

LORI CALLAN

## Hard-Wired

CAROLE WONDERS HOW LONG this one will last. He's the fourth, or is he the fifth lover she's taken over the course of her twelve-year marriage? And there's nothing remarkable about him. Jack's in his late thirties, married like her, bored with his love life, though committed to staying with his high school sweetheart wife of almost twenty years. Carole wonders why she chooses to lie underneath him as he pants and grunts and shuffles about, until the orgasmic rush takes him away from her too.

So they lounge there. Next to one another on the extra-firm hotel mattress, but not quite touching. Strange how just moments before, they burrowed themselves into the other, kneading and tugging at all the fleshy bits of their bodies, until they were so tightly welded together she couldn't be sure where her sweaty thigh began and his muscled one ended. And now, both afraid to admit the other's presence, or at least preferring not to acknowledge one another for the moment. Carole breathes in the musky odour of their lovemaking, feels with her fingertips the moist spots beneath her on the cotton sheets. As though she needs evidence of what just took place. But she doesn't reach for Jack. Nor does she speak.

The drama is a familiar one. Same script, different leading men. It's just as she and Frank have done so many times, at home. But it's different too, in a way. Where Frank fills her up with questions, hurts and sometimes even a little friendship, Jack (and all the other Jacks) takes all that away. No, taking is unfair. It's more a lifting, a peeling off of what Carole acknowledges to be her established respectability. Lying beside Jack, just having fucked his brains out, empties her of her own constructed self. And for this she feels everlasting gratitude.

It's not like Carole can't find sexual release at home. Frank has absolutely no difficulty in fulfilling her erotic needs, as long as it's between the first and second draft of his current novel, or after the final draft has been sent to his editor. He's particularly frisky, in fact, his optimum erotic peaks

seem to occur, when he knows his manuscript is actually in the hands of his editor, being read. Instead of rolling away to the far side of the bed, exhausted from a ten hour day of shaping and contorting his unruly words, he touches her on her shoulder, or lower down, in the small of her back. And soon they are quietly moving together, all his vagrant mixed metaphors forgotten in exchange for the inarticulate groan, the orgasmic spasm. She vaguely recalls this making her feel special in the first couple of years of their marriage. As though Frank's literary creativity, his fulfillment of his project, spurred him on to reward himself with pleasures he was somehow unworthy of before its completion. But soon, special isn't enough. And final drafts are few and far between. Like the royalty cheques.

Carole tries to remember the last time they could afford to eat out. How long had it been since she'd bought herself a new pair of shoes, an outfit for work, or even a couple of bras? She sneaks a peek at the carpeted floor of the hotel room, where hers appears defeated, splayed open, frayed at the shoulder straps, the lace beginning to look lacier by the day.

Not that she expects Frank to support her. Carole was raised in the seventies; part of the generation of women who view financial independence as a must in any romantic liaison. And she continues to accept Frank's role in their romance as the Starving Artist sort. In fact, Carole loves all the quirky habits, defining him so uniquely as Writer: the way he bounces story ideas off her at five a.m. when her own semi-consciousness is for him, simply, unfathomable; the way he hangs over her shoulder, reading along with her, as she gives his work its first real perusal (she takes great pride in her role as his sample reader); even the gentle way in which he taps his keyboard. Sometimes she stops outside his study door as she's walking down the hall, just to listen to the occasionally hesitant, sometimes hectic, always tender click, click, click emanating from within. The sounds bring on a nostalgia of sorts, a memory of her childhood, when she'd tune in to Mr. Dressup for the crisp, clean sound of his scissors slicing through multi-coloured construction paper, old milk cartons, and hardy bristol board.

But that was long ago. When her idea of financial security meant chucking fifty cents, exactly one half of her weekly allowance, into her moulded plastic Scooby-Doo bank. Before she'd entertained any ideas of a hundred year old row house near Bathurst and Queen. Before she'd contemplated collecting antiques, flea-market finds, family cast-offs and shaping her home into an eclectic, country-Victorian cottage, with aged Oriental area rugs, stained glass lamp shades, vintage busts with missing paint chips, fabrics such as damask, silk, cotton all mixed together with old tattered quilts, and checkered tablecloths. Kind of an Ed's Warehouse

meets Old MacDonald feel. Currently, she and Frank live at Bloor and Dufferin, in a flat on the third floor of a house fairly similar to the one Carole sees them owning one day. With Toronto real estate prices edging steadily upward, however, Carole wonders whether her fantasy home won't remain just that.

