HAVENARRATIVE.COM

ROALD DAHL

THE GREAT SWITCHEROO

THERE were about forty people at Jerry and Samantha’s cocktail-party that evening. It was the usual crowd, the usual discomfort, the usual appalling noise. People had to stand very close to one another and shout to make themselves heard. Many were grinning, showing capped white teeth. Most of them had a cigarette in the left hand, a drink in the right.

I moved away from my wife Mary and her group. I headed for the small bar in the far corner, and when I got there, I sat down on a barstool and faced the room. I did this so that I could look at the women. I settled back with my shoulders against the bar-rail, sipping my Scotch and examining the women one by one over the rim of my glass.

I was studying not their figures but their faces, and what interested me there was not so much the face itself but the big red mouth in the middle of it all. And even then, it wasn’t the whole mouth but only the lower lip. The lower lip, I had recently decided, was the great revealer. It gave away more than the eyes. The eyes hid their secrets. The lower lip hid very little. Take, for example, the lower lip of Jacinth Winkleman, who was standing nearest to me. Notice the wrinkles on that lip, how some were parallel and some radiated outward. No two people had the same pattern of lip-wrinkles, and come to think of it, you could catch a criminal that way if you had his lip-print on file and he had taken a drink at the scene of the crime. The lower lip is what you suck and nibble when you’re ruffled, and Martha Sullivan was doing that right now as she watched from a distance her fatuous husband slobbering over Judy Martinson. You lick it when lecherous. I could see Ginny Lomax licking hers with the tip of her tongue as she stood beside Ted Dorling and gazed up into his face. It was a deliberate lick, the tongue coming out slowly and making a slow wet wipe along the entire length of the lower lip. I saw Ted Dorling looking at Ginny’s tongue, which was what she wanted him to do.

It really does seem to be a fact, I told myself, as my eyes wandered from lower lip to lower lip across the room, that all the less attractive traits of the human animal, arrogance, rapacity, gluttony, lasciviousness, and the rest of them, are clearly signalled in that little carapace of scarlet skin. But you have to know the code. The protuberant or bulging lower lip is supposed to signify sensuality. But this is only half true in men and wholly untrue in women. In women, it is the thin line you should look for, the narrow blade with the sharply delineated bottom edge. And in the nymphomaniac there is a tiny just visible crest of skin at the top centre of the lower lip.

Samantha, my hostess, had that.

Where was she now, Samantha?

Ah, there she was, taking an empty glass out of a guest's hand. Now she was heading my way to refill it.

"Hello, Vic," she said: "You all alone?"

She's a nympho-bird all right, I told myself. But a very rare example of the species, because she is entirely and utterly monogamous. She is a married monogamous nympho-bird who stays for ever in her own nest.

She is also the fruitiest female I have ever set eyes upon in my whole life.

"Let me help you," I said, standing up and taking the glass from her hand. "What's wanted in here?"

"Vodka on the rocks," she said. "Thanks, Vic." She laid a lovely long white arm upon the top of the bar and she leaned forward so that her bosom rested on the bar-rail, squashing upward. "Oops," I said, pouring vodka outside the glass.

Samantha looked at me with huge brown eyes, but said nothing.

"I'll wipe it up," I said.

She took the refilled glass from me and walked away. I watched her go. She was wearing black pants. They were so tight around the buttocks that the smallest mole or pimple would have shown through the cloth. But Samantha Rainbow had not a blemish on her bottom. I caught myself licking my own lower lip. That's right, I thought. I want her. I lust after that woman. But it's too risky to try. It would be suicide to make a pass at a girl like that. First of all, she lives next door, which is too close. Secondly, as I have already said, she is monogamous. Thirdly, she is thick as a thief with Mary, my own wife. They exchange dark female secrets. Fourthly, her husband Jerry is my very old and good friend, and not even I, Victor Hammond, though I am churning with lust, would dream of trying to seduce the wife of a man who is my very old and trusty friend.

Unless…

It was at this point, as I sat on the barstool letching over Samantha Rainbow, that an interesting idea began to filter quietly into the centre of my brain. I remained still, allowing the idea to expand. I watched Samantha across the room, and began fitting her into the framework of the idea. Oh, Samantha, my gorgeous and juicy little jewel, I

shall have you yet.

But could anybody seriously hope to get away with a crazy lark like that?

No, not in a million nights.

One couldn't even try it unless Jerry agreed. So why think about it?

Samantha was standing about six yards away, talking to Gilbert Mackesy. The fingers of her right hand were curled around a tall glass. The fingers were long and almost certainly dexterous.

Assuming, just for the fun of it, that Jerry did agree, then even so, there would still be gigantic snags along the way. There was, for example, the little matter of physical characteristics. I had seen Jerry many times at the club having a shower after tennis, but right now I couldn't for the life of me recall the necessary details. It wasn't the sort of thing one noticed very much.

Usually, one didn't even look.

Anyway, it would be madness to put the suggestion to Jerry pointblank. I didn't know him that well. He might be horrified. He might even turn nasty. There could be an ugly scene. I must test him out, therefore, in some subtle fashion.

