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The Ménage

MOVING DAY, SATURDAY, third week of August and hot. Southern Indiana hot, over ninety in the shade and bloated with moisture. April leans back against the fender of her '68 VW Beetle, watching Josh and his sidekick Hawkins, her soon-to-be housemates, unload furniture from a van. Humidity kinks her hair, its russet red aflame under brilliant sun; a tank top clings, wetness darkens its perfect white, traces her spine and beads her nose, causing granny specs to slip down its bridge. Arrived early June by way of Toronto, she's wondering, too late, what insanity prompted her back then to rent this thirteen-room monstrosity, this vacated nursing home for old folk, along with one, maybe two, other females, three males, a sheepdog, Melchior, and a neurotic cat, Elektra.

It isn't that communes are uncommon, not in 1971, but when it comes to sharing, April's more a soloist. She, April Blume, came to Indiana — well, to bloom in Bloomington, she laughs to herself. Bloom musically, that is . . . under world-renowned Benyamin, distinguished artist-in-residence at this oasis of cultural activity, this Niagara in the midst of parched "Hill Ape Land." Here, at the university, under the master's guidance, she'll blossom into that concert pianist she's always dreamed of becoming.

She scans the length of the street. Lace curtains cloak shadowy figures, prying eyes. Along the sidewalk neighbours gather in groups of two and three. They gawk at the vans, the sprawled furniture on the drive, the activity. *Egheads takin' over the neighbourhood! God only knows what'll go on in there.* *Only two a the lot married!* (The word on the block as reported by Nellie, local real estate agent). Doing her own sizing up, April assesses them: ordinary townsfolk — janitors, waitresses, bartenders, stonemasons — "Hill Apes," labeled so by university types living on the other side — the "right" side — of Bloomington's railroad tracks, though *anyone* in and around Bloomington who's not a university type gets lumped without discrimination into that category. She figures the tag to be a variant of "hillbilly," but more mocking. Her gaze traces theirs as they mutely fix on Hawkins setting the pulley-stop to the screen door, bracing it open for Josh, then follow with their eyes as the two men haul a mattress up a wooden plank and through the narrow entrance.

Josh . . . Joshua Miller, assistant prof in I.U.'s theatre department; brilliant lighting designer, April's heard. She met him back in June at Browne County, at the Playhouse, the university's summer stock theatre. Openly regarding him then, she took a quick survey: his face, semitanned, expressive as a clown's, a child's open primer; delicious sable curls and startling blue eyes; worn chinos and loose-fitting T-shirt, lanky frame, well-built, though not slickly coordinated, a touch awkward, the boy-man. About . . . umm . . . thirtyfive, maybe thirty-six, kinda cute, yeah. Far as April's concerned, though, he comes across as overly sure of himself; she determined that at the very outset. Revved-up. Wired. Electric.

"Maybe even adorable," he'd said straight-faced, hearing her muttered

observation; but she caught the spark behind his glance. Or was he being serious? He did his own survey then, his eyes panning, flick, flick, down, up. “Turn-on!” he grinned, obviously pleased with his lighting allusion.

“That’s a turn *off*,” she shot back. Then, recovering from her annoyance — he looked so abashed, yet so devilishly innocent — she offered up a smile and more gently quipped, “So, Tune out!” pleased with her own wordplay. He didn’t waste a moment before giving voice to an immediate mutual recognition, an understood connection. Irreverently he observed, “Blume, huh? Don’t find many Blumes in these Hoosier hills, not foxy-haired with shamrock eyes anyway. Might ya be an Irish Blume now, lass?”

Nor did it take long for her to decide they were two of a kind in more ways than that he was a Miller, she a Blume. She for instance was in love with music, he with theatre. Dedicated, both. She, forever in the practice studio, he, always in some play or other when no student could do the part.

A smile plays about her lips as, thinking these thoughts, she watches Josh and Hawk manoeuvre the mattress through the open door and disappear inside; then, shifting her glance from the entranceway, once again she slides it past the gawkers to rove the street’s length. Pleasant enough, wide and elm-lined, homes surprisingly well-kept. Dormered third storeys, enclosed entranceways, latticed basement windows. She returns her gaze with a sinking feeling to the furniture sprawled across the driveway. Stacked kitchen chairs, chrome glistening in sunlight, a couch under a mustard-coloured throw, bedside table, its top end down on the sofa’s pillows. The “Big House” stands before her, stripped of all illusion, a diseased derelict beyond redemption, April about to cross its threshold. Pleading for a fresh coat of paint, the three-storey brick and clapboard sits on Fourth Street on the wrong side of the tracks and glooms grey-white even now, blistering under a high noon sun, its half-lidded windows screened with a cataract of grime, crying for a good vinegar-water wipedown.

