

## Buyer's Remorse

John Farrell

I have always been cautious about spending money. I choose my possessions with care. I am not too proud to hunt for bargains. Once I purchase an item, I am committed to it. I fear the sting of “buyer's remorse.”

Some people consider me excessively cautious. My husband, Walter, for instance, mentions periodically that our co-consumership is a trial of his existence; that buying a car with me is an ordeal; that he might not have married me if he had known how long it would take to select, not to mention furnish, our home. Being an economist, he often reminds me that the time and effort invested in choosing a commodity can easily exceed the difference in value between the options, thus making the process of deliberation a net loss. I tell him that I enjoy choosing my car, my clothes, my home; that part of the pleasure I take in them is knowing they were chosen well. When the occasion offers I even enjoy choosing my husband. To economists and husbands I counsel patience.

Given these traits of mine, you will understand why I found the following episode upsetting. It was Christmas week and I was at a holiday party given by the mid-sized consulting and management services company where at that time I held the position of assistant treasurer—yes, I am a treasurer in more ways than one. I was having an exceptionally jolly time of it. Drinks were flowing. Freddy French, an admirer of mine from the marketing department, was amusing me with tales of the gullible clients he had when he was an insurance salesman. I was one of the last people to leave, and in the best of spirits, until I got to the coat room, where a shock was awaiting me. There was hardly a coat left upon the rack, and mine was not among them. Hanging next to where I'd put it, though, was a not entirely distant replica—woolen like mine, and green, with a white fur collar,

but whereas my coat had been new, purchased at Nordstrom's only that September, this one was pale, fatigued, its dinginess enhanced by being two sizes larger than the one I'd left. I was expecting a coat that matched the festiveness of my Christmas mood; instead I got a horse-blanket. But since it was freezing outside, I took the impostor off the rack. At that moment a perky young secretary named Marcia came in to get her things. She got even perkier when I showed her the coat. "I think it must be Ms. Blaine's coat," she said, with a slight hush, referring to Cynthia Blaine, the VP and CEO of the company. "She left a few minutes ago wearing one just like that."

"Only perhaps a little more chic?"

"Might be," she said. "I'm surprised she could get into your coat."

"I have broad shoulders," I told her, "more than people realize."

Bill Frazier, the marketing director, came in looking for his coat. I could see he'd had quite a bit to drink, but he works closely with Cynthia so I asked him about the old coat. He came right over and gave it and me an exploratory sniff. "Yes, that's Cynthia," he said.

"She took mine and left this one behind."

"Wouldn't yours be a bit confining for our girl?"

"I've got big shoulders, bigger than you'd think."

"Well, we'll have to make sure you're pulling your weight." I didn't answer because I don't like being teased, and I really don't like being sniffed.

"I'll be seeing Cynthia first thing in the morning," he said, finally, "and I'll tell her she stole your coat."

"That's not how I'd phrase it," I told him.

So I put on Cynthia's coat, which did fit me reasonably well because of my unostentatiously broad shoulders, and wore it home, my mood now in a rumpled, soiled condition, having endured the loss of a treasured garment

and still suffering the musky afterwhiff of what was presumably Cynthia's perfume.

Cynthia Blaine had been our vice-president and CEO for two-and-a-half years, and she was generally credited with turning the company around. Immediately upon arrival she made some long-needed but awkward personnel decisions, so the first reaction to her presence was fear. After a difficult beginning, though, she proved to be a not unappreciative boss, and the success of her reign lifted the morale of the company. She led us through the Great Recession with a comparative minimum of pain, and it was assumed by everyone that if she was still here when the president retired, the job would be hers.

I must admit, however, that I never really liked Cynthia. There was something about her style that bothered me, though it was only after she appropriated my coat that I took the trouble to define it. First of all there was her size. As the dimensions of her coat would suggest, Cynthia is a big-bodied woman, imposing both physically and psychologically. That's not to say she isn't attractive. On the contrary, she has a soft, pretty face, fair skin, and blonde ringlets to go with her innocent blue eyes. She has a rich, opulent voice. For a man who wants a lot of woman, she is a find. Everything about her says, I have a beautiful, natural abundance. Also, from the male point of view, she has the kind of attractiveness that goes with power. Maternal authority you could say. Men can take orders from her and enjoy it in a way they couldn't from a cuter, more kittenish type like myself. Not that I wanted to give orders. But I knew I could never be Cynthia.

