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CLAY FEET IN COMMON

Joan S. Popke

I wanted to write to thank you, Polly Ames. You will probably read this and wonder about the state of my head. “Thank me for what?” you’ll say. For nothing, really, and yet for everything. I only hope that this may help you, too, in some way. I thought about showing it to Sue before I mail it, but have decided not to. Why put the burden of forgiveness on her when there is really so little guilt, and when the cause of the episodes has produced such effect?

Do you remember the first time we met, Polly? I was the cynical-looking soul in the suede jacket who locked eyes with you, as the song goes, “across a crowded room.” It had started out to be anything but an “enchanted evening” for me, mainly because I dislike cocktail parties, especially Sunday afternoon cocktail parties. But this was an affair honoring some newcomers to the area, and Sue had reminded me, just pointedly enough, that the Mellis’s were “socially prominent” newcomers. To Sue, social prominence means even more than having money. We had little of either, and it was easier to go to the cocktail party than to listen to her verbal torrents reminding me of this.

I remember greeting our host and hostess and being introduced to pale Harvey and beaver-faced Ginger Mellis. The amenities over, I walked to the bar to fortify myself, leaving Sue and Ginger Mellis trying two snow-jobs on for size. I turned around, and there you were, looking as out-of-place in that half-hung-over crowd as a baby on a bar stool. Your hair was short, and curled the way hair was meant to curl—not stiffened with lacquer and knotted and coiled, and not tinted to match the newest shade of mink. Your dress was just dress—not meant to exaggerate what was underneath it or to fill in something that was lacking. That wasn’t meant to be a back-handed compliment. You were the most delectably desirable woman I’d ever seen, and you looked like you didn’t know it. I finally got you to look at me, too, didn’t I? It was sheer telepathy on my part. I kept chanting to myself all the while I was looking at you “make her look up, make her look up, make her look up,” and I guess it worked. We stared at one another for a full ten seconds before you looked away again, but I kept looking at you and managed to propel myself over to where you were standing. It’s a wonder I didn’t knock anyone over on the way. I knew a couple of the jokers who were trying to impress you, so it was easy enough to sidle into the group. I had just found out that your name was Polly Ames, and you that mine was Jim Paulson when I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. I turned around, and could see that Max Cooper had been waiting for me, as usual, probably to seek some free legal advice. Max’s middle initial is L., and I have always thought it should have stood for Leech. He pulled me off to a corner, and when I finally got a chance to come up for air, you were gone. So much for Episode I.
I did a little checking, though. Subtly, of course, because in the Westport area a hangnail can cause gossip. You had quite a record of achievement to your credit, not the least of which was marrying a few million shekcles who also happened to be a nice guy in his early fifties. You were “oh, she can’t be much more than thirty, if that. Marge’s cousin went to school with her, and she’s younger than I am.”

Let’s face it. I had a crush on you. Although my rose-colored glasses had not been in evidence for several years, I still believed that there were good things around if you looked for them. Also, good people, though I’d seen my share of the rubbed ruins the criminal law court generates. I was near the bottom rung of the ladder in the law firm I’d joined the year before, after an unsuccessful five years of trying my hand at private practice in New Canaan. As an underling, I was accorded the dubious pleasure of defending people whose errors definitely consisted of more than putting too much vermouth in the martinis. I guess my hardened outlook was a defense mechanism. I had felt a keen disappointment when confronted with human reality. I was also an incurable sentimentalist which a lawyer can hardly let show.

After sowing my wild oats in copious quantities during college, four years in the Army, and law school, I had been more than ready to settle down. I had met and married Sue when we were both twenty-eight. She had been a Navy widow with a five-year old daughter, and I had fallen very completely in love with them both. That had been seven years ago. I had never tried to pin any medals on myself for being the ideal husband and provider, nor lover of late, but Sue and I had lost one another along the way somewhere. I blamed us both.

It was about a month before I saw you again. It was in Grinaldi’s, on Eighth Avenue, and I was having lunch there with a client who wanted to discuss his problems privately, without the chance of our running to too many gladhanders. New York can be a city of eight million blank faces to the friendless; it can also seem like old home week to those who want to be alone. Grinaldi’s wasn’t tea-roomy enough to appeal to the dieting matron in town for a day of shopping; yet it wasn’t plush enough for the expense-account padders. You could sit, and eat, and not get your check pushed into your face after the second sip of the first cup of coffee.

We were at the third-cup-of-coffee point when you walked in. You looked as I remembered you, only more vivid. You looked chic and well-groomed and vital, and you spelled “class” from your feathered hat, down past your Mainbocher suite to the tips of your pointed shoes. The man you were with must have been your husband—he guided you to the table like you were “his.” Luckily, you sat about three tables behind—John’s right ear. I could watch you and still put up a pretense of listening to what John was saying. You didn’t see me. You were too busy with your gloves and the menu and your husband. He looked like a very vigorous fifty, and he seemed to be
quite smitten with you. I could understand why. All too soon, John ran out of words and signalled for the check. I outfumbled him and as we got up to leave, I tried to catch your eye, but you were busy listening to something your husband was saying. I saw twinkling lights in your lovely blue eyes. That was Episode II.

