

Cambridge Vignettes (from the 1960s)

by DeWitt Henry

I.

She came to me late the other night—after I'd forgotten her and was busy working on something. About midnight, I guess. She was in her red robe—and I was civil, but preoccupied.

I wanted none of her. But also that day I had just finished *The Story of O.*, and my mind was full of sadistic whimsies and the mood of anythingness that the book instills: the pound of fleshness. Anyway, I sneered

at her and told her she bored me, and satirically, that she was a mass of mediocrity. And she said she was on her way to take a shower, but she had a boil on her behind, and what did my medical book say about that? She was lying on my bed. And this was funny, so I got out *Dr. Spock* and read her about boils in there--salt water compresses. And then I dug out the Anglo-Saxon charm against wens, and recited it ritualistically to her unwilling, uninterested ears:

Wen; wen, little wen ...
Shrivel as coal on the hearth,
Shrink as muck on the wall,
And waste away like water in a bucket.
Become as small as a grain of linseed ...
And become even so small
that thou become naught ..
(Wenne, wenne, . wenchichenne, ...

Clinge pu . alswa colon heorpe,
scring pu : alswa scerne awage, ...
litel pu gewurbe pet peu nawiht gewurbe.)

And I asked her if it felt better-and she answered, No, but now her ears hurt. And I got up to put my book away and said I didn't care, I enjoyed reading it, for my own sake. And what I thought was funny, was that even Anglo-Saxons had wens, probably from eating too many spices and drinking too much ale. And I sat down beside her and jokingly ran my hand up her leg, towards her ass. And she recoiled, "Hey!" "Um," I pondered, "nothing on underneath?" I tubbed her tail and back. And I forget what next. Except that I wasn't particularly interested in having her there-didn't desire her. And there were, as she shifted position, little exposures and glimpses of her breasts. But I wasn't interested. And I started kidding about masochism and pulled a large wooden club from underneath the bed, and started hitting my head with it.

To her, NO! Don't! Oh--and then we decided on salt treatment of the wen. She hiked up her robe to show it to me, on the white globe of the round of her ass, this bright red spot. And was I supposed to squeeze it? I peered at it closely, like a doctor--and disinterested. And said I'd go get some salt water. So I did and came back and got a piece of cotton and dabbed it and covered it with a band aid. So much for the wen.

Then I guess with mock roughness to her mock resistance and protest I parted the front of her robe and pulled it down over her shoulders, exposing her breasts--which still didn't especially matter, though they were pretty. And I brushed them upwards with my fingers and palms, and kissed them. And then I had my ballpoint pen in my pocket and I had an impulse--so I took it out. What are you doing? she insisted. What are you going to do? I had in mind that scene in "0." where Sir Stephan brands hermass with his initials;

ironically. And I started to draw on her right breast--to her bewildered amusement--a round eye to the right of the nipple and another to the left and then a grinning mouth under the nipple, with a Cheshire cat grin, one tooth missing. And the nipple was a perfect nose. So then I got her a mirror and bobbed it for her--and the effect was irresistibly hilarious. "I could make a living at this, you know. They pay money at the Lido for less ... in Paris." And she said as how I was outrageous. And would I do something with the other one? So I made that the face of tragedy, gloomy and weeping and a drop falling from the funny red nose. And then I bobbed them back and forth. And on her leg I drew an arrow pointing North. And then the footprints of a leprechaun returning to the womb, and then on her other leg the semblance of several tiny little crabs. And she said, Oh, no! And wriggled back, shedding the robe entirely until she made a sort of calendar tableau.

The robe was red and spread out under her and against the wall—she was leaning back to the wall and her legs off to one side and the lamp on my telephone table was casting light down on her from the side. And I said she looked like a stamp. What kind of stamp, said she. Some Italian stamp ... Titian, I said. And I admired her, a definitive nude. And me sitting on the large bed, just in front of her, fully clothed. And what was amusing was I still did not particularly care for sex--in fact the whole business would be too involved for my mood now--too much trouble and effort. And I was thinking that as I admired her for simply being a picture: for being a classical study in the nude who aroused a dim aesthetic interest, but no sex. And then I started to take a detached interest in her body, peering through her pubic hair for anything that looked like crabs. At the root of each hair. And she helped and said she'd already given a good look and didn't find anything. And I thought to myself, a la Henry Miller, what a funny-looking thing a cunt is. The slightly discolored-tannish flesh of its lips and, on her anyway, the double fold at the ventral tip. And then I kissed her stomach and started to move lower with my kisses, but she said, No, don't! And so my hand

did, probing between the lips and happening onto a substantial clitoris.

