

Issue #1

\$6

Short Fiction



By Women

The Break

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The disco job fell through at the last minute. It had been his closest thing so far, but the evening he showed up for work the disco owner told him the old manager had come back. He shrugged and bought an expensive drink at the bar. But he filled a pocket with cocktail nuts on the way out. His funds were getting very low.

He could not explain to himself how this had happened. Ever since he had arrived in Miami he had tried to be careful, going without cigarettes and cutting his own hair; but now, after almost three months of sitting in coffee shops and trying to figure out what lucrative and glamorous job he could get with a background in Intro. Comp. Lit., his small store of savings was nearly gone.

He decided to think it through. He called Sherri, a girl he had met in line in the bank, and took her to a French restaurant. They sat whittling a pâté beneath a cut-glass chandelier, and she sympathized.

“I need a break,” he told her.

“What kind of break?” she asked. She was very pretty, with red hair and small, perfect teeth. She had a boyfriend who was a state trooper. “What would you really like to do?”

“I’d like to be rich. I’d like,” he reflected, “to be a disco king. I would love to own a chain of discos around the Gulf of Mexico, where blond kids with gold necklaces drink and dance and fight all night.”

“You should get a job,” she said.

He was irritated. "What do you think we're talking about?" he asked her.

"Why don't you go back to that university?" she said. "I don't get it why you left. I mean you liked it, according to you."

"I liked being a *student*," he corrected her.

He had loved being a student. He had filled his notebooks with the wise, charming or sarcastic things his favorite professors said. In the springtime, he and his friends had dressed up as troubadours and sung medieval roundelays in the Student Union. One of the girls learned Provençal and performed ballads of courtly love, sitting cross-legged on her long hair. He had married her, and kept being a student.

But then, inevitably, he got his last degree; and the department gave him a teaching position. His circle of friends shrank and tightened into a knot; he went out for coffee in the morning and beer at night with the same assistant professors, year after year. He knew their mannerisms and their shirts by heart. His wife babysat for their children and their wives made cinnamon loaves for presents every Christmas. His lectures began to feel like standup routines. He resented his students' liberty to pass through his courses and move on. He feared he would not get tenure, and feared he would.

And his marriage began to feel like a bad habit. They fought sometimes, halfheartedly: he broke the strings on her guitar; she turned the cat against him. By the time he was thirty he had begun to feel old. And so he had made a break, impulsively and all at once, surprising even himself.

"I could never go back there," he told Sherri. "It was deeply, profoundly tacky. Pointing out the sexual innuendo in Molière to keep the freshmen interested . . ."

"It sounds creative," she declared. "Frankly, I don't think working at a disco would utilize your talents to the fullest."

She put the thing in a new light. He had never really visualized himself at work in the place – bundling the dollar bills with rubber bands, counting the liquor bottles, pulling the grate over the door at four a.m. He felt a rush of relief that he had escaped it. "Let's go dancing or something," he said.

But Sherri said she wanted to go home and go to sleep under her air conditioner. He drove her to her apartment, trying to inhale a whiff of the smoke from her cigarette. "Good luck, anyway," she said.

In the morning, he thought, he would renew the lease on his rented car. As a result of that and tonight's dinner, his funds would be lower still. But he had no choice. In the trunk of the little red car were his suitcase full of shirts, his soccer ball, his violin, an extensive collection of jazz records, his garnet cufflinks, a picture book of New York's nineteen bridges. His wife had made it clear when he left that his belongings would no longer be welcome there. So he had rented the car and stormed through the rooms grabbing things, throwing them in the trunk and driving away elated, as though he had staged a raid. Riding the crest of his mood, he had gone straight to the university and quit. Then he had left town, driving due south. By the time he hit the Delaware Memorial Bridge an old-fashioned sentence had formed in his mind: "He set out to make his way in the world."

He was thirty years old and he had never made his way in the world. He had never had a real job outside the university. But he had an idea he could do it – sell things, drive bargains, bribe cops, whatever it took. He decided not to wonder where he was going until he ran out of gas.

He ran out of gas in Baltimore. At a bar, a man told him about his brother in Atlanta who needed somebody cultural to be managing editor of a new lifestyle magazine. He bought himself a white linen suit and a Panama and got to Atlanta on another couple of tanks. The brother had already filled the position, but told him that Miami was the big new international city, just the place for a cultural person. He drove all day and all night and part of another day. He had never known, before he set out to make his way in the world, how much he liked to drive.

