

Desilu, Three Cameras

by Alicia Gifford

A new dancer is auditioning, stacked, bubble rumped, café con leche and legs like anacondas. Ricky imagines bending her over his conga, yanking that bushy dark ponytail like reins and ripping into her. He sits, watches, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. He needs a dancer for the Jezebel number now that Connie is showing. This girl would make a fine Jezebel, he thinks, blowing perfect blue smoke rings.

Lucy can barely zip her capris. She balls up her face and wishes she hadn't had pancakes. Six of them! She's so damn *hungry* all the time. She peers into the mirror and squints. Crow's feet! How fleeting it all is. There's a knock on the door and it's Fred. He asks Lucy if Ethel's there. Lucy asks Fred if she looks fat and Fred rolls his eyes and says, yeah, I'm going to answer that. Where's Ethel?

Lucy tells Fred she has no idea where Ethel is; maybe she went to the store. But Lucy has a pretty good idea where Ethel is, Lucy's pretty sure Ethel's in 4B with that Mr. Ripley. Ethel's been like a cat in heat lately.

Well I'm *hungry*, Fred says, and he asks if Lucy has anything to eat and Lucy asks why everything always has to be about food, so Fred says, if you see Ethel, tell her I went to Mort's for pastrami, and it's coming out of her allowance. He leaves.

Pastrami, Lucy thinks. Visions of cured meats dance in her head.

Back at the club, Ricky takes the girl into his office. She says she's twenty-one but he doubts she's eighteen. The buttons of her blouse tug around her tumid breasts. She leans forward and warm moisture, the kind that fuels hurricanes, lifts up from her cleavage, filling Ricky's mouth. With narrowed eyes she tells him that she enjoys sucking on a good Cuban cigar. He asks for I.D. and she brings out a crumbled New Jersey license with a photo that may or

may not be her. The March, 1931 birthday makes her exactly twenty-one years and one month. And she can dance.

She's still wearing the little calypso skirt she was shaking with an ass like maracas. He imagines sliding his hand up her sweaty thigh, finding her with his fingers. That's when she opens her legs and he sees the whole thing laid out like Sunday dinner. Aye dios mío, he says. Estoy fregado.

Someone pounds on the door and Lucy yanks it open. It's Ethel and she says she's in an awful mess.

Well at least you're not fat, Lucy says. She looks Ethel up and down. Never mind, she says. Ethel folds her arms and grimaces at Lucy, but then becomes distressed again, telling Lucy she did something awful, so Lucy says, I'll say, you're acting like an alley cat and leaving me ahem and a-humming to your husband.

I killed him, Ethel says, wringing her hands. Mr. Ripley. Bertram. Bert. He's dead.

You *killed* him? What do you mean 'you killed him'?

I went to see Dr. Gottlieb this morning because of a female problem, and he told me, he said—Ethel hangs her head—I have gonorrhea.

Gonorrhea! Lucy says, her eyes big as ping-pong balls, and she asks again what Ethel means about killing Mr. Ripley and Ethel says she went to his apartment in a rage over him giving her the clap and she smacked him hard across the face. She says that he lost his balance, back-flipped over the Chinese modern coffee table, and his head hit the brick hearth like an asteroid. Ethel starts crying. Oh Lucy, she says, it was just awful, like a broken egg.

So what'd you *do*? Lucy joins Ethel in the hand wringing.

I went to check his pulse but his eyes, both pupils black and huge. And his brain.

His *brain!* Lucy says.

Yeah, Ethel says. A bloody, gray blob poking out the hole in his head like the stuffing in Fred's chair. So I left and came here.

Fred goes to Mort's and orders a pastrami sandwich on rye with Swiss cheese, coleslaw and Russian dressing, fries, and coffee. The

waitress is a strapping blonde woman with ruddy cheeks and skin like a bowl of milk. Fred's always had a weakness for big blondes. He thinks back to the days when all he could think about was climbing onto Ethel. Man that was good sex. No place he'd rather be than buried in Ethel's big, warm muff. Fred takes a bite of his messy sandwich, Russian dressing oozes down onto his shirt and coats his lips. He watches the waitress. What he wouldn't give to have it all back again. When he started having trouble, he and Ethel never talked about it. The best part of them just stopped.

