

Hymen

by Ann Bogle

The nicknames revealed the nature of our relationship but not our identities. His name was Hymen and his last name Bender. This was a conceit, because though he had had a vasectomy, he did not ravish me; he ravished me and wept for all those who ravished and did not weep. He had two sons and a daughter, and he had a proper wife whom he didn't bother to divorce and an *ipso facto* wife, the mother of his littlest boy.

My name was Anneliese Neumann. For me German was a school subject. For Hymen, who could pronounce German but not speak it, it was a poetic technique or element, shorthand for what ails the world. One day we were listening to German language tapes.

"Anneliese, wo wohnen Sie?" the tape said.

"My name is Anneliese Neumann, and I live near Stuttgart," I translated.

"Do you have a hat?"

"No, Mr. Siebler. I lost my hat in the river."

Hymen said that Anneliese Neumann was like me, because she gave more information than was necessary.

The Wedding

Anneliese digested Hymen's lie to the *ipso facto* wife that there was no other lover. Later, witnesses to the wedding at AMPs, to which Anneliese contributed earrings and cashews, must have told Patty otherwise. A bartender from a different bar, a man who looked like Kenny Rogers, performed the ceremony.

Kenny Rogers came into AMPs with another man who looked like the cousin of all the men in upstate New York. His eyes were dull as a dog's and had a predictable closeness; his nose was sharp. They sat next to Anneliese, the way men often did when she

was with Hymen, as if she were alone, and began to talk to her. Anneliese enjoyed these conversations more than Hymen did.

Hymen said, "It's Kenny Rogers."

"What are you doing with this ugly faggot?" was Kenny's question.

"I love him," Anneliese said.

"You love him, are you going to marry him?"

"I'm a schoolteacher," she said and wrapped her legs around Hymen's hips from her barstool.

"This is a secret marriage," Hymen said.

"You have to have a ceremony, or you ain't married, and if you ain't married, then I can talk to her."

"That would be up to Anneliese Neumann," Hymen said.

"Let's get married," Anneliese said.

Kenny Rogers crossed himself and said, "Do you, sir ... love, honor, fuck only her. Anneliese, he'll always be sick, take care of him, and never talk to me?"

"I do," Anneliese said.

Hymen, who often lectured Anneliese on the semantics of intercourse, laughed snidely.

"He doesn't use the word 'fuck,' " Anneliese explained.

Anneliese inserted one of her crystal drops in Hymen's left ear and kept her left earring in. For a quarter, she bought a handful of cashews and plopped them on a red napkin.

"There," she said to Hymen, Kenny, and the witnesses.

"That's the reception."

In the Closet

Hymen had made a home for himself in the empty coat closet of the man with spectacular pectoral muscles. The pec man taped up a poster in there, while Hymen was at school, and, as a joke, he stored a gallon jug of urine. He drew skull and crossbones on a piece of masking tape and stretched the tape over the cover of the jar. When Anneliese climbed in the closet with Hymen, she

worried a little that the shelf wouldn't hold, and that they'd be splashed with urine and broken glass, all for a little privacy.

"Let's go in the living room," she said. "Your roommates are sleeping. They won't mind."

"No," Hymen said. "This is where I live now."

She couldn't make love to Hymen in the closet. They lay side by side, on their backs, tracing the lines of street light that seeped through the slats in the door. During the night she woke to find him clinging to her, his face wet and contorted. She stroked his forehead and imagined leaving him there.

He said he had lost his son. She told him that it wasn't true, that he could be a better father because he had moved out.

"I promised I wouldn't leave him," Hymen said. "I will never do that to my child."

"You did," she said to herself.

Killing the Spider

When he was a teenager, Hymen, the eldest of a record-large brood in Friendsville, Pa., cried when his mother and sisters stomped the life out of an enormous spider who had ventured into the kitchen. Seeing him cry, his mother, who cried herself when she thought she was alone, called the hospital. After that, the family and all the cousins—the whole town of Friendsville—said he was crazy.

