The Lady in the Swing

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Herman was in love with Annie. For three weeks after their marriage, he went hungry. To see her laughing while she crammed eskimo pies into her mouth was all that mattered to him. Day after day, when he wasn't busy, he was cooking for her, Annie getting fatter by the moment, sitting in bed all morning, three pillows behind her head and the sheets littered with Powerhouse candy bars and empty bottles of Nehi. But if his cooking kept her happy, he didn't mind.

In the mess upstairs she lay like a queen. Rarely was she without a smile, the grinning half-moon face reflecting again and again in her chins

and in the wrinkles of her throat. To cover herself she wore a modest cotton dress, over the front of which hung a bib, stained usually with the berries of some fruit pie or another. Hugging her feet were the enormous sky-blue slippers that were a little dirty around the edges like all the rest of her. But no matter, Herman was in love...

Then something occurred, something to which at first he paid little attention. He thought what he had been seeing outside was more the work of the wind or the rain, till he remembered how dry it had been without wind enough to turn the weather cock on the barn. When he looked around, sure enough he found marks rutting the dirt of the hillside -- right up to the living room window. Everywhere they climbed the hill, running off in all directions at the top.

When he brought up the subject with Annie, she giggled and hid her face in the pillow. Still, this deep in the country there was no telling who might be around. During the day there was hardly even a swirl of dust let alone a trespasser on the hillside. But about the nights he was uncertain. Whoever it was must be coming at night, thought Herman.

To get Annie to the roof, Herman rented a

heavy-duty winch by which he could lower a leather seat to the window of their bedroom. Each afternoon he wound the cable much as he would a fishing line and hoisted Annie up and onto the rooftop mattress to lay for awhile in the sun. When she was done and down, she went to bed again, and he brought her a supper of macaroni, then went to bed himself.

Of late he had been sleeping outside. It was better that way. Annie, who did not seem to mind the heat upstairs, could use the extra room. What worried him was that some night she might suddenly need him. She was so heavy, so thoroughly fleshly and her legs bothered her so, that she was just about confined to bed once they parted for the evening. He would never be able to hear her if she started whimpering, for come sundown he was out cold, usually not blinking his eyes again till he heard the rooster's call in the morning. But since the wedding, she had been sleeping well enough, so maybe she will be okay, Herman thought.

When at last he found just how little she had actually been abed all those nights, he cursed Annie and the God who made her. In the morning he rambled distracted. Everywhere he looked, wheelbarrow prints were digging up the valleyside. They

crossed and turned and zig-zagged about as if they would confound him. Then he thought it was the sun playing tricks, or that last night he had been moonsick. Fat as she was, who could possibly want her he wondered.

All that day he was active in the barnyard, cleaning, sweeping up. But again and again the pictures returned: of Annie with the enormous chins, Annie rasping a spoon thoughtlessly, senselessly, across the bottom of a saucepan, Annie waving to him from the bed and giggling. Seven times he fed her -- popcorn, melons, meatballs, soda water, dumplings, a doughnut or two. Counting the trips he made bringing the new Boston Store catalogue to her bedside, he had been up and down twenty times, each time pampering her, wiping her forehead, pushing the chocolates closer to her bed. No matter, his heart was not in it. When he dressed her for bed that night, he could not even find it in himself to kiss her lightly on the cheek...

Outside he closed his eyes. It was hopeless. There were too many things wrong. Where had he gotten with her he wondered. Was this how it would end, with Annie giggling like a pig in the middle of the night and filling the leather cinch with her behind for someone else? When he

remembered how she cursed him once for burning a ham, he thought he could go upstairs right then and take her throat between his fingers. How easy to stifle her with a handful of hay.

Past midnight he sat beneath the plum tree. When the whippoorwills ceased their cry, he still sat there. He stayed till the moon went away and all that was left were the stars. And still no one came, the valley without sound. Even the crickets had gone to rest, and Herman could hear his pocket watch drumming. Once he dozed off, coming as quickly to his senses. But there was nobody. And he began to think that he had seen nothing either and that he had made up the entire thing about the wheelbarrow.

