

Segue

online literary journal

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Black String Bikini

Ben and his girlfriend, Rachelle, drove up to the Bay Area for the long Thanksgiving weekend. Ben was twenty-two, in his last year of college, and had been dating Rachelle for a year.

They'd intended to spend a good chunk of the break with Ben's parents, who lived in Palo Alto, but the day after Thanksgiving they got restless and drove to San Francisco where they rode the cable cars, ate in Chinatown, and generally acted like tourists. That night Ben and Rachelle booked a motel room, had sweaty sex, and then slept, entwined. The next day they ran through a similar touristy itinerary.

On Sunday morning they met Ben's parents in the city for brunch. After the check had been paid and Ben and Rachelle were getting ready to leave, Ben's father said, "Ben, before you go, we have something to tell you." He was a software programmer, Ben's father, typically more comfortable interfacing with a computer than relating with people.

"Yeah, sure," Ben said, "but the freeways are going to be jammed." He was antsy to get back to Santa Barbara and his college lifestyle. "Can we make it quick?"

"It's important," said Ben's mother. "We would have told you sooner, but we didn't want to ruin your vacation." Because of her grave tone, Ben settled back in his chair with a sinking feeling and thoughts of cancer, brain tumors.

"I'm going to excuse myself," Rachelle said, and pushed her chair back.

"She doesn't need to leave," Ben said. "Does she?"

"Maybe you could give us a minute," Ben's mother said. She reached over and squeezed Rachelle's hand.

"What's going on," Ben asked, once Rachelle was gone, "is someone sick?"

"No, it's nothing like that," Ben's father said. "We're fine. It's not a big deal."

"What do you mean it's not a big deal?" said Ben's mother. She shot her husband a cross look.

"Of course it's big. I'm just saying that no one is dying."

"Can one of you please tell me what is going on?" Ben asked.

"What your father is trying to tell you is that we're getting a divorce."

His parents summarized years of simmering estrangement. Then the past two years of growing frustration, anger, failed marriage counseling. Ben's mother did most of the talking, although his parents agreed that since Ben was now a man and close to finishing college, it was an ideal time to split.

Just as Ben's mother was wrapping things up, she started to cry. "It's hard, but we're doing what's best for both of us," she said, and reached for a cloth napkin to dab her eyes. Then she and Ben stood up and hugged as a busboy tried to clear away the water glasses and empty plates.

As Ben rubbed his mother's back, he looked over at his father; his mouth was turned down, and he slowly nodded his head.

∴

Ben spent the last weeks of the semester trying to focus on his final exams, but his parent's divorce—which felt so wrong—threw him into funk. He brooded over it, his mind raced in circles. Most nights he would toss and turn in bed. He had always been mastered by his emotions, like his mother, a woman who never questioned the unbending truth of what she felt.

At the start of the semester, Rachelle had moved into Ben's off-campus apartment. Ben, who had grown accustomed to damp bras hanging in the bathroom and the other clutter that Rachelle created, suspected she was the one. They had met at a bookstore, where each of them leafed through books in the self-help section, which later Ben thought odd because Rachelle was the sunniest, most optimistic person he had ever known. She'd confront most setbacks with a smile and a cliché: "Oh, that wasn't meant to be anyway." Although she didn't know it, Ben had had his eye on Rachelle for months before they met. He'd seen her walking around campus – her sun-kissed, surfer girl hair and insouciant stride drawing his attention. For Ben – a hand wringer, nail biter, worrier—Rachelle's breezy personality was magnetic.

"How can they divorce after so many years together?" Ben asked Rachelle one morning as she poured coffee into a to-go mug. "It just doesn't make sense."

Rachelle, commiserative but after days of listening to Ben fret also ready for a change of subject, shrugged and said, "It's unusual, yes, but I read about a couple who divorced in their seventies, after being together for over forty years."

"Forty years—that's got to be like cutting your arm off."

"Or maybe it's like dropping a heavy load," Rachelle said, as she checked her shoulder bag to make sure it held her textbooks. "Besides, does the divorce minimize your parents' time together? Aren't we all just living from moment to moment?" She zipped up her jacket. "Are you coming to the library?"

