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# SONG OF SATAN

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## **Song of Satan**

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**(1)**

“Ouch”- said Sarah. Then in a very caring way she ran both of her palms over her protruding stomach. She felt good. Her touch soothed the baby inside her. Very gingerly, Sarah continued her mid afternoon walk around her grassy backyard. Beyond the grass lay the woods.

It was a sunny afternoon in late October. Outside, the breeze was cool. The leaves on oaks and maples and poplars had turned yellow, orange and deeply red. They brightened the world. A robin was staring at her from above a tree and a squirrel on the ground was gathering nuts for the impending wintery days.

Sarah was eight months pregnant. She had taken maternity leave from her job as an airline attendant. As an expectant mother she was anxious. After staying home for the last few days she felt she had turned into a lazy woman – very slow and sleepy.

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"Well, a woman about to deliver a baby has to be lazy"  
– she consoled herself.

Sarah's cell phone rang. It was the school bus driver. "Mary and Dan are coming home" – said the voice on the other end. The bus driver was a grandmotherly woman in her late sixties. She knew Sarah worked for an airline and the kids go straight to their baby sitter. Today they wanted to go home. She wanted to be sure that someone was home.

"I am home, Mrs. Dugal" – said Sarah.

The school bus stopped by the curb and one by one the kids came out – as if there was nobody in the world and the wide world belonged to them and just to them only. Finally, Dan and Mary got off the bus. The sight of them made Sarah's heart jump. Upon seeing her from a distance, Dan and Mary came running toward her. They usually do not see their mother waiting at the school bus. She works.

For Dan and Mary the presence of Sarah was an unusual treat. Everyday Heather, their babysitter, greeted them at the school bus. The school bus passes through her street and stops in front of her house. They would rather see their mom than Heather.

Before she could ask them "How was school?" Dan blurted out "How come, you are home, mom?" "I have taken leave from work. From now on, I will be home when you come from school" – she explained. "Good," said Mary, and tried to hug her from behind. She was little. Her two arms spread around the back of her

mother's legs. Sarah felt like picking her up. But Mary was too heavy for her now. Besides, she could not bend. She ran her hand over Mary's head. Little Mary buried her head in her mother's skirt. Sarah could feel Mary's wet cheek. "You are cold, Mary. What happened?"

"Nothing,"-she said

Together, they walked toward the door. Dan by then had thrown his book bag on the floor and had gone to his room to check on the cat; his cat. Both he and the cat occupied the room and the bed. The cat always took its nap on the window well facing the sun. They loved each other. So Dan had gone to check on his pet cat.

"Dan, how about some Twinkies?"

On hearing the word "Twinkie", Dan came running from upstairs. He loved sweets. Sarah was happy to give him his favorite snack.

"How about you, Mary?"

She just nodded.

Sarah gave Mary only half of a Twinkie. At home, both the kids had plenty of things to do besides their video game, the cat and the television. All of this kept them busy. It so happens that unless John, their father and her husband reminded them, the kids always forgot to do their homework.

Sarah gave her children snacks. Like any other child in the neighborhood Dan and Mary ate their snacks, played

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with their toys and pet. They filled their afternoon with activities. This was quite a contrast from the boredom they showed and felt at school.

Exhausted from walking, Sarah sat down at her kitchen table. A few minutes later, she laid her head on it and fell asleep. A kick inside her belly again woke her and she ran her palms over it. "Don't worry. You are going to see everybody very soon" – she talked to the unborn. "To whom are you talking mommy?" – asked Mary.

"I am talking to your brother. He is ready to pop out"

By now Dan and Mary had been told that they are going to have a new brother. Mary at this point came down and started feeling her mother's big belly and burst out laughing. "It is big," she said.

"You were big too," said Sarah. "What is your brother doing in his room?" -She inquired.

"He is playing with his cat"

"Call him. We will go for a short walk"

"Again," Asked Mary

"Again," Replied Sarah.

Mary ran upstairs to deliver her mother's message but yelled at the middle of the stairs "Mommy is calling you," she yelled again.

Dan ran down and overtook Mary to reach Sarah. In a moment all three of them went for a walk outside. For

Sarah this was one of the blessed moments. The children clung to her on both sides. Sarah was slower than her children and they held on to both of her hands. The three of them seemed to enjoy their walk around the yard.

On the far corner of the yard a ground hog raised its head; then came a small one. As if both of them were inspecting their human intruders. "Look Mommy, there is a ground hog," exclaimed Mary.

"That is a baby and her mom" – Dan chimed in like an expert.

"Yes, a mommy and a baby" – Sarah reassured both of them.

Sarah knew how much exhaustion she could take. So she told her children "Let's go in. It's getting cold". They went inside.

(2)

Sarah loved cooking. When John came home, she had dinner ready. Given the hectic life of an airline attendant she was frequently away from home at dinner time and missed the fun of preparing food for her family. Recently, she had gotten a ground job and did not fly as much as she used to. But she worked late sometimes.

"How was your day?" – she asked John while kissing him.

Instead of answering her he wanted to know about her. "How are you feeling?"

"I am okay. The baby is kicking. I think he is ready to come out."

"Well, his room is ready" – said John jokingly.

In spite of their pleasant exchange of words and warm feelings for each other there remained a serious disagreement between them which hung over their

lives and between them. John did not mind if they had ten or twelve children together. He came from a large family and saw nothing wrong with having as many children as God gave them. But Sarah did not want to be pregnant after this one. "The three are enough," she said bluntly. They had discussed and argued over the issue many times before. But there was no agreement. Each one stubbornly held on to their views.

At the present stage of her pregnancy John did not want to upset Sarah. Their difference of views hung like a black cloud between them.

As husband and wife John and Sarah felt love and affection for each other. They enjoyed each other's company and were genuinely crazy about their children Dan and Mary. Because of all those good things, their difference of opinion did not matter. At least Sarah thought so.

The situation was different for John. He believed that producing children was God's demand on man. For him, a woman's fulfillment was bearing her husband's offspring. There are things like God and country that he believed strongly. Having as many children was a belief he held very dear to his heart. Sarah's unwillingness to have any more children bothered him. But he kept his feelings to himself.

John knew that children needed all kind of things from toys to clothes to dental braces. All of those things cost money and he is not a rich man. He owned an electric supply store that sold gadgets like switch plates, wires, nuts, thermostats, smoke detectors and many other

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things. Given the down turn in the housing market, his business was a bit shaky now. He hoped that it would get better soon.

Money was tight. But he was not worried about it. He knew that running a small business was always a struggle and he was a small business man. He was an electrician. If push came to shove he could always go to work for somebody else.

John's financial inadequacy got a helping hand from Sarah's regular employment at the airlines. It gave the family a steady income and health insurance. John did not see anything unusual in their situation. Had he been a salaried person employed by a corporation he would have been getting the same benefits. He felt that they were in the same boat like many of their friends and neighbors where wives made more money than their husbands. At the end of the day they still remained husband and wife. At night, they shared the same bed.

John debated often within himself about his situation. The discussion between him and his inner self made him sure that he was working really hard. He was a good father, a good husband and a decent, upright citizen. Yet, at every stage of his life something or other was holding him back and screwing him up.

In moments of solitude John angrily remembered many of his past experiences. To prove his feelings he felt he had been cheated by others for no good reason at all. He had been prevented from getting a better handle on his future. Whenever he tried to get ahead he felt he was being pushed two steps behind. Sarah's stubbornness

not to get pregnant again was a part of this pattern. With Sarah he wanted to have a large family, a family as large as God would permit. But his wife stood in the way of attaining such bliss. He resented it.

Sarah was overwhelmed with the concern for her unborn baby who so far had no sign of any abnormality. Yet, she prayed for an uncomplicated delivery. In her mind now, all other things could wait. 

"Dinner is ready," announced Sarah. Each of the family members took a seat at the dinner table. Mary and Dan sat between their parents as they always did. John sat at the head.

"How was your day," asked Sarah

"The same old stuff. Customers come. They browse. Ask a lot of questions. Buy as little as possible. Everybody talks about the economy." said John.

"All businesses seem to be hurting," chimed in Sarah.

"Electrical supply seems to be the hardest hit"

"Why is that?"

"The real estate market is down. Employment is down. People are losing jobs right and left. No one wants to buy anything"

"There is a rumor of lay off in my company."

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"I hope you won't be affected. Would you?" - asked John. There was a note of concern in his voice. "Not right now. But it is hard to say." - Said Sarah.

"Oh, well," John was going to say something more but Sarah interjected, "We just have to watch our spending".

"With a woman like you in the house we are all in good hands" – John blurted out jokingly. Sarah gave him an adoring look.

Mary, while training herself to use her fork as a pro, was about to overturn her plate. Sarah caught the plate in time and said, "You have to be careful." Then she pushed Mary's plate away from the edge of the table.

Dan was quiet as usual. He was concentrating on his food. When they finished dinner it was dusk. The sun had set. Outside it was not quite dark yet. Sarah held on to John's hand and they took a stroll outside. Dan and Mary sometimes stayed behind or ran to the front or held on to their parents' hands. For Sarah, it was a joyful moment. The cool air made her feel good. But it was John's warm hand that made her feel really good.

**(3)**

For weeks Sarah had her bag packed. Her doctor had given her a delivery date. But from her past experience she knew that babies don't come on the dot. Dan was 2 weeks early and Mary was 6 days late.

Finally, her water broke. John rushed her to the hospital. The staff took Sarah to the birthing room right away. They prepared her for the delivery. She was in pain, the usual pain a woman gets while giving birth. The baby seemed to be in the right position and reasonably healthy. The delivery itself was uneventful. Yet, right after she gave birth, Sarah's uncontrollable pain made her momentarily pass out. When she finally came out of it she saw a tiny little human held by a nurse. It was crying its head off. It was Brandon – the little “human thing” – naked, out in the open in the hospital cleaned and held by a caring nurse. “He is beautiful” – Said the nurse.

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Sarah was too weak at this moment either to get up or to hold her baby. She wanted to but could not. She ran her hand on the baby's head and prayed for him silently. She wanted to stare at him forever. She was physically tired and exhausted and was forced to close her eyes and once again was forced to fall asleep.

There were two beds in her hospital room and the other one was not occupied. She was alone in her room and it was peaceful but deadly. The smell of medicine and the comings and goings of nurses, doctors, cleaning personnel irritated her. "It is a hospital. What do you expect?" – She explained to herself.

Between staying awake and falling asleep and between post delivery trauma and anxious moments of anticipation she wanted to see Brandon. She wanted to hold her baby.

The nurse brought the baby from the nursery. "The baby is hungry. You need to feed him," she said. While feeding the baby from her bare breasts Sarah took a good look at this new stranger in her life, a helpless naked thing resting in her arms. Her heart filled with joy and she kissed her newborn. There were flowers on the window. Beyond the glass window she could see the clouds in the sky and sunshine everywhere. "He looks just like his father," Sarah told herself. With high cheek bones, sharp nose and a wide forehead he looked like a miniature toy of John. "Father God, bless my son and keep him safe." In a very motherly fashion Sarah continued to pray for her son.

The hospital kept Sarah for two extra days because she wanted her fallopian tubes tied. The surgery gave her enough pain for a life time. And she was happy to have enough time to be bonded with her new baby while worrying about the two she left at home.

John had been coming to the hospital regularly. On one of his visits John asked "How are you doing?" She was awake. He kissed her on the forehead and she squeezed his hand. "I saw the baby. He looks great." John's enthusiasm for the new baby seemed to be boundless. Mary and Dan saw their baby brother. They touched their mother. She ran her hand over their heads.

