
Adam Peterson

It Goes Without Saying

Winner, Camera Obscura Award for Outstanding Fiction

He was nothing if not the consummate local. If a people were boorish he was boorish, if courteous then courteous. In Beijing he was anonymous, in Tokyo he was serious, and in Doolin he was a baritone. And, heavy and drunk at a picnic table in Munich, he was in a state of permanent appetite. A fly sentried the golden, salty chicken from which he tore a leg as the Germans around him licked the grease from their fingers and dried them on their shorts. So he too let the juices run down his chin then chased them with cetacean gulps of beer until his face shone and his pants looked as if he'd passed the afternoon crying rather than drinking stein after stein of the *helles* to hunt his thirst.

He'd been to the Augustiner beer garden twice before, once as a young man on his first trip to Europe and then some twenty years later on assignment for a magazine. On both occasions he'd lolled an afternoon exactly as this one. Beer. Chicken. Sunlight coming through the leaves and making a dirty marble of the earthen path to the beer tent and back. Every Sunday afternoon in Munich is the same. He wondered if he'd written that before. Still, there were always new discoveries though his eyesight was failing and the sun was setting and the only way he'd ever get home was if someone he loved and who loved him led him through his drunk to a foreign bed made domestic.

He was sure he'd written that before.

The fly found its way to one of the masticated lumps of gristle, and he let the creature flit around the boneyard on the paper plate as he rose to risk a walk to the bathroom. He made it most of the way when he heard his name. This happened enough that he didn't spin around like some heeled dog but only slowed his sloppy gait.

"Tom. Tom Trotter."

He had not been credited as Tom Trotter since his first book, but the name had lasted much longer than the one print run. Now he begged the morning shows for a compromise Tom "Trotter" Foster label under his balding face when he appeared (which was not as often as he would have liked).

"Yes?" He turned and smiled like it was his birthday. This is how it is to meet strangers.

They were there behind him, a short, Midwestern-looking couple with matching green backpacks towering above their heads. The woman reached into her canvas fanny pack for a digital camera as the man squeezed Tom's greasy fingers.

"We hate to bother you," the man said, "but we thought it was you and, well, Brittany's reading your books on the trains so we pulled one out and sure enough."

The man produced a battered paperback and tapped a photo of the young author on an African plain. This was Tom Trotter. Romantic, cheesy, and, most importantly, stumbling hero to a good woman.

Tom braced for it.

“So where’s Jules?” the woman asked.

Tom flipped the book over to examine the cover. It was his *Kampala Nights* from ‘84, a title he regretted since he’d only spent a single, though memorable, night in Uganda. “There’s no truth in travel writing,” his first editor had told him. “It’s one of our lies. There’s only an impossible-to-replicate journey which you will have distorted before you’ve written a word.” It was a mantra proven again when he noticed the photo was credited to Jules Foster. Had she?

“Home,” he said. “Home. I’m all alone, I’m afraid.”

“Are you writing about Munich?” the girl asked.

“No, I’m in town for a convention.”

They looked at him expectantly. He noticed Canadian flags sewn to their backpacks and suddenly grew to hate them and their corruptible youth.

He never admitted as much in writing, but a few cold drinks and he’d follow the wind home in the same tentative footsteps in London or Perth or Santiago.

“It’s embarrassing,” Tom said, “but ~~it~~ getting recognized. An award, really.”

The girl clapped out of instinct and even tried to jump, but the backpack kept her earthbound. The boy shook his hand again, the grease having gone from Tom’s hand to the boy’s and now back to Tom’s again.

Then there were pictures: the white flash illuminated the gleam of Tom’s face and drew nonplussed stares from the Germans.

“What part of Canada are you from?” Tom asked after scrawling his name in his usual calamity of ink on the title page. It was a cruel thing to do, he thought, to expose their lie. They only laughed.

“The Arizona part.”

The boy winked, Tom thought, but it was hard to tell. Underneath the gentle leaves it had suddenly become night.

When had he ever thought they were adults?

It was a dark stumble past the train station and to his hotel, and in the drunken ambiguity of blurred headlights and winking neon,

Munich could have been any city in the world. He never admitted as much in writing, but a few cold drinks and he'd follow the wind home in the same tentative footsteps in London or Perth or Santiago. The pavement, the sand, the hardened earth under his feet changing, but he never looked down to notice until he saw cheap hotel carpet and an itchy bed.

