Love Stories (a Trilogy)

Steve Snyder∗

∗Iowa State University

Copyright ©1990 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Love Stories (a Trilogy)

A Love Story

George, my attorney, is an able fellow with a first-rate legal mind, and he has always guided my affairs with aplomb and diplomacy. Through the many years of our association I have never thought of him as anything but the quintessential middle-aged lawyer, respectable, conservative and usefully methodical in every aspect.

Recently, I was in his office discussing a pending legal action and George was droning on, as is his wont at times, about some detail which I saw as irrelevant, but which he insisted on my knowing. As I said he is quite methodical. Once he latches onto a thing he keeps at it tirelessly until it’s overcome. At any rate, I was only half-listening to him. I was more noticing his eyes — how out of place they are. They seem undecided on whether they want to be blue or green and there is a softness in them which contrasts with the sharpness of his features. George is like an impeccably dressed man with a button missing.

Suddenly, as he shifted through papers on his desk, he paused and seemed to skip a beat. His expression pulled inward, away from the matter at hand. Had I not been idly fixated on him at that precise moment, I’m sure I would have missed it altogether. “What is it, George?” I asked. “What are you thinking?”

Very quickly, he collected himself and turned his attention back to its original line. “Nothing,” he shorted, “Occasionally I do that — think of something completely unrelated. Just a quirk.”

I wish I could say I was someone on whom nothing is wasted, but in truth I didn’t dwell on the instance. He had told me it wasn’t of importance and I accepted that. Later, however, when our business was finished and we were lunching together he brought the matter up himself.

“You know in the office today when you asked me what I was thinking?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Would you like to know what it was?”

“If you want to tell me.”

George was silent for a few moments. He placed his fork neatly beside his plate and re-straightened the napkin in his lap. He resembled a swimmer pacing up and down the bank looking for an easy place to slip into the current, and the expression I had noticed earlier returned to his face.

“When I was in my second year of law school,” he began, “I had a very brief, unremarkable affair with a woman named Madeline. When I tell you it was unremarkable, I’m being quite truthful. We saw each other for only a few weeks — just long enough for both of us to be sure there wasn’t anything between us.
After the initial curiosity wore off, I think we were fairly indifferent to one another. And of course that’s the damnable thing about all this. Have you never thought it was strange that two people come together briefly, share a certain forced intimacy and then pass on as if nothing had happened?”

“I’ve thought about it,” I said noticing how uncharacteristically distant George had suddenly become.

“Well, that’s exactly what happened between Madeline and me. She was somewhat plain, with soft, always out of place hair. She carried herself well, though, and was exceptionally bright, but for whatever reasons we never clicked. I think it was our one awkward attempt at lovemaking that convinced us to stop seeing each other. Neither of us was hurt; we had a single conversation to wrap the matter up and then we went off in opposite directions. There was no reason for our courses to cross again because we moved in different circles.

“Naturally, I thought about her for a few weeks after we’d broken up — wondered at how funny it was that we’d ever been together. The whole thing just struck me as odd. Well, a month went by and I was still thinking about her regularly. It wasn’t love, or regret or anything like that. She just seemed to be in my thoughts a lot.”

“And she was who you were thinking of in the office today?”

“Yes,” he said softly. “I have thought about her every day for the past thirty-one years.”

“My God, George, are you sure you weren’t in love with her?”

“Positive. It’s the most puzzling thing in my life. I thought about her on my wedding day, on the days my children were born and on completely inconsequential days—days I’ve forgotten.”

“And you never saw her again?”

“Once. It was years ago at a chamber of commerce banquet. She was with her husband—her second, I believe. She’d aged very quickly and smoked a lot. I remember wanting very much to speak to her. I suppose to see if there were any sparks, to see if perhaps there was some sense to my inability to forget her, but there was nothing between us. She told me of her children, her work, along with other uninteresting details and I did likewise.”

