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THE ROANOKE REVIEW

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CONTENTS

FICTION

Sean Lovelace, <i>Self-Paralysis*</i>	8
Valerie Cumming, <i>What the Night was Worth*</i>	50
J. Annie McLeod, <i>A La Cart</i>	71
Robin Beery, <i>I Hope You Hated it as Much as I Did</i>	99
JoeAnn Hart, <i>Floating Girl</i>	116
Ron McFarland, <i>The Booksigning</i>	129
Murray Farrish, <i>Charlie's Pagoda*</i>	142
June Spence, <i>Born Blue</i>	162

NON-FICTION

Bill Roorbach, <i>My Life as a Move</i>	25
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POETRY

Jim Dewitt, <i>Dial Wrong Number For Assistance</i>	7
Charles Wright, <i>Nostalgia III</i>	24
David Citino, <i>Poem Fifty Years After Everything</i>	42
<i>Controversy of the Bells</i>	44
<i>Dylan Sings for Pope at Eucharistic Congress</i>	45
Mary Agnes Dalrymple, <i>Woman Ironing</i>	47
John Davis, <i>Diamond Cherry Bells</i>	66
<i>Appalachian Trail</i>	68
Giovanni Malito, <i>Mendicants</i>	69
Linda Parsons Marion, <i>First Home</i>	93
<i>Wanderlust</i>	96
Susan Johnson, <i>National Geographic</i>	98
Naton Leslie, <i>Jewelry</i>	112
Sheryl Nelms, <i>My Kitchen</i>	114

Frederick Zydek, <i>Dark Bird</i>	127
Kathleen Glasgow, <i>Fourth of July</i>	128
Jeff Daniel Marion, <i>78 RPM</i>	139
<i>Cherokee Lake Drawdown</i>	140
Elisabeth Ward, <i>Arm in Arm</i>	158
Jesse Graves, <i>Taylor's Grove</i>	159
<i>West of Raleigh</i>	160

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES	169
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* 2001 SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNERS

J. ANNIE MCLEOD

A La Cart

WHAT CAUGHT this hero's eye about Kate was this: the first day of dot-com training she had a run in her stockings and knew it. That day the Head Tech had given me the task of taking roll. Even though I fashioned myself a demiceleb after five years on off-off-Broadway and all of six published poems behind my name—Gordon Meyer (alias Poet Boy)—I'd lost the previous three gigs I'd had since moving from New York to Chicago, and as a result my job was as an underemployed administrative assistant in the fast-paced world of image editing. So while I pretended to think Deep Thoughts, tapping my bottom lip with a pencil, I really watched Kate twist in her seat, tug at that impossibly short skirt, and try to cross her legs slow so that the long, white run snaking its way down her tormentingly beautiful thigh could not be seen. And as I ticked Kate's name off my legal pad, I noted three things beyond the run: the way she said "Here" as if it was a really rich word, a "liquescent" or "recamier"; how she looked at me with a flick of her eyes that spoke literate and dirty at once; and that little hyphen wedged between her two last names, Anderson-Lott.

*

Now a woman with a hyphen means business—tell her she's got a perky little ass and find yourself smacked with a law suit. I wanted to know who'd invented that insidious dash, two millimeters of black ink that said no longer for sale. It's a hex, the hyphen, quells

a guy's imagination before he even gets to the color of her camisole beneath that smart and sexy semi-suit for ladder-climbing girls on the go (or so the ads say). Kate might as well have thrown a circle with a slash around it for good measure since that's really what it meant to our non-existent—but what I wanted to believe to be our fully potential—relationship: no smoking, no pets, no shirt, no shoes, no service, and, most important of all, no doing the nasty in the supply closet over lunch (a closet only I had the key to).

Obviously, I had finally come to the moment in mid-forty-something-life where I was about to abandon the rule book and begin operating on appetite alone. I should have just ponied up the dough for a phallic Teutonic sportscar or joined the Hair Club for Men or looked longer and harder at the sorority girls doing their rock-a-thons for crippled kids in Hyde Park—in other words, I should have passed into my looming majority with resignation and a wistful sense of what might have been. But I couldn't quite get over Kate that first day, how the run in her hose let loose a little bit more of her skin each time she changed her legs, a maddening chink in that sober armor she probably called her "daywear."

Once the Head Tech had dispensed with the paperwork, it was time to show the new ankle-biters the Hardware. "Chop, chop," he said, hitting one hand against the palm of the other. "Grab your complimentary, full-fat donut, and let's go see the Hardware." My boss was very proud of his technocracy and his witticisms; both led him to perform gestures and phrases worthy of an Iowa drag queen on a slow night. Since this bunch of hires was to be our new troupe of Image Editors, the Techno Dynamo spent the next half hour wowing the crowd as he demonstrated the kinds of pictures his computers could generate and how the ankle-biters were to manipulate, describe, classify, and sort them for textbook publishers.

"Descriptors are the key, people," my boss said with a washed and pressed smile so white I half expected the new crew might ask for his ancient Chinese secret. "You must screw on your descriptive cap before you come to work in the morning. The adjectives you choose will determine whether a prospective editor can locate the image he most wants. If he needs a picture of a white Westie

terrier and you happen to describe such an image as a sandy-colored Carin canine, well, that's a few thousand dollars down the drain." At this, the Head Tech snapped his fingers and showed his palm—empty, like he'd just made something important disappear. "It's up to each and every one of you to think like a writer, boys and girls, and ask yourself, 'How would a writer describe this picture?' Walk around in Papa Hemingway's shoes."

