

## Fair

By J. Bowers

"I'll be home by eight tonight. We'll rent Brigadoon. It'll be fucking hilarious." -Perry, 3:38 AM, two days ago.

My mother always used to tell me that women shouldn't leave their makeup on the bathroom counter, and I still don't completely understand why. She had her sexist pre-feminist reasons, probably. All that jazz about retaining feminine mystery, maybe. The art of concealing the fact that you use Rum Raisin gloss to keep your lips reddish, or cucumber face scrub to keep your skin zit-free. Put the makeup away, out of sight, and every man will assume that you're a natural beauty. I think that was her logic. Not that it matters to me, though. He hasn't been home all weekend. As usual. Still, the keys jingle in the hallway, and I'm hurrying across the apartment to hide my makeup under the sink. I can't stand it when I catch myself following my Irish Catholic mother's advice, as if it were anything more than an old woman muttering an ancient edition of *The Rules*.

Perry catches me wiping face powder out of the basin.

"Hi, beautiful!"

I smile. It's late. Almost Sunday morning, after all. I always smile at him on Sundays, ignore the dark hollows under his eyes, let him massage my shoulders while I finish cleaning out the sink. We have a pretty good routine down.

"So, how was your weekend?" I ask.

I catch his sheepish half-grin in the mirror, and it's enough. It's enough to tell that his weekend was just a weekend, a typical Perry weekend...without me. Alcohol. Clubs. Whatever powders, pills, and baggies he could get his hands on. More clubs. Girls in tight dresses. The bedrooms of girls who formerly wore tight dresses. The sound of skin against sheets, cotton, silk, flannel. I flush my powder-stained tissue down the pot, and consider gagging myself after it. You wanna know why? Because he makes me sick, that's why. He makes me goddamn sick. I love him, you know.

Perry disappears into his bedroom and doesn't return. To anyone else, I guess this would mean a nice, relaxing Sunday with the apartment all to themselves. Sort of a "Yup, roommate's got a hangover, time to curl up with a mug of tea and act oh-so domestic," type of thing. I try the tea. I really do, I even get out the special china teacup and use fresh water, instead of recycling whatever stale glasses I have sitting around the kitchenette. I try to pretend I'm in a *Celestial Seasonings* commercial. And I sneak back the hallway to Perry's room. No, I'm not checking on him.

Yes, you are.

He's wilting across his unmade bed, still dressed, comatose-looking. I slip a finger under his chin, where he won't notice me. Yes, still a pulse. He's breathing, breathing and sleeping and completely beautiful. I'm his roommate. I'm his friend. I've seen him with his shirt off. I've seen him chopping carrots, for Christ's sake, flexing the pretty spiderweb veins in his pale lanky arms. I've noticed these things. When I bend down to kiss him, I catch the scent of perfume on his cheek. I don't wear perfume.

"Sometimes I think you're the only person on the planet who actually cares." -Perry,  
2/4/97

Sunday morning. Always big plans on Sunday mornings. I'm going to wake up early, run my errands, maybe stop in at the supermarket. The refrigerator is a disappointment. But I manage to find some milk, an egg or two, and enough time to make myself a pancake before I finally get dressed. It's therapeutic, standing here in stocking feet, listening to the television weather report. This is my Sunday game. I stand here and pretend that things are perfect, and everything's going right.

I tell my friends in at work that I'm living with my boyfriend. Living in sin, even. Because when he touches me, it means something. He comes home every night, right? Yeah. He comes home to me. Just like Sarah's Joe and Tilly's Patrick and Tarah's Jamal. I have my Perry. And I'll never be alone again.

"Pancakes...awesome."

The pits under his eyes are softened with a few hours sleep. Perry likes his hangover pancakes with syrup and powdered sugar. He likes my pancakes.

"Hey, they're mine!" I protest.

Hey, you're mine, too. You. Not the starry-eyed maniac they know in at the Orion Club. You. Really, really you. Got that, buster? I'm playing hardball here. Move it or lose it. I mean it this time, once and for all, you're going to have to choose. Them or me. Everyone else in the universe, or me. Got that? Got that, moron boy??

I pass him the syrup.

By the time I get to the supermarket, I've stopped trying to analyze him. For a little while, at least. The shopping list I've written kind of helps. I'm a methodical person. Perry's happier splashing paint onto old movie posters, artistic stuff like that. Me, I need a sheet of instructions to really understand anything.

How did I get here? Aisle one, meeting Perry. Toss in a baggie of fresh and sticky emotions, mostly mine, and a sale on mixed messages, mostly his. We went dancing a lot. We

watched a lot of art films, sitting next to each other, trying hard not to look like we enjoyed sitting together. We spent a couple of nights on my old apartment's balcony, eating ramen and talking about everything except us. If there even was an "us." I decided to love him anyway. Actually, it wasn't a conscious decision. I tried to get out of it. He stopped me every time.

