

Jelly Doughnuts (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

So far, Simmi hasn't asked me one single question about Buck—not a direct one, not an indirect one, not one. She also doesn't seem a bit interested in hearing anything about when he and I were together, or how we got together five years ago, in late 1985, or about us splitting up after a few months, that would be February '86.

It's probably all right that she doesn't feel any need to know that kind of stuff, because I don't think it would matter much to their being together. But when Buck called just now, I started thinking of the time I'd tried to find out why he was so quiet, and he mentioned his mother, how she'd had a way of speaking *for* him.

“You mean if somebody asked you a question, she'd answer it?”

“No,” he said. “It wasn't like that.”

“You mean she used to tell you just what to say whenever you had to speak to anyone about something important?”

“No, that wasn't it, either,” he said. “When it came to her and me, she had a way of saying things . . . so that even though she was speaking to me . . . it was as if I were doing the talking. To her.”

When Buck came by here this evening, he asked me if I remembered the lullaby he told me about once. The one his mother would sing to him in Penobscot, then in English.

I can just about see them going away.

There she was left

on a little islet.

She began to pick

gooseberries.

He told me that when he sang it to Simmi, she said, "It's beautiful. But please don't sing it again."

Buck's so interested in finding out what other childhoods might have been like that he's always trying things like that. They usually work. With me, and, I'm sure, others, they've worked. So he already knows, since I'm Simmi's sister, and I knew Buck first, that our mother sang to us:

Sleep, baby, sleep.

The large stars are the sheep

She sang it in four languages—Polish, Yiddish, German, and English. Mama would still sing it to Simmi anytime, if Simmi would just call her and ask her to.

Yes, Buck's heard it from me, but he hoped to hear it from Simmi, who's on to his wanting to know what it was like for her, growing up in Larchmont.

Last month, on her first day in New York with me, I arranged for my little sister to go to my stylist and get the works. Simmi didn't know it, but I made the appointment while she was already on her way there. Not everybody in the place was clued in to what was going on; I heard that when the woman who does my facials—and is pretty sure she knows everything about me—asked Simmi how she heard about her, and Simmi said, "I'm Etta December's sister," the woman kept on applying the steam mist and said, "Etta doesn't have a sister."

When Simmi told me that, I started to tell her about something a woman who lived with Buck in 1987 said to me, but the second I said "1987," Simmi broke in to say that it seemed like an awfully long time ago, so I just let the story trail off.

I guess I was wondering if she'd be interested to know that Buck can play guitar. I only found out by chance, when Buck and I were in Prospect Park one day and he noticed a boy with an electric guitar and a little battery-powered amp who was having some trouble tuning up. Buck says to him, "Here, let me try." He tuned it,

started playing, people gathered round; it was a scene. And it was like Buck was somebody else. After a while he gave the guitar back to the boy, and we kept on walking. I said, "Buck, you could earn a living at that." He just laughed. Then he told me how he'd taught himself to play guitar when he was little. He and his mother saved up to buy one, and she arranged for him to keep it with some people who lived at the other end of town and to practice in their garage. Buck didn't say anything else, as if that had been a normal way of doing things, so after a while I say, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you have to keep and play the guitar at someone else's house?"

"Oh," he said; then, "Dad." A few steps later, he said, "So there were only a couple of times I ever got to play for Mum."

If I don't know much about Buck, others probably know less. The woman I'd started to mention to Simmi, the one he'd lived with for most of '87, I'd seen at a Christmas party he took her to back then. She and I were just sitting around, there was no problem, and then, to make small talk, I said, "Isn't it something when Buck picks up a guitar?"

She got almost hostile; I could see she thought I was playing some trick on her, and she says, probably the same way the woman doing Simmi's facial did, so sure, so coolly, "Buck can't play guitar."

Last week Buck told me, there he is walking up Broadway with his arm around Simmi, and he doesn't say anything to her, but when he sees something in a store window that he thinks she might like, and lets go of her a moment while he goes to look closer—the instant his arm's not there, Simmi won't take another step in any direction. She's saying, "What happened to *me*? What happened to *me*?" Buck says that if I walked by and I wasn't her sister, I'd think Simmi was kidding. Because then she says, "Just a minute ago—no, just a *second* ago—I was here. What happened to *me*?" She's a riot; she's so funny, anyone would think. If she is being funny, it's just at

the very first, the same as when someone smiles without really meaning to.

