

the 2ndhand

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spring 2009

Tolerance

by Aaron Parrett

THE FIRST INDICATION HE had that things might not work out with Seonaidh was that when they were having sex, she would occasionally cry out, “Crack me, dad, crack me!” in her thick Scottish accent, and though he knew that she meant something different, it evoked vivid images of his father smashing flagstones with a twelve-pound maul. Her odd phrasing seemed to reveal some kind of latent violence in the sex act itself, and in turn caused him to have doubts about the defensibility of his maleness, something which, in spite of a solid liberal education, he had never questioned. Her ejaculations jarred him, and he was unused to being out of his depth in the bedroom.

On the other hand, he was rather fond of certain qualities about her that he considered exotic, in spite of their banality and the fact that probably not all that many generations back, they shared common ancestors. For one thing, she had a widow's peak dividing her coarse black hair, which he had never seen on a woman, and he delighted in the way it somehow drew attention to her eyes, which were the color of spring hay. She had thick, heavy eyebrows that lent her an air of brooding, offset by a mischievous glint in her smile. The overall effect was that she constantly looked as if she possessed some secret, the divulging of which would come only after he had sufficiently won her favor. This fact alone had initially attracted him in the way one continues to add quarters to a pinball machine that, against all finesse, refuses to give up a free game.

She worked in a bakery, and often when he saw her she had a light dusting of flour in her hair. After she finished for the day, she would come by his apartment and on the kitchen counter deposit loaves of bread—whole wheat, sourdough, pumpernickel—and other baked odds and ends like day-old pastries and broken cookies, the occasional wedge of cheesecake. Invariably she would have in her canvas handbag two or three bottles of Doppelspaten, and they would sit out on the back balcony of the Atlantic Hotel and drink the rich malt liquor. Sometimes she had her fiddle with her, and after downing her first pint would reel off tunes with names like “The Scolding Wives of Abertarff” or “Monymusk Reel” while he smoked and watched the sunset.

When he felt like it, or she asked, he would get a guitar and play rhythm, but his musical repertoire was limited to a few old standard country songs, and her severe Scots bowing threw him.

From there, a pattern had more or less eased into a ritual wherein together they would make and eat a simple dinner together. She was, not surprisingly, a meat and potatoes kind of girl, though equally adept at pasta and more complicated vegetarian affairs whose recipes she learned in college. After facing down the dishes, they would retreat to his bedroom to effect the congress that she called “rattling the bedsprings.” His bed (in a loft) was a futon on an oak frame that, even when put through the most vigorous paces, hardly creaked. Aside from her passionate, if somewhat incongruous, vocal outbursts, he found their lovemaking by turns to be affectionately tender and exuberantly athletic, and always authentic enough at the critical moments to be compelling.

But he was having an affair with another woman. He was not quite in love with Anne either, but since he was not prone to fine distinctions, he did his best to maintain a sense of detachment about his amorous habits on general principle. The duplicity was nevertheless confusing. It was enough for him to conceive of his behavior as the shameful variable in an equation with no rational solution, since he knew about sexual jealousy and sensed that cheating, on some fundamental level, was wrong. He was frequently bothered by the potential future need to produce an impromptu lie, and would rehearse various scenarios on his walks home, scenes in which he would offer a convincing narrative about his whereabouts at some earlier hour, or what in particular he had done with his day.

Yet he recognized in his infidelity the feeble attempt to inject a sort of homeopathic restorative into his relationship with Seonaidh, which he felt to be in a sort of decline. He imagined himself forced to articulate the inexplicable in her tearful presence, pathetically defending his taste for Anne by standing the two of them in parallel. He knew that the phrase “she reminds me of you” was no consolation to a dangerously wounded ego, and that pointing out that they both smelled of vetiver soap would never smooth the surface of waters once disturbed. In short, he dreaded discovery, even as he thrived in the corridors of questionable and risky secrecy, and somehow managed in spite of it—or rather because of it—to infuse both affairs with an ardor he had not thought he had in him.

