

FUCKIN' ROMEO & JULIET

All the characters and the names of characters in this story are either real or imaginary, and any relation they may bear to you or somebody you think you know is your trip.

Michael Ebner

Woody dropped by because he said he'd heard we were down with the flu, which was true, and that he was concerned, which was possible, as he tossed two halves of an English muffin into the toaster.

"Make yourself some coffee," I rasped, still in the grip of the bug. Linda was even sicker, immobilized in the bedroom, too sick to smoke. I couldn't tell whether nicotine withdrawal or the flu was worse for her.

"Yeah," Woody said, meaning he'd have some coffee. "But I only got a few minutes," he continued, "Got some towels and shit in the dryer for Ellyce so that when I move out on the first of the month the house'll be nice an' haha fuckin' neat for her. Ya got any smokes? I don't know whether ya know this or not, but I'm unemployed at the moment, out on tha street, so ta speak, since I quit my job at the mines hahaha. Ya know, ya don't look so good."

I pushed a half-full pouch of Bull Durham and some rolling papers across the table to him. "I've felt better."

"Is this shit stale? Ya don't have any, ah, factory made cigarettes, do ya? I'm really inta technology. Used to work in a Ford plant, ya know. Got a real, ah, appreciation for assembly lines."

"Yeah, it's stale and it's all I got," I snapped as the muffins popped up.

"Got any butter or margerine?" he asked, turning around in his chair to open the refrigerator door. "And where's the salt?"

"The butter's in the yellow plastic thing in the door. The salt's right here." Woody never hesitated to serve himself unless there was a woman around. He cast a few frowns at the bedroom door, looking almost disgruntled by Linda's absence from the kitchen, feeling perhaps that her bout with the flu had inconvenienced him as well. He finally had to stand up to get the muffins out of the toaster. He stood by the toaster, buttering his muffin and glaring at the tea kettle.

I couldn't resist: "A watched pot never boils, Wood."

"I don't know if ya know this or not, Dwarf, but there was a fuckin' guy up on the funny farm who told me the same exact fuckin' thing. They finally had to take him into one o' them small white rooms with fuckin' mattresses all over the walls."

The whistle sputtered a couple of times and then began to shriek. "Haha!" he bellowed triumphantly. "Ya better watch your step, Dwarf! Even you can be wrong once in a while, even Semites can make mistakes!"

My mood, as usual when Woody appeared, began to improve. "Not very fuckin' often," I countered. "Not half as frequently as fuckin' Wasps."

Woody laughed one of his tubercular laughs. "Maybe, but Hitler sure had his shit together, hahaha!" His pudgy face turned red with mirth and his eyes watered a little. "Hitler had the

right idea, except he missed one," Woody wheezed, thrusting his face toward me.

"I told him I had the flu and couldn't make it," I said.

Woody laughed again, finished buttering his muffin, made two cups of coffee, brought them to the table and then returned to the refrigerator. "This raw milk?" he asked, holding up a large bottle of milk in one meaty hand. He brought it to the table and, not bothering to shake it, began pouring a generous amount of the thick white cream into his cup.

"Yeah," I said, watching his coffee turn a light shade of manila.

"I'm gonna have ta start buyin' this shit again when I get, ah, resettled. You an' Linda gettin' surplus food? Ya oughta do that. I'm gonna get back inta that again. An' look inta employment. Ya still gettin' it?"

"Most of the time." The flu, insidiously, had only given me a short respite; the achey feeling was back in my bones and I felt a little woozy. I started resenting Woody a little for exposing himself to it with such abandon, nonchalance. He never even got hangovers. But then, I wasn't a diagnosed manic-depressive schizophrenic, 'with, haha, fuckin' papers ta prove it.' Well, I reasoned, you can't have everything. "They're always on time when I don't have any bills to pay, then when the rent's due or the car fucks up, they miss a week or two."

