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Almost Everybody Loves a Wedding

A.C. KOCH

*There are as many reasons to get married as there are marriages.
Maybe more.*

1. Record, Focus, Zoom

DAVID IS AS QUEER AS A THREE DOLLAR BILL. Everybody knows that—including Eliza, the girl he's just married. He was born in France but grew up in New York. Despite being more American than anyone I know, he doesn't have papers. Eliza has known this all along. She knows he's marrying her for the papers and no other reason except an excuse to have a party, but I guess people get a little weird when a wedding is involved. David is a very good-looking man. Maybe she was thinking she'd get a complimentary consummation on their wedding night in gratitude for the favor she was doing him. Or maybe she just wanted the pretty pictures to show her family. I'm not one of them, but some girls can get weird about weddings.

"She's looking at me," says David as he puts down another glug of champagne.

"She's your *bride*," says Pierre. "She's allowed to look at you. You have to allow her that."

Pierre's hand is on David's thigh. They're sitting close together on a love seat under a window that lets in a great swath of cityscape. Pinpoints of light from skyscrapers dance behind them. I'm filming from the floor, video camera propped on my knees.

David: "You know what I mean. It's one of those across-the-bar looks. The take-me-home-and-do-me look."

Pierre: "Oh yes, I know it well."

"You certainly do. That's why I took you home and did you."

"Was that why? Or was it my come-over-here-and-be-my-daddy look? I was giving you a lot of looks that night, you know."

"Actually, I think it had more to do with your Space Pants." In unison they sing, "*Your ass is out of this world!*" Then they're cackling and hanging on one another. I twist and capture a shot of Eliza as she turns back to the cocktail table. She's irritated. Not the kind of look you want to see on a woman in a wedding dress.

Pierre wrinkles up his nose. "*I should be the one wearing that dress.*"

A BUNCH OF THE OTHER GIRLS HERE WORK WITH ME at a strip club on Sixth Avenue. So how hard do you think it is to get a bunch of strippers at a party to take off their clothes? Answer: Like shooting fish in a barrel. The problem is, everyone's already seen us naked a thousand times.

Imagine partying with a bunch of your co-workers from Taco Bell and they all decide to put on their uniforms. You just feel like you're behind the counter again at work.

The essential thing, however, is that Eliza's friends are all strangers to us, and to them this is a strange party indeed. The gap between us is what makes the party: they just can't believe what a freak scene they've stumbled into. Here's how the party devolves:

Camille and Jenny both get completely naked. They're just dancing, or standing around drinking, mingling here and there—but completely naked. Eliza's friends try to be cool but the guys are having a hard time of it. Some college kid with a shaved head and goatee can't seem to believe his luck. He follows the girls everywhere, desper-

Pierre wrinkles up his nose.

***"/ should be the one
wearing that dress."***

ately trying to strike up a conversation. They are cruel and dismissive. They flaunt themselves, fondle one another's hips, kiss full on the mouth. Me, I decline to disrobe. I'm behind the camera. I need to melt into the background.

Meanwhile David and Pierre slip away for a while into an empty bedroom with coats strewn all over the bed. Pierre sticks his head out the door and begs me to get him Eliza's wedding dress. "How am I going to get the dress off the bride?" I want to know.

"Get her laid!" he whispers.

2. Not Very Romantic

THEY MET, DAVID AND ELIZA, THROUGH THE *VOICE* classifieds only two months ago. David's ad said this: *Who wants to get married? French national looking to obtain U.S. wife any way he can. I'll make it worth your while.* Eliza, I think, was the kind of girl who reads the personals because they're funny but maybe also because she hadn't had a real date in years. A French national? Wants to get married? Hey, that's a recipe for romance for a hard-up chick with an imagination.

David made it very clear over the phone: "Okay, sweetheart, you need to know a few things right from the get-go. One, I'm as queer as a three-dollar bill. I have a lover named Pierre and we own a flat together, we have a chocolate lab and a talking parrot and I'd marry him if I could—Pierre,

not the parrot. Two, I need U.S. citizenship so I can get a passport and travel and for that I need to marry a nice American girl such as yourself. Three, I'll pay you three thousand dollars and a lifetime subscription to *Wine & Spirits*. Four, We have a gorgeous knockout wedding for all our friends and family to see—no kissing the bride, though—and then I go on a honeymoon with Pierre, and maybe you'll just meet someone nice at the reception. Or do you already have a boyfriend?"

She didn't already have a boyfriend. But she did have her grandmother's wedding dress hanging in the closet and she was going to be 30 before she ever tried it on. And you know the stats on women in their thirties getting married: about as likely as a comet hitting you before you finish this sentence. I imagine her twisting the phone cord around her finger as she listened to David's bubbly chatter. Was he up front? Could she turn him around? Three thousand dollars and a knockout wedding—and would her friends and family have to know it was a scam or could she play it off as the real thing? Surely the newlyweds would have to share a residence for awhile until the paperwork went through. Then divorce? Or some kind of compromise? The ongoing illusion?

"Then after a year or two," David said, "We divorce the hell out of each other and throw another fabulous party. How about it?"

"Well," she said, "sounds like fun. Not very romantic, though."

David couldn't stop using that line. We'd be deciding on a restaurant or what kind of beer to buy. "Red Stripe? Sounds like fun—not very romantic, though!" Howling laughter, doubled over. But it should've been a warning, that line. She obviously wanted romance, poor thing. She wanted romance so bad she was going to take her grandmother's wedding dress out of mothballs to marry a gay man for three grand and a knockout party.

3. Pierre Wants the Dress

JAMES, BEHIND THE WET BAR, IS SERVING UP WHOPPER cocktails. This is his flat, which he shares with two strippers from the club. The place is wall-to-wall Persian rugs and tapestries, and there's a velvet theme among the furniture. Christmas lights are strung everywhere like cobwebs casting a blinking glow over a galaxy of knickknacks. They sprawl across the mantle, over door frames and along bookshelves: porcelain shoes, *Star Wars* figures, miniature Buddhas, vibrators, plastic food, incense burners, Pez doodads, pacifiers. Dozens of framed prints from a classical Japanese sex manual hang from the dark red walls. A row of windows looks out over the half-lighted towers of the financial district where stockbrokers and

lawyers, working late on a Saturday, could peer right into our fiesta like watching a crowded stage play where the choreography has gone totally awry.

"James," I say as he's fixing my screwdriver, "how am I going to get the dress off the bride?"

He raises his eyebrows at me as he's pouring the vodka. "Honey, I didn't know she was your type."

"Pierre wants the dress."

"Aha."

"Any ideas?"

He keeps pouring the vodka until there's no more room for orange juice. "Let me handle it." Big grin: James is straight, and he's been known to go for the full-figured type, God love him. He hands me the drink.

4. A Freak, a Pervert and a Compulsive Liar

THROUGHOUT THE PARTY I'M DRAGGING PEOPLE OVER to my corner and inviting them to talk about disastrous and/or beautiful marriages they've known. In particular I'm concentrating on Eliza's friends because they all seem so normal, so suburban, and are therefore sure to have experienced all varieties of really sick and depraved things. I coerce a woman named Kelly to settle into an armchair pushed against the wall. Behind hangs a sheet with a lamp tilted to pick up the texture in the fabric. Kelly sits there in her teal bridesmaid dress with her hair sprayed out like a fussy bird's nest. Fake pearls circle her throat. She sits forward, fidgety and uncomfortable.

"Kelly, are your parents happily married?"

"Oh, God! Happily! Did you say happily? They should both be shot and put out of their misery. They have the Vietnam of marriages, is what they have. It's my mother. She's a nightmare. She never shuts up, you know? You think I talk a lot? Get my mother in a room and you're finished. My poor father, half the time he's in the hospital with an ulcer, or his colon thing, and I swear he makes himself sick just so he can get away from her. She won't set foot inside a hospital, you see. So I tell him, 'Dad, I'm taking you home with me and getting you away from that old bat.' But you know what? I think he actually enjoys the torture. I think he really does."

"How do you think Eliza and David will get along, Kelly?"

"Oh, God, don't get me started on that one."

NEXT I GET DAVID'S BOYFRIEND PIERRE TO TAKE THE armchair. He's already changed out of his best man's tuxedo and wears a tight white t-shirt. His blond hair is close-clipped and he gazes straight into the camera through rectangular purple eyeglasses. His speech is clear and emphatic and weighted with pauses: he's an actor.

“Oh, you’ll love this. My parents. They met when they were on dates with other people. It was the coldest part of winter, deep dark February. Valentin—my father—was walking through the Montreal train station looking for his date, who was arriving on a commuter train from the suburbs. He sees a woman in a familiar overcoat standing under the arrivals board with her back turned, so he runs up behind her and takes her by the waist—and she spins around and slaps him so hard his glasses go flying and break on the floor! Of course, it’s not his date, it’s Mathilde, and my mother and father have just met. They’re both apologizing profusely, and then this other man walks up and Mathilde turns around and slaps *him* and knocks *his* glasses off while Valentin is just standing there astonished. And then Mathilde takes Valentin’s arm and they walk away while the other guy—the guy who probably should have been my father—just stands there rubbing his cheek. ‘He was twenty minutes late,’ she tells my father as they walk outside, ‘and a girl shouldn’t have to wait that long in the cold.’ So they went and had a drink and my father never mentioned that he was meeting his own date. As far as I know, *that* poor girl—who should have been my mother—is still waiting in the Montreal train station.”

“And does your mother continue to batter your father?”

“She couldn’t if she wanted to, honey. She divorced the shit out of him when I was five and they haven’t spoken since.”

“Heartwarming.”

“Doomed from the start. But at least they didn’t meet in the *Voice* personals. Ha!”

“I HAVE A THEORY ABOUT MY PARENTS.” THE TABLES have been turned on me. Now David is behind the camera and I’m in the armchair. He’s heard this story before, but can never get enough of it. I talk directly to the red blinking dot:

“You see, they’re very normal. They’ve always been very normal. That’s probably why they were allowed to adopt me in the first place. They just seemed like a harmless white suburban middle-class couple, the perfect types to take in a pathetic little Chinese baby on her way to some orphanage. But, you see, I’ve been trying to get to that orphanage ever since—I guess that explains why I hang around *you* freaks.

“Anyway, Phyllis, my mom, she was the stay-at-home type. She’s never had a job. But it’s not like she’s good at cooking or ironing or any of that household crap. She just stayed home and watched TV. How’s that for a role model? Meanwhile, Joe, my dad, was a company man. AT&T. Then he got laid off and *he* became the stay-at-home type. It’s always been very mysterious to me where

the money came from after that. I mean, neither of them worked for years, the whole time I was in high school. I dropped out halfway through my junior year and never set foot in Taylor High again. And you know what? My parents never found out. They never went to conferences, they never asked for a report card. I had always been a good student, and I would periodically tell them about an A+ I’d gotten or about landing on the honor roll, and that satisfied them. You know the stereotype of the studious Asian. Everyone assumes you’re a genius and bound for Harvard. Meanwhile I was spending my days cruising around in my friends’ cars, getting stoned, having sex, stealing shit. For graduation I just told them the wrong time, they showed up late, and we took pictures with me in my friend’s cap and gown. They still don’t know I never got a high school diploma—among a lot of other things they don’t know about me.

“So why were my parents so clueless? I’ll tell you my theory: They’re possessed. You see, my dad had this workshop in the basement. He had all these tools, but he never actually made anything or fixed anything, and his work-

So they went and had a drink and my father never mentioned that he was meeting his own date.

bench was always in perfect order. So what was he doing all the time, down in his ‘workshop?’

“This kind of became an obsession with me and my friends. We’d go spy on him through the basement window during the day, while my mom was upstairs watching TV. For a long time we had this stoned theory that he was using the ventilator system to transport himself across time and space, because he would just disappear for stretches of time—and then he’d be right back at his bench sorting through his screwdrivers. We thought maybe he was some kind of trans-dimensional assassin, and he’d just slip into his energy node behind the furnace and *flash!* he’s running through the alleys of Cairo blowing away some sheik in a cafe, and then he’s whisking back to Gunnison, Colorado to shuffle through his hardware. We thought that would be pretty cool, you know, and it turned into this whole epic thing, where my friends would swear they had just seen my dad rappel past their bedroom window or slip into the back seat of their car, like he was the Terminator or something.

