

Fishing Penny

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Penny used three fingers to wedge the last moon pie into her mouth. I had sore fingers from feeding her all night. Her eyes were sleepy with dreams. Christ, I didn't even know why or what or who or when in hell but she was getting naked, a woman half my age, and I had sore fingers that made my bones ache. Clothed, she wasn't much to look at. But naked she was becoming a vision. If we hadn't been in love, I would have had every right to shoot her just under the curl of her lip. Lucky girl. And I led her on believing we had no cares in the world.

Men didn't come to the Lady Bird Motel without cares. It was rank with memories of sailors and evangelists and misfit brides that did nothing but cry for the husbands they left. The Lady Bird tasted of laziness, the kind of laziness you get from feeding a half-naked woman moon pies for nineteen hours without sleeping. It was the crowning jewel of our town.

Penny yelled, stripped down, revealing little boy Superman underwear she bought at the drug store for \$1.99 a pair. She had a whole goddamn collection of them: Batman, Wonder Woman, the Hulk, and some local magician by the name of the Zephyr who had had his face put on the front and back and it scared the dickens out of the whole goddamn town. I thanked God that when she pulled off her pants it wasn't Zephyr's face stitched on her crotch staring back at me.

"Jesus, don't you ever wear clothes?" I said.

Penny drank wine and screamed, "You don't scare me!" and

snatched the last bits of moon pie, slamming the bathroom door. I heard water running. I bent on the floor and looked up at the ceiling, pulling my own clothes off as I closed my eyes.

I had come to the Lady Bird as ritual. I came to be with Alabaster Dufree and Cat Mulroney and Lubbock, the only friends I knew in the world. I came like every other man to work out my own demons or be overcome by them—whichever was my pleasure at the moment, though usually it was the latter. And I wanted to be in love.

Hours later Penny emerged from the bathroom and kissed me and then stood back and we looked at each other's naked bodies with grave curiosity. "You fat goat," she said. She kept her distance, standing at the window, dumb as bathwater.

We spent hours watching rust on the metal staircase. It wasn't yet morning. Sunrise would turn to afternoon, afternoon to dusk, dusk to night...but for now, we watched the desert. The thorns. The dust and dust and dust. Shit, there wasn't nothing else. The black shape of abandoned chemical plants like mouths waiting to be fed; the lingering scent of radiation and I never knew what radiation smelled like, but it must have been out there. People had just left. Got tired. Left town. Left the Lady Bird. Left us with dust and cigarettes and girls that devoured moon pies.

Penny smiled to keep from laughing and kept drinking wine. She had pelicans on her mind. An insistent little roach, she had prodded at me all night between cigarettes and confessions, wishing that I divulge the secrets I had about the cosmos, about pelicans, about presidential assassinations and a whole nest of other lies we wanted to

believe in. She threatened to tie me to the bedposts and ravage me or lop off my Johnson or set fire to the room if I didn't give away the mystery of the pelicans. And Penny did not bluff.

"We're out of moon pies," she mumbled. I wanted to be in love and Penny needed someone to listen to her dreams. We were little more than strangers. "Moon pies, moon pies," she muttered. The wine was almost gone. I wished we had whiskey. But Penny was a refined woman, full of imagination and I had a poor liver on account of old war wounds. My best years had been spent playing the piano all over Europe for soldiers: Reds, the French, the Krauts; whoever would listen. My business was playing music for men about to die. Combat scared the bejesus out of me.

Penny said the wine was good for my poor heart. And Penny knew. Like the time I had those headaches that made my jaw swell and cold sweats like someone lodging ice down my throat—and I was afraid to breathe or sleep and Penny fed me spoonfuls of honey and I told her the honey would nest in my throat and I'd be coughing out wasps in no time and we would have to leave the west and move to Florida where we could live in peace with the wasps. Penny had laughed and called me a jackass and how she adored men that were jackasses and she didn't seem to miss her husband, Lubbock, and reassured me that such a thing had happened, but only once, and only to a queen in Burma and I shouldn't worry...And Penny was naked and beautiful and full of dreams in our motel and she drank wine and laughed and I whispered over and over how I didn't have a care, no, not a care in the world...

I knew this was wrong. But then asking myself, I wondered if there was a right thing.

Penny was some man's wife. Lubbock's wife. And yet that didn't make it right or wrong. Lubbock was a nothing. We were all nothings. It wasn't even sex. There was never sex between us: just staring at our naked bodies, wondering the possibilities. What mattered was it was intimate. Shit. Intimacy with another man's wife means everything in the world because the woman is insignificant. It was a matter of pride. And without pride there would be no pistol fights or knife brawls and nobody would discover what they really have in their tar-thick heart. I couldn't say no to intimacy. Not with Penny. Not when it gave me the illusion of living.

