

Who Loveth Best

Shambling around his apartment barefoot and bathrobed one morning, Aaron was mildly surprised to step on a small, brittle ball, darkish in color. Curious, he picked it up, held it between thumb and forefinger, peered at it. He found it greenish-brown upon closer inspection, dry and hard, yet it crumbled under pressure. He brushed his fingers off on his robe but did not resume his stride. He couldn't recall just where he'd been going when his foot encountered the object. Actually, he wasn't going anywhere in particular. Aaron Fahey wasn't going *anywhere*. Period.

Tenure at this seedy little college for Aaron Fahey, Doctor of Letters, seemed not so much a breeze-billowed kite loose of its string, soaring off into stormy skies as a pathetic confection of tissue and twig plumped back to ground with a feeble thump, not even a hearty crash, and about whose remains he couldn't even manage a wince, let alone the unalloyed horror to which his wife Rena was given over. He'd make it up to her, he promised himself. For now, he simply registered the collapse of his ambition, his hope, his effort, and swallowed the inevitable—that he was out of full time college teaching for the likely future—and set about digesting that certitude. He assumed that in time, Rena would do the same.

In the weeks following the denial of tenure, Aaron Fahey dragged around the apartment, désœuvré, but hardly in despair. He just couldn't bring himself to sustain the pace he'd kept up over the years he'd struggled to establish himself even in this tiny department. Sentinel College, despite its flaking grandeur, laid claim to any number of university rejects who had, through academic devolution, leached down to the small college level to poison the well of a teaching faculty with their obsessive *collegiality*. His “scholarship,” in which he'd taken little enough interest even when it meant his *gagne-pain*, seemed hollow and vaporous to him now, the sympathy of his colleagues—who could see in his fate their own, ultimately—meaningless.

After the inevitable dissemination from mouth to ear of the Committee's decision, he'd detected a certain distance already establishing itself between him and some of his former friends. As a matter of fact, he had no *friends*, only *colleagues* with whom he shared a titter over some point of disciplinary arcana or a tuna-salad-and-pita lunch in the faculty lounge. Between his ferocious dedication to the spurious “research,” which immured him in his office and his post-tenure-decision sulking—which he chose to indulge in at home—there wasn't that much difference, either to the members of Fahey's department, who found him prickly enough, or to his students, who had never conceived much affection for him, so profound had been his focus on salvation in the guild. Forgotten but not gone, he said to himself, and made a resolution to spend as little time as possible at school from then on in.

This resolution, though, had the effect of revealing to Aaron Fahey just how empty his life had been and how little he actually did, *lived* outside work, how narrow his life had become. Rena, a clinical psychologist aggressively active in *her* profession, had

espoused any number of local and even global causes—the fucking rain forest, an endangered bug out in Oregon, the victims of an obscure and unpalatable degenerative nerve disorder, somebody-or-other's *syndrome*, the name of which he was always forgetting or mispronouncing—and still had her career momentum intact, her egos to salve, her bases to round. And she didn't have much time to stroke *him* these days. He understood that. He was on his own to piece together his shattered dreams—if they had actually been dreams—face the humiliation, recover. And likely he would, too. In time.

Just now, though, Fahey felt numb. He kind of enjoyed the incipient narcosis. He wandered around the apartment like a zombie, unshaven, unkempt, unshod, undressed. Read the paper from end to end. Every day. Watched the soaps. 'Rena was off at one of her colloquia, delivering a disquisition on the fruit of another useless project on animal behavior, *Synaptic Subtension in Johansen's Greater Etiolated Vole* or something. Jeezus. Wichita or Des Plaines or Des Moines or some awful place out west. Fahey shuffled from the kitchen, where he'd steeped for himself the umpteenth cup of steaming tea that morning, toward the front door to see if the afternoon paper had come yet.

That was when he stepped on another of those things.

Drawn from his reverie by the sensation under the sole of his foot, he picked up the source of it. It was, sure enough, a pellet, somewhat smaller than a marble, larger than a pea, brownish, but not so crusty as the first one. This one was softer, slick to the touch, spongy. Fahey reached into the pocket of his robe, took out his reading glasses, put them on. He peered at the little orb. It was grainy, packed tightly but composed of different kinds of, what... fibers? He couldn't make out. He passed it under his nose. It gave off a familiar enough odor he couldn't quite place. Puzzled, he swept the carpet with his gaze. He squatted down. Dropped to all fours. He lay himself down full length.

There was another one, right there, under the skirt of the easy chair. He withdrew it with a tentative gesture. What *are* these gismos? From the kitchen, he fetched a small porcelain saucer. He set the two globules in it and began to crawl about the room. When he got up, stiffly, he had six of the tiny spheroids in his hand. What *are* these things? He got a flashlight. He went from room to room. Checked under all the furniture. Behind the doors. Dozens of the little greenish-brown balls materialized. Soon they overflowed the saucer. He got a tupperware bowl from the cabinet. Driven by curiosity, he now searched high and low, mostly low. Are these things *eggs*? He imagined some kind of infestation as the small bullets erupted into... into... into... what?

