

SCARCITY

Fiction by Ronald Kaiser

*The second short story from promising
Granite State author, Ronald Kaiser[1]*

Mudge had a pot belly and a fake tan that colored him carrot-orange. He had halitosis so pungent I sometimes stared at his yellow teeth when he talked, to see if his breath was actually visible, like a brown cloud. He liked to do his tight-assed swagger through our office, summoning the most self-satisfied smile he could possibly manage. When we were supposed to be on the phones "smiling and dialing," which was when people were most likely eating dinner—and therefore home—Mudge would stroll through and interrupt us by telling us of his glory days of sales, when he could sell a shit-popsicle to a white-gloved woman. We all knew what really happened to that shit-popsicle. Down the hatch.

When he was finished interfering with the productivity that he demanded of us, he'd turn his sights on our assistant manager, Rita. She was from Puerto Rico, and in only five years had worked her way up to manager. She'd be dutifully typing away, or calling leads herself, and Doug would swagger over: "So, Rita, that's quite a Mercedes out there. How'd you afford that, hmm?" And he'd wink at her, as if he was in on some perverse secret. But Rita would ignore him. So to save face he would act like he was actually interested in what she was doing.

He'd look over her shoulder and say, "Whatcha doing, Rita?" in a manner he thought was casual and offhand.

"I'm minding my own business, Doug. What are you doing?"

Doug would laugh, as if the joke was directed at someone other than him, then return to harassing us. "Well, troops, I know not everyone is happy about my requiring everyone to work an hour later every night this week. I'll tell you the exact same thing I tell my wife. I say, 'Honey, I know I've been working over 70 hours a week, but just wait till you see the check!' And so the check comes, and she says, 'Please, honey, work all you want!'"

Of course we all had a pretty good idea of what she was doing when Mr. Halitosis was at work.

Quinton sat at the desk next to me, a large black man my age with beautiful dreadlocks that terrified Mudge. Mudge flinched a little every time Quinton walked in the room.

Sometimes Mudge would make calls using my phone. Never Quinton's. He was scared of Quinton. Needless to say, after Mudge hung up my phone, the receiver smelled like microwaved cat shit. So when Quinton left his desk I'd unscrew my receiver and switch it with his. It never got him though. He sit down, and as soon as he laid his long fingers on that phone he'd freeze, and his nostrils would flare, and he'd laughingly say, "Switch them back, man. That is cold."

It was a hell of a commute, from Philadelphia to Plymouth, New Hampshire. Took about seven hours, more or less. There aren't too many goddamned things that can compel a man to drive that much. I would have driven that distance every day, rather than every weekend, if that's what it took. In New Hampshire was Kathleen.

Now you're probably going to think I'm pathetic, because Kathleen and I are just "friends," as in: Kathleen wants to be my pal and I want to tackle her like a caveman and guarantee the continuation of my bloodline. It wasn't always this way.

We met in a hiking class right before I graduated from college, dated for a month, and she stopped calling. Kathleen is 5'10" with long, fine, strawberry-blond hair so thick and beautiful she makes Nicole Kidman look like Telly Savalas. So when she ended our relationship with that dreaded incantation, "friends," I felt like someone had just fired a cannon ball directly into the center of my crotch.

Now, bear with me. After a few months of desperate stalking (is there any other kind?), my roommate happened to walk in on me while I was crying and crushing an empty milk jug with my hands.

He said, "Aw, Jesus! Look at you!"

I wiped my eyes with my t-shirt. "I know, I know, I'm pathetic. I'm just going crazy, is all. I can't stand the idea of her going out with other guys."

Now my roommate was a psychology major. He said, "Well Christ, you don't need to take it out on the poor milk jug. That's called projecting your anger."

"Well what the hell else can I do?"

"Move. Get the hell out of here. Otherwise you'll go nuts."

"Well I can't just give up on her."

"No. Listen. Did you ever hear that Madonna song, The Power of Goodbye?"

"I'm not gay, man. I just want this one girl."

"Shut up. Just listen. You need to prove to Kathleen that you don't need her."

"But I do!"

"Stop being pathetic. Of course you need her. But you need to give the appearance that you are independent and strong, not a milk-jug victimizing pussy."

"Hey!"

"I'm just saying. No offense, but I'm just saying. Look. You remember last week when we came home from Tappy's and passed out on the couch?"

"Yeah. We woke up at like four in the morning, and there was that documentary on. We were into it."

"Exactly! So you remember how the De Beers Diamond Corporation increased the value of diamonds by hoarding all the diamonds away, to increase their scarcity?"

"I see what you're getting at. That's genius, man. So I need to hoard myself away..."

