

Love in America

by

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For my Mom, with love.

And for S.M. – “We could’ve had such a damned good time together.”

“Isn’t it pretty to think so.” –Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*.

Gertrude Stein – “Romance is everything.”

Abstract

This thesis is a selection of chapters and chapter excerpts from my short novel *Love in America*, a tale of two unlikely young lovers in present day America. They are only deemed “unlikely,” however, through the eyes of Ben Rose, a recently returned Iraq War veteran who finishes college in western NY on the GI Bill and heads west for Hollywood to try his hand at acting. After burning through limited funds, partying with a group of aspiring talents and other transients at the Chateau de Soleil, a temporary house for actors in LA, Ben must return home. Intermittently, Ben reflects on his past relationships, particularly concerning his German girlfriend whom he met during his time stationed in Germany while in the Army and whose scathing cultural critiques of America and her own beliefs in an “open relationship” and the freedom of European casual sex leave Ben freshly burned and bitter in his own country. Although the idea of living as an expatriate writer had always appealed to Ben since he read Hemingway, an adventurous, spirited American love affair swings his way in Samantha Kelly, a 22-year-old seemingly mainstream *Harry Potter*-aficionado whose coquettish attractiveness allures Ben to the point of obsession. Although a girl already spoken for, Samantha admires Ben and his risqué self-published novel. However, as an older veteran who never had much luck with such sociable American girls as Samantha, Ben is not surprised when she drifts out of contact with him. As he develops a modest writing career by finally publishing legitimately, Ben meets with Samantha once more after a small reading in Manhattan for a night of romance in the city.

Introduction

Writing for me has always been, for better or worse, an act of romance, and also, ironically, an act of patriotism. Whether I am attempting a childhood memoir or a gritty military saga, I seem to be wont to believe in some kind of prevailing uniquely American romantic arc. Perhaps this is to compensate for the fact that I never really had much luck with romance, particularly in my own country. Moreover, the books I came of age with as a writer usually involved some aspect of bittersweet romance, with characters just coming out of some great war, returning home or becoming European expatriates and redefining American literature with novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *On the Road*. In the former, Ernest Hemingway captures the carefree expatriates through a narrator impotent from war and hopelessly and subtly in love. And in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* Sal finally rediscovers the impetuous and storied Dean Moriarty bumbling along homeless, deflected from a beautiful yet irresponsible version of the American dream. Stylistically, these books were among the first that made literature seem accessible and imitable for me as a writer. In my own era now, and as a veteran, I found myself wanting to write something quintessential to the American literary experience of surviving a war and falling in love. Just as Kerouac depicts his love for the open road and Hemingway crafts the bittersweet romance of the veteran Jake Barnes and the impetuous Brett, I too set out to write a novel of such American adventure and romance. Yet in my comedic short novel, I believe I have broken from the unclaimed tradition of a bittersweet

ending. For I believe my work to be a true romantic comedy that takes place in America, features a veteran, but actually ends happily.

When I graduated from high school, my cousin gave me *On the Road* as a gift, knowing I wanted to be a writer. My parents often cite this as one of the key factors in my academic decline my sophomore year in college. The fervent prose of Kerouac opened up new worlds of late 1950s counterculture, Americana, and the art of weaving crazy autobiographical experiences into a work of fiction. Hence I was off and writing, and in my first years on my own at college, all I could think about was writing a book about a character I had created based on a sudden obsession with Westerns -- a cowboy in modern times on his arduous search for America.

Given my impulsive youthful nature at the time and my desire for experience, I ended up joining the Army at the cusp of Operation Iraqi Freedom, serving in Iraq with the First Armored Division. Upon my honorable discharge and return, I finished college and finally travelled cross-country to California to take an acting class. After a month and a half of acting and partying, my car broke down and I quickly burned through my money and ultimately had to come home, yet I gained some experiences and met some characters – enough to eventually start me on a novel reaching for the personal and political revelations which I think memorably imbue *On the Road*. For in this novel, Kerouac employs what he calls “spontaneous prose,” which is basically improvisational like jazz. The main characters live crazily among a litany of secondary characters which are almost like passing scenery yet nevertheless memorable. For example,

towards the end of the novel, when Sal and Dean and their crew are in Mexico looking for girls, they meet the newborn son of one of their friends and Dean gives a speech:

He is the prettiest child I have ever seen. Look into those eyes....I want you to par-ti-cu-lar-ly to see the eyes of this little Mexican boy who is the son of our wonderful friend Victor, and notice how he will come to manhood with his own particular soul bespeaking itself... (Kerouac 285)

After this random encounter and this speech by Dean, the gang proceeds to the whorehouse to continue their great Beat Generation adventure. In current criticism, *On the Road* could be viewed as largely a “man’s” novel to the extent that it is basically about a group of bored men living irresponsibly, using women for quick kicks, and so forth. Yet just that flash of joviality from Dean, “the father we never found,” continually embodies something, I think, truly American in that it comes off as something spiritual in an innocent, uneducated way: he is the young man who took off and never stopped running and believing in everything, doing everything. And Sal, or Jack Kerouac, shambled along recording the experience. It occurred to me the first time I read *On the Road* that this was the one author I had read thus far who truly seemed to just write what he felt and experienced, with eloquent, quintessentially American passages, detail and a somewhat overly-drawn-out corniness of dialogue, all of which was signature for its time. In my own experiences and in my prose vernacular, I think you will be able to see a clear influence of Kerouac as my prose will often read as improvisational and spontaneous. The story does stem from memories of when I

travelled to California, frankly, to get away from a girl, and the boredom of home, and to try my hand at acting.

Now, as Kerouac defined the Beat Generation, my second great literary influence, Ernest Hemingway, defined what Gertrude Stein called, the “Lost Generation.” Stein may have given the name, but Hemingway provided the text in *The Sun Also Rises*, inspired undoubtedly by his time in Paris in the twenties as a veteran of WWI. I would like to note here that I realize my literary influences are rather overly canonized white male American writers, both of whom can be perceived as stark contrasts to some of the more diversified and non-hetero-normative literary voices which have deservedly come to thrive today. However, I cannot deny nor shake the influences of these authors who seem to fit right into their literary milieus and ended up defining generations of literary dreamers – escapists, expatriates, travelers, adventurers, anyone seeking to live truthfully and artistically in their time and place. These authors to me were always more than writers but authors, monumental, larger than life. Now there are of course more great authors who I think share the same status as “authors” rather than mere “writers.” Henry Miller and Norman Mailer come to mind. Yet I chose Hemingway and Kerouac for my literary influences for this thesis in particular for their respective contributions to the craft of writing, and this direct influence on my own.

On this note, Hemingway exemplified for me a lean, athletic style that I always felt was like drinking a cold beer. I usually understood and tasted every word, and thus it made me feel good. His long sentences punctuated by a short

one, his realistic dialogue, fast and unsentimental, always swirled into a pitch-perfect romantic and often tragic novel of a man's experience on his own, in his time. As Brett slowly presses against Jake in the taxi in Madrid, one cannot help but wonder about Hemingway: did the war really did strip him of all his innocence? Did he lose a woman he loved? Like Kerouac, Hemingway's character is largely an outsider, a reporter reporting on the collage of expatriate writers moving about Europe. All the while, he himself is largely removed from the scene on account of his impotence, the result of his undescribed war injury as a pilot: "We could have had a damned good time together" (Hemingway 222). The theme of being outside a youthful milieu, yet documenting it with such detail, resonates well with me. At the height of my American experiences, namely in Los Angeles as an aspiring actor/writer, then in Rochester as a graduate student living among my friends, I always felt somewhat like an outsider, as an older veteran who has self-published a vulgar cowboy novel; yet I never stopped documenting my experiences, especially those which contrasted European and American cultures, as I have enjoyed both, journaling of their differences and complements in a time when America has gone alone to war.

Hence my story presents an adventurous young soldier who wishes in some way to escape America, especially after reveling in European culture between deployments to Iraq. For research into a story of a veteran's amorous affairs, I have read Tim O'Brien's only romantic comedy, *Tomcat in Love*, from which I have drawn considerable insight into how to artfully flash back to war memories in order to supplement the characterization and plot of an altogether

romantic tale. Aptly enough for my literary intentions, O'Brien writes: "as in war, so, too, in romance" (178). As Tim O'Brien's Thomas Chippering at one point ends up teaching pre-school after being fired from his university position as linguistics professor (for sleeping with one of his students), my character must teach K-12 English as a second language to support his writing habit and pay up for his reckless, dream-chasing past. O'Brien's romantic comedy reminds me that a narrator can ramble and reminisce, venturing into philosophies on language and mankind: "There was a reason, after all, that mankind had invented indoor plumbing, chimneys, brass beds, cotton sheets. It was in man's nature to defy nature. Why else the Industrial Revolution? Why else four-wheel drive and mosquito repellent? Why else language?" (144). Yet ultimately the horizontal storyline, with all its vertical spikes and dips into characterization, conflict and sub-plots, must have a climax and a resolution. In the genre I am attempting, it is largely clear what this will be: does he get the girl or not? Or is there some sort of bittersweet pass between them that leaves the reader wondering? After I took my own venture into language and completed this short novel about a modern veteran in love, and at the recommendation of novelist Deborah Reed, I discovered George Saunders.

In Saunders's collection of short stories *The Tenth of December* I noted how the efficient dialogue and pacing of "Home" implicitly establish the true-to-life point-of-view of a veteran more traumatized by his home than his experiences overseas. For instance, at one point the veteran is totally confounded by a commercial product, MiiVOXMAX, and by the unabashed indifference and

ignorance of two of his fellow countrymen: “They were so nice and accepting and unsuspecting—they were so *for* me – that I walked out smiling and was about a block away before I realized I was still holding MiiVOXMAX...whatever it was” (Saunders 185). In my work I also pit a veteran at odds with a seemingly trivial commercial homeland that really could care less about the wars. I involve commercialized products and popular social media which Saunders also brings into his prose. I believe it highly relevant to bring in such commercially hailed objects and technologies as strange characters themselves with which we must live.

Moreover, in a story which continues a progression of wonderful weirdness and revelatory intrigue, Saunders’s acclaimed “Escape from Spiderhead,” a science fiction story, sneakily yet powerfully conveys the extreme emotions which can only come from a human relationship. Saunders trademarks the “Darkenfloxx™” (among others) as the injected state-funded chemical “drips” which immediately cause extreme suicidal depression. What a visionary and an artist to create this sci-fi medium through which to satirize love: “We brought you high, laid you low, and now here you sit, the same emotion-wise as before our testing even began. That is powerful, that is killer. We have unlocked a mysterious eternal secret” (57). In our wired age of constant media and prescription drugs for just about everything, it is not too far of a shot to imagine a secret state agency that would test out such drugs on prisoners of passion crimes as Abnesti administers in “Escape from Spiderhead.” For ultimately in the arena of love we can be forced to kill; yet Saunders’s finely wrought narrative resolves

Jeff to never want to kill again, except poetically, himself: “and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would” (81).

