

# UC Riverside

## UCR Honors Capstones 2018-2019

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Narcissa's Broken Mirror

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## Abstract

The experience of completing a Capstone project is much more complex than the mere completion of an assignment. It involves the identification of a particular field of interest and the tailoring of a work to express and explore that interest within the academic world. Even when the Capstone project selected involves the production of a creative work, significant research is involved. In preparing to write my planned Capstone I began by studying narcissistic personality disorder, relationships, and character development in writing. All three of these elements are at play in the final work and created the framework for the fictional story I have begun to tell. My story focusses on the life of a woman with narcissistic personality disorder and how that impacts her relationships with those closest to her and isolates her from those who would and could be a support system to her. The story focuses on the end of her marriage and her navigation through a painful and acrimonious divorce. I have included the initial three chapters of my work and the preliminary outline for the full story as a part of this document.

I began by looking at research into narcissistic personality disorder. “Narcissistic Rage Revisited,” by Krizan and Johar (2015) explores the connection between narcissistic grandiosity and rage. This article clarifies the distinction between narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability and the disproportionate and unfocused acts of aggression in response to minor provocations that are displayed during a state of narcissistic vulnerability. This provides the basis for the immature and dysfunctional acts of displaced rage that my main character engages in throughout her story. “Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic vulnerability in Psychotherapy,” by Pincus, Cain, and Wright (2014) discussed the association of narcissistic personality disorders and other mood disorders and anxiety symptoms. This is foundational for further character development. Finally, “Quick and Dirty: Some Psychological Costs Associated with the Dark Triad in Three Countries,” by Jonason and Czarna (2013) explored interplay of narcissism, psychopathy, and

Machiavellianism and the effects of these disorders on interpersonal relationships , including romantic relationships. This began my transition to research more closely focused on the impact of narcissistic personality disorder and relationships.

At the heart of my story, like most stories, are the interplay of interpersonal relationships. “Self and relationships: Connecting Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Processes,” by Vohs and Finkel (2006) provided valuable information about how narcissists react in romantic relationships and their interpersonal self-regulation in the context of relationships with others. Chapter four of this book cites studies that provide insight into the behaviors of narcissists both in casual and romantic relationships. Most valuable to my purposes was the information provided here in regard to the positive attributes that a narcissist can bring to a relationship. Similarly, “Pathological Narcissism and Interpersonal Behavior in Daily Life,” by Roche, Conroy, Hyde and Ram (2013) used self-reported patterns of interpersonal behavior to study narcissistic expression. They found that the narcissist’s perception of the behavior of the person they are interacting and communicating with is the key factor in determining their own behavior in response. This will play out in my narrative by allowing me to showcase how my main characters perceptions of her husband’s behavior are colored by her disorder. With “Co-Parenting in a Highly Conflicted Separation/Divorce: Learning About Parents and Thier Experiences of Parenting Coordination, Legal and Mental Health Interventions,” by Mandarino (2015), and “Tearing the Child Apart: The Contribution of Narcissism, Envy and Perverse Modes of Thought to Child Custody Wars,” by Donner (2006), discuss the impact of narcissism on co-parenting following a divorce and the impact of narcissistic vulnerability and the pathological amounts of envy in divorcing parents. These studies are central to the story I am telling and to the character interactions I wish to portray. “Are Couples Really Happy After

Divorce? An Analysis of the Negative Post-Divorce Effects in Hanif Kureishi's Short Story *Midnight All Day*," by Gunes (2016) provides additional grounding into the emotional state of my character and that of her husband. My goal is to have all of my characters display multi-dimensionality and if my background does not reflect the reality of life for all of them, I will come up short. While the focus of my story is on my main character, it is essential that the people in her life be realistic and human.

