

3RD PLACE
RICHARD YATES SHORT STORY AWARD*

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HOW THE RAIN CAUGHT UP WITH THE SILKAS

1. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE HUSBAND

NOW THAT HER HUSBAND WAS IN THE GROUND, Harriet Silka spent her days driving. In her late-sixties Mercedes she criss-crossed San Francisco from one hill to another and never left the city limits. Drizzle pricked the windows, and the wipers beat a rhythm that made it easy to think and hard to drive slow. She drove so much that when she got out of the car she felt like she'd just taken off roller skates: stepping on solid ground made her dizzy. She'd slurp a bowl of noodles in Chinatown, grab a Jolt Cola at the Circle K while gassing up, and head out on the streets again.

Cocooned in the car and wrapped in fog, it was easy for Harriet to imagine how Henry felt right now in his luxury box sealed from the world under a heap of dirt. She had missed the funeral and she was glad for that—an urn on a shelf was more her style than a casket in a hole, and she knew just where he would have wanted the ashes spread—but she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd missed the punchline. Was the story over? Or was she doomed to some kind of limbo, like reading the same paragraph over and over without catching the sense of the words, and never reaching the end? Could she devise her own kind of funeral for him, without a body—without even ashes? This was what kept her driving.

In fact, the only reason she ever stopped the car was to rush into a hotel

lobby or a gas station and bee-line for the restroom where she would empty her grumbling bowels with a blast. She would warm the seat until her legs went to sleep and the dribbling stopped. Henry's death would always remind her of epic diarrhea. In a way, they had both been the victim of bad water, and at times, in the midst of a stabbing cramp, Harriet would rather have died than take another crap.

THE NEWS HAD COME YESTERDAY while she was on the toilet. She had been perched there for some time, skimming the latest issue of *Architectural Digest* when she came across the article. Her legs had already gone to sleep above the knees. The bathroom was the European kind – designed, in fact, by Henry Silka himself. It was nothing more than a wedge of a chamber beneath a staircase with room for only the toilet. No sink, no mirror. When Harriet saw the article – “Henry Silka Killed in Electrical Accident” – she reflexively stood, hit her head on the sloping ceiling, then dropped to her knees as her numb legs collapsed under her. There she lay on the tile floor, holding the glossy magazine rolled up two inches from her face, staring into part of a photograph of Henry that she herself had taken on the rooftop of this house. The photo was enlarged so much that the dots in the half-tone appeared splotchy, almost unrecognizable from this close. Her legs were tangled and she could feel cold porcelain against her calves. She tried to move, found her legs tingling as the blood returned in pinpricks all over, and remained right where she was. She read the article. He had cooked, she extrapolated, like meat on a grill.

Now Gustavo called from the bedroom, “*Qué pasó, Harrieta?*”

Henry, went the article, had been touring a museum under construction in Perpignan, in the south of France. He was the architect. So far there was only the frame of the building, a maze of wooden joists, limestone columns and flagstone floors. In some places the ceiling was open to the sky and, as it had just been raining, there were scattered puddles underfoot. He was inspecting the installation of the lighting system. Passing through the skeleton of the main gallery destined for a collection of Miró, Henry Silka ducked past a dangling wire. He didn't duck enough. The frayed end grazed his rain-spattered hardhat, then flicked onto his neck where it snagged on his raincoat. The wire, trapped like a wasp in the folds of his collar, delivered a high-voltage shock. That isn't to say he dropped peacefully to the floor. What the article didn't say, but what Harriet imagined, was that Henry had gone rigid with the jolt of the current and had stood there buzzing and sizzling, sparks shooting out of his eyesockets, hair crisping, skin curdling and going black as steam rose, and there he shuddered as his companions in their hardhats jumped back, afraid to even touch him. She imagined him

stuttering on a single word: “F-f-f-f-fuck!” When he had turned to carbon and conducted no more electricity, the voltage released him and he fell, stiff as a charred log, facedown in the puddle. And there on the wet flagstone he steamed. That, as far as Harriet could read between the lines, was how her husband died.

