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Margaret

Kevin Clouther

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KEVIN CLOUTHER

Margaret

We all want to be special, for someone to find our eyes in a crowded room and say, I pick you. That feeling is the best feeling.

At first, you love him for finding you. Only later do you love him for him, if you love him at all.

At first, he was unremarkable, which isn’t to say he was unattractive or uninteresting, but that he was medium attractive, medium interesting, no different from any number of people I might do something with; and the thing we were doing was so mindless, so totally devoid of consequence, I scarcely paid attention to anything beyond the clock. When would we be done, so I could return to my real life, whatever that was? I was twenty-seven and already felt old.

Things didn’t change until we were walking. I looked at him, my legs, the water, the sky, and thought, what am I doing? I thought this happily. He seemed so happy. It was contagious, and I was as unaccustomed to happiness as an exotic illness.

His desire was a warm breath on my neck. I felt nothing so much as skepticism. Not because I thought myself undeserving of desire but because it was so soon. What could he possibly know about me past what he could imagine?

The next day, he emailed me. He had an idea. That’s what he wrote: I have an idea. It was my work account, so I thought he meant the project we’d been assigned. I wrote back: Tell me; and he wrote, instantly: Rare book room. I knew what he meant.

I felt excited and not at all nervous, which I thought was a good thing, though it seemed possible was a bad thing, evidence I wasn’t interested so much as flattered. This distinction barely interested me. I studied my face in the mirror and thought, you’ll never look better. Then I thought, so why don’t you feel better? And finally I thought, nobody owes you happiness.

I took off my earrings and makeup and shoes and replaced them with something thirty-percent sexier. Then I put everything back the first way.

He looked better than I expected. His shirt, for instance, fit his torso in a way that suggested competency. He looked so happy to see me. It was almost enough to make me happy, and almost as close as I’d come in a long time.

We sat in the third row of eight. I wasn’t sure what we were waiting for, or if he knew either. It was clear, in any event, he didn’t care. I suppose I didn’t either. We were waiting for something new to begin.

The thrill of waiting! I’d forgotten how it felt to think something might happen this minute or the next or the minute after that. The present, which never much interested me, became charged with meaning, became in fact unbearably real. Were all of these colors always here? When I stared out the windows, springtime looked obscene. It occurred to me I was hallucinating, or was inside someone else’s hallucination.

Who was this man who smiled wanly throughout the presentation, who occasionally lifted an unironic hand to his face in appreciation, or nodded at some unexpectedly poignant observation? What possessed him to gauge my response—what made him think I owed one worth considering? I began to take inventory of my opinions. They didn’t seem any more interesting
than anyone else’s. They hardly interested me at all.

Afterward we went to a museum or a park or out for coffee or maybe all these things. We were always looking or walking or drinking. He said I reminded him of a poem about a painting, or a painting about a poem. I acted happy and felt confused, or I acted confused and felt happy. It barely occurred to me to find out anything about him. I lived inside his interest. It was petty and vain and totally unlike anywhere I’d been. I knew, without acknowledging the thought, it couldn’t last long; and it didn’t.

He never pushed his interests on me. He never insisted I like something because he did or, worse, judged me for not liking that thing. He was becoming handsome. People think it’s a fact when it’s a process. Only after I’d fallen for him did it occur to me something was wrong, that what was wrong came from him and not me, and life would soon become hard.

I welcomed it, in a way. Not because I’m a masochist. I don’t understand liking pain. But because feeling something, even a bad thing, is better than not feeling anything at all. I hadn’t realized that was the case, but there were a lot of things I hadn’t realized.

I first noticed during unexpected silences. We’d be doing something genuinely exciting, and I’d see his eyes scanning the crowd, or just past the crowd. I’d notice him listening, as if someone were about to surface unexpectedly. So I thought why. Then I thought who. It wasn’t hard to get thinking. It was hard to stop.

I considered confronting him, only what would I say? I didn’t know anything. I didn’t want to seem paranoid, but I wasn’t paranoid. I was the opposite of paranoid, which is to say, right.

There was a time, not a short time, when we knew without acknowledging that we knew. It was the end of the beginning. Already, I mourned what was lost. But it wasn’t all bad. We were able to—what’s the terrible word?—compartmentalize. Mostly, we were in love. Everything else was secondary.

