Mexico Is Missing
Mexico Is Missing
- AND OTHER STORIES -

J. David Stevens

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“To the Poet’s Wife” and “The Mask,” Carolina Quarterly
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“Mexico Is Missing,” “The Postman,” “Burn,” “The Joke,” “The President’s Penis,” and “Some Notes on the War,” Mid-American Reviews
“The Suicide” and “Fish Story,” New Letters
“My Mother’s Lover” and “The Death of the Short Story,” The North American Review
“Hunger” and “Why I Married the Porn Star,” The Paris Review
“When the President Prays,” Press
“Spelling Lessons,” Tampa Review
“Clara’s PC and the Second Coming,” The Virginia Quarterly Review
ou should not believe that poem about the plums. He didn’t eat them so sweet and cold. I ate those plums, then wrote that note in his hand and laid two plum pits bright as marbles side by side on your table.

But he found that note before you did and took those pits and ground them into powder, then wet that powder to make ink. Then took that note—that sorry excuse for a note—and crossed it all through with plum pit to make lines. Then gave it to you and said it was a poem.

I watched through your window, plum juice staining my chin. I had three more plums in my pocket for later.

But I also had hope, because here I saw a woman who knew the value of plums over poems and wouldn’t take a man’s word over the genuine article any day of the week. You failed me, my dear. You ate those syllables, making the plums in my belly less sweet. And then you kissed him, which probably kept him going for days.

I couldn’t eat after that. I left the plums by your wall near the sprinkler. Later, my friend who pushes the wheelbarrow saw three new plum trees in your yard. “That fruit grew fast,” he said. “Looks sweet.”
To the Poet's Wife

But I was off plums by then. "You want a sure bet," I told him, "stick with oranges."

I did not tell him about the dreams I was having: plum trees as far as one could see. I did not tell him how words ruin desire—how poems make men want both the thing itself and more than that thing, too.

