



For Instance

by Kate Falvey

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Jossy Jump and Eugene Boyle got married in a small chapel cut into the side of a hill. “No one got you into this mess,” Jossy kept thinking all during the sleepy ceremony. Eugene looked at her from time to time, with sweet, covetous eyes which made her afraid and guilty. No friends or family were present. Two hikers whose camping gear they had admired at the state park (Jossy and Eugene longed for a bright green dome tent, a kerosene cook stove, ensolite pads, and fold-away camp cots but somehow decided that they could do without them) were rounded up to act as witnesses. Everything had been planned weeks ago (“everything” being reserving chapel time) but they had neglected the main point of witnesses. This became a Problem for awhile which they ignored then panicked over then argued over, each blaming the other for being lazy, ill-organized, and inattentive to the important details of things.

The hikers were interesting enough and considered that they had been recruited to belong to this day for a reason. They became somehow re-enamored of each other, and lent a kind of brisk charm to what they now believed to be their own romantic spectacle cooked up by Providence in order to make them recount all their varied blessings, including their shared enjoyment of hiking back country trails. They stood, fresh-faced visions of the rough and tumble life, in clean khaki and vibrant orange checks, bobbing healthy heads to one another, gripping rapturous hands, listening to the little minister say the thrilling familiar words which would humble Jossy and Eugene to each other clear though to life’s natural end.

At the consummation of the ceremony, the hikers each independently vowed in the sanctity of their private hearts to finally buy that two-man kayak they had talked wistfully of for three seasons now. Afterwards, when they shyly confessed what mercenary thoughts their hearts had held while Jossy and Eugene were promised to each other, they were flabbergasted and momentarily tongue-tied. They figured it to be an overwhelmingly miraculous sign of how truly one their hearts truly were.

When the marrying was over, the two-person Boyle family was showered with handfuls of trail mix which was promptly scooped off the stone chapel stoop into the bushes for the starlings or rooks or whatever those blackbirds were. Then everyone sat down on the stoop and looked at each other, murmuring pleasantries. The minister’s wife, a plump dumpling of a woman, soon brought out a silver tray with lovely looking tea things on it, plates of sugar cookies and slices of pumpkin cake. Jossy was ecstatic, saying that she hadn’t thought of wedding cake and marveling with shining eyes at the

homemade moist rusticity of it all. The hikers eschewed cookies but politely dabbed at the cake and healthily wished luck to the newly wed couple by lifting china tea cups and ceremoniously tapping them all together.

The minister's wife leaned half a rump over the intricate wrought iron banister and fielded inquiries about the recipes while sizing up the couples who were eating up half a morning's wok as if it were their due. The minister crouched down to join the fun, jauntily inquiring about the Boyle's future plans. "What will you do now, Mrs. Boyle?" he asked, daintily holding his index finger over a jagged edge of sugar cookie protruding from his lips. Jossy instantly went cold all over as if she had just been dunked into a mossy eel-filled sump. "Do?" she thought. "Do? Now?" Why should Now be any different from Then? Was it naturally expected that she had now come to a fork in the road and that henceforth she would be presiding over a different self who was this minute marching along a different path that she could not yet see? Who was this slick ghost, Mrs. Boyle – plainly visible to others, shouldering her out of her own head start?

"Well," she said finally, because people were looking at her, "I thought we'd take a drive into town and poke around some shops looking for wedding gifts and after that maybe go up into the mountains away and find a nice place for dinner and, you know, Minister, nowadays women are apt to keep their maiden names." Maiden names? Was she ever maidenly? Maids have small breasts and sweet breath and blushing cheeks and glinting sapphire eyes. Most maidens probably also had long blonde legs which they tucked neatly under their skirts. Maidens got pleasant engagement rings that belonged to the mothers of the men they were going to marry. They sketched wave caps on the beach and had baskets of fruit that never rotted in their homes and sang while they did their busywork or hung spotless pink and white clothes out on the sunny line to dry. Maidens got married at nineteen and never looked back and never looked ahead. Maidens were blessed with present-momentedness. Even when their breasts billowed with matron's milk, they still looked neat and tea-cuppy, wrapped in something preciously called a bodice. If she had been a maiden, she wouldn't be so haplessly wishing for yesterday now. Although if she had been a maiden, she would, married or not, still be a maiden, because once a maiden always a maiden. Maidenhood was a particular state of being, like being short or tall. If you were hook-nosed and had water pockets under your eyes, you couldn't be a maiden.

