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# Smile

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Smile  
By Philip Booth

The stuff kicked in at the restaurant, Captain Carl's, a pit stop on their tour of Old Town. Marc and Christina ordered fried shrimp, conch chowder, a pitcher of Bud to soak it all up, and key lime pie for dessert, and waited on the food for three long hours. Christina perused the jukebox selections – the requisite Jimmy Buffett's "Wasted Away in Margaritaville" and "Son of a Son of a Sailor," along with tunes by Florida boy Tom Petty, the Eagles, Santana, the Rolling Stones and other old-line rockers. She scanned the autographed celebrity photos, plastered irregularly all over the front wall of the place. Marc used crayons to cover every inch of the children's menu, from the connect-the-dots sailboat to the word scramble. Maybe it just felt like three hours.

Meanwhile, the action was beginning to pick up in front of Marc's eyes, right there on the black-and-white checked tablecloth: Tiny gnomish men swung from square to square, hanging on the vertices like penny-sized monkeys. Steamboat Willie steered his ship to the north, south, east, west, shouting out instructions in that familiar, inimitable helium squeak. Gumbi chatted with Pokey, the two bending into impossibly contorted positions, and inappropriate sexual images briefly flickered through Marc's mind.

Marc told Christina what he'd seen, wondering if she had noticed, too. "You're hallucinating, shit head," she said. "It happens. Quit grinning. Get a grip. Be normal." He stopped and stared at her for several long moments, before happily returning to fantasy land. Afterwards, they jumped on their rented matching red Vespas, and rode over to Mallory Square. Her mood didn't improve.

"Quit grinning, dummy," she said. "Come on, cut it out. You look stupid. Stop it."

She paused, for dramatic effect. "I'm walking away now. I'm not kidding. I'm going."

Marc just kept smiling, focusing on inanimate objects with delight, reveling in the sudden, inexplicable profundity of a butterfly in flight, and bouncing on the tips of his toes. The planet cheese was full in the Key West night sky, practically winking at him, like in that ancient Melies short. And yet, somehow, he was treading lightly on the moon's surface, leaping across great distances in a single bound, eyeing a lunar module, his chest swelling with pride at the sight of the American flag, planted there by Neil Armstrong, once a stranger and now, temporarily, his best pal. Everything was going to be okay, he thought. He just had to wait it out.

Reaching for Christina's hand and then giving up when she pulled away, veering off for a solo flight, Marc consoled himself with an aimless stroll around the square, the place to be every night at sunset. Passing a pair of hackysack slackers, he walked over to the promenade, the water to his right, the salt spray in his nostrils. He dodged the overeager jugglers, fire eaters and unicyclists, and shifted his attention to the vendors selling multicolor kites, train whistles, hippie bead jewelry and tie-dye shirts. The sounds – a one-man band here, a quartet of bagpipers there – coagulated, creating a buzzing rush in his brain.

On the inside, Marc continued leaping across dunes, floating on air, riding an Everglades airboat over the Sea of Tranquility. On the outside, he was barely moving, paralyzed in stoned concentration, gawking at a trio of men, each of whom looked as if he had just walked out of Marc's scratched-up print of Papa in Cuba. One of them was wearing a gold ribbon. They glared back, puffing hard on smelly stogies, and rebuked him in unison.

“Hey, you Ernies,” Marc said, vibrating and pointing and finally getting around to asking the white beards about the best way to get to that house of theirs on Whitehead Street, and why all those cats didn’t just go ahead and have eight or nine toes on their paws, rather than the one or two extra. Did he actually talk with the Hemingways? Maybe he had just imagined the exchange. And where was that little tramp, anyway?

The affair had begun routinely enough. The two were already acquainted through a mutual friend, her little lover boy Kevin, Marc’s colleague at the newspaper, where Marc wrote about rock and roll and college boy Kevin picked up J-school credit as a clerk on the state desk. Marc and Christine ran into each other at a Cramps concert in February, at a courtyard in the city’s historic district, the cartoony horror-show music of the sleazy psychobilly rebels handily matching the misting rain and the faux-New Orleans feel of the place: It was gaudy but vaguely spooky -- a neon graveyard. Freaky-deaky creatures like Lux Interior and his sidekick Poison Ivy always put Christina in the mood. So did John Waters movies.

A quick ride around the block in her Honda, where they toked on a one-hitter and yielded to the raw, blistering psychedelic rawk of the Flaming Lips blasting through the Alpines, and they were back at the show, clothes getting more drenched, defenses dropping and private parts hardening by the minute. So he went for it. Why not? It wasn’t long before they leapt toward the inevitable, and migrated to his apartment.

She followed him home, and marveled at his treasure trove of pop-culture detritus. They made friends with her bong before undressing each other. Christina crawled slowly up his torso, pushing her firm flesh against his, wrapping her warm feet around his icy toes, taking her time before she straddled him and began moving, ever so

slowly at first. He thrilled to her gentle but assured touch, the way their bodies fit together so precisely, so naturally, like two long-lost pieces of a puzzle. He liked what he saw, and felt. She said she did, too.

He started grinning, and couldn't stop. And they locked limbs again. Then, without warning, out popped the words that would combine with others to seal her fate: "You're 29?" she asked. "You're in pretty good shape, for your age."

