

Trade-Offs

by vic fortezza

Smiling, holding hands, Joe and Lara basked in the sunshine of the mid January day as they approached the diner. The temperature was warm enough for golf. Joe had played in far colder weather in spring and fall.

They gazed at each other briefly and chuckled. They'd made love earlier. This was one of those rare moments of bliss when all seemed right with the world. Married only two months, Lara was three weeks late. Joe could not stop thinking about a baby, the miracle it would be. 55 now, he'd given up hope of being a father. Three times in the past ten years he'd thought he'd lost Lara to another man. He'd never really believed she would abandon her acute common sense and come to him, although he'd certainly fantasized about it. He doubted there was anyone luckier than he in all the world. Even the fact that a baby would mean the end of his Monday rounds of golf, his dream of breaking 80, failed to dampen his spirits. It was a trade-off he would make gladly. And he would still have all spring and summer to attain his goal. After all, he was far more positive than he'd ever been. Last season the sting of a bad score had been lessened by the thought that he would soon see Lara. He'd reduced his handicap to an all-time low of 13.8. Maybe this would be the year - and a child, perhaps a son, to boot! His innards fluttered at the thought. He did not understand why such happiness was scary. He no longer considered himself an utter failure.

As they neared the entrance, he caught sight of their reflections in the window and tried to gauge if they looked right together, if the difference in their ages were discernible. Although he was still svelte, he'd acquired that look of middle age he had such difficulty describing, which only "stunned, befuddled" approached. Only the makings of a double chin gave away Lara's 40 years. He did not understand how such a tiger of physical fitness and diet had come to have one.

A man of 35 exited the diner. His eyes met Lara's briefly, then

looked away. Her hand increased its pressure ever so slightly on Joe's. He thought he felt her whole body quiver, despite her effort at restraint. He fought despair. He wanted to spit at the man, an urge motivated not only by jealousy but by his contempt for the spoiled, rich brat who'd done Lara such damage. He cursed his luck, which he rarely did. What in the world was "pretty-boy" doing in Brooklyn, so many miles from his penthouse in Manhattan, from his parents' swank home in the suburbs of Jersey? No doubt he was fresh from a one-night stand.

Lara let go of his hand at the door. Joe experienced a ripping in his gut, as if she'd let go of him forever. He was not angry with her - he was mad at the world. He knew it was only by luck, only due to the selfishness and stupidity of modern men, that Lara and he were together. He'd feared he would never break the momentum of being alone. He was certain he would never have wed. Although it pained him terribly, he accepted that the swine, however undeserving, was the love of Lara's life. There was nothing he could do about it.

They were silent at the table. Lara focused on the menu. Joe did not look at it. He would not don his reading glasses, have them sit at the tip of his long nose, create a look that would make him seem old, remind Lara of the madness of their being together, of the selfishness of his wanting a child at his age. Although he was no longer hungry, he was tempted to drown his melancholy in a burger, fries and chocolate shake.

Lara raised a glass of water and made a toast: "To the world's greatest writer."

Although Joe knew it was a desperate attempt to appease him, he complied, clinked, and forced a smile to his lips. It failed to chase the gloom. The circles under Lara's sad brown eyes, which he loved so much, seemed to have darkened. Joe scanned the room, looking for couples, gauging happiness. He wondered how often husband and wife were actually the love of each other's life. He was certain it was rare. He'd always sensed he was the love of a co-worker's life, someone to whom he was not attracted. 50, she still lived with her parents. The pain of her unrequited love had him avoid her. He did

not want to feel guilty about not loving someone. He suspected Lara was experiencing a similar guilt at present. She was the love of his life. He didn't even mind the presence of her dogs, something he would never have envisioned.

He had loved twice before as an adult, and each had been for the wrong reason. The first, at 29, was rooted almost entirely in sexual desire, which he'd been unable to admit to himself until many years later. He still thought of that woman. Perhaps not even a day went by without his wondering where she was, if she were happy. He knew only that she was not with the love of her life, a cop who'd gone off the deep end. His second flame had been but a girl, a Latina beauty 21 years his junior. That feeling was more appreciation than love. Given his loneliness, it'd been the fight of his life not to give in to her. He'd run into her recently. Now past 30, she was divorced, living alone.

As powerful as his attraction to those women was, it did not compare to his feelings for Lara, whom he loved for all the right reasons. He wondered if a man were capable of true love while the sexual beast still lurked within him. He hearkened back to this morning's intimacy. In light of what had just occurred, it did not have the meaning it'd had only hours ago. The wonder of it now seemed illusion. He was visited by that sadness that too often characterized life, that had dominated him before Lara, when even his success at having his stories published in small press magazines had come to seem empty. His latest acceptance, his 27th, suddenly lost its luster.

"I'm sorry," said Lara, gaze averted.

"You've done nothing wrong," said Joe, doing his best to take the high road. "It's just life. I know you're a beautiful person."

He stifled the urge to say more, as it would not improve the situation and might make it worse. Their eyes glazed.

Suddenly Joe realized that a baby would prevent him not only from playing golf regularly but from ever becoming the love of Lara's life. The child would become the love of her life - and rightly so. Although there was sadness in this, it too was a trade-off he would make

gladly. Time was no longer on his side in these matters.
He ordered a grilled chicken salad, as did Lara.

