

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 37

June 2006

A Love Story

Christine Grimes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Grimes, Christine (2006) "A Love Story," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 37.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol6/iss1/37>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Grimes: A Love Story

A LOVE STORY Christine Grimes

Her skin is turquoise, the color of the ocean off the coast of France, where eighteen years ago I took a two-day leave on a rocky beach in Nice. The water glistened in the sun; my eyes squinted to look at it. Viv's skin is the same bluish teal. Tattooed and shaved, she has turned her body into a work of art. She shaves her head, even her brows, where she has implanted small balls to make her flesh ripple. The dye in her skin is etched past her hairline; black jigsaw pieces outline the rest of her skull. Her tongue is studded with a small orange ball she wiggled at me once.

I live behind Vivian's Surf Shack in a broken-down Chevette. I first met her at the Shack, where she worked for a guy in dreads. I helped her lift the boards in the back and she gave me her change when she could. She said when she surfed, she pulled out of her body, became something else, something better. It was hard learning, falling down at first, but when she popped up on the board, she felt that power. As she talked, her hazel eyes glowed with flecks of gold against her teal skin. She waved her arms about, the unfinished patterns of blue tattooed color contrasting against her pale flesh, and I wanted to touch her, hold her. She was the promise of something different.

I ended up here a while back. I lost my family, my house, my job, and finally I got drunk and went down to the water hoping for a sign. I fell asleep on the sand, woke up hung over, and slept some more in my car. That's where I stayed.

Port Aransas is nice enough. I sit on the beach and watch people. Spring break's this week, and it always brings beautiful girls and boys who fuck in the sand, trying to recreate *From Here to Eternity* even though they've never seen it. I like the carnival, young people getting drunk. It reminds me of when I was one of them.

This morning I sat on the beach. Off to my right was a volleyball court, a few tanned hard-bodies, to my left a little girl and her mom under an umbrella. The girl must have been two or three; she wobbled when she walked. Her eyes crinkled in concentration as she poured out water, then plunged both hands into the mush and pulled out fistfuls of wet sand.

When I came home from the service, my daughter was gone. My wife left me before I even knew it, and the last time I saw Annie, she didn't know me.

I wanted to walk over and plunge my hands into that sand, dangle my fingers in front of the child, so she would let me pretend some bonds can never be broken, would grab my grainy fingers and hold on. Instead, the tanned mother looked over at me, her eyebrow cocked, her lips drawn tight. She coaxed the girl into the water, glancing back to size up the growing distance.

I tried to swallow, but my tongue was thick. I felt bile rising and I wanted to chase it down with vodka, wash the hurt into my stomach.

I walked to the liquor mart and bought a bottle, chugging two swallows in the doorway. Then I headed to the pier, away from the families. No sandcastles, just old fishermen.

A couple regulars were casting out rigs and I sat on the planks and watched the waves break at the jetties. The breeze cooled my face. My head was loose on my shoulders. I swung my legs a bit and watched as one man lost his fish.

Ten feet up the pier a guy pulled in a small shark, and when he and his son posed for a picture together, I thought it wasn't too late for me to be that guy. I just needed the right break, someone like Viv.

Yesterday, she surprised me with a Brown Bag Special from Sonic. She joined me on the bumper of my car, and we watched the waves break. Her teeth flashed white against her tinted lips as she took large bites. She'd started showing up here and there with a burger or a hot dog. Sure beats shelter food.

"How goes it, Joe?" she asked, offering me her fries.

“Same shit, ‘nother day.” I grabbed a handful, shoving them into my mouth.

She shook her head and stared at me. “What do you want?”

I swallowed and shrugged. “Same as everybody.”

“What does that mean? You know, sometimes that takes work. You have to get out of this car and try.”

“Look where it got me.”

“Maybe it was the wrong time for you. You know, Goodwill’s hiring. They have job placement. You can use the Shack as your address.”

I just nodded and finished her fries.

