

Figment

from [The Ballad of Ken and Emily: or, Tales from the Counterculture](#)

Abstract: In the sixties, monogamy was out, free love was in, and everyone wanted to experiment with their sexuality but Q. Q was a writer, and his obsession was to write the classic novel, not fuck the perfect blond. He had feelings but he showed them only on paper. And then he met lovely Figment. But when Figment announced under a hot shower that she loved Martin also and she hoped Q could shed his middle class hangups and learn to love Martin too so that they could stay together as a threesome, it was then that Q analyzed the obvious alternative, namely life without Figment, and resolved to plunge into the future at all costs to be with her so that he would not lose her.

Q skipped lunch and wrote until early evening. He had newspaper deadlines to meet and stories as yet unfinished; at least three straight all-nighters stood before him. In his mind, he knew only a lunatic would take time out to go to the movies. But he had promised the night to Figment when he broke their date the previous week and he knew she wouldn't understand twice in a row. Also, now was no time to be casual with love relationships. This was the late sixties, monogamy was out, free love was in, and everyone wanted to experiment with their sexuality but him. Q was a writer, and his obsession was to write the classic novel, not fuck the perfect blond. He had feelings but he showed them only on paper. Love was the comfort he wanted to feel when his written words were playing hard to get. Although the spirit of the times allowed him his share of one-nighters, if one of them had said I love you, Q was the first to admit he'd have been back for a second in a second. After a third, he wanted to move in. Q suffered some serious setbacks in those days and he believed fully that he was unlovable.

And then he met Figment.

Ahhh, lovely Figment, so far ahead of her time. Q loved her for shunning Tip Top Wonder Bread in favor of whole wheat, even though the local health food store bread crumbled before the knife. He adored her for the way she recited excerpts from Hoffman-Rubin amidst a background of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto. And though he questioned her when she said possessiveness was liberal--because, indeed, he wanted to possess her always, but he feared being damned to liberalism for life--when she announced under a hot shower that, while she still loved him, she loved Martin also and she hoped that he could shed his middle class hangups and learn to love Martin too so that they could stay together as a threesome, it was then that Q analyzed the obvious alternative, namely life without Figment, and resolved to plunge into the future at all costs to be with her so that he would not lose her.

He met Martin the next day and they stumbled into an awkward friendship. There were no ground rules for triangular love relationships so they played hit or miss with the rules of learning to love one's enemy. Physical affection was a sign of acceptance, so it was encouraged. Dishonesty with one's feelings promoted negative vibes, so it was dealt with. Q still spent time alone with Figment, but so did Martin. They also spent time as a threesome. When the three slept together in bed,

Figment spent half the night in Martin's arms and half the night in Q's. Q confronted his apprehensions so he wouldn't be seen as a liberal. Then his half seemed to shrink and he began to see in free love only a creative way to be rejected. His fear of being dumped once again caused him to miss his first deadline. The more he worried, the more time he needed to spend writing articles, and so he was able to spend less time with Figment and Martin. When he was with them, he was the unpleasant leg of the triangle.

Q surveyed the scattered notes on his desk. In the time remaining before his fast approaching deadline, he believed he could organize them in an orderly fashion, and with creative persistence he was sure he could tie them into a convincing thesis. But he didn't have a moment to waste. Oh, the inconvenience of love. And was it even worth it to merely endure what was beginning to feel like a noose being tightened around his neck? But could he likewise endure the stigma of being branded a liberal in a liberated society? To show that he was still struggling with his liberalism, Q bought Figment a bouquet of her favorite red roses and he held in his feelings about work.

Figment was upstairs when Q opened the front door to her apartment and walked inside. She heard him and ran to greet him, still wearing her bathrobe. "Sorry I'm not ready yet," she said. "I was with Martin. You just missed him. He says hello." She kissed Q's cheek.

Q felt in his stomach the pain that until this current love affair became a triangle he had associated only with childhood trips to the dentist. He smiled because he knew he was supposed to be happy that Martin remembered him. He asked how Martin was doing. The question was more for acknowledgment than inquiry and so "Fine" was Figment's sufficient answer. Then they concentrated on the one-third of the triangle that was theirs alone.

Q gave Figment the bouquet and said "I love you." He had every intention, he believed, of adding "Please don't leave me," but he forgot the wording he had rehearsed on the way over and decided to wait for a better opportunity.

