

*Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1*

*Susan Tepper*

**BLUE SKIES**

It should have been the start of a perfect morning, Gunter awakening him early, singing that old BLUE SKIES song he always sang when the day dawned clear and bright, and they were all out there together, for the weekend, at Gunter's house in the woods of East Hampton — a crooked mile from the beach: he and Gunter, and the blond Fischl twins (Reed and Barry), and Gunter's cousin Helmut who sometimes brought his Latino boy, Louis, and sometimes a stray.

Today, however, was different. When Lenny opened his eyes to that song being sung in that same old out-of-tune way Gunter always sang it, he wasn't in the big bed watching Gunter move about the loft, stretching and flexing his long lean back, pulling his running shorts on over his tight tanned ass, ruffling his incredibly thick, wavy natural black hair. Instead that song drifted down from directly above the small room where Lenny now slept by himself. And, along with it, a stench of smoke from the French girl's GITANES cigarettes.

Chantal did not travel light. Thundering in last night, at dusk, driving a rusted yellow FIAT in need of a new muffler and a good washing. Stuffed in the back seat were two yelping poodles, one black, one white: Claude and Maxim. Not of the lap variety.

Her impending arrival announced, unexpectedly, by Gunter, the weekend before; over an outdoor lunch at the Clam Shack. No mention of dogs. "What!" said Lenny, "you've invited *a woman*?"

Except for Louis who said *wow*, nobody else seemed particularly interested and they continued to eat lunch. Then Gunter asked would Lenny mind moving his things to the green room — the green room!

Lenny's mouth had dropped open. "You want *me* to sleep in the ferns? Not her?" Referring to the small, twin-bedded room with the fern-patterned sheets.

"Yeah," Gunter said. And taking a wedge of lemon he'd baptized each of

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his two-dozen cherry stone clams.

To differentiate among the five bedrooms in his rambling, shingled post-modern house, Gunter had assigned each stark white room a specific color scheme involving sheets and blankets. Digging his feet in the sand, Lenny did a quick rundown in his head.

The black room, really a black and white hounds tooth check, belonged to Helmut. Where Helmut went, Louis went. Easy to please, the Fischl twins had long ago settled gratefully into the gold room with the backward Nazi logo. *Grecian fretwork* was how Gunter explained that.

So — he wanted Lenny out of the loft. Out of the red satin sheets. Off the real leopard skin rug at the foot of the bed where they sometimes *did the deed*. Offering him the small green room directly below the loft, with the pair of chintzy twin beds; while the ample peach room at the corner of the house with the queen-sized bed lay vacant. Gunter wanted Lenny out of the loft. When everything between them had been so perfect. So perfect.

Positioning his elbows on the table Lenny strained forward, getting as close as possible to Gunter seated opposite him. "What about the peach room, can I take that?"

"No, Runt." Gunter almost whispered it, this favorite term of endearment, usually a private thing between them, one that Lenny savored, that Gunter cried out during their most passionate moments. It had come about due to Lenny being a very short slight man; practically half Gunter's size. Playfully, in front of the others, Gunter usually called him Jockey. Which Lenny also adored. But not the way he relished it when Gunter called him Runt.

Rather than melting him, turning his legs to rubber, bringing Lenny to his knees, he'd felt himself getting angry. He tugged on the brim of his KNICKS hat. His face burned. His gray eyes bored into Gunter.

"Why can't she take the green room?" Lenny asked.

"I want you there."

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"So, she gets the peach room," Lenny said.

Gunter shook his head. No.

A silence settled over the table. Stunned, Lenny took a sip of beer. Both Fischl twins, in matching black ARMANI T-shirts, kept their eyes on the basket of steamers they were sharing. Leaning forward, Gunter slurped each raw clam directly out of its pearly shell. Pointing Louis said, "A lobster bib..." but was cut off by a rough poke from Helmut's elbow. Lenny took another sip of beer and decided that he no longer cared for the taste.

The sun had dipped behind some clouds causing the wind to pick up, carrying a chilly mist from off the ocean. Two young waitresses scrambled to collect flying napkins and paper plates and rolling plastic cups, while a line of gulls, perched like decoys on the phone wire, squalled with a sound Lenny had always linked to fun-in-the-sun, romping in the surf. Hearing it differently that afternoon — as a bleak and pathetic wail.