While my boss performed his Quipping Queer, Kate superbly stationed herself with the bad leg against a chair, one hand cupping an elbow, two fingers to her cheek. Every inch of Kate was buffed and smoothed and polished and powdered, each accent cut from glossy, brown leather—the Brazilian variety like so much dark roast. On the surface she had the sex appeal of one of those old "I can bring home the bacon" ads, a sleek sex that was smart and strong and seemed far beyond my rough-around-the-edges ken. My hard-boiled, big-city heart couldn't take the Katharine Hepburn look of her just then—statuesque and self-assured, one eyebrow cocked as if to say, "We women don't want advantages, and we don't want prejudices."

I narrowed my eyes and lifted my jaw, trying for a Spencer Tracy sort of face to match Kate's Hepburn. I expected her to think me a chump, a worn Marlboro Man in desperate need of a shave and an hour pumping iron in the gym every day. Ever since I stopped elbowing my way into publisher's parties on the upper East side, low-maintenance grooming was my motto. Much to my boss's chagrin, I dressed for work in Levi's and flannel button-downs. And like any pretty-boy, tobacco lobbyist's paste-up, I smoked—although I wasn't brand loyal, which made me a traitor to the race, I suppose. Depending upon my neighborhood store's specials, I alternated feeling alive with pleasure, cool and mild, coming a long way (baby), or arriving where the freedom was. Even that fateful first morning it was obvious that Kate was no smoker; she wasn't rough around the eyes, willing the clock to click forward to the consecrated coffee break.

Four months later, after Kate was history and I spent my days soaking in Mr. Bubble with one hand around the neck of a bottle of Jim Beam and the other flicking cigarette after cigarette

into the toilet, I wished I could stop smoking. It was the only time in my life, that wish. I didn't want to be hooked on anything.

But that morning, I made sure to say my first words to Kate. She'd been sitting at one of the Hardware Stations all afternoon, slipping the mouse around as if she'd been born with it attached to her wrist, and even after eight hours of digital downloading and adjective acrobatics, her hair was impeccable, not one fetching strand having worked its way free from her tightly coiled roll.

I ambled over behind Kate's left shoulder. She smelled like cloves.

"So what do you do here again?" she asked, eyes glued to the computer. I had a nagging sense she was following the lightning-fast undercurrent of her own thoughts while giving me this show of a conversation. This woman was going to be a problem for my fragile bravado: she was treating me as if I was a bore, a duffis, a dim-witted proto-guy in matters testosteronical.

"I'm the underdressed, underpaid, and overworked administrative assistant who, in his increasingly spare spare time, writes underrated poetry," I said. To my surprise, she laughed, a sheer luxury, as if I'd sunk myself in a vat of warm pudding. "But the boss would think that too long and too biased. And you?"

"Me? Oh, that's easy. 'Embittered, embroiled *émigré* with a penchant for Emily Dickinson,' if we're talking poets."

"*Émigré*? If you're Brazilian or Chinese, you know we'll have to fire you on the spot. You'll steal our secrets and set up a multi-million-dollar sweatshop with a total quality staff that grinds out glittering descriptors for half the pay. Fess up."

"I'm Canadian," she said and laughed again. Heaven. "Toronto. And, no, I don't speak French. Hey, are you carding me? You know they're pink now, not green. They're an eyesore in the wallet."

"No, no, that's not nec'sary, ma'am," I said, trying my best Southern drawl, a small something from my undistinguished acting days in the off-off Broadway debut of *Sam's Saloon*. "Just try not to speed in these parts from now on, ya 'ear?"

"You're funny," Kate said, and I felt looked at—really looked at—and summed up. I wanted desperately to ask my rating (did I

make above a 7.0?), but I choked. Instead, I grinned at her like an experimental subject in an amphetamine efficacy study and said she'd better get back to work before the boss man caught us gabbing and threw both our asses out on the street.

But Kate was a married woman. That's the stumbling block I kept coming to as I pretended to monitor the other ankle-biters. What was the script? You couldn't talk about the shortcomings of past lovers because, face it, she had a permanent one installed in her bedroom every night, offering it up regardless of how good or bad the poor bastard might be. You couldn't talk future, not unless you wanted to drive yourself crazy, and you couldn't make the kind of saccharine-sweet plans I imagined at the onset of any infatuation: walks in the rain; picnics at sunset; Ferris wheel rides and clouds of cotton candy. I was stumped, but I knew I had to get her alone, test her out, see how far I could get with my laviscious palaver before she clued in to my real hopes and left me like a little bit of human wreckage bobbing in her wake.

*

Two weeks later, I got my lucky break: an after hours party at PJ's, the bar of choice for us technitrons. By then I'd checked out Kate's file. She was younger than me by over a decade but already had an MBA from Hopkins, had worked for Ford, Xerox, and the Big Dog, Microsoft. Her references were stunning, V.P.'s and the like, and she'd spent the last few years in D.C. making gobs as a systems analyst. I wondered what the hell she was doing at Technitronix Electronix; she couldn't have been suckered by the Techno Dynamo's half-page ad in the *Trib*: "The wave of the future. Image, information, virtuosity. Job skills to take you through the next millennium." What I hadn't discovered was what the elusive Mr. Lott (Mr. Anderson, Mr. Anderson-Lott?) did for a living—the vitae provided no vitals.