I knew George had finished his story because he picked up his fork and started in again on his salmon steak. I sat studying him for a while, unnerved by his complacent attitude toward such a strange phenomenon. I expect he’d grown used to thinking of her, come to see it as another item on his list of things to do for the day.

“Well, George,” I said, “I usually refrain from spot analysis, but it appears to me that you should see this woman again. I think you must have some unfinished business with her.”
“I can’t see her. She died seven years ago of lung cancer. Queer thing, isn’t it?”

George paused, took a slow sip of his wine and then returned the glass to the table, directly where it had been sitting before. “You know,” he said, “I fully expect to go on thinking about her once each day until the day I die.”

**Pistols and Kisses**

The first woman Benjy Krebbs ever didn’t marry was Julie Tate. There were a lot of reasons their marriage never took place, not the least of which was the fact they were eight and seven years old, respectively. It was the old story — not so much passion as innocent curiosity; no so much love as gullibility.

And, of course, Julie was the kid sister of Benjy’s best friend, Jake Tate, or Tater Jake, Tater chip, Tater head — whatever the prevailing whim dictated he be christened. As Tater Jake’s best friend, a certain amount of discretion had to be adhered to in his affair with Julie, but at the time all the danger seemed worthwhile. What is it the French say? *You’ve never had a real love affair until a pistol is involved.*

Julie was not a beautiful child. Her hair resembled a mop that had been used to extinguish a grease fire, and her plump frame and gerbil cheeks made her curiously oval, yet there was something attractive to Benjy. Perhaps it was merely the mystery of the opposite sex, the fascination of a being almost like himself, yet with certain minor differences that at eight years of age struck him as interesting, but not necessarily significant. Later, of course, those differences took on other and more intriguing importances, but in his childhood it was merely another in the series of oddities he was gradually sorting through — like discovering that tiny people were not inside the TV. Rather, as Tater Jake had smugly revealed to him, the picture came out of the wall socket.

Benjy’s world at eight was comprised of backyards and wood-paneled basements, and it was in the latter than his affair took place. Tater Jake had been summoned upstairs to receive a haircut from his father, a trim man in a clipped moustache who taught his children at an early age how to roll their socks. Mr. Tate took his amateur barbering seriously. Once a month Tater Jake sat on top of newspapers, a stool and two phonebooks and endured his father’s cosmetological efforts.

There’s a physical law existing in the universe that applies strictly to kids, and it states that parents always summon their children at the penultimate moment of fun. For an hour Jake, Julie and Benjy had been rapturously constructing a labyrinth of tents and tunnels with old blankets, sheets and the basement’s furniture. The capstone of their creation was at hand when the “fun” law came into effect. Summoned by his father, Jake grumbled but resigned himself to his
fate as he tread up the thirteen basement steps to the kitchen.

So it was Benjy and Julie that completed the construction by pulling a ratty Indian blanket over a card table. Then they stood back gazing upon their creation. The basement was transformed into a crazy pattern of covered rectangles and arching chair backs, and the entryway, a short scurry beneath a long coffee table, beckoned to the two of them.

“Let’s pretend it’s our house,” said Julie, a smile on her face.

“OK,” said Benjy bending down to crawl inside their new home. He shimmied on his belly through the coffee table tunnel, made a right turn beneath the desk and squeezed under the big footstool, which even at eight was no mean accomplishment. Then, emerging into the central chamber beneath the card table, he turned to see Julie wriggling up the tunnel.

“Cool!” she said in awe as she entered. The light through the ruddy burgundy Indian blanket created a half-lit and condensed atmosphere, and they both took a few moments to acclimate themselves to the new space.

“I’m gonna ask if I can sleep down here tonight.”

“Me too,” said Benjy. He leaned forward and dragged his finger through the pile of the carpeting, thus making a visible line that separated the chamber into two halves. “That side is your room and this side is mine.”

“If we are supposed to be married then we got to have the same room.”

