

## Postmortem Literature

Fiction

*And why do you write? You'd better not tell me — I'm sure your answer will be more eloquent and convincing than mine.*

— Roberto Bolaño

Mary Guthrie earned her degree in art history and moved back to North Carolina at the end of the summer. Even before Halloween, Bobby Duncan was miserable without her. By Thanksgiving he was a broken man. All Bobby kept of her was a note she wrote in the middle of their affair and a memory of the night before she left.

Handwritten on the expensive and heavy cream stationery her father had milled specially for her when she first went off to school, the note read:

*Bobby, If I were to write all day I could never express myself as well as Henry James can for me, "Why, why have I made this evening such a point ... There comes a day when something snaps, when the full cup, filled to the very brim, begins to flow over. That's what has happened to my need for you — the cup, all day, has been too full to carry. So here I am with it, spilling over you — and just for that reason that is the reason of my life. After all, I've scarcely to explain that there are some hours which I know when they come because they almost frighten me that show me I'm even more so." Every hour I spend with you is such an hour. Today, something snapped, and I mark the time till I can be with you.*

After that, she spent the summer explaining why she was leaving.

"I just want to get down there," she'd say, "and think things through. Take stock, you know? Away from this damn place. Spend Christmas with my folks. Go down to the ocean and walk along the beach until things get clear — the way I did when I was a kid."

On the eve of her departure they argued.

"I don't want to live in this town anymore. Around here I'll never be anything but the redhead who stole you from Jenny Duncan."

"Nobody pays attention to that shit in Iowa City," Bobby said. "It's full of writers. Everybody fucks everybody."

"And everybody talks about fucking everybody. I wish you'd come with me. Then you'd see. Why don't you? Come with me, I mean."

"I've got a job," he said.

"Which you hate."

"It's a job."





Each morning that fall, Bobby Duncan showed up at the office, and each afternoon he rushed back to Mary's afterward to check the mail and the message machine. The place did not even feel empty to him. It was comfortable, if a little lifeless. Nicely decorated digs done by a woman with taste. Bobby never called Mary, though he longed to call her, and he never bumped into Jenny, as he dreaded he might. Life stayed simple and sad. Days Bobby worked at the magazine; nights he drank, sometimes at home, sometimes at this bar or that.

Mary's letter came a week before Christmas:

*Dear Bobby, I found a job teaching art history at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, which is not all that far from Raleigh. My father knew the president of the university and arranged for the interview, and that moved things along. The hardest part of all this is that I still love you, but I know I can't ask you to leave Iowa. It's home for you, like this is home for me. I don't know if that means you will try again with Jenny. If not, maybe you could visit me in the spring. I know how all this must sound to you. Cold, spoiled, selfish. I don't know what I imagine can happen. I daydream about you coming down here, but I know that's silly. We could not live here the way we lived out there. Everything is different in the real world. Please come see me in that world, if only for a while. I love you. Mary.*

Two other missives Bobby Duncan got that week did not come through the mailbox. One arrived at the office, and the other was tacked to the door of the apartment. The one on the door was a notice to appear in court on the thirtieth of January to show cause why Jennifer Whittington Duncan's petition for divorce and certain property claims should not be honored. The other one surprised him — it was an invitation to attend a Christmas party to celebrate the naming of Carter Cooper, who had just won an award from the American Society of Arts and Letters for *All the Way In*, to the newly endowed John Frederick Chair of Regional American Literature. The ceremony was being held at the residence of Harvey Friedman, the University of Iowa's hotshot Dean of Liberal Arts, who not so long ago — so it was rumored — had enjoyed a fling with one of his graduate teaching assistants, a Southern girl by the name of Mary Guthrie.

Bobby Duncan was drunk. Drunk, dressed, and ready to go. Bobby's pal, the pint-sized Paul Danilov came by at eight. They shared a cab to the party, out beyond Hancher Auditorium, on the posher side of Iowa City. Downtown, Christmas lights, strung along street lamps, gave off faint, pulsating illumination through falling snow and gusts of wind.



tossed her dark, henna-colored hair, cut in the square style young French women were wearing these days, and turned to Bobby, a bit flushed.

“You mean to tell me,” she said, “that you have not sobered up? I understand, I understand. It took me two whole days, and I only drank a fraction of what you drank.”

“We’ll have to do it again,” Bobby said.

