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## LONG WORDS

**M**INUS HIS ARRAY OF SHOES on the closet floor, Adele will be able to display her shoes without stacking. That's one advantage. Then there's medicine cabinet space. Laundry reduction.

"Whose is this?" he asks, holding up Adele's vinyl copy of *Hot Stuff* by Donna Summers. He's squatting before the record cabinet. Friendly sarcasm is his preferred mode. "Whose could this be?"

"Must be yours," she says, playing along.

"I think I'll make a gift of it." He's awfully jolly, considering. "In fact, I don't want any of these. I only listen to CDs, anyway."

"Presents," she says. "I like getting them."

He suddenly stands. "I remember now: recidivism. That's the word I was trying to remember last night." He shakes his head. She thinks he must be recalling more details of their fight, but he says, "I've got a head like a sieve."

June of 1979 is recognized as the peak month of the disco summer. Not only did *Hot Stuff* chicka-chicka over the air waves, Anita Ward's *Ring My Bell* led FM disc jockeys across the country to advocate the burning of disco records in a last ditch effort to revive the 70's. It failed. Adele was ten years old that year. She wore big headphones that looked like earmuffs wherever she went. "She works hard for the money," she often replied to questions, in a manner more than once described as inappropriate.

Adele's earliest memory besides the really hazy stuff: her mother, in panties and pearl necklace, dancing in the dining room with Uncle Gil to Motown, a gin and tonic in hand, sloshing over her mostly naked self, while Adele's father (brother of Uncle Gil) watches from the couch. Adele was having a bad dream until Gladys Knight and the Pips wake her. The dream featured a large spider and a cardboard box shaped like

a rocket ship. Adele once possessed such a rocket ship, but psychiatrists would later insist that it was a symbol at the center of her phallicentric muck.

When her mother spots her, she holds out her free hand and says, "We're dancing," inviting Adele onto the floor. She launches into a long explanation of just what it means to be a pip.

Adele's husband claims that her affair has nothing to do with his decision to leave. "Old business," he says. "Last year's news."

Adele is tempted to correct him as she just had sex with her lover last week. *Some things are better left unsaid*, she recalls, ancient words of wisdom. Instead, she says, "He has hair on his back."

This causes a pause in her husband's packing. "I'm supposed to be interested in that?"

"Just so you'd know," she says. "I could never care deeply for a man with hair on his back."

"You've become a head case," he says.

"I know," she says. "My husband's leaving me, and I'm a little unfocused." She notes that he has put on his referee's shirt. The broad black and white stripes are vertical and full of authority. "Well," she says as he zippers his last suitcase, "farewell fuck?"

He shrugs. The shirt comes off.

Contrary to popular belief, disco has many variations in beat and tempo. Chicka-chicka matured into boom-chicka-chicka. Some consider the Bee Gees as the kings of disco, but Adele has trouble accepting them since they were known before disco as a rock and roll band, and they too often sported bowl-type haircuts.

In her dissertation, she argues that the essential rhythm of disco matches the rhythms of a healthy young couple copulating. Her PhD in Cultural Studies failed to earn her a job. Personnel committees around the country were united in their hatred of disco. However, she thinks of her dissertation with pride whenever she herself copulates — with husband or lover — as the rhythm of their movement makes music in her head.

Bad music or no, it's hers.

When she was six, her mother was carried in from the yard where a party was going on. Her mother had not passed out, but for some reason was holding her breath and weeping. Much of the party went home, and the rest moved inside and surrounded the prone hostess. Adele heard her mother's request: "Carry me around in your arms," she said, and they obeyed. There were maybe twelve of them, mostly men, including Adele's father. They lifted her and began toting. "Higher," she demanded. She wanted to be held high over their heads like some

kind of Elizabeth Taylor. They tried, but they were either not strong enough or too loaded, and they dropped her to the hardwood floor, her foot catching the floor lamp, knocking it over. Shards from the glass shade flew into the corner where Adele had been hiding. They hurt, and she slipped back to bed to avoid being found out.

She woke the next afternoon in the hospital. She had almost bled to death. "That's my girl," her mother had said, patting Adele's hair as it lay on the pillow. She had sneaked a gin fizz into the hospital room. Before the night was over, she would convince an orderly to take a sip of it. "My baby," her mother continued. "She can one-up her mommy anytime."

Upon the abandonment of her husband, Adele asks her lover for advice:

"Take up a hobby," he suggests.

