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A Magazine for Fifty Readers

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Vol. 8, No. 2

Essays, poetry, fiction, reviews

Not a good fit

JUST BEFORE ELEVEN STU CALLED ME INTO HIS OFFICE AND SAID IT WASN'T A GOOD FIT.

I returned to my desk and called Maintenance Level to see if he'd come pick me up. I didn't feel like waiting for the bus after I'd just been canned.

ML said he and Short Arms Short Legs were writing songs, but that he'd swing by. Twenty minutes later they showed up: ML at the wheel of his ancient oversized Buick, Short Arms Short Legs riding shotgun, plentifully tattooed and wearing a cap composed of mesh and foam. I'd known ML since elementary school and Short Arms Short Legs almost as long, although not nearly as well.

I slid into the car behind ML. His hair was freshly cut, and I could see beads of sweat just above the collar of his golf shirt. He leaned forward to put in a CD, and the seat's headrest bisected the smoke streaming from his cigarette.

ML asked me what happened; I wasn't in the mood for talking but reprised my conversation with Stu anyway. Short Arms Short Legs snorted and said "Stu" was a gay name. He repeated it over and over, "Stew, Stew, Stew." He thought it was all a big lark, getting fired.

WE STOPPED AT THE BANK TO cash my final paycheck. Since I was now flush, I sprang for lunch at the Penalty Box. I'd planned to treat ML, but was annoyed that Short Arms Short Legs didn't offer to help pay when I took the bill from the waitress. He was on EI and never threw in for anything; he felt he shouldn't have to.

We ordered a pitcher of beer with our meal, and I felt dazed when we emerged from the restaurant. I was looking forward to a nap, but before I could ask ML to take me home, Short Arms Short Legs suggested we buy a case of beer and drink it in the park. ML quickly agreed. His shift at the casino wasn't until eight that night, and he needed to relax. I shrugged okay; I didn't want to be a killjoy, and it's not like I had any pressing engagements.

Maintenance Level and Short Arms Short Legs argued over what beer to get and as an afterthought asked me, since I was the one who'd just lost his job. I said I didn't care and they settled on Heineken, which Short Arms Short Legs allowed that he would drink, even though he thought it tasted like piss-water. ML explained that he wanted a beverage that wouldn't take you too high, or too low.

We got back in the car and Short Arms Short Legs said a little weed would be in order and he had some at his place, if his roommate hadn't filched it. This was a new word he'd taken up and he used it any time he could, telling ML, "Don't let that dude filch your parking spot," exclaiming when I mistakenly grabbed his fork at the restaurant, "Don't filch my utensil," and elbowing me as the clerk rang up the beer, "These prices are nothing short of highway filchery!"

WE PARKED OUTSIDE SHORT ARMS SHORT LEGS'S building, and he raced in while ML and I waited. I was about to ask ML how things were going at the casino – his last job, pre-paid funeral arrangements, hadn't worked out – but Short Arms Short Legs was back with the pot before I got the chance. We drove to Grosvenor Park and lay down on the far side of the tennis courts underneath a large tree, our case of beer obscured by some shrubs. It was very hot, and nobody was playing, except a few kids hacking around, chasing balls all over the cracked green cement. Eventually they got bored and left, and for a while the courts were empty, until two girls, university students probably, showed up and started playing. One had a great body and wore a tennis skirt that flapped up whenever she ran, providing a great view of her ass, which we discussed at length.

When the girls had finished playing, Short Arms Short Legs called out and offered them a beer. The one with the ass said, "No thanks, guys," and clanked the court door closed without turning around. ML told Short Arms Short Legs to shut up, because, who knew, these girls could go running to the park attendant crying about some guys drinking beer and bothering them, and we didn't need that. Short Arms Short Legs called ML a fag and an old lady, but quieted down.

IT WAS ALMOST SIX WHEN WE LEFT. We'd finished the weed and were out of beer, even though I'd gone on foot for more just after the tennis girls had left. Before we got to the car, I went for a piss in the clammy washroom. I felt drunk and weavy, and tried to remember if the latter was a real word. ML walked in, washed his face and hands, and said we needed to get going.

Maintenance Level piloted the Buick expertly, as if he hadn't drunk beer and smoked pot all afternoon. I sprawled in back, and the vehicle seemed to move on tracks like a train rather than drive like a car. The maroon upholstery was soft and warm like velour. It felt good against my arms and smelled of smoke, and I asked for a cigarette, even though I'd quit months before. I thought of the song "Velouria" and tried to remember if it was about velour or a woman or something else. How could there be a song about velour? Unlikely, but "Velouria" wasn't a name. Or was it? Short Arms Short Legs threw me a cigarette from the front and said, "Now you're even filching my smokes," as if he'd given me something before. I didn't respond. I thought about how intricate it all was: the streets, the cars, the telephone poles, the traffic lights. I marvelled at the way the sidewalks had been placed ingeniously in between the stores and the street, just so.

SHORT ARMS SHORT LEGS WANTED TO get a pizza, but ML vetoed it – he needed to get home and shower before work. A few minutes later, ML pulled up in front of Short Arms Short Legs's building. Short Arms Short Legs got out, pushed the car door closed with his foot, and, standing on the sidewalk, pantomimed playing guitar while scrunching up his face and uttering, "Nuh-nuh nee-nee nuh-nuuuh neeh." Maintenance Level told him to write it down. It was only a little further to my place, so I stayed in back. The car moved forward, things began to spin, and I couldn't speak.

I remembered my conversation with Stu earlier in the day and wished there weren't so many stops and starts. Things were swaying too much and were weavy, and I didn't care if that was a real word or not or what "Velouria" was about. I wanted to say unpleasant things about Short Arms Short Legs to ML but didn't, because it seemed like they had become close friends. I wondered when that had happened and was disappointed in Maintenance Level. I guessed it was their band, Antwerp, or whatever it was called these days, that provided the glue.

ML let me off in front of my building. As I got out, I saw the 6:19 bus I usually took home go sailing past two blocks away. It was a coincidence that I wanted to share with Maintenance Level, but he was already pulling from the curb.