The most challenging aspect of this project has been the mechanics of how to write the story that exists in my mind. "How to Write a Successful Short Story," by Rooke (2011), addresses the realities of writing and how difficult it can be for one writer to advise another. The author discusses a guide provided to him and the process by which he chose which advice to follow and which pieces to ignore. "Any Story I Would Ever Tell, I Would Certainly Never Write: An Interview with Mary Lavin," by Wray and Lavin (2018), discusses how to bring environments to the page and create a bond between the reader and the characters in your story. Lavin discusses her approach to character development, story outline, and the process of bringing a story to the page. I have leaned heavily on this article in the work I have created thus far. "11 Rules for Writing Short Science Fiction: A Veteran of the Genre Tells You What You Need to Know about Crafting and Selling Stories for an Audience 'Looking to Get Amazed,'" by Bisson, provided advice on consistency in realism and dialogue. I have struggled to follow the advice to avoid over-explanation and to remember the important context that can be provided by what is left unsaid. It can be too easy to overly rely on exposition, but the hallmark of a superior writer is to paint a picture without detailing every line and shade of color. I aspire to that level of excellence in storytelling. "Burn Rubber," by Ehrlich (2018) provided me with an example of this type of narrative told through vivid imagery. The author tells a complete and compelling

story without a single line of dialogue and completely from the point of view of a single character. I have returned to this story frequently as I have wrestled with how to bring my tale to life. The results of those efforts begin on the following pages.

## Narcissa's Broken Mirror

*December 26, 2017 - Claire*

Claire looked around the condo with a sense of satisfaction. She was pleased with the results of her efforts. The dark chocolate rug in the family room complimented the couch she had found on Craig's list and the tablecloth made the secondhand dining room table in the breakfast nook look elegant. She had seen the surprise on John's face when he dropped off the kids. He had expected her new place to be a mess of boxes and mismatched furniture, but she had made sure that everything was put away and in its place before calling him to bring them over. Her parents and brothers had grumbled about the time and effort of moving and unpacking all in one day, but they understood that she wanted her kids to see a new home when they arrived not a stack of boxes. Her mom had even found an area rug for the play room that perfectly matched the toy bench her in-laws had built for the kids. Their toys were all in place waiting to be played with and upstairs they each had their own rooms with their own familiar beds. John would have to find new ones if he ever found his own place. He had insisted on keeping every joint gift his parents had ever given them as a couple, so she had insisted on taking everything given to the children.

It was lonely and a little intimidating to be living by herself for the first time in her life, but this was the right thing. John had to see what he had lost. Someday this might be their home, but for now he had to see that she could live without him so that he would learn that he couldn't live without her. He had seemed devastated this morning when she told him that she was going through with the move, but she was committed to her choice this time. The cycle of fighting and making up had to be broken. If they were going to survive this rift, he needed to fully accept responsibility for the mess he made. He had half-heartedly done so before, but he always fell

right back to taking her for granted. This time she was going to make sure that his repentance lasted. Christmas had provided the perfect opportunity to remind him of what he was losing. They had spent the day with their extended families and it had been warm and full of love. So much so, that he had thought she had changed her mind about leaving him. The shock and hurt on his face when he realized she was still leaving had almost made her relent, but she had held firm. There would be a time for reconciliation later. First, he had to see what life would be like without her, without their family.

The last ten months had been the most tumultuous of her life. It had all started with a vague sense of unease. She and John had actually been getting along better than they had for some time. He had just seemed a little off, she had noticed that he was never without his phone and she couldn't remember exactly when that had started. He had never been the type to be obsessed with technology and he had certainly never been a social media addict. In fact, he had eliminated most of his social media accounts – ostensibly to decrease potential problems at work. But, he was still spending a lot of time on his phone. When she asked him about it, he was so defensive that she became suspicious. She would never forget the sinking feeling that washed over her when she accessed their phone bill online and saw the same number – one she had never seen before – fill page upon page of text messages and phone calls. She dialed the number and heard a woman's voice. She hit print and began mapping out when he was calling this person. A weekend three weeks earlier practically jumped off the page. John had been out of town for a conference and had asked her to call him when she got off of work. It had been very late at night, but he had insisted. When she called him, however, he claimed to have been asleep and rushed her off the phone. There it was the other number, her quick call, and the other number again

immediately after – a conversation that continued for over an hour. It was just one of many lengthy calls and countless text messages at all hours of the day and night.

She had confronted John that same day and he had begged her to understand – he had made a mistake, he loved her, he wanted to be with her. She had been deeply shaken when he told her that it had been going on for two years – that this wasn't just a passing thing, this was something more. She had insisted he leave and spent the evening taking solace in the closeness of her children. Over the next several days, John had begged her to relent and she had eventually given in, convinced that he would never hurt her that way again. She was convinced that this other woman could not really mean anything to him. He had always complained about their sex life and she must have just been an outlet for him. They had carefully planned their second child and she couldn't believe that he would have been able to do that with her while seriously involved with someone else.

