

OPEN DOOR

They were fervent in their affection toward the young woman, as children often bestow latching themselves onto things which give warmth and attention and pleasure. Rianne and Reed lived their whole lives, so far, in Pine Lake. Of course, all was rather new to them: Reed, chubby and creamy with pale reddish hair, two years old, and Rianne, round-eyed and blonde-curved in a Shirley Temple tomboy mode, four years. Pine Lake, to the children as well as everyone thereabouts, exemplifies an extravagantly peaceful and pleasant place: trees, pastures, quaint neighborhoods, animals, downtown of antiquated emptily discarded storefronts and a few struggling holdouts of dusty shops, albeit easy access to state highway and the newly expanded Wal-mart and a cluster of attendant strip mall.

When Candice and her husband Bobby had moved back out there, she felt sentimental and comforted and had said, "It will be a nice place to raise a family, don't you think?"

“Yes,” answered Bobby, distracted, plotting acreage and distance and other financial details.

“I remember spending beautiful summers at Pine Lake when I was a girl,” reminisced Candice. “The town was bigger then, though—businesses, I mean. Remember Icees?” Candice looked around along the red-sand roadway at the woods, now sparser, young pine and oak. There had been a time when families, at the very least college-age children, had resignedly and sometimes eagerly deserted the farm and timberland to move into Tyler, shunning the grand old houses for some of the spreading modern development acres bulging outward there, even as in Dallas and everywhere across the whole region. Tyler, acclaimed “Rose Capital”, was even then, from its place near the old Spanish Trace, so wizened as to resemble a sedate rocking great-grandfather, verandah-bound, entangled in antebellum-esque reveries, while engulfed by yelping and tugging grandchildren tykes.

The old town of Tyler, where Bobby had his financial services' office, sits about fifty-five minutes northwest of Pine Lake. Every weekday he drives the miles to the office and back again in the evening, listening to tunes on the CDs, watching the flickering long shadows, relaxing once again along the country roads with trees surrounding, green in spring and summer, rust in autumn. Candice, flitting at home all day, has taken up furniture refinishing; and dabbled in all the social niceties that Pine Lake could offer.

Consuela, what the young woman said was her name, came to work six months after Rianne was born. She was to be a general helper and, especially, a nanny. Consuela, originally from Dominica, so it was said, had lived around Pine Lake a year or so, in a small house on the farther far side of town; she had very nice though non-local letters of references. She kept to herself, and her own little girl two years old, and did not go out of her way to become involved in other people's business, except for the necessary but occasional odd job helping to clean

or babysitting. From the start then, she came to Candice's five and a half days a week; and Candice did not give a second thought to asking Consuela into her home to attend the new baby. Candice anticipated the relief that the help would bring. Consuela proved herself to be diligent and devoted to the care of Rianne, who was a charmer and only sometimes more fretful than others. Consuela, a warm and lively young woman, but she kept her temperament even and never seemed to have unhappy days. Once she had settled into the never-routine routine of the house, Consuela would often allow herself to be drawn into long conversations with Candice while both puttered with their work, though Consuela was for a great deal of the time still self-conscious about her nevertheless hardly noticeable accent, a soft slurring slush still generally distinguishable amidst the shrill drawling cackle (with its' Kentucky, Tennessee antecedents) of mid-East Texas' Pine Lake. In content as well as in timbre residents of Pine Lake were not accustomed to too-closely-monitoring what they would say; but the ladies of Pine

Lake, of whom there was a compact and somewhat sisterly exclusive circle, would at least in occasional public utterances drop to a *sotto voce* whisper when confiding in subjects which were deemed impolitely unacquaintable to young married homemakers or the mothers of cherubs. A questioning eye would be cast toward those who often displayed a hippy-dippy attitude, even in the fringes of what was left of untrampled back woodlands, or those who espoused a laissez-faire tone concerning the proper social niceties.

