

***#%¶!**

or

Dust!

(for the wives of Ely)

by Storm Garner

INT. DAY. Rehearsal Studio, NYC, a few years ago.

I

Fuck!

SHE

No. *FUCK!*

I

Right. *FUCK!*

SHE

Yeah but: *Fff-uhh(ugh)CKKK!*

Slower, with a bit of a downward arpeggio. You're seeing his painting of you for the first time.

It's like, it's like--

I

How about this: *Fuuuuhck....*

SHE

Okay... but it's really like you're saying *Oh my God!*
only you're saying *Fuck!*

I

Oh my God! as in *Turns out you're a terrible painter*
I'm so ashamed to be having an affair with you? Or *Oh*
my God! as in *You should not have put a painting of me*
in the department show they'll find out you're
sleeping with your student and buh-bye cushy boarding
school teaching gig, or...

SHE

No, *Oh my God!* like *This is fucking incredible, I*
can't believe how good your painting is, and I'm so
flattered that it's of me.

I

Oh.

SHE

So it's like you're saying that but you're actually
saying *Fuck!* cause you're a rebellious little 17 year
old art prodigy who's too cool to give outright
compliments, you know?

The exchange probably played out a little differently, but my point is: I did not know. I did not know about "Fuck" as a compliment. Or as a substitute for "Oh my God". Or about "Oh my God" as a substitute for a compliment. Plus, I did not understand why, if this character was so smart, she couldn't think of something more original to say than "Fuck!" Why, if she was so rebellious, she couldn't rebel against the norms of cool enough to say what she *fucking* (substitute for an underlining of the following word) meant. I'd walked into our first

rehearsal as their ideal lead actress, a physical type-fit with respectable stage chops and plenty of relevant real life experience to ground a gutsy interpretation of the role, which had been offered to me within hours of my first audition. The director, playwright, producer and stage manager had been coddling me throughout the castings and table-reads, asking me about my training, marveling at my insights into the character. And now, in our costly midtown rehearsal space, when we were finally ready to start scene work, it turned out I could not convincingly deliver line one of scene one, which was, simply:

Fuck!

I'd been exposed as un-American, un-idiomatic, uncool; I expected to be fired any minute. *Fuck!* (Substitute for: *I mourn this loss, imagined or real.*) The director could sense I was going at it all wrong, but was admittedly "not a swearer" herself, possibly because at 29 she still lived with her Israeli parents in their Orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn, and *fuck* was not part their limited English vocabulary, so she'd asked the playwright to coach me on my delivery of the dreaded expletive of multiple subtexts.

SHE (PLAYWRIGHT)

And don't forget--you're like totally in love with him but you're also just cool as fuck.

I was familiar with *as fuck*. (Substitute for *extremely*, but position after the noun to be modified.) From the playwright's passionate attachment to my performance, I gleaned that my character had been based upon some self-conception of hers. A real actress can become anyone. So I put my objections aside and resolved to simply emulate her every twitch and tone, *like totally*. By the end of that production, needless to say, both the director and I were fluent in *fuck*-isms and could substitute *fuck* for just about anything anyone could be too cool to say outright. *Fuck yeah.* (Absolutely.) *Fuck no.* (Certainly not.) *Who gives*

a flying fuck? (I do not care.) *I fucking love this shit!* (This makes me happy.)
Fuck... (I think I am falling in love with you and this frightens me...) *Fuck you!*

Origin:

1495–1505; akin to Middle Dutch *fokken*: to thrust, copulate with, Swedish dialect *focka*: to copulate with, strike, push; *fock*: penis

No, this could be fun, I told myself. I'd always loved hangman, mad libs, cryptograms, and neologizing in general. So I learned how to joke around like anyone else, filling up whole sentences with substitutions: "Fuck you, you know full well that's bullshit!" I'd say to my director, to practice, when she teased me about my male costar's supposed real-life enthusiasm for our stage-kisses. But I couldn't get rid of the literal cartoon-illustration that popped up in my mind each time I used an expletive. *Bullshit* always conjured up a steaming pile of wet manure on a misty, verdant knoll, with my first storybook hero Ferdinand the bull smelling new flowers nearby. Which had so *fucking* little to do with an untruth... And *Fuck you*, no matter how lovingly it was said, always sprouted a fleeting but deeply disturbing image of whoever *you* was, being roughly penetrated by an unseen force. Not something I'd wish upon anyone, least of all a feminist theatre director I'd quickly come to love and respect for her struggle to acquire and maintain a happy relationship with her sexuality despite having been told again and again as a child that her very body awoke men's *Yetzer Ra* (evil impulse) and thus must be always covered, neglected, despised.

