

Practice

a story
by Michael Descy

She calls me Walter. I call her Maryann. It's a nice arrangement. Civil. Fair. A marriage held together by a joint checking account.

I'm only thirty-five. When asked my age, I always used to say I'm old enough to know better and young enough not to care. But now I do care, and it tears me. Maryann calls it an early midlife crisis. A lie. I'm walking on the ceiling of my old life. Who would have thought that trying on an old pullover could do that?

Maryann was my model, a bright blonde contradiction in terms. She mesmerized me; still does I guess. Both of us were right out of school. She was working at a law firm; I was working hard at being unemployed. The first night I painted her in oil on canvas. The second night I painted her in honey on my kitchen floor.

After my brush worked its magic, she asked me, "Do you think you can ever love someone perfectly?"

"Don't you?" I gave her a sticky kiss.

"Then what about everyone who came before?"

"Practice."

We practiced almost every night for years. Even after we got married. We got quite good. She was so happy at our wedding that she cried. I remember that. I wrote down my vows on parchment paper, and handed them to her ceremoniously. Her

teardrops dropped onto the page, sealed the document. The ink ran, and my meager words blurred into poetry. It was beautiful.

These days, she's a partner at the firm. I've got a studio in back of our house, and my paintings actually sell. To corporations, even—faceless people with real money. Till now, I've distanced myself most from people with money.

Now *I* have money. My wife's money. My wife. Being a partner entails substantial reward. We've lived our dreams. We burned the last one like a Yule log last Christmas in Aspen. It burned beautifully. But somewhere along the line, in the midst of all this acquisition, I think we lost something. It wasn't like losing your socks or your virginity, though. It was like losing your middle name. Part of us was gone, but we weren't sure which, or even if it was important.

Just so you know, money really does solve everything. I'm not complaining about being able to afford that cappuccino machine, trips to Europe, superior health care or anything like that. I may be a painter, but I'm not stupid. It's responsibility that gums up the works, overheats the engines, and grinds everything down. Not my responsibility, though. My wife's. She's always been ambitious. That's why I married her. She was ambitious enough to choose me, and I knew well I was a fixer-upper if ever there was one.

But as my life kept getting easier and my paintings, ghost-like, drifted out of my studio and into other people's homes, life for her got harder at the practice. She had cases, late nights, research, court dates. I didn't mind all that; we both have to work, after all. My secret resentment was cocktail parties. To be paraded around on display for the

firm, for their clients. To their eyes, she was the power attorney, I the humble painter. I was there to legitimize my wife, to distract attention from her selling out like the rest of them. I was an oddity. For all they knew, I painted houses. Not that I'm bitter. I'm just mad. I am no glob of clay. I will not be molded into whatever suits the situation. Three weeks ago, Maryann decided to run for DA. Last I checked, district attorneys don't have much time to spend looking at paintings, let alone sitting for them.

It's not that I don't love her anymore. It's that I still do, in the same way, for the same reasons as ever. That's what drives me completely insane. We never fight, the sex was great up until we stopped having it a few months ago—"I have too much else to do," she'd yawn—but nothing's the same. She spends too much time at the practice. I spend too much time practicing something else. Yet we amble on.

Where's the challenge? Lori taught me that love was risk. Who knew that not risking could be so risky?

Ten years after reading my vows to Maryann, I decided to look for them again. Big anniversary coming up and all; I was trying to feel romantic. Rummaging through my closet, I found my old college jersey. I thought it had been sacrificed to the rag bag years ago. I'm not that young anymore; things don't fit like they used to. I'm like a girl with thin jeans and fat jeans. So I struggled into it. The seams moaned but didn't pop. As I thrust my right arm through the sleeve, I felt something clinging to my fingers: a single strand of dark brown hair.

Lori's hair.

Thick and long, it once colonized every upholstered car seat within range, any shag rug in its path; I had to stop wearing sweaters. When I kissed her, it fell forward and covered us like a camera hood. In bed, it beat my skin like rain. Amazing, the tingle of dead cells on live flesh. Lori, my first, my only other.

