

Chicagoo (from Swink literary journal)

by Rick Rofihe

Kim. When Kim handed me some of her husband's condoms—"Here, use these"—out of one of their bedroom dresser drawers, could she sense the astonishment I was trying my best not to show?

I did almost try to ask Kim a practical question, but I stopped myself, imagining her answering it sternly, or, more likely, in exasperation: "Jimmy. *Who counts condoms?*"

Estelle. The last time I saw Estelle was at the movie theater where we'd arranged to meet. "Make sure it's a short one, Jimmy—no epics," she'd said over the phone while I checked the newspaper listings. We were on the sidewalk in line for tickets when her husband walked by. He didn't say a word to either of us, but we weren't breaking any rules that I knew of.

The only rule I did know of was, yes, Estelle and I could spend time together and talk and drink tea or whatever like that we did—and, really, that was all I preferred to do—as long as he didn't have to witness it. That is, in their house which he had helped pay for. After all, who was I but some ex-boyfriend from twenty years previous? Until I moved back to the area, she'd never even mentioned me.

For the better part of the first year, I'd deliberately avoided her. When we finally did meet up, I told her so. She didn't ask why, but just gave me an inscrutable look and started talking about something else altogether.

After many meetings, and though I'd sworn to myself I never would, one time I asked, "Estelle, what about the guy on the island?"

"What guy? What island?"

Back when I first knew her, although I spent many occasional nights in Estelle's bed, I always left her the virgin I found her. What was she then, seventeen? Or eighteen? That's not so very young, but I was looking at it differently: she was just out of high school and I was already through university. Plenty of time.

Then she ran away with some guy who lived on an island. She came back to me after a week of that, but I wasn't having any of it. Which didn't make any sense even to me at the time, because I obviously cared for her, and I missed her a lot.

If Estelle didn't know what I was talking about, that meant she didn't remember her first time. I frequently recalled mine, a few years before I met Estelle, because it was in a house near where I live now and pass every day.

She—I sometimes see her around—had said it was her first time, too. But I read long after in a magazine poll that twenty-five percent of girls say it is when it is, twenty-five percent say it is when it isn't, twenty-five percent say it isn't when it isn't, and twenty-five percent say it isn't when it is.

“I like to run fast, Jimmy.” Kim has said to me more than once. “I can't seem to do anything else fast, so I run fast.”

There's no flies on Kim, though; nothing dragged-out about her. What she means is that having her kids and husband and everything else that goes with them for much of every day keeps her from doing all she'd like to do, and with the speed she'd prefer. Not that she'd want to give up anything she has, but Kim does enjoy extending herself back into her sometimes-imploding world with things like running fast. When we first met, Kim looked me up and down and then said, “Do you swim, Jimmy? I think you'd make a good swimmer.”

Within days of starting our affair, Kim, quite matter-of-factly, told me she'd told a friend of hers all about us. When I heard that, I

nearly jumped out of my skin, for while I didn't exactly know this friend, I knew I moved in the same circles she did.

"What did you tell her?"

"You know, my friend won't repeat this stuff."

"But what?"

"That you had exquisite lips—then I told her everything. How it was my idea, how I set it up, the time, the place. How you resisted...."

For a moment I just looked at her. It wasn't my first, or even second relationship with a married woman, but it was the first time I knew of that it had fallen from the realm of the hidden.

"Look," she said, "I don't know what you're thinking, but you know, everyone has secrets."

"I don't," I said, as if it were a sure thing. If I was trying to caution or intimidate her, it didn't work.

"Jim-eee!" she squealed, laughing. Kim already seemed to know me well enough to be sure that if I stopped and thought it over and started counting, I'd find out I had dozens or hundreds or even millions of them.

Holly. When it came to married women, Holly was the first. It happened in my car, after I'd offered to drive her home from work. I was shocked, really. Even in subsequent, similar situations, I always was, each and every first time. Not so much because of any specific actions, but by some general, insistent needs I'd find there, ones I'd incorrectly figured must be being met. Wherever they come from, you'd think I'd get used to such things, but I've never been able to.

As for single women, I suppose less furtiveness means less shock. Besides, at such times, often I was the desiring one. And when it comes to the times I myself was married or such, they've all turned out to be difficult situations for me to confront today—it's hard to believe that where there once was, had to be, such familiarity, now there's almost none. But that's the way it remains.

Holly I met when she had only one child, the first boy. She and I have sought each other out since, yet my main memory of her goes back to that first child. I was sitting on a rock wall one autumn day when they came toward me, she with her yellow hair, he with his red. The same colors as the fallen leaves they were walking through.

Whenever no one was around, Holly and I would hold hands, lightly. That day, she and her little boy were. With them it looked like the process of a near-perfect birth: incomplete, and through her fingertips.

The kid used to tell me some good jokes. “What happens if Chicago gets too hot and starts to melt?”

“What?”

“Chicagoo.”

People call it cheating. I don't know. Once in a while I've successfully resisted, wanting to keep the friendship, I would be thinking, pure and open to the sunlight. Probably always a mistake?

Sometimes they'd ask me to do things their husbands wouldn't do. Or do things they would never ask their husbands to do. Or do things that their husbands asked them to do, but they wouldn't do with their husbands.

As for Estelle, who's kind of a special case as I knew her, then didn't, and now do again, after the thing at the movies, I didn't see her or hear from her for one month, then two. I began to feel there were new rules—no phone calls or anything to or from me. And that perhaps she'd begun to agree that these new rules were good ones. Somehow I decided to write her a letter and send it in care of her mother in the suburbs. I didn't say much in it. I did close by asking how her mother was.

Not right away, but soon I got a letter in return: Hi Jimmy, she'd been busy, the kids and school this, the house and yard that, she'd bump into me soon, oh her mother was fine and—Estelle's not

coy or stupid—didn't I think it odd, us writing letters like this when we lived in the same city within walking distance of each other?

