

ALEX ICICLE
A Romance in Ten Torrid Chapters
by Robert Kaplow

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to Anthony Akey

*And the heart which was a wild garden was given to him who loved only
trim lawns. And the imbecile carried away the princess into slavery.*

—Saint Exupéry

ONE: POEM ON HIS BIRTHDAY

I am a sick man. I am a diseased man. I am not even a man, merely a boy. *And yet I love her.* I am all the loathsomeness of the human condition distilled into one horribly malignant growth and fashioned into the fourteen-year-old features of Alexander Preston Sturges Swinburne—boy monster.

Nay, when you read this line remember not the monster who writ it. Burn the wretched manuscript! Obliterate every vestige of its fetid presence from the face of humanity. The contents of this manuscript are so void of redeeming social value, so unspeakably low, so depraved and degrading, that I warn you (pray heed my warning!) to put it down. There are gentle books all around—books with pictures of gardens. There are books of sunlit poetry. Gentle reader, I implore you to read one of these other books, not the horrible document you hold before you. It is a record of humiliation and anguished self-hatred—stop, dear reader! Stop if you dare. Or, at least, hold the manuscript with long steel tongs so it cannot possibly touch you with its poison. But steel tongs may not be enough! Place the manuscript in a containment cell and reach through the walls with long neoprene gloves as your started, trembling fingers turn each rancid page. But make sure there are no holes in your gloves! Check carefully! Even the smallest pinprick will allow the foul and pestilent vapor to creep up with long, dark, gaseous fingers and pull you down into the abyss of degradation!

So read on if you dare, for I know I (crying now) cannot stop writing. I must confess it all! Every word and every hellish thought must be confessed. I cry, I sob, I throw my arms in the air; my head pounds, filled with boiling fever, *but I will not be stopped.*

The doctor by my bedside (I'm making this part up) stares at the throbbing body he sees before him. He shakes his head. If only his

professional code could let him escape this nightmare room (*for just one minute!*). But like you, gentle reader, he is locked into this deepening dream of self-destruction for the length of the whole trip. I warned you! I warned him! But, no, they stand with noses pressed to the hospital glass, staring in horror. Behold how their eyes start from their spheres!

I love her! (Have mercy on my poor, troubled soul.) Amy Hart! I have said her name. And I have disgraced heaven by uttering it. My lips have pronounced the loveliest of all syllables, and those soft, lyrical sounds have been forever shattered. Amy Hart! The first name is liquid, summer streams; the loop of the capital *A* is wind through the meadow (I've never actually seen a meadow, but I imagine it's something like that); the tail of the lower-case *y* is the fall of a silken scarf, graceful and secret. And *Hart!* First the *H*—all hot and beating, red-blooded—then stabbed to lingering death with the final *t*, an arrow that even now, as I sob by my flickering candle, pierces through the walls I thought I had fashioned and tears at my poor, battered heart.

Amy Hart! Goddess on earth. Fourteen-year-old maiden. O Amy! Unravished bride of Edison Middle School. The school falls hushed at the sound of those molten, golden tones! Dovewing, silverdust, O Amy Hart! I fall before the temple of your beauty. Do you not feel my thoughts tonight as I sit in the freezing garret of my horror-haunted home, desolate on the Night's Plutonian shore! Ah, nevermore! O Amy—perfect gown of white silk stamped in the black mud, sullied forever by the midnight fever of my desires. I am rotting death, Amy! I am stink-bag of rat feces; I am slime-monster; I am gorilla. Penned and chained, I sweat and roar. But I love you, Amy! Look at me. I weep. I beat my claws in a frenzy upon the cage behind which I must stand.

I love you.

I shout it to the thundering masses who riot now at the foot of my castle walls. "Kill the madman!" they shout. "Kill mad Doctor Swinburne!" But no! I stand, bellowing back to the madness of the moon. I wildly dance as I pull the bell rope. The tintinnabulation of the bells! I love her! Did you hear me? I dare to love her! Fire your puny arrows at me! I laugh! I, Alexander Preston Sturges Swinburne (Swine-born! Swine-born!)—with all the groping, hopeless power of my aching soul, my tormented soul—I say, I scream: I love Amy Hart! I love her! *I love her!*

"Alex, supper is ready."

A voice rises up through the fog, up the stairs to my maddened ears. I speak. I croak. I gasp, in a strangulated whisper that speaks of the inner depravity of a crippled soul, "Okay, I'll be down in a second."

