

Matt Miller

Penelope, who unknowingly puts on my shirt

Rob has finally begun to make efforts at forming an adult relationship. I am proud of this, as if I am his father and not his best friend and the last remnant of a time in his life where his most important communication with the outside world was a tube sock on our dorm room door. Rob begins to date, like a real, adult person. Rob, who has slept with enough women to field an intramural soccer league, begins to feel feelings, and, despite how unmanly it might seem, I am proud.

Rob dates a woman named Rose, for almost a year. She becomes a common figure around the apartment that Rob and I still share, desperately holding onto the brink of adulthood, well into our thirties. She leaves accidental strands of long, red hair on the bathroom floor. She installs kiwi-scented body wash and a loofah in our shower. She has a kiddie-sized, hot-pink toothbrush that—Rob warns me—I'm not allowed to say anything about. One time she accidentally leaves her underwear on the back of the door in the bathroom. It is maroon, filled with lace, and smaller than I thought it would be, slightly crinkled by the worn elastic. I look at it curiously, deciding whether to leave it or not while I finish pooping.

Rose makes a spectacular exit from our lives after a five-day argument. The two of them talk-yell through the walls about *commitment* and *maturity* and how *she doesn't have time to waste while Rob decides if he wants to grow up or not. How could she ever even think about marriage if Rob can't even commit to renting an apartment together?!? Why does Rob still insist on living with his college roommate like an immature child?!?* Rob explains to her that *children can't go to college, so her metaphor is illogical*, and it doesn't go well after that. On a Tuesday, Rose packs up all her underwear and her polka-dot rain boots and her weirdly pink toothbrush and leaves us. She never comes back to reclaim her loofah. I throw it into the trash where it ends up being filled with leftover chili before getting thrown in the dumpster, never to be rubbed against anyone's privates ever again.

Rob laments for the rest of the week as I make sure our bathroom doesn't have any stray, red hairs in it. I call him in sick for work; I tell them that *he has the flu and can't even get out of bed*, which is almost not a lie. On Saturday morning, I manage to drag Rob out of the house, promising him tacos from Los Poblanos. We sit in the sun and drink cans of Tecaté while we wait. *Are you gonna be okay?* I ask. He doesn't say anything, not even a little bit. That night we go to Skip Cassidy's to play pool and forget about Rose and her freckles and blue

eyes and the maroon underwear that Rob will never see anymore. We sit at the corner of the bar and wait for the table to open up. I mull over the familiar grain of the slightly tacky wood while Rob downs a Corona and wipes a tear away. This is the only setting in which he will talk about feelings, always in thirty words or less. *I just thought that she wasn't the worst person in the world*, he says. *I didn't totally hate her*, he also says. I nod and sip beer in silent solidarity, like he has done so many times for me. When I get dumped, Rob, who hates the world, accidentally turns into a somewhat decent human being. He will call in sick for me at work, telling them that I have the flu, and then he will buy me a Tecaté at Los Poblanos. I am the only person he cares about, and, in return, I silently agree not to tell anyone.

I put our names on the pool table chalkboard, and before I get back he is talking to some super-beautiful girl. I recognize this technique. I recognize the surprise in her laugh, and the way she flips her hair. I take note of the way he over-tips the bartender and lets his hand rest just next to hers. Rob is having a very practiced, specific effect on her. They are like this for almost an hour. When it is our turn on the board I casually tap Rob's shoulder to see if he wants to play, but I already know the answer. He looks at me—purposefully blank—for only a second and then turns back to the immaculately gorgeous human being in front of him. I recognize this version of Rob immediately, as I have grown to know it over the years. He is going to fuck his way through this breakup, because he can.

I give him his space and proceed to the pool table where I immediately lose my first and only game to a beautiful pre-med student who has—I find out later—a very large boyfriend on a lacrosse scholarship. I manage to fake surprise as she reveals this fact to me, forcing my eyebrows up and my voice into a higher lilt. Rob and his conquest are gone, so I sit back down at our corner and drink Jameson until my tongue feels numb. It is beginning to get to me, the years of being alone. When I get home, there are pieces of clothes on the floor and two beers on the kitchen counter that are not quite warm. I can hear them laughing through the walls for a bit, and then it gets quiet. Outside it has just started snowing. I close my eyes and imagine myself sinking into the covers like I used to sink into the ball pit at Chuck-e-Cheese. I fall asleep to the memory of a child-like me, excited for shitty pizza and the great, plastic deep; the snow is turning me nostalgic.