However, once he was back home John insisted that they needed to work on their marriage. She had initially agreed thinking that it would do him good to hear from others how much damage he had done. Their first session had gone well, until the therapist asked John why he thought he had strayed. He had the nerve to accuse her of being at fault. He said her focus on their first son had made him feel lonely and left out, that he had turned to someone else for the affection and attention she no longer seemed to have for him. She had listened, confident that the therapist would call him out on his selfishness and destructive behavior at their next session.

She was stunned when the therapist opened the next session by asking her to take responsibility for her role in his affair. The absurdity! How was she supposed to be responsible for his lack of self-control? What kind of a man couldn't put the needs of his child above his own? He couldn't give her a little time to adjust to the increased demands of being a wife and

mother? He had started cheating on her while she was still adjusting to the needs of caring for a toddler and continued to do so while she continued to plan for the growth of what she thought was their happy family. She had stormed out of therapy and refused to return.

What followed was months of tension and bickering, fighting and reconciling. She demanded he move out twice more and he begged to come home. He left in a fit of anger and begged to come home. It was exhausting. He would start off sweet and attentive and fall right back into the pattern of blaming her for his mistakes. She was over the constant fighting. Their lease was up in another month and last month they had begun looking for a new home together. When she had found this place, it was perfect, but it was ready sooner than they would be. The idea had come to her in a flash. She would move out on her own and let him see what it felt like to be abandoned and alone. By the time the lease was up on their shared home, he would have to accept the blame for their problems and agree to treat her the way he should treat the mother of his children and the wife he loved.

Comforted that her plan was on track, she slowly walked upstairs and peaked in on Troy, her oldest. He is sleeping soundly, the distinctive rumble of his snoring filling the room. At four, he is his father in miniature and she feels the initial surge of love and affection cool somewhat as the image of John appears before her eyes.

She quietly closes the door to Troy's room and silently moves next door to Ted's room. Only eighteen months old, he is splayed across his crib on his back, deep in sleep. The sweet innocence of his sleeping face touches her heart, but, like a horror movie villain, her anger rises within her again. How could he? How could John have cheated on his family? Didn't he see that he had betrayed his children too, not just her?

Her heart ached for her baby. She had found out about John's affair when Ted was only five months old and the pain had only been exacerbated when she learned that he had been cheating since before they had decided to have their second child. It was as if the very foundation of their lives had disintegrated beneath her feet. She had been planning their future and realizing her dream of the perfect family, while he had been secretly destroying it.

She closed the door to Ted's room and returned to the couch in the living room. She absently began scrolling through Facebook on her phone. John's high school best friend had sent her a message of support. She smiled to herself. Jim was a sweet guy, even if he wasn't very bright. He could be a useful source of information for how well her plan was working. She quickly typed out a reply.

E: This is so scary. I've never lived alone in my life.

J: If you need anything, I'm here for you. John wants you to be happy and so do I.

Her smile grew deeper. She had known both John and Jim since high school and she knew that Jim had always had a slight crush on her. He wasn't as attractive as John, and he definitely didn't have John's brains, but he could be an interesting diversion. Besides, it would kill John to think that she had not only moved out but was moving on. She eagerly began to type out her narrative for her unsuspecting audience.

The sound of Ted stirring break through a haze of sleep the next morning. She is momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar landscape of her new bedroom and then recognition washes over her as she rises to check on her baby. She hugs him to her as she carries him to the changing table to give him a fresh diaper. She takes him back to her room and cuddles with him in bed while they wait for his brother to wake up. She glances at her phone and is pleased to see

that both John and Jim are checking on her. She sends Jim a flirty response thanking him for being there for her. She chooses to ignore John for now.

By mid-morning, she is feeling restless and decides to take the boys to the park. There are several children playing and a handful of mothers standing guard over them. Troy quickly finds a boy of a similar age and the two of them are quickly playing a game of their own invention. Claire pushes Ted on the baby swing, feeling the warm sun on her face. A mother pushing a little girl on the swing next to hers smiles and says, "Is that your son on the slide?"

Claire glances at Troy and nods.

"That's my son he is playing with," the woman responds. "My name is Valerie, this is Marie and that's Callen. Are you new to the neighborhood?"

