

THANKS BUT NO

He was impressed. That was not what he expected to his invitation. He had not expected her to say yes. He thought she would ignore him or write something more addled. These three words were utterly direct and memorable.

He had toyed with the idea that she was spooky. In her late twenties, home-schooled, fanatically religious, both shy and blunt. She had been driving a lawn-mower for ten years since she was 17. She made slightly more than minimum wage. She took offense when he suggested that maybe her life was in a rut, but later she more or less agreed. She told me about a new beginning – studying to found churches. That was a couple of years ago. Another time she confessed a certain fear that she could not give an answer to any question about what was new. He decided not to ask that question again.

He saw her often because the company she worked for took care of the mowing and landscaping. She also shoveled the snow and cleared the ice in the winter. She was long and lanky but strong. Had the work ethic of a horse.

Several times they had had long talks about their lives. She knew he was not religious – not even interested in the current debate about God is good, God is bad. Years ago he had dismissed as foolishness the idea of gods, eternities, afterlife and worship. He knew that religion was an important historical question, but that was as far as it went. For him religion was simply another ideology created to exercise control.

He was never sure how she felt about being in conversation with an obvious disbeliever. Was she comfortable, uncomfortable, did she ever think about trying to convert him, was she really into the religious stuff as much as she claimed? He once asked her how long she had felt the religious impulse. Her answer was something like all her life. He then found out that her family – nearly a dozen - was also into religion. It seemed to be their thing. This life was simply preparatory for some imaged life afterwards.

Once while walking from the mailbox to his condo he ran into her on a mower. She was in tears. He asked if she was OK. She wasn't, as the tears got worse. She was so tired because she hadn't sleep for nights. Why, he asked. Her boyfriend had called it quits. That always hurts, he said. Did he give a reason, he asked. He needed time, he wasn't ready, he was too young, she blurted out.

He had to ask how young. Her boyfriend was almost twenty came her answer. He knew she wasn't twenty but more like twenty-five. The boyfriend was on a religious journey like her but was wavering about her. The expression on her face streaked with tears said it was about more courtship *per se*...about issues of intimacy that all relationships confront.

He had dated a woman who was an active church member, sat in the same pew every Sunday, worshiped with a vengeance. So religious was she that she forbade him to say the word fuck. And yet on their first date and almost every night thereafter, for a number of months that they were in harness, at approximately 10 PM she ordered him to her bed. (He actually had his own bed since they were not married.) They fucked for hours, and then she spent a half hour on the toilet. He found the routine exhausting and unendearing. He quit. He had heard such stories, beginning in his college days, but when it came his way, he learned something about himself – he was unprepared.

He tried to console L, for he thought she was almost too distraught to be running this big mower. He

reminded her that she was young and capable and would work her way through this. She wasn't sure she could deal with the loss. What she really said was she didn't want to deal with loss. He wasn't sure what else to say. He gave her his email, and she went back to mowing. This moment was never brought up again.

He had this odd experience in life that people, sometimes perfect strangers, would explode with what was rocking them on the inside. He remembered a phone conversation with a secretary at a university, a woman he had never talked to before or since. For a half or more he listened to her misbegotten tale – it was sad and compelling and he tried to console her as he had tried with L. When he discussed this phone encounter with his ex, he heard her say he had a sucker look or sound – he'd listen to any melodrama. She recalled that he'd cried during the *Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. She was right about the movie. But since empathy was not her thing, he had come to discount most of what she said.

Still, it puzzled him because he was known to be stand-offish and anti-social. Some people genuinely disliked him. Apparently some feature in his personality made him connect in ways he was unable to articulate or predict.

But he was pretty good at predicting when things would or were going wrong. Things were going wrong with L .

They had several conversations after the tractor experience. She seemed to alternate between hopefulness and something short of desperation. She had little money, she worked hard, she lived at home, she was tired but above all she conveyed restlessness (although he was certain she would deny it).

Sometimes they laughed about what was happening to them, but recently she had grown distant and severe. One day he was working on his back deck when the tractor came around the corner. It stopped, and she removed her ear plugs. They greeted each other, and he offered her a cookie from a box on the table. They talked about coffee. She had a shot on Facebook of her drinking Starbucks. He asked if she had ever tried Peet's. She smelled but did not taste what was in his mug. She said she had seen it but never tried it. He said he'd give her a package from the next shipment that arrived. She didn't demur. He offered her another cookie, which she took, and went back to work.

Several weeks later his Peet's shipment arrived, and since he knew she would be on site one of these days he stuck a pound of a popular blend in his downstairs study where he worked and had a view of the backyard. A few days later he heard the tractor, and when he looked out the window he saw her heading toward the deck. She gave him a small wave with her right hand, a signal she had used before. He grabbed the coffee, opened the door and appeared on the deck.

She stopped, unplugged and smiled. He reminded her he had made a promise that he was about to fulfill. He produced the bag of Peet's and threw it to her. She looked surprised, then angry and finally resigned as she turned the bag over and over in her hands. She said something like...he shouldn't have, and it turned out in retrospect he shouldn't have.

He did not talk to her after that. She obviously was avoiding him – that was clear. Once as he was sweeping away the cut-up grass and leaves off his front porch, she walked by in the driveway some distance from the porch. She looked over, gave her signature wave and ran.

A few days later she wrote on her Facebook wall a few lines that sounded edgy and scary. But not

being religious he didn't really know what was edgy and scary and what was not. At the very least it seemed to be out of touch with reality. The message was a call for Jesus to come down, come down now, it is time. Sunshine and rain coming down was not enough. The physical Jesus must come down. She warned that it was no longer enough to ask for help from Jesus, no, it was a plea, almost a command, for his physical return.

As irreligious as he was, even he could figure out the fundamental difference between praying for guidance and assistance and praying for some earth-shattering apocalypse. The sincerity, the passion came through, but to him so did something else more ominous.

Shortly after that he made another mistake. Because he knew she had an interest in photography and painting, he invited her to a special event at the local museum where he was a member. By the arrangements he made it quite clear it was not a date. He would meet her at the museum and find his own way home afterwards (since he did not drive). They would spend about an hour on the tour and then go their own separate ways. He knew the risk, and he also knew that if he had been a younger man, he would have tried to date her. He took the risk even though he told himself (being the trader that he was) he could buy no protection. A derivative he did not understand but nonetheless liked.

E the Painter had once dismissed him from her life in a manner that he had to admire. But L 's dismissal of three words took the prize.