On the occasion of the February AWP conference at Hilton Chicago, THE2NDHAND's Alabama contingent ventured northward to the home of the magazine's birth to find the vibrancy of the scene marching ever forward and took time to wonder at the possibilities inherent for so many of the city's writers. Thanks goes out to both Featherproof Books (www.featherproof.com) and Columbia College, who helped make our way. But as ever, a trip back to Chicago brings with it the prospect of a life's evaluation. How to be sure of decisions made and positions taken? How to balance one's former life against the possibilities of its various reincarnations? These questions hold a marked similarity to those facing the protagonist of writer and musician Aaron Parrett's short story “Tolerance,” featured in this issue. Parrett, who teaches in Great Falls, Montana, is the author of the 2004 book *The Translunar Narrative in the Western Tradition* (Ashgate), and his short work in fiction has appeared in numerous lit mags around the nation. For more about both his writing and music, visit aaronparrett.com.

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****WRITERS:** send prose submissions (2,500 words or less Web, 5,000 print) to THE2NDHAND, c/o Todd Dills, 4038 Clairmont Ave. S, Birmingham AL 35222 (todd@the2ndhand.com). THE2NDHAND is **editors** Todd Dills, C.T. Ballentine, **resident artist** Rob Funderburk, **FAQ editor** Mickey Hess, and the janitor R. Beady. Literate (and soon-to-be-literate) apes unite.

It was true that certain habits facilitated this delicate arrangement, particularly the late-night lifestyle he had adopted, which effectively ruled out scheduling anything important before noon. More than anything, this accounted for his lack of a job, which gave him the luxury of several hours ordinarily unavailable during the day in which to conduct his dual love life. An additional and less cheerful result was that he found himself perpetually in arrears at the Hotel, and seldom had money for groceries. Had it not been for Seonaidh's largesse, he would have grown thinner than he already was, and (a worse prospect) more sober. He justified his apparent indolence by reminding himself, and anyone who might view him with a disparaging eye, that his nights were consumed by writing—an activity for which, it was true, he had yet to be directly remunerated, but something he nevertheless considered to be his “work.” With the wistfulness of the poet he longed to be, he declared that he might be charged with *insolvency*, but never *sloth*.

Anne, for her part, contributed (in the abstract) by giving him a taste for the finery of a life less slipshod and improvisational, and (in the particular) by loaning him money, which she unofficially wrote off as an entertainment expense. Her disposable income thus distributed went toward his Hotel bill, and though it was left unspoken, the only compensation she expected—and *expected* was probably too strong a word—was his presence in her bed three or four afternoons a week. As a businesswoman and an incorrigible realist, Anne had no illusions about the nature of their relationship, even if he were given to pointed rhapsodies post coitus about Rasputin and the ladies in the court of Nicholas II. She was happily aware of Seonaidh, and actually depended on the distraction to prevent Irwin from becoming disagreeably entwined in her own life. She enjoyed a man who was already housebroken, but she wanted nothing to do with holding a leash.

He passed the better part of the winter in this fashion, creating in his mind a drama of much greater magnitude than existed in actuality. Still, he knew it was only a matter of time before he was exposed. More than the specific possibility of losing Seonaidh, he was haunted by general pangs of conscience, which he attributed to residual Catholicism, and which prevented him from somehow transforming his adulterous experience into artistic inspiration. He was so terrified of confusing names or events in a way that might make her suspicious that, more often than not, he simply kept silent. The fact was that he was more naïve than heartless and had convinced himself

that his motives sprang more from concern for her feelings than simple cowardice. And other than the cheating, he remained, in his own mind at least, charmingly devoted. In any case, denial had paralyzed him from accomplishing anything that might prove redemptive—a poem, for instance, which might be distinguished from a merely highbrow *graffito*. To compensate, his sense of the vocation for which he had

been naturally suited shifted from author to lover, though he hoped success in one milieu could be transposed to some kind of tangible accomplishment in the other.

He had lately been struggling with a series of what he called “psychogenic” poems and was disappointed to discover that the persona and de facto pseudonym he had adopted, Truman Peyote, was not original. Alas. His private lamentations had grown keener since he had started rationalizing his increased marijuana intake as fieldwork for the project. Now he stared blankly at blank pages and wondered whether anyone not living on the coast made a living from fishing. His few false starts at the typewriter had been punctuated by reveries involving a spinning rod propped against a log, a few beers, and two cans of Douwe Egberts—one full of fresh tobacco, the other filled with dirt and worms he would dig from a sodbank near the river.

