

ARIEL IN LOVE, SUMMER 1999

Bruce Pratt

Glenn wears his ponytail slipped through a dented pewter napkin ring and is so reedy it's a wonder it doesn't crumple in a stiff breeze. He fancies himself an artist, and while he's sold a few seascapes in the tourist galleries on Ocean Avenue, he spends most days slapping Benjamin Moore on summer cottages to manage the rent on a shack near the salt pond. He has an art degree from a school I've never heard of, though Ariel assures me it's a fully accredited college in Kansas, the state Glenn blew in from, and where he claims to work the balance of the year for his father's construction company.

Glenn's claim to island art fame is a four-foot square canvas hanging in Eddie Floyd's Lobster Pound. An off-kilter combination of four intertwined capital letters, KEFT, Eddie gave Glenn three hundred bucks for it last August and tells tourists that the letters are his initials and those of his partner Kendra

True. Glenn told Ariel that the letters stand for Knowledge, Earth, Freedom, and Truth. For me, they stand for Knows Every Fucking Thing.

Ariel favors flakes like Glenn, cocky, half-a-bubble-off-plumb poseurs who harbor a deep disdain for the world but expect a comfortable living from it. It's not her fault. It's genetic. When I began dating her mother, Lucinda, she'd completed her graduate degree in dance, and I'd just celebrated my first anniversary at the lab. When her lease was up, she moved her stunning dancer's body in with me. Six months later, pregnant with Ariel, she began blaming me for her killing her career.

We had nine good months and survived thirty-two miserable ones.

Glenn met Ariel on the beach when he crashed a party her friends from school gave for her twenty-fourth birthday. A week later he gave her a poster with the word *LOve* painted two dozen times in crimson on a pale yellow background. When I asked Ariel why the L and the O were always capitalized, she said, "Didn't ask."

First chance alone with Glenn, I said, "What's the significance of the capital O in the painting you gave Ariel?"

He sighed, as a child might before asking "Are we there yet?" and said, "It symbolizes life and the seasons, and it's about orgasm, too."

I didn't need my PhD in psychology to have guessed that much.

Since Ariel began seeing Glenn, I've been offering an atheist's best prayers that Labor Day arrives with her ensconced at school and him banging nails on the prairie, hoping neither one's infatuation will last the winter. After a false start that landed her on the six-year plan, Ariel's a semester from her Communications BA from Emerson. I'm just across town, so I hesitate to phone during the week, fearing she'll worry I'm peering over her shoulder, and because she's swamped under a full course load and her internship at the Globe that's part of her capstone project.

Still we're not strangers. Whenever dorm life gets too boring or chaotic, Ariel comes home for a few days. We stay up too late, and I neglect my work but savor each moment, aware they will be less frequent once Ariel's on her own. And it's not lost on me that this may be our last season together on the island. I fear the loneliness that portends.

When Lucinda dumped me, she dumped Ariel, too, though she keeps in touch by postcards with return addresses in care of names neither of us recognize. Ariel doesn't remember Lucinda, so she can't miss her. I remember her too well to forget.

When Ariel left the house this morning, I was dozing in my hammock, having drifted off while reading a biography of Jung. She pushed her bicycle alongside me and said, "I'm going to East Beach. Glenn thought the light would be good there this morning. I don't have to be at work until two. Lunch at noon?"

"Sure," I said, blinking my eyes open and shut.

I watched Ariel pedal away, recalling teaching her to ride her first bike two summers after the winter Lucinda left us, and remembered her snuffling into my chest as I set her in the blue Adirondack chair to bandage her abraded knees when, despite training wheels, she'd overturned her blue Schwinn in the gravel driveway. I thought then that she was the most beautiful four-year-old in the world, and nothing since has altered my opinion.

As she wheeled into the street, the sunlight firing her hair and flashing through the hedges on her tanned calves, in the manner which only a father can appreciate a daughter's beauty, I was smitten by her athletic grace, and the unflinching honesty of her carriage.