"Oh! Now I get it, now I get it," said Lenny. "A twin bed for a little runt of a man. Is that what you're saying?"

Helmut held up a warning finger.

Turning his chair around in the sand, Gunter sat back down facing the Montauk Highway. Lenny found himself staring at the

back of Gunter's head, where his cowlick swirled revealing a tiny white sliver of scalp. Unable to believe what was happening, Lenny shook his own head. A woman. Some leather-clad cowboy would be easier to take. But a woman. Gooey, wet, disgustingly pulpy. How could Gunter?

Just hours after Chantal's arrival last night the cops had visited twice; the second time issuing a noise summons for Claude and Maxim who barked tirelessly at every bird, squirrel, chipmunk and mosquito having the misfortune to cross the *shriek dog's* path. Even the Fischl twins, normally sweetly reticent, had begun to show signs of

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stress: furrows appearing across their identically high biscuit-colored foreheads. Reed Fischl, the more talkative one, begging they be let off, relieved of the nightly dunk in the pool which had become a kind of magical ritual: everyone high, floating naked staring up at the stars, sharing thoughts and wishes in Gunter's gently heated azure-blue water.

"Yup, you can count me out too," Lenny said.

Despite moonlight, wine, flickering candles, dinner outdoors had been a tedious affair, choking down a vile-tasting *terraine of blue fish*: an oily, under-cooked casserole the French girl had whipped-up in the city, transporting it via the FIAT in a battered Styrofoam cooler, criss-crossed with suspicious looking cuts. Teeth marks? Canine?

Then Chantal driving Lenny mad with an endless play-by-play of her favorite movie SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, all the while shoving food into her mouth off the back of the fork (how too too European), sucking on those stinking cigarettes she kept lighting off the beeswax candles, tearing at her short, cropped mouse-colored hair to make some pointless point. All in that nauseatingly dramatic way that only French girls can do it. And the drooling over the stars in that flick. "They were *so gweat, so gweat*."

How that marbles-in-the-mouth routine annoyed Lenny! A deliberate French tactic to make them stand out from the rest of the fumbling foreign pack. Convinced of this, he could never say it in front of Gunter or Helmut; both of them being first-generation German.

To kill the unbelievably bad taste of her food Lenny downed about a gallon of Sancerre. In fact, the whole gig was unbelievable.

All during dinner he kept watching Gunter's face for signs of disgust. That there weren't any was even more unbelievable. Because, he, Lenny, was totally disgusted. Burned up. Even though *love* had never crossed either of their lips, it being more of a long term lust thing between them. Gunter could level him with a gaze. A gaze, and Lenny could cream. Like that! And of course the friendship. Cheap, it all seemed now.

Dinner over, people scattered; only Gunter and the French girl lingered

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at the table. Having no interest in the bar scene and nowhere really to go except the green room, Lenny remained outdoors. But moved his chair away from the table.

Planted along the edge of the deck were fifteen blood-red rugosa bushes; each and every one of them put in by Lenny, they flooded the warm night air with their perfume. Taking a deep whiff made him sad. A moan mixed with a belch escaped his lips.

Single-handedly over the years he'd dug up most of the scrub oak on Gunter's land, replacing it with lilac, hydrangeas, rhododendron, and those hardy rugosa roses that took so well to sandy soil, that Gunter loved so much. Plants, apart from Gunter, being Lenny's life.

He ran his small business out of his apartment in the West Village, mainly providing offices with indoor plantings. Lately, though, he'd begun to do his fair share of roof gardens and penthouse terraces. And as for Gunter, who opened his house to them every weekend, never asking for a cent, it had been the least Lenny could do.

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Something Chantal whispered made Gunter throw back his head and laugh. Flinging an arm across her bony shoulders he accompanied her down the wide steps of the deck, her shapeless form, in orange spandex, guiding them like a beacon onto the murky grass, where the mutts had been bounding for hours, shitting and pissing at random, destroying everything Lenny had done to make Gunter's yard a showplace.

Clapping her hands she called out, "Claude, Maxim, come here, come here you little devils."

Then Gunter shouted up that they were going to take a walk on Louse Point Beach. Yeah, thought Lenny, you do that. Let the devil-dogs crap all over the beach, too.