Furthermore, his failure to produce a poem had been aggravated by fighting with Seonaidh. Last night at dinner she had asked why didn't he look for a job, a topical and legitimate question, against which he reacted violently because it was topical and legitimate. He hated himself all the more for resorting to the transparent strategy of attacking her, a defense mechanism left over from childhood, which he knew by now he should have outgrown. The quarrel had ended when he withdrew on the verge of angry tears and walked downtown to the bar. He returned to his room a few hours later, after giving things some thought, and was calm as he slipped into his bed beside her.

In the morning, he fiddled with the percolator as she boiled an egg. The tension was renewed when she made the mistake of trying smoothly to suggest again that his morose outlook might disappear if he found something to do with himself during the day. Even something as mindless as mowing lawns or shelving books at the library, things with which he had to admit he had experience. The manner in which she suggested it, standing there herding eggs with a fork, getting ready to leave to go to *her* job, he found nevertheless grating.

“Yes, mother. I'll look for a job.”

“Come on, Irwin. You need to do something. You mope about and look dull all the time. Do you ever get any sun?”

“I work. I do work. I just don't get paid.”

“You haven't written so much as a song since I've known you. If you got out once in a while, you might have something to write about.”

“You're just frustrated because you thought you'd come over here with your violin to be the next Ally McBain and instead you're scraping dough from a bakery floor.”

“It's Aly *Bain*, Irwin, you stupid twit. And he's bloody Irish. Do I need to get an atlas? And I didn't come here for the bloody fiddling.”

“Well. What for then?”

“I hated Edinburgh, and London is too full of Americans.”

He wanted to laugh, and especially because she had thwarted his feint toward melodrama with humor. But he lunged again, darkly serious.

“I've been cheating on you.”

“Don't be so dramatic. You mean sleeping



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with Anne?”

“You know?”

“Christ. You Americans. It’s like you think you’re all bleeding alcoholics because you drink more than three bottles of beer of an evening.”

“How do you know about it?”

“Irwin, it’s a town small enough. How could I not know?”

He recognized that this was a tricky anticlimax. If she knew, Anne probably knew she knew, and having fallen smack into the abyss of such intrigue, it was difficult to see how he might have been made a bigger fool. Even worse, Seonaidh apparently didn’t care. It was feeble consolation at best that he was too stunned to admit that he was being used by at least one of them.

He bolted from the kitchen and took the stairs at the back of the Hotel a half dozen at a time. Outside he paused in the alley to light a smoke, and attempted to shrug off the irritating shroud of embarrassment that had settled about him. What had glowed in his mind until now as the promise of a grand style, of triumph and capable success, had been reduced to a merely desultory performance piece. It genuinely pained him that he was incapable of inspiring a little simple jealousy.

He paused at Anne’s door before ringing the bell. The wraparound porch suddenly seemed huge, ornately carved balusters and stained glass windows made him halt: her opulence stood in opposed balance to his own squalor. Intuitively he knew that having money freed up a lot of space in one’s emotional hard-drive, such that more attention could be devoted to more essential functions, like sorting out relationship data, than worrying about rent. It seemed that Anne, in her inherited leisure, had naturally become proficient at worrying about nothing.

“Winky! What a pleasant surprise.”

He couldn’t remember pushing the bell, but there she was, holding the door open, her finger between the pages of a book, kissing the air near his ear, gesturing him in. The foyer always smelled of freshly oiled wood, an odor that recalled his father’s after-dinner basement furniture-tooling sessions. He had grown up believing that wood shavings possessed a spiritual significance, though this was probably the result of learning in Confirmation classes that, like his father, Jesus had been a carpenter. In any case, the odor out of context always slightly confused him.

“I wasn’t expecting you today. My God, you look as if you’ve seen a ghost.” Anne took a seat on the couch, setting her book down on the coffee table with a look that suggested she was slightly annoyed at having to put it aside.

“Seonaidh knows about us.”

“Oh dear,” she said.

He sat in the rocking chair across from her, hands folded across his chest, which made his shoulders ride high against the wood back.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Well, I guess these things have a way of getting out.”

“Do you care?”

“That she knows? It does take some of the zing out of it, doesn’t it? Well, the truth will out, as they say.”

The truth will out. He rolled the words around in his mind, deciding finally that *will* must mean *wants*.

He rocked, distracted, while she stood and went to the kitchen. He heard the usual noises prefacing her calling out to ask if he would like a drink.

“I guess. What time is it?”

