

Happy Billie! Lucky Nick!



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paperbytes

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paperbytes@paperplates.org

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Happy Billie! Lucky Nick!

SHE TOLD this story from her Junior Year Abroad repeatedly when she got back to college in Pennsylvania, though it failed her as a party piece. Drunk, stoned or sober, her classmates couldn't grasp why she'd stood tongue-tied under the orange-haired stranger's stare. They interrupted her with juvenile jokes and spoiled the climax by plunging into their own accounts of European nightclubs and missed trains. After a few of these disappointments, she saw that she might help her listeners make some sense of the incident by inventing a zippy punch line for the stranger to speak, but a compulsive honesty forced her to describe everything exactly as it happened. At least the story could serve as a test, she decided. If she ever found someone

who understood the emotions wrapped up in it, she would promote that person to be her best friend.

In Vienna her student group was sent out every afternoon to mingle with the crowds in coffee houses and shops in order to improve their German. The natives they met spoke fluent English and interrupted as soon as they began, “*Bitte, wo ist ...*” with “Are you looking for the Winter Palace? Or would you like to eat a pastry first, dears?” The protective Viennese put them on the right trolleys, pointed out the best buns in the bakery windows, and insisted on translating the street names for them.

Dutifully, Lois piped up, “*Bitte, wo ist ...*” as she strolled around the city with her compatriots, but she never managed to finish a German sentence. After a few weeks she began walking alone, thinking she’d be more likely to engage a native speaker that way, but her grammar was so shaky that she never had the nerve to approach anyone. Without a map, she wandered into narrow streets that stank of

cooking, but she no longer cared how lost she got. She thought her constant nausea must be homesickness – more precisely, a nostalgia for the smell of her aunts' farmhouse closets – unless it was an intolerance for butterfat.

On a wet day, outside the clock museum, a young couple stopped her. Their shabby American jogging suits set them apart from the dapper middle-class Viennese who took their walks at this hour. The woman wore a spiky mop of paprika hair. Quickly, the young man said, “*Bitte ...*,” and his face coloured. He fished in his jacket for a greasy dictionary and began thumbing through it. Lois burst out laughing.

“Ask me in English,” she assured them, thinking they’d enjoy the joke as soon as she explained it.

Ideas bubbled up. She wanted to tell them that Viennese hospitality was really a subtle lie, and she knew of a sweet odour locked inside the houses of northern Appalachia. She found herself inviting these

strangers to come eat apple dumplings with her. But the young man sternly poked his book in her face. “No, no, *wir müssen Deutsch sprechen!*”

He scanned the pages while Lois digested her surprise. The lean young woman was staring fiercely, as if she wanted to rivet Lois to the sidewalk while her partner patched together his question. Their desperation moved her so that her throat swelled and she could barely repeat, “Please ask me in English . . .”

The woman reached for Lois’s arm as if she would pinch it.

“I can’t find any of the words!” the man hissed. He flung the book onto the pavement. The woman kept her eyes fixed on Lois as the couple took a step backward together. Lois was so disappointed that she couldn’t find her voice even when they turned and began running along a row of naked linden trees, their necks bent with chagrin.

The woman’s raw cheeks and the man’s angry helplessness had shocked her sympathy awake. She’d been letting herself go in cynical

daydreams about her balloon-shaped Austrian professors bouncing among trays of swollen pastry. She was convinced that even if she mastered their language, she could never bridge the chasm that separated her from the wheedling Viennese. This couple must've feared a far worse failure, but they hadn't surrendered to it until they met her. Probably, the woman had egged the man on to speak, because she wanted to believe in his powers. They would break up as soon as they stopped running – the woman's dread of this sundering was conveyed by her glare. Compared with her rich expression, grammar books seemed like poor things to Lois.

In time, she conceded that her classmates' incomprehension of the story might be blamed on her own deficiencies. She was cursed with a chubby, inexpressive face, unlike the silent American whose fingernail had scraped her hand. Based on some tapes recorded in a German class, she believed that her voice lacked the highs and lows of passion, unlike the man who'd proclaimed his failure with such

convincing anguish. Her arms hung pointlessly beside her stocky body when she spoke. She noticed how Roger and Paul nodded to each other whenever she walked into the college cafeteria – how much scorn they were able to convey with a flickering of their tongues. She'd never expressed a judgment as clearly as that in her life.

