

3. DIAGNOSIS

Evangeline is a friend of my wife's. We hardly say anything to each other. I pull in to the driveway and wave. She's in her yard in shorts. She's directing a worker who's on a Bobcat. He's leveling her yard, going over the red clay until it forms a smooth surface. It is a big job. All the sod on her lawn has been torn up. This is a complete transformation.

Ariel is sitting at the kitchen table. She is dressed and ready to go. She is little nervous. She's going to get the results of her tests today. The doctor has to go over things with her.

"I hate for things to be out of my control."

I give her a hug.

"You'll be all right." I say that. But I don't know. I don't know a thing. I am even more helpless than she is. But I am also immune to it all. It is really not happening to me. I pretend that it is. That makes up for any distance that there might be between us. It makes us seem more real.

We don't say much in the car. She reminds about the direction to the doctor's office. I have already been there so many times before. She needs to remind me.

I feel like I have a toothache. I need to see the dentist. I am trying to ignore the gravity of her situation.

The waiting room is crowded. I have brought some work with me. Ariel says a few words to me. I seem to reply. I don't remember what I said. She is called into the doctor's office. He does a quick exam to see how she is doing. Then he calls me in.

I sit next to her. I am holding her hand.

"Ariel, I have some news for you. We have to look at this with a hopeful eye. There are a number of options. Our biopsy has discovered that the tumor is malignant. You could do nothing. But the tumor is not going to go away. So it will eventually pose a grave risk to your health. We could operate. That would take care of the tumor. But you probably would never be able to have children. Or we could do chemotherapy. The chemo is not a certainty like the operation. But if it is successful, you could still have kids."

"I have to warn you about the chemo. There are going to be side-effects. There will be days that you curse the whole procedure. As I said the chemo is not 100 percent."

"Doctor Abel, I need to think about this. How soon do I have to decide?"

"We still have some more tests to run. If we do the chemotherapy, we'll have to check things with regards to compatibility with the drugs. I'll have the receptionist make an appointment for you."

In the car Ariel is stunned. She wants to talk through all the options. She wants to weigh the possibilities. It is all too real for her. I want it to be real for me.

She says little at dinner. I have my appetite. She does not. She eats a piece of broccoli and a little of the fish. I know that she has to keep her strength up.

The next morning she seems resolved.

"I'm going to do the chemo. I think that feels a lot safer to me than the operation."

I feel that she has made the right decision. I do nothing to dissuade her.

"Honey, you've made the best choice."

She is going to drive herself to her appointment Friday. I have to go to South Carolina

for the weekend. She continues to go to work. She reads up on her cancer. She spends all her evenings looking at article on the internet. She has bought a couple of books on the subject.

When I come back, she seems more resolute about fighting the illness. She is up early to run before work. I feel that she is showing me up. I commit to doing more around the house. But I am there so little. On Wednesday, she goes back to the doctor. I offer to drive her.

“I have to do things for myself. At least until I can’t anymore.”

A positive attitude is part of her cure. She tells herself that is the key. When she is at the doctors’ office, they set up a program of treatments. It will start with a larger dose. Then they will put her on a schedule of regular sessions. Before she starts, she goes to visit her sister in Augusta.

I am home by myself. I have just arrived from work. An uneventful day. Evangeline is out in her yard.

“I heard that your wife isn’t feeling well.”

“The doctor has found out what’s wrong. She’s going to start treatments at the end of the week.”

“She told me all about it. It sounds pretty rough.”

“Yes, it does.”

“She has a good heart. She’ll survive.”

I change the subject. “Your lawn is coming along well.”

“They deliver the sod tomorrow. I made some iced tea. You want to come in for a glass.”

“Why not?” She invites me in.

She is in her shorts. I watch her walk over to the pantry.

“Where is your husband?”

“He’s away on business. You go away quite a bit too, I guess.”

“So he left you in charge of these workmen.”

“I have to keep my eye on them all the time.”

“It does get difficult.”

“My house is your house. I just want you to know that. I know how things are going to be tough for both of you. Ariel may be away. I can do anything that you need to help.”

She stretches to reach the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet. Her legs are extended. She turns to me to catch me looking at her.

She looks into my eyes, “It is a hot day. Where did you say Ariel was?”

“She’s in Augusta with her sister.”

“I guess that we’re both alone. Stop on by later if you want. We could watch TV. There’s some good stuff on Pay-per-view this month.”

“I have a little work to do. I’ll see.”