Sarah just smiled. In her soft hand she squeezed John's hand harder which meant, "Yes, I know." In a very soft voice, a moment later Sarah told her husband "They will keep me two more days".

"The nurse told me in the hallway".

"How are the kids?" – Enquired Sarah. While thinking about Dan and Mary she felt embarrassed and guilty.

"They are fine. They miss you" – Said John. "Mary is anxious to hold her younger brother." – He added. Sarah burst out laughing.

"How is Amy?" Amy was a friend and neighbor. Amy was three years older than Sarah. Divorced from her second husband two years ago, she and her three children lived in the house she and her first husband owned before he died of a sudden heart attack. Now, she cares for her mother. "The kids are with her. I leave them with her," replied John.

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"What is the plan for dinner?"

"I think they want a pizza". The children giggled.

"A safe bet," thought Sarah. The kids always liked pizza. She felt guilty that she could not be with them at dinner. The nurse brought baby Brandon to his mother. Both John and Sarah looked at him with curiosity and joy. Mary and Dan touched him. "Look how tiny he is," commented John. Sarah smiled in agreement. After a while John had to leave. He could not stay too long. Mary and Dan wanted dinner and he did not want to be late. Besides they were at Amy's quite a bit. Sarah and John kissed goodbye. When the nurse came back to take the baby to the nursery Sarah asked her if she could hold the baby a little longer. The nurse said "Of course."

It was hard for Sarah to believe that this tiny, little and helpless human being came from her. Two days ago he used to be nonexistent. No more a stranger, today his presence in her life is an irrefutable fact. All of a sudden she came face to face with the process that started the whole thing. "A man and a woman came together and they made a baby," she told herself.

In her case, there was more to the story than met the eye. While the baby sucked his mother's nipple, as all babies do, Sarah's mind backpedalled to a time full of agony and ecstasy. Sarah remembered that she was angry with John because he hit her. This was something he had never done in all the years she knew him. After such behavior she was ready to call the police. She was momentarily ready to leave him for good. She did

neither. For hours she just withdrew from him. They had quarreled about money. John had spent money which he could not account for. They were short for their car insurance. They argued and Sarah vented her frustration. "If I were not working, we would all be sleeping on the street," she said. John became violent and hit her.

That evening Sarah fed the kids but did not cook anything for her or John. She did not want to let her children know that anything was wrong. "Besides they were too young to understand feelings," she thought.

Late in the evening while she was watching television John came home with several boxes of Chinese take-out. He placed the containers on the kitchen table and planted himself on the sofa next to Sarah. She shrank away. "I am sorry, honey," said John, without any preamble. She did not respond and stayed focused on the program she was watching. He put his arm around her and in a very guilty voice repeated his contrite "I am really sorry. I apologize for my behavior." Looking straight into her eyes he begged, "Would you please forgive me? I beg you. I am really sorry". There was genuine apology in his tone. Sarah felt it. Having been married to him for so many years and having known him so well Sarah was familiar with every curve and nuance of John's behavior. She realized that he was remorseful. Yet, she could not stop feeling angry.

"You say you are sorry. Who knows? You may do it again tomorrow."

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"Believe me, it will not happen again. I am sorry. I beg you to forgive me"- John repeated his apology. Sarah began to melt. John put his arm around her waist. John kissed her on the mouth. Sarah responded by habit. Between the kisses John asked, "Are you still mad at me?" At this point Sarah did not know what to say or how to respond. She was in love with her husband. Together they had two children and she cared about him. Even if he acted like a bastard, she could not hold her anger against him forever. Sarah just looked at him. Her eyes told him all. He was forgiven. Pleased that they had patched up their quarrel, John lifted her up and held her in a tight embrace. "I will make it up to you tonight," he said. "Let's eat. I brought some Chinese takeout."

"I can smell it," said Sarah. By then the kids had finished their dinner and Sarah had put them to bed. Both of them ate from the container. John said "No silverware. No dishes. It's fun." Sarah smiled.

After dinner, John was extremely sweet. They watched television for a while. He pulled her head toward him and let it rest on his chest. His hand continued to explore her body. There came a point where their mutual desire for each other had to be awarded in a basic, primitive way. It was exciting and Sarah felt it. "Oh boy; it's enough to make me pregnant again," she blurted out. John kissed her on the mouth. Their naked bodies, warm and exhausted, lay next to each other.

The memory of that night's experience brought an instant smile to Sarah's face. But the motherhood prevailed in her. She continued to nurse her new baby.

**(4)**

Two months after delivering her third child Sarah returned to work. She loved her job but she missed being home with her children. The job gave her the opportunity to meet with all kinds of people. And she loved people. She was a "people person". Most of all, her job was a security against unemployment and piled up bills. There was no way she could depend on John's income as he was self-employed.

At times, she thought of taking a real ground job. But her schedules so far had worked out fine. She enters the airport before 8:30am in the morning and by 5 pm she is usually out. Her commuter plane that leaves the airport in the morning returns to its home base a few hours later.

In her striking uniform of an airline attendant Sarah always looked great. Yet, she was always conscious of her weight gain. In the culture of the airlines she being thin was an asset. She needed to be thin. But the

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pregnancies did not help much. She was neither thin nor overweight but more on the thin side.

With an aura of confidence she carried herself well on and off her job. A lot of men, mostly around whom she worked, were attracted to her. She never ignored them but made sure that the interested guys got the message that she was not looking for any one. She was married and was reasonably happy. She talked about her children, her husband and her home. More often than not her women coworkers felt that Sarah had everything; a beautiful family, a loving husband, a good paying job. Some of them were even jealous of her. Sarah's pleasant manner and unpretentiousness made them feel reassured around her.

As husband and wife John and Sarah knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. They knew who likes what. They could always read each other's mind. In a way they belonged to each other. Yet, things do not always stay the same forever. They change. And there does not have to be a reason for it. Sarah's likeability and confidence slowly began to work against her in John's mind.

John owned an electrical supply company. Because it was a small enterprise, his business suffered from permanent ups and downs. He could never be sure about his bottom line. Money builds confidence but he seemed to be permanently uncertain. John had to deal with his bank. The loan guy was always after him. His customers seemed to be a bunch of rogues, complaining all of the time. His business depended on retail sales, customers buying their needs from him.

He hated their arrogance, their unfairness and their duplicity. In a way, he hated his customers as a group. For him the store was just a store. It was a lousy means toward an equally lousy end.

At home Sarah would talk about some of her passengers, the likes of a famous country singer, a millionaire or a big politician. Sarah would give some tidbits about them. She would sound excited. But for John they were intimidating. In his store he saw only local people with very ordinary backgrounds. They were neither rich nor famous. "Most of them are blood suckers and rascals," he thought.

While minding his store John most of the time felt angry. His anger was not directed at any particular object or person. Things in general seemed to be bad for him. And this made him angry. He was selling merchandise but the sales were just enough to keep him afloat. He wanted to make money, real money. But it was not coming his way. The whole idea of owning a store was to sell a product with a margin of profit that helped to pay bills and generate wealth. He was paying his bills alright. The fact that in spite of all the efforts he made, there was no visible progress toward building wealth, bothered him. He hated to be one of those failed or semi-failed little men. He had dreams. He wanted to be rich; to have a big house with a lot of lawn and furnished with a hot tub, a swimming pool, a wraparound porch and a fire place in every room. Now that he had three children, he felt that his family had outgrown its current house. So having a bigger place became a necessity. Toward this end he needed more

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money; more income and more sales. His inability to achieve this goal upset him constantly and it showed. John's continued inability to fulfill the dreams he had generated, angered him, not particularly at anybody, but in general. In his way of thinking everyone was out there to keep him from getting ahead. He developed a profound suspicion toward people's motives and became increasingly unsure of their goodwill. He lived in a world that was competitive, arbitrary and full of evil. He felt as if he had to wade through all of that all the time, just to survive.

Sarah was fully aware of John's frustration. As his wife she too shared his dreams and wanted to be a partner in his hopes. Yet, she was relatively content with what they had. Yes, she wanted more money. Then who wouldn't? Yet, she was not unhappy or upset for not having all the money she wanted. She had a great family, three lovely children and a husband whom she loved. She had a roof over her head and a job that helped pay her bills. Once in a while she may have shown her frustration or anger about things that did not work the way she wanted but she seemed to be basically content with her life, the life of an ordinary working woman.

Her sense of contentment gave her confidence. Sarah's attitude toward life was totally different from John's. For Sarah, life was never rosy or rotten. It had its ups and downs. Like millions of others she just went with the flow of it. If life presented a lemon then she tried to squeeze it and made lemonade out of it.

Sometimes John thought Sarah was too naive and unrealistic. He wanted Sarah to read between the lines of what people say to her. However, she proved more and more of a hopeless case. She just took people's statements as they were at their face value. She believed what they said. She accepted others as friends, acquaintances and neighbors without dwelling too much on their possible motives. At times, she appeared to be "ignorant".

John tried to influence Sarah to look at things the way he did. So he would explain to her all the complexities in motives of different people when they said something to her. But when it came to giving an actual response, she would reply according to the need of the moment. This irritated John to no end. For example, if they were driving and a guy with a "homeless" sign begged for money Sarah would immediately look into her pocket book. The man may or may not be a homeless person. He may be an addict, a con artist. Giving that person a dollar would probably enrich the liquor store. The idea that someone is cheating as a beggar would never pass through Sarah's mind. The beggar's extended hand was enough for her to look into her purse. A few coins did not matter. John would ask Sarah, "Why bless the devil?"

"For you the devil is everywhere." They would laugh. It was the laughter between them that kept their marriage going.

On weekends they took their children to the park. Friday nights they went to dinner at McDonald's because the

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kids loved french-fries. They went to work every day and came home tired and worried like everybody else about the price of groceries and the future of their children. When the mood allowed, they made love. As husband and wife John and Sarah seemed to enjoy their lives with each other. Given the blissfulness of their conjugal life the problems, the worries and the shortcomings did not matter. Both of them loved and adored their children who were precious to them in every possible way.



(5)

In a small place like Glen Ridge, Harriet Heatherspoon's presence was fairly big. She ran a rooming house and owned a few apartments. She was a fortyish woman with a round face and long hair. She exuded an aura of strength and confidence and smiled easily.

Harriet did not have a particular man in her life. But she had no shortage of male friends. Local police chief McDermitt and county commissioner Brown were among her good friends. She could count on the support of friends like that at any time.

Among women, Harriet was known as a man-eater. Because she lived alone and was considered to be wealthy and important. Many of the women who knew her thought she was a prize catch for any man. The wives feared that their men would fall under her spell. They tried their best to sway their men away from where she was present.

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Sandwiched between three small towns Glen Ridge was a community of working class men and women where used car lots, fast food joints and tattoo parlors stood next to banks, gas stations and residential apartments and homes. One of the apartment buildings Harriet owned was right in the middle of the town and she herself occupied one of the apartments. One could not avoid noticing it even if one wanted to.

John's electrical supply shop was in Glen Ridge. Harriet often came there to buy gadgets. It was impossible for a shop keeper not to talk to his customers, if the customer was anything like Harriet Heatherspoon. After meeting her for the first time it did not take him long to know about her. Harriet was talkative and friendly. After a few visits to the store she asked John if he did any repair work on the side.

"I am an electrician. Yes, I do help people out," said John.

"One of my apartments has some problems. I need someone to check it out."

"How about after I close the shop?"

"Fine," said Harriet.

