

There's Love, and there's Marriage

by Kristen Tsetsi

His skin smelled funny in the morning. Like day-old sweat, or the inside of a worn, dirty cap. She inched an inch away from him and breathed the air between them, tried to identify. Had they been eating different foods? More fried, more pizza, more salts? She smelled her own arm and it smelled like—like nothing. She smelled her breath. Morning, but not unusual morning.

He didn't used to smell that way, like a rained-on boot, like the insides of a lived-on couch. His skin used to smell like fabric softener but not, and not the nauseatingly powerful perfume kind, but the chemical-free, subtle sheets. He used to smell like he wore light, subcutaneous cologne. Her body would slither up against his in pre-alarm darkness for those five minutes, maybe six, of wrapping around him and smelling his skin before they both got up for their showers, their cheap-tin coffee in the corn silk painted kitchen, and their separate cars.

She'd tried to ignore it, had thought it must be passing—something hormonal, maybe, or something he'd eaten at lunch—and had even spooned him from behind with a leg tucked between his and her nose just brushing the curve where neck becomes back. She had tried, but there was no staying. There was just that odor.

His alarm went off and he reached over to tap it into snooze before rolling toward her and touching her face with his. She could smell the loose, porous skin between his nose and his upper lip. She held her breath. When he kissed her, she puckered, and then smiled and pulled away. She said “Bathroom” and crept out from under the covers where it was warm, and where one of his hands lay on the creased sheets flattened by her thighs. She laid her hand on his fingers and said, “I love you. Do you know?”

His fingers moved under hers, but didn't grab. "I know." He yawned.

She *tap-tap-tapped* his knuckles before taking her hand away.

In the bathroom, she lifted up the toilet cover and set it down again and sat on top of it in her flannel pants. She smelled her cupped palms, then stretched her T-shirt neck and stuck her face inside, sniffed. Faint coconut.

When she heard the covers rustle and the drawer slide open and closed, she flushed the toilet and went out. He was sitting on the edge of the bed putting on his slippers. They were monkey heads. (The day she saw them after her first night with him was the day she'd fallen in love with him. It was the day after Nathan had told her he was getting married, a short conversation. Afterward, she'd called him and asked him out for dinner and had tossed an overnight bag in her trunk, telling herself "Just in case," because it had already been two months, and why not? The next morning, his skin smelling like apricot flesh, she'd looped a curled finger over the elastic waist of his briefs while he, folded on the bed with a foot raised high, put on one of those slippers. "Wakka, wakka," he'd said, bouncing his foot in the air.)

He pulled on a 49ers sweatshirt and came out of the bedroom and stopped in front of her. "You done in there?" He nodded at the bathroom behind her.

"Nope."

He kissed her cheek and pushed her out of the way. He slammed the door. It always slammed because of the towel hooks. She'd first seen them at Nathan's, in the apartment he used to share with his roommate. Five hooks all connected together like a family tree and hanging over the top of the door by two flat brackets. At Nathan's, the door had shut smoothly and quietly. At home, there was less space between the door and the frame.

She was still standing there when he came out.

"What're you doing?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Okay. Look. What is the *matter* with you?"

“What do you mean?”

“You've been weird—distant, and just...strange—for weeks. Ever since the day we went to...to that town, whatever it was.”

“Have I really? No.”

“Well, yeah. A little bit.”

There'd been coffee, bagel sandwiches, a walk on a stubby beach stuffed with tourists, and the kind of silence that belonged to strangers.

“So, what's going on?” he said.

“Nothing. I don't feel well.”

“For two weeks?”

“Whatever,” she said.

“You sick?”

“You know,” she said, “yeah. I think I'm staying home today.”

“Do you have sick days?”

“No.”

He tucked his hands in the center pocket of his sweatshirt. It stretched down with the weight of his arms. “Do you think just one day will be enough? If you think you'll feel even worse tomorrow, do you think you can take tomorrow, instead? Because we really can't afford more than o—”

“Today is all I need.”

“You sure?”

“How can anyone be sure about something like that?” she said. “I feel this way now. That's all I know.”

She watched his gray Chevy from the bedroom window until it made it through the intersection, then went out to the office/dining room and pulled the balled receipt from the back of her desk drawer. She flattened it and dialed Nathan's number, written on the back. After four rings, he said, “Hey, you! I was just on my way to work. What's up? Is something wrong?”

“What does she smell like?” she said.

“What?”

"Your w—Georgia. What does she smell like? —And not *there*. Just in general."

"Why?"

She whispered, "Brian smells different."

"What kind of different?"

"I don't know."

"Another woman?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

For a moment, he didn't say anything. She heard his car radio in the background advertising Halloween costumes.

"Like...uh...apples, probably," he said. "Red delicious."

She rolled her eyes. "Figures."

"What do you want me to say? She smells like shit?"

"Yep." She opened the curtain by her desk. One of the neighbors across the dust and gravel alley stepped out onto the stairwell with a cup of coffee and a cigarette and stared vacantly at her window. She pulled the curtain closed. "I had a dream about you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"It was a couple of weeks ago. I woke up and I felt you all day. I couldn't even talk to him."

He breathed into the phone and she felt it in the crackling vibrations against her ear. "Why did you call me, Lore?"

His voice was soft. She held onto the phone with both hands. "I don't know."

She heard his radio go quiet, the emergency brake's grinding yank. "It's pheromones. His smell. That's what it is."

She tested it. That night, before it was time to go to bed, she turned off the lights in the living room and took off her clothes by the couch. He took off his. She climbed on top of him and held his face to her chest and pretended he was Nathan. She lowered her head, smelled the skin behind his ear. It smelled like coconut.