“But one day I went snooping in the workroom when he and my mom were at the store, and I went behind the furnace to see where he’d been disappearing to... and I

found this little crawl space that I'd never seen before. It stretched all the length of the house, with a dirt floor and about a five foot ceiling. I took a flashlight and went all the way back in there, and in the far corner there was this weird container. It was a big jar, as big around as a tree trunk, with a clamped-down lid, and it was nearly filled with this weird fluid, kind of pink and pasty." David, behind the camera, is squirming with delight. Several other people have gathered around, but I look only into the camera eye.

"Now I see a bunch of stuff piled up against the wall in the corner. I don't touch anything, I just run my flashlight over it all. There're stacks of magazines and newspapers: some pornos, some *National Geographics*, some car magazines, some of everything. There's also a cooler—with a *padlock* on it. And there's a garbage bag full of food wrappers: chips, hot dogs, beer cans, meat trays, coffee cans. And my dad's footprints are everywhere. His hiking boot tracks completely cover the floor, and they make a circle around the jar. Am I creeping you out? I hope so. I mean, what was in the jar? *What was in the jar?*"

"I sure wasn't going to open it. Whatever it was looked nasty. Like he'd been dumping all that food in there for years. But something else too. Some other ingredient. I decided to keep an eye on my dad and see what I could get out of him. See if he would drop any clues.

"Well, the thing is, I got so creeped out I couldn't be around him anymore. We'd be having dinner, you know, pork chops and applesauce, and we'd be eating in silence and my dad would be there sucking the meat off the bone and my mom would be doing a crossword at the table and all I could think of was that *thing* down there, right below us, and how nobody in this house had a soul, and I started to think that my parents were genuinely possessed. No more trans-dimensional Terminator or anything cool like that, but really *possessed*, really *evil*. Because here was my mom, completely without a personality of any kind, and here was my dad, hoarding some kind of mucous solution in the crawl space, and no one ever said anything, ever.

"I moved out as soon as I was 18, and I absolutely will not set foot in that house again. They still live here. They're still married. They've probably still never once had sex—because I guess my dad just has sex with that jar—and they still think I work at a publishing company in Manhattan. They visit me once a year and I wear business outfits and impress them with what a professional woman I am. When really what they've produced is a freak, a pervert and a compulsive liar. Ha!"

David is cackling his ass off. The others watch me with mixtures of disbelief, disgust and hilarity.

"Was that for real?" says the plump blonde bridesmaid. "Did that really happen?"

"Here I am," I say. "My parents made me what I am. What else do you want?"

5. Kissing the Bride (part one)

BY NOW THINGS ARE GROOVING HARD. STEVIE Wonder's on the stereo serving up something funky and everybody's wiggling, naked or not. I see James the bartender dancing up next to Eliza the bride. He's really going after her, running his hands through the air all around her hips and ass. She's drunk and stumbly, not so much dancing as lurching, beer bottle in her plump little fist. Sweat spots are appearing in the folds of her grandmother's wedding dress. He reaches out and pulls the veil down over her face and she seems not to notice. She throws her arms around his neck and presses her body against him. His hands are trying to find her ass in all the folds and creases of the dress. Her face goes blurry with glee.

David and Pierre, meanwhile, have disappeared. Is it bad manners to ditch your own wedding party? I go investigating among the pantries, closets and bedrooms along the corridor winding through the apartment. Behind James' bedroom door I hear giggles worth peeking in on. Inside it's humid with darkness and whispering sheets.

"Glory? Is that you?" David and Pierre are tangled in a sailor's knot, peering at me in my sliver of light.

"Yeah. You newlyweds having fun?"

"Mmmm."

"Hey, your wife is still wearing the dress but we might be able to get her out of it. James is working her."

"Well for Heaven's sake, get her out of it before he works her *too* much. I don't want it stained or anything."

"What are you going to do with it?" I want to know.

"What do you think, Glory? You're going to make a movie. A wedding movie."

"Aha."

"And I assure you there'll be a lot of having and holding."

EVERYBODY'S DANCING. MAYBE THE FREAKS AND the Straights can be friends after all. I groove up next to James and match his dance wiggle for wiggle. "Get out of here!" he yells, "I'm dancing with the bride!"

But not for long. Eliza steps on her train and goes down with a crash in a flurry of satin and lace. She sits sprawled on the hardwood floor, blinking. Her beer bottle blisters up sending foam running down her forearm and she stares as it trickles toward the edge of her sleeve. "Fuck!" she spits out.

James is there to help her but she doesn't want to move. I have her neatly framed in my viewfinder as legs gather around and hands reach down to pull her up. That's when I

see her eyes go watery. Tears quiver like drops on a faucet, then come streaming down. Black mascara streaks through pale foundation. She looks like a scene from “The Wizard of Oz,” melting into the floor through the puffy cloud of her grandmother’s dress. But is she the good witch or the bad witch? And what has she done to deserve this?

I’m so caught up in the image that it takes me a moment to realize she’s staring right at me. Her eyes in the viewfinder meet mine. “How about another story about disastrous marriages!” she shrieks. Her voice cracks and spittle flies from her lips. She’s leaning forward and glaring into the camera. I keep my head down, eyes on the viewfinder.

“I’ve got a great one for you!” she says, pointing a finger at the camera. “How about the depressed fat girl who hadn’t been on a date in three years! Everybody felt so fucking sorry for her!”

Kelly the bridesmaid tries to pull Eliza up by the armpits but she slaps her away. Eliza’s voice gets quiet and hard, her eyes in the camera. “Every day she read the goddamned personals. And then one day she found the perfect guy who wanted to get married. He sounded like a dreamboat. And he was a fag! But she didn’t even care. She just wanted a wedding, and a party, and for all her friends to stop feeling so fucking sorry for her. But you know what the problem was?” Her eyes burn at the camera, her cheeks streaked with mascara. “*She can’t even get laid on her wedding night!* How’s *that* for a disastrous marriage? How’s *that*!” The beer foam slithering down her arm soaks into the satin sleeve. Her face closes up like a fist and her mouth hangs open red and wounded like a baby’s, furious at the rude shock of being born. Tears squeeze out of the creases of her cheeks and dribble down.

Everyone stands around helpless. David speaks up from behind me. “Turn the camera off, Glory,” he says. Then he steps in front of me and pulls Eliza’s arms up. She struggles against him for a minute, then gives in. He heaves her to her feet and she wobbles as if about to go down again. I marvel at the sight of David in his untucked tuxedo with his arm around Eliza, his wife, in her rumpled wedding dress. I would have loved to have gotten that image on tape, but I’d already turned the camera off.

David leads her to the couch where they crash down together among the cushions. “Now,” he says, “listen to me, because I’m your damned husband. The first thing we need to do is get you out of that dress—you’re never going to get laid wearing that thing around. Then, once you’ve slipped into something more comfortable, I’m going to introduce you to some nice straight boys, or at least bi’s. How’s that sound?”

She looks blearily at him, expressionless as a half-finished painting. “Why don’t you kiss the bride,” she says, and her red eyes narrow at him.

David looks around but there’s no one to help him. Pierre, leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets, rolls his eyes theatrically. But when you think about it, what could be more reasonable? This is a wedding party, isn’t it? Shouldn’t the bride and groom kiss at least once? Nothing else normal has happened all night, but wouldn’t a simple kiss be all right? I suppose that’s the girl in me talking. Girls all have that soft spot deep down, every one of us, no matter how punk rock we think we are.

Maybe David saw something in my expression. He looks from me to his wife and he gives her a little smile. It’s a smile like I’ve never seen on him before—what he would look like if he had been born straight. I never would have imagined it. He closes his eyes, seals his lips and kisses the girl. I see the corner of her lips turn up. She grabs a handful of his lapel and keeps his face pressed to hers until they both need to breathe. They separate with a little gasp and loll back on the cushions and the whole room is abuzz with silence. David casts a sheepish look over at Pierre. “My first time,” he says.

“Not very romantic, though,” says Pierre.

**Girls all have that soft spot
deep down, every one of us,
no matter how punk rock
we think we are.**

Eliza waves her arm to dismiss all such talk and says in a clear, strong voice, “That was absolutely the louisiest kiss of all time.” Laughter ripples around. She puts her hand on David’s shoulder and says, “If that’s all you got, honey, you can keep it for yourself.”

For once, David doesn’t have a comeback. He can see that the only way out of this is to let Eliza have the last laugh. In a weird way, isn’t that the kind of compromise that genuine married couples have to make all the time? But who would have imagined it from these two?

Eliza pushes herself to her feet and begins pulling the dress over her head as if it were an old sweatshirt. David and I and the bridesmaids are there to help her, unbuttoning the ties and unbuttoning the buttons and pulling it all overhead like removing the velvet drape from a new statue. The bride glows, bodiced and girdled and gartered and bulging. She crosses her arms and juts a hip sassily to one side. “What are you all looking at!” she yells. “Get me a drink! What is this, a funeral?”

I have the dress in my hands. It overflows. I hold it like Old Glory at the graveyard, going over to Pierre. He grins and takes the bundle into his arms. David says, smiling, “I think I could get to like that girl.”

Pierre raises one perfect eyebrow. “Let’s hope it’s not a pattern.”

David shrugs. “Hell, I wouldn’t mind kissing her again. At the divorce party.”

6. Kissing the Bride (part two)

DESPITE ALL THE SHATTERED ILLUSIONS AND drunken desperation, a little genuine romance somehow sneaks in at the end of the night. Watch: David calls me into the bedroom where the curtains blow with the harbor breeze. I have the camera running. Pierre is on the balcony appearing to float among the lights of skyscrapers in a frilly cloud of satin and lace: he’s a blushing bride for all the world in Eliza’s grandmother’s wedding dress. David,

tucked in and dapper, joins Pierre on the balcony and they take each other’s hands. I film from the floor where their silhouettes tower over the city skyline. Whispering, they speak their vows. Having, holding, loving, obeying, till death do they part. It’s not phony, it’s not a sham—they mean it. David pulls off his new wedding ring and slips it onto Pierre’s finger. Then he pulls the veil back. From the other room I can hear someone puking, furniture tipping over, a glass shattering. David the groom kisses Pierre the bride. Their lips press tight, and stay that way. The pin-point lights of the city appear as so much rice and confetti spiralling in freeze-frame all around. Me, I have tears in my eyes. That soft spot, it’s in there somewhere. I let the camera run for the length of the kiss, which is the real thing, and which lasts for a very long time.

A.C. KOCH

Lives in Zacatecas, Mexico, where he teaches college English and edits fiction for Zacatecas (www.zacatecas.org). His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and recently won first place in The Stickman Review fiction contest. He moonlights as a jazzman.

The Autumn Marriage

JOE BOB GRAMERCY

*Sometimes a kept secret ends up hurting the keeper.
But more often, it hurts the one kept in the dark.*

“SECOND CHANCES ARE OVERRATED,” SHE HAD said to him when he proposed.

“No, first chances are,” he answered. “Young people never know what they have. They throw things away without thought, then regret. To get the chance when you’re old is as good if not better.”

And that was why at 48 she had married a man almost twenty years her senior. That one thought struck her as profound because its truth made her feel good. Mind you, she would probably have said yes eventually. After the accident she would remember that night when something other than his own predicament occupied his thoughts, and when something other than the apparent fact that second chances in her life were overrated occupied hers.

It had nothing to do with sex, or so she told herself at first. It was more for companionship, in the way of the stuffed toys in the basement. She had raised the possibility of them getting the toy in June, one year after the accident made it necessary for Roger to have most of his body removed. After that he receded into sullen silence. She had not expected that they would have discussed it

openly, but the silence irritated her nonetheless. It irritated her because she could see his point: he would be replaced in his obligation by something better at the task that he could ever have been. And it irritated her because she was going to do it no matter what he wanted her to do.

The Hanson Sex-Partner Kit (*Young Stallion* model) arrived by delivery drone early in August. For private island customers the normal discreet presentation was unnecessary, so the drone’s hovering, spherical robot told her in copious detail about the product and showed her how to set it up—albeit in a low voice on her instruction. She made sure that the delivery would be at eleven in the morning when Roger listened to Debussy on his headphones. The drone explained that she could grow a functioning, fully self-contained penis of any size she wanted, and just the penis, using the nutrition pump to keep it healthy. She could also grow a headless torso with knees and elbows, an option that many women preferred (knees and elbows aided thrust). She could also grow a headless body or a brainless full man. Brainers were, of course, illegal—bio-ethics and all that.