"You know something," I said to Jerry about an hour later when we were sitting together on the sofa having a last drink. The guests were drifting away and Samantha was by the door saying goodbye to them. My own wife Mary was out on the terrace talking to Bob Swain. I could see through the open french windows. "You know something funny?" I said to Jerry as we sat together on the sofa.

"What's funny?" Jerry asked me.

"A fellow I had lunch with today told me a fantastic story. Quite unbelievable."

"What story?" Jerry said. The whisky had begun to make him sleepy.

"This man, the one I had lunch with, had a terrific letch after the wife of his friend who lived nearby. And his friend had an equally big letch after the wife of the man I had lunch with. Do you see what I mean?"

"You mean two fellers who lived close to each other both fancied each other's wives."

"Precisely," I said.

“Then there was no problem,” Jerry said.

“There was a very big problem,” I said. “The wives were both very faithful and honourable women.”

“Samantha’s the same,” Jerry said. “She wouldn’t look at another man.”

“Nor would Mary,” I said. “She’s a fine girl.”

Jerry emptied his glass and set it down carefully on the sofa-table. “So what happened in your story?” he said. “It sounds dirty.”

“What happened,” I said, “was that these two randy sods cooked up a plan which made it possible for each of them to ravish the other’s wife without the wives ever knowing it. If you can believe such a thing.”

“With chloroform?” Jerry said.

“Not at all. They were fully conscious.”

“Impossible,” Jerry said. “Someone’s been pulling your leg.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “From the way this man told it to me, with all the details and everything, I don’t think he was making it up. In fact, I’m sure he wasn’t. And listen, they didn’t do it just once, either. They’ve been doing it every two or three weeks for months!”

“And the wives don’t know?”

“They haven’t a clue.”

“I’ve got to hear this,” Jerry said. “Let’s get another drink first.”

We crossed to the bar and refilled our glasses, then returned to the sofa.

“You must remember,” I said, “that there had to be a tremendous lot of preparation and rehearsal beforehand. And many intimate details had to be exchanged to give the plan a chance of working. But the essential part of the scheme was simple: “They fixed a night, call it Saturday. On that night the husbands and wives were to go up to bed as usual, at say eleven or eleven thirty.

“From then on, normal routine would be preserved. A little reading, perhaps, a little talking then out with the lights.

“After lights out, the husbands would at once roll over and pretend to go to sleep. This was to discourage their wives from getting fresh, which at this stage must on no account be permitted. So the wives went to sleep. But the husbands stayed awake. So far so good.

“Then at precisely one a. m., by which time the wives would be in a good deep sleep, each husband would slip quietly out of bed, put on a pair of bedroom slippers and creep downstairs in his pyjamas. He would open the front door and go out into the night, taking care not to close the door behind him.

“They lived,” I went on, “more or less across the street from one another. It was a quiet suburban neighbourhood and there was seldom anyone about at that hour. So these two furtive pyjama-clad figures would pass each other as they crossed the street, each one heading for another house, another bed, another woman.”

Jerry was listening to me carefully. His eyes were a little glazed from drink, but he was listening to every word.

“The next pan,” I said, “had been prepared very thoroughly by both men. Each knew the inside of his friend’s house almost as well as he knew his own. He knew how to find his way in the dark downstairs and up without knocking over the furniture. He knew his way to the stairs and exactly how many steps there were to the top and which of them creaked and which didn’t. He knew on which side of the bed the woman upstairs was sleeping.

“Each took off his slippers and left them in the hall, then up the stairs he crept in his bare feet and pyjamas. This part of it, according to my friend, was rather exciting. He was in a dark silent house that wasn’t his own, and on his way to the main bedroom he had to pass no less than three children’s bedrooms where the doors were always left slightly open.”

“Children!” Jerry cried. “My God, what if one of them had woken up and said, “Daddy, is that you?”

“That was all taken care of,” I said. “Emergency procedure would then come into effect immediately. Also if the wife, just as he was creeping into her room, woke up and said, “Darling, what’s wrong? Why are you wandering about?’; then again, emergency procedure.”

“What emergency procedure?” Jerry said.

“Simple,” I answered. “The man would immediately dash downstairs and out the front door and across to his own house and ring the bell. This was a signal for the other character, no matter what he was doing at the time, also to rush downstairs at full

speed and open the door and let the other fellow in while he went out. This would get them both back quickly to their proper houses."

"With egg all over their faces," Jerry said.

"Not at all," I said.

"That doorbell would have woken the whole house," Jerry said.

"Of course," I said. "And the husband, returning upstairs in his pyjamas, would merely say, "I went to see who the hell was ringing the bell at this ungodly hour. Couldn't find anyone. It must have been a drunk."

"What about the other guy?" Jerry asked. "How does he explain why he rushed downstairs when his wife or child spoke to him?"

"He would say, "I heard someone prowling about outside, so I rushed down to get him, but he escaped.' "Did you actually see him?' his wife would ask anxiously. "Of course I saw him,' the husband would answer. "He ran off down the street. He was too damn fast for me.' Whereupon the husband would be warmly congratulated for his bravery."

"Okay," Jerry said. "That's the easy part. Everything so far is just a matter of good planning and good timing. But what happens when these two horny characters actually climb into bed with each other's wives?"

"They go right to it," I said.

"The wives are sleeping," Jerry said.

