

Lenore and I, excerpt

“*Cholly!*” came a cry. “Hey, *Cholly!*” Mr. Whitehead was calling me. I guess you know he’s drunk. “Come o’er hea, gurl!”

The man was a walking anti-drinking campaign for me, and if for nothing else, I appreciated him for that. “Hi, Marvin. What’s up?”

“Siddown hea, gurl, play me some *Checkas.*”

I just laughed! “You’ve run off Mr. Padilla with your cheating, and now you think *I’m* going to play with you?”

“I don’ cheat Ernie! Dat’s just his ‘scuse when losing, ‘sides... I don’ cheat.”

“*Marvin*, I’ve played you before... You *cheat!*”

“Siddown hea, gurl... You too tall to be shoutin’ up at!”

Don’t ask me *why* I did it. Maybe it was the part of me that still obeyed my elders, or the fact that he wanted someone to play so badly... or maybe I was just plain stupid! Anyway, I sat down on a packing crate on the opposite side of the Checkers board and made the first move.

I must admit, after about 10 minutes of play, Marvin was making an honest effort to not cheat, in fact, he was playing exceptionally well, considering he smelled like a *still*. He kept me on my toes.

I wondered if perhaps I smelled like that when I used to drink. I had always been careful to hide the fact that I had a buzz at eight in the morning by sticking with vodka, pretty much. And in the evenings, it didn’t matter really, people weren’t too surprised to smell a little alcohol on someone in the evenings, but even then, I did most of my drinking at home, and alone.

The fear of that time suddenly pervaded my senses and brought itself into my remembrance. I had spent most of my time being afraid. Afraid of success, afraid of failure; afraid of my past, afraid of my future; afraid of commitment, afraid of loneliness, just plain afraid....

I looked at Marvin Whitehead, concentrating on his next move, and wondered what he was afraid of?

“When did you start drinking, Marvin?”

Lenore and I, excerpt

“At 40 years old.”

“*Really...* so old?” Most alcoholic stories I’d heard began sometime during the teenaged years.

“Yep...” he seemed proud of this fact. “I ne’er drank a thang ‘til the night I got married.”

“Why did you start then?”

Marvin finally made a move, and then looked at me seriously. “Cause dat wife of mine trick me into marryin’ her!” He was apparently *still* angry over the incident.

“You were a grown man. How could anyone *trick* you into doing what you didn’t *want* to do?” I leaned over and studied the board for my next move.

“Belie’e me, missy, I was tricked!”

I made my move and Marvin promptly captured it and chastised me for talking too much instead of playing the game. I kept my mouth shut and studied my next move a little longer, but Mr. Whitehead’s story was much more intriguing to me.

“Why would Mrs. Whitehead want to trick you?”

“Secur’ty, gurl! A home, prop’ty, a good husband with steady employment...”

“Well, you sure showed her!” I said, rolling my averted eyes as I made my next move.

“Sho’ did!” he retorted, sounding proud of the well-known fact that he had drunk himself out of that steady employment, and now hung out on a street corner drinking and playing *Checkas* until he became too unruly and was put in jail to dry out a few days.

“So... *you* drink to spite *her*.”

“I gi’e her somethin’ to complain about,” he grinned at me, knowing (like everyone else in town) how much his wife enjoyed complaining.

“It seems to me, giving her *nothing* to complain about would be even *more* spiteful.”

Marvin looked at me with a raised eyebrow, letting me know he knew I was using psychology on him. He leaned over the board, studying his next move, as I considered Mrs. Whitehead. It was strange, her personality, being such as it was, that she would tolerate, or even

Lenore and I, excerpt

allow Marvin in her *very* organized house, if she was indeed as mercenary as her husband believed.

“How long have you and Mrs. Whitehead been married?”

“Twenty-five years!” he growled, making his move.

“Well Marvin, if it was so bad, why didn’t you just get a divorce?”

“She ne’er gimme no reason to. She works hard at her job; keeps a nice home; no one on the side...” He scowled again, as I promptly jumped him twice and took two of his checkers. “She *real* careful.” He pointed at me squinting, making it plain, he wasn’t fooled by Mrs. Whitehead’s *upstanding-wife-act*.

“Marvin, it’s the *Nineties*... people don’t need a *reason* to divorce!” I laughed when I realized where I’d landed. “*Crown me!* Besides, you could have divorced her on the grounds that she deceived you.”

Marvin’s eyes narrowed on me. “You tryin’ to take my mind off dis game wid all dis talk!”

“Not *!*” I shrugged in wide-eyed innocence.

“Hmph!” Marvin responded, leaning over the board again.

I was quiet, putting together everything I had learned from Marvin today, as he concentrated on his next move. He was forty years old when, *he* felt, he was *tricked* into marrying Mrs. Whitehead, in order to secure her *own* future. *He must’ve planned on being a bachelor until he died*, I thought!

Assuming that Marvin was indeed *tricked*, what did Mrs. Whitehead *do* when he lost his job... when she lost her *secur’ty*? She stayed with her husband, and in fact, started working, supporting them both. She kept a nice home for both of them, and apparently made him welcome in it, for he still called it *home*. And she’s never cheated on him. *My God*, I thought!

“She’s *in love* with you!” I said, having another epiphany. “Mrs. Whitehead is *in love* with *you!*”

Lenore and I, excerpt

Marvin looked at me with wide surprised eyes, as if he had *never* even seriously *considered* this possibility, and then they narrowed on me again. He took the box the game came in and swiftly swiped all the pieces back into it. He was *angry*... with *me!* "Aaron's done gone an' married hisself a *busybody!*" he muttered as he folded up the board and placed it, too, in the box.

"*Marvin...*" I laughed, "Aaron says the *exact same thing!*" It's uncanny!

"*Hmph!*" Marvin stood up abruptly with his *Checkas* box under his arm and marched off, muttering aloud. "A man can't sit comfortably on the corner in this town and play Checkas wid'out someone comin', handin' him a *tract!*"

"*Hey...*" I yelled at his retreating back, "*you called me over here!*" This is *sad*. I had been abandoned by the town drunk and was now sitting on a packing crate all alone... laughing all the harder!

I rose and pushed the crates up against the wall with an even *sadder* thought, Marvin had been married to a woman for 25 years and *never knew she loved him*.

It was as I turned to leave that I *felt* it... someone watching me. I looked about me and saw a person, leaning up against a car, seeming to look right through me, from beneath sunglasses. It was hard to tell at first glance, but the facial features were too feminine, though the clothing casually and carefully androgynous – it was a woman. It was Lenore.