In fact, I'm having trouble eating fruit at all: no guava or mango, no kiwi or elderberries. The fun has gone out of it, dear. And for what? What did I ever do to you? Me, harmless, a simple eater of plums.
And even though the tabloids ran the story first, everyone else was quick to hop on: NPR, the networks, CNN, until you had no choice but to believe—even if you didn’t want to—that Mexico was missing, and I know they sent people down to investigate, because I got word from Johnson who has a friend, Richardson, at the Times, who was sent by his editors to find out if Mexico was indeed missing (even though Richardson had never been to Mexico, which made his editors say, good, you’ll have an unbiased eye), but not knowing directions exactly, Richardson went to Tucson and asked the people there how to get to Mexico, and they said turn left, so Richardson did, and all he saw was the horizon, that big long red dirt Western horizon, which made it incredibly easy to believe that beyond was nothing, the end of the earth, and so Richardson said should I be able to see Mexico from here, and the Tucsonians all said it’s tough to say, but would you like to come in for a lemonade because even though it’s dry heat it’s still one hundred and thirty degrees out here, so Richardson entered their homes for lemonade and decided who would it hurt to confirm the report (he had done everything within his power, after all) that Mexico was missing, and so the Times ran the story, and whenever one reads something like that in the Times—well, you see where I’m going—and it’s not like anyone rushed to deny the report, not
even the Canadians, with their quick affirmation of their own existence, or the State Department with its mixed report expressing regret but also noting how Mexico had had problems in the past, of which disappearance is sometimes a result, which was the angle that all the talk shows took, even weeks later when Jimmy Rex had on the geologist, the economist, the anthropologist, and the conservative politician, and the geologist talked about possible “silent” earthquakes, and the economist talked about downward sloping market trends, and the anthropologist brought up ancient Mayan myths, and the politician first said aliens but then said DRUGS, until Jimmy himself had to step in and say but, gentlemen, never before in history has anything caused a nation simply not to exist, which shut them all up for a second, until the geologist said yes that’s right, and the anthropologist said you’ve hit the nail on the head Jimmy Rex, and the economist said that’s why you’re number one in the ratings Jimmy my boy, and the politician admitted later that Jimmy Rex was a formidable adversary, which is only to say that you couldn’t get away from the story, even if you didn’t want to believe that Mexico was missing, because it was everywhere, Belize calling for a UN probe, Guatemala casting dispersions on the CIA, Panama wondering if Mexico’s disappearance would make the Canal obsolete, and jokes everywhere about the President’s comment on not having good carne asada again, and private sources telling the media that what he really meant was Mexican women, which raised not only hue but also cry from the feminist groups, and then the jokes about the President not keeping his zipper up, even in foreign countries, but all of those jokes depending on this implicit acknowledgement—even at a conversational level—that Mexico was indeed gone gone gone, until it became too much to bear, watching the Mexicans in foreign countries lamenting how they would never see their homeland again, the Red Cross mobilizing for no apparent reason, and the actor-spokesmen, like Alex Bassinger and Ted Kitman, on screen asking for help with the relief effort until you felt guilty if you hadn’t stacked canned goods and clothing and toys and your checkbook and the pink slip to your ’65 Mustang by the door, patiently awaiting the relief workers who would come pick them up, but who would never really come because there was such an overwhelming outpouring of public support, and no one knew what to do with all the aid that had been offered, except for a con man or two, which should
have made it easy to believe that Mexico was not in fact missing, except that they kept counting the days on C-SPAN with their Missing Mexico Watch and started running retrospectives in the magazines from famous people formerly associated with Mexico and even held an essay contest for grade-schoolers—Mexico, What It Meant To Me—not to mention the non-stop Westerns running on the cable stations, whose titles ran together, Don’t Forget The Ruby River Way We Won The West When Santa Anna Was Here To Stop ‘Em Boys With Six Bullets To A Gun, even though none of these really presented Mexicans in the most flattering light, except occasionally for a beautiful and fiery Mexican girl or an idealistic young soldier (who were usually both Anglo actors with a lot of face paint), but none of that seemed to bother Nielsen audiences because everyone was so starved for anything Mexican that it seemed to some people Mexico had never really left, what with all the Made-in-China Mexican items flooding the markets, and getting snapped up to the point that you couldn’t even find a can of refried beans on the shelf at A&P, and small-business owners admitting in private that maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing about Mexico disappearing, what with the potential for merchandising and the stock market turning bullish and the S&P index looking good and the Fed surprisingly not raising the interest rates, all of which caused such an overall surge that even market analysts, the brave ones at any rate, were willing to suggest—though only suggest mind you—Mexico’s central fiscal role, as if the disappearance had been guided by some transcendental free-market hand and things could not have worked out better if we had planned them, and even if you were a little suspicious of such coincidence you had cash in your pocket, assuming you had invested wisely, and a little cash always helps smooth over doubt, which is probably why nobody followed up on reports of the people appearing at the border from that place where Mexico had been, calling themselves Mexican, and showing the border guards things that seemed Mexican enough (an Aztec fertility idol, the green and purple flower of a rare cactus, a blue-painted burro named Los Angeles Ed) and saying in Spanish as well as in English and in other languages that Mexico was not missing, it was where it had always been, but the guards refusing to look because they had heard on TV that, where Mexico once was, there now existed a giant mist capable of stealing a man’s soul, which sounded so ludicrous that the crowd of people
staged a sit-down strike to force the guards to take a peek, and drank coffee until they had to pee very badly, and watched a Johnny Hopper show about women who love women who once were men having affairs with their mothers (and the people said to each other, “They call us backwards . . .”) after which came several hours of news in which Mexico’s disappearance was again discussed, and you could see it on their faces that, while they didn’t believe the reports, they were beginning to see how other people could be swayed by such coverage, and they did have to pee very badly, and it was getting toward the dinner hour, and someone in back said it’ll blow over soon enough, and several others nodded in a way that was no longer angry and certainly not defeated, but accepting in a way that people often resort to when confronted by items which—however false—have such a convincing aspect of truth that they are hard to deny, a look that combines disappointment with a touch of understanding and maybe even a touch of fear about losing sight of the truth themselves, such that while some of the people vowed to stay until the guards agreed to turn their heads, most said it’s not really worth it, is it, when you have the truth on your side, just let the facts come out, because people who don’t want to believe these lies eventually won’t, even though it was obvious how difficult it was for them to concede that word eventually, wanting so much for the news to come out immediately, the kind of desire which as one small woman noted was probably what got everyone into this mess to begin with, but by then the people were balling up their coffee cups and telling their few friends who stayed that they would bring leftovers later (and she was a very small woman with a very soft voice) and someone else in the crowd was grumbling about how it was time to fight fight fight, but how do you fight words, which was all that was really left to them as they shrugged in frustration and clapped their hands to each other’s shoulders, the frightened guards still refusing to look as the crowd collectively wheeled southward and seemed to fall into its own long shadow as it began the slow plod home.
A priest, a housewife, a chicken, and a bag of chocolate bars are on the bank of a river. They are not sure how they got there but know, collectively, that they are there for the purpose of the joke yet to be told. Uncomfortable as a unit, they take up different positions on the riverbank, waiting for the joke to commence. The sun shines brightly, but a breeze off the river cools the skin. There is a boat nearby: a rowboat, red with white and yellow splashes of paint. The trees on the river’s far side bear fruit, though from a distance no one can tell what kind of fruit it is.

