Lone Bird

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MORRIE turned the key and opened the door into the small apartment.

He flipped on the light switch, and the glare from the bare bulb on the ceiling shed over the room. The linoleum squeeked loudly beneath his feet, even though his step was always light and hesitant—almost as if he were skipping over something made of delicate crystal. Except for the squeeks, and the dull thud of the briefcase as he dropped it on the floor near his desk, the room was silent.

He paused beside the desk, thumbs caught in the corners of his khaki pockets in a way that caused his thin shoulders to sag boyishly underneath the generous-fitting jacket. The sprinkle of freckles on the backs of his hands matched the copper-colored flecks that arched his nose and faded into his sharply defined cheeks.

Morrie breathed a long sigh as his doe-colored eyes shifted their narrow gaze from his own neatly kept side of the room to Rick's desk on the opposite side. The clutter of drawing tools, tracing pads and books that had been untouched during Morrie's absence told him that Rick must have been in a hurry to pick up Wanda.

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Morrie hung up his wool jacket on the rack behind the door; then he did the same with Rick's trench coat, which had been tossed carelessly over the arm of the threadbare couch.

He glanced at his watch. 10:30. Maybe he'd have enough time to wrap up the unfinished architecture project. Rick would be coming back soon with Wanda, he knew. Morrie reluctantly opened the briefcase and spread the prints before him on the desk. He selected a pencil from the tin-can holder and started to draw.

The dry heat of the room was overwhelming. Weary after spending a long, laborious evening in the deserted arch lab, Morrie dropped his chin into his hands. The tediously drawn plans stood out in meaningless lines and curves on the white sheets of paper. He dropped the pencil into the holder and stretched, trying to loosen the knot that appeared between his shoulder blades whenever he studied.

The sound of footsteps outside interrupted him. He heard low tones of conversation and then a high-pitched laugh. The door opened and Wanda breezed in, followed by Rick.

"Hi, Morrie!" she chirped. "Oh, don't tell me you're studying again — on a Saturday night!" Her high heels tripped across the floor as she approached his desk, pretending to scrutinize papers he'd been working on. "Hmmm, looks complicated. What is it?"

"Uh, hello, Wanda — Rick. Oh, I'm working on this special project for architecture." Morrie knew she wasn't really interested so he didn't bother to explain the plans. "Well, it's due Monday, and I thought I'd better get it done . . ." his cautious voice lowered and trailed off.

Rick helped the girl with her coat. "Would you care for a drink, Wanda? I've got some bourbon."

"Mmmm, bourbon sounds wonderful," she sighed as she bounced into the overstuffed chair and lit a cigarette.

"How about you, Morrie?"

"Uh, no thanks, Rick . . . not right now."

Rick disappeared into the tiny kitchenette. The clat-
ter of glasses was clearly audible in the silence. Morrie picked at his fingernails and tried to think of something to say to Wanda.

"Say, Morrie," she said casually, "I was wondering if you'd like me to fix you up with a date sometime. I was thinking about this new pledge we have at the Gamma house . . . ."

"Well, I don't know . . . ." Morrie began, but Wanda continued before he could finish.

"She's real sharp, and I think you two would get along real well. You could double with Rick and me the first time."

"Gee, Wanda, it's nice of you to offer. But I really don't know when I'd find time to . . . ."

Ice cubes tinkled as Rick returned with two drinks in hand. Morrie was glad he'd come back to keep Wanda occupied. Rick sat on the arm of Wanda's chair and reached out a long arm to flick on the radio.

Morrie turned back to his arch project. He tried for several minutes to concentrate, but his attempt was unsuccessful. He walked over to the couch and lay down, his head propped up against one unyielding arm, his feet crossed on top of the other arm. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

High-pitched music was coming from the radio and there was the irregular, scraping sound of feet as Rick danced with Wanda. The penetrating smell of the girl's perfume mingled with the stifling smell of stale cigarette smoke and the unenticing smell of two whiskey-sours, unfinished and now warm, sitting on the table.

He heard Rick's voice asking, "Wanda, what do you see in that picture?"

Morrie opened his eyes and fixed his attention on the large painting on the wall above his feet. Its orange-and-yellow hues were almost blinding as he continued to gaze at it.

Wanda moved slowly in the tight dress toward the couch where Morrie lay. She regarded the picture with tilted head and pursed lips. The silver bracelet jingled on her arm as she deliberately ran her hand through her blonde hair.
"Oh, that's easy!" she exclaimed, turning back to Rick. "It's two people. A man and a woman. See? He's bending toward her, and her hair is blowing in the wind." She traced a long fingernail over the painting as she spoke. "And the whole thing looks like we're seeing them through a screen of flames."

Rick nodded in agreement. Then he asked, "What do you think, Morrie?"

"Hmmm? Oh, I guess that's right," Morrie answered inattentively.

When the couple had gone and the room was again empty and still, Morrie's stare was fixed on the painting.

"Funny," Morrie thought to himself. "It's always looked more like a bird to me. A bright, tropical sort of bird.

"... a girl's hair blowing in the wind," she had said.
No, that wispy streak is a tuft of the bird's wing.
"... there's a man bending over her . . ."
That tallest part is the bird's head instead of a man.
And she had said, "two people . . ."
No. There was just one bird, not two.
Morrie sat up, shrugged, and began to get ready for bed.

*God's Assignment, A Satire*

*by Ann Marie Younggreen*

God's Assignment, student of life, should be copied Word for Word, completed exactly as directed, typed (double spaced) on unlined paper, and delivered to the social director no later than next Wednesday.