

Sixfold Submission

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CHERYL

(At the Rehabilitation Restaurant)

by

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*i*

Cheryl loved the boys. The boys always seemed to be a whirlwind of motion and she loved to see them run. She sat on the curb and watched them play kick-the-can and after dusk she watched them chase after the lightning bugs. Her father whistled and she would retreat home, but she sat at the open window and listened for the boys' final laughter and shouts of the dying day.

The girls bored her. She had no interest in peeing dolls or the horned horses that flew. She owned no teddy bears and she called her little sister "Sissy" because she

relished make-believe tea parties and brushing her dolls' hair; the nickname was not meant as a compliment.

In the summertime the boys would take off their shirts and Cheryl watched the sweat glisten on their backs. She loved the boys' strength, the sinew of their arms and legs. She was warned by her mother against taking off her top too.

She rode on the handlebars of the boys' bikes and her hair blew in the wind. She played spin-the-bottle with the boys because she got to kiss them: there was Michael who kissed so sweetly and Brendan, who blushed when he kissed her. She loved to play Twister at the parties, to twist herself among the boys, right hand on red dot, left foot on yellow dot, her back arched, like a cat, and her budding breasts barely grazing the soft cotton of her blouse.

She didn't mind taking off her top and showing her chest, she only wished the boy she was with would also take off his shirt and hold her, to feel her bare skin against his. As time went on it was no longer the mamilla that the boys wanted, they wanted what she had protected, some times too much so.

She found that giving the boys what they wanted did not work to her advantage; it was no guarantee she would keep the boy because, as she sensed, all the girls would give the boys what they wanted in the end, and it seemed that at that time, anyway, the boys went back to choosing the more clever or prettier girls.

Cheryl did not feel she was particularly attractive: her face was flat and her nose too wide. She filled out and had no choice now but to wear a bra. During this lonely time she watched the boys at a distance, at the football or soccer games, or from the background at the dances.

She attended the community college, but only half-heartedly. She was more focused on saving her tip money, and without a clear objective at school she drifted along, barely earning the C's that dotted her grade sheets. She told herself she was doing more harm than good, that the smart thing to do would be to work hard and save and then enroll at a good four-year school. So she took all the shifts she could get, filled in for the waitresses who were sick or away, and watched her savings account slowly grow.

Derek came to the restaurant with a group of his friends and then he came back alone to talk with Cheryl. He asked her to a Woody Allen movie and they went out for burgers and fries after the showing. Derek worked as an auto body man and he had a plan: he could do his work anywhere in the country, so why stay in Cincinnati? In southern California you have the ocean and the sun, and the mountains behind you, and the kicker, he said, was there was no need for a car. He could ride his motorcycle there year-round.

Cheryl came to share Derek's plan and they talked often about their getaway. She went to the library and learned about Carlsbad, a town north of San Diego she thought Derek would like. Her savings balance had bloomed to four-thousand dollars and she wondered if this wasn't her destiny all along, the hell with school and hometown life.

They took off in late spring, after the rains had melted the snow, Derek on his BMW and Cheryl trailing behind in her small Chevy. They picked up old Route 66 outside St. Louis and stayed at cheap roadside motels and ate greasy chicken with the truckers along the way. They took pictures with a giant blue whale in Oklahoma and

waited out the rainstorm in the Texas Panhandle. More pictures, from the middle of a meteor crater, a precipice at the Grand Canyon and beside the Tucumcari road sign, because Cheryl knew the name from the “Willin” song. When they approached Santa Monica, and she could smell the ocean in the air and then had her first peek at the magnificent blue Pacific, joyful tears stung her eyes.

They rented an apartment on Juniper Street in Karlsbad, several blocks from the ocean, and found their furniture at yard sales. Derek bought a surfboard and Cheryl paid twenty dollars for a serviceable second-hand guitar. Derek was hired at the new Toyota dealership in Kar Kountry and Cheryl took a lunchtime waitress job at Bully’s in Del Mar, further down the coast. They talked about family and kids and finding a place of their own, maybe even a dumpy little place in Leucadia, the next town over.

It was January and they were out riding in the hills behind San Bernardino. A light mist had begun to fall and Cheryl tightened her grip around Derek and leaned into him for the warmth. She was glad now she had had worn her parka.

