

LOOSED

BY CELESTE
MOHAMMED

WINNER OF THE
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL
PRIZE FOR FICTION

"That's what you're wearing?" Ruth asked.

Declan had known his wife would be watching, in her dressing-table mirror, as he left the bathroom. Watching, waiting to criticise. He'd known. And yet he went ahead anyway. He chose a pair of faded jeans and a green "Stag" t-shirt with the slogan - "A Man's Beer" - in fat, white print. It was his opening salvo.

"What wrong with this?" He avoided Ruth's eyes as he sank to the bed and began pulling on his loafers.

"Declan, it's a church service. What will Bishop and the elders think?"

Left shoe on.

"Well, ain't the Bible say, 'Render your heart and not your garment'?"

Right shoe on.

"No, that's not what it..."

Declan sprang up. "Listen, my clothes wouldn't matter to Christ. Only to fake-ass Christians." He glared at the mirror, where their images were frozen. "So let's see which kind we dealing with tonight."

Today was their wedding anniversary. Ruth had asked him to go with her to Night Service at The Pleasantview First Holiness Revival Church, a Pentecostal circus just like the one his grandma used to drag him to as a boy. Ruth had invited Declan many times before. He'd refused every time. But today, Declan had to go.

Going to church together was what decent couples did to mark fifth anniversaries. It was expected. To not go tonight would be an outright announcement, to everyone in Pleasantview, that he and Ruth weren't the upstanding school-teacher-couple they appeared to be. He and Ruth had been the first in their families to earn degrees: he, Chemistry; she, English. They'd been the first in their families to get married - not like his sister, Judith, who'd shacked up with her children-father for seven years until he left her for a white woman in America. They'd been the first to move out of the area - even if it was just across the traffic-lights, to Hibiscus Park. Every time they went back to Pleasantview to visit family, it was as if a people in the dark saw a great

light. "Morning Miss, Morning Sir," – everyone greeted them by their school-teacher titles. But it was hard being a shining example. It meant Declan could only fool-around with his outside-chick, Trudy, up in the East, near her house, where no one knew him. And, every so often, it demanded some sacrifice. Like tonight.

"You know, Bishop predicted you would behave so," Ruth said, lowering her gaze and resuming whatever it was she did these days at her dressing-table.

Declan stared at the reflection of his wife's face. A forty-two-year-old woman who no longer wore make-up, perfume, or jewelry. All those little, tell-tale signs of effort; they signalled to a man that his woman still craved him. But to Ruth's church, they signaled the sin of "vanity". Tonight Declan would show those damn church-people how little he thought of them and their brainwashing his wife. They weren't even worth a pair of slacks and a dress-shirt. And he would expose them to Ruth. He would use this opportunity to finally make her see: these "saints" were just sinners in sheep's clothing. She didn't have to follow them.

A few years ago - back when her name was still Michelle – this business of getting dressed would've gone so differently. Declan would've gotten ready first, then rushed into the living room to wait. He would've been watching TV half-heartedly, eager to see her emerge from their bedroom, to see what she'd done this time. What dress? What hairstyle? What colour lipstick? What shoe—the slutty platforms that made her taller than him, or the black, strappy ones that looked like lingerie? His pulse would've matched the rhythm of her heels down the corridor. When she finally appeared in the living room, though, he would've played it cool, dragging his eyes from the TV. Then she would've asked casually, "You ready, Deck?" He would've smiled and nodded with his reply, "Not as ready as you, babes."

Back in those Michelle-days, before she'd actually gone and had her name changed because it had the word "hell" in it, Declan was never sure whether he wanted to parade his wife around or lock her up – she was so friggin' sexy!

Now, he dropped his eyes from the mirror and walked over to

the dresser for cologne. Ruth held the bottle out, as if she was doing him some great favour. He took it, making sure not to touch her hand. He wished he could, though, and wished that, by that one touch, he could exorcise Ruth completely from Michelle's body. Then he would truly have something to praise God about. Then he would gladly go to Church, hold her hand the whole time and take her to dinner afterwards. A fancy knife-and-fork dinner, just like old times.