The next morning, I drag myself into the kitchen—smelling like stale cigarettes—in search of coffee and clarity. I rub my eyes and shuffle to a stop on the cold tile; suddenly I see her, Penelope, who has unknowingly put on my shirt. Something inside of me flutters, but I push it right back down, deep. There is something about her that makes me unsettled; I am very worried that she just heard me pee. Penelope

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sees me and turns around, slightly embarrassed, pulling the plaid flannel down more to cover her bare legs. She giggles at its futility and apologizes, with a smile so bright my heart all but cracks open. I push it back down again. She most definitely heard me pee, and also fart. I am now mortified as I recall the loud, trumpeting fart I left in the bathroom. It is nice of her not to bring it up.

She confesses her tendency as an early riser and assumption that no one else would be awake. I confess the same. My shirt looks much different on her, the muted green and black pattern rests gently against her silhouette. I normally button all but the very top button, but she has left the top three buttons open and has rolled up the sleeves haphazardly. I always take the time to roll them up neatly, so it doesn't wrinkle. Now I see I have been doing it all wrong. The best way to wear this shirt is not to roll up the sleeves neatly and button all but the very top button. The best way to wear this shirt is to find the most beautiful, earnest, endearing woman in the world and then ask her to wear it for you. I can see that so clearly now. She apologizes for her appearance. If she only knew.

I am wearing an old pair of boxer shorts with a hole in the left thigh and a t-shirt that says, *It's okay, I'm with the band*. I am a mortified child. I awkwardly put on an apron and offer to make us some breakfast. She offers to make the coffee, and stands very close to me while I slice into a potato. She smells like summer; I can almost feel the warmth radiating through her skin. I force myself not to look down at her bare legs, not to look at the three strands of flyaway hair tickling the back of her neck, not to look at her wearing my shirt. I force myself to stare at the wall. I force myself.

I chop the potatoes and sauté them with onion and green peppers, like the New Jersey diners of my youth. She is from Ohio and has never seen this technique. I find myself speaking about my childhood Sunday hours and my family's love of the great greasy-spoon. I find myself speaking about my childhood. I find myself speaking. I don't understand how she is doing this to me. She smiles a clear, bright smile; I am suddenly worried. She makes me forget not to look at her legs and I—somehow—stare directly into her hazel eyes as I tell her about our visits to my grandmother in Morristown. I scramble our eggs and tell Penelope about how skinny my grandmother got after the chemo and how ashamed I was, even as a child, to be scared of what the leukemia was doing to her. I describe to her my memory of the big, sweaty, Greek man at her favorite diner. How he knew she liked sitting at the same table over and over again, year after year; how he always brought over a blanket to cover her legs in the winter. I butter our toast and tell her about the morning she died, and how he let my father and me sit in that very same booth and drink coffee

long after they were supposed to close. He was her baby. Across the counter, next to my empty plate, Penelope puts her hand on my arm. The late-morning light is cloudy in our kitchen and her touch gives me goosebumps. It almost makes me forget that she just fucked my best friend.

I am not in love with Penelope.

Rob stumbles out of his room about an hour after she leaves. The shadows from the kitchen window are already starting to get long. I ask him if he had fun last night, and he mumbles something about toast. I am greedy and cautious, but he doesn't say anything about her. She left the apartment still wearing my shirt. I couldn't bring myself to tell her.

I am not in love with Penelope.

Three more women spend the night at our apartment that week. I ask Rob if he is going to get rug-burn, and he tells me to *fuck off*. For some reason it hurts a little bit when he says it. Penelope meets us at the bar one night. She is terrible at pool but in a really adorable way. One time, when she leans over to line up a shot and I accidentally see down her shirt, I stand up immediately and walk over to the table that's holding my beer. I pretend to study a ripped poster of Joy Division that has hung in the same spot on the same wall for years. I close my eyes for a second, but the only thing I hear is the sound of her voice as she dances around the table, having made her first shot. I can picture the joy on her face as it lights up with a smile, as she lights up the room. Rob sips his beer quietly. One of the other girls who has seen the underside of his ceiling saunters up to us. I remember the sound of her orgasm, like a yipping dog. I couldn't drown it out with my pillow. I move over to the table so that Penelope doesn't feel alone, but she doesn't need me, not even a little bit. She sips her beer as if nothing is happening. Rob only keeps it up long enough to make sure that Penelope doesn't give a shit, then he sends the yipping girl away like a rejected trophy. I want to punch a hole in the wall; instead, I scratch on a bank shot and skulk off to the bar for a shot of Early Times. The yipping girl is on the hunt for somebody else. Rob has his hand in Penelope's back-left pocket, staking his claim. I leave without saying goodbye.