“Shhh. After I’m married. Then it will be harder for Carter to toss me out. He wants to talk to you, by the way.”

Bobby snagged a drink from a passing beauty.

“Coop? That’s novel. Where is he?”

“Off with his butch pixie, naturally,” she said. She meant Cooper’s agent, Wendy Hough, whose close-cropped hair denied her dainty features. “They are in some smoke-filled room making kissy faces at our host. You know, Bobby, I see less of him now that we’re engaged than I did when I lived in Manhattan and was just his long-distance piece of tail.”

“He’s a fool,” Bobby said.

“And I love him,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You know what I mean.”

She touched Bobby’s cheek with her hand and laughed.

“I’ve never seen you embarrassed before.”

“I’ve never been embarrassed before.”

They were both laughing when McDowell, trimmed in professorial tweeds and topped by a swirling white mane, maneuvered Danilov into his spot in front of the state senator, and himself between Claire and Bobby.

“Did I miss something?” Fred asked.

“We were just discussing the decor,” Bobby said. Claire hooted.

“It is ghastly, isn’t it?” Fred said, giving them his life-is-slightly-painful smile.

“Have you seen the beast who inhabits the place?” Claire asked, arch and catty and loving it.

“She took a bite out of me at the door,” Bobby said. Then, looking at McDowell, who was a Jenny Duncan partisan, he added, “She wanted to know — she didn’t ask — but she wanted to know about *that* woman. You remember *that* woman?”

“Yes,” McDowell said uncomfortably. Claire watched him with bright, intelligent eyes, as he squirmed a little. “Did Miss — ?” He looked at Claire in a panic, having obviously forgotten her last name. Bobby could have helped him, but he didn’t.

“I told him,” she said ruefully.

“Mr. Cooper and I would like to speak to you before dinner, Bobby. About the Bagatelli book.”











hold of her — hard — by the arm and jerked her back into the room and closed the door.

Bobby Duncan joined the crowd at the banquet.

A dozen or so sat around the large table and listened to the rumors about the number of people who had been invited for the doings after dinner. The Friedmans had made some concession to the Christian holidays, and if Bobby looked very closely he could make out small arrangements of holly and mistletoe along the cherry wood paneling. When the guest of honor, his still-smiling agent, and his two grim cohorts walked in, Claire went over to talk to him. She stayed a while, but finally she came back to where she had been sitting next to Bobby.

“Now he wants me up front with them,” Claire said. “But I told him there would be plenty of time for that after the wedding.”

“You’re being polite,” Bobby said.

“I know. But he can be so ugly sometimes. He used to be your friend.”

“It happens,” Bobby said.

“The view is better from here, anyway.”

Bobby bumped her knee with his, hard.

“I’m going to do that,” he said, “every time you tell a polite lie.”

“Please,” she said. “I’ve got to get in practice.”

Carter Cooper’s aura filled the room with its distinguished glow as he gave — when urged — a little speech, off the cuff and brilliant, lasting about as long as it should last. Throughout the whole thing, Claire would squeeze Bobby’s arm when Cooper made a good point or said something clever, and he was glad for her. But Bobby had seen the crack in their golden bowl. He thought about Jenny, and he hoped Coop and Claire would be happier than he and Jenny had been. At one point Bobby squeezed Claire’s arm in return. She noticed and, for the first time, took her eyes off the head of the table and looked at him. The question disappeared from her face as soon as it formed itself. She turned back to Cooper.

Dinner was, naturally, delicious, and the table talk, generally, dull. Over coffee, while Cooper dawdled with Wendy Hough and Dean Friedman, Claire looked Bobby over carefully and said, “Let’s go get drunk.”

“Surprisingly good idea,” he said.

“They said the crowd arriving late, the after-dinner bunch, is back in the back room. That’s where the party is. Come on.”

She went to tell Cooper where they were going. He nodded his head curtly and turned back to Friedman and company. Wendy Hough caught Bobby’s eye and shook her head slightly. He raised his shoulders in his customary half-shrug. She laughed to herself and









A dozen things Claire Sibley said to Bobby Duncan that night:

1) Did anyone ever tell you you make love a little like a woman? No, no, it's very, very nice. I like it. A lot. It might even have been wonderful, if your heart had been in it, too.

2) It's sort of refreshing to fuck someone who is as self-conscious as I am. It's always a little embarrassing the first time, right?