Too late — the chance to cut out, she chides herself, was at the beginning when Josh drove her to survey the place for the first time. Now this venture threatens to drain and distract her. It has even taken on a buzz at the university. Josh innocently revealed their living arrangement to Prof. Scalini, the department’s master costume designer, and quick to recognize the salacious, Scalini grabbed every opportunity thereafter to leer, “So, Josh, and how go plans for The Ménage?” The label caught on, slipping into faculty conversations all across campus. Josh considers the tag quaint, seeing as it intimates a bawdy house; says it betrays its users as dying dinosaurs from the fifties. Not surprising, really. Yeah, their pot-smoking free-fucking offspring, most undergrads and a number of the forty-plus toke-inhaling key-swapping party-crowd into cool — married or single — prod them. Nonetheless, old biases cling like burrs onto wool, and scuttlebutt surrounding the Big House still pricks even relatively liberal profs’ Midwestern notions of decency. Renaissance Lit types may hang on to pre-sixties sensibilities, Josh points out, but thespian types, *they’re* programmed differently. From what she has seen April considers that an understatement.

Now, peering over the rim of her specs, she sees him exit through the braced-open screen door, tromp, loose and lanky, a big kid, down the wood

plank and amble over to fetch an unloaded handcart parked on the grass. Jeans sit low on his hips and unruly curls hang damp about his face, reminding her of how he looked one balmy summer evening at Browne County, kinda sweet and boyish, the two of them talking outside the Playhouse after the curtain came down. That was, oh, a month after they first met back in June and he brazenly established the “Miller/Blume” nexus they shared. On that mild July night, she recalls, they’d stood off to one side waiting up for Hawk and the show’s costume designer, Richard, making small talk, mostly about theatre and music and . . . oh, yeah, he’d just taught himself the guitar.

“For a part in Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*. I’m a goddamned Jimi Hendrix . . . when he’s not on drugs.”

“Which is never,” she observed, smiling.

“And a voice like Louis Armstrong, only sexier.” Here Josh went into a surprisingly good imitation: *When you’re smilin’, when you’re smilin’*, segueing after a few bars into “Let’s Fall in Love,” then, with Satchmo’s rasp and broad grin, *You go to my head, like bubbles in a glass of champagne*, catching her hand up to his thicket of curls, giving them a shake; and that’s when she interrupted with her question, laughing in spite of herself.

“Always masking, Josh? Flirting game, clowning game . . . acting game?”

“Yeah, always on, playing a part,” he responded with amazing frankness.

“What’s that all about?” she answered, truly curious.

“You mean the ‘acting thing?’” he asked. “Allows retreat from ordinariness, doesn’t it? I get to play nobility, Hamlet, Richard II . . . or the Noble Son, say Tom Wingfield in *Menagerie*. Hell, I even do a decent Willie Loman, paradigm loser that he was, poor self-deluded Littleman. Isn’t that what the acting thing is, working out life’s puzzlements?”

“So just whose ordinariness are you retreating from?” she asked, pointedly.

“Abe . . . my projectionist father — projected other men’s dreams, forty years, six days a week, four shows a day including Sundays,” he laughed, deflecting any hint of earnest introspection, and said no more about it. She, too, dropped the subject and made a mental note to pursue at some later time his statement about fleeing from ordinariness, theatre its escape. Then, almost offhand, sliding over words as blades over ice, Josh added, “Abe split early on. My mother, Rosalie, she’s great. Still lives in our old neighbourhood, a brownstone, the West Village. We — me and my brothers — fly in three, four, times a year.”

“You don’t sound ‘New York,’ Josh,” April said at the time.

“Yeah, well, acting classes made me a sensitive guy. Rrr-ound tones, short vowels — and how to talk ‘way down here’ . . . exaggerating a dropped pitch.

