

*A LOVER'S QUESTION*

Selected Stories

WORKS BY THOMAS FARBER

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*A LOVER'S QUESTION*

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time, earning more money, settling in sooner? Had he been a fool, had he failed to understand the game, was he now seeing the penalties for his actions?

While these questions rushed through his mind, his wife was nearby, talking to a fisherman who had just hauled in a small leopard shark. Though disappointed about losing the cottage, she seemed undismayed, apparently assuming something else would come along, or not minding at all if they had to move to the country to afford a place.

She was only several feet away, but he began to study her as if from a great distance. She had been a fine companion, had first traveled with him and then filled what homes they had with treasures. Plants, shells, rocks, nests, feathers. Fine meals. Love. She had shared and enhanced his life. He would have gone insane without her. But now, he thought, he was changing, even faster than he knew. He wished she had a source of income beyond the part-time jobs she took to pay her way. He wished she could bring as much to the purchase as he did. Then they could buy even in the hills.

Still looking over at her, he thought of the professional women he had once spent time with: filmmakers, lawyers, nurses, teachers. He thought of the kind of credit—not to mention savings—they must have had access to. He thought also of the heiress he had once lived with. In fact, he thought of all the women he had ever been close to who would have had the resources to help buy the house he now wanted.

As his wife continued to examine the leopard shark, waves breaking against the pilings, Pleiades running high overhead, he wished she had money, yes, he wished she had money. And, it occurred to him, since she had none he might be better off with someone who did.

(1977)

Though surely they were always all around me, I never saw them until the end of a rainy winter, and really not until early one evening when at long last the sky cleared. And then, in the afterglow of the waning day, they came into my ken, came out like stars. An elderly woman walking home from market, pausing after achieving a block before attempting the next; two aged gnomes, him with cigar pulling the wife behind; a grandfather watching his heirs mortgage the home he paid for free and clear. And Rose. "Once an adult, twice a child," she cackled as she watered her garden, throwing snails out into the street. Her six cats watching.

Rose's garden. Anemone, crocus, marigold, primrose, iris. ("Iris makes you believe in God, doesn't it," she said.) Hyacinth, foxglove, tigridia, gladiolus, scilla, hollyhock. Black tulip, Johnny-jump-up, nasturtium, sweet William, columbine, verbena, phlox. Campanula. Cosmos. African lily, regal lily, black lily of the Nile. Canterbury bells. Snapdragons. Bird-of-paradise. Forget-me-nots.

"The *crocus* flowers very early," she said that evening. "When I was a child I couldn't find the verb," she told me, laughing, reaching for her baseball cap to see if it was still there.

When I stopped by her garden the next morning I said: "Hi, Rose. The crocus flowers very early." She jumped. "How did you know that?" she asked. "That one always gave me trouble. Never could find the verb. Was I embarrassed!"

Rose approaching eighty, at long last on her own. Stacks of clippings, books, and records against the day she becomes a shut-in. Diet of bananas, peanut butter, pureed vegetables, and ice cream. Afraid of dozing off into a dreamless sleep never to wake.

And Rose in her garden. Dove in the birdbath. Blackbird zipping up to a phone wire to shake and preen. Robin catching a worm. "Goodbye, worm," Rose calls out.

"I'm kinda lost in the world now," she says, cars roaring by the garden. "Old as I am, I can't really separate the dreams from the reality." Two white butterflies dance past her. "This is living," she exclaims.

"When I was a little girl, I had a mammy, Aunt Ruth, and she used to tuck me in every night. One evening I wandered down in the Negro section and there was a colored woman singing, sitting in a chair on her lawn, just singing. The sun went down and I stood there transfixed, I just stood there looking through the paling. And then a colored man, Jim, he came along and opened the gate for me—the latch was too high to reach—and he said: 'Now you go tell your mama I let you in, and don't you ever be out this late again.'

"Once I embarrassed my mother. Lord! We were sitting at table—I couldn't have been but three or four, still in the high chair—and when everyone was ready for the prayer, I lifted up my small plate and said: 'Here, Grandpa, read my plate.' I thought that's where he got the prayer, I thought he read it off the plate. Oh, my mother was so embarrassed.

"I never was afraid for anyone to see me with my shoes off. I always walked alone. I never was lonely. I danced naked in the wilderness. We had a cabin in the mountains when I was small and I played with hornets, wasps, and birds. I danced naked in the wilderness; everything was my friend. But then one day my mother found me and told me I had sinned. I never did undress again and dance around. Until that day I never thought of what other people were going to think or say. I just grew like Topsy.

"When they put me under ether it was goodbye, I thought. 'I'm gone,' I said to myself. 'I'm going down headfirst into a dark pit.' So I

wiggled my finger to stop them from burying me. I felt like a house, and they were putting in doors and windows, just banging away.

“When I was a child, people believed old women were witches. They thought old women could turn themselves into cats, get into people’s drawers, steal things. They believed this.

“I died on my grandfather’s bed. Oops! I was just a baby then, he lost his foot in the Civil War. Tried to stop a rolling cannonball by sticking out his foot. I was wrapped up in a blanket on his bed when he finally died. I saw my grandmother die too, very calmly. ‘Rest in peace’ was her expectation. I have no fear of death. You may pick me up dead someday in the garden. I’m the last leaf on the family tree:

“...if I should live to be  
The last leaf upon the tree...  
Let them smile, as I do now,  
At the old forsaken bough...

