

Quadrangle

By

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I told her flat out she'd never fall in love with me. This after smoking a joint, lying together on the brown, beat up sofa that was the one piece of furniture in my living room. I figured I was, at best, some sort of way station, a rest stop, if you will, on her life's highway, but never the destination.

“I'll admit I'm not in love with you *now*, Gene,” she said, pulling herself up on one elbow, “but you can't tell me I'll *never* fall in love with you. How can you know sure?”

I didn't answer, but I knew I was right. She was so far out of my league there was little chance this would work. A funny looking guy whose high school nickname was “The Gremlin” (a reference not to the movie, which came years later, but to a truncated bit of automotive nonsense put out by American Motors in an attempt to stave off extinction) never gets the girl in the end. Who *did* get her surprised us both.

We met during registration our first fall at Northwestern, back when the process still involved stacks of paper and staff behind card tables with signs indicating which parts of the alphabet they served. It was a mild, late August day and the cool air coming off Lake Michigan mixed with the city's heat, making you wish summer would never end. I was waiting behind her in a line stretching from the entrance to Harris Hall, out around The Rock, the campus' most famous landmark, to where we stood at the edge of the main Quad.

In this, a time before smartphones came to absorb our collective attention, people in line were double-checking their registration papers and striking up conversations with each other. Looking around, I said, to no one in particular, “I’m sure glad I took the Evelyn Woods course in speed waiting... now I can wait an hour in ten minutes!”

The girl standing in front of me didn’t turn around, but her shoulders moved in a way that indicated she might be laughing at my lame joke. From the back I could see only that she was blonde, slim, and at least an inch taller than me. I began to wonder what it would take to make her look my way.

“Or maybe it’s the start of Northwestern’s highly touted liberal arts program,” I said, again to the air. “As in, you know, ‘Cultivating Patience 101’?”

She didn’t laugh this time, but did glance back to see who was speaking and I saw a face that did the body justice: high cheekbones, a slim, straight nose set above thin, naturally pink lips, and eyes that a watery blue. I don’t know whether or not love at first sight is real, but what I was feeling came awfully close. It was all I could do to keep from reaching out and stroking her cheek with the back of my hand.

As for her, the look on her face said, “I’m curious, but shouldn’t be talking to someone who looks so strange.”

And I did.

Look strange.

My outfit consisted of paint spattered white coveralls, a pair of bright green Chuck Taylor All Stars (also paint spattered), and a white, wool watch cap struggling to corral my long brown hair. I’ll admit, given the warm weather, the watch cap was an affectation, but I came to the rest of my get-up honestly. I was both a painter and someone who wanted to be a painter. I was a painter of houses during the summer with my uncle, and had enrolled at Northwestern with the intention of becoming a painter of

pictures. A very *famous* painter of pictures. So famous that I would become rich without having to die first.

Being short and odd-looking can have its advantages with girls, believe it or not. Knowing I had little or no chance to compete for the affections of a girl like this had a liberating effect on me. As the saying goes, if you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose. I was a career minor leaguer in his late thirties who gets his first September call-up to the big club. Knowing he'll never be part of the team's future, he relaxes and hits .350, a hundred and ten points above his lifetime average. I was free to swing for the fences.

"Hi", I said before she had time to turn back around. "At least it's a nice day to be stuck out here, eh?"

She blinked twice and didn't answer. Looking down at my outfit, a smile began to form on those perfect, thin lips. "So," she said, squinting from the sun that rested above my left shoulder, "you must be a painter, huh?"

"Your powers of observation are exceeded only by your beauty." I replied. "I am, indeed, a painter...a painter of all things, things both animate and inanimate. In fact," I went on, pushing the envelope now, "I would love to paint you...that is, I would be honored to ...um...*immortalize* you on canvas."

At this point I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to find a tissue fluttering in my face. I looked beyond it and into the cold stare of a middle-aged woman.

"What the hell was that for!?" I said, grabbing the tissue and pushing her hand away.

