

A CLAP FOR CADENCE
PART I

As soon as her guest arrived, Cadence knew she was wearing the wrong thing. She had gone with faded denim overalls and a loose-fitting baby blue T-shirt, and now, seeing Shannon in her smart plum skirt, blazer and flower-print blouse ensemble, she knew without a doubt that she had made some sort of fundamental mistake here. Not that she could fit herself into much else these days. Stubbornly refusing to relinquish all but the most inconsequential of her pregnancy pounds, her body remained far too large for any of her pre-conception clothes, and as for her maternity wardrobe, well, frankly she was entirely sick of those clothes. And so most days found her feeling much the same way, comfortably frumpy in overalls. Still, to counterbalance any feelings of inferiority, or rather, enormity, upon re-entering the kitchen she promptly poured herself a nice big glass of rather substandard local Merlot.

“What can I get you to drink?” she asked over her shoulder from the counter.

“Soda water, if you’ve got it,” Shannon smiled through twin racks of gleaming white teeth, sliding

into the near side of a kitchen nook somewhat decrepit in appearance, but in concept something of a quiet masterpiece.

“Not something stronger? I thought you were finished breastfeeding.”

“Oh, I am. But Bart,” Shannon said, “prefers I don’t drink in the afternoons.”

Bart, Cadence repeated to herself with categorical distaste, hiding behind the open refrigerator door in a deliberately dilatory and, hopefully anyway, overtly reproachful way. *Bart*, the sworn enemy of all things remotely female and fun, had sunk his long toxic hooks into Cadence’s life yet again. Casually shoving aside the tray of hors d’oeuvres she had specially prepared for the occasion, now suddenly and steadfastly determined that such expensive and delicious food would never be wasted on anyone, let alone those actually physically intimate with such a pompous jerk, Cadence finally located behind a half container of expired field berry yogurt a single sprawling can of soda.

“I like your new lip gloss by the way.”

“Oh do you?” Shannon said. “Good, I’m glad. I thought it might be a little too, you know . . .”

“Business lunch slut?” Cadence offered up, her smile flashing up the briefest of suns beyond the horizon of the still open refrigerator door.

“I was going to say wet.”

“Joking. Goes perfect with the outfit. Lemon?”

“Yes, please. That is, if you’ve got it.”

“Oh we’ve got it,” Cadence said.

This was, admittedly, less than poignant talk, but there remained for Cadence the more practical matter

of finding a viable collaborator to get drunk with. Grudgingly filling a glass with ice and soda and squeezing in a slice of lemon, she set it down before her guest and, together with the bottle of Merlot, took a seat roughly ninety degrees around the nook from Shannon’s station. Of course Cadence would have preferred sitting in the living room, and she would have too had not her father-in-law already fallen asleep on the one prime sofa location. She could plainly hear his snoring from here, each and every sleep apnea-induced nuance something of a cheese-grater on her already exhausted and maternally over-sensitive nerves. Silently, she vowed to suffocate the old man with a pillow at some future point, or, short of that, give him a really stern look or two with a nose clearly out of joint. In the meantime though, she would have to suck it up and try her daughter-in-law best to pretend to suffer through.

“Where’s Ava Joy?” Shannon asked, offering, Cadence noticed, a half glance beneath the tabletop, as though she might just find the poor little creature caged somewhere under there.

“Having a nap.”

“And the older one? Daniella?”

“*Danielle*. She’s out with her father.”

“Right, *Danielle*. I keep forgetting that you changed it.”

“We didn’t change it,” Cadence corrected. *We chose it.*”

“But Daniella *was* the original.”

“No, it wasn’t. Well okay,” she admitted, “maybe for a minute or two there.”

“Oh isn’t it nice having a little break though?” Shannon smiled with fierce exuberance, pleased to provide a break of her own. “I just love it. Not that I don’t love my children to absolute *bits* of course.”

“Of course. You sure you don’t want a *drink*-drink though? I promise I won’t tell your husband,” Cadence said only half-jokingly.