So there were many stages at which she could have said, this far and no more, particularly where she was told that the protein could be made to copy a digital mask based on a living person, creating a near-exact duplicate of a favorite celebrity or loved one. If adultery was not what she wanted, then why couldn't she use that option to make a twin of her crippled husband? But she chose the standard mold that came with the toy, and chose it to grow into a full brainless soy-man, a young pretty one with an unmaimed body, covered with tan skin and lots of hair on his head and a very large penis. (Of course, the "brainlessness" referred only to the medulla oblongata—the rest of his brain was, like his body, a functioning soy copy of a real one except for the nutrition pump in his stomach, and the fact that his waste came out in the form of edible yellow pellets that were a nutritious and convincing meat substitute, according to the delivery drone's robot.)

Setting up the kit was meant to be easy, even fool-proof: it came with a case to mold the protein as it grew. She started it downstairs in the living-room, which was the most deserted, desolate room in the house. The four hours it took she passed in the garden, trying to escape the feelings of anxiety and guilt and eagerness that wanted to control her. She dugged in the man-made topsoil that covered most of their man-made island and tried not to look at her watch.

In the weeks following she became obsessed with sex, or with the masturbatory variant of sexual activity that covered her behavior with the flesh-colored, muscular, spasming, ejaculator of seedless vegetable-based semen that she kept in the basement. Her time with Roger was more or less the same, never hurried, never cursory—she saw to that. They would have breakfast together in his room, her sitting at the foot of his bed with a tray on her lap as she had every morning since the accident. Sometimes they would discuss the news as it was being shown on the big wall-monitor beside the bed, or they would discuss the garden and the flowers she had planted or intended to order, seeing that he was still the keeper of the purse, a role that he could handle capably still, and thus of which she had no desire to deprive him. But then she would go downstairs and leave him to his music, with his headphones on. Sometimes she would be already naked at the foot of the stairs. The soy toy, with its perfect body and unwavering phallus became the center of her imagination.

"I'M GOING TO GET A SECURE-BOT," HE SAID MATTER-OF-FACTLY at breakfast one morning early in September.

"What?"

"I think we can afford it and it would be, well, fun. Not to mention we're out here by ourselves, Karen—one octogenarian talking head and his fifty year-old wife. I

realize it's unlikely that anyone would come all the way out here to hurt us, but we're vulnerable. I don't like being vulnerable."

"What kind?" She was wondering what to do now, and whether he knew.

"One of the hover-kinds, basic, no fancy gimmicks or anything. A stun gun and a saw. *Zoom zoom*, they fly around and kill things. The one they showed me on the monitor could cut a fly into four pieces in mid-flight... that's how precise it is. If we ever have flies I'll show you."

The drone robot arrived the next day. It came in two parts, which she was to screw together—and then she was to get out of the way. Roger wanted her to do it where he could see.

She was concerned about the sex toy. Of course, she could've switched it off—but once it was off, that was that—it was just synthetic meat. How would she explain the sudden increase of soy in their diet? She had paid for it with her own money, but she never used that money to buy food. Besides, she didn't want to get rid of it—and yet she was terrified that Roger would find out.

Still, she sat on the floor at the side of his bed and assembled the drone where he could see. It was shaped like a discus when its two circular halves were screwed together. The slot between the two halves was for the razor saws. It was light enough that if you dropped it, it would flutter to the ground.

"Okay, let it be. It only has a few seconds before it initiates, and then it will have to get pictures of both of us."

The robot began to whirl and almost instantly to whine, and then the sound of its motors quickly rose to a scream above the level of human hearing. It rose to about a foot below the ceiling and scanned the room. It saw a human female and saved her picture in its initiation files. And then it saw a moving, warm object on the bed. It scanned the database of its manufacturers back in Portland, Oregon. It ran through every species of animal on Earth and drew a blank. The anomaly on the bed had a head like a human's, and so the Secure-bot scanned the human databases as well, including those for body injuries and amputations, including the extremely rare full-body removal. It still found nothing that had no limbs and no torso below the shoulders and yet also had tubes and wires attaching it to what it understood was a computer. This possibility was something neglected by its programmers at Secure-bot Inc.

It was about to send the picture to the Universal Database for it to be looked at and identified by a human, when Roger said: "Initiation finished." With the sending of the picture aborted, the Secure-bot simply registered Roger as a part of the computer, an object.

"Setting?" Asked the robot.

The manual flashed up on the screen of the monitor.
“Two.” Said Roger, reading from the screen. “Target:
humans and humanoid.”

“All residents logged?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Option to disregard property damage in any action to
stop intruder?”

“Disregard.” Said Roger.

“Final check, are all residents logged?”

“Yes.”

To his wife he sounded tense and excited, eager to see
his new toy work. Did he know? Right then he looked at
her and she was certain that he knew.

“Find and kill.” He said.

The robot quickly, silently, left the room.

She followed after it to clean up the damage. She felt
a kind of attachment for her robot, because it had a face.
She was the sort of woman who attached personalities to
things with faces. She kept her dolls and stuffed animals
in a closet in the basement, simply because she was unable
to throw them away.

She hoped that if the toy had emotions, it felt no fear.

The basement door, made of titanium, had been cut
through easily. She threw it open expecting to see her lover
on the floor, bleeding his nourishing soy blood. Instead,
the toy knocked her down and sprinted over her, up the
stairs. The Secure-bot followed at a distance of about ten
feet, checking Portland about yet another peculiarity: a
headless runner.

On the floor of the basement lay the toy’s severed head,
cut off above the chip that told the soy sex-partners how
to do what they did so well. She sighed. And then Roger
was screaming. She sprinted up the stairs and arrived in
Roger’s bedroom as the Portland people decided that, yes,
any running intruder, with head or no, was a legitimate
target. The headless man had just reached Roger as the
Secure-bot began to shred them both.

She was screaming as she tried to pull the soy man away
from her husband. The robot, sensing the lone human in
the house as being physically close to the intruder, worked
even faster to annihilate him, disregarding any and all
objects in their immediate vicinity. She screamed as the
blood, soy and human, hit her face in warm goutts, pelted
her clothing and skin in forceful, slashing, flashing, jets,
and pieces of male flesh thumped against her as the robot
did its work.

JOE BOB GRAMERCY

*Is a struggling writer who is also a struggling web designer/entrepreneur on the side. This is his
first published piece of fiction after roughly 12 years of writing stories, poems, and articles.*

T a k e o v e r

EDWARD VASTA

*Sure, different perspectives can tear people apart.
But it's never really as simple as that.*

ARARE JUNE VACATION FOR IAN BERNARD. JUNE was always a busy month, yet the county road commissioners encouraged it—even though doing so declared their Silent Generation civil engineer, barely into his late forties, dispensable. So to hell with them. Ian arranged it and packed up for California.

Maia Bernard sided with the commissioners, but she wanted her vacation after Christmas, when her art gallery business slowed down. She drove Ian to O'Hare International early so she could get back in time to open the store. At the airport, she gave her husband a perfunctory kiss, waited for him to pull his luggage from the back seat, and took off.

In the terminal, the world of the '60s ambushed Ian from all sides. Young lookalike couples, male and female, in faded jeans, long hair, carrying backpacks, reeking of tobacco, slouching in seats face to face, sprawled asleep on the floor. Some only teens, bearded, wearing motorcycle jackets and headbands, lugging sleeping bags and guitar cases. One kid wore a Navy pea coat, and men as well as women harnessed babies to their backs.

An entire generation roamed about casually and naturally, treated each other politely, conversed cross-legged on the floor. At one point a girl unpacked her guitar and softly strummed. Others hummed along, simple melodies like folk hymns. The teenager in the Navy jacket stripped it off against the heat and sat on the floor cross-legged, his tanned and solid body bare from the waist up, in public. He pinched a smashed cigarette butt to his lips and worked his head back and forth, humming, eyes closed.

These people reminded Ian of Jeff. They could be Jeff's friends, and this observation startled him, made him feel a stranger to his own son. Jeff was cool, confident, and free with buddies, but quiet and morose at home. Confusing, yes, and a confusion his father did not understand.

And what about May?

He let that thought go.

By the time all passengers had crowded onto the plane and settled down, including the half-naked fellow carrying his Navy jacket, Ian didn't mind them. But he still wondered about these holy barbarians. They sat quietly and bothered no one. Many slept; a few walked the aisle, smiling as they moved toward the lavatories. As stewardesses served meals, Ian overheard them tell the standbys that meals were plentiful, so they could have one free.

The two men who filled up Ian's row to the window were also young, but they wore neat sport shirts and short hair. They spoke crisply to Ian and said "Sir." They were soldiers, Ian learned, heading for Hawaii, then back to Vietnam.

MAIA STEERED HER WAY THROUGH AIRPORT LANES and ramps and finally settled into the freeway home. She kept the radio off—too much on her mind. If May and Jeff didn't call soon, she would come apart. Ian was on his way to visit his sick and maybe dying father in Santa Barbara for a couple of weeks, and if the wayward kids sent no word by then, he would drive up north, beyond

**What Maia needed was
time for herself—be alone,
have the freedom to sort
things out.**

the Bay Area, and find their commune.

She pulled into her driveway full of thoughts and plans. She wished John were home instead of at St. Joseph's summer session, but she welcomed a month without preparing meals and leaving notes for her husband. And without Ian's phone calls to her at the gallery! She wished she knew where Seiji was at that moment, but the handsome Japanese businessman could be anywhere on the globe. She decided to write to him that night, after work, when she could stay up as long as she pleased.

Turning the key in the lock, she thought of treating herself to Lobster Thermidor at the Creamy and Delicious instead of a frozen health dinner at home. No, better stick to the frozen dinner—for the figure. She wouldn't have time to eat out anyway.

What she needed was time for herself—be alone, have the freedom to sort things out. She would like to sit at her Shimpo wheel again, spin wet clay under her fingers, live inside her mind. That's where her patience came from. But because women nowadays should be "out there," building careers, she hadn't been at the wheel for some time. Maybe she could get back to it.

The house was cool and dark, the more for being empty. She set down her purse and headed for the drapes on the sunny side. More light. More air. Turn off the air conditioner. Open the house to the warmth of June. Feel summer again. Get into that shower, maybe wear the aqua green sheath to work, maybe the spangled earrings.

ABOARD THE PLANE, IAN'S EYES LOOKED DOWN ON clouds while his mind looked back to his parents. No farmers but lovers of the countryside, they lived in southwestern Michigan until his father retired from high school

teaching. Then they sold the uncultivated farmland and moved to California, to a considerate climate and as much land as could be hoed by hand. That, and a small stucco house amid flower farms and avocado orchards near Santa Barbara.

In the decade since his parents moved, Ian had visited twice, the first to see them settled, the second to visit his father in the hospital, recovering from a stroke. His mother gave his father speech therapy, “to get him talking right,” as she put it.

Mother and father, always together, always agreeing, both tall, sandy haired, thin-waisted, sinewy-armed, and wearing glasses on long bony faces. His mother wore pants more than dresses, and a soft-billed cap over pinned-up hair. While Bud taught school, Rainy picked grapes with migrant workers, “by the jumbo basket,” she would tell her son. She called her husband Bud instead of Stephen; he called his wife Rainy instead of Loraine. Why they had but one child Ian never knew, but whenever the fact came up, his mother called down God’s blessing on the child they had.

MAIA’S AQUA GREEN SHEATH NEEDED TAKING IN, SO she wore her red flared slacks and a flowered see-through blouse tied in front. She opened the gallery in time and set to work sorting and cataloguing items that the owners, the Berringers, had brought from New Mexico. She had suggested to the Berringers that they reorganize their files and secure artwork by such household names as Rudy Pozzoti and Robert Indiana. Now that she had a month to herself, she could look into those possibilities. Mrs. Berringer had only two appointments that day, so Maia could bring it up when she was free.

The bell signaled a walk-in, a middle-aged couple, browsing. Maia got them interested in some Rockwell lithographs. They left in twenty minutes, but would probably come back.

She returned to her desk humming, poured a cup of coffee, and decided to have dinner at the Creamy and Delicious.

IAN’S MOTHER RELISHED HER SON’S PRESENCE, BUT his father seemed preoccupied with some overwhelming question. While mother and son raked, hoed, and mowed, father sat on the patio, staring north at the mountains, then south at the ocean. Occasionally, he read, usually Thoreau, including “On Civil Disobedience,” revived now as a popular tract. Or he stood in his garden and studied his worm-eaten and brown-spotted beans. “Can’t raise beans without spraying,” he confessed, thereby stripping all validity from Thoreau and all order from Nature. Then he threw society into the mess by adding, “Can’t be caught

spraying these days, either.”

To his father, life had lost rhyme and reason. “We crown immaturity with authority,” he pronounced. “Adults have lost all conviction; children are full of passionate intensity.”

Listening to his father, Ian felt a certain guilt. Today’s children—including Jeff and May and John—how did they get that way? No answer. If he didn’t understand his own kids, how could they understand him? Would his own retirement be as sad as his father’s?

