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Heads And Tails

by Tim Cockey

"Well what the hell would you have done? Danced around her room playing finger cymbals?"

Peter Diaz slammed the car dash with his fist.

"I might as well have," he muttered to himself, "for all the good it did me."

He hit the dashboard a second time; the brown plastic Buddha rattled against the windshield glass.

Peter Diaz glared at the benign little statuette. Whatever happened to the old Happy Face?

Have a Nice Little Crummy Day, Fleaface.

Peter turned the key and rocked up and down with the car.

"Come on, baby, come on now..."

The engine sparked and kicked into life. A cloud of oily smoke belched from behind the car. Peter set himself in the seat and pulled away from the curb.

As Peter drove into the city his car radio squealed out urgent demands that he wash up, eat right, drink beer, and shop around for low priced appliances. Peter wanted none of it. There was talk of news at the top of the hour and of music in the next hour.

"What hour?" Peter muttered, but nobody seemed willing to surrender the moment to the airwaves.

National security, thought Peter; state secrets.

How Peter wished for an old locomotive style cow-catcher for his car! With a little armor around the front and sides of the car, he pondered, the drive down St. Paul street might wax productive. Doors flying open suddenly from parked cars, as they always did, could be clipped clean, inquisitive bumpers inching into intersections might be tested, and those cars that muscled or weaved nonchalantly between lanes would simply have to suffer a 40 m.p.h. scrape and escape.

Peter set his upper lip to do battle. Where in the world the dashboard Buddha got off laughing on a day such as this was beyond him. Peter doubted there could have been a worse way to begin the day than to have had another needless argument. He knew he'd have to call her, he always did.

He took a quick right turn.

The sun was high and bright in a cloudless sky. Peter rolled down his window and took a deep breath. As he passed the park in the next block he saw a man and a woman standing nose to nose on the walk. An Irish Setter a short ways off stood barking at them. Peter noticed that the large tree in the middle of the park, merely an umbrella web of branches these past months, had gone suddenly green. A young girl in a short dress was leaning into a water fountain, and a man who was kneeling in the dirt of the flower bed straightened up to reach for one of the several cardboard boxes that were sitting on the grass behind him.

Peter consulted the Buddha.

"When did all this happen? Did I miss something?"

Have a Pacific Day, Oyster Ears.

Peter pulled over suddenly and parked the car. He went into a drugstore to buy some cigarettes. The lady behind the register blinked.

"You been working on the pipeline?" she asked in a scratchy voice. She wore a light green open jacket with her name punched on red label tape on the pocket.

Sherril.

"No," Peter mumbled, counting his change. "No, I...what?"

"Nothing by it, hon," she said. "Just thought you were a bit over bundled."

Peter looked down on his sweater and boots.

"Oh."

"It turned overnight," the lady said, moving away from the register. "It is beautiful outside. I wish I could get out there."

Peter nodded and hurried outside. Skirts and shirts. Everybody was showing their legs and arms. Men had their jackets hooked on their finger and thrown over their shoulders. Girls' necks were bare, their toes were exposed.

Cupping two dimes in his fist, Peter walked down the sidewalk looking for a phone booth. The first one he found was occupied by a short man with a grey moustache. Peter raised his eyebrows through the glass, but the man shook his head vigorously and continued talking. Outside the next booth a tall girl stood stiff arming the door and tapping against the glass with her fingernails. Someone, her boyfriend probably, was inside, hunched over, his back to the girl.

"Will he be long?" Peter asked the girl.

The girl lifted her free hand and let it drop against her side. She smacked her lips. "Who knows?"

Peter forced a smile and moved to a bench on the curb where he sat down and lit a cigarette. His palms were sweaty. He decided to take his sweater off. He grabbed it from the bottom, brought it up over his head and pulled it down across his face. A great rush of cool air ran through his shirt and up his back.

When Peter's head popped out from under the sweater, the girl was standing in front of him.

"Do you have a cigarette?" she asked. Peter dropped his sweater on the bench and pulled out a cigarette. The girl took it and sat down next to him.

"Match?"

He handed her his cigarette.

The girl was thin and angular. Her dark brown hair was short and straight, styled in a way that the ends came to a point on either side of her jaw, reminding Peter in the uniformity of its roundness of the old college football helmets. Her lips were painted red and her eyes highlighted by a symphony of blues. Two dark slices above the eyes suggested eyebrows, and an unflagging flush of the cheeks, Peter supposed, was intended to represent a sort of gaunt vigor. He wondered that her pillow case might not rival a Peter Max poster or a Leroy Neiman some mornings.

Breat and water diet. Lots of fiber.

Peter sensed, though he displayed the good sense not to stare, that the girl was sending her cigarette smoke through an intricate series of steps, up the nostrils, around the tongue, through the lungs, and out the lips, with each puff. He fancied

a few smoke rings on his own, though the wind proved prohibitive. He tossed his cigarette away before it was half finished.

He pointed, at length, at the phone booth and asked, "Your husband?"

She turned her colors to him and smiled.

"Not on your life," she said smoothly.