Frank stays home and writes. Carole hops the subway downtown to work every day. Their astronomical rent payments for a one-bedroom-plus-den reflect the short walk she has to public transit. Next month, that payment will be raised yet again, depleting their monthly savings by yet another fifty dollars a month.

Financial details bring Carole down. As does the reality of her situation, which she sees as unlikely to change much over the next twenty years. So Carole plays with the idea of what it would be like to live a different sort of life. Toys with those she might have been a part of, if she had only chosen differently. Of course, it's all just a game, really. Carole seeks out men like Jack: financially successful, attractive, married men who find themselves wanting. Perhaps his chosen partner gets her quota of sloppy embraces from the kids, or maybe she's working too, and drained from her own twelve-hour, stress-filled day, or maybe, like Jack, she's wishing she had someone new to hook up with, come lights-out.

Carole doesn't ponder Jack's reasons much, nor does she flatter herself about her sexual prowess. She isn't any kind of insatiable, sex kitten. She doesn't own a single piece of exotic lingerie, and not one kinky sex toy. The truth is, she can't afford the trendy, upscale shops in Yorkville, or even the shabbier ones on Queen West, selling such sundry luxuries. She guesses her appeal lies in the fact she's occasionally available, utterly uninterested in common fidelity, and she's not a wife. Or not that particular wife anyway. Carole supposes, in the end, it's more about what she isn't, than what she is.

For example: Carole doesn't cook for these men, ever. Even a cup of coffee is conspicuously absent from her repertoire. Nor does she in any way mend or launder their clothing. Their children are theirs. Mothering is something she leaves to the official mate. Their lovely, suburban homes are for their devoted families. Carole shudders at the prospect of leaving her beloved city each evening, travelling for hours to reach a treeless, barren subdivision of identical featureless tract houses. Nor does she in any way attempt to comfort Jack and his sometimes guilty conscience (unless, of course, he includes whatever solace he finds in the soft tissue between her thighs). The above is not her chosen role. Hers is to lie with him, create a suspension of belief erasing all memory of their former selves, if only for a fitful moment here and there, and exit stage left.

Nor does Carole really allow the Jacks to court her. Though some have tried. Elegant dinners, theatre, movies, even an offer to share a DVD that's just been released, are all declined. She isn't looking for romantic rendezvous.

Though at one time Carole thought she knew what these men provided her with, now she finds herself perplexed. So she lies beside this Jack, collecting evidence of her crime, already figuring out how she will dispose of said incriminating details so she can return home to find her loving Frank, nervously pulling on his right sideburn the way he does when none of the sentences will march into line the way he wishes they would.

"I have to go now." Carole pulls herself up to a sitting position, drops her feet over the side of the bed, and begins to gather her clothing from a heap on the floor. A quick shower to eradicate any sign of his heavy cologne (why are men's toiletries so intensely pungent, she wonders?), and she'll be on her way.

"You seem distracted, today. Everything okay?"

She smiles. Eases his concern with all the right answers. Small talk after having gained access to the most intimate crevices of one another's bodies. Carole wonders at the bizarre nature of humanity. The truly nonsensical way in which men and women enter one another, only to find themselves locked away in separate corridors. Parallel hallways lined with doors, all of which say 'No Admittance.'

"I'm fine, really. Just a little tired. Work was crazy. I was lucky to get away at all." Carole has recently risen to the position of Assistant Manager, Marketing at the National Ballet School. She realizes, perhaps too late, the "Assistant" part of managing means handling the majority of the daily grind of the department. All the supposed "details" the Manager doesn't have time to attend to, at about half the salary. Carole, too, would love to worry less about details and more about concepts when it comes to marketing the country's premiere ballet school, but she supposes that will have to wait until the next promotion.