In addition to all this, and more to the point, there was something slightly careless, slightly reckless, about Cynthia, despite her managerial aplomb. She knew that in the current business climate all of us were at her disposal, that she could do with us professionally what she wished, and she

never abused the privilege. She never teased or scolded or reminded anybody of the high level of unemployment. But you could see how her position buoyed her up. It was fun being Cynthia Blaine, righter of sinking ships. She was happy on the job, making decisions, giving instructions, leading the team, going over the books with the treasurer and me and absorbing the fine details. She never encroached on any of our expertise or questioned our methods. No, she made our confidence her own. It was a completely successful approach, and I have to admit that, from an objective point of view, Cynthia was the perfect boss. To this day it's hard for me to understand why I minded this, or how, if I'd been in her place, I would have wanted to behave differently. But to me she was just a little bit reckless, or if that's not the right word, maybe too all-assuming. It was too obvious to her that success would be found at the end of the parade she was leading. It was with this slight excess of confidence that I pictured Cynthia assuming my coat and, without even knowing it, leaving her old one to me. What was she doing with such an old coat anyway? Dinginess wasn't really her line.

At ten the next morning I went up to Frazier's office. He was looking baggy and out of sorts, hung over no doubt. When I asked him about the coat he looked like a man struggling to remember his name. "Coat?" he said. I had to remind him of the facts, including his sniffing expedition.

"Ah," he said, "but could Cynthia get into your coat?"

"You asked me that already, and I told you my shoulders are big enough to wear a coat her size, though mine was actually smaller."

"Oh right," he said. "Well, Cynthia doesn't seem to know anything about it, so I'm afraid you'll just have to go out and get a nice new one in your usual elegant style."

"You did ask her though."

Frazier searched my face for a clue. "Oh, yes," he said. "No, she hasn't the faintest idea."

Frazier is not the hardiest of souls. I suspected he didn't want to ask Cynthia about the coat, and that if he hadn't been drunk he wouldn't have volunteered in the first place. I didn't trust him a bit. So leaving a discreet interval, I went up to Cynthia's office where her secretary told me that, after the early morning meeting, she had left for the holiday. Wouldn't be back until New Year's. If I needed to get in touch with Cynthia, she suggested I email.

There was no reason not to. I knew that if I did, Cynthia would cheerfully get right back to me about the coat, telling me either that she had it or that the whole thing was a mistake. But on the holiday I was somehow reluctant to bother. More than that, for some absurd reason I didn't want to be beholden to her, even for my own coat. You will think I am a strange person. Of course it was my coat, and I had every right to it. But I still didn't want to ask, especially not at a distance. And by the time I saw Cynthia again the holidays would have come and gone. It would be humiliating to rehearse the ancient history of a missing garment. I must confess, though, that I was annoyed with myself over this scruple. For a few days I was bad company, unable to let go of the silly affair. My husband wanted me to go right out and buy a new coat. "We can afford it, for Christ's sake," he kept saying, but to me that wasn't the point. I kept wearing Cynthia's coat as if it were my own. I suppose I was punishing myself, and I suppose I deserved it.

When she came back from Christmas Cynthia had a smart new woolen coat, navy blue with big, shiny, self-confident buttons. It suited her better than my green coat ever could.

A year later, Cynthia Blaine became president of the company. Our treasurer departed, and Cynthia gave me his job, so the two of us worked together

more closely. Occasionally I wore the coat in her presence, with a slight sense of daring, but she never remarked on it. She never wore mine.

Working for Cynthia was easy. She made it clear what she expected, her expectations were reasonable, and she was appreciative of my efforts. I had almost forgotten about the overcoat and was thinking of buying a new one for myself when there was another episode. I had a mother-of-pearl pen-and-pencil-set my husband had given me. Knowing how difficult I am to shop for, he buys me practical gifts, often to replace things I already have. This set, however, wasn't in the best of taste. It had a cheap heirloom quality about it, which was why I kept it in the office rather than at home. One afternoon Cynthia came down to my office to go over a couple of figures. Not having a pen, she picked up the heirloom to make a note. Then, after waving it around a few times, she walked off with it. I was about to call out a reminder, but surely, I thought, she'll notice that this rather distinctive, old-fashioned, clumsy, and not very tasteful item isn't hers. But she didn't. That was the last I saw of it.