"It appeared to me, young man, that you were drooling," she said, looking down at the papers in her hand without waiting for a reply.

As the line reached the entrance to the hall the blonde and I parted ways, but not for long. She headed to the table marked “K thru P” and I to one just to its left. A little surge of warmth thrummed through my chest when I overheard her name (Constance Rose Keaton) and that she was registering for the same Art Department pre-reqs I was.

It took three weeks of mildly flirtatious comments, accidental meetings that, unbeknownst to her, were never accidents, coffee dates leading to lunch dates, and soon our classmates were thinking of us as a couple. It was something of an illusion. We had yet to kiss, or even hold hands. Our relationship would have remained on this platonic plane forever had not pot come along, something she’d never encountered back in her hometown.

Connie was from Pine City, a place she called a “suburb” of Elmira, New York. After consulting a map I told her she wasn’t from a suburb, she was from a *very tiny* town that happened to sit next to a *very small* town. She did not dispute the characterization, nor my assertion that she had much to learn about the world. It was one of the reasons she came to Northwestern, she said. Knowing it was located very close to, but not actually in Chicago, allowed her to ease her way into the experience of life in a big city.

Connie stayed in the dorms, but I was lucky enough to have use of an upper flat in a building my uncle owned. All I had to do was cut the grass in the summer and shovel the sidewalks in the winter. It came unfurnished, but through selective garbage day shopping I was able to pull together the rudiments of a household, including the ragged, brown sofa upon which Connie and I shared her first joint.

Her eyes were wide as she watched me separate seeds from the buds in the nickel bag I bought for the occasion. The pot was fairly moist, filled with oils holding the THC, and it was easy to roll in the thin cigarette paper. I licked along the open side of the joint and smoothed it down with my fingers, then slid the whole thing in and out of my mouth to moisten it. Connie didn’t get high the first time, coughing out more smoke than she took in, but eventually got the hang of it.

Her favorite thing to do when stoned was listen to Joni Mitchell albums, the early ones where her voice (before it was sandpapered down two full octaves by years of smoking) hit notes so high and clear you expected to find the neighborhood dogs baying outside your door. She said she could hear Joni breathing between the lines, and that it made her feel as if she were standing right next to her in the studio as she sang. And, she loved her lyrics—all those gossamer wings and colored lights flashing. I didn't get the attraction myself, but if it kept Connie ensconced on my couch, I was willing to go along. Ultimately it's all foreplay, as a very smart woman once told me.

"I used to think marijuana was something only drug addicts and Negro jazz musicians used," she said. "Now I don't understand why *everyone* doesn't do this."

"Ah...well, there's the small matter of it being illegal, Connie," I said, "and by the way, one mustn't say 'Negro' any longer. But you're right—as long as people think it's something only black people do; it'll never be legal."

After smoking we sometimes fell asleep on that couch, lying feet to head, ignoring the brrppp...brppp sound of the needle hitting the end of the record. One time I awoke and began absentmindedly rubbing her bare feet. She stirred, stretching her legs out toward me without opening her eyes, which gave me the courage to continue. I moved my right hand past her ankle and calf and up her left thigh. When she didn't resist I began to slowly stroke it, palm down, fingers splayed, and with each pass my hand went higher until soon the tips of my fingers were grazing her inner thigh. I could feel the heat from between her legs. Just as I moved my hand into this secret, warm space, she opened her eyes. "Wow", she whispered, grabbing for my hand and holding it tight against her there, "that is some *wonderful* pot!"

It was the beginning of a new, more physical phase in our relationship, but one involving everything except making love. This left me both frustrated and angry because I knew she wasn't a virgin. She admitted to having lost her claim to that title with the boyfriend she'd left behind in Pine City.

