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Upon Learning My Uncle Doug Had Been Married and Divorced Before He Died: A Dialectic

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Upon Learning My Uncle Doug Had Been Married and Divorced Before He Died: A Dialectic

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The Waking is proud to nominate "Upon Learning My Uncle Doug Had Been Married and Divorced Before He Died: A Dialectic" for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net 2021 anthology.

1. His Best Friend Scott, on the Divorce

Doug was married to a lady who didn't grow up on a farm. He met Beth in college, a real pretty girl with brown hair and brown eyes. Doug was broad-shouldered and blue-eyed, good-looking too. But Beth didn't get why he worked all the time, running from barns to the shop and back to the feedlot. She didn't know a thing about livestock. She didn't get it's not a job but a *living* you either love or you don't, and it was in Doug's blood. So Beth stewed at home, staring at the clock, wishing she was out. It was too much of a shock, from college to the country. Seemed to me she wasn't bored but angry that Doug was living the life he chose and she was stuck in a house she swore seeped dirt. Hated it like an allergy. And not a school in sight was hiring then, so she had all this time when Doug had none. But farming paid her school loans. In the end she got out debt-free and damned if Doug got slammed with alimony. He just couldn't tell the judge what everybody knew—no, he wouldn't talk of her indiscretions. Probably he was embarrassed, too proud and too private, but in any case, boy did he pay in every way. Probably best she didn't go to Doug's funeral. What's Beth doing now—do you know? Is that so. Well, now. That's a shame.

2. Beth Tells It Like It Is

They'll tell you, go to college, but mostly, they don't mean to study; they mean for the *M.R.S. degree*. They'll tell you, *what—you thought it was free?* When you tell them you like engineering, they'll ask if you mean education; you're clearly pretty and you must love children. They'll tell you, go to church to meet men, and when you do, they'll tell you to use protection. They won't tell you about STDs but about some girl they knew who died from LSD when she thought the balcony was the base of a tree, and you're too pretty to fall that far. They'll tell you, don't burn your bras—don't be one of them feminists who scare them shitless—but the man you like, maybe love (he's a country boy, a tall hunk who can sing and do things with his hands), he'll tell you to ditch all your bras for your natural shape. He'll tell you, don't worry about money; his family owns a farm, and he's got a vision once he's graduated. He'll tell you this like

...the vision with the farm and the family, and kiss the... you won't have to lift—unless you want to—and you smile because he has no idea what you can do, so you lift a finger to pinch his lips, and for a second, you can't tell if he likes it.

3. On a Road Trip out West, Scott Comes to a Crossroad

When the newly-split gets a new car and the itch to *get the hell out*, what's a friend to do but take off work and go too. You need two to share a drive that far; two to talk when the thoughts come and to divide the silence when they don't; two to navigate the map, the stations, the pop of bottle caps and yes, one can of Milwaukee's Best through Kansas because the guy sitting next to you needs this. Needs the forward motion, the strange sense of speed beneath a body sitting still in the seat, the tap of a finger on the wheel because you like this song—*when Cash was king of country*—and you like it more, set against this new scene changing from loam to clay, from beans to wheat to the occasional ditch weed to something we've never seen in the Rockies to the clean slip of sand. Look, it was land you married first, before the girl. Before she grew bored and went to bed with somebody else wedded to the land—when you'd done nothing but buy her a yippy dog and pay down her debt, and nothing offset her disappointment. Oh, she knew. She saw her life unfurl the way you pull down a shade and trade the view outside for a screen that's blank. I'm not saying it's fair but *fear* itself—just like that quote—that made her act out, and now four days on the road, only four days away from her, when we'd already made it to Anaheim and survived Santa Ana-something wind and the guy we found under the bridge in a fetal position you said could jump in—*now* you've gone and called her back? Now you're flying to *meet her in Phoenix*? To some health spa-thing where nuts bake in the steam and wait for some kind of spiritual awakening, some miracle healing—but I know what you'll do. Your pal's seen the chemistry like I was never in the room; like I couldn't see your touch above her knee half a foot from me that time at O'Toole's; like I hadn't thought about her too—oh, she'd had a few, and the next thing I knew her breath was on my neck and you had left to check a squeeze chute where a heifer had come loose. Always going *be back soon* but I think she assumed you were fooling around too. I set her straight and asked a waitress take her home but then later, well you know, she took her someplace else. So don't rope each other in; don't drive this far and think because the scenery's changed the situation ain't the same. You say your good-byes for the last time and don't look back—don't tell her *soon* when it'll never last. If you're not in Vegas by the first, I'll drive this car right up your ass.

4. The Farmer's Wife: A Cross-Stitch

Beth is poised with her hand on the board, chalk dust on her hip and a whistle around her neck so her feather voice might project. It will catch at the sound of her own mother's voice—it's never good to be called at work—thinking her father had fallen or wandered away again in search of a bird he'd heard from the bathroom window. But no—*it's Doug*. She won't recall the drive home, the call to his mom for the funeral date, when my grandma picks up the phone then hands it off for a cousin to take. Beth stays on the line and a friend presses a blue pill in her hand and says *drink*. She'll dream of Doug—not the fights, but the easy banter of two lovers who should've stayed friends, laughing at his relatives' homemade wedding gifts: ceramic mice in bridal outfits, a bouquet of Anne's lace and cattail reeds, and a cross-stitch his mother had framed: *Amidst Labors Never Done, We Three Wed/ You, the Land, and I Are One*. After the divorce she'll wipe it off and hand it back to him—*sorry it hung in the bathroom*—and he'll laugh and agree, everybody needs something to read. I find it tucked beneath the Order for the Burial of the Dead—imagine the old longing, them staring at each other for a beat—dust off The Farmer's Wife cross-stitch with my sleeve.

5. Doug Takes a Flying Lesson

He taxis up and down a band of runway—his first lesson: *get to know the plane*—at an hour safe from the babble of take-offs and landings, when the airfield lies blank as a board; when he should still be doing chores because everybody's *just worried about him* since the divorce, and they squeeze his shoulder and lower their chins and you'd think he'd been drafted or had run from a crime, and is it really *escaping* when he's back by lunch-time? He presses

...take on command and the plane rocks in place. He knows the rhythm of break-up, on and off, for two years; it's the push-and-pull nature of wanting different things. *Do you know why we do an engine run-up?* Doug feels like shrugging—enough with the checks; he just wants in the air—you *have to make sure each cylinder is firing at full power.* We talked about carburetor ice and Doug knows this too, the danger of rushing, of never testing what each other would not and could *do.* How fast it builds up and burns out, when no amount of touch or words or cash (not always in that order) can recover what's stalled, and it hurts to look at her when she asks if you're *done*; how it flies in your face, the whole thing, all the checks deposited in her name and nobody's touch or words can soothe the feeling you've failed at this too, and how's he supposed to know if a wind shear occurs just before a cold front passes overhead. How can the same air that feeds it be the death of a fire?



Rachael Peckham is a Drinko Fellow and professor of English at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Her lyric prose has been awarded prizes at *Briar Cliff Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Orison Books*, *Spring Garden Press*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. She is currently at work on a collection of essays about flight and trauma.

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June 23, 2021

Captivating at every turn; so good I reread it straight away.



Cindy Jones

June 19, 2021

Intensely engaging, I was fully lost in the story. Beautiful work.



John Backman

June 19, 2021

I am stunned by how completely Rachael Peckham nailed the voice in every single section. A heartbreaking and brilliant piece. Thank you.



Fay L. Loomis

June 07, 2021

Mesmerizing. Loved it, loved it, loved it. Thanks.

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