"But you're with him," Peter said, swallowing hard. "Or are you waiting for the phone, too?"

The girl pulled on her cigarette. Peter waited through the gymnastics for her answer.

"No. The phone is your's next. I'm with him." She tapped her dark burgundy fingernails on the bench. They were long and curved like a hawk's beak.

"If you're in a hurry, however," she added, "you might want to try another phone. Charles is so slow he might be in there until spring."

Peter sat up.

"It is spring," he laughed. "It's funny you said that. I would have said that, too, this morning, except somebody tipped me off. Look"

He held out his feet for her to see his boots. He also laid a hand on his sweater and smiled.

"It was winter when I got up," he added. "Cold as hell."

The girl tapped her cigarette out on the bench and flipped the butt away.

"It is still winter," she said evenly.

"I don't think so," he started slowly. "Look around. The leaves are back, it's warm out, everybody is running around with their sleeves rolled up.... Look at you. You don't have a coat on."

He blushed immediately. The girl's dress, a blue crepe outfit with a tailored slit up one side, was ripped nearly to the waist. Peter had not even noticed. The tear extended upwards from the slit. The girl's entire leg was exposed.

"I don't have a coat," the girl was saying, "because Charles over there insisted I would not need one. One god damned robin and he's jumping into his swim suit. All this gung-ho for spring nonsense is ludicrous. We are still involved with winter."

She caught Peter staring at her dress and she pulled down on the material to cover her leg.

"And I'm glad to see someone dressed properly," she added, indicating Peter's boots, "even if you think you're not."

Peter said nothing.

Holding her dress, the girl crossed her legs and leaned slightly towards Peter, forcing him to look at her.

"Is your phone call important?" she asked in a milder voice. "He really might be awhile."

Peter lost, for a moment, the reason for his call. He was studying the girl's eyes. Then the events of the morning flooded back into his head. He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I had a fight with my girlfriend this morning," he said. "I was going to call her up."

"To apologize?"

"No. I've thought of some nastier ways to phrase what we already yelled about."

Some real spinners. I don't want to waste them"

He grinned at the girl. She laughed.

"Don't you hate when you can't be clever the first time?" she said, letting go of the dress. "That always happens to me. I should be working up some gems for Charles, but I don't think he's even worth it. You've got to really like someone enough first before you want to impress them like that. Don't you think so?"

"Did he rip your dress?"

She shook her head. Peter was surprised at how attractive she had become all of a sudden. He wondered what she really looked like out from behind it all.

"Charles didn't rip it. It was an accident. I'm not even sure how it happened. A bike came by, real close, and the wind took my dress at the same time; somehow it got tangled, and luckily I didn't fall down. The damn thing ripped."

"That's horrible."

"He laughed," she said in a huff, pointing a long finger at the figure in the booth. "It jolly well made his day....the creep."

Peter started laughing.

"I'm not laughing at your accident," he quickly explained. "I'm not. I...I just think there is something funny in his being a creep. You've used the right word, I think."

She laughed with him.

"Do you think so? Well, I'll try it on him."

Peter offered her another cigarette and they sat smoking in silence. The girl did not resume her smoke tricks.

Eventually the man hung up the phone and emerged from the booth. He appeared to be in his late thirties, though his blonde hair was thin and receding rapidly. His swagger belied the fact that he was very slightly built. His eyes were small and bright blue. A bristly reddish moustache tottered below his nose. As he approached he pulled a pair of aviator sunglasses out of his vest pocket and planted them on the top of his head.

Peter grabbed his sweater and stood up, but the girl grabbed his sleeve.

"Wait."

Charles stepped up to Peter and thrust out a hand.

"Hello," he snapped, "Charles Dickey."

Peter could not return the shake because of the girl's hold on his sleeve.

"I'm Peter Diaz," he said.

"And he thinks you're a creep, Charles," the girl piped up. "And so do I."

Charles let his hand drop.

"Oh?" he said mildly.

The girl jumped up.

"Damn right!" she snapped. "He didn't laugh when I told him what happened. He'll think it's funny when it is funny...and that is later, not now! Right now I am freezing cold and wretchedly uncomfortable, and Mr. Diaz will take care of me."

She took three steps away and added, "For the rest of the day, Charles, for the rest of the day. Come along, Peter."

Peter stood a moment, nose to nose with Charles, who smelled slightly of rum

and Old Spice. His skin was a waxy pink. The moustache looked like a propeller.
"Glad to have met you," Peter mumbled and stepped aside. The girl hooked her
arm around his. Peter whispered something in her ear as they moved away. She
laughed and yelled over her shoulder, "Have a nice day!"

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Baltimore, MD 21210

When The Bough Breaks

by Alison Orleans Conte

There's a family of yellow birds out back,
Darting through branches
Blending in with the dandelions.
These immigrants from Baltimore,
move too fast for sight to catch.
A nest emptied in one of the trees.
Its contents spilled,
 fluttering aimlessly
 never touching ground.

30 N. Old Oak Drive
Beaver Falls, PA 15010