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I have been accused of being overly fond of writing about things sexual. And of making up much of what I write.

Oddly enough, both of these accusations are absolutely false. I mean false not in the sense that my accusers are malicious. But that they are dead wrong.

I do not enjoy writing about sex. I wish to God I could write about anything else. As for making things up -- I never had the luxury of doing that. Perhaps I could enjoy that. If I ever overcome the burden of catching up to the waiting list of real experiences which must be told -- the why of this doesn't concern you -- four therapists haven't helped, I can expect no relief from you -- if I catch up, maybe I will then for the first time in my life make up something. That would be strange. What a freedom that must be.

And so on to Francine. If I write five hours today and 18 hours this weekend, at 500 words, an hour, I will be only seven women behind. If nothing happens in the meanwhile. That big "if".

Francine. Stupid name. If I had the time or luxury to make up a name I would call her "Mary". There don't seem to be any "Marys" anymore. I never meet one. That is, no Mary ever forces herself upon me. I don't even know any women my age named Mary.

Francine. She came upon me in Winchell's Donut House on San Pablo Avenue. Not the first time it happened to me there. Nor the 10th time. But it doesn't matter. If it weren't there, it would be somewhere else.

I have a sweet tooth for doughnuts. To be accurate, I have a sweet tongue for doughnuts. No teeth left.

So I go there regularly. They expect me, have grown to know me. They don't like me, but that's another matter. By law they have to serve me. Anyway, they've got plenty of other freaks in that place, at any hour of day or night.

Deaf mutes hang out there, God knows why. Cigarette in one hand, coffee styrofoam cup in the other, sitting across from each other, staring at each other, putting down the cigarette or coffee for an instant to flash those signs around.

Then there's the --

I could tell about the freaks in there all day, but I haven't got time. Have to get rid of this Francine thing. Chapter, episode, call it what you will.

Obsession. Purification rite.

It's her fault. It was her fault. I never start this stuff. I'm always completely passive, the innocent one.

I came in there on my first round, which was almost exactly 11 a.m. I move slowly, so they saw me coming a half block away, as usual. I can see very well at a distance now, so I watch what happens each time. With little conscious emotion anymore.

They start clearing out, at least away from the counter. The regulars do. The new ones, they don't know what to do. They don't get it until it's too late. They're trapped. They want to get out of there, they want to stare, they want not to hurt my feelings, they want to punch me. They don't know what they want. They are really screwed and tattooed, and I suppose I like that. Not much else I can do with it.

So I came shuffling along -- oh, Christ! Wait a minute, I just remembered what happened just before I got there. I saw these two new freaks going in there.

Each in a wheelchair. I swear to God. They came rolling along, one behind the other, a quarter block ahead of me, and I thought, "Oh, Christ, they're not going in there?!" But they did, turned right off the sidewalk, right into that narrow doorway, one by one.

I never missed a step, just kept shuffling along, dragging reluctant parts, the ol' tongue popping out, rolling in, popping out, rolling in. Like a six-foot ant eater, they say behind my back. An ugly sight. I'm not used to it. I have to shave to keep my tongue from getting whisker burns from rolling down on the bristles so I have to look. You can't shave entirely without looking. Lolls down there, rolls back, pops out. Once a second, almost exactly.

Which is slower than a heartbeat. In my case, they don't know or don't tell why the beat is exactly regular like that, and in that exact time. Night and day.

Anyway, lost the lower teeth after the first 18 months of it. The upper teeth later. They don't know exactly why they, the upper teeth, left. Sympathy, I guess.

So I see all this seen as though seeing nothing at all, Mr. Tongue slurping in and out catching all the ants in the air. And I also see Francine, she sitting way to the rear in the last booth. Staring at me, of course.

The thing is, they don't like me in there because I smell like a privy. They can't refuse to serve me, but they don't like it. They never told me that directly, but I can read faces. Body language.

So I smell bad -- to others, no longer to itself. Beer is an acquired taste. As are pickles, cigarettes, so forth. The smell of urine becomes as natural over a span of years as one's beloved's perfume, so I dimly remember. She always wore Chanel #5, though a young girl, not knowing it was a matron's scent, and I kept an item of her clothing with #5 on it for years after the engagement was called off.

Not that I purposefully pee my pants because the smell of urine is now home-like to me. No matter what happens, I change clothes once a day. And that's it. My affliction has not removed all the remains of my pride. Which was pretty ferocious in the old days.

