

Corporate Wife

Stillness.

He stands in chest deep water, pleasantly cool. He feels the water completely, free of clothes. She lay balanced on his hand as light as a bird. Trusting, utterly relaxed, in the isolation of buoyancy, limbs settling to their natural jointing.

Long hair spreads darkly in a corona around a finely made head, tilted back to find the point of effortlessness.

Lit by a bright moon, her face, well known and loved, is seen anew as it glistens in this silver light.

Moments before her breasts had hung in casual beauty. Now they lightly flatten, held as they are by the water, their form captivating.

Her lower torso lay mostly submerged, with only a hint of defining strength finding the surface.

Two points of pelvis form little islands, framing a light garden of fine seagrass, waving slightly in some unfelt current.

Stillness.

There is nothing else.

Erie, Pennsylvania was a tough place to stay positive in 1980. The lake-effect weather served up an abundance of wet, cloudy days. The concurrence of sunshine and a weekend was a festival event, not to be squandered.

These were rust-belt days. While the cleanup of Lake Erie was well along and swimming in the lake was no longer madness, the shore was still dominated by heavy industry adding its own pallor to the grey skies. Kevin's employer, General Electric, was no exception. Here GE did heavy manufacturing, most prominently locomotives, and had its own foundry that spewed toxins into the air. To Kevin it seemed that anyone with promise and vision was working on some means of leaving Erie for brighter skies and prospects.

This was not always so. When Kevin first arrived in 1977 he insisted on focusing on the positives of the area and was consistently upbeat in the face of fellow new-hires who gave voice to negative assessments. Over two year's time roles reversed. Now Kevin was the one keen on getting out with career intact, while his fellows reconciled to the local scene.

Faced with being shunted into an uninspiring green-eyeshade job and the prospect of a lifetime of grim drudgery, Kevin took the risk of openly declining the offered career path and was surprised to be rewarded with a move to GE's financial services business in Stamford, Connecticut.

This was bright and heady stuff: He had stayed true to his employer, his coworkers and himself, had seized control of his life, and now was headed to a land of wealth and endless opportunity.

And expense. Compared to Erie, Stamford was fabulously expensive. Rents were far too high for the relatively modest salary increase received with the move. Kevin would have to somehow find a roommate, someone to share the cost of renting an apartment or house. Al Gore had yet to invent the internet, so one searched for housing in the classified section of the Stamford Advocate. There he found it: rooms for rent in a house owned by a guy who lived on the property in a separate structure. Close to work. Affordable. No clue who the other two room renters would be, but at age 25 this seemed a minor risk. Done.

A day after Kevin had settled in the two other renters arrived and presented themselves. Jessica and Winnie. Close friends, each very attractive, their most striking tie was that each was dealing with an impasse in their relationship with a long term boyfriend, and so had each had decided to make herself less available, and hopefully more attractive. In Jessica's case this was to fall into the pattern of weekdays at the rental house, and weekends back at Franz Schmidt's place in Darien along the famed Connecticut Gold Coast. So maybe just a little less available.

In a few week's time Winnie, Jessica and Kevin became good friends and learned a lot about each other.

Winnie was an authentic Connecticut trust-fund girl, age 25 like Kevin, who had a good sum of cash coming her way in a few years' time, and was trapped in motivational morass. An intelligent woman, she tended toward shortcuts and high fashion and high living, always at the raggedy edge of her monthly allowance. She dabbled as a travel agent, tended some bar, worked on her high society entertaining skills, and counted heavily on the coming funds to carry her until she could marry a man of means. Someone like Gary, who she had just moved out on. Kevin found her to be good company, entertained by her high-brow dismissal of much around her, enjoyed her cooking immensely, and marked her as a sort of manipulative, ambitious, financially demanding woman to steer well clear of romantically.

Jessica was completely different. Age 28, she was a genuine child of the sixties who had made it to Woodstock, done her share of campus protests and activism, probably was on some FBI list or another and had maybe inspired a wistful folk song or two. Now she worked as a graphic artist, remained very progressive in her world view and was to Kevin devastatingly attractive in her black Danskin top and close-fitting hip-hugger jeans. A willowy, fit 105 pounds with fine red-ish brown hair often worn up, and beautifully shaped breasts, it was as if she were made specifically to tempt him.

