

Borden, Dream on Lord of the Pies.

by Dennis Hiatt

Borden woke to such complete silence that, for three heart beats, he allowed himself to believe his oldest dream had come true: that he was a hermit living high up near the crest of a mountain, surrounded by pure, blue air and clean, bright light, in a cabin so remote that it needed no curtains.

Borden lived in a studio apartment in the back of a Victorian house, on a slow street. At his own expense, he'd installed carpets so thick; no footfall could ever be heard. Heavy, black drapes from an oriental theater covered the windows, doors and walls. In the room itself, were a mattress, an ashtray, a lamp, and his pre-Freudian books on philosophy.

Borden was thirty-four and frugal of mind and purse. He had; of course, a dresser and clothes (in the kitchen and closet respectively), and the bathroom sported a black-framed picture of Nietzsche. While sitting on his morning toilet, Borden observed Nietzsche's face, but as he shaved for work, Borden let his eyes look anew at his own face. This had been Borden's habit since he was a young man in college and new to the marriage bed of philosophy. Borden's love affair with thought (so much better than the drunk, lonesome and ugly women that had hunted his manhood when he wore a younger man's shoes) was marred by but one thing. He looked like Wittgenstein. Age, however, seemed to be lessening that burden. Most mornings, Borden could see in his mirror the spring of decay that had blossomed to full, ripe summer in his parents' faces. In the bags under his eyes, Borden saw death's teasing, coy as a girl in long, white gloves and an Easter dress: I am here, you pretty, pretty boy, and we will be together...someday. Death was a woman and, Borden knew, a bitch. But at least death, like the

purest of things, was pre-Freudian.

Standing on his slick, wooden doorstep, Borden breathed deep the cool, wet air of September and lit his first cigarette of the long, long day. He enjoyed the sting of menthol and tobacco as he enjoyed all passing vanities: true joy for the purity of the moment. Smoking Borden loved because it was a Faustian bargain with death: control of pleasure for the moment, traded for the abyss. Borden walked the four blocks to Harry's Ritz Cafe with tread measured to finish his cigarette as he opened the cafe door.

The lights of the cafe were on, and Harry was by the coffee maker, smoking one of his vexing clove cigarettes. Borden, of course, said nothing to Harry, and Harry, having been trained to respect Borden's silent nature, spoke not.

Coffee in hand, a slim menthol cigarette dangling from his lip, Borden pre-heated his ovens and pondered what he wished to bake this rosy September morning. Today, Borden's inner nature called for pies. Borden mixed flour, shortening, sugar, butter, vanilla, and yes, some stray cigarette ashes with water, and rolled the dough out. He folded and rolled, rolled and folded and, while Borden considered how the leitmotif of Ibsen's play, AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE, showed an intellectual dependence on Kierkegaard, he set the smallest part of his mind to what rich fillings of fruit or sweets he might co-join with his airy crust.

Borden's one joke was that his pastries were beyond good and evil. Pies, like lesser people, put a loving face to the world. Unlike people, however, the secret heart of his pies held nectar. Not that Borden thought ill of humanity in the specific. Harry, the owner, wasn't a bad sort. Harry had baked six years in the navy and taught Borden the trade. Admirably, Harry suffered little to invade his peace. As best as Borden could discern while avoiding his boss, Harry favored gentle worry to sanguine turbulence. But Harry's beauty as a boss was his downfall as a lover. Forty-six, bearish in size and soulful-eyed, Harry favored large-breasted women. Even if their tongue blazed like a stove on high. Unfortunately for Harry and all concerned, Amber, Harry's latest trounced-tongued love,

worked at the cafe.

Stewart and Emily, two of the six fair-of-face, skin and form clones who staffed the café, knocked on the glass door, and Borden let them in. They chirped their thanks and, as they went about the business of breathing life into Harry's Ritz Cafe, they continued to chatter softly, pleased with themselves and the good world around them and (as far as Borden could tell while ignoring the mindless little field mice) their happy future both after work and all of the next long, sweet week.

Borden was getting his second cup of coffee when tiny, redheaded La Donna bopped in and locked the door behind her. La Donna's strange, off-center, shark-fin hairdo bobbed to her Walkman. She was carrying a paper sack filled with job applications. Borden leered at the petite lesbian so as to stifle her chatter before it took off like cancer. La Donna smiled oh so knowingly. Last week, as Borden was leaving, he had noticed La Donna sacking the job applications. He'd raised an eyebrow, and La Donna, who once voiced the opinion that Amber was a Pig From Hell, had smiled and said, "It won't be long now."

"Indeed?" Borden had uttered against his better judgement.

"Yeah," La Donna purred, "Harry bought Amber a sweat-shirt that says, 'I wish they were brains.'"