In freezing darkness, on the library steps, she asked the boy she always studied with, Nick, if he thought she was defective as a communicator. He laughed gently. "Oh, you!" She held his notebook while he shrugged into his parka, waiting for him to confirm her doom. Instead, as they crunched away toward the dorm, he began talking about the gerbils he wanted to keep, illegally, in his room. She saw in his lively face that he'd forgotten her question – the gerbils took precedence in his mind. As he chattered about tiny paws creeping inside his shirt, her mind drifted; when he paused at last on a questioning note, she realized she had nothing more to say to any of the ciphers she'd met at the college.

HER FATHER retired during her senior year, and when she went home in June she found that he'd started buying clumsy old tables at country auctions and was refinishing them in the basement. Soon he was stacking them in the garage and filling up her mother's sewing room. His new hobby mystified everyone in the family. He'd worked as an accountant and paid a neighbor, Chuckie Arklow, to do the household repairs. In his last years, Lois had expected him to read presidential biographies and drive her mother around to the malls.

"Are we opening a furniture store?" she asked once when they passed on the basement stairs, smiling to take the sting out of the question. He turned to look up at her, and a flush spread above his jowls. He must've seen that his compulsion required some defence, but he'd always been laconic, and smooth words failed him now. That afternoon, Lois suggested to her mother that he should see a counsellor about adjusting to retirement. Her mother exclaimed, "Oh, you know Poppy!" and went on discussing possible wedding

gifts for a couple of Lois's friends. She'd lost interest in her husband several years ago. What her mother should've said, Lois thought, was the opposite: "Oh, none of us knows Poppy!"

After she graduated from law school and bought a bungalow in Pittsburgh, her father began driving down to visit her alone, with a table thrown in the back of his van. Over a decade, he filled her rooms with them. She had no dinner guests to feed or ornaments to set on them – she wished he'd bring her a microwave instead – but he ignored her hints. Quietly, he took her hand and showed her the grain of the wood, ash or elm or maple. Once, as he lugged in a cherry dropleaf, he said, "This one here comes out of a farmhouse on Osgood Road that they're tearing down." A story about the house and its family seemed in the making, but he cut it off and rambled outdoors to unload the four matching chairs.

They were odd-sized tables and wobbled if she nudged them. She could picture a flabby country woman with stringy hair sitting down at

any of them and gorging on sandwiches slathered with mayonnaise. She found that living with them was like inviting the less fortunate people she'd known in the centre of the state to come live with her in the city. She tried to diminish their impact by covering them with cloths and hiding their legs behind brightly patterned pillows. Her father said nothing about her tricks for making them disappear. He only brought her another one every month or two.

The tables had borne the brunt of squally children and harried baking and decades of family holidays. Even her careful father couldn't sand away their scars entirely. However painful their meanings were, Lois knew she understood them. After her father had his heart attack, she found that she respected the tables too much to sell them, though he wouldn't be coming to see what she'd done with them any more. They were an inheritance she couldn't duck.

Whenever she thought about having a child, as she began to do after both her parents were gone, she imagined a tiny adult with a smooth

white face and an enormous lap she could fill with the useless goods that were left to her. She came to believe this was how families built up meanings for themselves. Each generation completed its work by compelling the next one to value the objects it received.

SHE HADN'T been prone to crushes in high school. She'd tried to love Nick at college and failed. After she began studying law, she'd never thought about anyone she met for longer than ten minutes. But when Billie came to live in the bungalow, she stumbled into a strange communion of souls.

Billie's eyelids stretched wide with meaning as she talked in a smokey voice about the small facts of life that kept popping into her head ("Here's what I know about gorgonzola, and don't let the clerk in the deli tell you otherwise ... I want a shampoo to do exactly two things for my scalp, never mind what the label says"). Billie's opinions were absolutely her own, but the sight of her small dark body

curled in the pocket of a beanbag chair told how profoundly she needed sympathy and shelter from the world she evaluated in stark consumerist terms. The sheer unrestrained flow of her oracular-sounding confidences stirred in Lois an urge to protect her.

This impulse deepened whenever Billie rebelled against the domestic rituals Lois tried to establish. At first, Billie pitched in on the Saturday laundries and the Sunday flowerbed weeding without complaint. She took over the grocery shopping on Wednesday nights with a grim enthusiasm. But then came a stretch of months when Lois might walk into the kitchen any Friday evening and find a note saying Billie'd gone off water-skiing or mountain-climbing or camping with her yappy Jack Russell terriers. These impetuous adventures could last a weekend or a week. Billie didn't apologize when she returned, though as a form of self-justification she told detailed stories about her dogs' escapades and the woodsy women she'd slept with or failed to seduce.

