

8

Shaken, Not Stirred

Tap tap goes the mallet.

Chock chock goes the gouge.

Hands are steady but the rest of me feels like a snowglobe in the Fist of Kismet. Like I felt those first weeks in Terre Haute, waiting for comeuppance's other shoe to drop.

*

My Grandfather Rhine was, in his own words, an honest-to-God Indiana boilermaker. (Also partial to drinking the same, and rooting for Purdue's.) Grandma Rhine I never knew; she'd succumbed long ago to cancer, as was the custom in her family. All five of her daughters feared getting it, though not to the point of quitting cigarettes.

"The Rhine Maidens," they called themselves. Each was given a solid respectable *hausfrau* name—Mabel, Clara, Louise, Lillian, Thelma—but with Gramps being an incorrigible girlwatcher and moviegoer, he might have had the Misses Normand, Bow, Brooks, Roth, and Todd in subconscious mind.

My aunts produced a dozen grandchildren—also all girls—with Cassandra making it a baker's dozen. By the time I came along, forty years had passed since Gramps first wanted a boy in the family, and I proved too puny and wheezy for any kind of sporting activities. Or almost any: we did spend a lot of time on the veranda watching the ladies of Terre Haute stroll by. That is, when we weren't admiring latter-day actresses onscreen.

My mother would accompany us to the movies only to end up in another theater watching a different film alone. Her behavior baffled Gramps, but that was nothing new; she'd brought him great pride when she won a full scholarship to Oberlin at the age of seventeen, followed by greater consternation when she hitched up with Cassie's folksinging fellow-traveler dad.

There was never any turning Lillian Rhine aside from whatever she put her mind to. All her friends and even her sisters called her "Rhino"—not because her nose was especially large or sharp, but for the hard-charging attitude she'd displayed since birth. During our time in Terre Haute she kept galloping in and out of town, chasing after bright lights and trying to line up action sequences. Meanwhile my grandfather kept scratching his head.

"Boy, there's only one time you won't be able to understand women. And that's your whole life long."

(Another accurate forecast. Thanks again, Gramps.)

I was less interested in understanding women than feasting my eyes while pressing their flesh. Of course I didn't get beyond fantasy with the engendering Nadja Pankiewicz, but in her art class I did gain a handhold on sculpting in clay. My early productions tended to resemble boobs, so I'd add eyes above the nipple and a fishtail behind to make them look more like bluegills.

Another veranda activity I shared with Gramps was whittling. Hardly needing instruction when given my first pine block and pocketknife, I quickly carved a smooth bulbous oval that *might* have been a fish. In fact I found woodwork so instinctive, so effortless, that I put no great value on it—unlike modeling in clay, which took a lot more exertion.

At Christmas Gramps presented me with a set of fixed-blade knives I still use today. "He may be puny," he told my mother, "but he's got The Hands."

*

After a year in Indiana we rejoined my father, though not (to my concealed relief) back in Lawrence. Instead we moved to Columbia the gem of Missouri, whose university offered Dad a full professorship. He remarked I'd grown so much he didn't recognize me; and from then on my father often seemed mildly puzzled as to who I was.

I wasn't entirely sure myself after enrolling at brand-new Stonehill High School, a complex of interconnected single-story buildings whose banners proclaimed it the

*HOME OF THE FIGHTING QUIXOTES—
THERE ARE NO IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS!*

Not once in four years did they assign me consecutive classes in nearby rooms. I ran myself winded getting from one to the next, up and down those interconnected corridors and around Coach Sparger's goddamned cindertrack. The result (besides wheezing) was discombobulation.

My mother, however, was ecstatic to be in a college town again. She immersed herself in the MU campus swim, sprinting home from one faculty fest to bubble: "Do you know a girl named Crystal Smithson? Well, she sure likes you!"

Intriguing news (which I'd've preferred hearing from somebody else). This girl who sure liked me: did she hail from the Black Lagoon? Or could she possibly be a breather?

