

### Three Conversations

Rushing into the kitchen to grab a fast breakfast before shoving off to work, Beverly stopped abruptly at the doorway. She glared at Aaron, annoyed he was still hanging around. He was reading the morning paper. His eyes caught sight of her over the top of the paper. He glanced back down at the text.

"I thought you were to be at work by now. What's the matter--your girlfriend keep you up too late last night?" she muttered tersely. Her heels clicked a rapid beat as she crossed the tile floor. The kitchen was the one place they were most likely to encounter each other, so they agreed to adjust their schedules to avoid these uncomfortable encounters as much as possible. Until the divorce was settled, they decided that she'd take the upstairs bedrooms and bath, and he would take the rooms on the lower level. The middle level was the common areas—the living room, dining room, and kitchen—a kind of free zone.

Bev glanced at her watch. She dove her head into the refrigerator and started shoving things around.

"Damn," she muttered to herself. She grabbed some cheese and bread and flung them onto the counter. She pulled open the cutlery drawer, rattling through the cutlery for the cheese cutter. Finding it, she slammed it onto the counter and heaved the drawer shut. The utensils ricocheted off the drawer end as the drawer thudded to a sudden stop. Aaron watched the event the way a little boy enjoys a circus. Bev grabbed an orange and pitched it down by the cheese and bread.

"Don't be so tart so early in the morning. Besides, it's none of your business anymore what I do," Aaron said restraining an amused tone. He put down the paper and stirred the cold coffee in his cup and continued watching her. "You'd better get used to this arrangement. You know this is the way it's going to be until we can decide on the division of property, or until *ONE* of us moves out." He stressed the word "one," raising an eyebrow. The corner of his fleshy lips curled up on one side.

"You jerk." She grabbed the orange and sliced it through. "You think you're so superior because you make three times what I do. Well, I'll find a way to stay here, you worm." She knew without his income she wouldn't be able to meet the mortgage payments and other expenses, although she still insisted that she would stay in the house.

"We'll just let the facts and figures speak for themselves." He resumed reading the paper, hiding a broad smile.

Bev swung around at his remark and glared. She gritted her teeth and ground the orange with such fervor a seed propelled across the room. It landed on the table with a ping, next to Aaron's cup. He put his finger on it as if squashing a bug and grinned. He took his cold coffee and the seed to the sink and dumped them down the drain. The sun shone through the window over the sink onto the potted plants lining the sill. Standing close to Bev, Aaron absently picked at the drooping, crusty brown leaves, dropping them into the sink. Bev shoved her things down the counter away from him.

"Don't forget to be here tonight at 6:00 when the negotiator comes."

"You know I don't miss such things as that. Why don't you just go to work and let me finish my breakfast in peace," she snipped and moved further away from him.

"Why don't you try to be a little more civil. This situation isn't very comfortable for either of us. You agreed to keep attorneys out of this, so curb some of this bitterness."

"Oh, of course. We can afford to be cavalier when we hold all the aces, can't we?" She threw the pulverized orange rind in the sink and poured the juice into a glass. Aaron picked it up and surveyed the remains.

"Wow, Superwoman was here." He tossed the decimated orange peel back into the sink.

"Leave me alone, chauvinist. Your lack of sensitivity makes me puke. You have no conception what it's like for a woman." Bev gulped down the juice and wrapped up the bread and cheese in a paper towel. She walked to the table where her purse sat and searched through it for her keys.

Aaron walked to a chair and picked up his jacket.

"I don't need to hear about your self-pitying rantings. This subject is getting worn pretty thin." He shot a glance over at her and squared his shoulders. He sauntered casually out the door. Bev leaned against the wall and fought the column of heat rising in her spine, watching him drive away in the Mercedes.

"Wonderful. He gets the house and the Mercedes. I get the VW and the dog." She ran her shaking fingers through her short black hair and reached for the phone to call her boyfriend. She hesitated, then dialed.

