

LIKE WITH LIKE

Ellen Boyers Kwatnoski

Hilary hurries along O Street with a firm grip on her purse—you can't be too careful these days, even in Georgetown. The trees are awash with April green and tufts of daffodils are everywhere. A perfect day for the annual house tour. She enters St. John's Church vestibule, approaching the check-in desk.

"Just one?" The well-turned-out matron peers over Hilary's shoulder as if for an invisible companion. Hilary bristles. One is not enough? She says nothing, handing over her money. Society ladies of this stamp make Hilary, in her sensible shoes and wrap-around skirt, feel a bit frumpy. She's kept her figure at least. She squares her shoulders and runs a hand through her hair, discovering unruly curls have already begun to escape her careful coif. Nothing to be done about Washington's humidity, even in the early spring.

The woman makes change, counting out each bill with maddening care as Hilary eyes the stack of programs, dying to see what houses will be on this year's tour. Finally, her change in hand, Hilary snatches her program and sets out at a brisk pace, keeping well ahead of the small crowd fanning out from the church. At the very first address, years ago, a tabloid reporter had made off with Henry Kissinger's trash bags and was nabbed by the Secret Service. With a rush of anticipation, Hilary quickens her steps. Bright balloons mark the house and, with her program checked, Hilary steps inside the foyer. Henry Kissinger is long gone, but the dining room table is laid as if for a state dinner. Hilary's fingertips itch to feel the heavy damask, caress the flatware, turn over the plates, check their pedigrees. A person could easily slip the tiny silver saltcellars into a purse or pocket. Hilary glances at the tour monitor—another expensively dressed Georgetown dowager—who gives her a faint smile. On the sideboard, a collection of celadon figurines catches her eye. "Group like with like," her mother had told her. "Brass with brass, milk glass with milk glass. Pulls a house together." With a quick nod of approval, Hilary heads up the stairs, imagining them creaking under Henry Kissinger's bulk.

In the master bedroom, the bed is mounded with white pillows: English squares, French neck rolls, and an inexplicable sausage lying across the width of the bed. What on earth does one do with such a thing? She's tempted to ask the manicured tour guide hovering watchfully in the doorway, but, with an odd rush of shame, refrains, as if the pillow might involve an obscure sexual practice.

The second house, an 1887 gem, has been gutted and its open spaces filled with ultra-modern stainless steel and leather furniture. As a further affront, the wife of the lobbyist-owner has painted enormous abstract canvasses and hung them on the chalky walls. As appalling as Hilary finds her surroundings, she burns with a green slash of envy. This woman, this so-called artist, cosseted in her sterile house, indulges her little passion like some by-gone noble woman. She doesn't board the bus day after day, or spend those days churning out pointless memos and policy directives, fighting the tedious, incremental fights of the petty bureaucrat. She doesn't lug home yet more memos to be read, yellow highlighter in hand, until she falls asleep in her chair with the cat at her feet.

Whirling on her heel, with a curt nod to the guide, Hilary stalks out the door and up the path to the sidewalk. Leaning against the front gate, her anger spent, she eases one complaining foot, then the other, out of her shoes. She consults her program, slips her feet back into her shoes, and is off to the next house.

At Q Street she turns right and crosses long-abandoned streetcar tracks. This house is not famous—she's kept Georgetown's catalogue of important homes in her mind for years—but it is a fine one. She steps through a red door into a room splashed with blue, yellow, and lime. The guide points out carved Balinese birds, a hand-loomed carpet, lush with tropical fronds. Hilary climbs the steps to the landing where she spies a rustic chest. Good for them, leaving the old paint. She pokes her head into the master bedroom. Masses of lilacs fill vases on the marble-topped vanity and exude heady perfume, the scent of summer nights back home in Ohio. Peeking into the bath, Hilary admires how these people have combined old things of great value with found objects, quirky choices that don't scream *money*, although they clearly have it, and lots of it.

A woman with a notebook comes into the room. "Wonder who the decorator is," she says. Hilary doesn't care to speculate. She wants this house all to herself.

Halfway down the bookcase-lined hall, she finds another bedroom. Inside, a wooden dingy, fitted with brass, has been made into a child's bed. Sailors' knots hang on marine blue walls and in one corner stands a miniature lighthouse fit for Winken, Blinken, or Nod. A guide turns a dimmer and the constellations of the night sky appear in pinpoint lights on the ceiling. Transfixed, Hilary gazes up, until a group clatters in and breaks the mood.

