

THE LIVING ROOM SHOW

K A R E N B R O W N

THE LIVING ROOM SHOWS WERE RUMORED TO HAVE STARTED one New Year's Eve. They took place in Doug Brannon's Spanish Mediterranean, in the bowling alley-like living room that held little more than a fireplace at one end, and a pair of long, moss green couches arranged in an L at the other. The band placed two mounted speakers on either side of the fireplace, and Doug and the other guitar players set up their amps, and brought in an array of guitars on chrome stands. The drummer, J.B. Levine, placed his red sparkle Ludwig kit in the middle of it all, and whenever enough people had arrived, or the band members grew bored milling around, or it was just late enough and everyone was drunk enough, they would play.

Margaret Carr told us about the shows, and after accompanying her to one they became a monthly part of our social routine. Margaret is one of my husband, John Rushing's, old friends, a divorced woman with no children, whose own Mediterranean, acquired in the divorce settlement was just beginning to fall into disrepair. The awning in the front had torn, and the pool deck was cracked and discolored with mildew. There were porch lights with broken glass, and a lichen-colored run-off from the roof streaking the exterior of the house. The night of the living room shows was always a Saturday, and it would always start with drinks at Margaret Carr's, our two children entrusted to a babysitter and all but forgotten. We'd sit out by the pool under the frangipani and the fifty-foot high cluster of bamboo and have various Martinis stolen from the menu of one of the newer restaurants. She served them in over-sized plastic Martini glasses tinted different hues, and the success or disaster of the evening was something I associated with the color of my glass.

The night of the last show, a chartreuse night, took place in April, the air thick with blooming jasmine and tangerines rotting in the grass. A cat was

in heat somewhere in the lush overgrowth of Margaret Carr's landscaping, and John decided to have an argument with Margaret Carr's new boyfriend, Manuel, about his mint '85 Corvette. He made an unkind comment, something like, "What would make you want to collect a car like that?" and Manuel, believing the question to be in earnest, began detailing all of the car's special features. He was in his twenties, with dark eyes and a wide mouth and a chiseled torso that strained against the front of his cotton shirt. John gave him one of his looks, part disdain and part feigned shock, and he waved his hand and turned away from him in his chair to ask Margaret where she found him.

"Behind the register at your hair salon? Handing out towels in the country club?"

Margaret flushed, because as usual John was close enough to the truth to make her uncomfortable—she'd told me earlier she met Manuel in the country club entryway holding an application for a waiter position at The Nineteenth Hole. At this point Manuel realized his error and jumped up in anger, and John stayed in his chair with his legs crossed, his pants perfectly creased, sipping from his Martini glass. Margaret stood quickly, and placed her hand on the front of Manuel's shirt, and whispered something in his ear and led him off into the house. Through the open door I could hear her mules clacking on the Saltillo tile, and Manuel's voice, its urgent pitch, fading into the house's depths.

We left for Doug Brannon's around ten-thirty, following Margaret with Manuel in his Corvette. The Mediterranean faced a four-lane street and its grounds, separated from the same street by an ivy-covered wall, took up nearly a city block. The driveway was in the back, and the parking extended to the narrow streets behind the house, where the cars queued up along the curb and snaked through a neighborhood of tiny bungalows and cement block homes. Everyone went in up the driveway, through the back kitchen entrance, and on this night we parked behind a sizable line of cars, and joined a group heading down the sidewalk. We passed the hedge of gardenia and the two Magnolia trees flanking the driveway, the darkness balmy, scented with their flowers, tinged with a nervous excitement that took over everyone as we entered the kitchen.

Doug Brannon's house was built in the twenties of terracotta block covered with heavy stucco. From the outside it was an imposing two-story structure with an arched portico and an odd carved relief of a ship at sea over

one of the windows. The flat, pebbled roof could be accessed from a doorway in one of the upper bedrooms, and it created a porch along the front of the house, where bougainvillea climbed and shed its fuchsia petals all over the front walk. Guests would not see this, approaching at night from the back. Inside, they would remember the plaster walls, painted colors like saffron and squash and clay, and the high ceilings and oak floors, and the living room itself, which was forty feet long and lit by a large crystal chandelier dimmed by a switch near the door. On one wall three arches led to the kitchen, the dining room, and a small alcove, and on the other a bank of windows faced the four-lane street and a major intersection with a light, where the waiting cars, if they had their windows down, would be able to hear the living room show going on.