My character in my comedy also experiences such “drips,” albeit on a less extreme and allegorical level, as his conflict is more of a coping with a girl who comes in and out of his life. Hence, my character deals with his dejection from love much more implicitly within his vernacular, covering up his once-super-vigorous ego. Yet even so, the vernacular, I argue, captures the life-and-death nature of the game of love, particularly as manipulated through social media, which is new to the veteran:

She liked this comment with a white-gloved thumbs up. Sublime. I didn’t even know you could like a comment before that. It’s all random, fast, lovely, haphazard, hot and heavy bliss, then it’s gone, isn’t it? And it’s nothing then but a few comments and thumbs up here and there. She wouldn’t even poke me anymore. (Uebbing 136)

In the parlance of our times, with social media often the medium for romance and drama, I found it interesting to incorporate Facebook as a Spiderhead all its own through which a character can view another’s happiness or sadness as he or she goes about the changes in his or her life -- changes which can in turn dramatically affect a character, depending on how he or she feels towards the other.

My story involves such turnabout affairs as well as a few war flashbacks while presenting the character’s routinely brief love life here in America. The title of the novel is *Love in America*, and it is all about one Ben Rose, a veteran and 26-year-old English major at St. John Fisher College. After being teased by

one spoken-for yet flirtatious, and seemingly perfect Fisher student/fashionista/*Harry Potter*-obsessive, Samantha Kelly, Ben decides to take off for California to be an actor, only to run out of steam with his funds and his visiting German girlfriend. He then must come back home, where he serendipitously rendezvouses with the same exuberant yet seemingly unattainable American love interest, who is now single and living in New York City.

As previously mentioned, the work largely is also an homage to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which inspired me to write a romantic novel involving a literary-minded veteran and a tortuously coquettish girl. My story though, will depart sharply from Hemingway's. For in my comedy, the character Ben, not unlike O'Brien's Thomas Chippering, is very potent and the idiosyncratic first-person vernacular narrative explores the full repertoire of his romantic experiences. As the veteran and his muse, Samantha, discover themselves on opposite coasts and come back together in certain turns of events involving cultural contrasts to Europe (as both are at points left heartbroken by international love affairs), the story dares to believe in a certain kind of literary-romantic love that can exist in America. To complicate this American tale of love, part of the overarching conflict involves the main character's visiting international girlfriend, Nadia, from Germany, who, in her way, offers a scathing critique of American culture or lack thereof (as she nihilistically posits, in her way). How the two American characters come together to reconcile their own experiences with this certain brand of political, trans-Atlantic heartbreak is the novel.

In sum, this is my best, most finished work which has come about through my experiences and studies at Brockport and abroad. All in all, it is the tale of a jaded, disillusioned, and bored young veteran who finally cuts loose from the regiments he has known and ends up finding love where he least expects it: in his home country, the United States of America.

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I

I never would have met her if I hadn't had done a stint in the Army -- the ultimate aberration to my father's plan and my well-to-do social contract and what not. Samantha Kelly -- gorgeous, bombshell, sublime -- dated this beefy businessman, Frank D'Angelo, for nearly six years. Since she was sixteen, she dated him. Then, one day, in early 2008, she added me on the old Facebook. She was nineteen then and apparently an extraordinarily fast typist. She promptly messaged me, saying that she'd seen my horrible, self-published novel on display in the English hall at St. John Fisher College, and that it was her dream to see her own book in print. *And how does it feel?*

I'd seen her before: sitting in the back of the little theater at Basil Hall, I watched her approach in the semi-darkness. She wore this red thing, this *Little Red Riding Hood* sort of button up overcoat -- very cute. The event was a talk on the Iraq War. Something I should've had interest in. The speaker, a bald analyst from Washington, assured us that, "We have enough nukes to make Iraq glow green for decades" (if they actually did have WMDs and tried to bomb Israel, of course.) There was talk on the 100,000 plus Iraqis dead. All very eye-opening and interesting, but I couldn't stop thinking about the girl in red walking the

aisles, collecting question cards for the speaker. She came to my aisle and I thought about scribbling my phone number and a quick message down on my card.

Thankfully, I did not. But she smiled warmly, cordially at me in the dark theater as she helped coordinate the event which also stirred, I should say, some much needed political discussion. I sat in the back at the end of the row by the aisle, grazing her gentle hand ever so slightly as it took my blank index card. Bliss. She needn't say a thing. I couldn't help but to eye her a bit more through the blur of the dissipating crowd. Fortunately enough for her (or so I'd thought at first), she'd appeared too good, too traditional for my type. This was the perfect Fisher girl my parents hoped unquestionably that I would meet; as long as they paid the tuition, I'd go off and elope with *a nice Catholic girl*.

I'd walked out of the theater momentarily in love yet knowing still that she was too young and perfect, her GPA too high, her brown hair too beautiful and flowing in shined rivulets for an already half-jaded literary hack / 26-year-old-veteran like me. Then erupted the online friendship of certain rather trite yet tantalizing niceties that following semester on account of my book, I guess, and soon we swapped numbers.

"I'm going to read your book," she'd texted while I was hauling my bag of books into my dorm room. Before I could get situated and compose a reply, she sent another one: "Heard it's scandalous!"

"No no, don't read it. Never read it," I texted back. "Wait till my next one. More mainstream friendly. Like a romantic comedy."

I could already see her little fingers dancing on her keypad as indicated by the constant dots of ellipses pacing back and forth on the screen below my fresh text. Don't ask me to recall the random subjects of that night's texts. Let's just say she's far from a traditional Catholic but very American and very much into *Harry Potter*.

I lay on my bed reviewing it all, swiping my finger up the screen. I put the contraption down for a minute and pondered the idea of actually dating someone like Samantha: a girl who had *Harry Potter* marathons; a girl who dressed impeccably with snazzy colorful outfits and loud-clacking heels; a girl whose relationship to her high school boyfriend carried over into college and now seemed hell bent on untarnished marriage.

"He kind of freaks me out though," she'd said, notably. "He has high anxiety."

"Oh," I'd said. "Well...tell him to chill...we're just friends," I'd texted.

"LOL," she'd said.

Now, I do not do the "LOL" myself, but I understand it, and when Samantha Kelly did it, I must say, I understood it more implicitly, and I imagined finding her at once in her more natural state: lain out naked on a beveled rock near that glassy pond in the green courtyard outside my window, waiting for her strapping ex-soldier, Ben Rose, to come and ravish her.

"Coffee this week," she texted me last.

"Absolutely," I texted back, "Let's meet at one in Basil Hall, in the Cyber Café."

III

That semester went on and she started in heavy with the texting. Back and forth about this and that we'd text. I had my old iPhone 3GS back then, compliments of the GI Bill and my dad vouching for the tuition, which made it quite fun and easy. I loved that sound my phone would make when one of her texts would come in. I lost my phone down in the crack of my bed and the wall once in my little single dorm room. Even then when that happened she messaged me on The Book of the Face saying *what's up?* and *where've you been?* And I said, "I lost my phone." And she said, "Oh man, I hope you find it. I'd be lost without mine."

What to do with this information? I decided I'd ask my friend, the girl next door in the old dorm, one very stellar academic, Miss Coco Rosendale.

"Coco," I said, leaning in her doorway. She looked up from her Spanish notebook where she had perfect Spanish journal entries splayed out in elegant cursive. "What if I told you a certain somebody – friend of mine here at Fisher – who doesn't really get out much, you know, especially with the whole dating scene..."

“Yeah right, go on,” she said, putting down her green felt tip pen.

“Well let’s say this friend of mine, right, he’s not very experienced, socially, right – not because he hasn’t wanted to, ah, date, that is, but because he hasn’t really had the chance, particularly with American girls,” I mumbled out, trying to pinch off an impression of James Dean.

“Look Dude,” she said. “You’re a veteran. You fought for our country. You’re the reason why we can all sleep better at night. Now who’s the girl?”

“Samantha Kelly.”

“Samantha – oh I love her! She is so fashionable! Ben, good choice! So have you talked to her?”

“Yeah, few times: coffee, internet messages here and there – and about 200 text messages. It’s all just somewhat new to me and I’m not quite sure when and how or if I should advance, considering...”

“Considering...?”

Just then a group of girls shuffled in for a group study session. Coco promised we’d pick up our conversation later as I heard the muffled echo of Bill’s basketball bouncing along with him down the carpeted hallway.

“Where the hell were you?” Bill said.

Where I lived back in Murphy Hall in those days was all right. Across from me lived my good aforementioned friend Bill Ryan, an avid basketball fan whose voice one could often hear shouting “McGrady!” – his favorite player – from the hall walking by.

Sure enough, on the inside back of his door was a near life-sized poster of McGrady himself, leaping up for a dunk.

Often we'd play PlayStation and I'd give him feedback on his creative writing.

Often Coco Rosendale would be up all night blabbing on the phone. You could hear her through that one-brick-layer-thick wall – up at night with her parents on the old dorm phone she had installed:

“And I pray that Dad doesn't lose his job at Kodak...well maybe I do have psychological problems!”

And on and on almost nightly. She was a good old-fashioned violently Republican American Catholic girl who believed that Hiroshima was not just a good, necessary thing to end WWII but a glorious victory. Bill would provoke this by knocking on her door while she studied Spanish. She'd come out pissed at Bill who'd say, “Coco believes we should nuke Iraq, too!”

“Well if those terrorist bastards want to knock down our buildings – September 11th! It was awful! My aunt's friend was killed there!” she'd said once.

“Coco, you get a real sick kick out of the bombing of Baghdad don't you?” said Bill now. “Ben was there, he can give you all the details.”

“Well, of course, I wasn't exactly there at that--”

“You know what?” Coco stammered, amid the hallway of laughing freshman. “Kill all of those mother-effers!” Coco, the non-swearer said, stomping into her room in Republican rage.

And it wasn't just the war. We'd tease her about birth control, too, among other things.

I mean, history is always violent, but for Coco, the most historical and therefore the most necessary kind of history was that which secured America as a dominant force so she could get her straight As at Fisher and keep her chastity until the absolute right one comes along. She wasn't bad looking or anything. That's just how she was. Had the violence of hegemony and tradition and institutions in her. We loved her anyway because she was quite cute and harmless and great to provoke into a cute murderous wench who'd split you up the middle if you crossed her or said anything bad about the USA.

IV

Canandaigua, nestled against the lake, fresh water glimmering, green hills and foliage. My home town. The green-blue water, the wake in the wind in late August. A Sunday church wedding spilled out like black-stemmed lilies on the water and breakfast with mom and you drive by the lakeshore where they have that patio with the wooden archway (I hate the word gazebo) and water spout ten feet out, and you think, damn I have *got* to get married.

I'd been close once. Real great woman. But I'd been a perfect whore as a soldier over in Europe, naturally. Just had to experiment. I was young. Horrible thing was, I was honest. Fell from grace or whatever in a house of supermodels; put it all down in detail in a letter on yellow legal-pad paper and sent it to my

girlfriend back home. *Das ist kaput*, the lady had said. Told the old maintenance Sergeant about it while sitting around with the guys in the dusty bay in Karbala one day. He handed me his pistol.

Now I'm back and this girl Samantha won't stop texting me...

She texted me that her boyfriend had high anxiety about certain things and would freak her out. She told me over coffee that she had once punched him in the face. What am I to do with this information? Somehow she trusted me. I tried to get her to go to the movies as a friend. She almost did, but there was a scheduling conflict. She was quite busy, maintaining her 4.0 and buying clothes, working somewhere part-time and being the Editor of the school newspaper or decorating her boyfriend's house or whatever the hell it was that she did.

