

CHLOE MAKES A DECISION

A shrill whistle sounded in the crisp autumn air. The marching band broke onto the field, the drums thundered, the blare of trumpets and trombones accompanied her in triumph, a squadron of fighter aircraft, painted a brilliant pink, roared overhead and vanished into the blue. The crowd was on its feet, handkerchiefs fluttering, shouting “Chlo-e! Chlo-e! Chl-oe!” Dogs came rushing over the lawn to her car, tails revolving frantically; women threw open their windows, nodded and clapped as she went by; delivery boys waved to her, old men lifted their hats to her - everything and everyone was on her side. Mrs. Chloe Richardson, at the wheel of her BMW cruising down the interstate, could not help giggling as she imagined a greeting like that, because, at forty one, she was going this afternoon to make rapturous love with Roger Allenby. She was free! Her youngest daughter recently joined the two older girls at college, and there was now nothing more to hinder her. She was going to “do it” at last, and her odious husband, well he can... But she could not think about him. She must shut him off in a corner of her mind where he could not emerge to taint this wonderful day as he did every other day, to make it something awful.

She really had to relax; it was still only the morning; ten o'clock, and she wouldn't be with Roger till late in the afternoon. She would "burn herself out" if she weren't careful. She smiled tenderly, thinking of him. "Oh", she thought, "Roger is so sweet." And he had dark, curly hair, not the greasy, mound of hair that her husband had, a gleaming white - so jarring in a man who was still in his forties. She did not find it "distinguished" - not any more. "But no, let's not think of Edward", she told herself, because anything could happen. Just a few days ago, she was pulling into the toll booth at the bridge, and, without even thinking, she shouted to the collector, "I'm Senator Richardson's wife and I hate him!" What came over her to say something like that in public - "can you imagine?" Fortunately, the collector was an Indian, a Sikh, she thought, his head swaddled in a blue turban, and he just smiled pleasantly and passed her on. But what if he had been some smart aleck, who would call the newspapers! She *must* keep herself under control.

If only she could divorce him! But the girls would be so angry if she did; Edward had mesmerized them too, along with so many others. And her youngest, Ellen, was struggling with severe emotional problems, "bipolar" they called it, and they had strongly urged Chloe to avoid exposing her to

any tumultuous scenes whenever possible. But Chloe would never have had the heart to tell them the frightful things that Edward had done; but Edward, of course, would feel no such scruple if she tried to divorce him; he would stop at nothing to poison them against her and so destroy her.

She reached Hollins Avenue, and turned left; the new junior high school was in view. The broad school parking lot was open, and Chloe carefully parked the big BMW as some women, already there, came hurrying toward her, shouting their welcome. She came out of the car looking, as usual, very nice, wearing a soft jacket with a brown tapestry print over a simple green tank, which emphasized her blonde hair. The women rushed to her in a flock, many of whom she knew and liked, surrounding her, and gasping in their admiration of her outfit. She was equally astonished and overcome by their clothes as well, and said so lavishly. She knew, of course, that their enthusiasm was greatly overdone, but that was because they liked each other and they enjoyed making each other feel comfortable with their lives. Voluble, joyous, colorful in this early autumn day, they swept up to the front of the school, where the mayor, Jane Gallagher, large and pink cheeked, was waiting with the new principal for Chloe, who – as the spokesperson for their United States Senator, was to make a short statement, and then turn the festivities back to her.

“Hi everybody!” began Chloe, waving shyly as some women she knew well responded with a hearty “Hi Chloe!” from the audience. “It’s such an honor to be here today to join you in opening this marvelous junior high school to the community, where we can be sure that our children will continue to receive the education they need to cope with an ever more complex world. The credit for its success goes to Jane, of course, who did wonders to keep this project going”. She paused, and her eyes swept affectionately across the many faces looking up to her. “And to you, our volunteers. I want especially to say to all of you (“women” she wanted to say, because they did by far the greater part of the volunteer work, but it wasn’t PC to do that because there were a few men skulking about too), that without your amazing effort, made even while you held down jobs and families of your own, this fine building would not have come into being. You’re all wonderful!” For a moment, Chloe was suddenly choked up, and she thought she would cry, though why she couldn’t imagine. “I salute all of you, and I am very, very proud to be here with you today. I love all of you. ” She fought back her tears, and stepped back in the midst of applause as Jane took over.

