



Shipwrights

The Review of De-centered English

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Pulling Numbers

By Jenny Karlsson

The rain was beating hard against the window. The cats had curled up in the corner of our old couch, making it impossible to tell what part belonged to what cat. I pulled the blanket tighter around me, noticing the little Fast'n'Clean logo stitched into the corner. I had been meaning to remove it. It was a Christmas gift from the company, and I only liked it because the fabric was so soft.

The lottery ticket was lying on the table in front of me. I turned on the TV. We have this new flat-screen TV that we saved up for last spring and Kyle helped us pick out on the Internet. I'm still not quite used to the new remote.

Patrick Pearlman came on. He always goofs around a little before he starts pulling the numbers. There's twenty million in the pot today. I could quit my job tomorrow. I wouldn't have to get up at five-thirty every morning and get on the 57 across town to push that heavy swabbing machine through the corridors at Felton High, over dirt that's never going to come out anyway. And I wouldn't have to come home all worn out, too tired to do anything but rest up for the next day. People become millionaires every day.

Patrick Pearlman started pulling the numbers, and I picked up my ticket and held it hard. The first number he pulled was seven. I threw the ticket back on the table.

Jimmy came shuffling into the room, a beer in his hand.

"How'd it go today, hun? We millionaires yet?"

"No, Jim. Not today either."

The usual six o'clock crowd was standing by the bus stop. Everybody was there except an overweight woman who I sometimes talk to. I guess she took a sick day. She told me she does that sometimes, when she gets too tired. I rode the bus alone next to a stranger. The streets are almost empty that time of day. The only people out are the garbage men and the homeless people roaming around.

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At nine-thirty, when I have my breakfast break, I usually go to the teachers' lounge for some coffee. They're nice here that way. In other places they mostly just give you a windowless nook in the basement, but here they don't make that kind of difference.

The teachers' lounge is this dim room with a row of windows facing the schoolyard. There's a small kitchen in the corner and some worn tables with newspapers and crumbs all over them. It smells of microwaved leftovers and old furniture. The windows could let in a little more light, if I'd clean them. But it's not in the contract, so the company won't allow it.

Maria the gym teacher was there. She is tough, but in a joking kind of way.

"Hey Rose. We dragging in enough dirt for you?"

"Always. Don't parents teach their kids to wipe their feet any more?" She just sniggered and shook her head. First I thought me and Maria were alone in the room, but then a clink came from the other corner, followed by a "Fuck!" A man I didn't recognize was standing by the coffee machine. He was wearing a suit, a mismatched suit with open shirt buttons, but still a suit. Most of the male teachers at Felton wear jeans and sweatshirts.

"Who's that?" I asked Maria. He was trying to wipe up the coffee from the floor with some napkins, making a mess.

"Substitute chem teacher, I think, filling in for Maggie. Or just a fool in a suit with coffee all over it."

"Hey, I heard that," the man said, walking up to us. "Steve Bradbury," he said and reached out his hand.

"Rose Owens." He had a cocky, kind of mischievous smile.

"Pleasure," he said and just walked out of the room.

“Fool in a suit,” Maria said and left after him. I fetched my mop from outside the room and cleaned up the coffee on the floor before pouring myself a cup. I felt sorry for the guy, having to work his first day in pants with coffee all over them. He didn’t seem that bothered though.

*

The hours before lunch are always slow. I pushed the machine up and down the corridors. I took it down to the storage room in the basement, changed the water and filled it up with new chemicals. Then I spent a couple of minutes looking out at the basketball court. It was windy and raining a little. Some kids were standing around with a ball, but not playing. They looked like Patrick Pearlman had let them down too.

At lunch I stopped by the teachers’ lounge again, to pick up my lunch box from the fridge.

“Rose Owens?” I turned around. Mr. Bradbury was standing by the door. He was smiling, but not as cocky as before.

“Mr Bradbury,” I said.

“Steve.” He looked around the crowded room and then looked back at me.

“Where you going with that lunch box?” he asked.

“Third floor, cafeteria.”

“Yeah? Would it be all right if I came along?” At first I didn’t know what to say, really. I guess the question dumbfounded me a little. He still had those coffee stains on his trousers, although they were lighter now, and smudged. I think he had tried to get them out with water.

“Alright, sure,” I said. It was just lunch.