But all that was over now. Official functions and family events aside, he and Ruth hadn't hung out together in what? Years: two, three, maybe? People called Declan "understanding": he'd allowed Ruth to pursue her "path" even though he "believed differently". The truth was Declan had been betting, all along, that Ruth's faith was unsustainable – an experimental flash of fire, like that trick he did in the lab: potassium permanganate and glycerin. Poof! Over.

Yet she'd persisted. And, with time, an uninvited blackness, like mold, over-ran his hope. This might not be a passing phase. This might be a transmutation. His wife, Michelle, might be permanently gone. In her place, a bible-thumping freak named "Ruth", loyal convert of Bishop Roystone T. Scantlebury. Declan had sensed himself growing desperate lately, as this fifth anniversary approached. He hadn't known what to do about it, right up until fifteen minutes ago when he was in the shower. That's when he decided tonight was the night. He would bring Michelle back – shock her, talk sense into her, ridicule her – he'd do something, tonight.

"Why you have to be such a damn groupie all the time?" Declan snarled at Ruth. "Who cares what Bishop predicted? Ain't we agree I could wear anything I want?"

"Yes, but I didn't expect something so...demonic," Ruth replied, stabbing another pin into the coil of hair at her neck. She seemed to close her eyes and gasp – just for a nanosecond – at each stab, like it was some kind of medieval penance. Sick! This was why he needed Trudy: a normal, sane woman to balance off this madness. He let out a long, juicy steups and left the bedroom.

Passing through the living-room, he had a wicked thought that

made him squint at the CDs stacked next to his stereo. Ah! There: "Dancehall Ditty Mix". A CD he'd bought on a whim, about a year ago, at the Pleasantview traffic-lights, from that tall, scraggly boy, Silence. Declan had listened to it scornfully at first, had endured the merciless bass, the cussing, the crudeness: punani this, cocky that, ride-ride-ride, fuck-fuck-fuck. It wasn't really his thing: he was a sophisticated man; a jazz-and-R&B kind of guy. He kept listening to this CD, though, because at the time, he'd felt like he needed to. All over Pleasantview, young fellas were in their cars pounding out these styles; and in clubs, pushing up on girls to these beats; and in their tiny bedrooms, stinky with sweat, sports, semen and never-washed sheets, banging girls to these rhythms. Declan used to be one of those invincible boys. But at forty-three, the way his life was going with Ruth, he'd felt he needed to borrow some of that fire, to remember what it was like to be ablaze.

The CD had stayed in Declan's car for about a month, became the soundtrack of his drives to and from school. The "fucks" stopped grating and he learned the other lyrics without even trying. Then one afternoon, Trudy, the much-younger-History-teacher-with-no-man, had car trouble so he offered her a ride. The music came on full blast and she looked at him like he was a pervert, like she was ready to report him to the Principal. Declan had fumbled with the volume knob and eject button. "Sorry, sorry," he'd blubbered, tempted to crack the disc in two. But then Trudy had smiled in a pouty way and said, "You're very versatile, *Mister Rochard*." It was a dare: you're old, but are you cold?

Declan plucked the disc from the shelf and headed to the car to wait for his wife. So, he was "demonic"? Fine then. He would go to Night Service with Ruth but, on the way, he'd teach her what demonic really sounded like. Fuck her, fuck the Bishop, fuck the elders.

They pulled up to the Pleasantview traffic lights and the same Silence was there – selling mangoes this time. Declan raised the volume on the CD player, honked and waved at the boy like they were old friends. All for Ruth's benefit. To show how unaffected he was by her pinched face. Silence was just about to run across to them with a bag of fruit when the light changed and Declan sped off. Ruth reached down,

lowered the music.

For spite, Declan drove badly. He sang and worked the pedals to make the car dance. When Track 5 began, he swiveled the volume knob and sang louder, “*Gyal, skin out! Say if you know you can take the wuk. Gyal skin out!*” He kept slicing his eyes at Ruth. Skin out? Did she even remember how to? She walked around like a rusty clothespin, like she couldn’t open her legs even if she tried. What did she expect him to do? He was a normal, hot-blooded, Trini-man. It was *she* who’d stopped sleeping with him.

Declan remembered the exact day. Two years ago, at a time when things weren’t yet so bad between them, Ruth had barged through the door one Sunday after church. “Bedroom. Now!” she’d ordered as she kicked off her shoes and ran upstairs. He’d left the TV and followed, taking the steps two-by-two, thinking the worst: another round of bleeding, clots, loss, grief. A grief that made the house seem too small, that pushed them into opposite dark corners.

