

SLEEPWALK

Lurid Tales

OF

Lust and

Mystery

IN

Chicago

Volume

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ONE



Free





BALLS (PART THREE IN A CONTINUING SERIES)

Megan Stielstra

If you've been keeping up with poor Augustus, you know his sneaky young wife, Rhonda, stole his balls on their wedding day. Augie's been trying to get them back ever since, but, alas, he can't stand up to her. He has no balls. So, finally he got good and mad and went home to get them back, by God, while Rhonda was in the shower and the balls were soaking in the sink. He got one and secured it tight in his breastpocket, but the other just flooded out of the bathroom on a blast of water from a busted drainpipe. Go Augie! Get it! Hurry!

Augie really liked Saturday morning cartoons, those ones that put cats and roadrunners into terribly precarious positions and then make things worse, like after they fall off the cliff, a piano falls off the cliff, and while they're falling, they're scrambling around in the air trying to get out from under the piano so they won't be squashed like a pancake after they're bludgeoned into the ground—but they never do—the piano always gets them—it's life, you know?—so as Augie chased his ball down the stairs he knew what was going to happen: he would've left the front door open and it would flow out into the gutter, into the sewer, into the ocean, and he'd get a scuba suit and have some wild adventure swimming to Cambodia or some other Godknowswhere place. Or maybe, his dog—aptly named Dog—would pick it up in his slobbery jaws and bury it in the backyard and Augie would have to get a shovel and dig eighteen thousand holes across his property, possibly discovering dead bodies and pirate treasure during the ordeal but, sadly, not the testicle in question. Or maybe, there'd be a mouse hole in the corner of the room that his ball would roll into, and he'd get a crowbar and yank down the plywood and discover, there, behind the walls, a whole multi-leveled mouse colony with advanced technology and civilized society, and they would befriend him and teach him and play with him and presto—new Disney classic. So you can imagine, with such an active imagination, how surprised Augie was when the drainpipe current carrying his ball in its wake began to slow, peeter out, stop entirely, and there—on the living room carpet—sat his ball, a bit waterlogged, sure, but waiting patiently and obediently to be collected, like a little kid whose daddy is late picking him up from kindergarten.

Augie grabbed it up and rolled it between his fingers, looking for damage. None. He doublechecked the safety of its brother, gently patting his breastpocket. Safe. As safe as a baby kangaroo can be outside the pouch, and with that Discovery Channel-inspired thought in mind, Augie unbuckled his belt, unzipped his zipfly, and slid the ball down into his boxers. Once arrived, he wasn't sure what to do next, and stood there contemplating, hand down his pants, eyebrows crinkled, big welder's body hunched. He rooted around a bit in there—left, right, middle, and back around—searching.

For what? He wasn't sure, but there had to be something some port, or connector cable there had to be something, there just had to—

"What are you doing, Augustus?" Her voice was honey and that meant danger. Augie lifted his eyes up the length of the stairs and saw her standing there—the thief. The shrew. The bitch-slut-whore, the wife—fresh out of the shower, wrapped in a blue bath towel with her long hair dripping across her shoulders, her long legs white out the bottom of the towel. She started to walk down the stairs, slowly, one at a time. With every movement of her long white legs the towel shifted, lifted, and she was smiling, and she was beautiful, and his hand was down there anyhow and, "You need some help, there, baby?" she asked, kittens purring into a microphone, and he thought

no, I won't! I put a block on you! But her flesh was bubbling up over the top of the towel and her skin was glistening from oil and soap and as she got closer, and closer still, he could smell the lilacs and lavender that she smeared all over her skin and when she touched him he could feel them, a thousand purple flowers, laying on his back in a field with the sun shining down on him and soft petals pressing into him, his pants, his thighs, his—

"Aha!" she cried, that tricky bitch! and ran into the kitchen with Augie right behind but—Oh, too late! She made it over to the Cuisinart and punched a button. Automatically, the electric grating sound of mix/puree filled the room and Rhonda held her evil, murderous hand over the open blender and with it, his testicle hung by its sack between her thumb and index finger. She swung it there, dangling, helpless in empty space, a single dangerous second away from messy obliteration. "What's it gonna be, tough guy?" she asked, sneering wide. "You give me the other one and they both live, or else this one here says sayonara." She laughed, an evil villainous laugh that grew in volume: ha ha ha, ha ha ha, HA HA HA!

Augie had a sudden flashback to Sunday School class, sitting in those little desks in shirtcollars and bowties while the lady in the flowered dress droned on and on, *Jesus this, he loves you that*, but there was a story he remembered, something about two mommies fighting over the baby, and the king saying *kill the baby!* and one mommy saying *no, no, give it to her and let it live*, and that being the real mommy, and she got to keep the baby and get the afterlife and the angels and harps and stuff, and he could almost hear those harps—sweet and clear, like crystal—as he reached his hand up to his breastpocket, palmed the other ball—slowly, slowly, no sudden movements!—drew it out, held it out to his beautiful, terrible wife—her finger poised over the off button—and just as he was about to drop his precious, martyred diamond into her outstretched hand—BAM—he got an idea.



To be continued in the next issue of **Sleepwalk**



SLEEPWALK

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Notes from the Editor

Hey, thanks for picking up issue three.

After issue two came out, we received lots of interesting emails including one from a guy who wanted to know why we didn't include a little "Note From the Editor" section, such as we did in the first issue, such as we're doing here. To tell you the truth, we didn't really think about it ... we were just trying to get the thing out, or maybe we said everything we wanted to say in the first, who the hell knows. But since the question was posed, I've been reading the "Notes From the Editor" sections in other magazines I pick up around town, trying to figure out what I'm supposed to say. Many of them have to do with the responsibility of the artist. Or, what art should be accomplishing during these troubled times. Or, the thematic undertones of this particular issue and how it contributes to society as a whole and yabba babba.

Here at *Sleepwalk*, we just want to hear a good story ... so I thought I'd take these few lines to tell you about our search for a decent tiki bar in the city of Chicago.

It's hard, let me tell you. Every time we'd show up at a place, it'd be closed. We even paid for parking at Trader Vic's downtown and—no go. I've been a waitress for about a hundred years so you'd think I'd have the foresight to call ahead, but no, so there's the three of us—Lott and Joe and I—wandering around Wacker Drive with our hands full of to-be-discussed manuscripts and a burning desire for something fruity, with pink umbrellas, and waitresses in muu-muus and bamboo and coconuts and the whole ambiance of the thing. It was the fabulous Margaret Wappler who finally got us to one—way the hell West, this middle-of-nowhere perfect place, I'm talkin' bamboo ceilings and chains of flowers and drinks with names like The Bahama Mama that came in mugs lit on fire. The works, this place. So we're sitting there, the three of us, all our papers spread out over the table, arguing like we're prone to do ("This is in!" "Get a rewrite on it first." "I know I'm a Nazi, but ..." etc.) and next to us there's this guy and his girl and all of a sudden the guy gets down on his knees in front of her, and she screams—the kind that only a girl can do, like *Oh my God Oh my God No Bobby No!*—and everybody in the place is dead quiet now, watching, waiting, and he asks her—Vicki, we've been together for eight months now and ... —and we all lean forward in our seats even though we know what she's going to say, it's written all over her face—HELL yes, Bobby! HELL yes!—but we're still dying with him, you know, and finally he gets the whole question out and she says her Hell yes and we all start cheering and I swear, I wanted to cry like my mom does about this certain coffee commercial, 'cause it had been a while since something really beautiful happened about two feet away from my knees.

Or maybe it happens all the time, and I'm not looking carefully enough. Whatever the case, we walked out of that tiki bar feeling pretty good about the world, and people, and storytelling ('cause you KNOW every person in that bar went home that night to say "honey, guess what I say at the Hula place tonight!") and hopefully some of that comes through in these pages. Not necessary always feeling good, but hopefully feeling something, 'cause that's what a story can do.

So if you have any tiki suggestions, please let us know. Let us know any thoughts or ideas you may have at Sleepwalkmag@aol.com. We do enjoy reading your emails (even the nasty ones. Even from the guy who propositioned me. Even the guy wanting to know if Joe could get his band booked somewhere. Even the guy who asked Lott if he could film us for a documentary—don't know how exciting that would be, my friend, but we're still entertaining the idea.). In the meantime, thanks for picking up the magazine. Thanks for coming to the readings. Thanks to Undershorts Film Festival, the Subterranean, Quimby's, Barbara's, Barnes and Noble, Schuba's, Julie Korman, Combo Number 3, Hilary and the Gossip Cafe, Todd from the 2ndHand and Jay from Weep for giving us opportunities to get our work out there. Thanks to Jon Resh at Viper Press, Bill at Chicago Productions, and Dylan for the ideas which have yet to be realized. Thanks to Mike Casey for the harmonica and Trevor Arnholdt for a million things, but mostly the Brair Rabbit video. Thanks to the Fiction Writing Department at Columbia College Chicago, our advertisers (go buy something at their place!), everyone who submitted work, our wonderful writers for their infinite patience and our families, particularly Koren and Dia, both of whom might be saints.

Most of all, thanks to you for reading *Sleepwalk*. We hope you enjoy it.

Best,

Meg



WHAT IS SEXY?

Margaret Wappler

Bridget turned her head away from the table of beers, lurched to the side and vomited on the bench she was sharing with three other patrons. She coughed and sputtered afterwards like a drowning person and Nick, who stayed seated and silent, entertained the idea of performing CPR on her. He imagined the clinical but perfect motions of pinching her nostrils shut, fitting his lips over hers and breathing in. The other customers, a couple of feet away, shifted further down the bench as they seamlessly continued their conversations, pretending not to notice the slowly seeping pile of beer, bile and half-chewed peanuts.

"Oh my God!" she said, wiping away spit from the corners of her mouth with her fingers. "I can't believe I ate that many peanuts, and didn't do that earlier!"

Nick considered what she said. He didn't think she was bulimic; he had a cousin who suffered from that, and she always did her puking in private, in his aunt and uncle's pristine seashell-themed bathroom, emerging with all evidence of her activity smoothed over, save for the tousled ponytail sprouting from the back of her baseball cap.

After ruling this out as a regular occurrence, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it's just that I love those things! But I'm allergic, so I really shouldn't have them," she said, pressing on her mat of smooshed-down blond curls.

"You're allergic?" Nick asked. "But you've eaten every bowl that the bartender has brought for us. You even asked for two extra ones."

"Yeah, I know! I have a hard time controlling myself," she giggled, her eyes twinkling. "Anyway, I knew I'd throw them up eventually."

The two blinked at each other.

"So, what do you do?"

"Oh me? Well, I'm an artist. Well, OK, I like steal mannequins out of department store dumpsters and do stuff with them."

"Stuff?" Nick shrugged. "Like what?"

"All sorts of things," she leaned in. "What do you think I make them do?"

"I don't know," Nick said. "They're your things. How would I know what you do with them?"

"Come to my show," she said, thunking down her glass of wine with such force, the merlot lapped over the edge and ran down her white knuckles. "When you come to the show, you'll be surprised by the things I make them do, the personas I make them adapt, the way they become you, me, everyone—but not." She smiled and sat back like she had tasted something delicious but forbidden, too, and that she had just fed this thing to him with her fingers. "Sound good to you?"

"Yeah," Nick said. "When's your next show?"

"In a few days, actually. I don't know if I'm going to go to the reception though." She hugged herself almost imperceptibly. "I haven't decided if I'm ready."

Ready for what, Nick wondered, but he decided to let it go. He had been set up with Bridget through his aunt. This was his second blind date ever; the first was noneventful. Bridget's a

very nice girl, Aunt Marylee had explained. Very creative. Dynamic. One of those girls that can throw on a shawl and look suddenly like a movie star, you know what I mean, Nick? He did, as he gnashed between his molars the dry turkey Marylee had cooked up for the holidays. Within a week, he had Bridget's number and called it. After exchanging the usual series of salutations, Bridget burst into tears. Nick was extremely confused. At first, it was the typical confusion one experiences when they hear someone cry over the phone. Wait. Is she really laughing? But once he had determined she was indeed crying, he wondered what he was supposed to do.

Nick said, "Hey, this isn't supposed to happen until our final phone call." Upon shutting his mouth, he had the feeling that his foot had just fallen through what looked like secure flooring.

Her crying went down a notch. "What?" It seemed she genuinely hadn't heard him. He could hear her wiping her nose.

"Nothing. Dumb joke," Nick said, his face burning. "Why are you crying?" he asked quickly.

He was glad to report, even if just to himself, that things went OK after that. He found out why she was crying. It was carefully explained to him that she was in the midst of applying gesso to a canvas that had a lot of potential, you know? A lot of genius could go here, or a lot of crap, and I don't know which one. Why not?

Nick had asked. It will go one way or another, won't it? A silence had passed over the line after Nick said that. I am a total asshole, he thought with sober resignation. She didn't seem to think so.

"Wow," she said after a moment. "That is so, like, true."

A man came along and cleaned up Bridget's vomit, but he didn't seem to mind. He slapped a wet towel onto the plastic-covered bench cushion, and in one swipe had the pile gone like it was bird poop on a windshield. Bridget didn't seem to notice—she fiddled with the straw in her drink and stared off into space. Then she grabbed Nick's wrist.

"Have you ever crashed a wedding before?" Her eyebrows shot into the nether regions of her bangs. Her brown eyes held steady, nearly folding in on themselves before shooting out a gust of sparks. One flew off and alighted on his shirt, smoldered through the cotton weave of his J. Crew. He shifted in his seat. "No," he blushed into his drink. "Where do you go to do something like that?"

"Any shit-fancy hotel within the mile," she informed him. "Wanna go?"

"I'm not sure where a shit-fancy hotel is around here," he said, smiling. "Can you be more specific?"

"Yeah," she said, already hopping off the bench. "But first, okay," she giggled. "I have to put on a costume." She held a plastic grocery sack in her fist. Nick wondered if she had this costume with her all along, or had some cunning prop man produced it?

"Okay," he said. "What kind of costume?"

"Well, so, it's really not a costume. It's just a dress, a fancier dress," she threw her arms into a ta-da pose, and





announced, "A movie star dress."

She scampered into the bathroom and Nick contemplated the progress of the date so far. Other people had different dates, this was for sure. His friends had liaisons that resembled spy vs. spy; each agent stole secrets and slyly poisoned enemies for the preservation of the shadowy, never-named nation state. Most of his friends inhabited a hard-scrabble terrain of dating, a soviet place crowded with vodka-strong personalities who operated in the clipped Morse code of gritty sex and unresolved issues of mommy fuck me, daddy don't get so close.

He thought about his last date, Erin, this girl from work. In the beginning, things were looking good. The whole night they flirted with steel-locked arms and then the dam broke, gushing water. They went back to his apartment. In one searing second they locked lips, and lurched backwards together in their kiss. They stumbled around entangled. He became a little bored with it, but refused to stop kissing long enough so that they could find the bed. How dumb, he thought. Whatever it was inside of him that manufactured passion had gone from a steely and industrial kitchen machine to something a greasy-handed kid would push Play-Doh through and crank. He held back the smile that was creeping up from behind his lips, and wondered if he was tasting a smirk on her, too.

Eventually, they rebounded into his bookshelf, a wobbly thing burdened by too many paperbacks. He heard it tip, and then felt its frame slam into his head, neck and back, like a third party that wouldn't wait any longer to get into the action. Books slipped off the shelves and onto Erin's head, before the shelf itself crashed onto the floor. It kind of spoiled his mood that now he had a mess to clean up. "Oh shit," Erin said as she rubbed her lips and looked at the slain bookshelf on the floor. Nick became acutely aware of being tired, hung over, drunk and hungry. He wanted her to go home, but knew that he had to continue—with what he wasn't sure. A moment later, for a reason he was never able to discern, his alarm clock went off, and Rod Stewart had to deeply embarrass both of them by singing, "Tonight's the night." That's it, he thought, this shit is done. She knew it, too, as she started politely rummaging through the indisposed books as if she was at a yard sale. "Can I borrow this?" she said, holding up a book that he had started some hundred times but could never get through. "Yeah," he said, flapping his hand. "You can have it." A moment later, she was gone.

Everything about that memory, he noted, was blaringly loud and distorted like a TV at top volume; the sitcom laugh track shrieked, the silences rebounded with crackly pops that felt like they could register on the Richter scale. As he watched Bridget emerge from the bathroom, his hearing became muffled, like when he was a kid and he'd smash his hands against his ears and chant, "I can't hear you, I can't hear you, I can't hear you." This was going to be a good date, he decided, as he dimly registered the swirl of her floral dress. He shut his ears to the booms of crashing relationships around the city, the metallic cacophony that accompanied people once soldered together yanking themselves apart, or the aftermath of lover landmarks being bulldozed down by eager new developers.

Best of all, he couldn't hear the construction sounds that resided beneath it all, the constant jackhammering of you never listen to me, and why do you take so long to get ready, and will you do the dishes, and do you know how bad you smell in the morning, and have you looked at your ass in the mirror lately, and what makes you think you could get someone, anyone, after me, and the best thing I ever did was lie to you. Nope, he couldn't hear any of that.

Right now, he could just hear a whisper: "Touch me." He didn't want to listen too long, just in case it said, "not there."

"Tell me," Bridget said, as she twirled on her toes in her flowery printed dress with a big fluffy collar, "that I look like Blanche DuBois." She leaped into a crude version of one of those fountains where the leg is kicked up behind and the neck is extended, mouth spouting out water. She held it for a teetering moment, and then collapsed into laughter.

He smiled, despite finding the Blanche DuBois reference corny.

At the wedding of one Jeff Rhodes and Cynthia Bruski, Nick and Bridget (Bridget in appropriate dress, Nick looking like one of those guys who finds the very thought of dressing up abhorrent and insulting to his very nature) slurped champagne in a dark corner of a banquet room with movie theater carpet and plotted when would be the perfect moment to capture their sentiments on video. The videographer was across the back of the room; he had a light shining into the faces of various couples and singles that sheepishly, then with gaining confidence, blathered out stories, like that time Jeff switched around his boss's coffee mug, or when Cynthia, on a dare, had worn that blue wig the whole night at McDougall's.

Nick watched Bridget's face, her eyes which were affixed on the spectacle of recording in the corner. She watched with rapt and amused concentration, obviously getting more from the experience than he was. He wanted to get her attention; he decided he'd make a confession to her. Not a real one, just enough of his private thoughts to pique her interest.

"Earlier," he began, carefully modulating his tone, "when you threw up?"

"Yeah," she said, her eyes still locked on the opposite corner, "I'm real sorry about that."

"No, no," he shrugged and smiled down at his feet. "It wasn't a big deal."

She looked at him and smiled. "I'm glad."

"I actually, while you were coughing and stuff at the end, I actually thought about doing CPR on you. I don't know why," he laughed. "You didn't need it, but for some reason the whole thought of doing CPR on someone is just kind of sexy."

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious?" Her mouth fell open a little bit. "No. Are you serious. Don't fuck around with me here!"

"Yeah," he shrugged and stepped back a little bit. "What. You think that's really weird or something?"

