAM
I’m not ashamed!
Yeah, lots of guys have trouble with their first doll.

DR. BOKO

Now, everyone, remember our second rule: We are not here to judge. Sam, you don’t have to be ashamed of anything you’ve done.

SAM

But I haven’t done anything!

DR. BOKO

(soothingly)

And that’s all right, Sam. And I’ll remind you, that since this is your first meeting, you’re not obligated to leave your novelty here for a week.

JOANN

No, please. Take the doll.

SAM

(handing doll to GRETA)

That’s all right. I don’t mind.

DR. BOKO

That’s wonderful, Sam. We’re glad you decided to participate. And if you feel the need to talk to Wanda any time during the week, please drop in.

(pause)

Howard, you seem to have come empty-handed. Did you forget about novelty night again?

HOWARD

(indicates JoAnn)

No, but what about her? Where’s her novelty?

JOANN

I’m not a pervert. I don’t have anything to bring.

MAGGIE

We’ve all got skeletons in our closets.

HOWARD

Or electric salamis.

DR. BOKO

Howard, JoAnn’s just an observer tonight. Now, did you bring a novelty or not?
HOWARD
It's out in the hall.

DR. BOKO
Well, are you going to bring it in?

HOWARD
I don't think it'll fit in the door.

LANCE
What is it?

HOWARD
It's a Walla Walla Flab Grabber. I got it from The Smut Brothers Discount Novelty Store in Newport Beach.

SAM
A Walla Walla Flab Grabber?

HOWARD
That's right, $39.95, satisfaction guaranteed. I've got the instructions right here.

(HOWARD takes out a sheet of paper and shows it to the group. He points to the sheet while talking.)
Basically, you pour your hot wax in here, your oil in there, crank it up here, twist this on, and away she goes.

JOANN
(sarcastic)
And for $39.95, you've got a machine that will fulfill your mastrubatory fantasies, is that it?

MAGGIE
Yeah, what's the matter, Howard? The old right hand isn't good enough for you anymore?

HOWARD
Maggie, you're so old fashioned. The Flab Grabber isn't just for the individual.

(indicates instructions again)
It comes with all these attachments, too. It even has a multiple-user mode. (stands) Come on, everybody. I'll show you.

LANCE
(stands)
Okay.
MAGGIE
(stands)
I’ve got to see this.

DR. BOKO
(stands)
Maybe now would be a good time to take a break.

HOWARD, LANCE, MAGGIE, and DR. BOKO move to stage left. HOWARD, LANCE, and MAGGIE exit, but DR. BOKO returns to center stage when JOANN calls to him.

JOANN
(angry)
Dr. Boko. I’d like to have a word with you.

JOANN
What?

DR. BOKO
Call me Johann.

JOANN
Okay, Johann.
(pause)
I want you to know that I’m not very happy with what I’ve seen so far. It seems to me that there should be a better way to deal with perversion than getting a bunch of perverts together and comparing notes.

DR. BOKO
Actually, JoAnn, openness is a very important part of the group meeting. We encourage each other to reveal ourselves with the hope that such openness will lead us to the causes of so-called "perversion."

JOANN
Well, I think these stories they tell each other are the cause.

DR. BOKO
Actually, I’ve done quite a bit of research on the subject, and I’d be happy to show you the results.
I'd like to see those.

JOANN

DR. BOKO

(directing JOANN to his office)
Right this way. I keep my journals in my office.

As DR. BOKO directs JOANN to the office at stage right, LANCE, MAGGIE, & HOWARD return to get coffee and doughnuts. They talk quietly among themselves while SAM and GRETA talk at center stage.

SAM
I don't think my wife is very happy with the meeting.

GRETA
That's funny. I don't remember JoAnn being so uptight. But don't worry. Dr. Boko has done a lot of research on perversion.

(SAM)

GRETA
And what do you do, Greta? Do you always sit and listen?

SAM
That's the first step toward being a good psychiatrist. You have to know how to listen.

GRETA
You seem to be pretty good at it.

SAM
Do you think so?

GRETA
Yes, I do.

