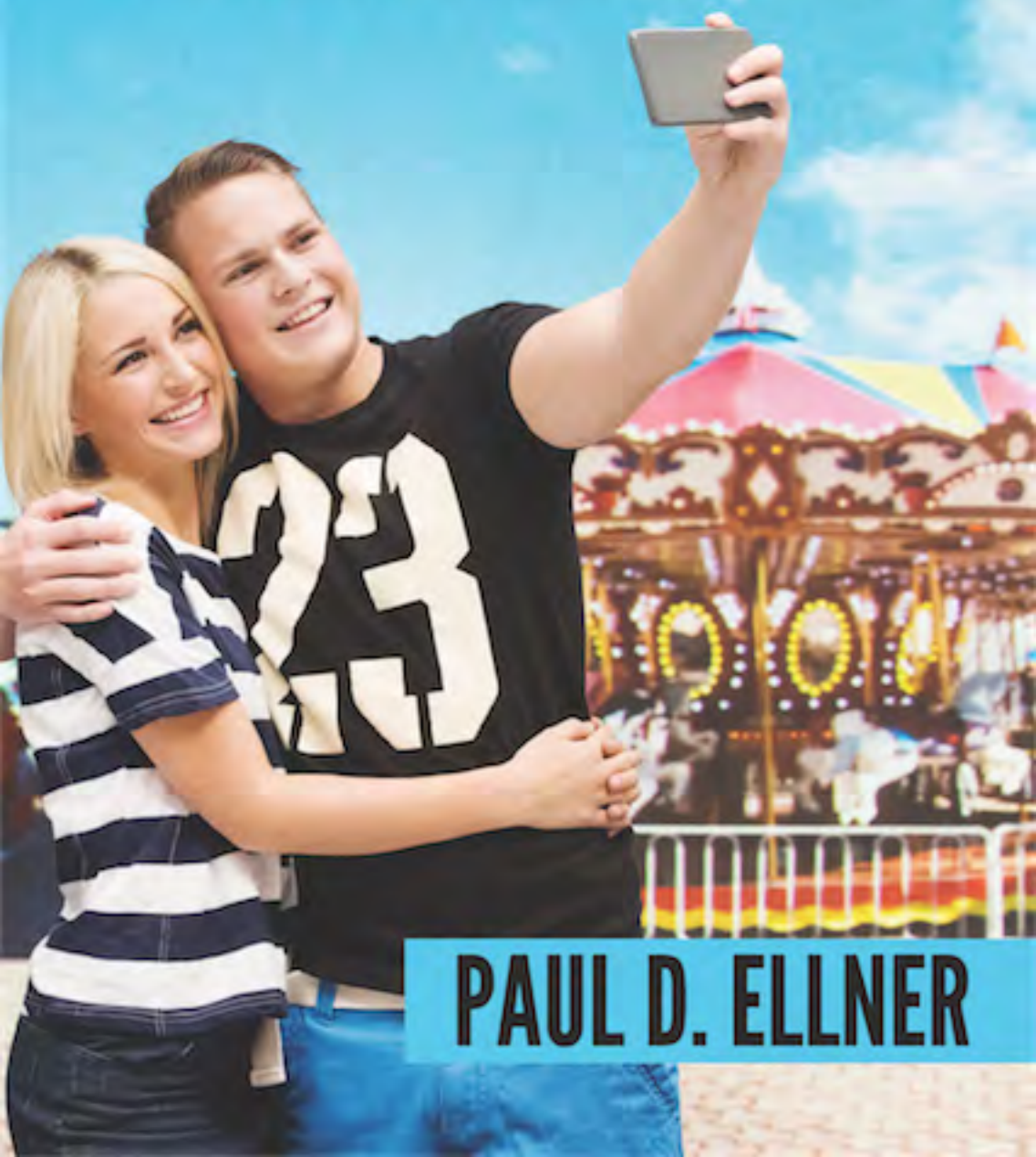


BRIGHT FIGURES SINISTER SHADOWS

SHORT STORIES WITH UNEXPECTED ENDINGS



PAUL D. ELLNER

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ABOUT THESE STORIES

My attraction to short stories with surprising conclusions was initiated when I read *The Lady, or the Tiger?* by Frank Stockton. The ending was tantalizing. Short stories have the appeal that one gets to meet the protagonist, learn about his or her particular problem, and enjoy the final resolution all in one sitting. Soon after reading *The Lady, or the Tiger?* I read *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* by Ambrose Bierce and was stunned by the last line. In time, I found other stories with surprising endings. Some of these were *The Most Dangerous Game* by Richard Connell, *The Devil and Daniel Webster* by Stephen Vincent Benet, and several of the stories in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. Rod Serling's T.V. series *The Twilight Zone* typified such stories. I liked the "twist" at the end.

I have tried to craft similar stories here. The endings may be startling, amusing, or cause you to ponder for a moment or two. I hope that you may find one or two pleasing.

P.D.E.

STIGMATA

At 5:20 on a spring afternoon, Doctor George Rosen pulled into the parking lot of the Piggly-Wiggly Market in Gainesville, Florida. He jumped out of his car and hurried into the market, pausing only to steal a quick glance at the checkout line. *Yes, Lori was there.* Consulting the list Evelyn had given him, he grabbed a cart and started shopping. He soon finished and took his place in the checkout line.

As the line shortened, George started to unload his cart in preparation for checkout. His heart began to beat faster. He could not keep his eyes off Lori. She was beautiful. When it was his turn, she recognized him with a ready smile.

“Hi, Dr. Rosen.”

He had to clear his throat before responding. “Hi, Lori, how are you today?”

“I’m just fine,” she said. Then in a lower voice she added, “When will we take those pictures?”

“Soon, Lori. In the next few days, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” she smiled. “Bye.”