In the hall, Hilary surveys the books on the shelves. Most have to do with traveling, sailing, or both. Silver-framed photographs crowd among the books. Hilary sees a gray-haired man, a woman whose blonde good looks are irritatingly ageless, and a small boy, tanned, white shirted, and

smiling. Surrounded by rigging and boats and deep blue water, they're as bracing as a whiff of salt air.

Hilary, her hand to her mouth, peers more closely at the photographs. Something about the trio's faces is familiar. Ah. Here are the wedding pictures. And here's his college graduation picture, judging from the optimistic grin on the young man's face. Hilary steps back, her heart thudding. She knows him. It's Doug Marshall.

Doug Marshall. It all comes back: the flash of his smile, his strong jaw, the flush of joy she'd felt simply being in the same room with him. And funny! There was a man who could make her laugh just by looking at her sideways. At the cast party after their senior year play, she remembers the fumbled kiss, his startled expression as the kiss deepened, become passionate. She'd pulled away to search his eyes.

Then came the troubled shake of his head. "We can't do this. You know I'm engaged."

Who didn't? All of George Washington University was a-buzz over them. Star athlete, brilliant lawyer-to-be, effortless actor, paired with Melinda Weaver, the leggy beauty whose socialite family was regularly splashed over *The Washington Post's* society pages.

Doug had touched Hilary's cheek. "The play was a blast, Hil. Let's not spoil it."

Spoil it? Spoil it with a kiss? In tears, she had gathered up her coat and fled.

Now, Hilary peers at Doug's wife and sees that she's a younger version of Melinda Weaver: her smile speaks of privilege, position, and easy confidence. Pain sears Hilary's throat and she bolts down the stairs, through the kitchen, out the back door, and down the alley.

At the end of the alley, she halts, panting and disoriented. She walks to the left, stops, turns to the right. As well as she knows these streets, she's momentarily lost, until, relieved, she spies Wisconsin Avenue, with its crowds and buzzing cars, a block away. She'll take a break. Collect her wits.

At Patisserie Poupon, Hilary cleans the table with a wad of napkins and sinks into a chair with an iced latte. *Doug Marshall.* Heat rises to her face. She presses her glass to her cheeks. She'd written his name, like a high-schooler, in the margins of her notebooks and schemed to match her courses to his. They fell into a comfortable companionship based upon a mutual love of theater. Student reviewers commented on their electric connection on the stage. Hilary sighs and adds Equal to her coffee. Even as a young woman, her looks were average. She'd always been shy, not skilled socially, but on the stage her inhibitions fell away. In the exaggerated make-up her features were alive, even beautiful. Acting with Doug felt as natural and easy as breathing, but at the same time,

she now sees, more thrilling than anything she's experienced, before or since. After a few unsuccessful dinner theater auditions, she'd abandoned any thought of an acting career, found her first government job and, well, not much had happened since.

Alarm wells up in her throat. Thirty years and nothing much happened? She gulps air, fanning herself with a sheaf of napkins. She grips the edge of the table, fighting the sensation of drowning, unable to get a satisfying breath.

She swallows hard. She will force herself to read the tour program. But the type swims. She sees Doug's face. How handsome he is still. She shakes her head to clear it and reads again, remembering nothing.

Abandoning her latte, she sets off for the next house. Another house will dispel all this nonsense in her head. Doug Marshall, indeed. A college girl's crush. What foolishness. Walking briskly, she feels better already. "Good for the soul to get a body moving," her mother would have said. *Get a body moving, get a move-on. Move on. Move on.* Hilary walks to the rhythm of this silent chant until she comes to a bouquet of balloons tied to a tree on R Street. With one foot on the step, she freezes. Her mind is a blank. She stares at nothing. Paralyzed, she sways as chills cascade down the backs of her legs. She grabs the handrail, bends double, gulping air, a spray of dancing black dots before her eyes.

The tour guide calls from the top of the stairs, "Are you all right, ma'am?"

Hilary reels away. She can't go in. After Doug's house, any other house would be an insult. She feels his house pulling at her. She longs to be back inside.

