Sep-1988

Short Story: Paul and Natalie at the Library

Ann T. Jones

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol6/iss1/8
They had been sitting in an isolated corner of the browsing room for more than an hour. The library was almost empty, only a few isolated students squirreled away upstairs in the carrels, no one — hardly — in the stacks. He felt safe from detection.

She sat alone on the long, grey sofa, the grey emphasizing her pallor and the deep shadows under her eyes. He sat opposite, straight upright on a wooden chair, looking at her across a small, wooden table he'd drawn up in front of the sofa. Occasionally he ran his hands through his prematurely white hair.

The argument was going nowhere. He was insistent, contending it must be done at once — and she continued to refuse. By now her refusal consisted mainly of quiet sobbing, and she ignored his pleas to lift up her head and look at him.

"I want this baby." Her words were barely audible. "It's all I have of you..."

"That's ridiculous. After it's over, we can be the same as before."

"No, we can't." This time her voice was stronger, and she lifted her head to stare defiantly. "That's why I want the baby. We're not going on the way we were."

"What are you talking about?"

"After the baby is born I'm leaving here. With my baby."

"That makes no sense at all. She doesn't suspect a thing. Neither does anyone else."

"I'm going home."

"To Kansas?" He laughed, but quickly smothered the sound with coughing.

"Have you told your shrink?"

"I'm not seeing him any more."

"When did you stop?"
to-ceiling draperies were drawn to one side of the windows, letting in white street-light from the courtyard. Outside the sky was black, with the bare, gnarled trees just beyond the window a grotesque outline in the white glow.

"My shrink said all my discussions with him are confidential."

"That means be isn’t going to repeat anything you say. You’re at liberty to tell anyone you please."

"But I don’t please."

"... Are you pulling some kind of goddamn rip-off? Because if you’re trying something like that I swear I’ll ... . Christ, Natalie. What did the goddamned shrink say?"

"... He said ... if I decide to kill myself to call him first. That it’s at least negotiable."

"What the hell? ... You walk in to a shrink and talk about killing yourself and he hands you garbage about suicide being negotiable? I don’t know who’s crazier, you or him."

"I’m not crazy."

"What kind of person puts rat poison in her oatmeal? And then changes her mind and feeds it to her cat instead?"

"Take back what you said about ‘crazy’ or I’m walking out of here now."

"All right. you’re not crazy. You’re a little bit pregnant but you’re not crazy."

Natalie began to cry again and this time she let her head drop down onto the small table. Her noisy sobbing worried him. Coming to the library was a bad mistake. His idea they could pass for just another professor and student was naive, a foolish misjudgment. He should have known there was no such thing as a simple conversation with Natalie. "What else did he say?"

"Who?" Natalie had stopped crying. She lifted her head from the table, and he was startled to realize that even sloppy and tear-stained her face was still pretty. Could be, if only she’d get rid of the something like that I swear I’ll ... ."

"Not exactly ... ."

"What precisely were his feelings on the subject? His words, Natalie. Not what you’ve interpreted them to mean."

She looked away and he quickly surveyed the browsing room, satisfying himself that no one had come in while they were talking. The chairs were still empty and the sofa at the far end of the room was still buried under a welter of abandoned books and papers. The heavy, floor-
going to watch your belly growing every month and not catch on to something, do you?"

"But why should anyone conclude it's yours? We're never seen together."

"We're together now, aren't we?"

"But you insisted. I didn't want to come here. This is my rest time. And I'm nauseous. I won't be able to eat dinner."

"Goddammit, Natalie. They'll know you've been with someone. And the damned little bastard will probably look like me."

"I said I'm leaving as soon as the baby's born."

"The next day?"

"That's sarcasm again. I don't know how I ever let you talk me into all of this in the first place."

"Aha! The pure virgin. I waylaid you in the halls and dragged you screaming into the broom closet. You ought to have me arrested for rape."

"You really get a high out of mocking me, don't you." Natalie began trembling, putting a hand to her lips as if trying to prevent a cry. "You really think this is one big joke," she said finally.

Paul stirred in his chair, wondering how she'd react if he stood up and simply announced that he was going home to dinner.

"I know you'll never believe this, but I loved you, Paul."

Here it comes. What the hell was he going to say to her now? The beautiful, crazy, sexy, pregnant doll was going to recount the depth of her feelings. And she'd mean every word of it. He'd sit here feeling like scum while she spread her heart out on the table, and he'd be looking at her, thinking what wonderful boobs she had.

"I know I get too involved, Paul. But that's the way I am. I don't go to bed just for something to do, you know. I can get along without it."

"Hah!"

"If you want to hurt me, why don't you just stick a knife in my heart?"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"No? You think I'm a whore. Or something pretty close to it."

Oh, for God's sake. She was going to detour right past loving him and talk about her low self-esteem. This could take a very long time. And what the hell would he tell Adelaide? Nothing at all, probably. Besides, Adelaide wasn't stupid. Sometimes she preferred him to skip the excuses. As long as he found his way home eventually.