I didn't think her boyfriend was beating her, but she did seem somewhat sincerely nervous and nondescript about it. She told me that he freaks out sometimes. I think she just wanted me. I don't know why. She had to have known that my novel was a self-published unsellable vulgarity, but in those days, I had the confidence and the swagger, I guess. I wore a leather jacket, shaved infrequently and knew that as soon as I graduated, I was going to get the hell out of Upstate New York. The Canandaigua/Rochester area is nice but I still had a chunk of Army money in the bank and this girl had a boyfriend, so.

VI

I love Samantha Kelly. There, I said it. I'm not Jake Barnes. I actually say things besides, "Go to hell." And I didn't get my damn dick blown off in WWI. Rather, I blindly participated in one of the greatest follies in American history. But I'm not Robert Cohn either. I'm a regular American. I drink regular Coke, etc. So why can't there be a little love in America between this jaded modern veteran and this smart gusty beauty?

But when it came time to get this ineffably cute girl who initiated coffee meetings and such with me to go out and meet outside the Fisher campus, there was very little luck. But as any true Mets fan will tell you: you gotta believe. Maybe not the most uplifting example, but it's a good motto nonetheless. Besides, don't you know I always wear my damned heart on my sleeve...?

There was this girl named Janelle in my magazine writing class. After a semester of sitting across from her I slowly fell for her. I think it was because she looked a bit like my ex-girlfriend over in Germany, except taller. She was half French, half Italian, *Vogue* magazine austere aloofness about her mixed with a seemingly very approachable disposition, and she worked part-time at the Eastman House. Loved clementines. Her magazine article in Fisher's *C* magazine covered a story on an artist who used her menstrual blood as paint. Kind of a weird artsy skinny girl. Took my mind off Samantha for a while, who as it turns out, also wrote and modeled for that lovely publication. In the fall edition, her brown eyes would warm and melt you from the cover, her brown hair

slicked wet straight down, shimmering along her lovely fresh cheeks and her hidden beauty mark.

For a while I weighed out which girl's sexy *Vogue* aloofness seemed less cold and more approachable. Janelle was taller and a bit colder, into psychedelic pop which Samantha definitely wasn't. Samantha was still a peach, a homegrown darling sweetheart who worked summers at Stella's Greenhouse in her hometown of Fairport, NY, tending the wandering customers, and the flowers. But when I played with my collar, this Janelle girl played with her skirt across the room and looked at me like a cold sexy cover model. I would always look away, but when I went to flip her a clementine one day, well, as it turns out, this Janelle had a live-in boyfriend. So she told me via email after class. They all do.

Samantha's live-in boyfriend, Frank, he worked for his family's advertising company and also as some sort of computer genius at RIT. He studied the divine art of plastering computerized advertisements on boxes – commercial packaging or something. Samantha told me that he had a 99.9 percent chance of getting a really awesome job. Hey, well I can be a famous writer, I thought. I mean, some parts of my novel were actually quite good and it would definitely make for an amazing film, I thought. Nevertheless, I advised her not to read it. My next one would be better, more mainstream friendly, like a romantic comedy. You see, the bulk of the first one was written when I was 19 over in the dorms, flunking out of Fisher and getting ready to run away first to Vegas on the Greyhound, then to the United States Army. I wasn't afraid of racy stuff then and I'd thought I'd set the world on fire when I came out with it all. I could just

picture myself walking from my red Lamborghini, with my Rolex and my Ray Bans and a stack of money that I'd flip casually to my awe-struck father standing on the front porch of 123 Holiday Lane with the drop-jaw: "Got that money I owe ya, old man," I'd say. And I'd get back in and burn out with my vanity plates that said, "Writer." Or something corny like that. I'm addicted to pipe-dreams and corn. I suppose that's why the wholesome all-American girl was so damned irresistible. Unattainable beauty.

Anyway, I was drunk at Lux Lounge in the South Wedge, having a good old time on Spring Break with my best buddy Conrad Spalding, trying to flirt with this Swedish medical student – and she was well-interested too; her light eyes would perk up and she'd lean her blonde innocence in to catch that I was a writer of sorts – "Yeah, we're doctors," said her friend as he escorted her back to her group of male med students. Well, I mean, if only it were a different century: he'd be the guy digging up graves for research and I'd be the revered national scribe. And just then, who would you think would send me a goddamned text? Good old Samantha Kelly. My gorgeous muse, alas, she'll never stop coming back.

"Hey man, look," I said to Conrad, a skinny blonde bearded Fisher graduate.

"That Samantha girl again? Tell her to come out here," he said.

Conrad was a hell of a guy. He knew heartache on account of his last girlfriend leaving him for a waitressing opportunity and her lesbian roommate out in Portland. Now he had a steady shit job up in Rochester and a one bedroom

apartment. We grew up on the same street, loving the Mets and me giving him rides to school in my old Hyundai Elantra, '93. Now we were both luses in our time, but me more so than him, still coming down off that insurmountable high of being a young veteran and a writer/actor artist of sorts in the United States.

I texted her: "Come to Lux Lounge."

She was complaining about her boyfriend again.

I texted her: "Come to Lux."

She Googled it and texted back: "Doesn't look like a good place for me, besides I'm not 21 yet."

I texted her: "Just come and I'll work everything out."

She thought about it. She told me so in a text. Then she said, "Doesn't sound like a good idea."

The next day she texted me while I was walking down the thin green-carpeted hallway of the dormitory. She said she picked up my book and read a passage. She read the wild Chapter Seven sex scene. I'd told her not to read the book but at same time I told her that it was awesome. And the book I'd lent her, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, had some erotic details in it so I figured it was cool. But she expressed, "My boyfriend says you just want to fuck me."

"You said 'fuck,'" I texted.

"So what, you say 'fuck' all the time in your book," she said the next day over coffee. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck...and the cowboy fucked the *virgin-whore* and the other ten girls he met on the side of the road--"

“Ok, ok, hardly a synopsis-- What does your boyfriend think about us meeting like this? Me lending you books and such?”

“He’s not your biggest fan.”

“You’re nothing more than a tease,” I told her later on via text message from my parents’ house. “Why don’t you just leave him and come out with me.”

“What, for some wild sex?”

“Well there’s that...and more,” I said. “So much more – just come out and see.”

... ..

Silence. I sat on my parents’ white flowery couch in the living room. I paced a bit, then planted my elbows on the mahogany ridge of the couch and I let her have it:

“Come on, he majors in putting commercials on boxes for god’s sake!” I texted.

And after just the right amount of time to pinch off a focused reply, she sent: “Yeah, he’s got a real nice *package*.”

That did it. I’d go back and scope out her FB page every now and again and I’d reassure myself. I’d catch a glimpse of Catholic school girl evil in every picture: how her hand crinkled like a spider upon her waist, or how her elbow jutted out, or just the sheer volume of pictures of herself and 30 pictures of her damned dog and 20 pictures of her and her fat nerdy boyfriend, who I’m sure is a nice guy. And she’s a nice girl. A nice Catholic private school 4.0 double major in English lit. and communications/journalism girl. Interested in fashion and

Harry Fuckin' Potter and all that happy teeny-bopper bullshit. Fuck her. Took me all of a couple of days to forget all about her. That May, I graduated with a decent 3.15, moved out of the dorms and put Fisher and all its perfect people behind me. Time to get the hell out of Rochester, I said. Fuck her.

VII

Sa-man-tha – one of those luscious girl names where the tip your tongue rolls off the palate to come to its dainty conclusion. There's a little "man" packed inside this one, though, requiring your tongue to flatten totally against the palate, as opposed to the torturous flicker of *Lolita*. Plus, of course, she was nearly 20-years-old when I met her. Anyway, I do recall that she said she resembled more so her father than her mother. Nevertheless, she had her girlish qualities: coquettish and unbearably cute. She knew she was desired. But as long as her page said "in a relationship," coupled with all her life's pictures like that, I actually found it quite easy to forget all about her.

I started living at home, sleeping on the fold-out bed downstairs on account of my sisters taking up both upstairs bedrooms. I'd stay up watching TV, sipping on my old man's booze and I'd fall asleep, awake, find my phone fallen under the couch/foldout bed and I'd lean over and grab it from bed and I'd stare at it, dancing my fingers on the touchscreen, Googling random things. Then I'd get up and eat and search on the downstairs computer for jobs.

My dad hovered behind me once to glance at my screen.

"Can I borrow 148 dollars to take an LSAT course?" I said.

“Ben, you blew off your senior year – your grades are lousy – now you wanna be a lawyer?”

“Well, I mean, just take the class, see if I can get a better score.”

“Get a job. Become a teacher or something, earn some money. You’ve never really had any money, have you?” So by and large he’d quipped. And off he went.

He did make a point, though: it sucks being broke.

That first summer the parents would have old friends over and they’d introduce me as the recent college grad. Sometimes Dad would throw in a word about my stint in the Army as well: “Ben’s more the strong silent type,” he’d say. And I’d tell them, “Yeah, I’m just not really sure what I’m doing now.” I wanted to get a job and my own place. It was, of course, insanely difficult. I had a damned college degree with the veteran status to boot. Now where’s my \$35,000 plus a year desk job? Sitting at a desk reading and writing. It took me a while to learn about money and reality. A financial services firm ironically expressed interest in my resume. But I had to pass: \$750 dollar certification test just to crunch numbers and chase dentists for a few bucks. That’s not me.

Finally, after getting sucked into a bullshit sales job where I actually put on one of my dad’s suits and drove my dad’s car out to some pizza shop out on the lake to sell some business owner a new credit card scanner; and after getting hired as an insurance agent and taking a 2-week-long course on insurance jazz, which my dad unwittingly elected to pay for; I had enough. I Googled acting

classes in LA. Found one that was recommended by Rainn Wilson -- you know, Dwight, from *The Office*. I called in and talked to the guy.

“I really want to get into the screenwriting /directing business,” I said.

“Well yeah, as a trained actor in LA...” he closed.

I told him I’d call him back.

I had a \$8,500 chunk of Army money in a CD in the bank collecting minimal interest and Sasha Grey had gone down from Sacramento with only \$7,000 from working as a server and she had a plan. Wikipedia. Bad comparison. Anyway, acting is such a longshot. I’d never acted, as my dad reminded me. But I’ve also never really worked, at least as a civilian. I was still fairly young with my Irish / Italian good old Benny Rose, New York charms about me. Fuck it.

My other option was the New York Film Academy – 8 week program for screenwriting. \$3,000 dollars times two at least given the cost of living, I figured. That guy on the phone sort of missed with his sales pitch:

I said, “Why should I pay to go down and study screenwriting – Why not just write it and send it out?”

“Yeah but, hey, this is New York City. Movies are made here every day,” he dodged.

Despite my family’s NYC connections, I decided to forfeit my 50-dollar application fee there and head out to LA. Get away from the old fam for a bit. Besides, anyone can do those New York programs. You’ll see the ads on bus stop

benches on Wall St. of all places and you'll see those guys making student films in Times Square. For me I had to get away from New York for a while.

