

The Distillery



LOVERS & HEROES

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Once upon a time in the 1990s, on Chicago's North Side, near Wrigley Field, there was a certain ordinary apartment, its living room sparsely furnished with a sagging second-hand couch, a small scratched coffee table, a few potted plants, and a long narrow wall of crude shelves, the bricks and wooden planks giving off a barely noticeable odor, the dusty worn-out scent of old books. On the opposite wall, as if it were a snide comment on the occupants' intellectual aspirations, a single small window endured a view of an air shaft and brick wall, its dark, sooty cement caked with Chicago's famously impenetrable grime.

Inside lived Joey and Marla, who loved each other but were finding their love increasingly difficult to understand. One muggy summer day, they returned home from a trip to New York City, where they had been visiting Marla's sister, a mother of two children and wife of a successful investment banker whose previous year's salary-plus-bonus covered the entire cost of a three-bedroom, two-bath co-op on Central Park West. (They paid \$2.8 million, in cash.)

When Joey and Marla came into their depressing little apartment, they silently put down their suitcases and looked around, avoiding each other's eyes. They both wore loose-fitting clothes, Marla an orange cotton sun-dress with a flower-print pattern; Joey, gray running shorts with a baggy blue T-shirt that had a picture of a wolf above the words, "Predators keep the balance."

As they entered the living room, Marla was thinking about the difference between her life and her sister's; Joey contemplated the subway scene he'd just witnessed. When Marla noticed the way Joey sat listlessly on the corner of the couch, his strong wide shoulders slouching,

she sat down next to him. As was frequently the case, she addressed his concerns, instead of hers.

"The guy was a monster," she said.

Joey didn't look up. With his gaze fixed on the floor, he took a long, slow breath.

"And he might have been carrying a knife or a gun," Marla continued. "You're not a policeman. The subways are dangerous. It's a fact of life. And Chicago's as bad as anywhere else, as bad as New York."

Joey thought of the woman on the subway and the flap of her gray raincoat collar as she pulled it close to her neck and switched seats while the man behind her followed, his bald, blotchy-skinned head jutting forward like an old dog's. And he was a big man, with enormous arms and legs, his nylon running shorts ripped up the side, threads hanging over the side of his chalk-white thighs. He was more than just a little off: the glazed look in the eyes, the jerky movements, the way he pulled himself with his arms from seat to seat, as if his legs were useless stumps, until suddenly there was a spring in his thighs and a leap across an aisle. Too weird, Joey thought. It was just too weird. One of the lost ones. Nature's victims. But is it my responsibility?

"We did what we could," Marla said.

"Telling the guy in the token booth?"

"It was better than trying to be some kind of a hero."

He knew the conversation was over. Marla's tender look—eyes wide, lips slightly parted, head tilted—made Joey think of someone about to sing softly.

"I guess it just got under my skin," he said. "That's all."

Marla leaned toward him, bending over the couch. She started to offer a kiss. But in the corner of her eye a dark fleck appeared, then in an instant it lengthened, jerked forward, back, and to the side. She turned her head.

"Eeeewh!"

"What?"

She pointed to the corner of the floor, near an old steam-heat radia-

tor, and there it was, just under one of the gray-painted coils. "Cockroach!" she yelled.

Thus began a familiar routine. Marla stepped back and lifted her foot in the air while Joey, as if it were choreographed, positioned himself to slip off her sandal and, in a single smooth arc, smash the heel down on the cockroach.

THhaack! Joey looked at the sandal. "Got it."

"Now that's what I call being a hero," said Marla, handing Joey a tissue. "Wipe it really good, OK?"

This second reference to heroism concerned Joey, though he couldn't name why. He could only feel a vague and fuzzy unease without making any link, intellectual or otherwise, to the larger implications. Fortunately, we can examine his life more closely, penetrating the layers of his resistance, appreciating the so-called "sacred" buried beneath the so-called "banality." (Yes, herein lies one argument for the enduring value of fiction: the offering of a glimpse of the so-called "psycho-religiosity" of everyday life.)

So what to make of it? Joey knew the line "Now that's what I call being a hero" resonated somewhere in the closed closets of his mind, but he didn't connect this muffled echo to what philosopher William James had in mind when he wrote, "Mankind's common instinct for reality has always held the world to be essentially a theater for heroism." The unasked question, for Joey, was precisely this: Is our central calling, our main task on this planet, to be heroic?

