

I Was Big For My Age

The first two women I ever slept with were an Amazon and a dwarf. My life, like the sea, has always been defined by its extremities.

I was big for my age, but the truth is I was only eighteen in the summer of '69; wouldn't turn nineteen until December, if ever. I didn't have much to do on the way over, so I read a few pages of *Europe on Five Dollars a Day* and smiled at the girl planted across the aisle from me. But she pretended that my seat was empty.

She was all apples and cream, nipples and seam. Nice blouse, nice skirt, slender beseeching legs stretching halfway to heaven – but of course we were halfway to heaven already, high above the toothy canyons of the Atlantic. She seemed like the kind of girl who'd tried to make it to Goucher but ended up at Villa Julie. VJ. She was clearly the VJ type. What Goucher girl would be seen thumbing a worn Kahlil Gibran?

It was my first flight. I paced the long spine of the plane like an ape in a dog run.

(Soon this is going to turn into a story about VJ, Fred and the Pope, a laugh a minute. Plus there's a dwarf in here. And lots of something that's meant to seem like sex. You'll see what I mean. Looking back across forty years, 1969 was a barrel of monkeys. I'll get there. I'll even stop dropping descriptors like "toothy" in front of nouns like "canyon." Not that I'm about to invoke the shade of sad old sparse Mr. Hemingway, but after a couple of pages I'm bound to run out of somnolent adjectives and so-so poetry. So grant me my few moments of discourse, a proper tip of the hat to someone nearing sixty, just because that's the way we Old Farts like to do it, and then this thing'll pay off for you like three bells on a slot machine.)

There was the pressure under my t-shirt of the absurd money belt my father had insisted I wear; and a bit farther down, the spare rectangle of the passport pressing against my thigh. I had to grin at the thought of that picture, its queer official intaglio, the very thing to set up at a funeral service for all the teary

aunties, that sanitized, authorized version – yet there it was in my pocket, pasted to my hip, certified me, silver halides on smooth stock, and my seaside squint and generous nose had put up a fight, my full fat lips and big chin made it look as if my face had been poured from the top down.

Are you tired yet? I was exhausted.

Aviation, bureaucracy.

Technology mystified, passports terrified me – something of Orwell's I'd read some years earlier, something in the Cliff Notes. I was big for my age. I thought of the tiny me face, stamped and sanctioned, hidden against my hip; I thought of the real thing lurking above my shoulders, surly and scruff-pied under shoulder-length curls. Unkissably to the rear I marched, the soldier of ennui, and in the dank light of the bathroom examined each pore, each pore with its pliant three-day hair.

Villa Julie was standing outside the door when I pushed it open.

“Hardly any light,” I said. “Don't plan on doing much reading.”

She looked at me as if I were responsible for the stench drifting through the rear of the cabin.

She was nearly as tall as I was. I stood six-four and weighed an even two hundred and I was a virgin save one black night, one blonde girl, a midget, likely a virgin save me, but I didn't know her name and when I got back to my seat and closed my eyes all I could vision was the passage of my midget's lower back as it swelled into her underpants. They weren't panties. They were underpants. There was a small tumescent roll of flesh that pushed out quite pornographically and lapped the elastic band. I couldn't even see her face anymore against the sand of my drooping lids, and thus mured I slumbered in my tight cage against the murmur of the engines, the buzz of the tiny bulbs and the tumble of all those human animals.

They were trapped as I was with their one-inch black and white snaps hidden away in their luggage, their coat pockets. We were running above the clouds, above a seascape rolling slowly from dark to light, miles above what might become, with the thin bad luck of a crapped-out engine, our saliferous common

crypt – and we couldn't stand each other worth a fiddler's fart. They bored me and I bored them and we went to hell ten times ten upon each other, breathing each other's air and despair, night into day and all the way from D.C. to London. I slept.

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Awake again. Still the dark light in the belly of the beast, the whirl of the firmament blanching our fragile hull, the two-coconuts rump of VJ Girl smothered in her seat with Kahlil smirking at me like a sentry from the back of her book – mustachioed, middle-aged Cerberus, this authorial Kahlil, frumped out past the wet cleft beauty of his youth. Have you ever encountered those (can't call 'em beefcake, let's say cheesecake) shots? What a mug. And now, what a mug. Shapeshifter! The flight of youth. The blight of beauty.

