

James Myers Budget

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Jack Lindy

## The Cheaters A Short Story in Three Parts

### Part I

Tuesday afternoon

Buck Forno lies naked, spread-eagle, on Margot Sindler's bed. He lights up a filtered Chesterfield. He has vowed to quit smoking – but this one doesn't count. He inhales feeling the smoke go deep into his chest. Margot throws a towel in his direction that he places gently over his organ of choice. He exhales, smells the smoke and the deed. Buck reflects on the power of his release, his attraction for Margot's Titian body, and takes a moment to savor the high points of the sex. She has a full body and great vocabulary: not limited to clichés like Oh, Oh, Oh. No Margot says: "you're so hard, like a rocket; or hit me deeper with your ace; or don't show all your cards yet; time to ride my stallion; or I'm about to erupt." Then towards the end while another might scream incomprehensible expletives, she shakes her long disheveled hair and shouts clear as a bell, "Hell fire and damnation."

Buck reflects, he has always been attracted to screamers, but this screamer with an actual vocabulary is more than he could hope for. Finally the high point, semen shooting from his loins like hot molten mercury. Buck takes another drag from his cigarette. Ah, "coitus ergo sum," he says to himself. Don't get me wrong, I have no affection for Margot, I just love

her body and her screaming like a wounded wildebeest. Ah, he sighs, the beauty and the ugliness of bodily drives.

Some might say I'm cheating. But here's the way I think about it. It's all a matter of decreasing personal risk. For example at the casino I count cards. It's a talent I have and it decreases the risk of losing at gambling. In matters sexual, the real risk is committing yourself to someone permanently as in marriage, yet sexual drives being what they are you do need to release them. So an available female who is not interested in marrying you is the ideal way to reduce risk.

Margot has covered herself with a yellow terrycloth robe and flushes his condom down the toilet. She looks in the bathroom mirror. There are the lines at the side of her lips, getting deeper all the time, the dark patchy circles under her eyes, ugly hairs on her face where they shouldn't be, a roundedness to her cheeks that seems puffy. She gathers her once silken hair into a proper bun, then reaches for a toothbrush. Margot feels the pleasure of release but also the grimness of remorse, no it's worse than that. It is guilt. Because she knows she will do it again.

Margot understands that cheating is wrong, and that she will feel guilty when she does. Trying hard to do things the right way, especially when her marriage to Percival is so barren as it is, is more than she can endure. So she succumbs: getting sexual pleasure from Buck as compensation for her sexless marriage with Percival. 'But what do I do with the pain and ecstasy of ill-got pleasure? It's as though I must now flagellate myself remorselessly. Ah, the Esther Price chocolates in the cupboard – they can

handle a crisis like this. Not on my diet but sometimes you have to give your body what it craves.'

Once more Margot inspects the mirror. No, she will pay for her indiscretion by getting fat. It is already happening. Justified cheating begets guilt which begets more cheating. When and where will the cycle end?

She looks at Buck stretched nude on the bed smoking that damned cigarette. How many times has she told him not to do that. Now it will be harder to disguise the odor in the bedroom from Percival. Buck has no feelings for her; and to tell the truth she has no feelings for him. But the routine is established and seems unbreakable. In a few moments she will shower, then spray the bed with lavender deodorant and place dried flowers on the bureau. Buck will disappear for his Tuesday afternoon golf game not to return until after dinner. She will run to the grocery store and buy a strip steak for Percival, his favorite. She doesn't eat steak. Margot has spent the day straightening up the house. Tomorrow the monthly check arrives. She will cash it and distribute money to the three inhabitants of her house. "I'll do a real shopping then," she reasons. "Time to pick up that steak and prepare for Percival's arrival home."

## Part II

### Also Tuesday Afternoon

After tutoring, Percival Sindler lingers by the rack of rifles in Jimmy's Gun and Hardware Shop. He inhales the scent of English walnut of the rifle stocks, the metallic tinge of the barrels, male sweat and Old Spice. He chats with Old Sam who opens the glass case so Percival can run his hand along the stocks, admire the woodwork, the fittings, the craftsmanship. Today he limits purchase to ammunition for the shooting range.

