

Simple Pleasures

by Vince Zandri

My girlfriend Maryanne is forever telling me I cannot relax.

"Who can relax?" I ask her, over spaghetti, meatballs, little strips of garlic bread soaked in melted butter. Maryanne picks from a Weight Watcher's Salisbury steak, imitation mashed potatoes and green beans, all neatly organized and proportionate on a plastic packaged tray.

I go through the whole thing about relaxation one more time, reminding her there are six men in back of me who want to be supervisor. All of them older, all of them more experienced. They are better builders than me. So sometimes I wonder how I got to be super in the first place.

"I mean, how long can it really last?" I ask, my fork an extension of my point.

Maryanne is the possessor of the last great hairdo. A tall, platinum puff that rivals Mother Nature's best beehive. It remains chillingly unaffected when she steals spoonfuls of my spaghetti or when she shakes her head in frustration, a habit she attributes to my talking too much about work. I watch the way the beehive seems to hover in midair when Maryanne leans back on her chair, balanced on the two legs. She opens the refrigerator worth one hand, finds a Bud on the rack and leans forward again, all in one fluid motion, that bee hive still solidly in place, forever and ever, Amen.

To protect her false fingernails, Maryanne opens my Bud with the sharp end of a butter knife. Foam rises and she catches it with her entire mouth, sucking away at the white, airy liquid and finishing with a swig. I watch the liquid travel the length of her neck and wait for her usual question.

"How can you drink this stuff every night?"

I give her the standard answer.

"How would you like having six guys after your job?"

"People come into the bowling alley all the time looking to waitress. Good looking women too...thinner than me."

She takes another swig, deeper than the first and shakes her head once more in open disgust. Wiping her mouth with the rear side of her hand "she says, "Learn to find enjoyment in your work, Billy. Or resign yourself to living a short, unhappy life."

Maryanne mixes her mashed potatoes and green beans into a stew. She fills her mouth with more of my beer and tells me in a drowning voice, "Make work a game, and you'll live longer."

I take what's left of my Bud away from Maryanne and place it next to my plate, out of reach. There is a faint ring of cherry lipstick halfway around the can and on the lid, near the tab.

"This game had better last a while longer, Maryanne. Because we bought this trailer and charged all the furniture to fill it. Nothing's cheap these days. Not low-calorie Salisbury steak, not hair-dos, not manicures. So how can I relax?"

"Beer doesn't grow on trees either," she says.

"This..." I say, lifting the Bud. "This is as good as life gets sometimes."

I eat a bowl full of strawberry ice cream in bed every night after enjoying some cigarettes. Maryanne gets her own spoon from the kitchen and takes some bites of it when she's lying next to me, rummaging through her *Cosmo* magazine, tearing out pictures of women she calls glamorous; women she'd like to look like, if only she were twenty years younger.

She takes a spoonful of ice cream, allows it to settle

on her tongue and studies the torn-away pictures, shuffling them like playing cards. My heart jumps through my chest when, out of no where, she throws them into the end-table drawer and slams it shut.

"It just isn't fair," she says in a fake-cry voice. With her hands she begins smoothing out the creases on her black stretch pants, as if this will make her thinner. She stands up from the bed and strains to see over her shoulder as she models her hind-end for herself in the mirror above the dresser, first one way and then the next.

Through the mirror she can see I'm not paying attention, so she speaks up.

"Well?" She asks.

"Well, what?" This is one of those **no-win** situations Maryanne gets me into when she's feeling obese.

"Do I look fat?" she asks. Only, she is not looking for an answer, so much as judging my facial expression. I play the game anyway, take a good hard look at her body. I think, not fat...not thin, but not fat. I mean, I like Maryanne's body the way it is.

Just to be safe, I say, "You look real thin today, Maryanne." I use the word "today" because tomorrow, she'll stand in that mirror and ask me all over again.

"You're just saying that," Maryanne says. This is the tricky part. I've got to maintain my expression of believability. I can't let her break me now.

"I'm serious, you look great."

Determined, Maryanne moves away from the mirror and takes another spoonful of my ice-cream. She pops it into her mouth and stands for a moment stifled in serious thought. Then she asks, "How can you eat this stuff every night?"

"You don't seem to mind it."

She fills her spoon once more and with her free hand continues smoothing out her stretch pants. "Calories like this," she says, "don't count."

