

THE SILENCE

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When he tried to think of it, he could not remember why they had fought and why he had left. At first. Then, slowly, he remembered the blur of yelling, pushing, pulling, hatred, and bitterness. He was embarrassed. Had he overreacted? As the memories came to him, harsh and painful, he tried to push them away and forget them. They reminded him he was a fool and a hypocrite and he didn't want to think of the consequences now. Lover's fights are often this way in retrospect: deep inside you know what has occurred yet you don't want to remember the details. You begin to remember the emotions felt, the words said, the actions done and a feeling of shame followed by uncertainty fills you. You don't want to admit you were wrong. Only this time, as Fred tried to hide from the memories, there was little he could do. He felt trapped. Though Fred was unsure what would happen next, he was fairly sure it was over. Or was it? It was up to him now. He didn't want to be certain yet.

So when the phone rang and it was Caroline, he was surprised.

"I need your help," she said.

"Why? What happened?" Did something even worse than he remembered occur? What was he leaving out?

"My Aunt Joan is coming today. You know that. She wants to meet you and I can't bear to be without somebody when she is here. You have to come."

"Tonight? I can't. I told you Lisa was coming . . ." he stopped. When he said the name of his friend, pieces of memory coalesced in his exhausted mind, forming one big memory.

Caroline was quiet and Fred didn't know what to say. He wanted to avoid any more problems right now. He didn't want to recognize there was something wrong between them. Like so many times before, he had said the wrong thing and was helpless to correct it. All he could muster was a quiet, frustrated, "Please don't do this again."

"It's nothing. I just need you to do this for me."

“I don’t know why you have to act like this. There’s nothing going on.”

“Just forget it. Never mind. I’m sorry I asked. Goodbye.”

“Wait. Okay, I’ll come over. But what does this mean?”

She was quiet for a second. “Just be here by six.”

She hung up and the phone was silent.

“What do you mean this girl is going to stay with you?”

Fred tried to save this news until dinner was over but the wine coupled with his good mood caused him to be careless with his tongue. He regretted opening his mouth.

“We’re just friends. We grew up together.”

“Does she know you have a girlfriend?”

“I think so.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t think it ever came up before.”

“How often do you talk to this girl?”

“A few times a week. Mostly by e-mail.”

“She can’t stay with you,” Caroline continued. “I won’t allow it.”

“It’s not really up to you so don’t tell me what to do.”

“About this, yeah, I can tell you what to do.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting upset about, anyway, you’ll be there. You can watch us continually for all I care.”

Caroline wrinkled her nose and glared at Fred. “Ew, I’m not staying at your place with some other girl. Forget it. How sick is that? Don’t assume I’m going to do that just because you want me to.”

“Why are you acting like this? I’m not trying to hide anything from you.”

“That’s what you want me to think. I know you fucked her.”

“We never even dated.”

“I’m not talking about dating. I know you did it. I can tell by that look on your face.” Pushing hard against the wobbly wooden table, Caroline shoved her chair back, knocked over both glasses of wine, and rushed from the kitchen.

Fred watched the spreading pools of red and tried to understand what went wrong. I should keep my mouth shut, he thought. Then he picked up a now empty glass and tried to discern the reflection of his face on its clear surface.

Fred did not have much time to get ready. He looked out the window, checked on the weather, watched the wind blow through the maple trees across the street, and figured it would be cool tonight. He hoped this meeting with Aunt Joan would not last long: Lisa was coming and he did not want to risk another confrontation with Caroline. But did it matter now? These confusing situations happen quickly. One minute everything is nice and ordered and safe and the next there are complications and confusion and few solutions.

He was annoyed with Caroline's psychic drama over her Aunt's visit. He had been hearing about it for two weeks and he was tired of being caught in the middle of Caroline's mood swings, her agitation and her elation. Her feelings were mixed about her aunt. When Caroline's parents died, Aunt Joan was the only one near who could care sufficiently for her. Having no children herself, Aunt Joan took Caroline in, raised her, and made her one of her own, but at what price?

Fred went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Why did Caroline have to be so anxious about her aunt? Couldn't she just relax? Maybe all the expectations, pressure, and the desire for perfection were too much. Why did Caroline allow herself to get this way? Could she ever change? He squeezed a thick glob of white paste on the natty bristles and began to brush.

