

KARIN ROSMAN

What Have You Done With My Love

Through sleep-slitted eyes, Tom Lovick watched his girlfriend sit up and stretch in the sagging middle of the bed and knew she was leaving. He watched her lift her arms straight out and lift her face so that her hair, stiff with dirt and sweat, tickled the lower part of her back. He tried to fake sleep and in the gray-shadowed room he should have managed it. She rested her hand on his leg.

“Movin’ to Montana, gonna be a dental floss tycoon,” he half-sang, half-whispered.

“It smells like the ocean in here.”

“You’re dreamin’.”

He met his girlfriend four days ago on the thirteen. He was supposed to get off the bus in the business district but she had settled in the back seat with a paperback, her lips moving as she read. The bus continued its big loop, taking him to a part of Seattle that he did not spend much time in, so he just rode along, working his nerve up to say hello and when he finally did, she got up and sat next to him.

“I have a place you can stay,” he said.

Looking at her, it was pretty obvious that she needed that.

“You can take a shower. It’s a shared shower--well, the room. Other people use it but not at the same time. And the toilet is in a different room than the shower, that way you don’t have to smell other people’s stuff.”

He stopped talking. Girls had never bothered to look at him and she was almost looking at him but she was looking past him, out the window. He was not sure she had heard him until she got off with him and said, “Where is it?”

His room was a ways away. The bus driver had made his loop a couple of times before Tom worked up the nerve to say anything, and all that time she had not said a word back to him. She probably would still be sitting quietly next to him if the bus driver had not kicked them off the bus. They were on Broadway and Pine. It was late in the evening, rush hour traffic had cleared but night traffic had not begun. The starlings were flocking and they lifted off buildings in great flutters, a dark spiral growing and landing. They clucked and chattered and did it again. Tom and his girlfriend watched for a while and when a number two arrived, they got on the bus together and he held her hand.

“You got off with me,” he said, and he could hear his own voice smile.

He lived in a house tucked among lesser maintained homes, the moldering of siding and trees splitting under the weight of age and too much fruit. Homes were being torn down, apartment complexes with parking garages. These buildings rose above it all, offering views at cut rates. The house was never meant to be a rooming house, it had only been a big house with old wiring and inadequate closet space, so new walls were put in and not all of these fit nicely. His room was at the top of the stairs, a place that used to be an open area for natural light.

“Welcome to my foyer.”

He said foyer the way the French do.

There was the bed and above the bed, a long row of red-tinted windows with lead soldering between each narrow pane. It felt like he was in church, or maybe hell, and though there was never much light in his room, it always looked pretty. She shrugged and asked for the shower. He walked her down the narrow hallway to one of the closets and switched the light on and a fan rumbled. It sounded like it was bent or caught and it stopped rumbling and just hummed and there was a smell of burning plastic, which was not as nice as the smell of mildew, which smelled kind of sweet.

“Cool,” she said.

Her hand was on the door knob and she was trying to shut the door on him but he was in the way.

“The toilet is right there,” he said.

He went out and sat with his back leaning against the door. The house had settled and the door had to be planed to get it to shut completely and then the Nisqually earthquake happened, so the house settled again and the door had to be removed and refitted. Now on one side of the door there was almost an inch where light and steam escaped.

“My girlfriend,” Tom said to anyone who passed by.

Not many were at the rooming house during the day but one person paused long enough to see who would come out of the shower and when she did, dressed only in one of his tee shirts, the man gave a sharp intake of breath and made yowling and growling voices, moving close to her and breathing in her scent, which had been completely replaced with the scent of lye, her skin scrubbed pink, even her cuticles were pushed back. Tom had to step in and the man stepped back but Tom saw that she had eyes that just did not care and that was going to be a problem.

He took her to the Five Point Café because that is where the people he called his friends were and he called her his girlfriend to anyone who would listen and once word got around that Tom Lovick had a girlfriend, there were a lot of people that he had to tell. They ended up at a party someone heard about, on the other side of the Seattle Center, in an old brick warehouse. The sewing machines were all packed up and it was just some desks and chairs, a couple of bolts of fabric that were left behind. There was a band with three guitars and a drummer, fistfuls of drywall torn out to find the wiring and they were hardwired in, no pulling the plug on this night.