Figment clutched his hand and looked in his eyes. Her crossed eyes that gave her such a complex seemed to relax and her pupils eased slightly away from her nose. "I love you, too, Dear," she said. "I really do, honest." Q wished to himself that she weren't so emphatic. He felt in love a loneliness that was not part of the happily ever after. When Figment ran upstairs to finish dressing, he rolled a joint and smoked half of it. Figment's cat became an irritant then. He kicked it for purring and wished he hadn't.

"Honey, is something wrong?" Figment called from her room.

"No, I'm fine, Dear, just a hard day at work," he answered. He lit a cigarette.

Figment came down to the den. She was wearing the same pair of jeans she wore the night they met at an antiwar fundraising committee meeting. Q had introduced himself to her after the meeting and admitted that, while he was worried she might accuse him of treating her like a sex object, he

couldn't keep his eyes off her and wanted to sleep with her at her first available opportunity. They stayed together that night and every night following until soon after Martin joined the committee.

Q was standing by the fireplace, reading the titles off a collection of books that were stacked neatly on the mantle. Figment put her arms around him and kissed the back of his neck. "Why are you such a grouch lately?" she asked innocently. "Don't you want to be with me?" Lately, Q thought, she was asking this question often, and he knew his own actions were the cause of her concern. He wondered what he could do to prove he wanted to be there, especially because he didn't.

"Of course I do," he said, impatient with his own confusion as much as her persistence.

"Then why are you pacing the floor? And why are you spending so much time alone? Don't you like Martin?"

"Of course I do, but I'm a writer," he insisted. "It's not you, it's not Martin; it's not anyone. I just need a lot of time alone."

Figment turned and paced four nervous steps toward the kitchen, then looked down at the carpet. "But you are spending a lot of time alone," she said. "You're hardly ever with us. I miss you."

"No, stop that," Q exploded suddenly. He crumpled an empty matchbook from his pocket and threw it into the fireplace. "You're laying a trip on me. You're just too goddamn possessive." Q loved Figment for that very quality but he wished she would blow off Martin and possess him only. "That's your trouble. You demand more than I can give you. But you can't have me like that."

Q's change of voice startled Figment and she jumped a step backwards. A defensive glance toward the clock in the kitchen told her that they were getting late. She stood erect and brushed off her blouse. "Look, it's cool," she said, straightening her hair with her fingers. "If you don't want to be with me, you don't have to be."

"But I do, that's just it," he said, even though at that moment he didn't.

"Well then just be with me. And stop being a boor. Let's go before we're late to the movie."

They arrived five minutes late to the theatre. Q blamed Figment one time and the traffic another. Then he harped at the ticket line for moving too slowly. Figment nudged his elbow in embarrassment and studied the line to see if anyone was watching. In the theatre, Q held Figment's hand but she felt he gripped it too tightly. She excused herself to visit the restroom.

Fifteen minutes later, she returned. Q made a remark about women taking forever in public restrooms and Figment called him a sexist pig. Hastily, she made another trip to the restroom. On her return, she said, "Q, I've got a headache. I want to go home."

“What?” he said. He brought her into view without taking his eyes off the screen. “You mean, I finally find time to take you to a movie and you want to leave? What do you want out of me?”

“Doesn’t it mean anything to you that I have a headache?” she cried. “Are you jealous of Martin?”

“No, I’m not jealous of Martin, but a lot of people get headaches. It’s no big deal.”

“Well, this one is. I want to go home.”

She slung her coat over the shoulder that carried her purse and walked up the aisle. He clenched his jacket in a fist and followed.

Traffic flowed smoothly on the way to the apartment where Figment lived, but their communication stalled early and died. Q wished Figment would say something so he could have a point at which to begin his defense. But no, he argued with himself, there would be no defense, he was correct in his feelings--she was too possessive. Sure, he’d like to be with her more often--all the time, in fact, even become a unit. But his calling was as a writer and nothing, not even love, could stand in his way. She also was nosing him out of her life, he could see that plainly even if she pretended otherwise. Figment pressed her sullen figure against the window and armrest of the door and hid her face in an upraised collar. She cried just enough so that Q would know she was crying. Q wondered what words existed to save an essentially unlovable person.