In the kitchen, people left their bottles of Jack Daniels and Absolut and Sapphire gin, their mixers, unloaded beer into a few coolers of ice on the floor. You didn't know who was there until you went into the living room itself, where the amps were set up, and the guitars waited shining on their stands, and everyone gathered in clusters, or claimed spots on the couches, or if it was crowded moved into the adjoining room that held a large screened television that I imagined Doug watched when he was alone, but on the nights of the shows was never on.

I left John Rushing in the kitchen mixing his drink, and Margaret taking Manuel through the butler door to the dining room on a tour of the house. I stepped up onto the stair landing, and down again, through the archway into the living room that shimmered with people, the chandelier light glinting in the glasses in their hands, off the bottles of beer, the watches and bracelets at their wrists. The stereo music played, and the men's voices were laughing and loud, the women in their circles more calculative, their murmurs focused on lipstick shades, and the attractiveness of shoes. I recognized nearly everyone there, having seen them at the grocery store, or waiting for a table at Bella's, or take-out at the Thai Palace. I knew a few from the afternoon pick up line at St. Mary's school, saw others at one time or another in the mall parking lot, loading their purchases into the back of their SUVs.

I didn't have a drink because I knew John Rushing would bring me one, and I stood by the arched entry waiting for him, when Alicia Hardcastle came up beside me and clung to my arm. The wine in her glass sloshed out onto the wood floor. She wore a sundress and sandals with high, spiky heels that would leave small dents in the wood floor. I didn't know Alicia well, but

when we drank together at fundraisers and private dinners we would become friends for the evening. She had wispy blond hair that always seemed to fall into her face, and narrow, tanned, freckled shoulders. Her husband, Guy, was new to John Rushing's firm, a young attorney with longish hair the color of his wife's, and a kind, gentle manner the others imitated behind his back.

"Listen," she said. She slid her arm around my shoulders and whispered in my ear. "I want to have sex with Doug Brannon."

I looked at her, and widened my eyes.

Alicia bit her lip and appeared desperate, at a loss. "Tonight," she said.

We both looked over at Doug Brannon's microphone, at his aquamarine guitar on its stand, and Doug Brannon himself stepping out from the shadows of the dining room archway. He moved past the cables and leaned forward toward the mike.

"Hey," he said, his voice throaty and amplified. "What about it? Are we ready?" He wore a gray silk shirt and had the disheveled appearance of a boy whose mother hadn't taken him for a haircut. His eyes, even in the shadowy room, shone bright and blue. Around him the other band members appeared and stepped into place, dipped their heads under guitar straps, and made noises on the strings.

"Oh God," Alicia said.

John Rushing came up beside me and handed me a glass, its sides wet from the ice, then moved past me without saying a word. I watched him disappear into the crowd in the adjoining room, where he would probably continue on through the French doors that led to the courtyard, where a fountain ran, and garden torches gave off a bluish, smoky light, and everyone sat in folding chairs or gathered in groups with cigarettes. Alicia still held onto my arm. She brought her wine glass up to her mouth and took a large swallow, her eyes on Doug Brannon, tuning up his guitar.

It was not difficult to find someone you wanted at the living room shows. Once you walked into the house and the band began to play, the rules changed. I cannot say why, or how everyone knew it, but the air became charged, the music absorbed into the plaster walls, into the planks of the floor. It followed you outside into the courtyard and beyond, to the pool, where it became a steady, unnamed urge in your body. Now, as Doug Brannon leaned into the microphone, and the drummer counted out the first song, everyone's head swiveled in his direction.

