

# Set Me Free

*M. Jennings*

The man I'm madly in love with who doesn't know it yet works at my organic grocery store. Today he stocked bags of chips—blue corn, red corn, and mixed corn—while I puttered nearby at the bulk bins of basmati rice and dried figs, concentrating, so as not to stare. My last boyfriend was blond and blue-eyed, but because he broke my heart, I can no longer trust Scandinavians. My father claims they are good stock, but I have my past as proof. The organic grocery store boy, whom I'll call Chip for now since, for superstitious reasons, I haven't looked at his name tag, has thick black hair like a Caesar's and serious dark eyes to match. I imagine he is Spanish, Portuguese or Basque, but raised here, in Oakland.

At home, later, I finger the cans of olives I bought, hoping for luck, for love.

To have one's fantasies, one's diversions from daily life, I think, is not so strange. My father tells me I am very lucky, because he can no longer dream. "Chip'll figure it out," he says, coughing as he tugs his ox-tank across the patio, a willful metal dog on its leash.

I imagine Chip in an Egyptian palace, in a toga, after a hard day supervising slaves who drag rocks through the desert for a pharaoh's tomb. He dreams of a short, chubby princess with ebony hair—me—and offers gifts at the throne of my flesh—lambs, eggplants, rubies. He oils my hair while reciting poetry, until I remember hieroglyphics and wonder how the Egyptians wrote poetry, which stunts the fantasy.

My place is a one-room, ramshackle cottage hidden in a ravine behind a larger house in the hills. I've known the family in the big house since the day I was born. Jeffrey, an architect, built the house when he came out from Connecticut as a young man. Originally, my cottage was to be his work studio, but eventually the cobwebs and damp nights drove Jeffrey out and now it's mine all mine. Jeffrey's in his late sixties, but he was only forty when my mother's water broke while my father was at work

in Richmond, at the refinery, and Jeffrey drove her to the hospital in town. That what's they called Oakland then, "town," where she had me. But now she lives in Cincinnati with a rodeo star, growing old in chaps and spurs with a man half her age who bucks broncos for a living.

My room's a half-mile from my father's place, which is what I call it, the place I grew up, the place where the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy broke my heart on my twenty-second birthday a few years ago, even though I didn't live there anymore. I can walk most places—to see Chip, my Dad, and to occasional work—while stretching Rocket's legs, my father's Schnauzer who's become mine since the illness unpacked its bags in Dad's lungs.

Most people here don't live in damp and drafty cottages because they're richer than that, but I find the place comforting and familiar, my home of a thousand years. Sometimes when I'm walking Tupelo Road at noon, the smell of the pine trees in the sun reminds me of high school, when I walked the same stretch of road with different shoes and different worries, clove cigarettes rustling in my pocket.

Although I'm not one now, I think Chip would be appalled by smokers, his healthy shine marred by the thought.

★

My father told me today that an electrical malfunction caused the headpiece of an electric chair to burst into flames, with the condemned in it. There was speculation as to whether the death was painless, or even instant.

"Cruel or unusual," he said. "I leave that to you."

A blue scrub jay dived through the slope of my father's backyard, where as a girl I played house and Civil War, digging trenches and making tea.

Maybe that's an extreme way to go, I thought, but there are certainly worse. I didn't say this to my

father, stretched out in a rickety lawn chair with his tank wheel-locked behind him, tubes contorting his nostrils.

Instead I said, “Both,” and, Rocket, sitting loyally next to my father per her routine, looked back at me as if I were a boring old friend. Dad has a fixation for National Public Radio, and I for unusual deaths, so he tries to keep me apprised of new ends, new ways to go, his small gifts.

A few weeks later Chip checked me out. Maybe he’d finally got the message after I began stalking the store, resorting to extreme frugality, buying only two thirty-nine-cent organic chocolates stacked near the cash register. My budget could no longer support my infatuation. It happened Sunday, my real grocery day. Chip eyed my soap, hummus, pita pockets, and mint, but then just after, sly but with an open feel, eyed me, checking my aura perhaps, my vibe. That’s how the organic people talk. “Good taste,” he said, surveying again my booty of desert foods, my latest culinary kick. “You have good taste.”