I wanted to understand the beating of my heart. If what I felt were only echoes, then by God there would be more of them.

I needed to know if my heart was capable of something terrible.

I needed to believe I had evolved beyond echoes.

I went to the window and pulled the shades and peered through them below. "Do you think they can see me?"

Penny said, "Can who see you?"

I squinted hard. "All of them..." Penny shrugged and turned on the clock radio and jumped up and down like a school brat because they were playing Neil Diamond and she said every time Neil Diamond was played lovers fell madly in love and California got one inch closer to falling into the ocean, it was so powerful. Penny said she had to dance. Lovers always danced and didn't I feel like dancing? And suddenly I was her cherry-cherry and what a goddamn screwy world it had become in a matter of eleven seconds...

Dance? Dance? What in hell...No. I grinded my teeth and tried to look mean.

We *were* being watched: Lubbock and Cat and Alabaster, maybe others. We spied on them and they spied on us and that bound us, that intimacy. It was what we had always done, what we had learned made us survive.

“There must be someone out there...”

Penny danced behind me, pale in the light. She pulled the blinds open.

“You’re thinning,” she said, pinched my sagging flesh.

“I’m still here.”

“They can see me all they want. I got nipples big as plums,” she laughed and in that second I felt safe with Penny. We lay down on the floor with our temples pressed together, her feet one way and mine another. Penny confessed her dreams. How she wanted to see Vegas and work in the casino pool halls dressed in a one-piece bathing suit and a red blazer racking the 9-Ball tournament games in the orange plastic triangles. She loved to watch men shoot pool. “You never know which way the balls are going to spin or how or why and it just leads you on to knowing physics is a load of shit,” Penny told me. Pool set the universe in its natural order: it was all magic and fortune and mystery.

“What will I do?” I said. I said it tender, but I really didn’t give a damn.

“You’ll smoke cigarettes and play the nickel slots with my earnings and I’ll join you at night. You’ll move to Vegas with me, right, lover? You’ll get out of this place, see the world. You leave this rot, for me, right, love?”

“Can’t, Moon Pie. Who’ll watch the motel when I’m gone?”

Penny smiled and pretended to understand but I knew she hadn’t a

clue. Penny's dreams were the things of madness and how do you put down a woman that dreams so big?

I watched Penny sleep, remembering how someone had told me dreams were bits of our breath escaped from between our teeth and sucked up the nose where they traveled into our brains and became our dreams because they were the things we could never say or hadn't the heart to believe. And that was the crowning difference between a dream and a prayer: the dream echoed and the prayer faded.

The smells of the Mexican bakery drifted through the window and I thought how the roads winding to the bakery were all Mexican—Calle Mayor running parallel to Friar Street and towards Plaza del Diamante and into Calle Roblas and bending into Avenida Pescadora, T-boned into Via Carnales and how all the streets in this town wound and bent and converged into one street, like a snake eating its own tail, young kids always snooping under porches of abandoned homes looking for gold, layers of pipes and underground libraries hidden by the world, the panties absconded by teenage lovers.

I gazed past the desert, past the old chemical plants and black wiring, past the dust. It was wide territory out there. Unchartered. This wasn't a place that time had passed over, that war had ravaged, or insanity conquered. This was land and people time had forgotten and worst of all, it had been done willingly.

And goddamn if me and Penny didn't wait for our lives to change.

Penny brought a new bottle into bed. Drinking wine younger than myself made me feel like an unpolished relic.

“When I was young,” she said, “we used to drink from broken bottles. We stole them from dad’s liquor cabinet. We held them high above our heads and poured it like a fountain, like the ones in France.”

I said, “I’ve been to France. You’re not missing much—and whoever caught the most shards in their mouth was the winner and it was like finding a penny and you made a wish.”

“Sounds ridiculous to me.”

“It was ridiculous,” she said.

“You probably wished for a prince. Don’t lie,” I said.

“And babies,” she laughed. “I would name my baby Blitzkrieg the Wonderful, you know, like that man Ivan the Terrible, only mine would be a *Wunderkind*...but I can’t bear the thought of bringing a child into the world with my husband alive. You’ll kill him for me, won’t you?”