About the overcoat I was perfectly willing to believe that the whole thing was an accident, even though Cynthia had made no attempt to find out who the coat belonged to. As Walter pointed out, I had been almost equally negligent. But the pen was a another matter. Not that I wasn't glad to see it go. I was. But could Cynthia have possibly taken it without knowing what she was doing? Could she be teasing me? Testing me? Admittedly it was hard to believe that, and Walter insisted the whole idea was ridiculous. Still, I couldn't escape from the feeling that Cynthia took my things not because she wanted them but because she liked to try her luck. By picking someone to impose on, someone she could test in an entirely covert and indirect way, she could find out just how far she could go before they'd squawk. I was determined that no matter what she did, I would not be that person.

This time I decided to take Freddy into my confidence. I told him about the pen and about the coat. "I was wondering why you were wearing that old thing," Freddy told me. "It's not like you at all."

"It's not like Cynthia, either," I said. "Do you think she could be a compulsive thief?"

"A klepto? If so, she's never condescended to steal something from me."

"Has she ever tried to test you out somehow? Test your patience?"

"There was only one odd thing I ever noticed about Cynthia," he told me. "I gave her a lift home one time when her car was in the shop. It was a miserable, rainy night, and it took me out of my way, so it really was a favor."

"So what was odd?"

"Well, we had a very friendly talk about the company and so on, and she thanked me profusely when I dropped her off, but when I saw her the next morning, we said hello and I expected her to make some mention of the episode, but she didn't. It was as though it never happened."

"That's funny. But she did thank you."

"Yes, she did, that night. But you know, when somebody does you a favor like that, next time you see them, especially if it's right away, you mention it again to let them know you haven't forgotten."

From the time Cynthia took my pen I started having fantasies about her. Rehearsing them gave me an unaccustomed pleasure. In one of these fantasies, I go back and examine the company books from the time Cynthia arrived and discover multiple irregularities and missing funds. I bring them to her attention and warn her she's risking her career. She admits to being a weak, careless woman, given to making unconsciously selfish assumptions.

She cries on my shoulder. I do my best to comfort her, but she knows I'll be watching from now on. She thanks me from the bottom of her heart.

In fact the books contain no irregularities.

In another scene I happen to glimpse Cynthia somewhere with a man other than her husband. She looks at me with touching alarm. I look back, understandingly but ruefully. Again, I'll be watching from now on. In a variant of this scene, my husband is the forbidden object. Cynthia is terrified at being caught with him. I look at the two of them with painful recognition. Walter says, "I see you were right all along."

In my favorite reverie, which I concocted more deliberately, given the success of the others, Cynthia and I meet on an empty street. It is dusk and the light all around is golden, very soft, with a soft breeze blowing. She is wearing my green coat and I hers. Both coats stand out in the golden light. Cynthia recognizes the accusation, but instead of offering to switch, she turns away. I take her by the collar. She tells me she has been impersonating me to carry on a life of petty crime. "Did you do this to test me, Cynthia?" I ask. "No," she says, "I can't help myself." "Why me?" I ask. "Because I know you're so careful about your things." For some reason this admission gratifies me deeply.

To add to these scenes, I have another line of fantasy about Cynthia, a more shameful one, which is that she leaves a valuable item within reach and I take it, not because I want it, of course, but because I want to make things even. The problem with this fantasy is that I do not really want to acquire an item I would not like to keep, and so far I have not been able to think of an item of Cynthia's I would be pleased to have. She has lots of nice clothes, of course, and wears grand jewelry that fits her scale, but nothing that wouldn't threaten me with buyer's remorse. Or should it be called "stealer's remorse"?



As you can imagine, I am extremely reticent about my personal life. I do not exchange confidence. Women at the office who attempt to befriend me give up after awhile because of my reticence. I keep my distance. I know that if I did not happen to be slender and stylishly dressed, with high cheekbones, I would not be forgiven for being stand-offish. But in the case of Cynthia I decided to suspend my reticence. I began to tell her quite a lot about myself, some of it true, some half-true, in the hope she would confide in me. Over the months I learned a lot about her.

Cynthia comes from a nice Catholic family with seven children. She is the second of three girls and fourth overall, smack in the middle on both counts. That's why she's a "negotiator." She's the only one of the seven who still goes to mass on Sunday. She goes again at least one day a week before coming to work. It makes her feel she's touched something "greater than herself and her selfish needs" before launching the business of the day. A sensible division of labor. Even more terrifying, Cynthia likes to perform secret acts of charity, or "little acts of grace," as she calls them, though she has never told me what these acts might be. Telling them, I suppose, would cancel their spiritual value. Could they extend to giving away thy neighbor's coat? I asked her once if she's thought of doing me an act of grace. She said she couldn't imagine me needing one. I don't know if this is flattering. Perhaps my needs would exhaust the resources of the tooth fairy. Does Cynthia balance her little acts of grace with little acts of spite?