“Thanks,” I said, baffled. I thought of the headpiece then, of it bursting into flame. Not so unusual really.

Walking back home on Tupelo Road with Rocket and my bags, I tried to convince myself to tell Chip my name, get it over with already, so that cosmically, I could then be allowed to look at his name tag. I was beginning to pick up the store’s lingo, I thought. *Cosmic, man*. Maybe this was good. But when I imagined the scene, the words ran away from me like Rocket when she knows we’re heading for Dad’s.

“It’s Vanessa,” I’d say. “My mother liked V-names, and that’s what she calls me, when she does.” I hesitate there in the chip aisle, thinking of the palace fantasy and how the rubies will be gone when I return home. “I have often thought of changing it to Nessa, or Essa, or even just Sa so I can be *it* in French.” I shrivel up like a raisin, just another concubine, good for a season but not lasting. “My father,” I say, looking at the ground, “calls me Ess, like the letter.”

My fantasies are beginning to demoralize me.

“*Why can’t you be a man about it?*” my father sings along

to one of his Motown records, the music following him out to the patio. The scrub jays, surprised, dart from the concrete edges in alarm. Rocket makes a quick break at them but then thinks the better of it and simply barks as they fly off. Dad negotiates the screen door with his tubes and tank, and wipes his forehead singing, “*And set me free?*” The door bangs shut behind him while The Supremes sing their *WoahWoahWoahs*.

He coughs a lot now and has stopped performing his small version of a jitterbug, what I imagine endeared him at one time to my mother, before he sits down to read the paper, NPR chattering death from the always-on portable radio he keeps in the center of the picnic table. Although we don’t talk about it, we have been waiting for the results of a blood test for a week now, anticipating the phone, the friendly doctor, and beneath those tangible things, the threatening possibility of new equipment, routines, procedures, and perhaps even a home nurse. We want to believe this is temporary, that the junk in his lungs will empty out, and it may, said the doctor. “We’ve caught it early,” he’d said. I’m sure my father hopes that The Supremes, NPR, the crackle of the newspaper, and Rocket’s high bark will drown out the ringing phone and the sound of his coughs.

Although I have explained to him that so far my crush is completely one-sided, my father thinks Chip is touched in the head for not yet asking me out. That’s how he put it. “Touched, just like that Scandinavian, although you know, they’re good people.”

From his lawn chair now he says, “All right, Ess, whatdayathinka this one?”

He cracks the spine of his newspaper for emphasis and continues, “Guy jumps from a fifth story window in San Leandro, from the highest building in town, doesn’t die, but the paramedics find a cyanide capsule in his pocket, squished open.” He looks at me with a twisted grin and says, “Huh? Huh now?” goading me.

“Why jump?” I ask.

“Yeah, well,” he says, positioning the newspaper in front of his face, closing the conversation. “That’s the question.”

My worst death scenario, while it might sound tame to others, is drowning. It’s the sound of it that horrifies,

all that gurgling and swishing, the struggle of it. That's why I prefer desert fantasies, the solid earth and sand, the searing dust through the soles of my rope sandals a reminder that there is no water about. No water for miles, and death a long, drawn-out process where I can see it coming, can measure the days, watching, noting changes in the dunes, the position of the sun in the blinding white sky.

At the palace my father is there. He reclines on a chaise lounge on a marble patio near a pool. There is no ox-tank, just good clean air and purple grapes on a silver platter. Chip arrives, sweaty from his supervisor gig with the slaves, and sits at the edge of my father's chair, talking quietly with him. I sense but cannot hear their conversation. I note the hand gestures and raised eyebrows, some tears falling from my father's eyes. Chip rubs his ring finger and stares at it longingly while my father rolls over, turning his back to Chip, refusing more words.

In the animal kingdom, Chip would have already been mine. Peacocks strut, spread their feathers and dance, exude scent. Some reptiles change color. Dogs do it for fun. But Chip and I tread lightly. The chocolates take their eruptive toll on my face. Chip continues to evade but seems to change color now as he hands me my receipts.

On my way home from a chocolate excursion, I knock on Jeffrey's door.

