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F[x] ≠ LOVE

Renée E. D'Aoust

When Rick was little, he organized the food on his plate, screaming if his grandmother served him a medley of vegetables, the colors all mixed together, orange carrots with green peas and yellow corn. Yellow was his favorite color, so he would start with the corn, painstakingly using his fork to separate out each kernel. Then he would work on the carrots, and last on the green peas, ending up with three separate and distinct circles of yellow, orange, and green. He counted each vegetable, they were from the freezer—his family never ate fresh vegetables—numbering each one as he ate, again starting with the yellow (corn), then the orange (carrots), then the green (peas). The color took precedence to the vegetable. If the final sum of each separate grouping of vegetable was even, he went to bed happy; if the number was odd, he didn't know what to feel and so felt nothing.

Later in his life, the nothing feeling turned into numbness, which Rick understood was not a feeling but a way of operating in the world that prevented disappointment. Numbness prevented chaotic medleys of emotion, most particularly with regard to women, particularly women who were not engineers.

Rick existed in a world of equations, some beautiful and complicated. Rick was an engineer. He had always wanted to be an engineer. His father had just retired; he had been a civil engineer. His grandfather had been an engineer before the distinctions were so sharp between electrical, civil, mechanical. Back then, they hadn't even thought of computer engineers. Rick remembered his first computer at Long Island City Community College. The computer filled an entire room.

His ex-wife had not been an engineer: his first mistake in judgment. She was a failed accountant: his second mistake in judgment. Before buying the rings, he had not properly calculated the probable failure of their marriage. He did not think the outcome would have been different had they stood at

an altar instead of in front of a judge. He was not superstitious. His ex-wife Gail had failed at accounting in the early nineties, long before fuzzy numbers became a viable legal defense. He realized too late Gail was too much like his mother, so he divorced her and moved her into a larger two-room house next door with a yard. He prided himself that he did the right thing. He took Gail to dinner every Sunday night with his mother and father. He called his mother, Mommy; his father, Daddy. He maintained his parents' plumbing, which was often nonsensically stressed, fixed their cars, mowed their lawn, and paid his mother's credit card bills.

He did not like a disorganized, unpredictable world, yet his small house was a mess. Now at the age of thirty-nine, he had somehow lost the ability to order things completely. Perhaps that was why he brought home this woman named Catherine, who laughed as he told her about those childhood vegetables. He looked at his house with a start.

Rick saw grime on the windows, piles of clothes on the floor, dirty dishes scattered around the computer console. He was mortified. He did not know that Catherine saw only him—that she loved him immediately, instinctively, when they were introduced by two mutual friends.

On their first date, Catherine had described her life as a dancer. "I try to use all parts of my body to create a whole," she said.

Rick had said, "Two sides of an equation make a whole."

He was 6'5", blond, muscular, and he had a good straight nose. Because of his reserve, or perhaps because of his height, he looked like a marble statue—not exactly a god but not exactly available, either. Except, unbelievably to Catherine, he was single. Available.

They completed each other.

Neither stood on formality or pretense, so they had come home together to Rick's tiny house in Medford, Long Island. He told Catherine right away that he lived uncomfortably next door to his ex-wife Gail but not too far from his job at Brookhaven

National Labs. Ten years into their marriage, he had walked in on Gail with her lover Tracy in their bed. That was the other reason he moved Gail next door. Other than that she had become his mother. Gail still needed Rick to change the oil in her car and fix her broken appliances.

Rick explained all this to Catherine. She listened. "I did the right thing," he said.

"Are you doing it now?" Catherine asked.

She looked intently at him, directly, never letting her eyes move from his gaze. It made her seem strangely other-worldly yet completely engaged with the present. Her body leaned forward to hear his words. Catherine did not have Rick's quality of standing away from life, of being reserved.

Rick was kind, and he was very good at self-rationalization. He was not good at self-reflection. Eventually, Gail's affair ended, but Rick and Gail divorced anyway. He had already bought the house next door and moved her there. From time to time, she entertained other women in her bed, but it was of no concern to Rick.

