

He Wasn't You

by Gary Percesepe

This is you, this is me.

Her voice gravelly with sleep, the woman traces the outline of her body and her husband's as if at a crime scene, her hands the yellow chalk of police. She wets one tapered finger and massages his eyelids gently. He registers the peach scent of her hair, newly washed, sighs, then digs deeper into the sheets.

There had been affairs. First him. Then, he suspects, her. They separated. It went on like that for eight months, then last night he called. And wound up here. Her house. Their old house.

He wakes to find ten sharp nails swinging lightly in his face, each perfectly shaped and painted Ferrari red.

"Kathleen," he says. "What time is it?"

"Blow them dry."

Martin blows lightly on each of her nails, careful not to touch them with his lips. When he finishes, she taps them lightly on his forehead, then reaches over, flips on the lampstand light.

He shoots her in this new light with his camera eye, unblinking, taking his time, as if he has never before seen this woman. He sees her chipped front tooth, the small scar on her temple, the gentle rise of her neck, the slope of her shoulder, the curve from hip to waist, and the way her legs, half folded on the bed, seem painted on the white sheets in a sexy angle.

"Stay there," she says. "I'm not finished here."

She twists to reach his thighs, the muscled calves, his feet, where the sheets lie bunched. He lies perfectly still until she completes her tracing, his strong surgeon's hands clasped and resting on his chest. From where he sits he cannot see the clock, his pants block the lighted dial. Dusty morning sun slants through the raised corner window. He props his head with a pillow and waits.

She grabs at the reading light suspended over their heads and adjusts it skillfully, like the doctor she is, so that it shines brightly into his eyes, blinding him momentarily.

"What time is it," he asks again.

"True confession time. Time to pony up some answers. Like, for instance, why you called?"

Martin considers. He had been out driving. He drove across the north shore, onto the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, twenty- four miles into New Orleans. Then turned around and got back on the Causeway. Fifteen miles out he had pulled over, as far out of the right lane as he could get, set the flashers and cut the engine. Cars roared by, honking and flashing their brights. He had gotten out of the car, moving carefully to the railing, buffeted by the wind of the flying cars. He was out of the sight of land, he realized. The black water beneath him, what he could see of it under the light of the half moon, rippled in what appeared to be circles of light. He spat into the darkness, considering. Then removed his blazer and let the wind kite it down, down, the sleeves swirling out then folding in and out of sight. He had twisted the gold ring off his right hand, another gift from the New Orleans woman, and thrown it over as well. Past midnight he found himself in a parking lot, looking in the window of an all night convenience store. The light was strange, that funny amber color you see everywhere now that seems to paint things more than light them, that makes you believe for a time that maybe it's a different world and that this is no ordinary convenience store, no ordinary night.

"So," Kathleen asks again. "Give me a sentence, Martin. The truest sentence that you know. Then another. Lay them down"

"So I was at this convenience store on the north end. I was parked there somehow, I don't why I was there and not somewhere else. And I saw this woman carrying stuff to the counter, piles of stuff in a basket. She was in a bikini, this woman, one of those thong jobs that makes your crotch hurt just looking at it, and she had lots of muscles, but she threw that stuff up on the counter like it was some great effort, with way more arm movement than you'd think was necessary for a small basket like that. And the thing is, I was parked head in, right up in front, so I had a good view. She had a bottle of peroxide and some rubbing alcohol up there on the counter, two

cans of Band Aids and a big economy box of Tylenol, an Ace bandage, a tube of Coppertone and a sixpack of Miller."

"Big night. What'd she look like, your woman?"

He frowns and gives her the big stare. Then says, "I don't know. Like your average woman in a thong at midnight getting ready to self-medicate."

"That's the B answer," she says.

"OK. She wasn't hard to look at. Sculptured. Good bones. Chiseled from the Cosmo prototype. Huge heaving breasts, wasp-like waist, that one perfect mole just above her pouty lips, which are lipsticked the color of--"

"Of these," she says, holding up her fingernails, which have dried by now but still have that nice wet look, and waving her toenails in the air, which she has done in the same color.

"Exactly."

