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# The Golden One

by Donald Mace Williams

**Neighbors, fellow church members,** and former co-workers kept dropping by the house to wish them a happy fiftieth. They left casseroles, salads, pecan pies, cookies, or dry orange-and-yellow bouquets from the only florist in Croft. Four of the five children had come, too, plus seven unrestrained grandchildren, whom Howard, risking the resentment of their parents, set down firmly a time or two.

“Those are energetic kids,” he said when he and Suzanne shut their bedroom door for final touches on their packing.

“They do make the house seem fuller,” she said. “Even.” She had reopened her suitcase, and now she knelt beside it on the floor with a sheer, black nightgown held full-length above it. She nodded. It would fit in like that.

“Hey, babe,” Howard said. “What you got there?” His voice, usually hollow and loud, had dropped. He knelt beside her, put an arm around her waist, and half-kissed, half-nuzzled the soft dent beneath her ear. “Seems to me I’ve seen that before.”

“Not for ten or fifteen years, I’m afraid.”

“Still fits, I bet.”

“Maybe. Here and there.”

He got up, steadying himself with a hand on the footboard of their bed and feeling the reflux surge upward from his diaphragm like a rogue hiccup. He was thicker in the middle than he would ever have imagined as a bridegroom of twenty-two, though Suzanne’s orange roughy pestos and skinned chicken breasts had helped him hold his own there for a dozen years or so. He had a red face and a prominent nose, and his thick hands seemed like the spread-out deltas of his arms rather than evolved grasping mechanisms until he did something with them, such as rewiring a fitful lamp or picking silk out of a newly shucked ear of corn, when they moved as deftly as a fly tier’s.

Suzanne was still on her knees, her dark eyes looking up at him—their usual perspective, no matter in what company, because she was so small. She laid the nightgown on top of the neat stacks of clothes in the suitcase and buckled it in. Then, she stood up and reached into her purse on the dressing table. She took something out of a small black box with a snapping lid.

“A beautiful little thing,” she said, holding it up to catch the light from the window.

“Yeah. Genevieve’s doing.” She shook her head, but really, when Howard had told Genevieve, the second youngest daughter, he wanted to get something nice, something gold of course, as an anniversary present for Suzanne, it was she who

had come up with the specifics. Genevieve had phoned him back that same day, full of energy and decisiveness: they would have a golden pin made in the form of a miniature goblet with double handles, to suggest the one in the aria from *Faust* about the king of Thule. (Suzanne, as a senior voice student at Hardin-Simmons, had sung the aria at an audition and won the soprano lead in an amateur production of the opera in Abilene. Her innocent presence, together with her clear, steady little voice, made for a delightful Marguerite, as even Howard, who by then had started dating her, was able to observe from his unprecedented position as operagoer.) And, they would get Travis, the older son, to find the right jewelry maker in Austin, where he lived and had connections among artisans, being, among other things, an artisan himself. Travis had brought the goblet with him when he drove up for the party. "It's really just a, like, goblette," he said.

Howard took it from Suzanne to feel its heft again. "Twenty-four karat," he said. "The jewelry guy told Travis it would be too soft; it could get bent. He wanted to use fourteen-karat, to keep it hard. Alloy. I said the hell with that, you'd be careful with it." He handed it back to her.

"I will," she said. "It's perfect. It's beautiful."

"Well, when you throw it at me, don't miss and hit the wall."

"I'll aim. Have you packed your toothbrush?" She held the little cup against her jacket, looked in the mirror, moved it to the left, nodded, and pinned it there.

Howard wished they could sneak out to the car, the way they had done after the wedding reception. They went back into the living room and spent a half-hour saying hello and goodbye to two or three friends who had come by late. After that, they hugged the children and whichever grandchildren they could grab as they ran through the room. Then, Howard picked up the suitcases and they started for the garage, using the covered passage that Howard, as soon as he retired, had built so Suzanne wouldn't have to dart across part of the front yard in sandstorms and blizzards to get into the garage.

"Help! Help! Help!" The youngest, Kelli, seven years old, being chased by a cousin, pounded through the tunnel, launched herself with pretend-fear at her grandmother, and hugged her so hard for protection that Suzanne gave a little cry.