So Buck tells her he was just looking at something he thought she'd like. "Something for you, Simmi."

She says, "Who, me? Who's *me*? There was a me who was walking with someone, but then the *someone* wasn't there. So what happened to *me*?"

Buck told me that he knew he couldn't win this one. Simmi wouldn't walk toward him or away, and of course she wouldn't swear or anything like that. So rather than have her get upset, he has to take the, oh, five steps to put his arm around her and steer her to the window. But of course by then whatever had caught his eye was beside the point, so they turned away together and kept on walking.

Simmi's only been in New York three weeks, but the second night she was here Buck took her to a coffee place he knew, and now Simmi makes sure he takes her there every night. Maybe if there's somewhere else they have to be, something one of them *has* to do, they'll skip a night, but they couldn't miss too many, because then it would become something they used to do. And that would make it part of the past. And what she thinks is part of the past Simmi won't consider.

I've been telling Buck, "She trusts you. If she didn't, she wouldn't do any of that stuff. She'd just walk away, get out the credit cards Papa gave her, and start in on that endless driving again."

I want to help Buck, because I really started all this. I asked Simmi to come to New York for a visit and then organized that instant party with my automatic dialer. I'd known it wasn't going to be easy to get Simmi to come to New York at all, and that it would be even harder to get her to stay. The only thing the idea had going for it was that Simmi hadn't ever spent much time in New York, so there was a chance she wouldn't think of it as part of the past. I could tell she might even be looking forward to coming when she called to ask if I'd send her the Manhattan yellow pages, care of

general delivery somewhere in Arizona, where she'd be in a couple of weeks. After that I got a fax from Colorado, giving the name of someplace in New Mexico where I could send her the white pages. I knew that Simmi was trying to get a head start on figuring the city out. That's good, I thought; she's acting as if she's never been here before.

But if she had a theory for it, it didn't quite work out. She got here at four in the morning. Took a nap. Took a bath. Took a walk. And then she was ready to leave. So I told her I was having a party that evening—that I'd forgot to tell her—and that I was treating her to the works at my stylist in the afternoon. She said o.k., she'd get her hair cut or something, and she could leave after the party, when there wouldn't be much traffic; so I said that people don't even *start* arriving at my parties until really late. Then, while she was at the stylist, I phoned everybody on my automatic dialer.

"You know," I said to Buck, "if she hadn't taken to trusting you at that party, she'd have been tail-lights over the Triborough the very next day."

My name is, or was, Etta Dietz, and I was lucky to be born in New York City in 1952. My sister Simmi was born, also lucky to be born, in 1954, but just before she arrived my parents moved about twenty miles out of the city, to Larchmont, where Simmi was delivered.

Buck, born *something* MacIsaac on March 26, 1955, was my boyfriend for, at most, four weeks in 1985. Now, in 1990, he has been the boyfriend of my sister, Simmi, for three weeks and holding. Buck was born in Bangor, Maine, at the hospital closest to where his parents lived, in a one-story bungalow on a long triangular lot, on the road between Orono and Old Town.

I hadn't really seen much of Buck in the past five years. Maybe on the street, and maybe once in a while at a party somewhere. I hardly ever saw him, but I did put his number on my automatic dialer in 1985, and I never took him off. Now, because of that, I've

seen him a lot in the last three weeks, because he either stops here to pick up Simmi on his way home from work or, even if he knows she's not here, drops by anyway to ask me a question about something that Simmi's done or hasn't done, said or won't say.

Buck isn't known for being very talkative. Otherwise, on the phone just now I would have asked him, "Buck, were you lucky to be born?" Of course, I wouldn't have meant it in the same sense that Simmi and I were lucky, which is *at all*, or in the very best sense, which is *and every minute since*, but just how it looks now to him.

It may be that Buck is not always good at explaining things, but I think he's a good listener. Over the years, I told every one of my boyfriends the most important story of all my family's stories, and as far as I know, and this was even before he knew Simmi, he's the only one who gave up eating jelly doughnuts on the spot and forever.

"I was eleven and Simmi was nine," I'd told Buck, "and it was in our house in Larchmont. My father goes out and buys a big bag of fresh jelly doughnuts.

"It wasn't that we'd never eaten jelly doughnuts before, but he and my mother had decided that the day had come that we were both old enough to understand what they went through living in Poland during the war. How they survived to get out after, to America.