“Well . . .” Shannon said, wincing through a short stretch of visibly fictitious indecision, “no, I’d better not. You go ahead though—dig in.”

And watching Cadence top up her bulbous glass, she asked, “So, what, you pumped out earlier then?”

“Oh yeah, last night and again this morning. I tell you what, I’m a regular little milk truck these days,” Cadence said, indicating with a little nod, as if separate sentient entities in themselves, each of her painfully swollen breasts.

“God it hurts when they get full like that though, huh?” Shannon said, registering for the record her own burdensome, albeit suspiciously elevated pair. “Yours, though, must be excruciating. I mean you were so big to begin with.”

“Big. Yes,” Cadence said, glancing reflexively in the direction of the living room, “that does seem to be the word for it round here.”

“You going to have any more then?”

“No way, two’s enough. You?”

Turning over her left hand and staring vacantly at the nail beds, Shannon nodded, “Bart wants a few more, sure. He’s always had this dream of having a really big family. And, well, since we’ve now got the money. . . .”

Cadence noted how she let that last statement hang out there for all it was worth—a nice little noose from which she might quietly dangle—and in truth it must have been worth quite a lot as, despite herself, Cadence found herself saying aloud, “You’re very lucky . . .” or else some other such dribble, for which she was immediately and deeply regretful, as leaning forward from the waist, hoping to extract an even more satisfactory response, Shannon said:

“Sorry?”

Again Cadence’s pride escaped her as she heard herself say, “I think it’s just settling in on Tom that we’re never going to be all that rich. You know, on only one salary.”

“Oh but we’re not rich,” said Shannon emphatically.

“Oh but I never said you were,” Cadence answered.

They both fell silent, sipping at their respective drinks, as Cadence’s patent disadvantage went on snoring up his not so private storm in the living room. In the meantime, perhaps due to the fact they were approximately the same color, Cadence could not help but notice the rather remarkable resemblance Shannon’s torso shared with the bottle of Merlot on the table.

Shannon took a moment to gaze provocatively out the window into the backyard, her vision levelling off at a point where the deck cut out over the gulf. “Say, is that a new deck? The one overhanging the ravine there?”

“Yeah, Tom and his brother built it a month or so ago,” Cadence told her, laughing at the memory of the debacle. “You should’ve seen—”

"It's wonderful," Shannon cut in, bringing an abrupt halt to any recollection that included lumber and physical labour that would, by its very nature, tend to wholly exclude her. "And I bet it has a gorgeous view once you get out past all those trees there, huh? Absolutely gorgeous. Tell me, do they still have that fishpond? What are they, koi?"

"Nope, goldfish. Simple old goldfish. Right out under the veranda here," Cadence said, tapping against the tabletop a short impatient tattoo. "But you can't really see it from here."

"Bart would *love* to see it. He just loves fish. *Loves* fish. Very 'serene,' he often says. Anyway, I told him about this one here—"

"Well there it is," Cadence said with a flick of her chin, occasioning the hitherto unseen pond, together with all its various inhabitants, to make the sudden and transitory leap out over the middle of the ravine, into view.

Both women gazed at it a moment, this watery image of the pond, fish and all, delicately afloat over the shifting abyss.

"What a piece of property you have here though," Shannon continued, chucking the pond at once into the conversational pit, as it were. "You're very lucky. It's hard to find such seclusion at an affordable price these days. Not anywhere remotely close to civilization anyway. Say, how deep is it by the way?"

"The ravine? Don't know," Cadence shrugged, adding with a single ominous arch of eyebrows, "No one's ever reached the bottom and returned to tell about it."

Shannon hesitated. "You're joking."

"I am," Cadence said. "Say, hundred, hundred and twenty feet—give or take."

"Oh *you*," Shannon scowled, directing at Cadence's nose a reprimanding finger. "Seriously though, do you know if they're in the market at all?" she inquired with her customary confidential forward tilt.

"They?"

"The owners."