At their reunion suppers Billie drank cheap burgundy ("because I

know what it takes to make me sleep, is why”), though Lois opened a bottle of something made for adults. She never complained about the absences, because she felt unsure of her rights; in time, she accepted them as part of a normal rhythm, since Billie always came back. Instead, as they sat in the dining alcove over one of Lois’s carefully prepared casseroles, she studied the way her lover’s features were constantly reshaped by the sentences she spoke. Later, in the low-ceilinged front bedroom where they lay surrounded by small tables, her spirit went on being lulled by Billie’s low monologue.

Happily, Billie never surprised her over a cup of tea by asking what she was daydreaming about. (The answer would’ve been “You!” but Lois preferred not to mention this; she was still puzzled by her emotions and didn’t know how to confess them.) Instead, Billie might pause while stating her views about store-brand cornflakes or describing a garage mechanic she’d outsmarted the last time she bought snow tires, stare at Lois and breathe, “You’re the one, babe – stay like you are.”

Clearly, she accepted Lois's readiness to listen as a proof of passion, and this flattered Lois's view of herself, since careful listening was also her chief legal talent – though, after their affair ended, she wondered if Billie had credited her with any abilities at all.

The goodbye note Billie left on one of the kitchen tables was not a bill of complaints. It captured the randomness of her conversation. There were some references to sexy women Lois hadn't met, advice about replacing the dish drainer, and an itinerary. For a few weeks, Lois kept expecting Billie's car to clunk up the driveway and Billie's three dogs to leap out of the back seat and swarm around her ankles. The moment she understood this would never happen again, she fell into an oceanic depression. She spent the nights asking herself how anyone could betray the intimacy created by so many confidences. Gradually, the house in which Billie had scattered her brightly packaged goods took on the look of an abandoned nest. Lois felt too drugged by misery to face people; dully, she wondered if her firm would vote to let her go.

It was four months before she could sit through a film or eat in a restaurant.

She was leaving an ear-splitting fundraiser given by a woman in her political circle when a friend of Billie's whose name tag read "Elaine!!!" pulled her aside and asked about the breakup. The woman didn't know Lois well and smelled of beer; her questions were blunt. She must've figured that a normal person would've stifled any regrets by this time. "You made an odd couple, huh? Of course Billie was such a great lay, even legendary, nobody could turn her down."

A wheel revolved inside Lois's brain, and she found herself talking excitedly about thunderstorms. "I screamed at thunder when I was a girl. I control myself now, but the scream's still inside me. I can picture giant trees crashing through the roof, water flooding in. So whenever we heard a storm coming, Billie would shout, 'Let's go out and play in the rain.' My hair felt electric, I was biting my knuckles, I was running through the house shutting windows while she followed me, raising

them again.

“This went on for a whole humid summer.

“I explained to her that the way I react isn’t a choice – it must be how electrons flow through my body, or else it’s caused by emotional associations I can’t control. She said I could get a grip on myself if I tried – but I figured one difference between us wouldn’t matter. It must’ve started her brooding, though.”

After that night, Lois told her story about thunderstorms to anyone who’d listen. She took a morbid pleasure in confessing her stupidity. She’d absorbed Billie’s conversation like blotting paper without realizing they had no relationship worth saving. “How could I be so deaf to what she wasn’t saying?” she asked, deliberately raising her eyebrows for emphasis.

People who heard these accusations crossed their legs with embarrassment. If they were Billie’s friends, they tried to interrupt with their own (comical and surprising) stories about those orgiastic

camping trips; if they knew Lois from the office, they asked what she heard from Billie now. In fact, she'd gotten only one postcard from Florida. "Love ya!" it promised. On the other side was a photo of a U-shaped motel roof embracing an empty, shimmering pool.

"You mean, how could someone with such lovely old-world manners turn out to be a brutal martinet?" Lois smiled. Her friend Nick was making large gestures and stumbling over his words. What he wanted to say about a professor they'd known in Vienna last year seemed like a complicated paradox to him, yet Lois unknotted the truth in five seconds.

Nick stared at her. "Yes, exactly! How'd you do that, Lo-lo?"

