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A New Love Poem

J. T. Prior knew the A, the B, and even the C of his student Jodene. He knew her pretty as you please eyelid flutter, her ooh la la Marlene Dietrich pucker, and her honest-to-goodness knee-knocking, heart-stopping, spin-you-like-a-top-topping shimmy and (moreover) shake. In even more words, he knew the bushel and the peck of her (even the sweat around the neck of her) sans one thing, one single, small thing that the now-dumped and never-more-to-have-her J. T. Prior wanted as much as that fool of fortune you've heard tell of. This thing added up to all that the word "affection" might have afforded him: the state of Jodene's heart.

Center, core, chi, life force—without going too far into the gushy sentiment that the soul is, in the three months of his luckless relationship with one Miss Jodene Glazeman, J. T. had never made nodding acquaintance of her id or ego, yin or yang, her ramma lamma lamma or her ding damn dong. And now he would never know if she might've been the quote solution to all of his problems unquote, problems too old and obvious to be anything but boring to the light and laughter that Jodene was: a wife, Lilly Rae, as green-eyed and carping as that monster Iago once taught to tango; a lifetime of poetry as slim and meaningless as the two-and-a-half inches it occupied on his bookshelf; and a graying of the head and the heart that made J. T. Prior think about what was and what was definitely, without-a-doubt not worth doing with his lips, his hips, and his time this side of cold, clod-ded death.

"Can you believe it," J. T. said to the motel ashtray, as dumbfounded at his three-days-old predicament as an elephant on an airplane, "I fucked the girl every which way I knew how, but I never did find out the song she hums while doing the dishes."

First floor and three windows to the north was where J. T. talked out loud in hopes of new knowledge. He sat on a bed, more sprung than springs, in the same Motel 6 he'd brought his students to for years. Close to his bourbon, his smokes, and the few books he was never without, he worked on getting grade-A shitfaced while trimming

verbiage from the new sonnet—for Jean Talmadge Prior was a writer and a cliché, middle-aged and hard-edged, and tonight he would write Jodene a new love poem.

"Disney, Paramount, and M-G-damn-M would know as much about her as I do," he said, his voice the thin creak of the mattress.

Jodene was no more than celluloid to him, a wrap and a print, as 2-D as Jane Russell dancing the hootchie-cootchie to a gallery of popcorn-passing, salami-slapping moviegogs.

"I've been booted and broken," he said, now to the hot plate, "by nothing but two long legs and a set of iniquitous hips."

First month, he'd only seen the spunk and the spank of her, all that made Jodene as criminal and dear as any eighteen-year-old he'd ever known in what he'd of course come to call the Biblical way to most all he knew but Lilly Rae. He had met Jodene at a creekside barbecue for freshmen at what J. T. referred to as the Salt Mine—a.k.a., Briarmoor College where he taught in Cold as a Witch's Tit, South Dakota. The barbecue had been a faculty-student meet-n-greet with white white nametags and white white plastic forks and white white styrofoam cups filled with nothing worth drinking to the bottom of. And later, when he'd read and rightly pronounced her name "Jodene" and she seemed to see he wasn't just a hollowed-out cowboy poet with all his brains in his britches, he asked her to a grown-up bar downtown for drinks without tabs or caps, and, what with Jodene's talk of "Beatniks" and "performance poets" and even the blank verse that the bard himself had been so very fond of (not to mention the dazzling doodads attached to the heavenly front-and-center of her), J. T. had managed to yadda yadda the have-or-die parts of Jodene onto this very same brown-stained, smoke-filled Motel 6 bed.

"Jesus," she'd said after all the rolling his hay could take, "that was fun."

"How about a movie?" he'd asked, ignoring the lateness of the motel's tick-tocking clock to do the that that was just: a lucky late-nighter on the boob tube with Marilyn singing about girls and diamonds and which friends are the very best.