SAM
I hope so. One of the first things I learned as city manager was how not to listen. I saw so many people with petty complaints that I just started tuning them out.

HOWARD
(to Sam and Greta)
Hey, you two. Last chance to get in on the gang-grab.
GRETA
No thanks.

HOWARD, LANCE, and MAGGIE exit.

SAM
How long have you been working with Dr. Boko?

GRETA
Two years.

SAM
Do you ever see his patients?

GRETA
I’m at every meeting.

SAM
No, I mean outside the office—you know, socially.

GRETA
You’re not going to ask me about spending a week in bed again, are you?

SAM
No, I’m sorry about that. That line is for shock effect. Just let me ask you a theoretical question.

GRETA
Okay.

SAM
Well, as I said earlier, I’m not really a pervert.

GRETA
Yes?

SAM
Well, I’m trying to remember what’s it’s like when people first get to know each other. What I mean is, if I were not a patient, and if I happened not to be married, what would be the best way for me to get to know someone? You, for instance.

GRETA
Now hold on a minute, Sam. You are a patient, and you are married—I don’t think you should be starting any new relationships.
SAM
You're absolutely right. I shouldn't be thinking about it. But I can't communicate with JoAnn anymore. Maybe it is me. Maybe I really am a pervert.

GRETA
Don't be so hard on yourself. We all have problems. I can't always communicate with my boyfriend, either. Sometimes, I think he should be in this group—or maybe I should. At any rate, we'll do our best to help you, Sam.

SAM
You're awfully understanding.
(pause)
By the way, who's the lucky guy?

GRETA
What?

SAM
Your boyfriend. Some young doctor?

GRETA
No...

SOUND: GRETA is interrupted by a loud noise offstage at stage left. The sound is roughly akin to a paint shaker in a hardware store. DR. BOKO and JOANN come rushing out of DR. BOKO's office and cross to stage left. SAM and GRETA also advance toward stage left, but the door suddenly swings open and LANCE, MAGGIE, and HOWARD fly into the room, followed by coffee and chunks of doughnuts.

DR. BOKO
What is it? What's happening?

MAGGIE
It's the Flab Grabber. We can't shut it off.
More coffee and doughnuts come through the door. LANCE and HOWARD lunge out the door at the machine, only to be tossed back into the room. MAGGIE grabs the pot of coffee and flings the coffee out the door. There are sounds of an electrical device short circuiting, then silence.

(looking out door)
My Flab Grabber. It’s dead.

We’re sorry, Howard.

Yeah, we’re sorry, Howard.

DR. BOKO approaches HOWARD and puts his arm across HOWARD’s shoulders.

Are you all right?

Yes, I’ll be okay.

Are you sure?

(nods yes)

DR. BOKO
Why don’t you let me take the Flab Grabber? Perhaps I can have it repaired. Would that make you feel better?

(again nods yes)

DR. BOKO
Okay. Lance, Maggie, why don’t you give me a hand. Greta, will you go unlock the back door of my office?
Yes, Doctor.

LANCE, MAGGIE, & DR. BOKO exit stage left. HOWARD follows. GRETA exits stage right. SAM & JOANN are left alone on stage. SOUND: Off stage, we hear the sounds of the Flab Grabber being moved to DR. BOKO’s office.

This is insane.

What did you and Dr. Boko talk about in his office?

He had the nerve to tell me I’m inhibiting the group.

I guess we’re leaving then.

No. I’m tempted to, but Dr. Boko guaranteed results and I’m going to hold him to it.

I thought you didn’t approve of his methods.

He’s a little unorthodox, but he’s also very persuasive. He’d make a good politician. I’m not wild about this group, but I think Dr. Boko is going to be good for you.

We’ll see.

DR. BOKO, LANCE, MAGGIE, GRETA, and HOWARD, still distraught, return from Dr. BOKO’s office. They all take their places in the circle of chairs, and SAM and JOANN return to their seats.
Okay, people, let’s get started again. It’s time to hear from our new member. Sam, would you care to tell us a little about yourself?

Sure.

