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Love is Not a Potato

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From the balcony the pool below resembled a Diamond Thrift stamp. A barrel-chested swimmer was poised on the tip of the diving board. His bald head gleamed under the spotlight. As he plunked into the green, the band stopped playing "Wait Till My Bobby Gets Home" and abruptly swung into a chorus of "Happy Birthday." Laughter and applause penetrated the muggy August evening.

The crowd, fresh from the air-conditioned Cafe Continentale, was scattered about the rectangular courtyard like bon-bons in an opened box of Fanny Farmer's.

In his corner of the patio, the old walrus plopped into the chlorine again. He rose to the surface and began to thrash his way toward the ladder. Two children splashed each viciously in the shallow end of the pool.

Most of the crowd was concentrated on the throwrug-size dance floor near the entrance to the Cafe. At the microphone local professional talent carried nicely the tune to "I've Got a Lot of Livin' to Do." A dozen young twisters jerked and grimaced at this musical revelation. They seemed insensitive to the heat.

Standing on the balcony, I fingered the camellia corsage on my shoulder. It felt cool and impersonal as the room I had just left. As I waited in that room on a Saturday night, I had resolved that I would not spend my seventh anniversary watching TV and listening to the air-conditioner belch. Harry had ruined our weekend.

The moon, busy with other affairs, was coming and going way up there. I patted perspiration from my face with a linen handkerchief. The motionless air tasted of honeysuckle. From the freeway
a yellow neon arrow pointed at me. It was part of an enormous sign that stood, like a garish jukebox, beside the freeway. On (in Kelly green) HOLIDAY INN. Off. On (in Kelly green) HOLIDAY INN. Off.

Above the yellow arrow gleamed a star to shame a Christmas tree. Red-pink-blue-green-yellow. The marquee's final message (WELCOME HONEYMOONERS!) reminded me of Harry. My groom of seven years had been too busy on the golf course to check the carburetor before we left home.

In order to make this anniversary trip to Chicago, I had to plan for one winter. I saved the money. I arranged for a sitter to stay with the kids. I saw to it that they didn't get sick at the last minute. And Harry's contribution was to let the Chevy break down on the freeway.

I had ordered my own corsage. I had signed myself in. What must the desk clerk have thought? Where was Harry now? Would the Chevy be repaired?

The danceband was now brightly repeating another chorus of "Rock Around the Clock." A dozen rockers grotesqued themselves onto the grass among spectators and umbrellaed tables.

The old mullet was on the diving board again. What a ham. This time he waved flamboyantly toward a chaise lounge in the shadows. Then he did a special one-and-a-half something that terminated in a loud splash.

The boys in the band chanted:

weem a waffa, shoop shoop,
do wah diddy,
yeh! yeh! yeh!
I entered my iced boudoir, took two aspirin tablets, checked to be sure that my seams were straight. I left the room by way of a second door which opened onto a corridor in the motel's interior. The flowered carpeting on the staircase was luxuriously thick to my new Spanish heels.

I left a message at the desk for Harry and then strolled through the crowded Cafe Continentale toward the courtyard.

The courtyard was an exotic hothouse. Dancers writhed in the sultry dark to that ever-popular refrain, "Don't Say Nothin' Bad About My Baby." I stopped a waitress and ordered a Tom Collins -- then set out to find a chair.

The cobblestone path was hard on my soles. I took to the grass and was soon feeling my way cautiously on the wet cement at poolside. There was one empty lawn chair, unoccupied for the obvious reason that no one wanted to get splashed to death by Old Fatty. He had been tirelessly climbing out and jumping back in like a windup toy.

The waitress located me and swooped her tray onto the tiny island of a table beside me. I gratefully sipped my drink as she made change.

Her tray still contained a fruit-decorated whiskey sour and an aromatic brandy. I viewed them thirstily and promptly ordered a refill. The girl whisked her tray into the shadows in back of me. For the first time that day I felt cool and relaxed. I settled back comfortably to watch Tarzan.

He plunged again and rose from the deep like Venus on the half-shell. He called out -- in a surprisingly pleasant bass -- "Polly, be with you in a moment!" His right fist shot out of the water. In it he appeared to be grasping a baseball. He
began to ascend the ladder only a few feet in front of me.

In that make-believe Hollyday setting where twisters contorted under the inconstant moon, the liquor abruptly liberated my libido. The old walrus, thanks to Beafeater gin, appeared before me big, wet, healthy.

On the first step he was a pirate with a knife between strong, white teeth. On the second step, he was a proud Prussian officer in uniform. And when he pulled himself away from the ladder -- standing close enough for me to touch -- he became a gypsy with a golden earring in his left ear. I could sense his maleness and was magnetized. I sucked in my tummy and thrust out my camellias.

Out of lifetime habit, he looked me over. Class of '36 sizing up Class of '57. Then, right hand extended, he walked (rather elegantly for a heavy man) toward the waiting Polly. She must be reclining behind me in the chaise lounge which I had seen from the balcony.

"Here's your towel, dear... and your drink. You have such vigor. How do you do it?"

