

The Ann chapter

by Stephen Stark

You already have some of my comments, but I really need to make some more substantial comments.

First, I think this was a great idea for a novel, what happened, and I don't mind that you're fictionalizing it, if that's the word. You've certainly fictionalized a lot of our life together. In retrospect, what else could you do?

But at the risk of intruding into your narrative and your own personal interpretation of events and possibly painting myself as the harridan, I feel as though you're really blithely glossing over why I did what I did, and how very difficult it was to live with you. You've—very cleverly—painted your 'depredations' as humorous incidents, and put a rather cartoonish face on me: my fists clenched, my face reddened and my mouth a livid O of anger. And it's all very amusing.

Charlie Burns here: One certainly can sympathize with Mrs. Grayson's predicament, even if we do not necessarily agree with her actions. Although she recognizes that this is her husband's narrative, and clearly admires his ability to imagine her own life, she seems to have a significant blind spot when it comes to recognizing what sort of agency she has over Mr. Grayson's imagination.

Her life and her narrative are infinitely intertwined with other lives and narratives—as are all lives and narratives. In certain lives, it seems to me, we play starring roles; in others, bit parts. We play the bit or starring roles we play only to the extent that we affect those other lives. Thus, in order to effect changes we may want on the narratives of others, we must have a very heightened sense of ourselves as tellers of and listeners to stories.

Unlike most of us, she has found herself not just a person, but a character in her very-accomplished-novelist husband's personal narrative, but also in his fictional narratives. Her predicament here is that she has admitted jealousy of her husband's characters. Yet now that she is an invented character in an invented narrative, she finds her actual self cast out in favor of a fictional self over which she has no control.

Except—and I don't know if this is because you really don't/didn't get it—you elide an awful lot. Maybe this is a narrative device, because I do think you get it now, but there is no inkling here that you got, or get, just how difficult you were to live with, and just how alone I was.

I would wake up in the morning and you were already out of bed. I wouldn't see any evidence of you at all except for dirty dishes still on the table. And maybe now and then, when I was getting Robbie ready to go, you would emerge from the basement to get a coffee refill or something, and you wouldn't talk to me. You'd disappear again into the basement, and I would leave for work, then come home and help Robbie with his homework, and when you'd come home from the office, it was like I wasn't there. Robbie would come and hug you and then you'd go upstairs and change clothes, and then there'd likely be some sort of argument over what we'd have for dinner, and then one of us would make it, but alone. And if we did talk at the dinner table, it was you with Robbie, like maybe you'd seen something cool at work, some science you'd be interested in, and most of the time you never—well, never is a bad word, so I'll try not to use it—most of the time, if we talked at all, it would be about you. You and your stupid novel. You and your stupid dreams. I'm really sorry to put this this way, because I know how important all this is to you, but how many years do sit by yourself and exclude the world around you, ignore the people you love the most, and throw away everything for this stupid dream?

I'm sorry, but it really did seem stupid to me then. It felt to me that you were throwing away everything. But me especially.

And then after dinner, when maybe we could have been doing the dishes together and chatting about our days—we used to do that sort of thing, remember?—instead of choosing to be with me, you'd disappear again into the basement.

And on the weekends, you were either in the basement or in the yard, and it was such a rarity that we actually did anything together. I'd suggest going to a museum or something, and you get this excruciated look on your face, and I could tell that you were calculating the time that you have to be away from your imaginary friends and whether or not it was worth it. Now and again, we would go to a museum, and it would feel nice to be at the Corcoran for example and wandering among the photographs or the installations with you. But most of the time that's not the way it was.

I kept waiting. I kept thinking that you would finish the damn thing. I kept thinking that you'd decide that maybe being with me, being with Robbie, was more important than the damn thing. And I know it was hard for you, I know your sense that you'd failed with *The _____* was enormous. And I kept having this feeling, like you have in dreams, of things falling away—of you getting farther away.

And then I'd look at relationships of other people, like even Claire and James with their crazy marriage and his ridiculous work schedule, but I'd run into them, at the Whole Foods, and they'd be together. Even holding hands and stuff.

And you don't know this, because you were never really around long enough for me to tell you, but I kept thinking—it was a time of life thing, I guess—but I kept thinking that maybe I wanted a baby.

I'm only guessing here, because again, we didn't really talk about it, but maybe after Duke died, or maybe even while he was dying, you were feeling your own mortality. I can't imagine how difficult it was for you because I know how close the two of you were, but I can't imagine it because you never shared it with me. You went into yourself, into your dreams, and maybe that was the only way you could process it, but it also made it difficult for me to process it

because although he was not my father, I did consider him a very dear friend, and I did—and still do—grieve his loss. But in my estimation that was not something that we shared.

I'm sorry, I'm crying, here. I'm thinking about what could have been, and what wasn't, and I'm not saying it's all your fault, certainly it's both of ours. But I just don't know how to disentangle the fault.

And, yes, you're right. I was testing you. Or maybe not testing you exactly, but establishing little mental goals, thinking, almost like pulling the petals off a flower and saying, He loves me, he loves me not. When I started thinking that we needed to live apart, it was because I had come to the conclusion that you loved me not. Somewhere in here you make kind of a big deal about my saying to you once that I understood that you loved me in your own way, and I did understand that, but whatever happened to love is patient and kind, whatever happened to never allowing anything to tear us asunder? No, you weren't sleeping with anyone else, but it was that same kind of betrayal I felt, with your work.

The way I felt was as though you were, every day, making the conscious and deliberate

Robert, I did not want to divorce you. You need to understand that. What I wanted was to Be With You. And I don't pretend to understand all of the subconscious reasoning—if reasoning is really the word for it—that went on when I made the decision to call the lawyer, I only understand that I was desperate. You make me out to sound little bit foolish and childish here—that I would do something so ruinous to a relationship as to file for divorce just as a wake-up call to you.

Charlie Burns here: Fascinating that Mrs. Grayson has little notion of how she's making herself sound.

Mr. Grayson's willing inclusion of this little rant in his narrative represents either a naive act of love, or a calculated act narrative sculpting. Either way, it furthers only his own narrative ends and not those of his wife.

I know this is your narrative, and you don't have to include this in it, and it's your choice to see things the way you want to see them, just as it's my choice to see things the way I want to see them, but the reality is, Robert, I wanted out. Sure, I was confused and ambivalent, but it was more the kind of confusion and ambivalence a person might feel helping a very dear but very ill friend commit suicide. It was the kind of confusion and ambivalence a person might feel taking their old, crippled dog to the vet to be put down. It was something, Robert, that was very deeply regrettable, but also very necessary.

