

Fiction by Alix Ohlin

The Teacher

On Doug and Carol's wedding day, murder was committed in their small town, which they steadfastly refused to take as a bad sign. They were that much in love. They spent their first married night in the Newport hotel wrapped in each other's arms, gazing into each other's eyes and so on, but after they'd had sex twice there was only so much more gazing that could happen, and Carol turned on CNN while Doug took a shower.

"Oh, my God," he heard her say as he toweled off. She was sitting at the foot of the king-sized bed, the coverlet loosely bunched around her skinny frame, exposing the delicate bumps of her spine. She was transfixed. A young man had killed his wife and child, and he was on the run; cameras were holding steady on a blue SUV driving on a strangely empty freeway, headed for the coast.

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"I don't know why you watch this stuff," Doug said. He sat down beside her and kissed her bare shoulder. She smelled like candy.

"She went to my high school," Carol said, her eyes wide and round. "Younger though. So young. And the *baby*. Did you know them?"

"I don't think so."

On the screen now was a photograph of the young couple on their own wedding day, red-eyed from camera flash and booze. Carol was a preschool teacher and spent all day long singing songs about bunnies and cows. Sometimes they bumped into her students in the grocery store, and the kids were so freaked out to see her outside of school that they ran away. Other times, to be fair, they got excited and seemed like they were going to pee their pants. In any case, she came home from being with the kids all day, from playing with their brightly colored blocks and vocabulary building cards, and she liked, by way of contrast, to watch violent television – crime dramas or breaking news about murders, kidnappings, disappearances. She was an expert on bullets and DNA evidence. She supported the death penalty and often, just before falling asleep, would shake her head and say things like, "He should rot in hell for

what he's done." In Jamaica, he'd booked a room without a TV; it was called the "Serenity Suite" and was more expensive than a normal room.

Once the honeymoon began, she mellowed, as he'd hoped. For three days they ate conch fritters and took naps on the beach, their skin burnishing. They held hands as they walked on the sand at sunset and were lulled to sleep by the sound of waves crashing on the beach, a soundtrack piped into the Serenity Suite's wall-mounted speakers. But Carol hadn't forgotten the story.

"We probably saw them at the mall," she said one day over lunch. "At the movie theater. Do you think they got married at the same church?"

All day long she kept this up, and her fascination started to get on Doug's nerves. When she asked if they could find a TV that night, he snapped at her, and she pouted, and they ate dinner separately – he on the beach, she inside the Serenity Suite – until he came back and they made up and had sex again and gazed into each other's eyes. By the sixth day of conches and tanning, he'd gone over to her side. At a bar they persuaded some people from Chicago to let go of the baseball game they were watching by buying them drinks. As they sat there, CNN cycled through world disasters and weather forecasts before turning to the case that interested them. And in fact, the young woman and her baby were being memorialized in the very church where Doug and Carol's wedding had taken place.

"Oh, my God," Carol said.

The camera lingered outside the familiar steps of St. Anthony's, mourners emerging sadly, single file, hunched in their black suits and dresses.

"That's where we had our picture taken," Carol said. "That's where I tripped

on my hem and almost fell. That's where the car pulled up." *The Teacher*

The young man had been apprehended and was out on bail. His parents gave a press conference in which they expressed their sympathy for the wife and baby's family. It seemed like they'd already given up on him.

"Let's stop watching this," Doug said, but Carol didn't hear him, and he didn't bother to repeat it, because they were showing the main street of town; they were interviewing the guy who worked at the hardware store – where Doug himself bought nails and plywood – about the murders.

"They were just like any other couple," the hardware guy said. "They had grout issues in their bathroom."

Doug wrapped his arms around Carol and told her that he loved her.

On the plane back to Rhode Island, burnt skin peeling off their noses and backs, they held hands. They landed in a dense, chilly New England downpour. Debbie, Carol's best friend and maid of honor, met them at the airport. Doug could tell just by looking at her that she was dying to share the news about the murders, and she did a poor job hiding her disappointment when Carol brought it up first. All the way home, Debbie driving erratically in her SUV – she had adult ADD, Carol had always said – they chattered back and forth about it, not even discussing the honeymoon at all. Debbie wasn't so much a bad driver as a bad multitasker; she'd light cigarettes and rummage around the front seat for stuff and only ever look up at the last second, swerving or braking with sudden jerks.

"And my little brother's ex-girlfriend's sister was in the Girl Scouts with her," Debbie said.

"Really," Carol said.