(SAM stands)

My name is Sam, and I don’t know if I’m a pervert or not.

Then why are you here?

Because JoAnn and I are having problems.

What kind of problems?

Problems with our sex life.

That’s not unusual, is it, Doc?

Not at all. Mrs. Boko and I have been married for twenty years and we still have problems with our sex life. All married couples do. It’s often a matter of sitting down together and working through your differences. What kind of trouble do you and JoAnn have, Sam?

JoAnn thinks I put too much emphasis on sex; she thinks I’m a pervert.

What do you think, Sam?

I suppose I think about sex a lot.

Is that why you bought Wanda Wanderlust?

I don’t know. I suppose it was either that or have an affair.
DR. BOKO
Yes, but why a doll? Why not another diversion?

LANCE
Like a Flab Grabber?

HOWARD
Or butt plugs. Butt plugs are very big these days.

SAM
I don’t know. At least a doll looks human.

DR. BOKO
Okay. Now, you mentioned an affair. Why didn’t you go that route?

HOWARD
Yeah, people don’t think you’re a pervert if you just have an affair.

SAM
I thought about it.

JOANN
He did more than think about it; he propositioned several women.

DR. BOKO
Is that true, Sam?

SAM
I asked them if they wanted to spend a week in bed.

GRETA
I’m interested in the way you asked them, Sam. It’s almost as if you wanted them to say no.

SAM
I didn’t care what they said. They didn’t know what I was talking about.

DR. BOKO
What were you talking about, Sam?

SAM
I was talking about getting away, really getting to know someone, but nobody was interested.

DR. BOKO
So you bought a doll?
SAM

Yes, but that wasn’t the answer.

DR. BOKO

What do you mean?

SAM

I mean, it wasn’t what I needed. I got Wanda Wanderlust because I thought maybe if I had a doll, I wouldn’t need someone else. But it didn’t work; I already find myself attracted to another woman and I don’t know what to do about it.

LANCE

That’s exactly what we were talking about earlier, isn’t it, Doc? Is Sam a pervert because of the attraction or is he a pervert because he doesn’t know what to do about it?

DR. BOKO

What do you think, Sam? What attracts you to the woman?

During Sam’s speech, GRETA stops writing for the first time during the meeting and listens.

SAM

I don’t know, she seems to be understanding and sympathetic, and those things help, but maybe it wasn’t just her. I mean, maybe it could have been anybody. You spend six months listening to political ideology and talking to an inflatable doll and you just get the urge to talk to somebody normal. She looked like someone I could talk to. Except you can’t do that; you can’t just go up to a stranger and start talking to them. So you hold it in until finally, you want to do more than talk. You want to skip the words altogether and just reach out and touch the other person.

DR. BOKO

Very interesting, Sam.

(to Greta)

Did you get all of that, Greta?

GRETA

(flustered, resumes her notes)

Yes, Doctor. I was listening.
JOANN
So was I, and I've had about enough of this. All you ever want to do is "skip the words" and "touch the other person." You make it sound so romantic, but what you really want is physical pleasure.

SAM
And your way is better? Total abstinence?

JOANN
I don't believe in total abstinence.

SAM
You may as well. The last time we made love, you started crying out campaign slogans.

HOWARD
Sounds kinky.

JOANN
(to Sam)
What's that tell you, Mr. Excitement?

SAM
It tells me you don't even try to enjoy it.

MAGGIE
Since when should a woman have to try?

JOANN
I've tried, Sam. But there's no point. I always thought sex would be like finding the perfect running mate....we'd fulfill each other's needs, compensate for each other's weaknesses.... People would look at us and say, "That's the perfect ticket. They get my vote." But it hasn't been that way.

HOWARD
Then why not go for the next best thing: A really powerful orgasm--Or at least an occassional filibuster.

SAM
(laughs)

JOANN
You can laugh all you want, Sam. But there are more important things than sex.

(pause)
There are five billion people on this planet. And beyond that, there are 100 billion stars in this galaxy, and 100
billion galaxies in this universe. That's 20 galaxies for every human being alive. Compared to all that, each of us is little more than a passing thought in some dark recess of God's mind.

