

# The Blue Nib

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## 'Fears That We May Cease To Be' By Gail Gauthier

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Mark comes home late. I am lying in bed, reading and listening to a radio station streaming through my phone, when he enters the room and stands about three feet from my knees. He rises up and down on his toes, his hands clutched before him, like an impatient child.

His excitement is contagious. I let my book drop onto my lap, carefully holding my finger between two pages. I look up at his face and feel myself smiling as I wait for him to speak, to say something about the work meeting he'd attended, his first with this new job. From the docking station next to the bed comes the soft sound of some old jazz piece that I think I should recognize but don't. Through the window comes the heavy, earthy scent that rises up from our yard at night late in the spring. I imagine it clinging to the curtains and bedclothes, even the walls, so I'll be able to smell it when I wake up in the morning.

"I killed someone," Mark says.

I had only heard the words out loud on television and in movie theaters. They don't sound real there in my bedroom. I just continue to look at Mark, waiting for him to say something that will actually have some kind of meaning.

"I killed someone," he repeats, and he kneels next to the bed and buries his head in the blanket and spread.

After a very long time, he looks up. His face is wet.

"He was bending over something near my car," Mark tells me. "And I picked up a

rock and hit him with it.”

I look away from him. The room is still the same, dark and warm and full of good sounds and smells. Nothing has changed.

I feel him clutching at my hand, pulling at the sheet that covers me. “I came to get you,” he says. “We have to get rid of him.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I reply. “This isn’t happening.”

Then he is going through my bureau drawers, pulling out a shirt, a sweater. He throws them onto a chair with the blue jeans I wore that day.

“Hurry,” Mark says. “He’s in the back of the car.”

I pull off my old, pink nightgown while Mark lies on the bed and watches. He has chosen a striped shirt for me, one of my favorites. I pick up a new belt that I wear at every opportunity, trying to break it in. After I am dressed, I automatically step before a long mirror that hangs on the closet door. My hair has lost the body and shape I’d forced into it that morning with gel. My features are nearly gone, washed down the drain with my make-up. My eyes flicker from my own reflection to my husband’s. His face with its high cheekbones, enormous eyes, and full mouth is there in the mirror, too. His hair is mussed, making him even more beautiful.

I remember what we’re doing and look away.

“Maybe we should take him back where you...found him,” I suggest. “Then we could call the police.”

“I ‘found him’ on the street behind the municipal building in Essex. That’s two hours from here. He’ll have been dead four hours by the time we could get him back there. I can’t drive around with him in the car for another two hours. I can’t.”

“We could call them now. Maybe they’ll understand that it was just a horrible mistake.”

“But what if they don’t?” Mark asks. His voice almost breaks, but not quite. Something in my abdomen twists into a knot.

What if they don’t?

“You’d better change out of your good shoes,” I tell him.

“Oh, yeah,” Mark agrees. He finds a pair of sneakers in the closet, and I watch him sit down on the edge of the bed to change. What is there to understand? I think sadly.

Mark has locked all the car doors, and we have to wait while he pulls the keys from his pocket. Once we’re both inside, he turns on the radio and finds the station I was listening to while we were in the house.

“There,” he says, smiling. “You hardly missed a thing.”

"Where are we going?" I ask as we pull out of the driveway.

"I thought we would drive along the lake. We might find a good place."

We *have* to find a good place, I thought.

At the edge of town is a white, wood-framed library. Mark turns there onto a smaller road, one that is narrow and will eventually wind around the edge of a small lake. We drive past the church I sometimes attend and the house we rented when we first moved to town. We pass a darkened trailer park and several small factories. The road narrows even more before we finally see water.

"I don't know if this was a good idea after all," Mark says. "This road is so small that anyone we meet might notice us. What do you think?"

I am not thinking. I will not think.

Mark drives around the lake twice before selecting a spot. He pulls in behind a partially completed cottage. He turns off the engine, and we sit in the car a few moments watching the moonlight on the water. When we get out we are met by the smell of pine needles.

He opens a door and bends over the back seat.

"I'm going to need help," he says, but I am listening to the music from a bar on the other side of the lake. The bar has a disc jockey, I know, and not a band. But the sound is so distorted from the distance it must travel that it has become something other than a mechanical reproduction. It's alive again.

"I'm going to need help," Mark repeats. "I need you."

I hurry to the back of the car and reach over his shoulder. We both pull at the bundle, which catches on the doorframe. Finally, it is on the ground.

The body is cool, but still soft. My heart leaps. Maybe Mark made a mistake. He does that. Maybe this man isn't dead at all.

"See where I hit him?" Mark points to a small mark on the side of the man's head.

We don't move. We are perfectly still, still enough to see that the chest of the man on the ground in front of us doesn't rise and fall.

We both jump, startled by the sound of laughter from across the lake. I stand up and frown at Mark and the man lying beside him.

"This is all wrong," I hear myself saying. "We'll have to move him."

"Why?" Mark asks.

I bend and pick up an arm. "We have to get him back into the car."

We stretch him across the back seat, and I slip behind the steering wheel. I don't turn on the headlights until the car is on the road. We drive back the way we came.

"What are we doing?" Mark's voice is rising as it always does when he is tense.

"We are taking care of this!" I shout, and then I begin to cry.

Mark leans over and pats my hand. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

We drive past the bar, and I pull onto an old, neglected road that is closed to all but parkers and drug dealers. The car is hidden by a large cluster of purple lilac bushes, planted years ago by some family to accompany the house that once stood on a nearby cellar hole.

