

She was Australian

By Joey Cruse

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor BARBARA YOSHIDA writes...*

Cruse writes here about a moment in time. Not just the moment when boy meets girl, but a kind of moment that, for most people, can only happen when they're young enough to take a risk and free enough to do it. Cruse's writing takes you to that place and you remember how it felt—a time of experimentation when you could let go of any restrictions. Cruse captures it poignantly. In the story, Joey does consider possible consequences, but continues to go along and see what happens. I identified instantly with him. Like Joey, I wondered how this would end. And the end was gratifying.

Cruse's style fits perfectly with Joey's fuck-it-let's-see-where-this-goes vibe. It's loose and free-wheelin', but don't be fooled, that style belies a tight, well constructed story. How Cruse does this in only 12+ pages is evidence of his skill. Joey's dialogue and thoughts are very real, and using both to define character in so few pages is no mean feat. The parts about the French families and Janine's Australian accent add another dimension, another layer, more texture to the story that makes it real. The story has an arc and good pace—kept my interest from start to finish.

So many great passages to quote, but here are 3 good ones:

Roll me up with the trash and float me to drift with the rest of that unforgivable mountain of waste in the Pacific.

I was in til' the end of this futile romance, til' Janine finally said 'goodbye,' because, as Slim Pickens demonstrated, though well aware it would all be over, was always going to end this way, in deafening silence and fire and ash, it's still a real good fucking ride down on the bomb.

And the orange highway, taking me across a lake I've never swam, into yet another city that wasn't truly mine, but was looking better and better in a new sense of love and madness, laughed back – highways don't cry.

Definitely 5 stars!

Senior Editor CHARLES writes... *Joey Cruse is one of a handful of literary artists who raise the stakes in whatever journal or zine has the luck to publish them. His is the kind of writing that*

can't be taught in a classroom, either grade school or MFA in CW. You either have it or you don't and Joey has it in unfair abundance. When the talent you are born with reaches this level of craft and authenticity, art is inevitable. And yo, Barbara, Tom and I both agree. Five stars, dude!.

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

She asked me, "how did you know I was from the South?"

"There, I could understand your accents easier. I'm not a shit listener so it was never bad, but certainly a noticeable difference South to North – same sure as fuck exists in this country. Never went West, but I imagine Outback, desert speech sounds different."

"You'd be surprised."

"Christ, I hope so."

She was Australian

Criers offer trashcan beer at 3 for 1. Costumed monsters, painted silver, startle babies after parents give a dollar. The drunk and stoned dress dogs in sunglasses, alcohol, and coffins for money or weed if you "stop and smile." Poets hock words for 20 bucks and your lack of critique. Children laugh at the blonde, upchucking her hand grenade, while pointing at the tits (not their first) of her friend showing nothing for beads not thrown during Mardi Gras. Thousands drunk, drinking, begging, offering up wallet and limb for drugs or pussy or ass or all three, and not one person cared for anyone but themselves.

I was anonymous and anonymity makes loneliness easier to bear when you can't stand yourself or anyone else, and this beautiful woman had the empathy to speak to the only drunk by

themselves in MaMa's Tequileria with the audacity and presumed know-better to nudge her drinking arm.

I tossed a nonchalant, "sorry."

"No worries," she returned with smile and bubbles.

An accent? Oh? Nine times out of ten when I managed to eavesdrop on foreign, I'd be stumbling on Royal into a used-up, gangly-looking French bastard and his ugly wife and ugly children speaking in fast and vapid clarity. Where was their fashion, their joie de vivre, their raison d'être? These people could camouflage themselves with garbage. I recalled, then, that France historically sent their shit, rich people to New Orleans and generally as punishment for some unforgivable misdeed they did at home. So here we are now, stuck with ugly, mean, French families, standing in bars next to beauty wondering how to place this woman's gorgeous accent without cocking it up or taking on the persona of every inept American. No, the girl standing next to me was objective at-trac-tive, an aesthetic attractive concrete enough in everyone's individual mindset that would make even Eliot cream himself. I took a shot in the dark as I am a firm believer in suave first impressions.

"You're from Soooouth Australia...?"

"Melbourne."

She was Australian. That should be enough – it was for me. Brunette, lovely, she had freckles you wouldn't mind taking hours to learn and these big, but not too big of, front teeth and blue-grey, ocean eyes. Shorter than me, but not with the stockiness some short humans grow into, she held herself on legs in tight jeans and had gorgeous ears. I can forgive a lot of oddly shaped body parts, but ugly ears make for a hard, gawky fucking head to stare at. The rest of her

was covered in rain-breaker and backpack, and as I didn't need to know what was underneath you simply don't get to.