"I see." Borden was halfway home before he realized that "they" meant Amber's vast breasts.

The next day, again against his better judgement, Borden casually inquired, "Did Harry request that you hire the next employee?"

La Donna chortled in her most annoying way, "Dream on, Lord of the pies."

Today, Borden put her petty sarcasm behind him and, filling her coffee cup, made a small joke, "Has Amber passed from this vale of coffee?"

La Donna nodded, her odd, off-center shark-fin red hair dipping, Borden thought, like a vulture sampling a morsel. She smiled cute and said, "Fiend."

Borden knew that La Donna did not mean fiend, as in devil, demon,

a diabolically cruel person, or addicted to something, as in dope fiend. Borden, on the other hand, did not know what she did mean. Fiend and Neef were the two sounds La Donna's gerbil, Germutlich, made. La Donna had taken these sounds as her own and used them...when she felt the calling. La Donna was not, however, stupid. She was, in fact, often brilliant in an animalistic fashion. Borden could chuckle even when he suffered the colorful fangs of her rude, if lesser wit, because he knew: the furrier gets the skins of more foxes than jackasses.

Borden refilled his coffee cup and asked La Donna softly, as if they were in collusion, "Does Harry wish you to replace Amber?"

"He will." She smiled cute again.

Borden's grip tightened on the cup. He didn't like this in the least. La Donna's place was not at the helm of the ship. Borden looked at La Donna with hooded eyes and murmured with calm disdain, "There are more tears for answered prayers than unanswered ones." "In the land of the bakers, the girl with one contact lens is queen." La Donna winked and swayed her small, round hips to a table half hidden by the display counter.

Harry, a clove cigarette dangling at a jaunty angle, wandered out from the back and said to one of the doll-like children behind the counter, "Hey Stewart, have you seen the job applications?"

"No sir," the boy replied with good cheer.

From where he stood at the baking counter, Borden saw La Donna smirk. Knowing Harry could not see La Donna from where he stood near the cash register, Borden laughed a laugh that was a malediction and said, "La Donna took them home with her, boss."

"That bitch," Harry snarled, sorely perplexed.

"Am not!" La Donna vouchsafed with hurt affront, which was in accordance with her usual lesbian humor.

Harry sighed deeply and went back to his office. When Harry emerged, coffee cup in hand, and joined La Donna at her table, inscrutable Borden was all sly eyes. As Harry and La Donna talked, La Donna read and either tore up, or placed in a pile, the job applications she was reviewing. Harry's demeanor was that of a

man negotiating from a position of weakness, but still determined to maintain a show of strength. Except for one theatrically shrill, "Fiend!" by La Donna, Borden heard no more than murmurs. At the end of the conversation, Harry made a dignified retreat to his office. Whatever had passed between them, Borden knew that the next employee would be hired at La Donna's bidding and would be, without a doubt, a sister of Lesbos. This 'niaiserie' must be stopped, Borden thought, using the French word for folly, stupidity, and silliness. 'Niaiserie' was one of Nietzsche's most loved French words.

Borden would be the first to admit that his options in thwarting La Donna were very limited. He had removed himself early on from the petty drama and kindergarten strife of socializing with his employer and co-workers. To bask and soar with his thoughts was all Borden wished and, to that end, he worked for small money and wore his intellect like a pincushion. La Donna, however—trendy, glib, lesbian La Donna—was not only unthwarted by Borden's sly, verbal knife work, but also seemed to like him all the more for it. Still, there must be something he could do. Harry could not be counted on to control La Donna. La Donna, fey lesbian that she was would hire one of her own ilk. One lesbian would lead to a plague of lesbians, and this plague would surely drive Borden from his rightful place in Harry's Ritz Cafe. To stop this plague of pushy women, Borden felt he must smother, in her infant bed of employment, the first of the hard, tattooed women who reeked of fat and Lesbos vice. The first link in the chain was the weakest. How might this be accomplished? It could not be so subtle as the time Borden mocked La Donna on her twentieth birthday. He had promised La Donna a pastry in her honor. Borden had, with his great skill, made a maraschino-cherry pie with a cinnamon crust—shallow, overly sweet and unnatural. La Donna loved it. Harry put it on the menu. And the fair-of-face-and-form clone children brought their less perfect doll-chums in to taste the new nectar and coo with pride and delight over Borden's genius. Borden hated those sickening, foolish coos. Borden's pride was to hide his greatness from lesser eyes. Here, he

had been judged by mice and awarded a jester's crown. What dark night for his soul would lurk in a café filled to the cracks with fat, fey, mocking lesbians? Borden could never remake the world to its pre-Freudian purity, but he could and would save his own small place of peace in Harry's Ritz Cafe.

