

RAYMOND CARVER

THEY'RE NOT YOUR HUSBAND

Earl Ober was between jobs as a salesman but Doreen, his wife, had gone to work nights as a waitress at a twenty-four hour coffee shop at the edge of town.

One night when he was drinking Earl decided to stop by the coffee shop and have something to eat. He wanted to see where she worked, and there was always the chance he could order something on the house.

He sat at the counter and studied the menu.

"What are you doing here?" Doreen said when she walked up. She handed over an order to the cook. "What are you going to order, Earl?" she said then. "You sure the kids are okay?"

"They're fine," he said. "I'll have coffee and one of those Number Two sandwiches."

She wrote it down.

"Any chance of, you know?" he said to her and winked.

"No," she said. "Don't talk to me now, I'm busy."

Earl drank his coffee and waited for the sandwich. Two men in business suits, their ties undone and their collars open, sat down next to him and asked for coffee.

As Doreen walked away with the coffee pot one of the men said to the other, "Look at the ass on that, will you? I don't believe it."

The other man laughed. "I've seen better," he said.

"That's what I mean," the man said. "But some people like fat women."

"Not me," the other man said.

"I don't either," the man said. "That's what I was saying."

Doreen put the sandwich in front of Earl. Around the sandwich there were French fries, some cole slaw, and a dill pickle.

"Anything else?" she said. "A glass of milk?"

He didn't say anything. He shook his head when she kept standing there.

"I'll get you more coffee," she said.

She returned with the pot and poured coffee for him and for the two men. Then she picked up a dish and turned to get some ice cream. She reached down into the container and with the dipper began to scoop vanilla ice cream. The white skirt tightened against her hips and crawled up her legs, exposing the lower part of her girdle, the backs of her fleshy thighs, and several dark, broken veins behind her knees.



She reached down into the container and with the dipper began to scoop vanilla ice cream.

The two men sitting beside Earl exchanged looks. One of them raised his eyebrows. The other man grinned and kept looking at Doreen over his cup.

She spread chocolate syrup over the ice cream. As she began to shake the can of whipping cream Earl got up, leaving his food, and headed for the door. He heard her call his name, but he kept going.

He checked on the children and then went to the other bedroom and took off his clothes. He pulled the covers up, closed his eyes, and allowed himself to think about the incident. The humiliation started in his face, the forehead and cheeks, and worked down into his shoulders and on into his stomach and legs. He opened his eyes and rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. Then he turned on his side and fell asleep. He didn't even recall her getting into bed later that night.

The next morning, after she had sent the children off to school, she came in the bedroom and raised the shade. He was already awake.

"Look at your self in the mirror," he said.

"What?" she said. "What are you talking about?"

Just look at yourself in the mirror for a minute," he said.

"What am I supposed to see?" she said, but she looked in the mirror over the dresser and pushed the hair away from her shoulders.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, what?" she said.

"I hate to say anything, but I think you'd better consider going on a diet. I mean it, I'm serious. I think you could stand to lose a few pounds. Don't get mad," he said.

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"Just what I said. I think you could stand to lose a few pounds. A few pounds anyway," he added.

"You never said anything before," she said. She raised her nightgown over her hips and turned to look at her stomach in the mirror.

"I never felt it was a problem before," he said. He tried to pick his words. He started to tell her about the cracks he'd heard the night before, but decided to save that for now. He could always bring that up later if she needed more convincing.

The nightgown still gathered around her waist, she turned her back to the mirror and looked over her shoulder. She raised one buttock in her hand and let it drop.

He closed his eyes. "Maybe I'm all wet," he said.

"I guess I could afford to lose. But it'd be hard," she said.

"You're right, it won't be easy," he said. "That's so true. But I'll help."

"Maybe you're right," she said. She dropped her nightgown and looked at him.

Later that morning they talked about diets. She had always been curious about the protein diets, the vegetable-only diets, the grapefruit juice diets. But they decided they didn't have the money to buy enough steaks and other lean meats that the protein diet called for. Besides, as he pointed out, it'd be hard on him and the children if she ate steak every night in front of them. She said she didn't care for all that many vegetables either, so she shouldn't think seriously about a vegetable diet. And since she didn't like grapefruit juice that much, she didn't see how she could drink the required glass of that before each meal.

"Go ahead then, forget it," he said.

"No, you're right," she said. "I'll do something."

"What about exercises?" he said. "They'd help."

"No thanks. I'm getting all the exercise I need down there," she said.

"Just quit eating," he suggested then. "For a few days anyway."

"All right," she said after a minute. "I'll try. For a few days, as you say. I'll give it a try. You've convinced me."

"I'm a closer," he said.

He figured up the balance in their checking account, then drove to a discount department store and bought a bathroom scale. He looked the clerk over as she rang up the sale.

At home he had Doreen take off all her clothers and get on the scale. He frowned when he saw the dark veins behind her knees, and he ran his finger the length of one vein that extended up her thigh.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said.

He looked at the scale and wrote the figure down on a piece of paper. "All right," he said. "All right."

The next day he was gone for most of the afternoon on an interview. The employer, a heavy-set man who limped as he showed Earl around the plumbing fixtures in the warehouse, asked if he were free to travel. He had many out-of-town accounts, he said.

"You bet your life I'm free," Earl said.

The man nodded without saying anything.

Earl kept smiling.

