

Harry, Giselle and Joyce

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Harry Reed does not want to die in this room, in front of Giselle, who has been his wife for exactly six months, who has slept beside him for twelve months. It's become abundantly clear to him, though, that his last breath will probably take place here with her and her long tapered fingers and cigarette holder. And so, in a single instinctual and self-reflexive move, he pledges that, bulging and metastatic prostate or no, he will refuse the outstretched hand of Charon, tear the veil of his life away and remain his own blue-eyed boy, very much alive.

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A year ago, Harry felt his fingers, his act, his life, going slowly, his songs and juggle-patter mere stutters of their former brilliance. He halted his post-hippie Joni Mitchell obsession at Blue. He moved onto more recent acts, slim-hipped and breastless women with curly brown hair and hyper-aggressive technique, women who were better axe-men than he, who shouted like bluesmen and rained down upon him the redemptive fires of slide and the snapping percuss of bass strings.

He had lost the ridges of muscle beneath his nipples as the girls who watched him became daughter-age, and he now lost the desire to play anything other than comfort songs as the attitude became more than the music. Blonde and throaty Joni, the lone ember in the ashes of his playing heart.

All the women of his life and the meanderings of his imagination had made him a jaw-dropped and stomach-churning mass of Eros at his first sight of her. She was French; he heard her tell someone so in a breathy cigarette voice. He dropped his guitar pick in panic and bent down quickly to retrieve it. She watched him play Big Yellow Taxi three times for an admiring crowd; she joined him on the last

verse, but where Joni's voice dropped Giselle's rose like a moonbeam, and Harry pretended it harmonized.

A thrice-divorced juggler of serving spoons and CD jewel cases, shot glasses and fiery rings, and a busker of Joni Mitchell songs in standard tuning, he was the kind of guitar player who would not mess with open tunings, the juggler who would not juggle an object he had ever dropped. He did not pick aimlessly through scales nor meander a blues riff; he learned each song, as note-for-note as his limited ability allowed, and went on to something else; he juggled chainsaws, dildos, declawed cats, always looking for the divine riff, the perfect concentric loop that would return his life to something securely within his grasp.

Giselle, woman extraordinaire, transfixer of his dreams, to whom he pledged—*A votre service*, forever, he said to her—the only phrase he could remember from a Charles Boyer movie he had rented on Betamax with his third wife, Gertie.

Harry and Giselle sank into the cat hair and fetor of his double bed. After he played Giselle's emotions like a stoned and somnambulant Neil Diamond, long after the pot and incense made of his fingers and strings an unmentionable hash, and long after he knew they would fuck, her knowing and free cackle of laughter as she pulled on his nut-sack and rammed her finger into his anus was the first hint of something else—so much for the slow languor of foreplay. She mistook his sigh for passion, moved deeper. “I thought that was Greek, not French,” he said, drooping in a panic and cursing his lack of forethought, preparation.

“I just finished *Zombie*,” she said, biting his earlobe, “by Joyce Carol Oates.” Sitting up now, rogering his tender anus, she tortured his penis into full erection, stared down into his face as her rocking on his thigh and her hand motion filled him. ‘It’s about a serial murderer who fucks corpses.’

“Oh.” he said, not wanting her to stop.

“Do you like it, Harry,” she said, “do you like it, do you like it do you like it do you like it ohhhh.” She collapsed on his chest, her finger popping out. She left him painfully erect with a sore ass, a

wet thigh, but her breath was somehow cool on his chest, and he fiddled with her sweat-thick hair in a burst of tenderness almost father-like, shifted her sleeping body off into a curl of blanket and spent his night sitting on a pillow, working out what he thought was once a Joni song rendered almost unrecognizable in a version by Jaco Pastorius, who claimed on his record jacket to have played on an entire album with her.

Harry thought, of all things, this was truly impossible for him to learn, and he fiddled for the first time with the tuning pegs, feeling fear claw at his guts and a warm blush of possibility. But he could not find the Pastorius note. It was right there under his callused middle finger, he thought, but then again, not. Her breathing slowed, her breast rose and never seemed to fall, his heart lifted.

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Annie Demaretta wanted, needed, a new boyfriend. Her life had been a melange of other people's stories with endings neither happy nor sad, but just endings, endings that she must hear every day again and again as she pours old black men their morning coffee in the 5th Street Diner, where the owner is her high school boyfriend's father.