"Fuck weird!" she said. "I love it! CPR, dummies—all that shit is really sexy."

"Dummies," he considered. "Yeah. They are pretty sexy, but just in an abstract way. I mean, it's not like I have blow-up dolls at home or anything."

"Oh, well, no," she smiled and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "That would just be weird and perverted."

"Right." Nick stared straight ahead.

"You know what else is sexy?" she said, turning to him fully now. "Those cards on airplanes. You know, the ones that depict people putting the gas masks on each other? If erotica was more creative, they would've done a whole book like that by now."

He laughed. "I'm not so sure I follow you here, but you are the lady that does stuff with mannequins, so I respectfully defer."

She grabbed both of his hands. The coldness of her skin shocked him. "You just gave me a great idea."

"What?" he said, trying not to give away the giddiness he felt about being someone's muse. She let go of his hands.

"Oh, I never tell people my art ideas. I just do them. You want to go do the video thing now?"

Before he could answer, she skipped off toward the light of the camera. As he trailed behind, he tried to think of another confession.

THE PANTHER'S THEME

Prof. Joe Mena

at the 33 Flavor's in the mini-mall is where it was at in Macomb. You better motherfucking believe it, king shit. 33, not 31 flavors like Baskin Robbins, though, I cannot tell you what the other 2 flavors were, except that Superman ice cream ain't nothing but vanilla with red, yellow, and blue food coloring in it, secrets like that, I still carry with me and that job still means a lot to me. All the strange ice cream concoctions I could create, like pineapple-chocolate-cherry and rum shakes and seven scoops of Irish cream parfaits, which after getting high by the garbage dumpster made you glad there was a counter to lean against; also, there were always tons of thin, body-conscious divorced women in leotards and pony-tails who would come in after working at the Jazzercise studio to try our non-fat soft-serve yogurt, and better than that, no boss, because the boss had been diagnosed with MS and his son, Caffey, let the goofy teenagers run the joint. It was such a fine job you didn't think about stealing because you wondered what the hell you were gonna do when you got caught, which you knew you were, because like all kids, you're either dumb or ugly or both.

I was dumb, and I had a ferocious case of acne, all over my nose, sometimes on my eyes, the corner of my lip, and all over my back, but Friday nights were my nights at the 33 Flavor's. There was a dual cassette player there and I would do this thing, where I would try and create the most perfect rock and roll mix, one unbelievable song after the next, like "Surrender" by Cheap Trick going into "Pervert" by the Descendents, one after the other, all night, as if I was being judged by someone like Ed McMahon or like there was a live audience there or something. In the middle of waiting on a customer, I would like dive into the back room where the stereo was and start up the next song before the first one was over, kind of bleeding it into the second, "Wasted" by Black Flag going into "Revolution" by the Beatles. No one noticed but me. Not the marrieds and their runny-nosed kids who you knew were gonna drop their single scoops before you handed them their ice cream, not the lonely housewives in yellow sweat pants who were obviously filling the gaps in their hearts with triple scoops of mocha fudge sundaes, not even the other teens, on dates, awkward and wondering if they had enough to cover the bill. I did this thing, every night at eleven, when I closed. I swept and mopped to "Wild Horses" by the Rolling Stones. That was my thing.

It was my younger brother, Ken, who was very into records. He was a year younger than me, a sophomore, when I was a junior, and he knew every cut on every record, every date, what alternate musicians were used; he studied bands the way other kids knew how much Sandy Kofax's rookie baseball card was worth. Besides knowing bands, though, all Ken did was work at

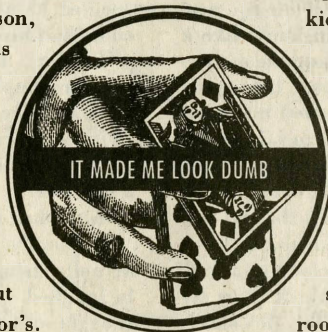
the tutoring lab at our high school, helping other kids with their math and Spanish. Ken was socially-retarded. He was like a nobody; short, brown mop-hair that hung over his eyes, always wearing turtle-necks, stumbling down the hallway in school, but he had a gift, like the retards who can play piano but can't speak, my own brother was like a retarded genius when it came to records. He had been collecting them since he was a kid. You know the little records with the picture books and you read along and it dings and you turn the page? He had dozens of them, like about Disney movies and Batman and Briar Rabbit; that was his favorite, Briar Rabbit, this rabbit that was always getting into trouble. Somehow all those records made him smarter than me, no I mean it. He was reading the books I was

having a hard time with in second grade when no other kid his age was supposed to be reading. It made me look dumb. He'd tease me about it whenever he had the chance. So I went and did a dumb thing. I broke all his Briar Rabbit records. What can I say? I was like seven and my mom was pregnant again with another smart-ass on the way. He didn't talk to me for months afterward. I didn't blame him.

Ken was still pretty much the same way in high school: smart, weird, and always sitting in his room with his headphones on, so he didn't have to talk to anybody.

The van I was saving up for had a black widow spider on it. On the side. The van was black and the spider was black and outlined with yellow. There was some white spider webs around it. I needed a van because guys who had vans got the most trim at our school, after the guys who could grow mustaches. Jeb Derrick had a mustache, a blonde one, and girls were always sitting on his lap in the cafeteria. For some reason, I couldn't grow a mustache to save my life. But I knew two other guys, real nobodies, who got hot vans, and within weeks, they were going out with foxes, and if they weren't foxes, they were at least girls with big knockers. I would settle for an ugly girl if she noticed what song was playing on the cassette player, if we were out cruising or parked somewhere. But most girls don't notice shit like that. I don't know. They're too worried about their hair maybe. I dunno. If some girl I was with had bad acne but said, "Is this 'The Faces with Rod Stewart?'" I would close my eyes and think of someone pretty and kiss her gratefully.

Who I really wanted was Gale Devine, who had a hot name and was truly hot, always wearing hot tank tops and jeans that flared at the bottom, hot, and she had Cheryl Tiegs hair, which was hot, but not because it looked like Cheryl Tiegs, but because of the way she would twirl it and you felt like she was twirling your heart right along with it maybe. Beyond her hotness, she





had already lost her virginity, and I knew she smoked dope, and once at a party I had heard her say, "Duh. He's such a nimrod. He doesn't even know how to fuck." When she said that I laughed and it made me think that I had no idea what she was saying. Then I thought that if she said it, then she must know how to fuck and since then I had these long fantasies where I'd be in the 33 flavors and she'd come in and "Come Sail Away" by Styx would be playing and her blonde hair would be blowing and she'd unzip her jeans and I know this is strange, but, there'd be like this golden crown that would appear, this magical golden crown would just appear as she unzipped her pants, like a flower blossoming, and we'd go in the back and have some sex and I never worried if I was good or not.

So what I really wanted was Gale Devine and not the van but I was sure I would get one if I got the other. Also, the van had a spider on it and fuck you if you say I already mentioned it.

One Friday night, Doby, this dude I knew, who had a yellow van with beautiful silver chrome work, came into the 33 Flavors with Gale Devine and as she was picking out her flavors, I was like, "What's that about?" and he was like, "Dude, I cannot handle her," and I was like, "What are you talking about?" and he was like, "Dude, she smoked all my dope and like I spent all my money at this fucking Red Lobster shit, and when I started groping her, she just sat there."

I looked over the counter at Gale and she stuck her tongue out at me. Immediately, I imagined the golden crown blossoming from behind her jeans.

"Dude, give me her number and I'll give you like free ice cream the rest of your life," I said.

"What?" he laughed. "I don't even like the shit. It hurts my teeth."

"Whatever you want. Man, I'm serious," I said.

"Well, I could use like ten bucks."

"Don't be a fucking jerk," I said. "I ain't giving you money, man."

"Your loss, then, sucker. Gale," he shouted. "Let's go for a ride to the Bridge."

Gale smirked and then winked at me. She leaned her long neck forward and shoved a scoop of chocolate chip on her tongue. Then she looked up. She was listening. She was listening to the cassette I had playing. "Is this Marvin Gaye?" she asked. "I love Marvin Gaye," she said.

I imagined the gold crown again and it nearly knocked me off my feet. I grabbed Doby's arm, sneering. "Ten bucks and you drive her home right now," I said in a whisper.

"Ten bucks and I tell her what a swell guy you are."

"Deal," I said.

That night, I bolted into my little brother's room.

"Ken," I said, shaking my brother awake. "Get up, man, get up."

"Why?" he moaned.

"Just get up," I grunted, pulling on his ear.

"What, you fag?" he coughed. "If I wake up too fast, I get nosebleeds." I looked down at him and thought how sad the rest

of his life was going to be.

"Ken, you little fairy, I need your help."

"What? I don't have anything you want. Is this about that stupid van? Mom and Dad said..."

"Listen, man. Just listen." I looked him in the eyes. He no longer looked like my kid brother. He looked like my dad. His face was longer, more thin, his eyes had become a nice kind of gray. He might grow up to be OK in a couple of years. Maybe during his senior year at Macomb County High or his freshman year at some college on Mars, he wouldn't still be so weird. "Ken, I need your help."

This made him nervous. He sat up. "OK, what is it? You're not hooked on grass, are you? Because I don't know what to do. I mean..."

"Ken, Ken, listen. I need the perfect song, man."

"What?"

"I need the perfect song. I need the perfect song, man."

The only record I could listen to straight through was Guns N' Roses' Appetite for Destruction. Yeah. That was the one, king shit. "It's so Easy", "Nightrain", "Out to Get Me," then classics like "Paradise City", "Welcome to the Jungle", and probably the greatest song ever, of all time, "Sweet Child of Mine". What was it about that song? I loved that song so much, it sometimes made me want to kick in the display case of green frozen yogurt bars. The one part, where the song kind of slows down, "Where do we go now? Where do we go now? Where do we go now?" I don't even know what the singer's talking about, but if I was helping a customer, I would have to stop and go in the back and crank it or just stand there and do the air guitar parts and I'd try to get whoever was buying a single scoop or whatever it was to sing along, too, but in a town like Macomb, sometimes that's hard to do.

I did not think there was any song on that record that was going to help me blow Gale Devine away. What I needed was a song she had never heard before, a song so sweet it would make the buttons of her jeans weary and then give in with a sigh. Because the van I needed cost nine hundred dollars and I only had six hundred dollars saved up. That meant it would still be a few months before I had enough. But if I could woo Gale Devine with the right song, if we could go park over by the Macomb County Bridge and I could shut off the lights, and pop in the right cassette, then maybe, well then maybe I'd have a chance now maybe.

My brother, Ken, wasn't having any luck thinking of the right song, either. We were sitting Indian-style in the middle of his room with all kinds of records and cassette tapes spread out all around us.

"How about 'Come Sail Away'?" he asked me.

"No way, retard, that's like a prom kind of song."

"How about 'Surrender'?" he asked.

"Too rocking. It needs to be more mellow."

"How about, well, something like Elton John?" he asked again.

"He's a fag. I can't put on any fag music with this girl."

"I don't know then," my brother said. "It's hopeless."



"Come on, Ken, don't say that. You're the only one who knows this kind of shit."

"I don't even know why I'm trying. You haven't even like talked to me in years."

"See, Ken, when you say shit like that it makes you sound like a puss. I'm your older brother. I am not supposed to talk to you."

"Man, you don't even wave to me at school," he said. "That makes me feel like a real loser."

"Jesus Christ, Ken, you are a loser. You sit alone at that one table in the corner. Your fucking hair is hanging in your eyes all the time. You just kind of mope around, man."

"I don't want to help you with this anymore," he said.

"I don't want to help you with this anymore," I repeated, mocking him. "Fine, but when you're like eighteen and still like hanging out in your room and you haven't gotten any pussy yet, don't come crying to me, OK? I'm just trying to help you."

"Sure," he said.

"Ken, I don't want you to be a weirdo, either, man. I wouldn't mind hanging out with you, but you're just so fucking droopy. Shit, do you remember when we were kids? The Panthers and all that?"

"The what?"

"The Panthers, man, the Panthers."

Ken nodded. His brown bangs flashed over his eyes. "That was so stupid," he said.

"It wasn't stupid. I mean we had our own handshake and club-house and all that. Remember, you made up all those rules, about having to help any fellow Panther out if you could. Like when Billy Murphy got in trouble for breaking that window. And we all said it was that kid from the other side of the block because he wasn't a Panther. Well, listen, Ken, this is a one in million shot here. You got to help me with this song. You got to help out your fellow Panther."

"Like when you busted my Briar Rabbit record?"

"Holy Christ, I was wondering when you were going to bring that up," I said.

"It was my favorite record of all time. I just want you to know that."

"You are so faggy. How old are you, man? You talk like a little fucking kid."

"Oh, because I'm not cool and I don't swear for the sake of it? Well, oh, fucking this and oh, dildo that."

"I knew I shouldn't have wasted my time with you," I said and got up to leave. He put out his hand, waving me to stay.

"Wait a minute, just wait a minute. How about a jazz record?" he asked.

"What?"

"It'd make you seem, kind of cool. Like a spy or something."

"A jazz record?" I asked again.

"Yeah?"

"Well, like what did you have in mind?" I asked.

The night after, I went by Gale Devine's house. I knew both of her folks worked late. Her dad worked third shift at the cereal factory, where my dad was a journeyman, and her mom was a

waitress at Cincinnati Joe's, this goofy restaurant where the waitresses have to wear these floppy green hats and all these buttons and they sing to you if it's your birthday and usually only high school kids work there, but everyone knew the tall, leggy one who called you, "Sweetie", was Mrs. Devine. Maybe the fact that both of her parents worked at night had something to do with Gale being so, you know, crazy. I didn't know. It made me glad they did because all I kept thinking about was the golden crown rising from her pants and me just smiling.

When I pulled up to Gale's house, I had the cassette in my pocket and I was ready. I just sat in my parents' station wagon for a minute and I could hear someone was listening to the hi-fi pretty loud, probably Gale. There was a light on in an upstairs window, probably her bedroom, and if I looked close, I could see her shadow on the white and yellow curtains.

She was dancing. You know, the way you do, when no one's home and you crank up the music and just run around, like when you're getting ready? There she was, upstairs, dancing from her room to the bathroom and back, and maybe she was listening to Madonna or something corny like that, and I felt awful guilty all of a sudden. Here was this girl, all alone, dancing in her house by herself and the only reason I had asked her out was because I had this idea that she would be easy, and I never thought, well, I never thought of her getting ready, dancing to music or anything like that, doing the things other girls do. It made me sick, in a way, seeing her dancing like that. She was like a little kid and I had never thought of Gale Devine as being anything but what she wanted people to think. So I just sat there and watched for a while. Then I realized the reason she was so wild was because she was lonely. Here she was in this big house and no one home and the thought of it scared me for some reason. I did not want to think about Gale Devine really being lonely, so I drove away. I never rang her door. I went to the mall instead.

I put the box on the end of Ken's bed. He was lying there with his headphones on, sleeping. He wiped his eyes, took his headphones off and sat up, looking at me, suspiciously.

"What's in the box?" he asked.

"Go on and open it," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders and lifted the top off the box.

"No way. No way. You didn't do this."

"Happy Birthday," I said.

"But it's not my birthday," he said.

"I know, but I haven't gotten you anything in like years," I said. "Maybe I won't ever get you anything after this, but, well, I dunno."

"Why'd you do this? This is stupid," he said. He looked like he was about to cry and then shook his head.

"I figure this way we're even," I said and when he set the vinyl on the notch and let the arm meet the almost invisible grooves, and we heard, "This is the story of Briar Rabbit. When you hear this sound...ding...turn the page," well, the way Ken was lying beside me on the bed like we were kids all over again, looking at me like I was his brother and all that, well, it didn't bother me at all. It didn't even bother me.

THE RARE JEWEL

Kim Morris

As far as he was concerned, Cody McSutfin's bike could fly. That's why he was in Tony Novak's face this summer day, yelling self-righteously, pointing his finger up at Tony's nose, ready for a fight even though Tony was a full head taller than Cody and about ten pounds heavier.

Around them were their friends, Tony's and Cody's. Tony's friends stood on twelve-year-old legs, elbows bumping into ribs, "fuck" and "shit" dropping out of their mouths like spit. Cody's friends, all of them ten-year-olds and trusting, settled into a line, tallest to shortest (though not purposefully so) and got ready to watch the show. Every few days Tony and Cody would get bored and Tony always knew exactly what to say to get Cody wound up like a yo-yo. Then Cody'd start popping like fire-crackers, dead-set resolute on whatever it was that got them going that day. They'd go at each other until someone's mom called them in, or Mrs. MacEvey walked by on her way to church, or Simon the Snow Cone Man yelled at them to stop being mean to each other.

Watching Cody in his manic state mesmerized all the boys. He had a colic that flipped his orange hair into one eye; the other eye squinted with the focus of a lion. Freckles smudged across his face like the Milky Way, his mouth perpetually opened and whirring.

Tony stood in front of Cody in the park on that summer day not hearing what Cody was saying, just waiting for the moment when he would have to take a breath. When it came Tony jumped in. "Your bike," he said slowly, "is a *Huffy*."

The crowd around them laughed as if they were cued to do so. Cody's face burned. Tony towered over him with that ever-present half-smile, like he couldn't be bothered with Cody. Tony was always making fun of his things, his clothes, Cody in general.

"So what?" Cody said, taking a step closer to Tony. He glanced around at the crowd like a true entertainer, locked eyes with Tony, then said, slowly, "It can *fly*."

Tony set his feet on top of Cody's and leaned in, mashing the balls of his feet into Cody's toes. "Prove it."

"No problem, shit breath," Cody snapped. He curled his lip up and glared at Tony. He wanted to make sure Tony knew he wasn't intimidated. Then he hopped on The Rare Jewel (like a superhero, he thought) and rode across the park toward a set of twin, red brick three-flats. On the left, Tony lived with his dad and brother; on the right, Cody lived with his mom but not his grandpa. His grandpa died two days ago and Cody told no one. His grandpa, Cody figured, would be coming back any day now.

Tony thought Cody pedaled like he was in the middle of a seizure. His rotations were lurching and he leaned so far over the stem, he looked like he was losing his balance. As Tony led the crowd over the grass that Cody's bike just smashed down, Tony remembered one day last summer when he saved Cody's

ass from the dickheads who lived a few blocks over. "It's ok to fight with us, in the neighborhood," Tony told Cody on their way home after pulling Cody by the neck just before a punch landed on the bridge of his nose, "but not out here. Don't mess with them. They'll kill you and they won't care." After that, Cody spent a week picking fights with Tony and Tony good-naturedly put up with it.

They were clunking up the stairs now, the herd of boys, traipsing around Cody's neighbors' porches on the way to the roof. Once up there, they all leaned over, looking down into the dark gangway below and then across the way to the roof of the three-flat where Tony lived. While standing in the park, the three-flats looked like they were merely centimeters apart. The gangway disappeared quickly, giving the impression that the two buildings actually joined together somewhere in their centers. From the roof, however, the distance between the two seemed an endless canyon.