Like everyone who goes away—to college, to the military, to prison, to wherever—Connie had left someone behind: Peter, her first love. She said she had once considered him a near perfect being. She described full lips hinting of a sensuous nature and large, dark brown eyes revealing an honest soul. She said he reminded her of Phineas, the flawless, ethereal character at the center of A Separate Peace, a novel that, like Catcher In The Rye, was a must-read for our generation. Her saying this prompted me to reread the book, only to be reminded that its narrator, Phineas' dark, alter ego, was a boy named "Gene". Not a good sign, I thought.

I got a look at Peter when he made his one visit to campus, a visit I was supposed to know nothing about. Connie had told me she was going to be holed up in her dorm room working on sketches for the first big project of the semester, but there she was, holding his hand, talking rapidly and pointing out landmarks as they walked across the Quad. I could see he was as beautiful as she had described. He appeared slightly dazed, stepping cautiously along the sidewalk, head tilted upward, scanning the buildings surrounding the Quad's green space.

I didn't understand why Connie lied about Peter's visit. I couldn't imagine our relationship being a threat to theirs. In spite of all the time we were spending together it was clear she was still in love with him. She wrote to him often and sometimes showed me one before sending it off. Each was an elaborate, penciled masterpiece on heavy drawing paper, with words scrolled in and around sketched portraits of the two of them. It came as a surprise when she arrived back on campus after Winter Break and told me they'd broken up.

"It was strange, Gene. This visit everything seemed smaller: the town, my parent's house, my old bedroom, even Peter."

She said that the special something she'd once admired in him—his lack of guile—now seemed nothing more than simply naiveté. She claimed she'd moved past the this first love, but I found it telling when she returned to school well before break ended.

My time with Connie, like Peter's, was to be short-lived. We continued to spend a lot of time together that spring semester, but the relationship moved inexorably from passionate back to platonic once Rob, a late semester transfer, arrived. The six-foot two, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, handsome Rob. A second-year painting student whose work was so good he could've taught the course, Rob began approaching Connie after class to comment on her work, and their conversations grew longer each time. When I saw the way her eyes followed him as he walked away I knew it wouldn't be long before I'd become another closed chapter in her history. She tried to pretend otherwise but, like the other, fictional Gene, I couldn't resist shaking the slim tree limb on which she stood.

"He's only interested in my work," she argued.

"Yeah, " I said, smirking, "as in he'd like to *work you over*. Face it, honey, he's exactly what you're looking for in a man. He's got everything you want: looks, talent, money...*height!*"

"Oh, Gene, please. That again? You know I love you. It never mattered that you were shorter than me."

"Yeah, my mother loves me too, but that's not getting me laid either."

"How shallow do you think I am?" she asked, pouting now.

"No more than any other woman. You have to look out for yourself, and think about your future. If the chance for an upgrade comes along, you go for it."

"Wait, and don't take this the wrong way, but isn't my being with you proof that I'm not obsessed with things like looks or money?"

"Whoa! Is there a *right way* to take a remark like that?" I asked, forcing a smile.

“You know what I mean. I’m not the superficial girl you’re making me out to be.”

I didn’t say anything at first. I recalled Connie telling me how, when she and Peter first became a couple, her friends were surprised she’d thrown over the captain of the football team for someone like him, someone who was, in the rigid class structure of high school, a nobody. I began to understand how important it was for her to see herself as egalitarian in her choice of men, and it burned my ass knowing she was using *me* as proof.

“Listen, sweetheart,” I said, “we both always knew one Eugene Hairston would never be handsome enough or tall enough or rich enough or anything enough for someone like you, someone who’s had her pick of the litter since 8th grade. But it doesn’t bother me,” I lied. “I know it’s not easy being a woman in this world. I personally wouldn’t trade places with you for anything. So do what you gotta do.”

The invitation to their wedding came as a surprise. Not that they were to be married, but that she was able to track me down, given how I’d left Chicago right after graduation for the more liberal and warm environs of San Francisco. I recognized her handwriting immediately and stood in the lobby staring at the envelope. The mark of her hand there was enough to kick my heart into a higher gear, and I guessed by its shape and heft what was inside. I left it on the kitchen counter for a few days before opening it to confirm what I already knew.

