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Channel Surfing in the Sea of Happiness

stories by

Guy

Babineau



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Chairman Mao and the Spiders from Mars

“WHAT DID YOUR parents say?” Rose whispered.

I kept my voice low. “They laughed. They told me I’d outdone myself.”

“Really? Mine would’ve killed me.”

“Yeah, well my parents don’t live on this planet. Tell me honestly, do you think it kind of looks like him? Even a little bit?”

I removed my father’s old felt fedora. I’d swiped it from on top of a box in the attic. I thought it would cover up the catastrophe. Rose peered at me for what seemed like forever, then took off her wireframe glasses.

“Sort of,” she said. “When you’re blurry there’s a faint resemblance.”

“I got it cut at that place on West Georgia, Crimpers. I told them to copy the cover of David Bowie’s *Pin Ups*. They wanted to dye it too, but it cost too much so I did it myself at home. Big mistake. It’s pretty hopeless, isn’t it?”

“It’s pretty orange,” Rose said, putting her glasses back on.

“It’s pretty homo if you ask me,” snarked Harlan, craning his neck around.

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He'd beelined for the desk right in front of mine when he came into class. He was saving the two desks on either side of the aisle from him. Mike and Sammy. Nightmare City.

"I didn't ask you, did I?"

"I didn't *athk* you, did I?"

"I don't have a lisp."

"Fuck man, like you need one."

"I don't do that with my wrists either."

It was Monday morning, the first week of October, three weeks into the first semester of grade eleven. Second period was Twentieth-Century World History, where Indian Summer sunshine shimmered in bright amber pools on the classroom floor. A light breeze through the open windows had a fresh tang of salt from the beach a few blocks away. Though warm for the time of year, and still several weeks away from frost, there was a slight undercurrent of seasonal nip. Outside, the maples, chestnuts, oaks, and elms lining our school parking lot were just starting to turn, random leaves sparking to a radiant glow of tangerine, blood red, and gold. Beyond the parking lot, above the changing leaves, towered a dense stand of teal Douglas firs. They thrust upward like daggers into a vivid, periwinkle, rock 'n' roll sky.

Blushing, Rose began to search for something in her huge, tapestried handbag. When she opened it, she released a bouquet of trail mix, apple, and a hint of old lady's perfume. Rose was introverted. I didn't know her very well. In elementary school we hadn't shared homeroom and in high school our periods didn't coincide, until now. In the hallways she blended into the background. I couldn't tell you where her locker was. But I did know what everyone else knew. Rose's family was loaded. They'd been in the seed business since forever. Esterhazy Seed Company packages with bright watercolours of the potential growth inside were on hardware, supermarket, and garden centre racks across the

country. I only sat beside Rose this morning because she was at the back of the classroom where I'd hoped against hope to hide my new, spiky, dayglo Ziggy Stardust hairdo. She pulled out a paperback of *The Female Eunuch*, opened it to a bookmarked page, and started to read.

The room was filling up. People turned around to get a good look at me. Mike and Sammy stopped at the door for a moment to gape, then took their places on either side of Harlan. Sammy's glass eye stared at me like a dead fish while he sat down, the other one spazzing all over the place. Mike had the sneer he'd been perfecting all summer as an accessory to his new military haircut. He used to be too stoned to sneer.

"You're so antediluvian," I said to Harlan, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Harlan raised his eyebrows and smirked, slid down in his seat, stretched his legs across the aisle, and crossed them. He scratched an armpit. I had spent grades nine and ten with a crush on Harlan, before I met Phillipe. Harlan was cute in a collegiate, all-American, apple pie kind of way, and the captain of the soccer team. We used to get along. Now he had a chip on his shoulder. It probably had to do with a party I went to near the end of grade ten. I drank almost a whole bottle of Baby Duck and told Harlan I loved him. Talk about hangovers that don't go away.

Mike whispered something into Harlan's ear. They both laughed and glanced at me. Mike wore a faded tight Emerson, Lake & Palmer *Brain Salad Surgery* T-shirt that used to hang like curtains off his skinny frame, back when his hair was almost down to his waist. In June, just before summer holidays started, his mother found twenty hits of purple microdot in his jeans. So, his parents sent Mike to a summer boot camp somewhere up the coast near Sechelt. It was supposed to have built character. If anything, it'd built muscles and eradicated his slouch. Now he looked

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like a member of Hitler Youth, in acid rock camouflage. It was kind of sexy.

