

Porcelain Doll

I suck in my breath, take a resigned sigh.
It has taken me weeks
to summon enough courage to offer up my wife
to my rival on the dance floor.

“Hey Dick, can you show her this
promenade walk-around turn?
You’re really good at it
and I am not leading her well at all.
Can you help break this log jam we’re having?”
So I give her up, hand my Beauty over to another man.

Dick looks at me wide-eyed, speechless, then says,
“Sure, I think I can handle it.”
He takes my beautiful wife by the hand,
slides his long arm close around her waist
slow and carefully, as if she were a porcelain doll,
slow, slow, quick, quick, slow slow . . .

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,
I think to myself as I watch my wife, the love of my life,
to see just how thrilled she is
to get away from me for a change
and dance with somebody good.
She looks up at Dick, seems a little flushed.

For 40 years I have guarded her
as Midas guarded his gold.
I have been possessive and jealous,
like an uncertain teenage boy, determined
to please her and make her happy in every way I can.
But also, I have never wished to hold her against her will,
I could never do that.
I always figured that if she ever tired of me
or needed someone else to make her happy,
I would never stand in her way.

But my heart pounds as I watch their turns
and chasses, promenades and close tight holds.
My heart pounds in trepidation,
hoping I have not started something that I cannot finish,
hoping that heart pounding does not lead to heart breaking.

Rough Spot

“We’re going through a rough spot,”
she says to me, “That’s all.
We’ll get through it.”
And I’m shocked, truly stunned speechless.
The last time I can remember
being so stunned
was that time in college
when she sent me away
so she could date another guy.
In my whole life
I am most proud of my marriage,
of my relationship with my wife.
And yes recently,
I admit to being overly attentive
and affectionate, I realize that she
is really sick of me touching her so much,
sick of me telling her so frequently
that I love her and think she’s beautiful.
I know it is over the top
and makes her uncomfortable,
makes her shake her head
and roll her eyes in disgust.
But in my defense, I have been trying
oh so hard not to act this way.
And I’ve been feeling that I’ve been better
about controlling all this attention.
I know I am not there yet
but I am getting better,
even she admits to that.
I realize that if I don’t get all this
obsessive sophomoric adulation
under control soon
that she may run off
with the UPS guy so for me this
is truly a matter of life and death.

“Where are you going? Michael. Michael.”

In the car on the way home
after dropping Linda off at the Ferry,
my wife begins to complain about me again,
one of those harpies eating the liver out of my chest,
telling me that I talk about her all the time,
even the children said I talk about her too much,
and I relate everything to her and she’s sick of it,
and she explains that at Mystic Seaport
she took my camera away
because I was taking too many pictures of her.

“I feel like you’re burying me,” she says,
“It’s like I’m already dead.”
Such a terrible thing to say to me.
I don’t understand. But I’m not going to argue.
Her feelings are her feelings.

But then she stops herself suddenly
like jerking the reins on a horse,
sees that she is being hard on me again.
She begins to cry,
“I don’t want you carrying all of this,
things are definitely getting better,
we are working our way through
this rough spot in our relationship.”

The rough spot again. The damn
ubiquitous rough spot.
I can’t seem to get rid of this rough spot.

I don’t believe her. I know she thinks
our recent troubles are all my fault,
she hasn’t done anything wrong,
she’s the same as she was a year ago,
it’s all me and my obsession with her.

But maybe she is feeling a little responsible
and guilty for picking on me
because in the middle of the night,
for the first time ever in our long marriage,
she says a few words in her sleep,
so clear and sure, yet trembling at the same time,
“Where are you going? Michael. Michael.”

Completely in my own mind

Looking at myself in the mirror at work,
I breathe a sigh of relief, literally,
say to myself, "It's been 8 weeks since he's
been to dance class, maybe he's not coming
any more." Then I smile to myself.

Finally, finally, maybe I can relax a little,
not be so concerned about competing
with him, dancing better than him. Maybe now
I can stop worrying about him
swooping in and sweeping my wife
off her feet. He has a wife of his own, but
she's nothing compared to my wife –
he likes watching her, likes dancing with her too
whenever he gets the chance. He thinks
she "moves smooth as a river."

My wife claims my jealousy is completely
in my own mind. She's not interested in him,
not attracted to his tall, debonair presence whatsoever.