I couldn't resist turning in my chair to see Polly and to see what he had brought to her. Whatever it was, he held it out as though she were teacher and it were an apple. Or as though she were his first girl and it were a flower. I saw a slim hand rest for a moment on his hairy wrist. Then the hand took the baseball or cupcake or whatever he had retrieved from the bottom of the pool.

You've seen Dina Merrill. You've seen Jacqueline Kennedy. You've seen Princess Grace. I gulped my Collins and stared. In about ten years, if those girls are lucky, they'll look like Polly. Staring at her,
I felt like a 27-year-old kid in my pink chiffon and bouffant hairdo. Polly was all woman. She wore black with utter simplicity.

As the pirate grinned and briskly rubbed his flesh with a large HOLIDAY INN (letters in Kelly green) towel, I heard a low voice murmur, "Thank you for the lovely present." I turned in time to see him bend down and kiss her on the forehead. Harry, I thought sadly, has never kissed me on the forehead. Behind us the all-girl vocalist was braying:

Maybe I know that he's been a-cheatin'
Maybe I know that he's been untrue-ooh,
But what can I do?

The pirate, big and bold, rubbed his salt-and-pepper chest vigorously and bellowed, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the comin' of the Lord!"

In front of us the aqua pool rested like an emerald in its expensive setting.

I carried my second drink very carefully through the corridor and up, up to our cozy little igloo. I had twisted the thermostat dial in the wrong direction. Now the room felt like a box of dry ice. Ordinarily, I would have stood in front of the full-length mirror and checked to see whether I looked like Somebody's Mother or a well-stacked glamor-girl. Tonight I dropped the camellias on the desk, hurled my Paradise Kittens against the farthest wall, and carefully hung up my dress in the closet. You can throw shoes because they don't break. But always hang up your dress, my mother taught me, for no one will press it after a temper tantrum but yourself.

I turned down the blue quilted bedspread and crawled under the covers. Surrounded by pink wool,
I sipped my drink and sulked. Downstairs in the shadows Polly was provocatively feeding the pirate a cherry from her whiskey sour. And me up here with only the blower for company. Shivering, I fell asleep.

Finally, at nine-thirty, Harry arrived hot and tired. He tried to kiss me but got the cold shoulder. He adjusted the thermostat and took a shower. (How pitifully under-sized he looked in his shorts compared to the pirate.)

We dressed for dinner. As he pinned the camellias onto my dress, I said, "Of course you made reservations for dinner."

"Honey, I'm sorry. I was so pooped that I didn't think about it."

"Harry!"

"That garage is going to take us for our last buck. I had to take a cab to the motel. They said the car will be ready tomorrow noon."

"Well, then, let's go down to the bar and wait for a table. The Cafe has been packed ever since I arrived on foot this afternoon."

There was a baroque grand piano nestled behind the booze bottles. We rested our elbows on the soft cushioning which rimmed the mahogany bar and listened to the pianist recite "The Days of Wine and Roses."

Harry reached for my hand. I did not remind him that it would have been thoughtful of him to tip the man to play Our Song.

The hostess arrived, her thin arms folded over huge menus pressed against a flat chest. "Welcome to the Cafe Continentale," she intoned. "New York strip for two is especially good this evening. May I recommend the Chef's salad with our special Holiday sauce? Right this way, folks."
Dinnerware and silver sounded the clarion call for food. They clanked against each other as heavenly Holiday odors of cooking filled the room. Waitresses hurried this way with trays of appetizers. Waiters hurried that way with flaming swords — all about us people were having the time of their lives. Harry and I sat, silent, against one wall.

As I told the waitress, I always order french-fried shrimp and Harry always has two pork chops, not too well done. We sat, saying nothing to each other across the square table, until the waitress manipulated the bowls of onion soup onto the table.

"It's too hot," I said.
"The soup?" said Harry.
"No, the weather."
"Oh."
The waitress asked, "Is the soup all right?"
"Too hot."
"Did you hear the thunder a few minutes ago?"
said Harry.

"No. Is it going to rain? That's all we need to ruin our weekend," I groaned. I could hear the piano from the bar.

Don't throw bouquets at me,
Don't meet my folks too much,
Don't laugh at my jokes too much —

The melody brought back memories of a happy time before I met Harry.

"Do you really think, Harry," I found myself snarling, "that the car will be ready tomorrow at all?"

Before Harry could defend himself, a splendid
voice interceded. At the next table sat the Prussian general and his lady. Unconsciously, I adjusted my bustline and patted my hair.

He was peering over his hornrims, menu in large capable hands. His square fingernails, like surrealistic phallic symbols, seemed to beckon to me. I turned quickly toward Harry to see if he noticed. Of course, he wouldn't.

The Prussian addressed us disarmingly. "Did you know," he grandly announced, "that my wife and I are celebrating our anniversary this evening?"

The waitress stood pad in hand. She registered this information. "Excuse me a moment," she said, and hurried toward the kitchen.

I turned again to the Prussian and saw that he sported a wicked mustache, carefully trimmed. Like his chest and his temples, it was salt-and-pepper tweed. His tan jowls rested on a snowy shirt. The shirt was partly concealed by a madras jacket. A black tie (probably purchased at A. Sulka & Company I thought) completed his above-the-table ensemble.

