

FICTION

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Young Love

THE ALL-NEWS STATION was running a call-in show on a suspected serial killer in police custody; *fry him, kill the bastard, do unto him ...*

A spring evening, a high school parking lot, the inside of my Chevette lit up by the dome light. I turned down the volume and stared at the two amphetamine capsules in my hand. I sighed. These were hard times. I had just finished a double shift at the hospital and my head was still thick with the smell of burn patients and cafeteria food. I had agreed to do this favour for Janet. Sweet Janet, jolly and pink, good enough to raise money for a drug awareness program at her son's school.

Under the dim glow of the dome light, the capsules were a perfect blue. Forgiving as an August sky, inviting as a neighbour's swimming pool. I swallowed them dry. Adjusted my hat. Got out of the car.

I stood in the gym doorway. The crisp night pressed at my back, reminded me of cool sheets and the seclusion of sleep, while waves of indoor heat, rich with breath and sweat rolled against my face. The bass beat of the dance music shook the floor, vibrated in my chest.

The centre of the gym was a single, dense mass of undulating bodies flagged by black and white numbers pinned to their backs. Around the perimeter, groups of teenagers, their bodies slouched and curved into the question marks of adolescence. They checked their watches, sipped water from an array of containers:

sports bottles, strap-on reservoirs with spigots, mini spring water bottles, thrift shop canteens. Up in the bleachers, the supervisory parents leaned into each other to converse. A gallery of khaki pants and expensive sweaters, mail-order pressed and casual. They gestured madly, nodded emphatically to communicate over the pumping din.

I spotted Janet barreling down the bleachers towards me. Janet was an overweight woman who enjoyed taking up more than her share of space. She wore a silk pantsuit, with flowing, trailing pieces, all in a kaleidoscope of blues and greens. Around her neck, a massive garland of seashells. I couldn't be sure if it was the pills or the lights playing off the fabric, but to me she looked like a giant tidal pool moving across the room. She opened her arms and splashed against me. The seashells scratched my collar bone, dug into my chest. She wiggled my paper hat. "This is great!"

Janet took my hand and dragged me up the bleachers. I watched my feet as they dipped in and out of the benches. While she introduced me to the other parents, the pills kicked in. As I said hello to a woman with Scottie dogs on her sweater, the edges of my peripheral vision started to flare; my face started to burn. I held it together, except for the sweating—I had no control over that. I shook hands with my arm pressed firmly against my side and silently cursed polyester.

The girls at work had teased me when I changed out of my unit scrubs and into the traditional white uniform. "Hot date?" one of them asked. They laughed when they saw the paper nurse's cap I'd bought at a joke store along with the official looking name tag that said "Florence Nightingale." What did high school kids know about nursing?

The parents weren't so impressed with the outfit. Most of them, I suspect, didn't think I was a real nurse at all, just a friend of Janet's in a rented costume. My speed-enhanced mood didn't help any either. I felt charged, excited, shifted my weight back and forth to the beat of the music, spoke too quickly. I probably looked nervous.

One of the parents, Rob or Todd, a man in his sixties, who, in my opinion was entirely too old to have a kid in high school, tried to test me. "So what is the prescribed treatment for dehydration?" I shrugged as if I was guessing and adjusted my hat, tapped my nails against my nametag, "Water?"

The triage room was set up in the girl's change room off to one side of the gym. Two sinks and a wall of mirrors at the entrance, a row of grey lockers, behind the lockers, showers and bathroom stalls. Janet had organized two cots, blankets, bandages, ice, and a water cooler. The moment I saw the cooler, I was crazy with thirst. I filled several small paper cups and downed them in quick succession. "Are you all right?" Janet asked in a good-natured way. Janet was nothing if not good-natured. "Rough shift," I told her. I left my equipment bag—stethoscope, thermometer, blood pressure kit, allergy kit, condoms—in the change room. Walked out to the bleachers with Janet to watch the kids dance.

I sat next to Janet and her husband, Tom. Janet chattered on about Miles, their son who was in the tenth grade and on the soccer team, while Tom stared at the gym floor and sipped a paper cup of fruit punch. Tom was a large man, probably six-seven or six-eight, burly, with thick, dark hair and a full beard. Only wore plaid shirts and jeans. He reminded me of Grizzly Adams, but less approachable. He was a structural engineer, specialized in stadiums. He was pathologically quiet. The silence made him intimidating in an omniscient sort of way. I felt inexplicably guilty whenever I was around him. While Janet twittered beside me, I glanced over at Tom. Wondered if he was thinking about me, if he could tell I was using. My eyes tried to follow the curls in his hair. I noticed the rise of a pectoral muscle under his shirt just before he turned and caught me staring. Janet once joked that he was a workhorse in the bedroom; I had never been sure what that meant.

