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Fulfillment

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Fulfillment

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"She found herself at the counter, buying another fifty-dollar dress. The whole scene: the glittering displays - sequins were in - the disorganized and overdressed clerks, the bee-buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead, recalled memories of cupidity and contentment. Apparel. Accessories. She was back to demanding the newest colors, the smartest fit. Even her jeans were fashionably faded on mornings of inhaled *Tide*, *Glamour* magazines and quarters disappearing down the slot of the front-loader"

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Fulfillment

by Kevin Moriarty

She found herself at the counter, buying another fifty-dollar dress. The whole scene: the glittering displays — sequins were in — the disorganized and overdressed clerks, the bee-buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead, recalled memories of cupidity and contentment. Apparel. Accessories. She was back to demanding the newest colors, the smartest fit. Even her jeans were fashionably faded on mornings of inhaled *Tide*, *Glamour* magazines and quarters disappearing down the slot of the front-loader....

Long ago, it seemed, she had met him on just such a day. Head buried in *Ninety-Two in the Shade* he surprised her immediately by failing to notice her body as she walked in. Most males over twelve did. Instead he looked directly into her face, unafraid, even met her eyes. Slate, his were impenetrable.

She was becoming Nicole Tiffin again, the girl with money to burn: the store-bought distractions: clothes, furnishings, fripperies were on their way to being fun again. The clerk folded the dress oh-so-neatly and boxed it, a hundred dollars worth of gauze under one arm. She walked out of the store into the sunny street and copped a lid on the way home.

Kevin Moriarty, obsessed by James Joyce's story, "The Dead," has promised himself a literary effort to equal or surpass it.

Beacon Street was never lovelier; skies full of sheepish clouds and springtime buds knotted like forget-me-nots almost made her miss the door of the studio. Even inside the furniture glowed with sun as she fingered the dimmer down to fifteen watts. The dress she'd bought had the same colors as the original Klee on the west wall of the living room, but it was not yet lit by the sunlight; and when she pulled the drapes she knew that it wouldn't be. That day at least. She'd wear the dress to work tomorrow, she decided.

The job was boring but paid so well she didn't want to quit. Besides, twenty-two and single again she appreciated the distraction of many young men, married or otherwise, but searching, concupiscent. Osgood Richardson, her boss and the most overrated claim adjuster in New England, was important enough on the executive table of organization to see that she got more than two hundred dollars a week. And she was due for a raise. The last one had been only one week before Rock left; how unimportant it had seemed just then. She must have been crazy, she said to herself, aware that she was talking aloud — to the Klee on the west wall.

She poured the glass of wine, spilling only a little on the rug, but it made her melancholy. She sat

down, back to the painting and staring at the drapes, and killed the bottle to keep from thinking, but thought anyway: the courier always dies that his message may live. But she didn't know what she meant by that.

She'd never known her real father. His overbearing spouse described him to her as harsh and unaffectionate, selfish and shy. When she was two, he was found in the garage, poisoned. The police were tactful; they never really tried to find his murderer. Too many people wanted him dead, among them her mother and the detective assigned to the case. A short while after her mother married, a millionaire investment banker whose hobby, free-lance photography of nature, now obsessed him so that he let his partners run the Wall Street business. He moved his new family up to New Canaan, to an estate complete with aviary, stocked trout stream, and several beautiful wild cats — puma, jaguar, cheetah, cougar — he kept discreetly in cages and even more discreetly occasionally took out for runs.

Nicole learned to love the lonely woods and the small animals there. She imagined herself communing with them, loved them, because she'd seen some of the cats kill cottontails and quail, with an abstract passion she fancied doomed to be unrequited. The self-pitying,

bittersweet mood became the dominant disposition of the twelve-year-old girl turning woman.

She did well enough in grammar school to be accepted at Concord, where her snobbishness blossomed, blooming easily among the daughters of the dollar. She drank the hidden wine, toked up, and dressed down with the rest — fine wine, good grass, but old though Abercrombie jeans — until one winter afternoon, alone in the woods near the school, she was nearly raped by a band of townies and escaped from her indecisive assailants carrying a chunk of eyeball under her half-inch fingernail. Its original owner was the only one determined enough to pull his pants down. For two weeks afterwards, Nicole told about the snowy woods and his frozen dong and carried that sliver of eyeball around in a biology lab petri dish; it was an amusing experience, she told her friends, and the local high school would have the perfect lead should they decide to stage the *Oedipus Rex* that semester. But she knew she had learned from her stepfather's wild cats.