“What? W’ happen?” he asked breathlessly, lunging into the bedroom.

Ruth was stripping like her clothes were full of red ants. She explained between pulls and tugs, “Healing service today. Bishop laid hands on me, Deck. He say before the anointing leave my body, we should try again. You drink beers today?”

“No. But you believe that old-talk, girl?”

“Good, then you ain’t defile yourself. Come on, I ready.” Ruth was now naked. She climbed onto the bed and lay with her legs and arms spread wide, curly hair fanning out. Like da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, Declan thought. Like she was submitting herself in the service of science. It wasn’t sexy. But he tried anyway. And failed. Who wouldn’t? Which man alive could stay hard if he knew his woman didn’t really want him, that she was thinking about another man? There Declan was, trying to pelt waist; and there she was, whispering, “Jesus... Oh Jesus... Come, Lord Jesus.” Ruth seemed to hate Declan more after that failure. It was as if he’d lost all usefulness to her. She’d moved into the spare bedroom that same evening.

Hurt afresh by the memory, Declan mashed the accelerator and swung the volume dial almost to its highest. Ruth turned it back down again. He swung it back up.

“Declan,” she said, “please stop. Please. Can’t you just put everything aside, just for tonight? It’s our anniversary. Can’t you just do this for me? Please?”

It was the “for me” that got Declan. That and her voice cracking. He still loved her – well not this version, not Ruth. He loved Michelle. God, how he missed her! The last time Declan had seen her was on Carnival Tuesday three years ago. As usual, they’d played mas in the band, Harts. They liked to play in the same section, but pretend they weren’t together. Carnival was a time to be free: he could wine-up on any woman; she could grind-up on any man. Of course, it was difficult for Declan to watch his wife in her costume – for all its sequins and feathers it was really just a bra, thong and stockings – and just surrender her luscious, bouncy ass to all mankind. But to see her flailing, cheeks red from sun and rum, hips gyrating, eyes closed in the ecstasy of soca music; and to watch other men watching her, jockeying to be the one who got closest, the one who got to wine on her– it made Declan feel other things. Good things. He was the one who’d be taking her home and he was the one who’d be making love to her that night and every night.

Except that three years ago, on Carnival Tuesday night, she left him for Jesus.

Since then, Declan passed his days in a tug-o-war between the looming suspicion Michelle was gone forever and the tiny hope she was still alive, somewhere, buried inside this holier-than-thou Ruth. That all he needed to do was dig Michelle out. Most days, Declan just ignored his wife and waited for deliverance to come from somewhere, other days he reasoned that the right remark – sharp and cutting - would free her. But there were still other times, like now, when his wife spoke to him in this way – “please...for me...” - with this humility, Declan couldn’t bring himself to keep up the nastiness. It sounded so much like an apology, like she knew she was the one encroaching, like she was asking him to just bear with her a little while longer.

He switched the music off. An onerous silence took its place.

Just as it had that Carnival Tuesday night in the car, on the way home. Michelle had been so quiet that Declan had reached over and squeezed her thigh. She began to sob that she “just couldn’t do it anymore”; she’d been “pretending to have a good time”; but she “would never play mas again.” All the way home, she sobbed and babbled while Declan tried to figure out what she meant. After a long bath – so long he’d knocked twice to see if she was still alive – Michelle had emerged into their living room, her long curly hair slicked back, her eyes bloodshot.

She sank onto the couch next to him and held his hand. She confessed that she had, since the last “bleeding episode”, been studying the Word with Yolande and Ottley, who lived two doors down in Townhouse 4. When? On evenings while Declan played football. They’d invited her to Church and she’d gone. When? A couple of weeks ago, while he was at that weekend retreat with his students. She’d felt something move inside her during the service but she’d held back. Why? Carnival was coming and she knew how much Declan was looking forward to it and that he’d already paid for their costumes. She’d chosen to ignore God’s call – she’d done it for Declan. But she couldn’t live that empty life anymore. She’d made up her mind to get saved.

There were so many cars Declan had to park down the street. It was the second night of a seven-day crusade and a huge, red-and-white, Ringling Brothers-style tent occupied the church parking lot.

