

## **Inanimate Objects**

Curt Eriksen

He was cold, but he didn't dare pull the thin bedspread up. She slept soundly, snoring softly at times, her cheek flattened against his back, one arm slung across his ribcage.

It might have been that he didn't owe her so much as to suffer the risk of catching a cold, or even one sleepless night, but he couldn't be sure. Of course he knew that he didn't owe her anything at all: they were ultimately strangers, despite the fact that he was lying in her bed. But it didn't make any difference. He wasn't about to move.

Then she snorted in her sleep and it sounded like fragments of laughter or cymbals clashing. She might have been mocking him as she snuggled even closer, her arm sliding to his waist. Now every time he inhaled the tips of her fingers brushed against the sensitive skin of his stomach.

He would have sighed as well, but he didn't dare, knowing that it was ridiculous, this perverse restraint, that he couldn't disturb her with a sigh and even if he did it would hardly matter.

But she had to go to work in a couple of hours, not him. And spend an entire day wondering whether she'd ever see him again, whether he'd call, or whether he'd be like any number of others, those who had found out and determined to stay away.

He figured she might be busy at her glamorless job, but she would no doubt think about what had happened, in between taking calls and cancelling reservations,

between memories of the brief trip she had just made to Tangiers and the fantasies of all the dream trips, to China and Madagascar, that she would, in all probability, never make. So he took it upon himself to bear those few hours and not bother with too much comfort.

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From where he lay he could see through the bedroom window but he couldn't tell if the sky had grown any lighter since he had first turned away from her and onto his side—how long ago was that?

It had really been far too awkward, from the beginning, or at least that's the way he saw it now. Far too awkward. Yet he had persisted, or at least allowed it to happen. Of course he realized that it had been his careless indifference to yet another meaningless adventure that had led him to where he was lying now. But even so he kept reminding himself that he hadn't forced anything, it wasn't his fault.

When he sat down in an empty chair at another table on the terrace of the Viva Madrid next to, but not facing her, he didn't even glance at her, that much was true. At least not until she asked him for the time. He never wore a watch so he couldn't say. But he did look over his shoulder then. Just once, sizing her up like that, taking her in with a sweep of his hooded eyes. And immediately he had seen that there was nothing striking about her. He saw that much in a flash. And he, of course, was always looking for something striking.

Then she made a banal comment about the time, something about the way it flew or slipped through your fingers, but he ignored the comment, acting as if he hadn't even heard it. He hoped that it was time for her to go, that she would leave and

make room for someone else. But she didn't go, even though it was getting close to midnight and she had to get up at seven o'clock the next morning and go to work on the other side of the city. It was she who chose to stay, *she* was the one who had persevered.

She said he didn't look like a Spaniard and asked him where he was from and this time he shifted his weight enough to turn and face her, briefly, before sitting back in his chair and staring straight ahead again.

She thought so, she could spot an American a mile away. It was the way they dressed, she said. "They don't dress like Europeans. They like to wear ugly, but comfortable, shoes."

He sipped his gin and tonic and stretched his legs out, crossing one foot over the ankle of the other. His shoes were Italian loafers and even though the leather was very soft they pinched his feet. But he still hoped that she would go away and make room for someone else.

Then she said, "I was in Cleveland once, living for three weeks with an Irish-American family. I was sixteen at the time and the father was a brute. I had to put a lock on my bedroom door. But even so, one night he came home drunk and he kicked the door down. Since he grunted in his sleep his wife habitually stuffed her ears with foam plugs, but one of his sons was my age and he was in love with me and he came running into the bedroom just in time. I went there to learn English and I was supposed to stay for the whole summer. But I left the next day."

He had to hand it to her, she was working hard to make some pretty creative conversation. It was obvious that she had taken a lively interest in him and he had a weakness for adulation, no matter how short lived.

