



MARC SIEGEL

THE QUARTERLY

The Assistant

“Hold it like this,” he said, and he showed me how to hold it. But here’s how I meant to hold it, right up against his back, stretching the cord, so that I might see something. He said I would break it like that. It would hit his back and break, he said.

I lit a circle. I moved it so that he wouldn’t notice. Imagine it, with no steel casing and me moving it like that. I mean, I might even have broken it, the way he said, against his back.

“I need you to do this job for me,” he said.

My job was to keep the circle going. It made shadows on his face so that it made him look old to me. I couldn’t see past his face to where his hands were working. Imagine his hands moving the way they must have moved for him when he was young. But I could see that he could probably work well enough without me. He could probably always hang this thing up on a hook and go on working okay without me.

She would call to me.

He wouldn’t let on to me that he heard her calling.

I would lean against his back and smell the oldness of his shirt. There was the smell of the bulb getting the flannel hot, there was the smell of the frying bulb, the hot steel casing, the dancing filament, and even the smell of the feeling that I had that the bulb was getting way too hot and that it was going to blow up and get pieces of it stuck into the back of his old shirt and set him on fire.

I never broke it while he was there. I broke it when he wasn’t around. I used to take it out of his toolshed and do a little dance with it. I used to plug it in and dance, making shadows with it in the dark. I would hop around on one leg and swing it over my head. I would hop as high with it as I could go. I would hop so high with it, I mean, I thought I could just

hop away. Once I went too far with it. Once I hopped higher than the cord could go. In the darkness I fell and smashed it when I fell. The cord was all chewed up. When I plugged it back in, it gave me a big jolt. I threw it down and ran away.

I think if it was mine I would have thrown it out. If it was mine, I swear I would have thrown it out. Anyway, he would never let me hold it for him again. Not that he needed me to hold it for him, the way I swung it all over the place, because, I mean, I could never really hold it steady the way he wanted.

I would think of him, when I was in bed, working. The man was a pro.

Well, he could change to a bigger one if he had to, if it got too dark. I think he could probably always change around to one of the brighter ones. If he used one of the larger ones, I think he could maybe really see something, but he used the one he used because when I took it off its nail, that was the one he let me take.

I didn’t know what to do with it now that it was broken. If I left it plugged in, it could start a fire, couldn’t it? If I pulled it out, I could get a big jolt from it again, don’t you think? I could tell her about it and she could decide what to do.

But I did not want to tell her about it.

I waited for him to come.

I wanted to go play with my friends. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything. I had to stay with it. Before he came, I unplugged it. I thought I would get a big jolt from unplugging it, but I didn’t get one. Now I could put it away and make believe that it was broken on its own.

But I didn’t put it away.

He went right to it. He picked it right up. He was dressed up. Without even putting his old shirt on or anything, or even asking me anything, he just picked it up. I kept waiting for him to ask me something. But he didn’t. He just kept looking at it in his hands. Then he went and plugged it in. If there was any life at all left in it, if it gave him a big jolt when he plugged it in, I couldn’t tell by looking at his face.

Well, it didn't work when he plugged it in. It didn't work when he changed the bulb. It didn't work when he checked the wiring with a special checker. It didn't work when he took the casing off and put it back on again. Every time he plugged it in again, I waited for it to give him a big jolt. But I couldn't tell by his face.

She called for us to come inside.

But we didn't come.

He sat with it in his lap and I stood there with him. His hands were going at top speed. He wasn't talking except for when he said, "This is just a light."

Well, he fixed it. When it was so dark I couldn't see him working on it, that's when he must have tried something on it that made it work. Anyway, he handed it to me and we stood inside the circle it made. I still thought I was going to get a big jolt. But I did not get one. I just held the light so that I could see his face. He said, "Hold it for me. Hold it how I showed you."

We worked. She called for me to come inside. But I didn't come. I stayed with him. I held the light. I held it so that he could see something even if I couldn't. **Q**