

Suspended Animation

by Alexandra Shelley

Kenneth looked wrong in foreign countries. We were in the Pyrénées Orientales and he was playing shortstop. His sweatshirt was the same new red as his sweatpants and he had that edgy eagerness of an American on a ten-day vacation. After every batter he'd announce the count to the outfielders. He was the only one keeping score. The first inning had started about a week ago, when the wedding guests began arriving from many lands — mostly New York. Tomorrow the ceremony would take place and so the game would soon be over, regardless of whether we'd gone the full nine.

"Good eye, Sweetie!" Kenneth shouted to me as I stood at the plate and let a wild lob sail over my head. He appeared to have forgotten that we were on opposing teams. The groom, Roger, my old college pal, was pitching with abandon, unused to being the center of attention. His perpetual please-like-me smile had broadened to a reckless grin showing the snaggly teeth that always made me wonder why his parents hadn't gotten him braces. Roger stooped to take a swallow from a bottle of beer he kept at his feet. I noticed Kenneth thwacking his fist into his glove. I tapped the bat on the plate, but Roger's attention had wandered. He was watching a small group make its way toward us on the road from the village, walking without haste, with the humility of people living in a valley. Probably no one had rushed in these parts since Charlemagne. From the train station parking lot where we were playing, the village, maybe a mile away, looked like a pile of stones that someone had started to collect and then, losing interest, left in a jumble. On either side of the road, behind the village, behind us, the Pyrénées rose like amens.

"Heads up, Lu! That was your pitch." Kenneth sounded injured. I realized Roger was throwing balls again and I had let another one go by. But by now the group from the village had arrived and as it was an official delegation — the Mayor and the entire Sauveterre Village Council — play was suspended. Roger went to get Danielle, the woman he was going to marry at 11 a.m. the next morning. She spoke the language. The rest of us were working with high school French, a miscellany of "*expressions nécessaires*" and rhymed paeans to torrents and princesses.

Danielle came out of the train station building with a pencil stuck prettily behind her ear. Her brother owned the train station. The train didn't stop here any more. The question was why it would ever have stopped here. Her brother lived on the second floor and ran a snack bar out of what used to be the ticket window. But when it wasn't ski season, his only customers were asthma sufferers on the way to some nearby institute.

The Mayor kissed Danielle's hand and presented her with a shiny black box. From where I stood at home plate it was hard to tell about the box. But its gold embossing was somehow familiar, perhaps from those pictures of local wares that you look at in the airline magazine when the turbulence makes you think about how easily your life could end. I asked him later and Roger said it was a bottle of Johnny Walker. It came from Andorra, a tiny duty-free country that was the fancy of the men who lived among these mountains, where borders were an afterthought, where Catalan and French and Spanish were blown away like a single whisper on the mistral.

We taught the Mayor how to play softball. He held the bat tentatively, like a still-warm baguette. We also tried to teach the councilmen. There was one in particular who got the object of the game all right but not the process. If he hit the ball, he ran to first and then immediately back to home plate. "You can't really blame him," said Roger. "It is a long way around just to get to where you started."

I had learned that Roger took nothing for granted that first time I saw him, sitting alone on the stoop of our freshman dorm and spinning a frisbee on the tip of his index finger. "My mother gave this to me," he'd announced. "She said I could use it on the quad to make friends." He watched the conga line of students snaking along slate paths to classes and varsity practice and dining halls, and said finally, "She should have given me a boomerang."

I could tell right off that he was the unassuming, attentive type whom girls like to keep around as a confidant about their improbable crushes, while wondering inwardly why they couldn't simply love someone like Roger. "Men are dicks," he would say comfortingly, and really mean it. I suspected he was a virgin and that he wouldn't be able to do much about it, what with the sophomore guys who at breakfast sloshed together bravado and Captain Crunch and calculated how many miles they had plowed the night before. It was first semester and I was homesick and intimidated. Roger taught me to throw a frisbee. "If you toss it at the right angle," he once said, "it comes back to you."

The smell of charcoal and burning hot dogs ended the softball game. "*J'ai une faim de loup*," I said, pulling off my sweaty mitt. I had been waiting for the opportunity to deliver this, one of the few complete phrases I remembered. I don't think anyone heard. And in fact I wasn't particularly hungry and didn't know how hungry wolves got; I suspected it was seasonal with them.