Claire smiles warmly back doing a quick calculation of the advantages of befriending a family with children so close in age to her own. She and Valerie chat amiably while she quickly gathers information. Valerie is separated as well and has lived here for three months. Val's condo is two buildings from Claire's and she has three children – her oldest is a teenager. She gets the sense that Val's separation was very dramatic and decides to learn more. The park demands a certain degree of attention that prevents her from advancing the conversation as she would like, so she suggests that they all return to her home so that the kids can have a snack and adjourn to the play room.

Once the kids are settled, she tells Val her story emphasizing the pain and heartbreak of John's betrayal. Val is vague about her own circumstances, but through carefully directed questioning, Claire is able to get her to tell the story of how she was abused by her ex-husband and how she carefully orchestrated her escape from their shared home. When her ex struck her son from a previous relationship, Valerie was forced to protect all of her children by fleeing her

abuser. Val's voice trembles as she tells her story, but Claire scarcely notices. She quickly turns the conversation back to herself and her struggle to adapt to life on her own.

Claire prevails on Val to agree to spend the evening with her kids so that she can have some time to regroup. She immediately texts Jim to see if he can meet for dinner. She feels a thrill of excitement as she prepares for dinner. She knows that Jim has always found her attractive and she is enjoying the prospect of an evening with an attentive man. She also knows that she can steer the course of the evening by careful orchestration of when and how she reveals how she is feeling. Nothing will come of this flirtation, but John will not know that and he needs the motivation of jealousy for his lesson to be complete. Later that night as she and Val carry her sleeping boys back to her house, she feels confident that things are going to work out.

Claire sighs as she opened another bill. John had always managed the household bills and it was a bit overwhelming seeing them all arrive and knowing that they were all her sole responsibility. She had insisted that John give her extra cash for Christmas shopping that she had secretly saved for herself and she had convinced him to give her additional cash when he picked up the boys for his first visit after her move, but her meager savings seemed to be miniscule when compared to the mounting bills. She had worked out a budget very carefully based on her salary and her in-laws continuing to provide free child care, but the reality was not what she had expected. Plus, she had always thought that John did very little around the house, but the last two weeks had opened her eyes to all of the things he did without mention or fanfare that had made her life so much easier. In fact, the kitchen garbage was overflowing again, the playroom hadn't been picked up in the last four days, and the baby's diaper pail needed emptying. The housework and chores never seem to end when you have to do all of the work yourself. A quick text exchange with Jim and he appeared like a genie. He emptied the diaper pail, took out the trash,

and even cleaned up the kitchen. She hugged him in gratitude and felt his arms linger around her. Everything might just work out after all.

John has continued to be solicitous of her needs and she can tell that he is miserable. The lesson should really stick this time. Just a few more steps and things should be back on track. She has continued to play the devastated wife. When her mother-in-law showed up to pick up the boys so she could leave for work last week, she waited for the boys to go to the playroom and dissolved into tears. She allowed Mary to convince her that she should call into work and take some time to herself. Once Mary left with the kids, she spent the night texting John telling him how much she misses him and subtly reminding him of how happy they had once been. She ignored him for the next several days as she returned to work and so that he would feel isolated again. A few more rounds of reminding him what he has lost and he will be ready to beg to move in with her at the end of the month when his lease is up on the home they once shared.

John had rearranged his schedule at work so that he would work a nearly opposite schedule from hers so that the children could be with one of them while the other was working – even though she knew he was leaving with his parents most of the time. Of course, so was she. It was a lot harder than she expected to be a full-time single parent. She thought she would stop by the house while he was at work – he never even thought to ask her to give him her key – and ostensibly check the mail. She wanted to make sure that there was sufficient evidence of his loneliness. The boys ran into the house and her oldest immediately headed upstairs to his former room. She poked around, noting the disarray and general mess. He had always been scrupulously neat, but he obviously wasn't spending any time worrying about the condition of the house now. She sat on the couch and looked at the empty walls – she had been careful to ensure that all of

the family photos and art work were now in her new home – and felt a sense of victory. Troy runs downstairs calling, “Mommy, mommy, look at the backpack Daddy got for me.”

She looks over at him and her heart freezes in her chest. Troy is wearing a clear Hello, Kitty backpack with a makeup bag inside. “Where did you find that?” she snaps.

“In Daddy’s room,” he answers tremulously, sensing her agitation.