He could hear the television before he opened the door to the house. The children didn't look up as he walked through the living room. In the kitchen, Doreen, dressed for work, was eating scrambled eggs and bacon.

"What are you doing?" Earl yelled.

She reddened but continued to chew the food, cheeks puffed, until she spit everything into a napkin. "I couldn't help myself," she said.

“Slob,” he said. “*Go ahead, eat. Go on.*” He went to the bedroom, closed the door, and lay on the covers. He could still hear the television. He put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. In a few minutes she opened the door.

“I’m going to try again,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

Two mornings later she called him into the bathroom. “Look,” she said.

He read the scale. He opened a drawer and took out the paper and read the scale again while she continued to grin.

“Three-quarters of a pound,” she said.

“It’s something.” He patted her hip.

He read the classifieds. He went to the State Employment office. Every three or four days he drove someplace for an interview, and at night he counted her tips. He smoothed out the dollar bills on the table and stacked the nickels, dimes, and quarters in piles of one dollar. Each morning he put her on the scale.

In two weeks she had lost three and a half pounds.

“I pick,” she said. “I starve myself all day, and then I pick at work. It adds up.”

He looked at her.

But a week later she had lost five pounds. The week after that, nine and a half pounds altogether. Her clothes were loose on her. She had to cut into the rent money to buy a new uniform.

“People are saying things at work,” she said to him.

“What kind of things?” he said.

“That I’m too pale, for one thing,” she said. “That I don’t look like myself. They’re afraid I’m losing too much weight.”

“What’s wrong with losing weight?” he said. “Don’t pay any attention to them. Tell them to mind their own business. They’re not your husband, are they? You don’t live with them.”

“I have to work with them,” she said.

“That’s right,” he said. “But even so.”

Each morning he followed her into the bathroom and waited while she stepped on the scale. He got down on his knees with a pencil and the sheet of paper. The paper was covered with dates, days of the week, and numbers. He read the number on the scale, consulted the paper, and either nodded his head or pursed his lips.

She spent more time in bed now. She went back to bed after the children had left for school, and she napped in the afternoons before going to work. He helped around the house, watched television, and let her sleep. He did all the shopping, and once in a while he went on an interview.

One night he put the children to bed, turned off the television, and decided to go for a few drinks. Shortly after midnight he left

the bar and drove to the coffee shop.

He sat at the counter and waited. When she saw him she said, "Is everything all right at home?"

He nodded.

He took his time ordering. He kept looking at her as she moved up and down behind the counter. He finally ordered a cheeseburger. She gave the order to the cook and went to wait on someone else.

Another waitress came by with a coffee pot and filled his cup.

"Who's your friend?" he said to the waitress and nodded at his wife.

"Her name is Doreen," the waitress said.

"She looks a lot different somehow than the last time I was in here," he said.

"I wouldn't know," the waitress said.

He ate the cheeseburger and drank the coffee. People kept sitting down and getting up at the counter. His wife waited on most of the people at the counter, though now and then the other waitress came along to take an order. He watched his wife and listened carefully to see if he could overhear any comments about her. Twice he had to leave his place to go to the bathroom. Each time he wondered if he might have missed hearing something while he was gone. When he came back the second time, he found his cup missing and someone in his place.

He sat down at the end of the counter next to an older man in a striped shirt.

"What do you want?" Doreen said to Earl when she saw him again. "Shouldn't you be home?"

"Give me some coffee," he said.

The man next to him was reading the first edition of the morning paper. He looked up and watched Doreen pour Earl a cup of coffee. He glanced at her as she walked away, then went back to his newspaper.

Earl sipped his coffee and waited for the man to say something. He watched the man out of the corner of his eye. The man had finished eating and his plate was pushed to the side. The man lit a cigarette, folded the newspaper in front of him, and continued to read.

In a minute Doreen came by and removed the dirty plate and poured the man more coffee. She didn't look at Earl.

"What do you think of that?" Earl said to the man, nodding at Doreen as she moved down the counter. "Don't you think that's something special?"

The man next to him looked up, surprised. He looked at Doreen and then at Earl, and went back to his newspaper.

"Well, what do you think?" Earl went on. "I'm asking. Does it look good or not? Tell me."

The man rattled his paper.

When Doreen started down the counter again, Earl nudged the man's shoulder and said, "I'm telling you something, listen. Look at the legs. But just wait. Could I have a small chocolate sundae?" he said to Doreen.

She stopped in front of him and let out her breath. Then she turned and picked up a dish and the ice cream dipper. She leaned over the freezer, reached down and began to turn the dipper in the ice cream.

Earl looked at the man next to him and winked as Doreen's skirt traveled up her thighs. At that minute his eyes caught the eyes of the other waitress. The man next to him put the newspaper under his arm and reached into his pocket.

The other waitress came straight to Doreen. "Who is this man?" she said.

"Who?" Doreen said and looked around with the ice cream dish in her hand.

"Him," the other waitress said and nodded at Earl. "Who is he anyway?"

Earl put on his best smile. He held it, and it broadened until he felt his face pulling out of shape.

But the other waitress was frowning at him, and Doreen began to shake her head slowly. The man next to Earl had put some change beside his cup and stood up, but he also waited to hear the answer. They all stared at Earl.

"He's my husband," Doreen said at last, shrugging. She looked at Earl and waited, and then she put the unfinished chocolate sundae in front of him and reached for the coffee pot.