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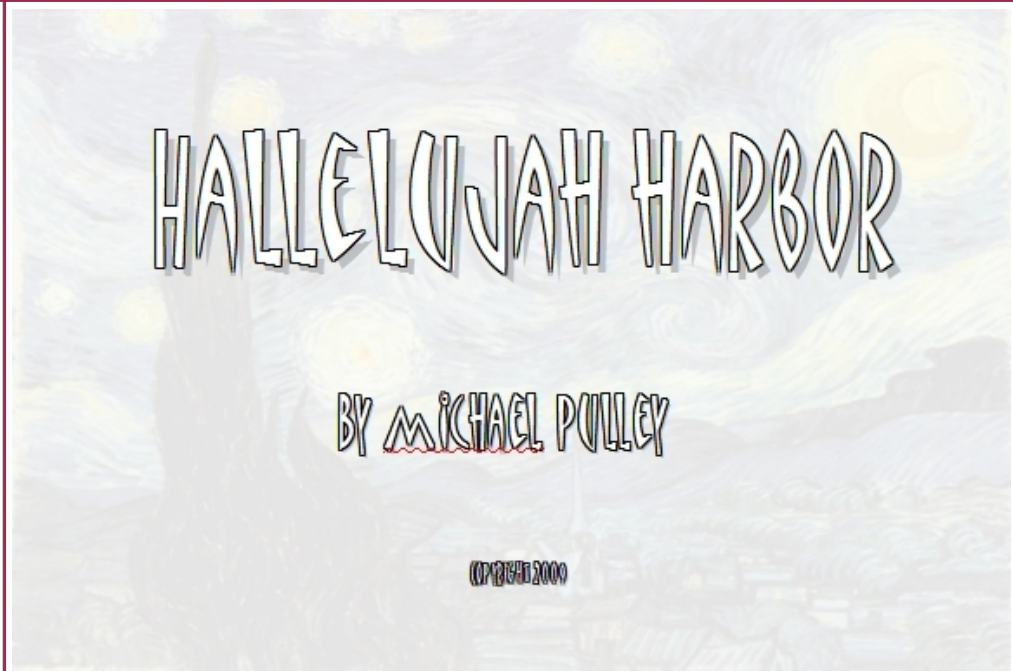
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I tell you, it was great fun at first. When Bill would march me in with silly salesmen all over the room. They'd be talking, but I noticed they were spilling drinks and tripping over each other to get a look at me Like they thought I'd be as athletic under the sheets as I was on the basketball court. They'd seen me hit three pointers, dish off in the lane, dive to the floor for a loose ball—everything Harmony Lovrien had done But there I was, a fake, a look-alike, waltzing in on Bill's arm. It was all kinds of fun while it lasted, fooling the insurance agents blind. I'm pretty sure I could've had any of them, but this was Bill's game, and I played it.

Harmony Lovrien, Lady Panthers' basketball All American, is the pride of Eastern NY State University and the darling of Greenston, New York. She's the only true All American the U ever had, and she did it in her junior year, too. She's in her senior year now and still ripping the nets. "Going to the women's NCAA Final Four," everybody in Greenston says. People say I even talk like Harmony Lovrien. I used to practice her talk when I was alone. Doing Harmony kept my life in some kind of order. So I worked at it. Not much else to do in Greenston.

Earlier this year I changed my hair to look just like Harmony's. Bill wanted me to. Can't say I blame him. He was getting lots of mileage out of me, and selling more policies than ever. We both knew why.

I kept thinking about what Sister Mary said. I still call her Sister Mary even though she's not a nun any more. She gave me some advice, and I'd better say this exactly or you'd never believe even a former nun would say it. "Better take your pick of those men now. Fuck them while you can. They won't be chasing you forever."

"Why are you telling me that?" I asked.

"Some things in life pass you by. Nothing worse than waste."

I thought that over.

"Ever read much?" she asked.

"Like what?"

“Thomas Aquinas.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

I always hate when someone does that. “Don’t cut me off like that,” I said.

