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### **Dirty Deeds**

I was in a biker bar. There were worse places. My colleagues, who had names like *Lumpy* and *Gargoyle*, thought no less of me simply because I was an English professor. *It's nothing to be ashamed of*, one dude suggested. *It's what's inside your heart that counts.*

The venue--the Astrid Hotel, in Astrid, Maine--was famous not only for the skankiness of its patrons but also for its ghost, an undead girl who walked its tattered hallways weeping in her pajamas. She'd drowned in the twenties, in the nearby Kennebec River. The girl was determined, supposedly, to find her

father and her sister, who'd been guests of the hotel, back in the day. *Hey. Don't you know I can't swim?*

I had come to the Astrid to play with my friends in an R & B band, Blue Stranger, up on the hotel's grandiose stage, in what had once been a fancy ballroom. Now it had a cement floor, fiberglass tiles on the ceiling. On one wall was a rough-hewn mural of the north country. There were lumberjacks hoisting logs with skidders, fur trappers trudging through the woods on snow shoes. The Astrid itself was depicted on the mural as it once had been: a genteel mansion perched on a ridge overlooking Carrabec Falls.

It was on a rock at the bottom of the falls that they'd found the girl.

Over at the pool table, guys with tattoos and beards employed the ladies' bridge. There were mill workers and river guides, taxidermists and hippies. The bouncer chalked his cue. To his left and right were guys named Sleepy, Gangrene, Itchy, Monster, Weasel, and Happy.

The last song of the first set was "Somebody to Love," the Jefferson Airplane number. I was playing Farfisa organ through an old Leslie amplifier.

*Your eyes I say your eyes may look like his*

*But in your head baby I'm afraid you don't know where it is.*

I liked this song all right. But sometimes, I don't know. It left me dispirited.

During the break, we all went up to the bar. The band's lead singer, my friend Shell, ordered me a drink.

I got out the book I was reading – *Pale Fire*, by Nabokov.

Shell looked over and sighed. “Hey. Professor Glasses. What now?”

I smiled. “It’s a fake poem,” I said. “And then there’s commentary on the poem, written by somebody who doesn’t exist.”

She sighed. “Whatever.”

“It’s really interesting,” I said.

When she wasn’t leaping around the stage of the Astrid Hotel in Spandex, Shell was the vice-president of a savings bank. “You think?” she said.

I cleared my throat.

*“Was he in Sherlock Holmes, the fellow whose*

*Tracks pointed back when he reversed his shoes?”*

She smiled. “You really do live in your own little world, don’t you?” she said, fondly. I was wearing a black skirt and top. My long blonde hair fell to my breasts.

“That’s so wrong?”

The bartender put two clear, fizzing drinks in front of us. There were what looked like prunes on the bottom. Shell handed me one of these.

“What’s this?”

We clinked glasses. “Fart in the Ocean,” she said. “Tequila and Seven-up.”

“Served – with a prune?”

“Served,” she said. “With a prune.”

Why is it, I wondered, that women have to drink the undrinkable? In my day, I had seen my sisters order everything from a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster (vodka, cider, cherry brandy and Tia Maria) to a Warsaw Waffle, an unspeakable union of vodka and Maine maple syrup. Would it be so wrong if once in a while we had a nice pint of Guinness instead? But whenever I had a Guinness it was inevitable that one of my girlfriends would come up to me and say, *You know how many calories are in that, Jenny? As many as a steak dinner!* This, from someone who was drinking something called The Screaming Chocolate Monkey.

From the other end of the room a woman's voice rose in anger. "Leave me alone!" she shouted, then threw her margarita in the face of her good man. This dramatic imperative was greeted with applause and cheers by everyone except for the fellow whose face was now covered with triple-sec.

Shell looked at me and smiled. "Brandy and Boyd LeMieux," she said, wistfully. "They're the perfect couple – she's an ex-model, he's an ex-Marine."

Brandy stood up and headed towards the bar where Shell and I were sitting. She was an attractive woman, in a dilapidated sort of way. "You want a cigarette?" she asked.

"I don't smoke."

Brandy laughed. "Right," she said.

"Jenny here's an English professor," said Shell.

Brandy LeMieux laughed like this was funny. "Yeah," she said. "And I'm an astronaut." She picked up Shell's drink, downed it in a single gulp. Didn't eat the prune though. She looked at my book.