Kenneth jogged over looking disappointed. "Don't worry, Lu," he said, "We'll finish up the game tomorrow." He consulted his watch, which was still on New York time. "Is this dinner? It's only one-thirty at home."

Kenneth had a face that would look good on the coin of a country where it's dark six months out of the year — square-chinned handsome. I watched him run his splayed fingers over his scalp, through the hair that he kept so short it could never get mussed, and didn't say to him, "But we've been here for a week." It was on our honeymoon seven years ago that I began not saying things to

Kenneth. We were canoeing on a lazy European river. Church bells pealed in stone towers and Kenneth shouted to me from the stern about how he fell right plumb between a size ten and size ten-and-a-half shoe and how rough that was for him. I remember liking his inability to transform himself.

I kissed Kenneth on the cheek. These were mostly my college friends here for the wedding — the invitation, in fact, had been addressed to “Lucille Bossom & Spouse” — and Kenneth didn’t feel comfortable with them. “Your friends are so talky,” he said. “It’s hard to finish an inning.” He was on vacation from saving lives. He wasn’t righteous about this, but it made things stark: there was life/death and then some other stuff in the margins. A vacation for him was being with people whose t-cell count wasn’t low. These other attractions — landscape, ceremony, cuisine, indigenous population — were garnish.

Lately Kenneth had been getting hung up at the hospital more nights than not and arriving home looking as if he’d been pithed. Out of a sense of schedule rather than hunger, I would already have eaten dinner, mine and most of his, and be reading a reference book to collect facts for whatever interactive software adventure I was researching — Commandmentquest last month, Critterquest this month — except mostly I’d be looking at the clock and at my life so far; at the radiator with rust stains that we’d meant to paint for two years; at my own hands, with their sharply etched veins and corrugating fingernails, holding the book; my aging portrait in the attic.

Kenneth always rang the doorbell. He needed to be greeted. The waiting would have made me angry, but it was impossible to be angry at him because he’d been tubing a guy his father’s age with a cardiac arrest, because he reeked of Betadyne that didn’t entirely cover the smell of vomit, because he never complained. So instead I’d politely answer the polite question he always asked with his head already in the refrigerator, his voice wafting back to me on a puff of cold air: “Your day, Sweetie?”

“Fine,” I’d say. “Worked on Critterquest. Kids’ll be happy to know there’s a frog in the Australian desert that lies dormant for eleven months a year.” I could already imagine the screen and that merry, almost human narrator: *If you want to know more about frogs, point with your mouse and click on the frog. If you want to know more about Australia, click on the desert. If you want to know more about dormancy, don’t do anything.*

Kenneth cared about everyone so much during the day that it was hard for him to be in love after hours. And I rarely got sick. We spoke in shorter and shorter sentences, having given up subordinate clauses and periods long ago. Soon, I expected, we’d be communicating in semaphore from opposite ends of the apartment. In bed he could fall asleep without notice, in the middle of a kiss, our tongues touching, and sleep so completely that the only thing that could wake him was the tiny voice that came over his beeper. “Code Nine in the Havemeyer Wing.” I knew every time someone started to die at Midtown Presbyterian and never got used to being haunted by the ghosts of strangers.

After Kenneth plunged into sleep, I’d reach under the mattress for the copy of *Forum* magazine that I kept there. But it was beginning to bug me that these people weren’t in love. This was merely the meeting of anatomies, parts of the body that seemed to exist only in porn magazines. I’d automatically log the information: areolae, snatch, load. Lustquest.

In the morning there were never any traces.

“Pretty as could be,” Kenneth said as we walked in the wedding procession from the train station to the village church. He trailed the antiseptic smell of shaving cream, jangled as he patted the change in his pants pocket. Danielle was at the head of the march with her father. She wore someone else’s grandmother’s long white dress (from a store in SoHo) and a frieze of Queen Anne’s lace in her lush dark hair. Camera shutters clicked. The elderly relatives were ensconced in a Deux Chevaux that crawled along beside us.