"Don't break her, hon," Howard said. He put down the suitcases, accepted his own hug, allowed his nose to be pulled, and said, "You come to see us again, hear?" He took the suitcases to the trunk and packed them, pushing his tool kit to one side to make room. As he backed the Subaru out of the garage and the door started lowering, he raised his hand to the knot of progeny on the front porch, who would clear up the kitchen and leave the house locked. Only then did he realize that ever since they got into the car, Suzanne had been uttering dismayed, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" like one of the hand-wringing, big-city Eastern women on the situation comedies. He stopped the car.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

She was tugging at the upper left side of her jacket. In a moment, stretching

across, she held her palm open near the steering wheel so he could see. One of the handles of the goblet was bent toward the back and crumpled inward—a small trauma but instantly disfiguring, the asymmetry arousing repugnance and pity in Howard as if it were a canary with a broken leg.

“For Christ’s sake, how did that...?”

“Kelli. When she hugged me.”

“Oh, damn. Why can’t those kids...We’ll get it fixed, honey. I’m sorry.”

She nodded and gave a hiccuping sob. “It wasn’t her fault. But...”

*But, it damn near ruins everything,* Howard thought. He hit the steering wheel with an open hand.

Three silent blocks to I-20, and they were on the way. He straightened and shook off the gloom. No matter what happened, now it was just the two of them, the way it had been on that day in 1956. He reached across and put his hand on her thigh. Damn these bucket seats, these tyrannical seat belts. Back then, he had pulled her across the smooth seat of the old Chevrolet as soon as they were out of Abilene, where the wedding had been. What a drive that was: 150 miles of quick, hard kissing with one eye on the road, fumbling at her blouse buttons, fighting against going so far that the night would be almost a letdown. He moved his hand now, softly upward, wrinkling the thin dress over her thigh, then down again, and up again, this time lifting the skirt enough to bare a knee and cup his hand over it, then higher yet with the skirt. Disappointment. He remembered how white her skin had been in contrast to the black tops of the stockings and how the black garter button, when lifted, left a rosebud in the soft flesh. That was where delight started, where the flesh puffed up a little in the valley between hosetop



and garter. Panty hose felt about as sexy as shellac. Underneath, though, where his hand moved now, the softness came through: gravity's work. He lifted her leg a little, let it down, lifted it again. She laid her hand on his arm, her fingers stroking him through the slit above the cuff button of his dress shirt.

"Look out, honey!"

He snapped his head around and tapped the brakes to disengage the cruise control. A truck ahead of them had slowed down for a hill. "Got a little close, didn't I?" He was chagrined, he whom, in the past, nothing could distract from attentive driving. They drove a few miles before he put his hand back where it had been. Not as sweet after the interruption. Better watch the road anyway. He put both hands on the wheel.

"Those kids," he said.

"I think they were picking on you."

"I guess. But, you know, they don't mind. I told them at least three times to quit yelling at each other and running through the house. When I finally grabbed a couple of them—Jamie and Rodney—and told them I wasn't kidding, I wanted them to stop that, they said, "Okay, sorry," and it wasn't half a minute before they were at it again. And, Robert sat right there the whole time."

"I know. It's just the way they do now. It's not just him."

"Imagine what would happen if you or I had done that when we were that age."

"We wouldn't have done it twice, would we? But, they'll grow up just fine. Wait and see if they don't."

"I'll try." Howard thought his chances were good. His parents had lived into their nineties. And, after all, he only felt about forty, only looked that old to himself in the mirror. True, the ticket girl at the movies in Abilene gave him the senior discount without asking. And, when he and Suzanne were on vacation to Taos a couple of years ago and he sat holding her white, finely wrinkled little hand across the table at Doc Martin's, the young waiter felt free to ask them with an indulgent smile, "And, just how long have you two been married?"

