

**Best Laid Plans
By A. Leigh Burgess**



Annual Fiction Writing Competition

The Editorial Board of the *Georgia Bar Journal* is proud to present “Best Laid Plans,” by A. Leigh Burgess of Covington as the winner of the *Journal’s* Ninth Annual Fiction Writing Competition. Honorable Mention goes to Joey Loudermilk of Atlanta for “The Shyster & the Shylock.”

The purposes of the Competition are to enhance interest in the *Journal*, to encourage excellence in writing by members of the Bar and to provide an innovative vehicle for the illustration of the life and work of lawyers. As in years past, this year’s entries reflected a wide range of topics and literary styles. In accordance with the competition’s rules, the Editorial Board selected the winning story through a process of reading each story without knowledge of the author’s identity and then ranking each entry. The story with the highest cumulative ranking was selected as the winner. The Editorial Board congratulates Ms. Burgess, Mr. Loudermilk and all of the other entrants for their participation and excellent writing.

Harold Becker’s father was a lawyer. Harold’s brother was a lawyer. Harold’s wife was a lawyer. Even Harold’s mother-in-law was a lawyer. As families went, it was a tough one in which to shine.

Not that this stopped anyone from trying. Harold’s father had twice argued in front of the Supreme Court. His brother was the youngest district attorney ever elected in his home state, his mother-in-law was a superior court judge, and his wife was an associate in a large downtown firm specializing in patent law.

It wasn’t that Harold was not successful in the traditional sense of the word. He was, but by the Becker and Hammond standard, he fell a bit short of greatness. Being born a Becker and married to a Hammond put him in a position where the rest of the world’s excellence was their slightly above average.

Not that anyone openly disapproved or told Harold that he was not quite up to snuff. No one in

Harold's or his wife's family would ever say that to him. But he knew anyway. He knew when his wife casually mentioned that legislative elections were coming up in several months, didn't he want to consider it this year? Or when his father just happened to slip that information about an L.L.M. into his Christmas card last year. Or the way his mother-in-law introduced him. "This is my daughter, Katherine Hammond-Becker; she's a partner at Goldstein, Roberts, and Webb; they do patent work. Oh, and this is her husband, Harold. He's a lawyer too."

Harold met Katherine, his wife, on the first day of law school. She was young, excited, and three months out of college with a political science major. Katherine had a lot to live up to with her mother's hopes for her always present in her mind. But Katherine lived up to them. Top five percent at the end of the first year with a summer internship at the most prestigious firm in the city, law review, and a job as a teaching assistant for her contracts professor when she returned in the fall. Harold himself didn't do so bad either. He also made law review, but with only being in the top fifteen or so percent, Harold's job offers weren't as forthcoming as Katherine's, and he took a job with a small firm called Baker and Sloan in the suburbs.

Back at school that fall, Harold, who only entered on a whim, won his class's mock trial competition. Katherine had known Harold during first year, and they were on law review together, but before this prize was bestowed on him, she hadn't paid him much attention. To her he was just one of the masses. After he won the competition though, Katherine tried to spend more time around Harold. Suddenly, he was interesting. Litigation was something that interested Katherine very little, in fact, it scared her. She'd been knocked out of the competition in the first round. The fact that Harold was good, very good in fact, fascinated her. Katherine was used to being the best in anything she wanted to be, and in this one area she was unable. Harold had something she didn't and knew she never could, and while this infuriated her, it also intrigued her.

Harold fell swiftly for Katherine. She was smart, confident, and inside of her petite frame was a tough interior. In the middle of second year, Katherine made up her mind to fall for Harold. He was intelligent and funny, and as law students went, good looking. Most importantly, he had the potential to be a highly successful lawyer. Granted he was only top fifteen percent, but he was on law review, and no one could

deny that he had the makings of a top notch trial attorney. Katherine could envision the two of them at a cocktail party given by one of their respective firms, people admiring them from afar, two successful attorneys, a perfect partnership. Harold was also crazy about her, and she liked the idea of being with someone who thought she hung the moon and who would do anything for her.

