Bitter November

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He walked away, not turning back — his strong shoulders square in the light of the doorway.

Jean bit her lip. No! How could she just sit there, when she wanted to stop him, to run to him and tell him he was right — they should be together. "Oh God, make me strong — just for a while longer!"

The minutes passed like hours. Time for the train. Jean walked numbly to the gate. She got on the train, found her seat and settled back, exhausted.

As the train pulled out of the station, the long held-back tears streamed freely down her face.

— Sue Fitzsimmons, H. Ec. Sr.

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HE PULLED the Ford up to the curb. "Here we are."

She nodded her head, saying nothing. "You ready to go in?"

She lifted her head and looked across at him. "I guess so."

He got out and walked around to open the door for her. The bare streetlight on the opposite corner cast long shadows of trees and telephone poles across their path. Something rustled in the grass and he saw a rabbit run a few feet and then sit to watch them pass.

At the door, he stopped and turned to her. "Maybe you better wait here a minute. I'll go tell them." He saw the scared, trusting look in her eyes — "and then you can meet them."

He lifted her chin and forced a smile for her. "Hey, cheer up. They're nice people, really. They won't bite you."

She looked up at his smile and his words. She managed a weak smile, "Yes, I'll be all right. You go tell them." He patted her shoulder and turned toward the door.

His hands were trembling as he reached for the knob and
he stumbled over the sill as he went in. Inside, he felt sick. He wanted to run. He didn’t want to tell them. He couldn’t tell them. He was scared, a little boy afraid to tell Mother he’d been swiping cookies.

“Is that you, Johnny?”

“Yea—,” he squeaked. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, Ma, it’s me.” His knees were water. He couldn’t tell them. “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s out in the kitchen.”

“You want to come along out here with me? I’ve got something to tell you people.” He put his arm around her shoulders. He smiled, he made his voice light. He was sick.

He told them. He leaned against the table, his head down, his eyes seeing the tile floor, the milk bottles in the corner, Dad’s slippers, the brown ones, the ones Ma had picked out for him to give Dad two years ago at Christmas. He could never remember to pick anything out.

Dad set his cup down and ran his hand across his face.

“But Johnny,” Ma said, “we had so many plans for you. You were going to school and then a job and . . . oh, I don’t know. But . . . but this!” She fidgeted on her chair, shaking her head back and forth, gesturing with her soft hands as she spoke.

Dad got up and rinsed his cup out in the sink.

“I know, Ma. I know how you people always planned things for me and did things for me and all and I’m sorry I let you down this way.” He took a deep breath. It was warm in the kitchen. “But what we did, we did. And . . . and now I can’t let her down.”

Ma was biting her fingernails, the way she did when something was bothering her. She looked aimlessly at the Frigidaire. Dad was wiping the cup on a good dishtowel. Ma would skin him.

“Ya see?”

His mother dropped her hands into her lap and looked over at her plants hanging in the window. His father walked over to the back door and stood looking out, his sloping shoulders framed by the little chintz curtains. “Well, I wish to Christ you’d used your head!”

The narrow shoulders came shifting around, the man’s big tired eyes avoiding the boy. “You’re always trying some fool stunt like this. Always something.”
John winced. He wasn't always doing things like this. The old guy didn't understand.

"But you're right." The hard line of the man's eyebrows softened a little. "That's the only thing to do." He looked at the boy. "Is your girl here?"

"Yes, sir. She's right outside. I'll get her." John almost ran out of the kitchen.

Out on the porch, Tommi was standing by the railing, looking down into the lilac bushes. They rustled leaflessly in the sharp breeze. She turned around as John came hurrying out. "Look, Johnny, I was thinking. You don't have to do this for me. It was mostly my fault. Maybe I could just go away someplace or . . . or something." She looked up with her sharp little eyes, like a cat someone had teased, ready to fight.

"Phooey." Johnny grabbed her arm. "It's all fixed. C'mon in."

He led her through the living room and dining room to the kitchen, pulling her along as she held back. He held the door open for her and guided her in front of the table.

"People, this is Tommi."

Ma smiled quietly and Dad bobbed his head a little.

"Her name's Agnes Moore, but everybody calls her Tommi. This is my ma and my dad."

She managed a shaky "Hello," and John pulled a chair out for her.

"I'm very pleased to meet you — Tommi," Ma began. "I — " She broke. Her head dropped in her hands. She was crying.

"Aw, Ma, don't cry," Johnny pleaded.

Tommi reached her hand over on the shaking shoulder. "Please don't cry, Mrs. O'Brien. I'm sorry we caused you all this. But I promise to be good for Johnny. I'll try to be a good daughter. Please don't cry."

Ma lifted her head, dabbing at her eyes. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry I have to act this way. It's so silly. But, we —." She sniffed. "Yes, yes I'm sure you'll make me a good daughter. I'm sure you will." She laughed and then shook her head. "Well, Dad, don't just stand there, sit down!"

Dad came over and sat down across the table. "Glad to meet you, Tommi," he smiled. "When you kids getting hitched?"
They all talked at once, then, quickly, a bit uneasily. Johnny said quietly it would have to be pretty soon. Everybody accepted that and went on about gifts and announcements and a shower and pictures and guests until they all ran out at once and all you could hear in the little white kitchen was the hum of the Frigidaire and the drip from the faucet Dad hadn’t turned clear off.

Dad got up. “You better take Tommi home. It’s getting pretty late. You do live here, don’t you?” he questioned.

John explained that she worked and had an apartment. They all got up and walked through the house to the door. John and Tommi waved goodnight and went down the walk to the car. Dad put his arm on Ma’s shoulder and then he closed the door.

“You going upstairs now?” she asked as he started toward the stairs.

“Yes, I am. Been quite an evening, hasn’t it?” He smiled at her, shrugged his shoulders carelessly and started up the stairs.

Johnny guided the Ford down the street. The movie was just out and some of the kids he knew waved to him from the sidewalk.

Gee, we just graduated six months ago. And here I am. Guess Bud’ll have to go to college by himself next year.

He stopped at the stoplight.

“We going to tell your folks tomorrow?”

She nodded.

“I’ll call Pete and tell him I’m not coming to work.”

“I’ll have to call Mr. Andrews and ask for the day off, too. He won’t like it.”

“Too bad about Mr. Andrews.”

The light changed and he moved the car forward and into second. Somebody called to him from the corner bus-stop and he waved to a bunch of kids. Down the street, a couple were getting into an old coupe. They were laughing about something.

He turned after the couple as he went by. He rolled down his window a little.

There was something bitter in the sharp November breeze that sent a shiver running down his back.