So. I come in stinking up the joint and those customers standing at the counter who weren't completely freaked out already by Mr. Tongue, Mr. Hiss Hiss Snake, well they said silently, "Pee-u!" and moved on out fast as possible.

"Plain old-fashioned and a small cup of coffee," I said, as I always do to the Chinese or Vietnamese or Indian or Siamese or whoever they are, always the same, behind the counter, a whole family or commune of them, all about five feet high, all smiling smugly, one with a brown arm scarred white in

great blotches where the hot oil slurped on him.

Only I didn't say it like that. There's no way I could put in words how I say it. It takes about 30 seconds to say it, which is 30 tongue toppings, and new pee down my pants, and spit rolling down my chin onto the floor.

But since I always order the same thing and do so at 11 a.m., 1:30 p.m., 4 p.m., 6:30 p.m., 9:00 or 9:30 p.m. depending upon -- problems -- problems addressed in these reports -- because they know me, they understand and go ahead and get it, my doughnut and small cup of coffee, before I can hardly get started to tell them what I want, but I continue to ask for it, fully, from -- what? A perverted sense of pride? A sick kind of humor?

I ask for it fully.

I was leaving, as I always must -- they would surely call the cops otherwise -- was taking those first dreadful steps, a doughnut in my side pocket, the damn coffee spilling as always, slop, slop, as I shuffled to the exit, 10 feet to go to the gutter where I can pour out the top third, same as always, when Francine came up behind me -- no big surprise, it always happens -- and says, "Sir? -- Sir? Could you help me?"

Of course, shit head. What else can I do? Ask and you shall receive. To him who hath it shall be given, and to him who hath not what little he hath shall be taken away.

I stopped. I poured the top third into the gutter. It made a pretty, steaming sick paint swab on the asphalt. I turned slowly, as I always do. I gave her a full five seconds of tongue poppings, staring over my bi-focals at her, and then I said, "Drop dead, sister."

Which she interpreted as -- who knows? Maybe she heard it like, "But, of course, my sweet darling. Who wouldn't?"

Whereupon she took my arm, nursed me as quickly, though carefully as possible to my wretched little one-room apartment three and a half blocks away and then screwed my brains out.

Nice story. Would to God that is what it's all about. Her and the 267 others like her over the last four years since it started.

"I say "like her", which is not accurate. Every word in this must be accurate. I sense in the end the burden will be lifted -- eventually -- perhaps, God willing, soon -- if I am genuinely truthful. Accurate. Leaving out nothing that could be significant.

Not "267 others like her". All of them were different. It is a terrible thing to group people together, classify them, pigeon-hole them together, as though they weren't as special, as different, as are each of the planets. Mars is a planet. Saturn is a planet. But how different.

Francine was different. They were all different. One every five days, on the average. Something like that. It computed that way in the second year, I remember.

267. Four years equals 48 months. 267 divided by 48 months equals 5.5625 a month. Say, 30.5 days average a month divided by 5.5625 equals 5.4832, or roughly one lady every 5 1/2 days.

So it has stayed about the same. Another thing they haven't answered -- why the regularity? The tongue does its bit exactly 57 times a minute. The ladies appear "magically" every 5 1/2 days. Why? They've put a man on the moon, for Christ's sake, why can't they figure out my little problem?

Little problem.

Francine was as different as they all were. There's a generalization. Pigeon-holing again. "They were all different."

Not necessarily. They obviously all have one thing in common. Me.

From 16 to 60. The youngest one said she was 16. Could have been 14. Or 20. As for the 60,

that's just being poetic. Has a nice ring to it. I don't

know how old the oldest was. 87? Who knows? It doesn't matter. They're all the same. In essence. The brutal, hard fact of it is that. Talk about humanity. Lack of it. All my life I was taught women are the gentler sex.

Enough of that. I'm too old to get into philosophical arguments. At my age, sexual distinctions get less clear. All I know is, when I was young, it was the man who did the asking. The chasing. The ladies were supposed to be demure, passive, put upon.

What a switch.

Well, to get on with it. Got to keep on schedule. She was pretty in an ugly sort of a way. We all know people like that. Now, I'm ugly in an ugly sort of a way. Disgusting, obscene. But she was pretty in an ugly sort of a way.

