

His Wife's Intermissions

Philip Damon

"You know there's one thing I've always had this fear of," he confessed to his wife. She offered no answer but he went on anyway. "All my life I've been afraid that people were following me."

He glanced into the rearview mirror to assess her response, but the persistent headlights of the policeman on his tail distracted him. "I'll just follow you for awhile," the policeman had said. "Then I'll decide what to do about you."

Sometimes as a boy on his way home from school he had been so certain someone was following him that he had turned into alleys and run home so fast his chest had come close to exploding. Even when older, as a man, he had often felt so strongly that a particular car was on his tail that he had pulled to the side of the road and waited for it to pass and disappear from sight. And now this cop was on his tail and it was for real.

He had known this was going to be a bad day, had had a foreshadowing of it this morning, when, during his regular 9:45 bowel movement after his Victorian novel class, he had leaned over to flush the toilet and the bowl of his pipe had dropped off and been flushed away forever. It was his favorite pipe, a Peterson, and consequently his 10:30 class had been a disaster. If Alice hadn't had her heart set on going to the drive-in tonight he would have suggested they stay at home.

He despised the drive-in anyway. Thomas Hardy—his four-year-old son nestled now in his mother's arms in the back seat—always spent the entire movie fidgeting back and forth from front seat to back, whining and sniveling that he was hungry, or that he couldn't get comfortable, or that he couldn't see the screen from where he sat. There were always large chunks of the movie that everyone missed as a result and he could never understand why they ever went back. But they did, and Harold was forced to tolerate it, along with the intermissions. His wife's intermissions.

"Harold!" Her voice rose accusingly from the back seat.

He glanced into the rearview mirror by way of an answer.

"You're weaving again. That officer is going to throw the book at you if you don't stay in your own lane."

"My ankle hurts, for Christ's sake."

"What, may I ask," she said, "does your ankle have to do with the way you steer the car?"

"It's part of the total thing," he said. "The total experience of driving."

"Well if you don't stay in your own lane we're going to be involved in a total wreck."

His damn ankle. He had tried to explain to the policeman: "It's my ankle, officer," he had said. "Which is a result of us running out of gas. If we hadn't run out of gas we wouldn't have had to go out of our way and end up on the freeway. And I wouldn't have had to walk a mile and a half for gas and twist my ankle to boot. So what with the twisted ankle and the strange section of the freeway I guess I veered from lane to lane a couple of times."

"Without signaling," the officer said.

"Without signaling," Harold agreed.

"And speeding," the officer said.

"Was I speeding?"

"I've got you clocked for nine miles over the speed limit."

"Well," Harold smiled a faint smile, "that must have been an unconscious effort on my part to make up the lost time. I assure you, officer, I am not a habitual speeder."

The officer nodded and left Harold standing on the shoulder of the road, between the two cars. He poked his head into Harold's car window and said something to his wife. Harold couldn't hear what was being said. He looked at the lower half of the policeman protruding from his car, the shiny gun slung low on the hip, the glistening, almost knee-high boots, and wondered about all the articles he had read about policemen suffering a higher percent of cases of masculinity crisis than the general public. Was that cop packing a heater because he was, in reality, a female castration victim? And then he extrapolated from that to wonder if perhaps the present level of sexuality in the entire country wasn't being artificially supported by its inordinate number of guns. If, in other words, all the guns in the country were confiscated, would the country stop reproducing? It was an interesting thought.

The policeman returned and gave Harold a long look. "Okay," he said. "I'll follow you for awhile. Then I'll decide what to do about you."

And now he was beginning to feel as though the beams from the policeman's headlights might bore a hole through the back of his head. "Why does he have to follow so damn close?" Harold complained.

"Maybe he wants to make sure you don't try to lose him," his wife offered, with some irony, Harold detected.

