A PRETTY GIRL
by
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A mechanical woman in a red polka dot dress rocks back and forth, mocking the midway crowds, gathered to celebrate the anniversary of Coney Island. "Oooh, look at them!" kids cry, pointing at parachutists who are waltzing in the air towards miles of sandy beach. And white boats sail a flat sea, their red spinnakers billowing.

Phoebe, in a thousand dollar Victorian frock, twirls her parasol as she takes the sea air. She rests all her weight on her trustworthy leg while Rob sets up a shot. She's doing a twofer, getting paid to look like she smells good. And at three, she'll be crowned, Miss Coney Island. So she can't lean against dirty wooden horses set up to keep crowds on the straight and narrow. Behind her is a wall of posters advertising the freaks inside, a smiling fat, fat lady, a giant, Siamese twins.

If she wore a chute, she'd be able to fall effortlessly, blown spray rising to meet her nostrils, nothing but air touching her skin. Rob drops her elbow. He’s focusing his camera on the faces in the crowd turned upwards, in wonder, with fear for their safety, not on boats nor jumpers but on the fingers that point at them.:

"You're hurting," he mutters.
"I am not!" Phoebe enunciates too clearly.
"We can put it off, We can wait for a better day."
"That's not a good idea," is all she says, because some two legged understudy might replace her. Amplified shouts of laughter almost drown out her words.

"Why do they do it?" Rob’s teen age niece, Annie asks. "They could drift out over the ocean and drown."

An honest child, she avoids makeup and wears a giant khaki sweater, out at the elbow, over patched dungarees. Frightened by falling men who might splash blood over the island or land atop her head, she hides behind her sunburned hands.

"For the fun of it?" Rob snaps faces and fingers that climb to meet the falling chutists, their lilac, pink, and baby blue chutes.

"Oh, god," Annie moans. "There—that one's going to..." "Watch out!" she shrieks. "He's going to hit the Cyclone tracks."

"Not hardly." Her uncle snaps his fingers at Donald, his gofer, who hands him a lens.

Annie tracks the figure with her finger. Sure enough, the wind has hold of the hot orange parachute overhead. They can see the chutist, a woman, pulling wires, guiding herself from drift to drift, aiming away from the Cyclone, past the Aquarium, to a tarp bull's-eye stretched out on the
"She made it!" Annie breathes now. Lucky she hadn't fainted away, what with holding her breath because the falling lady might have splattered herself on jetty rocks, breakwaters that extend at regular intervals as far on either side as one could see.

"It works, that’s why. We like ‘em. Falling bodies, freaks and antiques. That’s why we’re shooting the run-down Half Moon, a hotel that used to stand for class."

“This agency has got a finger on the pulse of the nation,” Don boasts.

"Up its ass, you mean." Rob says though he sold the idea.

"Now, now, you'll shock Annie." Phoebe hugs his niece. A straw hat in her hand trailing ribbon, a garden party smile upon her face, she says, "See us pose with a landmark" She wants to huddle under a protective arm She ought to warn Rob that she might not be able to walk when the time came

Rob studies a freak poster: a mermaid that the tattooed lady has enshrined on her broad right arm, above her, the robotic laughing lady, rocking back and forth, hustling the painted midway.

"You don't take pictures of freaks," Annie Laurie whispers. "It's not nice."

"No, it's not," Rob agrees, too cheerfully, relieved, maybe, that Phoebe isn't going to make a fuss. "But they exist. You see them, don't you? So why shouldn't the camera?"

Annie's eyes are cast down to the watermelon rind at her feet. "You don't put them in sideshows. You help them."

Donald giggles

"How?" Rob takes his camera away from his eye and looks inquisitively at his niece.

"I don't know how," she sputters. "But you do."

"I bet they like the way they earn their living." He taps Annie's peeling nose, a beautiful turned up nose. "They are showbiz, and proud of it."