She rushes upstairs and finds a curling iron, hair brush and women’s clothing on the floor of *her* bathroom. The bed that they had once shared is unmade and disheveled. How could he? In *her* house? In *her* bed? Well, if he thinks he can still cheat on her, he is tragically mistaken. She is going to take away everything from him. If he thinks he can find a life without her she will make sure he learns how miserable that life will be. She pulls out her phone and calls Mary, “can you please watch the boys? I really need some time,” she says with a catch in her voice as if she is about to cry.

When she drops them off, she allows her eyes to fill with tears as she confesses to what she found and pleads with Mary to give her some time to absorb what has happened. She just can’t let her boys see her like this. She can see the pain in Mary’s eyes. She and Jack have been so supportive throughout this ordeal, they genuinely seem shocked by their son’s actions and with a few maneuvers, Claire is sure that she can sway them to her side in the coming war.

Make no mistake, this will be a war. She immediately begins researching what she needs to do to file for divorce. She will have everything in order so that she can serve him on his next day off. She draws on everything she can think of to accuse him of in the papers to ensure that she will have the children the majority of the time, and to ensure that he will have to pay as much child support as possible. She had listened closely to Valerie’s tail of legal proceedings and custody agreements when they first met and she had carefully questioned her during several of

their later conversations extracting information for just such a possibility. She was going to ruin John. Let him start his new life with that whore supporting him. She knew quite a bit about this woman from when she first found out about the affair. Gina was also married and worked with John. She had no children and apparently had no problem cheating with a man raising two children with another woman. Gina worked in a different department than John and had a significantly less prestigious position, so Claire knew that there would be no way Gina would be able to help John resume the lifestyle he had shared with her. Claire, on the other hand, made slightly more than John and the two of them had strained to support themselves with their combined incomes. This income disparity was exactly why she needed to ensure that she had majority custody and that it was clear how negatively the dissolution of her marriage had affected her ability to work. She had already used close to all of the time off she had available to her, but she was confident she could manage some more. Her supervisor had soaked up the torrid details of John's betrayal and sworn to do everything she could to assist Claire in recovering from the shattering event. She needed to write the narrative for the court before John could.

2

*December 27, 2017 – John*

John slowly stirred. He felt the warmth of Claire as she lay next to him. Yesterday had been the best day they had shared in months. Earlier in the month Claire had announced that she was moving out – without him – and that she was through trying to make their marriage work. He had tried to heal the damage he had done through his affair, but she had steadfastly refused to accept that it had sprung from his deep unhappiness. Despite all of the anger, hurt, and recriminations something had changed. Yesterday, surrounded by both their families, some close friends, and their children they had reconnected. They had laughed together, shared affection

together, and had been on the same page for the first time in what felt like years. He stretched and pulled her closer to him. He felt her relax against him, then stiffen and pull away. “I’ll get the boys ready for you while you shower if you like,” she said.

He was confused, “What?”

“My parents and brothers will be here in an hour to help me move,” she said flatly. “You didn’t think that one little day of getting along could fix everything, did you?” she asked coldly. “I can’t continue to let you break my heart and just continue on like it has no meaning.”

“But, what did this mean? I thought you wanted to save our family. I thought you wanted to protect what we have?”

“What we *had* you mean. You destroyed all of that. *You* broke our family and you can’t just make it go away without taking responsibility for the damage you have done. Maybe being on your own will make you see that.”

“You have got to be kidding! I have done everything you asked of me. You get everything you want. You make all our decisions – what we do, where we go, who we spend time with. You treat me with less respect than you do our children. I’m tired of being a silent passenger in this marriage. You want me to earn money to support you, do everything you say, ask your permission before I think, much less speak, and you’re still not happy!” He showered and left with the boys without any further discussion.

The boys were delighted to spend the day with grandma and grandpa, but John couldn’t help feeling like this was the end. He had feigned a nap on the couch in an attempt to hide the tears of loss, shame, and failure that he could no longer hold back. His parents gave him his space and tried to make him feel better. They had been there for him throughout this entire nightmare, even though he knew it had disappointed them. They had encouraged him to make his

marriage work, to be there for his children. They had both been divorced themselves and shared their stories and reminded him of the challenges it had caused in his own childhood. He didn't want his children to experience that, but he had been so alone and unhappy. Claire's comments on his every deficiency had always been able to cut him to the quick, but after the birth of their first child, they had become unrelenting. Whereas before, he had been able to find a way to earn her affection – however minimal – now she had no time for him and no affection for anyone but their son. He had held out hope that their second child would diffuse the intensity of her focus on their son and allow her to make room in her heart for him again. Now, he was all alone.