"Nah."

"Don't worry so much, babes," Rachelle said. "Stuff happens."

"I know, I know," Ben responded. He didn't, though, not really. He hadn't yet seen that life doesn't necessarily follow a predictable script. Ben and Rachelle would spend the next ten years together. After college, they'd move to L.A. and get jobs at prestigious marketing firms. They would buy a loft, frequent trendy restaurants, and vacation in Europe. Ben would be happy. Then Rachelle would push for marriage. "Don't you want a family?" she'd ask. If Ben could be honest, his answer would be no. Though he couldn't explain why – selfishness, perhaps – he'd just know it. Yet, he'd love Rachelle and wouldn't want to lose her. So he'd buy an engagement ring and propose. They would plan a big June wedding, and the invitations would be barely sent out before Ben would get cold feet. As a distraction, he'd take up surfing, although he would mostly just paddle out to calm waters and float on his board. Then, with the wedding just weeks away, Ben would tell Rachelle, "I just can't do it," which would crush her. Ben would plead with her to stay, to return to the way they'd been before, but it wouldn't work, and she'd leave him.

All this was yet to happen. At the time, in the off-campus home he shared with Rachelle, Ben clung to a rigid, happily-ever-after concept of love and marriage.

Rachelle slung her bag over her shoulder, pushed up on her toes, and gave Ben a kiss. "You worry too much," she said. "Cheer up." As she stepped through the front door, she gave Ben a quick wave and said, "Tootles."

∴

Ben's father moved out of his Palo Alto home and took an apartment in San Francisco. Ben had planned to drive north at the end of the semester and visit his mother and father separately, but his mother, at the end of a long, chatty phone conversation, told him that she'd be spending the week before Christmas at their family's condo in Maui with a man named Charles.

"Charles?" Ben asked.

"Yes, Charles. He's a friend of mine. He's divorced. I've known him for years. Since college, actually."

"A friend?"

"Don't start! He's a good friend. Okay? We fell out of touch. Then I joined Facebook. Why aren't you on Facebook?"

Ben mumbled something in reply. The divorce was one thing, but now Charles.

"Well, you should be," his mother continued. "I have pictures of you on my profile. Anyway, Charles friended me when things were awful with your father. Charles was really there for me. He listens! He's so empathetic." Ben knew this meant that Charles was different than his father. "Why don't you spend a couple of days in San Francisco with your father, and then you and Rachele can fly to Hawaii and use the condo. Charles and I leave the day after Christmas."

One night, as the end of the semester neared, Ben turned off the lights, crawled into bed, and said, "I really don't want to spend Christmas with some dude who's doing my mom."

Rachele turned so Ben could spoon her. "I know," she said, "it sucks." Then she tugged Ben's arm over her side and said, "Now warm my butt."

∴

Parking outside Ben's father's two-bedroom apartment on Russian Hill was brutal, but after circling for twenty minutes, Ben and Rachele found a spot. Ben's father met them at the door, and after the young couple dumped their bags in the guest bedroom, he gave them a tour. The apartment was beautiful: hardwood floors, tastefully decorated, a view of Alcatraz.

"It came furnished," Ben's father said over his shoulder as he pulled open the refrigerator. "You guys want a beer?"

The three of them sat on the balcony and drank and appreciated the evening view of the bay. For Ben, it felt strange not seeing his parents together. His father looked out of context. Still, Ben was surprised that his dad – if not seeming happy, exactly – appeared content.

At eight, Ben's father said, "I don't have any food, but I know a good restaurant. It's called Rex. It's just a short walk."

It was cold outside, by California standards, with thick wisps of fog.

Rex, in contrast, was warm and bright. Ben's father, after waving off the hostess, led the way to a square bar in the middle of the room, where they each took a seat.

The bartender was a tall, curvy woman, with cropped hair and a round chest. She smiled. “The programmer has returned,” she said. She looked about ten years younger than Ben’s father. “I see you brought your baby brother,” she said, and winked at Ben.

The father, missing the joke, said, “No, this is my son, Benjamin, and his girlfriend, Rachele. Guys, this is Aubrey.” Aubrey gave a two-fingered salute.

