

BREACH IN DECORUM

I turned to the first person I saw and, being a good aerobics instructress, asked with my brightest possible smile “Can I help you?” I found myself staring at myself in the mirror. I had asked me if I could help me, apparently. The blue flash I’d seen in the nearly empty club house was my own leotard, catching my eye in one of the many mirrors that ran floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall in the exercise room.

A man sitting at the juice bar laughed. He was the only one who saw me. I blushed. “No, come here,” he said. I turned bright red. “You are too funny. How come I haven’t met you before?”

“I don’t know,” I said, walking uneasily toward him.

“Sit!” He patted the chair next to him.

“I can’t. I’m working.”

“Let me let you in on a little secret. I’m one of the owners of the club.”

His body was taut. I could tell this through his suit, an Armani, which I knew, having spent so many years watching my grandmother, Nana Rose, sew for haute couture. “Consider this an order,” he insisted, extending his hand.

So, I sat down. We chatted about the tuna fish salad and about Wei Ling, the cook’s, special ingredient. “Peeled grapes,” I told him. “Can’t you tell by how very sweet they are?”

He kept making references to Elvis and Frank Sinatra, how he’d looked like Elvis in his younger days, when they were both in their younger days. He did still look a bit like Elvis, the sharp indent in his chin, the kind women liked to touch and the very high cheekbones. “Have dinner with me, Blue Suede Shoes.” That was what he called me. My

leotards were blue, my skirt was blue and my shoes were also uniform blue with the suede soles of a dancer. “We can talk about the club,” he insisted, “Blue Suede Shoes.”

“I don’t know.” I considered his salt and pepper hair. He had to be more than twice my age. This both attracted and repulsed me, the same reaction I’d had, in my few years of experience, toward men who were ugly. Only this man was anything but ugly. What would it be like to tongue kiss a handsome man my father’s age?

“Come on. It will be fun.” His eyes sparkled. They were blue-grey, the color of the sea in winter. “We’ll go to a health food place.

I looked down. He wore fine leather shoes, Bally’s. I knew because my grandfather was a cobbler and often pointed out men’s shoes to me. “You can always tell a man by his shoes,” said my grandfather. And he had a gold Rolex watch. This, for some reason, made me uncomfortable. It’s not that I didn’t like money. It’s just that I wanted my own.

“You like health food right?” he said, playing with the keys to his Ferrari.

“I like steak,” I told him.

He burst out laughing.

“Please don’t take me to any of those health food places. Every damn fool who asks me out here takes me to a health food place. I eat meat, ya know. I don’t want to starve to death.”

“You’re a hoot,” he said, slapping his knee. “OK then a steak place, whaddya say?”

He was charming in that way a man so much older can be. He knew things: his soul was worn. His eyes focused on me, solely on me. He spoke softly. He was used to

people saying yes, apparently, and felt he need not push the point. I soon felt I was the only person in the room to him, in the club, in the world, in the universe. With all he knew about the world, which was considerable, what he wanted most, what he needed most was me. His eyes slid over me like a shock wave.

“Well, uh, OK, then,” I stammered. Then he asked for my number. I had not seen that coming. “I don’t have a phone,” I told him. He looked incredulous. “I mean, I’m, uh, getting one.” I lied, suddenly embarrassed. “I mean, the old one’s broken. The lines are crossed or the wiring in the building or something.”

I knew he didn’t expect me to have money, but I also knew he didn’t expect anyone could be that poor. “Take my number,” he said and wrote it down on a gold embossed business card. He winked as he left the club. He was wearing a beaver coat. I had never seen a man in a fur before.

On the day we were to meet, that Saturday, despite my excitement, I woke up with a wretched flu. I risked my life, going out into the snow, mowing down snowdrifts in my sandals – my Keds were wet -- to use the pay phone two blocks away. Miserable with fever, I clutched the handset, dropped in a coin and dialed. “I can’t go out. I’m sick.” I said.

“I can make you better,” he purred.

“What? No, I’m sick, really sick.”

“Maybe I can come by and we can just watch TV together.”

