

NAKED WOMEN

by Lowry Pei

The fight began on a Tuesday when my wife, Elaine, was rummaging around my workshop area in the basement, looking for a can-opener that could not possibly have been there, and found the pictures of my old girlfriends. The nude pictures, that is, the ones I had put inside the service manual for a VW Bug I hadn't owned in twenty years, which just shows that the can-opener story was not to be believed for a minute. I had almost forgotten they were there. There was a scream from the basement and then fascinated silence – I reconstructed this from the testimony of Naomi, who was only six at the time but had the observational and deductive powers of thirteen. When I got home from work that day Naomi said to me, in the tone of someone repeating a lesson, “Mommy says she has something she wants to show you in the basement.”

“She does?” That failed to compute. “Is the washing machine broken?”

“No,” Naomi said with a tiny smirk.

“Sweetie?” I called.

“I'm down here!” Elaine yelled from the basement with unnecessary volume. The pressure of her voice seemed to push open slightly the cat door I had installed in the door to the basement stairs.

“All right, I'm coming.” I descended the steep, dangerous steps, thinking as usual as they creaked and wobbled under my weight that I would have to fix them soon. At the bottom, however, was something more risky than the stairs – Elaine holding up a five-by-seven color print of Michelle Strickland in the altogether, stretched on a large flat rock on a deserted beach in North Carolina. I'm sure Elaine didn't know

where the beach was or, probably, that the picture was fifteen years old. In the photograph Michelle looked sort of like Manet's Olympia except she was doing nothing to hide what would conventionally be called her charms; it was equally obvious that Elaine was in a once-in-a-lifetime rage. "Where did you get that?" I said.

"It seems to me I ought to be asking that question, Tobias," she ground out. "You know very well where you've been hiding these."

"I went out with her a million years ago, before I even knew you existed," I said.

"Well, I don't want her in my house. Not without any clothes on."

"It's *our* house, Elaine. Besides, you never would have found them if you hadn't tried. You *could* just leave my privacy alone."

"With pleasure," she said dramatically but nonsensically, and ripped Michelle into four pieces.

"Damn it, Elaine – "

She reached behind her to my workbench, where the rest of the pictures lay in a pile, and grabbed up a tiny black-and-white shot of Marina Pratt, who happened to be the second girl I had ever made love to in my life. I remembered how daring we had felt when I had taken the picture – a modest one, really – I had only dared take her from the waist up. The trusting youthfulness of her small breasts and bony shoulders had made me feel a way I was sure I would never feel again. A glimpse of the picture, which I hadn't seen in several years, showed me how old I had become. Was that why I saved them?

"Skinny little thing," Elaine said, preparing to tear. Already I could see the delicate glossy surface of the image cracking beneath her trembling fingers.

"Don't do it," I said. "If you tear that there is going to be real trouble around here." That was my mistake; I should have made her think I didn't care, but I couldn't do it. She tore Marina in half. While she was watching the halves flutter to the floor of the basement, I grabbed the rest of the pictures and said, "GET OUT OF HERE! GO UPSTAIRS! OUT!" She was too startled to follow through on her obvious intention of grinding the pieces of the two photographs into pulp under her shoe. I made an effort to lower my voice. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I shouldn't," she echoed with a sneer. "We'll see who shouldn't have done what, Mr. Big Lover-Boy."

"For God's sake. I'm entitled to a past, aren't I?"

"If that's what you call it, fine. You can stay down here and masturbate, I don't care." She stomped gingerly up the stairs and slammed the basement door.

From upstairs I heard Naomi's unignorable voice: "Mommy, what's masserbate?"

Leaving Elaine to figure a way out of that, and knowing there was none, I picked up the two halves of Marina and the four pieces of Michelle, and fitted them back together. The tearing had left them permanently disfigured, making the past suddenly farther away than it had already been, but I taped the pieces as carefully as I could along the backs. Damn her. It wasn't as though I had luxuriated in the services of a harem, after all; I had had a not unusual number of girlfriends in the normal course of things before I married Elaine. Most of the pictures were of Michelle, because she had found that being photographed excited her; besides her, there was that one precious and now half-destroyed picture of Marina, and two of a woman named Jessica who turned out to be impossible to get along with, but who had a wonderful figure nevertheless. What business was this of Elaine's, anyway?