I looked at the way he walked. He threw his legs forward in a careless but still kind of decisive way. He kept his one hand in his pocket, while the other one, that was holding his lunchbox, was swinging by his thigh. I showed him my usual spot, a big round table over by the windows at the north end of the cafeteria.

“Good spot,” he said.

“Well, the kids usually disappear to the fast food places, so it’s pretty calm. Mostly, anyways.” He sat down first, and I left an empty chair between us. Then I

waited until he had opened his lunchbox before I opened mine. He had some fancy looking pasta. I had sandwiches. He didn't talk while he ate, but I glanced up at him and saw he was looking out the window. I wished I had taken off my Fast'n'Clean apron. When he had finished his pasta I put down my sandwich, feeling like I ought to say something.

"So how're you liking Felton?" I asked.

"Most charming place I have ever had the pleasure to work in." I couldn't help but smile a little.

"How 'bout you?" He asked. "You like it here?" I shrugged.

"You have to get a pay check from somewhere, right?" I was a little embarrassed when I heard myself. I wished it hadn't come out so bitter.

"True. We can't all be lottery millionaires, right?" I watched the naked treetops swaying against the gray sky. The rain seemed never ending.

"Right."

He told me about the classes he'd had in the morning. He made me laugh a couple of times. He was a funny guy. I guess I kind of forgot about the time.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly. "I didn't mean to keep you."

"Oh, you're not. Or I mean, I guess I need to—"

"But listen. What are you doing this weekend?" I probably blushed, stupefied. I hadn't gotten a question like that in years. Why would I? I mean me and Jimmy hadn't even—

Suddenly his number was on a napkin on the table.

"Just give me a call, alright? I have to get to class." His smile was carefree, almost like a child's. He walked away just like before, one hand in his pocket and the other one swinging by his thigh.

*

Me and Jimmy were sitting on the couch. The local news with Kenny Forrester was on. Sports was up next. One of the cats had curled up beside me, and the other one was sitting on the windowsill watching the dark backyard between the blinds. I had made us some coffee that sat steaming on the table. Sports came

on. I moved closer to Jimmy and leaned my head against his shoulder. He put his arm around me.

“You cold or something, hun?” he asked without looking away from the TV.

“A little.” I felt restless. I looked around the room and then at the couch. It’s a big couch, the kind with a corner. Now that Kyle was gone and his friends weren’t over any more, there was all this extra space everywhere. I cuddled up closer to Jimmy and laid my arm over his chest.

“You want me to get your blanket or something?” he asked.

“No, that’s alright.” They were showing clips from last night’s game. Apparently someone had made a nice play. “I was thinking, Jim,” I said. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we got some new furniture in here? I mean now that it’s just you and me, we don’t need this big couch anymore, so maybe we could sell it and spruce the place up a little, make it nice and cozy, you know, just for the two of us?” The cat lying beside me stretched her legs and pushed her paws against my thigh as if she thought I was too close. Her claws needed trimming. “Jimmy?”

“Did you see that? Fucking unbelievable!” They were still showing the clips. “Sorry, hun. What? You want the blanket?”

“Sure.” The commercials came on.

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It wasn’t even on purpose that I took the napkin with me. I put it in the apron pocket when I left the cafeteria just so I wouldn’t litter. Then I found it the next day when I was putting the apron in the washing machine. I took it out just so I wouldn’t get paper crumbs all over my clean washing. That must’ve been when it got into my purse somehow. I never meant to keep it.

*

I came down the stairs and walked through the living room behind Jimmy’s back into the hallway. I don’t know why, really. It’s not like he had never seen me with make up on. Although I suppose he would have found it strange that I was wearing the dress I bought for Kyle’s graduation. When I put it on, it didn’t look as nice as I remembered it though. I guess it was more of a summer dress, really.

“I’m leaving now, Jim,” I called. “I’ll see you later, OK?”

“All right, you girls have a good time, now. Call if Deb isn’t OK to drive when you’re getting home.” He had just assumed. I hadn’t made it up.

*

He lived in one of those brick buildings over by St. Lawrence hospital. A couple of windows on the bottom floor had cardboard taped over them, but other than that it didn’t seem so bad. His apartment number was 6A. When I raised my hand to knock, my wedding ring shot out at me, staring almost. I took it off and put it in my parka pocket.