That evening, John stopped by Harriet's apartment and checked out the problem. The glitch was a minor one but needed diagnosis and treatment from an expert hand. Within an hour John fixed the problem. Harriet was happy to have her problem solved. Harriet was a business woman. She did not mind paying him the

going rate. She knew how much the job cost. Both were in business and knew how much materials and labor cost. And that is how they began their friendship.

"Let me know if I can do anything else for you," said John in passing.

"I sure will. You know, I have a couple of extra rooms. For any reason, if you are ever stuck, you can always unroll your sleeping bag here," suggested Harriet.

"Why a sleeping bag? Don't you have a bed there?"

"The bed is only in my room"

"I would rather sleep there," said John in a mischievous way. It broke the ice between them. They became friends.

After that evening, Harriet often came to John's store and they talked. Once in a while, he stopped by her apartment and had a leisurely cup of coffee. If time permitted he did minor repairs and gave her advice on how to do the same. One thing led to another and eventually, not long after their first meeting, they actually became partners in her bed.

Harriet, in her own way had been planning that moment. Something about John struck her very early on. She liked him, not just as a friend but more than that. That is how they ended up in the same bed. She enjoyed her closeness with men in general and John in particular. John appeared to her as someone who needed recognition and wanted to prove his power and worth. By keeping Harriet, a woman of substance

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and value, under the weight of his naked body he felt satisfied to the core. Conquering Harriet was an ego thing for him. For Harriet, going to bed with John was not really a big deal. She had sacrificed her virginity a long time ago. Marrying someone for love or money had never been her cup of tea. She liked her freedom and felt pity for those women who seemed to be overwhelmed with motherhood and house-work. A long time ago, Harriet made a conscious decision. She was going to be no one's wife. Having a baby or raising a family was not for her. She wanted to be free and independent.

"Don't you need a man?" a relative or a friend would ask.

"Why" would be her prompt reply? She felt a kind of pride while answering them this way. Yet, she knew she needed a man, not always but occasionally. In her way of thinking, the world was full of men who needed the company of a nice woman like her. She could not think of herself of being anything other than 'nice'. She could carouse with any one of them because of her physical beauty. She had a host of admirers. Harriet's love affair with John footed the bill well. Their relationship was genuine, purely physical and open ended, without a sense of commitment.

Since John's relationship with Harriet, Sarah's negative comments about things he said or did bothered him. When angry or frustrated he would think of Harriet. At that moment she would look at him as friendly,

sympathizing and reassuring. Sarah on the other hand would look to him as selfish, domineering and useless.

No matter how much he liked Harriet or despised Sarah's attitude during his moments of anger, he could not break away from his family life. The children needed him. He loved them. He could not leave them. Even when John made love to Sarah, he could see Harriet's face. It was not Sarah but Harriet he made love to. Sarah eventually began to notice the change. She felt it in her bones. Sarah suspected, but did not know what, something was wrong. And she hated it. She hated uncertainty in general.

Not long ago, John used to be everything to her. She relied on his strength and his love. She trusted his words. All of a sudden everything seemed to have changed. Sarah failed to trust his words. She did not enjoy making love to him anymore. It became mostly mechanical and perfunctory. His manner irritated her to no end. Her words became snappy and condescending. They showed her true feelings.

John did not take his wife's condescending words lightly. Every time she mouthed off her frustration with him or toward him he became a step closer to terminating their relationship that was supposed to last forever. His passivity, his aloofness and his anger did not sit well with his wife. Both of them knew each other's mood and emotion very well, a result of years of affection. Presently, there seemed to be more and more of a distance between them. Their feelings appeared to be dried and empty. For Sarah, her job became a

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sanctuary. While dealing with customers or writing notes at work, she forgot her tormented life with John. Being busy at work meant she did not have to deal with feelings of hurt and emptiness. She did not have to face momentarily the fact that her marriage was falling apart.

The situation for John was more than painful. His relationship with Sarah was souring. His business was not doing very well. He was not getting where he needed to go. He was angry and frustrated with himself. In order to take revenge on himself he was determined to destroy his marriage, the only thing he was in control of. So he began escaping to Harriet's arms more often. He did not care what Sarah thought or felt about his infidelity.



(6)

Recently, things seemed to be going from bad to worse for Sarah. John and she were constantly bickering about everything. Many a night he was coming home late. If she asked where he was, then he would get angry and become abusive. He seemed unhappy and unpredictable.

On her own part, ever since the birth of her third child Brandon, Sarah did not have any interest in sex. She constantly rejected John's advances. Performing a sex act felt like a chore and frustrating.

She continued to feel that John was not pulling his share. She had a job. Therefore, she could not take off time even if she wanted to. John had much more flexibility than she did. Yet, he would not pick up the baby from the babysitter. The woman was reliable and took very good care of Brandon. But she wanted Brandon to return home no later than 5:30. It was

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expensive for Sarah to make a back up arrangement when John could not pick him up.

Both Mary and Dan needed dental work and their insurance would not cover all the expenses. John's attitude toward the problem upset her. He kept saying 'I don't have the money to pay for the dentist.'

"The kids need the work."

"Why can't you pay for it? You have the job?" He would say.

"My insurance will cover part of it. The rest we have to cough up."

"Business is bad now. I just don't have the money." Then John would narrate a list of things that he has been doing for the welfare of the family. He would repeat how useless she was as a mother and as a wife. In a mood of utter hostility he would say how ugly she was. This hurt Sarah badly.

Day after day Sarah kept feeling as if the ground under her feet was caving in. She had to keep her job. She had to make sure that the kids were not being affected by the constant bickering of their parents. Then she had to struggle to save her marriage also. She found herself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, without John's consistent help her salary alone could not pay for everything such as mortgage, food, medicine, dental work and the babysitter. She often felt like crying. She yearned for the good old days when John's love toward her had no boundary.

She remembered the time when John and she walked in the park holding hands. Their first meeting, the way he used to kiss her, all of this came to her mind in a flash. But all of that seemed to her like a dream. She felt sorry for her lost dream. "Why can't I get it back?" she asked herself, and thought perhaps she could – may be one day.

When angry, John was mean and used hurtful words. But he had not always been like this. When in a good mood, John would repeatedly apologize to Sarah for the bad things he did or said to her. He would try to make up by being extra nice. He would attempt to make love.

The cycle of John's behavior repeated too often and Sarah seemed to be increasingly concerned about his anger. She could not be swayed by his affection anymore. She wished she had a magic wand to change John. But she did not. So, she became increasingly worried for the safety of her children.

John was their father. Yet, his behavior toward them seemed at times very cruel. When angry, John would threaten the children or curse at them. He would become abusive. She badly needed a respite from all of this. Yet, she did not want to end her relationship with John.

Not long ago, they used to have a loving relationship. He was her husband and the father of her children. She genuinely loved him. In order to change his erratic, abusive behavior she was willing to do anything for him. Now she did not know what to do or how to change

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him. She worried all the time and it showed. One day one of her coworkers named Marci asked her, "Sarah, is everything okay?"

"Yes, I am fine," She replied.

"You look worried"

"The baby keeps me awake all night. But I am fine." She managed to speak in a convincing tone.

Marci was a recently divorced woman and a few years older than her. She instinctively felt that Sarah was hiding something. But she did not press and pretended to agree with Sarah. After all, they were coworkers. It was not her place to get into Sarah's personal business. Sarah, on her part, was devoted to her job. So, no matter what happened at home she showed up at work on time and determinedly played her part. The work place gave her a sanctuary. During work hours she tried to concentrate on her work rather than herself. In many ways she was even boisterous and bubbly. She did not want others to know all the details of her feelings or emotions. She tried to look as normal as possible. She knew all of that was a ruse. She was well aware of the human mask she was using to project her exterior. Her internal turmoil was making her weak and sick. She was hurting badly inside. One day she got a call from a worker from the Department of Child Welfare. Mary was seen walking in the neighborhood alone, without an adult around. The Department got a call from a neighbor.

"Where is she?" Sarah was alarmed.

"Her father picked her up eventually. But I would like to come to your house and talk to you and your husband." Then she asked "I know both of you work"- Is there a convenient time that I can come to talk to you?" The lady at the other end was polite but she carried authority in her voice.

"It has to be in the evening. Yes, we both do work, said Sarah. The lady on the other end agreed. ☹️

The worker from the Department of Child Welfare came the next day. She took all of the information. Convinced that Mary was not being neglected and that her wandering around was a fluke, she said that she would close her investigation. For Sarah, it was a relief. She knew of a few mothers whose children were taken away from them. She did not want that ever to happen to her. She did not want to lose any of her children for any reason. Now she realized that she could not trust John for their care anymore. At least to bring them home daily from the babysitter. It bothered her a great deal.

Sarah tried to talk with John. But John could not see there was anything wrong. He cursed the Department of Child Welfare. "Those suckers have nothing to do. So they put their nose into other people's business," he said loudly.

"They could take away our children"

"On my dead body," roared John.

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"If they can prove neglect, they can remove our kids," - Sarah said with concern.

"How are they going to prove anything?" replied John angrily.

"They almost did," replied Sarah

"No. They did not." John continued "You believe in anything anybody says."

"It is not about what I believe. The fact is that child should not have been walking alone. You were supposed to watch her and you did not."

"It is always my fault. No matter how hard I work or how much I work, nothing pleases you. You, ugly whore. You think you can push me all the time just because you have a job. I am leaving. I don't want to see your ugly face." With these choice words John left the house.

That night Sarah gathered Dan, Mary and Brandon and all of them slept in the same room. Sarah was angry and hurt and frustrated with John. At that point she did not care whether he was home or not. All kinds of thoughts passed through her head. She could not sleep and lay awake but the children slept soundly around her. Finally, her eyes closed. She woke up late. Thank God, it was a Saturday. She did not have to worry about going to work.

That night John slept at Harriet's. Her bed to him seemed to be warm and cozy. For him she provided a well deserved escape route. With Sarah, he had to answer about everything. With Harriet, he did not

need to. Harriet was a friend and full of fun. He liked her persona. "It was mutual," he believed. She was easy going. She knew John had a family and was married. Her expectation of him was limited. She did not press for anything and John liked her easygoing way of life.

John of course loved his children. In a way he also loved Sarah. But recently, things had been going badly between them. He was not sure how long he could continue to pretend that there was no problem.



(7)

John did not like to depend on anybody. It was in his blood. In the heat of their argument when Sarah reminded him that she was the one who was making the most money it made him feel as if he was depending on her. He resented it. This was the same woman with whom he fell in love. But her arrogant expression of being in charge slowly began to alienate him. A distance began to grow between them. It smothered their marriage. Like everybody else he knew, John wanted a good family life. Yet, he also wanted his freedom, freedom to do anything without having to answer to a nagging, boring wife.

John's twisted unsure thinking did not help his financial situation. He did not see any point in working hard and earning money anymore. For him, money was always a means to an end. In his case the "end" was his family. Now that he was psyching up to get away from it all, he did not see any good in working hard or making

money. This left Sarah with responsibilities and more headaches. She had to take charge.

When bills piled up and John did not make any attempt to catch up with them, she tried to talk to him. The bills affected her own ability to buy things for the kids let alone herself.

For a few minutes, they argued about money. "How the hell am I going to pay for everything?" asked Sarah.

At this point John became very angry. "Do you think you are paying for everything?" – He grabbed Sarah's neck and violently threw her. The floor was carpeted. Luckily, she did not hit her head. She knew that if she uttered another angry word John would probably kill her. She was unprepared for such a sudden, violent act from him. In her mind, she was preparing for a discussion. She was trying to solve a problem they both faced. Now, the consequence was totally different.

