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What's Left of Us · *Jill Weaver*

THIS IS THE WAY we play it. There is something there, of course there is. We just never say. We fuck, or we have lunch. He has a wife. I have a life that has little to do with him. Now, I never once let it slide, it isn't even *there* to slide colored warm and fleshy onto my face where he would see and be uneasy, or worse, frightened. And if it happens when we are making love or fighting that his brown eyes shift to blue or whatever the dumb song says, he closes them. We learned to do this the only way there is, him with another woman, a previous lover, and me, unfortunately, with him.

I said, I can't see you anymore. We were in this bar, a year ago maybe. No, not maybe. It was November 13, the middle of the day. I was full of resolution, drinking tea, cup after cup of tea. I had a cold.

On the fifth cup, he tells the waitress, "She has a cold." She sets two more little pots of hot water down, and he turns to me and says, "Talk to me about this."

"There's nothing to talk." I squeeze lemon in my cup and stir.

"I'm saying two things," he says, "and that's all. One. I don't want to be without you. Two. I understand. Because of Karen."

I tear up, drink tea. "Damn," I say. "That's hot." It burns all the way down. I dump ice from his glass into my cup. I look at him, at his eyes, and I say, "I know you understand. I don't want to hear the story of you and Karen. I don't want to hear that you were ready to leave Tee. Don't say any of that to me again."

He looks down and then up. "I don't plan to love anyone like that again. You know?"

"Shut up," I say, and smile, understanding what he does not, that Karen taught him and now he is teaching me. How not to love.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing."

"Well," he says. "Nothing has changed for me. You know that. You've known all along."

"Yes," I say. "I knew it every step of the way. It was good you told me, good I knew about Tee—and what's-her-name—from the beginning. Otherwise, you know, I might have really fallen."

“Funny,” he says.

“But this way, this way that you have is better. No commitment, no love, no nothing. That’s the only way to do it.”

“There’s a kind of commitment,” he says.

“Yeah, sure,” I say. I toast him with my cup. “I have to pee.”

I go to the bathroom. I see how dopey I look, my nose runny and red. I put some vaseline on it. “Girl,” I say, “you’re a piece of work.”

Somebody says, “What?” from one of the stalls.

“Oh, sorry,” I say. “I didn’t know anybody else was in here.”

I pop a second decongestant and lean into the mirror, whispering. “You ought to be home in bed. What the hell are you doing here?”

When I come out, he is at one of the pinball machines. I watch him push the side buttons, pull the spring. The little silver ball shoots up the alley and into the maze of lights and flicking white arms. Bells go off. Numbers click.

“Here,” he says. “I’m losing. You take a turn.”

I step in front of him and pull and push and click and ding. The numbers roll. “Hey,” I say, leaning in. “Hey. I’m hot.” I keep the next one afloat for a long time, so long that when it sinks the machine lights up and little stars shoot across the top. I hoot and a couple of people at the bar look around. He kisses me by the ear, moves right behind me and puts his hands on my hands.

“Give me a quarter,” I say. “I want to do it again.”

“You get a free game, woman,” he says in my ear. I forget my decision to stop being his lover. I move back against him. He is hard.

Whatever. I turn and he smiles. I spring again, but this time my score is pitifully low.

“I want some soup,” I say. We go back and order and he starts in on the subject of his son.

“I don’t know,” he says. “That boy confuses the issues on everything. Tee says we’ll get through this but I’m not so sure. She was never a boy.” He laughs at himself.

I don’t let the mention of Tee get to me. “He’s a good kid,” I say. “Don’t worry so much. Tee knows what she’s talking about.”

“I guess,” he says.

The soup comes. “I don’t want to hear any more about your kid,” I say. “I want some music. Put some money in the jukebox.”

“You,” he says.

“I’m sick.”

“You’re the one that wants music,” he says. He bites his sandwich.

“Take care of me,” I say. “I have a cold.”

“Not on your life,” he says. He reaches across and puts his hand against my forehead. “You have a fever,” he says.

“No I don’t.” I push his hand away. “I can tell when I have a fever. I’m old enough to know if I have a fever or not.”

He gets up. “What songs do you want?”

“Something that doesn’t jerk. Something that slides around.”

“Christ,” he says. “Slides around.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “Go on,” I say. “Put in five dollars.”

“You’re crazy,” he says.

“Give me a sax.”

He puts on “Songbird.” I can’t tell if I’m just fuzzy from the cold or if the medication is doing it. I decide I will never move again. I want to sleep.

He opens the newspaper. I slouch down in the booth, put my foot up on the other side, and close my eyes. About the time I stop watching the purple things that zing over my closed eyelids, I feel his hand circle my ankle, squeeze, and then loosen and rest there. I will sleep and he will hold my foot and I will let him. I don’t even open my eyes. I think, people with colds shouldn’t ever have to live up to their resolve.

When I come to, he looks up. He says, “I know of no one else that can actually sleep in a place like this.” He turns the pages of the paper.

“How long was I asleep?”

“About five hours,” he says. “You snore.”

“I bet five minutes. That’s all it takes for me. Hold my foot again. That was nice.”

“I’m not nice. You should go. *I* have to go.”

“Fuck you.” I always say this to him, and I always smile. It rolls off, gathers and beads and rolls away, like everything else.

We pay up. Outside, the air is like it is in May, the sun out full. “It’s so lovely and warm,” I say.

“Zip your coat. Learn how to take care of yourself, for God’s sake.”

I leave my coat open. “Are you driving?” I say.

