



PROBLEMS

by Joseph Newfield

- ONE -

Marty's left hand grasped his toothbrush and his mind was on Paint and his right hand held a tube of Bengay. The mirror reflected eyes that were wide and distant while he absently squeezed Bengay from its wrinkled metal tube onto bluish splayed bristles. He began circling the Bengay and bristles over his front teeth and gums. All at once his drifting consciousness was overwhelmed by a bitter pinch on his tongue and a menthol-sweet smell bursting in his sinuses. At that instant he was startled by the squeak of the doorknob and Paint's sudden glowing presence beside him. Out of a swirl of confusion and embarrassment he attempted to forge indifference, his gaze escaping hers and his spitting paced, despite the fire on his tongue. See my nonchalance at three a.m. on a Wednesday.

Paint was all black against the peach wall and her breath was thick with the scent of pot as her eyes passed over the counter and the Bengay and she fell against the wall laughing. "What the hell're you doing, Marty?"



“Nothing.” He was trying to wipe his mouth out with a washcloth.

As if she didn't know already, Paint reached around him and picked up the toothbrush and smelled, at the same time falling against the cracked pink-tiled counter in another fit of stoned laughter. The whole bathroom smelled like Bengay now. Bengay and pot. Paint stood and caught her breath, “You're brushing your teeth with Bengay. Are you trying to kill yourself? What are you thinking?”

“Nothing. I'm not thinking anything. Obviously.” He dropped the towel from his face and their eyes met in the mirror.

“Marty. . .”

He mouthed something at the mirror and his gaze fell to the sink and when he looked up her eyes and white hair were peering over his shoulder at their reflection. She pressed her head against his, “What? C'mon, sweetie, I can't read lips. Talk to me.”

A pained grin passed over his face and he said quietly, “said I was distracted.” He hesitated and then told her half the truth. “I was thinking about you.” He turned to face her and she kissed him, smiling a bit as she found the flavor of Bengay. The taste of pot flooded Marty and swirled inside him with the Bengay. He felt the scents invade his chest and pour down to his groin. Her arms encircled him and her tongue drifted above the torn collar of his sweatshirt. It glided along the ridge of his collarbone, awakening



something inside Marty and freeing a smile to swim over his body and come to rest on his lips, tugging them wide.

“Mmmm, you're smiling finally.” Paint's voice was inside his head and he could feel her breath on his face. She stood back and took his hand and led him into his adjoining bedroom. Her near-black brown eyes held him as she grasped his wrists in her hands and pinned him against the wall, his faded powder-blue sweats and pale green t-shirt rendering him an Easter display against the peach wall. She kissed him and said under her breath, “I want to make love.” Her hand reached over his shoulder and flipped the lights off, blinding both of them for a moment as their eyes stretched and adjusted. At night headlights from the big road that was never very busy swooped in occasional groups through Marty's room. A stoplight paced the cars so that the room would be misty and silent, then flicker with life for a moment and then fall still again. Tonight a milky moonlight softened the edges of the room and left Marty with a suddenly dry mouth.

He was aware in the darkness of Paint lifting his sweatshirt and pulling it over his head and whispering in his ear as the soft cloth, colorless in the bands of darkness, fell to the carpet beneath his bare feet, “Thinking about me. I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.”

He shifted his head and tried to see if she was serious, “Nicest? I'm not sure it's that big a deal.”

“Yeesss. Thinking about someone is the nicest thing you can do for them.” Marty smelled the



marijuana on her again. She continued, "Relax, sweetie. It seems like when we start to get close, you get nervous." The words were a draft through his heart and he couldn't help but recoil a bit. There was something wrong with him and he wanted to tell her, wanted to be close, but he couldn't. It shouldn't matter so much. Should it? He'd never told anyone. They always found out because he couldn't bring himself to say it and then afterward they just drifted out of his life. He didn't know if it was funny or sick or if Paint would care, but he couldn't find the courage to test her. She kissed him again, "It's just you and me. Be yourself. I want to be close to you." He felt kisses on his chest and her nose rubbing in the curly hair. She backed up, her silhouette disappearing into the darkness and then reappearing in waves as headlights flashed in the bedroom, illuminating her grin as she unbuttoned her blouse. The blouse's silver buttons glinted blue and Marty stared at the tiny stars and then, as her blouse drifted to the floor, at her eyes, curved in a smile as she said, "We always tease like we're gonna do it, but we don't. I like playing, but not this time. I want you." She walked towards him and the draft of anxiety blasted through his heart again. And then as she ran her hands over his shoulders and kissed him, the draft diminished and was gone.