From what he could piece together from Caroline's comments about Aunt Joan, she was not an easy woman to live with. She held some high position in her local government, a seat on the city council or something similar, and was always involved in high-profile projects such as new business initiatives, housing development and educational reform. Consequently, Aunt Joan was often on the evening news and developed into something of a local celebrity. This exposure made Caroline's life difficult. Aunt Joan's standards of etiquette and appearance were unbearable. Caroline was expected always to dress appropriately no matter what the situation ("One just never knows when one will see someone important now does one, dear?") Caroline had to attend certain schools, have certain friends, behave in certain ways. Despite these heavy-handed rules, Aunt Joan was rarely around. Caroline would see her in the morning before school and briefly at night before bed. That was all. Aunt Joan wasn't there to enforce the rules but Caroline was unable to break any of them either. The first time Caroline would stray from the golden path, Aunt Joan seemed magically to appear and right the wrong. It occurred

to Fred that Caroline was like the abandoned kids in a story he covered. These kids were frightened, untrusting, quick to anger as they struggled with their sense of loss and quiet despair.

He washed his mouth with water but when he finished his teeth felt slimy, still not clean. He opened his mouth wide, inspecting the teeth in the mirror, and decided they looked presentable enough so he gave up brushing and went to his room, rummaging through the pile of clothes on the closet floor for a pair of semi-clean jeans. He then searched the rack of hanging shirts for a suitable counterpart to the pants, deciding finally on a light blue oxford as Aunt Joan undoubtedly would require a button-down shirt in her presence.

As he buttoned the shirt, he remembered a conversation he once had with Caroline.

Fred: Don't worry about the button. If you don't find it you can get another one.

Caroline: No, you don't understand. My Aunt Caroline gave me this sweater. She'll notice if it has a different button.

Fred: Be serious. I don't think she'll care.

Caroline: You don't know my aunt. When I was growing up everything had to be in place, everything had to be perfect. That's why I have to find the button.

Fred: It can't have been that bad.

Caroline: You didn't have to live through it.

Fred: Everybody has their own problems. Everybody's childhood sucked.

Caroline: Not like mine. You have no idea what you're talking about.

Fred: Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

Caroline: Do you know what it's like to spend a lifetime looking for someone's approval and never get it?

Fred: (Silence).

Caroline: That's how bad it was.

He had nothing else to say so he helped her look for the button. They never found it.

He looked for his loafers, found them under the coffee table, and put them on. It was almost time.

The phone rang. It was Caroline.

"Are you coming?" It was not really a question but more of an exasperated statement, an expression of disbelief that he was still there

to answer the phone.

“I’m coming now.”

His face was grotesque and bulbous as it tried to curve and stretch and conform to the face of the glass. Deciding he had given her enough time to calm down, he finally left the table bleeding with wine and followed her. By this time, she had locked herself in her bedroom and refused to come out.

“Caroline open up. What the hell is the matter with you?”

There was no answer.

“Why are you acting like this?”

Nothing. He began to beat on the door. “Stop this. Open up. Let me in, I want to talk to you.” Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Go away.” The words were muffled, quiet, a good sign that she had calmed down.

“What are you doing? Come out so I can talk to you.” Bang. Bang. Bang. He could feel the thin wooden door vibrating under his fist and it gave him a sense of power and control.

There was no answer.

“Please open the door and talk to me. Tell me what is wrong.”

Nothing. Fred stood in the void of that silence and surrendered. As quickly as it appeared, the sense of power and control seeped from his body. There was nothing he could say to make Caroline open the door. He couldn’t understand why she felt this way about his friend, he had never given her any reason to think there was something between them, and he didn’t know what to say to change her view. The words they spoke lacked meaning and power. They didn’t know what they said to each other. All that existed between them was silence.

She spoke again. “I’m sick of you and your other women, your ‘friends.’ I can’t take it anymore.”

“You know there’s nothing between us. Why do you keep insisting there is?” Exasperation crept into his voice. Frustration filled his mind. What could he do? It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. If only he could make her understand that it wasn’t Bang. Bang. Bang. “Open the door. Now. Please.”

Bang, bang, bang.

Fred stood at the door of Caroline’s apartment, nervous and un-

easy, not knowing what to expect. When she answered the door, she looked at him and smiled, brown eyes bright, as if nothing was wrong. She wore the long black dress that he liked but he didn't know if she wore it for him or Aunt Joan. He noticed how the thin straps rested lightly on her tan shoulders and how the fabric then fell and expanded to hold her rounded breasts, her curved hips, and then fell loosely about her thin ankles. Her hair was up and pinned behind her head with a brown clip, a sign of seriousness.