That evening on the way to the railroad station, I bought a blue chiffon scarf to take home to Sue. It was the color of your eyes, a forget-me-not blue, and I suppose I was really buying it for you. It was the first time I'd brought home a spur-of-the-moment gift for Sue in a long while. I walked into the house that evening and handed it to her, and surprisingly enough was anxious about whether or not she'd like it. I guess she was surprised, too, for her eyes opened very wide and she seemed to drop the cool reserve for a moment.

"It's lovely, Jim. Really lovely, I mean." She was too polite to ask what had gotten into me, the unaccustomed bearer of gifts.

"Oh, I just thought it would make you look Godiva-ish when you put the top down on the car. You're always worrying about your hair getting messed up, and those jobs you tie around your head look like they should be hanging out of a brakeman's pocket."

She didn't say any more, but I later caught her opening the box again and looking at the scarf. I felt a twinge of guilt. If she had known the reason I'd bought the scarf, she would have wrapped it around my neck. That night, I added another jigger's worth to my before-bed tranquilizer.

Episode III took me rather by surprise. I'd taken the early train and a bulging briefcase home one Friday afternoon and when I'd walked into our living room, there you were. Usually, entering a room filled with endomorphic, bridge-happy women doesn't bother me at all. I annoyed Sue to the point of lividity once by picking up a roll basket and waiting for a lull in the cackling to ask quietly if anyone had any eggs to contribute. Perhaps a head-shrinker would say I hate women to try to pass off such a gem, but I remember it got more cackles.

That day, I completely lost my glib tongue. I mumbled "hellos" feeling like a knock-kneed, empty-headed schoolboy with egg on my face. I doubt that my confusion escaped Sue. I was seldom at a loss for words, especially in such a receptive crowd. Did Sue see me glance your way and say "hello" and then look away again instead of giving off with my usual lascivious leer at the sight of one of her well-stacked friends? I think maybe he did. My reaction to you was the same as before. I weakly hobbled to the den, shut the door, and cursed myself for acting like such an idiotic ass. I'd had much fewer immoral thoughts about you than I'd had glancing through the pages of Playboy. I wondered what sort of look I'd get from Sue that evening.

Luckily, Sally saved the day for me. She came bounding into the den where I was working, trailing shirttails and shoelaces and tawny ponytail. "Add six years to the twelve she has now," I thought, "and she'll be trailing a whole string of boys' broken hearts behind her."
“Guess what, Dad,” she said. “I’m Vice President of the Class, next year.”

“Tremendous, Kitten,” I said. “But, then, who else could they have picked? You’re just about the best, all-round American-type girl in the whole school. The Marilyn Monroe of Westport Junior High.”

“You’re a character, Dad,” she said. She was always a great ego-booster.

Dinner was rather a catch-as-catch-can affair that night, and Sue bustled about for the rest of the evening tidying up the smoke-smelling house. She was strangely silent, and while she emptied ash trays, she wore a pensive look, as if her mind weren’t on what she was doing.

I took a brief upstairs with me and sat reading it in bed. Sue came up shortly afterwards, and as she passed my bed on the way to her own, I thought I smelled a whiff of her special-occasions perfume.

“My God,” I thought. “What’s with her?” I laid down the brief and snapped off my bedside lamp just as Sue reached for hers. Our eyes met questioningly in that split-second. In the darkness, Sue spoke, “Polly Ames is quite attractive, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said. Sue seemed in the pregnant silence to be waiting for me to say more, but I let my inadequate answer hold. Just before drifting off, I realized that I hadn’t had a drink all day.

The next few weeks brought some interesting changes in our household. In the first place, Sue had her hair cut. It surprised me almost as much as if she’d had one of her arms amputated—she’d been letting her hair grow for years, and boasted the biggest chignon in the area, which evidently was no small accomplishment. “And it’s all mine, too,—no rats,” she used to say.

I walked into the house one night, and there she was waiting for me. It’s surprising how hair framing a woman’s face gives it a background on which the features mellow, the eyes especially softening. She looked like a different person—it took me a double-take or two to realize that she now wore her hair almost exactly the way you wear yours, Polly.

If jealousy had prompted Sue to do this—the thought was so ridiculous that I beat it quickly out of my brain. Sue was more the type to start swinging boletos, not the kind to cling, and pitifully try to imitate a supposed rival. But I couldn’t get over how unlike Sue this was. It was like coming home and finding everyone in the family speaking Japanese. For lack of a better word, I can say only that I was rather touched—the “I didn’t know you cared” feeling. But the incongruity of it wouldn’t leave me. Sue was usually pretty predictable. A definite stimulus would always produce the same reaction. But now, evidently something was zigging where it should have been zagging. I began to get a little bit annoyed. I wondered whether Sue suspected all kinds of assignations between you and me. But, good Lord, all I
did was get beet-faced one day when I looked at you. Yet, in me, that was as unusual as Sue’s behavior was right now.