A lonely alley led to the backyard parking lot that was reserved for tenants of Figment’s apartment. Q parked his car and took hold of Figment’s shoulder before she could open the door. She stiffened her entire body and stared coldly through the windshield.

“Honey,” he said. She looked defiantly at him, even though Q could see she was hurt. “I can’t spend so much time with you anymore.”

He wished for once she would understand.

“Oh?”

“Honey, I’m a writer. I need to be alone.”

“So you didn’t want to be with me tonight?” She pulled away from Q and pressed her back against the door.

“I did.”

“Then you are jealous of Martin.”

“I’m not. Honey, I’m a writer. I need a lot of space.”

“And what does that mean? How much space do you need? I don’t understand.” She cried in frustration.

“That’s just it. And I don’t know how to explain it.” He pulled her body into his and stared through her eyes. “Look, let’s call it off,” he said. “I still love you, Figment, but it’s better this way.” He kissed her one last time, then released her.

Figment wiped away some of her tears and allowed the rest to dry on her face. Then she looked angrily at Q. “You’re just a liberal,” she shouted. She pushed open the door without even looking at it, got out, and slammed it.

Q watched her run to the door.

What do basically unlovable people do to cope with sadness? Some ignore it or pretend it isn’t there. Others accept it and call themselves existentialists. For Q, sadness was like a bladder that needed to be relieved occasionally. Q wasn’t one to cry at every setback. Rather, he would store his moments of sadness until his grief became impossible to contain. Then he would hide away in his apartment, create a bummer atmosphere, and let it out all at once. Tonight, as he had anticipated, was one of those nights.

The bummer atmosphere was one Q had perfected after a series of bad experiences with strobe lights and King Crimson. It featured one burning candle in the far corner of a dark room and Q on the couch by the closed window throwing hypnotic glances at each other for the duration of Q’s collection of bummer albums, which included the complete set of Moody Blues and Claudine Longet’s first two, plus a few others that never made the Top Ten. A gallon of any cheap wine except Gallo was always on the table next to the couch, along with his notebook and pen, enough joints to last the evening, and whatever paraphernalia he needed to keep them burning.

This night, Q settled in earlier and mellowed out sooner than he expected. He welcomed the inner peace he was at long last feeling again. There had been periods recently when he believed this inner peace that he needed for the sake of his writing was gone forever. And even though he now had to smoke himself into an inability to speak, he didn’t care because there was nothing he wanted to say and no one with whom he wanted to be.

Q didn’t speak a word for over an hour. His thoughts and feelings were releasing themselves through his pen and he was beginning to feel grounded once more in what was fast coming to feel like an alien reality. There was a knock on the door. Q lived alone then, but locks on doors were considered bourgeois. The door opened wide and Martin broke into Q’s world with an annoyingly happy grin on his face that destroyed Q’s train of thought. His long hair was slicked back like he had just gotten out of the shower and his shirt was unbuttoned and untucked. He was carrying his moccasins in his hand.

“What are you smoking?” he asked.

“Columbian,” Q answered. He pointed to the ashtray filled with joints, then drank a glass of wine. Martin took one joint, then revealed an identification card that he had been hiding in one of his moccasins. The card said “State Police.”

“Q, I’m sorry to tell you this,” he said, “but I’m a narc, and you’re busted.”

Q had smoked too many joints by this time for his head to have room left for spoken words but his thoughts collided with each other in their rush to escape. “Oh migod, I’m busted,” he thought. “I’ve got to get away. No, I can’t get out. I’ll have to kill him. No, I can’t do that. In fact, I can’t do anything now. I can’t even move. No, that’s not true. My hand is moving. It’s putting a joint in my mouth. I might as well smoke it. I’m already busted.”

He took a hit.

Martin laughed. “I’m only kidding,” he said. He shook his head back so that his hair flew behind it. “This is just a license that says I can work as a drug counselor. I’m not really a narc.”

He lit the joint and took a hit. Then he went to change the record.

“What’s he talking about? Q thought. “Is he a narc or isn’t he? What a bummer this bummer is turning out to be. This dope must be strychnine-laced. Oh well, here comes my hand again. I might as well take another hit.”

The first of Martin’s selections dropped onto the turntable and began to play. It was a Hendrix album. “There, that’s more like it,” Martin said.

“God, not Hendrix now when I want mellow,” Q thought. He drank another glass of wine and poured himself one more. He lit a joint and took a hit.