Consuela doted on the baby Rianne, offering concerned advice about her foods and her clothes, watching her movements, hugging her almost all the time, and in due time, when Reed came and was brought proudly home from the hospital Consuela attended to him in the same manner and even more so. The children were devoted to Consuela. They hardly could await her arrival in the mornings—anticipating a day of entertaining play, for Consuela cuddled them and most often brought her own daughter, now almost six, to accompany them

—and downcast they waved goodbye in the late afternoon. It was she who kept them entertained, who accompanied them with adventurous walks outdoors, who baked them rice pudding, and showed them butterflies. Most days Candice kept herself occupied with her increasingly profitable workshop, stripping and refinishing the nineteenth century furniture and kitchen odds and ends that she found; and by having a finger in the civic clubs and charitable lunches of Pine Lake. On occasion they all, Candice and Consuela and the children, would pile into the navy blue Suburban and jaunt to the yard-sales or auctions or sometime estate sales where Candice found her projects. These adventures added spice to the ordinary days of errands and stay-at-home routines; and by drops, puddled as among the pinewoods spring dampness falling from a budding twig, Candice deduced from certain of Consuela's confidences a scenario, somewhat rosy and overly courageous, of Consuela's previous life—itinerant, bits of vegetable farm work along the border, following and then being misplaced by an angry husband,

searching for hospitable countryside. Candice had, of course, distantly heard of such things, as one had heard of gremlins or ogres and fairy tales; still the fascination of hearing from Consuela herself of her story was enthralling to Candice as if watching with fascination some dreadfully down-scale *telenovela* with everyone inexplicably badly dressed. Of course, Candice refused to gossip, other than the occasional off-hand remark, when with the other wives while at the Arts and Crafts League or the weekly lunch of the ladies of Saint John-by-the-Waters or the Pine Lake Gardeners' Society Coffee Klatch. Generally, the women had little reason to give any solid thought at all to Candice's "girl". But it was, in idle conversation at times, somewhat other-worldly of interest, commented on as the life Consuela had lived prior to her appearance in Pine Lake. For the wives of Pine Lake their own lives, sequestered snugly among the lovely groves, were a predictable series of orderly events which had returned season by season for quite a number of generations since the raw pioneer freshness had been scrubbed

off the place, by those piano and violin lessons and school functions and team-boosting bake sales, the vacation-Bible-school and choir rehearsals, the charity fundraisers and Lake and Sail Club teas, weddings, the family socials and Christmas dinners. Candice could remember every instruction that came with those things, which of course was the intent, every fork placement and every correct colour to wear and every properly acceptable attitudinal reference point. How could she forget? It was only obviously correct to serve red wine with game, to memorize the order of the liturgy and the correct points to kneel, to see that the "new girl" separated the spoons for cream soup from ones for clear soup when sorting the silver, to be scrupulous about placing lavender sachets for sheets and lemon verbena for handkerchiefs and scarves. It was the way history was passed down, slowly, and intently, and irrevocably. How much a world of newness and Internet access and cell phones had intruded into this ordered existence, shocking and disrupting it, was a question still open to considerable debate. The

foundations were laid deep, antiquated; but they were tottering old and under attack of erosion and could begin to crumble ever so slightly while the world around shifted. It might take only the merest tremble.

Consuela seemed happy and content caring for the children, and in the grownup passages that she encountered being at least close as on the outer side of a window to this world of stable days and luncheon party pleasures and choreographed picnics. She gave no indication of wanting to rock the boat.

Bobby, who spent all his work days at the office and most of his Saturday lazing on the water over various fishing and drinking locales, seemed hardly aware of Consuela's presence. She was like some fixture in the children's lives, cleared from his sight at the end of the day, like some brightly plastic tricycle toy. One evening, early April, after a soft grey day, when it was misting and cool with damp, the children tucked into their beds, Bobby, sitting in the golden pool of light at the study desk, an

old roll-top that Candice had polished to a bank-office dignity, studied the checking statements, something he for a brief lapse had unduly neglected; and there, something puzzled him. An unexplained oddity appeared, cash withdrawals of \$700 each, on the same day. It did not look exactly normal, not like the ordinary list of events. When Bobby questioned Candice, she stared with puzzlement at the columned rows of figures, assuring that she would never make such large amount withdrawals on the same day, perplexed as to why something like that had happened, and faintly recalling that the last time she had withdrawn any money from the branch ATM she, late and rushed, had sent Consuela on the chore with her card, something she had allowed once or at most twice before. It must be a mistake, or a typographical data misprint; nevertheless the balance was definitely depleted by this mysterious amount; and surely Consuela could not have tampered, no one would think, with their account. Inside as well as out, a chill fell on the whole evening. His lips white with

compressed anger, and slapping the back of one hand against the palm of the other, Bobby rose to pace and rave as an agitated watchdog might. A first-thing call to the bank would explain the whole confusion. Candice and Bobby thought it out, disjointedly, blindly, over cups of tea, ending with sips of brandy. What could have happened? Could it really fall to Consuela? The thought seemed so outrageous, so unthinkably about-face.