"How about a bong hit?" I ask.

"Sweetie," he says, "We haven't seen you around lately. How is he?" He ushers me to the kitchen table where the handmade glass bong welcomes me from its fruit-bowl-like pride of place.

"Fine," I say to Kim, Jeffrey's fourth and newest wife, who sits at the table sorting mail. She smiles at me, trying to look sympathetic.

"More tests?" Jeffrey asks, sparking the lighter as I bend over for my hit.

"You probably know more than me," I say. I inhale, noting Kim's pink bangle earrings and orange nail polish, and then stand straight again, my lungs burning.

"Not always," Jeffrey says, politely.

"My toilet has been running," I say, tilting my head back to exhale, to watch the smoke rise, anything to change the subject.

"I'll have a look at it," Jeffrey says.

"Cool," I say. I kiss Jeffrey on the cheek and he hugs me. I call Rocket in from the living room and we leave. As I descend the stairs to my cottage, carefully, I realize how much I want to be set free—from ox-tanks, from a phone that won't ring, from unusual deaths.

Back in my cottage, my phone does ring, and, unfortunately, it's my mother. She has been touring the southeastern seaboard, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, with the rodeo star, "With people you wouldn't believe, Vanessa." I lie on my bed listening, still stoned, to tall tales of the adventures of rodeoing—clowns bouncing in rings, rodeo stars impaled by bulls. In my mind I see one horn, like a rhinoceros, until my mind catches up and I recall that bulls have two horns, the better to really fork you with, like a hot dog speared in the tines of a grill utensil. Stepdads. Crawdads. Doodads. I watch the sequined green saris I bought on San Pablo Avenue ripple next to the open window, listening to the high hum of the toilet compete with my mother's voice.

My father refuses to tell my mother about the mess in his lungs. She would blame it on the refinery, which she had, over the years, begged my father to quit, to look for something less dangerous, what he understood, and I tend to believe, as less *banal*. The news of a severe injury or dramatic death there every couple of years—a third-degree burn, a fall from a beam, the error of one worker the fatal misfortune of another—filled her, so she's claimed, with a daily terror. Now, apparently, she lives a life of emotional ease with a rodeo star. *Liar*, I think, as my mother continues. The rhinoceros crouches low, then sniffs, tilting his horn to catch an odor on the southern breeze.

In one of her rare, level-headed moments, my mother said it was because she couldn't stand the threat of my father being mangled, suffering, or dying a hideous death at the refinery, that she left him.

"Then why a rodeo star?" I had asked.

"The thrill," she'd said. "And, statistically, the risk is low."

"Bullshit, mother. Bullshit," I'd said, then realized

the pun.

Now, from Savannah, she says, "I'll send you some boiled peanuts," the false notes of giving like marshmallows in her cheeks. "They come in a can."

"Cans are great," I say.

"Love you," she says.

"Love you, too."

I roll over onto my stomach and dream of Chip.

It happened later that afternoon when, still a little high, I stumbled back down Tupelo for more chocolate like a cartoon bear heading for the honey hive. Chip smiled at me, thinking, I'm sure, *Wow, twice today, desperate woman*, and then continued stacking heads of romaine lettuce, their torn green triangles dotting the length of his hands and wrists.

"What is your name?" I asked. It came out like a demand, like a hold up.

He stopped and turned to me, thinking, I'm sure, *What the hell?* Then he quite politely said, "Maurice."

I stood there, my feet and legs suddenly uncoordinated, my eyes unblinking.

"Well," he said. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too."

I have heard that love is like the moments before dying, the surprise and terror mixing like tear gas that overwhelms, smarting the eyes, dousing out one's incapacitated nervous system like a weak flame.

In his toga at the palace, Chip, who's become Maurice, tells me that my father will allow us to see each other, that he wants me to have someone after he's gone. My father is only this direct in my fantasies. Maurice bows low and offers grapes from the platter. But I refuse them, suddenly nauseous at the thought of my father believing he will never recover from whatever it is he has.

Back home again, the residue of chocolate still thick on my tongue and the sharp grit of organic sugar between my teeth, the news has arrived, and the pomegranate brilliance of my imaginary rubies fades. Dad has already arranged for a home nurse. There will be new meds and more oxygen.