“These are my friends,” she said thoughtfully as she headed the car down the interstate toward the shopping center. It was only to be among them that she endured the hollow ceremonial roles she had to play as a functionary of her husband. And sometimes, her position allowed her to do something of value for her community. Some day, though, when she was free of him, she would be able to do so much more for herself and for others, and she had no doubt that she would find her friends working there too, wherever there was something that needed done. She thought of them as the foot soldiers of civilization. They bore the children; they raised them, sat with them through the night, went to work the next morning, cleaned the house, took care of the dog, paid the bills, took care of their ailing parents, volunteered for the things that had to be done – and kept up a pleasant face all the while. They were indomitable.

Maybe each of them had a malign husband like Edward – the demon behind the mask - but no, surely not. When she was in college, she met a lot of nice guys. And some really liked her. But *he* really went after her, charming her with his now famous “boyish grin” and his (always vacuous) plans to “help the unfortunate”, a phrase which never failed to move her. They would make a “splendid pair”; they would accomplish wonders. So,

she married him. Because she was pretty and he could boss her. God! How could she not have seen how narrow his head was! Yes, she was sure his head was narrower by several inches than anyone else! There was so little cranial space. And his eyes, so dull, always so dull, because he was always looking inward at himself, never anyone else. And his tiny shoes – an elf's shoes. "Oh, God, his dead eyes!" she shouted in the car. "His tiny shoes!" Enraged, she hit the brakes of the BMW and it shuddered to a stop, and she pounded on the steering wheel in her impotent fury.

A moment later, her car shook violently as a monstrous eighteen wheel truck thundered by only inches from her, blaring at her with outrage as it roared smoking down the road. Pale with fear, she could see through her rear view mirror that other cars, scattered in odd positions, had desperately managed to avoid her too. None seemed damaged or turned over, "thank God", and she put the car in gear again and quickly slipped away, knowing that there would be a reckoning as soon as the drivers reached the police, but there was nothing to do about it now.

She got off at the first exit, and went on toward the shopping center through local roads. "Oh," she sighed, "I hope Roger doesn't hear about this,

at least not till tomorrow.” She was very fond of him. He was the family’s accountant, and he was a nervous sort of man the way accountants were, and the news of a possible car crash might upset him at the very time they were going to ‘do it’. Roger loved her; lord knows he had embarrassed her enough times, whispering it to her in the most annoying places like cocktail parties and city streets, sending her compromising birthday and holiday cards which hinted at romances between them that had never taken place and which irritated Edward. But “now, my dear Edward,” she said softly, “you’ll have a reason to fume because there’s going to be a love affair with Roger after all.”

And why should that surprise him? Heavens, hadn’t he run around like a tomcat soon after they were married? And didn’t he know that, like so many other women, she could have had more than a few affairs if she had wanted them? He was afraid that she would carry on with someone, and that’s why he kept telling her that she was fat when she was not, and why he made demeaning remarks about her body to other people in her presence. But that didn’t stop the men, like Tom Newhouse, his senatorial counterpart from downstate, who made a pass at her last year when he came by when Edward was away! Chloe was not vain; but she knew that she had always

been pretty, and she knew that she was still a very attractive woman. Her tall, willowy body, her wistful smile, her blonde almost white hair, and the wonderful charm of her cheek, which flowed somehow into shadow wherever she stood, and conveying a sense of mystery – these gifts had not yet been taken from her by the years. Yes, she thought, “it would be nice to undress slowly before Roger and let him see – little by little – that I’m well worth waiting for.” For a moment, her little pink tongue swept lasciviously over her lips and back again.

