

EROTIC INVENTIONS

MELISSA HARDY

Imposters in Love

IT WAS MARCH when a strange summer came upon them. It lasted for four days only. The forsythia erupted into blossom and the shoots of daffodils and hyacinths and crocuses stabbed impetuously through the soil. The town of Mons Des Saintes became thick with tuberous blooms. On the Mt. Olive College campus, students propped dorm windows open with sticks and tennis rackets. Music poured through the windows: the Righteous Brothers, the Beach Boys. The students of this college for the rich and unintellectual were plotting escape to Carolina and Myrtle Beach, Topsail and Emerald Isle, or to Pinehurst for the golf. Beyond the rail tracks which scissored Mon Des Saintes into two parts, one black, one white, the punch-in clock of the Honeycutt Mill kept the black population in thrall while white students made their mass exodus from the town in search of pleasure.

Mons Des Saintes was deserted. The townspeople wandered the streets in amazement. Shop doors swayed in their sills like ghosts in coffins. On their way to school on the Monday morning, children stopped to watch as joyful garbage men lifted from a pike driven into the front lawn of the Rho Beta Zeta fraternity house the head of a dog, sacrificed to the good weather. The year was 1966.

Eugene started taking ballet lessons from Mrs. Dodge when he was seventeen. "Well," he said, "I have to have a sport!"

Mrs. Dodge was delighted. "Anything in pants!" was how she put it. A couple of her girls, Virginia for one, stood a chance at the School of the Arts in Winston-Salem if they could get some *pas*

de deux work under their belts. This was how Eugene Foley became Virginia's dance partner.

Everybody said that Eugene was "a little funny." This meant that he was a homosexual, but homosexual is such a harsh word that nobody wanted to use it. "A little funny" sounded much nicer and everyone knew what it meant. As for the term gay.... Folks in these parts embraced change only in slow motion. In Mons Des Saintes they called Negroes coloured until it became politically correct to call them black. Then they called them Negroes. Of course some people did call Eugene a faggot.

Eugene never came out of the closet for the simple reason that he had never been in it. It was not that he flaunted his sexuality. That would have been dangerous and, despite what was to happen later, Eugene was no fool. No, it was just that he appeared to accept his sexual orientation without reservations, without regrets. In fact—and this is what the townspeople had great difficulty comprehending—he appeared very cheerful about the whole thing. "I'm just a little ray of sunshine!" Eugene would cry. And he was. One had to work hard not to like Eugene. A tall, ungainly boy, all joints and protuberances, with red patchy skin and an unruly thatch of wiry, straw-coloured hair, Eugene could not have been described as handsome. However, a generous humour enlivened his wide mouth, his eyes were large and a deep sea green colour, and, despite the ungracefulness of his contours, he moved with precision and flair. And he really was a very good dance partner, courteous and conscientious, tall and strong.

For three days, Virginia toyed with the notion of falling in love with Eugene—she was momentarily between boyfriends. In the end she had to concede the preposterousness of such a liaison. For a start there was the way Eugene dressed—in pastel jumpsuits. "Where does he get them?" her mother worried. Then there was the fact that Eugene sounded so much like a girl, not only in timbre and pitch, but also in intonation.

Virginia and Eugene danced together for two years. Their intimacy might have had its start in their partnership but would ultimately be based on the difficulty both experienced with the strange and alien race first of boys, then of men.

With practice Virginia became adept at attracting men. She was a pretty girl, and, with Eugene acting as her beauty and fashion consultant, she was able to capitalize on what nature had given her:

“Ginny! You’re so drab! Just let me put in a few highlights for you!”

“How many times have I told you not to bite your fingernails! Now, hold still while I paint them....”

Holding men, however, was another story. No matter how boorish her boyfriends were—and Virginia had appalling taste in men—she fell in love with each and every one of them. “It’s a game,” Eugene advised her. “For heaven’s sake, Ginny, do you always have to begin by laying your cards on the table? Play them close to your chest, honey, then maybe some day you might actually win! Although,” he added, “I don’t know if I’d call John Pendergast *winning*.” He rolled his eyes and sighed elaborately. “A face only a straight woman could love!”

