

gotten who it is she is talking to.

"No," he says, still staring at the wall.

"It's about these two men, good friends, and one of them's a painter. Peter Coyote and Nick Mancuso, I think." She pauses, takes a long strand of her dark hair, pulls it around in front of her eyes, then lets it go. "Peter Coyote plays a painter, I think, and he has this model. She's a call girl..."

"I have to go right away," he says.

"Just let me tell you this," she answers. Her voice has returned to its normal tone and quickness. The air in the room, she notices, suddenly feels colder and more taut somehow. She thinks how if there were a fire here, it would pop and crackle

now.

"All right."

"One night the two friends go to her apartment for dinner, and something happens, you know how things happen..." She waits. He nods. "And they all go to bed together." She lies back again, thinking about the blinking red light on his answering machine in the other room. "The call girl, his model, is in love with him, but he doesn't love her. And she says to him... something, um..." She looks at Baker's smooth back curving up and away from the concave line of her abdomen and touches him with her fingertips, on his shoulder, then drops her hand. "She

says, 'You loved being inside me. You were so... hard.'" Baker turns his head to look down at her, his eyelids flicker, then he looks away again. "Then she says, 'You're a heartbreaker.'"

She touches him again. Her voice has trailed away and in the silence the furnace begins to hum down in the basement. She wonders what time it is — three, four o'clock? And when he leaves, she has to go, too, because it's his place they're making love in. He sets his ashtray down on the floor.

"Is that what you think I am?" he asks. "A heartbreaker?" But she doesn't reply. Only looks at him.

Kat

A Story by Joyce Marshall

"Rona?" She'd always known it would happen and there was even a brief pause to alert her before Kat looked up from typing and, in a voice that wobbled in its effort to seem casual, the question came: "What was my dad like?" Rona waited, pretending to study one of the sheets Kat had completed, made a pencil mark. "You've been around, haven't you," the girl went on, "since before I was born? The family friend."

"Since about a year after you were born." The family friend. Yes, willing or not, and at first she'd been both unwilling and uneasy (though pleased that Sam should want to show her his life), that's what she'd been. "But you remember him surely."

Kat fiddled with the keys. Behind her the denim curtains hung lifeless. The room was stifling. "After the divorce doesn't count, the way he got fat and seemed trying to be something with us that he'd forgotten how to be. I don't think the boys minded. I minded. And before — I was only seven when he left. When I try to look for him in those first years I can't see anything much, it's gone cloudy."

"You don't remember the day he decided you should be Kat rather than Kathleen and re-christened you in the birdbath in the back yard?" Kat shook her head. "You still use the name." No response for a moment, then a small, rather puzzled nod. "He had a very special quality," Rona said, "if I could just make it clear to

you..." and to myself... "He was lighthearted." Moroseness was the other side of that lightheartedness. (Don't tell her that). "He had a gift for putting an edge on things. You felt that he met each day fresh and new." Am I telling her he wasn't fully grown up? He wasn't. At forty his face had a blurred boy look. His smile came all at once, one of the few smiles she's seen that literally sparkled. (With malice sometimes. Don't tell her that). Kat didn't resemble him. For years Rona had looked for something — hint of that smile perhaps? — on this very different face: blunt nose, long, rather trembly upper lip. She no longer looked. Kat was simply Kat, big and rather clumsy (the typing Rona had set her to when she turned up at the door three hours ago would have to be done over), with her mother's wide shoulders and hips but not fiery and dramatic like Sally, just open and too young for her age — twenty-five — and, so often, troubled. And still not safe, as Rona had hoped she would be, from her mother's griefs and demands.

"What was *she* like?" Kat was staring at her hands, as if the wedding ring with its tiny row of diamonds still surprised her. "The woman who broke them up."

"I know very little about her," Rona said. "She was young, I gather, and lived in Yorkville, which was sort of hippy haven in those days. Though she wasn't a real hippy, just sort of slumming. I mean she had well-off parents who sent her

money."

It had seemed such an ordinary occasion. "Come for supper in the garden," Sally had said. "The kids are at Sam's folks." Sally had drunk too much (but then she often did) and as the light thinned around them and they sat over cooling coffee, she'd burst out suddenly, "Who's this bitch you're seeing, Sam? A woman knows these things." Sam had given Rona a wild single look (and never another till the last). "I've been trying to tell you," he'd said (was that for me too? did I warrant even that much?), then on and on about this being the sort of thing men dreamed of but that he'd never dared hope would come for him. (Sam, always so quick and light, mumbling such banalities). He couldn't ask her to lead a hole-and-corner life (with me it was that he hated to ask me). She wasn't the sort to wilfully break a marriage. He'd have to deal with this part of it alone and go to her clean. Rona had stayed longer than she knew she should, heard things she realized she decently shouldn't hear, wanting to strike and scream but just becoming smaller, till Sally began to keen and rock and Sam, muttering "Look after her, Rona," fled from the house and the garden, leaving the women alone.

"What was so special about her?" Kat's eyes were a very pale blue. They were fixed on Rona.