She'd understood that the man was two-faced when he handed back her first German essay, about a lame performance of *Die Zauberflöte* the class had attended, so she knew what Nick must be thinking, and she would never take another class from the twerp, so

the red ink he'd scrawled across her papers meant nothing to her now. She had no trouble skewering him with a phrase that made Nick's eyes dance.

She supposed that if she married Nick, she could explain whatever he needed to know about people. Nick was dizzy, and they would laugh a lot. Probably, she would end up supporting them, since he'd be looking for work half the time. She might enjoy being the one who asked the waiter for more bread, the one who shushed the couple sitting in front of them at a cinema. Unfortunately, she knew that Nick wasn't challenging enough to live with.

Neither of them married anyone else when they graduated, then they lost touch for several years. Nick bellowed like a boy ("Oh wow! wow! wow! wow!") when she phoned him out of the blue on his birthday – she'd remembered the date in July – and offered to visit him for a weekend. He calmed down at once and told her honestly, "Nobody ever comes to Toledo for pleasure." Still, he embraced

her when she got off the plane and drove her around to see the city, such as it was. The first night, after dinner (Nick had become a fair cook, though the hot dishes were ready at unexpected times), they sat on his screened porch drinking wine and talking about their college friends, since Nick had kept in touch with several of them.

This conversation was cut by irony, because their memories contained a fascinating subtext. “Couldn’t you guess how much I wanted to tell Paul and Roger I was gay?” he demanded, grinning. “I never came to the point because I was afraid they’d drop me if they knew.” He’d engineered some painful forest hikes with Paul, and later with Roger, during which he’d almost declared himself but ended up listening to their outpourings about the bewildering women they planned to marry. When Nick saw either of them now – he was masochistic enough that he still visited them on holidays – they drew him aside to update their inconsequential complaints about the wife who was basting a turkey in the next room.

“With me it’s even more complicated,” Lois said, chuckling. “I’m not sure if I’m a lesbian, although I’ve slept with a few women and never with a man.” With help from the chardonnay she confessed that she’d never looked at anyone below the chin in the dormitory showers. She’d been that self-disciplined.

He roared. “Well, I sure gave the guys a going-over out of the corner of my eye! Once, Paul had an erection when I walked in the showers. That was the first time I’d seen anybody with one. I turned my back on him right away, and when he said, ‘Hi, Nick!’ I couldn’t answer, my throat was so tight. He didn’t care that I’d seen him, but it meant quite a lot to me.”

“I know what you mean,” Lois said, to sound encouraging.

She’d come to Toledo to ask Nick to father a child. She wasn’t going to propose that they sleep together, even before he came out to her and she sort of came out to him. She’d read about laboratory methods and was prepared to describe them. Still, if Nick preferred

old-fashioned ways, she was willing to submit before she left town. She felt no disgust at his smooth, plump body, though as he went on chatting about the pair of men who'd obsessed him for half a lifetime, she wondered how she should move to arouse him.

She popped the question as they lay on *chaises longues* with another bottle open between them the next night. She'd practised a tactful speech, but the alcohol scrambled her words. Nick understood her meaning instantly, though. Stammering and gesturing like he used to in college, he replied, "It's a once-in-a-lifetime question for me, so I'd like to talk it over with some friends before I decide. Even if you raised the child alone like you're planning, I'd be drawn in."

"Yes," she agreed at once. His weakness brought out people's better instincts, so she thought she could trust anyone he'd met in Toledo to guide him correctly. After the baby came, he'd disappear from her life again, despite his bluster about living up to his responsibilities.

Back in Pittsburgh, she heard nothing for a month; then he wrote

to her on his business stationery. A buddy who taught in a middle school had warned him about syndromes in children raised by single working mothers. A lawyer pal advised that he'd have serious financial obligations, even if he and Lois signed some sort of contract. More disturbing than any of this, his straight friends worried because he and she were homosexual. (Had she said this when she was drunk?) While everyone agreed that being gay was acceptable among adults, they didn't know how to calculate its effect on a child.

She screamed aloud, she was so furious. Nick had typed a list of other people's scruples in order to hide his confusion. He was afraid to get his feet wet. *Of course* there'd be complications – but what would they matter next to the satisfaction of bringing a creature of your own flesh into the world, one who understood you? The alternative to that was what? Noisy little dogs, or gerbils. She'd expected Nick, of all people, to appreciate this point.

LOIS WAS thirty-seven that year and ticking.

