Everything Stuck to Him
by Raymond Carver

She’s in Milan for Christmas and wants to know what it was like when she was a kid.
Tell me, she says. Tell me what it was like when I was a kid. She sips Strega, waits, eyes him closely.
She is a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom.
That was a long time ago. That was twenty years ago, he says.
You can remember, she says. Go on.
What do you want to hear? he says. What else can I tell you? I could tell you about something that happened when you were a baby. It involves you, he says. But only in a minor way.
Tell me, she says. But first fix us another so you won’t have to stop in the middle.
He comes back from the kitchen with drinks, settles into his chair, begins.
They were kids themselves, but they were crazy in love, this eighteen-year-old boy and this seventeen-year-old girl when they married. Not all that long afterwards they had a daughter.
The baby came along in late November during a cold spell that just happened to coincide with the peak of the waterfowl season. The boy loved to hunt, you see. That’s part of it.
The boy and girl, husband and wife, father and mother, they lived in a little apartment under a dentist’s office.
Each night they cleaned the dentist’s place upstairs in exchange for rent and utilities. In summer they were expected to maintain the lawn and the flowers. In winter the boy shoveled snow and spread rock salt on the walks. Are you still with me? Are you getting the picture?
I am, she says.
That’s good, he says. So one day the dentist finds out they were using his letterhead for their personal correspondence. But that’s another story.
He gets up from his chair and looks out the window. He sees the tile rooftops and the snow that is falling steadily on them. Tell the story, she says.
The two kids were very much in love. On top of this they had great ambitions. They were always talking about the things they were going to do and the places they were going to go.
Now the boy and girl slept in the bedroom, and the baby slept in the living room. Let’s say the baby was about three months old and had only just begun to sleep through the night.
On this one Saturday night after finishing his work upstairs, the boy stayed in the dentist’s office and called an old hunting friend of his father’s.
Carl, he said when the man picked up the receiver, believe it or not, I’m a father. Congratulations, Carl said. How is the wife?
She’s fine, Carl. Everybody’s fine.
That’s good, Carl said, I’m glad to hear it. But if you called about going hunting, I’ll tell you something. The geese are flying to beat the band. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many. Got five today. Going back in the morning, so come along if you want to.
I want to, the boy said.
The boy hung up the telephone and went downstairs to tell the girl. She watched while he laid out his things. Hunting coat, shell bag, boots, socks, hunting cap, long underwear, pump gun. What time will you be back?
the girl said.
Probably around noon, the boy said. But maybe as late as six o’clock. Would that be too late?
It’s fine, she said. The baby and I will get along fine. You go and have some fun. When you get back, we’ll dress the baby up and go visit Sally.
The boy said, Sounds like a good idea.
Sally was the girl’s sister. She was striking. I don’t know if you’ve seen pictures of her. The boy was a little in love with Sally, just as he was a little in love with Betsy, who was another sister the girl had. The boy used to say to the girl, If we weren’t married, I could go for Sally.
What about Betsy? the girl used to say. I hate to admit it, but I truly feel she’s better looking than Sally and me. What about Betsy?
Betsy too, the boy used to say.

After dinner he turned up the furnace and helped her bathe the baby. He marveled again at the infant who had half his features and half the girl’s. He powdered the tiny body. He powdered between fingers and toes. He emptied the bath into the sink and went upstairs to check the air. It was overcast and cold. The grass, what there was of it, looked like canvas, stiff and gray under the street light.

Snow lay in piles beside the walk. A car went by. He heard sand under the tires. He let himself imagine what it might be like tomorrow, geese beating the air over his head, shotgun plunging against his shoulder. Then he locked the door and went downstairs.

In bed they tried to read. But both of them fell asleep, she first, letting the magazine sink to the quilt. It was the baby’s cries that woke him up.

The light was on out there, and the girl was standing next to the crib rocking the baby in her arms. She put the baby down, turned out the light, and came back to the bed.

He heard the baby cry. This time the girl stayed where she was. The baby cried fitfully and stopped. The boy listened, then dozed. But the baby’s cries woke him again. The living-room light was burning. He sat up and turned on the lamp.

I don’t know what’s wrong, the girl said, walking back and forth with the baby. I’ve changed her and fed her, but she keeps on crying. I’m so tired I’m afraid I might drop her.

You come back to bed, the boy said. I’ll hold her for a while.

He got up and took the baby, and the girl went to lie down again.

Just rock her for a few minutes, the girl said from the bedroom. Maybe she’ll go back to sleep.

The boy sat on the sofa and held the baby. He jiggled it in his lap until he got its eyes to close, his own eyes closing right along. He rose carefully and put the baby back in the crib.

It was a quarter to four, which gave him forty-five minutes. He crawled into bed and dropped off. But a few minutes later the baby was crying again, and this time they both got up.

