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Soft Ice Cream

Bruce Colbert
New York

Never late not once in the mostly placid fourteen years we'd been married, she wasn't this time either, smiling at me from a still pretty face surrounded by her freshly-cut, longish dark hair maybe an inch over the green fleece collar, eyes quickly glancing around the dockside café she'd at been once before. We'd been legally separated for nearly a year; legally! she liked to say that word, not just separated, she'd tell people, no, not that, but "legally separated", a term which conjured up a five or six mildly threatening letters passing between our lawyers for a few months. There's no shouting on the phone when you're legally separated she told me once it was done, though I rarely shout anyway. Silence had always been my weapon of choice in our few arguments. Those morbid letters usually began with... "Pursuant to our last request about your dog, cat, sailboat, life insurance policy or grandma's India Tree china cups," and ended with a line or two of the usual venom. I can only guess that she thought these letters would somehow empower her urged on by her closest not-so-newly divorced girlfriends, and I'm sure they did. After all it was official, she was now legally separated from me in the state of California, a letter attesting to that fact buried somewhere in Marin County Court House records. For some strange reason, no one ever bothered to send me a copy, so I had to take Karen's word for all this.

Like most middle-aged men who suddenly find themselves alone, I stumbled through a few brief but doomed relationships with much younger women, ending

with them bored to death with me and my late night rants about a search for inner peace, listening glassy-eyed to my poorly paraphrased Jung over a half-drunk glass of stale wine. I hardly recall those nights. The truth was, I still wanted to be married to Karen, married on some level whatever that meant. We could start as friends I reasoned and maybe remain that way, trying not to become husband and wife again in not quite the same conventional way, at least not in the way we had ended up. Fat chance.

That July I had left our house on Bridge Street in Sausalito because she had asked me to, and rather than argue, I simply moved the four blocks down the hill onto the sailboat we owned which was comfortable enough, moored next to the San Francisco commuter ferry . For those first six months on the boat I patiently waited for some sign she'd come back to her senses, but nothing happened between us, no real conversations, actually none. Even when I'd bump into her in the grocery store at the other end of town she wouldn't talk to me, but instead pat her purse like it was a holstered six gun, wherein lay hidden the neatly folded legal separation document. She believed in the letter of the law almost like some kind of middle-aged female Wyatt Earp pointing to her tin star.

My attempt at another romance, can I call it that? started with the gum-chewing twenty-three year old blond assistant office manager at my Embarcadero office complex overlooking the Bay where I had an advertising agency along with my business partner Scotty Simmons who also happened to be between wives. He held the record for the shortest marriage that I knew of, three weeks. I had heard the

story when he was drunk three or four times in the last few years, usually after all the guests had left the office Christmas party. He would pace around the front office several times, stop at the fake silver holiday tree, play with the string of colored lights and say in his bass announcer's voice. "I've never told you this." Oddly enough, he somehow always had a fresh glass of scotch in his hand when he started his story and then looked out the window glancing back at me once or twice for sympathy.

After returning from his honeymoon cruising the South Seas, he and his then TV news anchor bride stopped by her San Francisco apartment for a few minutes on their way to dinner to listen to all her unheard phone messages and with him standing there, she turned to him and after listening to message number three from some unidentified man, called out like a penitencostal supplicant.

"Oh Lordy, Lordy, he really does love me!" she cried to the heavens after a long breathless sigh in her native Texas Hill Country drawl, and then looking directly at Scotty dried a tear of joy. "I think it's a good idea if we don't see each other anymore." And with that, she went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and uncorked a fresh bottle of Alexander Valley Chardonnay to celebrate this late breaking news, but alas with just one glass, her own, A particularly hurtful thing he later told me because it was a spectacular '94 vintage that they were saving to celebrate their return from paradise.

The only other thing Scotty ever said about the breakup of this marriage, his second, was that being a lifelong sailor "that it really took the wind out of my sails!" He could

be a very emotional man when circumstances called for it. Otherwise he was mostly humorless, using a few tried-and-true nautical terms to pepper his speech, sort of a complement to the boat shoes he wore on Saturdays.

Undaunted by the overwhelming grief he felt the next morning at the office he told me that despite this bout of depression he was still able to get a date that night for a quick dinner at the St. Francis Yacht Club. And later an intimate coffee employing the fancy new Italian espresso machine he got Cafe Trieste in North Beach to install on his new forty-foot Catalina sailboat. Mario the gregarious owner of Trieste thought of Scotty as a man unlucky in love and liked him immensely, and being a good customer too, had put it in himself in exchange for use of the boat over the Fourth of July weekend with one of the new waitresses he just hired while his wife and son visited her family in Genoa. The lady in question with Scotty at the reception desk that morning was a twenty-one year old woman he had met in the Starbuck's coffee line. This resourcefulness was something you could admire about him. He had promised her, a budding graphic artist fresh out of art school on her first job interview inside the building, that she could redesign and later become editor of a newsletter we didn't publish as yet, or ever would.

