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Article 1

Family Man

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Family Man

by Neil Howard

THE CLOCK-RADIO awoke me with strains, real strains, of music. I nimbly jumped from my bed and tripped over my wife's arms, which had been affectionately twined about my ankles. Picking myself up with slightly less vigor than I had jumped out of bed with, I stumbled into my clothes and woke my wife for breakfast. Having had the sweetest breakfast kisses ever, I left the house for my office, despite my wife's fervent efforts to prevent my doing so; removing her fingers deftly from my ears, I departed.

All the way to the office, my thoughts grew heavy with the day's work ahead of me. An editor's job, I told myself for the hundredth time, is no easy one.

The ever-present question bothered me: why did I quit acting? By now I would have been the top actor in Hollywood. What had changed all that? Bad scripts? Bad feelings between actor and director? No. Too many gorgeous actresses? Definitely not.

I wanted to devote myself to literature. So with my beautiful wife's beautiful money, I entered the publishing business.

I reached my office and opened the door:

MUSE NEWS MAGAZINE

BRAD SUNN — EDITOR

The sight of my staff eagerly working away brightened my spirits, and a smile lighted my face. "Good Morning, staff!" I shouted cheerfully, and everyone of the girls softly cooed, "'Morning, Brad."

Then my thoughts grew heavy again. I had so many blond free-lancers to take care of that I knew I couldn't get to them all before eleven o'clock. And that meant that I couldn't get to the redhead across the room and her thrilling poem — I knew it was thrilling: what else could it be? — before noon.

Stepping through the maze of desks and buxom, blond first readers, I made my way — one by one — to my desk, upon which perched the redhead in the bright white blouse and black skirt.

I deftly pulled her skirt below her knees so I wouldn't be distracted and then called in the first free-lancer.

When I first saw her, my heart leaped. This was too good to be true, such wrappings! And the way everything fit into such a neat package!

When the blonde placed the package on my desk, I nearly fainted. Such beauty I hated to disturb, but I knew that inside was what I had been waiting for, was what I had given up acting for!

Deftly, I removed the pink curlicue of ribbon and the white-on-white paper and pulled out the manuscript, fingers trembling for fear I might smear a single word.

Tearing the redhead's succulent lips from my succulent lips, I eagerly perused the manuscript. It was a let-down. My feelings, which had soared sky-high a moment before, now came crashing down. With reckless abandon, I placed the manuscript into the white-on-white paper and tied a granny knot with the pink ribbon.

"I'm sorry, baby," I said softly, "but it's just not what we're looking for." I looked at her in a compassionate manner, noting her hurt look. "I'm really sorry, but if you try *Atlantic* they'll buy it, I'm sure."

After a short snuffle, the blonde perked up, her eyes brightened, and she said, even more softly than I had spoken, "Don't I get a rejection slip for my collection?"

“Baby,” I said very, very softly, pushing aside the redhead very, very softly, “I’ll give you a rejection slip that reads, ‘This manuscript was read with exceptional interest by the editor himself.’ All right?”

And with that I agilely moved into her arms, pulled her eager body against mine, and kissed her.

I had my first readers pick her up and remove her from the office, then I sat down.

Those rejection slips of mine were admired and prized by all my female writers. I saved printing costs that way and kept the writers happy. They always come back for more—*with* more — manuscripts. And besides, it was a challenge as to how to word them each time.

Twelve o’clock finally rolled around — time to give my rejection lips a rest. The redhead and I left for lunch. Perhaps I could persuade her to allow me to publish her poems over a few drinks.

We entered the redhead’s red convertible, and we drove to a darkened club and slipped into a secluded booth. As soon as the waiter brought our drinks, I made my play.

“Your poetry is sincere and thrilling, right?” I queried, anxious to see her poetry, athirst for the touch of her manuscripts, knowing that this was what I had been waiting for, was what I had given up acting for.

“Yes,” she whispered into my ear between nibbles on it, “thrilling!”

She ran her hands through my wavy hair, along my smooth cheeks, across my broad back, through my wallet. Her pulsing lips rested upon my pulsing lips for a brief moment, and then I said, “May I see the poems, Miss . . . What is your name?”

Her lips moved, but I heard nothing. Her lips moved again, her eyes twinkled, her warm body sighed, but still I heard nothing.

Finally, I removed her fingers from my ears.

“Nadia Montresa,” she cooed.

Nadia Montresa! Of course! I should have known — the famous Nadia Montresa, watchword among publishers the world over! I gazed deeply into her green eyes, at her firm

expression, at the striking beauty of the pulsating being within my arms. Was this the face that launched a thousand poems? Yes, yes, yes.

“May I see the poems, Miss Montresa?”

“Nadia,” she replied, and kissed me again.

Then she said, “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

And she softly cooed, “To my home.”

To her home! This was beyond my wildest expectations! Just think of all the poems she must have there!

We pulled at last into the driveway of a modest castle, and we walked arm in arm to her door.

It was amazing what an interior decorator could do to a run-down castle. Instead of rusting old suits of armor, there were ivy league suits, blazers with coats of arms on their breast pockets. Other subtle changes filled my view, but Nadia tore them from my gaze, saying innocently, “Would you like to see my poems?”

Would I? Does a poor man want money? Does a hungry man want food? Does any red-blooded American boy want . . .

“Yes, yes, O yes!”

