Love Letters

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Miss Gaston bought the gun on Tuesday. Later, she was to establish it was Tuesday because that was the day the sixth elderly woman in their South Alabama town was raped and murdered.

The murders had terrorized the small town and most of the southeast, too, as day after day, it seemed, the press detailed the grisly stories.

"Just like you and me," said Mrs. Trumbull, the white housekeeper, as Miss Gaston attempted to read the newspaper. Mrs. Trumbull, large and red-faced, always talked at breakfast when Miss Gaston tried to read. She also talked as if the entire world were deaf. She stood at the kitchen door, looking into the breakfast room, another habit Miss Gaston found disturbing. When she wasn't talking she stared at each mouthful Miss Gaston tried to consume.

"Them was society. Not trash. Look in there," she said pointing to Miss Gaston's newspaper, which obviously she had already read, "says in there, says there was a struggle. Police found a dark hair underneath the woman's fingernail."

Miss Gaston looked up at her then, transmitting a hollow knowledge. But it was Mrs. Trumbull who spoke the word.

"Nigger," she said, and in silence Miss Gaston's thoughts turned inward. Miss Gaston's imaginative mind had more than once reenacted the murders. With herself as victim. But the true timbre of horror was impossible to bring to herself. She could see herself awakening in bed with a flashlight blinding her sight and then the shadowy face coming closer, closer. Hands. Her throat closed with terror. A knife. Blackness. She could never see further. The scene always left her in such a stress that she tried to vacate it by quoting Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn.*

Poetry sometimes helped, but when Mrs. Trumbull mentioned "a struggle" nothing helped and she saw the elderly school teacher

in her pink nightgown, bobbed grey hair, bolting from her bed, struggling with her attacker, knocking over chairs, mirrors and finally the gurgling from her throat as the attacker forced her to the bed again.

"I'm going to get a gun." she said.

Mrs. Trumbull stared at her open-mouthed.

"Yes." She placed her coffee cup down with authority. She was thinking of her mother. Her mother had bought a gun after her father died. She hadn't minded using it either. Mainly, she shot squirrels with it. When the squirrels began ruining her cutting garden she shot them. "The Southern Hedda Gabler" they had called her mother.

Miss Gaston had been terrified of the gun. She didn't even like to look at it.

"Don't be silly," her mother said. "A woman has to protect herself. If someone came in this house I wouldn't hesitate one minute killing him."

"Yes, I'm going to buy a gun," she said again, and her voice sounded exactly like her mother's. Since her mother's death Miss Gaston had often seen herself as her mother, as if the two had switched roles: she dead, her mother alive.

"A gun is for one thang only," said Mrs. Trumbull.

"Don't be silly. A woman has to protect herself."

"Not if she's got two men in here to protect her."

Miss Gaston said Mrs. Trumbull knew as well as she that her nephew Alden was rarely at home before twelve. He and his wife Olive had taken to going to Birmingham almost every weekend and even during the week nowadays. Alden and his beautiful spoiled bride had become popular there.

"And the Governor wouldn't hear an atom bomb go off if it were right here in this own house." Miss Gaston was speaking of her brother-in-law, a former governor of Alabama.

Mrs. Trumbull thought the Governor's near-deafness enormously funny. She fell against the refrigerator laughing. "If that aint the. . . ." She was wheezing. "Atom bum! He sure can't hear nothin." But suddenly her reddened face went blank and it hung naked like a cow's as if some stunning fact had found its way into her brain.

"How come some twenty-year-old would want some eighty-year-old woman? How come?"

Miss Gaston looked away. Mrs. Trumbull's oftentimes earthiness, naive as it may be, never failed to jar her. "Where is Robert?" she asked and then turned her gaze to find Mrs. Trumbull still pondering on her heels.

Robert was the black yardman who sometimes drove the Governor and occasionally her. Robert could take her into town to make her purchase.

The Governor was napping. He wouldn't need the car until four.

"You'll have to see the po-lice," shouted Mrs. Trumbull. "They don't give just anybody a gun. They'll ast you thangs. Private thangs." It was a dare. The police force, as most official positions in the town, was almost totally black, a fact Mrs. Trumbull saw only as evil. "What all goes on down there the Lord only knows," she said morning after morning.