"There's only one—that one you hear snoring—and no, it's not on the market as far as I know. At least it better not be. Tom and I are planning on staying only a few weeks until the condo sells, but still, it'd be a real pain in the ass to suddenly have it pulled out from under us." She paused a moment, wondering whether she had already said too much, but then carried on regardless. "No, the old man's not going anywhere." And finally, swept up in a feeling of displaced pride, she added, "He bought it for, what, twenty, and now it's worth like three-seventy-five."

A curt "Nice," was all she got from Shannon for her trouble, but she could tell an appraisal was in progress here.

"So how are you liking it here again anyway?" Shannon asked after a time, passing her glass of soda, Cadence noted, very nearly to her lips. "Nice to have a little more space, I bet. Even if . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well I was just going to say, even if it isn't your very own place," she finished.

“There’s that, yes,” Cadence said, accepting her guest’s ensuing look of condescending pity as her just desserts in this case.

“Still, that tiny little apartment must have been *hell* on you with two little ones around. Any word on a possible sale yet? And by the way,” Shannon said before Cadence could answer, “just so you know, I think it’s just *great* that you’ve been this determined to stay on in the old neighbourhood so long.”

“That’s us. Determined,” Cadence said.

“So . . . now what the heck was it I going to ask you—right. Any word yet on a possible sale?”

“The condo? Not yet, no. Still we’re fairly certain it’ll go though. I mean we’ve had it on the market for what, over four months now, and we’ve had a few interested—what? What is it?”

Shannon proceeded slowly, “Well—and mind you, it’s very possible I’m wrong here, Cadence—but I heard you’re not supposed to leave a property on the market for anywhere even *close* to that length of time. Potential buyers often shy away from something that, for whatever reason, is obviously not moving,” she added. “Not that that sort of tag necessarily applies in your case here. But then again, it’s best to play these things by the book, they say.”

“By the book,” Cadence repeated, refilling her glass. And then, skipping ahead to a complete loss of pride, she added, “I guess what we really want is something like yours.”

“Oh,” said Shannon, dismissing with one sweep of her freshly manicured hand any and all accumulations of material wealth, although of course any sort of

admission of envy regarding she and Bart always met with her highest concrete endorsement.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing out the back door.

Cadence craned her neck and caught a rare glimpse of the cat. “Oh, that. That’s Tom’s brother’s thing. She’s like, I don’t know, twenty or something. Old anyway. Probably feral. Lives outside all year round, poor thing. *Allergies*,” she whispered, indicting with a nod the unseen snorer by way of explanation such extended incarceration.

“Who feeds the thing? You?”

“Oh, sure. Likes Friskies. Only eats Friskies. You know, that smelly stuff in the can.”

“Oh right,” said Shannon, adding obscurely, “But you know, I’m not really sure I even trust that line.”

Cadence looked at her, justifiably perplexed. “Say, how’s your cat anyway?” she asked after a time.

“Oh, good. Yeah, she’s good,” Shannon said, a trace of grief complicating the corners of her mouth. “A little weird now with the new baby around though, hey.”

Sensing a possible chink in the armour here, Cadence pounced. “How do you mean?” she asked, managing to squeeze the vast majority of her facial features into a single squiggly conciliatory line.

“Oh you know—pukes, poor thing.”

“Poor thing is right,” Cadence winced, matching her guest’s singular look of disapproval, ever the aficionado of all things vomit-related, especially when they did not relate directly to her. And feeling a fresh surge of confidence, Cadence glanced nostalgically

about the kitchen a spell, taking in the venerable dishwasher, the vintage stove, and the original cupboards and countertop, managing to disregard completely the recently purchased banana holder.

“Yes, it’s been a real Godsend having this place to fall back on,” she sighed.

“It is beautiful,” Shannon agreed.

Just then, as Cadence seemed to be gaining all manner of strength through superior positioning over her suddenly floundering opposition, her sleepy father-in-law entered the kitchen wearing only a tight pair of impossibly lime green Bermuda shorts, and thus was the balance swung again, this time though quite permanently in the other direction, the new arrival’s overly large, incredibly distended belly providing an entirely new fulcrum to the existing equation.