Eventually, Ian sat with his dad and stared. Now at the mountains, now at the sea.

Mrs. Bernard worked in the kitchen and garden and let the men talk. Her day was full, and work kept a perpetual smile on her leathery face. She stored her responses in her heart. It was when Ian looked over the house for needed repairs that her heart opened a bit.

Standing on a ladder, Ian saw new roof tiles. “When did you get this done?” he asked.

“Last month,” his mother said. She was hanging laundry to conserve electricity.

“Was the roof leaking?”

“No, but tiles were cracked.”

“Did a good job. This whole place is in pretty good shape.”

“That’s Jeff for you,” she said.

“Jeff?”

“Yep. Came down twice. Borrowed a car the first time. Then rode his bike, poor fellow. Took him a week, round trip.”

It left Ian speechless. He descended the ladder and waited to hear more.

“He comes to make sure we’re all right. Looks around and fixes whatever needs fixing”

“When’s he due again?”

“Don’t know. This fall for sure, he said, but he could show up any time. A fine, fine young man.”

Ian was lost in thought about Jeff. He cast his eye about, to find other signs of Jeff’s work—newly puttied window-panes, a new outside water faucet.

“Lots of fine young folk today,” Mrs. Bernard added. “Real decent youngsters.”

That look of pride in her eyes—Ian was not sure he shared it, just as he was not sure he shared his father’s gloom. He avoided full accounts of the kids’ doings and didn’t want his parents to know that May was pregnant. It came to light that a year or so ago, May dropped in, with a male friend. The visit was awkward, because his father could not accept his granddaughter’s traveling with an older man. May left soon, and never returned.

But May’s child would be their great grandchild and a member of the Bernard family. How could they not know

of it? So one day at the dinner table Ian told his parents about May. His father received the news in stony silence, but his mother's eyes gleamed with gratitude and love.

ATLAST MAIA RECEIVED A LETTER FROM JEFF AND MAY. They apologized, explaining that their community house in northern California had no phone. They worked hard, brought the old vineyards into cultivation, and built a bunkhouse for the expanding community (fourteen members now). May's baby wasn't due until August—she had miscalculated the time of conception—and she was feeling fine, though having trouble gaining weight. “My diet in Oakland wasn't good,” she wrote, “but we eat well now, especially tomatoes. They grow between the new grape rows, give us a fresh vegetable (fruit, really), sauce and catsup for the winter, and a cash crop besides. We're loaded with tomatoes. Jeff thinks he's acquiring an Italian accent.”

Maia called Ian that morning and read him the letter. He sounded subdued, but that didn't deflate Maia's ebullience. “Go up there,” she insisted. “See how they are. Can't you use your folks' car?”

“Yeah, I intend to. Next week. I'll look them up.”

“No news from John,” Maia added. “I guess he's doing all right.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Fine. Things are going fine.”

And they were. The idea of handling established contemporaries went down because the Berringers couldn't compete with the big auction bidders, but reorganized filing took hold because Maia demonstrated the advantages of tax write-offs and controlled cash flow. She had a pleasant dinner at the Berringers and felt rewarded.

Most of all, she was in touch with Seiji. He sent a note from New York, addressed to both Maia and Ian, and Maia called him immediately. When he learned that she was alone, he called daily. They spoke tenderly and their voices made love. Seiji regretted a hundred times that his commitments kept him out of the States while Maia had a month alone, and Maia told him a hundred times that she was glad he couldn't visit her now, for no telling what she might do. They longed for each other and gave each other precise schedules of when they could talk. In early August, as it turned out, Seiji would be in Chicago again, on his way back to Japan. Maia invited him to John's graduation, and Seiji accepted immediately. Courteously, he added that he would be glad to see Ian again, too.

IAN WROTE AHEAD, THEN DROVE UP TO FIND JEFF and May. On the way, he mulled over how upbeat Maia seemed.

He found Jeff and May waiting in the darkness of California wine country—an old Midwestern style clap-

board house, a long low shed behind, a bunkhouse to one side, and a huge wooden water tank. An old stake-racked truck stood beside the tank.

Jeff and May were glad to see him, especially May, but they seemed reserved in their hugs and handshakes. May's teeming stomach pressed against him as he pulled his daughter close, and her arms felt like sticks. Malnutrition looked him in the eye.

“I wasn't eating well,” she anticipated. “I mean, before. I told you that in the letter. I'll be fine.” Her tone dismissed the whole topic.

**When he learned that she
was alone, he called daily.
They spoke tenderly and
their voices made love.**

“What about the baby?”

“It's my baby. That's all that matters.”

“How's grandma and grandpa?” Jeff interjected, and they exchanged notes about the old folks.

Conversation became easy when they talked about the commune. The kids brimmed with information. The community was founded by Don and Alma (Ian never heard their last name), who met and married in med school and dropped out together to build genuine and honest futures. They were the community's chemists, vinologists, and physicians, and they practiced medicine with the whole person in mind, using medicinal herbs and the body's natural healing powers. Jeff and May couldn't wait to introduce Ian to the founders.

They found Don seated at a trestle table, poring over documents. Bearded and portly, Don spoke briefly in a soft voice. He acknowledged Ian's presence, and in two minutes informed the Bernards that Ian was welcome, could stay the whole week, and was expected to reciprocate through skills and labor. When he learned that Ian was a civil engineer, Don became animated, and the two men settled into a conference on an irrigation project on which the vineyard's full harvest potential depended. Jeff and May withdrew when the men turned to a plat with an attached aerial photograph of the community's 80 acres (87 percent arable) and a drawing of an irrigation system in disuse but still in place.

The men were interrupted only by Alma, who came to put away bottles of dry leaves and pick up tomorrow's duty roster. Her strikingly plain American face caught Ian's attention: two brown pigtailed hanging down to her breasts, straight flat mouth, green eyes lined up straight across. Perhaps thirty, moderately tall, she wore bicycle

togs and shirt, and walked with an athlete's gait. Her muscular seat gave her slim back a pronounced curve. She looked straight at Ian, gave him an easy smile, and asked if he was hungry. "Some iced tea and fruit?"

"No, thanks."

Her eyes and smile stayed on him until he had to turn back to Don and the documents.

The rest of the community came in later, from a rap session in the living room. As they streamed past, May and Jeff bade everyone goodnight and escorted their father to his sleeping quarters in the newly built bunkhouse. On the way, they pointed out the outhouse and the well. Ian was assigned the lower bunk of an unoccupied room with a window and three walls made of black plastic drapes. The kids carried a flashlight, explaining that the electricity, while hooked up to the bunkhouse, could not yet be wired to unwall spaces.

The unexpected evening left Ian confused. The community had welcomed him so casually that he felt part of it and was sincerely engrossed in its irrigation problem, but he learned nothing about his children—their health, their condition, their plans. May and Jeff seemed happy with themselves and glad to see him, but that was it.

May gave her father another hug and said goodnight. "I sleep in the house," she explained, "until the baby comes. Don and Alma are right there, all the time."

"If you need anything," added Jeff, handing his father the flashlight, "I'm down at the end."

The children left, and Ian could hear others come in, men and women. They whispered jokes and comments as they moved among the rustling plastic curtains.

In a moment he heard a rap on the floor and Jeff calling, "Dad?"

"Yeah, come in." Ian noted that for the first time that night, Jeff called him Dad.

"It occurred to me, Dad," Jeff said, coming in and speaking low. "Uh... we're totally integrated here."

"Integrated?"

"Yeah. Co-ed. You know... men and women... together."

"Oh, I gotcha, Jeff. Okay. Thanks."

"We kind of pair up, you know? And feel free to change partners."

"Change partners...?"

"Right. So... you might hear things."

"All clear, Jeff. I gotcha. Thanks for the warning."

"We do try to keep things quiet..."

"Nothing more to say, Jeff. I understand."

"Good. Well, goodnight then."

"Goodnight, Jeff. Goodnight."

That left Ian wide awake. He cocked an ear to every sound, and the noises he expected started immediately.

Plastic rustled, bare feet padded the cement floor, and whispers, sudden movements, quick breathing, muffled cries, at one point a single shriek at which several people laughed. He lay unmoving, tried to make no sound of his own.

It seemed half the night before sounds subsided and left him reliving a conversation he and Maia once had about their "ongoing connubial relationship," which glowed fine, they affirmed at that time, perfectly fine. "It doesn't need to flare up," they agreed. The memory reminded him of the common joke at the office, where one shook one's head over the so-called Sexual Revolution and said, "Born too soon, my friends—born too soon!"

It's no joke, Ian told himself, as he heaved over and tried to sleep.

His airline ticket still gave him four days to stay here, he calculated, then one day to drive back, one more day with the folks, and then fly home. He thought up letters to Maia and vowed to write, or else find a telephone. He thought about the irrigation problem, too, and wanted to study the drawings more.

Dawn broke, a cowbell sounded from the house, then more noises, grunts, giggles, and that single shriek. He dressed as fast as he could.

By full morning the whole community had washed up at the well, spooned up granola, ate bananas and apples with peanut butter, and got their work assignments. Mainly, they would pick and haul tomatoes. A fine arts radio station kept news and music in the background.

At table, Ian found it fascinating to watch Alma make eating a controlled process, a kind of craft. She selected a banana, inspected it on all sides and both ends, peeled it, and sliced it into a bowl of grainy cereal. Ignoring her napkin, she inspected her fingers for banana residue, licked each tip and joint, and turned her hand to lick her little finger on the outside. Then she pulled the table's pitcher of milk before her with both hands—and so on, every step important, every movement deliberate. She consumed cereal, fruit, one slice of buttered toast, one cup of tea, and left plate, bowl, glass, and cup empty and clean.

Toward the others, too, Ian observed, Alma was direct and forthright. She spoke to her companions eye to eye, with nothing in mind but to speak and listen. She accepted or rejected offers of food politely but definitively, expressed her thoughts and feelings unselfconsciously and pointedly. Obviously a naturalist, she was vegetarian, loved animals, was protective of the ecology, and betrayed no intolerance toward differing values. She wanted life to be simple, with few demands, few needs, as simple as nature and culture allowed. Although smart, articulate, educated, and sensitive, she envisioned no future of greatness, riches, nor fame. She was who she was, without a fuss.

Watching her and listening made Ian feel young and brotherly. While even his own children made him feel doddering, an old codger and behind the times, Alma made him feel open to this new generation of hippies, flower children, protesters, and what have you. He respected their clear sense of freedom, their social concern, their gentleness, kindness, respect, and love. "Some generation," he said to himself that first morning, as he arose from the table, left Alma with Jeff, May, and the others, and joined Don, who was heading for the maps.

Ian's expertise proved crucial. He showed Don how to read the plats and drawings, and although his sore hip acted up, he spent the entire day walking out the irrigation lines, inspecting the creek and crumbled dam, and uncovering pumps under the giant oaken tank that the community used for a swimming pool. He spent the remaining three days making drawings and taking trips to county offices. By the time he left, the community had its water rights approved, all necessary permits, and an inspection schedule accepted and recorded with the Planning Commission.

Don spent all four days at Ian's side, nicknamed him Bernie, and spread elation throughout the community. As Don put it, "Bernie walked in here like he was sent from Headquarters."

No county road commissioner had ever said anything like that.

The community's normally reserved and soft-spoken founder also made Bernie something of a confidant. He revealed his sense of what made life authentic, why his previous life did not measure up, and his commitment to his community. He talked about Alma, too, and how they met, and how important she was to him. By the end of Ian's visit, he wished he knew the others as well as he knew Don and Alma. Even May and Jeff seemed less self-defined than defined by their peers. They, too, were young, agile, and cool, had some college education, liked bicycles, camping, and sex, and scorned technology, bureaucracy, and social hang-ups. He did learn a few more names—Cindy, Lisa, Mike, Paul—but little else.

Nor did Ian speak up at the evening rap sessions, the community's principal entertainment. Topics were lively and fascinating—old movies, Olympic sports, politics, philosophy, religion, and of course, sex—but Ian listened and considered rather than talked. The closest he came was on the last evening when the topic turned to sexual mores and whether the woman or the man should guide the partner's sexual technique. As the group chatted and joked and bounced on their fannies and waved their arms, Ian studied the good looks of these youngsters. Even May's bony chin and hollow eyes made her look sultry. Looking at them, Ian wanted to ask, "Why are all of you so good

looking? Where are the fatsoes? The awkward and homely? The odd-shaped? The malformed? Would you grant membership to an unattractive sexual partner?" Such questions burned in his heart. He wanted to blurt them out but knew he had to speak cheerfully, without rancor, without a sardonic smile. So he kept his mouth shut.