Crystal Smithson turned out to be the Tall Chick at my workstation in art class. Fairly nice-looking, but painfully shy. In childhood she'd suffered from a Cindy Brady lisp that made uttering her own name a torment. By age fourteen she was burdened with braces she tried never to reveal, and a height of nearly six feet she could do nothing to hide. Plus a blush that matched the vivid tomato shade of her long red hair. When she saw me the day after our parents met, Crystal's entire head turned the color of catsup.

As I said: intriguing.

"Wanna have lunch?" I asked her.

"With me?" blinked Crystal.

"No, with *me*," I replied. The suave new kid in town.

She tagged along diffidently to the cafeteria. Whether Crystal really sure liked me at that time I never found out. She would admit only to blurting my name when quizzed by her folks about boys in high school. Falling silent for the rest of the meal; scarcely opening her mouth even to eat. So I took a stab at tuning into any emanated vibes, and got:

—stupid—clumsy—homely—hopeless—stupid—clumsy—homely—hopeless—

Chant that mantra. I liked the use of *homely*. Unlike *ugly*, it implied some degree of self-worth—even a touch of vanity. Say about her vivid red hair. Which I asked if I could use for my first art project. Which alarmed Crystal until I explained “as inspiration.”

“It’s natural, you know, my own real color,” she muttered.

“Glad you don’t have to send away for it,” I said.

Her mutters turned to titters, and my reputation as a laconic wit took root.

*

The other students at our workstation exemplified two of the three syllables in Stonehill High. Link Letterman (related to neither celebrity) would blaze up anything remotely flammable, and Nancy “Green Springs” Ghillie was the only person I ever heard of who could mellow out on ditchweed.

The four of us joined the school Art Club on the insistence of Crystal’s best friend Elizabeth Erpe, a poisonous shrew with an adequate singing voice who discovered the Music Club was rife with controlled substances. Music and Art were born allies (they took part in dramatics, we painted their sets) and jointly formed a stoner auxiliary called Our Gang. I could only smoke in the secondhand sense and Crystal was afraid to inhale, however much peer pressure Elizabeth applied; so Nancy baked us her soon-to-be-famous Green Springs hash brownies (ditchweed-free).

They made discombobulation a lot more palatable.

But didn’t enhance my esp-ability, which faded into static.

Certainly I had no success subliminalizing Crystal. *Give yourself to Aitch! He will reward you with orgasms!* Nothing doing. She was pleasant enough company, deferential as to where we might go and what we might do there—except for “bed” and “boff.” Willing to hug and kiss and sometimes be fondled, especially when green-sprung. But not to jettison her virginity or help me overcome mine.

It didn’t help that I was 5'1" when we met, achieving only 6¼ additional inches (eventually above, relentlessly below) by way of growth-spurt. Crystal’s father, a professor of astronomy who could have expressed himself celestially, called us “Mutt and Jeff.” Even Our Gang, whose remarks tended to sound hilarious or profoundly insightful, would say: “Wow... you two, it’s like... she is like... so much *taller* than you, man...”

We were neither the other's ideal sweetheart. She mooned after basketball players; my eye kept getting snagged by shorter, darker, narrower-eyed girls. I occasionally worried that Crystal might find someone else and I'd end up with toxic Elizabeth. But no one better fell for either of us, so we kept going together. Farther afield as we got our driver's licenses and could hang out around the MU campus. Many an evening was spent at art-house cinemas, watching Fellini and Bogart movies for the first time.

One place Crystal and I never went was to school dances; we got enough Mutt-and-Jeff commentary as it was. But when she yearned for a venue in which she might wear a junior-prom evening gown, I bought us tickets to opening night of Britten's *Turn of the Screw* at the New Mizzou Opera. There we got a loge to ourselves, which made canoodling a distinct possibility once the lights dimmed. And when they did—

—I felt a sharp pang. As if of displacement.

“What's the matter?” Crystal whispered.

“Nothing,” I said.

