



End of the Workshop

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It's the end of our fiction workshop, and we're having a little reception, catered by the university, with wine, cheese, Pepperidge Farm cookies, and bottled water arranged on a table against one wall of the classroom where we spent the semester critiquing each other's stories.

As a sort of valedictory gesture of good will, the instructor has invited all of our characters to the event. It's something he started a couple years ago, after someone suggested it on his course evaluations, and he found it to be a fine way to finish everything off—hashing out lingering questions, putting to rest old grievances, spending one last half-hour with each other without any judging or constructive criticism. At least, that's the idea.

I'm crunching my way through a cookie—a mint Milano—standing with Rob, the protagonist of my second story. Rob and I have a lot in common. We both worked at the [Arch](#) during college, had pretentious girlfriends at one time or another, broke the relationships off messily but definitively. Despite these similarities, though, we have surprisingly little to talk about, and I'm chewing my Milano, savoring the last few moments during which I am not expected to break the uncomfortable silence.

Then suddenly Rob says, "I'm gonna grab another glass of wine."

I nod, relieved as he moves off toward the table. But as I watch him mingle, I have a disquieting thought. Has Rob just blown me off? Was he bored with *me*? Rob doesn't even make it to the table. That horn dog stops halfway across the room and strikes up a conversation with Mona, this flippant, aloof girl from Frederica's final story. But where is Jonas, the boyfriend with whom Mona fought during the story? I scan the room, but he's not here. Maybe they broke up after all. This surprises me—the ending of the story seemed so hopeful, what with Jonas telling Mona he wanted to live to be 120 and have her, senile, spraying him with Windex and batting him on the ass with a cane. It seemed a little *Big Fat Greek Wedding* to me, sure, but I never really doubted that it would work out between them. But here are Rob and Mona, picking up plastic cups of wine and a few toothpicked cubes of

cheese—and walking out the door together. “Going out for some air,” I hear Rob say offhandedly to my florid instructor. Peter, ruddier-faced than usual—must be the wine—nods knowingly and laughs.

Sighing, I drain the last of the Poland Springs bottle. Over by the window is Bill, the retired surgeon, with his people. There’s Pete, the fly-fishing lawyer who lives in a gated community and likes to drive a big SUV out to [Herculaneum](#), to the [Big River](#). He looks a heck of a lot like Bill, I notice. And next to him, a guy with an IV drip—must be Pete’s friend, Al. Yeah, that’s right—his biopsy turned up pancreatic cancer in the end, so that trip to Herculaneum was going to be their last one together. Well, it’s nice to see Al’s hanging in there.

A couple of Latin fellows on the outskirts of Bill’s clique eye lustily the behinds of the women in the room. Must be Paco and Juan—the Costa Rican guides in Bill’s other story who helped—what was his name?—*Jack* pull in that huge marlin or whatever the hell it was. And walking back to Bill now, laughing heartily—surely it’s Maria, the big-breasted Mexican woman who ran the cantina at the fishing camp and always, Jack suspected, had a bit of thing for him. Sure enough, she gives Bill another cup of wine—white—and leans her big chest against his arm, murmuring something into his ear. Bill laughs and Maria laughs, and then Paco and Juan and Pete and Al join in too, and they raise their plastic cups to toast their creator and his stories, that they may win first, second, and third places in *Fly Rod & Reel* magazine’s summer fiction contest.

But who’s this, lingering at the periphery of the circle, waiting to be invited in to the conversation? He’s shaking hands with Bill now, and I can hear Bill’s booming voice across the room.

“Martin! From Emily’s story. Right, right. Your wife ran off with some other fella—and your daughter ran off, too, at the end when your truck breaks down.”

Martin shrugs a little, makes an inaudible and no doubt self-deprecating remark.

“Lemme tell you something, Martin. I just gotta tell ya—I thought you were a wimp, guy. Some jackass steals your woman and you just sit around moping, feeling bad about every little angry word you let slip out when you talk on the phone with your ex-wife? Listen—and I’m not joking here—you’re just the type of guy who’s gonna get colon cancer twenty years down the road. I’ve seen it before, my friend.”

I can’t listen to this anymore. Bill and I got into a fight about it when we workshopped Emily’s story. I just hope he doesn’t run into Jill, that girl in Michael’s story, the sexually aggressive chick who chased down the coyote. Bill didn’t believe a woman like that existed. When Tracy suggested that maybe he didn’t know what he was talking about, he said, “I don’t know women? I’ve only operated on ten thousand of them.”

I head for the table—those cheese cubes look pretty good—and nearly bump into this woman with dark rings under her eyes.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” she says.

“I’m Frank,” I say.

“Lizzie,” she says, and then I remember. The girl who had everything, who’d always played by the rules, unlike her lifelong friend Amber, who slept around and had a messy apartment. From Amanda’s story. Lizzie always played by the rules, except for this one time, with this guy Craig, a one-night stand in college—and wouldn’t you know it? At the end of the story Lizzie finds out she’s HIV-positive, and now what’s Amber supposed to do?

More importantly, what am I supposed to do?

“How have you *been*?” I try, hoping to infuse that pleasantry with some extra degree of concern, hoping she’ll know just what I mean by that italicized *been*, hoping that she’ll recognize that it stands for the difficult question I’m too chickenshit to ask directly.