He looked at the fancy grandfather clock near the door. It bothered him that the pair of weights hanging from their chains had always looked like two turds dangling behind the glass. A hair past noon.

She brought him a glass of ice water garnished with a splash of scotch.

“Well, I’ve been thinking, anyway. Perhaps this is as good a time to put things on hold.” She had curled herself into the corner of the couch again.

“Put things on hold? What does that mean?”

He was beginning to worry that words weren’t meaning what they were supposed to.

“Oh, Irwin. You knew it couldn’t last. It was an indulgence. Stick with Seonaidh. Tell her you’re sorry or whatever.”

A vague hatred gnawed through the veneer of his self-concern, a reaction stemming, no doubt, from the fact that she looked frankly bored. It occurred to him that he was being dumped, but he had the dignity not to ask. Instead he gulped his drink and muttered a slur against the clock and the rest of her furniture, half under his breath. She seized the opportunity to close the account altogether.

“Irwin, darling, I was actually about to leave the house. I really need to run downtown.”

“Downtown.”

“Yes. I need to meet someone at the bank.”

She was standing now, digging through her purse, ostensibly for her keys. He stood, shrugged, and escorted her to the door.

“Oh, you can let yourself out,” she said. “I don’t mean to rush, but I simply can’t miss this meeting. Stay. Have another drink.”

“I think I was leaving anyway.”

He felt oddly vindicated for his infidelity by the discovery that Anne had no stake in him, though he was resourceful enough in his condition not to dwell on the secondary fact indicated: she considered him as dispensable as a portfolio of low-dividend stock. He marveled at the unlikely event of their ever having met in the first place, and now was sweetly bemused by their casual parting. And whatever fragments of romantic sensibility he possessed (if he allowed himself this moment of honesty) were anyway shored around Seonaidh. He felt growing shame, in spite of her apparent neutrality on the issue.

He salvaged what was left of the afternoon, repairing to a barstool in Jester’s Club. Braced with scotch now barely tainted with water, he scribbled furiously on the reverse of a flyer advertising the ROCKY MOUNTAIN OYSTER FEAST (more felicitously dubbed in smaller print, “23rd Annual Testicle Festival—Have A BALL!”), which he had torn from the wall of the men’s room. Using a pencil whose tip he paused occasionally to moisten with his lips, he calculated how many square feet of wall coverage the average movie would provide if converted into 8½-by-11 frames and snipped into stills. At 22 frames per second, he figured that the average full-length feature measured in at around 130,000 frames. If each frame were converted to 8½-by-11 (which worked out to just over half a square foot), that made roughly 72,000 square feet of wallpaper. The average room in the average house he estimated at 650 square feet of applicable area: 12-by-12 walls (he liked high ceilings) and 12-by-14 for the overhead area. The result, over 110 rooms, indicated that the average film thus converted could paper every room in the Biltmore mansion. So he recalculated, this time assigning new values to the variables—4-by-5 stills, and eliminating all but 7 of each 22-frame segment. How he chose this latter formula he wasn’t sure, but it seemed to have some relation to the

were moments between them, fleeting at first, that were in a simple and undeniable way just very, very good. A coincidence of fears and passions, eloquent silence, laughter. She made him laugh hard enough to snort a little, and he was not embarrassed by the snort, and she smiled at his lack of embarrassment, which in turn made him smile even wider. And this became the model for those first cautious months, these moments linking together, gaining momentum.

They were not superheroes. There were minor mutual dishonesties, brushes with temptation. But once they called it “love” they found they loved more for each weakness, confession and recovery, their momentum compelling them closer. They moved into an apartment and rescued a dog named Chester. They acquired furniture and painted walls, while around them seasons changed.

And it was one late-summer evening while preparing dinner that Scott glanced through a kitchen window and caught the last bit of sun going down across rooftops, and he stood watching as light became gray, and eventually dark. In the living room, Joy too happened to watch the changing light, and was likewise given pause, but for a different reason. What Scott saw was a day giving way to night as if exhausted, and he took comfort in this idea, a tired day that could only light the world for so long. Joy, on the other hand, watched darkness spread and imagined night dropped like ink into the day’s water, and was taken by the force of night’s invasion of the help-less day. And because they were in love, and because lovers share, they met in the hallway.