“If only we knew what the end of us was. Once I heard a voice, very steady and quiet. ‘You are going to die,’ it said. I didn’t fight it. I was tired. It was like a realization.”

Rose in her garden digging irrigation channels, passersby stopping to look or to ask for flowers, amazed at what she’s made of the vacant lot. “I’m in hibernation now,” she says, toes out, feet flat, cap on her head. “I walk alone. I told the children, ‘Shoo, out of the nest.’ I made a lot of mistakes. I don’t think I’d have children again.

“My husband never meant that much to me. He was the same outside the family as inside, the same with everyone. He left me to care for things. My husband was a very popular man when we were young, an athlete, but three days after the wedding I rued it. I gave up my freedom, you see. ‘After twenty-four, a girl no more.’ You didn’t divorce easily in those days. There were women and there were ladies. Ladies didn’t divorce. There was another man who wanted to marry me, but he went into the Army and by the time he returned I was gone. After all these years he tracked me down. Called me up and said he still loved me, that he never had married. Wants

to see me. On the phone he said: 'Is this Rose with the blue eyes and light brown hair?' 'Not anymore,' I told him. I never felt that kind of romantic love. No. I walked alone. I can't think of a thing on heaven or earth that could move me to remarry. My husband said that. 'You're a one-man woman,' he often told me. Patting himself on the back, I suppose.

"After my father died my mother married again. I set myself against her, told her not to. Do you know what she did? Just before the ceremony she switched me, three times in one day. I was a hard child.

"When I was at college, a professor wondered about me. 'Who is that girl who walks alone?' he asked. That was me. Now I walk alone. That fellow calls and wants to see me after all these years. Still loves me, he says. Well, it's too late.

"My grandmother was a fine woman. She was a tall person, from England, very beautiful. She lived by the Bible. When I was a child, I would put my head in her lap. 'Now, Rose,' she'd say, 'have you done anything wrong? Be sure to ask God for forgiveness or you'll be punished.' She never said what the punishment was. 'God is love, too,' she told me. Then Grandmother would tuck me into bed, snug and safe. As soon as she was gone, I'd pull the covers over my head so God wouldn't be able to see me."

One day the man who had loved her so many years drove up from Oklahoma in his camper. He stayed only several hours. "I made another mistake," she said after he left. "When he came in, I was surprised at the way he looked. I remembered him from way back then. 'Why, you're an old man,' I said to him. I guess that put him off."

On her own, Rose struggles to orient herself. "Which door did I come in?" she asks to get her bearings, constantly having to back-track to discover what she was doing. Events merge, jump out of sequence, confuse, intimidate. As she works in her garden one day, there's a gunfight across the street. A man threatens to kill his child; police shoot it out with him. Hearing the shots, Rose is certain the sounds are either in her inner ear or else happened years ago.

A week later she sees a monkey in a tree and calls the police. The monkey turns out to be a cat. And late one night she sees a man

feeding a raccoon right under her window. As she looks out into the darkness, the colors are phenomenally intense, her garden like a fairyland. She has no way to establish whether what she sees is real or not.

Thirty years ago, just out of the service, her son met a woman on the train and, within the day, asked her to marry him. Rose argued with her son, saying it was too precipitate, but to no avail. Years later her son's wife became epileptic. In a cruel trick of memory Rose now sees the two separate events as one. "Son," she has herself saying to him when they argued that day, "son, don't marry her. She's an epileptic." And what she remembers as her son's anguished reply keeps haunting her: "Mother, how could you say such a thing, how could you?" Her crime never having been committed—at least not in this form—there is no one to absolve her.

Each night Rose barricades the door. The cats take their places, one on the mantel, two by the heater, three on the bed. She drapes a black cloth over the songbirds' cage, and, suddenly, the din stops. Alone, adrift in the flow of the many people who have been part of her life, she reaches for something sure. Her grandmother. Wondering what will bloom in the morning, wondering if her sense of smell will return, struggling not to nod off involuntarily, she prays as she did as a child:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
And if I die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.

"I always add the Amen," Rose says.

(1977)



# *Hazards to the Human Heart*

STORIES



## *The Mad Dog Instructional League*

“Mad Dog’s back,” my wife said, no trace of enthusiasm in the mother lode of her voice, a vein of pure reproach just beneath the surface. “I saw him crossing University down at San Pablo. He looks heavier, his hair is cropped, but it was Mad Dog.”

“You positive?” I parried, trying in two words to express my hope that she was wrong, as well as to assert that of course I couldn’t be held responsible. Christ, how much weight can two words take? I’d have liked them to convey that by mentioning his name she’d not only conjured up an image of him, but, for all I knew, had in fact caused his return. Had she not said his name, I wanted to suggest, Mad Dog might have been sitting in jail in Parrish County, Louisiana, desperate to be cut loose from a drunk and disorderly before the Feds could check out his prints and send a detainer. I could just see him sweating it out: shining on the guards, hustling the trusty, kissing the public defender’s ass, swearing to the bail bondsman that he had a friend who would pay. Trying the line on anyone who’d listen, even his cellmates.

“Boy, let me tell you, if they allow me to go home I’m never coming back. I’ve learned my lesson. I sure hope they let me go home.” Some prisoners hearing this craven bullshit shaking their heads in disgust; others venturing a smile, realizing that Mad Dog was just rehearsing—he’d con his way out.