

A Triangle

The following account is of an event in my personal life that has been so devastating that I can no longer keep it bottled up inside me. A man sometimes finds himself in a situation for which any solution at all is excruciatingly painful. To obtain some relief he has to tell other people about it, hoping and praying for sympathy if not understanding. This is my condition. It is best related in the first person of course.

The protagonists are my wife, myself, and my companion.

"How can there be three protagonists in one situation?" you will surely ask, before I have a chance to continue. Well. Henry Fowler's Modern English Usage, published in 1926, does insist that "protagonist" is a noun that must only be used in the singular, because of the following definition "*the* leading player in a play, game or some other event." (italics mine). Therefore there can be only one in any given situation. This definition is reinforced in other usage books such as Bernstein's The Careful Writer, copyrighted in 1965 (1)

They seem to overlook the fact that one might use "protagonists" in the plural when one is conversing about the leads in several different plays. For example, I might ask one of our professors of English Literature what the protagonists in Macbeth, Midsummer Night's Dream, and All's Well that Ends Well have in common. On second thought I don't think I would pose that question, But if I did, I probably should ask what *each* protagonist had in common, just to be safe.

In any event I was delighted to note that the Oxford English Dictionary in its 1981 Supplement presents evidence to support plural protagonists. To illustrate this view, the dictionary quotes George Bernard Shaw who wrote in 1950: "Living actors have to learn that they must be invisible while the protagonists are conversing" (2) So I choose to emulate Shaw. My protagonists are three: myself, my wife and my companion.

The relationships between my protagonists can be compared to a right triangle with its hypotenuse at the bottom. My spouse and my

companion are at opposite ends separated by the hypotenuse base. The two sides represent the causes of my dilemma, which emanate from the two of them. The sharp 90 degree angle at the top, upon which I am uncomfortably seated simulates the pain I must inevitably suffer.

I have always been very much in love with my wife.

Concurrently I came to have a special love for my companion. At first this slight dichotomy (if you can conceive of degrees of dichotomy) was tolerable. Calm prevailed due to strong mutual affection when the three of us were together, and even when we were apart. We were truly devoted to one another, albeit in different ways and different degrees of intensity.

As my narrative becomes more personal and intimate, I think it best to assume a nom de plume. So that no one will know who I am. My beloved wife shall have one too, in case she decides to put her own view in writing later on. And I had better assign one to my dear friend and companion, the third protagonist, also. From now on he shall be known as Mr. X. Remembering our Club website, I have submitted a nom de email to those fussy officials at AOL.Com as well.

My wife and I were alone in a room when we first met Mr. X He sauntered through the door, glancing briefly at both of us. He showed little interest in me and walked right over to my wife, who looked especially beautiful that day. She also happened to have on a heavy application of Chanel #5. He looked her in the eyes expectantly. Flattered, but not an all sure what to do or say, my wife broke the silence with a pleasant but noncommittal greeting. From that beginning there evolved an affectionate but platonic relationship between them which lasted 4 or 5 years before disintegrating.

As for me, from the beginning, I was strongly attracted to Mr. X. He was young, good looking and clean, slim and lithe. I felt a strong desire to transform his apparent indifference toward me into love and affection. He also happened to be a rather nice shade of black.

"How can there be *shades* of black?" you would like to know if you are a regular consultant of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1941 edition. "Destitute of light devoid of

color the opposite of white" it says, implying that black is just plain black, period. Other dictionaries concur, but examples are given with the word black being used, either adjective or noun, as a synonym for Afro-American or anyone else of comparatively dark complexion. Obviously these persons are not pitch black. Objects can be dull or shiny black, and people can be tan or brown, but still labeled black. So I repeat what struck me right away about Mr. X's shade of blackness. It was nice and I liked it.

Early on, someone told me that when Mr. X was very young, he had undergone dreadful surgery. Perhaps his usually peaceful disposition and lack of aggressive behavior were side effects of that procedure. But after some years he did begin to show signs of peevishness now and then.

Over time he and I had become the best of friends. Quite frankly, he responded to my verbal caresses and physical fondling with patience, and eventually with love and trust. Then at some point in our triangular relationship, Mr. X seemed to get upset when he saw me display affection for my wife. If I should hug or kiss her, or even turn on a CD and dance with her in his presence, he would try to get my attention. Sometimes in a less than artful way he would try physically to separate us- it was more than just "tagging in" as on the dance floor. It was a disturbing development. He was obviously jealous.

The crisis came one day when my wife entered the dining room for breakfast and leaned over to kiss me good morning. Mr. X happened to be there having breakfast with me, and I had already kissed him good morning, but he jumped up in a fit of jealousy. Before I knew what was happening, Mr. X had become physical. My wife sustained a severe enough injury- not much blood- but necessitating a trip to the hospital followed by weeks of antibiotics and physical therapy.

As far as I know, my wife had not been jealous of us. Nevertheless I had to make a very painful decision, and whatever it was to be, carrying it out would surely be even more painful.

My wife had sworn at the altar to love honor and obey me. Yes, it was that long ago, and over the years she had been fairly obedient, except

in voting booths from time to time. I don't remember just what if anything I had promised at the altar, but I have always cherished her in spite of her foibles, if she has any, And, by the way, she is still very good looking, with plenty of pizzazz.

Likewise my dear friend, Mr. X, was still handsome and I was very fond of him too. I knew in my heart that he loved me so much that would have given his life to protect me from danger. And he trusted me,

It is apparent that my decision was whether to say goodbye to my wife, or to Mr. X.

There are husbands who would decide to slip a bit of arsenic into the spouses's bourbon toddy. But they might very well be apprehended. Doing away with one's wife must be some kind of misdemeanor, or maybe even a felony's with a rather large fine. And there might be unfavorable media attention too,

I must assure you that for me there was never any doubt that I would have to be saying goodbye to my dear Mr. X

And now my narration changes gears. No more of my supercilious silliness and poor attempts at humor. In my conclusion I simply ask for your deepest sympathy.

I was kneeling on the floor to be at eye level with Mr. X, who was lying on an operating table when the needle was inserted. He was lying on his side and I was holding his head in my hands looking into his eyes, those beautiful big dark soulful eyes He flinched just a little. Then he licked my fingers. He trusted me, you see.

A minute later the veterinarian lifted his stethoscope and said quietly: "He's gone now."

Mr. X was still looking at me. He wagged his tail,

"Post-mortem twitch", said the vet. "You may stay here in the room with him as long as you wish. I know how you feel." He left the room and dosed the door,

I asked myself how I could have let this happen. I had tried shelters, foster homes, etc. to no avail.

And I am still kneeling there in that room looking into my dear dog's eyes. I always will be.

Notes: (1) Theodore M. Bernstein The Careful Writer, Atheneum NY 1973 edition (2) Samuel Winchester, The Professor and the Madman Harper Collins 1998

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