

VANESSA FARNSWORTH

A JOKE TOLD BY PILOTS

BOB GAVE KATE A MARBLE for her twenty-sixth birthday.

“A marble?”

“Yes.”

“Then why is it brown and square?”

“Because that’s what they look like these days. Marbles have evolved since we were kids, you know. No one plays with the round ones anymore. No one.”

“This is a bouillon cube, isn’t it?”

“Now before you go ballistic, just ask yourself this: ‘Has anyone ever given me such a unique gift before?’ I think we both know the answer.”

“I’d rather have the marble.”

“No one would rather have the marble.”

“I would and do you want to know why?”

“Shoot.”

“Because when I shove this hunk of crap down your throat, there’s the off-chance it might dissolve before you choke to death.”

That was the last conversation Kate intended to have with Bob although, by rights, the first conversation she ever had with him should’ve been the last. It happened in a strip club a dozen or so blocks from where Kate worked. She was in the club because her car’s engine had blown a bearing and she needed to call for a cab.

And a tow truck.

And possibly a pizza.

The reason Bob was in the club had nothing at all to do with his car.

“I can give you a lift somewhere.”

“Maybe not.”

“I’m a lot cheaper than a cabbie and I speak a language that closely resembles English.”

“Definitely not.”

“You’re sure? It could be a long wait, you know, what with that meteor about to plough into the downtown core.”

“What meteor?”

“The one they were getting themselves in a knot about on the evening news. Surely you’ve heard about it. It’s all anyone’s talking about.”

“It’s not all I’m talking about. Or at least it wasn’t until you showed up. Look, you’re not actually expecting me to believe any of this, are you?”

“Not actually, but if you let me take you home, it’ll give me time to come up with a reason why you should.”

“It’s spectacularly difficult for me to imagine you get laid much.”

“We can discuss that, too.”

So Bob gave Kate a ride home and six months later he was still there. It turned out that he was a pretty decent fuck and a pretty decent fuck was just what Kate needed.

But there was something about Bob that offended Kate in a fundamental way.

The bouillon cube was a fine example.

It wasn’t so much that he thought a bouillon cube was a good birthday gift that bothered her. No, it was that fact that he’d told her it was a marble.

He was always telling her shit like that.

Like when his father died.

“He was skydiving over a Hutterite community in southern Saskatchewan when he struck a flock of geese.”

“Geese?”

“Exactly. He’d jumped from the plane seconds earlier when bam, no more Dad. He didn’t even have a chance to open his shoot. It all went downhill from there.”

“You’d think the geese would’ve moved to avoid a falling, wingless creature. I mean, they do have survival instincts.”

“But they don’t have brakes. I’m sure I’m not the first one to think that was a terrible oversight on God’s part.”

It was at the funeral that Kate learned Bob’s father had succumbed to a heart attack while walking to the convenience store to purchase a pack of smokes.

Not that she was all that surprised.

She hadn’t really bought the whole goose thing. She just didn’t want to argue with Bob since the end result would just be another lie.

What did surprise Kate was that mere moments after she found out the old man's real cause of death, she discovered that Bob's name wasn't really Bob.

It was Ted.

"Why did you tell me it was Bob?"

"We were in a strip club. You didn't really think I'd use my real name in a place like that, did you?"

"I used mine."

"Novice."

"Novice or not, that was months ago. At no time did it occur to you to correct me?"

"I thought that after a while you'd figure it out. It's kind of weird that you didn't."

The reason Kate was thinking about Bob now was because Garth was standing in the middle of her living-room brandishing a gun. He was wet and greasy and looked like a college student who'd been dipped in an oil-slicked ocean. Kate would've told him so except he'd whipped out the gun before they'd had the chance for proper introductions. She only knew his name was Garth because it said so on the front on his t-shirt for no reason she could determine.

"And you have no idea where he is?"

"I said that already."

"None?"

"Stop asking me that."

"But I really need to find him."

"I gathered that, but Bob didn't leave a forwarding address. At least not one that referenced Earth."

"Why do you keep calling him Bob?"

"Because Rat Bastard was already taken."

"I see."

"No you don't. May I ask why you need to find him?"

"Because I need to kill him."