“Family for the holidays,” said Aubrey. “That calls for a little celebration.” She filled three shot glasses with a bright red liquid.

“No, thank you, we’re not the shot-drinking types,” said the father.

“Really? Well, you are tonight. I insist. One’s not going to kill you. They’re just watermelon shots anyway. You won’t even feel them.” She pushed the drinks forward and then stood with her arms akimbo until Rachele and the two men emptied their glasses.

They ordered quesadillas, chips with guacamole, two beers and a sauvignon blanc. As they ate, Aubrey would come over and ask Ben’s father questions. Had he added anything to the apartment? Was he looking forward to the New Year? Did he see that movie she had told him about? It became clear to Ben that his father was already something of a regular.

Once Aubrey leaned across the bar and plucked something out of Ben’s father’s hair.

As Ben’s father was paying the bill, he turned to Ben and Rachele and said, “So, guys, Aubrey’s family lives clear across the county. I’ve invited her to join us for dinner tomorrow night. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine by me,” said Rachele.

“Sure,” said Ben.

“Great,” said Ben’s father and he turned toward Aubrey. “Come by around seven.”

∴

The morning before Christmas, Ben woke to find Rachele wearing sweats and running shoes. “Morning, babes, I’m going for a jog,” she said.

Ben sat up in bed. “Do you think it’s a weird that that bartender is coming over here tonight?”

“A little,” Rachele said, as she stretched her hands upward and then bent from side to side. “It’s weird, it’s really weird. Were those boobs real?”

“You’re kidding, right? Real breasts don’t thrust out that insistently.” Rachele did some knee bends. “It’s just one night, Ben. It’ll be okay.” She grabbed his hand, yanked him out of bed, and gave his butt a little pat. “Come on, your dad is in the kitchen whipping up breakfast.”

As Rachele scooted out the front door, Ben, still wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, walked into the kitchen. “What smells so good?” he asked.

“A ham and cheese omelet,” said Ben’s father. He had always been the family cook. “Coffee?”

“Sure.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“Just half-and-half.”

Ben's father poured them each a cup. He split the omelet and served it up on two plates. He had made toast and he gave them each a slice. Ben's father stood and ate in the kitchen while Ben sat on a stool at the counter. They ate and drank their coffee mostly in silence. Ben's father asked Ben a few questions about school and Rachelle. They talked about the weather.

Ben and his father had never once discussed the divorce. This actually didn't surprise Ben, because his father wasn't one to freely share his thoughts, and Ben wasn't about to pry. Days after he learned of the divorce, Ben assumed that his father would be happy alone, content to spend time with his work and books and computer. In the future, however, it would be Ben's father who'd remarry within a few years (to a mousy nurse, not Aubrey), and actually start a second family. Ben's mother would discover she liked the freedom of being single. She'd blossom in a new career as a real estate agent, befriend a group of sassy divorcees who'd call themselves the Margarita Ladies, and over the years would keep a handful of monogamous relationships at arm's length.

In his San Francisco apartment, Ben's father cleaned up after breakfast, and told Ben he was going to the grocery store to pick up a few more supplies.

Ben went out and sat on the balcony. The view was like a postcard, with boats on the bay, Alcatraz, and fog seeping under the Golden Gate Bridge. As Ben soaked in the view, his cell phone rang.

It was his mother. "Merry Christmas, Benji," she said. "I know it's a day early, but who's keeping track? We just saw a sea turtle, Charles and I. We went snorkeling yesterday and saw it surfacing. They say seeing a turtle near the New Year bodes good luck for the entire year."

"Let's hope so," said Ben.

"Charles is just so wonderful! We're drinking a few too many Mai Thais, maybe, but that's okay. Right? Even if it isn't, who cares?"

Before Ben could say anything, his mother continued.

"We're having a great time. But how can you not have fun in Maui? It is paradise here – just paradise. I love it. Did I ever tell you that I had to practically force your father to buy the condo? It's probably gone up forty percent since we bought it."

Ben listened to his mother detail her trip for a while longer, before he made an excuse and got off the phone. Then he sent Rachelle a text: I love you. She sent one back: Babes, I love u 2 ;).

