

The Plastic Masterpiece

Gwen and I were both with Charlie at the same time. Since she lived across the country and I lived a few blocks away from him, I thought I had the advantage. Whenever she called and I was over his place, I left the room or walked to the store at the corner. Every week or so he said he got a letter from her. The letters worried me. You can always scratch out a stupid remark from a letter to make yourself seem above ordinary conversation. And a steamy paragraph written on scented paper can be near close to great sex.

Charlie was very smart. He is still the most intelligent man who I have actually known, a person who was always thinking. He liked to read philosophy and his apartment looked like rooms filled with books first, and some furniture second. I still remember the titles of those books, the only titles I had ever known which sounded like parts of sentences pulled out and slapped on the cover: *The Critique of Pure Reason*; *Inquiries Concerning Human Understanding*; *On Morality*; *Causation Within The Empirical World*.

In bed, sometimes when we were touching, he would walk me through a theory. He would say something that didn't sound true at first and by the time he was finished I would believe it. He convinced me that the bed beneath us existed only when we saw or felt it, and that it could logically be all right to kill one person for the good of many, and that what we have become was determined long before we were born, no matter how much we thought we could change our fate, we could not. In the morning, back at my own apartment, I would look at my own bed but couldn't imagine it had been invisible all night. I would try to remember how I had come to believe it ever was, but I couldn't recall one step along the way. It may not sound valid, as Charlie would say, to love someone for this, but I loved him for making me believe everything once.

Gwen had a different opinion of him. She once referred to him as the first woman she ever loved. To her, the remark was the highest of compliments, but way later, when I met her and she told it to me, I laughed. Now that I know her I know she must have been serious. I never heard her call another man a woman, or another woman the first. Still, I hope she never told him. Like every man I've ever known, Charlie would have hated being called a woman.

Gwen had a way of saying her truth as if it were everybody's. To her it was true that Charlie was a woman because if she had to divide everybody up into who was a man and who was a woman, she wouldn't just use anatomy. Making my own truth was something I eventually picked up from her, but within reason. For instance I can now say Charlie was the first man I ever loved, even though I had loved other men before him. It can be true within reason because he was the first man I loved from the woman I had become, outside of the way I had learned growing up, or the way I thought I had learned.

It bothered me that Charlie never told Gwen about his thing with me until he had to, because he brought her up to me a lot. I could go only so far without him reminding me that we were casual lovers. Typically, we would go out, then go to his house, sleep together, get up and have coffee, then if I suggested going to breakfast, he would remind me that I was not the number one woman in his life. He would say that if that was not all right with me, I should move on. So I would stay away a few days and let him realize how much I meant to him. It was true that when I forced myself not to call, or go over there, it made him more interested. Then I'd get in it with him again, and he'd go awhile before setting a limit and reminding me about his thing with Gwen.

It went like this until the summer he told me she was coming to visit and that I would have to make myself scarce for that week or so—he wasn't sure how long—while she was there. It was hard. That whole spring, he hardly mentioned her. I had really thought that he was leaning more my way. He reminded me that his feelings for her went deeper than for me.

"How long will she be here?" I asked him when he told me. Around him I was careful how I talked. Charlie had once said to me, *I want to live as least influenced by the external world as possible*. I gathered this was why he ignored any comment that seemed normal. I thought it was a worthy goal, to act from deep inside, and not just go along doing everything the way you had learned from your parents or from watching others. I tried hard to be that way, but I kept falling back on the way I had always been, reacting in a way it seemed most people would. Around Charlie I was always catching myself and trying to say the thing that most people would not say, or say nothing when most people would speak out.

"I don't know. A long time."

"When is she coming?"

"Probably around next Saturday."

"Is she staying with you?"

"I don't know; we don't talk about things like that. She likes to be alone. She will probably want to stay in the woods somewhere." He smiled at me as if I was supposed to smile back at that, at how eccentric his other girl friend was.

"You don't talk about basic travel plans?"

He didn't answer.

"Does she know about me?" I said.

"Yes, I told her. Since she was coming here it seemed imperative. Do you want to know what she said about you when I first told her?"