Ricky zips his pants and tells the girl she has to go. Here, he says, fishing out his wallet, take a cab. He hands her twenty dollars, and she takes it. Then she says, what about the job? I need to work, she says, and Ricky says that he's married and after this afternoon it wouldn't be a good idea for her to work with him at the club. He never wants to see her again. I'll call you next week, he says.

And she says, oh I know you're married, Mr. Ricardo. I've met your wife. See, to make ends meet, to pay my rent—*until I get a decent paying dance job*—I'm working as a shampoo girl where your wife gets her hair done. She talks about you all the time: Ricky this, Ricky that. Ricky, Ricky, Ricky.

Ethel takes Lucy into 4B where Bertram “Bert” Ripley lies with his feet in the air over the coffee table and his head in a small, black pool of blood at the edge of the brick hearth. The women wrap their arms around each other and then take quick, bitty steps toward the body. They brace themselves—then look down. One eye looks east, the other one west—same as they looked when he was alive. His dentures loosened on impact and are half out of his mouth. Lucy couldn't see what Ethel found attractive in this guy—she would've guessed him to be the “confirmed bachelor” type.

I didn't know he wore dentures, Ethel says glumly.

You didn't know he had the clap, either.

Oh Lucy, I was so embarrassed. I wanted to die when the doctor said gonorrhoea. He thinks it's Fred.

Lucy looks sharply at Ethel—then they're bent over, snorting, squeezing their legs.

Oh honey, oh honey, Ethel gasps, *he thinks I got the clap from Fred.*

Lucy's face contracts into a wordless, squint-eyed, open-mouthed grimace. She shakes her hands. Ethel wipes her eyes on her sleeve and says she doesn't know why she's laughing; it's more tragedy than comedy.

There's a knock on the door then, and they recognize the voice of Mrs. Trumbull from 4D. Bertie, she warbles, I have a bowl of gumbo for you. Homemade and spicy—just like you like it.

Mrs. Trumbull! Lucy whispers. Just *listen* to her.

Ethel frowns, folds her arms. Bertie? Bertie?

Oh Bertie dear—spicy rich gumbo and cornbread for your supper. I brought the honey pot, too. Mrs. Trumbull giggles like a girl and Lucy's mouth stretches into a long oval, her arched brows knit together.

Ethel blinks and blinks, rubs her arms. *Bertie? Bertie?*

Then there's a jiggling in the lock. She's got a key, Lucy whispers. *Let's get out of here.* The women dash through the kitchen to the back door, but not before hearing a shrill scream and the crash of china. As they bolt out the back, they get a whiff of gumbo.

Ricky stands up and walks around to the girl. I hope you're not trying to blackball me, he says.

She laughs. I think you mean *blackmail*. If you're asking would I tell your wife that you took advantage of me then gave me a job, no. You give me a dancing gig here, pay me seventy-five dollars a week, and I'll quit my job at the salon and never see Mrs. Ricardo again. Unless she comes here, that is. The girl smiles with giant, white teeth.

¿Aye qué barbaridad, esta mujer loca, por qué no puedo dejar estas cosas en paz? ¡Y maldita sea dios, la muchacha sí puede bailar! ¿Por qué necesita ella a enseñar me el coño? Necesito una Jezebel esta noche, qué caramba.

He struts and flings his hands and she pulls out an emery board from her pocketbook and calmly files blood red fingernails.

Fred orders a piece of lemon meringue pie. The waitress's name is Inger. Summers when Fred was a teenager he used to visit his grandparents in Minnesota and he'd go down to the swimming hole and watch the Swedish farm girls with their thick blonde braids and robust bodies splashing in the water and then sunning themselves. He remembers a girl, Sassa, out in her father's barn, how he shot his wad on sight of those dark, pink nipples and that wheaten bush. He thought he could've been happy being a dairy farmer, wearing overalls and pitching hay, married to one of those robust Swedey-pies bearing him babies and fixing him meatballs. But vaudeville called him, and he never looked back once he met Ethel.

He had a dream last night that doctors had come up with a potion, one that got your pecker back. Would that be something. Fred shakes his head, eats his pie.

Huffing hard, Lucy and Ethel make it back to the Ricardo's apartment. Within moments they hear the plaintive wails of Mrs. Trumbull out in the hall. We have to go out there, Lucy says. It'll be weird if we ignore her.

