

GERIATRIC JITTERBUG

by Brian Farrey

Amy noticed first. Of course.

She was kneeling on the window sill of their new apartment—their first together—and peering out. First down twenty-one stories to the river below, then east to the building across the way. And when her gaze came to a rest, she pressed her face against the window, tattooing her fascination in lipstick and breath vapor on the glass.

“Come here,” she said, a bastard mix of laugh and gasp on her lips. “You’ve *got* to see this.”

He sighed. The question: pretend like he didn’t hear her and keep unpacking or just give in and join her? It was hardly a question. He couldn’t think of an aspect of his life that didn’t already stand as a monument to surrender.

So he waltzed around the graveyard of recently unpacked boxes and joined her at the window. The building next door could be poked with a yard stick, it was so near. When they’d looked at the apartment, his attention had been focused on making sure it had space for his antique wine rack, not how close the neighbors were.

They were close.

Amy wiped her lipstick stain from the window with her thumb and nodded. From here, in the living room, they could see right into the apartment in the next building. They could easily count the picture frames in the other living room, they could see the bathroom desperately needed a new paint job, and they could see two men making love in the bedroom.

“*Look* at that,” Amy said. “Grandpa on Grandpa action.”

The short, portly man sported bright, white tufts of hair on the sides of his bald head. His taller partner, so lean as to be sickly, wore a mosaic of liver spots on his arms, back, and chest.

Both were completely naked

“I mean, really,” Amy said, “*look* at that.”

His eyes flitted over to the spectacle, then he snaked his arm around her waist. “You are *so* naughty,” he scolded, leaning in to nibble on her ear.

Amy giggled, more at the neighbors than his attempt to be amorous. “They are *not* messing around. Go, them!”

He rested his head on her shoulder, surrendering again, and allowed himself to be drawn into voyeurism.

In the next apartment, the tall man had jockeyed his way to the top and did something with his hand they couldn’t see. It made the short man’s back arch, his mouth shoot open.

“We should stop,” Amy said, but she didn’t budge. If anything, she leaned in closer.

As Amy sighed, he kissed her neck. He, too, couldn’t stop. His eyes narrowed as the duo groped one another. Their fingertips danced across each other, pressing and tapping out a sensual Morse code.

Something electric passed from window to window. Something he could feel in every molecule.

He took Amy by the hands. She allowed herself to be pulled back to the bedroom. She threw him down on the bare mattress—they hadn't even assembled the bed frame yet—and together they inaugurated the new apartment.

They climaxed together, staining the mattress with sweat and tears. He waited for the electricity to return.

It didn't.

#

Amy was awesome. He knew it. Everyone knew it.

The friends who'd set them up their junior year of college said for weeks leading up to that first date that they'd be perfect for each other. She'd challenge him. He'd ground her. And it was all true.

Five years of dates, challenging yet grounded. Six years engaged.

"You're never gonna do it," his friends told him after he proposed. "You'll never marry her. You're chicken."

"Cowards die many times before their deaths," he'd answer, quoting his least favorite quote. "'The valiant never taste of death but once.' Amy and I want to get it right. We're taking our time." Now, it was only two months until the wedding.

Apparently, they'd decided they knew how to get it right.

#

He rose early the next day, kissed Amy on the forehead while she slept, then slipped out for a quick jog. When he returned, slick with sweat that glowed in the rising sun, he did a little yoga in the living room to cool down.

Or, at least, he'd meant to. He'd only gotten halfway through the first bow in his sun salutation when he looked out the window. The neighbors were going at it. Again.

Or maybe they'd never stopped last night?

No. They were old. No way they had the stamina to go all night.

Did they?

He froze, worried that they'd caught him spying. This morning's session was far less intense than the night before. Less about the sex. More like extended foreplay. Caresses. Rubbing. And kissing. It was all about the kissing. Slow and deliberate and so powerful, he thought he could hear each gentle smacking of the lips as they paused to breathe.