Gail still worked with numbers even though she had failed her M.B.A. She counted numbers of teddy bears sold from a business called Bears for the Soul. The bears came with a personal note handwritten by Gail. Her boss hired her because she liked the cursive quality of Gail's penmanship. Gail was not allowed to write the content of the notes. She had always wanted to run her own crafts gallery where people could come and make art—not any great art, but accessible art like magazine collages using pictures of things one wants to buy or stamp art using bought rubber stamps with hearts and stars and kitties. Like a lot of people on Long Island, Gail thought money and big cars were more important than dreams. She found the job at the teddy bear factory, which she had for twenty years before the business owner sold her bears to a man in Hong Kong who took the factory to China. Then Gail became their rep in America, and counted the numbers of bears sold per day. She entered the numbers in data fields on the computer and no longer copied

out cursive notes.

None of this was supposed to matter anymore to Rick, but he told it all to Catherine. She said, "I don't think that explains why your ex-wife still lives next door. Are you sure you're divorced?"

Rick bent over, all six feet five of his lean, muscled frame, and began rapidly picking up dirty clothes and throwing them in the corner behind one of his speakers. There was a feeling in his groin; it was definitely not numb. Something inside him was changing—rapidly and unpredictably. Catherine watched him, quietly. Rick wanted to touch her neck.

This woman was not a thing he could put into an equation. Catherine had long flowing hair and wore long flowing skirts. She knew how to listen. Even if she didn't understand the mathematical concepts that he couldn't stop telling her, she listened intently, her head tilted to the side like a bird listening to the wind. Even though he knew she didn't understand his work, Rick felt he had never been heard before—or seen—in the way he felt Catherine heard him and saw him.

His movement toward her would equal love, he thought, but there was no way to factor out love. There was no equation he knew of for love. No proof he could make except the feeling in the center of his chest. It was almost painful. The feeling, suddenly so real, so potent, could not be reduced to a number. It connected physical parts of him he had not thought previously connected: his heart and his tongue. The feeling could not be squared. It could not be made mathematical in any way. He knew this intuitively and stopped trying to explain it to himself.

Catherine had moved to New York City from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, at the age of eighteen to follow a dream of being a ballerina. She had auditioned for ballet companies but never made it. Then she discovered Isadora Duncan and dancing freely with scarves and in bare feet. She put her pointe shoes in a box in the closet. For the past twelve years, she had studied and staged Isadora Duncan's works, and taught to younger dancers the gentle, free-flowing movement, which required incredible

strength in the abdomen. She became an Isadorable. One of the few.

Sometimes, in the evening, after dancing all day, her abdomen cramped and she doubled over, unable to finish eating dinner. Catherine had learned to get down on all fours and slowly let her stomach hang out. As the cramp lessened, she lay down on the floor in a little ball, exhausted. She often woke in the same position in the morning, her body stiff and tired.

Rick watched her perform in all sorts of places—bars, galleries, theatres, city parks. “I’ll dance anywhere,” she said.

One night, she performed at the Baby Doll Bar on the Lower East Side. The walls were lined with the heads of plastic dolls. On a cement floor, in her bare feet with ten people watching, Catherine became the wind. She was so ethereal she almost seemed not to be there, but Rick felt her movement on his skin the way one feels the wind at twilight when the bright of day ends and the veil of night begins. Afterward, they walked the New York City streets for hours, talking and not talking, before riding the Long Island Rail Road for two hours to Medford and his tiny house.

That night, Catherine’s abdomen cramped again, but this time Rick plugged in a heating pad and placed it on her lower back. He covered her abdomen with the palms of his hands and spooned her body. She fell asleep in his arms. He didn’t sleep all night.

Rick wanted to dance, but the thought of letting his body go, letting his body move to some sound or sensation with Catherine in his arms struck terror into his breast. She soothed him and said, “Let me lead,” so he did. They swayed back and forth to B.B. King, the music coming out of speakers he had put together from a kit when he was eighteen. When she looked into his eyes, he felt that he found himself—his real self—inside her gaze.

They dreamed about moving to Idaho together. He would open an engineering design business. She would start a dance school. If he couldn’t open a business, he would repair electric wiring in houses. If she couldn’t teach dance, she would have

a baby.

For Rick, very gradually what had seemed intriguing about Catherine, magical, mystical, superstitious, began to be slightly irritating. He could not separate her out like vegetables on a plate. Her parts spilled over, the layers of her psyche were complicated, woven with wool and many colors and lots of pink. He started to feel that his layers were synthetic yarn at best and at worst that he might not have any layers at all. He felt a numbness returning, not in his groin, but a grey quality settling over his chest.

When Catherine started defining their union in terms of marriage and said she wanted a three-tiered wedding cake and a daughter named Isadora, Rick's breath caught. She was dreaming. He was still learning the ways of dreams—that some enter and leave without realization, that others have parts articulated but not all, that still others only remain in shapeless form, traveling with a body like hope travels through the air.