"Damn," she sighed, slamming the phone down when she heard the busy signal. Glancing at her watch again, she resumed looking for her keys, finally finding them. She walked out the door, kicking it shut behind her.

Beverly and Aaron's marriage had been disintegrating for years. Most of the time they just went along with their lives together, floating downstream facing different directions. They tried marriage counseling for a year, but nothing seemed to change. They had many friends, other married couples about their same ages. This group of friends had relatively parallel lives—career moves, children growing up, and other similar phases as families mature. Over the years, there had been several divorces within the group. Nothing is much of a surprise, though, within this tight-knit little group. They can detect disharmony between spouses like litmus paper. When Bev and Aaron announced to the group that they were splitting, everyone took it in stride and were supportive. Both were still invited to parties and other social events. It was left to Bev and Aaron to decide individually whether they wanted to go. The couples avoided taking sides in any other couple's lives.

Once at work, Aaron greeted the secretary and went into his office, closing the door behind him. He enjoyed the privacy of his office and the large window facing the Golden Gate bridge. He stood for a moment gazing at the early morning sail boats on the water. Since the room faced west he couldn't see the morning sun, but he liked the way it imposed itself by casting long, clean shadows pointing to the horizon. He inhaled a long, slow breath and rubbed his chest. The cool bay air always felt refreshing in the mornings.

The room felt comfortable. It was his: the window, the view, the shadows. The furniture was modern, the style he preferred. Everything was sleek and angular with clean lines. He settled into his chair at the desk. He rummaged through the messages his secretary lined up neatly, the way he liked it. He carefully prioritized them. Three of them he tossed in the waste basket. The rest he began taking action on—all business associates who needed to talk to him. Aaron drew strong lines between his business and personal life. He wanted clear distinctions, like the line between shadow and sunlight. Only his children were free to call him at work.

Following his usual routine, at mid-morning Aaron wandered out of his office for a cup of coffee. He headed for the lunch room, also a gathering place for coffee breaks. The room smelled of fresh brewed coffee and seemed friendly and warm. The employees took care to keep two pots of fresh coffee on the warmers. The center of activity, someone was sure to be in the lunch room whatever the time of day. Just before going in, Aaron hesitated at the door, smoothing down his hair and listening for who might be there. He heard two men he knew discussing some feature of a new program they were implementing in the plant. He expelled a silent breath, straightened his tie and walked in confidently.

At the sink he stopped to wash his hands and looked at his image in the shiny towel dispenser. He was proud of his good looks and excellent physical condition. At 49, his tall, thin frame was toned through regular exercise. His graying black, wavy hair gave him a distinguished appearance. When he walked, his body followed his chest like a peacock.

"Hey, Aaron, how's it going?" called one of the men as Aaron washed his hands.

"Hi, Aaron. Well, Sid, gotta get back to work. See you both later," called the second man as he walked out of the room.

"Hi Sid. Oh, I'm doing great. Have you solved that problem with your silicon supplier?" Aaron questioned.

"Chet and I were just talking about that when you walked in. I think we're getting it straightened out finally. Say, how's Bev and the girls? Haven't seen her since the Christmas party last year."

"Yeah, she's doing OK. The girls are great. Laura just started college, you know. Dena will be graduating next June."

"My God, Aaron. Hard to believe, huh? My twins are sixteen now. Do you think we are getting as old as our kids are? Or does raising them stunt our growth and we just stay the same age we were when they were first born?"

"Well, if losing your hair is any indication of stunted growth, I guess I qualify," Aaron chuckled. His hair hadn't thinned much on top, just towards the center in back so that it looked like he always wore a yarmulke. He reached up reflexively and smoothed down the hair stragglers still clinging back there. Sid's hairline had receded a little, but he still had most of his thick, red hair.

"Well, you know what they say about bald—or, balding—men, don't you?" Sid laughed, sensing he should smooth over a nerve he thought he saw spark in Aaron.

