

ELIZABETH WELLS

The Afternoon Visit

TEETERING ALONG IN HER best heels, Carol picks her way up the drive. She's in enemy territory; ankle-twisting country. One false step and she'll go over, sprawl in front of Dan's boss. And his new wife. She can see the house up ahead; torturous yards ahead. Are they watching her progress from the windows? She looks down and concentrates. But for all her care, the skinny heels skitter left and right on the chips of gravel.

"We're late," Carol says, "just like last time."

"That was years ago. Robert won't remember, and that wife's long gone."

"I still don't want to be late."

His polished leather shoes crunch up the gravel. He has neat feet for a big man. Sometimes when she watches him plod along, a ghost of his former nimbleness shines through; the athlete, buried in middle-management flesh. Then Carol remembers his dancing, his fluid, easy steps and the dizziness of being whirled around a dance hall floor in his arms. He doesn't dance now. He doesn't do much apart from obsessing over the front lawn. "Would he even notice if I left?" She glances across at him, and notices that his shirt still bears the folds from its packet, and wispy threads dangle down from the buttons. Way off in the distance a Weed Whacker screeches and whines. Carol pauses to tug at the pantyhose bunched around her thighs, then remembers the eyes watching her from the house, and leaves the snagged nylon alone. "Wish we'd parked here."

"Wish you'd worn sensible shoes."

He's short of breath now. They continue in silence, apart from his panting. The drive leads to the front entrance of a half-timbered, Tudor-style house. Dan finds a doorbell hidden in a carved rose. He presses it with no result.

"Anyone home?" he calls. The cicadas answer, and the Weed Whacker screams on.

“I can’t smell lunch cooking. Have you got the right day?”

He shrugs, but the furrow deepens between his brows.

To their right a wooden deck blisters in the afternoon sun. Carol can see a picnic table with some wine glasses and a dead geranium.

“Maybe they’re inside,” Dan says. “I’ll just take a peep.” He seizes a metal bucket by the steps, drags it over to the flowerbed and upends it beneath a large window.

“Dan, don’t,” she pleads. But already he has stepped onto the bucket and stretched on tiptoe to the window. A bulky figure in a ballerina pose, he reminds her of Oliver Hardy in a silent comedy; the fat man that always gets caught. She’s Stan, the thin, trembling one who keeps look-out, and weeps girly tears. She looks away to see a woman moving towards them from the back lawn, her blonde hair shot through with grey.

“Get down!” Carol hisses.

As the woman reaches the flowerbed, Dan bounds down from the bucket. She stares at him for a moment, and then turns abruptly to Carol. “I’m Sophie, Robert’s wife.” Her grasp is cool and steady.

Dan puts out his hand but the woman is already leading them onto the deck. Out of the corner of her eye Carol examines the boss’s new wife. She wears khaki shorts, rubber sandals and a tee shirt so old and over-stretched that the hem sags down like a medieval gown.

Sophie points to the dirt on her knees. “I’ve been digging a grave.”

“A grave?” Carol peers closely at her face for some hint of a joke.

“Kimber.” She pulls out some wooden chairs for them.

“Who’s Kimber?” asks Dan, but Sophie Rodd slips into the house without answering.

“The dog,” Carol whispers, “remember?” She can picture the great slobbering beast that fell asleep with his head on her foot last time they were here. “It belonged to Robert’s first wife.”

“He got custody?” Dan snorts.

Sophie reappears, carrying a bowl of cashews and a frosted bottle of white wine. Carol slides the glasses over to her, and notices a couple of Douglas fir needles in one.

“Kimber had a bad heart.” Sophie twists the curly hook of the bottle opener down into the cork, and drags the whole thing out with a *plunk* that echoes through the still air. As she hands Carol the glass, she nods at the patch of lawn. “Here comes Robert.”

Carol looks at the middle-aged man making his way across the grass. She can feel her husband twitch to attention beside her, like an animal sensing the approach of its owner. He struggles to his feet, and by the time

Robert reaches the steps, Dan has summoned up the polish and gravitas of a funeral director. “So sorry to hear about your loss.”

Robert stiffens a fraction. “Thanks. We’re almost finished. Help yourself to wine, Dan.”

The couple move down the steps. Carol wipes her forehead and gulps down the cold wine. Dan smirks. “Looks like you’re overdressed, darling.” He reaches for the wine bottle. Carol looks at his gelled-back hair and his fancy new shirt, and stands up.

“Don’t start.” Her voice is as lifeless as the scorched geranium.

He raises an eyebrow, “Start what?”

Nothing. If she waits long enough, he’ll leave off. No fun unless she fights back. No fun unless she ups the ante. Suddenly, she’s seized with restlessness on the hot deck. She drains her glass. “I’m not staying.” Slipping off her high-heeled shoes, she scrambles down the steps and feels her way gingerly onto the gravel path.

“Don’t hurry back!” he calls after her.

“I won’t. Don’t worry,” she thinks, and breaks into a fantasy about bolting down the gravel path, never to set eyes on Dan again. But she doesn’t make for the gate. Instead she seeks out her hosts in the begonia bed.

“Did you need something?” asks Sophie, her knees in the dirt.

“I just wanted to join you.”

Sophie smiles, and points at the bundle on the ground. Kimber lies on a patchwork quilt, her bushy tale protruding onto the dirt.

“Dead dogs look one hell of a lot better than dead humans.” Robert stares at the animal.

“A hell of a lot better than some live ones,” Carol says, and glances toward the deck. Then she looks down to hide the pink flush that she can feel climbing her neck. And from deep in her throat, a bubble of laughter fights its way up. She can’t help it, she’s just pictured Dan wrapped in a patchwork quilt awaiting eternal rest in a begonia bed, his neat dainty feet stretched out on the dirt.

“Are you all right?” Sophie asks.

“Just hot.” She tries to smother the violent, comical picture, but it lurks in her mind like a sudden passion. And the bubble of laughter tickles her windpipe once again.

Robert puts down his shovel and stands like a preacher in front of the grave. “Goodbye, Kimber. You were a good companion.” He throws in a handful of dirt. “And a fantastic ratter.”

Sophie wipes her eye, but she’s watching Robert and not the dog. She throws in a handful of dirt too, and turns to Carol, “Let’s leave him to finish up.”

Side by side, the two women walk back to the house. Carol struggles to control her thoughts. She doesn't want Dan dead; wishes him no harm. But the sudden picture jumped out at her from nowhere, and she can't shrug it off.

"Feels like the end of an era," Sophie says.

"Will you get another dog?"

"Nah. We'll manage without one for a while."

They're approaching the deck now. Dan is sweating in his stiff shirt. The bottle is almost empty, and Carol feels him watching her, cranky and ready to nip. The smile flutters to her lips before she can stop it.

On the deck Sophie nods at Dan, "Ready for some food, right?"

"Right!" he says.

Carol flops into a white plastic chair. She's ready too—suddenly full of appetite, and ready to eat. She wonders if it's the wine or the sun that's brought on the giddiness. It feels good. "The end of an era," she says over and over in her mind. She looks over at her husband and smiles. "Maybe I can manage without one for a while," she thinks.