Later in the backyard, I steer our conversation away from death.

"*Maurice?*" my father asks, in disbelief. "That's unfortunate," he says without explaining.

"I forgot to tell him my name," I say, staring out into the expanse of trees, chirping birds, and the prehistoric sun mocking us, mocking life.

"Christ," my father says.

In the weeks that follow, my father quits playing his records altogether, although I sometimes hear him humming "Set Me Free," quietly and out of tune.

Late at night in the dark of my room, after Rocket settles down and we lie in bed on the verge of sleep, the sound of Kim's wind chimes over the back yard—their incessant deep *bonnnng, bonnnng*, and the noise of water dripping from the low leaves of the maples—I'm spooked. I imagine a flash flood wiping clean the ravine, my little house dashed from its foundation and floating miserably down the hillside before sinking in a crash of sucking, swallowing, water-pandemonium. I cling to Rocket, who struggles. I can't face death alone.

At the palace there has been more talk between my father and Maurice. I'm unsure of their glances, their arrangements. Plans are underway.

Maurice is a nice guy, a nursing student. I like him. That's what I tell my father. On walks around the lake, where Maurice takes me on public busses, which take an hour each way, we fall in honeymoon-love, which I'm guessing is the forerunner to monumental-love, that bang-up ending on the love continuum. Maurice's Caesar hair sparkles and presents appear from his pockets while we walk—chocolates, gumball machine necklaces, and occasional pears. I am no longer a court concubine with black kohl lining my eyelids. My fantasies change to accommodate actual settings now, Mt. Shasta and camping trips.

My mother phones again and this time I tell her to go to hell, that I'm sick of her phony crap, that I never got the peanuts, and that she's a liar. My father is relieved. He thinks there will be less tension, "Now that the cards are on the table."

"It's not good to hide," he says.

"Then why do you?" I say, with a sharp malice

that surprises me. Has he been hiding? Isn't it me who doesn't want to talk about it?

My father pretends not to hear. He turns up NPR. A flood in India has killed five hundred people.

"Quick," he says. "The blessing of a good, quick end. . . ."

"Dad!" I whimper. He looks away. He pulls his ox-tank closer.

I sit in my lawn chair a long time crying. A home nurse. I imagine her following my father around the house, negotiating the ox-tank over thresholds, the sculptured carpet, the uneven concrete of the patio. Suddenly the backyard seems to open up beneath me as I realize, down through the hard bones of my skull and spine, that my father is going to die—soon. The shit in his lungs is filling them up, snuffing him out. I cry harder and then feel hysterical, out of control.

Dad reads the newspaper and then does the crossword puzzle, ignoring me, the world. "Maurice," he says, finally. "When do I meet Maurice?"

Rocket begins to bark.

"You are just like Mom," I say, my voice hoarse. "You can hide from her, but I'm right here, Dad, and nothing is okay," I say loudly, and then I keep on with that over and over until I'm screaming, "*Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*"

Later on my bed with Maurice, I tell him about the desert, how there is panoramic perspective, how nothing can catch you off guard.

"Then you've never been there," he says, squeezing my hand, kissing my forehead.

Suddenly he has lost his allure, his Caesar-charisma. He's a traitor. To something. To me. To my suffering. Rocket stirs at our feet.

"It's easy to get lost in the desert," he says, now playing with my fingers. "It's the heat, and the glare." Then after a long pause, "There's an absence of markers."

"No," I say. "I don't believe that. There must be a way to navigate it."

"No," he says. "There really isn't."

"What about the stars at night?" I ask, panicky.

"But then you've lost your panoramic perspective anyway," he says. "You're more vulnerable in the dark."

"Oh," I say, and roll over, my back to him. "When do you leave for work?"

"An hour," he says, cupping into my back.

Kim taps at the screen door. She has a cake in her hands, something fancy and rimmed with coffee beans. "We heard about the nurse," she says.

"The nurse," I say, as if now that others know, it is for the first time unavoidable, an event which must take place. I realize my father has talked to Jeffrey, telling him more than he would ever tell me. Will we communicate this way forever?

