

A Connoisseur

By Rebecca Andem

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor LAUREN SCHMIDT writes... In "A Connoisseur," Rebecca Andem explores the darkest reaches of imagination and lust. The moment Gavin and Meena, a married couple, pick up a young, sexy, albeit stinky hippie hitchhiker, I could feel the friction in the car, like the cool blast of AC in the hot, Nevada air. With at times a wry and biting humor, Andem crafts the narrative tension with such subtlety, from the semi that rocks the car as it passes them on the highway, to Gavin's memory of the time his once sexually adventurous wife stood outside naked in the snow, as he grew hard watching from inside the house, to the various other blurry spaces between what is real and what is daydream and dark desire. When the rental car crashes, the narrator notes: "Even in an accident, [the hippie girl] looked like she was begging for it, her mouth open, blond hair clinging to her cracked lips, a wild look in her eyes.... [Gavin] could almost feel his palm skimming down the length of her thigh." The details of the story's resolution are spare and deftly chosen, caught, still, between reality and reverie, and readers, like "the noble stranger ready to play hero," will look on. What will readers see? "Gavin doesn't care," the narrator says. We will think what we want anyway.*

A good example of the wry humor I enjoyed in the story: "It always ruined it for him when a hot girl had one of those chirpy helium voices."

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language):

Even in an accident, she looked like she was begging for it, her mouth open, blond hair clinging to her cracked lips, a wild look in her eyes. God damn! He was just about to turn toward her. He could almost feel his palm skimming down the length of her thigh, but then she was all motion, backing up, turning, her legs flailing, one hand clawing at the door handle, the other still holding the knife.

A long-legged hallucination dissolving into the veil of heat.

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Gavin glanced in the rearview mirror. Now there was proof that driving beat flying any day, even if the proof might need a shower. Body odor pervaded the car despite the open windows the girl insisted on. Desert air and AC collided like a storm front. His skin prickled.

They'd picked her up on Route 80, somewhere in the middle of the salt flats, nothing but heat shimmering a hundred miles in every direction. From a distance the girl had seemed like a mirage, a wavering illusion perched on a duffel bag, a chimera in a tattered cowboy hat. Gavin, true to form, had noticed her legs first, long tanned legs that couldn't have been more than twenty years old. His wife, as usual, had run interference.

“Isn't hitchhiking illegal here?”

Gavin glanced at Meena. She was sulking now, ignoring the hitchhiker she'd advised against. The wind from the back windows whipped her hair across her face, and every time she scraped it back, the corners of her mouth etched downwards. She wasn't aging well. Gavin checked the mirror again. Generally speaking, he wasn't a connoisseur of the new hippie chicks. They were leaner than their predecessors, more yoga he assumed, but if this one was any indication, they were equally dedicated to burning their bras. Perky little thing. Namaste.

A semi rocked the car as it passed. In a space of time as fluid as lava, it blurred into the waves of heat. The atmosphere was hypnotic. Gavin pretended to check the side mirror. It was too soon to let his glance stray into the back seat again. He knew the weight of his wife's gaze, and he knew to avoid it. So when he heard her gasp, he didn't turn right away. Instead, he checked the speedometer, a reactive habit from years of marriage.

“Everything will be fine if everybody behaves.”

Gavin jerked his head toward the unexpected voice, closer now, right there between them. His skin pulsed. A nice husky voice. It always ruined it for him when a hot girl had one of those chirpy helium voices.

Like a scene out of movie, the sun glinted off the blade held against Meena's neck. Her sunglasses sat lopsided on her nose, and she was breathing hard. There must have been some sort of resistance. The girl's arms were wrapped around the headrest, her face pressed against Meena's. Gavin must have been daydreaming. A small part of his brain questioned if he still was.

“When we cross into Nevada, pull into the first casino you see.”

Gavin wondered if the girl had practiced that voice in front of a mirror. He grinned. “You want to gamble?” He'd been told he had a sexy grin.

“Do you?” The girl grabbed a handful of Meena's hair. Her cute little chin lifted toward him. She was a tough chick. A rough chick.

He licked his lips. “You remember that bet?” The girl looked puzzled, but Meena flinched. “When that French student was boarding with us?”

A squeak got stuck in Meena's throat.

“You owe me,” he said. “You never did follow through. Our *ménage*...”

“Gavin!” Meena closed her eyes. She was trembling. “Don't,” she begged. “Please. No.”

