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The TV Freak

John Gorman

Brigit broke up with me back in senior year because she had no intention of marrying a dropout. She never believed I had enough in my tank to devote to my studies, her, and the filthy, forty-eight-pound whore that illuminated the dusty coal-gray tomb posing as my dorm room. She was right. Brigit did me a great service spooning herself off my plate. That year, I fried my brain with reruns, horror flicks, and game shows then crammed for my midterms and finals with Ahab's vengeance. My last semester became my Leviathan. I graduated Suma Cum Lightly, tacked up my diploma and earned Brigit's keep.

As newlyweds, we had a ball, but I never delivered her middlebrow basket of luxury. This was why I slunk back into my wormhole of convenience, the last great bastion for the quasi-civilized man, the vicarious, remote-flipping life of the couch potato. There was just about every artificial sweetener, powder, and coloring agent creeping within the microfibers of those rug-rough cushions. My elbow divots and heel prints prominent in the pillows.

At least I wasn't a peeping tom or a porno king.

Brigit managed the social calendar with a rickshaw-puller's ferocity. She was a saint to deal with a slob like me but she had a mission to rub elbows with the cultural elite even if it meant she had to burn every bridge we stamped on.

The Matthews entered the picture by sheer luck.

The Matthews didn't watch television, didn't own one and both were hard-pressed to recall a program they'd ever watched. Needless to say, Brigit wanted them to become the crowning laurel amongst our anemic circle of friends. Perhaps, their fortitude and willpower could rub off on me.

When they said TV wasn't something they could fit into their life, I pictured a huge clunky bureau or a marble-top cabinet that wouldn't squeeze past their doorway without a big scrape and Agnes cupping her heart-shaped cheeks.

"Please don't take it personally," Agnes said with breathy, Billie Holliday solemnity.

She declined the plate of goat cheese and sesame crackers. I think she felt the inner need for self-punishment. I spread on a thick smear and took a big crunch to let her know, no hard feelings.

We considered them the most decent couple we knew, including ourselves. The girls hit it off right away. They had antiquing, Philip Roth, and a cheesy affinity for Eighties New Wave in common. They passed for cousins. Second for sure, but maybe even first, especially around the dimples and the lean lashes handsomely trimmed into their Brancusi brows.

We took turns throwing themed dinner parties every other Saturday and had worn through Nigella Lawson's savory chicken recipes. Agnes and I sat back and enjoyed the friendly culinary competition between our spouses although, in all fairness, Brigit had the edge over

Gary. He made yummy croquettes, but he swung for the fences and added too much or too little spice.

Brigit, on the other hand, had studied at the French Culinary Institute so she had many tricks up her chef sleeves. She'd only been getting warmed up with chicken when Gary suggested they move onto the other white meat. I made a pig grunt to show my appreciation. Agnes laughed. Brigit pursed her collagen-juiced lips and showed the angry blue vein across her forehead when I decided to spout off my *Seinfeld* acumen. The Matthews played good sports and let me rattle off whatever made me feel like a little big man. I'll admit, I had pegged them for phony balonies so I prattled on with lines and mimes from a dozen or so episodes. Each time I went for the gusto and saw the vacuous bob of their heads, the *tabula rasa* on their faces, I knew they hadn't the faintest idea what Bubble Boys, Beefarino, and daytrips to Del Boca Vista meant. This puzzled and worried me. No, I wasn't worried for them, but for myself. I sluiced into a vortex of self-consciousness and kept bungling over the same recycled jokes and Agnes would offer some canned laughter, right on cue, but in the end, I came to realize I was a bigger blowhard than George Costanza.

All this, while Brigit watched her life preserver, Agnes, suffer the dinner party from hell. I'd come out of my shell *for what* to be consigned back to the basement to watch the tube.

It's funny how superficial the bones of companionship can be. One tall woman befriends another tall woman. Brigit flat out denied it, but she'd done it before. It served as a conversation opener. Naturally, the Chippendale commodes, Ginori soup tureens, and the Flemish tapestries sealed the acquaintanceship. I have always teased Brigit she has been in hot pursuit of her soulmate ever since she got stuck with me.

For Lent, she gave up the Idiot Box and encouraged me to do the same. Fat chance. If the Matthews wanted to keep seeing us they would have to accept the Little Engine for who he was or what he wasn't. As Brigit paid for her Penance I watched her share of TV and my brain paid the price. Jokingly, I said she could use my brainslop for a JELL-O mold. She was packing for a camping trip and I was taking in my second favorite *Fraiser* episode. She was kneeing the Gore-Tex sleeping bag back into its pre-ordained, hermetically sealed, entrapment. An overstuffed duffel bag loafed on the unpolished floor like a spoiled child. Brigit gave a small hint for help, wriggling her Botoxed forehead. I kept my eyes poised on the flat screen and watched Niles take back his rightful corkmaster medallion. Brigit rammed with the full weight of her road runner's frame and I hopped off the chaise when the commercial came on.

