

## *Silly Putty*

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My roommate, Mark, walks in the door. He grabs the last Henry's out of the fridge and asks what I'm watching.

"Bonanza," I say.

He sits on the couch next to me and watches as Little Joe takes on two bad guys. He doesn't say anything until the commercial.

"Are you going to be home, tonight?" he asks.

"Yeah. Why?"

"No reason. Lori and her friends are coming by, that's all."

"Lori?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Why Lori?"

Mark looks at me.

"I thought you were over her," I say.

"I am."

"Well, then, why did you invite her over?"

He doesn't answer me. Bonanza is back on. Little Joe is in jail, now. The sheriff doesn't like anybody beating up his townspeople.

Lori is Mark's ex-girlfriend. She broke up with him about a year ago. It took him a long time to get over it. He was in love with her.

A pretty girl brings Little Joe a picnic basket.

"A-Ha!" Mark says.

"A-Ha, what?"

"He's going to smooth talk her into getting him out of jail."

"Oh."

"I like Little Joe," Mark says. "He's always got the upper hand with women. Knows how to manipulate them. He never gets hurt."

Mark is the same way. Except with Lori. But that was a

long time ago. When she broke up with him, he was hurt pretty bad. He decided never to let that happen again. I wonder why he invited her over.

The phone rings.

"Answer that," I say. "Will ya?"

Mark looks at me. "Why?"

"Because if it's that girl I took out last Friday, tell her I'm not home."

"Who? That girl from your class?"

"Yeah, Sharon. She's called me at least three times in the past two days. I think she wants to have my baby."

Mark smiles. "Sorry, pal. You're going to have to do your own heartbreaking."

The phone rings a third time. "So you're not going to answer it?"

"Nope."

"God damn it," I say and pick up the receiver. "Hello?"

It's for Mark.

"Who is it?"

"Donna."

He takes the phone. Donna is gorgeous. She graduated with Mark last year from U.S.C.: A degree in Bio-Chemistry. Top three in her class. They have been dating for about a month. She's madly in love with him.

"Hi Donna," Mark says. "Listen, can I call you back in about an hour? I'm in the middle of something kind of important. — Thanks."

He hangs up and watches as the girl hits the sheriff over the head with a gun and opens Little Joe's cell.

"Told ya," Mark says to me.

On their first date, Mark took Donna to his ten year old nephew's junior league basketball game. Afterwards, he took her, and the team, to Shakey's for pizza and root beer. Their next date, he took her skeet shooting with his

shoot and by the end of the day, she actually hit two clay pigeons. Their third date, Mark didn't have any money so he invited her over to our place for dinner. The apartment was a mess, but the table was set beautifully: Expensive china and silverware that his grandparents had given us as a housewarming gift, embroidered napkins and gold mounted candles. For dinner he served two grilled cheese sandwiches. They drank ice-cold milk out of crystal champagne glasses. I got home from the restaurant just past midnight and they were playing charades in the living room. When I went to bed, she practically raped him on the living room couch. She's called practically every day since then.

One night I was home alone. I was making dinner when the doorbell rang and when I opened it, Donna was standing there with a half dozen heart-shaped helium balloons. Mark was on a date with someone else that night, so I wasn't sure what to say.

"He isn't here. I haven't seen him all day."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "He's on a date with that girl from his work. I just wanted to drop these off."

I let her go into Mark's room and arrange the balloons. I went back to the kitchen and dumped the noodles into the boiling water. When she emerged from the room a few minutes later, I was draining the excess oil from the meat into the sink.

"Just making myself some spaghetti," I said. "Would you care for some?"

"No thanks, I just ate. But I will have a beer if you've got one."

I grabbed two Henry's out of the fridge. Donna took one and sat down on the kitchen counter. I stirred the Ragu sauce.

"This is a really nice place," she said. "How long have

you two been here?"

"About six months. We used to live in an on-campus apartment."

She took a sip of her beer. "Oh, really? How long have you known him?"

"Mark? God, I don't know, about ten years now. We met in the seventh grade."

"That's a long time."

I looked at her. She was wearing a black skirt and an oversized white sweater. Her legs were long and tan. She had medium length blondish-brown hair that she kept in a light perm. Her eyes were a deep green. She was one of the prettiest girls I have ever met.

"You really like him, don't you?" I said.

She smiled and took a sip of her beer.

"Is he the only guy you go out with?"

She nodded her head. "He's the only guy I like right now."

"Doesn't it bother you that he goes out with other girls?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Not really, I guess. He's completely different than the other guys I've gone out with. He's the first guy I've met that doesn't want to get serious. He just likes having a good time."

I took the noodles off of the burner and strained them in the sink. Donna finished her beer and threw the bottle into the trash.

"I guess what I like best about him is that he never tries to impress anybody. He doesn't try to be anything he isn't."

