

James Beach

“Catch”

This was years ago; this story fragments.

PERCHED atop his stuffed suitcase, drizzle glossing his face, Marvin Kennelly waited. An irregular leather coat over hoodie kept all but his fingers, jeans-clad thighs and tops of his holey canvas shoes dry or at least barely damp. Worried if he had enough traveler's checks for the week, he also considered the concept Love.

He waited curbside at La Salle and Van Buren. The desolate streets, steam from manhole covers epitomized the edgy noir of his film appreciation class. It was a flippy distinction. When a ped passed he watched the way his breath hung, like smoke, visible a moment before disseminating. Perhaps displaced Marv was the hoodlum.

His host's vehicle, arriving, looked more familiar than did the driver — an economical new hatchback, color of blue common to Gregg-ruled notebooks. When the driver turned his way he wondered if Jack Catch had sent a pal to fetch him. In any case, Marvin bared his teeth in greeting. Jack unrolled the window, his cagey energy emanating.

“I was afraid you might d-d-ditch out on me,” stuttered the coed, anxious.

Jack put on a taut grin, twisted up the volume and said on a beat between the bridge and refrain: “Welcome.”

They sped through slick shiny streets, scored by snappy electronica. Marvin took in the rusty iron grilling and girders of the city, and the driver, who kept his eyes mostly on the road. Jack wore short hair, Eddie Munster-style; his dark denim pants, stiff and creased, were belted over a shirt the color of schoolhouse brick, the long pointy edges of his collar were tucked artily under a pricey suede jacket lightly spotted by rain. His feet were in shadow, but he'd be in black leather boots, polished almost to patent.

Marv considered his own clothes, his blah physique; this vacation was in another league, somewhere new, in flux between cool and hot, casual and exclusive.

After many wet blocks Jack's facial features congealed and were again familiar: black-edged crystal blue eyes rimmed by long lashes, fair skin, upturned nose, teeth gleaming inside reflectively slack lips. Marvin relaxed some; Jack was young yet, and appeared every bit the well-put-together post-grunge beatnik-revival type. In contrast sat Marvin, the introspective shoegazing college sophomore. He guessed his grunge attire, scraggly sideburns, were a compliment maybe, to the mod, polished Jack. And yet...

Their paths had crossed by chance that night — Jack'd been passing through town on a tour across the Midwest, careening from Chicago to Minneapolis, Madison and Milwaukee, and back again to "Shy Town"; Marvin's chancing upon the party was pure luck, hearing about the soiree through a peer in film class; happenstance-turned-fate. He felt his own grin beginning to tighten the lower half of his face, echoing Jack's.

Jack switched gears and sped through a yellow stoplight. The entrancing way his wrist, thin and pale on the stick-shift... Marvin spaced out, erased reality somehow, then came to, as Jack was speaking: "...or we could-could-could still make the Erasure Huddle. All ages show. Are you hungry? I've got hippie groceries at home."

"I could eat."

"Food, then."

They were in some sort of Ukranian village, where letters crudely painted on glass and lintel encrypted whatever waited indoors. Jack pointed out places as he drove. Marvin wondered about the all-ages show; being twenty-one, many of his friends back at Bellingham University were younger.

Jack drove by where "Flatliners" was filmed — Loyola University — and then past the building that had been home to "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer" on celluloid. The drizzle kept on; the entire city was wet with it. Instead of keeping a mental map Marvin found himself imagining what Jack's apartment would be like, how the rain might sound as it patted the roof and windows.

a life fitted together by the hero in hindsight, in therapy, in journals, via

JACK Catch lived in a squat cinderblock building on the second floor. Stuffed suitcase and backpack strained their puny party-boy muscles as they heaved them up the steep and wide inside stairwell; on the phone Jack had instructed him to "pack heavily". Where he would wear crotch-hugging corduroys, elephant-toe bell-bottoms, a thriftstore silk jacket, or steel-tipped bowling shoes, he had no clue but in the rush to meet Baybee's dad for the drive he'd crammed half his dorm wardrobe into that luggage. Also a few textbooks, some dubbed bootleg

cassettes, stamped envelopes and stationery to write Baybee and, if time, if the mood struck, if he felt homesick, his parents.

“Do you like my loft?”

“Yes.”

“It’s very hippie.”

Jack’s place was earthy: fresh bamboo floors gleamed under dimmed vintage track-lights, scarce with mod ’sixties-style furniture, heavy with a veritable botanical garden of foliage. Three-foot speakers and stereo system stood near a wide fireplace nearly bricked-over with bookshelves. The tall plaster walls shone bare except for an oblong hand-stitched sign that apologized: GOD BLESS THIS MESS! Even the ashtrays looked scrubbed with bleach. Several narrow windows with dropshades drawn faced out of the east wall. Marvin lifted the nearest one partway and saw Jack’s hatchback, wheels turned away from the curb, alone on the sidestreet.

