



## REINVENTING MARIA

BY

JD CLAPP

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

*What does it take to change a memory?*

*A drink?*

*A woman?*

*A different woman?*

*A peep show at the ol' jerk-it arcade?*

*Another drink?*

*When your life is a repetitious doldrum of liquor, remembrances, hunter tourism, and shitty country songs, do you hold on to a feeling that left you two years ago to go back to your brother (because that will happen) or do you quit pussyfooting about and move on?*

*JD Clapp's, "Reinventing Maria," plays with the concept growth and what it takes to change who you are in the face of a broken heart/head over the simple ease of staying the course and wallowing – and, believe you me, it is entirely too easy to wallow.*

*I enjoy this story because of the way in which Clapp frames the idea of how to save one's self. He has crafted a tale in which the underlying character flaw is not that Jasper, our protagonist, is unable to move forward, because he damn sure already knows he must, but is unwilling to do so in the face of letting go of the past.*

*We're not talking here about the reinvention of a woman so that she can get her groove back – although, spoiler alert, that does slightly come into play – but the way in which people must change their perspective of a memory before they are able to change the perspective of themselves and smile again.*

*This is a story with humor and heart, control and pace, tone and talent, longing and love.*

*Enjoy.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

Jasper made his way through a sea of silicon sex and wondered what the arcade booths could possibly offer in the era of free online porn. Glancing at a few titles like "Barnyard Bliss" and "Humpty Stumpty" he quickly understood Jolly's catered to the more depraved niches of the pervert community and headed for the live dancers.

Reinventing Maria

JD Clapp

Jasper sat at his favorite stool in the back corner of the bar, under the neon Coors sign with the old school logo. He drunkenly gazed at the trophy elk and mule deer mounts on the walls. The bar was mostly empty.

Jasper threw back his whisky, slammed down his glass, wrapped his knuckles on the bar top, and motioned to the barkeep for another. Cassy, his favorite barmaid at The Roundup Room, shot him a dirty look.

“Damn it, Jasper. Last call was ten minutes ago,” Cassy said.

Shaking her head, she poured a double in a fresh glass beneath the bar top and exchanged it for the empty.

“Why thank you beautiful. I like a girl you can count on in drinkin’ emergencies,” Jasper said.

She rolled her eyes.

“That’s it for tonight, drinkin’ emergency or not...Unless you want to come back to my place for a night cap,” Cassy said shooting him a coy glance.

“One of these nights...” he said.

“Don’t assume I’m going to keep asking,” she said, hoping to provoke a response.

“Well, I don’t want to screw up our wonderful working relationship of you pouring whiskey and me drinking it by us fucking,” he said. Before she could respond, he said, “That came out wrong. I’m sorry Cassy. I’m just in a drunk funk.

“Don’t worry about it. Hopefully you will get over your Cain and Able shit soon and get on with your life. Maria made her choice two years ago,” she said walking away.

Damn it all. She’s right and now I hurt her feelings, Jasper thought, draining the glass in a single pull.

He pulled an envelope from his pocket, took out one of the hundred-dollar bills the elk hunter he had just guided had given him, put it under the empty glass, and headed for the door.

##

Jasper buttoned his Carhartt field jacket and pulled on his wool cap then began walking. Cassy is right. Nothing good can come from this obsession. Nothing, he thought.

Three blocks from his apartment, Jasper stopped and looked up at the clear winter sky. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, watching his breath freeze and float into the starry December night. I’m not drunk enough to go home to face my empty apartment, he thought. He toyed with the idea of going back to catch Cassy, but he wasn’t ready for that tonight either. Maybe tomorrow night, he seriously thought, I really do like her; she’s smart and funny.

On a whim, Jasper changed course and headed toward Jolly’s Adult Arcade a few blocks away. He figured Jolly’s, Albuquerque’s only remaining peep show arcade, would be empty, anonymous, and the perfect place for a heartsick, drunk to feel sorry for himself.

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A tired looking old guy at the counter put down a vintage porn mag and collected twenty dollars from Jasper.

“You been here before?” he asked.

“Not since I was a kid,” Jasper answered.

