

The Coin Flips. Flops. Flirts.

Late one night, Jennifer walked over to Shaun and Bill and me sitting by the conference room near the pool. This Oaxaca night was balmy without the usually intrusive sweltering that precipitates irritability and a sluggish mind. So we lay in our recliners, relaxed but attentive.

“Hi Shaun...As in *high* Shaun. I’m going to need the keys so I can open up the place first thing in the morning. The rave this evening went on too long and the place is trashed. So the cleaning crew will need more time to prepare the lecture hall early tomorrow.”

As Shaun handed Jennifer the keys, she looked over at me with a sly smile on her face.

“I see you’ve been hanging out in the cute girl’s tent. Be careful. Remember what happened with Calypso.”

“Who’s Calypso?” Shaun perked up. “And what happened that you need to remember?”

“Calypso is one of Magelhães' best women friends. She and Mags and his other close friend Helen used to all hang out together, since he seems to have more free time than I do. Mags tends to get over-enthusiastic when he first meets someone. He settles down eventually. But he first comes on strong. And it can be off-putting. They’ve remained good friends but initially he drove Calypso off when he started getting too mushy on her.”

“Yeah man,” said Beach Bug Bill, “I didn’t know what to think when Magelhães and I first met and he kept sending me all those love letters. And then he just stopped cold turkey. It really hurt my feelings.”

We all laughed and I added, “Ah shucks Bill, I still love you, man.”

Two-hundred years ago, no one knew how fire worked, what property brought it to life. They thought it was some mysterious element. Jennifer and I continue to flirt with each other after all these years because some mysterious element keeps that fire burning. It’s true that we also flirt considerably with others as well, but we are certainly not swingers. The jealousy that resides with most couples is a stranger in our home. But our loyalty toward each other is not dependent on social strictures or on fear. Our commitment is based on the luxury of requited desires. We have no need to look elsewhere.

Once, Jennifer had a huge office crush on some guy named Ralph. She asked me if I would want to have a three-way with this person. Now I’ve had my share of sexual experimentation like everyone else, especially during my Bowie years, but 'guys' are not my cup of tea. I’m boring and limited I suppose, since I only get it up for women. So, Jenny asked if I would mind if she could have a little fling with little Ralphy all by their little selves. I said I wouldn’t mind. This surprised her and delighted her. She asked me out of curiosity why I could be so generous. I told her it was because I loved her and wanted to see her happy. Which is true. Now, I may have had

more cause for concern if the guy had looked like Brad Pitt. But he looked like Jack Black. Generosity is often effortless. Besides, this would fling open the door for my own 'little fling' should the opportunity arise. I'm a smart guy. Generosity is seldom motive-free.

Jenny and Ralph did a lot of heavy petting, but when it came down to the nitty-gritty, Jennifer backed down. She suddenly got cold feet because Ralph was not in a relationship himself and she began to feel his encroaching neediness. Not to mention the fact that once the taboos are lifted and you are given full permission to enact what was once prohibited, those unfulfilled desires are soon deflated and are no longer necessary.

Helen and I are longtime hangout buddies. I met her when I was in my late 20's and she was only 17. Don't even go there! It's not what you think. Even then, wow, what a brain and what a body! She is smarter than Nietzsche and curvier than Mulholland Drive – dangerous curves that could swerve a man's mind, and his car, over a cliff. Her youthful face is irresistible. I can't stop looking at her whenever she appears in my field of vision. Her eyes and her smile radiate a heart-full invitation – the kind of face that drives guys, every time Helen walks into a bar, to launch a thousand beers.

When Helen first moved to LA from New York to attend UCLA, she asked me if I could help her secure a place to live. It turned out that some mutual friends of ours had a room for rent in their spacious Bel-Aire home. One evening, a few months after Helen had settled in, I was driving in the area and on the spur of the moment decided to pay these friends a visit. A gay couple, who had been extremely successful as music producers for EMI. Helen had long gone to sleep. I guessed an early morning final exam had knocked the lights out of her usual night-owl routine.

