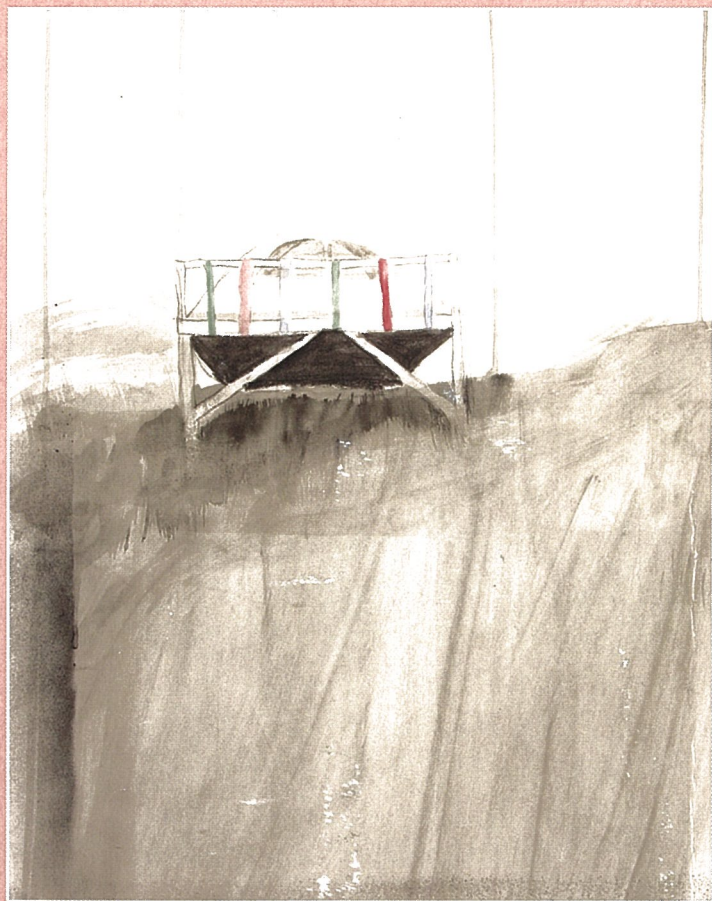


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"He"

I first saw her and the doll at a rock concert, sitting a few rows behind us. The doll was a man, life-size, sitting in the seat next to her, and I could see that "he" was obviously hand-made—the face was flat with stitching for eyes, nose and mouth. Hair was long brown yarn. "He" was hip, wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt and jeans, a large, silver peace-sign around his neck.

At intermission, when the lights came up and the audience rose to their feet and cheered for the band, I could observe her and the doll without seeming to stare. She had pulled the life-size doll to stand and was having trouble keeping him up, while also trying to clap. She looked at the doll's face and smiled, apparently sharing the concert experience with him and I was now wholly intrigued. Seeing her struggle, a man sitting on the other side of the doll kept the doll up by sheepishly lifting the doll's other arm. The doll stood straight now and she gave the man a closed smile of gratitude. Sitting nearby, a few people nervously glanced at her and the doll, vying for discretion. She appeared oblivious to their furtive glimpses.

I guessed that she was about my age—in her forties. She was pretty actually, shoulder-length, straight blond hair, with bangs (a bit in her eyes), wearing a peasant dress—the kind that no one wore anymore. I thought of Joni Mitchell. That's the thing—she didn't look like some kind of a crazy person, like the elderly woman I occasionally saw at the supermarket—dressed as a child in a short pleated skirt, gray hair in high pigtails, babbling.

I considered that the doll was a joke—a kind of prank—or maybe a promotional ploy for one of the bands playing that night, anything but an imaginary friend doll. I was reminded of Harriet, a small rag doll I brought everywhere, when I was four or five. I still had Harriet, but Harriet now remained at home, in a shoe box, alongside some other childhood stuff, in my bedroom closet.

Pete had taken me to the concert—this was our third date. He wanted to get a soda before the band returned and asked if I wanted anything. I declined, saying I'd meet him back at our seats. I already had a plan, albeit a sketchy one, to talk to this woman. As a news-

paper journalist, I held a certain confidence about my ability to sift out information in a friendly manner.

As most of the crowd stood to stretch or head for the lobby, she and the doll remained in their seats. After calculating an appropriate tack, I walked toward her. I would assume the role of her ally, a non-judgmental approach. She was rummaging through her purse for something. "He" sat next to her, stone-faced, staring out into the bustling crowd.