God. Listening to her was pulling teeth. I considered how I had only played the piano and how many men had I sent to their deaths with only the sound of my music haunting their footsteps? I had rationed cigarettes in a trench. There was that kid from Albuquerque singing ballads and dancing, got his eyes up too far and had his head blown apart. Bloodied the whole goddamn carton. Damnedest thing was he never stopped singing: gargles out his throat, the pitter-patter shuffling of his feet twitching in mud.

“And if I had a baby...” Penny kept saying, “And if I had a baby...”

I kept one eye on Penny. She was the kind of girl to make a man religious. Made me want to confess my crimes—even imaginary ones—if only to get over this fear of her eyes and those murmurings

she had of stealing my rib, like Eve. We would not rise in Judgment. Not our kind. Others would. Those with ribs, those without ribs. But not our kind. Rise in the Judgment...I kept repeating it because it had that certain sustaining sound that gave a man purpose.

My hands ran all over Penny, under her breasts and over the hips, wondering if while I slept she had given my ribs any consideration, if she was any good at prying, at getting her fingers in difficult places. Or if she had any thoughts of rising as well. One of us had to. I let my hands massage her ribs and if I only knew which one womanhood had stolen a thousand and one years ago, I would take it back... I goddamn would.

I circled down the stairwell. Penny watched from the window. It was a bad hour to leave. Dust and dust and dust. The poor Lady Bird was near her end. Windows shattered. Door frames splintered and grey. Where had all the dust been bred? Weeds and moss everywhere. Each step made a sharp pain in my toe. It had an infection and was swollen damn near four times normal so the only thing to do was take little steps and curse and praise the Almighty: Shit, lord lord lord in heaven, shit, lord lord lord in heaven, shit, lord lord lord in heaven, shit...

"Just a swim," I had told her. She had a terrified look on her face. There was green mulch in the pool. I made a lap then had a smoke. The algae and mulch dried to my skin. Evening passed to night. Light filled the courtyard and I saw a few streets over the Grand Masque Theatre. It lay in ruin. Steel beams sprouted from its dark shape and twisted up and tangled with weeds, the paint was worn, windows were shattered and those left were smeared in dried soap. Newspapers circa

1970-something filled the gutters. The doors were bound with metal chains and a padlock and the marquee said NOW PLAYING: DOUBLE FEATURE—DELIVERANCE & IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. I had seen Cagney play a mobster on that screen and Rita Hayworth a Spaniard. I lost my virginity inside the Grand Masque. I was seventeen and shipping out the next morning. First stop the Krauts and then to the Reds. She bought the tickets and led me into the darkest corner where I fumbled with her bra and garter straps and I was terrible with her tits and couldn't get anything right and made the cheapest and most pathetic love to her, never taking my eyes off the screen and Ingrid Bergman. We both felt that we had graduated to some higher plane of existence. Three weeks later I got word from home saying that she had been run under the wheels of a freight train and I was strangely relieved she would take those memories of our night to her grave.

I waited as the skies went dark. Damn near all the memories I ever had I played over and over again. Around midnight Alabaster sat next to me and popped open a beer. "You want?" he said.

"No. The liver," I said.

He said, "You're a rotten man without it." Alabaster was old and a professor of socio-economics at the college. He discussed mating rituals of African canines who maintained monogamous relationships to the same bitch their entire lives even in transmigration patterns confusing as all hell. Alabaster purported that if the world went monogamous, economic systems would thrive under the less hostile social and psychological conditions, thus paving the way for unbridled free trade and the end of neo-misogynist capitalism.

An hour later Cat slouched his way down the stairwell carrying twenty pounds of fish chum in plastic buckets and dumped it into the swimming pool. He fetched two more buckets. He kept leaving and coming back until the whole pool was a stink. Cat used a net to stir the chum with the algae. Then he used a finger. Then a hand. Elbow deep. Some of the fish still had twitching mouths. He slapped his hands, smelled them, then said, "Steady our hands, O Lord." Alabaster polished the revolvers. He whistled. A group of teenage boys and young girls were screaming across the way at Stan's Auto & Gas. They used the hoses as pistols, falling in the dust and playing dead, playing in love.

"There they go again," Cat said.

"Look at these forgotten faces," Lubbock said. He had slipped into the chairs between us unannounced. He drank a beer and displayed his failed suicide wounds with pride: a blue and purple rope burn along his neck. A small portion of his suffering for Penny's love. "She'll have me back," Lubbock said. "We made vows. If we don't honor those, what are we?" He smiled. Drownings, asphyxiations, car accidents, pills, boredom, extreme exposure to the elements, gasoline cocktails; poor, Lubbock—he had failed them all. Poor Lady Bird. Sing that song.