There was a rapping on the bathroom door. Gustavo tried out his English: “What’s happening in here?”

“Nothing.” She said this from the floor, one cheek pressed against the cold tile. It must have sounded strange for her voice to come from the floor. Gustavo waited a moment then knocked again.

“*Qué estás haciendo?*”

“Nothing.”

She waited until she heard him pace away before she struggled to stand up. Her legs were shot through with sparkles and she danced a running-in-place jig, flexing her knees to get the feeling back. She was careful not to crack her head again. She flushed the toilet. Then, with the magazine rolled up under her arm she opened the door and stepped into the hall.

Gustavo stood leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, scowling at her over his moustache. “*Se te cayó algo?*” he said. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” The word came out automatically as if it were the only thing she could say anymore. She saw a flash of anger cross his face. “*Ya!*” he barked, reaching for her shoulder to give her a shake. Then he pulled her to him, a smile curling over his teeth—two of them silver—and he gave her a hug that lifted her off the floor. In Puerto Vallarta he had started telling her how much he loved her, to which she had just smiled and looked away. Now he spoke into her hair. “Nothing, nothing, all day long with you.”

2. HOW HARRIET’S VACATION WENT

GUSTAVO HADN’T REALLY WANTED to go but Harriet was paying, so he didn’t have much say in the matter. Vallarta had been crawling with tourists, the air reeking of Coppertone and grilled meat. They found a hotel in the old part of town where the streets were quiet and there they stayed indoors and screwed day and night for two weeks. They got to know the shapes of mildew patches

on the ceiling from spending so much time in bed staring up with eyes wide and body bucking, first one on top, then the other.

The whole time, he only spoke Spanish to her. She understood most of it, and especially liked it when she didn't. She was inclined to stay longer but Gustavo had to get back to his job in the city. He was a carpenter at a gallery in North Beach where she currently had a painting exhibition. That would have struck a lot of people as lurid, she supposed: the artist humping the hired help. But didn't artists have a great tradition of humping the marginalized? Especially the ones with beautiful bodies?

She hadn't read the papers or even checked her email. There was barely time between lays to walk five blocks to the beachfront. It was a swampy blackout of a vacation, tangled in the sheets and getting pale instead of tanning in the sun. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world in the south of France under a gray sky, her husband was jittering away in a puddle, charred like a goat in a Mexican taco stand.

She and Gustavo had just returned to San Francisco that morning. He could barely tolerate the coach seats on the flight home, so much his balls hurt. She spent most of the flight in the bathroom with the liquid shits, which hadn't hit her until the last minute - the price of sucking the ice cubes in a farewell margarita. Now she sat on her bed watching her hands shake from dehydration or shock or both. The magazine lay open on the comforter between her sprawled legs. She fingered through a stack of mail, separating the personal letters from the bills and the junk and the fresh magazines. There was an envelope from Henry's lawyer in New York. Also one from Henry's architectural firm. Sober white envelopes, containing slightly different versions of the story she already knew. A funeral invitation from Henry's mother, postmarked last week. He was already in the ground, in an enameled coffin in Connecticut. The party was over and the guests had gone home, fresh gossip on their tongues. She bit her bottom lip to keep it from quivering.

Gustavo stood at the foot of the bed watching her. He wore a light blue towel wrapped around his waist, his torso thick and brown and cut like a swimmer's. He set his hands on his hips. "*Me vas a decir qué chingados esta pasando contigo?*"

"Nothing that has anything to do with you." She knew this was a cruel thing to say, but she didn't want to say it out loud: Henry's dead. Because not only would she make it real by saying it, she would have to explain that she was married to him. And that would be like telling a joke backwards, starting with the punchline.

THERE WAS A DAY, on the hotel balcony, when Gustavo had gone to the corner store for Cuervo and limes and Harriet had been alone. It was early in the evening and the sun was just merging with the ocean and the water was a shifting face of sparkling green. She could usually put him out of her head for days at a time, but something had reminded her of Henry at that moment. It was something in the color and texture of the waves. They curled at the crest in delicate whitecaps and it looked like the sea was being painted that briny green with a trowel. The green covered up the white layer underneath that now showed only at the edges, like a trowel had cut a line between the colors. That was the way Henry painted, but he did it with black underneath so a pear in a bowl had a dark outline that made it jump out like a woman's eye accented with eyeliner. It wasn't a new trick, but it was a rare one: Henry made fruit bowls erotic.

