

Musing

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Alfred Andersen hadn't had a decent night's sleep at his home in Barstow, California, in five years. He was prone, however, to falling asleep in the most inconvenient places: in his editor's office at the corner of 77th and Ferndale Street, during an eye exam at his optometrist Schlitterbahn and Schlitterbahn, and once, just for a wink, while driving his Honda Accord home after an eye exam. After 20 years of marriage, he had yet to fall asleep in the middle of making love to his wife—until now.

It was Tilly's sigh of exasperation that woke Alfred. He blinked his perpetually dry eyes for a moment, disoriented, before recognizing Tilly's form as she headed toward her closet. The outline of her body looked exactly the same as it had when they met 30 years ago. He had no idea how she managed it.

By the time he found his glasses, she had wrapped herself up in her fluffy pink robe and come back to sit on the edge of the bed. Alfred realized he was still exposed and quickly reached for the quilt to cover himself, but Tilly was sitting just on the corner.

"Could you move for a second, dear?" he asked. She released the fraying ends she was playing with, but didn't move. He tugged, but she seemed to be lost in a thought.

"Actually, would you mind terribly if I asked for my briefs?" he said. Alfred didn't like to be naked during daylight hours. He had folded his favorite pair of briefs on the floor near the foot of the bed in a neat square, where they still lay next to Tilly's blouse. The rest of her clothing looked it had been scattered around the room by a tornado.

Tilly was very quiet. That happened sometimes when she was angry, but sometimes she was just pensive. She used to get like this when she came home from a particularly rough day

teaching at the elementary school. Perhaps he should apologize for his little nap, just in case it was his fault. It never hurt to apologize. As he cleared his throat, she finally looked up and said, “That was the only time we even tried to have sex this entire month.”

Alfred saw that Tilly looked close to tears and knew he had to tread carefully. Her use of that word irked him, though. He preferred to use the phrase “making love” and never quite understood why Tilly insisted on using that word. Even when they were much younger he had never much enjoyed it.

“Well, that might be a slight exaggeration. We made love last week, didn’t we?” he said.

“I’m not exaggerating” she said.

“Even if that were true, that is still a perfectly healthy sex life.” Alfred still swore that it hadn’t been that long.

He looked away from Tilly’s eyes, down to the floor where his briefs still lay. Her silvery curls flashed as she followed his gaze, landing on the undergarments. She scooped them up in her fist and threw them in his face before marching to the bathroom. The door slammed behind her.

Alfred had never had underwear thrown in his face before, not even by a woman amidst a night of passionate lovemaking, and so he didn’t quite know what to do. He was wide awake now, and had been just a few short minutes ago. He didn’t know how this could have happened. He had been working on a short story down in his study, really making some headway on his main character’s motivations, when Tilly slid into his lap and planted one on him.

Tilly loved to surprise him like this, and he loved to be surprised. He, of course, always surprised her on their anniversary, February 14. Every few years he would write her a poem, a

sonnet in the style of Shakespeare. He would look at their wedding picture, Tilly holding tight to his arm and looking up into his eyes. Some years, they took trips, like the one out east five years ago for their 25th anniversary, stopping to see all the museums and grave sites of their favorite authors all along the way: Kate Chopin, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson to name a few. They'd even swung by Steinbeck's on the way home.

They'd camped the whole way, sleeping in tents in most places. As they came back through Wyoming one night, Tilly's stream of stories about her brother's antics slowed as they got closer to the campsite and the pouring rain showed no sign of letting up. Alfred told her to wait in the car and ran out into the dark with the weaker of the two flashlights, looking for a dry place. He eventually found a picnic shelter and ran back and forth with the citronella candles and sleeping bags until it was all set up for them. When they ran through the rain up to the shelter, Tilly's face lit up just like the candles he had placed around the edges. She kissed him harder than people their age were supposed to, and he kissed her back just as eagerly.

As Alfred was dressing, he heard Tilly turn on the radio she liked to sing along to while she showered. He was sure she had turned the volume dial past the line he had drawn to show the maximum level she could play without disturbing him in his study.