The guy looked annoyed, then launched into his spiel. He explained the retail section of Jolly’s had sex toys, lotions, and lubes. The video arcade was through the double doors behind the dildos. He explained how the arcade worked, “If the light above the door of a booth is red, somebody is inside. Green means go on in. But they will all be green tonight since you are the only one here right now. There’s lube, tissues, and a trash can in every booth; don’t leave me a mess to clean up.”

Finally, the old guy told him the two live dancers were in the very back of Jolly’s—“there are two small stages with three private booths each. If you want to jerk it, sit down so the girls can don’t have to watch. You tip them through the slot next to the window. If you want a lap dance, stand at the glass and wave. She’ll open the window enough for you and her to negotiate a price. She’ll take it from there.”

Jasper made his way through a sea of silicon sex and wondered what the arcade booths could possibly offer in the era of free online porn. Glancing at a few titles like “Barnyard Bliss” and “Humpty Stumpty” he quickly understood Jolly’s catered to the more depraved niches of the pervert community and headed for the live dancers.

The scrolling red dot matrix digital marquee on the left bank of booths advertised “Misbehave? See Mistress Misty” while the one on the right read, “Take a Ride with Cowgirl Candy.”

Fuck it. I’ll check them both out and be out of here quick, Jasper thought.

He headed to the far-left booth, went in, and sat on the folding chair placed under a very dim red bulb. He laughed when he saw the lube dispenser and paper towel rack bolted to the wall below a sign reading “Enjoy the journey but leave no traces,” thinking Jolly’s stole the slogan from a National Park. The black out curtain dropped from his booth’s window and the small stage and stripper pole came into view.

Jasper first thought the booth was empty until he saw a thick woman, darkhaired, probably north of 40 years old in a dominatrix getup sitting on chair in the corner reading a

magazine and sipping a Big Gulp. Jasper stood up to leave just as Mistress Misty realized she had a customer. He sat back down and waited. Without much enthusiasm she put down her magazine, took another sip of her Big Gulp, grabbed her prop whip, and took the stage. Mistress Misty clunkily worked her way through a whip cracking routine choreographed to Depeche Mode’s Master and Servant which ended with her cuffing herself to the pole. While she fumbled with the key to unlock herself, Jasper slid a twenty through the tip slot and ducked out.

Thinking Cowgirl Candy couldn't possibly be any worse, he entered one of her booths and sat down. As the blackout shade dropped, a raven-haired, athletic looking woman wearing a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, a lone ranger mask, and a red lace thong, gracefully twirled on the stripper pole to Chris Stapleton's Tennessee Whisky. Blue neon lit glowed in the background while a soft white spotlight shone on the pole. Jasper watched, transfixed.

As he watched several thoughts ran through his head: she's so into the dance she doesn't know I'm here; she can really dance; God, she's beautiful.

Then Jasper saw her tattoo. It took a minute register. Her tattoo—the ballerina holding a rose in one hand, and the other hand, atop an elegantly raised arm, releasing a dove. Her tattoo. The one he had stared at countless times when they all visited the lake house. Her tattoo... on the woman who toyed with his emotions, teased sex, then ran back to another man. Her tattoo--His brother's wife's tattoo.

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Jasper's mind went in several directions at once. He felt the strong urge to leave. I shouldn't be seeing this, he thought. At the same time, he couldn't stop looking. Does Tommy know she's doing this? She always wanted to be a real dancer, but Tommy wouldn't leave hunting country...but this?

Jasper slid a \$100 through the tip slot before the song finished and slipped out the door. Before heading back into the cold night, he stopped at the counter and asked what nights Cowgirl Candy worked. The old guy replied, "tonight's her first night. She is scheduled the next three Sunday nights, 2:00 am to 6:00 am. She's a little old but a real looker. She'd make more money in another shift, but she said she didn't care. She's a strange one."

Jasper walked home feeling instantly sober, strangely alive, but on edge. Did she see me? He wondered.

##

The next morning Jasper headed to Raton to dismantle their high and low camps. As he barreled east on I 40, the snow dusted New Mexican plains rolling by, he thought about the work ahead interspersed with thoughts about her. By habit, he checked the fields as he drove. Jasper spied a big bull elk mixed in with cow elk and antelope in a pasture; he stopped to glass a bit to take his mind off Maria.

