

Hart Schulz

University Girl

You're falling off a cliff and you reach at the last minute for a twig of a branch. It snaps as soon as you touch it. That's what it's like. You can never get as much as you want. They make the perforations especially weak on purpose—the cheapest kind, single-layer wastepaper-tissue! That's the feeling. You need it. You grab it. It just breaks off in your hand. You just splatter on the bottom. For what? To save a few bucks? Jesus Christ in heaven. And that token lock on the door too. They were out of tokens today. Really. I saw that shiny circus coin thing behind the counter—that's what he keeps the tokens in, Gonzales, under the register drawer. He snaps them out with a flick of his brown thumb, then holds one between two fingers, "Yes Ma'am, this will get you into the door," he always says. Gonzales has his picture on the wall here, "Manager of the Month." Jesus fucking Christ.

"Hey, I told you last week you don't use the restroom anymore. Got that, derelict? Why you think we *put* those locks on the fuckin' door, hey?" Gonzales has a little gold spot in his left earlobe. He cups his big hand behind his ear and says, "You like fries with that BigMac, mister?"

I get my tokens from the paper rack outside the Kentucky Fried though—that's why I can sit here now. You take the butt of your strong hand and rap the top of the rack in the middle hard. Meantime you pull the lid up with your weak hand and shake the hell out of the whole box. Slugs and coins drop out all the time!

Gonzales really is out of tokens today. You can see in the little windows at the bottom of each coin cylinder. But stupid Gonzales just keeps flicking his thumb on it, like trying to get water from a rock. Where's his little hat and his little circus monkey on a leash?

That University Girl is back, sitting alone in *No-Smoking*. With the double spaghetti straps on each side of the bumps of her collar bone. Skin like a brown pool table, and thin and boney. She gets Fillets with extra tartar so I watch her teeth, her long blonde hair with a strand or two sticking to her lips. Last week she saw me too, with a large coffee and a Winston Gonzales gave me so I'd leave. Man, she gave me a look! A University Girl. They used to think I was a Kerouac-*Dharma Bum*—now they just look away quick.

Gonzales has no idea I'm in here. Really. I could grab her, pull her right out of *No-Smoking* and through the slit in the door like a ray of sun. I could do anything I want to her in here. If she screamed I could break off some more of this stupid, cheap toilet paper and stuff it in her mouth and Gonzales wouldn't hear a thing. He doesn't even know I'm in here for Christ's sake. I got the token from the Kentucky Fried rack. I could have that University Girl right here in the head and then stop to finish my cigarette too. Fuckin' Gonzales still flicking away out there for big ladies with fat on their shoulders.

He is standing at the end of Malibu Pier watching below him the tiny tongues of sea chop, golden glowing on one side and the pale color of fish on the eastern side. They are for him a parade of shining stars near dusk. And he can look directly at the sun, west and just above the lines of waves at the point, the glistening black-rubber surferboys there. With its rings of city smog and canyon dust, it looks like the planet Saturn, broke out of orbit to approach earth. There is an urgency about its position in the sky, about the way the seabirds hover motionless in a steep ocean wind. The men around him are old and bundled, and the small fish they catch lay beside their boots in tiny droplets of blood. The old men don't know about the hazing tonight and they don't care. He imagines them tending their lines obliviously as the wave of coeds rushes up the pier, out over the end. Perhaps they would look up when they heard

the splash below, he thought, but not at the thin naked legs shuffling behind them at midnight. No, that kind of attentiveness is the exclusive province of younger men, an immutable primal thing. One small, flat fish contorts one last time beside a silver bucket, and on Pacific Coast Highway an array of sirens sever the monotonous hum of traffic. Seabirds accelerate in unison and slant away from the scene. He can see in the distance beyond Alice's Restaurant and near the row of fast-food establishments a commotion of lights and sounds—megaphones and the filtered, electronic noise of police-band radio.