The event took place in Pine City, and my being on the West Coast gave me a reasonable excuse to send my regrets. I assumed Peter had also been invited, and wondered if he had been courageous or stupid enough to sit there while the love of his life pledged her troth to another. As for me, the last thing I needed was to watch her standing next to Rob, her eyes shiny with tears as she lifted her head to receive the traditional, celebratory kiss.

The next thirty or so years went much the way I'd hoped. Oh, my love life still sucked (though, like the proverbial blind squirrel, I found an acorn or two, just none worth keeping), but I did become semi-famous. My reputation was built upon a slim body of work, a series of acrylic on canvas pieces that I'd begun in my senior year at Northwestern. The idea for the series came from a Yoga brochure someone had left behind on the El. It included an illustration of the Hindu god, Shiva, and suddenly I had a vision of him riding the train through downtown Chicago, staring up at the tall buildings. I could relate to how he would have felt as an outsider, a being who felt he was somewhere he did not belong. I did a series of paintings depicting Shiva in traditional dress and form, but in modern settings: riding a commuter-crammed train, at the podium of the United Nations, conducting the NY Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall, etc. I got a B- from my instructor on the project, packed them away, and never bothered to show them.

I came across them again in my early 30's when I was moving into new studio space, and thought the idea still had potential. My technique had improved greatly by then so I decided to re-do the originals and extend the series. I added pieces placing the deity in more contemporary settings: dancing at Studio 54, directing traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge, working as a peepshow greeter in Times Square, and others.

I wrangled a show from an old classmate who'd opened a small gallery in a rough neighborhood in New York south of Houston Street. The Great Jones Gallery was the first of many drawing artists to an area soon to be known as SoHo. The opening drew a decent crowd and the paintings caught the public's attention. It didn't hurt that, based as they were on an eastern religious motif, they hit the market at the exact moment that yoga was exploding across the upper middle class of the most important city in the world. Soon critics were falling over themselves trying to explain the cultural significance of the odd, juxtaposed images, turning me into the hottest artist of the season. Those twenty-six paintings made my fortune.

I never repeated my early success, and resisted the pull of performance-based art or any of other the new technologies. I was an analog guy in an increasingly digital world. One thing I could not avoid, despite seeing it as an invasive, addictive, and crassly commercial wolf in sheep's clothing, was Facebook. I held out for as long as I could, but when my agent said the Gene Hairston website wasn't generating a sufficient number of "unique page views" to be an effective marketing tool, I gave in.

One feature I found particularly annoying was FB's unceasing attempt to identify possible connections between me and people I may or may not know. Using some type of Kevin-Baconish-seven-degrees-of-separation algorithm it attempts to link people who have mutual friends but who have not "befriended" each other. Dawn, my assistant, took care of these unsolicited requests, giving me lists from which I would identify any I wished to accept. She came to me one day to tell me someone I repeatedly chose not to befriend was refusing take no for an answer.

"Look at this, Gene," she said, calling me over to her desk, and pointing to her screen. "This woman has sent you eleven friend requests in the past three months. I've declined each one, but she won't stop."

The name didn't ring a bell, but when I looked at her picture I had to catch my breath. It was Connie, hair still blonde (from a bottle, one might presume), cheekbones still high, eyes still a bright, watery blue. Her face staring out at me in high definition from the screen cut through the years and I was back there in the Quad, falling in love with her again for the first time.

"So, boss," Dawn said, breaking the spell, "I take it from the look on your face that you know this person?"

"Yeah, I know...I knew the lady well. But not well enough, you might say."

"She dumped you, huh Boss? Hurt you bad?"

“It wasn’t *that* brutal, Dawn,” I replied, continuing to stare at Connie’s face, “but yeah, ‘dumped’ is the correct term. I don’t hold any hard feelings. She made the right choice; the same one I think most women would’ve made. She picked the guy who seemed to have it all.”