Of course, in this post-everything age of the ironic-hip-detached, such a question embarrasses the questioner. Who among us so baldly asks about the meaning of life? Who wonders about our "task on this planet?" Joey himself could not formulate these questions without a crippling self-consciousness and dread of the label "New Age." To be serious, but not tedious; bold, but not brazen; filled with a sense of power and majesty without losing sight of our status as simple, lowly creatures—even these dichotomies would make Joey crack a sardonic laugh. Ah, yes, to joke, or not to joke? That is the question.

He looked at the cockroach squashed on the heel of Marla's shoe.

"Hero? I'm a murderer," he said, pausing for dramatic effect. "Violence across species, you know, is not really that different from two animals within the same species fighting for territorial superiority."

Marla smiled, the curve of her lips accenting her long, narrow face. "My dear crazed killer, can I have my sandal?"

Joey reached for a tissue and wiped it clean. "The murder weapon, the scene of the crime." He kneeled at her feet, continuing, "Your slipper, my dear."

With a queenly toss of her head, Marla extended her leg, allowing him to put on her sandal. She watched as the top of her foot was caressed and finally kissed with exaggerated chivalry.

"You realize, of course," Joey said in a thick whisper, "you're an accomplice."

Marla yanked her ankle from Joey's grasp and walked away, dragging her feet, the soles of her sandals slapping softly against the hard wood floor. "Great," she said, flatly. "When we go to jail, we can share the same cell, which is practically what this place is anyway, compared to my sister's."

He stood quickly, springing to the window, where he threw back the curtain. "What—this? Sure, it's not Central Park, but this is a world-class brick wall. And this air shaft is nothing less than gorgeous."

"Yes, I've seen the tourists lining up," Marla said, raising her hands to the sides of her mouth, as she were holding a bullhorn. "Ladies and gentleman, please note this famous bit of Chicago architecture. The buildings you see here are perfectly placed so that none of the apartments receive any sunlight at all!"

"That's not true."

Marla heard a familiar earnestness in Joey's voice, and she knew that his feelings had been genuinely hurt, that, somehow, the teasing had crossed a line. (Ah, yes . . . to joke, or not to joke.) But she didn't back off.

"I know, the fire escape," she said. "In May, for about twenty minutes every day in the late afternoon, you can get a suntan on that fire escape."

There was a wound being touched, like the peeling of a blister opening to a patch of raw pink skin. Joey poked around the tender spot, avoiding the pain, continuing the joke. "A regular vacation spot," he said. "Come on, let's go out on that fire escape right now. You can kiss me under the moonlight."

"Moonlight? There'll probably be an air conditioner dripping on our heads."

With his chest swelling, Joey stepped forward. "I'll shield you," he said. His voice dropped an octave below its normal register. "My beloved, no air conditioner shall ever I permit to drip on thee." Bending slowly from the waist, back straight, Joey reached for Marla's hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, one at a time.

Marla recognized that her desire for a more serious discussion was being successfully squashed. Their joking often had that effect, making her feel there was something pretentious about her own emotions, her convictions. Lighten up, baby, lighten up. But in this moment she couldn't stop taking seriously the comparison between her sister's life and her own. Little Bonnie, not even thirty, and already two kids, a view of Central Park, a ridiculously huge walk-in cedar closet—but all of it with his last name. And that's the kicker, Marla thought. Where is Bonnie, the real Bonnie? She's nowhere, lost in her husband's life, playing the woman's role, the mommy, the hostess, the boss's wife.

She thought about the way Bonnie had once looked, before she was married, her signature outfit: tight jeans; high-top sneakers, V-neck T-shirt, her pack of unfiltered Camels rolled in the sleeve. It was a tough look, edgy, almost butch. And up in Wisconsin Bonnie had been something of a small-town rebel, rejecting her dad's loving Catholic death-grip, sneaking off to smoke in the field behind the church. And she seemed, in those days, so genuinely interested in her big sister's ideas, the future of feminism, the development of a post-patriarchal consciousness. But now? Give it up, Marla told herself. It's not my place to judge my sister. It's her life. The real freedom is the freedom to choose.

This quaint line did nothing to quell her gnawing anger. Marla

looked down at Joey, who continued his kisses, cooing softly, slowly working his way up her arm. As he stood bent over in front of her, ringlets of chocolate-brown hair hanging on his shoulders, the combination of his sloped posture and dangling curls gave him a distinctly feminine quality. But his hands were large, with long, masculine fingers, the knuckles hairy. He gripped her elbow.