“She said that she was the sweetest person. I mean like seriously the sweetest person you ever met in your life.”

“Oh, my God,” Carol said.

In the backseat Doug, having had two Jack and Cokes on the plane, dozed as the women’s bright, excited voices filled the air. He was glad for the rain; there was such a thing as too much sun. Debbie’s squeaking voice squeaked higher, and suddenly it was joined by an extra squeak and squeal of tires, and he jolted awake in time to see the road rise up, like a wave, to meet the side windows, and the last thing he heard before impact was Carol’s voice screaming his name.

In the hospital, he woke up alone, and that was the scariest thing. There was only the sound of machines beeping and no voices. The door to his room was closed. After a while, Debbie came in. She was wearing a hospital gown and had bandages on her arms and hands and face. “Oh, Duggie,” she said to him, as if he were her child. She tried to stroke his arm with one of her bandaged hands, clumsy and paw-like. She was an animal, and he hated her. He tried to scream, but his voice didn’t come out. Then he went under again. This happened over and over, it felt like. A week passed, maybe more; he was never sure. They waited until he was out of the hospital to have the funeral, again at St. Anthony’s.

The year that followed held pain like he’d never known existed. He didn’t have words to describe it, not to other people, not even inside his own head. It was a lot more like physical pain than he ever would have expected, the ache and stab of it. It was like a broken leg, but no medicine or cast existed to mend it. Sometimes he drank a lot and that helped, but only barely and for a couple

of hours at a time, and he’d wake up in the middle of the night, sobbing.

He had this house full of wedding gifts. Appliances. Wine glasses. Monogrammed napkin holders, their initials intertwined.

For a year he went to work and came home, went to work and came home. As he began to come out of his haze, he understood what a totally crappy job he’d been doing for months, and he apologized to his boss, Victor.

“It’s okay, man,” Victor said, wincing, which was an expression he used to convey understanding. “What you’ve been through, nobody should have to survive.”

“I think I’m doing better,” Doug said.

“Hey, man, that’s awesome. That is so great,” Victor said, wincing harder. “You know what? Let’s go out. Let’s get some of the guys together and celebrate your return to the world.”

It didn’t sound bad to Doug. He’d let his friendships slide over the past year, ignoring phone calls from his best man, couples they’d socialized with, repeated ones from Debbie. He preferred the company of his TV, watching all the shows Carol liked. After months of incarceration and investigation, the guy who’d murdered his wife and child was now on trial. The news story kept him connected to her, her lust for punishment and retribution. The murderer looked different now; he’d changed his hair and lost weight. He looked younger and sickly and therefore more innocent. *Who cares?* He could hear Carol saying in his mind, her voice vibrant with anger. *He deserves whatever he gets.*

“What you deserve, buddy,” Victor said – as if eavesdropping inside Doug’s mind – “is a little bit of distraction. That’s what you deserve.”

That night, they went out with a couple other guys to a martini bar in a hotel

around the corner from the office. He'd never been there before – they used to go to a brewpub, since closed – and for this he was glad. They settled into a black leather booth in the corner. A couple of people were drinking alone at the bar. The waitress, a sweet-looking blonde woman in her twenties, dropped off the bar menu. There were seventeen kinds of martinis.

In the past year his tolerance for liquor had ballooned, so it took a few rounds for him to feel any effect, and only after the third could he relax and pay attention to the conversation. His workmates were talking about the waitress's ass. It was a nice-looking ass. She caught them looking and wiggled it at them a little. There was another woman they were discussing, also pretty, sitting at the bar. She was wearing a pink blouse and matching skirt and had long, dark, brown hair. She saw the waitress giving them a show and rolled her eyes, but nicely, as if she saw the humor of it. Doug's friends noticed him checking her out.

"Go talk to her, man," Victor said. "She's hot."

"Smokin'," said Wayne from Technology Services.

"Who says *smokin'* anymore?" Victor said.

"I'm just saying she's hot."

"Smokin'," Victor said, wincing for real. "Give me a break."

Doug was starting to feel drunk, and grateful for it, and he nodded vacantly through all of this. He hardly noticed when Victor and Wayne went to the bar to chat up the dark-haired woman. Gales of laughter peeled from the group over there. He ordered another martini from the blonde waitress and when it came, she said, "This one is compliments of the girl at the bar."

"Seriously?"

"I think she likes you," the waitress said.