He stood there, bent at the waist, and watched. Is that what he and Amy looked like? Last year, after a little too much wine, she'd suggested recording themselves, just a private little video for their own entertainment. They volleyed dares back and forth, laughing. He'd gone so far as to point his smartphone camera at the bed, threatening to poke 'record' as she tickled him into submission. In the end, they couldn't go through with it.

One wrong button press, she reasoned with more astuteness than Drunk Amy should have possessed, *and we're accidentally sharing that with friends on Facebook*.

Yes. That was why they'd stopped. It wasn't at all because they both harbored a deep, crippling fear that to see themselves making love would expose everything they never wanted to talk about. That could never be the reason they stopped.

He was sure what he and Amy looked like was nothing similar to what the neighbors did. He and Amy were a Mozart concerto: measured and perfunctory. The neighbors were a masterful jazz riff: unpredictable and soulful. It was something, he suddenly realized, he could never be.

He knew—corny as it sounded—that what the two men had across the way wasn't just love. Every gesture, every thrust told him as much. Somehow, they'd found a way past love. Uncharted territory. What they shared—god, was he really saying this?—was something rarer and deeper.

No, he decided. There was no way he and Amy looked like that during sex.

It's not possible.

#

Amy started calling them Laurel and Hardy.

“It's kind of sweet,” she said, glancing through the window. The two men, silhouetted in warm lamp light, sat side by side, reading the paper. A week later, and it seemed like he and Amy knew as much about their libidinous neighbors as they did themselves.

They had to be retired, because they rarely left the apartment. Mornings were breakfast, a shower together, then a game of bridge with neighbors. Afternoons, Laurel sat on their tiny balcony and sketched while Hardy kept busy in the apartment. Evenings were spent in front of the TV, more often laughing than not.

Bedtime was spent having lots and lots of sweaty sex.

Amy sighed a little.

He squeezed half a lemon over the freshly steamed asparagus. “Sweet? I guess so.”

“I wonder how long they've been—”

“Doing the geriatric jitterbug?”

She snorted. “Have some respect. How long they've been *together*.”

There was that look again. Eyes half closed, childlike smile, as if she were enjoying her favorite fairy tale. Amy was practical, sometimes to a fault. She'd been the ruthless negotiator

when their landlord had presented laughable terms for their lease. Overwrought sentimentality bounced off her like bullets off Teflon. She wasn't cold, she wasn't uncaring. But she guarded her empathy like a rare, rare jewel.

It took something really magical to move her to moon-faced displays. Clearly, she too had noticed that what Laurel and Hardy had was special.

"That's the real thing right there," she said. "You can see by how they touch each other in bed."

He had to turn away when Amy said 'touch.' That word conjured the image of Laurel and Hardy in bed, which dominoed into that building, electrical buzz that seized him when he watched. And he'd convinced himself that when he felt that tingling, when he felt his heart hammer and his breath softly heave, his eyes said everything that needed to be said.

Desperately needed to be said.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hardy take Laurel's hand and lead him to the bedroom. You could set your watch to their 8:30 dance.

"The real thing," Amy repeated. "That's forever."

Forever. A new trigger word. The hair on his arms stood erect. Cold jolts of energy penetrated the sides of his neck. He almost dropped the serving fork in his hand. Amy was too busy watching the neighbors. She hadn't seen a thing.

He laid a pork chop onto her plate, dusted it with a pinch of paprika, and kissed her forehead. "Stop being a peeping tom and eat your asparagus."

She laughed at how he said 'asparagus': ass-PAIR-uh-geese. He liked making Amy laugh.

They crossed forks, clinking them as if making a toast, and dug in. Amy's attention, at last, focused on dinner.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we're getting blinds."

#

There were decisions to be made.

Venue: The Conservatory Garden

Reception hall: The Conservatory Greenhouse (also, alternate rain location for ceremony)

Food: Kate the Katerer

Cake: _____

He let Amy make them all. Not because of any Neanderthalic machismo that said it was the woman's job. Not that he was lazy.