For a few seconds she lay on the floor and this helped her collect her thoughts. She did not realize that she was almost paralyzed with anger. She felt like calling him names, all kinds of nasty names. But she did not want to escalate the situation. He was seething in anger and looked like a wild beast.

Sarah got off the floor and looked straight at John. She had no idea what was going through his head. Now, she was afraid, afraid for her life and afraid for her children. "A wild animal could do anything," she thought. Without uttering a word she went upstairs and closed the door to her room and dialed 911.

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Within minutes a police car came and a woman officer knocked on the door. John was trying to leave home when the police officer pulled into the drive way. Through upstairs windows Sarah could see the arrival of a police officer. She began to feel safe.

With assurance from the officer Sarah came out of her room. The officer wanted to know what happened. Sarah told the story. "He grabbed my neck and threw me on the floor. I am still reeling."

"Do you need to go to the Emergency room?"

"No. I am okay. But I don't want him around me or my children," Sarah cried while pointing to John.

"She has been mouthing off about everything; always a smart ass. A man can only take so much," said John.

"Did you hit her?" asked the police woman.

"No."

"Did you throw her on the floor?"

"Not really."

"Then what happened? Why is she crying? Why did she call us?" demanded the officer. She seemed not to believe a word John said.

"I don't know. Ask her," he said with a smirk.

"I did. She says that you grabbed her around the neck and swung her to the floor."

"Maybe she deserved that," replied John.

"Then you did throw her on the floor," repeated the officer.

Then she called the station. And within minutes, another squad car with two officers arrived. They took John away without hand cuffs because they did not want to scare the children. The woman officer stayed with Sarah for a while to make sure that she and her children were alright. The police kept John in the station for a while. Since this was his first "incident" of domestic violence the police did not bring any charges against John. They gave him a stern warning. He came out with the condition that he would not come home for at least for 24 hours.

John demanded to know why not.

"Both of you need a cooling off period. We are not charging you with anything. Not now. Domestic violence is a serious crime," explained the officer.

John did not feel like going to Harriet's. After staying several hours at the police station his spirit was down. He was angry with himself for bringing such insult on himself. He was angrier with his wife for calling the police than with the incident itself. At this point he needed a drink.

While sitting on a bar stool and drinking his Miller Light he saw all kinds of people coming and going and laughing and giggling. He had no desire to join them.

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Alone and cheerless he, like a silk worm, was wrapped up in his own thoughts.

John did not stay in the bar very long. He did not want to draw attention. He drove to another bar through a narrow lane. Inside it was pretty dark. This time he ordered a Bloody Mary after sitting down on a stool. A woman with green shoes and skimpy skirt came from outside and sat down on a stool not far from him. On another day and in a different mood he would have struck up a conversation with her. Not this evening. He wanted to be left alone. He was upset and angry without specifically knowing about why or what. All of a sudden the place seemed to be too dark and dingy. He did not find it inviting and left. The night had deepened by then. He did not have a particular place which to sleep. The thought of resting at Harriet's place entered into his mind. He drove to her apartment building.

While he was pulling into her driveway, he saw the parked car of police Chief McDermitt. John knew that the police chief and the County commissioner were Harriet's friends. But how close they were, he did not know or did not want to know. Now he saw the proof. In the middle of the night, the police chief, a married man and a father of several kids, enjoying the company of a single woman! "What are they doing?" he asked himself. At this point he did not want to believe his own thoughts. Instead of knocking on Harriet's door John turned away toward a park and ride. He pulled into an empty spot, turned off the engine, pulled his driver's seat back and tried to fall asleep. All of a sudden

a crazy thought came to his mind. He wanted to be in bed with Sarah. But the demand for the cooling off period prevented him from going home. So he called Sarah.

Sarah was home but did not pick up the phone right away. Finally, there was a reluctant "hello" on the other end.

"Hi, honey," John's voice was smooth and inviting. As soon as she heard John's voice she hung up. His voice made her angry and bitter.

John called her again and again and again. Finally Sarah, without any preamble yelled "What do you want?"

"Honey, I am sorry"

"Sorry my foot." She was about to hang up.

"Please, please don't. I am really sorry. It won't happen again. It was a mistake," Implored John.

"You can't come home"

"I know; the cops told me. I still love you." He could hear Sarah's sobbing. He was touched and felt genuinely guilty. He wished today's incident had not happened. "I miss the kids. How are they?"

"You don't miss anything. They are fine; don't worry," said Sarah.

"I love you, babe," John kept repeating. From the other end, the only thing he could hear was Sarah's deep

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breath. With the parting words of "love you" John ended the conversation. That night he slept in his car.



**(8)**

In the morning, John washed his face, combed his hair and ate breakfast at a McDonald's. Then he went to open his store. He was his only employee. Because of the down turn in the economy, customers came to his store in dribs and drabs. So, he had plenty of time on hand to reminisce about his life. He did not like what happened yesterday. He wanted to forget it but could not.

John wanted to talk to Sarah and apologize. He knew she would be at work. He called her there. When the operator from the switch board connected her, he said "I love you babe".

"I know," said Sarah in a flat voice, without responding to his love. She wanted to end the conversation.

"I am horny for you. All the time," John was trying to continue his conversation but Sarah cut him short. "John, I am at work. I am really busy; got to go." John's last words irritated her. Had it been some time ago,

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such words from John would have melted her heart. She would have felt a tingling in her body, all over. Not today. A cross current of feelings toward John from her past and present overwhelmed her immediately. She felt like crying. There were people around her and she could not let them see her emotional meltdown. After putting down the receiver, she went to the ladies room. With running water from the tap she wiped her tears and washed her face. Looking fresh and composed Sarah walked back to her work station and acted like nothing had happened. Her abrupt trip to the ladies room had not gone unnoticed by her coworkers. One of them asked "Is everything okay?" She replied "Oh, yes. Everything is fine." She lied and she knew she lied. Then she tried to be as normal as possible.

At the day's end John returned home. 24 hours had passed. During the day he had called Sarah several times just to be nice to her. Sarah was unresponsive. He could feel that she was still angry with him.

At home, John tried to act as if nothing had happened. He even made some chicken soup from a can. Sarah made some salad. She did not want her children to know that there was anything wrong between their mommy and dad. They sat down to eat. The children ate. They seemed to be unhappy. No matter how much Sarah tried to hide, they knew something was not right.

John tried to cheer them up and played with them. Both Dan and Mary laughed. Little Brandon also joined them. Their collective laughter made the whole family

laugh again. Sarah said she was not feeling hungry. Her salad and soup remained untouched and she left the table soon after the kids were done.

As usual, Sarah helped Dan and Mary with their home work. She helped all three of them bathe and late in the evening put them to bed. Any other day, she would have sent them down stairs to kiss their father good night. But this evening she did not push the kids to do that. She just reminded them "Did you kiss your dad good night?"

From their bed rooms "Good night, dad" – they said in unison. John went upstairs to their room and kissed them good night. Sarah, while sitting on Mary's bed was coaxing her to close her eyes. In a loving way John stared at all three of his children. Together, they made him happy.

"Are you feeling okay? - He asked Sarah softly.

She did not reply.

He touched her hair gently and asked her again "Are you okay?"

"Not really," she replied grudgingly.

John left the room and came downstairs. Sarah's lack of response while he was trying to patch things up offended him deeply. He felt hurt because he wanted to make up and it did not work.

Sarah sat on the edge of Mary's bed for a while. By then she had closed her eyes and was soundly asleep. Sarah

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then went to Dan's room. He was half awake. Sarah caressed his hair and kissed his forehead. Without a word he turned over and in a few magical moments fell asleep. Brandon snuggled up to her and eventually went into deep slumber where only a child can go into. For a while she sat on his bed and tried to fathom the thinking process of her children.

"What is going on in those little minds?" she tried to imagine. All she could see was only her childhood which at this point seemed to her ages ago. Looking at her own child sleeping peacefully in his bed she felt happy. Instinctive maternal love overwhelmed her. At the same time she felt nostalgic for her own lost childhood. The picture of her parents and their row house in Upper Darby, a Philadelphia suburb in Pennsylvania, came to her mind. "Daddy was a big man. He always worked on a broken car. Mommy always baked something. She drove a school bus when she was not baking. Oh, those kids. She always had a horrible story to tell about those kids! But she loved them. Mommy loved everybody. Daddy thought she was too trusting."

"What is wrong with that?" she would ask.

"If a woman trusts too much she can lose her *you know what* at no time". He was not using any profanity but he had no inhibition to tell her what he thought in front of their children. Sarah remembered now that she was the youngest. Her sister Lucy was two years older and her brother Jack three years older than her. Jack seemed to be always in trouble at home with dad. Now he works for the Federal Government. He straightened himself

out pretty well. All of a sudden Sarah felt pride for her brother.

At that time her thoughts momentarily returned to her own condition. She remembered that last evening John had assaulted her and she had called the police. The very thought of the incident made her angry and sad. In order to protect herself physically she was no match for John. She did not want to fight with him. Fighting was a brutal act and she hated it. A sense of despair crept into her mind. She hoped and prayed for John to change his behavior.

While Sarah was absorbed in her own thoughts John was sitting on a sofa in their living room. He too was deep in thought. As he saw it, in a man's world men do lose their temper at their wives. Afterward, they patch up. Life continues as usual. Making a fuss and holding on to an incident forever is not helpful. "This is not how a family stays together." Sarah's behavior disturbed him. As Sarah's husband, he felt, he was entitled to her love.

Night deepened and both Sarah and John remained glued to their own thoughts. Neither of them entered their bed room. John tried to sleep on the sofa wearing the same clothes he had on all day. Sarah tried to sleep in the same room with Brandon and Dan. The children's beds were too small for her to lie down. So she spread a blanket on the carpet and made her bed there.

Tonight, she did not want to sleep with John. She did not want to touch his body or hear him breathe next to her. She was angry and hurt. The surface felt hard. It did

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not matter. She tried to sleep in order to prepare for the next morning.

She closed her eyes and tossed and turned over the blanket on the floor. The intensity of her emotion and thoughts kept her awake into the wee hours.

In the middle of the night baby Brandon woke up and let out a big cry. Sarah picked him up and held him close to her chest for a while. Then she put him back in his bed. Had it been any other day, she would have sung to him. But this night she was in no mood for that, even for her son.

While she was putting Brandon to bed John came up to the room and their eyes happened to meet. "Sarah, please. I want to talk to you," begged John.

"What is there to talk about?"

"Please," implored John. He was getting louder. Before their conversation woke up the children Sarah agreed to go down stairs to talk with her husband. They sat down on the sofa. He put his hand around her waist "I am sorry, baby," he said.

"Well, now you say you are sorry. Tomorrow, it will be the same thing all over again. I am just getting sick of this." Her manner was contemptuous.

"No. It will not happen again. Please..." He was begging.

After so many years of marriage, John knew how to melt Sarah's heart. He put his arms around her and kissed her

"I promise, it will never happen again," said John. "Let's go to bed. It's getting late." He pulled Sarah gently off the sofa.

John's words did not convince Sarah. Yet, tonight when he pulled her up and led her physically to their bed room she followed him without resistance. She followed him because she did not want to wake up the children. She also had a conflicting feeling. Part of her wanted to follow him as countless times she had done over the years. The other part did not want to do anything with him. Yet, out of sheer habit she went into the room, changed her clothes and lay on the bed next to John.

By apologizing over and over John wanted to reclaim his night with Sarah. He ran his hand on her back and snuggled closer to her. But Sarah was too upset to be roused or to respond. In a very mechanical way she just lay on the bed without responding to her husband's physical overture.