He held her hand until it began to slip out of his, and with arms lifted and just their fingertips touching, they moved into the crowd. The crowd pushed against them, and with his hand just barely in hers, everyone began to dance and they separated. Tom watched as another man began to rub against her, the slender muscle of the man’s arms twining around hers, pulling her hair over her head and down his back, emerging, his eyebrows plucked to beautiful, mother-like arches, his hands on her hips, a loose grind. Tom found her hand again and he gripped it harder but she found a way out. She was wearing his pants, rolled at the cuffs to just above her ankles and they slid low on her hips, her pubis peeking.

He lost her again until the Cowboy Pharmacist said she was down the hall and in the bathroom. The CP opened his trench coat and sewed inside were vials and hypodermic needles in plastic wrappers. Tom pushed past him and first walked to the women’s bathroom and then the men’s where she was, her hands braced against the urinal and someone was giving it to her, the man with the arched eyebrows. Her ass was heart-shaped.

“What is wrong with you?” Tom said from over in his corner but she did not look at him. Nor did she avoid his look. The man finished up and peeled the condom off, throwing it on the floor.

“It’s cool, man. What’s her name anyway?”

She was pulling up her pants, it was Tom's pants that she wore, and she had not bothered to undo even the top button so she pulled them up first over one hip and then the other.

The CP came in and hummed. Tom was mad enough that he wanted to punch something so the CP attended to him first and the pill was big and bitter but the CP held Tom's hands and talked to him until a warm feeling came over him and the dark places seemed a little more dark and the bright places seemed a little more bright.

Tom would have gone to work but he lost his keys and so he had no way to keep her in. They lay on his bed together, he wrapped his hand in her hair but he knew that would not keep her for long. She woke and said she was hungry, then she said, "Who are you?"

"You're my girlfriend," he said.

"I need to pee like a racehorse."

He let her go and she padded across the floor and out his door. He heard her walk the narrow hall to the bathroom and he heard the door open and close and the sound of her peeing for a very long time and then the toilet flushed. He lay there, waiting for her to come back.

A bird flew outside, its image broken between the window panes, its red shadow cast on the opposite wall. It jarred Tom awake and he ran to the bathroom and there she was, sitting on the toilet, saying, "What the fuck? Shut the door."

When he did not leave, she turned her face back to her bare knees and said, "I'll be your girlfriend for a few more days and after that you have to chill."

"Kay."

"That means I'm leaving in a few days. No hard feelings, no sad feelings. You got it? I'm not a mother, I'm a girlfriend. I don't have to stick around."

She did just as she promised. Two days later, she stretched her arms wide and got up, pulled her pants to her waist. Bruises there, and he was not the one who gave them to her but he loved her.

He hated the number thirteen before he met her and now that she was gone, he thought about not getting on the bus but then he decided to go ahead, he was late for work and he had not showed up for days. Rent was due. But riding the thirteen reminded him of her, so when it was time to get off, he stayed on. He just could not see himself stuffing hoagie buns and rolling them in paper at a time like this.

He rode the bus in the same loops as he did before, but it was not the same driver and this one was less kind and made him pay each time the bus looped into downtown. At about the third loop, the driver told him that he was going back to the base and he had to get off.

"Want a transfer?"

The next driver was not so strict and Tom rode the bus some more. He read *The Stranger* and when the driver had his layover, he let Tom stay on the bus and read his tabloid. It was early in the evening, the heat of the day broken by the rain drumming on the bus, steaming the windows and closing the passengers loud chat. Finally, Tom Lovick was alone. The driver apologized, saying it was time for him to go back to the base.

He did not get on another bus. He took the tabloid with him and walked home and lay on his bed reading the ads, the big and the small ones, the sex, the restaurants, the books, the plays, the movies, the love magic. The type was misplaced on the one for love magic and love was spelled Ivoe. He

thought he had had enough of that, but still. There was no phone number, just an address and “Ivoe magic” in a decorative box.

He caught the twenty-eight and took it to the corner of thirty-fourth and Fremont Avenue and stood there, looking around for someone, the Cowboy Pharmacist maybe, to open his jacket and show him, the stuff that would make her come back. But love was not easy stuff to negotiate.

A tapping on the window behind him and there he was, the man of the Fremont Apothecary, dressed in a tunic that went to his knees. On one side the sun radiated and when he turned his back to let Tom in, the moon and the stars ruled.

“I knew you would come,” he said.

