

Marcia From o o o Minneapolis

By

Bennett Falk

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Bennett Falk's, "Marcia from Minneapolis," is a philosophical treatise within a short story and I am here for it.*

Have you ever sat down at a coffee shop and the Angel of Sexual Fulfillment not only sat down next to you, said she was going to offer you the oneness in the world that you were missing, that obtaining that knowledge was definitely going to be through having sex with you, and is so good at the Socratic method that she effectively convinces you that she is actually an angel?

Well, today is Nyland Noughton's day.

I enjoy a few things about this story.

There is a straightforward simplicity about the lines in this story that make the complex ideas Falk is dealing with more palatable. I've maybe touched Kant as a chapter or two, read Plato, read Aristotle, no Hegel – well, maybe like 10 years ago (?), and I couldn't probably tell you who Stuart Mill is a part from using context clues, but those are just some of the allusions being played with in this story. Impressively enough their connotations float nicely in the background and are not being forced upon the reader. You don't have to know these philosophers or their specific ideas to enjoy this story – it can only add more depth the more you'd like to apply.

Really at play here is a sort of etymological discussion of the beauty and the sublime within the nicely crafted lines of a short story. The hell if I am going to add weight to any of that discussion within the next 40 words, but I think that finely crafted stories work on multiple levels of engagement. I'll quote Kant from some version of a book he wrote that I don't feel like citing, "We must seek a ground external to ourselves for the beautiful of nature, but seek it for the sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought, which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature."

You figure that out and apply.

"Marcia from Minneapolis," is one of those stories that is just as entertaining as it is fulfilling.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

"I'll cut to the chase: I have been fucking for as long as there has been sex. There is no sexed thing *in the cosmos* that I have not fucked. Repeatedly. There is no sexual role I have not played. I have been male, female, everything in between, and sometimes all of them at once. I am versatile beyond your ability to imagine: top, bottom, slut, virgin, you name it. If necessary, I can even feign indifference."

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On a sunny Sunday afternoon in Berkeley, Nyland Noughton sat on a bench in the patio of his favorite cafe across the street from the university. He sipped fitfully at a large cappuccino on the small table to his right. Waiting for the caffeine to make itself felt, he leaned back against the cafe wall, closed his eyes, and let his mind wander.

"Is this spot taken? May I sit here?"

It was a pleasant enough voice and surprisingly close. A woman, whose approach he hadn't noticed, stood just to his left, her shadow falling over him. She indicated the other side of Nyland's table.

"Hm, what?" Nyland replied, "Oh. No, not taken. Yes, please have a seat."

He moved his cappuccino aside to make room for her teapot and cup, and as surreptitiously as possible, he studied her as she slid gracefully onto the bench.

She was a slender woman, younger than he; mid thirties, he guessed. Her face was strangely affectless. She peered at the world through plain, plastic-rimmed glasses that seemed immune to fashion. She wore a black skirt, cotton print sleeveless blouse, and "sensible" footwear: black, low-heeled, plain toe oxford shoes, no socks. Her dark hair was pinned up. She wore no jewelry and no makeup that he could discern; he was intrigued by her elegant neck, bare arms and smooth legs.

Impatient for a buzz, Nyland took another gulp of his coffee, now well on its way to being tepid. The newcomer fussed with her teapot. She poured a cup, took a sip, and sat back. She pulled a book out of the cloth bag that was slung over her shoulder, adjusted her glasses, and

began to page through it.

Something in her bag buzzed. She set her book aside, rummaged through the bag, and retrieved her phone. She looked at the incoming number and flipped the phone open.

"Despina, honey, what's up?..."

"...Well, I have a bit more work to get done before I come home. Dinner will be a little late."

Nyland took advantage of the tea drinker's distraction to notice the author and title of her book: Immanuel Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*. He smiled.

"Is all your homework done?" the tea drinker continued.

"Okay, yes, you can go to Myrtle's if her parents say it's okay, but please mind your manners and be home by seven..."

"I love you, too, sweetie. Thanks for calling. See you later. Bye-bye."

She snapped the phone shut, returned it to the bag, and resumed reading her book.