From Cody's point of view, distance was irrelevant. He was on The Rare Jewel. That's what his grandpa called his bike. The day his grandpa gave it to Cody, his grandpa said, "Son, this here bike, she's a rare jewel." Cody was so happy. It was his first bike. Now he could get out of the neighborhood, go exploring. He imagined hopping on his brand new bike and taking off on it. Not down the street but up into the sky. He could fly out of Chicago. He could fly to Europe and Australia.

"I want to fly," Cody told his grandpa that night as he fell asleep on his grandpa's lap.

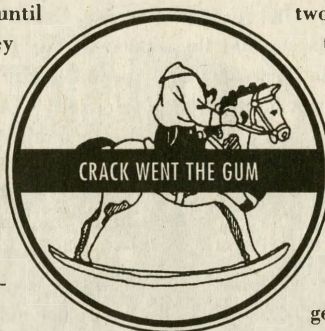
"You will fly, Cody," his grandpa told him.

On the roof, the boys spread into two lines facing each other. Cody pushed his ramp up against the lip of the roof and kicked it to make it stick. Then he marched up the middle of the two rows of boys (they were twitching like flares now). Cody's teeth clamped down so hard his jawbone popped out of his cheek. His arms jerked forward and backward like a soldier. He took The Rare Jewel from Tommy and hopped on.

Tony was at the far end of the roof, looking over the edge, then across to the other roof. He looked back at Cody, at Cody's set jaw and narrowed eyes, then leaned over and made sure the ramp was secure. He figured Cody would stop sometime before the ramp. He figured when Cody did, he'd let him go without a whole lot of teasing.

Cody took three huge breaths. Tommy cleared his throat. "You know, technically," Tommy said, "it's jumping, not flying."

Cody sneered at him then looked away. Sam walked up to him, cracking his gum. "You ain't gotta do it," Sam said. His gum cracked. "He won't say nothin'." He jerked his thumb at Tony at the other end of the roof. His gum cracked again. Like a con-





spiracy, Sam leaned in and whispered, "I'll talk to 'im." Crack went the gum.

Cody shrugged his shoulder away from Sam like his hand was there even though it wasn't. He stared at the ramp, then at the next building. He started pedaling. He imagined Europe and Australia. He imagined his grandpa. He pedaled madly. The faces surrounding him blurred. The voices became one loud, continuous hum.

At the right moment, The Rare Jewel took off on its own, valiantly charging toward the ramp and the chasm and Cody's wild imagination. They hit the ramp. Then they were airborne, floating high above the concrete gangway where soon there would be a crimson, heart-shaped stain whose residue would stick stubbornly to the ground for days after the firemen hosed it down.

But now, floating there in the air, leaning over the handlebars, Cody could see the exact spot where he wanted to land. He felt free. He felt so close to Heaven he thought for sure that was his grandpa walking out of the sky toward him. What he said to himself and the hazy, half-formed image of his grandfather, was an ecstatic, "I'm flying. I'm *flying*."

The front wheel of The Rare Jewel hit the edge of the roof on Tony's building. This tipped the bike backwards, so that the front wheel was momentarily suspended over the back wheel, like Cody was riding straight up the building. Except he wasn't. He was falling. He slid off the saddle, his legs dangling parallel

with the vertical bike, his grip tight and unmoving around the grips. The crowd of boys rushed to the edge of the roof. Mouths hung open. There was the strangest silence that fell over the group – like they were caught and frozen right at the moment before belting out a scream. Tony folded himself over the edge, his arms grabbing uselessly at the air passing quietly along Cody's back.

The Rare Jewel sunk into the darkness below, pulling Cody with it, until the boys on the roof heard the crash and clank of aluminum and steel. The echoes of the crash rang like church bells. Then it stopped like someone turned off the switch. They were left with pigeons cooing, a far-off police siren, and the horrible realization that there hadn't been a single sound from Cody since he set foot on the roof in the first place.

Raising his eyes from the blackness that hid the gangway below, Tony looked across at the roof that was supposed to be the landing site. In a flash, he thought he saw Cody over there, riding The Rare Jewel, pedaling away happily, oblivious to the fact that he was leaving his friends behind.

Years later, Tony would tell his own kids a variation of this story. Usually with an ending where Cody hits the ramp, soars across the roofs, down the street, across the neighborhood, pedaling into the moon to a place where The Rare Jewel was idolized. To a place where The Rare Jewel's flying powers were never doubted.

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THE PUBLIC RESTROOM INCIDENT

Deb Lewis

In retrospect, Ruth knew: The shopping-mall mother who rushed her stroller out, dumbfounded tot in tow; the old woman craning her bent neck to peer in between the antiseptic stall wall and its door. Ruth had known exactly what it was about in the women's public restroom, just down a hall from the high-ceilinged food court. Every time she'd been told, "This is the women's room," came to mind, every time she'd seen the look of surprise—the eyes falling from nose to chest to crotch, eyes smelling for manhood. The time the thinnest little black woman in the world opened a stall door and gaped her tight little mouth—wide as a baby bird's beak—to scream, then slammed the door in paroxysmal fear. Ruth knew.

And she knew she should've taken that biker jacket off, and she knew the flowers she'd picked up for her empty apartment didn't help. She heard her mother saying, "Well, Sweetheart, perhaps if you didn't cut your hair so short..." Perhaps if she wore an even number of earrings in each ear, if she dolled it up a little bit? Truth told, female drag felt like a goddamned clown outfit. Shoes one could not walk in, let alone catch a bus—or fight—in. Easy access skirts and smothering panty hose. Shirts hemmed two inches too short to tuck in. Pants with no pockets, pants that crawled to the armpits. Pants that showed your ankles. Belts of no substance. Shaming clothes she could neither afford in plus sizes, nor wear in practical comfort. Excruciating, diminutive, defenseless, ridiculous outfits.

That's what mother meant when she said, "Perhaps you should get some nice clothes and dress like a girl."

A gorilla girl, Ruth thought, *with two inches of my white wrist-meat showing and seams slicing at my armpits. Fucking buttons pulling across my chest.*

Ruth knew from the distant, cold heights of Pluto what these suburban hitches were thinking, what they thought they saw. She could've thrust her tits out for them, but she'd been feeling so good about the flowers—they were her birthday present to herself on this unseasonably cool July afternoon. It was such a frivolous, and on her salary, such an extravagant buy that'd she'd taken clandestine delight in them, walking with a little more energy this hour, secretly pleased with herself for having felt, from *within* no less, a girlish touch. A feminine and domestic flair. It would have been something to write home about—there was so little to tell them anymore, and yet here she could go on for half a page, at least, about the daisies and the black-eyed Susans, and little periwinkle whatnots; about how the colors contrasted and complimented one another so vividly.

She'd forgotten she didn't look like all the other girls and forgotten that she wasn't just some other person, and subsequently forgot to take precautions, like: take the jacket off—drape it over one shoulder, push the tits out (where in hell would she be if she had less of those?), swing the hips a bit, arch a hand back at the wrist, look at herself in the mirror and dish fingertips over her hair like a fag, talk in that diminutive, whiny voice, saying something insipid, like: "Oh my, it's busy in here, isn't it?"

But that smirk of the stroller-pushing, toddler-towing—it was a boy, Ruth noted bitterly, and that must make her a *good* wife—that smirk had broken Ruth's vulnerability and she was feeling crass again, crass as a hard-shelled crab. *Fuck you*, she thought as the bitch went out the door, the kid howling that he had to go. *Suit yourself, bitch! And: Good for you!*

Ruth had waited as long as she could. It'd been such a hassle for so long to use a public toilet that she didn't go unless the need was dire. A little pain going in the kidneys. So it all dropped away as she squatted and pissed, the good suburban mother added to the book of averages and spitefully forgotten. *Just pee*, she thought, then: *tacos for lunch*. And it was with surprise that Ruth looked up from fastening her zipper to see a wrinkled and magnified blue eye gazing at her through the slit in the front of the stall.

Ruth grabbed the flowers and bailed on the thought of washing her hands. It was too hot and hostile for her to drag it out, daring someone to say something so she could fire off a quip, like, "Don't know 'bout you, but I never seen a *man* with tits like mine,"

Or, better yet, "Honey, mine are bigger'n yours,"

Or better yet, "Darlin', I'm butch, but I ain't *that* butch—ain't you ever seen a *bulldyke* before?"

She thought up lists of them. Made it her past-time to think up new ones during her long drives to and from work. But they were never there when she needed them. Her tongue went dry as dust, stuck to the roof of her mouth. *Best be gone, and let it go.*

But this time was more surreal than the others in that the smirking cunt with the spoilt brat stood vigilant in the hall that led back out into the foodcourt, right across from the Ladies' Room door, arms crossed in vindication. The thin, black, pointy-arched eyebrows and lizardy green eyes were unsettling, and Ruth's head wheeled back a little bit at the sight of her. Ruth'd never seen the surprise and fear turn to such hatred before.

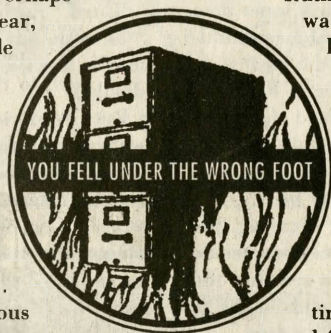
Whatever gets your rocks off, lady, Ruth thought as she scuttled out. Hate, after all, could go both ways.

Ruth emerged from the relatively dim hall into the glaring brightness of the foodcourt, the smell of warm grease reminding her that she was hungry. The skylights allowed huge, unbroken panes of exhilarating blue to shine in and tug at Ruth's spirit, and she was astonished to discover the fistful of flowers she'd just beamed so proudly over, not five minutes ago, was still in her hand. She set her sights on a couple of hardshells and a diet Coke.

It was noon, and the tables were full of women mostly, older couples, and pairs of mothers, each with her own brood, bags on the floor at their feet, bags piled high on a seat or a table. A baby girl, just barely walking, stood in a square of light, rocking a little, shaking her hands at shoulder level, squealing with delight.

I was like that once, Ruth thought.

And all around, the bored young black and Hispanic guys in





charge of changing all the mall trashbins, hung around in their little mustard-yellow jackets. Meanwhile, the older white women in hairnets and blue smocks who wiped the tables drifted in a loose ring around this figure in the biker jacket—the crew-cut one with the flowers.

A column of tan-uniformed mall security officers passed, following a real cop like a line of goslings. The cop consulted with a young woman, a mother in her mid-twenties perhaps who pointed a white finger at the blinking Ferdinand. The black patent leather brims snapped in quick, progressive formation, forming up by default when the man in blue stepped to, calling, "Hey! Buddy!"

And Ruth knew and chose not to know, safe in her shell, thinking, *That's not me. I do: 't have to answer that.*

But the call came again. "Hey, BUD."

And Ruth thought, *Oh shit.* But her mind had closed around one thing only: her intended destination. When all else crumbled around her, this is what Ruth did—as she had waited for college during the hell of high school: She crept along her pre-programmed course and shut down on a grim auto-pilot until all turbulence subsided, making it safe to open her eyes and see again, open her ears and hear.

But when the cop shouted, "FREEZE!" Ruth thought instantly that she would rather have heard it from Grace Jones as a part of *The Apple Stretching*, and for once Grace Jones wouldn't be the most frightening thing on Earth, only the most *deliciously* frightening thing on Earth. And something in Ruth felt all the eyes of the food court upon her. If she opened enough to hear the cop's voice, she must open her sweet meat to the whole terrible, glaring panorama of white tables and blank faces, and she thought in the smallest of voices, *All this? Over me?*

When the food court finished spinning—it was dizzying, the way she'd been dragged from the bottom of the ocean to become the center of everything—Ruth was surprised to see that the cop's hand was poised over his gun, as if a few seconds might've seen his drawing it.

A train of light flashed through her temples as her eyes went from flat gray to black fear; the bouquet fell to the floor, petals splashing against the large matte white tiles like paint splatters or smithereens of alien blood.

He seemed so thick-skinned—his lips blunt as he asked, "D'j'you get a little *lost*, pal?"

The tumblers spun inside her fast, without a click of a clue, for the right combination of denial and placation. She felt her hand clawing around in her back pocket for her wallet as his hand hung, poised for the quick-draw, over his gun handle.

Wallet free, she fingered through, hands quaking, making everything ten times harder than it need be, words and speech far flown and far-fetched. She knew; that hateful woman in the hall had set the dogs on her. She knew reaching for her wallet had made the cop nervous and he might opt to shoot her and call it self-defense, knew this even as she clawed after it anyway, because she needed proof. Needed proof that would keep them from stripping her naked right here, right now, cracking her crabshell open and probing her insides until satisfied. She needed proof, and had no thought, really, for being shot dead. *Just don't let them strip-search me in the security office*, she thought. The credit cards and photos and a few dollar bills and her video card and all her official life tumbled like dead leaves to the floor as she fumbled, then found her driver's license, at last, and passed it to him with a jaggedly shaking hand.

As his scrutiny shifted to the laminated card, the dam of speech broke and Ruth's voice shrilled in her own ears: "ImawomanImawomanImawoman...." Could it have possibly

♦ come from her own throat to scratch and chafe so against her own ears? She sounded like a damn woman all right. The outburst made his blazing blue eyes grow large and blink. ♦ Something in the jangling sound of this creaturish screech had ♦ shaken even his invincibility. She saw the waves of fear that blew around them—whitecaps come to tear them both apart. She saw them in his eyes, and then, the blue smoothed over.

He passed back the ID, and looking her up and down derisively, said, "I'll take your word for it, *birthday—girl*," then turned on his heel, tan goslings in tow, leaving Ruth to stoop before the food court and pick up the contents of her billfold. As she knelt, the garbage boys and the table women melted back into the walls.

The flowers had suffered, but she took them up again anyway. She straightened, noticed that all authority had left—it left her feeling uncovered again, in a new way: they'd stripped off her armor, then left her—molted and naked, surrounded enemies. Next, she stood dumb before the taco stand, not clear on how she'd got there. When the slight, brown-eyed girl asked what she'd like, Ruth's voice replied, sounding hoarse and hollow.

"Taco—two."

"Hard shell or soft?" the girl asked, brown eyes pouring over the beat, haggard face.

"Hard," Ruth said, and the *H* in it almost stopped her heart.

Then the girl's eyes went to the counter as she asked softly, like maybe she was little cowed by the whole thing too, "You want a drink?"

Ruth swallowed and nodded. "Diet." Then she drew out her wallet again, thinking, *what a nightmare*, and thumbed through again, after-tremors still making life difficult in her traitorous body. It wasn't until she stood facing the foodcourt again—the world, now, it seemed, had continued without her and had almost forgotten her entirely—when she realized that she had no shell and there was no safe place to eat. She couldn't stay—the old high school dizziness was hunting her like a wolf and she couldn't be here when it brought her down.

The limp plastic bag and flowers in one hand, the cold, wet Coke in her other, she made it to the parking lot with aching arms. She had forgotten what her car looked like, and stood, overwhelmed and witnessed by the cars, dying one crusty small death after another as minutes yawed past, keeping themselves between her and her tears.

By the time the little metallic teal Geo recognized her, the urge to cry was gone—she didn't know where—and she felt the heavy, solid bulk of armor fall into place, thick and dull as ever as she slammed the car door shut.

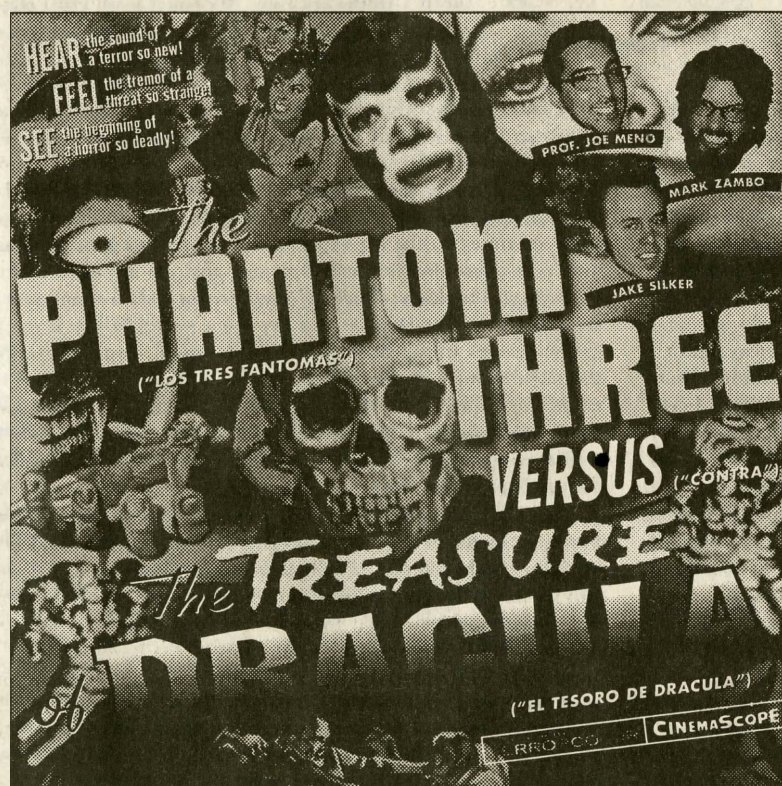
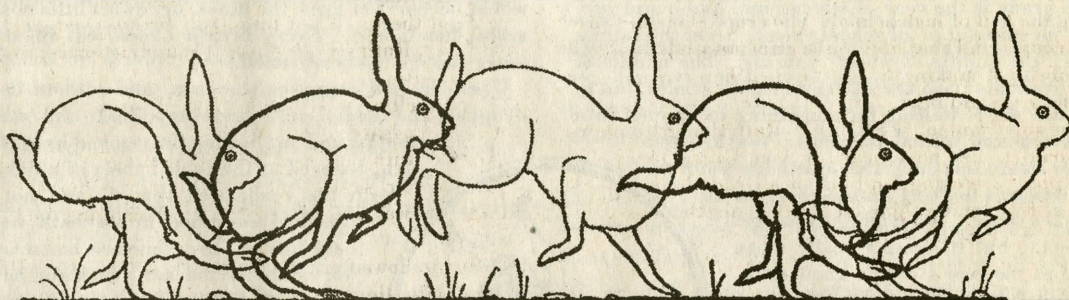
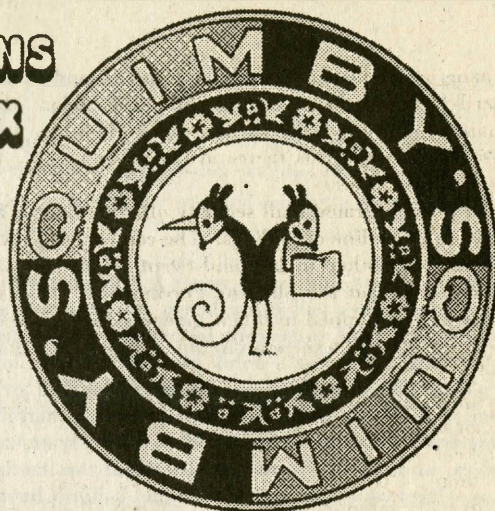
The flowers would sit in the passenger seat for days, until she resentfully stashed them behind it on the floorboard, dead and stiff. She didn't clean her car for months, knowing she would have to see and touch them again if she did.

