

Finalist, Fiction

Losing Face

By Janet Garber

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He was sitting naked on the edge of his bed, trying to capture the thread of the dream he'd just had. Emerging from the ocean, he had seen a lone woman standing on the beach, gesturing to him. As he walked past, she said, "Let Johnny Cash be your yardstick!" Then she turned her back and waved him off. Her voice still echoed in his head, a deep throaty voice.

Now what the hell did she mean? Was it a promise or a dare? Cash, with those kids with different wives, addiction to prescription pills, living on the edge of the law. Was that the Cash he was supposed to emulate? Or the tough guy, the man in black, champion of Native Americans and of guys with wife beater shirts who landed in prison?

As a matter of fact, he liked Johnny Cash, his voice, his music, if not his style exactly. Wasn't he slighting the forceful presence, the Country Music Hall of Famer, the deep dark voice, the male half of the June Carter /Johnny Cash love story. Oh, and the Talent!

Well, Terence was none of these things. Had none of these things, he reminded himself as he pulled on some pajama shorts and made his way to the bathroom. A quick check in the mirror revealed nothing new: a man of more than medium height with a physique that, despite not having suffered regular visits to the gym, was naturally lean. He had a face, he'd been told, that could be almost be called good-looking (in certain lights anyway) and an indisputable wealth of shaggy black hair. Some people liked what they saw (like that cute gal in the bar last night); some distrusted their vision (the girlfriend who pulled her away) Terence himself? He hadn't yet met this man. The reflection just confused him.

Terence made some instant coffee and gnawed on some old pizza crusts he had uncovered on the lower shelf of the small fridge. Johnny Cash, really? He couldn't see the connection but already thought that by day's end he would.

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Johnny Cash would not hesitate so neither did he. At 10 p.m. he was sitting in his favorite bar across from Cindy, the cute gal from the night before.

"So what's your story, Johnny?"

How was that for an omen? "You know, my name's actually Terence B. Foote. . ."

"Silly me for calling you Johnny!"

Was she a little put out at being corrected? He couldn't tell. He sneaked a look at her face. Still couldn't tell. "You are something!" he said, shaking his head.

"I'm glad you're smiling when you say that, stranger!" Cindy lifted her long auburn hair off her neck and pulled it into different shapes - pony tail, a bun - then let the hair fall back again to her shoulders. She was all lit up and bouncing in her seat. She leaned forward to take another sip of her beer. "So?"

He leaned forward too, crossing his arms on the small round table. As he hesitated, she put her hand on his arm and said simply, "Tell me. Anything. Johnny."

Maybe he'd made a mistake, telling her about the dream.

Terence glanced nervously around the room. At a half hour to closing time, the place was emptying out. He turned back to her. "For one thing, I can't tell if you're kidding me."

Instead of removing her hand, she rubbed it along the length of his arm. She waited for more.

Ah, what the heck. He gave her an abbreviated rundown on his life up to the present moment: his mother, the bigwig Chief Financial Officer, who spared little time for him, the father she'd made sure he'd never meet, a bum, presumably, the older sister, an Organizational Psychologist, who got her jollies, as she always had, by poking fun at him. Then, for good measure, he threw in his accounting job that was sucking the life, no, his soul, right out of him, one column at a time. He needed to take action, soon, to reclaim his life and he knew it.

Now why had he gone and told her all that?

She took it all in with no comment. He thought it wise to tell her she was a special girl. To test her further, he shared with her that although 22 years old the month before, he had never dated any girl more than three times.

Was that a warning? She didn't seem to notice. She seemed to be making pleasant cooing noises in response to his story. So he took a chance, leaned over and kissed her. She grabbed his face and kissed him right back.

Even he could read that message!

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Terence asked her to move in with him the following month. Cindy turned him down flat. He felt like the water was coming up over his head. He had shown her his sketch pad by then. But she'd wanted to know: Could he earn a living like that?

Cindy herself worked in a second hand bookstore. Not big money in that and that's why she said she needed a man with a job! She confessed she had a weakness for guys like him.

"What type of guy am I?" He did not know he belonged to any particular type and felt kind of happy about it.

