

MY CHIVALRIC FLASCO

By George Saunders

Once again it was TorchLightNight.

Around nine I went out to pee. Back in the woods was the big tank that sourced our fake river, plus a pile of old armor.

Don Murray flew past me, looking frazzled. Then I heard a sob. Near the armor pile I found Martha from Scullery, peasant skirt up around her waist.

Martha: That guy is my boss. Oh my God oh my God.

I knew Don Murray was her boss because Don Murray was also my boss.

All of a sudden she recognized me.

Ted, don't tell, she said. Please. It's no big deal. Nate can't know. It would kill him.

Then hightailed it out to Parking, eyes black underneath from crying.

Cooking had laid out a big spread on a crude table over by CastleTowerIV: authentic pig heads and whole chickens and blood pudding.

Don Murray stood there moodily picking at some coleslaw.

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And gave me the friendliest headshake he'd ever given me.

Women, he said.

See me, said a note on my locker next morning.

In Don Murray's office was Martha.

So Ted, Don Murray said. Last night you witnessed something that, if not viewed in the right light, might seem wrongish. Martha and I find that funny. Don't we, Mar? I just now gave Martha a thousand dollars. In case there was some kind of misunderstanding. Martha now feels we had a fling.

Which, both being married, we so much regret. What with the drinking, plus the romance of TorchLightNight, what happened, Martha?

Martha: We got carried away. Had a fling.

Don: Voluntary fling.

Martha: Voluntary fling.

Don: And not only that, Ted. Martha here is moving up. From Scullery. To Floater Thespian. But let's underscore: you are not moving up, Martha, because of our voluntary fling. It's coincidental.

Why are you moving up?

Martha: Coincidental.

Don: Coincidental, plus always had a killer work ethic. Ted, you're also moving up. Out of Janitorial. To Pacing Guard.

Which was amazing. I'd been in Janitorial six years. A man of my caliber. That was a joke MQ and I sometimes shared.

Erin would call down and go: MQ, someone threw up in the Grove of Sorrow.

And MQ would be like: A man of my caliber?

Or Erin would go: Ted, some lady

dropped her necklace down in the pigpen and is pitching a shit fit.

And I would go: A man of my caliber?

Erin would be like: Get going. It's not funny. She's right up in my grill.

Our pigs were fake and our slop was fake and our poop was fake but still it was no fun to have to don waders and drag the SifterBoyDeLux into the pigpen to, for example, find that lady's necklace. For best results with the SifterBoyDeLux, you had to first lug the fake pigs off to one side. Being on auto the pigs would continue grunting as you lugged them. Which might look funny if you happened to be holding that particular pig wrong.

Some random guy might go: Look, dude's breast-feeding that pig.

And everyone might laugh.

Therefore a promotion to Pacing Guard was very much welcomed by me.

I was currently the only working person in our family. Mom being sick, Beth being shy, Dad having sadly cracked his spine recently when a car he was fixing fell on him. We also had some windows that needed replacing. All winter Beth would go around shyly vacuuming up snow. If you came in while she was vacuuming, she would prove too shy to continue.

That night at home Dad calculated we could soon buy Mom a tilting bed.

Dad: If you keep moving up the ladder, maybe in time we can get me a back brace.

Me: Absolutely. I am going to make that happen.

After dinner, driving into town to fill Mom's prescriptions for pain and Beth's prescription for shyness and Dad's prescription for pain, I passed Martha and Nate's.

I honked, did a lean-and-wave, pulled over, got out.

Hey Ted, said Nate.

What's up? I said.

Well, our place sucks, Nate said. Look at this place. Sucks, right? I just can't seem to keep my energy up.

True, their place was pretty bad. The roof was patched with blue sheeting, their kids were doing timid leaps off a wheelbarrow into a mud puddle, a skinny pony was under the swing set licking itself raw like it wanted to be clean when it finally made its break for a nicer living situation.

I mean where are the grown-ups around here? Nate said.

He picked a Snotz wrapper off the ground and looked for somewhere to put it. Then dropped it again and it landed on his shoe.

Perfect, he said. Story of my life.

Jeez, Martha said, and plucked it off.

Don't you go south on me too, Nate said. You're all I got, babe.

No I am not, Martha said. You got the kids.

One more thing goes wrong, I'm shooting myself, Nate said.

I kind of doubted he had the get-up-and-go for that. Although you never know.

So what's going on at your guys' work? Nate said. This one here's been super moody. Even though she just got herself promoted.

I could feel Martha looking at me like: Ted, I'm in your hands here.

I figured it was her call. Based on my experience of life, which I have not exactly hit out of the park, I tend to agree with that thing about, If it's not broke, don't fix it. And would go even further, to: Even if it is broke, leave it alone, you'll probably make it worse.