The production was typical New Mizzou: outré for outré's sake. The children were costumed like the Jetsons, while Quint and Miss Jessel wore shrouds of foil and tossed a black volleyball back and forth. Enough eeriness seeped through that I grew concerned whether Crystal would be put off, to the point of not putting out.

At which moment I found her giving me her hand.

And not for me to hold.

My first thought was: *This is a rented tux!*

While onstage Miss Jessel sang: *I shall come closer, closer /and more often.*

But when the lights went up Crystal seemed to emerge from a state of mesmerization, and everything immediately below the navel was again off limits.

By our senior year all gloss was gone from Fighting Quixoteland, leaving nothing *but* impossible dreams. Yet Crystal Smithson strode confidently through the maze of interconnected corridors, shedding her braces and sometimes her bra; she even inhaled now and then. I take credit for none of this, other than being a passable stand-in boyfriend.

For her eighteenth birthday I got a block of cherrywood and carved her a bust—as I told her more than once, to make her titter. As before, sculpting in wood was such a natural

snap I didn't rate it too highly. Did I capture Crystal's essential image, blending shy with bold and preserving it in *Prunus serotina*? Maybe so, but without breaking a sweat.

And cherry bust or no, she *still* wouldn't sleep with me.

We corresponded for awhile after graduation. Crystal went to UCLA, got a degree or two in seismology, and last I heard was teaching college students about rocking their world. Good for her. I wouldn't mind seeing her bust again—the wooden one, that is. Not so much her own, after twenty-seven years of wear and tear.

*

Once upon a time there was a bashful beer baron who gave his fortune to fine arts, always anonymously. After Gerhard Liederkrantz's beneficent death, they plastered his name over an institute in Madison, Wisconsin. I opted to go there for college because of its laidback attitude toward figurative art, which elsewhere enjoyed much the same respect as Rodney Dangerfield.

Laidback was the theme of the mid-Seventies, and casual were its variations. One quick casualty at Liederkrantz was my chastity, thanks to sandy-haired Bonnie Pattering and her luminous lime-colored eyes. Plus a sun-kissed gymnast's body that she put to bountiful use. If her unspoken ambition was to boink everyone at that institute, who were we to say her nay? Least of all me, to whom Bonnie (a native of Knob Noster) took an early shine as a fellow Missourian. *SHOW ME* read her snug gold crop-top the day we first conversed.

"What does the 'H.' stand for?" she wanted to know.

"The eighth letter of the alphabet," I told her.

"What's it stand for *besides* that?"

"Hydrogen, enthalpy, and Planck's constant."

"You are so weird!" said Bonnie, not without delight. Nothing she did ever lacked that element—bliss, felicity, euphoria, what have you. Let's see how many euphoric cookies we can pop in a single sandy-haired hayroll!

I hit sandy hay on three separate occasions with Bonnie Pattering. Jubilantly at first, given her exuberant glee; the second time she kept pausing to call me names starting with H and watch for my reaction. Our third time she pulled this stunt during the deed itself, panting a series of H-names into my ear while doing her pelvic best to hotbox the answer out of me.

But Bonnie's best was far too good for this purpose—I was way beyond verbalizing, unless *Uhhhhhhh* counts as a verb.

She decided to label me Herkimer (after her favorite pet rock) and move along, bringing joy to other Liederkranzers. One uptight lithography major denounced Bonnie as “promiscuous,” which was like accusing a Good Humor truck of fostering juvenile delinquency. She just laughed and sang a ditty about there being safety in numbers, the more the merrier and so forth. (This was still possible in the Seventies, that fleeting interlude between the claps of old and high-fives on the horizon.)

After we moved out of the dorm I saw Bonnie less often, though she'd always greet me with a Herkimer-smooch when we ran into each other. Her affability never flagged, and at commencement she was given a not-a-joke award for outstanding achievement in interdisciplinary art. We stood and cheered her thirty-times-three; she looked blissful yet accustomed to receiving plaudits.

I lost all track of Bonnie Pattering after college, and have no idea whether she settled down or came to grief or continues popping cookies to this day. But if there's a luminous field in Casual Elysium, she deserves a lime-colored place there.