Alfred hovered outside the door, reaching for the painted door knob Tilly had chosen at one of her many flea market trips. She loved unexpected details, like this green door knob. She had demanded to know where he had ever seen one of those before, and he had to admit he'd never seen anything like it. He imagined her, now, lathering up her hair, her fingers working persistently through the kinks. Years ago, during their first shower together, Tilly had laughed

one of her big beautiful laughs at how he scrubbed down in less than a minute. “Slow down,” she had whispered with her lips pressed against his. “We’re already saving water, aren’t we?”

His hand dropped back to his side. Tilly needed this time to cool down. Down in his study, he opened his laptop to find the cursor blinking after the words “He’d never thought...” Alfred was in the middle of constructing the perfect first sentence in his head when Tilly had come for him, but now he’d forgotten it. He would probably remember it if he could get some peace and quiet. The radio was still blaring down the hallway, some ridiculous song about a girl named Ke\$ha brushing her teeth with alcohol.

It’s not like Alfred didn’t enjoy music every once in a while—just not when it was ridiculous and he wanted to be writing. He hadn’t published anything in five years, after all. Every time he sat down at his computer, the blinking cursor on a fresh word document mocked him more than it beckoned him. It was as if it knew that the ideas swirling in his head would never coalesce into anything of worth and it was taunting him even so. Last year, Alfred was grabbing at straws with that one story about talking vegetables that was an allegory for the death of religion. He knew before he even went into the office that his editor would find it derivative. He hadn’t even finished a story since then.

Alfred wrote his best story right after he met Tilly for the first time. She knew it, too, and called it her story. They’d both lived in Pasadena at the time, and he’d been waiting for his writing buddy Charlie at Brookside park when a woman with auburn curls piled on top of her head plopped down on the fountain next to him, bumping hard into his shoulder. Alfred had been beyond startled. He didn’t know many women who were so free with themselves like that. Well,

he didn't know many women. She was wearing a short flowy green dress and men's huarache sandals.

When he turned to ask her to scoot down a bit, politely of course, Tilly was already introducing herself, her hand extended in Alfred's direction. He really should have said his name first and shook her hand second, because the perfect warmth and smoothness of her hand became incredibly distracting. Her bare thigh was really much too close to his khaki-clad one.

"What're you doing here all by yourself, Alfred?" she asked.

He thought that was put a bit rudely, as though it was inappropriate to be by oneself in the park. "I could ask you the same thing."

She had just laughed and nodded her head like she had expected this answer.

Then she noticed the draft in Alfred's hands. She demanded to know what he was working on and was positively thrilled to hear that it was a fiction story and not some boring work report. He sort of looked like the boring work report guy, she told him.

"Not me. I've been writing since high school. I'm trying to get something published by the end of this year," he told her.

"Let me read it. I'll tell you if it's any good or not. I'm a high school English teacher, so you know I know what I'm talking about," Tilly said. He couldn't imagine what kind of school she taught at. He'd certainly never had an English teacher like her. He wasn't so sure he wanted to let her read the story, either; lately no one other than Charlie read his stuff.

Despite his protests, she practically ripped the pages from his hands. She had the strangest habit of rubbing her eyebrows with her thumbs as her eyes scanned the page. She

would read for only a minute or two at a time before bursting out with a compliment about this metaphor or that character's mannerisms. Her hair looked like fire under the setting sun.

Later that evening, he started writing her story. The next day, he called Tilly. He told her to meet him at the fountain again at 6:30 that evening. At 6:35 he had almost given up hope when he saw her walking close to the line of weeping willows, the leaves sweeping so softly it looked like they were brushing her shoulders. When she sat down in the same spot as yesterday, he showed her the copy of Kate Chopin's stories he had brought along, including "The Story of an Hour"—her favorite.

Alfred shut the laptop, cursor still mid-sentence on the blindingly white Word document. No matter, no matter, he'd get something down as soon as he got to the library. That was the other place he liked to write. He slid it into the leather satchel that Tilly had bought for him long ago with his initials A.A. monogrammed on the side. She once said she never could have married Alfred if her name had been Alice or Anne. The latch was broken, but it had been his writing bag ever since the first collection, the one with her story in it, had been published. He heaved the satchel up and held its sides roughly together as he made his way to the car.

He had just adjusted the radio knob to 103.1 KXRT Cool Oldies when a slamming sound brought his attention to the front door. There was Tilly, coming down the porch stairs in a pink towel, soap suds dripping from her shoulders down into the chrysanthemums that lined the walk. Tilly was wild, but she usually displayed it in a much less public place. Alfred put the parking brake on and rolled down the window to call out to her.