"Not particularly," I told him. I went into his kitchen for a beer he always kept in its carton on the floor next to the refrigerator. He had broken the freezer when he tried to defrost it and a stream of Freon escaped where he jabbed a knife into the ice and through. After that he unplugged it, taped it shut with duct tape, and there it sat ever since. I liked the idea of warm beer, but could never drink much of it. I took a few sips and handed it to Charlie.

"Okay, tell me what she said about me when she heard about me."

"She said she was in love with you."

I had no idea how she could say this, and it hurt because Charlie seemed proud of her words. "She sounds very clever."

"No, it's not cleverness. It's something way bigger."

I had two weeks' vacation leave, so I took it while Gwen was in town. I tried to keep myself distracted but all along a vague sickening feeling surfaced when I thought of Charlie and Gwen in bed together. My own hand on my pillow making a little sound became the sound of their heads close on his one pillow in a nightmare I had then.

Besides what she said about me that time, Charlie told me three things about her: she lived in Colorado, she had a lot of money, and a strange detail he mentioned to me spontaneously one afternoon. He said that when she had an orgasm, her teeth got whiter. It was the meanest thing anyone had ever said to me. For one, I never came with him. I have no idea why he said it.

I did get a glimpse of one of her letters once at Charlie's house. It was opened on the arm of his reading chair. She wrote on notebook paper, not perfumed stationery after all. Her handwriting was very small and angular, a cross between handwriting and printing. It seemed that she wrote slowly and that she was calm when she did so. Her being calm made me especially jealous. One sentence stuck out from that letter, *It will be so good for our skin to be together*. I guess if you were used to her writing, it could read very sexy, but I liked to make fun of it. I joked about it to Susan, my hostess for those two weeks, who read it different ways, accenting different words to make it funny. Deep down I admitted to myself I wish I had said it. It was the kind of phrase Charlie went for.

When I got back to my house I opened the door and saw a kayak in the center of my living room. My coffee table had been pushed aside and this boat seemed to take up the whole room.

I called up Charlie. "What is this canoe?" I said. I thought it was a canoe at the time.

"What canoe?" he said.

"The canoe in the middle of my living room. You're the only one with keys to my house, Charlie. You have to know about this."

"How big is it?"

"It's huge."

"Oh, so it's not a wind-up toy or anything?"

"Look, you go down the water in it with its big paddle lying next to it. You don't know about this?"

“Sweetie, calm down. Does it have a hole to sit in, to just fit one person.”

“Yes.” At this point I was scared. From the phone I looked as far into the other rooms as I could to see if anything was stolen.

“It’s a kayak, not a canoe.”

“Who cares! It could be a sailboat and still be wrong. Charlie there’s a cup on my dish rack that was not there when I left. Did you put that cup there? This is really upsetting.”

“Listen, a lot’s happened. Gwen’s still in town. She did not stay with me. I said she could stay at your apartment. I thought she had everything out by today. It’s her kayak. I have to go now, but it will be good to see you.”

“Okay. It will be okay,” I told him.

When we hung up I looked around for more evidence of a visitor. I saw my bed stripped down and on it a stack of my folded sheets with a piece of loose-leaf paper on top. On the paper, the careful hand I knew.

Sunday 2:00

Rosa,

Thank you.

If Sylvia is still here when you arrive, please know I will fetch her before dawn.

May I have your company for dinner tonight?

I’ve washed me out of these sheets.

We are to be neighbors for a time.

Please accept the small offering.

I will call at seven.

G

Her letter looked like a list, beginning with me as the first item, rather a version of me. Rosa was a name only my grandmother called me. My name is really Rose. It bothered me to have someone I didn’t know, someone who I was against, calling me a name that was only for certain people.

I read the note a few times. I thought the small offering could be a present, but I looked by the sheets and didn’t see any box. I assumed that the offering was the note itself, or that she was making a joke and saying it was her boat. I thought that naming a boat was an easy way to make herself seem odd. I thought that she talked just like a rich person and I went about imagining her as an aristocrat.

I made myself some tea, and while I waited for the water I looked around to see if I saw any evidence of her. I looked in the refrigerator but couldn’t remember the way my things had been arranged in the first place. All I knew for sure was that she definitely used the cup in the rack because it’s one I never used. I picked it up and sniffed the handle trying to smell any perfume, but nothing. I put a tea bag in it and poured.

