

JOHN TAIT

***Reasons for Concern
Regarding My Girlfriend of Five Days, Monica Garza***

That she cursed twice in the first full sentence she spoke to me, even though she was trying to pacify me after my accident with her uninsured younger brother. That she also drives uninsured and seems to view this as a lifestyle choice. That she is twenty-four and I am thirty-nine. That she has tattoos: two visible, one partly visible, unknown invisible. That in that first meeting, after her uninsured brother's truck crushed my Corolla's right front bumper in the Sac N' Save parking lot, and after he next tried to drive off before I blocked him in, and after he then swore and threatened for fifteen minutes before getting on his cell phone, Monica appeared and actually tried to convince me not to call the police. That she succeeded. That after she and I talked for another half hour, I decided to forget the matter entirely, even though between my divorce settlement and credit card debt I'll have trouble paying the repair myself.

That she asked me out first, to my surprise, pleasure and suspicion, said she'd enjoyed our conversation and I seemed nice, then asked if I wanted to see a movie. That she made the first move four hours later, at a picnic table up on the levee along the artificial lake, or at least nuzzled me in the evening chill when the conversation fell off and gave a series of soft, impatient sighs until

I kissed her.

That she seems more impressed than she should that I am an adjunct professor of English at the local college. That she probably thinks I'm wealthier than I am. That she refers to her job in the Wal-Mart auto center as a career. That her determination to work slavishly to support her doltish brother's education seems more misguided to me than admirable. That she wears shorter skirts and larger earrings and is better looking than any woman I've dated since high school. That she's less educated than any woman I've dated since high school.

That for two hours from the time I dropped her off that night to the time I climbed into my bed, nearly forgetting to take off my shoes, I couldn't form a single, coherent thought.

***Notable Insecurities at the Two-Week Mark
with New Girlfriend, Monica Garza***

Because I am so white and so lame at times when I'm with her that I feel like Lawrence freaking Welk. Because I know she humors my attempts to be cool, like when I asked yesterday about a song on her radio, "Is that *banda* or *gruperá*?" and she said wryly that it was neither, then changed channels. Because my best friend is

named Doug, who is an actuary who is married to another actuary, and they live with two golden labs in a gated community called Idle Pines, and Monica's best friend is named Analeticia, who is a manicurist who dates a guy I think is named Puppet who drives a chopped Civic with "*Chingalo!*" in gothic script on the back windshield, and both Analeticia and Puppet stared at me with stony incomprehension the only time we met. Because whenever I talk politics, art, literature, or the intricacies of human behavior with Monica, while she appears to fully understand, she seems utterly uninterested and just watches me with an amused, indulgent look like I'm a precocious child. Because when I finally convinced her to read chapters from my latest unpublished novel, she at first declined to comment then said mildly that my characters seemed to have much free time, and they spent a lot of it staring into the rain and agonizing over decisions they would never make or staring into the rain and contemplating actions they would never take. Because, though I thanked her for her feedback, kissed her forehead and made a show of noting her comments on my draft, I actually felt hurt and misunderstood.

Because when I force myself to be as brutally honest, I can't for the life of me see why someone like Monica Garza would want to go out with someone like me.

Because I question my own motives. Because I worried for an hour the other night, while preparing for my postcolonial lit seminar, that I view Monica, with her Mestizo cheekbones and glossy black hair, as some objectified, exotic "other"

to colonize with my white maleness. Because I have imagined, more than once, running into my ex and have pictured in exquisite slo-mo her every grimace and twitch at seeing me with a pretty girl fifteen years younger, before remembering that she would probably laugh. Because I have both fretted about running into neighbors, colleagues, or students while with Monica and secretly hoped that we are observed, discussed.

Because for the first time I can remember, the physical relationship has advanced faster than I feel comfortable. Because after our first time making love Monica interrogated me about what I liked and didn't like, then gave her own preferences, after which I said I usually liked to discover such things naturally, to which she said that it was just as natural to talk about them, to which I said that her way took away from the spontaneity, to which she said that my way guaranteed that one or both of us would never enjoy activities that the other was perfectly willing to join in just because we'd never bothered to ask, to which I had no real response.

