

The Evidence

She nervously examined her fingernails, averting her eyes from the seething contortions of his face. His anger came in waves. Her attention did not waver; she seemed convinced that staring carefully at each nail would file the rough edges and paint them bright colors. He tried to force his breathing back to normal. A cup of coffee on the table between them silently released steam into the air. The ambient sounds of the coffee shop came to him: clattering, chattering, jabbering. He reached for the cup and touched his fingers to its edges. He could not lift it to his lips.

Finally, after a dramatic measure of silence, he spoke:

"You're being unfair."

"I'm being reasonable and polite," she said. "Will you give them to me?"

"They don't belong to you."

"I don't want to—"

"No."

"Please don't be this way," she said, looking into his eyes. "I want them back."

"No." He slammed the conversation shut. Standing up, he bent his shoulder at a peculiar angle and stuffed his hand into his pocket to search for change. Finding some, he

R U B B E R N E C K E R S

dropped the coins on the table to pay for the coffee. One nickel hit the table at an odd angle and bounced into the coffee cup with a pathetic plop. She glanced at the muddy ripples but kept her eyes on him. He said nothing and stormed away.

The very first time, when it all began, neither one of them placed much importance on what had happened.

She was still in high school; he had been in college for nearly two years. She didn't want to attend prom but he insisted that she would want those memories when she was older. He borrowed a tuxedo from a wealthy friend and escorted her to senior prom, and speedily regretted everything he had said. While she giggled and danced with her friends, he burrowed into the corner of the cafeteria with a glass of punch and thought about the hotel room he had reserved with his recently-acquired credit card. Before too long, she would be in his arms, and this would all be worth the trouble.

They stopped at a grocery store on the drive across town. It had been hours since dinner and she was hungry for a light snack. They caused a scene by breezing through the produce aisle in their formal garb, and he enjoyed that spectacle. While she picked out a basket of strawberries, he scanned the shelves for whipped topping in a spray can. When they got to the cash register, she asked how come he wasn't buying a tub of Cool Whip.

B R E N D A N H O W A R D

"No reason," he said. "I like this stuff." He had other motives, but she failed to guess them. That was all right with him. He paid for the groceries with a twenty and they were off.

The hotel check-in did a number on his nerves, for reasons for propriety. The law doesn't take kindly to adults shacking up with minors, and she was still only seventeen. All his worry was happily misplaced when the clerk handed over the key. The two lovers rushed to their room on the third floor, tossed the key on the nightstand, ripped back the comforter, tore off their clothes and tangled their limbs. Sweat came quickly.

Urgent and breathless, he fairly begged her to make a little noise for him. Over the months he had grown accustomed to her shrill expressions of pleasure, feminine yelps that came from her throat when they made love in his car, out in the country, with the seats pushed back and the windows rolled down. She refused to yelp for him; certainly the neighboring hotel guests would hear what was happening and complain. He dropped the issue and concentrated on the rhythmic sound of their slick bellies slapping together, again and again and again. They reached a new level, and then another, and then it was over.

Taking care not to gasp, he kissed her deeply and savored the salty taste of her upper lip. He could feel her face shifting into a smile, and she said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said.

She took a deep breath, raising him a few inches into the air, and released it. "Where are those strawberries?" she