

Short Fiction
2745 Words

SNAKE BITTEN

My romance bubble began bursting and I realize that again with Kendall. “Virginia.” He yells my name, his words breaking the calm, while we walk along on my favorite trail deep in the woods. A dog starts yelping on the far side of the rain-swollen reservoir and, before I ask what’s going on, I warn him of snakes.

“No snakes here,” he says.

Kendall affirms these little facts like a smug mathematics scholar who can imagine an abstract concept, given a passion for exponential calculus, but one who rudely embraces nature. He kicks a stone over the edge and into the swift current of the creek.

“I don’t want to be seen as a couple in public, anymore,” he starts. “I need space. I want to meet other people.”

“Other women?” I sink inside.

“Other women, yes, and as varied as possible,” he says. “Whenever I want.”

“Kendall, no, let’s talk.”

“I can’t.” He shakes his head repeatedly.

“Can’t what?”

“It won’t work. There’s too many potentialities.”

“Kendall, no. Don’t—” I began feeling like a geometric shape he drew on a chalkboard and began erasing—a faded insignificant other.

“For everything, there’s a formula.” He turns toward the crest of the ledge overlooking the creek bed. He removes his leather jacket, anchoring it over his shoulder, slouching. “You are too unpredictable.”

“What’s your point?”

He lays out assumptions of how important I’d become, how valuable an assistant, even a confidante; and that our romance was over although I made him feel human again, more alive as a man. He omits words of love—intimacy, no way; his words distill our relationship into a set of random exponential functions.

“We’re only variables in a complex world,” he says.

“Put the obstacles aside and give us a chance.” I argue in my weak defense.

My great aunt, who pulled me out of a dead end job in Miami, had warned against such a moment. I almost wanted to run back to Miami, even at risk of my life. “Give us a chance.”

The gray overcast thins to a haze. The ground leaves bristle from a shadow crawling across the rocky ledge toward Kendall. *Ahhh*. He lets out a clipped yelp, and that dog across on the hillside starts barking again.

“My leg—something bit my leg.” Kendall bends his head, stumbles, and collapses on his side. He clutches his ankle, no socks, below the cuff. His eyeglasses peel off, slide along the rock, a lens loosens. He cringes, a flush of red fills his round cheeks below those glib eyes; and he puffs, breathing rapid like in bed the other night.

“Kendall?”

“My leg feels on fire, and there’s a sharp pain here.” He places his hand on his chest. “Go call someone. *Hurry.*”

The shadow slithers along through brown leaves on the ledge, reversing direction, and swishes past a leafless bush.

I’m more scared that Kendall’s mid-life affair may end with a heart attack—and not from the bite of a black snake.

“Virginia, please—”

“We left our cells in the car, like you instructed.” I find the car keys in his leather jacket and head back through the woods, skidding over slicks of red and brown leaves. Damn autumn rains and Kendall’s distant tone.

“Hurry.” I urge the Emergency 911 dispatcher over the phone at the car. “Oh, please hurry, I think it’s his heart.”

The dispatcher says to hold the line.

Kendall’s words flow inside my head. I feel an urgency but realize that he had erred in his choice of *where* to end our relationship. The woods always made him irritable and a cool breeze might muss his thin hair. I could not figure him. He’d rather contrive a scene over a scotch and water in a bar, like he could have done Friday evening after the movie. No, he decides on coming to our secret spot, the scenic rendezvous that *I chose* for intimate strolls, rather than breathing stale air of the college cafe where we diagnose his afternoon seminars.

Here on the other side of town. Out of sight.

“Yes, we’re in the woods, send the EMT.” I yell into the phone. “Reservoir area. On the old catfish creek. Ten minutes? Just hurry.”

I begin running back to Kendall through wet leaves on a muddy path. The muck splatters my white jeans but I feel like a disposable lover—a random variable in his world of x-and-y formulas. If he is having a heart attack and dies, I can only imagine the juicy gossip on campus. They'd read his obituary first:

University Professor Emeritus Dr. Irwin Kendall, age 48, dead of an unexpected heart attack. He was a tenured professor of mathematics admired by his students, and widely recognized for developing a set of theories on random paratactic concepts. He is survived by one son, Wayne, 22, serving in the Peace Corps in Guatemala, and his wife Susan Hammer Kendall (now separated). Funeral services are incomplete.

On campus they'd ask me, *what's up*, what were *you* doing in the woods? They'd deduce that we had an affair. Of course we did.

