

Tuning Pegs

by Brendan McKennedy

Maybelle found a job as a delivery driver for a pizza parlor called the New York Pie Company, though she had hoped to not work in food service. When she saw the hand-lettered note in the NYPC window — "HIRING 2 DRIVERS" — she parked in the gravel lot and sat for awhile, smoking and waiting for her standards to resettle. Behind her, the university stadium crackedled and thrummed with a drum corps practice. On the sign across the front of the store, a speckled yellow circle loomed behind the word "PIE."

Inside, she removed the note from the plate glass and brought it to the counter, as she had seen done at the beginnings of movies in which a new job set interesting events in motion. A young woman standing at the oven looked over and said, "Excuse me. What are you doing? Put that back, please."

"I'd like to apply for the driver's position."

"That's fine for you, but what about the next guy? How will he know?"

Maybelle returned the sign to the window. The young woman, whose name-tag read "CEZA," shouted "Hey Dad!" and her father emerged from the back of the kitchen. Flour clouded his clothing, and he wore a comb-like mustache and wire-rim glasses. Ceza told him that Maybelle wanted the job. He offered May his hand to shake and introduced himself as Khaled. "I'm the proprietor around here. You got a T.N. driver's license?"

"Not yet. I've got a Georgia license."

"Have you got reliable transportation? You have to have your own car. Some people don't realize this."

"I have a Volvo," said Maybelle.

"You got kids?"

Ceza said, "Dad, you're not allowed to ask her that. She could sue you for that."

Khaled waited for an answer.

"I've got two kids," said Maybelle. "But my parents watch them. They're retired."

"What hours are you available?"

"Whatever you need."

"You'll work Christmas Day?"

"I'm not religious," said Maybelle.

Ceza asked how May's driving record looked, and Maybelle admitted she had been at fault in a traffic accident six years ago.

"Six years ago is ancient history," said Khaled. He handed Maybelle a light blue job application, and she filled it out on the counter. Khaled said, "You know what six years ago was? My daughter was starting high school. She was talking about Vanderbilt. She wanted to be a veterinarian." He brushed flour from the face of his wristwatch, which he wore high on his forearm. "What can you do? Ask the world to stop turning? Try that out."

"God, give it a rest," said Ceza.

Khaled told Maybelle that she had one week to get a Tennessee license. "Let me find you a uniform, and you can take a delivery."

Maybelle said, "You want me to start today?"

"You're either ready, or you're not."

Maybelle delivered her first pizza to a campus dormitory across the street. Two boys played checkers at a concrete picnic table. One hunched over the pieces, pinching his goatee. The other lay on his side the length of the bench, in the manner of a Matisse nude. When he saw Maybelle approach, he swung his sandaled feet to the ground and said, "Yeah. That's us."

May slid the pizza from the hot bag and into the boy's hands. She asked who was winning. "No one yet, but he's a conference champion. So losing is more or less a *fait accompli*. You accept that when you sit down with him. I'm just testing the theory that eventually, everyone makes a mistake that derails their whole strategy."

"I didn't realize that people even played checkers anymore," said Maybelle. "I thought everyone was just playing video games. It's kind of comforting."

The champion said, "If you don't mind me saying, one downfall of your generation is this preoccupation with comfort." He dug in his back pocket. "What do we owe you?"

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Jeremy called her cell phone that night, as Maybelle lay in bed with her eyes closed, listening to the television — a police show in which all of the detectives spoke in perpetual indignation. *How long did you think you could string us along, Bobby? Did you think we wouldn't find out? Do you take us for fools?*

Jeremy said he might be moving to India. In fact, it was pretty much a done deal. He'd leave in a month, give or take. The vacuum cleaner manufacturer Jeremy worked for was opening a call center in New Delhi, and they wanted him to helm recruiting. He breathed heavily, as though he were doing push-ups as he talked. "It actually came up last month, but I wasn't going to move you and the kids halfway around the world."

"No," said Maybelle. She squinted at the ceiling and waited with curiosity for some feeling to hit her.

"So I've been scrambling all this week to get my ducks in a row."

"Yeah," said Maybelle. Jeremy asked whether she had found a job yet. "No," she said.

"I know what you're thinking," said Jeremy.

"What am I thinking?"

"The kids," he said. "I know, I do. But I've thought about it. And I think that, when all is said and done, it will be good for them."

"I admit, I wonder how you've arrived at that conclusion."

