

“The Man Who Loved Waitresses”

Failing to be there when a man wants her is a woman's greatest sin, except to be there when he doesn't want her.

Helen Rowland

When Fray Nolan got up to leave the bar, he asked the waitress her name out of habit. She said her name was Shirley, but everyone called her Greta.

"Why do they call you Greta?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Don't I look like a Greta to you?"

He looked carefully. About four inches above five feet, with a shock of blond hair, Greta/Shirley had the taut build of a former jock. Someone who had been a short bundle of muscle at one time, but now had gone just a bit to seed. Which, in her case, meant she could drink you under the table while dancing on it all night, then get up at 6AM and get in a 5 mile run before you even finished your first cup of coffee. She did, in fact, look more like a Greta.

Fray had been vaguely smitten with Greta all night (even before he knew her name), which meant he had snuck covert glances at her various body parts from the moment he and his friends had shown up in The Kenmark, a fratboy bar on Lincoln Avenue, and ordered their first round. By the time she dropped off the fourth round and turned back toward the bar, Fray was closely studying the shape of her ass. Clearly muscular, but not flat; round, but not oversized for her frame. Fray got to wondering if Shakespeare had ever crafted any iambic pentameter about a shapely behind. He sipped from his fourth martini and

realized he could only remember his lines from playing Mark Antony in college. “Thou bleeding piece of earth” didn't have the right flavor, so he ended up calling it a “nice ass”.

“Man, that’s a nice ass,” someone said into his ear. Fray turned around and got a full whiff of gin breath from his friend BitterMike Gustaitis . BitterMike and Caleb Gutlander had lost their rights to the pool table and were coming back to their drinks. Fray glanced around for another member of their group, Dan Kaegebein. But Keg had gone off to the bathroom a while back and gotten way - laid at the fozzball table by a brunette in a Cubs hat.

The four of them were part of a group of around ten guys, partaking in the religious ritual called “boy's night out”. They had started out at a restaurant up the street where they got beer and chicken wings, which were quickly followed by beer and an argument about where to go next, which evolved into smoking cigars and playing pool at their current location.

Also, beer.

Fray had cheerfully lost at pool, drank his fair share, and listened while various stories flew around the group. It was winter, so complaints about the Blackhawks and Bulls dominated the conversation, though since it was a boy’s night out, the topics of conversation also included strippers, fucking, and fighting, as well as sports. Fray tossed in his opinions randomly, like grenades over a wall, but he spent most of his time studying the waitress, which is how BitterMike had caught him.

A digital chirping broke Fray’s concentration as BitterMike helped him with the graduate ass studies. Instantly, he closed his eyes, knowing it was Mary calling. Fray debated letting the phone ring and claiming later that he had left it off or hadn't heard it ringing, but the last time he had told her that, he had still ended up sleeping in the living room on the futon. He had even been telling the

truth!

The phone shrilly harassed him again as he pulled it out of his leather coat. Keg and Caleb saw what he was doing and broke out laughing.

"Look out!" Caleb said. "Your leash is ringing, little doggie! Better talk to your owner!"

Fray flipped him off, then stuck a different finger in his ear and answered the phone.

"Where are you?" Mary demanded. "You said you'd be home early."

"It's not even midnight yet," Fray said.

There was a long silence.

"So are you coming home tonight at all? We're supposed to see the doctor tomorrow."

Fray sighed and dug in his heels.

After another five minutes of diatribe dancing, followed by the lame excuse salsa, Fray and Mary worked out that he was an unreliable jerk, that he would be home at some undecided time, and that they would still make it to the doctor's appointment no matter how hungover he was. It seemed a fair compromise.

When he hung up the cell phone and looked back up, BitterMike and Caleb had gathered Keg and the brunette back from the fozzball. The other three snapped their arms at him in unison and made whip-crack noises. *Whhht-tssssh!*
Whhht-tssssh!

"I am not whipped."

