

LOVE AND SQUALOR

A Short Story in Six Songs

By Craig Lancaster

A SOLITARY MAN | NEIL DIAMOND

We called an end to it, and all I could do is look around at the things we'd managed to accumulate together that now we'd have to parse out in a property agreement.

The sectional we bought last winter, no way was I getting that. She'd loved it more than she'd loved me in months. I couldn't deny her that.

Ruben, the cat, would be staying, too, on account of the fact that he'd bite me whenever Barbara wasn't looking.

Jell-O, the dog, wasn't going anywhere, either. ("Watch him wiggle. See him jiggle.") "He has separation anxiety," Barbara said, and I was thinking, hey, who doesn't?

"You can have the goldfish," she said now, and I got up and walked toward the aquarium to make sure he was still with us—a thousand dollars' worth of exotic aquatic life wasn't anymore, yet that gilled motherfucker, whom I'd won by popping balloons with darts at the county fair, still plied his waters blithely. As soon as he saw me, though, he started fish-flailing in angry parabolas.

I left the house alone.

I'VE NEVER BEEN TO ME | CHARLENE

Five weeks into the inexorable march toward divorce, when my despair is at such a pitch that my best friend Jimbo said "Get some help or I'll get on a goddamn plane and come beat your

ass,” I’m sitting here destroying a box of Kleenex when Julie, my therapist, asks me why I even bother coming.

“I’m not losing anybody else I love to my own bullshit,” I say, the exact same answer in the exact same words I used the first time I met with Julie.

Now, suddenly, she’s Inigo Montoya. “You keep saying that,” she says. “I don’t think you know what it means.”

“Tell me, smart lady,” I say, and she does.

“First of all, you don’t know what your bullshit is. Second, you realize this is a two-part equation, right? You can be bullshit-free and still lose someone, because she has something to say about how it all goes down.”

Why have I never thought of that?

She also tells me that she suspects the crux of my problem lies in an inability to access my feminine.

“Is my feminine hot?” I ask.

And here’s Julie: “Get out.”

HE’LL HAVE TO GO | JIM REEVES

We’re eight weeks in, we’ve had mediation, we’ve confirmed once and for all that I will not get the sectional nor Ruben nor Jell-O, and the goldfish, Barbara tells me, has died.

Julie has kept me on despite my fatuousness, and the wonder of it all is that it’s all making some sense to me, even the accessing-the-feminine shit. Life being the absurd comedy that it is, I’m about to get a real-time lesson.

Her name is Samantha. She works for the senator’s field office on the first floor of the building I also work in. She asks me if I can take a look at her network connection.

I like her. She smells good. She has these delicate hands that move in rhythm with her speech. I like those hands a lot.

“Could I maybe buy you lunch one day?” I ask her.

“I’d love that,” she says, “but I’m kind of seeing someone.”

“Right,” I say. “But you’re going to fall in love with me.”

Yeah, this is going to work.

I’M ALWAYS IN LOVE | WILCO

Historically, here’s how it goes, when it goes: I do what I do, you show a little interest, I start getting high on the dopamine and then double-down on whatever it is that I think caused the interest, and the chase is on. I don’t have time for you to come to love me on your own. No, I’ve gotta make this shit happen, and now. To do otherwise would be bucking millennia of the hunter-gatherer behavior that burdens my DNA.

Now, here’s Julie, steering me in a different direction after Samantha, indeed, fell in love with me, and just as quickly backed away when she figured out I’d already written the script.

“Have I got a role for you!” works for actors, maybe. But not real people.

“Love starts with projection,” Julie is telling me. “You’re holding a mirror. She’s holding a mirror. You say, ‘Look how beautiful you are.’ She says, ‘Look how beautiful you are.’ But eventually, the mirrors are going to drop, and your history and her history are going to collide, and that’s when it’s going to get tough. So you move slowly, and you let those things sink in and co-exist, and that’s how you build a foundation.”

I am so fucking stupid.

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT | BADLY DRAWN BOY

Here's the deal about pain: You gotta sit with it. You gotta cozy up to that son of a bitch and say "bring it, asshole," and then you gotta wait.

Here's a small list of things that have made me weepy this week, since the decree came through and Barbara and I were conscientiously uncoupled: dog food commercials, songs (always, always songs), my little nephew on the floor with a new toy, a "Mary Tyler Moore" rerun, the sight of my childhood best friend finishing a marathon in a video he posted to Facebook, a buddy movie from the year I graduated from high school, and Kansas (the state, not the band).

It's ridiculous.

And yet, every day I realize anew that this is the way through, that the words from the song in that Hugh Grant movie—you know, the good one—are straight and true.

The joy is not the same without the pain.

MESSAGE TO MY GIRL | SPLIT ENZ

It's been six months. Barbara, Christ Almighty, is marrying some dude who lives in Melstone. As for me, I would posit that if you're putting the onus for love entirely on you and one other person, you're not going to be happy with what comes. We've gotta be more expansive in our thinking.

I'm not anybody's paragon of wisdom on this thing, but bear with me.

Love is the person who cares about you, who hears what you're saying and knows how desperate the situation has become and threatens bodily violence if you don't get some intervention.

Love is a kind word when you're sure that the next sharp one will kill you.

Love is a dumb comedy flick and pizza with a friend you haven't seen in a while.

Love is giving enough of a shit about yourself for the first time to drag ass out of bed and get on the treadmill and pound out those miles.

Love is knowing that just because you've messed up before doesn't mean you're consigned to that fate again.

Love is the hope that truly knows no bounds.

Love is digging someone, and holding an option to upgrade to adoration.

Love is a goldfish in a Ziploc bag filled with water. Love is stepping gingerly through the snow to your car so you can deliver this little guy to Samantha, the one who came back around.

Love is her saying that you'll start him in a small bowl, but if things work out and the fish flourishes there, maybe you can get a nice aquarium with a filtration system and an aquatic habitat.

Love is wondering whether she's really talking in metaphors about the two of you.

Love is realizing it doesn't really matter either way, because you're not sitting this one out.

It's like Billy Shakes said that one time: Once more unto the breach, motherfuckers.