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Great Grunting Groans

Lorna McLaughlin

1994

Colleen wanted to end that life, and it wasn't before, after, or during her period. Wanted to, wanted to, and didn't know why. She sat in a straight backed chair with her feet caught in the cross bar. Her body was arched back; her feet were arched and bent torturously forward. She rocked the chair back and forth, holding onto the desk, and she stared intently at the screen.

"I hope zoology isn't the last entry in the encyclopedia," Colleen said to William, her blonde lover.

"It can't be," he said.

"Why not?" Colleen said.

"There's Zurich, Switzerland, for one," he said.

"And Zoroaster," Colleen said as the screen changed.

"Zwingli," she said moments later, as if hushed.

"And it's only taken us all day and all night," William said from the bed beside her desk and bookshelves. His head lay at the wrong end and was propped by five pillows from which he comfortably watched her, studied her body moving with the chair, her small white hands holding onto the desk. She could do things with her hands.

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“Unlike the rest of mankind, we travel at a speed faster than the brain’s impulse,” she said, and turned to see if he was listening.

“Mind if I change the song?” he said. “Three hours of that is enough for me and should be for you.” William stood, nude, and pushed the appropriate button on her disc player. “What are we going to do now?” he said.

She let the chair fall to all four legs and untwisted her feet. She hummed the *eye of fatima* and turned off the computer, covering it with plastic.

“Now we’re going to the library to look in real encyclopedias,” she said.

* * *

“An atlas?” Scott said. He pulled away from her body and leaned against the cold wall beneath a picture of Colleen painted in Paris; a self-portrait in deep chiaroscuro.

“I often find sex boring,” Colleen said. “You weren’t bored when we first started,” he said.

“I was, but I was thinking about Russia and that made me seem less bored,” she said.

Pure maid, covered with skirts,
what lies have you seen perpetrated.

“I don’t want to play games,” Scott said. He pressed her face between his hands and looked into her green eyes; she moved her eyes down to study the map. He crawled over her body, smudging the atlas wedged between the sheet and her lap, with sweat from his knee. He gathered his clothes and went into the bathroom and came out dressed in jeans and a rugby shirt.

“I thought you cared about me,” he said standing over her.

“I do care about you but you smudged the agricultural region of central Russia with your sweaty knee. Now I can’t tell what they grow there.”

"I've just given you the national treasure. How could I deny you anything else?" she said. She lifted her shirt and tugged it over her hair. When she opened her eyes he was kneeling on the floor, his hands were on her back trying to unclasp the bra.

* * *

"Listen, brain. I'm speaking to you. I want to have comical dreams tonight, something very funny. I want to laugh in my sleep. I want light-hearted dreams."

Cups overrunning, that kind of humor?

"Not like that. Humor that doesn't hurt anyone, or pick on anyone's weakness."

"Do you have an example? You're the brain, you find it, you create it. A kindly humor. Remembering all of man's dignity."

Satire is out then.

"Satire is out then," Colleen said outloud. "Try to remember that book about satyrs, about islands, about getting to the island on the fin of a dolphin."

About being small, a thumbelina. Going back in time, thinking. Or going forward, living. But not standing still because time does not, time cannot; the meaning of time is movement.

Colleen dreamed about the president of the United States. Oddly, she walked anonymous streets and, met him on every street corner. She would glance unknowingly and find him there. Embarrassed by the power, she would turn away, but held by the same power she would turn and look again. Sometime before each of her first and second looks the president always took off his pants. With every street corner, it seemed, he wanted more and more to know her.

Colleen woke up dazed, afraid, then she laughed the bittersweet laugh of the satirical dreamer.

"I'm leaving and I won't be back. I'm sorry I smudged your atlas," he said through clenched teeth.

* * *

"I'm reading Dostoyevsky," Colleen said.

"Which of Dostoyevsky," she said, motioning to a shelf that held each published work. The afternoon sun came into the room, lighting each volume with holiness and approval.

"That's good for you," William said.

"How do you know what's good for me?" she said.

"It's good that you've stopped thinking about suicide," he said.

"I haven't," she said.

"Then you need to talk to someone," he said.

Colleen frowned, looking at him through half-closed eyes.

"How do you know what I need?" she said.

"I know that if you're going to be a bitch I'm going to leave," he said.

"I won't be a bitch. I'm swearing off bitchiness right now," she said. She sat up straight and smiled weakly.

