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## Among the Lettuce

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## *Among the Lettuce*

There among the earliest lettuce in the garden, I saw a tiny figure of a man. I took it, at first, to be a doll, but as I approached I realized it was a real human being. He was perfectly attired for tennis — down to the white terry cloth sweatbands on his wrists — and he was sunbathing in a hammock stretched between two sticks that marked the ends of the rows of Black Seeded Simpson.

He greeted me without surprise and with a voice much louder than would be expected for anyone whose mouth was no larger than a cherry pit. I said hello and squatted down beside him. He removed his sunglasses to get a better look at me, revealing eyes as round and intense as a parakeet's.

"My partner never showed up," he said, "and it's just as well. I strained my back serving yesterday. You know how it is the first days of tennis weather — you get there and exert yourself without thinking about how you might feel the next morning."

"You play?" I asked. It seemed only polite to enter the conversation just as I would with any person, and not embarrass him by calling attention, right off, to his unusual size.

"Not as much as I used to," he said, "and not as well as I might. But classes are over now and I have nothing but final papers to read. Forty-five papers on *Ulysses*, and seventeen comparisons of Updike, Oates, and Cheever."

"You teach?" I asked.

"Those who can, do," he said, "those who can't, teach," he said, "or have I got it wrong?"

"That's close enough," I said, and I stretched out on the grass beside the garden. I confessed that I, too, was an English professor. We taught at nearby colleges in a part of the country over-supplied with institutions of higher learning. That he had never heard of me was no surprise. I had been in the area only since September and was on a short-term replacement contract, which means you don't bother to make friends because you won't be around that long. That I should not have heard of him was, of course, remarkable. His name — Conrad Avery — rang no bells. No one had even hinted that such a person, a person with such an unusual deformity, existed on a faculty so close by. He had been there, he assured me, for eight years.

"Do you have tenure?" I asked.

"I got it last year," he said, "and it was quite a struggle. There are people in my department who feel that because of my specialty—"

He stopped for a minute to re-position himself in the hammock. The word "specialty" seemed like a nice way of putting it, something I would not have thought of myself.

"It's Twentieth Century British and American Literature," he said, "and my department is rather conservative. They are worried that courses in what they call 'popular' writers will attract students away from courses like Chaucer and Milton. But my friendship with the president of the college helped me out. You see," he said, "we're both from the same suburb of Pittsburgh and share an ambivalence of affection and aversion towards the place, and, in addition, we share the same defect."

He paused and leaned towards me. My first thought was that there must be something about the town where they had grown up — proximity to the steel mills perhaps? — that had affected their genes, since it had to be more than coincidental that two people from the same place should be handicapped in such a peculiar way. My second thought was that it was highly impossible. For a homunculus to rise to the ranks of a tenured professor at a distinguished college was one thing. But to imagine that someone could overcome such tremendous obstacles to become a college president was something else.

"We're both southpaws," he said, smiling a smile that took up most of his face but was, in fact, only half an inch wide.

It was clear, then, that he was not going to bring up the subject of his size, and I decided to do my best to avoid it. When he asked me about what works I was teaching in my freshman literature survey I caught myself just in time before including *Gulliver's Travels*. It must be painful, I thought, for someone who has to cope with the realities of a physical handicap to talk about a work of literature where such a handicap has been exploited for the purposes of satire. We talked instead about *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sons and Lovers* and the poetry of Wordsworth, which we both disliked and which was part of the curriculum I had to teach.

Conrad's particular interest was the modern short story, but he was quick to point out he was no admirer of experimental fiction. His secret mission was to make his students appreciate the values of traditional realism.

"I always include work by the so-called 'experimental' writers in my course. Their cleverness entertains my students for a while but when they've had enough of the intellectual games they run back to Chekhov with relief."

We talked this way for quite some time. Long enough for the sun to shift so that Conrad was now almost entirely in the shade of the lettuce leaves. Soon he consulted his miniature watch and informed me that he had to be heading home. He unhooked his hammock and stowed it away in his nylon sport bag.



“It’s been good talking with you, Marya,” he said (I had told him my name earlier on) “and no doubt we’ll be running into each other again soon.”