Janet nattered on. Miles had a summer job working at a soccer camp for the underprivileged. I scanned the pattern of bodies on the gym floor below. An ever-changing mosaic of flesh tones, muted spring colours, darks and denims highlighted by the intermittent glint of jewelry and body glitter. There were dozens of young girls with sweet, thin faces and sweet, thin thighs. Their bare calves and arms so smooth, I was sure the word smooth was created just to describe that skin. Each girl took up such a small amount of space, a toothpick, a piece of string. Their painted eyes more open and awake than I had seen eyes in a long time. Hair cut on angles, curled into tendrils, cropped tight or shagged out; every style a thoughtful manoeuvre.

And the boys, their adolescent bodies all tight and sinewy. Fresh eyes, promiscuous grins, shoulders pressed back and down. Chins jutted up in a confident display or tucked under, enigmatic and secretive. Even the plainer ones, the furtive ones gave off a vibe, an electricity that hinted the energy generated by this source was bottomless and fierce.

Janet had gone on to explaining the structure of the dance-a-thon. How the kids had been dancing since nine a.m. and would continue to the next morning. How they were allowed a five-minute water break every hour. Janet was the type of person who was entertained, exhilarated by structure. "Pizza at eleven!" she practically shouted in my ear. I nodded. I had started to sweat again. This time I felt the rivulets of perspiration trickle down my sides and gather at the waistband of my pantyhose. My heart pounded; I looked down and watched my name tag jump to the rhythm. I must have gone pale because Janet asked me again, "Are you all right?" Tom and the row of parents beside him leaned forward on the bleachers to take a closer look at me. "I'm fine," I told her and excused myself.

Inside the triage room I splashed my face with cold water and rinsed my mouth, which had started to taste like an old carpet. I reclined on one of the cots and pulled a grey wool blanket over my body and head. I stared at the patch of diffused light that filtered through the weave of the fibres. I thought about the guy in jail, the serial killer, and wondered if he had the same kind of cot, the same blanket, if he was doing the same thing I was right at that moment. At some point, my eyes closed. When I woke up, I felt a lot better. I dug through my purse for some Ativan and slipped one under my tongue.

When I rejoined Janet in the bleachers, the gym clock said 9:17 pm. Janet smiled and handed me a paper cup of punch. "Cat nap?" She was the kind of person who said cute things like that. "Yeah," I said, "These double shifts are killing me." I downed the punch and silently wished for vodka. The DJ was playing a series of slow songs; all the kids were on the dance floor. My mouth started to feel dry again and I thought about getting more punch, but my muscles were starting to chemically relax. Janet pointed to the dance floor. "There's Miles!"

I followed the trajectory of her finger to the far right corner of the gym. A tall, thin boy with light hair was curled over a shorter, blonder girl. "Poor things can hardly stand," Janet said, her face

doughy with endearment. The other parents nodded, a consensus. Rob or Todd leaned forward in the row, "I hope you're watching for signs of exhaustion." I nodded, cooled the impulse to spit in his face. I couldn't generate the saliva if I tried.

I stared at the dance floor. The edges of my vision started to blur out and I tried to enjoy it. The kids were all clinging to one another; more opportunity than physical exhaustion, I thought. I watched a husky boy with a blond crew cut slide his hand over the slight, and tightly wrapped rear of a dark-skinned girl. He pulled her against him in a steady rhythm; she was moving her hips from side to side, grinding herself against him. I looked around and it was everywhere, hands up shirts, groping, kissing, grabbing. I watched those kids on the dance floor, their gestures so desperate and secretive, and glimpsed for a moment the sweet urgency and momentum of my own adolescence. The rush and tang of something unseen and forbidden. The cardiopulmonary reactions: sweaty palms, shortness of breath. Then I recognized the song that was playing, "Sexual Healing." I chuckled to myself. I looked down the row of parents beside me; they didn't have a clue. They were all smiling; some of them tapped their feet and clapped absently.

The DJ sped things up. Girls perked up, made use of all their body parts. Hips gyrated, bottoms shook, breasts bounced. In the center of collective motion, one young couple made a defiant statement, danced slow to a fast song. A girl with long red hair was hooked under the shoulders of a tall, wiry boy with dark curls. Seeing their faces buried in each other's necks made me nostalgic for certain smells: unwashed skin, acne gel, and cheap musk perfume. I closed my eyes and tried to remember my first kiss. The boy with glasses. Dry skin and a wet mouth.

Janet touched my shoulder. I opened my eyes, hoped she hadn't noticed that I'd been rolling my tongue inside my mouth. She pointed down. "Someone's fainted." I stood up and stepped carefully down the bleachers to the gym floor. Kids continued dancing, but craned their necks to see who had crumpled onto their knees at the center of the room. It was the boy who had been slow-dancing with the red-haired girl. She'd been trying to hold him up through two songs.

