

S C A L E S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

THERE'S A STANDARD rat behavior they call the Coolidge Effect. Back when I was a psych major, before I met Richard, before we got married, long before I had Emily, I worked in the lab 15 hours a week. I cleaned rat cages and typed data into the computer. The Coolidge Effect was one of those experiments that everybody had heard of but nobody had actually performed.

It seems if you put a new female in a male's cage, they mate a few times and go on with their business. If you keep replacing the female, though, it's a different story. The male will literally screw himself to death.

Someone supposedly told all this to Mrs. Calvin Coolidge. She said, "Sounds just like my husband."

IT STARTED IN JUNE, a few days after Emily's first birthday. I remember it was a Sunday night; Richard had to teach in the morning. I woke up to Richard moaning. It was a kind of humming sound, up and down the scale. It was a noise he made during sex.

I sat up in bed. As usual all the blankets were piled on my side. Richard was naked under a single sheet, despite the air conditioning. We'd fought about something that afternoon. I was still angry enough that I could find satisfaction in watching his nightmare.

He moved his hips up and down. I could see the little tent his penis made in the sheet. Clearly he was not squirming from fear. Just as I realized what was happening he arched his back and the sheet turned translucent. I'd never watched it before, not clinically like that. It wasn't especially interesting and certainly not erotic. All I could think of was the mess. I could smell it now, like water left standing in an orange juice jar.

I lay down, facing away from him. The bed jolted as he woke up. "Jesus," he whispered. I pretended to be asleep while he mopped up the bed with some Kleenex. In a minute or two he was asleep again.

I got up to check on Emily. She was face down in her crib, arms and legs stretched out like a tiny pink bearskin rug. I touched her hair, bent over to smell her neck. One tiny, perfect hand clutched at the blanket under her.

"You missed it, Tater," I whispered. "You could have seen what you've got to look forward to."

I MIGHT HAVE forgotten about it if Sally Keeler hadn't called that Friday. Her husband had the office next to Richard's in the English department.

"Listen," Sally said. "It's probably nothing at all."

"Pardon?"

"I thought somebody should let you know."

"Know what?"

"Has Richard been, I don't know, acting a little weird lately?"

For some reason I remembered his wet dream. “What do you mean weird?”

Sally sighed dramatically. “It’s just something Tony said last night. Now Ann, I know you and Richard are having a few problems—that’s okay, you don’t have to say anything—and I thought, well, a real friend would come to you with this.”

Sally was not a friend. Sally was someone who had been over to dinner two or three times. I hadn’t realized my marital problems were such common knowledge. “Sally, will you get to the point?”

“Richard’s been talking to Tony about this new grad student. She’s supposed to be from Israel or something.”

“So?”

“So Richard was apparently just drooling over this girl. That doesn’t sound like him. I mean Richard doesn’t even *flirt*.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, no. Tony asked him what was the big deal and *Richard* said, ‘Tony, you wouldn’t believe it. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.’ Those are like his exact words.”

“Does this mystery woman have a name?”

“Lili, I think he said it was.”

I tried to picture Richard, with his thinning hair and stubby little mustache, with his glasses and pot belly, sweeping some foreign sexpot off her feet.

Sally said, “It may not be anything at all.”

One new associate professorship would open up next year. Richard and Tony were both in the running. Richard was generally thought to have the edge. “I’m sure you’re right,” I said. “I’m sure it’s nothing at all.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t want to cause any problems.”

“No,” I said, “I’m sure you wouldn’t.”

THE NEXT WEDNESDAY Richard called to say he’d be home late. There was a visiting poet on campus for a reading. I looked it up in the paper. The reading was scheduled for eight.

At eight-thirty I put Emily in the station wagon and we drove over to the Fine Arts Center. We didn’t find his car.

“Well, Tater,” I said. “What do you think? Do we go across Central and check the hot sheet motels?”

She stared at me with huge, colorless eyes.