"I'm just heading out to the library, I didn't want to disturb you," he said.

“You’re really not going to talk about this?” Tilly said, leaning her head in through the window.

“I was going to do some writing, let you cool down,” he said. Tilly’s hair was dripping onto his slacks, leaving small wet drops like ink stains on fresh paper. “Maybe you should consider putting on some clothing.”

“You know, I don’t much feel like it,” she said, letting go of the towel with a flourish.

“Tilly!”

“Alfred!”

She stood there, hands on her hips, not so much as a hint of a blush on her cheeks. Alfred prayed to all the gods—Shakespeare, Hemingway, and Chekhov—that his neighbors had already made it to work and that their kids were off at school. If he tried that tone again, would she climb on top of the hood and strike a yoga pose?

He settled on a simple question. “Tilly, would you like to talk now? Inside? With clothing?”

“Perhaps you can pretend I’m a vegetable,” she said, leaning her head back into the car. “I’m corn. Whisper sweet nothings into my ear.”

Alfred calmly asked Tilly to take her head out of the window so he could get on his way to the library. She obliged, but didn’t pick up her towel. She didn’t move as he backed out of the driveway, nor had she disappeared from his rearview mirror by the time he reached the end of the block.

At the library, less than five minutes from home, Alfred tried to write for thirty minutes before giving up. Today wasn't going to be much of a writing day, but he could still do a little character work, what other people called "people watching." Unfortunately, there weren't too many people at the library at 3 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon. The rest of the world had a schedule.

Alfred wandered the stacks on the fourth floor, the contemporary fiction section. He usually liked to pass by the shelf next to the stained glass window of a dove to see if he could glimpse whether or not his collection of stories had been checked out. Not today. He headed for the reading nook that he always passed by but never used and was pleasantly surprised to find his next character.

A girl, maybe 19 or 20 years old, had pulled two of the cozy leather armchairs together so that their arms touched and was now laying across the furniture without a care for the fine upholstery. She appeared to be asleep. Pretending to listen to his Walkman, which had died in the late '90s, Alfred walked to the only other open chair, a slightly ripped, slightly dirtier version of the other two. Only the finest were useful for sleeping, apparently.

From his new vantage point, Alfred could see that the girl was not actually asleep, but was instead reading some book of contemporary fiction that was not his. It was much too hefty to be any of his collections, which were no more than 7 stories long.

It was the kind of partly sunny/partly cloudy day where big chunks of cloud drifted beneath the sun for minutes at a time, and each time the sun managed to punch through it shed a light on the girl's oddly long bare toes, which she flexed periodically in a most peculiar habit. Looking so closely that he had to actually squint (he had to remember to get back to the

optometrist for a new prescription) Alfred could see badly-chipped maroon nail polish and small, burst blisters on the edges of her outside toes. He could see no shoes nearby. It was too bad, really. Shoes say a lot about a person. Tilly's certainly had, when they first met.

Alfred decided to give the girl a working name of Sassafras. Only a very sassy person would be out in public without shoes, he reasoned. He could change it later, once she became more familiar to him. He wondered if she had dropped out of high school. He took the small leather-bound notebook he used for character work out of his back pocket to scratch these notes in. It was always difficult to appear as though he wasn't watching, so he would draw small doodles to pass the time waiting between looks. But before he knew it, the patch of warm sun had come to rest on his face and he felt himself grow more and more relaxed until he fell asleep right there next to Sassafras.

He woke from his second unintentional nap of the day ten minutes later to the steady scratch-scratch sound of a pen on paper. Cracking his eyes just the tiniest bit, Alfred could see that Sassafras had set aside the collection and was making rushed notes in a small green notebook. She looked between Alfred and the paper with such frequency that it became quite clear she was either writing about him or was extremely worried that he was about to mug her. Since he was still pretending to be asleep, she must be writing about him. He wondered if Sassafras recognized him as an author.

One cup of coffee and forty minutes later Alfred arrived back at home, afraid that he would find Tilly still naked in the driveway. The driveway was free from nudity. Now to check inside.

It was very quiet in the house. Strangely quiet if Tilly was home. He rounded the corner from the foyer and found her writing in her journal in the sitting room. She looked much calmer than the state he had left her in; he had always been an advocate for not talking when tempers were still high.