Eugene held Virginia’s hand through bust-up after bust-up. When she came to him, newly in love, insisting that, “This time it’s different, Genie! This one’s not a jerk!” Eugene would shake his head.

“Now, Ginny,” he would say. “Don’t get sucked under.”

Eugene’s knowledge of the human heart and how it might be hooked was partially instinctual—in a more primitive society, he might have functioned as a shaman skilled in love potions and lore—and partially based on acute analysis of what he so intently observed in nature. His actual experience of love was limited to encounters in certain infamous washrooms—the men’s at Snell Park, or the basement lavatory at the public library. He didn’t mention these to Virginia. She wouldn’t have been disgusted, at least not once she had thought about it. Virginia, after all, had gotten up to some things herself. But he sensed that she might feel sorry for him and he didn’t want that, so she knew only of his crushes, unrequited, on straight men of their acquaintance.

Virginia wasn’t accepted into the School of the Arts in Winston-Salem. She was not regulation size. “Too short and look at that pelvis,” was the jury’s verdict.

Virginia and Eugene went out and got drunk on margaritas. “Ruined by a pelvis!” Virginia was embittered.

Eugene had to agree. “The story of your life,” he said.

Virginia gave up ballet and ate more. So that they could still be partners, Eugene and Virginia signed up at Arthur Murray’s. By the time they entered their sophomore year at Mount Olive College they had their silver star and were clearing the dance floor at the Stars In Your Eyes Dance Club.

Then Virginia met another jerk and transferred to UNC at Chapel Hill in order to be near him.

"Don't get sucked under," Eugene reminded her.

"*Glub, glub,*" she replied. By this time she had attained a certain level of self-awareness in spite of the fact that she remained unable to act in anything resembling her best interests. She left Mons Des Saintes for Chapel Hill and, for the first time in years, lost direct, daily contact with Eugene.

In April of that year, Virginia's mother phoned her to say that Eugene was in the hospital. His kneecap was broken and his femur fractured. His shin was also involved. Her mother could give no details. Virginia borrowed her roommate's car and drove the three hours east to Mons Des Saintes.

Eugene was in Snow County General. His roommate was in the lounge watching TV. Eugene was in traction, his right leg swollen to twice its size by a massive plaster cast and elevated two feet off the bed's surface. The skin of his drawn face looked bumpier than usual. He was glad to see her. "Yellow roses!" he declared rapturously as she wedged the fat bouquet into a water pitcher. "Now I'm bound to mend."

"So," she said, pulling a chair alongside the bed. "What happened?"

His face fell. "You have to ask?"

"Out with it, Genie!" she ordered.

"Let's just say I was unlucky in love," he suggested.

"Unlucky in love means broken hearts, not broken legs," Virginia pointed out.

"In my case, it means both."

"Genie!"

"Well, after you left I had to do something!" Eugene defended himself. "I mean, I couldn't go out dancing with anyone, could I? So I started going to football games. I am a boy, after all. It was football season. It seemed the thing to do."

"You've always hated football," Virginia protested.

"Football," Eugene corrected her. "Not football players."

Eugene first encountered Raymond Pollock in Portuguese 101. Portuguese was a bird course, filled with athletes who needed to fulfil their language requirement in order to stay in college. Then there was Eugene. Seated at his desk, large, ungainly and wistful, Eugene studied Raymond while all around him raucous football players roiled restlessly, shifting their massive bulk from

cheek to cheek on the little chairs, belching, breaking wind, whispering to one another in booming voices, trying to stick masticated wads of chewing gum onto each other's skin heads and laughing uproariously when it failed to adhere, throwing chalky erasers at one another like they were footballs, yelling "Hup!" Raymond was an American classic: tall, broad-chested, heavy-shouldered, bull-necked. "Extra large," Eugene said. Tight skin packed to bursting with powerful muscle. Not that Raymond could run or throw. The mere possession of bulk was what qualified him for the game. Raymond was a lineman, a human wall. Raymond blocked. With the exception of a pair of brown eyes that might be construed as kindly, Raymond's looks were sturdy, clean, unexceptional. What drew Eugene to him was the small pencil line of a scar glowing whitely above his lip and the fact that, when he spoke, which was infrequently, it was with just the slightest bit of hesitation coupled with a lisp. Raymond had been born with a cleft palate, surgically corrected soon after birth. Eugene fell in love with the ghost of a harelip.