Later, as Gustavo was screwing her in the hotel bed and she could feel sand in the sheets and smell the sea salt in his hair, she was still thinking of Henry. It happened automatically when she opened her mouth to moan the name of the man who was inside of her. Her husband's name came halfway out before she could stop herself so what she ended up saying was, "He-y,...Gustavo!"

He paused in mid-thrust and looked at her, a nose length away. "Qué?" he said, as if she had asked him to stop for a chat while he was running to catch a train.

"Gustavo," she said again by way of answer.

3. HOW SHE GOT FAMOUS

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THEIR MARRIAGE, Harriet had been the famous one. One day in a Chelsea deli she was struck by the face of the old Korean behind the counter who bore a snub-nosed resemblance to Michelangelo. She didn't have her sketchbook with her but she felt the tingling need to draw the old man's face and so she grabbed a copy of the *New York Times* and sketched him right on the front page, over the type copy. Later, at home, she went over what she'd drawn with india ink. The ink soaked into the newsprint and turned a soft gray. This was the first of a series of hundreds, which got her interviewed on NPR, exhibited in TriBeCa and eventually paid ten grand for a whole collection which the *Times* purchased. They ran a feature on her. Other publications wanted her to do their covers.

She called this her Napkin Period. She had heard about how Picasso, when his fame was blooming, would go into restaurants in Paris and feast like a king, then doodle on a napkin and hand it to the proprietor as payment. She tried this once with the front page of the *Times* while lunching at a Greek place on Sixth Avenue. The manager said, "What, are you crazy, lady? I'm charging you for the falafel *and* the goddamn paper you just ruined." But that was just the way New Yorkers told you they loved you. That very paper (which cost her four dollars — the Sunday edition) she touched up and sold for a thousand at a gallery show the following year. Henry talked her into going back to that restaurant and telling the manager about it. The manager's response: "Congratulations, lady. I'll sell you another paper for five hundred dollars."

She never said it to anyone, but she thought that Henry might be the reason she got her ideas. When she bounced an idea off him, she could measure how good it was by the dimple that appeared in his cheek when he smiled. No dimple meant he was faking it and the idea sucked.

All this time Henry was working sixty-hour weeks in a suit and tie at a Manhattan architecture firm. He was the steady one bringing in a paycheck, whereas one month Harriet would bring home ten grand and the rest of the year nothing. He was the one doing the laundry and the ironing and keeping the apartment tidy while she was careening around her studio at five in the morning drinking tequila straight from a coffee cup and chipping away at wet limestone. When he came home late smelling of cigarettes — neither of them smoked at the time — she made a conscious decision not to wonder about it. She thought his explanation might make her worry more than her own suspicions. Wasn't that part of the compromise of marriage? Especially when you're married to a genius?

At the time, she was the only one who would call him that. But at the drawing board in his study he was scheming up what his obituary would call the "redemption of modern architecture at the ignominious end of the twentieth century." He looked like an accountant in his gray Brooks Brothers and starched shirts, and certainly no one but Harriet ever looked at him and thought that the creative fires were raging somewhere underneath that neatly trimmed hair. But he was doing with PowerMacs and blown concrete what Gaudí had done with granite and mosaics, and people had to catch their breath when they saw one of his models. His buildings looked like something upside-down or inside-out but always with a clearly visible entrance: someplace for a person to fit into it. His buildings went up and more contracts came in and his picture started appearing in more places than Harriet's. He

designed and built them a house in the Mission district of San Francisco. The house showed up on the cover of *Architectural Digest*. "Mission: Beautiful," said the tag-line. He was a little embarrassed about that. The best feature of the place was a vast rooftop terrace ringed with potted palms where they made love on a futon under the illuminated cloud cover of the city. "Are there any others?" Harriet said as they lay tangled in a sheet, beginning to shiver as their sweat turned cold in the night air. He stared into the sky. "No," he said, and the word sounded like an incomplete sentence, some unspoken idea hanging after it. That he didn't have to ask what she meant by 'others' just confirmed it for her. She didn't want to know more. She averted her eyes so she wouldn't see if his dimple was there or not.