"Papa said that as the Germans advanced he and Mama fled from the town where they lived, near the southern border—to Warsaw, but not to the ghetto. Papa wasn't Jewish, but he had to hide Mama, who was. He hated to walk in the street for fear that someone who knew who he was married to might inform on him, or that the authorities might follow him back to her.

"Before, my parents both had good professions, but now they were in hiding, in some small rooming house. They had to make a living quietly, and somehow they settled on jelly doughnuts. There were lots of cafés, and many of their suppliers were disappearing.

“Papa used the bit of money they had to buy flour, eggs, shortening, sugar, and jam. But he was afraid to hire just anybody to deliver the doughnuts. Then he noticed a little boy who'd lost his parents. ‘He was even younger than you are now,’ Papa said to Simmi. ‘And he probably didn't really know that he was Jewish. And, like your mama and your sister here, he had blue eyes and was fair—that was good, because he could blend in with the general population.’ And they took him in, like a son, and as a delivery boy.

“They taught him where to deliver the doughnuts and how to collect the money. They told the boy to take only gold coins, because the Polish money was worthless. At the time, jelly doughnuts were a boon to the cafés, but Papa said that didn't mean he and Mama were living well or anything—they spent just enough to feed themselves, pay expenses, and buy more supplies to make the doughnuts. Because if they wanted to be able to save for their escape, they had to live very simply.

“Papa said everything went o.k. for about nine months, and then one day a Gestapo man followed the little boy home. If it had been a younger agent—they were more ideological—it would have been the end. But it was an older man, and he was on the take. He demanded a cut. So he began to collect a percentage from them, and that made it more difficult to save money. They worked even harder, for about three more months, and then one day the boy didn't come back on time. They waited and waited. Then somebody from one of the cafés sent word that the boy had been taken away. So Mama and Papa took the gold coins they'd saved and sewed them under the buttons of their coats, inside the lining, and fled eastward that night.

“Papa said to us, ‘And in all that time, girls, because those doughnuts were all that we'd had to sell in that whole year we never ate one of them.’ Mama added that whenever Papa had sprinkled the powdered sugar over the finished ones his Adam's apple would go up and down with desire.

“Then Papa opens the bag, takes out the jelly doughnuts he'd just bought, and puts them on little plates and passes them around. ‘One for Simmi. One for Etta. One for Mama. And one for me.’ We all

started to eat—all except Simmi. That's the first time I ever saw that expression she still gets. We looked at her and her eyes were wet, and wide with fear, and she said, 'What about the *boy*? Where did they take the *boy*?' "

If Buck drops by my place when Simmi's not here, he's not coming to complain—he's just trying to understand. "Simmi won't even let me talk about what we had for lunch the day before," he might say. Or "What happened to Simmi?" he'll ask. What in the past, he means. I always tell him to believe me, nothing ever did. "But now you are," I say to Buck. "Now you are, and you're the only thing that's ever really happened to Simmi."

The evening Buck stopped in to ask me if I'd noticed that Simmi never swears, I had to tell him why—it was part of the past, so Simmi never would. I told him that when she was little she heard one of mother's friends use the word "ass." It wasn't a word Mama ever used, so later Simmi asked her if what the lady said was a bad word. And Mama didn't want Simmi to think her friends were saying bad words so she said, "It's really not." But then the next time the lady came over and said to Simmi, "How are you doing today?" Simmi gave her a big smile and said, "I fell on my ass." Simmi got sent to her room, and everyone was all flustered. That was the last time anybody heard her swear.

Buck's never actually come out with it, but sometimes I think he wants to know why Simmi and I are so unlike. The closest thing I can come to explaining it to myself is that it's as if the same light has fallen on different films.

When I turned thirteen and moved up to another school, I changed my last name. It all went more or less according to plan, and I think all plans probably involve some fear. But the more I watched the war documentaries on television, and the more I read about Poland during the Second World War, and the more I asked

Papa questions, the more I figured that if my Jewish mother could make jelly doughnuts there, in the middle of Warsaw, and survive inside the shifting borders of Poland from 1938 to 1945, I could be brave enough to change my name from the German spelling, "Dietz," which Papa'd changed it to for protection, back to "Dec," the Polish spelling. So I wrote "Etta Dec" on every school form in grade 7, and after a few days my homeroom teacher came down on me and said, "Etta, what sort of name is Dec?" I didn't want to explain, and that's when I started telling people, "It's short for 'December.' "

I might have thought about it later—what happened to the boy—but Simmi noticed right away. I remember we all stopped eating and Papa told us he had heard that the boy was sent to a concentration camp, but that he must have got away. Someone who knew that Papa and Mama had survived and gone to America saw and talked to the boy, who was working on a ferryboat between Italy and Malta. And that person wrote to somebody in Poland, who wrote to somebody in America who told them.

