

Short Carl and The Golden Box

A Short Story
by Toby Scales

His back was against the wall, his legs shot through the iron railing beside him and dangled off the balcony, and whenever he saw a pair of headlights he stiffened and waited for them to slow and sweep towards the driveway below. From there she would not see him waiting.

(Let's review the facts. She said she'd call, but she didn't. She was going to see that friend of hers, Carl from yoga class. Short Carl from yoga class.)

He sat on the balcony above the garage. From there he could clearly see her face as she stepped from her car into the blue light below, he could clearly see her expression and in that instant he would know, he would know with certainty. He waited for this certainty, and in the meantime he smoked.

(Short Carl with the bird tattoo. She likes tattoos. One on her wrist and one on the back of her neck, the one that says her name that means "a love of life" in Greek: Zoe. Zoe, Zoe, Zoe, Zoe. A thousand times Zoe.)

The street below his feet stretched dark and wet towards the light of the city, where she had been swallowed up since three o'clock. There Saturday night flickered and pulsed, there she laughed, she smiled, she embraced.

(Smiling and embracing Short Carl from yoga class, flicking her hair and laughing Zoe, Zoe, Zoe, Zoe.)

He flicked his cigarette onto the wet concrete and watched it snuff itself out. The dark wet street stretched toward the city and he thought again about driving into town and looking for her. Rumpus Room, The Gold Box, Sammy's. Only a handful of places she could be. How long would it take him?

(Twenty minutes into town, then parking.)

But it was too late now. He should have done that when he was sitting in her living room drinking wine, listening to the dogs bark next door and the lowing violins of Monteverdi's Orfeo. The cat staring at him.

(I was thinking of the Kreutzer Sonata and remembering the strange man on the train, what he said about music and how it should not be trusted because it has the power to evoke emotions over which the listener has no control.)

Of course, then he was simply waiting for the phone to ring. There was no doubt then, only the solemn stillness of a single soul, a pool receiving and reflecting light. And when she stepped into the blue light below, when he could clearly see her expression, there

would be certainty again. The certainty of Orpheus on the stair, the certainty of action, of consequence, of eternity.

(I was sitting in her living room waiting for her. I was staring at the floor and the cat was staring at me drinking wine. I imagined her phone dead in her purse, I imagined her saying goodbye to Short Carl or excusing herself to go to a pay phone because I thought sure that was happening, I thought sure she would call at any minute but I must have been wrong, she was not thinking of me and calling she was laughing and flicking her hair and saying yes let's go dancing in the city yes, yes, yes, yes in the city.)

He tried to imagine her dancing with Short Carl again, but this time the image melted into oil and slipped through his fingers, and he felt instead that she must be hurt. She must be in trouble, she'd had an accident and she must be in the hospital. Perhaps he should call the hospital?

(How do you know when to call the hospital? How do you know when to call the hospital and when someone is really late or just too damn stupid to use a pay phone? And what does it mean to "call the hospital?" How many are there? Who do you ask for? Is Zoe there? Could I please speak to Zoe? I'm wondering if you have any patients by the name of Short Carl? How about with a tattoo on the back of her neck? Like you were ordering curtains: Do you have this in blue?)

His heart throbbed and pulsed with these images and he felt the back of his neck prickling. What if she'd been killed? What if Short Carl was killing her right now? He imagined a stubby set of fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, collapsing her windpipe with the knuckles of the thumbs. But this image too became slippery and he imagined her dancing again, flicking her hair and laughing.

(When she steps into the light I will see her face and then I will know, I will know with certainty.)

A pair of headlights appeared at the end of the street, two pools of light separated by a finite distance. He stiffened and tasted suddenly the bitter cool of the evening in his mouth, smelled suddenly her hair. But the car passed, unremarkable, and he settled back against the wall.

