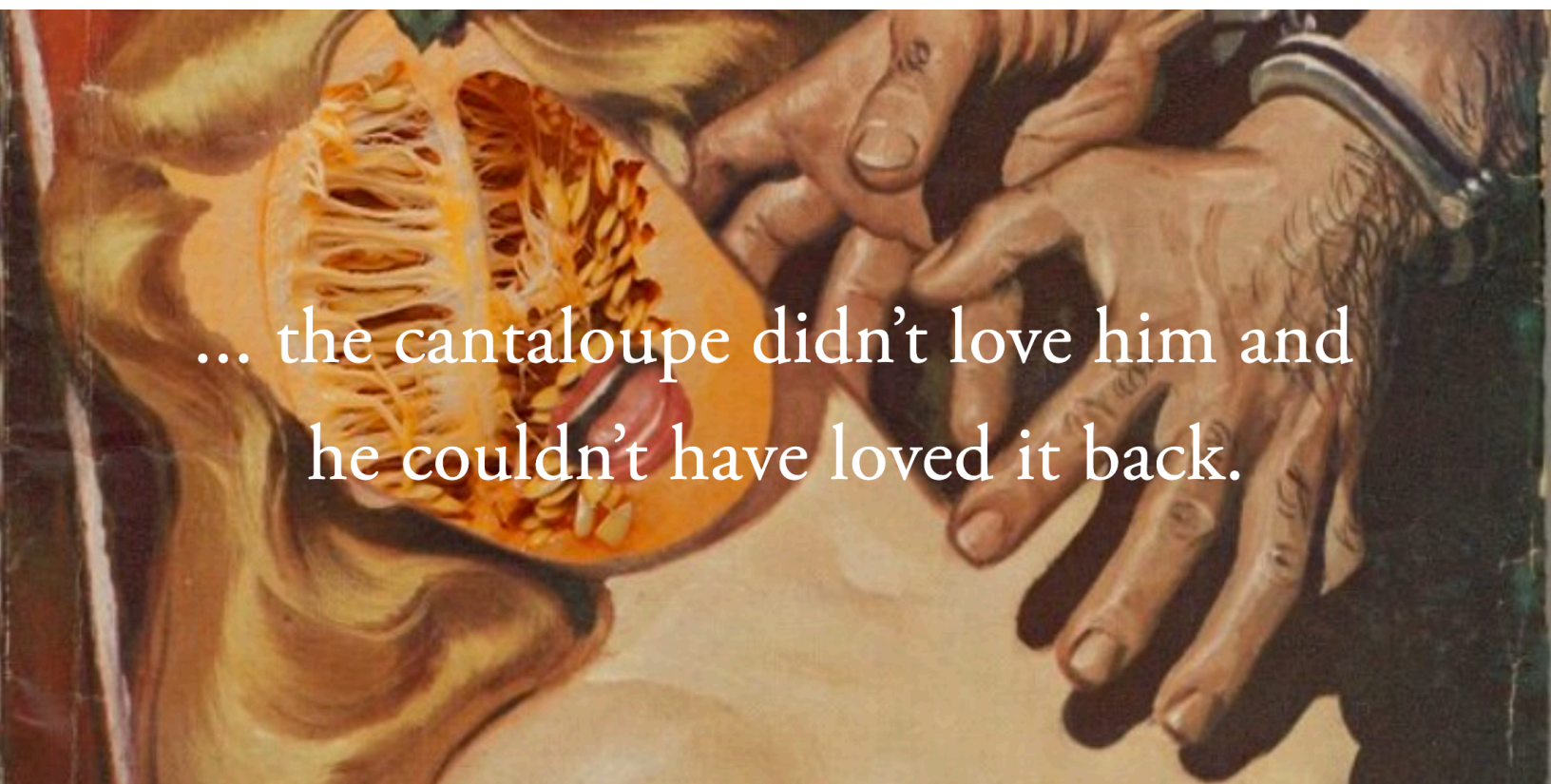


Sex Cantaloupes from OS (Outer Space)

Part II

A painting showing a close-up of a hand holding a sliced cantaloupe melon. The hand is rendered in a realistic style with visible veins and a watch strap. The melon is cut open, revealing its orange flesh and seeds. The background is dark and textured.

... the cantaloupe didn't love him and
he couldn't have loved it back.

BY ROBERT LONG FOREMAN

I am one of the lucky ones. After all this went down, I didn't have to spend time on a mental ward or in a prison. The spores in my head didn't push me to kill anyone in a despairing frenzy, once the worst thing that could happen came to pass.

I didn't even kill myself when I realized Quarterbuns was gone for good, the way many men did when they lost the fuckpods they'd named Veronica or Betty Lou, Scarlett or Beyoncé. Millions of men shot themselves, drowned themselves, or threw themselves off buildings. The same force that drew them to their pods like electromagnets caused them to end their lives when the pods were gone.

I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to die, like nothing I'd ever wanted. But my dear wife saved me.