They were all there for the band. The men shed their suits for faded jeans or khaki shorts and topsiders. They pretended they were young again, with no children or responsibilities, and they eyed the women and joked and bobbed their heads to the music. After the band finished a set the men would call one of the members over and invite them into their groups and tell them they should put out a CD, that their cousin worked at a record company, that they might know of a backer to help them get started. They offered them cigarettes out in the courtyard, brought drinks around from their stock in the kitchen. The band would stand within these groups, with someone's arm draped over their shoulder, and grin awkwardly, even Doug Brannon, whose acquisition of the house was always the object of speculation, who was asked at every show its square footage, how many bedrooms?

The band was more at ease with the women. They dropped their guard and their smiles grew sly. We leaned our bodies into them, grabbed their hands and pulled them down onto the couches, tugged them into corners—the living room alcove, the dining room, where the only light came in from the streetlights outside. Cornered by us the band was always ready to be taken, but only a few of us actually knew the places to suggest. It was not just the band members we ended up with. The other husbands there were potential objects of desire as well, though that was trickier, and didn't occur until near the end of the night, when you lost track of who you came with, when the rooms blurred and you couldn't remember how you got outside.

Margaret Carr and I knew more about the house than anyone else. Knowing the house was like learning Doug Brannon. The rooms downstairs were open and public, where nothing could really happen except whispered exchanges, or hands lingering in places unnoticed in the cover of the crowd. Margaret Carr found the library, a small room with a couch off the dining room, on the ground floor but private enough because of a narrow French door that kept it separate from the rest of the house. There were ceiling-high shelves of Doug Brannon's books, Pascal and Bertrand Russell, Kafka's *The Castle*, a collection of Chekov's stories, Kerouac's *On the Road*, a set of Shakespeare, and a copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* with its original cover. There were the thick American and British Literature anthologies, a survey of Medieval History, books required by the local college for courses Doug must have taken. Scattered in with these I found glossy, hardback books on boats and Arnold Palmer that were probably gifts, and romance paperbacks from the supermarket, which I imagined were left by the women who spent

a weekend with Doug Brannon out by his pool. Sometimes a book would be left on the end table by the lamp—*T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays*, and I liked to sit on the library couch with my drink and read the last page Doug Brannon read, marked with the book flap. Margaret Carr liked to take men into the library in the beginning of the night, when they had just had a few drinks, and she wanted to know how their mouths felt on hers, decide if she wanted anything else to do with them later.

The most private room downstairs was the laundry room that led from the downstairs bath at the foot of the stairs. Most people thought it was a closet, with its simple painted door. Once, on a periwinkle Martini glass night, I took the drummer, J.B., into the laundry room, and even he hadn't known it was there. We set our drinks on top of the dryer, and he pressed me up against the wall to kiss me, his hands roaming under my clothes. J.B. is funny and friendly and wears madras shirts, and is more unlike John Rushing than any man I have ever met. But even now, as he winked, and waved a stick in my direction, I remembered little else of the night except the smell of laundry detergent, and thinking that up close, that would be the smell of Doug Brannon's t-shirts, his khaki pants.

On another night, or maybe the same one, J.B. took me out to the poolroom. This was through the courtyard gate, a part of the house connected to the garage, with its own set of French doors and an awning covered with jasmine, and pots of geraniums on the cement step. At the doors, J.B. produced a key. Inside, amidst the jumble of band equipment—a drum kit and amps and mike stands and cables coiled on the floor, and overturned ashtrays and rows of empty beer cans, he found a couch. The poolroom was dark and silent, and you could pretend no one was outside, treading the grass by the door, or beyond the screened enclosure, lounging in the chaises by the pool. You could lie down and spread out and take off clothing you may or may not find afterwards.

The upstairs was one of the most convenient places to go, but also the least secretive. Almost anyone would see you climbing the stairs off the pass-through archway between the kitchen and the living room, and though there were bathrooms up there it was evident where you were headed with some else's wife or husband. Only two of the bedrooms were furnished, if that mattered to you at all. The stereo music would boom up through the floor, or the band's music, if you were with someone other than the band, which

might be something to experience, if you were lying down on the bare heart of pine floorboards.