“I like your hair,” I said. Then, feeling that I should expound a bit, “If you only knew how much I hated that bird’s nest behind your neck. You always looked like you should have had a pencil behind each ear and ink under your fingernails.

“You could have told me, you know,” Sue said, her eyes widening, yet crinkling a little at the corners.

“Sure. That would have sounded fine. If I’d ever told you to have your hair cut, you would have had it sewn into a shirt for me!”

I was back to my usual, charming self again. I waited for my sarcasm to boomerang back to me, but all she said was, “Come on, idiot. There’s a cold martini waiting to be poured, and a steak all ready to be broiled.” I meekly followed her into the kitchen. Sally was sitting at the table doing her homework, and I sat down and looked over her shoulder. Sue put the steak under the broiler, and came over to join us. I put my arm around Sally, “Kitten, you’d better take that second “f” out of terrific if you don’t want your paper to look like it had the measles when the teacher gets through with it.”

“Thanks, Daddy. Here, let me read you what I’m working on.” Sally started reading an essay on Freedom. I tried to concentrate on the words, but my eyes kept sliding over to Sue who was making much to-do over lighting a cigarette. It’s odd, but now when I look back to that evening, a warmth flows through me. At the time, I registered only perplexity and confusion.

Episode IV, the final one, happened just last Sunday. It was the briefest of them all—in fact it hardly even happened. Sue, Sally and I were on our way to the beach. Sunday was a beautiful, early-spring day, and Sue had suggested a picnic on the point by the bay. Sally was wildly enthusiastic, and I was more than mildly so, although I tried not to show it. The car’s top was down, and the wind was flapping Sue’s blue scarf about her face. We had to shout our words, as they were whipped away from our mouth as soon as they were spoken. Almost before I realized it, a white Jaguar raced by us, going in the opposite direction. I caught a swift glimpse of your wind-blown hair capping your face like waving suburn ribbons. You must have been doing ninety.

The only reaction I registered was astonishment. Oh, I guess I’m hedging a bit—there was a twinge of sorts which I felt around the midsection, but there wasn’t any debilitating agitation at all. Even the astonishment was a reflex following as unusual situation. This hell-bent-for-election bit didn’t fit in with the aura of calm serenity surrounding you in my mind.

“That must be some fire she’s going to,” I said.

I could see out of the corner of my eye that Sue was watching me closely. “She has problems, you know. She’s divorcing her husband, or he’s divorcing her. No one seems to know which—or why.”
My reaction came swiftly, and I was totally unprepared for its lack of feeling. I had thought that I understood myself, but I was wrong. It was as if I were on a train, thinking it bound for a destination, only to find myself going in the opposite direction and finding that I had really wanted to go there all the while. I began to be warmed with the insight and the first penetration of an almost metaphysical truth of feeling. Everything suddenly came flashing brilliantly into focus for me—the day, my wife, our daughter, and for the first time in a long while, myself. The car whistled down the winding ribbon of road, and we were all laughing.

TO THE SUN, FLYING

For roles I've played, my life has spanned a too-short time,
And now before I've studied it or barely read the script,
I find myself playing Icarus, son of Daedalus,
And feel beneath my feet the Minos soil.

How long it seems, since in the Labyrinth of Crete,
Which Daedalus built to hold the Minotaur,
Icarus watched his father mold Pasiphae's wooden cow
Marvelling at his art with no prescience or fear,
Not knowing that the charmed and royal life would end.
Out of the darkness, he had come to know the Sun,
The God Who walked above the mountain tops
With sandaled foot so light it failed to shake the clouds,
And wrapped in draperies of such golden gleaming brightness
The men of Crete must turn or shade their eyes.
He played in groves whose trees in crowded closeness
Threw shadows of so symmetrical unreal a straightness,
They seemed as unreal as those that threatened him,
And forced his father to turn to making wings.

It was a golden summer day when he, brought to the seas,
And bade to stretch his hands arm-high into the air,
Was lashed onto snowwhite wings with furious speed.
How hard to stand on feet that longed to fly!
There was scarcely time to hear the stern-voiced warning,
'Don't fly too near the sea! Beware the burning sun!'

Icarus, who'd known the wind and rain and flowers,
Had petted small wild furry things and wild, caked birds,
Now felt himself a brother to all things fleet and wild,
As he lifted like a home-hunting, mate-seeking spider,
Or thistledown, or small gray twilight bird.
The feathered wax curled thin and strong and light,
Reflecting rainbows like high summer butterflies.
Boy, still, although a god. He side-dived past a cloud,
And dashed pell-mell against a foam-topped wave-crest,
Then, godlike, pointed skyward, and flew straight towards the sun.