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Aubrey arrived at the apartment at seven sharp. She gave Ben's father a kiss on the cheek as he took her coat. She looked elegant, wearing a black skirt and stockings and a low-cut blouse. She had a big jar of caviar wrapped with a little bow that she gave to Ben's father. Aubrey floated around the room, commented on how handsome both men looked, and ended up next to Rachelle.

"You're so lucky to live in such a big place," she said. "Not like my little tin can. Rents are just crazy here. I don't know how I pull it off with my bartender salary, but I just make it work. And your view, I can't get enough of it! You can see the lights on the bridge. Ben, it must be awful having your parents divorce, even when you're an adult."

Aubrey's directness was strangely comforting to Ben. He exhaled as if he'd been holding in a deep breath. "I'm adjusting," he said.

“Adjusting, huh,” Rachelle said. The two women exchanged glances.
 “I see. It’s like that,” said Aubrey. “I’m sure this beautiful girlfriend of yours is helping out.” Aubrey reached an arm around Rachelle’s shoulder and gave her a little squeeze.

“It’s not like anything,” said Ben, “I just, you know, didn’t see it coming.”
 “In any event, thanks for allowing a strange woman to join you all on Christmas Eve.”

“We’re all happy you’re here,” said Ben’s father. “Come on, let’s sit down.” The four moved a few steps to the living room area where Ben’s father popped open a bottle of champagne that had been chilling in a bucket and poured everyone a glass. They added the caviar to a tray of hors d’oeuvres that rested on the coffee table. They drank and munched on finger foods. Then, tipsy from the champagne, Ben’s father said, “Let’s eat. Ben, can you give me a hand bringing the food to the table?”

Once they were all seated around the dinner table, Ben’s father said, “We have cranberries, turnips, scalloped potatoes, stuffing, pumpkin bread, and baked ham,” and pointed out each item. “Red or white wine, or more champagne – what’s your poison?”

Ben and his father chose red, while Aubrey and Rachelle drank more champagne. They passed the food around and loaded up their plates. They all polished off their drinks and then had another. The drinks seemed to loosen up Aubrey, and she started telling stories about the bar, laughing at her own punch lines. Ben’s father listened and laughed. Ben noticed that his father smiled throughout the meal. Aubrey also asked Ben a lot of questions. What was his major, how did he meet Rachelle, what were his plans after graduation? It felt to Ben that she was trying to win his approval.

“You know, you and your father don’t really look that much alike,” she said. “Do you agree, Rachelle?”

“Uh-huh. Except for the long eyelashes.”

“You are both very handsome, of course,” said Aubrey and she took a sip of her champagne.
 “You and Ben must really be looking forward to Maui. What are you planning to do?”

“Mainly lounge on the beach,” Rachelle said.

“I want to go whale watching,” added Ben.

Ben’s father pushed back his chair and started to reach for the empty plates, but Aubrey, with a hand on his thigh, said, “Don’t you dare. Where I come from, one person cooks and the other cleans.”

Ben’s father squeezed Aubrey’s hand and said, “I like that policy.”

Rachelle stood up and grabbed some empty glasses. “Let me help,” she said.

As Aubrey and Rachelle cleared the table, rinsed the dishes, and loaded the dishwasher, Ben’s father slipped a Frank Sinatra CD into the stereo. He and Ben then moved over to the living room and drank more wine. When the kitchen was almost cleaned, the song “I Get a Kick out of You” started to play.

“Oh, this is my favorite!” Aubrey said, and hustled into the living room. “I get no kick from a plane, flying too high...” she crooned. With both hands, she tugged Ben’s father out of his chair and said, “Come on, let’s dance.”

Ben watched for a bit as they spun around the room, then he joined Rachelle and helped her dry some wine glasses. Sinatra started to sing “South of the Border.” Rachelle said, “Care to dance, fella?” and she and Ben went to the living room where now both couples danced. When that song

ended, “The Way You Look Tonight” came on. As Sinatra sang, Some day, when I’m awfully low...Ben’s father twirled Aubrey and then twisted her in close. She pressed her body against his and he put his hands on her lower back and they started to kiss. The whole scene became a little too much for Ben so he grabbed Rachelle’s hand and led her into the guest bedroom. They closed the door and sat down on the bed.

