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PAUL THEROUX

YOU MAKE ME MAD

‘I think you’re going colorblind,’ said Ambrose McCloud.

Doris McCloud hitched herself forward to turn and stare at her husband. They had just pulled into their driveway and Doris was twisting the emergency brake when he took his pipe out of his mouth and spoke.

‘I didn’t want to mention it back there. Thought you might get rattled,’ said Mr McCloud. He chuckled, a pitying kind of mirth, and said, ‘You went sailing right through two red lights. Scared the pants off me.’

‘You’re imagining things, Ambrose,’ said Mrs McCloud. But she did not sound convinced; her tone of voice contradicted what she said.

‘Here,’ said Mr McCloud, ‘feel my hand.’

Mrs McCloud took her husband’s hand. ‘Why, it’s gone all clammy!’

‘You gave me a fright,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘Back there.’

‘God,’ said Mrs McCloud to herself, ‘I thought they were green.’

‘Better watch your step, Doris, or you’ll rack yourself up,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘Say, what’s on television?’

Mrs McCloud didn’t reply, not even when they were in the house and sitting in front of the television set. Mr McCloud filled his pipe; he did it methodically, packing it with his thumb and then brushing the little stringy droppings of tobacco on his shirtfront back into his cracked plastic pouch. He was a man of sixty-three, two years younger than his wife. It was a difference in age she particularly resented, since he was very spry and chirpy and she was not. He was short, his gestures were precise; and he had a beautiful head of white hair which gave emphasis to his tanned face.

In the three months they had been in Singapore, Mr McCloud had got the tan, and his healthy color was matched by a new vigor, the kind of rejuvenation that is promised to old people on the labels of patent medicine. During the same period his wife’s face had grown waxen and she had begun to seem especially aged. It was as if, since coming to Singapore, she had learned feebleness, the way a younger woman might learn to put on airs. She shook, she forgot things and mislaid her shopping lists; she repeated

herself and she had started that habit of the very old, of announcing what she was about to do: ‘Think I’ll have a bite to eat … Time for my bath … Gosh, it’s time I was in bed.’ She often accused her husband of making her that way, but still her doubt lingered to produce fear in her; the uncertainty was like being elderly and she had begun to be afraid.

‘I want to go home,’ she said finally.

‘We’ve been through this one before.’

‘I mean it. Two old duffers like us shouldn’t be living in a nasty place like this.’

‘I’m not an old duffer,’ said Mr McCloud irritably. ‘Anyway, the company won’t allow it. They’ll probably keep me here until retirement, is what they’ll probably do.’ Mr McCloud thought a moment. ‘Not many younger fellers are interested in marketing plastics like I am.’

‘We should have rented an apartment in town,’ said Mrs McCloud.

‘They cost the earth,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘What we save now we can spend later.’

‘Money,’ said Mrs McCloud. ‘Your penny-pinching makes me mad. Take the car. I think we’re the only people in the world with an old Japanese car. You’d think we’d have a new one, as it’s Japanese. But no. It’s cheap, and what’s cheap is dangerous.’

‘Some folks call it cheap,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘And some –’

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ said Mrs McCloud.

Mr McCloud puffed his pipe. He said, ‘Lots of people would give their right arm to live in the country, instead of that noisy city. We’re air-conditioned, no neighbors, lots of nice flowers, and it’s quiet as –’

‘Quiet as a grave,’ said Mrs McCloud.

‘Well, that’s what I was going to say.’

Mrs McCloud went reflective. ‘I was thinking about those lights,’ she said. ‘The ones I went through. What color were they, anyway?’

‘Red,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘I guess they looked like green to you. Take care when you pick me up tomorrow.’

‘Why, Doris,’ said Mr McCloud the following afternoon. ‘You’re all pale. You look like

you've seen a ghost.'

Mrs McCloud was not sitting in the driver's seat. She shook her head and said, 'You drive. I'm afraid.'

'What the devil happened?'

'I almost crashed the car. The other man slammed on his brakes. He swore at me. I could hear him.'

'What color was the light?'

'I don't know!' said Mrs McCloud, and she looked as if she might cry.

'You're a bundle of nerves, Doris. I suggest we get a drink at that new hotel over on Orchard Road. What do you say?'

'That would be nice,' said Mrs McCloud.

Only the lower portion of the hotel was finished, the lobby, the cocktail lounge, and two floors for guests. The rest of the hotel, in various stages of completion, rose from this solid lighted foundation and seemed to disintegrate, from lighted windows, to a floor of glassless windows, to a floor of wall-less rooms, to brick piles and finally to a rickety structure of bamboo scaffolding at the top.

After two drinks, Mr McCloud said, 'I'll bet you could get a terrific view from the roof.'

'Except,' said Mrs McCloud, 'there's no roof. It's not up that far.'

'I mean the top floor,' said Mr McCloud. 'Bet we could sneak up there and get a really nice breeze and see the whole harbor.'

Mr McCloud seemed very eager, 'like a college boy,' said his wife, which made them both smile.

'You go,' said Mrs McCloud. 'I'll just park myself right here.'

'Doris, you're no damned fun, you know that?' said Mr McCloud. 'To hear you talk anyone would think you're sixty-six years old.'

'I will be,' said Mrs McCloud, 'next March,' and she started to cry.