She’d laughed then, and chuckles now, her gaze fixed on him, standing alongside the handcart, unaffected, natural, the way he’d looked when he spoke about Abe, about his mother. The dark depth to his eyes, *real*, no hint of cleverness. A surprisingly (low key) macho moment, April at once realizes.

She had immediately intuited his meaning: “split” as in “from us,” *all* of us, and sensed a soulmate. They shared a whole other realm, a certain fix on things, a caution, if not outright skepticism about relationships, men and

women, friendship and romance, trust and permanence . . . or impermanence. No need to exchange words or explanations on that score; no, both instinctively understood one another. Yeah, we are, each, one of the walking wounded children of divorce, April thinks.

She should've been able to accept the split between Victoria and Harry Blume, accept the way things were, but five years after and her pain hasn't gone away, simply turned to anger, so long in shadow, emerged suddenly as constant companion. Maybe she's expecting too much; too much, too fast. Considering, however, the fleeting wince when back in July he recalled his father, the stoic set to his jaw, the throbbing muscle, one thing seems certain — neither she nor Josh is about to take on any entanglements, thank you.

As if her thoughts had channelled across, Josh holds up midway down the walk and turns to look directly at her. She's been examining him, he notes. Resting his foot on the handcart, his arm slung over the handlebar, it only now hits him that he's about to live under the same roof with this tall, leggy, flame-haired knockout more interested in music than in men. She *is* obsessive, always distracted by her one passion; but she's direct, a straight-shooter. Honest, deep and real, he thinks, chuckling at the sixties jargon; none a this female manipulating stuff. Doesn't let him get away with a helluva lot either. As a sparring partner, he assesses, she's his equal. She has a wacky humour, he thinks, shaking his head. Now *there's* a match! Hey, hey, Josh, cool it! — lovely to look at, delightful to know, as the song goes, but . . .

"Josh, my man," Hawk interrupts, coming up behind him, and follows his gaze. "Leave off the fantasizing!" he chides, and with Josh heads for the remaining boxes spread out on the lawn.

Observing them load the handcart, April asks herself, yet again: What *on earth* could I have been thinking? She remembers back to that very same July night at Browne County when Josh talked of Rosalie and Abe. Then she, Josh, Hawk and Richard piled into the theatre van after the show, headed to Bloomington and ended up at the Stardust Café. The four of them sat around the table, the men grousing about living on such modest salaries.

"Rent's too high. Too high and going up again!" Josh complained. "We need . . ."

"An angel," Hawk laughed.

"You got one," Richard observed.

"JJ? — my daddy," Hawk explained to April — "Think of another brilliant idea."

"Okay, how 'bout a commune?" Josh cut in. "Seriously, we can split the rent and . . ."

"Share. The 'in' word. 'Share' the rent," April said, not taking him at all seriously.

". . . and food. What do you say?" Josh asked, turning to her.

"You're sure you're not wanting to share anything else?" she returned.

"Oh, Reds, you read me too too well . . . No, no, just rent and food . . . for now. Only teasing," Josh laughed. "So, Hawk, whadda ya think?"

"Hey, I saw this 'For Sale or Rent' sign in front of a big ol' house across town, other side of the railroad tracks," Hawk said.

That's when a red flag should have gone up, April thinks, remembering

that night. Hearing Hawkins birth an idea about to mature into action, she'd coolly taken his measure: same age as Josh, maybe a few years younger; a hunk. It was the cleft in his chin, Colgate smile, disarming lack of complexity to his cornflower-blue gaze. America's version of a Royal Canadian Mountie.

Yeah, Hawkins "Oklahoma" Johnson belongs in jodhpurs and red jacket, Sam Browne belt and wide-brimmed Stetson, she thinks, still leaning against the VW, watching him disappear into the Big House with Josh. Mm, better yet, spurs and a ten-gallon hat.

That's what he was wearing at Browne County in June when she first met him. "This?" he'd asked, touching his hand to its brim. "This is what we wear down Tulsa way. My daddy's got a big old ranch and a corralful of bucks" — smiling his big Oklahoma smile. "The greenback kind." When she asked what he was doing here in Hoosier country he replied easy-like, "Temporarily driftin'." He'd answered an ad, "Bedford Limestone Cutters" — here Hawk framed a pretend square of paper with his hands — hopped a Greyhound to Bloomington and landed a job in a quarry. And the romantic lead in *Bus Stop*. "They needed a ringer," Hawk explained. That's where his heart was, with the stage, he told April and added, "Daddy maintains theatre's for fags."