Life of course wasn't all smooth sailing later as I came into the office late one day mid-week to hear Joyce, our straitlaced Mormon receptionist mutter, "What is wrong with that man, can you tell me? not really expecting any answer. Just repeating it again and again, not looking at me, or anyone for that matter.

Later over lunch at the overpriced deli across the street in the Ferry Building, Scotty told me the harrowing tale between bites of his roast beef sandwich. He had this

machine gun way of talking, mostly because he had been a radio DJ in his twenties in LA, where he even had a special radio personality created by station KVXT for him, the one and only surfer-dude, Bobby Oceans. So you always felt he was trying to talk above a breaking wave.

Well, it seems he had a deal to park his new car at a gas station nearby at half the price of the garages surrounding the Embarcadero. So the other day he's leaving early, I'm in Sacramento on business, and he's off about three o'clock on a sunny day in the October version of San Francisco summer. Before cranking up his shiny green Jeep, he gets a quick soft ice cream from the corner vendor and is licking away at the cone about to get into his car when he passes an attractive twentysomething girl with shiny red hair and long, smooth legs, his precise taste in women as he so often elaborated on whatever that meant, the ruining. I think he simply meant marriage and children but was never curious enough to ask. We're both fifty, actually I'm two years older than him, fifty-two. He's obsessed with this half-your-age appeal with women, it makes him feel like the combat helicopter pilot in Vietnam he once was. It's always risky he tells me with the younger ones, you never know how much flak you'll take before you go down in smoke.

Anyway he smiles at the girl wearing jean cut-offs on this hot day and says, "Want a lick?" She coos back, "Yeah." and they strike up some kind of banal conversation. He asks her where she's going, maybe he can give her a lift.

"I'm going where you're going," she purrs, then jumps into the Jeep and they're off to his beachfront apartment. And he's off to the races, or so he thinks.

Well, Scotty's a modest man in his storytelling unlike some and simply says that me they got intimate right away and had a marvelous few hours. But there were some

troubling signs.

At first when she walks into his beach shack as he calls it, she admires his paintings and then the view of Richardson Bay.

“I’m from Visalia in the Central Valley, the hottest and ugliest place on earth! you know where that is?” she asks walking out of his kitchen with a cold beer in her hand not waiting for an answer. Next she sits down on his white leather couch, takes her shoes off, wrestles with her purse and removes a bottle of nail polish and begins painting her toe nails a bright shade of pink. He’s very peculiar about his white couch but doesn’t say a word since everything this afternoon is about negotiation.

“You can wait for the five minutes they’ll take to dry, can’t you?” she whispers already guessing what he’ll say. As she puts her freshly painted toes on his coffee table, she pulls down the zipper on her cutoffs enough to show a tan line, smiling all the while. He grunts out a laugh from his soft belly, “Sure!”

After it’s all over and she’s almost dressed, she tells him she wants five hundred dollars in cash right now, or she’s gonna call the police and tell them he raped her. A real post-coital disconnect for him, I’d say. Well, Scotty’s no fool and he’s seen the inside of a lot of brothels in Southeast Asia in his youth and the seamy side of life in South Central and Compton too, but never anything quite like this, he can’t answer. So she repeats the request, or threat, like most people would call it.

“If you don’t, I’ll walk out the door here and I’ll start screaming you raped me,” she tells him giving him a dead man’s stare.

He’s starting to get the picture pretty quickly and his year of thinking he was never going to come back alive out of the jungle returns with a shiver. “You’re kidding!”

“Try me, mister!” she hisses.

Now he knows he’s in trouble, so he says OK, but explains that he doesn’t carry that kind of cash and they’ve got to go to an ATM. All the while his mind is working feverishly trying to find a way out of this nasty situation. A rape charge true or untrue would ruin him.

“My card is only good at Bank of America for that much cash in one shot, so we’ll have to go back into San Francisco for the cash,” he tells her, giving it a decent spin of sincerity I’ve seen in client meetings over the years. “It’s no problem going there. You’ll get your money, OK. Take maybe fifteen minutes.”

They leave his beachfront apartment and drive across the Golden Gate Bridge neither one saying a word. Finally he spots a bank kiosk next to Mel’s Diner on Lombard Street and points to it so she can see for herself. She nods a cautious acknowledgement.

