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Redd Boggs'
SPIROCHETTES

A WOMAN'S A WOMAN

She stood halfway out into the street at the corner of Milvia and University avenue, hitching a ride, and I picked her up. Berkeley is a city full of odd people, but she was one of the oddest I have met. Her name is Debbie, which I suppose is short for Deborah or more likely Deb-bra, as the fashion is now. She hails from Bloomington, Indiana, where, I think she said, she has three small daughters. She herself is about 24 years old. I don't know what she is doing in Berkeley. What albatross hangs about her neck I can't even imagine. I give this minimal biography in capsule form, although it took me long hard quizzing to learn this much. I spiered curiously after so curious a catch for the next couple of hours, with little result.

It wasn't that she was secretive. It wasn't that she refused to talk. She talked, talked incessantly. But little she said was intelligible, and she wasn't really talking to me. I have had more meaningful conversations with a cat. Seldom have I heard such violent gusts of words from anybody with so little comprehension of what was being said. She was brimming with words, but I couldn't even figure out from her talk where she was bound for. Somewhere west on University avenue, presumably, and I drove in that direction.

Meantime I looked sideways in amazement at my jabbering passenger. Even with my everlasting romantic admiration for Woman I found Debbie a little hard to take. She was pretty in a haphazard way, but she had been ill-used for a long time. Her hair had been chopped short against her small oval head. There was a bad gash, unbandaged, over her right eye (did someone slug her, I wonder?), and one of her front teeth was prominently chipped. Her eyes were bloodshot and a little mad. She wore ragged blue jeans and a sweatshirt of indeterminate color. The latter garment was torn and shapeless, and she had tied a huge untidy knot in the back of it to make it fit a little more snugly on her small thin frame. I discovered later that these were the only clothes on her back. She wore no bra or panties, and her feet were bare.

But the most amazing aspect of this hellen apparition was that she was caked with dirt. Around Berkeley over two decades I have seen many female derelicts, pitiful and filthy wrecks that I could hardly bear to gaze upon, but none so bedraggled as she. Half the dirt of the Bay area seemed laminated onto her, slicked into her skin and garments till she was polished with it. She shone dully with grime. It was hard to believe that she was a woman at all. She had about as much beauty and allure as the Emeryville mud flats at low tide. Where was my idealized female now?

"Einstein Einstein Hare Krishna Hail Mary," she declaimed, half singing. I thought of the "Primeys" in William Tenn's "Firewater." Was

she stoned out of her skull, or was she a crackaloo by trade? "Debbie you STOP FIGHTING with your brother and come set the table!" She talked a lot in italics and small caps. Little she said made any sense to me, but little was intended as a human communication. It was an invocation, a prayer, to God, to Einstein, to the spirit of humanity, to a distant orderly past, a cadenced blather punctuated with fierce gestures. In the lower depths of reality this girl lived in illusion. "Debbie you make your bed before you go to school and did you do your homework? Our Einstein who art in heaven have pity on us. Oh have pity on us!" She opened a notebook that had been lying on the car seat and she now held in her lap, and swiping a ballpoint pen from my shirt pocket she wrote "EINSTEIN" in a big childish scrawl on a blank page. As an afterthought she wrote "Alfred" in front of the name, an annotation that puzzled me.

As we approached Ledger's liquor store, kitty - cornered from the University Avenue Co-op, she at last said something halfway intelligible. She wanted to buy, she said, a bottle of brandy. By patting my hip pocket, where she presumed my wallet was located, she indicated by what means the purchase might be made. I pulled over to the curb and reluctantly handed her a couple of dollars. A few minutes later she came out of the store with a 200 ml bottle of De Kuyper's sloe gin in a brown paper sack. I wasn't sure whether I had been too generous or too stingy in the money I had given her that she bought gin instead of the brandy she craved. She uncapped the bottle and took a hefty swig. She generously offered me the second swig, but I was nervous enough with an opened bottle in the car without risking alcohol on my breath. In the next hour she guggled down the whole bottle.

Soon afterward a second moment of lucidity interrupted her constant gabble about God and Einstein and Debbie-put-away-your-dolls. She told me that she hadn't eaten anything in two days. Looking at her, I decided she was probably telling the truth. I thought fleetingly of staking her to a square meal at Brennan's at the foot of University avenue by the freeway, but I reconsidered after regarding the thick impasto of dirt that encrusted her entire being. What would the health department think if I brought her into the restaurant, scattering little hunks of squalor in her wake? I remembered the pound of ground beef in the refrigerator at home and -- grudgingly -- offered to share it with her.

While we drove in that direction I tried in vain to quiz her about herself. Her voice rolled on through billows of italics and small caps, but not in answer to my questions. She scribbled some more in the notebook, but now her scrawls were becoming illegible. They looked vaguely Chinese. She flourished the gin bottle out of the car window. "Hail Mary full of grace Debbie get out of the bathroom so your father can shave!"