Anneliese remembered this one day, when she and Hymen were leaving the student pub to look for the car, and the sky over that nameless stretch of humps in the Appalachian chain around Vestal was cornflower blue. Hymen stooped near the parking lot and popped a cornflower blue blossom in his mouth and ate it.

"And you're the guy who cried when they killed the spider?" she said.

Hymen turned instantly sullen, and Anneliese, the driver, pet his knee from the time they got in the car until they got to the next bar on the parkway.

Telephone Calls

"I don't think you understand how what you say affects people. You think you can say whatever you want, and that it won't hurt anyone." He said this three days after Anneliese had reminded him of the spider. He had walked to the grocery store with Nicholas to make the call.

"Papa, is that our friend?" Nicholas said.

"No, Nicholas. It's Anneliese. Anneliese is Papa's friend."

"Can we see Anneliese?"

"No, we're going home to make soup. I have to go," Hymen said. "I just wanted to tell you that this upset me."

The next day Anneliese was working at home when the phone rang. She picked it up and said hello twice. The caller waited before hanging up, long enough for Anneliese to hear a child's voice in the background.

"She knows," Anneliese said the next time she talked to Hymen on the phone.

"She doesn't know," Hymen said. "You've told everyone who knows, and you haven't told her, have you?"

"You don't live there anymore. You should tell her. If you don't tell her, someone else will, and that would be worse."

"No one has to know. No one has to get hurt. Someone is already hurt because you told him. I won't do that to her."

"He asked," Anneliese said, even though Hymen had forbidden her to talk about Harry.

Instead of Quebec

One of their promissory jests was a trip, at bar time, to Quebec City. It never happened. The best they ever came up with was a trip to Carl's. Anneliese was not allowed to talk about Carl, either, since he and his roommates sold cocaine from their living room. At Carl's the women and men stayed up late and didn't answer the phone. The men answered the door.

They always got to Carl's late, and they never had to be anywhere in the morning. Hymen sat with the others in the kitchen. He had quit using cocaine, except on special occasions, which turned out to be whenever they went to Carl's. Carl played guitar, and Hymen played harmonica; sometimes they improvised.

Hymen sang, "I've got the safe sex blues."

The men were laughing, but Anneliese knew it wasn't true. They avoided safe sex.

"He doesn't have those blues," she said. They looked at each other.

"I got me a vasectomy but the plague won out. It didn't make a vas deferens in the end."

Carl's concern was with sexual fidelity. He had a talent for keeping his women apart. One would leave minutes before another arrived, and no one, not even Anneliese and Hymen, knew how he did it.

Anneliese grew bored in the kitchen. She walked the rim of the living room on old acetate couches and sang Janis Joplin songs from the depths of her diaphragm, mentally correcting the grammar. Then she let her leg drop over the side of the couch, so it was visible from the kitchen, and lay there willing Hymen to come to her. Carl noticed her leg before Hymen did. Hymen resented it when Anneliese treated him as if he were like all other men.

"Mike," Carl said. "Your woman's looking for you."

"I don't have a woman," Hymen said. "You can't have a woman."

"Well, she's looking for somebody," Carl said.

In the Beginning

Anneliese and Hymen had taken a class together, but they hadn't known at the time that she would become Anneliese, Queen Anne from the Land of a Thousand Farm Machines. He remembered her lips because he had drawn them during her oral presentation on

Dada in Zürich. She had known—because her friend had told her—that he lived with someone.

When they met again, the moon had conjoined with Jupiter.

She was angling for an escape from Harry, who lived in Manhattan and drove most weekends to see her. For some time she had been living on a transom between boredom and guilt. Harry was forty and her moral superior, and she wasn't attracted to him. Hymen, people told her, was ugly and a drunk; whereas Harry had a sport coat and a job. She had never had the feeling with Harry, as she did with Hymen, that she had picked him. It was for Hymen that she had spent high school parting the curtains.

Here was Woody Guthrie.