Derek caught an image in his mirror of her ponytail being whipped around in the wind and he half-turned to tell her that he liked her hair up off her neck, that her neck was beautiful and that the ponytail should stay. The motorcycle hit something metal in the road, debris left behind by a passing car. This small collision forced the bike onto the slick yellow paint that divided the road at the bend, and the bike began to slide; it was sliding down and Derek was unable regain control.

Cheryl was thrown over Derek’s back and she hit the asphalt and skidded. She couldn’t quite look up because her body wasn’t working correctly but she thought that it

wasn't terribly uncomfortable there in the road. She only wanted to know that Derek was unhurt.

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She didn't sleep well that first month at the Restaurant and she fell into the habit of going out to the parking lot at two or three in the morning. One some nights the pain kept her awake, other nights it was simply restlessness. She had pajamas, but she preferred to wear one of Derek's old washed-out flannels. The tails of the shirt fell almost to her knees and she felt this was cover enough. She would pace the parking lot and smoke a cigarette, or just stand at the fence and try to empty her mind. Getting back under the covers felt good after being out in the chill morning air.

She liked to look back at the rooms to see whose light was still on, who was awake with her in these ungodly hours of the morning. Soon enough, she realized that a lighted room might be a very poor indicator: someone could be wide awake in a dark room, trying to squeeze their eyes shut for sleep. Similarly, the lights might all be blaring and the exhausted soul inside might well be sound asleep.

On this night her bad knee bothered her, and the stretches and leg-lifts only heightened the pain. She went to the dresser and regarded her dwindling supply of weed; she'd have to husband what remained till she found a new source. She took the stub of a joint from a crumpled baggie and sat on the edge of her bed to smoke it, and let the remnant die out in the ashtray. She went outside and leaned against the fence. Stars filled the night sky. Several cars passed by on the Coast Highway.

The front window of only one room was lit. The idea came suddenly and carried her away, and she wanted to move quickly, before she lost her nerve. At the sink she cupped warm water and streamed it over her face. She dried her face and hands and reached into the dresser drawer for one of the few remaining rolled joints, strapped on her sandals and climbed the stairs to Jude's door.

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He thought he heard a light rapping on his door. But it was after two in the morning and he felt almost certain this rapping was occurring in his head. He squinted at the small clock on the dresser. Who would stand out on his porch at two-thirty in the morning and knock so softly you could barely hear it? One of the guys would open the door and say, "hey, you awake?" One of the girls wouldn't be out there knocking, but on that wild outside chance she too would open the door, maybe only slightly, and ask if she could come in and talk, if only for a second.

And then it seemed the knocking stopped. Jude laid his magazine down on the floor and gathered the bed sheet around him. He smoothed out a spot between his legs for the ashtray and lit a cigarette. He pressed a palm against his right temple and massaged that side of his forehead in a tight, circular motion. The rapping began again.

He thought of getting out of bed and going to the door, but wasn't certain he'd have his legs under him. "Door's open," he called.

The door cracked open and she pushed through the narrow opening. She leaned against the closed door. "Hi. I'm Cheryl. I couldn't sleep either. I saw your light on and thought I'd see if you could use some company."

"I know who you are, Cheryl. You're the lunch bartender. We've talked a couple times.

She nodded. "Hope you don't mind."

"Have a seat." They both regarded the lone chair in the room; its back was covered with clothes and the seat was layered with books and magazines. "Just put that stuff on the floor," Jude said.

She picked up a magazine and added it to the collection on the chair and sat on the floor, beside his bed. She opened a palm to show a chubby, poorly rolled joint and laid it down beside her. She raised one knee and hunched her arms over it and looked up at him. "Feeling any better?" she asked. "I heard you were sick today."

"Headaches," he said. "I get these lousy fucking headaches."

"My mom got really bad migraines."

"So, you know."

"Is that why you're here? The headaches?"

"No." He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and inspected the results. "No. I'm here because Mr. Kessler asked me to stay. And I couldn't think of anyplace better to go."

He took a hit on his cigarette and exhaled toward the ceiling. He saw that she was staring at the floor and he tried to soften his tone. "I bet I look like hell," he said. He waved an open hand in the direction of the mess in his room, the clothes and the

towels in heaps on the floor. "And the place looks like hell. I was sick a couple hours ago, so I'm sure it stinks like hell too. Guess what I'm saying is, I wouldn't blame you if you didn't feel like sticking around."