His hotel, an anonymous matchbox set upon one end, held 78 other jaundiced bodies in cargo shorts and Panama hats, and in deference to his colleagues Tom rubbed his eyes clear and checked the altitude of his fly as the doorman greeted him with a *guten abend* as cold as the beer Tom drank. In the lobby, his fellow writers milled. The whole lot was drunk, and the lanyards holding everyone's name and country of origin (designated with glittery flags) had long since been taken off for the decoration of the lobby's rubber plants. This—and a great deal of regrettable fornication with even more regrettable description over the next morning's slippery continental breakfast—had also happened at the last International Travel Writer's Association convention 2 years ago in Kuala Lumpur. The award recipient then had been Richard Prum, a dashing, pony-tailed Brit who inserted himself into territorial disputes and genocides to colonize the victims' suffering (the only thing his country had usually left them with anyway). Prum, the kind of writer who had taught his voice to quiver when describing war crimes, had long ago dropped his Lancashire lilt for an Oxbridge gilding, and Tom considered the phony's having won the award before himself its own atrocity.

But now it was the lightweight's turn. Sweaty, arthritic hands slapped his back harder than necessary. Prum tilted a highball glass in his direction. The women—few that they were though, thankfully, growing every year—gave him half-hugs, the sort meant for a hated ex-lover.

They all, without fail, asked after Jules.

"Home, home," he said. It was the machete he used to beat back the vines until he could collect his messages from a pretty young German girl at the front desk and head for the elevator.

His room was a room was a room. He had once written that from the finest hotels to the dirtiest huts, if one was doing it right, it

didn't matter where one's eyes closed (or if they closed at all or whom they closed upon). This was, of course, another small lie. He set the messages on the desk and took a few aspirins with a large glass of water to stave off the morning then threw the paisley comforter off the bed and lay down to open his messages. The first was a letter from his mother who, at 91, never stopped reminding Tom, 54, of the long life of spoiled love and bitterness still before him. The next envelope, about the size of a birthday card and made of fine cotton paper, came without a postmark or an address, just his full name in a terse, boxy script. The folded missive inside was so delicate that Tom feared tearing it, and the pen that wrote the note seemed to have only dared to lightly scratch the surface of the paper. The lines were so faint—and his vision so blurred—that he couldn't make out what the note said initially. When he could, his heart jumped.

Tom "Trotter":

Very sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I'm afraid you've been caught. I count four published essays in the past year in which you've claimed to have been on trips with your wife when we both know you were alone. Tsk tsk, Tom. Such appetite for scandals these days, too. Remember that poor fellow who had to apologize on Oprah? Have you been on Oprah? No, I don't believe so, but there's never a shortage of those wanting flesh. Think about it.

Ta,

XX

He took the Gideon Bible from the bedside table and slipped the envelope somewhere in Deuteronomy. It took all of his will, made bold by the drink, to ignore the note until his eyes closed on the pillow next to his and, beyond that, another city obscured by gauzy curtains and a purple midnight.

She had never really left him at all. He still found little pieces of her everywhere, even places she'd never been. A long red hair on his pillow in Dubai. A pampered eyelash falling from his

passport. Little pieces of her that he carried with him until someday, someday soon, he'd run out. The desire to save each gifted artifact was trumped only by his lack of imagination and its shameful truth: he could not fathom what he'd do with the pieces so he cast the remnants of her back into the confusion of an anonymous world. The contradiction of the erosions having come from a woman in motion and his desire that she stay exactly as he remembered depressed him. He wanted confirmation that she was someone alive, someone not at all anonymous, yet someone, impossibly, unchanging. Even a haircut and all of her still left to be discovered in his suitcase would rapidly depreciate. It was a fragile time.

There wasn't anything of him left that wasn't also her and so writing her into the essays was easy. She would have tossed sand on his face to wake him up on a beach in Oaxaca. She would have suggested they go dancing in Madrid. She would have had one too many glasses of sangria and left him to direct the cab back to the hotel. She would have kissed him and told him she loved him at night then playfully punched him in the morning when she realized it was a different hotel than the one they'd checked into the day before. The intimacy was real, even if the moments never were, a distinction he ignored until the girl at the desk passed him an envelope where his sins had been carefully scratched out as confirmation that even if God were not watching, someone else might be.

Worst of all, his motive was so painfully clear his readers would only have to look at him standing, weeping, bleeding, to see why he'd done it.

The first false essay came from a trip Jules had begun but not finished, flying home alone and moving out of the house before he even left Reykjavik. It seemed as natural an end to the marriage as anything he could have imagined. It was the usual fight.