"Oh, I guess you could say, a dreamer." She gave him a little kiss on the nose. Was she putting him down?

"Are you a dreamer too?" he ventured to ask her.

"Hmmm, I might well be but I try to dream with my eyes open."

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They spent every weekend together, walking the city streets, having improvised picnics in the city's pocket parks, downing beers with her friend who had reluctantly accepted Terence's presence in their lives. Once in a while, finances permitting, they went to hear live music.

Terence had invested in a stack of Johnny Cash cd's which they listened to at his place at every opportunity, while they cooked a simple meal together, when they made love. What with his dream and meeting Cindy as he had the same night- the music became a lucky talisman.

For his birthday, Cindy took him to the opening of an art gallery. It was comic book art - the very kind he himself drew!

Over dinner later, she asked why the show had first delighted him and then not. She'd watched the look of delight on his face turn unmistakably to one of bitterness.

"What's up with you, Terry? I thought you'd love this exhibition. I'm kind of disappointed..."

Terry held her hands across the table. The waiter came for their order. Terry just shook his head, not ready to tell her.

In his apartment later, as she was combing out her long hair and retouching her makeup, thinking maybe she'd return to her own apartment, he came up behind her, wrapping his long arms around her and bending down to kiss her neck. Cindy loved when he did that, but this time their eyes met in the mirror. "Stop, Terry. Listen. . . . Why do you never tell me I'm pretty?"

Terence looked scared and backed away. She put down her hairbrush and followed him into the bedroom.

"Why do you get so weird?" She touched his arm. "Terry?"

"Because I am weird!" he said, shrugging her off and walking toward the door.

"Don't leave like this. Please. And anyway, it's your apartment!"

He hesitated.

“Let’s talk about it,” she said, sitting down on the bed and gesturing for him to do the same.

They did.

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"Is that right? You can't “read” faces? You’ve always been this way? So I could be an ugly rhino and that would make no difference?

“Nope.” Terence stared at his feet. A hole was beginning to wear through the side of his left sneaker.

“Really?”

“Nah. I would feel that big rump and realize something wasn't kosher!”

“Oh, now you're just messing with me!” She started punching him then dodging out of his way. But he caught her eventually and showed her who was boss - in a good way that involved lots of petting and sighing and body parts and friction.

Later that night, Terry reached into his bedside table and brought out a small red box, which he presented to Cindy.

“Do me a favor? Wear this necklace for me?”

Cindy let him drape the thin strand with pale pink stones around her neck. “What is this stone? I’ve never seen it before.”

“Rose pink quartz, the lady said.”

Cindy stared at her vision in the mirror, then looked at him. He was holding his breath. “You really are a prize!” She announced. Then she proceeded to show him exactly what she meant.

The next morning though, she was back at it. “How’d you know what to do with me, to kiss me?”

“Your hand on my arm. . .your voice. Those sounds you make when you’re happy. . .”

“Sounds? I don’t make sounds! Anyway, Terry, I can’t believe you’re giving me presents when it’s your birthday! You’re too much!”

“That was some great night, Cindy! Thank you. . .”

But Cindy would not be deterred. She confessed she’d been up early reading about prosopagnosia on the internet. "You know I'm pretty superficial. I judge people by their looks

and expect the same. Why else would I spend hours getting dressed, doing my hair, shopping? Now you're telling me it's all for nothing? That's kind of depressing.”

“Proso . . .? Cindy, no . . .” Terence started to correct her, then feared her mind was already made up. “Cindy,” he said, eyes looking straight ahead, “Leave the keys on the kitchen table...”

“I always knew this wouldn’t work out,” he mumbled.

“And don't let the door slam on my way out?” Cindy shook her head and then did just that. “You don't know a thing about me, do you? That's the real disability here!”

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Terence knew Cindy was angry but thought maybe that was a ploy, a way for her to extricate herself from a situation she was not ready to take on. Within the week, to his surprise, she was back in his arms. Did this mean she would move in and even marry him some day? They made up that time but the subject, alas, kept coming up. Cindy needed to be admired so he tried his best but his comments sounded wooden and unconvincing and often his timing was a little off. He vowed to watch some old romantic movies and copy the moves of the male lead. But he wasn’t really the Clark Gable type. More like Gary Cooper, but Cooper wasn’t all that great with the ladies, was he? In some ways, he was worse than Terence – shuffling, gawky, tongue-tied. So Terence kept looking for a role model.