Lori was about 20, with large blue eyes, a pert nose, and a wide mouth. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail secured with a rubber band. Her white blouse, which failed to conceal the cleavage of her young breasts, bore a nametag that read “Lori Sue” and her black pedal pushers were tight enough to accentuate her round bottom and long legs.

George was an instructor in Pharmacology at the University of Florida, his first position since receiving his Ph.D. At 32, he was one of the youngest researchers there. He and Evelyn had purchased a small house not far from the medical school and

Priscilla, their three-year old, had started nursery school. George and Evelyn were soon immersed in the town-gown social life. Most of their friends were other young faculty members. George played poker once a week with some colleagues who referred to themselves as the “Committee for Redistribution of Faculty Salaries.”

For the past few weeks, George flirted with Lori each time he went shopping. She stirred his loins like no girl ever had. He and Evelyn were married for five years and up till now he never strayed, but this girl was different. He could not help himself. He wanted her, and he plotted to seduce her.

George formulated a plan. He complimented Lori on her looks and suggested she could be a model. She became excited at the idea.

“That’s cool. As a matter of fact, I was a runner-up for the Miss Florida contest last year. I always wanted to be a model,” Lori gushed. She went on to tell him that she had been a cheerleader at Gainesville High’s football games.

Lori considered George. *He works at the medical school—he is some sort of a doctor—so he must be okay.*

“I can take some pictures of you which could be used for model agencies,” George told her.

Lori was enthusiastic. “How much will it cost?” she asked.

“Nothing. I’d be glad to do it.”

George had planned to meet her after work, drive to a deserted place he knew out in the Palmettos and convince her to pose nude. Then, he would make love to her. At night, George fantasized a naked Laurie beneath him, gasping with passion, her long legs wrapped around his hips, as he . . .

On the day George had arranged to pick up Lori, he was anxious.

“Are you okay, Dr. Rosen?” Grace, his technician asked. “You’re acting kind of jumpy.”

George assured her he was fine.

At 5:30 he met Lori at the Piggly-Wiggly and drove out into the country. They walked a short distance into the Palmettos where he knew of a small natural pool surrounded by sand.

