



The May Queen

Every May, in almost every Catholic parish around the world, a pubescent young maiden will be chosen to represent the Blessed Virgin Mary. A service will be held and a lovely song will be sung as the virgin walks down the aisle, dressed all in white amidst floral displays. She will then be crowned Queen of the May as the choir and congregation sing: "Bring flowers of the fairest, bring flowers of the rarest, from hillsides and valleys...."

I sang along, loving the song and the ceremony even though I didn't always approve of the one who was chosen. The honor usually went to the daughter of a lawyer or a merchant but never the daughter of a carpenter or a farmer. Except once.

Marie O'Connell was the most beautiful child in the county and everyone knew it. I had known it since I was five. She had only to walk down the street and heads would turn, jaws would drop, little boys would fumble in their pockets and little girls would duck into stores to avoid being seen next to her. The O'Connells were a farm family and Marie went to country school but once a week at early Mass, I got to feast my eyes. This went on for three years until our First Communion when I was seated next to Marie at the Communion breakfast. O'Brien and O'Connell, thank God for the alphabet.

Five more years passed. I continued going to early Mass and always managed to sit near the O'Connells and a row or two back. When Marie got up for Communion, I got up too.

When it came time to pick The May Queen, I was pulling for Marie. No one knew how it was decided. No one was given any ballots. It was assumed that the nuns bestowed the honor and it was possible that Father Frankfurter had a veto if he had any vital information gleaned from the confessional. But this year it was obvious; it could be no one else.

As Marie walked down the aisle in white gown and veil I had to choke back the tears barely managing to whisper the words of the song as the choir praised the beauty and innocence of the Virgin. Then I was totally unable to speak to her at the Communion breakfast; she was now even more forbidding to behold.

In the fall we would all be moving into High School and I was hoping

Marie would come to Sherman. She would be a natural as a cheerleader. And if she chose to cheer, I was determined to go out for football even though I had no interest in contact sports. I knew, however that cheerleaders went with football players like meat goes with potatoes, or cheddar cheese on apple pie.

For reasons never explained and never accepted by me, Marie went to High School in Ocheydan. She did become a cheerleader but our team and her's didn't play in the same conference. So I seldom got to see her in her short skirt and letter sweater. I still got glimpses of her on Sundays but could never work up the nerve or the method to separate her from her folks long enough to ask her out. The more time that passed the more futile it became. It was subtle pain, like a tooth going bad slowly and inexorably. I wasn't even sure she had ever noticed me or knew my name.

I always hung around after Mass until her car pulled away and turned the corner heading east. Then I would shuffle off down the street feeling impotent. By the next Saturday I would almost be over her. Then Sunday would roll around again. I was sure God would punish me for sitting there in his Church following Marie's every move even though my thoughts were always of the purest, fairest and rarest. At least they were before she was crowned.

Throughout high school I did my best to find out any thing I could about Marie. Who she was dating; was she in love? She dated a lot, mostly farmboys. I would see her on Saturday nights, sitting next to some clodhopper, cruising the main drag in his father's pickup. But it was impossible to imagine she was actually going into the cornfields with anyone.

When I turned sixteen, I bought my first car and began to get the

confidence that comes with the machine. I vowed that I would now call Marie for a date. But first I had to arrange a re-introduction to her, I couldn't just call her up and explain that I was the eight year old who sat next to her at Communion breakfast.

Before my scheme could be executed, Bobby threw a monkey wrench into my plans. He begged me one night to let him use my car. I didn't have any money to go out myself so I agreed. "You better be sure and put gas in it." I said. "I'm not paying for your piece of ass."

"Thanks buddy, I won't forget this," Bobby said as he cracked a knuckle on my skull.

"Thanks a lot, asshole," I said. "Who ya fuckin' tonight?"

"That's for me to know and you not to find out."

When I got up for Mass the next morning, my car was not in the driveway. I ran back upstairs and began to shake Bobby. "Wake up you asshole. Where's my car?"

"What? Ah shit Paco, stop hitting me. I didn't wanna wake ya. I'm afraid it got a lil' drunk out las' night. I had ta leave it inna ditch outside a town."

"You what? You dumb fuck – where's my car? What's wrong with it? You ran outta gas, right?" I was hoping. Then I started punching him awake.

"Stop hitting me. We'll go out after church. I'll help ya turn it over." Bobby rolled over and got out of bed. "It didn't look too bad, a course it was pretty dark."

"Roll it over? You shit! You totalled it, you bastard. Yer gonna pay for this."

