

HOWARD LINE

Thursday, 14 February, 1980

I recognized her dimples before I recognized her, through two layers of filthy bulletproof glass and fifteen years. For weeks I'd been suspended in that disconnected place where nothing makes you think of sex. Days or weeks on end you can't think of anything but, and every movement reminds you that you're a sexual being, every breath speaks erotically to you, and you resent the time everything takes because you can't wait to get to your lover's bed, or home. Other times, you're sated before you begin, as reluctant as a python who's swallowed a pig to move and hunt, when your skin might as well be made of rhino hide and your eyes have forgotten color, when your heart is just a pump and your taste is all in your mouth and your passion is all for cool, precise and solvable problems. When nothing moves you but a vehicle, and it's been so long you've forgotten how good it feels, like a mother forgets the pain between children. Ginger Larsen and her dimples yanked me out of that dull grey land like Dorothy ripped from Kansas.

I never ride the L if I can help it, but my car was in the shop; I'd paid my 45¢ at the Thorndale stop and caught an A train of old 6000-series green and white cars, the noisy ones, the ones that screamed and cried like whipped dogs going around the tight curves of the Howard line. It was stuffed with overcoated businessmen stiff as fish commuting to the Loop, and southbound Circle and U of C students. The 6000s are permanently coupled into two-car "marriages," and trains are 2, 4, 6 or 8 cars long, depending on rush hour. I was in the front car heading downtown, crammed all the way to the back against the locked connecting door. It was early enough that the bullet lights were still on, shedding a yellow glare on brown naugahyde seats, green painted walls, and ads on the curved panels above the windows. I looked again, through windows like a sepia-toned camera lens, and she smiled and waved as if it had been last week, not 1965.

That was my senior year in high school, the only year of it I'd spent in the States. The other three had been in a missionary school in Quito, three thousand meters above sea level, where the air was thin and pure and the only thing higher than the city was the snow on Cotopaxi. Ginger Larsen's smile had welcomed me to trig class, but I'd chewed the inside of my cheek, afraid to speak to her. She sat to my left and wore Blue Grass perfume that smelled of wildflowers in a wet spring wood. She had curly ginger hair and a big sweet smile with new-moon dimples; she had too much nose and not enough chin. She didn't have the parts to be beautiful, but even in high school she'd had skin like a

geisha doll and moved with the grace of a Kabuki player. Ginger Larsen wasn't the first straight girl I'd ever had a crush on, but her face was the one in my mind a decade and more later.

Her locker was near mine; even if I didn't see her in the morning, the smell it held carried me through an hour of English; Mr. Malmgren's favorite sport was humiliating girls who dared to take college-prep. Ginger and I only had trig and PE classes together, which meant I didn't see her much, but I'd seen her naked in the showers. She'd seen me too, though at six-one and 130 pounds there wasn't much of me to look at.

When they mixed boys and girls for square dance class, I'd smell her flowery scent while waiting to honor our partners—there's very little I hate more than curtsying—and I would imagine she smiled at me. Once she showed a picture around and I was sure it would be a boyfriend but it turned out to be of kittens; I touched her fingers when she handed it to me and I could almost hear the snap, like a bugzapper at dusk. Later, when they turned out all the lights and showed us "health films" in PE, she sat next to me and I could hear her breathing 'cause I held my own. In the dark I felt her fingers tracing mine but I knew I was hallucinating. I'd heard of LSD, I wondered who had given it to me. Maybe it was in her perfume; she wore it in a little cotton ball inside her padded bra, I'd seen her put it there after showering.

Ginger and I didn't talk much; we said "Hi" in the halls. She had her pick of all the boys, why should she talk to some scrawny dandelion girl like me? So it was surprising when she asked in square dance if I were going to the homecoming ball. I hadn't planned on it, since I hadn't been there very long and I was as far from the in crowd as you could get without being expelled. Momma would forbid it, Dad would say Ah, let her go, how often does she ask? I was foolish enough to say yes. I coerced Johnny Milton, the only boy I knew smarter than a football player, into taking me; they called him "Worm," for "Bookworm." He was shorter than Ginger's five-one, which precluded my being swept off my feet. When I found out that he didn't have his driver's license and transportation was up to me, I nearly cancelled.