Meanwhile the joker is not telling his joke. He sees the characters in his head: an oversexed priest, a voluptuous housewife, a chicken with a Napoleon complex, some chocolate. But he cannot figure out where to go with them. He’s had a rough day at work. He’s knocked back a few gin and tonics already—less tonic, more gin. He promises himself to try again tomorrow.
Things grow restless on the riverbank. The priest has missed afternoon confession, and the housewife—whose name is Lila—worries that she forgot to turn off the oven. The chicken, who has been watching the Asian markets and contemplating a major purchase in Chinese poultry feed, curses the malevolent spirit that caused him to leave the coop without his cell phone. Only the bag of candy seems calm. A few feet from the rest of the group, it discovers its own sentience and repeatedly counts the number of chocolate bars it contains. It wonders if the others recognize its new level of consciousness. It resolves to learn how to speak.

Days pass. The chicken would give his tailfeathers for a single glimpse at the S&P Index. Lila has unbuttoned much of her shirt and tied the bottom in a knot. She describes the riverbank as an adventure that she often longs for but never undertakes. Her husband is a corporate lawyer with a Jaguar and a 7 handicap who gets free T-shirts and gym bags from the tobacco companies he defends. Lila worries about her two sons—fears they will smoke, then hang out with leather-clad women, get tattooed, drop out of school, buy an RV. Her breasts heave slightly. The priest, whose name is Father Ron, watches the heaving breasts. The bag of candy composes, in a difficult Italian meter, an ode in which the river serves as a metaphor for their situation: both movement and stasis. It longs to recite its ode to the others. It pities Lila, and it pities Father Ron, who is now thinking about leather-clad women and an RV known to its neighbors as Lovin’ On Wheels.

The joker cannot get the characters out of his head. At work, he sits in front of a computer screen all day, entering tiny numbers into tiny charts that he has been told are instrumental to corporate success. Sometimes he receives messages from friends, usually of the hey-how-you-doing-isn’t-life-boring-as-hell ilk, but sometimes jokes. Funny jokes. Complex jokes. Joke lists. List serves. He is on many lists. He
cannot laugh out loud because his boss’s secretary might hear him. She knows numbers are not funny. She does not like him because he is somewhat fat, and deep down they both know that fat men are supposed to be funny. In a man, fat without funny is just . . . well, fat. Or Winston Churchill. Or Alfred Hitchcock. He thinks that maybe there is humor in such a realization. His boss’s secretary looks up from her *Southern Living*, testing the air. He reverts to numbers. Thinks chicken, candy, housewife, priest.

• • •

The chicken decides that the joke is a hell of his own making. Hubris compels him to believe that, if he can resolve the joke from the inside, he might break out of it. He tries the conventional approach. Why did the chicken cross the road? But here there are no roads, only a river. Somewhere from his youth he remembers a riddle about a farmer with a fox, a goose, and a bag of grain that must all ford a stream in a particular order to prevent any from eating the other. His mind works out variations. In the rowboat, he paddles priest, housewife, and candy across in different permutations—making sure never to leave priest alone with housewife, housewife alone with chocolate. The task is daunting. The oars are insecure. The chicken’s muscles ache, and his red comb becomes redder beneath the midsummer sun. The fruit trees on the opposite shore turn out to be lemon trees, ripe with yellow fire. The silence of the lemons makes the chicken uneasy. He thinks of recipes in which he might use their gutted pulp. Lemonade. Lemon chess pie. Lemon drops. Lemon . . . *chicken*. When nothing has changed by dusk, the chicken piles everyone back into the rowboat and returns them to the original shore. He learns to sleep with one eye open, trained on the lemon branches whose shadows reach like dark arms across the water’s surface.

