

Death of a Fat Man

by Scott Neuffer

He's only 28. A doped-up walrus. A lump of obesity oozing over the sides of the hospital bed. She scoots to the edge of her chair, drawing closer.

"Marty," she whispers. "Party Marty," she whispers, hoping this jest, this playing of his secret nickname, will mitigate the preposterous dominion his body claims in the thin space of the room.

She hates the way other women ask her why with incredulous eyes. *No, seriously, why?* Because she is thin and not bad-looking. Because he is so obviously not not bad-looking. Just listen to his breathing, that deep, raspy groaning. It's horrible. If only she could give her thinness to him. If only she could lift him with her lightness.

But there is no lightness in the room. There is only dread. She feels the pull of his enormous mass, pulling the walls of her world into his dying, collapsing star. True, she already has painted her eyes black — thick shining strokes of black eye shadow — but not for the occasion. She always paints her eyes black. She paints her lips black, too. She dyes her hair jet-black and wears it short and spiky. But her Goth mystique, no matter how grave, can't save her now.

She listens to the scurry of nurses outside the room, the squeaky rolling of portable beds and IVs, the scuffing of soft-soled shoes across linoleum. She imagines his nurse, old and cynical, scrubbing her hands in some random sink, scraping the smell of his death off her skin.

"Have you visited Marty yet?" Raven asks.

"Nope," Manny answers while rummaging through the house fridge.

He stops, not finding anything good to eat, but also fearing he might appear callous. He turns to his coworker.

"Have you?" he asks, affecting a soft, considerate tone.

She shakes her head. Her eyes are deep, stirring dark and beautiful.

"I think we should go together," she says nonchalantly; but her face betrays the hot gleam of incipient seduction. It's a smoothly chiseled face with taut olive skin and sleek black hair. Her body is a lithe, light-bending blade.

"When are you thinking of going?"

"Tonight, after work," she says.

Tonight. The word blooms in his head like a lascivious flower. He smells Levina at the edge of his nose, Levina from Panama whom he met the night before at the club. He instantly remembers her sharp, floral odor, and the exotic purr of her accent.

No, Manny thinks. He can't ignore the image of Marty, his obese body laid cold and flaccid on the sterile sheets of a hospital bed, contrasted with the flickering memories of nights they worked together, like two guys who'd just met in a bar, the crude jokes they made, the earth-exploding roar of Marty's laughter, the unfortunate stench of his person, like shit mixed with syrup.

Arising with these memories, Manny feels a vague self-righteousness, an urge to tell Raven that he knew this day would come, that Marty had no future with the way he ate and drank and smoked cigarettes. But before he blasts a fat man dying in bed, Manny remembers his conscience, socially attuned.

"Alright," he says. "I can meet you there."

"What time?" she asks, and the playful seduction in her eyes solidifies into a more serious force, the smoldering darkness of sexual expectation, a contract of sorts.

Oh, to be a womanizer in California, Manny thinks, in the days of the Mercedes-Benz, double-shot latte and wireless cellphone, to reap the post-9-11 anxiety of upper-middleclass hotties. *Let the devil tempt her towards me, but let not disease neither taint my loins nor touch my blood.*

By now, though, Manny has discovered the dead end of Raven's suggestiveness, the fenced-off elusiveness of her nature. He has discovered a creature eternally unsure about what it wants, lacking a decisive core, a primary root, living only in the surface of its moods.

Looking into her beautiful face, Manny senses that the ebb and flow of her evasiveness may be triggered by something deep inside her, something old and terrible, an irrepressible menace. In contrast, he envisions Levina, who is similarly dark and slender in countenance, but untainted and uninhibited in character. He's thrilled by her effluent innocence, her steady ignorance of stigma. The women he's had lately have been the opposite: scarred, damaged, shamed. There's a public restroom on the pier where he takes them. Not Levina, he thinks. She's different.

Manny decides he'll shorten the hospital visit. He and Raven get off

at 7. If he skips the barbecue with Levina and goes to the hospital straight from work, he guesses he can be done by 8 and back on the beach with Levina before absolute nightfall.

“I’ll go straight after work,” he says, signing the contract in her eyes, exchanging futures.

