

When The Conversation Ends

by Howard Giordano

It was a strange mood, unfamiliar, not one of her usual “I’m busy wrestling with my personal demons” type of moods. She’d been steeped in it all day and I, like a shipwrecked victim reaching out for any piece of flotsam that drifted by, interpreted it as remorse. I wasn’t sure. Therefore, I was surprised when she came downstairs, after putting the kids to bed, with a rolled joint from the private stash she had hidden in her linen drawer. Why I felt a tiny sense of hope when she handed it to me to light up, I couldn’t say.

During our marriage we’d smoked grass together many times, but I was never more in need to get high than this night. I wanted to be numb, to let the ache slip away, to blot out thoughts of tomorrow, of the future.

I exhaled slowly, keeping the smoke in my lungs as long as possible the way she showed me when we first met ten years ago, when I was still a conservative cherry. I could never manage toking and talking so we passed the joint back and forth in silence. It was dried out and burning quickly.

Watching her fumble with the roach holder and the smoldering remains, I wondered, as I always did when we came to this part of the ritual, whether the results were worth the fuss, the legal risks of buying it, the logistical inconveniences of smoking it. I often tried to imagine the reaction of my law partners if I ever got busted. The absurdity of that picture always brought a smile.

"You want any more of this?" she asked, offering the barely visible stub pinched tightly between the discolored tips of the holder.

I waved it off. I sat quietly, leaning back into the soft cushions of the sofa feeling lightheaded, and waited for the veil to close

across my brain. I really marveled at those kids of the sixties who could smoke the stuff all day and never show signs. I shook my head, shut my eyes still red from an earlier uncontrollable outburst of tears, and replayed in my mind that moment, two weeks before, when she exploded the bomb.

"Listen, there's no point in dragging this out," she had begun after we were alone.

I confused her meaning; not the first time. I realized later after days of painful talking, miscommunication had been a recurring theme throughout our marriage. She called it being on different wavelengths. I finally admitted an eleven-year age spread could account for that.

"I think we should get divorced," she'd announced. Right out of the blue. No signal, no warning, nothing! Several aftershocks followed. "No, there isn't someone else. . . . No, no, you're a good husband, a good father. I just don't want to be married anymore. It makes me feel camouflaged. I look in the mirror and I don't see anyone I like. . . . No, it's not you. It's marriage. I'm sorry. Really." Her voice had been strong, the way it sounded every time she addressed some women's lib issue. During the past year, she'd transformed into a soldier for the liberation movement, and I was made a casualty of her war by the unshaven legs of her fellow warriors when they pried open her door.

I'd suggested changes, like going back to her old job at the insurance agency in town, offered compromises, made promises, in an effort to turn her around. My arguments failed. Spent, I finally agreed on a date to move out.

As she tapped the roach from the holder, I watched it drop into the ashtray to die, along with our marriage. "How you feeling, I asked.

"Okay, I guess," she replied. "A little horny, maybe," she added, making no effort to hide her grin.

"Honest? I'm going to miss that, you know," I said, forcing myself to return a smile.

I looked into the face that I loved for the past ten years. Why was it, I thought, whenever we were stoned our lovemaking always reached a level of abandon we could never achieve sober? They were the moments when we shared our only form of real and honest communication.

As if reading my mind, she said, "You'll find others, and they won't need grass." She glanced up at the grandfather clock in the foyer and then at the ceiling. "Kids should be asleep. One for the road? It just might help us get through this night."

I struggled to my feet, feeling unsteady on my legs. She led me by the hand to the stairs, to communicate for the last time, to close the chapter. Tomorrow, I would flip the page.

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