

Echo

You'd miss it if you were not me. It's called flirting. And like all forms of human contact, it occurs in a single moment, then echoes for a long time afterward.

There is a young man in a navy blue shirt and khaki shorts standing behind her. She's laughing because the ski boots don't fit and the pant leg she is trying to unzip is stuck. Like a Christmas tree in her bright new outfit, she sways left to right, almost falling, but not quite. The young man's hands move gently toward her hips and kinetically hover in the air beside them. Small, eager hands. Losing her balance, her head falls toward his shoulders. With an audible brush of rayon, he makes contact. I watch her eyes grow wide as her hair falls all over him. It's so damn loud. If I had a tape recorder, I could make my point and be done with it.

For eight years we have carried on with glances and smiles and private gestures. And I'd bet this was a kind of love. The other day I was about to say something and not only did she finish my sentence, but she corrected the grammar of how I was about to say it. We make up words for things all the time. Our children are not simply perfect, they are love-ish. When we sleep together, we don't have sex or make love, we nook it.

We are playful and silly like this, but not silly - on the short bus. Like so many marriages, and even dolphins in love (so science has proven), this is of our own creation. Through our familiar language, the world falls in and out of place, and we have learned how to make the best of it. We can talk it out. We can talk the hell out of a great many things.

But only when we remember the details.

In our second year of dating, when moving in became a possibility, we would meet at the bars with our groups of separate friends. Often we pretended to be interested in each other like strangers for the first time. It was a game we played, and she played it better than I. But I remember *specifically* that I never got jealous back then. Never. Even with the simple matter of physics between us - her, four years older and a damn sight better looking, and me, just an average-looking guy with a law degree and straight teeth. I didn't even have the benefit of being smarter than she was. Initially, I was taken by her stained-glass voice and then later by her symmetrical good looks. Finally, it was her willingness to listen to my every word, no matter how boring or self-indulgent the subject of me remained. Her eyes were in a constant state of illumination at the things I said. Whether it was about some football game I lost a bet on or the details of a case trial I was pursuing - she would close in the world around me. I loved the attention and she loved giving it, and that is what we had.

Now I have to yell through a bullhorn to get a response, and when I finally do, the light is gone.

I recall that this was, in fact, all my idea - this *domestication*. Late one night, after last call at the local pub, we walked out to the parking lot, passed by our cars, and stepped onto the beach. The wind blew cool and strong with a green moon in eclipse above us. I remember the way the sand looked with our tracks parallel to the water. New terrain was being crossed. Impressions were being made. Eventually I asked her the question on my mind. A wave crashed - or rather, each time I recall the moment I

hear a wave crashing. The strangest thing was the way her voice sounded when, finally, she said yes. Probably we were both drunk. I honestly only intended to say: *Do you want to move in with me?* But what came out was: *Do you want to marry me?*

This is one of the very first things she does not remember.

In a sense, my adult life began with either a Freudian slip or an inebriated, overly-romantic gesture. Either way, we are in the thick of it, and by now the young man's hands are comfortably resting on my Sarah's hips. I can't blame him, not really, though I'd still spend the money to have him killed. The fact is she's a very attractive woman with a casual demeanor. People are naturally drawn to her. I have watched men of all ages turn to stare at her, leaving their wives or dates at the table at the first opportunity to stand face to face with her. She loved this and eventually came to expect it everywhere we went.

She clunks over to me from across the department store. I could meet her halfway, but don't. The boots make a dull thumping sound and jerk her knees forward. She stumbles as she gets near me and almost knocks me over, but this time her fall is an accident.

"I remember this being easier, darling. Perhaps we should call it off and head for the Bahamas instead."

"Do you know what's funny?" I ask.

"No. What?"

"That young man looks like your old friend Bob Weinstein." This is a complete lie.

"You think so?"

"At first I couldn't quite place it. But then I was just sitting here watching you and it hit me."

"That is funny, darling. Have you found the gloves you wanted, or do we have to order them over the web and have them sent up?"

"I actually found a pair that will work perfectly. And they match

my goggles.”

“Fantabulous.”

Everything is fantabulous. Our trip is going to be fantabulous. Her new ski outfit will be fantabulous. The snow, the cabin, the dinner with the Metz’s, the hot tub, the port wine, the old record player we bought on Ebay for our Bill Evans records - all of these things: nothing short of fantabulous.

I watch her clunk back toward the Weinstein look-a-like. When she gets there, her laugh radiates through the entire mall and every alpha male in the pack catches her scent. She is the epitome of fantabulous. It sends a chill up my spine.

These past few days, I have been constantly reminded of the thing Sarah does not remember, the thing that we brought back with us from Vermont the first time we went, the thing that did not stay in the white snow-tipped mountains of Sugarbush, nor linger in the fingers of the pine trees outside our cabin window, nor remain hidden beneath a wool blanket beside a fire. It is the image of Bob Weinstein’s shoe. An Italian-made thing of leather and gold, as expensive as the wristwatch I own and twice as gaudy. Like I said, I remember things - images especially. I could have been an artist, if only I’d had the courage to be alone for extended periods of time.

This is the truest thing Sarah has ever said to me: “There will always be secrets. Secrets among friends, family, and especially lovers.”

She does not remember saying this either.

One Saturday evening, about a year ago, a man and a woman - let’s just go ahead and call them Bob and Aubrey Weinstein - check into a popular ski lodge for a week in the middle of February. That very same evening, another couple drive up from Providence, Rhode Island, to meet them. They are all old friends from college and they used to get along very

well. The idea is to get away for a much needed vacation from the normal bump and grind of domestic life. They are over thirty, well-adjusted, and profoundly bored with life.