In the end, though, it wasn't at all fun—and not just because Lilly Rae streaked him up blue when J. T. finally arrived at his house that was not a home, six hours late. "You may be the father of my children," Lilly Rae had said, with a laugh like biting foil, "but your dick is as common as your poetry." Not fun in the least when, three days ago, Jodene had left him faster than he could say the "I love you" that never did get said and that he hoped to say this very evening. So now Prior sat on this sagging, empty mattress, and rather than mastering the 62

degree wedge or finding the world's tightest bottle of bourbon or dancing the mambo with the perfect woman on a perfect Midwestern night under a perfect, heart-jangling, throat-catching harvest moon, the only thing that J. T. could do right now, this minute, was to write fourteen lines about something that really mattered.

Was she really, as Jodene herself might say, the Age to his Aquarius?

J. T. fingered his pen, pulled on a cigarette, and said to the dead TV, "I aim to find out."

After that first fated meet-n-greet (and the subsequent heat of her sweet cheeks), Jodene signed up for Professor J. T. Prior's beginning poetry workshop. "Kiss and tell?" he wondered, but come month two when J. T. and Jodene were a weekly Mr. & Mrs. Smith at the Motel 6, her poems, it is true, didn't turn out to be about shoot-'em-up J. T.—nor were they the burnt-orange sunsets or the tear-soaked funerals that there ought to be a law against. But, then, and just as true, Jodene's poems were all about other boys. A boy with "muscle orange mesh shoulders" swinging a girl into a "winking pool." Another boy in search of a "midnight omelet" after sex with a girl still "damp on the rug." Still another boy with "tears in his eyes" and a "hummin' harmonica" in his hands, singing "dem blues, Jodes, dem blues is for da dogs, girl."

It wasn't the slackness of the speech that got him—her reliance on all that is hackneyed and false in a freshman's delight over such Hallmark twaddle as "eyes aglow with passion" or "cheeks afire with shame." It wasn't what Jodene herself might have written as the "stinging slap" her poems offered his own "stubbled cheeks"—a rich-boy bunch of moods and hard-ons Jodene clearly found as sexy as a stick in a crevice. No. It was her utter disregard of him, J. T.'s bo-um nothingness in each and every poem she offered up to his professional scrutiny.

J. T. taught the dead white guys, without apology and with a credible amount of praise, Pope and Donne and Billy de Shake. He taught iambic fucking pentameter galloping its way into the horizon line of literature. He taught such high-falutin' notions as enjambment, heroic couplet, and the long, slow length of that notorious Alexandrine. Indeed, J. T. approached the sonnet—ever Shakespearean—as incantation, holy words that wrenched his own insides out every time he said out loud, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments."

But Jodene would have none of it. "Free verse," she once said in class discussion, "took the bra off poetry. Let it breathe." Her poems were avant-garde gobbledygook to J. T.—loose and lazy, full of the dot

dot dots of old Walt and the clatter and chatter of that rapsallion Ginsberg.

"Fuck," J. T. now said to the exhaust fan, fitting his f's to its squeak. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

Then, deep into month three, Jodene wrote a poem without a boy. No glowing eyes. No burning cheeks. No fuckity-fuck-fuck. It was a poem J. T. could beat out the scansion of, too — trochaic tetrameter catalectic. The rhythm of a hatchet cleaving wood.

"Some say fleas are fortunate," Jodene began, eyes fastened to the onion skin paper she preferred to type her talk on. "Mixing blood of lovers' hearts. / I say squash them, for they suck / Vital essence from our parts."

Jodene done, and J. T. found himself undone, a poet without words. Yes, even then, J. T. recognized that squashed, famously before-used flea as his own tiny heart.

"Little does she know," he told himself, but J. T. had to admit that he was feet-swept, heels-on-head in love with his student Jodene.

Ever after, each day, each poem, and J. T. got more red-cheeked and thick-tongued and full of the muddled shame that typifies the word "doubt." There had been many and many before Jodene, of course — all blonde to Lilly Rae's brunette, all the medicine that eighteen-year-old laughter is. For two decades past J. T.'s first two, they'd followed him to room 33, numbers on the door like spooning in the dark, and after this and after that, and sometimes with a few lines of J. T.'s own about their rose-bud lips and skin like snow, they'd straddle him and — for a moment, one moment — stitch up the sum and substance of his nouns, verbs, and way too many adjectives. But now, despite the fact that Jodene had turned out to be take without give, spit without shine, just oh's and ah's as subtle and as sensitive as J. T. himself in a top hat and tails, this damn girl seemed to be at the very center of him. The Sweet-heart of the Rodeo herself.

