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THE ADVENTURES OF KEITH
(EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL IN PROGRESS)

Life—being by some ingenious property denied to all but the living—presents an excellent opportunity to undertake an exciting business venture, master a challenging sport, dabble in the arts, raise a family, defend the freedom and ideals of one’s native country, simply get some shopping done. And yet there are those restless souls among us to whom the preceding options seem inadequate. To our bemusement they insist on taking an unusual and even peculiar route through life, forsaking the common satisfactions of their fellow beings for the mysterious rewards of a singular existence.

Such a one was Keith. What follows is the story of his adventures beyond the commonplace affairs of the average citizen. It is also, of necessity, an account of my own observations and explorations of the world, or worlds, wherein our protagonist’s extraordinary life unfolds. May the reader suspend judgment, knowing that the hero of this story was once as drab and sensible as you.

Part One

The reign of the terrible lizards had long since ended. It was Tuesday, around 3:45 PM. I stared out my little third-storey window, with nothing to do and a head full of electric meat. Down below, as far as I could tell, was a seamless mesh carpet of copulating mammals luxuriantly furred in colours spanning from taupe to chocolate brown (a sort of Guatemalan dark chocolate). Even the parked automobiles were cloaked in its muscular weave.

The phone rang. It was Keith. Apparently, Helen had ingested too much citric acid just prior to her *Wainscoting For the Modern World* exam and was hoping for a little emergency acupuncture before heading to the university. I politely told Keith he could shove Helen up his ass and went back to my contemplation of the rutting groundcover three floors below.

In the late 20thC there lived a gas station attendant who committed suicide by dousing himself in gasoline and jumping in front of a subway train. The driver of the train became impotent as a result of the trauma he suffered. His exasperated lover, who happened to be his wife, shot him twice in the head—the first time fatally, the second time (in the vernacular of hockey broadcasters) as an “insurance marker”. The judge was sympathetic to cases of sexual frustration, so he let her off with a warning: “Don’t do it again!”

I think of this story whenever I pass a gas station or a judge.

A few days after hanging up on Keith, I started to feel a slight remorse. We’d met

in high school when he was the treasurer of the Young Conservatives Square Root Club and had maintained a sporadic friendship ever since. I really didn't care for Helen when they first met—felt that her interest in veterinary paramedics (the practitioners themselves, not the field) could only be bad for the relationship—but over the years, little by little, I managed to avoid her. When we did encounter each other, I was careful for Keith's sake not to be outright rude. In fact, I'd recently set myself a challenge to be particularly pleasant in our exchanges.

The phone rang. It was I, calling Keith to apologize. Helen answered.

"Helen!" I exuded. "It's so nice to hear the sprightly timbre of your voice."

"What do you want?" she croaked.

"Well, I was wondering if that husband of yours was around."

I could hear now that she was sobbing mucously, though without dramatics.

"He went out to get some furniture disinfectant."

"Ah, so he'll be back soon."

"No—that was two days ago. He called and said he couldn't find any, and that he'd decided to stay out, for good."

"Helen, I'm so sorry," I empathized. "Did he happen to leave any forwarding address, a flight itinerary, another woman's number, perhaps?"

"No—nothing. He said the subway was coming and he had to go."

"The subway, huh? That's not like him. Sounds like he means it."

Well it seemed there was nothing of use I'd get out of the old weasel-faced harpy, but I thought there was no harm in being pleasant.

"Say, Helen," I chirped. "How did the exam go?"

"Fuck you."

As the months passed, I gradually forgot about Keith entirely. The stock market had been particularly rambunctious and was taking up all my time, though I couldn't care less about it. Then one day, out of the centre of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a striking figure across the courtyard of the bank towers. He was clad in what appeared to be a purple rubber greatcoat and his bearing was imperious. His dark hair was not very long, but he wore it in pigtailed that jutted straight out above his ears. His ruddy mutton chop sideburns imparted to the observer a sense that he was not to be messed with, and that he was roughly two hundred years out of fashion.

