

STORIES

IN THE KEY OF C. MINOR.



Russell
Bittner

Something Special

A Novella

Chapter FOUR

I go immediately to our room in the expectation that a contrite Angie, finally reconciled to her ungratefulness, will be awaiting my arrival – hat in hand, as it were. I have every intention of extracting whatever price she’s willing to pay, penitence being as much at the pleasure of the aggrieved as it is at the pain of the transgressor. I have no idea who this young man might be; still less, any concern about his welfare; least of all, a thought about his retribution or damnation. The only compensation I wish to gain for this whole sordid business is Angie’s complete submission – that she should *beg* me to deliver her from her misguided need to look anywhere but to me for guidance, inspiration, and yes – transcendence. I and I alone will be her redeemer, I’m thinking as I open the door – .

There’s no one in the room. “Angie,” I call, half-expecting to hear a tearful “Yes, Bruce?” from somewhere within, but I hear only the sound of my own voice.

The thing now is to remain calm, think clearly, act decisively, I think to myself as I get undressed and pull back the bed sheets – but not before setting up my alarm clock with its luminous numbers and hands facing my pillow.

I’m solidly asleep long before both hands on my alarm clock reach twelve, and I have no idea how much time has passed when I first hear sounds outside our room, catch a glimmer of light from the hallway as she slips in through the door, then listen to her labored breathing as she waits

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for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. I half-open one of my own and note the hour: 3:00 a.m.

When I awake shortly after eight the next morning, the sun is lurking through the curtains. At the moment I realize where I now am, I hear the sound of heavy breathing from somewhere down on the floor, then remember I'm not alone in the room. I hoist myself up on an elbow and look in Angie's direction. Through a mass of scattered blond hair, I see the back of flannel pajamas covered with little teddy-bears in various states of dance over the hills and dales of her body. "Lions and tigers and bears—oh, my indeed!" I think to myself.

I get out of bed and take a shower, dry off and walk right out into the room to get a fresh set of clothes. Nothing compels my modesty at this point, and *less* than nothing compels me to consider her need to sleep undisturbed—and so, I make no effort to cloak or muffle any aspect of my presence. I am, in fact, quite disposed to have her wake up and find me exactly as I am.

Strange it is, I think, that she doesn't awaken.

I leave the room and descend to the dining room for breakfast, where I'm met almost immediately by Arthur wearing a grave expression. "Breakfast for one, Mr. Seymour?" he asks, but it's clear he already knows the answer.

"Yes, Arthur, breakfast for one. The young lady will be sleeping in this morning."

He grabs a menu and escorts me to our table of the previous evening, then goes without a word to fetch orange juice and coffee. When he returns an instant later, I hand him back the menu.

"A couple of eggs over easy, please, Arthur. And a double portion of bacon. I've got an expedition of sorts planned for today, and I can use the extra protein."

"An exhibition, sir? I should've thought last night's exhibition was more than sufficient."

I find his choice of words distinctly unsettling—and not just the malapropism—but I realize the tone is not directed at me or at anything I might've said or done. "Yes?" I ask, giving him plenty of latitude to unburden himself of the news he's so clearly eager to share.

His eyes dart first one way, then the other before he bends over almost within whispering distance of my ear. "Well, sir, as you might guess—out here in the middle of nowhere—most of the help at the Ahwahnee live on the premises, just beyond the guest cottages—."

"Guest cottages?"

"Indeed, sir. They're usually empty this time of year. But in late spring, summer and fall, they're every bit as busy as the main building."

"I see —."

"In any case, I finish up here in the restaurant not much more than an hour after you, yourself, have retired for the night. I'm making my way to the dormitory, minding my own business, when I hear sounds from one of the cottages and notice that a window has been forced. I'm not a Peeping Tom, mind you, and so I don't approach to get me a better look. Instead, I just slow down a bit — well, stand still, really — to 'ave a look at the moon. I don't know whether you noticed last night, but it was a fu —."

"Yes, and —?" I say. I notice — and then Arthur notices — that I'm now pressing the tines of my fork down into the table cloth. "Please go on," I say as I make a concerted effort to modulate my voice and lay my fork back down in its uneventful place.

"Well, sir, like I say, those sounds. Didn't seem natural. Sounded like animal noises. I thought it might be animals — we have plenty of wild ones out here, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"A body's got to be careful —."

"Please get on with it, Arthur."