"Forget it," she said.

"What? I'm here to help," I lied.

"Too late."

"Fine, suit yourself."

I sat back down and listened to her arrggghhh.

II

The next day Agnes approached me with the piercing blue eyes of a famished lover. I'll admit this terrified me. I could've sworn I snapped my Achilles heel, a smarting pain I'd known from an ungainly kayaking accident.

She held my hand with the dizzying warmth of a seasoned den mother. She could've had her way with me, made me track a dozen miles in the snow or mud or both. I was itching with the reckless joy of puberty, but I could see Agnes teemed with earnestness. She stepped away from me as if I repelled her and then stared again with a mortifying mix of steamy desire and inspiration. I'd never had somebody pursue me with such awe. It made the hairs on my chest curl into bimini twists.

"Take me," she said.

Whatever else she wanted to say caked to the roof of her mouth.

I gulped a goldfish and noticed Brigit had put up a new dry wreath over the bamboo mirror. Why did this reminder of my clever wife have to ruin my one chance at hedonism? I gathered my bearings, took a deep breath, but Agnes's earnestness weighed on me like a coat of armor. She smelled like sin. I noticed every groove, every fray in her unglossed lips. I would've killed an astronaut to be her balm.

When she'd composed herself and her wrist stopped trembling she continued her confession.

"Take me to the basement," she said.

I'm not sure of the mechanics of those next steps except that the bipedality of our great tribe must work on a subconscious level. How else can a drunk find his way home in the oily dark of night? Agnes had me drunk with anticipation, with the slow roll of her words, and the inscrutable possibility of pleasure. She rushed to the couch, tossed a pillow to the floor and let me pile next to her. The sinewy smoothness of her thigh brushing against me rotted a fistful of synapses. I felt like I was choking on a persimmon.

Then she snatched the remote off the armrest, leaned into the cushion with her eyes aglow on the red power button. She fixed on it as though it had the power to blow up a nation. She pressed it and I heard the abominable leitmotif from *2001 Space Odyssey*. She surfed the channels till she found a way station then ferried on musing over the familiar faces of an ill-begotten youth. She wore a shit-eating, family-gathering grin, the prodigal daughter back home.

She commenced with the curly-haired, germaphobe *Monk* and, between commercials, switched to laugh at the go-cat-go stupidity of *Laverne and Shirley*. Then it was *Boston Legal* followed by *Everybody Loves Raymond* followed by *Everybody Hates Chris*. She wore the same wide-jawed zeal with *Jeopardy* as she did when Vanna White spun the bling bling beaded *Wheel of Fortune* and she didn't lose steam when the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* popped on. She was cruising for a blister the way she abused the remote.

Never before had I felt like a prisoner in my own basement. For a split second, I wondered if Chinese Water Torture had the upper hand. Then I turned and saw Agnes fringed with glee. If I had a glass of water, so help me, *splash*. She found the guide amusing and scrolled it lengthwise and then longitudinally to capture the breadth of shows. I got seasick from the

passing glow of names and captions. She'd bypassed the simple intrigue of viewing and tuned into the warped joy of pixelated titles and their three-word summaries. It was pornographic.

She propped her feet onto the coffee table, knocking off a stack of magazines and catalogues, but paid it no mind, curled into the cushion with her left ear raised as a royal ornament. She had a coco-stained beauty mark where her earring belonged and she breathed like somebody ensconced in a mud bath.

I got up to get a can of Dr. Pepper. Leaving her in couch potato repose was the most loving thing I could do. In the kitchen, I cracked my Dr. Pepper, the sweet carbonated syrup, spilling into my lips made my heart jump. The cold tin was the perfect lip balm, but I did fret a little. What would Brigit say if she got home early?

She didn't. I had to practically fork Agnes off the couch, draped in my wiry arms like the *Bride of Mazzini*. Her eyes still fixed on the blank screen when I shut off the set. I carried her up the steps wondering if caretakers and orderlies browbeat themselves for not joining a better union.

Brigit went to a cha-cha class the next night and I'd planned to use the quiet time to crack open a book. I was still equal parts bewildered and spooked by my experience. When I heard the bell ring I didn't want to answer it, but I saw Brigit had left her keys on top of the potpourri dish so I played the good husband and rushed to the door before she rang again.