“There’s a design. Things happen then other things after that, and before long you’ve got yourself a life built up.”

Sounded pretty simple to me. “So?”

“You better get involved in the chain of events. You might be sorry some day if you don’t. I used to think I knew who Aquinas’s Mover was. Now I’m thinking maybe I’m a bigger part of the moving than I once thought, and I really might be the mover.”

“What’s that guy’s name again?”

“Thomas Aquinas.”

“What’s he got to do with this?”

“He said the Mover started things off and everything proceeds after . . .”

She went on awhile before I stopped her. “So why should I be sleeping with those men?”

“You’ve got to figure out what’s best for you. Make choices. Move.”

Which I did, but I didn’t go sleeping around. Not my nature, even though I never screwed around on Bill. The sex with him wasn’t that great, but it was comfortable.

Sister says she left the nuns for good. I couldn’t get a straight answer exactly why. She knows lots of stuff, but I get the feeling she’s trying to get things moving into some direction she’s never been. Sometimes she’ll give me one of her go-to-hell looks, which I think means she’s lonely, too.

Sister and I first met in the break room out at the mall. The suits who walked around looking at the store displays let the mall employees have a big empty store for a hangout on breaks. So I was there one day smoking my first of four cigs (I never smoke when I’m doing Harmony) when I saw this frumpy woman walk in. She’s really only ten years older than me, but swear to God when I first saw her, she looked darned old. Never had done a thing to her hair, decent clothes but no makeup, and a pair of ugly shoes. The kind of person you usually look right through when you meet. She sat next to me, and I was about ready to start spewing out the usual Harmony Lovrien act (by the way, I know lots about basketball—played in high school and was pretty good) when she asked me if I had a guy. I didn’t know whether to be Harmony or me, and in my confusion I just started talking and didn’t recognize the voice coming out of my head. “Yeah, I got one,” I said.

Sister looked at me like she’d known me all my life and told me how pretty I was. I felt something wild buzz through me like in a dream when something’s about to get you, and you try to scream but can’t. It occurred to me she thought I was Harmony, so I started my routine. Most Greenston people fall for it, but not Sister Mary. I could tell she wouldn’t know a back court violation from a free throw. I kept it up, but Sister wouldn’t give in. I looked around, and

nobody was paying any attention to us.

“I got a man, too,” she said, like she hadn’t even noticed me doing Harmony. “Stamps Bancroft. Good man. Clean.”

She had this calm, soothing look on her face that made me like her. Stamps Bancroft is her husband, an ex-con. She didn’t tell me everything about Stamps and her that first time. I’ve learned the whole story in bits and pieces over the last year. After prison he got a job driving a truck so he’s gone a good deal but then he’s also home some between runs. Somehow I don’t think the job’s working out too good because she says he’s been home a lot lately.

Sister works in the Sewing Center at the mall. I keep books at Sears, sit in an office all day away from customers. Some of my friends tried to get the suits to put me in the sporting goods section so people would think Harmony worked there and they’d sell more sporting goods. But the suits said they couldn’t have a person on the sales floor making what I make, which was the wrong thing to say, because now everyone I work with in Sears is asking what I make. Like it’s a big deal. I don’t do bad.

So right there in the break room Sister started telling me all about Stamps and how they got together. She was a full-time nun, and he was a convict in the state pen. She had started writing letters to prisoners and then started visiting them. That’s how they met. “I had this thing for trapped people at the time,” she said.

All the while that she’s talking I’m lighting one cig off another and wondering why I’m starting to like this dumpy woman. I don’t think she’s dumpy now, though. You know how it is when you start to like someone.

“Easy to figure out now why I wanted to minister to men prisoners,” she went on. “I was as trapped in my habits as they were in their cells. I needed to move on.”

She must have known by the look on my face that I didn’t catch her little joke about habits, so she stopped and explained. That’s the thing about her. She understands people by looking at them. “Why men prisoners?” I asked. Harmony would never have asked that.

