



Torn Wide Open

What Ripped Me Apart Also Made Me Whole

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Noah Publishing
Boca Raton, FL

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Published by Noah Publishing

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Author's Note on Language

This story is set in an earlier time. Certain words or expressions have been retained to reflect the language and attitudes of the era and do not reflect the author's present-day values. This work is creative nonfiction based on real life events. Names, places, and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy.

Prologue: 1972

It was the kind of waiting that drives you mad—the endless hours spent tethered to the kitchen table, staring at the faded yellow dial of the telephone. You don't know what's worse: the loneliness, the frustration, or the heartache of longing for someone who isn't even bothering to call.

For hours, Cassie had been staring at it, waiting for it to suddenly spring to life. She'd checked the dial tone over and over to make sure it was working. She'd come home from work and sat there, clinging to hope that was fading every day.

But what if he called and she missed it?

So she stayed, her life reduced to a kitchen table and an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes.

She'd gotten so excited when it *finally* rang—only to hear the cheerful voice of the lady at the bank.

She'd tried calling him, of course, and quickly hung up when she heard a woman's voice.

After three weeks of this, even the dumbest ideas started to look good. She couldn't stay here in her kitchen forever. She had to get his attention. But how?

She had to prove to herself—and him—that she was better than this, that she wouldn't be tossed aside so easily.

Maybe if she did something so crazy, so completely off-the-wall that he couldn't possibly ignore her, he'd understand how much she loved him. At this point, she was willing to risk everything to be with him.

Cassie pulled on a heavy coat and reached for her high-heeled leather boots. No sneakers tonight. She locked the door behind her.

They were supposed to start their life together. He had promised her that. And now he just disappears? Stops calling? How dare he?

She had made so many sacrifices to be with him, while he got to have his cake and eat it too. Every holiday, every vacation, he was with his wife and kids. And she was alone. He probably didn't even think about her when he was with them. The thought made her sigh in bitterness. She wasn't doing this anymore. If he wouldn't leave his wife, she was walking away.

She *had* to talk to him. All those nights spent together, all those whispered promises in the dark. The wife wouldn't be a problem, he'd assured her. Well, now the wife knew. And that was a problem.

How many times had he said he'd be divorced by summer? Summer was four months away. How on earth was she still married to that man? Surely, she hadn't welcomed him back with open arms.

It was a cold night. A thin layer of frost sparkled on the pavement. Her breath formed a cloud in the icy air. She shivered as she walked to her car.

She felt a trickle of shame when she thought about the day they'd been caught. She would never forget the shocked look on the wife's face as she frantically grabbed the sheets to cover herself. At least the wife turned her anger on him, so Cassie could gather up her clothes and sneak out, while the wife shouted and threw his clothes out the window.

It doesn't matter. Don't think about her.

She walked to the passenger side to make sure the door was locked. It was. She did the same for the back seat, both sides—even though she had never forgotten to lock her car.

It was even colder in the car than outside. As she started the engine, the car protested, then reluctantly sputtered to life in the frigid night. The radio blasted to life, making her jump. She hastily turned it off.

She checked the clock on the dashboard—7:45 p.m. He'd be home. They'd be finishing dinner by now.

She pulled onto the road, her stomach feeling hollow.

As she waited for the light to turn green, a cluster of teenagers stood on the corner, puffing their cigarettes and laughing loudly. They were attractive, basking in the easy self-assurance only teens could pull off. They looked like they were having the time of their lives.

A well-lit gas station rose on the horizon. Should she stop for a quick drink? Her throat was dry.

Better not. Can't risk being seen.

There it was. The hotel where they had spent so many nights together. Cassie remembered the blue-and-white carpet, the gleaming bathroom, and the king-sized bed with fresh-smelling sheets. She'd had some of her happiest moments in that nondescript chain hotel.

Best not to think about it too much.

Ten more minutes to his house. Needing a distraction, she turned the radio back on.

“Bye, bye, Miss American Pie . . . Drove my Chevy to the levy but the levy was dry . . .”

Long, deep, breaths. Her stomach clenched again. She could do this. She had to.

Deep breath in, deep breath out. A drop of sweat trickled down her back. She wished she had a paper towel.

Her stomach tightened again as she turned onto Mill Street, checking her purse for the tenth time.

She turned the key and the car went silent, except for the clicking of the engine as it cooled. She wiped her palms on her jeans, pulled the door handle, and stepped out of the car.

Again, she walked around to all the doors to make sure they were locked, even though she had checked them earlier.

She was stalling. *Focus, Cassie, focus.*

The building towered over her with its two-story windows. She couldn't see inside, but she knew he was home. His car was there.

Slowly, she climbed the steps to the front door, taking one more deep breath.

She raised her hand and knocked, not too loud, but firm and insistent.

She waited. No one came to the door. She knocked again.

Ten seconds. Nothing. But there were lights on, and that was definitely his car.

Okay, enough. I've come too far to give up now.

Ten more seconds. Her heart was pounding.

Her throat went dry as the doorknob rattled.

The door creaked open and a large Black woman in an apron appeared. She was older than Cassie, and she looked tired but alert.

“Can I help you?” she said expectantly. She stepped onto the porch and closed the door behind her.

“Where’s Mr. Klein? I need to talk to him, please.”

“He’s not here, ma’am. He’s out of town.”

“What? But his car is here.”

“That’s right. They got a taxi to the airport. Can’t drive the car to Puerto Rico, ma’am.”

“They?”

“Him and his wife.”

“He’s with his *wife*?”

“Yes ma’am. With his wife, in Puerto Rico. I’m sorry. You’ll have to come back another time. They’ll be back on Monday. If you give me your number, I can have him call you.”

“No. I’ve waited long enough.”

“Ma’am, you need to leave right now, please. I’ve got kids to look after.” Her tone was firm.

Cassie’s blood boiled with rage. Sweat trickled down her back in spite of the cold. *He ignores me for three weeks, and now he’s off on vacation with his wife? The same wife who found us in bed together a month ago?*

Did she not matter to him at all? Had he been using her, lying to her, taking advantage of her the whole time?

Cassie’s hands shook. This wasn’t going according to plan. Panic rose in her chest. She had to act. Now.

She reached into her purse and pulled out the Smith & Wesson 19, pointing it straight at the older woman. “I know he’s here. Tell him to come out right now. I don’t care what he told you to say.”

The large woman’s eyes widened. “What the . . . Jesus Christ. Put that away.” She didn’t shout, but she wasn’t backing down. She looked Cassie right in the eye and didn’t step back.

She stepped toward Cassie, forcing her to back down onto the first step. Cassie was still holding the gun.

“Get out of here!”

Cassie locked eyes with the woman and pointed the gun at the sky.

She fired.

Glass rained down from the second-story window of the townhouse.

“No!” The large woman jerked the front door open and stepped back inside before slamming the door shut. The dead bolt clicked behind her.

A baby’s cry rang through the night.

The bullet missed the baby girl by two inches and wedged itself in the bookcase behind her.

If the bullet had hit the baby, you wouldn’t be holding this book.

The baby was me.