Two or three page turns later, she looked up and gave Nyland an inquisitive look.

"Excuse me," she said "Did you say something?"

Nyland did not recall having spoken.

"What? No. Did I?"

"I'm sure I heard you speak. Didn't you say 'Interesting selection'?"

"Oh, sorry, must have been thinking aloud. Didn't mean to speak."

"Well, frankly," the tea drinker ventured, "there's nothing particularly interesting about this rooibos tea."

Nyland was puzzled: "What?"

She indicated the teapot and cup: "Rooibos tea, that's the only 'selection' I've made recently. Never had it before, I enjoyed the name: *roo-i-boos*. I'm afraid that brewed up as tea, it doesn't live up to the name."

"Wouldn't know, I'm not really a tea drinker."

"So, what *were* you thinking about when you were thinking out loud?"

"Well, that, ah, book you're reading," Nyland acknowledged, "Hardly anyone reads philosophy any more, in public at least, and you have a German edition of one of Immanuel Kant's less well-known works: *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. It's an interesting choice."

"You think so? Really? Personally, I'd say even rooibos tea is more interesting than this book. Kant seems to have no natural affinity for either beauty or the sublime: the closest he can get is to observe one's (*his*, I presume) feelings in *response* to beauty or the sublime. It's all terribly oblique, don't you think?"

Something in the tea drinker's reply put Nyland on alert: "Are you with the university? Has the Dean of Humanities sent you?" he asked.

"The Dean of Humanities? No. Are you expecting someone from the Dean of Humanities?"

"Not expecting, exactly. Dreading, more like. The dean and I have never seen eye to eye, and he has been known to, well, send out spies to test faculty members, even those of us with tenure, for something he calls 'philosophical orthodoxy and moral probity.'"

"How very unpleasant for you," she replied. "But I can assure you that I am not with the university. And I certainly have better things to do than ferret out philosophical heretics and libertines."

Nyland could not quite set his suspicions aside: "Like read Immanuel Kant in German?"

"To be perfectly honest, I couldn't give two hoots about Immanuel Kant. I just picked out this book to create the opportunity for us to talk, and it succeeded. You see, there's something you really need to be aware of."

"You aren't here," Nyland ventured cautiously, "on behalf of any of my students, are you? I can't discuss grades."

"Oh, no, no, this has nothing to do with your work. It's a 'personal' matter, and I'd rather not broadcast it to the whole cafe. Could you lean closer to me? Please."

Still wary, he shifted toward her fighting a panicky feeling that her confidential message might be that his fly was unzipped. He tried without success to glance down at the front of his trousers.

"Even closer, if you don't mind; truly, this is not for anyone else to hear."

He shifted again and felt her leg pressing against his beneath the table.

"Very good, thank you," she said. "Now turn toward me. That's right."

She looked steadily into his eyes and whispered: "I am the Angel of Sexual Fulfillment."

"Pardon me?"

"I am the Angel of Sexual Fulfillment."

"*You* are the Angel of Sexual Fulfillment?"

"Precisely."

"Don't angels customarily have wings?"

"Wings? Really? Do you not know that angels can look like any damn thing they please? *If* you needed me to have wings (and *if* I wanted them), I'd have wings. But you don't need them, and honestly, wings have never been a good look for me."

"Ah. Well, just so. My apologies, I meant no offense. I don't recall ever having met an angel before."

"Indeed? Your, um, 'equanimity' is quite remarkable. Many of the people I encounter go all to pieces. Are you always so composed?"

"This is Berkeley. Odd things happen all the time here: just last week Hildegard von Bingen hit me up for five dollars to get a bratwurst from a hotdog vendor."

"Hildegard von Bingen? You do know she died in, like, 1179. And bratwurst? That's a pork sausage, the real Hildegard wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole. That woman was pulling

your leg."

"Probably. I'm sure she won't be the last."

He paused, expecting a reaction from her. There was none.

"I wasn't really aware," he ventured, "that there was an angel of, uh, 'sexual fulfillment.'"