“This is the parlor,” he said as he carried his suitcase through the tiny foyer past wet- and cold-weather coats and hats dangling from oversized brass hooks. He placed the luggage near a closed door, continued down the hall. “And back here, our kitchen.”

Marvin followed him into a time-warp of a kitchen with a blue-and-cream tile floor. The colossal free-standing sink and heavy chopping block dwarfed the vintage icebox. A rack for wet dishes stood near the sink, under which was a chipped canary-yellow bowl of brown Os and Xs. The steel dining table, sans chairs, sat beneath a rack of butchering utensils. A metal fruit basket holding ripe tomatoes hung above a backdoor.

While insisting the kitschy stenciling near the ten-foot ceiling was painted by a previous occupant, Jack showed Marvin the sunporch — apparently what the GOD BLESS THIS MESS! embroidery was excusing. Black bags of trash, busted wicker, assorted cleaning implements and discarded clothing were strewn ankle-deep across the floor, except for a few cleared step-holes to the fire-escape.

“See, you were wrong,” Jack quipped. “I’m not perfect.”

At his guest’s unconcealed disgust, he added, “Izzy’s got to clear this out when the weather gets warmer.”

“Izzy... your cat?”

“My roommate. Izzy’s my roommate. She’s kind of not home tonight. Sasha’s my micro-cat! Here, puss-puss.”

An off-white shorthair (matching the decor?) sashayed into the kitchen and centered itself on a blue tile.

Jack stooped to tickle its chin. “He’s six-months-old today — well, close enough. He’s sure getting randy.”

“Is today your half-birthday, kitty-cat?” Marvin asked the petite pet.

“Last month Izzy and I brought him home from a K.-Party.”

“K., the letter K.?”

“As in, special K.”

“The cereal?”

“The animal tranq. Wow, we need to get you educated. Following? At this drug party there was a cover fee, and cover fee for the party was, we had to bring something that started with the letter K., and someone brought this kitty.”

“Next time, you could bring me.”

“K-k-k-k-k-k... Kennelly.”

“Huh. What did you bring to the party?”

“Ketchup.”

“Catsup!”

“We splattered the bathroom, all ‘Psycho’.”

art. Filmstrips, a former life.

NEXT, Jack showed Marv the bathroom, pointing out its claw-foot tub with a bit of reverence. He said later they could share a bath. His bedroom, directly across the corridor, contained a futon mattress, television, and blue milk-crate shelves neatly scarce with clothes. He set Marvin’s suitcase against the wall, led his guest to the parlor.

“What’s this door?”

“That’s Izzy’s room.”

“Oh, right. Your roomie.”

Jack smiled then, healthy smile glistening. “Hi,” he said, implying that he was glad for company. After a quick kiss he said, “Be right back,” and departed to the kitchen.

To pass the time, out of curiosity, Marv flipped through a pile of CDs: This Mortal Coil, Ultra Vivid Scene, Dead Can Dance, Blue Oyster Cult, My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult. He wondered what he’d heard playing in the hatchback. The music remained a marked change from his usual — Grateful Dead, The Dead, Phish, Blues Traveler, the imitators — and thus reverberated new emotions: wow!, futuristic, sought-after, unpredictable, nervous, spacey, happy yet restricted somehow from that joy.

Jack returned with two dark-rum-colas and a small china plate holding a slice of key lime pie. “I’ve been playing quite the housewife,” he said, eschewing irony, handing him the plate and beverage. “This is hippie pie — all natural, made from scratch, honey — I used honey, not sugar.”

“Wow. All right.”

“And I took out all the books and dusted them when I dusted the shelves.”

“This pie is good.”

Jack put in an ambient disc, sat on the couch. He patted the dull-plush of the loveseat cushion. Marvin sat and ate pie bites. Meanwhile Jack parted plant fronds and found a sea-blue hand-blown glass in the shape of a whale. Already loaded in its blowhole, the bong gave him two hits from a forked tail and he packed a bud for his guest while he held smoke. While exhaling: “Purple pot! Keep it tipped so you don’t suck water.”

The bong gurgled as Marv inhaled. He coughed as he exhaled. When he recovered he said, “Is Purple Pot a nickname, for me? Something gay? A joke?”

Jack was shifty, amused or annoyed, alternately. “It’s got purple hairs in it,” he explained.

“Oh, I see,” Marvin said, feeling the buzz lift him quickly into that edgy state of paranoia. He quit eating the pie... jack might’ve put something noxious in. same with the dark rum. no need for another chemical right now... and he keeps taking hits: cocktail, whale’s tail, cocktail and the whale’s tail. why is this awkward? is he queer? how queer am i? cock, tail and whales’ tails. he’s not talking, i’m not talking. we’ve shut up for minutes.