Their home was situated high on a hill surrounded by cypress and greenery, fruit trees and wild strawberries. At one point during the late 1960s and early 70s their house had belonged to The Doors. Historically, we know the Rock and Roll parties which took place here were notorious and the 360 degree view must have provided hours of psychedelic tripping pleasure. The visual panorama included the ocean, the Valley, West Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles. We sat in my friends' living room, as acoustically majestic as the Hollywood Bowl, overlooking the UCLA campus and the shopping mall wilderness of Sherman Oaks. This was now the 1980s and rapidly emerging technologies were revolutionizing the music industry. A Magical Mystery Tour was playing on a loop in the background, scratch-less and pristine, unlike any vinyl record in my previous listening experience. In fact, it may have been the first music CD I had ever heard. My Digital Mystery Tour of zeros and ones. We talked into the AM hours about art and Reaganomics and the fascist war on drugs spearheaded by William Bennett. And then I heard a faint sound coming from the bathroom. The familiar tinkling music of after-midnight girl pee. Then a quick flush. Then analogue footsteps tapping down the dark wood corridor toward the beat of my heart. Then Helen, rubbing her eyes, almost bumping into me, still bed-warm, her dreamy auburn hair fallen into Strawberry Fields Forever.

"Helen?"

"Mags... Hello, baby," she said, cheerfully, and threw her arms around me in a blanket of love, and whispered in my ear. "Would you mind hanging out with me in my room for a bit?" It was a rhetorical question.

She led the way and I followed her scent down that hopeful hallway, like a blind man. I was wrong in my assumption about the final exam. What had knocked the energy out of this sweet night-owl was boyfriend troubles. Broken love and twisted sleep had woven a pattern of fine wrinkles into her nightshirt. My eyes travelled over those delicious folds, those convoluted little wounds etched into the fabric of space and time...and the Fool on the Hill. All I wanted to do was smooth out the wrinkles. We sat on her warm bed talking until the wee hours of the morning. As my eyes glanced happily around her room, I noticed she was well organized. She had to be. A busy girl always prepares ahead of time. Neatly laid out in the corner, black bra and fresh panties complied for easy morning access. Waiting eagerly on a hook close by, a semitransparent dress fanned open its floral motif. An obvious precaution in case she woke up late, this exit strategy of prepared clothing would allow for smooth transition from nightmare through flightmode to class. Outside her window I heard the cackle of crows, mockingbird laughter, and the jabber of jays. She sobbed her heart out. Her boyfriend had been a complete shit. She had busted him with another woman. Well, not the actual woman herself, but a strange, red, solitary hair, not Helen's, stuck to the passenger seat of his convertible Mustang. She cried like a rainforest and confided that she would never love again. Crushed by the entropy of deceit, she would be scarred for life. She tossed her arms around me, once more, and wept through the *dew-eyed dawn*... and Bluejay Way.

Sitting so comfortably on her bed, I felt like a guilty dog, collarless and loose in the neighborhood, deriving such beastly pleasure at that awkward moment, as her trembling breasts delivered mountains of youthful sorrow against my tail-wagging chest.

Why Helen and I never connected romantically I will never know. We were certainly attracted to each other on many levels. Age was perhaps a contributing factor. And so was timing. Either I was in a relationship or she was. But no matter, my heart continues to rotate its heliotropic flower around her sunshine.

One elucidating summer, Helen invited me to participate in a seminar she was taking at UCLA on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The professor, a Joycean scholar, was more than delighted to have an enthusiast like me audit the class. As Helen and I walked through campus, every head turned to check her out in that semitransparent floral dress. Even the bees came bumbling toward her looking for pollen.

It was Helen who first pointed out Calypso's uncanny beauty. We both looked over in pleasant surprise at this young woman sitting across from us. Calypso responded in turn with a welcoming smile. She was Black Irish – porcelain skin, framed by hair as dark as the Middle Ages. But what struck me immediately was the intensity of her eyes. They blazed a life-affirming blue. Up until that moment, I hadn't really noticed her in class. But once she infected my consciousness, Calypso remained a permanent infatuation. I fell in love with her bubbling girlish enthusiasm.

We would go for coffee after class. Calypso chit-chatted about the slick and silly onslaught of New Wave British rock bands. Style vs substance. Depeche Mode or Simple Minds. Duran Duran or Echo and the Bunnymen. And then she would effortlessly segue into a full discourse on women's rights or the latest book she was reading – Nora – about the patient and long-suffering wife of James Joyce. Distracted, I dunked my donut-soul in an Irish coffee and bobbed my heart in her buoyant, blue-eyed sea.

Once the seminar was over, Calypso and I continued to do the hang through the cool mornings and hot afternoons of that endless summer. Jennifer punched a 17 hour time-clock as a migrant film worker at all the Hollywood, post-production, special effects sweat-houses. While I worked the occasional evenings massaging wealthy clients, whose largess in tips afforded me lots of free time during the day.