"I know," I said. "So they proceed immediately with some very gentle but very skilful loveplay, and by the time these dames are fully awake, they're as randy as rattlesnakes."

"No talking, I presume," Jerry said.

"Not a word."

"Okay, so the wives are awake," Jerry said. "And their hands get to work. So just for a start, what about the simple question of body size? What about the difference between the new man and the husband? What about tallness and shortness and fatness and thinness? You're not telling me these men were physically identical?"

"Not identical, obviously," I said. "But they were more or less similar in build and height. That was essential. They were both cleanshaven and had roughly the same

amount of hair on their heads. That sort of similarity is commonplace. Look at you and me, for instance. We're roughly the same height and build, aren't we?"

"Are we?" Jerry said.

"How tall are you?" I said.

"Six foot exactly."

"I'm five eleven," I said. "One inch difference. What do you weigh?"

"One hundred and eighty-seven."

"I'm a hundred and eighty-four," I said. "What's three pounds among friends?"

There was a pause, Jerry was looking out through the french windows on to the terrace where my wife, Mary, was standing. Mary was still talking to Bob Swain and the evening sun was shining in her hair. She was a dark pretty girl, with a bosom. I watched Jerry. I saw his tongue come out and go sliding along the surface of his lower lip.

"I guess you're right," Jerry said, still looking at Mary. "I guess we are about the same size you and me." When he turned back and faced me again, there was a little red rose high up on each cheek. "Go on about these two men," he said.

"What about some of the other differences?"

"You mean faces?" I said. "No one's goin to see faces in the dark."

"I'm not talking about faces," Jerry said.

"What are you talking about, then?"

"I'm talking about their cocks," Jerry said "That's what it's all about isn't it? And you'n not going to tell me "Oh, yes, I am," I said. "Just so long as both the men were either circumcised or uncircumcised, then there was really no problem."

"Are you seriously suggesting that all men have the same size in cocks?" Jerry said. "Because they don't."

"I know they don't," I said.

"Some are enormous," Jerry said. "And some are titchy."

“There are always exceptions,” I told him. “But you’d be surprised at the number of men whose measurements are virtually the same, give or take a centimetre. According to my friend, ninety per cent are normal. Only ten per cent are notably large or small.”

“I don’t believe that,” Jerry said.

“Check on it sometime,” I said. “Ask some well-travelled girl.”

Jerry took a long slow sip of his whisky, and his eyes over the top of his glass were looking again at Mary on the terrace. “What about the rest of it?” he said.

“No problem,” I said.

“No problem, my arse,” he said. “Shall I tell you why this is a phony story?”

“Go ahead.”

“Everybody knows that a wife and husband who have been married for some years develop a kind of routine. It’s inevitable. My God, a new operator would be spotted instantly. You know damn well he would. You can’t suddenly wade in with a totally different style and expect the woman not to notice it, and I don’t care how randy she was. She’d smell a rat in the first minute!”

“A routine can be duplicated,” I said. “Just so long as every detail of that routine is described beforehand.”

“A bit personal, that,” Jerry said.

“The whole thing’s personal,” I said. “So each man tells his story. He tells precisely what he usually does. He tells everything. The lot. The works. The whole routine from beginning to end.”

“Jesus,” Jerry said.

Each of these men,” I said, “had to learn a new part. He had in effect, to become an actor. He was impersonating another character.”

“Not so easy, that,” Jerry said.

“No problem at all, according to my friend. The only thing one had to watch out for was not to get carried away and start improvising. One had to follow the stage directions very carefully and stick to them.”

Jerry took another pull at his drink. He also took another look at Mary on the terrace.

Then he leaned back against the sofa, glass in hand.

“These two characters,” he said. “You mean they actually pulled it off?”

“I’m damn sure they did,” I said. “They’re still doing it. About once every three weeks.”

“Fantastic story” Jerry said. “And a damn crazy dangerous thing to do. Just imagine the sort of hell that would break loose if you were caught. Instant divorce. Two divorces, in fact. One on each side of the street. Not worth it.”

“Takes a lot of guts,” I said.

“The party’s breaking up,” Jerry said. “They’re all going home with their goddam wives.”

I didn’t say any more after that. We sat there for a couple of minutes sipping our drinks while the guests began drifting towards the hall.

“Did he say it was fun, this friend of yours?” Jerry asked suddenly.

“He said it was a gas,” I answered. “He said all the normal pleasures got intensified one hundred per cent because of the risk. He swore it was the greatest way of doing it in the world, impersonating the husband and the wife not knowing it.”

At that point, Mary came in through the french windows with Bob Swain. She had an empty glass in one hand and a flame-coloured azalea in the other. She had picked the azalea on the terrace.

“I’ve been watching you,” she said, pointing the flower at me like a pistol. “You’ve hardly stopped talking for the last ten minutes. What’s he been telling you, Jerry?”

“A dirty story,” Jerry said, grinning.

“He does that when he drinks,” Mary said.

“Good story,” Jerry said. “But totally impossible. Get him. to tell it to you sometime.”

“I don’t like dirty stories,” Mary said. “Come along, Vic. It’s time we went.”

“Don’t go yet,” Jerry said, fixing his eyes upon her splendid bosom, “Have another drink.”