It was almost one o’clock when Chloe entered the quiet, scented confines of Nieman-Marcus, to buy a perfume that a friend of hers had extolled as having a soft, musky fragrance that would get any man “in the mood”. “That would *really, really* be a help!” she believed, as both of them would be so nervous. A pretty dark haired girl, who looked about the same age as her own Jenny, came bouncing up, but after a search and a call to another station, regretfully told her that she was “sorry, we don’t seem to have it now. We could order it for you,” she said hopefully. “Everyone seems to want it.” But Chloe had counted upon it and was dismayed that the enticing scent would not be hers at the right time. “I really have to have it

now,” she said nervously, her throat dry. She implored her to “please look again.” The girl suddenly glanced at her sharply; her eyes moved quickly to Chloe’s ringed hand and back to her anxious face. “I’ll try”, she said coldly. Chloe was shocked to see the knowing smile, the dark eyes gleaming with contempt with which the girl now seemed to gaze at her. Chloe desperately sought to assume an expression of offended dignity, but to her horror her composure fell away. The color flew raging to her cheeks, engulfed the whole of her face in a great carmine surge of guilt. She was aghast. “No, no, it’s not important,” she blurted out, and hurried away down the aisle, pausing only once to turn around and force a careless smile at the girl. “Never mind!”

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Rushing out to her car, she could not help thinking of her mother, and asking “what would she think if she saw me there?” What her mother “would think” was a question Chloe always asked herself before taking any significant decision. Consequently, though Chloe’s mother technically had died some years ago, she lived on posthumously in overseeing Chloe’s life, chiding her for things undone, criticizing the things she did do, and generally

scolding her for failing to meet the standards of conduct she had set for her. And now Chloe found herself recalling one instance in which her mother had chastised her when she came back late from a date in high school. She had entered the house apprehensively, knowing that her mother had a penchant for awaiting her in the dark somewhere among their many rooms and then suddenly appearing before Chloe to make her presence more distressing. That night she emerged from the darkness of the kitchen, saying to the shaken girl that she “was disturbed by *this*” and wished to speak to her about it.

They passed into the living room, her mother in a billowing night dress and Chloe, who was well aware that a procession of this kind did not bode well, trailing miserably behind. Her mother turned on the light, and gazed gravely at her daughter. “Chloe, I must tell you that I am very concerned about you and the life you are leading. It is plain to me that if you continue on the path you have been following, you will turn out to be no better than a curbstone floozy.”

“I’m sorry, mother,” said a perplexed Chloe weakly, “what does that mean”?

“If you don’t know, my dear”, she replied with a thin smile, “then there is nothing more to say. But I will say something more: Let me remind you that there has never been an indecent woman in this family. Never.”

Her mother never did refer again to that ominous phrase, but Chloe could not help but feel that if it meant anything at all, her plans for the afternoon’s tryst with Roger were undoubtedly those of a “curbstone floozy”, just as the girl in Nieman’s had implied by the nasty facial expressions with which she had smirked at her. “What if I am?” she complained to her celestial mother. “If my own husband can run around as much as he likes, violating the vow he took when we got married, why am I not free now?”

In support of her view, she reminded her mother of the events of two weeks ago when she answered Edward’s cell phone, which he had always kept closely guarded in his possession, but in this one instance, he had left the phone on the floor after rising from a drunken stupor and rushing out of the house. Edward had frequently and loudly admonished her never to answer it, so of course when it rang this time she had seized it with alacrity.