He scurried into the living room, flipped through the phonebook, dialed the first number he found in the Yellow Pages under "exterminators." The specialist listened politely. Fahey, with what he fancied was a professorial sobriety and objectivity, described in all geometric fidelity the tiny pellets of organic matter, their location, their approximate texture, composition, configuration, odor, disposition, distribution. There was a pause. "Do you have children?" came the reply. "Children," echoed Fahey; "What would that have to do with it?" "Well," answered the voice, "What you describe sounds like droppings from a rodent, a hamster maybe, or pet rabbit." "Rabbit?" said

Fahey, rather more irritated than he'd intended; "We don't have children *or* rabbits. How could it be a rabbit? Rabbit?" Well, I'm just guessing from what you've told me. We'll come as soon as we can." Rabbit?

Fahey looked out the window. No lawn, no grass. City street. Gate. He walked around to the back porch. Peered out. Asphalt. He did notice a newly-deposited trash bag in the ash can. Had he put it there? Couldn't recall. Oh, yeah. 'Rena had pestered him all last week to take out the trash. She must've got fed up waiting and done it herself. Then he froze. He *did* take out the trash. And plumped it down into an empty ash can. This was a *new* bag that bulged out over the top of the can. 'Rena must've taken out *another* bag, this one! Now, why would she do that? And what could be in it? He tore at the bag with his fingernails, plucked the yielding plastic apart.

It was full of those things. And now, with the sudden release of the seal on the bag, he felt the scent he couldn't quite place before waft over him now. He took it full in the face, like a punch: *shit*. They were little pellets of shit. It was just as the exterminator had guessed. Rabbit?

He thrust his hands up to the forearm in the bag. He drew out fistfuls of pellets—OK, *droppings*—covered with shavings of some fragrant wood, cedar he guessed. The bag was full of the stuff, fresh to judge from the pasty feel of the balls and the moistness of the chips. What the hell is going on? He fled back into the apartment. What the hell is going on? The only room he hadn't searched was 'Rena's workroom, where out of discrete respect for her privacy, he never ventured. He poked open the door with a toe, gingerly. He walked in with mounting apprehension. A mortal instant, his hand hesitated on the knob. Old, white, hardwood door, object of numberless paintings, the scars from numberless screwings in and nailings on of racks, hangers, rods, hooks feebly concealed under the flat, flaking color. He turned the knob and yanked open the door all in one mad flash.

There, in the crepuscular light, nestled on a shelf, sat a long wire mesh cage, stuffed with wood shavings. A glass bottle sporting a stainless steel tube clung to one woven wall, the mouth of the spout thrusting into the cage, sealed by a ball bearing. As Fahey squinted closer, he made out the shape of a small, furry creature, about a foot long, sitting bolt upright amid the chaff lining the wire oblong. Its large black eyes fixed him with a regard Fahey almost took for contempt.

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When Serena Windschrift returned home from the New Directions in Neuropathology Conference in Des Moines, she found Aaron Fahey sitting in a darkened kitchen, feet propped up on the table, nursing a bottle of *Corona* beer and staring intently at a long, squarish shadow set on the counter by the sink "Well," she began, "Are we brooding?" She flicked the light on only to catch herself in mid-trill as she glimpsed the cage. He looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes and an expression she'd never seen before. He said nothing, took a swig from his *Corona*, and then from a plastic lime he

held in his other hand, shot a long squirt of the juice toward his open mouth. Much of it missed, dribbling down his chin and onto his shirt, where it joined the ample evidence of other failed trajectories. He belched gracelessly. Bwuuuuuuupppp! “Sit down,” he said.

She drew off her *Hermes* and settled herself at the table, determined to face this with dignity. Nevertheless, Fahey’s first question disarmed her.

“What *is* this?” he asked, head cocked slightly to one side, earnestly quizzical. ‘Rena didn’t seem to understand just how he meant that. “Why didn’t you tell me you wanted a pet?”

“Arvid’s *not* a pet,” she declared firmly.

“Arvid? Arvid? Arvid?” repeated Fahey in chromatically rising tones.

“That’s his name,” she replied coldly.

“Not a pet? What? One of your experiments? Thought we agreed you wouldn’t do that around the house.”

“He is *not* an experiment.”

“Well, what the hell *is* he, then,” croaked Fahey, popping the bottle into his mouth for a determined swig of the *Corona* and raising the plastic lime.

‘Rena straightened her back in the chair: “He’s my lover,” she said.

Fahey, facing away from her, turned back toward her in horror, nonetheless reflexively squeezing the lime in his fist. The stream of juice struck not his mouth, but his cheek, running down in a transparent sheen to drip noiselessly off his lower jaw. The jet of fluid, no longer impelled by pressure from Fahey’s fingers, receded first from a strong catenary arc, to a decaying parabola, to a feeble dribble, to a final droplet trembling at the hole fixed in the cap of the synthetic fruit. Fahey’s mouth dropped wide open. A thin filament of beer spilled from the slack lower lip. He stared at his wife.

The silence that succeeded ‘Rena’s avowal was a silence of the tundra. Of the snow-covered and trackless fastnesses of the Antarctic. Of the infinite wastes of deepest space. A silence of the end of the world. It was a silence as profound and fathomless as the abyss that separates one human being from another and for all eternity in the wordless chill of heart’s emptiness.