Through discreet inquiry, Eugene established that the lineman was a Rho Beta Zeta and, accordingly, resided in the Rho Beta Zeta house up on Pendleton Avenue. He had a girlfriend back home in Metcalfe, and he had been dating this girl named Vicky, but she had dumped him. He spent most evenings sprawled in front of the frat's big TV or throwing darts with his football buddies. About three times a week he went out for pizza and beer, drank too much, threw up on somebody and passed out. Unlike his more rowdy fellows, Raymond was quiet, awkward in company and prone to bouts of melancholy.

"I suppose it was telemarketing that gave me the idea," Eugene told Virginia.

One night after the Christmas break, the phone in the Rho Beta Zeta house rang and someone asked for Raymond.

"Hello," said Raymond oafishly.

"Hello," came the rather throaty reply. "Is this ... Raymond?"

"Uh ... uh huh," said Raymond.

"Oh! Hi!"

"Look, who is this?" Raymond queried. A rerun of *I Dream of Jeannie* was just beginning—his favourite show.

"Oh, you don't know me," the voice assured him. "I'm not in a class of yours or anything. I'm just ... well, a fan, I guess."

"A fan?" Raymond's brow furrowed in puzzlement. Quarterbacks have fans. Halfbacks have fans. Linemen do not have fans. He scratched his shaven head.

"I've been watching you play."

"I was on the bench the last couple of games," Raymond pointed out.

"I saw you on the bench," his caller clarified.

"Oh, yeah?" Raymond was growing suspicious. "Who is this anyway? Why are you calling? Look, are you trying to arrange a date or something? Because I don't go out on no blind dates."

"Oh, no! Never, Raymond! I just wanted to let you know how, well, devastatingly cute I think you are and so incredibly, I don't know, masculine. That's all."

"Oh," conceded Raymond. His voice faltered a little.

"So ... I guess you're busy, huh?" the caller asked. "I mean, too busy to talk?"

"Uh, no!" Raymond said quickly. "Not really. You can ... you can go on talking."

After he hung up, he returned to the TV room.

"Who was that, Pollock?" one of his fraternity brothers asked him.

"I don't know," replied Raymond. "Some girl."

"She want your body?"

"She just wanted to talk," Raymond said.

"Talk!"

"Hey, guys, get off my case, will you?" Raymond asked. "She just wanted to talk."

"Bud, what did she sound like?" It had been Bud who answered the phone.

"I don't know. Low voice. Kind of sexy," Bud recalled.

"So! What's going on, Ray, old buddy? You going out with her?"

"For Chrissake!" Raymond complained. He was starting to feel irritated, like he wanted to be off by himself and not with these jerks. "She didn't even tell me her name!"

"That only means one thing!" his buddies concluded.

"What's that?" snapped Raymond.

"The worst!" they cackled.

"What what's the worst?" he demanded.

"She's fat!" they cried in unison.

At first Eugene was cautious, calling Raymond no more than once a week. Then he began to call him twice a week. By March break he was calling him nightly at eight o'clock sharp. Eugene and Raymond talked about all sorts of things. Eugene told the lineman what classes he was taking (except, of course, Portuguese 101). When Raymond advised him that his frat brothers and football buddies thought he was fat, he sent Raymond a photo of Virginia.

"You sent him a picture of me!" Virginia exclaimed.

Why not?" Eugene asked. "What are friends for, after all? Besides, I just knew that I wasn't his type."

As for Raymond, haltingly he told Eugene about what happened at football practice that day. He described what it was like to live in the Rho Beta Zeta house. He told him that he had three brothers, but that he was the eldest, that his father owned a hardware store that he would take over in due course, that he had had a collie but a truck hit it. It was his brother's fault. He had left the gate open.

Eugene told Raymond that, although he had had lots of boyfriends in the past, he had grown disillusioned with boys. What he wanted was a man.

And Raymond told Eugene that he knew what he meant. He was getting pretty tired of Becky back home. She was a cute kid but she was still in high school and all she could talk about was the Prom and the Boosters Club. As for Vicky! What a tart! She was dating Jimmy Bates now. What did she see in him?

