



JOE HOYNIK

UNDER THE APPLE TREE

a short story by LAURA PRITCHETT

When Joe left me sitting under the apple tree and started to walk across the meadow toward my trailer, he looked back and waved, and then walked on, and then he did a complete circle with his arms out, like he was embracing the world. That made me laugh, because he was so happy and willing to show it. I was leaning back against the tree with most of my clothes back on, and I blew him kisses as he went on his spinning, cheerful way. Then he reached my dirt driveway, where he'd left his truck, and he climbed in, honked his horn, and left.

We'd just made love, and we'd both come twice, and my body was feeling full and tired. The contrails from the flying sparks of orgasm were just starting to fade as I picked twigs out of my hair and wiped a smudge of dirt from my forearm and let my mind think thoughts like *The only thing grand enough for a human life is to love* and *This is where wild and gentle get sewn together* — the sort of thoughts that make perfect sense at a time like that, and only at a time like that. I considered the fallen red apples and the yellowed leaves, and I guessed that I was in love — that, in fact, I was more in love than I'd ever been. And I simply took notice of that feeling and concentrated on the sharp, rotting smell of the apples and the slant of sunlight on my bare feet and the ache in my thighs.

After some time, I walked to my trailer, spinning around myself, and went inside and fell on my bed and closed my eyes and replayed the whole thing: our lovemaking, and my orgasms, and his, and our mummings, and his eyes. And then my mind wandered on to less romantic thoughts, such as: perhaps my rear end is not attractive from behind, because it's dimpled with fat, which is too bad, because I like that position; and perhaps I had said a stupid thing or two, which was also too bad, but entirely predictable. I brushed away the bits of earth still smashed against my spine and rubbed my head where it had hit the apple tree, and I considered the violence of love.

Joe and I have the exact same hair color — a brown so dark that it's almost black — only his is curly and mine hangs straight to my waist. Also, both of us have gray in our hair: Joe's near his temples and mine throughout. I love it when he takes my hair and starts to braid it, which he knows how to do from braiding harnesses. And I love pushing my hands up through his hair and feeling his soft scalp. Thinking of our hands in each other's hair, I made myself come again, because I was curious to know whether I could accomplish three, which I'd never done before.

When my body stopped pulsing, I decided that orgasm is the greatest physical pleasure in life, and I wondered if Joe felt the same way. I wondered how he saw the world, through

what lens. I imagined I *was* Joe. I tried to be in his tall body, looking at himself in the mirror, touching his own stubbled jaw, seeing his graying hair and brown eyes. I imagined how he might stare down his fears and hopes and hurts. I tried to feel his breath move in and out. I tried to imagine how he might close his eyes and become aware of his body and perhaps be aroused, feel alert and alive. Doing this made my heart hurt a little. Joe was a good man, and for some reason his goodness made me feel raw. I found myself thinking, *Don't trust him. He will hurt you.* But I turned those thoughts off and kept them off. Instead of tempering my feelings for Joe with those judgments the brain continually makes, instead of balancing love with *Joe-lacks-such-and-such-a-quality* thoughts — all those strategies the mind uses so that it loves less and therefore *feels* less — instead of doing those things, I stared at the ceiling of the room, with my hand still between my legs, and I felt Joe and knew Joe and experienced Joe as much as I could at that moment in time, despite the very real danger.

I live too hard, and I know it. I drink too much, I smoke too much pot, and I've continued to date men after they've hit me. Every once in a while I get into trouble because of this, but over the course of my life I have come to believe that it's worth it. My body and heart are getting worn out faster than they should, but I won't regret this life as much as some people want me to, because at least I feel alive.

One thing to know about me is that I severely dislike stingy people. By this I mean not only penny pinchers, but people who aren't generous with their *thank-yous* and *I'm-sorrys*; people who spend too little time thinking about others, too little energy loving; people who get through life by giving as little as they can. I do not like miserly hearts.

Which is probably why I like Joe so much, because he is, at heart, generous. For example, he's willing to walk away from his new lover and tell her goodbye in the most charitable way he can, by spinning and holding his arms out to the world, announcing: *Life is good. That was good. I love you.* That is something. Really, that is something.

I am a housecleaner, and I sell pot on the side. My goal is to make a living while working as few hours as possible, so I can spend the rest of my day drinking, or reading, or getting high, or now, increasingly, with Joe and his body, or with my thoughts about Joe and his body. The only other interesting thing I can say about myself is that I've always been fascinated by sex — which is not to say that I've engaged in a huge amount of sexual activity, but rather that I have paid attention to sex as a topic. I know about *The Hite Report* and *Deep Throat* and

Candida Royalle porn. I know what Freud and Foucault have to say, and I know the most basic truth about enjoying sex, which is that it's part instinct, but it's mostly a learned activity. It can't be learned with just anybody, though, and I'm beginning to think that's what's going on with Joe: I am learning from him. That is why the thought of losing him scares me. He's going to open me up, make me understand and feel, and then he will get in his truck and drive out of my life, back to his horseshoeing and hunting and woodworking and all his other activities that do not include me.

So I'm hoping we can both be generous with each other for at least a while, long enough for my body to understand this new feeling. I want to have the body knowledge of what it is like to be this happy.

Winnie is my one friend, and my only neighbor way up here on this mountain. She has short hair, which she dyes blond, and she's married with two kids who are always coming over to my property to pick apples. Winnie exercises and eats right. In many ways, she is the opposite of me. That's part of why we're friends: so we can each see the road not taken, and we can enjoy the scenery along that road without having to walk it ourselves.