"Well, we teach them by example, and what do they learn? Do they learn to waffle around? Or to meet opportunities head-on? Whatever the short-term may be, you have to admit it's ultimately better for them to see their parents succeed."

After they hung up, Maybelle sat up in bed, feeling cheated in heat-like waves. On the television, a woman wearing a cap pitched softballs at storm windows to demonstrate the strength of the glass. The balls bounced and rolled abashedly away. The woman shook her head at the camera, her face troubled, as though this experience

had damaged her faith in the laws that govern matter and energy.

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When Arnett asked Maybelle whether she had found a job, without even considering she told him she had not. Arnett said, "I want to tell you something, and I want you to try to take this to heart. I feel like I should have expressed this to you long, long ago."

"All right," said Maybelle.

"The world," said Arnett, "can be yours for the taking. But not until you want it." He reached into the air above his head with a gesture meant to suggest the picking of fruit from a tree. Then he held the invisible fruit out toward Maybelle. "You have only to reach out and take it. No one can take it for you. Do you understand?"

"I understand," May said, because she knew it was the only response he would accept. "Thanks Dad." But Arnett held his pose, offering her the invisible fruit until Maybelle had no choice but to take it from him.

Sallie and Arnett had earned a bundle from a song they wrote together in 1970 called "The Heart You Break (Might Be Your Own)," which George Hamilton IV had taken to Number 6 on the Country charts. None of their other songs had charted, but in 1981 they wrote the jingle for a TV commercial that ran on network for more than six years. When Maybelle saw Sanger Brand Charcoal Briquettes in the supermarket, she always heard in her head Arnett's leathery growl: *Don't rein your taste buds / on the range. / C'mon, take the bull / by the horns.*

Now Arnett was teaching May's kids how to play guitar. When Ethan asked him for lessons, Arnett said, "I thought your Mama was teaching you to play."

"She's too impatient," said Ethan. "She always grabs the guitar from you and goes, 'That's it — lesson's over.'"

As Maybelle helped her mother load the dishwasher one evening, Sallie said to her, "Honey, I just hope you know that we love you, no matter what," and Maybelle understood that her life, her decisions, how it all had turned out, had truly disappointed them.

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When May arrived at the New York Pie Company for her second day of work, Khaled stood at the counter arguing with a middle aged woman who wore a pink jogging suit and dangly diamond earrings. Her face had that strange preserved quality Maybelle saw in many aging Boomer women — like an old toy never removed from its packaging. Khaled explained that the coupon she held had come from Sir Pizza, and could not be redeemed here.

"Tell me this," said the woman. "Do you or do you not sell a large Luau pizza?"

"Lady, please for just a moment stop and look around you."

In the bathroom, Maybelle changed into her green polyester polo shirt. She tied her hair into a ponytail and put on a khaki cap with the NYPC logo. She tried to remember when was the last time she'd gotten her hair done. Not cut, which she periodically did herself, but made to look nice. She chewed on the sides of her tongue and studied her face in the soap-spattered mirror. The tiny lines gave her cheeks, she thought, the texture of a vinyl car interior. Other women of her age and intelligence were completing doctoral degrees.

In the kitchen, Ceza worked on a crossword puzzle while Khaled leaned his elbows on the counter and stared out the front windows. "Ring, phone, ring," he said. "Everyone: Think pizza."

Maybelle told Khaled that when she first pulled up to the restaurant yesterday, she thought he sold pies. "Like *pie*-pies," she said. "Like apple or rhubarb."

"Yeah, I know, I know. It's haunted me for three years, that single error in judgment. And don't think people didn't warn me."

"I warned him," said Ceza.

"But what do you do? You change the name, customers lose confidence in the product, loyalty goes out the window. Last year I pay this guy to put a picture of a pizza on the sign. Then I hear from my wife that it looks nothing like a pizza, but more like the moon. 'Khaled, why's the moon rising up there?'"

At last an order came in, for a delivery out in the country, and Maybelle felt relieved to get outdoors, to climb into her car and drive awhile. A thunderhead crouched in the western sky, and the high trees rustled. May listened to a Ramones cassette and smoked two cigarettes. At a mailbox hand-painted with the house number of her delivery, she turned onto a rutted dirt path. The chewed-up shade of the forest canopy pattered across her windshield, and the shocks of her car hee-hawed like a donkey.

