

Friday Blues · William Holinger

“E.T.” IS STILL PLAYING at the movie theater across from campus, and we are going to see it for the first time. There are four of us: my wife, attractive, slightly older than myself, a financial manager at the university hospital; my friend’s wife, shy, an expert organic gardener; my friend Derek, who sells insurance; and I. I do bio-chemical research at the university and occasionally teach organic chemistry, the introductory course for pre-med students.

It is a Friday night in fall, and cold. The wind sends dry leaves rustling down the pavement. The theater is on one of the few streets in this university town where you can find entertainment; neon signs and brightly lit windows glow along one side of the street, while university buildings rise darkly along the opposite side. The cold is unexpected, and nobody seems dressed for it. Derek is wearing just his suit, a navy blue pinstripe. My wife, Jo, is wearing a suit also, a brown wool herringbone. Betty is wearing a sweater, and I have on a wool shirt and a light jacket. The street is half-filled with college kids hurrying in all directions, their coats pulled up to their chins, their heads uncovered, their faces scrunched up and reddening. Most are laughing or talking excitedly. The line at the theater is not bad for a Friday, and we stand in it, shifting from one foot to the other, shivering, hands thrust deep in pockets, shoulders up and chins down.

Derek is a big, athletic, aggressive man, and I’m not sure why we’re friends. Perhaps he vicariously fulfills a desire in me to be more assertive. At any rate, we’re not close friends; I don’t like him very much anymore. We met twenty years ago in college. The one in this town. We see each other now four or five times a year, and then only with our wives, as a foursome. Last week, when I called Derek and we discussed possible alternatives for an evening out, I was relieved to hear that he and Betty had missed “E.T.” and wanted to see it too. It meant that we wouldn’t have to talk all night; we could sit in the dark and watch a film. Less intimate, more relaxing.

When we reach the ticket window, I count out a five and three singles. “Four dollars,” I say, reaching for my tickets. “Isn’t that unbelievable?”

“A drop in the bucket,” says Derek. “Do you have any idea how much this film’s grossed?” He pulls a wad of bills out of his right-hand

back pocket and slides a twenty under the glass. The girl punches up two more tickets and quickly counts out change. The four of us go inside.

The lobby of the theater is warm and dark. We're drawn to the refreshment stand by its bright warmth and the aroma of popcorn. We stand in line between two velvet ropes.

I turn to Jo. "What'll you have, darling?"

It's a needless question; I know exactly what she'll have.

"The usual," she replies, acknowledging this. "And someone ought to go hold four seats."

"Yes," says Derek. "Jo, why don't we go. Betty, here's a ten. Get me a Coke and a large popcorn, and make sure Kerry doesn't pay for it. Come on, Jo."

They leave. Betty and I look at one another. I try to smile.

"So," says Betty.

"Sew buttons."

Betty looks away. She and I almost had an affair once, about six years before. We had dinner twice; the third time we met, I rented a motel room in a town twenty miles away. At dinner she drank too much wine and became sick. I put her in a taxi. The next day she called me at the lab and told me she didn't want to see me again unless Derek was present. We've never spoken of it since.

The lobby is crowded now and the line outside at the ticket window has grown. "I can't believe this many people still haven't seen 'E.T.," she says.

"Maybe they're all coming for the second or third time."

"Maybe. I don't know. What else is there to do?" The line moves forward. "What are you having?" Betty asks.

"Popcorn. Reese's. Same old stuff. What about yourself?"

"Nothing. I brought one of these." She rummages in her purse and pulls out a small object wrapped in green paper.

"What's that?"

She hands it to me. "It's a sort of health food bar. Grains. It's really good—no sugar, no preservatives. Want to try it?"

"No thanks."

"Really, it's not bad. It grows on you."

"That's because it's got no preservatives."

She doesn't get it at first. I raise my eyebrows and wiggle my eyes.

Betty laughs. "Oh, 'grows on you.' Very funny. You always make me laugh."

"Best medicine there is."

"Do you really think so?" she says earnestly. "Do you know that book by Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*?"

"What? No."

"May I help you please?" says the girl behind the counter.

"Right." I order the Cokes, popcorn, and candy, and Betty insists on paying for everything. I let her. Then we gather up the food and go into the theater. Walking down the descending aisle, Betty in front of me, my hands full, I see my wife and Derek from the back, sitting together, their heads inclined toward one another, looking at each other and talking. It produces a shock, seeing my wife sitting with another man in a movie theater. Seeing them intensely engaged. I feel like an intruder; my impulse is to turn and retreat. But then we're upon them, and Betty stands aside while I climb over Derek's legs and Jo's and plop down on the far end of the foursome.

After the movie, on the sidewalk, Betty can't stop crying. Tears spill from her eyes and down her cheeks. She's already run out of Kleenex and uses Derek's handkerchief to blow her nose. He puts his arm around her. Across the street, four young men, walking fast, turn their faces toward us. "E.T. phone home!" one of them shouts. The others laugh. Betty puts a hand urgently on Derek's arm. "Please, don't say anything," she says.