In the meantime, "Assistant" allows her just enough wiggle room to manage the afternoons she needs to meet Jack, even if any extra padding on the budget is negligible. Carole tells herself this is the price she pays for the privilege of working in the Arts. Jack? He's the fringe benefit, she supposes, making up for her disappointment when pay day arrives.

She hurries into the ensuite washroom, lathers and rinses her skin until only the purity of the Ivory Soap scent remains (do hotels deliberately choose this brand for people like her and Jack?), and within ten minutes she's already dressed. When she bends down to the bed in order to brush

something resembling a kiss goodbye just past his left temple, he looks up at her, unsure.

Carole's confident in her position within this relationship, and it's not just because she's married to someone else. It's something about her head space. An ability she has to share a long and languorous kiss, warm his genitals with lips that just finished wetting his mouth, open her entire physical self to him, and yet remain almost totally disconnected at the same time. Something about her reticence, her emotional lack seems to excite Jack. And now, after a couple of hours of flat out lovemaking, he hardens yet again, wanting more.

"So, should I call you next week?" He appears vulnerable, prostrate on the bed, naked, as Carole stands fully clothed, above him, staring down on his poorly concealed lust.

"Yes, I think you should." She smiles that slow, welcoming smile, luring him in once again, beckoning him to try a little harder.

"Ya know, I might be able to get away again on Friday, this week... what do you say...?" Jack pushes himself up on his elbows, into a sitting position, a weak attempt at regaining something resembling a dignified pose. Carole stands by the bed, watching, appearing to weigh his new proposal. But shaking her bobbed head before he's done with his invitation.

"I'm sorry. I'm all booked for the rest of this week. Next week should be good, though. Call me." Again the smile. This time it's accompanied by a fleeting look of concern.

"Look. That's fine. We agreed we'd make it when we could, and I'm okay with that. Next week, then?" Is he pleading? Has he forfeited all control? Carole hopes not. Even in their sad little mock relationship she realizes some equity must exist to maintain the sexual tension.

"That's great. See you then." And she's gone. The business appointment made, the hotel door clicks quietly behind her.



Carole resists the urge to rush home immediately. Rather, she stops for groceries, picking up Thai noodles, peanut sauce, some sweet red peppers and peas in the shell for Frank's favourite dinner. Has she really become such a cliché? Heading home to the kitchen to prepare a savoury meal in recompense for her failure at fidelity? She wonders how long she can continue to play at wife. To pretend to be all that Frank bargained for when he signed on the dotted line. The supportive muse, urging him on to ever higher levels of literary success. She wonders, too, whether Pad Thai

will continue to grace their table over the winter, given the hefty price tags on fresh produce. Hopefully her spontaneous decision to make it all up to Frank hasn't hoisted their monthly grocery allotment over the preordained limit.

Of course, there hasn't been quite as much active muse work, or great literary success lately. Frank's first three novels await acceptance for publication. He holds on to each manuscript in the bottom of the linen closet, buried under some old tea towels and mismatched sheets. He keeps saying, in a mantra-like repetitive voice: *it only takes one successful novel, and then all the others will sell*. International rights, a screenplay maybe. Apparently this is the way it happened for Tom Clancy. Frank doesn't view himself as a Clancy-clone, though. Frank's too all-Canadian to yearn for that kind of commercial success. He'd much rather see himself compared to a Robertson Davies minus the beard and the three-piece-suit. Just give him the dignity of the man. Frank's big on dignity. Or even a smoke-free Mordecai Richler with a haircut and style. Not too coifed, not too tousled. That's her Frank.

In the meantime, Frank's published two books of short stories and a novella, and edited a couple of biographical tributes to dead Canadian authors. These he does under a pseudonym, in case he's discovered to be the next John Irving. He wouldn't want his general readership to view him as too academically inclined either, clearly the kiss of death to book sales in the North American market.

She hesitates at the wine counter, wondering whether they can afford a bottle of red to accompany her Pad Thai. Would a couple of drinks induce Frank to want to tear himself away from his written page, into her waiting arms? Two men in one day. Shouldn't she feel remorse? Something resembling guilt? Instead, the idea stimulates her. Unconsciously, she flexes the muscles of her buttocks, a couple of Kegels and now dampness. Since when has her sexuality motivated her to such lengths?

