

THE TWO OF US

FLASH FICTION BY

DAVID FEELA

COVER ART BY P. SMITH

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CAUTIOUS ATTRACTION

“Is that a canker sore on your lip?”

“No, it’s a wart. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

“There has to be a reason. Normally people look away.”

“Just wondering, that’s all.”

“Were you thinking about kissing me?”

“Kissing you? Don’t be ridiculous!”

“You’re probably worried about STDs.”

“I was not worried about anything, I was concerned. It must hurt.”

“Canker sores are not contagious.”

“I didn’t know that, but I really don’t care.”

“It’s the warts that can be transferred to other people.”

“You are a font of information about contagious conditions.”

“I thought it gave me a sensuous lip.”

“You ought to get it taken care of.”

“Actually, it’s just a canker sore. Eventually it’ll go away.”

“Then why did you tell me it was a wart?”

“I wanted you to think I was a prince.”

“That’s the worst come-on line I’ve ever heard.”

“So kissing is out of the question?”

“Kissing was never a part of the question.”

“A handshake?”

“That’s my Parkinson’s.”

BEFORE BREAKFAST

All night the cows next door bellowed. By dawn I opened the bedroom window and called to the nearest cow.

“What’s all the bellowing about?” I asked.

“You should ask?” the cow replied, “You who sleep all night in a comfortable bed while we stand in the field?”

“That’s not an answer, and besides, it’s only Orwellian cynicism about the human condition” I said.

“Have you no depth, no inner cow resources to plumb so as to describe what’s innately wrong?”

I didn’t want to sound overly philosophical, but I hadn’t slept well and the opportunity to talk with a talking cow was unprecedented. I decided on another approach.

“Maybe it’s health, one of your stomachs is upset from ingesting too much fiber” I proposed.

The cow stared at me with disdain, as if I’d just made a tasteless joke about hamburgers.

“Don’t look at me like that” I said. “An upset stomach is the cause of much discomfort among our kind. Your kind has twice the risk for suffering with an easily treatable condition.”

The cow continued to stare. I knew I’d gone too far, that this cow had nothing else to say to me, that never again would I be taken seriously by any cow, that I might not even be taken seriously by my neighbors once word got out about me talking to cows.

“Moo” I shouted and slammed the window closed.

I had more important things to do than try to understand cows, and all this before a bowl of cereal.

THE INVOLUNTARY HOUSING MARKET

“Congratulations, we’ve had a very good offer on your house!”

“You must be mistaken, my house isn’t for sale.”

“It wasn’t when we listed it.”

“You put my home on the market without my permission?”

“Don’t you want to hear the offer?”

“Absolutely not!”

“You’re not even curious?”

“I should be furious. My house is none of your business.”

“Actually, our business—Reluctant Real Estate—specializes in properties like yours.”

“Have you gone mad?”

“Careful, you’re crossing that fine line between reluctant and belligerent.”

“Why should I care about the difference?”

“The buyer often doubles the offer when the seller is reluctant, but belligerence tends to be a deal breaker.”

“Doubles the offer?”

“Doubles the offer.”

“Well, I don’t really want to sell.”

“That’s much better.”

“Where would I live?”

“Now you’re talking. The buyer must accommodate these logistics.”

“Are you saying I’d be rich if I sold this house?”

“Possibly, possibly, we mustn’t look anxious.”

“I can’t believe I’m still talking to you. This must be a scam.”

“Skepticism is the ugly stepsister of reluctance.”

“Stepsister? No way, I live here alone.”

“And loneliness is a lien that must be paid.”

LUCKY

I woke to a banging at the door, a hammering really, the sound a SWAT team might generate preparing to serve a warrant. When I got to the door it was only Lyle, from two farms down who raises cows for a living.

“You look terrible” I told him, “you better come in and sit down.”

“I had a wreck with my truck” Lyle said.

“Are you hurt?” was all I could think to ask, but he didn’t have a scratch and he was wearing his bes bib overalls.

“Nah” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets, staring intently at the floor.

“Then you were lucky” I said.

“I guess so” he said.

“Did you total your truck?” I asked.

“Nah, nothing, not a scratch” he said.

“Then what seems to be the problem?” I asked.

“My wife, my mother-in-law, both my kids, my insurance agent, and the dog, they’re all dead” Lyle said.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed. “How in the world did that happen?”

“I told you, I had a wreck” Lyle said.

I glanced out the window and saw Lyle’s truck parked and idling in my driveway. I could see a stack of bodies in the truck’s bed, one bloody arm dangling over the tailgate.

“Do you want me to call 911?” I asked.

“Nah” Lyle said, “I’ll drive them into town just as soon as I feel calm. A wreck can sure shake a person up.”

“You sure were lucky” I said again, “to have survived such devastation.”

“I guess so” was all Lyle could say, never taking his eyes off the floor.