Anything went completely awry, I still had my Irish cousin in Vegas, and in San Diego my uncle, the princely Italian priest. The point was getting out there to that sprawling arts and entertainment city on the other side of the country. My dad thought it was nuts. It was. But I just had to go and grind it out. So I'd hit the road to California. I'd get a job, do auditions, make connections, and just grind it out, I told my dad. "Ludicrous," he said. (He'd also paid unwittingly for the 350 dollar deposit for the acting class. I had to protect my account from chunky withdrawals before setting out. He was a rich lawyer, I was not, so.)

In the end, I just had to get out there and do something, grind it out and try *to be somebody* for a while at least. So I decided to hit the road for California.

X

The great Los Angeles' Valley gorged out before me. Traffic thickened with semis hauling on a road that hugged around a mountain. 66 was down at the base of the gorge in the dry rocks. The road lined around the mountains into the city, making a huge U around some grassland expanse, so you could see the trucks like miniature toy blocks coming around the bend. This was the passage into the City of Angels: with the mist of the mountains spreading out thin to the pinkish haze of traffic and blocks of towns at the edge of the sprawl.

I had this idea that I would take 66 into the finish, until it turned into Santa Monica Blvd. Not happening. Too many red lights and too hot as the street dragged on from town to town, all looking relatively the same, as though I were not travelling anywhere, just bumbling along the perimeter.

I turned around in a Ralph's grocery store. Some lady behind me in a red car honked vehemently and gave me a dirty look. I knew I was getting close to L.A.

Jumped back on the Interstate and streamlined in. Unlike my first venture out there when I drove up from my uncle Pete's in San Diego right into the palms of Hollywood and Highland, this time I saw the exit for Burbank Blvd. as the Interstate seemed to curve up and around about to cut further into the city. It then splintered right off and halted at Burbank Blvd. The SevenEleven on my left. My Garmin directed me right and then left to a fanciful little place on the corner with four little veranda-clad windows. The place looked elegant: like a breeze-washed Spanish hacienda. In Spain, however, we were not.

I parked behind a blue FIAT with some rust coloration and a bumper sticker that said: "USA – Still # 1!"

Alas, I had arrived. This was where the travelling actors live, and I was certainly that. Twenty-six and handsome, I'd say, a hell of a physique and still most of my hair intact.

I got out and went in to get settled.

Time to get on the receiving end of some cash flow and quick, I said to myself. With the help of a job fair for veterans I was able to make it happen. One benefit of the acting course: it sort of makes you more confident. So I interviewed better. Even my lovely old professor Bloomberg said I looked “more relaxed” after coming back from California. What a neurotic weirdo I must’ve been to her. Caught me watching her adjust her bra once and she knew I’d signed up for her two classes, *Legal Writing* and *Milton to the Romantics*, partially in order to get an invite to her house at the end of the term like the rest of the class did before. But before I had had to go to Germany, only to get my heart ripped out, as it turned out:

“Well, the course of true love never did run smooth,” I’d quoted to my blue-eyed German beauty the first time we split in ‘08. “At least your father will be happy.”

Now as I exited through the glassy passage that separates the passengers from the receivers that first day back on the east coast, I saw my good old man sitting on the bench to the side, smart bald head cupped in curly white hair. With a knowing smile, he closed his book and welcomed me back to New York State.

“What’s this LA Dodger hat? What are you, a Dodger fan?” he said.

“Hey, they came from Brooklyn,” I said. “Second favorite team, at least: last remnants of an era.”

We got in the car and drove home and I became somewhat overwhelmed by the green verdure of the east coast.

“You should see it out there, Dad, totally different terrain and culture – here might as well be England,” I reported.

“I know, Son,” he said, “I go out there for conferences. But they pay me to go out there. By the way, I published my book.”

And he had – a nice bit on educational jurisprudence.

....

Six and a half months, give or take, selling phones and data packages, etc. over the phone – “I sell phones over the phone”-- and making a decent base pay plus an average thousand buck commission a week, I just up and walked out of the cubicle, headed over to Jay’s Diner out in Henrietta; met Conrad there, ordered a steak salad as usual and told him that I had quit my damn job.

“You quit?” he said.

“Just walked out. Couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Aw God, really? You can’t go back there, man.”

I could’ve, but I didn’t. Though having sent a resignation form and letter to my boss, I never properly did my two weeks as per the ‘two weeks’ notice’ policy thing. I still cannot get back in there. Always do your two weeks.

Nevertheless, I’d saved enough to pay my dad \$1500 cash – “You’re making good money” he said. And I had the GI bill kicking in again as I’d enrolled in the state school down the road, going for my MA in creative writing. Living the life I was: taking poetry classes, building a real flare for John

Berryman and free indirect discourse, while my GI bill money came in every month, as long as I was full time. The Marxist critical theory paper on *Frankenstein* however was what pushed me over the edge, literally pulling my hair out trying to catch up with all this rampant Marxism in the literature field that nobody had told me about. Hence, I had to, just had to quit my soulless, capitalist money machine job, even though it was kind of fun. I must've sold over 20,000 iPhones while pissing off another 40,000 people with not enough credit to avoid the deposit. There is nothing more volatile than a 45-year-old African American woman when you tell her she must pay an \$800 dollar deposit to get a damn phone.

With money in the bank, I'd lie in my third floor apartment on University Ave. – a gray brick building with a steel awning jutting out Park Avenue, NYC style – with the castle-like brick lining around the roof – the uneven blotches of stone in the rainy night reminding me of my young scholar's dwelling as I'd walk in and lie around reading, thinking.

I'd lie till the sun hit me and I skipped the class on Robert Lowell because I had that brackish Harvard-swooned boredom/genius before as an undergraduate. Instead I'd go down when Conrad would finally get out of his shit job and I'd pop in for a drink.

And this drink I usually desperately needed, for mid-way through my creative writing degree, I succumbed to the idea that I might need another degree in order to get a decent job. And considering Nadia's refusal to move to the US, this job might've had to be overseas. Make a long story short, 15 months later

I'm writing my portfolio to attain my master's in teaching English as a second language, a real exciting, growing field of inquiry; I was really liking it, working with the multicultural learners and all, and lo and behold but what would you think would pop up on my screen:

An instant goddamned message on the old Facebook.

I didn't even know I still had this social site. The Book of the Face, as I'd liked to call it to my friends for no reason (part of a new language I invented that is having its problems taking off), had apparently opened every time I opened the internet, part of my homepage that I'd set up when I got the computer.

The message, alas, was from her, Samantha Kelly. My old college friend.

"Hey how's life?" it said.

I studied it then fervently composed my reply.

"Great," I said, "I'm just working on something for school..."

"Graduate school?"

"Yeah."

"Awesome. For what?"

I told her everything. I left out, however, the uncanny coincidence that I had happened to be revising a hypothetical I.E.P. (individualized education plan) for a hypothetical student with autism named Samantha. She was a real runner, this child. Required much art and drawing time and time outdoors, only watch out she doesn't run right out into the street.

I didn't tell her this, nor did I mention the intolerable state of my studio apartment, the relentless construction outside, building the new "art walk" by the

MAG (Memorial Art Gallery), and of course the lunatic in the building across the alley who would scream obscenities at random times so madly that neighbors finally would pitch in with a “yo, shut the fuck up” or two, but why not call the cops? I did once. I mean the guy’s probably getting orders from his dog or flogging himself in there.

What I did tell her was that I’d be happy to show her about Rochester as she’d reported that she’d never really been around the city in all her four years living at her boyfriend’s house in Webster and at the Dorsey Dorms at St. John Fisher College. I told her I was on the verge of finishing a handsome master’s degree from the University of Rochester, and that I was still writing – still plugging away at the old writing career at least, you know, one foot in the arts at all times. No more splurging, taking high risk chances on acting courses in the west – no more pitch fests on the credit card, straight scholarship and discipline now, pursuing literary merit and career now, straight waiting, with much regret, albeit, and random fits of utter consternation, pushing 30, hairline going from Spacey to Keaton.

Or perhaps, the other way around. Regardless, it was going, and here Samantha was just finishing college, Summa Cum Laude. No more wallowing at my failed search for the American dream, I had Samantha Kelly eloping with me on the net, my old college flame. I belonged after all, didn’t I? This vulgar novelist, crazy veteran, money blowing actor-wannabe had the sweetest girl in upstate New York checking in to make sure I still had her digits.

“Yeah ahh...go ahead, send it...unfortunately I got a new phone, so...”

“716-1629.”

I texted her the next day – a Thursday.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, what’s up,” she replied.

“@ Murphy’s law,” I said.

“I’m at the Old Toad,” she said.

“I’ll be right over!” I said.

“I’m actually just leaving,” she said. “I’m just here with some friends.”

“Oh, ok,” I said.

The next day was Friday. I decided to take the extremely familiar drive down to Canandaigua, New York to visit with my folks for the weekend. Three quarters of the 45 minute drive there, having just gotten through the toll onto the old rolling route home, she texted me.

“Doing anything tonight?” she asked.

“Hanging out with you,” I responded, having flipped a U-ey in a gas station as though a lasso had yanked me back.

She texted me her address. She lived quite close to my place, out on Blossom. I went back to pick up Samantha Kelly for a Friday night date.

...

I had to freshen up a bit and clean up my dump. This took a total of seven minutes. Had the place looking like mint and I’m wheeling out to her place spraying cologne. I’m coming in her apartment complex off Blossom Road, going around the traffic circle in there and she hits me with a *Did I mention how*

impatient I am? text. I pulled in near her place and texted that I was there. A few minutes later she came out. I caught a glimpse of her looking at the floor in the lighted vestibule then she approached in the darkness across the grass. I sat parked in my 1990 Buick LeSabre. Luckily I'd had my hair dyed back to its original color. I'd out some grizzled side patches as the war had not doubt aged me. I actually have a sliver of red in me in my upper sideburns apparently, according to the dresser at Hair World – red and then dark Italian black which I swirled stylishly over my forehead.

She fumbled with the old door and said clearly: “God, you’d think I’d know how to open a car door,” as she got in.

“Hey,” I said, “yeah, it’s one of those old-fashioned doors. “You look great,” I added as the brief interior white light died into the red semi-darkness of the dash and we drove away into the night.

She picked up her phone to text her friend and only then did I gleam the full aura of her and the wholesome bombshell that she was with her milky white complexion and silky brown hair – she hadn’t changed a bit. She wore this white thing, this silk blousy thing, sashayed across her full-bodied bosom and jeans. Classic, sexy American broad, through and through. And for once my old blue box of a car floated with the concupiscent allure -- the scent of a lady.

We drove on into town, the old car coasting in the night, under the dark bridge. A street light flashed on her face and she spoke:

“Yeah, I haven’t seen you in forever,” she said.

“I know I know, how’ve you been?”

I suggested Starry Nites, but we ended up going to Lux Lounge, on account of her wanting to see the dark liberal hang out spot that I'd told her about once.

I parked my old car on the right side of South Ave. in the South Wedge and we headed for the entrance. At first I didn't have my damned ID. I only had the temporary license the judge had given me because of my damned DWI which had been the ultimate reality check after discovering the new club across from the police station out by the State School where I'd elected to do my English MA when I'd come back. I was like John Berryman stepping out of that car, in my old Jeffersonian shoes and my beard and my cigarette hanging from my grin and my merchant's receipt that I'd handed the officer. They'd told me to step forward and I'd felt as though I was stepping off that bridge. I closed my eyes. When will I fucking grow up?