She would never quite get over the fact that no one had apologized. The thought plagued her that the smirking woman had known Ruth for what she was—a dyke and not a man—and had decided to punish her unfairly. This thinking was like a grain of sand inside her shell, and Ruth wasn't one to make pearls of anything, so it rolled around inside her, tearing up the delicate meat she fought so hard to protect. *Silly little crab*, she told herself, *you fell under the wrong foot.*

And so, from that point on, Ruth would stop fluids when going out alone into the world, preferring the burning lips of dehydration—anything it might take to avoid the public restrooms—to the sting of humiliation. Ruth became dry as a desert for a long time, giving no shade and no quarter to anyone, not even herself, as her temples throbbed for lack of water.

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DO YOU LIKE ME, YES OR NO?

Latt Hill

My brother always told me to never fall in love with a cheerleader, "They will either break your heart or get fat." And then, like some pubescent fortuneteller, he would add, "or both." But I was just a dumb kid and it wasn't long before I forgot his advice and fell for the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Julie Webb was a cheerleader, and she had this beautiful long brown hair that smelled like strawberries, and big brown eyes, and, for a seventh grader, what my brother referred to as a "nice rack," though at the time, I didn't have a clue as to what I would do with it.

Now seventh grade is the year of educational limbo and perhaps the least meaningful of all school years. Seventh grade is middle school, "the middle of what?" you say. The middle of nothing. You graduate from the sixth and eighth grades, but in seventh, you are stuck waiting for something to happen in a mire of confusion and sexual torment. You are too young to know or do anything that quenches your unnamed desires and nothing that is going on in your body makes sense. You might have a "girlfriend" in theory, but it doesn't really mean anything, and at the time I didn't know that, so sitting behind Julie in math class, I had no choice but to get lost in the sweet strawberry smell of her hair and forget the advice my brother had given me. I was in love for the first time, and no words of wisdom from my dumb old brother or anyone else could have changed that.

"Going out" in seventh grade is nothing of the sort. It is merely a status. A boy asks a girl to be his girlfriend and she either says yes or no, and that was that. If you were lucky, you might talk your parents into dropping the two of you off at the movies or you might meet up at a football or basketball game, but as I mentioned before, Julie was a cheerleader, and at a game, the closest I could get to her was the side of the court as she bounced and clapped and cheered for anyone but me. All I could ever do was fantasize about being the star player of the team, and after shooting the three point shot that won the game, I would rush over to the sidelines, take her into my muscular arms and kiss her and... The daydream always ended there, as I still wasn't really sure what would happen after that. I was only twelve years old and I didn't play a sport and I certainly didn't have muscular arms and all of this was before they taught you about sex in school. All my ideas about love came from the soap operas my grandma watched and they always cut to a commercial as soon as anybody kissed, but my heart ached for this girl since the first moment I saw her and it took me half the school year to build up enough confidence to scribble in shaky block letters on a folded sheet of notebook paper:

Dear Julie,

DO YOU LIKE ME?

☐ Yes

— or —

☐ No

Jake

My big chance came in math class one day while everyone was busy completing worksheets on long division. I was certain that the pounding of my heart could be heard over the scribbling of my classmates' pencils as I slipped the note over Julie's shoulder and dropped it into her lap. The sweet smell of her hair was overwhelming and I sank back into my seat and tried to hold the pencil with my shaking sweaty hands. She didn't move or turn around and by the end of the class, staring at the blank worksheet in front of me, I knew I was going to throw up. Every time I tried to answer the math questions, the eights would become her eyes, the nines, her sweet little nose, and the zeros, her mouth. Every breath I took was filled with that sweet sweet strawberry smell.

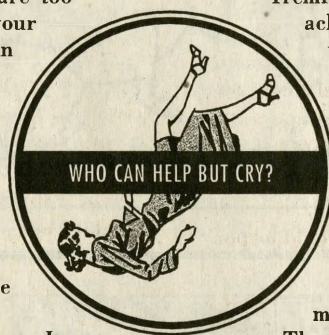
When the bell rang, she stood up, and without looking, she dropped the folded note onto my desk and walked out.

Trembling and swallowing the retched knot of my stomach, I stared at the folded sheet of notebook paper with the realization that it, and not the poor unfinished worksheet underneath, held the key to my future. Everyone else had dropped their work onto the teacher's desk and left the room before I had the nerve to open it up. Carefully, I unfolded the paper as if I might tear it, and then I saw her answer. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my entire life. With her pencil, Julie had drawn a bold X in the yes box. My heart leapt right out of my chest and pounded its way around the room.

The air was filled with that sweet smell of her. I didn't care at all that I hadn't answered one question on the worksheet. Suddenly, I had my first girlfriend, she had made it official. She marked yes, and I was the happiest I had ever been in my entire life.

Now, Julie's dad was a highway trooper. He was the kind of cop you see pulling cars over on the side of the interstate and belly-strutting up the asphalt in a wide-brimmed hat. He was a nice man who always carried a gun and ate breakfast every morning at the diner where my mother worked. I spent a lot of time daydreaming that he and my mom would fall in love and get married. In my dreams, my mom and I would move into their two-story A-frame house and Julie and I would share the room at the very top with the pointed ceiling. I imagined the sweet kisses we would share though I still didn't know what would happen after that, but we wouldn't really be related, so I knew that it was okay.

Julie and I never really talked at school, but because her dad knew my mom, he did let me take her to the movies. I had few models of behavior so our first date was perfectly uneventful. I can't even remember what the movie was, but we didn't talk, didn't hold hands, and when her dad picked her up in his patrol car, I had this desperately sinking feeling that there was something I should have done and if I didn't do it soon, she wouldn't like me anymore. In my daydreams, we were always holding hands and I was always saying something witty about our teachers at school and she would smile and laugh and touch the side of my face like they did in those soap operas just before she leaned in and kissed me. But whenever I saw her, my





mouth would go dry, my palms would get sweaty, and I barely ever said anything at all. I would just stand there like this little dumb kid who didn't know anything about love, and before I knew it, she would walk away and leave me there trying to breathe through all that strawberry smell she left behind.

Mr. Webb and my mom never got married, and I never said anything witty to Julie that made her laugh, but we did go to the movies once more. It was Valentine's day, and not really knowing what she liked, I did the only thing I could, I convinced my mom to let me buy her everything I saw. It was Valentine's day and I actually had a valentine. Unbelievable. My mother must have sensed my desperation because she let me buy the biggest heart-shaped box of chocolates, a bouquet of roses, and a white teddy bear hugging a satin heart that said "I ♥ U."

Julie wasn't at the movie theatre when my mom dropped me off, so I just stood out front with the candy under one arm, the bear under the other, and the flowers in my hand like some midget vendor at the county fair. Hordes of middle and high schoolers walked by, holding hands and kissing. No one else was carrying anything like candy or flowers and they looked at me with a mixture of amusement and sympathy, but I didn't care, I was waiting for my girlfriend, and when she saw all that I had for her, she would love me for the rest of her life.

I bought our tickets and then I waited and waited and waited, watching those couples walk by arm and arm and knew that tonight, during the movie, I would put my arm around Julie, and she would hold my hand, and afterward, I would kiss her goodnight. All the other kids would be envious that they hadn't thought to bring their girlfriends gifts and the girls would wish they had boyfriends as thoughtful as me. It would be perfect.

The crowd thinned out and I was starting to think that she wouldn't show when I spotted Mr. Webb's highway prowler casually pulling into the parking lot. When she opened her door, she glanced at me and then back at her father with a shrug. I took her embarrassment to mean she was surprised I had brought her so many beautiful gifts. Mr. Webb waved at me and smiled as Julie forced herself out of the car and looked around to make sure no one was watching as she walked up to me.

"What's all this?" She asked.

"It's for you." I grinned and shoved the gifts toward her.

She gave the Valentine's bear a sympathetic look. "I didn't get you anything. Can you hold all that until we get in?"

She took the tickets from me and marched into the theatre. It was dark and the movie was starting and the plastic wrap around the flowers was crackling so loud someone actually shushed me and the people around us giggled. We found some seats wedged between two other couples and Julie sat without taking my gifts, so I sat beside her and stacked them in my lap. I thought that if I put them on the floor, they would get dirty and sticky and she wouldn't want them any more.

My heart was racing. I had planned for a week on how I would hold her hand, but as mine were full, I wasn't sure how I was going to do it. During the first half of the movie, I stared at her lap where her hands were locked together and cursed my luck. If only she would lean back in her seat, then I might balance the presents with one hand and casually slip my arm over her shoulder. Of if she put her arm on the armrest between us, I

could put mine there and slide my hand over hers. Every other couple in the theatre was leaning in together, arm-in-arm or kissing, and there I was with this pile of cheap gifts in my lap and the girl of my dreams perched on the seat next to me like she was afraid if she touched anything she might get a disease.

The movie was *E.T.* and I eventually turned my attention away from Julie's hands locked in her lap and to the screen. She hadn't taken her eyes off the movie since we sat down, so I figured it must be good. I tried to ignore the theatre full of arm-in-arm couples kissing and the strawberry smell of the beautiful girl next to me. I tried to concentrate on the movie, and before I knew it, it was almost over and I hadn't touched her once. I was so caught up in poor little *E.T.* and Elliott that I had almost forgotten my dilemma.

And then it happened. I couldn't help it. I began to cry. You know that part of the movie where they have the house all bagged up and the flower is dying and *E.T.* is dying and Elliott is sick and it seems like all will be lost and then they make that great escape on flying bicycles and get *E.T.* back to the ship just in time for him to escape? Who can help but cry? So there I am with that heart and bear and flowers stacked in my lap and I am wiping at my cheeks and sniffing along with all the girls in the theatre and before I know it, the lights go up. Everyone gets up to leave the theatre, but there I am with my tear streaked face and Julie, dry-eyed, looks at me like she looked at that poor teddy bear before the movie and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I sniffled, embarrassed, and she gets up to leave without taking her presents. So I follow her out, trying to catch up with her through the crowd while carrying all of that crap and high school boys gawking at my red eyes and tear-streaked cheeks and snickering and I can't even wipe them because my arms are full.

Out front, Mr. Webb's car is at the curb, like he's been there waiting the whole time and I want to cry some more because we haven't even talked, much less held hands and then she turns to me and I look into those big brown eyes and I just know she is going to kiss me right there in front of her dad and everybody. I wonder if I should just drop all that stuff to the ground and take her into my arms and kiss her and then she takes two steps toward me and smiles. She lifts that big red chocolate-filled heart from my arms and leans in so close I can't smell anything but that sweet strawberry smell and she kisses me on the cheek and I inhale, filling my lungs all the way up with her, and for that moment I wonder if I hold my breath forever that it will never end and I don't care that my eyes are red and puffy or my cheeks stained with tears like some crybaby kid, because it's Valentine's day and I have a girlfriend, and she has finally kissed me. Her smile makes my legs weak and I continue to hold my breath wondering what to do next and then she says, "I don't think we should go out any more, Jake. Thanks for being so sweet."

Then she turns, hopping into where her dad has already opened the door and I can only stand there, holding my breath and the flowers and the bear while I watch her drive off in her father's police car, ripping open that big red heart-shaped box and sinking her teeth into those chocolates one-by-one like she didn't care if it made her fat.

HEART EXHIBIT

Germania Salóranza

Now it was the Museum of Science and Industry. When he was parking the car in the lot, Mark's hands suddenly clutched the wheel in resentment. Science!! Science had failed him horribly. But there they were and Leti held Mark's hand in a possessive type of pride—her head up high—almost for the world to see—"See he's mine." Because the fact that inside her she was growing his baby; that deep inside her there was a part of Mark growing in her womb—this had filled her with a wonderful sense of security about him. He is mine. She felt that. She was happy for it. And she was oblivious to anything else. In the museum, Mark felt like the place was taunting him, rubbing it in. First they saw the baby chicks, and then Leti dragged him upstairs to the realm of the human body. What better place to start than the creation of the human being? There on the wall was a long shallow display case and in that case were forty rectangular shaped glass jars mounted. The wall was painted matte black so that it was like looking out into deep space—looking deep within the great belly of the cosmos; the womb of the universe to see the creation of the littlest stars. Little stars. The first jar held a tiny globule of something unrecognizable but the label on the left of it clearly stated: Male Embryo: 3 days. Leti dropped Mark's hand to step up on the narrow platform which ran along the length of the exhibit, so that children could step up to see better. And she did, see better. There it was, a tiny glob of tissues that would later sprout arm and leg buds—that would grow a little heart—that would deepen eye sockets and harden little bones—a skeleton. She rubbed her belly with affection, thinking of the baby that was growing inside her. And she looked again into the glass—but this time, not to see the exhibit, but to see Mark's reflection. He was standing behind her and a little to the right, so that he was looking over her right shoulder. She just caught a quick glimpse of his pale face in the glass, letting her know that he was right there beside her. He was there beside her. He was with her all the way and then he sidled along to the next jar and she shuffled along too, to see the next stage of development—to peer again into the depths of the cosmos to see this beautiful mystery captured there in glass—like the specimens of beautiful butterflies mounted between glass sheets.

The rhythmic and heavy thudding of a heart pounded and vibrated the floor under Mark's feet. Over to the right of him, about half a block away, was the heart exhibit. Mark and Leti knew it well, as did the millions of school kids who'd been taken to the museum on school field trips. It was the size of a generously built kid's clubhouse and it was a replica of the human heart, divided in half by a tiny narrow walkway so that

you could actually stand inside it and see all the labeled parts. And it was painted the color of raw steak with blue veins running through it and white strips of fat and Mark felt his own heart constrict and thump loudly—ferociously—full of fear. The thudding beats bounced against the hollows of his ribcage. They echoed in the emptiness of his own fear and he looked into the glass case and grimaced. Ugh. It was an oddly shaped mass of tissue. It could be anything and the horrible darkened spots where the eyes should be were abnormally huge and reminded him of the exhibit they'd seen earlier of the baby chicks. The newly hatched ones were all wet and scrawny and ugly little beings—ugly in their fragility and exhaustion. And he was reminded of cracking an egg into a frying pan and seeing the white squiggly thing in the gluten and knowing that coulda been a life and he began to feel a sick nausea creeping in his stomach and a coldness creeping up his neck. He looked into the glass to see Leti's facial expression in the glass and to his horror she was beaming. She was smiling! How could she smile? Didn't she realize they were looking at an exhibit of dead babies? But she was grinning. He could see her teeth and he shivered a bit from the sudden horror of her grin and the sudden ice cold in his extremities and he stuffed his hands in his coat pockets.

Leti glanced at Mark. She turned around to him to see him, standing there with his hands stuffed in his pockets like a sullen schoolboy. But she chose to ignore the sick expression on his face and return her attention to the jars. He was always difficult, always a bit negative, at first but once involved, he enjoyed things, once it all happened she was convinced he would enjoy being a father.

There, there in this one, the thing started to look like a human baby, she thought. It was all lovely rounded curves. It had huge darkened spots where the eyes would develop—liquid and endlessly deep and innocent and observant. It had lovely rounded little arm and leg buds and she rubbed her nonexistent belly and thought of the baby inside her. She saw it similar to the one in the exhibit, could see it floating peacefully in her own brine, could see its own lovely arm buds and she talked to it in her mind. "Hello baby," she said in a silent singsong in her mind and watched the arm and leg buds wiggle in gleeful response.

The heart exhibit was pounding maniacally and Mark felt as though he might vomit. He moved along in the exhibit, but he was no longer looking at the jars. He looked at the floor, which was tiled and almost sterile looking like a hospital. Then he looked up and over both ways to take in the other people viewing the exhibit. To the left, he saw an old man, paunchy and





old in that hardboiled grumpy sort of way. And Mark was embarrassed to see the man catch him looking at him. The man looked at Mark and his lips turned up slightly in what Mark interpreted as a wry grin. And Mark's heart thudded against the bars of its cage, his ribcage. And Mark imagined the man's grin to mean, "You're a caught man, boy." And Mark felt very "caught". He felt like *Leti* had caught her man; him. He stepped over to the right.

The thumping heart in the background made *Leti* think of the baby's heart. She imagined the tiny quick pulse—rapidly thudding right beneath the surface of pale—almost transparent skin. And she could hear the sound, quick and tiny and fast like an animal's, determined like a rabbit's.

She got a sudden craving for sugar. She reached for Mark—stuffed her hand into his coat pocket—fumbled for candy. He always had a sweet tooth and always kept something sugary in his pockets, oftentimes Swedish fish—he never grew out of those. But she never really was into sweets that much, until now. Now that she was pregnant, she got the craving for sweet. She said it was for the baby. And so she fished in his pockets looking for sticky Swedish fish. Her warm fingers came into contact with his cold flesh.

"You're cold!" She exclaimed turning towards him in surprise. He just shrugged in response as she fumbled in the dark pocket, but found nothing but his cold knuckles. So she wrapped her arm around him to get at the other pocket. She was leaning behind him, her arm wrapped around him both for support and so she could rummage his pockets. She tucked her hand inside.

That was when he remembered the ring. Oh my god, the ring! He had forgotten all about it. He had bought it after work on Friday—just found himself in front of the jewelry store and bought a simple cheap gold band. What was he thinking? He didn't want to do it now. He wanted to think on it more. Was it the right thing to do? And now she was fishing in his pockets and she'd find the ring. He grabbed her wrist inside the pocket and held it for a moment of panic.

She inhaled sharply. "What do you have in there?" She asked suddenly very curious.

"Nuthin," he heard himself say it like a guilty kid caught in something.

She wriggled her hand and he let go of her and she wrapped her fingers around a wrinkled paper package. She began to pull her hand out of the pocket and again he held her at the wrist. Oh no. Not now. Please don't look at that now. He felt stupid now for buying it. He bought it on romantic impulse, but he felt that he hadn't really meant it but once she saw it, there would be no turning back, he thought.

She pulled out the package and unwrapped the crinkled soft brown paper to find the opening of the paper sack. Inside was a small gray velvet ring box. She pulled it out and her heart quickened. She knew it was for her. She didn't even want to think of what it might be, for fear of spoiling the spell, but the whole cloudy mass of her desires crept around the edges of this thing like fog creeping around a pond-- and she would not look at him. The wall of baby embryos looked on in witness, as *Leti* opened the little gray box with a slight creak of the hinge.

There was a simple gold band. Her lips quivered. She smiled involuntarily, her head lowered, her gaze glued on the ring in her hand. She smiled. Slow tears dripped down her face and she smiled. Her lips quivered and she could not look at him. She did not want to express her joy in front of him, because if she did, he might be overwhelmed and take it back. She just kept her eyes locked on the ring, but she wasn't really looking at it. She was just thinking and feeling her joy in the sense of things all coming into place as she thought they should be.