“No thanks,” she said. “The children’ll be screaming for their supper. I’ve had a lovely

time.”

“Aren’t you going to kiss me good night?” Jerry said, getting up from the sofa. He went for her mouth, but she turned her head quickly and he caught only the edge of her cheek.

“Go away, Jerry,” she said. “You’re drunk.”

“Not drunk,” Jerry said. “Just lecherous.”

“Don’t you get lecherous with me, my boy,” Mary said sharply. “I hate that sort of talk.” She marched away across the room, carrying her bosom before her like a battering-ram.

“So long, Jerry,” I said. “Fine party.”

Mary, full of dark looks, was waiting for me in the hall. Samantha was there, too, saying goodbye to the last guests-Samantha with her dexterous fingers and her smooth skin and her smooth, dangerous thighs. “Cheer up, Vic,” she said to me, her white teeth showing. She looked like the creation, the beginning of the world, the first morning. “Good night, Vic darling,” she said, stirring her fingers in my vitals.

I followed Mary out of the house. “You feeling all right?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Why not?”

“The amount you drink is enough to make anyone feel ill,” she said.

There was a scrubby old hedge dividing our place from Jerry’s and there was a gap in it we always used. Mary and I walked through the gap in silence. We went into the house and she cooked up a big pile of scrambled eggs and bacon, and we ate it with the children.

After the meal, I wandered outside. The summer evening was clear and cool and because I had nothing else to do I decided to mow the grass in the front garden. I got the mower out of the shed and started it up. Then I began the old routine of marching back and forth behind t. I like mowing grass. It is a soothing operation, and on our front lawn I could always look at Samantha’s house going one way and think about her going the other.

I had been at it for about ten minutes when Jerry came strolling through the gap in the hedge. He was smoking a pipe and had his hands in his pockets and he stood on the edge of the grass, watching me. I pulled up in front of him, but left the motor ticking over.

“Hi, sport,” he said. “How’s everything?”

“I’m in the doghouse,” I said. “So are you.”

“Your little wife,” he said, “is just too goddam prissy to be true.”

“Oh, I know that.”

“She rebuked me in my own house,” Jerry said.

“Not very much.”

“It was enough,” he said, smiling slightly.

“Enough for what?”

“Enough to make me want to get a little bit of my own back on her. So what would you think if I suggested you and I have a go at that thing your friend told you about at lunch?”

When he said this, I felt such a surge of excitement my stomach nearly jumped out of my mouth. I gripped the handles of the mower and started revving the engine.

“Have I said the wrong thing?” Jerry asked.

I didn’t answer.

“Listen,” he said. “If you think it’s a lousy idea, let’s just forget I ever mentioned it. You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“I’m not mad at you, Jerry,” I said. “It’s just that it never entered my head that we should do it.”

“It entered mine,” he said. “The set-up is perfect. We wouldn’t even have to cross the street.” His face had gone suddenly bright and his eyes were shining like two stars. “So what do you say, Vic?”

“I’m thinking,” I said.

“Maybe you don’t fancy Samantha.”

“I don’t honestly know,” I said.

“She’s lots of fun,” Jerry said. “I guarantee that.”

At this point I saw Mary come out on to the front porch. “There’s Mary,” I said. “She’s looking for the children. We’ll talk some more tomorrow.”

“Then it’s a deal?”

“It could be, Jerry. But only on condition we don’t rush it. I want to be dead sure everything is right before we start. Damn it all, this is a whole brand-new can of beans!”

“No, it’s not!” he said. “Your friend said it was a gas. He said it was easy.”

“Ah, yes,” I said, “My friend. Of course. But each case is different.” I opened the throttle on the mower and went whining away across the lawn. When I got to the far side and turned around, Jerry was already through the gap in the hedge and walking up to his front door.

The next couple of weeks was a period of high conspiracy for Jerry and me. We held secret meetings in bars and restaurants to discuss strategy, and sometimes he dropped into my office after work and we had a planning session behind the closed door. Whenever a doubtful point arose, Jerry would always say, “How did your friend do it?” And I would play for time and say, “I’ll call him up and ask him about that one.”

After many conferences and much talk, we agreed upon the following main points: 1. That D Day should be a Saturday.

2. That on D Day evening we should take our wives out to a good dinner, the four of us together.

3. That Jerry and I should leave our houses and cross over through the gap in the hedge at precisely one a.m. Sunday morning.

4. That instead of lying in bed in the dark until one a.m. came along, we should both, as soon as our wives were asleep, go quietly downstairs to the kitchen and drink coffee.

5. That we should use the front doorbell idea if an emergency arose.

6. That the return cross-over time was fixed for two a.m.

7. That while in the wrong bed, questions (if any) from the woman must be answered by an “Uh-uh’ sounded with the lips closed tight.

8. That I myself must immediately give up cigarettes and take to a pipe so that I would “smell’ the same as Jerry.

9. That we should at once start using the same brand of hair oil and after-shave lotion.

10. That as both of us normally wore our wrist-watches in bed, and they were much the same shape, it was decided not to exchange. Neither of us wore rings.