Morning passed, and Borden baked. On several occasions, Harry wandered from his office in the hidden rear of the café and fussed around the Coke machine. La Donna who, Borden soon came to realize, was not on shift, made several calls from the pay phone that was in the back by the restrooms. The fact that she did not use the phone in Harry's office leant a dark frame to Borden's already dim picture of the fate that awaited the cafe.

As the clock's long hand tapped the hour of ten, a slim young woman of stunning, melancholy beauty stepped into the cafe and left, in her hesitant walk to the counter, a bevy of heads bobbing like row boats sucked into the track of a super tanker. The girl was hard in her slimness. Her black, silk blouse and overly tight, pegged, black jeans showed off the rock of her body as if it proclaimed her soul to be an ice pick. Yet, the girl's face conveyed a purity of melancholy that she wore like a cloak of sensual gauze over full, aesthetically carnal lips, broad cheek bones as delicate as autumn leaves, a high, clean forehead and gray eyes that drew Borden's attention so far away from his thoughts and his pies that, for the first time in his employment, he burnt himself on the oven.

Her hair was dark, dark brown and the skull under it was small and smooth. Borden blew air on his burnt hand as the girl spoke to Stewart who waved to La Donna. La Donna rose gracefully from her table and bop-glided to the girl. The women shook hands and retired to La Donna's table. Borden did what needed to be done before he went behind the counter to get ice for his burn. He could not simply eavesdrop, so he grabbed a pen and yellow, lined paper and, by taking an inventory of deserts, stationed himself where he could see the girl quite clearly, if not hear her words.

As she spoke with La Donna, the girl's job-interview smile lit her still face like a dim candle in a vast cave. Seeing the girl's face straight

on, Borden was struck by its stillness. It was as if she was a deep pond whose cool water was colored by the blue of melancholy. And across that deep water, smiles, pain, flirts, anger and lust, could only but ripple like silver fish unseen from the shore.

As Borden recorded three rice puddings, the girl's face broke its stillness like a flock of small birds startled by a cat and then, as birds rearrange themselves into flying formation, she truly smiled and pulled her black, silk blouse down to reveal her right shoulder. After making three quick but sly steps, Borden could see what the girl was showing La Donna. From her shoulder to her neck, and down to her small, hard, left breast, was a tattoo—two overlapping spider webs, a black widow, and three small women caught in the webs.

Borden expelled his breath as if he'd been gut shot. His hands trembled, and he retraced his steps to the bright glass case filled with his fluffy, rich wares. Borden was as shaken as if his framed picture of Nietzsche had dropped and shattered and, in the ruin of glass and black wood, became, as if in a nightmare, Freud. From the castle keep of his baking enclosure, Borden watched La Donna guide the girl behind the counter and through the doors that lead past the dishwasher to Harry's office. Petite La Donna was graceful, far more graceful than the hard girl. But there was something ferret-like about the way the girl moved that suggested she would slip through a man's hands like an otter drenched in olive oil. Borden thrust his long fingers into a bin of flour. He had things to bake, and bake he would.

The girl emerged from the back and pushed a few silver coins to Stewart who smiled, pushed them back and poured her a cup of coffee. The girl pocketed the coins with a nod, added real cream and much sugar to her coffee, and then returned to the table she'd shared with La Donna.

Borden turned his back to the girl. With flour-encrusted hands, he flipped through his recipe cards. Blueberry tarts leapt out at him. Borden decided to make tarts—and make them as an art form. Borden's mind framed an image—flaky, sweet tart, and blue. A

melancholy tart. Borden turned around. As he sifted flour, he hooded his eyes and examined the girl again. This time, from over the rim of her coffee cup, the girl stared back as if she were a lean spider noticing a fat fly. Then she removed the cup from her open mouth and, with a smirk of her ripe, dark-red lips, looked away from Borden. Watching her eyes drift over the restaurant, it was, he thought, as if the girl had seen a fool trapped in the web of his foolishness. Spiders kill for need, and this lesbian girl might suck a woman's heart dry for recreation, but she would no more dine on a man's soul than a spider would feast on an orchid. Yet Borden did not feel safe. Something about the girl had invaded Borden's solitude. A plague of dykes mattered not. This spider-girl had driven the world of thought from Borden's mind. Borden glanced slyly at the girl. She held the thick, white coffee cup to her soft, red lips, and let it linger there, as if she were kissing the open petals of some cool, white flower. Borden blushed and turned back to his baking.

