

## Premium Harmony

They've been married for ten years and for a long time everything was okay – swell – but now they argue. Now they argue quite a lot. It's really all the same argument. It has circularity. It is, Ray sometimes thinks, like a dog track. When they argue they're like greyhounds chasing the mechanical rabbit. You go past the same scenery time after time, but you don't see the landscape. You see the rabbit.

He thinks it might be different if they'd had kids, but she couldn't have kids. They finally got tested, and that's what the doctor said. It was her problem. Something in her. A year or so after that, he bought her a dog, a Jack Russell she named Biznezz. Mary would spell it for people who asked. She wants everyone to get the joke. She loves that dog, but now they argue anyway.

They're going to Walmart for grass seed. They've decided to sell the house – they can't afford to keep it – but Mary says they won't get far until they do something about the plumbing and make the lawn nice. She says those bald patches make it look shanty Irish. It's been a hot summer with no rain to speak of. Ray tells her grass seed won't grow the lawn without rain no matter how good the grass seed is. He says they should wait.

'Then another year goes by and we're still there,' she says. 'We can't wait another year, Ray. We'll be bankrupts.'

When she talks, Biz looks at her from his place in the backseat. Sometimes he looks at Ray when Ray talks, but not always. Mostly he looks at Mary.

'What do you think?' he says. 'It's going to rain so you don't have to worry about going bankrupt?'

'We're in it together, unless you forgot,' she says. They're driving through Castle Rock now. It's pretty dead. What Ray calls 'the economy' has disappeared from this part of Maine. The Walmart is on the other side of town, near the high school where Ray is

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a janitor. The Walmart has its own stoplight. People joke about it.

'Penny wise and pound foolish,' he says. 'You ever hear that one?'  
'A million times, from you.'

He grunts. He can see the dog in the rearview mirror, watching her. Sometimes he hates the way Biz does that. It comes to him that neither of them knows what they are talking about. It is a depressing thought.

'And pull in at the Quik-Pik,' she says. 'I want to get a kickball for Tallie's birthday.' Tallie is her brother's little girl. Ray supposes that makes her his niece, although he's not sure that's right, since all the blood is on Mary's side.

'They have balls at Walmart,' Ray says, 'and everything's cheaper at Wally World.'

'The ones at Quik-Pik are purple. Purple is her favorite color. I can't be sure there'll be purple at Walmart.'

'If there aren't, we'll stop at the Quik-Pik on the way back.' He feels like a great weight is pressing down on his head. She'll get her way. She always does on things like this. Marriage is like a football game and he's quarterbacking the underdog team. He has to pick his spots. Make short passes.

'It'll be on the wrong side coming back,' she says – as if they are caught in a torrent of city traffic instead of rolling through an almost deserted little town where most of the stores are for sale. 'I'll just dash in and get the ball and dash right back out.'

At two hundred pounds, Ray thinks, your dashing days are over, honey.

'They're only ninety-nine cents,' she says. 'Don't be such a pinch-penny.'

Don't be so pound foolish, he thinks, but what he says is, 'Buy me a pack of smokes while you're in there. I'm out.'

'If you quit, we'd have an extra forty dollars a week.'

He saves up and pays a friend in South Carolina to ship him a dozen cartons at a time. They're twenty dollars a carton cheaper in South Carolina. That's a lot of money, even in this day and age. It's not like he doesn't try to economize. He has told her this before and will again, but what's the point? In one ear, out the other. Nothing to slow down what he says in the middle.

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'I used to smoke two packs a day,' he says. 'Now I smoke less than half a pack.' Actually, most days he smokes more. She knows it, and Ray knows she knows it. That's marriage after awhile. That weight on his head gets a little heavier. Also, he can see Biz still looking at her. He feeds the damn thing, and he makes the money that *pays* for the food, but it's her he's looking at. And Jack Russells are supposed to be smart.

He turns in to the Quik-Pik.

'You ought to buy them on Indian Island if you've got to have them,' she says.

'They haven't sold tax-free smokes on the rez for ten years,' he says. 'I've told you that, too. You don't listen.' He pulls past the gas pumps and parks beside the store. There's no shade. The sun is directly overhead. The car's air conditioner only works a little. They are both sweating. In the backseat, Biz is panting. It makes him look like he's grinning.

'Well, you ought to quit,' Mary says.

'And you ought to quit those Little Debbies,' he says. He doesn't want to say this, he knows how sensitive she is about her weight, but out it comes. He can't hold it back. It's a mystery.

'I ain't had one in a year,' she says.

'Mary, the box is on the top shelf. A twenty-four-pack. Behind the flour.'

'Were you *snooping*?' she cries. A flush is rising in her cheeks, and he sees how she looked when she was still beautiful. Good-looking, anyway. Everybody said she was good-looking, even his mother, who didn't like her otherwise.