It was, in his mind, a gift. He let her make the decisions as a gift. It was out of love.

He chimed in when asked. He never once shrugged and said, "Whatever you want, honey," when she held up two possible china patterns to add to the registry. *That* would have been unacceptable. Barbaric, even. No, when asked, he expressed his honest opinions, even when they contradicted what she wanted. But he did it kindly, and if she went another way with the final decision, he didn't dig in his heels. He'd had his say. The rest was hers. A gift.

They sat at a small round table, visiting the fourth of five potential bakers for the wedding cake. Tiny plates with tiny forks, a rainbow of flavor samples: red velvet, raspberry/white chocolate, caramel swirl. They tried miniscule bites of each, made notes in their notebook, and very coolly told the baker they had one more place to try before making their final decision. But the second they left, they agreed this was the best they'd had so far and unless the last baker blew them out of the water, their wedding cake would be that caramel swirl cake.

This was how he knew to love her. Making sure she was happy in all aspects of their life together. To that end, he sent her “just because” flowers every so often. He shared all household duties—cooking, cleaning, shopping—and never once came across as a henpecked schlub or a touchy-feely metrosexual like his brother, doing what he could to tear down the infernal patriarchy from the inside.

And he did this by thinking of Amy and her happiness. These were things he could control. And as long as he could control them, she *would* be happy.

There were those things he couldn't control. Those things that summoned a glint in her eyes, a small but fiery beacon that sometimes threatened to consume her smile. Not so much a flicker of doubt as an ember that didn't quite know it was supposed to fade and die. Immortality through ignorance.

After eleven years, he'd earned a black belt in distractions. He knew how to steer her away from doubt, not unlike a collie rounding up sheep and driving them toward the abattoir. Smoke and mirrors, watch the left hand while the right one works magic. Amy *was* happy. He'd seen to that. Happy enough to overpower any questions or suspicion.

But now, face to face every single night with Laurel and Hardy and all the raw, powerful, sensuous, unyielding sex...

Now, he had his own doubts.

#

The choice had never been men vs. women.

The choice had always been accept vs. surrender.

#

It was such a cliché, to ogle the barista.

But here he was, nursing a small chocolate chai—thimble-sized sips that magically stretched minutes into hours—and glancing—no, *staring*—over the top of his mug.

The barista's name was Connor. Tall, blonde, killer smile. A little on the young side, but nothing illegal. Or unattainable.

If he was going to indulge in cliché, he figured, he might as well go for the gold.

He'd decided, a long time ago, that things were going to work with Amy. They *had* to. Making things work required more work than anyone would give him credit for. It meant *not* visiting certain sites on the internet, no matter how good he'd gotten at erasing browser history. It meant *not* peeking into the bottom drawer where Amy kept the odd issue of Playgirl. And most of all, it meant *not* ogling cute baristas.

But here he was, admiring Connor's lithe frame, the way he greeted each customer with an enthusiastic 'hello,' the woven-hemp rainbow bracelet that dangled from his skinny wrist.

He was a regular in this coffeehouse and Connor knew what he wanted and had it ready just as he made it to the head of the line. It was, he mused, the best foreplay he'd ever had.

And maybe it was something extra bright in Connor's smile today. Maybe it was pre-wedding jitters. Maybe it was the unexpected octogenarian porn channel he could view nightly from his living room window. Whatever it was, something had changed.

What if I said more than 'hi?'

That was all he'd ever said to Connor. Nothing else. What if next time he came, he told Connor to have a nice day? Or complimented his hair cut? Or just flat out asked him to sit on his face?

This change within had made him bolder, but not that bold.

What are you afraid of?

Rejection? Humiliation?

His life had always been filled with both. Who would reject him? Certainly not his parents, the co-op shopping, composting, recycling liberals that they were. Why feel humiliation? He didn't care about anyone who would try to make him feel shame. And even at a pace that sometimes resembled lightning and other times resembled a turtle, acceptance was the future.