I was feeling mean and anything goes and enjoying it, and I was curious ... to see what she would be like in this kind of pleasure. And caressed her there until she twisted and moaned and reached down, saying, No. Stop! Stop! but still the thrills going through her and she pushed my hand on down into her vagina, getting me excited now too, with her excitement. And she spread her legs and writhed and I pressed my face against her stomach as I kept probing and circling with my fingers up against the round bump of her cervix (is it called?) and going in and out while she was in the first real orgasm-ecstasy I've gotten out of her. And finally she was spent and convinced me so and we lay still a moment. Then: Oh, I could kill you! Why did you do that? And I chuckled, because you wanted me to. And she said, I know, but I could kill you. I haven't done that for five years! (disgusted with herself). And she got up and wrapped her robe close around her and went to sit in the chair, picking at her toenails, and scowling up at me. What's the matter, I said. That's one way of having pleasure, and the pleasure for me is in giving the pleasure to you. And she said, I don't know. And I said, Maybe you don't like it because I didn't do anything you need a man for. Or another person even, if you want to be realistic. That's right, she mused.

Heidi could have done that. And then she got up: I could kill you for ... being so alive, she said,— much to my gratification, although I couldn't quite follow her reasoning. Except that she struck me as very dead. Then she left me to take her shower; slept down there.

I guess that's the last time we had anything like sex together.

II

I had a cigar and a beer and was sitting there thinking my thoughts and eating free hors d'oeuvres when along comes this professorial, flat-faced, thickly bespectacled intellectual sort, sits next to me. Okay. It's a crowded bar. And after a while he makes a remark to me--about Charley's Kitchen being the only good bar in Cambridge. And I say, sure, especially if you're starving and like free hors d'oeuvres. He says, they're good. And everything here is good and cheap. Just making conversation, you know.

Like any barfly loner. We talk about relative merits of Cambridge bars, and his Cambridge life goes back about twenty years the way he talks. I said this looked like it was shopkeepers and mailmen, then Whitey's up to Boylston for a slightly rougher crowd, and finally the Harvard Gardens where they all said Fuck and spat on the floor. And in his bespectacled, goggled way he says he doesn't especially mind the first (saying Fuck) but he does the second. He's about forty, I'd guess, and authentically intelligent and learned, so I'm flattered to interest him, see? (And he had a bare-toothed, buck-teeth grin.) We talked about politics and then about backgrounds. What did I do? Seriously? And I told him. And he said I

had
a fine sense of humor, a sharp tongue, young man. And he was
looking
for a booth, then, because he wanted to order a hamburger and
finally we
got a booth, and did I want a hamburger? I said no, and got some
more
hors d 'oeuvres. And paid for the next round of beers, since I don't
like
being bought for. And we went on to talk about ourselves--and
mostly to
my gratification, me, -but played Where Was He From--which turned
out
(he said) to be Indiana. And, as I said, his field was teaching or
whatever
in political history. And he said he was writing a book. And the next
move
was, as we were set to depart-me to home and dinner-to relieve
ourselves
of all the beer. So he leads the way to the men's room. And there I
do have
suspicions, only because if a guy so friendly is queer, surely as you
are
pissing together there would be some indication. But no. I only
remem-
ber feeling embarrassed pissing with him, urinal to urinal, which
may be
indication enough. And then out on the street. I have the buzz of a
drunk
going, and he asks it seems in the same spirit whether I won't come
to
his place for more to drink? Rather insistent. Which seems too
insistent.
Which seems too insistent for drinking buddies, but still not
definitely

wrong, really, except as I thought in my own depraved and overly suspi-
cious mind. Anyhow I declined. Upon which we exchanged names. His
was Mark Reynolds, which I take to be an alias or code name. And
he then
asked could he come to my place? While I ate? And this was the
crucial
stupidity if there was one. Because I shrugged and said (feeling a
little
awkwardly forced), sure.