From the bar, Victor gave him a thumbs up. Doug tried to grin, but it looked like a grimace, he knew. His smiling muscles were stiff from lack of use. He drank down half the martini and ate his olives, and by the time he finished chewing the guys were trailing back to the table.

"You're never going to believe this, man," Victor said, "but she gave me this for you." He opened his palm and showed Victor a key card in an envelope, on which the room number was written in blue pen.

"She thinks you're hot," Wayne said.

"Maybe even *smokin'*," Victor said. He elbowed Wayne good-naturedly, and they both laughed.

Doug could feel the vodka now.

"That's crazy," he said, the words running together. "We haven't exchanged a single word."

"So what?" Victor said. "She likes the look of you."

He drained his martini. When he looked over at the bar again, the woman was gone. Victor and the other guys walked him to the elevator, pressed the button for him, and left him alone. He could see his own drunk face reflected back at him in the elevator's reflective glass. Leering at himself, he couldn't feel the muscles move, like after the dentist. The elevator stopped.

He found her room and inserted the key. Nothing happened. He tried again. Was she in there listening to him fumble as he tried to stick it in? Not such a good advertisement for anything that might happen later. On the third try, the light turned green, and he turned the handle and stepped inside.

She was sitting on the bed, wearing a black lace negligee, watching CNN, a sound so profoundly reassuring to him

that his knees felt weak. She was thin and olive-skinned, and her shoulders were pointy. Her clothes were folded on the chair, a neat pink pile. It was only when he saw her with her clothes already off that he understood his friends had paid for her company.

“Hi, Doug,” she said, and turned off the TV.

“You can leave it on,” he said.

She pressed the remote again and a voice said, “Next up, the story of a lost dog traveling hundreds of miles all by itself to find its way home.”

He sat down next to her, unsure what to say or do. He’d never been in this situation before. “I had some trouble getting in.”

“Well, you’re here now,” she said, and patted his hand. “Are you okay?”

“I’m a little dizzy,” he admitted.

Patting his hand again, she stood up and fetched him some water from the bathroom. On her way back she turned down the volume on the TV.

“Who are you?” he said.

“My name’s Violet.”

“Where are you from?”

“New Hampshire.”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” he said. He felt close to tears. This wasn’t his thing. It wasn’t going to help.

“Your friends thought you needed some company.”

“I do need company,” he admitted. “I do.”

“Okay, then,” Violet said.

He put his head in her lap. But she was bony and her silky negligee was slippery – Carol always wore cotton – and the whole setup wasn’t very comfortable, so he lay next to her in bed instead, his heavy head propped up by pillows.

“My wife died,” he said. “She was a teacher.”

“I wanted to be a teacher,” Violet said. They were holding hands. Her hair

smelled good, not quite like candy, more like flowers. “I always liked reading.”

“You should do it,” he said. “You should be a teacher.”

“It’s kind of late,” Violet said.

“It’s not even midnight,” he said, and passed out to the sound of her laugh.

When he woke up, the room was dark and silent. It reminded him of the time he woke up in the hospital, and he was scared and sad, and his head hurt, and he said, “Violet?” and his voice sounded like a child’s. Her voice came from the other side of the room. In the darkness he could just see that she was dressed in her pink outfit, from the bar.

“I’m here, honey,” she said.

“Please don’t leave.”

“Okay,” she said.

In the morning, she was still there, and they ordered breakfast from room service. Violet ate a waffle, licking syrup off her fingers. Without her make-up and in a sober light she looked less pretty than she had, even younger actually but somehow more tired.

“You had a nightmare,” she said. “You were talking, but I couldn’t understand what you said.”

“I dreamed I was back in fifth grade and the other kids in school tried to kill me,” he said. They both laughed. “Pretty weird, huh.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be a teacher, if kids are that violent,” she said. “Maybe what I’m doing now is safer.” She smiled at him, then bit her lip. “You seem like a nice guy,” she said. “I’m sorry about your wife.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“My real name is Jane.”

“My real name is Martin. Martin Douglas Robinson. I thought Martin was a sissy name when I was a kid so I use my middle name instead.”

They shook hands formally, politely. He thought about kissing her, but she wasn't really attractive to him. That part of him was dead or almost dead; he took care of its occasional remaining needs by himself in the shower, quick and efficient, a system that worked fine in his opinion.

"I guess I better go," he said.

She shrugged, sweetly. In that moment he liked her about as well as he could like anyone, and he leaned over and kissed her cheek. She touched his shoulder, a faint, barely-there caress, like the first drop before you're sure it's raining. She put a card into his palm and folded his fingers over it.

