

# THE GHOST OF JOHNNY SLICK

Jessica Bentz

The love of Susan's life died on the day she was married. The day was clear and windy and the guests sighed softly in admiration. Her pink wedding dress fell over her plump belly and trailed into the dirt. She closed her eyes and sang, "A-B-C-D, I am so pretty." She looked deeply into her betrothed's brown eyes and said, "You are the love of my life." The wedding guests sat murmuring in the back yard until her betrothed gobbled down two of them and puked on the rest. Susan showered a benediction of Kibble on the happy wedding party and went inside to eat a tuna sandwich.

In high school Susan could never understand the girls who waited outside hotels for a glimpse of Johnny Slick. They would sweet-talk his security guards, bat their heavy eyelashes, fluff their hair. Then they would slink, those weaselettes, into his hotel room to look for dirty socks, used glasses, chewed bacon. "Even his sweat smells good!" they would say through pointed teeth. They pressed their lips over the cloudy film on the hotel cups. "It's just like kissing him!" Susan shook her head in disbelief. Probably some fat froggy manager with a lip wart had taken the suite while Johnny was out partying.

Susan made a shrine to him anyway, plastering her room with pictures torn from magazines. Johnny's faces flew over her head every night in the dark, tiny birds in bright sailor suits, torn jeans, and leather jackets cawing, "Slick. Slick. Slick." She went to school with dark circles under her eyes and her mom patted her and said, "You sure do like that Johnny!"

The ghost of Johnny Slick haunted her in college. He sat shirtless and grinning on the edge of her desk and murmured,

“Hypocrite. Hypocrite.” She would catch a glimpse of a bronzed nipple between Chaucer and Cheever when she went to the library. He sat beside her leering at the women’s rowing team as she read on the banks. He was right. She was in love with her own Johnny Slick.

Her dissertation was two hundred and ten pages on the use of the word “twilight” with its moral and metaphysical implications in *The Hour When Twilight Dies*, George Sour’s first novel. She recited the opening lines of the book over and over in her small apartment. “One violet September evening in the gloaming...” she muttered to herself over dinners of macaroni, chanted half-prayers for inspiration over the gooey cheese, and tried to find a thesis in her roommate’s cheerful forehead. Her roommate began lighting candles with garish pictures of saints, and hissed “*Satanist*” when they passed in the hall. She typed “darkness signifies the metaphorical end of man’s...” and backed her Volvo into a lamp post twice that week.

When she began teaching, her Special Author Series 1258 class could not tell she was in love with the man she taught them about. The neighboring professor of medieval literature would mist over and long for the smell of strong horse sweat and plague, but Susan’s mauve turtleneck sweaters and plain white face did not suggest such passion. She read George Sour’s biography like a dry personal ad: “He enjoyed the myriad challenges of beekeeping and was fluent in both French and German.”

Susan did not enjoy the myriad challenges of beekeeping. She spent the summer of her second teaching year researching bees, sitting in the hot library scrutinizing its many apiological texts, leafing through yellowed pages on the construction of beehives, the collection of honey, their mating habits, Latin classifications. She used two paychecks on a beehive, and purchased *Bees for Fun and Profit*, hoping to hear the dark humming of furry bodies, a pleasure that George expounded on in *Dark Balloons*.

She sweated terribly in her beekeeping clothes and bruised her knees carrying the heavy wood into her small backyard. The bees died lazily, and she found them everywhere, little dead crunches in her sandwiches, her shower. “Well,” the doctor said, examining the puffy hands that bulged out of her turtleneck, “it seems you have a slight allergy...” She drove into the country and left the beehive by the side of the road with a cardboard sign. *Free bees to a good home. Neutered+first shots.*

Her attempt at polyglottery went no better. She sat in a classroom beside her former students and watched them smirk as she butchered simple words. “*Nooon. From-ag-eh.*” Monsieur Lambet grabbed her blushing face and tried to squish it into the right pronunciation. “*Lee...tay...RACH...ture.*” The creases around her mouth lasted for a day, little brackets of hatred for the French language.

After fifteen years of teaching, she received a love letter. “Dear Miss Brown,” it read, “We have read your dissertation and it is our pleasure to invite you to...” Susan suspected that somewhere Johnny was stretching his full lips to laugh at her. She was further gone than the Johnny lovers; Queen Weaselette. They were going to pay her for her obsession. They wanted her to be George’s third biographer.