Nadia and I were alone. Together. Here. My heart leaped as Nadia draped herself supplely over a bearskin sofa. Alone together — this was my chance.

I advanced toward her.

“The poem — I want it!” I growled. When the bearskin growled back, I added, “It must be a thrilling literary piece. My readers will love it!”

Smiles broke upon the beautiful face that had launched a thousand poems and an equal number of editors. Her eyes glowed rapturously. Her supple body heaved. Her lips opened just so far. And then her soft voice cooed, “Yes.”

My cue. I moved forward, casting a quick glance at the bear, and edged onto the sofa. We were in each other’s arms. She was kissing me; I was murmuring, “May I see the poems?”

Nadia reached into her blouse and withdrew a neatly folded piece of paper. The moment had come, the moment I had been waiting for since I had begun publishing!

As I unfolded the warm piece of paper, I blinked my eyes

fervently to clear away the drops of sweat that had accumulated on my smooth brow, and I focused in on the short poem:

ETERNAL HUNT

The cat caught a victim;
The outlook — Grim:
Be chewed to a pulp,
Then — Gulp!

“O, Nadia!” I screamed with joy. “This is the greatest! Such profundity!”

“I know,” said Nadia between kisses.

“Nadia, Nadia darling, I must have this poem! I must! I must; or else I’ll kill myself!”

And with that burst of true spirit, I tore myself from her grasp. Her sharp fingernails scratched my ears as I did so, but that didn’t bother me. Such were earthly woes. The simple poem made everything earthly seem mundane. Only truth, beauty, and literary merit were worth anything to me now!

“What will you take for it?” I asked. “One hundred dollars?”

“No.”

“Two hundred, three? Name your price!”

“No, no.”

And then I realized that *the* Nadia Montresa needed no money. I couldn’t offer her cars. I couldn’t even offer her a castle. Ah! There was one thing I had that she might want.

“Do you want to be featured as my next issue’s fold-out *Muse-of-the-Month*?”

“No, no, no.”

“I must have that poem!” I cried, running around the sofa three times, pulling out my wavy hair. I felt I was overdoing it a bit, but I had to have that poem! “I must have it! What *will* you take for it?”

“You, I want you!” she replied, falling to her dimpled knees on the hard stone floor and clutching at my ankles. “You, you, you, that’s all I’ve *ever* wanted!”

I reached down and picked up her head by her chin. Tears were streaking down her face. I hated seeing a woman

cry, especially all over my shoes, so I picked her up and sat her down on the sofa.

“You want *me*?” I asked, drying her eyes with my handkerchief. Me? What *was* there about me that attracted so many women? Just because I was young, handsome, suave, debonair, an ex-movie actor . . .

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted, Brad,” she said, snaking her arms about me. “I’ve seen every movie you ever made. You were great, Brad, the best! You were my idol! I said to myself, ‘Nadia, darling, you’ve got to have that man!’ I want you, Brad. I love you!”

“But I’m married,” was all I could think of to say.

“Well, divorce your wife.”

Divorce my wife? Give up my income, my magazine, my delicious breakfasts, my loving, ankle-grabbing wife? Not that I still wouldn’t get delicious breakfasts, but *divorce*? For what? For a poem? True, it was a brilliant poem, one I must have at any cost. But to divorce my wife for this poem —

“Can you support me.” I asked tremulously.

“Yes!” Nadia answered happily.

“Then will you marry me, Nadia darling?” I asked between kisses.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

Once back in the car, Nadia turned to me and said, “Perhaps you’d like to publish another of my poems?”

Would I? Oh, this was too good to be true — two Nadia Montresa masterpieces and Nadia Montresa to boot, and all in one day! I opened the second piece of warm paper and read:

LICENSE

Marriage is a vehicle upon
The bumpy road of life:
Good shock absorbers are
Necessary for smooth running.

As we drove on to my home, I was extremely satisfied.

I opened the door to my home-sweet-home that was soon to be ravaged by divorce. Immediately, my wife was upon me, kissing and hugging me. I pulled her away from me, carefully extracting her fingers from my ears.

“Fran,” I said, “Meet my wife-to-be, Nadia Montresa.”

She took it well, I must admit. It took me only five minutes to untangle them. I tied my wife to a chair and proceeded to explain.

“I want a divorce so I can marry these poems. I mean Nadia. Will you give it to me? Fran, it’s for the benefit of the literary world!”

“What grounds for divorce, Brad?”

“Cruelty,” I answered with a sudden brainstorm. “You trip me every morning.”

“It’ll never stand up in court,” my wife said, smiling a smile of superiority that said, “Goodbye, Miss Montresa.”

At that, Nadia began crying. All seemed hopeless: I was lost. No Nadia, no poems. The thought of it all forced me to shed a tear, also. Murder was a thought, but what would that accomplish?

Then the thought of the second of Nadia’s poems came to mind. There was the answer! But I had to be sure. The paper was cool now, but the poem was still stunning in its impact.

“Good shock absorbers are necessary,” I read aloud. My wife surely had them, judging from her response to my introduction.

I had the answer! Turning to Nadia and wiping away her tears, I questioned, “Nadia, do you have any scruples?” I heard her reply, “I’m a writer,” even though her fingers plugged my ears.

I untied my wife with tears of joy, picked her up in my muscular arms, and said, “Dearest Fran, we’re adopting a daughter!”

And suddenly I envisioned *Muse News Magazine* as a family project. It was well on its way to becoming one.

So was I.