“That’s about enough.”

The coed jumped, nearly coating the couch with meringue. Jack was busy nestling the glass whale back among the potted plants, while Marv set the plate on the floor next to his full beverage.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh just fine,” Jack said, strangely, extending his vowels, morphing into an apparition, two-dimensional, multi-dimensional.

Marvin spooked. He closed his eyes for a moment, and squelched that fear by visualizing going to bed together. A holographic movie played in his head: of meeting JACK at that neighboring college party: MARVIN enters the hall to the party's only bath, overhears Jack tell a friend: “*I want that one*” —. Now the toll for crossing the threshold to the bath is: a French kiss. This leads to an escort into the bath by Jack, a fervent piss by Marvin, more kissing, a playful stroke from Jack. Knocking, soon, at the door. They unlock the door, pull the shower curtain, strip naked and then f., quietly; nobody peeks behind the curtain that Marvin sees before he's lost himself in the bonding, the new sweet pain.

“Sleeping? Am I that dull?”

Marvin opened his eyes to see Jack interested in him. He experienced a surge of something, lust maybe, beneath the fear. oh, i'm tense. i need to relax. no can't. i need to get up and move, wash up after my trip. no can't. could've taken the trip to south texas with the people from school, to hike and camp. bet they're having fun. ouch my heart is beating, a drum-machine. was the dope laced, then? might be an attack.

“I'm really-really nervous,” the coed eventually said, his voice enervated, crackly, nonetheless a lilt to his slight mocking, a truth to his confession. “I've never, like, dated a guy, before. You were my first, guy sex, ever, for reals, at that party. You can believe that.”

Jack's face sank, his vibe went covert. He turned away.

Another hologram, in Marvin's mind: BAYBEE breaks the silence by exhaling a blast of clove smoke and declaring, “Now that is the train.” An internal splayed mess of emotions, MARVIN breathes in the icy early Spring air as the train glides to a halt. Doors slide open and a CONDUCTOR emerges to help lift up luggage and say “this step is a doozey!” Marvin climbs aboard and turns back to wave at Baybee. No tears fall yet it seems some massive emotive moment. After that he half-expects her to rush the train and thrust a fistful of flowers in his face, the effect of four-score decades of radical feminism gaining momentum. (She has a crush on him.) “You can always stay at my parents' house, if it gets crazy, bi-boy,” says Baybee, statuesque with her arms at her sides, feet rooted to the slush above her crushed clove, face a mask of worry and hope. Marvin forces a smile, swallows. “Bi, Baybee,” he says. She returns the grin; “What's ‘bisexual’ about,

with you?” “Being with anyone pretty,” he tells her, imitating what he recalls of Jack and his flippant philosophy. Whistle-tones signal the train’s departure. Baybee regains her usual somber, slyly bemused self. Marvin finds a seat by the window opposite Baybee, so he can watch her fade. On the platform her raggedy hair fans round her head at the moving of the train. Replay. Edit. Replay.

Then a different filmstrip running: that of Baybee’s nephew, IAN, slouching on one end of the couch, smooth beneath his tank-top, a lift to the crotch of his sweats. He removes his brand-new Athletics cap and sets it in his lap. A glance then, finally, toward the intrigued MARVIN, who queerly shies away. (How unlike that feeling he had while romancing Baybee, that time they’d tried screwing, and she bled, made a stain on the sheets. No apologies, not another mention, only drinks, more pot.) This nephew of hers, this boy Ian, this preteen kin, sparkles, sparks a flame of love; with a fool’s grin, Marvin takes his leave, to breathe, fleeing to the bath, where he checks his face for bliss. Upon his return to the den, with Ian gone, the crazy coed brings a fist to his chest, palpitating. Replay.

At the sound of a fork falling to the bamboo, Marvin slipped out of the looped scenes in his head. He blinked at the soft light of the loft. As if space-landing on a foreign planet he noticed anew the lush plants everywhere; a hippie place, with hippie pie, with a hippie host. Did jack really live here? not his type of place. not for a munster, no, not at all! too sophisticated, him, for this, for me. and now i better check his driver’s license. oh god, no! the poor sasha, poor micro-cat, eating that evil. pie!

“Sasha,” said Marv. The cat stared at him a moment then resumed licking the lime rind; the man nudged it away with his foot. “No, no, kitty!”

“Would you relax?”

“Sorry — I’m stoned, nervous.”

“Let’s skip Erasure Huddle tonight and watch some,” he said, then added, as if to tempt, “it’s Mel Brooks week on cable.”