Things kept getting better for them. The big prize was when Henry's firm won a design competition for the Catalan Museum in Perpignan. He had sketched the original idea on a napkin while he and Harriet were eating at a dim sum place in Chinatown. "Your work is done," she said as she looked it over. "Sell them the napkin for a million bucks, let them do the rest."

4. WHAT DUFY MEANT

THEY SPENT A WEEK IN AND AROUND PERPIGNAN, Harriet and Henry, in a sweltering August. The museum plans had been approved by the board of trustees and there was nothing left for Henry to do until the contractors hired the construction firms. Two years married and still feeling like newlyweds, they hopped a train to Coulioure, a fishing village on the Costa Brava. They took a drab hotel room up a hill from the town center. The room was tiny, but the view was spectacular. A balcony, wide enough for two chairs and a standing ashtray, looked over the tile roofs of Coulioure and the curve of the harbor where the Mediterranean shimmered a deep blue. The ruins of Moorish outposts and stone walls topped the cliffs that rose out of the sea. Painted fishing boats rocked on the tide as sunlight gilded the limestone jetty. The tang of sea salt lacing everything.

Henry puffed on a cigarillo and waved the ember across the vista. He stuttered unless he was drunk. "So th-th-th-th-this is what D-D-Dufy meant." He was talking about the French painter who did nothing but seaside views of southern France. Henry would have been a painter or a sculptor, like Harriet, if he hadn't been so damn levelheaded. He was an architect because of the paychecks, and because he loved wearing suits and ties. All he ever painted were sexy fruit bowls.

Harriet set her own cigarillo in the ashtray notch and folded her arms over the balcony rail. She set her chin on her forearm and peered at Henry from the corner of her eye. "You know, we could always go to Tahiti, and find out what Gauguin meant. Or go to Japan, and find out what Hiroshige meant."

Henry grinned. "Of course, if there are p-p-problems with the museum - you know, shitty limestone or faulty wiring or something - I might have to spend a lot of time around here, s-s-supervising things. What do you think of that?"

"That sounds just awful, Henry. You wouldn't make me come with you, would you?"

"I'm afraid I'll need someone to i-iron my shirts."

They grinned at one another. Harriet had never ironed a shirt in her life, and she never would. But that night at the hotel on the hill overlooking the sea was the first of about a hundred over the years. It turned out that there were a lot of problems with the museum, faulty wiring being the least of them. Harriet, during their many stays there, started a series of abstract landscapes of the hills around Coulioure. She rarely painted the sea but rather tried to capture the quality of light that played across the cliffs.

This was the place, she thought later, where she would have scattered his ashes. She never got the chance because he was buried in the ground on his family's plot in Connecticut where she would never once visit for the rest of her life. But if there had been ashes, she would have tossed them from this balcony: he would've become an element of the light.

Once she said to Henry that it would be nice to see it rain here, to see the town with all its stones and tiles glistening. "It'll never rain," he said. "It never rains, wherever I go, whatever the season. You d-didn't know that about me, did you?"

"No, Henry, I didn't. Why didn't you tell me this before we were married?"

He stood before her in only a tee shirt and boxers, leaning on the balcony rail. A wash of late afternoon sun slanted over him and glinted off the mechanical pencil tucked behind his ear. Watching him at that moment she imagined the cityscape that occupied his head, all the buildings he would someday make, and the people who would live and work in

them. But not only that: the bodies of other lovers, the taste of their mouths. Smoke spilling from painted lips, a kiss pressed into that dimple of his. How much could a person submerge inside his head? And how much would never come to the surface? Henry was a well, and he was bottomless. "I'm destined to die by drought," he said. "It's my f-f-f-fate."