Eugene didn't know. He only had eyes for Raymond.

As time went on, Raymond and Eugene got to talking about things that the linemen didn't want the guys downstairs to hear. He had a private telephone line run to his room.

"I had a dream last night," began Eugene. "A dream in which we were together."

"Oh?" asked Raymond, uncomfortable, thrilled.

"You kissed me," Eugene informed him.

"I did?" Raymond asked. He groaned softly.

"On the mouth," Eugene clarified. "Your mouth was so soft and your kiss was so hard and long that I thought I would faint!"

"Sorry!" Raymond apologized.

"Then, as you held me limp in your arms, your lips travelled down my throat to my chest ... breasts! With one hand you pushed my blouse open and took my nipple in your mouth"

"You didn't have a bra on?" Raymond wanted to know.

("He was such a stickler for detail," Eugene explained to Virginia.)

"No, silly!" Eugene laughed merrily. "I was wearing a beautiful satin peignoir with Valenciennes lace all over it!"

At first the Rho Beta Zetas thought Raymond's romance with the mystery phone girl was a real hoot. Then Raymond became withdrawn, defensive. He spent more time in his room, talking on the phone to Eugene sometimes for hours, masturbating (everyone suspected) and just plain mooning. He ceased to partake of the plentiful social life of the fraternity. He told Becky they were through. He became obsessed with finding the girl behind the voice. The relationship became strained. He and Eugene began to fight. Their long and intimate conversations had taught them how they might best wound each other.

"Tell me your name!" Raymond would cry into the receiver. "Susan? Anne? Mary?" His fraternity brothers could hear him through the walls. He sounded like he was crying. To the Rho Beta Zetas, Raymond seemed unmanned.

In late April, just before finals, one of Raymond's fraternity brothers came up with a plan.

"We usually only do this if there have been complaints," his second cousin told him. She was in charge of investigating nuisance calls at the phone company. "But, as it's a case of young love, I'll make an exception." Within a few days, she called her relation back with the phone number he had asked her to trace. "It is registered in the name of Foley at 23 Walnut Street."

"Oh, Genie!" exclaimed Virginia. "What happened?"

"He showed up at my Mom's door with a dozen roses," Eugene told her. "Yellow roses."

Virginia glanced at the roses she had brought and groaned.

"It's okay, Gin," he told her, patting her hand. "They are my favs, after all."

Eugene's mother opened the door. "You must be mistaken," she said. "There's no Miss Foley. There's only me and Eugene. Eugene!"

Eugene just happened to be coming downstairs. "Yes!" he said. "Who is it, Mom?"

"At the sound of my voice he looked up and our eyes met," he told Virginia. "And in that one moment he understood everything. He crumpled. I mean, he just sagged. His fingers fell open.

The roses dropped to the floor. He turned towards the door. I started after him, then stopped. What good would it do? He left. 'What was that all about?' my mother wanted to know. I couldn't answer. I thought I might faint. I had to sit down on the stairs and put my head between my knees. Later I thought I would kill myself."

"Oh, Genie, no!" Virginia cried.

He shrugged. "Don't worry," he reassured her. "As it turned out, I didn't have to bother."

Two hours later, four hearty Rho Beta Zetas appeared at the Foleys' door. They told Mrs. Foley that they were initiating her son into the fraternity and so would have to kidnap him as part of the rite. She wasn't to worry about any screaming she might hear. Mrs. Foley had been born and raised in Mons Des Saintes. She knew all about fraternity initiations—how they would bury boys in shallow graves outside of town just long enough for them to wet themselves, then dig them up again. Harmless fun. "I never thought my Eugene would be a fraternity boy!" Mrs. Foley marvelled. Later she ignored her son's high-pitched screams; she only chuckled to herself.

The Rho Beta Zetas did not bury Eugene in a shallow grave, however. They took him down by the river under the Carmichael Street Bridge and went at him with a crowbar.

"Genie, you are pressing charges, aren't you?" asked Virginia.

"Are you kidding?" Eugene smiled. "And have them break my other leg?"

