

FICTION NOVEMBER 9, 2009 ISSUE

PREMIUM HARMONY

By Stephen King

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Illustration by Steve Powers

They've been married for ten years and for a long time everything was O.K.—swell—but now they argue. Now they argue quite a lot. It's really all the same argument. It has circularity. It is, Ray thinks, like a dog track. When they argue, they're like greyhounds chasing the mechanical rabbit. You go past the same scenery time after time, but you don't see it. You see the rabbit.

He thinks it might be different if they'd had kids, but she couldn't. They finally got tested, and that's what the doctor said. It was her problem. A year or so after that, he bought her a dog, a Jack Russell she named Biznezz. She'd spell it for people who asked. She loves that dog, but now they argue anyway.

They're going to Wal-Mart for grass seed. They've decided to sell the house—they can't afford to keep it—but Mary says they won't get far until they do something about the plumbing and get the lawn fixed. She says those bald patches make it look shanty Irish. It's because of the drought. It's been a hot summer and there's been no rain to speak of. Ray tells her grass seed won't grow without rain no matter how good it is. He says they should wait.

“Then another year goes by and we’re still there,” she says. “We can’t wait another year, Ray. We’ll be bankrupts.”

When she talks, Biz looks at her from his place in the back seat. Sometimes he looks at Ray when Ray talks, but not always. Mostly he looks at Mary.

“What do you think?” he says. “It’s going to rain just so you don’t have to worry about going bankrupt?”

“We’re in it together, in case you forgot,” she says. They’re driving through Castle Rock now. It’s pretty dead. What Ray calls “the economy” has disappeared from this part of Maine. The Wal-Mart is on the other side of town, near the high school where Ray is a janitor. The Wal-Mart has its own stoplight. People joke about it.

“Penny wise and pound foolish,” he says. “You ever hear that one?”

“A million times, from you.”

He grunts. He can see the dog in the rearview mirror, watching her. He sort of hates the way Biz does that. It occurs to him that neither of them knows what they are talking about.

“And pull in at the Quik-Pik,” she says. “I want to get a kickball for Tallie’s birthday.” Tallie is her brother’s little girl. Ray supposes that makes her his niece, although he’s not sure that’s right, since all the blood is on Mary’s side.

“They have balls at Wal-Mart,” Ray says. “And everything’s cheaper at Wally World.”

“The ones at Quik-Pik are purple. Purple is her favorite color. I can’t be sure there’ll be purple at Wal-Mart.”

“If there aren’t, we’ll stop at the Quik-Pik on the way back.” He feels a great weight pressing down on his head. She’ll get her way. She always does on things like this. He sometimes thinks marriage is like a football game and he’s quarterbacking the underdog team. He has to pick his spots. Make short passes.

“It’ll be on the wrong side coming back,” she says—as if they are caught in a torrent of city traffic instead of rolling through an almost deserted little town where most of the stores are for sale. “I’ll just dash in and get the ball and dash right back out.”

At two hundred pounds, Ray thinks, your dashing days are over.

“They’re only ninety-nine cents,” she says. “Don’t be such a pinchpenny.”

Don’t be so pound foolish, he thinks, but what he says is “Buy me a pack of smokes while you’re in there. I’m out.”

“If you quit, we’d have an extra forty dollars a week. Maybe more.”

He saves up and pays a friend in South Carolina to ship him a dozen cartons at a time. They’re twenty dollars a carton cheaper in South Carolina. That’s a lot of money, even in this day and age. It’s not like he doesn’t try to economize. He

has told her this before and will again, but what's the point? In one ear, out the other.

"I used to smoke two packs a day," he says. "Now I smoke less than half a pack." Actually, most days he smokes more. She knows it, and Ray knows she knows it. That's marriage after a while. The weight on his head gets a little heavier. Also, he can see Biz still looking at her. He feeds the damn dog, and he makes the money that pays for the food, but it's her he's looking at. And Jack Russells are supposed to be smart.

He turns into the Quik-Pik.

"You ought to buy them on Indian Island if you've got to have them," she says.

"They haven't sold tax-free smokes on the rez for ten years," he says. "I've told you that, too. You don't listen." He pulls past the gas pumps and parks beside the store. There's no shade. The sun is directly overhead. The car's air-conditioner only works a little. They are both sweating. In the back seat, Biz is panting. It makes him look like he's grinning.

"Well, you ought to quit," Mary says.

"And you ought to quit those Little Debbies," he says. He doesn't want to say this—he knows how sensitive she is about her weight—but out it comes. He can't hold it back. It's a mystery.

"I don't eat those no more," she says. "Any, I mean. Anymore."