Her expression turned suddenly fierce: "*Is*, damn it! Not '*was*', *is*!"

She took a deep breath to regain her composure:

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to scold. I may not be so well-known, but that's hardly your fault.

All anyone ever hears about are archangels, cherubim, seraphim, heavenly hosts and so forth.

However, there is also an angel of sexual fulfillment, and I am that angel."

Nyland's brow furrowed, "Does the Vatican know about you?"

"Oh, they know about me all right. The Vatican has had a secret subcommittee about me since the middle of the 16th century. They don't want *me* to be one of *their* angels. As if they had a say in the matter.

"They're pushing that whole abstinence, celibacy, fidelity thing. Anything else, they say, 'banalizes' sex. As if sexual fulfillment could *ever* be banal! As if anyone would *want* banal sex in the first place. So they pretend that I'm some kind of pagan concoction, Venus, Aphrodite, or what-have-you, and they imagine *I* should be grateful they haven't lumped me in with the Seven Deadly Sins. Bunch of jerks."

She took a breath, "You're not Catholic, are you?"

"Not me, I'm agnostic. More or less. Do you have a name?"

"Call me Marcia."

"Pleased to meet you, Marcia. My name is Nyland Noughton..."

"I know who you are, Nyland: Nyland Noughton, Ph.D., distinguished professor of philosophy. I read your book *Nearsighted Knowledge: The Epistemology of Myopia*. It's a classic."

"Thank you, that's very kind." Nyland began to relax. "Marcia, if it's not impertinent, may

I ask why you are, ah, announcing yourself to me?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, I have no wish to impugn your personal life, but I generally show up only where I am needed."

"I'm sure, and no doubt your devotion to duty is truly admirable, but, as you must know, I am already married."

"Nyland, I am the Angel of *Sexual Fulfillment*; *Marital Bliss* is another angel entirely."

"Ah, I see," said Nyland, not seeing. "And what is it, exactly, that I might need your help with?"

Marcia tilted her head to one side and looked at Nyland over her glasses

"Wait. Hold on. Wait just a minute. Are you offering me *sex*?"

"Not so loud, please. Technically, what I'm offering you is sexual *fulfillment*, though I will grant you that sex acts of one sort or another are the customary way to achieve it."

"You're offering me sex?"

"You expect something else from the Angel of Sexual Fulfillment? I suppose I could mow your lawn or do your dishes or whatever, but truly, I'm much better at sex."

"You're actually offering *me* sex?"

"Is that so hard to believe? Nyland, you really should work on your self-esteem."

"You do know soliciting is illegal, don't you?"

"And what? Someone will arrest me? Put me in jail? Do you have any idea how difficult it is to incarcerate a supernatural being?"

"But wait, weren't you just talking to your daughter? You have a family? Are you married?"

"Yes, I have a daughter, Despina. She lives with me and is a thoroughly normal teenager. She thinks my work is gross, but she's got a lot to learn. And no, I am not married. So you don't have to worry about Gabriel or whoever beating you up in a fit of jealous rage."

Nyland's equanimity was abandoning him: "Marcia, this is more than a little far-fetched for me. In the first place, I'm not sure I believe in supernatural beings of any kind, no offense. You certainly seem real enough, but how do I know you are who you say you are? Besides, I'm sorry to say it, but you don't exactly fit the image that 'angel of sexual fulfillment' first brings to mind."

Marcia bristled defensively: "Would you prefer that I look like a streetwalker? Or maybe you imagine your sexual fulfillment requires some kind of raving nymphomaniac? Perhaps you are looking for someone more, what, voluptuous? Someone less plain?"

"No, no, no. Not at all. But you see, I'm not really looking for anyone."

"I am not so certain of that. In the last fifteen or so minutes an even dozen women in this cafe have, as we say, 'piqued' your interest. If sex were a purely mental activity, you'd be Casanova, and I'd be the Angel of Wish Fulfillment with nothing more to do than keep your dreams supplied with sex fantasies.

"You seem to prefer younger women, but you aren't snobbish about age. You're admirably agnostic regarding ethnicity, body type, and hair color. You aren't fixated on any of the body parts that men traditionally fetishize. Very open-minded of you.