After weighing up the whole of him, April recalls, she'd figured him as a reliable sort, good for his share of food and rent. She hadn't been so clear about Richard and knew nothing of Richard's wife, Jane. Anyway, on reflection, if at first Josh's idea struck her as way out — with no job in hand and little money, divvying up the rent might be a solution. Were she lucky, *really* lucky, something would open with the school board and ease finances, but just. Still, she'd thought, both the rooming set up and a job could sidetrack her, big time! Even now, with the move about to become a reality, her eyes cloud over and she looks down at her hands, spreads her fingers, moving them ever so slightly over imaginary keys as if to convince herself she will not be deterred — just as she'd tried to reassure herself when this scheme of Josh's first came up.

Of course neither Josh, nor Hawkins, nor Richard had adequately described the condition of the property, she remembers, ruefully, with an eye on the sprawling house before her. When she and Jane finally got to see the place, Josh walked them through, bottom to top: cellar, a dank cave of dead rats, birds, cockroaches, black beetles and piled-up ash beside a prehistoric handfired coal furnace; a gaping hole in the ceiling above the stairs leading to the second floor; stair lift, broken from its hinges; thirteen rooms, five to be used as dens — two of them in an added wing on the west side of the house — and yes, she could fit a studio upright in one. Huge, twelve-foot-ceilinged kitchen, living and dining rooms; three second-storey bedrooms and two on the third level — all very spacious, Josh pointed out, each having slept two or three old folk (well, yeah, he conceded, so they were cramped). Bath on the second floor, and another, with stall shower, in the first floor wing, put in to ratchet up chances for a licence and zoning variance. Somebody greased somebody's palm, April figured.

By then, faced with the truth of what they'd taken on, too much momentum had gathered to turn back. Richard and Jane had already given over the lease on their apartment. Hawk was easy; after all, he pulverized rocks in a

quarry, a physical kind of guy. April figured the yellow-green puke-stained walls, peeling paint, cracked ceilings and doors off hinges — legacy of the old age home this place had been — were the reasons the city closed it down (not to mention it had no elevator!) and rental was so cheap. Now, with the consequences of what she's agreed to about to happen, April wonders if she'll survive the first week.

"Too late to fret now," she hears.

Looking up, she sees Josh standing by her side with the now-unburdened handcart, a white hand towel draped around the back of his neck.

"Here, have a swig," he says and offers a jug of water he's fetched from a cooler set in shade under a tree.

"Mmm," . . . takes a few swallows, hands the bottle back. "Where's Richard?" she asks. Her eyes drift over to the curb where Richard's wife, Jane, dripping from the humidity, continues unloading the theatre van, piling several boxes of dishes, a stereo and two table lamps onto the curb.

Josh's gaze follows April's. "Figures," he mutters. "Inside," he answers April and nods toward the house.

"For *two* hours?"

"Don't be uncharitable. Richard needed a break. He's 'doin' a reeky,' making plans on how to decorate," Josh says with a straight face.

"What's *with* him?" April asks.

"You mean, What's *with* *Jane*?"

"Okay, her too."

"Dick and Jane . . . Dick and Jane *Smyth!*" He chuckles at the incongruity of the names. "Smyth with a y," he editorializes. "She's in love with his intellect, or was it his 'artistic sensibilities'? He can be 'sweet'. And, oh yeah, don't forget 'needy'. That always brings out the maternal in women."

"Really?" April comments, dryly.

"Yeah, well, *most* women."

Wilting under midday sun, April takes the towel slung from Josh's shoulder, wipes her forehead, the back of her neck, and ponders on the disparate bunch she's soon to spend the better part of each day with: Richard, self-styled aesthete; Jane, suffering wife, willing victim; Hawkins, easygoing charmer; Josh, master of the mask. No one has brought up private doubts about the expected addition of yet another kennelmate — Josh's word — Polly Lovell, a social worker at the Bloomington hospital, someone Jane met at the checkout desk at the library. She's planning to join them next month, soon as her apartment lease is up. April sighs and her shoulders heave at the prospect of sharing living space with a professional do-gooder. A groan escapes her lips. Meantime, Polly has deposited her cat, Elektra, at the house "to make friends" with Richard and Jane's sheepdog, Melchior. April's eye skates the grounds in front and alights finally on the cat. It sentinels on the top step, head rising out of its recumbent body, a calico sphinx guarding an Egyptian palace portal. Chances of Elektra and Melchior becoming buddies, April thinks, are as good as Nixon embracing Ho Chi Minh.

