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Bonnie Burnard

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Abstract

John McLarty's furniture, in his office in the History building, his old teak desk and the two extra chairs and the filing cabinets and the potted plants, had been placed in every conceivable configuration, and he'd changed the drapes, at his own expense, twice. He believed there was a perfect arrangement, something conducive to dear thought, to an overall peace of mind, for himself and everyone who entered his office. He'd had some help, initially from his reluctant wife, and then from the others and recently even his daughter had gone up with him on a Sunday afternoon. They'd shared a bottle of wine as they hauled things around and argued amicably about what looked good where.

BONNIE BURNARD

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John McLarty's furniture, in his office in the History building, his old teak desk and the two extra chairs and the filing cabinets and the potted plants, had been placed in every conceivable configuration, and he'd changed the drapes, at his own expense, twice. He believed there was a perfect arrangement, something conducive to clear thought, to an overall peace of mind, for himself and everyone who entered his office. He'd had some help, initially from his reluctant wife, and then from the others and recently even his daughter had gone up with him on a Sunday afternoon. They'd shared a bottle of wine as they hauled things around and argued amicably about what looked good where.

His window, which was directly in front of him when he sat at his desk, overlooked the largest expanse of grass left on the campus since the building program of the seventies. The grass, a dozen kinds of green on any day of the week from April through November, was usually spotted with the small bodies of students wandering from one lecture to another. Few of them stayed on the narrow sidewalk. John's building was connected by this sidewalk to Talbot, further up the hill, where the economics people plied their trade. He'd never been there. Seventeen years on this campus and he'd never even thought to walk over. Everything he needed was on his own floor and the floors beneath him, colleagues, support staff, archives. He did, of course, use the main library at the base of the hill but none of the other faculties overlapped his own. Except socially, for those who could endure it. He wasn't one of those who could endure it.

They'd given their share of dinner parties, or Carol had, he'd simply been there to pour the scotch, when they'd first arrived and they'd continued for a few years to make appearances at the gatherings orchestrated by his fellows in the History Department. And then they'd eased out. Carol had eased them out. She'd said one spring evening, standing in her panty hose and camisole at the bathroom mirror, applying her blush, sucking in her tummy, that she couldn't go. He thought she was sick, or premenstrual, or maybe exhausted from the kids, who were just at the age when they had to be lifted and carried and fed and buckled up and wiped clean and tucked in, but she said no, she was fine, everybody else was sick. And she repeated some of the dirty, cynical gossip she'd heard exchanged by warm little groups in kitchens and she told him about the clammy hands tracing her funny little ass when they were crowded

around pianos in living rooms and about the rigorous, nerve-wracking effort needed to keep the whole thing in perspective. And the clincher, which had been a whispered longing, expressed by a dull-witted Yank who had long since departed for greener academic pastures, to see her nipples. She said she'd wanted to strip off her blouse and bra right there at the Bar-B-Que and say there you go sweetie, and aren't they as plain as plain can be, and you will notice they are not erect under your gaze and there's not a snowball's chance in hell they ever will be and now will you please just pass me that jar of mustard beside you there.

You didn't say that, John said, plugging in his shaver, what did you say? And nothing, she said. I said nothing, nothing at all. I walked over to you and Jenny and interrupted some inane discussion you were having about a cactus.

They'd skipped the dinner party. They'd gone instead to a dismal Bergman film and seen Liv Ullmann's nipples, which, if he remembered correctly, and he did, were not as plain as plain can be. That night, when they climbed into bed, when he should have been his most attentive, he began, habitually, to cast his dreams to other women. He didn't remember doing it before that night, not habitually.

The marriage had lasted only four more fretful years and then she'd gone off with the kids and her nipples and her funny little ass to seek a better life. She finished her stalled degree at another university and was now teaching computer science. She was a respected member of one of the hottest faculties in the country, or so their old friends told him, whenever they could work it in. And she'd married a moderately successful architect. They lived with the kids who were still at home with her in a house overlooking the Pacific, which they'd built on a great slab of smooth brown rock. John had been welcomed there often, for the sake of the children. He'd never once manoeuvred the preposterous slope of the driveway without feeling like an impotent uncle, but he'd endured, he'd needed to hold his kids as they grew. And everyone understood. There were lots of books on this kind of stuff.

For a time, he'd attributed this disaster to the dull-witted Yank at the pork Bar-B-Que, but then he'd relented and recognized the surrounding difficulties, the dead-locked impossibilities, many of them his own. On really good days he was content simply that they'd made it as far as they had, and that the damage, if his accounting could be trusted, had been minimal. He'd never told her what he dreamed of, habitually, only that he dreamed. And she'd had the decency to keep the worst of her secrets to herself. He watched her keeping them.