I drink my tea. She is sitting on a bar stool. I stand across from her.

“Are you sure that you don’t want to sit down, Walter.”

“I’ve been sitting all day.”

Her eyes are a little watery. Her lips glow with what remains of her fading lipstick color.

“You haven’t met Henry have you.”

“I don’t think that I have. We’re both away quite a bit. I guess we haven’t been around at

the same time.

“We’ll have to have you over to dinner.” She hesitates, “That is when Ariel is better.”

“Of course.”

Neither of us wants to consider that Ariel may not improve.

I have some work to get done. I have a client coming in tomorrow. I excuse myself.

“Come on back later on.”

“I’ll try.”

I work until it rather late. Around 10. I can see her scurrying around in her house. She is barefoot. Her top is pulled tightly around her body. She is still in the shorts.

“I am that I’m not calling too late. I just had a lot of work to do. Are you tired?”

“I’m tired. But I’m a little bored. I’ve just been fidgeting around the house all evening. I could use some company.”

“It’s not too late for that movie.”

“I’ll make you a drink and we can relax on the couch.”

She sits crouched in front of me. Her smooth legs are pulled up her chair.

“What is it?”

“The movie. Evangeline, are you going to start the movie?”

She puckers her lips and glances at me. “Of course. Let me just set the remote.”

She pushes a bunch of buttons as the successive screens appear.

“This looks like a good one. A little action. A little romance”

“Great.”

“Come sit closer to me. I could use some company.”

I take a sip from my drink. I move closer to her but not too close. I can already smell her perfume. It has a slightly sour sensation. I find her appealing in a common sort of way.

During the romantic parts of the film, I look over at her. She is sucking on her index finger. She quickly takes it out of her mouth and adjusts her hair. Then she looks over at me and smiles.

“Let me go get some popcorn.”

She pauses the movie and gets up. She has a really slinky walk back to the kitchen. I wait while she microwaves some popcorn. When she comes back, she is already eating it from the bowl. Her hands move in and out in a seductive fashion. She restarts the film.

“Have some popcorn.”

I take a handful.

“Thanks.”

She stretches out on the couch so that she is slouching next to me. The popcorn bowl is between us. I look over at her. She is licking the salt off of her fingers.

“It’s good popcorn.”

“Yes, it is. Thanks for making it.”

My heart is racing faster. I am just staring at the movie. She is sitting right next to me with her leg touching mine.

She turns around to face me. She crosses her legs on the couch. I am still looking straight ahead.

“Have you always been faithful to Ariel?”

My jaw drops. Where did that question come from?

“Pretty well.”

“Pretty well. What does that mean?”

“Yeah, I’ve always been faithful.”

“Henry and I have had our problems. Marriage has its ups and downs. But we have stayed together.”

“That’s good.”

“I do pretty well what I want to. I like to think of it as an open marriage. I know that if I ever did anything, he’d kill me. He’d kill the guy first. But if I did do something, I would be discreet.”

“Really.”

“Does it get lonely without Ariel?”

“I’m keeping busy. I’m alone. But not really lonely. We’re together that way. Even when she’s not around.”

“So what are you doing here?” She is brash.

“I got a little bored. I could use some company.”

She smiles at me. I look back at the television.

“Henry does pretty well for himself.”

“With me? Don’t you know it! I mean he’s fun and all. He taught me a thing or two. But I’ve always been independent.”

“Do you work?”

“I did. I was a CPA. I used to do his taxes. That’s how we met.”

“You’re not working now.”

“I wanted to take acting classes. I paint. I’m writing a novel. I keep busy. And there’s all this work around the house.”

“You have done a lot.”

“You never know when you want to sell the place.”

“Does that mean that you’re happy?”

“Sure, I get bored. I find ways to fill my time. Like now.”

“I really should get going.”

“You could wait until the movie is over.”

“I can sort of guess how it will end.

“Stay!”

I realize that it is too late to stay. It is too late.

“If I stay any longer, I’ll pass out here. You don’t want that.”

She gives me a knowing look.

I keep talking, “I had a long day at work. Then I’ve been on the computer since I’ve got home.”

“I could give you a massage.”

“That might not be a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I might like it too much.”

“You are a hard nut to crack.”

I call Ariel when I get back to the house. Her cell phone is off. She has gone to bed. She comes back at the end of the week. She seems resigned to beginning her treatments.

“You managed while I was gone.”

“I did all right.”