Politically, Cynthia is very liberal on fiscal matters, but she will not discuss abortion, which makes me think she's had one. She has doubts about the "free market" unheard of in a CEO. It bothers her that her job is to make the market work in favor of her company above all other interests. She also has doubts about America's role in the world and the size of the military budget. In spite of her liberal opinions, though, Cynthia doesn't mind firing people because she knows that the people who are out there

looking for a job might be just as worthy as the ones we are getting rid of. She has an eye for the big picture. None of us is indispensable.

Taking her straight, Cynthia is actually a rather inspiring specimen of humanity. She wants to touch people in a positive way, hopes that she can do just a little good, every day, with God's help. The one interesting revelation about Cynthia has been that, in spite of her piety and good nature, she is on her second marriage. Which the Church doesn't know.

It took Cynthia awhile to discover her sexual value—my way of putting it, not hers. In college she fell in love with a much older, married man and pursued him for years without success. All that time she was desperate, envisioning desolation ahead. Then she was shocked to be courted by a handsome younger man, couldn't believe her luck. Unfortunately he turned out to be boring and dependent. He was looking for a mommy, and eventually Cynthia found that tedious. Buyer's remorse.

Then she met a rich lawyer who became her husband. He pursued her with glittering jewels. Once married, they travelled, saw the world, lived a fairy tale. But here the fairy tale gets strange. Things ended badly because he was cheating, going to prostitutes in these various places, sex clubs and such, and Cynthia has trouble remembering what actually happened toward the end. She has even blanked on most of the places she traveled to during her marriage. I gather that a goodly settlement came of it, though. And I notice she's retained a wholesome supply of wit and wisdom about the vagaries of the legal profession.

Cynthia's current husband is a successful financial advisor, probably investing the money from her previous marriage. I've met him. They are a nicely matched pair, just about the same age and size, which makes his interest in her seem a trifle less perverse.

Lately, though, I have discovered, Cynthia's life has become more interesting. Someone has been sending her flowers at work. Not a dozen

long-stemmed roses, that sort of thing, but discreet, unspectacular flowers which Cynthia passes off as coming from friends. In fact the flowers are not signed, and it was telling that she chose this minor subterfuge rather than admitting the mystery. Then a gentleman started calling her at work, asking if they could meet. She told him no, of course, but the calls and flowers kept coming. It turned out that the two of them had actually encountered each other at the supermarket, in the bottled water section. He was posing as a neophyte, and she gave him advice about the indistinguishability of the brands. He was an amusing fellow, a little older, well-dressed, name of Henry. Just wanted to talk. Needed more of her advice about shopping and such. She explained that she was happily married, had no room in her life for him. No time, even, given her duties with the company. But it turned out he wasn't asking much. He just wanted to have sex with her occasionally, he said, or even just once, and to admire her from afar, with a chat on the phone from time to time, to find out how she was doing. He was happily married himself, with children. But something about her had touched him. She had a beautiful feminine nature. He had never seen anything exactly like it. And why should such chances be wasted if they didn't hurt anybody? No one would ever know what happened between them.

Of course I wanted Cynthia to take advantage of this opportunity with Henry so I could be the witness of her fall.

“Wouldn't this be an act of grace,” I told her, “to give Henry a bit of love?”

“That's blasphemy,” she said. “He has a wife and children. What more can he want?”

“He obviously wants you. He's seeing the end of the line which comes for us all, and he wants a last bit of grace before the end.”

“But what about his wife?”

“What about her?”

“This would hurt her, and I know that feeling.”

“But Henry is a discreet fellow. He's not a serial adulterer. He's just a man who's reached a certain point in life where he needs to touch someone, to be in touch with another life.”

“Would you do that to Walter?”

“That's a good question. I like Henry, I must say, from what you tell me.”

“I like him too. That's not what I'm asking you. What about Walter?”

“Would it really do him any harm, if he never knew about it?”

“Maybe not, but what if he said the same to you? Would you accept that?”

“It would be hard, but that's why it's better not to know.”

“Have you ever heard of a case where such a thing worked out?”

“Well naturally,” I told her, “you never hear about the cases where things work out. You only hear about the ones where somebody squeals and there's trouble. There are probably lots of cases where people meet and things go on for awhile and then they end naturally and nobody's the worse for wear.”