We dated in high school, throughout college—long ago. We weren't sweethearts, we were Adam and Eve in a new-age myth: we invented love and created each other in its image. It wasn't easy, though. She didn't see the world the same way I did; I just couldn't see it without her in it. Naturally we fought, even in the good times—especially in the good times. I couldn't stop pointing out all the beauty I saw in this world. I wanted to teach her everything I knew, to give her the gift of my sight. After a while, she called it something else.

Through every mistake, I learned to love her. Loving her *was* the mistakes. Love was waiting thirty minutes in silence for her to tell me what was wrong. It was drying our eyes on each others' shoulders, tasting the tears on each others' lips, forgetting what we were fighting about, making up, making out, making love. Double dates and shared milkshakes, walking hand in hand, steaming up car windows, watching the sun rise—none of that is love like a world lost and found again and again and again. Loving her perfectly was accepting every imperfection. Loving her was accepting her.

Lori's belly was soft and round. No one cares to caress a mound of warm snow these days. She would have it no other way. Even in her cradle, the nurses came over and rubbed her belly—like a Buddha, for luck. Our nights together, my hand circled her navel, painting her skin red, and the redness ran away from her belly, up her chest, into her cheeks, into her nose. I kissed her cheek; her concealer came off. I touched her skin,

and her face lit up. I rubbed her belly and kissed her neck. She was red all over, newborn again and I created her.

“What did you live on” she asked me, “before we were together?”

“Unrequited love,” I answered. “It used to be enough.”

That was ten years ago. That was ten minutes ago. Love doesn’t wear a watch. Love doesn’t watch. Who can see through steamed windows? Who can’t tell what’s going on inside?

It all rushed back—the energy, the drama, bold lines and bright colors. Just from that time-capsule strand of hair, Lori’s last, unexpected tendril into my life. I’d never forgotten, really; memories that important don’t fade. They just get stronger, but the feelings leak into other things.

After dinner that night, I grabbed Maryann, pulled her toward me, and kissed her hard. I looked at her fiercely, the fire in my eyes practically glazing her cheek—I want you. I released her.

“Whoa, bucko!” She staggered back a step. “What’s all that about?”

Lori would have kissed back. She would never have called me “bucko.”

“Kiss me back,” I said.

“Look, Walter. I’m not in the mood right now. I’ve got spinach in my teeth.”

“I don’t care.”

“Later, Walter. I can’t just turn it on. You know that.”

She left the room. I found myself beneath her portrait, the one I painted that first night. It hung over the fireplace. I noticed that the lips were a shade too thick, the hair a

shade too dark, the skin a shade too red. Even there, at the inception of my perfect love, I find Lori underneath her. Or she finds me.

Like the arches and swirls on their pads, the memory of that woman's skin is etched into my fingertips. Neither soap nor sandpaper can rub it away entirely. Standing there, I realized every time I touched my Maryann's skin, Lori would erupt to the surface, like a sunburn, like a rash. Lori. My first. An oak sprouting in a flowerpot. What she is should never be. Lori. Tell me another word for obsession. Please.

I don't remember being born, but my body does. It was violent, blood splattered, mucous slick—the root of all of me, inside and out. That feeling buzzes inside me, a swarm of bees, Africanized and useless. Galileo studied the motion of falling bodies by rolling balls down ramps. He had to slow the motion down to make any sense of it. You slow down that buzzing in me and you get music. You slow that music down just a touch and you get love. You slow it down too much, though, and you get mud.

I love Maryann. I really do. We never run out of stuff to talk about, we never fight. She soothes my heart. She has talented hands, small wrists, and hair that always smells of something delectable. She says she's bony. I call it slender. No mound of snow for a belly, just a plain of white. Her back is hollowed out like a tiny, porcelain canoe. My hands carved it out, searching for someone else's spine. We never discussed such things. We never had to. In short, she isn't Lori. Lori lit up like a halogen bulb. She could start fires, that girl—sometimes made me want to start them, too. Have I been building a temple out of cast-off things? The first love, practice? The next, perfection? Or recycling? I tell myself, I love Maryann differently than Lori. But this strand of hair reminded me: it's not the same; she can't keep up with me.