Maybe it was because she's an emergency room nurse. I don't know. But Greta knew how to read the look in my eyes after I looked out the broken window to see Quarterbuns rolling away from me, into the distance, back to the giant cylinder.

I heard her whack the wall again, and turned to see her crawl through the hole she'd made. She scrambled through and said my name.

I grabbed a shard of broken glass from the window. I didn't have a chance to plunge it in my neck.

Greta grabbed my arm and pulled me to the floor. She screamed to my mother, "Get him! Get his hand!"

Mom had just made it through. She'd brought the sledgehammer.

She brought it down in an arc onto my fist. The glass in my hand shattered. So did my hand's bones.

Mom insists, to this day, that her violence against my hand had nothing to do with her longstanding desire to prevent me from ever touching myself in a sexual fashion. I insist that only a blind man could possibly think she didn't get some satisfaction from it on those grounds.

I needed twenty stitches, and my hand required surgery. It's got metal pins in it, now.

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I can still masturbate. I assume I can, anyway.

I haven't wanted to. Things have not been the same, since the fuckpods left.

They all left at the same time, the ones that hadn't been run over by cars, broken by jilted lovers, or dissected on live television. They went back to the cylinders, and the cylinders blasted off again, propelled by engines no one understands.

Many of the pods didn't make it back to the cylinders in time to leave Earth with all the others. They were clutched in the arms of men more alert than I, or trapped in basements with no windows, no way to get out.

But as soon as the cylinders were gone, the pods that didn't make it back began to die. They had short lifespans, just a few days long.

When they died, they began to decompose like regular cantaloupes. They softened and bruised. They were colonized by worms and maggots. They smelled like rotten meat. People burned them, or buried them in mass graves.

Some wealthy men froze their pods cryogenically, so they can be revived and kept alive when scientists learn how to sustain them. They've raised millions of dollars, in the name of finding a way to do this. Some of the fat cats have no doubt preserved pods by the hundreds, and plan to sell them to desperate men for lots of money.

Linguists are working on conjecturing the alien language, based on the writing on the cylinders. They think we can learn a lot about the aliens, from this little bit of data they gave us.

I don't know what progress they've made. I don't keep up with the news. I've been trying to focus on myself and life with Greta. I've been meditating, and arguing with Greta.

One of the first thing she asked me, when it was all over, was how many times I had lain with the sex cantaloupe.

I didn't want to answer the question. I couldn't. I'd lost count of how many times it had been.

It was a lot. Maybe a dozen times a day.

It wasn't easy. It was hard on my body. My legs got sore in places I didn't know they could be sore. And despite all the lube I used — all of mine, and all of Greta's — my penis turned red and raw. The skin under the head tore, here and there. I bled where I'd never bled before.

I wished I had a foreskin. Maybe it would have helped, to have one. Less friction, maybe? But my foreskin was taken from me days after I was born, when my mother called someone in to strap my little arms down and mutilate me.

I don't know how to account for my stamina. I fucked that thing relentlessly, and I've never been a man who could do it again and again. It must have had something to do with whatever the fuckpod was doing to my brain. Its spores switched on a sexual adrenaline I never knew was there.

And for what? For a kind of theft. So that my sperm cells could be harvested and taken away.

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The fuckpods weren't a gift. They were a trick. They were a way to gather information about Earth's people, or to gather the raw material for inseminating aliens to make human-alien hybrids. Or whatever. Who knows. But when the fuckpods left Earth, they took a lot of human splodge with them.

"Of course it was a trick," Greta says. "They wanted to steal Earth's most private stuff. Our information. Our *genes*."

"If you're a bunch of aliens, and you want to learn all you can about humans, what's the best way to gather raw material? You target the most gullible half of the population, and you get them to stick their dicks in things. In three days, you've got a hundred million gallons of what comes out."

"But what will the aliens do with it all?" I said. "Why do they need so much? It can't be just a genetic info thing."

"I don't *know*, Duane! But it can't be good. Maybe they're freaks, and this is what turns them on. Maybe they want to clone more Duanes. And Barrys. And Trevors. God knows why they'd want to do that. We've got enough problems with the ones we've got down here."

This is how we talk, now. We're back to our old rapport, since we made up, except now we have more to fight about than ever.

"You miss it, don't you?" she said one night before bed. "You miss your *thing*."

I nodded. I cried. She cried, too.

I can't help it. The spores made me want it. They made me feel, when they were in my head, like I was loved. It's a feeling I've always fought, when it comes to the people closest to me. It must have something to do with how I was raised.

I'm honest with Greta about this, like the therapist said I should be.

"Never lie," she said. "Greta will know when you're lying."

Like I need a therapist to tell me that.

~

I don't talk to other guys much anymore. But they talk to me.

They approach me at coffee shops. And support groups. And yoga classes. I didn't used to go to those places, but nothing I used to do feels right anymore. And I'm trying to work on myself.

So are we all — the few of us who survived, the walking wounded who have had our lives destroyed but have kept on living.

A lot of the men want to ask what my theory is — about why the pods came here, who sent them, and what they did with our semen.

I say I don't know. They tell me their theories.