HOWARD
It's a wonder a guy can get it up.

SAM
to JoAnn)
You can't go around thinking that way all the time.

JOANN
Maybe not, but you can't go on forever pretending it isn't true.
(pause)
How can you justify your existence if all you ever think about is six inches of pleasure?

SAM
Seven.

MAGGIE
Don't stretch the truth, Sam.

JOANN
The point is, you're obsessed with sex, Sam. You're never going to amount to anything.

DR. BOKO
JoAnn, it sounds like you're saying that you have needs other than the physical.

JOANN
That's right.

MAGGIE
Haven't you ever done anything just for the hell of it?

HOWARD
Yeah, you've got to sow your oats sometime.

JOANN
Not everyone succumbs to their animal urges.

LANCE
Most normal people do every once in a while, don't they, Doc?
DR. BOKO
It's sometimes healthy to follow our instincts, yes.

HOWARD
Prudes don't have instincts.

JOANN
I'm not a prude!

DR. BOKO
Can you think of a time when you followed your sexual instincts, JoAnn?

JOANN
I'm not going to discuss my sex life in front of this group!

SAM
What's there to discuss?

HOWARD
Yeah, Prude.

JOANN
Prude, huh?

Okay. I'll tell you a story, then we'll see who's a prude.

When I was a freshman in college, Henry Kissinger came to speak at our school. He was going to discuss arms control. As the day of his visit drew near, all the young liberals were getting worked up into a frenzy. There were "ban-the-bomb" posters everywhere, and everybody was wearing a "no-nukes" button. It was really sickening. I planned to attend the lecture with the president of the Young Republicans, and we came up with a plan to quiet the liberals before Dr. Kissinger spoke. On the night of the lecture, I dressed up as the Statue of Liberty and my date dressed up a multiple-warhead Soviet cruise missile. We climbed up on the stage in front of all the slogan-chanting liberals, and the Soviet cruise missile chased me around until he caught me and destroyed me. The audience was stunned into silence. Then Dr. Kissinger came out, and in his soothing, seductive voice, he explained why we need nuclear weapons to protect our liberty. It was a wonderful evening.

(pause)

Afterwards, my date took me to Republican Headquarters. There was no one else there--except for the big
papier-mache elephant in the middle of the room. I guess it was too much for me—being there at headquarters after the lecture—I just went crazy: I threw down my torch and crown, and ripped off my robe, then the Soviet missile—I mean the president of the Young Republicans—made love to me on top of the elephant. I felt the power of the whole Republican Party build up inside me and explode. I never wanted it to end.

(pause)
I went out with the same guy a few more times, but it was never the same. That night at Republican Headquarters was the most exciting night of my life, and I’ve never experienced anything like it since.

SAM
Never?

JOANN
(decisively)
Never.
(pause)

MAGGIE
I’ve heard enough. Sam should sell his doll, JoAnn should quit playing politics, and they should both go back to contemplating their boring little lives. They’re not perverts; they’re just morons.

LANCE
Yeah, I don’t think Sam’s a pervert.

HOWARD
And I don’t think JoAnn’s a pervert.

LANCE
All Sam needs is someone to talk to.

HOWARD
And JoAnn just needs somebody to do to her what Nixon did to the country.

DR. BOKO
I think we’re being too hard on JoAnn. Remember: We’re not here to judge.

GRETA
Dr. Boko is right. We shouldn’t pass judgment on others. Anyone can lose her head for a moment. It’s happened to me, too.
MAGGIE

You, Greta?

HOWARD

You’ve made love on top of an elephant?

GRETA

No, but I’ve allowed myself to be seduced by my profession, just as JoAnn was seduced by politics.

LANCE

What happened, Greta?

DR. BOKO

(looks at his watch)

We’d all love to hear Greta’s story, but I’m afraid we’re about out of time, folks. Why don’t we call it a night.

DR. BOKO stands. The others stand also, but there is a bit of grumbling.

DR. BOKO

Try to stay out of trouble, and I’ll see everybody next week.

(aside, to Greta)

And I’d like to speak with you later.