Then Billie introduced herself by making a comment about the potato chips they were both eating at a fundraiser, and when they'd finished with each other Lois decided that becoming pregnant now would involve more risks than she wanted to take. She was casting about for some final pleasure or knowledge of youth when Sally, who'd married Paul after college, phoned and invited her to join their crowd for a football weekend at the campus. Lois had run into Sally at political caucuses over the years, but she hadn't seen the others since graduation. She knew they'd all made pots of money; she admired Sally for staying true to her liberal convictions despite Paul's success as a dental surgeon. In fact, though she hadn't missed any of them until that moment, she felt curious enough about how everyone had turned out that she agreed to come.

When she got to the motel on Friday night, Sally and Paul kissed her cheek, and Sally pulled her aside to say, "We invited Nick, too, but

he's tied up with a bankruptcy audit, so we probably won't see him this time." Sally and the other women, Rhoda, Glynis, Dolly, and Bree, kept bringing up Nick's name at dinner as if they were fishing for something. The ways they dragged him in got ridiculous after a while: the silvery pink restaurant menus reminded them of his new car!

Lois planned to reveal nothing about her weekend in Toledo – really, she hadn't thought much about Nick since she met Billie. There was no use disappointing his friends with that sorry tale.

She lost most of the others' conversation as they paraded around the campus the next morning among the red and yellow trees. She found herself studying the wrinkles in her former dorm-mates' well-fed, joking faces. Amazingly, all their marriages had lasted. Their satisfaction with life bred generosity; they kept touching Lois – not only the women but the men as well – guiding her back to their midst when she wandered away. The air of "almost friends" hung over them so poignantly that on Saturday night she went to her room and wept

briefly before turning back the blanket. She knew she was more vulnerable to the sensation of missed chances that fall than usual, but she promised herself she wouldn't return next year if Sally invited her.

On Sunday before breakfast Sally knocked at Lois's door, rosy and smiling. "There's not another soul up yet. I thought you'd like to take a little ramble." Lois agreed that the morning looked glorious, so Sally encircled her arm and led her over the familiar curving paths.

After some remarks about the football game (Lois couldn't remember which team had won, and Sally gave her a peculiar look when she discovered this), Sally said, "It's so sad you lost the child. Nick's told us everything, and we feel your hurt."

Lois stared. "What did Nick say?" she managed to ask.

Fresh colour crept up Sally's neck. Was she presuming on an intimacy that Lois didn't wish to remember? Lois had been too much of a loner in college, and maybe life still hadn't cured her of this habit. Sally took courage from her good intentions. "You can't blame him

for talking about it. A grief like that will come out.”

Lois was nearly choking. “You mean Nick’s been showing off to everyone with a story about me?”

“Well, it wasn’t just a story, was it? We love Nick, and we love you, too, and it would’ve been perfect if you could’ve raised his son.”

Lois didn’t know where to start. The worst of it was, a couple of years ago she’d pictured Nick dandling an infant, so the image came back to her easily. Nick might’ve told these people that he and Lois lost a baby because he’d really wanted one and was sorry he’d refused her; or maybe he regretted not giving her what she’d asked for because he liked her more than he’d ever said. She didn’t, after she thought about all this, see any need to inform Sally that Nick had invented the child. She found herself flattered to be caught in the net of concern that other people always flung over Nick. The sensation was like an effortless pregnancy – effortless suffering.

“When you agreed to come this weekend, we insisted Nick come,

too,” Sally went on. “To be honest, we were hoping for a reconciliation. But Nick told Paul he was afraid you’d ruin the party if you saw him. He wasn’t being judgmental in saying this. Hysteria’s a natural reaction to loss, though it can be difficult for other people to witness. But you seem so strong today – not like Nick described you.”

“Nick’s a lying bastard,” Lois said without thinking.

It struck her that Nick must’ve been scheming to get Paul to put his arms around him when the two of them were liquored up at one of their holiday reunions, and he’d invented the story without realizing how much excitement it could cause. If Lois ever heard about it, he was expecting her to help him out of the jam like she’d helped him out of several others.

She told Sally everything about her trip to Toledo. She quoted most of Nick’s letter from memory, stressing his affected phrases by raising her pitch. She spoke loudly and without sympathy. Spread-legged on the path, Sally listened, her mouth agape.

“I can’t have breakfast with you,” Lois finished. “I won’t be able to see any of you again.”