Mercifully he did not hold out his hand for me to shake. I would not have known how to manage it — whether to extend my whole hand, as gently as I could, or offer a finger, only.

“I’ll look forward to seeing you,” I said, and I started back to the house. I did not turn back to watch him, just as I would not have turned back to watch the exit of a cripple, but I found myself picturing him heading off through waist-deep grass.

I went into the house and fussed in the kitchen long enough so I was sure he was far out of sight. Then I went back to the same spot where I had been sitting before, to think.

Several things disturbed me, in addition to the most obvious. For one thing, I was puzzled by Conrad’s proprietorial attitude towards my garden. There he was making full use of my lettuce markers without having the courtesy to consult my feelings or to at least thank me for the liberty he had taken. It was a small matter, but it was the key to something larger. Conrad gave no indication that there was anything unusual about his behavior, just as he gave no indication that he knew there was something unusual about his looks. It seemed to me that the situation demanded at least a perfunctory sort of explanation, and his neglect — unconscious or calculated? — was a kind of rudeness which seemed inconsistent with the rest of his behavior.

And then there was the question of the tennis partner who hadn’t materialized. Was there someone else around who was as tiny as Conrad, or did he play tennis with someone of normal size? How was that possible? If Conrad were hit by a regulation size tennis ball during even a slow volley, he would probably not survive the impact. Yet a tennis ball proportioned to him might well pass through the holes of his opponent’s racket.

The question of the tennis balls brought up another issue. I had enough difficulty finding clothes that fit me properly — and I’m a woman of average proportions — where could someone like Conrad outfit himself? I knew that doll manufacturers had extensive wardrobes for miniature human replicas of both sexes, but although the versimiliture was striking, at least from my distance, I doubted that dolls’ clothes were really functional. Would Conrad be able to find tennis shoes that were a comfortable fit and a watch that really ran?

Where, I wondered, did Conrad live? How did he shop and cook and eat? And why hadn’t I ever heard about him before? I could understand how someone could manage — if he knew enough influential people — to keep his life safe from the press, but I would think that in academic

circles, at least, word of him would have gotten around. I wondered how it was possible for him to actually perform his academic duties. He would obviously have to dispense with things like writing on the board and bringing his text to class. I thought of the physical labor that would be required for him to just read a book on his own, walking back and forth to turn each page.

That the encounter had been real — that I had been in my sane and proper mind — I had no doubt of. The small sticks marking the lettuce rows had clearly been bent towards each other to accommodate the ends of his hammock, and although I am a person who dreams, I have never had any trouble separating my dreams from reality. And if I were to dream about a tiny man I would no doubt conjure up a leprechaun in a costume befitting his size, not an academic *Homo sapiens* in tennis shorts.

I had no one nearby to talk to about my encounter. If I were to call up some of my good friends — all of whom lived at considerable distances — they would no doubt treat the matter as a joke. It was something I was sure Conrad had had to suffer his whole life, and I was disinclined to have him laughed at by anyone if I could help it. My friends would certainly ask me all the questions I had been asking myself. And what could I say in answer?

That night, before I went to sleep, I took out my copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. I felt somehow guilty doing this, as if I were insulting Conrad by merely thinking about him and the Lilliputians in the same sentence in my mind. I knew the book very well, but I turned to it now with a kind of excitement and a kind of fear.

I read about Gulliver's travels to Lilliput where he is a giant among the population, and then I read about Gulliver's travels to Brobdingnag, where the people are giants and he is relatively Lilliputian in size. What had made my encounter with Conrad extraordinary was his treatment of the situation. He seemed to overlook, and seemed to expect me to overlook, the differences of size that Swift had made so much of. In both parts of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver is the wrong size compared to everyone around him. But with me and Conrad the situation was different. If you looked at just the two of us alone, it would not be clear which of us was out of proportion.

I went to sleep exhausted from struggling with philosophical questions about size and scale, and awoke sometime near morning after an unusually upsetting dream. In my dream I was lying, undressed, in a secluded corner of my yard, and Conrad, still in tennis clothes, was doing warm-up exercises on my naked belly.