She was holding up the line, Mark noted. He looked up in the glass and saw her reflection. Could see the sharp line where her hair was parted down the middle, the soft awning of brown bangs over her forehead, the gentle sweep of brown around her face pulled back into a loose ponytail. Her face was downcast with tears streaming and glistening in the light. He saw that she was restraining herself. Standing there wanting to cry and laugh at the same time, and probably wanting to attack him too. She was always attacking him. Sometimes he liked it and sometimes he didn't and as a result, he knew that she didn't attack him as much as she wanted. Watching her there, crying and smiling and holding her head down so no one would see her, made him feel the full effect of her restraint. He could almost feel waves of hot energy coming off of her. But she also looked like a child—very small and secretive. He loved the intensity of her. He always liked it even before he ever thought of her that way. Mark was impressed by her fierce animal nature, at the time. It was amusing. She was so small, and fragile looking and yet inside her a raging animal existed. And over time he learned that she was quite tame—at times. She loved him fiercely and sweetly and he couldn't resist her. He took her by the elbow and pulled her backwards off the platform and a few feet away from the exhibit.

She always had a knack for finding a way to fit just perfectly with his body. She buried her face in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and the heat of her body was incredible. She was like a little furnace. At night, she slept completely submerged under blankets and sheets until she seemed to build up heat. Then when she curled her body around his, he felt slightly scorched. They tussled over blankets. He liked the cold, she liked heat. He felt his fingers return to their normal temperature. She thawed them. He sighed and all the creepy sensations of nausea and fear seeped out with the sigh. They would get married. He would be a husband and a father. They would make a family. And *Leti* was warm. She was warm enough for everyone and it would all work out.

And the heart beat steadily, thumping, and the vibrations buzzed against the soles of their shoes and into their feet up their legs into their groins and up into their bellies, *Leti's* belly with the baby and even the baby bounced a bit to the beat, and up into their own hearts which were not separated by a narrow walkway for people to observe all the labeled parts but were two, no three separate wholes, beating on their own to their own rhythm. And for the briefest moment, their rhythms combined. They were all in sync; all in sync to the great recording of the heart in the Museum of Science and Industry. It wasn't a real heartbeat, but what difference did that make? Because for the briefest moment, they were all as one.



THE CANADIAN GIRLFRIEND

Brian Costello

We and my friends Lance "Romance" D'Ambrosia and Dave "The Wave" Dershimmer were smoking cigarettes at The Wall, the place where all the high school kids with juvey aspirations in the late 80's hung out before that first bell rang.

"Look, man," Dave said, jean jacketed back leaning against the long, five-foot-high wall that separated one of the relatively lower middle class neighborhoods from the six-lane road separating us and our smokes from the principal and his detention, "alls I'm sayin' is that Tommy Lee is as good of a drummer as Nikko McBrain ... I mean, if you listen to his drum solos, you can totally tell he's holdin' back on the songs."

"No fuckin' way, man," opined Lance "Romance" D'Ambrosia, big white feather earring twisting behind his big black feathered hair in the early morning wind. "That guy's all show, no go. That's why he plays upside down and shit, and flaps his arm and milks his cowbell." He went into a parodic imitation of Tommy Lee's arm flails behind his drum set, inches away from punching Dave and me in the face. "Not only that," he continued, "but I heard he's queer and he has a small dick."

Just then, Schmitty arrived, smacking his pack of cigarettes into his hand. "You guys arguing about Tommy Lee again? Can't you just agree to disagree? Comparing Maiden to the Crue is like comparing apples and oranges."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, Schmitty. What's up, man?" Lance Romance asked.

"Not much, but hey: Who're you guys takin' to the Sheetrock and Popcorn Shrimp Enchantment Dance?" Of course, Schmitty was referring to the dance our school held every year around that time in honor of our town's two largest industries.

"I'm takin' Amy Radosevich," Lance Romance said.

"And I'm takin' Loretta Morgenstern," Dave The Wave said.

"Well ... guess who I'm takin'?" Schmitty grinned like he was stoned. He was stoned.

"Who?"

"The one. The only. Becky St. Pierre."

"Aw, Schmitty dude," Lance said, "you're totally gettin' laid that night!" We high-fived him.

"Brian, you're pretty quiet today," Schmitty said, punching me in the arm of my red Member's Only jacket. "Who're you takin' to the dance?"

"Well," I answered, stubbing out my cigarette against The Wall and tossing it into the backyard of the unfortunate bastard who lived behind the official gathering place for all teen smoker metalheads, "I have a date, but I'm not sure if she can make it down here."

"Oh, no," Lance Romance laughed. "Don't start in with that Canadian girlfriend bullshit again."

"What's this about a Canadian girlfriend?" Schmitty asked.

"Well..." I began, "I have a girlfriend who lives in Canada. We met last summer in Calgary."

My friends were silent. Then they laughed. "Wait! Wait!" Lance howled, "it gets better! Tell him what she does for a living!"

I looked them in the eye. "She's a bra model for JC Penney catalogs."

More laughter. "Sure, dude. Sure." Dave the Wave said, "let's see a picture."

The only picture of her I had was in my wallet, and she had snipped it out of the JC Penney catalog from last Christmas—a waist-up shot of my girl, Winnie Peg, in a white cross your heart

number, shoulders back, back arched, hands on hips, smiling and relaxed as if this was how she always stood, short black hair contrasting the snowy skin. She couldn't write anything on the back because the other side of the page was a torn chunk of a black power sander, but in the letter accompanying the picture, she wrote—"My Darling Brian. I'm so glad we're together, and I miss you so. I'm wearing the took you gave me as I write these words. Stay sweet (and cute!), and I'm gonna try to make it down there for the Sheetrock and Popcorn Shrimp Enchantment Dance! Love ya' lots, Winnie Peg."

Unfortunately, I didn't have the letter with me. Lance snatched the picture from my hand, laughed, and sneered, "You dweeb! You cut this outta your mom's Christmas catalog!" He crumpled it up and tossed it into the road. My friends laughed.

"Don't do that!" I cried. "That's the only picture I have. She mailed it to me!"

"Sure she did!" Schmitty snickered, "and I'm taking Tawny Kitaen and the ZZ Top girls to the dance."

I ran into the street, dodging the honking traffic. Her eyes, the color of a British Columbia pine forest, watched me from the yellow median strip of the gray pavement. I snatched her picture, avoiding our school's short bus by mere inches, and dashed back to The Wall.

Lance said, "Come on, guys, let's get away from this weirdo...pretending to have a Canadian girlfriend."

"Yeah, Brian," Schmitty said, patting me on the back, "Those Canadian girls are out of our league, especially a bra modeling Canadian girl ... they'd never date Americans like us, especially a lyin' little greaser like you."

"Yeah ... you and your head full of dreams."

They left me at The Wall, pleading across the street, "Come on guys! I do have a Canadian girlfriend! Ya' gotta believe me!"

Their laughter decrescendoeed as they crossed the street and went to school. Why wouldn't they believe in my Winnie Peg? As I was thinking this, my good friends The Dapper Chapeaus, a local street-corner doo-wop group, came strolling by in their trademark zany hats.

"Hey, Brian. What's new?" they asked.

"Aw, hey Dapper Chapeaus, nothin' much, it's just that, well, you know how the big Sheetrock and Popcorn Shrimp Enchantment Dance is coming up, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well ... I have a girlfriend, but she lives in Canada, and she's gonna try to make it down here for it, that is, if she can get the time off from her bra modeling job, but, gosh darn it! Nobody believes me that I have a Canadian girlfriend."

"You have a Canadian girlfriend?" the Dapper Chapeaus asked.

"You guys believe me, right?"

"Sure, Brian. Why don't you tell us about her."

"Aw, I can't. Her beauty defies all description."

"Well, why don't you tell us about her through song?" They handed me a guitar.

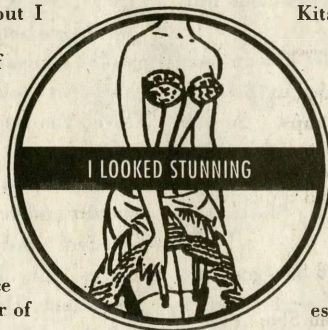
"I can't play guitar, guys. I can't even carry a tune."

"Sure you can, Brian. You just have to believe in the Power of Love."

"Okay, well, I'll try. Will you guys help me?"

"With pleasure."

"Well. Here goes nuthin'." I picked up the guitar and sang, accom-



I LOOKED STUNNING



panied by the heartwarming doo-wop sounds of The Dapper Chapeaus.

(first two times through: "doo-wop")

1. Canadian Girlfriend, up north a ways
Canadian Girlfriend, you'll meet her someday
My friends don't believe me (pa-pa-pa-pa, ma-ma-ma-ma)
But I swear she's true (pa-pa-pa-pa, ma)
Canadian Girlfriend (oooooooooooooooooooo)
I-ha-hi-ha-hi-lu-uh-uhve yooooo (wahhhhhhhhhhhh, he loves you true, he loves)

2. Canadian Girlfriend (sha-na-na-na), so sweet and cute
Canadian Girlfriend, what our love is uh-boot
She's a real beauty beauty (ooooooooo wahhhhhh)
With a maple leaf tattoo (ooooooooo wahhhhhh)
Canadian Girlfriend (ooooooooo weeee ooooooooo)
You-ha-hoo-love-me-hee-hee tooooooo (way oooo way oooo wah you love him to you love)

Bridge: When I first met you ("dip-dip-dip-doo" the whole time)
I couldn't let you leave my arms, even to pee
With your Vancouver style, your Nova Scotia smile,
You are the Canuck Princess to me-hee-hee-hee-hee

(Guitar solo) Spoken: Honey, you are my Candian girlfriend, and you are a special woman to me... and I'm well aware of the many vast sociological differences separating our two nation's cultures, but take my hand, and together dear, our love will unite our continent as one.

2. Canadian Girlfriend (ram ram ram ring)
Pour avec a moi u ce soir (ce soir) (sham lamb sham sing)
Canadian Girlfriend, je ne sais quoi
Maple syrup, hockey (shoop shoop wah, shoop shoop wah)
Back bacon toooooooooooooooooooooo-uh (shoop shoop wah shoo)
Canadian Girlfriend, I-ha-hi-ha-hi luuuuuuuuuuhve yooooooooooooooooo

When the song ended, I applauded. "Thanks for believing in me, Dapper Chapeaus, and thanks for singing a mean backup."

"You're welcome, Brian. Now you just remember what we told you about believing in the Power of Love, and all of your dreams will come true." They excused themselves, saying they had a gig on a nearby street-corner, and I went to class.

For the entire week before the dance, my friends tried fixing me up with a date, and there were some real pretty girls too, like Sally Sukowski from Home Ec, Patty Lynn Chechesnik from Shop, even Lindy Lou Lindeen from Pre-Algebra, but I turned them down, for I knew my Winnie Peg would make it. I just knew.

She'd call me in the middle of the night when she had free time to escape the glamorous world of bra modeling. She'd awaken me from enchanted dreams of my Great White Northern Goddess, resplendent in a silver sequined golden gossamer emerald prom dress, descending the heavens in the warming rays of a soft Manitoba autumn light, holding a Stanley Cup in her right arm and a moosehead in her left.

And when I'd get excited, my Canadian girlfriend said, "Oh baby, just you shut your mouth." She said, "Shhhhh." She said, "Shhhhh."

"I will be at the dance, Brian. Don't worry. I'll be late, but I wouldn't miss it for anything. Meet me at the gymnasium with a white corsage, and I'll bring you a crimson boutonniere. Don't listen to those hoser friends of yours. Our love is international, and they are mere provincials."

"Okay, I will, dearie," I'd say, and sometimes in the dark, I'd rise from the bed to embrace her, but then I'd wake up, and all I'd be hugging was the stupid pillow.

I arrived at the prom in a rental tux and my dad's black dress shoes. I even combed my hair. I looked stunning. I wish you ladies could've seen me, because you would've all been like, "Oh my God, is that Brian? I wonder what he's doing later on tonight? Maybe he'll wanna have sex with me. Gosh, if only I could be so lucky."

The gymnasium was nicely decorated with multi-colored streamers and hanging papier mache sheetrock and popcorn shrimp. Couples stood around waiting for the dance to start. I was by myself. Lance and my other friends were there, and they started razzing me.

"So, goin' stag, ehhhhh Brian?" Lance joked, exaggerating the "eh", because in Canada, everybody says "eh" at the end of their sentences.

"Where's your Canadian girlfriend? Canada?" Dave sarcastically asked.

"Modeling bras in Quebec City?" Schmitt snickered.

"Man oh man," Lance said, shaking his head like he was looking at the biggest turd in the toilet, "You could have taken Suzie Matthews to this dance, or Dawn Calhoun, or Ladonna Cornelius, all bodacious babes, and instead, you're left holding a corsage for nobody. Schmu-huh-huh-huh-huh-key."

I refused to dignify their responses. I knew she'd be there.

The Dapper Chapeaus were the prom band, and everybody danced up a storm. I sat on the front row bleachers at half-court and waited, staring at the disco ball, the dancers, the basketball championship pennants.

The dance went on, and on, and on, and Mr. Sheetrock and Miss Popcorn Shrimp were crowned in a moving ceremony, and my Winnie Peg was nowhere to be found. I left the bleachers and drowned my sorrows in cup after Dixie cup of unspiked fruit punch. How could I have been so stupid? I dreamt it all. She's too beautiful, just a figment of my overactive pubescent imagination.

The Dapper Chapeaus announced the last dance, the aptly named "Last Dance," by Donna Summer. I watched all the happy dancing couples and lamented my miserable fate. No, I couldn't just date an American girl like everybody else. I couldn't set my standards at a reasonable level. I had to go for the international women, the jet setting bra supermodels. But if you readers could've seen her, you wouldn't have blamed me. As you all know, "Last Dance" begins very quiet, real sneaky like, like you think that's the way the whole song's gonna go, and I actually figured it was gonna end soon, so I made to leave, since my Winnie Peg had broken my heart and my dreams were stupid. I planned to go home and listen to the uplifting musical groups my older brother listened to, like Flipper, and the Germs, but not before beating the shit out of the Dapper Chapeaus for making me believe in The Power of Love...but then, the disco beat started, and I looked to my right, and the entrance to the gym opened, and prismatic light bathed the door. The crowd of dancers froze and turned. The Dapper Chapeaus stopped singing. I rose from the half-court bleachers and walked across the basketball court. At first, I couldn't confirm who it was because the light burned my retinas, but she stepped forward, and I knew.

It was Winnie Peg. Fellow classmates, male and female, openly wept at her beauty. The Dapper Chapeaus stood frozen, slack-jawed and drooling. Her emerald prom dress was elegant and refined. When God made bra models, He really broke the mold with my Winnie Peg. He wasn't fartin' around on the job that day. The lights from the disco ball sparkled across her diamond tiara strapped across her short black hair and royal mountie-ette forehead.

The crowd of students parted as she ran to me and leapt into my waiting arms. We spun around and around and around.

She looked me in the eyes. "Hey, eh," she said. "Sorry for bein late der." She held out the crimson boutonniere. "Lookit what I got here for ya."

She strapped it to my wrist, and I held out the corsage and pinned it to her dress as The Dapper Chapeaus began singing Winnie Peg and me's favorite song:

"Sometimes when we touch, the honesty's too much/and I close my eyes and I wait a lonely lifetime."

"Ya' know, Brian," Winnie Peg said to me as we danced, "This is uh-boot the happiest day of my life." We kissed. Not to kiss and tell, but there was tongue.

Now everybody was in tears, even my dumbass metalhead friends. The two kids crowned Mr. Sheetrock and Miss Popcorn Shrimp, a couple of popular kids, attractive in a generic sort of way, relinquished their crowns to us, and my classmates cheered. As the Dapper Chapeaus sang, I looked over to them. They smiled at me and gave me the ol' "thumbs up."

And well, that's what happened. The next day, we got married and moved to Canada, where I trap and kill woodland creatures for fur coats. I haven't had a bad day since. Why would I? I'm married to a Canadian bra model.

THE MUSIC BOX

Josephina Gasca

From her customary perch on the cement stairs, Rosie watched Sophia Bueno walk down the street toward her with the characteristic swish and sway of her hips keeping her floral dress in a state of perpetual motion. The ringing of paleta vendors' bells, the whirl of traffic and dogs barking from behind the fences along the sidewalk filled her ears as Sophia glided over the pavement toward home. The smoky scent of barbecue set her stomach to rumbling. All eyes swung toward her on the busy avenue that late Saturday afternoon. She carried a bag of groceries in each hand. She held her chin high, the thick sweep of her brunette curls piled on top of her head bouncing in rhythm with her long steps. She wore dark sunglasses to shield her green eyes from the sun and to conceal her annoyance.

Sophia glanced over her right shoulder often, looking to the other side of the street. Every time she did this, she hoped against hope Enrique Carmel wouldn't be there, a half a block behind, following her. But no, he was there alright, as fastidious as ever in his cream-colored linen suit with his black hair and mustache neatly combed. It'd been almost a month since she'd moved out of their shared apartment, almost a month since she'd turned her back on their ten-year relationship, almost a month since she'd said her final goodbye. For a man who'd found any reason to be elsewhere when it came to her, she couldn't seem to shake loose of him now. She'd even tried to get the police to intervene on her behalf, but he'd threatened no violence, broken none of their laws. According to the police, there was no harm in their crossing paths, even though she lived in Wicker Park now and he lived and worked in the Gold Coast just as before.

Carefully adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses, Enrique waved at her as if encouraged, her glance having lasted a few fractions of a second longer than the usual head-turn-return-to-front maneuver. She lengthened her strides and hurried across the street to the apartment building where she lived. Rosie met her at the corner while she awkwardly balanced grocery bags, fumbling in her purse for her keys.

"Miss Sophia Bueno," Rosie greeted. "Buenos tardes."

"Buenos tardes," she replied distractedly, barely managing a polite smile. She paused on her doorstep, setting down her grocery bags on the stoop, and allowed her eyes to settle on the neighborhood psychic standing on the sidewalk below her.

Rosie was particularly tropical, dressed in a gauzy off-the-shoulder orange sundress and leather sandals. She held her short black curls at bay with a knotted orange scarf. She cupped her crystal ball in her right hand and peered into the depths of the sparkling glass.

"You're having man troubles, I see," Rosie said.

Sophia arched an eyebrow at her and leaned against the doorframe. "It's fairly obvious, wouldn't you say?" She laughed nervously. She'd heard stories about Rosie divining matters of the heart, sending answers through dreams. She wondered if she should dare to hope.

"You want to be rid of him, don't you?" Rosie asked.

Sophia glanced over her shoulder. Enrique stood next to a tree in the middle of the block on the other side of the street, waiting, watching her steadily. She nodded. "Yes, I want to be rid of him."

Rosie lowered her crystal ball and narrowed her black eyes, smiling. "If that's what you want, Miss Sophia Bueno," she said, "he'll be gone come morning."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"That," Rosie replied, plumbing the depths of Sophia's green eyes behind the dark lenses of her shades, "depends entirely upon you."

"How much will it cost?" Sophia asked, mining through her purse for her wallet.

Rosie patted her hand, stilling her search, and assured her, "You pay me what you think is appropriate. Tomorrow."