"Jossy has plans without ever telling me anything about them," she thought she heard Eugene saying. She shook herself back into the minister's stare. "I was very close to my father," she said, conscious that she might have been renewing a bit of conversation that had long since flagged. "I'm keeping his name out of respect for him." Eugene smiled assent then squeezed her hand. "Me? I'd like to head back to camp, maybe rent a canoe, maybe take the camera and train it on some tide pools. My woman here has antiques on the

brain. We're up to our eyeballs already in burnt out old photographs and pitchers and boxes." "Jugs and canisters," Jossy thought skittishly to herself. "I don't care what they *are*, he knows I call them jugs and canisters."

"Whatever my little lady wants, though," Eugene rocked her to him by her shoulder. "It's her wedding day." *Her* wedding day? Was he disassociating himself from the proceedings or what? Didn't two people have to have a wedding day? Or did they change the rules and let you marry your life away to a block of unregenerate wood? If you really didn't promise what you'd mouthed a promise to were you still, in the sight of God, married?

The minister's wife was deciding that she thought it was better if people got married when they were still fresh out of adolescence, in the sweet post-rebellion months when the world looked new and possible. Vows could then be made with ease because that final horizon seemed so faint and far away. Then you'd have a foothold, a grounding, a nest for your disillusion to hatch itself in. The business of making eggs for someone else's breakfast would already be a settled routine. There would be plenty of time for disenchantment but before you knew it it was Christmas again and the family gift list had to get bought. These people in their thirties were set in themselves, too stiff to join forces. They would wonder what was wrong for the rest of their lives.

The hikers, reacquainted with the mystery of their love, were inviting Jossy and Eugene to their ranch house in Fresno. It turned out that he was a financial analyst and that she was an executive and fitness consultant at an exclusive beauty spa. As a wedding gift she would order Jossy a free facial and body waxing and would give her a tour of the facilities. They might take a sauna together and later go shopping and have lunch. The hikers figured in their joy that Jossy and Eugene would be permanent parts of their lives. They'd take vacations together, the men drinking Japanese beer while developing their black and white photographs, the women sitting on the patio in white dresses, recalling highlights from their Patagonian wilderness adventure. They would assemble some interesting people for a dinner of escabeche and cold Florentine salad and some California champagne and smirk knowingly over private intra-couple jokes. Remember the time old Eugene nearly capsized our raft? Yeah, and do you remember old Joss up there trying to sleigh ride down the ski slopes? Eugene tore off a matchbook cover and passed it to the male hiker who exchanged glances with the female hiker as if to say, "we'll soon fix his smoking habit, won't we, hon?" They wrote their Fresno address, shook hands, embraced, were effusively delighted, then marched arm in arm into the hinterlands, canteens clanking.

Jossy offered to help the minister's wife with the clean up, knowing her offer would be refused. The minister's wife had half a mind to show her into the kitchen and sink her hands into the soap suds just to see the surprise on her tight, set

face. "A woman of thirty has no business looking so peaked," she thought, "especially if all she does for her amusement is buy things. Useless things, at that." She had half a mind to let her clean out the geegaws in the minister's garage. The minister often said proudly that he could never let anything go. No matter how old and dusty it got, he would still have a tenderness for it. Then he would look at his drop-biscuit of a wife and smile a "Yessiree" to the satisfied amusement of his sprinkle of parishioners. He had been saying this for so long, all had been amused at regular intervals by it for so long, that the minister's wife herself sometimes believed, when covered with baking flour, especially, that she was breaking up into dust particles. Sometimes she would chuckle slyly to herself thinking that the minister would one day find her rolling out the custard-cup dough, her head a giant coil of puffy under-the-bed dust. When he pecked her on the cheek he would get a mouthful of infinitesimal wood chips and woolen flecks of nook-grime.

