

He's driving down the state highway in his station wagon, trunk filled with various fabric samples, rugs, towels, curtains of all sorts. He casts a glance at his agenda, lying open on the dashboard in front of him. Looks at the day's schedule. Mrs. Baker. Oh yes, the old lady with the pet dachshund. Cloyingly lonely. She always seems to invent some last minute excuse for him to stay a bit longer. Freshly baked cookies, a cold beer (which, he has no doubt, she buys especially for salesmen of his sort, as her son-in-law hates her and never comes to visit. He has even managed to alienate her from her daughter, one of the few people on this earth that still had some regard for the old woman), a broken faucet or a rickety chair that she was afraid of falling off of and breaking her spine.

Seems that his 3 o'clock is a new client. Mrs. Ethel Walton. Just going by the name, he anticipates heavy ankles and a taste for sherry. Though one never knows. In 30 years he's seen it all. He started out working for a curtain store downtown, selling cheap polyester fabric to women that, back then, still knew how to make their own curtains. Though the time of velour and linen was already long gone. Back then every household had a sewing machine and children's clothes were handmade and handed down among siblings. Then people moved on to buying second-hand castoffs at the Goodwill, and now the majority of his clients outfit their offspring in cheap mixed-fabric crap they pick up at Kmart while doing their weekly round of the strip malls.

His own mother, a broad, no-nonsense matriarch, used to hand knit all of their underwear. She lived in a constant fear of pneumonia and refused to let them leave the house without long underwear and undershirts from October to April. Global weather had already started to shift by that time, seasons growing ever shorter and blending into one another; one year there would be no winter, the next a rainy summer that lasted for ages and transitioned into a sweltering, sickly fall. Nonetheless, his mother seemed to cling not only mentally but also sartorially to her childhood, to days when women still had a practical need for cashmere twinsets, layers that could be gradually removed as the day went on. Needless to say, he was the butt of many jokes in school. Central heating made him itch and sweat under his woolen undershirt, and he had formed the habit of scratching his crotch and ass; a habit that developed into an automatism, even during the summer months when he was allowed to dress in cotton shorts and t-shirts like the other kids. Crabby crack. The nickname followed him everywhere.

Maybe it was because of these experiences that he harbored feelings other than a thinly veiled condescension towards poor Mrs. Baker. She struck him as someone that had come to know humiliation much later in life, which is far more stigmatizing and hard to shake off than the embarrassments of childhood. This tender-heartedness of his was reserved for ladies of a certain age. Possibly the lure of sex caused his deep-rooted insecurities to resurge, creating a panic that translated itself into passive-aggressive dismissal towards women his own age and younger.

2.45. He is earlier than he anticipated. He never arrives early for his appointments, for fear of the client suspecting that she is his only activity for the day. Mrs. Walton lives in the deep suburbs, where one is hard pressed to find remnants of civilization such as a café. As the majority of his clients are what we for the moment still call middle class and inhabit these cardboard fairy-tale lands, he has taken to making a thermos of coffee every morning, which he keeps in the car and drinks on occasions like this. He wishes he had a danish or something. But maybe Mrs. Walton would offer him a refreshment.

As he sips his coffee and curses his cheap tendency to buy second-rate appliances such as this thermos, which seems to cool liquids rather than keep them warm, he stares at Mrs. Walton's front lawn and can't help but wonder if she has a husband or son that tends to it or rather if she's the type of woman that likes to get things done herself and has relegated the male members of the house to a position of comfortable unease. The lawn appears to have been "scalped"; cut too short in certain areas, leaving rather ugly brownish patches visible.

This appears to be the work of a resentful teenage boy doing his chores in the laziest way possible so as to avoid any unnecessary expenditure of energy. Energy which needs to be saved up for higher pursuits, such as fantasizing about the girl that sits next to him in math class and the way her hair falls across her tall preppy collar. He himself wasn't particularly fond of the girl that had sat next to him in high school math class, and could never understand the reasoning behind year-long assigned seating. Sitting next to girls had always made him nervous and physically uncomfortable, as he had a tendency to self-consciously suck in his stomach when in the presence of the opposite sex. Years of weight lifting in college helped him rid himself of that particular paranoia, but he continues to find women unnecessarily

self-aware and calculating. Maybe that's why he got into the fabric business; it presented a way of interacting with the opposite sex on a completely different playing field. He provides them with what they need, they express gratitude or, if dismissal, it is never meant personally. Over time though, he has come to find all human interaction tiresome, and feels like ripping his skin off whenever a new client comes along, requiring him to bow down to the niceties and superficialities of a first encounter.

Reluctantly, he screws the top back on his thermos and gets out of the car. He walks up the driveway to the front door; tries to get a peek inside before ringing the bell but rapidly averts his eyes when he sees someone peering out at him from the back of the dining room through the mesh screen door.

What he takes to be Mrs. Walton is not at all what he had imagined. She is a diminutive woman, forlorn-looking and homely, with thinning ash-blond hair that hangs limply down her shoulders. She's dressed in a greying pink quilted robe and grey slippers, looks like she's been sitting at home all day drinking too much coffee. She rather reminds him of the coach's wife in "The Last Picture Show", the kind of woman whose name no one ever remembers until they get to know her better and find that they have become addicted to her particular brand of self-effacing affection.