

Gorgeous World

by Alicia Gifford

I've forgiven my mother; she didn't know what she was doing. She heard voices, had visions. She imagined herself to be a prophet named Helen when her real name was Marge. When she learned she was pregnant with me she scored some Thalidomide from my grandparents' Nicaraguan housekeeper whose mother got it on the black market to treat her skin leprosy. I know the whole story. My mother wanted a "special" baby. She thought it would be good for Helen the Prophet to have a humanity challenge, something grotesque. She chowed Thalidomide down through her first trimester.

I was born in 1970 in Burbank, California with flipper arms, mini legs and normal-sized feet. My overall look is just like a penguin. I'm deaf in my right ear and I've had five operations to fix up a cleft palate, so sometimes I honk. My lower jaw didn't develop right, like a character on *The Simpsons*.

"Perfect," my mother said about me.

If I look in the mirror just right I see how I might've looked if my mother hadn't messed with Thalidomide. I might've been good looking. Mainly though, I don't look in mirrors.

My name is Robert but I go by "Penguin" and I work as a penguin at the Home Show. I'm a trademark-mascot for Ames Igloos—tents you inflate with a built-in inflator so they're insulated; and then you can A/C them with a self-contained coolant system, or heat them with a built in heater. It looks just like an igloo with all the comforts. Buzz Ames invented them and he's getting rich too. Every urban cowboy with an SUV and a backpack has to have an Ames Igloo.

My job at the Home Show is to waddle back and forth on a platform dressed in a custom-made penguin outfit and orange webbed feet. I draw people like shit draws flies. They watch me in my cozy Igloo, relaxed and smoking a fat cigar attached by a device to my flipper since the orange webbed feet keep me from using my feet to smoke. I honk for the crowd and get applause. I'm with Buzz

Ames seven years now, since I was twenty, and we get along fine. We travel towing Buzz's Airstream—the Land Yacht—and I like it. I've been to forty-eight states and Buzz wants to hit Alaska soon. I sleep in an Ames Igloo in the trailer park where Buzz hitches up his trailer—always pitching product. They're comfortable. Total quality.

Buzz likes women, has a new one every night, if he wants. He'll yak on his cell phone with his wife and kids in San Diego, a naked woman curled around him.

“Don't you feel guilty?” I ask.

“Naw,” he says. “Just a piece of ass.” He's about as close to family as I've got.

My mother and I lived with my grandparents. We never knew my father. I didn't know my mother was crazy. I thought she was beautiful.

On my sixth birthday my mother and I stole Gram's car—Helen the Prophetess wasn't supposed to drive. We got hot dogs, ice cream, stuff she usually wouldn't let me eat. We went to the pet store and looked at puppies and kittens, fish, turtles, smelled the pet store smells. We drove to Von's, parked in the lot, and then walked onto the Pass Avenue overpass of the 134 Freeway. She climbed on the guardrail in her white prophet dress, her long, red hair blowing out behind. She looked to the heavens, spread her arms wide and flew in a dead drop down to the freeway where she was hit by about a dozen cars in a minute. Take me! Take me! I shrieked, scuttling back and forth, my flippers bloodied from scraping them on the metal guardrail, trying to join her.

I had problems after that. I realized I was a freak and I refused to leave the house. My grandparents were teachers, Granddaddy taught philosophy at a community college and my Grams taught high school English. They home schooled me and I got a better education from them than I ever would've in school.

Granddaddy was an atheist. “Life's meaningless,” he said. “We push a rock up a hill, it rolls down; we push it up again. Then we die. It's that absurd. Your only hope is to enjoy the pushing.”

"Don't listen to him," Grams said. "He doesn't believe a word of it." She made me read books, from classics to pulp fiction. I couldn't get enough, Grams supplying me from the library. I could lose myself there, movies too. We watched movies everyday.

When I was eighteen I was as self sufficient as someone like me can be. Gram's arthritis became torture for her and her heart was bad. She was losing her sight and Granddaddy was losing his mind, and he knew it. They didn't want to squander their assets on institutions. They didn't want to be without one another. "We're done," they said.

They told me that they were leaving me everything, and that financially, I'd be okay for a while, until I figured out a way to earn a living. Grams gave me a comprehensive reading list. "These books will enrich your life," she said, "and give you this gorgeous world."

"Life's a crapshoot," Granddaddy said. "Load the dice anyway you can." He grabbed me. "Sorry about your mother," he said into my hair. I kissed him, my Grams, told them how much I loved them, how grateful I was. We cried, couldn't help it. Then they went to the garage that they'd sealed with wet towels, the Oldsmobile already running. They told me to call the police after an hour, and that's what I did.