She came to clearing at the center of which stood a full-sized sailboat made of wide wooden planks. The vessel was thirty or thirty-five feet long — overturned, cradled in a scaffolding of PVC pipes. The keel arched above the scene with a grace that suggested a forgotten art. A man Arnett's age sitting in the shade beneath the deck rose as Maybelle approached. He wore a trucker's cap and carried a can of beer in a yellow foam insulator. His shirtless chest reminded May of an old tree. He pulled crumpled cash from the pocket of his blue jeans.

Maybelle said, "Man, I wish I knew how to build a boat."

"Ain't nobody born knowing it," he said. When May asked where he would embark from, he said, "Oh no, I ain't sailing this year. I'm just shoring up the hull for the winter, to have a dry place to sleep."

In her car, May rolled down the back seat windows and took an indirect path to the store. The air expanded and coursed through the Volvo as though her car were a huge, living lung.

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The licensing office of the Tennessee Department of Safety was a squalid brown hut across the highway from a Nashville International Airport runway. Maybelle took a number and toed the mulch near the entrance with the other smokers, who gazed longingly at the planes that lifted off and disappeared into the haze. She had used the name Alamance on her license application, because technically she was still married. But standing alone in the sun, making eye contact with whoever she pleased, she *felt* single, she decided. It was this feeling that she needed to lose weight, to quit smoking, to have her teeth whitened — balanced with the pleasing realization that, as long as she lived, she would never have to listen to another fucking Peter Gabriel album.

Then Julia called the cell phone to report that she and Ethan had locked themselves in the basement and could not escape. The call sounded as though it were routed through another century. "What are you doing in the basement?" said Maybelle.

"We're looking for your old guitars," said Julia. Arnett and Sallie had bought Maybelle and her sister Jane folk guitars for Christmas in 1982, hoping to form a family act to tour the summer folk festival circuit. This had never panned out, but May's children had always loved to bang on the rusted strings.

Arnett and Sallie were golfing down in Franklin and wouldn't return

until evening, but Maybelle couldn't get out of line now. Julia said, "It's stuffy down here. I think we could suffocate."

"Oh Julia. Open the windows."

"Ethan's trying. We can't reach them. They're way up there."

"Listen, you can't suffocate down there. If you start to feel worried, just shut your eyes and imagine a large gymnasium."

The newly minted licenses dropped like gum-balls from the laminating machine in batches of four. The clerk called out, "Jackson! Nguyen! Alamance! Ballantine!" Maybelle didn't recognize her photo, and then realized she was looking at a picture of the woman standing beside her. It turned out the photographer had swapped their pictures in the computer, so both women had to wait for the clerks to void the botched records, and then sit again in front of the blue sheet. Ballantine shuffled her soles and muttered over and over, "This is *unacceptable*."

With the correct face, Maybelle hurried down Highway 41 toward home. September bluster lunged at the sides of her car. At a red light in Lavergne, she examined her photo. It made her look like a determined, possibly misinformed woman, her eyebrows raised unevenly, the line of her mouth pin-straight, firm. She saw that her first name had somehow been truncated to Maybe. "Oh for Christ's sake," she said.

She found Julia sleeping on the basement floor. Ethan sat on a rolled-up rug, playing Maybelle's guitar with the backs of his fingers. When she opened the door he glanced up the stairs at her with empty eyes, as if she were a memory that had just occurred to him. Maybelle descended and sat down beside him on the waffled underside of the rug. The air was stiff as plywood. Ethan said, "One of your strings broke."

"Yeah, they all need to be replaced," said Maybelle. "They're ancient."

They contemplated Julia, stretched out before them. In the amber light that filtered down from the kitchen, she seemed preserved. "She can be such a pain sometimes," said Ethan, with regret.

Maybelle knelt on the concrete floor beside her and touched her shoulder. Julia sat up at the waist, her eyes confused. Drowsily, she said, "Oh. I dreamed you already came home. You opened the door and I couldn't get up the stairs. My legs were turned to licorice."

Ethan asked Maybelle if she had found a job. She sat back down beside him. "Yeah, kind of," she said. "It looks like I'm delivering pizza. I realize it's pretty shitty, to have a mom that delivers pizza."

Julia averted her eyes, and seemed tempted to say something, but did not. Ethan shrugged, and picked at the guitar strings.

"Here, let me see it," Maybelle said, and reached across Ethan to the head of the guitar. "Strum," she said. He plunked a cockeyed G chord. "No, don't fret it," she said. "Just strum." Ethan dragged his thumb down the open strings. Maybelle twisted the tuning pegs one at a time, and listened for each wavering note to find its place.