Now, fumbling for this ID while she waited was a bit embarrassing, but I made up for it, I figured, by telling her the story of how my friends and I had gotten kicked out of there like a couple of bad-asses once. We walked right by the little coffee table where Conrad Spalding had slapped his brother Tim backwards sending him crashing on that old vintage wooden coffee table, shattering it. Tim had been asking for it pretty hard though, as I recall: jabbering his face around up in Conrad's like a damned rabid monkey.

Anyway, I played it cool once we got in there. I noticed finally under the white she was wearing sort of a sparkly bluish spandex top with jeans, very sexy,

and very much complementing her splendid Irish complexion in the red-lighted lounge.

“So this is it,” I said. “Kinda diabolical isn’t it?” And I pointed out the *Republicans Eat Shit* sign with Bush depicted as the devil.

“Let’s get some drinks,” she said, her lilt and smile half desperate and disarming under the pale club light.

She ordered at once, meticulously: Bacardi rum and diet and a Heineken for me.

It took forever to get that dreadlocked bartender to attend us as the place was quite crowded. I’d look back and catch her on her phone and she’d look up and I’d smile but she’d seem distant.

Finally we got the drinks and went outside to sit. “Where can we sit?” she exclaimed. The place was littered with people drinking and smoking on the picnic tables and out on the patio. Walking around out of the alley into that backyard night spot was always a treat for me, like entering a cool underground world of artists and hippies and people just relaxing.

“You can sit there,” I said impulsively, gesturing towards the rocking wooden chair sculpted like a giant penis on the side. I couldn’t help myself. It was the only unoccupied seat. She smiled and laughed a bit, thankfully, and we quickly straddled a bench by the fire, facing each other.

We quickly caught up. Her boyfriend was out of the picture. She was quite distressed.

“He stopped fucking me,” she said, and my eyes lit up as she said fuck.

“So we had to split up our assets and everything.”

“Assets?” I said, my eyes starting to wonder.

“Yeah, it was like a divorce.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot – you had that house out in Webster with all that stuff in it, right?” I said.

We made some small talk, on her job at Aristotle’s Closet: “Did you know, I sold my best leather jacket for 15 dollars there when I went bust in Vegas!” But she was otherwise quite direct. Apparently, she’d had a bit of fright after college when she ended up all alone after her new boyfriend Fred with whom she’d cheated on Frank had left her for above all other places, Germany, with the foreign exchange student. Now she was alone. And after I had – and I had, I remembered then, when I was drunk no less, instant messaged her while out at Murphy’s some weeks ago asking how’d she’d been. And she knew that I had an eye for her and that we’d had our somewhat literary collegial rapport, her digging me with the whole author thing going on, and me trying to steal her away.

Now she was out in the open.

“Let me call my friend Conrad, ah Conny Spalding, great guy, dynamite guy,” I said. “He can meet us out and hopefully make me not look so weird.”

She smiled a bit and didn’t laugh but pierced her eyes at me through the night. I sat across the bench and my eyes met hers as she said,

“Do you really want to call your friend?”

I put my phone away.

“I mean you’re here to fuck me, right?” she said.

“It had crossed my mind,” I said, suave as hell.

We got up and I finished my beer and followed her out to the car.

At this point in time, I felt compelled to tell her about my DWI. I mentioned it to her over the roof of my blue Buick as I opened the door and got in. I told her my long short story about how my boyhood memoir had been ripped apart by the graduate school people, so I drank afterwards at a bar across from the police station. She seemed not to respond in any way but a sly smile and perhaps a slight roll of the eyes. So it was three beers only and a quick drive home to my apartment and we had made it.

The old apartment building which housed my thin corner of the world had been a dormitory for University of Rochester medical students in the 30s. Right across from the MAG on University Ave, dwelled the gray brick block of Haddon Hall, with its castle-like roof and its jutting rusted black awning. I parked on the street and led Samantha in through the front. She awed a bit at the old mystique of the place: the hallway with a yellow hue of an old chandelier in the foyer and the walls decorated with pictures of old Rochester, in all its shagged elegance.

I showed her the way to the elevator and to be fair, offered the stairs. I let her hit that big bronze button and in we stepped as I held open both sliding doors: the muffled glass one with the ancient black frame, and then the heavy gray metal cage. I held them both for her to step daintily past, into the old jerky box.

“It’s three,” I said.

She hit the button, stepped back. “It’s just like the movies,” she said.

“It is just like the movies,” I said. And I kissed her, and she let out a sigh, as the elevator bolted upwards.

The elevator halted violently, parting our lips.

“This is me,” I said. And I opened the doors once more and led her out, around the corner, past that surreal painting of autumn which you could step into, so it seemed.

“I always thought this hallway looked like that scene from The Shining,” I told her. “You know, *hello Danny* with the twins...” She wasn’t into horror, apparently. I shut up and opened the door. We sat on the bed together and contemplated for a moment. She wore a white blouse over a blue tight shirt and jeans.

“Well...” she said.

And we kissed and took each other’s clothes off and fucked. Her breasts were wonderful silk balloons as they unfolded from what she claimed accurately to be C cups – a system of measurement entirely fascinating to me. Then, I must say, there was a moment, when I withdrew from a kiss and her eyes focused into mine through the soft city dark. She smiled like a prowling cat beneath me – such a vixen – and said, “Tell me how long you’ve wanted to fuck me?”

“Since the day I saw you,” I said.

.....

“Give us the deats, brosef, the deats!” said Conrad Spalding the next day. He stood shirtless by the open fridge in my apartment, broad shoulders, proud little gut flapped out over his boxers. I admired his hilarious physique showcased

in the light of the fridge like a puddle of pasty melted marshmallows. I let him know this, too.

“Ok. Nice hairline,” he said. “I’m like Brad Pitt and you’re like DJ Qualls, my man. Lemme hear some of those details, though, my man. Why is it so clean in here?”

I was dusting my bookshelf and spraying down the toilet at the same time.

“I’ve never had it this clean before,” I told him. “I have to maintain it.”

“That’s great, man. Details, though – nice rack?”

“Aw, amazing rack.” I gave him the more vulgar details at last: about how I first went down on her and how she possessed the softest, most tender, most ripe, shimmering fruit of joy, as she squealed decibels of high-pitched ecstasy up and over an easy pinnacle of pleasure, my feet dangling off the other end of the bed. And I told of her classic one-liners and my classic responses, unthinking in the moment yet cracking a knowing smile, as though it were meant to be like Indy rekindling with his special lady friend: *It’s not the years, it’s the mileage.*

But we were still young and free. I was 28. She was 22. It had only been a few years apart from my old college mate. She must’ve read the comments on my FB page about my break up from the German girl. Facebook. You never know who will come around.

“I’m gonna wait to text her,” I told Conrad. He agreed with this and left me be. I lay down to scribble a poem and review my text messages as a June breeze flew in and she messaged me just then:

“I’m just having a picnic. You are welcome to come,” she said.

An after-fuck picnic, why didn't I think of that?

I went down and banged on Conrad's door. I plugged the peep-hole, as I was known to do, and when he opened the door, I popped him a fake punch with my own patented sound effect, which he'd praised as dead on.

"This kid's not gonna go on a picnic with Samantha Kelly," I said.

"Shut the fuck up. Are you really?"

"Cha."

"Ben man, you're turning into a normal human – hanging out with a girl in the middle of the day? What you got there?"

"Satchel man, for my books. She said to bring books. You gotta bring at least one book to a picnic, man."

"Is that mine?"

"You gave it to me."

I sat down on the foot rest for a moment. Conrad went back into his kitchen to tend to his home beer making experiment.

Tim-bo-bopz, Conrad's 23-year-old brother, suddenly poked his head out into the room.

"Ben, you're going on a picnic?"

"Yeah."

"With Samantha Kelly? That's awesome, man."

"You know her?"

"Conrad was telling me about her."

"What are you doin' here anyway, Timbo?"

“I live here, pathetic fuck,” he said, shaking his head.

“Think about your life,” I said, as I walked out.

“Think about yours,” he said.

Leave it to Tim-bo-Bopz to get himself kicked out of his girlfriend’s apartment. Yes, that’s right, Tim’s rather plump (at the time) lady friend whose arms bruised rather easily had recently pushed him past his limits by not getting out of the car during a heated debate in which she’d kept pushing all the wrong buttons and he’d punched her in the arm. She sued and he’d spent a night in county jail. But the public defender fixed him up with a sweet probation, without piss tests, not that old Tim-bo-bopz would ever relapse to his old pill-popping, acid dropping, weed smoking days. He was a fully recovered long dirty blonde-haired celibate monk now, who simply studied classic rock and the finer niceties of life, such as 80s classic VHS collectibles, while he looked for work, living on his brother’s futon.

Alas, my friends and I had all tasted the bitterness of failed romance. And who hasn’t really? At least we still had each other to make it through with our somewhat bitter humor. Yet I, for the time, was on the up and up. A full-figured young college grad had texted me her address: out on Blossom Ave, and I was headed to it, thinking about throwing in some flowers, as lilacs were very much in season. But no, that would have definitely been far too much.

I took Atlantic out to Blossom, humming along with a Simon & Garfunkel song with the window down. June summer bliss twinkled gold in the trees as I turned into her complex, remembering what she had said about just taking a left and going the opposite way in the little traffic circle there – can't keep a girl waiting, after all. I got out and slammed the door of my old car. I stepped up a little knoll onto the platform of her yard and there she was a few yards yonder in the sun-dappled shade of the trees, legs swinging daintily as she lay. She lay on a purple blanket in her shorts and bare feet. She did not notice my approach until I spoke.

“Hello,” I said.

She flinched and looked back.

“Oh, hello, I did not even hear you. Here, lie down.”

I lay next to her. I wasn't quite sure what to do.

“Did you bring a book?” she said.

And most certainly I had. I showed her *A Farewell to Arms* and told her, “Just read the first paragraph,” and she did and it was gorgeous the way she smiled over at me when she read the part about *the channels* and she was gorgeous in the sunlight, perched on her elbows, peering over at me.

“Wow,” she said. She put the book down and rested her head in her arm.

“Of course it ends sadly,” I said, and I made my move for a light caress along her silky-clothed back.

“I know,” she said. “Tell me about the war?”

“The war?”

“You were in Iraq, right?”

“Well, yes,” I told her, “but I have a very different opinion on the war. A very negative one.”

“Yeah, who doesn’t,” she said. “Explain in a nutshell.”

“In a nutshell, ok, I like that. Let’s see: the reasons were forced BS, the invasion was improperly handled, stupidly assumed that we would prevail quite easily over the long term – but we got Zarqawi,” I said. She looked over. “He was the leader of Al-Qaeda at one time. Killed in Baghdad. We wouldn’t have gotten him if we didn’t go over there. Him and many others knocked out over there, so...”

“Yeah,” she said, dreamily.

“I never had to fire my weapon, though,” I said. “I was lucky. And that’s all I’ll say about that.”

