

At the End of the World There Will Only Be Renegade Lovers

by Kyle Hemmings

I didn't believe in hiding secrets or broken arrows. So I told my new girlfriend, who in earnest, tried shedding pounds like ugly memories, who glued herself to my shag carpet, watching exercise videos--that I didn't sleep alone. I tried to be as sensitive as possible, skirting certain issues and waiting for the right moment. She never completely recovered from a runaway father. And most of my girlfriends, perhaps from my abrupt manner and lack of diplomacy, went short, then went long.

I showed my new girlfriend, breathless from another workout that I knew would never work, the nuclear warhead I slept with. In fact, it even had a painted smiling face. I liked to keep hope close by. I explained that the warhead was stolen by one of my ex-girlfriends, an air force major, who eventually switched sides and became a terrorist of night skies, of distant lunar stations. To this day, I'm not sure if they ever caught her.

I told my new girlfriend that sometimes my ex and I would bop-u-late (a term she invented, being such a hi-tech freak) next to the warhead so as to rekindle something that was lost. Sometimes Major Girlfriend would wake up and tell me about a dream she had, like the one where we went on a safari and a group of lions surrounded us. Imagine doing it in front of the lions. Imagine doing anything for the last time.

My new girlfriend became obsessed, promising me she would go on the most obscenely rigorous diet, if only I let her sleep next to my warhead. She'd call all hours of the night, crying, calling the warhead, Dewey, her father's first name, and pleading with me to let

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her sleep over. One night, after I raided the refrigerator for some celery and low-salt peanut butter, I found my new girlfriend, standing at the top of the stairs, arms wrapped around "Dewey," like some Teddy Bear with a voice that could be heard for miles. She began to lose her balance, forever that unloved child with empty hands, wavering, eyes, glassy, seeing, perhaps, nothing at all. I would not be the one to keep her beefcake trim or from falling.

In a pitch of taut-wire voice, the kind you hear in movie characters who became disassociated by the end of the second act, but pretended they really had a handle on things all along, she demanded that I say I love you, Christina, and I never meant to leave without saying Good-bye. She kept insisting that I repeat this. And when you can't go on, when you stutter or forget the words, she said, this world, for what it's worth, will end.

I closed my eyes and mapped out the geography of my body, as if from aerial view, the sweaty parts that were like swamps offering no camouflage for victims, the bones and vessels that offered no shelter from radiation. I thought long and hard about a good many things. I was tempted to say This is the problem with most crash diets. They're just too demanding to be practical. Instead, I remained very still.