“I don’t have a TV,” I said. I thought only boys my age used that line.

“You’re a hoot. No TV, who doesn’t have a TV?” What was he going to say now, that he would bring one? But he was not that generous, no. “C’mon, how do you

know you're sick?" he said. "Do you have a fever?"

"Throwing up all over the place and 102." I made what I hoped were wretched retched sounds. At this unfortunate moment, an ambulance went by, siren wailing.

"What? Where are you now?"

"Outside, making this friggin' phone call, trying to cancel our date," I said, busted, as I clutched my nightgown under my threadbare coat. It was my Easter coat. I usually wore layers under it. The snow fell in furry chunks, the sky shivering down.

"You can't be that bad. Let me pick you up."

I sneezed. And again. Wiped my mittens on my coat. "Look, can't we do this some other time? I'm really not feeling--"

"Not feeling like you want to see me?"

"No, I have the flu. I can't go out."

"You're already out. What you mean is, you don't want to go out with me."

I did not know what to say. He was an owner. He could have me fired. "I'm not lying. I'm sick. I told you."

"I'll be right over," he said and hung up. I couldn't call back. The snow was piling up above the garbage bags left on the street for collection and a German shepherd was peeing on my feet. Besides, I didn't have another dime.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived. "It's Gregory," he said, trying to buzz into my building.

I hit the intercom. "Go away." I was retching into a plastic basin and had no time for amenities.

"I brought Chinese," he said, which made me retch again.

“You can’t come in.”

“What?” he said, banging on the buzzer which did not work well in the best of times.

“Do you want to get sick?” I said.

“I won’t get sick.”

This was a ridiculous conversation, each of us banging on the intercom, the words overlapping.

“Do you have someone up there?”

“No.”

“Then buzz me in.”

“I told you, I’m sick. We can go out some other --”

“Come on, it’s freezing out here.”

“Gregory, I’m sorry, I can’t --”

“I can’t hear you!” he bellowed. Then someone entered the building and let him in anyhow, and he came up to the apartment. He stood on the landing, singing that stupid song, “Paula, pretty little Paula. Come –oh-ohn! Open up!””

So I opened the door a crack, keeping the chain on, just to talk. I thought if he heard my voice, in person, saw my eyes, how sick I was, he would finally go away. “Hi” I said, batting my eyes as miserably as being alive would allow.

“That’s better,” he smiled. “Gosh, you’re pretty.” He held up the Chinese.

“Whaddya say? Hmmm?” There was no one on the stairwell, no one on the landing. No one at all around.

“I’m sorry. I can’t.”

All at once, he leaned his weight against the door, the flimsy chain fluttering. Only the door was between us. I leaned back, trying to close it.

“I told you. I have the flu.”

“Open up!” He slammed the door with his fist.

My apartment was a tenement railroad flat, the rooms set up like train cars on narrow tracks, narrow room following narrow room with open doorways and no doors. A police lock secured the inside of my front door, the sole door in the place. The lock, meant to keep out criminals, involved one metal plate screwed in to the back of the door at about head height and another riveted to the floor. Attached to these plates was a rigid, metal pole. Once clicked into place, the pole had little give, so if an intruder tried to force an entry, the door pushed harder on the pole and the pole against the floor. It’s tough to bust in on a police lock. Repeated force, however, can pop the pole, rendering the lock useless.

He slammed the door again. The police lock bent. He must’ve told his friends he was going to nail an aerobics instructress.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “You’re scaring me,” I cried, near tears, dripping wet with fever.

“Ok, all right, relax,” he said softly, his mouth at the opening. His breath smelled of mints.

“You relax!” I tried again to close the door but he had his weight against it.

“I’m sorry, ok? It’s just, I really wanted to see you.”

I started to retch. “What am I, your fucking Barbie doll” I wanted to shout, but my mouth was dry. I wanted a Lick-m-aid, a bittersweet candy. My tongue felt like the

army slept on it.

“Come on!” he insisted, jiggling the doorknob. “Let me in, baby!” he was shouting. The chain on the door trembled.