“Who are you,” he said, more a statement than a question, extending a large dirty latex-covered hand toward Shannon’s midsection.

“Shannon. Cadence’s friend,” answered Shannon, holding out her own limp fingers, watching with queasy trepidation as they slowly inserted themselves, one after another, into the too-smooth enclosure of the man’s firm right hand.

“Tom Dempster. Pleasure to meet you,” he said, adding a gruff, “Gardening,” in an effort to explain the whole medical glove thing.

The word ‘pleasure’ had the effect of further disturbing Shannon, but before she could design a suitable protest, her sobriety-refined social graces took over the operation.

“Tom,” she said, lobbing between Cadence and the new arrival a quick arc of comprehension. “Oh, like . . .” but her voice trailed off, as turning to Cadence, the man said:

“Sorry, I was supposed to go out, I guess,” without letting go of Shannon’s hand.

“That’s okay,” shrugged Cadence disconsolately.

An uncomfortable silence loomed on the horizon just then. Cadence, though, fortified by the Merlot, felt as though she could not be bothered to halt its progression.

Not so Shannon. She blurted, “Well sir, we’ve just been admiring your fantastic view here,” seeking an abrupt end to the stalemate.

“Yes, it is nice,” Tom Senior said, releasing her hand at last to rub something unseen from the thick white down of his chest. “But then you can’t live in the view, remember.”

Both women nodded solemnly at this sage piece of advice. Eons passed, every one assiduously observed atop Cadence’s rising tide of irritation, until Tom finally made his way back out to the living room sofa, three fingers worth of his daughter-in-law’s prized hors d’oeuvres clutched loosely in a latex-gloved hand.

“Retired,” Cadence whispered summarily upon his departure.

“Right,” returned Shannon in much the same way.

Refilling her glass, Cadence raised a subdued toast to all the forces of injustice presently arraying against her in this steadily darkening world.

“So, what’s this about you joining kung fu?” Shannon asked at length, returning from her virtual tour along the rugged threshold of the ravine where, in a moment of quiet conveyance, she had seen herself standing alone atop civilization’s last barrier.

“Oh, that—Tom’s idea. Not his, mind you,” Cadence said, indicating with a lift of her chin the recently departed senior circuit, “but mine. Thought it would be good for me. *Us*. Something we could do together, you know.”

“Well I think it’s wonderful,” Shannon said. “And you’ve certainly got that core body strength to carry it off.”

“Kinda difficult with these things though,” said Cadence, hoisting her sagging breasts, one then the other, in the manner of a Slinky toy. “But it’s helping I think. I’m still about ten pounds over my pre-pregnancy weight.”

Abruptly, she watched the scales recalibrate in Shannon’s face. And so, to prove a most dubious point, she arose from her sitting position to assume alongside the kitchen nook a most unusual and convoluted stance. With her right hand held palm down, flat and level to her navel, she extended her left hand partially out before her at an angle and position suggestive of a teapot’s spout, all the while keeping the middle and index fingers pressed firmly to their corresponding thumb and flexing the entire triad downwards in the direction of her forearm. This delicate and unorthodox position of hand and arm, if nothing else, rendered the immediate and lasting impression of a dandy performing the required stoop-and-scoop at the local

doggy park. And yet, as if this were somehow not enough in itself, she forged ahead to the coup de grace of the entire seemingly impromptu, but in reality, highly orchestrated movement. Slowly drawing up her left knee so that the plane of her thigh pulled level with her waist, and her foot hovered in a painful looking arch about her right knee, she gasped a singular “Crane Guard” at the blank expanse of refrigerator door before her, managing to hold the pose with steely determination until her expertise was adequately acknowledged and, more importantly, any and all elevated weight had been sufficiently exonerated.

“Crane Guard indeed!” Shannon exclaimed as Cadence began to lose her balance, listing dangerously to the left. “Come on now, keep it up! Keep it up! Wow,” she nodded solemnly, “that is just fabulous. *Fabulous*,” at which point Cadence allowed the entire arrangement to disintegrate beneath her.