Phoebe will have to step down if she's to do her job. She knows well enough that one-legged models aren’t in great demand, that Rob was being loyal to her beyond what anyone could expect. Through slits of tracks, sunlight picks out the bosky cavern beneath the arching Cyclone. Two women in house dresses, their frazzled hair curled under hundreds of bobby pins, their flabby arms crossed, talk in fits and starts as though nothing had fallen out of the sky. Serenely, they wait out the screech of wheels passing overhead and the riders, screaming to keep panic at bay.

She pivots on the new prosthesis. Bastards, they've got it wrong. She contracts away from the leg, her back twists, flesh raw. She rides waves of pain—all there is.

Behind Rob and Annie, an Icarus of a parachutist is floating down: A blonde, with white teeth flashing like shining foam. He'd drunk of sea, sky, the air through which he'd passed and knew something that made him part of the wind.
A Pretty Girl 3

Then, Phoebe falls, down she goes, sweating in her white dress, into a gutter of corncobs, melon rind, waxed paper. A buttered plate pasted itself to her right hand. Waiting, waiting, breathe: and, yes, it was passing. Pain was going away. She could breathe deep, tears running and nose dripping down. Ah, the sun on her face was good and Rob squatting beside her, holding onto her.

"I won't be able to stand up," she explained carefully, not worried, just making sure that no one would jar her right leg.

"Who's watching?" she asked. Donald, his mouth hanging open, stands there, camera forgotten. He ought to be catching the water dripping out of her left nostril. He'll never be one of the greats.

A gentle voice behind her says, "Bring her in here." Phoebe imagines a fairy godmother, opening a way out for her. Huffing, Rob carries her, skirt trailing like a bride's, past a faded curtain into a dark space. She turns out to be backstage at the freak show, complete with a Victorian fainting lounge, designed for the corseted ladies of the last century.

"Wait a minute," the angel voice warned. "It's dusty."

A sheet smelling of clothes line is spread out, and Phoebe, who'd fallen down on the job of making people want a whiff of a perfumed world they can't afford, has found a hideout. Here, nobody will spot her and laugh. Surprising tears still creep out, wetting the rough muslin.

"Feeling better?" The woman—pretty face, soft curls like an old Breck ad—hovers overhead. "I'm Hilda. That's me on the posters." She pointed to a mermaid pricked out in violet and pink on her arm. Above it a banner waved. "Love," it said.

"Lovely," Rob said. His eye took in the wonder of how much better looking she was than the poster and his brain instantly composed shots and angles.

Phoebe saw horror in Annie's eyes, poor Annie. She'd come along to see her uncle at his job and his old friend Phoebe whom she'd known forever. And now her most dependable uncle had led her to this sideshow.

"Yes, she is," Phoebe agreed, because now that the pain was gone away, a mermaid could be beautiful again. So were the whales Curving round Hilda’s shoulder; a rhythm of tails, swimming."

"She's the mermaid who married the keeper of the Eddystone light."

"My absolute favorite." Rob said, consulting his light meter.

"Do you want to see the cavern where the lovers slept?" Hilda turned her body to show them the rest of the story. The lighthouse upper right, a sea cave with moss bed just under her last rib, and the three children, two of whom, Phoebe remembered, ended badly before the song's end. They had a good deal in common, she and this artist whose canvas was her back.

"A clipper ship would have been perfect, but there wasn't room," Hilda says twisting to show them her crowded back.
"May I?" Rob had his camera poised.

"Oh, my, this is my lucky day!" Hilda beamed. Then she remembered Phoebe. "Will you be all right?" she asked. "Would a drink help? A soda to make you feel better?"

"I'm fine, really." Phoebe manufactured a smile.

"That lighthouse. I've never been sure about it." Hilda peered over her shoulder for a glimpse of the bearded keeper. "Did I do right, giving my whole back to a song? When you've used every inch of your skin, you find the perfect picture."

"Ain't it the truth?" Rob shifted her over to the door where the light was better.