“You’re right,” I said. “We have too much pride for that. We’ll just go home.”

THERE WAS A COOKOUT that weekend at Dr. Taylor’s. He was department chairman largely on the strength of having edited a *Major American Writer* in his youth. Now he had a drinking problem. His wife had learned that having parties at home meant keeping him off the roads.

The morning of the party I told Richard I wanted to go. By now he was used to my staying home from these things. I watched for signs of disappointment. He only shrugged.

“You’d better start trying to find a sitter,” he said.

After dinner we began the slow, seemingly random movements which would inevitably end with the women in one part of the house and the men in another. Already most of the wives were downstairs, clearing up the soggy paper plates and empty beer bottles. I was upstairs with Jane Lang, the medievalist, and most of the husbands. Taylor had made a pejorative remark about women writers and everyone had jumped on him for it. Then Tony said, “Okay, I want to see everybody come up with a sexist remark they believe is true.”

Taylor said, a little drunkenly, “Men have bigger penises than women.”

Jane said, “Usually.” Everyone laughed.

Robbie Shappard, who was believed to sleep with his students, said, “I read something the other day. There’s this lizard in South America that’s extinct now. What happened was another species of lizard came along that could perform the mating rituals better than the real females. The males all fucked the impostors. The chromosomes didn’t match, of course, so no baby lizards. The whole species went toes up.”

“Is that true?”

“I read it in the *Weekly World News*,” Robbie said. “It has to be true. What I want to know is, what does it mean?”

“That’s easy,” Jane said. “When it comes to sex, men don’t know what’s good for them.”

“I think men and women are different species,” Tony said.

“Too easy,” Robbie said. “They’ve just got conflicting programs. When we were living in caves we had these drives designed to produce the maximum number of kids from the widest range of partners. The problem is we’ve still got those drives and they’re not useful any more. That’s what did those poor lizards in.”

Tony said, “Okay, Ann. Your turn. Be serious, now.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I subscribe to the old business about how women are more emotional.”

“Emotional how?” Tony said. “Be specific.”

“Right,” Robbie said. “Be brief and specific. It’s fifty percent of your grade riding on this.”

I looked at Richard. He seemed distracted rather than contentious. “Well, men always seem concerned with exactitude, being able to measure things.” There was some laughter, and I blushed. “You know. Like they don’t want to say ‘I’ll love you forever.’ They want to say, ‘at current rates our relationship could reasonably be expected to continue at least another six months.’ Whereas I would appreciate the gesture. Of saying ‘forever.’”

Tony nodded. “Good one. Rich?”

“You want one? Okay. Here’s what Robbie was trying to say earlier, only without the bullshit. Men want women and women want babies.”

Everyone went quiet; it wasn’t just me overreacting. The first thing I thought of was Emily. What did Richard mean? Did he not want her anymore? Had he never wanted her? I’d heard that people felt this way when

they were shot. No pain, only a sense of shock and loss, the knowledge that pain would surely follow.

“Speaking of babies,” I said into the silence, “I should call home. Excuse me.” I walked out of the room, looking for a phone, wanting most of all to be away from Richard.

I found a bathroom instead. I washed my face, put on fresh lipstick, and wandered downstairs. Sally found me there and raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“I assume you’re here for a look at her.”

“Who?”

“Lili. The mystery woman. All the men in the department are in love with her. Haven’t you heard?”

“Is she here?”

Sally glanced around the room. As usual, the party had gradually segregated itself, husbands in one room, wives in another. I knew most of the women in the den with us. “I don’t see her now. She was here a minute ago.”

“What does she look like?”

“Oh, short, dark ... sexy, I suppose. If you like eyeliner and armpit hair.”

“What’s she wearing?”

“Is that more than idle curiosity I hear in your voice? A tank top, a red tank top. And blue jeans. Very tight.”

“Excuse me,” I said, finally seeing the phone. “I have to call home.”