He'd had to sell the house and take an apartment and he was no sooner into it and lonely than they started to show up in his office, the women from his dreams, with their nipples. Not the precise women, but very close. Those years, seven or eight of them, ran in his mind like a long raunchy film, one naked young bosom after another. Not that they weren't

fine women, some of them. Occasionally, more than occasionally, he remembered their fineness.

Most of them were simply young. They wore T-shirts and only T-shirts with their jeans. They expected him to make love to them with a wisdom he couldn't count on all night long and half the next day. They were enthralled by nakedness and long stretches of time and their own capacity to enjoy skin and nerve endings and they lied to him about his virility, not huge lies, but lies just the same, and necessary. And they wouldn't eat anything, wouldn't cook or sit still to eat a decent dinner.

They installed in him a status which was false, though flattering beyond anything he'd ever known. They looked up to him, literally, with sweet smooth cheeks.

He consoled himself with the conviction that he'd freed them to go after what they wanted and most of them did. Some had returned to his office boasting degrees better than his own. And two had come back to show off babes in arms, and fuller hips, and leaking nipples. Given the chance, he would have set the infants on the floor beside his filing cabinets to nap inside their downy sleepers while he jumped their still familiar mothers.

The victorious visits had more or less stopped when he found Marion. He was marching alone down the library steps one balmy Indian Summer evening, gazing up through the trees, and he might actually have fallen over her if she hadn't spoken. 'Careful,' she'd said, and he'd excused himself, feeling clumsy. She sat near the bottom of the long flight with a pile of books piled beside her on the step, exposed by one of the high new lights installed for campus security. He noticed immediately that her cheeks were wet. She wasn't young. A young woman in tears on the library steps would not have slowed him down.

He assumed that a public display from a woman this age did not indicate anything personal, he guessed she was in some kind of physical discomfort, that she'd been hurt, and he was right. She said she was just back to work and was likely pushing herself too hard but she was so damned tired of waiting to feel herself again. She said she supposed she should get the books back inside and then get herself home and watch David Letterman or something. He told her he didn't see that such drastic action was necessary and he began to load her books, economics texts, one Welty and one Hardy, into his briefcase and then into his arms.

'Can you stand?' he asked. 'My car is just over in the north lot. I'll bring it around and then I'll take you home.' And he hauled her books across the cool grass to the north lot. It didn't occur to him until he was back and helping her into his car to ask her who she was. She was Marion Alderson; she taught economics, had done so for three years on this campus and for many other years on other campuses across the country. She was just getting over a little bit of surgery and she lived in one of the high rises on the other side of the bridge. Maid Marion he'd called her and she'd raised her eyebrows, smiling only slightly. He got her home, up the

elevator and into her suite with her books settled on an elegant glass desk in her living room and he saw, when her back was turned, that she had a set of those perfect calves that actresses from the fifties used to have, with heavier thighs, he could read them under her dress as she walked. He accepted her graceful thanks and took his leave, feeling a little bit the hero, feeling decent and lively.

He didn't phone her, didn't even think of phoning her until two months later when he was marking a particularly fine paper on the Boer War. He found his directory and his finger hit the numbers to her office over in Talbot, just out of his sight line. He told her he wanted to know only if she was feeling herself yet and she said yes she was and thanks again for the gallant assistance and when he didn't take the conversation to its close she asked if she could buy him lunch in the Talbot cafeteria as a token of her gratitude. Sure she could, he said.

So they met, properly. And she was much better, much stronger. She wore an expensive shirtwaist, paisley, Carol had wanted such dresses when they couldn't afford them, and very fine leather shoes with narrow high heels. These, he knew, were to show off the legs. Her hair looked especially clean and full, it was a dark grey blonde and it swayed around her head as she talked. Only her eyes, a guarded deep brown, set off by rays of crow's feet, disappointed him. As he ate his grilled cheese he imagined her eyes bright, throwing off a phrase or two from the accumulated vocabulary of old eyes.

Now that she was well, her voice was clipped and businesslike and funny. She was one of those women who wear no rings but talk without apology about their grown-up children. Her breasts looked full and solid though he couldn't begin to find her nipples; they were lost under the swirling blue paisley. After two hours they counted between them, with some guilt, five students left waiting in the halls outside their offices.

