

# **HAPPY HOUR HERO**

by

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Carl stared out at the ocean, let its rhythmic sound lull him into a soporific state, let the rum numb him. As he shook off the stress of another day, melancholia settled over him like a heavy burst of South Florida rain, just like it did every day about this time. Happy hour.

He pined over former girl friends as if they were dead. Felt the loss of their companionship just as if he'd attended their funerals and wept with their grieving families. With every sip of the sweet, brown liquid he'd toast one of the old gals. ATo Linda. @ Sip. ATo Susan. @ Sip. ATo Penny. @ Sip. Time for another drink, and another round of former flames.

None of them were dead of course; just married to other men, or moved away, or otherwise unavailable to Carl. *Might as well be dead*, Carl thought to himself, bitterly. Then, he fantasized to himself about how great the relationships had been, how wonderful the sex, how sweet their kisses, their caresses. He could never remember why they had split up. He only remembered the good stuff. His romanticized version of these relationships actually manifested itself by producing a gnawing ache that began in his stomach, moved up to his chest and squeezed so hard, at times, he thought his heart would break. He soothed the pain; the pain of loss, the pain of *what if*, with another drink. The bartender, a frail woman with a sunken mouth and wispy mud-colored hair, obliged him. Noticing his eyes were wet, she asked if the drink was too strong.

ANot at all, @ replied Carl, clearing his throat and looking back to the sea.

This was his place, this bar; a dingy, out-of-the-way little joint called the Hawaiian Patio bar, whose only saving grace was its strong drinks and close proximity to the sea. The healing sea, as Carl, had come to think of it. It was the place where he first sought refuge after his wife had left him. His wife, the only woman whose *passing* he did not mourn. Not because he did not love her, but because their relationship had endured past the point where memory clouds the

wounds and the truth of what they really were to each other. They had gone through the romantic stage, too quickly it seemed to him now, fell into the complacent stage, then descended into the limbo-like separation stage and ended in the explosion that was the divorce stage.

The woman he coolly referred to now as *Athe ex@* had been a cold and calculating one. She=d waited until Carl had received the Chief=s promotion, and the money that came with it, which improved his salary, thus improving her alimony. Had she divorced him prior to his promotion, he would be paying her at least three hundred dollars less a month. So, Carl, did not fantasize about that one other than to envision how marvelous it would be to see her body, and her attorney=s, wash up out of his healing sea with huge bite marks decorating them from where the sharks had been feeding off their carcasses.

Carl looked out past the dry, round leaves of the sea grape trees that lined the patio bar and rattled in the soft, warm breeze like a diamondback=s tail. He looked past the magenta-colored petals of the crepe myrtle bushes and down at a couple of thin-legged boys scouring the wet ocean mud for sand fleas. They looked like sandpipers searching for supper in the surf. Carl had wanted children but the ex would not give them to him; her ultimate act of selfishness. He sensed the beginning of the end the day she=d told him, *AYes, Carl, you=d be a good provider.@* Not a good father, and she never told him he was a good lover; just a good provider. That word, *provider*, had signaled to him the demise of it all, the marriage, the hope for family, because *provider* is a job description and not a fulfillment of one=s self, such as father, or lover.

Carl finished another drink letting the ice chink against his teeth as he enjoyed the last of his happy hour two-for-one-drinks. He=d ordered three, which meant he=d really had six; enough to give him the courage it took to go home, to that house that was as empty and loveless

as an attorney=s soul. Twenty-three years of running into burning buildings and houses, completely fearless, and now he trembled at the thought of going into his own house, alone. He stumbled out to the parking lot and fumbled his car keys into the door=s lock noticing the many scratches produced by other similar attempts after other similar happy hours. He palmed the hot steering wheel until the air-conditioning cooled the car=s interior enough to allow a full grip, then pulled onto A1A.

The afternoon was clear but Carl was in a fog as impenetrable as any that might occur through nature. After awhile, he found himself at a stop light which seemed to last forever. Carl looked around before locking his sight on the car next to him. He was lost in thoughts he could not assemble before she came into focus.

Brunette arches framed her face, like angels wings, hiding all but the slightest button of a very red nose. Carl knew immediately she must have been crying. He saw the scowl on the man=s face next to her and assumed he was the angry boyfriend, or husband, pouting after a spat. *But she was crying wasn=t she?* He tried to see her better and it was as if she knew he was looking at her, sitting there at the red light waiting for the traffic light to change. She looked up and out the passenger window and Carl did not have time, nor the inclination to turn away his stare. Their eyes locked and, yes, she=d been crying. *Had the bastard hit her?* Carl wondered. Despite whatever shortcomings he had that precluded him from lengthy relationships, Carl had never hit a woman.

Suddenly, Carl saw the woman=s head snap to one side as the man struck her. Her bouncy brunette hair splashed against the window before sliding back to her neck which had turned blotchy scarlet from humiliation and the exertion of crying. Carl could see all this through the dark-tinted windows and it sobered him. He was about to roll down the window and yell

something when the light turned green and the car with the quarreling couple sped away.

But something had happened to Carl in that instant that the woman had looked at him, her large luminous eyes welling tears, her thick lips trembling. Carl had misplaced his self-pity and had instantly fallen for this abused woman. In her, he could see himself; the utter loneliness that can only come from being *with someone* who is not actually *with you*. He could save her and she could save him. She would be the one; his savior, the lover who could pull him away from the Hawaiian Patio Bar, the 2 for 1 drinks, the longing for touch, for companionship. The one who could fill that empty house.

Carl accelerated and pulled alongside the her car, keeping pace. They were going very fast. He rolled down the window.

“Are you okay?” he hollered through the wind. He saw the silhouette of her head, facing him. She seemed to be looking at him.

“Is he hurting you?” Carl yelled. Suddenly, he saw her hair shaking back and forth, her head moving around wildly. Was she trying to give him a signal? A message that said yes, he’s hurting me, just like your wife hurt you and if you can get this car stopped and extricate me from the grip of this uncaring bastard, I will love you forever and never leave you and all your happy hours from now on will be spent with me and the only thing you will ever mourn again is that we didn’t meet earlier.

That’s what he thought she was saying to him. But what she was really saying was, “Mind your own business and for God’s sake look where you’re going!”

Carl turned to look ahead, saw the flashing yellow light affixed to the concrete bridge abutment that looked like God winking his big eye, like at the end of a joke, and saying, “Get

it? Don=t you get it?@ And Carl finally got it. Just before his car slammed into the immovable object at seventy miles an hour, just before he went hurling through the windshield leaving his last thoughts splattered across the dash like cigarette ashes blowing across a bar top, he got it, he got the punch line: *Might as well be dead*. And somewhere, beyond life, even beyond death and certainly beyond memories both pleasant and painful, Carl laughed.