So, when he asked me to be his roommate, I saw it as an opportunity. I knew all about his weekends, his girls, everything. But I jumped in anyway. Like I said, an opportunity. Right?

The subtotal on the register doesn't add up correctly, all because this kid double-scanned a can of peas. Damn. It'll take forever to fix this mess, and all the washers at the Laundromat will be taken by the time I get there. I start crying.

"Mia, you're the best and a half, you know that?" -Perry, 8/24/98.

When I get home, he's gone. There are two messages on my machine. One's from a guy I've been attempting to go out with. He's a sweet guy, a stable guy, a call-you-back kind of guy, as the message proves. I spent all three of our dates silently comparing him to Perry. Shame. I press the button again.

"Uhm, er...Perry? Morning, gorgeous. I hope you got some sleep...I sure couldn't. Just calling to see what you're up to...oh, and you left your socks here last night. I'll be around tonight. Call me."

Like I said, he's not here. So I'm perfectly free to play it back ten or twelve times, and obsess over how cheap-sounding this one is. Actually, she's just plain cheap. Only a slut would call the next morning, on a Sunday, with a voice like a phone sex operator. Only a call girl would call him "gorgeous," a pet name that sounds like it has to do with food, instead of personal beauty. Only a whore would attempt to return his socks. His socks, for Chrissake. I do him a favor and erase the message. Because she's obviously a slut.

Unless "last night" actually meant something. Maybe they were up late discussing his deepest hopes and dreams. Maybe she's working toward a master's in art therapy, just like him. They're soul mates who were meant to sleep together. It was wonderful. She's better than me. At everything. Anything. Anything at all.

I hate her for a few hours, while I put away the dishes Perry ran through the washer, run the sweeper, and pop in my tape of Oprah. Yes, I tape Oprah, I'll admit it. That whore probably watches something called Fifty Surefire Ways To Drive A Man WILD!!! No, she hesitated when she heard my voice greeting her on Perry's machine. A slut wouldn't pause. A slut wouldn't be horrified by the prospect of a live-in girlfriend, fiancée, wife, wrong number. No. Wait a second. This girl paused. She reads Cosmopolitan. She might even watch Oprah. Fifty Surefire Ways To Get True Love Into Your Life.

Suddenly, I feel sorry for her. She thought Perry was The One, the guy our magazines keep talking about. The sweet, stable, call-you-back type. Then, of course, he came home to me,

and I made him pancakes. She just wanted to be the one who makes the pancakes, watches old episodes of Get Smart with him on Thursday nights.

It occurs to me that I have exactly what she wants, poor thing. She didn't know about me, not last night. She gave herself to him, not knowing about me. Well, it wasn't her fault, really. She couldn't have known. Otherwise, she would have realized that Perry Allen is taken, taken in the most important way a guy can be taken. I have his brain, his conversation, his confidence. I have him squirting silly string at my door in the middle of the night. I have him putting the seat down. I have him loading the dishwasher. I have him remembering my birthday. Poor thing. Poor thing.

She has his lips and tongue and crotch. It's not just her, either. It's every single one of them, the tramp from the week before, the other one who stuck around for a month, the one I actually got to meet, with her obvious makeup and tight skirt. Every single lip-glossed girl on the sidewalk below our apartment. He could have any of them. All of them. Me.

I make him pancakes. I make him pancakes and hide my makeup under the sink.

Something suddenly seems very wrong. I don't know who to be mad at, and Oprah doesn't help me. I wander away from her, out to the balcony to consider spitting on the happy couples inhabiting the sidewalk below. I'm convinced that they do it on purpose:

"Hey, darling, there's Mia and Perry's place!"

"So it is! So it is! Let's park ourselves right here under their balcony and explore each other's dental work!!"

"Sure! I'm game if you are!!"

Lovers get extra exclamation points in everything, and I always make them say idiotic things. Looking at most couples, you'd think the whole world was one great big fucking action movie.

"I'll protect you, my love! Nothing will ever come between us! We're going out to eat!"

This is the perfect time for Perry to come in, tap me on the shoulder and ask what's wrong, what's wrong with his best buddy, why do I have glassy eyes? I'll smile and lie, and he'll say something witty and adorable, he'll make himself a tuna fish and tomato sandwich, he'll fill my apartment. His voice will replace Oprah's. He'll tell me about Picasso and psychosomatic illnesses. Yeah, Perry will make everything okay for me. I'll make everything okay for him. We'll fix each other.

It's only three-thirty. He's still at work, and I'm still alone, watching the couple below me sample each other's salivary glands. Why would I want that? Why would I want anything like that? They remind me of a snake trying to eat itself. A fucking private nature show. It's pretty easy to yank a handful of weeds and dirt out of my flowerbox and drop it onto their heads.

