

# **Harmony House**

**By James M. Weil**

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John was awakened by the sound of his mother on the phone. His half-open eyes strained to see what time it was as he fumbled with the clock. It was past one-thirty. His head pounded from all the pot he smoked the night before, and he felt slightly nauseous as he got out of bed and staggered to the bathroom. “Christ, she never gets off the phone,” he muttered. He splashed some cold water on his face and slipped into a sweatshirt and blue jeans. Perhaps some food would settle his stomach.

Walking into the kitchen, he nodded abruptly to his mother, who was still on the phone, got an egg and a stick of butter out of the refrigerator, some silverware and a plate out of the pantry, and took a frying pan off a big, cast-iron rack that hung over the stove like a medieval instrument of torture. His father had given it to his mother years ago for Mother’s Day.

He cracked the egg on the edge of the counter and let it plop in the pan. The whites turned a milky color, and he pushed two pieces of toast into the toaster. As he was doing all this, he was listening to his mother’s telephone conversation. She was talking in exaggerated tones.

“Well, Nia, now everything has gone to hell. I can’t get a mortgage on our new house until my marital status is defined.” She stood over the sink with the telephone receiver clamped between her shoulder and her ear, rinsing out dirty glasses and placing them in the dishwasher filled with clean ones.

John showed her what she was doing. She snarled at him and shifted her stance.

“No. I can’t get my marital status defined until a settlement agreement is reached.”

There was a pause, and she started pacing the floor. Deep lines engraved her face, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her wiry, red hair was cropped short. She had made an

attempt to brush it down, but it stood up at an angle, pointing toward the back of her head. John chuckled. She reminded him of a rooster.

“We had a settlement agreement but Dick took the divorce papers to his idiot lawyer and everything got screwed up.”

John listened to the conversation with disgust. You’d think she would have thought of something new to say instead of the same old shit over and over again.

His egg was almost ready, and he slipped his spatula underneath it. It didn’t slip. The egg stuck to the frying pan and broke. It was bleeding yoke rapidly, and he attempted to save it from becoming a rubbery, unpalatable catastrophe by flipping it over on its sunny side. He lifted the wounded egg out of the pan and let it slide onto his toast.

Taking his plate over to the table, he sat down to eat. His mother finally got off the phone and sat down next to him.

“What behooves you to get up?” she asked.

“I got hungry,” he said, stabbing at the egg with his knife. “What’s new?” he asked between bites.

“I went to church this morning,” she said cheerfully.

“Oh, yeah? How was it?”

“Oh! It was a very moving service,” she said, her voice filled with affected supplication. “Father Willis gave a sermon on liars and lying and hung a nice guilt trip on us all.”

“Good thing I didn’t go. I probably would have died of shame.”

His mother laughed like it was the funniest thing she ever heard, exposing all her dental work, much to his disdain.

“Too bad your father wasn’t there,” she said. “He might have learned something.”

She laughed even harder at her own statement, and John threw her an angry glance.

“Why do you talk like that? He can’t help the way he is. It’s like he doesn’t know how to be honest.”

“Yeah, well, he’s lied to me too many times. But I won’t worry about it,” she said, taking a deep drag from her cigarette and blowing it in the air in a big, billowy cloud. “He’ll get his.”

“If you keep thinking like that you’re only going to become bitter and hard.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Listen, I know it’s hard on you but don’t you think it’s hard on us all? All you do is make it harder on everyone else, including yourself.”

He got up to pour himself some coffee. He sat down, folded his arms and looked at his mother. She attempted an encouraging smile. “You know something, Ma? You always make a big thing out of nothing,” he said matter-of-factly, as if the answers to all her problems were right in front of her.

Her face turned scarlet.

“You call this nothing?” she bellowed. “You call living on fifty dollars a week nothing?”

“That’s not the point I’m trying to make. If you would look at things rationally, you would make things easier on yourself and everyone around you. So we live in a broken home. It’s probably better this way. Even you know that. Your problem is that you overreact to everything. Just relax and do what is necessary.”

“I do what is necessary,” she yelled. “And who the hell are you to tell me? You make yourself sound like a saint! You’re so lazy you won’t even take out the garbage. I’d like to see you hassle with all these lawyers, bankers and everything else. Jesus Christ! I don’t even know

where the next buck is coming from. I am in debt with my friends, and I don't even have enough money to pay the bills!"

John raised his eyes in contempt.

"Ah, Jesus! You make it sound like every goddamn lawyer, banker and what have you is waiting to tear your throat out. You brood on your revenge, you exaggerate everything, and you do nothing but non-stop complaining. Imagine what it would be like if I did nothing but complain to you. You'd break my neck and stuff me in the trashmasher."

"That would be an improvement," she said, rolling her eyes up into the back of her head so that only the whites of them showed.