With his hunting season over, Jasper needed to finish up the paperwork required of hunting outfitters by New Mexico Fish and Game, then tackle the deferred maintenance of their hunting and camping equipment. His brother Tommy, his partner in the company, left a few days earlier to spend December and January guiding high roller hunters for trophy whitetail down in Texas. Both brothers appreciated the division of labor. The fact Maria—Cowgirl Candy— took care of the books and scheduling complicated things even more now.

About halfway to Raton, Jasper stopped to gas up his F250. He grabbed a cup of bad gas station French roast to sip while he stood in the cold waiting for the tank to fill. As the meter melted his tip money away, he felt his phone buzz a couple times; there were texts from Tommy and Maria. He felt a surge of adrenaline.

The text from Tommy contained a couple trail camera photos of a massive buck. Jasper knew he would be getting similar updates from Tommy several times a week for the next six weeks. Jasper texted back: Bruiser! Whack him!

Maria's text simply read: Call me when you get a chance.

She saw me, Jasper thought first. Then he dismissed the thought. It's about my paperwork, he reasoned, knowing she would be sending their annual forms into fish and game. Still, he wanted to think before calling her.

He got back on the road. A mix of classic country and Americana served as the soundtrack to an otherwise silent film as he kept his eyes on the road, driving on mental autopilot, he let his mind take him to Maria's bed.

As he approached Raton, convinced she had not seen him, he finally called Maria.

"Hey! Quick question did Dr. Powers harvest his bull? You left the form blank," Maria asked. Thank God, she didn't see me, he thought before answering her.

The next day as Jasper drove to their higher camp, he considered going back to Jolly's and simply watching Maria dance. Could I be happy just watching? Probably not. But goddamn I want to, he thought.

He took down the wall tents as the snow began to fall heavily. As he hustled to get things packed and back down the mountain, he considered telling Tommy. A barrage of thoughts flooded into his mind. Maybe he knows. With him gone for a month and no kids, she could be doing this without him finding out...Nobody they knew would be a Jolly's at 2:00 am on Sunday. But he was there...Tommy wouldn't be happy if he didn't already know...he probably wouldn't be happy I saw her...

As he drove back down the mountain, Jasper tried to put the whole thing out of his mind. Ahead of his slow going truck a mountain lion stopped in the middle of the snow-covered dirt road and stared at Jasper. He stopped, reached over and pulled his .45-70 trapper rifle from the passenger seat, and jacked a round into the chamber. The big cat just stood there and stared at him, something odd he had never seen before. He rolled down his window and carefully put the barrel on his rearview mirror and took aim. Slowly moving off, the cat turned broadside, a perfect and easy shot. Jasper didn't pull the trigger. Instead, he watched the cat slink into a pine stand then up the rock rim. Karma, he thought, give me some damn karma.

The following day Jasper drove to Pie Town to pick up the pile of cleaned skulls and antlers, salted elk, mule deer, and antelope skins his clients had left to for him to deliver to their

taxidermist over up in Denver. As he moved the boxes from their walk-in cooler to his truck, he debated confronting Maria. What would I say? Would she be embarrassed? Maybe it would lead to...what? Sex? No, trouble.

On the drive back to his apartment, he put a Chris Stapleton playlist on Spotify. As Tennessee Whiskey played, he once again let his mind free to mentally explore Maria's body but quickly moved to imagining a life together outside the bedroom, doing mundane things, just being with her. Eventually, Chris Stapleton's song Whiskey and You short-circuited his fantasy. Why are all damned country songs about wayward woman and heartbroken men? he wondered.

By Saturday Jasper had decided he was going back to Jolly's on Sunday night. He didn't know whether he would approach Maria or if he just would lurk.

##

Around 10:00 p.m. Sunday, Jasper made his way back to The Roundup Room, found his stool open, and motioned for Cassy to come over. Until then, he hadn't considered whether he would bring any of this up with Cassy. He ordered a Dickel neat, thinking Cassy seemed distant.

As the night progressed, Jasper's resolve vacillated. After his first round, he decided he would watch Maria dance for a song then slip out like last time. By his second round, Jasper decided he would buy a lap dance and what happened next, happened. By his third round, he started to think about the potential drama of confronting her or anything happening between them.