He tells her he’s sorry if he upset her, he thought mistakenly that she wanted the lovemaking as much as he did. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” he repeats. The woman doesn’t speak but her body language tells him she’s starting to relax.

“Hey I make a lot of change,” he insists, “this is no big deal,” and nervously laughs reaching across to touch her tanned arm gently. “We’re cool!”

He had pushed her into something she didn’t want, he was too aggressive, it was almost a rape. She tells him all this. He’s frightened of what this is becoming but acts nonchalant although his ex-pilot’s heart is beating fast. He’s finally scared.

“Tell you what, here’s a twenty, go get us some ice lattes while I get the cash for you, alright Then I’ll drop you off wherever you want, ” he tells her with false

bravado. He tries to keep his hand from shaking as he hands her the twenty and pulls off the street. She looks at him for a moment, gives him a half smile and takes the cash. He drives into the lot at Mel's and parks.

They both leave the car at the same time and he pulls his wallet out as he walks to the ATM, easing out his red bank card in plain view as he shuffles along. In a few seconds, Scotty's at the cash machine putting his card in the slot and touching the screen to start the transaction. He glances up once or twice at her and keeps touching the computer screen in front of him.

The girl stares at him across the small restaurant parking lot and then turns to walk into Mel's for the latte's while he's still waving to her. She walks up to the counter and places the order with a short, fat Mexican guy, looking back out the window every few seconds to catch sight of him.

He's smiling back at her and then in another moment he's holding up a handful of folded bills so she can see he's gone ahead with his part of the deal. She nods.

In an instant he's inside the Jeep again, starts the engine and slams the gear shift into reverse and is backing out into the street with screeching tires, and like a shot is part of the flowing traffic on Lombard, moving faster and faster from lane to lane in the next two blocks, only slowing down for a second, signaling a quick turn left and then the jeep disappears from sight altogether.

Without moving the young woman watches all this from the window in front of the restaurant cash register, mechanically handing over the twenty bucks for the iced coffee, very softly, inaudibly mumbling something to herself. With a handful of bills,

she takes the bag with the coffee out the front door and then without even looking drops it in the trash can at the bottom of the steps. Slowly she walks across the tiny parking lot and turns right on the sidewalk looking at her small hands first as if they had something to do with this, and turns uphill toward downtown San Francisco. Not angry, not sad, not even disappointment showing on her face. Nothing,

I watch Scotty closely for a few seconds, see his full Roman nose, his sandy hair, his freckles, and then instinctively just shake my head. He's wiping the grease from the sandwich off his large hands, he's six three, a big guy.

"That's a helluva story," I say not knowing what else to add.

"That wasn't the end, no Sirree," he goes on, trying to sound nasal like country singer Buck Owens whom he met once in Bakersfield., a rural backwater where he spent two exiled years at a country-western radio station before moving on to LA.

"I must have told her the name of the Agency and she looked it up somewhere alright," he explains. "Because by mid-morning the next day I hear Joyce arguing with a woman out front, saying she just can't walk in my office, unannounced. And that's just what the woman did."

She's standing in my office, her, this same woman dressed in a tee shirt with a peace symbol on it and brown chino slacks, and tells me point blank she wants her \$500

"You raped me, give me my money!" she says. At first she's calm but then starts getting louder and louder, calling me a son of a bitch, demanding the money.

I tell her to get out but she refuses and starts yelling. Finally, I get a little forceful and jump up from my desk and grab her by the arm pushing her out of my office. Now

I'm the one shouting, this time at a terrified Karen telling her to call 711 and get security up here fast. We have an extortionist on our hands, I gesture toward the woman glaring at me.

After maybe two minutes of this, the girl finally lowers her voice a little and keeps repeating to Karen that I'm a rapist, men like me get their kicks from raping young girls.

"I want my money, you raped me, you're sick," she tells me again.

Joyce's ready to start crying hysterically when the building's burly black security guard opens the office door and asks what's wrong. Like a flash the girl runs past him and must've taken the fire exit steps because a moment later when we came out into the hallway she was gone. The elevator isn't that fast.

I let out a deep breath at the table and asked Scotty if that was the end of it, did she try to see you again, call, or anything?

"No, nothing, that was a month ago, and I asked Joyce to do me a favor and not upset you with this. She just got a little emotional today, so I thought you should know what happened.

"What was her name?" I ask him. "It's funny somehow," he says grabbing his reading glasses off the table eyes totaling the check. "We never used each other's names, even from the beginning. I guess we both knew it was just a passing thing."