

On Being Surprised

I knew a girl when I was much younger who claimed to like being surprised. We worked for the same company. Really she was just soliciting attention. Men took her statement as an invitation to do things for her: send her flowers at work or take her to a play that was impossible to get tickets for. She acted like she didn't know what she was doing. She was a very pretty girl.

I was a moralist in those days. I sent her a rather serious poem, which if you thought about it was criticism of her behavior, though combined with admiration for her openness. She proved she was smarter than she was letting on by coming down the hall and slapping my face.

"How erotic," I said.

"Oh, come on," she said, but didn't walk away. "I'm just repaying you for the crap poem you sent me. You think I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Not at all," I said a bit too cleverly. "I know you know and I think you should know better."

I suppose I was able to say this to her because she was way too good-looking for me to aspire to. We were both just out of college. The men who sent her flowers were in their thirties and had lots of money. I wanted her so badly I had to punch my refrigerator when I got home at night. It responded by making a disapproving hmmm noise for a while.

Her name was Elizabeth. She had white skin and black hair and was five foot ten, almost as tall as me. It had seemed to me from the day she arrived that any skirt she wore wanted to creep up her legs whenever she sat down. Her legs

looked like they belonged to a dancer. They enjoyed being seen. The way she sat up straight at her desk suggested that her admirable breasts badly wanted to be touched. I was never going to be the person to touch them.

“Stop thinking about my body and pay attention,” she said. I paid attention. “What I’m supposed to say now,” she said, “is that I’m sorry I slapped you. Then you sort of bob your head around to indicate that you forgive me or it didn’t hurt or you deserved it, and I give you a little peck on the cheek and that’s the end of it.”

I bobbed my head around. It was involuntary.

“I have a better idea,” she said. “Come home with me. We’ll have dinner. I do know how to cook but we’ll get take-out to save time. We’ll open a bottle of wine and see what happens. And while we’re waiting to find out, I’ll tell you what’s wrong with your poem.”

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I wrote that passage after supper the day the Festival program was released. Jemma had called a few weeks earlier and graciously suggested I would be a fine curiosity, provided we could decide on my topic. I’ve published a couple of books that get classified as “erotic literature.” People find the incongruity with my day job amusing. There was a suggestion I might talk about, say, “Banking and Bondage.”

The title we settled on was a compromise. It permits me to talk about almost anything. Given that freedom, I found myself starting a story rather than an essay. This was only a mild surprise. It’s happened before. Since surprise is my theme, I decided to see where the story went. To please Jemma, I’ve called it “Courtly Love in Manhattan,” a reference to the romantic bondage invented in

medieval Provence that involved a knight pledging himself to a noblewoman he would never go to bed with.

The young people in the story. She's an Elizabeth, which is good news. I say *an* Elizabeth because to me that name suggests an attractive combination of intelligence and grit. And I'm *pleased* because when a character shows up who already has a name, it usually means there's going to be a story.

I call the narrator "James," but that has no special significance. He is not a version of me.

Elizabeth was surprised by the poem because it saw through her presentation of herself as an ingénue. I was surprised by the intensity of her response. Characters startle a writer sometimes.

I assume you want to know what happens next. We'll get to that. But this is supposed to be a "talk," so I can't spend my whole half-hour reading you a story. There has to be some analysis and opinion. I assume that's O.K. Most people want resolution but they also enjoy waiting for it.

If you look up "surprise" in a dictionary, which I felt I ought to do, you will find three usages. The oldest one involves an *encounter* – as in "The police surprised a burglar." The more common current usage involves a *violation of expectations* – as in "I was surprised when she slapped him."

There was a time when this second usage was considered incorrect, as illustrated by the following story. A woman of a certain age – definitely not an Elizabeth – returns from a trip and finds her husband in the bathtub with her best friend. "Henry," she exclaims, "I'm surprised at you."

"No my dear," says her pedantic husband. "I am surprised. You are astonished."

The third usage relates to the startle reflex itself – as in, “He registered *surprise*.” Psychologists will tell you that surprise is an emotion, that it lasts a fraction of a second and is evidenced by widened eyes and perhaps a gasp. Its purpose is to reorient attention when a fight-or-flight decision is required.

Some surprises involve a thought or emotion that just shows up. Newton had no pre-existing assumption when the apocryphal apple landed on his head. Many famous scientific breakthroughs happened that way. There was a lot of data swimming around in Newton’s brain – or Maxwell’s or Einstein’s – and suddenly it coalesced into a theory. This could be seen as another version of the unexpected encounter – being ambushed by an idea rather than enemy soldiers.