“Psychologically, I wanted to free myself through sex.” She looked at me like I would understand. I knew something about sex, but I wasn’t getting the psychology part.

“You’re a strange woman,” I said.

“Not really. I’m probably a lot like you.” And she gave me one of her patented now-it’s-your-turn-to-talk looks. She’s got brown eyes that can make you feel real uneasy when you don’t understand.

“Bill’s no ex-con, like your man,” I said. That was real bright.

“Like to meet him. You and him together.”

I didn’t know what to say. “Maybe sometime.”

Turns out we introduced our men to each other one night at Sister’s house when she invited us over for dinner. This was a few weeks after Sister and I had spent quite a bit of time in the break room. I told her, sure we’d come, but I had a heck of a time getting Bill to go because I’ve noticed he doesn’t much like to hang out with people who won’t eventually pay off.

Bill’s good looking, twenty-five years old, and dresses sharp all the time. He says he never

knows who might be watching him, and it's important to impress people right off. He turns heads all right. But as Sister Mary once said, "Looks don't mean much."

"Sister's been nice to me," I told him, "She's funny." Well, Bill clammed up, which is his way of whining, and I told him he could just kick back and let the evening flow. He wasn't too thrilled about the ex-con business either. On the way to their house, about the time we hit the run-down west end of town, Bill was ready to chuck it all. "Do all your friends live so elegantly?" was the way he put it when we got to their house. Bill can get real haughty. That's a word Sister taught me.

Their house didn't look too bad on the outside, but the inside had a smell to it, like an old person's house in the winter. Stamps did the cooking. He was stirring up things when we got there and cussing out everything in the kitchen. Slamming things around, but smiling all the time. He had long black hair pulled into a pony tail and was built like a Greek god. His T-shirt sleeves were rolled up two turns and his muscles popped. Here was a man in his fifties (Sister had told me) who looked like a thirty-year-old. But he looked like he'd done time, deep creases on his face. Suddenly Bill wasn't so cocky anymore. No haughty looks or anything.

Sister got us each a beer and said Stamps liked to have people stand around in the kitchen and talk when he cooked. I've never seen a person who could smile and cuss at the same time like Stamps. "Goddamn good looking pair of people," he said to no one in particular, referring to us. Every drawer in the kitchen was open, and he'd run to one and rattle around and cuss before finding what he wanted in another. "This son-of-a-bitchin' house don't know how to take pretty people. Right, Mary?" Sister's name is Mary Shurr. Sister looked like she was ready to lay him low with one of her remarks. "Handsome people," is all she said.

"Who does the little lady remind me of?" Stamped asked Sister. He had just dumped some green peppers, onions, mushrooms, and garlic in a sauté pan with hot olive oil and was talking loud above the sizzle.

"Someone you met in prison?" Sister asked, giving us a wink.

"Goddamn your eyes, wife." Stamps scrunched up his face as he gave the sauté pan a little flip to stir the ingredients. Stamps was good in the kitchen. "Screw prison," he said. "She looks like someone I seen around here."

Then I got kind of scared because he spun around with the pan still in his hand and looked at me like he would attack. I thought poor Bill was going to head for the door as I watched him inch back. Stamps just stared at me with the pan in his hand, and I knew what Bill was thinking—an ex-con was about to commit murder with a sauté pan.

"Jesus Christ," Stamps blurted out. "Mary, why'n't you tell me? That's Harmony Lovrien!"

Bill started laughing, the way people do when something's not funny, when they're just relieved. "That's right," said Bill. "In the flesh. Harmony herself." Bill was letting out some fake chuckles, the kind I'd heard him use before, but these were faster. Like he had to get in as many as possible.

Leave it to Bill to really screw things up. He had just lied to an ex-con who was built like a linebacker. Sister and I both knew we couldn't let it go on. But Bill couldn't stop himself. "You'd be surprised at the number of people who tell me how lucky I am. She's got the looks, body, and brains." Bill was back to being a salesman, like he was getting ready to close a deal.