To Boston after graduating, happy about it, Nicole worked at Brigham's in Kenmore Square for a year, dating sporadically. She discovered D.H. Lawrence and read all his novels in a month, picturing herself as Miriam, the Platonic priestess of *Sons and Lovers*, but she lost her virginity to a middle-aged man who was not so literary. When she explained the role she saw herself in and tried to usher him out of her flat, he slapped her down on the bed and took her with a directness and an absence of affection that told her of another role he saw for her, required of her, that she had not yet conceived of.

It was then that fashion obsessed her; if she wanted it, she got it. She bought antique furniture from Turbville's, French *haut couture* from Filene's and Sak's — Balenciagas, Chaneles, Yves St. Laurents, Diors — and rented the studio. Her mother sent her — without any other communication — a regular two-hundred-dollar-a-week check, so that, in all those matters, she could do as she pleased, because when she'd graduated from Concord there'd been the convenient

trust fund and over the years tax-deductible cash gifts. She knew, of course, that it was all a bribe not to come home, to stay as far from New Canaan as she could — and she kept her part of the bargain.

The following spring she applied for a job as a secretary at Liberty Mutual. She was restless, hared, and a series of casual bedpartners had only made her more restive. When she was hired she was assigned to the typing pool, but that voluptuousness she now knew she had, and used, walking, standing, fixing a pantyhose, crossing and uncrossing her legs, soon found her working in a pecan-panelled office, her pay increased by forty percent, the other girls in the typing pool hating her guts. Her first impressions of Osgood Richardson were that he was an ugly, garrulous man, but he treated her quite decently. She wondered how so unimpressive a man had done so well in the cutthroat insurance business and thought it might be just dumb luck. Her own "success" she knew was lucky, but more than luck; her typing was only average, her shorthand by no means the best, but her looks and that undulating walk were a help: how she used them helped even more.

She was independent; she needed no one, wanted no one, until, eighteen months before, she met Rock. She walked into the laundromat with four pairs of new jeans in a paper bag; since new jeans weren't *de rigueur* that year, they needed fading. He was reading the McGuane book and tapping his foot to some unknown melody. She'd read several reviews of the novel and was curious about it. She tapped one of his narrow shoulders and asked, "Interesting?"

The slate eyes came up from the book like pebbles from some depth and looked at her for moments before he said, softly, "A little overwritten, but Key West sounds fine."

"Ever been there?"

"Never been south of Washington, D.C." The slate eyes, almond-shaped, were sunk in hollowed eye-sockets, his lips were sunburned or chapped — or bitten — and his face was indoor pale. He looked like he never saw the sun.

"Spent a month there last sum-

mer and loved it. Beautiful town full of palm trees, round-assed Cubans and stoned shrimp-boat captains playing Hemingway." She had read *To Have and Have Not*.

She threw the jeans into the washing machine for the third denim-bleaching treatment, and waited for him to speak again, but he was silent until she sat down. "You a lit. major?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just a reader. I'm a secretary. Up there." She pointed through the ceiling. They were in the shadow of the Liberty Mutual building. "What do you do?"

"I'm a med student, at Northeastern." He closed the book, but kept his finger in the place. "Interesting work?" he asked.

"Boring as hell. My boss is a walking dildo. Sometimes I wonder why I do it. I don't need the bread."

"You're lucky." His expression had just the hint of envy.

"Rough going?"

"Let's say that I'm getting sick of mortadella and coke for breakfast."

"You do look a bit thin and washed-out," she blurted.

"Thanks a lot." Then his face broke into a smile. He put the book down and went to take some clothes from a washer. When he turned, she asked if he was doing anything that night.

"Organic chemistry, but I don't feel much like it."

"Why don't you come to my place? It's only a couple of blocks from here, and I guarantee you better than mortadella and coke." Even as she said it, she was aghast; she sounded too eager, even servile. Something was happening to her. She felt a wave, no, a *tsunami* of emotion engulfing her. What was it about him that caused it? The slate-eyed gaze? Cut out the romanticizing, she told herself; he's just a med student down on his luck and glad to get a free meal.

Another man came into the laundromat and started his wash. Rock kept staring at him as if he knew him, then muttered something to himself, and said goodbye. Before he walked out, she went after him to find out his name and to give him her address. "I'm Rockwell Carter, but people call me Rock," he said grimly, looking over her shoulder. They shook hands awkwardly and he left. The jeans were

Moriarty: Fulfillment

shrunk to size three, but Nicole was happy as she hailed a cab to take them home.

