

Curtis VanDonkelaar

# Larry and Charlene in Three Acts

## 1.

They planned to try everything short of knives and pliers. The first item would be an executioner's hood. That and two leather harnesses, one for each of them, meant to make things uncomfortable down there. Buying the hood excited them, in theory, in a way that had been missing for some time. Though each had turned fifty-two the previous June, neither Larry nor Charlene had ever been inside an adult bookstore before. Larry felt aroused just walking up to the heavily curtained door. Charlene had to slow her breathing. In, out, she told herself. In and then out, like walking. Full and then empty, her lungs a pair of expanding balloons.

"Perverts, I bet," Larry said, as he reached for the handle. "I shouldn't have worn a good pair of shoes."

"Will they look us in the eyes?" she asked.

A man in a purple dress shirt and a quality tie stood at the counter. He smiled as they passed him. No one else inside. Charlene stopped at a rack of videos, studied one cover. She blushed and said, "Oh my."

Larry found the hood, stuffed it beneath his arm. He found a thong-like G-string with a constricting device on it that he felt he could live with. He motioned to Charlene and she joined him, chose something with a great tangle of straps.

The counter man accepted Larry's credit card, rang them up without blinking. On a six-inch portable television set, the kind powered by D-cell batteries, he watched a syndicated episode of *Divorce Court*. He snorted frequently. As he bagged their merchandise in a brown paper sack, he wished them a good evening.

By the time they got home, the blood had left their groins. By the time they tried things on, they were tired. By the time Larry put on the hood, it seemed so silly to both of them, they stopped and laughed out loud. Larry sat cross-legged in the center of their mattress and Charlene turned on the news. They took off the harnesses, settled into bed for the night. Larry crawled under their chenille bedspread and watched Letterman count something down. He left the hood on.

## 2.

In high wave conditions, the city of Grand Haven kept the public from driving down to the beach's breakwater by obstructing the waterfront road with construction cones. Larry and Charlene had to drive on the edge of a dune to get around a string of them lined up in a parade of tiny, red-faced dunces. God, if the little fools had only had fingers to wag.

The thunderstorm had another twenty minutes or so to complete its crossing of Lake Michigan, but the storm surge had already come like a slow-moving tsunami, and Larry and Charlene figured they had timed things just right.

Waves higher than their Cherokee broke over the guard rail, slammed onto the street and flooded across it all the way to the far curb. Larry parked as close to the rail as he could. The surging lake was barely the length of a dead man, laid out flat, away from them. Or a woman. Each gush of water rocked the truck as the surf buried them, obliterated their view of the road sign at the end of the breakwater, marked "Danger!!!" in letters redder than the cones.

Larry reached over to the passenger seat and stroked Charlene's thigh. She pulled down the elastic band of her stretch pants, and real, honest, decent effort happened.

He looked up to her. "Well?"

"No," she said. "Not really."

A wave the size of a small house hit them, pushed the truck sideways two feet into the street. For a number of seconds, they floated. The sky darkened, and the first tendrils of Papa Storm rushed ashore.

She said, "I don't think I want to drown."

## 3.

Larry put his hands around her throat. He could feel her lymph glands, wondered what his life would have been like had he become a doctor. If he pushed hard enough, he could discern the hint of vertebrae. He squeezed, released, squeezed. From the dresser, the radio played Brahms, the First Symphony. Like a fly buzzing about his head, Larry found the melodies distracting, but Charlene insisted. When they were young, Brahms had never failed to put her in the mood.

"Are you sure you're doing it right?" she asked.

"No," he said.

“I don’t think you are.”

“Can you breathe?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

They had removed their clothing, done what was necessary for each of them to begin the act. This, especially for Larry, involved recollection. For Larry, of the coed who sold him his morning coffee at Starbucks, her bare belly. His eyes’ dream of her bare belly. For Charlene, of the man who came by on Saturdays and offered to rake the lawn for a twenty. Getting ready involved time in separate rooms.

Once they’d officially coupled, he’d clutched her. Afraid, though, to do it for real, he worked his hands as he would have had this been a friendly massage, pressure and then letting up, pressure and good air let through.

“You’re supposed to keep going,” she said. “Like snakes. They just keep getting tighter.”

“I don’t hate you,” he said.

He had to acknowledge that their sex was already failing. He was growing soft. He could tell that she listened to the music more than she felt him. He considered giving up, but at that instant, she fixed on him and said, “You have to. Do something, do anything.”

He squeezed again, this time harder, and he held on a little longer. Charlene turned red, then a light blue. She closed her eyes. When he released, she gasped and sputtered.

“Almost,” she said. “Again.”

“Will you do me afterwards?”

“Of course,” she said. “Why would I not?”

And so he strangled her, hard and without hesitation. She squirmed beneath him, but he only squeezed tighter. Like water through a garden hose, he could feel her coursing blood in his fingers, pumping with her heart.

When she passed out at last, he checked her for a pulse, and then he sat back in the pillows and blankets. Waiting on his turn, he listened to the violins. He studied the play of lamplight on the wall behind the bed. Like a hung tapestry, a swath of bright gold extended upwards from the shade in the shape of an inverted triangle. The light colored the off-white paint against shadows so harshly-defined they could have been guided on with a ruler and pen. Larry got up on his knees and pressed his not-quite-yet-fat stomach against the headboard. He reached up a hand, laid his palm flat on the unlit wall. A skin of paint, and dear God, so cold.

Curtis VanDonkelaar's fiction has appeared with *Passages North*, *Vestal Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Hobart*, *DIAGRAM*, and others (see [curtisvandonkelaar.com](http://curtisvandonkelaar.com)). He teaches in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Culture at Michigan State University.