She pressed against him and now he pressed back, pushing her form, vague in the moonlight, toward the bed. They fell onto a dark sea of sheets with him on top and her breath uneven against his nipple. Their clothes rolled effortlessly off, like rivulets of water toward and over an oily edge. Paint hooking



her black panties with her thumbs and slipping them down her legs. She pulling his distended white underwear off, too. Dropping them on the floor together, hers on top, his showing through in spots. Like a domino when the headlights came.

She was beneath him and he got inside her and they fell into a rhythm. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He felt good. His mind felt smooth and he became lost in the moment.

Then suddenly Marty felt himself slip and become instantly immersed beneath surges of fear and uncertainty. He stopped moving in and out of Paint and his voice was shaky as he said, "Paint, we shouldn't do this." But she kept moving beneath him and he felt himself drifting back into sexual pleasure as he tried again, his voice thin. "No, Paint, we shouldn't. I've got to tell you something . . ." Her eyes were shut and he felt self-control receding from his limbs, into his body, then into his head where it clung for a moment, a tiny spot in his brain. And then as Marty's voice faded so did the spot in his head. Paint was trying to get her mind to a point where she was unaware of anything other than them and she was drawing Marty into it. A last hope occurred to him and he began trying not to come. He did not want to come. Headlights began to run through the room and he felt like he was rotating as it seemed more and more lights flowed. At three a.m. an endless stream of cars suddenly outside, shining in. Marty saw Paint's black no-animal-died-for-this-belt belt on the floor beside the black and white heap of their underwear. He did not want to come. Think



about the belt. No animal died. And he felt himself dying. He heard Paint's voice and he was gone. His body collapsed and he fell against her, knocking a cough out of her as he landed.

Paint hugged him and whispered, "Thank you." He didn't move. She became slowly aware that his chest, wet against hers, was still and that his penis was still hard inside her. Fear spun into her light head and she reached up again and began to gently shake his shoulders, "Marty. . . Marty wake up. Are you okay?" He still didn't move and she pulled herself free of his penis, horrified to find his entire body stiff as she rolled him onto his back. He lay slippery with sweat, his penis comical, frozen stiff, sticking up from his rigid body. His eyes were pinched tightly shut a small smile spread Marty's lips and exposed the groove between his two front teeth. Paint hesitated and then with two extended fingers she felt for a pulse on his neck. She found sweat and heat and stubble and not much else, and just as true fear gripped her, his pinched eyelids withdrew and his eyes stared and then began to dart in confusion. His chest heaved and his dazed expression evaporated as his gaze found Paint. The two stared at each other for a moment, she sitting up beside him, wanting in the same instant to hug him, but afraid to touch him. His erection wilting against his leg. He looking away, unable to bare her confused expression. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Paint didn't know whether to laugh because it was funny, if it was funny, or to act sorry, or be happy that he wasn't dead. Her eyes searched his face, distant in the darkness, trying to see if he knew how much



he had scared her. Dead. That was ridiculous. Don't say anything. Marty said, "I'm sorry, Paint. I must have really scared you. I just didn't know how to tell you or what to say." He paused, "I guess I was just hoping it wouldn't happen."

"You knew this would happen?"

He took a deep breath and said, "Something's wrong with me. . . I don't know." He hesitated, then spoke quickly, trying to get what had occupied half his thoughts on any given day for the past ten years out in one sentence, "I pass out when I 'm going to come. I can't come. I don't know what's wrong with me. I've never come and I want to make somebody like you happy and I just scare people away."

She leaned and kissed him and said, "Hey, c'mon, Marty. It's okay. You scared me, but I'm not mad." Paint watched for a reaction, but he just lay there and a silence grew until neither of them wanted to break it. Finally he smiled. He laughed a hollow laugh and found her eyes. She was smiling now too and she said, "It's alright, Marty." They were quiet and then she said, as if she knew, "there's more to life than coming."



- TWO -

“Much has happened.” Peter spread his arms with a grandiose motion and gestured at nothing. He was sitting in red striped boxers on a banana slug of a couch reading a paperback that said “Freaky Deaky” on the front.

Paint was blue and green behind Marty who was black as they walked into the peach room on Thursday. Marty went to the sliding glass door across from the yellow slug and looked at a sunny backyard, but thought about his dick. Peter said, “We are large. Always large,” without looking up, and Paint looked at Marty and Marty walked over to Paint and reached out and inserted his finger into the waist of his sweats on her. Paint's blouse bound around Marty's chest as he pulled her toward him. She kissed him and smiled.

Peter looked up and said, “You've decided to see where we live.” His face was serious, like something mattered.

They looked at him and Paint bumped her hip into Marty's hip and said, “Do you like my top?” She shimmied her shoulders in the green t-shirt.