"However, you do seem to have an obsession with skin, some quaint idea about skin and intimacy. The closest you can get to a partner is to see, or better, to touch their skin: it is the boundary that separates you from them. You imagine the best you can do is to be familiar with that boundary because, you believe, you'll never know anything beyond it."

She gave an exasperated sigh: "As it happens, you're wrong about all that, and I can prove it. But wrong or not, it shapes your preferences. You are particularly fond of exposed legs, arms, necks, and the occasional shoulder. At this precise moment you are, hmmf, 'enchanted' with this spot on my sternum."

Her fingers fluttered midway between her throat and breasts over a smooth patch of exposed skin that had indeed caught Nyland's attention.

"In a sense, Nyland, you imagine yourself already intimate with any woman who shows off some skin. Whether she is aware of this intimacy or not. How lucky for you that it's a warm day and so much skin is on display. How lucky for me that I have perfect skin. I might not be able to hold your attention otherwise.

"Now, shall I catalog the women you've ogled here? I can describe them in great detail, and if you like, I could also explain why none of them can fulfill your 'desires' such as they are. "

"And what could you possibly know about *my* desires?"

"Well, for starters, they're, ah, misinformed."

Nyland shifted uneasily on the bench.

"Oh, calm down; you're a philosopher, you're supposed to understand these things. Desires are no different from any other kind of knowledge: they're just a story the rest of your body tells your brain. And *none* of what your body tells you is the *whole* story, so naturally it's easy to misinterpret."

"You sound like the undergraduates in Philosophy 101," Nyland replied.

"It never occurred to you that they might be right? Anyway, your desires are unfulfilled because the stories your body tells are incomplete. To reach fulfillment, you need to know things your body is not equipped to tell you."

"And you can teach me those things?"

"Yes. I can."

"Really? How would you do that? Divine revelation?"

"Oh, Nyland, you know as well as I do that there is no such thing as 'unmediated' knowledge. Everything you think you know is 'mediated' to you through your body. In effect, *all* your knowledge is carnal knowledge. That 'know-in-the-Biblical-sense' stuff is more accurate than most people realize: sex is knowledge, knowledge is sex. It's all the same thing.

"Then why aren't you the angel of epistemology?"

"I am that as well, actually. The official title is 'Angel of Knowledge.' The Powers That Be had some unfortunate budget overruns a while back, and in the reorg I was given the Knowledge portfolio. Sexual Fulfillment is usually an easier sell than Knowledge, so I lead with that."

"Right. And how is it, exactly, that you can teach me things my body isn't equipped for?"

"Well, Nyland, we are talking about sexual fulfillment: you and I will find some place agreeable and we will achieve fulfillment in the time-honored way. In plain English, I will fuck you."

"You will fuck me? You mean like with a dildo or something?"

"If you really think this is all about penetration, Nyland, you're worse off than I thought. If a strap-on is needed, I'm sure one will be available. But I doubt it will come to that. No, I just mean that I take the initiative, control the pace. I will fuck you."

"That's it? You fuck me (or whatever), and I'm 'fulfilled'?"

"Bingo."

"What about foreplay?"

"Nyland, in case you haven't noticed, we have been engaged in foreplay ever since you sneaked a peek at my *Beobachtungen*."

She smiled sweetly, "You've seen mine, now would you care to show me yours? It's only fair."

He sputtered: "But, wait, is there no, what, no relationship? No context?"

She fixed him with a serious stare: "Dr. Noughton, Nyland, I am offering you the sexual experience you're desperate for. Isn't that context enough? What more might you need? Do you want us to be better acquainted before we do it? I'd be happy to tell you my life story, it's very entertaining. But as it happens, I am immortal, so it's also very long, and we'd never get around to fucking."

"I'll cut to the chase: I have been fucking for as long as there has been sex. There is no

sexed thing *in the cosmos* that I have not fucked. Repeatedly. There is no sexual role I have not played. I have been male, female, everything in between, and sometimes all of them at once. I am versatile beyond your ability to imagine: top, bottom, slut, virgin, you name it. If necessary, I can even feign indifference."