He'd cost her a chance at having children.

She'd wasted her life.

He'd taken advantage of her for his writing.

When he returned to a stale New Jersey home a week later, he opened the door and knew she was gone before he even found her letter. All the furniture remained as did most of her clothes, but the

pictures had fled with her and there were only the holes where the frames had been left, rectangles of wallpaper a shade darker, dusty lines on bookshelves, gaps between pictures of Tom's family leading up the staircase. He was a prisoner in a house he could not make his alone. He'd open a cupboard searching for honey and find only instant coffee and boxes of baking soda. The next morning he'd go for the instant coffee and have to push aside the honey to grab it.

The editor called for the Iceland essay. Two weeks passed. A month. The editor called again and left whiskey-voiced messages on the machine that Tom could never bear to listen all the way through. Two months and there were threats. Advances had been paid. Reputations could be ruined. But without Jules he was stuck. In all their years of intimacy they'd never once acknowledged that she was the source of his popularity, that he was only typist to her whimsy that took their trips further, deeper than he could take them alone. Her name was the first word out of the mouth of every fan. They tolerated pictures with him to get pictures with Jules. He had his role too, of course. He was the writer, the conduit of her grace and humor that dulled and hid her shadows when she cried in Jakarta restaurants or threw lamps in Moscow hotel rooms. He made her temper feisty, her capriciousness sexy. She made his pompousness blithe, his dithering adorable. It was a narrative that had run through each of his nine books, and, when he finally sat down with the Iceland essay, it was all he could write. He told himself he was just finding his voice, that he'd edit out the Jules material, that he was only writing it to make himself less lonely. He knew it wasn't true. In the final scene of the Iceland essay, Jules throws her arms around a Viking-like fisherman and begs him to make her a fisherman's wife while he, the hapless writer, vomits over the side of the boat. She kisses the fisherman playfully, lips going an inch into his red beard without touching cheek. Tom green and teary-eyed watches Jules skip down the deck whistling a shanty as the sun rises pink and gold. That was how it ended.

He woke slowly. A glass of water helped, but it wasn't until a Styrofoam cup of weak pod-brewed coffee and a hot shower that he felt awake enough to feel awful. He stayed away from

the nightstand with the Bible and tried to come up with a list of who might know. Jules ran away to a mission school in Mauritania, it couldn't be her. She had no family to speak of, only a few distant aunts. There were any number of people he'd encountered on the four trips who might have read the essays and known. Still, after the fisherman story—his riskiest one—he'd grown comfortable with the necessity of subterfuge and mostly wrote the stories from his hotel rooms where he ordered expensive room service and watched whatever English-language television he could find. Without a stamp on the envelope, it seemed unlikely that some maitre d' or tour guide would take it upon himself to travel to Munich and accuse him of four fabricated stories when he only had anecdotal proof of one.

At 10, he put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door and left the trunk-like confinement of his room for the conference's daily breakfast. These were dour, sparsely-attended affairs with a speaker, unenthusiastic applause, and flavorless scrambled eggs. Only the last of which was a reason to attend, and Tom was able to choke down two platefuls before he was interrupted with handshakes from a few writers sneaking out the back. Tom himself crept out in the wake of a plump waiter and went in search of the brown-haired German girl who had been working the desk the night before. It hadn't taken him long as a full-time traveler to learn that the schedules of hotel staff do not conform to any recognizable logic or labor standards. Faces that wished you goodnight often mapped directions for lunch the very next day. Sure enough, the girl, now with her hair down and a radio clipped to her belt, gave a family of blabbering Swedes sweeping, magnanimous directions. As the family headed off looking no less confused, Tom cleared his throat.

"Excuse me." He turned his head to avoid the glare that obscured her gold nametag. "Lena. Last night you gave me an envelope, a small, white one. I was wondering if you might be able to tell me who left it."

She tilted her head like a schnauzer given a confusing command, and for a moment he doubted if she had the language for any of that until she answered in perfect, hotel conglomerate English, "I'm sorry, sir. I believe that came in when I was off-duty. Was there a problem?"

“No, no,” he said. “The person just forgot to sign it, and I wanted to thank someone. No bother, really.”

“I’ll check with the other clerks,” she said.

There are two kinds of hotel workers, the obfuscators and the wish granters, he knew, each as likely to fulfill a request as the other. She was the latter. Her blue eyes met his, and she smiled willingly.

