

APRIL'S FOOL?

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Jackson, the superstar of Gayle's hometown, was everyone's James Dean, Buddy Holly, and Roy Orbison, rolled into one. He drove a '57 Chevy painted a shade of plum mist purple the locals had never seen in real time. He introduced drag racing, glamorized lethargy, and intrigued everyone with stories about his friendship with Elvis' bodyguard. He excited them all, bringing a kind of agitated disturbance slightly out of sync and somewhat intimidating. A distraction from the Dairy Queen routine of their small town existence, he aroused suspicion in all the parents.

Jackson went out to West Texas in May of '61 with a seismograph crew that had come through town. He returned in the middle of August, much sooner than anyone expected. His unannounced homecoming, typical Jackson theatrics, did not surprise Gayle, his girlfriend's sister. No, his unexpected return did not surprise anyone, but the news that he had come back married stunned them all.

However, knowledge of April preceded her. Some of the guys from the group of Jackson followers had gone to visit him one weekend, and returned with reports about the fifteen-year-old daughter of the woman who ran the boarding house where Jackson and the rest of the crew stayed. Driving by Jackson's house one late afternoon, Gayle saw her for the first time. She was walking on the sidewalk with his little brothers in tow. As though framing a movie scene, Gayle's eyes zoomed in on her. All motion ceased in that instant as if someone had pressed the pause button. Gayle's staring must have electrified the air, for April literally glowed.

The sun, sinking below the edge of the horizon, poured its orange vapor over April, misting everything around her with the coppery tones of amber. The summer heat radiated from the pavement and Gayle could smell the asphalt mixed with charcoal from someone's backyard barbecue. Within that narrowly confined hesitation of time, April's beauty, like some strange form of muted energy, touched Gayle. She hovered between jealousy, on her sister's behalf, and fascination.

April wore tight, hip-hugger shorts, which rode way below her navel. A matching pink halter barely covered her breasts. Long black hair, tied loosely at the back of her neck, fell in soft bouncy curls around her shoulders, framing her face. She advertised sexuality. Just as she bent to take the hands of the little boys, she looked at Gayle. Her eyes, brightly quizzical and scrutinizing, asked *What?* Then, her full, slightly pouty, lips broke into a dimpled, knowing smile, before fading to a blur as Gayle drove passed them. She watched the trio through the rear view mirror as they crossed the street.

So, that was April. "What a little slut," Gayle said self-righteously to herself. They had all heard the rumors, how the whole seismograph crew had passed the girl around like a bowl of Christmas pudding. How Jackson, little Jack Horner with the plum on his thumb, was caught by the mother. How, under threat of a jail sentence, he had married April.

Then, a small, timid voice stirred inside Gayle, from so deep within her it might have been an imagined whisper until it called again. Awareness had awakened in her. Suddenly, she knew that she could call April *slut* all she wanted. That—whether she approved or not—April displayed a freedom Gayle had never seen in another female.

She saw April's liberation the instant their eyes met, and she had to deal with it often over the next few years.

Gayle overcame her indignation, the second-hand jealousy, and grew to like April, despite her rumored nymphomania and factual fondness for Jack Daniels. Gayle was shocked more by her own tolerance for April's shenanigans—for her boisterous indulgences, and for her wild rebellion—than she was by April's actual behavior. This laissez-faire attitude, so out of character for Gayle at the time, puzzled her.

However, the elemental disparity between her nature and April's surfaced the night Gayle came home and found April, with Jackson and Gayle's husband, Larry, playing poker at the kitchen table. It was 1965 in San Antonio, just a little after dark on a Friday night. Gayle had recognized their car in the driveway. Coming into the apartment, followed by her two toddlers, she noticed at once the closed door between the living room and the kitchen. Unusual. She heard April laughing, that pleasant, distinctive, Jack Daniels giggle.

Gayle promised the kids a picnic in their bedroom and had them wait there for their sandwiches. She opened the door and the sight of April sitting naked at the head of her kitchen table slapped Gayle in the face. Larry and Jackson sat on opposite sides.

"Hey, Gayle, we're playin' strip poker," April announced gleefully. "Guess who's losin'?"

Gayle's eyes flew to Larry's face in an attempt to make contact with his eyes, but they were glued to the floor. Funny how cheap linoleum had grabbed his attention.

"Come on, play with us," April begged appealingly, bouncing on the chair. Gayle noticed she had no tan lines, her body evenly and completely tanned. Being childless, there were no stretch marks either. April pulled one long, slender leg up to her chest, and rested her chin on it, as if waiting for Gayle to take her place at the table.

"No!" Gayle spat the words at Larry, surprising herself at the venomous tone.

"Get dressed, April," Jackson said tenderly, as if to a playful child.

"Hey, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to make anybody mad." April retrieved her underwear from the floor and nonchalantly began to get dressed. She genuinely seemed not to understand Gayle's anger, her embarrassment, or her inhibition. Gayle stood there feeling foolish and fat, trying not to cry.

Astonishingly, they remained friends, the four of them, and Gayle learned not to be offended by April's candid exhibitionism, by her penchant for doing housework completely nude. Gayle overlooked her honest vulgarity, accepted the bottle she carried in her purse, and even shared her marijuana cigarette a time or two. Gayle chose to ignore the gossip April attracted, the naughty reputation that followed her. April's unabashed sensuality was no secret to anyone. Finally, Gayle even delighted in, sometimes envied, April's earthy lustiness, which caused her to question, for the first time, the rigidity of her own southern-bred, puritanical morality.

The two women passed through each other's lives, then drifted apart. From time to time, Gayle and Larry heard from the couple. Postcards came from different places. Letters arrived periodically, with photographs of new friends on motorcycles, wearing black leather jackets and combat boots. April waved to them from the bottom of the Grand Canyon, from the back of a mechanical bull in Houston, from outside a strip joint in Vegas, and in more than one photograph, she posed topless from the front fender of their new Corvette convertible.

Gayle saw her for the last time unexpectedly, many years later, oddly on Main Street of their hometown, at the grocery store. A middle-aged woman in the wrinkled, dingy uniform of a worker in the local milk production plant, April smelled of cigarettes and disinfectant. Long since divorced from Jackson, she told Gayle that she lived a few miles out of town with someone she could never marry. She had thickened around the middle, and a slight paunchiness stretched the buttons across her stomach. To Gayle's knowledge, April never had children.

Her lips were still full, somewhat pouting, and the dimples still danced around the corners when she smiled, revealing a chipped tooth that had not been there before. Her eyes had not changed. Not fundamentally. They still looked back at Gayle curiously, intelligently, still asking, *What?* However, Gayle detected an unfamiliar tiredness inside them. She still wore her hair long and pulled back loosely from her face.

In parting, April asked about their kids and the grandchildren. Then, in the flirtatious manner that was April's essence, she said, "Hey, you and Larry come out some night. We'll play cards or something." She shifted her shoulder bag, and it bumped heavily against her hip. "Talk about old times."

"We just might surprise you and do that," Gayle replied.

Much time has passed since then, but Gayle thinks of April often. She remembers her, the first liberated woman she ever knew, as an enigma. The memory of her perplexes Gayle in its controversy. Could April's hearty appetite for life have been an unappeasable hunger, her unbridled freedom, enslavement? Was I conned by my own naïveté? Gayle questions. Was I commandeered by her insatiable need for an audience? Was I nothing more than April's fool? Gayle wonders.

She wants to believe not. She wants to believe that their friendship was mutually natural. She wants to believe that April's motivation for pleasure was pure, that she guilelessly enjoyed the looseness of every moment. Gayle wants to believe that April's liberation was real.

And on some days, she almost does.