The house they left me in Burbank I rent to a pair of twin sisters, so I have some income there. When I'm in town I stay there, in my old basement apartment. I'm happy like this; I don't think about loneliness anyway, and then Ray Ann Karnowski comes into my life.

Ray Ann is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed dwarf girl that I meet doing the Home Show in Orange County, California. First I see her hanging around, staring, nothing I'm not used to. She comes every day for a week in a different colored tube top, the same faded denim mini skirt, and red cowboy boots. She's got big spirals of yellow hair and a heavy hand with make-up. On our last day I ask her if she'd like to join me for a smoke.

"Yeth," she says. I remove the webbed feet, slip on sandals and we walk outside the Convention Center. We heave our bodies up onto a bench and I light her a Lucky Strike using my feet. I hand it

to her and she pats my leg with a hand that looks like the paw of a Saint Bernard. We smoke in silence for a while, ignoring the stares of all the good folk visiting the Home Show.

She gives me a sidelong look through blue-hooded eyes caked thick with black. She's familiar to me and then it hits me: she looks just like Miss Piggy.

"I like penguins," she says. She lisps all her S's.

"I like pigs," I say. I've got a trigger retort reflex and I see I hurt her feelings. "I mean I really like pigs. Smarter'n dogs. Smarter than penguins, for sure."

"I'm sensitive because sometimes people call me Miss Piggy," she says.

"Really," I say.

"What's your story anyway?" She swings her chunky, short legs, takes a long drag off the cigarette and blows perfect, concentric O's from dark, magenta lips. I give her my standard bio about Thalidomide, leaving out the insane mother part.

"I'm a Little Person, duh," she says. "Do you have a penis?"

My package is normal. I'm tortured by horniness and you can imagine it's not easy for a guy like me to get laid. I'm a virgin. I can masturbate with my feet but it's exhausting. I tried devices that came in plain brown wrappers from the Internet—artificial vaginas, blow-up dolls, blow-up child dolls—sleazy stuff. The best thing was the worst thing: a medium-rare rump roast. I told myself the whole time it was in the oven that it was just dinner but I knew I was going to fuck it. Trying not to think about what I was doing, I cut a hole in it, buttered it and then I fucked it in the kitchen with the lights off while it was still warm, pretending with all my might it was Natalie Portmann. What I wouldn't give for some genuine female anatomy. What I wouldn't give for a girlfriend.

"Nothing wrong with me there," I say, flapping my flippers for emphasis. I take a long drag and pull my lips back hard, trying to make a tough guy face, hissing out my smoke. I'm still in the penguin costume.

"I have epilepsy," she says. "Grand Ma seizures." She shrugs her thick little pork shoulders. "Luck of the Irish I guess."

"You Irish?"

"Polish," she says. "It's just an expression, duh. I'm Ray Ann. Ray Ann Karnowski."

"I'm Penguin," I say.

"There's something about you." She narrows her eyes and blows smoke out the side of her mouth. "You got a place?"

"Yeah I got a place." We're staying at a swell trailer park just out of Irvine. She leans back on the bench and throws back her head. I can see her nipples poking through her orange tube top like the ends of lemons.

"Let me see if my boss'll let me off early," I say.

When I go in to talk to Buzz about leaving, he grins. "Not unless you got a hot date." I grin back and his face marvels. "No shit? Get out of here." He claps me on the back.

Ray Ann's got a black '67 Mustang outfitted for midgets. We get into it and head to Irvine. I've figured if I ever were to get laid it'd be with someone along the lines of Ray Ann. I hope I like her. I'm nervous and hard as a block of ice the whole way to the Igloo.

Ray Ann sings to a "Best of the Carpenters" tape. Rainy daysth and Mondaysth al-waysth get me—she puts her paw on her heart—do-o-wn. "I was so sad when she died," she says wistfully. "Karen Carpenter was the finest singer of the century."

I hate the Carpenters. "She's great," I say.

We're wailing on We've Only Just Begun when we reach the Sunny Daze Trailer Resort. We park and get out of the car.

"Ooooh, nice trailer," she says. "A beauty."

"That's my place, out back," I say. She looks at the Igloo.

"Darling," she coos. "Even better."

I tell her to go ahead and get into the Igloo while I change out of my penguin garb in the trailer.

"Don't be too long," she says, ducking inside.

I change my clothes and do a quick freshen up at the sink. I take deep breaths. I help myself to a couple of Buzz's Trojans.

This is it, I tell myself.

I enter the Igloo with a couple of cold Rolling Rock longnecks clutched to my chest.