"Hello there—I was admiring your doll. Is he hand-made?" I probably said this a bit too enthusiastically. Sitting on the edge of the now empty seat, on the other side of the doll, I spoke to her on eye level.

She was naturally cautious, quickly snapping her purse shut, as if the satchel held her secrets. Nonetheless, she replied. "Yes, he is hand-made. I made him," saying this last part with a flicker of pride, signaling that praise would aid my quest.

"That's wonderful," I said, pretending to admire the features on his face, which were crudely done, but not too bad. She proceeded to show me that each tiny eyelash was a separate bit of black thread. While the handiwork was intricate, it made his expression seem startled, each eye like the sun in a child's drawing.

I noticed that she slid forward on her seat a few inches, seeming to relax around my admiration. "This is Jake," she said, looking at the doll. It was clear that this was a formal introduction, and I immediately followed suit.

"Nice to meet you, Jake," I said, matter-of-factly. "I'm Wendy."

She ate this up like hotcakes. "And, I'm Fran," she said, smiling at me now, anticipating my next question. Her teeth were crooked and the color of wheat and she didn't seem as pretty when she smiled.

"When did you make Jake?"

"Let's see . . . four years ago. I've always sewed . . . wrap skirts, halter tops, tablecloths."

Seated next to the doll, I could see that the face, arms and hands were made of tan stocking-like fabric and stitched adeptly by machine—the hands delineating each finger. And then, I saw it: a ring on the fourth finger of the left hand. A wedding ring? I glanced to her hand. She wore a matching silver and gold braided band.

This threw me and I felt a bit dizzy, which was compounded by the mounting drone in the theater, as concert-goers, jabbering and laughing, began returning to their seats. Glancing toward my own seat, I saw that Pete had not yet returned from the lobby. Some college-age kids stood nearby, gaping at our threesome—me and Fran with Jake

between us—his large, flat head like a pancake, his eyes wide, as if alarmed.

All around me, I could sense the sideways glances—as if the theater was swarming, not with an audience, but with a mob. This was quite unsettling, this business of not fitting in. I sensed that people were staring—not with benign curiosity, but with resolute disapproval.

Fran pulled me back into the conversation. "At some point," I heard her say, "I got tired of coming home from work and just talking to my cat. He's a Siamese. And I don't speak his language. So I made Jake." She combed his brown string hair straight with her fingers. "He's a hippie," she said, with pride. "I've always liked hippies and he's named Jake because I've always liked 'J' names."

"Oh, Jake is a hippie and Jake talks." I regretted that this came out in a mocking tone and her silence signaled that, in one fell swoop, I had lost her trust. However, she must have simply been considering her reply.

"Jake doesn't really *speak*," she said, "but he answers, 'Yes,' or 'No.'"

I couldn't look at her now, for my surprise would have given me away. I shifted my gaze to Jake instead, but this left me feeling even more flustered. She turned in her seat, directly facing me now, and continued.

"Last Wednesday was his birthday and I took him to a head shop to pick out a pipe. I was there the week before, choosing a few that he'd like, although we don't really have the same taste in things, especially food. We went from case to case, but he just couldn't decide, so we left. I bought a small cake instead and we had a little birthday celebration at home."

Suspecting that this last bit, *birthday celebration at home*, signaled some kind of sexual encounter, I managed a smile, one of those fake faces that leave your cheeks lifted, but your eyes lifeless.

"Does he go places with you . . . stores, restaurants, work?" My palms gripped the edge of my seat, as if the chair might fly up.

"Oh, no, I don't take him to work," she answered, taking his hands in hers and gently repositioning them on his lap. "That would be, you know, weird—bringing him into the factory and everything—paper products—but we sometimes go shopping for clothes for him—jeans and stuff. And I've taken him to a few restaurants. Some places have turned me away." She paused, looked me straight in the eye for the first time, adding, "I get that's it's kind of, well, odd." I was certain that she'd caught me in a ruse, but when I considered her expression, I saw an apologizing smile that read as resignation.

A few rows up, I caught a glimpse of Pete, holding a soda, eyeing me with a wary expression. He must have concluded, as I sat next to Fran and her doll, that I had an unsuitable acquaintance. And he probably knew that I wasn't enjoying the concert—I'm not a rock 'n roll fan. We'd been dating a couple of weeks and I was stretching my taste in music and movies to suit his. At forty-four, I was nine years his senior and this gap, at first seemingly a fracture, was spreading.