Alfred hesitated outside the door, waiting for Tilly to look up. She did so slowly, after finishing her last sentence. The fluidity with which she wrote had always struck Alfred as beautiful. So sure of her words.

“Hello, Alfred,” she said softly. She set the journal down on the coffee table and folded her hands in her lap.

Alfred sat in the chair directly across from Tilly so that they faced each other about five feet apart.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I spent the day writing,” Tilly said, nodding her head slowly, as if there was something she was just now understanding.

“Anything in particular?”

“Just trying to sort my thoughts out,” she said. “About what makes me happy and unhappy.”

It was Alfred’s turn to nod, very slowly and deliberately.

“How did you feel when I was in the driveway? What were you thinking?” she asked.

I thought carefully before saying, “I didn’t know what to think. I was sorry that you were mad at me.”

“That’s not the point, Alfred,” she said. She had leaned back in the chair now.

“You know, our anniversary is coming up,” he said, hoping he could cheer her up.

“You won’t talk about it,” she said.

“I will,” I said. “Later.” It would be easier in the morning.

“Okay, Alfred,” she said. She picked her journal back up, opened the cover slowly, and began writing in her even, fluid script.

Later that evening, around 10 p.m., Alfred closed the book he had been reading, some sensationalist new writer who everyone had been reading lately. A crap novel, in his opinion. He had been upstairs for many hours now and Tilly still hadn’t come up. He wondered if she would sleep in the guest bedroom tonight, which she did sometimes when he snored.

After brushing his teeth, Alfred neatly folded his clothes into the laundry hamper and climbed into bed, tucking the edges of the comforter neatly around him, but sure to leave Tilly enough space.

His nightly ritual of circling thoughts picked up where it had left off the night before. I need to write, he thought, followed by his ideas from the day. Tilly, popped into his head next. What was she doing downstairs? When that puzzle remained unsolved, his mind went back to writing. The bed’s old box springs groaned each time he rolled from right to left and left to right. He tried sleeping on his stomach, his back, each side, hugging a pillow.

Lightning flashed across the sky so brightly that he could sense the light even with his eyes closed. It was one of those late summer thunderstorms that Tilly loved so much. He was pretty sure it was called heat lightning, when it flashed like that without making noise. But every once and awhile one would streak down and connect to the earth, making it seem all the louder.

Tilly always made Alfred come stand outside with her during a storm like this. Not tonight. The storm wore on for hours before it tired itself out. The last time he remembered seeing on the clock before he fell asleep was 3:21.

Alfred awoke at 5:30 to find himself alone in bed. Without any coffee and only an hour and a half of sleep, he felt sluggish, but he knew if he stayed in bed the feeling would only worsen. He would make coffee for Tilly and himself, he decided.

Downstairs, in the hallway, Alfred stopped in front of a suitcase in the foyer.

It was Tilly's.

He turned his head slowly toward the footsteps echoing in his study. He took the last few steps to the doorway softly, peeking in. Tilly sat slowly in his old swivel desk chair, the one that he had bought after publishing his first story collection to reward himself. Tilly didn't look up.

She had a book in her left hand, his stories. Her story was in there. She was running her right thumb over her eyebrows, same as she always did. He watched as she set the book down with a sigh and ran her fingers through her hair. Still, she didn't look away from the desk. She picked the book up again, thumbing through its pages luxuriously. In the middle, she stopped to pull the book close to her nose, breathing the pages in deeply. He felt like he should say something, seeing her like this, seeing her suitcase in the foyer, seeing her so quiet.

The early morning silence was heavy. He was about to break into it, say anything or everything, when he saw Tilly rip the pages of her story out, the tearing sounding uglier than any angry words she had said to him during 30 years of marriage. She folded the pages and tucked them into her pocket.

Alfred backed slowly away, treading each stair carefully up to their bedroom. How many times had he seen Tilly walk these stairs without appreciating it? She was a work of art, a muse, so many things. His mind told him to turn around and tell her why she should stay. His body carried him to their bedroom, where he sat slowly on the edge of the bed, reaching his hand towards the fraying ends of the quilt. The car started and idled for awhile before pulling out of the driveway. Alfred still hadn't said a word.