“Oh look, a circus!” Declan said as they left the car, unable to resist throwing just a little *picong* at Ruth.

She stuck her nose even higher in the air. As soon as her feet touched the gravel car park, she crunched toward a group of old ladies lurking, in a huddle, at the side of the stage. All fat, they wore white robes with belts of golden braid that made their stomachs look pregnant. Declan guessed they were part of the choir. They embraced Ruth, two by two, rocking her back and forth, side to side, patting her back as if she were a baby they were trying to belch. When was the last time she’d hugged him, her husband? Then he watched them turn like

synchronized swimming whales, to scowl at him. What had she told them? What sad story was she telling them now? About his clothes? The music? Poor, poor Ruth; married to that terrible, terrible Declan. He smiled and waved as if he hadn't registered the bad vibes.

In truth, now that Declan was actually here, he did feel awkward in his STAG t-shirt. Like a child wearing a superhero costume to a wedding – then regretting it. Everyone seemed to be pointing at him. “Awww...a soul in need,” their faces seemed to say.

Looking around, though, he saw so much to criticize. The place was shabby, as if the great Bishop had spent all the tithes-and-offerings on the Audi parked outside. Imagine: Ruth gave that joker ten percent of her monthly salary, instead of helping with the mortgage Declan was now carrying alone, like a friggin' cross. A few feet away, under the glare of some dodgy fluorescent lights, two youths in shirt-and-tie wrestled with rusty folding chairs. Another boy stood with a broom, sweeping the bulbs, trying to coax them to light from end to end. A few decades ago, that might've been Declan. In the Jumping-Jesus church just like this one where his grandma worshipped. There was always one in Pleasantview – taking poor people's money to fatten the pastor, giving false hope in return. Where was the pastor and all that money when Declan's grandpa died? When his grandma, in her sixties, had to start scrubbing shit off other people's drawers to survive? When, on the worst days of Mummy's arthritis, Declan and his sister, Judith, had to battle the brown stains themselves?

Declan's jaw tightened with rage and shame. He had to look away from the boy. At the front of the tent, a small, plywood stage had been erected, made smaller by a massive, carved podium. Gargoyles gorging on grapes, it seemed – but it could just as well have been angels. Who knew with these superstitious freaks?

Ruth's voice came from behind, startling Declan, “Bishop says they have seats for us in front. Come, nah.”

He considered pointing out that she was breaking the deal they'd made. They were supposed to hang near the back, where he could slip out now and then when he needed fresh air, or when he couldn't stand any more of the spiritual somersaults and vampire-slaying. But Ruth

stood before him chewing her cuticles. Declan felt afresh that pinch of regret about the t-shirt and the music in the car. He followed her to the front row.

Declan made it through the Scripture Reading and Opening Prayer. He even maintained his smile when Bishop Scantlebury reminded everyone of the night's theme: "Saving Marriages, One Soul at A Time." Declan glanced around and noticed the male-female-male-female seating configuration: the audience was composed almost exclusively of couples. He grunted and locked his arms across his chest, debating whether to feel tricked. Ruth had made it sound like an ordinary Night Service, like they were just coming to pray; she hadn't mentioned the sermon would be focused on marriage. But then again, Declan considered, this was appropriate for a couple celebrating their fifth anniversary. And by now, Ruth surely knew better than to think she could convert him. What she didn't know, Declan smirked inwardly, was that he was intent on her re-conversion – back to Michelle – tonight.

He began his crusade by whispering in Ruth's ear.

"So, how much you think that Audi cost? *Papayo!* That's a fancy suit Bishop wearing. What colour that is, girl? Pimpish-purple? Any young girls pregnant for him yet?"

Over and over, getting nastier and nastier, Declan peppered Ruth for almost an hour, and still she ignored him. She was unbreakable.

She even became jubilant during Praise-and-Worship - jumping, waving, prancing – and it wasn't an act, something she was doing just to annoy him. When they sang, "Roll, Jordan, Roll" the woman was practically rolling her waist! Declan hadn't seen her so animated since that last Carnival Tuesday. A whirring, unsettling sensation started inside him, as if he was in a centrifuge and all self-control was dropping to his stomach and something volatile was rising up his chest. He felt light-headed. Maybe it was the crowd – being packed in, shoulder to shoulder, like that; he'd always been a little claustrophobic.