Like his wife. She was secondary. I only needed to follow the dour parade of pictures and posts online. They became a central part of my routine. I imagined they were directed to me. I felt sure she knew there was somebody like me, though I had no reason to suspect she knew who I was. I thought about what a meeting might look like. It didn’t look like anything I’d welcome.

So commenced my transition from compartmentalizer to conspirator. I wish I could say this made everything less interesting, but the opposite was true. It was he and I against the world, even if the world was right. His wife wrote, Another solo Netflix night. She posted pictures of a cat underneath bedsheets. I simultaneously pitied and despised her, and I pitied and despised myself. I played games of chicken with various add buttons on various websites, but I never pressed these buttons.

I imagined doing so many things. I lived, it sometimes seemed, more in my imagination than in the world. For instance, I imagined various meetings where I explained what I meant, though what I meant wasn’t nice. What I meant, pretty clearly, was to steal her husband. I already had. It didn’t start that way, but that’s what happened. It took some getting used to, or at least ignoring.

I imagined writing her. Sometimes I wrote a letter. This was the most gratifying writing I imagined. I even dreamed of it.
In one dream, I sat at a beautiful desk, nicer than one I'd ever owned. On this desk, which was made from a formidable wood, there was nothing but a blank piece of white paper. On this paper, I wrote various moving words, none of which I could remember upon waking. In the midst of the dream, I thought: You'll remember this. But I didn't. I even kept a notebook on my bedside table. The notebook remained empty.

Sometimes in my dream, I left the desk to find her sitting in my bedroom. Her expression was polite annoyance, as though I'd invited her and was running late. What we discussed changed by the dream. One time we talked about the French Revolution. Another time, curtains. She always initiated the conversation. Although I expected disharmony, I discovered I liked talking with her. We had a lot in common. She sounded like one of my old best friends. When I tried to remember why this friend and I had drifted apart, it felt like my fault.

She dressed nicely for our meetings. She looked better in a skirt than I did, but I wasn't annoyed. I was happy for her. Her manners were also better than mine. She never, for example, asked why I was doing what I was doing. Her interest was of a higher order. I admired this. There was a thing or two I could learn from her. About humility. About decency. I vowed to listen. She lit a cigarette. Right there on my bed! I admired this, too. I asked for a cigarette, but it was her last one. So I lit one of his, wondering if she knew, watching her wonder what I knew. We were, each of us, in possession of privileged information. Neither of us wanted to share what we knew with the other. It created a distance but also a closeness. I said something like, you smoke a different brand, and she smiled through the smoke, her smile as sharp as any blade I'd felt.

Dream time is different: an eternity can pass in an hour. She sat on my bed for a long time, in a way I never sat, in a way nobody did. Her last cigarette went on and on. There was no end to this cigarette. She seemed to be proving a point with it.

One time I saw her, or someone who resembled her, in real life. We were in the grocery store. I picked up a melon when she picked up a melon, and I thought, so this is what you eat. Or what he eats with you. I tried to recall eating this fruit and came up with nothing. I placed one in my cart.

I followed her through the aisles. I got close but not too close. Not everyone has a scent, but she did, at least that day. Her pants fit her very well. Her shirt looked unfamiliar, which probably meant it was in season. I'd never been in season.

She shopped haphazardly, which relieved me. I'd worried she had a plan. People who bring pens and lists intimidate me. People who don't walk down the same aisle three times intimidate me. But her trajectory was so scattered, I needn't have worried. I wasn't interested in what she bought so much as how she moved. Like she had something to do and plenty of time to do it. Like she couldn't remember what that thing was and perhaps it didn't matter. How much less, I wondered, did things matter since I'd intruded? Maybe I was exaggerating my influence. I hoped for this.

Never did she look back. Never did she turn to me, as I expected—maybe even hoped—and say, I know who you are. I wouldn't have denied it. I was ready to own up to it all.

But I couldn't bring myself to approach her, so I stayed anonymous, no different from the other women looking for
tomato sauce, asparagus, the right loaf of bread. The only thing in my cart was the melon. I couldn’t say what kind. I added a loaf of bread. Her hands were empty. She hadn’t bothered with a cart, and whatever she’d come for remained elusive. I could relate. I was her replacement for a reason.

