

Popeye

by Ulrica Hume

In one of the cartoons I watched as a child, Popeye the Sailor gives Olive Oyl a bouquet of flowers. She is thrilled, he walks on air, thinking they will marry. His one-eyed heroism is soon challenged by Bluto however, who pours cement into Popeye's bath. It goes on—one disaster after another. The message is that love is hard. How crafty men are! And women, too.

At Whole Foods a man stands behind me in line. He holds a bouquet of roses. He is gruff, but charming, a throwback to another era, perhaps a spirit. He shoves the cellophaned roses my way. *Whaddya think?* he asks.

I inspect the hopeful clump. The individual petals are pink, or rather salmon, with notched brown edges. The roses are in distress. This is almost an embarrassment, the flower heads fallen away, each from the other, a mania of foliage.

Aren't they wilted? I tactfully ask.

They'll get me in the door, he answers.

I yam what I yam, Popeye would boast. Because he accepted himself, his one eye seeing the world aslant, his cans of spinach giving him superpowers. He started out as a crewmember on a ship destined to a casino on Dice Island. His life was rough, catastrophic, his surreal brawls the stuff of dreams. As a child I was mesmerized by this porthole to the world of grownups. Bluto (or Brutus, as he was later known) was Popeye's nemesis. He was a sharp point on the love triangle that involved Popeye and the hysterical damsel, Olive Oyl, who was her own woman, who faltered, but briefly, who gathered in her swift affections, remained enigmatic.

I'm sure she'll like the roses, I say to the man at Whole Foods. He beams, he is one of those overconfident fools who steps off ledges, gets up, pats himself off, and does it again. His laugh like a chainsaw. I'm good at it, he winks—but good at what? I wonder. Superimposing his corrupt positivity on a lady's better judgment, for favors of sympathy. It is a metaphysical assurance.

Frank "Rocky" Fiegel was the real-life inspiration for the Popeye character. Not much is known about him, except that he was a one-eyed, pipe-smoking, rabble-rouser who happened to like children. He lived and died in the comic book creator's hometown of Chester, Illinois; an image of Popeye marks his grave.

And so the magical sea shanty played, and love was taught to me as hardship, persecution, a false exuberance. But how to keep exploiting one's heart, to wait with frozen spinach, these coins of complicity. I watch the man waltz off, with his air of bedraggled kismet. He will knock on a door with his subpar roses. This small gesture of sober incompleteness.

I bring you some flowers.

In 1939, Margie Hines, voice of Olive Oyl, married Jack Mercer, voice of Popeye. That they had stars in their eyes should not be faulted. They later divorced.

