

# **Five Years for Heartache**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

A free sample

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She spoke drug and always would. Gerald knew this a month ago on his and Amanda's first day together in the fallout shelter. As he opened a can of cannellini beans, her irritability broke through again with one of those long sighs. The sigh turned to a groan behind the tarp wall which separated them. And whenever that Oxycontin of hers finally runs out, Amanda will continue speaking drug.

She had brought two large bottles of the pills in her purse, Gerald recalled while pouring the beans in a pot. Amanda clung to her stash even while on the job, canvassing houses for market surveys. On that lucky day the little brunette appeared on his doorstep, wearing all the conventional makeup, Gerald's dream came true. He remembered gazing over Amanda's head, seeing the flash and rising mushroom cloud, and ushering the pretty, suited stranger inside.

But thank-you's ended quickly once he sealed them both in his cramped basement shelter. She hated Gerald's guts and toenails. The pedantic instructions posted everywhere irked her the most. That, and Gerald breathing too loudly. Amanda, having grown up spoiled, even despised the selection of food shelved on every patch of wall—the vast variety which kept them alive and hearty. The drug spoke every hour through Amanda's wrecked wiring. And soon, the pills would run out and make things worse through withdrawal symptoms. The first aid manual said so.

Gerald suspected she had started cutting the pills in half to stretch the stash. As long as Amanda didn't cut his throat, he'd stay optimistic. He had no idea what she'd do, or had already done, to herself beyond the tarp on “her” side of the shelter.

Despite having built the shelter and meticulously stocked it himself, Gerald agreed to stay on “his” side, the half with the primitive toilet. He never adapted to the subtle stink, especially with the vent on her side. He'd have licked Amanda's armpits up there on the doorstep. But after a month of apparent PMS, she loathed him for life.

Today she sat and waited, and paced and waited. Finally, Amanda hauled the tarp aside. The sound of Gerald's Zippo lighting the candle stove must have provoked her. Gerald knew the recipe down to quarter teaspoons of spices, but he checked the instructions anyway.

“Shouldn't you get out there and fix that car?” Amanda asked.

Gerald raised his eyebrows and feigned a smile.

“Yes,” he said, “right after this 280 calories.”

Amanda grunted and threw the curtain closed. It would have draped back by itself if simply let go. She walked in circles, and Gerald sat on his flattened cot to watch the lone candle flame wobble. He saw a list of breathing exercises on the wall and followed it.

Later, he ate the first square of the day. *Three squares and a chair*, the shelter manuals all boasted. And *munching for music*. Gerald then brushed, rinsed, and flossed in accordance with the dentists' handbook.

Gerald donned the hazmat suit in the stairway leading to his scorched lawn. The narrow concrete

walls and metal doors formed a crude airlock. It kept out most of the radioactive fallout. Before turning on the air cylinder, he depleted the suit's natural oxygen talking to Amanda.

“I feel close, Amanda,” his voice boomed from the red helmet. “If I can find some gasoline, the car might go. We'll get out soon, I hope.”

“You hope?” Amanda said. “Gerry, you fucking suck, Ok? You suck at cars. You suck at everything manly. You've worked on that same goddamn car for a month. Hurry the hell up.”

“Gerald, not Gerry.”

She marched over and slammed the big iron door. Even through the suit, Gerald heard her angrily clanging the locks in place. He knew how to bypass them, and Amanda knew it too. But something told him she'd soon find a way to poison his food. He'd have to work faster today before the air ran out—by following the engine and tire maintenance instructions exactly, of course.