Ginger's date was Jimmy Jones, not even as tall as Johnny. Was there something in the way she smiled at me? I was fooling myself. Johnny and I left early, eager to start work on the bourbon stashed in my car, but on the way out I saw movement in the back of Jimmy's old Chevy wagon and there was Ginger with her fancy green homecoming dress hiked up around her waist getting the bejesus fucked out of her. She caught me looking and stared right back at me; Johnny missed it all, trapped behind his hornrim glasses.

Ginger and her perfume disappeared from school not long after homecoming; everyone knew she was pregnant. They let Jimmy Jones graduate without a peep, Jimmy Jones who was about as smart and sensitive as your average rattlesnake. I heard later he took up politics; I would vote for the rattlesnake, myself. Johnny Milton stayed in trig, passed me notes and poked me in the back; after the dance, he thought he was somebody special. The only reason he didn't snap my bra was I told him I'd cut his throat; he thought I was joking, but he let me alone anyway.

We took our field trip after Ginger was gone. In Quito, we had gone to the Galapagos to watch iguanas diving into the surf; here, we went downtown to play tic-tac-toe with a machine that beat us every time. When I graduated I never wanted to see the class of '66 again, but now and then, I'd wake up late at night and think of Ginger Larsen.

I hadn't thought of her in months, however, until I saw those dimples through two locked doors as our cars rocked on independent springs and the speaker squawked: "Bryn Mawr." The train slowed and stopped and she walked out the open door onto the wooden platform; she wore a black beret, a camel-hair coat over a red-and-white striped pullover top, a little red mini-skirt over white lace-patterned hose, knee-high, shiny red boots with high heels and a little bitty matching clutch bag. I'd never seen the outfit before; it looked as if she would have worn it in high school if she'd owned it then, although they wouldn't have let her with a skirt that short. The big hoop earrings were new and bounced just like her hair. I wondered where she was going, besides out of my life again. But she squeezed her way through 50 people sitting and 20 people standing to jam in next to me. The doors closed and the car jerked and we rolled south toward downtown Chicago.

"Where you going?" she asked in a tiny breathful voice I barely remembered because I'd heard it so little.

"Loop," I choked out. "It's been a long time." She gripped the pole next to me and her head was—right where I wanted it.

"Yes it has and so am I." And then she looked, just looked and smiled until I wondered what her lipgloss tasted like. "I got divorced from Jimmy two years ago when I caught him with my sister and a friend of hers. I'm going back to school and golly you're sure looking good are you married do you have some kids or do you have a career what are you doing? Listen to me run on."

Where to start? Traveled half a world away to Việt Nam; lost both brothers; got married and he died; admitted I was a lesbian, like I always knew I was; currently unattached and lonely and wondering where I fit, or if there was a scheme to fit me in. "I'm a private eye," was all I said, expecting a laugh. But her eyes lit up and it had been a long time since I had impressed someone that way. "I got no kids and I'm not married now." Her slight body pressed against me as we hung on our straps and the train stopped at Argyle to take on more commuters to the Loop; we got shoved even further back, which was fine with me. I'd never been so grateful for big tall overcoated men before. I let go the strap and wedged against the door that connected to the car she'd left. I sniffed discreetly; she used Dial now, not Blue Grass, and I could smell the girl underneath the soap. "Are you still Ginger Jones? Or Larsen?"

"I'm so glad you remembered." She pulled off her gloves and unzipped my field jacket; her right hand fumbled with my shirt. Didn't she realize what she was doing to me? I jumped like a pound dog. "Hold still," she told me. Outside the car and across the tracks brick backsides of buildings full of wooden porches and stairs swept by as we slowed

down before the Sheridan station and the wheels began to scream as the train twisted around the curve. “I kept Jones because it was easier but I should’ve took back Larsen or done like a friend of mine and made up something like Dragonfly or Dream Spirit or—”

“—Crystal Butterfly? I never took you for a New Ager,” I interrupted and she smiled.

