

Five Acts

by Joseph Young

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"So what happened to Devon?" I wanted to know.

"He's making frozen pizzas," said Jack. "Somewhere in Iowa."

"Oh god. And he's still alive?"

The television was playing reruns of Mr. Ed, but it was hard to hear because of the flock of birds in the palm tree. I'd sometimes imagined the birds coming through the window, a swarming of pink cotton mouths, mawing everything in sight.

"And what happened to Nancy?"

Jack rolled his eyes. He was getting tired of the catch-up game. "I don't know, man. I heard she has an autistic baby."

I got up and went into the kitchen. I pulled open the freezer and poked around in the ice cubes and dead batteries. They were the same dead batteries I'd put in there a year ago, when I lived there, to extract the last of their juice. I looked in the cabinets too. Signs of Lindsay were nowhere to be found.

"Hey, Jack?"

"What."

I leaned against the doorframe, watching him watch TV. "You seen her?"

"Ah fuck."

"Really."

"No, man." He shook his head. "Not at all." His mood was rapidly souring. "I didn't take her from you, you know. She came on her own."

He knew I didn't believe this, but he didn't know that I'd forgiven him. "She was beautiful," I explained. "Lindsay had that gift."

Jack glared at the television screen, crushed his beer can in his fingers.

"I could open the window," I said, "Let the birds in."

He looked at the palm tree, then at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing."

He rolled his eyes. "Stay out of my freezer."

I went downtown. You only had to sit on the pier a few minutes before a sea lion would skim by, blinking its doggy eyes. The bay was viscous under the fog, like chocolate soup, if you were in the mood for such an idea.

I pulled my cell phone from my backpack and dialed Robyn.

"It's Philip," I said. "I'm in town."

"Yeah?" She wasn't so happy either. That's the person I'd been when I was around.

"You remember Chick's Diner?" I said.

There was a long, silent wind across the grid. "Are we reminiscing?"

"Seems like it. How 'bout meeting me for lunch?" When the silence blew in again, I played Robyn's trump. "On me."

She threw her purse into the booth and sat down. Her make-up was all smeared toward the left side of her face, like she'd stood in a thunderstorm. She plucked her menu from behind the mustard.

"Hope you got the cash, 'cause I'm getting a full dinner."

When she was sucking on her mint, she looked at me, for the first time. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I clasped my hands on my place mat while she smirked at me. Her eyes were the sleepest blue. "I still think you're cute." I said.

"Oh boy. And here I thought you were going to ask me about Lindsay."

"Would you tell me?"

She tapped her front tooth with a fingernail, a habit she'd picked up from the girl in question. "Nope."

"Why I figured I'd try and pick you up instead."

She made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat and got up to go to the bathroom.

While she was gone, I considered rifling her purse, to look for an address book. Somehow though, the busboy wiping the dirty tables, an old man actually, distracted me. The herringbone of his cook's pants, the seagull-shaped scar at the corner of his mouth, were unaccountably sad.

"Hey," I said to him.

But by the time he turned around, Robyn was back.

She sat down and took a long swallow of her ice water. "You didn't do it?" she said, gesturing at her purse.

"Do what?"

"Look for her telephone number, you loser. You think I thought you wouldn't think of it?"

"Too many thinks."

She dismissed me with a wave of her hand. "Then why would I sleep with you?"

The best I could get out of Robyn was that Lindsay had moved into a cabin in the woods somewhere. It was a lie, but when she told it, I felt such affection for her loyalty, I pulled her by the shoulder and hugged her. "I don't like you," she said.

I wandered into skid row and examined the rusty scissors and used nylons the junkies were selling on blankets laid out on the sidewalk. I bought a copy of *Daisy Miller* crawling with margin notes and stuffed it into my pack.

Up the block, I passed through the linoleum lobby and rode the elevator to the 14th floor. When Charles answered, he high-fived me. "Need a snort, dude? I can see you need a snort."

After we passed the bong, Charles got us grape popsicles from his freezer. "I don't know," he said. "You pretty much trashed her. I wouldn't ever speak to you again, if I was a girl. If I was a girl who'd been trashed like that? I might get a shotgun. I might get a bazooka."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know is right. She's better than that."

Charles' cat jumped into his lap and rubbed up against his popsicle, coating it with gray hairs. "Ah, Purty!" He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Who's a stupid Purty?" he said, scratching behind the cat's ears. "Who's a dumb SOB for ruining my popsicle?"

I fell asleep on Charles' couch, and when I woke, he was asleep in the easy chair, Purty curled in a grey crescent on his chest.

I went to the bathroom, and when I was done washing my hands, I pulled open the mirror. Behind the enormous bottle of generic aspirin was a photograph. It was taken in the mountains, fields of granite stretching out for miles, stone hills and domes and chutes. Lindsay stood in the middle of it with a huge pack on her back and a yellow bandana around her forehead.

I brought the photo out to the living room and nudged Charles awake. "Who took this?" I wanted to know. "Where'd it come from?"

He blinked and scratched. "My brother, Cam. Me, him, her and Caswell packed into the high country, what, five years ago?"

I looked at Lindsay's hair, slouching across one brown eye, her yellow t-shirt flaring over her hips. "She never told me that," I said.