"Right, I heard that old saw, but I won't tell you if it's true or not!" Sid's name was paged. Aaron felt relieved. They exchanged customary "See you later," and Sid walked away. Aaron poured a cup of coffee, added cream and sugar, shifted the knot in his tie and made sure his shirt was neatly tucked into his pants. He picked up his cup and turned to leave. As he walked to the door, Susan walked in.

"I was just trying to call you, so now I know why you didn't answer the phone," Her hand pushed back imaginary stragglers of hair from her face. She walked towards him, but he side-stepped around her to go towards the door. "I wanted to see what time you wanted to meet for lunch." He turned his head to look at her.

"Oh, lunch." He cleared his throat and smoothed back his hair.

"You say that like you forgot. Did you? You didn't return my messages." She squinted her eyes searching his face closely. They hadn't talked for over a week. She was becoming anxious about

their relationship. He seemed to be getting distant lately. Aware of the pressure he was under from the divorce, she was careful about pushing him, and he said he wanted their relationship to remain confidential, even though he was now free to date openly.

"Uh, no, of course I didn't forget. I was, uh, just going to give you a call when I got back to my desk. It's just that things have gotten real busy lately. I think we'd better go some other time." A trickle of sweat ran down his back.

"Aaron, what's going on? Since you and Bev decided to divorce, things have changed. It seems like you're trying to avoid me. Please tell. . ."

"You know we can't talk here, Susan," he interrupted. "Look, I just need some time, that's all. I gotta get back to my office." He stepped sideways around her to get through the door. He walked briskly down the hall. As he approached his office he realized she had followed him. She spoke just as he turned his head to look at her.

"Oh, Aaron, I need to talk to you about that account you mentioned. I'm glad I found you on your way back to your office because I was trying to call you earlier." Susan's manner was business-like and calm.

Aaron glanced over at his secretary, who was engaged in some task. He was annoyed. He stalled just outside of his office door, trying to think of a way out of this, but couldn't.

"Can we discuss it later?" He put his hand on the doorknob to shut the door.

"I'm on my way to a meeting and I need the information now, if that's OK." She walked passed him into the office and sat down in front of the desk. He shut the door and looked at her.

"What's wrong with. . ."

"Tell me what's going on, Aaron. What do you mean you need time? Everything was just fine while you were married. Now you're free—or half way, anyway—and all of a sudden you're acting funny and don't have time to see me now. Why?" She sat rigid waiting for his answer.

"Look, Susan, I don't think it's wise for me to take on any obligations of a relationship right now. I was married for twenty-three years and now I need some fresh air." He sat down behind his desk and picked up a pen, noisily tapping a rapid beat on top of his desk.

"I haven't asked you for any kind of commitment, Aaron. I'd just expected us to be together in a 'normal' way now that we can. You know how it's been for the last year. We've had to be careful not to be seen. The only thing we could do was meet at my place for lunch or sometimes sneak a few hours together at night. Now that we can be open and go out in public, you're avoiding me. What gives?" She pulled the chair up directly across from him to be face-to-face. She wanted him to look her squarely in the face. He swung around in his chair and looked out the window.

"Can't we just be friends?"

"Friends!?" She lurched forward in the chair and dug her nails in the cloth seat. "Not too long ago it was love and soulmate. Now it's just friends? How can anyone develop friendship this way?"

She brought her fist down on the desktop and got up. It suddenly flashed before her. "Oh, I see. The warmth and sharing—the touching and dreaming—the fantasies and dreams. That's all they were—just fantasies and dreams—all in the cozy safety of my small, quiet apartment."

She turned away and brought her hand to her forehead. "All fantasies and dreams. I can't fight this, can I?" She headed to the door, swallowing hard and checking her eyes for tears. Aaron crossed his arm heavily across his chest and turned toward her again.

"I don't know what you mean. I don't need this pressure. I told you, I need some fresh air. What's wrong with that?" His feet were restless. He shuffled them under the desk, pressing his eyes into her back.

