

Up Against the Wall

Robert Taylor, Jr.

1.

It was the eve of his wedding and he was in despair because he loved another. He lingered in the cool basement of Penney's among the manikins and dress racks until the manager came down and said, "Ciezki, you've done enough down here today. Get on home and rest up for tomorrow night!" So he went over to Woolworth's and killed time by wandering up and down the aisles. He liked to watch the women buy their shiny tubes of lipstick and their dark curly eyelashes. He bought a bag of chocolate kisses.

On the bus his heart seemed overflowing with love. He longed to embrace each woman who brushed against him. The ride was one great swaying press of body against body. He would have remained standing in that aisle forever if they'd let him, but soon it would be time for his stop and tomorrow he would marry Dolly Rozek. It was fate. They had been engaged unofficially for seven years, officially for five. Perhaps he had loved her once. He was loving by nature—he knew he was. Look at the way he felt now on the bus. And it was worse on Saturdays when the high school girls shopped downtown. He always took the turkey special at Woolworth's so that he could keep his eye on them. Sometimes he went with them out onto the street and watched their movements, their quick free gestures, fragile little wrists, and moist red lips. Oh, they were beauties all right. Passion flowers. Love children. Real sweethearts. . . .

2.

He lived with his mother and her husband Coblentz in a house on Scott near Twenty-Fifth. When he walked in, Coblentz said, "Leonardo! Leonardo Da Cheezki!" It was Coblentz's way of telling him they were having pizza for dinner. Coblentz was large and muscular and had a massive face and long straight fingers. Lately he had complained of chills and had taken to wrapping a black woolen shawl around his shoulders. He ran a 24-hour laundromat on Layton Boulevard and had two daughters, fifteen-year-old twins named Charmayne and

Eva, who lived with their mother (the first Mrs. Coblentz) in an upper flat on Eighth Street off Mitchell, across from the new Kroger's. The twins visited their father often. They loved to tease Leonard. Tonight they rushed up to him and touched him freely. Once he told them they had better be less free with him unless they wanted him to do something to them that they wouldn't like, but they wouldn't stop. Finally he fell in love with Charmayne. She was his secret love, his real sweetheart. He liked Eva very much too, but Charmayne was his passion.

He got past Coblentz, broke for the kitchen, but they followed him through the hallway, giggling and touching him.

His mother was in the kitchen flattening dough. "Mick," she shouted, "get these girls outa here!" Eva said, "Oh, Mrs. Coblentz, can we do anything to help?" His mother kept her eyes on the dough. Leonard sat down and the girls put their hands on his shoulders, but Coblentz came right away and shooed his daughters into the living room. His mother spread sauce over the dough. She had learned to make pizza from an old boyfriend, an Italian named Carlo Rufini, who ran a Standard station near County Stadium, just off the Interstate. She had warned Leonard never to mention Carlo's name around Coblentz. Coblentz believed she had learned to make pizza on a TV recipe show. Leonard promised he would never tell. But she went out alone some nights when Coblentz was at the laundromat. Once from the living room window Leonard watched her walk to the corner, and it was Carlo's tall, dark form that he saw joining her.

"You stay away from those two girls," she said to Leonard as she scattered sausage over the sauce. "A married man has no business hanging around with sluts like that."

He promised. Then he reached into his pocket for a chocolate kiss. The bag was gone. He smiled. He could hear in the living room the ringing giggles of the two lovely little thieves.

3.

That night Leonard's brother George threw him a bachelor's party. Everybody got drunk. George had hired a band—the Maurice Mraz Troubadours, silver-haired Maurice on accordion, with bass, drums, and clarinet. Mraz was supposed to have brought the stripper, but she was not there. Leonard heard Coblentz ask Maurice when she was coming. Maurice said any minute, but later he announced on the microphone that she was ill and sent her regrets. George said he'd withhold half of Maurice's pay.

The next day George told Leonard that now was the time to ask for advice. It was after lunch, a matter of hours before the wedding. George considered himself wise because he had five children and was in line for promotion to assistant manager of the Kinney's Shoe Store on Mitchell Street. But he was two years younger than Leonard and his wife was Cherry Zaborowski. Cherry was not so bad in high school, but now she was fat and ugly and considered herself the intellectual of the family because she had read all of Jacqueline Susann and a lot of other novels besides. Also she was Dolly Rozek's cousin.

Leonard told George he didn't want advice. They were in front of the house.

He had just caught a glimpse of Charmayne across the street near the corner. She was surrounded by tall fair-haired boys. She saw Leonard and waved, and each of the boys turned to stare at him. Smoke came slowly from their small mouths. They wore thick-heeled pointed-toe shoes. In the midst of them Charmayne's face seemed the face of a goddess. His heart throbbed violently. It was a lovely moment.

Then he went with George. They had to find Coblenz. Midway through the party last night Coblenz had announced that he was going after his own stripper. He had not been seen since.

They tried the laundromat first, but he wasn't there. It was George's idea to look for him at the domes—"I'll bet he's sitting inside one of them warm domes," he said. The domes meant the horticultural gardens at Mitchell Park, a four block walk from the laundromat. There were two domes, huge geodesic structures that rose from the banks of the industrial basin like shiny machine-made breasts. Inside them it was warm and light. Red sawdust paths lined with little redwood benches wound through an abundance of palm fronds and ferns. The heat was a very humid heat.