"Oh Dwarf," Woody began in one of his melodramatic tones, "Ya know I can't stand ta see sufferin'. Hahahaha. But if it gets to be too much for ya, get inta suicide. That'll really

get your shit together!" He smacked the table with one hand and stuffed an entire half muffin into his mouth with the other. He chewed it up vigorously, an old habit from years of rotten teeth and gums. "But fuckin' Jews jus' don' have the balls fa suicide!"

"Only because it's too fuckin' easy, Wood," I said. Suddenly, again, the acheiness and whoozyness were gone. "Suicide's just for fags and candy-asses!" I bellowed, imitating him, even slamming my fist down on the table for emphasis. He seemed to be genuinely amused by my act and laughed, his big head back and from side to side.

"I don't know, Dwarf, but maybe you're not quite as fucked-up as everybody thinks," he said, regaining his wind. "Except you're still a fuckin' JEW!" He slammed his hand down again and laughed some more.

I looked at him for a minute trying to detect at what point the bullshit stopped and the edge of truth began. The almost yellow walls of the old kitchen rose behind him to meet the high, dirty white ceiling. Woody was prejudiced against the world in general, against all races, religions, creeds and colors. Somewhere along the line someone from every ethnic group and denomination had given him a reason, a basis, for bigotry. Except it wasn't bigotry, it was "ball-breaking." A test. If he could bust your balls, if you responded defensively, you failed the test. If you replied in kind, busted his balls a little, the test was over. It was a kind of competition, and it wasn't whether you won or lost so much as whether you could relate to it as a game that mattered.

"Whatsamatter?" Woody asked, turning around to see what I had found so fascinating.

"Oh . . . I was just wondering if there's any fuckin' way I could make you feel more comfortable, Wood, like maybe paint the walls flat black. These colors just aren't you."

Woody nodded his head in agreement and took a few large gulps of coffee, still nodding his head. "Now ya sound like ya really gettin' your shit together. An' why dontcha do this: Just lay about ten bucks on me and supply the paint an' I'll do the whole fuckin' house for ya. An' maybe if ya lemme ball your ol' lady a coupla times I'll even paint your car."

"Well, I dunno, Wood, 'cause she usually gets about fifty bucks a throw an' I can get the car painted an' waxed for \$29.95 at that place downtown. How about throwin' in a tune-up ta sorta even things out?"

"Hahahaha," Woody wheezed, gulping down the rest of his coffee.

Outside it was an early spring day under a cloudless blue sky; I suddenly realized I hadn't been outside in almost a week, which was one reason we were out of cigarettes and almost out of food. It also occurred to me that except for some juice and a few slices of toast, I hadn't eaten anything to speak of in two or three days.

"I think I'm hungry. Ya want somethin' if I make it?"

"Ya don't happen ta have any canned squid, do ya?"

I snapped my fingers. "Ah shit, Wood, we just ate up the last ten cans las' night for dinner. Along with the caviar.

But do ya think ya could settle for some bacon 'n' eggs?"

"Only if ya lemme have another cup a coffee."

"Oh, please help yourself, Wood. No fuckin' need ta stand on formality here."

Woody raised the pinky of his left hand in the air and said, "Fuf." This was his rather personal impression of an English butler, or possibly high society as symbolized in raised pinkies. He stood straight up, still holding his pinky aloft, his nose pointed up and his mouth puckered like a prune. He proceeded in this posture to the stove and despite his attire--faded, patched levis, soiled green tee-shirt, his sockless feet riding on rather than in the mashed remains of what were once brown loafers--he actually managed to create an illusion of pomp and social standing that melted once again into reality as he guided the extended pinky into the left nostril of his still uplifted nose and began to twist it along the calloused walls. I looked away and went to the refrigerator.

"Want me ta get ya a screwdriver, Wood? You could really get up in there with a screwdriver."

"Ah, no," he said in his "Fuf" accent, "a screwdriver is such a fuckin' common, ah, instru-ment!"

There were seven strips of bacon and three eggs left. I felt for a moment like the whole scene was out of a Charlie Chaplin movie, even imagining myself dropping the eggs accidentally on the floor and while I stooped to wipe them up, the bacon burning to black embers in the frying pan. Still picking his nose, Woody returned to his chair at the table.

