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Larry W. Adams

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The Things We Do For Love

Larry W. Adams

Honorable Mention Short Story (Tie)

I've been waiting for what seems like hours. I should have known he wouldn't come. After the way he treated Clarissa, I know he can't be trusted. He's probably laying up somewhere with one of his whores, both of them nearly drunk. To him, women are condiments, just something to add flavor in his life. He's not the first man to make a fool of me, though he's certainly done it better than anyone else. Maybe that's his problem, he's too good. He always wins his bets, and he's so good-looking every woman wants him.

John Goode is tall, about six-foot-four, and powerfully built. He weighs over 200 pounds. Smooth, hard muscle ripples under the distended skin, like a shirt worn too tight. His bushy blond hair and perpetual tan give him a beach bum look. I believe he's got the whitest, evenest teeth of any man alive. Nearly blinds you when he smiles, which he does all the time. He takes great pride in his body and his good looks. Too much pride if you ask me. That's why I know he's looking for trouble when he saunters across the bar to where Clarissa and I are sitting.

"You wanna dance?"

Clarissa jumps as if stung. She's sitting with her back to the room and doesn't see him coming.

"No!—I mean I don't guess so," she replies, flustered. The last thing Clarissa expects is John Goode to ask her to dance.

He looked at her quizzically, "You don't guess so! Don't you know?"

"Yes—I mean, can't you see I'm **with** someone, John Goode?"

I can tell Clarissa's sharp retort hints at more anger than she really feels. In fact, she is more than a little flattered.

"Sure, I got eyes, ain't I?" he says, "It's just one little innocent dance." Turning to me Goode challenges, "You don't mind, **do** you buddy?"

The bar we are in is small and seedy, the kind you find in almost every rural county. Round tables, like the ones we had in the high school cafeteria, dot the floor around the pool table with its glaring overhead light. The walls, covered with cheap paneling, have a greasy look, and there is an open space near the front of the building where couples shuffle and drag one another, clinging as if they have no strength of their own. The jukebox plays whatever is on the Hit Parade, as long as it's sad. But the long squat bar where we are sitting is the center of attention. Most of the customers crowd around it like pigs at a trough, though nearly all of the tables are empty. It is the kind of place where it is impossible to mind your own business, so what else could I say?

"Sure, go ahead, it's a free country," I answer.

"Thanks, Runt," comes his reply. "I **knew** you'd oblige."

John Goode and I went to high school together, along with just about everyone else here. He has never used my name when talking to or about me. Even though I'm five-ten, or maybe eleven, and weigh close to one-ninety, he has always called me "Runt." He used to take a perverse delight in pushing me around in front of a crowd, like that time near the end of the seventh grade he made it up with some of his buddies to depants me.

Goode went through the voice change, and all that stuff, early that year. I was a little late catching up. Goode used to make fun of my squeaky voice and say, "Oh! It's Runt! I thought it was somebody's sister," and other junk like that. He was always bragging in the locker room about the girls he **claimed** to get to "first base" with. He even said he made it with "older women," girls of sixteen and seventeen.

I always thought it was a bunch of crap.

They were waiting for me when I came out of the school building to catch the bus one afternoon. I kicked and screamed like a bobcat in a steel trap. Didn't do me any more good than it does a bobcat. A couple of his buddies held me, and Goode stripped my

underpants and jeans off with God and everybody watching. The whole process didn't take three minutes.

There I stood, buck naked from the waist down.

It seemed like it took a hundred years to turn, run through the double doors, and get to the boy's bathroom.

"What's going on in here?" roared Mr. James, the principal, as he came busting into the bathroom.

The crowd that had gathered around the stall I was hiding in, parted like the

Red Sea did for Moses to let Mr. James pass through.

I couldn't answer him. I was throwing up.

"What are you doin' in there, boy?" Mr. James was still yelling at the top of his lungs. "Come out of there right now!"

Somebody finally clued him in, and Mr. James called my mother to bring me some pants. Even now, though, seven years later, once in a while somebody makes a crack about keeping your pants on.

Goode always took great delight in bringing me pain and grief.

He stills does.

I really want to scream at him, "It ain't a free country! She's mine!" But Goode would just stomp me. Nothing, not even Clarissa, would suit him better.

"Why did you have to make a fool of him, John?" I hear Clarissa ask, after she thinks they are out of my range of hearing. The way they have to yell to be heard over the jukebox, I hear a lot more than I want to.

"Kicks!" replies Goode, as they begin a swaying shuffle. "Why do you call him Runt behind his back?"

"Aw John, I don't mean nuthin' by it, everybody calls him that," Clarissa says, blushing at the thought of her hypocrisy.

Tankersley is a small place, and you take what you can get, just like John Goode. Still, he shouldn't treat her like one of his whores. She's a good girl!

Aw, that's a lie, and I know it. She wants Goode like an alcoholic wants liquor. I could see it when he asked her to dance. I know Goode takes advantage of his good looks. He's just doing what comes natural.

Look at the way he saunters along, so high he can barely shuffle. He feels fine, but then why shouldn't he? He's been hugged up to a soft, warm, willing woman, while I've been sitting here long enough to get cold. Cold sober and cold enough to kill.

As he passes me, every detail is etched in silhouette by the bright moonlight. The frost sparkles as if someone has scattered crushed glass. Suddenly I'm freezing. Chilled to the bone. I slowly raise the twin barrels of the twelve gauge, praying he won't turn to see me, even as I pull the trigger.

The reverberating roar in the still night is much bigger than I expected. So is the hole in Goode's back. He's turning, grasping, fumbling for the pistol just under the edge of his coat. Without really thinking, I pull the other trigger. He stops his fumbling as recognition fades from his eyes.

As I stand beside the corpse, an icy anger grips me. I pick up the .44 he so desperately wanted to use, and care-

fully put two bullets through his head, smashing his once handsome features beyond recognition.

Goode's golden hair is turning a peculiar dark color. The change begins at the scalp and flows outward, like a bleached blond going too long between rinses. That same peculiar stain is racing out from beneath his body, while his lips are drawn back in a smiling rictus.

Goode was always smiling.

The dark mass that used to be his face just accents that grotesque grin, like a minstrel in blackface. He's still got the whitest teeth of any man I know. I don't believe the bullets nicked a single one.

I might have known Goode would get the last laugh. □