But he owed Amy. He knew this. She had saved him. He'd told her as much, although he'd always suspected she thought he was being poetic. He wasn't. That first date—where they clicked so fast and so easily—had come at just the right time. College had been horrible, even worse than high school. Whatever burst of sexual frustration he'd avoided at Franklin High had arrived with a vengeance his freshman year at Kenyon.

Amy made it all disappear. She listened, she cared. In just a few short months, he'd amassed such a debt of gratitude for her every kindness that marriage and a lifetime of fidelity seemed the *only* worthy repayment. Which sounded cold. It wasn't. He *did* love her.

Maybe not the way she would ultimately need, but he did love her.

Still the question remained. The question he was convinced only Connor could answer.

What *was* he afraid of?

#

He started getting up before Amy, even when he didn't need to. He'd taken to sitting in the pre-dawn dark of the living room, against the wall so he couldn't be seen. He had a perfect view of Laurel and Hardy's bedroom.

Over the past two weeks, what he was doing had gone beyond voyeurism. It had taken on a life of its own, almost literally. Things were happening he couldn't explain. And, in the end, he didn't care to have them explained either.

When Laurel's hand slid down Hardy's arm, he could *feel* it as if it were his own hand. He could taste Hardy's lips when they kissed. He felt a shiver when the pair slowly...slowly...slowly reclined onto the bed.

He twitched. There was something different about the electric tingle this time. His heart raced. His breathing arrested. For a second, he thought he was ill. A second later, he thought he was dying. He couldn't tear his eyes from the couple next door, Laurel playing big spoon to Hardy, tenderly running his fingers through his lover's hair.

And for just a moment—not even a second, perhaps a unit of time yet to be named, something so minute and yet infinite—he saw himself in Laurel's arms.

He saw himself—thirty, forty years from now—with a saggy chest and bushes of white hair sprouting from rubbery ear canals. He saw himself smile and squeeze Laurel's hand. He saw himself close his eyes and purse his lips for a satisfied moan.

And then it was no longer Laurel. The man whose arms cradled his future self didn't look familiar; in fact, he couldn't even make out his future lover's face. But that didn't matter. He was being held, both exactly like Amy held him and entirely nothing like how Amy held him.

It hurt. It physically, spiritually, mentally hurt to see that.

He tried closing his eyes. But the image boomeranged back, stronger than ever.

That's forever.

When he opened his eyes, Laurel and Hardy were up, shuffling around their bedroom and getting ready to start the day.

He crawled back into bed with Amy. When her alarm went off, he told her he wasn't feeling well and was calling in sick. She kissed him and offered to make cinnamon toast. She did that whenever he was sick. He told her he'd rather sleep. She asked him to text her at noon with an update on how he felt.

He promised.

#

Days later, when he came home from work, he found Amy sitting on the floor, her back propped against the sofa. She was sobbing. All the wedding planning material was strewn about—a blueprint of orderly chaos for their special day.

He knelt at her side and pulled her close. The wedding reception seating chart—a landmine of circles speared with named, multi-colored Post-It flags—sprawled across her lap like a funeral shroud.

“I don't know what to do with Aunt Linda,” she said, holding up a finger with a green flag bearing Linda's name stuck to the tip. “I can't put her at table four with Uncle Gene. She divorced him. I can't put her at table six with her kids; they hate her for divorcing Gene. And Linda hates everyone at table three.”

Together, they moved flags around, re-arranging the seating to create the least hate-filled temperate zones. They drew up a flow chart with countless arrows, showing who couldn't stand whom, and indicating the minimum number of tables distance certain people—like Gene and Linda—had to have between them in order to keep the peace. It took two hours but they arrived at a reasonable solution.

This was what they did well together. This was their hallmark. Compromise.

“God,” she said. “Linda and Gene. They were always so happy. They were supposed to be forever, you know. I always thought my own parents would break up before anyone else I knew. But they’re still together and Linda and Gene...”

“It happens,” he said, and regretted it immediately. No one, on the cusp of a wedding, was interested in rational explanations for divorce.