She turned from the breakfast room. "Changin them letters for a gun," she muttered softly. But Miss Gaston heard her. She knew what she was referring to. Just the other day she overheard her talking to the black cook:

"She sometimes moves her lips when she isn't even saying anythang. And she totes old letters round with her all the time. Thinks nobody don't see em. Old Lady Gaston done gone daft, if you asks me."

"Is?" was all the cook had to say.

"Yes ma'am. Keeps em letters in the bed, too. Covers em up with the sheet if somebody just happens in the room. Wonder what all's in them letters?"

Miss Gaston had known for years Mrs. Trumbull did not care for her. The feeling was mutual. But she hadn't known the woman's suspicions about the letters. She was unaware Mrs. Trumbull even knew about them. She had felt she had been discreet.

The letters were from Albert Mackenzie, love letters which she had saved all these years. Forty or more years by now. In a sense the letters marked the end of her life. At least she saw it that way. Nothing since then (the brief affair at college) had occurred to give life to the routine of her days. She read the letters at least once every month, reliving those times, rejoicing in them. They were her savior here in her dead sister's old house.

"Bran," her dying sister had said to her. "Make sure the Governor gets his bran." And so she had. That was twenty-five years ago, and she had been in the house ever since, seeing to this and that, planning meals, tending the garden.

Love, in every form, had left her life. She had only the letters. And they brought back more than love. They also brought back youth and what she was like in that far gone time. Full of poetry and sadness and joy, her days were April days, each one. But after Albert left for the army the joy left, too. Bit by bit. Day by day. She never had another beau. "Too intellectual," her mother had said.

Albert had admired that about her. At least he wrote that he did.

But now was now. She left Mrs. Trumbull muttering and went in search of Robert.

Robert put on his baseball cap (an unadorned chauffeur's cap) and Miss Gaston arranged herself in the back of the black Ford. The Governor bought only Fords, simple ones. It was good politics, of course, even though he had retired from political office years ago. But his reasoning aloud was he didn't want anything "ostentatious." He had learned that from big Eugenia, of course. His daughter was "little Eugenia," though in reality just the opposite was true. His wife was petite and frail. The daughter was a carbon copy of himself.

"To the police station, Robert," directed Miss Gaston.

Robert, an aging, well-mannered man with lifelong aspirations toward the clergy, never asked questions. But Miss Gaston could see the back of his collar rising on his neck. An explanation appeared to be in order.

"I want to buy a gun," she said. And Robert, the bill of his cap practically covering his eyes, turned flat around to face Miss Gaston. His head was cocked to one side as if he were examining Miss Gaston's face, searching it for some dire sign of trouble, perhaps a small stroke, mental confusion.

"A woman has to protect herself," was all she said.

Robert turned then, pushed the cap upward, and started the automobile. "Thas right," he said snappily.

Robert parked across the street from the city hall, a low slung yellow brick building, a former W.P.A. project. As soon as the car came to a halt it became instantly clear that Robert was particularly revered in the area. Uniformed policemen on motorcycles waved, saluted. Onlookers grinned.

"Hey theah, Checkerboard. Whatcha doin, man?" A middle-aged black man with two gilt front teeth grinned. Robert responded to the greeting with a low chortle "heh, heh, heh." Clearly Robert was beloved.

> For it was passing fair to be a king
> And ride in triumph through Persepolis

Miss Gaston quoted to herself as she descended from the car.

She walked as tall as she could across the street, and she noticed her presence had caused a change in scene. There were no more grins, no more affectionate greetings, no salutes. Only eyes, shifty but reading, solemn. As she approached the door she said "how d

you do" to two men, one with a toothpick in his mouth, leaning against the building near the door. No one offered to open the door. The man with the toothpick removed it as if in preparation for speech.

Outside the Chief of Police's office she could hear raucous laughter. "Tawk bout money, man . . ." and laughter again.

She knocked.

"Yeh?"

The door slowly opened. It was pushed by a man sitting on a high stool near the door. The whites of his eyes questioned as if some miraculous presence had made its way into their jocularity.