"What's that? Any good?"

"It's Nabokov," I said. "You like Nabokov?"

Her mouth dropped open, as if I were one of the Beatles. "*Whoa,*" she said. "You really *are* an English teacher. Aren't you!"

"I guess."

Shell patted my shoulder. "Well," she said. "I'll let you two chat." Then she headed over toward the place where Boyd was sitting, staring sadly into Brandy's empty margarita glass.

Brandy and I watched as Shell sat down next to him.. I could imagine the counsel she was offering. *Don't worry, Boyd! There are plenty of other fish in the ditch!*

"What a nerd," Brandy said. "My husband. I can't believe I ever married him." She looked at me. "You married?"

One of the awkward hallmarks of my life was the way relatively simple questions commanded complex answers, the kind that required a Power-point presentation and several *Oprah* shows to do justice. I am more than a little hopeful, in most situations, to be seen as human. But there are plenty of times I don't want to go into the details. Especially when I'm sitting next to a woman who's just downed a drink with a prune in it.

"You're wearing a wedding ring," Brandy said, trying to help.

"It's a long story," I said.

Brandy raised her empty glass and clinked it against mine.

"You go, girl," she said.

"*You go.*" We were friends now.

"You're really pretty, did you know that?"

"I don't *think* so," I said.

"Will you buy me another drink?"

"Sure," I said. The bartender cut another Fart in the Ocean.

"Boyd wants to put me in a time machine," said Brandy.

"Hate that," I said.

"He can't see me where I am. Only where I was."

"Where are you?" I said.

She reached out and squeezed my hand. "I'm here with you, Jenny."

"My son wants to be a time traveler," I said. "When he grows up."

"Well the hell. Maybe he can use Boyd's machine, after he's done with it."

The topic of Superpowers, including time-travel, was a frequent one in our house. There were times when it seemed like it was all we ever talked about, Grace and me, and our middle school age children, Paddy and Luke. I maintained that the only two superpowers worth having were *Super-strength*, and *Super-speed*. Ten-year-old Paddy, for his part, advocated the *Power of Virtual Reality*, the power of *Time Travel*, and something else he called *Super-stickiness*,

which might be the thing that enables Spiderman to climb walls, or might be something else entirely. In any case, Paddy said that Super-strength and Super-speed were mutually exclusive. "If you have Super-strength," he maintained. "It slows *down* your Super-speed."

I knew well enough to let Paddy have his way in these discussions, even though I didn't exactly understand what the power of Virtual Reality was, not that it hadn't been explained to me again and again. "It's the power to turn your imagination into reality," Paddy said, exasperated that such an explanation was even necessary.

I'm not saying the power of virtual reality isn't a good thing. Honestly I'm not. But I've been in lots of situations in which super speed would have been extremely useful.

Boyd got up from his table and started heading toward us. "Shit," said Brandy. "Here we go again."

She took me by the hand. "Come on, follow me." We walked out into the Astrid's old foyer, then into the ladies room. Brandy leaned against the wall, next to the paper towel dispenser, and grinned at me. "So what do you think?"

"About what?"

Brandy rolled her eyes. "Duh, Jenny," she said.

I appeared to have agreed to something that had not been put into words.

"Look at you," she said. "You're trembling like a leaf!"

"I am not."

“The fuck you’re not. Come on. It’s really okay.”

She pulled me into the handicap stall. Then she drew toward me and put her arms around my back and hugged me. Her body was soft and warm, and her head fell against my shoulder. I was a lot taller than Brandy.

“It’s really okay,” she whispered, and then she raised her head and kissed me on the lips. Then she kissed me again. I felt her breasts pressing against mine. “Nngg, Jenny,” she said. “Nnnngg.”

I pulled back. Incredibly, my first concern in this skanky situation was making sure I didn’t hurt Brandy’s feelings.

“Listen,” I said. “You’re sweet, but you know, like—.”

“Please,” said Brandy, achingly. “It’s my birthday.”

And I thought, *It’s her birthday?*

“You don’t understand,” I said. “I’m married.”

Brandy didn’t understand what this had to do with anything “So?” she said. “I’m married too!”

I heard the voice of Jimmy Stewart in the back of my head: *This is a very unusual situation!*

“I should go,” I said.