THAT WAS WHY IT WAS A BIT OF A JOKE when Harriet dragged him shopping before their trip to Osaka. She had a show opening there of her Coulioure landscapes, and the gallery was flying them both out. "But remember," warned the curator over the phone with a chirping accent, "it's monsoon season. Bring your rubbers!"

"She didn't say anything about a raincoat," said Henry, protesting as they went from boutique to boutique along Haight Street, "She wants us to bring c-c-c-condoms!"

Harriet held a charcoal-gray trench coat up to his shoulders, biting her lip. The coat was nylon and covered in flaps and buttons. He shrugged himself into it and buttoned all the way up. Then he pulled the collar up and peered at her, menacing. He looked like a bat wrapped up in its wings. Harriet nodded. "We'll see, Mister Drought. If you can stop the monsoons in Japan, you might just be able to land a fat job with the government."

She bought him the coat, which a year later would snag on the dangling electrical cord and then melt and fuse with his skin as he fried in a puddle in the Catalan museum. He never wore it during the week they spent in Japan. It never rained.

5. WHAT THE JAPANESE BOY-WHORE WAS WORTH

IT ALL ENDED WHEN SHE FOUND HIM SCREWING a man. That was a twist she hadn't expected. "How original," she said from the doorway, crossing her arms and glowering at the two of them in the bed. It was a tiny hotel room in Osaka. Neon light in primary colors came in the window, cut to ribbons by the blinds. She'd spilled coffee on her blouse during lunch with the curator and rushed back to the hotel for a quick change. It wouldn't occur to her until much later that Henry had wanted her to find out. The suspense was killing him as much as the suspicion was killing her.

Henry rolled over and pulled the sheet over his head. His partner, who was Japanese and as thin as an adolescent – which he turned out to be – curled into a sitting position and wrapped his arms around his knees and looked back and forth from Harriet to Henry. He was breathing deeply, catching his breath. For several moments, that was the only sound. No one said anything. Then Harriet looked at the boy and said, “Do you have AIDS?” He shook his head. His hair, cut like the young Elvis, was the shade of chemical orange that half the college kids in Osaka wore, boys and girls alike.

She looked at the lump under the sheet where Henry was hiding himself and asked the same question. “No,” came the muffled response.

“That’s great,” she said. “Now please continue what you were doing.” And she closed the door behind her. During the 20 hour flight back to San Francisco she filled half her sketchbook with chairs. She didn’t know what chairs had to do with what she was feeling about Henry, but you couldn’t help noticing that none of the chairs were functional. They had two legs, or a big hole in the middle, or hung upside-down from the ceiling. They were crazy chairs. They were chairs that would spill you if you tried to sit down. She spent the next six months making them out of iron and burnished zinc. No one knew what to think. None of them sold until a library in Marin County bought three for a sculpture garden and paid her five thousand dollars. That was what the Japanese boy-whore ended up being worth to her: five grand, and an estranged husband.

Would it have been better if it had been a woman? This question she would ask herself the rest of her life. And the sad thing was that once she started sleeping around, she realized that sex with a stranger – even perverted, degenerate sex, or maybe *especially* that kind – didn’t necessarily constitute a betrayal of the person you were committed to. You couldn’t get everything you needed in one place. Just screwing someone didn’t mean you had shared anything beyond fluids and a mutual high. Sometimes that was just what you needed. And other times, of course, you needed more. If she had understood that at the time, standing there in the doorway in Osaka while Henry wilted away under the covers, she might have been willing to talk about it instead of crossing the ocean to change the locks and throw all his shit out on the sidewalk where it rotted in the rain.

He collected the remains three days later and stood by a parking meter calling up to her. She watched from the rooftop terrace, leaning over the rail like a gargoyle. She was angrier with herself than with him. She imagined herself a bitter old spinster, celibate and cranky for the rest

of her life: punishment for living an illusion for so long. The sense of whatever he was shouting got erased by the static of traffic. His suit was rumpled from the flight, his hair mussed and his eyes hollow with fatigue. Eventually he hailed a taxi and rode away. She couldn't bring herself to say a word to the man she still, despite everything and until the day she died, loved like a sickness.