Sauveterre, pop. 49. The blue and orange paint of its shutters was faded, its slate roofs swaybacked, and moss and tiny white flowers grew in the crevices between stones as if its houses were slowly merging back into the mountains from which they had been built. The whole village had come out to see, sitting on crumbling stone walls or standing on the three street corners, holding small dogs on leashes, watching this parade of strangers with the relaxed posture of people who knew they would die where they were born. Elderly women smiled. Children left their mouths agape. Their curiosity made us feel important.

The church was built like a fortress and had withstood centuries of assault by freezing winds and ambitious men. It was not at all charming, with the exception of the portly Curé, who welcomed us to his forgotten corner of the Pyrénées. The church was lit by candles and the windows were so small that even the insistent mountain light barely penetrated, its wisps playing over the tolerant faces of the wooden saints with their water-stained robes of gold and rust; over the flouncy flowered frock of a second cousin from South Carolina; over the green eyes of the New York fashion designer — “How do you like them?” he had asked me on the way to the church. “They’re usually blue.”

Roger knelt next to Danielle at the altar rail. The Curé leaned over and spoke so that only they could hear. I tried to imagine what secret he could be telling them that would last their whole lives.

At the supermarket, Roger used to lean his forearms on the handle of his cart, making it weave dangerously and crash into mine. Before he met Danielle, we went late nights together to the Food Emporium. He didn’t cook, but he liked the outings. The last time Roger and I shopped was over a year ago, yet it came back to me now in full color, booted up and played out screen after screen: Roger browsing halfheartedly until he saw me getting annoyed. Saying “I know what I need!” and rushing off. Me, freed of the obligation to look purposeful, leaning against the shelves of Liquid Cheer and zip-lock bags and watching couples piling goods into one another’s arms. Their laughter seeming

miraculous. All that *produce* you decide to buy together. Kale and Kiwis. Yam even. Can it just be eaten and forgotten? My husband could never find a woman who would put as many ingredients into a salad as his mother did.

Much later, Roger coming back with a jar of artichoke hearts rattling on the wire bottom of his cart. Me being pretty convinced he didn't know what they were. On the way home, Roger eating the artichoke hearts with his fingers, the oil collecting around his lips, dripping onto his white t-shirt, holding one out to me, "Want?"

"You know every guy's nightmare, Lucy?" The best man, Skip, waved his drink grandly. "Meeting the girl of his dreams at his own wedding reception." We were talking above the sounds of a jazz trio of conservatory students from Paris who wore sunglasses indoors and, during the dinner, had played undanceable renditions of *Waltzing Matilda*. At that moment I admired the drummer. He could make more noise than anyone else in the room. Danielle swayed in front of him, alone, her eyes closed and her hands in the pockets of the leather jacket she wore over her white lace dress. There was rice in her hair and promise in the sleepy way she held her lips.

"Rodge is one lucky dude," said Skip, whom I always suspected of hanging around Roger in college because of his coterie of lovelorn young women.

"Yes," I said. But I thought it sounded tentative, so I added, "He's the kind of ...dude you knew would marry the first girl he went out with. He was saving himself for marriage."

"Who'da thought he'd snag Danielle?" Skip said.

It was true. Danielle was exotic. The father was Belgian, the mother Catalan, and the kids had been brought up here and there and spoke three languages fluently, with accents that no one could quite place. Danielle apparently saw beyond Roger's soft-soled graduate student shoes and snaggle teeth into a heart that was sound as a fresh-milled 2 x 4. It could also be, there was speculation, because of the boyfriend before, who roughed her up — more than once.

"Are you going to the tenth reunion next summer?" Skip was asking.

"Did you know, Skip, that parrots mate for life?" I said. Skip wasn't paying attention. He was watching Danielle dance. "And by the way," I added. "Often they sing together. One finishes the tune the other started."

"I might go," Skip looked back at me, "I mean, why not? I've still got all my hair. And maybe there's some girl I overlooked."

What would I tell everyone at the tenth? "I do quests"? "I'm in edutainment." Roger had been skeptical when I got the job. "This interactive software for kids, is it a good thing?" he asked. "Whatever happened to books?"

"It's a good thing compared to doing crack," I answered. But I hadn't convinced myself. And even though the job sounded cutting-edge, essentially it required nothing more than turning pages, turning over bits of information in my head and determining what was clickable, and I'd begun to feel there was

something archaic about it. I might just as well have been illuminating manuscripts.

