

# LIPSTICK PEONIES

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*Kathryn Shaver*

Love is no enigma. It's hormones and pheromones. A matter of brain chemistry, you once said. But to me, love is a labyrinth. I'm lost in it, wandering through twists and turns, barriers I can't see past. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of you darting around a corner. David, I call out. You don't answer, because you think it's a game, then sing my name when it appears I've given up.

The last time, I find you sitting in your always-plaid undershorts on a metal kitchen chair, too small for the height of you. One sock and one shoe. You are contemplating your bare foot, elbows on your knees. Go through the gate and come in round the back, you had said, you were too weak to get to the door.

I brought you some peonies from my garden. The red-streaked ones, the first to bloom. Lipsticks, I call them. Had you forgotten they were my favorite flower? Did you ever know that?

You don't say anything, just raise your eyes to me, put your hands where your elbows were, and hold yourself up with your arms. Then you grin. A crooked, boyish smile, the same as the night we met. Got any peanuts? you ask.

Thirty years ago, in a trendy bar in Atlanta, its floor covered with peanut shells. I wore a scoop-necked sweater under my lucky pantsuit. Blue with navy trim. You, from the next table, aimed peanuts at my cleavage.

I make space for the Lipsticks in the center of the table. Old mail, a stack of unsigned checks. A dozen prescription bottles, clustered, some without lids. A small clearing on the glass tabletop, smeared with jelly and crumbs. Clutter everywhere, the detritus of your existence. An athletic shoe, well past a useful life, spills a dirty sock. Tired jeans in a heap on the floor, a belt still in the loops, like a snake poised to strike.

I take the unread newspapers off the other chair. The seat, besprigged with yellow flowers, a pattern selected no doubt by one of the women of your past. I pull the chair near, facing you, eye to eye.

You blink.

I couldn't believe it when you phoned after these, what, four years? I made myself wait until Saturday to come. Packed a picnic of cold salmon and slender green beans with lemon. Pictures of my daughter, twenty-five now, with her baby. Stacy, named after me. What would you think of me as a grandmother?

You touch my hair, the streak of white across the dark you always loved.

I think of our first time together. Dom Perignon at that lavish hotel. You in cuff links and a blue shirt with a stiff white collar, sardonically evidencing the success you had attained on your own. I was dazzled. You, married.

I was only twenty-six. But I was old enough to understand that you wouldn't leave a wife and two children. When Sam came along, I married him. A sweet enough guy, but not enough. I tied myself to our daughter and the Junior League, because Sam expected it, and to a graduate degree, because I wanted it.

How do you stop remembering when you must remind yourself to forget? I kept track of you, followed your rise through the energy industry, saw you move from city to city, divorce.

And then, there you were again. Six years had passed.

Lake Keowee. We spent ourselves in a secluded cove, then zoomed across the quiet lake. I stood next to you in the boat, you holding my breast, your other hand steering fanciful turns. You were a boy doing wheelies on his bicycle and I thought the boat would flip over. I was naked. We were both laughing. A good thing it was a Monday.

Second house from the Presbyterian Church, that's how you told me I could find you this last time. Yes, the little South Carolina town you grew up in does have three churches in a row down the main street and two more around the corner. They each have a cemetery, larger than the churches themselves, dotted with buckets of faded plastic flowers.

In your driveway, the silver Mercedes-Benz you loved, sitting dusty in the open garage, nose out, as if it might go somewhere were it not for the mildew-covered boat and the aging jet-skis in its path.

I knew the cottage was yours as soon as I saw it. Once—forever ago—you accused me of a Hansel and Gretel complex. Nothing about witches gobbling up good children, but about perfect families living in cottages where smoke curls from the chimney and the picket fence is laced with hollyhocks and daisies. A logical inclination. Me, child of a broken home in an era when families just accepted their unhappiness. You, from a home that should have been broken, from a long-suffering mother and a hard-drinking father. And now, you're the one in the cottage.

I lean down to place a kiss on your forehead. You smell of a man who routinely vomits everything he eats. What is wrong with you, I ask. Everything, you answer.

Do you remember the time, on the ten-o'clock news, the six-foot worm rising out of the sand in the Gobi desert and electrocuting its victims? There's no such thing, you said. Later in the night, I came back into bed from the bathroom and you weren't there. Stacy, help me. A cartoon call. Helllllp, you threw your voice. I was gleeful from love-making, from laughter, from you. In the dark, I crawled across the bed. You, hiding on the floor. You grabbed my arm and pulled me to you. Ze Mongolian Death Vorm, you said in a silly Russian accent, vill devour its tasty wic-teems. We fell asleep on the floor, entangled.

