

Gilded Shadows

Professor Paul Harris felt what he called the constriction. That tightness in the middle of his chest; as the conversation continued it spread throughout his torso, until any semblance of sincerity or his real self was drowned in its vortex.

Mrs. Phillips stood next to a bush of blooming hydrangeas, the white ribbon on her hat blowing in the breeze, holding a crystal wine glass full of garnet liquid. She smiled at him, but still, there it was, the constriction. Everything in him began closing up.

It wasn't her words that caused it; they were perfectly pleasant, speaking about her dog, and how difficult he had been to train, but then she and her husband had finally been able to do it. And they were so happy that Chance was housetrained. No, it

wasn't the words, it was something else. But when having a conversation, what was there besides the words?

There were facial expressions, of course, and body language, but how could those simple things cause the constriction? Paul thought there must be something attached to the words; he could almost see it, some sort of force, sticking to the words, so that when someone spoke, the force pushed its way into his being. But there were times, like when he spoke to Stella, that the words were weighed down with something sweet, that attached to his heart and bathed it in brightness, that let it open like one of the crimson roses on the bush in his front yard in springtime.

As Mrs. Phillips went on, talking about the dog show she was training Chance for, as Paul nodded and smiled when appropriate, his mind floated back to comfort; back to his

garden, to the huge old oak tree that created shade dappling over the grass, moving over it, a rapid alternation between shadow and light. The thought of it caused a small expansion within him, but then the woman kept talking, and the small expansion was lost beneath the torrent of her words.

Paul sipped his champagne cocktail and made a comment about a dalmatian his parents had when he was growing up, and how difficult it had been to housetrain, and how hard it had been to let him go when it was clear that he was untrainable. Mrs. Phillips smiled, a pleasant, polite smile, and said that's why she was so relieved that Chance had come through.

Paul wanted to escape, but where could he go? A man came up to them, tall and young, and Paul saw his chance. "Looks like I'm low. Would you like another drink?"

The woman shook her head and turned her attention to the young man. Paul veered onto a path that led into a grove of trees. He certainly didn't cut such a fine figure as the young man; he was middle aged, his large paunch showed in spite of the flattering cut of his suit, he had a receding hairline, and the hair that he did have was being overtaken by grey. No, he certainly wasn't what he had once been in his Eton days, tall and athletic, his interaction with women effortless. But he had never found anyone to captivate him, to make him want to know more, to go further.

Now he was middle aged, and Stella was only a dream. But he cherished their moments together; they stood out in his mind as reliefs: her soft, shiny, honey-colored hair, the strands glistening as they were touched by the sunlight streaming through the window behind her, as she sat at the desk in his

study grading papers; Stella sipping a cup of tea from the purple geranium

covered cup and saucer on winter afternoons, the clock over the mantle ticking as the light outside softened into shadows. With Stella, he finally felt free. But she was a young girl. In a year she would graduate and he would never see her again. And what would she want with her fifty-five-year-old professor?

No, it was useless. With Katherine he didn't feel the constriction, but there was no expansion either. They went along together, as they had for years, traveling in the same direction, looking in the same direction. There were times, as they sat together in the evening, Paul reading and Katherine working on her needlepoint, her head bent down, the lamplight resting on her grey hair—short wiry tendrils—as she hummed an aria from Carmen, that he felt he couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to

get up and walk out, walk anywhere away from her, from the sound of her voice as she hummed, from her steadiness, her evenness. But he would only look up at her, sigh deeply, then go back to his book.

“What is it Paul dear?” she would say.

“A particularly moving passage.”

“Ahhh.” And she would go back to putting the needle in, and pulling it out, and putting it in, and pulling it out, and putting it in, and pulling it out, until she had a bouquet of flowers or a horn of plenty that she would hang in his study.

Paul had met her at the university; she had been a secretary for a colleague who was retiring. At the retirement party she had worn a red dress with red lipstick, and a silver barrette in her short hair. He had liked her style. They had gone on one date, then another, then another, until one day he figured it was getting too

much to keep going on dates and that she should move in. So she had moved into his large, drafty, Victorian house and they had kept on going the way they had before.

Every morning she would make coffee, fill her mug and stand in the kitchen, looking out the back window at the large stone birdbath in the middle of the yard, watching the sparrows jump in and out of the water. When he came in, she turned around and pecked his cheek, and said, “good morning Paul dear.” She would get down his mug and fill it for him. He would thank her and sit down at the table. She would continue gazing out the window; every now and again she would make a remark about what she had to do at work, or how far Professor Brighton had gotten on his latest article, or what she needed to pick up at the market that evening. Paul would nod and say “mm-hmm,” gazing at her slender back encased in a cardigan sweater.