Stamps was confused. He looked over at Sister and back at us. "That's not the name you

used when you introduced us,” he said to Sister “You said her name was Julia.”

Bill piped up. “You wouldn’t believe how people swarm her around town, especially during the season when her picture’s on the sports page all the time. She likes to use an alias. Solves a few problems.”

Stamps was not buying it. I popped Bill on the shoulder like we were having some fun and hoped he’d pick up on it. Sometimes Bill is so dense he can’t see a thing. I said, “We have some fun with this, but . . .”

“Harmony is quite a shy star,” Bill said, “and does her best to . . .”

I figured we might as well start wiping the hot olive oil off us because Stamps was trying to get to the bottom of this. “Wait just a goddamn minute,” he said. By now he was in our faces and had pulled Sister over by the arm. “You’re lookin’ at a mean motherfucker,” he told us Bill understood and knew to shut up. Sister had a real serious look. “My wife here never lies to me,” said Stamps.

I didn’t see how Sister could bail us out of this one, but I could tell by the look on her face she wanted to try. Bless her heart. Sister looked up at me and said, “Bill’s probably never spent a day of his life in prison.” She looked at Bill, and he nodded real quickly. Then she looked at Stamps. “So, Stamps, Bill’s idea of humor is slightly less direct than yours. Nuance, my dear, nuance.”

That’s another one of her words, and it didn’t make Stamps mad, like it might anyone else. Stamps let her finish. “You haven’t yet learned to pick up on people’s humor. Bill here was kidding. This is really Julia Waller, not Harmony Lovrien. Bill was making a joke.”

Stamps eased off, and about that time, Sister started explaining to Stamps, real calmly, that he needed to learn some manners. His face kind of fell, and he put the pan down and went back and tipped up his beer and started cooking again.

“But I know about basketball, and she sure as hell looks like Harmony Lovrien,” he said, kind of low and sad.

Why do I feel so sorry for people sometimes?

* *

The thing I liked the most about doing Harmony was watching people’s eyes light up, almost like they had seen Christmas for the first time. It kind of made it all worthwhile. But then people can be real stupid and act like fools, too. And that’s when I would start having some fun. For example, I got the twitch down real good. Some blue-haired old lady would start to gush about how much she loved the Lady Panthers and how she and her husband had season tickets and what a wonderful person I was, almost like I rated right up there with Mother Theresa. Well, I’d start making the right side of my face twitch. First I’d kind of make my right arm hop ever so slightly and before you knew it, I was spazin’ all over. Then I’d say, “This never happens on the court usually.” And I’d pretend to take a jump shot, quivering all over. All the time smiling my prettiest Harmony smile.

I wouldn’t do that to everyone, just the ones who deserved it. Sometimes I’d pick my nose the

whole time I'd be talking and watch how they'd try not to notice. I never did treat the same person to both the twitch and the nose picking, though. No one deserved that.

I had told Sister everything about doing Harmony, and at first she had a hard time believing the stupid ways I said people acted until I told her to follow me around the mall during the Christmas rush. I pulled out all the stops for her, the twitch, the nose picking, and a few others. She managed to keep a straight face and hung right in there with me.

“Please meet my dear missionary mother from Borneo,” I told some old codger. “She teaches the natives how to use condoms.”

I looked over at Sister and thought she might go along with me. She looked at the old guy who was acting kind of sick and about to swallow his teeth. Then Sister shook his hand and patted his arm. She bent over almost like she was kneeling and mumbled something before kissing his hand. I thought Sister was playing off my routine, and I was about to really turn it on when Sister looked up at me and said, “I'll meet you in the break room, Julia Waller.” She wasn't smiling. She walked off and left me with the old guy.

“She called you Julia,” he said.

“First stages of senility,” and twirled my finger in the air beside my head.

That's about when I stopped getting such a kick out of doing Harmony.