Sally recovered in time to clutch Lois’s coat sleeve as she was on the point of striding away.

“Its name was Jacob, and it was eight months old when it succumbed,” Sally said. “It was a lovely boy in spite of the winestain and the birthing scars. Paul and I sent a donation to the hospital in its name.”

“You threw your money away!” Lois shouted. “I’ll sue him for defamation. I’m a lawyer like everybody else.”

She was lucid enough to see in Sally’s eyes that she didn’t believe her. Sally thought she blamed Nick for their baby’s death. To her, I’m a monster, Lois realized.

Of all things, she caught herself envying that scumbag, Nick. He’d told his lie so convincingly that his friends’ faith in it was unshakable. Nick’s face was a map of charms, and when he stammered he always

contradicted himself in a dozen endearing ways. Who wouldn't believe Nick? She'd half-believed him herself when Sally repeated his story about the baby. He could dream up anything he pleased and the world would feel the truth of it.

Nick isn't gay, she thought next. He only invented that lie to cheer her up about herself. She'd been wondering if she dared ask him for help – but after they began sharing confidences, she took courage and dove in. She felt like kicking herself for believing him.

Sally was leading her back past the student union toward the motel. She was speaking rapidly in Lois's ear, though Lois had stopped listening. She needed to pull her arm free soon so she could run to her room and pack.

“Look!” Sally nudged her. “That's Nick's car! He's driven over to be with us for the last day!”

In the parking lot Lois saw Nick himself, dressed in flannel and corduroys, his pleasant face caught by the early sun. He was speaking to

Paul, but when Paul mouthed her name, Nick turned quickly to see her standing in distress beside Sally. He held out his arms in what must be an offer to embrace.

“My Lo-lo,” she heard him say with a tremor that conjured the pain of losing a child, the weary longing of middle-aged separation, and a weak man’s doubt about a woman’s reaction to his incredible lie. There was self-accusation in the inflection he gave her pet name, as well as a cunning dare for her to conspire with him in putting the joke over on their credulous friends. She also felt how someone who’d treated Nick badly (though as yet there was no such person) might stir with remorse at the sight of him.

New feelings rushed in, and she pitied the well-meaning people he’d deceived, including that closet case Paul and his wide-bottomed, interfering wife Sally. She pitied Nick, too, for reasons she hoped she would never tell him. However, she did not pity herself. She knew worlds more about this situation than anyone else, and her superiority buoyed her up.

What she must do next was forming like a frosty white pillar above Nick's head. Threading through her nerves came the self-control she'd need in order to handle him in front of the others. But the determination that lay on her tongue undid her the next instant, since it prevented her from speaking any of the sentences she'd thought of when Sally and Paul began clamoring on behalf of poor crestfallen Nick.

AHEAD, SHE SAW Billie's mud-spangled car blocking her driveway. When she parked in the street and approached it on foot, she found Billie's shoulders wrapped around the steering wheel. The bushy head rose and fell with extravagant snores. Lois backed away from the open window as quietly as she could. She wasn't glad to see the vagabond returned, since they'd never been in love. Then she glanced around, remembering her annoyance as Nick's car drew up behind hers at the curb.

He'd followed her all the way from the college. She'd been unwilling to pull over at a rest stop on the turnpike for fear he'd accost her, even though her bladder was bursting with the coffee she'd brewed hours earlier in the motel room. It was the first time a man had physically pursued her. Typical of her luck, his interest came too late to be useful and looked like a dangerous parody of normal mating rituals. Good-natured Nick, she'd always thought. But in the heat of the chase even Nick might miscalculate and injure them both.

She ran past sleeping Billie toward the front porch as Nick flung open his door. During the drive, he'd pulled close a few times in order to mug sentimental appeals in her rearview mirror. Yet what could he want with her, since life had supplied him with a clutch of loyal friends, and he'd spent contented years without her? She supposed he must be performing this macho charade because he was nervous about losing Paul's approval.

Or no: give the man his due. If he was still the Nick she used to

know, he'd raced after her to apologize for a thoughtless tale that'd exploded in both their faces – though if she offered him the chance, he'd merely stammer until she supplied him with the proper words. Well, she didn't need to ask for her own forgiveness. Let him remember his humiliation today the next time he was tempted to invent a virgin birth.

“Lo-lo!”