The other members of the modern Algonquin Table just laughed and toasted each other.

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Fray said to them.

Keg sniffed dramatically in Fray's direction and said, "I smell futon in your

future."

"Yeah, yeah, you smell how full of shit you are."

Whhht-tssssh! Whhht-tssssh!

"Oh, fuck off, all of you." Fray tried to use his body language to broadcast that they didn't bother him, but he knew they didn't buy his act. The four of them had been mocking each other's love lives for ten years, and it was currently Fray's turn. And if he hadn't told the other three exactly how awful things had gotten between him and Mary, well, so what? Even if they knew, they still wouldn't have let up. That was the deal. Walk it off, you fucking pussy. That doesn't hurt. Broken leg or broken heart, just rub some dirt on it, you whiny little bitch, and get back in the game.

The game between Fray and Mary Rittenmeyer had started with show tunes. Over two years ago, he had been at an audition for a new musical by the Big Baby Theater, one of the more successful small theaters around Chicago. Having worked on a previous show with Albert Jennings, the musical's creator, Fray had gone into the audition with a fair amount of confidence. And in fact, when Albert saw Fray waiting in the small lobby of the Big Baby (which was little more than a stage shoehorned into a bar space -- it was the bar that made the Big Baby Theater profitable) the songwriter had given Fray a big hug, and shouted, "Where have you been, you big idiot? I wrote one of the main parts for you!"

Fray had been a little embarrassed to admit that his phone had been turned off for the last two weeks while he waited for a check from his latest temp job to clear. And his discomfort increased when he saw all of the other men waiting in the lobby stare at him with expressions that could only be called bitter envy laced with burning hatred.

Still, it was better than not getting the part.

Plus, maybe being singled out by Albert would impress the tall, athletic-

looking woman with long black hair he had noticed waiting to audition. As Fray tried to figure out a way to approach her, he heard Albert say, "Come on back with me. I'll give you a script and a score and a tape, so you can get the hell out of here and start memorizing." All Fray could do was hope that the black-haired woman gave a hell of an audition, so he could get another chance to meet her.

At the time, he had been sharing loft space in Wicker Park with six other people, four of whom were an aspiring rock band. When the loft got too loud - which was most of the time -- he would go to one of the local bars for some peace and quiet.

That day was no different. Fray choose one of his regular bars at random, got a beer and settled in at the far end of the bar near the bathrooms where he could hum along with his Walkman and start learning songs without bothering people. At four o'clock, Fray vaguely noticed that the bar staff was changing over. His current beer was still half-full and not lukewarm yet, so it didn't really concern him.

After a bit, the new bartender walked over and asked him something. He shook his head, then realized the question didn't involve beer.

He looked up as he asked, "What did you say?", then was bitchslapped by coincidence.

"How's the memorizing going?" the black-haired woman from the audition asked. Then she introduced herself.

Fray was a big believer in signs and signals from the beyond, so he took this as an omen that he should ask this Mary Rittenmeyer out to dinner, at the very least. As they talked, he discovered that she was waiting for a callback. Fray made a note to call Albert and try to influence the audition process.

During dinner, they discovered they had both been hardcore theater geeks during high school. She came from a somewhat uptight middle-class family from

the Western suburbs, as opposed to his Region Rat upbringing. Fray was surprised to realize his own father sounded relaxed by comparison to Mary's, but then again, Fray's Dad had never been conservative about anything but appearances. Do drugs, drive drunk, fuck around, but don't get busted and don't get your name in the goddamn paper. By contrast, Mary's folks sounded concerned with both perception *and* reality.

Later that night, they ended up back at her place, due to basic privacy math. She only had two roommates, as opposed to his six, and a small bedroom of her own besides.