The small offering was in the bathroom. Gwen’s giving me the shower curtain was the first thing I loved about her. My old pink drape was folded on the tub’s ledge. This new one was a collage of many women from famous paintings. I recognized the

two Venuses, De Milo and The Birth Of, Mona Lisa, Medusa, a Virgin Mary, a Sabine Woman flying in the air cut away from the man who carried her, the woman from Nighthawks, and a Titan-looking odalisque. There was a yellow note stuck on, *One is me and one is you*. I stood in front of my plastic masterpiece and found my own likeness. "Which is you?" I asked aloud.

At seven she did call, but not on the telephone like I assumed. I thought she was Charlie. I came to the door in my dress, my hair wet, my eyes half done. I was holding a mascara wand.

Gwen was pale and light: a thin woman with blonde hair and a translucent complexion. More than anyone I've ever known, she was a cross between something solid and air. It would have been easy for me to shut the door right then and think no one had ever knocked. No doubt the difference between my imagining her as a voluptuous beauty—like one of the odalisques in my bathroom—and actually seeing her, was partly the reason why she seemed so slight. All of my gearing up, a force huge enough to have knocked her over, dissipated into something else. She came inside.

"I didn't think of you as a woman who wore high heels," she told me. She was wearing two tee shirts; the top one had a hole large enough for her to take its two ends together and tie them into a knot, which rested like a little corsage over her shoulder bone. Her shorts had a few drops of white paint on them and her socks were wool. Her hair looked tousled, not messy, but uncombed. She was beautiful in spite of her disregard for appearance—a look that made me more aware of the concealed beauty that could be easily encouraged with a few minutes effort.

"I heard you were rich, so I dressed for dinner. Isn't that what you do?" I asked.

She was looking at me very hard in the eyes. I figured it was because I had darkened one more than the other.

"All right, I'll change," I said in answer to her staring.

She followed me into the bedroom and as a matter of course, patted her kayak as someone would pat a dog. If it weren't for her familiarity toward her boat, I would not have any real evidence that she was Gwen. Neither of us introduced herself by name, a lack of convention which would have impressed Charlie.

When I got undressed she didn't turn around. It seemed impolite but also mature. When I looked at her she looked me in the face but when I turned, I felt self-conscious. I tried to be the way I was in the women's locker room, but it was different. For one she was all dressed and, for two, she was still someone who was after my man, like an enemy. My thinking had been, make yourself as pretty as possible and prepare for battle by intimidation. And now here she was, beautiful without effort, and me, leafing through my shirts drawer to find anything I owned that was torn or had paint on it. I washed off my eyes, it seemed silly to even them out, and we left.

She drove a truck. Her dashboard was decorated with three or four branches whose greens and flowers had hardened in the sun. The cab smelled like a cross between engine and a hot field, a natural and mechanical smell that was easy to associate with her. She reached under the car seat and pulled out a piece of shrub. "For you," she said. "Creosote from the Sonoran Desert. Put it in your shower and let the mist hit it, it will smell like a long time since rain."

I took the brittle gift and thanked her for the shower curtain as well. "You've given me two shower presents," it occurred to me. "I feel like I'm having a baby."

"Either that or getting married."

At the restaurant we had an outside table. I got down to the business of the speech I had half gone over in my head ever since I heard about her. It was about Charlie and me, about how it was perfectly easy for her to conduct an affair from so far away. I reminded her of the way he was when he had too much of someone, something she would be finding out if she stayed, and I hoped she would so he would see how easily he tired of her company. He would see that I had not been so intrusive after all. "Didn't it bother you that I was such a secret from you for so long?" I asked her more delicately than I would have if she hadn't given me two presents. "It seems to me Charlie only told you about me because you were coming here. He never told you before."

She didn't answer; she was like Charlie in that way, letting me spin out on a jag she didn't care about until I was through it. She seemed to enjoy herself most when we talked about other things. She was very amused with my Baltimorian accent. My saying *salt* seemed to be the best part of the dinner for her. And she commanded me to pronounce a variety of words she spelled out.

"Well, what are your plans with him? I noticed you aren't staying with him, why's that?"

"KITCHEN SINK, say that," was her reply

"But you are moving here, is that right?" My purpose was wearing away. My questions became more of a play to counter her remarks, and then they disappeared.

