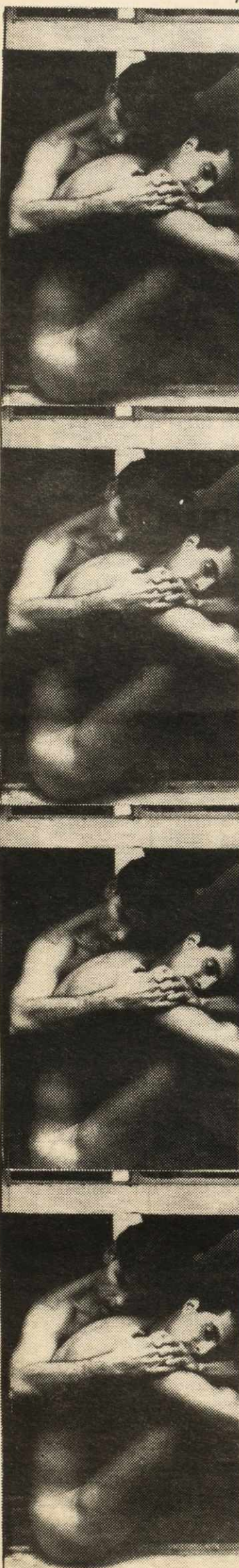


# GEORGE AND THE CAT



**I** began this particular Monday by losing a contact lens down the bathroom sink drain. The optician told me over the telephone that the fitter would be out for a week and to call back next Monday for an appointment. He hardly believed me when I said it was a matter of life or death, and he told me jokingly that it would probably do my ego some good to suffer the humility of eyeglasses for a week.

"Look on the bright side," he had said, "people are often a lot smarter-looking when they wear glasses." It wasn't exactly the response I was seeking, and I certainly didn't appreciate the implication that I looked stupid without glasses. Still, I was in no mood to argue so I made an appointment for the following week and then headed off to the university to get some reading done.

It was almost noon by the time I reached the Dalhousie Student Union Building. The cafeteria was beginning to fill with noisy students. I waded through the queue for coffee, hunted down a place to study, and found myself at a table-for-two in a row of tables-for-two. There was a blue vinyl bench seat attached to a plant-filled divider which looked as if it provided more comfort than the orange, moulded fibreglass chairs. The rest of the adjacent tables were occupied by single patrons, couples and groups, all of whom were studying, talking or eating. I set my coffee onto the table, staking claim to the dingy arborite, and as I unpacked my books I took a quick survey of the area for friends, classmates, or potential hazards to heart, mind or pure thought.

Still scanning the room, I sat down and reached for one of the textbooks I'd piled on the opposite corner of my table, and in the process I tipped my cup and sent a tsunami of Juan Valdez's not-so-finest over the whole table and all of my text books. My first impulse was to throw a temper tantrum but thought better of that idea when I looked up and realized I'd already drawn enough attention to myself by exclaiming FUCK quite loudly and with full feeling. I removed the soaked, stained books and began to dab at them feebly with a single sopping napkin. The oatmeal cookie I'd purchased to eat with my coffee was also awash, and busily soaking up coffee into each of its dry pores. I stared at it, imagining how good it would taste, all mushy and drowned in hot coffee, but I was too much of a chickenshit to scoop it from the tabletop, saturated and crumbling, and pop it in my mouth.

I suppose I looked pretty dazed and ridiculous. From around me there came a few half-stifled snickers, and even some outright laughter, so I did my level best to look calm and controlled. Well, I wasn't, and so my face had more a look of confident hysteria than self-assurance.

I turned with violence when I felt a tap on the elbow. It was the guy at the table to my right. He was offering me a handful of paper napkins. "Here," he grinned with sympathetic amusement, "I thought you might be able to use these."

You know how it is when you screw up really hard in a public place and the embarrassment puts you into mild shock? Well, before this guy tapped me on the elbow every ounce of my concentration was bent upon keeping intact my constituent faculties - and when I was jarred out of my head suddenly, my brain was left unprepared for communication with the external world. "Huh!?" I managed a prehistoric grunt.

The fellow laughed. "Take these." He shoved the balled up napkins into my outstretched hand and then forced my fingers to close around them.