I am not in love with Penelope.

One night she brings a friend to the bar, and Rob not so subtly tells me that it is for my benefit. *She said that you were 'sensitive' or some shit*, Rob tells me. I tell him I think *that makes me sound like hand cream*. I already told him I didn't want her doing that. Rob shrugs and claps me on the back before leaving to replenish his Miller High Life. The friend's name is Ronnie, she is almost a veterinarian, and she works at an animal shelter. Penelope thinks she will like me. We talk about school and animals and the type of work she wants to do. She and I play a game of 9-ball and the next time I turn around Penelope and Rob are

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gone. I put Ronnie in a cab and walk home in the dark. That night I fall asleep pretending my sheets smell like Penelope. I am enveloped by her lavender perfume as I sink into the soft, dark, deep.

I am not in love with Penelope.

I don't see the yipping girl or any other of Rob's conquests in our apartment for at least nine months. Rob asks if *I'm going through a dry spell because he's worried that I'm going to sprain my wrist*. I tell him that *monogamy suits him*, and he tells me to *fuck off* but smiles. Something in my chest contracts. Penelope gets her hair cut short, as if she has discovered another way to torture me. She asks if we like it. Rob says, *It's alright*; I tell her it looks nice as I stare at the dirt under my fingernails. I can't look directly at her; it is embarrassing. Then Penelope and Rob tell me they want to move in together. My smile is deep and fake, and I wear it on top of my face until they both leave. Then I take my old baseball bat out to the alley and pound on the wall until the bat splinters apart at my feet. There is almost a hole in the brick. I ask our landlord if I can move into the one-bedroom upstairs, and he says alright. I put my mattress down on the bare floor. The high, plaster walls feel incredibly empty. Penelope and Rob move into the first floor of a house. She talks about getting a dog. Rob says he *doesn't want to clean up anyone else's shit*. She buys them a beagle named Tucker. I doggy-sit sometimes when they go out of town. Tucker sits in my lap on their couch while we both miss her, droopy-eyed and sad. He is the only one who understands.

I am not in love with Penelope.

George and Stacey come for a visit and announce that Stacey is pregnant. Penelope squeals with delight and hugs Stacey, who seems to be perfectly fine with growing a human. George and I shake hands and hug. Rob calls us *gay* and then also goes in for a hug. We are all in the living room, hugging each other, it feels like the end of our hilarious college sitcom. Penelope insists that we go out to celebrate. Her hair is getting long again. I think that it looks beautiful. Everyone grabs their coats and heads for Penelope's car. Rob asks me to hang back for a minute. Once the coast is clear he pulls a small, square box out of his jacket pocket, and I feel my lungs go cold. He shows me the ring that he bought her and says *he is going to ask her tonight*. I clap him on the back. Now there are two people in the world that he cares about. Rob asks her that night, in the almost blue light of the moon. I finish a bottle of Johnnie Red on my fire escape, knowing that she will say yes. I am almost cold in the mild and bitter-blue light. I throw the empty glass bottle into the alley. It shatters into a hundred-thousand pieces; the metaphor makes me feel juvenile. I teeter-totter, looking over the edge for a while. Then I put my fist through the kitchen window. It breaks my hand. I don't see anyone for a while.

I am not in love with Penelope.

Rob asks me to be his best man, and of course I say, *Yes*.