'Aw, come on,' said Mr McCloud. 'People are looking at you.'

‘I can’t help it,’ said Mrs McCloud. ‘Ambrose, you’re so good and I’m such an old bag.’

‘You’re as young as you feel,’ said Mr McCloud, winking.

‘I feel eighty-seven,’ said Mrs McCloud.

‘Let’s skitter up to that top floor and have us a look, eh?’

‘You know how I am about heights,’ said Mrs McCloud. ‘I can’t even climb a ladder to change a bulb. I go dizzy and feel limp as a rag.’ Her last phrase seemed to depress her and she cried again; many people in the cocktail lounge turned to watch her.

Mr McCloud dropped the subject and put his arm around his wife.

On the way home Mrs McCloud said, ‘Ambrose, you just went through a red light!’

‘Wrong again,’ said Mr McCloud, driving fast. ‘It was green.’

Mrs McCloud stayed home for a week. She said it was a kind of convalescence, but instead of getting better she seemed to worsen, and each time Mr McCloud came home his wife was paler and more feeble than she had been in the morning.

‘I wish you’d come home for lunch,’ said Mrs McCloud one day.

‘I can get me a nice cheap lunch in town,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘Little bowl of noodles, little bit of boiled fish, tasty little omelette.’ He lighted his pipe. ‘Sixty cents,’ he said, puffing.

‘If you came home for lunch you could give me a hand when things go wrong.’

‘Don’t tell me things have been going wrong, Doris.’

‘So many things,’ said Mrs McCloud. ‘The other day it must have been something I ate. I think it was that sandwich you made for me, or it might have been a rotten egg, gave me tummy pains. I threw up. Today I blew a fuse. I just plugged in my hair dryer and it made a fizz and the TV shut off.’

‘Who fixed the fuse?’

‘The gardener,’ said Mrs McCloud.

‘You didn’t mention it when I called up.’

‘I was ashamed to,’ said Mrs McCloud. ‘Thought I’d make you mad.’

Mr McCloud was looking at the hair dryer; it was pistol shaped and blackened. ‘She’s all burned out inside. Wires must have shorted,’ he said. ‘Good thing you didn’t get a shock,’ and he looked closely at his wife.

‘I did,’ said Mrs McCloud. ‘But it wasn’t a bad one.’

‘That hair dryer cost a pretty penny,’ said Mr McCloud.

‘You can get a Japanese one to replace it.’

‘Not this month,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘Oh, no! That’ll have to wait, my dear. I can’t be throwing my money away on hair dryers. I’ve got the insurance coming up and God knows what else.’

‘How will I dry my hair?’ asked Mrs McCloud.

‘Sit in front of the air conditioner and shake your head,’ said Mr McCloud gruffly. He stamped the floor with one foot, as he often did when he was very angry.

Several minutes of tuning, twisting the knobs with two hands, had produced only squawks, the underwater babble of Tamil, a high-pitched Chinese opera and some Malay gongs; though they came in clearly, the Chinese salesman said these foreign noises were not showing the radio to best advantage, and he became anxious. He apologized to Mr McCloud and rearranged the antenna, whipping it around and just missing Mr McCloud’s left eye. Mr McCloud touched at the lucky eye, making a light tear-wiping motion with his finger; but he was smiling.

The salesman offered to demonstrate a powerful shortwave radio.

Mr McCloud said not to bother. ‘This one’s going to do me just fine.’

‘Let me search some English,’ said the salesman breathlessly, still hunting. He flicked the antenna again.

Mr McCloud leaned over and switched the radio off. He took out his wallet and grinned at the perspiring salesman. He asked, ‘How much?’ He removed the pipe when he counted the money, licking his thumb and peeling the bills into the salesman’s palm.

‘That’s a mighty fine little radio,’ said Mr McCloud. ‘Get me some nice programs on that radio.’

‘Don’t mention,’ said the salesman, smiling and opening the door. ‘See you next time.’

That evening Mr McCloud turned on all the air conditioners in the house. His wife complained, ‘I’m going to catch a death of cold,’ but Mr McCloud calmed her by saying, ‘Don’t worry – I put them on low. Freshen up the room a bit,’ he said over the roaring of the air conditioners.

Mrs McCloud said, ‘Time for my bath,’ and Mr McCloud said, ‘you do that. I’ll just sit here and fill my pipe.’

Mrs McCloud was singing softly to herself when Mr McCloud entered the bathroom. She stopped singing and covered her breasts, holding one in each hand, as her husband, chuckling, turning the radio he carried in his hand onto full volume, said ‘Alley-oop’ and pitched the yelling thing into the water at his wife’s feet. He stepped quickly out and shut the door.

‘Ambrose!’ Mr McCloud heard his wife scream. He nibbled on his pipe stem and smiled.

But she was out of the bathroom a minute later, wrapped in a towel and still wearing her plastic cap. ‘You silly old fool,’ she said, and slapped him with a force that sent his pipe flying out of his mouth.

Mr McCloud did not retrieve the pipe. He watched his wife with the extreme attention of disbelief. She looked very angry, but notill. At once, her face lighted with a thought, became concerned, grew rather small; she murmured, ‘Oh, God,’ and sat down, as if exhausted.

‘Oh, shoot,’ said Mr McCloud, and went to pack.