He took Tom’s arm and lead him inside where it was dark and rather old fashioned with pressed tin ceiling and light fixtures hanging low over their heads. Beyond the oak and glass cases were rows of wood boxes, hand lettered cards on the face of each box. The room smelled like poison.

“It will cost you,” the man in the tunic said. His grey hair was pulled back in a braid and his face was clean shaven. He was a small man, both narrow and short, a face like a weasel.

“Love is nothing to mess around with,” he said. “It will cost you.”

“I’ll do anything,” Tom said.

“Forty bucks.”

“Forty?”

“If you want it for free, you can wait it out, but you want to know now, don’t you?”

“I got five. What can you give me for five?”

He put the crumpled bill on the table. The man of the sun and the moon and the stars smoothed it straight before putting it in his cash-register.

“Give me your hand. Not that hand, your left hand. Are you left-handed? No. I didn’t think so. Give me your left hand. Now here. These are your past relationships. I see this one is quite long and deep. That must be her, isn’t it. Yes now, this is your life line and it’s very long. You want to live a long time, don’t you? Good you’re going to. And your love line, right here, it is very long, too. But it’s broken. See where it’s broken? That’s where you are now. You’re broken.”

“I’m broken?”

The man of the sun and the moon and the stars shrugged.

“Tell me more.”

“That’s all.”

“But what about the magic?”

“Come back when you’ve got forty bucks.”

Tom left and the bells on the door jangled. He had not noticed the bells before but now he did and his head felt hollow from the sound of them. The sun glared and finally, a dumb-founded moment combined with misery and the pleasure of being wronged. There was nothing he could do. These things were occurring because he could do nothing about them.

He got on the twenty-eight and rode up Dexter Avenue and down the front of it. Then he did what had become habit and when the bus looped around again, he saw the man with the sun and the moon and the stars on his tunic waiting at the opposite bus stop, waiting with a briefcase in his hand.

He ran into his boss downtown, a skinny man from Sri Lanka or Iran or Thailand.

“Australia, you asshat.” And then, “When are you coming back to work?”

“I’ll be fine in a few days.”

“You can’t leave me like this. I need to find a replacement.”

“What about me?”

“Can you come in tomorrow?”

He wanted her back. He needed forty dollars. He wanted her back. He needed forty dollars. He stayed in that night, lying on his back with The Stranger folded over him tent-like. He felt hunger in his belly for the first time. It rolled and grew in him; it fatigued him and kept him awake for a long time, the drum of footsteps going down the stairs, the press of footsteps when they returned, laughter like hers but not the same. Red light in his room. Morning had come.

“Can you cash it for me?”

He had not known there was a forty dollar check for him at work.

“When your shift is done.”

He filled containers with jalapeños, lettuce, tomatoes, olives, green peppers, three kinds of cheese, five kinds of lunch meat. He plated or wrapped, wiped down, swept, mopped. He wanted her back. He cashed his check for forty dollars and rode the twenty-eight to Fremont.

The man of the sun and the moon and the stars gave him a list of things he would need: at least one strand of her hair, something with the scent of her (such as a shirt or underwear), her favorite word. He was to meditate, to clear his mind of suggestion and rancor, to sit comfortably and feel nothing at all, not even love. When he had done this, he was to come to the Fremont Apothecary and they would begin.

“It should take at least one week,” said the man.

And so the familiar push of the broom, the wiping down of countertops, the dreamlike grip of a dead-end job. In the evenings, he searched for items of her, having to go through his bedding to find the few strands of hair that she left behind, having to air out his room and wash his laundry to find whatever item of his might have some scent of hers (his pillow cover) and when this was done and his mind was clear, it came to him that her favorite word was “martingale.” He did not understand how he would know this, he did not even know what the word meant, he just understood it to be the word, the one word that would bring her back.

A week had passed, just as the man said it would, and he skipped his shift at the sandwich shop to ride the bus to the Apothecary with her hair in a plastic baggy and the pillow tucked under his arm. The traffic became squeezed and it was as if something reached down from the sky and pinched off the circulation of love and the part of him that needed it yearned for a release until finally the bus was able to push its way into traffic and it inched across the bridge.

He got off the bus and walked past the flashing sign that read, “Businesses are open during construction,” and around the orange plastic fence coming to the locked door with a sign that read, “Closed until further notice.”