So said something about, well, promotions can be hard, they cause a lot of stress.

The gratitude was just beaming off Martha. She walked me back to the car, gave me three tomatoes they'd grown, which, tell the truth, looked kind of geriatric: tiny, timid, wrinkled.

You're a good friend, she whispered.

Next morning in my locker were my Pacing Guard uniform and a Dixie cup with a yellow pill in it.

Hooray, I thought, finally, a Medicated Role.

In came Mrs. Bridges from Health & Safety, with an MSDS on the pill.

Mrs. Bridges: So, this is just going to be 100 milligrams of KnightLyfe®. To help with the Improv. The thing with KnightLyfe® is, you're going to want to stay hydrated.

I took the pill, went to the Throne Room. I was supposed to Pace in front of a door behind which a King was supposedly thinking. There really was a King in there: Ed Phillips. They put a King in there because one of our Tropes

was: Messenger arrives, charges past Pacing Guard, throws open door, King calls Messenger reckless, calls Pacing Guard a lackwit, Messenger winces, closes door, has brief exchange with Pacing Guard.

Soon Guests had nearly filled our Fun Spot. The Messenger (a.k.a. Kyle Sperling) barged past me, threw open the door. Ed called Kyle reckless, called me a lackwit. Kyle winced, closed door.

Kyle: I apologize if I have violated protocol.

I blanked on my line, which was: Your rashness bespeaks a manly passion.

Instead I was like: Uh, no problem.

Kyle, a real pro, did not miss a beat.

Kyle (handing me envelope): Please see that he gets this. It is of the utmost urgency.

Me: His Majesty is weighed down with thought.

Kyle: With many burdens of thought?

Me: Right. Many burdens of thought.

Just then the KnightLyfe® kicked in. My mouth went dry. I felt it was nice of Kyle not to give me shit about my mess-up. It occurred to me that I really liked Kyle. Loved him even. Like a brother. A comrade. Noble comrade. I felt we had weathered many storms together. It seemed, for example, that we had, at some point, in some far-distant land, huddled together at the base of a castle wall, hot tar roiling down, and there shared a rueful laugh, as if to say: It is all but brief, so let us live. And then: What ho! Had charged. Up crude ladders, with manly Imprecations, although I could not recall the exact Imprecations, nor the outcome of said Charge.

Kyle departed anon. I did happily entertain our Guests, through use of Wit and various Jibes, glad that I had, after my many Travails, arrived at a station in Life whence I could impart such Merriment to All & Sundry.

Soon, the Pleasantness of that Day, already Considerable, was much improved by the Arrival of my Benefactor, Don Murray.

Quoth Don Murray, with a glad-some Wink: Ted, you know what you and me should do sometime? Go on a trip or something together. Like a fishing trip? Camping, whatever.

My heart swelled at this Notion.

To fish, to hunt, to make Camp with this noble Gentleman! To wander wide Fields & verdant Woods! To rest, at Day's End, in some quiet Bower, beside a coursing Stream, and there, amidst the muted Whinnying of our Steeds, speak softly of many Things—of Honor; of Love; of Danger; of Duty well executed!

But then there Occurr'd a fateful Event.

To wit, the Arrival of the aforementioned Martha, in the guise of a Spirit—Spirit Three, to be precise—along with two other Damsels in White (these being Megan & Tiffany). This Trio of Maids did affect a Jolly Ruse: they were Ghosts, who didst Haunt this Castle, with much Shaking of Chain and many Sad Laments, as our Guests, in that Fun Spot, confined by the Red Ropes, did Gape & Yaw & Shriek at the Spectacle provided therein.

Glimpsing Martha's Visage—which, though Merry, bore withal a Trace of some Dismal Memory (and I knew well what it was)—I grew, in spite of my recent good Fortune, somewhat Melancholy.

Noting this Change in my Disposition, Martha didst speak to me softly, in an Aside.

Martha: It's cool, Ted. I'm over it. Seriously. I mean it. Drop it.

O, that a Woman of such enviable Virtue, who had Suffered so, would deign to speak to me in a Manner so Frank & Direct, consenting by her Words to keep her Disgrace in such bleak Confinement!

Martha: Ted. You okay?

To which I made Reply: Verily, I have not been Well, but Distracted & Remiss; but presently am Restored unto Myself, and hereby do make Copious Apology for my earlier Neglect with respect to Thee, dear Lady.

Martha: Easy there, Ted.

At this time, Don Murray himself didst step Forward, and, extending his Hand, placed it upon my Breast, as if to Restrain me.

Ted, I swear to God, quoth he. Put a sock in it or I will flush you down the shitter so fast.

