

Feeling Sore

Jack Veryzer was sore thinking about the work party Mona had organized for that night. Jesus, he was sore. Schlep down to Brooklyn and spend hours helping with the announcements for Tom's show? Why? Just because Tom was married to Mona and Mona happened to be Sally's best friend? Just because Tom happened to have the magic touch? Just because Tom had come down from Calgary with no possessions and within a month had found Mona and also work for a famous sculptor and now was winning grants and even having a show of his own? For this Veryzer should have to drop his life and assist with Tom's meteoric rise to fame?

Always with the pushing, some people. You gave them a little and they took more, more, as if their fathers had taken them unto themselves when they were young and said, if not in so many words, "You will go out from here and impose your will on others. Do you understand?" Unhappy with the limited mailing the gallery had made, Tom had Mona design a separate announcement; several hundred of them had then been printed at her own expense. But no, it couldn't be a simple little card, in keeping with standards of normalcy. It had to consist of two pieces, one inside the other. When joined together by thread, the inside piece was supposed to twirl, like the mobiles that Tom would be exhibiting. Twirly shmirly things. Contraptions. Pah.

This is the kind of stuff that could happen when people came down from Canada.

"I know I said I would go, but would you mind if I didn't?" Veryzer said. They really were Sally's friends to begin with. Veryzer wasn't sure he had any friends.

"Why, Jack? Wouldn't it be just another night of watching Yankee baseball if you didn't come?"

She had a way of talking sometimes.

Veryzer did his weekend chores. He organized his desk drawers. He hung up some clothes that he had tossed onto a chair during the week. He vacuumed the living room carpet and fluffed up the jumbo pillows that served as a substitute for a sofa. Then he read a page from the dictionary, seizing upon the word *hapless*, pondering its meaning of luckless or unfortunate and wondering if the dictionary had gotten it quite right. Why couldn't words mean what they were supposed to mean? Why couldn't *hapless* mean "without happiness"? Would that be too much to ask? Did a person have to be unfortunate or without luck to be hapless? But then, maybe *unhappy* meant unhappy. Oh, he didn't have to know and he didn't have to care either.

He had meant to say goodbye to Sally, but as he arrived at the door, he saw that she was standing at her easel with her back to him. She didn't like him disrupting her concentration. She had told him as much. A little dab here, a little dab there, and then the cleansing action of her brush dipped in a coffee jar filled with *turps*. The American way, to shrink a word till it had nothing but the hardness of a small rock. *Turps*, my ass, he thought, an added shock of soreness shooting through him at the sight of Sally involved with her painting, a reminder that she got to stay home all week while he was at the mercy of the work world.

He stepped out, organized and efficient, into the sunshine, the big bag of laundry well in hand. Who was to say he was not getting the job done? Hapless? Hapless? He would show them hapless.

I am a human being, and I will love myself real well today, Veryzer thought, as he headed down toward Second Avenue. Here and there he saw the drunken soldiers of the night from the men's shelter a couple of blocks north. Oh, what a task it was to be functional in this world, and

did he not know it. Would-be orbiters of the earth, denizens of dreamland, absconders from the daily round only to be mired bleary-eyed in their stinking offal come break of brutal day. He himself had been headed on that same path before getting some help the previous year. Detox wards and falling down drunk on the street and Sally saying, “You stink. I can’t sleep in the same bed with you.”

“Together or separate?” the very direct Chinese woman at the laundry said, as he handed her his bag.

“Today I will go for separate, as I want the white to be really white. The dark can disguise its dirt but the white must achieve genuine cleanliness to be truly meritorious.” Though she would never know, it brought him almost to tears to see a family coming together, young and old, to make a business work, behind her standing her father in the solemnity of his old age. The marvel of having one’s chi going strong and the dignity it automatically conferred.

“One dollar extra,” she said.

“A deal,” he said, following where she led and pocketing his receipt.

He had only one thing more to do, and that was to get filled up so he would not have to ask his creativity at the typewriter to flourish while he was running on empty that afternoon. To effect a happy outcome, he took a table at the Balliloca, on Second Avenue, where, wasn’t it his luck as he entered, Stevie Wonder was ecstatically singing “The Sunshine of My Love.” And then, further taste treat of the past, and thematically in sync, followed “Sunshine of Your Love.” Oh, spectacular Cream, oh glorious year when they came into being and the world was young with the pain of new love and he was with Sally starting out in their *relationship*. Take that, he thought, you leather-clad knuckleheads with your purple hair, looking around him at the young East Side crew sodden and pasty-faced from their *night on the town*.

