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RIPPLES

One day, he looked down on the street and saw a ripple. It spanned the street, disturbing the strides of the people below. They stumbled into it unknowingly, tripping, bumping into each other, mumbling insults and apologies. Halfway down Third Avenue the ripple began to lose weight. By the time it arrived at the stoplight on Eighth Street it was small and not very real.

As the man looked down he saw another ripple start across the street, and then another. The street became a stream. Cars and people flowed beneath his window. Waves lapped against the sidewalk: cool waves in the summer heat.

The apartment was stifling. The fan on the table blew hot air through the room.

So he took off his shirt and he dove into the cool, placid depths of the street below.

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When you love someone who does not love you, sooner or later you may come to the conclusion that person is a snob. I have always wanted to be loved by a snob.

We live that way—like the punch line of a joke—making plans that follow logical steps to an impossible conclusion. That's why people always say, someday you'll look back on this and laugh. Of course, no one's saying that now.

Wandering through the Ottawa airport in search of a smoking section and a bar. My sister, Mary, flew me here for Christmas. Karen flew in four days ago with a shattered ideal and an adult purpose. To blame her for this would be obscene. We had an accident, the most trivial of accidents.

I am thirty-one and I finally believe in nothing.

When someone dies someone else dies also. Always. No one ever dies alone. And that second death lingers longer than memory and scrapbooks and photo albums in the attic. It is death beyond reason.

Every birth is singular. Every death is duplicate.

Suddenly anxious while I waited for my luggage at the conveyor. It occurred to me I might have gotten off at the wrong stop. Does every traveller feel this way? Is this fear peculiar to Ottawa?

The airport is strikingly small for the terminal of a capital city. Maybe that says something about the country, itself. You could cut the place up neatly, runways and all, and fit it into the washrooms at J.F.K.

I am not a fan of cutting things up.

I came to be cynical of political organizations early and often. Cynicism was taught to me first by the hippies.

The town where I grew up, Beamsville, Ontario, was in church for most of the sixties. We didn't exactly have a sixties generation. Our rock was the "Rock of Ages," and the only bohemians in town were passing through and probably lost. It wasn't until the summer of nineteen seventy that I actually met any hippies. They were late, but it's no wonder. Beamsville, ten years before it became a Toronto warehouse, looked like an orchard with a dozen steeples sticking out of it. The sign on the outskirts of town proudly read: *Beamsville The Heart Of The Fruit Belt*. We didn't get a lot of tourists.

I was seven years old in the summer of nineteen seventy and had a buckskin jacket and a Julius Caesar haircut. My family had been respectably very, very lower middle class, but recently we had come upon hard times. One Sunday afternoon, on my way home from church, I made a wide loop downtown (a dozen stores/one stoplight) to hunt for pop bottles. Raiding garbage cans for refunds provided me with my daily supplement of Mo Jos. As I sorted through the trash outside the drug store, I heard a voice call out to me from across the street and I looked up to see—the *sixties*.

There were five of them: three men and two women wearing bell-bottom jeans and tie-dyed shirts. Clothes. Hair. Posture. They appeared to be in a permanent state of disarray. It was a calm, clear day on my side of the street. They looked like they were standing in a storm.

"What are you doing?" someone asked, and I sheepishly replied, "Nothing."

"You are doing something," a tall, thin man assured me. Every anarchy has its leader. "You're soiling your hands in society's garbage." He pronounced it magnificently. "How old are you?"

I told him.

"And you've become so indoctrinated by society, you're willing to humiliate yourself for money." It was true. So what? I'd already sat through church once.

"Your parents have raised you to live in chains," he continued, then took a coin from his pocket. "I'll bet if I threw this into the street you'd pick it up."

"Can I keep it?"

The sound of their laughter burned my ears. They were laughing at me. He tossed a nickel into the road.

Church was just getting out and the traffic was glued together with only small, quick gaps interspersed between cars driven by elderly men in fedoras. In those days, rush hour in Beamsville was from noon till one o'clock, Sundays. I waited on the curb for a break, never losing sight of the nickel. A pop bottle was only worth two cents or four Mo Jos, depending on your perspective. I wasn't looking at a coin, but a bag of candy.

They were impatient. "If you get it now," said the thin man, "I'll give you this quarter. On the count of three. One." The street was getting dangerous. "Two." A lull and then a tractor dragging blue smoke ... coming ... coming ... now. "Three."

