

cockroaches

by Mimi Carmen

Some people would call me a drunk, but I'm not. My wife divorced me because she said I drank too much and had a wandering eye. Every hour on the hour she called me because she thought I was out with another broad and every time I came home she checked my shirt for lipstick smears and went through my pockets. Sophia my third wife, walked out with another man, and the other two didn't work out too well either. My job as a bus driver was always a put-down by these women. They greeted me every night with a sneer.

But after putting up with so much stress and aggravation on these bus trips, I was a wreck. Especially with these old ladies going to gambling resorts, where they scream, and hold onto their ten-dollar free stipend with the one arm bandits, and constantly complain, "Steve," you're going too fast, you're going to kill us all," or "Stop the bus, I've got to pee," Then there's, Agnes a seventy-eight year old, prune faced, mini-skirt all the way up to areas I shouldn't be looking. So she says to me "Stevie, come on, let me buy you a drink," As if I'd be remotely interested in this old bag. I tell her, "Agnes, you want to get me fired? My boss would kill me." And inevitably, I'm an hour late, which my boss is pissed off about. On a Christmas trip, Agnes slipped me an envelope with a hundred bucks and her telephone number and a note "Call me, we can get together and have a drink." Well, with all this hassle, I simply had to have a bar to go to.

Anyway, I did have a crack-up on the highway, and most nights since the accident, (that left me with a bad leg and walking with a cane), I head for the bar down the street, the Lost Dog Café, within walking distance from my apartment, and not too fancy. Well, guys like me, no family and no place to go, need someone to chew the fat with, without complications, especially after I get the news like I

got from the doctor today, You may not be able to perform, " he says, so I say, "What should I do, become a Priest?"

Tonight, New Year's Eve, it's still early, and the bar is empty except for me and Andy, the bartender, a ghost in the amber light, sort of lonely, the floors just mopped, with the Lost Dog Café sign flashing on and off over the cash register, the smell of pizza, beer, wings, the place gearing up for the crowd, and I'm like a street person on Thanksgiving. I have a place to fit in like I belong, which doesn't mean I love them all, Like Liz, for instance. Well, this Liz lady strides in, blond hair dripping all the way to where her pants start, like a waterfall, hands like a truck driver, a voice as deep as a bass drum. Of course, I know who she is because she's a regular, and so am I, and also know certain things about her, and I think it's best to give her the cold shoulder. So I light up a Camel and blow smoke through my nose, and make out like I'm using my cell phone, as if she's not breathing in my other ear.

But of course people like her don't have a clue when they're being snubbed. So she takes her silver cigarette case and pulls it open and holds it right up in my face. Which makes me want to swat her. Naturally, the case is empty, any moron can see what she's up to, and I'm no dumb ass, especially with my experiences with the bus ladies, and I suppose I could say we can't smoke in the bar anymore, or tell her my Aunt Julie just died of lung cancer, but I'm soft, so of course I offer her one, even flick open my lighter, and see her breasts as big as footballs, and that big waterfall. hair is a wig. So it's New Year's Eve, which is why what comes next is something I wouldn't do any other night, but tonight I let it all go.

She lights up her ciggie, and pretty soon she jumps up on the bar, pulls up her skirt and starts dancing. I must have been nuts, but as I say, it's a special night, so I clap my hands and make a few wolf whistles just to be cute, but then I get to thinking she looks cuckoo up there, poor thing.

"Come on down, crazy lady," I holler, as if she would listen, but no, as independent as a cat, she wiggles her hips pretty good, throws her chest out, and makes with a big "Happy New Year" in

her tobacco voice. The bar begins to fill up. Some of the guys throw coins. So I struggle to pull myself up onto the bar with my cane. I dance with her so she won't look so nutty dancing alone. I know she's had this operation, and her real name is George. I'm a man so I think, why am I doing this silly thing? Why do I dance with this man who wants to be a woman and calls himself Liz, when he's actually George? But I guess I'm a wimp, always trying to help, even those poor souls on the bus. Then she tries to kiss me right up there in front of Andy and the bar full of men with their bug eyes, and show up now from the woodwork, and, clap their hands, like they're at a circus, and we're the clowns, and holler, "More!"

Matty, the owner doesn't care if we put on a show, long as we don't deal drugs, but I'm sick of this now and I say, "I can't kiss you right now, but I will later, after you get down." She wraps her arms round me and says, "I'll get down after you kiss me." So I kiss her on the lips (and believe me I don't go around kissing men) so I wipe off her kiss off my face with my hands and she calms down. She gets back on her stool, Matty says to Liz, "Drinks on the house tonight, sweetheart." And now I'm a little annoyed with Matty.