I felt stupid, so I laughed. (What other recourse did I have?) "Oh, thanks. I, uh, I guess my mind was a million miles away. Thanks again." I set to mopping up my mess.

"Hey, my pleasure." A broad smile beamed across at me followed by an open hand. "My name's Evan."

"Good to meet you, I'm Shawn."

We shook hands.

"Bad day?" He inquired with a knowing smirk.

I laughed again, wiping away the last of the coffee crisis from the table. "Yeah, you could call it that; I started out this morning by losing a contact lens down the drain."

Evan grimaced, "Ouch. I hope it was insured."

I shook my head. "Are you kidding? Now this. I hope the next disaster happens soon. I don't want to spend the rest of today worrying about when I can expect it."

Evan was confused, "What?"

"Bad things always occur in threes."

"Nonsense. You're just being superstitious." He smoothed down the front of his plaid shirt and tucked the excess material into his pants. "Bad things do not always happen in threes; that's just an old wives' tale."

"No; or at least not for everyone. Just me."

"You're paranoid."

"No," I shook my head and gave him my best philosophic frown. "I have simply come to recognize that no matter what I do, the universe will unfold. It's just the way things happen for me, and I've come to accept it, that's all."

Evan laughed again. I excused myself and bought another coffee, then returned to the table. Evan had picked up his book and was reading, but when I returned he set it aside once again.

I took my seat, and sipped hot and bitter coffee from the styrofoam cup. Evan pulled a pack of cigarettes from inside the denim jacket that lay beside him on the blue bench seat. "Cigarette?"

"Sure, thanks," I replied. He placed two John Players Specials in

his mouth, lit both and handed one to me. Evan began talking about the book he was reading when I inquired. It was Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. I hadn't read it but I'd seen the film at Wormwood's in the summer. This led into a discussion about modern American social history. I mentioned that I was taking a course in this subject and Evan remarked that he'd taken the same course the previous year and had become interested in modern American literature as a result. After talking books we talked music, and we discovered that we shared a common interest in blues.

After several hours, and untold quantities of smokes and bad coffee, I discovered that it was nearly five-

ing card said simply, "Thinking of you - for the last time. Kelly." I guess that meant our relationship was over for sure. I was content to allow her the last word after all. It had been exactly this spirit that had attracted me to Kelly in the first place. It was strange that while I no longer felt anything for her, I still loved her acidic wit. Though I did not admit it at the time, Kelly's parting shot was a pretty damn good one, and it was one that I laughed about for many years after.

Evan took an intense interest in the story of my tragic break-up. It was really no tragedy as far as I was concerned, but Evan teased me that I was merely hiding my tear-stained eyes to protect my machismo. He

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thirty. I was to have met my girlfriend at five, and I hadn't done a scrap of school work. I gathered up my things, apologized to Evan for running off so abruptly, promised to pick up the conversation at our next meetings, then made my frantic exit.

Lately, Kelly and I had not been getting along very well, so needless to say she was unimpressed by my lateness. Our relationship was two and a half years cold. We'd tried living together when we first met but broke up shortly after. Both of us were single for a month following this first break when we decided to try it again without the cohabitation.

That had been two years ago. Now we were both comfortably bored, and securely frustrated by our relationship. Remaining together seemed less strain than breaking up, so here we were. But I guess when all was said and done, it really wouldn't have taken very much at this point to bring our relationship to a catastrophic finale: My lateness provided the perfect catalyst to ignite more than two years of dissatisfaction. Right there in the Thirsty Duck, Kelly, in her loudest voice, poured out every single incident of the times I'd been inconsiderate towards her. She told me that I was idiosyncratic, neurotic and annoyingly shallow! I retaliated in kind, and said she was selfish, manipulating and suffocating! My parents were crazy! Hers were uptight... as was she! I was a fucking, shit-for-brains bastard! She was... She left before I could respond. (Kelly always had the last word, damn her!)

Not this time, though. I wanted the last word for once. On my way home I picked up a postcard, addressed it to Kelly and wrote: "I guess this is finally it. You can keep all the memories, I'm not very fond of them. With feeling, Shawn."