I remember visiting Calypso one morning, where she took a summer job as park ranger with the Los Angeles County Zoo. Waiting pleasantly at the entrance for some time before her arrival, I met her playful eyes when she finally approached me, yawning, and slightly late for her morning shift. What had this girl been up to the night before? Her disheveled hair suggested a night of fun in the haystack – or the Hollywood Hills. She smiled and the DNA in her irises hummed a cerulean song to the dominant brown in mine. Eyes as blue and clear as a summer sky on the African plain. We trundled across the zoo's concrete plain over to the cramped, employee, changing room, where I sat in a fake zebra-skin chair as she put on her ranger uniform behind the half-open curtain. Khaki shorts and shirt streamlined her sleek shape, stretching and shifting whenever she moved, like the spots on a cheetah. Out of respect, I looked away as she undressed. Only to have my eyes land on the stainless steel water dispenser perked-up on a table in the opposite corner, where I could see reflected on its surface, every detail of her baby-smooth skin. She never needed to shave her legs because the peach fuzz that grew there was as barely perceptible as Horton hearing a Who. The hot sun had generated a few beads of perspiration, here and there, on her long neck and arms and thighs. These tiny droplets danced happily on the tips of her peachy hair like so many angels on the head of a pin. My sudden wild craving to collect those elemental beads into a shot-glass and chase down my thirst, needed to be tamed and caged.

We strolled over to her favorite animal hangout – the Orangutans. Smitten entirely by Calypso's beauty and charm, all the alpha males ran over as soon as they saw her approaching their cement enclave – a treeless home away from home, about as dry and inviting as the L.A. River. Between us lay an abyss of stone. Across this desolate moat, which separated captive audience from captive creature, they extended their long orange arms through the retaining bars, hoping to touch Calypso's magical physicality. They stared dreamily into the wild blue heaven of her eyes. Some irresponsible zoo visitor had provided these apes with wads of chewing gum, so they stretched and twirled the sticky gobs, like spaghetti, around their nimble fingers as they listened to Calypso's university lecture.

She opened a massive tome, annotated and highlighted, from which she recited for them in her lovely Irish voice. Over the course of that summer, Calypso had read to her Orangutan acolytes the entire Molly Bloom chapter from Joyce's Ulysses. The smartest animal in the world is Princess, a female Orangutan who has mastered the vocabulary of President George Bush – 40

words – in pictures. Since Orangutans have no larynx, unlike George, they need to point. But by the end of that smart, delicious summer, Calypso's educated monkeys could have passed the SAT test with a score that would have rivaled any over-achieving Asian kids and given them a good run for their (parents) money.

The great apes and I listened attentively, to the last few pages of Molly Bloom's soliloquy, as Calypso slid down that single sentence, phrase by sensual phrase, to reach the final, famous, affirmative word – Yes.

Intoxicated by the sound of Calypso's voice and by her parted lips as she uttered the last precious syllable, yes, I thought, yes, I would never leave that concrete island-paradise. But Calypso had other animals to attend and I had a beautiful wife waiting at home for me to attend. Yes.

So there you have it. That summer, Calypso and I did the monkey business. But only up to a point. Sensual, full-bodied hugs accompanied by sweet whisperings, laying around on her couch, or mine, with our clothes on of course, talking, occasionally rubbing my cheek across her facial skin, grazing her delicate ear with my lips and burrowing deep into her Black Irish hair, whose scent drove my leaping leprechaun over a shamrock.

But when it actually came down to the moment of truth, Calypso's Irish moral fiber reigned victorious. She and Jennifer were fond of each other. As Jenny has been fond of all my women friends. So Calypso retreated, refusing to take it any further.

In a way, it is a bit cowardly, on my part, to always pick women who are stronger than I. Women of solid character. Women with their ethics in tact. Women with a healthy sense of themselves. Being a typical guy, again the dirty dog, I avail myself by always choosing a strong woman to flirt with. This advantage gives me more wiggle room to push the boundaries – imposing the burden of restraint on them.

Consequently, in the final days of this tangled summer, Calypso and I had a falling out. She was angry with me. A complex transfer of feelings left us both confused. She wasn't in a relationship herself, at the time, placing her emotions at a vulnerable disadvantage. For my part, I became too assertive, crowding her independence. I realized things had gotten out of hand one night, when Jennifer and I were waiting in line to see Robin Hitchcock play at McCabes. Jennifer was speaking sweetly and lovingly to me, but I wasn't hearing a word she was saying because I was wondering what Calypso was up to that evening. All I wanted at that moment was to be near her – Calypso – while my adoring wife stood before me, under the dim lamplight, pale in comparison. Awakened by this startling epiphany, I knew I needed to regain my old equilibrium.