“Have you done that?”

“I haven't had the chance.”

“That's impossible,” Cynthia insisted, “there's a world of guys who'd go with you in a second.”

“I don't mean I haven't had my admirers. But none that interested me. You know I'm not exactly outgoing. And nobody's ever pursued me with Henry's type of aplomb.”

Cynthia and I discussed Henry constantly. We went over and over his case, and I kept deflecting the moral issue. She kept talking with him on the phone, continued finding him amusing, but for a long time she never got any closer to making a date. Henry, though, was extremely patient. He never

became desperate or needy, or pledged undying love. He just kept admiring Cynthia, kept having fun with her, and they had already spent so much time together on the phone that finally the idea of meeting again somewhere private didn't seem to add all that much to what was already going on. And after they had met privately a few times, to meet in bed no longer seemed such an important step either. Cynthia slid down the slippery slope until she was having a good time.

I must say that this development didn't entirely gratify me. At first I was enjoying Cynthia's slow and gradual loss of innocence. I finally had something on her. I knew she would never have confided in me if she had thought that anything was going to happen with Henry, but now that I was in on the story it was too late to stop. I'd expected that just being the witness of Cynthia's shame would be a sufficient compensation for the shame she inflicted on me. The trouble was that Cynthia wasn't particularly ashamed about Henry. In fact, she seemed more innocent than ever. She wrapped Henry around her like a new coat and was modeling him right in front of me.

Cynthia was no Madame Bovary. She was a sensible adulteress who took her pleasures in the right way and in the right amount, and Henry was a perfect match for her. She pursued her affair just in the way I'd suggested, as an enhancement to life, a supplement to marriage that took nothing away from her husband. I envied Cynthia this admirer. There was something so honest and straightforward about him. He knew just how to ask for what he wanted. I even met Henry once. He looked on my svelte being as an unapproachable treasure. I was out of his league.

At this point I began to entertain the idea of breaking the news to Cynthia's husband, Bill, the financial advisor. For some reason I would imagine that I was Henry's wife, and that I'd discovered he was having an affair with Bill's wife. I would tell him what was happening and give him

sympathy as a fellow injured party, and we would do our best to console each other over a drink. "Don't be too hard on Cynthia," I would tell him. "She would never want to hurt you. She's just being weak. My husband is a talented seducer, I'm sorry to say. He's got a nice routine."

"So you've been through this before?"

"Oh, yes. People like Henry and Cynthia, they don't know the pain they give."

"I'm going to show them," Bill would say. "I'm going to teach them a lesson." And I would encourage him to do whatever would make him feel better.

This went on for months as I watched and waited. One evening Cynthia had a date with Henry, but she was feeling under the weather, not quite up to it, and since Walter was out of town at a conference, she invited me to join the two of them for dinner. Henry wanted to get to know me, she said, having heard so much about me. I was the only one who knew what was going on between them. At that point I had met Henry only to shake hands with.

It didn't thrill me being offered a role in their little scenario, but I couldn't resist the invitation. When I arrived the restaurant, though, Henry was already there but Cynthia had texted him to say she wasn't well enough to make it. With his usual *savoir faire*, Henry invited me to be his guest. This is a fine situation, I thought. Now I'm sitting here with this middle-aged Lothario.

Henry was a thin, dapper man with reddish hair going gray around the edges and a still-reddish mustache. He made his living as a fund-raiser for a local college. Unsurprisingly he was good company. We talked about lots of things, including people at the company, and of course Cynthia herself—her wonderful qualities, her love of life and beauty, her spiritual nature. Henry appreciated all these things, not with the reverence I expected, but with a

certain wry wonder. He even knew about her "little acts of grace," though he couldn't give me any examples of what they were. Henry was quite a talker, a true bon vivant, adept in wines and travels. He knew how to admire women, too, somewhat in the manner of a nineteen-fifties crooner. And his admiration quickly extended to me, with my high cheek-bones and brown eyes "big enough to drown yourself in." I reminded him of Faye Dunaway. Before I knew it he was asking if he could come home with me. Wasn't I returning to an empty house?

"What about Cynthia?" I said. "We've just been saying what a wonderful person she is. Now you want me to help you cheat on her?"

"But Cynthia is so fond of you," he said, "and she's told me it was you who convinced her there'd be no harm from a little adventure in the wings. And that would be as true for you as it was for her. What's the harm to anyone? I can tell you'd like to, and you'll never have a more harmless opportunity than me. Besides, can you cheat on someone who's cheating on somebody else?"