Miami seemed to seethe with deals in the making and money changing hands – although he could not quite understand how to put himself in its path; even the crime rings, the drugs and guns and whatever else there was, never surfaced to his view. He had thought of international finance, perhaps, or investment banking. How did one become an executive? It seemed to him he was a

good candidate. He had the shoulders for it – he looked nice in suits – and his languages should have been a plus; all businesses were supposed to be international these days. All he needed was a break.

He stayed in a series of motels on the outskirts of town, checking in with only the clothes he wore. His mobility was astonishing to him. In one gesture he had managed to free himself of address, phone number, bedroom, coffee mug, proctor duty. He rented a post office box in case he might need it for business, and wrote its number on one brief, amiable postcard to his wife; but he never received anything in it. Almost effortlessly he had achieved a kind of social invisibility, floating high and light on the edge of the life of the world. He had no one to answer to. He knew a few people in Miami to call by name and have drinks with. When he did not see them they did not wonder where he was.

It was well before midnight when he took Sherri home, and after he dropped her he kept driving, fast, as though on an urgent errand. He drove into the business district and parked the car on a quiet, deserted street. It had begun to rain. He walked for a while, keeping a distance from his reflection in the glass windows, collecting rain in the cuffs of his white linen pants. Then he went back to his car. He felt tender toward it, as though it were a dog or a horse waiting there for him. He lay down on the back seat, his legs propped over the front seat so that his pants would dry smooth, thinking against his will of Sherri in her windy bed, of his wife and her friends going out for Chinese, of his students reading Petrarch in their socks in the library. He slept finally, without wrinkling his pants.

When the sun came up he climbed into the front seat and drove vigorously around the block four times as a sort of morning calisthenic. He ought to be getting more exercise, he thought; lately he had been aware sometimes of a dull ache in his chest around midmorning. The streets were already filling with people, men and women in suits with briefcases. He felt as though he should dress up for them a little and thought of his garnet cufflinks, but he was reluctant to open his trunk. He did not want to see the disorder, the flotsam of his personal life tangled in a heap as if thrown in the garbage. There were teabags in his shoes, snapshots

of his nieces between the pages of a cookbook. It seemed to him sometimes that his possessions were incubating back there in the dark, proliferating while the lid was down.

He parked the car again and walked to the post office to check his box. The man behind the grate gave him a sidelong look and he was sure the man considered him strange for having a post office box to which nothing ever came. He thought indignantly that his wife had probably not given their friends his address; then he thought maybe she had. He was very hungry. He stopped in a coffee shop for a doughnut, but the takeout line was long and seemed to be full of people who knew one another, and he remembered that his funds were very low. He left, and walked for a while. At an intersection he passed an old woman squatting next to her shopping bag, talking rapidly and quietly out of some secret lucidity. With a shock of recognition he saw the nest of tangled precious things in her bag. He walked faster, with a purposeful square-shouldered stride. Among the sunlit crowds he was not troubled by his reflection in the windows. He was going, he remembered, to renew the car lease.

The car rental agency was a big street-floor office with a glass front full of glossy posters of various mountain lakes and urban skylines. The furniture inside was chrome, with lucite ash trays and lamps that looked like power tools. A small girl with pink eye shadow was sitting at a chrome desk and talking on a lucite phone. Peggy Ellis, said the deskplate, was her name, and her title was Asst Mangr. She looked to him about fifteen years old. As he stood in front of her she stared at the wall to his left. "And a hard roll," she said. "With jelly. It was great. You get your money's worth at that place."

He listed carefully into her line of vision. Her unbroken stare now rested on his middle jacket button. "So where are you going for lunch?" she said into the phone. "I feel like Italian today, don't ask me why."

She was sorting papers as she talked. Her plastic bracelets clattered and her chewing gum popped like birdshot. "So listen, it's a madhouse here, I gotta go. Can I help you," she concluded pessimistically, and he realized she was talking to him.

He felt in his pockets for the car lease. "Why, yes," he began tentatively. She was wearing a tight, short-sleeved purple sweater with little gold threads running through it, and her dark hair curled all over her head.