Martin sat down on the couch next to Q. He accepted the joint from Q and took a hit. Then he turned suddenly serious. “Man, I’ve gotta say something to you,” he said to a surprised Q. He took another hit, then slowly took another.

Q noted that Martin seemed more uncomfortable than the cocky fellow who had burst into Q’s solitude. If Q had at that moment expressed his feelings openly as they had all tried to do during the period of their aborted threesome, he might have admitted that he felt uncomfortable, too. He saw in Martin a decent enough man and felt shame in his failure to accept him. Their relationship had until now been highlighted by displays of happiness and openness when the three were together, but he had seldom been alone with Martin. Q quivered slightly. He held onto his pen for the security it gave him but he laid his notebook on the table beside the couch. He drank a glass of wine to clear his throat and settle his stomach.

“Capitalism is bad, we know that. That’s why we’ve become socialist revolutionaries instead of middle class executives,” Martin began. He spoke slowly and deliberately, like he was really figuring it out for himself rather than expressing a seasoned opinion to Q. “But capitalism is everywhere. We don’t choose it, we’re inundated with it, and one of the foundations of the capitalist system is competition. We compete for money, we compete for property, we compete for love. And every winner needs a loser.”

He paused for what seemed like a long time. Q thought maybe Martin was waiting for him to say something but he didn’t know what to say. He attempted to say, “It’s good to know there’s a political analysis behind why I feel shitty,” but he didn’t know if his inflection should denote sarcasm or sadness, or even if he really wanted to say those words. He just wanted Martin to leave at that moment so he could be alone to ponder not capitalism, not competition, but hopelessness and what’s the use, and he had no faith in the thoughts that appeared in his mind to be spoken as words, so he didn’t speak them.

Martin continued, “I like to think that I’m a capitalist by transitional necessity rather than by personal choice and that that makes me better than capitalists who embrace the system in all its oppressive glory. But what I really feel when I’m not stoned and I haven’t had my coffee for the day is a sense of frustration that the capitalist system really is wrong, but that I don’t know how to live and love apart from it. Even the escape to the country is only capitalism in a natural environment.”

Martin paused again to consider what he had said. He went in to the kitchen and came back with a glass, which he filled with wine. He relit the joint and gave the first hit to Q. They passed it back and forth until it went out. Martin sipped of the wine. “I’m being impatient, and impatience is not a virtue,” he continued, “But I don’t know what else to do.” He stopped again and looked to Q as if for guidance.

Q felt an uneasy compassion for this man who had stolen his love. He was still confused as to the direction of this monologue, but he also felt a sadness that came from the relief of knowing that whatever had not been said that should have been was about to be said now. He said to Martin, “Do you feel alone?”

“Not usually, although sometimes I do,” Martin said. “No one said being a revolutionary would be easy--there certainly aren’t as many job openings as, say, being a stockbroker. And idealism is hardly a positive trait to include on job resumes for companies that want you to be like them. What makes it tougher, though, is that even being a revolutionary somehow becomes liberal in the capitalist system.”

“Look, man,” he said with a forced firmness, “what we need to do is destroy the system, not each other.” He placed his hand gently on Q’s leg. Q felt a chill. He had no thoughts at that moment. “We have to redefine the words that nurture it and then let people’s actions catch up with the new definition, dig?”

Q didn't. He nodded in agreement.

"Definitions are the rules of the game," he continued. "Let capitalism remain as it is but redefine 'competition' to have a negative connotation. I believe people will learn to cooperate. If capitalism still is able to survive under those conditions it will certainly be in a more humane form. If it can't, then it will die its long overdue death and good riddance to it.

"Look, man, what I'm saying is Figment called me as soon as you left her. She said you said you needed time to write. I know that's a crock. Look, I couldn't help what I did, I felt something for her."

Q trembled. He tried to say nothing but he started to talk anyhow, and when he did he felt like a failure for failing to be silent. "It happens sometimes," he said. "I did, too." He tried to steady himself, but he was too high and too filled with wine and too emotionally exhausted and he did not feel in control anymore.

"I didn't intend to become her lover," Martin continued. "I just wanted to be your friend. I hoped she could introduce us. I told her I don't want to see her anymore."

He embraced Q and kissed his forehead. Q sobbed freely and didn't care what anyone thought.