"Why do you get like this? We could be having so much fun. Do you really, honest to God, think so much about dying?" he said.

"If I talk I'll be bitchy and you'll leave. Don't make me talk," she said. He pulled her up to him, smoothing her red hair back from her face, pulling wayward strands out of her lashes.

* * *

Scott brought Colleen a book from the pink bookstore that had been a gas station; he didn't think she would always want to be reading maps or he would have purchased another atlas. He looked at several different atlases but they reminded him of her rejection. He looked at a book of Persian legends and almost bought a book of maps that illustrated where various tribal indians had lived in

North America. Then he found a book on the assassinated John Kennedy and immediately felt it was the right book to give Colleen.

It was a used book, an old book published by the Associated Press.

The Torch Is Passed... a line from Kennedy's inaugural address, graced the maroon cover of the book.

The book, once a gift of Miss Charlotte Davis to the library of her choice, now had loose and chipped pages. A librarian had written 92 KEN on the title page, and then again on the last page across from the pocket that held the reference card.

Colleen looked on the due date sheet for her birthday, or for Scott's birthday. She found William's birthday: October 21, 1969; William's birthday and the second time the book was due back at the library of Miss Charlotte's choice.

"Thank you Scott, for this wonderful book. Do you think he really slept with all those women in the White House bed," Colleen said.

"He was a great president," Scott said.

"It depresses me to think about it. But thanks for thinking of me," Colleen said and kissed him. She made love to him and Talk About The Passion played over and over on the stereo, a theme song for their union, during which she thought over and over, desperately, that she didn't know anyone strong enough to bear the weight of the world.

* * *

"I brought this," Greg said. He pulled a bottle of tequila from the inside of his jacket. The collar of his jacket stood high around his neck, away from his neck, like a puppet's jacket held by strings.

"I brought these," William said of two perfectly green limes and a small paring knife with a black plastic handle.

"I'll get some glasses," Colleen said. Walking into the kitchen she heard William tell Greg that she had been thinking of killing herself.

ancient heritage. I died when I realized there was nothing extant to die for, and nothing for which to live.

* * *

"You shouldn't have let us in free last night. I wanted to pay but William said it would make you very happy to let us come in free," Colleen said to the lead singer.

"Was he just drunk last night when he told me that you want to die?" the lead singer asked. His green eyes moved from her face to the plastic container she held on her lap. Her fingers moved through the dish that had once held pimento cheese, moving the coins in a repetitive, obsessive, lift and fall.

"Then why are you giving me that cup of money?" he said.

"It's blue pennies. They came from the old black men who used to buy tobacco at my parents store in Greenwood. Remember when I used to work there? I was looking at blue pennies one day and my dad saw me. He told me I'd never see anyone but niggers using money like that because only niggers dig through ashes from burned down houses."

"Why are you giving them to me? You're not giving all your stuff away, are you?" he said.

"This cup holds the National Treasure of the United States of America. Only we know, of course. And also, so you don't get bitter about being poor and I don't get bitter about being just breasts. Okay?" she said.

"Okay," he said, uncomprehending. He sat in the chair at her desk, she sat on her bed. Sunlight poured in from the sliding glass door on the opposite side of the room. He stared at her body. He had once known it very well and had even continued to dream about her body though it usually wore a different, more recent, face.

"You want to make love, Colleen? For old time's sake," he said brightly.

Most of the penny is dark and framed by the dark but Lincoln is in an opalescent bubble of shiny copper, though only part of Lincoln: Lincoln's chest, Lincoln's beard, Lincoln's nose.

A blue the color of turquoise sinks around the words that border the upper portion of the penny; a thick blue, like wax, but the color of stone.

Lincoln through the fire. Lincoln in two shades of green. Green like moss and green like powder. Lincoln with fungus on his face, or patina. Lincoln the flat sculpture, Lincoln the tiny bas-relief.

Lincoln hammered away.

Lincoln left on train tracks.

Lincoln pierced.

Lincoln pierced.

Lincoln welded.

* * *

"I called you last night," Colleen said. "When I couldn't reach you I looked at books. Then I got out my pennies and looked at all the living Lincolns," she said.

"We went to a party. Sorry Greg got so drunk," William said.

"You were just as drunk," she said.

"He doesn't even remember it. He wants to apologize."

"Oh well, it's not as if we're honorable human beings."

"You are," William said.

"I wonder what it feels like to be honorable. Maybe I should just grow into it," Colleen said.

