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Broken Bottles

By Sam Brown

To be honest, I never thought about marrying her until we were walking through that alley behind the old VFW. We liked alleys. They were the private highways for rejects like us. She had a Virginia Slim dangling from her mouth when she turned around and asked for a light. I had quit smoking just a couple weeks ago, after she picked me up from my last go-around at Rocky Mountain, but still had my zippo on me. We came out in this run down spot by the tracks. It was muddy, the tracks almost buried in some spots. We kicked around there for a while.

Balanced on a rail, Kathleen asked, “So, you get a job yet?”

“Yeah. Carpentry for this new shop on Main. No idea what’s going in there, but they don’t ask for much in the way of style”

“That’s good, because you’re a piss poor carpenter” she said and laughed and fell back into me so I could catch her. I realized she didn’t know I wanted to marry her.

I fell in love when I still made records and they still didn’t sell. BMG bought the rights to a song and I would get to hear it on the radio played by some shithead from Nashville. We were both married at the time; me to a meth addict and her to an abusive former state all-star. Neither of them loved John Prine though, so they had to go. I was sitting on my perch at this hole in the wall, alternating between bourbons and getting stoned in the alley. She was waiting tables and we got to talking after the doors closed on everyone but us. We were drunk enough to make a pact to leave our spouses for each other. I showed up the next day with my bags and my guitar and ended up not seeing her again for two years. Still the best promise I ever made.

We got back onto the streets by the old depot and found a good bench. I sat down and she fell into me. We laughed.

It's been weeks since we did that. "God this feels good," she said, muffled on my shirt. I said "What the hell are you talking about?" smiling, of course.

"You know damn well, you jackass." she looked me in the eyes. This was her way of saying I love you. So I guess I've never truly known if she does or not. One night, before my second rehab, we were on my lawn and she said, "You know, I really don't know what to say when I'm around you."

I asked her why and she said, "Well, you make a living making words say the right thing, but words for me never mean everything I'm trying to say."

I guess that answers my question.

She got up from the bench and grabbed both my hands, pulled me up, pulled me close. We were inches apart and kissed lightly. Counting that, we had kissed three times and slept together once in the five years we've known each other. The kisses were little life affirming moments. The second one was before third rehab, the first that first night. The sleeping together was an alcohol enabled accident that we joke about, always meant to repeat, but never did.

We were on clouds walking down the street. "I don't know if I ever want anything to change" she said, "I know it's been hard the last couple a weeks, and I sure as hell don't want to be a waitress anymore. But oh well. There are worse things."

"What will you do for work?"

"There's an opening at that flowershop that I'm asking about tomorrow. I could do that all day and not get tired and not get pissed at customers or silverware or the cook."

It sounded nice. Carpentry is uneven but with flowers every day I could just work on the house. It was a shitty double-wide in a quiet part of town. I could make it a real house for her. But there was that letter buried deep in my jacket, and the record deal in that, that said otherwise.

We wandered into a grocery store and got us a cheap bottle of wine. "We're regular hobos now!" said Kathleen to the street. I took a swig and groped through my pockets. She knew what I was looking for and revealed a fresh pack of camels in

her pocket. "You never help me quit anything." I said. In fact, just a month ago she locked me out of my own house while she flushed my drugs. I lit up and lit one for her too. We didn't need to say anything as we finished the wine in a new alley. It took us about an hour, but I was tipsy enough that my whole sense of time was off. That might have been a contributing factor to me saying, "So Kathleen, what would you say we are?"

She groaned and stood up. "Jesus Fucking Christ," she said, walking away.

I followed, saying "Wait, what's your problem now?"

"It's not my problem, it's yours: you're are an idiot drunk and you always have been"

"I'm just looking for something to stand on." I said.

She turned around, staring me down, "That's the fucking point, Ken, there is something to stand on, you just can't see it because you need your damn words." She stormed across the street and turned down the sidewalk. I ran too, tripped, realized I was a drunk idiot, but kept going. The last time we had this argument after we slept together, after she got back from two years living in California. There was some broken glass involved and a relapse for me. I haven't broached the subject since. I just shouted, stood my ground and said, "Hey listen! I've been wanting to tell this to you all night." She stopped.

"I got a letter from Joe in Memphis. Its a two record deal for a small label. I want you to come with me."

She turned, her whole face confused. "What?"

"It's not much, but I would be doing things again. I could really quit. We could live on the road."

She looked down and at me again. "I don't want to live on the road anymore, Ken. I want to live somewhere that doesn't move"

"Then you don't have to," I said, "You can stay put, and then for six months out of the year you'll get the whole house for yourself."

"I'm happy where I am, I am happy with almost everything as it is. Why aren't you?"

To be honest, I had been thinking about marrying her since the day I met her. I've been thinking about propos-

ing since I got the letter. When we were walking in the alley I thought I'd do it right there. We were in front of this trashy jewelry store, everything glitzy and over-jeweled. We only ever needed something simple. I hadn't gotten as far as thinking about the ring. I still wanted to tell her though, still wanted to ask her. I swear to God, I almost broke through that glass and grabbed her one of those ugly-ass rings. But all I could do was think about our favorite John Prine song. I looked at the gutter and said, "Ain't it funny how an old broken bottle looks just like a diamond ring."