I knew the answers by heart, but I didn't use them.

Cynthia hadn't misled me about Henry's advantages as a lover. I'm certain he was far above average, especially for his age, though it's hard for me to say whether I took more pleasure in the experience on account of Henry or on account of Cynthia. After round two, Henry stretched himself out with an air of satisfaction. "How do you do it, Henry?" I asked him. "Cynthia tells me you're happily married. Then you have her in your life. And now you have me, at least for a night. And I wonder how many others."

"Not so many others," he said. "My philosophy is modest. I know how to appreciate the good things in life, and I approach them simply. I don't make too much of them, because if you do, it's much harder to get them. I could persuade myself, for instance, that if I left my wife for Cynthia I would be infinitely more happy and in love, but in fact I probably wouldn't be. I'm

better off spending time with my wife, who is a good woman and loves me, while looking forward to seeing Cynthia now and again. And an occasion like this is even more special for being so rare, to be with a young and beautiful woman like yourself. It would be easy to ruin my life for an evening or two like this. But what would be the point? It wouldn't do you any good, that's for sure."

"What do you think Cynthia would say if she could see us here?" I asked him.

"O, I think she would see it as a little act of grace on your part. She's a generous woman, you know."

"I do know," I said, "That's why I'll have to thank her."

"Thank her?"

"For you, of course."

"What," he said, "are you kidding?"

"I'm not. The thing is, she and I being so close, I'll never be able to keep it from her. You don't think she'll mind, do you?"

Henry was astonished. He actually slapped his naked thigh with a smack. "She'll mind if you tell her," he said. "You know that. She'll see you've been trying to hurt her." Henry was registering a swift change of opinion about me.

"But won't she want to know what's really happening?" I asked him.

"God no," he said in disgust, "not if she didn't know already."

"What?" I said. "She knows already?"

"Well more or less. I told her how much I'd enjoy sleeping with you, and she said it would be alright. It would be a 'little act of grace' on her part too. She wasn't feeling unwell this evening. That was just a ruse to leave you and me alone."

"So the two of you were going to have a good laugh over my seduction?"



“Not at all! We agreed I was never going to tell her whether you'd gone along with it or not. But it'll ruin your friendship if you tell her.”

While Henry and I put our clothes on, I was struggling to process this turn of events. Here I had been planning to take something of Cynthia's, and it turned out she had wrapped me up as a present for somebody else. Could she be that much of a mastermind, with her “little acts of grace” and her petty thefts? Or was this all a way for Henry to get what he wanted? Maybe he was the genius. By the time we got downstairs, he was winding round to an apology.

“I never meant to make trouble between you and Cynthia,” he said. “Both of you were behaving with such wonderful generosity towards me. Even if you both knew everything, I thought you would have the same feelings about each other. But surely you don't want to hurt Cynthia.”

“How can Cynthia complain when she knew what was going to happen ahead of time?”

“Because you didn't know she thought it was alright when you were doing it. You did poach me like the devil after all.”

“If you're so worried about her, why don't you just tell her that I knew she said it was okay?”

“Then I'll get in trouble because I promised her not to. She thought you'd be enormously offended if you knew she knew.”

“Well I am enormously offended!” I finally shouted at him. “I'll never look at Cynthia again!”

“O good heavens, is it really that bad?” Henry shook his modest head. “What a mess I've made between two lovely, lovely women.” I could see that he was genuinely distressed, but he kept his gentility and sweetness to the end. His poise was like a work of art.

“Isn't there anything I can do?” he said, looking at me with the sincerest good will.

“Yes, you can answer one question. Did Cynthia steal my coat?”

“What?”

“Two years ago at the company Christmas Party, I went to the coat rack and my new green coat was missing, and Cynthia's old green coat was left in its place. I never got mine back.”

“Did you ask her for it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I didn't want to humiliate myself.”

“By asking for your coat?”

“Yes.”

“You must have a lot of pride.”

“Suppose I do.”

“So this is all about an old coat,” he said.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

I could see he was baffled, but I persisted.

“Did she take it?”

“I can't imagine she would.”

“But you don't know.”

“I've never heard of it before,” he insisted, staring at me and transmitting perplexity on all frequencies. For once he was at a total loss.

“Can I buy you a new one?” he ventured, taking my hand.

“No thank you. I think I'll just go strip a scarecrow” I heard myself say as I pushed him out the door. I'd had enough little acts of grace for one night.