Paul sat on the cold, hard, stone bench, half covered by trees, watching people standing in groups, holding their drinks, talking and laughing. Katherine had an event that day, some sort of get together with some of the other secretaries, so she hadn't accompanied him. She was a comfort to him at parties; there was a cord of emotion between them, an easy companionship.

He saw a young woman join the young man in the suit, and he thought he was having a vision. The honey-colored hair, the petite, slender body; that could be Stella. The young woman laughed; it rolled through the air, gently, like the tinkling of a small bell. Stella's laugh. She put her hand on the young man's arm, and Paul felt something much worse than the constriction, something much more intense. He stood up. Maybe that wasn't her. He edged closer, keeping close to the trees, keeping his eyes

on the young woman's face. Would she have Stella's large, sensitive eyes?

He reached the edge of the path. She turned and smiled at the young man, and he saw that familiar smile, he had seen it so many times. First it revealed the even teeth, then it traveled up to the eyes, and they shone with a soft light, that soft light he thought of in the dark hours of night when memories came back to him, that had taken the sting away from their sharp edges. That soft light that made life tolerable. And now, it was shining at the young man. Paul clutched his chest. The glow. His glow.

But it wasn't his. And what was more natural than for a young woman to be with a young man? She turned; she had seen him. She held up her hand and smiled. Paul let himself pretend, for just a moment, that the smile was his, everything about her

only for him. He smiled back and waved. He walked up the path.

“Stella, so good to see you, I didn’t think you would be here.”

“I sometimes grade papers for Professor Smith also.”

“Ah, of course, I had forgotten.”

“This is James. James, Professor Harris.”

“Good to meet you,” said Paul, holding out his hand. He looked at the young man’s chiseled, handsome face. Of course Stella would prefer him. It only made sense. He felt with every ounce of his being that he needed to get away from the party.

“James is a pre-med student.”

“Ah, how nice. And how did you two meet?”

“I saw her at a coffee shop,” said James, “and well, you know the rest.”

Paul forced a smile. “Yes, of course. Wonderful girl here.”

“Oh yes,” said James, throwing an arm around her.

Paul cleared his throat several times. “Oh excuse me, I had better fill my drink. I’m low as you can see. If you’ll excuse me.”

“See you Friday,” said Stella.

“Yes, see you then.”

Paul stumbled past Stella onto the path that led to the gate. He opened it and traversed the lawn to the driveway and got into his car. He didn’t remember how he made it home, but there he was, standing on the doorstep in front of the old oak door. A light was on in the living room; Katherine had gotten home

before him. He put his hand on the doorknob but hesitated. Something in him dreaded going inside. He knew that Katherine would smile at him, offer him a cup of tea, and give him an outline of the event she went to. Then she would ask him questions. And he couldn't bear to answer them.

He knew he was a fool, and what was worse than that, he was an old fool. But he couldn't help what he felt, the vein that had opened up in his chest, that poured out pain and bitterness.

“Hello Paul.”

Paul turned around. His neighbor, who was always out walking his huge grey husky, waved and smiled.

“Hello Tim, how are you?”

“Fine. Did you forget your key?”

“Oh no, I was just...uh...I was just going in. Have a good evening.”

“You too.”

He turned the knob and entered.

“Paul dear, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“You’re back early.”

“Yes, well, you know, it was one of those parties, that...you know, the same old thing.”

“I understand, but Jane does throw great parties.”

“Yes, she does. I’m going to go change.” Paul climbed the stairs, listening to every creak of the tortured old wood of the staircase. He sat down on the bed and looked at the lengthening shadows created by the start of dusk. The sight of Stella with the

young man floated before him like a specter. He stood up, slipped off his suit jacket and pulled on his brown cardigan sweater. He took off his shoes, placed them in the closet and pulled on his slippers. He went to the window, pushed aside the curtain and looked out onto the street. The eastern sky had deepened into a glowing cobalt blue; soon it would be enveloped in darkness. He heard sounds from the kitchen; Katherine was preparing dinner. The thought of looking across the table at her, telling her about the party, filled him with dread. He needed a drink. It was the only way to get through the evening.

He entered the kitchen and saw Katherine standing at the stove, stirring a pot, humming.

“I think I’ll have a drink tonight. Would you like one?”

“Oh, no, thanks. But you go ahead.”