"She's only eighteen," he said, the blank of his notebook his only reply.

Eighteen meant an utter ignorance of, say, those gazillion notes Buddy Holly and the Beatles and the one they still called the King had made much use of to explain that booze may be good but love was even better. Eighteen meant complete indifference to all ambassadors of wherever sent to powwow, plead, or be pardoned by the guy Jodene referred to as "that asshole" President of what her generation had starting calling the not-so-very-United States of America. Eighteen meant a staunch belief that the relative croppiness of her crop top and mininess of her miniskirt mattered more than Mohammed or his mountain

or how one might move to the other. And eighteen meant a full three months of blah-blahs and wah-wahs about the greatness of Jack Kerouac or the sanctity of Allen Ginsberg during Professor J. T. Prior's own neoclassic class time and always again during their hot-n-heavy Motel 6 get-togethers.

"Mother of God, to be eighteen," J. T. said, this time to the silent telephone. "Nothing's as fine or as meet."

At eighteen, J. T. had seen Lilly Rae as poetry. Even then, she would have written herself as a harlequin or a tragedy or, as she still might say, "a black joke that takes time to tell." But to J. T. in all of his own green and gold glory, Lilly Rae had been that summer's day, that many-chambered heart, and all, yes all, of those counted ways. At eighteen, Lilly Rae had been a poet, too, one who didn't cop to the *ars poetica* of 1949: anti-traditionalism, radical individualism, r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r, "no ideas but in things." Tight, fit, and true, her poems were bitter and fierce like her mouth against his. J. T. thought her work should be framed, corrections and all. Like her, it was too damn good not to gawk at.

Then once, just once, Lilly Rae had laughed at one of his poems, a poem flushed pink with the joy of his young love. He'd read it to her, too, without that Cary Grant edge, all jaw and hot eyes, but with the hope and tears of a man surrendered. But Lilly Rae had laughed that hard laugh, sour under the tongue, had said, "Oh, honey — could you be more banal?" and now, twenty years and an American dream later (one house, two kids, three pets, four strangers under one roof), she had become the stuff both on her and in her that had dried out or gone soft or just plain fallen. So now Jodene was the stuff of his dreamland, a picture as good and as sweet as an angel eating pie. For the one-hundred-and-sixty-five hours a week outside of Room 33, he missed the sight and the sound and the smell and the taste of her. J. T. ached for Jodene in all the wrong joints.

"By the way," Jodene had said in the part that came next, the part just three days ago, "I'm going to date around — you know, play the field." Playful she'd been as she said it, too, and as serious as the hiss of death.

Quiet was his tongue, and how.

"Really," she said, "I like you a lot. You're the only guy I can talk to, the only guy who's ever really listened to me. But, well, don't be upset, but it just doesn't seem right. You know you're old enough to be my father. I can't even tell my best friend about you or where I go at night. Or what we do."

Stopped in his tracks. J. T. now knew what that silly saying felt like.

That one as well as nowhere to go, every which way but loose, always judge a book by its cover, and, of course, one is the loneliest, loneliest number. To quote the Scottish play, other than that section about trouble and caldrons, life is a tale told by an idiot, bubba, full of both fury and its loud, loud sound.

Under the Motel 6 covers, Jodene's toes were pure ice.

"Very much," Jodene said. "Really. I still like you very much."

Had he felt hip or witty, he might have sung the only chorus he knew the Jim Morrison of, "Come on, baby, light my fire." Then, maybe, he might have brought her blood to boil, might have thickened her slim parts and slackened her mind. He might have done her in with his X-and-O, baby, and without the L-O-V-E.

But J. T. Prior didn't take to those who claimed hootch hijacked their chivalry. So when he'd failed to sing "light my fire," Jodene had sat up, smoothed down that long hair she was so proud of, and said, "You'll still look at my poems, won't you?" the weedy, sharp smell of her as redeeming and optimistic as the fourth or fifth bourbon he was now in the process of having and having and having.

Tabbed and slotted, zipped and buttoned, tied and taped, and finally boxed and buried was Professor J. T. Prior's heart when he'd said not "I love you" but, rather, simply, "Sure."