Usually a whole gaggle of us bopped down to PJ's every Thursday for complimentary wangs 'n pang from six to eight—wings so hot the smell alone stripped the paneling from the walls followed by the cheapest champagne chaser this side of the Mason-

Dixon. But this time only four of us were raring to go: me; an airhead named Moxie ("cute" was her descriptor of choice); Tom Marsh, a friend from work (the beer and pool kind of friend, not the tears at two a.m. kind—a man of sober descriptors, "sharp, serviceable hunting knife"); and, of all people, Kate Anderson-Lott. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

We got the best table in the place, too, farthest from the wafting wang buffet. Moxie sat beside Tom, and I planted myself next to Kate. After our first pitcher of Bud (the turpentine champagne didn't hold for more than one round), Moxie cranked up the charm, telling us about her sister's gala wedding the previous weekend: beautiful bride, lovely service, garter belt caught in the groom's teeth—the usual.

"When my brother got married," Tom said, "his wife passed out at the altar. We could've sent the tape to 'Funniest Home Videos' and won a million, I bet, but his wife said no way. She was really upset, cried most of the rest of the night, actually." Tom shook his head, a paragon of sympathy.

"I feel so sorry for her," said Kate. "Putting on a wedding is a nightmare, and you want it to be perfect. That was probably the worst moment of her life."

I was desperate to hear her talk about her own wedding, her husband—he either had to be so handsome he looked clipped from an Armani ad or so rich he rivaled Midas. Those were the only two excuses I could accept for Kate having married herself off, and I figured since she was bottom-feeding with us at the dot-shop, the former had to be the case, which didn't bode well for me. I was what Moxie would label cute but too short to be Armani and certainly not rich. I didn't have much else to offer but my wit, an unstable commodity at best. An utter and shameless cretin, I asked, "Was your wedding perfect?"

"It was," she said simply. Eyes closed, she took a drink from her glass, her throat long and exposed, and I wanted to peel away her daywear right there.

Tom turned to Moxie, filled her glass, and trotted out rote conversation—the drudgery of image editing, impending economic crisis, last night's "Seinfeld" re-run where the gang started calling

each other by insipid childhood nicknames—*id est*, the sort of conversation that really means "Fuck me?"

"You know," Kate said, swirling the beer in her glass, a gesture for the camera, I was sure, because no one swirls her beer at home. "My father gave me a nickname when I was a teenager—used to call me Ballbuster, said I was so headstrong I'd crush anybody who got in my way." If Kate had been a tomboy, I could've seen her as a Joe or a Scout, but never a Ballbuster; it smacked of bodysuited ninja femi-Nazis. "But the crazy thing is that it stuck. Buster, I mean. My whole family still calls me Buster. I haven't heard the name Kate from my father's lips for, I don't know, fifteen years."

Here was my chance. Don't blow it, Poet Boy, this woman's married. That's Married, capital "M"—white wedding, rings 'n roses, til-death-do-us-part. Look at her and think "dishwasher." Think "china pattern," "heating pad," "Saturday night prime time." Do not, under any circumstances, think "bent over the drier in my kitchen." But then I looked at her, a sideways glance that always caught my best angle (an old Robert Redford trick), and thought "sunlight in her hair at six a.m." Fool.

"You're really not a Buster," I said.

"I guess I'll take that as a compliment."

"Well, if you're taking compliments, I should have said you're a helluva lot more Busty than Buster." Once out of my mouth I remembered the murder-suicide mantra of my zit-popping, monkey-spanking youth: either "Now I'll have to kill her" or "Now I'll have to kill myself."

Kate blushed—a magnificent blush that crept slowly from her neck to her cheeks, roses up a trellis. I thought maybe I'd expire.

"I'm sorry," I said, swallowing sand. "I guess this is the moment where I should pull something from my lexicon of lightbulb-screwing-in jokes."

"Or just screwing jokes," she said, setting her almost-empty glass down with an "I've got to get out of here" click.

Her sculpted cheekbones and honeyed eyes, the impeccable lipstick half-moon she left on the glass like the seal on a valentine—it was all too much for me. She was going to go back to Armani,

snuggle down under their quilted comforter and doze on his meaty chest, the purple light from "The Late Show" playing across her face like twilight motes on still water. This woman was killing me.

Tom and Moxie sensed that the ions had changed from "hanging out" to "ready to go." Absorbed in a *Talk* magazine conversation (worst-dressed-best-dressed-who-do-you-think-will-get-an-Oscar), Tom barely looked away from Moxie's mouth as he reached over to help her with her coat. I couldn't count on any help from him to extend our time at PJ's; Tom was concentrating on not upsetting the delicate balance between "come on upstairs" and "get away from me you asshole."

So—astonished at the strength of my own voice, its playful undertone cut with a note of rakish danger—I leaned as close to Kate's face as I could manage without swooning and asked, "Does Busty ever go out?" I was proud of myself for sounding a bit like Sean Connery, complete with the tiniest trace of a highland lilt. "Would she have dinner with me?"

Every nerve in me stopped short for a second, suspended synapses.

Kate said, "I don't do that." But her eyes said something else, something about dark rooms and heavy breathing. "What even made you think of it? How could you think I would?"