It must be cloning, some say. They're going to clone us, or mix all our semen together, and impregnate a giant creature we've never seen. The size of a planet!

Or there's an all-female interstellar race that ran out of men. They needed lots and lots of sperm cells. They knew where to find them.

Or it's the work of time travelers — people from the future who sent the cylinders back to repopulate a ravaged Earth of the future.

But none of that makes any sense. Why wouldn't the space women just ask for our semen? Why would time travelers send cylinders through time *and* space, and not just time?

One guy at the yoga studio, with fresh scars running up and down his forearms, said the aliens must be planning to abduct Earth's women and breed them using the semen they collected.

I shook my head. I thought he was wrong, I said.

He asked what my theory was, if I was so sure.

I said I didn't have a theory. I said I've been trying not to think about it.

He got mad. He changed the subject — sort of. He said he saw a report on CNN about gay men. How they mostly didn't kill or hurt themselves, or even split up with their partners, when the cantaloupes left them.

His words came in a torrent. I couldn't tell what came from the CNN report and what came from him. He said they said there's something about "the gays," how they support each other more than straight couples. When their interstellar lovers left, they were there for each other. They helped each other. They understood.

I barely knew what he was talking about. I was looking for a way out of the conversation.

I thought I'd found a way, which was to walk to a different part of the room, where we stack the mats, when he started crying. He put his hands over his eyes.

I sighed. I couldn't leave him like that. I put my hand on his shoulder.

He said into his hands that he missed his pod. I said I missed mine, too.

He said he couldn't believe what they said on the news, about how the love he felt was an illusion, that the cantaloupe didn't love him and he couldn't have loved it back.

"I know what I felt was real," he said, sobbing. "I still feel it, now."

"I feel it, too," I said.

Without lifting his head, he said, "Do you think Holly Hunter loved me? Do you think it was real?"

It took me a second to realize "Holly Hunter" was what he'd named his fuckpod.

I said, "I think it was real. I think they really loved us."

I wasn't lying. I couldn't lie to him. All I could say was what I felt in my heart.

It was like my therapist said: I can't lie to Greta. And I couldn't lie to this guy, either.

"What did you name yours?" he said, wiping his nose with his hand. "What did you call your pod?"

I said, "I'd rather not say. Let me keep that to myself."

He scoffed. "Go ahead," he said, and scowled. "Keep it to yourself. You know, that's what got us into this fucking mess." He kicked a rolled-up yoga mat.

I closed my eyes. He wasn't wrong.

Wasn't that what they said on the news, once all this blew over, once we took stock of how many men were lost, how few of us were left? We were done in not by the interstellar visitors, by our refusal to talk about the things that were right in front of us. When the sex cantaloupes left, we had no words for the loss we felt. We felt things we'd never said the names of. And so too many of us opted out of language. We dodged our feelings in the worst, most final way we could. Or we tried. Or we wanted to.

I said to that man, "It doesn't matter what I called my pod. The thing's gone."

He nodded. He looked down.

"And I don't care," I said, "why they came and why they left. I really don't. There's no way for us to know why they were here, so why should I waste my time trying to figure it out?" He tried to speak, but I kept talking. "When you ask a question like that, you're dodging the real question, the one we *should* be asking."

"And what's that?" he said.

I sighed. "Why did it take sex cantaloupes from outer space to cure one half of the human race of our biggest problems? To drop the domestic violence rate to almost nothing? To show us what it's like to really love something, and lose it, and actually have to *deal* with that, and not just move past it or try to destroy ourselves?"

He was still nodding. His eyes were closed. And I felt that stab in my heart that I kept feeling, that I'll always feel.

I said, "It's never coming back. I'm so alone."

I began to cry, then, not for the first time that day. And that man took me in his arms and held me close.

He had big arms. He must have worked in construction, before we were destroyed and glued back together.

It was a good hug. I sobbed into his shoulder.

Before the visit from outer space, this man would have rather punched my face than embraced me. Guys like us didn't do this sort of thing, before. Definitely not in the open.

Through my tears, I saw that the older woman, at the front counter of the yoga studio, was watching us, her hand on her chest. She wasn't crying, but she was touched, I could tell.

I heard the voice way back in my skull, and it sounded like Terry Bradshaw. It asked how I could make this spectacle of myself. Hugging another *guy*? Terry told me to pull myself together.

And I would do that. Sure. But first I'd let myself stay broken, like this, for a little while. I'd try to learn from it. I'd try to learn about myself.

Because if I can't do that, Mr. Bradshaw, then what is the fucking point? If guys like me and my new yoga buddy can't tell each other how we really feel, and hold each other close when we need it, then why did we go through all this? Did we learn nothing? If we who are left can't even express what's in our hearts, in the hope that someone will listen and understand, then what the hell are we still even doing here?

Robert Long Foreman's first collection of short fiction, I AM HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS, is available for pre-order from Sundress Publications. His novel, WEIRD PIG, comes out later in 2020 from SEMO Press. He has won a Pushcart prize, and you can read more at www.robertlongforeman.com.