After accepting congratulations and once again thanking the minister for agreeing to the irregular hours, thanking the minister's wife for the lovely, unexpected wedding treat, and slipping a substantial gratuity into the minister's palm, Jossy and Eugene got into their yellow hatchback car and drove away.

II

The antique shop was on a steep road rising off the town's main street. It overlooked a vast ice cream pavilion girdled with flapping scalloped awnings of red and musty white. A sign announcing "Arthur's Seaplane Rides" did its provocative green and black bidding across the way from the shop's front porch. The seaplane itself, tethered at the pier, bobbed like a pleasant bumpkin cousin, waiting for the guests to come. Next to Arthur's seaplane was an eminent and unexpected paddle-wheeled sightseeing vessel, underneath whose soul-stirring awning you could cruise away all cares for a laughably scant fifteen dollars a head, ten fifty if your head was a child's or a senior adult's.

The shop, run by a self-proclaimed retired schoolmarm, was a tidy delight of shelved and labeled artifacts, attesting to the precise kind of love Miss Ida brought to a hundred score of children throughout her legendary forty-five year career. There were no mildewed seat cushions beneath which damp copies of Kennedy-era *Life's* were pressed, no crystal and jet buttons rattling inside chipped gravy boats. Here in the schoolmarm's shop, all buttons were carded according to date and type. Very fragile or old fabric buttons had protective cellophane taped around their cards. As much background information as possible was given on the labels "Snipped from an over

washed and un-mendable hand-knit beaded sweater, circa 1933. Beads available,” said the miniscule but perfectly upright and legible blue script on one of the button labels. Saran-wrapped magazines were ordered into numbered wall-racks ranked according to age and utilitarian value. Knitting and embroidery books from the '20's, '30's, and '40's occupied a place of state on a lace-covered mahogany table while movie magazines crouched in shame and lost glory behind *Saturday Evening Posts* and the ubiquitous *National Geographics*. The ancient dowagers, *Harper's* and *Godey's*, were packaged tightly and shelved away from greedy, aggressive, wise-crack modern thumbs. If one was genuinely interested in purchasing a magazine from the gilded years of the 1860's, Miss Ida had to be called to personally attend you.

You were always free to take a trip upstairs to the little attic room to look at portraits, prints, green copper kettles with seared-off spouts, buxom dress forms, and stiff wool hats printed with ocelot spots. The loft room was what most resembled a junk shop, though it was much more self-possessed than the frowzy mad-woman look of the bloated holes-in-the-wall Jossy felt most at home in Miss Ida's upstairs, unlike her downstairs, had no glass-doored, glass-filled cases and polished bureaus set with tortoise and mother-of-pearl combs and brushes. Here there were single pieces too old or too ghastly to be shown off alone. Here was the tawdry bric-a-brac that resisted immediate identification or whose labeling was incomplete or pending further investigation. One pink-sprigged German demitasse had a label curved inside it reading: “Bought at Mrs. Bigelow's estate sale. Ask Harriet if belonged to Grombach side.” The hats, it must be said, were mostly all on pegs and the hardy old tools, which Eugene loved so much, were all ranged according to species: wrenches, hammers, mallets, levels, hatchet heads, saws. There were books, too, mercifully un-plastic-coated, in a shelf marked merely “Old Books.”