He smiled back and said, “Thank you very much. *Danke.*”

He turned to escape back to his room when she said, “You must be lost without Jules.”

Tom tried to figure out what answer she wanted.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” Lena said, blushing as she lost her professional façade. “It’s just that I love your books. You’ll let me know if you have trouble getting around Munich alone, won’t you?”

So that’s how it is, he thought. He’s a husband who can flirt by being a husband.

“I will. I don’t know the city well. Jules does, of course.”

“Then you must.” She beamed. “I’ll make sure you don’t get lost.”

Tom managed a rambling promise to mention her name if he wrote about the trip. He rode the elevator up alone, grateful for each of the 15 floors he got to be away from the world and its traps.

In his room, he did a haphazard time conversion in his head as he watched the pedestrians walk slowly down the street. Germany had always looked particularly American to him from behind a window, a sort of rigid, pious tranquility that reminded him of home. Or maybe it was just easier to believe in camaraderie than it was in difference.

Unable to do the math, Tom convinced himself that, even from across the ocean, he could see the sun spreading across the wooden floors and the automatic coffeemaker beep to presage the sound of boiling water in his agent’s Manhattan home. He dialed.

“Tom, it’s four-thirty,” Ed croaked. “Jesus.”

“Sorry,” Tom said without really committing to the sentiment. “I have a problem.”

“Hold on. Christ. I can’t find my glasses. Will I need my glasses?”

Tom lay down on the still unmade bed and kicked the sheet to the floor with his feet still in his walking boots. He studied the cratered texture of the ceiling, imagining it to be frosting but knowing, if he touched it, it could cut him.

"Ed, I lied."

Ed exhaled loudly into the receiver. "Lied?"

"In an essay. More than one. Someone knows."

"Who?"

"I don't know. There was a note, but it didn't say much. They know, Ed, that's enough."

What if the ceiling was made of shaving cream? What if it were made of foam from the ocean? What if it fell, floor after floor falling down on him?

"Jesus, Tom, I need to know how big of a problem we have here. If you lied about ordering the bisque instead of the chowder, we don't have an issue. If you're telling me there isn't really a country called Togo, you might have to start taking diesel repair classes."

"It's Jules," he said. "She wasn't with me. Not on the last trip."

"The one about Mexico?"

"And the three before that," Tom admitted.

Ed was awake now. Tom could hear him fumbling with his coffee maker.

"It was easier to write it as if she was there," he said. "That's all."

A maid knocked on the door with four loud raps—tat, tat, tat, tat—and he yelled loudly to assert his presence as the door lock beeped and a small Asian woman—Thai, maybe—peeked around the corner. She bowed out politely but the thought of how he must look, sallow and abused.

"Tom. Tom." Ed was talking. "What happened to Jules? Is this coming from her? Maybe she's upset."

"She's in Africa," he said. "I don't even know if she has a phone. And, Christ, Ed, she's my wife."

"I'm going to be honest. We need to hope it's Jules, Tom. Jules loves you. If it's not her, it's someone who doesn't."

Tom's head felt the gravity of each of the 170 feet he floated above the Earth. It was taking him moments to visualize concepts

more complicated and less pervasive than the hum of the room's air conditioner.

"Was there anything like this before?" Ed asked. "You need to tell me now."

"I haven't done worse than anyone else," Tom said.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"Tom, I'm going to look into this. Let me make a couple of calls. Nothing that gets your name out there. Just hold your shit until I call back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"What did I say? Hold it. It'll take time. And Tom, this doesn't have to be a bad thing. Sales-wise, I mean. Give me time."

They hung up then. Tom went back to the window and watched the people walk the street. He gave them stories. They were all in love. They were all looking for him.

His only good fortune was that the conference, far from being anything productive, consisted solely of panels and discussions and networking lunches until the closing banquet which he was obliged, as the guest of honor, to actually attend. That meant one and a half days to pass in Munich with as little interaction as he could manage lest someone ask him about his wife and choke one more lie out of him. He tried to go back to sleep, but he'd only woken up five hours before and only made himself sweaty and bored until the maid knocked and he had to again chase her away. He ordered a movie, the first American option he recognized among the German blockbusters and pornography. The film was horrible, all bullets and blood, and he disappeared it in a black hole of static after thirty minutes.

He risked a ride down to the lobby and ducked out a side door into another warm Munich day. Around him his fellow writers wandered with their abdomens looking distended because of the wallets they hid in pouches worn inside their pants. He'd almost made it undetected when there was a tap on his shoulder and he found himself in the full Clive Christian-scented hug of Richard Prum.

