

Flipping Houses

Things were going fine for the eight or nine months we'd been living together until she said something I couldn't get past.

I told my friend Dick the next morning while we were warming up on the racquetball court. "We were in the driveway," I said. "I'd just checked her oil, she was getting in the car to go work, and I kissed her goodbye and so on."

"Hard to see it deteriorating too badly from there," Dick said.

"Just then a severe, animal-like friggin' sound comes from across the street. It's a guy jogging, who has blown his nose or partially thrown up, or God knows what."

"Aah Christ, I hate that. First of all, a lot of them look terrible out there to start with, all grungy, and then to subject people to bodily noises on top of it . . ."

"Yeah, this one looked bad, and no shirt, which made it worse. But Connie, she defends the guy."

"What?"

"She said he had to spit, was all. She said she can understand it, because she spits herself when she runs."

Dick stopped with the racquetball warm-up.

I said, "See what I mean?"

"That's disgusting," Dick said. "Pretty girl like that?"

"I've been trying to picture it ever since . . . Is she spitting because she's out of breath and doesn't want to have to swallow, is she pulling up flem, what is it?"

"I always wanted to fuck Connie. You can probably tell . . ."

"Or does she just assume that's what athletes do? Not that I'd classify her as one."

". . . but now, that might be tough," Dick said.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"I may as well lay it out, since we're both human beings here. That's a fine piece of ass. Shoot me."

"It is that, I'll admit. Not quite as dynamic in the buff, but they never are."

Dick said, "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Ask her to explain herself, I guess."

"Which could end up being no big deal."

"Maybe," I said.

Connie was a highly organized person. She'd meditate every morning for twenty minutes before coffee. She'd shop Thursday nights at Trader Joe's, hair appointment first Tuesday of the month, hike every other Saturday with her friend Marie at Bidwell Park. She rarely missed the Jimmy Fallon opening monologue, always turning off the TV and the lights at the commercial, the window open a crack.

Four days a week she'd come straight home from work, change, and take her run, always the same--across the state college campus to the Esplanade where she picked up the dirt trail, continuing over the little bridge to East Street, west to Nord Avenue and back down.

This time I followed her on my bike. It was November and it got dark by 5:30, but the route was lit well enough. Connie had on a florescent green windbreaker and little yellow shorts, which, up close in better light, you could see the outline of the thong through, something I had mentioned to her but she didn't seem to care.

I had to loop around a bit to slow myself down but I kept a pretty steady bead on her, and so far there was no evidence of her spitting. Maybe she'd just been referring to a one-shot deal, where she got a bunch of gnats in her mouth or something, and I was starting to loosen up.

There was an Indian restaurant on East Street that had a buffet we liked, authentic and a good deal, full of college students, and she was passing it now. Suddenly there it was: the head swiveling to the right, the hesitation and awful sound of the gathering of esophageal matter, and then boom, the delivery onto the sidewalk. Not even going left, off the curb or at least towards it, but right, leaving it five yards past the decorative double doors of the Shagorika Curry House.

It was weird--I felt like I had to spit now too, and I almost did, but I held it. After a couple minutes I rode down to 8th and went into Hansen's and ordered a scotch. I didn't even bother dealing with the bike lock, screw it.

James was an efficient bartender, a guy from somewhere in the south. He had a thick head of greying

hair and a heavy mustache, and always wore a starched white shirt with the sleeves folded back to the elbows.

Tonight he said, "Son, you ask me to guess, I'd say it wasn't your best day." *Wadn't.*

I said, "Relationship shit. Sorry to put a damper on your evening."

"Not in the least," he said. "I can relate."

"Yeah? How's that?"

"Well, okay, here's an example . . . We was watching that TV program, True Detectives?"

"Never heard of it."

"Don't matter. There's a scene where one guy's wife figures out he's cheating on her by finding pictures on his phone. She confides in the other guy, the partner, and that guy ends up banging her. It was brief, but very intense."

"That's not my issue though."

"My old lady, when it ends, she says she can understand it, that guy Matthew McConaughey is something else. So I take it to the next level, which I shouldn't have, and say, that mean you'd sleep with him too?"

"Get to the point, what'd she say?"

"She says well, since we're being so honest here, she would. So I asked about the other guy, the partner, Woody Harrelson, and she says no, he doesn't do it for her."

"Jesus, I see what you mean then . . . She's not giving you the typical star-struck answer of someone fantasizing about movie stars. She's zeroing in, making choices."

"Exactly. So now I'm thinking, who, in her daily goings-ons, is she mentally undressing?"

"But all that wouldn't bother me," I said, "long as she never acted on it."

"Well it bothers *me*, what can I say," James said. "What's your thing?"

"Well it's starting to feel silly now, after your situation. My girlfriend, when she goes out for a jog, she spits along the way."

"So?"

"I know, it's probably stupid."

"That the one comes in here once in a while?"

"Last year or so, yeah."

"She is one fine lady. Million-dollar smile, manners, the whole nine-yards. And chiseled out."

"All true. Might be a personality clash, is the thing I'm realizing."

"You're an idiot," James said.

Connie said, "I was planning to make veggie burgers, but I smell booze. Are you sure you're hungry?"

"I'm starved," I said. "But you want to fool around first?"

"Gosh, Ron, can it wait? I literally stepped out of the shower five minutes ago."

"It absolutely can. Although Dick's coming over at eight."

"So tell him don't."