My inadvertent command causes him to stand upright, almost to attention. "There's really nothing more to say, Mr. Seymour. I went on to the dormitory, went to bed, went to sleep. Some time around three o'clock, I think it was, I hear a door shut — or what sounds like a door shutting. I don't pay it any mind. Instead, I go back to sleep."

"That's it?"

"That's it — except for this morning."

"This morning? What did you see this morning?"

"I'm coming over for the breakfast shift. It's still quite early, the sun's barely up, and I see this boy — the same one I saw last night with your young lady — in jogging shorts and sneakers."

"Yes, the same boy —."

"He's putting the window aright."

"He's putting the window aright?"

"Yes, that he is. I stop a while, quite out of sight — and when he's finished, he looks around the entrance to the cottage. He then brushes his sneaker across the snow where, I suppose, footprints had been left."

"Footprints had been left?"

"Yes, well, sir, I don't want to say — you know, category-wise — that

I know who left 'em."

"No, Arthur, of course you don't. We can, however, make certain assumptions."

"Yes, sir. Assumptions are what we can make. If you'll now allow me, sir—" he says with what I take to be a clear signal of his desire to leave me to my musings and go about his usual business.

"Of course, Arthur. And please make sure the bacon is crisp."

"Crisp, sir."

When he brings my breakfast several minutes later, neither of us is disposed to continue our earlier conversation. I eat quickly and in silence, eager to get on with the original purpose of my visit to Yosemite. In twenty minutes, I'm done and pushing back my chair at the same time I signal Arthur for the check. I sign it and slip him a five-dollar bill, which he acknowledges with a nod.

"I don't know that we'll be lunching here today, Arthur, but we'll certainly see you this evening for dinner."

"Very good, sir. I wish you happy hunting and a most pleasant sojourn, wherever one or the other might take you today."

"A pleasant sojourn is what I intend, Arthur," I say with a smile. The word itself seems to fit the room's décor.

The first thing I hear a few minutes later as I slip my key into the door of our room is the sound of the shower. I decide to sit and wait to hear what Angie has to say about the previous evening—about her abrupt departure from the dining room; about where she might've spent the hours between midnight and three o'clock in the morning. Perhaps she'll have nothing to say at all. Perhaps, instead, this shower is a kind of ablution—her preparation for self-sacrifice upon the high altar of my forgiveness. I admit I have a certain soft spot for penitence—and I'm eager to hear her full confession.

I don't have long to wait. She exits the bathroom, fully dressed, in a flurry, and drying her hair with a bath towel. I wonder where she gets the energy after so little sleep. No matter. I have in mind to put that youthful energy to good use.

"Sleep well?" I ask.

"Very well, thank you."

"What shall we do today, Angie? Take a hike? Take a drive? Explore the park?" I'm secretly hoping she'll suggest, by word or gesture, that we simply sleep in.

"If it's okay by you, Bruce, I think I'll just hang around the hotel.

You run along and do whatever it is you want to do.”

I make a supreme effort to restrain my anger. This is *not* what I’d intended for the price of a cross-country flight and two nights’ stay in a very expensive—dare I say *romantic*—setting. “Angie, we’re here for a purpose. Time is now of the essence. We’ll be checking out early tomorrow morning and heading back to San Francisco. I told you I had business to conduct—.”

“Yes, I know, Bruce. I’m well aware we’ve scheduled a shoot. But I thought we were in agreement on a sunset shoot. Sunset’s still several hours away.”

“Yes it is, Angie. But a little quality time together might make this seem like less of a chore, more of a holiday. You can’t do much shopping out here in the woods,” I say with what I know is a bit of fashionable snarkiness.

“Shopping is not what I had in mind, Bruce.”

“Then what *did* you have in mind, Angie?”

She leaves off towel-drying her hair and looks up to face me directly. “Carousing. I thought I’d spend the day carousing,” she says trading snarky tit for tat.

“Fine,” I say as I practically jump out of my chair. “Go and carouse. Just be back here at four and in your body stocking. We’ve got only one chance to do this, and today’s the day. If you’re not here at four—ready, willing and waiting—you can find your own way back to San Francisco and New York. And then you can find yourself a new agent.”

“I’ll be here at four.”

I pick up the car keys from the on-duty valet on the way out of the hotel, then locate our car parked between two large mounds of snow, both melting down like a bit of day-old news. From the temperature and a quick look at the bits of sky I can see peeking through the Redwood branches overhead, a fresh snowfall would have to be far down on my list of predictions for the next twenty-four hours. However, I haven’t checked the forecast; I know that storms can spin up out of nowhere and spill suddenly in a microclimate like this one; and I have to admit that my predictions of late haven’t exactly been of the crystal ball variety.