During Mass, I thought I saw Marie looking over at me. She was

smiling and I forgot about my car for awhile. After Mass I rushed outside to get into position to confront Marie, finally. I'd ask her out that very night, then I remembered my car. Maybe it wasn't totalled. Better make it next Friday night. Right!

I waited and waited but no Marie. Then Marie and Bobby walked out together. Bobby walked her over to the parking lot and opened the door for her.

"That dirty asshole," I said, shaking my head trying to clear it of confusion.

"I beg your pardon, Shemus!" Sister Maggie said hovering over me. I didn't care at that point. I just ignored her and walked away feeling gutsick, lovesick. I still loved Marie but hated my brother for corrupting her.

I jumped Bobby when he walked into our yard and began to pound him in the guts and the face. I had him on the ground and he was so surprised to find me actually fighting him that he couldn't quit laughing. I wanted to kill.

"Wreck my car, steal my girl! What else didja do? D'ja try to fuck her too?"

Bobby finally had enough and simply pushed me away. "Look – I'm sorry about your car. I didn't mean to wreck it fer Christ's sake! But – your Girl? That's a laugh. You've never even spoken to her. All you did was sit around on yer ass waiting for her to beg you or sumthin'. You were dreamin' about her while every hick in the county was bangin' her. So don't give me no shit about your girl. I been watchin' her too – y'know."

I gave him one last smack in the jaw and walked away. "You owe me a hundred bucks, asshole. Pay up and don't ever speak to me again."

It was weeks later when Bobby somehow scratched up the money and left it on my desk in the room we shared. There was a note:

"Here's your money buddy. Sorry about The car. I'm off To The Air Force next week - see ya in four years. P.S. Marie is all yours.
Bobby

I didn't say goodbye when Bobby left town and didn't speak to him for a number of years and seldom speak to him now. It was anger for the first few years and apathy after that. We never were very much alike.

I got another car but it was never the same between Marie and me. I was still mooning over her but couldn't bring myself to ask her out. I'd had enough of Bobby's hand me-downs. Months later there was a rumor that Marie had gotten pregnant. She had left school and moved to a home for un-wed mothers in Sioux City. Even though I tried not to believe the rumor, I found myself, one day, driving down to Sioux City. I looked up the address of the home and found three different ones. I drove past each one a few times. I don't know what I expected. Perhaps, I thought she would come running out and I would offer to be her husband. I knew that was crazy but it did sound familiar.

The summer after graduating I was cruising the streets with JM, drinking 7-Up spiked with Four Roses. Whooping it up, talking plans. JM was going to college and I had decided to join the Air Force.

"Maybe I can become a pilot and shoot down my fucking brother," I said, laughing about it for the first time. I told myself I would write Bobby a letter the next day.

"Good idea," JM said. "Don't know why ya don't come to college with me though. Have another drink - hey did ya see those two?"

"Who? Where?" I said, craning my neck out the window.

"Turn around quick. I think it's old round heels herself and there's some dark haired chick with her. I get Mary Lou," JM said. "Tonight we get lucky Paco."

I slammed the gearshift on my black '47 4-door Plymouth into second and made a sliding U-turn. We crept up alongside the other car on the deserted midnight street.

"Hey Mara Looooo," JM howled like a coyote. "Why don't you park that thing and get in here. We got Four Roses an' only two mouths to feed."

"Hey Jack Off. Where you been?" Mary Lou was smiling and I was stretching to get a look at her partner. "I'll just pull in over here."

Mary Lou and her girlfriend got out and came around as JM crawled into the back seat. Mary Lou followed him and her friend got up front with me.

"JM? This is Marie. What's yer friend's name?"

"Marie, Mary Lou, this is the one, the only Paco," JM said as he topped off a couple more Seven-Ups.

I was so stunned I couldn't speak right away. Finally, I began to mumble and managed to say, "I know Marie. We sat together at First Communion. Remember?"

"Yeah – I sure do," Marie said. "I had a crush on you for years after that but you never seemed to notice me." She still had great ebony eyes and I could not believe what she was telling me.

"Hah!," I laughed ineffectually. "I couldn't take my eyes off you since we're about five fucking years old." Marie now seemed much smaller than I remembered. "How have you been?"

"Oh – so so. Gimme one a those drinks," Marie said.

"Comin' up," JM said, passing the drinks over the seat. "Enough of this old home week."

"Paco – whyn't you drive out to the sand pit? We can take a little midnight dip." Mary Lou suggested.

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"Me too!" Marie chimed in.

"That makes it unanimous," JM said. "But Gee kids – what will we do – I've forgotten to bring my swimming trunks?"

"You can wear my bra," Mary Lou said.

