

The Button

By Carol Hoorn

I left Debbie's house just in time to catch the 10:30 p.m. bus on the El Camino Real. I thought again how my Mom felt a certain embarrassment that we had moved from Palo Alto to Mountain View. Often I was the one embarrassed when I overheard her say when asked, that we lived in Los Altos. It was much more upscale than the mostly industrial with scattered suburbs of Mtn. View. She would sometimes defend herself in private to me that our backyard neighbors were, after all, in Los Altos. Other times, her withering look silenced me. What's the big deal I thought, our place in Palo Alto, which we rented for a year had once been servants' quarters behind the stately Victorian on Emerson Street. At least we now owned our pre-fab house.

"Where's the bus, where's the bus?" I began chanting to myself, rocking back and forth.

It was very cold that December night, but I glowed with each stroke by my freezing hands of my new suede jacket. It was café au latté in color with wooden buttons, and fully lined in yellow silk. I had never had anything quite so elegant. A long history of hand-me downs from my sister, four years older, had made the cross-country school change from Cleveland, Ohio to Posh "Paly", as the local kids called it, all the more humiliating. Where everyone at Palo Alto high wore

Cashmere and flannel, both boys and girls, and pledged fraternities or sororities as sophomores, I was too out of the scene, even to be ignored. I felt invisible, but still embarrassed.

The bus was late, and now the wind picked up as if to challenge me, I slipped one hand in a pocket to caress Debbie's Christmas/Chanukah gift. Though she had not known about my jacket, her choice was serendipitous, a small leather covered book of Shakespeare's sonnets. I sighed in momentary contentment, and then thought seriously of heading back to Debbie's to wait for the 11:15 bus. Her parents went to bed early, I knew, and probably would not appreciate my return.

Debbie's family were non-observant Jews, but still held her on a tight leash of rules. She had curly red hair, freckles, green eyes and like me was a transplant, but from New Jersey. "Funny, you don't look Jewish," one of the so-called elite Kappa girls said, as we had once innocently sat at her exclusive sorority lunch table. We never made that mistake again. Our friendship quickly grew in alliance against "them," the popular in crowd, which we figured, was 95 % of Paly.

Beautiful jacket or not, I was freezing as I looked at my watch again. A car, not the bus, first flashing its high beams, and then turning off its lights, pulled off the El Camino Real, and screeched its tires as it pulled in and suddenly stopped by the pumps of the closed and unlit gas station behind me. As I turned to

look, all four doors swung open and I was grabbed and shoved into the back seat, my head first hitting metal and a heavy body laying over me. The car took off as doors slammed and then it was black and silent.

Part Two- The Boys

Jerry, Mike, Sam, and I were telling one hilarious joke after another. We had just left Fools Rush In, where we had partied hardy after winning our matches over that lame San Jose State team. Stanford Wrestling Team rules! As we cruised the Real, Sam mooned some old ladies in their smart ass Mercedes. Right after, Mike shouted- “Look at that!” We followed his pointed finger and there she was, just waiting around for us. “Hey, she’s nobody’s sister that we know. Not from here at all, cause she’s waiting for the bus,” Jerry yelled.

“Let’s get her,” Mike shouted again as I doused the lights and pulled in real fast right behind her. Cool, how it was dark in the station and all. Just like we had rehearsed, we all busted out of the Woody and she didn’t have a chance. Didn’t scream or nothing. Cute too, I noticed, small, slender, nice hair, not too bad a dresser either. Jerry and Mike jammed her into the back seat, and Sam and I ran to the front. I had left the motor running, so no problemo. We were like pros. Head up hill, Paul, Mike ordered. So I gunned Dad’s old Woody from second to first and she shuttered a bit, but took off. Once we reached the darkest spot I could find, I parked and turned off the lights.

“O.K., you guys, get out, I’m first,” Mike whispered now, but no one could hear us up here in the hills of Los Altos, though we could see lights far below. The bitch was moaning a bit, but real quiet like. We got out like Mike wanted, stamping up and down to keep warm. It was colder than a Witch’s tit. Sam walked a few feet away and threw up on his shoes. “Man, your Wasted,” I told him. “Bet you can’t keep your pecker up, when it’s your turn.” He just gave me the finger and groaned.

The windows on my Woody were steaming up and that girl was screaming now, but the closed windows just made it sound like a far away howling wind. Suddenly the back door flew open and that damn bitch flew out too. She headed down hill, one shoe missing, but running like those skinny guys on our track team, maybe faster. Then she fell, but she just started sliding, and soon I couldn’t see her anymore.

“What happened, Mike?” Sam shouted. “That piece of shit hit me in the balls.” He opened his fist as he came out of the back seat, and stared at a wooden button. Throwing it down in disgust he growled- “Let’s get out of here. That slut’s not worth chasing.”

The Button- Dénouement

Once I stopped sliding, I got to my feet. I lost my other shoe somewhere on the hill. I was bruised, bleeding, my stockings were torn, and I was covered with mud. That damn bastard ripped the button off my beautiful two-day-old jacket. I began to laugh and cry at once. I knew I laughed because if it were not for that button, I might well have been raped by four drunken Stanford guys from the Wrestling Team, same fraternity too. I saw their jackets. I could probably pick them out in a line up. I started to cry at the same time, because I already knew I would never tell what happened. My Mom would say it was my fault. Being out late and all, what did I expect? Even though it was daylight that time when I was 12, and our Church Deacon had molested me after offering me a ride home. She slapped my face and said I was lying. So no, I would never tell.

I stumbled along maybe another 500 feet, till I was at the door of a large expensive looking home. I could see a lighted living room thru the top half of the front door, its glass etched with a white egret in flight. I hesitated briefly trying to wipe my muddied and bleeding face with the sleeve of my once beautiful jacket, and pushed the door bell which played a bit that sounded like Chopin piano music.

The door was opened by a tall handsome man with dark brown eyes and gray hair who wore a deep blue uniform “Are you a policeman?” I blurted out the words and began to sob uncontrollably.

“No, come inside, I’m a pilot with T.W.A. “What happened to you? Do you need a doctor?” I nodded no.” Should I call the police?” I shook my head. Flooded with shame and fear, I could not find my voice and just shook my head. He handed me his handkerchief and led me over to a long white couch and gently helped me to sit down. “Rest here, while I make you some tea and since I’m on my way to work in just about fifteen minutes, I will drop you off at your home. Do you live close by? Are you sure you don’t want to go the hospital?” I nodded no again, and sank into that deeply padded couch. “I’ll get that tea and then you can tell me what happened,” he said.

Just as he came back to the living room carrying a tray, a woman came tottering down the hallway on the opposite side. She wore a white silk peignoir with matching high heeled slippers, and in a deep throaty voice shouted out-“So you’re bringing them home now?”

The pilot, I never learned his name, nor he mine, set the tray down and in one swift motion, grabbed my hand, and we were instantly at the front door. We rushed to his black Jaguar, which he drove expertly and rapidly. We had no further conversation, except his almost whispered question about my address.

He waited till I was safely inside my door, taking off as I waved. I knew for the second and final time that I would never tell my mother what happened. I hardly believed the last part myself.

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