"Is there much demand for that?"

"More than you might think. Don't change the subject. For all practical purposes, I am sexually omniscient. The mere memory of me fucking you will bring you more actual satisfaction than any earthbound partner could ever provide.

"Think about it this way: every gene in your body is there because somewhere along the line I fucked an ancestor of yours to get that gene passed along. And when I fuck you every cell in your body will recognize me and go into an ecstatic fit. When I fuck you the boundary between us will become, ah, indistinct, and in that moment my body will teach your body everything it needs to know."

"Like in the Bible? 'The two will become one flesh.' Isn't that a metaphor about marriage?"

"It's not about marriage, and it's not a metaphor. You and I will have a cognitive orgasm. You will learn with absolute clarity what you need, what you have to offer, and how to bridge the gap between them."

"Cognitive orgasm?"

"Cognitive orgasm. Google it."

Nyland paused to consider, and his credulity evaporated.

"This has 'Dean of Humanities' written all over it. It's entrapment. But I wasn't born yesterday, and it takes two to play that game. What if I don't want to fuck you, eh? What about that!?"

"I do the fucking, Nyland."

"All right, what if I don't want you to fuck me?"

Her expression grew stern. "Nyland, you need to understand that I work for a much higher power than the Dean of Humanities, and you would do well not to piss that power off."

She relaxed. "Hypothetically, of course, you *could* simply ignore me. Some people have (your precious Mr. Kant among them, apparently). I would finish my tea, pack up my book and leave, and you need never see me again. No hard feelings. But that would be a very shortsighted move on your part: the rest of your life would be unbearably frustrating. After all, this might be the only opportunity you'll ever have for real fulfillment."

"Hold on, are you saying you tried to fuck Immanuel Kant?"

"Oh, Kant is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Hegel, Descartes, Plato, Aristotle, John Stuart Mill. You name it, I've fucked 'em. Kant was a very tame encounter by present day standards, and I thought I'd gotten through to him. But you'd never know it from this damn book. And now he's dead, so I can't take a mulligan."

"Wait, you don't always succeed? Fulfillment is transient?"

"Fulfillment is *not* transient! And do *not* talk to me about success, you have no clue what might count as success."

Marcia leaned back against the cafe wall, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

"Once upon a time, this was an incredibly easy job. It was all about pushing novel combinations of genetic material into the future. Then you humans came along, and the simple physical satisfaction of propagating genetic material wasn't good enough for you. No, you had to get your great big brains involved, and now, God only knows why, sexual fulfillment is somehow hostage to your overactive imaginations. It's more work for me, but not without its rewards."

She opened her eyes and turned toward Nyland: "As it happens, I know you really do want me to fuck you. But, you're worried I might not be 'feminine' enough to get you erect. Hah! Even now you're wondering if I might not really be a cross-dressing boy. Maybe the novelty would make up for my apparent lack of conventional sex appeal. It *is* true, of course, that I am more than

capable of conjuring up any (any!) anatomical 'anomalies' that might be required. But remember, *I do the fucking*. And I am more than woman enough to make you hard “

"Oh."

"Yes."

Nyland exhaled.

"All right. And what do you expect in return for this experience? What makes you think I can afford to be sexually fulfilled?"

"Strictly speaking, you can't afford *not* to, and anyway, I don't need much."

"Ah, so there *is* a catch?"

"Oh, Nyland, nothing comes for free. But, *all* I want from you is consent, a modicum of attention, and maybe five bucks for a bratwurst. You have to believe in me enough to say 'yes', and I'd say you're already about 90% convinced."

"Believe in you? You mean like Tinker Bell and believing in fairies?"

She smiled "I assure you, I am a great deal more persuasive than Tinker Bell."

"And consequences? What consequences might there be?"

"Geez, are you this smooth with all the girls? Are you worried that I'll get pregnant? Maybe give birth to a little half-mortal, sex-crazed, boy or girl? Or possibly infect you with some exotic disease previously known only among sponges? Not technically impossible, I imagine, but laughably unlikely.