I mixed the Ragu sauce in with the meat and stirred them together.

"But I suppose I would like to see if I could get him to stop seeing other girls and just go out with me. I guess it's

kind of a challenge.”

I dumped the noodles on the plate. “Well, if you ever give up on that nut,” I said, “let me know, will ya?”

She smiled. I poured the meat and sauce onto the noodles.

Besides Donna, there are at least three other girls that are always calling him. He likes them all, but if they aren't around, he doesn't think much about them. He really doesn't care that much. Mark seems to have mastered the art of enjoying himself and whatever it is he is doing at the given moment. I try to figure out why he invited Lori.

When Bonanza is over, I go to my room and sit at my desk. I look at the two framed photographs on my desk top: Mark and I, in our freshman year at U.S.C., in our dorm room amongst a pile of open books and lecture notes. Crystal and I, clad in gown and tux, at my brother's wedding. Crystal is my ex-girlfriend. She broke up with me last month. I open a drawer and pull my journal out. I read over last weeks entry:

November 6, 1986

Things are getting better. Got an A on my Hemingway paper. I may graduate yet.

Got drunk with Mark last night. Had a heavy conversation about life. He says that true love doesn't exist. It's just a non-existent goal we have been taught to strive for.

I called Crystal last week and asked her to come back. She said no. I can't believe I did that. Mark says that it's natural; we all want what we can't have.

I think I'm starting to get over her.

It's 8:30. I'm on the couch watching Humphrey Bogart

and Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep* when Mark walks in the door with two shopping bags. I turn down the TV and help him unload. A twelve-pack of Michelob. Three four-packs of wine coolers. Potato chips. Dip. Hot dogs. Popcorn.

I point to the Michelob. "What's wrong with Henry's?"

"Lori doesn't like it."

"Oh. Can I have one?"

"No. Wait until they get here."

I go back to the couch. Bogart is trying to smooth talk Bacall into untying him.

"Smoother than Little Joe," I say.

"What?"

"Bogie. He's smoother than Little Joe."

Mark isn't listening. He's busy washing the dishes. "Would you mind cleaning up that mess," he says, referring to the remains of my lunch from Burger King.

"Why?"

"Because I have guests coming over. Don't you usually clean-up when you invite people over?"

"Yes, but I've never seen you do it before."

"Well, I'm doing it now. Would you mind?"

I throw all the wrappers into the bag and throw the bag into the garbage. When Mark is finished with the dishes, he takes the garbage out. He wipes down the coffee table, the dining-room table, and the kitchen counter. He runs the vacuum over the carpet. Our apartment looks good.

Mark takes a shower. He puts on a nice pair of slacks and a button down shirt. He looks good, too.

"Aren't you going to change?" he asks me.

I'm wearing an old faded pair of jeans and a high school football sweatshirt.

"Why?"

"You look like a bum."

He wore army pants the night Donna came over.

"So?"

"I'd appreciate it if you changed."

I go to my room and put on a less faded pair of jeans and a polo shirt. I'm thinking maybe I'll go see a movie. I have no money, though. I decide to stay.

The girls show up a little after nine. Lori and her friends Beth and Monica. Monica is pretty cute. Beth is overweight and has braces on her teeth.

"You remember Tom, don't you?" Mark is saying to Lori.

"Of course I do," Lori says, and gives me a hug. But it's not a real hug. It's more like a cheerleader hug. Lori was a cheerleader in high school. She's very pretty, but doesn't come close to Donna.

Mark breaks out the booze. Beth and Monica opt for wine coolers. Mark and I start on the beer. Lori wants to make Pina Colladas. We don't have the ingredients, we explain to her, so would she settle for a Bartles and Jaymes? No, she *really* wants a Pina Collada. Could somebody please go buy the necessary ingredients? Mark says he will. I think he's kidding but he isn't. He gets his jacket and he and Lori set off to the liquor store.

I try talking to Beth and Monica. Monica is a hair stylist in the Valley. Beth is a cashier at Alpha Beta. Neither go to school. They both have boyfriends. Beth thinks hers is cheating on her and Monica is thinking about cheating on hers. Monica pulls out a cigarette. She looks ridiculous with it in her mouth. We don't have an ashtray. I give her a soup bowl.

Mark and Lori are back with the stuff. We make a whole pitcher full of Pina Colladas. Lori has one, then switches over to beer. Mark turns on the stereo. We sit around

listening to Johnny Reno and the Sax Maniacs.

Lori is rummaging through her purse. She pulls out a plastic egg and opens it up. A small ball of clay falls out. She picks up the clay and rolls it between her hands.

"Hey," Mark says, watching her. "Are you still playing with that silly putty stuff?"

"She sure is," Beth says. "We went to the store yesterday and she bought four eggs of it."

Lori smiles and takes a sip of beer. Monica lights another cigarette.