His somber mood that last evening never eased. By the time the group broke up and headed for their beds, he wanted only silence and privacy. The thought of enduring the bunkhouse moans for another night irritated him. The whole idea of random coupling carried on spontaneously

He respected their clear sense of freedom, concern, kindness, and love. "Some generation," he said.

to slake spontaneous appetites felt uncomfortable. And Jeff among them, without a single inhibition. And May, left emaciated and mothered by a man long gone and to whom she gave not a single thought. He wished this place had a phone. He would like to talk to Maia just now.

Ambling across the compound behind the others, he impulsively changed direction and headed for his car. In the dash light he looked at his watch. Terribly late, but.... He started up and headed for town and a telephone.

"Did I wake you?" he asked Maia, who answered quickly despite the late hour.

"No. As a matter of fact, I was just.... Everything all right, Ian?"

"Sure. Of course."

"You don't sound too happy."

"I'm fine."

"Sounds like one of your moods. Did you want to talk about something?"

"No, no. Heck no. Just wanted to tell you I'm leaving tomorrow early. It's a long drive to Santa Barbara. I'll stay with the folks another day, then fly out."

"You're not changing your flight or anything, are you?"

"No, not at all."

"Then I'll meet you as planned."

"Just confirming, that's all."

"Good. How's May?"

"She's fine. Things must have been rough before, but now she's fine. Sorry I haven't had a chance to write or call."

"What about the baby?"

"Still waiting. Due any time."

"Has she got a doctor?"

"Yes. Everything's fine. I'll tell you about it when I get home."

“John’s graduating on schedule.”

“Good. That’ll be the next thing.”

“Seiji will be here for the graduation.”

“Who?”

“Seiji Tanaka. You know, the family friend?”

“Oh, that Japanese fellow? The one you met at your sister Adele’s when you got your California facelift?”

“Ian, please.”

“World traveler, huh?”

“He’ll be in Chicago, so...”

“Look, it’s late. I’m calling from a gas station. We’ll talk about it when I get home, okay?”

After hanging up, Ian pressed coins into the coffee machine and sipped the thin liquid as the attendant serviced a truck. He emptied the plastic cup, went to the men’s room, then out to his car. He signaled thanks to the attendant on the way.

With the car windows up and the air conditioner on, he drove silently behind the pool of his own light. Daily trips to town had made the road familiar, but the darkness made him unsure. He strained to spot landmarks and crossroads. He wanted to think through his confusion of thoughts and feelings, but dared not lose his bearings, especially as he began to climb the hills toward the community.

He couldn’t understand how the community’s lifestyle was so easy to take on. It kept him from taking May aside to find out what’s happening. Is she on drugs? Does she have another boyfriend? Does she plan to marry someday? And Jeff, too. Is he going back to school? Does he really want to labor on a farm? And what about the military draft? There’s a war on, you know. Ian came to rescue his kids, but after doing a little work, he would now drive off.

And what about the community? He had accepted it, but had it accepted him? He had shared their food, their labor, and their entertainment—everything but their bed.

When he drove in, the compound was dark and quiet. He extinguished the car lights quickly. The air was stagnant and hot. He went straight to his bunk and tried to sleep, but couldn’t. He lay naked and uncovered in the dark, surrounded by suffocating plastic. No breeze came through the open window. He thought of Maia and his parents and John and his job... they all seemed like problems waiting for him. Everything was changing, and he was going nowhere.

Various kinds of breathing and soft snoring came from others in the bunkhouse. How could they sleep? He got to his feet and tried to read his watch in the starlight. He could make out the compound through his window—the house, the shed, the tank—shadows against a starlit night. He got a handhold on each side of the window casement, put a leg over the sill, and in one hop landed softly outside.

Feeling prehistoric and furtive in his nakedness, he headed in a crouch for the tank. Like a night animal, he scampered up the ladder and let himself down into the star-reflecting pool. The water was warm but refreshing. Quietly he let himself sink, then kicked off and paddled to the other side. He stood chest deep in the mirroring water and looked up at the sky.

The stars were bright, but a mist was forming beneath them. He tried to search out constellations.

Then he heard a soft shuffle outside the tank, near the ladder. He listened and watched. A figure appeared over the tank’s edge. Head and shoulders emerged above the tank’s black wall and rose against the night sky, until it stood in full shimmering outline—round head, glistening shoulders, two pigtails hanging in place, slim waist, curving hips.

A moment of fright flared, then vanished.

“Hi,” she said in a hushed voice.

“Hello.”

“I saw you.”

“Just cooling off.”

“Right.”

The glimmering brightness of Alma’s flesh turned its back to him as she came over the side, one leg at a time, and presented to him that seat of hers, those marvelous cheeks, pointed directly at him as she lowered herself into the water. She backed down the ladder with surety, one step at a time. Without hesitation, she turned toward him, then moved forward, heavily against the water, arms up, lifting herself along. Her engorged breasts came at him like two prows eager for engagement. When she reached him, her arms came down, her body pressed into his, full length, and she pulled his head forward with both hands. She drew his lips straight to hers, worked them open, and turned his mouth into an empty oval. Her sweet breath came, then the surprisingly tender tip of her tongue came searching stiffly for his.

EDWARD VASTA

Is an emeritus English professor and a published medievalist. He now concentrates on creative writing and has published stories and memoirs, in print and online, individually and in collections. He’s also written screenplays and a novel about human cloning that has been supported by a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. “Takeover” has also been expanded into a yet-unpublished novel, Family Passions.

*Love is a great gift. Even if you're giving away
the person you love to someone else.*

BEFORE I INHERITED, AS THE OLDEST SON, THE Murakami family art supply business in Akashi City, I inherited a set of attitudes from my father. For most of his life, Father sold fish in the famous Akashi fish market. A successful businessman, he also knew how to play the role of fishmonger. He wore a bandana around his head and a blue apron over his simple cotton shirt and baggy trousers. He knew how to clap his hands and shout, “*Trasshai!* Fresh fish!” with just the right pitch so that the milling shoppers in the narrow and noisy arcade would come to him. He could also be disarming by acting the simpleton, conforming to what middle class people expected an uneducated seller of fish to be. Those who knew him knew to keep their guard when dealing with him. Father was not dishonest but he was shrewd. I guess the bloke who was up to his ears in gambling debts underestimated Father’s shrewdness when selling him his failing art supply shop for a fraction of its worth. For Father it was a blessed escape from the fishy life which (he confessed only to his family) he hated from the depths of his belly.

Now Father quickly realized a simple-looking bloke who clapped his hands and bellowed *irasshai* was not going to sell paints and brushes to aesthetes. So he learned to *look* like an artist. He grew a goatee. He began wearing jeans and loose turtleneck shirts. He picked up the lingo and cool detached demeanor of a bohemian. As the shop prospered and consumed the tobacconist and shoe store spaces next door, Father hired staff and instructed them on how to look bohemian. The women had to let their hair grow long and cascade over their shoulders. Father insisted they wear tight turtlenecks in winter and black chest-baring leotard tops in summer. The young men had to look scruffy but not disreputable. He taught them to act aloof, yet show concern when serving customers.

I was my father’s son. I grew a trim goatee. Only I learned my art history at good universities in the United States and France—quite unlike Father who would pore over art books by fluorescent lamplight in his cramped office in the late hours after closing time. Relatives were horrified by my Western manners when I returned to Japan. Father was delighted.

Father took special pains in preparing me for managing the shop. Having never harbored any illusions that my destiny lay anywhere else except in the family business, I had few problems adjusting to the managerial life. Best of all, I did not have to work at acting like an artist, though, frankly speaking, I had not a jot of creative talent.

Having grown up around artists, I knew how demanding they could be and how irrational if we were unable to locate a special brush or the right shade of blue pigment. Yet I also knew they had a capacity of accepting eccentric people like no one else in Japan. It was a tolerance that became a natural part of me. Though Father’s many friends confided in him about their love affairs, though he was the perfect listener, the exemplary confidant, he

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by acting the simpleton,
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people’s expectations.**

was uncomfortable with them. In his heart I believe he disdained them.

In his domestic life, Father remained a simple man who preferred to live in a traditional Japanese house, eat ordinary Japanese food and watch game shows and soap operas on TV. He placed cheap summer gifts (*ochugen*) next to the expensive art objects his friends gave him—they were all the same to him. He was loyal to Mother, never left her side during her final illness, and never remarried.

Me? After Father died, I threw out every last bit of kitsch he had ever accumulated. I had an architect remodel our family home in the Western mode. An interior decorator Europeanized every last room except the one with the family altar where I kept my parents’ ashes. (I owed them that.) I preferred having a mistress to being married.

SHINKO-CHAN WAS RICH AND SHE SAID SHE WAS IN love with me. She was fun to be with because every day was a holiday for her. We called each other *darling* in English, finding the Japanese language’s terms of endearment too dull.

“Darling, I have tickets for Paris! You surely can escape for a week,” she’d say over the phone. “October in Paris, darling!” She wore flashy fashions from the boutiques on the Champs Elysees, from Harrod’s and Boomingdale’s, over her skinny ballerina’s body. She smoked her Players from a long ebony cigarette holder. “Darling, darling,” she would telephone me at midnight. “There is a musical I just have to see on Broadway! I bought two first-class tickets for New York on JAL for us. Don’t tell me you are too busy to go! And you know what? I’ve reserved a hotel in London!”

I was always busy and I always went with her. While she shopped at Boomingdale's or Harrod's or wherever, I'd be bustling around looking for hard to find art materials and making deals with suppliers. Those were the days before the Internet.

Shinko-chan spoke this comic choppy English and absolutely unintelligible French that won us friends everywhere. Shinko-chan slinking about a New York gallery party in a clingy low-cut dress and carrying that ebony cigarette holder was a work of kinetic art. "Oh darleegu Meesser Sumissu! I am sooo lovely disu Cez'ane weeth me maa-chi!" She was a comedian and knew it. People laughed at Shinko-chan and fell in love with her. When she exhibited her dreadful oil-on-plasterboard landscapes in Tokyo, a few of our eccentric rich friends actually flew over to buy them. At first they bought them as a joke. Then those awful things became camp, like Mickey Mouse watches from the 1950's, and she developed a small but dedicated following—collectors of "shinkos." The few critics who condescended to acknowledge her existence wrote scathing reviews of her exhibitions. Shinko-chan only laughed; she had no illusions about her work. And she said she loved only me.

There was but one catch to our happy and light affair. Shinko-chan was married. I did not who her husband was or where they lived in Osaka. I did not know Shinko-chan's telephone number. Until I saw it in her passport, I did not even know her family name. Shinko-chan would simply vanish at times—often for months—and then suddenly reappear in my life like a brilliant giggling flame. This went on for over ten years.

I WANT TO TELL YOU WHAT FINALLY HAPPENED between Shinko-chan and me, but before that I must tell one other Shinko-chan story.

I have only two real hobbies. My mild and domestic side comes out in my love of gourmet cooking. Mountain bike racing takes care of my wild side. I have six custom mountain bikes. Shinko-chan selected the colors. And Shinko-chan went loyally with me to my mountain bike races. Rolling over the finish line, I'd be covered in mud. She would be waiting for me in her low-cut dress and with a bottle of champagne in hand. Whether or not I'd won anything, she would always shower me with champagne and embrace me while I was still in my muddy jersey, which invariably left the residue of clay on her face and breasts. (A turn-on, she said.) Yet only once did I manage to coax her on to a bicycle, a tandem that I had bought. We were to spend the day on Awaji Island, which is across the narrow Inland Sea from Akashi. Shinko-chan showed up at my place in pink spandex and matching pink helmet and white cycling shoes. We got as far as the ferry building, about a block from my home.

"I'm *terrified*, darling! I can't ride this pretty bike of yours!" she exclaimed.

Walking back, we passed by the fish market.

"Oh let's go into the arcade!" Shinko-chan cried. "It's so exotic!"

"Oh no, it stinks!" I said. "Ugh!"

Father had always told us children that the Akashi Fish Market was dirty and foul smelling and inhabited by low-lives. Father's description of the place was so depressing that we never had any curiosity about it, famous as it was all over Kansai. Even as an adult I would make it a point of passing it by. The fishmongers should have delighted me when they sang in praise of their fish. But the sound of "*irasshai!*" and clapping hands always sent a shiver down my spine. Such was the power of my father's words.

"But darling, I like the smell!" Shinko-chan laughed.

"Doesn't it smell like my little girl place when it's ripe?"