John felt angry and frustrated and was ready to give up; but could not. He had Sarah and wanted her badly. Yet, his attempts to rouse her did not work. Finally, he had his fill. They could not make real love. The glue that held their emotions together had dried up somehow.

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Weeks became months. Day after day Sarah woke up in the morning and did her chores. She dropped off baby Brandon who seemed to be growing pretty fast at his babysitters. John saw Dan and Mary off to school. On her way back, Sarah picked up all three of them from the baby sitter. John and Sarah and the children went to the grocery store on Saturdays. Sometimes, the entire family went to McDonald's. Sarah and John went to work and dealt with problems that came there. They lived under the same roof as husband and wife. They had three children between them. And their children were a very important part of their lives. So, as parents, they remained committed to their welfare.

The well being of their three children was the important glue that bonded them together. They were the parents of those children and it was important for them to stay together for their sake. However, between Sarah and John there seemed to be precious little as husband and wife. The spark somehow was no longer there.

John's violent temper and physical assault on Sarah had dropped an iron curtain between them and damaged their relationship. Sarah was in no mood to oblige John with sex. But John continued to have his wish filled, anyway. Sarah could not bring herself to being John's partner in a sexual act. She liked him being around. She felt attachment for him and toward him because he was there. Yet, her sexual feeling toward him seemed to be permanently damaged. The resistance toward a sexual urge became very much a part of her existence. And slowly, she accepted the situation as a reality of her personal life.

Months passed. John and Sarah occupied the same bed at night. It was as if they slept in two different continents without kissing goodnight. Each day brought new challenges and new possibilities for each of them. They just rolled with the flow. Conversations between them became increasingly brief; after a certain period they even felt awkward in each other's presence.

One day, Sarah had a bad head ache in the morning. She called in sick. As usual John saw Dan and Mary off to school. Brandon did not have to go to his babysitter as Sarah was home. Even if he knew Sarah was not feeling good, John did not ask her if she needed anything or if she would like him to do something for her before he left for work. He just left.

Luckily, her head ache was not serious. She was sure that a couple of *Advil* would make her feel better. She lay on bed a while longer and when Brandon woke up, she tended to his needs. Like every mother everywhere

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she felt guilty every day when she left her child in the care of a baby sitter so that she could go to work.

She wanted to spend all her time with Brandon today. He was her latest creation; her "baby." And she loved him the most only because he was her "baby."

Around 11am John showed up in the house. Sarah saw him but was afraid to ask him why he was home that early

"Aren't you going to ask me why I am home so early?" he demanded of Sarah.

"Sure. How come you are so early?"

"Because I am horny." replied John.

Sarah did not pursue the discussion. A sense of repugnance filled her body and she felt like running away from him, from the house, from his presence. Baby Brandon was in the house. So she could not run away. She could not leave. Before she could collect her thoughts to answer him appropriately he asked her again, "Did you hear what I said?"

"What?" – Asked Sarah.

"I am horny. Let's go into the bed room."

Years ago, such a suggestion from her husband would have melted her. But now she seemed to be devoid of any physical attraction toward him. She tried to avoid his suggestion by moving away.

At this point John grabbed her from behind. "Didn't you hear? I said I am horny" John demanded.

Sarah tried to release herself from his grip. But he had held her in a tackling manner. He wanted to have his way by force. "I am not letting you go without fucking you." He said angrily.

"John, Let me go." Sarah kept saying. She thought she was crying at the top of her lungs. Then she was worried about Brandon. "It may scare him." She thought.

At this point John tackled Sarah to the floor. Right in the middle of the living room he jumped on top of her.

"John, I don't want this. I don't want you." Sarah kept protesting.

Her protests made him angry. He slapped her repeatedly. "You don't want me? You don't want me? Why? My fucking is not good enough for you?" He kept mocking her.

Sarah did not have on a bra or panty. Because she was in the house she only wore her gown. It was thin and old. When John pulled it to uncover her body it ripped. "I have been waiting for this moment for a long time," he groaned as he pulled his own pants down while lying over Sarah.

At this point, Sarah could not bear even looking at John's face. "This man is not my husband. He is a monster," she was telling herself. All of a sudden she felt something hard inside her. It was familiar. Yet, the thought of it

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brought excruciating pain upon her body. Pinned to the floor, she burst out crying.

“Why don’t you like it?” He mocked her again.

Her gown torn, her cheeks enduring slaps and her husband raping her in her living room, Sarah felt as if the world was closing in on her. Unable to dislodge John from above her, lacking the physical strength to push him away, preferably to death or to hell, she lay motionless while John continued to enjoy himself without mercy or remorse. He did not show any love or tenderness. For him Sarah, his wife, at this point was an object with whom he wanted to have sex. It was his right and he wanted to exercise that right by force regardless of her feelings. Sarah had insulted him by refusing to cooperate with him time after time. He needed revenge. His aggression toward her at this moment was the expression of that revenge- the cry of his manhood. He wanted this memory to be the signature of his power. After ejaculation, for a brief moment, he lay on top of her. His face touched her cheek. Sarah curled her face and felt as if her entire body was going to explode. She pushed his face away from her skin.

“You hate me. Don’t you?” He asked.

Sarah did not reply. He hit her. In the middle of the room, Sarah lay on the floor, humiliated and exhausted. John gave her a kick with his left foot and zipped his pants as he got up and left.

In the face of John’s violent aggression Sarah felt more than ever scared and humiliated. Lying on the floor, she

did not know, how long she wept. The space between her and the ceiling felt as large as the open sky. Finally, she got up and looked at herself in the mirror. On her cheek, she saw the imprints of John's palm. Her cheeks looked red and swollen. She called the police.

Sarah still wore the same torn gown that John had ripped. She had covered it with another robe when the police arrived. She was disheveled. The same police woman came to her house. She had come before. This time, without any preamble she put her arms around Sarah's shoulder and asked her gently "What happened?"

Sarah broke down. As if a flood gate of emotion broke loose with that simple question from the police woman.

The female officer handed her a tissue and asked her to narrate everything in details.

"Did he force himself on you?"

"Yes."

"Did you say you didn't want to do it?"

"Yes." Sarah replied through her continuous sobs.

"So, he raped you?"

"Yes."

"Son of a bitch could go to jail for this. Do you want to press charges against him?" Sarah weighed her options.

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She did not want to press charges against John and she did not want him to go to jail. She just wanted him to go away from her.

"He hit me. He threatened me," said Sarah.

"What would you like to have done?"

"I don't want him to come near me or my children. I want a kind of restraining order on him."

"That would be no problem."

The officer made a phone call. Sarah changed her clothes. And the officer drove her to a hospital. She took Brandon with her who throughout the entire ordeal was soundly asleep. The medical examination confirmed abuse. Then the officer and Sarah went up to a judge's chamber where Sarah described her problems. She made clear that she was terribly afraid of John and wanted protection from him. The judge listened to her and asked a few questions. Convinced that she needed legal protection from her abusive husband the judge signed an order. Sarah received the copy of an official document restraining John from coming within 100 feet of her. He could see the children in the presence of a third party facilitator.

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John could not go home now. His inability to return home, because of the court order, upset him greatly. He had to find a place of his own. And he did. But it was the supervised visit with his children that the judge ordered that really ticked him off. He blamed it on the system. His current situation reinforced the feeling in him that the world was stacked against him. He cursed at everything and everybody he knew. But that was of no use. He was stuck in the reality that he could not see his children without someone other than their mother being present with him. And he could not come within 100 feet of Sarah.

"Why did she do this? Am I such a bad person?" John asked himself repeatedly. The answer from within him came as an emphatic "no." He felt demeaned and devalued. His sense of anger gave way to outrage. He wanted to take revenge for his humiliation. Right now, there was very little he could do to fulfill his wish. He could not touch her. He could not ask her anything in

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person. All he could do was communicate with her through a court approved intermediary.

Three days after he was served with the judge's order, John called Sarah. It was 11:30 at night.

"Why are you calling me so late at night?" Sarah wanted to know.

"When can I call you? No time seems to be a good time for you" said John.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see the children."

"They are fine."

"I am not so sure. I want to see them."

"Then you have to make an appointment with the court," said Sarah. She was brief and curt.

John knew that he was violating a court order. But he also knew Sarah. He was quite sure that she would not send him to jail and therefore, would not voluntarily tell the court that he called. "You mean I have to ask for permission to see my own children?" asked John angrily.

"That is the way it is, John." – Replied Sarah.

"Why did you do all this?" John wanted to know.

"You acted like a son of a bitch. That is why." - Said Sarah.

Before John could shout and curse at his wife the phone went dead at the other end. He called again and again. Sarah refused to pick up the receiver.

After his unfinished conversation with Sarah John's anger reached a new height. He wanted to barge into his old home and drag Sarah to the floor. He wished to teach her a lesson by twisting her neck. But none of that was possible. He was angry but not without sense. He did not want to risk going to jail on his own.

For quite some time that night John felt restless. He could not sleep because he was angry and upset. He drove aimlessly and found himself staring at his old home from a distance. Inside it was dark. He imagined his children lying in their beds. He imagined Sarah in her pajamas lying alone in "their" bed. The images did not bother him. At this point he could care less what happened to them. What upset him the most was the fact that he had been deliberately alienated from them.

John realized that the Law had been unfair to him. The bad things, even if they happened at all, they happened between family members, between husband and wife. How they solved their problems, it was their business. He damned the judges and the lawyers. He damned the system. He damned his lousy misfortune.

While staring at the house he felt like knocking on the door and getting inside. He had the key to his house. "Oh, she might have changed the lock." John reasoned with himself and changed his mind and did not go in. From that place he drove away in disgust.

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Days passed. John kept on thinking of ways that would give him the upper hand. He continued to feel not only insulted but less than being a man. To him, a man was supposed to be in control of his affairs, his destiny. In his own case, he was not the captain of the family ship. This bothered him more and more. He seemed to be hurting all over for such a deprivation.

On her part, Sarah continued to be scared and worried. She knew how dangerous John could be. She knew that in anger he was capable of killing anybody. Not that he had ever killed anybody; ever. Yet, Sarah knew that John's anger was so intense and so violent at times he could kill someone if he really wanted to. She also knew she had angered him. Given John's level of anger and the situation between the two of them the children were caught in the middle. The kids were Sarah's prime concern. She knew John wouldn't help or cooperate in anything. It would be his way of getting even with her. Without his help she was stuck with all the expenses for a baby sitter, mortgage, medical expenses and food.

A sense of despair overwhelmed her. She did not know what to do or where else to go. Inside her own self, she often prayed and cried.

Both Sarah and John seemed to be victims of their own thoughts and actions. Each kept guessing what the other was capable of doing or could do.

In his moments of anger John saw Sarah taking his children away from the country, somewhere to a distant place. She could ask for a divorce and deprive him of visitation. She could ask for an exorbitant amount of

child support. She could call the police on him for no reasons at all and lock him up for years. At this point, out of a clear blue sky Sarah appeared to him as a villain, a scheming woman who hated him. "How did I marry this woman?" - He asked himself.

John's mind momentarily went back to his life of fourteen years ago. He saw a bright sunny day while he was coming to his apartment from work. At around 3:30 in the afternoon he saw a woman on the road side struggling with her stranded car. He stopped to help her. Apparently the driver of the car had a flat. She was trying to put the spare on and she was having trouble. "Can I help you? What is the problem?" - He asked.

The driver was unsure of what to answer. The road was heavily trafficked. Yet, where she had stopped was an isolated place. She was hesitant.

"I see you are struggling with a flat tire. Do you need help?" John tried to reassure her.