"You are honorable," William said, and hung up the phone.

* * *

I was trying to make myself believe the torch had been passed to me, member of a new generation of Americans, born this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of my

They were almost drunk when they reached the nightclub on Cotton but they were among friends. As the musicians tuned their guitars and warmed up on drums, William and Greg led her to drink at the Sportsman's bar, next door, where hard liquor was routinely served. The Sportsman's bar was underground and famous in its way. Moments later Colleen followed them out of the club and down the sidewalk, through a door and down steep steps into the bar.

It was a real bar and in no way a nightclub, here were true winos and actual hobos from the train yard a few streets over who sat in various pockets of the pool table sized room. Behind the bar was a mirror lined with bottles and pictures of nude women. A nude barbie, tied to a bottle of vodka, was thrust forward like a ship's ornament. Colleen was the only non-image non-plastic female in the bar. She was not as delighted the other ladies were to be there but she was more drunk.

William, then Greg, then William, then Greg, bought drinks for the three of them and also for a homeless man who sat away from the bar watching Colleen's face in the mirror. She focused on a dangling glow-in-the-dark skeleton while an elderly man at the end of the bar swung a piece of yarn for a calico cat who jumped wildly after it. Every few minutes he fed her pieces of sausage from a smelly can that made Colleen feel nauseous.

They drank scotch and water and listened to the bartender give Sportsman's bar history lessons until the band started next door. The bartender started to cuss.

It's only decadent if you're poor.

Their table had been kept for them; the drink Colleen left behind was watered down from melted ice. The band played only their own; however, when they played at home they covered a sixties song that reminded the lead singer of Colleen. Colleen was too drunk to recognize the song but her red eyes cleared inside the harmonica and she recognized his voice when he started to sing.

Greg stumbled outside and came back with a rose from a street seller. Red faced, he sat down abruptly and tossed the red flower across the table at Colleen. She laughed hysterically at the rose and swirled her fingertips in the water that stood in puddles on the table.

"I'm ready to go," Greg shouted across the table at William who had watched the presentation of the rose with mild amusement.

"What?" William shouted back. Colleen took William's arm and pulled him over until his ear was on her mouth.

"I don't want to go," she said into his ear.

* * *

Colleen got out of the backseat and walked around the front of the car where Greg met her, arms outstretched. In the brief second of her trust he knocked her into the car's bumper with the force of his body and rubbed his genitals on the hip she twisted out; she pushed the point of her elbow angrily into his face.

"Stop it," William said. He leaned against Colleen's cold car and, laughing so hard, held his sides.

"Don't come upstairs," Colleen said, but they were already on the stairs behind her. Once inside the apartment the talk turned to books as William told Greg that Colleen was reading all of Dostoyevsky.

"Don't you think he just makes up events so he can write about weird people?" Greg said and put his arm around Colleen's shoulder.

"Don't do that," she said.

"Just let me touch your breasts and I'll leave. If not touch, then just see," he said. She called William who was looking at a magazine with his back turned to them.

When Greg said, "Your cups runneth over," William finally turned and Colleen pushed Greg across the room to him. William mumbled something and began pulling Greg from the kitchen,

out of the apartment, down Colleen's front stairs. He yelled at her from William's car but she couldn't understand them until it became completely silent and then she heard Greg tell William in a quiet voice that Colleen had no sense of humor.

She heard the car engine start but saw them pull out of the driveway before shutting their doors and she prayed they wouldn't crash.

She went to sit on the white carpeted floor by her bed and pulled the telephone from beneath the bed. She dialed Scott's number but there wasn't an answer. She hung up and dialed his number again and then again. She finally looked up the nightclub's number and asked to speak to the lead singer.

"He's gone," the voice said. "Anyway, he was wasted. He's at a party if you want to go," the voice said.

She called William's apartment but he was not home or had already passed out. Then either a girl answered Scott's phone or Colleen had dialed the wrong number. She dialed it again and there was no answer. She put the phone away and turned on the computer, then turned it off. She picked up the book she was reading but it seemed tarnished. She looked at every large book she had until finding the book about John Kennedy.

* * *

Last night the people who usually keep me alive were not available and so I died. But before I died I looked at a book about you. There was a big picture of you and your beautiful wife and interspersed throughout the book were pictures of your casket.

* * *

It's burnished blue around the edges of the penny; a burnished blue halo above Lincoln's head. Liberty is almost obliterated and the copper is dark and lifeless. It is 1990.