"Read *Don Quixote*, finally."

"Visit your family."

"See if you can pick up the clarinet again."

"Join a health club."

"Study Indian cuisine."

"*Proust*."

"Become promiscuous."

This last tidbit of guidance upsets Adele. "You're advising me to fuck other men?"

Her lover sits up in bed. His name is James Madison, like the president. He parts his hair in the middle and brings his wife flowers on the 28<sup>th</sup> of every month. "Where did we deposit my pants?"

"My husband has left me —"

"We're all quite aware of that," he says, as if they were not alone in bed. "We've hardly spoken of anything else."

"— and my boyfriend tells me to start spreading it around."

"Look at this," James Madison says, gesturing to his cock. "I'm still hard. Despite everything."

"All your ideas suck."

"There's a Scrabble club that meets at the Y," he says. "You love Scrabble."

"I do not."

"You're always doing crosswords."

"That's not the same."

"It just won't go down," he says. He reclines and rolls over next to her. "It seems a shame to waste it."

"Rare commodity?"

"That's it," he says, snapping his fingers. He mounts her from behind. "Insult me. Call me names."

She does as told. "Sweetheart," she accuses. "Loverboy. Sugar Lips. Angel Dick. Mr. Bowser."

"What does that mean, Mr. Bowser?" he asks, still humping her.

She is on all-fours and begins barking. Men have always told her that she's entertaining in the sack.

"Are you humiliated by this?" Mr. Bowser asks. *Hopeful*, she would describe his tone.

"Satisfactorily," she replies. "And you?"

He doesn't answer until they're finished and the lights are on. She takes a turn in the bathroom, and when she comes out, he's gone.

*The PhD, unlike other sexually transmitted diseases, is always fatal.*

She writes this to her former dissertation adviser and on-again-off-again lover Mr. Z, who has suggested a magazine (not a professional journal, she notes, but a slick) that might be interested in a chapter of her dissertation if she revises it to suit a general audience. It would be for a special issue on post-Vietnam pop culture. After sitting in front of her computer screen for two hours and forty-five minutes, Adele changes the name of the file from "Magazine Article" to "Letter to Mr. Z." The chapter in question ties the disco movement to socio-economic factors and a rise of cynicism in the media. Adele no longer believes musical tastes are as closely tied to politics as she had thought in graduate school. She's not sure she ever really believed it. She had just needed an excuse to write about something that interested her.

In Mr. Z's letter of recommendation, he calls her "a tantalizing intellect." In bed, he gave massages and made her close her eyes and sniff at fruit. "Enable the senses and you enable the erotic," he liked to say. A tiny guy, but heavy when he would finally climb on top of her, like a miniature made of lead. He had liked her dissertation (or how she looked in short skirts) so much he had signed them up for a dancing class.

"You don't take lessons to dance disco," she told him. "It's like taking lessons to fuck."

His face opened greedily. He had completed a course in "Sexual Stimulation and Gratification," a graduate seminar. "We blindfolded ourselves and went around the room, touching." You could grope anyone, anywhere, he explained, unless the other person patted your cheek, which meant you had to stop. "You couldn't know, of course, whether it was a man or woman you were touching, or who was touching you."

"You got credit for this?" Adele asked.

"Audited it," he replied, slipping his arm around her and down inside the back of her jeans. They were in his office. Two Boston ferns hung from the ceiling. He had over-watered them, and they dripped noisily. "Each semester I can take a free course. One of the perks of being a professor."

Adele hated those ferns. She met her future husband in one of Mr.

Z's classes. Her future ex-husband, she thinks ruefully. She cannot face editing the chapter. She mails it to the magazine without any changes but the pagination. It makes it easier to write back to Mr. Z.

*Thanks for the lead. How's your libido hanging?*

Her mother likely did not intend to kill herself. Adele's father was expected home and would have raised the garage door to park his car beside hers. He could not have missed the idling auto and naked wife in the front seat. This, in fact, is how the body is found. But it is Adele, thirteen, who spots her mother on the front seat of their Cordova. Her father had been called to her school to take her home from play practice because Adele had been dismissed from *The Sound of Music*.

What she remembers from that moment in the garage: Her mother's white jutting hip. The slight blue of the toes. The slack mouth, open in disappointment. Her father's voice, upon stepping from their car, muffled by the headphones she was wearing. The song: "Bad Girls." Her father's words: "That's not for you."