• • •

The mind is stuck on itself, the joker decides. It thinks that the world cannot function without it. If a housewife falls in a river but there is no
one to hear her scream, no priest to pull her out . . . well, the mind sees the world merely as an extension of such musing. It says, hypothetically, that a chicken walks into a bar. But if a chicken actually walked into a bar and made a ranting beeline for the back table where the mind was talking up a couple of Rutgers coeds, it’s unlikely that the mind could continue to see the universe as a place of its own invention. In fact, it’s likely that the mind would do a screaming tarantella atop the back table until the bartender shooed the chicken out with a broom. This assumes, of course, that the chicken is not a bar regular, and that one of the coeds is not his steady girl Henrietta, and that most of the bar’s patrons do not want to buy him a Sam Adams because he is a well-known power broker around town. The mind would have trouble wrapping around such a chicken, but it would be one hell of a joke.

Meanwhile, Father Ron observes the supple curves of Lila’s body. They have now been stranded together for weeks, but she has shown no interest in him. Or, more precisely, she has shown interest in him only as a spiritual confidant—someone with whom she can share all of the problems of her marriage, including her unrequited sexual needs. Father Ron thinks of Job. He wonders if the joke is a test of his spiritual resolve. Thinking along these lines, he notices the chicken, the supple curves of the chicken’s body. He tells himself that he is not thinking in a serious way, but in a trapped-on-a-riverbank-with-only-these-questions-to-keep-me-sane way. This is philosophy. He begins to understand why women are called chicks—breasts, thighs, white meat, dark. He starts to dream about chicken. He wonders how egregious some sins might seem before God. The chicken, sensing something amiss, gives up on sleep altogether.

There is only frustration. Frustration and desire, the joker tells himself, which are really the same thing in the end. He watches the popular men at the bar, whose jokes rise above the smoke and waft into the corner...
where he sits alone with his domestic beer. How do they begin? Two sisters in Montana must buy a bull for their ranch. An old Jew and a Chinese man are sitting on a park bench. Three hobos eat corn on a train. A doctor’s office. A farmer’s daughter. A moose. These are items ripe with humor, but when he envisions his joke, he can manage only slight changes: a duck, a rabbi, a librarian, a cherry pie. In the end the joke is futilely the same. Returning from the restroom, he steals a dart from the dartboard and scratches his name into the oak table—then adds some eyes, a nose, and a mouth that resemble a once-famous cartoon cat. His mother always liked his drawings. She hung a few around the house and called him her *artiste*. She said that they would take a trip to France one day, though the closest they ever got was flipping through some travel brochures on Quebec at a rest stop near his cousin’s place in Syracuse. At home, after last call at the bar, he will leave two Hungry Man dinners to thaw on the counter of his un-air-conditioned kitchen, then eat them both for breakfast the following morning without cooking them. Later he’ll have a bagel at the office, extra cream cheese.

Egocentrism gets them only so far. At last they decide that the joke is not designed to punish any of them individually. It is merely a random confluence of cosmic forces, the teapot tempest in which they are tossed. They assume that they will be freed eventually but, in the name of order and civilization, agree to rules by which their small society might run. After several halting drafts, they create a constitutional theocracy with the chicken as President, Father Ron as Chancellor, and Lila as Minister of Culture and Good Taste. The bag of chocolate bars, because someone must, becomes the democratic masses. It redoubles its efforts at speech and thinks of the best way for a bag of candy to communicate with the outer world. It could pop its cellophane on a rock and attract throngs of approbative ants. It could melt into symbols on the sand. The First National Assembly is scheduled for a year hence: Father Ron will lead the country in prayer, followed by the chicken’s address on the health-care system, then Lila’s unveiling of the new Army uniforms made of couch grass and lemon rind. The
candy plans a Homeric hymn to commemorate the founding of the state. If it has time, it will fashion some scenery for its performance—perhaps a frieze of the chicken and Father Ron commuting their household gods across the river and onto the riverbank promised in the mystical covenants of their forebears.