But here something went awry. Without intention, sharing somehow bled into arguing—over the role of day, the invasiveness of night—and this argument achieved its own momentum toward collision. Screaming about days and nights led to a flood of

Pythagorean theorem. In any case, no illusion of motion was necessary, so most of the frames were redundant, even if the philosophical problem of deciding which frames were important was left in abeyance. This worked out to the much more feasible result of 9 rooms, walls and ceilings fully covered.

Halfway to determining that leaving the frames at 32 mm (roughly one-inch squares) gave him just enough to do a kitchen and bathroom, albeit diminishing the overall intended effect, he realized that he was stupidly drunk. Though he was intrigued by the idea of slowing a film down to absolute static so that the illusion of motion became synonymous with paint or wallpaper, he set down his pencil, slid off the barstool and theatrically drew himself up, noticing as he did so that the drinking had tempered his mood.

Outside in the settling dusk, he reflected rosily on the vicissitudes of the day, and resolved to wander the streets until he felt sober enough to make sense of what was shaping up to be his new life. He thought of his hero, Hart Crane, raging and drunken, hunched over the Victrola, taunted by the blank page and the inkhorn, straining to extract the muse’s spark from the swirling, needle-scratched shellac. He imagined the bottles broken and the shards of 78s scattered around the floor of his lonely cabin, the poetry still submerged.

When he eventually staggered through the darkness to his room, he found a note on the table: *Call me. Love, Seonaidh.* Her simple missive dissipated the lingering funk he had been in since the morning’s fight, which had only been exacerbated by Anne’s spurning and the ensuing shift he put in at the bar. He was exhausted, and was relieved to feel the cool cotton sheets.

When he awoke, he saw by the clock in the window of the grocery across the street that it was after nine. He boiled water for coffee and sat at the kitchen table staring through the blur of a hangover at the note Seonaidh had left. Then he rolled a cigarette and fondled a chunk of bone he had found in the alley the night before. He didn’t know much about vertebrate physiology, but he was pretty certain he held the scapula of some mid-size animal—dog or a deer, perhaps—a fan-shaped paddle of bone that thinned out to almost nothing at the edge. He rolled it over in his hands and then suddenly got up and rifled through the drawers looking for his pen—a special Parker with a fluted nib that wrote in imitation of the old fountain pens. After he had located it, he had to hold it under hot water for a few minutes to get the dried ink off and to get the ink flowing again. He blotted it on the note that Seonaidh had left, and then carefully and in his best calligraphic script inscribed the lines of poetry on the scapula—the first lines of poetry to emerge from him in months. “Bone Poem,” he wrote carefully at the lateral edge of the fan, in faux-gothic letters. What followed was an ode of devotion to the only woman he truly cared about.

When he was finished, he dressed in haste and left through the front door of the hotel, which opened onto Higgins Street, and walked alongside the noisy traffic to Main, where he turned toward the bakery.

The noon rush had already started when he walked in, and Seonaidh did not see him at first. She was working her way through loaves piled like cordwood, holding each one like an accordion, briefly, before deftly slipping the bag over it and finishing with a twist and a clip. He took an affectionate pride in the way she thrust out her lower lip to blow the hair out of her eyes; it reminded him somehow of Popeye in the old

cartoons. When she did notice him, he felt encouraged by what he interpreted as a smile, though it was the shape of her eyes, and not her mouth, that moved.

A brief lull in the movement of the line of customers afforded him the chance to move toward the pastry case. He held her eyes as he approached and then rested his chin on his hands, folded atop the counter.

“Hi.” He slipped the bone poem across the glass.

“Irwin.” With a slightly puzzled look she took the bone from his hands but smiled when she saw that he had written things on it. A brief pause followed as they mutually gauged the trajectory of their conversation. He offered a baleful smile.

“You can set it to music if you like.”

“It’s true,” she nodded. “Were you going to get something?”

“What have you got?”

“Well, we’ve a special on bagels. Two dollars a dozen. And sundry other things.”

He reached for her hand.

“I’m sorry.”

Now she smiled fully, her brows curving.

“You don’t need to apologize. But it’s nice to hear you say so.”

The shuffling of people behind him suddenly made him see that he had distracted her too much.

“Irwin, it’s a bit too busy for talking.”

“Will I see you later?”

“If you like. Now, what’ll it be? Do you want the bagels?”

“Sure,” he said. “Whatever you’ll give me.”

