

Venereal Eclipse

Short Story

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The affair had begun in earnest on the night of a rare eclipse. Now, it was the week of the summer solstice and the lightning bugs were flashing in the white mist breathing up from the ground drenched by a late afternoon thunderstorm. Claudia stood at her front door, looked down her old red brick sidewalk, mossed over and slippery after a rain, and really concentrated on the lightening bugs. This was part of the “mindfulness” training course she was taking at Duke. Be in the moment. Do not let yourself be carried away by the “tenacious habits of the doing mode of mind,” all that.

She really did want to calm down, focus, and not have this man be just another exhausting run around the same block she had memorized; The victim in her is seduced by a tall good-looking, fast-talking stranger with a touch of Peter Pan, whom she immediately morphs into some kind of guy from Bonnie Tyler’s song, “Looking for a Hero.” He is it. “He’s gotta be strong, and he’s gotta to be fast, and he’s gotta be fresh from the fight.”

She knows this old trance dance has begun when she romanticizes and invests him with qualities, she needs for him to have. She falls for every line, every move, that, by now even she knows he’s used on a thousand other women. Yet her heart beats her eyes’ light up and she beams her best smile, reflecting the eternal sunshine of a child’s mind. The sound of his voice, alone, is enough to keep her satiated for hours.

Yet, tonight, she acted on a slight shift in her dance; subtle, but definitely there. Like the difference between a Latina and a Caucasian doing the Salsa. When he didn’t show up by ten, when he said he would, she called and actually got him on his cell phone. She said, “Sweetheart, I’m going to bed,” fully intending to do so, alone. Then he said, “I’m just pulling out of my driveway,” and she returned to that old familiar rhythm, “Well, then, OK, I’ll wait.”

And that was what she was doing when she focused on the lightening bugs, the amazing, magical, here and now of these little flying insects she and all lucky children got to chase around on

summer nights, and put into Ball jars with holes nailed inside-out into the lids, so as not to hurt the bugs...then let them go when it was time to come in and get ready for bed. She was just remembering that when she heard an extra-loud truck noise grinding down the road leading to her house, she heard the wheels on the gravel road, and then saw large headlights turning the white mist silver. It felt to her as if some mighty dragon was descending upon her place. And she waited, not scared, but excited like a little girl. It took her back to the many, and many nights she would wait, as a child, for a similar sound, the sound of her daddy's blue Oldsmobile coming down the gravel road in her wrong-side-of-the-tracks neighborhood. Listening for that sound and feeling, but not yet knowing, that her house only became a sanctuary when he got home.

The lights and crunch and whoosh of the truck stopping at the end of her sidewalk brought her back to the here and now. Maxine started barking. And, somehow, the here-and-nowness of it all struck her funny bone. A guy pulling up, way too late for a southern lady to be receiving gentlemen callers, in this behemoth work truck, shining and spewing a cacophony of sounds, just struck her as a scene right out of a Clyde Edgerton novel. Only here in po-dunk rural North Carolina could this be happening so perfectly, in the fog with lightening bugs as a backdrop; a good-hearted woman waiting for a two-timing man.

"Well, maybe he's not...two timing...not yet anyway." So, instead of feeling like Loretta Lynn, Claudia let herself see the comedy of it all, with a tinge of tragedy. Two getting older people looking for something in the night. Was it each other? Probably not, but it was right here, right now, funny and sweet and fine. So, when he came up on the porch and she got all wrapped up in his smell and the feel of his blue tee shirt, it was all there was in that moment and it was good.

When Claudia met Peter, just two weeks earlier, she had not realized how dangerously lonely she was. She had weathered two seasons of death and loss. Eli, her beloved German Shepherd of 13 years had died of cancer in the fall. His pal of 13 years, a fat golden tabby had followed him to pet heaven shortly thereafter. She could not believe that her cousin, Cee Cee, had simply dropped dead right before the holidays. These losses had seemed like the last in a set of waves that had assaulted her sense of permanence and stability in the last five years.

May had arrived in a fury and stayed in a graceful spell of spring for weeks. Claudia chose a bright May Friday for her monthly trip to Raleigh to get her hair done. She dressed in her city clothes, choosing high-heeled sandals and a little black skirt that showed her post grief slimmed down figure.

Her car was knocking, so she stopped on the edge of town at her not-usual gas station to get some fuel injector fluid before heading out of town. Her mind was on pumping gas and picking up a bottle of fuel injector fluid her neighbor said would fix the car problem. She went to that section of the gas station and was dismayed that there were several kinds of fuel injector fluid. She had no idea that such a variety even existed. She grabbed two promising bottles, a blue one and a red one, and then headed for the counter, hoping the Indian man might know which one to buy. As she walked that way, reading the labels, she almost slammed into this tall, blue-eyed man, Eastwood-like, in a blue tee shirt with grease stains everywhere.