Around midnight only a handful of diehards remained. Cassy came around the bar and plopped down on the stool next to Jasper. He looked at her. She's beautiful, he thought. They shared sexual chemistry, but he had never noticed her natural beauty before. Jasper told her the whole story. Cassy reached across the bar, grabbed a bottle of whisky, and poured them each a double. They clinked glasses and each took a sip.

After a pause Cassy said, "obviously there is an issue when 35-year-old married woman is dancing in a shitty strip club. That girl has been crazy her whole life—running from Tommy when they fought, toying with your emotions, then going back to him like it never happened. My advice is to leave it alone. Get on with your life Jasper."

Jasper sat for a minute. He sighed, thinking there was no good outcome. He asked Cassy what his options were if he wanted closure. Cassy sighed and took a sip.

"The way I see it you have two options. Either move on to someone else who will be patient and understand or go tell her how you feel and face the shit storm."

Jasper thanked her, leaned over, and kissed her cheek. They finished their drinks, and Jasper closed out his tab. As Jasper walked toward the door he stopped and asked, "Do you want to grab dinner on your night off this week?"

Cassy looked surprised then grinned.

“Weds at 7:00. I’ll text my address. Anyplace but here.”

As he left the bar, Jasper wrapped his knuckles on the bartop and waved without looking back.

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Jasper headed to his apartment. He felt better. All this is almost over, he thought.

Back at his apartment, Jasper sat down at his computer and wrote Maria a letter, printed it, stuffed it unsigned into an envelope, then grabbed his coat and headed to Jolly’s. He only got a block, before turning back. I don’t trust myself.

He poured himself a drink, sat down, and texted Cassy: Can you do me a favor?

##

Jasper felt the weight of the week lift when he wrote the letter. As Cassy drove away with the letter headed to Jolly’s, he felt freed from the anchor that had pinned him to the bottom for the past two years; he was floating toward the surface now.

##

Cassie walked into Jolly’s with purpose.

“You looking for work or just here to shop?” asked the old guy at the counter.

“Neither. I’m not staying. I just need to give this to Cowgirl Candy” Cassy held up the letter.

“That will be hard since she quit. She gave some lame reason about just wanting to dance once in her life,” the clerk answered.

After Jolly’s, Cassy drove herself home, took a warm shower and crawled into bed. Before she clicked off the light, she texted Jasper: It’s done. She’s quitting. She apologized for how she treated you. Just wants to be family, no drama. Doesn’t ever want to speak about it. You can get on with your life.

Cassy turned off the light and fell into a deep sleep. She woke late the next morning, made coffee, and looked at her phone. Jasper had texted shortly after her text to him: Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Jasper’s next text, timestamped three minutes later, read: Are you the kind of girl who is understanding and can be patient?

Cassy sipped her coffee and smiled. Yes, I am... you idiot, she thought.

A few blocks away Jasper woke and made coffee. He opened the curtain and looked out on the brightness of winter sun gleaming on fresh snow and smiled.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Like most fiction, Reinventing Maria grew from seeds sewn in real life. San Diego has peep-show arcade like Jolly's. The place has been there a half-century, and most local men of a certain age have darkened its doors at least once. A buddy of mine went early one Monday morning after a night of drinking and a huge fight with his girlfriend. To his surprise, the dancer that night was his best friend's wife. The rest of the story is a product of my imagination and countless hours spent in dive bars and rural hunting towns.*

*My writing is influenced by a few desperate streams of American literature—the early hunting and fishing adjacent stories Hemingway wrote, the gritty blue-collar stories of Bukowski and Carver, and finally, the rural storytelling of Bonnie Jo Campbell. Reinventing Maria was my humble attempt to write a classic love triangle story with an Americana vibe.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** JD Clapp writes in San Diego, CA. His work has appeared in Cowboy Jamboree, Revolution John, Poverty House, and numerous others. His story, *One Last Drop*, was a finalist in the 2023 Hemingway Shorts Literary Journal, Short Story Competition. [www.jdclappwrites.com](http://www.jdclappwrites.com)