"Oh, hey, I know who you are," she said. She picked up the phone again and he feared she was going to pursue the question of eating Italian. But she dialed briefly and said "The new guy's here," and hung up. "Come on back," she told him, rising.

He followed her. There seemed to be no reason not to. She walked to a door at the back of the front office, her earrings swinging, her high heels clicking like little hooves, and led him into a very large room with high ceilings and a kind of waxy light everywhere. The room was full of metal desks and chairs separated by plywood partitions. Peggy Ellis went up to the woman at the largest desk and repeated, pointing back with her thumb, "The new guy's here."

The woman was writing in large, looping script across the front of some manila folders. "Good, right on time," she said without looking up. "Show him around, will you? I'm going out of my mind here." She kept writing in the same slow, placid looping rhythm. She had a pin on her blouse in the shape of a smiling sun.

Peggy Ellis turned to him. "I'm gonna show you around," she said, "even though actually I'm not supposed to leave front."

"Don't do anything you shouldn't do," he said. It was the first thing he had said to her.

"Leave front, big deal," she said. "Nobody ever comes in this early anyway." She began threading her way among the low partitions which ranged like snow fences across the wide linoleum floor. "You from Miami or what?"

It occurred to him that he should call her "Ms." He had usually been able to avoid the term, since the women in his experience had cultivated first names or professorships, or both. "Well, Ms. Zealous," he ventured, and rushed on, "not from Miami originally, no. But I'm currently here." He listened to himself, amazed. "Marvelous city," he added lamely. He was keeping an ear out for the sound of the real new guy entering the front office.

"This would be your work station," she told him, stopping beside a desk with a typewriter the size of a small raft on it. The top drawer was open and there were cracker crumbs and sugar packets in the pencil tray. Taped to the side of the desk was a tattered poster announcing a blood drive. A stick figure on the poster had a huge ventricle for a head and carried a flag that said GIVE BLOOD AND HAVE A NICER DAY!

He stared, wondering what the new guy would think of it. He wondered what the new guy was like. "You're a whiz typist, huh," said Peggy Ellis, as though to answer his unspoken question. He was, as it happened, no mean typist himself, having as a teenager spent a summer with a broken leg typing out an abridged version of *Great Expectations* for his mother, who was fond of reading Dickens but got confused by the subplots. "You like to give blood?" said Ms. Ellis.

He could not imagine the right answer to this question. "Yes and no," he said.

"Me neither," she said. "You can take down the poster if you want. They have this blood drive fetish around here, I don't know what it is. Tony here says it helps you lose weight. This is Tony."

Tony was at the next desk over, curling his hair around a pencil, and nodded vaguely in greeting. Next to him a large young woman named Dana was typing on a computer terminal and staring at the storm of white letters on the screen. She had on a pair of earphones plugged into a tiny transistor. "Nice meeting you," she said to him, bouncing her head a little in time to her private music.

"Bathrooms are that way, there's the coat rack, and everybody's gotta work Christmas Eve," said Peggy Ellis. "So any questions or anything?"

This was when he should tell her about her mistake, show her the car lease and pay her and go. The longer he waited the more embarrassing it would be. "What does the typing entail exactly?" he said.

"Well, the contracts and what have you. I interface with the customer, see, I'm the main front person, and I take down all the R.C.I., that's relevant customer information, and then I interface with you and you type up the contracts. All these other people,

they process the contracts. And maybe they need some supplementary information sometimes and say you don't have it so you'd just interface back to me about it." She had become very animated as she spoke. He caught himself staring at one of her earrings, a bright pearly little ball dangling at the end of a chain and winking with reflected light. She put her hand to her ear automatically, and looked away. "Oh, wow, coffee break," she said.

A group of people, including Tony, Dana and the woman with the folders, had gathered around a Mister Coffee machine and were filling styrofoam cups. There was a big box of doughnuts open on the table. His hunger suddenly kicked up again. As he and Peggy Ellis approached he could distinguish glazed, filled, toasted coconut, chocolate, and some other kind with colored jimmies.

"Coffee around here, what you do is, everyone pays in a share at the beginning of the month," said Ms. Ellis, pouring a cup. "Then somebody is Coffee Coordinator and goes out on work time and buys the stuff. It rotates, I mean, everybody gets to be Coffee Coordinator sooner or later." She held out to him the cup she had poured. "Cremora?" she asked.