George was right. Coblenz was there, alone on one of the redwood benches, staring at a lush green cluster of fern. He did not look up. George looked at Leonard and winked.

"Hey, Mick," he said, "doncha know who's gettin' married today?" He smiled big and put his arm around Leonard's shoulder.

"Who gives a shit."

"It's Leonard's wedding, Mick. You don't wanna be late, do you?"

Coblenz was silent. Leonard had nothing to say. He didn't care whether Coblenz came to the wedding or not. George sat next to Coblenz, motioning for Leonard to go to the lobby and wait, but Coblenz said, "Go away. Leave me alone, you greasy bastard," and George stood again. Leonard was thinking of how Charmayne had waved to him. Had she been waving goodbye? Then Coblenz spoke to him:

"You stay here. I got some words to say to you," and to George, "I said to get lost!"

George shrugged his shoulders. "You got about an hour and a half," he said to Leonard, and then he was gone and Coblenz started talking.

"I like this place. The air in here's warm like laundromat air. You don't get chills. It's good and warm. Sit down."

"No, thanks."

"Sit down."

Leonard sat. He thought: why does he always think he can order me around?

"Listen," Coblenz said, "I want you to tell me how long she's been running around with that Italiano behind my back."

Leonard was taken by surprise. An image of Carlo Rufini suddenly came to him: a bright smile, shiny white teeth, dark curly hair, forceful jaw and chin, thick neck and broad shoulders, colorful tattoos on each forearm ("Gina" with roses, "Mother" with lilies). Once years ago Carlo had come up silently on

Leonard from behind, when Leonard was sitting in the big stuffed rocker, and, putting his hand down firmly on Leonard's shoulder, had stopped the motion of the chair and said: "You are a good boy, eh. You always obey your mother."

Leonard told Coblentz he didn't know who he was talking about.

"Your mother, that's who. I mean your mother."

Coblentz suddenly smiled.

"So today you get married to that Rozek bitch." He laughed a little, then looked down at his feet. "Know what, Leonard? Last night I went looking for your mother. I didn't find her, but I know what she's been up to. What the hell's it all mean if she's gonna run around with a damned Italiano? You ask any priest. He'll tell you it's a sin and she'll pay for it too. You watch. You're going to tell me where I can find that fucking Italiano and I'm going to bust his nuts. I got the strength. Feel that muscle."

Leonard felt. It was an impressive muscle all right. Coblentz kept in shape. He lifted weights. Leonard had seen them in the basement, a silvery rod with heavy black rings of different sizes attached at each end, some heavy little barbells, and springs with chrome-plated handles. There was also a punching bag.

"I'm going to give you some advice," Coblentz continued. "You got to keep a tight ship. You can't let up on the reins. They can't take it. They got to be controlled."

Coblentz seemed calm. He stood and stretched. "You'll be a fool," he said, beginning to move for the exit, "if you show up for that wedding. I've known a lot of them Klught girls. Her mother was a Klught, and that Zaborowski woman and her little bitch Cherry. They're a bad lot."

Leonard followed him outside. They reached the edge of the park. The industrial basin lay stretched out beneath them, and beyond it was the skyline of the northside and downtown Milwaukee: low, squat skyscrapers and church spires. A gray haze hung over the entire northside and there was an odor of yeast in the air. The flat grayness stretching for the horizon in the east was Lake Michigan.

They sat down on one of the benches.

"All I need's his name. I can take it from there. What you do after that is your business. I'm going to bust his fucking nuts."

4.

At the wedding Leonard cried. The tears came when he was in the foyer waiting for his entrance. He pulled the fake handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped his cheeks with the little bit of cloth that was sewn onto the card-board. There was a record of a tenor singing "I Love You Truly," and it made him think of Charmayne. The tears came again when he was at the altar and the organ struck up "Here Comes the Bride." Then Dolly was at his side. To her left stood Charmayne and Eva and Cherry Ciezki. Charmayne's eyes glistened and her little ears sparkled with dangling rhinestones. The two held tiny white bouquets, wore pink organdy dresses and matching satin pumps. Charmayne was a perfect bridesmaid; she was so lovely he could not bear to look at her.

He saw her mother sitting near the front, Coblentz's Marie, her black hair curled in tight ringlets. Dolly's mother sat beside her, softly sobbing. Leonard's mother was on the other side of the aisle. She did not sob. Coblentz, of course, was not in the chapel.

Then he said the words he was supposed to say and when it was time he kissed the bride. Dolly. His wife. According to his mother, she would bear him strong and good-natured children. She was an inch taller than he was. She wore low-heeled shoes, but when he kissed her he had to raise himself slightly on his tiptoes. Her lips were moist, almost slippery, and she held his head with both hands, as if afraid he might miss or slip free to one side, but he neither missed nor slipped free.

5.