"You still have your headache?"

He turned toward her. His right eye appeared to be half-shut, a breach of blue against his pallid face. "The worst of it is over."

"I've got aspirin," she said. "And I've got Darvon."

"Thanks. I've taken about all the Excedrin I can stand. And the narcotics just make me sick." He swiped at his right eye with the bottom of his tee-shirt. "Funny thing about the migraines is that heaving usually means the worst of it is over. Throwing-up with a migraine isn't a gentle release--it feels kinda like a blunt board being pounded through your skull, but you heave away, try to get it all out, because if you're lucky, salvation might be right around the corner."

"Will you be able to sleep now?"

"There's a lot of caffeine in those Excedrin. Then I drank some Coke, it's the only thing strong enough to clear out that puke taste in the mouth. I'll crash soon enough. But for right now I'm just enjoying the quiet and the dark. It's the only time you can hear the ocean up here."

They sat quietly several moments and listened, but a motorcycle rumbled down the Highway and all they heard was the muffled roar of its pipes. "Where would I find a washcloth?" Cheryl asked.

"Probably one on the sink."



She got up and limped to the back of the room. She found a dried and rumpled washcloth on the floor behind the sink and washed it with the bar of soap under the hot water. She looked up at herself in the mirror and shook her head a little, much like her mother might've shaken her head at her years before. Really, she asked herself, what are you doing here? To see if he needs anything? With a joint in your hand? What he probably needs is sleep.

Steam fogged the mirror and she held the washcloth under cool water, wrung it out and went to the edge of the bed beside him. She washed his face, behind his ears and his neck, then turned the cloth over and slowly rinsed the cloth over his face. "I thought that might feel good," she said.

She picked up the ashtray and walked it back to the toilet, flushed, and cleaned the sink with her washcloth. She matched his shoes and sandals and boots and lined them up against the wall, and began picking up the clothes and folding them. She found some space for them atop the dresser.

He watched her awhile, agile despite her troubled knee. "Really, you don't have to do that," he said. "I'm not usually such a slob."

"That's the beauty of these rooms," she said. "It takes about five minutes to pick them up."

"Here, sit down. Smoke your joint. Relax."

Cheryl turned from the dresser. "Would the pot help your headache?"

Jude shook his head. "I'll have a cigarette." He swept the sheet away and swiveled, sat for a moment to make sure he had his balance. He turned the floor fan on low and aimed it out the north-facing window. He uncovered a sweatshirt from the pile

of clothes on the chair and zipped it up over his undershirt, and he straightened the candle that sat crooked on the Blue Willow salad plate. “The lady at the shop told me this candle was the scent of the ocean.” He lit the candle. “But it smells more like the lagoon, if you ask me.”

Cheryl smiled. Jude looked at her fully for the first time. He couldn't recall what it was that first put him off about her. Her face was pock-marked and she wore light make-up. Maybe that was it, the make-up. Certainly, it wasn't anything she had said-- they'd had only several cursory exchanges. Had she come across as aloof? Or maybe that was only reticence. He considered that perhaps his snap judgement had been off base. She seemed at ease in her flannel nightshirt. And he liked her open, toothy smile.

He turned off the lamp and climbed back into bed, and offered her space on the narrow bed beside him. “I like the tree branch that grows through your porch,” she said.

“They must've built the porch around that branch.” A slow smile spread across his tired face. “Some day I'll tell you the story of how Tawkee saved that branch and the County lost a chain-saw.”

“Tawkee doesn't say much. He worked lunch one day last week when Cid was sick and the girls were upset because he didn't say anything.”

“Long as he didn't slam any utensils down on the counter he was having a good day. Give him a few beers and he's fine.” Jude pushed the ashtray toward Cheryl and lit her joint. “Where'd you work before all this?”

“Bully's, in Del Mar. I worked the lunch. But after this accident,” she nodded at the scar on her knee and took a hit from her joint, “I couldn't swing the heavy trays

anymore. The knee buckles. Really, it hurts just to walk. All that running to the kitchen and the bar and back out front, I just couldn't do it anymore. So I went down to San Diego and took this stupid Mr. Boston course--figured I could stand behind the bar alright. But then I found out the managers are really only interested in hiring the chicks behind the bar. You know what I mean." She bent over the ashtray, careful not to let the ash fall on the bed, and she inhaled deeply. "Or maybe it's this limp. I'm not sure."