*

When I saw my attempts to sculpt in clay were lumpish, I disposed of them and turned to wood. In search of relief. As in *A Perfect Fit*. Locust and hickory weren't readily available, so I used basswood from a linden tree to carve the spirit of First Lost Love, fixed in midwrithe on an underpinning open hand.

Making it a Hand. And me a sculptor, more or less.

My parents by this time had filed for no-fault divorce and gone their individual ways. After graduation I could have resumed puzzling my father in Columbia MO, or joined my mother in the Bronx where she'd begun freelancing movie critiques. But I landed a job in Milwaukee and a space of my own at a converted foundry called the Strichleiter Lofts. And there—

—never mind what happened there.

Skip ahead a few years to Chicago, where I saw the Friendly Ghost.

Dr. Harvey's psychiatric office employed a string of receptionists who all seemed to be auditioning for women's-prison roles. I mentioned this to the F.G., who spent the rest of that session discussing the performances of Eleanor Parker in *Caged* and Glynis Johns in *The Weak and the Wicked*.

Then Vicki made her debut behind the reception desk. Vicki Volester: rhyming with "bolster," not "molest her." Precariously balanced between the beautiful and grotesque, like so much else in the Eighties.

She was another short dark narrow-eyed lady, the one who doused herself with White Linen before putting on outfits made of pure polyester. Plus fashionable shoulder pads that would have been outsized on one of Da Bearssss. But Vicki maintained a sort of balance (precariously) by having her hair biggified, permed up and poufed out till it doubled the scope of her smallish slightish noggin.

The same tottery alignment extended down to the soles of her feet. Everything about Vicki was a trifle off-kilter or just about to skew. Her disposition, for instance: squinting at us through tiny slits in bristling mascara, her mouth screwed tight as a pickle jar. But if she dialed a wrong number or mispronounced your name or knocked over her pencil cup, those eyes and that mouth would twitch open and hang agape. A hand might wander across her face to fiddle with an earring, while her lower half shifted from restless cheek to cheek in a chair that could've used a drop of oil.

"PLEASE quit squeaking!" cried an anguished patient one dog day afternoon. I thought Vicki's jaw was going to dislocate off her head and run for its life.

Squirmy McWriggle. I started arriving long before my scheduled appointments—not to stare at her, not to ogle, just gaze idly at Vicki's slender hands and rounded cheeks in perpetual motion. Fussing with her neckline. Tugging at her skirt. Shrilling in her chair. Giving me furtive little glances: was I still looking? What did I have in mind? How did it make her feel? I noticed she never went to lunch or on break while I was around, or lodged a complaint against me with the Young Receptionists Self-Defense League.

Then one day I felt a sudden tapping, as if a swarm of bats was flapping roundabout my inner ears. Except this swarm wasn't all bats—there were butterflies among them, as many or more, adding their flicks to the batflaps.

They were the first things I'd underheard in well over a decade.

So I quickcarved a panel showing the Friendly Ghost playing canasta with Freud, to mark one year of our making no progress together. As expected, he asked Vicki to hang it in the waiting room. As anticipated, it got her all agog. And when she worked up enough nerve to broach the subject of sculpture—

—before she knew it I was escorting her to a well-timed retrospective at the MCA of John de Andrea's life castings.

"They're all nayyykyked!!" exclaimed Vicki. (Agitation brought out the chiCAHgo in her.) "They look just like real peeeople! That are nayyykyked!"

"It's one approach," I said, contrasting De Andrea's attractive starko figures with Duane Hanson's clothed dowdies and George Segal's spookier apparitions.

"Guys too??" Vicki gasped, catching sight of lifesize men among the lifelike women. Goggling at their polyvinyl wangs as though she'd only been exposed to Ken-doll crotches till now. "Do you make statues like these?" she whispered.

"No, I don't cast in molds. I carve my pieces out of wood."

"Pieces? Who do you carve them... like?"

"Whoever snags my eye."