Harold proposed to Katherine the summer before their third year. Harold had accepted a job with a much larger, more prestigious in-town litigation firm that summer. This pleased Katherine greatly. This firm, while not as well-known as the one with whom she was interning for a second summer, was well-respected, and known for its prowess in the litigation field. Harold's firm was in a building just two blocks from Katherine's, and when their schedules allowed, they would meet for lunch at a deli one block from each of their multi-floored buildings.

Harold and Katherine married during Christmas vacation of their third year. Both families insisted on a large wedding although Harold would have preferred a to have small, family wedding and save the money for a house. The Hammonds and the Beckers, though, dismissed that idea the minute Harold expressed it. They were determined that this wedding would be an "affair." And an affair it was, although Harold spent so much time shaking hands and meeting attorney friends of both families that he didn't even get a chance to taste the food that had been so painstakingly picked out by Katherine and her mother. Harold went along with it all without too much complaining because he loved Katherine, and he knew that in the end they'd be married, and to him, that was all that mattered.

They arrived home from a Caribbean honeymoon to cold weather and a flurry of law firm interviews. Katherine was confident she would receive an offer from the firm for whom she had interned, but she still went on as many interviews as possible. At least once a week, it seemed to Harold, Katherine was being wined and dined by different firms, all of whom seemed to want to hire her. Harold had his fair share of interviews as well. Not as many people were courting Harold as Katherine, but Katherine was certain he would be offered a job by the firm for whom he had worked the past summer, and she reminded him of it almost every day. She knew where he was going.

Harold, however, felt lost. He knew how Katherine felt, but he could not get excited about working fifteen hours a day, shuffling papers, stuck in

a building where it took ten minutes just to get to fresh air. He was proud of his mock trial championship, but that was where it stopped. He had no desire to use it to propel him into a position where he would be stuck in a pristine office dealing with clients at arm's length, working all of the daylight hours of the day, only to fall into bed as soon as he got home so he could repeat the same thing the next day. Just the summer internship with the more prestigious firm had given him a taste of something he wasn't sure he wanted to continue heaping on his plate.

In the end, Harold was rescued from having to make a decision. He was offered several associate positions with various firms, and although Katherine waited expectantly each day when Harold brought in the mail, the offer from Katherine's first choice never arrived. Secretly, Harold was glad. Months before he had gotten an offer from Baker and Sloan. It was a small firm. General practice. Lots of hands on dealing with the public. A little litigation, but not too much. A one-story building in the suburbs with windows that actually opened. Not a huge salary, but certainly enough to live on. Katherine refused to let him accept. "Tell them no," she said when one of the partners called to see if he'd made a decision yet. "Any day and you'll get the offer." That was how she referred to the anticipated call or letter from the approved firm. But that call never came. He had hoped it wouldn't although he didn't tell Katherine that. He liked the small firm in the cramped little building with letterhead that actually had room to fit all of the names of the partners and associates.

By the time the in-town firm sent him his rejection letter, a form letter at that, most of the firms acceptable to Katherine, had grown tired of waiting on his decision and had hired more eager graduates. The partners at Baker and Sloan, though, liked Harold. They recognized in him a bit of humanity, of humbleness, that were frankly harder to find these days, especially in top law school graduates. They had a feeling about Harold. All of the clients with whom he had dealt liked him immediately. And Harold liked dealing with people, they could tell. He liked sinking his hands into a client's case, delving into their personal, professional, and financial lives and making circumstances better for them. The clients appreciated that; it wasn't every day they felt an attorney was looking at them eye to eye and not from a pedestal far above. When Harold didn't come back to work with them his second summer, the firm was disappointed. They knew offering Harold a permanent position with them and having him accept was a long shot, but they

were willing to try.

Baker and Sloan were not the only ones surprised at Harold's acceptance of their offer. "What?" Katherine practically shouted at him when he told her of his decision. "What do you mean you're going to accept? Are you crazy? Hidgen and Porter are offering you almost twice what this little firm is, and as least I've *heard* of them."

"Yes," Harold agreed, "but they do only corporate work."

"So?" Katherine replied as if Harold couldn't possibly come up with an answer that would be satisfactory to her. As if Harold's own preference had no business being calculated into this decision.

"So," said Harold, "I don't want to do corporate litigation. I want to do general practice. Wills, divorces, adoptions. I want to go to deal with real people, not be some overpaid paper shuffler."