But this the plane we all must board, I suppose (not my thought then, I'll grant you, but surely now, at the distance of four decades, a notion inexorable), the long fall into the teeth of the sun. Guten Tag, Heidi Klum. Goodbye, Bettie Page. Good luck, Ms. Ciccone.

I would apologize for the cut-rate philosophy, even cheaper and plusher than Gibran's, perhaps, but it's always the same story of time and materials, isn't it? You get the picture: the wrong way run against the stars and the night and the rain, god damn it, even for all our brash decelerations. I know it now and I suppose in a way I knew it even then.

I had decided that if I could find a job I wasn't going back.

But nobody was privy to this secret except my sumptuous pygmy, and she'd been drunk – drunk as a skunk, as we said in those days – and I doubt she ever caught my name. No way she'd absorbed my foggy escape plan through all her salt and squalling. Where had she come from? How had she made it up the two

flights of my dormitory stairs and down the party-loud hallway and into my exact room, my exact bed? All I knew is that she came to me shirtless in the white astonished gape of the moon. Ah, what a moon.

I awakened to her tears and incoherence. I spoke to her softly, as you would to a panic-stricken child. She made a little nest on the edge of my bed, settled in, and I soothed her as best I could, yet all the while my erection raged wild as a chimp, the secret shame of the pastor, the counselor, the confessor, wagging under my thin blanket. Oh, I was the very picture of probity above those covers. She dried up after a while, the decisive collapse of madness against the smooth and meaningless flow of my words, and then she grew soft and curious. She looked upon me in the low light with what I believe was tenderness. I offered her my confidence. She offered me her mouth.

I took it, of course, and her tongue her upper lip her cheek her neck her nape, leisurely they were ceded to me, lands lost in the flow of time to foreign boots, and so we started at our own pace down the pink brick road of devirgination. We took each step slow and delicious. When finally I abandoned the real estate of her mouth, it was only to stray over her short immaculate torso. I tuned her nipples in the dark like a ham radio operator. We moved on from there, irrevocably, resolutely, Polly Wanna Popsicle, Monkey Ride the Clown, all those sundry *Penthouse* pasquinades I'd been percolating that half decade past.

Reader, here's the kicker: it had been just two nights ago. Now, on the plane, it seemed like two years. I could hear her laughter in the dark, still fresh in my ears, sweet laughter after the festivities had eroded to the sibilance of night air hissing under the sash; it was the music of fine madness, the cachinnation of a Munchkin.

Have you ever heard the delighted machine gun chirps of a little person? Just like in the movie. She was as tall as I as we lay abed, and we fell to sleep kissing in the wet sheets, kissing like babies in a bath, a sweet babble of tongues, and innocent and silly after all that crazy first-time action. We fell to sleep bathed in the alembics of each other's breath, but sometime in the middle of the night I awoke to discover that she was gone.



VJ was off again to the bathroom. Maybe she was smoking in there. I decided to push up after her, she was all that was going on on that plane, but just as I started to raise my bulk she returned and began to fuss about in the storage bin above her seat.

I slid back down and her can was maybe two feet from my face then, buzzing under her skirt like a honeybee over the great Atlantic, and no man in the section could ignore her sixty seconds of sway and bump. If the midget had been there she would have barely come up to that can, she could have peeked under that skirt. VJ might have dropped down upon her all in a whoosh and made her disappear. I fell finally into a light sleep wondering if Judy Garland had hung between takes with the little people. How soaring she must have seemed to them, tiny little Judy – the giantess. Those midgets, those dwarves, those pygmies, they probably chewed their friends for decades about hanging with Judy, and the stories got better with the years, I'm sure. For many it must have been the high point of their lives.

I decided to write a poem. Low fizz of the lights and no pen – “Can I borrow something to write with, ma'am . . . ?”

. . . and before the stew even answered, VJ said, “Here, you can use this,” and a standard Bic passed over the aisle and then it was something called Seven Card Stud appearing line by line in my lap, it had to do with each week you're dealt seven cards, and plink plink plink you're down to four and it's the middle of the week, the days plink away slick as shoes in a mudslide and you're down to nothing, you're on your ass, stud, on to the next deal, seven cards, plink plink plink, seven cards. A couple times more and you call it a month.

You'd think a Hopkins boy could do better.