Gadzooks. Agnes again. She had her hair tied into a ponytail and her arms wrapped around a tub of popcorn.

"Howdy, neighbor," she said.

And before I could block the door she'd slid past my sockless foot. I was glad I had my Cape May shirt on instead of one of the tank tops or, God forbid, I opened the door in my hairy chest. Although, when I thought about it, perhaps this would have scared her off. She marched to the basement and I trailed behind in the defeated lope of a father after his teenage brat.

To buy time, I cut my descent short and two-stepped it back up to grab some sodas. Why I wanted to play hospitable host I'm not sure? I stalled before going back down. The clock crowned above the fridge read seven forty-nine. I really hoped Brigit broke a heel or got sick of class and came home early.

No such luck.

Agnes watched the tube with greater verve. There was a certain ferocity to her stare, but after a while she mollified her gaze. A wash of shame sobered her when she caught me looking at her. I knew then she'd been an over-coddled, only child like me. Two such similar souls could sit that close as parallel lines and never touch. This would only get uglier the more Agnes engaged her forbidden fruit. I learned the necessity of a good sharp pinch.

For two weeks I didn't clip my nails.

Amid this digital indulgence I got to know hints of Agnes. We laughed at reruns of SNL, Bill O'Reilly, the gargantuan sterility of Prius ads. We drew lines in the sand over sitcoms, dramas, and public broadcast. She told me how much she loved cats as a child, but was allergic to them. She once picked up a smoky, gray-bearded stray with whiskers that looked half-chewed.

Agnes fed him bowls of milk, oatmeal, and whatever crumbs she got her hands on. She hugged him like a carnival prize and Mr. Whiskers scratched his way to freedom. Agnes broke out into a frightening tapestry of hives. Her eyes swelled and the unbearable itch consumed her nine-year-old body. She patched herself with the medicine chest's stock of ointments, but the white creams hardly did any good. The rashes spread from a few clusters into a chieftom of shiny pink scabs and well on its way to a state of emergency.

When Agnes begged me not to tell a soul what we were doing a bolt of prurience shot through me. It made me spiteful and frustrated. I wore the shame around my neck like a bronze medal.

Brigit nudged me about Agnes, on a day I called in sick. I tried ignoring her the way I ignored the temps who nagged me to get them extra hours. Brigit read something on my face, studied me the way she had when I decided to grow a soul patch on my chin and she declared, rather haughtily, I'd never be a bad boy.

Calm down, old boy, I said to myself trying not to tip my hand. Brigit got nothing, but she grew suspicious when Gary pounded on our front door, in the middle of the night, his frail body twisted as a burnt crisp of a rubber band, dark patches under his eyes and his cheeks mottled with scruff. He seemed like he'd been squished through a meat grinder. He told us Agnes hadn't been home the past few nights and right then I felt as if I'd swallowed a brick.

My reaction must have worried Gary because he pat my hand. This guy was losing his wife and I was falling to pieces. Brigit tucked her arms tight to her chest. Ten years of marriage reduced to a fingersnap. I was tongue-tied, ornery, but most of all, I felt used.

Gary cut in at just the right moment otherwise I would've swilled into a puddle.

"You got to help me," he said.

"Anything," Brigit said.

She meant it.

She was blessed with impeccable peripheral vision. Only the whites of her eyes did I see, but I knew the irises waxed over me.

"There's only one way to straighten her out," Gary said.

And I was struck by the way he said it. Then I repurposed it, the self-righteousness, the chutzpah. Yeah, he was the husband and I'd only had a few weeks of PG-rated canoodling with his wife, but I felt I knew something intimate about her that escaped him. I had no clue where she was though. And the thought she might be sleeping with some nitwit made me furious, dejected.

Gary drove us in his Range Rover. Brigit sat elegantly beside him. She was born to ride shotgun. I pictured her Cool Ranch smile gleaming in the window and I was happy for her she could openly twirl her nut-brown hair to nab Gary's attention with me in the backseat, twiddling my thumbs.

We pulled into the lot outside Best Buy. Gary killed the breaks and let out a wisp of breath. He checked his teeth in the dashboard mirror then applied a fresh spread of chapstick

onto his thin gray lips. Brigit helped him clamp the glove compartment shut, but the chapstick tube fell on the floor anyhow and I kept a lid on it. They made a smart couple.

