

I'm Not the Only One

OASIS

Robert drove into the desert with Carla in the passenger seat and a cooler of marinated steaks in the back of his Jeep. He turned onto a dirt road five miles outside Phoenix and followed it until he could see the blurry flare of headlights.

The desert barbecues had started back in college. One of their crowd had suggested a picnic for Labor Day, but no one wanted to visit any of the city parks, which they knew would be overrun with sticky children. Robert suggested driving to a spot in the desert, where he had camped as a Boy Scout. They built a fire and cooked gourmet fajitas and ogled the stars.

The picnics had become an annual rite, a way of calibrating relationships, the gradual pairing off of the herd. They were all married now, all but Robert and Carla, who were living together and headed that way.

A dozen friends were there tonight, with one new couple. Johann was a visiting professor at the university. He was reserved, polite to a fault, with pale eyebrows that made him look stunned. Linda was a photographer, out from New York for the summer. She was tall, high-waisted, with a mouth a little too big for her face. She laughed easily and smoked with such elán that Robert felt tempted to bum a cigarette from her.

"What do you shoot?" he asked her.

Linda sipped her wine. "The native flora mostly. I love the cactuses. What are the big ones called? The ones that look like prickly cocks?"

"Saguaro?"

"Right." She gazed at Robert over the rim of her glass. "And nudes. I also shoot nudes."

Robert cleared his throat. He watched Carla step back from the fire and begin to make her way over.

"How long have you and Johann been together?" Robert asked.

"Johann and I?" Linda smiled. "I'd say we're more like old friends."

Carla took her place beside Robert and shivered, a little theatrically. She watched Linda take another sip of wine. The brief silence made Robert uneasy.

“To old friends, then,” he said, and put his arm around Carla.

Later, in bed, Robert said, “They were funny, weren’t they? That new couple. Johann was his name, and she was Laura, right?”

“Linda.”

“Linda.”

“You liked her?”

“Sure.”

“You didn’t think she was kind of—over-the-top?”

Robert paused. “Outspoken, I’d say.”

“And that laugh?”

“What about her laugh?”

Carla reached for his underarm and tugged at the hair. “We should think about getting engaged,” she said.

“I thought that’s what was happening,” Robert said quickly. “I thought that’s what we were doing.”

ROBERT’S LIFE

Robert was understated, a bit detached, moderate. He even looked moderate, of average height and weight, with a face that was pleasantly something, blandly handsome. He had followed his father into the insurance profession. His work provided a good salary and a tedious sense of accomplishment.

He had faced exactly one major choice in his life: whether to head back east for school. In the end, he settled on ASU. He met Carla there—Carla with her barrettes and her silly hats, with her sweet, embarrassed laughter. They fell into a pattern, not dating exactly, but studying together and sharing meals. She smiled at him when he spoke.

Eventually, lonely and drunk, giddy at the completion of his exams, Robert closed the door to his room and instructed Carla to take her clothes off. She did this for him and stood at the foot of his bed, laughing softly. At the time, this had seemed rather a reckless encounter. It occurred to Robert only later that the encounter had been orchestrated, that his friends were watching from the wings, nodding at the awkward depravity of the moment.

Robert made a half-hearted effort to break up with her upon graduation. But Carla waited him out, allowed his loneliness to draw him back. They’d moved in a year ago. There was less touching now, more talk about furniture and paints. Robert accepted this. He was supposed to move ahead. He was moving ahead.

Yet he felt sharp misgivings at undependable junctures. Carla would pick out a particular kind of cheese at the supermarket, a pungent Roquefort, and he could feel himself

sicken a little at the prospect of having to kiss her after she had put such a thing in her mouth.

SECOND DATE

“What about bowling?” Robert asked Carla, a week after the barbecue. “We haven’t done that in a while.”

Carla frowned a little. She was making a ratatouille.

“Just an idea,” he said.

But Carla heard the dip in his voice, and they both knew she would be held accountable if the plan didn’t come off. “Sure,” she said. “Call around.”

“Do you mind if I invite Frank?” Frank was one of Robert’s colleagues, a loud fellow who often drank too much.

“Don’t you see enough of him at the office?” Carla said.

“What about that new couple?”

“Invite whoever you want, honey.”

They gathered the following Sunday, at a downtown alley called Fiesta Lanes. Linda wore a tank top and a long, loose skirt. Her mouth was even larger than he remembered. It gave her an equine aspect.

They got drunk and bowled sloppily. They ordered Mexican from the alley café, nachos ghastly with fluorescent cheese, but they were far enough gone not to notice. Linda went to the bar and returned with a tray of tequila shots.