But no, I was stuck in the Sciences, no Liberal Arts for me – not for my boy sez my practical papa, and can't you just see the pips lining his collar, the jackboots shining? – and so I had to forgo, forsake,

forswear the careful ministrations of the laddies in Gilman Hall, no history, no music, no literachur for me, just the careful drone of the lower quad and the drip of the days into the beakers and now I was on a plane for the first time in my life with a Bic in my hand and a drone of its own and no end to my poetry, and VJ looking over to see how it was coming and god *damn* Kahlil Gibran, the bastard was sneering from the safety of his book jacket, done, desiccated, and yet cosseted in her hands he was, sneaky old Kahlil, looking for all the world like Einstein, over the shark, over the rainbow, over one million copies sold, and I realized it wasn't as easy as it looked. None of it was.



Her name was Lizzie Haskell, and it turned out she was neither VJ nor Goucher. So much for my career as a detective.

She had graduated the poor public school system that bubbled like a boil on the northwest suburban neck of Baltimore – Sudbrook Middle, Milford Mill High – and matriculated to the offices of one Melvyn J. Friedman, Esq., Baltimore proper, there to suffer the vulgarities of its principal and his collections, reorganization and bankruptcy practice. She spent one-half of her day on the phone, screening calls, the other half evading Melvyn's reptilian caress. Now she was on a half-summer's leave of absence.

I was a giant of mighty bone and bold emprise; I pushed on. This was her first trip to Europe, her first trip anywhere. She'd before this moment escaped Baltimore's orbit only so far as a summer's week each year in Ocean City might allow, and that with her vastly extended family. Third in a nuclear nest of five, first girl, whip-smart, long and loopy and teased for it, virginity tossed at thirteen to her next-door neighbor in a threesome that included the peculiar coupling of that young boy and his best friend. The incident lent her a worldly perspective.

As well you'll see, once I'm through tightening these lugs. I'm almost there.

We were orphans on a plane, twin and twain, the first two through Customs and on a train and off again, and then we were blinking in the early sunlight at ancient London, all stone and wood and flesh, and we had pounds in our pockets and we were searching for a cheap hotel. The red buses and black cabs crawled all around us, the runnels and rills of a great ant farm, double-decked and commodious and the world was, as they say, our oyster. First week of June two months and a half before Max Yasgur's farm was overrun by half a million Aquarian expositors, but what did we know? – we were far from the homeland, just a pair of long American students met in the heavens and wandering now the mouth of Carnaby Street, very improperly dressed, by the way, and if you had slung two cameras around our necks we couldn't have looked any more like tourists.

We had decided to find a hotel together, separate rooms of course, two heads better than one we reckoned, and I had the *Five Dollars a Day* book abrim with frugal hint and shabby suggestion, and so we dragged our luggage through the lanes of Soho and settled in adjoining cells in a fleabag along some not-so-tony side street. It was well past midday by the time we'd made our lodgings, and bidding fizzy adieu we each of us slipped into a well-earned nap. I dropped to my sheets in full dress and then I was out.



I hardly ever recall my dreams. What I remember was the steady tat tat tat of the rain that resolved to a steady tapping on my door, and when I stumbled across the room and pulled it open VJ smiled at me with the hair still wild across her sleepy eyes. In a fair demonstration of fluidity she glided past me, located my Baedeker and settled across the bed in one long sweep.

“We must eat,” she yawned, “and I’ve heard that Indonesian dinners are all the rage over here – so let’s see if this silly book of yours is worth the paper it’s printed on.”

We stumbled out into the last light and in just that way found ourselves sitting across a thirty-dish rijsttafel not twenty minutes later, fried egg, beef, chicken, lemon grass, coconut, condiments, sambals,

satay, sajours, fish, fruit, pickles and nuts, we were saturated with curry and aflame with spice, we were floating on a sea of cheap red and decided to walk it off when we were finished, but the only walk we could manage was the single block back to our flop. VJ looped her arm with mine as soon as we hit the street. She was wearing low heels and we were perfectly eye to eye, a Rockefeller and a Rockette.

We were giggling winy giggles when we pushed through the lobby. Our bodies were close, close up the narrow steps, too, and the curry and cheap red all over her lips and tongue and ten minutes outside my door on a single kiss – deeper even than my dwarf’s – and ten more inside, and the next morning we turned in her key and saved the charge of an extra room that we no more needed than a corpse needs a cathedral.