Stories come into existence in similar fashion – only the relevant *data* is memories and emotions. I’ll talk more about that later.

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We walked the thirty-five blocks to Elizabeth’s apartment. She started to hold my hand and then didn’t. “You don’t know anything about me, do you?” she said. It was as if we had been assigned to each other as part of an experiment. She was a subject too, but she had more information than I did.

“What do I need to know?” I said.

“I like to make men suffer,” she said.

“That’s pretty obvious,” I said. “Three different men sent you flowers last week.”

“My record is five,” she said.

“So what do you do besides making them spend money on you?” I asked. I’d bought the tandoori chicken and the wine that was supposed to make us relax.

“When we get there, and you’re naked, I’ll explain,” she said. When *we’re* naked, I silently corrected her.

The quiet perfection of Elizabeth’s living room surprised me – soft giant second-hand sofas facing each other across a low coffee table with a bowl of green apples in the middle of it, four hand-decorated high-backed chairs around a circular wooden table near the door to the kitchen, a scattering of tribal rugs and artifacts, and a lot more books than I’d expected. I realized that Elizabeth was a woman of discernment.

“Go in the other room and take everything off,” she said. “Quick sticks.” I went into her bedroom but I left the door ajar and she continued talking to me as I rather numbly complied. “It’s a rule I have,” she said. “Man wants me, he has to let me look him over, let me study his reactions and learn what excites him. Men are like sailboats. One of my aunts taught me that. You have to know how to handle them before you take them out.”

“I hope you’ll handle me,” I said lamely.

“No chance,” said Elizabeth. “Now come out here.” And then in a more reflective tone: “This could be quite intense, James. Can you handle intense?”

She sent me home as soon as we’d eaten, and before we’d had much of the wine. “I’d really like...,” I started to say.

“I know,” said Elizabeth. “And I’m enjoying it already.” I couldn’t help feeling she’d lost her nerve.

Now of course a man can’t let a woman treat him that way. So I told myself it was an experience I’d chosen – letting desire overwhelm me, becoming a tree struck by lightning, its branches aflame in the rain and darkness. And perhaps

that was true. Hmmm, as my refrigerator would say. Elizabeth and I were on a dangerous path. I knew that, but I pretended I didn't.

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I regard tension and release as the dynamic duo of art. (It's me again. James and I take turns with the microphone.) The release can come about in many ways – resolving the conflict that propels the plot, a pattern emerging out of randomness, restatement of the theme at the end of a long improvisation. These are all *formal* characteristics of a work. They whisper that there is order to the universe. The tension has *emotional or irrational* roots – conflict, disorder, improvisation – which reminds us that we are passionate animals, not thinking machines. Tension and release fuse the ideal with the real, which I think is one of art's functions.

Surprise isn't art *per se*, but they're cousins. Surprise compresses tension and release into a single moment, but within that moment, the energy flows in the opposite direction – from equilibrium to disturbance.

Fiction uses surprise to illuminate character. Our assumptions are shown to be wrong, which forces us to focus and reappraise. If our new understanding is something we should have known all along, we receive aesthetic pleasure from realizing that.

Poets use surprise to illuminate reality. Unexpected conjunctions of words and images make us see things in a new light. How far this can be taken is a matter of taste. Samuel Johnson, the 18th Century man of letters, objected to the "conceits" in John Donne's poems. "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together," he said. I suppose you could call that "*literary* bondage."

In the visual arts, surprise creates a bond between audience and object. My friend Lesley Kehoe represents a Japanese artist who makes multi-colored free-standing screens. Their two sides are always different – one softly *yin*, the other assertively *yang*. People come into Lesley’s gallery in Melbourne, marvel at whatever screen is on display, eventually walk around it and are startled. She says they *always* prefer the side they see second. It doesn’t matter whether it’s *yin* or *yang*. The side that surprised them was concealed. They discovered it. That gives it value.

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Elizabeth *hadn’t* lost her nerve. She made me wait more than a week, then appeared at my desk one five o’clock and asked, as if we were a couple, whether I wanted Indian or Thai.

“You don’t know very much about me, do you?” I said as we entered Central Park on the way to her apartment.

“What’s there to know?” she said.

“I spent six months in a monastery in Japan,” I told her. “I have enormous self-control.” This wasn’t lying because I knew she wouldn’t believe me.

“No you didn’t,” said Elizabeth. “Say something in Japanese.”

“I never learned any. They were Buddhist Trappists. They didn’t speak.”

