

Amy Wright

In the Arms of the Mastiff

Almost immediately Gupta happens upon May, who is a walk unto herself—the kind that has a wiggle at the bottom of it like a rock in your shoe. May prides herself on being anonymous, like a toothbrush, or a grape. She is on her way to the observatory. “I’m watching a star die,” she tells Gupta. “Aren’t we always,” he returns. “Not when we’re watching our shoelaces,” she says looking at his feet, “or our tassels, as the case may be.”

May was stung in her heartspot by a permanent goodbye, and now considers herself a bit of a Nova Scotian warrior playing hockey, gloves on or off. She moved to Barnsville, Gupta’s little haven of inadequacy, to recover as one might quarantine the flu.

She lives in a white bungalow. Every time the door chimes, which is often since May is a looker and a charmer, she figures something else out. The first thing she figured out was that “You never do know,” if it’s love, from Ms. Guinea, who had been married forty-seven years and still not been sure. By way of explanation, the widow Guinea showed May a photograph of herself with her uniformed husband who died fifteen years before. But Ms. Guinea was not alone in her solitude, like most. Ms. Guinea had grown comfortable in herself and came accompanied like the box mules sold in pairs to petting zoos.

May comes accompanied too, by the jokes she makes up quick as a concierge can say “how do you do?” Gupta, on the other hand, comes with gloom. His eyes hang low as a D on an oboe, or a hunk of malachite dropped from the pass of some salutary planet. But when he chances upon May he’s had barbecue for lunch and is playing the harmonica like he’s stringing a



pearl. When he stops to look at her, May asks, “What do you get when you cross a cornflake with a copperhead?” She doesn’t yet know the end of the joke. Part of the fun is the little shiver she gets wondering if it will work. Like taking a road trip where you take a left turn at every fork in the road until one leads back home.

“I dunno,” Gupto shrugs, keeping the train near his lips, unwilling to commit.

“A serial killer.”

“Huh.” Gupta smirks.

“How does the blonde know if she’s lost her marbles?”

“They stop rattling?”

“No, she just checks her hand to see if she still has them.”

Gupta likes to cry, as one might bite into a jalapeño straight, to exercise his faculties. Today, being Tuesday, his is walking to the elementary school near his house where they hold football practice in an open field. He watches the young players doing drills, each set of legs pumping from one set of chalk lines to another, their shoulders bearing pads like miniature versions of Atlas. He lets his mind drift off like music straining in the distance, and let’s fall the tears. It might take a while today, due to the joy in his heart. One could not time sorrow like a raspberry bush, but only wait for it. Still, it seldom takes long.

“I’m going to watch the boys play ball.” Gupta never tells the truth straight but sidesteps it or sideswipes it or avoids it altogether.

“I can do that for a while,” May answers as if she’d been invited, “unless it would cramp your style,” she adds, which is why she is beloved by her neighbors, because she is only as bold as she is polite.

“Alright,” Gupta figures she will help speed him toward misery quicker than if he goes alone, since most people do. The light is soft and deep, patching the angles of the houses with its honeysuckle mist. Gupta pays it no mind nor May holding her palms out to it. Sometimes she walks with her hands open, fingers pinched together like a chef commending the magnificence of a soufflé or the soufflé potential as it arrives in each of us. May “has a truly rare gift for unpretentious theory,” her film instructor in high school told her. The unpretentious theory she has today is that the clouds are still in their mirror stage. They rush toward one another,