And he wanted to take a cab, but I said don't be ridiculous. And
we
walked, still talking a blue streak about nice abstract, intellectual
type
things. And we get to 50 Irving and my room. I guess I was
operating on
the sentiment that the guy was lonely this afternoon and genuinely im-
pressed by me- and the flaw was my own vanitas in that respect. For
once
he was here-in my privacy, you see,

I had to play the Great White Host. And asked if he wanted any of
the
stew I was reheating? No.

Well, I only had coffee to offer him to drink, would he have some
of
that? All very formal and courteous, see, as I would be to one of my pro-
fessors, or even to one of my formal, conversational friends. And he
would
have coffee--so I leave him and go down to fix the coffees and my

own
dinner in the kitchen. After ten or fifteen minutes I return, with cups
and
my stew bowl, to find him sitting on the floor in front of my
bookcase.
Okay, I would do the same, perhaps. Only he's losing some of my
'regard
as an idea man; the conversation is getting hollow; he's acting more
and
more like an intellectual phony. Forcing conversation and blatantly
in-
gratiating me. So I give him his coffee, and a slice of rye bread, and
com-
mence to eat. And put, apropos of his observations about the same,
some
records on. He had remarked on a Shubert record I had out-Oh, you
like
Shubert!

I said, No, it was Carol's record+the Carol whom I had made a
special
point of telling him back in the bar I was going with and expecting
to meet
for dinner. And he asked me several times, well where is she? When
is she
coming? ... carefully remembering her name. And I said my own
favorites
were Beethoven, Sibelius and Bartok, whatever that meant, and did
he
have any objections? Ah! Beethoven, he says. So I put on Beethoven.
And
he asks again about Carol, where is she? To which I reply, I dunno.
Com-
ing soon, I hope. (She didn't). So now he sits in the green circle
chair by

the window, until I toss an ashtray to him on the bed, and he moves a little awkwardly close to sit on the bed, while I'm sitting near it at my desk, and the dish of stew in my lap. And he responds to the music pensively and emotional-histrionically-as a professorial sort should. Tells me about Beethoven's life and I should read the moving biography by Sullivan. And tells me how the Pastoral Symphony was the first record he ever bought. Etc. And I rejoin with similarly maudlin stuff'; which he indulges. And he asked if I read Plato (having seen several volumes in my bookcase), and I said yes (forgetting Alcibiades). And then he went from Plato to Nietzsche. Who was his mentor and idol in philosophy. As the anti-Plato. And here he began to sound a bit obsessive and off-kilter. Because mature, balanced folks I know-it seems-know better than to think of Nietzsche as the sublime refutation of Plato and the True Message for the Present Day. But who am I to argue? And also he swooned over Dostoyevski, to my defense of Tolstoy; and sympathized, in Renaissance jargon, with the beasts more than the angels. While I said I was the other way. And Ayn Rand, which somehow follows. And Thomas Wolfe. Okay, that sort of chatter. And I got what I deserved for being susceptible to it. For very next thing, soon as I'd finished eating and he was sitting, leaning on the bed, I said, ahem, look, I'd like to get some work done tonight-and he said I can tell when I've worn out my welcome, and I have. And no, I said, no offense. I intend to work is all. Look, give me your number-- see-and we have parties or something. I'll give you a call. You'll really call? he asks. I can't promise that, says I, but maybe. So he gives me a number. And stands up, smoking a cigarette. And boggles,

awkwardly close, like he's forgotten something. And I hold up the ashtray for him, embarrassed and perplexed. And he-then-leans suddenly close and kisses me on the ear.

Well, that, anyway, resolved the doubt. Oh, NO-buddy--says I--rather like a fluttery young thing, not wanting to offend him, yet not wanting any of that; I am very heterosexual, got it? Are you really? he asks, as if he knows better. I am, says I, and very satisfied with the arrangement. What, just lonely then? And I explained, No, but I responded to loneliness. Well, I never force anything, he says, smiling and resigned. But just a little good-night kiss? And I put up my hand between us. N-O! None of that. Come on. Cut it. You're sure? he asks. I AM. Okay, he says, and with urbane grace departs--gone.