We both stifled a laugh. “What did they make you do?”

“You can whip me if you want and I won’t react.” I was taking a risk here, but I figured with a girl like Elizabeth you have to do that.

“I don’t want to whip you,” she said. Or I don’t think I do. Especially if you won’t react.”

Neither of us said anything for a while. "What *do* you want to do to me?" I asked her.

"More of the same," she said with a shrug.

"You're driving me crazy, you know."

"I told you I would."

"You might try touching me," I said hopefully. "I'm quite ticklish."

"I like *not* touching you."

"That's actually more intense."

"Of course it is," she said. "What about not touching me?"

"That's hard too."

"I've noticed the way you don't touch me," she said. "Most men find ways to touch a girl."

"Do you mind being touched with words?"

"I didn't like your poem."

"Am I still being punished for that?"

"This isn't punishment. Your life is being intensified. And no, I do not mind being touched with words, so long as they're compliments."

"The feather touch of graceful compliments," I said. It was a line from a poem I was working on.

"The compliments can be quite direct," she said cheerfully.

"I expect your breasts are very beautiful," I said.

"I'm told they are."

"I think about them all the time."

"Of course you do," she said.

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For a writer, the *best* surprise is a new story asking to be written. This is deeply satisfying. It lets you believe you have talent, which would be evidence of an extremely well-ordered universe.

Any element of fiction can show up to make a story's case. For me, it is most often premise and prose that perform that role.

By "premise," I don't mean plot. Premises are situations. Plots are about consequences. Premises disclose their plans reluctantly. Plots are proud of their surprises.

I generally work out a plot by letting the premise suggest events. Some survive, some are rejected. Events reveal character. From a compositional perspective, events *create* the characters. But to be honest, it doesn't *always* work that way. Some characters are integral to the premise. "Courtly Love in Manhattan" *required* an Elizabeth. And she showed up before I knew what the premise was. The same was true of Cassandra in my novel, *Submission*. She just started talking to me one day.

The most striking experience I've had of a story volunteering was "Alice in Wonderland" in *Partners*. Four years ago, a whole sentence arrived in my consciousness unbidden. "The firm had a gym," it went, "and one day Alice, who they'd made a partner because there was no way not to, came in and took her clothes off." It was clear this premise had potential, but I was really busy at the time, so I wrote the sentence down on a scrap of paper and stuck it in my sock drawer – and promptly forgot about it, same as we do with dreams.

I care about the elegance with which a premise introduces itself. "Elegant" means simple and direct. For me, strong, clean prose is the best representation of order manifesting itself – the formal element of my dynamic duo.

Alice came wrapped in self-confident sentences. “The men were frightened,” the opening continued. “They wanted to kill her. Alice knew this. Her mother was a politician in a small way, and she liked to quote Lyndon Johnson to the effect that if you couldn’t walk into a room and know by instinct who your enemies were, you had no business in Washington. Alice lived in New York but she was good at walking into rooms.” It was a story about power. Writing it was easy.

I’ll try not to spoil this or any of the other stories, but if you are polite enough to buy a copy of *Partners*, you will encounter several openings that stand in front of you that way – relaxed yet full of energy. “Oscar went to a conference and met a lady judge. He was on a panel. She came up to him after the dinner. ‘I like self-confident men’ was her pick-up line.”

What these straightforward sentences do is establish ground rules. If you can’t accept the premise that a woman could start undressing in front of a group of male professional colleagues, or that a middle-aged female judge could look for sex, well, read no further.

One of the things that freed me to devise improbable premises in *Partners* was that my publisher, Jane Curry, told me to. A woman who knows what she wants is a gift. “I need ten by Valentine’s Day,” she said after a mutual friend introduced her to Alice. I’m a lapsed newspaper reporter. Deadlines energize me. But the uncompromising nature of the sentences also helped. Hemingway said that if you get stuck, you should focus on writing one true sentence. I agree – with the proviso that when Hemingway says “true” he also means brave.

Improbable premises license surprise. Your one true sentence not only gets you started writing. It can unlock the dressing-up closet in your subconscious,

which is where the irrational half of my dynamic duo hibernates. If you want your story to have any power, you have to gain access to that closet.

