

Excerpt from *The Patient Wife*

Roy Conlon got busted for going the wrong way down a one-way street. He was drunk at the time. He thought he could outrun the cops. After a couple of blocks he crashed into a parked car. When the cops caught up with him he punched one of them. There may be stupider things than punching a cop, but it's hard to think of one. Roy was prone to punching people, especially when he had too much to drink, but he'd never hit a cop before. Maybe there'd never been one handy. Anyway, they bounced his head off the pavement a few times to get him under control. Then they took him downtown to discuss things further. Next morning he was fairly tame.

Conlon was in his early thirties, a welterweight with big hands, mean eyes, and a bad temper. When he signed the surety papers you could tell by his slow shapeless scrawl that his name was the only thing he knew how to write. His car had been impounded, so George asked if I'd take him home.

He lived in a 1960s duplex that had seen better days. When we got there he said, "Just let me out." But something made me want to have a look, so I told him George had a rule that if I took somebody home I had to see them in the door. We went up on the porch. He'd lost his keys, so he knocked on the door. His wife was there. She let him in.

"Oh, Roy!" she said. "I was so worried! What happened? You poor thing! You look terrible!" But he just pushed past her and went on down the hall.

She was a few years older than him and soft looking, a licensed practical nurse I later found out. She took care of old people. Some bad characters attract that kind of woman. I don't know why. I figured I'd let him tell her what happened, so I just said, "His car quit, so I gave him a lift." She asked if I'd like coffee. I said thanks, but I had to go.

I didn't give Roy another thought until he didn't show for his hearing and George told me to find him. I made my usual rounds and left cards and told everybody to call me if he showed. I started digging into his past and hoped something would happen. About a week later it did.

It was late. I was home, watching TV, drinking beer. The phone rang. I answered. For a minute I couldn't understand what I was hearing. It was mostly a lot of yelling, a lot of noise. Then somehow I recognized her, Roy's wife. I don't know how because she was screaming and crying, and he was yelling at her, but I did. Then the phone went dead. I was sure it was her though, so I jumped in my car and drove to his house as fast as I could.

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Excerpt from *Mother*

Esther told her PA she'd see her tomorrow and drove to the school and parked across the street. She got out and leaned back against her car in the bright late-autumn sunlight, enjoying the feel of it on her face. The light reflected on the lenses of her big sunglasses, the ones she called her Jackie-O's. She enjoyed picking up Annie after school

and did it whenever she could, although at “almost sixteen” Annie was sometimes slightly embarrassed when she did it. There were only a few other mothers there today, all of them substantially older than Esther, which she noted with satisfaction. Ten years ago the fact that there were only sixteen years between her and Annie had been an embarrassment. Now she enjoyed the looks she got, the questions on the faces. Sisters? A young aunt and a niece? Soon Annie would be taller than she was, but they had the same cheekbones, the same heart-shaped faces, the same mahogany eyes and caramel-colored hair. Sometimes while she waited she thought of how she’d been at Annie’s age, how wild and how unhappy, and thanked whatever powers there were that Annie was neither. She was like a second chance.

The bell inside the school rang, and a moment later the students began to stream out. Esther pushed her sunglasses up into her hair. Two or three minutes later she spotted Annie coming down the steps talking to one of her teachers and laughing. The teacher put his arm around her, and Esther saw that he wasn’t a teacher. He was one of those boys who grow up early, broad shouldered and thick chested and probably in need of a shave by the end of the school day. He carried himself with a springy slumping swagger and was dressed in a short black zippered jacket. Next to him Annie looked even younger than she was, completely focussed on what he was saying, like a child listening to an adult but also like a woman listening to a man she likes.

“Annie? Annie! Over here!” she called.

Annie looked around. Esther saw her adjust her posture. She said something to the boy and laughed and caught him by the elbow and pulled him across the street.

“Mom.”

“Hi.”

“This is Kevin.”

“Hello, Kevin. Nice to meet you.” She put out her hand. He took it limply as if he wasn’t sure what to do with it. “Do you need a lift someplace?”

“No, I’m good,” he mumbled. “I’ve got my bike.” He still hadn’t met her eyes.

“It’d probably fit in the trunk. Do you have far to go?”

His lips twisted. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you.”

Now he looked at her uncertainly. She smiled as she went around the car. She was buckling her seatbelt when she saw him put his hands on the small of Annie’s back and pull her to him for a kiss. Esther’s facial muscles tightened.

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