Raisins

by Ann Bogle

There were five of us, not what you'd call gifted, but all fantastically hopeful. Professor Bowles released us Tuesdays at six, told us to work hard and prosper. He'd earned degrees in English, physics, and opera.

He went to the parking ramp briefcase under his arm. We went to the Union for Old Style and popcorn. The popcorn was dry and salty—it made us want to go swimming. Usually we stopped for green grapes and towels, ceremoniously forgetting our swimsuits.

That year we were all smokers. We got Marlboros, strong like red-hots, and dozens of unnecessary matchbooks.

The sun set at nine in June. We watched it go—broad, watery, orange and pastel strokes—then the lights came on and sent bars across the water. We crouched silently in the sand, our shoes kicked off, and nibbled at grapes. Alan stripped the skins off with his teeth, leaving the veins exposed like little green vines.

He went in first, his square head and v-shaped torso something from a super cartoon. Tina went next, moving more gracefully in the dark than she ever did during the day. Jonathan marched into the water, his head in an ad hoc turban, his stomach sucked in. He had a new mustache, darker than his hair, and back acne. Sylvia followed him, skittish, independent, and I, shivering, called from the shore that I didn't feel like going in anymore, could they please hurry up.

That summer we wrote stories about Tina's sister, Koko, and her imaginary boyfriend, Ray Ray. Ray Ray was a busdriver from the wrong side of town, and Koko was a distressed rich girl. Most of the stories were called “Koko and Ray Ray.” Alan called his “The Thighs of a Dove.” The stories began differently and ended the same way, Koko under Ray Ray with the covers untucked. Professor Bowles loved the stories. He even said they embodied the fearful clumsiness endemic to our whole generation.

One night Professor Bowles joined us at the Union. We sat outside surrounded by pigeons and a band played. Tina snapped pictures

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and said in her raspy voice how Jonathan was arrogant, but cute, nonetheless.

"Isn't he cute, Professor Bowles?" Tina said, pinching Jonathan's side.

" 'Handsome' has more dignity," Professor Bowles said.

"Jonathan doesn't have dignity," I said. "He's a confident loser."

"What do you say to that, Jon?" Professor Bowles smiled.

"I give them all a three. Three is the lowest. It's like a C. There are many better people."

Professor Bowles snickered then checked his reserve. I considered that what he did for a living was harder than it seemed.

Sylvia stood up to leave, as she always did, at the exact moment when everyone least wanted her to. She folded her little China fan and put it in her bag.

"Sylvia, have a date?"

"Yes, Jonathan. Don't you?" Sylvia dated a lawyer named Frank Wiener. She defended him by saying he had come from a long line of Frank Wieners, four in all, including his own little son. She used his computer to write two-page stories about women who killed themselves with blue pills because the shirts came back from the laundry unpressed and their husbands stayed out late with secretaries. Every story ended with the image it began: a door knocker, a delicate hand, a marble fountain.

"I never have dates," Jonathan said. "Women don't like me."

"Poor Jon Jon," Tina said. The truth was, Jonathan had rejected her, physically.

"Women like you," Sylvia said, sitting gently back down, as if she hadn't intended to leave. "They just don't understand you."

"Sylvia does," Tina said. "Sylvia understands Jonathan."

Sylvia removed her fan from her bag and spread it slowly open. "I'm a writer," she sighed. Her deliberate manner made everything she said seem reasonable.

"I'm going to find a rich woman and write long novels," Jonathan said.

“Where are you going to find a rich woman?” Tina croaked. She slapped the table.

“Visit beaches.”

“Beaches?” I said. Professor Bowles laughed. Everyone else was quiet.

“This is what I think,” Professor Bowles said. “You all should get jobs.”

It was true that we didn't work for pay. Tina's father was a doctor and sent her nine hundred dollars a month. Both of Alan's parents were doctors. Jonathan's father was a surgeon, and even though Jonathan was twenty-eight, he got out of working by saying he needed his time free to write. Sylvia had Frank Wiener, and I had landed a volunteer job pasting up a newsletter for the Eagle's Club. That satisfied my parents, who were not doctors.