Lucinda swore after Ariel was born that I cared only for her. "She's become one of your experiments," she declared, pacing our frigid apartment during a Valentine's weekend blizzard. When I didn't reply, she lit a cigarette

from one smoldering in the ashtray and added, "We've mated, conceived a subject, delivered it to your lab, and the rest, Dr. Freud, is up to you."

A week later, Ariel babbling in her Snugli, we wandered home from the park through the gray of a March afternoon to a deserted apartment and began our life as a duo. In the ensuing twenty-three years, Ariel has witnessed the loss of three potential stepmothers, while surviving the natural vicissitudes afflicting the single parent and child without a hateful moment.

I closed my eyes for another half an hour, then wrestled myself out of the hammock and ambled inside to brew a pot of coffee. The sky and sea shone a diamond-hard cobalt; the wind crawled westerly. Staring across the dimpled bay, the smoke from the morning ferry rising through the horizon, my mind was rent by a vision of Glenn making love to Ariel as my soul was pierced by a hatred whose fairness I did not question but whose petulance unnerved me.

I splashed water on my face. I saw the blue Schwinn, its red handle bar streamers, baseball cards riffling in the spokes. The kettle whistled. I plucked it from the flame resolving to be kinder to Glenn, not because that would be Ariel's preference, but to prevent him from emerging as my enemy should her affection for him deepen. I ground beans for the press, and, adding the boiling water, pondered what I'd say if Ariel announced that Glenn was the man with

whom she wanted to begin her own life—that new entity dependent on me for neither sustenance nor direction, that fracture that would rive my heart.

Before I could imagine that possibility, Ariel burst up the back steps into the kitchen and shrieked, “He’s such a fucking jerk.”

I suspected I knew, but said, “Who, honey?”

“Glenn,” she said, her voice rising.

I said nothing while Ariel leaned against the sink, arms folded, lips pursed. Half a minute later she said, “He wasn’t at East Beach, so I rode to Gasset’s Cove, where I saw someone painting.”

“Glenn?” I asked.

“Glenn, and a girl sitting on a drift log with her back against the dunes.”

“Someone you know?” I said.

“No, some girl Glenn says he met this morning,” Ariel said, opening and closing the refrigerator. “And get this. She was stark naked, one arm in her lap, the other across her boobs.”

“I’m sorry, Ari,” I said, recognizing the same searing sadness in her voice as when Phillip, her high school flame, dumped her by email.

“Glenn never asked *me* to pose, but some redhead with monster tits comes along, and he’s all over that,” Ariel said, slapping the sink. “And get this. He had the balls to tell *me* to leave because I was making *her* nervous.”

I stared into the steam of my coffee.

Ariel said, “Are there any good men?”

I couldn’t answer.

Ariel stared a moment at the floor, then asked, “When this happens, do you think I feel like you did when Lucinda left?”

“Worse,” I said. “I wasn’t blindsided.”

Ariel stared at me and shrugged. “You’re the shrink, Dad. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” I said,

“Come on. You wrote the textbook on mating behavior. Tell me what I need to know,” Ariel said.

“I ran rats through mazes for that,” I said.

“Men are rats,” Ariel said.

“You lead with your heart Ari,” I said.

“You don’t?” she said, fixing her eyes on mine.

“I did,” I said. “And I fear it’s your legacy from Lucinda and me.”

“You’ve stopped?” Ariel asked, gathering me to her as if enfolding in her arms the griefs of the world.

I replied, “I have, Ari, but I can’t say I’m better for it,” wincing from the pain of a wish fulfilled.

Bruce Pratt is an award-winning short story writer, poet, and playwright. He is the author of the novel *The Serpents of Blissful* from Mountain State Press, the poetry collection *Boreal* from Antrim House Books, *The Trash Detail: Stories* from New Rivers Press, and the poetry chapbook *Forms and Shades* from Clare Songbirds Publishing. His fiction, poetry, drama, and essays have appeared in more than forty magazines, reviews, and journals across the United States, and in Canada, Ireland, and Wales. He is the editor of *American Fiction*.