

Domestic Situation

by Greg Stolze

Neil's mouth was dry as he drove to her house. He'd never been before.

"This is it," Molly said. "You can go up in the back, there's a kind of..."

She trailed off.

"Nice place," Neil said, then wished he hadn't. He pulled around. The squad car following them parked in front. The officer got out and walked up the driveway, shifting her hat and rubbing the back of her neck. It was morning and already hot.

Neil made a three-point turn to aim his trunk at the back door. Molly and Donna had never thrown a housewarming party, or if they had he hadn't been invited. Now Molly was moving out.

"This won't take long," Molly said, "I hope."

The three of them – Molly, Neil and the cop, in that order – filed up the back porch and Molly was still jingling her keys when the door opened.

It was Donna.

Neil swallowed. *I hoped she wouldn't be here*, he thought, but where else would she be? It wasn't like they'd called first. Donna looked awful—bags under bloodshot eyes, skin pale and blotchy. Dressed in a white undershirt with a frayed collar and blue Bears sweatpants, she looked bleakly at the three of them, her expression bleak.

Behind her, the kitchen was trashed. A small table had been upended and there were streaks of food on the walls, arcs and spatters of mustard yellow and vegetable green.

"Oh," Donna said. She opened her mouth again, closed it, then stood aside and gestured them in. One blonde eyebrow rose.

Insolent, Neil thought. *She looks worse than Molly. That's rich.*

Molly looked okay this morning. She was pale too, no makeup, chapped lips, black hair back in a ponytail.

She'd looked a lot worse last night when Neil got home. He'd had to work late, doing a presentation for a prospective client and he'd stayed to dismantle the displays in the conference room. When he'd gotten home, his wife had been waiting at the door. "There's news," she'd said.

The news was, Molly was soaking in the tub after showing up twenty minutes earlier, red-eyed from tears, her hair smeared with yogurt, beer all over her shirt and jeans. Molly didn't drink. Supposedly, Donna didn't drink anymore.

Neil wished he'd been there when Molly arrived. She was more his friend than his wife's.

I'm lucky to have her. Neil thought that about his wife as he shuffled into Donna and Molly's kitchen.

I'm lucky our relationship isn't a total disaster.

When the kids were in bed and Molly was dressed in one of Neil's too-big tracksuits, she'd asked him to take her to the emergency room.

It was all kind of a blur, even though it had been just last night. *Not how I planned to spend Friday night, Neil thought. Not what I had in mind for Saturday.*

The E.R. doctor had checked Molly over, nodded at her bruised forearm, told her that cracked ribs were hard to spot on X-rays. Said she probably had some on her left side.

Donna wasn't a big woman. Neil wondered if she'd cracked Molly's ribs with her fist, or a kick, or maybe a lamp or something. He hadn't asked.

When Molly said she'd had a fight with her lover, the doctor had tipped eyes at Neil.

"No!" they'd said in unison, with Neil adding, "Hey, I'm the white hat here. I'm the good Samaritan." That part he remembered crystal clear, the look in the doctor's eyes. A weary look.

Donna looked weary this morning, watching Molly dump silverware and utensils into a plastic bag. The cop looked weary too.

"That's my whisk," Donna said, and Neil smelled a whiff of vomit.

Everyone paused. Neil set his jaw.

Cool as can be. 'That's my whisk.'

"Right," Molly said. She tossed it in the sink. The clatter seemed unnaturally loud.

Donna narrowed her eyes and Neil shifted. He took his hands out of his pockets.

Christ, what do I do if she charges? Blows up? Starts throwing haymakers? Deck her, I suppose. Neil had hit a girl once, in fourth grade. That probably didn't count, since his growth spurt hadn't kicked in and she hadn't stopped laughing at him even as she doubled over in front of the pencil sharpener. The teacher hadn't noticed or, he supposed, just hadn't cared.

What if she grabs a knife?

He hadn't been in a fight in decades. The last time he'd been a virgin who couldn't grow a moustache. The idea of winning a fight against Donna made him feel as creepy as the idea of losing.

Let the cop handle it, I guess. He glanced at her and saw how she, too, was adapting her position, keeping a watchful eye on the drowsy blonde, the mean hung-over drunk.

Christ, it's like Donna's the sun and we're all just in orbit around her. Cop or no cop, she's... this is her thing. She's in charge.

