

René Houtrides

Senior Spring

It was a circle. Amelia was in love with Sam who was in love with Clifford who was in love with Jack who was in love with Amelia.

They were all twenty-two years old and afflicted with love, which manifested in them as a kind of permanent fuzzy low-level sliding nausea that increased whenever they were in the same room with the one they loved. For Amelia, this meant the presence of Sam—for Sam, Clifford—for Clifford, Jack—for Jack, Amelia. It was a miracle that none of them threw up. Each of them would have understood, though, if that had happened.

The house they had rented together abutted a lake, three miles from campus. The house was a big old thing, its wood darkened from age. At night they sat on the wide beat-up porch and watched the passing car lights turn the corner of the road. They talked, laughed, whispered, smoked pot, drank bad wine, gawked at one another, and felt nauseated. They all cherished their nausea—gorged on it—and yearned to be near the one they loved. There was joy to their desires, even though the permutations were all wrong.

Sometimes they played gin rummy on the porch, and the flap of shuffling cards would ruffle through the spring air.

Of course it was spring.

They would graduate next month.

Clifford would peek up from the cards he held, look at Jack, and think Jack resembled a Percheron, shaggy headed and thick in the neck, torso, and limbs. Jack was a football player, a man with power in each stride, but placid, and in possession of a deeply private smile. His football teammates had stopped teasing him for his gentleness after the first day in the locker room, when his only response to their jibes had been to turn his huge cranium slowly from side to side and murmur, “OK.”

Everyone liked Jack. He was as comfortable as a patched quilt, a hardworking modest competent student who planned a career at a bank, back home in Iowa, after graduation. Jack carried something of Iowa with him, like a slight faraway scent of a recently harvested field. His big Percheron heart missed his hometown. On days of perfect sparkling warm weather he would stand alone in the back meadow of the shared house in early morning and snuffle the wind, hoping to catch the smell of new hay.

Yes, everyone liked Jack. But Clifford *loved* Jack and was never able to say so. Clifford’s love for Jack was a vast undertow that

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had dragged him out to sea four years ago, the first week of freshman orientation.

Clifford was an athlete, too. Tennis, not football, was his sport. At 6'7" Clifford was a giraffe of a man, with the coloring to match—rusty haired and freckled. But his face lacked a giraffe's softness. Instead he always looked startled, as if he were in the process of plummeting from a great height and had been nose-diving that way ever since emerging from the womb. He was a falling ungulate with a knack for languages, the distant vowels and consonants and the eccentric architecture of foreign sentences clicked for him into patterns he could recognize and duplicate. He had started his major with a specialty in Mandarin but had switched to Japanese.

Percheron Jack knew, without being told, that giraffe Clifford loved him. Jack had held that information calmly from the very first time its truth had dawned on him, that morning when he caught Clifford staring at him over the breakfast eggs. Jack was always kind to Clifford. Jack was always kind to everyone.

The person Jack loved was roly-poly Amelia. He loved the flesh of her and her side-to-side big-hipped sway of a walk. She was a healthy juicy youthful roundness, strong and elastically muscled. If Amelia's body implied a talent for welcome, her gaze implied a talent for trust. She had a patient soul and a mind that swung readily toward mercy. Early on, Jack had seen Amelia at the instant she'd first touched a fledgling orphaned hawk. How she'd accepted the wild body. How unafraid she was of the feral strangeness of the being that lay trembling under her hand. Jack wanted his skin to be the skin Amelia touched, his heart beating beneath it. Jack loved Amelia so much that, in the presence of her ASPCA-rescue Chihuahua, he struggled against his fear of dogs. Amelia's minuscule neurasthenic vibrating skittering bug-eyed Chihuahua, sensing Jack's dread, terrorized the football player. There was the day that Amelia, after having gone onto the porch to have a leisurely careless cheerful chat with the mailman, re-entered the living room, and chuckled to see Jack's dense bulk sitting in a paralytic state on the sofa, watching *Days of Our Lives*, a show he detested. At some point during Amelia's porch gossip, the Chihuahua's glare had nailed Jack to the couch's back, and Jack had been too intimidated to get up and grab the TV remote.

Amelia didn't love Jack. He was her friend, an animal she would sometimes put a soothing chubby hand on. As part of her friendship, Amelia had introduced Jack to the music of Charlie Parker, and now Jack would lie in bed at night and listen to the jazz notes slip out the open window in the direction of Amelia's room on the other side of the house. For Jack, the sound of Parker's saxophone was the same as the feel of Amelia's sympathetic skin. It was like being

touched by the moon.