"Mary, the box is on the top shelf. A twenty-four-pack. Behind the flour."

"Were you snooping?" A flush rises in her cheeks, and he sees how she looked when she was still beautiful. Good-looking, anyway. Everybody said she was good-looking, even his mother, who didn't like her otherwise.

"I was hunting for the bottle opener," he says. "I had a bottle of cream soda. The kind with the old-fashioned cap."

"Looking for it on the top shelf of the goddam cupboard!"

"Go in and get the ball," he says. "And get me some smokes. Be a sport."

"Can't you wait until we get home? Can't you even wait that long?"

"You can get the cheap ones," he says. "That off-brand. Premium Harmony, they're called." They taste like homemade shit, but all right. If she'll only shut up about it.

"Where are you going to smoke, anyway? In the car, I suppose, so I have to breathe it."

"I'll open the window. I always do."

"I'll get the ball. Then I'll come back. If you still feel you have to spend four dollars and fifty cents to poison your lungs,

you can go in. I'll sit with the baby."

Ray hates it when she calls Biz the baby. He's a dog, and he may be as bright as Mary likes to boast when they have company, but he still shits outside and licks where his balls used to be.

"Buy a few Twinkies while you're at it," he tells her. "Or maybe they're having a special on Ho Hos."

"You're so mean," she says. She gets out of the car and slams the door. He's parked too close to the concrete cube of a building and she has to sidle until she's past the trunk of the car, and he knows she knows he's looking at her, seeing how she's now so big she has to sidle. He knows she thinks he parked close to the building on purpose, to make her sidle, and maybe he did.

“Well, Biz, old buddy, it's just you and me.”

Biz lies down on the back seat and closes his eyes. He may stand up on his back paws and shuffle around for a few seconds when Mary puts on a record and tells him to dance, and if she tells him (in a jolly voice) that he's a *bad boy* he may go into the corner and sit facing the wall, but he still shits outside.

He sits there and she doesn't come out. Ray opens the glove compartment. He paws through the rat's nest of papers, looking for some cigarettes he might have forgotten, but there aren't any. He does find a Hostess Sno Ball still in its wrapper. He pokes it. It's as stiff as a corpse. It's got to be a thousand years old. Maybe older. Maybe it came over on the Ark.

"Everybody has his poison," he says. He unwraps the Sno Ball and tosses it into the back seat. "Want that, Biz?"

Biz snarks the Sno Ball in two bites. Then he sets to work licking up bits of coconut off the seat. Mary would pitch a bitch, but Mary's not here.

Ray looks at the gas gauge and sees it's down to half. He could turn off the motor and roll down the windows, but then he'd really bake. Sitting here in the sun, waiting for her to buy a purple plastic kickball for ninety-nine cents when he knows they could get one for seventy-nine cents at Wal-Mart. Only that one might be yellow or red. Not good enough for Tallie. Only purple for the princess.

He sits there and Mary doesn't come back. "Christ on a pony!" he says. Cool air trickles from the vents. He thinks again about turning off the engine, saving some gas, then thinks, Fuck it. She won't weaken and bring him the smokes, either. Not even the cheap off-brand. This he knows. He had to make that remark about the Little Debbie's.

He sees a young woman in the rearview mirror. She's jogging toward the car. She's even heavier than Mary; great big tits shuffle back and forth under her blue smock. Biz sees her coming and starts to bark.

Ray cracks the window an inch or two.

“Are you with the blond-haired woman who just came in? She your wife?” She puffs the words. Her face shines with sweat.

“Yes. She wanted a ball for our niece.”

“Well, something’s wrong with her. She fell down. She’s unconscious. Mr. Ghosh thinks she might have had a heart attack. He called 911. You better come.”

Ray locks the car and follows her into the store. It’s cold inside. Mary is lying on the floor with her legs spread and her arms at her sides. She’s next to a wire cylinder full of kickballs. The sign over the wire cylinder says “Hot Fun in the Summertime.” Her eyes are closed. She might be sleeping there on the linoleum. Three people are standing over her. One is a dark-skinned man in khaki pants and a white shirt. A nametag on the pocket of his shirt says “MR. GHOSH MANAGER.” The other two are customers. One is a thin old man without much hair. He’s in his seventies at least. The other is a fat woman. She’s fatter than Mary. Fatter than the girl in the blue smock, too. Ray thinks by rights she’s the one who should be lying on the floor.

“Sir, are you this lady’s husband?” Mr. Ghosh asks.

“Yes,” Ray says. That doesn’t seem to be enough. “Yes, I am.”

“I am sorry to say, but I think she might be dead,” Mr. Ghosh says. “I gave the artificial respiration and the mouth-to-mouth, but . . .”