“Oh, I’m...” she begins and then breaks into tears.

I put my arm out to console her, and she collapses against my chest. Over her shoulder I look at Bill, who’s standing behind Maria, his arms around her midriff, her breasts falling over his thick forearms. Martin is gone.

And then I see, coming through the door, someone I think I know. Yes. I remember that R.E.M. T-shirt, those faded jeans and low-top Converse All-Stars. I ought to, after all. It’s Maryalice, from my last story for the semester, the one I thought was the best even though most people in the workshop thought it a little obscure. What did Maryalice really think about her older sister, the one with the butt-tattoo who invited her to the party with all of her college friends? How was she changed by that night she spent out on her sister’s balcony talking with the guy from Minnesota, who tenderly puts his hand on her belly as they sit there and talk? They were right, in a sense: Maryalice never tells exactly how she feels about it. But I thought the details were enough to make it implicit. Oh well.

Here come Amanda and Amber to take Lizzie off my chest. They set up camp in the corner, trying to console the poor thing. But I can’t take my eyes off Maryalice. I like the way her T-shirt clings to the tops of her breasts, the way she’s not wearing any make-up, the way her hair hangs loosely around her neck.

Is this creepy? Maryalice is only a junior in high school.

A little incestuous? I named Maryalice after my aunt.

Adulterous? Well, the more I look at her, she does look like a younger version of my wife. And she is a fictional character, after all. What could be the harm?

She's at the table now, shyly talking with Dylan, the AWOL Marine from Michael's story, pouring herself a cup of Merlot. I butt in.

"Aren't you underage, miss?" I say archly. I know she'll understand I'm merely teasing. She smiles, and her teeth are white and straight, except for one eye-tooth that emerges from her gumline a little higher than the rest. (This is a little something I noticed about Patricia Arquette in a movie I saw over the weekend.)

"What business is it of yours?"

"Oh, I just like to keep an eye on you," I say. "Here, some cheddar would taste good with that." I hand her one of the cubes and walk around to her side of the table. We survey the room together.

"Who's that?" she asks, pointing to a long-haired, bespectacled, trench-coated youth flanked by two people who look utterly out of place and nothing like their creator. One is a blond man wearing a suit of armor and carrying a large sword. He looks to his left and his right slowly, back and forth, saying nothing, as if wary of dragon attacks or malevolent magi. The other is a willowy princess in a gossamer gown.

"That's Alan," I say.

Alan's arm firmly grips the waist of the princess, who appears to be looking around the room for someone else she knows.

"Ah," says Maryalice.

"Hey," I say.

"Yeah?"

"There's really no one here you want to talk to, is there?"

"Nah," she says.

"You wanna take a walk?"

She looks up into my eyes and smiles. "I do."

We head for the door. The instructor is leaning against the wall, a forgotten cup of wine in his hand. He surveys the room, grinning mildly.

“Peter,” I say as we approach the threshold, “this is Maryalice.”

“Maryalice, of course. How lovely to meet you,” Peter says, shaking her hand. “I’ve read wonderful things about you.”

There’s an awkward split-second that Peter ends by laying out his palm as if to show us the door. He knows what’s going on.

“Have a good time, you two,” he says and claps me on the back.

Outside, in the cool air of the quadrangle, Maryalice puts her hand into mine, lacing our fingers together as we move down the brick path. We walk through the main entrance, the little passageway through the admissions building. The wind forced through such a small aperture, is stronger here, and it blows our hair back from our foreheads. Maryalice stops.

“I love standing here,” she says.

“Me too,” I say, and I put my hand against her ribs. She moves toward me, and then we’re kissing, the way she and Paul never did in the story, because I wanted it to be more understated, a prelude to romantic experience rather than the full-blown event. But now, in the passageway, Maryalice knows how to kiss me, and I how to kiss her, how to enfold her in my arms and run my fingers through her fine dirty-blond hair, how to rub my hand along her strong back, feeling the clasp of her bra beneath the cotton R.E.M. shirt. I know how to stop kissing her for a moment and rub my thumb softly along her soft cheek. And she knows how to turn her head to kiss my thumb as it nears her mouth, and how to pull me back to her.

I take Maryalice to my car and open the door for her. She slides into the passenger seat, but by the time I walk around to my door she’s already gone.

I start the car, pull out of the parking lot, down the long tree-lined driveway, the dramatic entrance to the campus, on to Skinker. From the stereo comes John Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things,” and all of the lights ahead are green. By the time I’m coming down Kingshighway toward my house it’s the final minutes of the song, and I listen—paying attention for the first time?—to Coltrane’s furious imagination, to one idea blending liquidly into the next, that horn screeching and singing, striving, creating atop the monotonous syntax of the piano, and tears come to my eyes, thinking about that man blowing the hell out of that horn, making it all up as he went along, spitting out beauty with every breath.

I’m almost home but I don’t want to stop moving until the song is over, so I drive past my street to the end of the block. I turn the corner and drive past my old apartment. I look

up at the balcony where I had Maryalice and Paul spend the night talking. I slow a moment, looking back.

When I pull up in front of my house, no one's home, which is just as well.

I want to write.