“Evangeline told me that you stopped by.”

“She made popcorn, and we watched a movie.”

“That was nice of her. What did you watch?”

“Some shitty picture on pay-per-view. I don’t even remember the name of it.”

“Who was in it?”

“That Canadian actor who’s in all those action pictures. He had this intellectual look. He couldn’t save an otherwise dull film.”

“Wow!”

I offer to drive her to the first treatment. I am afraid that she won’t be able to drive on the way back.

“Evangeline’s agreed to take me. I’m going to be there a little longer. Did you know that Evangeline used to be an accountant?”

“She did tell me that.”

“She can help with the taxes. I know how you always have problems every year.”

Ariel is exaggerating to make me feel helpless.

As I drive home after work, I notice that Evangeline is not out helping with the workers. I assume that she is still with my wife. They get back close to 7. Ariel gives Evangeline a hug, and then comes in.

“How was it?”

“I feel like hell. I just want to go to bed.”

“Do you want to eat?”

“You can’t do anything for me. I just want to rest.”

The next morning Ariel feels a little better. She tells me about the treatment.

“They hooked me up through my veins. And they just kept pumping this stuff in me. I feel terrible still.”

“Can you go to work?”

“I need to. I don’t want to give in to this thing.”

I help her with breakfast. She only eats her toast. All the rest of the food is left on the plate. I watch as I pile it in the sink. Then I turn on the garbage disposal.

Ariel gets dressed and leaves for work. I finish cleaning up the kitchen. I can see that Evangeline is sitting on a lawn chair reading. She is in a swimsuit. When I take out the garbage, I wave.

“You want to come over for a cup of coffee.”

“I have to get to work. I’m late as it is. I was helping Ariel. It’s strange. She’s usually up and dressed before I’ve even got going.”

“It’s going to be difficult for her. Even the treatment was a bit of a nightmare.”

“Thanks for going with her.”

“Anything that I can do to help.”

She gets her book and walks in the house. I stare at her until I can almost feel her close to

me. Then I get my briefcase and leave for work.

I call Ariel at lunch. She has decided to head home to rest.

“I thought that I would be stronger.”

“The chemo is tough to bear.”

That night Ariel goes to bed early. I am upstairs in my study. I watch Evangeline going through her routine. She seldom closes the curtains.

I am up later than usual. I want to give Ariel the chance to sleep. I get beer and head out to the patio. It is a clear night. I see the last light go off in Evangeline’s house. There is darkness all around me.

Ariel is getting used to the chemo. But it is debilitating. It is taking its toll

Evangeline has taken her over the duty of driving her to the clinic and back. After the session, Ariel ends up going to bed early.

I look out. I see the flashes of her cigarette like a firefly dotting the night. I walk out to see her sitting on a reclining lawn chair.

“I didn’t see you.”

“I could see you like a lighthouse beacon at night.”

“Is that what drew you here? Are you a lost ship at sea?”

“I feel lost.”

“I didn’t know that there was that much life in you.”

“I’ve got a pulse.”

“I hope that you have more than that.”

She is wearing a low-cut blouse without a bra. She looks over at me.

“Are you staring at my boobs.”

“I can hardly see anything in this light.”

“That sounds like a likely excuse.”

“You do have a beautiful body. But I really can’t give in to those kind of thoughts.”

“Are you telling me that you can’t compliment me?”

“A compliment is often like a payment.”

“Wally, I’m not for sale.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“If I was, you couldn’t afford me.”

“I can hold my own.”

“I bet that you can. But don’t just stand over me like that. Take a seat. Don’t be afraid. Henry is asleep.”

I sit down. I am a little uncomfortable.

“Walter, can you still watch me from there.”

She spreads her legs in front of me.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m wearing shorts.”

“I’m surprised that you can even see in this darkness.”

“It’s not that dark. I probably could see everything that went on here from my bedroom window.”

“Are you a voyeur?”

“I’m curious. I’ve been known to take a look now and then.”

“Is that all?”

“What do you want me to say? That I touch myself while I’m watching. How far do you want me to go before you’ll do your part?”

“How far do you need me to go?”

“Maybe just a little farther than you can make it.”

“I told you that I do my part.”

“That may not be enough. Not from where I’m sitting.”

“I could move closer.”

“Close enough to touch me.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“I’m not wearing any panties if that’s what you’re were wondering.”

“I told you that I couldn’t see too well in the dark.”

“But you’re probably good at feeling your way home.”