As thematic support for the music, he ordered his eggs sunny side up, and would the waitress please complement the eggs with hash browns and, no, he would forego the usual rye toast for a blueberry muffin, if she didn't mind. And if she would bring a cup of coffee just to get things started.

His clothes smelly from the poorly ventilated eatery—oh what a stink food could create—Veryzer returned home and situated himself in his workplace under the loft bed. All around him, in neat piles, were the failed efforts if not of his heart then of his spleen, or just the ramblings of a man with a quota of words to put on paper each day so he could feel his real work was done. He remembered the brandy bottle on one side of the typewriter and the joint on the other, and the prayer that the two would generate sentences of Jamesian complexity and elegance, as if nothing of value could come from him without their aid. Briefly he understood the value of a day job. Apart from the homage the nine to five life paid to the gods for food and clothing and shelter, he could appreciate the temporary relief it afforded from an ambition that far exceeded his ability.

Mona had made a big pot of vegetarian chili and a salad with arugula as well as lettuce and bell peppers and generous chunks of avocado. And there was garlic bread to put energy into the indolent. Like Sally, Mona was a painter. But unlike Sally, Mona had a job, working as a graphic artist. They went way back to high school. She had the goods in her tiny frame and a moral universe informed that permanent smile.

Before they could sew the pieces together, holes had to be pricked in the pieces, which the die cutter had failed to do, Mona explained.

“Jack’s not going to sew. Jack’s just going to punch holes,” Sally informed Mona. Veryzer being within earshot, Sally felt obliged to say, “Punching holes is not nothing, Jack. We can’t move forward without that important first step.”

“That’s right, Jack. You’re a vital cog,” Mona said.

Oh, it was all a bunch of cow flop, and Veryzer knew it. Sally didn’t want to come right out and say that he was clumsy when it came to manual chores.

“Isn’t this just such an *enjoyable* way to spend the evening?” Mona asked.

“Oh, yes, I like it very much,” Veryzer said, trying to pay no mind to her irony and seeking instead to find strength in literalness.

“You *like* doing this?” Mona asked.

“A man or a woman needs a sense of purpose, wouldn’t you think? And does sweat not follow from obligation?”

“You have a strange way of expressing yourself,” Mona said.

“An unhappy mind must seek a solution to its unhappiness.”

“You scare me sometimes, Jack,” Mona said.

“Jack, don’t be scaring people, least of all Mona,” Sally said, in passing by.

The Gloples arrived. Fritz Glople had his red hair cut short. He had his leather jacket belted tight. When he took it off he showed an award-winning burgundy turtleneck to go with brown slacks of what Veryzer imagined was the highest quality tropical wool. It was not the usual case of fine apparel being committed to a lost cause, as he was an older man whose body had a trim heft. The statement was loud and clear that he was one who has navigated the treacherous currents of time well. His legs are like fine columns, Veryzer thought. Or maybe they are just like *legs*.

Sadie Gloppe, half Fritz's age, knew to shun the dull cover of denim duds for a silk blouse and a short, sexy skirt.

"Hey, Fritz. Hey, Sadie," Tom said, and really didn't need to say anything more, having apprenticed himself into Fritz's heart with his sturdy and yet creative work that helped to realize Fritz's sculptural conceptions. Fritz was big-time, Castelli big time.

"We've got to feed you before we put you to work," Mona said. "By the way, when are you leaving for Provincetown?"

"At the end of the week," Sadie said.

"That means you're going to miss Tom's show." Mona looked genuinely surprised. Veryzer wondered if emotional dullness did not coexist with an excess of intelligence in the woman, that she should go on in such a fashion. Don't push it, he warned Mona, if only in the confines of his mind. Do not try their patience, lest they be made to reveal the full dimensions of the large egos they must surely possess and shower the loft with unpleasantness.

"I'm afraid so," Sadie said. Did Mona not hear the steel in her voice?

"You mean nothing can induce you to spend a summer in Brooklyn rather than your home in P-town, not even Tom's show?" Mona asked.