And yet. She was very committed to Franz, who seemed a nice enough fellow and maybe 10 years older and a good bit wealthier. Within a few weeks Kevin had met him, visited his impressive Gold Coast McMansion, dutifully admired his extensive car collection, and come to understand that Jessica had lived with Franz for several years and had only recently moved out in order to bring the relationship to resolution, one way or the other. Franz carefully projected mild amusement and not too much concern with Jessica's recent maneuver, no doubt expecting

she'd move back in with him in due course. So Jessica and Franz were engaged, kind of. But she had moved out. Kind of. In sum, Kevin saw Jessica and Franz in a long term and serious relationship, and so kept himself on a tight leash, enjoyed the deepening friendship, and suffered his infatuation in silence.

Within two weeks of becoming roommates and friends, Winnie poured out cool, dry white wine for the three of them one evening, and took the floor. "Do you realize that between the three of us, we are paying \$2,100 a month for this scaggy little place? We could do a whole lot better, believe me."

In Kevin's world, the little three bedroom house was just fine, having been freshly painted and carpeted, and the easy drive to work was a serious plus. He sipped his wine and said nothing.

Winnie pressed on. "I know where we can get a luxury condo with a nice pool for \$2,000. We should totally get out of here and move on up."

Jessica offered nothing, but eyed Kevin for a reaction. No doubt these two were decided and looking to get him on board.

"It's just as close in as where we are now, has hardwood floors and a nice view of town", Winnie pressed on.

"We've only been in here two weeks, and Alex, our landlord will be seriously pissed if we all pick up and leave", Kevin observed. "Who knows how long it took him to find the three of us to fill his rooms?"

"That is Alex's problem. That guy is ripping us off! Screw him!". Winnie warmed to her topic.

"Well, let's go check out this place, but I gotta tell you, no way Alex will give back our security deposits. That's \$700 each, up in smoke." Kevin was uneasy, both at the prospect of the immediate renege on the rental agreement each had separately entered, and at the loss of the sense of being settled. Also, he had just met these two. Did he really want to join them on a long term lease after pulling a stunt like this?

"Look, you know we deserve better. The hell with the security deposit. We'll be so much better off. Wait till you see this place." This with a coy smile from Winnie as she swirled the wine in her glass.

In truth, Kevin loved the idea of living with these two beauties. In 1980 this was rare stuff. The sit-com, "Three's Company" was three years into its seven year run, and here Kevin was living it, and unlike John Ritter's character, Jack Tripper, he did not even have to pretend he was gay.

So while the renege was vexing, rubbing against his sense of integrity, he was really a push-over and readily agreed to move on up to the sparkling good life with his new best friends Winnie and Jessica.

In truth, the garden condominium flat overlooking a lushly landscaped pool proved to be gorgeous and irresistible, and now they lived in style. Kevin would come home from work at GE Capital and loosen his tie as Christopher Cross's crooning wafted over hardwood floors along with the scent of some delicious appetizer that Winnie had prepared, and a glass of white wine was thrust into his hand. The three would sit out on their balcony overlooking the pool, and thus the evening began. In grateful reflection Kevin noted this was a very long way from Erie, Pennsylvania.

A single male in Fairfield County, Connecticut, gainfully employed, mid-twenties, with strong financial prospects and no obvious character flaws was a rare and valuable thing in that time. Jessica and Winnie would amuse themselves by inviting girl friends for drinks or dinner so that Kevin might meet them and further expand his circle of new friends.

But Kevin met Trudy at work. She was unlike anyone he had met before. Perfect porcelain skin, baby-bow mouth, small and pretty features. Big blond hair in the Fara Fawcett mode, popular at the time. Stylish, designer everything, she was quite at home in spike heels and tailored suits. Her cosmetics case had heft and substance. And for some reason she was interested in Kevin. Trudy demanded to be treated like a lady in the high formal way and would wait while he came around the car to open her door for her, yet complained of any gender inequity she found limiting. She struck Kevin as extremely cosmopolitan, and if he was with her, maybe that made him a cosmopolitan man.

They met in GE Capital's in-house cafe, and suddenly were dating. Having recently fallen off the turnip truck from Erie and hungry for the shiny big city scene, Kevin was vulnerable to her charms, eager to learn her rules of refined behavior. Her strategy was to move quickly to the brink of intimacy, set the hook, and then hold Kevin at arm's length and expertly play him like a sport fish. Satisfied with her total control, she began to tell Kevin how it was going to be.