“Wait,” she said. On the wall behind her were phone numbers, profanities, names of men and women enclosed with hearts. Her eyes filled with tears. I didn’t want to wait for her, was in fact more than eager to get out of this particular situation. But I couldn’t leave.

“What?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Nobody knows me,” she said.

“Brandy,” I said. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It’s like having a dog. Like a St. Bernard.”

“What is?”

“The secrets,” she whispered. “Everywhere I go, they have to go too.”

“What secrets?” I said.

She laughed to herself. “*What* secrets,” she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, what her secrets were.

“Have you thought about talking to someone?” I said.

“Jenny?” She looked at me as if I were on drugs. “I’m talking to *you*.”

“I mean, you know. A professional.”

“You mean like a shrink?” she said, stunned by the suggestion. “Oh I’ve talked to plenty of shrinks, believe me.”

“Listen, Brandy. I don’t know you. I’m just an English teacher.”

“But that’s what I need,” she said. “Is an English teacher.”

I tried to think of what could possibly be so wrong with her that the only thing that could help her was an English teacher. Nothing came to mind.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

It seemed to take her a long time to put it into words, as if she were trying to find the courage to say something she had never spoken out loud before in her life. “I don’t want to be who I am,” she said, finally, in a hoarse, desperate voice.

Amazingly, I understood what this felt like. I'd had this feeling lots of times, when I was younger. "Okay," I said. "So who do you want to be?"

"I want to be someone—" she said, "who writes poems."

The words hung in the air between us. I blew some air through my cheeks, and felt bad for her. There'd been a lot of progress in the field of psychology over the years, but so far as I knew there was still no cure for poetry. I don't know. Ritalin, maybe.

"Have you--," I said. "You know. *Tried* to write poems?"

"No," she said. The tears spilled over her lashes again and rolled down her face. "Because I don't know how. Because I'm not the kind of person who writes them."

"Maybe you could change. You could be that kind of person. If you wrote some. Why don't you try?"

She stopped crying and looked at me suspiciously. "My poems would suck," she said, with an air of clairvoyance.

"Probably at first. Then you'll write some more, maybe you'll get better."

"You think?" she said.

I nodded cautiously.

"And then—" she said. "I'll be somebody else?"

I wasn't sure what to tell her. To be honest I was less interested in helping Brandy than I was in getting out of the ladies room. At the same time, I didn't want to lie to her. It seemed likely to me that she was clinging to a false hope,

the idea that writing poems would make her into somebody else. What seemed more likely was that, when all was said and done, she'd still be herself, except that now she'd own a rhyming dictionary.

But what the hell. I didn't know Brandy's future any more than I knew my own. Encouraging her seemed just as likely to be an act of kindness as of cruelty.

"Why don't you write," I said. "and see who you are afterwards?"

Brandy took this in. "Okay," she said, hopefully. "Okay." She looked at me hungrily. "And then—if I wrote a poem good enough—maybe you'd reconsider?"

"Reconsider?"

"You know," she said, softly brushing her fingertips against my shoulder. "Maybe we could be girlfriends, you and me? And if I ask you to kiss me, next time you won't act like I have leprosy and junk?"

I sighed. I don't underestimate the power of literature. But that would have to be one hell of a poem.

"Good luck," I said, by way of answer, and then left the stall. She didn't follow me. Out in the bar, I could hear the sound of Big Head Chester tuning his guitar. "You coming?"

"I'll be along," said Brandy. "I'm going to start working on my poem right *now!*"

"Good for you," I said, and washed my hands at the sink. "That's great."

“Hey Jenny,” she said. “Do you ever wish you were a man?”

“A man?” I said, stunned. I looked at myself in the mirror. “Not really.”

“I do,” said her voice, from the stall. “Sometimes.”

I dried my hands with brown paper towels.

“What do you think it’d be like?” said Brandy.

I told her the truth. “I don’t know, Brandy,” I said. “Kind of like being a woman,” I said. “Only less so.”

I arrived in the in the foyer of the old hotel with my head spinning. On the walls around me were framed photographs of John Wayne, Jesus Christ, and Elvis. It reminded me of something, but I wasn’t quite sure what. Out in the ballroom Big Head Chester was noodling around with the opening riff of *Paint It Black*, the Stones tune. I heard the crack of the cue ball as a guy named *Freebird* made the break over on the pool table. The nine ball fell into the side pocket.