We hit the pavement near a herd of shopping carts and almost got creamed by a crewcut in a flight jacket who dumped his bounty off a hand truck, inches from our toes. Gary put out a stiff-arm and led with calculating eyes that seemed to be following a mental GPS he'd trailed before. What the hell were we doing at Best Buy? Had Gary flipped his gourd? Brigit seized his arm and we closed in on the great house of electronics.

Axel rose greeted us. His kingsize cardboard self that is, promoting the newest Guitar Hero and PlayStations piled onto each other as a fortress of solitude. The insomniacs and wannabe DJs with brow rings and acne shimmied their hips and fist pumped to the noise in their earmuff-thick headsets.

A candy factory of lights both lured and confounded shoppers. An army of Bristol Palins stuck a collective middle finger at anybody willing to pay her homage. A quick flash and then it was Peyton Manning barking signals with his back leg so bouncy you'd swear he needed to take a minute-long whizz. I watched the snap smack right into the champ's golden fingers and the wideouts sprinted at lightspeed while the cornerbacks tailed in kamikaze-style and then I noticed Agnes standing off to the side, a zombie in a ponytail, a far cry from the zenith of serenity nestled on my basement couch. Shoppers crossed her field of vision and she never batted an eyelash.

Gary grabbed both my hand and Brigit's and bowed his head. We huddled while Gary gave his instructions. I'd never participated in an intervention. To me, to my limited knowledge on the undertaking, it was a plea to enlist strangers into the hot mess one couldn't settle squarely. Granted, Brigit and I couldn't truly be considered as the best couple to tackle this. Didn't they have other friends or family? Then I started to wonder how Gary knew for sure his wife was where she was. Had he got tipped off by the store manager or was he forever loping through the television aisles of department stores because Agnes had this obsession? Was he acting on a hunch?

Gary clapped and we broke into our prescribed posts. He had an air of scrimmage-hungry quarterback, but it was a Teflon veneer. I saw him getting sacked, spurned by the two-dimensional glare of the idiot box. He flubbed his first and second tries. He flicked off the power of one of the sets and Agnes shuffled a few wonky steps to find a larger plasma screen paradise. His pitiful, disparate attempts brandished him into a poor dancing partner who couldn't keep the pace of his lighter-footed, supremely agile superior.

Gary ticked off a couple of comparative shoppers, studying a triptych of wide angle screens. Agnes ignored Brigit's feeble attempt to coax her along as if Brigit were a useless sales clerk.

When Agnes stared blankly at me, I felt my vital organs crush into a bag of ice. The air filling the cavity between her neck and collarbone was the only sign she had a pulse. We would never share a sleeping bag in the woods. I'd never have another chance to scratch the small of her back. More than that, I had the strange premonition we'd never again cross paths. If

somehow I did see her wallowing alone as the shadows fused into dusk and the wind behaved for a moment, permitting me to win back lost time I'm not sure I'd say or do anything worthwhile.

The incandescent light brightened her face and glowed ghostly white on her teeth. Then two half moons pressed into her cheeks and her mouth opened a crack and I saw this as a sign of recognition. I approached her, but she said nothing, and worse, she curled away to keep me from blocking her view. The GEICO gecko made the usual jerk of himself and Agnes grew smitten with his smarminess. She made the cruelest of gestures. She chuckled.

The only thing that salved my pain was the fact Gary stood in the same boat. Ah, how misery craves company. The poor sucker. I did feel guilty for dragging his wife through this hell, but not for the fact I'd insinuated myself between them. He slunk away. I didn't see him there and I supposed he'd given up. Brigit had gone too. Whatever delusion, at the helm of reasoning, pushed me to one last try. I seized Agnes by the hand. She didn't register me. Her mind elsewhere although probing. I dug into my dusty repertoire of half scenes and line snippets from shows we'd watched hoping to set a spark. Out poured *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, I hammed the local weathermen, and culminated with *abbastanza bene* a verse of the winning solo from *American Idol*. She gobbled it up. I'd finally gotten through. If she'd had a dozen roses, she'd clench one between her spotless teeth and toss the rest at my feet. I prepared myself for the hug of a lifetime, the fairytale kiss and she rushed toward me with the wingspan of a polar bear. My sense of stasis was indeed wobbly and I slipped past. Paradise can't be paradise without a thimble-scoop of imperfection. This made my heart jump. When I did turn to catch her she had already clamped her delicate arms around the enormous box Gary held in his breast, a glorious high definition set from Panasonic marked in bold burgundy letters.

Lucky for me Brigit had bugged out because I couldn't bear her to see me nibbling on the crumbs of my rejection.

After the honeymooners paid for their new electric toy, I decided to take a long walk, the Mecca of walks until I made it off the grid, where the only white noise wafted from my open lips.