There were three men in the small water-stained office. The chief, resplendent in grey gear and hardware, was seated behind a worn desk with his feet up. The man on the stool rose, looked at Miss Gaston with half-closed lids and departed. The other, still grinning, dropped ashes from his cigar into his cupped hand and then scratching his head with his second finger began to frown.

"Chief Washington?" asked Miss Gaston, regarding the man behind the desk.

The man lifted his feet off the desk. "Y'all go on now," he said to the others. The buttons on his uniform were brass and they shone green from the phosphorescent lights above, one bulb of which was obviously defective because it kept going off and on like a wink from on high.

An empty chair was placed before the desk. Miss Gaston sat in it, waiting for the other men to depart. The room smelled of stale sweat and snuff and old tobaccos. She thought she detected the odor of leaking gas, and she spied the heater in the corner of the room. Its flame was yellow and blue and sputtered.

"Yes'm," said Chief Washington. "Now what kin I do for yew?" His voice was gentle, kind and completely different from what she had heard behind the door before she knocked. He had a round face with a snappy mustache and dark solemn eyes.

"I am here to ask permission to purchase a gun."

"Is?" He brushed his hand beneath his nose and sniffed. He was looking at something in the far corner of the room. Miss Gaston turned to see what had caught his attention. There was nothing.

"Yes, we live in the country, you see, and there is so much happening these days."

The man nodded in solemnity, still staring at the corner.

"Do I fill out something?"

The man straightened in his chair and looked at her for the first time. "That isn't to say to be exactly mandatory. But they's thangs I'd have to axed you. Just for instance," and he leaned forward, "is yew meaning to cah'y this on your pusson?"

"On me?"

"Yes ma'am. These is thangs we gotta know."

Miss Gaston looked away. "Well, of course, if I went out for a walk. On the place, you know. I think I would probably take the pistol with me." She looked back at him and he looked at the corner again. "You see, all I want is a very small pistol, one I could carry in my purse or—in a pocket."

"Gun's a powful thang. You wouldn't want to go shootin somethin you had no binness shootin. These is thangs we have to be under*stood* about. They mandatory."

Miss Gaston said she understood, but since her nephew was away so much of the time and the Governor had become hard of hearing she felt she and the housekeeper on the place needed some protection should, Lord forbid, such a necessity arise.

At the mention of "the Governor" the man's expression widened.

"You talkin bout the Governor?" His voice rose.

"Yes. He's my brother-in-law. We live in the same house."

The man was grinning. "Lawd help us. I knowed the Governor all my life, drove for him. Drove him when he was up in Mongumry. Lady, you can have anythang you wants. Anybody's a relative the Governor sure gotta be a friend of Chief *Po*lice Washington. Sure."

It was a triumph. Miss Gaston was also smiling. This was a friendly place, a nice place, almost pleasant. Mrs. Trumbull had no idea what she was talking about. "Well then," she said.

The Chief was scribbling on a piece of paper. "Now, you just take this here with you and—" he looked up at her. "Pick you out a nice gun, heah."

Miss Gaston received the paper. "Well thank you. Thank you very much."

"Any time. Tell the Governor you seen me, heah. Tell him I *still* got the silver dollar he give me. Wouldn't take nothin for it."

Miss Gaston said she would surely tell him about the silver dollar. She shook hands with him. They were friends. She wasn't like some people she knew. They would never have shaken hands with a black man. She was far and above such nonsense. There was not a prejudiced bone in her body.

They walked out into the hall together. From the rear of the building where the jail was located came the melodious voice of an inmate:

"Fuck you, Washington! You got shit all over the walls in here!"

The two, the chief and Miss Gaston, stared dumbly at each other.

"Drunk," said the Chief. "You get all kinds." He turned as if

addressing the voice. The back of his head was rounded and somehow touching.

Across the street she spied Robert. He was talking to a motorcycle policeman. The policeman's hat was resting on the back of his head. "Heh, heh, heh," she could hear Robert's appreciative laugh all the way across the street.

"Well, good-day, Chief Washington," said Miss Gaston. The drunk had begun to holler again.

"Good-day," said the Chief, averting his eyes. Robert knew all about guns, he said. He would teach her how to shoot.

