

[Home](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Spring 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Mail](#)

THE HEIR

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This goes back some. Nixon was still president but soon to resign, and my world was going into the ground. Without wanting to, dreading it, I picked up pen and paper, a stamp already on the envelope.

My letter, written on Tuesday, brought Carolyn's father down on Thursday—a great gray man with bloodless skin and brilliant false teeth, a kind of shabby enigma in worn worsted against whom I looked splendid in my buttoned-down shirt, dark tie, and tweed jacket worn thin only at the elbows where he couldn't see. Stepping off the Greyhound, he said nothing. Walking with me to the car, a tired blue Ford, he said, "This yours or was it hers?"

"It was ours," I said and annoyed him by opening the passenger door for him. He seated himself on stained upholstery, waited while I made my way to the driver's side, and then tapped the dusty dashboard with crusted nails.

"It wouldn't bring in much cash money," he said.

"I don't suppose."

"How's the engine?"

"Shot."

He coughed into one hand, wiped it with the back of the other, and stared at me at length. His eyes were blue peas hardly big enough for his pupils, which resembled the kind of specks flies leave behind. With remains of the cough still in his voice and shredding his words, he said, "You and her had strange ways, all that free-love stuff going around. Were you ever properly married?"

"Would you like to see the paper?" I had it in my inside jacket pocket, knowing he'd ask. Because Carolyn and I had had no children, he could never believe we were legally married.

"Not necessary now. I hope you know I had no insurance on her."

"I know," I said with an urge to cry, not because of him or Carolyn but because I was a poet and could no longer see rhyme or reason for being one. I wished I were a plumber with a toilet to tinker with, for there was purpose in that, with the promise of money.

He was staring so steadily that I felt certain he was about to say, "You're quite a weak young man." But that would have been intimate and from the start I knew he wanted no intimacy. A man widowed and now childless, who lived by himself without neighbors or

telephone, without a dog or cat, with only an old radio with a cracked shell, needed nothing. Or maybe he needed that radio as much as I had once thought I needed leisure and solitude. Maybe he needed that radio like crazy!

“How’s the burying bill going to be paid?” he said, opening his suit jacket. A terrible musty odor flew out. I smelled it, he smelled it, and immediately he closed his jacket.

“I’m taking care of it,” I said. Suddenly it became imperative that he think me responsible.

“You got the cash money?”

“I’m getting a loan.”

“Oh, then you have a regular job now?”

“The loan is from a friend,” I said sharply. There was still some fight in me, and I was about to say more, but he tapped the dashboard again.

“Take me to her.”

Amidst the odor of flowers we were shown into a small room with olive-green walls where Carolyn lay, serenely rosy-cheeked. There had been nothing whining or protesting about her death. She had died without a sound, as if it were simply another experience. I had awakened in the night and known that what lay beside me was no longer a living being.

“Better than her suffering,” a neighbor woman had said and I had agreed. Her eyes as big as goldfish, the woman pulled in her breath suppressing a dangerous desire to mother me . . . for which I shall be eternally grateful.

Carolyn’s father moved toward her like a man going to inspect merchandise. “Yes,” he said, “it looks like her.” His horny nails bit the box as he leaned over her. For a second I thought he might kiss her, but he didn’t. He put rough fingers to her red cheeks. “It’s not her real color, is it?” he said, tipping his heavy head toward me for a moment and then resuming his assessment. His fingers slid to her mouth and brushed her lips. He had always forbidden her to use lipstick.

I was angry. I recalled his overbearing Puritanism which would have turned Carolyn into a screaming idiot had she not been ready to fling herself into the arms of the first man to happen along. A slip of a girl, delicate and dainty with dark hair and darker eyes, she had been a student at the state university to which I journeyed with a lot of drunken others because of the dance. I recalled her father’s terrifying silence when she had married me, his refusal to have me in his home or allow her in except as an invited guest who slept not in her old room but in the spare one. Now he was her guest, invited only because I had written. All the same, watching him paw her face, I felt like an intruder on a private family scene in which a silent and sadistic interrogation was taking place. Alive, she’d have cringed. Dead, she lay blatantly beaming with paint and rouge. I was on the verge of tearing his hand away when he stopped.

“She’s not wearing her watch,” he said, straightening.

I was momentarily puzzled, for Carolyn had never worn a watch. Then I recalled

an obtuse white-gold piece with a forlorn face that Carolyn had kept in a dresser drawer and had worn only during those rare visits to her father.

“It was her mother’s,” he said. “I’d like it back if you have it.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll pay you for it.”

“Certainly not.”

He looked at her again, a final look, I could tell. “I wonder what it’s like,” he said.

“Sir?”

Still looking at her, he said “When there’s nothing left of you but a stone with your name and dates dug in it that’s rained and snowed on and Lord knows what else if there’re dogs around.”