She asked me, "how did you know I was from the South?"

"There, I could understand your accents easier. I'm not a shit listener so it was never bad, but certainly a noticeable difference South to North – same sure as fuck exists in this country. Never went West, but I imagine Outback, desert speech sounds different."

"You'd be surprised."

"Christ, I hope so."

"Why were you in Australia?"

"Student program."

"What are you doing here?"

"Drinking," I was a dick, with that tone, being snarly, but it was true.

"By yourself?"

"By myself."

"I get the feeling you do that often," she smiled.

She was coy and clever and leaned to nudge my shoulder with hers, giving me shit, to make me smile. And, because I have smiled happily back at someone showing a genuine grin since birth, I did.

"What's your name?"

"Janine," she could tell me her name a thousand times and if it sounded just like she had told me I would listen, "yours?"

"Joey. Joseph. Never Joe. I'm not a plumber – not that I have anything against plumbing or those who plumb."

She laughed, “what do you do?”

Only by sheer, dumb fucking luck had I managed to stumble upon this sweet unicorn of a woman out of all the women in the world. If she asked me to come to Australia, I would’ve traded my piece of shit car in for cash and sold blood, body, and semen to afford a ticket.

She asked, “you’re not from around here, yeah?”

“Moved from Illinois.”

“Then why Louisiana?”

“The ex and I split because I slept with her sister’s wife. Thus, I am here.” I pointed to myself and tried to slow the horseracing pace of my voice. “I’m what you call ‘horrible human.’”

“Wife?”

“Wife.”

She angled her head and raised her eyebrows enough to make the tiny whistle between her lips verge almost on impressed, but not, “you screw up big.”

I’ve no argument to said statement for years, “yes, I fucking well do. I figure if you’re going to screw up, then you might as well go straight into ruined and not pussyfoot. You’re lying to yourself doing anything else. Funny story in the scope of time, really, but right now it sucks ludicrously fatter cock than any pornstar has. Then again, they’ve seen some cock and would probably say it can still get worse.”

“Your eyes got bright when you talked about her.”

“They do that. Little Gabbie Gertrudes, open and eager.”

I thought can eyes be both voyeur and whore? I didn’t know and I didn’t have the luxury of too much digression. She snorted and tried not to laugh her drink onto the bar. Holding her hand up to her mouth, she swallowed, “Gabbie Gertrude?”

“I got tired of saying Chatty Cathy, so I started to blurt the first different association that came to mind. Talkative Tammy, Conversational Carrie, Gossipy Gale, lot of c’s and g’s, Loquacious Lucy, Jealous Julie. Well, she doesn’t apply within the context of talking, but you get the point. ‘You’re being a,’ and I held my left hand to my left side, ‘situational adjective,’ and I held my right hand to the right, ‘plus alliterative name.’” I put my head down and leaned, stretching, shaking off the searing self-awareness of my inexhaustible lameness.

She glanced up (she was shorter, it couldn’t be helped) with brightness and tequila and affection. Her cheekbones rose, she put wetted lips together, and, in stripped-down, earnest seriousness said, “you could be someone I love.”

And I remembered how easy it was to be completely ready to give everything to someone else without any care of the consequences, without the fear of being a fool. I needed to say something, anything, amazing, a response allowing me to close the small gap of space between us, which was quite small at this point, to test if she would be interested, but, completely unnerved by her statement, I ended up mumbling something incredibly fucking stupid and banal and devoid of wit or charm or sophistication.

“I was thinking the exact same thing, so what are you doing here?”

Roll me up with the trash and float me to drift with the rest of that unforgivable mountain of waste in the Pacific. We’re you thinking the exact same thing? Christ. Start liking it now. Sexually frustrated with word impotence. I might as well have been born mute –more mystery one can work with there.

“My boyfriend and I are traveling the country.”

Fuuuuuuuuuccckkkkmmmyyyyyyyhhheeeeeaaaaarrrrrrttttttt...

My ears perked and my head snapped, tilted, like a dog confused at his owner, but I heard the phrase as well as you can read.

“We started in Los Angeles. Stopped in Vegas, Austin. Been in New Orleans for three days. We leave for Miami tomorrow morning and tonight is our last little ‘hurrah’ here. After Miami, we fly to LAX and back to Australia,” and she pointed to the shaggy looking character that had chatted with me for thirty minutes before I decided that it was best to separate myself from society and that they would never know the difference.

