

A PAINLESS REUNION

By Terry Sanville

As Candace slid into the booth, she caught sight of a man that looked like Gregory, at least how she imagined he'd look. He sat by himself at a nearby table, fingering a dark mole behind his left ear. *Jesus, I always warned him that disgusting thing would turn cancerous and kill him. Funny, the only thing that died was our marriage.* She stared at his solid torso, square shoulders, neatly-clipped hair. *The decades haven't changed him much, still got that smarmy mouth, ready to utter the next —.*

"You want something to drink?" a brunette waitress asked.

Candace jumped. "Ah...let me think...yes...some... some Earl Gray would be nice."

"Sorry. We've only got Lipton."

"Okay, Lipton it is."

She continued staring. The coffee shop's piped-in music faded to a muted squeal. *What's he doing in Seattle? Shit...and on Sheila's birthday. He'd better not try...*

The man picked at the mole, making it bleed. He snatched a paper napkin and dabbed at it, red spots on white. Candace felt her stomach lurch and fought the urge to rush forward and slap him across the back of the head. He'd always been so immature, a poster child for the *Me Generation*, ready with some charming rejoinder. He was doing it now with his waitress, the blonde's lips pulled back in a perfect surfer-girl smile.

"Do you want lemon with your tea?" her waitress asked.

Candace shook her head absently.

"Do you want to order?"

"Huh? Ah... no, not right now. I'm waiting for my daughter."

A rainsquall off Puget Sound rattled against the front window. Candace gazed onto First Avenue, at pedestrians scurrying for shelter. The streetlights blinked on even though it was just past noon. Like a suicidal jumper drawn to heights, she let her eyes wander back to the man. *This is driving me crazy...should go over and give that son of a bitch the what-for.* She dug into her purse. In the compact's mirror she dusted her freckled cheeks, applied fresh lipstick, and pushed dishwater blond hair in back of her ears. The brown-spotted hand she reached for her teacup with trembled, fingers stained alizarin crimson from working on her latest painting. *Come on, it's been twenty-five years for Chrissake. Just tell him off... say something that hurts... like he really sucked as a lover.*

A slender blonde in a business suit pushed inside the coffee shop. The young woman scanned the tables, then waved.

Candace struggled to control her face. "I thought maybe the rain scared you away."

Sheila removed her coat to expose a chic sleeveless blouse covering a well-developed bust. "Not today. I've been looking forward to this shopping...Mom, what's wrong? Your face is all...sad."

Damn her, I can't hide anything. "Oh, you know me and rain."

"Still mooning about your precious hill country? You'd think all those cowboy dreams would be gone by now."

“Y’all cun neva take Texass outta a girl?” Candace cracked, laying on a thick long-dormant accent.

“God, I’m glad you don’t talk like that. People will automatically lower your IQ by twenty points.”

Candace laughed, a loud braying sound. The man twisted around and she lowered her head. *Not now, damn it. Not with Sheila sitting right here.*

“What is it, Mom? Is that man bothering you? I’ll have the hostess tell him to –”

“Don’t say anything,” Candace hissed. “Is he still looking?”

“No, but I’m going to –”

“DON’T.” Candace gripped Sheila’s mole-speckled arm. She felt the eyes of people staring. *I will not get into this today. No way am I going to tell...*

“Mother, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I guess your birthday just reminds me how old –”

“Ah come on, you’re still a babe and you know it.” Sheila smiled and patted her Mother’s hand. “Let’s order something so I can start my shopping spree. Hope your MasterCard has a high limit.”

“Honey, do you mind if we eat somewhere else? This place is just too, you know, ah...”

“Eduardo’s is just up the street. I take buyers there all the time.”

Candace dropped a five-dollar bill on the table and followed her daughter toward the exit. *She’s more mature than I am, educated, poised, neatly coiffed. I was never like that...never wanted to be. Bet she’d never be able to kept a secret like mine.*

Sheila was already outside opening her umbrella. As Candace passed the man's table, her knees weakened and she clutched a chair.

"Are you all right, Miss?" he asked, rising from his seat.

She stared into his eyes. They were the wrong color. "Oh my God."

He grinned, showing off perfect teeth. "I don't normally have that effect on beautiful women," he said, his voice devoid of any southwest accent.

"I'm...I'm sorry. I could have sworn you were someone else."

"Are you disappointed or relieved? I can't tell."

"Definitely relieved. Excuse me, but my daughter's waiting."

"Yes, of course. Have a good day."

Candace hurried to catch up with Sheila and begin an afternoon of escapist shopping. Inside the coffee shop the man motioned to the blonde waitress.

"I'm ready for my check. Say, they're playing my favorite song."

The waitress raised an eyebrow.

"You know, 'Don't it make my brown eyes blue.' I spent big bucks on these fancy contact lenses 'cause the ladies prefer blue eyes."

"Well I don't know about - "

"Sure ya do, hon. Didn't ya see that women just now, almost fell over when I flashed her with these blue babies. She looked kinda familiar too, almost like..."