My Love Is Young No Longer

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Julie pushed into the corner of the couch, shoulders curled protectively forward, fingers thoughtfully ruminating a small bump above her upper lip. She worried at it, releasing some of her tiredness and hurt through the unconscious jabs of her fingers. Reaching its pointed clumps under her chin, the oily hair she hated hung forward with the tilt of her head. Her eyes followed the arrow of her chin toward the convex just between her breasts and hips. It arched like one of those modern roofs, with all manner of things perking under one huge dome—the way the sky pinned down at the horizon vaults the constantly regenerating earth. Her thoughts momentarily turned the soft outline of her lips up, the movement pushing her high cheek bones toward the laugh-wrinkled outer corners of her eyes. The down draft of her next thoughts showed in the sagging muscles of her face. Sure! all kinds of things going on—at least twins, maybe triplets, or the full-bright-red-hot-harvest moon! Julie’s shoulders twitched with the vicious surge of her thoughts—the rest of her, lead-weighted with weariness, pinned to the couch. Who said women bloomed when they were pregnant—had a far-away expectant look—an aura of ethereal beauty or some such blah. She’d read it somewhere. Must have been written by a man. An unmarried! childless! hermit! Nausea filled her vast abdomen, rising to her throat. Her tensed muscles pushed her deeper into the couch. “I am not going to throw up. I am not going to throw up,” the guttural huskiness of her voice was hardly audible in the small room. “Besides, I’m too tired. I don’t have the strength. It’ll just have to wait until tomorrow.”

The one lamp in the room made dark corners and hid some of the shabbiness. It lighted Barry’s tall, lean vitality
springing out of the bathroom. His noisy energy made her
 cringe. He stretched upward and arched his back pulling his
 shirt out a little. “Well,” he broadcast, “I’m tired. I’m going
to bed. You can clean up the dishes tomorrow.” Why did
he always speak too loudly when she didn’t want to hear, and
other times mutter behind his teeth? Her lips tightened to
a small o, like the end of a pistol ready to spit death.
Looking up through her eyebrows she hated him a little.
They had just walked Charlie to the bus. Many times the
three of them sat up half the night just talking—about any­
thing. Like trying to figure out what the heck James Joyce
was doing in “Ulysses.” Barry would sometimes read the
paper when they talked about personal things, excluding
himself from the circle of their friendship. Had he always
been that way? Had she seen something that wasn’t there
before they married, or had he changed? He was barely
receptive when she turned to him with little personal things,
private thoughts. He still expected her to be interested when
he was declaiming his own.
Barry pulled his clothes off, dumping them in their cus­
tomary heap at the other end of the couch. She watched as
his farm-muscled body stood revealed. He had a magnetism
when he wished to exert it which made her forget everything
else for a while.
She remembered Barry’s hand on her back burning
through her clothes, burning her flesh, the heat spreading
through her. That was the day his proposal had been, “Say,
do you think you could stand living with me?” She had
thought it had a pixie-like appeal then. They had walked
through the museum, their arms encircling each other,
people staring at them. She hadn’t cared—neither had Barry.
Her thoughts dragged back to the three of them waiting
for Charlie’s bus. Barry had been jumpy and irritable. Was
he worried that she’d have to buy a new coat when he
sneered about her coat not fitting any more? She could feel
her stomach knot again and the hurt tighten in her chest.
Charlie’s quick, “Why do you think it doesn’t fit?” came to
her rescue, Charlie’s lips quirking in impatience with Barry.
Barry hadn’t meant it as a joke. His words had had a nasty
sound. Was he tired—was that what was eating at him? They
could get along all right even with the baby coming. He was going to school under a good scholarship—working in the lab part time. You could get just so close to Barry—then he put up his invisible barricade. She knew Charlie noticed it too by the way he always seemed to turn toward her, when they were talking about personal things. She wondered if many people noticed Barry's inner core of cold don't-get-too-close, under his surface cordiality.

Barry crossed the worn rug to the further wall, opened the double doors and pulled down the Murphy bed. Maybe it would bounce back and hit him in the face. No such luck. When Barry put the bed down it didn't dare spring back the way it did when she struggled with it. So what if they lived in a furnished apartment? She wasn't complaining. It wouldn't be forever. Why was he always saying things to hurt and embarrass her in front of people? Was his hostility directed just at her, or the world in general? Sure, Barry's mother had died when he was eleven and his father had married a girl just graduating from high school with his older sister. Certainly no mother to the children, whatever she was to Barry's father. All right, Barry had had his problems. So had she, but she wasn't taking it out on everyone, or Barry in particular.

Barry's voice whip-snapped across her thoughts. "Come on, get your clothes off and get the light out. I want to sleep. Have an exam in the morning." He threw himself onto his side of the bed with the bounce of physical well-being. Pulling the sheet up over his head, he became a long shapeless lump on one side of the bed leaving the other half flat and coverless.

Using both hands she pushed herself up from the sagging springs of the couch, clumsily side-stepping around the foot of the pulled-down bed. If he went to sleep right away she could be alone with her thoughts—figure out the tomorrows—the yesterdays—anything but the dissident today.

Slowly, she undressed. She sat carefully on the edge of the bed so as not to disturb the even respiration of the dollop lying next to her in the dark. Tugging the covers over the nucleated mound of her body, she inched down.