

Feeding A Woman.

I listened to her breathe. It sounded so nice. Warm and inviting, the more so the closer one could get. I'd never listened to a woman breathe before. I was falling in love with her breath, I suppose. Love always begins somewhere.

We talked. We dozed, I think, because I remember waking while I listened to her speak. And again nodding off when neither of us spoke.

We had spent a Friday night together in the late winter of 1964. Her roommate had gone upstate for the weekend. Early in our relationship, we were chaste. In our deeds if not in my thoughts. We stayed up all night and talked in her tiny apartment. She sat cross legged on the day bed turned couch. I lounged in the old high backed Queen Anne chair. I don't remember what we talked about. What do a couple of twenty year olds talk about when they're getting to know each other? Everything under the moon, I suppose.

The tall windows in the Brownstone ran almost to the ceiling and dark wood shutters hung a bit crooked on them. Two pair for each window, so the bottoms could be opened in the day time and the tops at night. One small lamp gave out a dim light. Out on the street the snow had been falling for a quarter of an hour.

I got up from my chair and opened all the shutters. Outside the snow gently drifted down into the cone of light beneath the street lamp. The sidewalk was lightly covered, as were the tops of the cars lining the city street. I turned back toward the girl. Feeling bold, I stooped to turn off the lamp.

"To see the snow better," I said as I sat down. She didn't object. With the lamp off the room wasn't much darker anyway. The street light gave the falling snow flakes a sparkle and painted our faces with pale light. Navy blue shadows lay between us. Even faux moonlight was romantic. A summer evening's moon could not have done better. She unfolded her legs and lay on her side.

Eventually the snow stopped. The sky lightened. The street lights dimmed and a buzz in the street I hadn't noticed all night shut off with a click. Across 92nd Street, a blanket of grey clouds hung in the sky over the junior high school, quiet on a Saturday morning.

I had not had a girl friend since high school. I'd never stayed up all night with a young woman. This cloudy and cold morning I felt grown up, but allowing those words to form in my mind would have admitted I was not much more than a boy.

I was now a man and there was what came naturally to consider. It nudged me. I really liked this girl, but I knew what a part of me wanted. I wondered what she wanted. The phone rang. She sat up and answered it.

"Hello?" she said into the old black phone.

She listened for a moment, then spoke. "I'm sorry, I can't fill in today. I have company and he's already here."

She nodded, listening to someone evidently from her place of work.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I just can't leave. I'll see you Monday. Good bye."

"I hope you're not in trouble," I said. I didn't want to cause her any concern at work.

She glanced at me and smiled. "If I am, I am."

She lay back down on her side and pulled one of the daybed's large boxy pillows to her. Arranging it front of her she wrapped an arm around it and embraced it in a hug. I was envious.

She said she was hungry.

"We can go down to the diner on Amsterdam Avenue," I said.

She tilted her head in thought. “We could buy bread and eggs at the little deli on the corner and make our own breakfast.”

“Yes.”

She sat up. Her hands slid up her arms. “But it’s so cold out.”

“You don’t have to come with me,” I said. “I’ll just run down and be back in five minutes.”

I pulled my loden coat from her tiny closet and put it on. Then I bent over her as she sat on the couch. She looked up at me with a questioning look, only a hint of a smile.

“I just wondered,” I said, “if I should buy ... mustard.”

“For what?”

“For ... the eggs.” It was obvious I was just making this up to hover over her.

“Are you going to the store or not?” she said, now with a smile.

“It’s just such a long, long way to the corner. I might get cold.”

She popped up and quickly planted a kiss on my lips. “Hurry back.”

On the street the hard leather heels of my wing tip shoes tapped sharply on the pavement. I hopped off the curb onto the upper Manhattan street. In college less than three months before, I wore only soft sole moccasins or sneakers. I’d just purchased the wing tips to wear on my first real job. I was so impressed with the shoes ... their comfort, their weight, their message ... that I’d begun to keep them on in the evening and switch from my suit to wool slacks and a sweater. I dressed as an adult now. And when I thought of it, I realized this morning was quite adult and also quite special.

The Dos Abogados Deli sat right on the corner in a neighborhood where English was a second language, a distant second. Near the front door an ancient meat cooler throbbed out a tired rumbling sound. I grabbed a package of bacon and slammed the cooler’s door. When I turned from my task I saw a girl out on the street with a coat like I’d seen in her closet when I put mine on. She rounded the corner

and disappeared down 92nd Street toward Broadway and the subway. It could have been her, but she didn’t seem the type to run out on a guy. Unless she had reconsidered working today. But she knew I was here in the Deli and would have stopped to tell me. Unless ...