His colleagues would whisper in the corridors through slight-opened doors, enjoying the thrill that gossip brings. They'd retell stories of Kendall's Spring Break romances with graduate students; they'd question *why* he tried again, so soon after his second wife moved out.

They'd piece together a time line of our romance: when we first met, when we first made love. They'd ask what did he see in her and, oh yes, they'd conclude the worst: *they'd blame me*.

If his colleagues had their way, the obituary would read a lot different:

Dr. Irwin Kendall is survived by his mistress, Virginia Gallagher, not quite thirty, a math teaching assistant. A redhead known for her insipid curiosity about older men, and a string of broken love affairs. She was with him at time of death as they strolled the old

catfish trail, deep in the woods near the reservoir *where lovers go*.

She once basked in his glow at department receptions. Her efforts to revive him proved fruitless but she did make the Emergency 911 call.

Damn the random contradictions. If one person on campus does ask, I'll tell the truth—if only for the sake of keeping the gossip clean. I must be jinxed to think I could have a romance with an older man.

My other mentor, *uh* boyfriend, had been Antonio Hernandez. I met him in Miami on South Beach. A Cuban without chest hair, he carried a ritualistic smell of onions. He taught me how to prepare Cuba's national dish *Ropa Vieja*: shredded beef and tomatoes, which resembled a pile of tattered clothes. *Just mix in veggies, he'd say, and then bay leaves and pimentos, and maybe add roasted red peppers.*

We didn't officially date. We coupled but not much in public. While his romance was relentless, I always had to wait somewhere hidden for our meetings. I couldn't phone him. He had a wife and two *ninos*, a girl and a boy. His wife had taut muscles from once wielding a machete in Castro's sugarcane fields. *She'd kill me if she found out, he said. She'd cut me off.*

More than anything else, I learned that Cuban men did not willingly introduce their girl to their male friends. Whether the reason involved jealousy or that machismo, they seemed to hold a hidden insecurity inside, perhaps of losing a cute concubine. To Antonio's credit, and he was so adorable, we did stroll the beach at night, and took drives to the Keys. He was as kind as any middle-age man could be as they become edgy nearing age fifty.

At that time, I worked at Lum's near the 16th Street strip, close to South Beach. He'd come in for a foot-long dog near the end of my shift, and take me to a circular cabana on South

Beach, one he got on loan from a friend. He often brought a gift, a trinket of jewelry, chocolate sweets and, once, a Cuban cigar. He sweet talked until he had to leave for home at midnight. His smooth words often sounded like bad poetry.

Ginny. Antonio had difficulty pronouncing Virginia. Your eyes are like the ocean I crossed when I left Havana. Distant but so close. As blue as the sea and as bright as the stars. With you, I forget Castro and all the banana trees on the plantation that my cousins loved.

He acted silly but we had fun. Each night I washed my hair of Antonio's onion scent.

Once Antonio took me dancing at Eden Roc Hotel for a New Year's Eve gala, and that was the last night. With Caribbean steel drums hyping the ballroom, we danced in the Poco-a-Poco lounge. Near midnight, we left the crowd and stood on the hotel balcony. I acted giddy with champagne as I watched the sky, clear and sparkling.

A breeze fluttered in off the Atlantic Ocean.

Right at the high point when I felt the happiest, a loud crack of gunshot shattered a glass door when a young Cuban girl unloaded a revolver in celebration. *Happy New Year.* The shock caused Antonio to grip his chest, perhaps thinking of his machete-slinging wife. He sank back and fell into a beach chair. He had a mild stroke as it turned out, and recovered within five days. I dared not visit Antonio at the hospital. His wife, mother, and children held a vigilance in his room like crowds waiting for a blessing from the Pope arriving in Havana.

I had made a critical decision and left Miami after my great aunt called, telling me of her nightmare: she saw me trapped like Indiana Jones in a pit of snakes. I agreed to take a drive-away station wagon from a transport company that needed to be in Pittsburgh, and wasted little time leaving. I packed a few possessions, including a white cottony pullover, a gift from Antonio

on our last night. While packing, I kept my eye riveted outside my apartment, expecting a crazed Cuban woman running the walkway, bloodshot red eyes and a machete in her hand.

Deep in August with humidity high in the mountains along the river, I wore a cotton dress to the interview for a graduate assistant position. Given my B.A. in math, I followed the advice of my great aunt who heard of the job opening.

That's when I first met Kendall. He wore a black leather jacket even in the heat.

He offered me the job of his teaching assistant in the mathematics lab. He told me I'd proctor classes, help with grading, and oversee quizzes. He needed a TA since he often had personal business out of town. He'd schedule regular meetings with me, he said. The work was better than fending off college drunks where I had been waitressing at a late night diner.