The source of my dream was immediately clear to me. The night before, I had left *Gulliver's Travels* open to a section that I had always found amusing but for the first time found titillating as well. It was a description of



Gulliver in Brogdingnag being played with by the maids of honour at the palace: "They would often strip me naked from top to toe, and lay me at full length in their bosoms. . . . The handsomest among these maids of honour, a pleasant frolicsome girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her nipples, with many other tricks, wherein the reader will excuse me for not being over particular."

I tried to go back to sleep but it was impossible. I was upset by my dream, even though I understood its source. I wondered about my own feelings about Conrad. Certainly I wanted to see him again. But did I want to see him again because I had found him—and obviously this thought worried me most of all—faintly attractive?

I went downstairs and hid Gulliver's Travels alphabetically out of order on my shelves, with its spine facing in.

The next day it rained and I did not expect to see Conrad, but the day after that was sunny and he didn't turn up. I thought about calling him, but could think of no excuse. He had left nothing behind—I had checked by the lettuce just in case—and I did not feel comfortable about inviting him over for dinner or a drink. I felt frustrated, and I felt angry at him because my awkwardness was in part his fault. By pretending there was absolutely nothing unusual about him he had made it impossible for me to inquire about any of the difficulties that might come up. If I asked him over would I offer him a thimbleful of sherry? Would I shred the cheese on the cheese tray into pieces the size of grains of rice?

When he finally turned up, a week later, the circumstances were similar to those of our first meeting. Again he offered no explanation for his presence in my lettuce, acting in fact as if that area of the garden had always belonged to him. He seemed pleased to see me but acted as if our first meeting had been in no way out of the ordinary, and again he made no reference to anything about his size.

In addition to talking about literature, this time we talked about music and theatre and a little bit about ourselves. I found out that Conrad was an avid stamp collector and that he played the rebec with an early music group in the area. I imagined that he held it cello-style between his knees. Apparently he had a fairly active social life and was up on current events in the area. His references to his "dates" surprised me, but I was secretly pleased to discover he was not married. It occurred to me then that he might have a certain charisma for some women. I remembered a crippled student in graduate school, and another who was blind, who were both very popular with members of the opposite sex. Perhaps there was a kind of woman who was attracted by a man with a handicap, a woman who likes to feel needed. Or perhaps such men were attractive because they compensated for their handicaps so well. Perhaps all men were handicapped in some way and some just manifested it more obviously than

others.

When Conrad felt it was time to take his leave, I seized my courage and asked him to dinner. He was busy the coming weekend, he said, but he was free the Friday after that.

"Wonderful," I said, and since I was feeling a little bolder, I decided to ask him what to cook. He interrupted my question by telling me he would be there at seven and he would supply the wine.

"White," he said.

The wine got delivered by the local liquor store exactly an hour before his arrival. It was a fine chateau white Bordeaux, properly chilled. I had been worrying about dinner all week and had finally settled on squab a l'orange—one for both of us—wild rice, salad, and trifle for dessert. The silverware and dishes were the greatest dilemma, and finally, on Thursday, I had driven all the way to New York to F.A.O. Schwartz, where I purchased a doll-sized service for eight.

A taxi dropped him off. I heard it arrive and looked out the window to see it pull away. Conrad came, as I might have expected, perfectly prepared. He had a small wicker picnic basket, which he used as a table, and his own plates, glasses, and silverware. His delicate wine glass made the ones I had bought look like crude toys, and I hid the whole set in the kitchen.

We ate in the livingroom, at the coffee table, which he easily mounted with the aid of a few books I had discretely placed on the floor before he came. Through the entire meal he made not one reference to anything about his size and I found that I soon forgot about all the difficulties I had been worried about. Once involved in conversation, it no longer seemed at all strange to be dining with someone no larger than a squirrel. In retrospect, I realized that not only did Conrad not shy away from situations that might present difficulties for him, but that he seemed almost to invite them. He left me to pour the wine but insisted on carving the squab, himself. When a piece of lettuce had the misfortune of sliding off my fork before reaching the destination of my mouth he leaped to retrieve it and restored it to my plate. I had seen this kind of phenomenon in effect before. There was, for instance, a professor on my own faculty, a white-haired gentleman who looked like a portrait of God in a child's illustrated Bible, who had a terrible stutter. Professor Pickering not only spoke at faculty meetings more frequently and longer than any other professor, but he also chose to speak on emotional subjects which raised his ire. Because of his remarkable self-confidence his stutter seemed to be a phenomenon that was happening not in his mouth, but in the deformed ears of his listeners.

