

Back at School

by

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About the author

Guy Nickologist is the pen name of an amateur writer living in the United States. By using a *nom de plume* he's more free to write about anything he wants without concern of criticism from friends, family, or employers.

The themes and situations depicted in his works in no way reflects his attitudes towards actual flesh and blood human beings and he poses no danger to society.

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Back at School

Jeremy's GPS announced he had arrived. "Thank God for technology", he thought, "every office building in this country looks like the one next to it." During the summer the sun rose early in this part of the country. It wasn't yet 7 AM and the sky looked like the streets should be crowded with hungry lunch goers. He grabbed his bag containing his laptop with video projector. He was hired to train the psychologists at Oregon Mental Health Associates on the client-tracking software they purchased. His boss had lectured him before he boarded the plane in Dallas, the people the psychologists saw were "clients" and not "patients". Apparently the latter term didn't fly in Portland.

A uniformed security guard let him in. He was surprised how easy it was. He set up everything, set out a notepad and DVD of the presentation at every chair, and then admired his work. The class wasn't slated to start until 8:30 which really meant 8:45. He liked to be early and his internal clock was still on Texas time. He wandered the halls looking for a vending machine. He found none, but did find a break area marked "PRIVATE". He went in where he found several coffee makers. He made pots of coffee and decaf and went over the class list again. That name still jumped out at him. Marlene Morris.

While a student at North Carolina State he dated a Duke student named Marlene Morris. His first real girlfriend. He loved her more than life itself. He could sit and talk for hours with her. On weekends they'd explore the area finding nature trails to hike. During the late spring they'd drive to the coast and spend the day at the beach. They'd eat at their favorite quaint, cheap, seedy seafood restaurant, drive back to Raleigh, and made love while "Saturday Night Live" reruns played in the background. On the eve of the first Gulf War, the one in 1991, she wanted to participate in a silent protest at the steps of the state capitol. Jeremy wasn't very political, but he went with her, because he loved her. Some of his friends spotted him. They were taking part in the rowdy counter-protest. Rather than back down and say he only did it to make Marlene happy he got in their face and told them to back off. She broke up with him before the war had ended.

Jeremy never understood why she did it. It was completely out of the blue. He had never been in a serious relationship before, but assumed the warning signs would be like flashing red beacons. They were two souls united as one on Wednesday and two complete strangers on Thursday. They both graduated that spring. Jeremy took a job near Boston and moved to Dallas a few years later. Marlene, he didn't know where she went. In 1991 there was no Facebook or web. Few had email or cell phones. But even if he had been armed with such tools, she didn't want to be contacted.

The director of the center found him alone with his thoughts at about ten 'til eight. She told him that their previous software worked just fine and they saw no reason why they had to switch.

"This should be a fun day!", he thought to himself.

The center had no wifi so he plugged his new 4G wireless modem into his laptop and checked his email. His wife was already at work. She emailed him saying the Honda was making that pinging noise again. It never seemed to happen when he was in the car and he wasn't about to take the car in to ask the mechanic to fish around until he found what was broken.

At 8:20 he turned on the projector and displayed the first screen of his presentation which gave the name of his company, their product, and his full name. He wondered if this was the same Marlene

he once loved. Certainly she had gotten married and changed her name. Or perhaps she maintained her maiden name professionally. He felt a burning in the pit of his stomach. His hands were sweating. His heart was beating a little fast. He stood up and paced around eventually parking himself next to the screen. More and more psychologists poured in. The class was taught in two sessions, morning and afternoon with the staff equally divided so they could continue seeing clients. Marlene was to be in the morning class.

Jeremy was mentally preparing his opening when he heard someone call out "Marlene". He looked up. A bearded man with almost no hair had called to her. A tall woman stepped towards him, nodded her head, and smiled. It was her! She looked older than 40, but not too much older. She had gained a little weight, but not a whole lot. She now wore her hair short instead of flowing down her back like in college. She sat about midway down the conference table. She looked at the screen and did a double take. She glanced over at Jeremy. Her eyes went back to the screen. Her face fell. She looked mad. Jeremy mentally rolled his eyes. Given what she had put him through she really had no right to be mad. And it wasn't like he plotted a nearly 20 year career path just to run into her in a conference room 3,000 miles away from where they first met. She got up and left the room.

Jeremy went through his opening pitch. He sometimes had the class introduce themselves. But since everyone in the room already knew each other he decided to skip it. He was on his fifth slide when the door opened, light from the hall flooding the room. He could tell from her silhouette it was Marlene. She stood against the side wall towards the back of the room.

Around 9:30 someone raised his hand and said the coffee was going right through him. Jeremy took the hint and called a break. Since no one was asking questions they were ahead of schedule. He gave them 15 minutes. Everyone filed out of the room except for Marlene. Jeremy look up at her.

