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By Kimberley Moore

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... What Kimberley Moore does well in "Follow Through" is to show the insecurities of men and how fragile, paranoid, distorted, and important the acknowledgement, or lack thereof, of our subjectivities are to the fulfillment of our (not limited solely to men) identity.*

Jerry is a broken man whose only dreams are in the past, a past in which the only person who can venerate his truth denies. Therein lies the crux of this story. For years, Jerry has been ruminating on what happened to him in high school, and, in focusing on clearing his name (to friends, family, or his therapist) he has lost his present: his dreams, his love life, his work, his way. It is hard not to be both empathetic and disgusted by the dichotomy of aggressive jealousy and blindered blame on display throughout this piece, "Small talk with these people reveals no hint of deception unless my inclusion years ago was out of pity from the start and now it is effortless to pretend to like me."

How can such a person be both holier-than-thou and insecurely indignant? I will freely admit that I do not have much sympathy for Jerry, but I do carry some empathy for him.

The line that Moore walks between the two is finely tuned and finely awkward. She makes the home of her story within the space of social anxiety and holds you there reliving your most inelegant and life-forming moments until release and there is a talent in her ability to do so.

There is heart, tragedy, and a well-rounded knowledge about how the deep the insecurities of the mind project, outwardly, into our lives. With "Follow Through," Moore has created a narrative that shows as much tenacity as a writer as her characters do in determination.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language...)*

Small talk with these people reveals no hint of deception unless my inclusion years ago was out of pity from the start and now it is effortless to pretend to like me.

Why she is telling me she used to be thin, I don't understand. I remember her former appearance. I don't know where to look when she tells me everything she eats rents a condo in her ass.

I join the table, relieved that they don't expect drugs at the sight of me. They have photos of wives and babies, resort vacations, their boats, and large suburban properties in the city. Two of them made fortunes in gaming. The other two are doing residencies. It's the typical nerd revenge that we all know is karma.

Follow Through

Angie didn't ascend to France the way Jesus ascended to heaven, but that's the way I remember it. She had little in common with Jesus, neither the propaganda Son of God with a creamy complexion and white robes nor the real one. In our hometown, a girl leaving high school on scholarship to France was as unlikely as evading death and being sucked straight up into the clouds. Angie did that. The rest of us went to state universities and community colleges, abandoned our dreams in hopes of finding security. Tonight, I partially look forward to the reunion party Angie has arranged at her parents' cabin. Not whole-hearted enthusiasm. I've been sitting in my car for three minutes, keys still in the ignition. I could leave.

There she is, on the front porch, talking to her girlfriends. I can hear the cackling laughter from my car with the windows up. She was loud in high school, and her laugh hasn't changed. Very "ha-ha", as if she had mimicked it from reading instead of letting it roll from her lungs naturally. It's not fake, though. Her real laugh sounds fake. We talked about it once when I brought her home from school. She punched me in the arm, telling me not to make her paranoid about her laugh, and the punch traveled from my arm through my chest and moved south to give me a boner. At that age, any girl touching me for any reason could have had the same effect, so it

doesn't make Angie special. I don't know why I'm thinking about it now.

What I should remember about Angie was the last three weeks before she ascended to Paris, I somehow managed to fuck her twice without dating her. One night in my mother's Buick, she kissed me, unprecedented. I was shocked but ready. The hurried, backseat copulation, serenaded by Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*, seemed unreal to me at the time and for years later. Five days before she ascended, she pulled me into her bedroom for a repeat performance, ending quickly because her parents returned home early. I escaped through her bedroom window half-naked, knocking her collection of trophies to the floor and scraping bare skin against the twigs of a hedge while listening to her giggle. That was the last time I saw or heard her until now. It's been six years.

Dr. Etheridge didn't exactly tell me not to attend this party, but she didn't encourage me, either. I could still change my mind. If I go, there will be questions. Some people know I was engaged earlier this year, and now I'm not. I've rehearsed the explanation; it didn't work out. It's a simple truth that most people understand quickly and respond with an apology. A party is a small town; once I've told my story, it will spread quickly and the questions will stop. I can believe that if I want. They won't be like my mother, questioning me until I am faulted for the entire debacle. I never follow through with anything, my mother reminds me every time I see her. That's why my life is going nowhere.