Carole thinks back to the 20/20 episode where Barbara Walters interviewed sociopaths, mostly jailed for heinous acts of violence, the ones Barbara Walters tends to especially perk up for. What were their determining characteristics? Lack of remorse, inability to imagine another's pain, a certain creative penchant with the truth, and an unwillingness to accept any consequences for their behaviour. Though she may resemble these men superficially, Carole knows she's not of them. For she's more than cognizant of emotional distress, hers and others. Usually, too much so. And consequences? Why, she's almost always awaiting them. Has been for the last twelve years or so, anyway. For Frank to call her on her illicit acts. Her

flagrant infidelities. She guesses she miscalculated on that one. Expected a little more jealous guarding of her time, a little less preoccupation with his fictional worlds. She wonders momentarily if it isn't mere lack of interest masquerading as trust, that has transformed Frank from hero into one of the betrayed.

Carole points to a large bottle of Merlot, and as the clerk turns to retrieve it from the shelf behind him, she squeezes her thighs tightly together again, rubbing herself with the folds of her own genitals. In response to the pleasure, she wonders why she bothers with Jack and his predecessors. Can't she just take care of her common appetites herself? For God's sake, she read *The Hite Report* back in the seventies, along with all her friends. What's wrong with her? The clerk pushes the bagged bottle of wine at Carole, awakening her to the bustling sounds of the market, and to her half-formed plot of seduction. Her packages in hand, she hoists her load, arming herself for Round Two.



"Dinner was great. How'd you know I've been craving Thai for a while?" Frank's obscenely happy. He's had three and half glasses of wine, two helpings of her noodle dish. Now he leans back, languid, in his chair, stretching his legs out before him, staring at his knees as though he's never seen them before. But she knows he isn't contemplating his knees. He's in someone else's plot. Oblivious to all her overtures.

That's okay. She'll catch him by surprise. Maybe even make her advances right here, in the dining room. On the table, like that wild scene from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, with Jack Nicholson and who was the female lead again? Jessica Lange? Whatever happened to Jessica Lange? Perhaps Carole and Frank might get some flour flying about in puffy clouds of erotic savagery, just like Jessica and Jack. No. Frank isn't the throw-her-down-on-the-table sort. He'd be too worried about her head hitting the hard oak surface, too careful about her neck flying backward. Too gentle to create clouds on the cool blue surface of tablecloth beneath them. Still, spontaneity might just provide the aphrodisiac the dinner and wine failed to manage.

Carole grins at her husband over her wine glass.

"What's funny?"

"Not funny, really. I was just thinking about attacking you. You look adorable over there."

"You want to go to bed early?"

"I was thinking about right here ..."

"How much wine have you had?" He glances over at her glass, as though reading it for her level of intoxication.

"Just enough." She rises from her chair, approaches his, straddles his lap.

"You're determined to do this, aren't you?" He has no choice but to speak directly to her breasts.

"You might say that."

"Well, I was never one to argue with a healthy sense of determination."



Her latest exploit accomplished, Carole sends Frank back into his study, where she knows he's been for the last fifteen minutes anyway, though he's such a decent man he'd continued to sit underneath her, pinned to his chair, pretending to bask in his afterglow.

"Get out of here. I'm finished with you." As he struggles back into his pants, she playfully whips him on the behind with a napkin from the table. "I'll clean up. You write the best seller." Carole finds herself alone once again, in the dining room, clearing away plates still swimming in peanut sauce (she'd made it a touch runny tonight), knives and forks, wine glasses with the imprint of Frank's lips, or is it her own etched along the rim in a sated smile?

Then, as Carole loads the dishwasher, she imagines herself confronting Frank with her awful news. Practices the very sentences she'll speak: "Frank, we need to talk. I have to tell you something...", or perhaps he'll open the conversation leading to the end of their twelve years together: "What's wrong, Carole? I've been getting a strange feeling from you for a while now ... are you happy here with me?" And what then? What on earth will she tell him then? Everything? Nothing? There isn't a lot of grey to work with here. Although she has read somewhere certain liberal counsellors believe spouses lacking in the fidelity department have no right unloading their guilt on their partner. The old ignorance is bliss approach. To date, Carole's bought into this one. Like an overprotective parent, she neglects to educate Frank about her harmful deceptions. Finished with the loading of the gooey plates, she slams the door of the dishwasher shut.