Amelia had one photograph taped to the wall of her room; it was of her and Sam. Amelia loved Sam, and she liked the photo especially because it showed Sam's ears, which were too big for him, as if they had been glued on from someone else's face. She would look at the photo, while pretending to study for an exam, and smile at how goofy Sam looked and at how much she wanted to look at him. Sam wasn't a Percheron or a giraffe. He was the kind of guy who would go from boy to boyish-looking-old-man without ever passing through the adult-male stage. Sam was short pale intelligent and frail of build. Gloomy and tense, he worried all the time. He often worried that he worried too much. Amelia wanted to rescue Sam. He was another kind of giant-eared Chihuahua.

The photo on Amelia's wall showed her and Sam sitting next to one another in a booth at the local pizza parlor. Underfed Sam. And Amelia, his plump opposite, her hair, as usual, in a tidy pre-Raphaelite wave that framed her broad face. Her ears were just the right size for her face. But neat hair and correctly sized ears were the only orderly traits Amelia had. Everything else about her was vague. Other than liking animals and knowing that she loved Sam, Amelia drew a blank on other ideas. What to do after college? How she wanted to spend her life? When it came to decisions about herself, Amelia was permanently imprecise.

Jack didn't mind Amelia's aimlessness; it reinforced his sense of her as a lunar creature. He had enough earth for both of them.

Sam didn't have any photos taped to the wall of his room. He particularly hated photos of himself; he was sensitive about how his ears looked attached to his delicate face. He fretted about his physique—too small. If he'd had any photo on his wall it would have been of Clifford, tall Clifford.

Amelia, Sam, Clifford, and Jack offered to do little things for one another.

For example, undersized Sam nervously helped Clifford (whom he loved) move a large captain's bed from one side of Clifford's room to the other. The bed was too heavy, really, for just two people, especially when one of them—Sam—was someone with anxious thin shaky stringy no-account muscles. When Sam lifted his end of the bed's weight, he felt a rib on his right side crack under the effort. Now Sam had a bothersome ache when he moved, in addition to the ever-present nausea he felt whenever he pictured how beautiful Clifford's giraffe thighs looked in tennis shorts.

After helping move the captain's bed:

Sam was in his room rubbing BenGay on his rib and thinking of Clifford, while . . .

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. . . Amelia was in her room, not-quite studying for a final in something or other and thinking about Sam, while . . .

. . . Clifford, who had no finals and had handed all his papers in early, propped his lean body up on his newly repositioned captain's bed and thumbed through his Japanese text, repeating, "Where is the library?" and "Can you recommend a hotel?" and "What's in the box?" and "Can you help me? I have broken my leg." Some phrases he was unlikely ever to need, such as the one on page 104, which read, "He often recites Goethe's poems admiringly." Clifford did practice saying, "I love you," in Japanese, adding the sound, "Jack," at the end, a name for which he knew no equivalent in any Asian language. Clifford even managed to construct a Japanese sentence that went, "Loving you makes me weak in the belly, Jack." He murmured the sentence like a prayer, while . . .

. . . Jack's horsey snore vibrated audibly down the full length of the house stairs. Jack was dreaming of Amelia. In Jack's dream, Amelia's body hovered like a balloon in the rays of a luscious lustrous round perfect moon.

The night before graduation, tall-as-a-tree Clifford stood on the porch and called up to the windows, "Jack! Amelia! Sam!" When they'd all gathered outside, he said, "Let's go. No talking." They obeyed, following Clifford's stretched shadow to the menacing murky ancient lake, where they all fumbled wordlessly into one wobbly green oversized canoe. Clifford extended his arms and paddled them into the center of the shimmering black lapping creepy body of water. No one spoke. Tight-faced bats flew around their heads, squeaking.

The four friends drifted silently for half an hour. Until Clifford, who sat in the stern, placed the paddle carefully on the canoe's sloshy floor, and reached out toward Jack, who was facing him. Jack bowed his equine skull, allowing Clifford to place a kiss in the center of Jack's brow. The kiss over, Clifford leaned back, waiting. Jack, in turn, swung his fetlock ankles around, so that he now faced Amelia. With one brown-haired mitt he grasped Amelia's right and then left palm, kissed each in a gallant gesture worthy of a fairy-tale prince, and peacefully let each hand fall. After a moment Amelia took her recently kissed hands and, rotating and tilting her body, embraced Sam where he sat in the bow of the canoe. Sam's face rested for a minute or two on the fullness of Amelia's breasts before he floundered ineptly to his feet and, relying on the steadying clutch of Amelia and then Jack, made his awkward way to the canoe's stern. Once there, Sam lowered himself to a sitting position on the soggy floor, his back cradled against Clifford's slender legs.