Because she likes to go out dancing and I like to stay in reading. Because I speak softly and hear poorly, and she talks so loudly it makes my ears ring but can hear my neighbor's cat jump on the sill outside the bedroom window to watch us. Because she walks faster than me, drags me by my shirtfront into mall stores with gaudy signs and loud music where she buys her short skirts and large earrings. Because most of what sustains our relationship so far is what we find amusing or incomprehensible about each other, her snickering at my alphabetized New American Film collection

and morning Tai Chi, me marveling at her girlish little charm bracelets and industrial-sized overnight make-up bag.

Because she grew up speaking a language I can barely form a sentence in. Because she can have a phone conversation with her cousin, and I can hear my name spoken twice but have no idea what she is saying about me.

Because I never care about any of these things while I'm with her, but only afterward, alone, late, pouring a glass of milk at my open fridge.

Troubling Revelations Regarding Monica Garza, My Girlfriend of a Month and a Half

The fact that, an hour before what I will refer to as our “big talk,” at my place following our weekend away in Austin, she admitted that she flirted with me that first day mainly in hopes I wouldn't call the police on her uninsured brother, and I laughed a lot because I'd suspected as much, then laughed less because I hadn't really wanted to believe it. The fact that, immediately before the “big talk,” while continuing a debate on whether I am either a cautious or a crappy driver, a clip of a girl crying beside a burnt house came on the TV news, and Monica's demeanor changed and she sat up straight in bed then told me, with grave expression and moist eyes, that she had some “important things” to tell me.

The fact that the first thing she told me was how she ran away at sixteen and became an exotic dancer in San Antonio, a story I tried to receive with the unflappable understanding of a man of

the world. The fact that she went on to describe how, during the stripping years she dated a dealer and became “half-addicted” to methamphetamine and contracted one of the “not-so-bad” hepatitises, which I also tried to hear with cool equanimity. The fact that she next went on to tell me how at eighteen she was incarcerated in Wilson County Jail for fifteen months for kiting checks while involved with another man who is now dead, details which I tried, less successfully, to shrug off, distracted by the quiet, persistent voice that repeated, in case I'd forgotten, that SHE WAS IN JAIL.

The fact that, after our big talk, as I watched her sob and tell me that I wouldn't think the same of her anymore, she looked so miserable and I was still so dazed that I told her that everyone does things they regret, that I certainly had, even stealing a Christmas tree from a department store once while on acid back in college, and that we could only hope to learn from our mistakes. The fact that, as I said these words, I hated how much I sounded like some ineffectual youth counselor. The fact that, after she kissed me and went home, I absently took my wallet from the dresser and counted the cash, a moot action since I couldn't remember how much I'd had, and was so filled with self-reproach after that I threw said wallet hard against said dresser.

Reasons I Shouldn't Call My Quasi-Girlfriend of Nearly Two Months, Monica Garza

Because I haven't called for over a week

following our “big talk,” with a resulting buildup of anticipatory dread for the moment when I do. Because there was honestly some ambiguity about who would call whom. Because even in the message she left today, asking if I wanted to come out clubbing with her and Analeticia this Friday, though she tried to seem casual, the way her voice hitched at the end sounded so tentative and anxious that it made me feel the same.

Because my parents are visiting from Kansas City this weekend, and though our relationship has of late matured into a fellowship of adult equals who respect each others’ life decisions, and though Mom and Dad have managed to adapt admirably to America’s changing culture, I can’t be sure what effect the combination of Monica’s youth, ethnicity, social class, wardrobe, legal history, bodily decoration and vocabulary might have on them. Because I get so mad that I would even care, at almost forty, about the above that I feel like inviting Monica over anyways, which another part of me recognizes is an immature and dangerous rebellious impulse, much like the one that led me fifteen months ago to go out for drinks with a woman I knew had a crush on me just because my wife had made some belittling remarks, though the marriage-ending tryst that followed was pretty much my own dumb fault. Because I just got a new cell phone and haven’t transferred all my old numbers yet. Because I would actually think of the previous issue as an excuse not to call someone.