Sophia peered over her shoulder one last time. He was still there. She closed her purse before unlocking the door, retrieving her groceries and slipping into the hallway. "Alright then," she murmured to no one in particular.

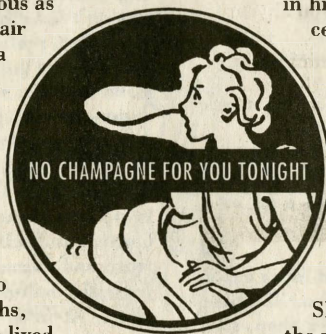
Rosie waved to Enrique Carmel and flashed a pearly smile in his direction before taking up her usual spot on the cement stairs. He jammed his hands in his pockets, disappointed at Sophia's leaving. He stared darkly at the impenetrable wall of blinds drawn on the inside of her second story windows. It was going to be another long night.

Much later in the evening just before she lay down to sleep, Sophia saw Enrique through a fingertip-sized slat in her bedroom blinds. He was pacing back and forth across the street, smoking a cigar and occasionally looking up toward her windows or down toward the hall door.

She snuggled under the cool sheets with her back to the window, hugging her pillow tightly. She'd opted for air-conditioning even though she preferred fresh air, because she wanted to ensure that her windows were locked when she slept at night. She wasn't sure what Enrique was capable of anymore, not that she ever knew. She closed her eyes, fervently hoping that Rosie's intervention would finally rid her of Enrique and his relentless haunting. She drifted off to an eddying of blurred dreams until she found her way into a theater and everything came sharply into focus.

Sophia stepped onto the dark stage from the wings. The lights lining the stage floor sparkled like wet pearls in the sunlight. In the center of the stage was a table. The ornately carved silver music box Enrique had given her for her birthday, the last one he remembered, oh, about eight years ago, rested on its center. She walked over, the patting of her bare feet echoing through the empty theater, and opened the lid. The figure of the dancer had changed. It was the size of a G. I. Joe doll, only it was an exact replica of Enrique Carmel, standing there in his favorite gray pinstripe suit with his shiny shoes together and his fists at his hips. There was no turnkey in this version of the music box so she placed her index finger on the top of his head. As the music, "Some Enchanted Evening," began to play, his eyes popped open and he raised his arms as if acknowledging the adulation of an invisible crowd. And he revolved slowly in front of the three-sided mirror before him. She wondered as she watched him if, like a baby, there was a soft spot on the top of his head, and what, if anything, would happen if she applied more pressure?

Enrique smiled at his own reflection in the mirrors surrounding him as he spiraled slowly. He arched his chin. In his reflection, he saw conqueror, conquistador, matador, irresistible. He





kept smiling even as his suit blurred and melted around his masculine form until it transformed into a dove-colored dress with a plunging neckline and back that billowed around his legs. Even as he internally quaked with horror, his face remained masked in a placid Mona Lisa smile. Occasionally, his skirt would lift in the swirl to reveal strappy stiletto heels that made his arches scream and pinched mercilessly at his tender feet. He burned with shame as his masculinity was reduced to that of a mustached queen. And all this time, there was this pressure like an anvil being balanced atop his head.

Sophia covered her mouth with her hand, giggling at Enrique's predicament.

"You look ridiculous," a man's voice thundered.

The music stopped.

The mirrors trembled.

Sophia recognized Enrique's voice and looked all around her, walking around the four corners of the table with her finger still pressed against the dancer's head. She fully expected him to appear onstage behind her. She smoothed her lacy gown reflexively as her thoughts plummeted to her bare feet and unpainted toe nails, then skyrocketed to her sleep-mussed hair.

Enrique recognized the voice as his own, but could not respond, his lips paralyzed into a smile as he continued in his relentless spin.

"Don't you know how to dress? Haven't I taught you anything? YOU LOOK RIDICULOUS!"

Sophia realized with a start that the voice was coming from the music box. She bent down, peering closely over the dancer's shoulders.

Enrique blushed furiously from the crown of his head down to the tips of his hairy toes. She felt the heat of it through her

◆ fingertip.

◆ "Don't open your mouth. You embarrass me. Don't open your mouth," the voice insisted. "It's obvious that you're uneducated, uncivilized, that you don't even know the difference between a salad fork and a dinner fork and a shrimp fork. DON'T OPEN YOUR MOUTH, I said. You're fat. No dessert for you tonight. You're fat. No champagne for you tonight. You're fat. Why couldn't you look like *her*, or *her*, or *her*?"

The mirrors shuddered. Sophia shuddered. Enrique shuddered. Or did her shudder simply pass down through her fingertip to him?

"Leave? You can't leave. You're nothing. A piece of gutter trash no one else in their right mind would have. Leave? I don't think so." The voice boomed with laughter. "Lay down now and take it. Take it like the gutter trash you know you are."

The mirrors quaked. Sophia quaked and released her hold on the dancer's head. Rosie had asked her if she wanted to be rid of Enrique Carmel. *Without a doubt*, she thought, her eyes long since bled dry. *Without a doubt*.

The dancer kept spinning in his slow spiral without her. She saw her own face in the reflection, solid and unwavering. Enrique saw her there, too, crisply beautiful and unattainable with a grace that made him feel smaller and more foolish than his own reflection in the mirrors. Sophia sighed at the tears staining his plastic cheeks, too many years too late and too little, and closed the lid.

In the morning, there was no sign of Enrique Carmel, not even a cigar stub on the street across from her windows. She knew this, because she checked. By that afternoon, she'd raised all the blinds, flung open all the windows, and allowed all that fresh air to come sweeping in. ♡

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EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK.



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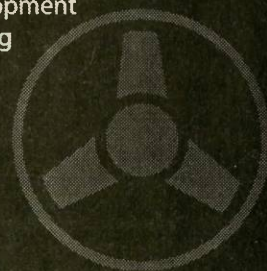
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REMOVING THE BOOT

Megan Stielstra

Penny got a collect call from the Illinois Department of Corrections and her imagination went a little crazy. What if it was Elliot, on a payphone, fresh inky fingertips, using his one phone call? Wishful thinking, she knew: Elliot was a law-abiding citizen. Elliot paid his taxes on time. Elliot looked forward to jury duty. Elliot, Elliot, Elliot. You know him, the guy behind the glass wall at the auto pound on Sacramento. He takes your VIN and your hundred-and-five dollars. He is stone-faced and cold, oblivious to sob stories or threats. "It's illegal," he recites, "to park or stand to obstruct a roadway less than eighteen inches of width on a two-way street or ten inches on a one-way street in accordance with the City of Chicago Department of Revenue." Elliot deeply respected city departments and legal institutions in general, all except marriage, seeing as he'd left Penny—his soft, thick, pink-faced wife—left her without so much as a Dear John all alone in their big empty house on the boulevard, watching anxiously out the picture window.

After he'd been gone a week without word, Penny went to the auto pound to confront him. She rehearsed what she'd say on the drive down, trying out facial expressions in the rearview while waiting at red lights. Here is angry. Here is hurt. Here is dignified. She'd say this: "Elliot, how could you?" Her tone was powerful, dramatic, very NYPDBlue. "You don't just leave. That's the coward's way out. It's spineless, and I deserve better." She tried out that last phrase a couple of different ways—I deserve better. I *deserve* better. I *deserve better*—and decided in the end to emphasize the I—I—me, this is about me, me standing up for myself, me fighting for what's mine. Penny felt empowered as she sped down Sacramento—*forty* in a *thirty* zone, thank you very much!—and turned up Gloria Gaynor on the stereo.

The auto pound is a football field of barbed parking lot, gray and dismal, full of trapped, stacked cars and angry people waiting in line at the trailer office to present their registration, pay their fees, and bitch and moan. They don't want to pay the tow fee. They want to contest. It didn't say no parking. The no parking sign was behind a tree. The no parking sign had graffiti on it. What do you mean, ten dollar per day storage fee? So if I got towed at midnight, that's an extra ... what? What's expired? The line stretched back between the ropes, out the door, down the ramp, and into the parking lot. It was a slow-moving line and the closer Penny got to the front, the more she lost her nerve. She imagined Elliot looking up over his glasses at her, his shirt buttoned all the way up his neck. "Elliot, how could you—" she'd say as rehearsed, but he'd cut her off. "Vehicle identification?" he'd ask, as if she was any old person waiting in line, not his wife of five years who he'd abandoned without warning! and she'd be so stunned that she'd forget her speech. "VEHICLE IDENTIFICATION," he'd repeat, loudly, like she was deaf, and she'd stammer and eventually cry.

None of that happened, though, because Elliot wasn't there.

It was a woman behind the glass partition, and her hair was dyed red like a candy apple. "Vehicle identification?" she said. She didn't look up at Penny as she spoke, just held her hand towards the hole in the wall, waiting for the appropriate paperwork to be slid through. Her nails were red acrylic and she wore cheap gold rings on every finger. Penny knocked timidly on the glass to get her attention. "May I speak with Elliot, please?" she asked.

The woman raised her eyebrows. They matched her hair. "Who are you?" she asked.

Penny hesitated. "His wife," she said.

The eyebrows went higher. Penny was suddenly afraid of what this woman knew about her, like maybe she was Elliot's confidant and had listened to him talk about how he and his wife were growing apart. How she had put on weight over the past couple years. How he didn't come to bed 'til after she'd gone to sleep, and if she tried to touch him, he took his pillow and went to the couch and one night she'd gotten desperate and had put on some godawful lacy underwear and tried to—she just tried too hard.

"He transferred to another office," the woman said.

Penny couldn't speak.

"Will you hurry up?" snapped someone behind her. "I'm getting old just—"

Her eyes were tearing up. She didn't know what to do with her pride.

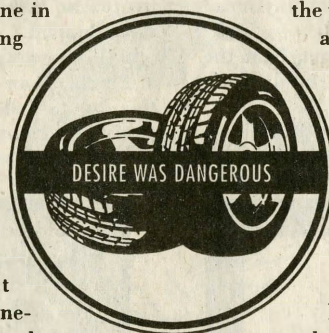
"Come on!" came the voice behind her, and another voice said, "Goddammit, lady!" and lots of other voices started to grumble and raise, and the redhead stood up behind the glass wall. "You're going to have to step asi—"

"Where is he?" Penny asked. Her voice was small and scared. She wanted to melt and trickle towards the door.

"What did you say?" asked the redhead, loudly, annoyed, "I can't hear—"

"I said, where is he?" Penny found a spare ball of strength hidden away in the corner of her stomach and looked the woman in the eye. One-Mississippi. Two-Mississippi. Three-Mississippi. "I'm sorry," the redhead finally said. "I don't know if he'd want me to tell you."

Penny imagined breaking down the glass and getting that woman in a chokehold across the counter. "You tell me where my husband is, you Crayola-haired faux-gold ghetto bitch," she'd hiss, and would grasp hold of one long, sculpted nail between two fingers and bend it precariously back. "I don't know," the redhead would gasp from the limited air in her windpipe. A snap—a shriek—one nail down, four to go—"I asked you a question!" "I told you I don't"—*snap*—"know!"—*snap*—"Goddamn!"—*snap, snap*—"Still got five more, sweetheart!"—bending, bending, almost there—"Okay okay OKAY!" The woman'd write down an address with her one working hand and Penny would loosen her grip. She'd look up and see the miles and miles of people waiting in line to get their cars—all of them staring at her, mouths open, eyes pleading—and feel





an overwhelming sense of purpose. She'd rush to the door and throw it open. "Run, my friends!" she'd cry, as swarms of humankind ran to the lot and towards their vehicles. "Go! Be free! Drive home to your wives!"

That was the fantasy.

This was the reality: Penny, in a baggy dress from Target and too much eye makeup, pressing her palms against the glass dividing wall. Never before had she felt this low. She was begging a woman with fake red hair to tell her about her very own husband. "Please," she implored, humbly, simply. Pride was gone, only hope left. "Please."

The women looked down at her paperwork.

There goes the hope.

It came back on the day the Department of Corrections called. Penny accepted the charges and had fun imagining Elliot in prison. Elliot needing her. Elliot in a cell with a guy named Chuckie. Penny knew what it was like in prison. She watched Oz.

It wasn't him, though. It was a mechanical-sounding voice telling her that the conversation would be recorded. Then a fuzzy joggly sound. Then a man who thought she was someone else.

"Michelle?" said the man.

"No," said Penny. She'd wanted it to be Elliot. It'd be a lot easier to deal with him being taken away that it was with him leaving on his own.

"Is Michelle there?" the man asked.

"There is no Michelle here," she said.

"Yes, she lives there," he said. "She told me she did."

"I'm sorry," said Penny.

"Please," he said

Penny hung up.

She didn't want to deal with someone else's needs. She had too many of her own.

The Department of Corrections called many times over the next few months, but Penny never accepted the charges. She went around her daily business—operator for Triple A, cleaning the house, cable television—but always listened for the sound of Elliot's car in the driveway, checking the answering machine, the post office, the mailbox, the inbox: nothing. Still she waited—waited and waited and waited—until something finally happened.

Penny got a parking ticket. Her first ever. She'd stopped at K-Mart to pick up some of those Pledge Grab-it dusters that she had a coupon for, and had inadvertently parked outside the diagonal markings. Code 09-64-030(b). Twenty-five dollar fine. Twenty-one days 'til it doubled. She could hear Elliot's voice in the back of her head: "It's illegal. Illegal. Illegal."

Penny set the parking ticket in the center of the dining room table, poured herself a glass of wine, and sat down to consider her options. What should she do with it? The logical answer, of course, was to pay it. But Penny was a little bit angry with logic. Logic hadn't been good to her lately, why should she be good to it? She glared at the parking ticket. It made her think of Elliot: *you have broken the law*, it seemed to say, like on her birthday when he'd refused to dance with her in Buckingham Fountain. "We can't," he'd said, holding her arm. She'd toed off her shoes and implored him to live a little. "You're drunk," he'd said, and she'd said, "it's romantic," and he'd said, "it's illegal."

Penny took the ticket up to her bedroom and went to the clos-

et. From the top shelf she pulled a carved wooden box that she'd bought on her honeymoon in Santa Fe. She kept things that Elliot had given her over the years: origami birds he folded out of deli receipts, first-second-third-fourth anniversary presents, a stack of letters he'd written when they'd first met and had gone to different colleges in different states. She'd meant to put the ticket in the box, as if her parking outside the diagonal lines was another milestone in their relationship, but instead put the box on the floor and sat next to it, legs crossed, back against the bed. She took one of the letters out of its envelope, read the *Dear Penelope* at the top, and got up again. A few minutes later she returned with the wine, sat back down in the same place, and continued reading.

Here are some of the sentences: *I think of you often. We are fortunate to have met each other. I've been considering our future.*

There were others, but they all read the same: tepid, at best. Penny wondered how she ever thought he loved her. By the time she'd finished all the letters, the bottle was gone, too, and Penny cried twenty-six proof for all the things he was supposed to have said but hadn't. *I love you* and *I need you* and *sweet-heart* and *darling*, and before she knew it she was ripping the letters into little pieces, slowly at first, with deliberate, even tears—riiiip—*I think of you often?*—riiiip—*Fortunate to have met?*—riiiip—*You've been considering?* but as she threw the little confetti scraps into the air she knew that he was the closest she'd ever get to love—someone like her, so plain, so miserable, what chance did she have?—and the ripping got fast and angry and destructive, papers flying around the bedroom, origami birds crunched underfoot, deep gutsy sobs pulling from her middle 'til she finally collapsed in a lump and balled into the carpeting, that sniveling pathetic sort of crying, the soundtrack to desperate acts.

The phone rang then. Penny reached up to the bedside table, fell over, picked herself back up and let the receiver topple to her lap. "This is a collect call from the Illinois Department of Corrections," said the mechanical voice. "Will you accept the charges?"

She most certainly will.

"Michelle," he said, after a beat or two. "Baby, is that you?"

Penny bit back a wail. *Baby, is that you?* Why hadn't anyone ever said that to her?

"Baby?" he said again, and Penny realized that she'd have to say something back. She felt fuzzy, like she might faint, and all she wanted to do was curl up around the phone and hear him say *baby* until she fell asleep. She sniffled loudly, and made some of those gaspy sounds like when you're trying to get your crying under control.

"Shhhh," he said. "I know."

The room was swirling now. "You do?" she asked, through the phlegm and salt.

"I do," he said. His voice was sad, and sensitive, and deep. Penny shut her eyes and imagined the man that wrapped around that voice. Strong arms, and a thick chest to lean against, and stubble, and eyes with very dark lashes. "I know how hard it is," he said.

He knows, Penny thought through the haze.

"Just remember that I love you," he said. Then he hung up, and Penny sat there on the floor, the phone pressed against her ear, listening to the silence where he'd once been.

The letter came a week later. It had Penny's address and Michelle's name typed on the front, and on the back was a blue



stamp that read THIS CORRESPONDENCE IS FROM AN INMATE OF THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS. Penny stood at her mailbox for a long time, looking at that envelope. Then she brought it inside, set it down in the middle of the dining room table, and looked at it some more.

Here is what she *should* do: write Return to Sender on it and put it back in the mailbox.

Here is what she *wanted* to do: open it, read it, memorize it, sleep with it, read it again, read it eighteen thousand times, and develop an elaborate fantasy.

Here is what she *did* do: sprint up the stairs, rush to the closet, pull down the Elliot box, close the letter into it, put it back on the shelf, slam the closet door and lean against it, breathing heavily.

This was how Penny always dealt with desire: ignored it, hid from it, denied it. Last year she'd tried one of those diets where you can't eat any complex carbohydrates, and, almost immediately, bagels started talking to her. *Eat me*, they'd say, *just this once*, and after a while the noodles joined in, and the crackers and Rice-a-Roni, too. Penny had to run around the kitchen with a Hefty Cinch Sac, sweeping all the offenders into it and throwing them to the curb.

She would not give in to desire. Desire was dangerous. She would be safe.

For a while anyhow, because more letters arrived—five, ten, twenty showing up in the mailbox. Penny put them all in the closet and closed the door, hoping to forget about them, but temptation is a strong drug. Every time she went into the room the closet would rattle. They wanted to be opened. They wanted to be free. She'd shut her eyes and try to calm the beating in her chest—no go. The more letters Michelle received, the more the closet shook. Penny remembered Poltergeist and got paranoid. She avoided the bedroom, keeping the same clothes on for weeks at a time and sleeping on the couch. She fought a great inner battle: *open it! No! Yes! No! Yes! Shut-up-shut-up shut-up!* The more letters she put in the box, the louder the yelling in her head 'til eventually she decided *enough is enough* and let the envelopes stack up in the mailbox. She took to driving mindlessly around the city, putting distance between herself and Pandora's box. She'd stay away for hours, camping out in bookstores and wandering the aisles of grocery stores. There were dark circles under her eyes and she was *thiiiiis* close to losing all her cookies.