"But they assaulted you!" Virginia protested. "They committed a criminal offence!"

"Well, technically, I suppose," Eugene said. "But, as far as they were concerned, it was me who committed the offence. They were just ... oh, I don't know ... avenging Raymond's honour."

For a moment neither of them said anything. Then Virginia asked, "Was Raymond there? I mean, under the bridge?"

"Oh, yes," Eugene replied.

Virginia began to cry noisily. She pounded the edge of the hospital bed with her fist.

"Stop it, Gin! You're jiggling my leg!" Eugene complained.

"How dare they?" Virginia demanded. "If they were here, I'd saw off their miserable dicks! I'd saw them off with a rusty hand-saw! I'd hack them to bits with a rusty handsaw! They'd die of horrible, suppurating wounds and they would stink!"

“Good job for them that they’re not here then,” observed Eugene. He gestured towards a box of Kleenex beside the bed. “Mop up, will you, Goddess? You’re getting the cast soggy!”

But Virginia had leapt to her feet and seized her purse.

“Ginny!” Eugene demanded. “Where are you going?”

“Where do you think I’m going!” she cried. “I’m going to see Raymond! I’m going to saw off his dick!”

“He won’t stand still that long,” Eugene pointed out. “He’s not too bright, but that I can promise you.”

“I’m going to do something to him then! Something that he won’t forget!”

“I’ve already done something to him that he won’t forget,” Eugene pointed out. “I’ve humiliated him. If there’s one thing straight men hate, it’s being duped. They hate it worse than anything. The irony is, of course, that we dupe them all the time.”

“What do you mean?” Virginia asked.

“You’re a prime example,” said Eugene. “Your perfect nails, your flawless makeup, the dress you chose to mask the wideness of your hips”

“You chose,” Virginia reminded him.

“Well, someone has got to make sure you don’t look like too much of a tart!” Eugene exclaimed. “And look at the ways you distort yourself to attract and hold men, Ginny? The metamorphosis you undergo would score a ten on the Richter Scale of Self-Transformation! The bugger is ... you have to. I have to. We have to. We all have to tell lies. We all have to omit the details that put us out of the running, that disqualify us! When you go out on a date, for example, I suspect you don’t mention the fact that, if it weren’t for tweezers, there’d be a giant black hair about a foot long growing out of that mole on your jaw. Same thing with me. If I had told Raymond that I was a boy, I would have been out of the running. So I omit a detail. You omit a detail. Doubtless he omitted details. We all omit a detail and we do it all the time. The truth is that we are all imposters in love.” Eugene pulled the neck of his hospital johnny away from his body and peered underneath it at his stomach. “*Aggggh!*” he cried.

“What, Genie?” Virginia gasped, startled.

“The worst!”

“The worst?”

“The absolute worst!” declared Eugene. “Not only am I getting bulbously fat lying here with my leg in the air, but I’m break-

ing out all over in hives! I knew I shouldn't have eaten all those chocolates! Unsightly blotches all over my sickly white body!" He moaned. "Oh, Mary! What's a girl to do? Have you got a little pancake on you, darling? Say you do!"

Virginia rummaged in her purse.

"Just enough for a tiny touch-up?" Eugene implored her. "There's just the sweetest male nurse who comes around to 'do' me around dinnertime. Lionel. How can I let Lionel see me in such a state?"

When he graduated from Mt. Olive College two years later, Eugene moved to New York City and started what was to become a very successful dog grooming studio called Le Fluffy. In June 1969 he numbered among those Stonewall rioters who confronted the police sent to dispatch the unruly homosexuals with a kick line. As they kicked, they sang (to the tune of *Ta-Rah-Rah-Boom-Dee-Ay*), "We are the Stonewall girls ... we wear our hair in curls."

In 1986, at the age of thirty-eight, Eugene died of an AIDS-related illness, contracted, it was widely suspected, from a hustler he had taken in off the streets some years before. No one could understand quite why he had taken him in. Eugene's taste ran to young, very slim men and the hustler was not only well past his prime, but overweight. The hustler's name, Eugene's landlady told Virginia when she came to New York to execute his will and pack up his apartment, was Raymond something. The last name, she was pretty sure, began with a P.