* *

The night at Sister and Stamps' house turned out to be OK after the episode with Bill trying to pull one over on Stamps. It scared Bill and me both, but believe it or not we ended up having a pretty good time. Stamps got real drunk and started telling lots of weird stories about prison, but each time he was about to go overboard, Sister could somehow calm him down. I'll have to say Stamps was a likeable enough guy, but I never got used to all that cussing. I've never been religious and God knows I've heard some cussing in my time, but it creeped me out to hear this ex-con talk like that in front of Sister, even though she could take about anything anyone dished out.

Bill told me never to see them again. “Not the kind of people you need to be associating with,” he said, which really pissed me off. So Bill and I had this big argument and didn't see each other for a couple of weeks, until we needed each other again. Sex can be real confusing.

But leave it to Sister to read me. One day in the break room she said, “You're not any happier than I am.” I've always been one to stand up for myself, so I said, “You a mind reader?”

She decided to wait me out, I guess. Nobody budged or said anything. I couldn't take it any longer, so I blurted out, “Just who the hell do you think you are?”

Sister really dug her eyes into me. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. So I snuffed out my cig and went back to Sears. When I got there, my phone was ringing, and it was Sister telling me to meet her that night at some address up on Trade Avenue. I jotted it down, and by the time I was ready to talk, she had hung up. I didn't call her back because sometimes it's best to leave Sister alone.

So I went up to Trade Avenue after work. Maybe the worst street in Greenston, full of bums and closed down stores. The rich people in town have been trying to get it fixed up to put in fern bars and little boutiques, but it'll never happen. The TV news is always telling about somebody getting stabbed or freezing to death around the railroad tracks up there. So I wasn't thrilled to be going there by myself, at night. Of course, Bill wouldn't have wanted me to go, which kind of made me want to go more.

I didn't have a clue what Sister was up to and was thinking of turning back when I saw her car parked in front of the Hallelujah Harbor. Oh man. I checked the address she'd given me and this was the place. Several people were waiting around outside, not the kind of people you see at Sears, for sure. I drove around the block twice because I hoped the crowd would thin out. Funny that I never once thought about not going in. I look back on it now and realize I must have really trusted Sister.

After parking, I managed to walk down the street without anyone pinching me on the butt or saying anything rude. I was dressed pretty nice. No one looked at me. They just stood around smoking their cigarettes.

The place must have been a store at one time. There was this long entryway set back off the street before you actually got to the door. An old guy was sitting cross-legged in there out of the wind. Over him was a sign—NO SMOKING IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD.

I've been in plenty of uncomfortable situations and know how to handle myself, so I walked in pretty confident, even though I was scared. Never look from side to side in times like those because people will notice and figure you out. I was trying to draw a bead on Sister. I was at the back of a small room that must have been used as a chapel because there were beat-up metal folding chairs set in rows with a pulpit in front. A few people, mostly asleep, were sitting in the chairs and the place was dead still. I didn't know what to do and thought about walking right out, then someone came charging through a swinging door behind the pulpit. Well, you should have seen the sleepers bounce up. They jerked and flinched like God had dropped a bomb on the place. One old guy said, "Aw dammit!" and another one passed some loud gas.

"Praise be! The word of the Lord!" said a woman who had come crashing through the door. "Let us fill our souls!"

She left the door swinging, and I could see through to a room behind it with long tables. Lots of people were eating, and I heard dishes clanging. She tossed a Bible onto the pulpit. Everyone seemed to be awake now. The smell of food from the other room had drifted in. I got the picture Preaching before food.

I was still standing, and the woman motioned for me to sit down. I said, "I'm here to see Sister Mary. On business."

Since all the sleepers were now awake, they turned around and gave me the once-over. The guy who had said "Aw dammit" said, "She's here on business. Put her right through to the chow line." Then he started laughing and ended up in a coughing fit.

The woman behind the pulpit opened the Bible and was holding it in one hand with half of it rolled back like a scroll and the other half flopping around. She must have been ready to do some heavy preaching. "You're here to see who?" The woman had a braid down her back, no makeup, and wore a long blue skirt.