We talked about a few other things. I told her about how I’d joined to piss off my dad and first voted just to cancel out his vote and how dumb and reckless it all was and how I was graduating with my MS in teaching English to speakers of other languages now from the University of Rochester, using the remaining funds in my GI bill and how I wanted to go back West and live with my uncle who was a prince, and I’d get a job out there and start up with the writing again. She seemed fairly interested. She told me some facts about her family, a relative with cancer, her refusal to become a “soldier of Christ” and get confirmed and

how this, in her words, divided her family (yet I'm sure she was over dramatizing possibly to compete with my nonchalant war references); how she was more like her dad and more forcible and aggressive and impatient like a man, she said; and how she hated that her younger sister was naturally skinnier yet her sisters were her best friends. It's adorable to get to know a girl and fall in love under the sun. Neither of us said anything about it, but just enjoying each other's company, even only for a moment, is a kind of love, especially outside, laid out on my back, she on her front, beside each other on a blanket on the soft shaded grass.

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The sun dissolved into a shore of clouds and I remembered just then: the Jazz Fest in downtown Rochester.

"Hey," I said, getting up and brushing off my knees, "would you like to go to Jazz Fest with me and my friends later tonight – in like an hour?"

"Sure," she said. "Just let me get dressed. I'll call my friends."

"Great." And I said goodbye and wheeled out to go back and convey everything to Conrad before going up to my own closet/box of an apartment to shower and fix my recently dyed hair with an excellent gel.

And what seemed like five minutes later, my phone is buzzing and I'm rushing around spraying my place with cologne, tucking in my bed sheets extra neat with the old military fold, so tight you could pop a quarter off of it. But I hadn't the time to check. Last time she'd commented on the boxes of books and stuff next to the bathroom– "I'm going to stay away from that area," she'd said, crashing into my bicycle on her way past to my freshly bleached and near mint

condition toilet. I'd left the bike there, though. It served for hanging clothes and bras on the handle bars. And I figured it added a little small city charm to the whole scene of me the 28-year-old graduate school veteran and her the freshly-broken-up-with college grad sweetheart, stomping around in my carpeted rectangular pad of lust and happenstance, as we'd lie together in the moonlight watching that black cat writhing against the rusty fire escape and meowing seductively in the late evening just outside my window.

"I'm ready. Ready to go. How long? I told you how impatient I am, right," she barraged in some form via text.

I responded by running out the door with an exuberance unmatched by anything before in my young adult life. This kind of thing simply did not happen to me. Very cute Fisher girls did not Facebook IM me out of the blue and then tell me point blank, well, what she said, and then screw all night, the details of which will never fully come through. Let's just say she had quite a devilish tongue and wasn't afraid to use it. And sometimes, she'd playfully bite.

I picked her up and she wore this turquoise and white striped summer dress, tight yet sashayed in a way across her. We drove in the night down Browncoft to Culver, under that old creepy bridge. She wouldn't stop texting. I played the tough guy and spoke in quick dead-on spikes of manliness, like say Bruce Willis perhaps: "You look nice tonight. Ready to go. Let's go. We're gonna meet my friends."

We wheeled in again to my lot and I parked it between those two poles which indicated my space. "Home sweet home," I said. "Who you texting?"

“My friends. They want to meet us out, too? That ok?”

“Yeah, totally.”

We went in. She put her phone in her purse.

“This is it,” I said, at my friend’s door.

“We’re not gonna....”

“You wanna go upstairs for a minute first?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, let’s go upstairs,” I said, and we went.

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She sat on the bed and fell apart at my touch. I started to remove her top and she said, “And I’m not even drunk.”

At some point I pulled back and caught her eyes for a second.

“What?” she said.

“You have amazing....tits,” I blurted (perhaps I should’ve said buxom breasts) with a surprising stutter of confidence.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Can I....titty fuck you?” I croaked out in crippling lust as I lay raised above her on my elbows. My triceps flexed.

“Yeah,” she said, “here...”

And she set it up, pressing her gorgeous tits around me, her eyes watering, her jaw dropping in undulating sighs.

“I like that,” she said.

She honed her eyes in again -- such a vixen this one -- in the dark her eyes leveled my sweat-soaked ones in my little sweaty apartment.

“You want me to fuck you?” I asked for the pleasure of it.

All she could do was nod.

.....

We dressed quickly as we were due to meet my friends. She slipped on her turquoise and white striped summer dress that fit her snugly, yet seemed to dance around her. I may never fully understand women’s fashion, how they sashay and snug all at the same time. She brushed her hair in my mirror that was nailed to the wall by the door and I fixed mine behind her with my hands and with a bend of her back we snapped out of the brief shot of our reflection (fixing our hair fervently in my apartment before we went into the hall to go down and knock innocently on Conrad Spalding’s brown wooden door).

“Yeah,” Conrad opened the door, iPhone to his ear. “Yeah, there’re here, finally – Ben where have you been?”

“Just had to spruce up, *Bruce*,” (a common nickname for each other as friends) I explained.

“Oh, well. Come on in, man. Have a beer?” He saw her then.

“This is--”

“Sam,” she said, and shook his hand.

We settled in and Sam sat upright on Conrad’s futon, watching *Seinfeld* no less.

Conrad was in a chipper mood walking back and forth from the kitchen to the TV room checking in on everybody. Sam sat so straight and studiously stared at the TV until she said, “Oh *Seinfeld*, you can tell it’s getting outdated.”

My god, she was right, and she was gorgeous. I sat on the foot rest leaning in with my bottle of beer. I could hardly contain myself but knew I must and in a way reveled in the secret between us. She had a glow around her, a bluish halo in the squalid guy’s one bedroom apartment on the brown futon with the cigarette holes in it (I owed Conrad for those, I admit. Weed smoking and cigarettes and laughing then a tendril drifts up past your nose and Conrad’s pissed. Our mutual friend Jay-Boss, who had arrived with the volcano vaporizer bong handcuffed to his wrist in a briefcase, looks over at me like he doesn’t want to say anything but the truth always comes out, my friend). She was not privy to any of this, just a girl previously satisfied in lust but perhaps desirous of a bit more. She barely looked at me now, though. Too much temptation. What would Epicurus do? Touch once and learn and leave. Or in the words of my grandpa, look but don’t touch. Just as Timbo popped out of the bathroom with his scraggily blonde hair and his godly skinny pale body, she shot me a look that implied there’d be a bit more touching and out we went, Tim, Conrad, Sam, oh and E-Monz (Eric Money), who also tagged along.

We went out to the Jazz Fest around the corner. On the walk down Sam spied a sign for an apartment. She called in right there.

“What’s going on?” Conrad inquired.

“Sam’s looking for a place to live,” I said, smiling over at her and her perfect bosom.

She projected her lovely voice into the phone, only to discover the rent was too high. Imagine her living around the corner, if she had, though, if she had?

Down East Ave. the masses had already gathered, and we got some beers and listened to a band in the crowd on the corner of East and Alexander.

“That guy went to Fisher,” she said.

“Which one?” I said.

“The one playing the bass, uht, now the Sax.”

He was this excellently trim, groomed black fellow.

“Really,” I said. “I love that guy.”

Suddenly her phone was blowing up with her friends and it took forever squeezing through people to try to find them only to find ourselves lost in the crowd, but we didn’t care; we decided to wander a bit, Sam and me.

“So thanks for showing me around Rochester,” she said.

“Yeah, no problem.”

“I’ve lived here six years and I never really got out to see it.”

“Well you’re about ready then,” I said.

“So how’s your book doing?” she said.

“It pretty much died on Amazon,” I said.

“Aww, I liked the cover, though,” she said. “Did you design that?”

“No, I just signed off on it.”

“Yeah I thought about design myself--”

Just then she tripped terribly on an improperly juttled up sewer lid, nearly planting herself on the sidewalk.

“Oooh, you ok? You stub your toe?”

“Yeah,” she said, “there’s a giant sewer there.”

“Yes there is,” I said. And we kept walking.

I bumped into my friend Conrad down at the other end across from the Eastman Theater. We had a beer near the big tent but didn’t go in on account of an extra 20 dollar charge for some attraction. Conrad took our picture, naturally, as he was a photographer and we made our way back, stopping only for a whiskey sour and an attempt at a piss in a church – but they were charging to go in there, too.

“Oht...I think I see my friends; they usually have weed on them,” said the Summa Cum Laude grad., Sam.

I was loving her more and more, but as we approached the crowd sucked us in and spat us apart from each other only to pit us back together. I felt enthralled and wrapped my arm around her and tried to kiss her but she pulled away. No kissing in public. And her friends we met and talked and they took our picture, with me at least holding her, and both of us with genuine smiles, and me with my recently dyed jet black hair that waved over long enough to fall at least about a quarter of the way to my eyes, I’d say.

Just then, her friend, the black one, as Sam would later refer to her as, grabbed my hand and yanked me through the crowd. The plan was to get a beer

or get her in somewhere somehow, as she was 18, I believe. We ended up buying a cigar at the local smoke shop just so we could roll weed that she had. Then we reconvened and I could see Sam was getting antsy. We went into a bar called the Dublin Underground and I bought Sam and her other friend fruity mixed drinks and myself a gin and tonic, my pleasure. “Isn’t Sam so cute!” I said hoarsely over the music to her friend.

“What!”

It took a while now to get the slightest semblance of meaning across, but I didn’t mind, for I was in ecstasy.

“Isn’t Sam so cute, he said,” Sam said cutely to her friend. “Thanks for the drinks,” she said to me.

We danced a bit, awkwardly, on our own. Sam’s friend was texting. She was pissed she couldn’t get in on account of her age. Sam said she’d better go out and talk to her. I followed her out. We got caught up at the intersection of East and Alexander as the crowd had bulged for the grand finale. A blonde foreign, perhaps Indo-European attractive woman looked back at me and danced closer in the crowd. Sam instinctively, then, took my hand and took me away through the crowd. We found her friend, crying on the little knoll by that huge ancient apartment building.

Conrad’s sister and her fiancé showed up and they asked for the thin cigar with which to roll. Sam’s friends asked me and unfortunately it had fallen from my ear. I went out on my own to get another one. The night had fallen. I went around the corner into Monty’s to get a whiskey and stand in the window. I

danced and drank and stared out the window. Passersby laughed and it was glorious. I could not see Sam and them. She texted me then: “Hey, where’d you go? I’m about ready for round two.”

I went back there where they had been standing on the street. They were not there. I despaired, fervently looking in the night as the crowd dissipated. Then I found her, them, having drifted just a little further out. We walked back, Sam and me.

“Well, no weed,” I said.

But at least I bought her a slice of pizza. We ate and walked. The random remaining night howlers, brawlers and wounded gazelles all made their way home. I shared the story of how Conrad and E-Monz and Jay-Boss all got in a fight on the strip of Alexander that got a little sketchy going towards University Ave, and how Jay just froze while Eric tackled this huge thuggish guy over the steel rail of the parking lot while Conrad got in a few before being pummeled and pounded good until old Jay-Boss came in with a swift kick to the guy’s jaw.

She was unimpressed. No amount of violence could impress her.

We went into the apartment building. I had to check on Conrad, which was probably a mistake – should have just taken her upstairs. Tim was sitting up and I doted on him.

“Sam, isn’t Tim the coolest guy with his angel long blonde hair and his awesome sense of being and all?”

“Ok man,” Tim said.

“Is Conrad here?” I said.

“No, he’s not back yet,” Tim said, navigating the music videos on the TV screen with the PlayStation controller.

“Think he’d mind if we slept over?” I said, ruining the night.

“I have to go,” Sam said, “can you take me home?”