Harlan leaned over to Sammy and whispered, obviously repeating what Mike had said. They laughed. Sammy had his yarmulke on. He was going through a see-I'm-Jewish phase even though his mother wasn't Jewish and the only religion his father, a doctor, practiced was mixing martinis. I'd overheard my parents say so when I eavesdropped on one of their conversations. Sammy's true heritage was anyone's guess. He was adopted. The yarmulke looked out of place with his shag haircut and puka shell necklace, not to mention his glass eye.

Mike and Sammy didn't exactly tilt the IQ meter. When they were together, they were of one mind, thanks to sharing. Harlan ruled them. We'd studied all about the emotional ravages of adolescent testosterone in Sex Ed and I kept waiting for the onslaught to turn me into a lurching moron too, but so far, no dice.

"You don't know what antediluvian means, do you?" I said, even more loudly.

Harlan fiddled around with the squeaky top of an inkwell. Even though the school was housed in a modern building, a school board shuffle had dumped a pile of ancient desks on us. A corny heart with an arrow through it was carved on the top of my desk, but the names had been rubbed out by time. I wondered where the owners of the smudged initials were now, if they were still in love, if they still knew each other. And if not knew, remembered. I didn't want to end up a memory on a desktop. Or worse, old.

"Big deal," said Harlan. "So what if you've read the dictionary? What's that supposed to prove?"

"Why don't you tell us what it means, Trevor."

Mr. Cuthbert, our history teacher, smiled at me. I melted. He stood by his desk in front of a large poster of Mao Zedong pinned

up over the blackboard beneath a roll-up map of the world. The electric eggshell-blue background on Mr. Cuthbert's poster was even more shocking than the sky outside. The leader of the Chinese revolution was airbrushed and retouched with colour. His skin had an orange glow, his cheeks were too pink, and his lips were a luscious red, as though the Long March of the Communists had straggled into a bad makeup school instead of the Shaanxi province.

Two weeks earlier when he found out that hardly anyone — except, it turned out, me and Rose — knew who Chairman Mao was, Mr. Cuthbert handed out a one-thousand-word assignment on communism in China, any aspect we wanted. I got hooked on the Cultural Revolution because it sounded cool. When I found out that Mao and a pile of teenagers called the Red Guards imprisoned and brainwashed millions of artists, teachers, and intellectuals, I didn't get Mr. Cuthbert or his poster. I'd spent the whole weekend writing a screwy essay about the Cultural Revolution, partly to get my mind off Phillippe, partly to set Mr. Cuthbert straight on a few important issues. It was due today, but I was having second thoughts about handing it in. I needed to get a grip.

I could have lived without Mr. Cuthbert's moustache but despite that he made me weak in the knees. I stared into his dreamy eyes, unable to speak or think.

"We're waiting, Trevor," said Mr. Cuthbert.

I became aware of everyone staring at me and fumbled with my father's ridiculous hat as I put it back on my head. The brim fell to just above my eyebrows. I was mortified.

"It means outdated, a throwback," I mumbled, wanting to kill myself.

"I'm sorry Trevor, I don't think everybody heard you."

"It means old-fashioned," Harlan said loudly.

"It means ignorant," announced Rose, staring at Harlan through her mass of frizzy hair.

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“Thank you, Harlan,” said Mr. Cuthbert. “And thank you, Ms. Esterhazy, but I think yours is a matter of interpretation.”

Rose smiled. “No Mr. Cuthbert, it’s a matter of poetic licence. Harlan can probably tell us what homo means though. He’s apparently an expert.”

Everyone laughed, even Mike and Sammy, until Harlan gave them a look. Surprised, I looked at Rose. The bell-bottom jeans with hand-sewn tie-dye inserts had to go. So did the water buffalo sandals. So did the wraparound muslin shirt and the woven poncho. She had to trash the glasses. And that hair. She might, I thought, end up being pretty. She caught me looking at her. I mouthed “thank you.” She blushed and shrugged, managing to knock *The Female Eunuch* onto the floor. When I stood up and bent over to pick up the book, Harlan slammed a sneaker down on top of it.

“Hey, your favourite position,” he said.

“Fuck you.” I yanked the book out from under his foot and passed it back to Rose.

Mr. Cuthbert handed out permission slips for a field trip to Fort Langley in two weeks. We all groaned.

MY PARENTS WERE liberal intellectuals. They both taught at the university. They advocated for human rights, attended anti-nuclear rallies, went through a swami and guru period when the house smelled like sandalwood all the time, and had dinner parties attended by artistic guests where I sat with cauliflower ears quietly taking mental notes to use as ammunition.