He's barely settled himself behind his desk when she taps on the door to bid him goodnight.

"I'm going to bed early. I think I'll read, or maybe catch a little TV first. See you later."



"Love ya." He turns toward her from his laptop, though the screen has a magnetic pull, dragging his attention back despite himself.

"Love you too." The usual words spoken to the usual half-turned back, the usual end to their evening.

Carole climbs into bed, grabs the remote control and begins scrolling through the channels. Ten o'clock news, one of those relentless forensic crime shows, reality challenges, the shopping network. On to the educational channels: a massive herd of wildebeests on the Serengeti—one of which is inevitably devoured by a roaming tigress (Carole plays a ruthless game with herself, seeing if she can guess which hoofed animal will inevitably become the torn-up prey before the elegant, finely-muscled feline strikes—the claws have only just made contact, however, when Carole leaves the world of Natural Selection to the hunter and hunted, to work it out amongst themselves); a game reserve in Kenya where elephants are still slaughtered by poachers, for their tusks alone (Carole makes a hasty retreat); a parenting advice show where a screaming toddler is moved progressively further away from her dining family, until she realizes only her quiet will bring her back into the fold (here Carole pauses, curious about the child's capability to adapt, needing to stay with the crying little girl until, sure enough, she is welcomed back into the family, comforted by her anxious parents who are somewhat unsure about this behavioural intervention they take part in for the purposes of scientific research and well-mannered humanity). And then a narrative voice-over, sounding much like Desmond Morris, on early *Homo sapiens* behaviour:

*The female of the species is an intrinsically independent creature, until she reproduces. At this time, she requires the male to bond with her in some way other than the typical conjugal one, so that her offspring is afforded the opportunity to reach maturity. As humanity descended from the trees and evolved into two-legged, upright animals, the female was no longer able to transport her offspring with ease upon her back. However, cradling the infant in front of her left her vulnerable, unable to carry out basic functions such as hunting and the gathering of food, not to mention basic self-defence for her and her child. It became necessary for the male to provide for his mate these basic needs. It would seem to this day, though various suffragias, and feminist movements have more or less successfully effected change in her cultural role, the female's brain is in some way hard-wired. In the twenty-first century, with the advent of highly educated, professionally trained women in all aspects of contemporary life, there yet remains a primal expectation for the male of the species to provide. In today's terms, this might best be represented by his foray into the workplace, his success in his field. Though she is more than capable of earning her own living in the twenty-first century business environs, she nevertheless chooses to place her male counterpart in high esteem for his status, though his might and brawn are no longer absolutely necessary. Where early man's quick-witted ability to fend off a violent predator led to his survival, today, man's success is judged by the status he earns in a commercial world. Thus, the financially successful male is the alpha male in today's terms ....*

When Frank enters their bedroom, he finds nothing unusual. Nothing to create any suspicion. Carole lies on her back, on her side of the bed. Her head is half buried in her pillow, arms thrown up, almost as though to shield herself, snoring lightly. A dim glow in the room issues from the television screen, some old seventies' footage of Diane Fossey with her beloved apes. Frank turns the knob on the television, and the light fades gradually, leaving him and Carole in comforting darkness. Frank undresses quickly, the shadows slowly forming as his eyes adjust to the dimness. Careful not to bump a table or make any other sudden movements that might awaken his sleeping wife, he drops his clothes to the floor beside the bed, swings his long legs up beside Carole's already warmed ones. She turns to her side, faces away from him.

As he rolls toward her, cupping her back with the length of himself, her eyes open wide, though she doesn't stir. Staring into the depths of the room, Carole swallows hard, buries all the disturbing words and deeds somewhere within a place where consciousness doesn't dare reside.

Once hidden there, the carefully discarded instincts await her Daughters, who for generations to come, continue to hear the frantic whispers.