At that moment, a small dog came in and started barking. Feeling a flood of relief, Neil bent down to let it sniff his fingers.

“What's your name, huh? What's your name, lil' fellah? You a good dog?”

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Molly felt a small and queasy flicker of happiness as Neil bent down to pet Donna's dog. As if nothing was wrong, as if he wasn't standing between abuser and victim.

“His name's Puppet,” Donna offered.

Donna was trying to play it cool but Molly could tell she was edgy. *Of course she is, she's got a cop giving her the stink-eye and there's a six-foot tall man she met one time, when he helped me move out of my old apartment. Too bad they weren't here last night.* She thought it before she could stop herself and the shame and the fear and the humiliation came, like the dark comes when you flick off a light switch. She remembered Donna clutching her arm and saying, “You can't leave me, you can't leave,” and the eerie way her voice had slid, going from desperate to cruel so naturally. Molly blinked hard and stepped into the living room, silverware jingling. She'd get the dishes later. She'd come back when Donna wasn't around.

The cop followed.

“So...” the officer asked, looking around, shifting her hands on her belt. “You got everything under control here?”

“What?”

The policewoman shrugged. “You want me to stay, or is it all right for me to leave?”

Molly couldn't believe it, but then she hadn't believed it earlier when they'd gone to the police station. No one had told her she *couldn't* press charges, but their intent to discourage her had been clear. They'd told her she could probably get a restraining order, but Molly didn't need one. Molly was moving away. *Jesus, that's what started the fight in the first place.* Did she want to file battery charges? Get a court date? Travel all the way back to sit in court and try to put her lover in jail?

The desk sergeant had been sympathetic, but he'd mentioned, as if in passing, that almost all battery charges were eventually dropped “when it's a domestic situation.”

Molly looked around the living room. She started putting a few odds and ends in a cardboard box, but most of her things were already gone. That had been the easy stuff, the books and her computer, her pictures and her old high school softball trophy. She'd gathered that up last night and stuffed it in her car, a Volkswagen, she'd carried out two armfuls of slippery CDs and pressboard furniture, Donna yelling throughout. The car was nearly full when Donna went from shouting to hitting.

Donna was a nail-biter. Molly had found that really cute, but now she was thinking how bad it would have hurt to get clawed at with fingernails.

Yeah, I was real lucky.

“So, do you...?”

"Please stay," she told the cop. She hated it, this woman who didn't know any of them sweeping in and taking charge, but maybe she saw this kind of thing all the time. Still, Molly didn't like feeling like she had to beg.

"Okay." The officer rolled her neck and glanced into the kitchen. "Your buddy seems to have things under control."

Neil had picked up a piece of tofu bacon and was holding it over Puppet's head. The dog was going crazy jumping for it, spinning around and dancing. Donna was watching and even she seemed to have softened. It was enough to make her look sad.

How could Donna hit me like that?

Molly had waited a long time to tell Donna she was planning to move. Too long, sure, she shouldn't have kept it a secret like she had, but she'd thought one swift, sharp break would be easier. All at once, like ripping off a band-aid. Her last lover had been a man and she'd crawled out of that slowly, too slow, it had been hell. She wanted it to be better this time. Wanted Donna to have an easier time of it.

She'd also worried that unless she did it quick, Donna would start drinking.

She seems okay this morning, Molly thought. *Sad but... normal.* She picked up the box and then put it down, deciding to pack everything first and then ferry stuff out to Neil's car.

She did the bathroom next, separating her shampoo from Donna's, her lotion, Donna's hairspray, her medicine for canker sores, Donna's sore-throat lozenges. It went quicker than she'd thought, untangling hair dryer and curling-iron cords, and before she left, she glanced over her shoulder. Then she popped open Donna's conditioner bottle, it was dry and felt scaly because Donna hadn't showered. Molly took a sniff. Donna's smell.

Not quite, not exactly because it wasn't on her and hadn't mingled with the aroma of skin and hair and mild perspiration, but Donna didn't wear perfume, so it was the conditioner Molly had smelled late at night, curled next to her in the big bed, maybe with an arm over her shoulder or a hand lightly on her hip.