I could tell he was upset, so I left him alone for a minute and stepped out to the porch. Two of the accident victims at the top of the heap had distinct bullet holes in their foreheads and I could see a rope still tied around the dog’s neck. The insurance agent’s briefcase must have sprung open during impact; a few forms were scattered on the lawn. I went back inside. Lyle hadn’t budged an inch.

“Are you sure you hit something with your truck, or was this some kind of psychological wreck?”

Lyle finally looked up at me.

“I’ve got full coverage —collision and liability” Lyle said.

He reached for his wallet to produce his driver’s license and registration and handed them to me.

“Yes” I said, “I can see your expiration date is still a ways off and everything is in order.

I guess I can let you off with just a warning this time, but you’ll have to be more careful in the future, especially when it comes to pounding on neighbors’ doors.”

Lyle smiled for the first time. “I’m sorry about that, the wreck and all, you know.”

I listened to Lyle gun the engine and back down the driveway as I climbed back into bed. Lyle was usually a careful driver. I hoped he’d learned his lesson.

BUGS

“So the television signal comes from that hill to the southeast, and that’s where I should point the antenna?”

“That’s right, you’ll get the best signal from there.”

“Should I have my television at that end of the house?”

“No, not necessarily, if you orient the antenna correctly.”

“Should the rabbit ears be droopy or straight up, like it just saw a weasel?”

“What rabbit ears?”

“The rabbit ears on my roof.”

“I thought you had a roof antenna.”

“I do now that I put the rabbit on the roof.”

“And you’re on the roof?”

“Right. With my rabbit.”

“Did you remove the rabbit ears from the television?”

“I have the television up here too.”

“I hate to tell you this, but rabbit ears are supposed to be used indoors.”

“I wish you’d have said something before I got my recliner up the ladder.”

“You have a recliner on the roof?”

“Yes, and my television, and my rabbit ears, along with my rabbit.”

“Do you have an electrical outlet up there?”

“Well I’m not stupid, I brought an extension cord.”

“Then plug it in and tell me if you have a picture.”

“Oh yeah, now there’s a real good one.”

“Do you think you can stay in that position until the end of the game?”

“Oh for sure, but I don’t know about the rabbit.”

RAISING THE BAR, DIMMING THE LIGHTS

“I’m Mrs. Jacobs, Jacob’s mom,” she announced as she reached to shake my hand. “I’m here to check on his behavior in your English class.”

She smiled, her bright, artificially whitened and perfectly spaced teeth reminding me of a movie star.

“Mrs. Jacobs,” I said, “so good to meet you, come in, and sit down.”

Her extreme pleasantness made me wonder what she had in mind. She followed me into the classroom, scanning the movie posters I’d stuck to the walls. As we sat, she pointed to the slightly racy photo of Gwyneth Paltrow from a 1998 release of *Great Expectations*.

“I see you’re watching Dickens. How do your students like it?”

“Oh, they find the plot a little complicated, but not half as challenging as the black-and-white, 1946 Alec Guinness version.”

She sighed, her unspoken criticism of my methods now surfacing like a bubble in a witch’s cauldron.

“I’d heard from Jacob your classes are required to watch the same book twice. Do you think that’s wise?”

“It helps the students focus, to see another perspective.”

Mrs. Jacobs stood, her finger starting to wag in my face.

“What’s the point if they’ve already seen it? You know, at home, Jacob has an extensive collection, including the classics. He loves watching books. I’d hate for school to ruin that.”

I let the silence after her rant fill the room, then stood to meet her glare.

“Mrs. Jacobs, this is a college prep course. If Jacob can’t handle the extra work, well, maybe he should transfer to a Twitter class. Next week we’ll be watching Keira Knightley’s 2005 rendition of *Pride and Prejudice*, followed by Colin Firth’s portrayal of Darcy in the 1995 release, and then the 1980 five-part BBC miniseries. If there’s time before midterms, we’ll take in the Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier production. It did, after all, receive the 1940 Academy Award for Best Art Direction, despite its unfaithfulness to the actual book.”

Mrs. Jacobs could tell I knew my stuff, and she backed down.

“I’m sorry,” she said more quietly. “I guess I got carried away, but I worry so much Jacob will get confused and end up hating movies.”

She reached to wipe a tear away. I handed her a tissue.

“I’m sorry, too,” I said, “but don’t worry so much. Jacob isn’t likely to get confused. He sleeps through most of class.”

“Really?” Mrs. Jacobs brightened. “You aren’t just saying that to make me feel better?”

“No, it’s true. He even snores a little.”

We both laughed a bit, the tension easing. By the time Mrs. Jacobs left, she knew I was right, that nobody truly appreciates a good book the first time they see it.

UNDERGROUND PUBLISHING

“I had no idea self-publishing could be done posthumously.”