If there was one thing he hated, it was when she rolled her eyes at him. He slammed his coffee cup on the table, forgetting it was glass, and stood up abruptly. His chair was pushed back into the stove.

"Fuck it! I've had enough of this shit."

"Good," she said, rolling her eyes at him once more. "You can go live with your father, you little bastard."

She always threatened to send her kids to go live with their father whenever she was angry with them. It was an idle threat because it was doubtful his father would have taken any of them. He put on his coat and slammed out the back door.

"Christ, she is such a bitch," he muttered. "When I'm eighteen I'm out of here."

He sighed and looked up into the sky. Dark clouds were gathering and the air had that funny feel of an impending snowfall.

“All she ever does is pity herself,” he mumbled again. He was finding it more and more difficult to maintain his self-control when he was around his parents. His father wasn’t around much anyway, and he guessed that was more of a blessing than anything else.

He lighted a cigarette and walked across the backyard. The yard was huge—almost three acres. It was shaped like a basin so that during heavy summer rainfalls it filled up with water, becoming a haven for ducks and mosquitos. The mosquitos and weekends spent cutting the lawn he wouldn’t miss. Otherwise he hated the thought of moving out of the house. There was no other like it. An old, English Tudor built in the 1800’s, it seemed to ramble across the property like a freight train. At least he could always find a place to be alone in it. The place he was moving into with his mother and sister was a tiny breadbox less than a half mile from where his father was now living. Why she chose to live so close to his father was beyond him. He guessed it was her way of getting back at him. He remembered when his mother first showed him the house they would be moving into. Although the house was charming, he couldn’t see how he could survive in such close quarters with his mother and sister. His bedroom was the size of a closet.

“You’ll live like a monk,” she said, as if that were a virtue he was looking forward to.

He sat under an old weeping willow tree that bordered the edge of the property and looked at the house. During the summer the tree provided a canopy of foliage under which he could see out but others couldn’t see in. He and his sister used to hide there from his father when they had to do chores or when report cards came. His grades were so bad it looked as though he wouldn’t be graduating from high school on time. At this point both his parents didn’t seem to care, and he was too burned out to care himself. Everyone in his family seemed to be in their own little world of misery.

He couldn't help feel that he was responsible for his parents splitting up. It had been a crazy summer. His mother had been drinking heavier than ever, and he had just starting smoking marijuana. His parents were hanging out with the Rolstons that summer, and he became best friends with their eldest son, Jason, a morose and reclusive sort who'd do just about anything to get high. John could hardly blame him; Mr. Rolston was a manic depressive who had burned through the family fortune in no time flat and was always in and out of mental institutions. His mother couldn't stand the Rolstons.

He remembered the day when he discovered his father was having an affair with Mrs. Rolston. It was one of those blazing-hot, August afternoons that made you feel listless and irritable. Jason had gotten some new pot that was supposed to be great, and John rode his bike over to the Ralston's to smoke some with him.

The Ralston's house was an old, brown-shingled place on the river. It was shaded by tall trees and the property was unkempt and overgrown, giving the place a lonely, abandoned look. When he arrived he saw his father's car parked in the driveway. John went inside. The air felt cool and damp and smelled kind of musty. He looked around but saw nobody. He figured his father had left the car in the driveway and walked to the tennis club. He did that frequently because the traffic was so bad.

Jason usually spent most of the day in his room reading or listening to music, so John went up to have a look. The winding stairs creaked under his feet. He was halfway up them when he heard the sound of his father and Mrs. Rolston making love. He was in shock. He crept back down the stairs and left unnoticed.



When he got home he was on the verge of tears. John knew that his father saw other women, but catching him in the act made all the anger and hurt in him rise to the surface until it lodged in his throat like a hockey puck.

His father didn't come home for dinner that night and his mother was cursing and snarling about him all evening. That was enough. He had had it. It was time to confront his father. Without a word he got on his bicycle and pedaled it in a rage to the Rolston's house. He nearly lost control of his bike as he careered down the long, stone driveway to their house. Slamming his bicycle on the ground, he stomped inside and went through the place from top to bottom, but nobody was home. With his determination deflated, he got back on his bicycle and started for home. It was useless to wait for them to come back, he thought. Besides, his father might even be at home by now.

The evening sun was sinking when he saw Mrs. Rolston's yellow Volvo at the end of the street. "There she is," said John. She was driving fairly fast when he flagged her down and had passed him before she stopped. She backed the car up and rolled down the window.

"Hello, John," she chirped, "I almost—" John cut her off before she could finish.

"Where's my father?" he asked. She was surprised by the tone of his voice and looked frightened.

"He's on his way home," she said. John looked at her frigidly.

"How long has this been going on?"

"How long has what been going on?"

"You know what I mean," said John, spitting through his words. She was very upset, but he spared her no mercy.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, almost crying. "We're good friends."