Then I remembered that no one ever called her Sister Mary. That was my name for her. "Mary Shurr," I said. "She must be working here tonight. I need to join her." I was hoping to get out of a boring sermon. But I didn't have a clue what Sister would be doing there or why

she wanted me.

Scorn. That's the kind of word Sister might have used to describe the look I got from the Bible thumper up front. "Let the pretty lady through," wheezed the codger before he had another fit.

"This way," the woman said and opened the door. Some people applauded as I walked through the room.

"Thank you," I told her, at the door.

"Why certainly, young lady." Scorn is the word.

I was in the noisy dining room looking around. It smelled pleasant in there, all the food.

"You here to take pictures?" Sister asked. She almost pushed me off my feet as she flew by, nudging me with a big platter she was carrying. "You gonna fish or cut bait?" She was busy and serious, and she went down a long row of tables before I could think of something to say. People were talking loud and eating like it was their last meal. By the time I had noticed Sister again, she was at the other end of the large room unloading what looked like pies or cakes. She came back in a half run, and I was standing in the same spot, feeling stupid. She yelled at me, "Don't just stand there in the way." I followed her back into the kitchen. "Sandwiches," she yelled, over her shoulder.

Some greasy dude grabbed me by the arm and twirled me around. "Glad to meet you, Miss Sandwiches. My name's Mashed Potatoes." He let out a kind of whoop that I could tell meant I should laugh. One tooth in front was missing and another was dark and rotten.

"Where's Mrs. Gravy?" I said. It just came out. He started jumping up and down with his mouth open but no sound was coming out. Catching air, I guessed, to work up a good laugh.

I didn't hang around. Sister was on the other side of the kitchen waving me to hurry over. She headed for a table in the corner and waved again. "Sandwiches," she yelled. I had to walk through the people who worked there, mainly a bunch of women dressed in skirts that hit them below the knees. The men wore white shirts.

"Evening young lady," one man said. "I'm Pastor Wiggins." He shook my hand and held it too long. "Are you here to help us serve the needy tonight?" I didn't like the look in his eye.

"Here with her." I pointed to Sister who was clanging around with Miracle Whip jars and butter knives. I dropped his hand and beat it over to Sister. "Who's the dude with the clammy hands?" I asked Sister She was setting up what looked like a little assembly line. White bread, baloney, Miracle Whip, lettuce, mustard.

"He's the head guy. Thinks he's a preacher. About as smart as a slice of this baloney."

She tore open four long loaves of bread and fanned out the slices on the table like she was dealing cards. "We got hungry people out there who haven't been fed yet. Start slinging. Make this baloney and mayo fly."

I hadn't seen Sister like this before, kind of bossy. I started working, but I was feeling sort of sick, not from the work or the food or people. It was something else. Hard to explain. Then I started in on Sister.

“Why are you working here?” I asked.

“Just keep making those sandwiches, Julia.”

“How come you married Stamps?”

“That’s my business.”

“Why’d you bring me here?”

“Because there’s work to be done.”

“Why’d you quit being a nun?”

“I believe I answered that for you before.”

“Why do you let Stamps cuss so much?”

“That’s pretty much the way he is. What would you suggest, my dear?”

I didn’t have an answer. She was making me nervous. “How did you know I wasn’t happy?” I asked.

“Well, are you happy?”

I knew I wasn’t, but I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. “I suppose.”

I ran out of questions. We went on in high gear making those dumb sandwiches and finished off two jars of Miracle Whip then the preacher brought over some more. When we ran out of baloney, someone brought us a huge bowl of ham salad. We ran out of bread and lettuce and were brought more.

“The Bible jocks around here are all ignoramuses,” Sister said out of the blue. “I don’t like any of them.”

“Then why do you work here?”

She didn’t answer. I was wearing down on my questions and feeling kind of neutral. Not mad. Then I got to thinking what Bill would say if he knew Sister and I were making sandwiches up on Trade Avenue at the Hallelujah Harbor. All the time I was slapping those sandwiches together and thinking about a lot of things, mainly about Sister and Harmony Lovrien.