Time is a river, they say, and we were two sugar cubes dipped in the drink. And ah, how the fish will sip at that vague sweetness, even as it dissipates. When you’re young you look upon the aging and the old, and you think, How the hell could they let that happen? How could Beautiful Kahlil let that happen, that back cover shot?

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VJ liked especially to lie in the forest of my chest and have me recite to the *nth* the long details of my night with the midget – dear lord, we’d even named her Midge – and thus twelve-plus feet of American youth lay beneath the moons of the Old World countless hours recapitulating every aspect of my defloration, analyzing the means and methods of three feet and a half of horny dwarf.

Oh, horny dwarf about covers it; that’s what Midge became to us. But still, there had to be a back story. For all I’d begged her to come clean, Midge never offered so much as a clue as to what she was doing in my dorm. The night was good, the time surreal, I’d let it drop. Now, in London, the mystery had VJ and me by the napes of our naughty necks. We thought and re-thought The Narrative of Midge in the Dark – limitless rewrites upon our pillows – and decided finally

a) that she had been dropped drunk and unshirted that evening upon the cropped lawns of the campus by an unreconstructed sadist – doubtless her pent-up Colts-lovin’ Boh-guzzlin’ crab-crackin’ stepdaddy, likely most recent in a line of same, and wild with frustration at her queer inaccessible beauty, but too much the Essex gentleman to simply rape her and have done: the equivalent of a swift kick through the trailer door assbackwards onto the gravel, but softer, this, and funnier; and

b) that it was the crabbed and random hand of fortune that had pointed her half-nudity to my room. Pure chance. Let he that hath the steerage of her corset direct her tail. And there was a certain mordancy to the situation, too. I was, after all, the tallest freshman on that floor.

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Five days into London and VJ and I were plotting our way to Bruxelles. It was a little after nine in the morning, I believe. Half-naked as the Night of Midge we lay a’snooze (she the bottom half, I the top) when we were startled into daylight by a loud, unwelcome thumping upon our door.

We threw ourselves together and opened it some moments later to the blaring self-introduction of one Sally Santini – rotund and bald, unsmiling, clay nose bulbed capaciously, sporting – at best – half a chin. Several half chins, actually, each cascading from beneath the nest of its parent.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Santini?” I asked. I didn’t like his look. “My friend and I were just thinking about going down to breakfast, so – and I don’t mean to be rude – whatever it is, I hope it’s quick.”

He burst into a big stubbly grin. He had the eyes of a basset hound and his small mouth tended to the circular when he was listening, as though he were holding a hot dog between his lips. But now he was talking.

Sally was short for Salvatore, he explained, “and what I am t’inkin of, it might not be so quick. Ya gotta minute, kids?” As he pushed past me I examined his face with a certain awe. The heaviest stubble I’d ever seen, and this Salvatore/Sally was still wearing traces of shave cream.

“I’m yer nex’door neighbor, so ta speak.” He nodded towards his room. “Maybe ya heard me movin aroun in dere? Da walls here, dere so t’in dey only got one side. *Ha!* Good one, eh?”

Sally was pleased with his little jest. “Anyway, I been lissnin ta you kids tru da wall. I been watchin ya in da hallway. Yer good-lookin kids. Tall. Very tall. Y’know, two smart kids like you could make a bundle dis summer. A bundle. Take yer trip an’ make it pay off for ya da whole time. *‘Pay as ya go,’* but in reverse! Good one, eh? Ya just gotta use yer heads, ya dig? Earn a few shekels. Ya gotta use what God give ya.”

Who was he calling kids? I don’t think Sally Santini was that long-ago morning a day over twenty-five. But I stifled my resentment:

“Well, Lizzie and I could use some extra money, I guess. Neither of us owns the Bank of Baltimore. So what do you have in mind, Sally? And where do you come from, anyway?”

“I hail from here an’ dere an’ everywhere. But basically I hail from South Philly. And Brooklyn. Not dat it matters. Lissen, Balteemore, what I got in mind, I wanna tell ya, but I wancha ta promise first no monkey business, cause yer a big kid and I don’t cotton ta no smackin around. Plus, I have a nasty left hook, so don’ say I didn’ warn ya if ya get smart on me. I’m from da city, we know how ta use our dukes. So what I’m about ta say, if it’s gonna upsetcha, just promise me first I can say it and no monkey business. I don’t want no monkey business.”