“Well maybe *you* could be that guy now, boss,” she responded, her finger touching the screen. “Lookie here.”

She was pointing to the Relationship heading, under which sat the word “Widowed.”

My heart was racing now, but I had no reason to think anything would come of her suggestion. Too much time had passed, and I told Dawn so.

“Come on, Gene,” she said, “get with it! Old sweethearts are reconnecting over the Internet so often now it’s become a cliché. Everybody wants to find that long lost, first love and see if the flame still burns.”

The first time we met was for lunch halfway between San Francisco and LA, where she and Rob (dead five years now—a six car pileup on the 405) had been living since he’d given up painting to produce digital content for Fox Sports. She said he’d been a wonderful husband and provider, leaving her with three children, four grandchildren, a very healthy life insurance annuity and a big house in Santa Monica. Too big, she complained, and too full of echoes and memories. She was looking to downsize. She claimed to be tired of the LA weather and traffic and, given that her kids were scattered about the country, said it no longer mattered much where she lived. I suggested someplace further north might suit her, and told her I’d been thinking of moving up to Portland myself. I began to imagine a second chance for us, just as Dawn had predicted.

“Remember way back when, Connie, the very first time you told me I was wrong?” I said as I passed her the joint. There we were, sitting on the front porch of my craftsman style bungalow in Portland’s northwest side, smoking weed right out in the open. She’d never lost her love for the magical green matter, and Oregon’s decision to legalize it confirmed for her that our moves north were the right thing.

“About what?” she replied, putting the thin cigarette to her lips, taking a deep pull and passing to Peter, who was sitting to her left.

“Yeah, about what, Gene?” he asked, taking a toke.

“About Connie never falling in love with me,” I said.

“Oh, that old business,” she said in a bored voice. “For god’s sake, Gene, you know I love you. I’ve always loved you, maybe not the way you might have wished...but are you never going to let it go?”

“Hey, when I’m right, which isn’t often, I need to remind people of the fact. Besides, the pathetic, platonic love you’re offering is something no man, if he’s being honest with himself, would freely desire. Furthermore,” I said, choking out smoke and the words together, “I’m tired of being the weak link in this chain of triangles. First you, Peter and me, then you, Rob and me, and now damned if it isn’t the three of us back for a return engagement.”

While they considered what I’d said, I thought again about how fate, or rather, the Internet, had done me wrong. As it turned out, Peter had also received one of those “You May Know...” messages on his computer, and before you could say “Zuckerberg Sucks!” he and Connie got back together, leaving me on the outside once more. Facebook giveth and Facebook taketh away.

Looking at Connie, I said, “How am I supposed to let *it* go if *it* never goes away?”

The two of them stared at me a moment and began to laugh. Then Peter piped up.

“Gene,” he said, “methinks your figures were off. I count *four* of us, if you include Rob, rest his soul. This ‘thing’ we have is bigger than a triangle.”

“And that would be...?”

“Why, a *quadrangle*, of course,” he said, chuckling.

Connie laughed along with him while I considered what he’d said. I wasn’t ready to buy it. What I saw was that we had each spent time in evolving, intersecting triangles, triangles in which only Connie was the constant. She had chosen me over Peter, then Rob over me, and now, finally, it was Peter’s turn again. But a quadrangle? I had a different idea.

Coming out of my fog, I looked at the two people sitting across from me, their hips touching, their fingers intertwined and said, “Quadrangle, huh?”

Connie looked at Peter, back to me, and nodded her agreement.

“A quadrangle,” I said again. “is a four-sided figure. I’ll agree that, if nothing else, it describes *your* situation, Connie.”

“How so?” she asked, a puzzled look on her face.

“Well,” I said, “I’d argue that, if you’ll allow me a geometrically mixed metaphor, you’ve now come full circle, and,” pointing to Peter, added, “because you’re right back to square one!”