



The Economics of Spooning by April L. Ford

by Sheila Lamb | Dec 2, 2013 | Fiction, The Journal | 0 comments

"I can't do it without getting hard."

"Please try."

"How?"

"I don't know! Think of something that doesn't make you hard."

"Then what's the point?"

Jackie pulled away from Kyle. She stared at the wall she and her dorm mate had covered floor to ceiling with trophies from their sorority adventures since the start of their senior year at Bushwick College: Perfectly intact beer bottle labels ("You know what *that* means, right, roomie?"); napkins with phone numbers so sloppily pinned they were never dialed ("I dare you to figure it out."); laserjet printouts of the girls of Sigma Gamma Phi drilling pledges through one hundred pushups along the sidewalks of Main Street ("Strong arms build strong communities!") or huddling together outside the Red Fox Tavern on a crisp November night, matching covergirl smiles, hands on jutted hips, and sequined green and gold dresses ("We're so *hot!*") It had been a good semester, and Kyle had made it the best.

"My Stress Management instructor said spooning with your loved one can be very relaxing," Jackie said, turning to him. Tall, thin Kyle whose face, at 21, was still round and boyish. In the four months since they had started dating, Jackie had felt scruff only once, the second weekend of September when her dorm mate had stayed in town with her boyfriend and encouraged Jackie to take the opportunity to get to know Kyle more intimately. But she hadn't been sure she could call it scruff. More like a rougher texture of the skin under his cheekbones and on his upper lip. "I know we're not exactly loved ones," she went on, "but I think it's time we spooned."

"We spoon all the time." Kyle sat up, the muscles of his body long and controlled like a Pilates instructor's. The creases of his tummy reminded Jackie of a slinky toy; she pulled the bed sheet up to her shoulders.

"We've never spooned. All we do is fuck. We fuck and we fuck and we fuck, which is great, but it's finals week and I'm really stressed and I'd like to spoon."

Kyle lit a cigarette. He inhaled thoughtfully, letting the smoke escape his mouth at a slow, sexy pace. "We could spoon after we fuck."

"Don't you get it? I don't want to fuck right now!" Jackie stood up quickly and turned away so her boyfriend wouldn't see how much water she had retained since the start of finals week. It was all those energy drinks, she was sure of it, but right now it was more important for her to be alert than to have a flat tummy. She went to the bathroom and locked herself inside. She ran the bathwater, poured some vanilla-scented salts into the tub, rinsed her loofah sponge in the sink in case her dorm mate had used it on the sly. As for Kyle, he could see himself out of the room, which he did. It wasn't easy to put a guy in the doghouse when you didn't live together, and in two days she and Kyle would be heading home for the holidays—she to Long Island, he to Newark—so Jackie had to come up pronto with an alternative of equivalent impact.

The scarlet and blue boys of Chi Phi had warned Kyle about Jackie. "A real firecracker, that one," they had said, "but not so quick to the mattress." He had met her at the first open-house party of the semester, an event designed to attract freshman girls who didn't know about Greg's secrets, or Brian's proclivities, or Josh's "Trail of Tears." The punch bowl was brimming, the strobe light was pulsing, the deejay was influencing the crowd with beats like "Wild Ones" and "Looks Like Sex." Kyle wasn't interested in freshman girls that time; the age-gap between them and him, a senior and honor student in Business Economics, felt uncomfortably wide that night as he sat on the mildewed couch in a corner of the living room-cum-dance club and watched the 18-year-olds perform the same boring tricks over and over again. In either pairs or trios, the girls scrutinized the room for a hot guy, pointed at him like he was a movie star, then placed hands on hips and smiled like, well, silly intoxicated girls who had spent their senior years of high school preparing for that very night. Then there was Jackie. The house lights came on, and a girl who could have been a boxer stood at the top of the staircase leading to the second floor, gold streamers woven into her ass-length red hair, bullhorn to her mouth.