"So," Papa says to Simmi, "the boy was all right. Now you can eat your jelly doughnut."

But Simmi just looks at the doughnut on her plate and asks, "Did he—did the boy ever eat one of the jelly doughnuts you and Mama made?"

"No, none of us did."

"Then," said Simmi, "I think I'd rather have ice cream." So the rest of us didn't finish our doughnuts and we all ate ice cream instead.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. When Buck heard the story from me—even though he didn't know or ask anything about Simmi, and even though he and I weren't together for very long after that—right then, on the spot and forever, he stopped eating jelly doughnuts.

“*Safe* with me? *Comfortable* with me?” That's what Buck said, the day after the party, when I told him how I thought Simmi felt with him. “And of all the guys on my automatic dialer I'm glad it was you,” I told Buck. “And she even got to sleep with you.”

Buck said, “I really wouldn't call it—well, it was sleeping *only*. She wouldn't even let me take my leather jacket off; when I started to, she gave this little shake of her head to say no.” Buck looked at me as if he didn't know what was going on. “Safe with me? Comfortable with . . .?” She had him so afraid of seeming forward that he kept his boots on. “*Breathing* together, maybe. And sometimes our kneecaps touched under that old opened-up cotton sleeping bag—that was it.”

Simmi hadn't wanted to use my convertible sofa, so they'd slept beside it on a small rug, with Buck facing her, she in her wool sweater and jeans, nestled where the floor met the wall.

“Puh. Puhnub.” My father just couldn't get it right when he heard it the first time. Almost like when he first heard “crunchy granola” and thought it was one long new word.

“Puh-nob-scot” I said it slow into the phone. “Penobscot. Well he's half Penobscot, really.”

Almost twenty years in the city, and I've never met a man that I've trusted like Simmi trusts Buck. I mean *I* even met Buck, but it wasn't so much that I trusted him—for me, I think, it was those high cheekbones and that straight, jet-black hair. But Simmi had only been in New York about twenty hours before she did—Simmi, who gets uncomfortable if a man even looks at her.

When I called my parents in Coral Gables, where they live now, and told Papa about it, and that I didn't think Buck could support her, right away he said, “I'll send checks.” He said that anything was better than that constant motel-to-motel movement of hers. That he wouldn't go broke either way. “If only we can get her to just stay in one place,” he said.

After I got out of college, I had a way of advancing from job to job, but when Simmi graduated she would start out on one thing, then quit for an entirely other kind of thing. It didn't seem to matter so much at the time, because, even though she was changing jobs, she was always working. Now it matters, because she doesn't want to do any job she's done before, so there's almost nothing that she'll do.

I've been telling Buck and everybody not to get Simmi wrong. She likes to work. It's just that you can tell by the look of fear in her eyes when someone says to her, "Why don't you work in public relations?" and she says, "No, I worked in public relations," that it's useless saying to her, "Yes, but this is a different city, you'd be at a different firm, and you could try a different position there."

When I told Buck about calling Papa, he said he felt a little funny about the money part, but he'd agree as long as we let Simmi know all about it, so we did. Then Buck says to Simmi and me that our parents sounded really interesting, and it would be nice if they came up for a visit. So Simmi wouldn't have to say anything, I said to Buck, "They kind of like the idea of Simmi better than the real Simmi." When Buck asked just what that meant, Simmi came right out and said, "It means they love me better when I'm not around them."

Of course, I hadn't told Buck or Simmi the whole story. During the call, Papa said that if Buck every wanted to marry Simmi, he'd buy them an apartment. And when Mama got on the phone she said that if they did get married then maybe Simmi would think, There, that's that, and then she'd get on with whatever she was supposed to do in life. But I told them that I thought the best thing to do at this point was just to take it one check at a time.

