

Lionel pushed the button for his building's elevator, which had an annoying habit of breaking down at the most inopportune times. To his relief the doors opened right away. He stepped in, pressed the button for his floor, and leaned back to better appreciate the havoc being played on his senses by recently consumed whiskey. After spending the day walking through a frigid north wind on a picket line, he had been sorely in need of something to warm him up and mellow him out. Once again, McCann's bar came through in a pinch.

As the doors were closing, a hand reached in between them. They re-opened, and in walked his wife's friend. A single glance told Ellen everything there was to know about Lionel's condition, and told Lionel that Ellen would be giving him grief over it.

"Let me get some coffee into you," she said, no trace of hospitality in the offer. "Maybe we can make you semi-sober before you go home."

"It's my home and I'll walk in any way I damn well please."

"Well I want to talk to you first."

"About what?" asked Lionel.

"About your family."

"What business is that of yours?" The opening of the elevator momentarily silenced Lionel. Ellen wasn't the only nosy neighbor he had.

"Let's continue this in my place," she said, gently tugging on his arm until they were inside her apartment. "I'll make you that coffee."

"To hell with coffee. You got something to say, let's hear it."

Lionel surveyed the unfamiliar surroundings. What he found was himself, for much of the wall space was covered by mirrors. Some of them masqueraded as art, the rest

pretended to be nothing more than the odes to vanity that they were. Her furniture came in a variety of neon colors, most of the pieces faux leather. Ellen's home perfectly reflected Lionel's opinion of her. Tacky, loud and cheap.

"I know the strike is tough on you," she said. "It's hard enough to make ends meet nowadays when you *are* working."

"I'm glad you know so much. Now if you don't mind..."

"None of that gives you the right to abuse your family."

Ellen took off her coat. As usual, the outfit she wore underneath revealed more than it concealed. She was dressed in the fashion of women fifteen years her junior. Her hair had recently been dyed an obscene blonde, as if anyone could possibly be fooled. She gestured for Lionel to have a seat, but he ignored her and waited to hear what else she had to say.

"I heard you tried to start a fight with Tony the other day. What kind of father are you? What kind of man are you, pushing around the people who are supposed to matter most to you, who you're supposed to be taking care of? Maybe Caren's willing to stand there and take it, but I'm not about to let that happen."

She took a step forward, getting right in Lionel's face. He had to give credit where it was due. The woman had balls.

"I'll call the police the next time. I'll get a gun and shoot you dead myself if necessary. But I will not let you mistreat them any longer."

"Thanks for the advice," Lionel said, his voice as serene as an ivory cloud concealing the tip of a brewing volcano. Before Ellen could say another condemning word,

Lionel walked out. Rather than feeling assured that she had done good, Ellen was left to wonder if her judgement would prove costly to those she had aimed to protect.

As Ellen worried, Lionel marched briskly home. A man's place was at the head of his household and it was essential that this be recognized. God was worshipped first and foremost because of the fear His power elicited. People might praise His infinite capacity for love, but it wasn't love that brought them to their knees in obedient prayer. When Lionel entered his kitchen he found Caren setting the table for dinner. A dinner the money *she* earned had paid for. What need did she have to be grateful to her husband, except for the merciful restraint he showed? But in order for the restraint to be acknowledged, a hint of power had to be displayed. Caren must be reminded of the fear.

"So I'm a real bastard, is that it?"

Lionel answered his own question by flipping over the dinner table, sending dishes and silverware clattering to the checkered linoleum floor. "How dare you tell Ellen I abuse you?"

Caren was momentarily distracted from the question by the mess her husband had created. A few plates and glasses had been broken. Fortunately, she had not yet placed any food on the table.

"I never said such a thing."

"I don't care how crazy she is. She didn't come up with that shit off the top of her head. She was quoting you."

"I told her you've been on edge because of the strike," Caren said. It would be no easy task to douse Lionel's anger. She would probably have to settle for stifling her agitation at Ellen for poking her nose where it didn't need to be. Caren knew that her friend

had well meaning intentions, but stirred up trouble pays little heed to the purpose of its instigator.