Mona laughed and the Gloples laughed too but made no reply, causing Veryzer to make a kachunking motion with his open right hand. Not once but twice, with samurai boldness a la Toshiro Mifune in his face. Let enough be enough, he was saying. Cut it right there, pals, before there was bloodshed, or even worse.

Only Tom had seen Veryzer's emphatic gesture. He was wearing one of those white and blue latitudinally striped collarless tops that Veryzer associated with French sailors, and he wore it well. "How's it going?" Tom said, with some nervousness. Veryzer understood that it was not

Tom's way to discuss human peculiarities and that all such personal observation was sublimated into the work itself—windmill-like contraptions and huts made of wire and hoses from used-up tubes of toothpaste. Tom was the Mozart of form. He wrote symphonies in space. Or some such thing. Veryzer didn't know much about art or the artists who created it; it just happened that he lived with one.

“I am feeling very much like an outcast, a renegade existing on the borders of time and civilization,” Veryzer said, “but all the same I am persevering. To speak plainly, I wish we had some savings. That way I might be tempted to leave the world of work I now am in, and have the freedom to flourish that you so ably demonstrate. Frankly, I torture myself with resistance to accepting what is and resistance to what could be as well. Right now I feel like a ditherer and a dunce, a perpetual hanging string.” He saw that Mona had led Sally into her studio to show her some new paintings. “But Sally doesn't have a job and hasn't had one for two years, so I think—I don't know what I think.”

Tom stood there listening. He had a mop of blond hair, bangs obscuring his brow, and blue eyes that gazed at you clearly. There was no cold wind blowing from him, only incomprehension. Veryzer didn't expect much more than the “Yeah” Tom gave him before easing away.

Mona revisited him that night, with a look of patient understanding, but it was a look that also said, beyond the veil of her smile, that she remembered.

“How are we really, Jack?”

“We are fortitudinous. We are persevering,” Veryzer said, assigning holes to two more cards as he spoke.

A rash act based on the premise that the way out of a hole is to dig a bigger hole, so Veryzer's marriage to Sally had been—an attempt to rescue a floundering relationship. Mona had come to visit them several nights after they had been hitched. It was before she got lucky and met Tom. The marriage tie had rendered Veryzer hysterical. Drunk and desirous of nothing so much as escape, he called Mona from a bar later that night. The sheer desperation in his voice moved her to consent to have him over to her Brooklyn loft. She offered him her ear and coffee that night, but not her body.

“Tell me the truth. Why do you speak that way, Jack?” Mona was a diminutive woman. Veryzer was a large man. There was interest, of a kind, in her voice.

“Wouldn't you, if your life was pregnant with impossibility?”

It was 2 a.m. before they stopped for the night. The Gloples had long since departed, as any sensible people would have. Tom drove Sally and Veryzer home in his Toyota pickup. A feeling of relief, if not exhilaration, came over Veryzer as the truck sped over the Brooklyn Bridge. “It reminds me of when I drove a cab. I'd be flying over this bridge with a fare and...” The windows were rolled down, and his words were blown away on the roar of the wind.

“She's beginning to be vigilant about him,” Sally said the next morning, over coffee and rolls.

“That's four thousand dollars of her own savings that she's sunk into his show. She's an artist, too, and a damn good one. He's not going to turn her into his slave. Know what I mean?”

“What kind of vigilance? Are we talking surveillance?” Veryzer said, pondering Sally's words.

“He comes from a wealthy family. I mean, his father is an ambassador. He might just expect all this help Mona is giving him to be his due.”

Sally had wanted him to sign a contract before they moved in together, only she never wrote it, so Veryzer couldn't be sure what she had intended to be in it. Something about her freedom.

"My father was an ambassador, too," Veryzer said.

"What?"

"An ambassador. Someone who is sent to another country to represent his native land."

"Your father was a cashier."

"An unofficial ambassador. You know, behind the scenes and all that. Clandestine meetings in the night. An ambassador and a spy and a Romeo all in one."

"Don't start, Jack. Just don't start. This conversation is over."

Veryzer ate an enormous brownie that morning. Then he ate another and passed out on the pillow sofa. He came to after a few hours, groggy from his prolonged snooze. "Oh, Jesus," he said, thinking of his manuscripts and the lack of care he had given them on this Sabbath day, which in his plans was decidedly not a day of rest.

"We have a piano recital to attend this evening. Remember?" Sally was standing over him, in her white painter's overalls.