Cars swerved. Horns blared. People driving home from church opened

their windows to swear at me. But I emerged unscathed, goofy and triumphant with my nickel, and true to his word, the man gave me the quarter. It, too, was thrown into the street. The game must have lasted an hour. All the while I was treated to a dissertation on my ignorance, my servitude to society.

There was nothing more to what he said, just the same words reorganized, packaged in more ornate sentences and hollered over the sound of horns, screeching tires and laughter. When they either ran out of change or the game was no longer dangerous enough to hold their interest, they stopped.

I stood blinking at them across a division of asphalt. My pockets were full of American coins. I said, "Got anymore?"

"You don't get it. You were nearly killed," the thin man shouted, incredulous at my blind obedience to the pursuit of money. But I did get it. It had come to me in a flash. I had been a living prop in their play—a cut-out thing that happened to have a pulse. They were the actors, ad-libbing a script they didn't understand.

I couldn't know it at the time, but it was Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin who wrote that script. They'd created a near riot when they dropped money for the visitors' gallery of the New York Stock Exchange. Stockbrokers had abandoned million-dollar deals to scurry after one-dollar bills. Did this group really believe that putting the life of a seven-year-old boy in jeopardy amounted to the same statement?

The blueprint is almost invariably more beautiful than the construction.
I don't care for politicians. I love Karen.

I met Karen four months ago at Dalhousie University. She was a friend of Margo's, a girl I'd known since I first moved to Halifax ten years before. I was seeing Colleen at the time although Colleen wasn't seeing anyone at all. Possibly everyone has a person in life who has the ability—the natural talent—to destroy them without breaking any laws. If they're lucky, they'll never run into that person, never fall in love with them. Colleen had. Her ex-boyfriend, Frank, *had* broken the law; before he left her, he robbed her. So she would never again share anything in common with anyone. She wouldn't let herself.

I knew immediately that it wouldn't work out between Colleen and I, but I really didn't care. I was beyond looking for *things that work out*. I only wanted someone to see movies with, and Colleen was lost on a desperate search for distraction—killed by the absurdity of trying to forget one specific thing. The only man she would ever love had hurt her badly with his infidelity and his indifference. He'd committed theft.

Mediocrity held us together. Colleen clearly felt I was in some way inferior to her although not so inferior that she'd be embarrassed to be seen with me. But my lower status was also the source of her interest in me. I was curiously safe. There was never any fear of her emotions running wild when she was with me. I didn't merit emotion.

I would sit in the cafeteria between classes telling Margo stories about my dates with Colleen because there was a certain absurdity to them that made them sound as good as fiction. The problem was that I was steadily falling for Colleen,

probably because of her ability to make quick enemies. Something about her posture, her expression. She was self-contained. People instinctively hated her, but I think it was envy. Most people standing by themselves slouch. She didn't. She had a beautiful dignity that she didn't turn on for any specific audience. She was simply dignified. And I was starting to enjoy our dates far too much.

That was when I met Karen, when I was trying to come up with a rationale to break my rules so far as they concerned Colleen. Margo, Karen, and I would sit for coffee and talk about our lives the way you do with people you know you won't offend. That is: we didn't spend the bulk of our time explaining the meaning of what we'd said. There was no need. Karen should have been offended. The second time I met her I made a statement that was as conceited as it was true.

"The hippies used to say never trust anyone over thirty. Personally, I don't trust anyone younger than twenty-five. They'll tell you things they don't understand, things they've adopted as the truth. And because they believe it they have a dangerous sincerity you can fall for too easily. You can say things that aren't true without lying. But it adds up to a lie all the same."

"I'm twenty-two," Karen said, and I was shocked. I thought she was twenty-seven.

She certainly looked older and seemed more mature than the women at the other tables around us. She was with Margo, both of them biology majors working on their Master's. And her stories didn't have to end in jokes. They were just as likely to have conclusions.

"God, I'm sorry."

"You're probably right."

Karen wasn't exactly sitting—she was crouching on the chair with her legs pulled up the way schoolchildren sit at their desks when they've overcome their fear of the teacher. She dressed like I do. No labels. And she had beautiful, wide, incautious eyes. Her hair was short and boyish and the overall impression was one of being streamlined and functional. There was not a trace of arrogance about her, nor of servitude.