“I’m parked in the lot.”

“Let’s go for a ride. OK?” It doesn’t have to be long. Just a little ride. I’ll drive if you want.”

“I have to get back to work.”

“Fuck work. Come on.”

He says, “A very short ride.”

So he’s driving and I’m looking out my window. “OK,” I say, “I’m ready.” I smack my hand on the dashboard. “From this minute on, we are just friends. *Capish?*”

“Do what you have to do,” he says. “That’s my only advice. And I’ll do what I have to do.”

“No more nothing,” I say. “Not even touching.” I turn and look at him. “No more standing close behind me at the pinball machine.”

He laughs.

“I’m dead serious,” I say. And I start to cry. I’m not letting him see, though. I’m shuffling around for Kleenex and cursing the common cold. “Shit,” I say. “I hate to be sick.”

He puts his hand on my head. “I want you to know,” he says. “I’m still going to be around. If you want to talk or something.”

“I don’t want to something. I’m never going to something you again.”

He pulls into the cemetery. I say, “What are we doing?”

“I said a short ride. We’re driving up the hill to look at the view for a minute. We’re talking out what we do next—but only for a minute. Then we’re going back. I have work to do.”

“Christ,” I say. “I have stuff to do, too. You know? You’re not the only person around with things to do.” I roll down the window for some air. “And we don’t have to talk out what we’re doing next. What we’re doing next is nothing.” I blow my nose.

“It’s all right if you have to get angry with me,” he says.

“Who’s angry?” I say. “Stop the fucking car.” I get out and stomp off across a row of graves. At the crest of the hill I stop. The city is there below me, lumps and dips and houses growing all over, the river running between.

He comes up beside me. “Go away,” I say.

He stays. “Look at the light on the river,” he says.

“I’m not talking,” I say. I turn and look the other direction. “I can’t believe I’ve never been up here before. I wonder if I can see my house.”

“Sure,” he says. “The Congregational Church is there, see? So count over four streets. You can’t really see the house itself, just kind of where it is among the houses. There are too many and from up here they all look scrunched together.”

I look where he says, squinting and widening my eyes to see if that helps. “I can’t see it,” I say. “How do you know where it is?”

He kicks at a gravestone. “I come up here sometimes. I just noticed one day. That’s all.”

I walk around in small circles and look at names and dates and the circumstances of death. There is one gravestone from 1888, a tiny angel on top. “Laura Race Grove,” it reads. “Born July 7, 1885. Died May 2, 1888.” I say, “This was practically a baby.”

“There are lots of them,” he says. “Down over there is a family that lost three children within a few months.”

“Jesus,” I say.

“Eva, Harold, and Helen Clark. Helen was the baby.”

“You remember that?”

“Of course,” he says.

We walk around some more, quiet, our hands pushed down in our pockets. Then he says, “Come here to the other side of the hill.”

There is a miniature stone built to look like the Washington Monument. “I like the angel better,” I say. “A monumental reproduction is presumptuous.”

“But his name is George Washington,” he says. He runs his hand across the letters on the stone.

“Tack city,” I say.

“He didn’t name himself. His mother named him.”

“How do you know? How do you know what his mother did? Don’t be so stupid.”

“I like George,” he says.

I concede that I don’t know any more than *he* does. “I either love him or hate him,” I say. “It depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether he picked the monument or not. Maybe his wife picked it. Maybe Martha picked it.”

“He picked it and you hate him or he picked it and you love him?”

“I don’t know. Don’t ask hard questions. I have a cold.”

“God,” he says. “You would drive me nuts.” He sits and pats the ground beside him. “Sit down here and look,” he says. “You can see clear over to West Virginia.”

I sit beside him and he points things out. The sun is warm on my head, on my legs, the cloth of my jeans holding heat against my thighs. His shoulder is against mine. He looks at me, all his fine black hair blown about on his head. He is still. Then he reaches over and snaps my suspenders.

I take his hand and run my finger down his life line. “So you figured where my house is,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “I know where everything is. From up here, anyway. The long view,” he says. “Perspective.”

“Did Tee ever come here with you?” He shakes his head no.

I’m not sure I want to know more, but I can’t help myself. “Did you ever bring Karen?”

He turns and pushes my hair back and rests his hand on my shoulder. “No.”

I take his hand up and put my mouth against the palm and suck in his skin. It only takes this and we are into it, him stroking the hair at my ear back and back and pushing my coat off my shoulders and me saying I have a cold, I have to leave my coat on and him sliding his hands down my back and up under my breasts, me whispering, “Will anyone see?” and his tongue tracing my mouth outside and then in and me pushing away and moving down and taking him out, pink-purple and hard, into my mouth, his hands so soft in my hair and then him rolling me over on my side and reaching around front so he can unfasten my jeans, sliding his hand in, me pulling things down and then he is behind me and in me and I think Jesus, we are making love in a cemetery. I think, you two are amazingly, cheaply symbolic.

After, in a heap, we are very still. I sneeze and he pops out.

I laugh. “I’m never doing this again,” I say.

“Me either,” he says. “No more touching. Especially from behind.” He rolls over, stands and zips his pants. “Maybe we can figure how to do it without touching,” he says. “That would solve it.”

In the car I am so loose, I don’t care if I’m sick, I don’t care about anything. I’m going to bed for good, for always.

Now, then. If I catch myself resolving, which is all the time forever, I say it out loud. I hit it back. I back-burner the big stuff and keep laughing at the small.

So, fool me twice.