He did not hear the giggling till along toward morning. He thought it could be just about anything else, a creaking door hinge, a mouse in the barn. Then he heard the man. His voice was coming from the roof. When Herman peered around the corner of the house, all he could see obliterating the light of the stars was a jumble of flesh in mid-air, a shapeless cargo descending from the end of a cable, twisting one way, then the other. On the roof he heard the voice again. It was his neighbor. It was the man from Bluebird Farm, and

all along he had been taking him for a friend, buying his oats and corn only to find the neighbor stealing his wife from under his very eyes. When Annie touched down with a plop, was settled in the wheelbarrow, Herman heard him on the rooftop. "Just wait, honey, and we'll go riding," he was saying.

The man must have jumped clear to the ground, for before Herman noticed, he was pushing the wheelbarrow away and up the hill, Annie giggling with each bump it took. Herman stood transfixed. He could not believe his eyes. There was some mistake, he thought, running into the house, wiping his face. It was hot in there, and he burst up the stairs and into her room. He ran his hands over the damp sheets. All that was left were a few crumbs from her Powerhouse. "Annie!" he called.

He came upon them hurrying across the valley, Annie's hair done up in pigtails, her head cocked back, her sky-blue slippers dangling over either side of the wheelbarrow. Pushing this freight in dusty circles was Jug, his simple face dotted with sweat. He must have been carting her off like this for days, thought Herman. When Jug spotted his rival, he speeded up, Annie leaning her head into the wind and gripping the sides of the wheelbarrow. Round and round they went, kicking up such a fury

of dust that Herman nearly lost his way. Time after time they circled past, Jug staying just far enough out of his neighbor's reach, till finally in one vain effort and when Herman least thought he would ever see his wife again for the dust, he managed a piece of shirt tail and held on for dear life.

"I oughta kill you," he hollered, lunging at his neighbor, Jug landing on the seat of his pants. In the wheelbarrow Annie exploded with a sneeze. Fanning the dusty air, she shook her head, setting the loose flesh of her chins to jiggling as Herman, reaching for a boulder at his toe, eyed his man in the dirt. "I am going to kill you," Herman said.

For a moment, however, his eyes were drawn from Jug to where Annie sat. She wasn't watching, her chubby fingers toying with some bauble instead. She does not even care, thought Herman, as he sized up the wheelbarrow and scratched his head. He kicked the wheels and gripped the handles. Flexing his muscles, he tried to lift her.

In the dirt Jug hugged his shins and sniffled. But Herman, investigating the wonderful possibilities of Annie and the wheelbarrow, was no longer aware of him. It is sure strong and the wheels are good, he thought. He took a better grip. With an upward jerk, he lifted her once, twice, the lady

inside beginning to giggle.

"Hey, now. That's a work implement, Herman. The only thing with wheels I got left in the world. You can't go off with my wheely-barrow! HERMAN!!!"

It was getting to be a considerably fine day, thought Herman, starting up across the alkaline powder of the valley top. The sky was brightening a riotous shade of orange. Breaking into a trot, he did not even turn around to witness his neighbor's futile semaphor, guiding his treasure home across the field instead, Annie waving one fat arm. This was sure enough better than murder, he thought. "Whoo-ee, what's he gonna dream of next?"

As he rolled along, the sun was piercing over the valley, over the walls of Annie's new prison. One last plunge and he was down the hill. He fastened his lady in the leather cinch. The ladder shaking, up he went three steps at a time. With Annie twisting from side to side, he felt as if he had hooked the weight of the Ages, but in spite of the difficulty, up she came, his cargo bobbing in the leather cinch.

Each time he tired he spit on his palms and, turning to the cable with renewed vigor, raised it another few inches until, when it was in mid-air, he halted her entirely. Mopping his brow, he

squeezed in through the bedroom window. The walls were plastered with photos, on the floor a vase of withered flowers. Peeking here and there -- in closets, in drawers -- Herman came up with a crust of bread and some left-over cheese. Nibbling a sandwich, he sat on the bed. Outside Annie was giggling. He plucked her a daisy. He rummaged in the closet for an eyeshade. She was the picture of contentment hanging like that, wearing the eyeshade, a flower in her hair. And best of all, trapped in mid-air, she was going nowhere, thought Herman, as he pulled back the covers and fluffed up the pillows. Looking happily about him, he enjoyed a satisfied yawn and, closing his eyes on the rising sun, settled deep into the oversized bed for a good day's sleep in the heat.