I shouldn't think about that now. I always do this. I'm a downer. A human barbiturate without the euphoria, my ex said. Tonight is about catching up with old friends, not just Angie, and, logically, we have all changed. There is no need to tell them how the last six years have been shit. At least, I'm not like Tommy, who still thought high school was phenomenal as of three years ago when I ran into him at a bar. I have the pride of consistency—high school was

shit, and the past six years have also been shit.

If I restart the car and leave, this party will be another something I didn't follow through with. I commit to one hour and I exit my car into the humid night air. Past the row of pine trees, I am visible to her. She screams, jumps off the porch, and runs to me. I brace myself when she prepares to jump on me, arms and legs wrapped around me. I stumble but hold her.

“My God! It's you, Jerry! Look at you!” She's holding my face in her hands, a grin stretched across her face. “You're all grown up! Oh, I missed you!” She slides down my body but her arms are locked around my neck.

“I missed you, too. So good to see you, Angie.” Her body fits against me differently than I remember. We're both a little larger. Her breasts are a little lower. Her face looks more angled. She has lost a layer of softness.

Sentimentality isn't what I'm known for, but when she releases me and looks into my eyes, I realize I wasn't saying I missed her because she said it first. It seems natural to lean in and kiss her lips once for old time's sake. I move toward her. Her face drops and turns. Her smile is gone for a long second. I don't want to react, but my balance falters like I've dropped quickly in an elevator.

“Come in,” she says. “Everybody's here.”

She holds my hand for a few steps. My hand gets dropped, too. I know I'll replay the last ten seconds of my life for years wondering what I did wrong. I committed to an hour, but I'm willing to half that now. I'm sub-human walking up the porch stairs behind her. Her girlfriends touch me here and there, out of pity, I suppose. Two of them hold imaginary joints to their lips. I have to disappoint them, too. When my pothead uncle died, my supply disappeared. Maybe I was only invited because they expected me to bring weed.

Do I remember Beverly, Katie, Jack, Greg, Sasha, Mal, and Jojo? Of course. I won't attempt to kiss any of them, though, in case they've considered me disgusting and reeking of unworthiness all my life. I hope I'm being ridiculous. Small talk with these people reveals no hint of deception unless my inclusion years ago was out of pity from the start and now it is effortless to pretend to like me.

"You're still thin," Sasha says to me. She used to be thin, she continues, before the twins were born. Why she is telling me she used to be thin, I don't understand. I remember her former appearance. I don't know where to look when she tells me everything she eats rents a condo in her ass. She shows me photos of her babies. "There's the jackass father. I don't know what I was thinking."

"We've all been there." I don't bother showing her a photo of my ex. "It didn't work out."

Sasha grimaces. "I'm so sorry."

I shrug. "Back at you." I hope I've explained enough to guarantee no one else will ask questions. Sasha rehashes her divorce to a lazy slob who expected her to do everything necessary to sustain their lives. Her eyes are animated with fury, but her lips smile when she takes a moment to breathe. She does that because we're at a party, the way I'm smiling at her with sympathy when I'm really still confused why Angie dodged my innocent kiss.

Sasha is interrupted by Deshawn. He sneaks up behind her and covers her eyes, but she knows his voice and now they are reminiscing. Deshawn frowns because I've arrived without marijuana, and now I may as well go fuck myself. I have nothing against Deshawn, but we weren't close in high school. Anyway, like Sasha, he is fat now, so they can lament or celebrate their extra pounds while I find some alcohol.

The bar is juvenile as if it is a high school kegger. Even the liquor selection is domestic and mediocre. Being Angie's party, and since she has been living in Europe for so long, I expect something better than plastic cups and cheap beer.

"Not at all pretentious," Steve says as he retrieves a beer.

"That's what I was thinking."

While Steve is telling me about his adventures operating his uncle's trucking company, I wonder if this party's lack of finesse is intentional. This is all Angie believes we are capable of appreciating. Sure, she wants to see us again, to remind her of how she has progressed. We are all losers. She didn't want to kiss a loser. It might contaminate her.

I hear her laughing in the next room. Of course, I'm insulted. However, she is outnumbered here by her loser friends, and by the end of the night, everyone will see her for what she is. She's a snob. Steve must already suspect it.

"What are you doing these days, Jerry?" Steve is better at looking interested in my sell-out to the accounting degree my parents wanted me to get than I was in his business inheritance. He's watching my face and nodding. When I stop talking and start drinking again, he smiles. "I thought you wanted to be a music journalist. Wasn't that you?"