“They serve hard liquor in here?” Robert said.

“They do now.”

Linda drank hers without flinching and the men followed her lead.

“Easy there,” Carla said.

“Easy where?” he said.

Everyone was laughing by now. No one could throw the ball straight. An announcement came on the PA that the lanes were closing. All bowlers were asked to return their shoes. Linda got up and walked purposefully out of the alley in her three-tone bowling shoes.

“What about her real shoes?” Carla said.

“Flip-flops,” Johann said. He sounded tired and unsurprised.

“Someone should maybe go after her,” Robert said.

“Good luck,” Johann said.

Outside, he found himself running.

Linda was leaning against Johann’s hatchback.

Robert came to an awkward, skidding stop. He was panting.

“Hey there,” he said. “You forgot to turn in your shoes.”

Linda looked at him with her heavy eyelids. "I'm not the only one." This was the first time he'd seen her in the daylight and he was surprised to find that her eyes were light green, the color of dried moss.

"Should we go back and get our real shoes?"

"Why? Don't you like the way these look?" Linda lifted one of her legs slowly, her long skirt falling away. Robert could see a pale, muscular thigh. She leaned back against the car door and let out a slow sigh.

"You don't have my phone number, do you?" Linda said.

A chorus of familiar voices sounded behind them.

Linda lowered her leg.

"Why don't you find it," she said.

Then Carla was between them, a small, hot thing clinging to his side. She looped an arm around his waist. He looked down and noticed a pimple on her chin.

It's going to happen, he thought.

Shit, he thought.

Shit yes.

NUDE

Her apartment was a sublet near the university. She was on the third floor, up a steep set of stairs around back. Robert felt a vague sense of having been there before, for a party. Linda had lit some incense, but nothing could mask the old beer odor, which haunted the carpeting. She hadn't done much decorating. The only visible sign of her inhabitation was a print above the bed, a kind of cubist thing.

"Is that Picasso?" Robert said.

"Duchamp." Linda lit up a cigarette. "*The Third Nude, Descending*."

Robert looked at the painting. All he could make out was a central figure, a man rendered in choppy blocks, who seemed to be stumbling. "Oh, I see. Is it stairs? He's coming down the stairs? I always meant to take an art history class in college."

Linda sighed, bored already.

Robert stood there, unsure what to do. He looked at the painting again. It made him a little nauseous.

Linda went into the kitchenette and came back and stood behind Robert. He could feel her breasts against his back. She slipped a mug of wine into his hand. "He was a handsome bastard," she said. "Handsome in that French way, all combed and weepy. He thought about fucking his sister all the time. You don't have a sister do you, Robert?"

"No."

"Then you'll have to fuck me."

SNAPSHOTS

Linda asked Robert to pose for some photos. He was flattered but reluctant.

“You’ve got a very expressive body,” she said. “Now be a good boy and take off your pants. I’ll make it worth your while. Yes, those too.”

He stumbled around her studio, worried one of the boys downstairs might be watching.

“Don’t be so stiff,” she told him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve never done any modeling.”

“I’m not asking you to model,” Linda said. She squinted at some boxy instrument. “This isn’t going to work. We need to get some shots outside.”

“No way.”

Linda flung open the door. “Come on, Roberto. Don’t be such a chickenshit. We’ll find an out-of-the-way place. The light in here sucks.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t you want to make me happy? Isn’t that the point: to make each other happy?”

“I’m really just not comfortable walking around like this outside.”

“We’ll try it with clothes on first.”

It was a Friday morning in late June. The sun was starting to beat down. Linda directed him to stop on a suburban side street, and coaxed him out onto the median. A car sped past. The driver stared at Robert with amused pity.

“You could at least take off your shirt,” Linda said, setting up her tripod.

He removed the garment and stood next to a yield sign.

“Give me some energy,” Linda said. “But let it come naturally.” He hopped around a little and posed like a bodybuilder and pointed both directions at once, like the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Linda clicked away. “Nice,” she said. “But still too ... partial. I’m going to need you to take off those pants, nature boy. Would you do that for me?”

“I’ve got to get back to work,” Robert said. “I’ve got a meeting at eleven.” He was pouring sweat. “Seriously.”

Linda looked up from her viewfinder. “You know what a blowhard is, Robert? Don’t be a blowhard.”

ADVICE

Although he had been with Linda only a few times, and never slept beside her, Robert began consulting his single friends about the situation. He was *troubled*, he told them. That was the word he used. He took them aside and explained that he had taken another lover. He wanted a sense of expiation and therefore chose not to acknowledge the vanity of his confession.

“Is it a serious thing?” they asked. “Do you love this other woman or what?”