“Not bad, eh?”

“Not bad at all,” Shannon said, applauding as Cadence retook her seat in the kitchen nook and tossed back a good mouthful of wine.

“I am *very* impressed. You know, those martial arts are not at all easy to do.”

“Tell me about it,” Cadence said.

Out in the living room the television came on, the volume increasing steadily to near obnoxious levels.

“*Going deaf*,” Cadence whispered, far more quietly than was even remotely necessary, especially considering the interference currently being run in stereo out there. Still, knowing full well how her father-in-law liked to hover about, eager to pick up on any

conversational crumbs that might fall his way or thereabouts, she was not about to take any sort of gamble here.

“Mmm,” said Shannon, pursing her lips, seeming to Cadence, if nothing else, ever vigilant when it came to the testy fields of precarious in-law relations. Gently, Cadence fingered the stem of her glass in a slow and inappropriately seductive way, noting with displeasure how little Shannon had actually consumed of her soda and lemon. Her glass, in direct contrast, being almost empty again.

“So . . .” Shannon said, out in search of a viable topic, “how’s your brother-in-law anyway?”

“Kevin?” Cadence said, “Oh Kevin’s fine, I guess,” speaking in hushed undertones so as not to upset her father-in-law for whom the subject of his perpetually unemployed, recently separated second son was such a constant source of disappointment and stress these days. This despite the fact that she herself gained such infinite joy each and every time her brother-in-law’s name was censured.

“Did you know his wife was sick?”

“Jenny? She’s not sick. Where’d you hear that?”

“No, I mean way back when. Did you know she’d *been* sick—before.”

“Oh that. Of course,” Cadence said, “everyone knows that.”

“I didn’t.”

“Oh God,” Cadence said, dismissing all manner of life-threatening disease with a smooth wine-fuelled shrug, “she’s been sick twice, hey.”

“*Really?*”

“Oh sure. Tough little bird though, hey. *Tough.*”

“When though?”

“Once in high school and then again six years later.”

“Poor thing.”

“Yeah, poor thing. . . . Tough though. Incredibly tough. Yup, tough little bird, that Jenny. Got no spleen, hey.”

“No?”

“Nope, no spleen at all. Spleenless, you might say. The ‘Spleenless Wonder,’ Kevin used to call her!” Cadence roared before hushing herself quiet again.

Both ladies sat quietly a moment, wondering just what in fact the spleen’s function might be.

“Anyway, I never knew she was sick,” Shannon went on. “News to me. I mean she looks, you know, so *healthy*. Great skin. *Great* skin. Smooth.”

“The bitch,” Cadence grinned. “Well she is now, hey. Healthy, I mean. And no doubt healthier all the time not carrying all that dead weight around.”

“What *is* Kevin up to these days?”

“Not a helluva lot, believe me. Though in truth I don’t talk to him all that much.”

“What, he and Tom not getting along or something?”

“God no, what would make you think that? Peas in a pod, those two. Two peas. Peas!” she roared, the image of her husband and his brother enveloped in green sheathing more than she could bear just then.

“Well I just thought—”

“What?” Cadence interrupted. “What’d you think? No, Kevin’s just off on one of his tangents

again,” she said before Shannon could step in and explain. “It’s funny, you know, I always wanted a brother—I never had any brothers or sister of my own—and I finally get one, and he turns out to be everything I detest in men.”

“Like what?”

“Huh?”

“What is it exactly you hate about him?”

“W-ell,” Cadence said, suppressing a wayward belch, “for one, he drinks too much. Kevin, I mean.” This, too, struck her as incredibly funny, which due to the irony of the immediate situation she suspected actually might be. “Everything has to be so *quiet*,” she went on. “Everything has to have its *place*. And the quiet! Did I mention the quiet? Everything’s got to be so damned quiet all the time. Don’t know how Jenny could even stand the prick.”

“Cute though.”