... of course, a joke should be easier to tell. He finally decides that the problem is his mother. When he was a child, she trained him to laugh at misfortune—every accident met with a smile. In this way he learned that pain was comedy. Pratfalls. Pies to the face. A well-placed boot in the groin. He imagines the chicken writhing on the sand, wings to his crotch, moaning “Oh, my nuggets,” and he cannot help smiling. His apartment is dark except for the late-night TV. His undershirt rides up his belly where he sticks his hand beneath the elastic of his shorts and cradles his testicles, an unconscious gesture. He sucks an ice cube from his whiskey glass and spits it out the open window, wondering if it might kill a man twelve stories down. Gravity is hilarious, he decides, hefting his paunch with a forearm. The TV audience roars at the host’s one-liners. He resolves to get a bigger chin.

... But nothing can help at this point. Long before the National Assembly, friction arises when Father Ron abolishes the institution of marriage and criticizes the chicken’s population control plan. They both fear Lila, who has taken to wearing the new army uniform, stockpiling stones, and telling stories of how the Amazons each burned off one breast so as not to impede their bowstrings. An uneasy truce is called. They doff their official vestments, sacrifice the candy bars to a recipe that Lila dubs Couch Grass S’mores, then part ways. As the chicken slips downriver in the rowboat, he dreams of the new society that he will form out of the misfits he finds along his way—characters from bad jokes or other jokes never to be told: one-legged midgets, gay hairdressers, most of Poland. From here on, until his death, he will strive to view himself
The Joke

as a fowl in charge of his own destiny. But even years later, in his tent beneath the mountains—the Sultana’s warm body reposed beside him, the drifting incense, and the sound of their many camels spitting in the distance—he will wake with the irrational fear that he is still part of the joke, that he is still working toward some inevitable punchline. There is a spirit at the door of the tent, waiting to sweep in. The chicken stares through the darkness. He sees only the image of his youngest daughter—a red-haired, smoke-eyed beauty who maligns him when she is angry. Silly bird, she chastises. Silly, silly bird.

Fat man in a little car. Fat man bowling. Fat man in bikini briefs. Fat man doing the cha-cha. Cellulite, he concludes, is the sole of wit. In all honesty, he can do no more with these characters. He detests the chicken and Father Ron. He desires the chocolate bars and Lila. He has grown too close to his material. He’s trying too hard. Humor, he knows from somewhere, cannot be forced but must spring from the mind like snakebite. It will come, he assures himself. He just has to wait for it. And when his mind does manage to coil like a rattler, the world will finally see him for the hero that he is. The men will buy him drinks; the women will come home with him, and they will titter in the lavishness of their un-air-conditioned sweat. There will be no calories that laughter cannot melt away. They will love him high and low, the Bobos in their Versace drinking Sea Breezes by the Sound, the Guidos in their leather pants drinking forties down the shore. The elevator door opens onto his boss’s secretary who greets him with a sneer. But he exalts in the stale office air, anticipating the day when he is boss and can send her back out because she has not brought a pickle with his egg salad. She, above all, will be forced to acknowledge her treachery, the wanton ignorance of her kind. When the new him arrives at the office one day—the joke, the wit, the mind itself—then she will know how wrong she has been. She will see him in the glory of a new light and swear that everywhere she goes they want to be like him: the Bobos, the Guidos, the bosses, the masses. He is his own religion and not the anti-miracle she sees now. Fat man in a cubicle. Fat man at a desk. Fat man who sweats too much. Fat man in off-the-rack pants.
She can quote Milton Friedman from memory. She can lock her ankles behind her head.

... ...

When my mother asks why I married her: I mean, why her and not one of the trillion other girls in the world, why not Lucy Hoffmeiller next door who’s the picture of respectability in the neighborhood but would probably get kinky in private, if that’s what you’re looking for, I reply, I don’t know, because I love her. Love, repeats my mother. What do you know about love?

... ...

Our first meeting: in the exotic foods section of the local market, reaching for the same kumquats. She was the All-American Girl almost—calves a bit too big, cheekbones too low, hips a touch wide. Later, she would look into my eyes and say that she wanted to take care of me.
Why I Married the Porn Star

She wears only business suits. Her closet overflows with them. She owns no bustiers, no leather body-suits, no whips, no sexy g-strings, no crotchless panties or fishnet. She is a nineties woman, my wife. She means business.