"I also wanted to be an astronaut in the first grade. Things changed."

"Good point, Jerry." He pats my shoulder, and again, Deshawn shows up with Sasha and another girl who has blimped out since high school. I'm still standing with them, but the circle begins to close and I'm outside the circle. If I'd brought weed, gained sixty pounds, or become a music journalist, perhaps I would be included. As it is, I'm looking at the back of Steve's head. No one notices my awkward exclusion.

Who the hell is Steve to judge me for not becoming a music critic? We're both bean-

counters, and he knows it. My beans are digits, his beans are trucks. This hierarchical bullshit was supposed to end six years ago, but I've been un-kissed and uncircled within fifteen minutes of my arrival.

I follow Angie's laughter. Perhaps I should talk to her again. Get more clues.

I'm too late. The front door opens and Tommy walks in alone. He opens his arms and Angie gallops to him and leaps, the way she did with me before she rejected me. One of his hands is gripping her ass to hold her, which seems inappropriate here. My hands were around her waist, the way normal people achieve this position. She is screaming for him as she did for me. She slides down his body, says something sweet to him. I wait. Tommy is going to feel her cold denial any second now. Next, he'll complain about the low-quality alcohol, and later, we can share our confusion and misery.

Tommy kisses Angie. Not just once. He enjoys two, both times smiling and enthusiastically studying her face. "God, I've missed you!"

I have to get out of this room.

The back deck that overlooks a steep drop to the lake has been claimed by the smokers and guys who would rather piss into the abyss than wait for one of the bathrooms. I recognize some of these people. Four guys seated at a picnic table smoking were the outcasts until senior year, living in a fantasy world of science fiction and mythology games. Approaching them, I expect to see them swapping cards, but they are empty-handed except for their plastic cups of beer and cigarettes.

"Jerry! How've you been?"

I join the table, relieved that they don't expect drugs at the sight of me. They have photos of wives and babies, resort vacations, their boats, and large suburban properties in the city. Two of them made fortunes in gaming. The other two are doing residencies. It's the typical nerd revenge that we all know is karma.

"I thought you'd be on tour buses and auditioning groupies by now," Daryl says when I admit that I'm an accountant. "You were always saying you'd tour with the best of them."

"Didn't work out," I say. "I had real-world bills."

"You used to say all kinds of shit, though," Billy adds. No one gets it at first, then the chuckling begins, circling the table in contagion.

"What?" I ask. My face is already heating. I put my empty plastic cup on the table and wait for an explanation.

"Remember that time you told everybody you screwed Angie?"

Now, they're all laughing.

"I did," I say.

The laughter intensifies.

"Twice," I tell them. "Once in my mom's car, and once in her room, a week before she left for France."

"I'm surprised you can remember the details of the original story. You always were hilarious," Daryl says. He offers me a cigarette.

"What is so hard to believe about it? It happened!"

"Jerry, give up, man. She denied it and laughed her ass off."

"When?"

"Back then, when you told us."

“You weren’t supposed to tell her, for one,” I say.

“Obviously, but we had to check your story out. Shit like that doesn’t happen.”

“Shit like what?”

“Angie with you? No way in hell. Also, remember her mother? She wouldn’t let Angie do anything but study.”

Around the table, there is a consensus that I’m a liar. They’ve thought of me as a liar for six years. Now, I’m a liar and a failure for not becoming a rock critic. “You can all go fuck yourselves because it happened. She’s the liar.”

Daryl is still laughing, but the rest calm themselves.

“It was a long time ago,” Billy says. “Forget it. I hate remembering high school.”

None of them look at me. I’m a pariah. All I’ve done is tell the truth.

I look out at the lake from the side deck questioning myself while I drink a mix of vodka and Sprite that Deshawn gave me. Maybe I’m delusional about Angie, but I have full memories of both occasions. I search them for clues. She had wanted me, both times. It made sense that she might deny it when a bunch of immature boys asked her, but when combined with her refusal to kiss me, it is all I can think about. Not that either event was a pinnacle of anything, being high school sex and both of us lacking skill and confidence. Even so, I remember in detail the feeling of our bodies pushing together in desperation, the heat, the wetness, the way everything around us throbbed for a few minutes.

