

Turning Thirty

by Ann Bogle

Of all the authors in the library, it was a wife in Maryland who called out from her marriage dormer I was not to read her. It might have been 2006. She shouted: "Some people should not be allowed to *read* books!" I intuited from Minnesota that the shout was for me, though we hadn't spoken of or to each other since graduate school, and almost never then.

On the cover of her book is a girl from the waist down in black skirt and shoes. It is one of many covers that began to appear after *Reading Lolita in Tehran* had delivered *Lolita* in a turn in planetary events as a beloved American novel to the hands of school kids and friends of Bill.

I have a writer friend in her sixties who reads for language, for its sounds and expression. She does not read to be taught moral lessons. She reads to listen to language as if it were as abstract and lyrical as music, emotive and without argument.

I have another friend, nearing sixty, who reads like a music librarian. He reads Vladimir Nabokov. He reads Robert Musil. He reads Alice Munro. He has read more of Richard Howard's translations than anyone I know (including the wife in Maryland, who knows Richard Howard outside of these stories). He reads scores. On the train he may read scores or he may conform to print culture and read *The New Yorker*. He might argue that music does argue, that he follows its arguments as if they were written in Italian rather than in notes on a page.

I used to read then write for the enjoyment of language—Gertrude Stein through the Beats—and when I read *Lolita* it was that way. I said later that *Lolita* was top shelf, not a book for messengers, but that might have been off, a dusty statement.

Then the covers appeared: girl from the waist down in rain boots. Girl from the waist down in Mary Janes. Girl from the waist down her socks slipping. Girl from the waist down on a park bench in the

sun. These covers spoke as clearly as the bones and ghosts in titles.

After the wife in Maryland telepathically commanded me not to read, reminding me for the first time of child prostitution in her father's native country, I turned away and didn't read her book. An American princess, she gave in an interview that she drank whiskey in a Manhattan studio before she married. There are different kinds of whiskey. Being there, reading. I didn't know by what rules or game she had won or the effect of other antecedents—her glistening branch of hair, her pretty knees (knees I don't recall), or her visionary decision to write with her writer husband their first sex in *Nerve*.

In John 4:18, the harlot is a Samaritan who has had five husbands, and the man she has now is not her husband. The husbands of the departed wives have strokes and sinus infections and seizures and lesions and kneecap replacements. They are celibate, though they may own someone.

I began not to care as I had cared that women I had known were at last publishing novels, except for the first one at thirty whose books I had read, women trained to write poetry who were cheerleaders in high school, multicultural cheerleaders who had married, had children, and in middle age signed novels about women turning thirty. I saw how parochial and sycophantic it might seem to care for novels written by women in friendships tested by beauty: Asian white cheerleaders! Latina white cheerleaders!

I had been a cheerleader at Lolita's age or younger. In fourth grade in our red corduroy skirts and white wool turtlenecks we looked like the girls on the book jackets. It was a year of red, white, and blue bell bottoms, chokers, and mini-skirts. It was not a decade of pink stretch pants, pink sweatshirts, and pink snowsuits.

The police heard the music at my birthday party in fifth grade: A group of us girls had taken the portable record player to the park in the middle of the night and dropped our clothes. We hid in the willows from the cops' searchlight, our outfits draped over the hockey boards. The light scanned the horse path in a staccato blare then passed. We were aware but not afraid. I had felt in my spirit a

song, though not a song, about “freedom,” a poem that had nothing to do with law, religion, or sex. The girls who stayed curled in sleeping bags while the others streaked in the night became athletes and cheerleaders, sisters without borders of the doctors of “turning thirty.”

I had thought of reading every book by every writer I had met at school. When the wife in Maryland rang across the country, I gave up my plan, conceived in joy. I had read the novels of a classmate, for joy that she had come so far, for joy in the stories and surprises in language, for joy that she had beaten the clock and found readers, not only the competitive and pilfering and preening writers who had been her audience at school, but readers for a story.

The institutional preference for short poetry and novels rushes one at the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs in the form of human bodies, younger women and older men, poets seeming to outnumber fiction writers eight to one with their sixty- to eighty-page collections surpassing fiction writers' cumulative stacks of “nothing” if not published as novels.

The wife in Maryland had not studied fiction writing, had not sat in fiction workshop, and her novels with the girl from the waist down and the rain boots on the covers became *New York Times* bestsellers.

In 1997, nearing thirty-five, I sent a short story about a girl, the academic daughter of East German immigrants, turning twenty-eight, to *The New Yorker*. The editor I knew had left. The next editor, a poet herself, called the story “ambitious” when I sent it again in 2000. I did not know then that the editor was in her early twenties when she returned the story. She was thirty-five when her memoir about her mother appeared its year. It took eleven years. Vernon Frazer published the short story as “The Sitzer” in *Big Bridge* in 2008. Meanwhile, in 2005, *Harper's* had published an essay on experimental fiction by Ben Marcus. Marcus writes, “Ambitious” in menial code suggests, “You stand not with the people but in a quiet dark hole, shouting to no one.”