He liked her, he decided he liked her tremendously and by the time he took their trays to the cafeteria window, standing in line with economics people he recognized but didn't know, he felt the need to be in love again. As he walked back across the grass to his office he very deliberately resurrected all he knew to be true and ridiculous and daunting about what he needed. He lined it all up, chose what he wanted to believe, and dumped the rest into the caverns long since dug at the back of his brain. He was going to get into her pants and he was going to fall in love, in whichever order was necessary. She could decide the order.

It didn't take him long to fall in love. She was available and game. They went to concerts in the city park put on by a youth orchestra and to a fall fair thirty miles out of the city and once to the horse races, where he lost forty dollars and she came away even, and smug. They talked about her husband and about Carol over caesar salad and beer and about books she'd had a chance to read that year and about economic theories he'd wanted to comprehend, and she said one evening, while putting down a

twenty for her part of the dinner, that she had no credit cards. She said she thought unnecessary debt was very unwise and that night he'd stood in his kitchen in his gotch and cut his Visa card into pieces with his nail scissors. The next day he took enough money out of his savings to pay off every cent owed to everyone for everything.

They even had a short Sunday afternoon at her apartment with two of her children and one of his own, all gathered in the city for youthful, compelling reasons. The younger adults had thrown back beer nuts and pretzels, eyeing each other and circling their parents warily, as had been expected, though they gave brief, spontaneous lip service to companionship and fun, for anyone. The companionship line had come from his long-legged son, gratis, full of good cheer. Just drink your beer, he'd told him.

He expected by this time, quite rightly he thought, to be into her pants. She was friendly beyond bearing, she touched his arm or his back whenever there was even the mildest excuse to do so, but she'd said no twice to his offer to tuck her up and she kissed him chastely.

Because he knew no other way he asked her one night, over a late dinner after an economics lecture on the campus which he'd understood and agreed with, why they weren't making love. 'I want to bite those thighs,' he said. He didn't broach her nipples; he wasn't entirely without discipline.

She plopped sour cream over her baked potato and loaded it with chives. 'I'm forty-seven years old,' she said. 'I would bet you've never been with a forty-seven year old woman.'

'No,' he said, grinning.

'It's no joke,' she said.

He knew what had to be done. He was sure he could match her. He listened to her go on about Dostoyevsky over dessert and as soon as they were into the car in the parking lot he pulled up his shirt and let his stomach hang out over his belt, though it wasn't as obscene in the dark as he'd hoped. He took her hand and placed it on his thick, hairy flesh.

'There,' he said. 'Flat as a board.'

She took her hand away.

He hiked up his pant leg and pointed to a long lumpy vein just under his skin. He'd been watching its steady movement to the surface for a year.

'Look at this,' he said. 'Like an old log bobbing up.'

She watched his excitement calmly for a minute and then she lifted her bum off the seat and pulled her dress up to expose her thighs.

'Yes indeed,' he said. 'I'd recognize them anywhere.' He started the car and got them on their way, sticking to the passing lane of the main thoroughfare from the city core to the campus.

'There's more,' she said.

He turned off onto a quiet side street, continuing home at a steady sixty kilometers an hour. She had unbuttoned her shirtwaist, a soft green print, and was pulling her arms out of it as he drove. He saw, glancing as often as he could in the intermittent light from the street, what she wanted him to see. Her lacy black bra was filled with something other than flesh, something similar in texture and shape to the kids' old bean bags. She reached around and unhooked her bra, letting it fall heavily into her lap. He was looking at a war zone.

He slowed and pulled the car over to the side of the road.

As soon as his hands were free he turned and used them to cover the two nearly healed slices.

Her eyes were bright, finally, but not with the sulky passion he'd put there in his dreams. She looked empty, and raw.

His thumbs moved over the rough dark texture, up and down, up and down.

'They don't hurt much anymore,' she said.

He leaned over and buried his face in her. The scars felt strong and final on his cheek, as if the cells had said, this is it, don't ever cut here again. He was astounded by their warmth, scars as warm as flesh can be.

'You might have told me,' he said.

She put her hand into his thinning hair, lifted it between her fingers, watched it fall back into itself, soft and orderly. 'I'm telling you now.'

He could hear her heart, as clearly as he'd heard his own, when he'd been alone and listening for it.

'They're in my mind,' he said. 'Safe and sound.'

He took what he could into his mouth, the thick layers of tissue where the needle had gathered the skin, the tough ridges rising like a mountain chain where all other land had disappeared.

He knew escape would always be a possibility. There were ways. He'd had some practice. He could be bravely direct or clever, cowardly, subtle. It wouldn't matter much. She was braced for anything.

He could feel her fingers absently working their way through what was left of his hair. She was a million miles away.

'I've got them,' he said, bending quickly, sinking his teeth into a hard and shapely thigh.