Cash? Well, June Carter did keep taking him back, warts and all. And they never stopped loving each other. Or that’s how it appeared anyway.

Cindy, meanwhile, was feeling pretty frustrated with her life – a psych major stuck in the stacks of a bookstore. At her roommate’s urging, she started sending out applications to grad schools’ MSW programs. She wanted a career; her parents (a school aide and a postal clerk) wanted her to have a career; they said they’d lend her some money. She thought counselling teens sounded difficult, no challenging, and definitely rewarding.

“Why are you so afraid of change?” she continually asked Terence, though, of course, she knew the answer. “Why don’t you try for something better?”

Terence, lately, when he wasn’t being sweet and attentive to her, revealed himself to have a rather short fuse. Wasn’t he drinking a bit too much too? And always complaining about the stacks of paper on his desk at work, the endless numbers to be reconciled. The emptiness...

One day – they had been together for two years - she laid it on the line. “You’re right, Terence. I’m too young to take you on.”

With that, she walked out of his life. She left his keys on the table. As he knew she would.

What a loser he was! He was worse off than before he met her – now he knew what he was missing. What had made him think he could “do” normal?

She had no real idea of what it was like to be him, the uncertainty, the nervousness, the humiliation. He never told her about the time he showed up for a third date and the girl and her sister played a prank on him--he almost took the wrong girl out for dinner!

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He just needed some nice girl to give him a break. That was all. Some encouragement too. His mother, his sister, horrors. He was in danger of souring, he was spoiling to be a grim-eyed bachelor, stooping to catch his expression in the mirror: "Where have all the years gone?" And that wasn't really him. You just had to look to his comics...

What would Johnny Cash do? Fight! Fight for his love. Stay true and stay on course. He was through being a loser!

Cindy had believed in him. Now it was his turn to believe-- in himself.

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Three months later, Terence told his boss he had enough of “Doing My Time.” Then he headed for the downtown neighborhood where artists had set up their lofts, holding weekly flea markets to showcase their latest projects. Strolling around, he found a few willing to talk about what they were working on. He bought some art supplies too. The sun was beating down hard on his head. He was feeling pretty good, considering . . .

That night he played, ”Remember Me (I’m the One who Loves You” over and over and over.

Yes, he had been studying up again on Johnny Cash’s repertoire, looking for hints on how to proceed, how to win her back. For without her, he was no more than a drowning man in a sea of faces.

A part-time job materialized after a few weeks of hanging around the little galleries. It was poorly paid but he got to work on comics for a local free paper, sketching in mostly animals. His editor, although mystified, coached him in adding in details that would convey the appropriate emotions. Many times this would simply be a lot of exclamation points in the blurbs above the characters’ heads. It was fairly routinized so he began to learn the short cuts for expressing anger, fear, love.

Now if only life were this simple, he observed wryly. If only women . . .

At the end of the summer, he got up the nerve to track Cindy down to her old apartment. The friend opened the door.

“Cindy?”

“Cindy’s gone to Michigan, to grad school, dummy!”

When she saw the look on his face, she added for good measure, “You couldn’t give her what she needs!”

“Neither could you apparently! Your friendship means nothing to her. And. . .you’re so ugly, I can’t look at you!” he retorted. He turned away and wondered what emotion was playing on her face! He bounded down the five flights and ran back to his apartment.

A few weeks later Terence walked into an Ann Arbor bookstore. He had a hunch Cindy might be working in a place like this to offset her tuition. But he had trouble spotting her. He looked around once more before leaving. That’s when he noticed the woman on a ladder stacking books. Around her neck was a pale rose pink quartz necklace.

“Hey, Cindy.”

She almost fell off the ladder. “Terence! What are you doing here?”

“He doesn’t know when to give up!” she muttered to herself. She slowly climbed down the ladder and stood facing him, hands on her hips.