“Alright already,” chimed in Lizzie, “just get on with it. He won’t hit you. And neither will I. What do you want us to do, Mr. Santini, knock over a few banks for you like Bonnie and Clyde?” She mimicked Bonnie Parker pulling on a cigar. Faye, or Groucho.

“Kinda like Faye Dunaway, yer on da right track girlie. Yer movie star A-1 goods, first class. So what I gotta say is dis. Da walls are t’in here and I got ears, is what it is. It’s no secret what you two are up to every

night, da whole floor can hear. And what I'm t'inkin is, you two, yer two good-lookin kids. Now don't get me wrong, he ain't no Rock Hudson, dis one, but he's okay. An' anyway, dey'll all be watchin *you*, little lady."

When he said "little" you could see that he knew it was funny; Lizzie stood nearly a foot taller than Sally and, I was beginning to suspect, many feet closer to the angels. Sally was no saint, and whatever he was cooking had a fairly strong smell.

"*Why* would they be watching her?" I asked.

"Why you damn fool, because she'll be nekkid as da Lady Vagina or whaddeva ya call her. Da one on da horse's back. Nekkid as Eve, mother to us all. Nekkid as da day she was born. Like da girl on da clam shell, ya know da pitcher. Ya can't make a fuck film widdout she's nekkid."

"Fuck film? You mean a blue movie? A *smoker*? You want us to make a smoker?"

"Kid, I got it all worked out. Not a smoker. A real full-lenk feature film an' popcorn in da lobby an' jujubes like dey do wit Elizabeth Taylor. In color. Dis girl Lizzie here, she got what it takes. An' you too, kid. Ya see, all ya gotta do is keep doin' whatcha been doin', but let me *film* it. An' here's da hook: We're in *Europe!* Ya dig? You could fuck in fronna da Eiffel fuckin Tower. You could fuck in fronna Big Ben. You ever heard udda College Seeum, or whaddeva dey call it? In Itlee. Ya goin' ta Itlee? It's huge, dey use ta feed da Christians to da lions right inna center ring, da Pope could do anyt'ing he wanted widda Christians he didn' like. Same as today. You could eat her like a lion eatin a Christian . . . real slow, ya know? Take yer time." Sally leered a million dollar leer.

I could tell he'd thought a good deal about eating my Lizzie real slow.

"We gotta gedda camera can shoot at night, we need sumpin low light, cause I can see us doin' a lotta shadows an' artsy shit like whatzisname, Antolioli, ya know who I mean. Artsy fartsy. Cancha see her as da slave girl in da middle udda College Seeum wit her hair all in her eyes like it is right now? *Verrry* sexy. Yeah, we get her all dolled up like a slave girl, ya know, like Raquel Welch. I'll play da Pope, we'll get some

little guinea kid ta shoot dat scene. But yer Lizzie, she'll be bigger'n Raquel Welch. I even gotta name for it. *Aroun' da World wit Lizzie an' Fred*. Or whaddeva yer name is, kid."

My name's not Fred.

"You could call it *The Grand Tour*," offered Lizzie.

I looked at her with eyes that must have resembled railway tunnels. "What are you *talkin'* about, Lizzie? Are you out of your mind? You can't be taking this bum seriously. You've got a mother and father; and grandparents, for Christ's sake. And friends. And a job. What the hell do you think would happen if your butt started showing up all over the screens of those dirty little movie houses? Don't you think someone would notice? And those places are disgusting. Everyone says they're sticky, they smell."

"See, dat's da beauty of it, kid. Nobody she knows would be caught *dead* inna place like dat. We put her in wigs an' stuff, we shoot inna shadows, nobody knows it's Little Lizzie from Balteemore. And who's gonna be lookin' at yer face, kid? Yer inna clear. Yer bote inna clear. Plus, we start out distributin local, like in Paris, somewheres like dat. I hear Paris is real open-minded wit dis kinda stuff, and den dere's Amsterdam. You heardda dat town? Even worse! Dey got whores in glass cages in Amsterdam. Glass cages! Do ya know anyone from Amsterdam, kid?"

"Little Lizzie from Baltimore?" I repeated, a little dazed.

"Don' worry abouddit. We'll give her a new name if ya like. We could call her Delilah or somethin. Delilah Desmilah. And you could be Samson. Samson Longbow. No, no, *get this!* – Samson *Longsticker*. Cancha see dat rollin across dem screens?"