We don’t have a problem with it, her sister Evelyn claimed when I went to her family’s house for our first Christmas together. Sure, maybe at first, but it’s only natural then, until you get used to it. Besides, it’s nice to have a celebrity around, at least that’s what the neighbors say. I’m sure you saw the children waving as you came in. They don’t know any details, mind you. We’re all Christians here—we just say “movie star” and watch their eyes light up. I mean, even Alice Shockley—the Mrs. Reverend Shockley—will tell you in private that the whole thing has really brought the community together. But why do you ask? Do you have a problem with it? Silly me, of course you don’t. What could shock a poet? Oh, you better not stand too close to that mistletoe, naughty boy. We’re not all as uninhibited as my sister, but none of us balks at tradition.

Her hair is blond, and her eyes are blue. Her breasts are real.

We don’t have close friends, by and large. Sometimes we hang out with the other porn stars, but I have no idea what to talk about. When they learn I am a poet, they are always intrigued. They say I am in the same business as them, just working a different side of the street. Once a brunette with breasts the size of two challah loaves and breath reeking of Jim Beam plopped down in my lap and told me to write a poem
for her. She forced my hand down her blouse and squeezed her fingers around mine. For inspiration, she said. Between her breasts, I could just make out the low-pitched wailing of her heart.


Sometimes when I want to have sex, my wife says that she has a headache. I ask, Did you have a headache all day? Yes, she replies, but that was business—do you stop working because you have a headache? Somehow I think she misses the point.


Our city is not one where you would expect pornographers to live. Not to imply anything about the insidious nature of pornographers—this is no conspiracy. It’s just odd for a city as conventional as ours. For instance, our street alone boasts four Baptist churches, and just one block over, the entire avenue is devoted to statues of Civil War heroes, dark and imposing in the sense of tradition they inspire. The city loves the war. People here identify themselves by the battles in which their ancestors fought and died. On the Fourth of July, more people stand when the band plays “Dixie” than when it plays “America the Beautiful.” The pornographers have ties to the war, as well. One pornographer, who also owns a dry-cleaning business, paid to have the remains of his great-great-great-great uncle moved from South Carolina to the city cemetery so that the old soldier could be buried with his regiment. The pornographer says he loves the South as much as he loves America. His wife is big in the DAR. They have been to our house for drinks, but because of my reluctance to talk politics, we are not close. The pornographer and his wife are not flashy people. When they bow their heads in church, you would not be able to pick them out from the rest of the congregation. My wife is correct, though, when she says that they cannot be upheld as true representatives of the porn industry. They are only representatives of what I choose to see. The other pornographers are nothing like them.
Why I Married the Porn Star

She has a small tattoo just above her left elbow, a dove with an olive branch in its mouth. She explains, I didn’t know it meant anything when I picked it out. I was just a kid. I thought it looked cool.

From the window by my writing desk, I can see Robert T., the doorman, ushering women from cars at the curb. Robert calls me Mr. Albright and pretends to fuss each year when the Pulitzers are announced and my name does not appear on the list. How is Mrs. Albright? he asks conscientiously when I return from my daily jog. Once, when he thought I could not hear, he looked at my wife and said, Gotta get me some of that. And all I could think was, You can, Robert. Just $19.95. Shipping and handling not included.

You don’t have to worry about my having an affair, my wife says. What do I want with sex? Every woman should be as faithful as me.

Occasionally she brings home videos to review. She sits before the TV, taking notes on a yellow legal pad in bright red pen. She wears lavender bifocals only at home. The company she works for may let her direct next year, and she asks what I think of this scene or that. Since we have been married, I have seen her in every position imaginable, with a man, a woman, men, women, both. The images no longer excite me. But I can’t get over watching her watching herself, sliding her bifocals up the bridge of her nose like a scientist hovering over some new discovery. The voyeur observed. The cerebral irony makes me both horny and ashamed, so much that I have stopped questioning whether the two impulses are truly different at their base. I should take her...
Why I Married the Porn Star

now, like a beast, bifocals and all. I should write a poem. I am a genius of the perverse, a perverted genius. If only my wife could curve to me like verse—if only verse could hump like a dog.


But love, she continues. Love is a different story.


Don’t get me wrong, her brother Edmund admitted after several swigs of eggnog, no woman of mine would ever do what she does. But to be honest, I’ve watched a tape or two. It’s like peeking through the bathroom door at them when you’re a kid. You got sisters? No? Well, you know what I mean. And hey, if you don’t have a problem with it, I say what the hell. It’s not like you’re married to her or anything. Oh, really? In your pocket? I bet a rock like that set you back a bundle. Oh, no, I won’t say anything until you make your move. But listen now, you treat her right. She’s my sister. I love her.