"It was a motorcycle accident?"

"I was riding on the back. Light rain. We were out in the hills and my boyfriend kinda half-turned to tell me he loved the way my ponytail was whipping around in the wind and we hit something in the road and the bike skittered and then that awful feeling of loss of control, and the bike went down. We might've been doing seventy, maybe seventy-five. Derek cracked the back of his head open and they said he died instantly. I seemed to hit and skid. I hit on my left side and shattered my knee and broke my arm and a bunch of ribs, skinned my face pretty good. I remember that I couldn't move and I called for Derek till an older couple came along--she stayed with me and the old guy went up the road to find a house so he could call an ambulance. I asked her how Derek was doing and she said she thought he was fine, just resting, bless her heart."

Jude saw that she was crying. She rubbed at her eyes and smeared her mascara. "Jesus, I feel terrible," he said. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

She shook her head and closed a wet eye against the rising smoke of her joint. She took a long hit. "No, nothing to feel bad about. I'm glad to have someone to talk to."

“I’m very sorry.” He fought the urge to take her hand. “And what about your knee? Will it get any better?”

“God, I don’t know. The docs keep telling it will, but I’m not so sure. They’ve tried twice now and I think it felt better before the last operation. And all this medical stuff has made a joke of my little savings account.” She tried a smile. “I guess this is my cross to bear.”

“That’s a tough cross, Cheryl. Like every step you take.”

“I went through my self-pity period. And lots of pain pills. Depression, or whatever you want to call it. I lost weight, didn’t feel like eating. I couldn’t work, so I bummed money from my dad for rent, which I still feel shitty about. Not exactly sure when it was--maybe when my dad and my little brother came out, Josh pretty much cracks me up--but I just started coming around again.”

“It’s odd how the fog seems to lift and the sun breaks through again.”

“Does it always?”

“Wish I could say that it always did--for tonight let’s say yes, the sun always shines again.”

Cheryl took a final draw on her J and tipped it into the ashtray. She rubbed a sleeve against her cheeks.

“How’d you hear about this place?” Jude asked.

“One of my friends saw a notice in the *Karlsbad Breeze*. It worked out pretty nice because my lease was up and I couldn’t ask my dad for any more money. It was either this or go back home, and I couldn’t go back home.”

Jude scrunched his pillow. “I’ve gotta lie down,” he said.

“You want me to leave?”

“You’re fine. I’ll just feel better if I lie down. Wanna put on some music?”

“I’m okay with the quiet. Should I put it on for you?”

“No, the quiet’s good.”

Jude folded an arm over his eyes. Cheryl felt warm, the prickly warmth she always felt after smoking pot, and undid a couple buttons of her shirt and fanned it to create a small breeze. She knew that her face and chest had blossomed with splotches of pink. She leaned over and lightly stroked Jude’s forehead and pushed her hands through his hair and kneaded his scalp. “That feel okay?” she asked.

Jude burrowed himself deeper into the pillow and assented with a sigh. He lifted the arm from his face and gazed at her breasts as she moved her hands over his head. He worried what this visit meant, but decided that for now it didn’t have to mean anything; his headache was passing and he felt a closeness to this girl he barely knew.

Cheryl folded the tails of her shirt into her crotch and Jude rested his arm on her leg. “Do you like it here alright?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Lonely. I could be more outgoing, I guess. I talk a lot with Lillian.”

“She’s adorable. I love her dimples. How far along is she?”

“Maybe five months. I think she’s due at the end of November. A Thanksgiving baby. She told me she likes you best.”

Jude rubbed his eyes. “Is there a guy you like best?”

“Nah. Takes me a little while.” Cheryl got up from the bed and went over to the open window. “You’re right,” she said. “This candle does have a funky smell. Mind if I blow it out?”

“You could turn off the fan, too.”

“The moon is bright tonight.” She looked out the window. “I like being near the ocean,” she said. “I know I’ll miss it.”

“That’s what I’ll miss the most.”

“So you won’t stay?”

“I’m trying to save up. I’d like to backpack Europe till the money runs out. Figure it out from there.”

“That’s good you have a plan. I fear I’ll end up back in Cincinnati. There’s the other side of me that says, forget it, do something adventurous. Maybe join the Peace Corp, see the world.”