Fray was impressed by how smoothly they moved past the usually awkward, "which of us is going to start the kiss?" moment straight into the naked with saliva part. But then he started getting nervous. During foreplay, Fray always made a point of listening attentively to his partner for clues, but Mary was disturbingly quiet. So he instantly started questioning his performance. Too aggressive? Too slow? Or just wrong? Wrong tongue, wrong technique, just wrong, wrong, wrong. But as he kept at it, Mary didn't seem to have any problem grabbing him and showing him where to go, even if she didn't speak while doing it. And then he noticed an occasional quiet gasp.

So he tried to listen harder, at which point he realized that in between the gasps, Mary was humming. More than that, she seemed to be humming a particular tune. Fray wondered if she was trying to delay an orgasm, but he had never heard of a woman trying to do that.

When he entered her, the humming got louder and louder. And he realized that she wasn't just humming, she was humming a particular tune, a tune he couldn't quite recognize. And then the humming turned to actual words, actual quiet singing in syncopation with their mutual thrusts. Fray leaned in close, his ear right next to hers, and heard:

"What's the buzz, tell me what's a happening. What's the buzz, tell me what's a happening..."

Jesus Christ Superstar!

Fray's eyes sprang open in surprise. He'd been in that musical! Twice! Once as Jesus, even! He slackened off his pace, but Mary grabbed his ass and urged him on.

Now that he knew what to listen for, Fray heard the tunes change as the two of them changed rhythms, faster or slower. After a complete medley of Broadway's greatest hits, Fray could feel them both heading toward culmination. Mary started singing, almost panting, "The rain. In Spain. Is mainly on the plain. The rain. In Spain. Is mainly on the plain." But as they sped up, Fray was agog to hear her break into a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song.

"And such affairs as sorties and surprises I'm more wary at" -- faster and faster -- "When I know more of tactics than a novice in a nunnery" -- Fray felt all his muscles tensing uncontrollably -- "But still in matters vegetable, animal and mineral" -- there it went! -- "I am the very model of a modern Major *General* -- OH!"

Fray let go, and assumed Mary did, too. Her moaning seemed to say "sit down; sit down, stop rocking my boat." But it didn't seem to stop. Was, in fact, getting louder. He kept thrusting, curious as to what the hell was going on.

"Oh! Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

That *must* have been it. Fray felt a sense of real achievement. Somewhere, Lerner and Lowe were nodding in approval. Then, Mary said:

"Kay!"

Oh, no.

"Ell! Ay!"

Oh, come on.

"H! O! M! A!"

Fray felt Mary shudder one more time before she sang out, "Oklahomaaaaaaa," descending down the her vocal range to "ohhhhhh kaaaaaaaay..." and then they collapsed, kissing, into each other's arms.

The next morning, Fray called Albert and told him that he had coincidentally run into Mary, and her voice was "really excellent, it really grabs you."

It was another two weeks before Fray worked up the courage to ask about the showtunes. After blushing, Mary had told him that she had always been embarrassed to know people could hear her having sex.

"For a long time, I just tried to hold all the noises in. But I really like making noise. So my boyfriend in high school told me I should sing. I sang all the time anyway when I was in a show. That way, if people heard me, they still wouldn't know what was going on." She laughed. "My parents had no idea. One time after school, they came home early, and I was in my bedroom fucking my boyfriend. When I walked out of my bedroom, Dad told me what an *excellent* job I was going to do as Maria in *West Side Story*."

Mary got the part in Albert's musical, and Fray had imagined that no relationship in the world could be better than the one they had. His friends had always noted his tendency to romanticize the women he dated, but even Keg and BitterMike had admitted that Mary seemed to be pretty admirable. Caleb had been living in New York then, but he had met and liked Mary when Albert's musical had gone to New York for a two week off-Broadway showcase.

So with all three of his closest friends saying they liked Mary a great deal, the two of them found an apartment together and moved in, just as the musical ended its run.

So, without a production to keep Mary focused, Fray found out about her vicious bouts of depression, which he could do nothing to alleviate. And the screaming matches that set up weirdly vicious sex wore him down like spray from

a high-pressure hose. Then there were the crying jags, the uncontrollable fits of jealousy, the insomnia (partnered with pacing, stomping, smoking, and muttering), and she also showcased a distinctly disturbing giggle.

