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Too Late for Cows

Sandra stood in a Palo Alto art gallery on a Saturday night and clutched a hand-knit Peruvian cow, her long fingernails stroking its pudgy tummy. Though it was supposed to be white with black spots, the unbleached wool carried a beige cast and shed in her hand. Then there was its udder: oversized, protruding, and red, like a bovine fertility doll. Sandra told herself to just set it down, step away from the cow. At thirty-nine, she was too old to be buying herself stuffed animals, even if this store called it textile art. A salesclerk drifted up, fresh-faced with long wavy hair, and pointed to the tag. The alpaca wool had been raised in the Andes by women from an indigenous tribe. “That’s great,” Sandra said and turned away. She didn’t care about free-range alpaca sheep or whatever they were. She’d been politically correct when she was younger, but now she wanted to be happy.

Still, Sandra couldn’t walk away. This cow wouldn’t go with anything she owned, not her Italian leather sofa, her glass-top coffee table, and certainly not her antique Chinese armoire. Sandra, herself, clashed with the cow. She was tall, thin, angular. The cow was plump and squishy.

When her date, Jim, touched her arm, she startled. The last time she’d checked, he’d been studying a landscape painting far across the room. It had been safe to pick up the cow. She turned it to hide the udder. “Doing some early Christmas shopping?” he asked.

“For my niece, Amanda.” Sandra’s shoulders clenched. She’d sworn she wouldn’t lie tonight, but the words slipped out on their own.

“Let me get it.”

Really? “I couldn’t.” She hardly knew him. “Amanda wouldn’t understand.”

“What’s to understand? The cow’s cute. Family’s important.”

Sandra’s muscles relaxed, first her shoulders, then down her back, a rippling cascade of calm. Her family would love this guy. She could picture them all in her parents’ backyard under the sycamore trees: her two nephews playing bocce, Jim and her dad manning the grill, her mom carrying a giant bowl of potato salad, mouthing behind his back, “We like him.”

But was she ready for that? She hadn’t had a real boyfriend since she’d ended her engagement three years before. She really liked Jim, maybe too much.

So when he reached for the cow, Sandra hung on. He gave a slight, uncomfortable laugh, as if he might be on to her. He tugged a little harder, just as she let go. He stumbled back and bumped into the salesclerk. Sandra winced, but Jim quickly recovered. The clerk put her hand on his arm and tried to catch his eye. Sandra saw the way some women looked at him. Jim wasn't conventionally handsome, but he was built and had a sweet, wide-eyed openness seldom seen in the valley. He ignored the clerk's advance and simply handed her the cow, "We'd like this."

"It's delightful," she said. The young clerk carried the animal to the register and Sandra trailed behind. Up to now, she'd thought it was fine for Jim to buy her dinner and expect something later. So far she'd held him at bay. But tonight they'd flirted during dinner, and now he was buying gifts for a nonexistent niece. As the cow lay on the counter, Jim glanced at the udder. Would he say something? He'd grown up in a farm town so maybe this was normal for him, or maybe this whole situation was so odd he considered it another California affectation.

The clerk rang up the cow. "Wow," he said, handing over his credit card. "Forty-five dollars for a stuffed animal."

The clerk swiped the card. "Our work is crafted by artisans. The wool is all hand spun."

Sure, Sandra thought. The women were probably paid two bucks. But was that better than no pay at all? Global problems confounded her. She never knew the right thing to do.

Jim arched an eyebrow: are you sure you want this? Her pulse quickened, so she turned away. It's like they were becoming a couple, making joint decisions, just like she wanted. If they'd been going out longer, this might be something they'd discuss. But they were new. This was only their third date. Yet, they had chemistry. Could he feel it? She picked up a pencil that looked like a twig.