"Don't stare at me like that; it makes me nervous. Just come in," she said.

He walked in without saying a word and headed for the couch.

"Take off your shoes," she said.

"So where is this famous aunt?" Fred asked as he removed his loafers. He could still feel, faintly, the slime clinging to his teeth.

"Don't leave them there. Put them by the door," she said.

He waited a moment before complying with her wishes. "Where is she?"

"She'll be here in about half an hour. I wanted you to come early so I could talk to you."

"What do we need to talk about?"

"Don't act this way. You know what has happened between us and it's obvious we can never be the same."

"You saw to that."

"You didn't necessarily help matters either," she said, a smile playing along her lips.

"I didn't sleep with somebody else."

"Not yet," and the smile disappeared.

"Is there a point to this talk or did you just want to attack me again."

She looked away, turning her head so he could only see her profile etched sharply against the backdrop of the white wall, took a deep breath, and said, "I want to make this work."

Fred laughed.

"Don't laugh. Please. I mean it." She turned to look at him again and her eyes were calm, serious, and sad. "We can work through this. But we both have to try."

"You're serious?" Fred wasn't prepared for what she said. Her words only added to the uncertainty he felt. He couldn't let her know what he

was thinking. "I don't know. My mind's messed up. I can't think. I don't want to think anymore." Is this why he had come here? Did he think, in the swirling eddies of his thought, if he came here tonight the dishonesty between them would disappear and their old world would magically reappear? Now, confronted with exactly that vision of life, what did he want?

"Don't you love me anymore?" she said, moving on the couch next to him, putting her hand on his. Her hand was damp, warm, and comforting.

"I don't think that really matters now."

"Of course it does. If you love me, we can fix this."

Was that true? "No we can't," he pushed her hand away from his. "Love is not some amazing cure for all the terrible things in life. There are some things that can't be fixed. There are some things that should never happen."

"We can get beyond this."

He still didn't know what to think but he couldn't show any sign of weakness. He looked at her, saw her sad eyes, her earnest expression, and thought of the possibility. When he looked at her face he didn't know what he saw, there was something else at work here, an underlying force that tugged and pulled at them, forcing them into patterns of behavior, repeating the old story.

"Why are you bringing this up now?" he asked. "What's really wrong?"

She still refused to open the door so he picked up a fallen glass, filled it with wine, and sat on the couch. His fist felt hot along the knuckles where he had hit the unyielding bedroom door. His mind was slowing down, it was no longer fiery and petulant, but he could not understand why Caroline had suddenly exploded. His breathing, only labored and forced a few minutes ago, became less harried and agitated. He took a drink. The warm liquid and the sharp aroma calmed him even more.

He sat confused on the couch for what felt like a long time. He wasn't sure what to do now. Should he stay and try and deal with this madness or should he leave and let Caroline calm down on her own? Before he could decide, Fred heard a click and a brushing sound as the bedroom door opened and Caroline walked into the room, slow and

cautious. They looked at each other in silence for several minutes.

Caroline was the first to speak.

"I need to tell you something and I need for you not to say anything as I'm doing it," she began and then quickly put her finger to Fred's lips when he naturally moved to speak. "No, please don't say anything. I need to get this out."

He looked at her, at her sad brown eyes, and the sense of the unknown that had taken root in his consciousness expanded. Strangely, he wasn't wary of this unknown, it only made him more curious as to what Caroline was about to say.

He looked at her and said nothing. She looked down at the faded blue rug.

"I slept with somebody else," she whispered through tears.

As always, Caroline didn't answer immediately. She sat and looked at Fred. Then she turned away and looked at the wall or the ceiling or the carpet.

"I'm right, aren't I? There is something else going on here. Talk to me. Tell me. Please, what is wrong?"

She continued to ignore him.

"You can never talk when there is a need for it. The times when we need to talk the most are the times when you are the most quiet. Do you know that?"

Caroline looked at Fred again. Outside he heard the wind on the road. Her lips began to part, slowly, revealing her white teeth. She was about to speak. Then she stopped. She sat straight and moved from Fred. She ran to the window and peered down to the road below. When she again faced the room any trace of what she may have said was gone and her face was tight and restrained.

"She's here."