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Elizabeth and I went on this way through July and most of August. Once a week turned into twice a week. Sometimes she cooked for me – lovely, light stir-fries with spices I’d never heard of. I got quite used to being naked. She had no compunction about looking at me. My body had no compunction about indicating that it liked that. I investigated her bookcase, which harbored savages. *Kinship in the Amazon. Exogamy Among Nomads.* Her degree was in anthropology, which explained the masks and drums and temple bells. I learned that her friend Lilac ran an art gallery where Elizabeth could count on getting picked up. She disclosed bits and pieces about her family, which was complicated by the remarriages of both her parents. “I’m an only child but I have six step-siblings,” she said.

“Why do you go out with all those men?” I finally asked her. If a woman makes you walk around her apartment naked, eventually you should be entitled to ask some questions.

“To study my own reactions.”

“Do you sleep with them?”

She laughed. “I have sex...”

“ Unlike me,” I said.

“Yes I know,” she said. “It’s delicious.” She paused to savor my distress. “The answer to your question is that I have sex with most of them but always go home afterwards. So you needn’t be jealous.”

“You never bring them here?”

“Not the image I wish to create.”

“Create for what?”

“Well, if I got tired of working, it would be useful to have a supply of rich admirers who found me mysterious. You aren’t secretly rich, are you, James? Lilac’s flat-mate is. I wouldn’t like it if you were. I like to imagine you starving in a garret, scribbling poems.”

“I usually have a can of soup,” I told her.

“Good,” she said. “And no other women. They’re against the rules.”

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If you want to write erotic fiction, and I recommend it if you wake in the night worrying about stuff, the trick is not to get carried away. End the scene early. Suggest more than you say. There’s a line in one of Hemingway’s stories about a native American girl who, quote, “did first what no one has ever done better.” I first read those electrifying words when I was fifteen, at which age no one had ever done anything – or not with me. I have always remembered that sentence.

John Kennedy was running for president when I was fifteen, seducing the nation with his off-hand version of ambition. One sensed he knew things. He’d been injured in the war and survived. The nurses wouldn’t have been able to keep their hands off him. We all had good imaginations at girl-deprived Phillips Exeter Academy, where I learned to put words together. The power, we discovered, was in what *wasn’t* said.

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Elizabeth had four masks on her living room walls, each of them simultaneously hideous and beautiful. She asked me to wear one. I didn’t want to, but I agreed. She led me into the bathroom to look in the mirror. I wasn’t

myself. “You can do anything you want now,” she said. She seemed excited. I perched like a baboon on the back of one of the giant sofas and watched her as she paced around the room.

“Actually,” she corrected herself, “you don’t need to do anything. You’re a spirit prince for whom and to whom things are done.”

“Sacrificed to improve the harvest?”

“It’s complicated,” she said. “I wrote a paper about it. But here’s an idea. I’ll paint the two halves of you red and white and invite some people for drinks. You’ll be a piece of performance art. We’ll see how they react. Are you game?”

“Wouldn’t that be disrespectful to the mask?” I asked. Being shown off was a frightening prospect. It gave me a buzz I didn’t want to reveal.

“The mask comes from a remote island,” said Elizabeth. “The relevant spirits have no jurisdiction in New York.”

“Spirits have jurisdiction everywhere,” I said. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic and wanted to take the mask off.

“You can take it off now,” she said. “We could probably achieve the same thing by painting your face black. You’d be your own mask.”

“What is it you want me to do that you think I won’t without dressing up as a monster?”

“Don’t know,” she said.

“I’ll do anything you want, you know.” I said this when I was dressed again and leaving.

“I know,” said Elizabeth. She seemed dissatisfied. She was hungry for surprise.

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I've got a novel coming out later this year that describes a three-day party in a beach house. It's a Mozart comic opera sort of thing – false identities, coincidences, changing partners. The premise is that anything is possible. At one point the host gets maneuvered into having to undress in front of everyone. Like James, he discovers that being naked is easy, once you are. Virtually all the energy is discharged at the moment you realize you're going to do it. The best erotic literature lingers at boundaries. Immense pleasure can be had creeping up on things we think we wouldn't do.

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If Elizabeth lingered at the edge of sex – it's James, by the way – it was not exclusively to drive me wild. She enjoyed torturing me – she said so all the time, anyway – but she also seemed to be exploring her own limits.

We would touch each other eventually. I had faith in that. If you spend your evenings writing blank verse, and throw most of it out in the morning, you get pretty good at having faith.

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Some people are afraid of the dark. (Me again.) They fear the natural disorder of creation. Surprises make them ill. I feel sorry for such individuals. Expecting reality to be logical is like wearing glasses with the wrong prescription. It will give you a headache.