One time, two months into their blissful cohabitation, Fray had gone to lunch with two other temps from the law firm job he was on that month, and when he laughed at one of the other (female) temp's jokes, Mary had come charging out of nowhere, accusing him of making jokes about her behind her back. Later in the apartment, she had tearfully apologized, and they had gotten sweaty before he could find out what she had been thinking. That was one of the basic features of their relationship. Sex replaced answers.

At least the sex stayed good.

Then one night, as Fray was pounding away, he caught himself wondering:
Are the Cubs ever going to find an everyday third baseman?

He got through that night without mishap. But the next night, he found himself thinking, *I really haven't enjoyed a David Mamet play since Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. It unnerved him so much, he finally ended up claiming he had come, just so he could stop fucking and get some sleep.

The next morning, Fray finally asked Mary why she didn't get help, medication, something. She looked at him with a withering look.

"Because I don't want to alter myself. If I'm sad, then I'm sad. I'd rather be myself and be depressed instead of being artificially happy."

Fray gaped at her. "That is," he stammered, "Fucked. Up."

"It's real. If reality is fucked up, then so be it."

Fray thought about calling Caleb, Keg or BitterMike to talk about it, but it just felt too uncomfortable. Even so, he found some time alone to think about her dedication to true unhappiness. And decided it was completely fucking crazy. Worse, since he could feel her depression and anger starting to break him, he

slowly came to realize he had better move out and move on. He loved her, but that didn't mean he had to destroy himself. There was small voice telling him he was just bored. That he should stick it out like a man, like a real man, but he tried to ignore that. Walk it off, you whiny little bitch. Rub some dirt on it.

The very next night, as he fucked Mary and thought about some of the apartment listings he had seen in the Reader, he noticed a new song had entered the book. As he grinded away, he heard Mary singing a song from *South Pacific*. "I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair," he heard, "and send him on his way."

Can't wait, he told himself, and prepared appropriate exit lines.

Then a condom inconveniently broke.

And a period didn't come.

And all discussions of abortion got extremely nasty. He couldn't bring himself to leave Mary while she was pregnant with his kid, so they signed up for Lamaze class, found a good OB-GYN, and started to argue about getting married. At least the midnight singing selections got a bit more upbeat for awhile.

Eight months later, that was where he stood. Still unmarried, but with a son on the way (according to the ultrasound, anyway). Fray had gotten a cell phone, so in case of any emergency, he could be contacted wherever he was. But of course, as the arguments got more and more heated, the cell phone became a symbol of everything he didn't like about his life. He would find himself fiddling with it while he rode the El to rehearsals or to his current temp job, seeing how long he could bring himself to leave it off before guilt turned it back on. He would set it on desks and "accidentally" knock it off. Time after time, he would prepare his face to be upset about a broken phone, but the damn Nokia was too well-made. He busted the LCD display, but that was the extent of the damage he had passively inflicted.

His failure to arrange a fatal accident for the cell phone meant he continued to have arguments with Mary wherever he went, just like this latest one. After he hung up, he wallowed in an increasing pool of guilt -- *Whhht-tssssh!* not withstanding -- until he decided, a couple of minutes before midnight, that it was time for him to head out.

He waved at the blonde waitress, who he would soon know as Greta, or Shirley, but failed to get her attention. He stared at her ass again, wondering what she did when she wasn't waitressing. Every other person he knew who worked as a waitron, or bartender, was only doing it on their way to other things.

Pulling out his wallet, he went to settle up his part of the tab. Fray got up to the bar near the cash register, but the waitress had already moved off to collect cash from a few departing groups. He had a few minutes to fantasize. Her breasts fit the same pattern as her ass, rightly sized and nicely shaped. As he watched, she laughed at a joke a guy made as he handed over a stack of bills, and Fray noted how her eyes, normally round and wide, crinkled up to tiny slits.