He was tempted to call Gina, but quickly suppressed the urge. He hadn't contacted her in over two months and he wanted to keep the break clean this time. Whatever happened in his life, he knew she wasn't really who he wanted to be with. She had been convenient and understanding and he hadn't looked beyond that. When he last heard from her, her marriage was ending and he didn't want her to think there was more to their relationship than there had been before. Sure, he had enjoyed her company and they had talked endlessly of unimportant things, but that was what he had sought in their relationship. A lack of intensity, no attachment. A connection that could spring to life and shut off just as quickly.

He was impressed with how warm and welcoming Claire had made her new home. He felt a pang of jealousy that she had created it without him. He offered to help her clear away some of the empty boxes and debris and she declined, making it clear that he was not welcome. Their former home felt cold and empty in contrast when he returned home. Debris from packing and moving was everywhere, but he chose to simply go to bed and think about it another day.

John kept in close contact with Claire over the next few days, making sure that she knew she could still count on him. He spent most of his time with his sons at his parents' house

because he didn't want them to see the emptiness of their old house, or the shambles he had allowed it to become in their absence. He was beginning to tell people about the separation and had even found some support from a few co-workers who were also separated and, in some cases, divorced. They made him feel more at ease with his situation and made it easier to pretend that everything was fine. The only one he really shared his true feelings with was his father. They had always been close and his dad was the only one who seemed to see past his mistake and was willing to accept that it wasn't *all* his fault.

Claire seemed to be settling in to life on her own much better than he was. He was sure that she missed him and they had even shared some warm moments of reminiscence via text. His best friend, Jim, had promised to keep in touch with her and take care of anything that she was unwilling to share with John. Jim said that she was doing well, her initial fear was passing, but that she was still sad. The shock was wearing off, and John couldn't help feeling that it was easier for her to move on with her life.

As the end of his lease approached and he still didn't have a new place to live John felt even more stuck. He didn't even have a real bed yet for his son. Even his dad was losing patience with him. When he called him to try to make a plan, his dad actually encouraged him to call Gina and see if she would be willing to move in so that he could stay in the house. He wasn't ready for that big of a step, but he sure could use some of the comfort Gina was so good at providing. What the hell, he thought as he punched in her number. He'd figure out the rest of it later.

Gina had responded with more enthusiasm than he had expected. She had come over two days ago and hadn't been home yet. Tomorrow was his day off and he was actually looking forward to seeing Claire and the kids. Gina had made him feel valued again and reminded him of what it was that their relationship lacked – the security of family. Maybe, he could convince

Claire to let him make their family whole again. In fact, he was going to commit himself to that goal. If nothing else, he would move in with his parents until he could convince her of his sincerity. Gina was actually downstairs, he would make sure she knew it was time to go home and that this was goodbye.

Her voice startled him as she called to him from the front door. As he descended the stairs, he saw Sonja, his sister's friend and sometimes babysitter to his children, at the door with an envelope. Gina had clearly recently woken up and he was in his pajama bottoms. He took the envelope and looked out the front door to see Claire's car at the curb. "You've been served," Sonja snapped and walked quickly to the car. They drove away as he opened the envelope containing a petition for divorce.

3

*January 28, 2018 – Claire*

She had seen John's face from the car as Sonja handed him the divorce papers. He hadn't even opened them, but he knew he had been caught. She had seen that woman open the door. How could he just carry on that way? Well, he'd see what it was like to spend his life alone now.

She had called in to work again and one of her new neighbors, Melissa, another single-mom, was keeping the boys so she could have a night out. Melissa had introduced her to Match.com and she was enjoying the warm reception her profile had received. This was her fourth date this week. She had a very specific type of man in mind, so she was able to quickly decide if they were worth any more of her time. She had also heated things up with Jim. She had been out with him three times in that same period and she was almost ready to take their relationship to the next level. There was no future for their relationship, he could never give her the kind of life she deserved, but the satisfaction of John hearing about their affair was too good

to pass up. She asked him to keep their relationship a secret, so she expects John will know about it in two weeks or less. Jim is incapable of circumspection. In fact, he will be the perfect tool to make sure that her next relationship proceeds exactly as she has planned. John has to move out of their former home by the 31<sup>st</sup> and she knows she will have to see him to make sure everything is in order before it is turned over to the management company. The night before should be the perfect occasion to sleep with Jim.