He opened the door the same way he walked and smiled: carefree. He gave me a glass of wine and told me to make myself at home.

“Dinner’s almost ready. Feel free to snoop around while you wait.” He disappeared into the kitchen.

His living room was small and messy. A bunch of magazines were laying on the coffee table, most of them crossword puzzle magazines. I felt a little strange walking around someone else’s place like that. I sipped the wine. There were a couple bookshelves, but they didn’t have many books on them, a couple of chemistry books, but mostly just other stuff. On one shelf there was a framed picture of two kids, a boy and a girl. I took another sip of wine.

He had lit candles on the table. The lights were reflected on the window, warm yellow flickering against shiny glass. It was pretty. He had made some kind of pasta, maybe the kind he had for lunch the other day. It was delicious, but I didn’t eat much. I guess I was a little nervous still. He refilled my wine glass. We talked, and he told me about his youth, about how he had wanted to be a figure skater. Then he asked me about my dreams, and I said something about writing. It all felt kind of surreal. Except when we laughed. That was real.

I asked him about the kids in the picture. He told me their names were Trevor and Olivia.

“What about their mother?” I asked.

“Left me last Christmas,” he said. “Moved away with some asshole.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You see the kids?”

“She drives them up here every other weekend. It’s not much, but it’s something.” I told him about Kyle, about how he was off to college and doing really good, about how he was getting a little snobbish. I didn’t mention his drinking.

“What about his father?” He asked. “He around?” I emptied my glass of wine and shrugged. I probably blushed, but it could just as easily have been the wine.

*

We had moved into the living room, and he had opened a second bottle of wine. His couch was so comfortable. I was getting tired and my head was starting to spin a little. It was probably getting late. I leaned my head on the back of the couch for just a moment. My cheeks were warm. A strand of hair fell down over my face. I lifted my hand to pull it back, but he was faster. His fingers were on my skin. My insides turned. I had to close my eyes.

*

It was still dark outside when I woke up. My head was pounding hard, and my mouth was dry. There was a blanket over me. The door to his bedroom was open. I found my shoes under the couch and my parka by the door. I waited to put them on until I was out in the hallway.

It was another hour until the busses would start running from the hospital bus stop. The city was silent except for the sound of my heels clicking and scraping against the asphalt and someone shouting in the distance. I found my ring in my pocket and put it on. I pushed it hard to the base of my finger. I walked as fast as I could. It was a thirty-minute walk, but I made it in less than twenty.

My hand unlocked the front door in slow motion. Jimmy must have called Debbie by now. He must be worried sick. I took off the shoes and carried them. I was dripping with sweat and had blisters all over my feet. He wasn’t in the kitchen or the living room. Of course, after he had talked to Debbie, he must have gone out looking for me. I’d have to call him. I had to wash the make up off and change out of the dress, and then I’d have to call him. It was going to be OK. He was going to come home, and we were going to talk. I was going to tell him everything about Steve’s couch and everything about our couch, and it was going

to be OK. I just had to change first. I hurried into the bedroom and flicked the light on.

He was sleeping like a child, hugging a pillow. I reached for the light switch, slowly, and flicked it off again. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I walked around the bed and back again. I had been out all night, all fucking night, and there he was lying like a pig in its fucking mud. The irresponsible ass. The unbelievably clueless fucking ass. I grabbed a book from the bookshelf. I ought to throw it at his head, I thought. That would wake him up. Or maybe I should tip the whole fucking bookshelf over on him, anything to make him wake up and see what a fucking mess it all was.

I couldn't stop crying. My whole body was shaking. I couldn't control it, so I just sat down on the floor. I was so tired. I didn't know you could be that tired.

*

He was already in the kitchen, eating eggs and flipping through the paper. He had made coffee, too, and put out two cups.

“Jesus, hun, you girls went wild last night, huh?” he said when he saw me.

He was sitting right there at the table, looking straight at me, but he was still too far away to see, however that was possible in our little kitchen. Then he looked at his watch.

“Don't forget to watch your numbers, hun. Patrick Pearlman's on soon.” I poured myself a glass of water. My hands were still shaky.

“It's a big one this week. Newspaper says twenty-six million.” I gulped down the water and poured myself another glass.

“Might be our turn today. I have a good feeling.”