As soon as we get to the dance studio
our instructor declares, "Guess who's coming
tonight?" And my heart sinks, it does,
drops like a stone to the bottom of the sea.
But I admit I am not surprised,
guys like him never really ever go away entirely.

But what does surprise me is that immediately
upon hearing the news, my wife,
by reflex really, turns, stares at herself in the mirror,
pats her hair and says, "Oh my hair is such a mess
and I didn't put much makeup on either."

Her pretty little finger

Shocked to see her diamond ring, her engagement ring,
lying quiet and all alone on the counter.

I realize she took it off because she
was working in the garden,
didn't want to get it dirty.

But to have it simply sitting there, stark, alone,
for anyone to see or touch or take, startled me.

And she's been in now from the garden for hours.

Hasn't she missed it?

Maybe it's a Freudian slip of some kind,
that she doesn't want the ring any longer,
doesn't want to be my wife any longer.

It happens you know. People find
other lovers and friends and leave their spouses
all the time. Why hasn't she missed it?

Is this a signal to me, I wonder? I'll come upstairs

brandishing her diamond ring

on the end of my pinky. I'll say,

"Missing something?" and hold it out for her to take.

And she'll simply look at me with that

blank look of hers, shrug and say, "No, that's ok dear,

you can have it back. I've held onto it

far too long as it is. It's yours again."

And off she'll go to her new life with her new lover,

leaving me behind with all my clutter,

all alone and quietly clutching

onto this stupid diamond ring, useless now

and meaningless because it is no longer on

her pretty little finger.

My Heart Pounding

A number of my high school friends
admit to me today
to having had a crush on you back then.
But they were too awed and overwhelmed
by your breathless beauty and your long
straight dark hair to ask you out like I did,
my heart pounding all the while.

They were too frightened by rejection
to imagine they could ever have a chance with you
like I did (such an audacious thing I realize now).
So, my heart pounding through the adolescent haze
I dared to reach out to touch you,
held your precious hand in mine,
kissed your sweet lips with mine,
and vowed to love and care for you
until the last breath left my body.
Then I hung on for dear life
making you mine against all the obstacles and odds,
driving all the others out
of your pure white light
and into the shadows where they belonged.

But then again perhaps I was simply
too innocent and hapless to know any better,
too helpless, my heart pounding all the while,
unable to resist the pure wonder and allure
of you – of Patti, my Patti,
the best and most beautiful thing
ever to happen in my life.
You are the purpose of my life, my reason
for living, without you my life
would have been dross, simply dross,
and my heart would not have been pounding.

The way I fell for her

Through those 4 harrowing years of college,
with me at a different school,
I tried so hard to maintain my relationship with her,
like looking into the cafeteria
through a window while standing outside
in the freezing snow.

I was so worried I would lose her
to another more worthy guy,
worried sick and frightened
some other guy would fall for her
the way I fell for her,
pursue her as relentlessly as I pursued her,
and win her from me,
some other guy, handsome, smarter,
stronger than me.

I worried she would put me behind her,
put us behind her,
and explore her options,
go off and be with someone else,
leaving me behind forever,
leaving us behind forever.

But as fate would have it she,
the most beautiful girl I have ever known,
chose me. How
could such a thing be?
If I live 100 years I'll never understand it.

Blind Date

“I’ve never been on a blind date,” I state,
feeling a mixture of pride and sorrow.
“I haven’t either,” my wife responds immediately,
looking away from the TV screen.

I look at her to see if she is kidding.
But she isn’t.
“Yes you have,” I say. “You’ve been on a blind date.”
A quizzical look crosses her face.

“In college, remember,
when you decided you needed to date other guys.”
“Oh that. I forgot all about that.”

“So you’re one up on me,” I continue,
“seeing as I’ve never been on a blind date
and you have.” I guess it is pride I’m feeling.
I’ve never had to resort to a blind date
like my wife has.
“Yup, I’m one up on you, ha, ha,” she kids me,
turning her attention back to the TV.

Of course I can’t help but reflect
on how that blind date of hers, a date she dismisses
out of hand, that ha ha blind date of hers,
was actually the worst day of my entire life.
The day she sent me away
so she could spend the day with another guy,
the day I could have lost her,
the most beautiful woman I have ever known.

I guess the laugh’s on her though,
because her stupid blind date was a fiasco
and she ended up stuck with me forever, poor thing.