Robert didn’t know what to say.

He associated the word *love* with a kind of contentment, whereas his feelings for Linda were of turbulent attachment, of yearning, undependable rapture.

When Carla curled into him at night, he clutched her with a protectiveness that felt more real than before. He filled her ears with details, made the expected sympathetic noises. He felt pity, and was therefore affectionate. By saying nothing to her, he believed he was sparing her grief.

Still, the little lies began to stack up between them, as with passengers in the same car, so that eventually he could see only bits of her face at a time, a disappointed chin, a confused eyebrow. She became a composite of parts that he could no longer add up into a real person.

FONDUE

Robert lay on his back. Linda had made him do this, then laid something cool over his eyes, a weighted bag that sealed him into darkness. He heard her bare feet padding off, then back, the snap of her bra hook. He felt her climb onto the bed, the weight of her knees on either side of his body. He smelled the oil of her body.

She leaned back on her haunches, so that her behind grazed his stomach. He imagined the bunching of her hips. He heard a soft, wet click, like a tongue coming unstuck from its palate, then a sharp breath and more clicking. Something wet touched his lips and her fingertips opened his mouth and his tongue touched the thing, two sides sweet and sticky, the third rough against his tongue like felt. His teeth came together and he tasted peach. She fed him like this for several minutes. Then her legs moved up to his armpits and Robert felt her hairs tickling his chin. He tasted her, tasted the residue of the fruit, the warmth of her half-dissolving on his tongue.

SECOND NUDE

Carla had wine at dinner. She talked about all the silly things at work. She did imitations. Robert laughed. She was funnier than he remembered. He did the dishes and she had another glass of wine. After dinner, she wanted to dance with him in the bedroom. It was something they’d done in college. Robert was in no position to deny her. She kissed him on the neck and looked up at him and smiled.

“I’m happy,” she said. “Aren’t you happy?”

Robert said he was and she hugged him closer.

Later, Robert got into bed and pretended to read some book about Lyndon Johnson. His father had given it to him for Christmas.

The bathroom door opened and Carla came out in a new camisole.

“Nice,” he said. “Sexy.”

Carla looked at him. She was wearing lipstick. She came and stood at the foot of the bed and canted her hips and reached up and flicked one strap from her shoulder. She slid her hand beneath the other strap and caressed her own shoulder and the camisole fell to the swell of her breasts.

Robert knew it was important that he look intent and turned on and a little frightened. Carla wiggled out of the camisole and her body was just delightful, round and tan and firm. There was no reason not to feel desire for her. He wanted to explain this to her, to sit her down and offer some kind of reassurance. She wouldn't stop looking at him. He didn't know what to do, what she wanted him to do. And he knew that she didn't know either. That was the worst part.

Carla stood on the carpeting, trying to look assured.

“Do you like my outfit?” she said at last.

Robert nodded.

“You're not acting like you like it very much.”

“I do. You look gorgeous.”

Carla smiled and reached down and tried to decide what to do with her hand. The light from the bathroom had cut her body into soft brown strips. It was a terrible moment.

Robert rose from the bed and took her hand and she was pleasant, a little drunk and relieved and pliant. She wasn't that kind of performer, they both knew. Her orgasms were brief and earnest.

Afterward, she asked him: “Why didn't you come?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don't pretend.”

“I'm not pretending.”

Robert knew she was trying to decide whose failure this was. Her natural tendency was to assume it was her own—it made problems easier to solve. “Are we losing chemistry?” she said. “Is that what's happening?”

“Chemistry comes and goes.”

Carla rose up on one elbow and looked at him and for a moment she knew—*she knew*—and her cheeks froze up. Her fingertips settled at the base of his throat. His heart flopped. He waited for her to say the next thing.

“So you've lost chemistry for me?”

Robert looked back at her. He was conscious of the need to meet her gaze. She was trying not to look angry, but all her hopes were there, gathered in her eyes. She couldn't do anything about them and they made her tender and her tenderness made Robert furious.

“Why are we arguing?” he said.

“I’m expressing a concern.”

“Because I didn’t come? Do I always have to come? Where would we be if I held you to that standard?”

Robert had intended this comment to sting, but Carla laughed. “You’re right,” she said. She hugged him tighter and her belly came against his hip. “I just wanted to make sure you were happy. I could still make you happy. With my mouth.”

Carla had a gift for clemency. Her strength made her patient. It was awful. He thought of her fingernails on his chest, slicing open the flesh, rooting around for his heart. He thought of her naked body at the foot of the bed, hovering.

MISTAKES, SMALL

He made mistakes, small ones.