The apple tree stands midway between our two houses, with about an acre of land on each side. My lot is bigger than Winnie's and more overgrown with raspberry bushes and milkweed and mountain mahogany and grasses. I tell Winnie's kids to watch out when they come to pick apples, because there's a bear around. Its scat is all over the place: big, apple-seed-laden piles. In fact, Joe and I had to search to find a place under the tree that was free of the stuff. I haven't actually seen the bear, but I can smell the vinegar scent of its urine, the rank odor of its body, and I imagine it's pretty fat by now and ready for winter. Winnie keeps an eye on the kids, but sometimes they escape out of the house when she's trying to put bread in the oven, for instance. These kids were meant for the outdoors, and I think that's great, but I worry about the bear.

Winnie's marriage is a typical one, which means that sometimes it gets rough, but then it gets better. As far as I can tell, there's not a lot of passion, but there is that blend of patience and knowledge and affection that marks long marriages. Except for the boredom part, it seems pretty appealing. The boredom would kill me, though. Winnie's house is very organized. She lines up cans in one cupboard and plastic containers in another. She makes lists. Sometimes I envy the clean edges of her life, how marriage and motherhood seem to be enough to hold her together, although I don't completely understand her for this very reason.

Winnie thinks I'm amusingly wild, and I like regaling her with stories. So when she came over that day for our usual five o'clock margaritas, I told her about Joe and me under the apple tree. Winnie's kids, five and six, were playing in the grass, and Winnie and I sat wrapped up in blankets and drank our strong drinks and watched the sun set over the mountains. I told her about how Joe's kisses had a certain pull to them, how his hands had a certain knowledge, how his fingers listened. I

told her that it was startling, at this age, suddenly to be experiencing such orgasms: orgasms that came so easily, the muscle contractions spreading through my body with unexpected force; but orgasms that, despite their force, were grounded in tenderness. I had never believed that being with a man could seem so safe and gentle.

Winnie rubbed her fingers over her lips in a thoughtful sort of way and said, "Jeez, Gretchen, I wish I was having sex like that."

She meant it too. I could hear it in her voice. So I said, "Well, a lot of days I wish I had kids."

We like to lust after each other's lives. Come right down to it, neither of us would trade what she has, but still, there's that occasional yearning.

"I haven't kissed someone new in thirteen years," she said.

"I don't have anyone to sleep with me at night," I said. "Not most nights."

"Well," she said, "we could all use more than one life."

We sat for a while and ate some of her homemade bread with havarti cheese and the last of this year's raspberries, the sweet kind that grow over by the property line between my land and hers.

"Can I ask you something?" I finally said. "When you have an orgasm, during sex, you're telling yourself a story in your head, right? You're imagining another scene, other than the one that is occurring, right?"

"I think that's probably true," she said.

"Can you have an orgasm without it?"

Her eyes moved across the pasture, as if the pasture were the landscape of her brain and she were examining the horizon for memories. "I don't think I can. I think I need the story. I'll have to pay attention next time, to be sure." She stuffed some bread in her mouth and looked up at the sky.

"Because I couldn't. Come. Without a story," I said. "But then, with Joe, I suddenly can. I mean, it's ridiculous!" I told her I knew it sounded like I was doing a disservice to woman-kind by granting the man too much credit, by having too much pleasure, by exaggerating the possibilities. It was also just the beginning of an affair, not the part that tests and tries you. I knew that too. "But I just want to be happy right now," I said. "I want to store these moments up for later."

"That sounds smart," she said. "Have another margarita."

"I've had bad sex before," I said. "Plenty of it. Bad sex, mediocre sex, OK sex. But suddenly this. It has to do with how *there* we are. It's a whole different way of being, really. And it's confusing my body. I just didn't expect it." I stabbed the knife into the havarti and looked at her.

She said, "Maybe you should figure out a way to make this work. And just so you know, married sex can be good too. It can be great."

"I believe it." I said this like I meant it, which maybe isn't true, but I'd like it to be.

Winnie looked at me and bit her lip, and I could tell she was reminding herself of all the things she *didn't* like about my life, so that she could confirm her choices. As part of righting

herself, her eyes veered off to her kids, as if to say, *There. That's what you have. There they are.*

"Can I ask you one more thing?" I said. "These stories in your head, they have some violence in them, don't they? At least sometimes?"

Winnie raised her eyebrows and said, "Gretchen," in that tone of voice you use with a child who's gone too far. But then she backed away from it and sighed. She's very patient. That's another thing I like about Winnie: her great capacity for finding fondness for people, even after they've irritated her. Now she found her fondness for me and said, "Probably. Well, yes."

I said, "I think most women link violence and arousal. Some buried evolutionary remnant or cultural leftover. It's true for me. Or it *was*, before Joe. But here's what I'm getting at; I was thinking about this while I was cleaning today: Humans are going to evolve. Someday, when you and me are long gone, humans will change for the better. This violence, it's going to disappear; it's just not going to be inside us anymore."

Winnie gave me an endearing look and said, "Gretchen, that's very optimistic of you."

"I know," I said.

"You seem very young today," she said. "It's lovely. Your cheeks are flushed."

"It's ridiculous, I know," I said. "I'm thawing. I'm evolving. And I'm sorry I sound this way, but I can't help it. I don't know what to do, because he's a good man, and I'm in love."

(end of excerpt)