Then out of nowhere she asked me, “When you gonna cut your hair?”

That’s the thing about Sister. She can read minds. Suddenly I heard someone yelling, “Out ‘a my way all you sons a bitches.” And here came Stamps Bancroft digging a path through the people in the kitchen and nearly knocking the preacher off his feet. Stamps was waving his arms and making the Christians scatter like he was Moses parting the waters. “Who’s in charge of ordering supplies around this chicken outfit? We’ve run out of damned ham salad.”

I was as surprised as everyone. Sister poked me in the ribs. “He’s a delicate sort, no?” Then

Sister gave me one of her looks. "Why are you here?"

She'll do that to me every time.

* *

Next day in the break room Sister and I were really tired because we didn't get out of the Harbor till 12:30 or 1:00 am. There's a lot of cleaning up to do after you serve that many people. Plus there was this fight outside with the police coming in to break it up. Sister said she was just happy Stamps didn't get involved because he still liked to fight.

We didn't say much to each other on break. I smoked my four cigs and Sister talked, the usual boring stuff about what happened in the Sewing Center and what kind of fabrics they got in. I couldn't figure out why she didn't say something about the Hallelujah Harbor because I really hadn't slept much the night before, thinking about all sorts of things. First, I'd think about somebody I'd seen there, then my mind would wander around to Bill, then back to Stamps and Sister, then back to those poor people scarfing down free food. And Harmony kept jumping in there, too. I thought a lot about her, about how I was trying to be her and all. I didn't even know her. And there was Sister in the Hallelujah Harbor acting like she was a nun again. And what was Stamps pretending to be? An ex ex-con? I can be a pretty deep thinker at times, but I try not to overdo it. Sometimes, though, at night you can't help but think. I hate those nights. Anyway, in the break room I kept wanting to say something to Sister about the night before, but she was just talking away as usual. I still had a bunch of questions left to ask her, but I didn't ask any. Instead I stayed at home that night thinking, trying to come up with some answers. The phone rang several times, but I didn't answer it.

The next day I started my moves, doing things. First, I called in sick at Sears, then I called Connie down at the Cottage Clippers.

"What's up?" she asked. Connie's been cutting my hair for years.

"You got to work me in today," I said.

"What's the rush?"

"I need a cut. A big one."

She booked me for three in the afternoon. Then I called Sister at the Sewing Center and told her to meet me at the Hallelujah Harbor that evening. I told her about my big plans for old Bill.

Sister laughed.

Then I called Bill at work. "Where were you last night?" he asked. "I called and called."

"I was home thinking." I had rehearsed putting just the right amount of excitement and honesty in my voice. "Thinking about us. And I'd like for us to have dinner tonight. My treat this time. I know a great place. Lots of people go there."

"Where?"

“Up on Trade Avenue.” He didn’t say anything. “Bill?”

“I knew that area would rebound.” He took the bait. “Finally getting some adventuresome entrepreneurs in that part of town.” I knew visions of a fern bar and polished chrome danced in his head. I’d be on his arm and everything.

“Bill, I’m a greeter there. Just took the job. So I’ll have to meet you. About 6:30?”

I could picture Bill’s face light up. I was sure he’d bring a client or two. “Looking forward to it, hon,” he said. I gave him the Hallelujah Harbor’s address. Bill is a happy man when he has people to impress.

* *

He brought along two hot shot guys in fancy shoes and expensive sweaters—the kind of guys you see walking out of those men’s specialty shops at the mall. And, swear to God, Bill didn’t recognize me at first. Connie cut my hair pretty short, which she said changed the shape of my face, and I bought some new makeup, and some new clothes. “A new person,” Connie had said. I didn’t like Harmony anymore. I walked right up to Bill and gave him one of those dainty pecks on the cheek. “Hello, Bill.”

“Julia?”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?”