Now the whole situation made sense to Fred. Caroline's actions made sense. The accusations made sense. The sudden argument made sense. Despite Caroline's announcement, he felt glad that now, at long last, he could understand.

He noticed Caroline looking at him, waiting for a response, but he merely sat with his own thoughts. Was it that easy? Had he broken some code? Did the silent language between men and women suddenly

make sense?

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. “I don’t know.”

Fred wasn’t sure what he wanted now. Did he want the details or did he want to remain ignorant? He looked at Caroline: did she look different? Her soft luminescent face was surprisingly blank after such an admission and her eyes were empty as they stared at him. He thought she was searching him for an answer or a direction, but he didn’t have one. He felt relieved. Did she ask him a question?

It didn’t matter. He had nothing to say. He stood up and walked toward the door.

“Hello, Cari, how are you? You look great,” Aunt Joan said as she walked through the door and caught Caroline in a light embrace.

Fred noticed Caroline immediately changed. She stiffened visibly as Aunt Joan hugged her and she returned the hug with an awkward pat on the back. Her tough and restrained demeanor changed and in the presence of the older woman she became an awkward nine-year-old child struggling through ballet lessons. She smiled widely, she laughed with an almost maniacal giddiness, and her eyes shown with faint apprehension. She almost closed the door on Aunt Joan before the older woman was inside the apartment. As Fred watched this embarrassing scene unfold he became self-conscious as he realized he was now subjected to Aunt Joan’s judgement. And for what? Aunt Joan turned and looked at him but didn’t say anything. For several seconds they looked at each other, silent, self-conscious children unsure what to do.

Caroline realized she had not introduced Fred and finally said, “Aunt Joan, this is Fred,” with a tone of familiarity that signified to Aunt Joan she should already know who he is.

They shook hands. Fred watched her as she muttered the regular pleasantries, “It’s nice to meet you” and “We’ve heard so much about you,” but there was something in Aunt Joan’s face, the unfocused look in her eye, the downward turn of her mouth, that caused Fred to be suspicious. What was she thinking about right now? Fred could feel her thin dry hand under his bigger sweaty grip and it was the only part of her that seemed alive. Her body was small and her presence was uncommitted, as if she wasn’t there. Fred returned the niceties and remained quiet for a few more moments, not knowing what to do next but hoping

that Caroline would say something.

Aunt Joan looked around the room. "So this is the apartment," she said.

"Yes," Caroline said quickly. "What do you think? It's small but nice."

"It's fine. I'm sure you're still working on it," Aunt Joan said.

Caroline was quiet. She wasn't still working on it. Fred tried to escape the awkward moment by removing himself to the couch. Awakened by this sudden movement, Caroline finally jumped into action. "Here Aunt Joan," she offered, "sit over here, in the big chair."

"In that thing? Surely darling you must be joking." When Caroline moved to speak, Aunt Joan continued. "It doesn't look comfortable at all. I'll sit in this chair," and she sat in the chair next to the couch and, by extension, next to Fred.

Caroline was upset now and determined to change Aunt Joan's choice of seating. "It really is comfortable. Everybody says it is. Isn't it Fred?"

Understandably not wanting to be caught in the middle, Fred said, "Some think so" and laughed while glancing over at Aunt Joan. Since he didn't know what to do, he saw nothing wrong with sharing a little joke with Aunt Joan.

She ignored him. "Well, never mind. I don't like the looks of it. But," Aunt Joan began as she once again surveyed the room, "this is a very cute place. I remember that table from your parent's house."

"Yes, I took it out of storage," Caroline said.

"Well you'll get new furniture when you two get married anyway, so don't worry about what you have or don't have now."

Fred and Caroline avoided the other's glance and sat in silence.

Caroline grabbed Fred by the arm and forced him to stop. He turned to her, "What do you want?"

"Don't leave like this. Stay. I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Please," she continued, pulling on his arm, pulling him deeper into the room, "don't leave."

"I don't know what to stay right now."

"Please don't go. Let me explain."

He surrendered and followed her to the couch. They sat for several

minutes, not speaking, not knowing how to behave toward each other. Fred didn't want to be the first to speak but the longer he remained quiet the more his mind began to move toward the inevitable questions: Who? When? Where? Why? WHY? WHY?

"Just let me explain a little more," Caroline said, disrupting the silence.

"There is nothing else to explain. I don't want to hear any justification."

"It happened one night when you were away . . . You're away all the time. What do you want me to do? I can't be alone. I can't stand it." She began to cry.