Almost too easy. We're talking sitcom-style easy. The appropriate sitcom reaction follows, they're shrieking, jumping away. The man shouts some expletives up at my balcony. As they stomp away, I hope that they have beautiful children. Beautiful, perfect children who beat mine at tennis and spelling bees. If I'm ever lucky/unlucky enough to have any.

My life's full of "ifs" like that. I don't let myself have any real "whens." Certainty and I have never been on good terms. Other little girls planned out dream weddings for Barbie and Ken, I set up a seedy racetrack underworld for My Little Ponies. It's funny that everything Barbie has or owns is prefaced by the word "dream." Dream car, dream house, dream job, dream wedding. I got a little Barbie wedding dress, and my Ken revealed that he was having an affair with Miko, Barbie's perpetually nude Hawaiian friend. Poor Barbie cried a lot and took a bath in her dream underwear. There just wasn't much sense in having a pretty pretend wedding, because I knew that the whole thing was a sham, an "if," a barely believable possibility.

"When I get married, I want pink roses."

"When I get married, I'm going to have eight layers of my mommy's cake."

Yeah, right. If I get married...I...well, I'll just be pretty damned shocked that it actually worked out, is all. "Someday your prince will come," my male friends kept telling me, cheerfully witty with their Disney quotes. "Someday." Yeah, sure. Do I look like Cinderella to you? Do I look like I'm waiting for a prince? Damn, I hope not. How needy and pathetic. How plastic. How goddamn Barbie.

It seemed needy and pathetic, until I met Perry. I was so damn stupidly sure that Perry was a big perfect "when," and instead, he's turned into a sonar series of tiny, distant, chirping "ifs."

If I tell him how I feel. If he stops seeing other women. If I get him drunk...no, if I make him see, make him see somehow how much I should mean to him. If I mean anything to him. If I was in an accident. If I started seriously seeing someone else. Anything, anything, anything to make him realize what he's doing to me, how he's killing me, how he owes me so much and I love him.

I realize that I'm crying into my marigolds.

This is the part where the music is supposed to swell. Sure, it was a false alarm the first time, but this, this is really it. He will wrap himself around me, make everything soap-opera perfect, and the universe will be Right. It will be fair.

"There isn't anyone I'd rather go through hell with than you." -Perry, 5/12/97.

Is it possible to fall in love with someone's bookshelf? To become so obsessed with the idea that they own dog-eared copies of Thoreau and Ferlinghetti and Doyle, to become so infatuated with the idea of someone being like their bookshelf on the inside, neat and tidy shelves of information and art, that you completely ruin yourself trying to catalogue the damned

thing? Trying to make him real, create him, pull the ideas you love into a tidy little ball and replace his heart with it? Wrong. So wrong.

I am sitting in the moldy rattan chair on our balcony.

It occurs to me that he has never once said that I am beautiful.

Do I love him so much? Do I love him at all? Or am I just addicted to the tragedy of the situation, the concept of star-crossed lovers, the midsummer night's perfect stupid fucking dream, the old-fashioned obsession with happy endings?

I am the tragedy. I am the fucking tragedy.

And I want my life back. I want to go to parties and enjoy freely admitting that I'm single. I want to feel happy without him. I'll even sleep with random men, if that's what it takes. Anything it takes. Ever. Again.

"It feels so good just knowing you exist." -Perry, yesterday.

If I spend a long time leaving, I'll never make it out the door. So I'm packing fast, grabbing my gym bag and stuffing in random things, underwear, my sweatshirt, my shampoo, picking bits and pieces of me out of his messes.

He wanders out into the living room in his boxers, just as I'm cramming my videocassettes into a discarded milk crate.

"What are you doing?"

I'm crying.

"Perry, I'm moving out."

"What? Hey, Mia, wait a second! What are you talking about? What the hell's wrong with you--you, what the hell are you--"

"Shut up."

I don't even care. Halfway to the bus stop, after he's stopped following me, I figure out that I've forgotten my keys.

But it's no big deal. It's no big deal at all. Not to him, and certainly not to me. Not anymore. Not ever. Because I'm going to start eating my own pancakes again. Right? Yeah. Yeah, that's a good ending.

I slide my dufflebag under the bus seat and smile at the old woman across the way, making her uncomfortable. It's okay. It's what I do best. Perry knows that. He knows all about it,

all about how hilarious it is to stare at fat people in restaurants, have anonymous bottles of beer sent to lonely librarian-looking girls at bars. He was always my partner in crime.

Actually, when you get right down to it, this is going to drive him absolutely mad with worry. He'll stay up all night calling my friends, my parents, the police. He'll sleep in my bed and cry over me, burying his face in the scent of my pillow, using my bath towels, drinking the vanilla soy milk just because he knows that my lips have touched the carton. He'll just die inside, frustrated, confused, wondering what he did wrong, realizing what he's lost, crying, crying like the baby he is. I can't wait to see the look on his face.