“This is a good spot,” he said.

He posed Lori in sexy positions with the pool in the background and took a number of photos.

“Now we’ll take some as if you’re going to go skinny-dipping.” He directed her to face the pool and remove her blouse. “Take off your bra too, and hold your blouse over your head as if you were just removing it.” Lori complied without hesitation. “That’s great,” he said, and took a few shots. At this point, George planned to tell her to turn around and face him so that he could feast his eyes on those perky young breasts. Next he would . . .

But then, a stern voice in his head warned. *Whoa boy, do you know what you’re doing? You could be in deep shit! Evelyn could find out and divorce you. It would become known. You could lose your job and that would be the end of your career. She’s not worth the risk.*

“Okay,” he said huskily. “You can get dressed.”

Lori seemed disappointed. “Is that all?” She seemed quite willing to share her charms and all the allure of young Southern pulchritude for him and his camera.

During the drive back, Lori seemed confused. “Did you get all the pictures you wanted? Are you sure that’s enough?”

“I think they will be fine. I’ll have them for you in a few days.”

At the market, Lori got out of the car. “Thanks, Dr. Rosen. See you.” George could not get away fast enough.

A week later two police officers appeared at George's laboratory. "Are you Dr. George Rosen?" one of them asked.

"Yes, that's me. What can I do for you?"

"Could you please step outside for a minute?" the officer said.

George accompanied them into the hallway. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"We'd like you to come down to the station with us," the officer told him.

"Why? Is this a traffic thing? Has my license expired? What . . ."

"Do you know a Lori Sue Benton?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Has anything happened to her?" George's mouth became dry.

"When did you last see her?" the officer asked, ignoring George's question.

"About a week ago, in the market. What are these questions about?"

"She claims that you raped her," the officer said. "Let's go."

George became aware that Grace and some other people stared as he and the police officers walked away.

At the police station he was forced to wait until Lori Sue, accompanied by a police matron, her father and one of the arresting officers, arrived.

"Is this the man you claim to have raped you?" The police officer asked. Lori looked at George, and then turned away.

"Yes, that's him," she whispered.

"Are you certain that he is the man?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Her father, a burly man, glared at George.

Lori and her father left. The police officer turned to George. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?"

"Yes," George said. He was stunned as he was photographed and fingerprinted.

"You have the right to phone anyone," he told George.

George tried to call Evelyn, but she was not home. He had to wait several hours until he was able to reach her.

"What do you mean you're in jail?" Evelyn asked. "What did you do?"

"Are you alone?" George asked.

"Just me and Prissy."

"I'm accused of raping a girl."

"What?" Evelyn screamed.

"I didn't do it," George said, "but I think I need a lawyer."

George was locked in a cell, where he spent a miserable night.

The next day, a man in a business suit was admitted to George's cell. He handed a business card to George. "I'm Joe Morelli. Your lawyer."

George took a minute to look him over. He was of average height and balding.

"Tell me about it," Morelli said. "Did you do it?"

"No."

"What happened then?" Morelli asked.

"Nothing happened. I just took her out to take some pictures. I didn't touch her."

The lawyer looked unconvinced. "Why were you taking pictures of her?"

"She told me she wanted to be a model. I tried to help her."

"Is that the whole story? You didn't—like hug her or anything?"

George bristled. "I told you I didn't touch her."

"Then why do you think she says you raped her?"

George shook his head. "I don't know."

"Okay, I'm going to try and get you out on bail," Morelli told him as he left.

The following day George stood before a judge with Morelli at his side. An assistant district attorney was present. "You have been charged with rape," the judge said. "How do you plead?"

George looked at Morelli. "Just say 'not guilty.'"

"Not guilty," George told the judge.

Morelli addressed the judge. "Your honor, the defendant is a faculty member at the Medical School and a family man. He's not likely to attempt to flee."