In preparation Miss Gaston bought a target with a bull's face square in the middle. The salesman at the pawn shop, where guns were also for sale, had taught her how to load and unload the small .22.

Robert had told her to buy a "Sarday night special." But the clerk at the pawn shop thought the small .22 would be more to her liking.

"That's a *mean* gun," he explained with pride.

Thus equipped Robert and Mrs Gaston returned to the country.

She hadn't been home half an hour before her nephew Alden approached her. It was only two in the afternoon and Alden was never at home in the afternoon.

"Floss," he called to Miss Gaston from the back door of the house. She was sitting outside enjoying the February sun. She would have to tell him "Floss" was not her name. She did not like to be called that. Florence. She had always been called "Florence."

She said nothing. She was determined to get along with Alden and his pretty pouty wife Olive. The future ever loomed. Just who would be living in this house should something untoward happen to the Governor? Would there be two here? Or three? Of late Olive had taken an inordinate interest in the house. No longer was there talk of building a house of their own.

Miss Gaston saw in her sensory way that Olive considered her extra. She had seen that ever since Alden brought her home as a bride.

"Now, what is this I hear about a gun?" Alden's blue eyes were redder-rimmed than ever. And, yes, he was losing more and more hair. This was much more obvious in the sunlight. By candlelight at dinner it wasn't so noticeable. Nor was his weak mouth. Alden had the Governor's mouth.

She smiled at him almost coquettishly. "Now who's been telling you things, Alden?"

"Well, Olive, really. She's worried you might harm yourself."

Of course Mrs. Trumbull was the true culprit. She saw the woman sassing up to Olive, gleefully spitting out her gossip. It was as if the two had formed a conspiracy. She saw them making plans, plotting to have her evicted from the house. In a kind way, of course. The happiest day of their lives would be the day she entered the Greenleaf Nursing Home.

She saw herself in a small cubby hold of a room, nothing there but a bed, a chair, a table. And, of course, the letters. She was too intelligent, too whole to be put away like that.

Alden was her answer. Alden did have a sweet side. She played up to that, complimenting him on this and that, the way he looked, a special point he had made in a political discussion. And Olive knew it. Whenever Alden paid the slightest attention to her, Olive's leg would begin to swing up and down and her mouth pout. Olive, with all her prettiness, had the most revealing face Miss Gaston had ever seen. Her emotions were as public as a child's.

"Robert is going to teach me," she said to Alden.

"But you might hurt yourself or—somebody else. A gun is a very, very serious thing."

"Alden, you are such a sweet boy. You've always been. To think you would worry so much about me that you'd actually come home. At two in the afternoon."

Alden was as vulnerable to flattery as the Governor. His eyes crinkled into a smile. He put his arm around her. "Floss, you're quite a woman."

"My mother was excellent with a pistol," she said. "Do you know what started her? I mean got her interested in pistols? It wasn't just Father's death."

Alden said he did not know and yawned into the sun. He had a black tooth far back on his left jaw.

"Hedda Gabler. She played Hedda Gabler at the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston when she was a young woman. The reviews were excellent. I think she rather thought of herself as Hedda. People never forgot her performance. She was very beautiful, your grandmother. Even more beautiful than your mother, if such a thing could be possible."

Alden's face softened. He enjoyed talking about his mother, and he enjoyed even more the fact she was beautiful, something he rather seemed to transfer to himself.

"No, don't you worry, Alden. I'm a practical person. I wouldn't think of using a weapon unless it was absolutely necessary, and I certainly don't plan on that. At least, I hope not."

He gave her another little hug, as if he were hugging the past. "Just be careful, hon."

Hon. Just like his father. No matter what Alden did, the cracker in him would always out. Dress them up, dress them down, nothing ever really changed. How grateful she was for her own heritage. Not a bad seed in the lot, as far as she knew. She sighed with the sweet sadness of it all and went to join Robert at target practice.

"*Bools*eye!" shouted Robert. "You gettin it, Miz Florence. Ats the ticket. You gettin it!"

How heady it all was. This discovery of a latent talent was fine, indeed. She liked the feel of the steady instrument in her hand, and she was a good shot. Standing there, pointing the gun, she was indeed her mother. She was Hedda. Impetuous, beautiful, witty, high strung, high willed.