"But I haven't paid," he said awkwardly.

"Well, how about it's on me," she told him, still holding it out.

He took it from her carefully, with both hands, as though it were a delicate object. She smiled very briefly. "I don't even like coffee," she said. "I pay in so I can eat the doughnuts."

He felt a surge of jealousy toward the new guy, who would be interfacing with her all the time, figuring out her handwriting, asking her for supplementary relevant information, buying her doughnuts when his turn came. Around them people were talking and laughing noisily. Dana's earphones were slipped down around her neck and she was punching Tony lightly on the arm. "Typical," she was saying. "Tony, man, you are just too typical."

The woman with the manila folders came over to him and handed him a folder. "Nice to meet you finally in person," she said. "First thing to do is fill out these forms. Your file came from the agency not quite complete." To Peggy Ellis she said, "You better go back front."

"I'm going," said the girl. She turned to him as he stood staring at the manila folder in his hand. The looping script across the front read "O'Connell, Jarvis F. Typist/Clerk." "Jesus," she said as the woman retreated, "the pressure around here." She dug a package of chewing gum out of her jeans pocket, unwrapped a piece and folded it into her mouth. "Juicy Fruit?" she asked, holding out the package to him.

He had the coffee cup in one hand and the folder in the other. "Look, I'm not really - " he began, and then stopped. "I'm not really much of a gum chewer."

"Yeah, but you know, when you're typing forms and so forth," she said, continuing to hold it out. Her bracelets slid back along her arm very slowly and lodged with a soft click at her elbow.

He gazed at the Juicy Fruit, suddenly wanting a piece very much. "Hold it a sec," she said, noticing his full hands. She removed another stick and unwrapped it. Then she reached it up to his face. He opened his mouth and quickly, deftly, she folded the gum inside.

The spurt of sweetness was enough to make his eyes water. Ms. Ellis led him back to his work station and rolled a blank page into the typewriter to show him how it worked. "If you need anything," she said. Then she left.

He opened the folder and looked at the top form. "Confidential Employee Information Please Type or Print NEATLY," it said across the top, and went on to ask for "Name Last First Middle."

He sat at the workstation of Jarvis F. O'Connell, typist/clerk, and stared at the form. He wondered what the "F" stood for - Fitzgerald? Farley? Frank? This Jarvis was not exactly a model of reliability on the job so far. How was Peggy Ellis going to be able to count on him to get her contracts typed up, if he couldn't even come to work on time? Why wasn't his file complete, anyway? Was he the type of guy who would try to sneak coffee without paying his monthly dues?

He could hear the murmur of voices through the partition, but no distinct words. It was a comforting sound. They had all been there yesterday; they would all be there tomorrow. The coffeepot would always be attended to. There would be a party on

Christmas Eve. Ms. Ellis would wear a silk blouse and she would be excited.

On the previous Christmas Eve he had spent the day grading papers on sonnet form and listening to his record of Christmas carols in medieval Latin. There had been a feeble fire in the fireplace and his wife had been in the bathroom making his present. He could not remember what the present was. He could barely remember the rest of that month, or of the spring after it or of the year before. He knew, rather as a matter of record, that there had been a whole life back there of reading Dante and playing frisbee, of arguing over the derivations of words and making pesto sauce, that he had spent days with only his shorts and sandals on and weeks with lines of French poetry filling his head like musk; but the memory of all this seemed like a fable he had read or invented. He had let go of it all for a moment and it had raced away from him like a kite, and now he lived in Miami in a red car and a white suit. He thought of writing his wife a chain letter which she would have to send to ten friends or suffer a dire curse. He thought of writing Jarvis O'Connell a reproving note and leaving it in the typewriter.

On the other side of the partition he heard the soft nonsense rhythms of many typewriter keys going at once. The telephones chirped and twittered. It was ten-thirty in the morning, and Jarvis O'Connell had not come. Ten-thirty; half the morning gone already, and still no ache in his chest. Someone's spike heels bit the linoleum; someone coughed.

Fitzgerald, he decided: it should be Fitzgerald. He inserted the form in the typewriter, blew a gentle gray bubble, and began to type.



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