“Do you think my father is about to get laid?”

“It looks like a possibility.”

“It’s so weird. I mean, the divorce isn’t even final yet.”

“Apparently neither one of your parents is a slow mover.”

“Apparently.”

“She is hot, you have to admit that.”

“Yeah, in a fake boob, come bang my brains out, sex kitten kind of way.”

Rachelle laughed. “Sex kitten – maybe that’s what your dad needs.”

“What! We’re talking about my dad. Just the image creeps me out.”

“Ben, sometimes we just need to get fucked.”

They talked for a little longer and then fell back on the bed. Rachelle rested her cheek on Ben’s chest. He kissed the top of her head and smelled her hair. As they lay there silently, Ben’s mind lingered on the phrase – need to get fucked. Ben had always found Rachelle to be an eager lover. But it wouldn’t be until far in the future, nine years after their engagement dissolved, when Rachelle was divorcing her husband, that Ben would learn she could turn to sex for emotional healing. They’d bump into each other at a trade show in Las Vegas, have cocktails “for old times,” and end up having sex in Ben’s hotel room—Rachelle on top, tears rolling down her cheeks as she climaxed. For a few months, they would meet in different L.A. hotels, Rachelle’s sexual appetite insatiable. She’d seem unable to tap into her normal buoyant personality, her moods alternating between sadness at the end of her marriage and anger that she would now have to share custody of her daughter. Ben, who’d be mourning the sudden death of his mother in a car crash, would also find comfort in their arrangement. Though, with the passing of time, he’d push for more; still a bachelor, he’d grow to regret his inability to commit. Not content with just the physical, he’d want a real relationship, a second chance. But Rachelle, preoccupied with her divorce and wary of getting burned by Ben again, would resist. So they’d split again and fade apart.

“Hey,” Rachelle said now, on the bed, her eyes shut, “we’re going to be in Maui tomorrow. Did I tell you I bought a new bathing suit?” She yawned. “Babes, I’m so tired.” Ben helped her strip down to her underwear and tucked her under the covers.

Restless, Ben listened at the door, didn’t hear anything, so walked out to the living room, which was empty. He grabbed a beer and went out on the balcony. Ben could hear the low rumble of house parties and a foghorn. He sat and sipped his beer. Eventually he went back inside to the fridge to get another bottle, but feeling buzzed thought better of it and decided to join Rachelle. As he made his way down the hallway to his bed, he could see light shining under his father’s bedroom door.

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The next morning, Ben and Rachelle woke up early, packed their travel bags, and stripped the bed. Rachelle went to the shower while Ben made his way to the kitchen. When Ben turned the corner, he saw his dad seated at the counter examining the front page of the newspaper. Aubrey stood behind him, gently rubbing his shoulders. His father had a wide, blissful smile, so different than the thoughtful countenance Ben was used to seeing. The scene and his father's happiness actually gave Ben a jolt of joy.

"Coffee? Eggs? Toast? Breakfast is on me," Aubrey said. She was wearing a pink, woman's robe with matching slippers that perfectly fit her feet. Ben suspected then that this wasn't the first time Aubrey had spent the night.

Ben said yes to all three food items and took the sports page from his dad as he sat down. He and his dad discussed football, the NFL playoffs, and the craziness of the college bowl season.

"You're both such men. Is that all you can talk about?" Aubrey said, already comfortable filling the girlfriend's role of nag. As she served Ben his plate, she looked at him and said, "Thank you for letting me join you last night."

"Don't thank me. Thank my dad."

"Yes—he's been thanked." She leaned over and kissed the father's cheek, which elicited from him an impish smile.

After Ben polished off his breakfast and showered, he and Rachelle were ready to leave for the airport. The four of them said their goodbyes at the door; Rachelle hugged Ben's father and Aubrey tussled Ben's hair as one might a nephew.

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In Maui, Ben's mother and Charles were there to meet Ben and Rachelle at the airport. Charles wore a loud Hawaiian shirt and said, "Nice to finally meet you, champ," as he shook Ben's hand.