She shakes her head furiously. This is madness. She must keep moving. She must get away from the house on Q Street, Doug's house. Mechanically, she covers blocks and blocks, not seeing the window boxes spilling petunias in the spring air, the gaily painted doors, the cats curled up in the sun. Finally, feet aching, she leans against a gnarled old tree, its roots buckling the sidewalk beneath her. She glances at her watch. Almost five. She's been walking for two hours. The tour's winding down. No matter. She's missed the last three houses anyway. She gazes across the street, her eyes out of focus, and sees the facades, some clapboard, some brick, as mere shapes, until one house comes into jarring focus.

A red door. She's standing smack across the street from Doug Marshall's house. A wild laugh bursts from her throat. She's walked miles to escape this house and now, here she is, as if she'd known all along where she was going.

What would one more look hurt? She dashes across the street and slips in the door as several

tour-goers come out. The distracted guide doesn't see her mount the stairs. She is alone in the master bedroom. She plunges her face into the lilacs and hungrily strokes the bed-covers. She darts down the hall to the child's room, twists the dimmer. The stars bloom over her.

As she steps into the hall, she hears the tour guide shout up the stairs. "Everybody out?"

Hilary jerks open a hall closet and bolts inside, closing the door behind her. Heart hammering, she cowers among the coats as she hears the guide check the rooms and trip back down the stairs. The front door closes. Silence.

What has she done? My God, what has she done? She sinks to the floor shaking. Gripping her arms, she forces herself to think. It's Sunday. Maybe Doug and his family have taken a long weekend sailing trip and won't come home at all. On the other hand, maybe they keep their boating gear in this very closet. What if they come home, open the door and see her feet poking out below the hanging coats. She burns with humiliation. *Get out now. Run before they come home.*

Yet she longs for them to return. She aches to feel them near. She doesn't move. Time is liquid. She can't see her watch in the swimming darkness. She must leave. If she's caught, she'd be charged with trespassing, or worse, breaking and entering. Doug would call the police. She'd be fired.

She rises, parts the coats, opens the door and blinks in the sudden light of the hall. A key enters the front door. Turns. She pulls her head back into the closet, fear slicing through her. She shrinks to the back and pulls the coats around her.

A man's voice calls out, "The house is none the worse for wear, honey."

Doug.

Hilary's blood is rushing in her ears. Her heart thuds with such force she fears she will faint.

A child's voice pipes up from the living room. "Catch me, Mommy!"

A woman's voice follows, "Time for your bath, Skipper."

Small feet hurtle up the steps; a woman's sure tread following them.

Taps turn. Plumbing gurgles behind the wall. The boy shrieks as he is lowered into the bath. Hilary stops breathing. *Where do they put the child's dirty clothes?* Feeling around in front of the coats, she finds the handles of stacked suitcases, but nothing that could be a hamper. After a moment of relief, she is again seized with panic. Doug might have planned a business trip for tomorrow. He'd have to pack tonight. Squeezing her eyes shut, she clenches her fists in a fugue of terror. After several beats, she forces herself to relax. Her fate is in Doug's hands. She has no say in the matter. She can't control the outcome, so she won't think about it.

She shifts her weight. Her back has begun to ache with a dull, somber pain. Water rushes through the pipes behind her. Bath time is over. Hilary pictures Doug's wife slipping pajamas over the boy's damp head. She closes her eyes, sways slightly, feeling as if she has merged with the scene, has become part of the house, and is now an element of this family, unseen.

"Bed time." Doug's voice comes up the stairs. "Teeth, young man."

More squealing.

The sound of a chair being moved in the child's room, then Doug's rich voice, "Goodnight, brush. Goodnight, bowl. Goodnight, mush. Goodnight, moon."

"Turn on the stars, Daddy!"

A wave of affection washes over Hilary. She can feel Doug through the wall. Can he feel her in some small vibration in the air? Her heart a butterfly wing beating, barely perceptible?

Doug's footsteps move past her hiding place and down the stairs. She imagines she hears the pages of a newspaper turning, feels the rhythm of Doug's conversation with his wife, punctuated by quiet spells, the shorthand communication of domestic life. She feels the house settling. The timbers rest, the daytime brightness leaches out of its bones and it quiets for the night.