Rick didn't start to sweat, not quite. He had read about men sweating when the marriage topic came up; he thought he'd heard it called the "m" word. One try didn't stop lesser men, more hopeful men, from a second try, but he realized it would stop him.

Catherine said, "In a way, you're still married to her." She placed her hands on her hips, forming little sideways triangles interrupted by a stomach. Rick froze a little and yet still felt that numbness in his big toes.

Catherine said, "Why not follow love? Why fight your heart's desire?"

He stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

Usually then Rick would run out of the little house, escaping for a moment into fresh air, and then into the familiarity of Gail's house next door.

Catherine was left in his home. "Us," she said to herself. "I'm talking about us."

Gail had black hair, dyed, and wore red lipstick with matching red nails. She had her nails painted at the nail salon every

Saturday morning. Gail never changed the color of her red polish, and the color never looked fresh or glossy. She wasn't a glossy person.

To her ex-husband, Gail pretended about everything except his girlfriend. Gail pretended she loved his ability to write down long equations from memory, his ability to show the proof of any theorem, when really she just wanted him to change the oil in her car.

"My ex-husband does something important for the defense of our homeland," Gail told Catherine the first time they met. "What do you do?" The "ex" was formally supposed to suggest that a relationship had ended, but Gail used it as a form of ownership to suggest that a relationship continued.

If Catherine was visiting and met Gail outside, Gail turned on her heel and walked away without saying a word. If Catherine answered Rick's phone when Gail called, Gail hung up. Once Catherine waited for Rick for two hours on his front porch. Gail brought her a glass of water and said, "Are you sure he knows you're coming. He's very busy today." Catherine said, "I'm not thirsty." When Catherine did not take the proffered water, Gail set it on the stoop beside Catherine.

Catherine asked Rick, "Does your ex-wife have no love in her heart?"

He said, "What do you mean?"

Catherine said, "What is hate but an aversion to love?"

Rick loved the steamed medley of fresh vegetables Catherine made for dinner when she slept over. He no longer felt the need to separate the vegetables on his plate. Catherine's abdominal cramps subsided. When they made love, she felt her insides were being massaged. Rick entered her deeply enough that she could feel him touch part of her iliopsoas muscle. He felt it, too. Her cramps stopped entirely.

Rick started taking Catherine to his parents' house for the weekly Sunday night dinner. Gail, Rick, and Catherine drove to the parents together. Rick drove Gail's car, and Catherine sat in the backseat. The family used a different paper tablecloth

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every week with matching paper cups and plates and napkins. Catherine's setting never matched because Rick had to set her place; his mother set the table for four—never five.

At dinner, Gail talked the entire time. Gail inclined her head, so that it looked as if she were including Catherine; however, Gail never actively looked at her. When Gail moved her head, she didn't look like a little chickadee listening to the wind. She looked like a turkey trying to find his hen.

"Ricky Dickey," Gail would say, "remember you said you'd check my car next Saturday? Take me to get my nails done, and then do the car."

Another time, Gail said, "Ricky, remember your girlfriend Patti? I really liked her." Catherine knew about Patti. Patti had written her name on Rick's hot water heater in black permanent marker. At least, thought Catherine, Rick had a girlfriend between me and Gail.

The mother saw her daughter-in-law's misbehavior, but said nothing. The family was of an exclusive sort where harsh words to outsiders were allowed, even encouraged. Those words kept the family walls raised and impenetrable. Gail was part of the family. Rick's mother had decided that Rick and Gail had never divorced, that Catherine was a temporary irregularity.

The father believed in family. But he didn't know that family meant letting your children go to create their own lives and their own families. He mentioned once that his sister had stopped talking to him when he married his wife. He did not know that he needed to say to his son, "You love Catherine. Go be with her. We won't stop talking to you."

Catherine had taught Rick that Isadora Duncan dancers create lyrical, beautiful, and continuous movement. Even in sharp motions there is no disconnection in the phrasing; all parts of the body pull together, all motions look seamless. Only intense strength and a will of the spine and body can create such flow.

Rick understood the family enclave would destruct if he married a woman who danced anywhere she could with scarves and in bare feet.

"I'm trying to do the right thing," he said to Catherine.