A vital instinct for emergencies brought Billie's head jerking up at the shout, and she struggled out of her car to shake herself awake. Nick bumped into her chest on his dash uphill. Lois twisted her knees defensively, but this time there were no Jack Russell terriers to trip her. She heard the two bodies smack together, two diaphragms push forth their grunts. As she pawed through her purse for the house key, an indignant smokey voice cried, “Are you with her?”

Lois bolted toward the shrubbery that hid her garbage cans. She pushed down her slacks and squatted above the dirt, relieved that if

there must be Nick, there could also be Billie to occupy him with questions. When she finished there, she discovered her key where it should've been, in the zippered pocket. Unobserved, she let herself in by the kitchen door.

With a practised shimmy, she passed through the obstacle course of tables and peeked out a crack beside the living-room window shade. Billie was talking rapidly, one hip thrown against a dirty fender, while Nick nodded at her from a distance. Lois couldn't hear the words distinctly, but she assumed Billie was delivering an impromptu history of her two-year journey – a mixture of outdoor adventures and opinionated shopping. She felt no curiosity about these subjects, so she wasn't tempted to reveal herself yet.

Gradually, Nick's eyes took on a hurtful slant. He interrupted at last by flinging a hand at the house and miming a vast question. After listening for another minute, he pulled out a wallet from which he plucked a white square – a photo of an infant? Billie bent over it

silently and nodded with her whole torso. Then she raised her eyes and stared, not quite meeting Lois's gaze in the dark slit. By some instinct, she and Nick stepped forward together, and he grasped her elbow when she faltered on what appeared to be a bum leg – but they didn't reach the porch. Instead, on a second magical impulse, Billie spoke in Nick's ear. She no longer looked aggrieved. They walked back to her car trunk where, after a bit of flailing, she lifted out a jug of something dark, probably burgundy. They crossed the lawn and found shade beneath an autumn-struck birch. Carefully, they sat. Billie uncapped the jug, passed it to Nick, and began talking at greater ease. Lois couldn't catch the sound, but she imagined what Billie must be saying as she rolled her lovely black eyes.

“It's spooky – that house is chock-full of *tables!*”

Nick leaned back on the grass to observe Billie's face. Twice he laughed. Lois knew that Billie's tastes prohibited it, or she would've figured that Billie was satirizing her as a first step in seducing Nick.

Remarkably, the suspicion that jokes were being made did not wound her. The pair on the lawn looked so cordial. They'd been drawn to Lois's house out of regard for her; their flirtation arose from their shared approval of her unusual nature. If, God forbid, Billie drove Nick away to pitch a tent somewhere for the night, their motive wouldn't be passion, but the discovery, as twilight fell, that there was still so much to confide about their wondrously complicated mutual friend.

It would be a kindness to save them from that erotic disaster. Lois could picture herself sitting cross-legged between them as shadows moved around the tree. She might smile away Nick's pathological lies and massage Billie's injured thigh as if she believed Billie'd always been faithful to some Lois-of-her-mind. She wondered if making up with them might really be the better choice? Treachery had proved commonplace, resentment ineffectual. Speechlessness might indicate that she felt her little hurts too deeply.

She touched the doorknob, struck by the difficult idea that people could cherish such things about you that they felt more comfortable embracing the warm thought of you than your ordinary limbs and belly. Maybe she was someone to make love *for* instead of *with*?

Next, she performed a calculation for which she forgave herself at once. Despite Billie's weathered skin, she was seven years younger than Nick; her womb must be supple and strong. (As a favour, Billie would fearlessly bear any child lucky enough to get itself conceived; giving birth was the only local mountain she hadn't climbed yet.) For starters, Lois could feed them, let's see, tuna salad and boiled eggs. She could pour Nick a good riesling, though Billie would go on sucking at her jug.

A hall table creaked behind her in the afternoon warmth, a sound like the snapping of delicate bones. Lois's father had never looked bitter, though his marriage was false. She opened the front door, picturing her garage sale find from a few years ago, now covered with a dusty sheet –

a red wooden crib. She felt no pressure on her tongue this time, only the pleasure of imagining a piece of furniture put to its intended use. She waved at the couple, who struggled to their feet. Their faces left no doubt about their surprise at the interruption.

She threw them an unusually wide smile. “Are you two going camping?” she called.

About the Author

RICHARD BROWN teaches creative writing and British literature at the University of Nevada Reno. He has published a novel (1988) and a collection of stories (1994) through the University of Nevada Press, as well as other short stories, poems, and academic critical articles.