"That's a goddamn *beauty* of a scar," Cat said.

"I read in the paper today about a man combusting on an operating table. First his heart stopped. Then he burst into flames. They just watched as he turned to ash. Isn't that a slap in the face? Here I can't even die once. The ex-wife even flew out to be with the ashes. If I had only considered such a thing," Lubbock said. His eyes were yellowed. One by one we felt the burns in his neck.

“You did good, Lubbock,” Alabaster said.

“What can I say? I love my wife,” Lubbock said. He itched the raw flesh. He didn’t stop itching.

The law of averages said one day Lubbock would succeed. I had cautioned him not to question the universe and these things happened, just as Abel had gone and killed Cain secretly and God had thrown the world into utter chaos by resting on the seventh day and there was no explanation for the grossly inexplicable and other-worldly—you simply let it take you for the ride and hope to God and even that Buddha fella you survived.

“To another year of infamy,” Alabaster said. He toasted the swamp water chum with his beer. We were all standing around the pool now, watching the fish rise and bubble in the algae water.

“To sleepy motels and old theatres,” Cat said.

“And may God damn the Mormons who ate their children first while coming across the plains hoping for the springs of eternal youth,” said Alabaster. “And the Jews for their nepotism, the socialists for their idle lasciviousness, the capitalists for the ways in which they destroy culture and breed worry and doubt amongst us all.”

“To sperm in waiting suffering delusions of grandeur, may our aim be right and true,” Lubbock shouted.

“Amen,” someone else said. We had our heads bowed and didn’t even know it.

“This isn’t a goddamn sermon,” Alabaster snapped. And thus began the tirade of injustices.

“I seen a woman give birth to nothing but water.”

“I seen the tits of the Virgin Mary burnt into a piece of toast in Paraguay.”

“Hell, we all know no one here has been to Paraguay. Keep it honest,” Alabaster growled.

“I seen pennies fall from the sky and people open their mouths like slot machines to greet them.”

“I seen an orphan in her underpants crying at the world because there was no one to dry her socks.”

“Underpants. Crimeny,” someone whispered, as if the combination of *orphan* and *underpants* was more than he could bear. These were all we had in the world. These were what we held to with such gusto it nearly killed us. And whoever said that it was in the quiet hearts that knew the most sorrow didn’t know shit about fishing at the Lady Bird.

“For Adam’s rib, may it rest in peace,” I said, but it came out more like a howl.

“Jesus, you’re thinning, Red,” Alabaster told me.

“Terrible how it happens,” Cat said.

Without giving it much thought I told the story of the pelicans: how they had come out of the sky without warning and broken their bodies on the pavement. Children had laughed. Women wept. Shattered skulls and broken necks for eighteen blocks and some said it was a mating ritual, and others said they were starved and it really didn’t matter because when the feathers had cleared the bodies were left to litter the streets and no one cleaned them because it was the natural order of things.

“What do you think we did to deserve seeing such things?” Alabaster said.

“We left the womb. We were the brave,” Lubbock said.

And then I heard Penny behind us and she was naked except those damn Superman underoos. She was crying: she had heard the whole goddamn mess. I opened my arms and felt like that poor wolf from that fairy tale whose stomach was filled and sewn up with stones and I think he eventually drowned and all things at the Lady Bird were eventual.

“Jesus, Penny,” I said, “you’re no good for this place, no good at all...”

She cried in my arms. We all looked at each other, thinking about that poor son of a bitch on the operating table bursting into flames and becoming ash without knowing that both his time and passion had come.

Then the fish were all dead and their bodies had floated up.

Alabaster issued the revolvers and I let Penny hold mine and held my hand over hers.

“Steady our hands, O Lord,” Cat whispered.

We opened fire on the water and fish, our eyes closed with the frustrations of children. We did our best not to get wet. Penny fired like a madwoman, reloaded and fired again. She discarded her Superman underoos exposing all her mystery but we were watching her eyes. They were sweet. They were nasty.

The world seemed to stretch like a very worn and troubled elastic band and for the first time it seemed real. A soft glow hung just below the rooftops, a green radiance, almost seeping out of the desert’s mouth: it lurched down slowly in the courtyard over us. It moved with the shadows, and slowly, as if undressing, began to take shape. Penny held her revolver steady and fired at the water. Fish sprang out;

they flopped onto the cold cement and we crushed skulls under our heels. Guts exploded. Penny's naked swaying was precious, it was terrifying. She fired at everything that moved. Everything that didn't move. And we waited in that darkness for the natural order of things to overcome us. □