How long did we last that time? Was it you who broke it off? I can't remember any more. Me, married. You, not. You once told me that if you had had the luck to marry me instead of the woman you naïvely chose the first time, life would have been different. Or would we have sunk into a ritual of domesticity: washing machine repair and meaningless little dinner parties with people one or the other of us doesn't particularly like? Would we have drowned in a tidal wave of ordinariness?

Desert Storm. A Marine goes to war, you explained. Even at forty-nine. Before you left, I hid peanuts in your suitcase. I slipped the image of you behind my eyes, slid your taste into my mouth, stuffed the smell of you in my nose, so that you were always there. I held you in my senses where I hid you, where I kept you safe.

Only months, though it seemed forever. When you returned,

you were not David. You were exhausted. You complained of mysterious pain. You couldn't go to sleep. You couldn't wake up.

Steps up to the postered plantation bed that had been your mother's. Under it, a hard black plastic case. What's that under your bed? My machine gun, you answered. I crawled up into the bed and nuzzled the back of you. My nose in the clean smell of the T-shirt you always slept in. Your smell. Like you just came out of the washing machine.

A grease-splotched pizza box with hard cheesy crusts on the table. Bones from fast-food chicken in the sink. The biscuit half-eaten, cole slaw untouched. No wonder you were getting a paunch. Your house smelled of spoiled food and garbage. This was not you. I was confused.

How many times were we up to by then? Five or six? Each a year or two years, surrendering to our consuming attraction for one another until we reached a pitch too impassioned for you or me or both of us. Parting in a sputtering of fireworks, one of us demanding something impossible at the moment, knowing it was unreasonable, just demanding it because it would give a reason, any reason, for our separation.

Each time we went nowhere, I fell as if from a moving car, rolled hard into the ditch. And then I crawled out, walked away from that place. I didn't even limp. Not so anyone could see.

You married someone else. A thirty-year-old with legs all the way up to her neck. Sometimes it hurt so much there was no place to put the pain.

There are two rocking chairs on the porch. New ones, from the hardware store. Stacy. You keep saying my name. I've loved you for thirty years, you say. And I, you, I say. Isn't that why I am here?

I am remembering the beach, the time we sneaked away from our spouses for an island tryst. You said you would have married me. I, too, I said. You said you wanted us to grow old together, to sit side-by-side in rocking chairs. I, too, I said. We walked barefoot on the sand as far as we dared in the darkness, the lateness. We agreed to divorce them.

When I told him, Sam took me to Paris. I promised him that

our life, Sam's and mine with our daughter, was the most important thing in the world. I promised to forget you.

In Paris, Rodin's statue of Balzac. The brute nakedness of him, his cloak flowing behind. It was you, as you had become, prosperous and ventripotent from being fifty-three with no exercise and a diet of fast food. Couldn't your thirty-year-old wife cook? I went back to the rotunda of the museum three times. I stared at the statue for hours.

Damn you, was there not a place without you?

I kept my promise to Sam, made myself not long for you until not longing for you became a habit.

When you showed up at Sam's funeral, I didn't want you there. You'd read about the accident in the newspaper. Five cars, piled up in fog. Three dead. Not now, David. I can't start again, I told you. For the first time, I did not love you. Not absolutely.

All those years. And we had never opened ourselves up to one another. Not entirely. We mistook our physical intensity for intimacy. Was there anything left?

One last time, we tried again. Four years ago, on the cruise ship, in the piano bar. I was imitating Billie Holiday, singing old songs you didn't know I knew. 'All of me, why not take allllll of mee-eee.' I was smiling, daring you. 'You took the part . . . that once was my heart . . . So why not take all of me?' You left the bar without me.

I found you in the casino. You said you were scared of such a gamble.

I didn't mean it, what I was singing in the bar.

The one thing we agreed on: This time we part forever.

Stacy. You say my name again. You take my hand. Come live with me.

You can't do that, I say to your 'I love you.' Not now. I won't let you do that. You can't just call me after all these years and tell me you want me.

So many accumulated disappointments.

I pick up one of the dirty glasses on the countertop and throw

it to the floor. It doesn't break. With both hands, I slam a plate hard into the sink, snapping it clean in half.

You look at me without a shred of comprehension.

I retreat to the bathroom, close the door, press the lock. In the mirror, my eyes are glittery. My face, severe. My hands shake. I sit on the toilet, if for nothing else to do, pretending that is why I am there. I flush and wash my hands noisily.