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At the wickiup she quite capably put two big hamburgers to fry, a simple act that nevertheless surprised me. While they were on the stove I wandered into the livingroom, but from time to time I went back to the kitchen, hearing her voice raised above the sizzle of the meat and bemusedly thinking she was asking me something. But she was only jabbering as usual. Once I returned to the kitchen to find her industriously scrubbing out the sink. It needed scrubbing, but I began to worry a little. Like Tristram Shandy I think a lot about "the construction and come-at-ability of that animal called Woman," but of this particular specimen I had seen little heretofore to indicate that she had "come-at-ability" or indeed any of Woman's admirable traits. I began to fret.

Again she was generous. She urged upon me one of the hamburgers. Although I have a strong stomach -- I survived army grub, after all -- I hastily turned down her offer, remembering that the patties had been shaped between her smirchy palms. Besides, she needed that food. A third lucid moment followed. She had come back to reality twice before: to ask me to buy her liquor, and to provide her with a meal. But this was the most rational request of all. She wanted to take a shower. This seemed like the best idea of the month.

She disappeared into the bathroom, and I sat down to read Herb Caen's column in the Chronicle. The buzz of the shower went on for a very long time. I could understand why. After it ceased she did not emerge from the bathroom, and after a while I began to hear strange noises mingling with her gabble. They were soft incessant sounds, a susurrence like "the sweep of easy wind and downy flake," but I hardly thought it was quite as poetic as that. What was it?

I tapped on the bathroom door, and called her name. No answer, only a steady jabber. I peered inside. I found her, stark naked, on her hands and knees, mopping the bathroom floor with a sponge I keep for the purpose but too seldom use.

For a moment I felt an unreasoning rage. I very nearly reached down and ripped the sponge from her hands and hurled it out of the window. Then I saw my image reflected in the mirror, where the mist formed by the shower was swiftly dissipating now that the door was opened. As my face was revealed I saw that I looked even crazier than she did.

I bent over and took the sponge very gently from her hands and pulled her to her feet. We confronted each other, nose to nose. "It's all right, Debbie," I said. She looked at me, really looked at me, for the first time, like a wondering child. For a moment she even stopped jabbering. She didn't understand what I was saying, of course, but that was all right, for neither did I. Probably I was trying very clumsily to assure her that she was under no obligation to repay me for my eleemosynous hospitality. Then

THE DEED

I've done the deed at last
last month I planted petunias
in the typebar basket
of my Smith Corona
the blossoms tremble
in the sunshine red
and blue and white
and aphids sip
the sticky nectar
all day the bees buzz in
at last the mute machine
is full of poetry

I realized that she had no such impulse after all. She was merely reverting to her essential womanness. Under all her personal drabble, joined to her by circumstance, her female instinct for cleanliness and order lay like riprap, laid down in the days of Debbie-do-the dishes-and-take-out-the-garbage.

I knew what had enraged me. At last I was feeling something more than pity for the poor damned woman. She had gotten under my guard. She looked like a different person once the dirt was removed. I regarded her with reluctant approval. Most of the grime had been washed down the drain. She glowed ruddily. A mud hut had become, if not the Grace cathedral, at least a small gazebo by the roadside. Deified by her freshness and nakedness she was, well, she was a woman. The bathroom was steamy and she had been working hard. A trickle of sweat glistened between her breasts.

On impulse I kissed her awkwardly, and said again, "It's all right, don't worry." While reassuring her, I began to feel panicky myself. Now I was as vulnerable as she was. What if she prevailed upon me to let her stay here for a while? I couldn't refuse her now. But my god, I couldn't endure her eternal gabble for more than a few hours. Or days or weeks. Well, at least the kitchen and bathroom would be kept clean; that would be some small guerdon. I began to wonder how she might look, asleep. It might be interesting to behold her in slumber, wonderfully silent at last. (What if she talked in her sleep?) She might even look lovable with her face in repose, beautiful and innocent, like "admir'd Miranda."

Luckily she didn't ask for any such favor. It obviously never even occurred to her. Unlikely as it might seem perhaps she already had a male friend or protector. Perhaps I should have felt offended, but instead I was immensely relieved. If she didn't ask for help, I was under no obligation to provide it. I carefully refrained from suggesting or even implying the possibility of rescuing her temporarily from the lower depths. There is an extraordinary catharsis in the act of discharging a difficult burden with the best and most uplifting righteousness in the world. My spirits soared as I drove her back to Berkeley. Not knowing what else to do with her, I took her to the same corner where I had found her.

In parting Debbie fired a last salvo or two of God and Einstein. She got out of the car, seemingly oblivious to where she was, and put her freshly washed feet into the gutter alongside the discarded Coca-Cola cans, cigaret butts, and candy wrappers. She didn't say goodbye, but wambled quickly away without a backward glance. I watched her swirl out of sight amid the anonymous crowd, like a sheet of yesterday's newspaper flying in a gust of autumn. I was helpless to call her back now. She was gone forever, as lost as she would be if the little adventure had never happened. I sat for a while in the car, with my hands folded. (Einstein forgive us for we have sinned.) Poor Debbie. Where are you now.

We make a fanzine the old-fashioned way. We mimeo it.