"Like me, you mean?" Katherine turned her back from him. Harold couldn't think of anything to say to that. He rinsed his plate of pasta and dropped it in the sink with a clatter.

"Listen to me, Katherine, this is what I want to do. It would make things much more pleasant if you'd be happy about it. Or at least make an effort to pretend you are." Harold grabbed his glass of wine from the table, spilling some as he did and went out onto the porch to get some fresh air. Katherine said nothing else about it. On the night they had dinner with the Baker and Sloan partners, after Harold had formally accepted, she went along, with, even though it may have been forced, a smile. Katherine never said anything else to Harold about his decision, never complained, never told him he could do better, never said anything to make him feel less because of his choice. But she didn't have to. Her looks, her sighs, her tone of voice told him, every day.

He tried not to let it bother him; he liked his new job, loved it in fact. Every day was different, every day presented him a new problem to solve for a real person who sat before him in his office. It felt good when clients appreciated him for taking time to listen. He sat and listened to Hoyt Willis, who owned a local service station he was desperately trying to save from foreclosure. Hoyt told Harold how he'd begun his business in 1934 and about Clarence, his right hand man, and all the others who had worked for him over the years. They were like family to him. Even though Harold had other things he needed to be doing, he listened to the ninety-one year old man because somebody should, and he couldn't think of any reason why it shouldn't be him.

He executed a will for Doctor Pittard the second year he was with the firm, and a year later escorted the doctor's widow to his funeral. He walked the land of many people for whom he did real estate closings. When Maryann Jensen found out her husband was having an affair, he prepared her divorce papers after she had sat in his office and cried for almost an hour. Of course, he had clients he dealt with only on paper, but that was fine with Harold. All in all, it was a balanced, challenging, fulfilling job that he was thankful he had. He was made a partner four years after he started working at Baker and Sloan and knew he was where he should be.

Katherine had apparently found her niche also, although she worked so much that Harold didn't hear it from her. By the fifth year she was with the firm, she was making well over six figures and was on the path to partnership. Harold would have preferred a little less money and Katherine home a little more, but her response was inevitably, "Just a few more years. Just a few more years, then I'll make partner, and we can think about starting a family." Harold knew that wasn't likely. Katherine was already thirty-two and religious about birth control almost to the point of obsession. Harold couldn't foresee her turning maternal in time enough to outrun the ticking of her biological clock.

Early each morning when Katherine had already been at work for at least an hour, Harold met a group of local businessmen at the corner drug store for coffee. It was there, during a particularly heated discussion concerning politics, that he first encountered Carter Cotton, local author, celebrity, and town eccentric. Cotton had written several novels classified as "southern fiction" that dealt with crime, lust, and deception in misty, moss-covered fictional southern towns. His novels were immensely popular especially among northern readers who had never visited the south, but who imagined it as a wild, sultry, untamed sort of place.

Carter Cotton was a sporadic attendee of the morning coffee chats. Whether he was caught up in the middle of prosaic inspiration or whether he just liked to give the impression of an eccentric, unpredictable author, Harold never knew. When he did attend, Cotton would enter quietly and take a seat by the window ordering hot tea rather than coffee. He always arrived impeccably dressed in an expensive suit, cufflinks shining, and a cream colored hat atop his head. Occasionally he would engage in conversation with the others, but just as often he would sit quietly sipping his tea sometimes listening to the banter,

sometimes staring ahead blankly, apparently caught up in his own thoughts. When he spoke, it was with eloquence and intelligence no matter the subject — politics, medicine, law, or even meteorological patterns. The extensive research he had done for his novels had filled him with knowledge that, while not always practical, certainly enriched conversation.

Cotton was married with two adult children, though no one with whom Harold spoke ever recalled seeing them. Cotton was reputed to be an immensely private person who lived in a log cabin, complete with modern conveniences, right outside of town by the river. It was rumored that Cotton had a sort of adult-sized treehouse, covered on all sides with glass, the northern side looking down into the lazy river below. It was not until Cotton was accused of murder that Harold knew this to be fact.