Adele had been dismissed from the play along with a boy who had come in her right hand. Parents were called. A long discussion ensued. Her father shuffled unhappily in a metal chair, pinching the creases in his gray pants.

One wayward handjob, and her mother succeeds in killing herself despite intentions to the contrary. This is what she should have studied, Adele thinks. She should have written a dissertation on suicide and handjobs – and how a PhD in Cultural studies is both. Working title: "I've Become My Mother!"

Her husband's tentative voice vibrates on her machine. "I've been thinking. I've been wondering." Adele has come home from a bar alone. After working all night to seduce a boy with broad shoulders and a buzz cut, she pushed him away after one kiss in the parking lot. His face in the neon of Al's Tavern turned ghostly but no less beautiful. His kiss, though, had felt bad on her mouth, his lips too fleshy, too pillowy, his tongue too insistent and energetic.

"What the fuck?" he'd said.

"Changed my mind," she told him. "Don't take it personally."

"How do I take it then?"

"Statistically. One of every seven women is a hopeless tease."

"You mean *bitch*."

"You say potato," she replied.

Adele clicks off her machine and dials her husband's number.

"Is this you?" he says.

"No more, no less."

"Do you know what time it is here?" he asks.

"We need to move," she says. "Together. Somewhere new. Start

over."

"Who's to say it won't happen all over?" he asks.

"It probably will," she says, "but we could get in a few good years. Then skip town again."

"Where?" he asks.

"Mississippi," she says. "We'd never think of living there."

"Don't we need to think about life's necessities? Employment, for example?"

"We'd work hard for the money."

"So this is a joke?" he says.

"No joke."

"I've never been to Mississippi," he says.

"Every school kid can spell it," she says. "It's the first long word they learn."

Her father calls the first night in their new condo. "Why Hattiesburg, Miss?" he wants to know.

"It's your birthday," she says. "I'm supposed to be calling you."

"The big seven-oh. I feel like Methuselah."

"That's a really old guy, I assume. How's the babe scene?"

"You know who Methuselah is," he insists.

"You just said it was you. I'm yakking with Mr. M himself."

"I'm dating a younger woman," her father says. "She's a computer expert of some kind. Forty something, wants to get married, have kids if we can make it happen. Can you imagine? At my age?"

"Have you set a date?"

"We're thinking the summer," he says. "June wedding. Or maybe this weekend. Can you get away?"

"Will I like her?"

"You don't have to call her Mom," he says and laughs. "I'll fax you details. Give what's-his-name my best."

Adele's mother used to claim that John Kennedy made a pass at her. Adele heard her tell a man at one of their parties that she'd had sex at 30,000 feet in a commercial airliner and in a submarine two hundred feet below sea level. The man had said, "You were in the Navy?"

When Adele was picked for the middle school cheerleading squad, her mother took all the chosen girls to the Village Inn Pizza parlor to celebrate. The conversation took a turn, and her mother announced that she was pregnant when she got married. "Otherwise," she said and rolled her eyes. The gesture was lost on all the girls but Adele, who became upset. "Oh, come on," her mother said to her. "It's not like he's your real father."

Never again, though, would she talk with Adele about her true parentage.

"Don't you know how to take a joke?" she'd say. "You'd better

learn." She sucked on her cigarette and exhaled violently. "You of all people. What do you think is in store for women like us?"

The magazine prints her chapter after many editing changes have reduced it to near-meaningless pulp. Adele is delighted. The publication, though, does not change her life. Mississippi does not change her life, either, but it permits her to believe change is possible.

Her reconciled marriage works. For now. Both love to say "Y'all." Everybody in town smokes and has porches. Her father's marriage leads to an immediate pregnancy, but there are complications. His bride must stay in bed every hour of the day until the fetus is viable. That's how the doctors put it. It's how Adele comes to think of her life: viable.

In Hattiesburg, the summer air is as heavy with water as the air about rose bushes is heavy with sweetness. The party that has not happened yet, the one Adele dreads, the one where she strips off her clothes to entertain the crowd, the one where she slips away with one specific stranger or two, the one where she finds herself drunk enough to slit her wrists. It waits patiently for her arrival.

Is it so bad to live in the shadow of this celebration?

When she graduated from college, her father said this: "I can see her in you. She's alive still."

It had sounded to Adele like the words of a song she could dance to.