"I try to go slow, but I already made mistakes. Take this heart, for instance..." Doves twine round, a pink ribbon spelled out "MOTHER." Hilda patted Annie's frayed sweater. "DON'T WORRY. I won't be insulted if you say it's common."

"Oh, no," Annie, pale under her freckles, hurried to reassure Hilda. "It's really sweet."

"But ordinary? Don't you think? I was only sixteen when I had it done. You can't depend on your taste when you're sixteen."

Phoebe couldn't answer. She was now part of Rob's picture, a foil for the Disney whale swimming past the lighthouse. Maybe he was making use of the elegant dress, leaving her face out of focus so no one could read tear tracks, smudges and smears.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"Not a chance," she said breezily. A shameful blush messed up her face but not her voice.

"Annie, get me my bag."

Annie looked around but couldn't find it. Oh, lord, they'd left it behind. Somebody would have scooped it up by now.

"Donald has it," Rob said, brow wrinkled, mind clicking like an empty camera. "A hansom cab would do the trick."

"Swell! I'll ring up Central Park and order one."

"Wait a minute!" He does his I've-found-the-answer dance. "Isn't there a pony cart ride at the corner?" he asks the tattooed lady.

"Yes," she nods, pleased to have good news.

"Don," he calls.

Through the curtain comes Donald, her bag on his broad shoulders. She stretches out her hand. Donald, bewildered but willing, takes hold.

"My bag." He hands it over.

Meanwhile Rob peels fifties off his money roll. "Rent a pony cart for the day, the prettiest of the lot."

Rings on her fingers, bells on her toes, she'll ride when others must walk. Ain't she the lucky
"Can you do it?" Rob asks as if they were alone.

She can't say, but if she falters he'll hire someone else. "Yes," she tells him, so angry at her body for failing that she snarls.

"The pony cart's the perfect touch." Donald applauds. "The horse looking through the glass at the whales. It's perfect."

Any minute now, he'll tell her that falling down was not only a lucky break but also a brilliant maneuver! Except that she will never be able to climb to the grandstand to pose with the Mayor.

"Fix your face," Rob tells her. She points to the forty watt bulb above her. He opens the curtain, and she leans into a triangle of sunlight to mend streaks of black mascara, add smears of rouge and lipstick. Annie watches, her naked face sun-tanned, crinkle lines about mouth and eyes. What must she, who refused artifice altogether, be thinking?

"You look swell!" Hilda says.

"Thank you." She fixes the brim of her straw hat, ties up the ribbon, meeting Hilda's eyes in the mirror. They are of the same sort, both useful commodities, both canvases. She wants to stay right here in her shack forever.

"Do you think...?" Hilda hesitates. "I can never be sure of what the audience sees. Mirrors change things round, don't they?"

"They do."

"In a photo, I could see just what the audience sees. I 'd really like to see the prints."

"You should and you will. Don," Rob snaps his fingers. "Get the lady's name and address. And may you find space for your clipper ship."

"I could erase 'MOTHER.'" Hilda winces.

"Don't do that," Annie trembles, fearing the needle's prick or disloyalty?

"Is the change worth a whole operation? It hurts to get tattoos off, you know!" Hilda asks.

Phoebe has no answer. But she’s here, beside Hilda, who has become a sister?

Rob intones: "To make space beautiful sometimes requires blotting out the old, then drawing in the new."

Donald bustles in, clip board in hand. "We have transportation."

"Look at this!" Rob whistles. "A cherry-red surrey with a fringe on top."

Don smiles modestly. "The livery stable had one for hire."

"Donald you're a genius." Phoebe says, gratefully. She wants to hug Hilda, the tattooed lady.

"You've been so very kind," she says. "Thanks for the use of your..." She stumbles. What to call it? Shack? sideshow? black hole? And what to say of the canvas she designs? She settles for “Good luck!”
"Happy to help. I hope you won’t forget my photos." Hilda bows her white neck. "I'll be able to really see for the first time. Then I can decide."