Roger and I both pretended that careers were out of date. His dissertation research was in decision-making. He was forever trying to dream up defense applications, scrabbling for Federal grant money. Still, I admired the cheerful way he'd say, "For myself I always make the wrong decisions — but I know exactly why."

He got angry when I first told him about Kenneth: pre-med in seventh grade, the oldest son of the owners of Krasnof's Pharmacy, the whole family arranged around his success, like a machine that could turn out only one, perfect sample.

"What are you marrying, Lu, a resumé?" Roger had asked. It was then I became aware of an unstated pact we had made: a commitment not to make commitments. I was glad I had escaped. I felt finally I'd repudiated all those dateless weekend nights in high school when my mother, bringing a cup of tea to my room and attempting to push my unruly hair behind my ears, said I shouldn't worry, men would fall in love with my intelligence. Of course this made me worry a great deal. But Kenneth was oblivious to the nonessential details, like whether a girl's hair stayed parted straight. He was under the impression that I was sweet and, as he was tall, he often lifted me up to kiss me. His simple physicality made me feel for the first time the body in which I had been a squatter for twenty three years and made me forget, for a moment, to narrate my own life. I thought the differences between us would keep us going.

I watched Roger make his way toward Danielle through a thicket of slaps on the shoulder. "Are you tired, Little Beetle?" he shouted over the music. She nodded. He looked at her with his head canted, then smiled and ran his knuckles over her cheek. She held his hand tightly as they went up the stairs to the bedroom, and the rest of us tried not to betray what we were picturing to ourselves.

Suddenly the station seemed very large and chilly. There was so much floor space to cross back and forth, spilling beer on our fingers. Americans, French, Spaniards, Catalans. Couples coupled and uncoupled, danced close with that clean-burning lust that transience fuels. Cigarette packs emptied. A local solar energy expert was drawing a turbine on a piece of cardboard for Kenneth, who wanted to know why it used salt water instead of pure water. The Mayor and the Curé were trying to figure out how to pump the keg. I stood with my back to the refrigerator, a noncommittal smile on my face, listening to the yeasty sounds of incomprehensible foreign languages whose words could mean anything.

"She worked so hard to make everything perfect for today." It was Roger. He had come downstairs alone.

"She's tired," I offered.

"Yes, she's tired," he said. He didn't look so hot himself. His eyes were red-rimmed and he was sniffing. "But I wasn't ready to go to bed," he said. "*In the mountains, there you feel free*, and all that." He pulled me by my wrist until we were in front of the trio and he began dancing with wild jerks and spins that had nothing to do with the music. I'd never seen him like this. For the first time in our long friendship I could imagine him as a little boy, before he became considerate and cynical and afraid to ask for what he wanted.

Suddenly he stopped and spread his arms wide, like a skydiver before the chute opens, and, catching my neck in the crook of his elbow, drew me toward him. He smelled of the sausagey stew we'd all had for dinner. His breath in my ear caused a feeling like the sound of heavy rain. And then it was silent. The drummer had stopped playing first, but the snare still hissed in echo from the rafters. I saw Kenneth across the room, from over Roger's shoulder. He seemed so far away that I was surprised when I saw him notice me, then look down.

"You're plastered," I said to Roger, stepping back.

"No, *you're* plastered," he said.

"Maybe neither of us is plastered," I said.

"Yeah, but it's better not to consider that," he said. He blew his nose into a napkin, "I was allergic to the goddamn flowers in her hair," he said, "Lu, how come we..." he started, but his voice was lost in a thunderous clatter.

The Paris train went by, its fluorescent-lit windows one blurred line like a comet's tail. I walked outside alone and sat down on the edge of the platform. I could still feel the pressure of Roger's arm around my neck, tensile and urgent. I realized then how long it had been since I was desired — so long that I had lost my appetite for desire. I dug my fingers into clumps of weeds broken through the cement of the platform and I held on, waiting, telling myself that if I could keep sitting here, order would return. I thought about going inside and asking Roger: Incidentally, what was that angle at which you throw the frisbee so that it comes back to you? And then I thought, Too late. And when I thought that, I let go of the weeds because I couldn't remember how to stand up anyway.