The conversation shifted. Margo and I speaking about old friends. Karen's mother's religion. Evidently, Karen's mother is a clean freak.

"When we lived in Belgium, she gave instructions to have the house painted, but she doesn't speak French and she didn't have a colour chart so she was describing shades of blue in sign language—gesturing with her hands and pointing at the sky. It was a hot day. We went on vacation, and when we came back, the house was painted tan."

Margo and I laughed. "What did she do?" Margo asked.

"She had it repainted. First she got a colour chart and found someone to interpret."

"How could she afford to have the house painted twice?"

"It was free. My father's high up in the military. The government paints his house. I'm not proud of it. No one else gets those perks."

"Maybe there should be a rule that it has to be khaki," I suggested.

Karen said, "In that case, my mother would paint it herself. Everything

about her house has to be perfect. She vacuums twice a day. You actually have to walk around the edge of the living room. You can't go directly across the floor.

"They were out one weekend and I had a boyfriend over. Before they came back, I vacuumed everything, but she knew I had someone over anyway. Know how? One of the pillows on the edge of the couch was compressed, and I never sit on the couch."

It was an important story.

I worked in a refinery on weekends, and the schoolwork was already piling up so I was spending twelve-hour days at school trying to free up time for a date. Colleen and I had planned for Friday night. She should have called me to confirm, but didn't. I called her to make sure we were on, and she didn't return my call. Finally, on Friday, I got through and she told me she wasn't going. She'd spent the day doing nothing and felt exhausted from the effort. I said, "Okay," and hung up.

Then I paced around the apartment, made a series of loops through the living room, and arrived at an inevitable conclusion. I picked up the phone and called Colleen back.

"Hello."

"Hi, it's me again." Well, she knew that, of course. It was printed on her call display, taking the suspense out of the whole situation.

"What's up?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy, but I'm calling to tell you I can't see you anymore. This dating thing isn't working out."

"What? Why?"

"Oddly enough, because I think I'm sort of falling for you, and I'm fairly certain that's a bad idea."

"Wait a minute, Sam. I thought we weren't going to get serious. I told you that all along."

"That's my point. I am getting serious."

"We agreed that we wouldn't."

"And it was a good idea," I agreed. "Unfortunately, you can lead a horse to water but you still may have to shoot it."

There was a pause while she sifted through my comment to see if there was an insult hidden in it. "I've always been honest," she said, as though she couldn't decide.

"That has nothing to do with it."

"It's not my fault?"

So that's what she was getting at. We'd gotten to the point of intimacy where she didn't want me to hate her. I said, "No."

When I got off the phone I bawled. What a sap. It was the first time in my life that my heart had been broken and it was by a girl I wasn't seeing and I didn't love. Did I love her? I tried to assuage my feelings by telling myself that Colleen was a snob.

Mary's plane doesn't land for another three hours. I could have hopped a bus into town, but every possibility has an equal and opposite impossibility. Like

the one about going downtown and running into Karen in the street by some cosmic fluke—a sub-fluke to the one that has us in the same city now, a thousand miles from the one in which we met.

When I knew for certain Karen was leaving, I consciously attempted a coward's suicide. I tried to give myself a heart attack. I didn't eat for four days, doubled my consumption of cigarettes and coffee—the inability to sleep came naturally. The night before Karen left I took her out for dinner, and the two of us sat, doubled-over in pain, trying not to say anything meaningful or apologetic. I walked her home and her apartment was immaculate. After she was gone, I spent my nights at home waiting for her to call—certain that she wouldn't. She didn't.

Sometimes I think life can be reduced to two essential elements: a memory of anticipation, and a reality of regret. Like finding a woman who would flee to Iceland with me. But not flee. We would go there with a sense of purpose.

Karen didn't spend eight hours alone in the airport trying to file her grief. There were two people to meet her—her parents who are still in love with each other and have set a daunting standard. I wonder what her father did. Did he hold her? Kiss her? Describe the depth of his wound? He was the one she spoke with the least on the telephone when I sat in her apartment trying not to be heard. I could tell when the phone was handed over to him because Karen's voice changed entirely, like there were two people inside of her, and the phone was being passed between them as well.

Her father is a two star general. I kept referring to him as a brigadier-general, and she would correct me. "Major-general." Perhaps I'm wrong about that, too. I didn't care what he did. My last girlfriend's parents had been so contrary that I feared him for that reason alone, not wanting anyone to disagree with our relationship.