“Maybe it’s not such a good idea to talk like this.”

“It’s just talk. All in fun. I’m not making any more of it. You shouldn’t either.”

“So what would you do if I came over there and took off your shorts?”

“I’d probably slap your pretty hard. Then I’d scream loud enough to get Henry down here. It would probably get Ariel down here too. Even in her drug-induced slumber. Besides, all you had to do was ask me to take them off.”

“And you would.”

“If you said please. But I thought that you didn’t want to engage in such talk. You’re the one with a sick wife.”

“She’s your friend, too.”

“I know. And I’m helping out anyway that I know how.”

“Why are you like this?”

“Why are you?”

“I can’t let things get to me. That’s how I maintain a positive attitude.”

“So you’d fuck me on your lawn chair while our respective spouses slept in their own beds.”

“Who said anything about fucking?”

“It sounded as if it was going that way.”

“You were the one who asked about taking off my shorts.”

“You told me that you weren’t wearing any panties.”

“I’m just trying to stay cool on a hot night.” She takes a particularly long drag from her cigarette.

“You’ve been smoking that for quite a long time.”

“I’ve got a way for making things last. It’s a trait of good smokers. What about you?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“But are you good at making things last?”

“I’ve been known to be OK at it in my time.”

“I’m told that you can make it last longer if you close your eyes.”

“Sometimes it’s good to have an image right before you to get you going.”

“Like this.” She slides her jeans shorts along her thin legs, They rest momentarily along

the edge of her feet. I see the outline of the bone. The painted nails are visible from the dim reflections from the street. I am now looking squarely at her clearly shaved hair line just covering her sex. She remains motionless with her feet now resting on the chair and her knees in the air.

Time seems to stop. I can feel the blood rush to my head. I am already aroused—already! She moves her feet along the surface of her deck chair ever so slowly.

“Do you like what you see?”

I smile. I bury myself inside her. My tongue tastes the electric sour-sweetness. She pulls her legs tight around my head.

She is so uninhibited. I float inside her. We move together for what seems to be almost an hour. She can barely contain her howling. She is now on top of me. We share the humidity of the summer’s evening. She is tight in my embrace.

The next time out we dispense with the small talk. My hands are all over her. I can barely contain my excitement.

“I love it how you go down on me. I like a man with daring.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Aren’t you afraid that Henry will get up?”

“Once he falls asleep, nothing can get him up.”

“I’m glad that I don’t have that problem.”

She touches me. I kiss her deep.

“Be sure to not leave any marks.”

Nowhere obvious as I suck on a corner of her flesh on her inner thigh.

“Walter,” she coos. “Don’t stop!”

I make it back to my wife’s side. She is sighing in her sleep. It is becoming difficult to sleep by her side. If Evangeline denies me, I wonder if it will cause me to seek elsewhere.

I think that I really want to get caught. It might make me feel some of the desperation that Ariel feels.

“Have you ever thought about ending the treatments?”

“I think about it all the time. But I can’t stop it. Not with what I’m risking.”

“It’s hard to see you go through this. I wish that there was something that I could do.”

She tries to go to work. But her attendance is irregular. I have an excuse to be at home even if she is not.

“Ariel is at work. I want to fuck you in our bed.”

“You are crazy.”

“Crazy, maybe. But I’m also good at what I do.”

I shook her until I lost all track of myself. This was all about forgetting. The bed creaked almost to the point of collapse. I finished before lunch and went in for a short day of work.

“You went in a little late today, honey.”

“What?”

“I called you at work. And then I rang the home phone. You didn’t answer.”

“I was taking a nap.”

“That’s what I need now.”

Ariel goes up to our room. Later that evening I bring her a snack. Some soup and a chicken sandwich.

“Thanks. I needed that. I have to force myself to eat.”

Later that night, Evangeline and I are outside.

“Why are we doing this?”

“Because we can get away with it.”

“I told you before that I want to get caught. But it’s more than that. She upstairs dying. And it’s just easier for me pretend that it’s not happening. That nothing ties me to death. It gives me a sense of immortality.”

“So if it wasn’t me, it would be someone else.”

“What are you worried about. That I’m cheating on you now. I’m married to the woman upstairs.”

“Has she ever given you what I’ve given you?”

“She gave me something more. She gave me herself. She gave me her trust.”

I feel disgusted. All the talk only makes me want Evangeline more. I feel harder when I am inside her. Nothing can take that feeling away from me.

