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Issue #6
4 August 08

Customer Service to the Pain and Sleep Department
by Spencer Dew

I was just there for pregnancy tests, cotton balls, but I'm a fiend for cheese-flavored snack crackers, which naturally pair best with Grape Nehi, so my cart was loaded when I ran into Gage again.

She'd scabbed over some, was wispy but hard-edged, like a beautiful girl who'd been Xeroxed a few too many times.

We'd met at that exact same spot, the CVS checkout line, years previous, me with mousetraps and beer, her with granola-lidded yogurt cups, traces of clay under her fingernails, robins egg blue. She'd been an artist back then. Her medium was stop-motion time.

"It's been years," she said.

Her breath still smelled like bubblegum, but now she had markedly fewer teeth.

We ended up back on my fire escape, sucking candy, smoking recessed filter mentholated cigarettes.

She made a cornball joke about her sweet tooth, her lack of other ones, then she went through this elaborate ritual of burning symmetrical holes around the cellophane wrapper of her cigarette pack, saying, "This is what smokers of yore did to catch ducks."

She put her lips to the pack, then lowered it.

"Here duck, duck, duck," she called.

Gage had a way of being around you that helped you forget whatever you needed to forget. There was her nonchalance in undressing, a cornball humor in how she talked. In sleep she clutched her pillow, hard, purring. When she was in a chair she liked to turn at the waist and pop her back, in both directions, and she had this kind of contortionism, too, where with a series of quick chest motions she'd nurse out a burp. She liked the same things I liked: role play rape, gem donuts, methamphetamine.

And there was the way she said my name, especially in company of the phrase "falling for you again."

The other girl just got forgotten, which was her whole history with the world, anyway.

She called, left messages. Gage and I made fun of them.

My impending fatherhood went away, a tourniquet untied.

The seventeen-year locusts came out, rattling in the trees around the Metra tracks.

My brother's death was broadcast again when they repeated that episode of Frontline, all about the war, one Sunday afternoon, for the pledge drive.

Gage and I fucked a lot, with violence and tenderness.

We spooned honey straight from the jar after we ran out of fruit chews, chocolate hearts, Swedish fish, breath mints.

Gage stayed two weeks, stole everything worth selling when she left, which was totally worth it, a fair trade, not that anyone asked me.

The stripped down apartment was like a gift, crackling with fresh and unbounded possibilities.

I'd sprawl out in her aftermath, alone on the futon mattress, the window open where the air conditioner had been, the locusts making their metallic buzzing.

I remembered everything good, nothing bad, everything sweet, nothing rotten.

Issue #7

11 August 08

Fresh Paint

by Caroline Picard

I went to look at a garden apartment on the cusp of Humboldt Park. In the ad they called it "West Bucktown" because Bucktown was nice. The apartment was all right. There was a Tasty Freeze half a block away that made me happy but for the same reason the Tastee Freeze endured, I knew not to walk around the neighborhood late at night.

But that's beside the point.

The point is I stepped downstairs and inside this relatively nice apartment. What boasted three bedrooms was really two and a closet, and really one rather than two. It was more of a one bedroom with an office and a vinyl partition that separated it from the kitchen. But the kitchen/office/dining room was big and bore a lot of light. And the landlord only wanted \$600 a month. Heat included.

The landlord was there. He was painting the walls. He looked like Chicago. He was younger than he looked. His eyes were small and shone like water. The skin around it was marbled with stories he'd probably collected in underbelly dives and now they sat like a layer of ash and I thought that if I sneezed I might blow him away on accident. When he smiled he breathed heavy and his breath reminded me of dark living rooms and shag carpet and old beer. His breath smelled of places unfriendly to women. He smiled at me first thing. He took off his painter's cap and scratched his head. He said, "Phew."

And then he did a double take, still breathing heavy but the smell was by now innocuous.

"Hey," I said. I nodded.

"Hey!" he exclaimed as a silent partner disappeared into a tiny bathroom to my right. "Say, I know you." I was blank. I was sure he did not. "No, wait, that's right," he continued, "you look like the one I paid last week."

I laughed. Then I doubled over and then I smacked him on the shoulder and called him dirty without thinking. "That was dirty," I said, but then he was blank. And then he asked me if I was Christian. And he told me not to go to any of the bars in the neighborhood because I shouldn't pick up any trouble. And he told me about how he was a Knight of Columbus and that he had promised his niece \$50,000 for her to join a nunnery when she turned 14. He told me his nephew wouldn't join the Knights of Columbus unless he got \$100,000, then the old man grumbled about how they get greedy the older they get. I think I asked him about National Paczki Day.

Issue #8

18 August 08

The Soul Mate Formula

by Odgen Belfret

– I do love him, you know that. And I love it that he adores me so much, but when he talks about me it's – I don't know – like, over the top.