“Huh?” he said.

“And you got to be nice. Married people are always friends no matter what.”

Benjy thought about it for a while. It seemed to make sense so he agreed to the terms. Besides there was something strangely appealing about the idea of pretending to live in the new tent house with Julie.

“Let’s get some pillows and stuff and bring em’ in here,” she said. They crawled back out through the tunnel even though it would have been easier just to lift one side of the Indian blanket. After several forays into the outside world they managed to pack their home full of the necessities of life. Feigning exhaustion, they pretended it was bed time. Benjy flopped onto his pillows and Julie did the same on her large, square couch cushion. They lay like two fish hooks facing in toward each other. Julie cupped her hands to the side of her face and Benjy did the same. Moving together they discovered they created a new tent, one small enough to contain only their faces and the four or five inches of space between them. In the blue-grayness of that tiny place they stared at each other. Benjy thought she seemed extraordinarily close. He could sense the warm moisture of their breaths filling the air, and he began to think how funny it felt to be this close to a person’s gaze. There was nothing else in that place to see but Julie’s face.

“You have to kiss me goodnight if we’re married,” she said in a voice that
Snyder

would’ve gone unheard but for their nearness. Benjy pressed his lips to hers and sensed the strange, yet compelling taste of a woman for the first time.

And then there was a sudden burst of yellow electric light as Tater Jake snatched away the Indian blanket and revealed two huddled children with their plum faces pressed together.

“Eeeewwww! Growdy!” Jake yelled in a prepubescent shriek.

Benjy jumped up and felt sharp pinpricks of squirted water on the small of his back. Jake, alien-looking in his freshly shaven head, pumped shot after shot into Benjy with his lime-green water pistol.

**At the Canterbury Lounge**

Sal and I and a bunch of other guys from the jobsite were sitting around the bar one Friday night after work. We were all telling stories one by one. Shaky Jake had just finished telling about the time he went home with three strippers, and Marvin had followed with the time he drove a newly purchased Ford right through the plateglass window at Miller Motors. Then Paul spoke up.

He was a college kid working construction during the summer. Not a bad guy, really, but he took a lot of guff about his East coast education and the fact that his old man was treasurer of the company. He seemed to laugh along with us, so we accepted him.

“The problem with all your stories is that they’re not true,” Paul said.

A couple of the guys looked at him kind of funny.

“Oh, I’m sure there is some factual basis, but for the most part your stories are exaggerated—you always come out looking good. Life isn’t like that. A real story—one with resonance—has to communicate some personal truth. It has to convey a person’s honest perception of life.”

“You an expert, college boy?”

Paul looked around at the faces at the bar. He paused for a moment, then reached for the pitcher and filled his half-empty glass. “Maybe,” he said. A few of the guys snickered, and Paul glanced at us one more time as if hesitating, but then he began a story anyway.

“A couple of summers ago I attended a college conference on debate techniques. It was a boring thing, really, and I only went because it was for a few days. About twelve of us from school went, and we stayed in a large hotel that looked like a transistor radio. The first day, when we were all gathered for the opening lecture, I was glancing around at the other participants when I noticed a woman sitting three rows in front of me. She was bent over her yellow legal pad making notes of the lecture, and I watched her for several minutes as she wrote and brushed back a particularly troublesome haircut. She was pretty, but not breathtaking, and yet she had the compelling quality of detachment—as if she
Love Stories (a Trilogy)

were forcing herself to pay attention to the lecturer’s new methods of outlining, when in fact, it was the same old Greek thing he had repackaged and sold to a textbook publisher. Her boredom was obvious, and her attempts to overcome it interested me right away. What’s the poet’s corny, old line? *Whoever loved, that loved not at first sight?*

“So I sat through the rest of the lecture imagining what she might be like. It’s a rotten habit to superimpose imagination over reality; hell, most fascists are romantics. In reality, dopey sentimentalism is a dangerous thing. Anyway, I wasted an hour daydreaming about the back of this woman’s neck and the way she chewed on the end of her pencil. Her eyes, when I could catch sight of them, appeared intelligent and a little tired, but what probably attracted me the most was the damned quality of indifference. Guys like me take a lot of crap about being drawn to it, but if we’re honest, it’s there. Hell, Fitzgerald made a whole career by writing about moody, capricious women.”