I had only been upstairs once, the time I followed John Rushing, who had Margaret Carr by the hand. They went into the guest bedroom, which held two twin beds and a bureau, and had the bare, impersonal tone of a motel room, except for the door to the roof, and the set of long casement windows that faced east and looked out over the pool. I am not sure why I followed them. Maybe I had to see for myself, to watch them together out of curiosity. At the time, I believe I wanted them to know I knew, as if that would make me part of their secret. But we are almost always wrong about what we want.

As the band began to play on the night of the last show, and Alicia Hardcastle held onto my arm, I wondered what she wanted from Doug Brannon. She might have heard from the other wives that he would be seen occasionally playing golf at the club, that from their tables at the Nineteenth Hole they would watch him and not recognize him at first. She would hear he went to the Little Monkey's coffee shop with his paper, picked up his cleaning from Morris Fonte, worked during the day from his house, though no one, really, knew what he did. Outside of his house he could easily be mistaken for the boy in wrinkled khaki pants, ordering his girlfriend a Colosso at the Dairy Joy, and once he stepped from behind the microphone at the living room shows he could mingle with the crowd and safely be overlooked. I could have warned her Doug Brannon knew how to slip in and out of an embrace and leave you untouched by the end of the night. But singing with the band in front of his fireplace, with the guitars' melody reverberating through the room, and the bass coming up through the floor, he handed you something, like a gift you could not resist—part song, part himself.

Doug's band played its own songs. Occasionally, near the end of the night, they might do a request of another artist's music, but this was rare. There were bars and clubs where you could hear "Stranglehold," or Rolling Stones covers, where the front man could pace a stage and pretend to be a rock star. Doug's band's music was so good that no one missed the jolt of a familiar hook, a kind of sixties, psychedelic rock, with melodies that followed jangly guitars, and lyrics inspired by his library's holdings, Kerouac, and *Pensee*, and Eliot's "Quartets." On the night of the last show the band started up and the music invaded conversations. The people in the courtyard, John Rushing among them, moved back into the house and filled the space in the liv-

ing room, bringing the smell of the oil from the torches, the jasmine, their cigarettes. It was so loud no one could speak. They pressed in close and Doug Brannon sang, and Alicia's eyes were on him again.

"I just love him," she said into my ear, and I knew she would find him that night in the crowd and grab hold of his gray silk shirtsleeve and tell him this, that he would smile at her and shake his head, his eyes slit with doubt. It would be somewhere dark and advantageous for her to whisper in his ear, to slide her lips along the curve of his neck. Her husband Guy stepped up beside us, and his arm fell comfortably across Alicia's freckled shoulders, and I moved off into the crowd, where everyone's cologne mingled, and I could smell the lime in their drinks, where I did not have to think about Alicia's misguided love for Doug Brannon.

After a while, I decided to look for Margaret. I wanted to tell her about Alicia, knowing the story was one she would appreciate, and I found her out at the pool in a chaise with Manuel. They were sipping from one of her Martini glasses, brought along with her in the car. No one was outside at the time, and it was a warm, spring night, and the potted tropical plants waved in the breeze and the smell of orange blossom came from across the fence from the neighbor's yard, where the plants grew untended, a dense, jungle-like green.

"Look who's here," Margaret said. She raised her eyebrows at me. Her blouse was all the way unbuttoned, and her feet were bare.

"You know Alicia Hardcastle," I said.

"Why, should I?" Margaret asked.

Manuel looked up at me, drunk, his wide brown eyes glazed, and placed his hand on my bare leg. I stood there and suddenly did not want to say anything. Manuel slid his hand up under my dress, and I stepped back and stared at them both on the chaise.

"Well?" Margaret asked.