Howard slapped the steering wheel again, remembering. *Long enough, Buster.* Long enough that sex came along less often. After enough days, watching the Cowboy cheerleaders on TV, whenever the station thought it could show those lithe bellies as just part of the atmosphere and not as anything, God forbid, sexy, made him draw in the bottom of his abdomen in front and wiggle the foot that was crossed over a knee. Sex was still sex, different in degree, all right, and frequency, but not in kind, and, thank God, he had never failed to be ready and able—he couldn't imagine that, not yet. If it came along when he was, say, eighty-five, he would just have to accept it. He had accepted the other effects of age pretty well, he thought: not combing his hair over the bald patch in front, not pulling the smaller grandkids around the yard in the old sled last winter when it snowed during their Christmas

visit but leaving the job to one of his sons, not hanging onto the Oldsmobile that he loved when it started leaking oil and developing underneath rattles, not insisting on climbing the locust tree to get onto the house and clean the gutters. At his last checkup, when his doctor asked him how his sex life was, he said, “No problem. Not like when I was thirty, though.” And the doctor, who was new in town and looked about thirty, nodded as if to say, *well, of course not*.

*How about like when he was twenty-two? It was going to be, by God. This once.*

They had skirted several towns. An Acme van had passed them and been passed by them four times on the downgrades and upgrades as if they were in an evenly matched checker game. The sun behind them wasn’t low enough to make him switch the mirror to anti-reflect. They would hit Fort Worth at rush hour, but the going-in traffic should be light enough to manage. He looked at Suzanne. She was asleep, her gray head rolling a little on the back of the seat. Too bad—she would mess up her hairdo. Thank God she didn’t sleep like the poor old women in the nursing home in Croft, with their mouths wide open as if they had died and flies would be buzzing in and out. He glanced at her again. The skin in front of her ear looked as if she had been lying on a spider web. She was three years younger than he. Think how he must look. With allowances, though, she was still a woman, still desirable under the clothes. He considered slipping a hand beneath her thigh again. No. That would wake her up. Besides, thinking about their ages had got him out of the notion. Tonight would be different. She was going to wear the nightgown. So, she had thought ahead, too.

“Why, we’re pretty near there.” Suzanne had woken up and instantly spotted the skyline of Fort Worth in the distance. Her eyes never needed to adjust to being awake. She was either sound asleep or wide awake. “We’re eating at Cross Keys, I presume?”

He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “Don’t we wish.” It was long out of business, the restaurant where they had had their first meal as a married couple.

“It’s too cold for you, I suppose,” he said. Her thermostat had baffled him for fifty years.

“No, no. Well, a little cool on my knees.”

He slid the temperature control farther toward the red zone. “Now?” Damn it, he could hear irony in the one word.

“Perfect, thank you.” She was looking ahead, sitting straight, her hands clasped in her lap, the politeness of her smile a shade exaggerated.

With a couple of exceptions, stirrings of affectionate exasperation on his part and prim suggestions of righteousness on hers were as near as they had ever come to the incivilities that city people in movies and TV series seemed to exchange on the hour. Even Robert and his wife, Austin residents like Travis, were sure to snap at each other at least once during a visit, even in public. As for Travis, he had never come home with either a female or male friend—he seemed to have about as many of one as the other, and he spoke of all of them in the same carefully offhand

tones. A sweet kid, unwilling to grieve his parents except just by being....But, that was all right. They said guys like that couldn't help it; times had changed. Lord, think of what the kid can do: making scenery for the opera, arranging music for the symphony, figuring out moves for the ballet dancers, painting bear grass and mesquite bushes on fancy cups and plates, never holding a regular job but always getting by and sometimes doing well. Not a one of Howard's kids had asked for help from home since college, though he and Suzanne had sent them small equal amounts now and then when his pension as a retired football coach and algebra teacher the December check from his part of the family cotton farm permitted.

They had three kids in college at once for a while, and one of them, Madeleine, at Stanford, no less. She was a mathematician, on a three-month assignment in Norway, figuring out probabilities for an oil exploration company, so she couldn't come to the party. Howard always felt sorry for her husband, Mike. He was down in San Antonio, taking care of their four kids with the help of a sitter when she went off. He put up with abstinence for so long, no better off in that respect than a convict or a priest. Even at his age, Howard felt like a penned stallion when Suzanne went off to see her sister in Missouri for a week or ten days. He reached over and smoothed the skin over the white knobs of her pulleybone. She took his fingers in hers and brought them up to her lips.

