

New Fiction by Todd Easton Mills: “When Beauty is Convulsive”



From his notebook, illustrated with a picture of a four-eyed flower:

We live in a bungalow in Pasadena, California, where my father is a professor of physics at Cal Tech, and my mother is a plein air watercolorist. My mother taught me how to read, and at the age of seven, I was assigned two books per week or eight per month. Later the number went up. You may have already guessed I was homeschooled and that was the case. It was a utopian life, unmarred by peer pressure and the stresses

of competitive education. I am now twenty-nine years old and understand the world of "common consent." Except I can't take it anymore.

It was Tuesday afternoon and Bartholomew was tutoring English to a ninth grader from San Marino High School. His parents, Anthony and Barbara, quietly slipped out the kitchen door so as not to disturb the lesson. They had been walking for several blocks around the leafy neighborhood.

"He needs a degree," Barbara announced.

"We've talked about this before," said Anthony. "College isn't for everyone. Barth is what they call a creative."

"Who says that?"

"It's a designation."

"Whose?"

Anthony laughed. "Never mind."

"He needs a good job—a career," she said. "We thought he would find his own way. Fat chance."

"I thought you were being serious."

"I am."

"He likes living with us," said Anthony. "He doesn't see a logical reason to leave home."

"Then it's time for him to move out," she said.

"He's broke."

"Give him his college fund."

"And push him out to sea," said Anthony.

"If you're going to the Athenaeum for lunch, I thought I would join you."

"I'm having lunch with the department head."

"Oh, well then—" she said.

"Don't look so glum."

It was the beginning of April and unseasonably hot. They walked around Lacy Park and down Orlando, past the big houses that Anthony referred to as palaces. Barbara was the first to notice a broken sprinkler flooding the lawn of a Spanish revival. Ducks from Huntington Gardens had discovered it.

"We're in a drought," she said. "I'll go up."

She rang the doorbell—and rang it again. A big dog started barking, and Barbara told the dog to shut up. This made the dog snarl and scratch at the door demonically.

"Shut up," yelled Anthony from the driveway.

"Shut the fuck up," chimed Barbara.

They were cutting across the lawn when another sprinkler went off, and they had to run through the duck pond to get away.

At lunch at Cal Tech's Athenaeum, they discussed the pros and cons of giving Bartholomew his college fund, which had grown substantially.

"You're right. Barth needs a job where he can meet new people," said Anthony.

"Like single women," said Barbara.

"What do you think he would do with two hundred fifty thousand

dollars?" wondered Anthony.

Bartholomew didn't have a driver's license, but he didn't mind walking to Barnes & Noble three miles away. When he arrived at the store, his shirt was sticking to his back under his corduroy sport coat. The store manager gave him an application and directed him to a table at the bookstore café.

"Let's see. Bartholomew? Like the apostle?" asked the manager.

"That's right," said Barth.

"What's your experience working in retail?"

"None in retail," he said. "I've been tutoring for the last several years."

"I see. How many hours a week?"

"Two."

"I see," said the manager evenly. "Are you living at home?"

"Yes."

"And no college?"

"No college but I am quite well read."

"Everybody who works here reads. We like to hire people who are bibliophiles. Do you know the word?"

Bartholomew nodded. "I'm a bibliolater."

"That's a word I don't know," said the manager.

"I have an extravagant interest in books."

"I like how you say that, Bartholomew. Can you estimate how many books you've read?"

“Over four thousand. My parents kept a log.”

“Excellent. May I ask how—”

“Five books a week—twenty a month.”

The manager returned to Barth’s application. “That’s the advantage of a homeschool education, I guess. We have an opening in customer service. This package has all the information—the benefits and raises. We pay eighteen-seventy-nine an hour to start. You don’t need to wear a sport coat to work. Some people wear T-shirts, but we prefer a shirt with a collar. Can you start tomorrow?”

“I’d like that very much.”

It had been three days, and he still hadn’t run into the manager. Instinctively he knew what to do. There were books in carts to put away, books on the floor, books and magazines on tables in the store café. The scene was similar to the disarray at the public library. He arranged errant books alphabetically and put the magazines back on the rack after reverse rolling them to make them lie flat. At the end of the day, a young woman named Nadja introduced herself to him.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked.

“A customer?” Barth ventured.

“I’m Nadja, your boss. I’m taking over Carmen’s job.”

“Nice to meet you, Nadja,” Barth said.

She appeared to be his age and had a nice figure—although it was hard to tell under her wrinkled khaki jumpsuit.

“I like how you’re organizing the fiction section,” she said.

“It was a big mess. What happened to Carmen?” he asked.

"Carmen quit." She stood up on her toes to stretch her calf muscles. "He quit the day he hired you. He said he can't stand customers who never buy anything."

"You mean the homeless?" Barth said.

"Oh, they have homes," she said oddly. She looked at him suspiciously. "Carmen thought you were homeless."

"I was hot from walking."

"I do like your corduroy coat. Why don't you wear it for work?"

They were in the children's section on the second floor. Nadja took a seat in a tiny chair at the table. There were several books out, including one turned over with a broken spine. She picked it up like it was a bird and bent it backward to restore its shape. "Nothing can be done for it," she said.

Barth was surprised at how different she looked. Her blond hair was clean, brushed, and tied back in a ponytail. She wore slacks with a gray blouse studded with military buttons. She wanted to know about the books he had read.

He said: "Well, just about everything we have in fiction."

"How about non?"

Bartholomew was too tall for the table and his legs were cramping. He tried to keep them down, which made one of them vibrate. At the bookstore café he had noticed a lot of people with the condition—usually vibrating one leg at a time. It was something to look into.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He blushed.

"We have something in common," she said.

"Were you homeschooled?" he asked.