“Your l... l... l...” Fahey stammered at length, recomposing himself. “Your l... lover? He’s a fucking rat!”

“He’s not a *rat*,” asserted Rena, defiant now; “Arvid’s a *marmota monax prairialis*. A prairie dog to you.”

Fahey registered this information, frozen in astonishment at its clinicality, with a blink of both eyes.

“A prairie dog?”

“We met last fall when I went to that Conference at Wichita State. I was so bored. So bored, Aaron. I let myself be dragged along on a bus tour of Kansas ecology. I mean, after the shadows and dreariness of this place. That sky and the open spaces. That sun. I felt... Well, anyhow. We stopped at their community out on the prairie...”

“Whose community?”

“Arvid’s, of course.”

“Prairie dog holes?” interrupted Fahey, incredulous.

“Arvid’s people call them ‘communities.’ The *marmotides* are highly evolved and socially sophisticated. They don’t eat meat or make war or poison the air or...”

“Apparently they *do* shit on the floor,” grumbled Fahey, wiping the lime off his cheek ruefully.

“If you’re going to be like that...” said Rena.

“OK. OK. So you went to a ‘community’...”

“That’s where I first saw him. And... where he first saw me,” she giggled and looked toward the cage where the creature inside actually seemed to be listening to her words. “It was easy to pick him out from the others. He was so tall, so proud... so virile! He had been nibbling grass. Not after our eyes met, though. I couldn’t stop looking at him. Or he at me. As the tour director hauled me back to the bus, though, Arvid let loose this long, piercing, sibilant wail, a whistle you might say, but it drove right into my soul, a *cri de coeur*... it said ‘Come back to me, fair one.’ It was a shattering moment.”

Fahey’s eyes narrowed. As he pressed the beer bottle to his lips, he shifted his gaze alternately from... Arvid to his wife, breathlessly relating her encounter with what appeared to be genuine and sincere passion.

“That night I tossed and turned in the motel room. I saw Arvid everywhere I looked. I heard his throbbing declaration in the running tap water, in the TV static, in the moan of an ambulance outside in the street. I got up, took a taxi to the airport, rented a car, drove back to the community. I don’t know just what I was going to do. I stepped out of the car, walked toward the first of the little entryways—only the vulgar call them

holes—I don't know how I proposed to find him again. But just as my despair and my sense of reality were conspiring to snatch me back out of that place, I looked across that endless Kansas horizon and there, silhouetted against the sky under a moon that seemed to shine for us alone, a moon for all time and for all lovers, there was Arvid, perched on those muscular haunches of his..."

She cast upon the cage with its furry occupant a look that actually revulsed Fahey.

"The white fur of his chest," she went on a hoarse whisper, "all purple in the pale prairie moonbeams, that stubby tail of his vibrating with desire, erect"—a catch in her throat—"nose to the breeze, drinking me in, hackles raised, in full..."—she quivered—"...display!"

'Rena bestowed a beatified glance on the cage. Its inmate stirred in the shavings with a faint rustle of response.

"I went over to him. We knew what we wanted. It's as if we'd known one another all our lives. We shared right there, on the cool prairie sod, beneath an approving prairie moon, our hearts' desires. Right there. The most passionate moment of my life. Sexual fulfillment I've never known. I'm so sorry, Aaron, my poor baby."

"Sexual fulfillment?" stuttered Fahey.

"Yes," she echoed dreamily. "Sexual fulfillment."

Fahey blinked. He looked at the cage. He looked at his wife. He took a pull on the beer. He looked again. His lips moved soundlessly. He blinked once more.

"He... doesn't... have... a... dick!" he shrieked finally, surprised himself at the violence of his response.

"Oh, yes, he doooooooooooooooooes," purred 'Rena, chucking the little animal under the chin with a complicitous glance, or at least what Fahey *took* to be a complicitous glance and under what Fahey *took* to be the thing's chin. "Proportionately speaking," she went on in rather more clinical detail than Fahey was looking for, "Members of the family *rodentides rattus rattus* and especially"—was that *another* knowing glance at the little beast?—"especially," she went on, *marmota monax prairialis*, are among the best endowed members of the vertebrate species. A series of membranal tissues and prehensile organs allows nearly forty per cent of his blood supply to be diverted... at the appropriate moment"—was she actually blushing now, for Chrissake?—"to where it's needed most." Then a giggle.

Fahey drained the bottle of *Corona* in a single gulp and slung the empty in a wide, hopeless arc over his head and vaguely toward the waste pail. It missed and shattered with a sharp report of splintering glass. Fahey fixed her with a glazed countenance.

“My wife is fucking a *gopher*,” he exhaled, as if savoring the sound of it somehow.

“I told you, Aaron. Arvid’s a...”

“Yeah. Yeah. I know. *Marmot monad*...” His speech was slurring.

“*Monax*,” she corrected. She drew herself up from the chair and stepped over against the counter, laying a hand on the wire mesh roof of the cage. “Aaron,” she declared, her voice deliberate and calm, “I want a divorce.”