And verily, part of my Mind now didst give me sound Counsel: I must endeavor to dampen these Feelings, lest I commit some Rash Act, converting my Good Fortune into Woe.



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Yet the Heart of Man is an Organ that doth not offer Itself up to facile Prediction, and shall not be easily Tam'd.

For looking upon Don Murray now, many Thoughts did assemble in my Mind, like unto Thunderclouds: Of what Use is Life, if the Living Man doth not pursue Righteousness, & enforce Justice, as God granteth him the Power to do so? Was it a Happy thing, that a Fiend went about Unhindered? Must the Weak forever wander this goodly Orb unprotected? At these Thoughts, something Honest and Manly began to assert itself within me, whereupon, Secrecy not befitting a Gentleman, I strode into the very Center of that Room and sent forth, to the many Guests gathered there, a right Honest Proclamation, in Earnest, & Aloud, to wit:

—That Don Murray had taken Foul Advantage of Martha, placing, against her Will, his Rod into her Womanhood on TorchLightNight;

—Further: that this foul Wretch had Procured Martha's silence by Various Bribes, including her current Job of Worke;

—Further: that he had similarly attempted to Purchase my Silence; but that I would be SILENT no MORE, for was a Man withal, if nothing ELSE, and would SERVE Righteousness, Regarding NOT the Cost.

Turning to Martha, I requested, by inflection of my Head, her Assent in these Statements, & Confirmation of the Truth of that which I had Declared. But alas! The wench did not Affirm me. Only drop'd her Eyes, as if in Shame, and fled that Place.

Security, being Summoned by Don Murray, didst then arrive, and, making much of the Opportunity, had Good Sport of me, delivering many harsh Blows to my Head & Body. And Wrested me from that Place, and Shoved me into the Street, kicking much Dirt upon my Person, and rip'd my Timecard to Bits before mine Eyes, and sent it fluttering Aloft, amidst much cruel Laughter at my Expense, especially viz my Feathered Hat, one Feather of which they had Sore Bent.

I sat, bleeding and bruised until, summoning what Dignity remained, I

made for Home and such Comforts as might be Afforded me there. I had not even Fare to make the Bus (my Backpack having been left behind in that Foul Place), so continued Afoot for well unto an Hour, the Sun by then low in its Arc, all that time Reflecting sadly that, withal, I had Failed in Discrimination, thereby delivering my Family into a most dire Position, whereupon our Poverty, already a Hindrance to our Grace, wouldst be many times Multiplied.

There would be no Back Brace for Father, no Tilting Bed for Mother, and indeed, the Method by which we would, in future, make Compense for their various Necessary Medicines was now Unknown.

Anon I found Myself in proximity of the Wendy's on Center Boulevard, by the closed-down Outback, coming down hard, aware that, soon, the effect of the Elixir having subsided, I would find myself standing before our iffy Television, struggling to explain, in my own lowly Language, that, tho' Winter's Snows would soon be upon us (entering even unto our Dwelling, as I have earlier Vouchsafed), no Appeal wouldst be Brook'd: I was Fired; Fired & Sore Disgraced!

Whence came a Death's blow of sorts, underscoring my Folly, delivered by Martha herself, who, calling me upon my Cell Phone, addressed me with true Pain in her Voice, that didst cut me to the Quick, saying: Thanks a million, Ted, in case you didn't notice, we live in a small frigging town, oh my God, oh my God!

At this she began to cry, & in Earnest.

'Twas true: Gossip & Slander did Fly like the Wind in our Town, and would, for sure, reach the Ear of poor dumbfuck Nate soon withal. And finding himself thus cruelly Informed, Nate would definitely freak.

Oh, man.

What a shit Day.

Taking a Shortcut through the high school practice Field, where the tackling Dummies, in silhouette, like men who knew the value of holding their Tongues, seemed to Mock at me, I attempted to Comfort myself, saying I had done Right, and served Truth, and shewn good Courage. But 'twas no Comfort in it. It was so weird.

Why had I even done That? I felt like a total dickBrain, who should have just left well enough alone, & been more Moderate. I had really screwed the Pooch, no lie. Although, on the other Hand, did not the Devil himself, upon occasion, don the Garb of Moderation, as might befit his Purpose? Although, then again, who did I think I was, Mr. Big Shot?

Damn.

Damn it.

What a clusterfuck.

This was going to be Hard to live down.

I was almost completely myself now which, believe me, was no Picnic.

One last bit of Pill got digested by me, seemed like. Producing one last brief but powerful surge of Return. To that former Self. Who, Elevated & Confident to a Fault, had so led me astray.

I took me to the Banks of the River, and tarried there awhile, as the lowering Sun made one with the Water, giving generously of Itself & its Divers Colours, in a Splay of Magnificence that preceded a most wonderful Silence. ■

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