Sally's hands went up like opposing L's, he was framing the credits already.

"Samson an' Delilah. *Verrry* romantic. An' forty percent udda profits go ta youse an' d'udder half ta me, of course, seein's as I'm da one come up widda idea, and da money, except I need ya ta lend me just enough fer a camera anna coupla lights fer a coupla weeks seein's as I just hadda small, um, whatchacallit,

financial reversal. Okay, Samson? Dat's all dere is to it. I even got an in wit gettin some wholesale-like movie equipment. We're as good as in da can, I tell ya. Da sets are free if we play our cards right. Set-ups by day and den we sneak back in at night for da money shots. Whaddaya say?"

I was eighteen and dumb as a brick. Lizzie looked at me and smiled. Then she looked at Sally.

"You're not very good with your math, Mr. Santini. I hope you're a better cameraman than a mathematician. Half of a hundred percent is fifty, not forty. But the thing is, I think you have to salt away ten percent of the gross for expenses – and don't kid yourself, we're going to have to bribe a bobby or two. From what I hear of the gendarmes, they'll be happy to let us do it so long as we let 'em watch. They might even stand guard for us. But not every man is as liberal as a Frenchman. So all the rest should fall to the bottom line, and that leaves us maybe ninety percent to split, if we're lucky, and since there are three of us, that works out to thirty percent each." (Whip-smart.)

Sally frowned.

"Plus you get to see my tits each and every night of the summer, even if it's only through a camera lens. Do we have a deal?"

"Forty percent fer me," growled Sally, and his eyes narrowed.

"You say forty. These say thirty," countered Lizzie, and she pulled open her shirt and let her girls do the rest of the talking. They were marvelous negotiators, very full of themselves.

Sally's eyes grew wide again. He was eye-to-nipple with his adversary, five-five of him, six-three of her. Her little pink tips jutted like pencil erasers. He drank his fill for five, ten, fifteen seconds. Finally Lizzie coughed, and her mams bounced. Globy miracles they were, the planet's Eighth Wonder and its Ninth, as I'd come to learn, even better than I'd imagined on the plane. The plane was a billion years ago. And God knows what Sally'd imagined through his wall.

“Okay, okay, lady, ya drive a hard bargain. Tree-way split. Tirty percent fer me. Ten ta shmear a cop or two and buy da film, dat leaves tirty fer eacha ya. Fitteen per titty, Delilah. So okay, ya win. Ya in?”

Lizzie closed her shirt and buttoned it with the delicacy of Shirley Temple.

“I’m in,” she said. “Fred’s in, too.”

And that’s how Lizzie and I got into the movie business.

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The next morning Sally Santini was at our door before eight; his sharp rap once again roused us from our drunken sleep. He had all sorts of movie equipment behind him, some of it looking quite expensive. He was beaming like a quartz halogen softbox.

“Ya see, kid? Ya see what I got last night fer yer money? Summa dis stuff just fell offa da back of a truck, if ya know what I mean. Oh, wait . . . *lorry*. I forgot where we was at fer a minute. I just didn’ wancha t’inkin old Sally was gonna take yer money an’ run. Sally’s not dat kinda guy, I hope ya see dat now.”

“Sally, all I can see right now is that open bathroom door just down the hall there. I gotta pee. But yes, it looks like you did a good job.”

Sally’s wattage increased.

“Listen,” I said, “why don’t we meet over breakfast downstairs, say eight-thirty? No, nine. I need a shower and shave, and even Little Lizzie from Balteemore isn’t a bed of petunias first thing in the morning. Order us some coffees. We’ll be downstairs at nine. And Sally . . . leave the studio in your room. Or in here. I don’t care where. All I know is, you look like Alfred Hitchcock standing out there in the hall with all that junk. Hitchcock with the stubble from Hell.”

Sally rubbed his chins and grinned. He grinned and nodded and looked at his shadow painted on the floor of the hallway. A charming silhouette.



There's a great arcing bridge just beyond Big Ben, and we were standing upon it in a frisky breeze. It was nearly noon. The great London landmark loomed huge behind us. Tourists in double-deckers were taking snapshots of us as they whizzed by. Could you blame them? I was dressed in hunting boots and a smoking jacket; I was wearing an ascot; I was squinting through a monocle looped through a long gold chain, fake. Lizzie was decked out to look like Samuel Johnson's serving wench.

