

Fiction Feature

Cat-dancing at a last chance Voyageur

by Gilbert Bouchard

The hamburger tasted like Saskatchewan. The bun was large and dry (the cook must think toasted is a synonym for burnt), and the patty — a see-through affair — was cold and stringy.

The patty also squished out of the bun as she tried to bite into it and landed with a splat beside the limp, oil-laden chips.

Marge slapped down the bun and tried to find solace in the coffee, but Saskatchewan beat her to it — and even it tasted like the prairie.

She hesitated for a moment, swirling the tepid brew from cheek to cheek before swallowing. All the while she stared at the door of the men's room. "Boy, he's sure taking a hell of a long time in there," Marge mused.

She imagined her fiance, Timmy, crawling out of the tiny Voyageur washroom window and driving off. Yes, driving off in his red Porsche 917 and leaving her in this dinky highway grease-spoon heaven knows where. She had fallen asleep an hour outside Calgary and Timmy would only say they were somewhere in Saskatchewan. Fuck, she hated him when he teased.

Marge sipped from her cracked Voyageur-plastic tumbler and was zapped again. The water had that flat prairie slough-water taste. It didn't taste as it should have, with that safe metallic chlorine after-taste. Hell, she'd probably catch some Saskatchewan disease now.

She banged down the glass, splashing her hand and the plastic table cloth. She was now certain to remain hungry for the rest of the afternoon. This meal, this day, and perhaps her entire life were complete and total disasters.

A few wisps of hair collapsed into her eyes and she didn't even have the energy to lift her hand to brush them back in place. She sat there, her hair ticking her eyeballs.

She was sure she looked a fright. After all, she'd been dragged out of the hotel room with hardly enough time to shower and certainly no time to style her hair and apply make-up. Of course, Timmy had gotten up half an hour before she did and looked like

the cover of GQ while her socks didn't match.

Timmy didn't seem to care how she looked and almost took satisfaction from sabotaging her appearance. The worse she looked, the better he appeared, I guess.

"He still isn't out of the bathroom. Wonder why? Maybe he had a heart attack in the middle of a bowel movement," thought Marge. She had read accounts of that very occurrence. Elvis, it was said, bit the big one while pinching a load. Marge smiled at the mental picture of Timmy dead, hunched over a dirty toilet in a dinky Voyageur restaurant in heaven-knows-where Saskatchewan.

"Wake up, kid, your food's congealing." Timmy had snuck up on her while she was in the middle of her reverie. Marge blushed and almost laughed out loud upon seeing Timmy. The extreme juxtaposition of day-dream and reality was almost too much.

"Sure took your sweet time." "Sure, why not? Isn't a man allowed to take his time in the can?" said Timmy digging into his rapidly cooling omelette.

"You didn't seem to think so this morning when you dragged me out of the motel," jabbed Marge.

Timmy chewed silently for a few seconds and then set down his silverware.

"Don't start again. We went over all that this morning, between Calgary and here. I'm taking this job with my father in Toronto and that's it. If you're pissed off, talk to me about it. Don't whine for the sake of whining."

Timmy was calm, too calm. And the calmer Timmy was, it was guaranteed Marge would be proportionally steamed.

"You egotistical pig," Marge sputtered. "You think you can read me like a book, don't you? Well, you're wrong. I'm not angry about having to move to Toronto."

Timmy picked up his knife and fork and resumed eating. "Well, no loss for sure leaving Victoria. It's not like you were accomplishing much there anyway," purred Timmy between bites.

"That's it! Boy, I'm mad!" Marge was really worked up now. She stood up and was screaming. People at other tables were discreetly gawking at them and the waitress

poked her head out of the kitchen to see what was the matter.

Marge had bottled it all up for months and she decided that now was the time the situation came to a boil. She wanted all the cards on the table and she wanted them down now.

"I'll have you know, Mr. Have-to-bum-a-job-off-my-father, that my play was on the verge of being workshopped, and Mr. Know-it-all, you knew I wanted to stay in Victoria a few months longer. It's not like we were starving. Your job at the travel agency wasn't that bad. I only needed a couple of months." Marge slammed her fist on the table to punctuate her last statement. She thought it was the dramatic thing to do.

"Well, why didn't you take a couple of months? Nothing said you had to follow me," said Timmy. "You could have moved at Christmas time."

Marge didn't know what to say. He was right. But it just wasn't the whole story. It was more than that. He was playing with her like he always did. Like a cat with a wounded rat. Teasing, plotting and occasionally giving the illusion there were avenues of escape.

For the past six months, he was enticing her to come with him, sometimes begging, then reverting to logic games, but ultimately attacking her sensibilities, forcing her to follow by destroying her self-confidence.

Timmy had so manipulated her that she had no option but to follow. As always, he won.

Marge lost her voice and then lost her nerve. She sat down and almost on cue burst into tears. Timmy squirmed. He always did when she broke down.

"Well, we better be heading." Timmy wiped his lips and glanced nervously at his Rolex.

She couldn't stop crying. "Well, pull yourself together and let's move it."

He gestured for the waitress and pulled on his windbreaker. She was now caught in a wild wave of hiccups and rubbed her index finger round and round the rim of her coffee cup. "No." Marge's response was barely

audible.

"Now that just takes the cake. Lady, you just got your wish," said Timmy, aggressively zipping up his windbreaker. "You can just stay here. I've had it with your little snits. I'm going out to the parking lot to empty out your suitcases. I'm driving out of here. You can follow me if you want by bus. If not, you can go straight back to Victoria and workshop that trashy play of yours." With one last angry tug at his jacket, Timmy stormed out of the restaurant. Marge started sobbing with renewed vigour.

She watched him through the tinted-front window as he unloaded her bags and stacked them neatly on the sidewalk near the door. He waited for a while. Waited for her to run out at the last possible moment. Waited for three whole, awkward minutes. Then he piled into his red Porsche 917 and ripped up the Voyageur parking lot on his way to the highway. Marge sat there for who knows how long, crying and thinking, but mostly crying.

"Ma'am? Are you alright?" Marge looked up and saw one of the locals, a farmer by his dress, older, with a round, concerned face.

"Sure, sure," mumbled Marge. "Is there some kind of town nearby with a bus stop? You know, for Greyhounds?"

"Yup. About four miles down the road. Do ya wanna ride?"

The farmer swayed ever so slightly and twisted his baseball cap with his large, calloused fingers.

"I guess so. My ride seems to have left without me," Marge quipped. And she smiled at her own bad joke.

She wondered exactly where she was and wondered how long it would take to get to Saskatoon by Greyhound. Her mother lived in Saskatoon. She hadn't seen her family for much too long and she needed a few weeks on her own and her play needed one more draft.

Maybe she would go to Toronto, but Victoria and a two-character play about a young professional couple breaking up all over Canada seemed more inviting by the second.

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