“It's nice,” Peter's straight face said, “but not so nice as Marty's blouse. Could you unbutton that a bit more, Mart darling?”



Marty opened two buttons and shimmied. He said, "My large roommate has undertaken an Elmore Leonard novel in our large living room." Marty didn't really think what he said was interesting or funny. Or anything. But he thought he ought to speak. Peter's eyes fell back to *Freaky Deaky* and Paint pulled the pocket of her pants that fit Marty pretty well. She tugged open the glass door with her free hand and tugged the guy who couldn't come behind her into the warm backyard. Pants like a leash in her hand, a beat-up wood fence around the yard as they stood on dead weeds that somebody had mowed last week.

"Smile, Marty."

He didn't see why, but he did anyway.

She said, "Hey, I almost forgot to tell you. I won some tickets and it's this deal downtown where we go at midnight and we can — "

"We, huh? Are you asking me out? A guy who can't do it?"

"Don't be stupid." Paint was then quiet. Tiny dots of moisture glistened on her scalp. Her short white hair glowed in the sunlight and she smiled and poked his nipple through her blouse and said, "I've never let a guy wear my blouse before."

He relented and smiled again. She said, "We go at midnight and they have six theaters and we can



go back and forth between them. We can theater-jump while the movies are going. Did you ever used to do that? We always used to do that and we got in trouble and always got thrown out."

"What're the flicks?"

"Oh, I don't know. Rocky Horror or something and a bunch of others. Who cares? It'll be fun. Tomorrow night."

He said, "Midnight, baby," and thought about his dick. She kissed him and said, "Mmmm, no Bengay today." Her finger poked his chest through her blouse and she said, "Call me after work."

She turned and walked out the space in the fence where a gate was supposed to swing. Marty watched her butt, blue in his sweats, and then heard the tinny sound of her car door as it slammed shut. He heard her car whine and rattle to life in the lot behind his house and heard it crunch gravel and then bump out the driveway and onto the big road and he thought of the headlights in his room last night. He stood sweating in the sun in Paint's black blouse and black pants and felt alone and didn't want to go back in the house and didn't want to go through the gate hole. Didn't really want to do anything. Sat down in the weeds and opened Paint's blouse and lay on his back in the sun and shut his eyes.



- THREE -

Marty was startled awake by Peter's voice, "Ah! My large man. Have you been drained by Paint?"

The sun burned Marty's eyes through his lids and he kept them shut as the guy who shared his house with him stood over him on Marty's day off. Making him wish he worked Thursdays. Making him wish he was downtown trying to sell. Smiling in a suit on the car lot flirting with middle-aged women. Trying to get them into a Chrysler. Wishing he was doing the one thing he could do, and getting paid to have his mind occupied instead of sweating on a dead lawn in Paint's fucking black clothes and listening to his roommate and obsessing on his fucking dick.

Peter circled, punning with Paint's name, "Man, that much time you'd think Paint would dry." Marty opened his eyes enough to see Peter's form above him, distorted by his squinting eyes, a belly swelling over his boxers. Medium belly, just got it about a year ago, though it was still growing. Potential for a full-fledged gut.

"I guess some Paint's always wet." Peter stopped circling. Marty sat up, open blouse stuck to his back, eyes still not really working. Standing stiffly, brushing the grass off the blouse, off the back of Paint's pants. Walking into the house without looking at Peter.



Marty opened the fridge. There was Peter's bread and Peter's ham and Peter's tomato. There was Marty's mustard and damn there was no more mayo. He'd make a sandwich by putting their ingredients together. He smiled. Hey there was one Coke, too. And there's some lettuce behind the Coke. Marty cracked the Coke and drained half of it as Peter's belly led the way through the sliding glass door.

"Little dehydrated, my feminine compatriot?" Despite himself, Marty began to feel stupid wearing Paint's black clothes and he moved a little so Peter could see what he was doing in the kitchen. Slowly slicing the tomato, spreading the mustard, opening the ham—

"Lover's hungry? Help yourself. I got it for free at the market. It's all past the date. Such a stud. Such an appetite." Peter went into his room. Marty checked and of course the stuff was past the date and he put the ham down and he looked at the big fish tank across the counter against the peach wall across the room. It was bubbling and making a dull vibrating sound and it was Peter's.

Staring at the fish, Marty felt for the meat and felt for the bread and put the meat on the bread. He found three slices of tomato and put them on the meat and he found some lettuce while he watched the angel swim past the clown. He found the other slice of bread and put it on top and lifted the sandwich to his mouth and bit it and chomped and chomped and bit it and chomped and watched the fish drift around as he chewed.



