

Fiction
The Unbinding
By Walter Kirn
Installment 28

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Dear "Kent,"

I was not surprised to hear that you remember our evening differently than I do. And btw? Just because a person asks you to park closer to the curb does not mean she has OCD.

I wouldn't write again except that a coincidence compels me. My friend Kathy thinks you are the guy who "fixed" her heater. She said you came up to her apartment for a drink and offered to get the heater going. She said you hauled in and, after a while, said, "Next, we'll throw out the lifter pump. That's one piece of hardware you don't need." My friend Kathy said she just knew those were going to be famous last words. And in fact, the next night she gave a dinner party, and her guests had to keep their coats on during dinner. Was it Kate Millett who said women need the kind of confidence men have when they don't know what they're doing?

Yours, Amy

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Dear Amy,

Obviously, "I'm horrifically ashamed and sometimes think I deserve to get gangrene for how poorly I treated you that night" wasn't quite enough. Nor was assuring you that I've changed since Greyhounding out of New York that humid June—partly due to your wonderful friend Kathy, the so-called "Post-it note heiress of 83rd St." who, if there's any justice on this earth, is known nowadays as The Body Odor Queen of the Coney Island

Subway Platform. Yes, I pretended to fix her heater once (who's Kate Millet, anyway? One of your high-chinned lady writer pals?), but I don't think that justifies how she lied about me just as I was beginning to connect with folks.

One nauseated morning-after at Kathy's Hamptons "cottage"—which looked like a mansion to my small-town eyes, and which I later discovered didn't belong to her but to a hush-hush mistress of Martha Stewart's whom Kathy knew from a New Hampshire fat farm—she accused me of having date-rape-drugged her daiquiri at a beach party the night before. The truth was she'd taken a fistful of Mexican Vicodins bought from an elderly man in white suede hot pants who was also selling turquoise glow sticks. I should have known the party would be trouble when everyone said Billy Joel had left just 15 minutes before we got there. I'd only been in town for seven months, but I'd already heard enough to realize that BJ exits a shindig early only if it harbors the very lowest elements.

I suppose it was easier for Kathy to slander me—a friendless young bike messenger from out of town who'd delivered a couple of envelopes to *Vogue* once but hadn't been allowed inside its offices—than to admit to her parents and the docs at the ER that the foreign object lodged inside her had not only been inserted at her direction but lubricated by her own left hand. In the end, that's what chapped my ass about your "set," even more than the way you ate your hamburgers by setting aside their perfectly good buns and neatly wrapping the patties in lettuce leaves. (The actual reason, by the way, that I accused you of being OCD.) You pitied practically every creature on earth, from Guatemalan coffee farmers to endangered forest gorillas, except for the men you lured into your beds. Depending on whether we seized you from behind (as you invariably dared us to) or requested a brief, loving kiss before we serviced you (as you mocked us for desiring) we all were either psychopaths or closet cases, would-be-murderers or latent fags, and nothing in between.

Or maybe "borderline" is in between. Perhaps you don't remember, but that's the diagnosis you laid on me that night—a full hour before I said you were OCD. Did I deserve it? Not at that point, no. All I'd done was point out in the movie theater that for

the price of the popcorns and diet sodas that you so patronizingly bought for both of us, even though I had my wallet out, I could have paid the teenage couple in front of us to put on a live-sex show back at your place and give us nude cocoa-butter massages afterward. “You’d like that kind of thing?” you asked me, and I said, “Who knows? But I moved here to find out.”

Borderline. I didn’t get it but I didn’t mind, since there are certain disabling ideas that I’d rather die not understanding than to have to spend my life being undercut by. The word reminded me of two other terms that you used that night but which I haven’t heard spoken since leaving New York: “pyrrhic” and “Kafkaesque.” Keep them, Amy. We don’t need them here. Or whatever the heck they stand for. We’re doing fine.

And you are also doing fine, I gather. (I searched your name at work the other day and learned that you’re still writing your little stories about loyal animals and lousy humans.) That pleases me, Amy. As I said, I’ve changed. I eat much less meat now. I sold my antique sword. I’ve learned to appreciate modern German cinema, I’ve given up collecting, and I’ve befriended a former Marine Corps colonel who helped cook up several of the new “religions” that the Pentagon developed to influence Hollywood but has withdrawn its support for recently due to changing budget priorities. As for my novel, *Portal People*—which you so kindly helped me edit even after I borrowed your purse that night—it was lost by the Library of Congress, to whom I stupidly sent my only copies. Don’t worry, though: The place is on my hit list. Someday fairly soon (July, perhaps, when my paintball squad plays in a tournament in Maryland) I plan to sneak into the Library’s main reading room with a kitchen match taped behind one ear and a balloon full of kerosene or diesel fuel tucked into my jeans. What a barbecue that will be! And what a menu! Baked Hemingway. Fried Fitzgerald. Roasted Thoreau. (I know you’re “literary,” Amy, but since all the great books will be safe on Google soon—including yours, let’s hope—there’s really no need for that flammable old castle.)

Seriously, though, I’m doing well. And maybe better than well, if things work out. I’m basically under contract at the moment to star in a major national ad campaign promoting

the AidSat Active Angel service (which I urge you to subscribe to, since I assume that you still live alone and do a lot of walking after dark). But before we start filming, there is one tiny hurdle that I'm wondering if you can help me with: a background check.

I have no right to ask this, considering the grief I caused you, but if you have even a microdot of mercy for the guy who "hitchiked" on your credit history and snapped a few photos of you on his phone that he sold to an amateur porn site in the Netherlands you'll do me this favor: Forget you ever knew me. Either that, or remember (if you're ever asked to) that you knew another, better me. The Kent I'm becoming, not the Kent I was. And maybe you can ask Kathy to do likewise.

In closing, I must ask you to stop writing me and to stop expecting that I'll write you. This is for your protection as well as mine. Revisiting the past, I've found, is like dabbling in black magic—it seems a harmless rush at first, but you never know what dark spirits it will unleash. There are more souls than bodies on this planet, more ghosts than there are houses for them to haunt, and I'm content with the one inside me now. I'd rather not open a back door to those which I've shut out.

Eventually you'll see the ads I'll make and understand that I'm not who you remember.

And thank God for that, I bet you're thinking!

Kent

P.S. Borderline between what and what?

Don't answer.