"Call me," she said.

At work that day, Victor and Wayne grinned with accomplishment. They kept walking around slapping him on the back and announcing loudly that they knew something other people didn't. Hung over, Doug didn't say much, a silence taken for gentlemanly discretion. A lot of women came by to check on him, stopping by his office with lame excuses about confirming meeting times or having run out of toner and needing to use his printer. Suddenly there was an aura around him; he was back on the market. He wasn't sure how to feel about this, and he left the office early, looking forward to a night at home in front of the TV.

When he pulled up, he saw a girl sitting on his front step. It was Violet, or rather, Jane. She was wearing jeans and a pink cardigan sweater and white running shoes. He stood in the driveway for a second, not knowing what to say.

"You're in the phone book," she said, before he could say anything. "I hope you don't mind I just dropped by. Can I come in?"

"What are you doing here?"

"You're in the book," she said again. She was standing up now, with her hands plunged in the pockets of her jeans, and she looked innocent and vulnerable, or like a person who was trying to look innocent and vulnerable. The year he and Carol started going out, he remembered, she'd been obsessed with a hooker who was blackmailing an alderman in Ohio and had amassed thousands of dollars that his wife thought was safely gathering interest in their kid's college fund. *What a scumbag*, Carol had said of the alderman. *He should have kept it in his pants*.

"I was just on my way out," he said to Jane. "Now's not a good time." Quickly he got back in the car, and drove to a theater and saw two movies back to back, and when he returned home it was midnight and she was gone. She probably had to go to work, back at the hotel bar. He breathed out a deep sigh. Inside, he checked his messages.

"This is Jane Eckman calling," her voice said. "That's my name. Jane Audrey Eckman. I really am from New Hampshire. I'm not a creep or a crazy person. I just wanted to call and tell you that. I'm sorry I freaked you out today. I just didn't know if you'd remember my name, I mean if I called you I thought you might not know who I was, so I thought I'd just stop by. I just thought you seemed like a nice person, and so I thought I would just stop by. I'm in the phone book, too, if you want to call me back. Or also you have my card. That's all. Okay. Bye."

Alone in his house, he exhaled. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath. In the pocket of his pants, hanging in his closet, he found her card (*Friends for all Occasions*, it said, with a phone number, next to which she had written, in blue ballpoint and bubbled letters, *Violet/Jane*) and tore it into small

pieces, which he flushed down the toilet.

The next night, she called again. He wasn't picking up the phone, just in case, and she left another message. This time, her voice trembled a little.

"Martin, this is Jane," she said. "I know this is making me sound crazy, but I'm actually not crazy, I swear. I just. Listen. I don't know a lot of people here. And I don't meet a lot of people either, because where would I meet them? And if I did meet them and they asked me what I do, what would I say? So I guess I just thought, I mean, in your case, you already know from the start. I guess I just thought, I'm kind of lonely, and you seem kind of lonely, too, so maybe it would be okay. Anyway, I just wanted to explain that. You have my card. That's all. Okay. Bye."

The next day, she didn't call. He'd expected her to – but of course he was glad she didn't. He went out for a beer with Victor and Wayne, to a sports bar, not the hotel, and when he got home he was even a little disappointed not to get the message, but of course not really disappointed, but a little let down. She was just a lonely person and that was all, and now she was leaving him alone and he was glad. He'd been through enough.

A few days passed. Life went back to its routine, such as it was. He cleaned his office, cleaned his house. No calls.

Then the verdict came down on the man who killed his wife and child. He was guilty. Absent the death penalty in Rhode Island, he'd probably get life in prison. There were protesters outside the prison, saying he should be killed. The parents of the dead woman were interviewed and declined to press this issue one way or another, saying only that no matter what happened, their daughter and grandson weren't coming

back, and given that, there could be no justice. Punishment, but not justice. Doug turned off the TV and sat by himself on the couch, his hands shaking.

A week later, when he pulled up to the house after work, Jane Eckman was waiting on his front step again. This time the weather was warm, and she was wearing a pink flowered sundress, like a girl on her way to church. It looked like an outfit her mother would have bought her. For the first time he wondered how old she was. He almost reversed out of the driveway, but didn't. He got out of the car and faced her.

"Hi, Martin," Jane said. She swallowed visibly. "I'm sorry about those phone calls."

"It's okay," he said.

"I came here to ask you out," she said.

"What?"

"On a date," she said.

To this he said nothing; just looked at her.