Hymen actually did jump freight trains, but it was only between Johnson City and Endicott. He wanted to move to Dublin and to see the cities of the world, but he stayed where he was to save the children.

Barfly

They were so busy going to bars that they hadn't seen *Barfly*, but they called Charles Bukowski on the phone. His houseboy answered at a home on Long Island. Anneliese told him that she had been a gatekeeper herself. "Put him on," she said to the houseboy. "We are here reading his poetry, and there's a part we don't get."

"Sorry, lady, but this is the wrong number," the houseboy said.

"What is the right number then?" Anneliese said.

"I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Don't be afraid," she said. "Just let us talk to him. We are poets."

Hymen was laughing at her antics, but he said, "You don't sound tall on the telephone."

"Here is my houseboy," Anneliese said and handed the phone to Hymen.

"You can't trust kids with the phone anymore. Sorry to wake you," Hymen said and hung up.

It started because the man with spectacular pectoral muscles had gone to bed early after seeing the movie and saying to Anneliese, Hymen, and the others present, including Hymen's proper wife, that Anneliese and Hymen were *Barfly*.

When the pec man had come in, Anneliese was jumping on the small trampoline that they used as a coffee table.

"Get off the tramp," the pec man said. "You're so elitist."

The pec man talked that way to everyone, repeating things he had heard in other contexts. He was in school and applying to school, finishing his undergraduate degree in deconstruction theory.

"I'll have you know," said Anneliese, a little breathless from jumping, "I have had thirteen clerical jobs."

"What does that have to do with anything?" the pec man said.

Hymen's wife, who was with them because her boyfriend had hit her, rolled her eyes. "Dumb but cute," she said confidentially.

"The living room is not a gym," Anneliese said solemnly in the tone of her mother.

The White Goddess

As good as Anneliese and Hymen together were Anneliese, Hymen, and Tom. Tom had grown up in Binghamton and had played with the children of the town's poets. He spoke in lyric riddles and knew how to whistle.

One of Hymen's ongoing projects was to find Tom a lover. He lined up one woman who wore too much make-up, and when that didn't work, told Tom that there was no reason to be ashamed if it turned out he was gay. What Tom liked was distance. He kissed Anneliese lingeringly when she and Hymen dropped him off in his

driveway. No one had ever known him to have a steady girlfriend, but his name had been linked to a woman named Claudia.

Claudia wore jumpsuits in the primary colors and large wooden earrings shaped like safari animals. Anneliese met her when Tom's sister graduated from medical school. Tom was the youngest and lived at home. His parents gave their children everything and expected only what they got.

Anneliese and Hymen went to the party for the food. Anneliese filled a plate and brought it to Hymen who was hiding in the study, reading a book about squirrel habitats. He was the eldest of his parents' twenty children. He hated parents. He hated being a parent, and he hated knowing that the world would continue its ceaseless propagation despite his vasectomy.

"Claudia isn't Tom's girlfriend," Anneliese said.

"How do you know?" Hymen said, dropping the book. She had smuggled a tiny bottle of tabasco under her plate, and he tapped it over an oyster.

"Her colors are too loud. Her hair is treated. She isn't Tom's type."

"I think she's very attractive," Hymen said categorically.

Anneliese knew Hymen's fantasy about the voluptuous hitchhiker in white lace lingerie and sheepskin vest, stranded at the side of the road by her insensitive biker boyfriend. Hymen comes along to save the day but gets them arrested on a technicality, and they're forced to spend the night together in a single jail cell. The White Goddess, he called her.

"Well, she's not exactly the White Goddess," Anneliese said.

Hymen had told her two things about his attraction to her: He had never been attracted to a woman like her before (for one thing, he liked short, fat women, and Anneliese was tall and thin), and that she was more attractive to other people than the women he had married. He had a theory that she provoked sexuality in everyone. He didn't get jealous, he told her; he was just concerned for her welfare.