Declan stopped reading the song-lyrics off the projector screen. He didn't sway and lift his hands like everyone else. He just stood there,

fingers interwoven behind his back, gnawing the inside of his cheek, feeling seasick as he watched Ruth dance. But he couldn't look away. If only she would stop moving. If only she wouldn't glow so much. If only she didn't seem so relaxed.

He grabbed her underarm and reeled her in. "This is what you does come here for? To wine like you in a fête?"

Ruth wrenched herself away, continued rejoicing. Somewhere between "Shout to the Lord" and "Make a Joyful Noise" it hit Declan that he'd always known this but had never wanted to actually see it and have his suspicions confirmed: Ruth was different with these people than she was at home; she was happy. She'd taken something that was once his and given it to these strangers. It was the worst betrayal he'd ever known. He'd tried to even the scales – Trudy – but that had never made him as happy as Ruth was now. So Declan stood there, in Church, watching his wife dance, and hating her just a little bit.

The Testimonies started and they could finally sit. Over a crackling, wheezing sound-system people droned on about how the Lord had changed their lives for the better. They seemed, to Declan, eager to prove some kind of scientific correlation between how sinful they were in the past and how much Jesus loved them now. Sex, drugs, booze, kleptomania – gripping stuff! There was the man who testified he was a born-and-raised Hindu but his life changed the day he'd come, as a visitor to this Church, and heard the story of "The Portugal Son." So stupid. Then, the gorgeous dougla lady who claimed she was a former prostitute but, even in those days, between jobs, she studied "The Book of Palms." So dumb.

The testimonies convinced Declan that nobody in this blasted tent was better than him. Yes, he had Trudy, but he'd never been as depraved as any of these losers. He was a good, educated, respectable man.

Nudging Ruth's ribs, he murmured, "You see? You call me a demon for wearing a t-shirt and playing a CD. But I never yet do anything like these people, your so-called friends."

Ruth answered from the side of her mouth, not taking her eyes off the stage. "At least they're not hiding anything."

"I not hiding anything."

"Oh really? Then prove it. Why you don't go up?" she shout-whispered in his ear. It had suddenly become noisy as, next to them, Sister Yolande was prattling in tongues. It took Declan a moment to realise Ruth was referring to the Altar Call the Bishop had just made, for any spouse who wished to be "born again".

"Look, girl, don't be stupid," he said, before turning his back to Ruth. Facing the open side of the tent, a cool night breeze reached him. He leveled his arm on the back of the chair, propped his head and closed his eyes.

An ear-splitting squeal came from the speaker-boxes. Declan jerked upright and stuck his fingers deep into his ears. He turned around just in time to see Bishop Scantlebury – his jerry-curly hair shone like mercury – descending the three stairs from the stage. Actually, the Bishop hopped. He lingered on the first tread to do a little shimmy, grimacing until his unibrow convulsed like a worm in a beaker of acid.

Declan unplugged his ears. Bishop Scantlebury switched between groaning and shouting into the mike. Declan noticed he worked with a formula: gargling the words, like Listerine, before spitting them out so hard every line ended in the same phonetic syllable.

"...And Gahd said to me-ah,
He said 'Roystone-ah,
I'm about to give you a word-ah,
For a special woman here tonight-ah."

There, Bishop paused, giving the congregation time to cheer. Some clapped, some stamped, some swayed.

Bishop hopped down to the middle step and continued. "This word is for a woman unevenly yoked, tied to a man who don't know Jesus. Sister, no matter what you do, your man just won't believe. You know why?"

"Why?" came the high-pitched response. All the women in the audience were yelling in unison but, seated next to Ruth, Declan heard only her plaintive voice. He stole a glimpse at her. She sat transfixed, gaping at the Bishop, unblinking, as tears boiled over onto her

reddened cheeks. She was thinking about them, wasn't she? Her face, her tears – just like that awful evening, that last time, when he'd come home from work and followed the streaks of blood to find her on the toilet crying. He'd known right away she'd lost another one. And now, just as then, Declan's forearm twitched with the urge to pull out his kerchief and wipe her face, but he was afraid to touch her.