“Fuck off!” I shouted back through the door. I clutched my drenched nightgown between my legs.

“Oh, c’mon, baby, please, baby, please, baby, please!” as if we had already done it. As if he had the right. I could see his thick red lips moving through the crack in the door, the twisted door chain straining, its silvery glint flashing off his teeth. The police lock groaned.

My super was no use. “Germanium, geranium! Marjorium!” He was down in the bottom of the airshaft, ass in his lawn chair, drinking with his red-petaled geraniums and pining, between pints, for his wife, Marjorie, long gone. My gay neighbors, fucking and sucking when in love, screaming bloody murder otherwise, and once, tossing a TV, still plugged in, down the airshaft because one or the other’s ex-lover was on it, were unreliably quiet. The old couple across the airshaft couldn’t see this far. I wished I could dial 911, but I didn’t have a phone.

“Go away,” I moaned, soft as a kiss. The room spun, the flu assaulting me in waves. Holding my nightgown aside, I retched into the washbasin. I held the basin like I did when I was four and my mother and I sat cross-legged on her plastic-covered sofa, me in my feety pajamas clutching Lamb Chop who only had one ear and the Tupperware basin in which we used to put salads, then sandwiches, then blocks because the top had bent and the seal was no longer air tight. My stomach upset, my father and brother long home from a party I never attended, everyone, even the goldfish, already fast asleep, my

mother would feel my feverish forehead, her hand cool as a whistle. I could smell her sweet perfume, White Shoulders, and feel the rustle of her silk and taffeta, the kind of dress worn when the Pope and President were Catholic. After a moment, she'd rise like some unholy ghost and disappear down the long dark hall in a flick-flack of butterfly slippers. Up alone, my eyes adjusting, I'd see through the slats of the gold Venetian blinds the headlights of a boat-shaped Oldsmobile passing on the dew-shined road; then I'd feel something like a wave in the shooshing of the tires on asphalt, the urban surf, roaring and rolling away. The nausea of abandonment. One pays for the freedom of being alone. By being left and leaving things behind.

“Do you have a fever, baby? Poor, poor baby.” He was being sultry now, through the door.

I retched. I vomited again. “Please. Just. Go.”

I didn't want him to see me like this. I didn't want anyone to see me like this. I didn't even want to see myself like this. Unfortunately, my stove was the shiny old chrome kind, highly reflective, the only thing the super had polished in years. My hair looked like Farrah Fawcett Majors' on speed, finger in a plug. Like the illegitimate daughter of Don King and Farrah Fawcett. My eyes were old as Yoda's, but not as wise.

“I can make you hot, baby.... How about a little chicken soup, hmmmmm?” He was humming now, a lullabye to lure me. He wanted in, into my tenement apartment and then, presumably, all the way in to me. It pissed me off that I did not warrant coins of the realm. No diamonds, no flowers, no chocolates... just a nut. Outside my door. Rattling my chain. So very par for the course. “I don't think so. I don't think so, no,” I managed. My head was swimming. Did he do this with supermodels, too? Make them

unsupported offers. Or did he also wave scads of cash? I would've said 'no' anyway. To any offer. I think.

He got angry again, slammed and joggled the door. "Who the fuck do you think you are!" he shouted. "I'll have your ass fired! I'll have your ass --"

"You're not gonna have MY anything!" I had no idea where that voice came from, somewhere deep inside like an iron when it burned. "Leap away," it said and I did.

"I'll have your ass in a sling!" he insisted.

"What is so goddamned interesting, anyway, about my ass?" I yelled back, as if I expected some sort of honest discourse. "What about the parts I don't sit on, huh, what about those?"

The man who was trying to break my door down could do whatever he wanted with that particular part of my anatomy as long as he stayed behind the door.

"Sure. Sure, whatever you want." He was making grunting sounds.