She said she'd found a swimming hole she wanted to show me. We drove to the suburbs until we stopped at what seemed to be an apartment complex where a security man in a box controlled the entrance.

Out her window, Gwen said, "I'm here to visit my grandmother, Judith Montgomery at 2098. He handed her a laminated card that said Twin Elms on it and raised the arm for us to go through.

"I didn't know your grandmother lived here," I said and thought how this explained why she was moving here when she seemed disinterested in Charlie, and why she hadn't stayed with him.

"Yes, it's true. I have many grandmothers throughout the country, and all of them with pools." She drove deliberately to a certain parking space, cut the engine and looked at me. In the near dark I could see her stare the way she first did when I thought it was my mascara she was examining.

We walked down a grassy hill to an ornate cast iron gate and fence surrounding a kidney shaped pool, dimly lit from the inside. This one isn't so bad," she said, stepping into a space in the iron and hoisting herself up. "You should see the fence around my grandmother in Michigan's pool."

I climbed easily, it wasn't like being a man climbing a fence, it was like being a girl, back when girls were way better in sports than boys. And swimming illegally and naked with Gwen was a little like being a girl, but also like being one of the women on my shower curtain.

"I like how the water makes your breasts move." Gwen was coasting around at the other bulb of the kidney, looking my way. I didn't know if she was talking about her breasts or mine.

"This is the water ballet routine I had when I was ten." I showed her a few of the beginning moves, I floated on my back and pointed my toe into the air, submerged and tried to come up again toes first. "It's not deep enough here." I stood in the middle of the pool and curtsied when she clapped.

"Look in the tree." She nodded toward a nearby elm. "Keep looking." She went under and made a dinosaur shadow in the tree by shaping her hands in front of the underwater lamp.

"You're very talented," I said, treading in the six feet.

She moved so that she stood at the lamp in such a way that her body's profile cast a wavy shadow in the elm. "Now look," she said. "We're even. You've seen me naked in two places."

I pushed both hands into the water making the biggest splash I could so that her shadow would waver more. In the tree she grew so obscured I had the feeling I had hurt her, and instantly wished I hadn't done it. I felt like I had gone too far in some vague way.

Her response was to go under and emerge in another area and go under again for a while. I went over to the steps on the shallow end and watched her.

She coasted to a spot on the steps near me. The water got more and more still.

I couldn't tell if she had been flirting with me or if she was being the way she always was. Were passes a woman gave a woman like this? Had her comment about breasts been a come on? Coming from a man, absolutely. At a time when I probably should have had no thoughts of men, I thought of how clear the rules were with them. It was a funny alliance I felt with men just then. I missed them; they were old friends.

I moved my leg and the water rippled out from the point of entry. It was like touching her because the water was touching both of us and it made me want to touch her for real. Just when I would go ahead and believe so much that it was right to touch her waist or her shoulder—closer than an arm's length away—the idea of mistaking all her signals made me panic. I couldn't tell if it was a casual situation or a serious one.

I remember that it was both a decision and a desire to touch a woman and kiss her. And by the time desire had decided, she had kissed me. I was startled by how small her face was. A woman's face felt more refined than a man's.

Back in my bed with her, I didn't want to think about the difference between men and women's lovemaking, but when you're having sex and expectation isn't satisfied, it forces something basic to be satisfied. I couldn't rely on any of my usual ways, and eventually I gave them up. My whole way I was in bed had gone off in some other direction. When sex itself made it too much to compare or think, it really threw me.

Gwen could be alternately serious and playful in bed without seeming clumsy in the transition. Laughing during sex was new to me. It had been Gwen's first time with a woman too. "Is this sex?" she had asked, and it was funny because I had

privately wondered myself what women do, even though of course there were other ways.

“I don’t think this now is sex, but that last bit definitely was,” I said.

Afterwards we took a shower and got very talkative. We went over every detail of our brief history of knowing each other, what one knew, and what the other thought of what she heard. I told her how Charlie had told me that her teeth got whiter when she came.

“How would he know?” She showed her teeth when she smiled at me on purpose; maybe they were whiter, I thought.

From the inside of the shower we could see the outline of the great heroines of art. “It’s nice to see them all together, without the men,” Gwen said.