“Sheridan is next, doors open on the right!” shouted the PA.

“I’m not.” She paused a beat, deciding. “But some of my friends are lesbian—”

“—Separatists,” I finished and we understood each other perfectly. “How many kids did you have?” Her small hot hand found its way underneath my shirt where she stroked my belly skin, then my breast. I could barely breathe, I felt my heart pounding, heard the rush of blood in my ears. The train pulled away from the station and the acceleration pushed me into the connecting door. Pushed her against me inside my coat.

“You don’t care about my kids.” She looked up at me, her head framed in tight coils and curls. “But I only had the one. Maybe that’s why Jimmy screwed my sister he wanted more. Now she’s pregnant he always wanted a boy.”

It came out before I could stop it. “Jimmy is a horse’s ass.”

“That’s not nice to horses,” she said. “Why didn’t you ever say anything in school?” She weighed no more than 90 pounds; her hand was small, her wrists thin, and when she slid her arm down the front of my jeans she didn’t even have to unzip them.

“I was scared to death,” I said, scared to death. She wasn’t wearing makeup—she never had—except for that lipgloss that looked like it was poured on. I wanted to smear it. And have it smeared. I glanced from side to side; I didn’t want the men around us saying, “Guess what I saw on the L today.”

She poked me with her free hand and said, “You worry too much.”

I blinked and for a moment I was back on an electric trolley bus in Quito, full of people tight as rolled up anchovies in a tin, everyone shouting in Spanish, the enclosed air redolent with the smells of garlic and chiles and fried masa and cigarettes. Then Ginger moved her hand in my jeans and I gasped. I gripped her shoulder too hard and she smiled and did it again, her hand stirring when the car rocked.

“—I got married ’cause I had to and everyone expected it but I guess I got what I deserved—”

“Nobody deserves a prick like Jimmy.” I touched her hair; it was like touching a ball of steel wool, springy and resilient. The train stopped abruptly at Fullerton. I looked out the standee window past her head and saw snow on the platform; the wood was wet and slick from the meltwater. A 2400-series train of red, white, blue and stainless cars raced

by northbound. I found it hard to breathe; her arm was soft as moleskin, her fingers strong and flexible, making me weak, making me tremble. Was she leaving marks? She found the perfect spot and I quit caring; I had nothing to hang on to but her.

“Daphne my daughter’s at school in Evanston she’s old enough now to take care of herself and she knows I’ll kill her if she drops out she doesn’t know I’m putting her through college but she’ll thank me someday when I’ve saved her from what I’ve gone through. When I finish school I’m moving someplace warm damn I hate this weather.”

The train started up again and shoved us harder against the glass and I bit my lip until it bled; it was that or shriek out loud. It was 1° C outside and too hot inside and every time she shifted her hand it inflamed my skin. I was sure everyone around us could tell what she was doing, but no one shuddered for air but me. I closed my eyes and let it happen.

When I could breathe again she took her hand away, leaving me spent and wet. “I heard Jimmy went into politics. Did he get to be an alderman?”

“He got his ass kicked!” she chortled. “He lost three elections and more money than his daddy wanted to spend so he went into jewelry and makes plenty now I get my child support and my alimony on time and the state’s helping me pay for school I’m not doing too bad.”

The train slowed and squealed and stopped at State & Lake and sighed the doors open; the light grey limestone Chicago Theatre building loomed in the background. “I get off here,” I said.

“I transfer to the Congress to get to Circle campus I can do that here.” We stepped together onto the wooden platform, her arm around my waist. “I’d like to see you again,” she said. “I live in Evanston in the mobile home park with a friend who watches Daphne and a great big dog who eats more than my kid let’s trade numbers you can call me any evening I don’t go out much I stay home and study and watch a little TV the news with Walter Jacobson I got time to spend on you.”

I gave her my card plus an extra to write on.

“Hey you really are a PI.” She stuck her tongue out to write as if the words were big and she were three. When she was done she slipped the card into my pocket and pulled me down for a kiss. “Happy Valentine’s Day,” she said, smiling slyly up at me.





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