Jossy was sitting on the floor leafing through *Stoddard's Lectures on Scotland* when Eugene creaked up the stairs and stood before her, holding out a dowdy, flame-colored ceramic pitcher by its handle. “Is this any good?” he asked so shyly that he almost shuffled. “I thought this would look nice next to that other yellow jug we have. It looks about the same shape.” Jossy sat, Stoddard on lap, and gazed at the proffered pitcher with meek and humble love. “Yeah, it's good,” she said. “I saw some tools over there underneath those pillbox hats. Maybe we need a lugnut wrench or something.”

III

Jossy got herself some rye bread and butter and a cup of honeyed tea and thought about the things she liked. She liked

eating, she thought, though she was not supposed to like it because she was already passed plump and into something more noticeable like premature frumpiness. Still, to take a lump of buttered bread into one's mouth gave an instant sensation of solidity and salt; the teeth bit automatically, swallowing was automatic – it was an effortless something that one actually *did*, a slight notch up from letting the wind seep into one's face. The trouble with eating, though, was that it was over so soon, which probably was the trouble with everything pleasant. Yet eating, on the other hand, was often so unconsciously comfortable that she doubted that sensation was what she was after at all. Maybe she didn't like eating so much after all, but just convinced herself that she did.

She thought it was possible that she liked defying Eugene. For instance, when she got the butter just now, she left the refrigerator door ajar and didn't close it until she was done with all her buttering and until the tea-water fussily boiled for some time. Eugene was a study in contradictions, she decided. He would rave about wasting electricity – which meant wasting money – if lights were left on or the refrigerator door was not closed instantly after the food was loaded in or loaded out, but he would think nothing of buying his favorite perishable groceries in bulk which he knew from past experience were more than he could eat in a week, then going through a ritually predictable refrigerator-emptying ceremony when the cheeses greened or the mushrooms shriveled. He wasted more money on food than she ever wasted on electricity and he knew it, too, if only he would think.

She liked humping along the snowy beach in sloppy galoshes of wobbly black rubber. She thought of herself walking. The loop of elastic that held her boot button to button had, in some distant year, snapped. Snow and sand would scuff up into her sagging, jouncing boot-top. She had on a red woolen scarf wrapped around her ears to protect them from whistling and a giant coat of pink quilting hulked over a black woolen vest and a purple university t-shirt. A small yellow duck was patched fuzzily over a tear in her coat. It twitched and rollicked against an embroidered spray of apple bough, sewn on out of sheer winsomeness. She thought that the day would be heavy and grey and the houses would look hunched and spindly under the weight of the desolate clouds. She loved the beachfront houses, all caulked, sided, and weather-stripped against impending ravages of wave and wind. She loved their neutral stone colors, the Nantucket greys of the wood, the grizzly Floridian pastels of the stucco shacks, the splendor of the constant glass in the turreted, garreted sun palaces. She pictured an empty beach. No one was walking their water spaniels, no one was poking sea pods with drift wood or scraping net and muck from the sides of a mysterious crate. No children slipped along the jetties, their tall fathers calling safety warnings from the shore. No brand new lovers idled in the dunes, brushing rough and rioting hairs back into caps and smiling at the startle of salt on each other's smooth, cooing lips. Jossy might then have kicked a can or cracked the back of a shell with her heel. She might have dragged furrows into

the water line, pretending her feet were gophers. She could see herself now, sitting down on some wet planking, unloading the clumps of sand from her boot. She saw the air shimmering its blankness, thick with the powdery push of unsnowed snow, the greasy waves plashing over and over, upside down, sideways. The air, she thought, was the barely told color of faded aqua bathroom tiles clouded with the peculiar iced milkiness of celadon ceramic and wisped with the occasional smirk of stony malachite. For an instant it all seemed real.