Then, in this configuration and with no words spoken, Clifford paddled

them all back to shore, where they returned, still silent, to their separate rooms.

The next day, immediately after graduation, the four sets of parents helped their specific children pack their specific belongings into station wagons and vans and U-hauls. Sam, Amelia, Clifford, and Jack were moved into the future.

Amelia and Clifford went to New York City where they remained friends and met every so often for dinner or a movie. Through an old connection of her father's, Amelia got an entry-level job in the financial office at the Metropolitan Opera. She hated it. The unbreathing numbers. Clifford immediately began collecting a very handsome salary as a translator for a multi-national corporation interested in opening up a market in Japan.

Sam, whose rib had completely healed, didn't move to New York. He drove instead to a tiny college in Indiana, where he'd been offered a position as a teaching assistant in the history department. It was likely that he would go on to receive his masters degree and doctorate within x number of years. He did not write to Amelia or Clifford or Jack, nor did he call. Not even when he was diagnosed with serious kidney disease. Not even when he went on dialysis. Not even when he received a kidney transplant. Not even when the new kidney was damaged during the transplant surgery, causing the doctors to up the anti-rejection medication. Not even when his liver enzymes skyrocketed. Not even while he waited to see if the transplanted kidney would cure itself. Not even when his flashy boyfriend was too busy to visit him in the hospital and called Sam only to complain. Not even when the boyfriend suggested that, upon being released from the hospital, Sam should travel back to their apartment on his own. "At least you could do that," the boyfriend said.

Jack had gone, as planned, directly from college to Iowa, taking all his Charlie Parker recordings with him. As expected, he took a bank job. He married a girl he'd known in high school. She drank a lot. Nine years later, Jack, who had divorced his alcoholic wife (fortunately no children), was visiting New York and looked Amelia up. She had been in several relationships that hadn't worked out, was glad to see Jack. They went out and had lots of fun and, when Jack went back to Iowa, Amelia went with him, moving into the immaculate nice house he owned on the edge of a yellow field, where the scent of hay was constant.

Sam, who now—despite his infirm body and his fragile kidney and his boyfriend vexations—had a PhD, wrote a book about Theodore Roosevelt. When the book became a best seller, Sam decided to break his extensive silence. He tracked down a contact number for Clifford, who was in Japan. Sam was picturing the grin that would

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cross Clifford's freckled face when he heard of Sam's success. But Clifford never got the phone call. He'd been killed a day earlier in a car accident on a Tokyo expressway. In the moment before the accident, Clifford, who had become fluent in Japanese, had been wondering if the Japanese language lacked a word for *risk*; he couldn't think of one. In the instant Clifford realized he was about to crash, his face wore its customary surprised wide-eyed open-mouthed expression. It had taken quite a while for the highway crew to extract Clifford's red-haired shattered giraffe body from the wreck of the compact Japanese car.

When Sam learned of the accident, via e-mail from Clifford's mother, he turned off his computer. The computer crackled when it shut down, as if it, too, had died. And then everything was quiet, while Sam sat there, at his desk, for a long time. Immobile. All his habitual worry gone out of him.

Clifford's body was flown back to New York. Amelia, Sam, and Jack went to the funeral together and clung to one another's hands.

Jack finally convinced Amelia to marry him. Sam attended the wedding. Amelia, who still loved Sam, still wanted to rescue him and his big elephant ears, tried not to think about him when she said, "I do," to Jack.

At the reception dinner, held in Jack and Amelia's house, some pasta sauce jumped from Amelia's fork and onto the pink front of her dress.

"Corn starch," Sam said. "Put cornstarch on it, and it won't stain. I'm sure they have some cornstarch in the kitchen. I'll go get some."

Sam went into the kitchen. It was full of frazzled caterers struggling with chicken wings, stuffed mushrooms, and something containing cabbage. The food staff didn't have cornstarch. They hadn't used any and didn't know where any might be. After all, it wasn't *their* kitchen. And, anyhow, Sam was in the way. After Sam had opened every cabinet and drawer in the kitchen and had bumped into every caterer and still hadn't located the cornstarch, one server brusquely suggested salt as an alternative. There was a big open carton of salt on the counter. Sam emerged from the kitchen with the carton. While Sam poured a lot of salt on and around the stain on Amelia's dress, Amelia looked at Sam's hands. They were so near her. In order to avoid focusing on Sam, Amelia concentrated on the sauce stain, which, she thought, had taken a final defined shape reminiscent of Portugal. But she couldn't be sure; she'd been so bad at geography. Sam apologized for the amount of salt that ended up on the floor and said, "I don't think it'll work. It's not cornstarch."

