

James Beach

“On Bluffs and Bluffing”

LAUREL lit some nag champa incense. “All right?” she asked her study-buddy Chuck dozing on a dilapidated recliner left by a previous tenant. “The air smells funky still.”

Chuck sat forward, rubbed his cheeks with his fists, blinking here and there vacantly, searching his mind. That brilliant O, faded from their conversation about the gentrification of the Olympics, went dim.

“Filtered tap-water?” Laurel asked her freakish guest, wondering about it. Then she looked at her feet, sheathed in thin chrome green socks.

Hunched on his elbows, Chuck wrinkled his slack mouth into a semblance of disgust and popped his protruding spine, his arms up like caught doing the wave at a varsity game.

The brash hues of the block pattern quilt scrunched beneath him took her attention off his webbed thumbs.

“Got anything to drink?”

Sleek veil of hair draped over a pointing finger, she watched herself step over a text on the humanities, stray pens and a notebook, before collapsing on a shining purple beanbag chair. “No I don’t. I don’t like the hand I was dealt—my feet are enormous,” she confided.

Outside, gray clouds fanned like a hand of poker—the darker wisps spades and clubs, the lighter clouds diamonds and hearts. Then she saw she was looking at the sky, not a card game or veiled art.

Chuck said, “You’re fine,” before shuffling closer for a close crouched look.

“My toes are freakish,” she lamented. “Whenever shoe department salespeople try to assist me I bluff a snob routine. The bones in my feet grew and grew.”

Chuck removed her chrome green socks to study her long flat feet with his fingers, to burnish and chip seductively at a clump of clear polish on her big big toe.

She said, “What are you doing?”

He reached for her loose shirtsleeves and rolled them up to the elbows.

She said, “What are you doing?”

Chuck said, “Your feet are the same, exactly, as your forearms. Give a try.”

Laurel could feel the stretch in her trim hamstrings as she placed her left heel on the crook of her right elbow and the toes up to the crease of her wrist.

“The other side’s going to fit, too,” Chuck assured. He flicked on a halogen desk light. “See, your feet are exactly as they’re supposed to be.”

Except now her arms were too long. Her breath tightened, the chair sifted into a fat cookie of beans against the epoxied floor. In the grotesque she saw herself as some insect-thing, a teeny torso, limbs angled awkwardly about the beanbag.

“I’m imperfect,” Chuck said. “I’m sure the Spartans would’ve tossed me over that cliff, with the other deformities.”

“What cliff?”

“You know the Spartans,” he told her, a smug look overtaking his slack open mouth. “The thing with them was male beauty—the elders of the Sparta inspected each newborn; if it failed physical criteria, they tossed it.”

“Tossed it. The ugly baby.”

“Over the cliff, like garbage.”

“I don’t think I do know the Spartans.”

“The Spartans: Jar-head athletes, brothers-in-arms, a race of soldier-kings. You know, the drawings on that pottery? a perfect circle. Dudes all looked like porn stars!”

The girl, still spacey, giggled. “The Spartans?”

“They chucked their deformities,” Chuck said.

“I thought the Spartans, like, dressed up in tin skirts and combed each other’s hair and let it all hang out, wrestling in the buff with buckets of olive oil, in the buff?”

Chuck nodded a pink flush into his waxen cheeks. If she only knew his theories about the early Olympics, why little virgin girls and old old men were the only citizens in the stands.

“Are these guys on the quiz?”

On his feet, he sought out the staircase of music discs beside the dusty player, counted the rungs. “Yeah, maybe,” said study-buddy Chuck. He opened the text and read: “In ancient Sparta no deformed child was allowed to live; boys began military drill at the age of 7 and entered the ranks at 20. Spartans looked upon themselves as a military garrison, and all males lived in barracks until the age of 30. From age 20 to 60 all Spartans were obliged to serve as foot soldiers and to eat at the phiditia, or public mess, even if married. These resolute, ascetic warriors are best known for their 300 heroes at Thermopylae. Yet they failed to create a workable political or economic program. Excavations of the ancient city have uncovered ruins of temples and public buildings and also a theater of the Roman period, but the remains are scanty and insignificant for a city of such renown in antiquity.”

“Oh.”

Chuck quit reading. “Spartan society was based on separation of the sexes; their females nursed babies, ran village commerce; all males drilled each other, in the outback.”

“I get it.” Suddenly flouncing on the shining purple beanbag, Laurel bounced round her boobs. “Thanks for making me feel exquisite about my perfect feet.”

“They’re alive and well, those Alpha Males doing the Spartan thing. Tune in, every Monday Night Football.”

“Excuse me?”

“These pansy-assed over-glorified strappin’-young Alpha-men.”

“Pansy-assed?”

“Pampered-ass. I said pampered-ass over-glorified wannabe-Alpha-men. Boys, really. Pamper-ass over-done...”

“Listen Chuck,”

Chuck fell into his blinking habit out of comic resolve after his forget-getting-laid-by-her-after-that-comment. He forgot. Her uncle—

“nobody recruited my uncle because he was a, whaddaya call it, pampered-ass wannabe,” Laurel shot back.

—humanities text slipping from hand to hand—

“My uncle just signed with the Vipe’s.”

—Her uncle was NFL. “Your uncle plays for the Hawaii Vipers?” Chuck’s heart raced with his attempt to cover the gaffe. Pro players trained, brotherly, but not ultra-macho gay to the analogy.

Laurel leapt coltishly from the beanbag. “We’re extremely proud of him for making it to the top.” The nag champa stick sizzled as she pinched it out with licked thumb and forefinger, discretely.

“Making it to the top.”

“My uncle built himself into NFL material. Even in grade school he mowed lawns, shoveled snow, to pay for football camp, his equipment and everything.”

“Football camp.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what happens to little boys at football camp? I do. I can say I do. Only now—Hazing, you’ve heard the stories. The older guys and coaches and maybe even a star player from the League, they’re all hazers. They use...”

“What?”

“You’ve heard the stories.”

“I don’t think I have heard the stories.”

“They use the small ends of brooms, plungers. Toilet scrubbers.”

“Toilet scrubbers.”

Chuck nodded, waxy cheeks spreading into a crimson grin.

“Toilet scrubbers for what, Chuck?”

The guest let his eyes drop to Laurel’s bare feet. “Who ever heard of rejecting a boy over big feet?” he asked, eyes and mouth friendly, voice betraying major incredulous resentment with a crack.

“What cliff, Chuck?”

Heavy clouds and a thunderclap threw the apartment into dark, gave the host surreal anxiety. She verified the whereabouts of the recliner, the desk; reminded herself that glass from a broken halogen bulb was toxic dust.

“Believe me Laurel, the Clod-hopper, your uncle, he had an in from the get-go.”

Drops of rain snuck through to tap at the east window. When lightning streaks lit the apartment an intense white, Laurel could only hook her toes and wait for the thunder.

--references to Sparta paraphrased from Microsoft ®
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