Ray thinks of the dark-skinned man putting his mouth on Mary’s. French-kissing her, sort of. Breathing down her throat right next to the wire cylinder full of plastic kickballs. Then he kneels down.

“Mary,” he says. “Mary!” Like he’s trying to wake her up after a hard night.

She doesn’t appear to be breathing, but you can’t always tell. He puts his ear by her mouth and hears nothing. He feels air on his skin, but that’s probably just the air-conditioning.

“This gentleman called 911,” the fat woman says. She’s holding a bag of Bugles.

“Mary!” Ray says. Louder this time, but he can’t quite bring himself to shout, not down on his knees with people standing around. He looks up and says, apologetically, “She never gets sick. She’s healthy as a horse.”

“You never know,” the old man says. He shakes his head.

“She just fell down,” the young woman in the blue smock says. “Not a word.”

“Did she grab her chest?” the fat woman with the Bugles asks.

“I don’t know,” the young woman says. “I guess not. Not that I saw. She just fell down.”

There’s a rack of souvenir T-shirts near the kickballs. They say things like “My Parents Were Treated Like Royalty in Castle Rock and All I Got Was This Lousy Tee-Shirt.” Mr. Ghosh takes one and says, “Would you like me to cover her face, sir?”

“God, no!” Ray says, startled. “She might only be unconscious. We’re not doctors.” Past Mr. Ghosh, he sees three kids, teen-agers, looking in the window. One has a cell phone. He’s using it to take a picture.

Mr. Ghosh follows Ray’s look and rushes at the door, flapping his hands. “You kids get out of here! You kids get out!”

Laughing, the teen-agers shuffle backward, then turn and jog past the gas pumps to the sidewalk. Beyond them, the nearly deserted downtown shimmers. A car goes by pulsing rap. To Ray, the bass sounds like Mary’s stolen heartbeat.

“Where’s the ambulance?” the old man says. “How come it’s not here yet?”

Ray kneels by his wife while the time goes by. His back hurts and his knees hurt, but if he gets up he’ll look like a spectator.

The ambulance turns out to be a Chevy Suburban painted white with orange stripes. The red jackpot lights are flashing. “CASTLE COUNTY RESCUE” is printed across the front, only backward, so you can read it in your rearview mirror.

The two men who come in are dressed in white. They look like waiters. One pushes an oxygen tank on a dolly. It’s a green tank with an American-flag decal on it. “Sorry,” he says. “Just cleared a car accident over in Oxford.”

The other one sees Mary lying on the floor. “Aw, gee,” he says.

Ray can’t believe it. “Is she still alive?” he asks. “Is she just unconscious? If she is, you better give her oxygen or she’ll have brain damage.”

Mr. Ghosh shakes his head. The young woman in the blue smock starts to cry. Ray wants to ask her what she’s crying about, then knows. She has made up a whole story about him from what he just said. Why, if he came back in a week or so and played his cards right, she might toss him a mercy fuck. Not that he *would*, but he sees that maybe he could. If he wanted to.

Mary’s eyes don’t react to the ophthalmoscope. One E.M.T. listens to her nonexistent heartbeat, and the other takes her nonexistent blood pressure. It goes on like that for a while. The teen-agers come back with some of their friends. Other people, too. Ray guesses they’re being drawn by the flashing red lights on top of the Suburban the way bugs are drawn to a porch light. Mr. Ghosh takes another run at them, flapping his arms. They back away again. Then, when Mr. Ghosh returns to the circle around Mary and Ray, they come back.

One of the E.M.T.s says to Ray, “She was your wife?”

“Right.”

“Well, sir, I’m sorry to say that she’s dead.”

“Mary, Mother of God,” the fat lady with the Bugles says. She crosses herself.

“Oh.” Ray stands up. His knees crack. “They told me she was.”

Mr. Ghosh offers one of the E.M.T.s the souvenir T-shirt to put over Mary’s face, but the E.M.T. shakes his head and goes outside. He tells the little crowd that there’s nothing to see, as if anyone’s going to believe a dead woman on the Quik-Pik floor isn’t interesting.

The E.M.T. yanks a gurney from the back of the rescue vehicle. He does it with a single flip of the wrist. The legs fold down all by themselves. The old man with the thinning hair holds the door open and the E.M.T. pulls his rolling deathbed inside.

“Whoo, hot,” the E.M.T. says, wiping his forehead.

“You may want to turn away for this part, sir,” the other one says, but Ray watches as they lift her onto the gurney. A sheet has been tucked down at the end of it. They pull it up all the way, until it’s over her face. Now Mary looks like a corpse in a movie. They roll her out into the heat. This time, the fat woman with the Bugles holds the door for them. The crowd has retreated to the sidewalk. There must be three dozen people standing in the unrelieved August sunshine.