The sitter answered on the second ring. Emily was asleep. There were no problems. “Okay,” I said. I wanted to be home with her, to blow raspberries on her belly and feel her fingers in my hair. The silence had gone on too long. I said thank you and hung up.

I couldn’t face going back upstairs. It would be a boy’s club up there by now anyway. Fart jokes and cigars. A sliding glass door opened up to the backyard. I walked into the darkness, smelling summer in the cut grass and the lingering smoke from the grill.

Richard found me there when the party broke up. I was sitting in a lawn chair, watching the Dallas sky, which glows red all summer long. Something about all the lights and the polluted air.

“Nice move,” Richard said. “Just walk right out on me, let the entire fucking party know our marriage is on the rocks.”

“Is it?”

“What?”

“On the rocks. Our marriage. Are we splitting up?”

“Hell, I don’t know. This isn’t the time to ask, that’s for sure. Oh no. Don’t start. How are we supposed to walk out with you crying like that?”

“We’ll go around the side of the house. Taylor’s too drunk to know if we said goodnight or not. Answer my question.”

“I said I don’t know.”

“Maybe we ought to find out.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Let’s do whatever it is people do. See a counselor or something.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all? Just ‘okay?’”

“You’re the one pushing for this, not me.”

“Fine,” I said, suddenly giddy. It was like standing on the edge of a cliff.

Would I actually do something irreversible? Only Emily held me back. Then I looked at Richard again and thought, do I really want this man as her father?

“Fine,” I said again. “Let’s get out of here.”

MY BEST FRIEND Darla had been divorced twice. She recommended a Mrs. McNabb.

“Oh God,” I said. “It’s going to be so expensive. Is it really going to help?”

“What do you care about help?” Darla said. “This is step one in getting rid of the creep. The rest gets easier. Believe me, it gets easier. My second divorce was no worse than, oh, say, being in a body cast for six months.”

I sat in front of the phone for a long time Monday. I was weighing the good and bad in our marriage and I was throwing anything I could find onto the scales. Everything on the good side had to do with money—the house, Richard’s insurance, financial security. It wasn’t enough.

I got us an appointment for the next morning. When I told Richard about it Monday night he looked surprised, as if he’d forgotten the whole wretched scene. Then he shrugged and said, “Okay, whatever.”

We left Emily at the sitter’s house. It was hard to let go of her. Richard kept looking at his watch. Finally we got away and drove downtown, to a remodeled prairie-style house off of East Grand.

Mrs. McNabb was five-eleven, heavy in the chest and hips, fifty years old with short hair in various shades of gray. No makeup, natural fiber clothes, neutral-colored furniture. A single, ominous box of Kleenex on the table by the couch.

When we were both settled she said, “Now. Are either of you involved with anyone outside the marriage?”

I said, “You mean, like, romantically?”

Richard was already shaking his head.

“That’s right,” Mrs. McNabb said.

“No,” Richard said.

“No,” I said.

She looked at Richard for a long time, as if she didn’t believe him. I didn’t believe him either. “What?” he said. His arms had been folded across his chest from the moment he sat down. “I said *no*, there’s nobody else.”

After a few minutes she split us up. Richard waited in reception while she asked me questions. Whenever I said anything about Richard she made me preface it with “I think” or “it seems to me.” I didn’t mention Lili or my suspicions. Then I sat outside for half an hour, reading the same page of *Newsweek* over and over again, not able to make any sense of it.

Finally Richard came out. He was pale. “We’re done,” he said. “I paid her and everything.”

We got in the car. Richard sat behind the wheel without starting the engine. “She asked about my parents,” he said. He looked out the windshield, not at me. “I told her about how my father always made my mother bring him

the mail, and then he would open it up and throw what he didn't want on the floor. And then my mother would have to get down on her knees and pick it up."

He looked so lost and childlike. I suddenly realized that the only other person who could understand what we were both going through was Richard. It was hard not to reach out for him.