The boy did a terrible thing. He swore.

For God’s sake, what’s the matter with you? the girl said to the boy. Maybe she’s sick or something. Maybe we shouldn’t have given her the bath.

The boy picked up the baby. The baby kicked its feet and smiled.

Look, the boy said, I really don’t think there’s anything wrong with her.

How do you know that? the girl said. Here, let me have her. I know I ought to give her something, but I don’t know what it’s supposed to be.

The girl put the baby down again. The boy and the girl looked at the baby, and the baby began to cry.

The girl took the baby. Baby, baby, the girl said with tears in her eyes.

Probably it’s something on her stomach, the boy said.

The girl didn’t answer. She went on rocking the baby, paying no attention to the boy.

The boy waited. He went to the kitchen and put on water for coffee. He drew his woolen underwear on over his shorts and T-shirt, buttoned up, then got into his clothes.

What are you doing? the girl said.

Going hunting, the boy said.

I don’t think you should, she said. I don’t want to be left alone with her like this.

Carl’s planning on me going, the boy said. We’ve planned it.

I don’t care about what you and Carl planned, she said. And I don’t care about Carl, either. I don’t even know Carl.

You’ve met Carl before. You know him, the boy said. What do you mean you don’t know him?

That’s not the point and you know it, the girl said.

What is the point? the boy said. The point is we planned it.

The girl said, I’m your wife. This is your baby. She’s sick or something. Look at her. Why else is she crying? I know you’re my wife, the boy said.

The girl began to cry. She put the baby back in the crib. But the baby started up again. The girl dried her eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown and picked the baby up.

The boy laced up his boots. He put on his shirt, his sweater, his coat. The kettle whistled on the stove in the kitchen.

You’re going to have to choose, the girl said. Carl or us. I mean it.

What do you mean? the boy said.
You heard what I said, the girl said. If you want a family, you’re going to have to choose.
They stared at each other. Then the boy took up his hunting gear and went outside. He started the car. He went around to the car windows and, making a job of it, scraped away the ice.
He turned off the motor and sat awhile. And then he got out and went back inside.
The living-room light was on. The girl was asleep on the bed. The baby was asleep beside her.
The boy took off his boots. Then he took off everything else. In his socks and his long underwear, he sat on the sofa and read the Sunday paper.
The girl and the baby slept on. After a while, the boy went to the kitchen and started frying bacon.
The girl came out in her robe and put her arms around the boy.
Hey, the boy said.
I’m sorry, the girl said.
It’s all right, the boy said.
I didn’t mean to snap like that.
It was my fault, he said.
You sit down, the girl said. How does a waffle sound with bacon?
Sounds great, the boy said.
She took the bacon out of the pan and made waffle batter. He sat at the table and watched her move around the kitchen.
She put a plate in front of him with bacon, a waffle. He spread butter and poured syrup. But when he started to cut, he turned the plate into his lap.
I don’t believe it, he said, jumping up from the table.
If you could see yourself, the girl said.
The boy looked down at himself, at everything stuck to his underwear.
I was starved, he said, shaking his head.
You were starved, she said, laughing.
He peeled off the woolen underwear and threw it at the bathroom door. Then he opened his arms and the girl moved into them.
We won’t fight anymore, she said.
The boy said, We won’t.
He gets up from his chair and refills their glasses.
That’s it, he says. End of story. I admit it’s not much of a story.
I was interested, she says.
He shrugs and carries his drink over to the window. It’s dark now but still snowing.
Things change, he says. I don’t know how they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to.
Yes, that’s true, only——But she does not finish what she started.
She drops the subject. In the window’s reflection he sees her study her nails. Then she raises her head.
Speaking brightly, she asks if he is going to show her the city, after all.
He says, Put your boots on and let’s go.
But he stays by the window, remembering. They had laughed. They had leaned on each other and laughed until the tears had come, while everything else—the cold, and where he’d go in it—was outside, for a while anyway.

Making Meanings: Everything Stuck to Him
1. What was your emotional reaction to “Everything Stuck to Him”? 
2. What is the effect of not giving names to the main characters? Why do you think Carver uses the terms boy and girl rather than man and woman or father and mother? 
3. How would you describe the main conflict between the husband and wife in the inner story? 
4. What thoughts and emotions do you think the boy experienced as he “sat awhile” in the car? 
5. The man, having told the tale of the boy and the girl, says that “things change.” What has changed since the time of the inner story? What has the man discovered? 
6. Near the end of the story, after the man offers statements about change, the woman replies “Yes, that’s true, only——” She does not finish. What do you think she intended to say, and why did she stop? 
7. The story’s title refers to an incident in the inner story. Explain how the title also refers to something much more important to the man.