He was summoned, that was the best way Harold could describe it, to Cotton's home one day in late spring. The sun was shining, glinting off the wet leaves and ground after a pre-dawn thunderstorm, but the inviting appearance of the day didn't assuage Harold's feeling that something was looming. Harold had heard that Cotton's wife had been found in the passenger seat of her car, not far from her home, shot once through the chest the prior weekend. That had been the principle subject of the morning coffee group for the past week as well as the talk of every other person who knew or knew of Carter Cotton. There were a variety of theories floating around as to who had done it, ranging from suicide, to a bitter lover, to Carter himself. No one had glimpsed the author since his wife had been shot, and it took Harold by complete surprise when he picked up his phone one evening while waiting for Katherine to get home and heard Cotton's quiet, cultured voice on the other end.

"Mr. Becker," Cotton began without introducing himself, "I don't know quite how to say this — I never assumed that I would have to, but I need a lawyer."

"Sir?" Harold asked. He hadn't seen this coming at all.

"I need a lawyer, Mr. Becker. A defense attorney, that is, and I'd like to hire you. It seems I am to be investigated in connection with my wife's death." There was no emotion in Cotton's voice, no grief, no fear, only a matter of factness, an assuming of a role he knew he must.

Harold leaned back against the kitchen counter, one hand gripping the phone tightly to his ear, the other against the counter for balance.

"Me, sir?" Harold asked. "I'm sorry if I sound

dense, but I really don't understand."

Cotton sighed as if the telling of the thing were exhausting him. "Mr. Becker, I've found myself in a very precarious position. I may be charged with my wife's murder. I don't think I need to tell you the repercussions this could have on my career and book sales, not to mention my life. I realize I could afford any number of attorneys anywhere in the country, but I don't know them. I know you. Not very intimately, of course, but I know enough."

Harold's mind was whirling. He could probably count on one hand the number of true conversations he'd had over the years with Cotton, if they could even be classified as conversations. And a potential murder trial. Harold had done some criminal work, but save one aggravated assault on a police officer, they had been mostly misdemeanors, a few DUIs, an occasional battery or theft, cases requiring minimal prowess in the courtroom. He had won acquittals for over half of his clients, but Harold knew there were plenty of more experienced local attorneys with a better record than his. He'd never even observed a murder trial, much less defended one.

"Mr. Cotton," Harold said, "I don't want to disappoint you, but I don't think I have the experience you need. I've never tried a murder case. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

Cotton cleared his throat and spoke slowly, "It's not experience I'm looking for, Mr. Becker. It's a willingness to go to the edge for a client. You have that in abundance, from what I've seen and heard." It didn't occur to Harold to ask how Cotton had gotten that impression.

Cotton continued. "You know this area, the people, the attitudes. I don't want a high profile attorney drawing more attention to this thing than it will naturally receive. I would like to hire you."

"Mr. Cotton, I'm not sure . . ." Harold began to tell him that he wasn't confident taking on the case himself, but Cotton interrupted.

"Well *I'm* sure, Mr. Becker. And I've tried a murder case. At least on paper I have, a couple of novels ago. I didn't kill my wife, Mr. Becker. That's all there is to it."

Harold wished it were as simple as that.

"Mr. Becker," Cotton said, "I insist." And Harold found that as much as he felt he should refuse, he couldn't.

The next few months seemed a blur to Harold. Carter Cotton was indeed charged with his wife's murder. They were reportedly having "marital difficulties," as the tabloids put it, and there was a large

insurance policy at stake. While Cotton insisted he didn't kill her, there were at least two incidents when the police were called by the Cotton's live-in housekeeper to respond to "domestic disturbances." Harold knew the next few months would be anything but smooth.

Katherine was at first thrilled that her husband had landed such a sensational client. Defending Carter Cotton meant a lot of money, she kept reminded him, not to mention if Harold got him acquitted, what a boon that would have to his business. Soon, according to Katherine, he could start his own practice, or move in with a downtown firm; whatever he wanted..

Harold had barely a moment of spare time to listen to Katherine's plans for him, much less keep a check on them. Besides, Harold knew it was futile to remind his wife for at least the thousandth time in their marriage that although having such a life may be the end all for her, he preferred his life, at least his professional life, the way it was. So he let Katherine go on dreaming while he worked at a furious pace trying to familiarize himself with the intricacies of trying a murder case.

