



## Marny

by Greg Leichner

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Marny was a self-employed arborist. She lived with her young son Emmett in a century-old cabin on North Lick Creek in Williamson County south of Nashville.

I was a self-employed carpenter. At 40 I was ten years older than Marny. I lived in Seattle.

Marny and I were in the fourth quarter of the fourth year of our long-distance relationship.

Road-dazed, I arrived at Marny's cabin in early November.

Friday, 6 p.m.

Visit #8.

Marny was on edge, rough week, grueling labor, glitches galore. Her hello kiss was a cold peck on the cheek. It was Emmett's first day back home after two weeks with his dad. Emmett was seven. Emmett and I exhibited signs of shellshock, but it was Marny who was truly in agony.

"Wrong night for the overwhelming desire to be alone," Marny muttered.

After dinner Emmett went to his room and flipped through the pages of his dictionary. Marny and I drank beer and played cribbage. We used our favorite card game therapeutically. We tried to create a neutral zone, but we failed to take the edge off the evening. We wisely quit at one win each.

That night Marny and I, two frazzled strangers, took off our clothes and climbed into her bed. Without a word we thankfully turned toward sleep.

By late Saturday morning the distance and grating were well into dissipation. Emmett, named after the only Dalton brother to survive Coffeyville, was in the front room taking apart an old telephone. Marny and I sat at the kitchen table.

"Why can't you just say it?" she kidded. "Lie to me. It doesn't have to be real. Just say it."

"I love you."

She perked up. "Wow. Nice try. Congratulations." She leaned back in the rocker. She wanted only one thing from me. "That's all you have to do. Just love me."

At dusk the progressive party began. That two-mile stretch of North Lick

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Creek was not a commune, but the couples in the hollow displayed a high degree of collective behavior. It was a hayride, kids included. We were conveyed from house to house in the beds of three pickups. The hay was excelsior grade and soothingly aromatic.

We grazed the hors d'oeuvres at the Wolf/Moore's.

Salad and bread at the Krafts'.

Gravlax and aquavit at the Harvards'.

Marny's weighty lasagna.

Cheesecake at the Tebbets'.

It was a tasty ordeal that rode the Bell Curve, peaking at the Harvards', the only place we danced, and scattering during dessert when a major fade attacked the weak.

Suzy Ward asked me, "How's it going with Marny?"

I said, "It's only been twenty-four hours."

"Marny can pack a lot of firepower into twenty-four hours."

"This re-entry into her life is not going to be easy. Some part of her is fed up with me. But I don't think she wants to end it. I don't want to end it. It could go either way."

Sunday afternoon I sat at the desk in the front room. File by file I began working through eight liquor boxes full of letters, rough drafts and editorial cartoons. Emmett was on the couch watching a Mighty Mouse video. Marny was at her desk in the bedroom typing a job estimate.

I admired Marny, as a lover, as a mother, as a businesswoman and as a worker bee. I am fond of the photo of her free-climbing a giant magnolia with a chainsaw clipped to her work belt. Her presence in my life added two crucial flavors, companionship and adventure. But I was not in love with her, yet.

I said, "It's not that I'm incapable of love. I'm just slow to fall."

"Love is not one of your moving parts," Marny sighed.

Marny was an avid reader. Her bookshelves were packed with top-notch fiction. She laughed at my cartoons but found my letters to her "too dry, stripped of emotion." At the progressive party Marny made the gang laugh when she revealed her idea for my epitaph.

"This lifetime was just a rough draft."

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For a few weeks I put aside all labor and became a desk potato. I relished my clock-less sabbatical. The break from reality made me a happier man.

It irked Marny that I got to stay home while she went out into the cold autumn wind and ran a tree-pruning crew. By Friday she had graduated to caged seething.

She gathered herself. "I need to calm my resentment. I want you to start paying rent."

We negotiated over shots of tequila and achieved a just and lasting peace.

Since that first rough night, Marny and I had been on/off, up/down, fun/not fun, then whoops!

The airless confinement.

Marny was vehement about her need for love. I was direct and honest when I reaffirmed my sexual fidelity. I asked her to let the bread rise in its own time. She guffawed and flooded the kitchen with impatience.

Dear Bob

Christmas shopping is not my favorite sport. I, zombie, go in and out of dozens of stores, sometimes going back two or three times to confirm a yes or a no. I am partial to practical gifts. My first gift to Marny was a splitting maul. She guessed correctly that I was thinking about buying her a wheelbarrow.

"You'd better not," she admonished. "Think of something sweeter."

I hulked up and set out immediately to hunt down and haul home an exotic pair of earrings.