As I approached, for I could not help myself, this almost mythic being began to turn slowly, deliberately, toward me. As he did so, he raised his right arm and draped it over the shoulder of the person standing next to him. My God—it was Keith! What was he doing with this weirdo?

I called to him and began to jog toward the spot where he stood on the marble tiling of the massive courtyard. He looked toward me with an expression of mild but insistent alarm. At that moment I was knocked out cold by a golf cart transporting executives from one skyscraper to another. Actually, it was the collision of my head against marble that did it, but I only remember the impact of the cart against my shins as it slammed me off my galoshes.

When I came to, Keith was nowhere to be seen, but there was a gorgeous Ecuadorian nurse administering a carefree dose of intravenous Demerol, so I didn't really care.

The doctor—the most singularly hirsute entity I’d ever encountered, with every scrap of flesh from knuckles to eye sockets bursting with chocolate brown hair (a sort of Icelandic dark chocolate—which is really quite good if you get the chance to try it—on his arms and, in a raging bowl-cut, his head; a sort of Lansing, Michigan milk chocolate—which I can’t say I recommend—from the V of his fuchsia smock up through his neck and into what had to be called his face despite the fact that its only visible features were the tip and ridge of a rather small nose and two pink circles of flesh with macrobiotic blue irises poking out from the slits of his eyelids)—wanted me to stay the night. No, not at his place, I was quickly assured—at the hospital. They needed to do some tests, to determine, I presume, that any oddness I may exhibit was not the result of my brief coma. Speaking of which, if I’d been unconscious, why were they giving me a painkiller?

“Oh, just a precaution,” explained the doctor, winking as he tugged at the Demerol sponsorship logo on his breast pocket.

I had no objection to staying. I was euphorically stoned and had fallen in love—in the boyish way that only thirty-six year old men (and to some extent boys) are able—with the saintly and voluptuous nurse from the outskirts, she informed me, of Quito. And it’s not as if my studies—which I’d taken up conditional to receipt of my inheritance—couldn’t wait. My Aunt Frank, in her will, had insisted that I set aside my worthless English Literature studies, which I was only faking anyway, to concentrate on a practical career. She chose acupuncture—merely, I presume, because it had cured her of cancer. (She died within the year, nevertheless, due to a lightning strike, the nearby occurrence of which frightened her so much she rushed madly back into her house via the patio’s sliding glass door, which, to her fatal surprise, was closed at the time. No amount of Demerol could save her.) According to her will, I would receive one quarter of the money when she croaked and the rest only upon attaining a practitioner’s certificate in acupuncture. Fortunately, I was able to find a school of acupuncture in Zhongshan, Guangdong, China that offered a certificate course by correspondence. Twelve years had elapsed since the first beguilingly translated lessons arrived by post and, the initial installment of the inheritance being nearly spent, I was looking forward to my graduation—a ceremony I would conduct, as with all the most joyous events of my life, in solitude.

So I would stay until morning in my cozy hospital bed. Immediately upon my agreement to stay, Lanamaria (for that was her name) began applying electrodes to my face and scalp. I released an inappropriate sigh and then reached to grasp the outstretched hand of the suitably named Dr. Link. The top of his hand bristled with the rugged overgrowth of an orangutan’s pubis (it was a dare by my older brother one day at the zoo when we were young), but his palm was as soft as a baby’s bottom (my own curiosity).

What I didn’t count on was being fitted with one of those neck-up cones dogs are made to wear to prevent them from scratching infected or abraded skin.

“For the sake of the electrodes,” comforted Dr. Link. “You’ll get used to it. I had to wear one, too.”

Yes, I thought, when they mistook you for a fucking Bouvier hound. But I didn’t say that, for a wave of Elysian bliss washed the last of my cynicism away as Lanamaria—her sweet breath filling my nostrils while she struggled to secure the cone—providentially nudged the syringe with her pelvis and shot the rest of the Demerol into my bloodstream.

