

Let Us Pretend

by Heather Fowler

For just one moment the lovers are too startled to speak. He has begun his periodic overture towards her heart and body, with the signals she has grown accustomed to: the warm touching of her palms, his arm thrown around her shoulder, his delicate and gentle kiss that is a prelude to his bedroom kiss, light, soft, till it deepens to fill her teeth and throat. Tonight, he has asked about her subjects, though we all know her subjects are not his subjects. How are her girlfriends Rita and Sally? How was her day? Since he has been kind, she is amenable.

He has refrained from watching countless hours of military television. With half-held breath, he waits for her to reciprocate his touches, light as spiders on her skin, but she has forgotten how. What is the adequate response to his renewed interest in her hands, her body, her subjects that he has heretofore considered tedious and called as much on one or more occasions?

"I want--" he says, but there is no continuation, as though his utterance of this very phrase has made things too complicated already. She imagines his head spins. What shall he state? He wants her to stop sleeping on the couch? He wants her to belong to him again? He wants her to go the hell away, but only after he sleeps with her one last time? To encourage the delivery of words, she leans toward him, following his paced circles, bringing her own ear closer as he strides so his words might have less distance to travel.

"You want, you want?" she says. He can't look at her. There has been a betrayal. Had there not, why would he be so clumsily attentive and tongue-tied now? "Perhaps a divorce?" she continues, thinking of his thin, long hands and how they almost, not quite, but almost, made their usual pattern on her body, remembering having queried many men on what their most erotic sexual encounter was and found that the answer of "athletic and seething break up sex"

was high on the list, close second only to "sex with a teenage girl." But who didn't want to fuck a teenage girl? All that perky skin, that dewy enthusiasm, that acceptance of the current as better than what had come before, had there been a before. Teen-age skin, she thinks. Hers had been so soft, not like now when moisturizers must be slathered on yet still dry age encroached.

"Damn it! No," he says, waving his arms around, gesticulating madly as if the thing he wants is desperately out of reach, but he suspects that if he motions with wide sweeps of his hands for long enough, it might fly back. "It's just..."

The idea of athletic break up sex begins to appeal to her. For this, she knows, he would ignore his old athlete's knee injuries, his ginger care of his body, his prudish reluctance to do what she wants, when she wants, as she wants. "Tell me what you want, you little fucker," she might say.

He could tarnish her too. They were their most electric when self-tarnishing, the tired and polite kindness of those who spoke of bills and duties and royalties and ethics margins vanishing. She has, she has discovered, a cruel streak on occasion. And she can slit him open and heal him sealed. He likes it when she doesn't treat him like they are married, when she treats him like she did in the beginning, as if he were only there to please her and she might ask him to leave any moment, for her own mysterious reasons, or as a matter of course. "What the hell do you want, Ted?"

"I want things back the way they were," he finally creaks. But he is touching her cheeks. He is rubbing her arms up and down as if she were standing in winter wind. He is almost losing his voice from a cold that's been present for weeks. "I don't want to have touched her. I don't want him to have touched you."

"You return to the couples swap again," she says, sighing. For her part, the thing was not that interesting, held at a suburban house with sterile rooms, barely any people of interest. Oh, God, were some of them ugly!

"It's just that I can't get past it. I shouldn't have let you go off with that guy. That guy! You didn't even want to go in the first place. And that woman. I didn't really want her."

"Look," she says. "I am not freaking out about that. I could care less. I told you, we'd do what you wanted to do when you wanted to do it. Why have you avoided me all these weeks since then? Okay, yes. I told you her tight little runner's ass got to me and that she had clearly botoxed the shit out of her forehead, but I don't think of her as competition. Didn't you enjoy yourself? Something new, you said. What? Fuck's sake. Am I the man in this relationship? I'm the one who doesn't care? It was just sex, remember? I wasn't new enough for you, remember? Would you leave that alone for now, for good, please?"

Then, she paces. He stops her from pacing. "It was new," he says. "But I kept losing it." He points down and seems to enjoy and detest watching her eyes widen. "You going to ask me why now?"

She stares into the sliding glass door reflecting them and their living room. "Why?"

"I could hear you," he says. "It was so loud. It was a fucking boom through the house! I heard you with that Fabio type in that room, and it's been bothering me ever since. I mean, you are not that loud for me. What was he doing in there? And I was thinking: I can't be good enough for you. All these years and you never made that noise before. Never made most of those noises before. So from this, I can only surmise that a complete stranger pleased you more than I do! And I've had years to get better at this. I'm falling down on the job. Very much falling down on the job. But that's all I hear now, in my head, your cries from another man."

She does not tell him the true and uncomfortable facts of that evening, her boredom, doesn't even bother to explain in a series of back and forths what happened in the room. Nothing one says in these conversations is ever believed, just seems to tap loose a new string of paranoid thoughts or hurts. And yet, she feels wronged. Distinctly. She wants him to know this. "Let's pretend," she says,

getting down on the Armenian rug and laying flat, "that you are him and I am me. Come here."

"I don't like the way this is going," he says.

"Come sit on me or near me." She closes her eyes. "I didn't want it to be bad for him," she says, black lashes fluttering. "It's not his fault I was there."

"Stop. Stop!"

"But there he was, doing his thing. So I just kind of--helped?"

"Will you be quiet?" Ted asks. "This is not helping me."

She looks at the ceiling and practices a miraculous scale of notes, mimicking the sounds of sex like a bird's cry could be refashioned, repeating the tones and volumes from that earlier night as if in reenactment. Like he's a policeman. Like she's a performer. Ted listens.

He listens through three or four crescendos, until she has replayed approximately ninety percent of the other night's show, and then she sits up, glaring. "You dick," she says. "That was an exercise in self-distraction. The softer noises are real."

There is a moment when they are like children with renewed faith; he slaps her, but it is a lover's slap, one paused in such slow motion that it might resemble a caress to an outsider, but it's the eyes that make intent--and "You fucking bitch, you fucking bitch," he is saying after a moment, but he is saying this tenderly into her nape, he's so grateful, he is crying, and he is kissing her all the while.