Heart fluttering, dizzy, I felt like I was in a time warp. When fantasy becomes fact it feels larger than it is. Marie was smaller. Everything else larger. How many drinks had I had? I lost count after the first two six packs. Oh yeah, then we ripped the Four Roses off Old Pancake.

Pancake ran the liquor store across the line in Minnesota. He was not too bright and had a face that looked like it had been hit by a Mack truck. When anyone needed booze they would drive to Bigelow and hustle Pancake. The trick was to go in and ask for something known to be kept in the back room; like Canadian beer. Then when Pancake left the room you would slip whatever you could into your pocket. Pancake would return and ask you for your I.D. "Aw hell," you would say, "I forgot to bring it with me."

"Can't sell ya no booze without ya got an I.D." Pancake would say. It had worked for years, maybe generations.

As soon as we parked Mary Lou and JM jumped out and were stripping before they hit the sand. I could hear them hit the water while I was still getting acquainted with Marie. I knew better but still felt it

necessary to woo her. JM and Mary Lou quickly finished their swim and came back to the car for a blanket. They disappeared up one of the sand piles. I was spinning on adrenalin but faked casualness as we undressed. Marie faked nothing. She took me by the hand and led me into the water. It felt like being Baptized.

"Ooooooh – it's cold," Marie said shivering up next to me.

"Jump right in. You'll get used to it easier," I said, much more seriously than the situation called for. I dove in but the chill made me even dizzier. Marie swam up behind and mounted my back. I could feel her wet fur on my waist.

"Let's get out and grab a blanket," I said.

We retrieved our drinks, found another spot on the piles of sand and heard Mary Lou giggling in the distance. We crept down low when a police cruiser made its rounds and wrapped up in the blankets shivering. Marie reached down and took me in hand as if she was looking for a cigarette. It wasn't enough to fill a hand at that point; more like a shriveled pickle. Marie said, "We gotta do something about that." She rubbed it gently and I put one of her breasts in my mouth.

"You better watch out – you might get a mouthful."

"Whaty ya mean?" I said, winking to myself, not wanting to let her know I knew.

"I'm still breastfeeding," she explained.

"What? You got a kid?" I continued to feign ignorance.

"Yeah – didn't you know?"

"No – I sorta lost touch – y'know." I lied. There was a palpable silence until Marie broke it.

"I went with your brother Bobby one time – d'ja know that?"

"Yeah – he told me. The bastard wrecked my car that night. Did you know that?"

I put her tit back in my mouth wanting to get off the subject. It was making me go limp again. "I'll just take a little taste," I said. "I wouldn't wanna deprive your kid." My nephew, I thought.

"Help yourself," Marie said, "It's time he started drinking cow juice anyhow."

I sucked and felt the tiny sprays inside my mouth. Delicious. Primal. Christ – the memories it brought back. I sucked a little more then reached for the Four Roses and took a straight shot.

"Wow – you oughta try this. It's great."

"I wish I could," she said. "I don't remember what it tastes like."

"Here," I said, handing her the whiskey. I took another suck on her breast but didn't swallow, then I passed it into Marie's mouth. She swallowed.

"Mmmmm nice," she said, then took a sip of whiskey.

I was still limp; enjoying myself but couldn't seem to get it up. Marie tried something Catholic girls have a reputation for not doing. It felt nice but I remained flaccid.

"Shit! I guess I had too much to drink." I said, feeling very foolish. How long had I waited for this? Fifteen years? Fifteen years of fantasy and still I was not prepared. The Boy Scouts had taught me nothing.

"It's all right," Marie said, giving me a nice little bite, "I don't really wanna get pregnant again. I don't know how it happened the first time."

I heard that but let it pass. Christ! Catholic women, I said to myself. How twisted can they be. Even if they were not dumb, somehow they had to pretend they were.

JM and Mary Lou were whooping it up in the water again. Marie and I lay there cuddled up in the blanket. I fell asleep and woke up with JM shaking me.

"Hey – c'mon Paco. We gotta get the ladies home."

I climbed into the back seat dragging the blanket behind me. "You drive JM. I'm not much good for anything." Then I pretended to be asleep as JM dropped the girls at their car. I heard Marie say, "Tell Paco it was nice to see him again."

"Yeah – goo-night girls. We sure did appreciate the company," JM said. "See ya soon."

I must have fallen asleep after that because JM was shaking me again when he pulled up in front of his house."

You're on your own from here Paco. You all right?"

"Yeah – I'll make it," I said as I slid behind the wheel.

"How was it Paco? I got a great BJ," JM said, proudly.

"It was..." I paused for a long time with my head leaning on the steering wheel. "...beyond my wildest expectations."

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