Why not try for both?

The Crisis Response House is a sky-blue rambler tucked discreetly in the rolling hills of California’s central coast. Half an hour from the ocean, surrounded by shapely ranches and wineries etched in the hills, it looks like the quiet, pastoral residence of some happily retired couple.

In reality, the house belongs to a large not-for-profit company specializing in the care of mentally and socially challenged adolescents. Children in the agency can be placed in the house if their domestic situation has been deemed “in crisis,” meaning they have become a threat to their loved ones and/or themselves. Crisis Response allows each client a three-month residence, during which time his or her behavior is hopefully modified and valuable social skills learned. The program offers a lighter, more personal alternative to other forms of institutionalization, and the house’s primarily college-aged staff credits itself with having saved countless children from the soul-numbing oblivion of mental hospitals.

Marty worked at the Crisis Response House for almost a year before getting sick. Prior to that, he worked at Ashen Oak State Hospital some fifteen minutes up the road, the largest mental facility of its kind and home to California’s criminally insane. At Ashosp, as it was commonly referred to, Marty trained as a psychiatric nurse. Because of his enormous weight, pushing 500 pounds, he was frequently called on to quell violent episodes — patients gnashing at each other with fingernails and teeth; or cornering some poor nurse with sexual desire so pent and mad it foamed from their mouths. Marty’s weight was used so often as a physical suppressant that inmates came to fear him and eventually nicknamed him, “The One.” During his breaks, when he sat in the courtyard smoking cigarettes, he mused over the secret pride this nickname provided him.

It was during one of these breaks that Marty met Jessie. Unlike the other nurses, she didn’t look at him with the usual mixture of gratitude and disgust. When she emerged from the metal doors, he noticed the luscious blackness of her lips, the winged blackness of her eyes, the spiky and refulgent blackness of her hair; novelties of darkness drawn dramatically against the dire paleness of her skin and the absolute white of her nursing jacket. Her body

was slender but not seductive; her steps were nervously clipped, fluttering. She fluttered in his mind like a frail bird, like the innocent creature of some dark and perverse world that had wandered away and now found itself uncertain beneath a bright and empty sky.

She stopped in the middle of the courtyard, nervously eyeing her surroundings. Marty sat in front of her, slumped on a concrete bench. There were a few other people scurrying on the edges of the cement square, but no one in between her and Marty. Just the mystic wreath of smoke around his head. The strong pull of his swollen body. She still remembers what he was wearing that day: a huge, glossy-white medical coat with a single pocket over his heart, billowing down over black, baggy jeans, shredded at the ankles, and a giant pair of worn-out sneakers. His hair was as jet-black as hers, a staunch pad of it. His eyes were nuggets of obsidian, gleaming with lost warrior secrets, signaling the native tint of his broad face, the dark stubble of his chin and cheeks. His eyelids were big and purple, strained by obesity, but somehow balanced by the silver stud in his stalwart nose.

Jessie fumbled in her pocket and whipped out a cigarette. She raised it to her mouth but hesitated to slip it between her lips. She held it in front of her face, between her elongated fingers, on the outward sway of her wrist, all hooked in the strange contortion of her arm. She tried to look pensive and sexy, but she fluttered with nervousness. Suddenly, almost manically, she fluttered towards Marty. His huge heart bellowed. It was already overworked, churning, grinding to keep up. He felt faint; his breathing became quick and dizzy. He felt sweat form in the folds of his fat.

“Do you have a light?” she asked, and although she was thin, her voice was deep and husky, like the blare of an organ.

“Yeah,” he grunted, swelling with panic.

He tried to stand up, so he could reach into his jean pocket. He leaned to one side and planted an elephantine hand on the cement and pushed off. But his spine whimpered in the effort. He collapsed back on the bench, breathing hard and raspy, and his face reddened with shame. He looked up. All he could see was the blade of her body, reflecting the sun in a vertical line of blinding white. He tried again, grunting as he pushed, his face twisted, but again he collapsed on the bench.

“Sh...” he uttered, his panting devouring the unfinished word, his chest heaving in great cataclysms of motion.

“Sh...” he tried again, but couldn’t complete the word. Sweat glistened on his thick warrior skin. He coughed, spat a gob of brown.