With a few deep breaths, I remember the peace of Dr. Etheridge’s office. She would remind me of what she believes is the truth—I have nothing to prove to anyone and no one has

anything solved at the age of twenty-five. My next visit with her, however, will prove to her I've regressed. We had been dealing with my failed engagement, and now we'll be returning to my high school insecurities. It shouldn't matter anymore. In all fairness, I can't blame Angie for lying when I was immature to tell my friends. I take the blame for that much. I pour the rest of my drink over the deck. Perhaps I should leave.

Leaving won't be easy. My car is blocked in. I'm looking at my car when I'm tapped on the shoulder.

"Jerry! Good to see you, man!" It's Tommy, who was worthy of being kissed. Twice. All I want to know is if he also screwed Angie, but I remember that I'm letting that go. It doesn't matter. I tell myself while I shake his hand over and over that it doesn't matter.

"You haven't changed at all," I tell him. Not everyone would take a lack of change as a compliment, but Tommy never wanted to leave high school. He never stopped talking about it the last time I spoke to him, being an ex-jock.

"Was it four years ago I saw you?" he asks.

I'm looking at his lips. Maybe mine are deformed and I've never noticed. Or I have chronic halitosis and no one ever told me. The entire time Angie was squirming under me while *Whole Lotta Love* blared through the speakers, she was trying to avoid breathing my rotting corpse breath. "About that, I think. I didn't remember you and Angie being so close."

He appears to be thinking, then he takes a swig of beer from his plastic cup. "Senior year, we took calculus together. There were only five of us in that class and we bonded. It was tough."

"Shared trauma?"

He chuckles. "Right. All that stress and I've never used calculus. It's not very useful installing floors."

“She never used it, either. Not a lot of ambassadors need advanced math.”

Again, he laughs. “You have to be happy for her, though. Her parents were so strict. It’s a wonder she can function at all. I remember her being stressed out all the time.”

I should walk away now. I shouldn’t say another word. Yes, I remember her prison warden parents and her creased forehead if anyone mentioned GPA. I also remember her stoned in my old treehouse eating marshmallows out of a plastic bag. I really should change the subject to sports. “Did you two go out?”

“Me and Angie?” He raises his eyebrows. “No. Why?”

“No reason.”

“You’re not still insisting that you and her did the deed, are you?”

“We did.”

“Jesus Christ, Jerry. You have to stop saying it.”

I shouldn’t have talked to Tommy. He’s staring at me like I’m crazy, but I replay his entrance to the party, his hand on her ass, those two kisses with partially open lips. “Why, did you fuck her?”

“No, of course not. I just told you.”

“You said you never went out. It’s not the same question. I never dated her either, but we had sex twice.”

“Jerry, I consider both of you friends. I don’t want to be involved in this bullshit. Everyone understands why you lied about it then, but you have to let it go.”

“I agree it’s not a big deal that it happened, but I don’t appreciate being called a liar.”

“We were all full of shit back then, buddy. I told the entire baseball team that I fingered Laura Shaler. Never touched her.” He attempts to calm me with this story, tilting his head and

shrugging. Suddenly, he looks nervous. “I wonder if she’s here. She probably still hates me for that.”

“As she should! But I’m not lying!”

“You’re getting loud. How many drinks have you had?”

My cup is empty and I don’t know why I’m still carrying it.

“Enjoy the party, my friend. Talk to you later.” Tommy leaves me to stare at my empty cup. I don’t feel drunk. If I were drunk, I wouldn’t be this pissed off. Maybe I can ask around and find out whose car is blocking mine.

Back in the kitchen, I join the crowd lined up at the counter sampling appetizers. If I’m tipsy, which I don’t think I am, food should level me enough to drive. The fact that I care enough about driver safety to eat something is proof that I’m not drunk. On the other hand, I’m a liar and nothing I believe to be true seems to hold water with this crowd. I shove a pig-in-a-blanket into my mouth.

“Hey, Jerry.” It’s Angie, standing behind me searching for something on her phone. “I want to show you this guy. I met him last year in London. He did what you wanted to do. He went on tour with The Who, The Stones, a bunch of the old classic ones.” She stops and holds up her phone. It’s a gray-haired man posing in a selfie with Angie in a dark location. “Of course, he’s pretty old. Anyway, all the while he was talking to me, I wished you were there to hear him. So many good stories.”

“Interesting. Did he mention Zeppelin, by any chance?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t remember.” There is no trace of recognition on her face, although six years ago we talked and laughed about how *Whole Lotta Love* was the perfect sex song. Again, she shakes her head. “Maybe, but I don’t remember. What happened to you with

that dream?”