She put the bottle down, moved the box into the living room beside the previous one, and then went into the bedroom. That's where it had happened, not just screaming and grabbing and that bizarre awfulness with the food. (*"You want half the food, too? Take that too, take half of everything, you're taking my life away!"* That's what she'd shouted, throwing and smearing.) This was where Donna had slapped her, and then hit her on the back of her head, and when Molly bent over and covered up...

No. Molly wasn't going to think about that, and she wasn't going to think about the good times either. The bedroom was in disarray, but she'd get her things and go and if she was lonely, well, there were worse things than loneliness.

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Donna had expected a confrontation, to the extent that she'd expected anything at all. She felt barely awake, even though she'd spent an hour walking and drinking coffee and staring at the TV without really understanding it. She'd looked at the ruined kitchen and bedroom and knew she'd have to clean it, but just the thought of starting, of doing anything, seemed so overwhelming that she did nothing. It felt balanced, now. It was still the moment between the action and the consequence. Coyote time. If she started to scrub the walls or clean the pasta salad off the counter, it would mean that the next phase had begun.

But it has, she told herself. It started when you opened the door and she was there.

Coming up the back way blank and pretty with her constellation of cops and protectors in tow. In charge. Come to settle matters, as she always did, Donna was sure of it. She'd expected the cop to snap on the cuffs and that would have been an end to it.

They'd met at a gay bar. Molly had come up and said hi and smiled, she'd twisted her hair around her fingers and been unbelievably outspoken about wanting to dance with her. Donna hadn't believed it. She'd grown up in a small town, one she described as "a flaw in the wheat fields." No one had talked about lesbians there, there was no Internet then, no GLBT section in the local bookstore because there was no bookstore. All her life she'd felt there was something wrong with her, something different that words couldn't explain and in college there'd been this first fumbling *something* with Ronette Agnell and Donna hadn't known what she wanted but she'd wanted it more than anything.

Then one night, a decade and a half later, Molly. Molly without politics or preamble or hesitation, like an alternative to shame.

Donna sighed.

She heard Molly calling Neil for help. Calling the *man*.

Those bisexuals always betray you in the end. Donna couldn't even remember who'd said that, some radical in her Alternatives For Gay Alcoholics group. *They can fight society for a while, they can be alt-culture and lipstick cute, but after a while the pressure caves them in. Anyone would fold, anyone with the option. The only one you can trust is the one with no choice.*

The thought of Molly with a man made Donna sick, sick in a different way than trying to be with a man herself. Donna had male friends, just like Molly or anyone, but... no. Not *like that*. It would be like making love with a lobster or one of those deep sea polyps. An alien life form, too different. She couldn't take the thought, so when Molly had told her that she fell in love with *people*, not with a body or a gender, Donna had heard it but not really listened.

Donna followed Neil as he went towards the bedroom. The cop watched.

Molly and her friend were looking at Molly's dresser, a huge ancient oak monstrosity that Molly had inherited from her parents. "No way is it going to fit in my car," Neil said.

"You don't have to..." Donna said it before she even knew what she was going to say, and she trailed off as everyone turned to her.

"Look," she said. "You don't have to move out *right now*, do you? I mean..."

"What time does U-Haul open?" Molly asked, her voice brisk, looking at Neil now, not looking at Donna. Donna half wished Molly would look at her, but she was also glad.

What I really want is for her to look at me like she used to, Donna thought, but the ship's sailed on that, now hasn't it?

No, the ship hasn't sailed. The ship is sunk. I went and scuttled it.

Donna had done stupid things before, especially when drinking. She'd cut herself, she'd crashed cars, she'd sampled other drugs to get even more wasted, it was just dumb luck she hadn't gotten fixed on anything else. *Though the alcohol worked for the job at hand, now didn't it?* One time she'd gotten drunk and wound up with a guy, this horrible man, but she'd never gone berserk like last night.

Then again, I never had anyone mean everything to me. I never had anyone I'd fight to protect.

She felt the warm beginning of self-pity, but she couldn't do it. The morning sun was too bright and she'd spent too long trying not to lie to herself.

You fought all right, but it wasn't to protect anything. Come on. You knew she was leaving and no one made you go buy that twelve-pack. You knew something was going to happen and if you didn't know what, isn't that even worse?

Probably not. Probably there's nothing worse that you could have done.

Neil and Molly were on either end of the dresser, straining as they shuffled through the doorway. With a sigh, Donna went over, got in the middle, and lifted.