"Does it ever strike you that life is a tragedy?" I asked.

"No, Dwarf, I kinda look at life like it's jus' one big fuckin' nose waitin' ta be picked."

My mind was racing: Could he possibly--no, no, not even Woody--but maybe--could he possibly be trying to get all the bacon and eggs for himself by making me throw up? Even before the thought had completely formed, I was ashamed for thinking it. To allay my guilt, I decided to give Woody two eggs and four strips of bacon. But I changed the subject.

"How's pottery goin'?"

"On, no shittin' aroun', I foun' my fuckin' niche in life! I got 350 pieces bis fired an' now all I gotta do is glaze 'em!" In went the entire other half muffin, like a rounded piece of clay, into the fiery kiln of his mouth.

I did some computing as I prodded the shriveling bacon. 350 pieces in 5 days = 7 per hour, thrown and fired, for 10 hours a day, or 3½ per hour for 20 hours a day. At 7 per hour, Woody was throwing a cup in a little under 9 minutes--and that would have to be one after the other without a break except for lighting cigarettes, picking his nose and an occasional piss for 10 SOLID HOURS A DAY! HOW MUCH WOOD WOULD A WOODCHUCK CHUCK IF A WOOD--

Woody burped, snapping me out of my numerical fantasy.

"No shittin' aroun', ya really oughta look inta surplus food. Now they give ya stamps an' it's jus' like shoppin' except they don't let ya get cigarettes and booze, ya jus' go into the fuckin' market like a respectable citizen and grab ya goodies. Sometimes,

no shit, I'm just fuckin' amazed at people who say anything's wrong with the country at all. America's fuckin' incredible an' I'm proud to have stood by her in her hour a need!"

He was referring to the time his Naval Reserve unit was put on alert during the Cuban missile crisis. The alert lasted a week, which represented one-tenth of Woody's entire military experience. He never went into detail about the other nine-tenths or the nature of his separation from the armed forces.

He burped again and then eyed the bag of Bull Durham but didn't pick it up. "I jus' can't unnerstan' why the fuck ya can't get cigarettes with them stamps," he began. "I mean, when they start tellin' ya what to eat and what not to eat, I mean what the fuck kinda democracy is that?"

"How long ya been eatin' cigarettes, Wood? That why your teeth are so fucked up?"

He ignored my remarks. "The only trouble with this fuckin' country is they got too many dipshits making the rules--too many Jews runnin' things. What this fuckin' country needs is about three big ovens in every city!"

I turned over the bacon and dropped the last of the English muffins into the toaster. "Maybe insteada puttin' two cars in every garage, we could turn every other garage into an oven," I offered.

Woody snorted and laughed.

"Hey--I just figured out why ya got into pottery, Wood: Ya get to play with the ovens!"

"I kinda preten' every fuckin' pot I shove in is a little Dwarf Jew!"

"I knew it!"

"Hahahaha. Jus' fuckin' beautiful," he said half to himself, shaking his big baby head.

The aroma of frying bacon and toasting dough began to have a paradoxical effect on my stomach. I was almost hungry and almost ready to puke.

"I'm to the point where I can throw a pot in about five minutes, maybe four," Woody said suddenly, throwing me into a new series of computations. That certainly would allow him time to piss and pick his nose, as well as stack and unstack the pots in the kiln. By 'pot' Woody meant 'cup,' a small drinking vessel, without a handle, with a bottom diameter of two to three inches, widening to nearly four inches across the top and standing about five inches high. Still, these were hand-crafted artifacts from lumps of slightly moist clay; and each one was nearly identical to the last, which, in some esthetic view, could be regarded as an accomplishment.

"But the trouble is ya gotta fire 'em once in order ta put the glaze on," he continued, "and then ya gotta fire 'em again to bake it in." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Ya know, maybe I could just throw the pot an' let it dry really good, then glaze it without bis firing it, and let it dry some more, and then just fire it once instead a twice!" He rubbed his chin some more. "I'm gonna try. I'll jus' fire 'em all once instead a twice. Nex' week I should be able ta crank out twenty, thirty percent more pots, hahahaha!"