“Shit,” he finally managed.

Jessie grinned. Her nervousness was consumed by fluttering wings of invisible fire.

“It’s okay,” she said with inexplicable spunk. “I already got a lighter.”

A shrieking laugh cracked from her lips.

“I’m sorry. I just...” she stopped mid-sentence, suddenly unsure, anxious once more...

“I just wanted to talk to you!” she blurted out. “I don’t know anyone here, and you seem really cool.”

The pink faded from Marty’s face. Jessie removed a lighter from her pocket and lit the end of her cigarette. Marty extinguished his and probed in the shirt pocket over his heart for another. The sweat was cooling his shame. A fresh, nervous joy throbbed in his mind. He wanted to say something, anything to keep her interested, but, in its upheaval, the strange new emotion had abandoned all his regular words and their perfunctory meanings. He was washed anew by tingling throbs of blankness. He looked to her face for an answer and found the same sweet revolution in her eyes, blue eyes painted black. Twin seas of light diaphanous blue thickly, sharply rimmed by darkness.

“Here,” she said and handed him the lighter.

He lit the end of his cigarette and cherished the first drag.

“How long have you worked here?” he asked, keenly aware of how heavy and grating his voice was.

His heart faltered at the thought that such a light and sweet creature couldn’t tolerate his monstrous elocution.

“This is my second week,” she said.

She too hated her voice. Someone once had told her that she sounded like a cow.

There was a moment of silence. The smoke wisped from their cigarettes, combined in brief coronation above their heads, illumined by sunlight, then swallowed by sky. Their courage thrashed in that ocean of sky. Then Jessie spoke.

“Party Marty,” she chortled. “I like your name.”

He looked at her. She had breached the sink of doubt in her own fiery, spunky, completely random and ridiculous way. He saw that beneath the lightness, the giddiness, there hid some terrible secret, barley contained by the pale curves of her skin, a secret of awful and constant force that perpetually struck her into nervous flight. And he saw how she had tried to mitigate the effects of this secret by transforming its pain into a vogue of darkness. All her Gothic modifications constituted a seal of suffering, a sign of warning but also



of victory. She reminded Marty of a singed bird, a black dove, and he would have to rise in order to catch her.

Within months, they were married. Neither had a lot of family, and it was a small wedding. Marty then transferred to the Crisis Response House to work nights, and Jessie stayed on at Ashosp to work days. After her shift, she’d drive to the house and drop off food, right when Marty’s shift was beginning. Most nights, he worked with Raven, and she liked those nights. Raven was extremely attractive, but this didn’t bother Jessie. She knew that someone as high and elusive as Raven could never stop and stoop to love someone like Marty, or even spend time considering why someone else would love him. It would be a waste of her time, and so, save a faint look of repulsion, she showed no searching disbelief when Jessie entered the house holding a greasy paper sack laden with fast food.

But Manny was different. She dreaded nights when Marty worked with Manny. She initially found him very handsome, his lean frame, his dark hair and dark eyes, but there was something unsettling about the way these features aligned themselves and probed the outside world. He looked at her not with contempt, but with sympathy, true, prying sympathy, and this bothered her more than any amount of condescension. In condescension, people

were cruel, but they were aloof, as the emotion naturally required distance between the better and lesser objects; insult was diluted as it traveled the space between. Jessie had more than space; she had Marty as insulation. But Manny's presence penetrated even that. He infiltrated the core of her mental world, and because his reaction was one of sympathy, it could only mean that what he'd found inside her was something dire and pathetic, something deserving of his compassion. This caused the walls of her world to shudder. She knew exactly what he'd found, not something exclusively about her, not her dark history, but rather her sanctuary built of Marty, that cloistered vigil, that secret moon rising in her chest. He had found its moribund seal.

