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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Fish Story

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Fish Story

“*How did this affair get started?*” she wondered, looking at the man lying next to her, surprised by the skinny shanks and a wrinkled pot belly she hadn’t noticed three weeks ago when they first met. She remembered eying him in the lobby of the Illinois Valley Community Center while waiting for the charter bus to arrive, an older gent but still suave in a Calvin Klein vest and RayBan sunglasses. *He doesn’t look too bad for a guy from the senior center*, she had thought to herself, considering that the half dozen other men taking the Museums of Chicago tour were barely ambulatory, wore plaid pants with striped shirts, and smelled like a freshly opened sardine tin. And to be truthful, she had been the one to open the door to the flirtation that began when he boarded the bus, her smile the invitation for him to plop into the adjoining seat. And she had to admit, her sassy reply when he remarked on how much energy she had – *my husband was the one who died, not me* – certainly suggested she was not a gal pushing a walker in shapeless orthopedic shoes.

Did seventy-three-year-old women have affairs? She felt the heat of the blush that covered her cheeks. The women that Danielle Steel and Nora Roberts wrote about had quixotic assignations, dreamy-eyed trysts. The exotic heroines baring their bosoms in the pages of a Barbara Cartland romance novel wouldn’t be caught dead in the flannel gown she was wearing. Not that she would be appearing on the cover of Playboy anytime soon. Lying in bed with the morning light less than kind, she wondered if he would notice the spider veins on her calves and those damn liver spots on the back of her hands.

How would she describe the awkward lovemaking with the man sprawled across her bed, gently snoring? Her shyness had kept her passion in check, and admittedly, the culmination of her fantasy was still a ways off. But as far as she was concerned, that was just fine. The

fireworks were missing but he was sweet and gentle and didn't hide behind the bluster and blame-game she remembered all too well.

It had been a long time since she had lain naked next to a man. Towards the end of her passionless marriage her husband was more like a lump in the mattress than a lover. She hadn't thought about being intimate in years, until the day of the tour, when suddenly she was a desirable woman again, with a man sitting next to her giving her the kind of goose bumps she hadn't felt for what seemed an eternity.

The group of seniors, most of them small town folks from Oglesby and nearby Peru, had wandered over to the Waters of the Worlds tanks at the Shedd Aquarium, pausing to listen as the guide talked about Old Granddad, the museum's long-lived Australian lungfish. It was all she could do not to laugh out loud as the earnest young ichthyologist described the fish that had been on display since arriving for the Chicago World's Fair of 1933.

"He hangs out like a sunken log on the bottom of his habitat, so our aquarists have to monitor his respiration and eating."

The description matches Al to a tee, she had giggled.

"Scientists think lungfish might be the missing link between fish and amphibians," the escort continued. "Its tubby silhouette has not evolved much, if at all, in the 100 million years it's been around. When the water is low, the lungfish swims to the surface and gulps in air through its mouth."

Sure sounds like Al sitting on the couch watching television, she thought, grimacing, recalling the endless weekends stuck at home when the highlight of an interminable Sunday watching football was getting up at half-time to see what was in the refrigerator.

Now here she was, three weeks later, having had sex with a man from the senior center, a man she hardly knew. She wasn't surprised by her timidity. With Al, for the last couple of years when they actually lived together as husband and wife, it was mostly about him, struggling with performance anxieties that left him moody for days on end. He took Viagra a couple of times, but his face turned so red and his heart beat so fast he was more afraid of dying than looking foolish. The medics who took him to the hospital suffering from pains in the chest didn't even snicker; they had handled similar calls dozens of times.

It wasn't exactly cloud nine for her, either. She was too old fashioned to voice her own disappointment but truthfully she hadn't felt a tingle since watching Jeff Bridges make love to Michelle Pfeiffer in "The Fabulous Baker Boys."

Her lover (surprisingly, she liked the sound of that) was stirring. Was there a set of rules covering the awkward moment when the harsh light of day turned cute little freckles into ugly brown liver spots? Would he take one look at her and bolt? And what were her feelings? Did she want him to stay? She thought of the time they had spent together since the bus tour to the big city. Turned out they liked a lot of the same things; and each other. He was easy to be with and didn't have to "be right" all the time. Maybe it was because they both had been around the block a few times and had pretty much decided that who they had become at this time in their lives was good enough, with no need to embellish the story.

Fact is, she had been on her own for more than ten years and had done quite well, thank you very much. When Al was diagnosed, she had the foresight to enroll in the community college and study for the Real Estate exam. By the time he died, she was making a decent living, paying the bills, helping the kids with their college tuition, and doing pretty good in the market

to boot. So this fellow lying next to her, she might want him to stick around and be the companion that made life more enjoyable but she sure as heck didn't need him to take care of her! The intensity of her avowal embarrassed her. For all her bravado she realized she was afraid that when he awoke he would see her *au natural* and scoot out the door before he took time to tie his shoes.