And I knew then that Margaret had planned for me to have Manuel. She smiled and winked, her eyes lonely and full of the masked guilt that kept her seeking ways for me to pay back John Rushing, as if I still believed being unfaithful would hurt him. I glanced down at Manuel, the comb marks etched in his hair gel, his white shirt front stretched across his chest, and I felt the emptiness of the four martinis, the carved out place the vodka inhabited, vast and sorrowful. So I shook my head and turned from them, pretending to need another drink. I walked back across the lawn, but didn't yet want to

join the groups gathered in the courtyard. Instead I turned and wandered around the caged pool, up along the vine-covered chain-link fence. I heard Margaret calling me back, and Manuel piping in, "I'm sorry," as if that had anything to do with it. I could just make out Doug Brannon's neighbor's house through the orange trees and fern, a small bungalow, its windows unlit. One night a few weeks before I'd come out here alone and been startled by a woman's voice, thin with age, very close to me on the other side of the fence. "The jacaranda is blooming early this year," she'd said.

I'd stepped back. In the dark I could just make out the shape of her, small and hunched in a striped housedress.

"I can smell it especially strong out here," she said. "Are you one of the party-goers?"

I told her I was, and then I felt the need to apologize for the noise. "Is it very loud?" I asked her.

"It keeps me up," she said. "But I don't mind being awake at night."

She explained to me that she was nearly blind, that the night time was a solace—quiet and cool, filled with the smell of flowers. Her name was Esther. She was ninety years old. I had wondered what to say to this admission, but then she told me that it wasn't especially advantageous to live so long. "The body goes," she said. "A little at a time. The strangest things stay with you. Like the smell of the jacaranda."

That night I'd heard her take tentative steps through the fern and twigs that comprised her yard, and she was gone. I'd questioned whether I had even spoken to her at all, so complete had been her disappearance. Now I stood by the fence and listened. I heard small, furtive movements—fruit rats gnawing on fallen citrus, lizards slipping through over-turned clay pots, along the bleeding heart threaded through the chain-link. I waited a long time, summoning the old woman back, but she did not appear, so I left the yard and made my way back to the courtyard. The band had stopped playing, and I watched the groups of people for Alicia and Doug Brannon and I didn't see them, and I realized, with a stab of something close to jealousy, that he had given in to her, maybe her eyes, her admission of love. He had taken her somewhere, though I didn't know where until later, when I saw Guy Hardcastle coming down the stairs.

He was pale, and expressionless. His sandy blond hair covered his eyes. I assumed he had seen them go up, or someone else had seen them. I imagined it might have been John Rushing, who approached by Guy looking for

his wife had not been able to resist. He would have pulled him aside, and spared nothing, and Guy would not have believed him.

"Go look for yourself then," John would have said, dismissing him, moving off to a group of friends to tell the story, just as I had.

And Guy had gone up the stairs to the first door, which was the guest room, and not found anything. Perhaps he heard her voice, that certain quality it held during sex, soft and full of secrets, or something else that moved him forward to the door that led to Doug Brannon's room. The hall light was off, and he could have opened the door and they might not have seen him standing there, watching them. No one followed him down. He came clutching the banister, and brushed past me heading into the living room to mingle with the others.

And eventually the band started back up for one last set. It had to have been near two a.m. I had seen Alicia come down, carrying her shoes, but I hadn't waited to see Doug round the stair landing. Guy Hardcastle, whose face remained white, who held a glass of iced-down scotch, stood in a small group of people he didn't know in the TV room, and nodded at things they said, his eyes underneath his blond hair scanning the crowd for Alicia. As the band began to play she went right up to him, her dress rumpled, her cheeks flushed. Guy looked down at her and asked her a question. I never found out what it was. The music and Doug Brannon's voice filled the rooms, spilled out into the courtyard and drifted up past the billows of cigarette smoke, and Guy turned from Alicia and put his fist through one of the French door panes. If you didn't see it happen, you wouldn't have known anything had, and because of the crowd, and the music, no one reacted save one or two people out in the courtyard, whose faces exaggerated shock, and who moved through the doorway and walked off, laughing.