So he scooted his chair back a little, just enough to allow him to turn and comfortably look at her. And then he let his gaze roam. There was a fake blonde in a short skirt, with long slim legs that had been tanned on some southern beach, standing at the window beside the waiter and talking to him while the bartender set the drinks on the tray. Other than that, there wasn't much to look at. So he actually considered the possibility of getting up and leaving. But he knew himself well enough to know that he wouldn't know what to do with himself if he went home this early, and without any company.

She said, "I've always wondered what would have happened if I would have stayed in Cleveland. Maybe things would have worked out some other way."

He looked at her again and she said, "I mean, everything that happens in our lives follows upon everything that has preceded it. Haven't you ever wondered, if you wouldn't have been in just such a place at just such a time, if you had only turned left instead of right, and gone down one street instead of another, or simply come along five minutes later, then something that you wished with all your heart would never have happened might not have ever happened?"

The gushing, almost confessional quality of her speech was disarming, but he didn't know what she was driving at. Still, he ordered another drink and this time he asked her if she would like one as well.

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He thought he heard something, and it might have been the first tentative twittering of a city sparrow. He held his breath and listened and the tips of her fingers pressed lightly against the most sensitive part his whole body, between his navel and his groin. Her apartment was located in a concrete building on the south side of Madrid, in a working class neighborhood that used to be an independent and outlying town. It was small and cluttered with all sorts of cheap knick-knacks, good luck roosters from Portugal and crystal dolphins from Ceuta, the innumerable souvenirs she had brought back from the many trips she went on by herself, always at a discount.

Not like his place, right in the center of the city, near the Plaza Mayor. His apartment was high-ceilinged and almost too big, with lots of space he could never successfully occupy. And in his apartment he could overhear passing conversations on the street at all hours of the night, and the delivery trucks sounded like they were coming through the front door. Here it was too quiet, too still.

He let his breath out and her arm jerked with a dream spasm, sliding even lower, to settle in the curve of his hip. Now every time he inhaled her fingers grazed his pubic hair and he shivered at the unusual degree of intimacy. He had never slept with the same woman for more than a few months running. That's why he couldn't understand why she had said, looking at him through the play of shadows in her bedroom, once they had finished and she had lit another cigarette: "I don't know what it is, but you're not like other men. I can't put my finger on it though. But you can imagine what it's like, sometimes. Spaniards think they're pretty tolerant, but it isn't true. Most men are macho pigs. You, on the other hand, you don't say anything, and I

can't read your mind. But you seem to have at least accepted me, even though it was obvious that you didn't enjoy it very much."

A clock chimed somewhere and he counted six stokes. In another hour the alarm would sound and she would wake up. Then they would climb out of opposite sides of the bed and get dressed without looking at each other. Maybe she would make a joke to hide her embarrassment. She would probably offer him a cup of coffee. He would rather do without and leave straight away, but he couldn't risk the offense. Anyway the coffee would taste good after such a long restless night.

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It must have been the third or fourth drink. She kept making the same enigmatic references to her past, to some unfortunate event, but he wasn't interested in probing and sharing her secrets. Sure, he was feeling pretty loose by then and occasionally he would laugh at one of her self-deprecating jokes. But even then, long after midnight, he kept hoping that she would leave, even though it was getting late and the crowd had already thinned to nothing.

But she stayed on, lighting one cigarette after another and, forgetting that he didn't smoke, she kept offering the pack to him and laughing at herself when she realized her mistake—yet again! And she kept flourishing the cigarettes with her speech and blowing the smoke out of the side of her mouth and teasing him with her pestering banter, even though her humor was corrupted by a heartless cynicism. And slowly, with her carrying on in this way, as if she was better left alone and should never be pitied, she began to seduce him. It might have been the smoke in her voice, that grainy and harassed quality, as if her life had been too much already.

While they sat there drinking together and the night wore on he started looking at her more and more often and he saw that her face, without being striking in the least, was nonetheless handsome. The line of her jaw was strong and her mouth was wide and her lips were full and she kept sweeping the untidy black hair off her bright round forehead. And there was that voice she used to say such queer things to him.