It was obvious that nothing was going to be sacred anymore, and that I would have to do some serious hiding if I expected to keep these dangerous little mementos. After an examination of the basement I finally unscrewed the back of an old short-wave radio that had sat on a shelf serving no purpose for years, and stuck them inside. Elaine would never look there. Then I teetered my way up the steps, preparing a suitably impassive face.

Over dinner, Naomi was telling Elaine in some detail about the stupidity of her first-grade classmates who had to be shown how to read a book. I noticed that there wasn't a place set for me.

"If you're planning to have dinner, Tobias, you can serve yourself," Elaine said, interrupting Naomi's list of the mistakes she had heard that day.

"Toby," I said. "My name's Toby. Nobody has ever called me Tobias in my whole life."

Naomi looked interested. "Tobias," she muttered, as if testing it out.

"Toby. Don't you start too."

"Toby, Toby, Tohh-by." She sounded like a tiny cheering section.

"It's 'Daddy' to you. Eat your broccoli."

"Tow, Bee, Tow, Bee."

I got a plate, but when I looked into the various pots it appeared that the reason Naomi hadn't eaten her broccoli was that she had been served mine. There was hardly enough dinner left to make dirtying a plate worthwhile.

“I think I’ll go to Burger King,” I said. “Anybody want to come?”

“I’m full,” Naomi said. Elaine said nothing, fixing her water glass with a stare worthy of Edward G. Robinson.

It’s about a mile to Burger King from our house, and it was a spring evening and the lilacs were in bloom, so I thought I’d walk. It would give me a chance to ponder the situation, and the walk back would settle the bacon cheeseburger which I would eat despite the certainty of indigestion.

This was not your average utility-grade snit. It surpassed even the famous attack of indignation that followed my leaving in the living room a plate with a blob of catsup on it, during a particularly precarious period in Elaine’s self-realization. That was before I had realized how easy it was to commit male piggery; now avoiding it was a matter of course. Besides, Elaine had Naomi to worry about, who was female and could make more housework than two grown men any day.

It seemed to me that I had a perfect right to ex-girlfriends. If they bothered her, why did she go poking around looking for them? Except that she was always looking for something more to do, as if being a management consultant and the mother of a six-year-old prospect for College Quiz Bowl and a devourer of spy novels were not already enough. So she found those pictures, so what? I would probably have lost track of them if she hadn’t. And just because Elaine had gone out with a succession of creeps – her own description – did that mean I had to regard my former loves as scarcely worth the trouble of sneering at? But: nude pictures. I tried to imagine the tables turned. A strange idea; women didn’t seem to go in for that kind of thing. Maybe *Playboy* imprinted certain images on the brains of little boys hanging around magazine racks at the age of nine, and after that it was all downhill. We grew up wanting to sneak another look at a breast, and they grew up to read Doris Lessing. If this was God’s sense of humor at work, I found it annoying, but the lilacs made it impossible to stay mad.

Maybe looking at a bunch of Younger Women made her realize she wasn’t going to be Younger any more. But what was she complaining about? She could have been forty-four, like me. Try telling yourself that’s not middle age. The more I pondered, the more the situation seemed beyond my control, just like the rest of life; the only course of action was to have a double bacon cheese, with everything, and take the consequences.

I meandered back from Burger King even more slowly than I had gone there, in no hurry to get home under the circumstances even though our skill at living together was such that a fight had never made a great deal of difference. So far, at any rate. Maybe this time would

change things. I didn't like thinking that. But I also did not like being cast in the role of the family degenerate, especially since we had been jockeying for moral position ever since our marriage. Why should my whole backlog of points be erased for nothing? What about the incredibly slinky tax lawyer whose meaningful looks I had pointedly not noticed at the seminar on personal computer languages for business? What about the fact that I absolutely never made any remarks about Elaine's amazing flirtatiousness when drunk? Thinking of that irritated me anew – not that she flirted, but that she *wanted* me to make remarks. She actually had the nerve to get mad at me for not being jealous. I was almost sure she had never had an affair, because if she had, she would have made sure I found out. Unless she had just given up on the project of getting me satisfactorily enraged.

Well, perhaps she had finally found a way. If only I could take it seriously for more than five minutes at a time.

When I got home Naomi was watching "All in the Family" and Elaine was not in evidence.

"Toby," Naomi said, "do you get all the jokes on this show?"

"What is this, a quiz?"

"Well, do you?"

"I try not to," I said, sitting down next to her anyway. On the screen the usual shouting plunged on.

"Toby – "

"Call me 'Daddy,' okay? At least for a few more years."