A reception was held in the hall of the same tavern where the bachelor party had taken place. Coblentz was not there. George gave Dolly a long kiss. Leonard kept having a fantasy of approaching Coblentz some day to ask for Chamayne's hand in marriage. He was thinking of it when Coblentz's Marie came up to him and shook his hand. "We've never met," she said, "but my daughters have often spoken of you. I hope you'll be very happy." In her eyes was a flash of the same gleam that sparkled deliciously in the eyes of Charmayne. He had to look to one side. "I knew your father," she said, lowering her voice. "You look just like him." Then she turned to Dolly and said, "Mrs. Ciezki, this is one whale of a man." Dolly looked confused. "Thank you," she said, and Coblentz's Marie moved on.

When Coblentz appeared at the doorway, Leonard saw him immediately. He was smiling. He looked around, sized up the place. He seemed in no hurry. A few people noticed him, but no one seemed alarmed. George tapped Leonard and said, "Look who's here." Leonard felt like laughing, but again tears came to his eyes. Dolly gave his arm a squeeze.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"My stepfather."

"Oh, not him! I know Mick Coblentz. That other guy. Who's the guy with him?"

Leonard knew the answer without looking, just as he had known Coblentz would come. The other guy was the betrayer, the Italiano, Carlo Rufini. He looked just as Leonard had expected him to look: dark, guilty, the shadow of a man. He held a bloody handkerchief to his nose and dark metallic curls dangled in disarray on his forehead. He wore a white, grease-stained teeshirt and his dark skin glistened with perspiration. Standing still, he seemed in motion. He staggered, swayed, shuddered, then leaned against the doorsill. Coblentz straightened him up. Rufini's knees buckled, but Coblentz pulled him closer to him and together they took a step forward. Light shone full on Rufini's face. One eye was swollen shut, and the other shone like polished glass. Motionless in its socket, it seem fixed in an unseeing stare. Coblentz led him into the room.

Everyone had stopped talking. By the time Coblentz and Rufini were almost in the center of the room the entire crowd, slowly and noiselessly and imperceptibly,

had moved back against the walls. Leonard was there too. He had moved as if enchanted by Rufini's open eye. Dolly tugged at his arm; she had moved with him. "What's he doing? What's he want?" she whispered.

Only Leonard's mother had not moved. She stood alone in the center of the room, her face as stern as ever, not a sign of a tear in her eyes.

Leonard told himself he was not to blame for what was happening. It did not matter that he'd told Coblentz the Italiano's name, given him the address of the Standard station. Coblentz would have found out from somebody else and all this would still be happening. It was fate. It was his mother's fault. Let her stand alone.

He wished he were down in the cool basement of Penney's with a cold soda and a bag of chocolate kisses, sitting in the old easy chair and listening to the footsteps on the sidewalk above. He could take Charmayne and Eva down sometime. Or just Charmayne. He would buy her a soda and let her sit on his lap if she wanted to.

This is one whale of a man!

His mother stepped forward, moved towards Coblentz and Rufini. Coblentz said, "Here he is, sweetheart. Here's your sweet young Italiano." He released Rufini and turned for the door.

For an instant Carlo Rufini stood there in the center of the room, swaying, his great open eye as fixed as ever. When he fell, everyone rushed in at him at once. Everyone except Leonard, who stayed where he was. There were whispers of amazement, sighs of relief, voices of concern. Leonard thought: everybody loves a wounded man. Rufini was moaning something, but no one could understand him. "Anyone speak Italian?" George asked. "I understand him," Leonard's mother said. She had kneeled and held Carlo's head in her lap. She took Carlo's bloody handkerchief and substituted one of her own with lace edges. She seemed to wait for absolute silence. "Just like a movie," someone whispered. "So mysterious!"

"He's saying 'Lemme alone.' That's all," she finally said. "Where's George?"

"Right here, Mom." He had been standing right behind her.

"Help me get him out of here."

George looked around.

"Hey, Len! Gimme a hand here."

Leonard did not move. What was happening in the center of the room seemed miles away. Why him? Why call him for help? He shook his head slowly, then more vigorously as it dawned on him that he'd better make himself clear once and for all. You've got to draw the line somewhere, he thought, and this is it. This is the tight ship. Who was this Rufini anyway? His mother's lover. What did that have to do with him? So she had loved, had had her secret passion. So what?

He looked at her. Her eyes were full of fire. They were eyes of passion. He could see that now. They were wise, big eyes, full of a vision of passion that had nothing to do with him. She was looking at her lover, her Italiano. She was not alone at all.

Leonard felt ill, sick to his stomach, as if *he* was the one who had been battered by Coblenz. A miraculous transference seemed to have occurred. He had a sudden vision of himself on his knees before Charmayne, in pain, but covering her ankles with hot, moist kisses. She kneeled to kiss his swollen eye.

And George says, "Come on, Len, give us a hand, willya!"

He wasn't going anywhere. Let her lift her Carlo without his help.

He had a moment of peace. He saw nothing, heard no sounds. There was only the feel of the wall against the palms of his hands. The wall was very smooth. He stroked, rubbed. He thought: Ciezki stays where he is. *This is the tight ship!* The silence was lovely. The new darkness seemed exactly what he'd been looking for.