11. That each man must have something unusual about him that the woman would identify positively with her own husband. We therefore invented what became known as “The Sticking Plaster Ploy’. It worked like this: on D Day evening, when the couples arrived back in their own homes immediately after the dinner, each husband would make a point of going to the kitchen to cut himself a piece of cheese. At the same time, he would carefully stick a large piece of plaster over the tip of the forefinger of his right hand. Having done this, he would hold up the finger and say to his wife, “I cut myself. It’s nothing, but it was bleeding a bit.’ Thus, later on, when the men have switched beds, each woman will be made very much aware of the plaster-covered finger (the man would see to that), and will associate it directly with her own husband. An important psychological ploy, this, calculated to dissipate any tiny suspicion that might enter the mind of either female.

So much for the basic plans. Next came what we referred to in our notes as “Familiarization with the Layout’. Jerry schooled me first. He gave me three hours’ training in his own house one Sunday afternoon when his wife and children were out. I had never been into their bedroom before. On the dressing table were Samantha’s perfumes, her brushes, and all her other things. A pair of stockings was draped over the back of a chair. Her nightdress, white and blue, was hanging behind the door leading to the bathroom.

“Okay,” Jerry said. “It’ll be pitch dark when you come in. Samantha sleeps on this side, so you must tiptoe around the end of the bed and slide in on the other side, over there. I’m going to blindfold you and let you practise.”

At first with the blindfold on, I wandered all over the room like a drunk. But after about an hour’s work, I was able to negotiate the course pretty well. But before Jerry would finally pass me out, I had to go blindfold all the way from the front door through the hall, up the stairs, past the children’s rooms, into Samantha’s room and finish up in exactly the right place. And I had to do it silently, like a thief. All this took three hours of hard work, but I got it in the end.

The following Sunday morning when Mary had taken our children to church, I was able to give Jerry the same sort of work-out in my house. He learned the ropes faster than me, and within an hour he had passed the blindfold test without placing a foot wrong.

It was during this session that we decided to disconnect each woman's bedside lamp as we entered the bedroom. So Jerry practised finding the plug and pulling it out with his blindfold on, and the following week-end, I was able to do the same in Jerry's house.

Now came by far the most important part of our training. We called it "Spilling the Beans', and it was here that both of us had to describe in every detail the procedure we adopted when making love to our own wives. We agreed not to worry ourselves with any exotic variations that either of us might or might not occasionally practise. We were concerned only with teaching one another the most commonly used routine, the one least likely to arouse suspicion.

The session took place in my office at six o'clock on a Wednesday evening after the staff had gone home. At first, we were both slightly embarrassed, and neither of us wanted to begin. So I got out the bottle of whisky, and after a couple of stiff drinks, we loosened up and the teach-in started. "While Jerry talked I took notes, and vice versa. At the end of it all, it turned out that the only real difference between Jerry's routine and my own was one of tempo. But what a difference it was! He took things (if what he said was to be believed) in such a leisurely fashion and he prolonged the moments to such an extravagant degree that I wondered privately to myself whether his partner did not sometimes go to sleep in the middle of it all. My job, however, was not to criticize but to copy and I said nothing.

Jerry was not so discreet. At the end of my personal description he had the temerity to say, "Is that really what you do?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean is it all over and done with as quickly as that?"

"Look," I said. "We aren't here to give each other lessons. We're here to learn the facts."

"I know that," he said. "But I'm going to feel a bit of an ass if I copy your style exactly. My God, you go through it like an express train whizzing through a country station!"

I stared at him, mouth open.

"Don't look so surprised," he said. "The way you told it to me, anyone would think.

"Think what?" I said.

"Oh, forget it," he said.

“Thank you,” I said. I was furious. There are two things in this world at which I happen to know I excel. One is driving an automobile and the other is you-know-what. So to have him sit there and tell me I didn’t know how to behave with my own wife was a monstrous piece of effrontery. It was he who didn’t know, not me. Poor Samantha. What she must have had to put up with over the years.

“I’m sorry I spoke,” Jerry said. He poured more whisky into our glasses. “Here’s to the great switcheroo!” he said. “When do we go?”

“Today is Wednesday,” I said. “How about this coming Saturday?”

“Christ,” Jerry said.

“We ought to do it while everything’s still fresh in our minds,” I said. “There’s an awful lot to remember.”

Jerry walked to the window and looked down at the traffic in the street below. “Okay,” he said, turning around. “Next Saturday it shall be!” Then we drove home in our separate cars.

“Jerry and I thought we’d take you and Samantha out to dinner Saturday night,” I said to Mary. We were in the kitchen and she was cooking hamburgers for the children.

She turned around and faced me, frying-pan in one hand, spoon in the other. Her blue eyes looked straight into mine. “My Lord, Vic,” she said. “How nice. But what are we celebrating?”

I looked straight back at her and said, “I thought it would be a change to see some new faces. We’re always meeting the same old bunch of people in the same old houses.”

She took a step forward and kissed me on the cheek. “What a good man you are,” she said. “I love you.”

“Don’t forget to phone the baby-sitter.”

“No, I’ll do it tonight,” she said.

Thursday and Friday passed very quickly, and suddenly it was Saturday. It was D Day. I woke up feeling madly excited. After breakfast, I couldn’t sit still, so I decided to go out and wash the car. I was in the middle of this when Jerry came strolling through the gap in the hedge, pipe in mouth.