"I break my back every day for this family. All I ask for in return is a hot meal and just maybe a little respect. You think I treat you bad? You don't know what bad is. But you seem to want to find out."

Caren was aware that the right choice of subservient words could placate Lionel. But thoughts had been placed in her head lately that she was unable to wish away, and these thoughts urged her to challenge rather than concede. Perhaps the self-respect fostered by her job of the past several months played a large part. Day by day, the woman who allowed herself to be intimidated by her husband was fading away. In her place, a woman who was just beginning to recognize her own value after four decades of living now stood. This woman was tired of such tirades, and even more tired of rationalizing her husband's occasional cruelty. Ellen was right. Lionel's reign as tyrant had gone on long enough.

"I've got to run back and forth between work and keeping this place up," Caren said. "You know what thanks I get? A drunken husband screaming at me like a baby who wants his bottle. You want a hot meal? Go eat it off the stove."

She tried to leave the room, but Lionel stuck out his arm to prevent her exit. It was then that Tony stepped into the kitchen, unheard over his parents' argument and shielded from view behind his father's tensed back.

"Don't you walk out on me," said Lionel.

He could not allow the matter to end on Caren's terms. It was not supposed to have gone like this. Where was the remorse, the groveling for forgiveness? His wife needed to

learn what life had taught him a long time ago. Pride would be knocked right out of a person who didn't have enough sense to hold it in check when necessary.

Caren read his eyes and found herself at peace in the retina of the tempest. Like the most experienced of sailors, she knew that nature's wildness could not be fought, only waited out.

"What are you gonna do, hit me? Go ahead then. Get it over with if that's what it will take."

Caren staggered backward from the blow which followed, tripped over an outstretched table leg, and fell to the floor. Tony wrapped his arms around his father like a boa constrictor suffocating its prey.

"Who is this? Get off me. Get off me or else."

Tony ignored the commandment, holding on as if the fate of the universe depended on his grip.

"I'm not going to tell you again." Though his words were still acerbic, Lionel had ceased to physically struggle against the vise he was in. He was too drunk, and his son too strong with desperation. Nevertheless, Tony held on even tighter.

"You're going to regret this, boy."

Tony did not doubt that the truth had been stated, but refused to acknowledge it. No one would be allowed to harm his mother, not even the man he feared most.

"Let him go, Tony."

His mother's soft spoken request accomplished what his father's threats could not. Tony backed away from Lionel, hyper-alert to whatever might happen next. Lionel did not bother to look his son's way, but simply walked out of the kitchen and left the apartment.

Caren knew exactly where he was headed and what he would do. Her husband would drink until his wallet was empty. Then he would come home, shamed and drunk enough to be willing to apologize in order to coax her into making love. She was used to the ritual and accepted it as she did the sun rising each morning.

"Are you okay?" Tony asked as he helped her up.

"I'm fine."

"I'll never let him hit you again."

Caren's sudden burst of indignation had just as swiftly disappeared, replaced by a need to pacify and explain.

"Your father has a lot to deal with right now. He's angry about the strike and this is the only place he can let it out."

"He has no right to take it out on you."

"We're his family. If he can't count on us, who can he count on?"

Tony shook his head. Not only was his mother not distraught, but she seemed to have accepted what had happened and was asking him to do the same.

"You forgive him for everything."

"Of course I do. That's what love is."

Caren ran her hand through Tony's hair. She could see the hate in his eyes and wanted to remove it. No boy should hate his father. Life was tough enough as it was.

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, and so does your father. Promise me you'll try to understand him."

"I'll try," Tony said, not caring if he sounded sincere. He understood his father's brand of love well enough. It was based on orders being followed, his presence being

trembled before. But the day hopefully was soon coming when it would no longer reduce Tony to a petrified child.

Mother and son stood in loving embrace. Caren reflected on what she had just said. That's what love is. Moments earlier she lay on the floor, her hand covering the handle of a fork. She had imagined shoving the tongs into her husband's eye. If Tony had not come into the room, if Lionel had advanced to finish teaching his lesson, would her fingers have let go before bad grew irreparably worse? She didn't know the answer so she silently made the same promise she had asked of her son. All was lost once people could no longer forgive.