I went a little mad. I went online and looked her up. Didn't take long, really. I wrote her number down on my hand like a high school kid. Then I came to my senses. I flushed the hair down the toilet. I scrubbed my hands clean, washed them in solvent. I went into my studio and threw paint at canvases for the rest of the day. A week later, I was painting over our wedding pictures.

Our bed's near the heater. It's made of metal; on chilly nights the frame gets hot. The mattress is a pat of butter sitting in a frying pan, and I'm on top. I don't sleep much. Just kinda cook. Too hot beneath the covers, too cold on top of them. Half of me sticks out from under the comforter. I put my hand out and touch the bed frame; it's hot and hard like Lori's thigh. I just touch it and close my eyes. But eventually, my hand got used to it; it's no hotter than my hand, than my forehead, than my insides; the heat passes entirely into me. The bed frame hasn't changed. I have.

A train passes by the window. The oak trees shake, their shadows clutch at me. I'm lying here with feverish visions, turning over and over and over, winding the blankets around me. My bed is a bottle tossing on an ocean. The train rumbles through my front door, through the living room, the kitchen. The china cabinet rattles like when my fat uncle stomps past it. My wife hears nothing. Never does. If only she could hear my heart beating right now; if she put her ear to my chest she'd hear helicopter blades.

This has happened before. The first time, I rolled out of bed and ran to my studio. I grabbed the phone, dialed Lori's number, and wrung the receiver like a washcloth as it rang. Nine times. I almost hung up.

A voice breathed into the receiver: “Hello?”

“Lori,” I said.

“Look, you pervert,” she croaked, “stop calling here! It’s two in the fucking morning!”

“Lori, no, it’s me, Walt.” I grinned. My heart pounded against my chest like Keith Moon on the drums. “I know it’s late, but—”

“Walt! Oh my God! It’s been so long.”

“I know this sounds weird and all, Lori, but I’d like to see you sometime. We can catch up, you know?”

Perhaps she didn’t. She didn’t answer.

“Lori?”

“I don’t know, Walt. We had a clean break. That’s what we wanted. It’s been so long. And aren’t you married?”

She could probably hear me breathing. “No, Lori,” I answered after a long pause. “No.”

She finally agreed. We live in separate cities, three hours apart. We decided to meet for lunch somewhere in between. Of course, “somewhere in between” was a restaurant fifteen minutes from her apartment.

The next day, I told Maryann I was going to an exhibit. She believed me. She had no reason not to. When I got to the restaurant we agreed upon, Lori was sitting at a little table. She looked gorgeous, bright round eyes, face a little flushed. She cut her hair, but it was still long. That was all that mattered.

The first thing she said to me was: “You still paint me, don’t you?”

“I’m into more abstract art these days, Lori,” I said.

“Sure you are, Walt.” She smiled. “Don’t think I don’t know why you called me in the middle of the night.”

I dared her to continue.

“Next you’re going to ask me if I’m involved with anybody, and I’m going to lie to you. I’ll say yes or no, and you’ll just sit there and say, ‘oh, that’s nice,’ or ‘oh, that’s okay,’ and not really mean it.”

“What are you—a writer?”

“Bingo. I’ve seen this scenario before: I’ve written it. I saw it coming a mile away.”

“You never wrote before.” I smiled, less with embarrassment than with wonder.

“You drove me to it. You kept trying to make me see the world like you do, think like you do, like a painter, an artist, a critic. You knew everything and all you told me was that I knew nothing. I couldn’t do it anymore. After our final meltdown, I started a journal. It was better than pulling out my hair. After a while, I got good. Some magazines picked me up to write features. I do short stories now, too. I’ve been pretty successful at it, really. Maybe all that time you spent lecturing me on how to think and be artistic—how to achieve what *you* really wanted—wasn’t wasted after all.”

“But if you knew why I asked you, Lori, why’d you come?”

“I’ve never known you to be a wreck, even a well-controlled one.” She smiled. “It’s kind of endearing.”