Lately I'm getting a healthy dose of the domestic, half warm and worthy, half standoff. Two months into visit #8 and I find myself perfecting my wall, the wall that will save me from being consumed by Marny's agenda.

I baited her. "Your cage is too small. If you give me total freedom, I'll give you total love."

She was swift and sassy. "I hereby give you the total freedom to give me total love. Ha!"

Kinzly Moore and Charlotte Wolf, married fourteen years, lived on top of a woodsy hill in a house they built themselves. Kinzly had a PhD in geology with a special interest in marine geology and biology. He'd fled his post at

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Vanderbilt and was now a self-employed carpenter. Every workday Charlotte drove forty miles to Columbia where she was a lawyer for Southern Tennessee Legal Services.

Kinzly and Marny had a strong open regard for each other. They were confidants. Charlotte and I were linked by a low-key mutual affection and a quirk. We were born on the same day, same year.

“Demented twins from the Planet Me,” Marny quipped.

Kinzly agreed. “We don’t stand a chance.”

The four of us faced a 450-mile drive and figured it would be less painful if we covered some of that distance Friday night. For the first hour all of us were withdrawn, inhaling and exhaling bad air, the byproduct of last minute bickering. The women sat in back and nestled into pillows and comforters. Kinzly did the driving. I was the DJ.

I sat back, closed my eyes and allowed Neil Young to work the cure. I looked forward to the beach, but I did not look forward to a long weekend with the Marnster, the Edge. Fifty miles north of Birmingham we started looking for a motel. I found an oldies station and the music slapped us back through time. Shimmy shimmy koko bop, doo wah diddy, it’s my party.

“I was just visited by an aroma from the past,” I opened. “Fried baloney on toasted white bread, with iceberg lettuce and mayo.”

Charlotte said, “I grew up in a house that smelled like burnt Velveeta.”

“When our house smelled like tuna casserole,” said Marny, “we knew mom was pissed off at dad.”

Kinzly confessed that in his youth he’d eaten the same thing for breakfast for fifteen years, “Two pieces of toast, peanut butter on one, jelly on the other.”

At noon we crossed the bridge at Pensacola Beach and quickly found the Surf & Sand Cottages. We settled into a two-bedroom cinderblock bungalow fifty yards from the Gulf. A stroll along the beach took us past college kids and locals soaking up the first hot day of winter.

By sundown we were well into cocktail hour. Marny and Charlotte delivered a feast, teriyaki salmon, steamed artichokes and Caesar salad. Cottage #19 was ours now, scent marked with beer breath, salty skin and fishy odors.

“A toast,” I said, “to the restorative power of the honeymoon.”

“Hear hear!” said Kinzly and Charlotte.

“Life can’t always be a honeymoon,” Marny cautioned.

“I’m fond of the honeymoon,” I said, “and I’m shooting for as many as I can

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get. The dream is this: lovers and friends, frequent honeymoons, pure escape, satisfying.”

At midnight Marny and I squeezed onto her twin bed. It was quickly obvious that “something sweeter” was out of the question, and that what needed to be said was not going to get said.

Sipping morning coffee, I found I possessed both an open mind and a closed mind. “For me, friendship is the ideal.”

Marny glared at me and swallowed a bite of buttered toast. “I don’t need another friend.”

I vowed to hold the line.

We spent the afternoon wandering a deserted beach near Fort Pickens. I found a mint-condition sand dollar and we all thought this was a good omen.

Kinzly said, “The small hole near the hinge of many clam shells is the work of the predacious gastropod, a slug that bores through the shell, injects a digestive juice, then later sucks out the jellied mass.”

In the same flash, Marny and I pointed at each other and barked, “Ha!”

Charlotte chastened us. “Just for now, forget the shit.”

At sundown we entered the fort and made our way to Battery Payne.

“Constructed in 1904 and positioned on the western end of Santa Rosa Island, the battery mounted two three-inch rapid-fire guns designed to defend the bay entrance against fast torpedo boats and minesweepers.”

The sun turned orange, then red, and with the sudden chill we put on our sweaters and windbreakers. A heron circled above. The sky eased from gray to black. We lay down shoulder-to-shoulder on the slanted aggregate concrete of Battery Payne, four impromptu meditations on the Big Picture. The heron looked down and saw Kinzly, Marny, me and Charlotte. We were holding hands and scooting closer.

Kinzly and Marny spoke the names of the stars as each appeared. Charlotte gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. My right eyelid began to twitch. I let go of Marny’s hand. I laid a fingertip on my eyelid and felt it squirm. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the sand dollar. Marny and Kinzly pointed upward, their fingers interlocked, and named the Seven Sisters.

