

Officer Friendly

by Tiff Holland

The last time Ray and I broke up, I flew my flag at half-mast. It was the kind of thing that pissed him off. He was very big on flag etiquette: how the flag should be folded, the fact that it should never touch the ground, when to fly it at half-mast, the rules regarding its destruction. As a former ROTC cadet, I already knew these things myself, but I wasn't much for authority, especially after our final break-up.

Ray went on with his life. He went out with that skank whose name he had written on his calender: "Miriam-Party 7p" on the 17th of the month. He had told me to check the calender when we were at his place. We usually ended up there. He had cable. I didn't. Since he was a cop, his days off were always changing. I blinked when I saw the party entry, traced over and over in his black printing.

When I left, I went to the drugstore. I should have known. He'd been on some kind of diet, and I'd noticed a pack of some cherry smelling cigarillos tucked into the visor in his car. At the drugstore, I stood in line with my razor blades, a whole new pack of five safety blades in cardboard sheafs. My wrists were already itching. I held my arms in tight like wings. I figured "Miriam" must be the new dispatcher. He'd been talking about her a lot. She sounded like a flake to me. She did tarot readings on the side. I wouldn't have thought she was his type, but he did say she had strawberry blonde hair, blue eyes, like him. Deep down, I knew, he was just enough in love with himself to like that, to want someone who looked like him.

I was pretending to scan the impulse crap right by the register when I saw it — one of those punching bags like we had when we were kids, blue with a giant rubber band on the end so you can keep hold of it no matter how hard you hit it. In that moment it looked just like his head, big and round, his hairline receding, so I bought it, too.

When I went home, I didn't head to the bathroom to start the warm water. Instead, I got out a sharpie marker and drew his face in the middle, a big badge near the bottom. "Officer Friendly" I said, and I gave it a good punch. I punched it and it punched it, but it kept springing back, his nose, his mustache, one corner of his three cornered police hat eager to make contact with my fist.

We went out a few times before the party. I pretended I didn't know. A free meal is a free meal, right? Especially when you're in college, and I wanted to see if he was going to tell me. Maybe, I even hoped he'd change his mind.

The last night we went out we didn't go to his place but mine. That's when I knew what was coming. Whatever else Ray was or did, he didn't go out with two women at once. It took him a few minutes to notice Officer Friendly, probably because he was busy thinking about how to do it this time.

"What's this?" he asked when he did see it, slightly deflated, hanging from the pegboard over the counter. "Is this me?"

I didn't say anything. I can draw. It was obvious who it was. Ray took the bag from the hook. He gave it a punch.

"Weak," I said. I took it, gave it three quick jabs on the chin: pop, pop, pop. The sound was so satisfying. I hung it back on its peg, adjusted the face so it seemed to be watching. It was the tenth of the month.

"I can't see you next week," he said after a minute.

"I know," I answered.

He still kissed me before he left. I waited until I heard the sound of his tires backing out over the gravel. Then, I took Officer Friendly

with me into the bathroom. I tied him to the towel rack and turned on the hot water.

“Watch,” I said, opening the box, unsheafing the blade, and then I plunged it into him. I didn't mean to do it. One moment the blade was hovering over my wrist and then, the next, Officer Friendly was deflating, making that flappy sound like a whoopee cushion. That's when I turned the water off and went out to the flagpole. I tied the balloon's fragments to the flag before I sent it halfway up the mast. Then, I went inside and called American Airlines and booked a flight to visit my father in California.

Ray drove me to the airport two days before his date. “That's not right,” he said when he saw the flag. He didn't notice the remnants of Officer Friendly. The car smelled like the cigarillos. She must smoke, I realized. He must be smoking those to cover up the taste when they kiss.

I shrugged. I half expected him to get out of the car and reel the flag down but we were running late, and it was freezing. There were three fresh inches of snow on the ground.

“You cold?” he turned up the heat. He was always good about that kind of thing, trying to make sure I was comfortable.

“No,” I said, thinking about California, about my father who, when I was a kid, always kept safety blades on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet to scrape paint off the windows. Dad could draw, too, anything, like me, but he was messy around the house, not like Ray who ran masking tape around the edges of the panes.