A real actress can become anyone, can adopt any language, any diction as her own. The word *fuck* has no real meaning. It's an expletive first and foremost, and an expletive by definition is meaningless, a filler: it does not mean, it points. Just as *Like, like, like...* points like a tease, like a pause button, getting attention, delaying satisfaction, *fuck* with all its variants points like a slap at the punishable, underlining faults, emboldening loss of control, proclaiming religious-like fervor and/or the pain of realizing one is as breakable as that, and so unhip to the wiles

of the winds. It *fucking* derives its--*fuck!*--emotive impact from its very *fucking* meaninglessness, substitutes for God, the Unknown, all our greatest fears, joys, ineffables...

But at bottom: it's only a word, a style, an attitude, a put-on, which I, as actress, can and will master, I told myself. Or better yet: maybe without my knowledge some savvy feminists in some generation before my own actually succeeded in reappropriating the word *fuck*, the way my first girlfriend, back at boarding school, who was black, called her other black friends "nigger" and meant it as a gesture of minority-race solidarity; the way all overeducated non-heterosexuals and even just open-minded straight people now refer to themselves as "queer"; the way today's most popular anti-rape-culture activist event calls itself "Slutwalk". Maybe, I thought, I was the only one who still felt the original connotations of *fuck* piercing some organ or other each time it was spoken, maybe this problem was long-solved and I just had to get with the times.

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INT. EVENING. Guest bedroom with two twin beds in an old Virginia mansion, a few months earlier.

Sammy*, my close friend, my very attractive close friend, my very attractive but *straight* (she says) close friend--also an actress--is still lying naked under a white sheet by candlelight. It was her idea to come here for a weekend, to go on long walks through the countryside during the day and now to give each

other full body massages, but professional-style, as in: nude, with oils, and white sheets under and over the body, so that the recipient's limbs are uncovered one by one as they're worked on, and then covered up again. Sammy played masseuse first, then I did my best to emulate her confident, effective strokes. Now I pour us glasses of water, trying not to look at her body, which glows like Titian's *Venus of Urbino* come to life...

SHE

Marge*, could you teach me--how do you...
enjoy sex?

I

Huh? You mean... with women?

SHE

No, sex: with men.

I

Okay... Hm. What do you mean, exactly?

SHE

You... know how to orgasm?

I

Know how...? Um: yes...? But: you--

SHE

Even with men?

I

Well yes of course or else I'd never have--

SHE

I've never...

I

Oh.

...Ever?

SHE

No, I don't think so. I think I'm not getting the right--

I

...Not even alone?

SHE

Alone sometimes, almost, maybe... I'm not really sure. But with men--

I

But never with men?

SHE

I just get scared, you know? Freeze up or something. Something about penetration. Or penises.

I

...I--I'm sorry.

I don't know what to--

SHE

It's ok! I think it's just a matter of technique. So just tell me: when you--

I

No. Sammy: if you're not comfortable... You should not be... Have you ever been--Has a man ever...taken advantage of you?

SHE (MY DEAR FRIEND SAMMY...)

Yeah... But: men, you know? Nothing too serious really... and--not recently! I'm just a fucking prude...

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(I mourn Sammy's loss, imagined or real.)

transitive verb

1 *usually obscene* : to engage in coitus with — sometimes used interjectionally with an object (as a personal or reflexive pronoun) to express anger, contempt, or disgust

2 *usually vulgar* : to deal with unfairly or harshly : cheat, screw

Fuck. Fuck this! Fuck that. We're fucked! We fucked all night. You're fucked. You got yourself fucked, man. She totally fucked you over.... (Substitute for *screw*, which is another sexual substitute for *cheat*.) *FUCK IT!* (Substitute for expression of *anger, contempt, disgust*.) *No, FUCK YOU!* (Similar, but in which "you" is the object of said anger, contempt, disgust.)

*#%¶!

"Fuck you, you know full well that's bullshit!" I'd say to my director, to practice, between call and show, wholeheartedly appropriating my character's lingo into my own voice and playful manner while getting into costume and makeup, convincing myself that all negative connotations of this word were safely buried in the distant pre-post-feminist past... But then I'd catch in my director's eye a glimmer of what I'd glimpsed in Sammy's, and I'd stop and listen to my own echo:

FUCK YOU! (Similar, but in which "you" is the object of said anger, contempt, disgust.)