"Shinko-chan! People can hear us! This isn't Paris."

"Oh you can't take me anywhere!" she giggled.

Then a few minutes later, when we were approaching my neighborhood, she giggled again. "Darling, a sexy fishwoman wearing rubber boots made eyes at you back at the fish market! I saw her and I smiled."

"Ugh! Now you've made my day," I said.

"She had long straight black hair and voluptuous breasts and wide hips. Like Sophia Loren! I smiled at her and she smiled back."

"It's not nice to tease people," I said.

"Darling, you know what would be fun? To invite her to a love hotel with us. She could bring a live fish—"

"Shinko-chan," I said breaking into a laugh. "Enough!"

Instead of going to Awaji, we bought Shinkansen tickets for Nagoya, where Shinko-chan had seen a love hotel shaped like a cabin cruiser. After I had peeled off her pink spandex in our deluxe suite, she insisted on wearing her pink helmet as we made love.

IT WAS AFTER THIS THAT SHINKO-CHAN BEGAN insisting that I sleep with other women—jokingly at first, earnestly later. She insisted it aroused her desire for me to greater heights. I didn't want to—the residual influence of my father's conservatism, I guess—but I did a few times. I should have known something was up with Shinko-chan.

One September night Shinko-chan telephoned and announced that we must fly to Paris in the morning—she had the tickets. There was an urgency in voice I had never heard before. I left the store to my trusty manager and flew to Paris with my beloved.

On the plane Shinko-chan, usually a non-stop talker, was mute. She read the in-flight magazines cover to

cover. When I asked her if anything was wrong, she said, “Nothing,” and patted me on the cheek. Over the North Pole, she covered her eyes with the airline’s eye mask and slept. Or pretended to sleep.

At Charles DeGaulle we got a cab to our hotel on the Left Bank, on the edge of the Latin Quarter—a modest hotel near Jardin du Luxembourg that we loved not for its luxuries but its atmosphere. It was late evening and we were suffering from jet lag. Yet we made love into the night. Shinko-chan clung to me, bit me, sunk her long elegant lacquered fingernails into my back. I had never known her to make love with such ferocity. When her loins were aching and I was physically spent, she rammed her tongue into mouth. “Can’t we just kiss?” she said. “How long has it been since we simply kissed...”

We awoke early. Shinko-chan pulled me out of bed. The cafés were just opening. We ended up in one for coffee and croissants. She snuggled up against me as if she were cold, though the morning was quite warm.

She was fatigued as I. Yet she took me by the hand and dragged me to the Jardin du Luxembourg.

Did I remember our precious memories of the Jardin du Luxembourg? she exclaimed and began to sob.

I escorted her to a bench. Her face collapsed against my shoulder.

“All right, dearest,” I said. “It’s time to tell me what’s up.”

“I’m pregnant.”

I closed my eyes. The morning sun warmed my eyelids.

“Is it mine?” I asked.

“My husband’s.”

I did not open my eyes. What right did I have to feel betrayed? Hadn’t I slept with other women? Hadn’t her husband always been the person she went back to? Hadn’t we been happy because neither of us felt jealousy? Was it jealousy I felt now? Or was I angry with myself for never having the courage to asked about her life apart from me?

“Do you hate me?” she whispered.

I opened my eyes.

“You know me better than that, darling,” I said.

She sighed and kissed me lightly on the neck.

“Look, I know we decided long ago that sex with other people is a turn-on,” I said. “But getting pregnant—was it a mistake?”

“No, darling.”

“You honestly wanted this child?”

Her head nodded against my shoulder. “More than anything.”

I sighed. “But why?”

“Because I want to be a mother,” she said softly. “I’m

thirty-six. I didn’t have much time left. Oh, we tried and tried for years and years, my darling.”

“Ten years?”

“Oh, longer! The hell I went through! Shots! Pills! Doctors scraping and scraping the insides of my vagina! And the anguish of my poor husband! We were about to give up and to separate when the miracle happened!”

“Are you sure it isn’t mine?”

“No, darling. I promise you, it’s not yours.”

“Darling, I’m tired,” I said. “Suppose we go back to the hotel and sleep. Then we’ll talk some more. We’ll find some way to redefine our relationship.”

“I’m flying home this afternoon. Then we won’t see

**“Remember me as I was
before. There is nothing
else to say. Except please
fall in love quickly.”**

each other again. Darling, what time is it?”

I dumbly looked at my watch. “Five to nine,” I said.

“I must catch a taxi! I called for it to meet me around here while you were sleeping. Oh! There it is! Thank you for everything, darling!” She kissed me on the cheek quickly. “Goodbye!”

She went for the taxi with a wobbling sort of run, waving her arms as she went.

I was too stunned and too sleepy to follow. She planned all this, I thought. Maybe it was all a silly joke like her oil on plasterboard landscapes.

At the hotel I fell into a comatic sleep. I awoke with sunbeams on my face. Automatically I reached for Shinko-chan. My hand touched an envelope under her pillow. A farewell letter. I read: “I will cherish our life together and always love you in my own way. All parties must end, my dearest darling. The rest of my life will be devoted to motherhood. To raising my son or daughter. I shall become dull and unattractive. Remember me as I was before. There is nothing else to say. Except please fall in love quickly. It will do you well.”

I took the train to Basel from the Gare du Nord. Switzerland’s neutral beauty calmed me. I took another train to Bern. An art supplier I knew lived there. I made a deal. In Milan I became sick of Europe, and so returned to Paris and flew home.

BACK IN AKASHI I TOOK SOLITARY WALKS AFTER work. Otherwise I would sit by the telephone waiting for Shinko-chan to call. Of all the memories I had of Shinko-chan the one that stood out for reasons I could not explain

was of the day we passed by the fish market and she had made her remark about her “little girl place.” I chuckled every time I thought of it.

In the late night my feet carried me to the fish market area in the arcade when all the shops’ steel shutters were down and there was but the lingering scent of fish. I became fascinated with the patterns of the arcade’s tile pavement. It took me a while to realize they represented fish scales. (So much for my imagination.) I was charmed. This had probably not been there in Father’s time, I thought. One afternoon I braved the smell at the market and bought a fish. A sea bream with glaring eyes.

Fond as I was of gourmet cooking, I had never cooked fish before, only vegetable and meat dishes. Father had never allowed us to cook fish at home. We ate fish—but always out. My first fish creation—the sea bream in white wine and lemon sauce—turned me around. I discovered I liked the smell of fresh fish in my kitchen and the lingering aroma of fried fish. I bought a small library of cook books on international fish cuisine.

To whom did I feed my beautiful fish dishes to? Only myself. Shinko-chan had been my one and only dining guest when I had cooked. I had no other real friends—people to whom I felt close enough to invite home. So I treated only myself. And the more I did that the fussier I became.

IMUST CONFESS: I FIRST STARTED GOING TO THE SKINNY old bald fishmonger not because of his voluptuous daughter, the lady I guessed Shinko-chan had smiled at that day, but because of the quality of his fish. Only after some six months passed did his daughter and I start exchanging looks and then faint smiles. I guessed the fishmonger’s daughter was either in her late twenties or early thirties. Her oval face and her merry eyes had that ageless quality that made age-guessing not so much difficult as irrelevant. After we started to greet each other I noticed subtle changes in her appearance. She still wore her blue apron over her sweater and blue jeans and continued to wear her rubber boots. But she let her hair grow longer. A gold bracelet appeared around her neck.

Her father always greeted me with a resounding, “*Trasshai!*” Her two brothers, muscular guys with permed hair who chopped and sliced fish, would shoot glances at me.

One evening in April I was pouring white wine over a flounder and my heart started to beat fast. I was thinking of the fishmonger’s daughter. She had started wearing tighter sweaters of late. I remembered how once, when she had bent down over a crate, her heart-shaped bottom had stuck out at me.

I had not been with a woman since Shinko-chan had left me in Paris. It was spring. The night air in my garden was

heavy with the smell of flowers. I recalled Shinko-chan’s letter: “Fall in love soon. It will do you well.”

I shook my head and continued to marinate my flounder. The absurdity of falling in love with the fishmonger’s daughter! Father would laugh at me.

I returned to the fishmonger and his daughter the following evening. “*Irrasshai!*” the old man cried. The two brothers glanced at me as they hacked fish. The fishmonger’s daughter and I smiled and bid each other good evening.

“I want fillet of tuna,” I told her.

“The fillet is old now,” she said. “Come by tomorrow at seven in the morning. That’s when it is freshest. I will save some for you. How much do you want?”

Taken aback by this unusually bold invitation, I could only answer: “Two kilos.”

“Tomorrow at seven,” she said.

I returned home with a beating heart. I longed to fondle the breasts under her blue fishmonger’s apron. I imagined her fishy hands swimming over my naked back.

Oh fool, fool, you fool! I said to myself. Back in my shop with its warm and sterile smells of wood, paper and paints, I laughed at myself. What nonsense—to fall in love with the fishmonger’s daughter! What could we ever talk about? Cooking fish? Was I not getting tired of fish? No, I wasn’t. I preferred the taste of fish to meat these days—

I barely slept that night thinking of the fishmonger’s daughter.

AT SEVEN SHE WAS WAITING FOR ME BY THE shuttered front of her shop. A packet wrapped in butcher paper was in her hand. She was not wearing her apron, but a tight black top. Her nipples protruded.

“This fillet is so fresh it is still twitching,” she said.

When I tried to pay, she refused. It was present from her family, she said.

“Look,” I said, “I’m getting over a love affair. I would probably be terrible company if I asked you out.”

“I’ve seen you cycle sometimes. I cycle,” she said.

“You don’t race, do you?”

“When I have time. I had more time before my mother died.”

I felt embarrassed. Here I was mourning the end of an affair and she was coping with the loss of her mother.

“I can get away tomorrow,” she said. “The boys can help dad.”

“I have a tandem I’ve never really tried. We can go to Awaji for the day and return on the ferry in the evening. I have an extra helmet if you need it.”

“I have my own,” she said.

So that’s how I got to know the fishmonger’s daughter. She wore a sleeveless top. I first noticed her muscles when

she was helping a crew member and me load the tandem on the aft desk of the ferry. As we rode out from Iwaya our cadences meshed.

We had planned only a short spin but before noon we decided to circle the island in a day. We would have made it had we not stopped to exchange long kisses on a lonely winding mountain road.

Late that evening we stopped off at the only open diner we could find. We both ordered fish dinners, then simultaneously burst out laughing at an unspoken but mutually understood joke. Fish had brought us together.

“We’ll have to stay at a hotel tonight,” I said.

“Just what I was thinking,” she answered.

I was in love with the fishmonger’s daughter. Why? I only knew we were comfortable together. As we rested in each other’s arms in the hotel facing the sea I thought of the Jardin de Luxembourg and Shinko-chan wobbling toward the taxi, her arms—her skinny whitish arms—flapping. I had never had her, only shared her. For first time in my life I felt as if I were giving myself entirely to another human-being.

“I worry how your brothers might take us sleeping together. I mean, the way they wield those cleavers,” I said half-jokingly.

“The boys are the most gentle and understanding brothers in the world. There’s nothing I have to hide from them. Dad too. I didn’t lie to him when I called him from the phone booth out there on the road. I guess I’m a lucky girl.”

“What would your dad say if I took you to Paris?” I asked.

“He’d insist I pay my own way. I can, you know.”

“Yes, I believe you,” I said, thinking of Father. “You’ll enjoy the singing fishmongers.”

“I want to see art museums and cathedrals, silly!” She tickled me and I tickled her back. “I want to take a cycling trip through France and make love in quaint old inns.”

Later, dressed in the hotel’s *yukatas*, we sat together by the window and watched the lights on the distant Wakayama coast. A small fishing boat passed by. The night was so quiet that we could hear a crew member drumming with his hands on the boat’s prow. My lover was still as she listened, perhaps experiencing a primal communion with the rhythm. I would have shared in its mystery had my family remained fishmongers, I thought.

“To tell the truth, I’ve been to Paris already,” she said. “With a lover.”

“I’m glad,” I said.

“A woman lover. My first and only woman lover. Your friend Shinko-chan.”

There’s no need to tell you how startled I was. I couldn’t speak.

“Forgive me if I hurt you or disgusted you. I hate hiding the truth! It was brief and it’s over.”

“I cannot explain why, but hearing this makes me happy and nothing else,” I said.

“Shinko-san once said you were an usually understanding man. She loved you.”

We were silent for a moment.

“I was surprised that it happened,” she said. “At first I didn’t think of it as a love affair. Then I would think of her as being like a skinny young boy. She would hold me and weep about not being able to have a baby. Was she that way with you?”