Dinner was a success. The steak was tasty and tender, the hollandaise on the broccoli perfect, the salad crisp and sharpened with almonds and onions. Normally the opposite of meddlesome, Nicole sensed that he liked her gentle prying which seemed to make him bite his tongue before smiling and making some clever and venomous remark about a professor or a politician. He spoke of colleagues more than subjects, of books more than medicine, though he told her he planned to practice proctology.

She tried and failed to stifle a laugh. "A rear admiral!"

For an instant, he seemed offended. "There are plenty of asshole doctors, but I want to be a proctologist." Then, again, he smiled, even white teeth except for two pointed incisors, and said, "I find the rectum abundant with meaning."

The evening drifted away in talk, in music, in drinking the special burgundy she had bought. She wanted to see him again, and decided to play it straight: no coyness, no games, no faking.

They had a carefree time that summer, the kind two young people can have with plenty of money and curiosity. She learned that he was a loner, an only child whose parents were separated and had copped out on him. No affection. No ties. No money. He was on scholarship to Northeastern, had been on scholarships and fellowships since high school when his parents had told him he was on his own. He never spoke of any other parts of his past, except the work, the deprivation, the hardships, never of past loves or joy. When she asked, he turned the conversation to theater or painting, subjects about which he seemed to know a great deal.

The wedding was small and in New Canaan. Her parents demonstrated their approval in characteristic fashion; they gave her more money. Rock's parents were invited, but never showed. When they asked him for a guest list, he had none. But since he came from the mid-West it didn't seem odd.

They decided to keep the studio. It was large enough for the two of them. They bought a new head-

board for the bed, bookshelves and more pots and silverware. Nicole noticed the rickety card table he had been using for a desk in his old apartment, and one day she surprised him with a magnificent refectory table of solid oak complete with a good work chair. He brought her an unbelievable volume of Van Gogh prints, the kind of thing she wouldn't have thought to buy for herself, and slowly she felt walls inside of her begin to dissolve. Why hadn't she done these great things before? She began to sketch, rabbits, quail, deer, from memory, but the one time she tried one of the big cats, a puma, she tore it up. Rock bought her some how-to books on painting, more prints, books about painters. She felt he had released an altogether new, or long dormant spirit in her, but exactly how he did she didn't know. A hint? A gift? A frown?



But after months of living together she could not tell why he was studying medicine; it was evident to her that he lacked the physician's rigorous objectivity or obsessive concern. He spoke of the responsibility he felt to other men. "There aren't enough good doctors anywhere. In America or Bolivia or India. In most places death doesn't mean anything. It's just ignored." And when she pressed him, he spoke about the sacredness and uniqueness of life, the slate eyes opaque, his face embarrassed, as if his conviction made him uncomfortable. He seemed so grim and unhappy with it, and when she asked if perhaps he owed himself something, should do what would make him happy, he shrugged her

off impatiently. "Happy!" he grunted. "What an...American...word!"

One night, while he was taking an exam, she was rearranging the books on his desk, and a large manila envelope fell out of his zoology text. Out of it plopped two essays and a part of a novel. She sat there on the floor and read them, immediately, yet half-guiltily. Rock wanted to write. That was clear to her now; what was bothering him must be the conflict inside him between literature and pleasing himself, and medicine and doing his duty. At once, she admired and sympathized with him, that driven creature who was her husband.

At first, Rock's informality was irritating, but soon she freely adopted it. She began, stone by stone, to take down the wall that had kept the sun from her garden, but also protected it from storms. Another honesty and freedom surged in her blood, and when Rock talked about her mask of propriety and how she hid behind it, she nodded and agreed. This was what marriage should be, probing and questioning and growing together. "I'm something more than what I wear," Nicole told herself as she slipped on her new bluejeans.

At the office, she no longer thought of herself as the same sexy clotheshorse. She skipped the eyeliner and most of the makeup, which created quite a stir, started to talk to some of the girls in the typing pool she'd always avoided and who had never been especially charmed by her. The new Nicole seemed to inspire intimacy in them, and beneath the overpainted, cookie-cutter lookalikes, she saw their tragedy. They were all there to find the rising young executive. Nicole saw her old self in these women and said a prayer for them to find their own Rock on which to build. It was corny, she knew, but she had discovered love and she wanted all to share in it, all to be happy.

But Rock wasn't happy. She saw that he couldn't study. He told her that the classes seemed unending. He was bored and restless. Even nauseated. His marks fell. He lost his scholarship at the end of that semester, but though the money was no longer necessary, the loss dispirited him further. Often, at four in the morning, missing his presence in bed, Nicole would find

him asleep at the typewriter, paper crumpled in the roller beneath his head.