"I think about it all the time, every day." I had hoped to sound villainous and handsome, reckless and heroic, the lead in a romantic novel whose dark impulses kept him in bank, bottle, and bed, but I had too much of my heart in the words, and she'd heard it. A strangled sound in her throat, and Kate was gone—chocolate-colored purse, gold-fob keyring, double-breasted jacket and all. Moxie and Tom followed, not noticing when I said I'd walk instead of sharing their cab. After all, they were the two who woke up sexed and satiated while I woke to faltering fantasies after a night of hugging my pillow. That morning when my dog, Toby, stuck his wet snout in my face, I told myself I'd just made the stupidest move of my life.

*

Of course by lunch I'd rethought the situation; it's amazing what a scalding shower, a dose of cheap coffee, and a few cigarettes can do for the male ego. She was the one who had left, after all, sprinting out of PJ's as if she had the devil on her heels. I just had to play it cool, virtually ignore her, and then, like the sitcoms, she'd be all over me—a lion on lunchmeat.

So for the next week I kept out of Kate's way, kept to typing my boss's mind-numbing memos and making his "deli-wich" runs (the Head Tech called Stan's Corner Deli "Stanwiches" just like he called our office supplier the "A&P" and inevitably turned my Gordon to "Gordy"). On coffee breaks and over lunch I huddled with the smokers, a renegade group my boss had labeled the Branded and one Kate avoided like Mormons at the door. After work I was the first one down the elevator; I stopped going to Thursday night PJ's. Kate had no opportunity to get my attention.

But she did anyway. She posed for me. At first I wasn't sure because she didn't strike centerfold shots, no hands-behind-the-head or open-thighed sitting postures, no juts of the hip. But they were there, nonetheless—subtle, aesthetic combinations worthy of the highest, high-toned women.

One afternoon, the late sun shining thick and orange-yellow through our thirty-third story windows, I was cataloging a new shipment of Raw Materials—a.k.a. high-school textbooks—and Kate walked over and stood opposite me, her blue eyes fixed on the mammoth Individual Progress Chart (IPC) updated daily in day-glo colors. As in gradeschool, the IPC was designed to show which members of the team were outdoing the rest, and Kate's work, of course, was lime green: the *crème de la crème*, the people the Head Tech called "Key Limes." As Kate admired her own neon glory, she crossed one ankle behind the other, put a hand on her hip, parted her lips the slightest bit. Her amber earrings shone like chips of gold; her hair gleamed; she had a pencil twisted in the bun, a touch of carelessness that screamed forethought. And then, as if on cue, she turned away from me and drew out a compact. My face caught in the tiny mirror, Kate slid on her lipstick slow, a color like copper. She would have been Lord Leighton's "Flaming June" if I had reached over and unpinned her hair; her ochres and yellows

and gold made her glow, made me hot. But even though every one of these perfectly executed stances shattered me to where I had to lock myself up in the supply closet and jack off like a pubertal teen, I didn't say a word to her, didn't even look her in the face. I had to know if she would cross the line, if she'd cave, or if she'd simply tease me 'til I spontaneously combusted.

Then, just three weeks shy of our conversation at PJ's, my doorbell rang in the middle of the night. In frayed sweats and a sour shirt, eyelid-heavy and cable-weary, I opened the door and, for once in my life, was struck dumb. Kate was on my front porch, eyes moving side-to-side, toe tapping, arms crossed, a guilty broad in a black suit right out of a 40s gumshoe script—all she needed was a wide hat and a string of pearls.

"Hey, handsome," she said. "How about sparing a girl a cup of coffee."

I must have looked like one of those put-upon cartoon characters—Wiley Coyote, Elmer Fudd, Sylvester the Cat, my eyes and mouth all "O."

"It's just a cup of coffee. You don't have to look like I'm out to steal your pork-roast."

"Sure," I said, regaining my highly practiced composure. I mean, why wouldn't she show up at my door? What else could the starved girl do?

Toby came up behind me, a big brown ball of fur, and that gave Kate a way to gain the threshold.

"Hey there, you," she said, Toby all tail, thumping the carpet like a bass drum player in a Sousa band. "Aren't you the cutest boy in the whole world? What are you doing with a dumb lug like this guy?"

Toby just panted, all agreement, while Kate scratched behind his ears. She knew dogs, at least she knew how and where to scratch. It made me wonder if she knew boys the same way.

"I'll get that coffee," I said, switching off the tube on my way to the kitchen to brew two cups of java. I could hear her oohing over Toby, calling him a big old bear, and I stood there, smelling Folgers and telling myself that Kate had her fabulous ass nestled in my couch, like the only thing I could do was state the

obvious. It was almost midnight; Kate was dressed to kill and yet not out on the town with Armani—Busty with her "luteous" hair and "lucent" eyes and lips of the kind we read about in Romantic poetry.

Buck up, Poet Boy, I told myself. Let's get to work on your libidinous extra-credit project.

"Isn't your husband going to wonder where you're at?" I asked, not exactly the line of a card-carrying ladykiller but one that got us to the business at hand.

"Oh, he thinks I'm in D.C. with the computer chumps. I've been moonlighting as a consultant to supplement my dismal pay," she said, keeping her eyes on Toby, a small smile on those rose-bloom lips. "I was supposed to come back in the wee hours, but I was able to get an early flight and thought I'd play a little hooky." So I'd managed to get Kate to turn her wheels to the when and the where. Rule one of affairs—plan first, bed second.