"Groovy," she says. "I LOVE beer."

She's lying down, propped up on her elbow, boots off. She takes a long pull off the beer. "Ahhh," she says.

I sit and gulp down beer using my feet.

"That's amazing, how you use your feet like that," she says.

"Yeah, well." Surgeons wanted to operate on my flippers and fit me with artificial arms but my grandparents said no and I'm glad. I've heard of other thalidomiders who've done it only to chuck the prostheses because they hated them, ending up with nothing. I can type, strum a guitar, smoke, do just about anything with my feet that hands can do. My flippers are useful, too. They're short but I have an elbow joint and then the forearm part tapers into a paddle I can curl. I can carry things, clutched to my chest. My legs are sturdy and normal but the bone shafts didn't grow so they're short. I get around just fine on them.

Ray Ann chugs down that beer in no time. I go back to the trailer and bring out two more and she guzzles both of them while I work on the first one.

"Bwaaaaaaaap!"

"Nice burp," I say.

" 'xcusthe," she says. She reaches for me then, pulls me down and rolls on top of me. She presses her lips on mine and thrusts her fat tongue down my throat. I like it.

We grope, wrestle; she's got her clothes off and her two white tits and cherry nipples look like a twin ice cream sundaes. She's shaved her pussy and when I catch a glimpse of the glistening pink I nearly come.

"Gnash the gash, baby," she says in a growly voice. "I'm opened wide for chunky."

Ray Ann's soft, musky flesh pressed to me is unimaginable. Maybe there is a God. She straddles me, bounces—her big round tits brush my face, my tongue. I come—a burst straight out her spine that

circles the earth—the Penguin Meteor. I see God. Feel Him. I get why people think He exists, anyway. Then I snuffle like a baby.

Ray Ann cradles my head. “Jeez, are you crying?” She kisses my wet cheeks. “You are hot, baby.” She licks her finger, puts it to her butt and makes a sizzling noise.

We smoke my last two cigarettes and then, she burrows into me, raising my flipper and tucking it behind her neck. In thirty seconds she's snoring on my chest. Saliva slides out the side of her mouth and runs down along my ribs to my sheet. She moves in closer, snuggler, wrapping my legs with hers. She's so beautiful! I blink tears and float on the ceiling of the Igloo. I feel bliss. Connected. An ordinary Joe.

I can smell her on my upper lip and I relive the sex while she sleeps, making me hard again. Dusk falls. Buzz pulls up in his Jeep and parks next to Ray Ann's Mustang. If this igloo's a-rockin', don't come a-knockin' he sings. I honk a reply. Ray Ann lets a wet fart and I grin in the dark. I grin until I fall sleep, inhaling her vapors.

When I wake up, it's three in the morning. Ray Ann's bunched down around my feet with my penis in her mouth, working it like a leg of chicken. Soon I'm spurting down her throat.

“How was that Pengie?” she says breathing beer and cum in my face.

I make soft honking noises. “Heaven.”

“We're going to have so much fun together,” she says. “I can't wait to hit the road with you guys.”

My scalp shrinks and some hairs stand on end. “We're taking time off the road. This is our last gig for two months,” I say.

“So?”

“I go to Burbank and Buzz drives home to San Diego.”

“I LOVE Burbank,” she says. “Where do we stay?”

I sift through a flight of ideas. What the hell?

“We stay in a basement apartment in my house that I rent to some sisters.”

“I LOVE basements,” she says.

* * * * *

Luce and Lila bend and hug me. "So good to see you Robert," says one of them. They won't call me Penguin.

"You look fine," says the other.

The house smells great. "We got the smoker going. Ribs and a brisket," they say in unison.

I never know which one's Luce, which Lila. Their grizzled hair is processed and blown out in big, bouffant do's reminiscent of The Supremes in the early '60's. They're tall, slender and tilt sideways to their left when they stand or sit. They wear matching yellow gingham shirtwaist dresses that show off the milk chocolate of their skin, and nurse's shoes. They must be pushing seventy.

"I brought a friend this time," I say.

"Glory, come on, wonderful news. Where is he?" They look out the door in a synchronized motion.

"She'll be right back. She went to get some cigarettes."

Luce and Lila look at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Land," they say together. "Well come in, your room's all ready."

Just then Ray Ann screeches into the driveway and we watch her jump out of her car and swagger over to us carrying two six-packs with two bottles missing.

"Nice place," she says looking around. She sees Lila and Luce. "Twins! Sisters. You're sisters—and you're—sistahs." She widens her eyes and grins like a maniac.