“You think so?” said Cadence, furrowing her brows in an overly complicated way.

“Sure he is. I mean I assume he is. I haven’t seen him for some time though, hey.”

“No, he’s cute in his way, I guess. And what does he do with it, you ask? Nothing. Not a thing. Ambition zero on a scale of one to . . . whatever—ten, say. No,” she frowned, “that guy’s dead weight. Jenny’s that much better off without him as far as I’m concerned.”

She regarded her empty glass and what little was left of the bottle of Merlot. For a very brief moment she actually felt like crying, but only for a moment, before finally regaining control.

“Good with Ava Joy though, hey,” she said, splashing the last of the wine into her glass.

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah. Great. And Ava, she loves him too, hey. *Loves* him. Kinda pisses you off actually. Don’t know why it does, but it does.” She sighed tremendously. “No, in Ava’s mind Uncle Kevin can do no wrong. *No* wrong.”

“Kids,” Shannon said, shaking her head at all the intrinsic shortcomings of the young.

“Yeah, kids. They still talk though, hey. Kevin and Jenny, I mean, they still talk—quite a lot actually.”

“Well if there’s one thing I remember Kevin being good at, it’s talking,” Shannon said. “That boy has the gift of the gab.”

“That’s true,” Cadence admitted. “Terrible listener though. Terrible. Awful. Full of aw, that man.”

“That so?”

“Oh yeah. Awful, *awful* listener. Terrible. Same with his brother of course.”

“You’re talking men in general now,” Shannon observed.

“You got that right, sister—men in general. General men. General . . . Actually, I lied. Kevin’s a heluva listener. Sorry Kev, wherever you are.” Leaning heavily on one elbow, she waved awkwardly to her perpetually absent brother-in-law. “Yeah, he was an exceptional listener, Kevin was,” she said. “You know, before all this went down.”

Whatever ‘this’ was evidently stood dissected and ready for inspection on the table before her, or so at least Shannon surmised.

“Yeah,” Cadence continued, “it seems impossible now, but he and I actually used to get along quite well.”

Shannon ventured, “You two didn’t . . .?” allowing the upward lilt in her voice to finish the question she obviously could not.

“What? Who? You mean *Kev and me*? God no, are you kidding? No, no, not my type at all. I like less . . . well less complicated men. And thinner. You know, not quite so . . . what’s the word I’m groping for?”

“Fit?”

“Fit? *Fit*, you say? No, not fit—brawny. Don’t like brawny so much.”

“So you like simple, skinny men. Sorry, honey, but if that’s the case, you crapped out there comp—”

“No, no,” Cadence interrupted, “you’re putting words in my mouth again. Quit it, word-putter. Just quit it. No, I like men like . . . well, like Tom,” she said smilingly, triumphant in her quest.

“Tom’s big. In fact, as I recall he’s even bigger than—”

“Kevin,” Cadence finished. “Yeah, I know. That’s the wicked, wicked irony of it all. Ironic. Byronic. Actually, it was Kevin who first introduced us, hey.”

“No way.”

“Yup, back in university. We were all living in the same residence at the time, and their house was putting on this party. Sponsoring it or whatever. Anyway,” she sighed, “Kevin and Tom were President and Vice-President of their house respectively, and one day they sent out all these invitations to all the other houses in the residence—hand-delivered them actually. So

anyway, there’s this knock on my door one night, and I open up, and lo and behold, it’s Kevin. Boy, was I ever surprised. Not so much that it was *him* per se as the fact that, well, our house was all women, hey. And my room was directly across the hall from the lounge. So, needless to say, having a strange and attractive man come knocking on your door at ten o’clock at night brought about the expected unwanted attention.

“So anyway, he introduces himself and states his business,” Cadence continued. “And there I am listening and nodding along, you know, trying to seem aloof, because all the girls in the lounge are now watching, and of course they’re all going ga-ga over him too. He really was an attractive young man back then. Not like you see now. But handsome. And athletic. Yes, an attractively handsome, athletic gentleman is how I’d describe him. Played lacrosse too, don’t know if I ever mentioned.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Oh yeah, that’s where all this latent capacity for violence comes from.”