III

The building I watch every day, out my window: a brick apartment building, whose windows have caught my voyeuring curiosity enough so I know the folks who live there--suddenly this noon billowed smoke and burst into fire. Fire-fighting equipment, etc. was slow coming, and pretty soon flames were coming put the roof and windows--I saw them eat up curtains and then windows pop! And a woman was shrieking hysteri-

cally for her child: enough to sicken me, watching. I learned it was the
the
child later-who had escaped. But all I knew was this inhuman
shrieking
at the time-and the first firemen unconcerned or helpless to locate
or do
anything about it. It might have been someone trapped and burning
alive,
but I didn't want to know. I wanted to accept it as a matter of course
and
forget it. Unnerving sounds. And all the apartments familiar to my
eye,
without occupants, were flaming now. Then fire trucks arrived and
men
got organized, but so slowly. And all this in an emergency snow
hazard
too, in the midst of the storm and bitter cold. The fireplug near
which my
car was parked was frozen. They couldn't get any water. And then
they
had special trucks draw hose from hydrants on other blocks and
finally
got a stream directed towards the window where the flame was
show-
ing. And from then on it was a fight for control, about two hours of
smoke
and cold and several firemen smoked out and carried away: and
smash-
ing windows and working their way up and into the top floor
apartment
and onto the roof. It was in the top apartment where it first broke
out, to
my eye at least. But rumor has it, and the efforts of firemen later
indicate,
that the heart of the fire was in the basement: that the furnace

exploded or
something and either flames went up the heating ducts or up
between the
walls or something. All that destroyed. Those young couples,
especially
the husbands returning from class or work and nothing there, but
now the
fire's out, a charred brick shell. Not something you can believe
happening.
Their belongings, everything, gone. The terror is self-interest, of
course
(what if this firetrap went?). Coming home and finding this place
charred,
my books, papers, etc. Where do people go next? Having this
descend
upon them, arbitrarily. In the midst of their lives suddenly staggered
.. .1
can imagine them looking at me now, or the likes of me, going on in
my
ordinary life, worrying about literature and shopping and my
car...and
pitying me. And on my side, the queer, helpless sense of guilt in
being
untouched and still in the midst of my life, as I pass by one of the
burned-
out wives who lived over there, and who is grouped with some
friends
warming themselves in our foyer I remember seeing the woman
in the
top apartment looking out her window this morning, an hour or so
before
the fire: looking out, as I was, at the snow.

* * * * *

The following day is clear and the gutted shell of the building there, an object of speculation to occasional passersby, but otherwise quite simple. Covered with snow. And the couple who lived in the top apartment, with four kids and a large Labrador retriever come to pick through the snow-covered heap of charred debris that the firemen have thrown down. The dog snaps and chases too -- much and the father lashes out at the oldest boy, Matthew, and tells him to take the dog home and keep him there (wherever that may be). The mother picks around nervously here and there, shakes out a frozen skirt. The father finds the kid a box with a radio in it that doesn't look too damaged.

The mother has a brown paper bag with her that she is gradually filling with whatever there is-- pots and pans and bits and scraps-- whatever didn't burn. And meanwhile some firemen have come back and gone into the building, informing a rude, nosy old woman who is gawking after them, that they're only after some tools they'd lost. And the old woman remains to pester the burned-out family with the obvious questions, until the mother turns on her with exasperation and shouts: "I don't want to talk to you. Go away and leave us alone!" And then these two snow-shov-

elers aged thirty or so, pass by, without seeing or noticing the family,
and
one of them pauses to look over the fence at another pile of debris
from
which he extracts a metal towel rack. And he obviously sees a
chance here
for some good scavenging. He stops the firemen on their way out
and asks
them some questions. And then with a whetted interest (his buddy
shows
none), but still some uncertainty, not scrupling to check a shoe he
finds
on the sidewalk and reject it, he watched the father working on the
pile of
trash round the back of the building. And then, finally, he hangs
around
the mother and kids and her paper bag and picks up the kid's radio,
as
if it were unclaimed, to examine it. And this elicits sharp words from
the
mother and no doubt a rejoinder from him, to which she loudly
replies:
"Look, I live here!" After which, with his towel rack as his prize, he
moves
reluctantly on by. Then the family leave too, with their first load, the
paper
bag, the kid with his radio, the father with a frame of a chair over
his back,
and a kettle.

