



Standoffish

Alex was fifty-eight years old and he wanted to be a poet, not a bookkeeper. The thing is, he never actually *wrote poems*. It was much easier to google *poetic forms* and write down the format for a *cinquain* - five lines, with an *ababb*, *abaab* or *abccb* rhyme scheme - than to actually write one.

But he may have finally stumbled onto something. He figured out that he could do a poem a week - which meant he could do *fifty-two poems* in a year, enough for a self-published *volume* of poems - if he worked on them during lunch. Except for Maria.

“Alex,” she said, “why are you sitting over here by yourself? I got a table for everybody in the banquet room. Don’t be so standoffish.”

Everybody was the entire staff of Waldron and Waldron, CPAs. He had made the mistake of telling Maria, the office manager, about Templeman’s, just two blocks from the office and, until now, usually overlooked by the downtown Seattle professional types. Now Maria had everybody showing up there for lunch.

He closed his laptop and the old-school composition book where he kept his ideas. He stuffed them into his shoulder bag and followed her. When they got to the banquet room she announced, “Alex has agreed to stop being a dork and join us. Let’s hear it for Alex.” A couple of his friends from bookkeeping started a slow clap. Everybody else glanced up for a second, then went back to gabbing.

Maria had Alex sit next to her, then ignored him while she talked to Chuck, about how to deal with accelerated depreciation for software

installations. He ate his PB&J sandwiches and bag of Fritos without saying anything to anybody.

When they got back to the office, she said, "Alex, come into my office for a minute."

He dumped his bag in his cubicle and followed her into the office. She closed the door.

"Alex," she said, "I like the strong, silent type as much as the next girl, but you've taken it to a new level. It's not working for you, Alex. I know for a fact most of the people here think you don't like them. Not good, Alex. I also know for a fact that Chelsea has eyes for you. I don't ordinarily encourage that sort of thing, but you need something to get you a little enthused about life. Chelsea thinks you're on the autism spectrum or something."

He knew for a fact that Chelsea was spending the weekends with Gavin, one of the senior CPAs, even though his divorce wasn't final. He felt himself starting to heat up, so he walked out of her office without being excused.

The next day he didn't go to Templeman's. Instead he took his lunch bag to the Starbucks in the lobby. He knew people wrote entire novels in Starbucks. He was on deadline. He'd found a poetry contest in *Seattle Slam Magazine* and he needed to submit something by 5 p.m. He'd be written up if Maria caught him working on it during one of her random cubicle stop-bys, so it was lunchtime or nothing.

He was working on the second line of *Triolet for Juno*, a *paean* to the older Husky / Golden Retriever mix he daydreamed of adopting from the King County Animal Shelter, where he volunteered every Saturday morning:

Triolet for Juno

*Sweet mercy in your careful paw
that rests upon my sleeping breast.
You could have waked me, raked your claw.
Sweet mercy in your careful paw.
Your careless love your only flaw
(save many a failed obedience test.)
Sweet mercy in your careful paw
that rests upon my sleeping breast.*

He was thinking about substituting *chest* for *breast*, or changing the whole rhyme scheme. Maybe *triolets* were too damn repetitive. Maybe the whole thing was really hokey.

“Alex!” It was Maria. She had Chelsea with her and they were buzzing straight at him.

“What are you doing here, Alex?” asked Chelsea. “Don’t be such a weirdo. The rest of us keep wondering why you don’t want to have lunch with us.”

The rest of you don’t really give a shit where I eat lunch.

“I have to finish this project I’ve got,” he said. “Tomorrow I can be back with the group. I have a deadline.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Alex?” said Maria. “You’re not working on anything so pressing you have to hole up by yourself, not that I know of.”

“It’s not for work,” he said.

“Writing the great American novel, Alex?” Chelsea said. “I didn’t know you had it in you.” She slid alongside him and turned his laptop toward her.

“*Breast?*” she asked. “Is this a porn?”

He closed the laptop and put it in his bag. “No,” he said, “it’s not a porn.”

“Okay,” Chelsea said, “I can see we’re bothering you. You seemed like you could use a little cheering up, that’s all.”

They laughed and walked away, waving back over their shoulders.

“No, no,” he called out after them. “I appreciate it. I really do. Please wait. I’m coming.”

Deadline, schmeadline. Maybe he was mistaken about Chelsea and Gavin. He could see how she would laugh at his pathetic little doggie doodle. It was *doggerel*. *Now that’s funny: Doggerel. He was a 58-year-old wannabe poet with the skills of a 7th grader. Time to wake up, Alex. Maybe it wasn’t too late for a 58-year-old bookkeeper to take the CPA exams. Move over Gavin! Alex is coming.*

The women had already gone through the doors, out into the street. He needed to stop being so standoffish. He started running.

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