“No. Never.”

“She called me an earth mother because of my big breasts and wide hips. She said maybe my hormones would change hers, though I’ve never had children in my life!”

“That’s Shinko-chan!” I laughed. “You know she succeeded.”

“Sometimes I miss her.”

“Me too,” I said.

She put her hand on mine, then clasped it.

ALEX SHISHIN

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Amber Valentino

JOHN HOLTON

*Some people, you forget even before they leave your sight.
Other people, you're bound to remember forever.*

THE VAPORETTI LEFT A FOAMY, CAPPUCCINO WAKE in the murky water of the Grand Canal. The air was thick with the scent of espresso wafting from outdoor cafes. Venice might have been a series of islands in a sea of caffè latte. I cupped my hands and yelled over the engine noise into Rich's ear. "Why are we going to the station?"

"A friend of mine is arriving from Salzburg. She's coming to Crete with us."

"A girlfriend?"

"No, just a friend. She's split up with her fiancé. I met them when I was skiing in the Tyrol, then stayed at their place back in Salzburg. Amber's great—you'll love her."

Rich was from South Dakota. I met him in the restaurant car on the train from Nice to Venice. I'd wandered down from economy looking for sustenance and ended up drinking stubbies of Stella Artois for three hours courtesy of my newfound friend. It came as no surprise when he extended his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Rich." He'd had to be at thirty-five francs a pop.

South Dakota. It sounded like wagon trains and Indian ambushes. But I was from South Sydney and the change of hemispheres was playing havoc with my sensibilities. Rich showed me a photograph of his parents' house—columned portico, bowling-green lawn, fancy letterbox, his old man's Pontiac in the driveway—the wild frontier! Amber Valentino was Californian. Her father was Rudolph Valentino. Not *the* Rudolph Valentino but Rudy Valentino, the building contractor from Venice Beach. She didn't seem to find any of it remarkable—the surname, or the fact that she'd arrived in the thousand-year old city that provided the name of her birthplace. Despite her famous surname, she had never seen a Valentino flick, though she joked that her family albums were full of Valentino pictures.

We were sitting in the foyer of the sprawling Venice Youth Hostel on the Giudecca. Eight hundred beds stacked three high in dormitories of Gothic proportion. Famous at the time for its unisex bathrooms and lack of curfew, it was the cutting edge of backpacker accommodation. Rich and Amber were drinking Heineken from stubbies the size of fire extinguishers. I was sipping chocolate milk through a straw. *La Via Lattea-Cioccolata*. The Milky Way. Aah, those Italians could make Big M sound like an operetta.

Amber Valentino was drop-dead, take-your-breath-away gorgeous. The kind of woman you watched from a distance and marveled at the ease with which she carried herself. Something more ethereal than mere poise—like

time slowed down when she entered a room or stepped from a train.

Call me romantic, but there's something magical about a beautiful woman stepping from a train. If I were a film director I would always portray women alighting trains in slow motion.

It was her legs I noticed first, as she swung her pack onto the platform. Effortlessly tanned. Smooth as Bondi sand. Unattainably gorgeous was Amber Valentino.

I'd already begun to paint a picture of her naked. Sounds

**She had it. That inexplicable
something that made Amber
Valentino irresistible.**

devious, but it's what men do. All men. Even the ones you'd least expect. It's genetic, I think. Programmed into us at birth. When you see the Prime Minister congratulating the Australian Netball team on their latest success, exchanging casual banter, what he's really thinking is: Jeez, look at those legs. I wonder what she looks like in the shower.

So there I was, picturing the graduation of thigh to buttock. That irresistibly sexy depression at the small of the back. The physics of her breasts. The gentle curve of her abdomen down to a manicured mohawk. All this in the time it took her to walk the five steps from the train to where Rich and I waited on the platform.

But sitting across the table from Amber Valentino, seeing her catch the last drips of cold beer on the end of her tongue, she seemed blissfully unaware of her beauty. She laughed raucously at my lame jokes and chewed peanuts with her mouth open. She had it. That inexplicable something that made Amber Valentino irresistible. And I was a goner. A skinny, smitten streak of Australian manhood.

AMBER VALENTINO SPOTTED ME ACROSS THE TV room. I was engrossed in an episode of *The Flying Doctors* (dubbed in Italian and retitled bluntly *Aereo Di Medico*). She called out from the doorway, "Hey, Aussie, you didn't fly twenty thousand kilometers to watch bad television, did you?" The edge had been taken off her Californian accent by three years living in Austria. It was a strange hybrid thing, vaguely European. Every male head turned in unison. She could have read the label from a bean tin and still captured the attention of the room. "Are you going

to show me Venice or not?” A question which required little thought on my part.

I told Amber Valentino I would show her the other side of Venice, so we walked the back streets of the Giudecca where the narrow lanes are home to a thousand and one cats. Cats warming every doorstep. Cats perched on rooftops like clumsy, mewing birds of prey. Cats spilling from rubbish skips like the garbage they are.

“I don’t like cats,” I said.

“Neither do I,” she said. “They’re users. You can never get close to a cat.”

But we fed them just the same. Snacks from the youth hostel vending machine that had a bull on the packet but tasted suspiciously like chicken-flavored Twisties.

“I always thought cat hating was a bloke thing,” I said, throwing a handful at a mangy-looking tortoiseshell.

“Blowke! Giddy maate.” Amber Valentino did a bad imitation of my Australian accent and spat on the ground. A spit that was intoxicatingly sexy—in a vulgar kind of way.

“You’re in no position to make fun of accents,” I said. “It’s like you stepped from an L.A. production of *The Sound Of Music*.”

She laughed her raucous laugh and unexpectedly slipped an arm through mine. “Carn, mate. Let’s go an’get pissed.”

IT WAS AMBER VALENTINO’S IDEA TO TRAVEL TO Athens via Yugoslavia. She wanted an adventure, she said, after twelve months of selling tickets in a Viennese cinema. The normal backpacker route was the train south through Italy to Brindisi then a ferry to Patras via Corfu. Instead, the three of us were squatting in a packed economy-class carriage, relegated to a passageway for lack of space, watching the last of Italy slide by through smeared windows.

I was too preoccupied to feel uncomfortable, Amber Valentino pressing into me with every sway of the carriage. I would have stayed there until my joints seized, but Rich was whingeing. He had a Gold Star Eurail Pass and reminded us that he could have been lounging on the red velour of first-class instead of crouching with his pack on the sticky linoleum floor.

“Come on, guys,” he pleaded. “Let’s check out first class. If they see my ticket we might be able to wing it.”

“Wing it? You’ve been hangin’ with the Aussie too long,” said Amber Valentino. “Let’s do it, blowkes. Too right.” She pushed on my leg to help herself up, and gave it an unseen squeeze. I would have followed her over broken glass.

From the bleak gray of economy we crossed the threshold into the vivid reds of first class. The corridor was empty,

as were most of the compartments, apart from a smattering of well-groomed men in business suits and middle-aged women who looked down their heavily-powdered noses at our backpacks as we walked past their windows.

Halfway along the carriage we found an empty compartment and drew the curtains to shield us from the corridor. Rich took a bandana from his pack and tied one end to the door handle, the other to the bottom of the luggage rack on the nearest wall. It was a trick he’d learned travelling first class around Europe. A way to get a good night’s sleep without the extra expense of a sleeper compartment. The seats in first class folded down so that the entire compartment became a single expanse of seat, like a giant mattress.

So that was how we farewelled Italy. Three virtual strangers, safe in our comfy first-class cocoon, sharing cheese and bread, toasting our health with cheap Italian red from plastic cups. “To nude bathing in Crete,” Amber Valentino said with conviction, holding her cup aloft. Rich and I extended our cups in a toast, sharing a furtive sideways glance, knowing full well that Amber Valentino was not one to waste words.

THE TRAIN CRAWLED ON INTO THE NIGHT, STOPPING frequently for no apparent reason. Though we were technically still in Italy, we were now bound by Yugoslav Time, a strange twilight zone between the civilized worlds of Italy and Greece. A world where peasants on bicycles somehow traveled faster than diesel-powered trains.

We sprawled on our red velour life raft, backs propped against our packs, and talked and drank into the night, the alcohol gradually extracting details of the lives we’d left behind. Rich whittled away at a piece of wood he’d been working on since I’d met him on the train from Nice. It still looked just like a piece of wood, only smaller. He was preoccupied with blaming his old man for everything from his parents’ divorce to the U.S. economy and the Cuban missile crisis.

“Thinks he can buy me off with a round-the-world flight and a Gold Star Eurail ticket. After how he treated my mom...”

“Yeah, that must be awful for you, Rich,” Amber Valentino said, rolling her eyes at me in mock horror. “What a selfish asshole of a father you’ve got.”

“I know. It’s been his answer for everything, since I was in elementary school. New bikes, the most expensive gym shoes. My first day of college he hands me the keys to a Mustang convertible.”

“Maybe you should cancel your Asian stopover on the way home. That’d show him who’s boss.”

At that point I burst out laughing. Rich looked up from his whittling and turned red with embarrassment. “Don’t

be so insensitive, Aussie,” Amber Valentino scolded before joining in the laughter. Even Rich laughed then. It was impossible to take offense. She had a way of taking the piss that made it seem like a compliment. The moment she smiled you were a goner.

After the second bottle of cheap vino, she started to spill her guts about her man, Don, in Vienna. “Men are all cowards. Too scared to commit.” With all the wine in me I’d have committed armed robbery for Amber Valentino. “Five years, and all of a sudden he needs space. Well, let him run home to Mommy. I’m not going to fall at his feet and beg.”

“Good for you!” I said feebly, raising my plastic cup.

Amber Valentino rested her drunken head on my shoulder. “Yeah... but he’s such a fantastic fuck.” At the same moment the door of the compartment burst open, tearing Rich’s bandana in two like cheap toilet paper.

THE MAN IN THE GENERIC GRAY UNIFORM FILLED the entire doorway and had to bend his neck for his melon head and hat to enter the compartment. We hadn’t noticed the train pull into the unnamed station that was the Yugoslavian border post. It was unclear whether the gray mountain gesturing for our tickets was from the railways, the military, or the border police, though the image of him standing in the doorway gave me an eerie feeling of *déjà vu*.

We handed over the three tickets with Rich’s on top, as if by the grace of God all three would miraculously become first class. He peeled open Rich’s Eurail pass with a fat thumb and leered at him disbelievingly. When he opened my pass, then looked at Amber Valentino’s ticket an evil grin spread across his face. “*Klasa drugi!*” he yelled, thrusting the tickets in our faces. “*Economija! Pasos, odmah!*”

The number-one rule for backpackers traveling in eastern bloc countries back then was: never become separated from your passport. Foolishly, we handed them over, trying to avoid a confrontation. As he snatched the passport from my hand I got a good look at his ugly dial. A cross between Boris Karloff and the evil prison guard in “Midnight Express.” At that point the red wine started a rinse cycle in my guts.

He lingered over Amber Valentino’s passport, looking from the photograph back to her. Not her face, but her legs and thighs. I grabbed a jacket I’d been using as a pillow and threw it across her legs. Then, in an act of pure lunacy, or perhaps chivalry, though I’d never been guilty of the latter, I heard myself say, “Seen enough, have you Boris?” Rich raised his eyebrows at me in a desperate you’ll-get-us-all-shot kind of look. Amber Valentino gave me a smile that in spite of the nausea gave me an instant erection.

“Down, boy,” she said with such perfect timing that I glanced in the direction of my crotch just to check the inference.

Boris stared at me with eyes that could split firewood then rubbed his thumb and index fingers together grubbily. “*Platiti... novac!*” he barked, as I fumbled in my pocket and produced a sad collection of thousand lira notes. He threw them over his shoulder and said, “*No, Americanac!*” I shrugged my shoulders theatrically. No way was I going near my money belt or travelers’ checks. Amber Valentino came to the rescue, thrusting a couple of low denomination greenbacks into his filthy mitts. Then, without a word, he turned and walked down the corridor with our tickets

He lingered over Amber Valentino’s passport, looking from the photo back to her.

and passports in the pocket of his jacket.

We watched through the window in disbelief as Boris strode across the station platform in the direction of a large wooden building.

“Shit,” said Rich, turning white.

“Fuck,” said Amber Valentino.

“Jesus Christ, what do we do now?” I said.

“One of us has got to go and get those fucking passports.” Rich was looking paler by the second and nervously cracking his knuckles. “And since you’ve built up such a rapport with the man...”