Then she raised her head, and with eyes clean as rain, she fixed me. "I can't have sex with you," she said. "That's my bottom line. I couldn't live with myself if I slept with you."

I didn't know exactly what she meant, but I also knew she hadn't shown up here, Armani unawares, ebony suit and superficial coffee requests to tell me that there weren't any options. "So what does that leave from the line up?" I asked. Bird on a wire, every part of me hummed.

She put down her coffee and spread her hands, a Madonna in black. "Everything else."

*

The trouble began the fifth night we were together, Kate on her way back from one of her extra gigs inside the beltway. After weeks of freezing showers every time Kate was within a hundred-mile radius, I'd finally gotten past the mind-messing mystery of her clothed and coveted physique to her contours and hollows, the sloping curve of her hip and the crescent moon at the base of her throat. Those first four nights, as soon as she'd cross my doorstep, I'd be airborne, hurtling Kateward, peeling off her suit to try and

make my way past her terribly lacy bra and panties. And even though we always kept a few shreds of frilly silk between us, we'd manage to melt the paint and incinerate the rug with our everything-but-sex oohs and ahs—all, mind you, with no equipment save our hands and tongues.

After these elongated bouts of what most people consider foreplay, we'd drink coffee and tease Toby and talk. Although Kate never did tell me much about Armani (I found out he was a Philosophy professor at Northwestern who, when cajoled, made a mean palak paneer), she clued me in on their sex life. It sucked. She called him her best friend, her partner, her psychic soulmate, but she made it clear he was no firecracker.

"Never marry for lust," she warned me. "If you do, you won't stay married."

I asked her what it meant to marry for love and work in lust on the side, a la cart.

"Honey," she said, "men have been doing it for years."

I told her if I was to play the part of Kept Boy, I expected the advantages of such: a condo, a new wardrobe, expensive but tasteful rocks—diamonds, rubies, sapphires.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. And she did.

In fact, Kate got more and more aggressive with the gifts after each round of slap and tickle—ridiculously domestic gifts, deserving of a housewife or teenager. It started with a David Lodge novel (she said I'd "find him funny"). Then a shirt ("Something that's not plaid"), a tea-kettle (for Ginseng; she claimed it made her smarter), a sweater she'd knitted on the commuter train between D.C. and their previous home in Virginia (a size too small for Armani, not exactly what I wanted to hear), a self-dubbed tape of her favorite Annie Lennox, a small teddy bear, a loaf of homemade banana bread.

There were cards too—a Shoebox Greeting on my windshield, a Far Side taped to the kitchen door of my house, an Avalon Romantics tucked between the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *Complete Idiot's Guide to Making Millions on the Internet* on my work desk: "Whatever our souls are made of, yours and mine are the same" (Emily Brontë). I didn't know what to do in response

but bite her neck whenever she managed to squeeze me into her schedule; I certainly didn't reciprocate with roses and poesy, muck myself up in an inevitable trainwreck.

But that fifth night, after I'd licked the unclothed parts of her stem to stern, we went into the kitchen to make coffee, and without even waiting for the afterglow to fade from our scandalous cheeks, Kate said she'd made a decision, her voice tight and clipped, her eyes on anything but me. "I want to make love with you, Gordon. I've decided I want us to sleep together."

Make love. Gordon. Notwithstanding the warning sign of her weighty lingo, all I could think about was the fact that Kate was offering up the thing I wanted with the greed of a kid on the snow-kissed morning of his eighth Christmas: both the in and the out of her, the bushel and the peck.

"What about the bottom line?" I asked. "What happened, did it move when I wasn't paying attention? Did someone cover it over with concrete?" I couldn't figure this out—Kate had gone over some edge, walked up to a cliff and jumped, and now she wanted to take me with her: no bungee cord, no parachute, no Superman swoop, just the whistle of the wind before an excessively gory death.

"I know what I said, and I meant it when I said it," she said. "But I don't want to have affairs, Gordon. That's not how I want to live. I want to have *the* affair. I want you to be the one affair of my life."

If I'm honest in the telling, then I must admit that for a moment before I saddled up for the fatal ride, part of me wanted to rein in the horses and relegate my chaps and spurs to the back of the closet. Despite my unreconstructed, brutish exterior, I felt things—and climbing into the sack had always, in the past, raised the stake of those feelings, raised them to a screeching pitch. But here was Kate, half-naked on my kitchen counter, resplendent in the track lighting that on most women would have looked hard enough to crack glass. Holding onto Kate's waist and looking up into those moonlit eyes, I thought, "If you fuck this woman, you will never be rid of her."

So what did I do, savant that I am? I gravity-checked over

the precipice with the kind of reckless abandonment of those long-haired, body-pierced boys in revved-up sodapop commercials.

*

Let's just say our first time was as close as this Poet Boy has been to Paradise. Granted, my chicken legs aren't exactly the stuff of Mel Gibson or Antonio Banderas—and no real-life carnal deed is without its nagging worry over flaccid and flabby body parts—but after my tour on off-off Broadway, I knew all about smoke and mirrors. I made sure the scene was set: soft music, indirect lighting, a bottle of nice wine instead of the rotgut I usually quaffed. I opted for a theme of scented candles and celestial, second-skin satin instead of police cuffs and black leather; somehow, I couldn't see svelte Kate as an S&M party girl.