Cold distant Kendall, a smug and confident man, held an allure. I learned he might be headed for a divorce. Nothing happened right away but I craved the fantasy. First, I began dressing in a simple light dress; a silk scarf, nothing threatening; a cottony feel in dry weather, and corduroy slacks or jeans for the chill of early fall.

He still held his distance like a tenured professor. His cynicism attracted students, male and female. He embraced their quaint questions with deep responses. While lecturing, he'd stare out a classroom window, reflecting on the shape of light. His fresh-faced prodigies tittered over his smugness; they'd say, *he's brilliant, no he's magnetic*. They could not figure him.

He enjoyed toying with them, and with me. He'd argue a point until he won an argument, and he'd change views; he'd take the opposite side and turn evidence in his favor. He thrived on a term he called the paratactic experience: a random universe where all persons and events, in

fact all human affairs, existed as only bits of phenomena adrift without a real world logic. He became infamous for this theory.

I never dressed in black clothes until I met Kendall.

On campus his signature was a black leather jacket like he held a mystique; he wanted to emit the dark energy of a polished intellectual. His bright-faced recruits often wore black, too, as a tribute. Students gathered outside his fourth floor office like in Cuban Santeria rituals, which my Antonio swore by on ceremony nights in Miami. Each new apprentice savored selection of that week's sacrificial chicken.

If my wearing a costume held a deep hidden meaning, I realized that black leather was the formula for attraction. We began our affair in his office after the mid-term math exam.

Back at the reservoir creek, the sunlight bursts through clouds and I think that Kendall should have known what I wore today under my white pressed jeans. The light casts down on him like the glow of aromatic candles the other night in his bedroom.

A distant siren from an ambulance hovers in the air but the murky rapids below absorb the artificial sound. A coolness spreads low across our rocky ledge, the haze lifts.

I wince not from a chill but from the thought my romantic life is jinxed, and I never get lucky with an older mentor after he became a boyfriend,

Kendall lies at my feet, his leather jacket crumpled in a heap. Bugs crawl inside the fur collar. He's not blinking, saliva melts from his mouth. He puffs in spurts and his belly heaves, as though he's squirming beneath my weight on his sofa..

Inside I feel pain but I fear his heart will really fail.

He rolls onto his other side and slips close to the crest. I almost feel like pushing him over the edge and into the ravine. Instead, I stuff his car keys and cell phone in his pockets and fold the jacket under his head. I undo his collar, flick a bug from his face, and smooth his thin black hair. I pat his forehead, thinking *there, there*. He calms and breathes like a baby.

I almost tell him not to be afraid but don't say a word.

“Cold—I'm cold, Virginia.”

“Lie still,” I say. “Help's on the way.”

“My jacket—where's it?”

Black bugs weave in a detour around his crumpled shape; a few red ants stumble over the corduroy ridges of his pants. I wipe sweat from his brow. He begins squinting at the barren trees, possibly imagining how that sprinkle of light adds dimensions to the grays and browns.

He's analyzing the angles, I know, and reflecting on the future, his past, and likely having a final hypothesis.

Below the ledge, a rush of rain-swollen creek water vibrates the cool air.

Upon arrival one medic apologizes for arriving late due to traffic. She checks Kendall's pulse and blood pressure, and says, *he's responding just fine*. The larger medic applies a cold pack, advising that, *he'll be okay in a day or two*.

“What were you doing this far out in the woods?”

“We were talking about life . . . well, maybe getting hitched, *maybe waiting*.”

I lie without thinking what I'm saying as I bend over to pick up Kendall's glasses, the one lens missing.

“Gotta be careful this deep in the woods,” the large medic says. “Rain and mud and all.”

“I swear we never saw the snake coming out of the hole—least not in time.”

The medics tuck a blanket about Kendall who glances in my direction. I grab his jacket. He turns his head skyward and, in that moment—just like that without a regret—I toss his leather jacket into the muddy creek waters where trash and driftwood float toward the river.

The medics lift Kendall onto a gurney and struggle as the wheels grab muddied ruts in the trail. We breach the tree line of the woods.

“For the record—.” The medic at the rear turns around on the path. “Snakes in these here woods aren’t poisonous.”

“My great aunt told me,” I say.

“He probably felt trapped,” she says. “That’s why he struck out at you.”

“I’ll take that as a word of advice and a lesson learned—” I arch my eyebrows but glance at my loafers squishing through the wet leaves. “—if there’s ever a next time.”

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