When she got back to where he was, he decided he wanted to know what she did when she wasn't a waitress. He smiled at her, and she smiled back regretfully.

"Hey, my shift just ended. If you need another --"

"I wanted to settle up my part of the tab," Fray said.

She looked at him quizzically. "Why don't you just throw down some cash for your friends?"

Fray hadn't thought about it. That would have been a lot easier. "I guess," he said slowly, realizing it himself, "I wanted to talk to you before I left."

She looked at him, then leaned against the bar and said, "What did you want to talk about?"

"I just wanted to know what you wanted to do with your life," Fray said.

She stared at his face, and Fray knew he looked disturbingly earnest. Not desperate, he hoped. He needed to know this.

"I'm going to school," she finally admitted.

"For what?" he asked.

"I'm still deciding."

"Do you want to act? A lot of people want to act. A lot of people like to pretend to be someone else."

"No, not me. I used to dance, but I had to give it up."

"What kind of dancing?" Fray felt he was getting closer to what he needed. He didn't know what it was yet, but he felt it emerging.

"Ballet."

"I thought ballet dancers had to be taller," he said, inanely.

She rolled her eyes. "No. No, no, no. Have you ever seen the guys who dance ballet? They're all midgets. Plus, they have to lift the ballerinas over their heads a lot. Can you imagine how hard it would be to do that gracefully with a tall woman, if you're a shrimp?"

Fray couldn't imagine it at all, no. "Why did you quit?"

"My knees. I had trouble with my knees, so I had to stop dancing."

"You don't dance at all?"

"Not really."

"What do you do instead?"

She considered him again, then said, "Mostly I sit around my apartment, drink bourbon and read. Sometimes," she paused and looked around conspiratorially, "Sometimes, I watch Ally McBeal."

Fray laughed with her. Then he looked into her eyes for a long moment. The moment stretched, until she finally broke the stare and rubbed her cheek. "Is there something on my face?" she asked.

Fray decided not to ask her the question he wanted to ask. That was when he got up to leave the bar, and learned her name was Greta.

"You're right, you *do* look like a Greta." He took a deep breath. "Greta, would you like to get a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," Greta said.

Back at the table, Caleb Gutlander leaned over to Keg Kaegebein, who was kissing the brunette in the Cubs hat, and pointed at Fray leading Greta out of the bar.

"There he goes," Caleb said. "Into the Fray! Into the Fray!"

Keg laughed. Then he frowned. "Jesus, should he be doing that?" Then he looked at the table, and said, "Hey, he stiffed us!"

Outside on Lincoln Avenue, Fray hailed a cab. As he opened the door, he asked Greta, "Where do you know around here to get some coffee?"

She said, "I have coffee at my apartment."

He got in the cab. She gave the cabbie directions. They sat in silence for a couple of blocks, before she leaned over and whispered in Fray's ear, "It's a very nice night tonight, don't you think? Seems odd there's no one kissing me right now."

Fray kissed her.

A bit later, the cab stopped in front of an apartment building near the corner of Sheffield and Roscoe. Fray paid the cabbie, and the two of them got out.

"My apartment is in back," Greta said.

Fray's phone rang.

"Oh, fucking christ," he said.

"Who's calling you this late?" Greta asked. Then she waited while he answered the phone.

"Where are you?" Mary yelled into his ear.

"Why?"

"Because my water just broke, you asshole. Am I going to have to take a cab to the fucking hospital?"

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

He turned off the phone as Mary started yelling more questions. Greta was looking at him. He had expected suspicion, but she only looked vaguely curious. He started to talk, thinking about omens, but she held up a hand.

"Do I really need to know?" she asked.

Fray thought about it. "No, not need. But I have to go and do this thing."

Greta nodded. "Sure."

"But I need something first."

"What's that?"

"Your phone number. I *need* it."