“Glad to see you’ve kept your head,” the man said. “Last time, mine was the size of a hot-air balloon after all the attention.”

“I remember, Richard.”

Prum’s white collar pointed up from out his red, cashmere sweater. That must be the fashion, Tom figured, because with Richard Prum it could be nothing else. The tasteful watch, the Burberry umbrella, the inch-deep smile, it was all a veneer and underneath it was only the scars of an impoverished childhood and the darkness behind it. It was all there, wasn’t it, in Prum’s first book, a slight confessional which Tom had blurbed at Ed’s insistence. It was a now a book out of print, a book the man had turned his back on. But were they all supposed to pretend they didn’t know who he really was?

“Funny about Mauritania, no? Damnedest thing. I saw her before I even stepped from the jeep.”

Tom had been trying to look over the man’s thin shoulders as if someone else needed him, but he focused at the feminine pronoun.

“What’s that, Richard?”

“Jules. Surely she told you I saw her. Great thing she’s doing at that school. Tell her not to worry. I’ll call her the second the article’s out and arrange to ship it her way.”

“You saw Jules?” He said it before he could mask his surprise. In recovery he added, “Oh, yes, of course. She asked me to say hello, and I up and forgot. You were there for...?”

“Piece on the coup,” Richard said. The wind blew a dark strand free from his ponytail and he pushed it back behind his ear. “She’s an angel for staying.” He paused and when he continued his voice took up his practiced tremble. “Nasty business. Braver than I am, don’t you know. A fair bit lovelier, too.”

An editor for *National Geographic* pulled at Prum’s arm.

“One quick thing,” Tom said. “I left the number for the school at home. It’s only a week, but I’d hate to miss our weekly call. Jules’ll think I’ve run off with some *fräulein*.”

Richard laughed, loud and empty. He took a black monolith of a phone from his pocket, hit two buttons, and scrawled the number like an autograph with his fountain pen.

Humiliated and betrayed, Tom fell in with a group of Japanese tourists marching in picture-snapping unison toward a beer hall where he had a few pints with a widower from Kyoto who spoke damaged English. They shared stories about their wives as the rest of the tour left them behind. The Japanese man, Ken, placed his hand on Tom's forearm as they talked seriously about what they had lost.

"What do you miss most?" Tom asked.

The man touched his lip as he considered the question. A full minute passed as a waitress in blonde braids and lederhosen tsunamied two mugs down on the table. Beer wetted Ken's sleeve who didn't notice, only touched his lip as he went deep into the past to find the answer.

"Sound," he finally said. "It's very quiet for me now."

They toasted their wives through two more rounds before Ken stumbled out to rejoin his tour. Tom never bothered to mention that his wife wasn't dead, just somewhere else. Somewhere Richard Prum had been.

He managed to skulk back to his room without running into another writer and ordered a ham sandwich, a bottle of milk, and a bottle of bourbon from room service. It was dark outside, but he closed the drapes anyway, turned off all the lights except for a single lamp, and created his own permanent dusk. Silence. He clapped his hands. Silence. He said his name. Silence. He said her name. Silence. Nothing lasted more than a moment. It was very quiet for him now.

It took ninety minutes for a knock at the door to break the oblivion, and he was grateful for each stern tap. The brown-haired girl from the front desk pushed the cart into his room with a smile. She was dressed in the same black and gold uniform as the day before and Tom struggled to remember her name, finding it impossible to visualize the nametag without light cutting across the letters.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've forgotten your name."

"Lena," she said. "It's okay. It's a very common name."

This didn't seem true, but he smiled anyway before lifting the silver dome and eating a French fry.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm famished. Help yourself if you'd like."

She nodded, but didn't reach for the fries, only pulled the bill out of her back pocket and left it by the plate.

"Of course," he said. He signed it exactly as he signed his books, the same showy hand spasm he couldn't turn off. He left a big tip for the cute young girl because she was a cute young girl and he was an old, lonely man.

Lena picked up the bill but didn't move to leave. "There was another message for you. That's why I brought your order. It's not my job, but you were so interested in the last one I wanted to get it to you as soon as possible."

From a pocket she produced an ivory envelope identical to the one hidden in the Gideon Bible. She set it down gently on the table so that his name—in the same thin ink, the same square script—faced him as he chewed on a pickle. Lena's eyes watched closely so he tried to maintain his composure.

