

# Couples

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## 1. Soldiering On

The color of all things, money particularly, is not necessarily green. The color of money is not always money. I'm befuddled, and so should you be, about the events lately occurring in Tennessee Williams' and Eugene O'Neill's red, dead, divided, revived characters, off-screen and here in our chartered homes. Homebodies went out of circulation circa 1959, Jackie Gleason's last days of fame.

– Filthy bitch. How long since you've been on the stairs? Watching me?

– What's it matter to you? As long as you've been watching that stupid ball game.

– It's not stupid. You like spying on me?

– Who says I was spying?

– Then come down and suck my dick.

And so it goes, day after day, night after night. On their throats hang indentations of unforgettable medallions, their names and dates of birth engraved in tool-makers' gold, from the time they were both *happening, assertive, revenue-enhancing* cab drivers in the city. A couple who met as a mismatched pair at a cabdrivers' convention, that's how they thought of themselves, the convention held on the stoop of the oldest black-owned apartment building in East Harlem. A building burnt to the core, in symbolic terms. You smelt rats and poison, if you had the nose for it.

Charlene is the woman, Harry is the man. In all things, they are the accumulation of Lithuanian villages gone wrong, that is to say, when safe priestly advice turns out to have been Lawrence's nightmare visions in Taos. A powdery blue sky in the city does not lower the heroic smell of pretzels to something instant and consumptive. Garlands of praise around whose neck, did you say, make one feel old and welcome at home?

– The fish seller came on to you. I saw it.

– I think he murdered his first wife.

– Oh please don't make excuses.

– I'm not. I dislike the man. For his smell.

– It's not his smell.

– Now who's making excuses?

– Excuses, excuses.

– The social security check is late again.

– Call the bastards.

Slow, slow, sloooooowww it down. To a crawl in the space between the second and the minute hands. New words, strewn over the carpet, like stardust off the street. Then she sips green tea, a new habit of hers, until 6 P.M. A pot of tea, a universe of sadness. New routines gifted to her by her older sister, Rose. Retirement creeps up on you, when you think after getting rid of demanding sons and daughters you can take time off for the undeadly coral reefs of Australia and other large and small Pacific islands. But there are snakes in the grass in the safest parks. Besides, Charlene and Harry—the order of their names must always be the same—never had children. *Her* infertility problems, according to his best buddies, men with bloated last names used to fishing in calmer waters.

Never mind, this way it's quieter when she dies, and he dies.

He was seventeen before she learned what jheri curls meant. She didn't cry when her nana died. She ascribed it to overwork, her determination to be secure in her high school class, the necessity to prelive the American Dream, regardless of futile obstructions, distractions, along the way. Oh shove it! She's fooling herself, donating herself a leftover heart from one of the rich city socialites at Bellevue. A socialite is a woman with a grass hill of beans for her head, and little trickles of yellow sugar-sweat sliding down the shoulders of her London Fog raincoat when she's looking for her poodle under the antique dining table. It's always raining in her living room. The opposite of a socialite is a woman with a first and a last name. And no secrets.

– Big Charlene, full of hoity-toity ideas about her value to society.

– Shut up, you old fool. You fat old fool.

– Where did you get these ideas, huh? You some kind of literature scholar at NYU?

– Where you ogled the big asses of Puerto Rican girls. If you were lucky enough to find a ride that wanted to go to that part of the city. Bronx bomber.

- Dark chocolate.
- What did you say?
- The meaning of your ass.
- Oh Harry. Will we ever be friends?
- Friends? Isn't that what they do when they break up as teenagers? Buddy-buddies?

– Rose might be staying with us for a couple of weeks. Her son's been laid off.

– The moron. The bitch. Again, laid off again? How many times can a man be laid off from the same job?

– It's like coming home every night as a cabbie. Feels the same.

– You bet your ass it doesn't.

Slow, slooowww down the rain of words, please.

Then they fall asleep on the couch, Charlene's shoulder on Harry's broad, hairy chest. With all the burgers and fries he's eaten at the worst greasy spoons in the city, he should have been dead of a heart attack long ago. But he's robust as a steel door guarding a nuclear plant. He hardly ever sneezes or coughs. They've saved thousands of dollars in hair implant and testicle testing costs. The TV stays on. Letterman laughs at no one in particular. There is a gap in the universe where there used to be serious TV. They watch a lot of TV. It makes them think they're not alone in their suspicions of each other. Except that these suspicions are an act, behind which lie all the stories they've never told.

When morning comes, Harry cautiously moves Charlene's head so as not to wake her. He heads to the barred window, where he sees an old-fashioned milk truck parked in the street, with no driver in sight. Didn't they go out of style decades ago? He hopes he didn't snore. Snoring is a bitch. Time was, he could clutch Charlene's behind from behind, and instantly get a hard-on that lasted all night. Now he sees the signs of irrevocable death on the heads and mouths of the most ravishing models in the city, their tiny breasts jogging up and down in tune to the years ticking off God's calendar.

A little over dramatic. So he pauses and sneezes at imaginary pollen.