That first time really was a bit like the movies. Kate played the part to perfection; she showed up in nothing but a slip under her raincoat and her hair in a Harlequinesque knot. We barely made it through half a glass of wine before we were tearing at each other, Kate making soulful moans worthy of any Hollywood diva, Kathleen Turner or Anne Bancroft. Like many a midnight fantasy, I bent Kate over my drier and, hard-humping, took the clip from her hair, spreading her yellow mane over her bare back and shoulders. Strong as moonshine, her scent of ham and sticky buns made me think right then that I could have died a happy man.

Afterward, we pretzeled ourselves on my couch, toe-on-toe, knee-to-knee, her fingers in my hair, my head on her chest listening to the thump and rumble beneath her ribcage.

"I hate to fly," she said out of the clear blue as if answering someone else's question. "I always have. When I was a kid, we hit wild turbulence coming back from Disneyland. It felt like the world was shifting away from me."

After what we'd done on my drier, I thought this line a wee bit canned, like the chit-chat at the end of a business lunch that turns to the semi-personal. "So you came here tonight for turbulence comfort," I said, my voice with the careless edge of a Lovelace.

She drew in a quick breath, and I could feel the pump of her blood speed up. "No. I was thinking that's how I feel right now. The world shifting."

Even though it was four in the morning, the time drunks and lovers tell truths they hide in the high afternoon sky, I was not about to let this woman talk love. Kate shifted, pubic hair tickling my stomach, and I knew I'd better say something to keep her from saying things I'd regret when we weren't sweaty and buff-bare. So I closed my eyes, settled my nose under her left breast, and decided to tell her a story. "For a while," I began, "I worked as a flunky correspondent for an insipid morning talk show, back in New York. This was before my serious acting days when I was willing to sell myself for a little Time Warner."

Kate settled her hips into the folds of the couch as if willing to be humored out of earth-moving, sky-falling kind of talk. "The producers had me ricocheting all over the country to interview talking parrots and a guy who'd made a replica of Stonehenge with old cars—you know, human interest for the submoronic. The sleep was miserable, the sex nonexistent, and, well, not to sound too high-flown, but the travails were what an English professor might call 'manifold.' But, you know, it paid my unspeakably expensive rent."

Laughing, Kate's breast jiggled against my face—a good sign. She didn't seem moony or mawkish anymore. I hadn't thought about this incident for years, and it was a bit foggy, like looking through a streaked windowpane for the mailman to bring the next poetry rejection. "One Friday night I was heading home on a red-eye from Memphis, and we circled New York until we ran out of gas."

"We touched down in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to tank up and stuff ourselves with overpriced breakfast items, and then we reapproached Kennedy during what had to be the worst gale on record, or that's how it felt to me with the plane taking dips and slides like a monster rollercoaster." I could almost taste the memory—stale eggs and the metallic bite of fear.

"The roar of the engines nearly drowned out the screams of my fellow passengers on the last of several attempts to land, and

we finally touched down—hard,” I said, slapping Kate’s thigh and then using my hand to demonstrate the landing across her stomach. “We bounced once, touched down, bounced again, yawed to the right for what seemed like forever, and finally hit the ground before skidding off the runway into a clump of blue spruce.” Kate’s gorgeous right breast doubled as the spruce.

“Really?” Kate said, her heartbeat sounding as if Bonanza’s galloping hoard was in there. My own blood was pushing along a little faster than usual; I remembered with Windex clarity the utter vulnerability I felt at that moment, a beetle on its back with a three-year-old about to pull its legs off.

“For a few minutes,” I said, “there was nothing but silence. You could hear the tick of the airplane, and then my crazed fellow passengers broke into applause as if the whole thing had been some sort of thrill ride.” But while the idiots had cheered, I’d sat silent, relearning how to breathe.

Trying for John Wayne, I drawled, “And ever since that fateful day, little missy, I guess I’ve become a little hardened to the ways of weather and death.” What I didn’t tell Kate was that I’d tendered my resignation to the show’s producers that same afternoon and that I hadn’t flown since, not once.

But Kate wasn’t laughing anymore, just breathing deep breaths that made her chest and stomach rise and fall like slow waves on a lake. “Oh Gordon,” she said, putting her hand to my face. This time she didn’t say anything soppy or sappy; she just took my face in her hands and kissed me, a soft kiss that let me taste a trace of her, the tip of her tongue but no more. It was the kind of kiss that shot right through, turned every nerve inside out, left me suspended and aching. We spent the rest of that night, really the first few hours of the morning, making out on my threadbare couch, and I relearned what it’s like to kiss a woman, to seek out that kiss, and to let the kiss speak for itself, not as a prelude but as a means and an end.

That night for the first time I didn’t feel like a robber baron, copping a prized piece of ass from another man’s wife. I felt a kind of teeth-rattling, knee-knocking, head-spinning something both dangerous and transcendent—something belonging to gods

and devils. And I wanted to light candles and censers, mount a horseshoe on the lintel, stack lucky pennies skyward, and run outside to watch for a falling star upon which to wish that Kate was real, that this would last, that she would stay here in my house forever and kiss me with her whisper kisses. As we touched each other, she hummed and laughed and spoke quiet words, and listening to her voice do dips and flips, it was a sound completely physical, completely mystical. I dissolved into that voice, its liquid cadence, and knew in that moment that the world was shifting away from me.