The Bishop was now on the last stair. "See, your husband is a man afflicted. Blame the Devil, sister! Don't you blame your man! For, no matter his faults, the Bible says he is still the head of your household."

"Amen! Amen!" the baritone voices took over. Declan was silent. He hadn't acted like the head of anything when he'd remained at the bathroom door and said to his weeping wife, "Come on, we'll get through this one too," before hustling out to their bedroom and turning the knob, locking her out.

As if she was sharing in the memory, Ruth turned to Declan. His impulse was to break the stare but he found he couldn't. They hadn't looked, really looked, at each other in ages. He was surprised to see no disdain or judgment in his wife's eyes – only a skewed silhouette of himself stretched over her dark pupils. He stared past it, as if down a tunnel, searching for Michelle. And he thought he glimpsed her – her love at least – she was still there, hovering, misty. What was *she* reading in *his* eyes? Love, shame, the truth he couldn't say: how he'd left her in the bathroom because he'd felt his body folding in on itself like a broken umbrella and how he'd ended up in a heap on the bedroom floor crying because four lost babies was just too much and he had no more words to comfort her – or himself.

Declan was afraid to breathe. The movement of his chest might interrupt whatever it was taking place between him and his long-lost Michelle. Was this the moment she'd come back?

Then, Bishop made landfall. He bellowed into the microphone, "Gahd says, 'Woma-a-an!

Thou art loosed-ah!

I will finish the good work-ah

I have begun in you-ah!

And tonight-ah,

And forever more-ah,
I will loose your man!”

Ruth ripped her eyes from Declan’s as she launched from the chair, bawling openly now. She waved both arms at the Bishop as if he were a rescue plane.

Declan jumped up as well, a reflex. For the past three years they’d been castaways on opposite sides of the same empty island; but now, now that they’d finally made contact, he could not let her leave. Not again. He wanted to shout, “Michelle! Look at me! Me! Not Scantlebury! We don’t need him.” But Declan stood foolishly, arms dangling when he knew they should be reaching.

Garbled instructions were being yelled over the mike and Declan lost sight of the Bishop. The open space between the front row and the stage grew dark with jostling bodies. For a moment, the crowd seemed to swallow Ruth, but then she burst through and flung her arms around Declan, stapling their bodies together.

The circle contracted and, it seemed, a thousand hands fell upon Declan. Thud after thud shook his back. He wriggled, but couldn’t free himself. The centrifuge started spinning again. He heard nothing but a constant roar, saw nothing but shadows. Then, Bishop Scantlebury’s face appeared. Ruth let go but the Bishop’s abysmal glare held Declan in place. Bishop planted a palm on Declan’s forehead and gave a mighty push. Or did he? Declan felt himself falling backwards with no time to panic. He felt himself pass through arms, chairs, legs and reams of memories. All he knew when he hit the ground was that his wife was now on top of him. He was back in her arms.

Declan slowly came to. Above, one face: Michelle. He lay still and smiled at his love, his eyes finding their focus. She kissed his forehead. Where was he? Had he fallen asleep on the carpet in front of the TV? When she said, “Praise God,” Declan sat up as if released by a spring. It was slow and fast at the same time: the remembering; the feeling of having his insides scalped out, of losing Michelle again. And there was Ruth, stroking his face and saying, “It’s ok, babe. You were slain in the

Spirit, praise God.”

Grief, hot and red, pulsed through Declan. He wanted to cry. He wanted to howl. He wanted to rip his clothes. He tried to stand. Yolande and Ottley rushed to help, cooing and lifting him by the underarms like a newborn. Declan shoved them away, handed Ruth the car-keys and hobbled out of the tent.

The CD player remained off. Ruth was driving. Her voice filled the car as she tinkle-tinkled like an over-wound music box. A ballerina whirling to her own distorted melody. She was deliriously happy.

Declan sat in the passenger seat. Taut – and still tightening - like a guitar string before it pops. His mind strumming one chord, the same chord: apology, apology. She owed him an apology. For tricking him into attending the service, for having the pastor and her friends ambush him, for them crowding him till he couldn’t breathe, or hitting him on his head – or whatever they’d done to get him on the floor like a blasted fool. For the past three years. For everything.

“So what did you see?” Ruth asked, reaching across to squeeze his hand.

“What?”