No, that hadn’t been her. I laughed and stepped to the Deli’s other wall. I took a dozen eggs from the dairy cooler and slid a loaf of bread from the wire stand beside it. My arms full, I brought everything to the counter. Rafael manned the cash register.

“Thank you for journeying to my uncle’s humble supermarket today, your Lordship.”

Rafael’s Jamaican accent was somewhat slurred this morning. I never knew if he was sarcastic or had learned his manners from Edwardian set pieces. The correct answer might have been both. When he wasn’t waiting on a customer, his nose was stuck in a book

I passed the bacon, eggs and bread across the counter and he smiled brightly. “Going to make breakfast today, Your Grace?”

“I’m feeding a woman,” I said.

“Most of us are, kind sir.”

“No, I mean we ... uh ... we spent the night together and I’m getting things for her to make us breakfast.”

“You are gentleman and worthy of your station in life, Master.”

Busy punching the prices into his cash register Rafael was unfazed by my singular announcement. This was a momentous occasion. I had never had the opportunity to proclaim anything like it in my entire life. Since reaching puberty some years before I had bought popcorn, hot dogs, and cotton candy for two or three girls. And occasionally an inexpensive meal. But I had never brought groceries home to a woman. Nor spent an entire night with a girl, despite nothing of any importance happening. Still, I was beside myself with the heady thought that my life as a man was off to a great start. I was with a young woman who didn’t have to be home by midnight.

To be realistic, what could Rafael possibly say about the most common of morning occurrences between a man and woman? But somehow he sensed I was impressed with myself.

“Got yourself a girl, huh?” and he smiled.

“Well, yes,” I said too matter-of-fact.

As I climbed the stairs up three floors to the apartment I thought I smelled her perfume in the hallway. The terrible thought struck me she had indeed left. Sending me out for food was a ruse, so she could flee from my company and not return home for hours, assuming I’d be gone by then. She’d gone into work to be with a man she liked better. I couldn’t think of anything I’d said or done to lose her affection. But I had had indications in the past I might be more boring than I suspected.

I knocked on the door. Nothing. I tried the knob, but of course it was locked. This was after all New York City. Her employer might have called back. A boyfriend she never mentioned to me may have called. That’s why she didn’t stop at the Deli to tell me she was leaving. She ran off with a guy who had just returned from an African safari. Or maybe with an entire rock band, back from their successful concert tour. What did I know about her, really?

This was silly. I was standing in the hallway with a bag of eggs and bacon and I was getting hungry. I knocked again, this time louder. I heard the sound of her springing up off the day bed.

“I fell asleep,” she said, opening the door.

“Understandable, since we’ve been up all night.”

“Were you waiting very long?” she said.

“No, you must have woken up right away.”

She took the bacon and eggs and bread from me and moved to the tiny kitchen on the end wall of the studio apartment.

Soon the wonderful smell of frying bacon filled the apartment. I set the table with dishes from the cupboard that held six plates and six of everything else except for five coffee cups.

Maybe she had thrown a cup at one of the rock musicians. We sat down and ate our scrambled eggs and bacon with instant coffee and wonderfully burnt toast.

“What are you doing today?” I asked.

“Nothing. Want to walk in the park down by the river?”

“Yes,” I said. I was delighted to be asked.

“We can walk up toward Grant’s Tomb.”

“That’s over twenty blocks.”

“Yes, but I think I need a nap,” I said.

She looked at me, then down at the table. For an instant I wondered if I should have said that. What the hell, I thought, I’m a man. She took a breath and then laughed lightly.

“I’ve never fed a man before.”

“Not your brother or father?” I asked.

“You know what I mean,” she said.

“It’s no big deal,” I said, smiling as I needed her. “It’s not as if breakfast is ever a momentous occasion.”

“I also do lunch and dinner,” she said, “but only if I like you.”

“Do you like me?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“You don’t have to make lunch for me. We’ll get something at a restaurant after our walk.”

“And after my nap,” she said.

I nodded yes.

“You can sleep in the chair,” she said. “I’ll take the day bed.”

I wondered how I’d ever fall asleep, listening to her breathe as she lay hugging that lucky pillow just a few feet from me in the tiny living room. I wondered how long I’d have to stay in my chair.

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