Oh, dearest Cosmos, how you’re always good for one hey-I’ll-cook-you-breakfast-the-next-day-but-not-really-cook-you-breakfast-the-next-day, universal fucking after another. I stood there, reminded why unicorns are unicorns (because they are an IMAGINARY, IMPOSSIBLE fucking animal to capture), taking it.

Looking over, all the while thinking ‘you deserve this,’ and I did, I was determined not to be daunted by some schlub who was probably more eloquent than I and who could still snake charm me with his accent. Standing in the middle of New Orleanites, he was the life of the party, telling jokes, comparing and contrasting all of the Americana he’d seen over the past week and a half to Australia - in preference of the latter and much to everyone’s humor, but more so their blatant, oblivious chagrin. How do you look at a sloppy, beach fit, livelier than any man that you’ve met so far in a city you have just spent four hours hating everyone in man, and then make the conscious decision to fuck their girlfriend, if she let you and wanted to in total choice, knowing that your probability of success is about the same as finding pi and then being allowed to figuratively fuck all of the decimals?

I stood there trying to salvage a sentence. She saw me stumble, and I made a poor attempt not to show my face’s honest disappointment. Selfish, and too engaged in my moment to

remember talking to him, it didn't occur for me to put two and two together and recognize that, odds are, the only other guy in the room with an Australian accent would be dating the ONLY fucking woman in the room with the same.

“Bryce, come here, yeah?”

He would be. To all the Bryce's throughout space/time and spelling: your name is awful.

“I want you to meet someone,” and she got off her stool and walked towards the bathroom.

Clever girl.

She thought there was no chance in hell I would watch her legs walk off face to face with good-guy, boyfriend. I didn't get to see her legs, but I caught her eyes in mine glancing back before opening the women's. As I put my hand out to shake, failing to avoid the impending conversation, I realized I was bullshitting myself to feel meagerly better, but, still, it WAS better to think those eyes held some immediate and fleeting emotion for me so I was perfectly alright letting the lie roll.

He shook mine with a forgetful, “déjà vu, yeah, mate?”

There it was. The obligatory, Australian ‘mate.’ I had the sneaking suspicion that Janine was doing her damndest not to let that slip out - as I imagine that any Australian in America immediately gets asked to say ‘g'day mate’ and that that gets fucking annoying - but the word must've been a part of his subconscious lexicon because he didn't give shit. Bryce could have cared less if I existed, let alone thought of sleeping with his woman, for the sheer fact that he didn't have to. (Boats in some of the most exotic waters on Earth and he took a three-week break to hang out in America? Yeah-fucking-right, mate.) We were similar in our insignificance to each other and I was still going to shamelessly entertain bedding his lady down, just like him.

Although let's admit, here and now, that we've always known it would be all for naught. I was in til' the end of this futile romance, til' Janine finally said 'goodbye,' because, as Slim Pickens demonstrated, though well aware it would all be over, was always going to end this way, in deafening silence and fire and ash, it's still a real good fucking ride down on the bomb.

Janine walked up, "dirtiest fucking bathrooms," she put her arm around Bryce's waist and patted his side with her palm, resting her hand in his pocket, "we have an early plane, baby."

I had two choices: smile, say my 'goodbyes' with hugs and handshakes, turn around, and walk right the fuck in the opposite direction, towards what I imagine would've been a combination of more alcohol and southern style, fatty, rich deliciousness to soothe my self-loathing, ooooo I could've done what I did.

"What hotel are you staying at?"

"The Holiday Inn – the one with a clarinet on it."

I had passed out in that hotel one night. I was relatively familiar with how to get there.

We paid our tabs and walked out the tequileria back onto the streets and down Conti towards the Mississippi. An Asian cellist and her lady black lover on guitar echoed 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' along the cobbles, and, although we were walking to my car, Bryce had taken lead once I pointed him in the right direction and was having a dandy time wobbling ahead of everyone singing "Waltzing Matilda" over the instruments. I had never seen anyone drunkenly sing their unofficial anthem with such zeal, and it was arrogant to bogart someone else's happiness, smiling at his humor of the world, but I still did.