"Is Mom all right?"

"Beats me. Are you?" I gave her what was meant to be an understanding paternal tell-me-everything look. Naomi crossed her eyes, stuck out her tongue, and pulled her braids around so they met under her nose.

"Beats me too – Toby," she squealed. For a couple of minutes I tickled her mercilessly and she shrieked, and by the time that subsided, Archie Bunker and his insufferable relatives had called it a night.

"Now go to bed," I said, panting slightly.

"But I'm not tie-yurrd," she whined, on the verge, I could suddenly see, of actual tears.

"You are. Take my word for it. Go upstairs and put your nightgown on and brush your teeth, and I'll come up and tuck you in when I hear you get in bed."

"No."

"Naomi. It's been sort of a tough evening, so how about a little cooperation, okay? You're six years old, it's time for you to go to bed."

She got insulted every time I mentioned her age, and now – she really was tired – it made her cry. “Sometimes I just hate you,” she wailed. I had to keep from laughing.

“Go on. You can hate me from upstairs.”

Snuffling and for once acting her age, she stamped her feet all the way up. But to my surprise she did brush her teeth; after that she slammed her bedroom door at me and the house was, so to speak, at peace. I clicked off the TV and listened for any emanations from above that might tell me what Elaine was hatching now, but all I could hear was a passing car with its radio on some oldies station. “Tonight You Belong to Me” faded in and out abruptly but unmistakably, as if my high-school prom had just driven past, trailing memories. There comes a point in life when one is shamed by the predictability of one’s own desires, and I had reached it. What was Marina Pratt doing now? Reluctantly, I knew the answer. Wherever she was, she was busy being forty-four.

With that dark thought in mind, I went upstairs. The door to our room was shut, and a dim light gleamed through the crack at the bottom. I peered cautiously in at Naomi; she was sleeping for all the world like a child. Or else she had gotten still better at pretending. I took some time brushing my teeth to give me and Elaine both a chance to prepare for the next scene.

But when I opened the bedroom door I found her lying asleep and naked, face down on top of the bedclothes, a *New Yorker* next to her and partly crumpled in one hand. She reminded me of Naomi; sleep took the edge off both of them and exposed the innocence that for some reason they both tried to keep a secret. I took the magazine away from her and straightened it out; she had been reading the book reviews, and I knew she’d want to finish them. The sound of crinkling paper woke her up; she turned over and looked up at me sleepily just as if we weren’t in the middle of a fight, and I could see her remember to be mad.

“Hi,” I said, starting to unbutton my shirt. She raised one eyebrow and tried to look stony. “Why don’t you get under the covers?”

She sat up and reached to her right, and there on her night table – Elaine has always been a meticulous planner – was my camera. “I thought you might want to take my picture,” she said, picking it up and holding it out to me. I didn’t take it.

“I don’t think there’s enough light in here.”

She started to cry; I could see that Naomi would look exactly the same when she cried as an adult. Usually Elaine tried to avoid anything that might cause wrinkles, but now she was beyond all that. “You

creep,” she said between sobs. “You’ve had those pictures down there all the TIME!” Convulsively she threw my camera down onto the bedroom floor, where it hit so hard it bounced. “What’s the matter, aren’t my knockers as good as theirs?”

“Elaine, you’re being impossible,” I said, picking up my dented Nikon and heading back out.

“Meee!” she yelled at me, red in the face, tears trembling on the curve of her jawline, ready to drop onto her shaking breasts. I closed the door on her and stood in the dark hallway taking deep breaths while her tears subsided. As my eyes adjusted, I could see Naomi standing in the door to her room.

“Toby, what are knockers?” she asked, seriously.

I thought of saying Those things on doors, but I knew it wouldn’t work. “Boobs,” I said. “Now go to bed.” It was too late to be any more understanding. I marched back down the stairs, poured myself a double Scotch, and lay down on the couch. There was no doubt about it; this was war.

I should have known better than to drink the Scotch; it knocked me out, as planned, but it also woke me up at 3:30 in the morning. Another effect of being forty-four. I lay there in the dark living room, no longer seething, and watched the light skating around on the ceiling when cars occasionally passed. What a life, I kept thinking, amazed as usual by the peculiarity and disorderliness of feelings. The house was silent, as if no one were having a fight in it, or even, most wonderfully, as if no one inhabited it but me. That thought made me feel light, unburdened, off duty – like myself – an old self, as far back as college or even before. I hadn’t thought about myself disconnected from my various functions in life for a long time. Elaine did that better than me, and more often, and most of the time I admired her for it. She had managed to get her company to give her a computer terminal so she could stay home and still tell other people how to run their businesses – that was something I would never have been able to pull off. But just then I didn’t want to think about her or Naomi or my job or anything but the one unfinishable sentence, If I could do anything I wanted . . .