"Tell me I am dreaming."

"Not a dream, Jack. Not a dream. The reality bell clearly ringing here. This is Mona's brother who's performing. We have to support him. We have to."

Support. There was a word.

"All I know is that I will support *myself* with a good pee and a vigorous brushing of my teeth," Veryzer said.

Maxim Minton, older brother of Mona Minton, was to be the second coming of Vladimir Horowitz or some other classical luminary of the keyboard. His mother's dearly beloved, if Mona lived in his shadow, then so be it, it was a long and brilliant shadow. For a mother to help a genius, a *genius*, was a hardship? Renting Avery Fisher Hall for a night and hawking recordings of his finest work to the concertgoers was some sort of foolish extravagance? Get up there, Maxim, and swing your tails over the piano bench and caress those black and whites so our hearts can sing. Oh, my scrumptious. Oh, my heart's delight. I would be more than only one of the fifty friends of Maxim Minton in the program if I could. I would be your light, your love, forever and ever.

A mother's love was not a foul and misbegotten thing. I would never go down such a road, Veryzer thought, as he studied the program. He saw that Mona was also listed as a friend of Maxim Minton, right there with her mother. And there, at the top of the list, was someone entered as Anonymous.

"I don't know about this," Veryzer said.

"You don't know about what?"

"This. This. What does it say?" He let his finger be the guide to the line in the program he wanted Sally to see.

"It says 'Anonymous.'"

"Precisely. And you don't find that completely strange?"

"It's strange that someone should be listed as anonymous?"

"If you wanted to be anonymous, you would go and announce yourself as anonymous?"

"Sure."

“You wouldn’t simply vacate the premises entirely by not announcing yourself at all, in that way saying, “Let them find me in the air. Let them find me where I am not. Let them try.”?”

“Jack, we are at a concert. Rearrange your mind.”

“Pah,” he said, exhaling loudly.

“Stop it,” Sally said.

The stage door looked huge, like a barn door swinging open. Maxim Minton, a horsy creature in a white coat with tails, trotted out.

Classical music intimidated Veryzer. He didn’t know the bass clef from the treble clef or the chromatic from the diatonic scale. And all that musical notation—quarter notes and half notes and whatever else there was. It had the smell of mathematical precision underlying it, an arena in which Veryzer had never fared well.

Maxim Minton played a Chopin étude and then a nocturne—sweet music for the evening ear or for any time of day. Music that changed you, gave you a depth that Country Joe and the Fish or Grand Funk Railroad could not. For a guy with doofus dimensions, Maxim played with real sensitivity, as if music were the only means by which his soul could express itself.

Maxim stood up and made a small bow and exited bent over out of the same big door. Moments later he peeked out and then made his reappearance on the stage.

“Why does he do that?” Veryzer said. “Why doesn’t he just stay where he is?”

“That’s the way they do things at concerts,” Sally said.

“But it’s not working. Something is wrong. The door is too big. He should come riding out on a horse or mule or some other large creature. That door is crying out for something commensurate with its size.”

“Not now, Jack. Not now.”

The Mozart piece was like taffy—tasty but stretched very thin. Veryzer presented this analogy to Sally after Maxim had trotted off once more.

“You’re trying, Jack. I appreciate that,” Sally said.

“But he should come out of different doors for each new piece, don’t you think? And maybe have a new costume each time he reappears? Then the audience could get involved trying to guess his entry point and what kind of getup he would appear in. Will he be Rodeo Rick, wearing chaps and a ten-gallon hat? Or torero Tom in his *trajes de luce*? Don’t you see? This could be award-winning stuff.”

“Jack, I have to tell you...”

“Tell me. Just tell me.”

But Maxim was back out there and the thin applause had begun. Veryzer turned around and took in the sparse crowd. Across the aisle he saw Mona, seated between her mother and Tom. She was staring his way. Veryzer nodded his head and turned back to the stage.

That night, as Sally lay eight feet off the floor in the loft bed, Veryzer said, from below, “I am viewing creation from afar.” When Sally did not reply, he repeated himself. Sometimes a man needed a receipt for the words he spoke.

“I’m trying to sleep,” Sally said.

And I am too, he said to himself, thinking of the work week that would begin again the next morning and staring into the dark space under the bed, his manuscripts lying somewhere within.