"Well, yeah, I guess. Just get out of here, then send her emails or postcards or whatever, saying you're doing all kinds of cool, manly stuff, like rock climbing and snowboarding."

So that's how I got to Philly. Pathetic, huh? I managed to wait a month and a half before emailing Kathleen, and her only response back was her phone number, which I already knew, of course. She wanted me to call. Of course I couldn't let her know I was

driving up there exclusively to see her, since we were still technically just "friends." So I lied and said I was heading up to see my family.

So that's why at five p.m. Friday I shot right up 95 North, past the New Jersey Turnpike and its myriad billowing smokestacks and pinpoints of red light, and past the rest areas that are like shopping malls compared to the dinky New Hampshire rest areas, that usually feature a vending machine if you're lucky. Over the George Washington Bridge I went.

A caveat: never decide that you just can't hold it any longer, and try to pee in a cup when going over the George Washington Bridge if you're driving a standard. Even if it looks clear (the bridge, not your pee), there will invariably be a huge, honking traffic jam suddenly and without warning, and you will end up like me, forced to move your foot to shift into neutral, and spill the whole cup of warm piss in your lap, with the rest of it still spraying out all over the window and dash like a cartoon fire hose, screaming, "This is a catastrophe!"

I crashed and showered at my parents' house that night, and in the morning I killed time visiting my old friends. At eight I picked her up and we had a delicious dinner and a bottle of wine at the Common Man. She was radiant in her mantle of red and gold hair, iridescent blue eyes drawing out my will and my stratagem of scarcity like poison from a snake-bitten heart. At the end of the night I leaned in for a kiss, and she put up a hand.

"Just friends, right?"

So I drove home the next morning, consoled via cell phone by my sister. Time, she said. That's all it would take. The dam would have to hold a bit longer.

I returned to the life I found myself hating more by the day. Calling strangers, being told off, trying to sell people adjustable mortgages that I knew were bad news. So I stopped calling almost everybody in my lead pool, save the ones who requested to be contacted. People went online and entered their name and phone number into the Website and 20 or so banks call them day and night to get their business. At least those people wanted to be contacted, supposedly. Most of them were just plain frustrated by the time we got them on the phone. And after those leads got stale, too, I started pulling credit reports on Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, whaddaya know, they were in the system! Someone at Maleficial was obviously at least as bored as I was.

To make things worse, Mudge canned our poor manager, Rita. Funny thing was, he canned her for not locking the door to the office when she left that Wednesday night. But she wasn't the last one to leave. I left after her that night, and as I was pulling out I saw Mudge arrive in his gold Lincoln Navigator.

And I know I locked that door. But coward that I was, I didn't say a peep.

Rita knew I'd left after her, but she wasn't about to rat me out, and she wouldn't even let me talk to her about it. She packed up her cardboard boxes full of things and I never saw her again.

I found some reason to be in New Hampshire for the next four weekends. My parents, my sisters, my ass. I drove straight to Kathleen's apartment, hung out with her as "friends," and drove back either that night, or the next day. Mudge was making everybody work on Sundays. Since Rita was gone, he was temporary branch manager of our office, and he did less work than ever, near as I could tell.

It was a weekend in early December when I lost it. I couldn't take the shitty job, the friend bit with Kathleen, and cold, friendless Philadelphia. The weekend before, Kathleen had sat me down and told me she was afraid she was leading me on, and that she just wasn't ready, and she didn't know when she would be. And I, heart rotting, said, "Sure, sure, I understand."

Driving back to Philadelphia every weekend was like getting your ass kicked and then walking home. Hell, half the time I was closed-fist punching myself in the face going down the New Jersey Turnpike at four in the morning, just to stay awake.

So that first weekend in December I finally admitted to myself that Kathleen just wasn't for me. She was for somebody, oh was she ever. But just not me. I was born too late, or too early. I just couldn't make it work. The problem, of course, was that I was in love with her, and I've learned that when such a grave disparity exists between how two people feel about each other, it's bound to fail. There has to be balance.

So that weekend I headed back up to New Hampshire and got drunk as a skunk, just like in the old college days, in my old college town with my old roommate, Bill. We dented in the roof of my maroon 1999 Kia Sephia good that night, not wanting to risk a DUI by sleeping in the car. We slept on the car. Our old friend Scott slept on his car next to us, right in the middle of downtown Plymouth, New Hampshire. The only trouble the police gave us was for one of them to shine a flashlight at us at three am, look disgusted, and walk away.

For a gag we left quietly in the morning, pushing my car down the street in neutral till we were a way off so as to not wake Scott. He got sunburn sleeping on his roof till noon with no shirt on, and awoke to a Sunday marketplace bustling with gawking shoppers.