If you ask me

My wife's in the supermarket,
inadvertently touches her cellphone
and calls me – "Hello, hello!"
Garbled noises and scraping sounds
like some monster stuck in the bottom
of a well, a moment or two
of real talking, some beeping
as she checks out.
After 5 minutes I hang up.

When she gets home I tell her about it.
"Good thing you weren't
having a clandestine meeting with
that tall suave debonair guy
you like to dance with
in our dance class
and called me by accident," I quip.

"Yes, that would have been
an interesting phone call for you,"
she responds, not even looking up,
rather too nonchalantly
if you ask me.

Barely perceptible grin

Here I am barging into her life again,
into another corner of her life
that should be only for her, without me
for a change, she can certainly use a break
from me for a change.

This time I'm at her chorus rehearsal,
back in the rear of the auditorium,
back in the shadows, watching her carefully
through my opera glasses, drinking her in,
deepening the image of her that has already
completely suffused my brain,
of her sure, sweet, pure singing,
her pretty head bobbing softly to the rhythm,
her body swaying slightly to the beat.

Poor thing, can't get a break from me,
from my stalking her. (In my defense
she is my wife after all.) But she did
take a step in the right direction this week,
"forgetting" to get me a ticket
for the show Friday night.
And now it's too late, I won't be able to go,
won't be able to see her singing on stage.
"Who would've thought they would sell out,
sorry Honey," she states,
with a barely perceptible grin.

Plenty of crushes on boys

She's in the tub, bathing herself peacefully,
when I barge in, try to get her to tell me
who she dated before I came along to claim her
for my very own forever. As usual, she claims
not to remember back that far.

But I'm prepared this time, I open up her diary,
read a passage from August 16, 1964:
"I've had plenty of crushes on boys by now
and only about a dozen dates in this year,
most of which I'll probably forget
when I'm out of my teens."

I close the diary. "You mean to tell me
you had a dozen dates in 6 months
when you first began dating boys
and you don't remember any of them!"
I'm incredulous. "You must've dated
some really exciting guys."

"A dozen really?" She scrunches her brow,
continues splashing the water
over her gleaming shoulders and arms.
"Well maybe I went on a number of dates
with a couple of guys, not a dozen guys."

"That's all the more reason to remember them then,"
I respond, trying not to stare at her
beautiful form glistening all wet and soapy.
I continue, "Probably guys remember their dates
because they have to ask girls out
and that's a terrifying experience,
especially in the beginning."

She's still thinking, running the washcloth
over her thighs and calves and pretty little feet.
"I must've exaggerated in my diary," she says finally,
"Because I can't remember any of them."

I continue talking and avoiding looking
too closely at her, "No wonder you were eager
to date me. You needed some excitement
in your life at that point in time."

“Yes,” she smiles, “Guess I did
and you were so cute too.”

“I’m glad you remember me dating you.”

“Of course I do, silly, you’re the only date
that counts for me in my whole life after all.”

“OK,” I reply as I slowly back out of the bathroom
before I get myself into some real hot water.

Stopping Time

Fifty years ago she sang
in the 6th Grade Glee Club,
slightly big for her 12 years,
standing slightly stooped
back in the rear row.
She sported bangs back then,
above a serious expression
of attentive youthful beauty.

Fifty years later she's still singing,
sure and sweet and pure,
now in the Acton Community Chorus,
second row center
from the front this time.
She's still sporting bangs
above a serious smile this time
and a lustrous shine in her mink-coat
brown eyes, her pretty head
bobbing sparingly to the beat,
my girl alert and bright
in her brown jumper,
soft white top, black slacks,
and dark brown sandals.

She's still the same beautiful girl
I fell in love with almost 50 years ago.
She's still my girl, stopping time,
this time and for all time.

On Her Own

She, except for college,
had never been on her own.
And she liked it then,
liked the freedom of being on her own.

But then there was me, always there
like a mosquito buzzing round her head,
there bothering her,
with her constantly in high school,
walking her to classes, carrying her books,
calling her at home at night, taking her here and there.

And in college too, I visited her
all the time every weekend and during the week too,
dating her, calling her, writing to her,
never leaving her much time
for her to be on her own.

No wonder she kept returning my ring to me,
why couldn't I take the hint!
No wonder she flirted
her little butt off in her classes.
No wonder she kept telling me all about
Ralph and Larry, Don and Steve.
No wonder she dated that guy behind my back
and went away to another college
with Sandy for that weekend.