“I got a job,” Alan said, suddenly remembering he had forgotten to tell us.

“Where?” Tina said.

“Publishing menus,” Alan said. “In Seattle for fall.”

“This fall? You're not graduating, are you?”

“My brother lives near Seattle,” I said. “I can give you his address. He runs a shoe store—work shoes, uniform shoes. They have these great shirts. Janitors wear them. They're blue with front pockets, for ten bucks or so.”

“Mia,” Professor Bowles said. “The point.”

It reminded me that he often wrote “point” in the margins of my stories, and I had thought he meant I earned one.

“Mia can't stick to the point,” Jonathan said. “She's a born digressor.”

“Cross-dresser, you mean,” Tina said, laughing more loudly than the others.

“Cross-purposes,” Professor Bowles said.

“Cross,” Jonathan said.

“What is this?” Alan said. “Air scrabble?”

Jonathan opened his backpack and loaded his two huge manuscript binders into it. “I'm going to the library, folks. Real writers read.”

“Real writers,” Sylvia said, “get up at six.”

“Real writers,” I said, but I couldn't put my thoughts into words.

Tina and Alan walked me home, but they couldn't come in since I lived in a women's residence. I suggested that we sit in the garden or on the porch.

“Okay,” Tina said, “but I don't understand why you live here if you can't have men in.”

Tina was testy because she hadn't eaten a good meal in five days. Her father sent her money in a lump sum at the beginning of the month. He was a busy man; he forgot sometimes that sending her check even a few days late meant she went without food or ate only potatoes. She kept a sack of potatoes in her coat closet. I had asked her once if this arrangement bothered her.

“If I didn't smoke so much,” she had told me, “if I didn't talk so long to my mom and sisters on the phone, if I didn't buy so many bracelets … ”

“But your father … ”

“My father has had two wives and eight children. He doesn't have to support me.”

“You guys want something to eat?” I said. “I can make sandwiches.”

“I'll come with you,” Tina said. “We can have a little girl talk.”

“What,” Alan said. “Jonathan again?”

“Jonathan?” I said.

“You always talk about Jonathan. I think he's a … ”

“A what?” Tina hovered over him, hoping for the worst.

“Jerk.”

“Vixen,” Tina said, standing on the n.

I held my tongue. Anything I could have said about Jonathan would have sounded too hostile. Jonathan was attractive because he wanted to be, and we couldn't get near him.

“You like him,” Alan said. “That's what I don't get.”

“We'd like you,” Tina said, kissing his eyelid, “but you like men.”

“Not men like Jonathan,” Alan said.

Tina's sister Koko came for a visit in July. She brought two trunks and five pairs of sandals to stay for one week. Every day before noon Koko went to the beach, trailing an air mattress behind her.

One day we went to meet her. Koko lay on her beach towel in a pale bikini. She looked as straight and slick as a band-aid. She flipped pages of a women's magazine and listened to her Walkman.

“Hi,” she said, rising up on her elbow to greet us. “I've heard all about you.”

“Hi,” we said. Then we studied her. Alan had given her blond hair, but her hair was black. Jonathan had given her apple breasts, but she seemed to have none. Sylvia had said Koko's skin was as smooth as cornsilk, but it was as rough as sand. I had said that she was twenty-three, but she was nineteen, going on thirty-seven.

“Talk to them,” Tina said. “Be Koko for them.”

Koko put her magazine under her towel. “You wrote stories about me. My fiancé, he hates poetry. He hates poetry as much as I do. Stories are different. All I do in your stories is put polish on my toes. I don't like stories like that. I like action. Action-packed thrillers like The Three Musketeers.”

“Tell them what Mom said,” Tina said.

“You tell them,” Koko said. Then she lay back on her towel and put her headphones on.

“We deserved it,” I said on our way back to the Union.