He found himself alone. At the far side of the pool he watched Louis, moving like a ballet dancer, encircle Helmut from behind. Insisting on kitchen duty, the Fischl twins had vanished into the house. Probably felt

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guilty. Guilty wasn't on Lenny's agenda. He heard the dishwasher grind into gear. He gave the wood railing a kick. Let Gunter float in the pool with *her*.

Pushing himself out of the chair, feeling like a third-wheel he joined Helmut and Louis. Tightly entwined, they were already into the first stage.

"Sorry," Lenny said.

"Hey, don't worry about it," said Louis, "it ain't like either of us is going anywhere."

"Brilliant," said Helmut untangling himself. He picked up his wine glass, the three of them staring out over the high sides of the pool enclosure.

Somewhere beyond the clearing, a stirring in the underbrush where the grass met the woods, a soft rustling: chit chit - chit chit - chit chit - chit chit.

Did the satin sheets rustle when Gunter knelt behind Lenny, planting himself inside? And they moved together as one? Lenny couldn't remember. If he'd known that he might never know, he would have paid more attention.

Out of the tree line a small doe ventured cautiously into the clearing.

"Bambi," said Lenny choking a little.

Slapping his thigh Louis laughed. "Yeah, right, Bambi."

"Where there's a Bambi, there's a sniffing buck not far behind," said Helmut. And dropped a look on his boy: *merengue-time*.

Shrill staccato barking from off in the distance sent the doe melting back into the woods. If there was a buck he was too savvy to show his colors. Suddenly very tired, Lenny pointed to a neighboring house, ablaze with lights, just a shallow acre away.

"I wonder if they're the ones who called the cops?" he said.

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"Gunter always liked women," said Helmut.

"Well, I like women too," said Lenny.

"No, man," said Louis. "Gunter doesn't *mind* pussy. You couldn't do one if your life depended on it."

Lenny looked from Louis to Helmut. And he couldn't swear, it may have been the glare from the halogen spot lights, but the German cousin's green eyes looked a tinge yellow. And, amused.

"I thought you knew," Helmut said. "Men, women, women, men. Gunter likes variety. He likes change. Gotta have it."

"Wine, women and song," Louis said.

"Right," Helmut said, breezy, tossing the remains of his own wine onto the grass.

What bull-crap, thought Lenny, tempted to ask if Helmut would have chucked Gunter's cut-crystal glass into the fireplace, had it been winter. Instead Lenny said: "You call that change? I call that fucking boring. I mean, christ — SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE."

Slipping an arm around Helmut's waist, Louis' slim hips gyrated to some inner beat. "I saw it," he said, "it wasn't so bad."

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Cold air blasting all night long out of a vent in the wall behind the twin beds only added to Lenny's misery. At some point he'd awakened from a dream: an unfamiliar middle-aged woman, with short cropped hair and a fake hand made of Styrofoam, embedded with multi-colored gemstones that kept falling off. The hand, that is.

Frozen stiff on his back under the thin green blanket, terribly, terribly, he was missing Gunter. Cradled in the strong arms, under the fluffy red comforter, cold had never been an issue. If Lenny's nose started to chill from the air conditioner, he simply lodged it into Gunter's armpit till it

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thawed.

Now, before he'd even opened his eyes, strains of BLUE SKIES, in Gunter's warble, floated down from the loft. Along with enough smoke from those damned French cigarettes to choke a furnace. Gunter singing to that girl was the final slam.

"Keep it to yourself!" Lenny screamed up at the ceiling.

He kicked his heels in succession against the mattress, wincing as a sharp tingling pain dug deep into his skull above his eyebrows. He rolled onto his side. Drew his knees up to his chest, covered his ears with the blanket. Too much wine, too much wine.

Naturally in all his upset he forgot to pack his IMITREX. In fact he'd packed his toilet kit, unpacked it, packing it again. Cursing Gunter the whole time and feeling strangely out-of-whack. Almost teary. With nobody to confide in. Besides. Anyone he knew would taunt him: Mary must be getting her period.

Now somewhere overhead, on Gunter's bed, or standing under the domed skylight, or pissing into Gunter's private red toilet, Chantal was laughing. Peals of laughter. Lenny stuffed his head under the pillow. He'd like to peel her all right; peel her like an onion. Layer by layer. Let Gunter see what's really inside, deep in the heart of her.