After a while I got up and returned to the basement, where all this had begun; I unscrewed the back of the short-wave and took out the pictures. Even if the old set could not bring me Radio Moscow any more, it would make a good place to keep a past that seemed no less distant. The tearing of Marina’s picture had severed her torso with a diagonal slash which I experienced as a form of violence, an assault on tenderness. And then Michelle: I laid the five shots of her (one now

patched together) on my workbench under the glare of the trouble light I used for fixing the car, and studied her delicious willingness. When I looked at her what seemed striking about sex was that it was such an innocent pursuit. An open secret: here we are together wanting what everybody wants and why the hell not? But somehow this simple world in which people got laid because they felt like it and had fun doing it was as fantastic as a Jules Verne book where people flew to the moon by firing off cannons to propel them.

As I moved slowly from picture to picture, I could feel my balls wambling around loosey-goosily in my pants, reminding me that a part of me – not the part that was Elaine’s husband and Naomi’s father – would always be horny and lonely and about twenty-four years old, walking around with a middle-aged body and an unsatisfied dong, in what was clearly no longer a world of unfolding possibilities. And novelty is the ultimate aphrodisiac – everybody knows that. We just don’t talk about it much, because what would be the point?

No more Michelles, that was for sure. The thought was too depressing; I put the photographs back inside the radio and climbed the basement stairs. It was nearly five o’clock and outside the sky was already beginning to lighten. I wanted to go up to our bedroom, take off my clothes, and get in bed, but that didn’t seem like a realistic plan. And presumably I would have to go to work; if people stopped analyzing the stock market every time they had a fight with their spouse the financial structure of the U.S. would collapse in a week. Glumly I wandered through the dim downstairs. In the front hall I stopped at a picture I had originally picked out but hadn’t actually looked at in some time – another naked woman. It was a print of a Carl Larsson painting, a young woman without clothes sitting at a desk, pencil in hand, perhaps writing a letter, a faint smile on her face. She seemed to be contemplating with satisfaction and even merriment what she had just put down. It had always been a pleasant picture but now I thought I knew exactly what he had meant. The question was, what would be in that letter – the one that couldn’t even be written until I got undressed? I lay back down on the living room couch to think about that and promptly fell asleep.

The next thing I knew, Elaine was standing by the couch, not looking at me, but glaring more or less at the room in general. She seemed to be in the middle of a paragraph; the first words that registered were, “or have you just decided to quit going to work too?”

“Too?” I said. “What is this ‘too’? Come off it.”

She looked down at me, disgusted. “Don’t talk to me like that,” she said, and left.

I looked at my watch; it was seven-forty-five, which meant that I would almost certainly be late for the office. As I trudged upstairs to shave and put on a tie I could only hope that this fight was as much of a strain on her as it was on me.

When I got home she confronted me in the kitchen as I was pouring myself a drink. "I want to talk to you upstairs," she said, in a tone that suggested no alternatives.

"Do you mind if I get something to eat first?"

"Yes."

Naomi, who was watching the local news on the kitchen TV with the volume turned up high, gave us both a baleful look over her shoulder. I felt unreasonably guilty as I followed Elaine out of the kitchen.

"All right," she said, when we were in the bedroom with the door closed, "which one of them are you going out with? Or is it all three? It's probably not all three, because nobody wears their hair like that skinny nineteen-year-old any more, and anyway nobody her age would be interested in you. That leaves the other two. Now –"

"Elaine," I said, realizing this could go on for some time, "I told you. Those are old pictures. Very old. I went out with Michelle Strickland fifteen years ago, when I was twenty-nine, and the other one was even before that."

"Oh yeah?" Elaine looked ready to tear out my hair. She panted a couple of times, through clenched teeth. "I can't believe you can just stand there and lie right to my face," she said.

"I'm not lying, Elaine. I know you think I am, but you're wrong, so why don't you just grow up?"

I was still holding my drink in my hand, and with one irresistible slap she propelled hand and drink upwards so that the whole thing splashed in my face. "You bastard! You really have some nerve."