“Yeah sure,” I said. And I took her home. “Goodnight Sam,” I said. I kissed her on the cheek in the dark in my car and she got out and went in and I pulled out and went home.

... ..

The next day I slept late and thought it was over, kicking myself in my bed for ruining the moment by suggesting the use of Conrad’s bedroom. It was considerably bigger though and it was just a half joke. No public evidence of our lust, though. You should’ve known, I told myself. This was purely a fling. She didn’t want any friends even thinking that it was anything more. In hot breath we’d decided that too: “Let’s just be fuck buddies for a while” I’d said and she’d nodded her agreement.

She had to be unsatisfied, though, knowing her. She had to have her round two. But this would have been round three, actually. And most certainly, late in the day, after tidying up and dusting my place – a good practice that meeting a girl like Sam will entice a guy to do more often, a habit which I’d tried to embrace and make a daily routine – the text came in: we were to meet that night at Starry Nites Café.

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Sam looked ravishing, I must say. She emerged from the night in this black silk cocktail dress and we wheeled over into the city. We decided for some dry Riesling, discovering that we both only liked it dry.

“I love your hair,” commented the girl behind the counter as we ordered.

“Thanks,” Sam said with a quick blush.

She had some locks in braids going back in front, yet she left enough room for her bangs. It was cute as hell. Plus she had some reddish highlights sashaying across there. I didn’t know how she did it. In my awe and upon my first sip of Riesling I missed a little exchange there between Sam and the girl. But I believe it was her explaining that red was her natural color. And didn’t I too possess a speck of ginger in my lineage, sporting a red patch in my sideburns no less, least that’s what the girl at Hair World told me before she turned it back to my original dark black. As I said, this was thankfully right before Sam came around to throw herself at me, right after California.

We sat giddily as old schoolmates (heck, we were) in the corner of Starry Nites. There weren’t too many people out that young Saturday night, just a few students pecking away on laptops, reading casually, some highlighting. A man was setting up to play the ukulele.

“This is where Frank used to take me,” she said.

I smiled and made easy conversation as we sipped that chilled dry white wine in the room of Monet and dark blue antiquated walls and elegant old furniture. She was glowing, as though she’d just escaped from somewhere. She was constantly escaping with me, so it seemed, and her face lit in the cool light of

the wine as she hovered above it, her chin on the back of her folded hands. We sat in the corner and drank and talked. Then we went right next door to that ritzy little restaurant.

We sat down and discussed risqué things we'd done or considered in our young lives. We sat by the tall thin windows and we sunk down in the old living room chairs around that antique coffee table they have there in the barroom.

"This place – there's a story behind this place," I said.

"Oh yes – caught my eye," she said to the passing waiter. She ordered another vodka cran something or other fruity cocktail; I another gin and tonic.

Was she flirting with that waiter?

"So what is the craziest thing you've ever done?" she asked.

"Well, I've..." I told her about my travels, briefly; then stumbled into an admission of having tried cocaine.

"I wonder how I would act on cocaine," she said.

"Ah, it was stupid," I said, "You're flawless – radiant enough as it is."

And in the evening sun through the window of that elegant place she emitted a lovely fickle white luminescent girlish hue. She was very proud of how white she was.

"Did I ever tell you who I took to the senior ball?" I said then.

"You took Adrian Conway," she said, decidedly.

"I asked her – she said yes but backed out at the last minute – wait, how'd you know?" I said. I raised an eyebrow at her.

"I just...heard." She shrugged.

“No, I ended up taking this girl, Ashley Smith – my sister’s friend – this blonde really sorta slutty yet innocent girl – I don’t know maybe she was just poor – but I can’t believe Adrian backed out. I think it must’ve been a race thing? You never know. At any rate, I went with my sister’s friend, took her out to dinner right here – we sat over by the window in the dining room over there and she said the cutest thing: first off she ordered this shrimp scampi noodle thing and she hardly touched it but cut it all up into little pieces, then after a nice bottle of champagne -- my treat -- you know how I have to doll it up for special occasions, right? – and the waiter comes back and she looks up at him and sort of curls into herself and goes, ‘My you’re tall – I don’t even want to stand up, you’re so tall. I’m a shorty.’ Or a ‘short thang,’ I think she said.”

“I know how she feels. I’m five one,” Sam said.

“I’m a foot taller than you,” I said. “But that was one tall waiter. It’s just that she was legitimately embarrassed. It was cute. One little step out into a more elegant soiree than she’s used to I suppose. She’d never been out to a restaurant in the city apparently and with the champagne and all – can sweep a girl away, I suppose.”

“I’ll say,” she said.

“Anyway we ended up making out real sloppy-like on the dance floor at the Lotus Country Club.”

Sam was laughing, checking her texts intermittently, which seemed a natural habit of hers, but laughing nonetheless.

“During the graduation ceremony they showed us together on the big screen – I swear I had a lipstick smudge on my cheek. Our faces all flushed red, too. I don’t know, it was just funny.”

Sam finished her drink, snapped her phone closed and put it in her purse. Some plan about meeting her friends had dissolved. “Wanna get out of here?” she said.

“Surely,” I said with a classic corny half drunken smile and a wink.

We went for the door and made it out into the clear gray early evening.

“You might have to carry me,” she said, half tripping on the curb.

“I’m ready for ya,” I said, about to scoop her up.

But she made it to my apartment, arms interlocked, leaning against me, and I pulled open that worn golden handle under the walkway awning and in we went.

Due to the risk of giving out details too prurient for the Supreme Court, or what have you (and I do promise you there is a redeeming quality to the end of this exposé) I must unfortunately skim over the details of our impassioned pleasure in my sweatbox of an apartment for round three. I will give this one little one though: as I kissed and breathed into her lovely neck, lobe and shoulder area I felt her hot whisper in my ear: “You can tell me anything you want, you know....I won’t remember.”

She must’ve been able to feel my thinking head against her for I had been trying to summon the right words.

“Oh Sam,” I said.

“Go on,” she said. “You can tell me, tell me you love me,” she said.

“Oh, Sam I do – I do love you,” I said at last. I kissed into her and sort of disappeared in her with my eyes closed. “I can’t believe your boyfriend wouldn’t fuck you. What was his name?”

“Frank.”

“Right, Frank,” I said, fucking her.

“Yeah, what an idiot,” she breathed, barely able to close her mouth.

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I had started to sweat.

At least I’d had an AC unit put in earlier that day. Two hundred dollars at Wal-Mart. Waited five minutes in line with Timbo then drove out of the ghetto back home to install the thing right before she called. So I had the cold air funneling in right on us where we lay, relayed to us via a vertical shaft of a fan that scanned back and forth from the AC in the window to us on the bed.

As we lay there feeling the AC come and go on us, her on her back, me on my side in the twin bed, I felt totally cool and satisfied. Night came and she’d passed out long ago: “If I have any more orgasms I’ll pass out,” she’d pronounced.

“Go ahead, pass out,” I’d said.

I turned over in the night then propped up on my elbow. As I watched her sleep, it occurred to me: “Who is this fleshy thing beside me?”

“You with all curves and me with no brakes,” I’d actually delivered while running the back of my hand along the swift slope of her shoulder blade to her stomach and butt. “Have you ever heard that?”

“Yes, but not to me,” she said, hesitating for just a moment.

What could I say? She’d admitted she was self-conscious about her body? Her? No way. Can’t have that. So the line just came out, and I’d meant it. It was true.

I moved then. She suddenly did, too. I sat up.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, can you take me home?” she said.

We both agreed, even with the AC and fan, it was rather difficult to sleep in that place on a twin. Besides, she needed her beauty sleep. Sam collected her bra from the handle bars of my bike. She dressed quickly and before I knew it I pulled into her place and looked over at her with a sly smile in the dark.

“Goodnight, Sam,” I said.

She shot me a weary glance. Exhausted? Ashamed? “Good night,” she said and got out and went in across the grass to her place.

XXI (excerpt)

I didn't see Sam again for weeks. What are you going to do? Wait, I did see her again, briefly. She came into Starry Nites while I was writing – red hair, gorgeous – no, that wasn't her. A look-a-like, a fraud. Are we all just copies and of what original strand? Nay, there is only one unbelievably gorgeous, beautiful, virtuosoest, best, Sam!

She messaged me again, saying how bored she was. I enticed her to a movie at my place, a romantic comedy I'd swiped out of Red Box. Should've gone with the thriller she brought over, though. Never watch a romantic comedy with a girl you're crushing over, especially if it's more romantic. This one was, with slowed-down scenes about "what are we becoming" and all. And I could've had her cringing into my shoulder as Liam Neesan takes back his daughters from a fat, evil Arab royal on the East River.

She pushed back my yellow laptop to the foot of the bed and we rolled over together facing the wall which she'd once pressed her hand against so passionately, which now only seemed to embody the end of our little conversation.

"I'm just really tired," she said. "Wanna give me a massage?"

"Of course," I said, and I got up to get the oil, an old gift from my German girl.

"No need," she said.

“Right,” I said, remembering the silky Irish shimmer of her skin in my hands. She drank a lot of water, so she’d explained.

“But don’t be brutal,” she said.

I massaged her as she lay on her back and side and we cuddled together and began to grow still and talked about the past.

“So what about your ex-German love?” she asked.

“Well, it’s complicated. We first met in a rush at a club – turned out I was the other guy. Foolishly, I volunteered to stick around till she chose me. Coulda just let her go. I remember there was a chance. She was literally turning away and I said, ‘Wait.’ What can I say? I’m a sucker for beautiful women and we had some nice times together, travelled the world, New Zealand, Ireland, France. But I had a lot of suppressed vengeance planned on account of being the other guy so long. We seemed to have a long artfully complicated sort of international battle back and forth. I mean I showed up there once uninvited. Bam. I’m at her door in Germany. Had to figure out what was going on with her and this other guy. I stayed at the hotel in her small town where we first made love, I suppose is the proper term... Anyway, it worked. About a year later she came, not exactly crawling, but she came back and I took her, far too easily now I will admit in hind sight. That whole open relationship just killed me.”

“Yeah, it would me,” she said.

“Right? It’s a European thing. After all my attempts to escape and be some kind of literary expatriate I find myself back stateside. But hey, why can’t there be love in America?” I said. “After all, we won the war.”

In the yellow light of my apartment we shared a laugh and I began to massage her front.

“We haven’t won any recently but we won the big one,” she teased.

“And we’re still trying,” I said.

She undid her bra then and I felt her underneath. Bliss. Nothing but one right hot silky balloon of bliss full in my tender grasp.

Heavenly, divine. I kissed up her nape and ear.

“Well, I better go,” she sighed. She sat up. “I have work in the morning.”

“You know I’m going to have to turn you into literature,” I said. “You’ll be my Lady Ashley.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so.”

“The rising quiet desperation of it all: the veteran and his unattainable love.”

“And you’ll be all impotent from the war.”

“I don’t know about that part. You’re not gonna have to sleep with the matador are ya?”

“Well, just make sure you get it right,” she said, and she sat up and I watched her reach back and under to snap back her bra with expert precision. And just like that she was gone. I drove her back and said goodbye, cordially. Little did I know she would not be answering my texts for months.

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Then set in the great silence of that late summer between us. She’d post song lyrics like, “Kathy I’m lost I said / Though I knew she was sleeping....”

