

Kinko's Copies

by Paul Smith

WHY WE LIKE IT:

A crazy, madcap, curved like an arrow and just plain gaga modernist confection that has us panting for more! Quote: 'We had graduated from infatuation to the knowledge that we were probably wrong for each other to the compromise that maybe we couldn't do any better to the final stage—commitment to make the best of it.' It's a voice all his own and as original to his funny bone. And you're wondering why we love it?

I went to Kinko's Copies to buy a birthday card for my true love, whose birthday was tomorrow. They're cheaper here than at OSCO or Walgreens. I used to come here to print resumes, especially those carefully worded, carefully edited resumes of mine, of which I had twelve different versions. That whole episode is over with, so now I shop for cheap birthday cards. There are two racks of them next to the FedEx counter, where you weigh your packages for shipping. There is also a rack of self-help books which people who come here sort through since they are at one of those crossroads in their life that Frost and Robert Johnson spoke of. Not me, anymore, though. Nope. I just buy cards. They vary from sincere to sarcastic. Since sincerity didn't really describe our relationship, I went for sarcasm and humor. Humor is the opposite of sincerity, although in some cases they are one in the same. I picked out a sarcastic birthday card I knew she'd understand.

When I went to pay for it, there was a guy in line ahead of me. I usually don't notice other people much because I don't really like them. I noticed this guy, though. He was the polar opposite of me. He was still 'in the life' as prostitutes have been known to say. He had a gray suit, somewhat hunched shoulders or maybe it was the shoulder pads in a very old suit. The back of his head was disheveled with hair that needed combing or cutting. He had a cane. He was fiftyish. On the Kinko's counter was his fake leather portfolio in which you put papers or in the case of a job hunter, you put fake resumes. Peeking over his shoulder now, I could see copies of his resume on the same cream colored heavy duty linen paper I used to get. I think he noticed me, so I backed off, snickering. I was glad I wasn't him anymore. But I also felt this need to offer him a few words of encouragement and maybe a tip or two on how to 'tweak' a resume to make yourself look better on paper.

When he paid for a new batch of resumes I saw he had a hearing aid. Fate had dealt this guy a lousy hand – cheap suit, a limp, mussed up hair, hearing loss. I shook my head. Then a Kinko's sales guy rung me up at another cash register. I paid for my snarky birthday card and left at the same time he did. He walked his gimpy walk to a Ford Falcon right outside. Still feeling helpful I tried to start up a conversation.

"Job hunting?" I began.

"Fuck off," he said, without turning around. The Falcon's window was rolled down. He reached inside to open the door. He couldn't even get his door fixed.

I was a little insulted, but philosophical. I thought about the word 'fuck'. You never used to see it. Now it was everywhere, omnipresent like the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleberg. No, that wasn't

right. It wasn't that the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleberg were omnipresent, it was that they saw more than they let on. My eyes were like that. I could see that this pathetic human specimen was a copy of me earlier in my life. And I was a copy of him later in his life after he'd graduated from the desperation of finding a job, sucking up to someone, getting over the embarrassment of being fired and then constructing a skyscraper of lies to hide the fact he got canned. His Falcon backfired once before speeding him off to his job interview. Years from now, when he no longer had to face the humiliation of begging for work he would still have a shabby suit and a cane and a Ford Falcon.

My mind went back to the word 'fuck'. Holden Caulfield doesn't use this word till the end of ***Catcher In The Rye***, not until his letdowns with Sonny and Maurice and Carl Luce are over with. At this point Holden is fed up with things and using the word 'fuck' has a much heavier impact than if he'd been using it all along. I figured that out with no help from Cliff's Notes. I had the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg.

So I hopped in my car and drove home to present my true love with her birthday card. Her birthday was tomorrow, but I decided to give it to her today. She'd think this was all she was getting!

I walked in the door.

"Hi, honey. Happy birthday!" I handed her the card.

"What the fuck is this?"

"Open it up."

“It’s a fucking birthday card. Is this all I fucking get?”

I laughed. “Read the fucking card.” The outside of the card had a guy in an old, crumpled suit.

He looked like Ulysses S. Grant. Inside was the phrase:

‘My middle finger gets a boner when I think of you’

‘Hey, that’s pretty fucking funny,” she laughed.

I laughed back.

“Well, what else did you get me?”

I laughed.

“Well?”

Her voice hardened into something like my finger felt when I thought of her. It had that edge that told me she meant business. We had graduated from infatuation to the knowledge that we were probably wrong for each other to the compromise that maybe we couldn’t do any better to the final stage - commitment to make the best of it. She did deserve something more than a card. I had something stashed in the car.

“I’m going fucking shopping,” I said, making for the door.

“My birthday’s tomorrow,” she said, her voice wobbly.

I turned around in the front yard. “That’s when I’m fucking coming back!” I shot at her.

Her laughter pierced the cream-colored sky as the car door slammed and I drove around the block.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I actually went to Kinko's Copies (now officially called FedEx to get my wife a birthday card. They have great cards at non Hallmark prices (cheap). There was this shabby looking guy in front of me pretty much the way I describe him in the story. My mind is always searching for material so, as I watch him fiddling with resumes (as I used to do), I felt sorry for him but also figured I could work him into a story. I did not talk to him. I did sort of peer over his shoulder and senses something that told me he didn't like me hovering. It was simple, like a sudden shake of his shoulders or maybe it was a slight turn of his head. Hemingway told us to pay attention to the littlest details. I don't know if he drove a Ford Falcon, but he did have trouble opening the door. All of this excited me and I started composing on my way home.

The part with my wife is completely made up. We are not that blunt or sarcastic, but after years together we have come to an 'arrangement' like a truce or cessation of hostilities or whatever they call that agreement between North and South Korea. The caption in the birthday card is actually what one of the cards said.

My influences? Bukowski definitely, plus as I referred to Fitzgerald and Salinger, them too. I have many more. And as much as I like all the writers that have influenced me, I try to write with my own voice, which varies from story to story and tries to capture those minute immediate details Hemingway speaks of, tries to avoid clichés and tries to be honest.

BIO:

Paul Smith writes poetry and fiction. He lives in Skokie, Illinois with his wife Flavia. Sometimes he performs poetry at an open mic in Chicago. He believes that brevity is the soul of something he read about once and whatever that something is or was it should be cut in half immediately.