LANCE, HOWARD, and MAGGIE exit stage left. GRETA remains seated. SAM and JOANN approach DR. BOKO.

SAM

Tell me the truth, Dr. Boko: Do you think I’m a pervert?

DR. BOKO

Your case is not as severe as others I’ve seen, but yes, I think you need help.

SAM

But what about what the group said? They don’t seem to think I’m a pervert.

DR. BOKO

Who are you going to listen to? A trained psychiatrist or a bunch of perverts?

SAM

Where do we go from here?
DR. BOKO
For you, Sam, we continue the meetings. But for JoAnn, well, we’ll have to work something else out. Perhaps I could have a moment with you in private before you go, JoAnn.

JOANN
Okay.

JOANN and DR. BOKO exit stage right. SAM sits down next to GRETA.

SAM
I want to apologize again for that stuff I said about spending a week in bed. I feel like a complete fool after that discussion.

GRETA
Don’t feel bad. You said some very insightful things.

SAM
You mean you weren’t embarrassed when I said that I was attracted to another woman?

GRETA
Should I have been?

SAM
I was talking about you.

GRETA
(stands)
Please, Sam. Don’t say anymore.

SAM
I know I had no right to speak the way I did, but I couldn’t help it.
(pause)
I guess I really am a pervert after all.

GRETA
(sympathetic)
I don’t think you’re a pervert, Sam. It’s never been easy to tell who’s perverted and who’s persecuted.

SAM
But you heard what Dr. Boko said.
GRETA
Dr. Boko is a brilliant man, but everybody makes mistakes; even doctors.

SAM
You know what the worst part of it is? If I am a pervert, it’s probably because I don’t even care what happens to my marriage anymore.
   (pause)

GRETA
You can give up on your marriage, Sam, but don’t give up on people. When you give up on people, that’s when you’ll know you’re a pervert.

SAM
Is that what’s happened to you, Greta? Have you given up on people?

GRETA
I haven’t given up, but I’m no different from anybody else: I’ve got my own problems to sort through.

SAM
What is it? What happened?

GRETA
I don’t think we should discuss it.

SAM
Is it what you were talking about at the end of the meeting? Being seduced by your profession?

GRETA
Sort of...

SAM
Well, go ahead and get it out. All I’ve heard about tonight is openness. Maybe you should practice what you preach.

GRETA
But I feel like such a hypocrite.

SAM
Nobody’s going to judge you.
   (pause)
GRETA
I don’t know how to say this, but.... I’ve been having an affair with Dr. Boko for the past two years.

SAM
I thought he was married.

GRETA
He is. That’s why I feel like such a fool.

SAM
I don’t understand. How did it get started?

GRETA
I don’t know how it started exactly. I was a young intern; he was a world famous psychiatrist. It just happened. All that fame and power; it’s seductive. Now I’ve got to live with what I’ve done.

SAM
So does Dr. Boko.

GRETA
That may be true. But the point is, Sam, I’ve learned something from you: You’ve got the right instinct: We’ve got to keep trying to break through the barriers until we’re able to touch someone. But you’ve got to do it one step at a time. You scare people if you just reach out and touch them. You’ve got to be able to talk to people first. That’s where you need help, Sam. But don’t worry; it’s not as hard as you think.

SAM
Not when you’re talking to the right person.

SAM and GRETA clasp hands and suddenly there is a loud noise off stage.
SOUND: the Flab Grabber is running again. DR. BOKO and JOANN are thrown out of Dr. Boko’s office, partly clad and their clothes in disarray. It should be obvious that they have been fooling around in Dr. Boko’s office. JOANN gets up in an orgasmic daze while DR. BOKO runs back into his office and shuts off the Flab Grabber. DR. BOKO then returns.

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JOANN
Oh, Johann. That was wonderful.

GRETA
Dr. Boko! How could you?

DR. BOKO
It was easy. First I wiped off the coffee, then I put in new batteries. The thing started right up. You should try it.

GRETA
I mean how could you violate the doctor/patient relationship?

DR. BOKO
JoAnn isn’t a patient.