"Ray Ann—Lila and Luce," I say.

"Don't bother saying who's who. Y'all look alike to me." She looks at each of us with the same manic face. "It's a joke, DUH. Which way to our room?"

Lila invites us to have supper in about an hour and we agree. I take Ray Ann down in the little elevator to my basement apartment. The sisters have put sweet smelling roses from the garden in a vase.

"I think I'm going to like it here," Ray Ann says, running around, poking in the closet, the bathroom. She flops on the bed that sits directly on the painted concrete floor and rips open a beer, tilts her head back and chugs it.

"Is that an icicle in your pocket or are you just happy to see me," she says. She sets down the beer, opens her legs and runs her tongue around her lips. It works for me. Next thing we're thrashing in bed for a couple of hours, skipping dinner with Lila and Luce.

"Hand me—oops! Foot me a Kleenex, Sugar." I give her one and she mops up the mess between her legs. We didn't use a condom. I couldn't get it on by myself and she refused. "What's the worst that can happen?" she says. "Let go, let God."

She talks about her messed up female parts askew in her interior, tangled tubes, crusted ovaries. She talks about operations she's had, teeth that were pulled, her battle with constipation. She says everything happens for a reason and it's our karma to be together now. She thinks she knows me from a previous life, that we could be soul mates. If I'd heard all this last week I might've called it drivel, but now my mind's wide-open.

Her father, a dead dwarf actor, provided the trust fund she lives on. She'd been living with her mother and sister, both normal-sized and they don't get along. "Try growing up with a fucking prom queen," she said about her younger sister. "I'm like the evil pet chimpanzee there. My mother's always bitching. Says I embarrass her; that I drink too much. She wants to put me in rehab. Fuck her."

Over the next few weeks Luce and Lila watch with arms folded and leaning like two trees blown by the same wind as Ray Ann staggers around like she's aboard rough seas.

"She's fun loving," they say with tight lips as Ray Ann knocks back four shots of tequila and shimmies to Barry Manilow's "Copa Cabana".

The straight fact is that Ray Ann is loud and sloppy drunk almost every day. I'm not sure she's ever read a book. But she is fun loving. And one hundred percent woman. Lying next to her, hearing her gentle snores, watching her wet, slack mouth move like she's praying, I get it. I get the sappy songs. I get Romeo and Juliet. I get why every other movie and novel is about love.

"Do you like drugs?" she asks.

"Never done any."

"I used to do drugs," she says. "I like them, duh, but I get more seizures." She shrugs.

"How'd you get a driver's license, anyway," I ask.

"Driver's license?"

She asks me if I got teased much, growing up. I tell her I rarely left the house, except to get surgeries or speech therapy.

"You're lucky," she says. "I went to Beverly Hills High and had zits galore. This one girl said I grew maggots in my face. She and her friends made fun of me for years." She smiles with watery eyes and lights a new cigarette with the butt of the old one. "I fucked their boyfriends to get my self esteem back. They didn't think I had maggots." She takes my face in her two hands. "You're sweet. Respectful. You make me feel good about myself, beautiful. And look at all these books—you're smart, like a fucking genius." She hugs me and I could bust like a piñata, pour out hearts and flowers.

Ray Ann takes me clothes shopping at Snow White's Den, a shop for dwarves or "Little People" as she insists on saying. In a toy store I get big, pink, rubber hands and I wave to everyone as we strut down the Venice boardwalk, tasting the salt in the air, the ocean glittery with sun and us, giddy in spangled vests, satin shirts and cowboy hats, fitting right into the Venice freak show. It's fun.

We go to restaurants and for the first time, I eat in public, Ray Ann feeding me at first and then me using the silverware with my feet. "Take a picture, it'll last longer," Ray Ann says when people stare. We see movies and go to Disneyland. We screw like rodents. I engage with the absurd world outside the Home Show, and I like it.

One night after we'd been together for a month Ray Ann tells me she's going to visit her friend Graciela, have a hen session. We'd been inseparable until then. "Go ahead," I say, but I miss her soon as she leaves. Two o'clock in the morning, she's still not back. I watch TV, smoke up all my cigarettes. At four I walk down to the 7-Eleven and buy some more. I fall asleep and then Ray Ann's waking me up a few hours later. She's sweaty, stinks, has dark circles under her eyes

"I had a seizure," she says. "Wiped me out. I slept at Graciela's."

"I wish you'd called. Luce and Lila want us to have brunch."

She's agitated, shaky. She sits and then paces, lies down and springs up. She lights a cigarette when she's already got two going.

