

A Matter of the Heart

by J. A. Johnson

Charlie's recurring fantasy emerged from its hiding spot as he finished his fourth Old Fashioned. He'd be on his back; she'd be astride him. A strong, assertive young woman with her hands planted on his chest and her hair falling forward over her face. The rhythm would be hers. She'd be dictating the action. With all the pressures and responsibilities a C-level guy faces every day, didn't he deserve to have someone else be the boss once in a while?

He drained the last of the whiskey and bitters from his glass, tipping it down only after the ice had rested against his upper lip long enough to numb it. He held up the glass and jingled it in the direction of the bartender.

Charlie often had to settle. His fantasy usually played itself out without adequate shape or form, without someone to play the lead. An anonymous lady cop? Perhaps. The general counsel from work? Workable, yes, but nowhere near what he needed. He'd have to give his imagination a seriously negative performance review, maybe even have Security walk it out of the building with its cardboard box full of desk things.

Charlie's little reverie burst softly like a soap bubble as a group of paramedics entered the bar, bringing with them a draft of sharp autumn air. He watched them settle into a booth along the far wall—three men and a woman. He pondered his good fortune.

His drink arrived along with his tab. "Subtle," he said to the bartender, who responded with an affected shrug. Charlie turned back to the paramedics. The woman motioned one of her colleagues into the booth and then slid in next to him. He could see her in profile: long blonde hair, strong jaw. She seemed to have entered on cue, as if she'd read the script and had been to Wardrobe. Her fitted, navy uniform showed off her athletic build. By God, he thought, there must be a gym back at her station. He pictured her on the machines. Up and down. Reps, sets, push it, work it. It was almost too much for his tired old heart.

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The lightness in his head told Charlie that he needed to slow things down. He buttonholed the bartender for a glass of water. Two pulls for every sip of his final Old Fashioned. He needed the time to consider this perky young life-saver. What was she drinking? Tall and dark—maybe just a Diet Coke. Was there rum in it? Should he send one over? No, too pushy. He thanked God he still had his wits about him.

Charlie felt a little wobble in his barstool. His head became suddenly cumbersome, but when he tried to prop it up, his elbow missed the edge of the bar. No problem. She didn't see, did she? The bartender said something stern to him, but Charlie had turned away, and good thing he did, because his little paramedic had turned toward him. He gave her a smile and she gave him a laugh—a laugh so pure, he thought, so infectious, that it spread to the others in the booth.

Seeing her face-on for the first time, Charlie realized he had misjudged her. She wasn't just strong and uniformed; she was beautiful—tender even. Her face was somehow asymmetrical—he knew it without knowing how he knew. It just was, and the imperfection pleased him. She had a gap between her front teeth that he found irresistibly adorable. He tried to remember the last time he adored something. Wanted, desired, demanded—yes—but adored? It pained him now, right now, right in his core, to think of his shallowness. He felt as if he were imploding, crumpling like the settlement papers he'd tossed into the fireplace that was suddenly only half his. A bolt of lightning shot up his arm. He clutched himself, trying to catch his breath. The pain was exquisite. He lingered in its grip for some unknowable stretch of time. The first wave subsided, or perhaps he simply broke through it, and he realized he was still on his barstool, still turned toward the booth where she sat. As she rushed back into his consciousness he saw that the laugh he had last witnessed was turning into a look of concern, then alarm, then action.

The second wave hit him and Charlie let the drink tumble from his hand. He let that newly-freed hand clutch his upper arm, let

himself pirouette off the barstool and onto the cool, tile floor. He let loose of everything, freed himself of any semblance of control—over appearances, over pride and emotion, over his own body—what did it matter? He gave himself entirely to the pain and the clarity it brought.

He saw her rushing toward him. Gap-toothed or not, asymmetrical or not, wasn't she a woman in uniform, wasn't she in charge? She threw a leg over him. By God, that thigh, he thought, wasn't it as stout as a Christmas ham? She drew her hands together and planted them on his sternum. Was he wrong about her imperfections, about her asymmetry? She was perfect. She rode him forcefully and with such metronomic precision. It hurt so bad, with her there on top of him, finally. He tried, from somewhere outside his own body, to match her rhythm, but then he saw that she had paused. He thanked God he was able to see her sweet face as she bent down to him. He imagined that her hair smelled like coconut. He saw the way it draped upon his cheek. He willed himself to linger in this strange moment, to feel all that there was for him to feel. He imagined himself smiling as she continued her descent, putting her hands on his face and opening her mouth to meet his.