If you made a Venn diagram of sex and secrets and surprises, there would be a lot of overlap. What you do with another person should be a secret. By extension, anything you keep secret has erotic energy, and any act of disclosure has erotic resonance. Disclosure by definition means some amount of surprise – and vice versa. Surprise is therefore inherently erotic. But we knew that.

Any successful story brings out something hidden inside a person or a situation. James and Elizabeth surprise in each other a capacity for reciprocal role-playing that gives them pleasure – and exploit their discovery with more aplomb than most people can manage.

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Elizabeth and I arrived at her building to find a woman sitting on the front steps. “This is Jessica, James. Jess is the only member of my family I still talk to. She’s my mother’s second husband’s little sister. Mother is on husband number four, so I’m not sure we’re still related. Put your bag in the bedroom, Jess. There’s only one bed but we’ve shared before. James never stays the night. Would you like a glass of wine?”

Elizabeth was keyed up about something. As soon as we were alone in her tiny kitchen, she explained. “I’m going to want you to undress,” she said.

“What?”

“You don’t know her. You’ll never see her again. Put it down to my wanting to show off. Most of the venturesome things I’ve done in my life I’ve done with her. Too much to drink. My first visit to a topless beach. Foolish stuff but important. So now I’ve got a man who looks terrific naked and I want to display him.” She paused for breath. “Also, it frightens you, and I want to watch you be brave.”

“How exactly do you plan to do this – not that I’ve agreed?”

“I’ll work it into the conversation. Jess is a connoisseur of extreme behavior. And you’re very sweet.” Elizabeth kissed me on the cheek.

“I scored a plane ticket,” Jessica said as soon as I came in with her wineglass, “so I figured I’d come check on Lizzie. I’m plunging in because I have

to go back tomorrow, and if we dance around stuff we'll waste the evening. I hope Lizzie's telling the truth about my not kicking you out of her bed because I do need a place to stay. I'm thirty-five. I'm not married but I'm not a dyke. I quite like men. I even like their smell. I just haven't ever been good at relationships. So what's your story, James? Oh, and I teach playwriting and contemporary culture."

"James is a poet," said Elizabeth.

"Where do you sleep then, James?"

"I have my own garret," I said, trying without success to elicit a laugh.

"We work in the same office," said Elizabeth. "He went to Yale. We're not lovers but we're more than friends." She'd never told me what she thought we were.

"Meaning he'll go out for the pizza when it's raining and delivery would take an hour and a half?"

"More than that," said Elizabeth. "But yes."

"But no sex?"

"I've never actually touched her." I said. It just popped out. I'd meant to say nothing.

"That must be quite hard?" said Jessica, smiling for the first time.

"We're conducting an experiment," I said.

"Are you practicing to be a priest? You don't *look* Catholic."

"We're practicing intimacy without sex," said Elizabeth.

"And obedience," I added.

"He'll undress if I ask him to," said Elizabeth, by now quite breathless.

Jessica looked at me without speaking. I figured the easiest thing to do was just take my clothes off.

“What an interesting party trick,” said Jessica. “When you finish, James, come sit next to me. I want to observe him close up, Lizzie.”

I tossed my clothes on the floor and sat on one of the giant sofas, leaving a foot and a half between us.

“The thing about the theatre,” said Jessica, “is that it’s live. Unlike in a movie, if someone strips, there’s a naked person in the room. You wonder if their nerve will hold. There’s a whole extra level of performance happening, which is why so many playwrights include it. I tried it myself once – got a part that required three minutes of nudity. I’m not much of an actress but my body is nothing to be ashamed of, or it wasn’t then. I made the excuse that it was research.”

“What did you learn?” said Elizabeth. She was trying to be cool.

“One could develop a taste for the experience, but I haven’t done it again.” She stopped talking and inspected me. I pretended I was an artist’s model and didn’t move. “May I touch him, Lizzie?”

“I think that’s up to James,” said Elizabeth.

“You don’t understand,” said Jessica. “He’s committed. He might as well be on stage in front of five hundred people. We can do whatever we want.”

“Well, go ahead then,” said Elizabeth.

Jessica sat back into the sofa pillows without touching me. My body found this surprisingly hard to take. “Once he knows you can and might,” she explained to Elizabeth, “you don’t need to do anything.”

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Sex gets a story going. If you can weave it into the premise, people will read at least the first few pages. Love *keeps* things going. For me, there needs to be some prospect of love or the story isn't worth telling. Sex makes some people fidgety. Laughter calms them down. Love is both at once. I like to describe my books as love stories with the sex left in. I want both. Love just takes longer – and lasts longer.