Sally had a bizarre sense of fashion, but he wasn't just our cinematographer: he was our director and producer as well. And wardrobe master.

Lizzie and Sally had holed up the three days prior, teasing out our script; I'd been to the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace and Madame Tussauds. Each afternoon I'd come back loaded down with pamphlets and stories, but it was all they could do to contain themselves while I blabbed on about this or that. Then, at the first opening, one of them would say, "Okay, now listen to *this!*"

And off they'd go, egging each other on like maniacs, making changes on the fly and building upon each other's insanity like termites sculpting their mounds as they talked their way through one outrageous plot line after another.

"But I can't do that," I'd say, "have a heart. No human body can bend that way."

"Ah, don' be silly, kid, lookatcha, you could do *anyt'ing!*"

"But why would a woman let me do *that* in the first five minutes right after I met her?"

“Because yer a hansum kid is why, kid. Besides, don’ worry abouddit. Ya t’ink too much. No guy dat’s sittin inna dark strokin away is gonna be askin nuttin, all da blood’s gonna leave dere brains as soon as dey see little Lizzie’s tits. Go ahead, baby, show’m yer tits!”

And Lizzie threw open her shirt and they both dissolved in gales of laughter.

“Yer gorgeous, baby! Look, if he can’t get it up one night, let me step in an’ do da trick. Old Sally’s got it where it counts. We could write it inta da script. Da Pope’s gotta get his, ya know. Dem choir boys’ll only getcha so far . . .”

Lizzie smiled and looked at me. “The short ones. It’s always the short ones,” she sighed. “What is it with the short ones?”

Then Sally laughed like a bulldog coughing and off they went on a new story line.

I told them they could forget all about the Pope, and Lizzie nodded, and Sally just kept coughing like a dog.

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Isn’t the basic premise of pornography that someone out there is having more fun than you are? Well, that was us. We were like bakers, we were making fun you could taste, fun in the front window hot and fresh and come in and sniff the goodies.

And don’t shake your head – what if the gig were offered to you? The eighteen-year-old-you? I mean, who would know? – that’s what you would ask yourself.

Or tell yourself.

“Two good-lookin kids like you, Americans . . . it might show up on half a dozen screens in art houses in Paris or Amsterdam. Or Berlin. It’s wild in Berlin. Den it will be gone, gone as yesterday’s paper.”

We believed him. We were brash and glorious in our innocence.

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We were brash and glorious in our arrogance, and for six weeks lit up the various European hotspots with the candles of our presumption, so sure of ourselves by day, joining our names inside the curve of the Leaning Tower with a thousand other beef-wits, leaving our thumbprints upon naked Vermeers - a private, pestilent game - challenging the traffic circles of Rome on sneakered feet, sunning naked by the crags of Nice - we could hear the fish laughing hard from their shallow blues.

And by night, the movies. The movies. Her long, pliable beauty captive forever. And we thought it would last forever.

What did we know?

What did we know of the suspect, the criminal, the savage? It grew both absolute and regular for us - what did we know of the relative and the revolutionary?

Brussels, Amsterdam, Munich, Vienna, Madrid. The fine old stones of Sienna beneath our sandals. We were Romeo and Juliet in blue, tracing the steps of Leonard, of Olivia. We were stars in the making, and an unmaking of the stars: there was no time for job hunting. All there was was the great outdoor museum of our lives - and fucking. Fucking for Sally.

Sally had become the medium, finally, through which we came to correspond, and as it might be said of a churchman that whatever the sins of his youth, in time he comes to live for the church, so it was with us: whatever we thought of Sally that first morning as he stood half-shaved in the hallway outside our door, we came that summer to live for the Pope and his spools of glory.

His spools of glory – did I really write that?

Can after can of film, friend, that disappeared with him when he waved us goodbye that final day at Heathrow.

And no Sally ever again.

And no movie.

Whatever happened to *The Grand Tour*?

Life is lovely, and we were dying. We were dying in the green chase of our youth, but what did we know? Trees for the cutting, fine lumber. I stood six foot four and she nearly the same and we were both big for our age, for any age. The blades of time, though, were clanging that summer in different forests.

I went back to a life. Lizzie went back to another.

Hopkins, Melvyn – these were our destinies, appointed as stars in the endless ether.