After her shift one Sunday she gathered her cigarette holder and her Gauloises and hopped a train to Princeton, New Jersey, where she had a favorite uncle and a dream of being a secretary for Joyce Carol Oates, whose novel *Bloodsmoor*, found in her boyfriend's bookcase, spine unbroken, had made her decide that she must meet this mousy and timid-looking woman with the large and scary talent, who with all those books under all those names, must need a stalwart and raven-haired beauty like Annie to organize her files.

Along the way she left all her clothing in her torn Gucci bag under her seat. She became Giselle Pompidoux, used her uncle's wife's credit for clothing she felt apropos for her new name: silk skirts, black stockings, low-cut blouses for the breasts she wished she had more of, a flowery silk hat. As she stepped onto the campus, she saw a funny-man, a great shock of red hair and black clothes

and silver-blue eyes, juggling bricks for, of all people, Joyce Carol Oates and a crowd of sycophants.

Her breath caught, and she pushed so near to Joyce Carol Oates that she smelled the tang of her vinegary sweat, but no, it couldn't be hers, and she realized then it was her own natural scent, born of fear and trembling. Then she blushed, and the juggler suddenly threw his knives, one-by-one, into the soft ground, where they quivered in sequence by a black gym bag and a hard guitar case from which the man picked out a blonde and warm-looking guitar. Though she looked and looked, scanned the crowd, Joyce Carol Oates was away in a sea of faces, and Giselle was left with the funny-man, who she now saw was much older than she, lined face and weathered cheeks, a scar under his eye.

"I'm Harry," he said.

She offered him her hand in a graceful princess gesture, and at the touch of his lips was transfixed. I will love this man, and he will love me back or not, I don't care, she thought, memories of her diner jobs and muscular boyfriends with cigarette packs rolled into their T-shirt sleeves. This is the point from which all lives branch, she thought. Right now.

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Harry feels G. feeding him ice chips. His groin feels full and warm, even after the doctor has lubed his innards and emptied his gland. Giselle hates even the hint of kink now after the bad news, for some reason, and this disease smacks of it, ass and semen and cursing the temple of God, yet she watches the process with no small fascination, even holds his hand and squeezes it against the pressure of the doctor's insistent finger. This is the danger of the younger woman, Harry thinks, they take the risk of burying you and the embarrassment of the slow decline into senility. He smiles at the strong tobacco smell, which holds memories of longish nights of passion, but brings with it as well a mass of tension at what her future may hold for her without him.

Harry's superstitions are many. He will not sleep in a woman's house. He cannot spill salt without throwing it over his shoulder

with a muttered invocation. He will not use condoms. He will not marry women. Anymore. They have not saved him, though he clings to them as if they will. He believes he will join some great force in the sky when he dies, a spiritual body politic with which he can talk of things of the spirit. Right now, though, he is gasping for breath from nerves as a doctor prepares him for the unkindest cut. He imagines he can feel the severation of the orange-sized prostate lying hot and turgid against the back of his pelvis; he can imagine the lightness of his body when the burn of the meteor finishes; he imagines himself floating in a vast and silky sea, free to pee as much as he would like without straining, a full and proud stream that will rattle the toilet-water as he sinks into the ether.

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Giselle is her own best friend now, in her own New York apartment, dreamily scratching a long-haired cat whom Harry would hate if he were alive. Her bookshelves are lined with every book by Joyce Carol Oates and her other self, Rosamund Smith, a hundred or more of them, French first editions, a prized German first, even the stripped-cover mass markets. If Harry could see, he would be thrilled, she thinks. His guitar and one awful juggling brick are now bronzed, stored in the corner of her home on a special table with her first edition of *Them*. She thinks about him often, even as she sleeps now with other men. She has a picture of Harry and herself in Princeton on her mantelpiece, where the cat often naps, and she imagines somewhere in the background, in one of those lovely buildings, Joyce Carol Oates tapping away at her latest opus, maybe another book on boxing. Or perhaps she's given in to her Gothic side that day, dark castle, a darker secret, trees lashed and swaying in the wind like broken fingers against a lightning-ridden skyline, and Giselle imagines Harry imagining her now from his perch in a lofty heaven. How would he feel about this? How would he feel about anything?