And that’s when he got this sad and frightened look, like a little boy might get when he’s lost and can’t find his mommy. I walked right up to the two other guys and shook their hands and made them like me. Some women can do that. I didn’t catch their names because I didn’t want to, and I was thinking about Bill and what was to come next—Stamps and I had worked it out.

Bill finally got the strength to talk, “What is this?” We were standing in the entryway, and a couple of scroungy guys were trying to push their way around us to get inside.

“This is a place to eat,” said one of the scroungies, and he turned to look at Bill and his buddies. “But you gotta listen to preaching first.” Then, “Nice clothes.” They laughed and went in.

“I’ll show you to your waiter,” I said too loudly—which was Stamps’ cue—and swept my hand toward the door.

Stamps appeared wearing a greasy T-shirt that said OUTTA MY WAY. “Get your asses in there, gentlemen,” he said. “And sit down and shut up.” I took Bill’s hand and led him to a folding chair in the back so he could get a good look at the clientele. His buddies followed close behind. Then Pastor Wiggins walked in and the sermon began. Lots of talk about how Jesus wanted to fill our souls before He fed our bellies. I stood at the door and smiled and waved at Bill every now and then. Poor thing. Trapped like all the others.

This was going just as planned. Later Bill and his friends would eat the white bread and baloney sandwiches in there with all the smelly people, and I would have made my point—which was that Bill deserved to be embarrassed for all his phoniness and for putting on airs

like he always did. I'd show him he couldn't use me anymore, that I'd become Julia Waller, not Harmony Lovrien. And I knew he wouldn't want me anymore. I didn't care because I'd seen the light. He could go jump in the lake as far as I was concerned. I had thought dozens of times about how funny this would be and how good this would feel. Bill and his snotty friends in the Hallelujah Harbor!

But watching Bill sit there with his sneering buddies didn't make me feel good at all. Bill got this helpless look on his face, like "What do I do now?" He was trying to go along with the two guys he brought along, who were having quite the time laughing and making fun of everyone. But Bill's world was crumbling—I could see it falling around him. He had built a world of his own—as stupid and fake as it was—but it was his. And I had set things moving so it would fall to pieces. And there I stood watching it go. His buddies would walk out to their wives and homes and chalk up the evening to comedy, like some fraternity night out.

I saw Bill's pathetic face, and I walked over to him while Pastor Wiggins yammered on. Bill tried to keep up appearances, which brought even more pain into his face. "Let's go," I said.

"Great stunt," one of his buddies whispered to me on our way out.

The other one said, "Now where are we going to eat?"

"Wherever the hostess takes us," Bill said, looking straight ahead.

"Your call," I said, sadly. I reached for Bill's hand, but he pulled it away.

As we walked down Trade Avenue, I realized that I knew something about tearing down worlds but very little about building new ones. I reached for Bill's hand again, but he had jammed it into his pocket. I didn't know where we were going, but wherever it was, I didn't want to be there. I marched along beside Bill until I fell behind. He wasn't saying a word, but the others were talking loudly, happily. I watched the back of Bill's head.

"Hey, Bill," I said. "I'm sorry."

He turned and smiled, which made me nearly collapse. I hardly recognized him. "Julia, maybe you should have dinner with your friends back there."

I knew I couldn't go there anymore, because I had just torn it down. The place was as lost to me as Bill's smile. Instead, I kept walking and turned the corner to my car. Bill and his buddies had parked on down the street. In my car I put my head on the wheel, forgetting where my keys were. I knew I'd sit there for a long time before remembering how to do familiar stuff again, like starting a car. But those things would eventually come back. Soon I'd make a move, probably find my keys and put my hands on the wheel.

And then off I'd go, leaving Sister and Stamps fussing strangely and warmly in a life of their own making.

Michael Pulley's short stories have appeared in *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Sonora Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Furnace Review*, and *Review Americana*. He is currently marketing a novel, *Wooden Nickels*, and a collection of short stories, *Amid the Blues and Browns*. He holds an MA in Language and Literature from the University of Missouri-St. Louis and teaches writing at a community college in Springfield, MO, where he lives with his wife Ann.