I don't know why, but when my muffin popped up, I offered him half of it.

"Sure," he said, snatching it directly to his mouth, "now

that I'm on the street so ta speak I ain't gonna refuse nothin'. An' when I get my shit together, Dwarf, ya can come by anytime ya want an' jus'help yaself ta half a muffin!"

"Why don't ya butter it?" I asked almost ruefully, still wondering why I'd offered it. Idiot, schmuck, I accused myself.

"Butter's fa fuckin' fags an' Jews!" he bellowed as he chomped it in his busy mouth.

I wished I'd had a couple of cigarettes for him, but I decided unalterably to keep the other half muffin no matter what. Still chomping, he yanked open the refrigerator door without turning around and, still without looking, shot his hand directly to the bottle of milk and took it off the shelf. There were times when Woody's powers approached a cosmic level. He took a few big gulps of milk, not bothering to shake the bottle and thus taking down the last of the separated cream. He wiped his mouth with one hand and picked up the bottle with the other, reversing the process of replacing it in the refrigerator without turning around. Then he burped a few times and started to laugh, his head slightly bobbing, and said, "Holy shit have I been gettin' laid since I quit at the mines, hahahaha! I been ballin' some o' the sweetiest, juiciest most edible chicks I've ever fuckin' seen in my life, no shit, hahaha!" He raised the flat of his hand to his forehead and made an exaggerated "Ohhh!" sound in his mouth. Maybe he could sense I was still brooding about the English muffin because he launched right into a story without waiting for the usual coaxing. Or maybe it was just an energy rush from the food.

"Like yesterday morning this cunt in my pottery class asked me where the Frog was, so I just took her over there at lunch time. Only trouble was I already had made a fuckin' date with Winona ta meet her there for lunch, see, an' then I showed up with Irene an' when I walked in with Irene there was Winona sittin' at the goddam bar an' I had ta make a real painful, ah, fuckin' decision: Winona or Irene, see. So I looked at Winona an' her big tits, I mean that chick's got whippies out ta here, an' then I looked at Irene--oh my God, she's got tha thinnest fuckin' body in the whole state, maybe the whole country, I dunno, she's thirty-six with tha fuckin' body of a nine-year-old, no shit--"

"--you find that exciting?" I asked, interrupting, setting down his bacon and eggs and the salt and pepper. I brought my food over and sat down across from him at the table. My half muffin was a little cold by this time but still delicious. Woody went right to work on his food and polished off the rest of his coffee in about ten seconds, then resumed his story, as if having simply cranked out another tray of clay cups.

"--well maybe not exciting, it's . . . ah, weird sorta, different--I mean if ya got any real fuckin' balls you'd go right down to the fuckin' elementary school this afternoon an' check out some o' them little lovlies!"

"I would except I'd jus' fuckin' hate ta give one of them the flu, Wood. Man's gotta live with his conscience."

He laughed and started to eye my bacon. "So what about Winona?" I asked, hunching a little over my plate.

"Well, anyway, I decided ta let Winona go. An' besides, I'd already balled Winona that same fuckin' mornin'--yesterday mornin'--and lemme give ya tha shake," he said, raising his right hand toward his head and giving it a few shakes from the wrist, somewhat like a man being sworn in before a judge, except for the actual hand movement, which was Woody's particular elaboration, "Winona's jus' about the finest piece of ass you'd ever hope to stick your tongue inta, no shit, she's just about the nicest finest fuckin' FAR OUT piece since the Jap, an' that's takin' in a lotta fuckin' territory. Oh yeah, tha only problem with Winona yesterday mornin' was when we was ballin' Ellyce dropped in ta pick up a few things, right when we was in the fuckin' middle of things. An' when Ellyce left she slammed the fuckin' door."

"She doesn't usually slam the door?"