His days at the office lengthened. Not long after taking Cotton's case, he began arriving at work before seven and staying until at least eight or nine each night. His morning coffee chats were a thing of the past — if Harold had a spare moment, he felt guilty if it weren't dedicated to Cotton's defense or to his other clients, the ones he hadn't passed off to the partners at Baker and Sloan. The firm didn't mind, or they didn't let Harold know if they did. In their minds, this was a once in a career opportunity, and they were happy for Harold and the attention he was bringing to the firm. They worried, though, that after this, Harold might not be satisfied with the less sensational work he typically did at Baker and Sloan, and would want to move on to greener pastures. As much as Harold had tried to hide it over the years, they knew Katherine's personality and ambition and her preferences for Harold. So they gave Harold their blessing and took on the work Harold wasn't able to, hoping in the end the result would be good for all.

Somewhat to Harold's surprise, Cotton helped out immensely in the preparation of his own defense. He had logged countless hours in courtrooms watching criminal procedures and reading hornbooks on criminal law and evidence to gather enough knowledge to write a convincing legal tale a few years earlier. Often, Cotton would meet him at the office before dawn going over strategies, witness lists, and his own testimony. Harold probed into Cotton's

background with his wife, trying to identify any weaknesses the State was sure to discover. Cotton persisted in his denial, and through their conversations, Harold discovered that Cotton barely knew his wife at all. They had drifted apart long ago and had been sleeping in separate bedrooms as well as living separate lives for longer than Cotton cared to remember. He insisted that although his wife had been a stranger to him for more than a decade, he still loved her and could never hurt her. Most of the time, Harold believed him.

The closer Harold got to Cotton, the further he drifted from Katherine. Initially, she had been excited that he was defending the famous author, even leaving work a little early one evening to cook dinner for her husband and his client. As time passed, and the case consumed more of Harold's life, however, she lauded his defense of Cotton less and less. Because the trial date was bearing down on him, and he was still handling several of his other clients, the hours he spent at work lengthened. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten home before Katherine, when in the past he'd always had two or three hours to kill before he heard her keys jingling in the door. Now, he'd frequently arrive home to find her curled up on the couch breathing deeply in sleep, the TV murmuring in the background. He would lean over, remove the remote from her sleepy grip and push her hair from her face. Asleep like that, she looked so innocent and vulnerable. Often she'd stir, creases on her face, confused about the time or exactly where she was. He would offer her an arm and pull her from the comfortable folds of the sofa, guiding her to the bedroom where she'd carelessly remove her clothes and drop them onto the floor before falling into bed, mumbling vague questions to him about his day.

The times that Harold and Katherine were together and awake were often strained and uncomfortable. Katherine was frequently quiet, staring blankly out of the car window as they drove to eat dinner on a Saturday night, her mind nowhere close to the car or Harold. She insisted things were fine — she'd just gotten a raise and her work couldn't be better, but it sounded more like Katherine was trying to convince herself than to convince him. More than once, Harold caught Katherine staring at him as if she couldn't quite place him, as if he were someone she had met once but couldn't quite recall when or where. Sometimes she would ask about the defense, and when he would tell her the details, an edge of excitement in his voice, she would listen and nod, looking oddly sad.

The shorter the time before the trial got, the more Katherine seemed withdrawn and melancholy. It was unlike Katherine to be this sensitive. Lately, she'd cry at the slightest thing, a criticism from Harold, a moving story on the news. One night he came in quite a bit later than usual, and Katherine met him at the door, her eyes glazed with tears that spilt out as she explained that the weather had been bad, it was so late, and she'd been worried that he'd been in a wreck.

When Harold would question Katherine about what was bothering her, she would say it was nothing, not to worry, just concentrate on the trial. So Harold tried not to let it get to him as much as he could, hoping that after the trial, things could get back to normal, as normal as their lives could be considered.

The week before the trial Harold worked practically nonstop. At most, he got three or four hours of sleep, crawling into bed long after Katherine had been asleep and rising before she began to stir. His only communication with her was an occasional note left on the kitchen counter reminding him to pick up something at the store or to let him know she'd be working late that evening in case he called and she didn't answer.

