

# The Elegance of Things Once Living

by **Jenny Maloney**

Angie's taillights went around the curve and, for a brief moment, Craig was relieved by the cool, dark space. He gripped the small black box tighter into his palm. Those red lights had glared at him the entire thirteen miles from Angie's parents' house. The curve was the final turn of Peter Downing Road. Peter Downing was a back road, a road that served as a shortcut for those who lived on the outskirts of town – a stomping ground for speeding teenagers and police officers. There was a series of hills and loose curves before the final, tight one where cars drifted out of sight. After the bend was a stoplight and a right turn into the brighter lights of the city. But he had not cleared the curve yet, unconsciously slowing, not wanting to see the twin angry reds.

If there were justice in the world, Riley would be screaming, shrieking, in the backseat.

Craig maneuvered around the corner and everything was normal. The headlights swung around, illuminating the gray, dry grass and endless black of the undeveloped outer rims of the county. Broken yellow lines pointed the way around the shallow hill and Craig followed. Then everything was not normal.

It must have happened so fast.

Angie into the intersection, making her turn, or not making her turn, never seeing the other car – no headlights – spinning into the intersection, meeting head-on somehow. Craig saw only the end of it. He heard brakes groaning, trying to force tires to stop that did not want to stop; he heard it, but the whole thing was muffled, far away and dull behind the immediacy of Aerosmith. The sound of glass breaking was overshadowed by the grind of metal on metal on rubber on pavement. The change of the streetlight – the last one before turning back into the city – from red to green to yellow.

He never pressed his own brakes; his foot hit the clutch instead, pushing him forward faster. Angie's car enveloped another, bending to make way for the car that should have stopped. His own car passed into the intersection, red lights, red brake lights and his hood pushed into them, throwing Angie all the way out of the windshield. He did not see her fall. Craig sailed into his airbag, making no attempt to brace himself, letting it punch into his nose, chest. In the second before it deflated – so fast – he heard Riley crying through the cracked windshield, heaving, trying hard to scream.

Craig felt the same scream trying to escape his own bruised chest, trying to free itself from the blood, hot like urine, gushing down his face but drowning instead. And he could only sit, still, and let Riley's pathetic wails sound out over the music still playing on the radio.

He wiped his mouth. His fingers came away wet. He grasped the door handle and pushed. The door opened. Cool night air rushed into his face. The blood became sticky. He leaned forward. Something caught him. Seatbelt. He unbuckled. He leaned forward again, stepped out. Saw Angie.

Her dark hair sparkled with glass, now red, now green, now yellow. That was all he saw at first – of course, she'd always had so much hair. Thick, down to her waist, a pain in the ass in bed, but beautiful for pictures. She lay on her stomach, one arm stretched out in front of her, the other bent at her side, legs sprawled, jeans ripped.

Craig could hear Riley better from the outside, still confused and scared and inexperienced. The others were starting to sound off too, the ones in the other car. Two of them – men? women? – had managed to walk away, one to puke on the side of the road. Craig smelled gin. And the second tried to open the warped door to get to Riley.

"Mister," the one at Riley's door said. "Mister, I need your help. Are you okay? I need your help." That one banged on the door, Riley hiccupped from somewhere inside, between shattered windows. "There's a baby in here, mister. A *baby*."

Breathing. The baby had to be breathing to scream. Angie just lay there. She never just lay there. Not even in the hospital with all that dark hair, now sparkly green – no yellow – tied up at her neck. Riley cries, Angie moves.

Craig did not touch her or try to wake her. He knelt, then lay, beside her, one arm stretched above him, the other bent at his side, legs sprawled. She stared at him.

Dark, dark eyes, the pupil had opened so wide it had swallowed the iris. Angie didn't blink.

"Riley's crying," he told her. "He's ready to go." Craig felt the asphalt dig into his cheek, scraping his sticky skin, cold.

“Riley’s crying. He’s ready to go.” Angie had said that, not thirty minutes before.

Angie had called him earlier in the evening, wanting him to meet her at her parents’ house. Dinner again. After Riley was born, her parents wanted to see them more. It was easier to meet Angie there than to go get her and the baby, only to turn around and drive to her parents’. It was the third dinner in two weeks, always the same thing.

“It’s not because of anything we said, is it?” asked Angie’s father, Mike.

“No, not exactly. Hormones mostly.” Angie had wiped at her eyes – Craig remembered her wiping her eyes – and snuggled Riley closer before releasing him into the carrier/car seat. She didn’t look at Craig or directly back at her parents. Angie didn’t say a goddamn thing to her parents, ever.

“Sure, sure,” Mike nodded, like he understood what the hell his daughter was talking about. Angie’s mother, Barb, didn’t feel like letting up, though. Craig had hoped she would relent until Riley was at least two months old, three more weeks, before bringing up the old discussion.