Fever crept down my spine in slow small shivers. I moved to the opposite side of the kitchen and pulled a ladle, like a saber, from the feet of my fat ceramic cow. Nose chipped, one hoof gone, she reigned over the windowsill, thick beside the aloe plant and stuffed with wooden spoons, spaghetti pincers, an egg whisk, assorted spatulas, nutcracker and meat fork and, of course, plastic ladles, new and improved. The old metal ladle would have to do. I brandished the soft-cupped end of the utensil, pointing it toward the door, where my "date" had switched back to soothing, cooing noises, "ooo, ooooh, aaaah."

"I'll call the police if you don't go... like now!" I found myself shouting deliriously. His fingers inched their way inside the small opening the police lock would

allow, fidgeted with the damaged chain. They were soft, slim, manicured fingers, olive-skinned, smooth to the touch most likely, the kind anyone would like to kiss, to be caressed by. Not the hard worker hands of my uncles and my brother, made for toil and family. I raised the ladle but could not bring it down. “Like now!” I shrieked. Like the “like” had some metaphorical weight, meaning “in reality, this minute, I really mean it, buddy-boy.”

He kept cooing for a minute or two. “C’mon, baby, ooh, baby, oh baby.” Shuh, shuh, shuh. Wiggling his fingers. Then silence, like a rattlesnake before its strike.

What was he doing out there? A jiggle. A grunt. BAM! He was forcing the chain. That’s what! It started to break, to flutter apart, its wings utterly useless. The pole on the police lock slid, popped up, then down. The door bent and groaned. BAM! He slammed it again. The police lock slipped up an inch, two. He clutched the doorframe, actually trying to lift the door and pop the police lock. He was a big man, full-bodied. I would be squashed like a bug on a calabash if he got inside. His voice thickened, his fingers strained. “Oh-pen-up!”

The ladle wouldn’t do it. I stuck the ladle back in the cow. I had knives but only dinner knives. Quite dull and useless. Without thinking, I hurled myself off the stove and across the kitchen, slamming my full weight, all 95 pounds of it at 15 mph, into the door, which bumped shut.

I heard the expected crack, then a yelp. I leaned away quickly, not out of pity, but because I did not want to see what I had wrought with his fingers. He cried out, like a sickened dog. Then I rammed the door again. Bang! “Bitch! You filthy bitch!” he shrieked, pummeling the knocker with what I imagined was his good hand. I hoped he

didn't play the piano. He would no longer be able to strike the chords.

I leaned hard now on the inside, feet slipping on the worn, cracked linoleum, the police lock rolling at my feet. "Go away, or I'll call the police! I will!" I cried, heart pounding. He knew I didn't have a reliable phone. No TV. No phone. No shower. Only a tub in the kitchen and a pull chain toilet in the closet.

"Filthy bitch," he raged. In half a minute, he could find someone better and easier than me. He wanted to let me know that. "Good for nothing. You're a nobody. No-body!"

"And you're a nothing!" I shouted back, like I cared who or what he was.

He was just not happy. Anyone could see that. One might even say he was in a great deal of pain. Not just because his fingers were broken either. He bellowed, "Who the fuck do you think you are? You stupid bitch!"

What was he crying out for? The mother who had abandoned him? The womb that had spit him out into the world? A fuck. A hug. A lollipop. What he was doing guaranteed none of these. I reckoned he wouldn't have me fired either. What would he report? No, no. He was ashamed. A girl had crushed his fingers, someone less than half his age and half his weight, just by slamming her body against the door. And I had so liked his eyes. Love could turn to hatred and hatred love. That was all that I knew about it.

"Fuck you!" he said, hopping off, slapping the hallway wall behind him, like a bruised animal. I imagined his shoulders hunched, head down, hand between his legs, soft lips frowning. Then I could hear him stop, turn back. The sadist had turned victim. I was relieved, while he was feeling low as a worm. But the thought was occurring to

him, obscured by pain but nonetheless there, that he was not a worm, but a man. He put his forehead, I could tell by the dead spot against my ear, to the middle of the door. “Paula,” he sang, “are you there? Are you listening?” I imagined him clutching his bloody hand. My back to the door, his lips four inches from my ear, I stayed mum. A bead of sweat trickled down my left ear. “How about tomorrow night? Tomorrow night, you’ll be better, right?”