Hymen stood like Donatello's David, petulant, with his stomach thrust slightly forward and his back swayed. His hair fell in thin braids over his shoulders. He had strong wrists and hands that he put on the table to win easy money arm wrestling in bars, easy because no one knew he had it in him. He also made some money under the table as an artist's model, but most of that business he had diverted to the pec man, Tim. Ten years ago, he told her, men pestered him like flies. This she could imagine because she had seen a photo of him that was so striking, she had asked him who it was. "That's me in my eyeliner days," he told her. It was his knees that got her. They were square as stone wedges, and she couldn't look at them without wanting to span them with the arc of her fingers.

Harry

If it were true that Harry had wasted his time loving her, it was also true that he hadn't saved time before he met her, so it was relative. Everything was relative. Everything was a choice. Every choice was a thing that stood between her and the door to her apartment. She'd go out, she'd come in, carefully avoiding the choice in her living room, a day, a week, a year, not choosing, carefully avoiding the decision and walking around the thing. The thing had a smell to it, like a body, and she thought of her past friends, who lived far away, how they didn't have this thing to deal with; they had other things but not this thing, which was her thing, and she didn't want it, so she called them, and as time went on, the living room smelled bad.

Habits

It took as much coffee to wake up the system as it took beer to let it rest. There was the additional bombardment of cigarettes. Hymen smoked Camels or he broke the filters off hers. At a certain time of night, nothing was strong enough. Two

cigarettes at once. On Wednesdays they smoked cigars at Swat Sullivan's Hotel. Old men went there, including George, who was hired to heckle at the readings. What George said from the sidelines mattered more than what the poets said in their wildest moments. Perhaps it was because the poets weren't getting paid. George got five bucks. He agreed to keep it secret, but Anneliese knew.

"What are you doing with that ugly devil?" was George's question.

"I love him," Anneliese said.

"Love," George growled. "You need a man to support you, buy you flowers."

"He buys me flowers," she said. "And cigars." She was smoking a cigar at that moment, inhaling, holding it between her fingers like a fat cigarette.

"Jezebel," he said.

She had to look that up at home. George knew his stuff. He was worth every penny. He knew "The Face on the Barroom Floor" by heart.

About Face

From an angle a face, that face, the face, his face, the first and final face, the face to wake to, the face to push against her face, their eyes open, connected like the ramp to the plane. Three days under the stars, a poster on the ceiling really, of the *Creation of Man*.

One of his ex-girlfriends had left them the keys. They fed the dalmatian, got up to eat and pee. There was plum betty in the fridge. Anneliese was surprised. His ex-girlfriend didn't seem the type to make or eat plum betty. It was a waterbed. There were porn videos, and lingerie dangled from every doorknob. His ex-girlfriend was a counselor at the abortion clinic. She fielded tips from Florida when the clinic was about to be bombed and stationed troops of rednecks at the door.

Anneliese looked forward to going to her apartment because she could finish reading articles in *Cosmopolitan*. Women in *Cosmopolitan* had more than one lover. They knew what they wanted and how to be wanted. They thought wanting was a good thing.

She told Hymen, "I don't know why I spend so much time trying to figure these things out on my own, when it's all written down here."

He laughed in a gentle way that pulled her up to their dance floor. It was important for them to see themselves as others saw them: artists or famous people. Their genitals were so swollen they were one person. It was Easter weekend. Good Friday to the Resurrection.

The End

It was difficult to trace the infection when it happened, but she felt responsible. She called all three men and told them one story. She read them the brochure: "Chlamydia is not a flower. It is a dangerous sexually transmitted disease." Two of them were negative. Hymen didn't test. She figured that one of them would have gotten it from her had he at that point, that weekend, been with her, and the other would have gotten it had she had it then, that weekend, etc. Eventually she realized that it was not from her; it was from Hymen.

He denied it. They fought, not about spreading disease, but about lying. He had not been jealous about the broker, he said, but mad that he would have to tell Patty something. They would need to take the cure. Anneliese hadn't known that he had been with Patty. Hymen told Patty that it came from wearing tight pants, and Patty believed him. That was one thing. Then the pec man told her that he had heard banging in Hymen's closet. Hymen told Anneliese that his ex-wife had been crying, and later, that she had used a vibrator. These were sordid details, and Anneliese had to sift through them, again and again, so that she could say, at the end,

that he still was lying, that there was medical proof of it and that he had been unkind to expect honesty from her without being honest himself.