Paul went into the living room, to the drink cart against the far wall, and poured a finger of whiskey into the finely etched cocktail glass Katherine had given him last Christmas. He took a sip, then returned to the kitchen.

“So how was the party?” asked Katherine, as she scooped rice into a bowl.

“It was OK, you know, a huge spread, string quartet set up in one end of the garden, everything crystal.” Paul took a long sip of his drink. “Oh look, I’m already low, I don’t think I poured a full finger before. I’ll be right back.”

Katherine didn’t answer as she forked chicken cutlets onto a serving platter. Paul refilled his glass and returned to the kitchen. When Katherine turned from the stove, setting the bowl of broccoli on the table, he felt that he didn’t love her. That was why he had never asked her to marry him. He had believed his

own excuses, when he and Katherine had talked about it and he had said, “I don’t need a piece of paper to define what we have. I don’t need some sort of external thing on it. We know what we have, and really, in the end, that’s all that matters isn’t it?” He had honestly believed that was how he felt. But he had been lying to himself.

Katherine sat down and smiled at Paul. “Who was there?”

“Oh well, half the department, and you know, I never saw Jane. You know how she is, the whole time she’s in the kitchen, directing the staff. I don’t know why she even gives the parties. She never leaves that kitchen.”

Katherine chuckled. “She is rather eccentric, isn’t she? You know, I ran into her in town. She was with one of her teacher’s assistants, and they were sitting in the coffee shop looking very cozy.”

Paul sipped his drink and sighed. “You know how I feel about gossiping.”

Katherine’s lips pursed. “I hardly call it gossip. We were just discussing how eccentric she is, and so I was giving an illustration. In fact, you interrupted right in the middle of my story.”

“Well you have a very narrow definition of gossip.”

“I see.” Katherine concentrated on her broccoli, as she speared a piece and chewed.

“And you know how intense Jane is about her students. She’s a very devoted teacher. So for you to say she was getting cozy with him was gossip plain and simple.” Paul took another sip of his drink.

“Really Paul, do you have to drink so much? You know how you get. I hope you won’t be like this when we go to the concert tomorrow night.”

Paul looked at her and sighed. “Of course I won’t dear. Now tell me about your event.”

In the dimness of the concert hall, Paul watched Katherine fold and unfold her hands, place them on her knees, place them on the armrests. It was very distracting. He put his hand over hers and squeezed. She smiled, took in a breath and settled into her chair.

There was a moment of hushed silence; the pianist lifted his hands and played the loud, sharp opening chords of the Grieg piano concerto. Paul settled in. It was a favorite of his. But he wasn’t prepared for what he was going to feel when the second

movement began. As the strings created a canvas of luminous beauty that the piano set its tender notes onto, Stella's eyes floated through the rising music, expanding into it as the sound flowed through the room like a stream of light. A feeling opened up in him, like a beam of sunshine resting on the ground: steady, serene, peaceful—he felt that something in Stella's being answered to the lush beauty of the music. Tears came to his eyes. He turned his head slightly to the right, so that his eyes were hidden from Katherine.

As the second movement led into the third, and the piece became more agitated and filled with passion, he knew he had to end it with Katherine. He couldn't go on like this anymore. Seven years had played out whatever had been between them. The piece ended, the lights came up and it was intermission. Eyes still on the floor, he held out his arm. Katherine placed a

hand on it and he led her out to the lobby. People milled around talking; there were lines to the bathrooms.

“Isn’t that Stella?”

Paul turned. Stella stood next to the window, talking to the young pre-med student, her eyes fixed on his face, smiling, putting her hand on his arm as they laughed.

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Who is she with? I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

“He’s a student. And I don’t know if he’s her boyfriend.”

The young man put his arm around Stella, pulled her close to his side and whispered something in her ear. Paul had to leave. “Katherine dear, I’m terribly sorry, I’m not feeling well, I need to go home.”

“Really? What’s wrong?”

“It’s my stomach. It must have been that meal we had at the restaurant. I guess the clams aren’t agreeing with me.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“No, you stay. You’ve been looking forward to this for weeks.”

“I know but...”

“Please dear. I want you to stay. I know how much you want to hear the Beethoven. Liz can drop you off afterwards.”

“Alright, if you’re sure.”

“Yes, please.”

“Feel better dear.”

“Thank you.”