Losing him was the farthest thing from Harold's mind. Right now his primary concern lay in trying to keep the car in the appropriate lane at a consistent legal speed. He had a tendency to swerve, he knew, as well as a marked inability to maintain a steady speed. As like as not, one moment he would be doing fifty or so

and the next time he checked it would be forty, or perhaps sixty. At any given moment if someone were to ask him how fast he was going he would be hard put to answer. His mind would be elsewhere. On some other subject. Such as his wife's intermissions.

Tonight was one of the bad ones. The trouble for Harold stemmed from the sexy way Alice dressed. There was just something about the clothes she selected that, when she put them on, came out sexy. She didn't act sexy. And she didn't talk sexy. The fact of the matter was that she *wasn't* very sexy. But whenever they went to the drive-in, and she went to the snack bar, she was a knockout. The only way Harold could explain it to his own satisfaction was that there was something chemical about the drive-in snack bar. Something in the air, the atmosphere, perhaps the popcorn smell, or the hamburgers, but whatever it was it was Alice's time to shine.

She said, of course, that she didn't know what he was talking about. *She* didn't notice any difference. But he knew that she did. Why else would she always be the one to volunteer to go for the popcorn during the intermission, leaving him in the car with Thomas Hardy? And why else did it always take her until the end of the intermission, even though she started out from the car while the credits from the first movie were still on? No, she knew what was happening, he was sure of that.

And tonight he had gotten a good look at her doing her act.

About halfway through the intermission, Thomas Hardy, in his own inimitable sniveling way, had informed Harold that he had to go to the bathroom. And together they had gotten a good look at wife and mother doing her act. Sashaying around the snack bar she was the center of attraction for every male eye in the place. With the detached air of someone who could only be knowledgeably the cynosure, she somehow managed to present herself before each and every male, making it seem as though she was just another customer. It was disgusting.

It hadn't seemed to bother Thomas Hardy too much. The two of them were snuggled together now in the back seat like a pair of rhesus monkeys. But it had damn well bothered him.

He always felt vaguely intimidated in the snack bar anyway. Usually filled with young people, student types in varying stages of undress, the same types who sat dumbly in his classes and feigned interest, the same types who he was sure each time he turned his back to write on the board were exchanging bits of information about him, the snack bar scared him to death. What if one of them said something unpleasant to him? How would he react outside the protection of the classroom? Someday it could happen and the thought of it petrified him.

In the car on the way from the drive-in he had been deciding to have a few words with her about it when they ran out of gas.

And now he was being tail-gated by a policeman. His name was Officer Carney and he was about six-two. Harold had had to look up at him when they were talking. He felt as though he was not in control of the situation. He felt, in fact, like some character out of a Hardy novel, being pursued by his fate in the form of some giant of a black-booted policeman. It was eerie.

Officer Carney continued to follow him off the freeway. Through a number of busy intersections and on through the residential district he came, relentlessly pursuing, and Harold wished for a moment that he was being followed by the police for something more romantic than a couple of traffic violations. Maybe he was a hit man for the Mafia and the strange woman and child in the back seat, huddled close from fear, were the family of some two-timing double-crosser who was planning to testify before a Senate committee. His job was to hold them incommunicado so the two-timer wouldn't sing. But there was a sadistic streak in him a mile wide and if the woman and her sniveling brat weren't *very* cooperative . . . he might just waste them. This cop on his tail wouldn't be too tough for him to lose, not here in his own backyard, so to speak. He could hang a quick right at the next corner and floor it for a few blocks, then douse the lights and turn a few more corners and the poor dumb flatfoot would be left blowing his siren like a guy who threw a New Year's party and nobody showed up. Harold pulled into his driveway with Officer Carney right behind him.

"Well, how'd I do?" he asked the policeman once they were both out of their cars.

Officer Carney had his ticket book out. "Not too good," he said.

Harold was trying think of something persuasive to say, some glib line that would mollify the policeman enough to get him off with a mere warning, when his wife said, "Would you like to come inside for a cup of coffee, officer?"

"Don't mind if I do," was the reply, in a tone that, to Harold, sounded quite un-policemanlike.

"What are you doing?" Harold whispered to her on the way to the house. "Inviting him in like that?"