Of course, before they were married, Meena never said no. In fact, she'd been exceptionally good at saying yes. Back then she'd had a figure like a goddess, Parvati with her perfect globes. Gavin still had fantasies about his wife's breasts, which was a lot more than most men could claim. He still remembered the first time he saw her naked, back when he was teaching in Boulder. It was snowing that day, a Sunday afternoon in December, and he'd invited her over for mulled wine next to the fire. They were talking on the sofa, the intellectual foreplay

Gavin had perfected, but when she laughed suddenly, he had the overwhelming desire to see her playing in the snow, to watch those big soft flakes melt into that velvety brown skin. He asked her to stand outside on the patio, to remove her clothes, to raise her arms like a child. And she did, no questions. He had to hand it to her. Her gaze never wavered from his, and somehow, she managed not to shiver, although every inch of her was alert to the cold. He could sense it, just like he was alert to her even from inside the house, watching, his hand twitching for his cock, making himself wait, the perfect agony of it. For all his expertise on female flesh, Gavin had never seen anything so perfect. The breasts of a goddess, he remembered thinking.

“Mine,” he had whispered. “You’re going to be mine.”

“Gavin!”

The world lurched as Meena’s voice cut through his fantasy. They’d drifted off the road. A sign loomed in front of them advising drowsy drivers to pull over. Gavin blinked. *As if on cue*, he had time to think, but then the tires caught in the sand. The steering wheel spun through Gavin’s hand. He gripped it, yanked. The sideview mirror clipped the sign, and the metal thundered like a sound effect in a bad play. Gavin slammed on the brakes, and when they finally came to a stop, the car seemed to sink into the sand.

He glanced over his shoulder. The girl was splayed across the backseat, her long legs braced wide against the impact. The cowboy hat was crushed under her hip, and her shirt had slipped off her shoulder. Even in an accident, she looked like she was begging for it, her mouth open, blond hair clinging to her cracked lips, a wild look in her eyes. God damn! He was just about to turn toward her. He could almost feel his palm skimming down the length of her thigh, but then she was all motion, backing up, turning, her legs flailing, one hand clawing at the door handle, the other still holding the knife.

Gavin lunged toward her. He managed to grab her wrist, but she twisted and squirmed. Kicking and screaming, she spat at him. She cursed and growled. A wild little thing. Gavin was breathing hard, but when the toe of her boot caught him by the chin, he gasped. His teeth clattered. He lost his grip. Before he could even catch the hem of her skirt, she was scrambling out the door. He watched her plunge through the sand, awkward, pitched forward, but when she reached the verge, she found her footing on the solid road. She started running. A long-legged hallucination dissolving into the veil of heat.

The day splintered. Gavin reached for the knife, not comprehending at first. The blood. The girl had dropped it, and now the blood was staining the car's upholstery, a rental. Meena always insisted on renting a car for road trips. She said they shouldn't put too many miles on their car, but he knew that was just a pretense. She liked the feeling of anonymity the rental gave them, like they might be anybody driving down an unknown road. They might do anything. He did know her, after all. They'd been married eighteen years. Some might even say they were perfectly matched.

Gavin set the knife down on the console between them. Meena was leaning against the door. Her hair had fallen over her face, and Gavin reached to tuck it behind her ear. And yes, he knew she hated when he did that. Said it was patronizing, or cliché, like something he'd seen in a movie. Her hair dragged through the blood on her neck. It was a lot of blood. Too much, he knew. Of course, he knew. Her blouse was drenched in blood. The sunglasses still sat twisted on her face, one lens shattered, and Gavin pulled them off. Her gaze was nowhere.

Gavin pressed his cheek against hers, as if they were dancing at a faculty party, Meena insisting, like she always did after a few drinks, on a territorial display of affection. He slid his right hand to the small of her back where she most loved his touch, and with his left hand, he

reached inside her blouse. He could almost feel her breath catch, but he knew it was his own. He lifted her breast, the familiar weight of it, and oh God help him, he wanted to fuck her.

Soon enough someone would see them. A car would pull off the road with some noble stranger ready to play hero. They would run up, peer in the window. What they would see? Gavin didn't care. He had never cared. Let them think what they wanted. In the end he'd been dreaming about his wife. A man dreaming about his wife. That had to count for something.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story actually started as an exercise in a Writers Studio class. The prompt was to create a character who acted inappropriately in a dramatic situation. We were working from the inspiration of Tobias Wolff's classic story, "Bullet in the Brain." I had actually worked with the same prompt in an earlier class, and the resulting story, "The Crack," was published in Light and Dark Magazine. So I was excited to work with it again; however, when I came up with the idea of a man flirting inappropriately, I had no idea where it would go! That's what I love best about writing, when it taps into something subterranean and the characters come alive – especially when they're so far from yourself. Nothing creates theory of mind quite like the written story.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Rebecca Andem earned an MFA from the University of Southern Maine. She has a short story collection available on Wordrunner eChapbooks, and her work has appeared in literary journals such as *Upstreet*, *Burrow Press Review*, *Scapegoat Review*, *Petrichor Review*, and *Wilde Magazine*. For years she worked as a traveling English teacher in China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Russia. Now she lives in Tucson, Arizona, where she's an active member of the Writers Studio and Old Pueblo Playwrights.