The Prussian's lady, still in black, smiled indulgently at her husband's pride. At the same time she removed her black stole. A fragrance drifted from her that suggested a single red rose.


The lady smiled, this time in protest. "It's really only our twentieth anniversary," she said gently. "My husband not only has a commanding presence," she said, "but he also exaggerates."

They smiled at each other, and I felt that Harry and I had missed something precious in our
time together. If only we could be as happy as this Lunt and Fontanne. Maybe it takes time.

The Prussian's voice came now, reasonantly, through his proud, large nose. "We eloped in 1944 after attending a matinee performance of 'Oklahoma'." "Really?" I smiled.

"We come here every year because this is the city where my wife was born. Maybe you heard them play 'People Will Say We're In Love'. That's our song. I arranged for it to be played."

Polly spoke. "This is a happy time for us. My husband and I take our happiness as a yellow bird, caged for a little while and singing an exquisite poem, then released and gone."

These words were uttered lightly and the Prussian seemed not to take note of them. He said to Harry, "I courted her with skill and daring, and I presume that she resisted me coyly. I guess you could say that she was a lovely thing. Still is. Now we will go down the sunset path together into the golden years."

Harry was impressed. Somehow I had the feeling that the Prussian was making fun of us. I tried to imagine his as he might have looked when he was young and had lots of hair and no middle.

The waitress returned to our tables. She brought our check to us and she brought a small, white anniversary cake to the Prussian and Polly -- compliments of Holiday Inn. There was a fat, white candle stuck in the middle of the cake, and of course Polly had to blow it out.

"How thoughtful of you," said Polly to the waitress. And she gaily cut the cake as we watched her pleasure. The Prussian said, "I enjoy my wife."

Harry was impelled to say, "May I tell you, sir,
that it's wonderful to see two people like you aging gracefully together."

The Prussian pushed back his chair, stood his full six feet of dignity, and replied, "You may."

I took a final look at them before we left the dining room. They appeared to be holding hands across the table. I sighed. We stepped into the courtyard just as a clap of thunder sent most of the dancers indoors. Lightning flashed to the west. In the corner where the band had been, a lone trumpeteer blew, "Tell Laura I Love Her." The moon was gone for good. We crossed the yard on the cobblestone and entered our section of the motel.

In Room 242 Harry lit a cigarette, turned on TV, and eased himself onto his twin bed. When I emerged from the use-all-the-towels-you-want-to shower, he lay sprawled out snoring with his shoes on. I gently removed his shoes and covered him with the spread from my bed.

In terrycloth robe buttoned to the chin, I sat down in a matching chair beside a matching lamp and listened to the static. The prayer for the night had been said. The flag had been waved. Channel 7 was off the air. The screen crackled brilliantly. The air-conditioning unit blew freezing drafts of air at me.

I switched off the TV and switched on the FM. Streisand, at the top of her lungs, was shouting at 1 a.m.:

Pe-pole, pe-pole who need pe-pole
Are the laaaaaakey-est pe-pole
In the whirl
Matching beds, matching drapes, picture-window, glass shower with butterflies embossed on the door. Harry snored louder.

I rose from my matching depression, crossed the turf in my bare feet, and stealthily unlocked the door to the balcony. The courtyard below was silent except for the sound of one katydid. The bluegreen water rippled slightly in the pool. There was no one poised on the diving board.

As I breathed the oppressive air, a door nearby was being unlocked. Startled, I turned to dash back into our room. To my astonishment, I faced the gypsy queen standing majestically in her doorway. Beyond her, in the light of a tall lamp, I couldn't help but see a single, unrumpled bed. Where was the gypsy?

Polly, embraced by an ephemeral dressing gown the exact shade of the pool below, drifted gracefully to the railing. She resembled Ingrid Bergman standing at the hotel railing in the late-late "Casablanca."

I visualized the gypsy king shrewdly trading horses in the firelight. Perhaps riding swiftly through the August velvet astride his iron horse.

"It will rain in a few minutes," I said foolishly. Silence.
"May I ask you a personal question?" I said. Polly shrugged.
"Is anything wrong?"
She shrugged again.
I couldn't resist asking. "Is your husband all right?"
She gestured for me to enter her doorway.
I stood just inside hoping that the gypsy would emerge from the bath. It was so still. Surely he would come bursting through the door from the corridor with an armful of gladioli for his love.
The single bed with its ivory quilted spread looked inconsolable. Against one wall, opposite the foot of the bed, stood a desk. On it, reflected by the mirror above, sat the small white object which the gypsy had triumphantly rescued from the pool's bottom.

In a nearby wastebasket lay the little cake. It lay on its side smashed in its little cardboard box -- white candle stabbing its middle.

I turned to Polly.

Polly's voice was controlled. "The Russians," she said, "have a saying: love is not a potato. One must be practical. He has gone back to his wife."

The cloudburst descended as she spoke. Together we walked to the railing of the balcony, absorbing the summer storm and watching merciless raindrops pock the perfection of the gypsy's watering place.

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