“It wouldn’t be a world without men,” I said. The water streamed down the two Venuses, as it streamed down us.

“Well yes obviously, who wouldn’t say that?” She leaned back to rinse the shampoo on her forehead. “But what a world. We wouldn’t all be the way we are now. We would be something we can’t even imagine.”

The next day it was hard to think about what happened. I went about unpacking from my trip which made me miss Charlie. I wondered how it would affect him if he knew, whether he would like me more or less. It was a cruel thought. As it turned out he stayed away pretty much. I called him a few times and he said he wanted to be left alone. It was such strange behavior that I began to think somehow he knew about me and Gwen. I had been having dinner and sleeping with her nearly every night.

But he hadn’t known. He wanted to take me for a drive, he called to tell me nearly a week after. We drove out to the country and when we were good and out there he asked me, “Did you know, I’ve been sleeping with Gwen?”

My first thought was *when?* but what I said was, “Pull over.” When he turned the car off I said, “Did you know I was?”

Charlie’s face went from being all ready to sympathize with me, to something I had never seen in him. “How can you justify that ethically?” he asked me, starting the engine and driving away.

“I don’t know,” I said.

We drove home in silence. When I looked over he wouldn’t look back. At my place he leaned across to unlock my door and let me out. “Why don’t you just bite it off?” he said as I got out.

Gwen seemed unmoved by the story. She said it wasn’t that she didn’t care but that she was in love with me and that she had been finished with him for some time and had dealt with it then and it was his problem if he couldn’t accept that. I didn’t ask her the last time she slept with him. I thought it might not be my business. Besides, I didn’t think I’d get a straight answer.

I had a whole chunk of me that still loved him.

I would rather say that my loving women had nothing to do with men, that it had nothing to do with the mind, or chance, that it hadn’t been a decision, hadn’t taken so long to come about, that the first time in bed had settled it all. I wish I could say

I bought it all from the first kiss, or from the first mention of her, as she had. But human factors played a part.

Gwen thought the first time in bed had settled it and that I just wanted to get all complicated to the point that I couldn't see what it was I was doing. She thought that not everyone can cast off the whole idea of women being with men without having something else to get caught up in.

Then it was settled in an evening. Gwen and I were at my house talking in bed. It was late. We were looking back, trying to see if we had ever had any crushes on women in the past now that we saw that we could have. A girl I was very close with in elementary school came to mind; we had the same birthday and our last names began with the same letter so we were always in the same class.

"Like the two Julies!" Gwen interrupted, talking about two women I knew. She loved the phenomenon of both members of a couple having the same name, and mentioned it as much as possible. She wanted to call them up and ask for one and then act like she was really asking for the other, but I wouldn't give her their phone number.

"Sort of like Julie and Julie, yes," I said. "Our names were next to each other, not the same. At lunch we would go to the far end of the school yard and play jacks. I don't think I had a crush on her, though. I just think we were playmates."

Gwen said there was no other woman in her past but Charlie. I hated her joking that way in light of recent events and I told her. She said she wasn't joking but she apologized.

It was as if on cue that we heard the particular sound of Charlie's car, the distinctive race of his engine slow down at my driveway—where Gwen had parked her truck—and pull away.

I couldn't stop feeling terrible about it. I wanted to call him. I wanted to tell him that we were not making love at that particular moment, as if that would have meant anything.

Gwen seemed impatient with me for worrying about him and wanting to call. When the phone rang I knew it was Charlie and was relieved. I remember going to the phone thinking of comforting things to say. But when I said hello the first thing he said was he wanted to talk to Gwen.

When she came to the phone she seemed like she knew he would ask for her. She seemed like she knew everything. I saw a lot just in her getting out of bed and walking to the phone. I saw how they both had something I didn't have. And I could see why both of them would want someone like me. I saw the three of us now, in some spiraling effect of Charlie loving Gwen, Gwen loving me, and me loving Charlie—everybody wanting the person wanting someone else. I saw us spinning faster and faster, out of control but set, like in a centrifuge.

As if love could be something man-made, fashioned from an idea and molded not of water or earth, but of an artificial substance like plastic, right then I decided to be the one body in the centrifuge who turned to face the one who loved me. When I did, Gwen and I banged up against each other. And Charlie flew away.