### *John*

John closed the door and pulled out the papers. He wasn't expecting this so soon, but now that it had happened, he was less upset than he had expected to be. He had Gina for company and he was sure that he and Claire would work through things reasonably. Then, he actually read the papers. She expected full custody of his children? What was she thinking? He had always been a hands-on parent and since the separation had spent the entirety of his time off with his boys. She was accusing him of being violent and threatening to her and the children. And she wanted court ordered child support? She knew that he would provide for them, he didn't need a court to force him to do so, besides she made more money than he did anyway. He sat down at the kitchen table and began to read the paperwork more closely as Gina peppered him with questions. She always claimed that their relationship was commitment-free, but she sure did have a lot of questions about Claire. He answered her as succinctly as possible while mentally calculating how long it would be before she had to leave for work.

As soon as Gina drove away, John headed for his parents. They were as shocked as he was by the aggressiveness of Claire's claims in the court documents. They encouraged him to give her time to cool off and not to make the situation worse. He didn't think that was going to

work though, he had to move out in the next three days and she had insisted on being present for the turnover of the keys. His dad said he would help him move and he was grateful. He was going to be staying with them for a month or so until he got his bearings and found something affordable that would accommodate him and the boys. His parents had full bedrooms for each of the boys and they had agreed to putting a bed into the nursery so that he would have somewhere to sleep as well. He didn't expect to spend too much time there anyway, he just needed somewhere for the boys to stay while in his care.

Preliminary Outline:

- I. Elaine moves out on her own (Portions of this chapter will be from John's perspective)
  - a. John is impressed with her independence and heartbroken over the loss of his family
    - i. Story of John's infidelity and the immediate aftermath told through flashback
  - b. Elaine befriends some of her neighbors who are single mothers (I plan to tell some of this story from the perspective of one of these new friends, Valerie)
  - c. Elaine struggles with the reality of living by herself and decides to convince John he has a chance to win her back
    - i. She calls in sick to work to give herself time with John
- II. Elaine discovers John has resumed sleeping with the woman he cheated on her with (John's perspective will continue through these events)
  - a. Elaine files for divorce and full custody of the children
  - b. Elaine begins seeing John's best friend from high school
    - i. She also begins posting on dating websites to find a more financially secure boyfriend
    - ii. She misses more work to pursue her dating life
  - c. The lease is up on the home Elaine and John shared and John moves in with his parents
  - d. Elaine learns about her new friend Valerie (may be told from Valerie's perspective)
    - i. She has an abusive ex, from whom she has a restraining order

- ii. Valerie has had to deal with CPS because her ex struck her oldest son
  - e. Elaine attempts to turn mutual friends and both sides of the family against John
    - i. Manipulates her in-laws by playing the victim (I may use the perspective of her mother-in-law to give perspective on this plot point)
  - f. Their son needs to have his tonsils out and Elaine refuses to allow John to have visitation with him while he recovers
    - i. They have no official visitation schedule because they have not yet been to court
    - ii. She misses more work for this and exhausts her allowed sick/personal days at work
- III. John and Elaine attend mediation and the mediator recommends joint physical and legal custody with 50/50 physical custody of the children
  - a. Elaine is enraged and immediately begins planning to discredit John so that she can obtain greater custody
    - i. She calls the police and reports that he has threatened her life
      - 1. She claims she is in constant fear
      - 2. John is working in another state when she claims he was threatening her
    - ii. She calls the police and reports violence that she claims occurred several months previously
    - iii. She calls his work and tries to have him investigated for improper conduct by his employer