"People say sometimes men are dense so you have to be clear. So I'm here, being clear. I like you. You seem like a nice man. You told me I should go ahead and try to be a teacher. It made me feel good; do you know what I mean? I meet a lot of men, and most of them don't seem very nice. So I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me tonight?"

"Jane," he said.

"If you say no, I'll leave now and I won't ever bother you again."

"No."

"Okay, then," she said. She pulled a cell phone out of her purse. "I'll just have to call a cab. It's okay if I wait out here, isn't it? Sorry. This isn't a very good exit."

In the living room, he watched her stand in the driveway until the cab took her away. He couldn't see, from where he was, whether she was crying or not.

He thought that was the end of it, but she kept calling. She didn't leave messages, though. She'd just call and hang up, every few days. It was ridiculous, like high school or something. After a couple weeks of it he made up his mind. He went to the hotel bar, but she wasn't there. This went on for another few days, her calling and hanging up, him looking for her at the hotel bar at night after work. Finally he saw her, sitting at the hotel bar, nursing a cocktail. He had two thousand dollars in his pocket, in a small manila envelope. It was money he and Carol had saved for a down payment on a new car. Jane smiled when she saw him.

"Buy me a drink?" she said hopefully.

"I can't stay," he said. He looked around the bar, eyeing it the way he thought she would, for prospective marks. Was that what she would call them, marks? He didn't know. "I came to bring you something."

Jane smiled again, and he saw she was blushing. She thought he'd come around to ask her out. He put the envelope on the bar. "Be a teacher," he said.

Her smile was gone, but the blush was still there. She didn't touch the envelope. She curled both hands around her glass, holding it tightly.

"My wife and I were saving it," he said, "but I don't need it. Take it and go back to New Hampshire. Go back to school and be a teacher. Meet a nice man and have children." His voice was cracking. The bartender was eyeing him, but he didn't care. "Start a new life."

Jane pushed the envelope back at him and stood up. "Is that what you think I want from you? Fuck you." Her voice rose to a shout. "Seriously, Martin. Fuck you." She got up and ran out of the bar, her high heels clicking spastically in her rush out.

The bartender shrugged. "Women," he said.

Picking up the envelope, Doug left the bar, went home, and took a shower. While he was in there, the phone rang. Jane, he thought, I'll never get away from her. After he got dressed, he saw there was a message, and he poured himself a drink and steeled himself to listen to it.

But it wasn't Jane. It was Debbie, Carol's best friend, the one who'd been driving on the night of the accident. She'd called him every few months since the crash, but he'd never called her back. It wasn't that he hated her; he just couldn't stand the sound of her voice.

"Douggy," she said, in her high, squeaky voice, and immediately he was back in the hospital, back in the embrace of her awful bandaged paws. "I know we haven't really talked since . . . Maybe you don't want to hear from me. But I was watching the news about that guy and how he's going to jail forever now, and I was thinking about you." Her voice trailed off, and he guessed she was drinking, or on the verge of crying, or both. "I was . . ." She hung up.

Debbie was divorced and lived by herself, ten minutes away, in a condo in a development called Lantern Hills. Every time she told people where she lived she'd say, "We do have some lanterns, but the land is actually flat," and laugh. He'd always found her annoying, but now, all of a sudden, he felt like he'd missed her.

He rang the doorbell, and she answered the door in jeans and a college T-shirt, no bra it looked like, bare feet. Her hair was down, uncombed.

"I got your message," he said.

"Come in," she said.

They sat down on the couch, and she brought him a beer. She held the bottle funny, and he noticed two of her fingers

didn't bend. There were scars on the backs of her hands.

Seeing him looking, she waved her stiff hands at him, almost apologetically. "They're full of pins," she said.

"That guy," Doug said, "the one who killed his wife and kids. Carol would have said, *Too bad we don't have the death penalty in Rhode Island.*"

"That's true, that's so exactly what she would have said," Debbie agreed.

There was a silence.

"I met this girl," Doug said, "She was a hooker. But she wanted to be a teacher."

"What?"

He told her everything, from start to finish, but he left out the very end, the part where Jane didn't want the money. He just talked about giving her the envelope and telling her to start over, and Debbie nodded and listened with her scarred hands awkwardly semi-folded in her lap. With the ludicrous, almost lurid story in the air between them, he felt closer to her than he had to anyone in a very long time. He felt a tenderness gurgle inside him and gasp for air, and as he spoke and gestured he let his hand brush over hers.