Greta leaned back against her door, crossed her arms and looked down at the ground. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders, looked up and said, "Got a pen?"

It took Fray almost an half hour to get back to his apartment. He took the precaution of taking his ear plugs out of the case on his key ring and putting them in before he entered.

Between the yelling and the hustling down the stairs, they were in the car before Fray realized he was pretty drunk. He pulled out onto North Avenue and headed toward the Northwestern hospital complex over toward Water Tower Place. The rhythm of Mary's yelling changed as the contractions hit her, but she seemed to get relief by punching Fray's right shoulder as hard as she could. When he asked her to stop it, she started punching him in the ribs instead.

At the hospital, the nurse who helped him scrub up wrinkled her nose in disgust at the stench of beery cigar smoke.

"Lady, she wasn't due for another two weeks," Fray said. She just sniffed

disgustedly.

Mary was in labor for four hours. Objectively, Fray knew that wasn't anywhere near as long as it could have been, but it still seemed like an eternity as he coached her through her breathing, and she swung wildly at him every time he got within reach. One time, as he felt a righteous hangover kicking in, he leaned in close to the side of her head, and she tried to bite his ear. He snapped his head back, and smacked it into some pinging machine. After that, he made sure to keep out of teeth range.

When the kid finally popped, Fray saw a purple mess, covered in blood and a sickly yellow goo, and he thought he was going to vomit. As the baby started crying, the doctor announced, "It's a boy," and Mary said, "We already knew that, you dipshit! You did the ultrasound!" Then she wept as the nurse presented the baby to her. After staring at the baby through her tears for short while, while placenta issues were dealt with, Mary finally handed him over to Fray and promptly fell asleep.

Fray stared at his son, at his ugly purple face, while Mary was wheeled into the recovery room.

Finally, the nurse who had helped him scrub up before the delivery came back into the room and helped him put the kid in his crib. Apparently, she had changed her opinion of him in the intervening hours, because she offered him some aspirin and a glass of water. Fray thanked her, then asked for directions to the phones.

"You're going to call your parents already? That's nice of you."

"Something like that," Fray said.

The bank of payphones was empty at this early hour. Through the windows at the end of the hallway, Fray could see it was still dark outside. It was winter, and dawn was still a long way away.

The phone rang for a long while before Keg picked up with a blurry, "Who the fuck is this calling?"

"Keg, it's me. Is Caleb there?"

Keg still sounded drunk. "Sure, he crashed here. Did you think he was going to drive drunk back to Michigan City? Are you a moron? Hey, wait a second! You stiffed us!"

"Keg, Mary just had the kid."

Keg shut up, and put Caleb on his extra phone. When Fray was sure they were both listening, he told them, "If anyone asks, when Mary called me and said her water broke, I was with you guys. Caleb, you drank too much, and we had to find you a cab."

"Why do I have to be the one who drank too much?" Caleb argued.

"Shut up!" Fray yelled. "Just tell me you're going to say it!"

Keg and Caleb quickly agreed, and Fray let them go pass back out.

Then he reached into his wallet and pulled out the small piece of paper with Greta's number on it.

She picked up the phone after only one ring, and she sounded alert.

"Were you still up?" Fray asked, without identifying himself.

"Yes," she said. "But I usually stay awake until dawn. I work nights, you might remember."

"Yes. I have a question I have to ask --"

"I have one for you first," she interrupted.

"Okay," Fray said.

"Do you still love her?"

After a few moments, he said, "Probably. But that kind of shows how unimportant that kind of thing is, doesn't it? How really stupid it is."

He waited for her to respond. Finally, she said, "My."

Fray said, "I have a question of my own."

"Go ahead."

"When you sit in your apartment, and you drink bourbon, and you read, or sometimes watch TV, are you happy?"

"Happy?" she asked, then thought about it for a bit. "Well, not really. But I'm working on it."

They listened to each other breathe for awhile.

"I'll be right over," Fray said.