

## “The Widow-maker”

“TULL Alan is so cute! And smart! He’s in all the accelerated classes. I’m in love with him. Am I sick?” said Peggy, long legs crossed at the knees and ankles, angled toward the door of the pick-up.

“How old is this kid?” asked Cory, to alleviate the boredom of the drive. Their trek “up north” ran through miles of pine families and their relatives, the cones bouncing down into the bed every so often, the only activity besides road construction, and in his mind a sex fantasy, to keep him alert.

“He’s seven now. I’ve been babysitting him since I was thirteen.”

“Yep, Peg, you’re sick,” Cory said.

“I got naked in front of him, bathing him. You should see his little penis, and the look on his face when he gets a boner! He has a body just like yours, only, smaller, and smooth and no big muscles, but the same bones.” After a silence, during which Peggy implored her boyfriend several times with her eyes to speak, she added, “Did you ever babysit?”

Cory groaned under the tension in the new relationship. Being in his mid-twenties, he figured he had about twice the maturity level of his date, who’d just graduated high school. She was the child; he, the adult. His job would be to take care of her. He preferred that to the other way it sometimes goes, wherein the female bosses and nags the male, as though the man needed another mother. Either way, nothing was ever fifty-fifty; tossing a coin evaded the factor of the rim.

“Hello, Mr. Shipping and Receiver Guy?”

“Guys don’t babysit,” he said, matter-of-fact, as if repeating a game stat. He refused to be single, an old man alone, like his dad.

“You’ve never once babysat?”

“Maybe! Okay, sure. Once. This once I had a neighbor kid pawned off on me, you know, for the afternoon... I made a few bucks. Richie, the kid’s name. Fat Republican, already a chunk and a politician at nine. Sat there stuffing his face in front of the TV — wouldn’t talk to me about girls or school or movies or anything except wanting his right to vote. My mom set us up. I made twenty bucks.”

Peggy began picking at her nails with a nail trimmer. “I suppose teenage boys aren’t allowed to babysit little girls, or little boys, anymore, either. That immaturity... thing..., in you males.”

“Tha's right! I’d be all rapin’ and molestin,’ tearin’ up that boy butt, doin’ him all to pieces, tha’s right.”

Startled, she gaped at her boyfriend. “Oh, you’re making fun!”

“Peggy. If I don’t make fun, how will we ever have any?”

“Are you bored?”

“Why would you say *that*?”

“Oh! This is gruesome, I know; did I tell you about my great-aunt, who was killed? I doubt if I did, it’s very personal. She was almost twice as old as Tull Alan is now, and she was *reely* blooming, you know, sexually active and all that... I’ve seen her Super 8 film debut! Politically active too, into stopping Roe v. Wade, and explaining Watergate. Cory, she had groovy hair, grown out to her knees! A psychotic *stranger* at the mall broke her charm bracelet off her wrist then pushed her down the escalator stairs and (sob) you can guess what happened.”

“That groovy hair got caught up in the machine?”

“Gruesome, I told you. A heinous mystery for my small family, since the stranger walked off, in all the bloody commotion — we all wonder who he was.”

Cory thought a moment. “I’m sorry (you told me). It is a gruesome story. Sad, too. I wonder if, do you think maybe the stranger who shoved your great-aunt was a government death agent?”

“Government death agent!” shrieked Peggy. “Why would the government want her charm bracelet?”

“Maybe the government, or the people above the government, wanted to stop her before she started making politics her life.”

“That crime was too heinous! Nope, it was one of those random pedophiles.”

“Huh? A random what? Peggy darling, ‘pedophile’ means ‘a lover of children’. Your theory is nonsense.”

“Do you want children, Cory? I can go off the pill... Let’s get married, and make babies! Make all the evil go away!”