When Mary is stored, the E.M.T.s come back. One is holding a clipboard. He asks Ray about twenty-five questions. Ray can answer all but the one about her age. Then he remembers she’s three years younger than he is and tells them thirty-five.

“We’re going to take her to St. Stevie’s,” the E.M.T. with the clipboard says. “You can follow us if you don’t know where that is.”

“I know,” Ray says. “What? Do you want to do an autopsy? Cut her up?”

The girl in the blue smock gives a gasp. Mr. Ghosh puts his arm around her, and she puts her face against his white shirt. Ray wonders if Mr. Ghosh is fucking her. He hopes not. Not because of Mr. Ghosh’s brown skin but because he’s got to be twice her age.

“Well, that’s not our decision,” the E.M.T. says, “but probably not. She didn’t die unattended—”

“I’ll say,” the woman with the Bugles interjects.

“—and it’s pretty clearly a heart attack. You can probably have her released to the mortuary almost immediately.”

Mortuary? An hour ago they were in the car, arguing. “I don’t have a mortuary,” Ray says. “Not a mortuary, a burial plot, nothing. What the hell? She’s thirty-five.”

The two E.M.T.s exchange a look. “Mr. Burkett, there’ll be someone to help you with all that at St. Stevie’s. Don’t worry about it.”

The E.M.T. wagon pulls out with the lights still flashing but the siren off. The crowd on the sidewalk starts to break up. The countergirl, the old man, the fat woman, and Mr. Ghosh look at Ray as though he’s someone special. A celebrity.

“She wanted a purple kickball for our niece,” he says. “She’s having a birthday. She’ll be eight. Her name is Talia. Tallie for short. She was named for an actress.”

Mr. Ghosh takes a purple kickball from the wire rack and holds it out to Ray in both hands. “On the house,” he says.

“Thank you, sir,” Ray says, trying to sound equally solemn, and the woman with the Bugles bursts into tears. “Mary, Mother of God,” she says. She likes that one.

They stand around for a while, talking. Mr. Ghosh gets sodas from the cooler. These are also on the house. They drink their sodas and Ray tells them a few things about Mary. He tells them how she made a quilt that took third prize at the Castle County fair. That was in ’02. Or maybe ’03.

“That’s so sad,” the woman with the Bugles says. She has opened them and shared them around. They eat and drink.

“My wife went in her sleep,” the old man with the thinning hair says. “She just laid down on the sofa and never woke up. We were married thirty-seven years. I always expected I’d go first, but that’s not the way the good Lord wanted it. I can still see her laying there on the sofa.”

Finally, Ray runs out of things to tell them, and they run out of things to tell him. Customers are coming in again. Mr. Ghosh waits on some, and the woman in the blue smock waits on others. Then the fat woman says she really has to go. She gives Ray a kiss on the cheek before she does.

“Now you need to see to your business, Mr. Burkett,” she tells him. Her tone is both reprimanding and flirtatious.

He looks at the clock over the counter. It’s the kind with a beer advertisement on it. Almost two hours have gone by since Mary went sidling between the car and the cinder-block side of the Quik-Pik. And for the first time he thinks of Biz.

When he opens the door, heat rushes out at him, and when he puts his hand on the steering wheel to lean in he pulls it back with a cry. It's got to be a hundred and thirty in there. Biz is dead on his back. His eyes are milky. His tongue is protruding from the side of his mouth. Ray can see the wink of his teeth. There are little bits of coconut caught in his whiskers. That shouldn't be funny, but it is. Not funny enough to laugh at, but funny.

"Biz, old buddy," he says. "I'm sorry. I forgot you were in here."

Great sadness and amusement sweep over him as he looks at the baked Jack Russell. That anything so sad should be funny is just a crying shame.

"Well, you're with her now, ain't you?" he says, and this is so sad that he begins to cry. It's a hard storm. While he's crying, it comes to him that now he can smoke all he wants, and anywhere in the house. He can smoke right there at her dining-room table.

"You're with her now, Biz," he says again through his tears. His voice is clogged and thick. It's a relief to sound just right for the situation. "Poor old Mary, poor old Biz. Damn it all!"

Still crying, and with the purple kickball still tucked under his arm, he goes back into the Quik-Pik. He tells Mr. Ghosh he forgot to get cigarettes. He thinks maybe Mr. Ghosh will give him a pack of Premium Harmonys on the house as well, but Mr. Ghosh's generosity doesn't stretch that far. Ray smokes all the way to the hospital with the windows shut and the air-conditioning on. ♦

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