“You cut your hair?” He was aghast.

“Yes,” she admitted, tilting her head and running her fingers through the soft curls. “Like it?”

Terence nodded solemnly. “I can’t live without you, honey.”

“Oh, Terence. You should not have followed me here. We broke up, remember? Months ago?”

“I know. I know. 28 weeks. Look, just take this.” He handed her a wrapped present. “Open it please.”

Inside was a book with his illustrations in it, depicting this very scene – his coming to claim her. He had published a graphic novel and the sales were trickling in!

“Omigod, you really did it! Terence! Look at me,” she wiped her eyes. “I’m crying!”

“Is that sad?” he asked seriously, wiping a tear away gently.

“No, happy.”

“Okay, I’m lost. Officially lost.” His heart was beating so loud he could hardly hear her.

“No, you’re found. Come give Mama a big kiss!” She laughed and cried as he started landing kisses all over her face and neck and –

”Okay, big boy, we’re in public. Cool it. You’re going to get me fired.”

“But you’re my fiancée.”

“Not yet.”

“Turn to page 11.” He dropped to one knee and held out a pink quartz ring.

An elderly woman in the Cookbook section hooted. Cindy jokingly told her to mind her own business. The woman reluctantly went back to her browsing.

“Yes, yes, I guess I am.”

“You’re what?” Terence asked, baffled once again.

“Your wife-to-be.”

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Terence and Cindy went back to NY together and surrendered to Cindy’s mom who was dead set on a middle class wedding for her only child. She was not dead set on Cindy’s choice, however, thinking little of his financial projections or future career prospects. And overall, she found him to be quite a strange duck.

Nevertheless, by the start of their third year together, Terence and Cindy were a young married couple, unsure of themselves, but little by little learning how to create a life together. Terence found another part-time job, this time as a draftsman, which enabled him to continue his passion of illustrating and drawing comic books. When really pressed for cash, he’d do his neighbors’ taxes. They made out okay. Cindy stayed home for a few years with their twin boys, Carter and Roswell, both of whom were, thankfully, normal. They eventually bought a coop apartment in Queens.

Over the years, Cindy taught Terence how to interpret some basic signs. She practiced with him. They would sit side by side in the Mall and she would quiz him on the emotional state of the people walking by. They made it into a game and would sometimes concoct elaborate back stories, intrigues and criminal pasts for shopkeepers and passersby.

Cindy also made sure to keep her hairstyle the same. She bought the same watch for both boys, something a little unusual that Terence could easily recognize. Terence still insisted he merely had trouble reading emotions; she suspected it was more serious – that he had trouble recognizing one face from another.

The years went by, during which Cindy completed her MSW, began seeing private patients referred by the guidance counselors of the local high schools, and without warning, fell in love with the father of one of her patients.

Her new man was a trader, at least sixty years old, with a house on the Long Island Sound shore. He had no trouble recognizing her, registering her emotions, or dealing with new hairstyles. He loved to show her off and promised to take her sailing on his yacht down to the Caribbean. For the first time since she'd become an adult, she experienced a sense of freedom.

Cindy decamped. The boys were on their own, so why not?

“Why, Cindy? Why?”

“I need someone to take care of me for a change.”

“I don't get it.”

“Of course you don't. I don't want to be your interpreter to the world. Enough. Finished.”

The truth of it was she was also tired of his moodiness and his six packs all over the living room.

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With Cindy gone from his life, for good this time, Terence stopped showing up for work regularly. Instead he frequented his old hangouts and made daily visits to the liquor store. Not quite sober one night, he paid a call on Cindy's old roommate, whose name had turned out to be June.

“Those stairs got a lot worse since last time!”

“Same old stairs, Terence.” But this time she let him in.

He sat with her at the little table in the kitchen. She poured them fresh drinks.

“I know you never liked me.”

“You're wrong there.”

“Eh?”

“I was hurt you chose her over me,” June said, handing him a glass of cabernet. “I'm smarter. Less self-involved, and yes, a lot prettier than Cindy ever was. . . .You never even noticed!”

Terence choked a little on his wine. “Well, you know, June, about my problem. . .”