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After that night I started slipping. From the High Irony Files, I started pursuing Kate with thrice the alacrity with which she’d pursued me. One Sunday I spent hours in a string of badly lit, second-hand bookstores hunting up a copy of the out-of-print cookbook that was my personal bible for French bread. When I gave it to Kate, I gushed that I’d let her in on all my trade secrets, that her next entertaining venture would give Julia Childs a run for her money. Still stoking fantasy’s furnace, the following week I left a single rose on Kate’s desk and spied from the other side of the IPC as she smiled and slipped it into a styrofoam cup. During coffee breaks, I taped terrible lust poems to Kate’s computer, little black screams. And I planned a surprise, candlelight dinner when Kate was due for one of our romp sessions (the whole shebang wound up in Toby’s dish when Armani cancelled his out-of-town meeting at the last minute).

But even though I ate my heart out with each of these movieland gimmicks, Kate started acting preoccupied whenever my ship slipped past her telescope. At work, she gave me half-smiles. At my place, her body started thinking instead of moving, as if calculating its best pose. After sex, when Kate emerged from the bathroom, she didn’t linger anymore, a sumptuous Siren, curls snaking every which way. She was all business—her hair a glossy helmet, face powdered and clothes snapping.

To make matters worse, my mistress muse proved a fickle

bitch. It wasn't the usual problems I'd had viz moi and the great American poem—a lack of luck, inspiration, and cachet. No, I was mused-out, my muse had gone on holiday. I'd look at a picture of a dolphin and think, "Dolphin." With concentration, I'd think, "Grey." My descriptors weren't worth a wooden nickel—I couldn't get past morose monosyllables: black, dull, night, sad, cold, stale, dark, dead. Dr. Seuss for the suicidal.

Bottle-blond Sisyphus that I am, however, I continued to awaken each morning with dumb resolve to roll my rock up that hill. But come bedtime, said rock having again tumbled meward and conked me cold, I would wonder why Kate was having a change of heart, why her Boy Toy had lost his gift for ribald repartee. Granted, my hard-hitting days of the more than occasional tippie and snifter had canceled some key brain cells, but I still had enough grey matter to recognize the symptomology as textbook: Kate had won the prize, and now she was bored, on the lookout for a new contest. The more furious my pursuit, the louder I chanted "What doesn't kill me makes me (fill in your own punchline)," the wider Kate yawned, fiddling with a lock of her hair, thinking about whether she should go out on a limb and buy the red pumps or stick with the classic black heels. And as my sleep debt grew and work fell apart, I finally acknowledged that, without even showing up for an audition, I was starring in my own version of "Honey, I Shrunk my Self-Esteem!"

One Saturday morning, Kate playing wife, me without anyone to lob the sexual softball to, I decided to buy groceries for what was quickly becoming a bread-and-water kitchen best kept by monasteries. Meandering through the parking lot, I drove past a beauty supply store, and in a fit of passion, told myself that I should stop for a bottle of sexy shampoo that didn't smell like the standard apricot-and-chlorine grocery-store fare. Despite the chance that I might seem a little light in the loafers, I had a hankerin' for a signature scent, something that might grab Kate's attention. A rhinoFaustian bargain.

Picking up bottle after bottle from the rows of luminescent liquid, I twisted off the caps to see if anything would induce lathery orgasms. Eyes closed tight, sniffing each bottle as if it

might contain essence of nectar or spirit of ambrosia, I found synthetic green apple, old-lady rose, fruitloop grape—smells that might tempt a sex-starved octogenarian or a Lolita-like preteen.

"May I help you?" The salesgirl was a Buffy sort—sans vampire—and I could practically imagine her thought. *Why is this dipshit sniffing the product like an Herbal Essence ad?*

"I'm trying to find the shampoo my girlfriend uses," I said, putting on my aw-shucks, you-caught-me grin. "I thought I'd pick up a bottle for her, but I don't remember what she told me it was. I think it smells like cloves."

Buffy clicked her mail-order nails through the merchandise until she came up with a contender. "Try this," she said, then bounced back down the aisle.

I loosened the cap, and smelling something more akin to curry than cloves, I got teary-eyed because this wasn't going to end well. Let's face it: I would never pick up Kate's beauty paraphernalia while I ran the household errands. We weren't going to wind up old friends, either, bending an elbow at the local bar while we yukked it up over past times. Even the more likely scenario—a same-time-next-year version that would involve yelling and sex—wouldn't get me the things I really wanted from Kate: the ease and comfort of constancy. The small routines and shared habits.

Finally my boss asked me into his office for what I knew would be the classic "we've got to let you go" lecture. I didn't want to wind up so depressed that I became a statistic—"Washed-Up Actor Electrocuted by Sequencing Gaskets, Technitronix Electronics. Head Tech Says, 'Gordy Never Did Understand the Hardware'"—so to avoid an ignoble end, I met the fated meeting with whatever shreds of dignity I could muster. For one, I shaved. For two, I sought out the last clean button-down in the closet. For three, the moment he called me "Gordy," I fully intended to trot out my compendium of extrafunny boss jokes involving bars, beer, babes, and all matter of compromising positions with various flora and fauna.