He looked at the family portraits, the ones where Angie was sixteen or something, when he didn’t know her. Her smile was crooked.

“You’re both adults –” Barb began.

“Thank you,” Craig answered, his fist balling at his side. He’d take that family portrait and throw it at her head. There were no pictures of Riley up yet.

"Craig." Angie's tone told him to shut it, to grin and bear it, like always, like she did, while Barb continued.

"— but you have a child to consider now. What if something happens? What if you decide it won't work out? What if you walk out?"

Craig pretended he didn't see Angie's warning look. "We're both still his parents. And I wouldn't —"

"— twice. Twice you've left already."

"And twice I've come back!" he yelled. "Marriage doesn't change anything. Either one of us could still go if we wanted. It's none of your damn business anyway."

The door clicked shut behind him and he turned around, cutting off Barb's "— my grandchild —" Angie and the baby were gone. He grit his teeth, feeling his whole jaw clench. A small, satisfied smile lifted Barb's otherwise tight lips and then disappeared. Craig nodded a tense good-bye and followed Angie.

The night was starting to cool on the quiet neighborhood street. It was an older neighborhood than where they lived. The trees were thicker, bigger. The branches cast shadows though the streetlamps, making everything darker. Angie had finished strapping Riley in and was straightening, shutting the back door of the Honda, when he reached her.

"Angie," he said and she whirled around, cutting off his explanation.

The streetlight illuminated half of her face, the rest was shadowed. She'd been crying. He saw the tear-tracks and puffy redness of

her eyes. Angie didn't say anything, just looked at him. Craig couldn't read the look but he went on anyway.

"I'm sorry we had to go through that again. If she would just be quiet about it —"

"Craig."

He stopped and looked at her. Her hair was down, her back was straight. Chin up. The tears were quiet; she looked composed. All the features — cheeks, lips, forehead — were relaxed and Craig thought she'd never looked more beautiful. Then he realized she was trembling. Every part of her shook together, almost imperceptible.

"Craig," she said again, her voice also shaky, "I don't want to get into this with Riley in the backseat, in my parents' driveway. So I'm going to say one thing —"

He moved to interrupt but she held up a hand, surprisingly steady.

"I love you. I want to marry you. But, when you fight everyone so hard against it, when you have left twice to get your space," she almost spit the last word. She shook her head. "I can't do this. Either you choose that you want to be with me and Riley or you choose not to. Not making a decision is the same as making one." She paused. "And don't bring my parents into this, because I don't disagree with them."

She turned then, her dark hair brushing his shoulder, her vanilla scent lingering in the air around him. He heard, rather than saw, her climb in. She did not slam the door but only a breath passed before

the ignition turned over. Angie didn't buckle her safety belt.

He was left in the middle of the driveway, staring after the Honda. The small walk to his car did nothing to clear his mind. Vanilla perfume clung to his shirt, sweet. Craig climbed in, reached over to his glove compartment, and pulled out the little black box. He opened it. The diamond wasn't large, a quarter karat. But the cut was beautiful – a round cut that reflected every shade of light – even the streetlamp above him in the shadowed car. The diamond twinkled at him, every color. If she would stop for one minute, instead of yelling or lecturing, if she would just be quiet for one minute, like her mother, she'd know what his decision was. He'd snapped the lid shut. He remembered snapping the lid shut, turning his own ignition and following her out.

Now she was quiet and the only reflected light was stoplights – green, yellow, red – bouncing off the bits of glass embedded in her hair. Her features were relaxed and there was no tremble. The comforting caves of her black eyes were nothing but glassy reflections – red, green, yellow. Her graceful neck twisted toward him, her manicured left hand spread flat on the street, the third finger naked. Everything elegant remained. The sickening vanilla scent, the round eyes, the full lips. But her voice, her tremble, had gone.

“Riley's crying,” he told her again. So was he.

The only response was more light. Red and blue. Sirens squeaked and then bleeped out.

“There's a baby in here!” He? She? was screaming now, beside Riley's door.

“Sir? Sir? Are you okay?” Someone was asking him questions. Craig could see the blue of a uniform.

Craig tried again. “Riley’s crying, Angie. Can’t you hear him? Time to go.”

They flipped him onto his back. Propped his feet up. Blood rushed to his head and he could see were the stars beyond the refracting red, green, yellow. He heard them – all of them yelling and crying. He turned his head to look at Angie but they’d already lifted her to a gurney. They kept asking questions. “Is this your wife? Is that your son?” and on and on and all Craig could see was the long stretch of asphalt where Angie once laid and he wondered where she’d gone. So fast. But it was so, so, slow.