This distraction is an annoyance. He thinks quickly back to the hazing. And with the way the mind works, its webbing of miraculous segue, he connects the hazing to this commotion. The cold water below him is blackening. A young girl could be pushed against a barnacled piling by the surf, cut or knocked unconscious. Or she could succumb to hypothermia. They would find the girl's naked body in the sand below the pier the next morning, cordon off the entire area with yellow police tape while they conduct an investigation. He would lean over his office desk at the university and see out the huge plate-glass Malibu below him with police cars and ambulances and fire trucks all buzzing about like tiny asteroids in the space of land just after dawn, before classes. Heather's face would pale when he queried his eight a.m. Freshmen Astronomy (unless, of course, it was Heather whose body lay in the sand!). "A sor-or-it-y girl," she would say, her eyes probably down around his shoes as is her shy way with him. "In a haz-zing," her way of breaking syllables, teeth clenched tightly around the "Z" sound. "There is nothing sex-i-er than a young teacher," she had told him in that same office. With his back to her he could see her reflection in the night-darkened window, her marvelous bare shoulders like an inverted coat-hanger, the defined, chocolate divots between collar bones. "In *The World According to Garp*, Heather, there is a terrific line. Do you know it? 'There is no sexier word in the English language than eighteen.'"

For a moment he feels within himself a surge of panic. If there is an accident and a commotion he might be discovered here! How would he explain? I was on the pier to watch the stars when

suddenly a dozen or so of them, these young women, completely undressed, came running, full-speed, to the end of the pier and over into the water. These men were fishing...Momentary fear is usurped quickly by what got him where he is in the first place, his "am-a-zzing" penchant for the rational. Heather would have to come forward to say she had mentioned to him the hazing. This would not happen (especially if it is Heather who meets with tragedy tonight). So he pulls over his ears his woolen watchcap that snags momentarily on an earring and plunges his hands into twill pockets locking his elbows, and he waits stiff-armed on Malibu Pier waiting for the University Girls to arrive.

If Heather comes in tonight I'm gonna act like nothing ever happened. All I said was "Studying stars and planets isn't gonna teach you anything about real life." And, hey, I mean that. She doesn't think much of me for all the wrong reasons. She thinks because I work *here* I'm not any good. She thinks you have to be a University Guy to be something. It's a cultural thing when you're Mexican, you know. My grandfather used to say, "Do what you do and do it well." It means you work hard at a job. That's what I do and that's why they made me manager, that's why my picture is on the wall too, you know. It's not like I like doing this. She thinks you have to like what you're doing. The fat women that come in, that fuckin' derelict, it's a lot to do. There's a buzzer supposed to tell you when the fries are ready only works half the time. So the employees get upset because they burn the fries. Then the customers get upset, you know, and I get upset. That's the way real life is. It's like this coin dispenser. You flick it and the coin comes out. Simple. You do one thing and another thing happens. As a result. You get what you work for, you know. When I was a kid in southern Texas there was this guy with one of these things at a circus peep show, the kind where they'd have middle-aged women doing live sex acts, you know. They don't allow those anymore. And I remember this guy flickin' at it to get change for the men lined up with big bills. He'd flick at it and quarters would pop up 'cause he had it upside-down on his belt. He'd catch the quarters in one hand and took the bills with the other. So sometimes he'd drop one or

two, and in the noise and all of the circus, you know, we'd be down at his feet on all fours pickin' up the coins! And from there you could look right under the seam of the tent where they were having this peep show. So a few months ago we all took a bus to Vegas and I found one of these old cylinder dispensers in a pawn shop there, and with us goin' to quarter-sized tokens for the toilets and all, I got it. That's the way life is. That's the way I've always learned about things, you know. I mean I went to college for a little while and I just couldn't hack it. Does that make me *unfocused*? All I said was, "Studying stars and planets isn't gonna teach you anything about real life."