"Need there have been? I think it was mostly your father, Kat. He'd seized on

that girl as an object." And when I went round to her place, intending to say, "For God's sake, take him or let him go," I was so startled by the ordinary, rather nervous, brownish face and skimpy body that I'd pretended I'd knocked on the wrong door. "Your father thought she wouldn't marry him because of his abandonment of you and your brothers. I don't know whether she ever said this in so many words. Perhaps he just heard what he wanted to hear. Or she may have been playing with him, enjoying her power. I don't really know." Stories don't always end, she might have added. No one tells us that when we're young. Some things are never fully understood.

"So he lived miserably those few years," Kat said, "then had a heart attack and died."

And when he was most miserable he'd call Rona. Each time she'd vow: Never again. Then he'd call and she'd let him come. I loved him though it's hard now to understand what that meant or how it came to be. (I was away from home for the first time. I felt lost and drab in the city. It was flattering to have all that gaiety and brightness turned on me. Why do I try to explain it? Whatever we may say about others, we feel that for us there must have been certainties announced by bells). She'd been used to hold the marriage together: "Rona, I couldn't stand it without you." Now she was being used to give him courage to go on. And to be punished for not being the one he wanted. She'd seemed to be aware of everything that was happening but unable to stop it. And deeply ashamed, knowing that she was beginning to borrow that love, listening for words he'd never say about her. Obligated to be Sally's mainstay too. Years and years of it. Even after he was dead (they went to the funeral together because Sally wanted it and Rona didn't know how to refuse). Till she learned that she didn't have to be used. She could be useful. On her own terms.

She didn't learn this all at once of course. She could sum it up in a few sentences, forgetting the days and nights, the false recoveries, bitter relapses that sent her out to walk the streets, looking

straight ahead so no one could see how desolate she was. All through the worst of it she had her writing — a point of sanity, she used to feel — but both the books she tried to write about Sam were worthless. She couldn't go deeply enough. Perhaps wouldn't. Which shows that I'm not really a writer, she thought. Real writers have no shame. What she did have, it turned out, incongruously since she'd always seemed to herself a rather heavy person, was a gift for irony, a wild sort of foolery. So she wrote humorous sketches, flippant radio plays.

"It's not much of a heredity, is it?" Kat was once more staring at her hands. "Father who ruined himself for a woman who may not have cared about him, mother an alcoholic."

"Kat, surely you haven't been — People don't inherit things like that — Anyway, your mother isn't an alcoholic, she just —"

"Drinks when she's unhappy. Isn't that what alcoholism is?"

"Oh I think it's a bit more complex, Kat. Your mother's had a bit of a disappointment." What a romantic phrase. Sally inspired romantic phrases. She made bad choices — flabby charmers, Sam again and again. "She'll get over it. There probably wasn't any need for you to rush down from the Sault to be with her."

"Especially since we always get on each other's nerves and I come running to you. When did I start doing that, Rona? When I was twelve?"

Eleven actually. An evening knock at the door and there she was. With a little suitcase. The first of many such knocks. Sam's child without Sam's face. Part of my cure. Something salvaged.

"You mustn't brood over what I've told you," she said. "You have your own life now. How's Danny, by the way? You've scarcely mentioned him." Kat was silent, her long face so open, so unpretty, so distressed. "Ah, Kat, you *are* brooding. Let's go into the living room, shall we? It's probably cooler there. We'll have a drink and you can tell me just what's worrying you and then we'll put your worries to bed, the way we used to."

Kat gave her a quick look, then looked

away. "You're not going to like this," she said.

"Like what, sweetie?"

"It isn't any of your business anyway." She stood up as she spoke. "I'm going now. Not back to Mother. I've got me a date. A little holiday from domestic life. I arranged it before I came down. And don't say what about Danny, Rona. You wanted to know how he is, well he was horrid. Really horrid. He said I spend so much time considering and analysing I have no time left to act."

"So just because of some silly little quarrel you're going to — Kat, you can't, you mustn't."

"Yes I can. And it wasn't a little quarrel. I know what you're thinking, Rona, but you said that sort of thing wasn't inherited, remember?" She didn't look at all open at the moment. Crafty was what she looked. Knowing. She's going to say something terrible, Rona thought. She's going to tear all of it open. And here it came: "Don't you think I know?" the girl said.

"Know? Know what, Kat?" Be cool, she thought. If she shows that she suspects, deny it. Think of the words. Think of them now.

The girl was still looking at her in that odd way. "Don't worry," she said. "You haven't seen the last of me. I'll either go back to Danny or I won't go back. Either way I'll be bound to turn up again some time and you can be just like you always are, just sympathetic enough to —"

"Just sympathetic *enough*, I don't know what you —"

"That's what you want, isn't it?" She was smiling now. "What you've always wanted. Of Mum and me both — she minds more than I do by the way — that we should keep being weak and silly and running to you. Well, I won't disappoint you," she said. "I guess you can be fairly sure I won't, Rona."

And before Rona could think of an answer or do more than tell herself how much thinking, rearranging, crossing-out and filling-in would face her now (all coming to what, she couldn't say), Kat had given a swish of her heavy shoulders and walked out of the room.

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