"Let us know, won’t you?" Phoebe squeezes Hilda's hand. It's time to get moving.

She makes it to the front door, but Rob must lift her up to the red leather seat. She wants more than anything, to undo the molded calf, let it sit, unattached, next to her trusty left. She imagines it falling over. Sees a bystander squeal. Squelches a giggle! Waves goodbye to Hilda.

Had she been careless? Is that why her leg had betrayed her? Or inept technicians or is it all luck?

Pick up the whip, flick it; "Everyone out of my way, if you please." An air of owning the road is all important. Crocheted mittens, hat, a smile pasted to her face, as sticky plate had been pasted to her arm, she doesn't dare shift from one buttock to the other. Just the day before yesterday, she had walked without a limp, freewheeling, by shank's mare, up and down the canyons of the city. Now, music, sun and sparkling ocean, admiring faces are wasted. She's nothing but stump, and how to keep it from touching anything.

At the Half Moon Hotel, she poses easily in her cart, parasol open, hat in hand, smiling dreamily. But where the whales turn and turn again in salt water tubs, she has to be picked up, plucked like a fruit, from the pony cart and set on her one good leg. Donald, dressed in a fortuitous striped jersey, becomes her crutch-groom. Only he might drop her if he has to hand Rob a lens. She wants to beg him to be careful.

"Don't move a muscle, Don." Rob, bless him, asks Annie for the box he needs and she finds it. Whatever he needs, she finds. And packs up when it’s over while Don shepherds her back to the surrey. They want to eat, choosing the open air cafeteria.

Rob fans away flies with the paper open to today's schedule. At two, she joins the mayor. Meanwhile she sips iced tea; in her mind’s eye is the needle, pricking an ancient tale on Hilda’s white skin. Her dress she wears is a write off, soggy and stained. Maybe she'll keep it, souvenir. This might be her tale’s end. Wait and see.

Donald orders a couple of hot dogs and a big cherry coke. He looks trim in the borrowed jockey shirt; yellow and white stripes become him.

"About time the old cow had her day," Rob holds up pictures of Coney Island. "She's crumbling into the sea."

"Why does she do it?" Annie asks, yet again, rolling hamburger roll into balls to throw to a pigeon: now there are two, now four-- fourteen.

"For god sake, cut it out," Rob says. "They'll spray us with psittacosis or whatever you catch from their droppings."

"They won’t, Uncle Rob." She watches the birds. "But how could she make awful pictures all
over her beautiful skin?" She shudders. "She has a lovely complexion, doesn't she?"

Rob points to graffiti on the cement stanchions; to a four by six foot poster of white whales; to a second poster where a pretty girl in a short skirt, fish in hand, dangles precariously on stilt heels, over a tub of performing dolphins.

"The world's full of pictures," he says rather grandly. "Now, Hilda takes hers wherever she goes. She doesn't need to worry about agents and galleries. Her work's tucked under her shirt, unbutton and flash an exhibit, anywhere, anytime."

"And the fat lady, those Siamese twins! They stand up on a stage where everyone can see them and ask awful questions?" Annie catches eyes, watching them, professionally pretty people in costumes. "People talk right to their faces, about how fat they are or how they sleep? It's awful."

"Freak show," Phoebe tries out the name. Is that home? Now, now, feeling just a trifle sorry for herself, was she? "They have to earn a living," she comments. "She does have a lovely complexion." She pats Annie’s shoulder.

"It's entertainment." Don's fingers' tap dance, then point at the tank. "Feeding time, whales don't care who watches."

Those whales, they move so easily. Oh, to be one with them.

"They beach themselves when they're ill," Rob muses, as if he read her mind. "They die on the shore, poisoning towns with the smell of their rotting carcasses."

"We could establish whale graveyards," Donald says helpfully. "You know, like the elephants have."

Rob regards him benignly. God, but he's dumb.

"Food!" He celebrates the tray their waitress brings by tucking a napkin into his shirt, third button down. A huge bite of burger disappears into his mouth.