"The air used to be fine at my place, Aaron. Now that things can be legitimate and open, the air suddenly turns stale. I guess I was the fool." She bit her lip, slowly opened the door and walked away.

He got up and walked to the door, watching her walk away. Then he shook his head like a wet dog, shut the door and returned to his desk, shoving through papers. He picked up a file from one of the stacks and began working on it.

The ringing phone startled him. He looked at the desk clock and noted that it was past noon already. He hadn't realized how much time had passed since Susan walked out. He picked up the phone.

"Hello, this is Aaron."

"Hi, Aaron. It's me, Julie. Hope I'm not interrupting you."

"Julie? No, no. Not at all. I was just thinking of grabbing some lunch. What's going on?"

"Well, I just wanted to remind you that the singing group meets tonight. You said you'd like to come, remember? Can you still make it?" Julie's voice was welcome relief to him. She and her husband, Sam, had been friends for years. They were one of the "group." Now that he and Bev were divorcing, Julie's been good about inviting him places and making sure he wasn't alone. She's always been there to talk to when the problems got too heavy.

"Yes. Yes, of course. I've been looking forward to it. I always wanted to come, but Bev never wanted to, so . . . well, you know that story. It's such a pleasure now to do all the things I want to do and not worry about what someone else wants to do." He leaned back in his chair and swiveled around to look at the bay.

"Yeah, I know, I envy you. Sam doesn't like to go either, but I go anyway."

Aaron sank deeper in his chair, resting his feet on the window sill. He smoothed back his hair.

"Well, don't envy anyone until you know how they die."

"Hmmm, yes, I guess you're right—that makes sense. But you always make so much sense. You seem to think about things most people don't think about. That's what I like about you. You make me think—not like most men I know."

"Careful now, Julie. Flattery will get you somewhere."

"Gosh, I hope so." They both chuckled. "Anyway, we can go together tonight. It'll be fun. Everyone will be glad to see you there. Is everything OK with your situation at home?" Julie knew all about their arrangement. She and Aaron talked frequently at parties and other functions that the couples attended.

"Well, you know how Bev wants the house. The negotiator is coming tonight to help us figure it all out. But I don't care about material things. The house really doesn't mean much to me.

Relationships with people are what's important to me. I'm just a simple kind of guy. My daughter says I remind her of Forest Gump." He played with the curls in the phone cord.

"You're so thoughtful and gentle, Aaron, and you have some really nice female qualities. That's important to women, you know. Boy, a woman would be so lucky to have a man like you. I wish Sam was more like you. He's all business and facts. Not like you. You like being open and talking about things. I really appreciate having a friend like you."

Aaron sat up straight in his chair and smoothed the hair on the top of his head.

"Well, Julie, you know you're important to me. I just couldn't have gotten through all this mess if it wasn't for you—and Sam. So, about tonight. Did you say it was at 9:00? The negotiator comes at 6:00 and should be gone by then. How about if I pick you up at 8:30. Then afterwards we'll have coffee somewhere?"

As he spoke, he penciled a note in his appointment book.

"OK, that sounds perfect. See you at 8:30!" They hung up. Julie dashed upstairs to check her closet. Her heart pumped fast. She could feel it in her temples. A faint web of heat rose to the surface of her skin and titillated her. She looked over the clothes in her closet, carefully choosing what she'd wear. Suddenly she slid the door closed and decided it was time to buy something new. Like a giddy high school girl, she went to the mirror and primped. She fluffed up her naturally curly, blond hair, pinched her cheeks, and dabbed on some lipstick. She grabbed her purse and ran to the garage. She pulled the Beamer out, glancing repeatedly in the rearview mirror at the reflection of her own eyes. They gleamed in the sunlight. She slipped on her Laura Biagiotti's. As she drove to the mall, her insides tingled. She thought about how glad she was that she and Aaron had become such good friends.