"Funny," he said, "I didn't expect to get another one."

With affected nonchalance, he tossed the envelope on the bed and removed the squat 750ml of bourbon and the glass milk bottle from the room service cart. He forced a small, unworried smile on his face for the girl's benefit, holding it though it hurt. When she didn't leave but instead stood watching him and fidgeting with the antenna of the radio clipped to her belt, he went ahead and removed the paper from atop two of the room's glasses.

"Drink?"

"No," she said, "not a bourbon girl. Or a milk girl."

"I ordered poorly," he said and poured a glass half full of bourbon then filled it to the brim with milk.

The girl watched him carefully. He tried to guess her age, maybe 23, 24, but it had been so long since he'd had to even consider such a thing that she could have just as easily been 30. She had an athlete's smile, big and self-conscious, but she was short and thin and met his eyes not like some soccer goalie but like he'd want his daughter to. The competition in his head between Lena as a girl he'd like to bed and a girl he'd like to be his daughter troubled him. It was a point in his life he'd reached without even realizing it.

"So did you happen to see who dropped this one off?" he asked.

Lena stood against the long, low dresser and shook her head before reaching out to take a fry from his plate.

"Sorry," she said. "Achim was at the desk but didn't see."

She'd stopped fiddling with the radio and swallowed her fry. He thought maybe she was waiting for him to seduce her, but he couldn't, not after thinking of her as his daughter, as the could-have-been union of Jules and himself. When the thought became unbearable he asked her again if she wanted a drink.

"No, I should get back," she said. "I just wanted to see what a famous writer did at night."

He looked around the messy hotel room and said, "Disappointing, I'm sure."

She shrugged, "Not so different from what I imagined. You just edit this part out, right?"

Instead of opening the note, he dialed Ed. The machine picked up and Tom left a desperate ramble that he realized with a panic was self-incriminating and on tape. He stopped mid-sentence and stammered something about Munich's weather before abruptly hanging up then drinking from the bottle of bourbon until there was a darkness to marry the quiet.

The same maid woke him and his hangover. It was nearly noon, and after he shooed the dogged woman away he ordered breakfast. Would Lena deliver it? He couldn't say if he wanted it to be or not, mostly because he lacked the constitution to take a shower or change his shirt from the night before. When an elderly steward appeared with the food, Tom left a tip even bigger than what he'd given Lena.

All but the eggs went uneaten, but Tom drank the pot of coffee as he pushed his sausages around his plate and watched the BBC. The world went on around him, he just wasn't home to watch it. This was another mistruth of travel writing. The distance one felt when getting away was an illusion. Everything, including the traveler, fell hopelessly forward. This was his last thought as he fell back asleep with the television whispering to him. On the edge of his hung-over sleep, he even heard a story about Mauritania without being able to catch if it were war or famine destroying the country one more time. Poor, poor Jules.

The phone woke him.

It was dusk outside the window. He'd missed most of the day, no doubt a topic of conversation among the assembled writers lingering around the hall for a chance to ask a favor. Before answering he shut off the television and took a swallow of warm orange juice lingering from his abandoned breakfast.

"Tom, it's Ed. I've called twice already. Where've you been?"

"Asleep. I'm not feeling so well."

"What did I tell you, Tom? I gave you one simple task."

"I'm okay, Ed," he said. In his hotel room there were two food service carts with half-eaten meals, white towels strewn about the floor, and a bottle of milk that had spent the night and proceeding day open and unrefrigerated. "Things are going well here. I have the banquet tomorrow and then I'm back home."

"Uh huh," Ed said. "This isn't a problem that stays behind with the schnitzel. I reread the essays. They're complete horseshit, as you know. There's no way to spin the fact that you have Jules trying to convince you to make love on a beach when she was spooning porridge to starving Africans."

Tom sighed. They both did.

"Look," Ed said, "I'm your agent, not your conscience. If you want the right advice, you should pray. But if you want my advice, we leak this ourselves to the worst places possible. Trash TV, gossip rags, blogs, wherever. It's going to be hell for awhile. People will hate you. You'll apologize again and again, but each time you'll sell more books. Your publisher won't give a shit because they're making millions. We're making millions. I've asked around, it's a goldmine. That Oprah guy..."

"And after," Tom said, "after everyone thinks I'm a liar?"

"Then you write a book about being a liar, and it will sell more copies than anything you've ever written. The world is a beautiful place, Tom."