Each year we go to the porn star awards ceremony, and each time I wonder how they determine who wins. Who is acting and how? My wife has won many times. Sometimes while she sleeps, I hold my hand very close to her cheek and wonder if she must act with me. If she acts better than other women.


So what is love? I insist. Love, she says, is the words around a roll in the sheets—love is the silence between gasps. Face down, I feel her thighs on either side of me, her fists kneading a pain into the small of my back. Leaning close to my ear, she whispers, this is good stuff, are
you taking it down? I buck my hips to roll her off. She licks her teeth in serpent ecstasy, and her eyes are shattering mirrors in which I am lost. You should be a poet, I say.

But love has to be something more. Something deeper.

I go to the private screenings of her movies. She comes to the private readings of my poems. Being honest, I am a mediocre poet, and the people who come to hear me are mediocre artists in their own right. But we are passionate in our fallibility and cling tightly to ideals which have inspired the truly mediocre for centuries. Mediocre sculptors surreptitiously inspect my wife from across the room. Mediocre photographers cup her jaw in their hands and promise impossible miracles. Mediocre actresses say, if only I had a body like yours.

I have tried to write her love poems but inevitably fail. Words cannot hold her like fingers. She struggles too much. As to poetry—well, poetry is too imperfect a form for either of our imperfections.

She has a Psychic Friend—her one vice, she claims—and runs up our Visa bill with 900 number calls. My friend says I have a problem with intimacy, she declares after hanging up—can you believe it, me, intimacy? Intimacy isn’t necessarily sex, I reply, it’s more like love. If you’re suggesting I have a problem with love, she replies, I want to know what accusations like that say about you. Me, I stammer, I don’t have a problem with love—with love or anything else. Well, says my
wife as she slides another tape into the VCR, neither do I.

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There once was a man from Nantucket. Would you call that a poem?

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But love, she admits, must be more than an exchange of fluids. I know the difference between business and pleasure.

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Once I told her that I could not understand how the men watching her fantasized about her so. It’s kind of pathetic, I said, don’t you think? To which she replied, I’m not the woman you see. The woman you see is something you’ve made up, the same way I make myself up when I put on mascara, or a costume, or take any of them off. That’s the way reality is. You of all people should know that. I’m no more than a part I have to play, a few words or less, and reality can go to hell.

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Sometimes when we screw, the slats of the bed come loose and the whole frame collapses onto the floor. But by then we are too anxious to stop. We bounce around the mattress like stones loosened from a hillside. She bites my shoulder. The wet sheet flails my skin and sticks to her long, blond hair. I love you, I scream. Deeper, deeper, my wife replies.

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She has a vaguely heart-shaped mole on the back of her neck where her hairline ends. Right at my brain stem, she likes to say. It’s a sign,
you see—I had no control over what I chose to do with my life. It was pre-ordained.

... 

Last night on TV, there was the story of a Norfolk man who caught his wife in bed with her lover, so he killed them both, cut them into a hundred pieces, and piled their remains on a quilt which the women of his wife’s family had made as a wedding gift. When questioned, he told police that he only wanted to make her happy, and now the three of them—wife, lover, and quilt—could be together forever. That’s a guy who has a problem with love, one cop remarked to the camera.

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Now and then I ask, Am I good in bed? To be honest, she says, I’ve never really thought about it.

... 

And then there’s Crazy Ethel, the homeless woman who makes her home on the sidewalk opposite our building. She says that she was put under a spell by a man whose love she refused, and it made her teeth fall out. She keeps her teeth in a Ziploc bag in her shopping cart and will show them to passers-by for a quarter. For a dollar, she’ll pull out a clump of her own gray hair and promise to bless you over it when the moon is full. She says that God will punish the wicked. I give her a quarter. She eyes me sternly and says, You know who you are. I give her a dollar for good measure. Not that I think I am wicked. But sometimes I wonder if I can be condemned for someone else’s sins, if my wife’s sins are my own, passed to me through the sweat and saliva of our love. Of course, none of this should matter since God is all-merciful. The young men in starched white collars who stand on the street corner with salvation on their tongues know this. God is love, they
Why I Married the Porn Star

declare. But is He a lover? The distinction is essential, inescapable. Or is it? Is God a businessman? What kind of clothes does He wear?

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Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? What does this guy know about love? There is more love in a chipped press-on fingernail scratched down your back than in any stanza this guy could utter.