“I want forever,” she said. “And don’t laugh at me for saying it. It’s stupid, I know, but I want it. I want it, dammit.”

He brushed her cheek with his thumb. “Hey, where’s this coming from?”

The question had barely escaped his lips when he saw it. The ember. Questions roiled off it like steam. Eleven years worth of doubt burning just behind her eyes.

He’d hidden it. Jesus, how he’d hidden it. Amy was the only one close enough to even suspect. But even for all his distractions, he’d clearly not been convincing enough.

How do I convince you I love you? What can I possibly do so you know I won’t act on any other thought?

Nothing. Because he couldn’t even convince himself that anymore.

Didn’t he deserve his own forever? His own Laurel or Hardy? His own something that made him tingle.

And Amy. Didn’t she deserve hers? Something truer than he could give her. Something without stubborn embers of doubt and questions that could never, never be answered. Really, he was being selfish to keep her from that.

He noticed that she’d stopped crying and was gazing wistfully across the way. Laurel and Hardy were making dinner. Hardy stopped tossing the salad long enough to remind Laurel to take his pills. They kissed.

Amy had saved him. He'd spent eleven years thinking repayment was the same as forever. But that wasn't true. For the first time, he understood this.

"You will get your forever," he said. "I swear. A forever worthy of you."

#

He rehearsed what he wanted to write.

~~I'M SETTING YOU FREE.~~

~~I'M SO, SO SORRY.~~

~~THIS IS FOR THE BEST.~~

In the end, he took a notecard and wrote: I CAN'T GO ON LYING TO YOU. He'd thought about writing so much more. Explanations. Apologies. Would any apology be acceptable?

Would any explanation provide new information?

He packed a bag. He had enough cash to last a week. By then, he hoped, the storm would have blown over and they could start the process of extracting one another from their respective lives.

He went to the dining room, placed the notecard on the table, and weighed it down with his engagement ring. He gave one last look over at Laurel and Hardy's apartment. He wanted to say, even silently, *This is for you. You gave me the strength. You showed me what I always wanted.*

It looked like Laurel and Hardy were having a party. People had gathered in the living room, suits and dark dresses. Nearly everyone wore a *kippah*. No one seemed to be enjoying themselves. A row of vases, filled with lilies, lined the window sill.

In the bathroom, a woman was draping the mirrors in black cloth.

When his gaze hit the bedroom, he found Laurel sitting on the edge of the bed. Shoulders slumped forward, his eyes staring lifelessly at the floor.

Hardy was nowhere to be seen.

An image of Connor the barista flashed in his mind. Come and gone so quickly. Lingered just long enough for the fear he'd forbidden himself to feel to overwhelm him, a fierce tide against the rocks.

He'd dreamed of what it would be like to get what he truly wanted. To feel that electricity with another man.

He'd never imagined what it would be like to get that...and then lose it.

He could lose Amy. He knew it would hurt but he could see past the pain.

But a loss like Laurel's. That was different. That, he knew, was unthinkable.

Quietly, he slipped his engagement ring back on. He tore up the note. He wiped the tears from his eyes, preparing for one more death as Amy walked through the door and he continued the lie.

He leaned against the window, staring at Laurel who remained motionless on the edge of the bed. He tried to summon the tingle, what it felt like when the couple had been together. He didn't want to feel what Laurel felt now.

For the very first time. Laurel looked up. Their eyes met.

He stared at Laurel and mouthed, *I'm sorry*.

The old man nodded.

He turned away from Laurel. *There is no forever*, he thought.

Laurel straightened his tie. With tremendous effort, he pulled himself up to standing. With great care, he stumbled out of the bedroom, down the hall, and into the living room. The others descended on him immediately, a wolf pack of care and concern.

The old man mustered a small smile as he shook hands. He gently fended off attempts to press small plates of food into his hands. He swept the room with his eyes, as if taking a moment to appreciate everyone who'd come to share his grief. His gaze was sad and tired and filled with love.

And so, *so* valiant.

END