“They’re called ball-busters,” said Sal, and we all laughed. “In certain circles, I’m sure they are,” retorted Paul undeterred. “What I’m saying is that this woman stood out. So when the lecture broke up and everyone went over to a banquet table which was stocked with coffee and fresh danishes, I took the opportunity to wander past her vacated seat. Her notepad was lying on the chair, and I glanced at it and saw a single line written in the center of a page elaborated with penned squiggles. There, within that myriad of furious doodling, it said *Does sin exist in isolation? — does grace?*  

“I laughed to myself a little, and wondered if this were the culmination of some insightful chain of inquiry, or only bored foolishness? I glanced over at her. She stood apart from the clucking crowd who was gorging itself on the sweetrolls. Past the rim of her styrofoam coffee cup, she’d been eyeing me as I admired her artwork, so I smiled at her and very deliberately mouthed the word ‘no.’ She stared for an instant, then, completely without expression, turned away.

“At the moment I wasn’t quite sure what to make of our first encounter, but I thought I’d handled it pretty well. Perhaps if she’d have smiled back, or come over to talk, I would’ve lost interest, but because she’d done nothing but casually disregard an intriguing moment, my interest in her increased.”

“Cut to the chase!” interrupted Jake slapping his hand on the bar. “Did you or didn’t you?”

“You have to allow for dramatic build,” protested Paul. “Cut to the chase!” said Jake again. “This is getting boring.”

“Alright, alright,” said Paul sensing he was losing his audience. “The chase—well, I tried to make inroads after that, but each time I was rebuffed. I sat next to her at lunch once and asked her if she was still trying to guess how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? She looked up from her soup and replied quite
matter-of-factly, ‘Twenty-three.’

‘Then, the night before the conference was over, there was a general reception in the hotel ballroom. As you can imagine I went thinking this was it; it was now or never. I sat next to her and struck up a conversation—even managed to get her to laugh a little, and I scored that as a personal victory. Later, I asked her if she’d go for a walk with me around the outside of the hotel, and she agreed. We ended up by the pool. It was deserted at that time of night, and we sat on lounge chairs for a long time with that insipidly huge transistor radio looming behind us. The only illumination came from the pool’s underwater lights, so the deck and the terrace glowed in a sort of odd aqua-marine. The wind was warm, and the moment seemed right, so I blurted out something foolishly nineteen, like, ‘I think I’m in love with you.’

‘Really?’ she said wide-eyed.
‘You sound as if you don’t believe me?’
‘I don’t,’ she said. ‘Most men are cowards of the real thing.’

‘I sat there for a long time and searched for something to say. As the length of my silence grew, so did my inability to answer her. I thought about laughing it off, about telling her I wasn’t afraid, or admitting I was, but as I thought of all this I was constantly aware of my growing silence. It began to gape at me like the mouth of a corpse.

Finally, when nearly two minutes had passed, I got up and left. She said nothing. I walked across that empty terrace and didn’t see her again for the rest of the conference.’

Paul sat for a moment staring at the dissipating foam in his beer. Then Jake spoke up. “What the hell kinda story is that? Nothin’ happened.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” mumbled Paul without looking up.

“If I want a story like that,” laughed Sal, “I’ll go home to my old lady and my godamned truck payment. Hell, let’s buy another round and I’ll tell you about the time my Uncle Duane hit the daily double at the track.”

Sal signaled the waitress to bring another pitcher, and I looked over at Paul. Like I said, he was a good kid, really, but he didn’t know a whole helluva lot about story-telling.