And one of her friends tried to guess the reference totally missing with *Wuthering Heights* of all else and I claimed it: “America by S&G!” She liked this comment with a white-gloved thumbs up. Sublime. I didn’t even know you could like a comment before that. It’s all random, fast, lovely, haphazard, hot and heavy bliss, then it’s gone, isn’t it? And it’s nothing then but a few comments and thumbs up here and there. She wouldn’t even poke me anymore.

Overwhelmed with graduate school and student teaching, I finally received a substantial paragraph from my dear friend Samantha about mid November:

Hey, Sorry I haven’t talked to you very much in a while. Truth is, I got back together with my boyfriend, Frank. I’ve moved back in and have been living with him back in our house. We’re going to try to work things out....

That guy? She just wanted a comfy house she could decorate while plotting to cheat again and find someone else, someone more set up. If only I had a house.

“He’s a graduate student at the U of R,” Sam had said at the Jazz Fest, puffing me up a bit as she introduced me to her friends.

She didn’t just want anybody. She wanted a guy with a house and a job. A girl doesn’t just jump from a fancy house out in Webster to a guy with a studio apartment on University Ave. with 50 grand in student loans, no less. Ok, so once she’d messaged me and we got together for a drink at Jeremiah’s in Rochester. They must’ve been fighting themselves apart again, I could only surmise. We sat giddy as schoolmates again across from each other under the bar light drinking

beer. She told me her current woes about her boyfriend and her work in sales at some company, how she couldn't get promoted and how they were taking advantage of her and even how she had a thing for older guys, including her boss, who was 32. And would she ever break that glass ceiling? Or would she ever break out into fashion and / or literature? Would she ever have her coveted family and career? Would her crystalline desires ever truly be satisfied by this world? I took her hand across the table and kissed it.

“Oh Sam, you're going to be fine,” I told her.

She smiled but looked up at my hairline immediately afterwards, I believe. I now nearly had an island of hair at the fore. What are you going to do? Just own it like Bruce Willis, advised my brother. Besides, she liked older, right?

I dropped her off that night and breezed my knuckles through her luminous locks.

“Yeah, I'll be fine,” she said. “I'm just gonna take a Xanax. I'll be fine.”

“Feel better,” I said. “And don't hesitate to call.”

XXV (excerpt)

“This really is the best deal in town,” Sam said. “Gotta show you around on the cheap,” she said.

“Fine by me,” I said.

“And this is where Brooklyn begins,” said the announcer. “We keep going and we’ll hit a sign that says: Pennsylvania: Where America begins...”

We got off in Brooklyn and got a beer and a slice of pizza. The girl behind the bar said she was an actor.

“There you go,” Sam said. “You can do acting down here.”

“Yeah, well...I do have my bartending license,” I said.

“So why are you not a bartender?” she said.

“Cause I’m not a hot chick,” I said.

And we walked out without paying for our pizza. I didn’t realize it until we were busing through Manhattan. There were just so many people in that bar / pizza shop.

I had just hopped off on Canal St. and Sam had wandered off to the park overlooking the Statue of Liberty out on that little piece of New Jersey, when this guy tried to sell me a watch.

“No, what else? What else you want?” he said.

Ring necklaces with *Amore* inscribed in them, earrings, fake gems, rubies, silver and gold, pearls galore, like popcorn in a trench coat.

I picked up a bracelet from his little stand then. It had little peaches and apples chained together in sterling silver.

“Real silver fruit bracelet, my friend – 50 dollars,” he said.

“Twenty-five, no twenty,” I said.

“40,” he said, “Final offer, take it or leave it; I throw in T-shirt and certificate of authenticity – some real silver in that bracelet my friend?”

He'd used all the bargaining phrases. At least he gave me a neat little white box for the bracelet, which I chucked inside my inner jacket pocket.

I crossed the street and found Sam with a squirrel running up her leg.

"How cool is this?" she said.

I took a picture of her and a Chinese family took one of us and she let me post it, even, and people started commenting from way back: Norm and Bill and even Coco: "*Looking right at home there Ben...real slick...*" and: "*Who's your friend?*"

Susie W. gave it a thumbs up, too. She was out there studying marine biology apparently, like she always wanted -- so I gleaned from the picture of her kissing a dolphin.

It's amazing, this social media thing. I'd thought that I'd sort of peaked at Nintendo and AOL but now I finally got it -- and I must've just missed the cut at first -- always the oldest of my generation, but, indeed, it's like one big constant reunion.

"Way 2 go tank driver!" Bill commented.

And those guys, Chance, back home with his young wife in Montana, American Phil, back with his young family over in Florida, they all liked it. The Elmer Fudd look-alike, enjoying retirement in Tennessee, apparently. And Jay-boss and Conrad, Timbo, and all those true-blue east coast boys who hadn't yet given in to the idea of constantly updating their status, well, I'm sure they would've tipped their hats. And for all my old friends that didn't make it, I'd pour a little whiskey in the dirt.

“Got you a shirt,” I told Sam then, as I slid my phone in my inner jacket pocket with the bracelet. We strolled along the dock.

It was one of those “I love NY” shirts. “Thanks,” she said, and she stuffed it in her purse. “I can hang it up in my window or something.”

“Do you realize that we didn’t pay for lunch?”

“Oh yeah, ha!”

“Who says there’s no such thing as a free lunch in NY?”

“I don’t know. Is that a thing?”

We re-boarded the bus and headed back uptown. Gazing out the window like a couple of kids, we held our hands lazily together, and she rested her head on my shoulder again.

We got off near Times Square and got some food and drink at a restaurant with an open table on the sidewalk on Seventh Avenue. We got into some fruitful conversation then. Her eyes danced over the light of her wine as I drank a beer.

You know, I was almost related to Pat Benatar?” she said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, my dad went to school with her on Long Island.”

“I didn’t know your dad was from Long Island. Mine too.”

“Small world.” She laughed and drank her wine.

“So did he hit her with his best shot, er?”

“My aunt apparently blew it for him,” she said. “She was asking about him; said he was cute with his little Jew-fro and everything.”

“And?”

She started dipping bread in this aioli sauce they'd brought out.

"You're the worst damn story teller," I teased.

She reached out with her other hand and smoothed down the alfalfa sprout of hair in the back of my head. As she smiled and continued, I saw her white teeth awash in red wine as her speech grew alluringly coquettish.

"My aunt said he had a girlfriend, so. Besides, my last name would've messed up her image. I like hers way better. Mine just sounds trite and ditzzy."

Hmph. How long have your parents been married?" I said.

"31 years," she said. "And they've only had one fight."

"And it lasted 31 years?" I said.

"How'd you know?" she said.

"My dad tells the same joke over and over," I said.

"Wow," she said, "we've got something in common."

"Right. So Samantha, it's just you down here, right?" I dared.

"How do you mean?" she said, chewing.

"No, boyfriend, no Mr. Big, no kids? Right?"

"Not right now," she said. "Why, you wanna have kids?"

"Ehh, I've thought about it. But who am I? Who am I to propagate God's single imperfection?"

"Ok, Adam," she said. "Somebody finished an MA."

"If only they could've respected each other as individuals," I said.

"I know, right?"

"Totally."

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

“I can’t believe *you’re* here.”

We both drank dry red wine then, which was on special at that half-Italian half-Irish Seventh Avenue dive. We laughed and leaned in together as the night fell, our teeth red, like children at a wedding.

“So who is that kid with you in your profile picture?” she said.

“My nephew,” I said. “He wards off the bad ones. I’ll take him to the mall sometimes, too. But no, no kids of my own.”

“So you’re free to move down here and save me,” she said.

“You could say that.”

“Teachers get paid really well down here,” she said, “and pretty much, every third person needs to learn English.”

“So what do you think?” she said after a while.

“I think we’ve led very precarious lives. Finding you here now is quite charming, though. And who knows?...”

“No, what do you think?” she said again running her hand through her strawberry blonde hair with a little flip at the end.

We stood at the bar with Martinis now, and I smiled over at her. “Well, gentlemen do prefer blondes, right?”

“Let’s dance,” she said, tugging at my arm.

We finished our drinks in haste and went to dance together. They were playing that hot and heavy scandalous song that had all the women up in arms, with the exception of course of everyone in the club and the singer’s own wife,

apparently. Closer and closer she danced around me, insouciant, relentless, alive. The flash of her under the lights froze her vixen visage in my eye as I'd spin her, hold her, shaking up and down, round and round. Every couple in there seemed to be trying to mimic us, or perhaps to reenact the scene of that one scandalous music video, but nobody got it quite like us. I caught her and she swept down and spun around and shot back up to slow dance for a while, defying our growing audience with a premature ballad.

“Let's get out of here,” she said. “I know a place.”

But we didn't make it past *Toys R' Us* where me made out in front of a father trying to protect his children from soft core porn.

She ran her hand down my shirt.

“Wanna jump in the balls?” I said.

We fell in, briefly; then rushed back out into the night at the behest of some red-suited usher. Sam hooked my arm and we ran to the street where she hailed a cab with a whistle that nearly summoned Jesus.

“Top of the Rock,” she said to the cabby.

It occurred to me that we could've walked, but the cabby seemed pretty chill, and he had that other song, that techno pop catchy song on in the cab, so we wheeled out into traffic right past this huge black guy saying, “If you da party people, I got the party stuff!”

She swayed against me in the cab and we had our little Hemingway moment. Her arms were cold. I put my jacket around her.

In the nick of time we'd made it before they closed up down at the base of the Rock, with Atlas shrugging 'neath that iron globe. It didn't even occur to me until much later, but we were literally backtracking over heartbroken ground for me. I did not tell her this, but my previous German love and I had been there a year ago and she didn't go up with me, too costly. But she let me take her camera. I'd flipped through her pictures -- couldn't help it -- only to see a thousand of her and this Asian fellow and some more of her and a German chap. She was quite the one for boyfriends, but she wouldn't come up. For Sam, though, I gladly paid the 44 dollars for both of us to go past the mysterious floor of her favorite sitcom, you know the one, and up to the top with the words of Gertrude Stein, as they were displayed above the reception desk in a bronze panel, ringing in our ears: "'Tis the greatest sight I've ever seen, ever seen, ever seen..."

The greatest city in the world spangled out in endless stretches around us and for the first time that night I saw the girl I knew. It occurred to me then: how a guy like me could stick it out and come to be accepted by somebody once perceived as so blasé, so Chanel No.5 (though she did have a modest upbringing, didn't she?), so Vogue-aloof yet straight-laced and sharp, and current, ever current – full in red in the night, in my arms, before me.

"Sam," I said.

"Yes?" she said.

"You know, you met me at a very strange time in my life."

"Hm, same here," she said, stars in her eyes as she closed them and lilted up on her toes and back down to drift back and open them again.

“Will you be my girlfriend?” I said, and I took out the fruit bracelet.

She needn’t say a thing. She arched her bare heels, departing the leather, and kissed me slightly – showed me the pinkness of her gums.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean I am, a Yankees fan.”

“I think we can make an exception,” I said.

“And *Harry Potter*?” she said.

“That will have to be a later discussion.”

She laughed into me. The buildings stood like statues in the night, like classical nudes looking on. She arched her heels once again and in slid that devilish Irish tongue of hers to seal the night away with the juiciest kiss.

The End.

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