So her shopping took on outsized importance. Whatever she bought would mean more than it should. It was unfair, but lots of things about the situation were unfair, such as her being married instead of me. I didn’t even want to be married! But I didn’t want her to be married, either. I thought, maybe, we could reason things out like adults. She walked like an adult. There was something sensual about the way she navigated the aisles. I tried, not for the first time, to understand why she wasn’t enough.

But that was the wrong way to think about it because he didn’t want more. He wanted different. Everybody, eventually, wants different. A part of me, one I didn’t like, wondered if I liked him because he was so removed from what I was used to. I didn’t date married men. Except, of course, I did.

I wanted to leave: him, the grocery store, possibly the planet. We’d all benefit from a change of scenery. I felt like I had a lot to offer a new planet. It wasn’t about being a bad person. It was about doing a bad thing.

At least, this is the story I told myself. It was almost convincing. But I didn’t stop. I didn’t stop following her that day, and I didn’t stop seeing him, not until he told me he was leaving her. Then I stopped.

Later I came back.

But that day in the grocery store all the options lay before me. There was still time. I made eye contact with one kid, and the look she sent back was so knowing, so totally stripped of pretense, I nearly confessed everything. I think she would have understood. Her mom loaded box after box of off-brand macaroni and cheese into the cart.

When my boyfriend’s wife stopped, I stopped. Everyone else was moving. He wasn’t even my boyfriend. I didn’t know what he was. She turned toward me but didn’t see me. Or she saw me but didn’t care. She reached for a box, and I reached for it too, so our hands nearly collided. Reflexively, she apologized. I stared at her, wondering what my face looked like.

You can have it, she said.

Neither of us was holding the box or even reaching for it. Our arms were at our sides. We were each waiting for the other to do something or say something. It seemed like the waiting could go on for a long time. I was okay with this. Anything was preferable to things staying the same.

But it didn’t go on for more than a second or two. I was a stranger to her, and she moved past me and onto the next thing. I looked at the box, but it was nothing I recognized, nothing I’d ever buy on my own. It wasn’t important. I left it. I stopped following her and walked to my car, where I didn’t cry or yell or hit the steering wheel, where everything stayed exactly the same.

When he left her a few months later, he called me. I asked him what he expected me to say, and he didn’t answer. I didn’t feel sad or victorious. I felt tired. It seemed like information I’d possessed my entire life. I wondered how she felt, where she was, what she would do next. Eventually, I told him I needed to be alone, though I was already alone and didn’t want to be.
I wanted things I couldn’t ask for, things I barely understood myself. This is still true.

As soon as I hung up the phone, I looked for her. I walked the streets of my neighborhood like she was a missing dog. I might have called her name. She never goes by Maggie, only Margaret. I’m sorry, Margaret. You deserve better. In my mind, I’ve had so many conversations with you. I’ve imagined your reaction so many times, and you always say different things. You’re smart, quick, elegant. You seem to like me, strangely, or maybe not strangely; and I like you. To my relief, you never accept my apology.

KYLE HEMMINGS

Alice’s Therapist Compares Depression to a Washed-Up Canary

It’s a slow bullet boring through layers of years. It will convince you that tennis is impossible. A snotty, Madison Avenue socialite who tells you that you’re a baby elephant in a ridiculously tight tutu. On some days, you’re bulging at the seams or feeling as empty as you did that one summer when Brad Pitt turned you down. Or was it Prince? Or the day the teacher made you write “I must pay attention” fifty times on the blackboard before you overdosed on the chalk. The horizon keeps shifting. You’re off-balance in high heels. Alone before a mirror, you experience a watered-down version of stage fright, in tight spaces a cramp of claustrophobia. “Save the fish” is your girlfriend’s doomed moniker, the one with frizzy, rust-colored hair and sneakers to match. She’s a chain-smoker from her hippie days and claims her mother laid waste to her will to string pearls and make babies. To blame is to be human and to be unmanageable. You start calling friends at all hours but they’re not listening to the subtext in your voice. So you stop calling them. Snoopy callous shits. Instead, call yourself an orphan. Call yourself a wound. Call yourself a blind eggshell. Swallow your tongue.