Lucy and Ethel venture out into the hall and call up the stairs. Anything wrong, dear? Lucy says.

Is Mrs. Mertz there? There's been a terrible accident.

Lucy and Ethel look at each other. Oh no, they say simultaneously. What happened?

It's Bertie, Mrs. Trumbull says. Mr. Ripley, I mean. I'm afraid we've lost him.

Ethel freezes, wide-eyed, open-mouthed and Lucy shakes her by the shoulders Snap out of it, she says. Ethel gulps, comes to. The women go upstairs to the apartment. Gumbo and cornbread are splattered all over the place and Lucy is starving again. She wonders if any of that cornbread is salvageable and then winces when she sees the body. It's a heat sink and she shivers. It's a color drain and everything goes black and white. She looks at Ethel and she's a pillar of salt. Mrs. Trumbull has already phoned the police and soon two officers stride in. One examines the body and looks around the living room while the other listens to Mrs. Trumbull

explain how she let herself in to bring gumbo and then found him like this. They ask her why she has a key to his place and she says that she and Mr. Ripley are very good friends; that she often fixes his suppers and he looks after her since she's a widow and needs a man's help from time to time. Blushing, she says they've even discussed marriage.

Ethel's jaw drops and Lucy pinches her.

A detective shows up and confers with the uniforms. He looks around, checks the coffee table, the angle of the body. He squats down and inspects the man's face, shines a light on his cheek. Looks like he was slapped, he says. See, he says to one of the cops, a handprint, frozen in death. The detective stands and slowly looks around the room. He asks if anyone knows who might've wanted to slap this guy.

Oh no, Ethel says. He was a good tenant.

Goodness no, says Mrs. Trumbull. I loved him very much. She starts to cry.

No sir, says Lucy.

A woman, the detective says. A man would use a fist. Women slap open-handed. So a woman with a grudge comes in, slaps him, he falls back and busts his head.

Everyone turns to look at Mrs. Trumbull, and she faints.

Ricky is desperate for a dancer. Connie is around to teach the girl the Jezebel routine and he's confident she could learn it for tonight's performance, sparing the audience Connie's pregnant belly and udders. The girl is perfect but he knows she's trouble too. He could kick himself for being so weak, but the lure of strange pussy is something he struggles with. He loves Lucy even if she drives him crazy. He chastises her for being suspicious, and then he gives her grounds. It's not easy being Ricky.

All right, he says. You start now. Try on the costume and have Isabel make any alterations. And then you'll work with Connie to learn the routine. But I'm warning you, what happened today will never be repeated. Do you understand?

The girl tilts her head. What you say, boss. She stands and sashays out.

Ricky will replace her as soon as he can. During his dinner break he'll swing by Bloomingdale's and pick up something nice for Lucy, that perfume she likes—or maybe some sexy lingerie.

Fred finishes his meal and Inger brings him the check. She smiles but her eyes look through him. But what's to look at anyway—paunchy, balding—cherubic, maybe, curmudgeon, more like it. He leaves her an extravagant tip, resisting the temptation to take half of it back, and then strolls out onto the avenue, feeling full and a little icky. He can't handle pastrami like he used to. He sits down at a bench to catch his breath, wishing he'd brought his jacket.

He's too grumpy with Ethel; it's his way of dealing with his lost wood—making like Ethel doesn't stoke him anymore. She's probably got it figured out but now he's stuck in the grouchy, long-suffering husband mode. Ricky confides in him about this molly and that one. He'd never felt the urge to cheat on Ethel; she filled him up. Sure, he'd see some cute little tail and he'd wonder, but mostly it just fired him up for his honeybunch.

The coroner arrives, inspects the scene and bags up Mr. Ripley. When Mrs. Trumbull revives, the detective asks if she'd go downtown and answer a few questions. In a daze Mrs. Trumbull staggers out between the two uniforms, her hair disheveled, a rip in one stocking, her legs spattered with tomatoes and okra.

Gee honey, Ethel says, wringing her hands again. Do you think I should—?

Don't you dare, Lucy says. If you tell them they'll get you for leaving the scene. Hit and run. The whole ugly mess will end up in the papers. Don't worry, they'll figure out that Trumbull's innocent. It was an accident, anyway.