As usual, when Bobby had picked up Consuela from her trailer park and brought her across the leafy winding lanes to their home, his home and Candice's and Rianne's and Reed's, conversation was most morning-quiet and restrained. He drove stiffly and after depositing Consuela on the doorstep, giving Candice semi-secret signals of winks and nods, drove off to the office, leaving the two women with the chilled sticky lump of silence between them. Rianne and Reed were awake, still in their pajamas, questioning about breakfast possibilities. Confused, Candice, tense and hesitant, unsure of how to proceed, busied herself with straightening kitchen utensils saying

“I’ll help you with the cereals”. Surprised Consuela looked at her with mild amazement; then went about as usual whipping the eggs. After what seemed like long dwindling hours, Candice brought forth the incendiary packet of papers emblazoned with the bank’s letterhead; she asked if Consuela might have any idea what the astounding numbers meant. Consuela stopped slicing fruit for a moment, the sight of the bank’s logo casting a shadow across her dropped eyes, tentatively accepted the outcast papers, looked briefly at them, and shook her head indicating no. She let her face droop into the look of a wounded lamb, protesting that it was not possible to believe that she could be responsible. Candice was the one flushed red with embarrassment, stumbling to explain that they were just trying to make reasonable explanation of it; Bobby having called the bank, being alerted that security officials should be looking into details. Consuela mumbled unappeased. Candice fidgeted. A silence mushroomed. When it became necessary, as usual, to talk of plans for the day the clumsy voices seemed different and

hoarsely strained, Candice trapped to think creepily: what is going on here?

Middle of the morning Consuela traveled as usual to the market while meandering to pass and explore the several farm stands on the way there, armed as customary with a folded stack of currency, and taking Rianne who begged to go with her, but leaving small Reed behind waving from the porch swing while Candice coaxed him back to her workshop. There she answered a call from Bobby, admitting to his consternation that Consuela had seemed offended instead of guilty; the day was a confusing, stupefying and unsettling mess. Pine Lake was intended to be an oasis, a cushion from the jagged points of a spiky stinging world, not a place of threatening mayhem.

When Consuela returned laden from the markets she quietly set the bags on the counter, but did not begin immediately to put the provisions away. Instead she asked Candice to listen, please, while she spoke, "The money—your money—I took it" she whimpered.

Candice stared back at her, deflated as if struck by a stone, flushing with the pump of her thumping heart, “aha” pulsing forth like the staccato of a distant but approaching siren. Astonishment made Candice reach for the counter, clinging to the solidity of its structure for support to her shaken knees. She mumbled, then shot out, “How? Unbelievable. I don’t believe how you could do this.” Around the two eye-to-eye women was the kitchen, familiar, comfortable, where she (they both) had spent so much time together, sometimes sharing lunches, discussing their children, laughing; the walls slipped into a shadow. “I don’t know who you are. These years a stranger behind a face. I trusted you. You’ve been here—in my home—with my children—part of the family—for four years.”

Consuela could not lift her eyes; would not look up from the floor. “The money—I am sorry I could not help it. It was bad. Yes, and you are very upset—because it was so much, and perhaps because of more than the other times.”

“Other times? Oh my god,” Candice cringed.

“Yes. I could not help it though. It is a lot, I know.”

“How could you do such a distrustful thing? And other times? How could you? I thought we...we were friends.”

Consuela stood silent, only her eyes moved and a quick fidget fluttering her fingers, a muffled sniffling slipping from her face. After another dense silence she spoke slowly, trancelike, her face frozen over with the icy look of one who was out of long habit forced to often reflect upon a private introspection that was wary of open and, perhaps, heedful thought, wary of connection and grown closeness. “What do you know—know of me? Of having ‘friends’ like me?” The silent plentiful tears continued to slide down Consuela’s rosy-rouged cheeks; her words hardened, suddenly sharply accusatory, flung like mud from taunting fists. “I look for a place—a home. Anywhere—I look for work in these United States, for I must live; I must eat, and feed my little girl. I am all she has now. Jose is gone, disappeared like the breezes; though this is not really such a terrible bad thing for he is very often mad with anger. Now I am

alone, with my *chiquita*. I want to find a place—from one travel to another. And people stare; they whisper out loud, staring. Sometimes they turn away. And do I not see? I see them stare at me. And I see women with nice things, with nice shoes, with a car, smelling of perfume, with their nice man. I, too, like nice things. So does my new man-friend; for him I wear satin pants. I only want to have nice things, pretty American things—to be as the happy women. It is not improper.”