His fear of hurting her feelings had been supplanted by the anxiety of losing her altogether, a distinct possibility indicated by her apparent indifference to his infidelity. While he knew that he had not exactly been reduced to groveling, he had, between his misplaced confession to Seonaidh and Anne’s jilting him, suffered what he might have referred to as a reversal of fortune. Not that his future had ever looked all that promising to begin with. He sensed it was best to be content. To adapt from one of his father’s favorite homilies, he had been served a simple reminder as to which side it was that his bread was buttered on. And, more importantly in this case, by whom.

Anyone else would have understood the discovery was precisely what was meant by insight. But aside from doing his best to arrange things so that he would no longer have to second-guess his own emotions, he wasn’t sure of the next step. Showing up at the bakery was, he felt, an effort at making an arrangement he could live with, even if it was notably analogous to the way a dog rolls over when threatened.

Her evident incapacity to feel jealousy still bothered him. Wondering whether she loved him might have posed the mindless pleasure of a *gedankenexperiment*, but trying to figure out whether love could truly exist without jealousy posed a problem too difficult for solution. It made his head hurt as much as his heart.

She loves me, she loves me not. He imagined petals of decision falling all around him like snowflakes. He realized that, at the very least, he was tolerated. And if he could somehow recognize in the simple energy of her patience some confirmation of his own value, that alone might save him.

END

Next up: Patrick Somerville, June 2009

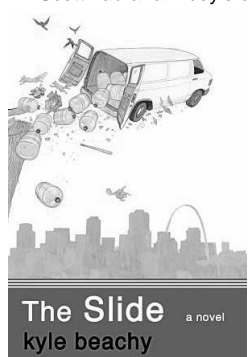
NO SMALL FEAT by Kyle Beachy

Because they were both single, and because their mutual married friends were the sort to believe anyone who was not married was therefore lonely and sad even if they did not realize they were sad, it was decided that Scott, white male, and Joy, black female, should meet for a low-pressure drink. Once the idea was suggested it felt obvious, as natural as day turning to night. And though nobody said so out loud, that Scott was white and Joy black seemed like a nice progressive bonus, a slight but honorable contribution to American harmony.

For three years, Joy had been vigorously single, running through a series of men with little patience or enthusiasm. Scott had just ended a two-year relationship with a sweet, kind, wet paper towel of a woman who left him horrified of his tendency to inflict pain on the very people he claimed to love most. But the friends, charged by that bored meddling impetus unique to the married, persisted until Scott and Joy decided OK, fine, whatever, just please shut up.

Scott had a farmboy’s charm, and somehow managed over that first drink to tell a not-totally-tasteless joke about anal sex, which to Joy was no small feat. Joy carried herself with a standoffish cool that made Scott feel small for the first time in a long time. And there

Beachy is the author of The Slide, a first novel, out earlier this year (Dial Press). He lives and writes in Chicago.



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Questions from: the Disabled Soapbox blog's 2008 Economic Stimulus FAQ

Answers from: TheLeftHand.net

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vicious insults, pointing and slandering with intent to harm. Chester barked out of confusion. As the fight grew it spread outward, to the world they had created. Joy ravaged bookshelves and tore paintings from walls. Scott opened cabinets and threw wineglasses to the floor. They went about the obliteration of their home like a long rehearsed dance: toppling dressers, ripping plants from their pots while Chester’s stumpy tail wagged, oblivious. And as time passed and they saw what they were doing, the fight worsened for their consideration of it, anger about the fight fueling anger for the fight. Both were livid, sickened that the world they’d built from nothing could be destroyed at such whim. Hammering, tearing, and suspecting that at some level the fight had to be racial, didn’t it, and wondering, once the destruction was finished, how

they could possibly still love each other having seen what they’d done, and knowing what they now knew.

When police finally arrived they found the apartment door hanging crooked on its hinges. Stepping over broken glass and demolished furniture and chunks of drywall, lighting flat in pre-dawn dark, they came upon Scott and Joy huddled naked together on the floor beneath the living room’s east-facing window, clutching each other as if for warmth, fingernails dug into bodies shiny with sweat as they stared toward the first break of day. At their side lay Chester, black snout crusted white with the salt he had licked from their skin.

Officially, the incident would go on file as a “Domestic Disturbance,” a term at which the married couples laugh, and call deeply redundant.