And with a sudden swell of sexual feeling, Marla plunged her hands deep into his mop of hair and pulled his head up into her chest, pressing his face into her breasts. He moaned loudly, the long, low note striking her as the bellow of some strange, dangerous creature, like the deep, brassy call of a whale rising from the depths. But she flashed again on her sister—or, more precisely, Tom, her sister's husband, with his cocky one-hand-in-the-pocket way of standing, that scrawny frame leaning like a puny step-ladder against the molding of his high-ceilinged walls, the spaciousness echoing with the sound of change jingling in his pocket. She pictured the little lump of Tom's hand in the big pocket of his well-creased pants, and her feelings for Joey vanished. The weight of his head against her chest was oppressive, constricting her breath. She stepped away.

Joey stepped after her, but she grabbed a pile of mail and sat quickly on the couch.

"Here."

Joey hesitated, still feeling the effects of that great groaning desire. He puzzled over her frowning face, until she handed him an envelope, which, after a moment, he tore open and read.

"Hey—I've been invited to attend the N.C.M.M. conference in New York."

Marla didn't look up. She was distracted by an overseas aerogram from Joey's brother, which she picked up cautiously, and then put down. Big brother Saul—what does he want?

Joey didn't notice the letter and continued, "After reading your series of articles in *Wingspan*—" He stopped and looked up at Marla. "I wonder if they also saw the one about that workshop?"

"Hmm?"

"The piece on my workshop in Madison."

"Was that also in Wingspan?"

It annoyed Joey that Marla didn't remember where his articles were being published. He grabbed a copy from the coffee table and waved the obscure men's magazine in the air.

"Oh, yeah. I thought it was the other one published at that college in Minnesota."

Joey dropped the magazine, which lacked the weight to make a sufficient thud. "Anyway," he went on, turning back to the letter, "the Alachua Men's Center would like to formally invite you to attend the third Annual—"

"Hey, Alachua?" Marla interrupted, hoping to make amends for her earlier slip. "Is that where that guy...?"

"Harold Davies?"

"No, the guy at Harvard. Head of the Gender Studies Department."

"Davison," Joey answered. "He's the one who can't stand Bly's terminology."

Marla's enthusiasm kicked in: gender identity and, specifically, the emerging picture of feminism's impact on men.

"That's the guy," she said. "And he's right. 'Mythopoetic' is a ridiculous term. And not just because the whole Jungian thing is so muddy. The word makes it sound like you have to be a graduate student in literature to be a real man."

"Hey," Joey said, smiling, "real men read literature."

"Yeah, I've heard." She rolled her eyes. "So what's the deal?"

Joey went back to the letter and read, "The National Conference on Men and Masculinity is this year sponsoring an exploration of..."

He lowered the letter and looked squarely at Marla, who saw in his expression the familiar look of the excited little boy, wide brown eyes sparkling. "They want me to do a workshop!"

"Really! Let me see." She took the letter. "A full-day workshop. Hey, this is great!"

Their eyes met again, but this time Marla saw the excitement

quickly drain from Joey's face, his smile flatten, his lips draw together, as if he were about to lift a heavy box.

"We'll see," he said. "It might be an opportunity—of sorts." He stood, picked up the suitcases, and walked toward the bedroom, leaving Marla sitting on the couch next to the pile of mail.

It's happening again, she thought. The doubts, the undermining self examination. "Joey," she called after him. "You're going to make some terrific contacts." And she couldn't help notice a critical voice chasing after her upbeat comment. Sure, contacts, she thought. But no money. What about the money? The money! The MONEY! She beat the word back into submission, stepping up like a cheerleader, calling loudly, "And hey, you'll be back in New York!"

Joey answered from the other room, "Oh, boy! Another trip to the center of the universe!" Then he came back into the living room pretending to stagger. "I can hardly contain myself." He was carrying a rolled-up rubber exercise mat, which he now spread on the floor. "Why have this kind of conference in New York?"

"Because it's one of the world's major cities, and what's going on at the grassroots level needs. . . ."

"We need one of the world's major cities to hold a yoga workshop for a bunch of troubled guys and one famous college professor who's not even that famous?"

Marla slapped her hand down hard against the pile of mail. "God-damnit!" she said. "There you go again. Why do you—"

"Diminish it? Yes, I know. I mean, I don't know. Just another attack of the old existential ache: am I doing what I should really be doing with my life?"

Marla watched him start to stretch, bending from the waist, back straight, his strong, lean, supple frame folding in half as his big palms pressed against the floor. So much poise, so much energy in his physical presence. It blocked out the weakness, and sitting there watching him her financial worries quelled and a sudden warmth filled the center of her body, spreading into an edgy sense of anticipation, a tingle of sexual excitement. Yes, the glue that held them together, their great,

raunchy, athletic sex. In bed, there was so much power, and so little doubt.

