

So Long, Night

by Liz Lydic

The first night Steve gave Flora three orgasms was four years ago at the 2017 conference. The intensity of the night was a complete and utter surprise, a kind of out-of-body experience that Steve never had with his wife Julie. Perhaps it was the extra round of drinks California Consortium of Sanitation Districts offered, courtesy of a recent increase in membership, or maybe not.

Tonight, Steve thinks, if I make her wait longer—edging, like the article said—I can surprise her with four orgasms. Kneeling on the floor in front of her, he sucks her right nipple slowly, allowing his tongue to dawdle along the texture, the feeling on the roof of his mouth and behind his front teeth, the malleability of her other breast as he massages it. Steve tries to memorize that perfect fit.

“Please,” Flora whispers, lowering herself to her elbows from her seated position on the bed.

Steve takes his time kissing his way down the soft skin of her stomach, as Flora reaches for his ears. She visualizes three parts of Steve 51 weeks of the year: the surprising swell of his biceps; the softness of his outer ear; and his hands, with their rough cuticles and thick fingers, which she knows he uses in his work as a Water Quality Lab Supervisor.

As he reaches her lower abdomen with his tongue and lips, Flora moans and breathes out. “Steve,” she pleads.

Suddenly, Steve stops thinking. He grabs Flora by her wrists and pulls her to stand. Her face, with her pleading blue eyes and thin lips framed by graying hair, complies and she

lowers her gaze to his. The trust they've had throughout the decades—trust grounded in discretion, in understanding the affair's boundaries, and that they would be there each winter—guides their movements.

"Flora. My God..." he says into her right ear.

Flora wishes he would say more.

Steve pulls Flora's panties down, and her hips and legs comply. With one hand, he releases himself from his belt and pants; his other hand wrapped tightly around Flora's waist.

"I want you all year," Steve says, and then enters her. There is electricity surging from behind Flora's right eye all the way to her toes.

"I'm all yours," says Flora, as she cups his neck with her right hand, and with the left, guides his hip back and forth into her. They maintain synchronized motion for a few minutes before one of them speeds up or slows down. After a minute of thrusting, Steve clenches and grips Flora's shoulder. Steve's body, the tan and smoothness of it, slackens, and he looks at her. Those eyes, dark in color but bright in expression, always surprise her by how much smaller they are without his glasses on.

Tracing the ways in which their bodies have changed over the years was like trying to remember the exact moment their respective children sprouted teeth or the Michelin Man-like cushiness of their bodies stretched into awkward, pointy limbs. Steve's belly was there, always; it grew bigger, but so did Flora's. They'd both widened and shortened. At every conference, when they embraced in the lobby as colleagues in front of fellow attendees, they discreetly took inventory of one another. The minutia registered first: the widow's peak a centimeter deeper, flat practical shoes replacing high heels, a new groove in the skin on the face or neck. But the details were passed over quickly. They were a phenomenon to one another: in each other's presence just like magic: they were the same as always.

Quickly, still naked only from the waist down, Steve moves Flora gently toward the bed. He pushes her down onto her back and then lays next to her. He strokes her slowly with his right

thumb before finally cupping her with his palm, inserting his middle finger inside her. They find a rhythm, and he watches her. She's turned slightly toward him, and he sees the crook in her nose, so elegant and mature, it always gives him a hard-on. Her ears are weighted down by her earrings, two doves hanging low and stretching her cartilage. Her breasts splay to each side of her body. Laying down, their fullness is betrayed, *but I know better*, he thinks.

Flora cums as she grips Steve's working forearm with both her hands. As usual, she says his name several times in a row. She flops back with her left arm thrown across her forehead for a moment and then looks over to him. "Well, that was good. As usual. New moves. Mama likes."

"It was great, as usual. I agree." Steve smirks at her. His front right tooth overlaps the left by a millimeter. Steve feels warmth in his groin, which quickly turns to butterflies. His heart races. "I'm retiring."

Flora sits up. "What?"

"End of June. Julie and I bought property in Montana." Flora's eyes avert independently at Steve's wife's name, and then the implications are sudden.

"So," she says coldly, "This *is* it."

"Yeah. This is it." Steve sits up and shrugs apologetically and then regrets it. He tries again, looking at her, right in her eyes, and lowers her voice. He wants her to know how great tonight was, how much he will think about it when he's in Montana. "This is it."

"Well," Flora says, eyes big, and her voice too forced into a false chirpiness, "I guess we knew this day would come."

"Yep, we always did. Back when we were dumb kids." Steve tries to laugh. The onsetting tears Flora feels from hearing the word 'kids' gain momentum as she remembers—like it was yesterday—their first night together, so spontaneous and so right, not pointing toward something that would last decades, but had, for any number of reasons. Her mind flashes to Steve hovering over her in the bed of his hotel room back in 1989, and the feeling

she was letting go.

“I don’t know what to say. I’m shocked. I guess it’s weird to me that you make decisions about the rest of your life and don’t think of me.”

Steve shakes his head. “We said we would never talk about...I mean, we agreed we wouldn’t leave our spouses or whatnot in...all this. That was supposed to be the thing we knew wouldn’t happen.”

“I know. I know that. I’m just surprised to find out just now. That this is it.”

“Yeah.” There is a very long pause. “I didn’t not think of you, though. I did think about this. Losing this.”

Flora finally looks up at him. *Steve*, she thinks. *Steve, Steve, Steve Balliet*. How a name in her head, repeated and thought about for so long could make her feel so much ownership over him, she couldn’t comprehend. There would never be another Steve Balliet. But, it was true: what they had never superseded real life: wives, husbands, kids, homes, predictability.

“Well,” she says, “Thanks for tonight. Safe travels home.”

“I was hoping I could give you a few more...I could probably go for another round...I mean, you don’t have to go,” Steve says, and Flora is repulsed by his assumption they would have more sex.

“I know I don’t, but I should.” Flora pulls her panties on, steps into her dress, and finds her cell phone and purse. The quick movements emit a blast of lavender lotion from her body. She waits for the right words—whatever they are—to entice her back.

“I’m sorry.” Steve’s eyes are searching and he genuinely looks sad. But, Flora realizes right then, she has nothing to do with that. She is split in half: this moment was inevitable.

He hasn’t duped her, this was always part of their arrangement. However, simply by retiring first, he is, in the end, leaving her.

She looks at Steve, her items gathered in her hands, and raises her eyebrows in an attempt at lightness.

“Nah.” She smiles, and the tears well again. She is a mix of

sorrow and joy, an older version of herself from that first night decades ago, when she was flooded with guilt and elation. A wave of sexiness, excitement, youth, and hope overwhelms her now, typical for the time after the conference and time with Steve. Over the years, she has shifted from an eager and doubtful, apologizing young woman into something she had thought as an adolescent she might one day be. Her world has become colorful, and she has navigated her successes with pride instead of disgust.

“It’s been great.” Flora turns and gets to the door then looks back at him. He hasn’t moved from the bed. “Actually, Steve? It’s been amazing.”