"We have to go over some paperwork," I said. Dick and I flipped houses together. Now and then we'd get stuck with something that backfired, like this current one, having to short-sell it. But overall it was a decent living and there was always home-run potential, though we hadn't hit one yet.

"Well how was your day?" she said.

"I'll be honest, Babe. I spent a good portion of it mulling over the relationship."

Connie was unloading the dishwasher. She put down a stack of plates and said, "Ours? . . . Please tell me that's not it."

I said, "It's all me. What it is, I get fucked up in the head. It's not about you."

"But it obviously is about me. I wasn't prepared to drop everything just now, like I should have been." Her voice was shaking.

I tried to pull her close. "Sweetie, you're way off . . . Please?"

She spent a couple minutes in the bathroom and came back with a far-off look in her eyes, sizing things up. She said, "If you need some space, I can stay with Alice for a while."

"Don't be silly. Anyone goes anywhere, I'll go to Dick's."

"No. I get scared here by myself. That time you had to to Redding, I didn't sleep."

I went down in the basement and got on the computer while she ate. By the time Dick arrived she had a suitcase sitting by the front door.

"Someone taking a trip?" Dick said.

Connie didn't say anything. "She's spending three, four days at Alice's is all," I said. "Just to give us a little breathing room."

"To recharge the batteries," Connie said, managing a weak smile.

Dick said, "Jeez . . . Though sometimes that's not the worst thing, you know it?"

Connie said, "Ron, I'm expecting something from Amazon. They're going to leave a slip if no one's home."

"Please don't be sweating the small stuff right now," I said. "But don't worry, I got everything." Connie slung a big bag over her shoulder, grabbed her suitcase, and was out the door.

"What the hell happened?" Dick said.

"That thing I was telling you about," I said, "it came up again."

"What, the guy ran by and spit again and she defended him?"

"No, she spit herself, I saw her do it this time."

"Holy Toledo. So she wasn't joking."

"You know something? You're starting to piss me off. You know her personality, when have you seen her joke around?"

"I didn't mean it like that, man. I'm just saying . . . you might have been embellishing it the first time. Without meaning to."

"Asshole, she spit tonight on her run. On East between Cussick and Alamo."

"What, you followed her to make sure?"

"Yep."

"Ron, with all due respect, Connie doesn't deserve that."

"Is that right," I said, opening the door and waiting until Dick got out of my face.

A couple days went by and I was starting to miss Connie. Friday was one of her running nights, and I tried to time it. Setting off from Alice's apartment would alter her route a bit, but she'd end up on the Esplanade and so forth for the bulk of it.

It was an unseasonably warm evening. Northern California was struggling with a drought, and the weather was haywire. I got as far as the strip mall above the medical center when I saw on the next block what appeared to be Connie coming toward me, the wrong way, walking and on her phone.

I angled my bike off the Esplanade and waited. When she passed by she had her pink shorts on, with a sweatshirt tied around her waist and just her running bra on top. Under the street lamps the sweat was glistening off of her, and her skin was browner than I remembered. She was off the phone, walking with a slight limp.

I followed her south for a couple minutes until a car pulled up near the intersection of East Washington and she got in. It was a white Subaru wagon, Dick's.

On the way home I stopped and sat on a bench outside the campus student rec center. Groups of kids were pouring in and out and you could see silhouettes of people exercising through the vaulted windows. There was all this energy. Occasionally you heard splashing and laughter coming from the outdoor pool.

Connie answered on the second ring. "How'd you end up at Dick's?" I said.

She said, "What Ron, you followed me not once, but twice now? You bastard."

"You were limping," I said.

"Well I pulled a calf. Very slight, but I didn't want to chance it."

"Alice didn't work out?"

"No. Her boyfriend was there the whole time, it was awkward."

"But Dick's isn't?"

"It's comfortable. He's a good host."

Dick was clever. After college he'd bought a four bedroom tract house on Hazel Street, low cash with the owner carrying back. Dick rented out three rooms which paid for everything and put money in his pocket.

"Where you sleeping?" I asked Connie.

"In the living room," she said. "On the couch." But there was a slight bobble.

"Which means you're banging him," I said.

"What do you want from me Ron?"

"How is it?"

"I'm not going to talk about it."

"He enjoy it?"

"Yes, if you must know."

"Have a nice life," I said.

A month later, Dick and I were attending a foreclosure sale at the Butte County Courthouse. There was a frenzy of bidding activity, guys we'd never seen before who must have had a vested interest, and we didn't get the property.

I said, "You hungry?"

"Ravenous," Dick said. "Not to mention pissed off, getting up early, coming all the way up here with no shot."

We went around the corner to Denny's. "So I heard you kicked out your three roommates," I said.

"Word travels fast then apparently," he said.

"It's the right move. She can spread out. I hear you're a good host."

"Except I've kind of been re-thinking it . . . She is a sweet girl . . . What do you got going? Anything?"

"Well . . . remember Angela?"

"Wait. You're talking Angela from that sorority?"

"Yeah, she's still around. I bumped into her at Target."

"Jesus Christ . . . How is that?"

"Great so far. Unbelievable, if you want to know the truth."

"I'll bet . . . She must exercise, body like that."

"She works out at home. She's got a yoga mat and videos."

"That it?"

"Far as I know. Something I'll have to keep an eye on of course."

"Yeah, you will," Dick said. "But Angela . . . fuck."