* * *

The evening had started as the perfect date. Jim had taken Sandra to the new Spanish restaurant and scored them a table in the courtyard under the purple jacaranda tree. Between the gurgle of the fountain, the classical guitar, the tapas, and the wine, she almost felt like they were on vacation, especially when they practiced their skimpy Spanish. "*¿Dónde está el baño?*" he'd asked the waitress, even though

neither of them had to go. It was easy to make Jim laugh. They liked the same books, and he was surprisingly well-read for an engineer, never once mentioning sci-fi. Amazing. When he used the word *film* not *movie*, Sandra set down her fork. Where had this guy come from? Nebraska, of all places. As he spoke, he smiled often and sincerely. No one did that. She couldn't even listen correctly, so as she gazed into his blue eyes, she murmured vague, positive sounds. She told herself this date was no big deal. People went on dates all the time. But as they left the restaurant, he placed his hand on the small of her back and they eased out the door gracefully, like mated swans. Their eyes met, and for a second she had a vision of them together, ten years from now, leaving this very restaurant. Immediately, she tripped.

"Are you okay?" he asked, grabbing her arm.

"My shoe." She bent over and pretended to adjust the strap. What was happening? She fiddled with the strap on her other shoe to gain time. He waited patiently. Finally, she rose. "Let's window-shop."

As they strolled down the street, he took her hand and every nerve in her skin prickled. She felt covered with tiny satellite receivers, all searching for signs of his next touch. She couldn't think of anything to say, so she stopped at a store window and pretended to admire the display. But she couldn't concentrate, feeling him standing there, just inches away, her hand enveloped in his gentle bear paw, their breath commingling like it might do later at home. Her heart hammered so she took a deep breath and told herself to calm down. When they walked into the art gallery, she did the only thing she could. She let go of his hand and drifted away.

Wandering down the aisle, she stopped at a table with a large blue blown-glass bowl from Murano. Pretty, she thought, as she ran a fingertip along the edge. It would look nice on her living room table. She glanced around. No one was watching. Jim was far across the store. She ran her fingers up and over the lip of the bowl, then flattened her palm along the bottom of the smooth, cool glass. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and counted to ten. She took one final breath, exhaled, and opened her eyes.

Directly in front of her, on a table against the window, sat the cow.

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As they left the store, Jim handed her the bag. Sandra felt bad. She'd never imagined he'd buy the cow, and she certainly wouldn't have bought it for herself. But as they walked, she kept picturing that squishy body with that urgent protruding udder. She would never have engorged breasts of her own, not at the rate she was going. Since she'd left her fiancé, she hadn't dated anyone longer than a couple of months. Recently, she had problems even getting past date two. She'd complained to her friends about her "second-date slump," and they said she dumped the good ones too soon. But the truth was the guys didn't call her.

She had no trouble meeting men and getting asked on dates, but the dates themselves were a problem. She'd heard the same story a thousand times before. All the marketing guys had founded start-ups and were working on IPOs. Every engineer had a brilliant idea that would change the world. But how many changes did the world really need? Those early dates felt like job interviews as she rolled out her same story over and over again: born in Chicago, earned a computer science degree from Urbana-Champaign, moved to California for her Stanford MBA. She began to feel like an aged comedienne in need of fresh material. That was how the problem had started. She'd toss in embellishments to spice things up, words like chutney on her life. Then the lies started dribbling out, as if language had a mind of its own: she planned to buy a Peugeot, she'd traveled through Europe alone. Even when the stories became bigger—she'd lived in Indonesia for a year, her mother had once been a cloistered nun—it didn't matter because she rarely saw the men again. She'd invent a life and by the following week it would dissipate, her identity vaporized into the strata of the dating clouds.

But in the past few months, even the second dates grew scarce, and she had turned to the internet. It was humbling, to say the least, but she was done with bars, and there was no way she'd hang out in grocery stores to chat up men. Surprisingly, she soon felt at ease. She was the director of marketing and what were these profiles? Marketing. It was easy to make hers stand out: funny, not needy, and sufficiently vague. Plus, she said she wanted to learn how to scuba and surf. That part was true. Yet she couldn't believe that all the guys who answered wanted to scuba or surf. In a hundred words, for the first time in her life, she'd

become Sporty Sandra. So the next weekend she tried again. With a few swift edits, she transformed herself into Granola Sandra, then Nerdy Sandra, then World Traveler Sandra. It's like she was a one-woman Spice Girls band. In the end, she settled on a profile that fell somewhere in between: successful but not a workaholic, somewhat outdoorsy, sarcastic, and politically aware-ish.