The trial itself lasted a week with jury selection on a Monday and the jury receiving their instructions from the judge mid-morning Friday. The trial itself seemed unreal to Harold. When it was over and he looked back at the whole process, it was like being in a car accident — he remembered it, but the memory was vague and dreamlike as if it had happened to someone else and he was on the periphery watching. When he later read over the transcript from the trial, he was amazed at some of the questions he had asked and the arguments he'd made. At times, Harold felt insecure before the jury, but the transcript showed him that his arguments were sound, his questions right on the mark, and Harold realized that while he had a lot to learn, he had done a damn good job. Sometimes, he couldn't figure out from where some of his questions and arguments had come. Much of it hadn't been planned or practiced, but Harold had studied hard and absorbed so much that in the end it all came together and flowed from him as if it had a life of its own. Perhaps it was because he believed Cotton, perhaps it was because he wanted to prove something to himself, or maybe, probably, it was because he wanted to prove something to Katherine, prove that he could take on something bigger than himself, bigger than her even, and succeed.

In the end, after four and a half hours of deliberation

and one smoking break, the jury acquitted Carter Cotton. As Cotton stood beside him and the verdict was published, Harold felt a wave of emotions pulse through him — pride, relief, thankfulness, and a bit of disbelief that he had actually done it. At this point, looking back to the beginning of the whole process, Harold felt slightly nauseated as if he were looking over the edge of a cliff he had just climbed realizing only now the sheer height of it and the slippery spots that lurked in crevices he had miraculously avoided. He felt lucky.

The relief on Cotton's face was palpable as were his feelings of gratitude toward Harold. Harold was equally grateful, for without Cotton's familiarity with murder trials, Harold would have had to spend a great deal more time than he did bent over books researching. Cotton shook Harold's hand firmly clasping the handshake with his other hand. "Mr. Becker, I am indebted to you," Cotton said, looking Harold squarely in the eyes.

Harold gripped Cotton's hand. "Mr. Cotton, I haven't said it before, maybe I'm too superstitious, but I appreciate the opportunity to represent you." Harold smiled, something it seemed, he hadn't done in quite a while. It felt almost unnatural, but it felt good.

"No, it is *I* who have learned," Cotton said. "I now have an idea for the main character in my new novel." Cotton had a wry, conspiratorial smile on his face. "I'll be talking to you soon, Mr. Becker." Cotton picked up his hat, tipping it to Harold before placing it on his head and striding from the courtroom.

When Harold left the courthouse, reporters were waiting on the steps — cameras, tape recorders, and bright lights in hand. Harold had expected this, but the first glimpse of the menagerie of press waiting to talk to *him*, Harold Becker, gave him a slight thrill. He patiently answered all of their questions until they were apparently satisfied that they had captured the whole story. Then he picked up his briefcase and walked toward his car, the sun having just dipped below the horizon, street lights blinking on with the waning of the day.

When he opened the front door to their home, Harold could hear the television in the den. Katherine was standing in front of the TV, still in her work clothes, a shot of Harold leaving the courthouse not thirty minutes earlier, on the screen in front of her. When she heard Harold lay his keys on the foyer table, she turned to him with a crooked smile on her face. "You've already had nine phone calls," she said holding out a list with names and numbers. As she

did, the phone rang and Katherine laughed. "Congratulations," she said before he picked up the receiver, "in case I don't get a chance to tell you." On the coffee table, Harold saw a bottle of champagne and two flutes.

It was late, almost midnight, when the phone finally quit ringing. Katherine and Harold sat propped on opposite ends of the couch, the champagne unopened in front of them. After all the incoming calls and the calls Harold had returned, he had an offer from a well-known litigation firm downtown for a salary almost twice what he was presently making. How they had heard of the verdict and decided to offer him a job in the five or six hours that had lapsed since he left the courtroom, Harold had no idea. He only knew that his life was about to change immensely depending on the choice he made. He felt excited and flattered, yet unprepared.

"Well?" he said to Katherine after he'd relayed the details of all the messages. "It's what we've always wanted, isn't it?" Katherine sat watching him and pulled her feet underneath her as if to make herself occupy as small a space as possible. "Harold," she said softly, "I'm afraid, it's what *I've* always wanted." This was the first time Katherine had admitted that this dream for Harold was singly hers.

"But maybe this is what I should do," Harold argued. "Maybe winning this case was a sign that I can do more than I'm doing, that I'm not utilizing my ability to the fullest."