Percival reflects on the good job he did today with his student Roger, today. He explained how subtracting like quantities from both sides of the algebraic equation simplifies solving the problem. "It's like this," he explained to Roger. "If you cash out the register at the end of the day, and it shows \$5.00 less than the cash on hand, how much can you remove from the register to make the equation equal?"

Percival's altruism definitely deserves a reward. But when he steps into the gym locker room to see if he can catch a glimpse of the boys showering, no luck. They are away for a game. Feeling cheated he comes to Jimmy's, still missing that reward he deserves.

Maybe pilfering this screwdriver will work. Jimmy won't miss it. With the skill of a practiced thief, Percival checks the monitors then places the Phillips screwdriver in his pants pocket and walks briskly out the door.

## Tuesday Dinnertime

“I’m home,” Percival shouts. Without waiting for Margot’s reply he climbs upstairs where he smells fresh flowers. He removes his prize Philips Screwdriver from his pocket and hides it in the safe in his bureau. He washes his hands vigorously. Once he washed so vigorously he thought he saw a stigmata on his palm.

Margot’s best meals are on Tuesdays. Percival follows his nose into the kitchen, and sees the sirloin strip sizzling in the cast iron skillet. While his mouth salivates, a bright reflection at the surface of the waste bin captures his eye. He walks over to inspect it, clearly a silver wrapping paper.

“Damn it. There you go eating chocolates again. Woman you have no will power. You are a profligate culinary whore. Soon you will no longer be plump but disgustingly fat. I’ll bet you downed one of those fruit pies too.”

Margot feels her face grow hot. Why does it always happen this way: an unexpected and brutal attack? But instead of defending herself, she feels guilty. “You’re right as usual, Percival. I don’t know why I give in to that urge for chocolates. Here, I’ve prepared your favorite.”

Percival frowns, and drums his fingers on the table top.

Margot imagines plunging his steak knife into his belly.

## Wednesday morning

Percival awakens early and goes into his workshop. Today is his turn to carry his protest sign at Planned Parenthood. He inspects the large letters,

“Stop Cheating Mother Nature.” From his desk Percival turns his chair 45 degrees to catch a glimpse of Buck doing his morning exercises. Buck does this in the nude, and Percival finds it arousing.

Margot sleeps in. The check for the month will arrive in her name today. She will cash it at the bank, give Percival and Buck their monthly allowance and use the rest to stock up, hiding a little for chocolates and fruit pies.

Buck will meet with his golf partners to finalize their real estate scam.

### Wednesday evening

Percival, Margot and Buck sit in the living room. On television is National Geographic. It is the only program that the three can agree to watch. In fact it is the only program on TV.

Margot speaks to no one in particular, “We live in a strange town. People are so predictable; they’re like robots.”

Buck muses aloud, “What kind of name is ‘Interlude’ for a town? Makes you wonder what’s next.”

Percival drums his fingers on the couch, “Odd that the largest part of the paper is the obituary section”

The three fall back in silence.

“The seasons never change,” mumbles Percival. “It is always hot and getting hotter. “

“I’m so bored,” says Margot rearranging the bun of hair behind her.

“I have an impulse to flee the house, but it’s as if an invisible force keeps me here,” says Buck as he re-arranges his Jockey shorts.

Margot, “Each month our check gets smaller.”

Percival, “And you still haven’t figured out where the check comes from.”

The three turn their attention to the screen.

Percival sighs, At least there are no scenes when poachers raise their rifles. That’s when my headache starts.

Margot covers her abdomen, No devilish pregnant or nursing female animals. That’s when I throw up.

A reptile appears on screen and starts to swallow another animal. Buck chokes. “I have to go.”

## Part III

### Tuesday Afternoon Some Time Later

This Tuesday Percival's student is absent for tutoring. Percival foregoes lingering at the Gun Shop. He will use the extra time at home. He stops at the sign indicating Dead End Place, then turns left. He pulls into the driveway. Funny, Buck's car is still parked in front. He must be late for his golf game.

