

The Boyfriend

by Andrew Roe

The boyfriend knows that he should say something. It's the proper time, the right amount of silence has uncomfortably elapsed, and if he doesn't utter some kind of solace or at the very least resort to a well-traveled cliché (better than nothing) pretty soon here, she will start to wonder what's going on and why he isn't reciprocating, isn't responding to her immediate needs, which are really quite simple: for him to say something, anything, although ideally something that's reassuring and supportive of her place in the world as a human being of import and snowflake uniqueness. And he should be saying something along those lines, he should be responding and reciprocating and so on. It shouldn't be so difficult. He knows this. It's the time-honored boyfriendly thing to do, he's fully aware, and plus he's been the boyfriend for a long enough period of time that he should be able to read her many female moods and nuances and signs (some subtle, some not so subtle, as was the case with her exclamation, only seconds ago, of "My life is fuck-fucking shit") and thus intuit what is, what could be, the right thing to say. At least get a ballpark sense. Only he cannot. He cannot summon the necessary language that will end this swelling stalemate and make everything all right so that she will then continue on with her crying and confessing and whatever else requires release, knowing that if nothing else he has acknowledged her pain in the obligatory boyfriend way, accepted it, perhaps even understood it a little, maybe. Instead, as he holds her, growing impatient in spite of himself, smelling her unwashed hair, his mind races with all kinds of weird, unrelated stuff (like how her hair smells unwashed, and who but him is dumb enough to talk smack to a cop after you've already had two DUIs this year, and what's up with all those celebrities who are into Scientology?) that boyfriends most definitely should not be thinking of at a time like this, and just now he detects the slightest, smallest hint of nipple blooming underneath her blouse, but there it is, what can he do—not notice? As a boyfriend, he knows that such

A.D.D. insensitivity could be considered a major liability in the eyes of most girlfriends, including his. He reasons, however, that he is the boyfriend and not the husband, not the father, and that there is a significant distinction here. This helps calm him. This differentiation—between the words "boyfriend" and, on the other hand, "husband" and "father"—this, he gratifyingly realizes, makes a huge big fucking difference. Just the boyfriend. The freedom that that allows. Which is after all part of the attraction, the lure, of being the boyfriend and nothing more. Truth is, he doesn't believe he'll ever reach the point where he can be anything but that, the boyfriend, but who knows, he is young, life bitch-slaps you around in ways you never expect or see coming (his cousin in Florida, for instance, who one day was making good money at UPS and the next was on disability and eating all his meals through a tube), and too there's the fact that he has some friends—disturbingly increasing in number come to think of it—who have graduated from boyfriends to husbands and/or fathers, although they do not talk too much about this superhero-like transformation, which he's pretty sure is a few years away for him personally, if ever, but then again you never know, as the example of his cousin in Florida illustrates. Really, who knows anything. Like for instance: she might be pregnant and that was the real reason why she was crying—not because some S.S. supervisor at work embarrassed her in front of everyone and spurred a self-confidence crisis, but because she had not been able to bring herself to tell him of the pregnancy because he was not husband/father material let alone boyfriend material—and soon, very soon, his life would dramatically change and he doesn't even know it yet, like a dope he's been going to his job and working out at the gym and renting movies he's already seen three times while this unspoken fate awaited him, and it has all narrowed down to this moment, sitting here, present tense, on the itchy sofa he's always hated (in his defense, hardly a conducive setting for cuddling and intimacy) with her head still buried in his chest and he's stroking her hair but it's just not the same as saying something to console her, which it's too late now anyway. I'm just a boyfriend, he tries to

reassure himself, only it doesn't work as well as it did a few seconds ago. She stirs a little, pulls away some. And that small retreat contains multitudes. And he knows she's not pregnant, that's not it. No, it's what he initially suspected, simply that there's been the escalation he'd dreaded, only now it's official, verified: the situation at hand is no longer merely about her self-confidence crisis but also now involves the issue of his response, or rather his lack of response, his silence, his guilt, his inadequacy—not only his own, which was considerable, but his entire gender's, maybe. It's not the first time this has come up, with this particular girlfriend in addition to others in the past. Not surprisingly, the boyfriend's track record as a boyfriend has not been good, not good at all, but the girlfriend, it should probably be pointed out, knew this going into the relationship, which has had its ups and downs, but no more or no less than usual.