We distanced ourselves, Calypso and I, for a few painful months. A year, to be exact. But her friendship was vital to me. I missed her terribly. So I worked on trying to mend our broken fence. I continued to write her the occasional letter or card. I paced myself in order to avoid any further conflict – not wishing to annoy her or to appear overbearing. Besides, this all took place in the eighties, just on the other side of the internet, which meant the old snail-mail system could provide a natural time buffer in which to heal all wounds. Eventually Calypso came around and

we have been fast friends ever since. She is now married with kids, and leprechaun be damned, she is still as fine an Irish woman as there ever was one.

Then out of nowhere Shaun blurted, “Did you hear what happened to 3D?”

“No, what?”

“He almost got robbed and killed.”

“No shit! You say it so matter-of-fact, Shaun.”

“Yeah well, I’ve known him for years. It’s par for the course.”

“So what happened!” said Jennifer, concerned. She had a soft spot for 3D because she could feel his suffering.

Shaun related the whole story. 3D finally found a cab driver who would take him to his long sought after strip bar. So the cabbie drove the despairing, yet eager, 3D to some dark outpost about 45 minutes beyond the city limits. It was pitch black when they pulled up to a rundown looking dive with the name of the place in tacky neon, but missing a letter here and there. He paid the cab driver and told him to wait but the cab peeled off in a cloud of dust leaving him stranded. A couple of rowdy-looking dudes in leather who were standing outside the door having a smoke and a raucous, blubbering conversation gave 3D a cocky eye as he entered the dive. He gave them a polite nod as he passed between them. The place was as dry and desolate as the bottom of a moon crater. He walked straight up to the bartender and ordered a shot of tequila. The two leather boys walked in and locked the door behind them. 3D could hear the deadbolt’s hasty tumble into silence and the loud pounding of his heart. Walking up to the bar, the men planted themselves on either side of 3D and with imposing friendliness and boisterous, joking slaps to his back, demanded he buy them a drink. 3D ordered three more tequilas and lay down some white powder on the counter. Then he pulled out his, by now, tattered Spanish notebook asking for high quality naked women dancers. The bartender beamed assurance and gestured he would be right back. After a grueling half hour the bartender returned with a fat woman missing as many teeth as the neon sign and wearing a wardrobe scratched out by a drunk Toulouse-Lautrec. She beckoned him to come dance with her in the bleak light of the lonely dance floor. The men kept encouraging him with more backslap. He felt duty-bound to dance with the woman. The bartender hit the jukebox and an environmental hazard of crude music spilled into the barroom. The woman’s gaping smile was accompanied by bumps and grinds of rotundity and hoots from the men. Applying her vigorous bottom and mammary real estate, she thumped and thwacked 3D till he backed into a chair. From there she straddled him copiously, her *gluteus maximus* circling the mountain as it rose from the molehill. She lowered her corset and buried her generous breasts in his face, obstructing his vision. 3D said at this point, once he couldn’t actually *see* what was happening, with his eyes closed, the physical sensations were just as good as if he had paid for a more expensive lap dancer.

“Security!” Beach Bug Bill chided loudly.

Jennifer said, “Now that’s a man who knows how to appreciate a woman – making the best of any given situation.”

Shaun continued the tale. Satisfied, 3D asked for a cab back to Oaxaca. They informed him that no taxis would drive out here this late at night and insisted on their own arrangements to take him home. They made a phone call and after another half hour a '63 black Buick, fresh out of a seedy detective novel, popped up in a sinister cloud of dust. With two *hombres* in the front seat, the leather boys wedged 3D into the back seat between them. 3D said it was a long and winding road. The longest ride and the most uncomfortable he had ever taken. His senses were more alert than he ever remembered. He could suddenly count the dew drops on every dusty leaf and understand the secret language of crickets, warning him of his doom. He felt at any moment they would pull him out of the car into some ditch and rob and kill him. But they finally dropped him off in front of our hotel, unharmed. He was so grateful to be alive he gave them each a large sum of money. As soon as the men left, 3D got down on his hands and knees in front of the hotel entrance and kissed the ground.

In the distance we heard Klezmer music clashing with a sole accordion player, whose fledgling notes thrashed and tumbled through the sticky air to the tune of Blackbird and All You Need Is Love. A tropical breeze snuck in past the lobby like an uninvited guest, scooped up the rising steam from the pool surface, and slapped our faces with the scent of eucalyptus and chlorine. We sat in astonishment.