What I did with Heather though is I screwed up. I mean she comes in here every weekday afternoon for two weeks and smiling at *me*. The thing about her is her shoulders and her blonde hair. The first time she just kind of laid one little hand on her collar bone and kind of looked embarrassed I think because I was staring at her. "I know, I shouldn't eat junk food," she said and rolled her head back over her shoulder. It was really exciting because she looked right at me. People don't look right at you. And then later she asked me about being a *Latino*. Nobody uses that word anymore. I really screwed up because I knew she was a University Girl and I shouldn't have come off like I knew everything about everything. I shouldn't have said, "Studying stars and planets isn't gonna teach you anything about real life." She just looked me right in the eyes and said, "Is that supposed to be the world according to Gon-zales?"

Half the time I didn't know what she was talking about anyway. And you wanna know the truth the whole thing pisses me off royal. And if she comes in again I'm gonna act like nothing ever happened, like I don't even want her. Even though I still do. How could a guy not want her. I'm gonna give her the cold shoulder.

The University Community was shocked at what happened. The quaint, benign coastal town had been a sleeping monster, a tragedy in waiting. News releases featured the archetypal photos of the romantic old pier draped in a pleasantry of thin, shining fog. Never do these show you the vacant lots where the homeless sleep,

the cheap rendezvous motels, and the simple architecture of a row of, of all things, fast food joints. Malibu residents prefer to keep these undercover. But to the good mind, there could have been no surprise. One must only have studied the elements of the story. It has to do with a mixing of differences. There is an incompatibility about the facets found here. The have-nots cannot be expected to live in harmony with the haves. And this event irrefutably is a culmination of a series of causally related, even predictable events, don't you think?

When parents send their young girls off to college shouldn't they think of such things? Shouldn't they at least take the time to visit the location? Their young, bare-shouldered daughters set loose upon a town where homeless men awaken in sleeping bags to stare. Or would the University Girls better relate to Malibu's working class, those who live each day here with a festering resentment and a violent sense of alienation? And shouldn't parents inquire about the itinerary of the University Ethics Committee? How often do people misbehave in Malibu, especially those who grow old behind huge desks and intellectual spectacles?

And assuming they had not to worry about their daughters becoming victims of assault, shouldn't they have been concerned about the predictable, well-documented behavior of adolescence? What happened in Malibu can quite simply be accounted for by the tendency toward rebellion. Behavior manifested by this tendency is often symbolic of the need to break out of mold, or perhaps to avoid a sense of impending doom. In any case, these factors all were there, and they still are. Meaning that the University Girl story could repeat itself quite easily. When random forces fall into place in a predictable pattern. Don't you think?

You're sleeping on the beach and you can forget all about the commotion and all about the damned University Girl and all about stupid Gonzales. And none of it makes any damned difference. There's just the sand and the water and the birds and you. Or me, I guess. And you can do anything you want. I'm picturing myself as the Saint Teresa bun in *Dharma Bums* all holy and righteous. I still carry it around with me and read it all day, even in Gonzales's

McDonalds. I'm reading from that first chapter, the dream and sitting on the morning beach with Kerouac in Southern California.

How many human beings have there been, in fact how many living creatures have there been, since before the less part of beginningless time? Why, oh, I reckon you would have to calculate the number of grains of sand on this beach and on every star in the sky, in every one of the ten thousand great chilicosms, which would be a number of sand grains uncomputable by IBM or Burroughs too, why boy I don't rightly know (swig of wine) I don't rightly know, but it must be a couple umpteen trillion sextillion infideled and busted up unnumberable number...

That pier is striking out to sea like an American picket fence. If it weren't for the yellow tape and chalk lines, you'd never suspect anything could be wrong at all. Not on this beach this morning. You don't have to do anything at all, just sit here. Later I'll head up and check the dumpster behind Kentucky Fried, maybe get a paper and some quarter coins. By then this morning magic mood will be broke for sure. There'll be traffic and noise and sirens, and maybe some stupid headline on the paper. Maybe they'll interview stupid Gonzales. They won't find me to interview, that's for sure. I'll just be reading my book. Some headline it'll have probably. University Girl.