Of course, the guys also spun their own profiles, though the marketing guys were savvier than the engineers. She quickly became the queen of the phone screen. She didn't bother to meet for coffee anymore, she bragged to a friend.

"Do you even want to meet someone?" her friend asked. "Doesn't sound like it."

The next day she rewrote her profile. Near the end she wrote, "I miss the kindness of the Midwest but not the weather." Then she took a deep breath and slowly typed, "I would like to start a family someday. At my age, that means rather soon. Hope this doesn't scare you away." She reread the final sentence. Wasn't that the point, to filter out the wrong ones? She erased the last line and clicked Update. There, she'd said it.

For the rest of the day, she felt light and free. Apparently, the key to saying what you meant was to first put it in writing. She could control her words and correct herself if she misspoke. Too bad she had to talk at all. But when no emails came—one day, two days, three days—Sandra wondered if she'd made a mistake. The week wore on and her inbox echoed, empty. She'd finally spoken her truth and no one responded. Forget it, she thought; when the month expired, she'd delete her account. Yet she checked faithfully, a few times a day, until finally a short note appeared from a man who was a couple of years younger and new to the valley.

A week later as she opened the door to the coffee shop, she braced herself for a stable of men staring at their phones. Would she be forced to drift table to table, trying to meet eyes: *Are you my date?* But Jim stood, smiled, and even waved, and as she approached, he pulled out her chair.

Just talking to Jim made Sandra feel happy. He said he'd lived in Nebraska until his college buddy recruited him last fall. Was it simply that for him, everything was new? After they finished their coffee, she wished she didn't have to go. She'd made plans to help a friend buy a car, which was true but sounded like a lie. The irony killed her.

For their second date, he'd suggested a restaurant that served fondue. How retro. Who was this guy?

"I've always wanted to try this." He dunked a wedge of bread into the melted cheese.

"Now you have." The spark in his eyes dimmed a bit. Had she sounded snarky? She hadn't meant to. "This is such a treat," she gushed. His spark rose again. Good. No damage done.

After they gorged on chocolate fondue, they kept talking, giddy on sugar and wine. He said he would have lived his entire life in Nebraska if it weren't for his friend. Now he was living in the "land of opportunity." He actually used that phrase. Coming from anyone else, she would have made a flip remark, but from him it sounded charming. He was sincere. He felt lucky, he said.

On his first weekend in the valley, six months ago, he spent a Sunday driving around: There's Intel, there's Cisco. Look: Apple, Google, and Facebook. "It's like the history of computers has come alive."

She remembered that feeling years ago when she'd first stepped off the plane. That first year she'd driven past every landmark she could find—the HP Garage, Sand Hill Road, Buck's in Woodside—though she'd never admit that in public. She'd come to Stanford in the late nineties, when the tech bubble was frothing to a head, and was dropped straight down into the middle of the new economy. Technology had changed all the rules. She earned her MBA, joined a start-up, and six months later the bubble burst. She was lucky to have any job at all. Over time, her final shreds of optimism eroded away, ground down by the pressure of deadlines. But for Jim everything was wonderful and new. She considered telling him she'd seen Steve Wozniak again last month, at an ordinary Mexican restaurant, eating enchiladas verdes a couple of tables away. She held off. It might be too much, too soon. He continued to talk, hands moving, eyes laughing like a child's. When was the last time she'd met a man who was so . . . open? Cheerful? Naïve? So much less jaded than she? "I'm starting over," he said. "I'm like a new college grad. My life is on reboot."

"But why now?" she asked.

He grew quiet. His hands stopped. He stared at his plate for a solid minute before meeting her eyes again. He said his wife had died two years ago, from breast cancer, and then rolled out his long sad story of miscarriages, her

diagnosis, and arduous, fruitless treatment. It was too much for Sandra to take in and a thought flashed in her mind: It was a fluke that he was even here. He was a human arbitrage, a fleeting opportunity she could seize before the dating markets restabilized. Then her moral mind woke up—stop. Where had that thought come from?