"Why are you here?"

Jeremy detected a combative tone in her voice so he decided to save his sarcastic answers for another day.

"There are only three of us and one is out on maternity leave. I have west of the Mississippi, Dave has east."

"It just seems rather odd is all."

Jeremy gave her a smile and shrugged. He followed by asking, "So how have you been?"

"Fine."

The silence in the room was thick.

"How'd you wind up in Portland?"

"I wanted to live here."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

More silence. A couple of women came in. They were carrying open cans of Diet Coke and chattering up a storm. Jeremy moved closer to Marlene.

"I'd like to catch up, see what you've been up to. If that's okay?"

She shrugged noncommittally. He noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. He also noticed her hands. They looked old. Their birthdays were only a couple of weeks apart making her 40. She wasn't aging well. More people came in. Jeremy stepped back and then returned to the front of the class.

Jeremy felt like the class wasn't going well. Marlene had stepped out for nearly half the duration of the class. He was relieved when the morning class was finally over. The receptionist directed him to a sandwich shop down the street. He grabbed a ham and cheese sub to go and returned to the conference room. The afternoon class went much better. The students frequently stopped him to ask questions and even had feedback for the developers.

With both classes finished Jeremy started to tear down. He checked his email one last time then tossed his laptop into his bag. He heard a familiar voice clearing her throat.

"Hi."

"Hi." She stepped more into the room. "I'm sorry about this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

She gave him that look. "The way I acted. I really was not prepared to see you."

"It was shocking to see you too. You look great."

"No I don't."

"Why would you say that?"

"Jeremy, I'm a trained psychologist. I saw how you reacted to me. No, I'm not married. Yes, I look old and tired. Is this what you hoped would happen to me?"

She did have him nailed down. Twenty years ago he'd have gotten defensive. Today he knew just to deflect the criticism. "I would never wish ill on anyone."

"I seem to remember some of your last words being pretty hurtful. I was going to regret dumping you. I wouldn't find anyone else who loved me like you did."

"Oh, Marlene. I was young, stupid, and hurt. Listen, can I take you out to dinner? I said some really stupid things and I really don't want those words to be your lasting memory of me."

She tried to smile, but couldn't.

"Can you pick me up? I don't like driving after dark, my night vision is pretty bad."

"Sure, sure. Just tell me when and where."

She took out a business card from her portfolio and scribbled her address on the back.

"Seven?"

"I'll be there at seven."

Jeremy returned to his hotel. It was only after he was in the shower that he questioned the wisdom of taking his old flame out to dinner. For some reason that Dan Fogelberg song kept playing in his mind. He called his wife, asked about the kids, told her about his day leaving out the small detail of running into an ex and taking her out to dinner. A few minutes before seven he pulled up in front of a small, cute house. She was ready on time, something no girlfriend since had been able to do. They climbed into his rental car and drove to a Japanese steakhouse she knew about. After the waiter brought them their drinks she opened up.

"Jeremy, you were right."

"About what?"

"Everything. Everything! My life has been a giant train wreck and I'm certain you have a beautiful, loving trophy wife back home with your two perfect kids who play the cello and are soccer stars. Your golden retriever is perfect. Your two SUVs are parked in your three-car garage of your 4,000 square foot house."

Jeremy showed a soft grin. "Marlene. My life is good, but it's far from perfect. Sarah is a good wife, but I wouldn't say she was a trophy wife. Neither Dillon nor Madeline play any instrument. They both played soccer one season and hated it. We don't have any pets except for Madeline's goldfish. Sarah drives a five year-old Honda, I have a seven year-old Ford pickup. And our house is about half that size."

"You named your kids Madeline and Dillon?"

"Yeah."

"You hated trendy names."

She was right. He always told her he would never name his kid anything cute or trendy.

"Yeah, well. Once I thought about it I decided saddling a kid with a name like Bob or Cindy or John was cruel." Jeremy took a sip of beer and asked, "So what have you been up to?"

She sighed. "I had to get away from North Carolina. I took a job teaching in Utah. Hated the place. Just hated it. I moved to Chicago, went to grad school. I met Greg. We got married. He moved me to Huntington, West Virginia to be near his family. When I was 33 I went through menopause, or so I was told. Those redneck doctors had no clue why. Then I learned my husband had been having an affair for the past 2-1/2 years. And the next day I get a call about scheduling my hysterectomy. I told them they were mistaken. No, my redneck doctors failed to inform me that it wasn't menopause but

rather ovarian cancer. When I wasn't being operated on or given chemo I was in my lawyer's office or in divorce court. Because he was a local boy with connections I got screwed in the settlement. So I moved out here to start my life over."

"Wow. I'm sorry you've had to go through all of that."