He looked for someone to let loose on and there was someone his age who was walking past with a wheelbarrow full of junk. Tom ran after him, shouting for him to stop and he did not but he caught up to him easily and raised his fist, shouting, “I thought businesses were supposed to remain open.”

The worker just gave him a dull stare and then dumped the contents of the wheelbarrow and walked away. There were pieces of concrete that knocked him in the shins and landed on his feet but by the time Tom stopped yelling the guy was gone.

He went back to the apothecary where there was a box of books, each of them with broken spines and dog-eared, the covers torn off and the print painfully small. He found the ones with recipes and took an armload.

He took a bus to Discovery park and went for long walks, gathering whatever plant turned his skin red, angry white bumps rising. He found useful roots and mosses, belladonna and yarrow. He discovered a new apothecary in Ballard where he purchased mandrake root and hellebore.

He memorized the recipes and made tinctures in small brown bottles. He developed a clientele. People sought him out for their ailments, from aching feet to heartbreak, cancer and gout. The weight of knowledge fell over him like the comfortable weight of an old quilt. He felt heady, prepared for love and his preparation released him, creating a breakthrough of long strange chants which he at first sounded out and later wrote down. He hated the people who came to see him for their ailments but he welcomed them for the opportunity of knowledge. In the lonely patterns of his life, the incantations soon came easily and he began to see her return in the whorled pattern of dust in the air. Pushing the books aside to lie on his stomach, chewing and sucking on the last strands of her hair, he followed the path, splitting the wheat-colored lint with his finger, looping it slowly and forcefully back to him.

It happened. The stairs drummed with her footsteps, the doorknob rattled and then turned. She was there.

“Get me a glass of water,” she said.

He left the room to fill a glass from the bathroom tap, pausing to lick his finger and rub it round the rim of the glass, feeling where her tongue might enter. He returned to her and saw for the first time some unease on her face, and he knew then that he was winning. She wiped her hair away from her eyes with the back of her hand before taking the glass from him.

“Where have you been,” he asked.

“Nowhere.”

“What do you mean? You were somewhere.”

“I was away. It doesn’t matter where.”

She walked away from him. He waited and willed her to return but eventually followed. She paced from his room to the shower and he closed in on her, shouting at her, raising his hands to her twisted back, her hip bumping the wall, not pausing. She is gone, again. She is walking into the shower room. She is leaving him. She is turning and slamming the door in his face.

His open hand slapped against the door, his ear pressed to hear her movements.

“Tell me why you came back,” he said.

“Because I did.”

Her voice was tired. He sat with his back against the door and he heard her do the same.

He placed his hand against the thin, hollow wood and felt her movements.

“But were you always going to come back?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Where were you when you decided to come back.”

“I didn’t decide.”

“But where were you.”

“I was sleeping in the cold.”

“And you woke and came back.”

“Not right away.”

“When?”

“Forsythe.”

“What is Forsythe?”

She said nothing.

“Tell me about it! What did you smell?”

“Grease and creosote.”

“What did you see?”

“The boxcar I slept in.”

“And then?”

“At night it was too cold to sleep, so I walked.”

“What else?”

“There were people, drunks mostly, in the bar near the tracks. When they learned where I was sleeping, they gave me a room above the bar. I cleaned the bar in the mornings.”

“Who? What did you see during the day?”

“I saw dirt and cigarette butts rolling in front of my broom.”

“Is that why you came back?”

He meant it as a joke. He had meant to hear her laugh.

“I came back because you told me to. I’m your girlfriend.”

“Please open the door. Please, open the door and talk to me.”

She stayed. Even after the night that she pulled the tinctures he had forgotten about from under his bed.

“What have you done?” she asked.

Then she turned and sat in front of the television set, the one she bought to give her something to do while he was away making sandwiches.

That is how it is for them. He returns each night to find her asleep in the tin sound of the flickering box. He wakes her, and she makes room for him on his bed. On especially cold nights, when she drifts so deeply into sleep that she rolls to the center of the bed, he wakes to feel the hand of her resting, almost pushing, against his chest. On these infrequent nights, a memory comes over him of cigarette butts rolling in front of a broom and the sound of a hand slapping vinyl before it cups the back of a head for a kiss. He knows that it is not his memory, it is hers, but always he welcomes the cold nights and puts his nose as close to the top of her head as he dares, breathing the sweet smell of her musk.