She heard him breathing, his permanently scarred nostrils sounding their familiar faint whistle, like a quiet alarm warning that no recovery is ever complete. And all that tragic past made him, at one level, even more attractive. His work too, his ideals—Marla believed wholeheartedly in the “Men’s Movement,” its fundamental reality. In spite of the inevitable corny stereotypes of “sensitive men,” there was, for Marla, a bigger issue: the moral imperative to measure the force of feminism not merely by its political gains and cultural impact on women but, more subtly, by its overall effect on the definition, by men, of what it means to be a man.

Such grand and heady reflections made Marla suddenly want Joey in the worst way. He takes me seriously, she thought. He takes everything seriously, right? And so do I.

With a quick sweep of her arm, she shoved the pile of mail off the couch. Then, as the envelopes fluttered to the floor, she slid to the couch’s edge and put her hand on Joey’s butt.

“Hey,” he said, still bent over. “I’m concentrating.”

“So am I,” she said, and squeezed, grabbing a handful of firm flesh, pressing her palm against the bone of his buttocks. “Mmmmm.”

“What is this?” He was still bent over, looking now between his legs at the upside-down figure of her frame kneeling on the edge of the couch.

“Don’t move,” she said. “Unless your back is going to give out, I have an inspiration.” And then she slid her hand from his butt to the waist of his gym shorts, and gently pulled.

As Joey felt the cool air on his bare bottom, he pressed his hands harder into the floor. Then he wriggled his hips, trying to assist Marla as she lowered his shorts to his ankles. A moment later, Marla’s hands slipped between his legs as a wave of moans and giggles rose and fell like scales from a pair of out-of-tune flutes, breathy shrieks, squawks of pleasure.

“My hamstrings are giving out,” Joey said finally, and he stood,

straightening his back, then turned around to find Marla pulling her dress over her head. He always felt grateful for these sudden bursts of her passion, but this time—and it wasn't the first time—his gratitude was complicated by a trace of guilt. He couldn't quite name it. There was just a faint feeling, something like shame, or maybe a sense of unworthiness, like he'd received an unearned compliment, or was the recipient of undeserved generosity. It was the same vague unease he felt on the rare occasions that he and Marla dined at an out-of-budget restaurant, the doting waiters oppressively noting a half-full water glass.

"Don't go anywhere," she said. Then she tossed her dress on the floor and sat back on the couch. "Your back OK?"

Joey nodded, fighting the confused discomfort accompanying all the blunt pleasure. He watched Marla unfasten the front clip of her black lace bra. I didn't know she was wearing that, he thought, and flashed on Marla's sister, that maternity thing she wore to breast-feed the babies. But this, this is for pleasure, he thought, a celebration of the body . . . pleasure embodied.

He looked at Marla's small, firm breasts, the nipples erect. Then she smiled, wriggled out of her tiny bikini underwear, and stood up, her long, lean legs straightening as she turned around and leaned over the back of the couch, tilting her pelvis upward, offering him her backside. He hesitated, focusing on the smooth curve of her firm buttocks and the arch of her back, its small grooves of muscle outlining her shoulder blades. Then he stepped forward, taking hold of her hips, pressing closer and closer, until the slow swivel began and the fantasies swirled, their minds and bodies going, sinking, rising, sinking, rising, in-and-out, pictures and words and phrases and fragments of monkeys, dogs, beasts, three-headed flaming monsters annihilating—faster and faster and harder and harder—the human face, disappearing, the trace of radiant feminine beauty, masculine grandeur, roses and wine, smashed, the smell of sweat, the sound of quick breaths, shallow, a high-pitched pant, the veritable goddess banged into nothing, beautiful men, naked briefcased men, blasted into nothing, out of nothing, into the void, now, yes, now, yes, almost there, and she too, the sub-

lime miracle of the human face, together, together, nowhere, yes, yes—nowhere. . . .

They collapsed, folding into each other, sticky and happy in the success of their unarticulated goal, which we can formulate as the hidden redemptive promise of their sexual connection: the breakdown of individuality, the rise of an animal dimension, the intentional surrender to purely biological forces—all executed with the unspoken assurance that their humanity will, somehow, not be negated.

And the questions were momentarily hushed, without a whisper of doubt about whether such heroic sexual energy could be called real love or was, in fact, a substitute for it.