Maryanne stays up watching late night television reruns. Old programs from the seventies, mostly. From where I'm lying in bed finishing up this ice cream, I can see the static light coming from the Sony we charged at Sears and the fake log revolving in the fake fireplace, flashing red and gold in the corner. Living in a trailer is kind of like looking inside a cardboard tube once the paper towels are finished. The beauty of it is that you can see everything from anywhere. But sometimes being aware of everything can be a real problem when you're trying to relax.

"Don't eat too much of that stuff, Billy. You'll have bad dreams again," shouts Maryanne above the voice of J.R. Ewing. A "Dallas" rerun.

"Don't deny me my simple pleasures," I tell her.

"You said yourself, learn to relax. Well, I'm relaxing." I finish what's left of my strawberry ice cream, wiping up the last of it with my finger. I set the bowl onto the end table and place my hand to my belly. Flesh is beginning to run over the elastic of my boxers. I think, tomorrow. Tomorrow I will get some exercise.

But for tonight, I'm gonna relax. I'll begin by lighting up another cigarette and slide even farther under the covers. When I blow smoke into the living room, Maryanne coughs. She turns away from the tube for just a second. She says, "You're going to have bad dreams tonight, Billy. I just know it. I can't take another night of your squirming. I work too, you know."

"I won't squirm, Maryanne," I insist, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because I know me. How can I know anybody if I don't already know me?" I feel for my stomach underneath the covers, squeeze a handful of flesh and think, I just wish there wasn't so much of me to know.

Later on, after Maryanne and I fall asleep, it happens sure enough, just like Maryanne said it would. I dream

sure enough, just like Maryanne said it would. I dream of six men trying to kill me for my job. All six are holding on to me, three on each side. I'm nearly dead, but see everything as if I'm watching like a bystander. I discover all six men are really the same man. There are six J. R. Ewings using my head like a battering ram, pounding it against the imitation fireplace. Pounding and pounding, the explosions real and painful.

I wake up to find I've been slamming my head against the end table again, against my forehead, just above my right eye. This isn't the first time I've felt the slam like sledgehammer. It isn't the first time I've woken Maryanne up by screaming, "Thank the Lord, thank the Lord!"

She lifts her head from beneath a foam pillow, wipes away a strand of saliva from the corner of her mouth. "I told you," she says, adjusting the plastic wrapping that surrounds her rollers, those long, prickly, pink, tubular things that hold her beehive together when she sleeps.

"Goddammit, Billy. You're dreaming again. Why can't you learn to relax?" She leans over to read the clock-radio beneath the table lamp, in the moonlight.

I say nothing, not a word. I can't help it. It's out of my hands when I'm asleep. It's got something to do with eating before bedtime and smoking cigarettes. It's got something to do with this trailer we bought and the furniture we charged to fill it. It's got a lot to do with six men after my job. Six guys that want to be super, like myself.

There's something else, too. Something that makes me have these bad dreams. All those rollers Maryanne uses to maintain that beehive, just rubbing against my head night after night like sandpaper. I suppose I should say something to her about it. Simple enough. But you know, it's not really that simple. I can't make Maryanne stop using them. I can't make Maryanne give up on making herself pretty.

Sometimes you have to compromise, count your blessings, learn to live with a little pain. For instance, when I slam my head against the end table, I always wake up saying the same thing: "Thank the Lord." You see, I'm grateful to Him for sparing my eye. I remember what my mother taught me a long time ago: Blood on cloth, she said, makes a terrific stain.

And you know, pillow cases and bed sheets don't grow on trees. Who needs all that mess, all that fuss when there's already so many things to worry about? Besides, I really need a good night's sleep for a change. Because tomorrow—I'll tell you about tomorrow. Tomorrow is the day I begin doing it all over again.

A FULL SERVICE SALON FOR
TODAY'S LIFESTYLES...

Alfredo's
of the Berkshires

33 State Road, Great Barrington, Massachusetts
413-528-1711 • Open 9 to 9 Monday - Friday 9 to 5 Saturday

413-528-5955



ACUPRESSURE
MARTHA WATSON LORENTZEN

CERTIFIED INTEGRATIVE ACUPRESSURE PRACTITIONER
HEALING BODY WORK FOR WOMEN
92 HILLSDALE ROAD, SOUTH EGBRONT, MA 01258