Paul rushed through the lobby, pushed open the door and entered the cool darkness of the night. It was such a relief to be

under its cover, alone, no need to keep up any appearances. He breathed in the fresh night air, laced with a hint of honeysuckle from a large bush next to a bench. He sat down on the bench and looked up at the night sky. The light of a few stars emerged from the darkness, and the moon was a large, bright orb. Looking up at it, he felt free, under the cover of the darkness, his only companion the moon. From the corner of his eye he saw the door open and someone exit the building; he hoped it wasn't someone he knew, someone who would rip him from his solitude, and then he would have to adjust his being to their conversation, when all he wanted at that moment was to be, to think.

But the voice he heard in the darkness, saying his name, was a bright sound that reverberated through the air and entered his heart, adding a balm to his solitude. "Professor, I'm glad I

caught you. I had a question about those papers you asked me to grade. I couldn't figure out...." He watched Stella talk, covered in the cool dimness, next to the honeysuckle bush, and he forgot everything. Nothing else existed, and he felt a hint of something more, something that wasn't constrained by time, that seemed to continue forever. She smiled, through the dimness it was like a spark, she stopped talking about the papers and began talking about the concert.

"That second movement. It was beautiful, wasn't it?"

"Yes," replied Paul. "I felt...I felt it so deeply. More than ever before."

Stella looked down at the ground. "Yes, there was something about it for me too...."

Paul felt the inner expansion, and with each word Stella spoke it increased, erasing all the constriction; his heart

bloomed, as though it contained a summer garden, warm and fragrant, filled with vibrant streaks of color.

The door opened, and the young man walked towards them.

“Oh yes,” said Paul, “about the papers, I’m so sorry, I forgot to tell you that you are to grade them with different criteria. I’ll email it to you later.”

“Yes, right, thank you professor.”

The young man walked to her side. “The concert is going to begin again.”

“You two go in. I’m going to head home. Something...uh...something has come up.”

“Is everything OK prof?” asked the young man.

“Oh yes, of course. You two go in. Enjoy it.” Even through the dimness he saw Stella give him a wistful look. She turned and followed the young man.

Paul sat in his study, enjoying a cup of tea. The ticking of the clock over the mantle punctuated the silence; Paul felt the silence, he breathed it in. This would be his last cup of tea at the house for a while. Katherine’s things were gone, she had taken up residence in a small apartment above a boutique in town. The night of the concert they had stayed up until dawn; Katherine had been very calm. It turned out that she hadn’t been happy for a long time, and she put everything honesty before Paul: she had been having feelings for Professor Brighton for a while, and they had gotten a drink a few weeks before. Paul had been grateful that he hadn’t sacrificed himself to try and keep her

happy, since she wasn't happy anymore anyway, and her affections had already strayed.

He finished the tea, stood up, brought the cup and saucer to the kitchen and rinsed them out. He put them in the drainer where Katherine had put her empty coffee mug every morning, and he felt a strong pang of missing her. But as quickly as it came on, it passed.

One of the things he had realized in the past few weeks, spending time alone in his study every night, sitting in front of the fire, letting himself look at his feelings and unravel them, was that, in the end, Katherine had been more of a friend than anything. A companion, a fellow traveler.

He glanced at his watch. The car would be there in five minutes. He went upstairs, put on his traveling hat and picked up his suitcase. He paused at the threshold of the bedroom door.

Stella. Her face flooded his mind, his heart ached; was it a mistake to go away? He looked at the mellow sunlight slanting onto the old, threadbare hallway rug. Dust motes floated through the shafts of light, and once again, he felt that Stella's soul was present in the sunlight, in its bright, nourishing, warm light.

Every morning since the concert, he had been greeted by a faint echo of the joy he had felt as Stella had spoken to him, enshrouded in shadow, standing near the honeysuckle bush. He would get out of bed, go downstairs, and watch the vestiges of the sunrise disappear as the sun rose higher in the sky. One morning, as he watched the bright, fresh morning sunshine tumble down onto the back lawn, he had realized that it wasn't Stella's being that was in the music, or the sunshine; it was something that his love for her had helped him to see in those things. But what was it that he saw?

He didn't know.

Slowly, he made his way down the stairs, listening for the last time to the creaking staircase. He would begin his sabbatical at his brother's cottage in the countryside. He had spent a week there a few years ago; he remembered the quiet, and taking walks surrounded by the wildflowers in the meadow behind the house. They had been days of peace.

The driver knocked on the front door. Paul looked at the dear old house, the foyer and the staircase, the living room sitting empty, knowing it would be a long time until he saw it again. He turned and went out the door.

The house stood, the clock in the study ticking into the empty silence.