They rode in silence awhile. Once Peggy leaned over to kiss him, once she fell asleep against the window, deep breathing fogging the glass near her gaping mouth. She was best drunk, he decided. Sober she talked too much. Alert but quiet, and sexy, and flirty and compliant, that was Peggy, drunk. And he figured he’d reached the zenith of his cash flow at the warehouse, not counting those ridiculous coin-raises each year in October; at that rate, he could afford a good life only if his partner earned more than he did, which, in the case of this one, who babysat neighbor kids for her job, was unlikely. He’d hit a glass ceiling in his career, and though he could see scads of dollars bunched on the other side of the glass, he was sure he didn’t know how to get up in there. The idea of marriage, a family, was bearing on him, a weight to be wrestled out of the way, only to have it return again every few months. As a navigator, Peggy was at least able to read a map.

The last few miles were tricky, on dirt roads, way out, in the boonies. Despite the summer warmth Cory felt a chill there among the uncivilized country, and rolled up his window. Peggy said “brrrrrrr” and pulled her sleeves down over her fingers, buried them between her black-jeaned thighs.

When Cory turned up the drive he knew right off that his dad had overpaid for the cabin property. The lot was lush, overgrown in the ditch with weeds, saplings. Beyond that the pines and their relatives, spruce and fir, were vying for nutrients in the earth. As for the cabin: its frame was plywood and chipboard siding, weathered gray. The bowed walls were flanked by half-dead evergreens; green-grey moss was thick on the tarpaper roof. Cory vacillated between rage and disgust. He’d guessed the fuzzy image, in the link online, to be a doctored photo! The cabin looked much more decrepit in person.

“No way. No way, Peg.”

“No way I’m sleeping in the truckbed again,” Peggy whined. “I have a crick in my neck that won’t quit.”

“I hope there’s a clause,” said Cory, “to upend this real estate deal.”

He shut off the engine and got out of the truck, walked round the scratched and dented front fender to grasp the hand of his pretty, leggy, Peggy. On the pebble drive she sank and wobbled on her heeled boots, threw a sneer at the cacophony of dying and desiccated pine, fir, spruce. Some of their needles were orange.

“They’re ‘widow-makers’,” he told her, then let go of her and cupped his hands on his mouth. “Timber!”

Peggy wondered, sarcastic, “If a widow-maker fell, and squashed somebody, and nobody else was around to hear, would it make a sound?”

“That was making fun!”

“Is that a squirrels’ nest, way up in the branches?”

Cory put his arm beneath Peggy’s loose sweater, held her small waist. Together they steadied a piece of chipboard on the deck that slipped loose beneath their feet. Then Peggy giggled until gusts of smoke from the flames in the fire-pit choked her into coughing. Cory stood tall. They crossed the threshold.

Sight of his aging, crusting, balding dad, standing admiringly, in stoic appreciation, pontificating or pondering his property in the dilapidated cottage, helped Cory lose his cool in a hurry.

“Pathetic,” he scolded.

“Well, hello to you, too. Putting on some bulk, eh?” He turned his attentions to Peggy.

“You must be the new girlfriend.”

Peggy blushed, said, “I see where Cory got his good looks.”

“Really?” he said, turning to his son, “I think I like this one.”

Reeling at the absurdity of the scene, Cory puffed up his chest for the fight. “Dad, you threw my inheritance into this... shanty-shack?”

“Your inheritance?” was his dad’s reply.

He flicked a switch on the lone interior wall and a florescent light buzzed on behind a translucent plastic panel, yellowed and spotted, with what was that, mildew or...

A pitter-pattering from the center of the ceiling and out to the darker corners sounded almost like rainfall.

“Rodent piss?” spat Cory, pointing accusatorily at the grid of mildewed panels in the false ceiling.

“Turds too,” the father replied, shrugging. “There’s a family up there, squirrels I like to think. Baby squirrels.”

“Dad, you bought an illusion! The, the rustic-looking photo, the... what, ah, the ‘indoor plumbing?’” fumed Cory. He let his cool eyes play over the bare studded walls, the grimy vinyl flooring, other bleak attempts at modernity. “A spigot and drain in the kitchen, a sweaty toilet in a closet? Dad! That sentimentality, your old memories, can’t be bought.”