She denied it. She couldn't risk asking him to change. She didn't want him to change. His voluptuous stink was hers, and it abounded with unprecedented affections. Early in the dark morning, after work, they'd fire up the grill, and she would cook him hamburgers and hotdogs, this on top of the meal she had already brought to his work. She would drink a light beer, and he copious amounts of cola and whiskey. He would get drunk and parade around the house in nothing but his underwear. The naked folds of his fat would jiggle gloriously as he romped, as he whooped and hollered and danced. He would tell her awful jokes that were so asinine she couldn't help but laugh. And she did what she could to make him laugh, because his laughter was earth-exploding; it shattered the inequities of her past and floated her on a roaring ocean of joy. Then he would try to lower his voice, trying so lovingly but unsuccessfully to soften its tone, so he could whisper how precious she was. He was like a giant child in her bony arms, and she strained to hold him through the few hours of sleep, as his bravado faded, as he succumbed to slumber.

"My Party Marty," she would whisper, cooing his dreams.

A month before their first anniversary, Marty got sick. Fever took his body and began melting his insides. When Jessie rushed him to the emergency room, he was placed in intensive care. Doctors found a strange sore on his skin that looked like a belated birthmark. They told her they'd seen similar cases. Some mysterious and malignant germ was spreading through California. The media hadn't picked up on it yet, and doctors, working with the government, were scrambling to figure out what it was before mass hysteria broke loose. *In your husband's poor...um... questionable condition, his body is not able to fight it.*

The strange mark became the virulent seal of his fate, the point into which death dug its cold, stark fingers and scrambled his inner organizations. Although it lasted only a week, the dying was long and torturous. His body

gave up buckets of liquid infection in return for morphine. Awake, his moaning was unbearable, his talk gibberish. In sleep, he gasped and groped for air. There were endless processions of doctors, dozens of them crammed into the room at any given time. Their white cloaks buzzed around his colossal, dark body, which they'd splayed on the bed like a monster specimen for inhuman experiment.

This lack of dignity hurt Jessie more than anything. Her love alone had shaped him. Her love had defined what was noble in his nature. It had given integrity to his otherwise ludicrous form, the same way his love had dignified her. But as his condition worsened, her love lost its guiding power, and Marty degenerated back into absurdity. A doped-up walrus lost at sea, bellowing pathetically as it died. In vain she tried to save him, to lift him with her lightness, her wings of invisible fire, but his death was obstinate. There was no recourse, no one else to help soften his fate with love. Not one family member or friend or coworker had shown up. When the doctors and nurses vacated his room, she fell prostrate at his side and pounded her tiny fists into his mammoth chest. She wept for his recovery, and when his body lay unmoved, she wept for her own consolation.

Manny Cash loves driving. He looks for women alone at the wheel, sealed in the tight, metal space of their automobiles. He probes into the secrecy of their lives the way a grizzly bear would pry open the back hatch of a new Toyota 4-Runner in search of food. There's a secret fraternity on the road, he thinks. Strangers separated in strange vessels all floating together on the surreal spinning of their tires. No one knows where the other is going, yet they catch glimpses of each other through spots of glass: salacious smiles, full-on eye-fucks, or, more often, flashes of distrust, rage, a passing tableau of despair hard as asphalt. A stop sign proffers eternity...

Quick! There's a black BMW with blonde-haired hotness barely visible behind the tinted windows. She's passing you. Or how about that depressed, middle-aged brunette driving the minivan? She looks like she would release years of pent-up fury, take you in the back of her tract house, slip the ring off her finger and mollify her petrified dreams of romance by pounding you into oblivion. He thinks of Raven driving in her Subaru (he can't see her in the rearview mirror), and how behind the yuppie exterior her face glimmers dangerously. Or Jessie, the blackened blade of her body, whimpering and willing from loneliness in her Ford Escort. No! he thinks. What the fuck? The oak-split air whistles in the cracked windows of his not-so-cool truck....

His cell phone suddenly chimes, and its ring is intensified by the scen-

ery, by the huge hollow of drained sky above him, and the plumes of pinkness flaring in the west, and below the unscrupulous sprawl of cooling, darkening greenery. His cell phone rings with uncanny urgency.

“Hay lo,” Levina says upon reception, the trace of her accent crinkling like fire. “Howz mi estupido?”

“Me so tired, me so horny!” he jests, using a phrase lifted from the first movie they saw together, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.

“Yeer stupid,” she says.

“I guess, but baby, I got some bad news...”