Probable Reasons Why Monica Garza, the Girl I Was until Recently Involved with, Hasn’t Called Me

Because when she last appeared, at two-thirty on Friday night/Saturday morning, dropped off by best friend Analeticia after their night of clubbing, and she hammered on my door, waking my parents on the foldout in the front room, I didn’t answer until she’d wailed my name and shouted in a voice both playful and severe that I was a dick and better take what was coming to me. Because when I did answer, I told Monica that we should talk some other time. Because when she then laughed and started to walk away, swaying on her high heels, then wheeled back to call me a coward and hypocrite, I acted like I didn’t understand. Because when she suddenly darted inside my apartment, then lost her balance on the slippery hardwood and fell and only then looked up to see my parents in their plaid pajamas and smiled at them with heartbreakingly hopeful timidity, Monica received back a look I could call Arctic. Because, in my parents’ defense, one of the reasons for their reaction might have been that, as Monica fell, her skirt rose the small distance necessary to show she wasn’t wearing underwear. Because, instead of helping, I stood over her and felt an irrational fear that she might grab or grope me in view of my parents. Because, when she rose and I introduced her, we all noticed that the hand she waved in greeting before stuffing it hastily into her purse held the same panties she should have been wearing. Because I then called a cab for her.

Because when I led her outside and she stood, facing away, shivering and sniffing, I didn't touch her or speak until her cab arrived, just paid the driver then went back inside where my parents waited, their faces stricken and very pale.

***Feelings I Must Fight in the Wake of
My Split (?) from Monica Garza***

A malaise that makes it hard to focus on what I should—my teaching, my writing, my income tax preparation—a tiresome funk I can only alleviate by writing long, self-involved lists. A compulsion to go to Wal-Mart and walk the aisles, approaching the auto center with dread and hope until I glimpse her, maybe over by the spark plugs, and flee. A painful awareness that never before in my life has a pretty girl banged on my door and wailed my name in the middle of the night, and it's unlikely this will ever happen again.

A dread that, by losing Monica, I've lost my one late opportunity to become a person who continues to grow and change along with a growing and changing world rather than shutting myself fearfully away with the rest of the people like me. A naive optimism, fueled by well-intentioned movies and TV shows, that we Americans can overcome all barriers between us and embrace each other based on our shared humanity. A recognition that even though the above is a crock, it shouldn't be. The worry that I am more concerned with what others think of me than with my own happiness, a fact that makes me wish I was miles from every other human

being—maybe on some unpopulated island or at least archipelago, though when I imagine myself in that desolate place it seems only natural to add a companion, leading to fantasies (about M. G.) that are both pleasant and troubling.

***Consolations To Remain Mindful
of Post-Monica G.***

That a year from now I will be dating a woman more age-, ethnicity-, and background-appropriate, a librarian, journalist, or real estate agent who wears long skirts and small earrings, a relationship I will find pleasant, comfortable, comprehensible. That a year from now, if I do see Monica Garza, maybe at the mall, clinging to the arm of her young, tattooed *novio*, I won't be as torn up by that image as I am now. That I shouldn't be expected, at nearly forty, to undergo changes I am unequipped to make. That, though our brief time together is over, at least the pleasures I remember are mine to store fondly in my memories. That even though the preceding is a crock, it really shouldn't be.

***Questions I Wish I Had Been Able To Ask
Monica Garza, the Woman I Can No Longer
Quite Believe I Dated for a While Last Year***

What did she come to talk about that night, drunk and banging on my door?

Why did she say I was a coward and hypocrite, or at least did she think I was those things in ways I don't already know I am?

What was it like to run away at sixteen and be alone in the city?

What was it like to be in jail at eighteen?

What dreams does one give up to work at the Wal-Mart auto center to support an uninsured, doltish younger brother?

Did she hope that, if we continued dating, I would help her financially?

If not, did she hope I would help her in some other way?

If not, why did she want to be with me?

Could she understand that, the more I think on it, those revelations about her past didn't bother me so much for what they said about her as much as for how they contributed to my larger worry that she lived in a different world than mine—not just a different culture or different neighborhood, but a place I could never inhabit, a place from which somebody, looking over, might find someone

like me quaint, dull, complacent, undeservedly protected?

What is she doing right now, while I write this?

Where is she now?

If, just suppose, Monica, I was passing by the Wal-Mart auto center with my cart of groceries and was to run into you, maybe over by the spark plugs, and was to overcome my impulse to flee, and we were to talk, maybe laugh at what happened between us last year, how would you look at me now and what would you see and what might we talk about with the honesty possible in the brief moments allowed for such things?

And would I be able to handle it as I waved then walked away, feeling you watching me, steering my grocery cart through the aspirin and diaper displays back toward the checkout? 