Vicki's sidled over to find mine upon her, and not just gazing idly. Oh Gahd! No no no we mustn't, I was a payyytyent, she worked for my doctor, she shouldn't even be here with me, it was wrong. And besides—she knew she wasn't in the same league as these women, even if she could be talked into undressing which she couldn't so forget it 'cause she would DIE OF SHAME at being seen like that by complete strangers or even worse people she knew, did I think she was pretty?

"I think you're gorgeous."

"But do you think I'm *pretty*?"

Dark dazzle fueled by embarrassed fascination. Attracted but affronted, afraid yet attuned. I nobly offered to seek a different shrink, but Vicki wouldn't hear of it. She genuinely believed her Friendly Ghost was the Carl Jung of Wabash Avenue, and refused to let me compromise my mental health just so we might have a relationship. Amorous or artistic.

When I hinted at willingness to compensate Vicki for the latter, she scrambled up onto her high horse. Practically propositioning her at a museum! Take her home at once, please, and leave her at the curb! I tried to make amends at my next appointment, presenting her with a quickcarved butterfly. Which Vicki picklejarringly said she could not accept, since (flashy wave of cubic zirconia) she had just gotten engaged.

What surprised me was the depth of protective indignation I felt. For her: poor Vicki, seduced by some cheap bastard. This rival soon had a name (Scott, alias “Pooh Bear”) and a face (from the photo kept on her desk, inscribed to “Bun-Bunz”). How dare he make bastardly reference to what ought to be *my* girl’s caboose!

Thus we entered a holding pattern that lasted for months. During which I mentally sketched Vicki every week in the waiting room, while she fiddled and shrilled and put her off-kilter chin in the air each time she caught me doing it.

Till the day I found her crying in the coffee shop, and she admitted having broken up with (i.e. been humpty-dumpstered by) her alleged fiancé. “This is what I get for letting my friends set me up on bad blind dates,” she sniffled.

I urged her to go out on an open-eyed limb with me, anywhere she liked. Even if that meant wistful-drippy movies like *Peggy Sue Got Married* or *Some Kind of Wonderful*—or *Dirty Dancing*, drippiest of them all. Followed by Vicki’s favorite nightcap (a pitcher of rainbow margaritas) after which I might be invited to take her arm or hold her hand or kiss her goodnight.

Then back would swarm the flaps and flicks.

More months went by. She had other humptyminded suitors, but it was MY wooden butterfly that replaced Pooh Bastard’s photo on her desk. Joined there by further carvings as I was granted further liberties—each one hesitantly, since Vicki was never absolutely certain I wouldn’t go nutcrackers and try to debauch her. She begged me not to breathe a word about us to Dr. Harvey, but I said it was therapeutically crucial for me to allude, at least, to everything we did and everything I dreamt.

“Oh GAHD!!” went Vicki.

(I did tell the F.G. I’d started watching films surrounded by Real Live people, including this one Real Live girl on an irregular basis. “Really?” he said. “What’d you see

last, and what did you think of it?")

One night it was *Moonstruck*, which swept Vicki off her susceptible feet and back to my garret for the first time. Where I reached second base on a stand-up double, discovering something I'd already cottoned onto—her shoulders weren't the only things she padded. Needless: she *had* a stand-up double, more than enough to whet my appetite and water my mouth. But no no no we mustn't, she shouldn't even be here on my lap getting her nifty little A-cups nuzzled, it was wrong, so wrong, oh Gahd, oh Aitch, ohhhh *STOP!!*

Which I did, having more at stake than mere mouthwatering. Vicki dried off and reupholstered herself, and we went out to gulp down too much tequila.

But I'd piqued her to the point of agreeing to pose for me. Clad in a buttoned overcoat to begin with. (It was winter and my garret could have used more insulation.)

Only incrementally would she unbend and divest. Taking off her clothes one garment at a time, with maybe a week before the next item's removal. And the more Vicki bared, the less able was she to keep still: it was Squirmy McWriggle all over again. Becoming such a tantalizing jitterbug toward the end that I could capture no more than brief impressions of her dark dazzle.