He anticipates her silence, and when she doesn’t speak, he proceeds:

“I gotta go to the hospital and visit a coworker.”

“Whin?” she squeals.

“Right now.”

The silence recurs, followed by a melodramatic sigh.

“I thought we weer to have dinner,” she whimpers.

“I know. I’m sorry. But my co-worker is really...”

“I thought that we weer to go to the beach and barbequite.”

The very jingle of her mispronunciation evokes in Manny the beauty of the ocean. He envisions a wholesome expanse of sand, a churning curve of crystal sea, and the sky above like a long, glistening mirror strewn with thick, twilight clouds, throbbing, longing incarnate. He sees their fire on the beach, circled in stone, the flames like liquid tongues, curious, curled, crackling in the dancing declamation of their love. He sees bloody chunks of meat hung on crude driftwood skewers, the blood dripping and sizzling in the lustrous heat. He sees a bottle of wine lifted from a cooler of packed ice, meltwater dripping from the dark, curved glass. He divines the rich, erotic tang as the wine slips down the throat, followed by more wine, succulent ribbons of meat, fresh bread, fine cheese, slightly moldy strawberries. And after their stomachs settle, they’ll make love on the beach. Their conjoined bodies will move as one body beneath the blanket, becoming one breath, one small whispering. Their love will grow like a nascent star, an infant incandescence whose light makes claim against the darkening sky.

The vision is irresistible, and it fills Manny with strange rapture, at once serene and urgent, like the feeling of sunset: the softly spreading tranquility of color, coupled with the anxious knowledge of its inevitable diminution.

“Estupido, are you there?” she asks.

Manny feels his stomach sinking with the car in their hushed descent of Cuesta Grade. An obscure doubt grows in his head until it resembles the image of Jessie. He first sees her paleness, professing the weakness of her con-

dition, and then he sees the novelties of darkness she’s fashioned in order to negate such weakness, the crow-black hair, the zombie eyes, the crypt keeper’s lips. He thinks how she has strived so hard to contradict death, even in her choice of a mate. She and Marty appear preposterous together: a tiny, flighty woman paired with that huge, morbidly obese man. The fact of their love bothers Manny now more than it ever has. In the beginning, he empathized with her longing for the impossible, her idea that she could save him. Manny, too, is afflicted by impossible dreams, but at some point, he thinks, one has to throw in the towel. Now she demands not only his sympathy, but some concerted effort of consolation. He knows that she’s scared shitless. He knows that she’s alone. But she caused the damn misery herself, he thinks. Everyone knew Marty was destined to die young. His fate, tied to 500 pounds of drooping, reeking flesh, couldn’t have been otherwise. She knew it going in, and she tied herself to the sinking star... In this way, Manny justifies not going to the hospital.

He’s only 28, and *OH GOD HE’S DYING!* A doped-up walrus. A lump of obesity oozing over the sides of the hospital bed. Before they, the other, can push her out of the room, she kneels beside him, she strokes his hair, she runs her fingers across his cheek. His eyes are giant, bruised eggs. The heaving of his chest an unformed memory.

“Party Marty,” she whispers, trying to rouse him, trying to wake him.

If only he knew how much he means to her. His significance to her life is proportionate to his weight; his obesity anchors her in happiness; but now its corruption pulls her into the putrid boundaries of space.

“Party Marty!” she cries. “Party Marty!”

But it’s no help. Soon, he will die. White coats will rustle like the wings of doves trying in vain to revive the jelly mass of his body. The walls of her world will collapse, and she will know the darkness she has sought so hard to govern.

It’s never what you dream. There’s no fire, no sizzling meat, only a grease-stained sack from Burger King and a paper cup of Diet Coke where wine should be. He checked his account before coming and found it drained. So here they find themselves on a beach cluttered with condos and tourists, on a penniless sand littered with cigarette butts and soggy newspaper. Above the brooding ocean, yards from them, the sky is severe with twilight, clouds like shards of glass, yet where severity usually begets beauty, there is no beauty, just something random in the air, glib and terminal, as pop music whines from a

far-off convertible.

“Mi cutie,” Manny tries to jest.

He offers Levina a hamburger, and she shakes her head.

“I no eat that,” she says. “Boison.”