For a long throbbing time, Hilary hears nothing. She leans forward into the coats, breathing in the faint ghost of the wife's Chanel, and runs her hand down the length of what must be a dress coat, a cashmere cloud. A faint tobacco note—Doug's scent—infuses rough tweed hanging next to the cashmere. Hilary lets her head fall to one side, stretching her neck muscles, and is startled by voices nearby. Could she have fallen asleep standing up? She hadn't heard them come up the stairs. She pulls herself farther back into the coats and holds her breath as Doug and his wife check on the boy.

"Little man."

Hilary almost jumps out of her skin. Doug's voice is just outside the closet door.

"Sweet little man." His wife's voice is husky with feeling.

Hilary's eyes sting. For an interminable time she hears nothing, dreading a hand on the door knob, or worse, her own cough.

At last, they walk down the hall to their room. But no, here is Doug again, calling to his wife. "Did you leave Skipper's Lacrosse stick in the hall closet? He'll need it tomorrow."

Hilary chokes back a cry. She strains to hear the wife's reply, but all she hears is the keening of her blood in her ears. Time staggers, stands still.

Doug's voice comes after what seems an age. "Okay, sweetie."

Okay, *what?* Icy sweat trickles down her back. She yearns to hear something, anything, to resolve the whereabouts of the Lacrosse stick, but nothing comes. Gradually, her trembling subsides and she guesses the stick must be in the car, in the basement, or in the boy's room.

Taps turn again. There's muted laughter. Hilary's face is hot in the darkness as it dawns on her: They are about to go to bed. Yes, she had wanted to merge with them, for her heart to beat along with theirs, but not to *bear* them in bed. She hadn't planned on that. The blackness of the closet dances with sparks of light, pulses with the washes of purple and green Hilary sometimes sees behind her eyelids as she drifts off to sleep. Even with her eyes wide open she might as well have them closed. She might as well be blind. She wishes she were deaf. More laughter, softer now. Was it his or hers? The voices entwine, rise and fall, coming through the walls, the coats, her skin. She holds her breath. Mercifully, the bedroom sounds quiet and stop. Hilary pictures Doug and his wife wrapped in each other's arms, giving themselves to sleep.

It must be ten o'clock, eleven at the latest. She will plan her escape. She'll stay long enough make sure everyone is asleep but not yet likely to use the bathroom. She stands as long as her aching back and feet can bear, longer than she imagines possible. Then, with caught breath, she parts the coats. The hangers glide over the pole with only the merest sigh. Pins and needles shoot up her legs as she inches forward, places her hand on the doorknob, turns it, and is out. Slowly, slowly, keeping to the hall runner, she puts one foot in front of the other, past the little body wrapped in his boat, past Doug and his wife in their lilac-bowered room. At the end of the hall, readying herself for the flight down the stairs, she removes her shoes. In a convulsive motion, she snatches a silver-framed photograph of the three of them from atop the old chest. She can make them out in the dusky dark: heads together under the white of a sail. She adds the photo to the shoes in the crook of her arm and off she goes in her stocking feet, down the stairs, in a rush, like the wind in the eaves.

At the bottom of the stairs, something catches her eye.

The child stands above her on the landing, a teddy bear in one hand, held by its leg.

Hilary is frozen in place. Her heart gallops.

The child blinks. His small body sways with his breathing and he regards her with naked interest, as if she is a friendly Mother Goose character appearing unexpectedly in his house.

Hilary is flooded with feeling for this small creature: the fall of his hair, the endearing curve of his cheek, his tiny rosebud mouth. *Could she take the child, too?* She yearns to gather him in her arms, to bury her face in his downy neck. She puts a hand on the banister, raises her foot to the stair.

The child watches.

Hilary shifts the shoes and the picture, freeing one arm, preparing to scoop the child up. She rises to another step, and another, and then, horrified, grips the bannister with all her strength, and stops herself. No. She can't have the boy. She knows it now. Backing down, her eyes brimming, she forms a kiss, touches her fingers to her lips, blows it to the child, and turns away.

At the back door a ruby-eyed alarm glows. One twist of the deadbolt to the right and she has thirty seconds or more to get away. Outside, she slips on her shoes, puts the frame in her purse and hurries down the alley, keeping to the shadows.

At home, the cat rubs against her legs, complaining loudly about being left so long unfed. Hilary doesn't speak to him as she usually does. Instead, she pulls the framed photograph out of her purse, studies the faces, and places it on her Regency table among the silver candlesticks, the silver Jefferson cups, and the silver tray.

“Like with like,” she murmurs, touching the frame with gentle fingertips.