The full weight of what we had done to one another hit me. We had not even seen one another fully, let alone touched. “Go away, please!” I started to cry and I made sure he could hear me, making hunched baby sounds. “Ahwaaaaw! Ahwaaaaw!”

My voice faded. For a long breath, two, three, it was ungodly quiet. He had sounded so sad, his voice cracked. Was he too in tears? It must have been humiliating to find himself, a man of some means, out in the hallway of a tenement flop, fingers crushed, forehead pressing the door of an aerobics instructress’ railroad flat, dressed in flawless Armani, albeit with a couple of spots of blood by now, facing midlife with a full head of hair and floppy silk scarf and still not being let inside. Perhaps he’d realized what an “ass” of himself he’d made. He sure didn’t want my ass now. He wanted comfort. He wanted to know the world was all right, the way it had been before his breach in decorum. When all was right and his future was filled with Girls! Girls! Girls! No hard feelings. After all, it had probably occurred to him that we would see one another at the gym the next morning. And that even though I was a nothing, I was a nothing who might spill the beans. He didn’t know I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. Not then. Not even now.

He had wrought it on himself. He was sobbing now. Perhaps he was thinking

about a woman? A wife? How she might cradle his fingers, kiss the inside of his bruised and broken hand, caught in the car door, he would tell her. Or perhaps he didn't have a wife. Perhaps, like me, he had no one. It is an awful sound when a grown man cries. Should I let him, maybe, inside? Take him in my arms. See what transpired? "Gregory?" I called his name, but what we can control is almost nothing. Small events, meaningless, out of context, often intervene.

I could hear voices in the hallway, people climbing stairs, my neighbors coming home from a party. "Take me out to the ballgame! Take me out to the crowd. Find me some peanuts and crackerjacks..." It was the only bar song they knew. Maybe the only bar song Americans have. They slapped the walls, stomped on the stairs, rattled the already shaky railings. In their faux furs and polyester parkas, waving Yankee pennants and American flags, they easily broke the mood.

"Well, alright, then, Paula. Alright," the fellow who tried to break my door down whispered, the fight kicked out of him. Whatever demon there was had crawled back under his skin. "Paula," he murmured softly. I so wanted to take a peek, to open the door. "Paula, puh-lease." He sounded desirous. I felt desired. He wasn't a complete zero. He was human. He had Omar Shariff eyes. "Open?" said a voice in my head, the steely iron of my past falling away quickly. I wanted the openness of love and lovers. This man with the broken hand was older than me. I fancied he knew such pleasures. I had not yet had an orgasm -- not with a man yet, anyhow. And he'd had such lovely hands. But he was backing away, his voice softer and softer. "I won't bother you anymore, no I won't, Paula, pretty little, Paula..." He began singing that 50's song Hey, Hey, Paula, cutting off well before the "I want to marry you," part. He waited, in silence,

just feet away from the banister and stairs that would take him out into the world. I started to retch. The nausea was sweet. This was my first entanglement with the blues. “You’ll be sorry. You’ll see. You’ll be sorry what you passed up,” he croaked, the demon one last time. I could neither close the door nor open it. I hesitated. He need only to slam against it one more time. Or I would soon be alone. I would be alone forever, maybe. And who else had seen his demon? Not many, certainly not those who endowed him with Ferraris. And so, we shared a bond of sorts. For a moment, we were one. Two moments. Three. Four. Time stretched. My body trembled. Then the hallway went black, not the kind of black that looks black. The lights were, technically, still on. I could see them through the cracked open door. In fact, it was lighter now than it had been previously, his shadow no longer there. “G’bye,” I said, hollowly, to no one in particular. Apart from the light, I could tell by the extreme silence, the vacuum one feels when one has been keened up to face a danger that suddenly disappears, that he had already shuffled off. I scratched at the door from the inside at the spot where I thought his forehead had been on the outside. I placed my own forehead there for warmth. Then I threw up all over myself and slumped against the door.