“But what if the train leaves? Besides, you’re the U.S. dollar man. That’s the only language the guy understands.” Rich stuffed a bundle of greenbacks into my sweaty palm.

“Look, if I don’t stay with Amber and something happens, Don will kill me.” Amber Valentino shot him a stinging look.

“What’re you talking about, Rich? You’ve spoken to Don? What gives you the right to talk to Don behind my back?”

“Look, it’s not the time to talk about it now.”

“Of course it is. What the hell’s going on?”

I left the two of them tearing strips off one another and moved quickly down the corridor, feeling nauseous enough to throw up on the first person who gave me trouble, wondering how I came to be stranded on the Yugoslav border with a couple of neurotic, half-drunk *Americanacs*. As I headed across the platform I looked in the direction of our compartment and could see Amber Valentino still unleashing a torrent of abuse. She was incredible; poking her finger into Rich’s chest, pushing him against

the window with the flat of her hand, giving him a serve the likes of which, it was obvious, he'd never experienced. For a fraction of a second we made eye contact and, without missing a beat, she gave me a wink. It was just the encouragement I needed.

The station building was a strange, makeshift affair. A jumble of trestle tables and canvas partitions that served as ticket office, passport control and station cafeteria. Leaning against a table in the center of the room were a couple of gangly, acne-faced youths in gray uniforms and hats that sat way too low on their heads, so that when I entered building they had to tilt their heads back to make eye contact. I wondered if maybe they'd been last in line to collect their uniforms or if indeed their heads had shrunk. Either way, they were the least threatening border police I could have hoped for—apart from the lugerish pistols that gleaned in their holsters and made the two of them look like extras from an episode of *Hogan's Heroes*. The tallest of the two was holding three passports; two U.S. and one Australian, and from the leering and gesturing going on it was clear whose they were looking at.

In the corner of the building, a large, ugly woman in a grubby apron and sporting a moustache that either of the pimply border police would have killed for, was busy sorting three miserable apples into a display of sorts. She gave the impression that she had been born with a worried look on her face and would take it to her grave. She motioned for me to cross the room, and without saying a word, nodded her head in the direction of an adjoining room where I could hear the familiar, dulcet tones of Boris. The only word I could understand was *Americanac*, and then he laughed, a wicked, guttural laugh that sounded like an old man vomiting.

The woman spoke to me in a low mumble, as if I were her son and could understand every word she said. She gestured several times in the direction of the pimply youths who were still engrossed in Amber Valentino's passport, then pointed to a clock on the wall that was missing its hour hand. "Train. *Zurba!*" She reached under the counter and produced what appeared to be two Mars bars (the wrappers were the usual color, only the writing was unreadable) and stuffed them into my shirt pocket. "*Pasos!*" she said in an urgent whisper. "*Zurba!*"

The train whistle sounded twice and I heard the diesel engine groan to life. The tickets were history. I turned and ran, plucking the passports from the hand of the gangliest youth as I passed, making a beeline for the train. Amber Valentino and Rich were hanging out of the window yelling... something. I was too busy waiting for the volley of gunfire to hear what it was. I think I was saved by the hats.

It was Amber Valentino who dragged me through the

window. She plucked me from the platform like a mother lifting a toddler. God, she was strong. Rich had already snatched the passports from my hand and was quizzing me about the tickets. I lay on top of Amber Valentino where we'd landed, my head resting on her shoulder, breathing the sweet smell of her perspiration, feeling her heart pound against mine. "Glad you could make it, Aussie," she said.

AMBER VALENTINO LAY WITH HER HEAD RESTING ON my lap as the train swayed into the Yugoslavian darkness. Todd was mourning his Gold Star Eurail pass and still sulking from the ear bashing he'd copped over the whole Don business. He wouldn't let us use another of his bandanas to tie the door shut so we borrowed a pair of Amber Valentino's tights. When Rich was finally snoring, I produced the chocolate bars the mustachioed woman had given me. It was the worst chocolate either of us had ever eaten, but we ate it just the same, washed down with the last of the red.

Amber Valentino had a tape player with tiny, crackling speakers. We turned off the light and listened to her one cassette, Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, until the batteries went flat and it sounded like Louis Armstrong. I stroked Amber Valentino's hair and she closed her eyes and said, "That's so nice." Soon she was asleep, but I sat wide awake, watching the faint outline of Yugoslavia slide by, wondering about the beautiful woman snoring on my lap.

"WAKE UP, AUSSIE, WE'RE THERE."

"Huh? Where?"

"Iraklion!"

"Iraq? What?"

"Crete. We're there."

"Already?"

"You've been asleep in a deck chair for twelve hours." Amber Valentino was standing over me, her perfectly tanned breasts dancing inches from my face in a chocolate-colored bikini top. "That train journey really took it out of you, huh?"

"I never sleep well on trains. Where's Rich?"

"He's getting the packs from the luggage room on the lower deck."

"So he's over the whole ticket thing then?"

"Oh yeah, he's real perky today. I think he joined the lifeboat club."

"Huh?"

"She's German. Blonde. He's been flashing his American Express Card around, buying everyone drinks." I must have been staring at Amber Valentino's breasts. "There not bad, are they?" she said, cupping a hand under each one, giving them a gentle squeeze. She meant it too. She

seemed duly proud of the cards she'd been dealt in the breast department.

"Sorry... I—"

"Hey, I like looking at them too. You might as well get used to it. You'll be seeing a lot more of them when we get to Matala." I swallowed hard and realized I was out of my depth. I should have been in Florence buying postcards of gothic cathedrals, or having my photo taken pretending to hold up the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Instead I was heading off for a week of nude bathing and possible amorous encounters in lifeboats. "By the way, Aussie, your face's as red as a baboon's ass. I think you've had a bit too much sun."

AMBER VALENTINO, RICH, AND RICH'S LITTLE BIT OF German fluff (as Amber Valentino liked to call her) had already headed off to Red Bluff, a nudist beach a couple of kilometers from the main tourist beach at Matala. I was on my way to meet them, a new pair of thongs tearing at the webbing of my toes, a cheap straw hat that felt more like a crown of thorns. I'd bought it from a stall near the beach that sold hats, film, Coke and "flip-flops." That's what they called thongs, no doubt due to the influence of English tourists. It was hard to feel manly in a pair of flip-flops, especially wearing a straw cowboy hat and a pair of op-shop army pants that I'd converted to shorts that morning with a pair of hotel scissors.

When I arrived at the beach, Rich and his blonde German were splashing waist-deep in the bluest of oceans. I saw Rich's stark white bum disappear below the surface as he dolphin dived under a wave. The blonde German had those pointy, bombalaska-shaped breasts and a big bottom. I heard Amber Valentino's voice. "Howdy, partner! I hope you found a shady tree for your horse."

"Very funny," I said, tilting the brim back with my thumb to see where her voice was coming from.

Amber Valentino was lying on her back on a lime green beach towel, her head resting on what she'd been wearing earlier that morning. All she had on was a pair of sunglasses and one of those wraparound sun visors that women golfers favour, which seemed a little ironic: like, hey, you wouldn't want to get too much sun on your nose. Her pubic hair had been waxed into a straight-edged racing stripe.

"I thought you Aussies were all bronzed lifeguards." She was looking over her sunnies at my legs. A couple of hairy, bleached pretzels protruding from my baggy shorts.

"Yeah, we all have pet kangaroos too. What a boring world it would be if we all lived up to our stereotypes," I said, laying my Barney Rubble beach towel on the sand opposite Amber Valentino.

"Barney Rubble?"

"Yeah, he's one of my favorite actors."

She laughed that raucous laugh. "I know what you mean. I've got a great admiration for Elmer Fudd." She stood and brushed her bottom with her hands as if she were dressed. "You coming for a swim?"

"No, I don't swim in the ocean. There's way too many things down there. Sharks, jellyfish—who knows what else."

"Not to mention Germans?" I nodded at the sand. "You know, Aussie, it's OK to look at me. I wouldn't lay around naked if I didn't want you to look." She struck a pose like a model on a catwalk, swinging her hips, then slapping a thigh with the palm of her hand. "So, what do you think?"

"What do I think? What do I really think? I think you're beautiful. I think you're smart and funny. I think you're drop-dead gorgeous, and if your man Don has got even half a brain he'll have already realized the mistake he's made and be on his way to find you as we speak."

Amber Valentino blushed for the first time since we'd met. It was strange to see a naked person blush. All of a sudden she seemed very aware of her nakedness. Vulnerable for the first time. She stood there awkwardly for a moment, not knowing what to do with her hands, then said, "You're a sweet guy, Aussie," before turning and running in the direction of the water.

I wished I'd had the nerve to let my dick swing in the breeze, to follow her into the ocean with the sharks and jellyfish and the big-bottomed German with the pointy breasts. Instead I watched the sway of Amber Valentino's hips as she ran, her feet squeaking and flicking sand. With a splash she disappeared beneath the foam of a breaking wave.

DON CALLED THE HOTEL NEXT MORNING BEGGING forgiveness, claiming he'd tracked her down, though it was clear Rich had set the whole thing up. She was to meet him at Roma station in two days time. Rich was reluctant to leave his blonde German, so I volunteered to escort Amber Valentino back to Rome and he shouted us two plane tickets from Athens to Rome with his old man's American Express card.

Something strange had happened there at Red Bluff. There was a closeness between us that belied the six days we'd known each another. She stopped being naked in front of me. Cut out the sexual references when we spoke. In Athens we shared a hotel room and when Amber Valentino showered she wore a robe from the bathroom, slipping her underwear on beneath it, dressing with her back to me. It was unnervingly sexy—like I'd fallen for my sister. We shared a bottle of wine and she slept with her head resting against my chest, and this time I slept too.

We flew to Rome the next morning and took a cab to the railway station. In the cab, out of the blue, Amber Valentino leaned across and kissed me. A long, sweet kiss on the lips. It left a lingering taste of the peppermints she'd been eating on the plane. I must have looked shocked.

"Thanks, Aussie," she said. "Thanks for everything."

We sat in the allotted coffee shop at the station and waited for Don, both of us just playing with our spoons rather than actually drinking the coffee. "It's been quite a week," she said.

"You're not kidding. It feels more like a month."

"What'll you do now?"

"Well, I won't be catching any trains. Probably head for Britain and get a low-paying menial job."

"Sounds a bit stereotypical."

"It does, doesn't it? Maybe I'll go and see the Sistine Chapel and think about it in the morning."

Then Don walked into the coffee shop. I knew it was Don because Amber Valentino launched herself at him like a flea to a dog. He was a big guy, with big hands and a big accent. He pumped my hand and said something corny and predictably American like, "Thanks for bringing my girl home," and I shrugged and left them to it, still with the faintest hint of peppermint on my lips.

IN LONDON A COUPLE OF MONTHS LATER I HAD A letter from Rich back in South Dakota. He was managing one of his father's ice-cream emporiums and seeing a "nice girl" from his neighborhood. He wrote that Amber Valentino and Don were married and living in San Diego.

Two years after that he wrote to say that Amber Valentino was divorced and living with her father in Venice Beach, bringing up a young son. She'd named him Rudy, after the old man. I wrote to her a couple of times and she sent a photo of herself and little Rudy. We lost contact after that... like you do.

I saw her again twelve years later. I was sitting up with my own little boy doing the midnight bottle feed, watching late-night TV, CNN to be precise. There was a news story about an old woman in Pasadena who lived in a house with over a hundred and fifty cats. And there was Amber Valentino. Drop-dead gorgeous Amber Valentino, interviewing this cat lady right there on my TV for CNN. I wanted to wake someone up, to yell out: "Hey, look, it's Amber Valentino—on the TV. Amber fucking Valentino, self-confessed cat hater doing an interview with a cat lady on CNN!" But Amber Valentino was just one week of my life out of a possible eighteen-hundred and seventy-two. The only people in the world we had in common were an ice cream salesman from South Dakota, a big-bottomed German woman whose name I never found out, and some Californian guy named Don.

As quickly as she'd appeared she was gone. "This is Amber Valentino in Pasadena for CNN." That's what she said. Clear as you like—as if we were sitting across from one another in an Italian coffee shop. For a week I watched CNN into the early hours of the morning, but I never saw Amber Valentino again. She'd vanished into the airwaves. And as much as I try to forget, the taste of peppermint is always the taste of that kiss.

JOHN HOLTON

Is a newspaper writer and short story teacher from Bendigo, Australia. His first collection of stories, Snowdropping, was runner-up in the Steele Rudd Award, the most prestigious prize for short story writing in Australia. He is currently finishing his second story collection.

You can't have nice things.