Across the table, Jim frowned. "I apologize," he said. "That was too much."

"Oh no." He was as sweet as a puppy. His wife had died and now he was consoling her. She had to buck up and try to act normal, but she blurted out the first words that came, "Would you have moved to California if you'd had children?" She cringed. Why had she said that?

His eyes widened and face flushed. He started to speak, but stopped.

"I shouldn't have asked that," she said, aghast.

"I can't play the 'what if' game. My head would explode." He gestured to the waitress for the check. "We'd like to go."

* * *

The next morning she woke with a fondue hangover, solidly stuck in her second-date slump. She had blown it with Jim, the only guy she'd liked in ages. She moped all afternoon, never bothering to shower or even change her clothes. After dinner she sat in bed, propped up with the *Sunday New York Times*. But none of the stories interested her. They were about people far away, whom she'd never meet and whose problems she could do nothing about.

She lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. There were cobwebs in the corner, but who cared? No one would see them. Why had she said those things? Where had the words come from? And these crazy thoughts—how did they get there? It's like the thought police were beaming bad ideas into her brain. As she hugged her pillow and curled onto her side, she wondered if maybe something was seriously wrong with her.

Later, she walked to the kitchen in the dark. She opened the refrigerator, stood in its glow, and then reached for the cake, a leftover slice from someone's birthday at work. The plate clattered on the marble countertop. She forked a bite. The yellow cake was flavorless and stale and the frosting overly sweet, but she swallowed and

took another bite. She stood eating, wearing her sleeping clothes, a huge red Stanford T-shirt and torn panties with a few loose threads and the elastic coming off. She should buy herself new underwear, but what did it matter? No one ever saw them but her. She sipped some water. As she leaned against the counter, her cell phone rang. It was after nine. Not too late but late enough. Who would call on Sunday night? A telemarketer. She let the call go to voicemail as she ate more cake. When she glanced at the phone and saw it was Jim, she grabbed it. Could she still answer while he was leaving a message? She stopped. No. He'd know she was screening her calls. She waited for the message icon to light, an interminable delay. Why did it take so long? He *had* left a message, hadn't he? Finally the little icon lit, and she punched the screen and cradled the phone to her ear. Jim sounded so kind as he said he was sorry, that he'd said too much too soon. He asked if he could see her again. Maybe they could get together next weekend. Then he was gone.

Wow. Jim really was a stand-up guy. She wanted to call right back, but what could she say, that she'd been in the bathroom? He'd see through her. She fiddled with a thread on her panties, twisting it around her finger, over and over, until it snapped. She shook the thread into the trash. Why was she keeping these beat-up panties? She stepped out of them and threw them away. Jim had called. Yes. She scurried around, straightening the house, knocking down cobwebs. Jim wanted to see her again.

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After they left the gallery, they headed to his car, saying very little on the walk. Should she thank him again for the cow? No, she didn't want to remind him. Maybe he would forget about the niece. Or when the right time came, she could set the record straight. This might become their own private joke, a story from their early days.

As he drove her home they were quiet in the car. The paper bag on her lap grew heavier with every mile. When she leaned and placed the bag on the floor, he glanced over.

"Tell me about your niece."

She could tell him now, but what would she say? *Did I say niece?* Or, *Here's something funny.* No. She didn't trust herself.

"How old is she?" he asked.

She bit her lip. He just bought the girl a forty-five-dollar stuffed animal. It seemed like she owed him something. "Eleven?"

"Does she play any sports?"

"Softball."

"We should go watch her."

"She's not very good."

"I can teach her."

"Jim, please," she said. She didn't mean to sound so harsh. Her heart pounded. The lies had piled up quickly. She'd hoped that one tiny detail would move things along, until they changed the subject, but now she had to keep the facts straight. The bag leaned against her ankle. As she pushed it away, she realized that if she did have a niece the girl would live near Chicago. Shit. Why hadn't she said that?

He turned on the radio to soften the silence. She tried not to fidget but the wire from the new push-up bra dug into the sides of her breasts. She wanted to adjust it but he was sitting right there. The same strong arm that the clerk had touched was next to hers. She wanted him to reach over and take her hand. Her fingers sat on the lonely divider, waiting, primed. Did he see them? Finally, she put her hands back in her lap.