"Ladies, welcome!" she said, sweeping a hand over the dazed crowd. "I'll only take a minute of your time, but this minute will be more important than any other you'll have here at Bushwick College."

The freshman nursed from the complimentary flasks issued to them when they had entered the fraternity house and gazed at Jackie as if she were now the movie star. A sea of bobbing drugstore

blond hair, glittered eyelids, twitters of excitement, while the frat boys scowled at Jackie and whispered angrily at one another. Kyle stared in awe.

"The punch," Jackie announced, pointing shrewdly to the empty bowl, "is not spiked. It's just punch, and actually it's not even punch, it's a *Kool-Aid* knockoff. So unless you arrived drunk or you've been nipping at something of your own, you're as sober as ever."

The freshman gasped and gaped at their shiny new flasks. One girl near Kyle looked at her friend and cried, "What does this mean?"

After thinking out loud separately and then collectively, the girls turned to the frat boys, who had assembled into military formation, and released their meanest glares. Hands on hips again, always hands on hips, bunched lips and narrowed eyes and other body language that threatened a cold, sexless night. The boys played hangdog and tucked their Budweisers behind their backs. When nothing more happened, the deejay clapped his hands and yelled, "Last one to the kegs is a rotten egg!" Heads spun left and right, nostrils sniffed the air for a trail. A modelesque downstater, whose brand-new boyfriend was among the frat boys and had informed her of the kegs stored in a tub of ice in the basement, fisted the air Braveheart-style and led her sisters to victory. Order was swiftly restored, and once the strobe light was back on and the music had reinstated the vibe, Kyle went to Jackie on the staircase.

"We finally meet," he said.

"I have no idea who you are," she said.

"Sure you do. And you, Jackie McFarland, are that girl no brother wants at the first party of the semester."

"Are you going to kick me out?"

Without looking at her, Kyle slung his arm around Jackie, surprised by how easily she leaned into him in spite of her pitbull way of standing. "Only if you'll let me leave with you."

Now, midway into finals week, here he was evicted from his girlfriend's room by a mere look. He had taken his first two exams on Monday, and his last three were on Friday. Today, he had thought, would be all-day sex day. Jackie didn't have any exams either; it was serendipity. They had started off momentarily with bad-breath morning sex, sex in the shower, after-breakfast sex on Jackie's study desk. Then, as people did when they were worn out from such activity, they collapsed onto the bed and dozed off. When Kyle awoke an hour later, he curled around Jackie and kissed the back of her neck and nibbled her ear until she pushed her ass against him and reached for his hand. And then she said it: "Let's just spoon, babe. Okay?"

"Spoon?"

"Like we're doing. I want to stay like this."

"But I can't do it without getting hard."

Jackie promised herself she would answer only the most relevant Facebook messages before studying for her Friday final, Non-Profit Economics. She had been to every class, done every assignment and written every test, watched every video and listened to every podcast, but still she could not make peace with the underlying for-profit agenda of many organizations. All those starving children in third-world countries who were only as real as their Photoshopped images! When Kyle, dead-set on entering the corporate sphere to become a CEO of international caliber, argued that not-for-profit organizations had to make some profit or else they couldn't function, she had wondered if they were really meant for each other. Could she be with someone who didn't champion her causes, couldn't be bothered pioneering ways for America to challenge the World Bank? What would their lives be like in ten years? She could see it as though they had lived it already:

Me: [Peeling potatoes] Hi, honey! How was your day?

Him: [Dressed in a fabulous Italian suit] Terrific! We bought out a small fur trade

company in Canada. Beaver is the new mink. What about you, my darling wife?

Me: I helped the Walshes move into their new home.

Him: The who where?

Me: The Walshes? After the flood?

Him: What's for supper? I've got an hour to eat and then make babies with you before I go back to the office.