In the beginning of Rick and Catherine's time of fighting, Catherine lost control and beat on his chest. She was familiar with passion, and it didn't scare her. It didn't excuse pounding on her boyfriend's heart, but he was a statue, some Greek figure that Isadora Duncan would have used for inspiration. For Catherine, he was no longer a god-like statue, but had become immovable marble. His heart looked all sticky and full of glue, and she wanted to make it beat again, to make him feel. But she scared Rick. He called her loss of control hysteria—not passion.

Rick decided that such deep feelings were highly overrated. In the middle of their fighting, Rick knew his lines, the whole story of their problems, so he responded on cue but without care. He had memorized what to say: "Yes, I made a mistake. I'm sorry. It's just that Gail is a very needy person."

In the end, they both forgot that love without listening is not love at all: Rick became unable to hear because of the numbness inside him—the numbness had filled his groin. Catherine stopped dancing spontaneously in the center of his little house. To Rick, she began to resemble a popsicle-stick scarecrow, not a bird. He was repelled.

Finally, Catherine lifted her arm. Pointed at the center of Rick's heart.

The motion reminded Rick of a leaf falling and catching on the wind, then falling again.

"F[x] ≠ Love," she said.

"You don't make any sense," Rick said.

Catherine packed a tote bag of her weekend clothes that had collected at his house.

Rick put his hands in his jean pockets. He followed Catherine and stood in the middle of the doorframe.

Once on the brick lined walkway, Catherine turned around.

"Our love still equals love," Rick said.

Catherine could no longer hear him. She turned and saw Gail standing in a window of her house, watching them. Catherine

walked away.

Rick saw Gail standing at her window, too. He went back inside his little house.

Rick took his yellow, plastic mechanical pencil, and wrote at the top of a piece of graph paper:

$$F[x] \neq \text{Love}$$

He stared at the equation. It didn't make any sense to him.

Rick's house got messy again. He spent almost every evening with his ex-wife. Gail made dinner for him. She never served fresh vegetables. The frozen vegetables came one at a time, each on their own plate: yellow (corn), orange (carrots), green (peas). One night, a carrot was out of place in the corn. Rick ate the colors together and said nothing. Rick and Gail went to Rick's parents' house every Sunday for dinner. Rick no longer set an extra place for Catherine. No one mentioned Catherine or asked about her.

Catherine moved back to Idaho to Coeur d'Alene, a quiet town on the edge of a lake. The Bank of the Mountain States funded a dance school where young children could dance with scarves. The bank's president had done his M.B.A. at City College in New York and understood the power of movement. He'd seen Catherine perform once in a park in Upper Manhattan and remembered her long, blond hair. He'd never seen a woman move like the wind. He'd never thought it possible before or even imagined wind could be seen.

"No," Catherine said to the bank president when he tried to kiss her. But she said it gently, a ripple of a breeze. He understood that she had loved too hard and that she would not love again.

Rick's forty-first birthday came. There were four places set at the table at his parents' house. The paper tablecloth and the paper napkins said "Happy Birthday." The plates had nothing written on them. They were blue. Gail had put a plastic figurine on the table, made in China, which she bought at Wal-Mart. An army soldier, a foot soldier. Gail had written a little sign and placed

it in his hand: "For the defense of our homeland."

It was a sign, Rick thought, that Catherine would never make, and he felt sickened. He couldn't eat his birthday cake. He couldn't look at his mother. I am forty-one, he thought, and I have given over my life to fixing the cars of women who describe where we live as a homeland. Rick didn't even feel home in his body. He had felt home inside Catherine. Two parts of an equation make a whole.

Inside, somewhere inside, Rick realized he had given his soul to the negative female animus and that it wasn't supposed to happen this way. He hadn't even known the word animus until Catherine taught him.

Rick gave two weeks notice at work. He had to be responsible. He needed references. He still had to tread carefully. He called the U-Haul and made a reservation. He called the realtor.

The last night in his home, he cooked a medley of fresh vegetables. He separated the yellow (corn) and the orange (carrots) and the green (peas) into three distinct circles. He thought maybe he shouldn't separate the vegetables, but he couldn't help himself. He counted. The sum was even. She loves me, he thought. Then he mixed all the vegetables together and ate them.

Rick pulled up in front of Catherine's house in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. At first, Rick didn't notice the little blond-haired girl wearing a pink sundress and running barefoot around the yard trailing a huge silk, purple scarf in the air behind her. Then he saw Catherine standing in the doorway. He wanted to be inside her, to be fully part of two sides of an equation with an equal sign in between.