"I am trying to unbolt this flat. But the tire wouldn't move"

"Let me see" - Said John and examined the situation.

First of all the woman had put the jack on the wrong groove. Therefore, she was unable to lift the car. The flat tire was still on the ground and could not be yanked.

"You have your jack in the wrong groove," he explained. "You could have killed yourself. I know someone died when his jack collapsed on him. His chest got pinned against the belly of his car."

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"I am sorry to hear that" Sarah replied.

While talking to Sarah about the dead man John had lowered the car, put the jack in the right place, lifted the car and unscrewed the flat from the stranded car. Then he picked up the spare from Sarah's trunk and bolted it on to the empty wheel. It was just a few minutes work. But for a stalled driver on the road side it would feel like an eternity.

"Thank you so much for your help," said Sarah. She was genuinely thankful.

The late afternoon sun plus the anxiety of getting back into the car had made Sarah sweaty. She had a bandana over her long hair. But her face looked beautiful to John in spite of the beads of sweat.

"How far do you have to travel?"

"I am going to see my parents near Philadelphia. I am late. They would be worried to death by now."

"Do you want to use my phone? Go ahead." He handed his phone. As an electrician he always carried a telephone on his belt.

Sarah made a call to her parents. She was really thankful to John for his generosity. His helpfulness impressed her. At that point she was not looking for somebody. After several break ups, one after the other she was burned out. She had no desire to get involved now or in the future. For her, men were jerks. All of a sudden John appeared before her as God sent.

"By the way, my name is Sarah," she said and gave him her phone number. To her John looked handsome and likeable. She thought she could benefit from knowing him. Once again a desire to get "involved" took root in her mind.

The incident that started as a nuisance was the beginning of their courtship. It continued for two years and ended up in marriage. All of a sudden, all that pleasant feelings of the past seemed disgusting to John. He wanted to wish away his entire past with Sarah. But it would not wash off and stayed with him like a sore thumb, painful and real. The situation between him and Sarah seemed to be unbearable. Now, they had become strangers. The future looked gloomy and hopeless. He braced in his mind, not only an adversarial behavior from his estranged wife but a royal court fight involving custody, child support and visitation. He also feared a lawyer's fee.

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Alone in his apartment, most nights, John seemed to be restless. In his anger, he could not sleep. In order to forget his present condition which was miserable most of the time he started drinking, alone. Drinking made him depressed. He neglected to eat regularly. He lost interest in his business. He lost his appetite. Without a strong motivation for going to work, he, without his knowledge, began drifting away from life's various demands causing him more setbacks. John began to think of himself as a failure.

Weeks passed and months went by. His situation did not change. His relationship with Sarah became increasingly antagonistic. She wanted money for the children, constantly. John's business was in tatters and he was not making any money. Ever since Sarah kicked him out of their house, he had lost his desire to make money. Her insistence for money and his inability to meet her demands always ended in name calling and angry outbursts, mostly on John's part. Because of the

court order, he avoided calling her. It was she who out of desperation tried to reach him by phone.

Finally, one day John found himself before a mediator in the courthouse. It was the summons he did not want to neglect. For the first time in a long time Sarah and John sat face to face.

The mediator controlled the conversation between the parties. There was anger between them but the authority of the mediator had kept both parties reasonably civil. Finally, a \$400 a month child support was slapped on John. He thought it was too much money to give away. But Sarah showed all the expenses she had been making for the kids and all the things they continued to need. She was asking \$1,000 a month. There was haggling between them. John was about to blow his stack. Finally, at the prodding of the arbitrator, he signed a piece of paper. This committed him to paying \$400 a month child support to Sarah.

By then John had been living away from his family for quite some time. He had refused to give Sarah any money for anything. In his way of thinking Sarah was the one who pushed him out. So it was not his job to bail her out.

John loved his children. He did not want them to suffer for what happened between Sarah and him. Yet, he felt that money was one of the ways Sarah wanted to get back at him. She knew that his financial situation was shaky. But she insisted on this high amount as child support. In John's view it was mean of her and he hated it. "She is not the same Sarah I used to know.

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She is a really mean bitch," he told himself. No matter how much he hated Sarah, the reality did not change. He lived in an apartment without his children or wife. He was committed to providing child support. His business was falling apart. He felt more and more like a drowning man. Weeks gave way to months and a year passed since his separation from his family.

One day when he was in a really gloomy mood, someone around 8 am knocked on his door. It was unusual for a stranger to show up at his door. He answered the knock. "Are you John?" asked the man.

"Why? Yes."

"Well, here is a court paper for you." The man handed him a yellow envelop.

Sarah was asking for a divorce and he now held the summons from the court in his hand.

John's anger now reached a new height. "Sarah wants a divorce. My wife wants to screw with somebody else," he screamed inside his apartment. The word "divorce" always brought a bad feeling to him. He had never thought that one day he himself would fall victim to such a tantalizing trauma. Now that he actually had become a part of such a traumatic process he was at a loss about how to react.

John had no money to hire a lawyer. His estranged wife wanted to be his ex-wife. There was no point in contesting such a move. Overwhelmed in his thoughts and miseries John, staring nowhere in particular, sat on

his sofa for quite some time. The morning's air was crisp and cold but the sun was bright. All of a sudden he felt a chill in his bones.

Now, he was angry, very angry. But he was not angry with anything in particular. It was the world. The way life treated him made him angry.

"What did go wrong?"

"Why this, why me," John kept asking himself repeatedly.

There was no reply. He reached out to a half empty bottle next to his bed and started drinking without the help of a glass. He felt relaxed and drunk. Without realizing how much he had consumed or how drunk he was, he dropped to the floor. Nothing spilled as the bottle was empty.

"Thank God, it was empty. Otherwise it would have been a big mess," John reasoned with himself and fell asleep. His head rested on his dining table.

John's staying away gave Sarah a sense of safety. She did not have to face his violent behavior or his abuses anymore. On the other hand, without him she had to do everything for her children. Mary and Dan often asked for their father. They seemed to miss him. They saw him now and then. But everything became awkward as their visits to him had to be supervised.

More often than not John missed his appointments to see his children. This disappointed the kids a great deal.

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The kids get upset and angry. Some days they refuse to go to school. They say they miss her also. She tells them stories and tries to control them and prays that some day they will be strong enough to overcome the absence of their father in their lives. There are many children who grow up in a one parent home. "Well, Mary and Dan will do fine. So would little Brandon" – She consoled herself.

Ever since Brandon's birth Sarah has not given much thought to the need for a man in her life. When John was around, she kind of depended on him for things to be done around the house. Even if she had a secure job and made more money than John did, it was he who always took the lead in managing everything. That also included her emotional needs. The habit still lingered on and at a deeper level she still continued to expect someone to make decisions for her and take care of her. But at the moment, she was all alone with her three children and had to tend to all her affairs. As days went by she became convinced that getting back with John was out of the question. In her mind now, he was not only abusive but irresponsible as well. He seemed not to care too much to see his children and this irritated Sarah to no end. "He could be angry with her. But what did the children do?" She would ask herself quite often. For the heck of it she often tried to remember all the good times she used to have with John. However, at this point they appeared to be totally blurred to the point of being nonexistent.

With all kinds of thoughts passing through her head, Sarah realized that she had to tackle her problems

alone. Because they are her problems! Her children's father would not co-operate with her in anything. He would not contribute a penny toward their expenses unless he was forced to. They made an agreement at the court house. But he still does not pay his share. His reply, "I don't have the money. I don't have a job."

Angry and frustrated Sarah filed for divorce. Many times, over the phone they argued about money, children, the house and his belongings. On his end of the phone, John would shout and often wouldn't allow her to speak a word. It was his way of salvaging a lost argument. Sarah would try to reason with him and try to talk to him about the needs of their children and so on. But he would cut her off and go on an extended tirade. When he would start cursing and calling her names she would hang up. She would often cry.

Sarah did not want her children to know about her crying or to be upset. They could see the dried tears on her cheek. "Were you crying, mom?" Mary would ask. She would give her an evasive answer, not a blatant lie but not a positive yes either. She often felt that she was playing a cat and mouse game with the emotions of her children. She felt guilty.

Finally, she realized that her children had to face the fact that they are going to grow up without their father living with them as he used to. For herself, she had to undergo all the experiences that any single mom had to go through. Living as a single mom was not a unique experience that happened to her alone. "There are tons of women who go through this every day," she

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theorized. Somehow, such a realization soothed her emotionally. But it could not put her mind totally at ease. She knew what lay ahead; children's ball games; buying clothes for school; braces for their teeth; medical appointments; taking off days to nurse a sick child; parent teacher conferences and baking cookies for their school. The endless things that she was supposed to do overwhelmed her. But she had to go on and could not stop the existence of those possibilities. She prayed and prayed for strength. After she put her children to bed, every night she lay awake fearfully and worried. The thoughts often made her pillows wet. Finally, she wanted to bring an end to her situation. She filed for divorce.

Sarah knew that the house had to go. She would not be able to handle the mortgage and maintenance. John could pick up his tool chest and other junk he has in the house. The rest are her personal things like clothes and jewelry. Those objects would always stay with her. Anything she didn't need she would donate to Goodwill or the Salvation Army.

Sarah knew that John would be difficult with her at every step of the way. She was prepared to face him. By the time they both faced each other in the divorce proceedings she knew exactly what she wanted. As if she had built up her inner strength by then, adversity had made her not only strong but wise. By the time they became divorced Sarah would gain half of the profit from the sale of the house plus the money owed to her. She was paid \$400 a month child support by John. By mutual arrangement, on the week or weekends, John

was to pick up the children from Sarah in the presence of another adult. The arrangements, with the exception of extraordinary circumstances, should not interfere with the children's school program.

Sarah was more relieved than happy with the court's decision. She was happy for the finality of her marriage to John. She did not want that any more. "No more abuse and no more threats," she told herself. ☹

On his part, after the divorce John was neither happy nor sad. At least he did not show this from the outside. He was visibly angry. In his mind, Sarah took advantage of the system and cornered him. After the court proceeding and on his way out he let out a scream "I hope you are happy now." "Very happy," said Sarah, without a thought.

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Coming to a divorce settlement with John was not easy and Sarah's divorce proceedings did not end her problems with John. Her ex-husband continued to play all kind of tricks whenever possible to make her life miserable. His child support checks did not come in time if they came at all. So, Sarah could not count on his legal commitment. Desperate to find money for various needs for her children, she would call him and ask him whether or not he had mailed the check. She did not want to talk to him. But often she felt she had to because of the kids. John's response was always the same. "I don't have the money" or "Go, tell the court. They can take me to jail." At that point Sarah could care less where he needed to go, to jail or to hell. All she wanted was the child support check the court ordered him to pay. Toward the end of the first year of their divorce, John was six months behind.

As a working mother Sarah had to pay for the baby sitter. A big chunk of her salary went to pay for it. The cost of

food and clothing for the children was high and she knew it. She was prepared for this. She was counting on the child support.

Given her financial predicament Sarah could not go on indefinitely without a check. Finally, she went to court.

When the judge asked John why he had not made a payment John was defiant. "I don't have the money."

"Why don't you?" asked the judge.

"Bad luck, I guess."

"Sir, it is not a question of luck. Your children have to eat. If you do not have the money, then you have to find work to pay for their needs." said the judge.

"They don't need all that money."

"That is the amount you agreed."

"I didn't agree to anything," said John.

To be sure that he was not mistaken, the judge once again looked at the form of agreement and asked the defendant before him "Sir, is this your signature?"

"Looks like it," said John.

"Then you have to pay."

"I can't pay," shouted John.

"Then you have to go to jail."