They drove in a convertible. The rushing wind made small talk a challenge. Ben languorously slumped next to Rachelle in the backseat as they sped under an azure sky.

Once they made it to the condo, they unloaded the car and moved inside. Rachelle said she was going for a swim and left to change into her bathing suit. Charles and Ben's mother soon bustled about, blending a batch of cocktails, pulling cold shrimp and tartar sauce from the fridge, and arranging flowers on the table where that night the two couples would eat Mahi-Mahi. Ben watched the scene with dread. He felt embarrassed by the childlike animosity he felt toward Charles. It irked him.

After an hour or so, Ben's mother said, "Why don't you check on Rachelle?" Ben jumped at the chance to escape. After walking through the condo's sliding backdoors, Ben saw the ocean and heard beachgoers splashing. He tilted his head upward to let the sun beat on his face. Then he shifted his gaze toward the water where Rachelle bobbed in the waves, less than fifty yards away. He walked down to the beach, past a group of kids digging in the sand, until he reached the edge of the water. Ben stood as waves rolled in and soaked his sneakers. He was happy to just stay in this moment, spying on the woman he loved. Rachelle eventually spotted him, smiled, waved, and started toward the shore.

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On a crisp fall afternoon Ben would see Rachelle for the last time. They'd bump into each other at an airport terminal, Rachelle with her adult daughter, and Ben, who finally married in his late forties, with his wife. It would be more than two decades since Ben last saw Rachelle. They would chuckle politely, but wouldn't embrace or agree to blend their groups together for a latte at the airport's Starbucks; any flickering passions were long ago extinguished. The four travelers would, however, talk for a few minutes, before Rachelle and her daughter break away to catch a connecting flight. Ben would watch as Rachelle walks away. Her hair would be flecked with grey, and age would force her to move just a little more slowly, but Ben would be able to detect a carefree skip in her step—palpable happiness with just being alive—that came so easily to her as a young woman.

As Rachelle blends into the crowd, what Ben's mind would chose to flash back to is that moment outside his parent's condo in Maui, when Rachelle came out of the ocean, salt water dripping off her hair and black string bikini, her face flush with the glow of youth. When she had embraced him, all the anxiety Ben felt melted away. The memory would be so vivid, it would warm Ben and charge him with such joy that he'd take his wife, twirl her, and laugh. Then they'd slowly dance around the terminal, next to stewardesses and tourists, as the fluorescent lights flicker.

Author Notes

*Mark Richardson's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Switchback, Crime Factory, Nth Position, the anthology D*CKED, and Thirst for Fire. Richardson lives in Northern California and works as a marketing writer in Silicon Valley.*

About the Work

“Black String Bikini” was inspired by a story written by Alix Ohlin, one of my favorite writers. Her story included abrupt jumps into the future. I'd never seen that before and I really, really liked it. So many stories have back-story, of course, so why can't you have significant glimpses into the future? I've since had a chance to ask Alix what inspired her story. She said it was particularly influenced by *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark, which, according to Alix, “is full of flash forwards—it has this really confident narration that doesn't mind spiraling forward in time to inform you of the fates of each and every character.” I think it's cool how one piece of art can influence another and then another—an ongoing dialogue.

Typically when I write, I have an idea of the story, and I then struggle with the best way to tell it. “Black String Bikini” was the opposite. I knew the format I wanted to play with, but I didn't have a story. So writing it was very challenging! And it took me a long time to determine what the story was really about.

The easiest parts for me were the flash forwards. Those just flowed out of me. I had originally planned to write a story that focused on the main character (Ben) and his relationship with his parents. But the flash forwards mostly came out as glimpses into the future of Ben and his girl friend (Rachelle). So over time I realized that their relationship was the central focus. At first, Rachelle was in very few of the scenes, but dominated the flash forwards. I went back and included her in more of the story.

To me, the story is about the emotional power of your first love, and how that sticks with you throughout your lifetime. Also, there is more than one way to tell a story, and it's good to be open to stories that try non-traditional techniques. It is fun as a writer to try something different.

Mark Richardson on the Web

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