“Hi, sport,” he said. “This is the day.”

“I know that,” I said. I also had a pipe in my mouth. I was forcing myself to smoke it, but I had trouble keeping it alight, and the smoke burned my tongue.

“How’re you feeling?” Jerry asked.

“Terrific,” I said. “How about you?”

“I’m nervous,” he said.

“Don’t be nervous, Jerry.”

“This is one hell of a thing we’re trying to do,” he said. “I hope we pull it off.”

I went on polishing the windshield. I had never known Jerry to be nervous of anything before. It worried me a bit.

“I’m damn glad we’re not the first people ever to try it,” he said. “If no one had ever done it before, I don’t think I’d risk it.”

“I agree,” I said.

“What stops me being too nervous,” he said, “is the fact that your friend found it so fantastically easy.”

“My friend said it was a cinch,” I said. “But for Chris-sake, Jerry, don’t be nervous when the time comes. That would be disastrous.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “But Jesus, it’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“It’s exciting all right,” I said.

“Listen,” he said. “We’d better go easy on the booze tonight.”

“Good idea,” I said. “See you at eight thirty.”

At half past eight, Samantha, Jerry, Mary and I drove in Jerry’s car to Billy’s Steak House. The restaurant, despite its name, was high-class and expensive, and the girls had put on long dresses for the occasion. Samantha was wearing something green that didn’t start until it was halfway down her front, and I had never seen her looking lovelier. There were candles on our table. Samantha was seated opposite me and whenever she leaned forward with her face close to the flame, I could see that tiny crest of skin at the top centre of her lower lip. “Now,” she said as she accepted a menu

from the waiter, “I wonder what I’m going to have tonight.”

Ho-ho-ho, I thought, that’s a good question.

Everything went fine in the restaurant and the girls enjoyed themselves. When we arrived back at Jerry’s house, it was eleven forty-five, and Samantha said, “Come in and have a nightcap.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but it’s a bit late. And the baby-sitter has to be driven home.” So Mary and I walked across to our house, and now, I told myself as I entered the front door, from now on the count-down begins. I must keep a clear head and forget nothing.

While Mary was paying the baby-sitter, I went to the fridge and found a piece of Canadian cheddar. I took a knife from the drawer and a strip of plaster from the cupboard. I stuck the plaster around the tip of the forefinger of my right hand and waited for Mary to turn around.

“I cut myself,” I said holding up the finger for her to see. “It’s nothing, but it was bleeding a bit.”

“I’d have thought you’d had enough to eat for the evening,” was all she said. But the plaster registered on her mind and my first little job had been done.

I drove the baby-sitter home and by the time I got back up to the bedroom it was round about midnight and Mary was already half asleep with her light out. I switched out the light on my side of the bed and went into the bathroom to undress. I pottered about in there for ten minutes or so and when I came out, Mary, as I had hoped, was well and truly sleeping. There seemed no point in getting into bed beside her. So I simply pulled back the covers a bit on my side to make it easier for Jerry, then with my slippers on, I went downstairs to the kitchen and switched on the electric kettle. It was now twelve seventeen. Forty-three minutes to go.

At twelve thirty-five, I went upstairs to check on Mary and the kids. Everyone was sound alseep.

At twelve fifty-five, five minutes before zero hour, I went up again for a final check. I went right up close to Mary’s bed and whispered her name. There was no answer. Good. That’s it! Let’s go!

I put a brown raincoat over my pyjamas. I switched off the kitchen light so that the whole house was in darkness. I put the front door lock on the latch. And then, feeling an enormous sense of exhilaration, I stepped silently out into the night.

There were no lamps on our street to lighten the darkness. There was no moon or even a star to be seen. It was a black black night, but the air was warm and there was a little breeze blowing from somewhere.

I headed for the gap in the hedge. When I got very close, I was able to make out the hedge itself and find the gap. I stopped there, waiting. Then I heard Jerry's footsteps coming towards me.

"Hi, sport," he whispered. "Everything okay?"

"All ready for you," I whispered back.

He moved on. I heard his slippered feet padding softly over the grass as he went towards my house. I went towards his.

I opened Jerry's front door. It was even darker inside than out. I closed the door carefully. I took off my raincoat and hung it on the door knob. I removed my slippers and placed them against the wall by the door. I literally could not see my hands before my face. Everything had to be done by touch.

My goodness, I was glad Jerry had made me practise blindfold for so long. It wasn't my feet that guided me now but my fingers. The fingers of one hand or another were never for a moment out of contact with something, a wall, the banister, a piece of furniture, a window-curtain. And I knew or thought I knew exactly where I was all the time. But it was an awesome eerie feeling trespassing on tiptoe through someone else's house in the middle of the night. As I fingered my way up the stairs, I found myself thinking of the burglars who had broken into our front room last winter and stolen the television set. When the police came next morning, I pointed out to them an enormous turd lying in the snow outside the garage. "They nearly always do that," one of the cops told me. "They can't help it. They're scared."