Mama and Papa both made me promise to try to get Buck to talk to Simmi about getting professional help. I hate it when they bring it up, because I never know if they're right or wrong. But I said that sooner or later I would. Then, before we finished the call, Papa said I should make sure to tell Buck about the jelly doughnuts too, so he wouldn't bring some home by mistake and ruin

everything, and I said to him, "Don't worry, Papa, he already knows," which was the truth.

If you ask Buck if that's his real first name, he'll just answer, "My mother always called me Buck." I think it's his way of making sure everyone calls him Buck now, here in New York.

He's never told me much about his growing up in Maine, just a little bit now and then, to get me talking. He would always look at me with wonder whenever I'd tell him stories of my girlhood, about how Mama would put us on the train, and Papa would meet us in the city, and take us somewhere for ice cream, and then say, "Now to the stinky children's zoo!"

If you asked Buck what he might have been doing on a summer afternoon in 1963, he'd just say something like "Oh, making stuff. In the back yard." He wouldn't tell you that he was using scrap lumber he'd gathered to build birdhouses to sell by the side of the road, and that that's how he helped pay for his guitar, and that he really liked to work with wood, so he got good at it, and that's how he became a cabinetmaker.

To find just that much out, I had to ask him about a dozen questions. Because Buck can't believe that anybody could find those things interesting.

I've always thought Buck has too many preconceptions of what a normal childhood's like. Even if there were some things he missed, he shouldn't confuse them with what might make him happy now. He has this idea that there's some certain way to be, that it's all around and he's not in on it, but when he asked me something about Simmi the other day I told him, "You think you want to be with somebody cheerful, and have everything in place. If that happens and you're happy, fine. But what if that happens and you're not?"

Buck has admitted to me that there are times when he starts to think that Simmi's trying to tell him he really isn't so different from her. One day he took her along to Connecticut to look at some

cabinet restoration work outside Stamford, and when they got near the exit to Larchmont, he said, "We could stop off."

"Sure," she said, "Someday when we're on our way back from Bangor." Bangor, Orono, Old Town—you can tell that those places seem very far away to him, and Larchmont so near, but of course he hadn't been thinking how it all might have seemed to Simmi.

When Buck came by earlier this evening, he told me that he and Simmi were out for a Sunday-afternoon walk yesterday, and that they bumped into a couple of designers he was building cabinets for. Buck stopped to talk to them, but a pizza delivery must have gone by, because all of a sudden Simmi started sniffing the air and tugging at his arm, saying, "Buck, I smell pizza. Let's get out of here."

Things like that about Simmi aren't news to me. I could have just explained to Buck that, first, it has nothing to do with pizza, because you can take her to a pizza place where you can see pizza and smell pizza and eat pizza at the same time, and everything's o.k. But to just *smell* it without at least *seeing* it—that might make her start thinking of someplace she went for pizza in, say, 1988. Or even 1968. I could have told him that, but I thought this was a good time to keep my promise to my parents instead.

"You know, Buck," I said. "There are people who think maybe Simmi needs to see, you know, some kind of shrink. But of course I tell them that then they'd better take up a collection to send you through shrink school. Still, maybe if we could find a good professional . . . and you could talk to Simmi . . . maybe go with her . . ."

But Buck just ran both his hands at once over those high cheekbones of his and through that shining jet-black hair. It seemed to leave his eyes extra clear as he fixed them right on mine and said, more firmly than I'd ever heard him speak, "She was right about the doughnuts."

I just nodded. Yes, she was right about the doughnuts, quick about the boy.

So this evening he left here about a quarter after five, and I was surprised when he called me about an hour ago, at eleven-thirty, while Simmi was taking a bath. He said something about how he'd tried to make an issue out of the things that were bothering him, to see what he could get Simmi to say. And he especially wanted to get her to swear. He said they had dinner, and then she was lying on his sofa, reading a book, and he was on the floor, using her leg to prop his elbow on while he read the paper. When she says isn't it time for them to start heading out for coffee, though he's got nothing against it, he starts in on her that maybe they shouldn't go there so often, or maybe only on alternate nights, or one week to one coffee place and another week to another. He's trying to get her angry, but after he keeps it up for a bit her eyes go full of fear—first wide, then wet. “And then,” Buck says, “I swore *for* her. And after a while we did go where we always go for coffee, thought by that time it didn't seem like such a big deal.”

Yes, they went, but not right away. Because Simmi said, “I think I'll read my book some more before we go.” Buck thought she was even smiling a little when she said it. That was after he said, “Turn around. Turn around so I can kiss you.”