"No, the only consequence you really need to think about is this: how will you cope with getting what you want? Because that is precisely what I am offering you: the one thing you yourself have always wanted, never expected to get, and even doubted the existence of; the one thing that will make you you. You may find that it's not exactly as you imagined it, but you'll recognize it nonetheless.

"What will you be like when you've finally had that experience, when you discover that fulfillment is objectively real and not just some fantasy you play over and over again in your

head? What will you do when you don't have to spend your afternoons getting wired in this cafe pining away for the unattainable?

"Will you tell your wife? 'Honey, I met a woman in a cafe, and she fucked me, and I had an experience of oneness with every sexual being that ever existed, and she's gone now, and I'm sorry, but it was worth it'. Whose marriage is up to that? You could easily wind up divorced. Is that consequence enough for you? Or maybe you'll try to explain the experience to your friends. You'll talk and talk and talk, but they won't get it, can't get it, really. It can be a little isolating."

Nyland thought for a second. "So, my life changes, I risk a divorce, and my friends think I'm tiresome. Is that all? Any other long-term effects? Dependencies, addictions, that sort of thing?"

"Not very attached to your current circumstances, eh? Look, if you weren't already at least a little dependent, a little 'addicted', a little lacking in fulfillment, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. I'd be Marcia Mercoury from Minneapolis, that's what it says on my driver's license, the 13th woman to catch your eye this afternoon, a little too plain to inspire any genuine lust, the prim, embarrassed woman who blushed when she leaned over to warn you that your fly is unzipped."

"My fly is not unzipped... Is it?"

"Of course not, and I'm not blushing. But, you are, well, 'interested' in sexual fulfillment, and I am offering you a variety of carnal knowledge you can't get anywhere else.

"Besides, if you play your cards right, apart from your personal gratification, this just might rehabilitate your career: you could be a pioneer in the emerging field of *carnal epistemology*."

"And what? Maybe title my next book *Observations on the Feeling of Sexual Fulfillment*?"

"Don't press your luck. You *do* realize I could still just walk away and let you stew in your own juices, don't you?"

"And what about you? Do you get any pleasure out of this? Will you come when you fuck

me?"

She tilted her head, her eyes opened wide, staring straight into his, and her mouth blossomed into a lascivious grin wider than he thought possible. His cock stiffened and twitched.

"I certainly will. I never fail to come. And I promise we will both enjoy it when I do."

"And love? What if I fall in love with you?"

Her grin faded.

"Many do, or at least think they do. It never ends well. My work requires that I travel a lot, and humans, at least, are prone to jealousy. Eventually, of course, you'll die and I won't. It's not really a good foundation for a long-term attachment."

"Marcia, this is a lot to take in. Do you need an answer this instant? Can I have some more time? Can we meet again?"

"Nyland, caution is only an *imaginary* Virtue and should not be practiced to excess. You can trust me on this: the Virtue Sisters are my drinking buddies. After a few beers even *Temperance* scoffs at caution.

"However, this is not a busy week for me: my only projects are a colony of hermaphroditic barnacles who have lost the capacity for arousal, a bonobo with a compulsive masturbation problem, and you. Shall we say here, next Sunday, 1PM?"

She slipped the book back into her bag, slung the bag over her shoulder, levered herself off the bench and rounded the table to face him.

"By the way, if I were you, I'd be careful of the cappuccinos here. The hallucinogenic properties of caffeine are not well understood."

In one smooth motion she bent slightly forward, reached out with both hands and zipped his fly. She smiled and planted a light kiss in the center of his forehead.

"Now about that bratwurst, can you spare a five?"

Nyland fished a five dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to her.

“Thanks. See you next Sunday. Don't be late.”

He closed his eyes briefly to think of a reply. He opened them, and she was gone.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Even supernatural sex workers get the blues.*

AUTHOR BIO: Bennett Falk lives in Berkeley, California and is retired. He has degrees in philosophy, systematic theology, and philosophy of religion. His career was in software technical support. He wrote *The Internet Roadmap* (1991) and contributed a monthly column to the now-defunct *MicroTimes*.