'I was looking for the bottle opener,' he says. 'I had a bottle of cream soda. The kind with the old-fashioned cap.'

'Looking for a bottle opener on the top shelf of the goddam cupboard!'

'Go in and get the ball,' he says. 'And get me some smokes. Be a sport.'

'Can't you wait until we get home? Can't you even wait that long?'

'You can get the cheap ones,' he says. 'That off-brand. Premium Harmony, they're called.' They taste like old stale cowshit, but all right. If she'll only shut up about it. It's too hot to argue.

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'Where are you going to smoke, anyway? In the car, I suppose, so I have to breathe it.'

'I'll open the window, I always do.'

'I'll get the ball. Then I'll come back. If you feel you *have* to spend four dollars and fifty cents to poison your lungs, *you* can go in. I'll sit with the baby.'

Ray hates it when she calls Biz the baby. He's a dog, and he may be as bright as Mary likes to boast, but he still shits outside and licks where his balls used to be.

'Buy a few Twinkies while you're at it,' he tells her. 'Or maybe they're having a special on Ho Hos.'

'You're so mean,' she says. She gets out of the car and slams the door. He's parked too close to the concrete cube of a building and she has to sidle until she's past the trunk of the car, and he knows she knows he's looking at her, seeing how she's now so big she has to sidle. He knows she thinks he parked close to the building on purpose, to make her sidle, and maybe he did.

He wants a cigarette.

'Well, Biz, old buddy, it's just you and me.'

Biz lies down on the backseat and closes his eyes. He may get up on his back paws and shuffle around for a few seconds when Mary puts on a record and tells him to dance, and if she tells him (in a jolly voice) that he's a *bad boy*, he may go into the corner and sit facing the wall, but he still shits outside.

The time goes by and she doesn't come out. Ray opens the glove compartment. He paws through the rat's nest of papers, looking for some cigarettes he might have forgotten, but there aren't any. He *does* find a Hostess Sno Ball still in its wrapper. He pokes it. It's as stiff as a corpse. It's got to be a thousand years old. Maybe older. Maybe it came over on the Ark.

'Everybody has his poison,' he says. He unwraps the Sno Ball and tosses it into the backseat. 'Want this, Biz? Go ahead, knock yourself out.'

Biz snarks the Sno Ball in two bites. Then he sets to work licking up bits of coconut off the seat. Mary would have a shit fit, but Mary's not here.

Ray looks at the gas gauge and sees it's down to half. He could turn off the motor and unroll the windows, but then he'd really

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bake. Sitting here in the sun, waiting for her to buy a purple plastic kickball for ninety-nine cents when he knows they could get one for seventy-nine cents at Walmart. Only that one might be yellow or red. Not good enough for Tallie. Only purple for the princess.

He sits there and Mary doesn't come back. 'Christ on a pony!' he says. Cool air traces over his face. He thinks again about turning off the engine, saving some gas, then thinks fuck it. She won't bring him the smokes, either. Not even the cheap off-brand. This he knows. He had to make that crack about those Little Debbies.

He sees a young woman in the rearview mirror. She's jogging toward the car. She's even heavier than Mary; great big tits shuffle back and forth under her blue smock. Biz sees her coming and starts to bark.

Ray unrolls the window.

'Is your wife a blond-haired woman?' She puffs the words. 'A blond-haired woman wearing sneakers?' Her face shines with sweat.

'Yes. She wanted a ball for our niece.'

'Well, something's wrong with her. She fell down. She's unconscious. Mr Ghosh says he thinks she might have had a heart attack. He called nine-one-one. You better come.'

Ray locks the car and follows her into the store. It's cold inside after the car. Mary is lying on the floor with her legs spread and her arms at her sides. She's next to a wire cylinder full of kickballs. The sign over the wire cylinder says HOT FUN IN THE SUMMERTIME. Her eyes are closed. She might be sleeping there on the linoleum floor. Three people are standing over her. One is a dark-skinned man in khaki pants and a white shirt. A nametag on the pocket of his shirt says MR. GHOSH MANAGER. The other two are customers. One is a thin old man without much hair. He's in his seventies at least. The other is a fat woman. She's fatter than Mary. Fatter than the girl in the blue smock, too. Ray thinks by rights she's the one who should be lying out on the floor.

'Sir, are you this lady's husband?' Mr Ghosh asks.

'Yes,' Ray says. That doesn't seem to be enough. 'I sure am.'

'I am sorry to say but I think she might be dead,' Mr Ghosh says. 'I gave the artificial respiration and the mouth-to-mouth, but ...' He shrugs.

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Ray thinks of the dark-skinned man putting his mouth on Mary's. Frenching her, sort of. Breathing down her throat right next to the wire cylinder full of plastic kickballs. Then he kneels down.