Then the waiter arrived with another round, and as he stood up to pull the wallet out of his back pocket he bumped the table and the fresh drinks spilled into her lap. The long tubular glasses rolled off the table and shattered on the ground. He made a clumsy attempt to brush the ice cubes off her pants but she lurched back and almost fell over. The waiter cursed under his breath, “Me cago en la leche.” But he turned to the man and ordered another round anyway. The waiter kicked the pieces of glass under the table and stomped away.

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Now the fingers of his left hand tingled with the sensation of sleep. He tried to open and close them, but they were already so numb they felt detached from the rest of his body. He couldn't be sure he was actually moving his fingers when he tried to wiggle them. If he could only shift his arm forward, out from beneath his chest, just enough to relieve the pressure? But that might wake her.

“Christ,” he thought, “why do I care?”

And the urge to throw back her arm and jump up and grab his clothes and run out of the apartment nearly possessed him. But he didn't move a muscle. Instead he breathed steadily, patiently, envying the insensitive fingers of his left hand.

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Halfway through the drinks the waiter had brought to replace those that had spilled, she said that she would have to tell him something. “It’s confidential,” she said, boldly smiling to dissimulate her own doubts. “Top secret.” And he noticed how the unexpected shyness also softened her features, and he urged her to feel free to tell him anything she wanted.

They had edged their chairs together by then and were sitting so close their forearms would sometimes brush against each other. The early September night had cooled and he had already abandoned himself to the possibility, to the likelihood, to the eventuality of making love with her. She kept telling him stories about the friendly men she met on the countless trips she had made throughout Europe, the different ways the French and the English and the Germans came on to her, but ever since he spilled the drinks her humor had been infected with a curious sobriety. And he couldn’t figure it out. When she mentioned the chill in the air he reached an arm around her shoulder and ran his hand down her spine and along the roll of her ass which he cupped and pulled towards him. But he was disconcerted by the way she tensed when he touched her, as if bracing for an impact. Later, while laughing at something she had said, he reached forward and touched her thigh but she immediately grabbed his hand. And her grip was strong.

But her prohibitions only sharpened his interest. As if she were guarding something all the more valuable for being well guarded.

And he suddenly felt casually intimate, like he and she were old friends, rather than potential lovers. He encouraged her now to confide in him, he said that she could trust him. Why not?

And she believed him. She tried. He watched her search for the right words. It was like watching a child walk barefoot through an abandoned lot full of dried up thistle and broken bottles. But the haze of the alcohol made him feel generous and uniquely understanding. He didn't care anymore, about anything at all. He said, "Tell me," and his voice was reassuring and—somehow—oddly sincere. She looked at him and there was gratitude in her eyes, which seemed to dilate when it all came out in a rush. He closed his own eyes and his head spun with the rapid Spanish that he was trying to translate and interpret as quickly as he could. The silence that followed was very awkward, but she interrupted it almost immediately by saying, "It's something I've come to terms with. It doesn't matter anymore." He sat up in his chair and told her that it didn't matter to him either.

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Sitting in the passenger seat of the car he watched the shadows produced by the street lamps grow long and pull apart before they dissolved into nothing. He imagined her at the end of that summer she had started in Cleveland, walking with some friends across one of the four streets that converged in the Puerta del Sol. The taxi had run a red light and one of her friends was left in a coma from which she never fully recovered.

He shook his head. He was drunk, no doubt about it. But through the mist of alcohol that shrouded his thinking he began to see the obvious, something he had vaguely noticed earlier, something he *should have* noticed—when she lurched back from the table, or grabbed his hand so firmly? But whatever it was, he had failed to pursue it and now it didn't matter any more.

During the long drive to her apartment he took no interest in the special features of the car, the way it had been adapted to her needs. He felt cold and bloodless, like a reptile. She kept telling him that he could turn around at any point, that she would understand. But each time she said this he answered her too hastily, saying, “No, no,” as if he meant it.