“Are you afraid of dying?”

“Evie, I can’t think about it that way.”

“How then?”

“I just live life for something fuller. And if I can’t reach that point, it all seems pointless.”

I have been sleepwalking through my life until I met Evangeline. What will I do when Ariel gets better?

“She is going to get better. Walter?”

“I hope so.”

I am starting to have my doubts. She complains about more pain. And she is dizzy all the time. She has actually stayed home from work all this week.

“You really can’t expect to go in until you get better.”

I am spending all my spare time with her. They want me to go back on the road. I am actually preparing a trip. I need to see more improvement from Ariel. I ask to see her doctor.

“I know that you often keep things from a patient. I’m her husband. You need to tell me.”

“You don’t know anything differently than I’ve told her. She is my patient. I need to keep her hopeful. But she has every reason to be.”

“I’m not sure that I can take this anymore.”

“I know it’s bad for you. Think how she feels. For every pain that she has, there’s a corresponding doubt that makes it all seem worse.”

I will not give in to my fears. I use my time with Evangeline to compensate. I am getting into her body. It is so different than Ariel. Ariel is rail thin. Even before the disease. The cancer is only marking her propensity to being slim. It offers a macabre side to this characteristic. On the other hand, there is a rich fullness to Evangeline’s body. My mouth waters when I look at her breasts. Or when she turns around in her tight shorts. She is in shape. Just a different form.

I am drawn to her big lips and wavy blonde hair. It is sort of a dirty blonde. I can see the roots. She likes it that way. It makes her seem as if she doesn't care at all. As if she lives for one thing, and one thing alone—to turn men on.

"I don't want you to think of me that way. It's really the other way around. I just live for my own pleasure."

"But you give so much. If I asked you to suck my dick while you were kneeling on the kitchen floor, would you do it?"

"It's almost like you're degrading me to get back at your wife."

"Would you do it?"

"You're a pig!"

"But you'd do it."

"Of course, I would. I'd twist my tongue around that little prick of yours."

She gives me a big smile.

Henry is upstairs in his bed. I am doing her on the couch. She roars with the passion. I can hear him getting up to take a piss.

"Come on, Walter, fuck me harder."

She is laughing. The TV is on loud. I keep thrusting away. We are drenched in sweat. Our bodies squeak together.

The next week it seems like a crisis. I am sure that Ariel is going to pass away. She catches pneumonia and is admitted to the hospital. I visit her in the evening. But I rush home so that I can be with Evangeline.

"Don't you feel guilty that you are making it worse for her?"

"Don't you feel bad?"

"You're married to her."

For the moment, my only concern is maintaining my erection. I feel like this monster. I love it.

After she is cured of the pneumonia, Ariel starts to improve. We hire a nurse for home care. I deliberately let the nurse catch Evageline and me together. I want to get her thinking what I have in store for her.

Ariel is still on the treatments. As she gets stronger, she goes back to work. She encourages me to spend more time at work. At work, I am having some problems. Some of the things that I did on the road are incomplete. There are reasons why I have to head out again. I know that there is more to it. I am going away for a short trip. Things will be clearer when I return.

The nurse is watching me. She wants to say something. I am looking at the slight slit in her skirt

"Is that a regulation uniform?"

"We don't have one standard outfit."

"Oh really." She is flattered that I notice. I know that she thinks that I am cruel. That is what I love about the nurse. I can only match her cruelty.

When I am with Evangeline that night, I think about being with the nurse. She is only with us for a few more days.

"I'm not going to need a nurse after this week."

“Honey, you look great.”

I hold her close as she fades into sleep.

“Ariel looks much better today,” Evangeline tells me.

“I saw her earlier. When you were at work, Walter.”

“You seem to know my business better than I do.”

“I try to protect myself.”

“Yes, you do.”

I plant my kisses along her bare back. I grab her naked ass and pull it towards me.

“What does Walter want to do tonight?”

“Walter wants to do what Walter likes.”

She loves my tongue as it works its way around here. I speak her language. If my wife gets better, I’ll quit this.

I make my plans. I know that Ariel is still sick. But I need to get away. I only hope that the worst will be gone when I return.

I am thinking about Evangeline when I take the plane to Chicago. I rent a car in Chicago. After my business there, I will drive to Indianapolis and then St. Louis.

“You may have some other stops along the way. Just don’t turn your phone off like you did last time.”

“Is Henry in bed?”

“Can you feel that wave come over you?”