Candice’s own hysteria was eruptive yet scattering directionless, confused, imploding back in on itself. She had to hold her head to keep it from spinning. “But it is a crime to steal them”, she said, “to steal the money to buy things. Money that did not belong to you; not yours, but that could have been lent. How could you think that of me? How could you think such things? I don’t understand it. I thought we were friendly, truly.” She sighed, “I just need back my key; and, please, leave. Just leave.”

The children were engrossed in their own playtime in the hallway; they did not notice as Consuela gathered up her few things and left by the kitchen door. Consuela, red-eyed, chose not to speak. Later, when they asked for her, Candice hugged them and told them Consuela had to leave and when they inevitably demanded "Why?" Candice held her head again, looking into the clear incomprehensibility of their eyes, and tried to elucidate about Consuela's actions an honest answer: she who had hurt them all by taking money from them which did not belong to her.

Afterward, following days of remorse and recrimination and resentment, Candice became aware that the news of her family's upheaval had, like a straying cat, crisscrossed the byways of the neighborhood. This back-fence gossip was, of course, what placed an itchy mosquito bite atop the bee-sting of Consuela's betrayal; though Candice knew such by-the-way fascinated talk was inevitable, and short-lived, from having seen its flood-stage heights wash overboard in close neighborhoods since time

immemorial, and having participated herself in the past in the small town ritual sacrifice when other victims were marched before the fire. Candice attempted to maintain a reserved silence, but she did unleash when questioned directly. When she listened as when her mother called from Tyler on the phone with the repeated comment, "Well, dear, it's not your fault. It happens; and it's to be expected. You just can't trust the household help. It's a story as old as good Christian wives, dumbfounded as they may become. It happens." For a strange particle of the time, though, Candice missed Consuela: sentimentalizing places they had gone together, moments with the children, rituals grown familiar, the ebb and flow of the days, the easily developed dependence on the smoothing effectiveness of her care when she was a presence around the spacious house. Bobby, bewildered and perplexed by the crudeness of what had happened, did not change his routine, saw no reason, still practical—coolly composed. Some neighbors were astonished: Consuela seemed so upright, caring and trustworthy,

and how is it that Candice and Bobby can go by so blithely without checking their bank statements for months, and who gives a PIN (although haven't I been just as carelessly non-thinking?) to anyone not a member of the family, and yet how in all does anyone faithfully function, so naively? It was not the first time, though it may have stung as such, the tale had been told of duplicity, betrayal, and meltdown ending in emotional earthquake. Most of these types of tales told concerned someone's frivolous romantic affair or an age-inappropriate escapade; but this was serious. It involved money, and the right to not have it taken unwillingly.

Not long after the phone call messages began. Consuela called, but speaking only to the message recorder, she wept about her weakness, her sorrow at what she had done, how she missed the children, about prayer, how she had been overtaken by "some grasping evil". She called back, crying, again and again. Candice listened with soft pity for her tears, but would then be torn for revenge thinking "don't fool me", heart-wrung

and on the verge of tears herself, ceding that perhaps the calls were prompted by the cautious and , of course, hypothetical inquiries she and Bobby had made at the public prosecutor's and the police precinct. Involving the authorities—in even a rhetorical way—entered a labyrinth of possibilities none of which was good, and still did not retrieve the money which had already been scattered on trivial indulgences. Candice found herself having to advise Consuela after the policeman had questioned her to seek a public-aid lawyer in order to help her traverse the legal system, answer the questions, and fend off the immigration service. Consuela's promises to pay back the funds drug on over endless time, and still no dollars in good faith had appeared. Candice and Bobby, tarred with spots of liberal guilt, now found themselves suddenly burdened with the absurdity of assisting their very own thief manoeuvre the trails of the legal system thicket. Revelations of bureaucracy entangled them, becoming the interminable hallways of a bad dream. Candice wanted simply to move past, to sigh resignedly, freed of the nagging

encumbrances and the hollow nausea. She wanted to breathe again, as if she had sanded away layers of dark old varnish to get clean stripped golden wood. But it was hard not to constantly return to the arguings of Consuela when she had blurted out “What do you know—know of me?” Indeed, Candice thinks now, flaring life bursts out beyond her secure world, burning embers, bursting out like fireworks on the Fourth of July, beyond the sweetshop and the Tastee-Freeze, beyond the ATM at the Planter’s Guaranty Trust Bank, beyond the marina and the church bazaar and the volunteer fire-hall, beyond the edges of the lake and all the piney woods.

--J. F. Lowe