“Yeah, sure,” said John. “What kind of friends? You’re nothing but a whore!”

He pedaled away as fast as he could. He felt dizzy and his heart was beating wildly in his throat and temples. He could actually feel pressure being released as he rode home. That filthy bitch, he thought. I should have slapped her!

He arrived at home, parked his bike against a tree and went inside. His mother was sitting in the study, nursing a six-pack of beer. She was staring at the wall and the unhappiness in her eyes made him feel sick to his stomach. She turned when he walked in.

“Where the hell were you?” she asked.

“I was looking for Dad.”

“Did you find him?”

“No.”

“That son-of-a-bitch! I cook a nice dinner and he has the unmitigated gall not even to show up,” she said, scrunching up her eyes in anger.

John went upstairs. He wasn’t in the mood to listen to his mother rant and rave about what a bastard his father was. He went into his room and locked the door. He couldn’t help but feel that his father had let him down. He didn’t know how to explain it—it was just a feeling. That empty feeling had always been inside him, but he had never felt it as strongly as he did now. It was like someone had dug a hole in his heart. He knew his father would be furious over what happened, and he felt guilty about it suddenly. If news of what happened got back to his mother, his parents would surely be through. He felt he was to blame. His father was going to kill him. Let him, he thought. That son-of-a-bitch had terrorized him long enough. He lay face down on his bed, and then finally drifted off to sleep.

It was after midnight when he awoke, and he wondered if his father was home yet. He left his room to look out the front, hall window for his car. There was no sign of him. He went back to his room, locked the door and turned the stereo on. Music roared through the room. He was beginning to feel less nervous when his father came crashing through the door in his underwear, splintering the lock off the wall. He flew over to the stereo and smashed it on the floor.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” he screamed. His eyes were wild with rage. John was terrified and didn’t say anything. Before he had a chance to react, he felt his father’s fist slamming into the bridge of his nose. He tasted blood in the back of his throat. “Just who the hell do you think you are telling my friends things like that? Jesus Christ! You upset poor Mrs. Rolston with something that isn’t even true!”

John was fuming. He could smell her perfume all over him. His mother yelled for him to come to her bedroom. He walked down the hall with his father stomping at his heels. His mother was lying in bed with a book beside her, and the expression on her face showed that she had been waiting for her husband to come home.

“Don’t you listen to him, John,” she said. “Every bit of what you said is true.”

“It is not!” his father yelled. “All that stupid little ass did was upset a very nice lady.”

“You mean a very nice relationship,” she retorted.

“Bullshit!”

“Then where were you all night? Consoling your trollop?”

“She was very upset,” he said.

John went back to his room. His nose was still bleeding, and his whole face throbbed. His parents continued screaming at each other, and he heard a lot of heavy objects being thrown

around. He hoped his mother wasn't among them. His father finally flew down the stairs and slammed the front door behind him with such force it shook all the windows in the house. He started up his car and roared out of the driveway, squealing his tires.

The next morning, John, his mother and sisters left for Maine to stay with some cousins for the rest of the summer. His mother told him how brave he was for standing up to his father, although he didn't feel any better for it.

When they returned home, they discovered that his father had taken off with Mrs. Rolston to God knows where, leaving his mother without any money and a pile of unpaid bills. Two weeks later his father returned and was living with Mrs. Rolston. Mr. Rolston cracked up again, and Jason tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of his mother's Darvon. He was in a coma. Things got crazier everyday.

John felt a chill. The wind kicked up, whipping the bare branches of the willow tree into his face. The temperature was dropping as the sun went down. The enormous house looked kind of spooky in the purplish dusk. He went back inside, went up to his room, and took a baggie of marijuana out of his desk drawer. He rolled it around in his hands, remembering when he first started smoking pot. It used to be so much fun. Getting high made him laugh uncontrollably, and nothing seemed to matter. But lately smoking pot made him depressed and anxious. Instead of providing an escape it sent him deeper within himself where he was confronted with emotions he couldn't handle.

He opened the bag and put it up to his nose, inhaling the grassy scent of the herb. He wanted to escape desperately. Stuffing the pipe bowl with weed, he lighted a match and inhaled deeply. The smoke expanded in his lungs and he felt lightheaded. He took five or six deep drags and lay on his bed.

After the initial lightheadedness dissipated, he could feel the muscles in his body tightening up. He knew his mind was working against him and that he wasn't going to enjoy being high. Not able to relax, he got up and started pacing the floor. This whole divorce was his fault. He could have confronted his father before going off on Mrs. Rolston. Perhaps his parents could have worked things out. Then maybe Jason wouldn't have tried to commit suicide.

He sat down in the middle of the floor, put his head between his knees, and rocked back and forth in tears. His whole life seemed like a chaotic nightmare without beginning or end. The pain inside him reached monumental proportions, making every muscle in his body constrict so tightly he cried out loud. There was no escape from it. He was enraged at both his parents, but his self-hatred because of his own helplessness surpassed any anger toward his parents. He was friendless, alone and desperately in need of help.