That wasn't the worst of it.

"Has anyone every talked to you about that little quirk of yours, you know? I mean, have you ever considered doing something about the goofy grin that's always plastered on your face?"

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Christina paused, trying to read his face.

"No offense, okay? I'm just asking." Now embarrassed, she let her words keep on rolling out, in an unstoppable stream. "I mean, it's goofy. It's crooked, you know? You're not mad? You promise? I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. Really." Marc's smile evaporated, and he looked at her, silently seething.

Gradually, he began to forget, or merely blocked out, Christina's random act of unkindness, and settled into a routine with her that was practically domestic. They stayed at her spartan apartment, near the university, most nights, and at his place, in the thick of the city's entertainment district, on weekends. Most Fridays and Saturdays, she'd accompany him on his rock-reviewing assignments, to see headbangers or pop bands or classic rock acts or nostalgia shows at the local enormodome or one of the area's outdoor amphitheaters or concert halls.

Late nights, they'd often end up at the Chatterbox, playing boozy games of pool

with UT students to the sound of “Worried Man Blues” on the jukebox. Sometimes, they’d head downtown to the Hub. There, homeless characters, punk rockers, muscle-car drivers, slumming yuppies and inspiration-seeking artists constituted a fragile biosphere of early morning liquor suckers.

It was Christina’s idea to go to Key West that summer, and Marc was up for the adventure. After all, he had never traveled that far south, and he had always wanted to make fun of Margaritaville, check out Sloppy Joe’s and soak up the whole Hemingway vibe. He was keen on seeing the fleet of little pastel-colored houseboats, the ones officially doomed for destruction every time hurricane season rolled around, and maybe do a little snorkeling and deep-sea fishing.

Ten miles east of Tampa, the knocking sounds started. He turned up the Seattle grunge (her choice), but they could still hear the pounding, and things started getting tense inside his Nissan. “Stop!” she shrieked. “My bike!” Her mountain bike, not quite secured to a rack on the back of the car, had slipped down, and was being dragged along the highway. The frame was bent. So was she.

They drove all night, tracking the sun’s rise over the ocean and finally pulling up to the quaint, gay-owned 1920s bed and breakfast at 8 a.m., parking out front and crashing in the car until the purple-and-pink inn opened. Normally, passersby might have noticed, and inquired: *Is something askew here?* But this wasn’t normal. This was Key West, the tail end of the South, the bottom of the entire country, the last stop before Fidel. Stand close enough to the ocean down there, and you could feel the final pitched battles of the Cold War.

That afternoon, she pulled out her sheet of blotter acid, and gave him a hit.

“Am I going to like it? Will it freak me out?”

“There’s always a first time,” she said, pulling off her sun dress and pulling him down on the bed. “You’ll dig it. Trust me. You’ll be fine.”

An hour later, he sat cross-legged in front of the mini fridge, his AE-1 in his hands, taking pictures of a blue bong on the top shelf, and working hard to finesse the composition of each shot. He was making art. Obviously. Later, as Marc continued his stroll around Mallory Square, he gasped, nearly overwhelmed by the smell of funnel cakes frying, and the whole carnie-food menu, emanating from a nearby concession stand. He gagged.

Time shifted, locking in place, sliding backward and then exploding forward again. Minutes, seconds, hours contracted and expanded at will. Did what just happened really just happen? He couldn’t feel his face. Were those his feet he just dipped in the Atlantic? Did Christina really walk by, snapping her fingers in his face as if to say “Wake up, you moron!”? There was really no way of telling. Could anyone help him if he were to fall too deeply into the trip? Was she ever coming back?

Funny how a tiny square of porous paper, with a Cheshire Cat stamped on top, soaked long enough in the right stuff and applied to the tip of one’s tongue, could upend reality so quickly, and so thoroughly. Sad how Christina couldn’t be there with him.

Back at the inn, while Christina was vegging out, watching the Red Hot Chili Peppers on MTV, Marc walked out on the balcony, ringed by wrought-iron latticework and surrounded by tropical foliage. The sun was beginning to slip below the horizon, its Technicolor pink and orange and purple strands breaking up into illogically long tentacles, reaching toward his face, cradling his entire body in its glow. It was

exhilarating, and, somehow, peaceful.

Eventually, he began descending from the stratosphere, reality fading back in as the lunar voyage dissipated. She did, too, bitching and complaining all the way through an extraordinarily ugly return to *terra firma*.

Then, without warning, his smile flared up. Just like that. As mentioned, he couldn't quit grinning, even though Christina didn't like it, and repeatedly told him so. He really couldn't stop. It wasn't a matter of control – he didn't have any -- or of desire, although, it's safe to say, Marc didn't really want to quit grinning.

“Take that goofy fucking grin off your face,” she demanded, her face somehow melting, threatening to slide off her skull into her lap, little devil's horns popping up on the top of her head. It was all because of that smile, the one she could see, and the one she couldn't. His public grin. His secret smile.

So Marc opened wide and let loose, mowing down Christina and her shadow army of blonde complainers with a single shot of his mighty pearlies. He couldn't help it: It just felt right.