So today when I found a twenty on my way to the Surf Shack, I splurged. I bought a liter of Smirnoff and a small bottle of Jose Cuervo for Viv. I thought she’d like an afternoon margarita with a twist of lime. She works too hard, never surfs anymore. She used to be out in the line-up every day. When she caught a wave, twisting and cutting, she looked like a turquoise carving gliding in air, until she paddled back in and shook her body like a wet dog, her breasts jiggling in her wetsuit. But at Christmas, the dread-head went broke and sold the Shack to her. Now she never gets out for a set.

I walked into the Shack with the Cuervo and leaned against the counter. Viv stood near a wall of wake boards arguing on the phone.

“It’s spring break for Chrissakes. Get the fucking sign back up!”

She clicked the phone off and pounded her fist into one of the foam boards. I gave her my best smile, thinking I should have gone in the water and rinsed my oily hair and put on a different shirt.

“What do you want?”

I waved the tequila back and forth, swirling it inside the bottle seductively.

“Cocktail hour, missy. You need an instant vacation.”

She walked over to me. "I don't have time for this."

"What happened to your sign?"

"Some punk kids tore it down last night."

"Maybe I can—"

"Forget it. What'd you need? It's fucking two o'clock in the afternoon and I can smell you from over there."

I shrugged and took a step, holding the bottle out as a peace offering. "No big deal. Thought you could lighten up."

I crossed my right foot to turn away but my knee buckled. I tumbled into a rack of swimsuits and beach shirts, toppling them into a customer as I hit the floor. The bottle broke. Glass shattered and liquor spread as I rolled over onto my belly, stunned. I crawled a few steps trying to get up and she was suddenly by my side, digging into my elbow and pulling me up.

"What's the matter with you, man?"

I tried to shake her off. "You. Everybody. Nobody appreciates. You know once in the army, I stole a horse, and I rode bareback with the prettiest girl in town. I let the reins out, just racing across a field."

Viv stood still for a moment. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the horse, dammit. See, I squeezed with my legs, wrapping them around his belly, just like she held onto me. The horse ran into the woods and he leapt into the air, and it was like flying." I smiled. "I got busted three ranks. Nobody ever appreciated how beautiful it was."

"That's great, Joe, but I'm busy." She pushed open the door. "Take it someplace else."

Outside, I tried to lean against the wall but slid all the way to the ground. A group of drunk college students swarmed past me.

"He looks like you did this morning," one of the boys said.

"Fuck off," I mumbled.

One of the boys stopped to help, but his buddy slowed and turned.

“What the hell,” he yelled. “We’re on our way to a fuckin’ wet t-shirt contest. Leave his ass there.”

“Hold on, man,” the first said, as he hoisted me up.

But his friend walked over and pushed me down.

I fell on my elbow, scraping it.

“Fuck him,” he said and kicked me in the ribs.

“Sorry, man,” the nice guy said, walking away.

I leaned against the building, hoping Viv would see me and help, but when I looked inside, her back was to me while she talked to a customer. I stood and walked to the side of the Shack. Viv’s sign was bent and scraping the ground, the pole broken in half. There was no way to fix it.

I shook my head and started down Main, bumped and jostled. I moved past the boardwalk, into the old industrial neighborhood.

In a construction yard, inside a fence, I saw a twenty-foot, six-inch diameter metal pole. It was perfect to repair Viv’s sign. It lay on its side, propped against six others. No one was working.

I rounded the block to the Korean grocery to get supplies. Inside, the air-conditioning hit my skin and beads of sweat slid off. Down the last aisle, I tucked my head in a cooler and, standing with the door open, eyes closed, let the air blast over me. In the security mirror, I saw Mr. Yan carding seven or eight kids. I pocketed an ice cream bar and slipped a bottle of Boone’s from a stand behind me and quickly ducked down the side aisle. Outside, I grabbed a cart and jogged to the construction site, eating my already melting ice cream. I shoved it into my mouth in two bites, then licked my fingers, getting dust and dirt with the drips.