Their hotel had changed hands three times since their wedding night and had recently been restored to look as Victorian as king-size beds and push-button phones permitted. The room rate would have slimmed the billfold of an 1890s cattle baron. Hell, even a tip, now, would have been a night's room rent back then, and every car-parker, door-opener, and luggage-cart-loader had a hand out—not like in Croft, where people did things for you to be friendly or as a matter of good business. Warned by Genevieve, Howard had put two five-dollar bills into a shirt pocket before leaving Croft, but he had to get another from Suzanne on the way upstairs after the bellhop had seized their bags to bring up on an emptier elevator. Howard hated these bought welcomes. It was more pleasant to stay in a motel where you parked outside your door and carried your own luggage. For this, though, he wanted Suzanne to feel nostalgic and spoiled. When the bellhop's smile had dissolved out the door, Howard took her around the waist from behind. She turned her head and tilted her face upward. Surely they had done exactly the same before at exactly the same juncture, and this kiss was unaffected by a half-century of sex inflation. Howard turned her loose lingeringly. They would go to dinner first. They had done that before, when he knew she was scared.

Howard called a cab. That was what they had done back then, expense be damned.

"Nice night to be steppin' out," the driver said over his shoulder.

"We're looking forward to it," Howard said.

He saw the driver's bloodshot eyes glance at them in the mirror. "You guys been married a few years, huh?"

There it was again. "A few," Howard said.

The restaurant: hushed guidance to their table, then the menu. “I don’t see shrimp scampi,” Howard said. She laughed. That was what he had ordered on that first night, but Suzanne cleared her throat and shook her head. “Have this,” she had said, pointing. The beef Stroganoff. Mystified, he had changed, and it was only when the waiter had left that she explained, almost whispering: “Garlic.”

“They’d probably make it special for you,” she said now.

“Oh, I guess not.” He took her hand, rubbed the top of it softly, and felt a stirring between his legs. Amazing that this part of a hand could contain so much womanhood.

Their waiter, a tall young fellow with an acne-scarred face, practically clicked his heels and bowed as he asked if they had questions about the menu.

“Yeah,” Howard said, jovially. “How did you make it all look handwritten?”

“I wouldn’t know, sir,” the waiter said to the air beneath his nose.

“You wouldn’t, huh? What would ...?” He caught the stop sign in Suzanne’s eyes. “Never mind.” He would have loved to grab the kid and shake him.

When the food came, it was as pretty as it could be: the guinea hen cutlets laid out like daisy petals with a molded yellow center which, since Howard could account for nearly everything else on his plate, must be the polenta.

A sheaflet of snow peas suggested an eccentric calyx, and three little mounds of lingonberries, caramelized baby onions, and what Suzanne identified as a tapenade could have been taken as companion blossoms. Or buds. “Must have been cooked by a sculptor,” Howard said.

“A minimalist sculptor,” Suzanne said sympathetically. It did taste good, such as there was of it, but Howard was almost afraid to chew; everything was so fancy.

On the way back to the hotel, he undid his seat belt and slid across, relieved to be alone with her and out of that oppressive restaurant. He pulled her to him, gently at first and then, remembering that the pin was gone now, hard enough that she gasped. He kissed her. Nothing. The day’s experiences swaddled him darkly, suffocatingly—the fake smiles, the contemptuous waiter, the prissy food, and, most of all, the damaged goblet. He kissed her again and twice more: lips of chamois skin, lips of some old aunt from his childhood. *It’s not her*, he thought, *it’s me*. He moved away but kept a hand between her shoulder blades. That was the way: companionability. Hell, that was all that was left.

In their room, he stepped to her side and held out a hand. “Oh...” she said, as if it didn’t matter, yet, it struck him, knowing instantly what he wanted. She took the goblet out of her purse. Holding it so as to catch the dim overhead light, he assessed the damage.

“Damn,” he said, turning away, his eyes damp. “I should have told them fourteen karat. Should have been a damn realist.” He held the goblet out behind him. As she took it, she touched his hand lightly to show sympathy but not make a big deal of it.

“We’ll take it to a jeweler first thing tomorrow,” he said.