Fred ignored the tears. He wanted to remain quiet. "When, which time I was away?" He immediately regretted asking but couldn't stop himself.

"I don't know. When you were in Indiana researching some story, I think."

"In Indiana? For the story about capital punishment? Oh, Christ, I can't believe this. I was only gone three days." Despite his efforts to ignore it, Fred's curiosity pushed him forward. There were many questions and images now forming in his mind. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know more and if knowing would make the situation better. But he was thinking about it now, and thinking was bad.

"It really was an accident. I didn't plan it. I went out with Cheryl and Wendy—"

"Be quiet! I don't want to hear. It doesn't matter. All that matters is what you did."

"I felt abandoned. I didn't know what to do."

"That's a hell of an excuse."

"I can't stand you going away all the time. I don't know what you are doing."

"I'm not doing anything. Why would you think that?"

"Don't lie to me. I'm not stupid. I know you've been seeing that Lisa girl."

Fred stood up and headed for the door again. He wasn't going to bother and defend himself against that allegation. Caroline jumped in his way.

"Wait! I haven't told you everything yet. Don't leave."

Fred ignored her and walked out the door.

“Well, what’s wrong now? Don’t you have anything to say?” Aunt Joan asked, peering at the quiet couple.

“Aunt Joan,” Caroline laughed nervously, “we haven’t even talked about it yet.”

Fred remained quiet, a little stunned, waiting for some answers from Caroline.

Aunt Joan looked surprised. “But didn’t you tell me that he’s the one or some other romantic nonsense like that?”

Sitting in the big comfy chair, surrounded by a deep pool of plush fabric, Caroline fidgeted uncomfortably. Fred could see she didn’t know what to do. The awkward child ballerina emerged again, red-faced and squirming. Fred wasn’t sure what to do either; he was more than a little surprised by this newest revelation. Should he come to Caroline’s aid or allow her to deal with this situation alone? She did bring this problem upon herself, after all. But, since he was in the room, and part of the unfolding action, he felt that Aunt Joan was also questioning him. He searched for something to say, anything that could move the conversation in another direction, but he came up with nothing.

“Please, Aunt Joan, we don’t need to talk about this now.”

“Alright but it is important. You are 25, Cari, you need to start thinking of these things. You can’t wait much longer or you’ll end up old and alone.”

“Would you like something to drink?” Fred asked abruptly.

Aunt Joan looked at him, trying to remember who he was. “No thanks. I thought we could go out for something. Did you two eat?”

“Yes,” they said together though it wasn’t true.

“Okay. How about some desert?”

Fred was nearing his car when Caroline caught up to him and grabbed his arm.

“Don’t leave.”

“Leave me alone. Go back inside.”

“You can’t do this to me. You can’t leave.” She pulled on his arm. “I am.” He pulled on his arm.

“No.”

Caroline pulled hard on his arm and Fred pulled just as hard back. They were engaged in a furious tug-of-war on the sidewalk, Caroline

trying to steal Fred's arm and Fred trying to grab it back.

"I'm tired of your paranoid dreams; your excuses for your behavior."

"You can't tell me you haven't done anything with this Lisa."

Fred finally rescued his arm from Caroline's grip. "I haven't seen her in five years. How the hell am I supposed to have slept with her?"

"How do I know you haven't seen her in years? You could be lying."

"I'm not lying."

"She was with you in Indiana."

Fred turned away and opened the car door. Caroline grabbed the open door, refusing to allow Fred to close it.

"Please don't go. I need you. My Aunt Joan is coming tomorrow."

"That has nothing to do with me. I hope you have a good time."

"I can't take her alone."

"Let go of the door."

"Please. She'll bother me about not planning for the future. She makes me feel like a failure."

"In some things you are a failure. Deal with it."

She let go of the door and looked at him, surprised and hurt. He slammed the door and drove home.

As they placed their orders for ice cream, Fred looked at his watch. He had about two hours before Lisa arrived. Maybe he shouldn't go, he thought. Then everything will be fine again. He remembered a scene from last night, the revelation and the shock and the anger. No, he did not want to remember. He tried to stop thinking. It was Caroline's fault so she should deal with the consequences, not him. He did not do anything and should not surrender to Caroline. He couldn't respect himself if he gave in.

He was startled to notice Caroline looking at him. Had he spoken aloud? Had she heard his thoughts?