“Doctor,” I stated evenly through clenched teeth, tears circumnavigating the electrodes as they streaked down my cheeks. “On a night like this, I could get used to anything.”

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The air was refreshingly crisp and cool as I stepped into the breezeless brilliance of the autumnal morning. Having victoriously emerged from my brush with death, I was feeling uncommonly buoyant and optimistic. I would treat myself to a double macchiato with pure maple syrup and powdered cocoa (local cocoa) at the Imperial Javaporium while flipping through the morning edition of the National Conveyor to find out what predicaments my fellow beings were getting themselves into around the world. I might even have a glance at the Sports section to see if those Beavers had managed to put a few pucks past the opposing goalie. I knew they’d been struggling since the death of their best player in an off-season hunting accident, but that was nearly forty years ago, so you’d think ...

“Spare any change, mister?”

I pretended not to notice the dismal bastard with his hand held out as I stepped around him and began walking east on Rotchwell Ave, admiring the monstrous potted thistles decorating the boulevard (another triumph for City Council). But as I neared the corner, a strange sense of brotherly compassion caused me to freeze in my steps. I looked back at this solitary figure, still standing stoically, his eyes staring into the distance as he bore his poverty with quiet dignity and zen-like composure. He was perhaps fifty-three or fifty-four but had the weathered look of a man whose exile from common comfort stretched back beyond his lifetime into the phantasmal greyness of his own prehistory. I felt in my pockets for a few coins and, finding them, turned on my heels and made my way back to this noble ambassador of downtrodden humanity.

“Just a little something toward a coffee perhaps,” I said as I dropped my donation into his palm. His eyes lit up and he slowly turned his head, like one of the old-time mechanical figures animated by coins. I smiled, as far as I could tell, and made to leave, but he held out his other hand to grasp mine in thanks.

“God bless you, sir, God bless you,” he said as his eyes welled up.

I couldn’t help but be touched by his response. “Really, it’s nothing,” I said.

“Oh, I know,” he replied, gripping my hand even harder. “But it’s more than anyone else has given me today. You’re a saint, mister, and God bless you.”

“And you,” I said, attempting to pull my hand away without success. Grizzled strands of his grey sideburns curled up over the rim of his toque (proudly sporting the Beavers’ team logo). His neck was protrusive with scraggly derelict hairs and his breath, more noxious the closer he drew to me, smelled of stale whiskey or fresh hair tonic, and the whole state of affairs was starting to sour my mood and turn my stomach.

“You know, I didn’t plan for this to happen, you know. I was a Rank 3 dock hauler back home and I used to drive a semi for the provincial poultry off-loaders division of Klipple and Fland—you know, the ones who run livestock compressors for the whole east coast, eh—but then I caught the old lady gettin’ a free breast exam from the elevated water storage commissioner who was making his rounds trying to get elected to parliament as the fucking NDQ candidate, eh, well I sent him to parliament right there with my fist but I busted my

hand so bad I couldn't drive my rig and they wouldn't give me compensation 'cause I'd used up all my benefits so I had to go on the dole, plus Elma turned lezzie after I found her topless with that arse-face, pardon my language, and she moved to New Blandford, eh, with her cousin's ..."

I'd extricated my hand during a lapse of muscular attention on the part of my new acquaintance, but now he held me by the elbow.

"... my license for two years after I got out of rehab, eh, because I had too many tickets and they said I'd been skimming chickens, which I wasn't, you know, but I'd started mouthing off a bit about how we were getting screwed out of our pensions, eh, and they didn't much ..."