*#%¶!

EXT. EVENING. Sidewalk in front of theater, NYC, a few years ago.
(CONTINUOUS)

I

(soliloquy in half-costume, between bites of apple while hurrying
to the backstage entrance)

So long as the word *fuck*, with all its intersecting meanings, continues to cement our conceptual pathways between sexual penetration and anger, frustration, fear--all the emotions that cool people prefer to stuff into expletives--where it is always the object, not the subject, of this transitive verb that garners the brunt of that hatred (the *it* in *Fuck it!*) ie the one being penetrated ie (usually) the woman in heterosexual intercourse, isn't *fuck*, spat out as an expletive, contextually condemnatory or not, doing much the same harm to women's corporeal self-worth as those rabbis who taught my director to hate her body, as those "men, you know?" who made Sammy think she

was a "fucking prude" for not thoroughly enjoying being thoroughly *fucked*? How could women be expected to enjoy sex with these kinds of associations afoot? With every new, inventive use of *fuck*, we makers of media, construction workers of cultural associations--we actors, directors, writers, pop-singers--aren't we merely beautifying a long-standing bridge between women's sexual bodies and penetrators' hatred which should have been torn down long ago? I am not innocent in this, and I'm starting to wonder.... if with every public utterance of the not-quite-meaningless word, I might not also be killing--worse than fairies--women's orgasms...

I own my flair for melodrama, but doesn't it make a nice slogan?

EVERY TIME YOU SAY *FUCK*
YOU KILL A WOMAN'S
ORGASM.

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The word apparently is hinted at in a scurrilous 15c. poem, titled "*Flen flyys*," written in bastard Latin and M.E. The relevant line reads:

*Non sunt in celi
quia fuccant uuiuys of heli*

"They [the monks] are not in heaven because they fuck the wives of [the town of] Ely."

(Who were the wives of Ely? Did they choose to have sex with the monks? Did they take pleasure from the encounters? Did they lure these men of God into their houses while their husbands were out, fill them with wine, beg for divine blessings and direct their admiring hands and mouths to the desirous parts of their bodies? Or were they simply *fucked*?)

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In Su Friedrich's 1987 film, *DAMNED IF YOU DON'T*, a lone woman in her bedroom works on a generic embroidery project of Jesus's face, eyes rolled up towards the heavens. She sews a piece of white yarn into the whites of his eyes, while another woman's voice reads a passage from *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*.

Sister Benedetta, in order to have greater pleasure, put her face between my breasts and kissed them and wanted always to be thus on me. Also at that time, during the day, pretending to be sick, she grabbed my hand by force and putting it under herself she would have me put my finger on her genitals, and holding it there she stirred herself so much that she corrupted herself. And she would kiss me and also by force would put her hand under me and her finger in my genitals and corrupted me.

Corrupt! →Crave! →Erupt! →Coin!

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(Solve for *#%¶!)

(David* told me once, while folding my laundry, that he'd lost his monk-like faith in a Polish-American Catholic-style God when one day at 17 he'd discovered he enjoyed making love with his girlfriend Annelise*--he had figured he must be the Antichrist. I assured him he was the most Jesus-like soul I'd ever met, though I didn't know much about churches or God and still don't.)

(7 years after we broke off our engagement, he reappeared out of the blue, moved to my city and everything. Turned out we were both in a video art phase: he played me some Jonas Mekas, I showed him my favorite Bjorn Melhus, and mentioned my girlfriend, to be safe. I do not believe in lesbians, he said, and *fucked* me to prove it, holding me down with the hands I'd once found holy. After the miscarriage, a month or so later, I just wanted words. Words to point at all that. Words to throw to the sky. Words to make something pretty out of pain. Impulse to yell *FUCK!* but that just felt so redundant...)

Corrupt! →Crave! →Erupt! →Coin!

*#%¶!

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Shit! Shoot! Shucks! Curses!

Damn! Darn! Drat! Rats!

Balls! Fudge! Gosh! Poop!

Oops! Dang! Dung! Crap!

Love! Lost! Lust! Dust!

*#%¶!

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.

Dust!

(Substitute for: *I mourn this loss, potential or real.*)

*Name has been changed.