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Elizabeth said she had to run an errand and I should meet her at her apartment. When I got there, she was naked. “My turn,” she said as she opened the door. I can't claim this was completely unexpected.

“Touching?” I asked.

“Of course not,” she said.

When people get naked they look different. Assumptions you'd made about their curves and muscles turn out to be wrong. I explained all this to Elizabeth. “Tell me I'm not a disappointment,” she said.

“You are straight-backed and delicate as those chairs,” I began pretentiously. I was twenty-two, remember, and I'd just had my first poem published.

“I painted them myself,” she said, which didn't exactly follow. She was proud of having invented *herself*, I decided. “Each chair is different,” she continued. “I make a secret alteration to everything I buy to make it mine.” She was talking faster than usual. Being nude excited her.

“So everything in this apartment is odd,” I said. “I have to say, it fits together nicely.”

“Like me,” she said, lifting her arms above her as if she'd just won a contest.

I stared at her. She looked fabulous without her clothes.

“Oh, please don’t do that,” she said, squirming where she stood in the middle of her living room. She dropped her arms and walked into the kitchen to serve out the food. “Open the wine, please,” she said briskly. “Set the table. Tell me about your childhood.” I’d learned a lot about hers during Jessica’s visit.

“What sort of childhood would you like me to have had?” I asked her after we both were seated. I hadn’t warmed to Jessica.

“A happy one,” said Elizabeth. She began to cry softly like the petals falling off a rose. “James, I don’t think I can keep this up.”

“Would you like to get dressed?” I said.

“Not in the least,” she said. “I want to forget about dinner and get into bed and have the maximum possible amount of your surface touching the maximum amount of mine.”

Which we did.

“You had me with the poem,” she said later, as twilight dissolved. “But I was afraid.”

“It was a love letter.”

“I know, I know.”

“Everyone fears rejection,” I told her. “My poem, as you may have noticed, pretended someone else was the speaker. That way, if you laughed, you wouldn’t be laughing at me.”

“I knew it was you speaking. I could hear your voice. But I had to find out what kind of person you were before I let you know how it touched me.”

There didn’t seem to be anything more to say. We’d done a lot of touching.

Elizabeth spoke slowly from the darkness. “Also, I saw an opportunity to find out what sort of person *I* was.

“So you tortured me for a couple of months.”

“You didn’t mind.”

“*You* certainly enjoyed it,” I said.

We were lying next to each other on the crumpled sheets, listening to the traffic on Amsterdam Avenue. “Guilty,” she said. “But admit it: so did you.”

“I liked being your sailboat most of the time.”

Both of us were silent for a bit. “Thank you for when Jess was here,” she said.

“Think of it as proof of my devotion,” I said.

“I’m likely to insist on frequent proof,” she said.

“I hope you do,” I said.

We were silent again. “You could demand things of me, you know,” she said quietly. “Sometimes. Now that we’re lovers.”

“You’d like to be the sailboat?” I said.

“And slice through the water under your control? Very much.” She let that thought linger in the silence for a minute. Then she sat up and turned on the bedside lamp in order to study me, shameless and confident as ever. “I like your body, James,” she said. “If you’re very good, some day I may admit to liking your poems.”

She gave me a kiss, hopped out of bed and put on a striped nightshirt. “You stay put. The take-out will be inedible but I’ll make us some toast.”

“There’s one thing we should probably clear up,” I said.

“And what would that be, sweetheart?”

“Why you slept with all those other men.”

“I didn’t,” said Elizabeth. “Or not as many as I let you think. But I do need sex.”

“That will not be a problem,” I told her.

“I shouldn’t think so,” she said merrily.

I sat up in the bed, retrieved a pillow, listened to Elizabeth organizing supper and was generally pleased with myself.

“But most of all, James,” she continued, coming in with a tray of toast and plums and pinot noir and setting it on the bed, “most of all, my poetical lover, I like your courage.” She took off her nightshirt and tossed it on the floor, which seemed a wanton act. She was shockingly beautiful. “We’re going to have a lot of fun with each other, James.” She got into bed beside me and slid her hand under the covers to be sure she had my attention. “We’ll do unspeakable things.” She tore open a plum and fed it to me quickly so my mouth was too full to argue. “We’re going to test boundaries, James. So I hope you like being surprised.”

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I’m a romantic, as you can see, but not unrealistic. Anything that works in a story is possible in life. So whether it’s a wet kiss in the dark or the feather touch of graceful compliments, do something nice to your partner tonight. Take your time about it. Make it a surprise. Keep it a secret.

The End