Cory’s dad kept up a smirk. He found a chair and sat, before long insisting, “I got this cottage for a real steal. The property it sits on is appreciating like mad, and what does anyone care about a false ceiling, Cory? The place has a solid roof and joists, a sturdy foundation. We’re getting a highway paved right to the front door... Wanna move in?”

“Here? Are you retarded?”

“Your cousin Ace found his niche in this region. Opened a vegan restaurant right nearby, with the young son of a resort owner.”

“*Ace(’)s high!* did that? College-educated faggot.”

As Peggy spritzed at the mustiness, with perfume, Cory sneezed. He would’ve told her to quit stinking up the stinking place, except... her belly was distending slowly over her low-riding jeans.

“You all right, Peg?”

She nodded, jiggling a belly that had been as trim as her wide, flat ass just moments ago; she was preg-O? when did that happen? (put into context, the huge platter dinner she ordered in the roadside diner on the drive up made some scary sense...) the idea of her giving him his offspring put him in a panic. She better be joking!

Peggy dug through grocery bags, tore open the packet of wooden shish-kabob spears, found the grocery store knife and plastic cutting board, spreading the color of the raw ingredients on the board, the filthy vinyl counter. Her stomach swelled out from under her shirt, the pale flesh around her navel taut as a balloon as she prepared the kabobs. Stunned, Cory could think of no way to excuse, or escape, the morphing of his girlfriend.

“Loving the new old homestead yet?” asked his dad.

“We need to take apart that ceiling,” the son persisted, believing the pregnancy to be a hallucination, a trick. “Getting rid of my ceiling evicts your freeloaders, don’t you see that much, Dad? Tear down that, we’re both ahead in this game.”

“They were here first,” the father retorted, grabbing corroded tongs from the coathook rack. He stepped through the peeling gray of the cottage door to tend the fire-pit. “Besides, I haven’t signed off on the counter-offer yet. This weekend is a dry run.”

That night, twisting and rolling in a mummy bag in the loft beneath the false ceiling, on a musty perfumed mattress in the condemnable cottage, next to his heavy-breathing beer-bellied date sweating in her mummy bag, he dreamed. Included in the patterns, symbols and symbolism, and acting out of interior traumas past and future, he dreamed up the next years of his life. A rather smooth ride, the span of him, in retrospect. Easy-going, and simple, is how the dream resounds...

At daybreak: a sunbeam glint shone on the wedding band on the somehow hairier and thicker ring finger on Cory’s left hand. He rolled from under the flannel sheets and stepped into his jeans, then his boots before pulling on a sweater slung over the railing of the loft. Blinking in surprise, he saw the vinyl floor replaced with hardwood, laid with wool rugs. Near a broken-in couch and rocking chair was a black iron pot-bellied stove. Above all this stood a new knotty-pine ceiling, nailed right to the roofbeams. As Cory descended, the stair treads creaked beneath his weight, and then they became solid and silent. The pine walls were scuffed and bare, set with old then new windows. While descending, he could detect a magical sanding and shellacking of the walls, see a covering over of them by antique frames with heavy oil landscape paintings and old photos of his family, and fishing rods and reels crossed above a motley school of taxidermy sunny, walleye and trout... shellacked, at work and at play. Days lapsed into weeks and months then years. In his mind he could access specific dates, incidents, rites. Yet too for the life of him Cory questioned whether he was among the living. Was he asleep, dreaming? What was real? Was he refurbishing the cottage, with his dad? Was his dad rich anyway, having made some brilliant investments in computers and data info services? What did he do for a job anymore, was he still in shipping and receiving? Was he married, to Peg? When had he put on all this extra muscle? He racked his brain til it bled — all that thinking; he had to remember to forget, he had to try and just live... He could do the math, he could hear the music. Yet was he playing? Was he being played? Life added up for him only in small sums.