Tom helped me get the boy into the triage room and lay him out on the cot. Tom left without a word. The boy was woozy, but not unconscious. I put a cold cloth on his forehead and took another amphetamine to wake up.

When the boy was ready to sit up, I took a seat beside him on the cot, gave him a few paper cups of water. I asked the usual questions, his name, did he know where he was, did he know what day it was. His name was Josh and he knew everything. There was a tap on the door and Janet stuck her head in. "Everything okay?" I told her it was simple fatigue and that Josh would need to rest for a while before going back out. "Poor thing," Janet said before she popped back out into the gym.

I refilled another paper cup and handed it to Josh. He sipped this one slowly. I asked him if he had any allergies. He shook his head. I stared at the tiled wall in front of us, followed the dirty grout lines with my eyes and asked him what he was on. He leaned away from me, wary. I felt him looking me up and down. I turned my head to face him. We had a bit of a staring contest. The sweat started again under my arms and around my hairline. I turned back to face the wall.

"No one else needs to know," I said.

He looked at his palms, pressed the tips of his thumbs together, shook his head. "Some lines in the parking lot, a few hours ago."

I nodded. We sat there on the cot for a long time, both of us staring straight ahead into nothing.

When he spoke again his voice was quiet. "What are you on?"

I glanced sideways to check his face, expected to see him smirking, challenging me, but his profile was still.

"I saw you pop, just after you guys laid me down." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. His hands were narrow. He offered me a cigarette and I took it, even though I didn't smoke. He lit up, then held the lighter for me.

The flame touched the edge of the paper.

"Blues?"

I nodded, inhaled.

"Can you hook me up," he leaned down to my name tag, "Florence?"

I laughed out loud. Shook my head.

He smiled, mouth closed, licked his lips and he took a drag of his cigarette.

"How long you been using?" I twirled the lit cigarette in my fingers.

"Long enough. How long you been a nurse?"

"Long enough."

He smiled again and this time his face gathered in smooth lines.

"That your girlfriend out there?" I took a deep drag of my cigarette and exhaled quickly.

His eyebrows lifted; he examined my face as if there was something to learn. He shrugged. "Some girl."

I smiled, then looked down at my legs.

A moment later, he put his hand on top of mine on the cot. Out of the corner of my eye I watched him suck on his lower lip. My mouth felt dry. His lips looked wet.

"You know, you don't look old enough to be a nurse."

I smiled broadly and against my will. "Really?" My tone was sarcastic.

"Really." His hand lifted from mine. With his index finger, he traced the damp trail around my hairline.

I stared at his face. His skin was pale and thin, almost translucent. It made me think of embryos and their delicate see-through forms.

I dropped my cigarette on the tile floor and crushed it with my shoe. I felt his thumb press against my brow bone then down the outside of my temple and across my cheek. His fingers curled under my chin. I stared at the lower half of his face, the skin pulled taught along his jaw line, his lips slightly parted. I waited and when I was sure he wasn't going to make another move, I leaned into him and pressed my mouth against his. His body stiffened for a second, then relaxed. He opened his mouth slowly; I closed my eyes. I took his tongue in, guiding it with mine. He tasted of cigarettes and sweet punch. We stayed that way for some time, me, sucking on his tongue. My knee started to shake from the uppers. We stopped kissing to watch my knee vibrate uncontrollably; we both laughed.

For a moment, I wondered how much I had taken that day. But my mind couldn't make it back to the second shift, let alone work out the dosage. I thought of poor Janet finding me unconscious on the change room floor and the flack she'd have to take from the other parents. And honestly, I didn't care.

I unbuttoned the top of my uniform slowly, pausing between buttons to watch Josh's reaction. He smiled. I thanked God that I had worn a good bra.

The top of my uniform was open, my bra undone. Josh's T-shirt was on the floor, his dance-a-thon number, 113, beside it, his jeans and stretch boxers down at his knees. My pantyhose and underwear were in a ball somewhere at the bottom of the cot. We were under the gray blanket, pressing and rubbing. His body was harder than I remembered bodies ever being. I crushed myself into him to feel the slats of his ribs against my torso, the sharp grind of his hip bones into my pelvis. The sensation of his knee knocking against mine sent a charge through me. His hands gripped at parts of my body, demanding, insistent. I sat up to reach for my equipment bag, for condoms. The door to the change room swung open. I heard someone say "Shit!" Then recognized the voice as my own.

"I thought you'd—" Tom was holding two paper plates folding over with pizza.

I scrambled with the top of my uniform. Josh yanked up his jeans. Tom balanced the two plates on the edge of the sink, then walked back out into the gym.

I sat down on the cot. My body felt suddenly hollow.

"Fuck!" Josh laughed.

I looked down at my bare legs. Josh continued to laugh. I picked his T-shirt off the floor and threw it at him. "Get dressed."