"Vanessa, it's going to be all right," Kim says in a voice that actually calms me, a voice accompanied by the tinkling of her beaded earrings, a genuine voice, the first one I have believed for weeks. I take the cake, grateful then for some small goodness, a coffee bean to worry between my teeth and tongue for the rest of the afternoon. Maurice thanks Kim and she leaves after she, too, squeezes my hand.

The Egyptians saved loved ones with mummification, the bodies wrapped like caterpillars, cocooned through the millennia like a spider's future meal. Jumping from the fifth story window with a cyanide capsule in one's pocket begins to sound reasonable, if only for that last thrill, knowing full well it could have been much easier, the final gust of life shooting through your lungs before you hit the earth.

"Portuguese?" my father asks.

"Yes," Maurice says. "Third-generation."

"Good stock," my father says.

There is an awkward silence during which NPR's Science Friday reports that petrification is the process of mineral-laden water turning an object, often a tree, sometimes a village—and occasionally a human body—into stone.

"Dad," I say, finally. "We have to go."

After this my father and I exchange no words directly, but some things manage to get through the lines, through Jeffrey, as if there has been a war and Tupelo Road is under siege.

I spend hours listening to *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. Maurice doesn't know much about music, so for him, David Bowie is a vague, possibly political figure from the past. The title, he says, reminds him of propaganda films. I try to explain, but then just turn up the stereo. *It ain't easy*.

Maurice knows more about nitrates, phosphates, and the rest of the "ate" kingdom, about ionize and deionize, all the words, he says, with appetites. Words, I think, with a hunger for destruction, metastasize.

Although I have never been able to understand Ziggy's words, I sing my guesses loudly, *It ain't easy to get your helmet when you're going down*.

At the desert palace, although an agreement has been reached, the figures have remained for days in a kind of freeze-frame, turned, as it were, to pillars of salt. Perhaps one of them, foolishly, wanted a look behind him. Maurice sits forever at my father's feet, while on his side, my father lies turned away, still as a petrified tree, a village, the occasional human body.

On my birthday I turn twenty-five and believe that I am old. Maurice throws a private party for the two of us and presents me with an organic whole-wheat cake, flat and beautiful as a pancake. I think back to my twenty-second birthday, that night having been the fateful one of the Scandinavian, the after-midnight breakup on my father's patio through the aftertastes of chocolate cake, Rocky Road ice cream, and too much rum—my total wonderment at love and loss.

Now I make a wish on my pancake cake, although there are no candles, for my father's health, for a miraculous recovery, like a Hallmark card in my head. Twenty-five, I think. I am susceptible to real pain now, the Scandinavian only a precursor of worse things to come. At twenty-five the threat of real pain looms—real love and real loss.

Maurice produces a gumball machine, clear rhinestone ring from his pocket, a prize, he says, that took him three weeks of quarters to procure.

Good stock.

A postcard arrives, late, from my mother. City Hall, Tallahassee's pride and joy, shines under the Florida sun. *Happy Birthday, Vanessa. You will never know the love I have*

*for you. Your father will be okay. We are returning to Cincinnati in three days. Yours, Mother.*

It is like a code, hieroglyphics again, or Sanskrit. I understand that she has called Jeffrey and that innocently, he has told her everything. *My father will be okay?* Even now, lies.

I see again the figures on the marble platform of the palace in my mind. Maurice is no longer there, just my father's figure, coiled and snug as a cannonball on the chaise lounge.

Maurice has taught me about my third eye, which is suddenly tight and pained, as if a bullet has bull's-eyed through. I am seized by the thought that perhaps I am a Cyclops, an old and blind Cyclops growing cataracts and scales over the skin of my third eye, and I will roam Tupelo Road shouting, *My father may die, My father is going to die, My father is dying and he will never know the love I have for him*. I lose all and every ability.

Headpieces burst into flames.

There will be floods.

Set me free.

*Set me free.*

Dad still doesn't sing, but I get his records out anyway and jitterbug across the patio while he bobs his head and smiles at Maurice. "My daughter," Dad says, nodding in my direction, no further description necessary. He says he's dreaming again. He says he's happier than he's ever been.