Dear God and gentle reader, forgive me. I must go down and join them and pretend to be their son. Shameful pretense! How gracious is young Alex, they will say. A model lad! The paragon of animals! And yet beneath the flesh and bones that they have created, beneath the green sports shirt with small red stripes, beneath the white painter's pants, beneath the sneakers, there lives...O God! O God! I am Godzilla in a polo shirt. I am Kong, shot and bleeding, the biplanes buzzing around me. They rip at my flesh. They hurt me, Mother! Stop them! Stop them! Mother, I am dying! I clutch the satellite dish on the roof. This is the end. I spit blood! The Red Death has me in its grasp. I love her, Mother! I love Amy Hart! Please, God, make her notice me! Let her see me in Spanish class! In Honors English! Amy, I stand before you, stripped of pride, weak with pain.

"Alex, this is the last time!"

My poor mother again. O maternal creature cursed with crooked offspring! Had I been shot in the womb with a bazooka, all would be right. But no, God, I live! I live! Amy!



7:10 P.M. Another dinner at the Swinburne mausoleum and investment management center. My father sits with a calculator, studying a rate-sheet from the bank. He has a small gray beard, glasses. My mother sips her herbal tea. She is also reading a rate-sheet.

"Wells Fargo is giving two point nine," she says. "But that's only on the ninety-day."

"Doesn't HSBC have one for three?"

"On a fixed rate?"

"There's a twenty-thousand dollar minimum."

My mother looks at my untouched plate.

"Alex, it's growing."

O reader, they mean well I am sure, but even when I attempt to share an experience with them (watching TV!) it consumes me with contempt. I listen in misery as they prepare for the evening's viewing.

"Who's on *Jay*? Is there anyone good on *Jay*?"

"I don't know," says my father.

"You've got the *Guide*."

"This is last week's."

"Where's the new one?"

"I thought it was in the bedroom."

"Don't tell me you threw it out again?"

“I didn’t throw anything out.”

“Now I’ll have to look in the garbage again.”

“They took the garbage this morning.”

O Amy, save me from mediocrity!

Both my brothers were disappointments to my parents. They never did well in school. There was trouble with the police; there were drugs; there were calls from the school principal. And then there was charming Alex who never did anything to embarrass his grateful parents. Even my brothers liked me. And what good, dear reader, has it done me? I live in a dream world. I hide in books; I hide behind my grades. What a dark lie I live!

“Alex it’s still growing.”

“All right.”

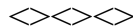
“Are you going anywhere special with Michael tonight?” asks my mother.

“No.”

“You ought to do *something* for your birthday.”

“I’m going to write in the journal you bought me.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.”



10:00 P.M. Calmer now. The weight of homework has dulled the edge of my madness. (So you see, there *is* some purpose to algebra.) Reader, I must tell you the whole story. But how can I begin when my voice chokes with passion? Let me describe her to you. You, of all people, must understand that which lies beyond logic. Passion is a blind, wild thing. It destroys everything in its path.

O reader, I should be stronger than this. I am an A student. I am on the distinguished Honor Roll. I receive awards for my scholarly achievements. But look at me! The unhappiest man on earth. “Look at him!” they say (my enemies, legions of them). “He’s got everything!”

Yes, poor poetic Alex sits by the window in the back of Honors English, smelling of B.O. and chicken soup, and writes in his notebook. Yes, he gets an A on his pronoun quiz. He never raises his voice. He is well mannered. Half-hidden in the shadows in the back of the room, he broods in his melancholy, chained to his cynicism, shackled to his bitterness.

But one day, dear God, he’s going to explode! He’s going to rip these chains from their massy bolts and rise—the demon, the behemoth—and with twelve-inch dead fingers on arms thirty feet long he will reach to the front of

the classroom and grab...Amy Hart! The girls will scream; the boys will cower. With octopus tentacles, boiling blood, and dripping V-shaped mouth he will carry Amy Hart back to his lair. What goes on there may never be described to ears of flesh and blood. Unspeakable! Gentle reader, stop reading now, I pray you. Only those sick of heart need follow from here.

Let me describe her to you. The body is a tall one for an eighth-grader. The hair is straight and short and light-brown. Behold, she wears shirt of antique design, white with a lace collar. She wears jeans that read Triple A Rated on the back pocket—Amy, Amy, Amy—and she wears extravagantly striped socks! Indian moccasins! They are white moccasins with a design in beads stitched upon them. O Amy, dear Amy, dear exalted Amy, I would throw my mother into a pool of sharks if I could kiss one of those moccasins! (I am sorry, Mother; I apologize to you, but I am insane.) But her shoes, dear reader! You must *see* those white moccasins. And the socks! White woolen socks with cranberry stripes! Each stripe is two inches wide. Her arms are perfect goddess arms in her short-sleeved antique white shirt. Note how they exquisitely fill the sleeves: golden arms that speak of health, summer, and sunshine. My own arms are death-white poles; I have the thinnest arms that have ever been seen on someone who wasn't actually dead. O God, I *am* dead, tongue dry with corpse dust, formaldehyde in my veins, cold and sick with the moon. I must fashion my anguish into a poem. A death poem! A torment poem! Knell! Knell! The dolorous funeral bell! Ho! for a rhyme!