'Mary,' he says. 'Mary!' Like trying to wake her up after a hard night.

She doesn't appear to be breathing, but you can't always tell. He puts his ear by her mouth and hears nothing. He feels air moving on his skin, but that's probably just the air conditioning.

'This gentleman called nine-one-one,' the fat woman says. She's holding a bag of Bugles.

'Mary!' Ray says. Louder this time, but he can't quite bring himself to shout, not down on his knees with people standing around, one of them a dark-skinned man. He looks up and says, apologetically, 'She never gets sick. She's healthy as a horse.'

'You never know,' the old man says. He shakes his head.

'She just fell down,' says the young woman in the blue smock. 'Didn't say a word.'

'Did she grab her chest?' asks the fat woman with the Bugles.

'I don't know,' the young woman says. 'I guess not. Not that I saw. She just fell down.'

There's a rack of souvenir tee-shirts near the kickballs. They say things like MY PARENTS WERE TREATED LIKE ROYALTY IN CASTLE ROCK AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY TEE-SHIRT. Mr Ghosh takes one and says, 'Would you like me to cover her face, sir?'

'God, no!' Ray says, startled. 'She might only be unconscious. We're not doctors.' Past Mr Ghosh, he sees three kids, teenagers, looking in the window. One of them is taking pictures with his cell phone.

Mr Ghosh looks where Ray's looking and rushes at the door, flapping his hands. 'You kids get out of here! You kids get out!'

Laughing, the teenagers shuffle backwards, then turn and jog past the gas pumps to the sidewalk. Beyond them, the nearly deserted downtown shimmers. A car goes by pulsing rap. To Ray the bass sounds like Mary's stolen heartbeat.

'Where's the ambulance?' the old man says. 'How come it's not here yet?'

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Ray kneels by his wife while the time goes by. His back hurts and his knees hurt, but if he gets up, he'll look like a spectator.

The ambulance turns out to be a Chevy Suburban painted white with orange stripes. The red jackpot lights are flashing. CASTLE COUNTY RESCUE is printed across the front, only backwards. So you can read it in your rearview mirror. Ray thinks that's pretty clever.

The two men who come in are dressed in white. They look like waiters. One pushes an oxygen tank on a dolly. It's a green tank with an American flag decal on it.

'Sorry,' this one says. 'Just cleared a car accident over in Oxford.'

The other one sees Mary lying on the floor, legs spread, hands to her sides. 'Aw, gee,' he says. Ray can't believe it.

'Is she still alive?' he asks. 'Is she just unconscious? If she is, you better give her oxygen or she'll have brain damage.'

Mr Ghosh shakes his head. The young woman in the blue smock starts to cry. Ray wants to ask her what she's crying about, then knows. She has made up a whole story about him from what he just said. Why, if he came back in a week or so and played his cards right, she might toss him a mercy fuck. Not that he *would*, but he sees that maybe he could. If he wanted to.

Mary's eyes don't react to a penlight. One EMT listens to her nonexistent heartbeat, and the other takes her nonexistent blood-pressure. It goes on like that for awhile. The teenagers come back with some of their friends. Other people too. Ray guesses they're drawn by the flashing red lights on top of the EMT Suburban the way bugs are drawn to a porch light. Mr Ghosh runs at them again, flapping his arms. They back away again. Then, when Mr Ghosh returns to the circle around Mary and Ray, they come back and start looking in again.

One of the EMTs says to Ray, 'She was your wife?'

'Right.'

'Well, sir, I'm sorry to say that she's dead.'

'Oh.' Ray stands up. His knees crack. 'They told me she was, but I wasn't sure.'

'Mary Mother of God bless her soul,' says the fat lady with the Bugles. She crosses herself.

Mr Ghosh offers one of the EMTs the souvenir tee-shirt to put

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over Mary's face, but the EMT shakes his head and goes outside. He tells the little crowd that there's nothing to see, as if anyone's going to believe a dead woman in the Quik-Pik isn't interesting.

The EMT pulls a gurney from the back of the rescue vehicle. He does it with a single quick flip of the wrist. The legs fold down all by themselves. The old man with the thinning hair holds the door open and the EMT pulls his rolling deathbed inside.

'Whoo, hot,' the EMT says, wiping his forehead.

'You may want to turn away for this part, sir,' the other one says, but Ray watches as they lift her onto the gurney. A sheet has been neatly folded down at the end of the gurney. They pull it up all the way up until it's over her face. Now Mary looks like a corpse in a movie. They roll her out into the heat. This time it's the fat woman with the Bugles who holds the door for them. The crowd has retreated to the sidewalk. There must be three dozen, standing in the unrelieved August sunshine.