“Speak for yourself,” Jonathan said. “My story had action.”

“That's not the point,” I said.

Our assignment for the summer was to write forty pages. Professor Bowles said that if we couldn't do it, we should be something else.

Sylvia was in a bind. She had committed first-person suicide four times in eight pages.

Jonathan had put Ray Ray in New Mexico to see what he would do there. Ray Ray got lost in the desert, stole a school bus, and called

Koko from Nevada. Jonathan was toying with the idea of a gang war, in which Ray Ray would rescue all the girlfriends of two gangs and put them on the bus. Then they would drive like hell to Mexico, where they would be arrested after they crossed the border. Jonathan explained to Professor Bowles that this was novel material. He couldn't leave Ray Ray with twenty women in a Mexican prison. They had to get the bus back, but how?

Tina's heroine had fallen through a frozen pond into Hades. She was still in the anteroom, trying to dress for the Underworld Ball. Tina had to find the mythological loophole, the secret stairway or subway, that would get the gods and goddesses to Ohio, where the pond was.

Alan was sending out résumés and cover letters. He didn't want to edit menus for a living.

My story was set in the nineteenth century. Ivy was a country girl who had come to the city to be an actress. It was winter, and her cruel stepsister had kicked her out, saying it was a hardship to keep her. Ivy wandered the streets, living on hot pretzels and cinnamon buns.

One day, while she was walking in the park, a boy in a leather apron and charcoal smeared on his face spotted her red fingers through the holes in her muff. “Excuse me, girl,” the boy said, “I don't mean to be forward, but you look destitute.” The boy took Ivy to his uncle's house, so she could eat something and warm herself by the fire.

The boy's uncle knew of a place where Ivy could find work sewing soles onto boots. He gave her some pennies and a worsted suit that the boy's mother had worn before she had died. Ivy thanked them and told them she would repay their kindnesses.

The hardest part about working in the garment district was the threat it presented to a girl's reputation. The girls Ivy sat beside at the long sewing tables had long lost theirs. They wore rouge on their cheeks and hiked their skirts up past their knees. Ivy was meant for better things: She would be a great stage actress.

One day, while Ivy and two other seamstresses were wending their way home, to the women's residence where they lived, a strange man approached them. He wore fine clothing and had a gold watch chain. The other seamstresses seemed skeptical because he was wearing a turban. They probably thought he was a foreigner who was after one thing. “We have nothing to give you,” one of the seamstresses said. “I do,” Ivy thought candidly. Then the man did a remarkable thing. He took Ivy's hand and kissed it. Strange, unidentifiable emotions welled up in her. He told her that he owned a theatre, and he had a part for her, if she would only accept it. Ivy took his card and promised to think it over.

The next day Ivy didn't go to work. She went to the man's apartment half-decided. In the morning he told her he was traveling to London. “When do we start rehearsing?” Ivy asked him. “When I return,” said the man. “When will that be?” Ivy said. “Before long,” said the man. He was in a hurry, otherwise he would have bought her breakfast in a restaurant. Instead, he gave her a bowlful of raisins to chew on while he shaved. Ivy stared into the bowl. The raisins were hard and dry. She tried to eat one, but a lump formed in her throat. Tears slipped from her eyes, so that the raisins seemed to glisten in the bowl.

“This, Mia,” Professor Bowles said, striking the pages sharply against the table, “is a nice story. It reminds me of Dreiser.”

That night I didn't go to the Union with the others. I walked slowly home past garbage cans lined up at the curb. The trash was dry then, but by morning, stray box tops, soggy bits of cellophane, and orange peels would be sticking to the bushes.

When I got to my room, I bolted the door. I took out my mother's old sewing machine and made a bathrobe out of my beach towels.

I dreamed that night that I had gone to Professor Bowles' office wearing blue jeans under my bathrobe. I told him that I had never met Dreiser. He told me that writers are what they are. His words made a deep impression on me until I woke up and thought about it.

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