Back in the car I drove rapidly around the fringe of the business district and away from the foul exhaust of a city bus. The clock on the bank building looked like the single median eye of a Cyclops. We passed a solitary tree full of colorful feathers. Autumn was upon us. With a slight heave, Carolyn’s father shifted forward on the seat.

“Do you have a plot for her?” he asked.

“I’ve made arrangements.”

“There was a place for her next to her mother. I buried a cousin in it last year.”

“I remember,” I said. “Carolyn was at the graveside. I waited in the car.”

There was silence as we coasted down a street lined with tenement houses, three-deckers for the most part. He kept his eyes on me as I tried to maneuver into a tight parking space. Failing, I swung out and backed in, scraping the curb.

“I never approved of you,” he said in a small burst. “You and your crowd should’ve done your duty in Vietnam instead of hiding behind your school books or sneaking off to Canada. Now people like you are trying to drive a good man out of office.” He drew a breath, a hard one. “And I’ll say this to your face. A man with no steady job who made his wife work while he wrote verses is no man at all in my mind.”

“I know your feelings, sir.”

“Did she ever sell her blood for you?”

Bewildered, I looked into his deadish face. I wondered if I’d ever seen him smile and was sure I hadn’t. “What do you mean?”

“To one of those blood banks. I’ve heard how people do.”

“No, she never did.”

“Why didn’t she ever have any children?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer him or even if I wanted to. Finally I said, “We were careful.”

He wrenched himself out of the car and stood on the cracked sidewalk, waiting for me to lead the way. My tenement was on the top floor, the climb a task for him, which he tried not to show. He took a chair in my kitchen while I went into the bedroom to hunt up the watch. Considering the messiness of the place, he probably found it difficult to believe that Carolyn had ever lived here. I was going to explain that the mess was mine, but it didn’t seem worth the effort. I laid the watch on the table, in front of him. Then I sat too.

“She really live here?” he said.

I nodded. At the same time I wondered what he was thinking and imagined his thoughts all in small print. "Would you like to see her things, in case there's anything else you want?"

"I want nothing except this" He swept up the watch and pocketed it without a glance.

I wanted to show him the little epitaph I had written and fished it from my pocket. It was nothing really; actually I thought it unworthy and futile. What good are words when death erases everything while denying what could've been.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing."

"What d'you have there?"

"Nothing." Behind my back I crumpled the slip of paper. I asked if he would like to spend the night and wasn't surprised when he said he didn't plan to attend tomorrow's funeral.

"What will you do now?" he asked, lowering his chin as if tucking in his breath. I wondered if his eyes—those tiny blue chinks—were the only openings in his armor. Inadequate peeks into the dark of his head.

"I'll keep on writing. There's nothing else for me to do." Suddenly I had a memory of Carolyn occupying the chair her father was in, both feet bare, one raised. She was painting little piggies, working on the one that went to market. I could see her so clearly. I could even smell the enamel.

"Those verses?"

"Yes."

"How will you do it if there's no one to work for you, put bread on your table, a roof over your head?"

There was no malice in his voice, only a flatness. "I'll manage," I said.

"You should've had a child," he said. "What if you never sell those verses? Who can you leave them to, so you'll know somebody will read them? Everybody should have an heir."

I shrugged. I wished I could tell him that I had never given it much thought, but he sat there so inscrutable, so airtight, except for the chinks. His hands lay in his lap like big mittens. Then I realized he was ill.

"Would you like coffee?" I asked.

Glancing at the wall clock, he said, "I have to catch my bus. But I'll use your toilet first."

"Of course." I indicated the way, and he pulled himself to his feet and moved awkwardly, as if his bones had lost much of their character.

During the ride back to the bus station we barely spoke. Either there was nothing on his mind or too much. Once our eyes met by chance, and it seemed I had caught him in an embarrassing moment of pain. Passing that single tree again, I noticed that the leaves on the bottom branches were fluffy yellow, like a canary's breast. Had I paper I'd have jotted the impression down. The clock on the bank building gave out the wrong time, as if cockeyed.

We said goodbye in front of the nearly lifeless bus station. The Greyhound was waiting but wouldn't leave for another twenty minutes. He shook his head when I offered to wait

with him. He seemed both anxious and reluctant to part.

“Remember her,” he said, “because I won’t.”

I rocked a little on my heels. I was angry again, and he could tell. He seemed glad. A cool breeze lifted his hair, what there was of it. I tried hard, desperately hard, to read some of his thoughts, a hopeless task. The print was too tiny.

Back at the tenement, instinctively and immediately, I went into the bathroom. On top of the toilet tank, weighted down by a bottle of Carolyn’s shampoo, was a wad of money, a small fortune I could tell, with a stench of must and sickness about it.

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