In the army, they used to love for me to do grunt work. I was a good man to have around. Now it had been years since I’d lifted more than a fifth. I found a two-inch chain and rigged a pulley to lift the pole onto the cart. By the time I finished setting up the chain, sweat dripped onto my hands. Already my neck, back, and knees ached, but it felt good.

I imagined her response, the hairless face surprised, eyebrows

raised, mouth opened in an O, then spread into a secret smile that said thank you, oh Joe, it's wonderful, I'm sorry I was angry, why don't you come by later?

I wrapped the chain around a post and started to winch the pole towards me, bracing my feet, leaning back and into the pull. When I was almost halfway, I stopped to take a drink. Down the road, I glimpsed a police car cruising towards me. I propped the cart against the fence and ducked behind the pile of poles and covered myself with a tarp. Lights flashed as the car stopped next to the cart and pole. A cop got out and crawled through the hole, searching. He looked over my set-up and shrugged at his buddy, then began walking into the yard. I lowered myself into a ball. Then, his partner bleeped the siren and waved. The cop jogged across the lot and back through the gap and they left. I breathed slowly and took a long pull on the Boone's, then hurried to finish.

I got the pole onto the cart. I had to get to the surf shop before it closed. It was hard to balance the load, but I got the hang of it. I kept my elbows loose but my wrists tight. Walking down the middle of the street, pushing a shopping cart with a twenty-foot pole balanced on it, I got some strange looks and cheers, and was even flashed by a drunk co-ed. Her tits were small, but I still appreciated the gesture—tits are tits. The cart rolled down a slight hill and I loosened my grip, letting it pull me forward. One boy pumped a fist into the air, another toasted me.

As I walked up to the shop, I saw Viv locking up. I jogged just a few steps towards her calling her name, but the cart started to swerve and I pulled up short to keep from losing it.

"Ta-da!" I yelled, waving my arms in the air behind the cart.

"What the hell is that?"

"For your sign. So you can advertise."

Viv just stood there, her blue face dull, her hairless brows pinched. "You stole a *pole*?"

"It's free and I can set it up."

"Joe, you'll kill yourself up there. You should take it back."

“Viv, I got this for *you*.”

She took a step away from me and I could feel the Boone’s in my stomach, recoiling. I licked my lips and swallowed, trying to figure out how to fix this.

“Look. Just let me set this up for you, no charge. Then, maybe you can take an hour or two off and we can go do something. You see?”

“Oh, Joe.” She started towards me.

I made sure the cart wasn’t going to roll and went to the front of it as she reached out to touch me with her small hands, her fingertips grazing my arm, elbow to wrist.

“Joe, I’m going to leave it to the pros. Okay?”

“But—”

“You shouldn’t bring me presents. And, listen, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to hang around so much.”

“I’m sorry about today.”

“I understand, but I don’t think we should spend time together anymore. Sorry.”

Her head tilted downward. The corners of her mouth turned; it was the same look I’d seen before. There was nothing for me there. I’d given her all I had.

Now the current pulls at my knees, funneling sand from under my feet. The waves pass me as if I’m nothing. Each one tugs me a little deeper, pulls me farther away until my feet float. I swim, stroking up into the swell, pulling through as it crests, sliding into the next. I can still feel where her hand touched. My arm tingles, that spot still feels alive. My legs weak from the current, I kick less, letting the Gulf pull me out. Waves splash my face and the briny water washes away any taste of liquor I had left.

A wave pulls me under but I sputter back to the surface, coughing, before another one breaks over me. I sink again without catching my breath. My chest burns as I struggle to the surface. My fingers reach up and I stroke hard to the top, gulping air and bobbing at the surface. Every other stroke, my legs and arms give while I try to tread water and stay afloat.

I look towards shore but can no longer make out the Surf Shack. Small lights twinkle from left to right, farther than I can reach. I pick out a spot and pretend it's the Shack and close my eyes. Letting the tingling in my arm spread through my body, I imagine Viv on a board beside me, both of us waiting for a good set to come.