"And I know you would never have cheated on me. I can't help but think he gave me some virus that produced the cancer. So here I am at 40. I'm childless, will never bear children, and I have the body of a 55 year-old woman." She swallowed a sip of wine. "And before you suggest it, no decent man wants a barren 40 year-old woman. Trust me. The good ones my age are taken. All that's left are the swines."

"Swines?"

"Pigs. Hogs. Gross men with no respect for women."

Jeremy wasn't much of a Dr. Laura fan, but he had heard her complain about women who threw away perfectly good men. He felt thrown away by Marlene. And some days he questioned how much Sarah valued him.

They finished their dinner and by the time the waiter brought the check both were laughing and enjoying the evening. For a very brief, fleeting moment Jeremy was taken back to 1989 when they were two crazy kids madly in love. He paid the check and took Marlene back to her house.

"Would you like to come in?"

Jeremy thought for a second and then shut off the engine.

"Sure."

She poured them both a glass of wine and turned on her stereo. A John Lennon tune wafted out of the speakers. They sat down on the couch.

"I had fun tonight, Jeremy. Thanks."

"I had fun too. It was nice catching up."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Leaving you like I did."

John Lennon segued into Billy Joel.

"There's nothing to apologize for. I mean my life worked out okay."

"Just okay?"

"I dated two other women before meeting my wife. I enjoyed all of those relationships. But, that spark. The energy I felt with you just wasn't there."

She smiled. "I know what you mean. I've felt like I was just going through the motions."

Jeremy looked down at his near empty wine glass. "I kept hoping one day the phone would ring and it'd be you."

"I always figured you'd hang up on me."

"Why did you call it off?"

"I was confused. And scared. I didn't want to end up like my parents." She gave a sarcastic laugh and continued, "They just celebrated their 43rd wedding anniversary." She finished her wine.

"Yeah, wouldn't want to be like them."

Marlene stood up and retrieved the wine bottle. Jeremy didn't complain when she refilled his glass. They both took a sip. She smiled. He always loved her smile. That hadn't changed. A Van Morrison song came on. Marlene set her glass down. She took Jeremy's from him. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. Jeremy started to put his arms around her. He pulled away, but then held her close. He moved his lips from hers and went across her cheeks and behind her right ear. That used to drive her wild and it still did. She quickly unfastened the buttons on her shirt. Jeremy held her left breast while he continued to kiss the spot behind her ear. He reached between her cups to release her bra.

"I haven't worn that style bra in many years." she whispered.

Jeremy moved his hand to her back and unfastened her bra. She quickly removed her shirt and let the bra drop. Her breasts still looked perfect. He took the opportunity to remove his shirt. She ran her hands across his chest. He undid his belt and unfastened his pants. She reached in and felt his hard cock. He unfastened her pants.

"I have a scar I didn't have before. It's from... the surgery."

He kissed her.

"I don't care what you look like. I just want you!"

He pulled her pants and panties off. She didn't resist. He planted his tongue firmly on her clit. She gasped. He moved his tongue all over her. She sat up and pushed him off. For a second he was afraid she was ending it. Instead she pulled his pants off and reciprocated. He remembered for all the years they dated he could never get her to "69", that is perform oral sex at the same time. Since they were on the couch it would have been rather clumsy for him to get her into that position. After enjoying her for a couple of minutes he sat up and pushed her back down and continued eating her out. He played with her breasts as he did. She pressed her pussy into him several times and then orgasmed. She shook hard, something he also remembered. She had very animated orgasms. He climbed on top of her, penetrating her. She felt exactly the same, from how her face pressed against his neck to her heels digging into his legs. They immediately entered into their familiar cadence as if they had been making love continuously for the past two decades. Jeremy emptied into her.

Marlene pulled a small blanket down on top of them. Jeremy held her like he used to after their love making in the past.

"That's been the first time since my surgery. I wasn't sure if anything down there would work."

"It felt the same to me."

She spun around and said, "I'm sorry I made you do that."

"You didn't make me do anything."

"It's so ironic. The one memory I held onto about you was how faithful you were. And you just cheated on your wife with me."

Jeremy cringed. He was so caught up in the passion being taken back to his college days that his wife had slipped his mind. He didn't like the sound of "you cheated on your wife" at all.

"Oh God, I did, didn't I? She just slipped my mind. I felt like I was back at school. I..."

"It's okay, Jeremy, it's okay." She held him for a second. "I want you to spend the night, but then I won't want you to leave in the morning." She kissed him. "I think you'd better go."

Marlene fought back tears as she watched Jeremy's car pull way from the curb. Dan Fogelberg's voice now played out of her speakers.

*She gave a kiss to me as I got out,
And I watched her drive away.
Just for a moment I was back at school,
And felt that old familiar pain.
And as I turned to make my way back home,
The snow turned into rain.*