I see Kelly, the waitress, black short hair, mini-skirt, long-legs in black tights, white, soft skin. I motion her over, she smiles with teeth that sparkle like stars in the face of an angel. And when she leans down to pick up my cane, I see the arch of her back, and wonder what's under, as if I could do it, even if she'd be willing. She pats my cheek, and sits down for a moment, with her vanilla smell. I never know what to say to Kelly, even if I know what I'd like to do.

I say to Kelly, "If you see a big black guy, maybe six foot four, with a big smile and a brief case, let me know, will you? We're having a big conference here tonight." I kid around with her to keep her near. She says, "Oh, sure, Michelle called in for Obama's reservations." She gets close. I get this kind of dizzy feeling, so I say, "Kelly, bring me a Pizza with everything on it, will ya', hon?"

She hollers, One P with the works, to the kitchen, and orders me another draft from the bar. She brings it over and I take a sip, the foam comes up over my mouth. I hold my glass up to her like a toast.

She winks at me, but then turns away, as if I'm the cockroach I see on the bar. "Hi, Norm." she hollers to a young guy in an orange college sweater two stools down.

Then Liz comes over with her plate of chicken-wings and sits next to me, as if I'm her date. She wants to talk about her son, busted for drugs. Well, I think, who'd want you for a mother? You look like a Liz but you talk like a George. so I turn my back.

Andy Tubers on the other side of me jabs me in the ribs. "She wants to know you better," he says winking. I give an, Oh my God no, shrug and cover the cockroach with an ashtray, but Andy has his own problems. He swings around, tells me him and his wife just split. I say, "Oh, no, Andy, too bad"

"Well, she had to have her can of beer before breakfast. I like to have a drink, myself," he says, but she was drunk all the time." I say "I'm sorry." I don't tell him about my divorce. Sixteen years and three kids later, she walks out. and takes the kids. " So long ago I don't think of her anymore." I say, "Andy, I don't want my Pizza, How about you take it? Andy's on Social Security, not much else. He says he'll take it and says he'd like red pepper and extra sauce. The bartender shoves the cheese and crackers my way. I say thanks, but I don't take any. The yellow light glows on the ashtray with the cockroach struggling up and sliding back.

I'm still nursing my beer at 4 a.m. when the place closes. I remember my cane, go outside and start to walk home. I walk for my leg, the doctor says it helps. I turn around; go back to the Lost Dog Café. Maybe Kelly will come out.

She finally is the last one to come out the door, and says, "Hey, Steve, forget something?" I say, "Well, it's a nice night, I'd like to walk you home," as I know she lives close. She checks me over to be sure I have my cane, and. I hold it up. She says, "Sure, why not?" So I limp along beside her, with her tapping along in her six inch high heels, past a lot of apartments houses gray in the dark and we talk awhile about this and that in the frigid night air. Finally we get to what looks like a ten story apartment, and she says in her Cardinal voice, "Steve, would you like to come up for a drink? " I'm

stunned, like a kid with Santa Clause, because I don't know why, but of course I would, so it's up to her second floor apartment, spotlessly clean, a bed with a white, Martha Washington spread.

I think of the times I tried to look at her, of what I wanted to do. But right now I sit down on an old, comfortable chair with flowers on the cover and it feels good to sit, while Kelly putters around fixing drinks. I know what I'd like to do next, the normal thing. But it's been so long since I've been out; I've no idea how to handle a situation like this, like a date.

I look at my watch. I say, Kelly, hon, it's been a long day, and I really have to run, Sure, she says. O.K., sure.

I give her a hug, a big grin and wave. So long kid, I say, pulling my scarf around my neck. I turn back, put my arms around her, give her one last hug. She looks puzzled, but no way can I tell her, about this goddam curse that makes me impotent.

I could try, but suppose I can't. Like the doctor says, "Well, it's iffy." Maybe you can, maybe you can't."

Then she sort of pulls me back. "I have a leak in my faucet. How about you fix it.

Well shit, what does this mean? I'm quiet. "It's iffy" I tell her. "Suppose I can't make it work."

"You could try," she says.

I'm so happy my bones ache like a bad tooth, and my head is as giddy as a cocaine addict. The moonlight sweeps into the window right past the clouds. I know I should play it cool, so I kind of casually say, "Well, get me a wrench, please," like I knew what the hell I was doing.

I'm under the sink, sweating and pounding, and Kelly is all smiling and soft voiced, on the side, when the door downstairs creaks open, and up the stairs bounds the college kid, the one in the orange sweater in the bar, with a bottle of gin, and a smile as big as the map of the United States.

"Happy New Year," he slurs, with that ra ra kind of voice, Then he spots me, under the sink, and I guess he thinks it's funny because he bends over in his Jeans, laughing so hard I was afraid he'd puke.

I can hear the water leaking, and the cloud pulled itself over the moon.