“There you go, Cheryl. Cincinnati will always be there.”

She came back to the bed and sat close to Jude, facing him. She unfastened the three remaining buttons and brushed either side of the shirt away from her. Her chest seemed to shine in the light from the moon. “I’m warm,” she said.

Jude pushed himself up against the headboard and pulled her toward him. “You’re very pretty,” he said. He held her and she traced the outline of his face with her fingers, over an eyebrow and cheekbone, down along his jaw, behind an ear and across the forehead, wisps across his brow. He bunched his sweatshirt up under his chin to feel her warm skin against his. He moved his hands up and down over her back to her neck, then along her sides to feel her breasts in his palms.

They sat side by side, hips hugging, their torsos twisted together. She hung her head over his shoulder and he closed his eyes and felt that long tug of sleep. To bridle his desire he repeated to himself a simple chant he would use to ease himself to sleep,

*I've loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.* He turned this phrase around and around in his mind and he thought the quiet had grown immense. Not a car rolled along the Coast Highway. The calm of the night had stilled the swishing of the thin leaves of the great silk-oak in the yard. A block away the waves buckled and crashed, but he heard nothing--not even the ticking second hand of his clock.

He suspected he was in that twilight between wakefulness and sleep and that this oneiric interlude with Cheryl had been a mere play in his head. He wondered why it was that he dreamed of her, but soon shook the question off, reminding himself he couldn't answer for his dreams. He took his mind back to when he conceived the knocking on his door--he remembered putting down his magazine, the lines of print had begun to waver, and it was time to turn out the light on a hurtful day.

He tried to visualize all the girls at the Restaurant. He wanted to picture each one in his mind's eye and then hold that frame, but his mind wouldn't focus and all he saw was a blur, a jumble of eyes and lips and chests and then, Lillian's belly.

He felt the pulsing against the right side of his head, almost gentle now, a vestige of the fury from hours before. He told himself to lie down now and pray that with the grace of a good night's sleep these waves of pressure would cease.

He bowed his head and raised his hands to cradle his face. Cheryl pulled away quickly. He opened his eyes, momentarily startled, and hit the back of his head against the headboard.

"Jude?" she asked. "You alright?"

"I must've knocked off for a second. Maybe I'm trippin on Excedrin."

Cheryl smiled her big smile. "Time to lay down," she said. She plumped the pillow and set it under his head.

Moonlight had washed the small room in its gamboge glow. Jude looked up at Cheryl--her top was open and her high breasts swayed as she moved her hands lightly over his face and chest and stomach. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed and her hair fell down over her shoulders. He imagined her in a ponytail, the wind snapping, and he pictured her on the back of a motorcycle. He wanted to tell her that it was going to be alright.

"Will you be able to sleep now? she asked.

"I just realized that I'm exhausted."

"Then close your eyes now, sleepy boy."

Cheryl shifted her position slightly and moved a hand along the inside of his legs and then between his legs, and she settled there into a peaceful rhythm. He covered her breasts with his hands, then slid his hands up over her shoulders and caressed her shoulders and neck. Hair had fallen over her eyes and he brushed it back behind her ears and he pushed himself up to kiss her chin. He could see that she was shaking her head no, "just relax," she whispered.

He watched her shadow on the wall, then he watched her. She tugged at his boxers and slipped them off, both hands working now. He watched her lips--he thought he saw red flecks of lipstick and he thought she'd bend down to kiss him. She bit her lower lip and he thought he'd start crying. She covered him with his boxers and he came in what must have been a stream, at first rushing, then flowing, then still. Sleep came in the cascade of a rushing wave, into what seemed the black night of eternity.



Cheryl sat motionless a while, then bunched the boxers in a hand and pulled up his sheet to cover him. She closed the shade over the open window, down over the sill, so the morning sun wouldn't interrupt his sleep. She wasn't sure what to do with the boxers in her hand. She didn't see a laundry basket. She weighed taking them with her and washing them with her laundry, but no, that didn't seem right. She left them on the floor near the dresser and considered leaving a note--but really, she knew it would be best to just slip out. She buttoned her buttons and slipped her feet into her sandals and kissed the tips of her fingers and touched him lightly on the forehead. "Sweet dreams," she said, and quietly let herself out the door.

END