“None of our authors talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“For the obvious reason.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Are you interested in submitting a manuscript?”

“Do I have to before I’m dead?”

“Not necessarily, but it’s the only way you’ll know if the manuscript is accepted.”

“Ah, again I see.”

“It takes time for our authors to understand the process, but in the end they’re happy with the services we provide.”

“How would you know?”

“No complaints.”

“I too am beginning to understand. Of course, you collect your money from the living.”

“No way around that one.”

“And if the book sells well?”

“The author gets every dime.”

“I see, posthumous royalties.”

“Exactly, and no taxes.”

“I’ll have to think about it and get back to you.”

“That would be fine, but as I tell all our authors, don’t wait too long.”

THE TUNNEL

Traffic moved unusually slow, probably an accident in the tunnel up ahead, but because I had time to look around I spotted the sign half hidden among the trees: Mole Problems? Call 4U2-MOLE.

Normally I ignore advertisers, so what got me interested in this sign is still a mystery. I dialed the number.

“Hello, Mr. Mole speaking.”

“That can’t be your real name.”

“Yes, yes, the business has been destiny since the day I was born. How may I help you?”

For an instant I was speechless. I didn’t have any moles.

“Can you tell me what time it is?”

“I’m sorry, it’s too dark to see a clock” Mr. Mole replied.

“So you’re at the job site, very industrious of you.”

“No, No, I live here. Is there anything else you need?”

“You live underground?”

“Did you expect me to live in a tree?”

I could hear the sarcasm in his voice. Perhaps this signaled the beginning of my mole problems.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you” I apologized, believing he’d hang up, but the line stayed open, a musky panting coming from the other end.

“Are you still there?” I asked.

“You don’t get rid of moles by just hanging up.”

“I don’t actually have any moles” I said, “I just called because I’m stuck in traffic and didn’t have anything better to do until I saw your sign.”

“Do moles attract you?”

“I have no feelings whatsoever for moles!” I snapped

back, but I was immediately sorry for my temper. I pictured the dirty burrow where moles live, the wife clearing a cavern under someone's garden, preparing a cold kettle to mix a meal of pale roots. My problems with traffic were trivial compared to the struggles moles face, so I pulled over to the shoulder and settled back.

“Go ahead” I encouraged, “I’m listening” and Mr. Mole started talking, all his dark secrets coming to the surface, passions that made my cell phone blush though I’d had it set to vibrate.

THE WRITING COACH

“Nietzsche thought God’s boredom after the seventh day of creation would be a great subject to write about. Give that a try.”

“That’s plagiarism.”

“Nietzsche is dead, he won’t mind.”

“But the subject is sacrilegious.”

“God won’t mind.”

“Why not?”

“According to Nietzsche, he’s dead too.”

“Probably bored to death.”

“There you go, an excellent place to start.”

“What else is there to say?”

“What, for instance, did God do to relieve his boredom?”

“Apparently nothing, if he’s dead.”

“Okay, forget that I said he’s dead.”

“You said Nietzsche said he’s dead.”

“Okay, forget that Nietzsche said he’s dead.”

“Is Nietzsche really dead?”

“Good God, yes, not a word since the year 1900.”

“It could be a case of writer’s block.”

“Excellent, another subject to break your dry spell. Try that one.”

“A writer with writer’s block writing about writer’s block?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Anything I wrote would be proof that I don’t have writer’s block.”

“You’re killing me with these excuses.”

“At least you’re not bored.”

BACCHUS DOESN'T DRINK HERE ANY MORE

The restaurant was empty. The waitress showed me to a table near the window. She seated me, then apologized for the frenzied pace of the evening, rushing off to the kitchen where she claimed something was on the cusp of burning. I picked up the menu and glanced at the list of daily specials.

Returning, she looked disheveled, as if she'd just finished wrestling with the chef.

"Is everything okay back there in the kitchen?"

"Oh, yes," she sighed, running one hand through her hair while the other smoothed a few wrinkles out of her skirt.

"May I bring you something to drink?"

"What do you recommend?"

"Nectar of the gods."

I picked up the wine list, scanned it, but nothing going by that name was listed.

"Is this nectar concoction a mixed drink?"

"Oh no, it's the actual thing."

I looked up at her, expecting a smile, a giggle, some acknowledgment of the incredulity of what she had just said, but her eyes drifted dreamily toward the ceiling.

"So, what's in this nectar drink?"

"Gee, I'm not entirely sure, but I know Zeus orders it every time he's here."

"Zeus?"

"Yeah, him and Cronus. And the Vestal Virgins, when they're out on the town, which isn't that often I'm sorry to say."

I glanced around the restaurant once more, every table

vacant, not a soul aside from the waitress and me.

“Are you trying to tell me the Greek gods eat here?”

“Oh yeah, and the Roman gods, too, but not on the same night.”