"So you're blue?" Karen said in summation of a half hour discourse on the pointlessness of human contact. She was wearing the articles from her wardrobe I liked least: sandals with work socks, and a pair of jeans with a ripped knee. I've seen so many students dressed in those clothes they've become a uniform. But she looked happy, and it was nearly infectious.

"Define blue," I said. "Do we feel the same way?"

"I don't know. How does blue feel to you?"

I cast a penetrating gaze at my feet and said: "Blue is a solitary rock on a mountain—the weathered remains of something larger. And it's raining. The glacier at the top of the mountain is draped in black clouds."

"Is there lightning?"

I looked up and she was smiling at me. How did she do that? In an intense conversation filled with sexual innuendos I always have to mentally tie and untie my laces or I'll blush. "No. This is undramatic rain. Run of the mill."

"I agree," she replied. "But the rock ..."

"But the rock is the entire colour; however, a colour doesn't exist except in contrast to some other colour which in this case is the glacier and the rain and the smell of pine. Blue, then, is a difficult survivor. Too heavy to move. Too exposed to

last.

“So yes, I feel blue.”

She applauded. “I feel orange. Do you want to feel orange?” I nodded. “Orange,” she said, “is cleaning up the dishes, which, of course, is usually tedious work; however, these dishes are of particular importance. There has been a large gathering of close friends, and it was fun. No one talked about losing his or her job or graduating and serving coffee for the next fifteen years to pay off student loans. It was just great. Everyone spoke the same language. You understand?”

I said, “Completely.”

“Orange is doing the dishes afterward. Can you feel that?”

I soaked up the moment. I felt great. I felt orange.

Margo interjected: “Couldn’t you still be friends with her?”

“Colleen? No. You can’t be friends with someone you feel that way about. I told Colleen that the last time we went out and that’s probably what killed it. Colleen wasn’t going to get serious with a man in my state, and the more I became serious about her, the more she withdrew. She started making up excuses about not being able to see me.

“Of course, she’d lied to me from the start about her relationship with Frank. She said it was over then called him twice from the bar on our first date. He must have answered both times because she slammed the phone down like it was on fire. She was probably trying to find out if a woman would answer. Well, I didn’t mind her lies. Everybody lies. I just didn’t think I knew her well enough to listen to her excuses. It breaks my heart but you can’t make someone love you.”

We all agreed on this point.

One day Karen asked me what I would tell my child if they asked me if there was a hell. I answered that I would say hell is a word people use to express their worst horrors and put them out of sight so they don’t have to acknowledge the everyday horrors around them. They can live next door to Auschwitz. There’s a hotter fire in hell. And I would tell my child that hell happens every day all over the world. And sometimes you can save people from it. But not with prayer.

“What would you say about heaven?”

“Heaven?” I laughed. “You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“No, you’re safe. Say anything.”

“Heaven is Iceland. Living on the side of a volcano with the Reykjavik harbour for scenery. Complete autonomy from the world you see in advertisements. But hopefully any child of mine will have grown up there and seen it first-hand.”

A broad grin had worked its way over her face. “I always wanted to live in Iceland, too. It’s been my dream.”

I caught my breath. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

We were in the bar at Dalhousie. Margo had been there with us, and she and Karen had shared an order of garlic bread. When Margo got up to leave, Karen had made the appropriate, polite excuses for staying. There was a speck of parsley stuck to one of Karen’s front teeth. I’d been consciously trying not to look at it until she

shocked me into staring into her eyes. They weren't lying. Oddly, I didn't blush. We were finished our beers. It was time to leave.

"Do you want to shoot a game of pool?" I asked. "I'm not particularly good, but I can lose a decent game."

"I'm the worst," she replied, agreeably.

"Oh, you don't want to."

"No, I love pool."

"Me too, it's the best."

"It's great."

"So we're playing pool."

She drew in her breath like she was making a momentous decision. "Yes. We're playing pool. Where? Here?"

"I'd rather play downtown," I said.

"Me too, but I want to stop off at my place and drop off my books. It's on the way."

We were standing in the wreckage of her apartment. It was a bachelor and her cat, Malone, had tipped over an ashtray, and there were clothes and dishes everywhere. Not stepping on things was like playing a game of twister. We found a clear spot face to face, and she added her bag to the mess.

"Okay," she said. "Do you want to go?" Her breath reeked of garlic.