Lonely Nights

Some nights Hymen climbed out of the closet to fulfill his fatherly obligations, and Anneliese prowled her apartment, a sphinx shut out of Egypt.

Her roommate's wild days were behind her. Angelica had found a mate, and she had spent the last year trying to convince him of this fact. Geraldo was hard to convince. He had not put his past behind him. The phrase they used was "burning bridges." Angelica would say of Hymen, "He certainly doesn't burn any bridges," and Anneliese would say of Geraldo, "His bridges are all unburned."

One night Geraldo was out reinforcing the foundations; his ex-girlfriend was back after a year in Paris. Angelica must have been spraying perfume. She had been in the bathroom for more than an hour.

"Do you want to go out?" she said. Steam swirled above their heads and into the bedrooms like a question.

They were in their second year in the same apartment and had never been out together; that's how important men were. They had heard the sorry halves of each other's telephone conversations, had heard each other howl from the bedroom—crying or trying to come—but they had not gone out together, not even for coffee.

"Okay," Anneliese said. "But what will I wear?"

"Black, don't you think?"

Anneliese assessed her black stuff. Garter belt. Heels. Angelica wore size one. Nothing of hers would fit Anneliese, and nothing in Anneliese's closet remotely resembled what Angelica was wearing. Angelica's clothes were frilly.

She put on a slip, a skirt, a vest, and the heels. She observed herself from every angle to be sure she knew which parts were detracting. It was full battle dress. Drag, she called it.

Hymen would feel he had missed something. She was all dressed up with no one to kill.

Anneliese hadn't gone to a disco since she was fifteen, when it had seemed very important. They attracted a fair amount of attention. Angelica seemed to know a lot of people in the bar; men approached from right and left to ask where she had been hiding herself.

"Well, you know," Angelica said. "Busy doing things."

Angelica introduced Anneliese to the taller men, including a lawyer from a Yankees family. Two generations of his family had been on the team. His own career ended when his back caved in.

"What do you do when you're not here?" he asked her.

"I teach," Anneliese said. It was a variation of her standby. He wouldn't want to picture the children.

"What I remember best about school is Henry James," he said. "I'm inspired by Henry James."

"Oh?" she said undramatically, seeing him suddenly as Alice James, drained of his athleticism.

"The beautiful sweeps of time," he sighed, nudging her with his soft shoulder. "I have a favorite leather armchair where I read. I light a fire. You can't resist it."

"You just don't go to the right places," she said. "I know people who read Henry James for a living." That was a brush off, she thought, but he still seemed interested. He asked her what she was drinking.

For one half-second she was alone. Then Angelica came back from the rest room, trailing a piece of toilet tissue.

"It's sick in there," she said, looking around. "Wall-to-wall people. Oh, my God," she said in a whisper. "Don't turn around, see this guy, coming up behind you. Say something in German."

Anneliese turned around. "*Guten Tag, Herr Siebler. Wie geht es Ihnen?*" It was the only name that came to her.

"*Hallo, meine Freundin. Wie geht es mit dir?*" His "dir" undid her. She considered telling him she was visiting from Switzerland, but his German was faster than hers. He was a

commodities broker. His parents lived in Mexico. Nazis, she thought.

“Bulgarian,” he told her.

The lawyer reappeared with the drinks but stopped to talk to someone else when he saw the broker.

“You want him?” the broker said, nodding at the lawyer.

“*Nein*,” Anneliese said. “He's not my century.”

The broker raised his eyebrow provocatively. Everything about him was provocative. She had no idea what she was doing in this place, but she felt happy. No one could touch her, and no one knew her name.

“What are you drinking?” he said.

“That reminds me of the old one,” she said. “The man would say, ‘What are you thinking?’ ”

1990