"And after she made her purchase she drifted out of the store and toward you in some big, final way, like an Obsession ad, like she's built for speed, like all your days hereafter will be filled with a modicum of happiness and just the right amount of danger, like the grail is in reach and all the brothers notified, like--"

"Like you."

"That's sweet," she says. "Pathetic, but sweet. Now, are you going to tell me about the New Orleans woman?"

"What's to tell? It's over. The New Orleans woman got deep-sixed, over and out, tossed over the Pontchartrain, buried deeper than Hoffa. Like a spot, she's been mopped up."

"And that's why you're here."

"Sure. Well, no. Actually, I had a dream."

"You and M.L.K. Lincoln Memorial stuff."

"No, seriously. I really did. I mean, maybe it doesn't mention you directly, this dream--"

"Dreams don't mention, they enact. Your un-lived life. Your shadow self. The whole coulda, woulda, shoulda thing."

"Right."

"Didn't Oprah do a show on that?"

Martin ignores this.

"So anyway," he says, "it's a Pope dream."

"A pope dream!" She stops her laugh dramatically, looks at him hard, with mock seriousness. "Was the popemobile there? I always wanted to ride in the popemobile."

"No popemobile," he says.

"Isn't the Pope in every dream, technically? I can't remember."

"Wants to be, maybe. Anyway, you're the Catholic," he says.

"Was the Catholic," she says. "My girlish patent leather youth. OK, serious now. So there's the Pope. What's he doing?"

"I was in a classroom--"

"Tell it in the present tense, like it's happening now."

"I'm in this classroom. I must be back in high school because I recognize the colors of the walls and where my locker is, and the Pope has come to our school to answer our questions and to talk to us. And I'm scheduled to say something to him, you know, make some kind of scripted remark, like it's a photo op or something. Like they had out in Denver or wherever it was."

"Stick to the dream. Don't editorialize."

"So then, for some reason, I'm on the ground, crawling around. I mean, I didn't start out crawling around in the dream, I did one of those deep knee bend things that Catholics do--"

"Genuflect."

"Right, I genuflect to the Pope, and then I seem to like it, because I stay down there a long time. I'm crawling around on the ground not being noticed by the Pope, who is busy blessing everyone and doesn't see me."

"What are you doing down there?"

"Well, this is the funny part. I'm crawling around by the Pope and I remember I'm trying to feel something. With the Pope there and everything, I figure I should be feeling things more intensely. I have this idea that everything will be intensified."

"But it wasn't happening."

"Right, it wasn't happening. It's just not there, I don't feel anything. So then I see this other kid, like me, on the floor, crawling.

Except he's cut his thumb, and I can see this raised bead of blood on it, and he's looking at this blood and at the Pope, and it's like I start to feel through him, you know?"

"Uh huh. Weird."

"Yeah. It's like I feel for him, bleeding like that, and then I began feeling like him, and then I was him."

"And now you're thinking--what?"

"That-- you know." Martin looks down into his hands. "That it might be a sign or something. For us."

"For us?"

"Yeah. Like we're going to be OK now. I was this one person, and now I'm another."

"Just like that."

"Just like that. Why not?"

She sighs, and turns into the wall.

"You know you didn't have to work up a dream for this, you could've just bought the Pope's book at the mall."

"Knock it off, Kathleen."

"I'm sorry."

There is a long silence. Then she turns back to him, reaches out for his hand. He lets her take it.

"Look, Martin," she says. "I believe you, what you're trying to say here. That it's over with what's her face. Miss November. But there's something you should know."

He bites his lip. And waits.

"You've met someone. Is that it?"

"Well, what'd you expect, that I'd crash the convent? It's been eight months. You didn't call. I didn't call. Then I called and you didn't want to deal with it. Then you called and your timing, once again, was off."

"Who is he?"

"Who is she?"

"Was she. Miss November, remember?"

"Well, he's Dr. November, OK? A guy at work. No one you know. Why don't we just leave it at that?"

"So what was the big attraction for you with this guy? He's the master swordsman? He touches you in all your deepest places? He's the one we've all been waiting for?"