Jackie pushed her textbook off the desk. She began to answer a Facebook message but found she had nothing to say. She tried replying to a different message and felt even emptier. She typed "spoon" into Google search on her laptop and scrolled through the image results until the Black Eyed Peas lit up her iPhone. The caller ID indicated it was one of her Sigma Gamma Phi girls, but Jackie wasn't up for a conversation; at this point in the week, no sister phoned another unless there was an emergency. If someone wanted to gripe about study guides or how bloated she had become from all the take-out, she texted. The phone rang four times then fell silent. Jackie waited for the voicemail indicator or a follow-up text. The latter lit up the screen anew: *just saw kyle*.

grumpy as hell! everything ok? No, everything was not okay. Her boyfriend had balked at being intimate with her after she had given him sex all morning, and then he had left her alone. He had missed every cue like either he knew what he was doing and wanted out of the relationship or he was a complete idiot. Had she been heavy-handed in saying “loved one?” But that was exactly how her Stress Management instructor had put it: “Spooning can be a very relaxing activity to do with your loved one.” It wasn’t like she had told Kyle she loved him or demanded him to say he loved her. And where had he gone while she took her bath? They had study plans, a dinner date in town at the new tapas bistro, a sleepover if Jackie’s dorm mate texted to confirm she was staying at her boyfriend’s, then more studying tomorrow—their last full day together before Friday finals. After that, they’d each board a bus home for the Christmas holidays, and she’d be damned if they were going to spend a month apart without discussing their problem. The fact that their problem had flourished in the middle of finals week was an emergency. Jackie seized her iPhone and issued a group text: *Meeting in the glass room pronto.*

An hour later, seven girls sat on beanbag chairs in the glass room. The room was on the third floor of the College library and designed to make study hall as appealing as possible. Normally, students had to request occupancy a day in advance, but Kayla, the most popular of the Phi girls for her fantastic cleavage and campus advocacy for Planned Parenthood, knew the Circulations desk staff well enough to call in the occasional favor. Marianne, the newest member of the sorority, presented Jackie with a Venti Gingerbread Latté, no whipped. “I’m so sorry for your troubles,” she said.

Jackie sipped her latté and considered her girls. Like her, they were planning to work in the non-profit sector after they graduated. Like her, they had held summer jobs as camp counselors or fundraisers during high school. Unlike her, they had boyfriends who were Anthropology or Sociology majors, or there was Kayla’s boy who wanted to become a museum curator, and Marianne’s new guy who had just switched from Finance to Geriatrics.

“So I have a big problem,” she began. “And it’s gotten bigger since I called this meeting.”

The girls nodded gravely and blew kisses at her. Kayla was the only one smiling—a shit-eating sort of smile—and Jackie had to breathe in deeply to keep from scolding her friend. “I’m serious, Kayla.”

“Of course! It’s just, as I was getting ready to come over here I found this and thought you could use it.” Kayla held up a cone-shaped green garbage bag.

Jackie knew right away what it was. “Oh my god! Where was it?”

“At the back of my closet. Don’t ask how it got there.”

Jackie unwrapped her bullhorn and cradled it like a newborn baby. “Oh, how I’ve felt so small without you.”

The sisters applauded. Jackie stood among them and spoke into her bullhorn. “Friends, I have exactly two days left with Kyle. Two days to make him understand how important my needs and feelings are. I have to come up with a plan, and I’d like your input.”

Outside the glass room, beleaguered freshman lifted their heads from their study materials to watch the girl in the fitted green and gold tracksuit. She stood with feet shoulder-width apart, back arched and strong. Jackie knew she had become the subject of interest, and she knew she had to set a positive example with her leadership skills. She smiled through the glass walls and invited a table of watery-eyed girls in pajamas to join her focus group.

After speed walking around the hilly campus twice, Kyle felt calmer. He stopped at the convenience store by his residence hall for a liter of homogenized milk and then went to his quad. His three roommates were off writing exams, so he would have the place to himself for the next couple of hours. More than enough time to get it right. He would prove Jackie wrong. He had to.