He awoke early, before Munich rose to its feet and got about its yeoman-like Wednesday. It was easy to sneak out of the lobby without facing inopportune questions and sarcastic praise. At

a bakery, he helped himself to three pastries, two cups of coffee, and a glass of grapefruit juice. He felt unsatisfied even after eating, yesterday's hangover having left behind a hole where his body was telling him a headache should be. Still, Tom was in a good mood for reasons he didn't want to risk exploring. A girl behind the counter gave him an extra cruller. An elderly woman dropped her umbrella and Tom gave it back to her by its mallard head handle. She smiled. He smiled. The shadows were deep and the morning was cool. There would always be days like this, he told himself. No one can take mornings away.

He felt this way until he returned to his hallway of his hotel room and saw the poor, stubborn maid he had turned into an enemy. Tom gave her a wave, but she scowled and continued to knock on a door despite the inhabitant's muffled British voice calling, "No, thank you. Tomorrow."

As much out of pity for the poor sod as a desire to delay the inevitable, Tom pointed into his own room.

"I'm ready."

The maid looked suspicious, but Tom thought he may only be projecting his emotions onto her. Jules claimed he did this. She was never angry, it was him. She wasn't the indecisive one, the jealous one, the happy one. This is what he thought about during the forty minutes they cleaned. He helped the maid push the room service carts into the hallway. He carefully hid his underwear before she saw it. While she vacuumed he began making the bed until it became clear they should switch. He bumped her foot with the vacuum, and she exclaimed in a language he didn't understand. He apologized in a language she understood better than she let on.

When she found yesterday's unopened envelope on the bed she held it up to him as if to ask what she should do with it.

"Oh, I'll take it," he said. "Birthday." He pointed at his chest. "My birthday."

The maid left a €100 richer, and the minute she was gone he took the envelope from the television and slid his thumb underneath the seal certain he'd find a number, some ransom he would surely pay.

Dear Tom,

It's so blasted sad, this business. I know that. One moment she's teasing you, the next she's lifting you with kisses out of whatever jam you've managed to ensnare yourself in. I tell you, the desperation of these lies is breathtaking. Were the others true? A Journey to Love, for instance? What an awful, saccharine title even if it were true. I certainly hope it is. God help you if you made it all up and still called it that. It's going to be a movie, isn't it?

Forever,

XX

A Journey to Love? Every year they said the movie was close, but then six months would go by without a word until there would be a phone call from a new producer with a new vision and a new idea on who would play Tom and Jules Trotter (the script had long ago dropped his real last name). The book was his most popular, and, not coincidentally, Jules's had played her largest role. It was the story of how they'd met in Brazil while she was working with the Peace Corps and he was trying to fulfill the promise of his first published essay with another. That he'd gone to Brazil, that they'd met in a market when she helped him haggle the price of a banana down to something less than criminal, had been so arbitrary and imperfect that it was impossible to put the pieces together in retrospect. For years Jules hadn't wanted him to write the story—it's not over, she said—but when he ran out of ideas and had a book contract coming due, he wrote it without telling her. It was another month after he finished a draft that he found the courage to let her read it. All she said was, "I don't like the title." He didn't like it either, but the publisher did and so did his readers.

And now he had a new critic with no dollar signs for solace. What did they want? What would he do? He knew what Ed thought, but for the first time in years he had no idea what Jules would say.

Richard Prum's digits were nearly illegible after so many anxious, sweaty squeezes in Tom's pocket but he managed to make them out. The phone clicked, buzzed, and, after a moment, rang. A woman answered in what Tom assumed was Arabic. The explanation that

he was looking for Jules Foster—or even Julia Nicolay, her maiden name—didn't get him anywhere until he and the voice were able to get some shared understanding through a flimsy, piecemeal French.

The woman left him hanging on the line for so long that Tom was sure he'd been forgotten until he heard voices somewhere far in the distance and then his beautiful Julia.

"Yes?"

"Jules," he said.

"How'd you get this number?" she asked. Her calm voice gave no indication of surprise.

"Richard Prum," he said. "He's at the conference. Nice of you to give it to him."

"When I was ready, I planned on calling. I certainly didn't plan on Richard bloody Prum being here. I'm sorry. I don't want to fight. I'm glad you called. I am."

And then he said it; he said it all. There was a silence so long it was as if each of his words, his dutiful confession, had to be carried to Africa by hand and reassembled into a sentence.

"I'm sorry," he ended. "I wanted you to be with me so badly."

When she finally spoke she spoke in a whisper, "I know you just as well as you know me. You didn't use me, you didn't steal me like that, because you were lonely."