Percival throws open the front door. He hears screaming, maybe Margot, maybe a wild beast. Percival leaps up the stairs two at a time to rescue her. He opens the bedroom door, just as her voice rings out clear as a bell, "Hell fire damnation." Percival tries to decipher the lines and shapes before him. But they make no sense. He feels like a blind man recovering sight after surgery, but unable yet to comprehend what he sees. Then, the figures before him come into focus. Margot, is nude as a jay-bird astride Buck Forno, her hair flies as she rides him like a cowgirl on a bucking bronco.

Percival pauses, then walks to his bureau drawer, drums his fingers on the top, and opens the safe.

Margot dismounts dismayed that her one moment of pleasure for the week has been disrupted. She watches the scowl on Percival's lips turn to stone. "Oh Percival you're a hypocritical paranoid prig," she spouts. "Your greatest pleasure is finding fault with others."

Percival fingers the Phillips screwdriver. Then he picks up the pistol.

“Percival,” says Buck foraging for his jockeys, “Don’t do something foolish. All right, I have been cheating on you. But that’s not the end of the world.”

“Cheating,” adds Margot, reaching to place her hair back in a bun, “it’s something we all do more or less.”

“You call it cheating. I say it is breaking God’s commandment,” shouts Percival. “That’s what it is. And the righteous shall be avenged.”

“Look, man, says Buck. “You’re no angel. You think I don’t see you every morning peeking to get a good look at me doing calisthenics in the nude?”

“And I know perfectly well where these tools you keep bringing to the house come from,” adds Margot. “You cheat every time you get a chance, but instead of owning it, you find some weakness in another and then attack them as though your hands were clean.”

“My hands **are** clean. And they will be even cleaner after I do the Lord’s work and rid this earth of you two serpents.”

The only question in Percival’s mind is who should die first. Buck is the aggressor. He has taken advantage of Margot’s weak will. More important, Percival has misjudged Buck’s evil ways. He adores Buck: all the more reason to wipe him off the face of the earth, for treachery and deception.

The shot frightens Margot. Buck gasps for breath. Oddly, she feels no compassion for him. “Percival, I didn’t know you had such courage.”

“The courage to kill you too.”

Percival watches the astonishment in Margot’s face as he fires the pistol at her.

Silence.

Percival paces, then seems struck as though by a revelation. He throws the gun to the ground. What have I done? Yay I am become Moses who breaks the precious tablets God has given him. How can I atone?

Calmly Percival now points the gun to the base of his chin. One steady squeeze and it will blow off his head. He hears the click and even the sound of the blast.

But what follows is more confusion.

For now, despite three lethal bullets, Margot, Buck and Percival look at each other. They are in no pain. The bullets haven't even wounded them.

Silence – as if forever.

Later Tuesday Night

The three sit in front of a silent TV.

Buck begins, “Before the two of you arrived at the house I was reading an obituary. It was the story of a couple caught up in gunfire at Planned Parenthood. The wife, heading into the facility, dies from the bullet of a crazed protester. A photo captures the jeering of a man, later identified as her husband, among the protesters. Shortly after the killing, a second article describes the death of her husband who turned the rifle on himself.”

Margot continues, “And I read an intriguing obituary when I was cleaning out the basement as we moved in. It told the strange story of a middle-aged man who was replacing a lost ball as if he had found it, near the swampy water canal on the golf course. His partners watched as an alligator came out of the water and ate the man alive. In an interview one partner said, “terrible tragedy, but ironic justice for a guy who cheats on his partners.”

Margot: “So that’s how each of us died. Then moving to this house must have come about after death.”

Percival: “All of us in hell together; living with each other is our punishment.”

Buck: “Cheating - there is no way out.”

Introduction:

When Jim Myers asked me to be part of a budget on cheating I asked myself – why me? Then it hit me: the last time you saw me in this location I was giving a paper on 12 months to live. Now many months later, I am still very much alive, so I concluded, I must be the biggest cheater in the literary club.

So be it.