- FOUR -

Friday at the August-hot Chrysler lot. Paisley car salesman tie strangling red seersucker collar. Layer of sweat lubing Marty's neck as his head swiveled in search of prey. Thinking about Paint's movies tonight. Telling himself what a stud he was so he could flirt with the women who were there to spend their husband's money. Tingling irritation floated up his throat. Feeling horny again and knowing there was nothing he could do about it. Feeling embarrassed doing nothing. Just standing there on the pavement surrounded by a bunch of new cars shining at him expectantly.

The women made the decisions. Always. Don't even kid yourself about selling it to pops. Make him realize how much his wife likes the car. But make him think he's buying it for him.

Donald, you know Marilyn may not feel the difference between the four and the six. But I know you'll like the six. Let's take it out.

There we go. I take it off the lot and now it's you, Donald. Mmmm, yeah, it is smooth, isn't it? A chuckle and then, let's give Marilyn a try, Donald. (Marilyn not too bad, maybe give Marilyn a try on the big bed you bought for her, Donald . . . yeah right. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.) Oh c'mon Marilyn, you don't want to try?



How can you drive it home if you don't practice now? Big grin. Okay. . . I guess it's just you then Donald, with the big grin now too. Everybody grinning.

Everybody grinning as Donald and Marilyn and Marty walk into the booth to talk about some details with money. Marilyn smiling at Marty and Marty thinking about his dick. Thinking about how much he really liked Paint.

- FIVE -

Paint and Marty started in theater six at about a quarter after twelve. Everybody was dressed in either bright or tight or flowing clothes and they were all in aisle seats and their voices were excited as they got ready to act out scenes from the movie they were about to see yet again. Chicks were dressed like guys and guys were dressed like chicks and Marty thought about Paint's black blouse that he'd ruined in the dryer that morning and he felt a wispy paranoia now. Like Paint was playing some drawn out joke by putting him in her clothes yesterday and taking him here now and leading him into a near the back of the medium-sized theater, filled with dancing guys in chick's clothes and the staccato pops of their sticky feel.



Well, then he didn't feel so bad about ruining her blouse. Whatever. He wanted the movie to start and it did as Paint was saying, "This is great, seats in the middle open and everything. I don't want to switch theaters. I've always wanted to see Rocky Horror." She whispered in his ear, "Look at these people. This is gonna be really wild." She kissed him and again he started to get horny in this dark theater filled with guys singing like chicks.

Things happened on the screen and different things happened in Marty's head as Paint put her hand in Marty's lap and began to feel him through his new jeans. Getting spiffed in new jeans to go to something like this. Marty rolled his eyes at himself and focused his eyes for a moment in the dark theater. He saw somebody in a long dress dancing with somebody with his shirt off and some kind of tights on. He looked at Paint and her eyes were flat looking and she kissed him. Her tongue curled and danced in his mouth and his eyes over her shoulder watched people in the aisle dancing. The dancers began to make out and he realized it was two guys. For some reason he thought of Peter. Paint kept kissing him and he felt sick. Pulling back, she looked at Marty as she felt his penis shrinking. She looked over her shoulder and then looked back and whispered a laugh in his ear and dammit his penis started down his leg again beneath Paint's hand.

The movie was playing out all around them as they made out, Paint in a long yellow dress, the two



of them surrounded by people doing stranger things. And as Marty felt his way up Paint's thigh he could feel her smiling against his face. A big grin got a hold of his face and wouldn't let go. A real smile. Paint saw it and unbuttoned his stiff new jeans and forced her hand into his boxers. Forgetting that anybody else was there and forgetting everything and then suddenly as she looked at Marty's face, remembering.

There were transvestites and homosexuals and a lot of other people all around and the grin held onto Marty's face as he looked at them with Paint's hand hesitant in his lap. He rubbed his right hand against her slippery panties and stuck his left hand in her dress and pulled on her nipple and she began tugging at the dick that Marty had hated for about ten years. That he had let nobody's hand but his own and now this month Paint's touch since he had first scared the shit out of himself in his bed when he was fourteen. Watching the people around him he became aware of how like them he was. These freaks were the most average people he had ever met. Too wide for his face, a smile began to spread across all of Marty. He began to laugh, and as his body shook in the theater seat, a vibrating rush of pins and needles flooded him, as if his whole body had long ago fallen asleep and, having just been jarred, was now resonating with sensation. He lay bent in his seat, smiling now as pins and needles pulsed through him. Relief. He was drunk with relief.

In the middle of the theater on Friday night, real people all around, Marty passed out, but it felt



good. And when he woke up some time later, Paint was sitting beside him smiling like she was watching a really good movie.