"She asked me were they happy," he said. "I said no. And then the weirdest thing happened. I found myself explaining all this stuff to her. Stuff I didn't know I knew. How I'd always believed it would be so easy for my father to make my mother happy. That a marriage should work if you just didn't throw your trash on the floor for the other person to pick up. I don't remember Mrs. McNabb saying anything, it was just suddenly I had this flash of understanding. How I'd spent my life looking for an unhappy woman like my mother, to prove how easily I could make her happy. Only I was wrong. I couldn't make you happy after all."

That wonderful, brief moment of intimacy was gone. I was now an "unhappy woman." I didn't much like it.

"I feel all wrung out," he said, and started to cry. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him cry. "I don't know if I can go through this again."

"This was just the start," I said. "We haven't gotten *anywhere* yet."

He shook his head and started the car. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know if I can go on."

AND THAT WAS the end of counseling. The next time I brought it up Richard shook his head and refused to talk about it.

By that point he "worked late" at least two nights a week. It embarrassed me to hear the shopworn excuse. I pictured him in his office, his corduroys around his ankles, some exotic olive-skinned wanton sprawled on her back across his desk, her ankles locked behind his waist, her mouth open in an ecstatic scream, the rest of the department shaking their heads in shame as they passed his door.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. I lay awake at night and tortured myself. One morning in August I was so far out of my head I called Sally. "This woman Richard is supposed to be seeing. Lili or whatever her name is. Describe her."

"Can you spell slut, dear? What more do you need to know?"

"I want the details. Like you were doing it for the police."

"Oh, five-six I guess. Wavy brown hair, just to her shoulders. Deep tan. Make-up, of course. *Lots* of makeup. Did I mention armpit hair?"

"Yes," I said, "you did."

During summer sessions Richard taught a two-hour class, from one to three every afternoon. Assuming he was not so far gone that he'd given up teaching entirely. At one-fifteen I climbed the marble stairs to the second floor of Dallas Hall, looking for the woman Sally had described.

There was nobody in the common room. I got a cup of coffee and found Robbie in his office. "Hi," I said awkwardly. "I'm looking for one of

Richard's students? Her name is Lili something? He had this paper he needed to give her and he forgot it this morning."

He didn't buy my story for a second, of course. "Ah, yes. The redoubtable Lili. She was around a while ago. I could give it to her if you wanted."

"No, that's okay. I should try to find her myself."

"Well, you can't miss her. She's only about five one, with olive skin, blonde hair to her waist, and ... well, you know."

"And great tits," I said bitterly. "Right?"

Robbie shrugged, embarrassed. "You said it. Not me."

The descriptions didn't exactly match. I suspected Robbie was not seeing her with much objectivity. For that matter, neither was Sally.

The offices faced out into a central room which was divided into a maze of cubicles. I wandered through them for a while with no luck. On my way out I stopped at Taylor's secretary's office. "I'm looking for a student named Lili? She's short, with..."

"I know, the most gorgeous black hair in the world. I would hardly call her short, though—oh. There she goes right now."

I turned, hearing heels click on the polished floor. "Thanks," I said, and ran into the hall.

And froze.

She looked at me for no more than a second or two. Afterwards I couldn't say how tall she was, or describe the color of her hair. All I saw were her eyes, huge and black, like the eyes of a snake. It must have been some chemical in her sweat or her breath that I reacted to on such a blind, instinctive level. I could do nothing but stare at her with loathing and horror. When her eyes finally let me go I turned and ran all the way back to my car.

I picked Emily up at the sitter's and took her home and held her for the rest of the afternoon, until Richard arrived, rocking silently on the edge of the couch, remembering the blackness of those eyes, thinking, not one of us. She's not one of us.

THAT FRIDAY RICHARD came home at four. He was a half-hour late, no more than that. Emily was crawling furiously around the living room and I watched her with all the attention I could manage. The rest of my mind was simply numb.