Gradually, the effects of the marijuana wore off, and the muscles in his body began to uncoil. The more desperate he became to escape, the harder it was. Pot just didn't do the trick anymore.

John sat up on his bed, massaged his aching head, and looked around his room. He loved his room and kept it immaculate. The beds were always made and the furniture dusted. He vacuumed once a week and everything had its place. It was the one safe haven in the house where there was harmony and order—but not for long.

On one of the rare visits his father made, he came up to John's room and stood in the doorway, surveying the orderliness John had created with his steely, pale-blue eyes.

“In another month all this will be gone,” his father said, and then he left the room to go talk with his mother.

John was terrified with him. There was no way to tell when the man was going to strike or say something to put him down. The only clue he had was that terrifying, steely look in his eyes. But most of the time there was never any knowing what brought his anger on, and ever since he was a boy he had flinched whenever his father came near.

Night had fallen, and he felt a twinge of hunger. He went downstairs to see how dinner was coming but stopped at the kitchen door. His father was arguing in the kitchen with his mother. They were hurling insults at each other, but none of the epithets were very cutting. That wasn't very unusual; they got so mad at each other that neither of them could think of anything intelligent to say.

He could hear his mother pacing back and forth as she usually did when she was having an argument.

"You bastard!" she said. "You're telling me to be civil. You're so uncivil you won't even help support your kids."

"Oh, don't give me that crap," his father said. "I give you plenty of money. You just spend it all on that goddamn booze."

"Why don't you take a flying fuck at the moon?"

John could imagine her rolling her eyes as she said it. His father laughed—a high-pitched roar tinged with guilt. He used it in situations like this to aggravate her. It did the trick, too.

"Bullshit!" she yelled. Her voice cracked with anger. "You don't give me that much money. I am in debt with my friends because I don't have enough money to pay the bills. You say you don't have enough money to give me more than fifty dollars a week? That's a lie! You make almost twenty times that amount. What do you do, spend it all on your trollop?"

“Listen,” he said. “I pay all the bills around here. The mortgage, the gas bill and the electricity are all paid for by me. You don’t have all that much to pay for.”

“Don’t give me that. I have to buy groceries and pay the gas bill for that cheap chariot that guzzles gas like it’s going out of style while you’re off on ski trips with your trollop.”

“That’s my business,”

“And what about your family? Don’t they matter anymore?”

John leaned against the door. His hand rested on the door knob, and he could feel his cheeks become flushed. He imagined himself bursting into the kitchen and punching his father in the face, throwing him out the door and telling him never to come back again.

He opened the door slowly and stepped inside. His parents stopped arguing and looked at him. He stood there rigidly, without saying a word, and just looked at both his parents.

“I’m sick of you two always arguing and playing games with each other,” he said. His voice was low and quavering with emotion. His parents remained silent, watching him. His fingertips were shaking slightly and his upper lip was raised, like a dog before a fight.

He fixed his gaze on his father. His father’s face twitched slightly, and he shifted his stance nervously. John felt his anger peak, and tears welled up in his eyes and dribbled down his cheeks.

“You bastard,” he said. “Why don’t you just get the fuck out?” His father looked at his son shock, as if he were looking at a completely different person.

His mother came over to John’s side and grimaced at her husband in triumph. John moved away from her and looked at her in disgust. He was not going to get involved in anymore games. He turned his attention back to his father.

His father’s eyes glazed over with anger, and John backed away slightly in fear.

“This is between your mother and me, so why don’t you just stay the hell out of it.”

John stood his ground. Years of anger rose up in him like a tidal wave.

“Like hell it is! I’m sick of your shit. I’m sick of everything, and I just want this bullshit to end. Get the fuck out!” he yelled.

His father moved toward him suddenly. Without thinking, John picked up a heavy, porcelain bowl and heaved it at him as hard as he could. His father ducked, and the bowl shattered against the kitchen counter in a splash of tiny shards. His father lunged at him, but John stepped away and ran to the other side of the kitchen table, picking up a large carving knife on his way. He brandished it in front of him like a street thug. His father stood in front of him breathing heavily.

“You’re fucked up!” he screamed.

Although it was a childish thing for him to say, John knew it was true, and he hated him even more for saying it.

“Yeah? Well, who fucked me up?” asked John.

His father looked as though he wanted to hit him but thought better of it because of the knife his son was holding. His eyes turned red with rage, and he stuttered slightly, as if he were going to deliver one final epithet that would put his son in his place forever.

Instead, he slammed open the kitchen door and went out into the night. It had begun to snow. John stood in the doorway and watched him as he started up his car and disappeared into the snowflakes. He shut the door and went upstairs to pack.