“I fucked up.” Might as well tell her what she wants to hear.

“It’s not over. You’re not dead. Do what you want to do.”

“Why do you assume I still want what I wanted then? Maybe this is what I want. I’m an accountant who can’t hook you up with weed.”

She looks confused. “All I’m saying is nothing is stopping you from doing what you want to do, whatever that is. If you’re happy, I’m happy for you.”

“Maybe what I want to do is drive my car into the lake.”

She rolls her eyes and slides her phone into the back pocket of her jeans. There are things I want to scream at her now. There are things I want to hear from her. She has to remember the night in the back seat of my mother’s Buick coming to the beat of Zeppelin. A few nights later in her teenage bedroom with its flowered sheets. Why would she deny it? We were kids simply having fun. It was innocent naughtiness.

“Why did you invite me here?” I ask.

“What?” Her confusion seems genuine. She looks at her phone again. “You’re taking this the wrong way. I thought you’d find this man interesting. That’s all. It’s not a judgment of what you’ve done or haven’t done.”

This is a setup. This is her subtle revenge. Maybe everyone is in on it. It’s possible that making me into an ass is the point of this gathering. For six years, she has waited to show up again and watch me lose all credibility. Or perhaps I never had credibility. No one could believe that someone like me could hold her high-class attention or body, and her shame for slumming with me was too great. My failure to follow my dreams merely confirms what these people always knew about me.

“My God,” she says, “I’m sorry I brought it up. Are you okay?”

“Do you know whose car is blocking me? I want to leave.”

“Don’t go because of me. I had no idea you’d take it this way.”

She’s so full of shit, I can’t look at her anymore. “Who’s driving the gray Nissan?” I yell.
“Can you move so I can leave?”

Corey, who was fat in high school but is a bodybuilder now, rushes to move his car. I can hear the party behind me. They’ll discuss me when I’m gone. Angie will tell them she doesn’t know what happened, but she knows. Tommy knows. They all know. I’m their punch line.

I text Dr. Etheridge once I back out of the driveway. It’s unlikely she’ll answer me quickly on a weekend. Even Dr. Etheridge in her professional behavior sometimes looks at me the way Angie did tonight as if my insanity is beyond her imagination or comprehension. Maybe I’m Dr. Etheridge’s punch line, too. Maybe stories about me are the highlight of her psychologist parties. She’s not going to answer my text tonight. She has better things to do.

I had planned to stay with my parents tonight. There’ll be some asinine television show from the sixties in the living room with my father staring at it, unaware of the plot. My mother will want to talk, and she’ll want more details about my broken engagement. No matter what I say, she’ll insist that it’s my fault. Nothing has changed since I was five at swimming lessons, shunned by my fellow swimmers.

“Stop acting like a weirdo and you’ll get some friends,” my mom told me then, all the while smiling as if a five-year-old could understand the statement in any way other than literal. I assumed she thought I was only acting like a weirdo. Since I wasn’t acting, I must have been a weirdo.

I am a weirdo.

My whole life has been this night in reruns.

I don't know what I did wrong.

I've circled the lake, windows open, no music, the humid summer air feeling thick in my choked-up throat. It's an easy choice. I won't make the turn ahead. I'll pick up speed and break through the guard rail, feel the drop, and sink. I'll follow through on this one thing I want. Nothing ambiguous to doubt. Punch line to my own joke, for a change. I accelerate.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Follow Through is what happens when an overthinker prone to paranoia confronts how he was labeled years ago, but I believe it is a more universal experience than most of us would like to admit. The inspiration came from criticism I have received as a writer more than once—the reluctance to let my main character suffer without relief. Although Jerry's suffering stems from what may seem petty triggers, it is ultimately more than he can tolerate. He is in hell from the moment his friend refuses to kiss him.*

I feel my writing style has been influenced by many. I admire writers who reveal human frailty with honesty and without judgment. To name a few of this century, Jeffrey Eugenides, Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith, Margaret Atwood, and Chuck Palahniuk.

AUTHOR BIO: Kimberly Moore is a writer and educator. Her first novel is a finalist in the 2021 Launchpad Prose Competition and the 2021 New Media Film Festival. Shorter works are in publication this year in Typehouse Magazine, MacroMicroCosm, and 34 Orchard. She also wrote educational video scripts that you slept through in high school