"What's silly putty?" I ask.

"Oh, you know," Mark says. "It's a kids toy. It's like a ball of clay."

"Yeah, and you can mold it into things," Monica says.

"Well, anyway," Mark tells me, "Lori's always been really good at molding this silly putty into little animal shapes and stuff. They look incredibly real."

"It's just a hobby," Lori says, pulling out a little plastic instrument from her purse. She starts working on the silly putty.

"She made this really cute little cat yesterday," Monica says between drags. "You should have seen it."

I get up to go to the bathroom. When I get back, Mark is talking about how he saved the next door neighbor's cat. It's a funny story. I've heard him tell it before. It isn't very funny tonight. He's not telling it right. He's trying too hard. The timing is off. No one laughs. Lori makes a sarcastic remark about it.

I watch Lori. She is working intently on the clay (it already resembles something from the animal kingdom) yet doesn't miss a word of the conversation.

The album is over. Mark gets up to flip it over.

"Can we hear something else?" Lori asks. "I hate this group."



"Sure," Mark says. "I'm getting kind of tired of these guys, anyway."

"You just bought the album two days ago," I say.

Mark gives me a dirty look.

I've switched over to Pina Colladas. I'm starting to get drunk. Lori seems to be finished molding the clay with her hands. It looks sort of like a little man. She starts carving features into it with the plastic knife.

We start playing charades. Mark is great at charades. He goes first:

Television show. One word. Three syllables. First syllable. Bone. Second syllable. Small word. And. Third syllable. (Sounds like "draw".) Saw. Bone- And - Saw.

I know what it is but let the girls try and guess. They repeat the three syllables. Bone- And - Saw. Bone-And-Saw. BoneAndSaw. Boneandsaw. Lori stops working on her sculpture. Beth and Monica look at each other. They can't figure it out. I can't take it.

"Bonanza!" I scream.

"Shit," Lori says. "I was just about to say that."

Mark gives me another dirty look.

"I hate that show," Lori says.

"How can you hate Bonanza?" Mark asks.

"I just do. It's boring."

"Well, what about Little Joe?" I ask. "What do you think about him?"

"He's a wimp."

I stand up and go to the kitchen to make another pitcher of Pina Colladas. Monica whispers something to Beth and they both laugh. Lori wants to know what they said and Beth whispers something to her. All three of them laugh. I sit down at the kitchen table.

"It's all finished," Lori says. She puts the figure down on

the coffee table. I get up to take a look. It's a sculpture of a little monkey. I carefully pick it up. It is incredibly real looking. The face, the body, the hands and feet. A little paint and it would be a perfect replica. I can't believe it. The whole thing took her less than twenty minutes.

"Let me see," Mark says.

I hand it to him. After everybody gets a good look at it and after we all take turns complimenting her, Lori takes the monkey, rolls it up into a ball of silly putty, and puts it back in the plastic egg.

"I'm hungry," she says.

Mark gets up. "We've got potato chips, popcorn, or hot dogs," Mark says. "Take your pick."

Lori thinks for a second. "Bacon and eggs."

"Yeah," Mark says. "That does sound good." He gets up, goes to the kitchen, and turns on the stove.

I stand up. "Jesus Christ! I cannot believe this!"

"What's wrong with you?" Mark asks from the kitchen. Lori sits on the barstool at the kitchen counter. Beth and Monica look at me.

"What's wrong with me!?" I look at him scouring the refrigerator for eggs. "Oh, Christ."

I grab my pitcher and go to my room. I open my journal and begin an entry:

November 14, 1986

Tonight I have witnessed the most pathetic act in the history of mankind . . .

The phone rings. Mark answers it in the next room. There is a knock on the door. "It's for you," he says.

I think of Sharon, the girl from my class. "Tell her

I'm not home."

Mark sticks his head in the door. "It's Crystal." He closes the door.

I look at the phone. I can't believe it's her. I pick up the receiver and listen for a moment.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Tom."

"Crystal! How are you?"

"I'm doing just great, thanks. How about yourself?"

Oh, not too bad. Jeeze, this is kind of a surprise. Is anything wrong?"

"No, not at all. I just wanted to see how you were doing. I haven't talked to you for awhile."

"I know. It's been a long time." I sit on the edge of my bed. "So, how have you been?"

"Oh, pretty good," she says. "Listen, Tom, do you mind if I ask you a small favor?"

"Not at all."

"Do you think it would be okay if you could call me back? This is a long distance call and I don't want to run my parents' bill up."

"No problem," I say. "598-5288?"

"That's it."

"Okay, I'll call you right back."

I hang up and wait for the dial tone. As I dial her number, I hear Mark in the next room.

"How do you want those eggs? Scrambled or over-easy?"

I finish dialing and realize that my hand is sweating. I hope I don't make a complete fool of myself like I did the last time I talked to her.