"She knows I don' like it, reminds me of the mines. But like I wasn't tryin' ta bum her out on purpose, I mean I didn't know she'd be comin' by the fuckin' house," he argued, plaintively.

"Of course not, Wood, ya wouldn't fuckin' hurt anybody for the world . . . so what about what's-her-name, Aileen?" I asked, munching happily on my muffin.

"Oh yeah, Irene. Well, first we was at the Frog, an' Winona got kinda bummed out an' left, and so Irene an' I stayed there a coupla hours jus' flappin' with each other--she's kinda fuckin' bright as a matter a fact--an' then we went back to the pot shop until kinda late, maybe nine or so, an' then we went

back ta tha Frog for a few more beers an' then we got ta her house. See, I'd teen tellin her how I was practically out on tha fuckin' street so ta speak an' even about Ellyce walkin' in on me an' Winona an' how I was afraid Ellyce would sneak into the fuckin' house while I was asleep an' cut off my balls or somethin', so anyway, Irene said I could stay at her place las' night. Oh it was jus' like a movie, hones' ta Chris', jus' like a MOVIE! See, at first I was supposed ta sleep on the couch in the livin' room. .Hahahaha. So she went into the bathroom and by the time she got out I had a coupla candles goin' in tha bedroom an' I was in her bed in my fuckin' birthday suit, hahahahaha. Then she comes outa the bathroom in this little fuckin' see-through nightie an' doesn't say anythin', ya know, jus' sorta gets right into the fuckin' rack with me. And then she says somethin' like, 'Since you and I are apparently sharing the same bed (he's using the "Fuf" standard high English tone of voice), fah fah, and since bowth of us apee-ah to be practicallee newd, well then my Dee-ah, why don't we just FUCK!'" He sprayed me slightly across the table as he exploded into laughter. He really had a good time with that laugh, rolling his head, wheezing, watering eyes, and about five or six good wallops on the table. Finally he finished the laugh and continued, "Well, she's got my dick in her hand as she's sayin' all this, see, an' I've got a pretty good hard on by this time an' so so I tell her, well, I'm gonna have ta run my tongue aroun' your juicy fuckin' box an' tits an' maybe even your ass jus' ta make sure you're fuckin' PURE enough for me. And then," he continued, starting to spray a little and laugh a little as he

went, "I told her that if she fuckin' measured up I'd probally fuck her until she, ah, withered away into a little fuckin' mound o' jelly or at least until she started to fuckin' beg me ta come . . . ah, it was beautiful," he sighed.

"Romeo and Juliet," I said, sipping the rest of my coffee.

"Hahaha, fuckin' Romeo and Juliet no shit," he agreed, laughing. Then he looked around for a cigarette again, saw the Bull Durham, and stood up. "Well, I better get back ta that shit in tha dryer before some shithead rips me off. It's probally finished by now anyway."

"How much money'd you put in?"

"A dime. Don't like for that shit ta get too much heat. Bad for tha fuckin' material."

"It's probably finished," I agreed. "You've been here for what seems like years."

"Hahaha," he wheezed. "Well, I'm glad ta see ya back on ya feet again," he said, already half-way to the door. "An' come on down to tha house, why don't ya, before I have ta move out. I don't know whether I tol' ya this or not, but I gotta be out by tha first of tha month and then I'll be--"

"--out on tha street so ta speak," I said. "Ya did mention it once or twice."

"Yeah. An' thanks for tha fuckin' feast, Dwarf, ya really outdid yourself this time." He laughed and was down the steps, letting the screen door slam behind him.

I stood there a moment, watching him walk his hunched, fast walk up the street, and then Linda called weakly from

bedroom, "Who's that, Michael?"

"That was Woody. Just Woody. Hey, are you hungry, kid, could you eat anything?" I asked, walking into the bedroom. She looked absolutely miserable, her dark hair dull against the pillow, her eyes still glazed with fever, her normally thin body now impossibly thin. I was filled with a feeling of sympathy, but also there came a soft, dimmest, subtle urge.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered weakly. "Maybe something. Maybe an English muffin."



Bean & Woody NYC 1965