Richard nodded at us and walked toward the back of the house. I heard the bathroom door close. I put Emily in her playpen and followed him. I could hear water running behind the bathroom door. Some wild bravado pushed me past my fear. I opened the door and walked in.

He stood at the sink. He had his penis in one hand and a bar of soap in the other. I could smell the sex he'd had with her, still clinging to him. The smell brought back the same revulsion I'd felt at the sight of her.

We looked at each other a long time. Finally he turned off the water and zipped himself up again. "Wash your hands," I said. "For God's sake. I don't want you touching anything in this house until you at least wash your hands."

He washed his hands and then his face. He dried himself on a hand towel and carefully put it back on the rack. He sat on the closed lid of the toilet, looked up at me, then back at the floor.

“She was lonely,” he said. “I just ... I couldn’t help myself. I can’t explain it to you any better than that.”

“Lili,” I said. “Why don’t you say her name? Do you think I don’t know?”

“Lili,” he said. He got too much pleasure out of the sound of it. “At least it’s out in the open now. It’s almost a relief. I can talk to you about it.”

“Talk to me? You *bastard!* What gives you the idea that I want to hear anything ... *anything* about your cheap little slut?”

It was like he hadn’t heard me. “Every time I see her she’s different. She seduces me all over again. And there’s this loneliness, this need in her—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear it! Don’t you care what you’ve done? Doesn’t this marriage mean anything to you? Are you just a penis with legs? Maybe you’re sick of me, but don’t you care about Emily? At all?”

“I can’t ... I’m helpless...”

He wouldn’t even offer me the dignity of putting it in past tense. “You’re not helpless. You’re just selfish. A selfish, irresponsible little prick.” I saw myself standing there, shouting at him. It wasn’t like me. It was like a fever dream. I felt weightless and terribly cold. I slammed the bathroom door on my way out. I packed a suitcase and put Emily in her carseat and carried her outside. It wasn’t until we were actually moving that she started to cry.

For me it took even longer.

DARLA KNEW EVERYTHING to do. She told me to finish the story while she drove me to my bank. I took all but a hundred dollars out of the checking account, and half the savings. Then she called her lawyer and set up an appointment for Monday morning. By midnight I had a one-bedroom apartment around the corner from hers. She even loaned me some Valium so I could sleep.

Even with the Valium, the first few days were hard. I would wake up every morning at five and lie there for an hour or more while my brain wandered in circles. Richard had said “Every time I see her she’s different.” And everyone I asked about her had a different description.

Helpless. He said he was helpless.

After a week of this I saw it wasn’t going to go away. I left Emily with Darla and spent the evening at the library.

Back when I was a lab assistant, back when I first met Richard, I took English courses too. Richard was a first year teaching assistant and I was a lovestruck senior. We read Yeats and Milton and Blake and Tennyson together. And Keats, Richard’s favorite.

I found the quote from Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* in Keats’ *Selected Poetry*. “Apollonius ... by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia; and that all her furniture was, like Tantalus’ gold ... no substance, but mere illusions.” The lamia had the head and breasts of a woman and the body of a snake. She could change her appearance at will to charm any man. Like Lilith, her spiritual ancestor, she fed off the men she ensnared.

*I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!"*

I drove back toward my apartment. The night was hot and still. Suppose, I thought. Suppose it's true. Suppose there *are* lamias out there. And one of them has hold of Richard.

Then, I thought, she's welcome to him.
I brought Emily home and went to bed.

BY THE SECOND WEEK it was time to look for work. With luck, and child support, I hoped to get by with a part-time job. I hated the idea of Emily in day care even half-days, but there was no alternative.

I left her at the sitter's at nine o'clock. I came back a few minutes after noon. The sitter met me at the door. She was red-faced, had been crying.

"Oh God," she said. "I didn't know where to find you."

I would stay calm, I told myself, until I found out what was wrong. "What happened?"