"Matter of fact," he said, "neither did I. Never thought to, somehow." He shook his head sadly. "Big old lives we've got."

I went to the park. "Ruff!" I said to the bison standing in the dusty weeds. I wondered if they ever got tired of being taunted and charged the fence. Their horns loomed black as thunderheads over their crazy eyes, and I was sure I could see vengeance in them.

As I stood there, this kid came down the road on his bicycle, front wheel spinning in the air. He wheelied past me for 30 yards, turned around, and wheelied past again. He smiled at me with a candy-red tongue.

"Hey," I called, and he swung around once more.

"What up?" he said. "Huntin' the buffalo?" He pulled his jeans up from the puddle they made on his bicycle seat.

"Right. By the millions."

"That's lame, dude. White dude." He spread his feet and pretended to push a cowboy hat from off his eyes. "What you want?"

"Nothing. I just thought it was cool what you could do with that bike. Well, and also, I wanted to ask you a question."

"What?" He looked at me suspiciously. "I ain't gay."

I shook my head. "Neither am I. I just wanted to ask something. If you had a girlfriend?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "Of course. Why's that relevant?"

I laughed. "*Relevant?*"

"I ain't stupid neither."

"Okay. So you have a girlfriend? A steady one?"

"Yeah."

"What I wanted to know is this: I wanted to know, you ever hit her?"

"Huh? What you mean, hit her?"

"I mean, you get mad and hit her. Slap her on the face or something. Get a little rough."

He looked at the ground, at his tennis shoes. "Naw, man. You crazy?" His face was pinched tight. "You can't hit girls, man."

"I don't know," I said "I think you can hit girls. It's just that you're not supposed to."

"Ah shit. That's what my Mom says is circle talk." He shook his head at head me. "You *can't* hit girls."

"Okay then. So you can't. But what I'm asking is, have you? Just one single time? When she wouldn't listen to *anything* you'd say?"

His face pinched tight again, his eyes looking inside at something. I could see a thought in there, big and dark. "You sick, dude," he said. "White dude."

"Yeah maybe. But we're just talking, right?"

"Naw, man. You're just talking."

So that was it, no more talking. I went downtown again, to her office building. I went to the address given on the company's website I found when I'd Googled her name.

I stood in the cement plaza with the ugly fountain and looked at the smoked-glass front doors. If this were a movie, I thought, I'd stand here with music playing until she came out. She'd be laughing with her coworkers but when she spotted me she'd stop.

It was cold and crisp in the suite of offices and women with long legs in wool skirts kept flashing by. Finally, a round guy in a pinstripe suite asked me if I needed something.

"Lindsay Cowpers?"

"Hmm. She in personnel?"

When I said I didn't know, he laughed. "Oh, one of those, huh?"

Once again, I rode the elevator to a 14th floor. And, as the doors opened, just as in a movie, there she was, bent at the waist to drink from the water fountain, holding her hair back with one hand.

She lifted her head and squinted at me. "What's this?" she said.

I shrugged.

"Okay then, it's you." She looked me up and down. "In a bad shirt and torn jeans."

"Yeah. But you look good."

"That's my job," she said. "To look good."

A woman came by wheeling a mail cart. She looked at Lindsay with a sour expression, and then smiled at me. "Howdy doo!"

Lindsay backed against the wall to let the woman pass. "You *go*, Margie," she said.

Then she turned to me. "Pretty weird of you to show up here, Phil."

I nodded. "It was the neutral ground, I guess. The fluorescent lights and all. Not so many shadows."

"Shadows are bad?"

"Could be."

"Could be they're the best thing."

We stood there for another five minutes looking and not looking at each other, saying things like this.

Finally, a wave of pale, sweaty light broke across her face. "So, fuck it, Phil, come on. This is making me nauseous. What's the deal?"

"Can we go outside?" I said.

She laughed. "What's outside?"

I followed her to the employee lunchroom, with four round tables and a bank of vending machines. She pulled out a chair for me, waited for me to sit, then sat across.

"First of all," she said, "there's this: I had sex with Jack. That morning you and I fucked in our bed, then you hit me, then I went over to Jack's and had sex with him."

"I know." I answered.

She tipped her chin. "Then I gave your stuff to the Goodwill. Except for your CDs, which I still have, and which I won't give back."

"All right."

"Then, two months later, I met a new guy. I dumped him, met another, dumped him too. And by that time, I'd forgotten all about you."

"I got you."

"So there it is, all mapped out for you." She was smiling. "Which you already knew all about anyway. So? What the fuck?"

I ran my hand over my face, which was tingling as if it were charged with the current of a 9-volt battery. I put my palms down on the greasy table and looked her in the face. "I," I said, and tasted the salty words on my tongue, "I hate you."

Her chin dropped. "You hate me? This is what you came to say?"

"Yes." I shook my head, which was clearer now. "I thought I was going to say something else, but that seems to be it: I hate you."

"No, Phil," she said. "That's not how it works. You don't do that."

I shrugged. "I'm not sorry though. I do, I hate you."

I could see her heart beating in her throat, her nose flaring and her eyes a pearling gray. She reached out and put a finger on my hand. "Philipp," she said. "You're crazy."

I got up then, the fluorescent lights crazy around me, strangely blurred. I walked out of the room, to the elevator, pressed the button for the lobby below.