When I come out, you are in the living room on a recliner, its cording lying on the floor, a slaughtered snake. Your apneic gasps, then silent stillness. I hope you will never ever have another breath. You are still asleep when I leave.

You are not who I thought, I say to myself. You have always been incapable of your own happiness. And now, look at you. Gaunt and sick. The blinds drawn in a darkness that drowns you.

I'm standing at the passage that takes me out of your labyrinth. I can see little Stacy, scampering on squat legs. Her mother, my daughter, is beginning to show the belly of another child. I hope for a boy.

I look back into the maze at you. I realize I'm where I've always been, at the edge of the conundrum, lured by a scent I couldn't smell.

Even so, our patched history leers at me.

It is a month before I decide to come back. Those first Lipstick peonies are gone. What's left are the late ones, the glorious last stand paeonia. The early ones are fluffy with hundreds of petals. The last ones to bloom have a simpler acceptance of themselves. A dozen petals at most, with centers of yellow filaments. I decide to bring you the last blossoms. These are red.

An unfamiliar car on the gravel driveway.

A red-eyed girl does not open the screen door, stands behind it. She is you. How could it be that I have never seen this girl? This woman. Susannah, of course. She has your tall angularity, a woman's version of your nose.

I'm Stacy, Susannah. Your father and I have been friends since you were a little girl. Why do I feel the need to justify my presence?

She still does not open the door.

Daddy's had a heart attack. Her voice is flat.

Inside, I can see my peonies from last month, their shriveled heads in a waterless vase. Their petals, brown now, carpet the clutter on the kitchen table.

I just talked to him four days ago, I tell her. I don't say anything else.

Your daughter fills the silence. Dad quit working last year because he was sick. Gulf War Syndrome, maybe. Nobody knew. Then this heart attack, on Tuesday. All the things that were wrong with him, he didn't even know he had a heart problem.

I ask if I can come in, if I can see you.

You're on the porch, she tells me, and points the way through the flickering TV light of the darkened living room. Aunt Barbara is out there, too, she says. Your sister. I haven't met her either.

I sit in the other rocking chair, beside you, and push the floor gently with my foot, rock, creak, rock, creak. Hey, you say, without saying my name, as if I am a neighbor you hardly know, bearing a dish of macaroni and cheese. I pat your hand. I hope you will hold mine, touch my fingers the way you do when you want me, but you don't.

Barbara watches me, curious.

They put in two stents, you say. Have to go back for more in a couple of months.

I tell you I am going to be a grandmother again. I rub my finger lightly on your arm.

That hurts, you say. But I am the one who is hurting.

Susannah walks me to the door. I try hard to mask my disappointment. I've been with your father off and on for the last twenty years, I say to her. I feel the need to lie about the first ten.

No, I didn't know. Dad had two wives and a lot of girlfriends I never met. He was pretty quiet about that stuff.

All these years, David, and you never even mentioned my name to her?

Actually, he was pretty quiet about everything. After he and mom divorced, I hardly ever saw him. Now, I guess he needs me.

I am wondering why Susannah is saying these things to me. To a stranger. I tell her I am sorry. But it's myself I'm grieving for.

When I walk back to my car, I find the peonies on the seat. Your dusty Mercedes is in the garage, the boat and the jet skis still in its way.

I remember once, when we were at the seaside, looking for dolphins, you sped away in your jet-ski, while I plodded along behind in mine, afraid of the speed. You'll scare them off! I screamed to you but you were too far ahead to hear. I honked the little horn. And then I saw them, swimming along, arcing their bodies out of the water to play their game with you. I wanted to be there. I wanted to swim beside you, too, arc my body. I pushed my little boat faster. When I came near, the dolphins were frightened and disappeared.

You were right all along, David. It was only chemistry. But it takes more than hormones and pheromones for two people to make a life together. It takes more even than habit.

I pick the cemetery enclosed by a white fence. The mellifluously named Pendleton Presbyterian Church. Immense oak trees, and crepe myrtles with bark that is shiny green and soft brown. I know now it wasn't the cottage or the picket fence, or even the little town of your childhood. I know now it was the cemeteries. You've set yourself up in a place with graveyards on all sides of you, ready to take you, as if all you have to do is lean to the left or the right, totter a bit, and you'll be tucked away for good.

I look around for a grave that seems neglected. I lay the peonies against a headstone: Frederick Thomas Wood, Beloved Companion. Somebody I never even knew.