"I only left her alone for five minutes. We were out here in the yard. The phone rang and I went inside, and—"

"Is she hurt?" I said. I had grabbed the sitter's arms. "Is she alive? What happened?"

"I don't know."

"Where *is* she?"

"I don't know!" she wailed. "She just ... disappeared!"

"How long ago?"

"Half an hour? Maybe less."

I turned away.

"Wait!" she said. "I called the police. They're on their way. They have to ask you some questions..."

I was already running for the car.

Subconsciously I must have made the connection. Lamia. Lilith. The legends of stolen children, bled dry, turned into vampires.

I knew exactly where Emily was.

MY TIRES SCREAMED as I came around the corner and again as I hit the brakes. I slammed the car door as I ran for the house. A fragment of my consciousness noticed how dead and dry the lawn looked, saw the yellowing newspapers still in their plastic wrappers. The rest of my mind could only say Emily's name over and over again.

I didn't bother with the doorbell. Richard hadn't changed the locks and the chain wasn't on the door. There were no lights inside. I smelled the faint odor of spoiled milk.

I went straight to the bedroom. The door was open.

All three of them were in there. None of them had any clothes on. Richard lay on his back. Lili crouched over him, holding Emily. The smell of spoiled

milk was stronger, and the smell of sperm, and the alien sex smell, Lili's smell. There was something else, something my eyes couldn't quite make out in the darkness, something like cobwebs over the three of them.

Lili turned her head toward me. I saw the black eyes again, staring at me without fear or regret. I couldn't help but notice her body—the thick waist, the small drooping breasts.

I said, "Let go of my baby."

She pulled Emily toward her. Emily looked at me and whimpered.

I was shaking with rage. There was a gooseneck table lamp by the bed and I grabbed it, knocking over the end table and spilling books across the floor. I swung it at Lili's head and screamed, "Let her go! Let her go!"

Lili put her arms up to protect herself, dropping Emily. I swung the lamp again and she scrambled off the bed, crouched like an animal, making no effort to cover herself.

Emily had started to cry. I snatched her up and brushed the dust or whatever it was away from her face.

"Take the child," Lili said. I had never heard her voice before. It was hoarse and whispery, but musical, like pan pipes. "But Richard is mine."

I looked at him. He seemed drugged, barely aware of what was going on around him. He hadn't shaved in days, and his eyes seemed to have sunken deep into his head. "You can have him," I said.

I backed out of the room and then turned and ran. I drove to my apartment with Emily in my arms, made myself slow down, watch the road, stop for red lights. No one followed us. "You're safe now, Tater," I told her. "Everything's going to be okay."

I bathed her and fed her and wrapped her in her blanket and held her. Eventually her crying stopped.

THE POLICE FOUND no sign of Richard at the house. The place was deserted. I changed the locks and put it up for sale. Lili was gone too, of course. The police shook their heads when her descriptions failed to add up. Untrained observers, they said. It happened all the time. Richard and Lili would turn up, they assured me, probably at some resort hotel in Mexico. I shouldn't worry.

One night last week the phone woke me up. There was breathing on the other end. It sounded like someone fighting for air. I told myself it wasn't Richard. It was only breathing. Only a stranger, only a run-of-the-mill obscene phone call.

Some days I still wake up at five in the morning. If lamias are serpents, they can't interbreed with humans. Like vampires, they must somehow turn human children into their successors. I have no doubt that was what Lili was doing with Emily when I found her.

I can't say anything, not even to Darla. They would tell me about the stress I've been under. They would put me in a hospital somewhere. They would take Emily away from me.

She seems happy enough, most of the time. The only changes in her appearance are the normal ones for a healthy, growing baby girl. She's going to

be beautiful when she grows up, a real heartbreaker. But puberty is a long way away. And I won't know until then whether or not she is still my daughter.

Time is already moving much too fast.

© 1978 by Lewis Shiner. First published Fiction Liberation Front, 2007. Some rights reserved. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, U S A .