“What, you mean . . .” Shannon whispered wide-eyed, leaning forward from the waist once again.

“Oh no, not that I’m aware of. No, I’m just explaining his athleticism. Yes very athletic, Kevin was. And social. Way, *way* more social and different than he is now. Christ, he’s like a hermit now. I mean he *runs*. You know, he goes for *runs*. Like in running shoes and stuff. But back then, well, back then he was something.”

“Hmm,” purred Shannon appreciatively.

“Anyway, Kev and I got to talking that night, there in my doorway, alongside the lounge and all the

obligatory spectators, and then for whatever reason—remember now, I was a fairly brazen thing—but for whatever reason I invited him in. To be honest, it was more to do with the fact that everybody was watching—I mean those bitches were tenacious—plus, you know, he had a bit of a reputation if you know what I mean.”

Shannon nodded to show her complete understanding of that sort of thing. Suddenly though, she checked herself. “But you never . . .”

“No, no, like I said, he was a real gentleman back then. We just talked. And talked. And talked. He really was very interesting. I once told him he was the most well-rounded, multifaceted individual I’d ever met. And I meant it too. I mean he had all these amazingly insightful, *intelligent* things to say. *God*, was he intelligent! A regular ol’ . . . well you know how he can be.”

“Yes, he’s certainly intelligent when he wants to be.”

“He certainly is. I mean don’t get me wrong, he never got any really outstanding grades or anything—in fact, as I recall he barely passed some things—but no question, he was definitely intelligent. And *charming*! He could be really charming when he wanted to be. Back when he had ambition,” she said, tipping back her drink. “So anyway, he invited me to the party and I came.”

“Went.”

“Went. Correct.”

Shannon smiled her smile again, lifting up each portion of the story and giving it a sentimental little shake for good measure. “So how come you two never hooked up?” she asked at length.

Cadence just looked at her, smiling wanly through glazed eyes.

“*What!* But you said—”

“I said we never got *together*,” Cadence amended. “I never said we didn’t hook up.”

“So you *did* hook up,” said Shannon incredulously.

“Oh sure, we hooked up. At that party I was telling you about.”

“And?”

“And it was nice. That is, as far as I can remember. . . . No,” she decided upon further review, “no, it was definitely really, really nice, no question.”

“Nice? What do you mean, ‘nice’?”

“I mean he was gentle. And sweet. But really, really driven, mind you. My, but he really drove that thing—whew.”

“Boy,” said Shannon, imagining.

Cadence sighed again. “But then, wouldn’t you know it, not two days later this Jenny character comes trudging back from parts unknown. Turns out they’ve been an item on and off since like the eighth grade or something, and of course she moves directly into his dorm. And for whatever reason—her, undoubtedly—I didn’t see him again for ages after that.”

“And that’s it?”

“And that’s it. Before long his brother started prowling around and, well, pretty soon he was all I thought about.”

“Tom.”

“Yes. Tom.”

“Tell me, does he know about you and Kevin then?”

“Tom? Oh I don’t think so, no. At least I never told him.” She considered the possibility momentarily, then stated absolutely, “No, that I’d never tell him. No way.”

“And Kevin?”

“No, I don’t think he would. At least I don’t *think* he would. But you know, he’s really very well endowed actually.”

“Kevin?”

“Tom. Terrifically well endowed actually. Absolutely terrific. A perfect fit,” she said, holding it up disembodied before her in case anyone wanted to partake of its pleasure vicariously. “‘Like sands through the hourglass, these are the Days of Our Lives,’” she added climactically, entertaining a series of final graphic snapshots.

“Well, yes,” Shannon said as if this were in fact entirely common knowledge—in truth though not at all certain what to do with the information—a small part of her still wishing to express the appropriate level of fascination warranted by such a complete and obvious revelation.