GRETA
Yes, but her husband is.

DR. BOKO
Yes, that does present a problem...

GRETA
And what about us?

JOANN
(coming out of her daze)
"Us?" Greta, do you mean you and Dr. Boko...?

DR. BOKO
Nothing has to change between us.

SAM
I think a lot of things need to change around here—including any doctor who would take advantage of a woman. You call yourself a doctor, yet you’re worse than any of your patients. You seduced your assistant, now you’ve seduced JoAnn. What do you have to say for yourself, doctor?

DR. BOKO
I, too, have needs, Sam.

SAM
And you’re married, too! What about Mrs. Boko? How does she fit into the picture?
DR. BOKO
Mrs. Boko has a personality disorder that causes her to display antisocial behavior most of the time.

SAM
What?

DR. BOKO
She’s a bitch.

SAM
Oh. (pause) Well, that doesn’t change the fact that you’ve been fooling around with other people’s lives.

JOANN
I don’t understand, Johann. You’ve been fooling around with Greta?

DR. BOKO
"Fooling around" sounds so cheap. When two people work together as closely as Greta and I have, there is so much psychic energy at work that the result is often a physical attraction. I think that’s only natural.

SAM
I’m beginning to see who the real pervert is around here.

JOANN
Don’t talk to Dr. Boko that way. If Johann has been corrupted in some way, it was in the name of science. He’s no different than those selfless medical martyrs that risked their lives to treat the plague in medieval Europe or yellow fever along the Panama Canal. Only a great man is willing to go amongst the sick even if it means risking infection.

DR. BOKO
Thank you, my dear. But there’s no need to defend me. Perversion is only an illness when it controls us, not when we control it.

GRETA
Now I’ve heard everything. There’s nothing more perverse than trying to justify your own hypocritical actions. No, I take that back; there is one thing worse: It’s trying to convince your patients that they’re the perverts.
DR. BOKO
Don’t fool yourself, my dear. Everybody that comes to me is a pervert.
(takes instructions for the Flab Grabber out of his pocket)
If I may quote the makers of the perilous Flab Grabber: "All the world is flab and everybody’s looking for a place to grab." That, my dear, is human nature.

GRETA
Well, I’ll tell you one thing, Doctor: You won’t be grabbing me anymore. I quit.
(GRETA turns to exit)

SAM
Just a minute, Greta. I’m coming with you.

GRETA stops and waits.

JOANN
What?

SAM
(to JoAnn)
That’s right. You keep telling me that there’s something wrong with me. Well, okay; I’ll admit it. I’m not like you. And if that makes me a pervert, then fine. I’m a pervert, and I’m proud of it. But I’m through listening to you. You and Dr. Boko, you’re hypocrites, and in a world full of hypocrites, an honest pervert doesn’t have a chance.

SAM and GRETA exit stage left. HOWARD, MAGGIE, and LANCE enter.

HOWARD
We though we heard the Flab Grabber. Did you get it fixed?

DR. BOKO doesn’t answer. ALL look at JOANN’s and DR. BOKO’s disheveled clothing.

MAGGIE
I’ll say they got it fixed.

HOWARD
Come on. We never did get to try out the multiple-user mode.
COUNT ME IN.

LANCE

I'LL GIVE IT A TRY.

MAGGIE

LANCE, HOWARD, AND MAGGIE EXIT STAGE RIGHT.

DR. BOKO

(OFFERS HIS ARM TO JOANN)

SHALL WE?

JOANN

(TAKES HIS ARM)

WHAT THE HELL.

DR. BOKO AND JOANN WALK TOWARD STAGE RIGHT.

JOANN

TELL ME, JOHANN; HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF RUNNING FOR PUBLIC OFFICE?

DR. BOKO

WHAT DID YOU HAVE IN MIND?

JOANN

HOW DOES "GOVERNOR BOKO" GRAB YOU?

DR. BOKO

"GOVERNOR BOKO": IT HAS POSSIBILITIES....

DR. BOKO AND JOANN EXIT STAGE RIGHT.

CURTAIN.