"So be it," said John, still defiant.

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John went to jail for nonpayment of child support. But that did not help Sarah in any way. Three months later John was back in the world and she was as broke as ever.

After he returned from his incarceration John was always visibly angry. While in jail he also tested drugs, all kind of drugs, drugs that makes one really high. There were a lot of guys in prison who had sold drugs while they were outside. John learned from them what to get and where to get the real stuff. Once out of the slammer, he used his know how. The recreational use of illicit drugs eventually made him an addict. John's addiction to drugs like PCP, heroin and crack made him a seasoned addict. His addiction became abundantly clear in his erratic behavior. By then, his business had folded. He possessed neither physical strength nor mental desire to work as an electrician.

Drugs were not cheap. He had to dish out real money. So he became a pusher. He sold as well as used the substance. It was the natural progression of things. Yet, he was determined to stay under the radar of the police and he carefully continued to do that. From all accounts John's situation went from bad to worse. Within a short period of time, he had no job and had no desire to get one. His business was ruined. He had no savings. His credit cards had reached their limits or were cancelled. He was managing himself by selling whatever he had. His creditors bugged him constantly. But he had no means to pay them. He often cursed them over the phone for disturbing him. He frequently hung up in disgust. This continued until his phone was cut off.

He knew that a single careless step would land him in jail. But the process of outwitting the police and the Law had a thrill of its own and John kind of enjoyed its unwanted romance in his life. For an outsider looking in, his life was chaotic and pitiful. But like a pig in a pool of feces he seemed to be content with himself.

Sarah and the children continued to live in the house. But the house was becoming more expensive for Sarah to maintain. She had no choice but to sell the property. In their divorce settlement they had agreed that the profit from the sale would be evenly divided between both of them. She was to continue paying for the mortgage in the mean time. It was not very much. Yet it was a struggle for her. She could afford to make payments for a while. So she did. They had made a hefty deposit from the sale of their first house.

Sarah also found it increasingly hard to live in the house. It had become a noose around her neck. She wanted to get rid of its presence from her life. In addition to needing maintenance the house stored too many painful memories for her. She wanted to forget them. One useful way to do this was to sell it.

She knew she could not sell it without John's cooperation or agreement. Sarah let him know that she could not continue to pay the mortgage. The house would be foreclosed if she did not sell. For once, to her surprise, he agreed to the sale.

John agreed because he was entitled to half of the profit. He needed money and could use some.

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In order to facilitate the sale, Sarah moved out of the house. She rented a 3 bed room rancher with a back yard the size of a postage stamp. Her next door neighbors were an elderly couple. The man suffered from severe diabetes and his wife was always attached to an oxygen tank. They loved to talk to the children of their new neighbor. Sarah felt safe in her new neighborhood because of her new neighbors. Her kids and they seemed to enjoy each other's presence.

Sarah put the house up for sale as it was. She had neither money nor time to make the needed repairs. Even if the deal brought her less money she did not care. She wanted to wipe out her past and move on. Selling the house that was her home for so long was for her a kind of *new beginning*.

Five months after she listed the house for sale, it came to settlement. John and she got their share of the profit. Now that John got money, he had no excuse not to pay her the child support he owed. But he refused to pay. Sarah had expected that when the home was sold John would pay back the money he owed. But he did not. Without a court order she could not block his portion of the money. She went to court again.

Sarah did not have a lawyer at this hearing because she could not afford one. John's lawyer had done a good job in protecting his client's interests. As a result, once again, she was at the mercy of her ex-husband to get what she thought to be her legitimate claim.

This time, John had hired a lawyer. In the court room his lawyer presented him almost as a saint. He asked

to reduce the monthly payment. He also had the gull to ask the court to forgive the payment that is owed because John had no income. Thankfully, the judge threw out the argument but reduced the amount for him any way. Sarah silently cursed the lawyer but it did no good. Actually, the court order did not make any difference. The child support checks from John came to her so erratically that she could not depend on them for anything.

John was angry with Sarah. In his mind Sarah was getting loads of free money from him for nothing. He hated her. Her money grabbing attitude angered him constantly. Right or wrong, he did not want to give her a penny. He knew Sarah would eventually call him and ask for the money. This was the only occasion when he could thrash her and trash her on the phone.

Recently, trashing Sarah always gave him a good feeling. She was his ex-wife and the mother of his three children. But in recent days, as far as John is concerned, she has become a monster. The only thing she seems to care about is money, her money. She has no concern about him and his situation. Whenever John thought about Sarah's attitude toward him, it made him angry. The more he thought about her, the angrier he became. First of all, he always thought Sarah was using the children as bait against him. He was unable to see them at will. She was going to court over and over which did not look good on him.

He felt he was always being accused of something. In his thinking Sarah was using every possible means to

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put him down or to portray him as a villain. She was out to destroy him. "She always needs money and I am not going to give it to her, no matter what." This was his line of thinking.

One evening, while sitting in his apartment John was thinking about his situation. His conflict with Sarah was the uppermost in his mind. He was angry and upset. His powerlessness to stop Sarah from doing what she had been doing to him triggered his anger even more. At the moment he had snorted some powdered substance and was in a state of hallucination. Through his drugged up and foggy mind he seemed to see things quite clearly – at least he thought so. All of a sudden he realized that things can't go on like this forever. He has to end this for good.

While John was going through turmoil in his mind Sarah's economic situation was getting precarious. She needed braces for Dan. Her children needed school clothing and books. No matter what she did, she seemed to be always scraping for money.

Sarah had a job. But after paying for the babysitter, there was hardly enough to go around. Many times she wondered, whether it was worthwhile holding on to a job like hers. The job provided good health care benefits.. She needed that job for her children. She needed a job, period. She wished John could keep his commitment.

In desperation, once again she went to court. She wanted the judge to order John to pay back all child

support money he owed to her. He had his share of the profit. There was no reason why he could not pay her.

The possibility of another confrontation at the court house did not make John happy. Inside of him, he was angry. But he did not show it. Sarah had asked for money. This time, through the court, he paid up the entire amount in cash. Sarah was surprised. "I hope, you are happy now," said John.

Sarah did not know what to say. She was stunned. She kept silent. "Maybe he is changing," she thought to herself. Sarah took the money. And the judge had a warning for John not to be indifferent to the needs of his children.

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John's regular use of drugs and alcohol was making him chronically angry and depressed. He could not always think straight. Sarah's repeated complaints about money and children's needs were driving him crazy. While standing in the court room and listening to Sarah's lawyer and then to the judge it was a demeaning experience. He was determined to stop all of that.

In John's way of thinking, Sarah could have brought her complaints directly to him. After all, he was her ex-husband. But accusing him in a public court room through a third party, a lawyer, as a crook was beyond any decency. John felt that she had a strong desire to extract money from him in the name of *children's needs*. It was a good trick and Sarah was good at using it. At the very depth of his heart, he was willing to give her money. But the way she continued to demand, through the court and through the lawyer upset him. He showed her his stubbornness.

On the other hand, unable to reach out to John and pressed by ever growing needs of her children Sarah had no choice but to go to court. She did not want that. But she was left with no choice.

Sarah's action and John's interpretation of it ran in a parallel line. Every time Sarah involved the court, John seemed to be at the losing end. She helped him go to jail. She made him a criminal. While thinking about those bad memories he also thought of many other things that Sarah imposed on him. She threw him out of the house and made him almost homeless. She took away his children from him. Quite frankly, she betrayed him. He did not tell a word of it to Sarah.

After the last encounter in court Sarah began to think - maybe John has changed. The way he paid up without putting up a fight told her something new about her ex-husband.

A few days later, when John wanted to see the children, she accommodated him. When they returned, the children told her that they had a good time with their father. The children went to a McDonald's. They went to a park. They seemed to have enjoyed everything. Their father also bought them new clothes from Wall Mart.

John's attempt to connect with his children made Sarah very happy. Regardless what happened between the two of them, Dan, Mary and Brandon needed their father's love and guidance to grow up. Every child has a right to the love of his/her parents. Her children are no exception. Their happiness was her happiness.

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And seeing them happy made her heart tickle. "Maybe something positive will come out of it," thought Sarah.

She went out of her way to accommodate John's visit with the children. She knew that he did not have a reliable car. So, she would take the children with a neighbor and hand them to John at an agreed upon place. When they are ready to return, she would pick them up in a mall or in a restaurant. In fear that her direct encounter with John might get ugly, she let her children come and go from her car from a distance.

Although they were divorced, every time she saw John from a distance Sarah felt a lump in her throat. She was not aware of his drug use or what was going through his mind. Many fond memories and bad feelings simultaneously flooded her heart. Sarah wished things were different. She wished she and her children and John were still a family. Now, all that seemed to be just a meaningless wish. They had gone too far away from each other. They had fallen apart too widely. There was no going back and she knew it.

As a divorced, single mother Sarah was determined to create a new identity for herself. She imagined she could freely go out now. She could date again. But she was too tired to do any of that. Her entire universe centered round her children. Her life centered round them. Whatever she did, she did it for their benefit. Now, she was glad that John and the children seemed to be getting reconnected. "I wish he had done this before," Sarah told herself.

Thinking positively came to Sarah naturally and in many respects it was convenient. In the process, Sarah had completely misread John's state of mind and his intention. Unknown to Sarah, John possessed a motive that occupied his mind like a dark cloud. He was determined to hide his true feelings and he did it very well, successfully.

First of all, John was angry and he had been angry for quite some time. He was angry with Sarah because in his mind she was the root of all his problems. In the court room when he faced the judge, a large woman with a very condescending voice, with all that accusation from Sarah's lawyer, he felt insulted. He got a feeling as if his manhood was being challenged. When the woman judge ordered him to go to jail, he felt impotent, emasculated and castrated. He hated the judge. He hated Sarah and her lawyer. He hated himself and he hated the whole world. Out of this hatred came the idea of revenge and a strong desire to end all of this forever. And he made a plan which he kept to himself.

John's plan was to play the role of a nice guy and gain Sarah's trust. He had to let her see that he cares for his children. Toward this goal in mind, he visited them regularly. So, he became punctual in picking them up and dropping them off. The very first thing he did was paying Sarah her money without protest. This eliminated a lot of argument and contention. His *connection* with the children put him in a very different light. He was pleased to see that his plan was working. Like a professional hunter who takes every precaution

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to make his trap effective, John made sure that he had covered all the bases.

It was the end of the summer. Like every eligible child in the neighborhood Dan, Brandon and Mary had to go back to school. By now Brandon was in preschool and had to attend only half a day at school. They needed new things like clothes, lunch boxes and shoes. In order to give them all of this Sarah needed money. She could not rely on John and she did not want to face his obnoxious behavior once again. Even if she had a clear feeling that he was changing and changing for good, she had apprehension to deal with him. So she did not let him know that the children needed anything or she was tight for money.

Two weeks before school started, when all three of them returned home after visiting their father they had new clothes, new shoes, new lunch boxes. Like a newly minted penny, each of them looked shiny. Sarah could not believe it. Yet, her mother's heart fluttered with joy when she realized that her children received an unanticipated largesse from their father. With new shoes and new clothes the kids were happy and their happiness reverberated in her heart. With this new observation of John's behavior she prayed to God for John to keep up this behavior. In a silent way she theorized that if her children are *connected* with their father, for her to reconnect with him would not be impossible. At this point a strange emotion passed through her body and she remembered her early days with John, their emotional encounter, courtship and marriage and the birth of their children.