Charlotte whispered into my ear, “I’m glad I don’t know the names of the

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stars.”

That night we drank margaritas and played seven loud games of cribbage.

“Yes! Yes!” Marny erupted when the cut went her way. Her good fortune drowned out her edge and we broke free for a few hours, cage doors flung open, all juices freshly squeezed.

Marny and I lay naked on my twin bed, holding hands, staring at the ceiling.

I admired Marny’s pit bull approach to need fulfillment. She was solid, adamant and sincere, but none of the voices inside me counseled compromise.

Marny whispered, “I’m the only one keeping myself sane.” She turned to me. “You’re lying there, cold and motionless, like road kill.”

I pictured my new epitaph. “Ha. Yes. Road kill. Perfect.”

North on I-65, Yellow Leaf Creek, the Mulberry Fork of the Warrior River, past Athens “where cotton is king,” past the monolithic rocket at the Alabama-Tennessee border, dark thunderheads, light rain over the pink soil of soybean fields. Just south of Williamson County our foursome slid into a brutal deafening cloudburst.

From the back seat Marny yelled, “What happens when you play country music backwards?”

“I don’t know!” we sang.

“You get your job back, you get your wife back, you stop drinking and it stops raining!”

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Dear Bob

I’m in Room 223 at the Anasazi Inn in Cortez, Colorado. I am looking forward to the kind of privacy found only in a quiet motel room, divorced from everything beyond the triple-lock door. While I was in Carson City building Moby Deck, Marn and I broke up four times, four separate phone calls, all in one evening. I’m on my way back to her. We’ve decided to try one more visit. Up ahead is R&R, a few days with Chris in New Mexico, one evening with my sister in OKC, two nights with my parents in Dallas, then a beeline to Marnville via Texarkana, Little Rock and Memphis.

Dear Chris

Twenty years ago my crush on you made me ache and writhe and drove me

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to one mad gesture. I attempted to walk off my desire by following the one hundred miles of rail line that winds east out of Cincinnati to my hometown, Portsmouth. That night I slept near Mount Orab, in the mown grass beside the tracks, my raincoat not protecting me from the drizzle.

You are so right to say that no matter what happens from here on out, we will have our two wondrous days together. I want to hear again all the things we talked about at Jemez Falls. I lie here in Dallas, on the living room couch in my parents' apartment. I am deepened, and amazed. I love you.

One week into Visit #9, I pulled the plug and Marny agreed. As I drove away, she turned and did not look back.

Face down on her bed Marny cried it out as if I were still in the room.

"Why didn't you fall in love with me? I still don't get it!"

She pounded her fist into the pillow. She slumped to the mattress, hugged the pillow, and finally she gave herself credit. Defiantly she said to me, "I was the one who loved."

I was a mile up the road, turning onto Pinewood when I said to myself, "I'm glad it's over and already I miss her."

Marny exploded at the bar at Joe D's when Suzy Ward told her that Chris and I were coming to Nashville.

"You've got to be kidding!" Marny was stunned. "You can't let them stay at your house!"

To her credit, Suzy would have none of it. Suzy had known Chris since the second grade, and it was Suzy who introduced me to Marny. Suzy did not take the bait. She did not take sides.

After a half dozen long distance calls, all four of us participating, Marny abruptly backed away from her outrage, cooled, laid down a few ground rules, and threw her final punch at me.

"You've got the soul of a mannequin, the empathy of a serial killer, and the emotional depth of a placemat."

Chris and I spent an October week at Suzy's house in Nashville. Chris and I were still enjoying the honeymoon, lovers' grace, the naked embrace, the long freeform kiss.

On the morning of day three, Marny called. She needed me for a pruning job.

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Chris said to me, "Do it. She needs to talk to you."

That afternoon, pruners in hand, Marny and I circled the dogwoods in Lamar & Honey Alexander's front yard.

Marny said, "I hate losing you. I'm finally over the rage. Still, it hurts. I console myself with the fact that we are friends with a colorful history together."

She reached for me and we held each other tight.

Through tears she whispered, "So... now that you've learned to love, you love me. I can tell."

Dear Bob

Six months ago Marny's Christmas card carried this note: "Kinzly helped me remodel the attic. The front room is next. I'm going to need more bookshelves. You've built every shelf in this house. I would like you to build two more."

June is hot and muggy in Tennessee. From Suzy Ward's house in Nashville, I drove down into Williamson County, South Harpeth, Pewitt, Pinewood, North Lick Creek. I splashed across the limestone bed of the shallow stream and up onto Marny's dirt driveway, overhead a jungle of leaves, redbud, walnut, birch, elm, sycamore.