“Oh, excuse me. Hmm...Really, excuse me but you look like the kind of man who would know something about fuel injector fluid.” She was really looking for information, but meeting his eyes threw a little flirtation into her voice.

“Well I wouldn’t get either one because if you put that in your gas tank it’s going to affect the...” and he went on to provide her with a long, drawn out explanation of how an internal combustion engine worked. TMI. But, coming from him, she would have paid attention to his reciting the periodic table.

That's where the loneliness began to show itself. She had not until now been aware of this particular sense of loss. She noticed that she missed the sound of a man's voice, especially one that wanted to help her.

He checked out ahead of her and walked outside. She hated to see him go but had no idea of how to pursue a grown man. She checked out, buying only a bottle of water, and walked into the bright May morning.

He had waited for her. Holy shit! His large work-style truck with lots of extra wheels was parked right next to her Volvo. His motor was not running. He sat with his left arm dangling out the window, smoking a Marlboro with his right hand and staring at her.

"Well this is it. What do I do?" Claudia encouraged herself as her legs took her right to his driver's side door. She had to look up to see his face. If there had been a running board, she would have surely jumped on it. Some part of her knew that the ball was in her court now. It was her game to play. He had waited. So, with shearing terror in her heart, she stepped forward to announce herself.

"Hi," she eked out like a scared teenager.

"Where you headed?"

"Raleigh. Today's my hairdo day."

"You live around here?"

"Yeah, just the other side of town."

"You?"

"Yeah, just down the road a piece. Mine's the house with all the boats in the yard."

"Boats?"

"Yeah. I have lots of boats."

"I love boats. I grew up near a lake, spent my summers' water skiing."

"Well, come by sometime. We'll go out on the lake."

"Well, O.K., maybe. Hear. Call me." Claudia handed one of her fuchsia-flowered business cards up to him. He took it with a grin. She was grinning, too.

At the beauty shop, her beautician and longtime friend, Beth, got an earful. The other women eaves dropped and joined in the giggles and fantasizing. It was fun, but Claudia had expected nothing but what she got, a flirtation, a little buzz on a spring day.

Turns out, two weeks later, almost to the day, she got a phone call late one evening.

"This is Peter."

"Peter?"

"From the gas station."

"Oh, yeah, hey. What's up?"

"I just got back from Florida. What a crazy trip. I'll never do that again."

He went on to explain a Three Stooges-like travelogue of himself and a guy friend going down to move into a house the friend had just bought. He had hoped to get some boating and fishing thrown in for

the effort. He described it as a drunken comedy of errors from beginning to end. Claudia chose to ignore that red flag. She also ignored the time of his call, almost eleven. Was this a nocturnal soul like herself, one prone to insomnia and rumination, staying up late, hungry but not satisfied?

“So, I’m back and what do you think, wanna go out on the lake Sunday?”

“Sunday?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, O.K. What happens?”

“Just put on your bathing suit and come over to my place about one o’clock. Good for you?”

“One o’clock. Sure. O.K. One o’clock Sunday.”

Claudia hung up her phone and felt stunned. She had an actual date, and one involving a bathing suit, an unknown man on a lake, and the fear of too much self-disclosure. She went from stunned to terrified.

He was asking her for more than he realized. A date, sure, simple enough, but a date that required the exposure of extensive areas of skin, this was too much. She began to ponder layers. How many things could she put on top of a bathing suit while still seeming to be a good sport and actually having it on? This was a project.

And then there was loneliness. What about that? In college, B. J. Thomas’ song “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” had been one of her favorite songs. Claudia had been wedded to her loneliness for a long time. She liked to claim she was fiercely independent, but loneliness was her companion, like Billie Holiday’s heartache. She had used it to hide, mostly from love, even though she protested to friends

how much she wanted a man, a good man, but she never found one. Instead she stayed wrapped up in loneliness and the idea of love, an impossible kind of love. One to pursue, but never find.

In May, two days before meeting Peter in the gas station, Claudia had a dream. She was a dreamer, a talented dreamer. It was not unusual for her to dream things before they happened. On that night she dreamed a name, Peter Comingworth. It repeated itself in her mind and woke her, so she slid over to her nightstand and wrote it down. She kept paper and pen there for just that purpose. Peter Comingworth. She didn't know anyone by that name.

Now, she did. Dreams are tricky and send things in code, in pictures, in universal symbols. Her dream had introduced her to him the day before he called. Peter. Comingworth, i.e., "Peter is coming, and it will be worth it." She took this as an omen, a portend, a reason to pursue this date at the least, and maybe this man.