Trudy was born into money, grew up with money, and planned on working at GE Capital just long enough to catch a man with strong earnings prospects. She shared with Kevin her dream: summers with the children at the country club pool, with the monthly tab for their comforts taped to the inside of his locker. He would come upon it after a round of golf with fellow senior executives and chuckle at her charming excesses. How Kevin could hear this and not run screaming from her mystified him in later years.

One Sunday Trudy was keen to rent a tandem and tour along the Darien Gold Coast for a few miles past the fabulous homes looking out upon the Long Island Sound. They made a pretty couple and Kevin supposed she wanted him to see what they should be aspiring too. Their ride took them right past Franz's place, with Jessica quite possibly there at the time, though Kevin

made no remark as Trudy was not at all keen on Kevin's living with two women, and so anything connected to Winnie or Jessica was best left alone.

The tandem was old and heavy and as Kevin worked hard to pedal up the occasional short hill he found that Trudy was not contributing to the effort at all. Later he would remember concluding to himself that he would never agree to another tandem ride with her. The obvious metaphor for the entire relationship went unnoticed at the time.

They planned a weekend visit with Kevin's parents in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Trudy was insistent that they take a high end hotel room while Kevin had expected they would simply use the guest room in his parents tidy little Cape Cod style home where they were fully welcome, making for a better visit and saving a lot of money in the bargain. Trudy wanted the hotel room so her make-up and hair could be perfect at all times in his parent's presence. This was theatre for her, not an opportunity to sincerely know and be known by Kevin's parents.

Kevin's parents had always been kind, virtuous and unpretentious and lived simply and frugally. They had absolutely no frame of reference for understanding Trudy. Nor did Kevin, in retrospect. He stuck to his guns and there was no hotel room, they stayed in his parents home, Trudy was boiling mad, and Kevin's parents were equal parts bewildered by Trudy and concerned for him. Kevin was nearly vibrating with tension at times. The drive back up to Connecticut Sunday afternoon was chilly and quiet. It was over.

And Kevin felt great about it. Whatever spell she had cast upon him was broken, he could see clearly, and counted himself very lucky to have received this education with no real harm done. Kevin's mother in particular was ecstatic to receive the news.

And so were Jessica and Winnie. They too had been watching this spectacle with growing horror and were thrilled to learn their Kevin had broken free of a bondage that would have crushed the life out of him. They immediately threw a big welcome-back-to-sanity party featuring a fine meal and more girl friends trotted by for his consideration. Kevin was grateful for the opportunity to browse the eligible women from the comfort of his living room, but there was a problem. Jessica was again in front of him: so real, so deeply attractive in her straightforward authenticity, so unavailable. He ached for her but it was not to be. She was kinda-sorta engaged, right?

A few weeks later Kevin was in the half-bath across the hall from his bedroom scrubbing his teeth with the door left open. A hand snaked in and gave a playful squeeze on his bottom, and was gone, clearly intended to provoke a reaction. Kevin's eyes went wide. A drive-by shooting, and that was Jessica! In the mirror he had seen her strolling down the hall just before.

In the next few moments awareness grew. Maybe his hopeless and bottled-up infatuation was not completely one-way. Maybe he had been blind to signals of greater welcome or

unconsciously framed them as pure friendship. Maybe this fantasy was becoming real. Surely the question was now squarely in front of him. What to do?

Kevin was an official graduate of GE's Financial Management Program, a two-year grind of rotating through six-month assignments (to rapidly provide a broad base of experience in financial accounting) and challenging classwork (to provide the GE equivalent of an MBA and cull hopefuls who wilted under the intense pressure of exams that led to dismissal if failed). Graduation tagged one as a young elite, worthy of rapid progression in a GE career. Kevin had survived this pressure-cooker and then transferred to Connecticut so rapidly that he had moved before the official graduation party, an opulent affair. He was offered the opportunity to attend the same sort of graduation dinner, but with the Connecticut-based program survivors, to be held at the Patterson Club, a well-heeled country club in Fairfield, Connecticut, very near GE's global headquarters. Kevin had been weighing whether or not to bother attending, since he would not know a soul there.