"We had a little toot," she says, licking her lips. "I need a drink." She pours herself a tall Southern Comfort and gulps it down. She pours herself another one, gets half way through it and then falls asleep with the glass in her hand.

Once she's settled I go by myself to eat with Luce and Lila.

"Ray Ann under weather?" they ask.

"She had a seizure—wipes her out."

"Drinking's no good for that," one says, the other nodding in agreement. "Girl's got a bottle problem, Robert, looking to be your problem."

"I don't remember asking for opinions," I say, thinking how I'd never seen what nosy biddies these two really are. "Excuse me, I've lost my appetite."

I go downstairs and munch on three-day-old pizza while Ray Ann snores.

A few days later Ray Ann tells me we're invited to a party given by her friends. "These people are like family to me," she says, "and they can't wait to meet you." I have a jinxed feeling about it, but she's excited and insistent and hey, it might be nice to have friends.

We show up at the party in a bungalow style home in Highland Park, mainly biker types and hard looking women. Kegs of beer sit on a wood table in the middle of the room. Everyone stares at us but Ray Ann's oblivious.

"Pengie," she says with her wide-eyed manic face, "you just gotta try crank—you'll love it."

"I don't—"

"C'mon." She pulls me to where a couple of people are bent over a table, chopping chunks into powder.

A burly guy with long, greasy hair, a leather vest and no shirt looks at her. "Well if it ain't Miss Piggy," he says. He looks at me. "And Kermit."

I laugh way too loud. Ray Ann's only got eyes for the meth. "C'mon Toto. Fix us up."

Toto stares at me. "Jesus Christ," he mutters, "she looks fucking normal next to you." Someone puts a straw and a plate of methamphetamine to Ray Ann's nose and she snorts it up, wagging her rear like a puppy.

"Ever seen a penguin on speed?" she says in a high-pitched titter. "Your turn Pengie."

"Sure," I say, "but first, where's the bathroom?"

Toto points to a hallway. "Follow the yellow brick road," he says. Ray Ann throws her head back with her mouth wide open and squeals.

In the bathroom I lean my forehead on the cold sink. I hate this party. I don't want to speed or trip or drink myself stupid. These people are fucking scary. I want to get Ray Ann out of here. I want her to have different friends. I want her to drink less, to not do drugs.

I want her to be someone else. I take this in and get a sinking feeling worse than loneliness. I try to rev up the love, the excitement, but I just want to go home.

I go back out to beg her to leave but they're gone. I wander around, ignoring the stares, trying not to be scared. I end up back at the bathroom. The door's open so I step inside to hide and think—and there's Toto on the toilet, smoking a cigarette and Ray Ann's in front of him, blowing him like a porno video in fast-forward. He sees me and puts his head back, exhales a stream of smoke and closes his eyes. I swallow a mini-vomit and spin around to leave but then he lets out a deafening screech and I turn back to see Ray Ann in a seizure on the floor with blood spurting from her mouth. She goes rigid and then flops like a landed halibut. Blood gushes from a meaty hole where Toto's penis used to be; his penis that's now clenched between her small, gory teeth, pink foam pouring out on either side of it; and then it disappears. She bucks and flops on the floor turning purple while Toto goes pearl-eyed, twists off the toilet in a slow slide and his big head hits the tile floor with a hollow thunk. It's that absurd, my Granddaddy whispers in my ear.

I stick my head out the door and honk with all I've got.

* * * * *

A Heimlich maneuver might've saved her but with her convulsing like that and Toto's situation flooding the bathroom floor with blood, no one thought of it. By the time the paramedics figured it out they couldn't revive her. The convulsions burned up her oxygen, they said.

They removed the penis from her airway, packed it in ice to sew it back on but from what I saw they'd have as much luck sewing on a handful of ground round.

I'm waiting with her body for the coroner and man she looks awful: big head torqued all crazy, yellow hair soaked in blood; face steel-colored and staring; her whole existence reduced to something as perishable as pork. Poor Ray Ann. I feel grief like I feel grief for all lonely, fucked-up people. Lonely and fucked-up is what we had in common. Now I don't have to figure out if that's enough.

The coroner tags, bags and takes her away, and then a cop drives me home after I give my statement and tell him what I know about her next of kin. "You take care of yourself," he says, avoiding my eyes.

In my room I kick an empty bottle of Southern Comfort and it clinks into some beer bottles, toppling them like bowling pins. I've never felt so alone. I tell myself that maybe something good can happen some day. It almost happened—it kind of happened with Ray Ann—

I crawl into bed, and I'm so tired I can't keep from crying and then the strangled honking noises make me hate myself, and I can't wait to fall sleep.