When I was fifteen, my mother got it into her head to have a serious talk with me. I knew what it was going to be about the minute she introduced the conversation by telling me that I was precocious for my age and that some people might get the wrong idea. Harlan said “homo”; my mother said “precocious.” They

both added up to the same thing as far as I was concerned: oh brother. At least with homo I knew where I stood. Precocious was shaky ground.

I sat at the kitchen table resting my chin on my hands, watching my herbal tea grow cold in a homemade mug from my mother's pottery phase. After a weak preface, she struggled with a sketchy central theme and hedged around the focal issue toward an inconclusive conclusion, the brunt of which concerned my being careful not to get into cars with strange men. I was certain that I wasn't getting the meat and potatoes of her point, but the smell outside the restaurant was enough. Eager to extricate myself. Fortunately the phone rang. As I went to answer it, she offered her assurance that if I did happen to get into a car with a strange man, she and my father would still love me.

Poor Mom. If she only knew.

One rainy night the previous April, I was on my way home from a Joni Mitchell concert. I had to hitchhike because I'd lost my bus transfer and didn't have any money left. I got picked up almost right away by a guy driving a '72 Olds Cutlass. He was old, maybe about thirty, but good-looking. There were baby things in the back seat. He wore a wedding ring. He put a hand on my lap while he was driving and asked me if it bothered me. I said no. He turned down a side street that led to the edge of the university woods and parked in a secluded spot where he gave me a blowjob and jerked himself off. He thanked me when he dropped me off around the corner from my house and I told him it was no problem.

I hitchhiked a lot after that.

MY LOCKER WAS right inside the door to the smoking steps. It was lunch hour, and they were crowded. I put away my books, took out my knapsack, and stepped outside. There was a brief lull in

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conversation followed by a couple of titters while I walked down the steps. Then some grade eights resumed telling each other Monty Python sketches. If I heard “This parrot is dead” one more time, I was going to kill myself.

A slight rise in the ground on the school side of the field formed a knoll above the baseball diamond where a couple of cute, shirtless grade twelves played catch. I sat down on the grass against the concrete gymnasium wall to soak up some sun and watch them. I wanted to be by myself to think about Phillippe, the reason I’d been home alone on a Saturday night with a new haircut and a bottle of dye. Even worse, watching a repeat of *Midnight Special*. Even worse than that, with Yes and Edgar Winter. The woman on the TV commercial had said, “A little colour is a little pick-me-up.” It was funny how little pick-me-ups could quickly become big put-downs.

“Hello.”

I looked up. It was Rose.

“Hi.”

“Mind if I join you?”

I did but I said, “Go ahead.”

She put down her lugubrious handbag, spread her poncho on the grass, and sat. She smiled at me. Politely, I smiled back. She brought out a sandwich in wax paper and carefully unwrapped it. She methodically smoothed out the wax paper, then lifted the sandwich to her mouth. It was gigantic, two slabs of dark grainy bread with a perimeter of a pubic mattress of alfalfa sprouts.

“Wanna bite? It’s cream cheese,” she said.

“No thanks, I’ve got my own lunch.”

“You’re not eating.”

“I’m not hungry.”

It was probably a good thing since I wanted to reduce my waist to a size 27 down from 28 so I could buy a keen pair of satin

pants at Le Chateau. I had to save up two more family allowance cheques to make the purchase so I still had some time to reach my goal.

“You shouldn’t let those idiots get to you,” Rose said, munching on her sandwich. She brushed the hair falling into her face behind her ears. “What do they know? Male hormones. They’ll be the death of us.”

“They don’t get to me.”

She swallowed and looked at me. “You don’t have to be so defensive. I’m on your side.”

“I didn’t know I had a side.”

“Fine. I just meant I don’t care if you dye your hair orange. Or purple or green for that matter. Even though your natural colour’s much more flattering if not so ... spectacular.” She threw her arms into the air to express drama. “I don’t understand, though, why you’re doing what women have spent the last few years fighting against.”

“I haven’t really thought much about it,” I said. It was gross how everybody thought my fashion statement was a gender manifesto. Why couldn’t the world take a big pill and lighten up?

Rose finished her sandwich and neatly folded up the wax paper, putting it back into her handbag. She pulled out an apple and crunched into it. I stayed silent and stared at the guys playing catch. I was trying to insinuate that our conversation was over, but the hint sailed right over her head far into the woods behind her.