"Ats it!"

Robert was a skilled teacher. Also an appreciative one. Whenever she hit near the target, joys of appreciation came forth from his throat: "Heh, heh, heh." Miss Gaston found herself wanting to please her teacher.

"Ats it! Atta way! Attaboy, Miz Gaston: Ats it: BOOLSEYE!"

Miss Gaston began to treat what was happening to her as a little joke:

"I can remember what happened a hundred years ago, but I can't remember what happened yesterday," she told Mrs. Trumbull more than once. Lately, Mrs. Trumbull had been oddly silent when she made the remark.

What prompted her to think of this now was the box of letters from Albert. She could not find them. She had looked everywhere—in her trunk, in the attic, the top of her closet, underneath the bed. They were nowhere. She had planned to read them tonight. But where had she put them?

She decided to go down and ask Mrs. Trumbull if she had seen them. After all she was so curious. Also, just by asking, she would inform the woman she had overheard her talking to the cook.

She slowly descended the stairs in hopes of hearing more from Mrs. Trumbull. But instead she could hear laughter in the Governor's office—loud guffaws from the Governor and Olive and Alden. They were having a family time, a cheerful time. It was nice to be a family when all was going well. She wondered if she should join them. She paused at the office door.

"My god," said Olive, "I'd never have believed it."

"I never knew the old girl had it in her," said Alden.

Miss Gaston removed her hand from the brass knob. There was

no room in that merry collusion for her. She would be an intruder. She listened further, and her body stiffened.

"Listen to this here," said the Governor. "This is somethin else:

" . . . No, I haven't forgotten a moment of our time together, not one. In a sense the only good thing about our separation (if anything is good) is to see if my feeling for you was merely infatuation or a fleeting thing—I find that this has not been true at all . . ."

"Hot damn!" said the Governor. "That's somethin. Listen to this here:

"My thoughts and dreams are only of you, coming at the oddest times. Always you. My love at times becomes heavy and oppressive and at times soars carefree and effortless. Is it no wonder I think of you—night and day? Twenty-four hours at a stretch. If only . . ."

"Aunt Florence's been keeping things from everybody."

"the memory of the campus and rain (that rain in which we first recognized what had affected us—in which we tasted the first symptoms of love) . . .

"Luv," said the Governor. "Hah. Hah. Hah. Ah, luv.

" . . . how gaunt and towering the wooden skislide appears on a moonlight night—how the boards up there creak and whisper in the night wind, how they whisper and repeat what they have heard whispered to them.

"Memories of the hours we spent in the valley. Down there in the quiet and stillness that only a grove of pines can seem to create—down there where the snow gathers white and deep in the winter . . .

"Remember the music hall where we found each other, and a small Episcopal Church, a lighter and a deserted pub . . ."

"I think it's sad," said Olive.

Miss Gaston entered the room. The Governor was seated behind his desk and the faded letter dripped from his hand like blood. His weak mouth tried to smile.

She saw the letters in the familiar hat box. They rested there tainted. He had found the precious letters in the storage room. She remembered now.

"I'm sorry, Florence," said the Governor. "I thought these were something of Eugenia's. I'd never—"

She looked at the three of them, Olive and Alden looking down at their laps, and the Governor folding a letter, placing it back in the envelope, foolishly handing it to her.

She stared at his fat balding face. Then she tried to speak. Nothing would come. She took the letter from his hand and kneeling placed it back in the box. She picked up the box and saying nothing left the room. The pain was so deep in her she could not cry. She ascended the stairs with her arms wrapped around the box.

She would never be the same again. She placed her hands on each side of her face. She had to cry. She could not. The very thought of the Governor's pudgy fingers touching her sacred letters caused her to turn about in the room with rage. She thought of the sixth elderly woman in town who had been raped and she knew then something of the woman's violation.

The gun was heavy in her smock pocket. She placed the box of letters on her bed and descended the stairs once again.

The three of them were still there. She looked into each face, the rage in her veiling the faces. Only the Governor was smiling.

She aimed the gun at him, not seeing his face now. Then arms about her. Alden. And a strident pain in her right foot. She looked down and her foot was covered in blood.□