Near the heat of the ovens, the afternoon passed slowly. Borden's Melancholy Tarts turned out good, but nowhere near great. Koo, the spider girl, sampled one hot from the oven and told Borden that it was "Rad". Rad, Borden assumed from Koo's quick smile, was an honorific. Koo, Borden now saw, was as illiterate as a cockroach and, very probably, as brainless as a waterfall. Still, he could not stop watching her. Whether she was bussing tables across the room or hidden in the back, washing dishes, he felt Koo's presence. It was as if, after a lifetime of living alone, Borden had awoken to hear another person flushing his toilet or making a late dinner in his kitchen. When he'd handed her the tart, he'd caught a faint whiff of her underarms—pungent, earthy and womanly. Borden could not stop himself from thinking about how wild and raw a girl this Koo must be. It was as if she lived, if only in her heart, in some far land of dark forests and damp meadows. This land was a land Borden could see and evaluate from his sunlit mountaintop but never brave, because of the beasts that lurked in the shadows to dine on the flesh and bones of unwary travelers.

La Donna bopped by and helped herself to a tart. Borden raised one questioning eyebrow. La Donna nibbled the blue tart with her small teeth and said to Borden, "Neef!"

Borden lowered his eyebrow and picked up his slim, menthol cigarette. "Neef-T?"

"Call them 'Blue Koo's', and watch Harry put them on the menu."

La Donna smiled a mystery smile.

Borden smiled back unpleasantly. "No, they are not of sufficient quality."

La Donna chortled to herself. "Uh-huh. But flamingo legs turns on every light in your house. Doesn't she?"

Borden's unpleasant smile ripened under his now hooded eyes. "We are lacking canons of decidability on that issue. Are we not?"

"Scared of you," La Donna laughed and patted Borden's flour-soft hand, saying, "Make Koo a care package. She's got a husband, and they're broke."

Borden finished his cigarette in the men's rest room. Standing before the urinal, he noticed how long, smooth and white it was. Borden buttoned his pants and, reaching out, ran one finger down the cool porcelain. If he were God, he'd bake women out of this. Borden smiled to himself, thinking of the beautiful women that would populate the world. The smile died, frozen on his face as a new image came unbidden to his mind: Koo nude, lying on her back...and men standing in line using her arched, spread thighs as a urinal. Borden left without washing his hands.

Borden filled a large paper sack with food. He arranged bread, meat, fruit, pastries and a pot of jam, so that the light fluffy items would not be crunched by the heavier ones. His hand shook as he nestled the small jar of raspberry jam next to a fresh loaf of his best bread. Stewart, who was looking over his shoulder, asked with gentle concern, "Do you have a hangover Borden?" Borden shook his head but spoke not, nor even acknowledged Stewart's existence. At 2 p.m., the shift changed. Stewart and Emily were replaced by Nancy and Timothy. It was as if, to Borden's eye, there was no change at all. Borden hoped Koo would leave when the shift

changed because, from two on, he made puddings, fudge and like items. This was the time he reserved for his deepest thinking. Koo did not leave.

Goethe had said, "He who is firm in will molds the world to himself." Borden realized his will had faltered. It had faltered because he was of two minds about the girl. On the left hand, judged by her tattoo and hardness, she seemed foul, strange and unnatural—a beast of a girl that was not to be touched, tasted or handled. On the right hand, judged by her sad smile woven of hope and sunbeams, she was, as Burke had said of philosophy, "Queen of arts, daughter of heaven." Koo was as ignorant as a viper, but as Nietzsche stated, "When a woman has scholarly inclinations, there is usually something wrong with her sexually." Borden, considering the reverse of this, burnt himself on a pot of fudge. Wrapping ice in a cloth to cool his burn, Borden asked La Donna, "Is the new lesbian working out?"

"Neef?" La Donna replied, smiling. Her weird hairdo be-bopped to the stereo. "Is Koo working out?" Borden pressed the ice to the burn and shivered.

"Koo's doing dandy, but she's not special ... like me," La Donna said as they both watched Koo bus tables.

"That's an odd tattoo for ... someone who's not special." Borden fired up a menthol cigarette. "What do you make of it?"

La Donna shrugged. "The important thing is that she's real. Like you an' me."

Holding the ice to his latest burn, Borden returned to his baking area. La Donna had given him a gem of truth, though she did not know it. Borden could be touched in such a way as to drag him back to earth. And for what? Love? Not with Koo. He could see his choice. He could live in the silences of his own heart where he soared, hunting the great mysteries of life, like pure thought roaming the vast, cold distances between stars where even light is frozen. Borden closed his eyes and saw truths burning like the hydrogen furnaces of great white suns. He smiled, opened his eyes and there, staring at him, was Koo. His other choice. No choice.

When she looked away and went back to her bussing, Borden opened the oven and, not taking his eyes off her animal body, rested his hand on the searing grill. When the fiend-pain and Koo were as one, Borden pressed the shroud-covered ice to his fried fingers. He smiled through his noiseless tears. Borden loved the simple purity of Faustian bargains.