They're back in the Ricardo's apartment and Ethel rubs her rear where the doctor injected the penicillin. Dr. Gottlieb said he wouldn't put it on my chart, for privacy's sake, she says. That's good. He also said that Fred needed to come in for a shot, too. I'll call him

next week and tell him Fred got a shot at the men's clinic. Fred's an old goat but it'd kill him if he knew what I did. Ethel's face knots up. I didn't want to die without ever getting laid again. I'm hoping after the change I won't care.

The change! We're *light years* away from the change, Lucy says. Come on honey, I'll fix us a sandwich. Liverwurst on pumpernickel and a couple of cold beers will fix everything.

Ethel pulls a hanky from her bra and blows her nose. Got mustard?

Fred feels better after a few moments digesting, so he gets up from the bench and strolls back toward his brownstone. The park is lush with spring and he takes a minute to smell the flowers. He's going to take a nice snooze when he gets home. Then there's a good fight on TV and then, Sid Caesar and *Your Show of Shows*. Fred rubs his palms and wobbles his head. Hotcha, he says. If he could leap and click his heels, he would.

That night the Jezebel number is a smash. The gifts for Lucy—a spray atomizer of Chanel No. 5 eau de toilette and a lace peignoir—are wrapped in silvery paper under Ricky's desk. He and the new girl take another bow and Ricky's hand slides too far down her backside. Then the finale with the Babalu number. Next day critics will write that Ricky and his new dancer lit up the stage like St. Elmo's fire. Boffo, they'll say.

In the morning, Lucy kills a jar of pickled pig knuckles and makes a loaf of French toast. Ricky's still asleep. She shivers and her groin gets lust-achy recalling last night. That man! Ethel comes to the back door, enters the kitchen and pours a cup of coffee.

I just saw Mrs. Trumbull, Ethel says. Get this: she says the detectives realized her hand was too small and delicate to have made the imprint. They said Bertram Ripley was a well-known blade in the homosexual circuit and any one of his poufs could've smacked him. They're ruling it an accident. She sits at the table and stabs a piece of French toast with a fork.

Aha, Lucy says. *A pouf!*

Ethel goes on. Of course she's mortified, poor thing. Know what? I'm glad he's dead, using men, using women, what filth. How dare he? Ethel pushes an entire piece of French toast in her mouth and then swigs syrup straight from the bottle. She chews and swallows and chews and swallows. She dabs delicately at her mouth with a paper napkin. Fred's acting weird, she says. He wanted to cuddle all night long.

Lucy looks dreamy. I love cuddling. I could fuse with Ricky; melt right into that Cuban dreamboat like hot cheese. She rests her chin in her hand and sighs. He brought me perfume and lingerie last night. You know what that means. Lucy lights a Phillip Morris and does an expert French inhale. He's feeling guilty over something. And I just kept my mouth shut like a good little wife and let him make love to me. Boy did he make love to me. I had to smother my face with a pillow to keep from waking up the whole building when he—

For crying out loud Lucy, do you really need to tell me this? Ethel stabs another piece of French toast. I just killed my—what's it called?—paramour. Now it's back to life as Sister Mary Ethel. She butters the toast thickly and then douses it with syrup. You know, for a man of that persuasion, Bertie sure knew what he was doing. She shudders.

Those dancers *throw* themselves at Ricky, says Lucy. And me packing on the blubber. And getting crow's feet. It's enough to make you want to—

She too, grabs another piece of French toast. You know, Lucy says, if we could master sticking our fingers down our throats and throwing up after eating, we could feast like queens and maintain our figures. We could start a new diet craze.

Hey, that's a great idea, Ethel says. Ricky loves you honey. You can see it in those bulging brown eyes of his. Men don't confuse love and sex like we do. Hell, I'd about convinced myself that I loved queer boy.

The women laugh with wide, full mouths.

And get this, Ethel continues. I couldn't resist. I asked Mrs. Trumbull if Mr. Ripley was good in bed.

You didn't!

I did, and she said that he never pushed her for sex, that he was happy to wait until they married. Then I asked her if she was feeling all right and getting to the doctor regularly and she said, oh yes, she'd just had a complete check-up and a little infection she'd had in her throat had cleared up nicely with a shot of penicillin. Do you think?

Lucy flings her head back and forth and stamps her feet. Ethel snorts and chokes. They finish the French toast and then ravage some left over spaghetti.