The movie was “High Anxiety” and it had a calming effect, as did the flickering of the colors and patterns onscreen.

lifestyle, style of living — a mess, still

THEY watched the old tube bubble-screen with such intensity their eyes bulged — Jack’s galactic pupils pooled, large, unblinking. Marvin made the first move. The men made out, hands on old territory; Jack fumbled with Marvin’s money belt (worn because of the oversized and clunky buckle) with no interest whatever

in his traveler's checks. Flys unzipped with that voluptuous tearing sound; pants at the knees; boxers askew; shirts shed; more kissing, sucking, suckling; the big belt unbuckling at last. Clothes off, and Jack was up, out of the room.

The blood pulsed through Marv's temples. He was hot so he didn't cover up with the brocade spread he could feel bunched and scratchy on his bare back. "High Anxiety" still showed. The two-dimensional comedy, so intriguing less than an hour ago, now obnoxious and petty. He took a fortifying sip of cocktail to help gather his scattered wits.

Jack returned with a bottle of baby oil and shut the door behind him. His nude body, silhouetted against the movie, looked lubricated and magnificently skeletal. "Guess, guess, guess what I like to do with my prey," he said.

playing, havoc, mayhem in the mind...

LATER Marv Kennelly awoke as if he never went to sleep, on his guest-side of the bed, away from the wall, chest pressed against Jack's spine, fingers locked with his and clammy. Garish moonlight on his cheek, emitted from the gap between the shade and the sill. The coed stood, opened the shade and hunted for Baybee's gifted pack of cloves, feeling groggy from Jack's high-end pot. He needed a grounder.

Jack sat up on one elbow and watched him search. "In the mood for that Huddle, earthling? Quick-quick? I'm just about."

"Now?"

"Why not?" Jack said while his eyes and teeth gleamed. With a flick of the spread, he revealed his enormous affection, arching his bony spine for emphasis. "After some of this, yes, yes."

After some of his *this*, they ventured to the kitchen in a naked state. Jack put a tea kettle on the range. In the hall Marvin got the chills, went to the foyer and chose a trenchcoat missing buttons.

The cool bamboo against his toes and a draft under the front door reminded him that it was Spring Break but also late winter, the equinox, and he wrapped the coat by crossing his arms over his chest. Thoughts of Jack's chilly "mess" in the sunporch, for no obvious reason, reminded him of the K.-Party. His party story. The catsup, the ketchup, "splattered" or "spattered" or however, on the bathroom walls, all psycho.

"Do you have trash removal here in this district?"

“Yes, we have it,” said Jack.

“All that garbage in your sunporch! I was thinking — stupid, I know. I'm stuck on why it's there.”

“Did you say that story you wrote about me, and showed it to your friend?”

“To my friend Baybee? No, not even. Not yet. I'm just not getting the thread, of the story.”

“What's the story.”

“That's the question.”

“Is it.”

“Have you heard of a... but you know you have. It's in your music collection. It's in you...”

“What's *in* me.”

“I'm... How many shy people live in Shy Town? How many shy people die... here, a year, in Shy... Town?”

The real shocker, yes, yes, came when Jack said, in a curious spate of spitting and finger-wagging, that the Eraser Huddle show would occur in his apartment.

“R-r-right here?” asked Marvin.

“It's happening just now,” replied Jack.

The coed thought absurdly of Baybee, in her parents' rich-quiet suburb, her ragged hair moussed curtain-like while she read. Baybee claimed that all she knew (at eighteen!) was that each life path contorted and swayed and switch-backed and double-hooked in what could only be dubbed “mystical orderliness”... so why not experiment, and see what develops? And what had? Friendship? A brief romance with her nephew Ian, on a visit, lonely, seeking to surrogate his absent dad...

The tea kettle announced itself ready. Ignoring incongruous shadows and vulgar shifting shapes in the high corners of the kitchen, Marv watched Jack, still nude, turn off the gas. Instead of readying mugs, the host stared at him in that sorrowful way of his. Marvin shivered and attempted one of his taut-grins, telling himself that Jack Catch cared, in his way.

Yet Izzy — and that is her, is it not, emerging from the back bedroom, all gloamy and slick and hopelessly sick with a pipe-joy simper — in fits fits her ghost in...

then our antennae — jack, izzy; my antennae — a mass of assumption and wicked awareness, with a tardy blessing of tawdry killing-love, and gluttonous end-of-the-jar bliss... a grand experiment.

“Jack, I think I’m slipping into psychosis,” he said. says. yes, now in me, yet ouch and clumsy, only no; i’ve been hit, and hard! enough to erase the scene with baybee and the flowers and the train, hard! enough to erase my life; the lame lackluster years, the essays wrote, the charcoal depictions, the history learned... the black bags of rot, in the sunporch... who must we all be? i think about this: every stinking body has a given number of years left to live; maybe nearly as many as those already used up, maybe less, knowing, right, now, if i reflect, if we genuflect...