Now I was finally as mad as she was. I put down the glass on my dresser, took off my glasses, wiped my face, and thought about exactly what to say. Elaine looked a little worried already, as if she hadn't meant to go that far. It occurred to me that for some reason she almost wanted me to be having an affair. Was that what she was up to?

"You're absolutely right," I said. "I've been plunging Michelle Strickland every chance I've gotten for years."

Elaine leaned forward, her eyes widening. We must have looked like an umpire and a manager arguing over a called third strike. "Is she good in bed?"

"She's wonderful."

“Well, I’ve got news for you. I’ve been having an affair with Joe Milnik for a year and a half.”

“What? You’ve been screwing a guy from my car pool? How the hell did you manage to keep it a secret?”

“You were too busy with Michelle to notice.”

“Why, that little runt – “

“He’s not as little as you might think.”

Joe Milnik? She must be out of her mind. He was even less fascinating than me. What was she, desperate? But I needed something to tell her. “Well, you know when I went to that seminar on computer languages at the Sheraton Tara? I met this lady tax lawyer who was six feet tall and platinum blond. We started sending each other hot notes on the computers and ended up taking a room for the afternoon instead of pushing buttons.”

She looked completely unfazed. “You know why you got transferred out of Chicago? Because I was seeing Waldron Cooper and his wife found out.”

“You were messing around with one of the senior partners? What do you want to do, ruin us?” Waldron Cooper! A martinet like that, screwing my wife, giving me fishy looks in the corridor every day – so *that* was why! Suddenly I got the idea that I had lost my grip ages ago without even realizing it. Senility would be next. I made one more effort. “Well, when I used to go to the day care center on Saturdays to clean up I made it with Jolette on the playroom mats, every single time.” Jolette had been the day care teacher of the three-to-five-year-olds; she was twenty-five at the most, and I knew plenty of fathers who had the hots for her.

That got to Elaine; the blood rushed to her face. I could almost see the wheels turning furiously. “When you went to Seattle for a week,” she said in a deadly undertone, “I called the TV repairman and when he got done he put a tape of a porno movie on the Betamax to show that it worked and then we made it right there in the living room and he came back every day that week and we did every single thing that was in the movie. ” She stuck out her jaw belligerently, trembling a little, and we stared at each other for several breaths. I was dazed, and I couldn’t top what I had just heard. I was the first to look away, and there in the doorway stood Naomi, with nothing on – framed, as in a photograph. The sight of her froze me and Elaine both. How much had she heard?

“Daddy, what did you make with Jolette?” she said in a tiny voice.

One sentence, I thought – even one word, the word “love” right now, would change my entire life, call in the lawyers, send this

household flying apart. “Nothing, honey,” I said. “I didn’t do anything but clean up the playroom. I just made that up.”

She looked both of us over, and for a moment no one moved.

“Could I see?” she said.

“See what?” But I knew, of course.

“Those pictures.”

“Have you been listening the whole time? You know you’re not supposed to spy on us.”

She lowered her head slightly, but kept staring at me from under her level brows.

“Those pictures aren’t for you. They aren’t for little girls. You wouldn’t like them.”

“I would too.”

“Sweetie – “ Elaine said, but then she seemed to get stuck. “What are you doing with your clothes off?”

“Who’s Joe Milnik?” Naomi said to her. See how you like it, I thought.

“Oh, nobody. He’s a friend of Daddy’s. I hardly know him.”

With dignity, clothes or no clothes, Naomi turned and went back in her room and closed the door. Elaine and I breathed out, unable to look at each other. “Well,” she said.

“I’ve got Scotch all over my shirt, thanks to you.”

“Are those pictures really fifteen years old?”

“Yes, damn it.”

“I’m sorry I messed up your camera,” she said, but I could tell she wasn’t. “I’ll get it fixed, okay?”

“You do whatever you want.”

“I want – “ But she didn’t go on. A divorce? No. That hadn’t been what she had started to say. We had not gotten to the edge.

“You want what?” I said, but she only looked at me in the terrible solidarity of marriage.

Naomi reappeared in the doorway, decently dressed in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. “I’ll go to Burger King with you this time,” she announced.

“Tell me,” I said to Elaine. “Tell me what you want.”

“You’re getting bacon cheese,” Naomi told me, “and you’re getting plain cheese,” she told Elaine, “and I’m getting a hot dog and I get to help you eat yours.”

“Who said we’re going anywhere? And how do you know we want any help?” I said to her. But Naomi had already turned her back and started down the stairs.

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