Quite Early One Morning

Now, in the early morning, the lawn was sheathed in ice, and Rick lay in bed listening to the frozen grass crunch beneath Melissa’s feet as she approached the French doors to the bedroom. Rick pictured the yard pale and hoary with the dark trail of Melissa’s footprints etched across it toward the door. He sat up in the bed and looked out. The world outside was black and white in the gloom with the lawn brighter than the sky. A thin fog snaked filaments along the ground. Rick shivered. The cold tendrils would catch at her slippered ankles and bring up the color where her skin stretched thin over the bone. He turned back from the view and looked around the room, bathed now in the soft orange glow of the fire. Inside, the world was warm and palpable, for he had slept poorly and been up early to make a fire.

Then her outline was against the glass and she slid open the door, stepping inside and pulling her sweatshirt over her head in an easy motion that lifted her quick hair into the air. Her hair was fine and red and full of flame as it settled back to her shoulders. Then she pulled her drawstring loose, stepped out of her pants, and walked across the room to where Rick waited. The light stayed in her hair and her skin was lit with an orange glow. Her hips rocked smoothly as she walked, cradling the bright triangle of her mons, and her breasts swayed with the movement of her legs. She bent, lifted the sheets and slid under them.

“Hey, you,” she said and touched his cheek with her fingers. The diamond in her ring was an icy flame.

“Hey,” said Rick. He did not say anything else until she was warm. They lay on their sides with their lips touching. Rick inhaled. Her scent was tinged with the sharp ozone from the cold. She moved in close, slid her arms around him, tightened, and sighed deeply. Rick pulled her closer and pressed his nose into her skin below her ear where the musky smell of her sleep still lingered.

“Good morning,” he whispered, and closed his eyes.

“I was on my way to yoga class,” she said, “but wanted to snuggle.”

“How was your day yesterday?” he said.

“Good,” she said. “Mmm, you’re so warm.”
“Tell me what you did,” he said. She spoke into his mouth then and held her eyes shut as she whispered, and he spoke back against her mouth as though they spoke a sort of Braille with their lips. Then he closed his eyes too, and while they talked the blue-gray light of the morning pried away the night and filtered in through his eyelids. *I'm sunk,* he thought.

Rick had not wanted to fall in love with anyone for a long time and had hoped to travel and be in the world. He’d even thought about living abroad. Now he was thinking of a woman who was newly separated from her husband and occasionally considered returning. He lay in bed holding Melissa and wondered if she would think the better of what she was doing. He wondered if at some point she would telephone and say that for the sake of her family she was calling it off. She had whispered to him of “reality,” of the whole heap of entanglements and outrage and grief and the heartbreak of navigating through those terrible shoals, and Rick knew not only the sound of that word but also the feel of it. He knew the movement of her lips saying it against his. The word had a discernible nap to it.

“Reality,” he whispered.

“Shhh.” As he lay in her arms his heart eased. He could feel it. He lay quietly, holding her tightly. It was useless to try to put it into words. It was enough to have her face very close as he studied the freckles on her lips and kissed them one at a time, and he liked that she liked that too. Now his nose and lips brushed hers lightly, and she whispered about her day as though it were a secret between them. Then she folded him in her arms and pulled his head down and held him to her breasts.

“You’re still cold,” he said. “And you’re early this morning.”

“I had a bad dream,” she said. Rick wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She said, “I had a bad dream at 4:30 and needed you.” Rick raised his head to look at her, then at the clock. It was 4:46 a.m. He pictured her waking up in bed and needing to drive across town in order to be comforted. Then he put his hand behind her head and ran his fingers into her hair. Slowly, he guided her face into the hollow of his neck and shoulders.

“Tell me about your dream,” he said.

As he listened, Rick remembered one October morning when she had not arrived and
had sent no message. He’d thought at the time that she could have slept late, but that had 
not explained the absence of a call the night before. At the time he’d thought that she 
might have spent the night with her ex-husband. He’d suspected the worst and had not 
liked to think about that because he’d known he was in an untenable position: he felt 
strongly about a woman who had been too recently divorced and who would stay linked 
to her ex for the foreseeable future. He did not like sharing the woman he loved. It had 
been bearable for a while when he had not been in love with her.

The sky was brightening outside the big window as Melissa talked about her dream. 
He did not understand her thoughts. It was her own interior landscape and it was strange. 
Rick watched the clouds take shape outside instead and pulled the blanket around his 
chin. He murmured softly as he lay beside her to let her think he was still listening. He 
nested closer, but his mind moved back to that morning she had not arrived, and he was 
lost in a reverie of his own. Memory snaked through his consciousness, cold and 
unwelcome. It caught at his insecurities. He was jealous and afraid of losing her. He 
looked out into the February morning and sighed and tried to push the thoughts away. 
Then he became aware of the silence.

“What does it mean?” Melissa asked. She had finished telling him her dream, and 
Rick realized he was back in the present and had missed much of what she had said. He 
lifted his hand to her face and cupped her cheek.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But you’re here now, and it’s all right.”

“You take such good care of me,” she said. Rick pulled her closer.

“No,” he said. It was light now. The sun was rising over the trees.

“I have to go,” she said. “I have to be at work soon.”

“Yes,” said Rick, “but I want you to stay.”

“I never want to leave,” she said. Then she sat up and sighed. Rick ran his hand up 
and down her back.

“Mmm,” he said. He was unsure of her again. Then she stood and walked over to the 
clothes on the floor. She faced him as she dressed. She never turned her back when she 
dressed. She stayed open to him. Rick loved this in her. When she was ready, Rick stood 
and walked over to her. He hugged her tightly and she pulled him hard against her and 
kissed him. Then she turned and opened the door.
“I’ll call in an hour.”

“Good,” he said, and she stepped outside. Rick leaned out into the morning and the cold air was sharp and good on his skin. He could smell the ozone again.

“You’ll freeze,” she said. Then she laughed at his nakedness. “Don’t let anybody see you.”

“I like the cold,” he said. His skin tightened and puckered around the hairs on his arms with a small ache. He watched her walk across the lawn to the corner of the house. She turned back to him there and looked him straight in the eyes and blew him a kiss. He waved. Then she was gone, and Rick looked at the spot where she had disappeared, her red hair afloat, now an afterimage in the air, and he looked down at her footprints in the grass, the two sets very clear now, one coming and the other going, the former straight and true and leading purposefully toward his door, to him, direct. The other track was errant and reluctant. Rick nodded because he could see the reluctance now in the footprints that lead away. Suddenly it became clear to him, and he was sure. It had been there the whole time. The first rays of the sun touched the frost and the frost caught the light on each blade of grass and lit the little lawn with a white fire that outlined each dark green footprint that she had left, and Rick leaned against the doorjamb looking at the two directions of the trails as the sun lifted a little more and the frost became too bright to look at. Through the glare he could see the colors of the prism scattered like tiny rainbows on the grass, and he thought of Melissa in that white and icy light with her fiery red hair and pale skin, and he thought of the fire still burning behind him in the bed, the bed still fragrant from her, still holding her heat.

“Yes,” he said.