Harold was finally verbalizing the thoughts that had been lurking in his mind lately. "I don't know Katherine. You've always thought I could do better. I know you have," he added when she started to protest. "Maybe you're right. Maybe this is some sort of awakening for me."

Harold rambled on trying to tell Katherine what he thought she wanted to hear and convincing himself that this was what he wanted or even if it wasn't exactly, it was what he owed himself. When he quit talking, he glanced over at Katherine and was surprised to see she was crying, tears rolling down her cheeks, before she could wipe them away.

"Kate," Harold said, calling her the name used to call her when they were dating. "Kate, tell me what's wrong." For the first time that evening, Harold realized that Katherine had already been home when he arrived, a little after five. Not once since she had begun working, except for the time she'd had to have her wisdom teeth removed and was beside herself with pain, had she been home that early.

Katherine's silent weeping turned to sobs. "I'm

sorry, I'm sorry," she repeated. Harold had no idea what was wrong, but he took her into his arms and held her tightly until she relaxed and finally laid her head on his chest. "I'm sorry," she whispered into his lapel.

"For what?" Harold asked. He was bewildered. He couldn't imagine what had happened to cause her to be waiting for him at five o'clock, to upset her this much.

She sat up, wiping away the mascara that had collected beneath her eyes and looked at him. "I'm sorry that I've made you think that who you are isn't enough."

Harold went to pull her closer, but she sat up and pushed him back. "Let me finish." She cleared her throat. "I've been horrible, Harold. I have. And I am so, so sorry. These past weeks, with you involved in this trial, made me realize just how awful it must have been for you. I've come home every night for a month to an empty, cold house, and it got to where I didn't even want to come home anymore. I know it's been the same for you too, but not just for a month, for years."

Harold reached out and tucked her fallen hair behind her ears. He didn't know what to say. Coming home to an empty house, knowing Katherine would rather be at work than at home *was* awful. He couldn't deny it. But Harold loved her and was willing to live a sort of shadow life rather than live without her.

"Katherine," Harold said gently, "I love you. I agree, being alone so much isn't much fun, but I knew how driven and dedicated you were when I married you. It didn't come as a shock. And it's part of the reason why I love you and why you're the person I married."

Harold could see Katherine's lower lip tremble as if she were holding something back that was struggling to come out. He reached for her hand and tears began cascading down her face. "But Harold," she sputtered, "what if I've changed, what if I don't want to be that exact person you married anymore." Harold felt his chest tighten. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," she said, sobbing now so that Harold had to strain to hear what she was saying. "I'm saying, that I've missed you so bad it hurts like hell. I'm saying I want you home with me at the end of the day, not with a client, or in court, or at work. I'm saying *I* want to be at home with you, not three hours later when we barely have time to speak to each other before we turn out the light."

Harold felt his own eyes begin to tear up. "And

I'm saying," Katherine continued, "I'm saying that in seven months we're going to have a baby."

Harold's gaze snapped back at Katherine, his face probing hers, questioning. His mouth began to form questions, but nothing would come out. Katherine began laughing through her tears, and then fresh tears started flowing again. "I'm pregnant, Harold. Damn it. I'm pregnant. I just found out I'm about to make partner, and I'm pregnant." Harold didn't know whether to congratulate or console her. She had completely stunned and confused him, and he had absolutely no idea what was going to come next. "And you know what?" Katherine asked. Harold couldn't possibly begin to guess. "What?" he asked.

"I'm happy." As she said it, she threw her arms around his neck hugging him fiercely. "I'm happy," she said again still crying but smiling as well.

Harold hugged her back, stroking her hair, and letting a few tears fall himself. He had no idea what would come next, what this would mean for their careers, for Katherine's goals, but right now he didn't care. He just cared that his wife was there, right there with him, and it seemed like she was there to stay. Harold uncorked the champagne that he now realized hadn't been purchased just to congratulate him on his win. He poured himself a glass and poured Katherine a smaller one. They toasted each other, and curled up on the sofa together, they talked late into the night. They said all the things they hadn't said over the years and things that had never occurred to them to say. As night began to turn toward day, long after all the other lights in the neighborhood blinked out, theirs still burned. ☒

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