I decided to probe a little deeper: “Has Thor been in?”

She glanced around surreptitiously, then leaned close to my ear: “He ordered take-out once, but complained about the meatballs.”

I didn’t know what else to say; my knowledge of mythology was hampered by a single, poorly taught high school English elective over forty years ago.

“Do you serve ambrosia?”

“That’s our speciality!” she announced, clapping her hands together like a water nymph that’s just had a shower.

“I’ll have a mug of your nectar, then, a plate of ambrosia and a side of french fries.”

Mythological food is fine, if one has an appetite for it, but a little fat can get a person through the leaner times.

FAUSTUS VISITS THE AG STORE

The herbicide boasted on the package of its nondiscriminatory approach to killing. The manufacturer named it, *Kills All*. I picked the product up, drawn by the image of a mushroom cloud balanced like a balloon above a cartoon plant's head. The thistle looked as if it might be trying to talk to me, but having drawn a blank it needed my purchase to complete its thought. This was marketing at its finest, devastation and a conversation concentrated in an easy-to-use container. I stopped a sales associate.

"I can't find a price."

He took the container from me and examined the label.

"64 ounces of death. Death always requires your soul."

"But does it kill bind weed?"

He scrutinized the label like a monk assigned to illuminate a manuscript without his reading glasses.

"It says it 'kills everything.'"

"But bind weed?"

"Everything."

At the checkout I unbuttoned my shirt.

"I'm not sure physiologically where the soul is located, but I am assured this stuff kills bind weed."

The checkout woman laughed—cackled, really—then pointed her scanner gun at my chest.

"That's a good one."

OLD WORLD ELEGANCE

The photo in the magazine glowed with the kind of luxury reserved for families of wealth, a financial torch passed down for generations with nobody getting burned, so I made my reservation, two nights, and asked if they offered an AARP discount.

The voice at the other end of the line had a distinct British accent and he asked me to repeat my request.

“AARP discount” I repeated.

He said he’d never heard of such a thing, that it sounded a bit guttural for their hotel, and that maybe I’d prefer one of those new hotel chains with refrigerators and microwaves in every room.

“No, I’ll stick with you” I said and he said “Very well.”

He could have said “Very good” but his language—a sign of breeding—assured me I had made the right choice.

When I arrived no uniformed valet greeted me, which seemed odd. I parked the car and walked into the lobby.

The check-in desk wasn’t really a desk, but an old three drawer dresser beside a wooden stool.

“Very antiquey” I said to the receptionist.

“Pardon me?” she said.

“I was just commenting on the old world elegance of your furnishings.”

She glanced down, shoved a sock back into its drawer.

“I beg your pardon” she said, a twinge of embarrassment flushed in her cheeks. “Do you have any luggage?”

“I left it in the car” I said.

She reached into another drawer and retrieved an oak

paddle which she slammed against the dresser. Immediately a little girl clad in rags emerged from behind a curtained doorway where it appeared she'd been sleeping.

"Get the gentleman's bags!" the receptionist shouted, as she swatted the girl's backside with the board.

"No, really, I'll carry them myself. They're actually quite heavy" I said.

The little girl glanced back toward her keeper like one of those orphans you see in drawings illustrating a Dickens novel.

"Very well" the woman said and the urchin disappeared behind the curtain.

I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, toting my suitcases. A sign on the elevator read "Out of order" and the creaking stairs reminded me of a Bronte novel, though I can't say which one, those sisters arranged in my mind like identical hotel room doors.

I located 432 at the end of the hall and as I reached for my key somebody inside the room coughed.

I knocked.

"I'm sorry" I said, "I thought this room was mine."

The same little girl pulled the door wide and ushered me through with a gesture. I surveyed the room with a sweeping glance while she went back to sweeping the floor. A wooden pallet in the corner with fresh straw spread across it, a bucket turned upside down beside a bigger bucket with a lid, like a crude unsteady table, and a pitcher of water.

I had stepped into another century and my luggage standing in the hall looked so out of place I decided to leave it.

I closed the door. A stench from the street came up through an open window.

If I could survive for two days without festering boils and a fever I'd have to consider this little getaway one of my most memorable.

WILDERNESS SURVIVAL

“Did you remember to bring the pedophile?”

“No, I thought we’d just have a nice hike by ourselves.”

“Then how will we keep track of the miles we walked?”

“I brought a pedometer for that.”

“Oh. Did I say the wrong thing again?”

“I suppose a pedophile would work if he wore an ankle tracking bracelet.”

“I can’t help it if I don’t remember the names for all the gadgets you own.”

“Oh, let’s just go for a hike and forget about it.”

“What if we get lost?”

“I also packed my PMS navigation device, so we’ll be okay.”

“What does that do?”

“It pulls in signals from satellites and tells me when to shut up.”

“Is it working?”

“Yep.”

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