When Mary is stored, the EMTs come back. One is holding a clipboard. He asks Ray about twenty-five questions. Ray can answer all but the one about her age. Then he remembers she's three years younger than he is and tells them thirty-four.

'We're going to take her to St Stevie's,' the EMT with the clipboard says. 'You can follow us if you don't know where that is.'

'I know,' Ray says. 'What? Do you want to do an autopsy? Cut her up?'

The girl in the blue smock gives a gasp. Mr Ghosh puts his arm around her, and she puts her face against his white shirt. Ray wonders if Mr Ghosh is fucking her. He hopes not. Not because of Mr Ghosh's brown skin, Ray doesn't care about that, but because he's got to be twice her age. An older man can take advantage, especially when he's the boss.

'Well, that's not our decision,' the EMT says, 'but probably not. She didn't die unattended—'

'I'll say,' the woman with the Bugles interjects.

'—and it's pretty clearly a heart attack. You can probably have her released to the mortuary almost immediately.'

Mortuary? An hour ago they were in the car, arguing.

'I don't have a mortuary,' he says. 'Not a mortuary, a burial plot, nothing. Why the hell would I? She's *thirty-four*.'



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The two EMTs exchange a look. 'Mr Burkett, there'll be someone to help you with all that at St Stevie's. Don't worry about it.'

'Don't *worry*? What the hell!'

The EMT wagon pulls out with the lights still flashing but the siren off. The crowd on the sidewalk starts to break up. The counter girl, the old man, the fat woman, and Mr Ghosh look at Ray as though he's someone special. A celebrity.

'She wanted a purple kickball for our niece,' he says. 'She's having a birthday. She'll be eight. Her name is Tallie. She was named for an actress.'

Mr Ghosh takes a purple kickball from the wire rack and holds it out to Ray in both hands. 'On the house,' he says.

'Thank you, sir,' Ray says.

The woman with the Bugles bursts into tears. 'Mary Mother of God,' she says.

They stand around for awhile, talking. Mr Ghosh gets sodas from the cooler. These are also on the house. They drink their sodas and Ray tells them a few things about Mary, steering clear of the arguments. He tells them how she made a quilt that took third prize at the Castle County fair. That was in '02. Or maybe '03.

'That's so sad,' the woman with the Bugles says. She has opened them and shared them around. They eat and drink.

'My wife went in her sleep,' the old man with the thinning hair says. 'She just laid down on the sofa and never woke up. We were married thirty-seven years. I always expected I'd go first, but that's not the way God wanted it. I can still see her laying there on the sofa.' He shakes his head. 'I couldn't believe it.'

Finally Ray runs out of things to tell them, and they run out of things to tell him. Customers are coming in again. Mr Ghosh waits on some, and the woman in the blue smock waits on others. Then the fat woman says she really has to go. She gives Ray a kiss on the cheek before she does.

'You need to see to your business, Mr Burkett,' she tells him. Her tone is both reprimanding and flirtatious. Ray thinks she might be another mercy-fuck possibility.

He looks at the clock over the counter. It's the kind with a beer

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advertisement on it. Almost two hours have gone by since Mary went sidling between the car and the cinderblock side of the Quik-Pik. And for the first time he thinks of Biz.

When he opens the door, heat rushes out at him, and when he puts his hand on the steering wheel to lean in, he pulls it back with a cry. It's got to be a hundred and thirty in there. Biz is dead on his back. His eyes are milky. His tongue is protruding from the side of his mouth. Ray can see the wink of his teeth. There are little bits of coconut caught in his whiskers. That shouldn't be funny, but it is. Not funny enough to laugh, but funny in a way that's some fancy word he can't quite think of.

'Biz, old buddy,' he says. 'I'm sorry. I forgot all about you.'

Great sadness and amusement sweep over him as he looks at the baked Jack Russell. That anything so sad should still be funny is just a crying shame.

'Well, you're with her now, ain't you?' he says, and this thought is so sad – yet so sweet – that he begins to cry. It's a hard storm. While he's crying it comes to him that now he can smoke all he wants, and anywhere in the house. He can smoke right there at her dining room table.

'You're with her now, Biz, old buddy,' he says through his tears. His voice is clogged and thick. It's a relief to sound just right for the situation. 'Poor old Mary, poor old Biz. Damn it all!'

Still crying, and with the purple kickball still tucked under his arm, he goes back into the Quik-Pik. He tells Mr Ghosh he forgot to get cigarettes. He thinks maybe Mr Ghosh will give him a pack of Premium Harmonys on the house as well, but Mr Ghosh's generosity doesn't stretch that far. Ray smokes all the way to the hospital with the windows shut and Biz in the backseat and the air-conditioning on high.

*Thinking of Raymond Carver*