That's when it happened: the parking ticket. 09-64-100(g). Parking within thirty inches of a traffic signal. "Goddammit!" she yelled, grabbing the orange envelope. "Why can't you leave me the fuck alone!" She ripped furiously, dropping her purse to the ground to get at it with both hands, taking the small pieces and shredding them even smaller 'til there was nothing left and then she stopped. She stood there, on the sidewalk, breathing heavily, and realized—as the wind picked up the orange scraps and spun them in the air—that she felt good. Damn good. Elliot-free, the big fat monkey off her back, surrounded by calm, her inner peace all purged of crap, Z-E-N Zen and D-O-N-E done with it-over it-past it. She felt so good, in fact, that the next day she parked within fifteen inches of a fire hydrant while she ran into the Currency Exchange. When she saw the familiar orange underneath the windshield wipers, she felt a rush which could only be likened to her niece Amber's description of cocaine. "A hundred dollars, eh?" she said, as she grabbed up the ticket. "This is what I think of your hundred dollars, Elliot!" and

the confetti hit the wind. The next morning, it was street cleaning. Penny drove around looking for the signs attached to trees, and parked wherever she saw them. One, two, three, four tickets by three p.m., a grand total of two hundred dollars sailing to the sky, and Penny was giddy. The day after that it was loading zones, and then underpasses, and then disabled parking in public and private lots, and she felt wild and reckless and drove right up onto the sidewalk in front of 7-Eleven as she ran in for a slurpee. When she came out—BAM!—the boot.

Penny stared. Then she laughed. Then she walked into the nearest bar and sat there for the next six hours drinking Maker's Mark until somebody put her in a cab and she teeter-tottered into the house, made for the closet, and read every damn letter he'd sent.

This time the temperature was *juuust* right: boiling burning scalding hot. All the right words were present and accounted for: *love, cherish, desperate, desire*, and *Henry*. His name. *Henry*. Henry loved her and cherished her and was desperate with desire and didn't know if he could go on sitting in that jail cell going crazy from Not Knowing where she was and what she was doing and if she was still his or not and in her wild, drunken, wobbly hand she wrote *I Love You* on the back of a picture postcard, took it through the midnight darkness to the mailbox, and made it back inside before she passed out.

So it began.

Penny and Henry wrote every day. Theirs were long, soul-searching letters. Henry asked for forgiveness: *I'm making good in the eyes of society, babe*, he wrote, *but what am I in your eyes?* Penny wept over his words. When she found out what he was asking forgiveness for, she used it as yet another piece of evidence that they were destined. Henry in prison for grand theft auto? A coincidence? I think not! Penny was smart enough not to laugh in the face of fate, and this—THIS!—was fate. She was in love and you could see it. She had that glow that they talk about, lit up like a lightbulb as she walked, and since her car had been impounded, she walked everywhere. With the walking came the weight loss, and with the weight loss came the new clothes, and the confidence, the love of life, of her fellow man, of herself, and everything was wonderful and beautiful and perfect.

Except for one thing: she wasn't Michelle, but she couldn't have managed to ignore *that* fact if it hadn't've been for *this* one: Henry wanted to see her. He wrote it at the end of every letter.

Eventually there were more letters than there were excuses.

The visit room was crowded with couples and families reuniting. In the middle of all of them, Penny sat alone at a metal table, staring at her hands in her lap and waiting. She had on a new dress. Size eight. From Marshall Fields. She'd gotten a make-over that same morning at the Mac counter, and there was perfume, too—Dior—and a manicure. She figured the only way to kill Henry's shock at her not being Michelle was to be better than Michelle, so there she was—better—the best. She had never looked so good. Amazing, what love will do to a girl: you start to see yourself the way he sees you, and Henry, Henry loved her—didn't he?—wasn't he?—where was he? A couple of guys had just walked in, all wearing denim and looking around for their mothers-girlfriends-wives-children. Was he there? Penny inhaled sharply and looked back at her hands. She shouldn't be here. *This was a horrible, horrible mistake,*

she thought, and started to stand up.

That was when she felt it.

The look. That at-you, in-you, through-you look. Penny lifted her head slowly and—there. He was leaning against the wall at the far end of the room and everyone else suddenly vanished. He was big and burly and beautiful and she felt drunk and their eyes locked and Penny knew this was him.

"Hey," came a voice at her elbow. She glanced up quickly and saw a wispy little guy wearing the same denim shirt. "Hello," she said, being polite, and then spun back to Henry, her hair spinning, almost slow motion, like a shampoo commercial.

"Okay if I sit here?" the little guy asked, indicating the empty chairs at the table. "I'm waiting for my girlfriend."

"Whatever," said Penny, not really listening, too involved in this first seduction. Henry's eyes were all over her body, traveling up her feet, legs, stomach, chest, neck, mouth and back on down, a wave of warmth. She was acutely aware of heaving. She hadn't ever heaved before.

"She must be running late," said the little guy, sitting down across from her.

"Oh," said Penny. Every second Henry didn't touch her was agony and the anticipation mounted, but something about drawing this moment out was strangely intoxicating—

"She'll be here, though," said the little guy. His face was a bit pockmarked.

"Uh-huh," Penny said, completely oblivious to everything but Henry. She wanted him to grab her, maybe a little too rough,

♦ but how rough was too rough when—

"I'm kind of nervous. I haven't seen her in a really long time," the little guy was going on. Penny turned to face him and shot him a very calculated look, the same one you give to the guy who won't stop talking when you're trying to read. Then back to Henry, back to heaving.

"Are you waiting for someone?" asked the little guy.

"Yes," she said. *I'm waiting for that hunkrock beefcake leaning against the wall, and I'm going to go over there and climb him like a tree.*

"That's good," said the little guy. "I mean, it's so nice that you came. We get to wondering in here. Like with Michelle—that's my girlfriend—it was absolute torture for a while because I—"

For a single moment, everything stopped, like the pause button had been hit. Penny suddenly found herself being pulled by two very strong opposite forces. She turned and looked at the little guy. Then she turned and looked at the beefcake. Back and forth, back and forth.

"—didn't know if she still loved me, you know?" Henry was saying. "So I'm just saying, be sure to tell him," he finished, and smiled a big, toothy grin.

Penny smiled back. "I will," she said, and then she leaned across the table and took Henry's hands between hers. "Thank you," she said, and stood up. She walked out of the room, feeling both men's eyes at her back.

On the way out, she stopped and asked directions to the nearest grocery store.

She was craving bagels like you wouldn't believe.



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ROCKET TO EARTH

Prof. Joe Mena

NARRATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, Pennsylvania Coal Company is proud to broadcast another installment of Invisible World Radio Theater, the most thrilling adventure stories on the airwaves! Remember, dear listener, Pennsylvania Coal is the coal with that attractive blue glow, perfect for all your heating and cooking needs. Pennsylvania Coal comes in three useful sizes: small, for utility stoves, medium, for most coal-burning models, and large, for industrial heating needs. Make a call to your local coal salesman tomorrow and ask for Pennsylvania Coal by name! And now, ladies and gentlemen, we're pleased to present, "Rocket to Earth", starring Lon Vidor and the lovely Mary Pitworth, starlet of cinema and stage, recently voted Best On-Screen Personality by MovieGoer Weekly!

AIR: Foxtrot-One, Foxtrot-One, this is Charley-Two, Charley-Two on Venus Space Station Delta. Over. Mission command, I'm getting a visual of an unidentified flying object heading earthbound at an unconfirmed speed. It just passed one of the moons of Venus here, going quick as a comet, sir.

BASE: Charley-Two, this is General Chalmers at HQ. We're picking it up on our radar right now. It's moving like lightning. Are you still able to view it? What's it look like, son?

AIR: I only caught a glimpse, sir. It was black and sharp, like a rocket of some kind. There were some kind of tail fins along the exhaust end and it came to a sharp point in the nose area.

BASE: It looks like it's heading back your way now, Charley-Two. Can you tell if it's one of ours?

AIR: Definitely not, sir. Over. It's on a direct course for the space station, sir. Should I scramble our defenses?

BASE: Let's see what we're dealing with here, son. We don't want to make anyone uncomfortable up there.

AIR: Mission command, it seems to be slowing. It seems to opening a hatch of some kind. Wait a minute, wait a minute, it seems to be a kind of ray cannon, no, sir, I ... Oh, God, no, no ... No!!

BASE: Charley-Two, this is Foxtrot-One. Charley-Two, this is Foxtrot-One. Over? Over? We've lost them. Transmit a message to Astroman. Tell him we're in a code red situation. He's our only hope now.

ASTRO: Mission Command, this is Astroman, the Man From Beyond the Stars! How can I be of service to God, country, and man?

BASE: Astroman, thank goodness you picked up our transmission. We have a hostile spacecraft, a rocket of some kind, flying on a direct course to Earth. They've just attacked the Venus outpost!

ASTRO: Say no more, General Chalmers. I'm on my way!

When truth and justice are in doubt, Astroman is there! So says the Man From Beyond the Stars!

NAR: With that, Astroman, atomic superhero, servant of God, country, and man, flew speedily into the depths of space. Armed with his atomic powers of flight, super-strength, and cold fusion breath, he hurtled past shooting stars and comet dust in his silver spacesuit, intercepting the black rocket as it sped towards Planet Earth.

ASTRO: General, I see the rocket now. It's heading directly towards our planet, just as you said. I'll make short work of this outer space villain and be back to Earth in time to finish that game of chess I left. Have no fear, so says the Man From Beyond the Stars!

BASE: Good luck, Astroman ...

ASTRO: MY God! No! No!

BASE: Astroman? Astroman? Are you there?

ASTRO: Arghhh! It's ... it's firing a death ray of some kind upon me. It's ... it's more powerful than anything I've ever faced ... I will try to hold it off, but prepare for the end, humble Earth! Prepare for the end! So says the Man From Beyond the Stars!

BASE: Astroman! Astroman?

ASTRO: Argh!!!! The humanity! The humanity ...

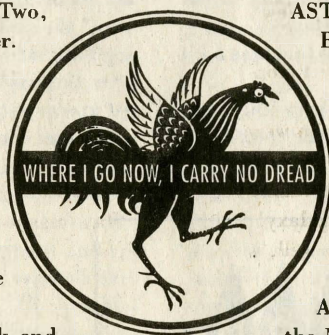
ASE: We've lost his signal. Good Lord, Astroman, the Man From Beyond the Stars, is dead. What can we do? There's only gamble left, only one more chance ...

Send out a call to arms to the Noble Five. Yes, I know they've been disbanded for nearly thirty years. Yes, thirty years. But they're our only hope now. Noble Five ... Noble Five ... this is Mission Command ... this is Mission Command ... SOS ... SOS ... We need to find out where these superheroes are now! The last anyone had heard, the Human Furnace had become a Hollywood actor, the Molecular Boy and Queen Bee had gotten married and after a long life together fighting crime, are now living in a retirement home, the Night Owl, the Man Without Dread, had lost his mind and is now being kept in a mental facility up in Tacoma somewhere. We need to transmit this message! There are only a few minutes to spare ... SOS ... SOS ...

NAR: At that moment, in a luxurious senior citizen retirement facility somewhere in the most exclusive part of Hollywood Hills, husband, Jack Elroy, and his wife, Wendy Elroy, were engaged in a most dramatic game of shuffleboard, enjoying the early afternoon sun. Little did the other residents of the Sunnyvale Retirement Facility know that Jack Elroy and his wife Wendy, now aged well into their late seventies, had once been the famous masked adventurers known as The Molecular Boy, Master of All Matter, and The Queen Bee, the Girl with the Deadly Particle Sting.

BOY: Wendy, dear, did you hear that?

BEE: What is that, darling?





BASE: Noble Five ... Noble Five ... this is Mission Command ... SOS ...SOS

BOY: It sounds like ...

BEE: It couldn't be ...

BASE: Noble Five ... Noble Five ... this is Mission Command ... SOS ...SOS. Do you read us?

NAR: Touching his hand to the silver communicator which had never left his wrist, Jack Elroy sat up and responded as quickly as he could, his aged hands trembling.

BOY: Mission Command, this is Molecular Boy.

BASE: Molecular Boy! Good heavens! You're still alive. We didn't know if ... well, if you were still with us.

BOY: I'm still here. So is my wife, the Queen Bee. It's been quite a long time since we've been in contact with you. We weren't sure if you'd just forgotten about us. Well, you, well, you've probably been busy.

BASE: Molecular Boy, Queen Bee, we need your help. A menacing rocketship is headed on a path towards Earth and it means us harm! I'm sad to have to tell you that it's already taken the lives of one of your colleagues.

BEE: One of our colleagues?

BASE: We, well, we lost contact with Astroman a few moments ago.

BOY: Astroman! Why, if he, well, if he couldn't stop it, what hope do we have?

ASE: But, you're, well, you along with Astroman were part of the Noble Five! All of you, armed with your own terrific superpowers, were a team dedicated to fighting and eliminating evil in every corner of the globe, every part of the galaxy!

BOY: That was over forty years ago, son. We, well, we're not quite the same.

BASE: But surely, you could ...

BOY: I'm seventy-nine years old, for goshsakes. I walk with two canes. In my youth, I could transform a wall of bricks into a wall of chocolate pudding and back again. Now the only time I use my powers of mastery over all known matter is to make my food softer to eat. And my wife, the Queen Bee, why, once she had been wasp-waisted, agile, swift ...

BEE: I'm about a hundred pounds overweight. I don't apologize. Cream puffs. Cream puffs turned out to be my secret weakness.

BASE: But surely, you, you could convince the Human Furnace. I'm told he's still active, that he's aged well.

BEE: He's only interested in money. A few years ago, a group of evil Russian Cosmonauts had sent a radioactive meteor hurtling towards the Empire State building. When we contacted the Human Furnace, he said the only way he would get involved was if he was getting paid.

BASE: But, this, this might be the end for all of us ...

BOY: I really wish we could help. But I have a hard time of it even trying to stand.

BEE: Don't mind my husband, General Chalmers. We will assemble the remaining members of the Noble Five and will stand ready to defend our planet once again.

BASE: Good Heavens. The fate of our planet rests in such strange hands. This is Mission Command, over and out.

BEE: Well, my darling, are we to sit here, much more the useless, waiting to see who solves the problems our world faces? Or

♦ shall we once again answer the call to arms as Molecular Boy and the Queen Bee?

♦ BOY: But, well, I hate to admit it, but I'm afraid, dear. If this rocket ship destroyed our old friend, Astroman, what hope do we face? Even at the height of our powers, well, Astroman always carried the burden of the weight.

BEE: I am afraid, too, Jack. But I rather have fear in my heart, facing this danger, than just sit here ... waiting. I wonder if the old costumes will still fit.

BOY: I can always use my powers to be sure they do, dear. Shall we try and summon the Night Owl then, dear? I believe we might include him on this.

BEE: I think it would only be fair to him. I wonder how reliable he is at the moment, though.

BOY: He was very ill the last time we saw him. Poor ol' Brent Burkwood, the Man Without Dread, locked up in an asylum. The last time we visited him, it seemed he hadn't slept for days. He was nearly delirious. He said all his old enemies were haunting him from beyond the grave. He said he could see the ghosts of the Evil Brain and the Green Magnet floating around his room.

BEE: His eyesight was very bad, darling. He confused me for Captain Massive last we visited.

BOY: His eyesight used to enable him to see through the dark of night, directly into the hearts of criminals and the innocent alike. Now, he's kept up in that padded cell, like a ninny. Should we pose as his family members, wanting to take him for a walk? He doesn't get too many visitors. Not since Dirk Bannon, his sidekick, passed on.

BEE: It might be easier for you, darling, to transform the wall of his room into air and I could fly in and carry him out and then ... (*BEE laughs*) We can dream still, can't we?

BOY: Family members it is.

NAR: And like that, the daring duo slipped as quickly as they could into their old costumes, Jack Elroy in a moment becoming Molecular Boy, in dashing red, and his wife, Wendy Elroy, in striped yellow and black, when after a few adjustments for her added girth, revealed herself to be the Queen Bee! No sooner had they donned their hero's garb than they were aboard the Noble Five rocket, stored in the parking facility of the Sunnyvale Retirement Home, skybound, stopping only briefly to free Brent Burkwood, the Night Owl, the Man Without Dread, from his asylum quarters in the Little Pines Rest Facility, before resuming their flight towards destiny.

BOY: So Night Owl, how does it feel to be free of that tiny room? Free to spread your wings again?

OWL: A little scary, I guess. They treat me very nice there. The structure in my daily life there, well, it does me well. I find I need order the older I get. Change scares me. So, well, so Astroman is ... is ... really gone then?

BOY: It seems hard to understand, doesn't it?

OWL: I didn't think, well, I never thought it was possible. I thought he became more powerful the older he got. I just, well, I always imagined him showing up at my funeral, adding a touch of class to the whole thing. He was the last one of us, well, the last one who was still involved, flying around, foiling capers, that sort of thing. I thought I'd be the first to go, surely.

BOY: We've just left Earth's atmosphere. There's no sign of the



rocket ship yet.

OWL: That's good. I hope it either flies past us or deals with us quickly.

BOY: Night Owl, just listen to you. Where has your courage gone?

OWL: It died with my sidekick, young Dirk Bannon.

BEE: Dirk was sixty-seven, Brent. He died of heart failure.

OWL: Heart failure! We all know what he died of! A plot! An evil mastermind's scheme! It only seemed he died of heart failure, when in reality, the Evil Brain concocted a scheme so brilliant, so diabolical, that ...

BEE: The Evil Brain blew himself up nearly twenty years ago, Brent. You tried to stop him, but, well, we were all too late.

BOY: I think I know what you're afraid of, Night Owl.

OWL: You do?

BOY: You carry the oldest fear in the world with you, Man Without Dread. You, like all of us, are afraid to be alone.

OWL: It's true, Molecular Boy, it's true. When I had Dirk, well, even when we weren't fighting crime, well, he was like a son to me. And even after he passed, I still had my work. Unlike you two, I fought crime well into my sixties. But then, well ...

BOY: All of your fellow crime fighters, even the criminals, began to die natural deaths ...

OWL: When the Laughing Thief died, I never felt so lonely.

BEE: Well, we will face and defeat this evil threat, together, as we always have, as the Noble Five, as a team.

OWL: Have you tried contacting the Human Furnace yet?

BEE: No, not yet, Night Owl. I'm sorry to admit the Human Furnace is the one we really need. Beside Astroman, he was the most powerful.

BOY: Troy Banister was never interested in anything but fame. He didn't care a dime about the people we saved. As long as he had his face on the front page, well ... we might as try and contact him. (beat) Molecular Boy to Human Furnace ... Molecular Boy to Human Furnace ... Troy, do you read me? SOS ... Molecular Boy to Human Furnace ... SOS ...

FURN: This is Troy Bannister. Jack Elroy, is that you, old chum? Why, I haven't heard from you in a lifetime!

BOY: Troy, the entire planet is danger. We need your help right away.

FURN: Whoa, just wait a second there, chum. Troy Bannister got out of the superhero biz years ago. Didn't you read the headlines? I'm an actor now. Troy Bannister, King of Screen and Stage!

BEE: This is Queen Bee, Troy. Please listen we need your help. You must ...

FURN: Listen, Wendy, doll. I'm too old to be playing games. I have a great movie career, a beautiful home, plenty of lady friends, what could running around the globe possible grant me that I don't already have?