Penelope wants an April wedding; she is thinking of cherry blossoms in bloom. She asks to set me up with her old college roommate named Francie. She thinks that *Francie is hilarious*; she tells me as much, over brunch at their house. I tell Rob in private that I don't really want to, and he says that it's *best-man duties*. Francie is a bridesmaid, and Penelope's thinking of pairing us together. I ask him to get me out of it, but he won't. They want me to meet her at Tre Fratelli, Rob's go-to fancy Italian place. *They have little forks for salad*, he says. *Any place that has little forks for salad is guaranteed to at least get you a blowjob*. Penelope sing-songingly scolds him from the other room, *Ro-o-o-b*, she says. *What?* he counters, *it worked on you*. She laughs playfully and splashes dishwater on him while he goes in for a kiss. They are both wet. I feel a cold bout of nausea in the back of my throat. I can see it when I close my eyes: Penelope down on her knees pleasuring him. I squeeze my right hand up into a fist; I can still feel the lines where it fractured, slightly sore.

I get to the restaurant early, with my shirt tucked in. I am nervous, so I polish off two at the bar before she gets there. All I can think about is Penelope. Francie might be a very nice person, but I wouldn't know. I make it purposefully hard for her and I am also rude to our waitress. I can see, with such clarity, the bitter old man I am becoming. I tell her *I don't know why I'm here*, like they didn't tell me. When she tells me about her favorite art gallery, I tell her *I think that art is pointless*. When she tells me she used to swing dance, I tell her *I think swing dancing is stupid*. When she says, *the fettuccini alfredo looks SO yummy*, I say that she shouldn't order pasta with cream because of her figure. I am purposefully shitty. I have never wanted someone not to like me this much. I have never been so unlikable. Francie leaves before they ask about dessert. She goes home to call Penelope, crying. Rob is outside my apartment waiting for me. *What the fuck did you do to Francie?* he asks. *She's been on the phone with Penny for a half an hour*. Penny . . . I forgot that he calls her Penny. I tell him *I don't want to talk about it and that Francie can fuck off*. Rob lays in to me, so I sit there and take it, leaning against the cool brick of my building. He never gets pissed off at anyone; he must really love this girl . . . Penny. It is the first argument of our lives, Rob and me. It is the closest I get to telling him.

I am not in love with Penelope.

We smoke cigars and play poker for Rob's bachelor night. His brother flies in from Colorado and brings a bottle of Woodford Reserve. Rob and his brother and George and I all share a hotel suite. We smoke our cigars and play cards and drink bourbon until 3 or 4 in

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the morning and then slowly—one by one—they all fall down, dead asleep. Rob is the last to go, mumbling about how long we've been friends and how *it's gonna be weird to be married* while he sits on the couch, his legs slumped over the side. I watch his head go limp, take the bottle out of his hands, and throw a blanket over him. Then I walk quietly down the long, empty hallway. Penelope is in room 523. I walk slowly in the dark; I am in a daze. I mostly walk in a straight line and only need one of the walls for support. Suddenly, here it is in front of me, the small metal numbers that tell me she is on the other side of that door: 523. It is here sooner than I expected so I slink down onto the carpeted floor, to better study the numbers, to collect myself, to think of what I might say. I take the last swig of bourbon, it feels numb against my mouth; I have to turn the bottle all the way upside-down. I can see through it now. I can see through the door. I can see how she's sleeping soundly. I can see her waking up early and getting her hair done. I can see her putting on her grandmother's pearl earrings. I can see her in here with him tomorrow, exhausted and happy and beautiful. I can see her moving them into an actual house, one with a garage and a porch and the stuff that everyone has on a State Farm commercial. Rob unwraps all of the boxes because she is pregnant. I can see their new car and the car seat her baby is carried in. I can see Tucker getting old in their backyard. I can see Penelope play house with her beautiful twin girls and get painted with glittery makeup, her eyes alight with joy. It rolls by me in waves, over and over again. I see her do all of the things that I want her to do, but not with me. There is no version of this where she and I are together.

I am not in love with Penelope.