- iv. She begins to have problems at her work due to her overly emotional behavior and failure to show up to work
    - 1. She comes home from work with a headache
    - 2. She comes home from work after a respiratory attack that is attributed to an allergic reaction, but was self-induced
  - b. John moves in with his mistress, Claire
    - i. Elaine makes calls to Claire's work as well
    - ii. Elaine convinces John's parents that Claire hits the baby
      - 1. She takes her son to a counselor and calls CPS
      - 2. She tries to turn John's parents against him using the allegations of abuse
  - c. She meets Valerie's mother who used to work at the same place that she does
    - i. Valerie's mother retired with a medical disability pension after she was injured at work
  - d. She claims that her now ex-boyfriend, John's former best friend, is stalking her
  - e. She begins dating one of the men she met via Match.com
    - i. She convinces him to pay to have a security system installed in her home – he also pays for monthly monitoring
- IV. John and Elaine appear in court and the court awards joint physical and legal custody with a 50/50 custody schedule
- a. The court dismisses her claims because there is no proof of abuse and all of her allegations against John were made months and years after the fact
  - b. Her mother accompanies her to court

- c. She is represented by an attorney recommended by her mother
  - i. The attorney advises her that the court's decision is in the best interest of the children
  - ii. She has the attorney subpoena her mother-in-law in an attempt to malign John. She also plans to have her mother speak on her behalf
    - 1. The attorney advises her not to involve anyone else in the dispute, in the interest of family harmony
- V. She "slips and falls" at work and goes on medical disability
  - a. She enlists the aid of her former in-laws because she is overwhelmed with caring for the kids and dealing with her "stalker" while "injured"
  - b. She continues to undermine John's relationship with his parents
  - c. She offers to accompany Valerie to court to support her
    - i. She claims that Valerie's ex, Carlo, physically threatened her outside the courtroom
    - ii. She offers to testify to this in court
  - d. Her new boyfriend, George, takes her to Las Vegas
  - e. Her former in-laws provide financial and emotional support (through use of the in-laws perspective, I will show how they realize that she is faking her injury, but their pity for her circumstances and their desire to remain involved with their grandchildren causes them to humor her behavior)
    - i. They assist her with cleaning the house and laundry because of her physical injury

- f. She doesn't want to go back to work – she tries to find ways to avoid having to return from her medical leave
    - i. She tries to sell supplements from home to supplement her income and, she hopes, enable her to work from home
    - ii. When her physician clears her to return to work, she seeks out a second opinion that says she is unable to return
  - g. She tries to enlist Valerie to make a fraudulent call to CPS against her ex
    - i. She is trying to bolster her earlier fraudulent accusations of abuse
    - ii. Valerie refuses, Valerie realizes that Elaine lied when she made the claims against Carlo
- VI. She takes John back to court to seek more time with the children and more child support
- a. She writes a letter to the court and signs it on behalf of John's mother
    - i. She assumes that his mom will go along with her lies
  - b. She revels in spending time with John's parents
    - i. She tells John about it to hurt him
    - ii. She knows that they did not approve of his affair and uses this to keep them distant
  - c. She hides a recording device in one of her children's toys in an attempt to spy on John and Claire
    - i. John finds it and files a police report
- VII. She realizes that she is not going to be able to separate John from his parents
- a. She decides that she doesn't want her son to participate in t-ball anymore
    - i. She and John had agreed to this and her in-laws pay all of the costs

- ii. Her in-laws frequently take him so that she is not inconvenienced
    - iii. When they refuse to side with her against John in quitting t-ball, she begins to separate herself from them
  - b. She begins to treat them coldly and deny them opportunities to see their grandchildren
  - c. She steals a recording device from his parents and hides it in one of her children's toys, planning on John finding it
    - i. It has John's father's voice on it
    - ii. His parents begin to realize what she has been doing
  - d. His parents find out about the letter she submitted to the court
  - e. She tells his parents that she does not want them to see or speak to her or her children anymore
    - i. She is furious with John for continuing to allow them to see the children
  - f. The court refuses to make any changes to the custody agreement
    - i. She threatens John's parents outside the courtroom
- VIII. She pushes her new boyfriend to propose
  - a. She tells him she is afraid of her former in-laws and afraid to live alone
  - b. She convinces him to move in with her until they can find a bigger place
    - i. He has a son who he has visitation with on weekends, so they need more room
  - c. She tells her ex that her landlord is selling her condo and she has to move out
    - i. It is a lie, she is breaking her lease to get her new boyfriend to commit to a new lease

- ii. She tells Valerie that she wants nothing to do with her and that their children are no longer allowed to play together
- d. She is convinced that now things will be perfect, like she always dreamed with her new man and a new family

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