"Don't worry. You won't be late for your date," she said and handed him a cone.

He grabbed the cone and reached in his pocket for money but Aunt Joan stopped him. "Don't worry. It's on me," she said and smiled at him for the first time.

Before he could say thanks, Fred began licking the ice cream as it

was already dripping down and over the lip of the cone. He walked over to the table Aunt Joan had chosen for them and noticed Caroline talking in animated gestures while Aunt Joan calmly listened. He hoped they weren't talking about him.

"So Fred, what is it that you do again? Some kind of writing?"

"I'm a reporter," he said between quick licks.

"Yes, that's right. I had forgotten exactly what it was. Can you get a good job with that?"

Once again he felt cool ice cream touching his hand. He licked faster to stop the newest tide of surging iced milk. "Eventually. I like it well enough. I make a decent salary," he said quickly between more furious licks.

"Well I hope you make enough money to take care of my Cari. Lord knows that's not easy—"

"Aunt Joan!" Caroline protested and Fred noticed she was licking quickly at her cone too.

"What?" Aunt Joan asked innocently. "Don't forget I raised you. I know what you are like."

Fred continued to lick but it seemed no matter how fast he licked the ice cream only melted faster. He wondered why the ice cream was melting quickly; the weather was cool and the open doors invited the pleasant breezes inside. The strange thing Fred noticed was Aunt Joan had no trouble with her cone, which was almost finished.

"I'm getting good experience now so I hope to get a promotion by next year."

Aunt Joan laughed. "Nothing comes fast or easy in this world. You just have to work as hard as you can and hope the rest follows." As she finished her sentence she placed the last bit of cone in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

Fred turned and looked at Caroline. She looked different, sharp and focused. He looked at her as they finished their cones, wondering what she was thinking.

When Fred arrived home he was too tired to make it to bed so he kicked off his shoes, grabbed a blanket, and lay huddled wrapped in a cocoon on his couch. The silence of the room screamed at him, repeating the words and the emotions of the night. Words echoed through his mind constantly reminding him of all that had occurred. They were

never honest with each other and he couldn't be honest now. It was too late. She was too close. He couldn't tell Caroline now of the childish crush he had on Lisa. He couldn't tell Caroline that he had sought her after all these years, wondering where she was, wondering if she was married, wondering what would happen if they spoke again. He couldn't tell Caroline that he was looking for something. When he first read the e-mail Lisa sent he was surprised at its contents. She wrote, "If you're not busy, maybe I can come visit some weekend. What do you think? It has been a long time since we saw each other." In the jumble of the other words, bits of information, complaining about the job, these were the words that stuck out, these were the words he saw. He was alive with the sudden idea of possibility. Without thinking, he wrote her back, "That would be great. Come whenever you get a free moment." He sent the message and then thought there may be some problems. What was he looking for? He sighed. It didn't matter now. He needed to be honest with Caroline but it was too late for that now. In reality, he wanted it to be too late. It was easier that way. They were not honest people. They could not talk to each other. They did not know each other. He didn't think he could ever know Caroline and he didn't want to know her anymore. He had tried. Isn't this what mattered? He had no answer.

He lay, huddled against the increasing cold, his mind searching for emptiness, and, in the silence of the night, slowly fell asleep.

Fred climbed out of the car. "Well, it was nice to meet you Joan. Have a safe trip home."

To his surprise, Aunt Joan also got out of the car. "Don't be silly," she said, "give us a hug."

Fred avoided Caroline's glance as she came around the back of the car and leaned over, awkwardly, hesitantly, wrapping his arms around Aunt Joan's petite and bony shoulders and back. She still seemed impossibly small and light, not a body after all but a papier-mâché human put together with paper and glue.

"I'm sure we'll be seeing you again. Take care of yourself."

"You too. It was nice to have finally met you."

"Same here."

And with that, she returned to her seat in the car and drove away.

The couple stood together and watched the car creep away and continued watching until it disappeared over the hill. Fred looked at

Caroline. She was still watching the vanished car.

“I guess I’ll get going then.” He wasn’t sure if he made this sound like a question or a statement.

Caroline looked at Fred a moment, empty and blameless, seemed about to say something, thought better of it, and remained quiet. Turning away from him she said, “Yes, I guess that’s best,” and walked inside the building, stopping briefly to unlock the door and let herself inside. Fred watched her walk away then he got in his car and drove home through the night and into the silence.

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