“Yo?” Kyle put his milk in the fridge and checked to make sure he actually was alone. The coffee table in the living room was piled with last night’s dinner plates and this morning’s breakfast bowls, and the television was set to Pandora. His roommates’ doors were closed, but he peered into their rooms anyway. More crusty plates, revolutions of underwear and socks, candy bar wrappers and defaced calculus textbooks. Perfect.

His own bedroom was tidy except for an overturned stack of flashcards, which he would need to reorganize for his most important Friday final, Investments and Capital Gains. For now, he toed the cards under his bed so he wouldn’t have to think about it. He closed the blinds and smoothed the surface of his still-made bed. Shut the bedroom door and secured the lock. Turned on his laptop and launched his favorite Top 40 iTunes radio station. Placed his wallet and keys on his desk, lay the framed photo of his family facedown on the dresser, dimmed the light. As he undressed, Kyle’s heartbeat grew stronger and his palms sweat. Down to his boxers, he checked the lock once more and turned up the volume on his laptop before getting under the sheets. He lay on his back and breathed deeply ten times, like Jackie had told him to do whenever he felt anxious. Then he turned onto his side and embraced the body pillow she had given him on their one-month anniversary.

“No big deal,” he said out loud as he curled—spooned—around the pillow. “Nothing wrong with a little cuddle play.” Except, of course, that spooning wasn’t the same as cuddling. Cuddling was hooking an arm around your girl after sex, kissing her on the cheek and maybe playing with her boobs a little. It was licking her neck until she gave in and went down, or pulling her into you so you had easier access to her parts. Spooning by itself was almost offensive, like asking a dude to wear a G-string or flirt with the scaggy barmaid who worked Sunday nights at the Red Fox. It was a rewardless type of intimacy. It was punitive. Nonetheless, he would prove to Jackie that he could spoon without getting a hard-on; if he could last a solid five, even ten minutes, they’d end up fucking anyway.

Kyle experimented with different angles and amount of pressure. There was no question he would get hard if he pressed his groin directly against the pillow. It was basic mechanics of the penis.

Maybe he should explain this to Jackie, how friction didn't have to be sexual to get the blood flowing. Perhaps he could tell her about how in middle school all it took was squeezing between tightly arranged desks on his way to the restroom. Wearing his jockstrap too loose. Rolling onto his stomach during a dream. Listening to Justin Bieber. Sometimes, it took nothing at all. But how could she not know this already? He wasn't her first, probably not even her tenth. She was messing with him. Asking him to do the impossible so she'd have a reason to break up with him before the holidays. Ha! Well, he'd show her. He'd spoon her until she begged him to stop. He'd hold her hostage to his roaring intimacy until she decried spooning for the rest of her life.

"Dude. *What* are you doing?"

Kyle snapped upright and concealed himself with the body pillow. "What the fuck! Don't you knock?"

Greg, his least favorite of the quad mates, presented a butter knife. "Sorry, man, I jimmied your door. Can I use your flashcards?"

"For real?"

"I just need 'em for—"

"Get the fuck out."

"Ooookay. Touchy-touchy." Greg started to leave then turned back and handed Kyle a piece of green paper. Kyle's name was inked in glittery gold cursive at the top, followed by: *sorry about today. won't be able to make our bistro date tonight but why don't you come to my room tomorrow at 6 and we'll have an order-in date! your girl still likes you XOXO*

The day off from their relationship had done Jackie good. She had resisted the option when her sisters first brought it up, but after hearing their personal stories and considering the wisdoms they had gained, she decided that time apart would give both herself and Kyle time to replenish. They had been seeing each other and fucking nonstop for a week; that was the most time they had spent together as a couple. Tonight, they would have a discussion, a mature, calm discussion about Jackie's needs, and then about Kyle's needs, and then about how they could negotiate areas where there was little or no crossover—it would serve as good test prep, too! Jackie had come to realize that spooning wasn't the issue, and the first point on her agenda was to apologize to Kyle for having made a big deal out of the wrong thing.