"No. I want to kiss you. But we could go if you want."

It was a stunning kiss. Curious and emotional. Then we looked at each other and laughed.

Karen said, "I think this is a good thing."

"I think so, too," I replied. "Yes, this is definitely a good thing."

"That's what I think. It's a good thing."

"I agree. We have an awful lot in common. I don't know if that matters. Does it matter?"

"Are you trying to talk yourself into this?"

"No. No. No. I mean it. It's a good thing."

"Yes," she laughed. "I'm absolutely positive it's a good thing."

I told her something afterward, while we were lying together in her bed watching the window darken. I was thinking of all the previous disasters that had brought me to the state where I would consider a stillborn relationship with Colleen to be so damned attractive. This one was unbelievably alive. I wanted to keep it alive. I spoke out of fear. "I don't know about love," I said. "Maybe we don't have to worry about it. It might not happen to us. I just don't like to hear people saying that they love me. It always seems to be a grievance. Like: 'Why did you do that? I love you.' If you love someone I think you should express it with actions."

"I don't like that word either. We won't say it."

"Probably won't have to worry about it anyway."

She shrugged. "We're not in love."

We learn our lessons out of order.

I once dated a woman named Donna who had an empty fridge. No garnishes. So I knew it wouldn't work out.

She had lived in that apartment with that fridge for three years and hadn't accumulated so much as a jar of mustard. A silent alarm triggered in my head the day she sent me to the kitchen for milk for the coffee and milk was all she had.

Her life was like that fridge. Donna took in exactly what she needed, no frills, consumed it, and left the apartment empty when she went to work. Donna must have shopped for small items every single day of her adult life.

And she had a breezy, unconnected way with people. Her deepest, dearest friends were all *nice* people. She couldn't come up with any other words for them. That one said it all.

"We can still be friends," I suggested to her after she broke up with me on the phone one day, and she had the temerity to say, "No, I can't be friends with anyone who isn't nice." At least, I think that's what she said. Donna has a smoker's habit of never speaking directly into the transmitter because it interferes with the path of her cigarette. The sound of her telephone voice is best described as "remote."

I said: "I'm not nice?" and I probably sounded too grateful. She hung up.

When nothing happened at first with Karen I thought of committing a phone call, but it occurred to me that I couldn't. Donna is paying some vague debt to society working the suicide hotline. I couldn't risk the danger of talking to her.

The second night after Karen and I didn't fall in love was a repeat of the first. It was a mutual decision that we'd be intimate again, unbiased by any complicated arguments. Afterward, Karen worried about moving too fast, but I didn't know that we had.

"We've actually been seeing each other a lot longer than just one night," I suspected. "A month, really."

It was morning and we were late for school. We were in her apartment, awash in a sea of scattered clothing.

"You're right," she agreed, but we were having two separate conversations. I thought she was talking about the recent past. In retrospect, she was talking about the future. She wasn't concerned with what we had done, but with what we might do. Otherwise, my argument was great. All those times we'd *run into* each other had not been a prelude but a relationship of some substance. We'd had a real connection and the randomness of our meetings had only heightened our awareness of their value. We never planned our coffees at Dalhousie. They just happened with an increasing frequency which had led us to the point where we'd made it physical, which is something people do who aren't necessarily in love, and we fit that description.

"One way to look at this," I suggested helpfully, "is to draw a timeline starting yesterday. Everything after that time can be measured in time A.S."

"A.S?"

"After sex."

"Then everything else is B.S." she laughed. "All right." She picked an empty glass off the floor. Any dirty dish she could have asked for was conveniently at hand. "Could you get me some apple juice? Please?"

She'd only been in that apartment three months. Tops. I went to the fridge and it was full of food. And a third of it was rotten.

Nothing, not even my memory will ever convey the feeling of the kiss Karen and I shared before we left the apartment to find the world had changed. The ten years I'd spent in Halifax feeling comfortably certain I was intimate with my surroundings were swept away—washed clean in the marvelous dark drizzle of a Tuesday morning. The city and the world had been rewritten optimistically.

I wrote a story when I was nineteen about a man who dives out of a window into the street. What I meant at the time was that this man had liberated himself from a concrete world and swum off into his dreams. But I left him hanging, suspended in mid-air, so the reader could decide what had happened, and virtually everyone I showed the story to thought it was about suicide.