If he could have disappeared though, just then, while they were gliding through the empty streets of the city, and simply vanished, dissolving into the night like the other shadows, without leaving a trace, nothing to remind her, ever, of him...

But right before they left the Viva Madrid she had insisted upon writing her home, cell and work phone numbers on the back of the tab the waiter had unceremoniously delivered to him. All he wanted at the time was to go back to his place and sleep, alone. And yet upon taking the piece of paper from her he felt committed, not the last of his absurd ideas. The way he saw it, events had been set in motion: with his offer of confidence he had closed a door and shut himself inside.

He tried to be creative, and think about it in a variety of ways—as an experience, of course, another notch on the deeply scarred butt of his gun. Or as a demonstration of a bizarre sort of self-sacrifice. When he worked at all he worked as an airline steward, and he had always found it easy to bed attractive women. But for whom could he be sacrificing what? Any self-gratifying notions of his own nobility filled him with disgust. He always knew what he was after, every time he stepped foot outside his door, and unlike others in his crowd he took no pleasure in deceiving himself. By the time he seriously considered leaping out of the car she had found the parking space that was reserved for her and she was backing into it.

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Her arm jerked again and he wondered if she could be dreaming his thoughts, if such a thing were possible. So he tried not to think at all, but he couldn't quiet the clamor in his mind. He had slept with so many women, and he had never suffered any remorse. In fact he had done some pretty hideous things in his day, using women for his own amusement and tossing them away like dirty rags once his most basic needs had been satisfied. So why should he be bothered by this particular encounter, why did he feel so savage, like a predator?

He didn't know the answer to that question, but he had another hour to think about it. And just as he always did, after every other conquest, he felt compelled to go through it all again, to relive what had happened in his memory. What else could he do? And he had to admit that there was a morbid pleasure in the discomfort of seeing it all again: the way she brought the car to a stop, right beneath the street lamp, braking with her left hand; the feeble smile on her face then, an expression of empathy which simultaneously offered and precluded his acceptance of his last opportunity to withdraw; then the short but interminable walk to the block of cheap apartments, with her limp so blatant now and her hesitation—and his perplexity—before the flight of stairs; the echo in the stairwell, rising after him, and the ease and agility of his own ascent; the sugary pop music on the radio she turned on once they went inside, hoping to create some romantic ambience, and his prayer that the alcohol would see him through; his relief after she turned out all the lights, followed by the sudden animation of the strange blue shadows in the room; and then the absolute failure of his imagination on the sofa, and her benign suggestion after a while that they go into the

bedroom; his intense desire of nothing but sleep then, only sleep; and finally that courageous sentence that overwhelmed his protest of disbelief: “I’ll be right back, I have to take it off.”

His left arm ached now and he couldn’t feel his fingers at all. He tried to concentrate, but he seemed to have successfully blocked out the image of her hopping back to the bed. He couldn’t see that. But he could see himself, very clearly, in the dim light of the bedroom, rolling onto his side to make room for her on the narrow mattress. He was scanning what he could see of her face for something to fix on, anything, as she climbed under the sheets, but he was also looking instead, despite himself, at the secret she had offered to him.

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Later, after he had turned away and she had fallen asleep against his back, the intoxication seemed to lift like a curtain. His sudden sobriety shocked him. He desperately wanted another drink. He thought about getting up and looking for a bottle, even a beer. He knew he could find something. But the idea of rummaging about in the unfamiliar apartment among all the mute and inanimate objects, the mementoes and trophies of a stranger’s life, and finding, instead of a bottle, her leg propped up in a corner, paralyzed him where he lay.

She murmured in her sleep and snuggled against him, the tips of her fingers brushing the most sensitive part of his groin. He was the kind of guy who used to consider the women he slept with as victims of his irresistible charm. But he knew now that nothing could be further from the truth.

Originally published in *The Ranfurly Review*  
September 2009

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