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She has a small scar on her left foot where the doctors cut away an extra toe after her birth. Sometimes I can still feel it, she says, or maybe I just think I can. It’s not like I remember it. Still it would have made me special, and now it’s gone. So I miss that toe. Sometimes I think that’s what love is, an extra toe. Sometimes I think it wasn’t a toe at all, but my heart, and it’s out there in a jar of formaldehyde on some doctor’s mantle, waiting for me.

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Mediocre poets are a curse, a blinding light switched on only halfway. Lazy mediocre poets are even worse. I should do something definite. Leap from the window beside my desk. Make love to my wife with the camcorder running. Get baptized. Give Crazy Ethel so much money that she plucks herself bald and blesses me for it until the day she dies. Punch Robert T. in the nose. Punch another mediocre poet in the nose. If I had courage to do any of these things, I might figure out what love is, beyond broken mattresses, beyond poetry, beyond bright young men on street corners who drool cleansing fire, beyond a woman whose breasts grow larger as her heart ticks away, beyond my wife, beyond corrective bifocal lenses. Man, woman, men, women. Beyond seeing, almost beyond sense. Together, beyond.

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But when she asks if I have a problem with what she does, I simply wonder whether or not my problems make a difference to her. Only sometimes, she admits turning away, only sometimes.

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And I am not a hero. Several blocks over, the marquee of the adult video arcade advertises a movie starring my wife. In one of the small booths, I slide my quarter into the slot, and the screen buzzes to life. The volume on the machine is broken, so I imagine that my wife speaks poetry as she does what she does, but not one of my poems. I want to see her on the couch with her pad and pen. The light here burns my eyes. From the booth adjoining mine comes a low moan and the sound of a shoe knocking against the wood in steady rhythm. My wife turns and gyrates, ebbs and flows. She is a picture on the screen, a collection of color, a few electric needles, no more. As the camera closes in on her face, her mouth hangs open in expectant silence. I can count her teeth, and my shoulder tingles for the anticipated bite. The man in the next booth screams, I LOVE YOU, and I reach out to touch the screen. Love, I think before my quarter runs out, what do you know about love?
The Story’s death caught us all off guard. We’d been watching Poetry so closely that we failed to heed the warning signs. One day the Story was here, watching football, going to singles bars, making quiche. The next day—POOF!—we were reading about his demise in the Times, our bagels forgotten, our untouched lattes forming white rings on the dark wood of our kitchen tables.

Naturally there was a public outcry. On TV, we watched the crowds stack flowers and stuffed animals outside libraries worldwide. Soon the talk shows buzzed with innuendo. A genre cut down in its prime, they claimed. Audiences were stunned when the Memoir admitted to an affair with the Story during her “reconstructed memory” phase. Media scrutiny became so intense that the entire Autobiography family left town for a month to work out its issues in private.

At the funeral, the Prose Poem delivered a eulogy where she referred to publishers as “market whores” and called academics “literary vultures happier since the Story’s departure.” But in truth, we were all to blame. We milled around the reception feeling sheepish, thinking about what we might have done. In a corner, the loutish Novel got drunk on cheap Chardonnay and babbled about the good times he and the Story had shared. He consoled himself by hugging random passers-by and saying “I Love You!” much too loudly for the
comfort of the lit-mag editors several feet away.

In the weeks that followed, rumors began to circulate about how the Story’s brain had been cryogenically stored in a bunker near Omaha. A Glasgow professor offered a thousand pounds to anyone who could produce a sample of the Story’s DNA, for cloning purposes. Still others maintained that the Story was not gone at all, but had faked his death and retired to an isolated mountain retreat in the Andes or the Himalayas.

This last idea redeemed us somehow. We began to make up lies about the Story, lies which seemed like truth after a while. We pictured the Story sitting around a fireplace with John Lennon, Jesus, and Amelia Earhart, where they sipped century-old cognac and talked about what players to put on their All-Time Fantasy Baseball Teams. They wore the socks that we’d lost in the dryer over the years and jangled the spare change that had dropped between our sofa cushions. A single bay window looked out over the mountains from which they could see, above the clouds, a spinning whirlpool of various colors. The colors, they imagined, were their dreams, and they waited patiently for those moments when a sliver of light would break loose from the oblong, suspended momentarily like a musical note on fire before streaking recklessly into the surrounding night.