I’d gone on many travels in the last few years, voyages that had taken me halfway around the world, to Chile, and Venice, and the Turks and Caicos. But it’s fair to say I had never felt quite so far away from home as I did at that moment, at the bottom of the worn-out stairs of the Astrid Hotel. Looking around at my hairy companions, my ears still ringing from the volume of the band, the memory of Brandy’s lips on my neck, I thought of the phrase my sister and I used to call at the end of a round of Hide and Seek: *Olly olly oxen free*.

That was when I saw her, frozen at the top of the stairs: a young girl, about eight years old. She was dressed in odd clothes, a Victorian nightie. Her

blonde hair fell to her shoulders. Her head was cocked to one side, as if she'd just been asked a question.

"Hey," I said.

The girl didn't move. I couldn't be sure she'd even heard my question.

"Are you okay?" I said.

Then she turned her back on me, drifted up to the top step, and dissolved into the door.

For a moment I stood there, looking toward the upper stories of the Astrid Hotel. Then I climbed the stairs, one hand trailing along the rickety banister. I had a pretty good sense I ought not to be following this girl, wherever it was she was leading. I followed her anyway.

When I opened the fire door, I found myself at the end of a beat-up corridor. It didn't look like anyone had stayed in the upper rooms of the Astrid Hotel for a long time. There was one empty room after another, the doors wide open, with bare mattresses on the floor, water stains on the ceiling.

"Hello?" I said again, more softly this time, and as I said it, I felt the hairs on my arm all stand on end.

I walked to the end of the hallway and looked out the window. As I stood there, I realized what it was that seemed so familiar about the Astrid Hotel. It reminded me more than a little of the house I'd grown up in, back in Pennsylvania. On the walls there were holes where gas lamps once had been. The wallpaper was peeling.

From where I stood I could see the waterfall in the Kennebec River, could see the place where the little girl had drowned. There was a path from there to here. In the parking lot below, Brandy was fighting with Boyd, who looked to me as if he were now auditioning for the soon-to-be available role of Brandy's ex-husband.

Jeez, I thought. I'm surrounded by Exes. The place was lousy with them. There was Brandy, for one, the ex-model. Her husband Boyd, the ex-Marine, was another.

As for me, I was an ex-man, which is different from being one of the X-Men, although over time I'd found it was less different than I'd hoped.

The world is full of Exes, of Priors and Formers, people who can never quite live in the present.. Sam Kinnison (the ex-comedian) used to do a very funny bit about all the former astronauts who'd become alcoholics, men who'd returned triumphantly from the moon only to find themselves unable to proceed with life post-splashdown. *Pardon me!* he'd scream. *I was only on another planet!*

Or, as the songwriter Ray Lamontagne sings, *You see I been to hell and back so many times I must admit you kind of bore me.*

Over the years I'd seen plenty of people who had more serious cases of the Exes than I did, and most of them weren't transsexuals, either. People like Art Garfunkel, or Danny Bonaduce, or Michael Dukakis—just to pick three kind of at random--are seen as vaguely comic figures, people who are so completely

defined by what they Used To Be that we are unwilling, even irritated, by the prospect of seeing them As They Are Now.

How is it, I wondered, that some people manage to integrate their lives, and live in the moment, while others become stuck, become Exes, haunting their own lives like ghosts? How do we learn to Be Here Now, (in the words of Ram Dass, the *Former Timothy Alpert*.) How do we let go of the past, when its joys and injustices are such a large part of making us whoever it is we've become?

Maybe, I thought, you do it by writing poems, by trying to tell your ridiculous and incomprehensible story. Who knows? It was possible that Brandy, a consumer of prune cocktails, was better equipped at unraveling the mystery of life than I was.

There was an echo from a distant room, the remote whisper of a human voice.

I thought about going over to visit our brand new haunted house for the first time with my family, on a summer day in 1972.

Just like that girl--the one who'd vanished over the edge of Carrabec Falls - I'd lost my father and my sister too.

*Hello?* I said, looking down the long, empty hall. *Is anybody there?*

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[For the rest of the chapter, please visit your local bookseller, and ask for *I'M LOOKING THROUGH YOU: Growing Up Haunted*, a memoir by Jennifer Finney Boylan and published by Broadway Books, © 2007. You can also inquire about other books by Jenny Boylan, including the memoir *SHE'S NOT THERE: A Life in Two Genders*, also published by Broadway. ]