"I never went to school. I had a studio teacher. Actually he was my dialogue coach. I played an English boy, and it got harder for me to do as I grew up."

"You never went to school?"

"Not a single day. I played against type. Do you know what that means?"

"Reversed?"

"Yes, reversed," she laughed. "My coach wanted me to try different dialects. It confused me. Sometimes I was a posh boy and sometimes sort of cockney. I wasn't a good actress. 'Hello, chappy.' See, I can't do it anymore."

"Hello, chappy," repeated Barth.

He noticed how she had outlined her left eye with makeup but not her right. "Did you have friends your own age?"

"Adults mainly."

"I had neighborhood friends," he said. "They're not the same as school friends."

She was paged: "They need me at the register."

He had been thinking about Nadja all week. He loved watching her go up and down on the escalator in the pink pastel sweater she now wore every day. He thought of her as a pink cloud that floated up-diagonally. A routine had developed between them. She would surprise him when he was replenishing the stacks. When he was engrossed she would whisper something in his ear. Once she asked: "Does it frighten you to go upside down?"

He thought he understood the question. He identified it as a reference to St. Bartholomew, his namesake, the patron saint of plasterers and bookbinders. For his zealotry the saint was flayed and crucified upside down. Bartholomew had always been frightened by the story. One day Nadja said: "Has your heart ever been higher than your head?"

In May Bartholomew saw Nadja standing in front of Tiffany & Co. on Colorado Boulevard. She looked hypnotized by the window display and didn't seem to recognize him at first.

"I'm shopping for a birthstone ring," she said in a voice that sounded distant.

"Let me guess—" said Bartholomew.

A pretty little girl in a sundress ran up to Nadja. She asked her something Barth couldn't hear. "Yes, puppet, the diamonds are real, but the emeralds are made of celery," she said.

The little girl laughed and ran away.

"I know your birthstone," said Barth. "You're moonstone!"

"Bingo!" said Nadja.

"Let's grab a drink at the 35er. We can walk there!"

At the bar the bartender seemed to know her. Bartholomew ordered a Bloody Mary, and Nadja asked for change for the jukebox. She dropped quarters into the slot without pausing to read the selections. After a minute "I Am, I Said" by Neil Diamond came on. The next song was called "The Dolphin on Wheels." She tapped her foot against the barstool but was a beat off. A man approached them at the bar and asked her if she was working. She smiled at him and said: "Is that you, Charlie Chaplin?"

Nadja's apartment was in a condo converted to an extended stay suite. It was a furnished one-bedroom unit with a gas fireplace and refrigerator with bottles of Perrier and Laughing Cow cheese. The light was low and Bartholomew sat across from her in a red leather chair. He liked that she had colored her hair black, and it was cut short with bangs.

"Did you just move in?" he asked, looking around.

"Not just."

"Where are your books?"

"At the store. Oh, you mean..." She laughed.

Nadja sat with her hands folded in her lap. He sat with his knees touching hers, and they shared a long moment when neither had anything to say. Barth didn't mind, he didn't need to talk. She was such a strange bird—the bird is the word—and she made him feel easy because she was like him. Of course she wasn't just one person. That was obvious. Why was she wearing her watch with the face turned backward on her wrist? As he considered this, the name of the book he had been trying to remember came to him. It was a book by André Breton, the charismatic leader of the early surrealist movement in Paris. Barth read it when he was thirteen and had not thought about it since. The book was called Nadja!

Nadja laughed. "I forgot you were coming over."

"Did I come on the wrong night?"

"I was playing no-argument solitaire," she said.

"How do you play that?"

"No kings or jacks."

"How about jokers?"

“They’re anarchists, you know.”

Bartholomew laughed.

“We haven’t seen each other for a long time.”

“Not since you quit at work,” he said.

“How long ago was that?”

“Two weeks.”

Nadja removed the back cushions from the sofa and threw them over the side. “Take off your sandals. I want to see your feet. Oh, too wide.” She laughed.

As she leaned over he could see the teardrop shape of her breast. He remembered more details of the story. Nadja had been the lover of Max Ernst, who said she was the only natural surrealist in Paris. Bartholomew kissed her and felt an electric disturbance that ran through his body and coiled around his tongue. He remembered this feeling from a dream, and it was accompanied by paralysis, where he found himself hanging upside down with blood rushing to his head and arrows in his chest. It was at this moment that he moved up the plain of her long legs to where they forked and revealed a small yellow bird’s nest.

He started gently and she cried: “Oh Charlie, oh Charlie.” This was her reanimated meme, and it made him angry and so he teased her slowly, exploring with his tongue, until the dam swelled, trembled, and broke—and then he pulled her up by the waist, and they climaxed together in beauty and convulsive beauty like wild horses.

Afterward Nadja drove him home in her car. There was condensation on the windshield, and Nadja turned it into a blank slate and started to write a message with her finger. She licked it and said: “They say you aren’t supposed to lick your finger. It makes the writing smear.”

The word she wrote was HELLO. It ran and only HELL was left.

Bartholomew felt his heart beating too fast.

"What is it, dear friend?" she asked.

"I know how this story ends," he said solemnly.

"How does it end, André?"

Anthony and Barbara were playing Word Exchange on the dining room table. "Barth has a new girlfriend," said Barbara.

"He told me about her," said Anthony.

"I'm not sure she's right for him."

"Who is?" asked Anthony.

"Nadja was his manager and then something happened."

"He told me."

"Did he show you the book?" asked Barbara.

Anthony nodded: "He believes he knew her in a previous life."

Barbara fell deep in thought—her breathing changed and she started to sob. "We both thought it was the way to go. He's not normal, is he?"

"Unfortunately, he's not," said Anthony.

"What happened?"

"It's just the way he came, Barbara."