– What do you mean?

– He says – you know what a rationalist he is – he says all the desirable qualities of a companion are derived from four basic character traits. Like primary colors.

– Four?

– Yeah, like primary colors except there are four instead of three.

– OK.

– So here they are. They are all equally important, so the order doesn't matter: Beauty, kindness, intelligence, and joie de vivre. Which literally translates to 'joy of life,' but more accurately, it's having a big appetite for experience and knowledge. There just isn't a good phrase for that in English.

– Interesting. That does seem more thoughtful than the old, 'looks, brains and money.' But I've always thought that a person's sense of humor would be important to me.

– Yeah! That's where he'd say, if you have a high degree of intelligence and joie de vivre, it would be impossible for you not to have a good sense of humor.

– Or at least unlikely, I suppose. So, why is this over the top?

– Well, before he met me, he worked out a rating system for his dates. And he decided that if he scored a person high in two categories, it was reason enough to try for another date. Then, if the person scored high in three categories, it meant he should get serious, probably propose marriage. And he said I scored at the top in all four.

– That's so sweet! And you only needed three high scores for marriage?

– He said anyone with top ratings in all four categories deserved not only a marriage proposal, but lifelong worship.

– Wow.

– See what I mean?

– Yes. He was rational until you made him lose his mind. Now that he's lost his grip on rational, he's still clinging to methodical.

– Cute. What do you really think? I mean, what should I think?

– Tell me, how would you rate him?

– Totally top of the scale. Except, maybe, not at the very top for joie de vivre, but I think it's possible to have too much of that. It reminds me of a French nobleman – he actually had the title of count – who tried to cross every famous strait in the world on his windsurfer. He ended up trying to make it from Taiwan to mainland China and was never heard from again. No one will ever know if it was sharks or Maoists that got him.

– Yeah, disappearing isn't the best quality in a soul mate. So, you feel as strongly about him as he feels about you?

– Yes.

– So?

– It just seems a bit – systematic. ... Oh, don't say it: I'm being –

– OK, I won't say it, but you are. He thinks you're the most desirable companion in the world, and you think he is. That's what everyone wants, isn't it?

– (Sigh).

Issue #9

25 August 08

Frannie

by Lindsay Hunter

My friends and I made a bonfire out of my dad's foldout couch mattress. He'd called earlier in the night and when my friend Zoe picked up the phone he said, "Hey, Joey, is Ann there?" She assumed he was talking about me, since Ann sort of rhymes with Frannie, my name. When I put the phone to my ear I heard a faint whistling and when I said, "Dad?" he snorted, cleared his throat, said, "I'm staying at a friend's in the city. You think you can hold down the fort?" though it sounded more like "I'm schtrayin atta frens inna shitty..." You get the picture. He was drunk.

My mom had sent me and my friends Zoe and Kath to his house at the beach for the weekend—she had a big date and didn't want me "screwing it all up for her. Again." Zoe brought her foiled roll of pot and on the train had stuffed it down her pants, pretended like it was her big pot penis, kept pointing at it, saying "Hey, ladies..."

When we got to the house it smelled musty and the couch was wet in places, but the fridge was stocked with beer and my dad's girlfriend's favorite—Martini & Rossi—which just so happens to be Kath's favorite as well. We ordered a pizza, watched Cinemax, smoked a giant joint, Kath and Zoe dared each other to kiss and I went into the bathroom and stared at myself in the medicine cabinet mirror and made vague promises into my face, things like You'll fall in love one day, You'll be famous, You'll stop looking so much like your dad.

When I came back out Kath and Zoe sat up and pulled their shirts down, wiped at their mouths. I had this weird feeling—almost like being left out, except it was more like I couldn't stop the universe from including me, couldn't stop its constant demands that I feel something, that I react. A giddy nothingness. Also, I was pretty high.

I threw the pillows off the couch, pulled at the foldout handle and it opened in a great metallic moaning, like some metal jaws were opening wide. The mattress was really heavy so Kath and Zoe helped me drag it out to the beach. Zoe pushed Kath down onto it and Kath got a little peeved, but it just made her focus more because she was the one who ran into the house and got the kitchen knife, stabbed the mattress, yanked at the slits until they were gaping mattress filling. That filling caught fire like we'd peed kerosene onto it, and we held hands and danced around the fire as it grew. Zoe broke out and ran for the dark water, then Kath broke out and ran after her. I stayed and watched them through the flames, my body so hot I was sure I was also burning, though I wasn't, not even close. I could see the future if I wanted to, and it looked as black as the center of the fire, but it had edges to it that glimmered, and that's what I watched, and that's what I remember.