The judge looked at George. "Bail is set at \$10,000." The judge looked questioning at the A.D.A., who glanced at George. "That's acceptable to the county," he said. The judge glanced at the docket. "The trial will take place in two weeks."

Morelli drove George home. "Don't leave town," he told George as he dropped him off in front of his house. George could see that some of the neighbors were watching.

George went back to work, but he was aware that his colleagues tried to avoid him. Even Grace was unusually silent. At home, Evelyn said nothing, but she slept in the guest room.

During the next two weeks, George endured the coldness of his colleagues and friends. In the faculty dining room, he was obliged to eat a solo lunch each day.

At 9:00 on a cloudy morning, George entered the courtroom with his lawyer and took his seat at the defense table. He told his lawyer he wanted the opportunity to take the stand and tell his side of the story, but Morelli disagreed. "It'll be better if I do the talking," Morelli told him. George noticed Lori's father and brother. Mr. Benton, a large man, who worked at the feed store in town, looked grim and her brother, a muscular man, glared at George. George thought he saw some of his neighbors and fellow faculty members in the gallery. The assistant district attorney prosecuting the case started by having Lori take the stand, describing Lori as a sweet, innocent, hard-working young woman. Lori testified that George had enticed her into the Palmettos, promising to take some photos, and then attacked her. She went on to describe how she struggled. The prosecutor produced a large photograph of George, naked to the waist. The picture showed four parallel scratch marks running diagonally across George's chest. "I would like to enter this into evidence," he said, and the photo was shown to the jury.

"I don't remember when they took that picture of me," George told Morelli. Morelli stood to cross-examine Lori. After asking her why she had accompanied George into the Palmettos, he asked her why she had not sought medical attention after the alleged incident. Lori blushed and said that she had been too embarrassed. "Ms. Benton, have you ever had Morelli sexual relations before this?" The prosecutor called, "objection, irrelevant," and the judge told Lori to disregard the question.

Morelli sat down, and the prosecutor rested his case.

The jury retired but was back in ten minutes.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

The Foreman nodded and handed the Bailiff a slip of paper.

“The Defendant will rise,” the judge ordered. George and Morelli stood. The judge opened the slip of paper. “The jury finds you guilty of rape.” George slumped. “I sentence you to be confined in the state penitentiary for three to five years.” He banged his gavel.

George rushed over to the bench. “It’s not true!” he yelled at the judge. “I’ll tell you the truth now. I really wanted to—have sex with her, but I chickened out. I never laid a finger on her.”

“Bailiff, remove the Defendant,” the judge called. The Bailiff and a deputy rushed forward, pinioned George’s arms, handcuffed him and, dragged him from the courtroom.

“I didn’t touch her,” George screamed. “I didn’t touch . . .”

“You didn’t touch who?” Evelyn asked. “Wake up, George. You were dreaming.”

George opened his eyes. It was dark. He lay in bed with Evelyn next to him. He was covered with sweat.

My God, it was all a dream—just a damn dream.

In the morning George dressed and went down for breakfast. He felt like a new man.

“Good morning, Daddy,” Priscilla chirped as he bent to kiss her. Evelyn served him bacon, eggs and grits, poured his coffee and smiled as she sat down at the table.

At work everything was normal. Grace greeted him with a smile and, his friends joined him for lunch.

The prints of the photos he had taken of Lori were delivered to his office. He could not bear to look at them. When he left work, George took the prints and drove to the Piggly-Wiggly. He did not shop but got into Lori’s checkout line. When it was his turn, she greeted him with a cheery “Hi, Dr. Rosen. How are you today?”

“Here are the pictures,” George said as he handed the photos to her. His hands were shaking. He started to leave.

“Thanks a lot, Dr. Rosen”, he heard her call as he left. He would never shop at that market again.

That evening was a quiet one. At bedtime, Evelyn, already in bed, watched George as he pulled on his pajamas.

“George! What happened to your chest?”

George looked down, dismayed to see four parallel scratch marks that ran diagonally across his chest. They had already started to heal.