She observes Hawk come out of the house, down the plank incline and over to the boxes stretched across the lawn, beside the path. He picks one up, obviously heavy, judging from the way he leans his back into it. Laden with a

last armload of clothes, Lady Jane starts up the driveway. Sir Richard ambles out of the house, Melchior at his heels, and loiters down the drive, offering his help — now that everything has been done. Swivelling her tawny head, zooming in on Melchior, Elektra bounds from her pedestal in a great leap onto the path, across the lawn and down the drive to but a few feet behind the dog. She arches her back. Her tail shoots straight up — an exclamation point — as if zapped by lightning. Glacial-green cat-eyes narrow and shoot hot ice. She bares her teeth, emits a shrill shriek. Poor Melchior! The dog cowers behind Richard — then with Elektra giving chase races toward Jane, orbits her legs, causing her arms to fly open, the clothes to spill, speeds across the drive to the neighbouring lawn and spinning sprinkler, holds up, stunned by the spray, lopes back to Richard and lunges into his arms, bowling him over backward, soaked and sputtering. Elektra has lost interest and scoots up a tree, stalking a bird.

“Stupid cat!” Richard shouts after it; turns back to Melchior, who has dropped to the ground and lies panting at Richard’s feet. “Are you going to let that alley cat intimidate you?” — wagging a finger at the dog. “And look what you did to your mother! Come!” he commands, picking himself up and walking toward Jane.

Hawk has put his box down and strolled over to help, urging Richard to cool it. The neighbours gathered on the sidewalk chuckle, a few clap, momentarily forgetting their distrust. Not for long; their expressions tighten to their habitual state: taciturn. Suppressing a laugh, April and Josh start toward the little group in the driveway, then seeing they’re not needed, turn back to the boxes stacked curbside near the VW. Arms akimbo, April settles one more look at Richard, Jane, Hawk and Melchior.

“Is this a sign, or what?” she puts to Josh. Aware she’s straddling her options, tensed to bolt inside the waiting car and take off, she slowly bends to the boxes, hesitant to lug them into the waiting house.

“It’ll take you all year that way!” Josh says. “Okay, let’s just do this!” — taking a box from her, loading it and the remaining boxes on the handcart nearby. He wipes his forehead with the back of his other hand and settles a critical eye on April. He is not unappreciative. Seeing flints of copper lick hair red as rimrock under the noonday sun, it strikes him that his life has recently reeled from black and white to Technicolor. Admittedly, he’s been keeping up a two-night-a-week casually comfortable affair with a lady over in English Lit, with the understanding there are no strings attached; which is the way he intends to keep things. He maintains a policy of not messing around in his own backyard, meaning students are off-limits — making him, he observes wryly, unique among theatre profs. She’s a lecturer in Dramatic Works of Shakespeare. Intellect stuff. Now performance types, he contemplates, studying April, they add unpredictability, excitement, ardour.

Clearing his throat, he says aloud, “Come on, let’s deposit these. Where’s your den going?”

“In the extension,” she says, pointing to that wing of the house. “The other room, across the hall, is reserved for Polly Lovell. You think she’ll be as friendly as her cat?”

“Hey, Reds,” Josh says good-humouredly, “No more stewing over how you

fell for this.”

“Right, how did I?”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time I guess,” he shrugs.

With neighbourhood Hill Apes still looking on, the handcart loaded up, Josh reassures April she’s about to embark on an adventure, cross a threshold. She suspects that when Josh speaks of “threshold” he’s talking “proscenium,” crossing over it the challenge, this entire communal affair just more theatre.

“Threshold into what?” she asks. “Gerontological memorabilia?”

“Old-age merde,” he grins. His tumblly curls have crisped in the humidity, he’s sweaty and relaxed and laughing at her. Sweeping his arm toward the house, he says, “Welcome to The Ménage!”

Throwing him a determined glance, she squares her shoulders and starts along the path.
