

Toad On Fire

by Shawn Misener

People always remarked that his voice sounded like a muscle car. "Idle or rolling?" he would ask, lighting cigarettes and squinting. "Seriously though, how many people have to tell me that before I start slaughtering?"

Brenda glanced at the trees, the relaxed park-goers, the sneaky bugs fluttering between scenes and most likely considering themselves to be invisible. If they considered themselves at all. The sentience of insects was a suspect notion, she thought, not even worth the five seconds she was giving it. She smashed a voyaging ant under her thumb to prove the point. *I don't feel guilty at all*, she mused.

The sun was gracious and kept behind the clouds. They stood and stretched and silently stared at each other, silly human beings they were. Eventually she spoke: "You rev. *Vroom vroom.*"

"I guess so," he conceded, hands in pockets.

"This is, I don't know, like an arthouse film or something," she said.

"Totally pretentious," he added.

"Totally."

The drugs were good. No, they were the *best*. Hamrick the Dealer had informed her that- like all quality narcotics- she would find herself looking down on everything. Becoming a third person. She shared the little pills with Clive so they could both be narrators. It was a noble and pretentious idea.

"Where are we going?" he asked as they slid between two thorny bushes. "Machete: *Activate*"

With an ear-popping SCHVING he came to possess a large blade and wasted no time in using it to clear a path through the hostile shrubbery.

"Be careful with that, hombre," she said. His arcs and swipes were a bit too much on the loose side for her. "Have you ever used one of those before?"

"Absolutely not."

"I would like to keep my head, at least for a few more nights. Didn't you say we were gonna have sex one of these days? Isn't that in the manual?"

He slowly turned around, completely conscious of the dramatic effect such a methodical swivel would produce. He let a few stray thorns carve into his biceps and form squiggly blood patterns around his tattoos. It was all in good fun. And it was rousing the right response from her: Her breathing became ragged and desperate, her eyes glazed over and quivered briefly, she unconsciously began twisting her hair around her fingers. "Mmmmm..." he growled, batting his eyes and smacking his lips.

"Mmmmm?" she replied.

"*Mmmmm*," he confirmed, and they both fell into the bushes, propelled by the force of their sudden unstoppable laughter. The glee quickly turned to howls of pain. After all, these *were* thorn bushes.

It felt as though her body was overtaken by a thousand points of suffering, and she immediately fell into a sort of willful coma. Moving only made it worse. She could feel the thorns in her eyeballs, her lips, her ears, her breasts, her toes. Everywhere.

Clive screamed in an epic baritone, scaring off the crows that had gathered to document their LOVE EFFORTS. They collectively mourned such a waste of narrative promise.

He thoughtlessly flailed the machete, which didn't do much to release him from the bushes. Instead, two *extremely* unfortunate outcomes played out: The thorns that were already embedded in his skin slid even deeper, in some cases making contact with bone and vital organs. And, much to his dismay, he beheaded Brenda.

At this point he also opted for a willful coma instead of witnessing the rich geyser of blood that was blasting from her neck. The crows returned, recording devices on again, aware that it no longer was a LOVE EFFORT, but instead a FATAL TRAGEDY. They could hardly contain their joy, and the songs they bellowed could be heard for miles in all directions.

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When Clive regained consciousness the bushes were gone, Brenda was gone, the park was gone, *shit* everything was gone from what had seemed like a solid setting just moments before. Instead he was reclining in a large purple bean bag in an empty kindergarten classroom. He recognized the teacher pacing before him as Mrs. Ballard. She had his machete.

"This is a *nice* one, Clive," she said, turning it over and examining it. "No flaws, correct dimensions... really good work for a novice such as yourself. I even got a chance to see the way you swing it. The birds got a few good angles in. Except for the overly-dramatic severing of Brenda's head your form is impeccable."

"So that really happened."

"What kind of question is that? Think about it. It went from a love story to a tale of lifetime regret like *that*," she snapped her fingers. "Sometimes, with people like you, I wonder if you really know what's going on."

Mrs. Ballard began undressing. "Is this what you want? Are we gonna fuck right here, on the alphabet mat?" Off came the skirt, the blouse, the bra, the panties. She was moving too fast and he could see her image becoming skittish. Bad transmission.

"She suggested it to me. She wanted to have sex. Remember?"

"No," she said, her voice crackling. Her left arm was suddenly missing. "You both wanted it. It was in your manual."

"My manual," he remembered.

Mrs. Ballard was only a mouth by now, with a sliver of nose hovering inches above and spinning wildly. "My *god*," she (the mouth) breathed. "You have a terribly sexy voice. It almost sounds like a motorcycle on idle."

"Don't say that," he murmured.

"Oh, but I did," the mouth said, biting at his belt. "I know where the story starts, and I know where the story ends."

"Where's that?"

Instead of replying the mouth focused its efforts into yanking down the zipper to his jeans. Clive watched, resigned and exasperated, as the spinning nose exploded like a rocket and became lodged in the ceiling.

"Oops," said the mouth. "Remind me to get that back later."

"When it's over?"

"Yes, Clive, when it's over."

