

THOMAS CLARK



Stalking Gracie

a short story by STEPHEN ELLIOTT

It's 6:30 in the morning, and Maria is still asleep. I'm awake before the alarm goes off, but I don't move yet. I just stare into her auburn hair. Her back, with its thick pale scar, is pressed against my chest. I have to be careful when I get up. If I move too quickly, Maria will startle awake and want me to stay, and I can't miss another day of work. We can't afford that. I want to get inside her now, but I resist.

Our place is on the North Side of Chicago, in an area known alternately as Rogers Park and the Jonquil Jungle. There are thirteen apartments on every floor. We live on the third floor, in a small room with a kitchenette, a half fridge, and one window, but we have our own bathroom. The paint in the hallways is dark red and cracked. The girls that work the sidewalk in front of the bookstore on Howard all live here, five or six to a room. They bring their customers in and out, and their customers come from everywhere. We've changed the locks on the door three times since we've been here.

I raise the window shade to let in a little light and pull on my pants. I boil water in a saucepan, fill my coffee cup — two spoonfuls of instant coffee, one spoonful of creamer — and sit at our table. My caseworker told me they're changing out the furniture at the day center, so Maria and I might get a new table and some other stuff this weekend.

Maria sleeps naked on the mattress a few feet away. The blanket has slipped off her shoulder, and her breast is exposed. She looks as if she's having pleasant dreams. This is rare. Normally the blanket is pulled tight around her shoulders, gripped in bunches in her hands. She sleeps with her eyes pressed shut and her mouth wide open, and she talks in her sleep.

I drink my coffee slowly and take one of Maria's paperbacks off the shelf. I read two sentences, then put it back. She's always reading. She likes romances. I told her she should write a romance about us, but she said nobody would be interested, because we don't have nice things. She reads while she's filling in at the branch library, and she summarizes the stories for me when I get home.

I take one last look at her before leaving to catch the 7:15 train. Her scent fills the room. She'll wake up soon and call me at work. But now she's breathing easily, and I think she should always be able to sleep this way. She should have slept this way her whole life.

"Most file clerks don't stick around," Ms. Ward says. "We have a high turnover because of the monotony." Ms. Ward wears her thick red hair in a tight ponytail. She has a small mouth and pointy teeth, and she questions the minutes on my timecard every week. She's thirty years older than me and was once married, but now lives alone in an apartment in Lincoln Park, not far from the zoo.

"You don't have to worry about me leaving," I tell her. "I'm not going anywhere."

I'm working on benefits for overseas employees. The rows of filing cabinets are endless: half a floor of a building downtown. I work slowly but steadily under the long fluorescents, organizing the folders by location, then specialty, then last

name. The file cabinets are in the middle of the building, far from the windows, and are ringed by offices that nobody uses. On each office door there is a nameplate and a white board and a marker for leaving messages. Occasionally, when no one is looking, I'll write a joke message on someone's door.

I read through the enormous sums of money — salary, compensation, per diems — the overseas employees receive. They all come from good schools; it says so on their résumés, attached to the files. The receptionists keep plates full of apples on their desks. The firm consults for governments. It has copywriters stationed in China writing political billboard ads.

Ms. Ward tells me I have a phone call.

"When are you going to be home?" Maria asks.

"I don't know. It's all the way out there by the western suburbs. The brown line stops running after seven. I'll have to come back through downtown."

"I never should have encouraged you."

"You were trying to be supportive. Look on the bright side: after today I'll be home every day by six."

"I'm not going in to work today," Maria says. "I'm going to see Jackie instead."

Jackie is Maria's therapist. When you turn eighteen, as Maria and I both did recently, you lose your status as a ward of the court, but you still have access to social services for a year. If you're good, the state will even pitch in on your rent.

"Don't tell her about Gracie, OK?" I say.

"Jackie thinks you should be in therapy too. You're more messed up than I am."

"I hope not."

"I could get in trouble if you get caught," Maria says. "I could lose my privileges. I need my therapy."

I can picture her holding the phone against her ear with her shoulder and squeezing her arms together. Ms. Ward is standing at her desk, watching me.

"Theo?" Maria says.

"Yes?"

"I wish when you left for work that you would tie me up like a pig. You could use the electrical cord. I'd have to wait here for you like that."

Ms. Ward brushes past me.

"I want you to hit me so hard I have bruises everywhere," Maria says. "You don't hurt me enough."

"Tell Jackie about that."

"I can't. She'll think I'm a slut."

"I've got to get back to work."

Maria's sigh comes through clearly over the phone.

Before I leave work, I finish organizing all the employees in Japan. Ms. Ward asks me if I would like to contribute to the bagel pool. Everybody pitches in two dollars, and on Fridays we have bagels and cream cheese.

"But I'm a temp," I tell her.

"But you eat the bagels, don't you?"

"I'll have to talk to the agency about that."

"You know, Theo, you shouldn't be on the phone so much at work."