Teeth, too, are failing; her Rob has to spend awful mornings at his periodontist who's carving his gums and sewing his teeth back into place. Hold together, Rob. For my sake, stop aging so fast.

"Oh, gawd!" Rob looks at a spray of ketchup that's spurted out of the bun, landing all over his shirt. "Now see what you've done, you clumsy, you." He stalks off to clean himself. Don leaps to his feet to keep his mentor company, running two paces after. If he'd step out, he'd cover twice as much ground. He won't, not ever.

She's stranded, with only Annie to save her were a fire to break out on the boardwalk, as it could. She reminds herself she can hop, can crawl if she has to.

All around her, people covertly watch. She has to be careful not to catch an eye. They turn from whale, from sky, from freak show or cyclone towards Victorian Phoebe, who isn't the kind to sweat. She’s frozen at the core, shivering on this hot day. They need powder or spray to keep cool.

Swirls of custard Rob ordered for vegetarian Annie arrive. Spoon in hand she consults
Phoebe.

"You're not in the business. Eat the chocolate." It feels good, this being indulgent, the good fairy. Should she explain their relationship, tell Annie that she loves her uncle; her uncle loves her? No, she should not. Annie doesn't need a fake aunt whose line of work she has no use for.

An astonishing tear slides down Annie's sunburned nose.

Appalled, Phoebe reaches across the table to touch Annie's fingers.

Annie snuffles, wiping her nose on a sleeve. "I want to go home," she whispers.

"Why then, we'll take you to the airport."

"You don't understand." Her eyes are awash. "They don't want me...not like I am."

Phoebe pulls the big, gawky girl over to her, pillowing her head on her shoulder, wishing for her grandma's comfortable bosom. "Of course, they want you."

"No, they don't. They get so mad at me. I drive them to drink."

Phoebe dips a napkin into her glass and wipes Annie's sweaty brow. "Now, you know that's not true."

"They drink! That's true." Annie's head pops up.

"But that is not your fault. You must never, ever think it is." Phoebe feels herself sputter.

Where's Rob?

Annie looks timidly at her old friend. "I'm not brave. How can you be so brave?" She wipes her eyes.

Phoebe turns a spoon over and reads the back. "Automat," she says. "It's where my grandma would take me after the theatre. I'm here to tell grandma’s story." She's no braver than Annie but she and the mayor, descendents of immigrants have their stories to tell.

"I admire you more than I can say." Annie makes herself look at Phoebe. "But I don't know how to be like you."

Rob returns, soaking, wrung out but spotless. "Time for the mayor," he says, helping himself to a sun-frazzled clam.

"Are those safe?"

"I doubt it." He munches another.

"Annie wants to be like me."

"So say all of us." His arm sweeps past tables of happy consumers. "That's why you're in the business."

"Oh, look. fire boats!" Rob and Don follow Annie's stubby finger to hoses, spraying salty fountains that blow landward.

Somewhere out there, a whale is dying. Despite antibiotics shot into his side, he's stubbornly trying to beach himself and Rockaway will stink all summer if he does. Seagate, behind its wire
fence, is a sewer. Can't swim there.

Time to get moving—table to grandstand, while everyone's back is turned. The mayor's limousine inches towards them and a marine band plays. She counts seven wooden stairs, taps Donald's shoulder. "Take me up there—now ..."

The dais shakes under her. Then she's seated, safely arranging her skirt, inclining her neck as if she were that dumpy little queen.

When the time comes, she'll grab the wooden railing, pull herself upright, and make the speech: her grandma crossed the Atlantic in steerage to land on Ellis and live in a tenement, as so many did, including the mayor. And look at 'em now!

Shorter than she thought, he bends down to kiss the native-born hand she offers. The mike whines.

"Miss Coney Island" echoes, echoes off jetty and boardwalk.

"Ellis Island, the immigrant's island," she answers. She tells her story. The mike splinters her words. The crowds applaud anyway, and the band strikes up "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody."

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