She had delectable skin. The color of eucalyptus or honey oak.

One warm evening in May she finished getting down to it.

And did not die of shame, but stood there trembling. Moistening her lips. Handling her altogether self as if she were trying to bathe without soap or water or a washcloth.

"Vicki?" I rasped. "You okay?"

"M-m-my name is Victoria Lorraine Volester," she quavered, "an' I'm twenty-six an' a Pisces an' I went to Malcolm X College an' my favorite movie's *Moonstruck* an' my favorite actor's Nicolas Cage an' my favorite artist looks just like him an' my favorite f-f-fantasy is men with wood in their hands..."

Break my heart wide open.

Stir it as no woman had since traumatic Milwaukee.

I'd intended to mark the moment by playing a Puccini cassette, but in my distraction I got hold of the Pointer Sisters who thundered forth about BEING SO EXCITED THEY JUST CAN'T HIDE IT, THEY'RE ABOUT TO LOSE CONTROL AND THEY THINK THEY LIKE IT!! Which sent

Victoria Lorraine completely over the brink, me close behind her, and we spent the rest of that evening making butterflies. Lots and lots of butterflies. With a few bats thrown in to keep things lively.

She was worth the long wait.

This, I decided, must be significant otherhood.

Sated in each other's arms; tapped into each other's unspokens.

I wouldn't've done This if you weren't so dreeeeamy and I didn't love you so awwwwful.

Perhaps all women are capable of doing this (as well as This) if they put their minds to it.

That was so good, that was so right, I needed it so bad, it's been six months since I had any loving—six whole months! How 'bout you?

The truth had been effective before, so I turned to it again. (Big mistake.)

Eight whole years.

WHAT??

Hysterics. Not the laughing kind, either.

“Eight whole years” had to mean I'd infected her with every STD imaginable, plus a host of phobias and derangements. This last seemed likely by the way she was carrying on. Trying to order me out of my own garret; then fighting for the sheet off my bed to wrap herself in; then crashing around in the concealing dark, even though it meant she couldn't find any of her clothes.

“What've you done with my paaaanties, you psycho perv??” she was shrieking as the police arrived. To find Vicki Volester skewed completely off-kilter, shielding bosom and belly with loose shoulder pads.

“What's the problem here, ma'am?”

“I told him I loved him! He hasn't had sex for eight! whole! years! and now he's gone and done it with meeeeeee!!”

I didn't think Chicago cops could look that nonplused.

*

All shook up by the Fist of Kismet. (Not a stirring feeling.)

No charges filed, other than my being humpty-dumpstered significant-otherwise. No reason left for me to keep seeing the Friendly Ghost. Nor were any pieces ever carved from those brief impressions in perpetual motion.

What they said in *Moonstruck* about having bad luck with relationships: how you love the wrong people, make a mess of everything, ruin yourself and *die*. My luck's been bad more often than not. For every Bonnie or Crystal I've taken favored leave of, there's been a Vicki or Rozay—or a Judith. Sometimes the bad luck stems from circumstances beyond my control; more often from my inability to understand women. Still callously callow in the face of indefinite infinitude, despite all the wavelengths I've tried tuning into.

Don't try to figure it out, my father told me. Your whole life long, Gramps warned. Transcendence is unfathomable.

Only by shaping wood with chisel and gouge do I even seem to come close.

Outside, skyrockets are splattering the night like motion sickness on an astral plane. It's the 4th of July and Zerfall is celebrating independence by blowing things up.

I stay indoors with my scalpel and dental pick, bringing out niceties in Honduras mahogany. As the swimmer stretches to grab that medallion just beyond her reach, I add traces of all the ladies I've remembered.

Diffidence, derangement, delight. Bountiful mettle and butterfly pluck. Hot fidgets and cool grace.

There we go. There they are. This is it.

Prized, with a twist.

I snap off the spotlight, step away from the workbench, and pour myself a drink.