There's a Baskin-Robbins ice cream store down the street, and we walk into it. The evening has turned genuinely cold, so the ice cream shop is nearly deserted. The person running the store, standing behind the counter, is a tall, thin kid wearing a Toronto Blue Jays baseball cap. His face is marked by pimples.

The kid gives us the once-over and says, "What'll you have?"

"I don't know," I say. I'm looking at the ice cream cartons in the glass freezers. I bump into Jo. "What are you having?"

Jo says, "I'll have a double-dip chocolate chip."

The kid waves a chrome ice cream scoop at Jo and says to me, "She with you?"

I look at him. He's wearing sort of a mocking expression. "Yeah," I say. "That's my wife."

"You're not married to *him*," he says to Jo, pointing at me.

"Why not?" she says.

"You're too old for him, ain't you?"

She takes a step backward as though she's been struck. "We're the same age," she asserts, lying just a little.

The kid snorts. "What happened to you?"

Jo stands there staring at the kid, her face reddening.

It is Derek who elbows his way past me and steps up to the counter. "Listen, pimple-face. Keep your punk mouth shut or you'll find yourself stuffed into one of these ice cream cartons."

The kid looks at Derek for a moment, then turns and walks off into the back room.

"Come on," says Betty. She tugs at Derek's suit coat. "Let's get out of here."

"No," Derek says, looking at Jo. "I'm going to talk to the manager. That was inexcusable."

"No, it's all right, Derek," says Jo firmly. "Just drop it now, please. You said enough." She is looking at Derek, admiring him, thanking him with her eyes.

We find ourselves on the street again. The students all seem to have disappeared. It occurs to me that there used to be more kids around here on a Friday night. There's a home game tomorrow—where are they all? Then I remember the state of the economy, the state of the university. Applications were down twenty per cent last year; this fall's freshman class is smaller than any class since 1962. The faculty went without a raise again this year—third year in a row. There's been talk of a union, talk of a faculty strike.

"What'll we do now?" asks Betty.

"I need a drink," Jo says. "That little bastard."

Derek says, "One-eyed Jake's is right up the street."

"Fine."

We walk upstairs to One-Eyed Jake's. It's warm and dark and alive with activity. We stand in line while waiters in green-and-white striped shirts, green pants, and yellow aprons hurry by. Soon we're seated. A waiter immediately comes over and asks us what we'd like from the bar. Jo orders a double scotch on the rocks. The rest of us decide to share a pitcher of beer, and Derek orders snacks: potato skins and nachos with hot sauce.

Nobody says anything. We're all looking around, playing with our napkins and silverware. The drinks come quickly.

Jo takes a slug of her scotch and finally says, "I mean, I know I look older than Kerry, but he looks like a baby."

I say, "Jo, will you drop it? There's nothing you can do about it. The guy was a jerk."

"But I *do* look older than you."

"It's the clothes, that's all," says Derek.

"No you don't," I tell her. "And so what if you did, anyway?"

"You're lovely for your age, Jo," says Betty, who is almost ten years younger. "Really you are."

"Oh for God's sake," says Jo.

"Betty," Derek says. "That was not the thing to say."

"Why not? It's true."

No one talks for a few moments.

The waiter arrives with the nachos and potato skins. "And here are four plates," he says. "Enjoy."

"Hey, Betty," I say as we all reach for food, "how'd your garden turn out this year?"

"Oh, great. I had lots of tomatos and cucumbers, and even a few good muskmelon. You should have come over."

"Did you can anything?"

"Sure."

"She's taken a job at the Sunrise Bakery," Derek says. "So she didn't get as much canned this year."

"Really?" says Jo. "Why?"

"Gives me something to do. Last winter I almost went stir crazy. As you well know."

"What are you making?" Jo asks.

"Well, first of all, everything's natural. We make bread, all kinds—"

"No, I mean how much money are you making?"

"Three-fifty an hour."

"What's minimum wage these days?"

"Three-thirty-five," says Derek.

Jo sips her drink. "Are you guys still trying to have a baby?"

"Yeah. Still trying." Derek reaches for the pitcher and pours more beer into his glass and mine. He shrugs and puts the pitcher down.

"Do you think you two will have kids soon?" Betty asks Jo and me. "I mean, have you discussed it?"

Jo and I look at one another. I reach for the nachos. Jo says, "No, not right away. We've talked about it, sure. But this isn't the right time."

I drink some beer to wash down the hot sauce. Not the right time for her, I think. Perfect for me.

Derek says, "It changes your life, that's for damn sure."

The waiter comes over, pad in hand. "Would you folks care to order dinner now?"

I notice the menus for the first time.

"No," says Derek. "We're just here to drink."

"Very well." He collects the menus and leaves.

"Will you excuse me, please?" says Jo. "I'm going to the women's room."

I get up to let her slide out of the booth.

"I'll go with you," Betty says, standing up. A waiter with a full tray barely misses running into her. "Whoops, didn't see you," she says. "Sorry!"

"Come on, Betty," Jo says. I sit down as they walk away.

Derek's picking at some invisible blemish on the sleeve of his navy blue suit coat. "So," I say to him. "What have you been up to?"