I had seen that instantly when I entered the doughnut house. Saw everything clearly, perfectly, forever in that place. Like a blind person sees when they get their sight back that first day.

She was ugly in a pretty sort of away. Smoking there at that last booth, her ashtray overflowing. Smoking, drinking an enormous cup of coke or whatever they sell like that in there other than coffee. A tremendous cup. And she was reading a book, but there was also two magazines on her table and a broken-apart newspaper, and I didn't mention, she was also writing a letter. Or keeping a journal, whatever.

Very intensely doing all these things, plus observing every newcomer in the doughnut house, but especially staring unbelievably hard, impolitely, at me.

Could have been a whore or a crazy or a writer or a perfectly innocent young woman (between 24 and 36) just new to the country.

Because, now, out here by the gutter, her "Sir? Sir? Can you help me?" was delivered in a heavy accent, so I had to almost go into a trance to understand her. Not helped by her obviously not making heads nor tails of my tongue-popping interrupted speech as I attempted, as always, to tell her to buzz off.

This is taking too long, I've got to get through at least one more, preferably two, today.

Her gimmick -- they always have a gimmick -- the weirdest, the best, was the lady who let me know I was a harmless old man's so could she please come to my

apartment which she knew (God knows how) was nearby, so she could repair herself, use my bathroom, because the doughnut shop wouldn't let her use theirs, to clean up a bit, her tampon having failed -- but now, the Filipino girl, or lady, her gimmick wasn't so imaginative, she just said in her broken English that her name was Francine, and since I was obviously a kind old man, could I please just take a moment and help her fill out a legal form because she can't understand all the words?

Well, I mostly by sign language and spitting all over her finally conveyed to her that I can't go back in there with her, because they don't allow me to sit in there, but she forces this legal paper close up to my face and says: "Plaintive"? What that be? What that could be? You tell me that."

Well, it was a legal paper all right. I am somewhat of a psychic at times. I could almost feel completely certain that the legal paper had something to do with sexual harassment. Don't know why. Subliminal cues, I think. She looked dangerous that way, the kind of woman who would give you the clap. Or a legal summons.

Meanwhile she's staring at my tongue as though it is the center of the universe and all this other crap is just conversation. A look I well know. As old, if not as comfortable, as my own piss smell.

All the signs. I'm an expert. Her watching. Watching that tongue like hypnotized. Me the snake charmer. Or the snake.

I didn't even argue. It never works. It's always the same. She insisted she "help" me home, to my home, so I could help her with her legal matter. "I live too goddamned far away," I try to tell her, but she doesn't understand my eloquent sign language -- meanwhile I'm holding the damn cup of coffee and can't even have the privacy to try to drink it without losing three-force of it or making passersby sick.

So I gave up as always, and she drags me along toward my place, halfway gagging and at the same time pushing me along and also chain-smoking. A mean-looking woman. In the bright sunlight she looked real mean. Some women should wear makeup.

Pushing me along. The same as 267 others have. I figure at the rate of one woman for 5000 women -- don't ask me where I get that figure -- I can just feel it, like I can a horse which will win -- I can sense it is about one in 5000 -- at that rate, there are 527 potentials in this metropolitan area. I've been through 267, which leaves 260 to go. 5 1/2 a week, that's about -- that's -- 206 weeks. 52 weeks a year, that's about four more years. I should live so long.

The therapist -- make that therapists -- they all said the same, the new one says the same -- says I make all this up.

Why, for Christ's sake? Answer me that? Why? Why should I make it up? That bastard sits there in his office with his nose mask on, like I'm typhoid Harry or something and makes me sit on a disposable towel to protect his precious fancy chair from a little pee droppings, and he tells me I'm "making it up".

Why, for Christ's sake. Why would an old man make up such crap? What's in it for me?

Do they think I like to do this? Really?

I have written an average of approximately 2500 words on each woman. 2500 times 267 women. That's 667,500 words. At 80,000 words a novel, that's over eight novels!

They think I do this for fun?

I wish to God they could have a similar affliction for just one day.

They say -- they all said the same -- in their different ways -- they all say -- I make it up, all of it, in some exotic, bizarre attempt by my "unconscious" to make sense of, give dignity to, my disability. That I think I would die, otherwise. Just die.