She was greeted by a woman demanding to speak to Edward or “his ass is in a wringer”. Immediately intrigued by this metaphor, Chloe, always polite, asked if “she could be of any help?” The woman hesitated, then burst out in a rough, surly voice that he owed her a lot of money and “the fucker won’t even answer his phone”. Chloe replied in her sweetest voice: “Oh, don’t you know that Edward never pays his debts – he thinks it’s enough that he was willing to spend time with you? If he owes it, he should certainly pay you. Tell me,” (though she thought she knew well enough), “what services did you perform for him?” Hesitantly, Lanie – as she called herself – told Chloe that they “spent a lot of time together”, but she said hurriedly, “we never had sex, Mrs. Richardson, “I swear to you.” Chloe was agog. “What is it you did?” After a brief nervous pause, Lanie revealed that ...”we... we...” Chloe crushed her ear to the phone and when she heard the story, the two of them burst into gales of laughter so hilarious that Chloe had to run to the bathroom. By the time their conversation ended, Chloe had given Lanie the name of a newspaper that loathed Edward almost as much as she did, and that merely to mention that tabloid would loosen up his wallet with a lavish generosity. “Thank you, Chloe”, replied a grateful Lanie. “Remember, we’re tight now you and me. I owe ya.”

“Poor Lanie”, meditated Chloe, as she arrived home and put the car into the garage. Who could say how that sordid life began for her, except to say that she had to take the first step somewhere – coerced or not – and would it have been so different than the one that she, Chloe, was about to take now? And weren’t there good, sound reasons underlying the pompous phrases that her mother had imparted to her? Once one begins to accede to impulses that had best be kept at bay, anything is possible. And also, she had to think of her friends, whose brave, worn faces reflected a modest pride born of endurance and a cleaving to that which was right, a distinction that would be denied her as she carried on her adulterous affair in the secret shadows of the night. Wouldn’t her face begin to resemble that of her husband’s? “No”, she conceded ruefully, “it was not to be”. Maybe some day it might be different, but not now. She picked up the phone and told Roger.

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Some months later, on a bright June afternoon, Chloe was sitting in what was once Edward’s library. She was putting pen to paper, completing her formal agreement to go to Equatorial Africa to join a humanitarian group

seeking to relieve the deplorable conditions of people in remote villages who were cut off from the traditional aid organizations. She had corresponded with the woman in charge and had seen her picture, and since she looked very much like her friends at home, she decided to go there. “What a strange course of events”, she wondered, as she sealed the letter, and sat back in her leather chair to reflect upon it.

It all began when Edward , crowing over his good fortune, served her with documents demanding a divorce. He had, he announced, found a woman who “understood him”, that is to say, a trophy wife, a very pretty girl, with immense boobs, very much younger than Chloe. Edward fell back in mortified surprise when Chloe hugged him, showering him with thanks and kisses. But then the sting – she was to receive a couple of thousand dollars per year and a dingy condominium in a decaying part of town. While Chloe had no doubt that she could support herself quite well, she was miffed at being cheated that way, and was also concerned that the girls would probably be left pauperized once the new wife had kids of her own. Since Edward knew most of the judges in the state, he left the house chortling that if she had the nerve to challenge the arrangement, it would only be worse.

Chloe called Lanie, and asked whether she could help. The following week Chloe sat down with Edward and discussed the matter with him. Roger was there, also, sitting in another room, but one in which he could hear everything. “Oh, I like this one, Eddy”, she said, passing the photo to him. “Oh, that cap, with the pointed ears - it’s so cute! And that apron you’re wearing – the perfect little maid. Your own tiny shoes too – what a touch. Wendy, your new slave, would certainly love this one.” She watched with delight as Edward’s face, now a delicate shade of green, worked furiously, his dead eyes actually bulging with horrified life. “Ohhhh,” she drawled, “now this is my favorite! “Your little butt! – You have a dimple! – and you, looking over your shoulder at the person about to spank you! It’s adorable. I’ll have it on a billboard along Route One, so all of your constituents can enjoy it too. For your birthday!”

Well, she got half the money and the house. Edward, of course, could make up the loss rather quickly, but at least she was clear of him. It was time for her now. Roger was staying in the house, and would look out for things while she was gone. She invited Lanie to come out to Africa with her, but she said it “wasn’t her ball game.”

THE END