(OK, let's review the facts. She said she'd call, but she didn't. She was going to see that friend of hers from yoga class. If she doesn't come home, we'll call the hospital tomorrow morning at seven. No, eight. Eight is better. If they're open. Do hospitals close? Nine. Nine o'clock tomorrow, just to be safe. That's what time we'll call. Maybe she got stranded somewhere, maybe she had to check into a hotel, maybe she was arrested, maybe Short Carl tried to attack her and she had to get away. Maybe she had to get away from him and she should have had her gun.)

He recalled the sentence he'd written earlier that evening: "Her laugh is like scattered coins, each syllable a silver dollar." But something wasn't right about it now, it didn't

hold his feelings for her the way it had before. He shifted position, the concrete cold and hard against his hand.

(Damn leg's asleep again. How long have I been up here? I have no idea. Time has stopped for me. I'm an endless void, a ghost. I have no effect on the world, I am sitting and not moving, nothing is happening but these endless endless pouring images and my mind my mind. I should write this down. I should write this feeling down. It's me it's me.)

He set the gun aside and carefully pulled his leg through the railing and onto the balcony, gripping with both hands.

(Ouch that hurts that hurts that hurts. Ow ow ow ow ow OW!)

He held his breath and squeezed his calf muscle, hard, trying to bring the blood back into it. He tried to shift position again and bumped the gun with his hand, causing it to angle towards the house. Suddenly it looked ridiculous and sinister: a twisted fist and stubby finger pointing stupidly at nothing, at a blank wall. Yet everything in its shape evoked the certainty of its purpose.

(I have nothing left I am nothing she has me all of me)

He picked up the pistol, cold and hard and heavy in his hand. Pulled the chamber back. Twisting the device in the light he could see the glint of the chambered bullet, and he tasted suddenly the bitter cool of copper in his mouth.

(I was searching for her diary.)

He remembered the bullet rolling out from under some papers, stopping pointedly at the bottom of the drawer. It had seemed to him anxious to perform.

(I was searching so I could know her, I have always wanted to understand her and she doesn't appreciate that.)

He had put the bullet in his mouth while he loaded the others in the clip, rewarding its eagerness by making it the first and last, the one true bullet. Her bullet.

(If nothing else she can see that I'm persistent, I'm consistent and persistent and this just proves my point about why I always make her call me and why I tell her twice and then call her anyway. It proves that she is not to be trusted and that I'm a rational, consistent person who she is driving crazy.)

He kept thinking to himself outside himself, thinking he was thinking of it all, imagining he wasn't there, wasn't waiting on her balcony with a gun but remembering or reading it somewhere, safe at home and listening to opera still, writing alone this horrible story that he would repeat to her later when she came around the corner in her robe too short for her body and the shoulder would slip off to one side while she dried her hair and listened to

him read it aloud, she would listen and consider and smile and laugh and toss her head and flick her hair and come to him again and embrace him. Zoe, Zoe, Zoe, Zoe. All of life is Zoe. Why can my heart not stop screaming her name?

(Let's review the facts. She said she'd call, but she didn't. She was going to see that guy Carl from her yoga class. She has a tattoo on the back of her neck that can be used to identify her in case she's dead.)

From there she would not see him waiting, from there he could clearly see her face as she stepped into the cool blue light below.

He wanted her to look upset. He wanted her to not be smiling, to not linger in her car for a last guilty drag of cigarette, to not straighten her hair or fix her make-up before coming inside but to come straight to the door looking worried and looking for him. When she stepped into the cool blue light below he could clearly see her expression.

(And I will come and meet you and I'll tell you all about this crazy night and you'll listen and look surprised and then I'll show you the gun and you'll know, you'll know with certainty. I won't have to ask you twice anymore. You'll take me in your arms and embrace me and apologize and understand me, you'll understand me and know me at last.)

The street below his feet stretched dark and wet toward the light of the city. He was about to light another cigarette when a pair of headlights appeared. He shifted position, and Sharon's dogs began to bark next door as the headlights swept slowly toward his feet and the blue light below. When she stepped out of her car and looked up at him, surprised, they were two pools separated by an infinite distance.