Ass holes. If they're so damn sure this is all a figment of my imagination -- 267 women! -- 667,500 words of pure goo goo from my senile old unconscious -- why in the name of truth don't they just invest 50 bucks a day on some private dick, private eye, private elbow, and follow me around for 5 1/2 days? Why don't they do that? Hell, I'll hire one for them!

But no, they'd rather sit there in their fancy offices and call me a loony, treat me like a child -- "Show us your latest, we need to know what you think is happening."

As though I cared whether they read it or not. That has nothing to do with it. They can read it. Or not. They can pass it around, laugh their guts out at the old man's latest fantasies. Screw them. They understand nothing. Their world is a surface world, one-tenth, no one-hundredth of the real world. They are like in a shallow dream, not even a clever dream. Their silly little idea of reality is so puny, so third rate, so pedestrian --

What if I collected an article of clothing from each of the "ladies"? A garter belt here, a bra there, maybe a used tampon, stockings? a slip? What do they want? Would they believe, then? What does it take for them to believe? Would anything convince them?

The son-of-a-bitches. If I could walk into this latest son-of-a-bitch's office just one time, one day, with a normal tongue, with that tongue staying inside, proper, for a few minutes -- I would tell that son-of-a-bitch the truth in the way he would never forget!

Have they never heard of expiation? Don't they teach that in psychology school?

If I could just catch up. Just once. Be on top of it. Be up to date on it. But there's always a new one!

If I could do one more today, maybe too. And maybe five over the weekend -- and if there were no new ones, no goddamned new ones -- but how the hell do I avoid that? I've got my rounds: "McDonald's" for breakfast, "Burger King" for lunch, "Taco Bell" for dinner, or supper as we used to call it. And the library and the children's park -- God damn matrons, young mothers there -- how can I avoid them? They the most dangerous of all. Pushing a baby buggy, and they see ol' Mr. Tongue popping out, in, out, in, out and it's goodbye Charlie, all sense and propriety out the window, maidenly modesty shot to shit.

I have to do my rounds! Everybody has the right to something.

I'm an old man. Why can't they leave me alone. I don't just mean the women. Why can't the half-asked psychologists give me a break? Why can't they listen, just once, with an open mind? Take something on faith, something they can't understand? Do they really think they are the Lords and Masters of understanding, that there is nothing, nothing at all, unless they say so?

Why would an old man make up such things? I have no sex drive. There's been no lead in the council at all, not once, since the stroke. I'm not in my 90s, for Christ's sake. When supposedly your sex drive returns. I read that some place.

Doesn't it ever occur to just one of them that I might be telling the truth? That this could be happening?

Well, this is too much. Is doing no good. The only thing that will help, that can help, is to catch up, and finally, soon, maybe next week, catch up. Put the cap on the whole thing, finish it off, end it. Then I can be free again. And maybe the curse will end.

As for Francine, she took me home three and a half blocks and screwed my brains out.

Would it were so.

She took me home, she almost threw up on the inside of my place, a studio apartment with a bath. The place stinks if you're not used to it. They all nearly puke. I can't keep a pet.

But they do come in. They come into my place. Some puke, some don't. They make me do what they came for. The devil knows why. I will never again tell exactly what they make me do. Enough psychologists have been titillated by that. Talk about sick. Who's the doctor and who's the patient?

I did what Francine wanted. I have no choice in these matters. I remember a kinder time when I was young when ladies were less aggressive.

I did what Francine demanded. And then she screwed my brains out.

I should be so lucky.

Now I can start on Rita. With luck, I'll finish Rita today. Then maybe one more. There's a chance. I could catch up. If I could only write faster. Or they could leave me alone. If that could happen.

Rita. It was at the playground. I was just resting a bit. On my rounds. Well -- like they all do, she got to staring. Ol' Mr. Tongue, he was just minding his own business, doing his thing, and Rita -- stupid name. If I had the time or luxury to make up a name, I'd call her -- what? Mary? There don't seem to be any Marys around much anymore --

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Grant Flint was born in a Nebraska at the beginning of The Great Depression. His short stories, creative nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Poetry New York*, *Weber*, *Amelia*, *Slow Trains*, *Common Ties*, and other print and online journals. He was memoir winner in the 2007 Soulmaking Literary Contest, and will appear in the 2007 *Writer's Digest Short Short Story Competition Collection*. He has recently finished a series of seven memoir/novels, collectively called, "The Innocent Sensualist", the Great American Novel.