He slid his arms into the T-shirt. "Hey, are you gonna get fired?"

I shook my head. "Volunteer."

"Cool." He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes.

"Get outta here."

He raised his eyebrows, then shrugged and put his cigarettes away. He walked towards me with deliberate strides and leaned in to kiss.

I jerked my head back. "Just. Go."

He backed away, nodding. Picked his number up off the ground. Hooted some kind of victory noise and went out the door.

I untangled my pantyhose and underwear from the bottom of the blanket, sat down on the edge of the cot with them in my hands, and cried. I twisted the pantyhose around my wrists as I sobbed, and cried until all the colour drained from my hands.

I was still crying when I peeled off my uniform and bra and stepped into the girls' shower. I stood under the shower head with the water on cold. Let the icy pellets pummel my face and body. I stared at the tile wall in front of me, watched the mildew patterns dance. I thought about how tired I was. Tired beyond sleep. Tired to point of wanting to punch something. Then, I did it. Made a fist and drove it forward as hard as I could. Thick needles of pain crackled across the back of my hand and up my arm to my elbow. I did it again, quickly, with the other hand. My head started to swoon, my body felt numb. I sat down in the shower and laughed.

I dried myself with the grey blanket. Got back into my uniform. Dropped the pantyhose and underwear into the garbage. I stood at the mirror, pulled my hair back into a ponytail, got ready to pin on my paper hat. I stepped close to the mirror. My eyes were sunken, the puffy skin underneath them yellowing like bruises. My lips were pale and cracked. The sides of my face were hollow, my cheekbones protruding, as if the skeleton of my face was trying to break through my skin and escape. My hands started to hurt. I crumpled the hat in the best I could do for a fist, dug for Ativan in my purse, but there weren't any left. I took a deep breath instead and went back into the gym.

The DJ was playing another set of slow songs. I moved past the swaying bodies on the dance floor. Noticed Josh in the corner, back together with the red-haired girl. I looked up to the bleachers. Janet waved. The other parents had faded, but she was still beaming. I sat down beside her. She touched my wet hair, looked puzzled. "Did you take a shower in there?"

I nodded. My body started to shiver. "Cold shower. To stay awake."

"You're insane." She touched my cheek. "You're a popsicle." She reached over to take one of my hands, then stopped. "My God, what happened to your hands?"

"I fell. In the shower."

"Oh, sweetie, this just hasn't been a good night for you."

I slouched against Janet and shook my head. We both stared down at the kids on the dance floor. She took my hand in hers and patted it gently, carefully. I felt tears coming up again and decided to just let them come.

I rested my head on Janet's shoulder as the tips of her fingers drew circles and hearts on the top of my hand. She hummed soothingly to the music.

"Where's Tom?" I whispered.

"Oh," Janet snickered. "Revisiting an old habit." She pointed to the parking lot exit. There was Tom, leaned against the open gym door, smoking a cigarette, staring out into the night. "I don't know what's gotten into him."

By the time the giant gym clock said 2:30 am, most of the parents, including Janet, were nodding off. The DJ started a reggae set. I watched the young bodies bounce drunkenly to the beat. These kids had been dancing for almost eighteen hours. And yet, when I looked down into the crowd, all I saw were freshly glossed lips, eager hands. Some girls had started a reggae beat can-can line. They swung their hair from side to side as they kicked up their legs. A group of boys ambushed them from behind, grabbed each girl round the waist and swung her in the air. The girls squealed and bodies fell into neatly matched pairs, as if it had all been planned.

"I hate reggae," I whispered to Janet.

She mumbled; her head shifted on my shoulder.

"It's so damn happy. It's childish. Let's get together and feel all right." I looked down at her head for at least a nod of support, but she had fallen asleep.

So it went on like that. I watched those tireless creatures dance. I watched them swap spit, sneak cigarettes, and take swigs from miniature bottles. I watched forms, like puzzle pieces find each other, connect, then separate in search of something new. I watched arms and hips and midriffs move and grind and sway against each other until they could hardly stand.

When my back started to ache with the weight of Janet on me, I pressed my hands into her shoulder and righted her against the woman on her other side. The woman with the Scottie dog sweater. I sat alone on the bench, stranded somewhere between the sleeping dreams of adults and waking dream of adolescence. I thought about the serial killer one last time, imagined him in his cot at that very moment, awake and alone in a jail full of people.

I did fall asleep, eventually. And before I did, I watched Tom down at the gym exit, smoking what must have been his twentieth cigarette. His head, tilted back against the door, his one arm limp at his side, his other making the slow, lit arc to his mouth. I won-

dered again what thoughts filled the mind of that quiet man. As Tom smoked, he gazed skyward, into the night. I can only guess what he saw up there in the endless dark. A falling star, a winking satellite. Something bright, something different, something beautiful and just out of reach.