Later on in the wedding reception, when Sam was on the border of drunk, or actually drunk, someone came around with a video

camera, to interview the guests.

“Is there anything you’d like to tell the bride and groom on their wedding day?” the interviewer asked.

“Yes,” Sam said. “They’re out of cornstarch. I looked everywhere. Maybe they do have cornstarch, but it’s lost somewhere in the house. Someplace I didn’t look. I didn’t look in the bathroom for instance. The cornstarch is lost. I understand all about lost. It’s not like I’ve never been lost—on a night road, or in someone’s arms, or in myself.”

“Uh-oh,” said Jack, ushering Sam away from the video camera.

Although he probably shouldn’t have been driving, Sam headed back to the motel where he was staying. It had started to rain. Trucks on a wet road. He could hear their wheels’ papery spin in the distance. The whirr magnified as the trucks approached and then reversed itself as the trucks passed. On the curve that led into the motel parking lot, Sam glimpsed a wall of ivy rippling in the raining wind. He had the distinct impression that, during the drive, something in the damp air had introduced itself into his head, just behind his eyeballs. He got into his ugly motel room and wove around the furniture, thinking about Clifford, even though the Tokyo accident had happened three years ago. Sam lay on his back in the motel bed and wept, the tears rolling into his big ears. He decided he must have been right in thinking that the rain had somehow entered his brain and was now coming out of his eyes.

Post-wedding, Sam got annual Christmas cards from Jack and Amelia. They had adopted a yellow Chihuahua that played in the yellow meadow outside the nice house in Iowa. Yes—Sam, Jack, and Amelia stayed in touch. But it was never like that for them again, the way it was that spring of their senior year.

There were times they would all pause. Maybe . . .

. . . for Sam, when a morning drizzle trickled like a question mark down his windowpane, making him feel that he was drinking a big bowl of rainwater for breakfast, and reminding him of leaning, silently, against Clifford’s legs, as each pull of Clifford’s paddle moved the green canoe, in short surges—like a throbbing heart—toward the shore and the old house . . .

. . . or for Amelia when she happened to come across the photo of Sam eating pizza, and a memory returned, of his big-eared face resting on her breasts in the canoe . . .

. . . or for Jack when a Charlie Parker tune brought him back to that hushed night on the lake and made him realize, again, how much he had loved Amelia, even before they were married.

Once, without their being aware of it, the three of them thought

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of one another at exactly the same moment. It was in the middle of sleep. They awoke simultaneously, Jack and Amelia in the same bed, Sam miles away. In that instant, they were thrumming, all of them under clean sheets, to the same pitch. A single tone hummed along their nerve lines, snapping through their brains, signals crackling. A flipped switch, a surge of ancient wandering energy, had lit them up in a unity they could turn to no use.

In that awakening, Sam and Amelia and Jack, each recalled the habitual late dinners at the shoddy Chinese restaurant just off campus. The happy table where the three of them, and Clifford (about whom there was no more to know), lingered in the light and conversation—easy, even under the restaurant’s brutal fluorescent glare. In that triple awakening, they remembered how they once swam in their collection of voices, arms, lungs, in a way that was no longer possible for them, anywhere. Each of them, except Clifford, thought of how happy they had been when their hearts were oceans in which they floated, seasick.

On that night of awakening, Sam, who had broken up with his boyfriend and now lived alone, said into the dark room around him, “What was it like? Back then. Loving Clifford. It was like . . . like . . . I’m afraid I have no words for what it was like. I hold people. Even when I haven’t seen them for years and will never see them again. I don’t lose track of who they are. I’m a history professor. I study the past. Every book is open.”

On that night of awakening, Jack looked at Amelia, curled next to him in bed, the moonlight on her throat. Jack knew that Amelia still loved Sam. Love is for pouring, Jack thought. Love from the other person isn’t necessary. That is the beauty in sorrow. I pour my love for Amelia into a broken cup, and it pours out again.

On that night, Amelia awoke calling out a name. “Sam,” she said.

“I’m right here,” said Jack.