Beneath a rack of vintage copper-bottomed pans, his very pregnant wife was frying flapjacks over a cast-iron griddle on the range. She fed him, hair long and brunette and tied loosely, now short and blond, now medium-length and ashy. Her face puffed up and drew gaunt several times while he ate the stew, the fish, the eggs, the flapjacks again. He felt his beard grow thick and bushy, stroked at it, then looked in a mirror, in the bathroom that was no longer a closet, but an actual room with a shower and vanity, a linen closet, towel racks — he was as freshly shaven as on prom night, the hint of jewels now. His dad grinned, patted him on the back, a joy in his lucid old eyes not seen since Cory was little. They each had a bedroom there; the loft was now for the many guests who sped through the cabin like ghosts.

Offspring? He had them! A pair of infants squalled from a playpen beneath the loft stairs. An addition on the shack was drawn up and got built: two bedrooms, another

bath, a shed with indoor and outdoor access. Quickly Peggy lost interest in the boys; she gave them over to their dad for rearing; they enervated her, she said, talking now as though she'd taken some college. She preferred her new baby, a girl. Cory's boys, dark-featured, hyperactive twins age four, or now six, with movie star smiles and moves to match, feigned cops and robbers, shooting each other with squirtguns. Could the man grasp any of this long enough to enjoy himself? As their dad, he had to tell them to get serious and start thinking about earning a living; they were, after all, turning eight, nope, ten. The third child, a blond, reminded Cory of the photo of his mom at that age, aging, older already. At age five she insisted they start the tradition of each of them planting a tree at summer equinox: fir, spruce, pine, maple, oak, birch. Sitting in her granddad's lap on the rocker, amidst the din from the boys' play, she struggled to speak phrases perfectly from a picture book about saving the planet.

In the surrounding acres Cory took the twins camping overnight to learn about their guns, how to clean and polish they already knew from their day treks out and winter nights snug by the stove but the boys were men now, they were old enough, at twelve, to learn how to shoot. They never killed anything. Cory and the boys honored and respected wildlife too much to do it much harm. Even when they fished they threw the littlest ones and the big ones back. College or trade school stood a handful of years away... The boys' friends, a few new ones each month, drifted in and out of the cabin, each one growing some since the last time he visited. Never of a mind to take these friends hunting, Cory nonetheless housed them for a night or two and he or his wife made them meals and entertained them with stories and music. One boy, obese and anti-sports, stuck on hydrogen-fueled vehicles, informed them all that he'd run away from home, where his dad coached all his enemies on the ball team; a trucker stopped on the new highway out the front door of the cabin picked up the fat boy and the two of them disappeared despite national media coverage about the missing youth. Cory felt responsible and secretly thrilled at the idea of him creating a life of his own. But mostly it was quiet round the cabin, with only him and the wife and their offspring.

Once he explained to them how snow hardly ever fell this early in the year, here, "up north". When he had to tell them their granddad died last night, they returned solemn, teen gazes. Peggy was slim and brunette again, an archetypical mom, telling their sister. The sniffling preteen feigned a smile and wandered outdoors; despite warnings to steer clear of widow-makers, she approached a scaly, black deadhead spruce to ask it if it felt anything, to knock on its trunk. Cory ran to shield his daughter with his body as the spruce shook in the earth; the caught maple limb knocked loose fell and narrowly missed him, so he roped off the dying grove and forbade anyone from entering. The groves continued to dance and die, one after another, always one patch near their home sloughed off and needing nixing. His primary reasons for declining to fell the trees: his daughter had an aversion to the snarl of the chainsaw, and whenever he would lift an ax or a handsaw his sons would notice a nest of birds, or squirrels, and get panicky over babies in the boughs.

As for work, Cory supposed he did toil, although the hours of labor passed quick as anything. He chose construction as his occupation, getting a quickie certification and

then working independently, erecting and perfecting homes in the region. Plenty of structures benefited from his meticulous mechanically-inclined eye, and his savings also benefitted. The last job he took, when his boys were all set to enter college for their science degrees, would provide for early retirement. See, the nearby resident bachelor named Gage wanted an escalator put in, said he had a fascination with the electric staircases for over 40 years... When the encased charm bracelet and other antique kiddie-items displayed oddly about the cabin raised a red flag in Cory he failed to recall exactly why; and, although Gage told him the power was off at the source, when Cory tipped a screwdriver into the escalator a heinous jolt—.