Out in the living room the television droned on in a monotonous stream, only after continued and careful listening resolving itself into specific financial facts emitting from discernible figurines. Together Cadence and Shannon gazed out the window, their eyes adrift to the edge of the ravine, each woman’s presence marring the sacredness of the vigil for the other, not that they would ever admit such cupidity.

“So why’d they break up?” Shannon asked after a time.

“Kev and Jenny? Who knows. Maybe because he’s insane.”

“You mean to tell me he’s actually—”

“Well no, not *actually* insane. Just, you know, insane. Crazy. *Warped*.”

“Because he beat her,” Shannon put in.

“*What?* He never *beat* her. I never said he *beat* her. He just says—and get this—that he’s not going to *lie* anymore. Whatever the hell *that* means.”

“*Not going to lie anymore,*” Shannon repeated. “How the heck does he expect to pull that off. And more importantly, *why?*”

“Who knows. Who cares. Anyway, I’m sure it’s just a faze. Kevin’s very—how shall I put it—eccentric. Yes, eccentric I suppose would be the word for him.”

“But he’s not like, you know, suicidal or anything.”

“God no! What a question! No, no, he’d never do that. He’d never *dare* do anything like that. After all, that’d only mean one more unnecessary journey to make certain I’m not abusing his brother in some way. Oh you laugh, but believe me, it’s a genuine obsession of his. Complete preoccupation. Speaking of which,” she said, “you know he’s working in my Dad’s restaurant now, hey?”

“Oh really? What’s he doing? Bartending?”

“No, *dishwashing*. He’s a *dishwasher*,” Cadence said, bestowing upon that position the maximum contempt of her enunciation.

“Jeez, hey?” Shannon said, incredulous. “But then the bigger they are, I guess. . . . Say, you don’t

think . . . No, forget it, it's stupid," she said, waving off the suggestion.

"What?"

"Nothing, it's stupid."

"Tell me, Shannon. Please."

"Well, okay," she paused, gathering her thoughts. "I was just thinking—and this is just me, mind you—but I was just thinking that maybe they might have broken up because of, you know, because of you and Kevin's little fling. You know, since he's not lying anymore and everything." She paused another second to gauge Cadence's reaction, but nothing of the sort was forthcoming. "Tell me it's stupid," she said. "I mean it's stupid, isn't it? Yeah I knew it, it was an entirely stupid suggestion."

Cadence looked at her, blinking, not saying anything, just as her father-in-law returned to the kitchen, bringing an abrupt halt to the conversation. In truth, no doubt due to the wine—in fact almost certainly due to the wine—Cadence had forgotten all about him till then.

"Got one flies up to the railing there," he announced with apparent irrelevancy, indicating with a single extended latex-encased finger the fence running along the lip of the ravine. "Should see the bastard. Early in the mornings, comes rising up like a ghost out of the fog. Comes up for the fish. Love to get his beak into one of my fish. I've stood here for hours watching him."

Both women regarded Father Tom with confusion.

"What are you talking about?" Cadence asked finally, blinking a rapidly advancing blur from her

vision. Meanwhile, Shannon, despite the obvious gravitational draw of the lime green Bermuda shorts, made a concerted effort to look the man squarely in the eye just then.

"The cranes," he said. "I thought I heard you earlier talking about cranes."

Shannon continued to regard him with confusion as Cadence blinked out the window in the direction of the ravine.

"Oh, the kung fu. He's talking about the kung fu," Shannon laughed at last, happy to be relieved of the burden of someone else's senility.

"Huh?"

"We were talking about Cadence's kung fu," Shannon said. "You must have misheard us. The crane, you see, it's this sort of martial arts thing."

She offered the air a short series of rapid hand slashes as visual aide. Now it was Tom Senior's turn to look confused.

"Huh?" he said again.

"Cadence and I, we were talk—"

"Actually, I think that's a heron," Cadence interrupted hoarsely, no longer blinking, staring abstractly at the ravine instead. "It's a heron that tries to eat your fish—not a crane."

"Crane? Heron? What's the difference?" Tom said. "Either way I ought to shoot me the son of a bitch."