Holding my index finger in the air, signaling one minute, Pete nodded in recognition, turned his back to me and sat down. Shifting my gaze back to Fran, she continued confiding in me: "After two marriages and some bad relationships, this seemed, I guess, a way to go." The graceful lift of her chin took on poignant nobility now, signaling a stoic acceptance of defeat, similar to the outlook of some divorced women I knew—women my age, women of middle age—who had quit putting themselves out there, who had resigned to a life alone.

Our discussion reminded me of chats with my weekly divorce club—I'd been going every Thursday night since the papers came through. "Group" took place in a small circle of folding chairs in our church recreational room, where conversation inevitably turned to past betrayals by husbands, and the present paltry assortment of suitors.

At the flickering of the theater's house lights, signaling a return to our designated seats, I was forced to cut our conversation short. It seemed that Fran's friendly manner most certainly would earn me her phone number and, indeed, she scribbled the digits on an old receipt from her purse. I remember sliding the scrap of paper into the front pocket of my uncomfortably snug jeans.

Seated back with Pete, suffering through the awfully loud second set, I feigned enthusiasm for the band. I felt idiotic, tapping my foot, his hand on my knee, clapping enthusiastically at intervals between songs, while I was actually applauding their longed-for ends. Pete liked rock music and had purchased our tickets from a colleague. He was a technical writer who edited software manuals. He was fairly handsome and I wondered why he had showed any interest in me—an older woman growing stout. I guessed it was because he was shy and I talk easily.

After driving me home, when things heated up between us in his car, parked outside my apartment building, I invited him in. As I fiddled with the lock to my door, he revealed that he had no condom. This seemed blatant at first, and I was quite embarrassed that he assumed I would go all the way, but I recall deciding that he was exhibiting responsible behavior and I went along to a Walgreen's, nearby. From

the parking lot, I watched him disappear behind the sliding glass door into the glaring fluorescent light.

He quickly returned, opened the car door, and leaned inside, "Looks like they don't have my size," he said.

At first, I didn't see the humor in this and then I got it. "OK, big boy," I said. I remember thinking I sounded clever. But Pete didn't return my smile and I was confused then, looking at his sour face.

He slipped into the driver's seat, slammed the door—a little too hard—and asked if we could go to his place instead, saying he had condoms there.

"They don't have a condom in all of Walgreen's?" In retrospect, I see that this was a tad harsh.

"No, they do, but maybe we'll just go back to my place. I have some there."

"Wait—I'm confused," I told him. Pete lived half-an-hour away. Now I was feeling uncomfortable, even a bit unsafe.

"Look, they don't have the ones I need." He was angry now. "They have smalls. I need extra-smalls."

I looked up to see if he was kidding—wondering again if this was his idea of a joke, but no, he hung his head.

"How 'bout if we go to your place another time?" but he knew I was lying. I meant it when I said, "I'm not concerned about your, you know, size, I just lost the moment." He sneered at me and then, pounded the dashboard with his fist. This terrified me and I fled into the drug store, staring back at his startled and angry face, while the glass door slid closed. He tore out the parking lot.

"Not counting Pete, I'm on my fourth boyfriend since the divorce," I told Arlene, a friend from my divorce group who rescued me from the drug store that night. "Each one a disaster in its own way," I told her, almost in tears. We sat at my kitchen table. It was well past midnight and we were sipping red wine and picking from a can of mixed nuts.

"Why even bother?" said Arlene, her mouth full of choice cashews, hanging on my open refrigerator door, eyeing other instant edibles. She returned with a hunk of Jøllsberg and a knife. I retrieved a box of Wheat Thins from the cupboard and we headed into the living room for comfortable seats. Arlene was a successful mortgage broker. When she began making good money, she left her husband, up and moved out. "Who needs 'em?" she added. I liked Arlene, I did. But I often pondered her waving off men like houseflies, especially when she called me in tears on Christmas Day. She was alone. So was I, but I hadn't continually claimed to like it.

After a glass of wine, I began reciting my wish list: "I want someone to tell things to, like I bought a new pair of Nike sneakers, today, on sale. I want someone to fix the dryer. I want someone to cover half the mortgage." Arlene said that I just liked the idea of a man and I wondered if that was true.

"I saw that new internist, Dr. Greene, last week," I continued. "I hated circling 'D' on the stupid paperwork. Why do they need to know your marital status? I'll tell you why; it's because married *is* status. It's like my hot flashes and mood swings were invalidated just because I didn't have a husband putting up with them." I looked over at Arlene for her hard and fast pep talk. She was fast asleep.