Janine was walking within two feet of me. If I put my arm out, I could've reached over her shoulder. I didn't but kept pace while she inched closer and closer to me - to the point that we were walking down the street side by side. I can always be wrong, but I was convinced she was

doing this on purpose. The cost analysis of rubbing shoulders and arms with me seemed much more of a risk than simply not touching me. As if there was an agency and implication behind her subtle but obvious actions. I was too enamored to fathom a reasonable emotion that sufficed as a motive for doing so in front of the boyfriend though. Lust? Adventure? Love? I hoped there was some form of emotional honesty, but, in all excitement that comes from doing the unforgivable, between her arm and the small weight of her body pressured against mine, walking, in the lights and shadows of two-stories, shotgun housing, and one of the sleaziest, ratbox, massage-your-cock-for-money Asian massage parlors I've ever had the pleasure of seeing, I didn't honestly fucking care and didn't want her to stop.

It dawned upon me I had no fucking idea what I was doing or what I was getting into. Hadn't I read enough about bums being rolled outside of New Orleans' bars, wads taken by cheap women in cheap motels, in Bukowski or the overwhelming foolishness in that poor, Southern, bastard Toole? Didn't I listen well enough when Waits sings about love and sadness for the Crescent City, losing everything having had nothing? Shortsightedly nowhere near exhausted of possibilities, in my mind there were only three scenarios to be played out that evening: 1) the oldest story in the book: a couple befriends a loner off the road or in the streets or in a bar, the woman is cold but beautiful and knows her way into a heart or a fly, the man doesn't care he wants to get drunk, the woman flirts, the woman touches, the woman seduces, maybe an h.j. in the backseat while the guy drives, and BAM the loner ends up rolled in the fucking parking lot for his no money, car, and, in this city, his life only to be found the next day as another murder that was senseless and didn't matter and wasn't worth the 27 dollars; 2) with less chances of being murdered in the end but with being murdered still certainly in the cards, I was entering a weird, possibly rapey, sex game/threesome with these two - which, if so, I hoped they

would bring it up sooner rather than later so I could mentally prepare myself for if, or when, they refused to let me back out; or 3) I'd take them to the hotel.

I was parked in a semi, well-lit parking lot next to the Mississippi that didn't quite inappropriately finger you on parking and was familiar enough that I could walk back no matter where I was in the city or in what condition. I told Bryce and Janine to wait by the car while I went over to the ticketing machine to pay. Paid the 12 dollars for however many hours and walked back to the car. Janine was leaning on the back of the car next to Bryce who was sitting on top of the trunk. They both looked at each other.

Janine said, "we want to smoke before bed. Do you smoke?"

"What?"

She smiled, her eyebrows supercilious, "weed, Joey."

The last thing I expected to happen was for Janine to whip off her backpack and rummage out a swirled, glass mouthpiece and small plastic baggie with an almost used up nugget inside, but - lesson for the day, kiddies - when the pretty girl whom you're attracted to offers, even though it'd been a while and you've been drinking AND you were about to drive through a crowded city, you don't say, 'no, I don't smoke pot, but I think you're really pretty,' you say, 'yes,' and shut your goddamn mouth and take the hit and go with it. I could describe the scene in great detail, with psychedelics and kaleidoscope colors, a great euphoria looking up at the stars, realizing how small you are, or with watching the lights of the city shift with the mood of its people and the two next to me, but, honestly, it wasn't that exciting. If you've been high more than twice in your life, then you know the feeling is a mellow mediocrity. If you haven't been high at all in your life, then you should probably go get high and try it on.

Bryce sat in the passengers' while Janine got in back directly behind me. He hadn't compensated the weed with the drink (he was on vacation) and when Janine closed the door his head hit the window with an all too pleasant thud. She was trying to apologize to me and yell into his unconscious not to "vomit all over the fucking car."

I was asshole-ly tickled.

He kept it together and I pulled out of the parking spot and exited the lot. There was a flash of blue and the warning pop of two sirens crackled out from a loudspeaker. A white SUV pulled out, blocking the right side of the road from getting onto St. Peters. I didn't hear the first sentence yelled from the intercom between a stomach-pitting fear and the fact that I was busy giving Janine the "hey-there's-a-chance-that-we're-going-to-jail-between-me-driving-and-you-carrying-so-be-prepared-for-that" speech.

Janine asks in my ear, "what should I do with our things?"

A part of me took time to like that, "ours."

"I don't know. Hiding em' won't matter a fucking bit," was all I could murmur without taking both of my hands off the wheel and turning so it most assuredly looked like I was telling someone to do something in the back. We were about as fucked as fucked as three people could get, but you can't just say that out loud. You've got to stay cool. Stay cool in the face of everything you're about to lose, and had a large part in setting yourself, and others, up for. (Because there are always are consequences for your ridiculous version of love. Didn't you know? You utter dumbfuck.) And time stopped for three seconds and the dread of disappointment by friends and family, the lawyer, the slap in the face by someone you love, the sentence, the community service, the useless rehab, the parole, the forced house arrest, the lack of privacy, and the cost and the cost and the cost. I rolled down the window.