The croak of a bullfrog made the silence more complete. I took off my shoes and stockings and put my feet on the cold smooth tracks. Through my big toes I could feel the vibration of the citybound train, then nothing. The tracks had come from even higher up, passed other tiny stations with tin rain gutters and long names like Fontpedrouse-St. Thomas-Les Bains, passed bedrooms where people who couldn't sleep longed for the clamor of the train, passed villages whose altitude was hundreds of times greater than their population, ran alongside this stream here and under my feet, and on through the creases of the mountains. When I first got to this valley I kept calculating: How high are these mountains exactly? What year did Charlemagne come through? *Point mouse*

and click on the mountains if you want to know more about glacial formations. Click on the softball players if you want to know more about what college friends do nine years after graduation.

But now I saw that the mountains were incalculable. You brushed your teeth, closed a car door, swung a bat, and then you looked and there they were, inviting your steps upward. Lacking the time, companionship, courage — are there bears? avalanches? — avalanches? you stayed below and dreamed. During the daytime, the mountains were gentle and green except for the grey incisions of ski runs. And at night, they were vast shapes that were an absence of stars. This little scene below, fragile and complicated as the rusty iron crosses in the village cemeteries, could be crushed in an instant.

Kenneth lay on top of the hotel-room bedspread, his tie loosened and askew, his eyes closed. We were out of range, separated by a voiceless ocean from the Code Nines, but still it seemed impossible to remember the necessary expressions with which we could cross the silence between us. He should have said "You embarrassed me." And then I could have said "I embarrassed me," and there would have been expiation, maybe.

"The thing about the Australian frog?" I said, sitting down on the bed next to him. "During the one month of rain in the desert it wakes up, gorges itself, lays its eggs."

"Summarize for me," he said. "I'm beat."

"It eats enough to go into suspended animation for the rest of the year."

"Nice adaptation," Kenneth said.

"Yeah, but what kind of life is that?"

He yanked off his tie without opening his eyes and turned over onto his stomach so that his cheek was squashed on the pillow, his arms cradling either end. I took off my jeans and lay down stiffly next to him. I could feel the spot on my shoulder blade where I wanted his hand to rest. It was like an itch, times twenty. I looked hard at those blunt-tipped fingers so familiar with life, with flesh and the instruments used to save it, and I was bruised by jealousy of all the people he had healed.

His arms stayed around the pillow.

"What's that frog stuff all about, Sweetie?" he said finally, sleepy with habit.

"I think it's about us," I said.

He didn't answer. He inhaled... exhaled.... My last words stayed chiseled in the silence. They had a ^{Finality} ~~fruity~~ I really didn't intend. But there it was.

I got out of bed and zipped my jeans slowly. On the floor were his empty shoes, size ten and a half, fissured with his brisk walking down the hospital corridors, his standing in front of the open refrigerator. The insole was worn shiny and the tongue crinkled and parched-looking. I knelt and untied the double knots, something he always struggled with in the morning. I was hoping he'd wake up. When he didn't, I hoped at least he'd remember.

We all came down from the mountains. Months went by and I didn't hear from Roger. I tried to write lists of things I had forgotten about him. I switched supermarkets. I worked sluggishly on Literaturequest. *If you want to know more about T.S. Eliot, point mouse and click on the lilacs breeding out of the dead land....* Roger would have gone to town on this one.

I was afraid to call. I pictured them in bed, Little Beetle eating bon bons and dreamily watching the TV with the sound turned off while Roger sucked on her toes. In the moment between when I picked up the phone and put it to my ear, I always hoped.

This time it was Skip. The last time he called it was to report that Danielle wanted to get pregnant right away but they were having some trouble. They were using the urine of Italian nuns. I'd felt a stingy pleasure. Now, by the impatience of his how-are-yous, I could tell Skip had even bigger news to purvey.

"Where to? She took the flatware?" my voice rose into the upper register of disbelief "With the *drummer*? Eighteen? I guess in retrospect." Roger didn't want to tell anyone, Skip was saying, because of all that distance the guests travelled to the wedding, because the Mayor came, because he bought the goddamn tuxedo.... I stretched the phone cord over to the refrigerator and opened the door. It was empty except for the Tupperware containers of soup, loneliness immunoglobulins, which my mother had been bringing over since Kenneth left. "So, what do you think?" Skip was asking.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm hungry."