She knew I wouldn't have allowed
her to be on her own
for even ten damn minutes.
And she needed a respite from me,
needed her space, her freedom to be on her own.

So why is she still here with me, I wonder,
after all these years of me pestering her,
and when will she see the light
and get rid of me for good
so she can truly be on her own?

Across the blankets and folding chairs

The grass reminds me
of death and sneakers
and picnic baskets. The band
is setting up. The sun, cooler now,
will soon be setting down beyond
the distant trees.

The music will begin soon,
in earnest, and the people
will settle down. I take my pill
to deaden the pain in my back.

I spray some OFF!

SKINTASTIC on my arms
and the back of my neck
and over my hair.

I hate it, but it's the lesser
of two evils. Across
the blankets and folding chairs
I see my wife.

She's talking to some friends,
pushing her hair back
with her hand. I think
how pretty she is still, listening
to her voice reaching me in
brief, flat, unorganized
stretches. And I think, too,
how grass is the same everywhere,
really, and so are people.

French Manicure

The music's beginning,
Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 in B-flat, Opus 60,
conducted by the still formidable Andre Previn,
such a big sound, big and steady and indomitable
as the surf rushing the shore in a storm. But, alas,
I am distracted by my wife's little foot,
wrapped in the thin straps of her lime-green sandals,
a petite leather flower holding steady
at the base of her big toe,
her toenails proudly gleaming even in
this dim twilight gloaming
in their new French manicure.

I want to kneel down before this magnificent woman,
take her precious foot carefully as if it were made
of ancient porcelain in my hands and kiss
it reverently as Lancelot kissed Guinevere's foot.
But for now I'll have to settle for Beethoven's 4th
and remain secure in the knowledge that
Beethoven has nothing my wife's little foot can't top,
of this I'm certain he would agree.

I steeled myself for the possibility of losing you

For 2 years I had done my very best
to prove my love for you.
But if you needed something more,
if you needed someone new,
all I could really do was shrug and step aside.

You owe it to yourself, after all,
to be certain of something as important as that,
you needed to try and find him.
Better for me not to get in the way,
to step aside, let you explore the others
and discover for yourself
that I am the best man to care for you,
love and adore you for your whole life.

So, I took a deep, deep breath,
steeled myself for the possibility
of losing you then watched from afar,
as from a lone window above the fray,
as you flirted and teased your way
through the benumbed boys in your classes,
hoping for, expecting, something to happen.

Yes, I moved out of the way,
praying you would finish your exploration
and realize what I knew all along,
that I am the only one for you,
and no one else in the world
could love you more than I do.

I should never have let her go

“Sorry you came all the way over here,
but I can’t see you today,” she takes a deep breath.
“I have a date with another guy.” She shrugs,
looks at me defiantly.

So, like the yellow-bellied cowardly jackal that I am,
I tuck my tail down between my legs
and leave her dorm, her campus, her town.

I actually (can’t believe it today)
allowed her, my girlfriend of 2 years
to go off to spend the day
with this creep, when instead
I should have balled my fists,
stood my ground, exclaimed,
“No you’re not. You’re my girl,
you’re not going off with any other guy,
unless of course you no longer want to be my girl.”

Yes, that is what I should have done.
There is a time for civility and gentility
and a time to ball your fists
and stand up for yourself and what’s yours
and for what’s right too.

Lost and Useless

Propped up on pillows doing her SODUKO puzzle,
my wife rests in bed across our room
in the Rookwood Inn, waking up,
sipping the coffee I brought her from downstairs.

I'm watching her silently mouthing numbers
as she works her puzzle, her white nightshirt
hanging loosely around her lush and sumptuous chest,
rising up and down rhythmically with her breathing.

And I wonder what I wonder every single day of my life –
how did I ever get such a woman,
how did I manage to make her mine?
She stirs and my heart stirs,
she looks over at me
and my eyes smile back,
she speaks and each of her precious words
soaks immediately like water
in a dry desert riverbed into my soul.

Then she slips out of bed and strolls across the room,
her nightshirt flowing like her wedding dress
once flowed, stilling air,
silencing the room, dimming the lights,
taking my breath away as I see
that beautiful 18 year old girl again
I fell in love with all those years ago,
and I am lost and useless for the rest of the day.