“ONE WAY STREET!”

The intercom kicked on again with a little less re-verb.

“YOU”VE GOT TO TURN AROUND.”

Sweet fucking murdered saints and baby Jesus. The car was security for Harrah’s, blocking off some monstrosity tour bus of a ludicrous country singer five years past his prime, and wasn’t looking to do anything but make sure I didn’t drive right into his fucking car. As I stuck my hand out the window, to wave thanks in desperate appreciation, my arm shook the left to right out of fingers. I three-pointed and drove off into traffic and silence.

“Your hotel’s this way.”

I knew her reply as the statement escaped my mouth.

“I think I’ll walk Bryce the rest of the way.”

“It’s not fa-.”

“I don’t want him to throw up in your car. Really. It’s better if we walk.”

I twisted my head back and saw a tired terror. The residual effects of adrenaline and fear having been helpless in fight or flight. I became the loner who kidnaps the drunk couple out of country and makes them disappear. I was the terribleness I spent so much time convincing myself I wasn’t. Janine didn’t hate me. She wanted out and away and onto the comfort of the streets, in command of herself. Janine tapped Bryce on the shoulder, roughly, making him wake up. There was no parking. The two would have to get out at the same time on a stoplight. I braked onto Chartres’ when the light turned red, Janine got out, opened Bryce’s door for him, and looked inside, “sorry.”

“Never to apologize to me.”

She whispered back too quietly, and I couldn't make out the words. The door closed and it was over, if it ever had started. I watched Janine put her arm around Bryce and point in the direction of their hotel. The light turned and I drove off. I hooked a left on Dauphine and took Poydras to I-10, breathed deep, and laughed and laughed a hilarious existence into the face of all that happened until I cried. And the orange highway, taking me across a lake I've never swam, into yet another city that wasn't truly mine, but was looking better and better in a new sense of love and madness, laughed back – highways don't cry. She was Australian and I had a thing for Australians, and I had felt love again and it was finally fucking good to be alone.

I did deserve it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I started this story eight years ago when I moved to Louisiana from Illinois. Like many others, the piece began as a way for me to, I think confession is the wrong word choice here, excise some of my past out of my head and onto the page, so it began as it ended – with catharsis. I wanted readers to know that they are most definitely reading and engaging with me throughout – hence, using my actual name within the piece. To that end, apart from a few name changes to people (for privacy), places (the tequilaria on Bourbon wasn't called MaMa's), and a lack of transcribed dialogue (real life needs some style and flair, right?), the story is, call it, 97% true, and the sentiment of crafting myself as an anti-hero – as both a relatable and sensitive character, yet incredibly flawed human – was necessary to come into my own, in a new place, as a person searching for connection in someone else.

Influences:

It's hard for me to read this over again and not see spackles of Bukowski, Fante, Richard Brautigan, Nabokov, Céline, Phillip Ó Ceallaigh, Burroughs, or even John Kennedy Toole (it truly is a Confederacy of Dunces). But, more importantly I think in reflection, is the immense impact New Orleans had/has/and continues to affect my writing.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and teacher. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhet./Comp., when not getting into trouble he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other short story work has been featured in Phree

Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press.

EDITOR'S BIO: Barbara Yoshida is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work has been exhibited throughout NYC, the U.S., and internationally. Her short play, *Language Games*, can be seen in *Fleas on the Dog*, Issue 6, Part 2 (plays & screenplays), and was presented in NYC's Rogue Theater Festival in December, 2020. Also during December, a trailer of the film, *Language Games*, was shown prior to an artist talk in *AD ABSURDUM: The Politics and Poetics of Absurdity* by the Philadelphia Avant-Garde Studies Consortium (PASC). After taking Peculiar Works Project production and publicity photos for over a decade and editing too many grant applications, she began working as a dramaturg on projects such as *Planet X* (Black Mountain College), *2 Jane Jacobs* (Cherry Lane Theater) and *Son of Cock-Strong* (La MaMa). Other than English, she speaks French, Japanese, and Spanish (some more than others). She has served on the Board of PWP since its inception in 1993. You can visit Barbara at www.barbarayoshida.com Her latest monograph (below) is now available.

MOON VIEWING

Megaliths by Moonlight

Photographs by Barbara Yoshida

Essay by Lucy R. Lippard

Foreword by Linda Connor

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