Jossy thought she would like to live in a world where there were heroes and villains and yeses and no's and preordained consequences and predictable outcomes. She thought, for instance, that if you spent days painting a wall a lovely pale shade that you had spent two hours of your life choosing just to make a sure and habitable environment for yourself that you should then be happy with the change when the work was all done. You shouldn't then have to contend with the creeping thought that wall-color makes no difference after all and you were infantile to think it might in the first place. She thought, for instance, that she might have married a lumberjack with feet that left prints that told you he was *here*. She thought they might have moved to the north country where he would teach her the names of all the things that grew and where he would show her the stand of new trees that he planted. They would live in a beautiful cabin hewn from the trees he had felled. Inside, logs of cedar would burn heat and joyous light into their open, willing souls. They would rock by the fire and read each other compelling passages from ardent paperbacks and in the deep night under the eiderdown the y would smell each other's skin and know they were alive.

Sometimes in the certain chill of winter, Jossy would sit in a thin bathrobe near an open window, soothed to know that she could still shiver.

She could, for instance, have become a dancer. She dreamed of having penetrating muscles, spirals of fiery sinews that could grip the air and climb in lacy, self-made pathways. A shine would be left in the sky where her heat rubbed off and her secret design could be traced by the vaporous wash of gold that she trailed. She would be happy with the lifting she could do, her skin marking its own aesthetic lines, angles made from the bend in her knees. Her feet, in the bounty of her own mind, sprung her, braced her, brought her this far. There was no telling, never any telling where she might whirl and on what winds she would land.

Jossy thought she might love her wedding gifts which were on display on the dining room table as a tribute to custom and convention. The truth was that she never really liked to mark the endings of things. She sat on the troubled living room couch and peered in at her presents. The fact that the gifts were there proved that she and Eugene had been married. Friends had been clever and quirky in their giving. The newlyweds received: a deed to a square foot of Irish earth and a book called *Square Foot Gardening*; a barnyard of foot-high

ceramic animals – cow, goose, rooster, pig; thin stemmed wine-glasses in a fascinating hybrid color – something like grape jelly seen through an opalescent, predominantly yellow bowl; a hand-made miniature replica of an adobe hut with tiny shawled Pueblo women stooped over near-microscopic pottery vessels; a combination desktop globe and pencil sharpener; a gingham-covered family photo album with a ruffled cut-out heart puffed out on the front which snapped open like a locket to reveal a heart-shaped ten year old picture of Eugene and Jossy hugging each other in swim suits.

They had made clear to family and the few friends they had that gifts would be unwelcome. They already had several cast-off ice tongs, a functional if disused blender, several mug and dinnerware sets, as well as the odd piece of crystal or two. They had been together for so long and had accumulated a wide diversity of household items; there was no need to pretend they were a new couple in need of setting up. The truth was, that Jossy might have enjoyed new-couple status, might even have wanted to fit her cute twenty year old hips inside a pair of faded stone-washed denims and sit on a high-backed, ribbon-and-crepe draped dining room chair in front of a bulbous, circus-colored pile of surprises. One of the squattest cousins in the room would come over and pull back Jossy's waist-length, red-gold hair and her mother, eyes teeming with pride and delight, would tie beneath her daughter's confident chin, the azure streamers of a special bonnet made from a paper plate overlaid with stapled-on gift bows. "Ouch," Jossy would say when the staples pinched into her hair and a minor feverish crisis would ensue, an aunt blaming the cousin-in-charge for not simply using curls of masking tape, even if the bow bottoms did pucker and drop off. Her mother would save the day by lining another paper plate, staples up, inside the bonnet. Jossy's presents would include a bread box with *Pan* written on it in script; a wooden spice rack with gum-backed labels for nutmeg, cinnamon, thyme; a quilted peach-colored king-sized comforter; and, from her grandmother, a set of copper-bottomed cookware.

She might have enjoyed seeing Eugene in a grey tux, his crinkly brown ponytail held back by a tasteful snippet of shoelace. She would wear her mother's elegant satin princess dress with the myriad pearlized buttons dropping down the small of her back. What was left of her grandmother's lace mantilla would be rethreaded and draped cunningly over a small, prim beaded crown. She would have preferred to wear the mantilla without the crown since it felt more natural and alluring that way, but she would defer to her mother's insistent judgment: Jossy's head was too small and she needed the height. Then she would walk down the aisle with her father and later dance to *Daddy's Little Girl*, crying from nerves, champagne, and genuine sorrow, clinging to her Daddy's tall back as if he could prevent her from being given entirely away.