He throws her a defensive look.

“It’s not poison. It’s American food.”

“No, es boison,” she repeats. “I thought we weer to barbecue.”

He sets the hamburger down. In a mashing, sucking frenzy, he draws soda from his straw. When he looks back up, her hair, her eyes, are glowing darkly in the grayness, matching the shade of her scandalous bikini, and giving way to the luminescent, silken contours of her body. Desire ignites his loins. His head is emptied of blood and refilled with a rushing, swirling terror — he has to have her, or else he’ll die from lack of dignity.

“I got an idea,” he says and jumps to his feet. “Follow me.”

Startled, sandals flailing, she is led to the shack of public restrooms on the pier. To them both, the shattered sky around is dizzying on that edge of antiquated wood, and the smell of sea-salt and creosote further stings the senses.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I’m going to the bathroom, but I want you to meet me in there in a minute.”

“No se,” she says. “I no know what you want.”

“Just count to 60, then come in and find me. Okay?”

She pales in confusion. His face glimmers dangerously.

“You go in the bathroom with me, okay?” He gives her a little tug.

“But in a minute.”

In the tight, foul-smelling space of the bathroom, someone has left a fresh turd spinning in the toilet of his stall. He flushes it down with fury. Jessie grows in his mind like a germ as he wipes off the seat, as he pulls down his pants and positions himself on the toilet. There’s no artificial light in the restroom, which makes it perfect for his devising, but in the dimness he can’t see the tally marks on the metal partition beside him. So he runs his fingers along the cold metal until he hits them near the bottom: one, two, three thin indentations. Instantly, he’s hard with the recollections of women he’s had in the stall, the filth and noise and acute pleasure of it. Sitting there, he begins to play with himself. He strokes his sex into power, stokes the primeval fire, but suddenly stops when his fingers graze a crusty patch of skin on his inner thigh. In the darkness, he bends down and strains to see what looks like a birth mark. As he prods it further with the edge of his fingernail, the bathroom door swings open.

“I’m in here,” he says distractedly. “I’m ready for you.”

Little does he know that Levina already has left the pier in confusion and disgust, and that the shadow moving toward the stall is not that of a woman, but that of a very large man burning with loneliness.

Jessie stands in front of the mirror. The bathroom is a typical hospital bathroom, small, cramped, sharp with disinfectant. A pop-up knob ensures the water won’t be left running, but she turns the dial to hot and pins the knob with her elbow, while using her other hand to wring the soap dispenser of its last few drops, as pink as bloody semen. Soon, the room is steaming with heat, and after contorting her body to properly lather, she lifts her elbow and plunges her hands into the taut current of scalding water. With a weak cry, she begins rubbing down her extremities, grinding the reddening surfaces of skin. But even in that scalding friction, the feel of his cold flesh still throbs in her fingertips. The crackling sound of the sheet being pulled over his head still resounds in her ears. The stink of his life, the sour smell of his death, still lives in her nostrils. And she hates it! She hates him! She leans over and slaps hot water onto her face, slaps harder with each wincing shock of pain, until her will breaks in a squeal of despair.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” a woman asks, knocking lightly on the door. “Ma’am?”

Jessie bites her lip, fights the cringing of her eyes.

“I’m alright. I’ll be out in a minute.”

She listens for footsteps, for the soft scudding of shoes on linoleum, but she hears instead, barely, the tremulous breath of the nurse on the other side.

“Really, I’m fine,” Jessie says.

The faucet turns itself off, and she wipes the mirror with her forearm, noticing first that her makeup is gone; only traces of it remain in her lower eyelashes like a wet ash. As the hole in the glass widens, she stares incredulously at the image revealed there. A face as lovely as any looks back at her, a face she hasn’t seen for years, now glowing like the flushed heart of a white rose.

She leaves the bathroom and has hardly reentered the bright, buzzing world of the hospital when she hears her name being called.

“Jessie,” the voice calls, and it’s the softest, sweetest voice she’s ever heard, as if Marty has come back from the dead with the body and voice he always wanted.

She turns to find Raven standing in the hallway — not the high, superior Raven of the Crisis Response House, but Raven small and subdued, heartbroken, friendless, offering her condolences.