Susan sat on the plane to Boston, her plain brown hair coiffed and her turtleneck ironed, dozing and waking with a start. She realized that somewhere a poor man or woman knew what Herman Melville’s favorite kind of sandwich was, or Emily Dickinson’s favorite day of the week. She guessed bologna and Wednesday and fell asleep again.

She met with Biographer Number Two in a small coffee shop. Number Two had given his class to a graduate student for the day. “And after all those green miles...” he quoted. Susan returned, “he reached the end of the day.” They smiled. Number Two leaned in and pushed back his gray hair. “His son is gay, you know. His son wasn’t talking so I hired a detective who saw

him holding hands with another man. Sour didn't know when he was alive. My angle is Sour's family. What's your angle?" Susan wrinkled her forehead in confusion. "My angle?"

One Friday the mailman delivered three thousand letters to her doorstep, on special loan from Stanford University. Each letter was sealed in a special bag, three thousand presents for her to open. She taped a picture of Johnny to her bathroom mirror and began to forgive his followers. She picked a shining packet at random. "Dear Raymond," the letter began, "You will happy to hear that we had a son."

The letters hummed softly to her at night, the spirits of dead bees filling her ears. "Mr. Sour," she told them in a mock country twang, "you surely are the first man to break my heart." Her stomach ached with the ghost of pregnancy, and she craved peanut butter and bratwurst.

Each letter had its own weather. They rained sandwich crumbs, sprinkled grass clippings, were spattered with hair oil. In one letter to a child she found giraffe eyelashes with a small note pinned to them in slanted writing. *Don't worry. The giraffe keeper promised that she needed her eyelashes trimmed.* Her own handwriting began to slouch, and her 'A' developed a limp.

In box 100498B Susan fell a little bit in love with the Dearest Mary, the little bunny, the lady whose breasts were like twin deer nuzzling, Miss Sweet to his Mr. Sour. She unwished the pinches to underarm fat that she had wanted for the Johnny fans. Now she was the one twirling her hair in math class and reciting, "His favorite color is blue. His eyes are green." She forgot the color of her own father's eyes and asked guiltily when he called, "Dad, did you ever write for mom?" Her tomato plants and goldfish died, and she begged the head of her department for another year's sabbatical. She got a postcard from Florida with one written line: *Take care of my father.*

She was working on the footnotes for the final chapter when *Sweet and Sour Quarterly* invited her to a symposium

in Europe. After a week of TV dinners with an elderly neighbor she said yes. She felt slightly seasick on the plane, and downed a rare vodka. The next morning her head pounded as a tour guide led her group to the cemetery where George was buried. She was blonde and cheerful, and Susan half expected her to whisper “Satanist,” but instead she began a canned speech. “And here we have the famous author that you might be familiar with. He was born in Stokesham, England on April 16<sup>th</sup>...” Susan mouthed the words, her lips dry and numb.

That night she arranged the notes for her speech, “*Giraffe Eyelashes: A Postmodern Approach...*” half-heartedly. Tomorrow she would stare out at blank faces and try to tell them about the man she loved while they thought longingly of the free sandwich cart. Her underarms would darken and her head would shrink into her turtleneck. She drank the rest of the vodka from the plane and walked out into the dark street.

She stumbled seven blocks to the cemetery and looked through the dark bars. Her voice slurred slightly, “You and me, Mr. Sour, we have ourselves a date.” She snuck around the side of the cemetery and began climbing the stone wall. She grabbed a stone gargoyle for leverage and heaved her stockinged legs over the ledge. Her sensible shoes fell deep into the bushes.

She took a left at the drowned poet and limped past the consumptive writers. He was nestled between two contemporary authors, a plain gravestone. She reached up and traced the arc between b. and d. Yes, she thought, *George Samuel Sour, born in Stokesham, England on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1901. Died March 21, 1964. No. George Samuel Sour, born on a windy day in a small mining village. Married once, to dearest Mary. Died one violet September evening. Yes. And.*

*Harry Joseph Brown. Born 1930. His eyes were...and he liked jazz. His eyes were green.*

*And.*

*Susan Rose Brown. Married once, to a golden retriever,*

# *Wag's Revue*

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***at age seven. Divorced that night. Hobbies: Not beekeeping.  
Friend to the ghost of Johnny Slick.***