She and Eugene would spend a honeymoon night at a local motel, then drive up to a little cabin in the mountains where they would play cards, drink wine, and watch the ferrets on the

morning lawn. Holding hands, they would take exploration walks in the clean air, poking about in the undergrowth with the tips of their sturdy hiking branches. Every sorry shrub or mushroom would transfix them, every overhead leaf-swish would give them pause. At midday they would sit down on a rotted log and unwrap half a loaf of black bread and a couple of slices of extra sharp cheddar. They would eat in shared silence, pondering together. At the exact moment when she began to feel lonely, Eugene would offer her cool water from their flask.

IV

When Eugene got back that night, Jossy talked to him again about the gifts. They sat in the dim light of an elderly wicker-shaded lamp and looked at their own thoughts from far away. "Do you think," she said for the tenth time in that many days, "do you think we did the right thing? Should we have gotten married with a band and bouquets and all? Should we have asked for presents like toasters and pillow shams? What should we have done?" She rocked giddily back and forth on the old rocking chair, then, picking a stiff bit of binding from the worn seat-cushions said, "Can you fix this? The stuffing's coming out? Can this be fixed? Is it ruined?" Eugene sipped sugary Sanka and turned the pages of an old atlas, filing current newspaper clippings in between pages of the appropriate countries. "Yes, I'll take a look at it. It can be fixed, I'm sure. Yes, we did the right thing. No one needed to go through the bother and expense." "So you really think so? But it would have seemed more new, maybe, more different." Eugene looked up with "English Riots" between his scissors. "Why are you so sure we need different?"

"I don't know." There was a single elm tree outside with a huge splay of

branches arced into a giant hemisphere, shaking with chilly families of thrush and sparrow. Jossy and Eugene listened to the sterling curlicues of chirps and song, heard the plain little breasts bristle with decision. Jossy thought she might have become a farmer. She pet pigs in her head and called the chickens to her grain-filled skirts for lunch. She thought that Eugene must be somewhere on the mesas, contemplating the eerie swagger of the stars.

V

At night in bed she churned the butter, did anything to make her eager muscles work, plucked herbs from her little garden and hung them up to dry, cooked huge bustling pots of soup with hoards of home-grown vegetables bobbing beneath the tender pats of her long-handled, wooden spoon. She thought again and again of the dour minister's wife and her happy, pious, grainy pumpkin cake and worried that too much wind-swept health might not be such a good thing. Still, in her dreams, she went where it was calmly perilous, rubbing the flanks of impossible cows and scating the squirrels away from her seeds. Eugene wrapped his arm beneath her heavy breasts and burrowed his forehead into the warm arch of her neck. If the cows weren't milking right, if a yearling foal went astray, or if she scalded herself with morning bacon grease, she would bolt and turn and eek out little nips of whine until Eugene woke and left the bed and came back with an ancient, pale blue plastic bathroom cup filled with water from which she, gratefully, drank.

Kate Falvey's poetry has appeared in a number of print and online magazines including *Fringe*, *Subliminal Interiors*, *Hoboeye*, *Umbrella*, *Italian Americana*, *Hospital Drive*, *Red Line Blues*, *The Mom Egg*, *Aroostook Review*, *Danse Macabre*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Volume*, *OVS*, and *Hearing Voices*. She has fiction forthcoming in *the Citron Review* and has also published articles on women writers as well as work for children. She is on the editorial board of the NYU Langone Medical Center's *Bellevue Literary Review* and is the editor in chief of the *2 Bridges Review*, published through City Tech/CUNY, where she teaches. She lives in New York with her daughter.

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