



Porcelain Smile

By Angela Wallace

He came into our lives one summer afternoon in the middle of the week. I had just put the salad bowl on the table when the doorbell rang. It was the first time my dad had initiated a family dinner set around the kitchen table (usually Dad ate in his study in front of his computer). But today we were going to eat like those families on T.V.— and it was interrupted. Mom was going to be home from work soon, Dad was cooking, I was helping, and even my little sister was eager to set the table.

Then there was the man at the door. He and my dad greeted each other as though they were long-lost friends. Dean was his name. He was taller than my dad, and his hair was gray on light brown, which I think looked older than gray on black, my dad's color. Dean was a traveling salesman from Oregon. How he found my dad after twenty-something years I don't know, but there he was, traveling through California, in our city, down our street.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Dad asked.

"Well, actually, no."

"Stay with us a few days."

Three days was decided. They went off to my dad's study like two grade school boys. When Mom came home they didn't come back to join us for dinner.

We had an unusually long driveway, flat at the top, and then it dipped down towards the street. It was great for launching bikes or rollerblades into the wind. Getting back up took the hard work, I ran, as best I could with rollerblades, to the top and spun in circles to amuse myself. The neighbor kids would be done with their dinner soon. They always ate late.

I stopped spinning when I saw him. Three days was up several weeks ago. Dean had moved into the cottage in our backyard where my dad held his sermons five times a week. Dad's real job gave him split shifts, and since most of my dad's congregation was from his work, they all had three-hour breaks used for coming out for Bible study. Dean went to every one. I once saw him kneeling at my dad's feet at a church get-together. My dad's pulpit was a lazy-boy chair. Dean looked like a Peter, and Dad was his Jesus.

Dean had a smile on his face as he came up the driveway. "So that's how you stay so neat and fit," he said.

"What?" I said.

He nodded to my skates. "Good exercise. You'll have guys all over you with that figure." He kept walking.

I didn't know why, but my stomach suddenly trembled and my heart rate picked up. I stomped on the cement and kicked my legs into action, hurtling myself down the driveway, out into the street, and I skated as far down the block as I was allowed.

Three days, three weeks, three months. Dean had moved this base of operations into the cottage. Supposedly he still went out to sell things, but all I saw of him was a lazy loafer. The question "when is he leaving?" was no longer allowed. Dad said Dean stayed, and there was no more to talk about.

With the progression of time, a new feeling festered inside of me. If I had had fur like the cat, it would have bristled. Perhaps that would have been less conspicuous than my facial expressions, which I seemed to have little control over.

Dad and Dean were coming down the hallway. My sister and I were standing in front of the mirror. We wanted to make sure our black skirts and gray tops were respectful enough for where we were going.

"Well, look at you two." His voice put me on the defensive. "You two look ready for your hot dates," Dean said, smiling, always smiling at us.

"We're going to a funeral," I said indignantly. I heard my dad chuckle.

"Well, maybe you'll pick up some dates there," Dean said.

My mom called us to the door then; it was time to

leave. On the way out she put her arm around my shoulder and spoke close to my ear.

"Watch the faces you make."

"What?" I asked, still feeling defensive.

"If looks could kill, Amy," she said.

I wanted to.

"We must treat the traveling evangelist with love and respect. Open our homes to them, for they are doing a great work." Dad looked at Mom and me too many times during that sermon. He also exaggerated the job description of a traveling salesman.

Summer was gone, and it was dark at 7:00. Jane came up to Mom after the sermon was over. I stood by my mom's side, under the dim porch light, as the ten plus cars in our driveway began to disperse.

"What is that man doing here?" Jane asked.

"He and Ray are friends from seminary. He's been staying here for almost five months," my mom replied.

"In the church?" Jane seemed as perturbed about it as I was. "He gives off a bad feeling," she continued.

My mom nodded. "I know."

I didn't say anything; I wasn't allowed to. Tonight's message proved that my dad didn't listen to us when we told him our concerns. I heard their laughter as they came around the corner from the backyard.

"Hey!" Dean shouted towards me. "We need a beautiful broad to come keep us company." He waved as if to signal me over. I went inside the house.

My mom and dad organized their work schedules so that at least one parent was always home. Dad was at work, but today my mom had to take my sister to the doctor. I was 13, perfectly capable of keeping myself out of trouble while home alone.

It hadn't been five minutes since my mom left that Dean showed up at the back door, knocking, with a smile on his face. I opened the door.

"Your dad said I could take a shower." His towel was draped over his shoulder.

"He's not here..." I stammered.

"I won't be long," he said. "Real quick, I promise."

I knew what my dad would say. I knew what I wanted to say. But I was afraid to say no.

He didn't bother closing the bathroom door while he got the water going. I stayed in the living room.

"Hey, Amy," he called. "Could you show me how to turn the shower part on?"

I rose from the couch reluctantly. He already had his shirt off.

"Just pull the knob up," I said.

"Where?" He smiled at me.

I was a toy, a rubber ducky a child taunts by letting it float, then dunking it, drowning it, and then letting it bobble back to the top for air.

"Have you showered yet?" he asked.

I bolted from the door and ran to my room at the end of the hall, locked the door, and slumped against it. I listened for footsteps, but they never came. The water eventually stopped running, but he did not come to my door. My hands shook with terror.

"Please come home, please come home." I rocked back and forth, clutching my knees.

I heard a car pull into the driveway and ran to my window to see if it was Mom. Then I heard his voice outside my door.

"Amy, are you all right in there?"

I moved towards my bed, afraid to come near the door to brace it, terrified he'd open it, despite it being locked.

"Thank you, for letting me take a shower. You're a good little Christian."

Angela Wallace is the winner of the eighth annual Award for Prose, a writing contest initiated by Karen Rosenbaum, who taught creative writing, literature and composition for more than 30 years at Ohlone.

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