BEE: A sense of dignity.

FURN: Ouch! The Queen Bee still has her sting! No, I'm sorry, gang. Not interested.

BEE: Human Furnace, you used to be so great. Why ... why did you change?

FURN: I'll tell you why I changed, doll. People stopped being impressed. I would fly by on a wind of flame and kids used to

♦ come out running in the street and wave to me. Then they gave up. They got used to seeing me do it. They started taking what ♦ I could do for granted. Expected me to save them every time they were in a jam. Not even saying thanks, just like it was my ♦ job or something. Well, I got sick of it. Me putting my neck on the line like that, without a thank you, even. Forget it. That's why I got into the movies. People look at you different when you're in the movies. They know you're something special. They're grateful when you walk by. You can save the public service for someone else. I got all the dignity I need.

BEE: But Human Furnace ...

FURN: Troy Bannister, over and out.

BOY: Well, that went as I expected.

BEE: It's terrible how one man could lose his sense of what's really important.

OWL: Without the Human Furnace now, we're doomed.

BOY: All we can do is to try to save the ones we love, I'm afraid.

BEE: Just a moment! Maybe there's one more gambit, Molecular Boy. Perhaps ... perhaps, we could contact Astroman's son?

BOY: Darling, I had forgotten he had a son.

BEE: Well, Astroman was very protective of him. He didn't want, well, atomic supervillains coming after the poor boy in the middle of the night. He wanted the child to have as normal a childhood as he could.

OWL: But, does he possess his father's powers?

BEE: Yes, for the most part. He was never interested in civil service, though. The boy, well, I believe he's in his thirties now, well, he felt slighted because his father was always off saving the planet. He swore he'd never use his super powers.

OWL: But if he knew, well, if we could tell him that the sake of the world hung in the balance ...

BEE: I believe he's living in an apartment somewhere in New Jersey. He sent us a Christmas card from there a few years ago.

OWL: What name does he go by? New Astroman? Astroman II? Son of Astroman?

BEE: Derek. He just goes by Derek. Like I said, he feels slighted that his father wasn't around more. He's not interested in the superhero lifestyle, I'm afraid.

OWL: I can always use the Night Owl's powers of hypnotic persuasion on him, if necessary.

BOY: This boy sounds like the only hope we have left. Fire the interplanetary thrusters! To New Jersey!

NAR: Somewhere, back on the planet Earth, Derek Astroman was staring lifelessly in front of the television, wishing for something to interrupt the lonely monotony that had become his dull existence. Beyond his daily routine of television viewing, there was his job as night shift manager at Sparky's Auto Parts, his usual consumption of alcoholic beverages, and his desperate phone calls to an ex-wife, Mindy, whom he had been separated from for over a year. Just as he was doing what he did every afternoon, staring at the television screen, wondering why Mindy had left, there was a dramatic knock at the front door.

BOY: Yes, good day, is Derek there?

DEREK: Um, no, no. He's not. Who are you? How much does he owe you?

BOY: I'm not in the collection service, my good man. My name is Molecular Boy, master of matter. May I speak with Derek,



the only known son of Astroman?

DEREK: Well, yeah, it's me, I guess.

BOY: Derek ... As your father would say, you are needed now by God, country, and man!

DEREK: For what? Who put you up to this? Damn, you had me going!

BOY: This is no joke, son. The Earth needs your help, Derek. Only you can save us now.

DEREK: Well, what do I have to do? I got to work in like two hours.

BOY: Son, is it true you possess most of your father's astounding outer space powers?

DEREK: Well, I guess. I mean, well, he said I didn't ever have to use them unless I wanted to, you know? But I guess I could do the same stuff as him, pretty much.

BOY: The power of superspeed flight? Atomic strength? Cold fusion breath?

DEREK: I guess. I mean, well, like I was changing the transmission on this Chevy last week and the lift gave and like it would have crushed anybody else, but like I just, you know, stood there until they towed it off me, I guess.

BOY: But surely, you've used your powers for good before?

DEREK: Well, like I said, I dunno. Once, this dude next door kept beating on his wife and I was going to go over there and tell him like, "Listen, if you don't lay off, I'm gonna like bust you in two," but I dunno, it was like their thing, you know. Fighting. Mind your own business. That's my motto. Like who am I to judge?

BOY: A rocket ship of certain doom is hurtling towards our planet right now. Please, please, we need your help, Derek.

DEREK: OK, OK, quit hassling me. I mean it's only because I don't really got anything else to do. I don't want to go to my job tonight anyways, so this gives me a good excuse.

BOY: Your father would be proud of your courage.

DEREK: Where is my dad?

BOY: Well, Derek, son, it's my sad duty to inform you, that, well ...

DEREK: You can quit it right there, Mr. Molecular Boy. I've heard that speech coming in my head for years. *(beat)* So he went out fighting? Doing his thing?

BOY: He was a testament to bravery until the very end.

DEREK: Well, I guess I should be more serious about this then. OK, Mr. Molecular Boy, what do I need to do?

NAR: And with that, the Noble Rocket hurtled back into the sky, speeding towards outer space. Aboard the spacecraft, introductions were made as the team harnessed themselves to their jump seats, attaching their large, silver space helmets.

BEE: Can it be you, the mysterious son of Astroman, the Man From Beyond the Stars? How you have grown, Derek!

DEREK: Yeah, It's me, Derek. From just beyond the New Jersey turnpike. Yep.

BEE: Your father would be so happy to see you joining us on this most perilous of missions.

OWL: What will be our plan of attack, then, do-gooders?

BOY: I believe a frontal assault is in order. First a blast of the Queen Bee's neutron particle sting to disable their defenses, then Night Owl, you use the fog of confusion, rendering their instruments useless. I will follow by transforming their danger-

ous rocket to pie custard, and Astroman ... pardon me, Derek, Derek, you can round up the prisoners.

BEE: Just as before, our combined powers shall put an end to this menace quickly.

BOY: Ready the rockets for zero gravity travel!

OWL: Rockets are ready.

BOY: Let the scales of justice swing mightily to the side of good. Fire rockets!

NAR: And before long, the Noble Rocket found itself speeding in a direct path straight for the mysterious black rocket, neither spacecraft diverting their course, neither slowing, until ...

BOY: All right, team, remember your battle assignments. Queen Bee, you are first. Good luck, darling.

NAR: Just then the black rocket fired upon them, cutting a swath of electric flame through the metallic hull of the Noble Five spacecraft. Transistors exploded, sparks rose like a wall of blue static, someone screamed loudly, until the poor Noble Rocket finally gave, sending each hero hurtling helplessly into outer space.

BOY: Team members report! What's your status?

BEE: Queen Bee, battle-ready.

DEREK: This is Derek. I hit my head on something, but I'm OK.

BOY: Night Owl? Night Owl, what's your status?

NAR: There floating in the distance was the Night Owl, his black cowl burned from his whitened face, his black space suit destroyed, his eyes fluttering.

BOY: Night Owl, Night Owl, do you read me? Are you all right?

OWL: I am done for, my friends. Now I go to face the unknowable ...

BEE: But Night Owl, no, Night Owl ...

OWL: Where I go now, I carry no dread. Where I walk now, alone I do not tread ...

BEE: Night Owl!

NAR: Fury filled the hearts of our heroes, fury which had seemed dismissed so long ago, before the games of shuffleboard, before hours watching television, before sleepless nights watching the sun-rise, before fears of cancer, glaucoma, diabetes, colon trouble, bone marrow deficiency, heart attacks, years before, when their hearts had felt something. As the mysterious Black Rocket swung about for one final destructive pass, the Queen Bee summoned all of her power and aimed, then fired a terrific neutron particle blast, the Queen Bee's sting! dismantling the ship's nose cone, hull, and rear rudder most dramatically.

BOY: Well, done, darling! Derek, see what you can do about their death ray!

NAR: But Derek only bobbed about, drifting quietly in space.

BOY: Derek, do you read me? Derek?

NAR: Still, there was nothing.

BOY: Queen Bee, it seems we're on our own on this one. I'm going to attempt to molecularly transform the ship into a gigantic marshmallow sundae.

NAR: But each time the Molecular Boy sped close enough to do his work, he was fired upon by the powerful death ray.

BOY: It's no good, I can't get close enough. Queen Bee, darling, can you try another attack?

BEE: James, I'm afraid I'm having trouble breathing.



BOY: Wendy, please, please, hang on a moment longer ...
Derek, please, we need your help. Think of your father,
Astroman ... please, Derek, you are the Man From New Jersey!
DEREK: Dad ...

BOY: Please, Derek, please ...

NAR: With that, Derek snapped into action, flying like a fiery meteor towards the drifting black spacecraft, dodging each destructive blast. With one mighty blow, he swung his super-charged fist against the hull, nearly splitting the spacecraft in two. He dug his fingers into the strange unknown metal, tearing it apart, destroying the black rocket with each swing of his energy-packed fist. Soon enough, he had disabled the death ray cannon, ripping it from its place atop the spacecraft, and had wrangled two spacemen in shiny black spacesuits. Before they could be interrogated, the two space fiends let out a laugh (*laughter*) and then, each pressing a button upon their chest, disintegrated themselves immediately.

DEREK: They, they destroyed themselves ...

BOY: A fitting end to them as cowards, perhaps. I must check on my wife.

NAR: The Queen Bee had begun to recover, flying about slowly.

BOY: Darling, are you all right?

BEE: I am, dear, and yet, not quite the same. I had not, well, I had never considered being called upon again to serve in that way, and ... I feel proud that I could help. Proud and saddened perhaps.

BOY: Why?

BEE: That it took an event of this magnitude to make me realize what I most take for granted.

BOY: Quite right, darling, quite right.

NAR: Using his mastery over all matter, Molecular Boy quickly used the floating space debris to construct a make-shift vessel to transport them back to Earth. Derek, the Man From New Jersey, used his flight and super strength to hurry them back to the planet they had just saved.

DEREK: I didn't know, well, I never knew I could do any of that.

BEE: But we knew, Derek. We knew you could do it.

BOY: Sometimes man is called upon, in dire circumstances, to take a stand, shoulder to shoulder with his neighbors, his town, his brothers, and take arms against evil, visible or not. Sometimes the threat is danger from another land, another planet, sometimes the greatest danger is the one we unleash upon ourselves, by not treating our fellow countrymen with dignity, kindness, and respect. Everyone can fight the fight against villainy and evil in their own way, but, mostly, by being appreciative of their fellow men, man or woman, like or unlike, young or old. We must dare to seek the humanity within all the humans of our world if we possibly can.

NAR: Stay tuned for an episode of "True West Radio Hour", sponsored by Pennsylvania Coal Company, Pennsylvania Coal, the coal with the blue glow!

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MAMA'S BOY (PART THREE IN A CONTINUING SERIES)

Lett Hill

In parts one and two (Sleepwalk Nos. 1 & 2), Beulah, Enit's mother, discovers that Enit has begun a strange growing spurt on his eighteenth birthday. After growing out of his clothes and getting too big for the house, Beulah sends him outside. Before long, Enit has grown taller than the roof, and with word traveling fast as it does in small towns, a large crowd has gathered to gawk at him. Beulah hardly notices as she is frantic with cooking to keep her growing boy fed, and just as she is about to faint from exhaustion, Talullah, the girl from the bakery in town whom Enit has a crush on, steps forward to take over the baking. Beulah falls asleep in her chair and then...

I woke up to the sweet smell of cornbread and even though the kitchen was warm with baking, Talullah had covered me up with one of the blankets I crocheted for Enit's future wife, and it reminded me how Enit said he never wanted to get married or leave his mama, and how I told him that he'd feel different when he grew up big into a man. I could tell by the way that bright sun was coming through the windows that it was earlier than when I had gone to sleep and I knew it was the next morning. I flew clear out of my chair with worry and then sweet Talullah came through the screen door with that big empty pan. She gave me a weak smile and I could tell she was tired from baking all night. She asked me to walk outside with her and I was expecting to see even bigger crowds than the day before as I was sure that word had spread to towns for miles around. I imagined the wagons and carts, families set up in tents, and vendors selling their goods like they do every chance they get and anywhere a crowd is to be found.

Talullah stepped out onto the porch before me and I had to squint because the sun was so bright like it is after a whole night's snow fall covers the ground with some big white mirror. The ground was white, but it wasn't snow. Old Man Clinky's house was nowhere to be seen and all the people were gone and just for a second, I thought my heart would leap clear out my mouth because I thought my poor sweet Enit was gone too, but as I stepped off the porch, I realized that the ground wasn't covered in snow and that it wasn't ground at all, but the soft skin of my only son's stomach. I recognized the arrow-shaped birthmark, now bigger and longer than me and dark like a patch of mud against the snow white ground of his skin. I looked at Talullah but she just smiled that same smile and said that we were all that was left. She told me how Enit kept growing all through the night while I slept and people had to scatter. They went back to their homes, back to town, gathering everything that they could to get out of the way of my enormous growing son, and when Enit was so big that the stars were getting in his eyes, he laid down across the land and everything on it and picked up our little house and the trees from the yard and the other things he figured we could use for supplies and he put us, house and all, right there on his belly where he knew we would be safe. She said, "That old man who lived across the way told Enit to pick him up too, but Enit didn't listen."

"Clinky?" I asked.

She nodded, "He hollered at Enit and called him a big dumb

mama's boy and a whole bunch of other names that I didn't know and I'd be too embarrassed to say."

I imagined Old Man Clinky, red faced and shaking his fist at Enit like he did when Enit was ten and had eaten some of Clinky's prized strawberries right from the patch. Clinky hollered for days about how they was the biggest crop he ever had, how big and red they were, how they were going to win him first prize at the agricultural fair that year. Those strawberries were bigger and redder than apples and Enit, still sticky with that red juice all over his face, agreed that they were the biggest and reddest and sweetest he'd ever seen, and that's why he ate them. Clinky just got madder and louder and called Enit all sorts of names that a boy shouldn't hear and I was sure that during the night he'd done the same thing, but this time, he was shaking his fist up instead of down, because Enit was the big one now.

As far as we could tell, we were all that was left in the world, and I wondered what happened to everyone else. We could no longer see my boy's sweet face, but every time Talullah would haul out another pan of bread, Enit's hand would come down and take it, she said, like the hand of God, and before you could go in the house, his hand would be back with the empty pan. It was like Enit was the world, and we were the only people left on it.

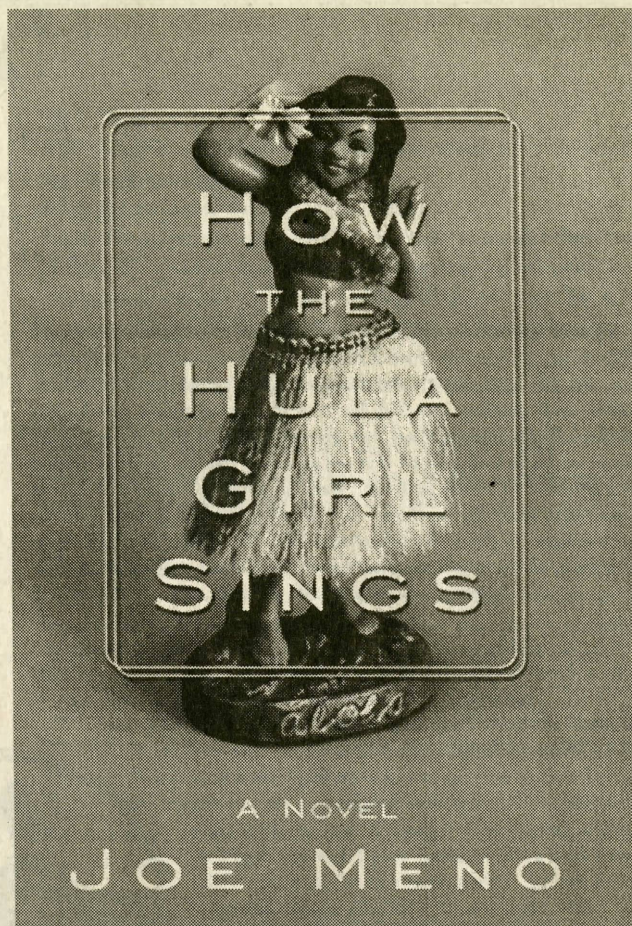
Talullah and I worked out a routine of baking and resting and for a while it seemed that as much as we could bake, Enit could eat. We picked from the corners of that cornbread to keep ourselves fed but when you're baking, you hardly ever get hungry. Talullah began to pick up on the songs that I hum or sing when I bake and she began to add in those of her own that she had learned from her mama and her aunts. Sometimes I sensed that she was wistful for her family, but if I ever asked her about such things, she would just shrug and ask me what Enit was like as a boy. What could I tell her? Enit was just your normal boy, never had on shoes, never stayed under a roof for too long. But answers like that didn't satisfy her and she would patiently ask me again and again until I would remember some story about how when Enit was a kid, he wouldn't wash himself because he was afraid that he might shrink and how he wouldn't eat pumpkin seeds because he was scared that pumpkins would be growing in his belly. We would laugh about it for a while, and then we would both get quiet thinking about how things were now, and then she would ask me gently what kind of man I thought Enit would be, and I would have to hold back from crying because I knew he would be such a good man. Ever since he was born, it's just been Enit and me, and he's done his best to do the man's work in taking care of his old mother and this old house. When ever I told him that one day, he'd grow up big and find a wife and settle down to have a family, he would just shake his head and say, "No, Mama, I'm not ever leaving you. I'm gonna stay right here and take care of you forever." When I told Talullah that, it seemed to set something in her face, she didn't say anything, but it seemed to me that she had made a decision.



To be continued in the next issue of **Sleepwalk**

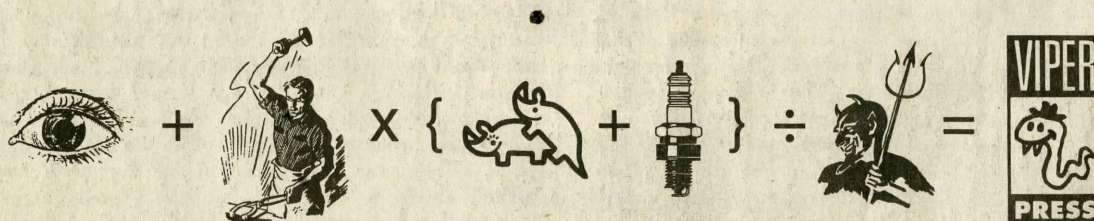
JOE MENO

HOW THE HULA GIRL SINGS



Luce LeMay, fresh out of prison and ready to repent, can't catch a break in his old hometown. The girl he loves won't go near an ex-con, the only job he can get is pumping gas, and his days of incarceration haunt him in the form of an old nemesis who won't be satisfied until Luce's blood runs red and hot through his murderous fingers. In *How the Hula Girl Sings*, Joe Meno describes the ugly, unforgiving underbelly of the American Dream with a voice as visceral as the best of Dorothy Allison and as compelling as a Tarantino script. At turns achingly tragic and wholeheartedly hopeful, *How the Hula Girl Sings* plumbs the depths of the schizophrenic American psyche.

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