6. WHAT THE NEXT IDEA WAS

NOW THAT HER HUSBAND WAS IN THE GROUND, Harriet spent the day driving. She cruised the length of Telegraph, up and down Market, Columbus, the Embarcadero, over the Golden Gate and back. Sometimes the fog lifted but the drizzle never stopped, and the wipers kept chattering like a joke without a punchline.

If the *Times* had given her the inkwashes, and Coulioure had given her the abstract landscapes, and the Japanese boy-whore had given her the crazy chairs, what would Henry's electrocution give her? How could she turn this, like she did everything else, into a fresh idea? Electric wires hanging from the gallery ceiling, big puddles on the floor? A series of blackened, unrecognizable portraits? An installation of hot griddles, rainwater sprinkling and sizzling, skinned goats charring?

She could just keep driving around and around, never stopping except to gas up and crap, like John and Yoko in bed but with less glamour, and no lover. Instead, just a woman driving in circles, lost off her ass. Gustavo, on a corner, handing her a sandwich through the rolled-down window as she cruised by. She imagined Henry's face, nodding and smiling at the idea, but there was no dimple. She stared out at the streetlights that slid over the black enameled hood. What had she learned from all this? Sex is meaningless. Boys, girls, whores, whatever – it didn't matter who you fucked. What mattered was *who you thought about* while you fucked.

At least Gustavo had served well in that respect. And for all she knew, Henry had called his boy-whore "Harriet!" at the crucial moment, generating some cross-cultural confusion. Who knew how long was the trail of discarded lovers? Gustavo had finally stormed out yesterday when she refused to tell him what was bothering her. He would send flowers for a week and call three times a day. She would change her phone number, leave the flowers on the sidewalk. Easy enough.

She turned off Hyde Street and cruised into the Tenderloin. There was a boy standing on a corner, a red plastic raincoat hanging on his skinny

frame and a feather boa wrapped around his neck. He was cinnamon brown, with hair in nubby dreads. His mirrored glasses followed as she cruised by, taking the corner hard and sending up a spray of rainwater from the gutter. She circled the block and went by again, this time slowing at the corner and pulling up to the curb. She bent to meet eyes with the boy through the rain-jeweled windshield. Something churned in her bowels, the trace of those tainted Mexican ice cubes, and she nearly drove off to get to a bathroom in time. But she held it. She tensed her sphincter like a fist and took a breath – diarrhea wasn't going to get in the way of her next good idea.

The boy in the plastic raincoat came to the window as she leaned over to crank it down, shedding beaded water on the rubber lip. "You want something?" he said. He laid a forearm along the door and pushed his sunglasses over his forehead.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she said, feeling her cheeks burn red.

"Depends."

"Do you have AIDS? I have to know first."

He waved his hand to dismiss the idea and pulled the door open, sliding into the leather seat where his raincoat squeaked. "Relax, lady. I need to get out of the rain if this is going to be an interview or something."

She held the steering wheel like she was still driving. Along the sidewalk a block ahead she could see more boys and men, standing under awnings, smoking and watching the traffic. "Is this okay?" she said. "I mean, if it's a woman? Can you do that?"

"What do you have in mind?"

She had no idea how to answer that question – it was the question she was trying to get away from. She stared at the boy. Eighteen, maybe twenty, shiny as an otter with his hair matted from the rain and his cheekbones glistening. When she didn't answer he laughed, and a dimple as perfect as an inside-out candy kiss appeared in one cheek. "Lady," he said, but she cut him off.

"You're perfect. Don't say anything else." She tucked the stick into first and accelerated up the street, spraying another sheet of water at the corner. *P-p-p-perfect*, she almost said out loud. The word stuttered in her head with the slapping of the wipers. She took the quickest route back to the house, driving as fast as the tires would hold. She didn't

know exactly what she was going to do with the boy, but it would be better to let him figure it out on his own. He was a professional, wasn't he? He would know what she needed. She wouldn't have to tell him that she was finally cheating on her husband. It would be a better way to put Henry to rest than tossing a handful of ashes, because there would be a body after all, and the body would be warm.