Harry and Charlene, once in love: when grocery shopping was an art, a picnic, a tantric sprint, and all the constellations were there for the taking on starry, clear nights, when the expected rain didn't come.

When she wakes up, a couple of hours later, she complains of chest pains. He tries to make light of it. He tries to defuse the horror.

## 2. Paradise Bombed

Can of Horlicks. Opened but not fully. Lick its outsides like a blurry cat. Fire in the soul where humans have peeked. A worshiper's trendy clothes. White the color of purity, even after cancer. Bamboo, its beatitude, and strength. Rain when it comes, lashing windows like flogging an unarmed man. Rusting bike in the corner, victim of wobbly knees. The fewer the number of films the local industry makes, the larger the number of fan magazines.

South wind, straight as an arrow.

– Zubeida, here's the change from the shopping. Fifteen rupees.

– What am I supposed to do with it, Farooq?

– Use it for Sumeira's children. Buy some gifts.

– For fifteen rupees? The other day, I gave a leper five rupees, and he looked at me like I

I was a *churayl*.

– We must make do with what we have.

– I believe that. With all my heart I do.

– There's no warm water for *wudu*, Zubeida.

– The cold water is supposed to be good for your skin.

– I wish the visa would come through.

– They say it can take up to five years.

– It's good that Hashim didn't marry an American girl, for practical reasons.

– I'll warm some water in the pot.

Then when the village headman asked for a virgin's sacrifice, the two were ready with their only daughter. Please take only what you need, they both pleaded. It's all mine, the headman said, with a malicious grin. In later years, we'll be telling our progeny how we withstood our ordeal without shedding tears. Like Abraham offering Isaac—or was it Ishmael? Without complaint. Inhumanity is the imperfection Allah introduced into the human system to ensure faith. This is paradoxical, borderline blasphemous, but under the guidance of a master, its meaning becomes clear.

Farooq and Zubeida's fiftieth wedding anniversary rolled around, without anyone knowing, not even themselves. On the day they don't remember anymore, a boy in the neighborhood, eight or ten, was hit by a speeding Vespa scooter. The mother didn't shed any tears as she picked up the broken boy from the side of the street and loaded him into a rickshaw for the municipal hospital. It could have been worse than the broken limbs and ribs. He could have lost his brain,

become an idiot. Be faithful, my followers. I will transform liquid into solid, fantasy into reality, if you refuse pulp fiction.

We may as well get into Muhammad's head. A sullen philosopher, in a time and place where such a profession would have got him blacklisted. To create your own system of thought, like Aristotle you must disown former wives, but in a calm, organized manner. You must rally to your side the disaffected young, as long as they don't drink and fornicate, and aren't attracted to beasts of burden either. Then the skies open one dark blue night, and on the heads of angels flirty pinup girls who'll one day be wanted and unwanted in Brooklyn, Jewish mostly, dance and sing of the savior's joy. Beethoven was deaf to the din of self-acclaim.

– Zubeida, did you know that Moses was the greatest miracle worker in all history?

– But ordinary humans must not believe in miracles. It interferes with faith.

– It's in the book. If it's in the book, it can't interfere with faith.

– I'm only telling you what I've heard.

– One must ask if the advice giver is rife with envy, Zubeida.

– None of my friends are envious.

– But mine are.

– You have many friends.

– Of course, your friends came as if with *jabez*. Not that I'm complaining.

– You can complain. What's wrong with the *jabez* I brought?

– Did I say anything about *jabez*?

– Please let's not fight on the day Sumeira's coming with her children.

– Four hearty, healthy children, before she's thirty. Allah's blessings, in such plenty.

– Alhamdulillah.

– Masha'Allah.

Most women fear tarantulas, because they're supposed to bite off the head of the lover who feeds sugar. The smartest women, of the kind who blaze trails in the desert, eat them alive, because in their stomachs they multiply, while shrinking to minuscule replicas, and become books of holy words. Words of the kind that might be exchanged between one citizen and another on voting day. Of the kind that boys and girls before puberty sometimes say to their elders to make them think twice about bribery and molestation.

The truth is, Lahore came in a cardboard box the Mughals forgot to open, especially Aurangzeb. He was so busy destroying temples he forgot the spatial inheritance of mosques.

Finish your rice, sons and daughters of Sumeira, my one and only, now that Hashim is gone. At least he doesn't have a white wife. They wrinkle easily. Their faces sunburn. Their hearts go sour at fifty. In the end, they leave you for the man with more money and better looks. And who can be guaranteed of keeping looks when one must work so hard?

– The checks, in American dollars. Do you think the bank keeps track of the money?

– How should I know, Farooq? Am I the head of the bank manager?

– No, I suppose not. Still, I worry about taxation. Unnecessary taxation.

– We already pay *zakât*.

– That's not the point.

– I'm headed off to Sumeira's.

– Again?

– To go with her to the children's tailor.

– That's a good use of time. I mean it.

– You'll have to do *wudu* with cold water.

– At least we don't have to pay for tankers of water.

– Allah is great.

– Allah is great.