"Hey, babe!" She kissed her boyfriend on the lips after she let him into her room, and she smiled graciously when he offered her a stuffed bear whose zippered belly was filled with green and yellow M&Ms. "Thanks so much!" She tried to ignore the way her voice pitched, but Kyle noticed, too.

"You still like M&Ms, right?"

"Absolutely! And you still like Chinese food, right? I got us some wontons and eggrolls on my way back from town."

"Actually, I'm not hungry. Exam nerves, I guess."

Jackie turned the stuffed bear around in her hands, unzipped his belly and picked at the M&Ms. "Are these mint-flavored?"

"Not sure. Why?"

"I don't like mint." She held the bear up to her nose and sniffed. "Definitely mint. Sorry...I can't eat them." Not wanting to completely reject Kyle's conciliatory gesture, Jackie sat the bear on her dresser and fashioned a wreath of gold streamers for his little head.

Kyle swished his mouth compulsively and sat on the bed. "So," he said.

"So," Jackie said.

So. It had come to this after only four months, the silence and inflexibility of married people.

"There's something I need to talk to you about." As soon as she said it, Jackie discovered she had nothing to say. She stalled by watching Kyle stall, rubbing his face as though to get the color back, clearing his throat once, twice, three times. Eventually, he took initiative.

"Me too. Let me start. I was thinking this morning about my favorite memories of you. You know, things I really li—love about you."

"Oh?" Jackie stopped fiddling with her pouf of gold streamers.

"Like that first night we met. You were totally badass on those stairs, outing us evil dudes to the new girls. I thought, now there's a chick I could totally dig."

Jackie remembered her own experience of that night, how Kyle had stood out from the crowd not by standing at all but by watching her intently from the nasty "fucking couch." She had known he was one of those guys who preyed on freshman girls, but she had never heard about him doing anything worse than laughing when they fell for harmless pranks, like acting drunk and reckless because they assumed the punch had been spiked. "That's so sweet, Kyle! What else do you really love about me?"

"That's mostly it."

"Mostly?"

"I mean that's it."

"That's *it*? After four months you can only come up with one thing?"

"Mind if I use the bathroom?" Kyle wiped his palms on his jeans and walked a wide path around Jackie like she was someone with b.o. or meth breath. He shut himself in the bathroom and took the longest piss—the piss of a guy who had downed a few beers before coming over. And after a few beers, Kyle was as useless in bed as a cigarette without tobacco.

Jackie banged on the bathroom door. "You planned this all out, didn't you?"

She heard Kyle flush, wash his hands, close the toilet lid, buckle his belt, and then reverse the steps when apparently his bladder demanded further voiding. He didn't answer her. When he came out, Jackie was sitting on the edge of her bed, resting her chin on the mouthpiece of her bullhorn.

Kyle sat beside her. "Want to spoon?" His invitation was toneless, tired, and probably rehearsed.

Jackie stared at the ground. "I've been thinking about joining the Peace Corps after I graduate in the spring."

"Are you ready for your exam tomorrow?"

"I've decided to carpool home with Kayla. I hate taking the bus."

Jackie let go of her bullhorn and flopped onto her back. Kyle flopped onto his back, too, and the pair stared at their reflection in the ceiling mirror above the bed. Jackie's dorm mate had claimed the installation of a ceiling mirror would ensure things were always fresh and exciting, but this was the first time Jackie had allowed herself to look at it other than when rolling from underneath Kyle to on top of him. Now that they were lying side by side, she saw how incompatible they were. His legs were practically as long as her body, yet one of her thighs was thicker than both of his together. The color of his face next to her red hair looked sickly. He still didn't have scruff, while she had to shave her pits and other regions every second day. He was a knife to her spoon and they had hit a fork, and it was neither one's fault.

Jackie sighed and squeezed Kyle's hand. "You smell like you drank a forty."

Kyle sighed and squeezed back. "Will I see you and your horn at the top of the staircase in January, or will you be hardcore Peace Corps by then?"

Jackie smiled at him through the mirror.

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