

Cynthia Morrison Phoel
from *Never Trust a Man Who—*

When Sylvia was in ninth grade, Ms. Kuneva told their class, “Never trust a man who carries a kerchief in his pocket.”

“K-e-r-c-h-i-e-f.” She said each letter as she wrote the word on the board. Then she dug into her purse and produced a small lace-trimmed square into which she blew her nose with great gusto. “Kerchief,” she said, holding out the balled-up cloth for all of them to see.

“Hanky,” she carried on. “*Hanky* is a synonym for *kerchief*.” She wrote this word up on the board, too. “H-a-n-k-y. Hanky.”

A flit of giggles made its way around the classroom. *Hanky*—the silly sound of it—was just the sort of word they loved. From then on, they would look for every excuse to use it. As in, “*Gospozha*, can I go to the bathroom? I think I left my *hanky* at home.” Or, in the event of blood drawn from a paper cut or picked scab, a forcefully whispered, “Let me wipe this with my *hanky*,” which, if Kuneva heard, she could not get angry about, because at least they were speaking in English.

“Tissue,” she continued with yet another blow of the nose, and dutifully, they wrote this in their notebooks, entry number 584. That year, they would add 1,463 words to their English vocabularies, many of them having to do with things that were on Kuneva’s mind. That fall, when Kuneva had taken up mushrooming, they learned forty-three different kinds of edible and inedible mushrooms, including *boletos*, *morels*, and the most ominous of mushrooms, *the angel of death*. And when she’d mistaken a *jack-o-lantern* for a *chanterelle*, they learned words having to do with nausea, including *vomit* and *queasy* and the delightfully noxious-sounding *puke*, which they practiced in mock dialogues in front of the class.

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“I’m not feeling well today.”

“You’re looking a bit *green around the gills*.”

“Well, I just *puked* in the trash can.

“You don’t say. Did you catch that nasty *bug* that’s going ‘round?”

“No. I ate a *jack-o-lantern*.”

“Blimey!”

The dialogues blended vocabulary words from Kuneva and polite British expressions from their English workbooks and curses the sharper-eared students had managed to pick up from Arnold Schwarzenegger films. Though the conversations could be about anything having to do with the words at hand, to the great merriment of the class, pair after pair chose to replay Kuneva’s misfortunes. And though Kuneva would argue against this—“No, no! Tell your own story!”—she couldn’t suppress a smile, and they could see she liked to be at the center of things.

After *tissue*, Kuneva had gone on to teach *jilted*, *dumped*, *spurned*, *forsaken*—grown-up words, words that were sobering for a ninth grade class. For the first filaments of love were already forming among them, Vanina and Stoyan, Olya and Misho. If you weren’t one of the lucky couples, you were watching closely the oily machinations of love: the sweaty hand-holding, the slippery kisses, the gifts of greasy snacks from the school café—pastry with marmalade or bag of crisps—displayed on the corner of the desk and eaten slowly, appreciatively, throughout the day. So public were these romances that the thought of being *dumped* was at once terrifying and delicious, and whose side would you be on when it was over?

Indeed, while there was always the choice to revel in the fun that could be had at Kuneva’s expense, there were moments, long moments, when the only sounds were those of Kuneva writing on the board, the wheeze of air through her oversized nostrils in sync with the motion of the chalk. The class would take notes in perfect silence, aware that Kuneva was telling them something no other adult in their lives would tell them, that they would otherwise have to

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learn on their own—from TV or movies or from each other. If someone were to open the door during these moments—“*Gospozha*, can Mrs. Georgieva borrow some chalk?”—the unwitting outsider might look at his or her fellow students strangely, sensing the pall that had come over the room, and what was going on? After class, they would report how Ms. Kuneva had been *spurned, jilted, shunned, and forsaken*, and wasn't that funny? For it would have been impossible to explain how giddiness had turned into sobriety, which had turned into respect, even awe, for one who had been through so much and lived to tell the tale.

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Just barely, Sylvia thought grimly, as the bus tunneled through a mountain pass, emerging into more rain on the other side. Smoke wafted back from the front of the bus, carried on a stream of hot air from the dashboard blower. From where Sylvia sat, she could see a puddle at Kuneva's feet, but by now the dripping had slowed. The small towel the bus driver had handed back for mopping face and head lay crumpled in her lap. As Kuneva stared vacantly out the windshield, cigarette fixed loosely between her lips, it appeared wetness was the least of her problems.

More than five years had passed since Sylvia had last seen Kuneva. Aside from her current waterlogged condition, it seemed little had changed. She still wore the same mauve coat, dress, and shoes, the same mauve stockings. It was Kuneva's special occasion outfit, worn on days when spirits were high, the first and last days of school, days when they had special programs in the auditorium. It was the outfit she wore on her birthday and on trips to Sofia or out on a date. Today, the occasion was Women's Day—a holiday that, to Sylvia's knowledge, had never panned out well for her teacher. She didn't want to imagine the spat that had left Kuneva

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stranded in this storm, a piece of roadside flotsam, and what kept her hoping? *Never trust a man who—*, she had taught them. Yet, time and again, she disregarded her own advice.

Of course, if Sylvia was being honest with herself, she would admit this was exactly what had happened with Lazar. Staring at the soggy hollow of Kuneva's cheek, Sylvia could only blame herself for having trusted him so much. She had recognized the intention behind this distance they kept, her on the chair, him on the bed, the physical boundary of their relationship. She had known he was married, known that there were properties in Balchik and Albena on the Black Sea coast that needed to be maintained, and he could not possibly stay away too long. He had shared with her all of these things, and still Sylvia had given herself over to him in a way she could not explain—in a way she had not entirely realized until he told her he was leaving.

Yes, if she was being true to herself, she would admit that, without specific thought or intention, a discreet backdrop of belief had formed—one that had her living at the seaside and putting her tourism degree to good use. Spending her free time strolling the sandy boardwalk, her extra *leva* going to fruit-filled *palachinki* and bicycle rentals. Laughing and sunny nearly all the time, so full was her life, her head, her heart. And before all that, a belief this relationship was about to take a turn—from cigarettes and smoky companionship to something more.

Instead, she'd been *dumped, jilted, spurned, forsaken*. Blimey! She hadn't expected that at all.