"You shit."

"Well?"

"He wasn't you."

Martin gets up, puts on his pants. He reaches under the bed and finds his shoes. He starts to lace one on, then throws it at the wall. The shoe ricochets off the wall and knocks a vase of flowers off the endtable.

"Are you quite finished?"

The water from the vase has soaked Martin's socks. He peels them off slowly, and lays them methodically on the bedspread.

"Look, Kathleen, I'm sorry. I guess you had the right. And who am I to blah blah blah. It's not pretty, any of it, and the worst part is I feel like we're reading off a bad script."

"Ditto."

"And the weird thing is, is that nothing really happens in this story. I mean something happened, something big took place here, but in a way everything is still in place. You're you, I'm me, the house is still the house and these are my clothes and our friends are still our friends--it's just that all the meanings have gotten jumbled around, out of order or something. Stuff that normally goes with other stuff is just lying around now, out of place. Emotions. We don't know where to put this other stuff that we feel, right? The bad stuff, I mean."

He considers this.

"And divorce is the ultimate cliché, isn't it? I mean, then we'd join the national rap about personal growth, the word space would come up, repeatedly, when we're out with our respective support groups, in this priestly tone our therapists use, there'd be the usual talk about us, the allowances made as to how at least there were no children, our parents and friends would do just the right amount of tactful commiserating, or they wouldn't, but the whole thing would be so boring and predictable we'd want to fucking kill ourselves."

"Death before divorce, that what you're saying? Take the long view. Play the hand you're dealt. Be adults. Stop whining, take what you can get, pray the St. Francis prayer or whatever it is, 'change what you can and don't sweat the rest,' get a dog."

"Something like that. Maybe without the dog part."

"The dog, I think, is critical here."

"Could we start with a hamster or a gerbil or something? You know, work our way up to the big stuff?"

"Sorry, pal. Nothing in cages. You get my drift?"

"Right. Check. Gotcha."

Martin punches the TV remote, surfs to CNN. There's an update on the latest disaster haunting the world, some wildfire footage out West. The firefighters look grimy and weary. Like they'd rather be somewhere else. A place without heroics.

"So, this was good, right?"

"This, meaning what," she says.

He waves his arms vaguely, spinning now, around the room, like a child's top whose string has been pulled.

"This. Our talk. Our understanding. I fucked up, you did what you had to do. Now we go on. Right?"

"Sure," she says. "We go on. Thoroughly modern. But here's the deal."

"What," he says, taking a seat on the bed next to her.

"I'm going to continue to see him. Tuesday and Thursday nights, same as before."

"What! You're fucking kidding me."

"I kid you not."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Relax, I'll bring him by. Introduce him. You'll like him, I promise. Think of it this way, I'm back to seventeen. It will be like you two have joint custody."

He stands up, turns around, and looks at her. Her color is up, and he can see her lightly freckled shoulders, the delicate collarbone, twist away from him, then back. He sees now that both her hands are behind her back, fingers crossed.

She sticks her tongue out at him. She looks so small to him, then, sitting there like that, so present, so completely within reach.

"Deal," he says.

"You like my hair, yes?" She fluffs out her hair, which has dried to the color of a new penny. She lies back on the pillow so that it fans all around her face, framing her.

"I do," he says softly.

"Hair I am!"

He laughs, and they grow silent.

"We'll have our moments, though, am I right? It's not this easy, is it? There'll be things I'll want to know that I shouldn't, words will be said and I'll piss you off and we'll get off kilter, do stupid shit. That the arrangement?"

"Pretty much. And one more thing."

"What's that."

"I see her around, or you see her, and I do her. Then you. The full Hoffa. You tracking on this?"

He walks into the kitchen. Opening the back door he watches their neighbors up and down the street, getting the paper, taking out the trash, setting the flag on the mailbox, ordinary stuff he's seen a thousand times. He watches them get into their expensive cars to pull them out of their cluttered garages to go to their important jobs.

He studies the careful way that they move. He stands on tiptoe, lifting his eyes and craning his neck to see past where his street turns out of the development and connects to the main road into town. He can just barely make it out.