Most had already headed into the living room once the band began, but there were a few who had lingered, who noticed the blood, and Alicia bending over him trying to squelch it with the bottom of Guy's shirt. I stood near the back of the group that slowly gathered around Guy, who decided to take him out into the courtyard because he was making a mess, the blood pooling and seeping into the cracks of the wood floor. Outside, in the light of the garden torches Guy's face appeared ghostly. There was some confusion about what to do, with Guy assuring everyone he was fine, and trying to walk away, and Alicia pulling him back. A call had gone up for a doctor, but surprisingly there had been no one there that night to answer. At some point

Guy must have weakened and sat down, and I noticed, before I went back inside, that several people had cell phones out to call the paramedics, but no one among them knew the address. They all had operators on the line, telling them different things—"Doug Brannon's house," someone said. "The Spanish Mediterranean on the corner of—what was it?"

I looked at Guy's face, the hopelessness in it, and knew what he must have seen in Doug Brannon's bedroom. The casement windows would have been opened, and he may have even felt the night air from where he stood at the door with the bed in full view. He may have watched for a while, the lights around the roofline shining in and lighting up their clothes on the floor, their bodies moving on the bed, their faces and the expressions on them. It had been winter when I had followed Margaret and John up to the guest room. The windows had been closed, and the room was filled with the scent of Margaret's perfume. That time, the hallway light had been on, and I had opened the door and seen them clearly—John holding her back on the bed, looking like the posed and passionate movie stars in old films. Margaret had lifted her head off the pillow and squinted into the glare of the hall light without recognition, but John turned and saw me and gave me the same look of irritation he'd give one of our children if they walked in on him in the bathroom, and told me to shut the door.

I don't know what my face had registered. I did as he told me and moved on to the next door, which was Doug Brannon's room, and I'd gone inside and lay down on Doug Brannon's bed. The band played downstairs, and gradually my eyes adjusted to the roofline lighting and I could see the bureau top littered with things—scraps of paper with song lyrics, matchbooks from different bars, golf tees, and a photo of Doug and two other people who may have been his brother and sister, who may have been anyone, standing on a pebbled driveway, their shoulders touching. Behind them was an old, restored truck, its paint job shining in the sun, and behind that an ivy-covered house with mountains rising up around it, shrouded in mist. Doug's face looked out of the photograph at the person holding the camera, or at someone else beyond that, with his blue eyes and the same expression he wore when he performed in his living room, and glanced up and caught you looking at him.

Now downstairs the music filled everything. Margaret Carr sat on one of the couches, her shirt only half-buttoned. Her eyelids were heavy, and every so often she would nod off. Beside her a woman had passed out sitting up-

right, her head tipped at an awkward angle. I stood in the alcove beside Manuel and he took my hand, and I didn't say anything because it was two or three drinks later, and his hand felt warm and callused at the creases, and his shoulder smelled like starch, and John Rushing had moved in beside Margaret on the couch, and she was laughing and looking around the room for something, maybe us together in the alcove, maybe the small group gathered around Guy in the courtyard.

The bass thudded up and down the plaster walls, the crystals on the chandelier shook, and somewhere the ambulance maneuvered between rows of cars parked on the narrow neighborhood streets, while Guy Hardcastle bled onto the courtyard tiles, and Alicia knelt beside him, her hand over her mouth, disbelieving the amount of blood, the whiteness of his skin. The courtyard fountain bubbled, the stone angel looked on, its face fixed, impervious. I would never know what it had been like, if what she wanted from Doug Brannon could be found in a night. What we did—that groping under clothing in the laundry room, those hands, cold from clutching iced glasses, seeking skin on the poolroom couch, had nothing, really, to do with love.

Manuel threaded his fingers in mine. As I stood there I didn't know it would be the last living room show, and I watched Doug sing, the rueful chandelier light moving across his face, his voice straining with the yearning that shifted everyone's mood, their heads turning, eyes riveted. I realized that I loved Doug Brannon, my own version of him—the one with the women out at the pool, the one whose golf clubs leaned against a wall in the garage, who had read Eliot, whose ashtray in the poolroom overflowed with cigarette butts, whose aquamarine guitar was just then slung across hips. I saw, too, that he would have a life in which I would never play a part. "The body goes," Esther had said. Somehow we must know that the source of all our longing is death. I watched Doug Brannon sing with the force of the band behind him, felt the song on his voice move through me and wrench my heart. I imagine now that was all I ever needed from him.