Suddenly Paul was aware of another presence in the room. Mary the cleaning woman swept towards them, righting chairs, emptying ashtrays. Her expressionless face zeroed in on the corner where they were sitting, nodding blankly at Natalie. She snatched up a crumpled cigarette butt from an ashtray, dumped it into a small plastic pail she carried, emptied the waste basket next to the sofa, inserting a fresh plastic liner. "Good evening, Professor Cummings." The voice out of the blank face was completely noncommittal.

"Quiet around here tonight, Mary." He kept his tone even.

"Sure is." Mary moved toward the next grouping of chairs. Her stiff back was a ramrod of condemnation.
"What do you mean, no baby? You've already had the goddamned abortion? And you've been sitting here torturing me?"

"I didn't say that. . . . I'm only asking what you would say if that were the case."

Natalie's pale face had grown even more pallid and her eyes appeared glassy.

She is crazy. She's a total screwball. How did I ever get myself into this mess?

"Assuming, for purposes of argument — discussion — that you have had the abortion, why do you tell me every day that you're suffering from nausea? You continually skip my classes."

"I'm not feeling well. I feel terrible."

"Did you tell that to the shrink? Before you parted so amiably? He's a doctor, isn't he? He might have been able to help you."

"I told him."

"And?"

"He said I'd be dead in a few weeks if I kept it up, that I leave him no choice."

"If you kept up what? A feeling of horror swept over Paul, creating a wild, ridiculous fear that his heart might stop. His hands shook. He trembled. She was back on the rat poison again. "If you kept up what?" he repeated, but his mouth was dry and the words stuck.

"Nothing. If I kept up nothing at all."

"Don't play games with me, Natalie. The shrink said you'd be dead. What was he referring to?"

"I don't want to talk about it any more. I'm going home. I'm tired." She picked up her notebook, tucking it under the slim volume of "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" she always carried around with her. Some of the book's pages had come loose, and she was using a rubber band to hold the seagull pictures together. She held the book in one hand so that she could smooth back her straight, soft hair with the other.

Even with dark circles under her eyes she was still far prettier than Adelaide. Adelaide's features were brittle. She was a dried clay mask ready for firing into porcelain. Natalie's features were soft, fragile. And the grey eyes were lovely, except that now they were bloodshot from crying.

Natalie half rose from her seat but seemed to change her mind, sat down again. An unusual mixture of determination and pleading played across her face. He'd seen her this way once or twice before. And when finally she spoke her voice had grown quiet, thoughtful, maybe even wistful.

"There's still time, Paul."

"I don't know what you mean. He was ashamed of his own caginess."

"The shrink said it's never too late to find some kind of redemption, even in the worst of situations."

"I think you'd better go back to that shrink if you want redemption, as he chooses to call it. I don't think I'm into redemption just yet."

"I'm serious, Paul." She seemed about to scream but she pulled herself together, and when she resumed speaking her voice was controlled again. "I don't really want to die, you know. But I need something to live for."

"You knew from the first that I wasn't going to leave Adelaide. I've been totally up-front with you. You said it didn't matter. That our relationship had a 'consecration' of its own. It didn't require society's approval."

"That was before I started seeing Dr. Asbury. I've begun to view life differently."

"But is that fair? I'm not in therapy."

"I'm asking you to save my life . . . ."

"Don't be melodramatic."

"Is that all you have to say about it?"

"Oh, Christ. I can't sit here all night. As if I had nothing else to do . . . . There are other demands on my time."

"I know. You have a wife."

"Don't try to make me feel guilty. You had a husband once. You know the obligations marriage entails. You can't just wander around all evening and never show your face at home."

Natalie rose to her feet unsteadily. For a moment he thought she might topple over onto the table. Her face was deathly white, and she seemed to look right through him.

"I'll call you tomorrow, doll," he said airily. "A good night's sleep and everything will look better."

"Goodbye, Paul." Her voice was shakier than before.

"I will call you. In the morning. First thing." Paul stood up, too, stretched, cramped and stiff from sitting so long in one position. He made a quick check around the room to be sure no one had come in and froze as he recognized the young student in dirty T-shirt and jeans loping toward him.

"Excuse me, Dr. Cummings. You wouldn't have a minute, would you?" He dumped his books onto the sofa Natalie had just vacated.

"Not now, Jake. I'm sorry."

Disappointed, Jake turned, leaving his books and papers behind. Paul stared at the scuff marks on the carpet from Jake's running shoes. He bent down to pick up a candy wrapper overlooked by the cleaning woman. When he looked up Natalie had disappeared. He was completely alone in the silent room, with only the hum of the ventilating system. The clickings. The buzzing.

What a crazy dame she'd turned out to be. He should have known she was unstable. A nut.

Why kill herself now?

He dropped down onto the sofa beside Jake's books, lit up a cigarette. What a nutcase! Natalie, sweet Natalie. All fragility and deadpan honesty. But actually holier than thou, when you came right down to it. A real judge. A goddamned judge of a woman, with all her soft femininity. Blaming him because she'd decided to kill herself. What did she want him to do? Put rat poison in his oatmeal? Shit! He didn't even like oats.