I should say, at this point, that one of the less predictable perils of the oddity of our relationship—although perhaps not one that Conrad was



as innocent of as I—was that the bottle of white Bordeaux was not shared quite equally. I filled our glasses the same number of times but ended up consuming most of the wine myself, and a half-bottle is often sufficient to render me slightly inebriated. I found myself, not long after the trifle had been eaten and before the coffee had even been served, in a compromising, though in no way unpleasurable state of disrobement in my bed.

There are—if the popular press of our time is correct in having us believe—a substantial number of women in America today who indulge in sexual activities that other members of our society might find alarming, at best. There are certainly even more women who fantasize about such activities. Certainly what were once traditional boundaries—things like race, and age—have been challenged, and even the most conventional woman, may, in some situations, admit to having fairly bizarre appetites in sex. I should say, quite definitely, that although my imagination was no less fertile than that of any other member of my sex, the thought of intimacy with a man one eighth my size, had never once occurred to me. Had I thought about it I would no doubt have been stopped by trying to imagine how intimacy in such a situation could possibly occur. A kiss itself, would seem to pose insurmountable difficulties.

What happened with Conrad was that these difficulties never arose. He was clearly experienced with women and secure in his own sexuality, and he had developed ways of achieving sexual satisfaction for both himself and his partner that seemed at once perfectly natural and unquestionably appropriate. He performed, in fact, so skillfully in bed, that he almost made me question how sexual satisfaction could ever be reached by two people of relatively the same size..

Our relationship progressed with predictable smoothness and rapidity after that. We spent more and more time together as the summer wore on. By the end of July, although Conrad was still paying rent for his room in a colleague's house nearby, he was actually living with me. When his parents came up for a weekend visit they stayed with us in my house, and seemed not the least bit uncomfortable that we were sharing a bed without benefit of marriage. The morning after they left, I mentioned this to Conrad at breakfast.

"Your parents are such wonderfully liberal people," I said, "they seem to accept us exactly the way we are."

"They're remarkable people," he said. "They've never seemed to feel that I was any way different from any other child. My mother's only remarks on the subject were that I saved her the expense of maternity clothes and made for a perfectly painless delivery. I think their attitude has made it easy for me to expect that same acceptance from the world. And I've found, as you obviously know, that people are comfortable with me



because I am comfortable with myself.”

I was quiet for a minute. It was the first time that Conrad had ever broached this topic, and although I had almost brought it up on many occasions I had always finally held myself back. It seemed amazing to me that it should come up so easily and unintentionally.

“Conrad,” I said, “I was talking about their attitude towards our cohabitation, not their attitude towards you. But I’m relieved we can talk about that now because it’s been a subject I’ve been afraid to bring up.”

“What subject?” asked Conrad.

“You,” I said. “Your size.”

“Afraid to bring it up?” asked Conrad.

“I felt it was something unmentionable, something that—”

Conrad cut me off. “You mean it’s been bothering you all this time and you’ve been afraid to bring it up?”

“It hasn’t been bothering me,” I said. “I mean it’s not been bothering me that you’re—that I’m—so much bigger. But it’s bothered me that we’ve never talked about it.”

“We never talked about it,” said Conrad, “because I had no idea that it was something you wanted to talk about. How was I to know it was something on your mind?”

“You don’t have to get angry,” I said.

“Something’s been on your mind all this time, something serious like this, and you’ve been keeping it to yourself,” said Conrad. “Don’t you think I have a right to be angry? Don’t you think I feel hurt?”

“I was just afraid that if we talked about it, it might become a problem—I mean almost as if it was something that was fine as long as we didn’t—”

“Mention it?” shouted Conrad. “Do you think our relationship’s so fragile that talking about something would ruin everything between us?”

I pressed my fingers over my eyes. “Isn’t there anything, Conrad,” I said at last, “that you’ve been afraid to bring up? Are you so different from me? Don’t you have anything on your mind? Don’t you have any secret questions, any secret doubts?”