Three days later, just as I was beginning to regret my impulsiveness, a candy box full of dog shit arrived from Kelly. The accompany-

ing card said simply, "Thinking of you - for the last time. Kelly." I guess that meant our relationship was over for sure. I was content to allow her the last word after all. It had been exactly this spirit that had attracted me to Kelly in the first place. It was strange that while I no longer felt anything for her, I still loved her acidic wit. Though I did not admit it at the time, Kelly's parting shot was a pretty damn good one, and it was one that I laughed about for many years after.

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insisted that we go out and get drunk and said he'd even buy. It was Thursday, the first day of the weekend for most students, and I had no Friday classes. Besides, I have never been known to turn down the offer of a few free beers. The Seahorse was too noisy; the Flamingo had a band and a prohibitive cover charge, so we settled on the Up Here Bar as the place in which we would drown our lives.

Evan and I found the place empty except for a lone bartender and a single middle-aged man who was well into his cups. The bartender hurried over to our window-side, corner table. She seemed almost grateful to us for helping to rescue her from the guy at the bar. She said he was boring and drunk and dropping every desperate hint conceivable that he simply could not leave without her phone number. The more she refused, she told us, the longer he stayed and the more persistent he became, and the more he drank. She told us that she was a lesbian and that he was wasting her time. He said he could reform her; "cure" her had been his exact words. She said it was at that point when Evan and I had walked into the bar. Following the story, Evan introduced me to the bartender named Kate. She was dark-haired, dark-eyed, and her Annie Lennox hairstyle suited her sharp facial features and her tall, fit frame.

A mischievous grin stole across Evan's face. We ordered our drinks, and in addition he ordered a pen and cocktail napkin. Kate left with a wicked, knowing smile on her face and returned shortly with our order. Evan scrawled something on the napkin and handed it back to Kate with instructions to give it to her bayside Cyrano. Kate winked at Evan and hurried back to the bar.

I felt I had to ask... "So, what phone number did you give Kate?"

Evan washed the sly grin from his

lips with a drink from his tumbler of scotch and soda, "Dial-a-Prayer." I smiled, then burst out laughing when he added, "Well, it is for people who don't have one...and I figured that the guy could probably use a prayer or two."

We watched amused as the forty-something, suburban desperado swaggered, or rather staggered, proudly down the stairs and out into the night time streets of another busy Halifax downtown Thursday. A few more patrons had drifted into the bar by this time. On her next trip round to our table, Kate brought us a free round of drinks to thank Evan for his help.

Our conversation throughout the evening was subdued and centred on academics at first. As the liquor flowed, so did the topics of discussion, and we digressed from school into other, more interesting things. Evan spoke of his family, and his two brothers, one who was younger and one older, only separated by a year on either side of him. His parents were divorced, like mine, and he said his mother worried about him too much and his father cared about him too little. Also like mine. There was thinly veiled hostility in his voice when he spoke of his father. Evan didn't refer to him as father, or dad, but simply as "he", which he ejaculated each time through clenched teeth as if the mere mention of this parent angered him.

Evan ordered another round of drinks which was meant to signal a change of topic. It was my turn to speak, and Evan pressed me to reveal what he called the sordid details of my sorrowful break-up and broken heart. In a few minutes I was able to give him a detached and disinterested history of my relationship with Kelly. Naturally, he asked about the sex. I confessed that after only a few weeks into our relationship I'd grown very bored of our sexual encounters. Both of us were pretty conventional and conservative in bed, and after a while, sex became more of a routine than anything - once a month, whether we needed it or not! I admitted I was probably as much to blame that our relationship could only sustain such a dry toast sex-life. But it wasn't as if I hadn't tried. The one "kinky" overture I had made towards her met with:

"Shawn, I have sex with you out of duty, not because I enjoy it. What makes you think that bringing another body into the picture will make it anymore interesting for either of us?" (We nearly split up over that comment but I foolishly accepted her apology and our relationship was unfortunately spared once again.)

Evan was intrigued by the three-some story. "So, you had another woman who was willing to sleep with you both? Wow!"

"No," I felt myself blush, "actually it was another man, a friend of Kelly's named Calvin. He and I got really stoned one night while we were waiting for Kelly to get home so we could go out. Cal told me that he'd had fantasies about the three of us. It made me feel sort of strange at the time, but later when I thought about it, the whole idea gave me

kind of a thrill. I agreed to ask Kelly, but she, naturally, said no. I argued with her, and pointed out that Calvin was very attractive and athletic. They spent a lot of time together as it was and for all I knew they were already bopping each other. But it wasn't that. Kelly just didn't seem to want to have sex, with me or anyone else for that matter. I know that Calvin was really disappointed. He stopped hanging around us after that. I think he was probably pretty embarrassed, too."