We ate lunch. It wasn't anything sexy like lightly salted oysters, just pasta and salad. Something I'd have at home. We didn't talk about much after that—just unimportant stuff, a little about the old days—but it was wonderful. Afterward, in the parking garage, I pulled her into my car. She looked at me, eyes wet, tongue wet. I took off her shirt; she took off mine. This body is my castle, my eyes told her. This castle is my body, hers said. I kissed her like I've wanted to for years. The next day, our lips were black and blue. I tumbled out of her bed, thought about putting on my underwear. Instead I pounced on her again, and we tussled like cats. My hands wandered to her belly and found a home. She brushed her hair from her face.

“I love you,” I said.

She was silent.

“I said, I love you.”

“That used to be enough,” she said.

“What does that mean, Lori?”

“You tried too hard to mold me into something I wasn't. Now I am that thing, near as I can be, and you can't have me. We're wrong for each other.”

“How can you say that after we...after we...”

“You can't paint this picture. Go home to your wife, Walt.”

“Why'd you do this?” I asked her, picking my clothes up off the floor.

“The experience, Walt.” I swear she yawned as she pulled the covers over her.

“How can I write about life if I don't experience it first?”

As an artist, I've always needed to world to experience me. In my experience, art bleeds into life, anticipates it even. I didn't argue the point with Lori. We never saw eye to eye before; we weren't going to start now. Love isn't about agreeing; hell, it's barely about getting along sometimes. I just floated out of there, embarrassed that my violent love became something as flimsy as a one-night stand, embarrassed that I had to crawl back to my wife. It took me a long time to get home. I'm sure I missed the freeway exit on purpose.

Maryann was waiting in the kitchen. She looked as if she'd been there for days. I took a look around—not much was broken; a good sign, I guessed.

“You don't have to tell me her name,” she snarled. “Don't tell me you're sorry.”

She had so many words and her mouth was so small they starting pouring out wherever they could. A tear rocked back and forth on her lower eyelid, grew heavy, and slid down her cheek.

“What's that you're holding?” I asked.

“A letter.” Her hand trembled. “To you. I had to put my thoughts in order, Walter. I guess I'm not used to this. This isn't like you.”

“Please, Maryann, let me explain.”

“Don't worry, Walter. This is fine with me.” She forced in a breath. “You do whatever you want. This is an open marriage now. Always was, really, wasn't it, Walter?”

“No, Maryann. Never before. I couldn't—”

“You never forgot *her*.”

I stood there dumbfounded.

“She called me, Walter—crying.”

“Look: you don’t understand.”

“Don’t say that!”

“But you don’t—”

“Don’t patronize me, Walter! Just tell me what happened to the man who showed me how to see beauty, who convinced me to abandon suspicion, who taught me how to love a man with my whole heart? I trusted you. I trusted you to be strong like I am, to be faithful like I am, to be just, like I strive to be. I need that. Don’t you think I deserve that?”

“It was a moment of weakness. I won’t ever—”

“Isn’t it strange how much a second of weakness can dissolve a lifetime of strength?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry means you can’t do anything about it.”

“Sorry means I’m sorry. I love you and I made a mistake. For crissakes, we’ll work this out, we’ll go to therapy or something.”

She thrust the letter into my hand and walked out. I unfolded it, found it dotted with tears. Not poetry this time; I imagined Morse code: SOS SOS STOP. On top of paragraph after paragraph written in shaky script were a few words, scrawled with a black “not for letter writing” Sharpie: “I thought *she* was ‘practice.’”

That Maryann stayed with me doesn’t make much sense. She tells me that the strong were born to suffer. Maybe she’s right. Still, I wonder what’ll happen after the

election. She loves me kind of like how I love her these days: carefully. It's a few weeks later now, and it's most hard at night, frying alone but next to her on the mattress.

Maybe it's always been this hard at night.

It's true that I lived in my studio for two weeks prior to this. I painted a lot, day after day, abstract stuff, cubist stuff, weird inverted landscapes, sometimes just a single line slithering across the page. Images of Lori kept surfacing. Nothing that looked like all of her, mind you, just glimpses: her bottom lip, her shoulders' curve. I couldn't get over it. So I painted her from memory, curled on her bed, sheets tight around her body. I took the letter Maryann wrote and copied it, word for word over the painting, brush strokes like slashes, all but obliterating the image. I showed Maryann a few days later.

"She must still really mean something to you," she said.

I touched her shoulder and looked right at her. "I call it *Practice*."