I reached the top of the stairs. I crossed the landing with my right fingertips touching the wall all the time. I started down the corridor, but paused when my hand found the door of the first children's room. The door was slightly open. I listened. I could hear young Robert Rainbow, aged eight, breathing evenly inside. I moved on. I found the door to the second children's bedroom. This one belonged to Billy, aged six and Amanda, three. I stood listening. All was well.

The main bedroom was at the end of the corridor, about four yards on. I reached the door. Jerry had left it open, as planned. I went in. I stood absolutely still just inside the door, listening for any sign that Samantha might be awake. All was quiet. I felt my way around the wall until I reached Samantha's side of the bed. Immediately, I knelt on the floor and found the plug connecting her bedside lamp. I drew it from its socket and laid it on the carpet. Good. Much safer now. I stood up. I couldn't see Samantha, and

at first I couldn’t hear anything either. I bent low over the bed. Ah yes, I could hear her breathing. Suddenly I caught a whiff of the heavy musky perfume she had been using that evening, and I felt the blood rushing to my groin. Quickly I tiptoed around the big bed, keeping two fingers in gentle contact with the edge of the bed the whole way.

All I had to do now was get in. I did so, but as I put my weight upon the mattress, the creaking of the springs underneath sounded as though someone was firing a rifle in the room. I lay motionless, holding my breath. I could hear my heart thumping away like an engine in my throat. Samantha was facing away from me. She didn’t move. I pulled the covers up over my chest and turned towards her. A female glow came out of her to me. Here we go, then! Now!

I slid a hand over and touched her body. Her nightdress was warm and silky. I rested the hand gently on her hips. Still she didn’t move. I waited a minute or so, then I allowed the hand that lay upon the hip to steal onward and go exploring. Slowly, deliberately, and very accurately, my fingers began the process of setting her on fire.

She stirred. She turned on her back. Then she murmured sleepily, “Oh, dear…Oh, my goodness me…Good heavens, darling!”

I, of course, said nothing. I just kept on with the job.

A couple of minutes went by.

She was lying quite still.

Another minute passed. Then another. She didn’t move a muscle.

I began to wonder how much longer it would be before she caught alight.

I persevered.

But why the silence? Why this absolute and total immobility, this frozen posture?

Suddenly it came to me. I had forgotten completely about Jerry! I was so hotted up, I had forgotten all about his own personal routine! I was doing it my way, not his! His way was far more complex than mine. It was ridiculously elaborate. It was quite unnecessary. But it was what she was used to. And now she was noticing the difference and trying to figure out what on earth was going on.

But it was too late to change direction now. I must keep going.

I kept going. The woman beside me was like a coiled spring lying there. I could feel

the tension under her skin. I began to sweat.

Suddenly, she uttered a queer little groan.

More ghastly thoughts rushed through my mind. Could she be ill? Was she having a heart attack? Ought I to get the hell out quick?

She groaned again, louder this time. Then all at once, she cried out, “Yes-yes-yes-yes-yes!” and like a bomb whose slow fuse had finally reached the dynamite, she exploded into life. She grabbed me in her arms and went for me with such incredible ferocity, I felt I was being set upon by a tiger.

Or should I say tigress?

I never dreamed a woman could do the things Samantha did to me then. She was a whirlwind, a dazzling frenzied whirlwind that tore me up by the roots and spun me around and carried me high into the heavens, to places I did not know existed.

I myself did not contribute. How could I? I was helpless. I was in the palm-tree spinning in the heavens, the lamb in the claws of the tiger. It was as much as I could do to keep breathing.

Thrilling it was, all the same, to surrender to the hands of a violent woman, and for the next ten, twenty, thirty minutes how would I know?-the storm raged on. But I have no intention here of regaling the reader with bizarre details. I do not approve of washing juicy linen in public. I am sorry, but there it is. I only hope that my reticence will not create too strong a sense of anticlimax. Certainly, there was nothing anti about my own climax, and in the final searing paroxysm I gave a shout which should have awakened the entire neighbourhood. Then I collapsed. I crumpled up like a drained wineskin.

Samantha, as though she had done no more than drink a glass of water, simply turned away from me and went right back to sleep.

Phew!

I lay still, recuperating slowly.

I had been right, you see, about that little thing on her lower lip, had I not?

Come to think of t, I had been right about more or less everything that had to do with this incredible escapade. What a triumph! I felt wonderfully relaxed and well-spent.

I wondered what time it was. My watch was not a luminous one. I’d better go. I crept

out of bed. I felt my way, a trifle less cautiously this time, around the bed, out of the bedroom, along the corridor, down the stairs and into the hall of the house. I found my raincoat and slippers. I put them on. I had a lighter in the pocket of my raincoat. I used it and read the time. It was eight minutes before two. Later than I thought. I opened the front door and stepped out into the black night.

My thoughts now began to concentrate upon Jerry. Was he all right? Had he gotten away with it? I moved through the darkness towards the gap in the hedge.

“Hi, sport,” a voice whispered beside me.

“Jerry!”

“Everything okay?” Jerry asked.

“Fantastic,” I said. “Amazing. What about you?”

“Same with me,” he said. I caught the flash of his white teeth grinning at me in the dark. “We made it, Vic!” he whispered, touching my arm. “You were right! It worked! It was sensational!”

“See you tomorrow,” I whispered. “Go home.”