"I'm familiar with that need."

With that, Garth started to cry. Kate placed her hand on his sleeve, thinking that she should probably comfort him or at least make sure he wasn't some sort of a mirage. This so startled Garth that he accidentally shot her basement.

"Take that outside."

“What, the gun?”

“The gun, the tears, the entity that is you. All of it. Outside.”

“But it’s cold out there.”

“It’s about to get rather frosty in here, too.”

It turned out that Garth had a good reason for wanting to kill Bob. Actually, he had several, but when you consider the main one was that Bob had disappeared with a toaster-sized chunk of hash that Garth had already found a buyer for, the rest of the reasons seemed piddly in comparison.

Kate nodded as she processed this new information.

Then she told Garth a few things that made him feel better.

“A bouillon cube? Man that’s one fucked-up excuse for a birthday present.”

“No shit.”

“You sure it wasn’t hash?”

“I didn’t have it in my possession long enough to find out.”

“Because if it was hash, that would’ve been a really great present.”

“Then it wasn’t.”

Kate agreed to guard Garth’s gun while he took a shower. She guarded it by going into the kitchen and pretending it didn’t exist. While she was at it, she made two mugs of hot cocoa. When Garth returned, he was more wet dog than oil-slicked student, but either way he was grateful for the cocoa.

“Excuse me for pointing this out, but you suck as a criminal.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“What are you going to do if you can’t find Bob?”

“It’s more a question of what’s going to be done to me.”

“Which is?”

“We left it vague.”

“So then you could use a partner.”

“Or a beer. I’d rather have the beer.”

“Too bad. You’re getting a partner whether you like it or not.”

Garth didn’t like it, but as long as he was allowed to keep his gun, he was happy enough to let Kate call the shots. And so she did. All the way to Tobermorey, where they caught up with Bob, who was about to board the ferry.

“Going somewhere?”

“Clearly.”

“Garth’s got a gun.”

“It’s probably not a good idea to be pointing it at my head like that.”

“Point it at his dick, Garth.”

“I meant, people will see.”

“See, yes. Intervene, no. Human nature is funny like that.”

“Won’t be so funny when you’re in jail.”

“I’m not the one pointing the gun. Give Garth your knapsack.”

Bob gave Garth his knapsack and that was the last Kate saw of her partner. It was not, however, the last she saw of Bob, who got on the ferry with Kate pressing a finger-gun into the small of his back. When they landed on the island, she told Bob the way things were going to be. Bob pretended not to understand what she was saying, but Kate ignored him. Then she made him get a job selling fish burgers to tourists. In the winter she made him chop wood.

“Can I die now?”

“No. We still need a fuckload more wood.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“Fuckload is specific.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Bob continued to hawk fish burgers and chop wood. He did this for six and a half years. Then, one day, Kate had a revelation.

“What kind of revelation?”

“The kind that has nothing to do with God.”

“I see.”

“No you don’t. Why are people always saying they see when they don’t?”

“We’re the only ones here.”

“I know that better than anyone. Don’t you want to know what my revelation was about?”

“Not really.”

“Good. I didn’t want to tell you anyway. All you need to know is that I don’t need you anymore.”

“You mean I can go now?”

“Technically, you always could.”

“It didn’t feel that way.”

“It never does.”

Bob left on the next ferry and sent Kate postcards every Easter from places he’d never been. Kate took over his job at the fish shack and every winter she chopped wood. She chopped so much of it that the stack became a joke told by the pilots of local float planes.

Until the day the stack collapsed and crushed Kate underneath it.

Kate thought about Bob as the air leaked from her lungs.

Then she thought about God and wondered if He would be mad at her for saying her revelation had nothing to do with Him when really it had.

Probably not.

God was the one who contacted her after all. Presumably he knew what she was like before he popped a vision into her head. And in that vision Kate had seen herself lying crushed under an unruly pile of wood contemplating Bob, then God, as the air leaked from her lungs.

But she'd also seen something else.

She'd seen that she wasn't going to disappear from existence like an insect whose entire life had gone by unrecorded. No, she was going to live on as a joke that turned into a legend passed down through several generations in this small northern town.

And there was something about that she liked.