"Maybe he was just disappointed in you," Evan offered the speculation with a gesture, drink in hand.

"Maybe." I took a long drink. I was parched from telling the story and a little embarrassed for having told Evan. The alcohol had probably got the better of my conservative good sense. I realized that I'd known this guy for four days and I'd just divulged a choice and deviant tidbit from my sex life to him. I had never taken to anyone quite as quickly as I'd taken to Evan. We seemed to become instant friends. Though it had been only four days, I felt that I'd known him for years. For a moment I felt like a jerk for being so self-conscious, and I laughed. He asked what I was laughing at.

"I can't believe that I just told you that story. For Christ's sake Evan, besides myself, Kelly and Calvin, you're the only other person who knows."

"Don't let it bother you," he said, swirling the ice around in his scotch and soda. "I wouldn't dream of telling anyone; and anyway, you didn't have to tell me if you hadn't wanted to."

I trusted him; I trusted him implicitly, though I did not know why. "Yeah, I suppose you're right." I held up my glass deliberately, hoping I could get Kate's attention. She was very busy, besieged on three sides by liquor quaffing patrons. Kate waved at me indicating that two fresh drinks were forthcoming. I turned my focus back to Evan who was watching me closely, a broad smile spread across his face. I smiled back and laughed self-consciously. I could feel the alcohol and it was making me lightheaded. "It's funny that I've only known you for four days and already I feel as if I've

known you all my life."

"Yes. It's true. Not only am I intelligent and blessed with charm, grace and good looks..." he began, grinning devilishly, "but I'm friendly too."

I could not help my smile, "Uh huh?"

"But seriously, I was just thinking the same thing about you. You were so funny the other day when you spilled your coffee..."

"What do you mean, 'funny'?"

"I guess helpless is probably the

better word." We both laughed. "Helpless." I nodded, "Yes, you're right."

"Of course I'm right. I'm seldom wrong." Again the devilish grin. "I'd seen you around the SUB and around campus before...Isn't it funny how you recognize so many faces of the regulars who hang out at the SUB? I often have the urge to strike up conversations with other SUB regulars when I see them elsewhere. Then I remember that I don't really know them and that they'd probably think I was weird if I did speak."

"An unfortunately truth of our modern, urban society." I replied.

Evan gave me a pained look. "Please, let's not get into social criticism, I'm having fun." He smiled, yawned and stretched. I noticed that the T-shirt he wore beneath his checked, flannel shirt had something written on the front. I loved T-shirts, and having acquired a unique collection of my own, I was curious to see what was on Evan's T-shirt. "What does your shirt say?"

"Pardon?" he asked.

"Your T-shirt; what does it say?"

Evan eyed me silently for a moment. Slowly, a mysterious smile rose on his lips. "People ask that same question all the time. As a matter of fact, you're the fifth person today who's been curious enough to ask."

"T-shirts with pictures, logos, sayings - no matter how inane - are one of the single greatest inventions of the twentieth century, in my opinion. I sort of collect them. I guess, that's why I'm curious." It was a childish obsession for a twenty-two year old but an obsession all the same.

Evan leaned forward slowly, his elbows propping up his clasped hands upon which he rested his chin, not lazily but almost sternly. "Do you know what I say to people who share your intrigue with my T-shirt?" I shook my head and was eager to hear some witty line. Evan's face held its solemn cast, except for the very corners of his mouth which were minutely upturned. "If you want to know what my T-shirt says, you either have to be with me when I undress for bed at night or when I dress in the morning."

Evan sat back in his seat and

*"If you want to know what my T-shirt says, you either have to be with me when I undress for bed at night or when I dress in the morning." Evan sat back in his seat and smirked.*

smirked. I laughed. I laughed because I didn't know what else to do. Evan's manner had been such that I couldn't be sure if he was telling me or if he was telling me (if you get my meaning).

Kate brought another round of drinks which helped to break the growing uneasiness. There seemed to be unspoken agreement between us to drop the subject. We carried on with light conversation. Kate brought another round. I watched Evan telling Kate a story about a

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