"Being polite," she said.

Inside the house the policeman turned to Harold. "Lemme have your license and registration again please."

While Alice made the coffee Officer Carney sat at the dining room table, his shiny-booted right leg stuck out straight and the heavy pistol resting prominently on his thigh, writing things into his ticket book. Harold, fearfully wondering how many things the policeman could be writing down, tried to get Thomas Hardy ready for bed, but his son was more interested in the gun on the officer's leg.

"Is that a real gun?" he asked.

"Yup," the policeman said, still bent industriously over the book.

"Does it have real bullets?"

"Yup."

"Stop bothering the officer, Thomas Hardy," Harold said.

"That's okay," Officer Carney said. "I'm almost finished."

"My dad doesn't like guns," Thomas Hardy said.

The officer stopped writing and put his pencil on the table beside the ticket book. He smiled. "He doesn't, eh? Well, in the right hands a gun is perfectly safe."

"You could shoot somebody, though, if you wanted to. Right?"

"Yup."

"Can I touch it?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

Thomas Hardy ran his hand over the wooden handle and the flat blue metal and the thick, unyielding leather of the holster. "Wow," he said.

"Okay, T.H.," Harold said. "Time for bed."

Thomas Hardy looked at the policeman. "Better do what he says, son," he said.

"Will you be here tomorrow when I get up?"

"I doubt it."

"I hope so," Thomas Hardy said. "Goodnight."

Harold sat beside his son's bed, in the dark, for a good while after the boy had fallen asleep. He was thinking about how his own father, not a particularly strong man, but a good one nonetheless, had reassured him when something went wrong. "Let's let the good fairy take care of it for us," he would say, and if it was something like a bad report card they would put in under Harold's pillow, or if it was something he had done they would write it out on a piece of paper, like "Harold was a bad boy and made Mommy cry," or "Harold didn't eat his spinach," and if the piece of paper was gone in the morning it meant the good fairy had made it okay. Finally he put his hands on his knees and lifted himself from the chair and returned to the dining room.

Alice and Officer Carney were drinking coffee and talking. Harold felt as though he was interrupting. "Well," he asked the policeman, "what's the damage?"

Officer Carney put his cup on the table and picked up the ticket book. Leaning back in the dining room chair, he said, "Let's see. I've got you down here for the original speeding and changing lanes without a signal violations, plus you turned off the freeway without a signal, you were driving in a careless manner, and you ran a stop sign two blocks from here."

Harold's first inclination was to take it all as a joke. This man had to be kidding. Maybe the next step was a little hint that if Harold were to make Alice available, why then possibly. . . . Well if this cop thought he could work *that* kind of flimflam game he had another think coming. But what was there he could do? Even if he was big enough to throw the officer out of his house he would probably just end up with another list of violations on his ticket. He stared at the policeman, smugly sipping coffee and in general making himself at home at Harold's dining room table. Harold reached down and picked up the ticket. "Well, officer," he said, "it's been a long day. If you don't mind we'd like to turn in."

"Harold," Alice said, "why don't you go on to bed without me. Officer Carney and I are having a nice chat, and when we've finished our coffee I'll come up."

"Doesn't Officer Carney have to get back to work?"

The policeman extended a hairy wrist and consulted his watch. "It's five minutes to twelve," he said. "I'm off duty in five minutes."

There didn't seem to be anything left to say. "Well, good night then," he said, and, the ticket still in his hand, he turned toward the stairs.

"Good night, Harold," his wife said.

"Night," Officer Carney said.

In their bedroom Harold debated over whether to read for awhile or not. There was a new article on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* he had looked forward to reading, but he decided against it. He undressed as slowly as possible, put on his pajamas, then went to the bathroom and washed his face and brushed his teeth. He had taken as long as he could without seeming to be stalling, but still his wife hadn't come to bed.

The last thing that he did before turning out the light and going to sleep was to take the ticket Officer Carney had given him, and, folding it over once, slip it carefully beneath his pillow.