I jump in, start the engine, ease out of the lot. I’ve got a map of the park—but am really in no mood to see the sites. Instead, I spend the next several hours driving in circles, killing time, watching the hands move around my watch towards four, and thinking.

When I return to the hotel just before the appointed hour, there’s still

plenty of light – though it’s an afternoon light, moving inexorably towards dusk. The temperature has also dropped by several degrees, and I make a mental note to check at the front desk for an update on the weather.

As I enter the front door and make my way to reception, I glance in the direction of The Great Lounge. There, seated in front of the fireplace and looking from a distance like two happy mourning doves cooing and pecking and completely oblivious of their surroundings, are Angie and her young man. A quantity of bile rises in my throat as I quickly turn my attention to Meredith at the front desk.

“Mr. Seymour, good afternoon.”

“And the same to you, Meredith,” I manage to squeeze out with a quick smile. “What’s the forecast for this evening?”

Meredith’s eyebrows knit together into one long line of consternation. “I’m afraid there’s a storm on the way. We could have a foot of snow by morning. They’re good about the roads up here, so no need to worry about travel tomorrow. But you may want to stay close to camp this evening.” And then, just as if she has suddenly remembered some instruction from basic training, she lights up, all smiles. “We’ve got plenty of wood for the fire, and the chef has added a few new specials to this evening’s dinner menu. You and Mrs. Seymour won’t want for the comforts of home, Mr. Seymour.”

“Thank you, Meredith. I’m certain that with you at the helm, we won’t. Not for a single one.” I make a mental note to write a letter of commendation to her boss as I pick up a book of matches with the hotel’s name and address embossed on the rear panel.

I turn around and head off towards the elevator, but not without first glancing again in the direction of The Great Lounge. The loveseat in front of the fireplace is empty.

When I arrive at the elevator, I note that it is, at that very instant, stopping at the third floor – time enough, if she hurries, for Angie to get back to our room and change into something more appropriate to *outdoor* recreation before I arrive at the same destination. Up till now, I might’ve hoped to catch her in mid-change. Now, however, I want no surprises to interfere with, or otherwise alter, my plan. I tear all but three of the matches out of the book, drop them into a dustbin next to the elevator, and put the book back into my pocket.

Sure enough, in the time it takes for the elevator to descend to lobby level, pick me and a few other passengers up and deposit us at the second and third floors, I find that Angie has changed into her bodysuit and thrown on a loose-fitting sweater that reaches to mid-thigh. Flushed,

freshly made up, and with a happy face she can have acquired only after years of practice and polish, she greets me like a dear friend.

"Bruce!"

"You're ready?" I ask.

"I am. Couldn't be ever readier even if I were the bunny!"

"Hmm."

"Brucie, why so glum?"

"Not glum, Angie. Just concentrating on this afternoon's plan."

"Well, then, let's execute!"

"I think you might want to put on a few more clothes. It could get cold out there," I add, knowing that she will do exactly the contrary of what I suggest.

"Nonsense! It feels like spring!" she says. And suspecting that she's spent the entire day indoors and at least part of it in front of the fire, I'm sure it does. As she stands up and moves past me towards the door, I catch a whiff of her—an almost overwhelming combination of natural musk and "Come Hither"—her perfume, of course, of choice.

"Angie, you might want to lose the perfume. Sweet smells attract bears, and we don't want to meet any of them on this trail. They'll be coming out of hibernation—hungry and reckless."

"Brucie, don't be ridiculous! There are no bears in this park. At least not *dangerous* ones!"

"I know only what I read, Angie." And with that, I grab a flashlight and my camera, tear off a couple of heads from the dozen roses still standing in a vase next to the bed, and follow her out the door. While we wait for the elevator to arrive, Angie asks—as if she might actually have any real interest in our little project now that it's all about her—how long the trek out to Mirror Lake will take. I tell her an hour—plus or minus. A raised eyebrow tells me she suspects it's more of "plus" than of "minus." I let the suspicion ride.

An hour and several of Angie's exasperated sighs later, I once again see the sign indicating that Mirror Lake is still seven tenths of a mile off. I know from my previous excursion out to the lake that just beyond this point is a wide service road running directly back to the hotel, and I'm now careful to steer Angie away from it and onto a narrow path leading through the woods. It's from here on that I begin to drop rose petals at regular intervals.