He looks at me and shrugs. "Same old thing. The insurance racket. Booming business these days. Like movies. My golf game went to hell this summer, though."

He has always been a good golfer, even in college. He won a New England-wide collegiate tournament as a junior, placed second as a senior.

"How come?" I ask.

He swigs his beer. "My back. Losing its elasticity. That's the first thing to go on a golfer—your back stiffens up."

"That's too bad."

"Happens to all of us. Damn shame, too. Back muscles stiffen up, the front one relaxes."

I look at him sharply. He turns away without speaking, and I don't ask the question.

After a moment Derek says, "What'd you think of the movie?"

"It was okay," I say. Images from the film flash across my mind. I see the alien, the kids on their bikes, the ship, the scary face of the scientist who said, *You did the best that anyone could possibly have done.*

"Yeah, I liked it," I say. "Kind of an interesting recycling of the Christian myth. It got to me, I have to admit. Those flying scenes. . . ."

Derek chuckles. "It's a heart-throb, all right. You have any idea how much that film's grossed?"

"No."

"Just over three hundred million dollars."

"Say again?"

"You heard me right."

"Jesus Christ."

"That's right."

There's a silence. Our eyes meet; we quickly look away. I take a swig of beer. Derek eats a potato skin.

"I want a baby too," I say. "But Jo just wants to make money. 'What's the money good for,' I ask her, 'unless we have a kid to spend it on?' 'Oh, there's plenty to spend it on,' she says. 'Watch me!' " I grin and shake my head. "But she doesn't have too many years left."

Derek's looking at me. He seems unfazed by our sudden intimacy. "Yeah, but I know what she means," he says. "I don't want a kid either. It's Betty who wants kids. I don't know what we'd do with a kid."

"Can't you afford it?"

"Hell yes, I can afford it. But I don't want it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. He's eating the last potato skin and staring about at my forehead. "Maybe I don't love her enough. Know what I mean?"

I become aware of the background din of the restaurant: the clinking of flatware on china, the hum of excited voices, the rattle of cookware from the kitchen.

"I guess so," I say.

The women return. I shove over and Jo sits on the outside of the booth, opposite Betty.

"Why so glum?" asks Betty.

"'E.T.' has grossed three hundred million dollars," I say. "According to your husband."

"Bit more than that," he says.

"Yeah, he told me," says Betty. "I can't conceive of that much money."

"I can't either."

Derek says, "It's easy enough to imagine. But what's the reality of it? I mean, what would it be like to *have* that much? What would you *do* with it?"

"You'd have to employ a lot of people just to manage it," I say. "It'd be nice, though."

Jo stares at her glass for a moment. "I guess that's not really so much money, after all. The hospital budget for this year is about one-fifth of that figure, and it goes fast, believe me. We've been over budget every year since 1975."

"That's not the point," I say. "That's not your money, it's the

hospital's. The point is, can you imagine having that much money of your own?"

She looks at me. "No kidding, Kerry. Is that the point? Is that really the point of this conversation? What are you, the referee?"

I look at Betty, then at Derek. "Swell evening," I say.

Upstairs at home, as we undress, going from hall closet to bedroom to bathroom and back, Jo and I meet abruptly in the hallway. We pause, look at each other. She is wearing just bra and skirt, and I am in trousers.

Jo draws a deep breath. "He felt me under the table, you know."

"Did he?"

"At least I think so. You didn't, did you?"

"Was that you? I thought it was Betty."

She laughs. "Cad," she says. "Masher."

"What were you two talking about in the theater?"

"Oh, nothing. Derek was talking about his business. Bragging. He's taken on another agent—couldn't keep up. He was trying to impress me."

"He felt you up, huh?"

"Yeah."

"He needs to learn a little impulse control, don't you think?"

"You need to learn a little less."

"What, you want me to go and feel up Betty?"

"No. Me."

"Ah."

She puts her arms around me. "Undo me."

"Where?"

"Right here. Go ahead."

"No, I mean where'd he touch you?" I'm holding her now, stroking her back.

"On the knee. Then up the thigh."

"Movie theater? Or at Jake's?"

"Under the table, at Jake's."

"Under your skirt?"

"Yeah."

"What'd you do?"

She holds me tightly, and I can't pull back to look at her.

"Nothing."

For the second time this evening, I'm scared. "You liked it."

"I was flattered."

"But you know he has a crush on you. Always has."

"He's never acted on it before."

"Great." I pull away, go into the bedroom. As I take off my trousers and get into bed, I can hear water running in the bathroom. I fluff up my pillow and lie back. I look over at her dresser, top drawer, where she keeps her diaphragm. For a moment I am E.T. From the bed I open the drawer, levitate the diaphragm. It hovers over the bureau, in its blue plastic case, looking like a flying saucer. I spin it around the room a few times, testing my powers, skimming it close to the walls without touching them. Then I whip it out the door. Jo squeals as it hums past the bathroom. It plunges down the stairs, the front door opens and it sails out, down the street a ways to gather speed and then I send it shooting up, up into the wind toward the stars, toward the shore of some distant world where small creatures wander off into the forest at night, looking for something they lost.