He returned home once, smelling of Linda’s soap.

“What’s this,” Carla asked, nuzzling him.

“What’s what?”

“This coconut smell?”

“Some new crap they put in the dispensers at work,” Robert said.

His heart sang the words. They had come to him unbidden, and his ingenuity made him feel absolved of his deception.

BEDSIDE MANNER

When they were through, Linda swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood, with an air of mild irritation. She performed brisk, minor tasks: emptied the ashtrays, folded her laundry, threw wine bottles into the recycling bin.

Robert tried to lure her back into bed. She laughed at him and shook her head. He felt heartsick, knowing their intimacy was at an end, that she was denying him more. There was nothing he could do about this.

He was certain she was annoyed because he was seeing her on the side. A woman like Linda expected more. This was why she didn’t return his calls, why he had to keep trying her back until she picked up. She didn’t want things halfway. This conclusion provided him an odd sense of assurance, which he used to lift himself from her bed and rejoin the rest of his life.

PINKIE

Robert was driving toward Paradise Valley, the plush suburb where his parents had moved. Carla was next to him. Linda was up north, shooting the Grand Canyon. It was a Friday

night in August. A late afternoon rain had swept in from the west and spelled the heat. Scarves of steam rose up from the road.

His mother would make her tortilla casserole, because that was Carla's favorite, and they would have a bottle of wine (his father had taken an interest in wine) and they would sit in the somber light of the dining room and wait for Robert to announce the engagement. It had been this way for some months.

On the day Robert graduated from college, his father had called him out to the backyard and stared into the bright blue water of his new swimming pool. "Passion fades," he announced suddenly, "and must be replaced by the small gratitudes of compatibility."

"Is this our man-to-man?" Robert said.

His father shook his head. "Do you understand what I'm telling you? You can learn from your mother and me."

This was the glorious myth of their marriage: how they had been overwhelmed as a young couple, nearly come apart, but persevered, made the tough compromises, raised a successful son, learned to live with each other. But his father had looked miserable, perched on the edge of the chaise lounge. And all the compromises he spoke of seemed like cheap heroics now, the actions of a man unable to imagine better options.

Robert had a sudden, crazy fantasy: he would take Linda to meet his father. His father would listen to her discuss her photography and examine her clothing and he would see, at once, that his son had traded up from Carla, who was fine, a sweet girl, but not someone who excited the soul.

"Slow down," Carla said.

He was taking the turns too fast. But he didn't slow down and they skidded a little on the next one, onto the damp, red dirt of the shoulder. Carla shrieked. Her brother had been badly injured in a car accident.

"Calm down," Robert said. "We're fine."

She threw open her door and hurled herself out of the car.

Robert joined her at the guardrail. He touched her arm cautiously. She wouldn't turn to face him. Down below, the city was lit up against the dusk.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No you're not."

He tried to take her hand, but she grabbed hold of his pinkie and jerked it back, hard.

"Jesus," he said. "You fucking, Jesus, shit, that fucking hurts."

"Good," Carla said. Her body was trembling.

A light rain started in.

Robert tried to move his finger. It was bent all wrong.

"Just how dumb do you think I am?" Carla said.

“You broke my fucking finger.”

Carla turned and looked at him. “If you don’t want to be in this,” she said quietly, “then don’t be in this.”

“Who said I don’t want to be in this?”

BREAKUP

Carla left the next morning, to visit her mother in Prescott. She made him agree that he would pack his things and be gone when she returned, the following Sunday.

All week, Robert called Linda.

She called him back on Thursday.

“Where have you been? Did you get my messages?”

Linda said nothing. For a second, Robert thought she might have hung up.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I missed you.”

He was starting to hate the sound of his own voice.

“How sweet,” Linda said. “How sweet to be shouted at.”

“I’m sorry,” Robert said. “I’d like to see you. We could have dinner. How about dinner tonight?”

“I’ve got to unpack.”

“All right,” Robert said. “Maybe tomorrow. We could eat here, at my place.”

There was another pause. Robert wanted to explain what had happened with Carla, that she was gone, that he had chosen for her to be gone.

“It’s OK,” he said.

Linda yawned into the phone. “You come here,” she said. “That would be better.” Robert saw her rising from the edge of the bed, her legs scissoring away.

They had dinner. Linda talked about her trip and about the quality of light in the Canyon, the guide who took her down on a burro, Pedro, and his beautiful brown skin and the meal he had prepared her—homemade tortillas and grilled trout—and the stars that shone above them. She talked about a certain gallery owner in New York, a man named Otto, to whom she had sent some of her work. She expected to hear from him about the possibility of a show in November. “I can’t wait.”