Louis was right. Lenny could never stick it in a girl, it would kill him. At least seeing Gunter with a beautiful girl would be easier to understand. The French girl was a scrawny bitch — no tits at all — the worst nipples Lenny had ever seen: brown and crisp and dry like two shelled walnuts.

Yesterday, as he watched her stroll around the pool like hot-shit, wearing just her bikini bottom, wads of hair hanging out from her armpits, Chantal scooping trail mix out of a paper bag, Lenny had wanted to yell at the top of his lungs: G-u-u-u-u-nter-r-r-r!

Piss, nothing else, finally forced him out of bed. Unsteady, Lenny looked down at his cold numb feet as if they belonged to somebody else. In the bathroom he did not shave or shower or brush his teeth.



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Last night's rumpled khaki shorts and the white T-shirt he'd slept in were good enough.

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Under a shameless, cloud-free, china-blue sky breakfast was spread across the glass table. Everyone, except the French girl, already seated. With his head burning Lenny took the chair next to Gunter. Hating to admit that Gunter looked rested, content, confident. Incredibly sexy in a soft, putty-brown shirt printed with an exotic cream-colored raw vegetable.

"Nice design," said Lenny fingering the short sleeve. "White asparagus?" His knuckles grazed Gunter's arm; he sucked in the clean smell of Scottish oatmeal soap.

"Good guess." With that same arm Gunter reached across the table for the juice pitcher. "Actually, it's hearts of palm."

"Here, take one," said Louis, thrusting the basket of bagels at Lenny.

Cradling it against his chest Lenny said, "Ah-ha! Hearts of palm." He shook his head, let out his good-sport laugh. "I should've known that."

Smiling back at him Gunter looked more beautiful than ever. "So — it's just us guys, huh," said Lenny.

Poking through the basket of bagels he was doing his best to sound casual, while down in the grass Chantal romped with the dogs. Lenny couldn't decide. There were poppy, marble, raisin-cinnamon, onion, sesame, half a garlic. A genie could drop a bagel full of diamonds into that basket and he still couldn't decide. How could he? When all he wanted was to throw himself at Gunter, jump into his lap. Wrapping his arms around Gunter's neck, pressing his mouth to it, licking and sucking the salt out of it. Marking him with *the brand of Lenny*. That's what they all said when Gunter and Lenny pulled an all-nighter, going at it till the wee hours, and Gunter came down to breakfast a mess of welts: *the brand of Lenny*.

This morning there was no talk of it. Just bagels, and a platter of crisp

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sausage links, and one of eggs fried sunny-side-up that taunted Lenny like golden breasts that he wanted to smash savagely with his fork. Both Fischl twins pecked at their food like birds. But Helmut and Louis had full plates and were chowing down. Still untouched, Gunter had his usual well-done sesame bagel smeared with cream cheese and chives.

Then Helmut was saying that Gunter looked as happy as punch, when his cousin guzzled a tall glass of mango juice.

"I am," Gunter said. "I'm one happy guy."

Against his will Lenny felt his top lip curling. He snarled. "Well lucky-fucky you." His hand shook as he raised his own glass in the air. "To your tit-less French whore."

Setting the glass down hard, Lenny picked up a fork and stabbed a burnt link sausage, shoved it part way into his mouth. "Did she take it like this?" With the sausage dangling, tears filled the sad gray eyes.

Everyone seemed to stop moving. Gunter just looked at him, not angry, not anything.

"You have sausage schmutz on your face, honey," Gunter said. He ran his finger gently across Lenny's chin, touching the grease to his own lips. "This is the best I can do for you now."

Down in the grass the poodles were riotous, Chantal laughing and throwing a ball for them.

"You see, it's my mother and this house and my inheritance," said Gunter. "And all the other neat stuff I wouldn't be able to live without." Adding quietly, "Mother wants a daughter-in-law. She wants things very respectable. You see?"

"No, I don't," said Lenny.

Hunched over he was crying openly, the platter of sausage links reminding him of dog turds, making him feel quite sick to his stomach. "You think you can do it, Gunter, but you can't. I know you. Better than

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anybody."

Reaching his large hand out, Gunter laid it finger to finger on top of Lenny's small one, covering it, pressing it into the table.

"I know you do, Runt. I know you do."

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