Inspiration, in the form of a drive-by bottom squeezing, had struck. Less than a day after this revelation, which had passed without any comment from either Jessica or Kevin, he took his chance.

"Jessica, how would you like to play Corporate Wife for an evening?"

He explained that in two day's time there would be a very fancy, very dressy corporate dinner to attend, and he needed a date. There would be a few brief speeches to endure, but otherwise it was a glittery evening of fine food and drink. Neither of Jessica or Kevin were making a lot of money, so such a chance was not to be missed.

Jessica accepted with no hesitation. Kevin was a little surprised and a lot thrilled. Really thrilled. He had no idea where this might lead, but the thought of being out with Jessica, of even pretending to be a couple, had him deeply happy. They would put on their best finery and try it out in a country club dining room.

A thing that is known, that is certain, will become normalized, common. This time with Jessica was the polar opposite. Kevin had no idea what might follow. No reason to believe that this one night together as a couple would ever be repeated. No reason to doubt that at the evening's conclusion Jessica would reassert her kinda-sorta engagement with Franz.

As the evening began Kevin had no sense of pacing, no say or control over what happened next. No clear sense of what was in bounds, what was not. He was just happy to be with her in that moment, playing at being a couple. And so he was fully present and accepted each moment as a special gift, to be cradled with significance in his hands, regarded in silence for a beat, and then lovingly opened.

The country club dining room was splendid and the evening was hosted by a senior leader and his wife. After cocktails all were seated for dinner. This was 1980, and the dozen or so local graduates were men, and all of the women their wives. The host stood to speak. He commended the graduates on their important achievement and made much of what their futures with GE now held. He welcomed their wives and spoke of the sacrifices they made as their husbands worked long hours and studied into the night to secure their family's success. Jessica found Kevin's thigh under the table at this point in the speech and gave a squeeze. She now better understood what they were playing at and how she was cast for the evening's performance, and was enjoying herself all the more.

The speaker's wife was seated next to Jessica. Her antennae were waving about and she could sense the energy of a young love between Jessica and Kevin. To Jessica: "So, my dear, how long have you and Kevin been married?"

"Oh, we're not married. This is our first date", Jessica chimed back, a note of mischief in her voice as her hand slid a bit further up Kevin's thigh. He managed a neutral expression.

The speaker's wife frowned in distaste that so weighty an evening be invaded by an uninvested woman. A woman who was a little too attractive, having a little too much fun, and lacking the stamp of GE wife, fully committed to her man's run for wealth and power, prepared to sacrifice much in the near term, hoping against hope to one day live grandly and preside over many such evenings.

Had Kevin been in direct working contact with the senior leader now speaking, the disapproval of his wife would be dangerous ground. He could make or break Kevin's career, and if his wife was sharpening her blade for this most unserious Kevin, who had the questionable judgement and temerity to bring a first date to so important an occasion, there would be trouble. But Kevin truly was out of place, the odd interloper, working three towns over and in a completely different part of GE. This incident would drop from her thoughts soon enough and Kevin's path would never cross her husband's again. No harm done. Probably.

On arriving home late into a Thursday night the pretend-couple found their neighbor's windows darkened and Winnie not in the shared condo flat. She might be out for hours yet, given her recent pattern. Jessica poured two glasses of white wine, gave Kevin a peck on the cheek and suggested a midnight swim, and they separated into their rooms to change.

They made their way back down from the second floor flat, Kevin in trunks with a towel draped over his shoulders, Jessica in her robe, each toting their stemware. The pool was dark, well into quiet hours, unlit but for a bright moon. There were no lamps on anywhere and all was still. Private enough.

In her natural and direct way, without a word Jessica let her robe slide off her shoulders and stood revealed. She was a study of light and shadow, her beauty beyond Kevin's imaginings.

This was magical and he was transfixed. The evening had brought yet another lovely and unexpected gift.

A few strides and she had slipped into the pool. She was wise to be quiet, not wishing to call a sleepless neighbor to a window, and Kevin slid out of his trunks and did the same. They embraced, warming the water between them. Never had he known the rapture of such perfection. Then she gently leaned away to lay back and float upon the water in a gesture of openness and trust. He wondered at how her body needed just the lightest touch to find its balance upon his hand.

After a time the water cooled them.

In silence they toweled off and padded up to the empty condo flat. More gifts to open.