Robert was mad with envy and reverence. He couldn’t separate the two emotions. He watched Linda pick at her tempura and felt...what was the word? Abject, maybe. He paid the check and they returned to her apartment and drank a bottle of wine. The evening started to cool off. Their conversation was sullen and halting. Robert kept trying to figure out how to direct them back to the place where they had first come together, everything a little forbidden, a little frantic. That was his idea of love with Linda: a panting production.

When they finally got to it, Linda was strangely passive. Robert did what he could to animate his own desires. He stared at her face and her body, at his own body joining hers; he tried to convince himself. Afterwards, he wanted to hold her a little, but she twisted away from him and put on a shirt and reached for her cigarettes. She sat on the edge of the bed, with the shirt tucked around her wide, lovely bottom.

Robert didn't know what to do. "I'm moving out," he said.

Linda took a drag, and blew out a long blue plume of smoke.

"Carla and me, it's not working."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Linda said. "Should I be sorry to hear that?"

"I don't understand why you're being so cold," Robert said.

Linda stubbed out her cigarette. "Let me get this straight: you're upset because I'm not being more sympathetic about your having split up with your live-in girlfriend. Do I have that right?"

"You're being mean," Robert said softly.

"Because I'm not there for you, at your beck and call? That's mean? The fact that I have a life outside of these little trysts? That I have other interests? What is it, exactly, that you want me to say here?" Linda laughed a little. Shook her head. "I knew this was a mistake."

"What was a mistake?"

"This. Dinner. Dessert."

"I'm sorry," Robert said. "Look, I'm just, I just want us to get along. Like before." He paused. "I thought we were building something here."

Linda reached for her glass of wine, swirled it a bit, then set it down and took another cigarette. "Now listen," she said. "Let's just try to look at things as they are. We had a nice time this summer—"

"It was more than nice," Robert said.

Linda looked at him, almost tenderly. "Do you know why you're here, Robert? Because you want to feel untrustworthy. You're trying so hard to be that way. It's almost sweet."

"Don't condescend to me."

"Call it what you want, it's still the truth."

Robert looked at Linda in profile. She was so beautiful right then he wanted to break her nose. He set his hand on the small of her back. "This is real for me. What we have is real."

Linda laughed again. "You don't even know who I am. Just some exotic piece of ass who served as your ticket out of a dead-end relationship. You got what you wanted, Roberto. You're out. Don't try to get me any more mixed up in your shit. I've got my own shit to deal with."

"Did you fuck Pedro?" Robert said.

"Oh, you poor thing."

“Did you?”

“Don’t make this any more embarrassing. I’m asking nicely, now.” Linda got up from the bed and went to the kitchen to dump her wine.

Robert looked at the room around him, the cracked walls, the window unit rattling out cold air, the print of the man chopped to bits and descending the stairs. Outside, he heard two guys talking, in that daring, ruthless way young men use to disguise their fear. He wanted to tell Linda she was a bitch, to beg for her affection, to shake the arrogance out of her, to slip tenderly back inside.

He pulled on his pants and stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Linda was sitting at the table, looking over contact sheets.

“So you’re blowing me off?”

“If that’s what you need to call it.” Linda said this without looking up. Robert wanted to see her face; her hair was in the way.

“What did I do, exactly, to deserve such shitty treatment?”

Linda didn’t answer him. She seemed to hope he would simply leave.

“You bitch,” Robert said quietly. “You fucking New York slut. You act like a slut, you know that?” He went on like that, for another minute or two.

He wished he were capable of violence. The fact that he wasn’t seemed to confirm something about him Linda already knew

SOUVENIR

The envelope arrived six months later. There was no return address.

The photos inside were eight by elevens: twin saguaros wearing the silvery rind of overexposure, acres of pink scrub, a tremendous dark gash in the earth. The final shot was Robert, naked to the waist, sweating like a pig, standing on the median beside a yield sign, his arms flung in opposite directions.

His chest fluttered then jolted. He thought of the final moments inside her apartment, gathering his clothes in that fierce silence, and why he hated Linda so much, because he had allowed himself to bear her detachment, because she always kept herself out of reach, never quite allowed him to feel certain about things.

He remembered the last thing he saw, that horrible painting, and how it made him think of Carla standing at the foot of their bed, cut into strips by the light. He heard a scraping sound and envisioned Linda, rising from her chair, ready to admit to her cruelty, to rescue them, though the sound had come from him, a single sharp cry. He fled into the night without even putting on his shirt, fled in disgrace, staggering down the stairs while the boys below took him in at a glance and shook their heads a little, as if his kind of trouble was nothing they cared to watch.