She watched him yawn lazily, then sit up with a start, bemused but uncertain, his eyes searching for assurance that everything was okay. She realized with a bit of a shock, a pleasurable revelation she was quick to note, *He's feeling as awkward as I am*. Her qualms eased, she took a deep breath and dove off the cliff.

"Hello, sleepyhead," she teased. "Would you like some tea?"

"*How did this affair get started?*" he wondered, looking at the pudgy, gray haired woman lying next to him, surprised by the Caesarian scar on her belly and the crow's feet under her eyes that he hadn't noticed until this moment. He remembered when he first met her three weeks ago, charming in a knee length skirt that hit the mark between too girly and too trendy, just the right choice for a woman of a certain age. *Hard to believe she's a gal from the senior center*, he had thought to himself, eyeing the bus full of widows and divorcées wearing shapeless slacks with elastic waistbands and smelling vaguely like the lilac scented sachet bags his ex-wife kept in her underwear drawer. He had made it a point to sit next to her, noticing with surprise the nervous stammer as he introduced himself. She was lively and smart, but he was a cautious man and adamant about steering clear of divorcées and widows. Yet he couldn't help but be aware of the faint stirring in his mid-rise briefs as he slid into the aisle seat.

The aquarium was the first stop on the tour's itinerary. Half-bored, he had been ambling without direction from exhibit to exhibit when he overheard one of the museum guides talking about an aquatic geezer of a fish called Old Granddad. It was the fattest fish he had ever seen, slippery scales covered in brownish patches, droopy eyelids, slithering unperturbed along the weeds and reeds at the bottom of the tank, waiting for the next serving of worms and water fleas. What struck him was the staying power of the fish, put in that tank the same year he was born. He might have seen it decades ago when he was a kid in short pants and Buster Browns, and today it was still alive and kicking, so to speak, using his stubby muscular fins to walk underwater like the land animal some scientists think his species might have become. Suddenly, unexpectedly, it hit him, *Sonofagun, if that old fish is still hanging in there doing its thing, why should I call it quits just because I'm not quite the man I used to be.*

More to the point, *what kind of man was he now*, he wondered. Did he have what it takes to prompt the attractive lady from the bus to give him a second look? When he was in his prime he had all the moves, all the pick-up lines: "Did the sun come up, or did you just smile at me?"

After he married, he quickly became bored with the routine. His mind wandered to the peccadilloes that led to one affair after another. It was all so easy and predictable: the impromptu conversation with the curvaceous thirty-something woman on the late afternoon flight to New York or Los Angeles or wherever, the possibilities of staying at nearby hotels prompting them to eye each other like fruit flies sucking the same juicy peach.

She would make a point to tell him she was engaged. He would be quick to reply that he was married, the message being, *Don't worry, it's safe, I won't tell. Whatever happens is between you and me.*

With the charade on schedule they would share a cab to the hotel and he would make his surreptitious call home. "Hi sweetheart. The flight was uneventful. I'm having dinner and going to bed early. Love you. Call you in the morning."

The martini before dinner was serotonin and dopamine with a jigger of gin and in the hours that followed the anything-goes recklessness of the one-night stand freed him from Episcopal taboo. In the morning, they would kiss each other goodbye like suburban Republicans riding different carpools to their separate offices. He would go to his meeting, sleep soundly on the flight home and arrive at the family manse without guilt or regret.

That was then and decades had passed since he was the big man in the big office making the big bucks. Now he lived on a budget and carefully managed a fixed income. He used to jog a couple of miles every morning and show off a Speedo as he strutted along the beach. Now he had an expanding belly and took three Advil capsules before he got dressed. At one time, he had a beauty queen wife and an address book of friends. Now he was divorced, lived alone, and went to the senior center so he wouldn't start talking to himself. In the past, he was bold, gregarious and persuasive, fearlessly traveling to all corners of the world. Now he was leery of anything new, pretending to possess a confidence that had deserted him. He had always enjoyed sex, never lacked a woman if he felt the urge, and fancied himself a more than capable lover. Now he was so anxious about not performing up to snuff he had just about given up on the idea it

would ever happen again. And then he met the woman on the bus, and saw the fish, still swimming; and saw himself, still alive.

He pulled the covers up to his chin to hide his discomfit. After a thousand nights fantasizing about the big event, the real thing didn't play out quite like he imagined it. He had been nervous, a far cry from self-assured, but it was okay; better than okay. His partner's sweet nature eased the awkwardness; allowed him to admit he needed a little help in doing what used to come naturally. Yes, it was less than perfect but there were gratifying, tender feelings of intimacy to more than compensate.

It was time to face the music, to face her. He sat up, dropping the blanket and his defenses. He felt happy when he was with this lovely woman. They had a lot in common. Perhaps she felt the same way.

Apparently she had been up for a while. He liked the flannel gown she was wearing; it matched the mood he was in, feeling comfortable and cozy. When their eyes met, he did not turn away. *Look inside me, I have nothing to hide*, they said. Gratefully, he accepted the invitation.

"Tea would be nice," he answered.