By day, the couples ski the sunny mountainsides of Northern Vermont. They do both the downhill and cross-country trails. At some point, they discover a frozen pond off one of the flatland paths to skate and ice fish on. They drink buttered rum at the busy little cafe at the bottom of the slopes. They lounge in hot tubs, take unexpected naps by the fire in their New England furnished rooms of lighthouse paintings and dark wood rocking chairs. They read, write letters, talk philosophy, and reminisce. The men recall early business proposals and, during a round of single malt Scotches, make plans to call one another when the week expires. The women linger beside bay windows watching the fuzzy bundled children topple down the kiddy slopes; they speak of their hopes of future children, their ideal vision of family life, the concerns, the devotion, the way everything might change.

There is an atmosphere taking shape between them. They are lighter, somewhat altered for a short time as their specific gravity acclimates to the week of leisure.

“Why not move to Paris and write?” Bob Weinstein says almost angrily over a tabletop of empty champagne bottles. “Why not just do that?”

“Because, well, first of all Bob, the French hate us and secondly, all of that has been done before. Who the hell wants to read another book by an expatriate? I sure as hell don’t,” I say.

“That’s because you’re a realist, Sam. Where is your sense of adventure? Your sense of danger and risk of the unknown?”

Sarah reaches across the table and takes out a cigarette, the neck of her dinner dress dips low. “Sam is certainly a realist, that’s definitely true,” she says. “But you’re not being very imaginative Bob. I mean come

on, Paris?”

“Trust me when I say I can be very imaginative when I need to be,” he says.

This actually happened. The facts are as stated: we had been drinking steadily, each night drinking more and more. What began as a few glasses of wine with dinner, quickly turned to bottles of champagne, assorted highballs, and multiple rounds of martinis.

More facts: Bob Weinstein is a stocky man - five ten, dark hair, bearded, and often mistaken for being in a foul mood. Really it is only the burned in façade of a corporate officer who has limited responsibilities in his company. When Bob isn't renegotiating his salary, he's making plans to fire people. It shows in his face.

Aubrey Weinstein is a ceramics teacher at a community college. A bohemian turned housewife, she smokes marijuana regularly, but Bob doesn't know this. She says it helps her unwind from her busy day of spinning pottery. She is attractive in the way that some things possess a gentle, unobtrusive beauty. She doesn't stand out in a crowded room, but when you notice her, you cannot stop noticing her.

Together, Bob and Aubrey form a modern union of left and right brain symmetry. For myself, they came across as perfectly balanced. They fit together better than most. I'll admit that.

In contrast, I don't know how Sarah and I were viewed. Maybe in the same way, but I doubt it.

“I like the law, Bob. It's solid.” I knocked on the table for effect. “Real.”

“Sam, tell me what's so solid about it? Words on a page. No less real or unreal than the works of great literature,” Bob said, his voice inflected with the echo of a Harvard English professor.

Aubrey chimed in, “The point you two gorillas are trying to make

is essentially the same: the things we love fill us with a sense of wonder. They remain always bigger and unfathomable.”

I thought it was a hell of a thing to say and mostly true. Bob had other thoughts.

“Nope. Not everything that we’re taught to respect is good for us. Some things suck the life out of us and we don’t even realize it. Our careers are essentially choices we’re forced to live with to provide for those who depend on us, and all the while our hearts go in other directions. I’m talking about desire.”

It was at this point that I realized the core of the conversation was beyond my grasp and the game now was to sound as profound as possible without actually having to make any sense.

Sarah looked radiant, but acted quiet and distant. We had spoken very little that day. I believe at the time, I just thought she was relaxing and feeling introverted. She and Bob got along well. I could tell by their eye contact.

Facts.

At some point, the hour was very late. There was a common area between our two adjoining rooms with comfortable leather chairs and a couch. Aubrey and I found ourselves sitting alone. We had no thought of where our mates had gotten off to. A large fireplace sat squarely in the middle of the room and cast an orange hue over everything, while simultaneously drawing everything toward its blazing center. The windows nearby were large and gave a wide view of the falling snow outside. Above the tips of the dark pine trees, you could see the whiteness of the snow settling in clumps. They lined the horizon, creating an effect like that of clouds viewed from the window of an airplane.

The fact I remember next was leaning into Aubrey Weinstein. Falling almost, as though I was off balance and unable to stand without someone’s help. A rather pathetic gesture. But if done correctly, it could

send us headlong into a course of action that somehow could be reasoned as a fault of gravity rather than our own.

At first, we were both slow to respond, but only in the way our mouths hesitated to stay connected. The first few seconds were unfamiliar and awkward, but in time, the warmth spread. A natural glide of desire that can only run an unconscious course. A course of simple surrender to weight and motion and gravity.

The very next thing I have chosen to remember is the fact of the shoe. I awoke the next morning to find it beneath our bed. In the room rented under the name Sam and Sarah Radcliffe. The fact was that it did not belong there. It was out of place and unexpected. Tilted sideways with the laces not even untied. Kicked off haphazardly the night before. To think then, in that moment, as I knelt down on the floor examining it, that I felt nothing but the afterglow of something predetermined having finally occurred. It was as though Bob Weinstein's shoe had been waiting for me there the whole time. I knew I could talk about this with Sarah. I had the shoe. It was evidence. More solid and real than anything else that ever transpired between us. It was a confirmation of the way we were. The evidence of the people we were turning out to be. Or more truly, the people we had failed to become - the way we had settled.

So here we are. Luckily for both of us, it's my job to collect the facts and I haven't given up yet. Case in point: today I will recall the sound of hair brushing against rayon. The subtle, frictionless gesture of a human head falling toward synthetic fibers. A sound that can easily be remembered because, if I listen carefully, I will hear the echo everywhere I turn.