3) Did you ever want something badly, and then when you got it, not want it anymore? No, not not want it exactly, but not be sure you wanted it? I mean, you want it so badly for so long, and suddenly you have it, and having it, well, frightens you? It makes you think, is this it, then? Is this all there is? Don't look at me like that. I'm not talking about you. About us doing this. This is nice. I'm trying to explain the way I feel about getting married to Carter. Suddenly I find I have developed a deep, abiding satisfaction with the state of being single. Otherwise, maybe I wouldn't be here.

4) I think it might be hard to stick with the just-this-once thing. I don't know what it is about you. One hears about you and women. You know you're good-looking. I don't have to tell you that. But it's not that. There are a lot of men better looking. And it's clearly not your sterling personality. You proved that tonight. Or your strength of character. You proved that tonight. So what is it? You strike women as kind of loose, but that makes it sound too seedy. Listen, I'm not trying to psychoanalyze you. It's just that I think I want to see you again, fuck you again to be exact — maybe fuck you a lot — and I'm trying to decide why. So I think, maybe, it has to do with looseness. One look at you and any woman would know you were available. You just look like you don't care about any of it, you know, the bullshit. And that turns us on, I guess. Turns me on at least. How about Wednesdays? Maybe I can see you Wednesdays. Carter's always tied up on Wednesdays. He teaches his workshop then. I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe I shouldn't. Damn, it's almost too easy.

5) I think you should think seriously about running off to Mary.

6) It's funny. I don't know her but I seem to admire her. For you to feel the way you do about her — she must be some woman. Makes me think I'd like her. Weird, huh?

7) Maybe it's because the only time I've seen you express anything, I don't know, honest, well at least, *uncalculated*, was tonight when you told me her name and said she was gone, and you did not know what to do about it. You looked almost surprised. I think you were telling the truth and that surprised you.

8) Do you — do you want to see me again?

9) After we're married, I think I'm going to have to tell Carter about us. Not to get back at him or make him jealous or, so help me God, anything at all to do with that fucking asshole, Sigmund Freud. But I want to try to be honest with him.











class as well as her lit courses. She had signed up for a seminar in existentialism, she said, believe it or not. She had gotten interested in the existentialists over the winter in Davenport (an absurd notion) after some friend of her mother's mentioned at a party that Nietzsche had really been a godsend when she (her mother's friend) had split up with *her* husband. She had come up to Iowa City a few days at the end of last semester (Bobby didn't tell her he had seen her in the apartment) specifically to sit in on some classes by a guy named David Lachterman she had heard a lot about who taught a course in the subject. She liked him, she said. He was smarter than Bobby, she said. Finding a man she thought was smarter than him, she said, helped as much as anything, even more than her new relationship with Edward, whoever Edward was. He probably drove a Chevy, Bobby thought.

When Bobby had enough of her patter, he cut her off, asking her abruptly: "Why did you act like that before I left?"

"Why do we have to talk about it?"

"The way you handled it may be fine for you, but it's not for me. It makes me feel as if things are suspended somehow. I'm not talking about the fucking divorce. I don't care about the damn divorce. I just need some sense of finality. That's why I wanted to say goodbye. I thought I could put an end to all this."

"You want to write an end to our life?" Jenny glared.

"It's better than the self-deluded drivel you've opted for," Bobby said. She took careful control of herself, obviously determined not to lose her composure.

"What is it you want to know?" she asked, wearily.

"I don't know," Bobby said. "Why you ripped up the thesis, I guess. I mean, Jesus, *every* copy, Jen? Wasn't destroying the original enough a gesture?"

Jenny huffed, as if it were useless to go on. She frowned. She sipped her coffee. She clattered her fingernails on the cup. She acted as if she carried the tiresome burden of all knowledge on her small shoulders and Bobby was supposed to notice. She was world-weary, disaffected with all conversation, all facts, all truth. "OK," she said, "I'll tell you. It doesn't matter to me. But it's not going to be very pleasant.

"Our life, you, the marriage, it just got to seem, well, *seedy* is the word I come up with. Decadent. It simply struck me, the way a curious fact in a magazine piece strikes you. It struck me why you would never be a real writer, why it would never be like we always used to talk about it being. You were decadent, corrupt. I'm sorry, I don't especially want to hurt you — I'm happy and I'd just as soon you be, too, though I don't care *that* much. But that's how I felt. Like the little redhead this morning. They are all fascinated by the pretty face of corruption."