"Yes, yes, terrible—but I really have to—" Even as I shook my elbow loose and began to turn away he wouldn't let me go. Clutching my wrist, he resumed his verbal effluence, telling me, as I began to swoon, about freight-hopping with a deranged poet who knifed him in the ankle, hostels full of kleptomaniac transsexuals, the daughter who married a rich cosmedontist and has now completely disowned him, etc. His grip was surprisingly strong, and now he pulled me even closer to his fetidness, tears brimming in his grimly jovial eyes.

"But all I been through, there's something I never forgot, and when I meet a kind fucker like you, a real gentleman, who understands and cares enough to listen and offer up what little bit he can, eh, I know it's because there's somebody lookin' out for me, somebody who's always been there, you know, who won't turn away from me no matter what I do or how much of a messed-up bugger I might be sometimes, someone I can depend on to watch over me, and you know who I'm talking about don't you mister, his name is—"

I could stand it no [couldn't stand it any] longer. Impulsively harnessing my now raging exasperation I did what anyone might do under the circumstances and brought my knee forcefully up between my captor's legs, doubling him over instantly and loosing his grip on my person.

"—Jesus!"

I was perhaps as stunned as he was by this turn of event. Adding to my discomfort was the fact that, as I looked down at him rocking to and fro in foetal position on the sidewalk, he looked much older than I'd initially surmised—his advanced age being possibly a factor in his failure to retaliate.

Pulling a two-dollar coin from my pocket, I set it down on his toque, which had fallen off in his writhings, and was about to slink quietly away when a voice bellowed at me from the direction of the hospital. A male doctor—as hairless as Dr. Link had been hairy—was dashing towards me with his arms waving.

"He was talking too much!" I called loudly, by way of explaining what might otherwise be construed as an act of random brutality. It was clearly time to slip away gracefully, which I did so swiftly I nearly knocked over an old woman who'd been standing behind me with her hand to her mouth. Glancing backwards, I saw the doctor change course from me to the collapsed beggar and back again before finally deciding—in what must have been a moment of vocational recollection—to tend to the injured and leave the well [healthy] to dart off in peace.

The assault by the beggar had frazzled my nerves so much I didn't even wait to get

home before taking my capsule of Zombutal. I was no longer in the mood to luxuriate at the Javaporium, so I cut through the back lanes of Little Cuba, where the newest electronic hybrids of mambo and country, samba and baroque, etcetera, already swelled from wrought iron balconies draped with colourful sundresses and other laundered attire, past the corner known as Togo Town, and down tree-lined Ossiferwood Road to my door.

Because I hadn't eaten, the Zombutal was already pleasantly liquefying my musculature as I climbed the spiral staircase to my garret flat. With each step, the morning seemed more benign, its soft yellow rays pouring through the narrow windows of the cylindrical stairwell with the same soothing grace it once poured through the slats of my crib.

I knew what I needed to make my spiritual restoration complete. I flipped through the record sleeves until I came to the one with the wide-eyed sprite in the gossamer nightie riding a zebra through a misty dawn forest. On the back of the sleeve, just a down-sweep of brunette locks, and the eyes: innocent but wise, searching but self-realized, vacant but profound. In an overripe Art Nouveau typeface, the two words that instill such languorous excitement: Claudette Longine. Yes, this is the album, this is the one—Lollypops, Puppy Dogs & Daisies—that contains her best work, the one where everything came together gloriously, from the arrangements, to the production, to the voice itself: breezy and intimate but virginal, engineered with the perfect crisp but delicately enveloping combination of close-miking and high reverb. And the songs themselves—so ideally suited to her soul it's as if they'd been written for her, or even by her, but really they were written because she would one day be there to sing them: The Man in the Puddle, Stranger on the Shore, (When I Said No) I Didn't Mean You Should Go, Born Free, Golden Slumbers ...

I lowered the needle onto the vinyl, turned up the volume and floated onto the sofa as the strings and Moog and harpsichord swirled and swelled like a billowing cloud bearing the ethereal marvel that is the voice of Claudette Longine: "Once there was a way ... to get back home ..."