Bed. He had anticipated anticipation. None. Shaving in the shower, he had been able to think of bed only as rest. That, he did anticipate. Weariness and defeat dragged at his cells, billions of micrograms of cooperative gravity. In bed, waiting, he almost dropped off, but then Suzanne came out of the bathroom wearing the black nightgown. He had forgotten, and he felt a stir—of gratitude, cool appreciation, and love. He pulled her to him as soon as she was in bed, and one hand smoothed the gentle topography at the back of her gown. “Hey, doll,” he said. “You’re something else, did you know?” But, their kisses were boy-and-aunt again, and when he slipped the thin strap of the nightgown down one shoulder and then the other and followed the contours of her breasts with a big palm, then worked the gown downward and stroked her bared middle to the navel and below, all was rote and nonproductive of the needed response in him. After a few minutes, he patted her cheek, shook his head, muttered, “I love you,” and, too tired even for despair, feeling only a glum disappointment, turned over and fell asleep.

Ten forty-five, the luminous dial of his watch said. The hour of sleep had helped. He heard Suzanne exhaling in free-fall. Good. He slipped the sheet back and rolled gradually out of bed. He took his robe off the back of a chair and started to put it on. No, that wouldn’t do. Stepping across the room barefooted, he pushed the knob of the closet door slowly inward to avoid metal-on-metal noises, then jerked the door toward him, too fast for it to squeak. He found his pants by feeling for the belt and his shoes by reaching down blindly to where he remembered leaving them. To hell with socks—zipping open the suitcase would be too noisy. But, he fished yesterday’s shirt out of the laundry bag and put it on.

The key. Where would he have left it? Oh, yes, one of those plastic things. He fumbled slowly among pocket-emptyings on the night stand, found it, remembered he had to have the car keys, found them, lifted them like a mouse cheating a trap, and stood for a moment, breathing through his mouth for silence as he pondered. Yes. He would get the other when he came back; no sense in carrying it and maybe getting mugged here in the city. He stepped to the door, undid the chain, slipped out, and shut the door behind him.

It took three minutes of riding the elevator up and down before he found an exit to the garage. It put him on the second floor. No telling where his car was. He started walking and swinging his head from side to side as he searched. Three levels later—or was it four?—he stopped to rest, panting. Where the hell had that smirking kid hidden it? Two more levels and it turned up, a small blue Subaru, almost lost between a Cadillac and a BMW 700. He beeped open the trunk and bent to reach inside.

“Anything I can help you with, sir?” More challenge than helpfulness in the voice. A security cop, plump and sixtyish, flashlight in hand.

Howard straightened up. “No, thanks. Just need something out of my toolbox.”

“Sir, we prefer that you have our valet service bring your car down to you.”

“Well, I prefer to save the tip.” Howard laughed, sourly. The officer smiled for a second but asked for his ID, was grudgingly satisfied with the room key, and stood about, undecided, before saying good night and clumping off into the gloom.

Howard fished two small pairs of pliers and some extra-fine sandpaper out of the box, closed the trunk, walked thankfully to the exit, took the elevator back to the fourth floor, and stole into the room. Good. She was still sleep-breathing. He took her purse into the bathroom, and under the light, after considerable digging, found the box with the pin in it. Padding the delicate jaws of the pliers with his handkerchief, he used only enough strength to feel the soft metal faintly give once, twice, and again. Then, gently, almost erotically, he sanded the handle, squinting at it first under and then against the light until he could not find a trace of a golden scratch.

Back in their room, he put the purse on Suzanne’s bedside table with the pin in it. She had turned onto her back and thrown off the cover, and by the brown light coming through the curtain he saw that her breasts were flattened against her chest, one nipple sweetly exposed where a strap of the black gown had slipped. He caught his breath, impelled to bend and kiss her there.

Instead, he turned his wrist and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. Twelve-ten. Too late for anything to be official. They’d both be rested in the morning, anyway. “That which we are, we are”—when he had learned the line in high school, it was the determination in it, and not the resignation, that had impressed him. Now resignation, acceptance, seemed like the whole thing. In the morning, after love, after breakfast, he would buy some jeweler’s rouge and put the last restorative touch on the little handle. It would look like new. Still, he would never get twenty-four karat again. It wasn’t the fifties anymore.