I have always felt at home in Marny's cabin. Built of poplar in 1900, its walls inside and out are dusky rough sawn planks. All doorway heights are at a dangerously low seventy-three inches, the jambs shortened in the 1930 conversion from dirt floor to wood.

There were books stacked on the kitchen table, books stacked in the far corner of the front room. A loaded shotgun was propped against the wall beside Marny's bed. A bottle of tequila and \$200 in twenties sat on the kitchen counter. Pinched under the Cuervo was a note: "Emmett and I will be back in four days. Make yourself at home. XO, Marny."

I put my duffle bag upstairs in Emmett's attic room. I took the carpenter's tour of the house and grounds, the poplar trestle table I'd built from weathered scrap, the white pine vented clothing shelves in Marny's bedroom, and by the creek my favorite, the cedar table and benches, another old fence recycled. At each stop an animal appeared, dogs Roy and Sally and cats Fluffy, Olive, July and James Bond.

Three days of labor and sweat, t-shirt soaked through, waistband itchy, tennis shoes steaming, twenty chigger bites around the ankles. Maddening. Every shower was so utterly deserved it was akin to pure justice.

My mission was to build twin bookshelves for the front room, each four feet wide, floor to ceiling, one for each side of the doorway to the entry hall. From prime two-by-tens and lattice trim painted teal, I wrought two hearty

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monoliths.

Marny and Emmett came home to the finished product and they declared the project a success. Emmett and I carted books and Marny systematically shelved them. Emmett found the World Atlas and disappeared to his room. I found Marny's notebook from Honeymoon #1 and, with her permission, I sat down and went through the pages.

"It bothers me that you've suffered so little," she said.

I looked up. "Is it your wish that I suffer a great deal of emotional pain?"

"I just want some sense of balance, some justice."

"We were a good team. We traveled well together."

"I know."

"Honeymoon #1."

"I remember."

"The second half of Honeymoon #2."

"We finally got around to our best behavior."

"And it was wonderful."

"I agree."

"That's the balance. That's the justice." I read from her diary. "Sun, fog, cool wind. Whole trees carried by the ocean for months and years have been tumbled to a smooth gray and are packed tight at the back of the beach, slammed there by the meaner waves. Gulls, cormorants, unsullied beach of polished stones. Rock formations, towers and humps, jut from the surf. The ocean crashes and foams. It is a good scouring for us. We are scrubbed clean inside by the white light and roar."

"Olympic Peninsula, Rialto Beach, La Push," Marny said. "If you want to read to me, read this in the kitchen while I figure out dinner."

She handed me a novel by Cormac McCarthy.

"Primal Mexico," she said, "post civil war. Indians and Mexicans duking it out, with a few tattered Norte Americanos caught in between. Dead horses everywhere." She paused. "You can stick around tonight if you don't mind sleeping on the couch. I promise I won't harass you any further."

"Thank you. I promise to be out just after dawn. I want to make Dallas before sundown."

"What's your mom cooking, spaghetti and meatballs or Thanksgiving in June?"

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“Spaghetti tomorrow night, turkey on Sunday.”

“Be sure to wake me and I’ll make coffee.” She bent over and examined my face. “Your eyelid is twitching.” She touched my eyelid with intent to calm. She whispered, “Cheeseburgers or chicken breasts?”

I can flip through the Marn File and find damn fine evidence that she and I quit too soon. Exhibit A: her first postcard to me, after Honeymoon #1:

“Friday night and I’m sore and weary and itchy from too many insect bites. I dropped the little boy off at his daddy’s and went for a drive with a six-pack of Beck’s.

Cold Water Road to Mangrum, right turn onto Shoals Branch and along the limestone ridge to North Lick Creek, a noble road, one lane, dirt and gravel, remote. Careening toward plum-colored lightning, I splash through the creek and pull up at the woodpile, cats and dogs leaping, owl hoots in the field, lights inside warm and peachy.”

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**Greg Leichner** won the First Annual (1995) Rocky Mountain Artists/Eccentric Book Competition sponsored by the Hemingway Western Studies Center at Boise State University for his 15-postcard series "Citizens For A Poodle-Free Montana." His fiction, poetry, personal essays and editorial cartoons have appeared in numerous publications including the *North American Review*, *Northern Lights*, *Utne Reader*, *Kinesis*, *Prizm* and *Apalachee Quarterly*. He is an itinerant self-employed carpenter living in Seattle, Montana, New Mexico and Nashville.

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