Angie stops and turns around at one point just as I drop a petal. "What on *earth*?" she says as she puts her hands on her hips.

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"Just a precaution," I say. "I want to make sure we find our way back to the .7-mile marker." At the same time, I realize her pose is a great "woman in her natural element" kind of thing. "Hold it now," I say as I remove the cover from my lens, then focus and snap.

Angie guffaws. "What are we, Hansel and Gretel? You are *too* much, Brucie!"

"One can never be too careful, Angie." I take a second insurance shot.

"Indeed—!" This single word is as much energy as she's willing to spend on my apparent folly, and I notice she's somewhat winded from the walk. At the same time, it's growing chilly even if the sky is only partially overcast, and I wonder whether she now regrets she didn't take my earlier advice to dress in a way more appropriate to the setting than to her mood. In fact, when we finally arrive at our destination, a few flakes are beginning to fall, and Angie shivers as she squints and looks up at the sky.

"It's just a single raincloud. It'll pass soon enough," I say to reassure her—and the snow does indeed stop almost as quickly as it had started.

I point out the rock to her—just a small leap from where she's now standing. She looks at it as if calculating in her mind whether she can bridge the gap without falling backwards or overshooting and falling headfirst into the water. I assure her she can do it, then remind her of our purpose—her book—and ask her to lose the sweater. She jumps, settles down onto the rock, then eyes me skeptically as she removes her sweater and hands it back to me over our watery divide.

I tie both arms of her sweater around my waist—a warm embrace at last! I think.

While I pretend to be working out angles and backdrops, Angie is perched on the rock—very Little Mermaid-like—and shivering. I take my time. Her occasional shivers turn into a regular tremble. I take more time. I note she's losing all hint of pink in her face. I conjure up new angles; the mountains behind us remain stubbornly as they have for millennia, though their color and hue are turning slowly to monochrome in the fading sunlight.

"Bruce, can't we get started? *Please.*"

"Problem is the light, Angie. We've lost most of the natural light I wanted for these shots. I really hate to have to use a flash. If only we'd started out sooner—." I say this last in the expectation that she'll recognize and acknowledge the fault for where it lies.

"I understand," she says as she drops her head to her chest—as much in contrition, I assume, as in an effort to expose less of her neck to

the cold.

"Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't we build a fire?" I dig down into my pants pocket and withdraw the book of only three matches. "We've got the spark—" I say as I hold up the book, then lay it down a leap away—"now, all we need is some fuel. You and a campfire with this backdrop? Marvelous!" Angie nods slowly in resignation as she registers my placement of the book of matches. "Let me go fetch some wood," I say as I move off into the woods.

Over the course of the next half hour, I'm a diligent wood-gatherer. I'm careful in each instance to head out in a different direction, return by a different route, carry only a log or two each time. I never bring back kindling, but Angie's too self-absorbed or perhaps too cold to notice my omission. I offer comforting words upon each return, tell her it will only be a matter of a few minutes more before we have a blazing fire—just like the one in The Great Lounge. I suspect this reminder gives her some additional warmth—however much warmth a fond memory can give as the thermometer inches inexorably south.

Almost no light remains in the sky, the temperature is certainly below freezing, and the snow has begun to fall once again when I grab the flashlight and prepare to head out one last time. "B-b-b-ruce, can't we p-p-p-lease start the fire?" Angie asks pathetically through trembling lips.

"Of course we can, Angie. Brucie now just has to fetch some kindling. Very difficult, you know, to start a fire without kindling," I say in the most pedantic tone I can muster. "Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find any so far," I lie. "I'll have to go further back into the woods. This may take a while. Just try to stay warm—think warm thoughts."

She nods slowly, dejectedly, and I set out via a circuitous route to find the path that had led us to this spot in the first place. I see the last of the rose petals I'd dropped to mark that path, pick it up and thrust it deep into my pocket. I continue along the same path, bending down occasionally to retrieve rose petals as I walk, right up until my flashlight finds the .7-mile marker. From this point on, I know I won't find any more petals, but they're no longer necessary for me to navigate my return to the hotel. I've made this trek twice. And although I suspect I could find my way back under a full moon, the snow—now falling in ever-thickening sheets—tells me there will be no moon tonight, full or otherwise. Instead, I depend upon my flashlight right up until the point at which the hotel's own exterior lights illuminate my path.