“When you were out? What did the Holy Spirit show you? The apostle John saw the whole of the Book of Revelation. There’s no shame in it, you can tell me.”

Declan withdrew his hand, gripped his knee.

“But some people don’t,” she continued. “It doesn’t really matter. What matters is that tonight, you received Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. When you were on the floor and I was holding you and Bishop asked, I heard you say yes. Things will be different for us now, Deck. You’re a new man now.”

The high green walls and electronic gate of Hibiscus Park came into view, about fifty feet ahead. Ordinarily, Declan would’ve picked up the gate remote by now. Forty feet. He would’ve pressed it by now. Thirty feet. But this time, he said, “Stop, stop, stop.”

Ruth mashed down on the brakes, looking worried.

“Pull over and park.”

She did, then leaned in. "You want to throw up? That happens to some people after..."

Stabbing the switch for the overhead lights, Declan said, "At first, I really thought this was a phase, you know, Michelle."

At the sound of her old name, she recoiled into her seat.

"Yeah, for this conversation, you're Michelle— you can go back to being whoever you want after." Declan felt like he was sitting on top of something huge and powerful, gripping its reins, trying to restrain it before it trampled them both into the mud.

"I thought it was all about that last...loss...after we were trying so hard. Maybe you thought God was punishing you? Or maybe you thought you should pray harder? I didn't know for sure, but—"

"Did you ever ask?"

"Michelle, I ask you all the time why you're hiding in that Church!"

"No, did you ever ask me how I felt about what happened?"

"Well, I could see you were sad. That's natural. But, each time you got over it, went back to normal. I figured that last time would be the same. That's why I thought - "

"You blamed me, ain't? You decided something was wrong with me. You resented me," she said, voice quivering.

"Come on!" he urged through gritted teeth. He didn't want to answer that question, to put himself in the wrong. Not when he still had steam to vent.

"Sure," she said, her features curdling, "that's what you said last time. When I was on the toilet bleeding and crying my guts out? You said it, 'Come on,' like I was being melodramatic. Then you just left me."

Declan made a steeple with his fingers, pleading, "Michelle, you know I was disappointed too. I just meant we could try again."

"We did. Remember? At least I did." She looked past Declan; as if there was something out there behind him. Declan had to stop himself from glancing over his shoulder. "But anyway," she continued, "God knew what he was doing. You weren't ready to be a father; you could barely be a husband."

Declan grabbed the hand-brake. She was right but he didn't want

to hear it out loud; from her, all he wanted to hear was sorry. With his thumb, he began a secret, manic clicking of the engage button. "Oh! Is so? Well, tonight your precious know-it-all Bishop said plenty 'bout being a proper wife. When last you behaved like that? When last you had sex with me?"

"When last you had sex with someone else? That is the question!" She flung the car door open and got out. She stood there for a few seconds, in the middle of the road, as if trying to decide what to do next. Then she headed for the pavement. As she rounded the front of the car, Declan leapt out and blocked her path.

He put his hands on her shoulders. She tried to shrug them off. Declan wouldn't let her. They began to struggle. Right there, under the street lamp, in the shadow of the mint green walls of Hibiscus Park, mere feet from their own gate. They wrestled and clawed at each other. Neither spoke, but intermittent, breathy grunts escaped them as she pushed and he pulled. He got hold of her wrists and clamped them behind her back. She was writhing and slippery, she tried to bite him – his chest – but then Declan felt her give up and go limp.

Cautiously, he let her go. She looked chastened, her expression softer than in the car, her eyes milky. She shifted, her fingers landing like a butterfly on Declan's cheek as she said, "All this confusion – let's put it behind us now, Deck. Tonight changed everything. We should go inside and...be together. Whatever was wrong with you down there – it's healed."

Declan's hand shot out. He slapped his wife with a force that flung them apart: her against the bonnet of the car, him against the green wall. Declan's eyes searched the pavement in a panic, as if it wasn't he who'd done it; as if it was some invisible, malevolent spirit. Then, he turned away from Ruth. He began stomping down the pavement, away from the car, back the way they'd come, toward Pleasantview. Soon, he was running. God! What Ruth had done to him in the Church! What he'd just done to her! Declan knew he had to go. He had to leave the townhouse tonight, tonight, tonight. It was the right thing to do. He no longer knew the people who lived there.