It was a mulberry-skied New England morning when he told her he couldn't go on with medical school, his eyes apprehensive, waiting for her reaction. "I'd probably never get to see you once you started interning. I never wanted to be a doctor's wife," she joked.

He seemed relieved that she wasn't angry, but he was still uneasy, and moments later she understood his uneasiness. "I want to go to New York for a while. A couple of weeks maybe." For a moment, a wave of nausea overwhelmed her, because she thought he was going to add, "I want to find myself," but he didn't. He told her he needed her, only her, that he wanted her to help him write, but she had no idea what he meant by "helping him" to write. Washing clothes? Buttering his toast? Buying Corrasable Bond paper and Royal ribbons?

He needed money of course. Would she let him have some? Of course, she would. She went to the bank the next morning and put two thousand dollars in one-hundred dollar bills into his suitcoat pocket. He left for New York on the Eastern shuttle the next day at nine.

She missed him terribly. At first he called every day, but soon the intervals between calls lengthened. She drew him a Connecticut landscape; she sent him *The Writer's Handbook* and Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*; she had Filene's food department ship him a box of S.S. Pierce delicacies. She worked, she read, she painted, and she waited. She was hurt that he didn't ask her to come down for weekends to New York, so hurt that she couldn't suggest it herself, or take the initiative. And he never spoke of taking that one-hour flight back up to Boston. When he telephoned, he talked about art and writing. Had she done any drawings? Had she enjoyed working in gouache? Was she really

going to try some terra-cotta sculpting? Had she read the new Gauguin volume he'd sent her?

She was staring at the Gauguin, remembering that he'd been eager for her to read it. When she did, she realized with slow horror the significance of the story; the artist had abandoned his business, his wife and child and friends for the South of France and then the South Seas and unpainted canvas and unpainted scenes. Was that Rock's plan? Of course she wasn't sure that it wasn't just someone else, another woman he was sleeping with; his voice sounded so distracted and distant on the telephone, it was as if she spoke to a stranger. Why wouldn't he come back home? Why hadn't he even given her his address? Why didn't he tell her what he was doing down there, what was happening to him, to them?

She felt sick and skipped work. Depressed, and she drank more wine than she should have for the first time in years. She was halfway through Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, which Rock's Gauguin author had recommended, when she heard the lock and he walked through the door. She embraced him and he held her and kissed her cheek. He was hungry, he said, hadn't eaten since yesterday noon. She held him at arm's length to look at him, but he was lighting a cigarette, and the new indulgence broadened her uneasiness. A new habit; perhaps a new person?

His voice had a different ring, his speech was more staccato. His trousers were smart wool plaid, and — God! — he was wearing an ascot! And where was his luggage?

The eggs were finished and the coffee half-gone when he said, "Nicole, I discovered myself in New York, discovered that I might make it as a writer." His voice quavered. "But I've got to do it alone."

She cried, she argued, she pleaded, but the slate eyes, narrowed above the cigarette smoke, gave

her no quarter, and asked none. Until she began to throw things and he ran out of the flat. She followed him down the stairs, couldn't find him, and returned an hour later, stoned, but he wasn't there. He hadn't removed any of his belongings, but the astrakhan hat he'd worn from New York was gone.

To ease her loneliness, she had Osgood over for dinner. The "Walking dildo" responded to the new mood of intimacy created by a liter of Montrachet, spoke of his longing to be a cowboy, to do the Houston rodeo circuit. A cowboy, a real Gary Cooper cowboy! It took him a while, and not a little money, to find out that a five-foot-four-inch asthmatic couldn't make the grade. He was banged up in a steer-dogging contest that put him into the hospital for nearly two months and three thousand dollars. He became an insurance adjuster after one such adjuster took him to the cleaner's on his medical bill. That's where the money was, he decided, and if he couldn't do what he wanted, he might as well have the cash. Nicole saw his talent then, for the first time; he was intimidating because of his very persistence: he kept his eye on what he wanted.

She let him make love to her, on the new gold-colored satin sheets she'd bought after Rock left. She'd tried to think clearly, to see matters in perspective, to be objective, but she couldn't. But neither the Montrachet nor the toke could turn Osgood's face above her into Rock, and then it did and she said to it: "What did you expect?"

I think I'll buy that orangetweed skirt tomorrow, she thought that night in the flat, as the red wine cascaded from the bottle into her glass. On the sofa were four new dress boxes, and when she glanced at the west wall of the flat and finished the second bottle, she imagined the wall bare.