And so I passed the weekend in drunkenness and despair. It was nine o'clock Sunday night when my hangover had subsided enough to drive back to Philly. I'd done it. I'd spent a whole weekend in Plymouth and I hadn't even seen Kathleen. I knew it was over between us, but I still missed her voice. So I called her when I was hours away in Lowell, Massachusetts, heading south.

She had this to say: "What? You were in Plymouth all weekend, and you didn't even stop by to see me?"

"But, I mean, we're just friends, right? So what's it matter?"

"I... I've got to go to my study group. I'll talk to you later."

My mouth hung agape. What was that? Suddenly I mattered. Somehow I was aware I'd blown something, through sheer lack of patience. My dashboard clock read 9:13.

At 11:13 I was back in Plymouth, sitting on Kathleen's couch. This was it. Do or die, shit or get off the pot. My car was parked one street over, so she wouldn't know I was here. Stalking again, I guess. I waited in the dark.

Within ten minutes or so footsteps sounded outside the door. It opened, the light flicked on.

"Jesus!" She yelled, hand over heart, blue eyes starting.

I jumped up, and pinned her against the wall. Our foreheads touching, I said, "I don't care if you just want to be friends. I just needed to see you" Then I laid one on her, boy, like I'd never laid anything on anyone. Months of spent up frustrated love and

aggression infused that kiss. And when I pulled away she was crying. Okay, so was I. A little.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to scare..."

But she hit me, boy, with her whole body, slammed me backward and pinned me right on the couch with a pent-up kiss of her own.

We talked and cried for two hours, about how she didn't believe she'd ever settle down because her dad had left when she was 10. We laughed about how my parents had been married over 30 years, and how I don't know how to do anything but go for the long haul. Grudgingly I rose, and told her I had to get going. It was two a.m., and I had to be back in Philly for work at nine.

I nearly knocked myself out trying to stay awake while driving down the New Jersey Turnpike again, but this time I was laughing and crying while I did it.

That Monday, Quinton was laughing like hell cause I looked like the devil, having not slept, and I was deliriously happy. I didn't make a single phone call. I did pay a visit to our Website, though. The one that people use to sign up to have mortgage companies call them.

It turned out Quinton was leaving. He'd been accepted to law school out in Texas, and he was still burned about what happened to Rita. I looked around at that office. Mudge was sitting there with his face three inches from the computer screen. Playing solitaire, no doubt. Rita was gone, Quinton was going. I decided I was going too.

That Friday I packed my car and drove up the New Jersey Turnpike for the last time. I told Mudge I was quitting. It was only four o'clock, but it was my last day, so I said to hell with it. That was the last time I saw Quinton, his luxurious lion's mane of black dreads flowing left, then right as he smiled at my brazen exit. His would be next week. As I left I saw a young man my age in a suit coming through the door, with myriad suits behind him. Tonight was to be the Christmas party. The mandatory Christmas party, in which everyone in our district had to meet in our office to make phone calls to potential leads. Some party.

So as I was crossing onto the George Washington Bridge I rang up Quinton at the office. "Man, what the Hell did you do?" Said Quinton, in a hushed, incredulous voice.

"What do you mean?" I was trying to hold back a laugh.

"People keep calling up and asking for Sheetmuth Mudge."

"So?"

"So everyone's phones keep ringing, and everyone's asking for either Sheetmuth, or Sheetmouth, or Sheemouth. Finally I ask the lady, would you please spell the first name? And she says, 'S-H-I-T-M-O-U-T-H'. I said, man, that spells shitmouth! Everybody started cracking up, and Doug got all red-faced and stormed to his office out back. Man I know he's giving that pillow in his office hell right now. You know, the one I got him beating the shit out of when Rita burned him that one time."

"Yeah, I paid a little visit to that mortgage Website, Quinton, and put Mudge's name in there with a minor modification."

"But get this!" Quinton said. "Mudge is in deep shit! There's a couple HR guys here talking to him, and it turns out Rita filed a complaint. They're checking the video tapes

out back right now, to see if it really was Rita that left the doors unlocked that night. Man, I think Mudge is history.”

So here I stand on Kathleen’s doorstep, and I hope these flowers and this bottle of wine are enough.

Wish me luck.

[1] If you have a fictional piece and you would like to post on the Coffee Coaster, please send via email to Brian Wright. Mainly, I'm looking for short stories 1000-4000 words— with authenticity and feeling, humor, about them... and, if political, at least an implied peace-and-liberty edge. If your piece is posted, I will contact you for approval first; at this stage in the CC world, there is no remuneration but it will receive a full professional copyedit.

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