When Zubeida is gone to Sumeira's, Farooq goes to the window of their sixth-floor apartment and looks into the busy courtyard below. A pair of buxom girls in their late teens is giggling loudly over the ineptitude of their younger brother in facing the leading bowler in the building. One of them bends down unnecessarily low at the sturdy hip and picks up the shattered wicket, aiming it at her blessed heart as if it were a gun. Her hair is plastered around her eyes. Farooq wishes he could reach over and smooth it back over her head. She could be his daughter. His daughter before she had all those kids. Farooq can't force himself to move away from the scene. He'll make up the missed prayer in the morning.

### 3. Street Fighting

The horsemen of the desert now dash along twisted streets with armor of words. Words meaning faultless action. Speed, speed, speed. But when you do get a taste of slowness, you think it's alien. This world and the next, bottled in the tiny legs of a beetle, falling off the

crinkly outside of a dry, shattered bamboo stick, planted outside the chief's hut in visible suggestion of his kingdom come. Pearl oysters, their feverish smell. Surf off the coast of anywhere tourists don't go. Hurrying shoppers. Dreams as if tracing a dead plant's hollow index.

Harry, meet Farooq. Zubeida, meet Charlene. A woman's spiral beehive hides five millennia of hope that the tables will be turned. A man's will to envy is rooted in the absence of war.

Therefore, long empty sets of tea. Therefore, Beatlemania. Therefore, war in the desert.

– Mister, you like repeating words, dontcha?

– Where I come from, history is eternal. The future belongs to the past.

– Ha! By saying it you hope to not make it so.

– We're the fallen tricksters. We play tricks only on our minds now.

– Do you wonder how women deliver children?

– It's a source of endless amazement. Four in a row. And happy.

– Happy, happy, happy.

– Happy.

Then all the stolen pictures are carted off to the fence. It's an early morning for him. Dynamite delivery boys, oh I'd eat their cute faces if they weren't so rough. Just leave the last Picasso. It's not for sale.

– Does your husband love you?

– I wouldn't know. I'm not up at nights.

– Would you have wished for a criminal daughter?

– I wouldn't know. It's tough enough to drive around the city.

– Who gives you polio shots?

– We're vaccinated at birth.

– Is it true that mandolins are instruments of torture?

– Wondered myself.

– Galley proofs. What does that mean?

– Galileo's head was in a spin.

– So you play with words too?

– After sex. After love. Yes.

– Come to my house for a bake sale.

– For?

– Juvenile horse addiction. Its cure.

– We must be sisters-in-arms.

– Together, yes.

– Marching into the sunset of our lives.

– Which may never come.

– Which came five drum beats ago.

Women speak longer, notice. A pile of canceled checks with the government's name on them. Citizens like to play boss. Voters' apathy, a new malady. It refers to gangrene of the mind. Still, it's better than its flowering like octopus's arms.

All together now. (Zoroastrians burn their dead in a silo, or funnel, or pyramid of fire, so that what comes out at the other end is grit of the soul, coarsened pieces of fiber you can name. All elements have been named.)

– Hitch your ride to the most successful man in the neighborhood, I tell you.

– What if the neighborhood is not big enough?

– Works every time, I tell you. Then go to Cancun for your first vacation.

– I don't know where that is.

– Relationships are like rocks of sugar in waiting.

– There is reward in waiting.

– Waiting is for women without degrees. Your countrymen, mathematicians all? You should ride up Morningside Drive some morning.

– Two plus two is always four. We're born that way.

– Excuse me, can we men have a word?

– Which of you? I mean, who has the more secret life?

– Speaking on behalf of him, we don't have any secrets.

– Lusting for girls young enough to be your daughter?

– Which one of us are you talking to?

– I only know one of you.

– So.

– It's come full circle. We must tip our hats to the waiters, and go our way.

Silence, for a space of many minutes. Between the minute and the second hands, a snicker, heard by all.

– Conversation is difficult when you get so literal.

– Hear, hear.

– I guess we all agree.

– I was the one who asked the question.

– I'm only human. No human is infallible. Except for prophets and miracle workers.

– Wrong there. Prophets are fallible.

– How about poets?

– Especially poets.

– Then who do we go to for truth?

– Certainly not the government.

- Conversation is easy when you get so abstract.
- Fool, I see right through your toughness.
- Fool, I see right through your sentimentality.
- What does your son do again?
- Works for an engineering firm. Data accumulator of some kind.
- I thought it was all convenience stores.
- That too. A side business. Dormant investing.

Plenty of easy money.

- Easy money.
  - Am I the only one with a sense of guilt?
- Silence of many more minutes.
- Conversation is impossible when you broach reality without handcuffs.

For two centuries they get to know each other. In the end, relationships ensue. The Crusades, it turns out, were legitimate. Both sides were right, if queerness has any meaning at all. And the centrality of Mecca, as of New York? It only takes a dispassionate cab ride through the uncluttered streets at dawn to see that wherever God decides to descend, he does it in grand style. Tall as heaven's unbuilt spire, pairs of people squeezed dry, like matching lemons hung.