Conrad was very quiet for a while, too. Finally he looked up at me and spoke.

“O.K.,” he said, “I’ll tell you. One question. Something I have always worried about with women. Are you attracted to me in spite of my size or because of it?”

I thought for a moment. I didn’t know what to say. My first thought was “in spite of it,” but that didn’t seem exactly true.

“I can’t answer that,” I said, “because I don’t think of your size anymore. I mean I just think about you, you the man. I can’t separate those things. I don’t think of your size as something any more special about you than the color of your hair or the curve of your mustache.”

"Is that the case?" he asked.

"That's the case," I said.

I guess it would be fair to say that at this point we realized that we had fallen rather in love. And the outcome of it all was that we decided to formally plan our lives together. The only real obstacles in the way were coordinating our academic careers and breaking the news to my family.

My parents, unlike Conrad's, were not wonderfully liberal people. I wrote them a letter that informed them of my impending connection and only hinted, as softly as possible, that the groom might not exactly fulfill their image of a son-in-law.

My mother called the day they received my letter. She said they were delighted that I was going to get married—I was, after all, over thirty—but they were concerned about the implications of my note. My mother thought it was a question of religion. My parents had come to accept the fact that I was not religious myself and that I might well marry someone who shared my lack of belief. But they wanted the religion my spouse had rejected to be the same as my own. When that matter was settled, my mother moved on to race. She did this as delicately as possible, since my parents are theoretically open-minded.

"Thank God," said my mother, when that matter had been settled. And then, in one breath she broached what she thought were the last two dreadful possibilities. The first: that Conrad had been married before and had left his wife and children for me, the second: that he was gay.

"No Mom," I said, "it's nothing like that. It's something quite different."

"What else?" cried out my mother, five hundred miles away, "what else could there be?"

"He's small," I said.

"Oh," said my mother, obviously relieved, "there's nothing so terrible about that. Your father's short."

"Not just short, Mom," I said, "small."

"Small?" asked my mother.

"Small all over."

My mother was clearly struggling to imagine what I meant. "How small?" she asked.

"Very small," I said, and then I decided to get it all over with. "Eight and a half inches, four and a half pounds," I said.

First my mother was very quiet. Then she laughed. Then she was very quiet again. Then she got angry.

"Marya," she shouted at me, "Marya, what are you talking about?" Then she called my father to the phone.

My father, who had been watching television, was annoyed at being disturbed. He had to be filled in on the entire conversation. He thought I was up to some joke and in the background I could hear him tell my



mother that she should calm down, didn't she know a joke when she heard a joke?

"It's not a joke, Dad," I said. "His name is Conrad Avery. He is an Associate Professor of English. He is thirty-seven years old. And he is unusually small."

"Small?" asked my father, for the first time, taking me seriously, "how small?"

"At this moment," I said, "he is sitting in my hand."

My parents refused to come to the wedding and we decided to get married by the college chaplain by ourselves. We wrote our own brief ceremony, composed of lines from our favorite works of literature. Conrad had bought me a delicate gold wedding band, which he put on my finger at the close of the ceremony. I had not had one made for him, because he never liked jewelry on a man. We spent our honeymoon on Bermuda, where Conrad insisted on paying a full double occupancy for our cottage overlooking the ocean and was offended when I suggested that he might negotiate with the airlines for a special rate.

The problem of coordinating our academic careers was put aside for the time being. We had already decided to start a family and when my contract was up at the end of the year I planned to take some time off from teaching to write.

The doctor in New York, who had facilitated my pregnancy, had predicted that it was extremely unlikely that what he called Conrad's "condition" would be passed on to our children. He reminded us how fortunate we were, since if it were the woman who had the "condition", not the man, having a child, who would most likely be normal size, would be out of the question. Both Conrad and I were relieved to hear him assure us that unlike skin color, in cases of size difference, blending does not exist. Both of us would be happy to have offspring of any size, as long as they were healthy, and, as Conrad jokes, "shared our tastes in literature," but we would no doubt find it a real strain on our marriage—as would anyone—to have to adjust to a child who was some abnormal, intermediate size.