"Stay here," I order. I leave the car and hurry down a narrow path dotted with rusty beer cans. It suddenly ends at a large clearing bordering the lake. I stand at the edge, under the trees, and look around for a few moments. The clearing is only partially lit by the moon but appears to be empty, so I rush back to the car and open the back door.

"There's no one there, but we'll have to move fast," I say.

Mark leaves his place at the front of the car.

"Close that door." I don't like the way my voice sounds, as if I am speaking to some inferior, to someone incompetent and contemptible.

Mark is by my side now, tugging at the shoulders of the man in our car. He drags the body onto the ground and picks up a foot, ready to begin the trip to the clearing.

"We'll have to carry him," I tell him.

"Why bother?"

"We don't want anyone to know the body was brought here in a car. We want everyone to think he either died in a fall from a boat and washed ashore or was killed by someone in a fight in the clearing. If we drag him, there'll be all kinds of tracks."

"Hmm." Mark pauses in mid-movement, thinking. "What part do you want?"

"Give me the feet."

The body is heavy and awkward to carry. We have to rest several times. When we do, I carefully brush away leaves and twigs, hoping to hide all trace of our presence.

We reach the clearing and slip the body into the water, lodging it under the bank among some tree roots. It has been a dry month and there is no mud along the edge of the lake, just a heavy coat of moss and old pine needles that shifts under our feet and then settles again.

As we walk away from the clearing, I try to check the ground for tracks or things we might have dropped. When we reach the car, I am carrying an armful of old

brown bags, gum wrappers, magazines, and paper cups.

"You bringing that home?"

"I better," I answer. "I've touched all of it."

I throw the stiff, dirty items onto the floor of the car and start back toward the path that will lead me to those tree roots. I stop and turn so I can head to the car instead, and then stop again. I stand there, at the edge of the path, wanting to go down that path to the water but knowing that if I go back once, I will always want to go back.

"It went pretty well," Mark says on the way home. "There shouldn't be any problems."

"You mean there won't be any problems if no one finds the body for a while. If plenty of people go walking around in that clearing and on that path so any tracks we might have left will be ruined."

"Ah, it's Saturday night. In another hour that place will be crawling with kids. Nothing's ever as bad as you make it out to be."

Mark is using his impatient and brittle voice, the voice he uses just before he leaves the house for four or five hours.

I pull the car over.

"You'll have to drive," I say. "I can't drive any more."

"Okay, baby."

We are traveling again, but my eyes are closed. They stay closed through the village. I don't want to see who may be on the street, or at windows, or in oncoming cars.

But my eyes are open by the time we're on our street, and I notice her as Mark pulls into our yard. "There's the Emerson's daughter—the one in my journalism class. She must be coming from the house on the corner where she babysits for that family's twins."

Mark turns to me. "Why didn't you stop me?" he shouts. "Why didn't you tell me to keep going when you saw her? She would never have noticed us if I'd kept driving. Now she's seen us drive into the yard, she's seen our car, she knows we were out tonight. Well, *you* can be the one who takes care of her. You've only got a few minutes before she gets to her house."

I am afraid now. I think that I have never been afraid before, not with this feeling of wanting to escape my body, of wanting to cut these last few hours from my life.

But I do what I always do. I lean over and gently take Mark's hand off the steering wheel so I can hold it. He never calms down until I touch him, distract his mind.

"Lots of people were out driving in their cars tonight, Mark," I tell him. I speak

slowly so his mind will have to slow down to listen. I speak slowly so I will have time to think of my next words. "All those people who were out driving tonight didn't do what you...what we did. Coming home after being out in our car isn't a sign of guilt."

Mark brings my hand up toward his face and rubs it against his cheek. "What would I do without you?" he asks.

"What would I do without you?" I whisper.

We go into the house, our arms wrapped around each other.

While we were gone, time passed, of course, and the evening smell from our yard has faded away. I pull one of the curtains toward my face, inhale deeply, but nothing is there.

"Why don't you take a long shower?" I suggest.

I watch Mark empty his pockets into a drawer. I watch him pull off his shirt, his pants, his underwear and leave them all in a heap on the floor. I'm still watching my favorite parts of him—the muscles in his back that lead down from his shoulders to his waist, the backs of his thighs—as he walks naked to the bathroom. When I can no longer see him, I sigh and bend to pick up his clothes. I wait to strip my own things off until I'm in the little room off the kitchen where our washer and dryer are. I put everything in the washer and start it. My shoes go into an old plastic grocery bag, and I go back to our bedroom to get Mark's. Then, still naked, I vacuum the whole house, anywhere we've been since Mark came home earlier in the evening and anywhere we might have been. I take the vacuum bag out and put it with the shoes, getting them ready to drive somewhere, anywhere, the next day on my way to work. I put a new bag into the vacuum and clean a little more. An empty, new bag, I think, would look suspicious.

By the time I get back to our room, Mark is in bed. He has the sheet and blanket pulled up past his waist. He's propped up on pillows as if he's waiting for me. But I can tell he's tired.

His eyes open a little wider when he sees me come through the bedroom door.

"You look good," he says. And he just barely lifts up an arm, gesturing to me to come to him.

It is all I can do not to run across the room and throw myself on top of him.

"I have to take a shower," I manage to say.

He closes his eyes and starts to inch down along the bed into a more comfortable position.

"I'll be here," he says.

I start to smile as I head toward the bathroom. I can feel the tight, painful thing I've

been carrying in my chest these past hours releasing and moving along my limbs in a warm glow. Because all I want is for him to be here.