But before I could squeeze out a peep, the Head Tech said, "Well, Gordy, you've lost your sense of style. Your *joie de vivre*." He sighed a perfectly executed, we're-so-disappointed sigh. "I don't

suppose you have anything on that pretty little mind of yours you'd like to share?"

Arching his eyebrows and steepling his fingers under his bottom lip, I couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't worked a venue more in keeping with his taste for the dramatic: school counselor, say, or minister to the masses. I mean, that scene would have suited his style: pomp, circumstance, and choir boys galore.

"Well, let's see," I began. I could have lied and said it was the grass stains on my brand-new clamdiggers. Or an embarrassing case of dry scalp. Or those persistent telemarketers who sell mildew for basements. But I was running on whatever comes after empty, so I just said, "I guess I've lost my way with words."

"No need to tell me *that*, Gordy my boy," he said, waving his hand at me as he would a gnat. "You had real promise, you know. Given half the chance, you and me might have outperformed that Gates fellow and his poorly decked out *entourage*." Eyes to the ceiling, my ex-boss was saying a prayer for my long-lost descriptive touch. "Ah, well," he said, "*c'est la vie*."

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I suppose even the gravely myopic would have seen the next episode coming a mile off, but now that I could add the designation "unemployed" in my arsenal of self-destruction, I was sure Kate would rise to the occasion and give me the sorely needed sexing I deserved. While I closed my office door and packed the proverbial box, I vowed that I wasn't going to be the kind of guy who winds up in contemporary short fiction as the stock-issue wash-up living on what's left after meltdown in a small, underfurnished apartment close to the train tracks. You'd be surprised by what the human mind can conceive in the warm, dark privacy of middle-management office space: Hollywood fame, celebrity authorship, Ken-doll pecks, notorious wealth.

By the afternoon break my office was as clean as a slaughterhouse floor after hose-down, and I was semi-delirious with a new-found, over-inflated sense of what I would become—just call me Kenny, I thought. And while Tom was slipping his hand on

Moxie's ass as they headed for their three-fifteen colloquy with the Branded, I cornered Kate in what had become our usual spot between the water cooler and the supply closet, breathless with the anticipation of telling her how my luck was about to change.

"You are a piece of work," I whispered into her ear as she poured herself a cup of healthnut hooch. "But I'm afraid I don't have the key anymore. I got the shaft this morning." I slipped my hand underneath her suit jacket, raising hairs.

"Oh, Gordon, I'm sorry," she said, her tone a little too much like I just said I'd scraped my knee.

"Make it up to me," I said, kissing her in the broad light of the corporate fluorescents. "Come see me tonight."

"Gordon, don't," she said. "I don't think I can make it."

"Kate," I said, "you've got to come over. Tell him you're getting your hair done or your nails buffed." At that moment there was nothing I needed more than Kate—even if she just wanted to eat pizza and watch a Warner Classic, I needed the smooth feel of her hair against my cheek, the weight of her head against my chest. "Look, I'm no longer a Technitronix lackey. I want to celebrate. I want to talk about what we're going to do now."

"What we're going to do now?" she said, her voice incredulous, a mom taking away the keys from an accident-prone juvenile. "Please, Gordon, I'm going to keep working here, and you're going to get some other secretarial job. We both have bills to pay. We both have commitments."

Kate blushed that blush of hers, a Victorian heroine. "I've been thinking about this for a while, and I really just think it's best that we stop this," she said. She stepped away from me, against the light streaming in through the windows. "It's gotten all out of hand. There's too much at stake."

At the time, I didn't know whether to believe she was too much in love with me to risk the danger of an abduction to Mexico or if she was one of those femme fatal seductresses with steel tits and a vagina dentata. What I did know was that I was about to be sucked under the quicksand, breathing what air I could manage through the straw that had once been my throat. How could I tell her that each time she left me, I'd ramble around my stark, one-and

story ranch style, picking up objects she'd touched as if they might carry a ghost lipmark or thumbprint, her smell everywhere, Kate nowhere. How could I say that I loved her, that I loved her hard and would have loved her long had I been able?

A slab of tenderized meat, pounded and flat, I said, "Kate," stopped. I needed to say something—anything that might trick her into revealing what she really felt about me.

"Why did you and your husband move to Chicago, anyway?" I asked. "Why'd you give up the goldmine at Microsoft?"

Her body backlit from the late afternoon sun, Kate looked staged and silhouetted, a marquee. "Brian got a tenure-track offer," she said and shrugged. "You simply don't turn those things down."

In other words, Kate was married and wasn't the type for permanent side menus, just main courses. Our little affair was limited to surreptitious squeeze sessions because Kate would never dance the tango or cry at the opera or sample escargot with a guy like me, no self-styled *d'accompagnement* of *crêpes au fromage* but something more akin to a yard of truckstop hashbrowns with heart-stopping chicken gravy. No matter how much chemistry zapped the ozone when I touched her, it would never be me who helped her out of a taxi, placed my hand at the small of her back and walked with her through a crowded hotel lobby. It would never be me who chopped the onions for her french onion soup, who hung her Christmas lights on the tree, or who told her aunt off-color jokes at family functions. And, of course, it would never be me who rocked her at night, smoothed back her hair and watched her face lose its lines to sleep.

Just then my old, grey heart broke into a million pieces, and I had no idea what I was going to do now.