“Of course, but at the time, I was so hurt.”

“But as you got to know me over the years, you. . .

“Let's have another drink,” she responded.

June had never married. She had worked as a personal assistant to a wealthy society woman in Scarsdale, but as her boss aged, the work got much less demanding, less interesting. So she had retired and now had a lot of time to brood and be lonely.

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As the months piled up, one on top of another, Terence and June did the same. They became a couple, spending their time at home or in bars. But their union had no soundtrack of its own. His boys pulled away and cut communication with him though he pointed out repeatedly that it was their mother, not he, who had initiated the breakup.

When he stopped over one evening, June mentioned casually that she had seen Cindy for lunch.

Terence couldn't hide his interest – he wouldn't know how.

“She looks awful, Terry. Awful. The widower dumped her, you know.”

Terence jumped up, indignant. “How could he?”

“She's over 40, Terence. She's gone back to the old second-hand bookstore. At her age. Can you believe it?”

Terence jumped up. “Thanks, June.”

June wasn't a bad person. But he had room in his heart for only one. She kissed him on the cheek and wished him well.

Was he wrong, a loser, to forgive Cindy? After all, she cheated on him, betrayed his trust, she left him without a second thought, she was just a slut! Terence tried these attitudes on for size, but they just didn't fit him.

Terence had found a new inspiration. Or an old one. He talked to his bosses and signed himself into rehab. There, he also received counseling for the first time about his face-blind condition, began to understand the burden it placed on others close to him.

When he was ready, he sought Cindy out in the book store. He crept behind the slender woman wearing the rose pink quartz necklace. “Show me a mad face,” he whispered in her ear.

Cindy wheeled around. She smiled.

“Mad face?”

“No, like this.” She showed him.

He imitated her. “And when I'm mad as hell, I bang down a fist, like this?” He thumped his hand down on the dictionary resting on her desk nearby.

“Excellent!”

“That’s all I got, Cindy.” Terence looked down at his feet. “I know how hard it’s been on you.”

Cindy took his hands in her own. “Terry, I should have listened to Johnny Cash when he sang, I should never be ashamed of you. You’re a good soul . . . unlike some others.”

Terence silently agreed.

“I know I look terrible,” she said, trying to straighten out her frizzy hair. “I got a terrible haircut last week. I’ve gained ten pounds! And my face is all broken out. . . .I hate for you to see me like this.”

“That’s not how I see you, Cindy.

“Oh, right.” She smiled ruefully.

“Cindy, I need you in my life. I’ve tried to live without you but My shoes keep walking back to you.”

“Why do you forgive me? How can you? I’m not worth it,” Cindy said, dropping his hands. “June is a much better person. She always secretly had the hots for you, you know.”

“Cindy, listen to me! Johnny Cash is my yardstick, remember that? I WALK THE LINE!” Terence grabbed her a bit roughly by the shoulders and stared into her eyes.

He started to sing in his most deep and rumbling voice, “I fell into a burning ring of fire.”

“No, Terry, please, no singing!” She was caught between laughter and tears and finally settled for nestling into his arms.

After she recovered, she took his hand and started walking toward the door. “Well, then, Terence B. Foote, I’ve decided to walk the line with y’all though rings of fire dance around us.”

A few ragtag schoolchildren glanced over at them this time, but lost interest quickly and went back to their comic books.

“Grownups! See that look on her face?”

“Mush City! But. . .Isn’t he the guy on the back cover of that Comic there?”

“Let’s go home, Cin, and listen to some music,” Terence said.

Now Cindy and Terence were free to live happily ever after. There was peace in the valley. Using Johnny Cash as their yardstick, they worked at forgiving each other’s trespasses, accepting their own shortcomings, celebrating their daily triumphs. It was a tall order. Terence

learned to depend on her less, he kept his counselling appointments and even became a facilitator at the Tuesday night groups; Cindy henceforth separated business and pleasure, reminding herself of what a good catch she had made, what a loving and talented partner she had married. Also – not a trivial matter--she'd have no worries in the future about not looking her best, a few crows' feet or a little belly fat. Her man could see far beyond all of that.