Mr. Gracie is a security guard at the Standard Oil Building, but he used to be a corrections officer at the Western Juvenile Detention Center. That's where I know him from. I saw him again a little over a month ago, while I was walking to the beach one day on my lunch break. I recognized him immediately. I stopped on the sidewalk, and people had to walk around me.

I wait for him today after work, as I have every weekday for the past month. I watch him pull his coat from a hidden closet behind the security desk, tip his hat to the man arriving for the next shift, and push through the revolving doors to the subway line. I follow him to the train, keeping a few people between us. I shouldn't be wearing a jacket in this hot weather, but I am. A light blue denim with an inside pocket.

I'm hoping he doesn't apologize. If he apologizes, I don't know what I'll do.

We take the underground pedestrian tunnel between the two main subway arteries of the city; the long corridor amplifies the sound of the commuters' footsteps. I swear I can smell his cologne. The traffic in the tunnel runs both ways. I push against people and walls trying to get through.

Mr. Gracie gets on at the front of the car, and I get on in the back. The blue line hurtles toward the Kennedy Expressway and the northwest suburbs, out by O'Hare International Airport. He sits on the outside of a two-seat bench. No one sits next to him.

When I first saw Mr. Gracie, I was surprised that he didn't look very different: the same short black stubble on his chin, top two buttons open on his shirt. But then, it's only been a few years. People don't change that much when they're in their forties. I look different. I have long hair now. In the juvenile center they kept it cut close to the scalp. My hair is straight and blond and hangs past my collar. This could be one reason Mr. Gracie hasn't noticed me following him. Another might be that he isn't looking. A third might be that there were so many boys, he can't remember us all.

We pass Fullerton and the Barrio. The Polish restaurants and the Ukrainian Village. I tug on my jacket, adjust the weight in the pocket. He's just sitting there.

A few weeks ago, on a Saturday, Maria and I went on a picnic with our friends Dave and Nadia. Nadia's pregnant, and Maria rubbed her face against Nadia's belly and put her hands inside the waistband of Nadia's shorts, on her stomach.

"Babies," Dave said, handing me a paper plate with a tuna sandwich and potato salad on it. "Who gives a fuck about babies?" He laughed.

I took a seat next to Maria. She didn't want to eat. She didn't want to move away from Nadia's stomach.

Maria's the smartest person I've ever met, but she had a hard time getting through the system. The state placed her in the sister group home to mine. She taught me multiplication and has won every game of backgammon we've ever played; she always locks up my last five spaces. She carefully explains every move, but I never get it. I'm smarter than her in one way, though: I know every major street in Chicago and the address numbers of each block. I knew the boundaries of all the neigh-

borhoods by the time I was thirteen.

At Foster, a Chicago Transit Authority officer boards the train and stands next to me, his holstered pistol inches from my nose. He's scowling and his hand drops heavily over the gun, his fingers pressing the leather.

The third time I followed Mr. Gracie home, I hid in his neighbor's bushes across the street. I thought someone had seen me, so I crouched quietly in the dirt and waited. I felt as if I were naked and hiding in the bushes so that nobody would see me without my clothes on, like in a dream. I crossed my arms over my chest. I thought the police were going to come and surround me and ask what I was doing, and I was going to have to admit that I was following Mr. Gracie. They would grab me by the arm and ask why. They'd want reasons, but I wouldn't have any to give them. When I run through this in my mind, I shake my head slowly and also kind of nod knowingly at the same time. I say to myself repeatedly, *I am following Mr. Gracie.*

Nobody saw me behind the neighbor's bushes, and I hid out there and watched him come home and waited for the lights to snap on. I learned that he has a wife and two children, a boy and a girl. They live in a bungalow in Jefferson Park. After eight they sit together in the living room and watch television. He has children. That kills me.

When I first started coming home late, Maria thought I was cheating on her. She broke all our dishes. Standing in the mess she'd made, I told her that I had seen Mr. Gracie and I had been following him. She knew who Mr. Gracie was and what had happened between him and me. (Maria and I tell each other everything; that's the foundation of our relationship.) At first she was interested. She'd be waiting at the table when I got home. "What did he do today?" she'd ask. "Eat an apple? Read the newspaper?" Sometimes Maria would have bruises or a bloody lip. "I tried to wait for you, but it got late, so I had to go out." Yesterday she told me I had to finish the job, or she was going out and not coming home again. For Maria, being alone is the hardest thing.

Mr. Gracie unzips his bag and looks inside of it. Satisfied, he zips it back up. The CTA officer exits the train, hand still massaging his gun holster, and looks both ways in the station.

In juvenile, none of us knew anything about the staff's outside lives. We didn't even know their first names. The staff carried nightsticks and handcuffs. We had baggy brown pants and T-shirts. I had been in a glass cage for two days after losing a fight to a kid named Larry when Mr. Gracie came to get me. He told me to walk close to the red lines on the floor. The facility was dark, and everyone's gym shoes were out in the hallway, their doors locked from the outside. Mr. Gracie took me into an empty office. He told me to put my stuff in the corner.

"You think you're tough?" he said. "You like to fight? You want to fight me?"

(end of excerpt)