Even if the thought of her sexual partnership with John crossed her mind, at this point, she hated the thought of it. She wanted to block it from her mind. Then she thought of John's screaming and hitting and all the physical and mental abuse that came with them. Overwhelmed, she wanted to stop thinking. But her thoughts continued. Her mind kept moving from one scenario to another, from good to bad and to good again.

For the umpteenth time Sarah realized that there is no solace in dwelling on the past. John and she were divorced now. Regardless what John does or does not do she has to go on with her new life. Thinking about him and his behavior, good or bad, was a waste of time. She told herself that after divorce, she is free to start a new life. She could date. She could go out. If the right man came along and was willing to love her and her children, she might even think of marrying him. All these jumbled up thoughts convinced her that for her own good and for the good of her children she must distance herself from John both physically and emotionally.

It was easier said than done. He was the father of her children. In appearance and behavior each of them reflected something of John. "How do other women do it?" she asked herself.

"Maybe I need some help to get over my feelings" – The reply came from within her.

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John had a plan. It was developed over a period of time. He also had a goal and a target. After thinking for a long time, he had come to the conclusion that he must do something to end his present situation. His goal was to bring to an end his own life along with Sarah and the children. He was convinced that Sarah was the culprit of his misery. So she must pay the price with her life. He did not want the children to suffer without their parents. So they too must go. It was a sick way of thinking. But that was John's state of mind. He was careful not to show his true intention. He tried to play the role of a caring father and a trustworthy ex-husband. As days went by, the desire to eliminate Sarah and the children as well as himself became an article of faith for him. He waited for the right moment

John regularly saw his children and they regularly visited him. In case Sarah suspected anything, he studiously avoided meeting her. Either inside a mall or in front of a Wall Mart store or inside a McDonald's the children

came to him. Sarah dropped them off at the entrance. She could recognize John's face. She would wait in her car until the children get to their father. At the time of return, they would wait at the same place. Sarah would come to the front of the store and the kids would come running to her from their father. Again and again they were dropped off and picked up and John and Sarah never exchanged a word. They saw each other but never said hi or hello. The children carried the messages if there were any from one party to the other.

Dan, Mary and Brandon went to school and to their baby sitter and when their mother came home from work they hungered for her attention as much as they did for food. They ate and played and kept their mother happy. Their elderly neighbors, the lady with her ever present oxygen tank and her bald headed husband with a hooked nose often called them to their porch. In a very short time the entire neighborhood became familiar with Dan, Mary and Brandon. Everyone thought of them as "good kids".

In late afternoons, on their way to the babysitter, they kicked pebbles on the road, if they found any. It seemed that among the three of them they had enough company to keep themselves busy. The siblings seldom fought or quarreled. They seemed to be each other's best friends. Brandon being the youngest always latched on to his older siblings. For him, it was safe. On the other hand, Dan and Mary took their older sibling role pretty seriously. They gave Brandon advice about how to walk and how not to walk. They showed him

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the best way to bite an apple or things like that. They loved him without realizing what love was.

Among the three, Dan was the oldest. So, he kind of took over the job of keeping everyone in line. For their decent behavior toward others and for their playfulness they became the toast of the neighborhood. Not only their immediate neighbors but everyone who knew them liked them. As a mother, Sarah was always proud of her children. When one of the neighbors commented "such nice kids"; or "they behave so well"; - Sarah forgot all her sadness and deficiency in life. Her children were her everything. She lived and breathed for them. No matter where she was, her children seemed to be at the uppermost of her mind. She worried about them constantly. She prayed for their safety. Whether carrying a grocery bag from a super market or going through all the motions at her job, her mind remained glued to her children's needs, their safety and their welfare.

Sarah's desk at her work adorned all kinds of pictures of her children – clowning, smiling, and posing. Her purse, where she kept her credit cards carried her children's card size pictures. It gave her immense pleasure just to look at them. In a roundabout way, in spite of everything, she thanked John for creating with her the children she so dearly loved.

Time seemed to fly by. Summer's roaring heat gave way to the autumn's cool, brisk air. The season changed. And a change came over the landscape. Before any other trees could shed theirs, the poplar trees dropped their yellow leaves and they blew the way the wind

chose to carry them. For Sarah's children Halloween was a big day. This year, because of crime in the streets everywhere, schools and civic organizations suggested to parents that they take their children to malls for trick and treat. In the fall, evening came early. So Sarah took her children to trick or treat. It was fun. The kids dressed like a pilot, a bandit and an angel. They loved their costumes and they loved the goodies they got.

"Don't eat all the candy you got. It will give you a bad stomach ache and ruin your teeth," Sarah lectured her children. They ate their candy anyhow.

The spirit of Halloween gave way to the anticipation for Thanksgiving. It was the beginning of the season of festivity in America. Thanksgiving in every home told the story of abundance, sharing, caring and good food. John wanted his children with him on Thanksgiving.

As a part of the divorce agreement, every Thanksgiving and Christmas the children were to spend one half of the day with their father and the other half with their mother. They had to come to their father the night before.

John wanted to be sure that Sarah would drop the children near his apartment on time. Sarah agreed.

At work, the day before Thanksgiving was a busy day for Sarah. Yet, unlike previous years, she managed to take three hours of leave of absence and was home early for her children. She had bought the turkey a few days earlier. So the rush to buy a turkey was not there. Yet, all the traditional things that go with fixing a bird like

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stuffing, celery and onions, she had to buy at the last moment. It was different from any other cooking she did for her children. Thanksgiving dinner was formal, ceremonial and something to remember at least until next year. It had to be both impressive and perfect.

In spite of all the things she had to do she agreed to drop the children off near his apartment. Usually she did that near a mall or a shopping center. There would be people and John could not threaten her in public. In recent months she had observed a distinct change in John's behavior. To her, his behavior appeared to be civil and good. She began to feel comfortable. And it was comfortable for her to think that John, her ex-husband and the father of her three wonderful children had modified his behavior so that there will be no confrontation between them. She was quite sure in her thinking.

The children, especially Dan the oldest did not want to go to their father this time. He had seen the turkey and wanted to watch his mother cook it. All three of them had seen many interesting things at their father's house and had done many interesting things with him. But for Thanksgiving, they did not want to go. They wanted to stay with their mother. Sarah did not want them to go either. Yet, the occasion was Thanksgiving and John wanted the children to be with him. She did not want to cause any legal problems for herself. She told the kids that they should go and visit their dad and when they came back they would help her cook the turkey. They will have a real feast after they come back. Finally, they agreed to her plan.

John called Sarah that afternoon. He had made plans to take the children to a restaurant for a pre-Thanksgiving dinner. He wanted to know if she could meet him in the play ground of the park on route 93. The park was a familiar place. It was not too far, may be a few miles from where she lived. Her children went to play there frequently. She felt comfortable to take the children there for John.

In the late afternoon of Wednesday before Thanksgiving around 4:30 pm Sarah put clean clothes on her children and piled them into her car. She drove them to the park on route 93. "You look so pretty," she told Mary.

"How about me, mom?" "Do I look pretty?" - asked Brandon.

"Boys don't look pretty. They look handsome," -said Sarah. She kissed each of her children and hugged them together like a bunch of flowers.

Around Thanksgiving time in late November, the sun sets fairly early. When Sarah reached the park with her children it was almost dark. Had it been summer time, her kids would have wanted to play on the swing set. It was cold outside and they preferred to huddle with their mother in the car that was warm.

Sarah had her car locked. She knew the area very well. She knew some of the people in the neighborhood around the park. Even if it was getting darker and there was no one in the park she felt safe. She waited for John to arrive on time. She wished her children's visit with their father would go smoothly. Tomorrow is

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Thanksgiving. She did not want any discord. In a spirit of good will she had agreed to bring them to the park and meet him alone.

"If I see anything wrong, I can always drive away," she consoled herself and kept the engine running.

A short while later, a sedan pulled up next to the passenger side of Sarah's car. John opened the door on the driver's side. He was on time.

"Your father is here," announced Sarah. By then the children had gotten over their reluctance to go to their father's. Dan opened the door and was getting ready to jump out but still inside the car when an unusual sound broke the silence around. It pierced into Sarah's heart. It was the sound of a bullet being discharged from a gun. Dan slumped on to the floor instantly. Then the sound continued 1-2-3-4 and pop-pop-pop. Dan was hit in the neck; Brandon on the forehead and Mary in the back. Before they fell, each of the children screamed. John did not hear anything. He did not want to hear their pain. He did not even want to look at their fallen bodies. He did what he had decided to do months ago. Their screams and their pain were songs of Satan. He did not want to hear. There was no time for any of the victims to express reaction other than a howl or a scream. Death came to them suddenly from an unanticipated source.

John had planned their murder meticulously. That is why he had decided to show his cool side and actively tried to earn Sarah's trust. Now, Sarah had no time to reflect or react as to save herself or her children. Within

seconds, a bullet hit her between the eyes and she was instantly dead. Bodies of all the victims piled on each other.

There was no groaning or moaning. No sound at all from any one. The silence of the place seemed to be deafening and deadly. Jugs of blood kept pouring on to the car seat, on the floor.

John looked at his dead young children ages eleven, eight and four. He was pleased now that they were dead. A Satanic relief came over his soul. He felt a devilish satisfaction when he saw Sarah's dead body. "Job well done." He certified himself. He had no desire to live. "Not after this," he thought.

Before anybody could approach him, John drove his vehicle a few hundred feet into a wooded area. He gave himself a few more minutes. He wanted to cry but was afraid to waste anymore time. Having been sure that he had killed Sarah and the children he looked at the Western sky, the direction his sedan faced. A lone star seemed to be peeping through the clouds. Once again, he looked at a vast empty space. Nothing impressed him anymore. He had lost his desire to live. Now, his time was up. He still had bullets left. With a big sigh John put the loaded gun into his mouth. Then he pulled the trigger. A sound vibrated inside the sedan. And pieces of flesh with oozing blood plastered the inside walls of the vehicle. He was dead.

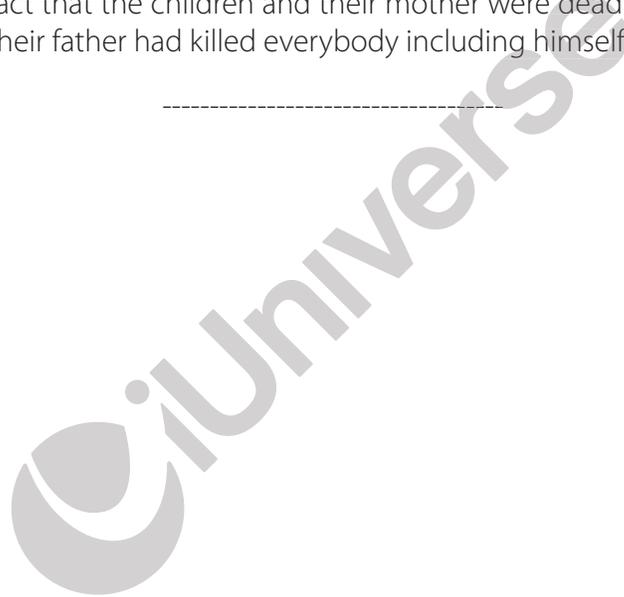
On the morning of Thanksgiving, a police officer driving by the park spotted a car. It was still running. He looked inside and could not believe what he saw. It

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was horrible. The dead bodies of Sarah and her children lay in the car, piled up. Gallons of blood had caked on the ground. He did not have to go very far to find the assassin. John's body with a gash on his head lay in his sedan, a few hundred feet away in the woods.

"Why did he kill those innocent children?" Everyone kept asking this question when the news got around. No one could come up with any viable answer, except the fact that the children and their mother were dead and their father had killed everybody including himself.

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