I guess I knew that I would call Fran—and Jake. It was just a matter of time. Of course, I realized that she was crackers, but she intrigued me and there was something sweet and sad and real about her.

Fran didn't have a car, so that Sunday, I picked up her—and Jake—to go to a restaurant near her place, where the waiters were nice to Jake, she told me. I slowly pulled up to her apartment building—a disheartening brick rectangle, like a motel, yet someone had cared for the small patch of green lawn out front and kept the hedges trimmed, which flowered yellow. Fran sat with Jake on a concrete bench, outside, waiting. I guessed that she didn't want me coming to her door—she probably wasn't proud of her place. The relief I felt, about not going inside, made me aware that I was somewhat fearful to be alone with her. I remember thinking that she could be stranger than I had imagined.

She smiled and waved, lifted Jake at the waist, and carried him to the car, his sneaker-clad feet dangling, his head bent forward, as if in solemn gratitude. I could tell that she was happy to see me, and in contrast, I wondered what I was doing there. What had I been thinking? While we said our hellos, she buckled Jake into the back seat and then strapped herself in front. We drove down Chester Street . . . I felt I had joined the circus. At least I wasn't going somewhere where I'd meet someone I knew—this part of downtown, where the railroad passed through, had only a small artist's enclave, and was mostly abandoned factories and odd businesses, like palm readers, junk yards and automotive shops.

We took a table at Alberti's—a red-and-white checked plastic tablecloth kind of place with a vase of fake daisies and a bowl of sugar packets on each table. Yet, there was cheeriness there, with bright white, starched curtains filtering the afternoon sun. I learned that it was a family-run restaurant—mother out front (with a long black braid

in a bun and hair net), father in and out of the kitchen (his fat tummy tied with a food-stained apron), and adolescent son and daughter waiting the small square room of tables. Just one other table was occupied when we arrived, and initially they paid no attention to Fran and me arriving with an oversized plaything. Fran sat Jake at our corner table, unzipped and carefully removed his jacket, and hung it neatly on the back of his chair. I don't know what possessed me, but I played along, saying, "He was probably hot." Seeing Fran's smile, I don't think I've ever uttered words to make anyone happier. The waiter attended our table, carrying a pitcher of ice water and filled our glasses, first mine, then Fran's, then Jake's. He did this with great flourish and I guessed that he and I were both playing the same game. Without his jacket, I could see Jake's T-shirt blaring big black print: *Support Our Troops: Impeach Bush*.

"Do you like it?" Fran asked, smoothing out the wrinkles of his shirt. I nodded, remembering that Jake was a pot smoking, tie-dyed T-shirt-wearing kind of guy. But, it was hard to make fun of Fran when she added, "Jake and I are involved in the peace movement. I'm the president of the local chapter of Move 'Em Out. We've signed over 300 new members and raised \$4,330 for the anti-war movement."

I remember my admiration for her then, and also wondering who I'd invent if I wove needle and thread to create a mate. If I wound up with a compilation of my recent boyfriends, I'd be sitting with a stuffed corporate attorney, who listens to Barry Manilow, while raging about his inadequacies. I think I let down my guard a bit then.

Fran consulted Jake before ordering, asking him yes-or-no questions about certain dishes and beverages, listened intently, nodded to his mute responses, and then ordered what she liked, which was chicken parmesan. At her suggestion, the waiter split her lunch between her and Jake, on separate plates. She ate hers and then his. They shared a lemonade.

With the surreal quality of the day and the sun brightening our table, I recalled the teddy bear picnics I had arranged on a tattered mauve blanket in my backyard. I'd name the bears, dress them up, serve them "tea" in a plastic teapot with matching cups, and then read them my favorite stories. I was engaged for hours. Those might have been some of my happiest childhood times, lost in my own world, of my own making. I recognized this kind of innocence and contentment in Fran, in her fantasy with Jake. Having forfeited acceptance by others, she relied instead, on her own small sphere of play. I saw the bravery in her act.

When we had finished our chocolate cake, and I paid for lunch, we got up to go. Across the room, at the only other occupied table, a young girl, maybe four or five, said loudly to her mother, "Mommy, look. Who is he?"

Standing by the front door, holding Jake by the waist, Fran looked at me and then, lowered her head. I turned to the girl and said, "This is Jake. He's a peace activist." I held the door for Fran and Jake and the three of us walked down Lincoln Street to my car.