

MY OLD FLAME | JUNE 9 & 16, 2014 ISSUE

GOOD LEGS

BY JOSHUA FERRIS

My old flame and I met in the hallway of a dorm in Iowa City. I didn't think much of her, but I was sure she had never seen anyone quite so handsome. That was the year the weather never cleared of hand-rolled smoke and a mild hangover. I was arrogant with the ignorance of all that I didn't know. She was dating the Philosopher, a theoretical proponent of free love who disapproved of her seeing other men. The onetime incident behind the pool table in her basement meant almost nothing to us. Then my old flame graduated early and was gone. There were rumors of a new boyfriend and a life in Ireland. I didn't miss her. By then, I was in this terrible on-off thing with Sisyphus, who kept dragging me up a pretty blond hill and hurtling me down.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN GRALINGEN



A few years later, my old flame and I caught up with each other in Chicago. She was a whole new person. Her interest in medieval theory had given way to Scotch on the rocks. Everyone had a little pocket money. We drank in a hotel bar and ate fried chicken in the suburbs. She had moved on to the Writer, but she still wore the same weird pants. We had a brief thing in front of the television. The Writer moved out. What a poisoned letter he wrote! Then I insulted her at a Tom Waits concert. It was “Rabbits to you!” after that, at least for a while.

I realized one night that I loved her, but with conditions. I wanted fire to hover over my lover's head. Could she do that? My heart was a cathedral. Did she expect me to give her every last key? And those pants had to go. I was looking for someone exactly like her but totally different. She continued to make love to other men, which was provocative. We ate by candlelight on a balcony in Andersonville, and every Monday tutored a family of Sudanese. The Mighty Blue Kings played on at the Green Mill.

Then my old flame moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. She became another new person altogether. She spent her nights eating Indian and studying the law with blue bloods who had names like Turner Buford deSalles Jackson IV. I hardly recognized her until she made me pancakes in her pajamas during a weekend visit. And, in bed, those same good legs. Still, long distance is doom, and my old flame resumed making love to other men while I went after a former heroin addict who danced alone to Etta James in Orange County, California.

I'm not sure exactly how we patched things up. I know that punching the sand at the beach in Naples helped. There were letters. Other people's weddings. Rom-coms.

We drove a Penske to Brooklyn and unpacked during the blackout. My old flame dressed in a power suit and began spending her days at Federal Plaza, eating Peking duck for lunch. She was going places. I was the same old me: reading Bellow out on the fire escape. I liked to wander our Carroll Gardens neighborhood before the gates came up in the morning. For Thanksgiving that year, she made eight courses for just the two of us.

Later, for a time, we were married to entirely different people. How had that happened? We woke up one morning and introduced ourselves. My God! It was us after all, only no longer impossibly young. We were out of joint, better friends to our phones, though we still made love once a year whether we needed to or not.

How about taking up tennis together? we asked. How about starting a family?

The bank let us buy a house. The exterminators rid it of mice. My old flame grew round-wombed. It was a boy. One night, as we lay in bed, my hand on her belly, she said, "You know what's strange? I'm growing a penis." It was hard to argue with. We brought the baby home from the hospital and the tennis rackets gathered dust.

My old flame was now a mom. What an apotheosis! Nothing had prepared her: not the long nights with the law, not years of her husband's tantrums. But she was a natural. That sealed the deal for me, although I still appreciated women who smoked in Berlin bars. Part of me still wanted to die wrapped around a

tree. We spent seven years in that house, going out Saturday mornings and bringing back half the farmers' market and a few more books. Eventually, as the boy grew, she decided to leave herself, yet again, for another woman. I didn't mind.

I don't know who my old flame is and never will. All other candidates are fixed in amber. They tell a static story of heartache and failure. This one keeps evolving. She's the violin player, the precocious bowler, the shy nerd, the medieval scholar, the assistant to the director of the foundation, the law student, the clerk for the district judge, the discovery drone at the law firm, the good mother, the happy cook, the wit with an idea. Who will she be next? Whatever she wants, I hope. Burn on, old flame. ♦

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