We moved apart. I went through the hedge and entered my house. Three minutes later, I was safely back in my own bed, and my own wife was sleeping soundly alongside me.

The next morning was Sunday. I was up at eight thirty and went downstairs in pyjamas and dressing-gown, as I always do on a Sunday, to make breakfast for the family. I had left Mary sleeping. The two boys, Victor aged nine, and Wally, seven, were already down.

“Hi, daddy,” Wally said.

“I’ve got a great new breakfast,” I announced.

“What?” both boys said together. They had been into town and fetched the Sunday paper and were now reading the comics.

“We make some buttered toast and we spread orange marmalade on it.” I said. “Then we put strips of crisp bacon on top of the marmalade.”

“Bacon!” Victor said. “With orange marmalade!”

“I know. But you wait till you try it. It’s wonderful.”

I dished out the grapefruit juice and drank two glasses of it myself. I set another on the table for Mary when she came down. I switched on the electric kettle, put the bread in the toaster, and started to fry the bacon. At this point Mary came into the kitchen. She had a flimsy peach-coloured chiffon thing over her nightdress.

“Good morning,” I said, watching her over my shoulder as I manipulated the frying-pan.

She did not answer. She went to her chair at the kitchen table and sat down. She started to sip her juice. She looked neither at me nor at the boys. I went on frying the bacon.

“Hi, mummy,” Wally said.

She didn’t answer this either.

The smell of the bacon fat was beginning to turn my stomach.

“I’d like some coffee,” Mary said, not looking around. Her voice was very odd.

“Coming right up,” I said. I pushed the frying-pan away from the heat and quickly made a cup of black instant coffee. I placed it before her.

“Boys,” she said, addressing the children, “would you please do your reading in the other room till breakfast is ready.”

“Us?” Victor said. “Why?”

“Because I say so.”

“Are we doing something wrong?” Wally asked.

“No, honey, you’re not. I just want to be left alone for a moment with daddy.”

I felt myself shrink inside my skin. I wanted to run. I wanted to rush out the front door and go running down the street and hide.

“Get yourself a coffee, Vic,” she said, “and sit down.” Her voice was quite flat. There was no anger in it. There was just nothing. And she still wouldn’t look at me. The boys went out, taking the comic section with them.

“Shut the door,” Mary said to them.

I put a spoonful of powdered coffee into my cup and poured boiling water over it. I added milk and sugar. The silence was shattering. I crossed over and sat down in my chair opposite her. It might just as well have been an electric chair, the way I was feeling.

“Listen, Vic,” she said, looking into her coffee cup, “I want to get this said before I lose my nerve and then I won’t be able to say it.”

“For heaven’s sake, what’s all the drama about?” I asked. “Has something happened?”

“Yes, Vic, it has.”

“What?”

Her face was pale and still and distant, unconscious of the kitchen around her.

“Come on, then, out with it,” I said bravely.

“You’re not going to like this very much,” she said, and her big blue haunted-looking eyes rested a moment on my face, then travelled away.

“What am I not going to like very much?” I said. The sheer terror of it all was beginning to stir my bowels. I felt the same way as those burglars the cops had told me about.

“You know I hate talking about love-making and all that sort of thing,” she said. “I’ve never once talked to you about it all the time we’ve been married.”

“That’s true,” I said.

She took a sip of her coffee, but she wasn’t tasting it. “The point is this,” she said. “I’ve never liked it. If you really want to know, I’ve hated it.”

“Hated what?” I asked.

“Sex,” she said. “Doing it.”

“Good Lord!” I said.

“It’s never given me even the slightest little bit of pleasure.”

This was shattering enough in itself, but the real cruncher was still to come, I felt sure of that.

“I’m sorry if that surprises you,” she added.

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I kept quiet.

Her eyes rose again from the coffee cup and looked into mine, watchful, as if calculating something, then fell again. “I wasn’t ever going to tell you,” she said. “And I never would have if it hadn’t been for last night.”

I said very slowly, “What about last night?”

“Last night,” she said, “I suddenly found out what the whole crazy thing is all about.”

“You did?”

She looked full at me now, and her face was as open as a flower. “Yes,” she said. “I surely did.”

I didn’t move.

“Oh darling!” she cried, jumping up and rushing over and giving me an enormous kiss. “Thank you so much for last night! You were marvellous! And I was marvellous! We were both marvellous! Don’t look so embarrassed, my darling! You ought to be proud of yourself! You were fantastic! I love you! I do! I do!”

I just sat there.

She leaned close to me and put an arm around my shoulders. “And now,” she said softly, “now that you have…I don’t quite know how to say this…now that you have sort of discovered what it is I need, everything is going to be marvellous from now on!”

I sat there. She went slowly back to her chair. A big tear was running down one of her cheeks. I couldn’t think why.

“I was right to tell you, wasn’t I?” she said, smiling through her tears.

“Yes,” I said. “Oh, yes.” I stood up and went over to the cooker so that I wouldn’t be facing her. Through the kitchen window, I caught sight of Jerry crossing the garden with the Sunday paper under his ann. There was a lilt in his walk, a little prance of triumph in each pace he took, and when he reached the steps of his front porch, he ran up them two at a time.