“I have an uncle who’s gay,” she said, her mouth full of apple. “He’s my mother’s older brother. They’re English. They were born there but they came here when they were little. He lives back in England now with his boyfriend. I stayed with them in London this summer. My mother told my uncle to keep it a secret from me. She didn’t know his boyfriend was living with him. To say my

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parents don't approve would be an understatement. But my uncle didn't. Keep it a secret, that is. Like they could hide it. I'm not blind, well, not with my glasses."

"How come you don't get contacts?"

"I wanted to. But I can't because I've got a hereditary stigmatism in my left eye. All the worst things are inherited. I think the nineteenth-century determinists were right, don't you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. I don't even know who they are."

"Well, trust me," said Rose. "They were on to something, at least on a psychic level. But people inherit the good things too. Like my handbag you keep staring at. I inherited it from my Great-Aunt Daisy."

"Daisy Esterhazy?"

"I know. Unbelievable, huh. It's this superstitious thing in my father's family to name every girl after a flower. They should've been consistent and named the boys after vegetables. Aunt Daisy was a homesteader on the prairies, a pioneer woman of great intensity, passion, and reading. She never married and she did the accounting for my great-grandfather's seed company. I carry this around with me in respect for her memory. It took me a while to reconcile her early feminism to my family's rampant capitalism, but she was a product of her times."

She reached into her prodigious satchel and produced a plastic baggie of nuts, raisins, and seeds. "I also carry it around because I've got a lot of crap."

I forgot I wasn't supposed to be hungry and took a handful of trail mix when she offered me some. Rose had just strung together more sentences than I'd heard her utter the entire time I'd been cognizant of her existence.

"My uncle says England has a homosexual tradition, especially if you include Ireland. Like Oscar Wilde. Half the men in

England who aren't gay sound gay, the educated ones anyhow." She threw her apple core into a nearby bush. "How come gay men act like they're the only people with interesting personal lives?"

"I'm not gay," I said.

"Fine with me. No big deal."

"Okay, I'm gay, all right? Happy?"

"Like I said, Trevor, I'm not blind. You'd like London. You'd fit right in. Everyone there thinks they're David Bowie. I saw someone with a pair of platform shoes this high made of clear plastic, with a live goldfish swimming around inside, at a pub my uncle took me to. I had a beer. He's coming here. Do you want to meet him?"

I wondered what I'd do with a fruity old Brit. I envisioned him with a ton of pancake makeup on his face, enormous spidery eyebrows, hair combed and sprayed into a bouffant, wearing a velvet pantsuit and trying to get his hands down my pants. Gross.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess."

"I thought you'd be more enthusiastic. I wasn't going to go. Not by myself."

"Go where?"

"The concert. David Bowie. You know, skinny guy, red hair, androgynous? Sings a lot about outer space? People like you are nuts about him. Don't ask me why. What did you think I meant? It's for his new album, *Diamond Dogs*. I've got a backstage pass."

"No way. Get out."

"Uh-huh." Rose folded up her trail mix baggie and put it back into her handbag. I noticed the handles. They were dark wood, mahogany maybe, and had a brilliant patina.

"My dad is on the board of the Pacific Coliseum," she said. "We'd get to meet David Bowie."

"That's fantabulous! Meet him? Like really meet him in person! I'd kill to go."

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“November fifteenth.”

“I can’t believe it.” I could feel my pulse racing as I calculated family allowance cheques to figure out if I’d have enough time to get those satin pants before the concert.

We sat in silence for a little while, watching summer’s chilled rump waddle past the horizon. A lazy bee wavered in the air and landed unsurely on my knapsack. Nullified by the lateness of the season, it didn’t react when I tried to wave it off, so I killed it. It was a matter of survival. I was deathly allergic.

Rose sighed theatrically.

“What?” I asked.

“Fort Langley,” she said.

“I know!”

“There’s no God,” said Rose.

I couldn’t entirely agree. I was in heaven as we spoke, millions of miles away in another world where I was mentally assembling my wardrobe for Bowie’s concert. I imagined the luxury hotel suite where I would be whisked along with David and his entourage — and Rose, thanks to my persuasion — to a post-concert party. David would don a satin kimono like some cat from Japan, smiling sadly for the love he could not obey. There’d be champagne. Someone well hung would pass around a polished mirror with thin lines of snow-white sand and a tiny silver spoon, like the party I went to with Phillipe. It would probably be the Bayshore Inn, but maybe the Four Seasons.

“He’s so bourgeois,” said Rose.

“Hunh?”

“Mr. Cuthbert.”

I sighed like Twig the Wonder Kid as I pressed my space face close to Lady Stardust and imagined Life on Mars. I was lost in a Moonage Daydream. Dancing with spiders from Mars.

“Oh, yeah.”