Tom choked out a word that was somewhere

between 'Jules' and 'Jesus.' His head hurt at the temples and to avoid thinking he beat his chest with the base of his fist as if it held a knife that could hit his heart. He could practically see her, alone and crying in the sunlight.

"Oh, Tom, you've ruined it," she said.

The silence drowned his voice as he practiced his speech until it was time to make his way down to the hall where the room was filled with faces he'd passed in airports and whose books he'd read with jealousy or indifference.

"I don't know what to do. Tell me. I need you."

"No," she said. "You can write me. Make me perfect. You always do."

She hung up then, but Tom kept the phone tight to his ear until its bleating replaced the silence without improving on it. He hung up too.

He took the envelope from the Gideon Bible, held it with its brother, and ripped them until the pieces were so small that he couldn't tear them anymore. He flushed the confetti down the toilet and poured a glass of water from the bathroom faucet which he drank while he dressed for the banquet. The silence drowned his voice as he practiced his speech until it was time to make his way down to the hall where the room was filled with faces he'd passed in airports and whose books he'd read with jealousy or indifference. For an hour he wandered blindly in their pleasantries about his last book, about his good fortune, about Jules. He answered everyone politely, slapping backs and shaking hands until he reclaimed his seat at the dais and eventually took the podium to a soft round of applause that died out quicker than he would have liked.

"My friends," he began, "my colleagues. I know only one thing: I have not yet seen the world."

It was a theme that brought the assembled to their feet, but it was another of his big lies. He had seen the world. He knew its failures. He knew his own. He was the foreigner, the colonial mercenary, the outsider who understood everything after a long weekend. After landing there were only names and menus. And it was enough. They never admitted that. It was enough.

When it was over, he caught sight of Richard Prum sipping red wine and showing a scar on the back of his hand to a table full of admirers. Tom felt only the chill of the scotch on the rocks in his hand as he approached the man holding court.

"Richard, a word?"

"Certainly," Prum said. His sharp, olive-colored suit made him look like a defendant in a sexual assault trial, Tom thought.

Tom led him to a far corner where the place settings went untouched and said, "I need the notes to stop."

“Tom?”

“I know it’s you,” Tom said. “Stop. Please.”

The man’s face tightened and became serious.

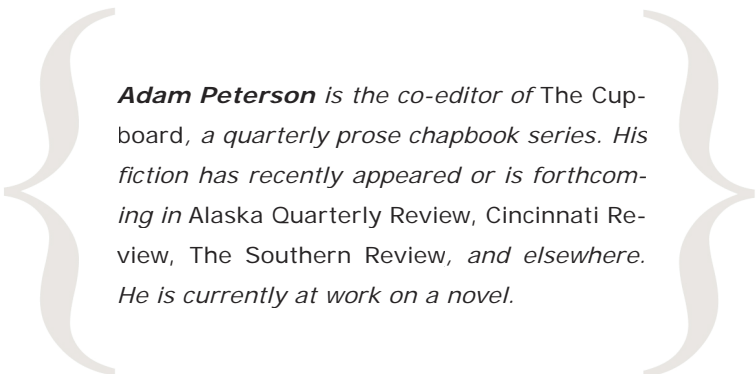
“Tom, honestly,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Is this about Jules? I’m sorry, really. We barely even saw each other before I had to run off to see where the bullets were flying. Believe me, mate, there’s nothing to fret about there. I’ve got a wife myself, you know.”

Tom huffed.

The Brit smiled, “Despite what you may think of me, I’m an admirer of yours. I wish I could write lighter stuff myself. But we all have our role to play, I suppose. When did Jules tell me she’d be back? Six months? Only a blink. It’ll all be copacetic then.”

“Sure,” Tom muttered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, well, you’re right anyway. It will be fine then.”

Prum held out the barely scarred hand he’d been showing off. Tom shook it and left with his lies, great and small. In the lobby, Lena stood behind the counter. Her eyes wandered to Tom, and she waved. He waved back stupidly, eagerly, trying again to see it. He would get lost in the Munich night. She would come looking for him and lead him back to the hotel by the hand. They would laugh and talk about what a story it would be. He saw it now. The bare shoulder, the tongue between her teeth, the din of her sleep filling his room.



Adam Peterson is the co-editor of The Cupboard, a quarterly prose chapbook series. His fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in Alaska Quarterly Review, Cincinnati Review, The Southern Review, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on a novel.