*He bears the love of a goddess
deep inside him
growing black
in the darkness
of his heart:
A broken pump
sick with the moon
and bursting with cancer.*

Most excellent! I am collecting all my verse in a volume to be entitled *I Hate Myself: The Suicide Poems of Alexander Preston Sturges Swinburne as Told to Amy Hart Before He Killed Himself Because of Her*. Or maybe *The Human Scum: An Autobiography in Verse*. Or *The Unspeakable Burden of My Desire*, with a cover so obscene I tremble to think of it. All dedicated to Amy Hart. I dedicate my life to Amy Hart. (And, yes, I've published all my earlier poetry under my pseudonym: Ourang Outang.)

O Amy, Amy, I write furiously by flashlight so my parents won't see the light beneath the door. One day I know I will be discovered. They will smash down the door with fire axes and catch me, horrified and guilty, as I write these words. Flames will leap from my bedsheets! "There!" I will shout, pointing to this wretched journal. "It is the beating of her hideous Hart!" The walls will fall in hellish cinders. The roof will crumble. And a scream will arise from the conflagration like the great crying of a million tortured souls.

Her face! Gentle reader, how I can describe the face upon which I have so often meditated? She wears braces. Go ahead, laugh! Laugh at me! Good, I revel in your hatred. The more you despise me, the more I know I have succeeded. For I am to be despised and hated as the foulest, most abject creature on earth. I would compare myself to an earthworm but I am far lower. Garden slug! Sick creature of the dead night. Step on me, smash me with a brick, do *anything*, but you must love *her*, gentle reader! For every increment in your loathing of my toadlike presence, you must love her more. You must *see* her in your mind. The face! The face! Yes, there are braces, but they only enhance the beauty. The complexion is smooth. There are no ravages of adolescence here. Such things do not happen to a goddess. And the blue eyes, reader! The ironic self-mocking smile! The stately neck, the queenlike carriage! Have you forgotten to observe the tiny silver chain around her neck? You must see that or you have seen *nothing*. And the long, sensitive fingers?

She is grace. She is perfection. She rarely speaks in class, but when she does all strain forward to hear. The teacher (a withered crone) smiles when Amy speaks. The class sighs at the incandescence of her voice. We are awed that she has consented to break the rarefied vault of her silence to speak to us. A goddess walks the halls of Edison Middle School! I swear it is true! History will bear me out. She *is* beautiful, sweet reader. And she is nearly as intelligent as I am. I say *nearly* for honesty forces me to confess that there is no one in the school as intelligent as I. But my mind is twisted. Her mind is straight. Where she has used her remarkable powers for good and beauty, I have used mine for sickness and evil. Dear reader, I am anguished and solitary, but I love her. Every minute, every pulse of my self-hating heart says *Amy! Amy! Amy!* I draw her name in the air. In keyboarding class I press the keys of her soft beautiful name. I begin an imaginary novel: *I first met Amy Hart....* O wondrous Amy!

But there is something you must know. I look out at this soft May night and I am filled with pain. It is May thirtieth, which as you only too clearly know is my pitiful birthday. I bring it up not to wring from you

cheap sentiment, but so you can understand that there are only nineteen days of school remaining. And (I must say it) the unutterable truth is that Amy Hart is moving to California. Her father, I think, is being transferred. A minute does not pass that I do not think of it. If she is absent now for even a day of class, I feel the coming void as nothing but pain.

Time, time, time. It is my greatest enemy. I have barely spoken five sentences to her this year (and those in a haze of self-consciousness). Dear God, let me talk to her before she goes. Let me tell her what I feel. This passion will not, cannot, come again. I am miserable. I lie in bed tonight by this dim flashlight. This is my birthday; dear God, how can she move away? How can you play this monstrous, horrible joke on me? But I will talk to her; it is the one thing I *swear* I will do. I will tell her. She will laugh. I know. All the world will laugh. But beautiful Amy, I love you; I love you; I love you beyond measure and reason. I hardly know you, Amy, but I swear that the love I feel is like nothing that has ever happened before. I cannot explain it.

My flashlight has died. I put on the overhead lamp.

“Alex, it’s past midnight! Shut that light off or I’m coming up.”

It is my father; dear God, I have so much more to say. But I must shut the light off now. My father yells at me. Dear reader, stay with me. I beg you. Wish me a happy birthday.