When I get back to our room I lay down on the floor and drift off into a deep, dark sleep. In my dream I am drowning in a bucket of tar. I am miniscule and entirely unseen, trying not to be a casualty. I am holding a large rock, trying to keep it out of the great, dark deep. The thick black tears at my lungs as it swallows me. I can feel it enveloping me, pouring in between my clothes, running into my ears, filling me up. I smell it burning my nostrils as it seeps into me, the rock still over my head. When I wake up, it is almost light outside. The room smells, just a little bit, like farts. I can taste the stale tobacco in my morning breath. Rob is snoring. For some reason I am cold. George is already taking a shit; we can hear him. He apologizes when he comes out but it doesn't help; it smells awful. Slowly, the four of us begin to piece ourselves together. Rob and I, as we have so many times before, slog through our hangover together. I lay four glasses out that may or may not have had bourbon in them the night before. I pour in some water and drop two tablets of Alka-Seltzer in each. The fizzing starts to make me feel better. George comes back from the lobby with a couple of

Gatorades. Rob's brother is still on the floor moaning like a baby. Rob and I shrug at each other; I guess it doesn't run in the family.

Rob and Penelope are getting married in her favorite park. I had them put up a gazebo. It stands in between two cherry blossom trees, her favorite. When she saw it she squealed with delight. I said *it was Rob's idea*, and he just stood there and took all the credit. Today it looks perfect in the early afternoon light; I had them put flowers in it. They are orchids, also Penelope's favorite. The wedding party takes pictures in a great big line. Penelope can't stop smiling, even when the photographer changes lenses. Afterward, George takes Rob's brother to go puke again; he really can't handle his bourbon. Rob's mom asks me to check on the catering and also on Rob, who has wandered off somewhere. The caterer says that everything is going fine, and I find Rob on the floor of the reception hall, alone. He tells me that *he can't do it*. In the left breast pocket of my tux, I have both of their rings; in my right pocket there is a piece of paper with his vows. This is the moment. I close my eyes and remember her sitting in our old kitchen, wearing my shirt.

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When it is Rob's turn to say his vows, he pauses and starts to cry. *I'm sorry*, he says. *I should have done this a long time ago*. I can hear her audible swoon, her eyes alight. He wipes his face, gives—sort of—a hiccup, and begins for real. I am standing behind him; I can see her the whole time. She is radiant. He reads the speech I wrote for him and she loves it. Of course she loves it. When they dance together at the reception everyone claps and smiles; then they clink their glasses and Rob and Penelope kiss, on the happiest day of their lives. She rests her hands, gently, on the back of his neck with a smile so bright my heart, finally, cracks open. I catch a sob in the middle of my throat as I duck out of the room. By the time I start to hyperventilate, I have made it upstairs. I throw open the door to an empty men's room as my sobs overtake me. It is too much. It is too much for me. I have finally lost her. I scream at myself and then take my frustration out on the cheap, brown aluminum of the bathroom stall door. I can feel the cracks in my right hand, where it was broken before. I pound over and over again until the door dents, until my hand starts to bleed, until the loose hinges break off and it tumbles to the floor. It feels good to hurt. It feels good to break my hand again, the knuckles red and swollen. I begin to regain control and decide, on the bathroom floor, that I have to leave. I have to leave her. I wrap my hand in cheap, scratchy paper towels. A little boy from the bar mitzvah next door wanders in, his hand-me-down jacket still too big. He looks at me, scared. *This is what it's like to be a man*.

I am in love with Penelope.



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Devon Balwit

Eclogue: A Golden Shovel

When everything I say to anyone all day long is bang.
—Bill Hicok

Loneliness presides like a grain silo in Kansas, tall when
nothing else is. I dump everything
but cannot find what I
clutched at dawn. *Locusts gnawed to the stalk*, I say,
a whole county of farmwives opening throats to
storm clouds. Anyone
can shatter. Harder is to burble a spring. All
follows the same fly-bitten haunch, day
after day, day after day, yoked in a long
march. My name is
Gone. The screen door follows with a bang.

Make Portland *Holy*

the bumper sticker says. I do a double-take
lean in to be sure. *Holy*, not *Weird*. I try
to pierce the mirrored glass to see the soul
so unafraid. *Take off your shoes. Where
you stand is Holy Ground*. Or, like Ezekiel,
suffer a lit coal to the tongue. I count
the seconds, smell my own scorch, ready
now to prophesy. I picture the murky rivers
ewered, lifting city to sky, paddleboats
of choirs, hands raised in halleluiahs, naked
bike riders ash-smudged. *Holy, Holy, Holy.*
Holy gentrification. *Holy* infill. *Holy* mezcal bar.
Holy vegan canine deli. I follow the bouncing
ball, slain by the spirit. I speak in tongues.