They stopped at the light a block from her home. She had to say something.

He pulled into her driveway.

She took a deep breath. "I had a nice time," she said. Simple. Good.

"I'm glad." The light was low. Was her breath okay? Should she invite him in? She wanted to, but things felt tense.

"Good night," he said, before she had a chance.

She waited three, four, five seconds. He didn't say that he'd call. She smoothed her hair and carefully opened the door. It was too late. Her lies had ruined everything again. As she reached her door, she promised herself that if she got another chance, she would tell him.

"Sandra." He leaned out the car window.

She stopped. Was this fate? Her final chance to set things right?

"You forgot your cow." He really was the nicest guy she had met in years. If anyone would understand, it was Jim.

He walked toward her, carrying the bag. Her front light flickered. What could she say to make him understand? *I'm normally more sophisticated.* No, that's not the point. *You're different than other men.* Maybe. *You make me cling to fertility dolls.* God, no. Her hand trembled, clutching the keys.

He held out the bag, but when she reached for it, the paper slipped. He bent and caught the bag before it hit the ground. That felt like a sign.

"Wow," she said.

"I played shortstop in college."

He shrugged. It was no big deal. That's what she needed, a no-big-deal guy.

This time he carefully folded her hand around the bag, and the paper crinkled. He laughed. This was it. She had to tell him now. "In the store," she said, "When we were looking at the cow?" She closed her eyes. "I lied."

"You didn't want it?"

"No. Yes. I love the cow." Her head throbbed, and she felt like she was gasping for air, a tiny fish on the shore. Why was this so hard? "I lied about my niece."

"She doesn't play softball?" He looked confused.

Sandra wanted to run. How could she admit to anyone, let alone Jim, just how flawed she was? He waited, his blue eyes searching but calm. He was such a great guy. He had to understand. Sandra took a deep breath. "I don't have a niece. I lied."

He cocked his head. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, of course not." This was a serious moment, but she felt a sudden urge to laugh. She'd seen this in her nephews—a nervous laugh whenever they got caught. "When you asked about the cow—if it was a gift . . ." She tripped over the *g* and giggled for a second. "Those were just the words I said."

She bit her lip to stop laughing.

"But we talked about softball."

She spoke sheepishly. "My two nephews play baseball?" She pressed her lips together.

They stood at her doorway under the flickering light. Jim looked handsome in blue. She wanted to remember all the details of this moment, when she told the truth and he accepted her. She clutched the paper bag.

He looked down the street, away from her. "It's late," he said.

"I know."

Then he turned and walked back to his car.

As she stood on her porch, his car pulled away, blinkered, and then turned the corner. She unlocked the door and told her hands to be still.

Inside she slumped on her bed and tossed the bag to the other side. She couldn't face that awful udder. Was there anything sweet in the fridge? Last week's cake was long gone and she hadn't bought anything new.

She slipped off her heels and slid between the smooth, cool sheets. God, what was wrong with her, lying to Jim? And why, because she liked him, as if she were an eleven-year-old girl? No other woman would do that. They'd snap him up. Like that clerk in the store. The young woman's face was inviting and wide, the type who would tell him everything, open kimono, all her secrets and dreams laid bare. That's what Jim wanted, what he deserved all along.

She should just call him. Right now. She had to tell him the truth about why she had lied, the full truth, no games. There was no other option. She stared at her clean ceiling for a long time, until she was sure he was home and had changed for bed. Soon he'd be asleep. Without looking, she pulled the cow from the bag and held it to her chest. She remembered his face as they stood on her stoop, his eyes searching and the slow shake of his head. All she had to do was pick up the phone. That's all it would take. She studied the ceiling and stopped at a corner—a cobweb had returned, already—until she knew it was too late to call.

Patti Jazanowski's writing has appeared in *Cimarron Review*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Ploughshares Blog*, *The Rumpus*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and elsewhere. She earned an MFA in Fiction from the Bennington Writing Seminars and degrees from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the University of Michigan. She's currently at work on a collection of short stories and a novel.