

## *Paul Stapleton*

### **Gotham City Goth**

It was the late 1980s, and I had not kissed a woman since a night in early autumn when I took my girlfriend Mina to see the Yankees at the Stadium. After the game she informed me, while we lingered in our seats and watched the crowds shrink away (it was a practice of mine to be the last person out of a stadium), that if I did not want to marry her sometime soon and start a family, then she, being twenty-seven and not getting any younger, really thought we should put an end to the whole charade.

We had been dating almost a year, and it was not the first time she had ever threatened this. Nor was it the first time I had ever responded that I wanted to wait until things were right. As I tallied up the runs, hits, and errors in my scorebook, however, it was definitely the first time she had ever shouted, “Arthur! I’ve had enough of your waiting, so why don’t you add that into your little checkbook.”

“Scorebook.”

“What?”

“It’s not a checkbook. It’s a scorebook.”

This was also the first time she had ever slapped me in the face. Then she clicked off with her boot-heels echoing around the grandstand, while a beer vendor, a red-capped usher, and a full-grown man dressed in a full pinstriped Yankee ensemble, shook their heads, first at Mina, in admiration of her spunk and sashay, then at me, indignant at my seeming lack of appreciation of the woman I was letting walk out of my life.

After that night, I lifted weights in my apartment on the Upper West Side, slept until noon on the weekends, read the early edition of the Sunday *Times* on Saturday nights, and attended many sporting events. I had always loved the big four sports of baseball, football,

basketball, and hockey, so there was no surprise that I could not get enough of the Knickerbockers and the Rangers, but I never would have guessed how quickly I would develop an appreciation for Madison Square Garden's wide range of events, kennel shows and indoor track-and-field meets, rodeos and monster-truck derbies, boxing and music concerts, while sitting in the cheap, rafter seats, mostly alone. I also signed up for membership in the New York Road Runners club, collecting t-shirts from the 5ks of every charitable organization known to the five boroughs, but inevitably crawling out of bed long after their Saturday morning start times, then on Sundays, to make up for it, running marathon-length distances along the Hudson and back up the East Side, cutting back to my apartment through Central Park and, through it all, telling myself how much I enjoyed my freedom and my solitude.

But it was a lie. I tried very hard to convince myself otherwise, but the fact was I was lonely. I was in the middle of the biggest city in the country, living with millions of human beings, yet I felt isolated and removed. I did date a few women after Mina, a girl I knew from college here, a woman from a Christmas party there, but my loneliness had just as much to do with the very person I would find myself sitting across from at a restaurant table as it did with anything else. So my go-to solution was to hop on the 1 train to Penn Station, scalp a ticket from one of the hustlers roaming outside the Garden, and join the masses in cheering on whatever it was we were cheering about that night. It was far easier applauding the likes of Patrick Ewing and Brian Leetch than it was negotiating all the reasons why some Susan or Alice or Wendy did not understand me, or me her.

My best friend and former law-school roommate Larry Berger, or, to be more precise, engaged-to-be-married and wildly successful litigation lawyer Larry Berger, did not understand me, either.

"Arthur, you're turning into one of those guys who shows up on the eleven o'clock news after the body parts are found in his freezer, his neighbors saying, 'He was a nice guy, but sort of a loner.'"

We had met for breakfast in one of the diners outside the Bronx

County Courthouse on 161<sup>st</sup> Street, a few blocks from the Stadium. Larry believed the only path to success was his path, and though he meant well, for various reasons, including Mina, he was convinced I had gone astray.

“It’s been nearly six months since Mina. Don’t you think it’s time for a full-fledged relationship?”

“Look, man, I’m content. Besides, love is a matter of chance. It’s best not to force the issue.”

“Content? Then why are you calling me every night to meet at the Garden?”

“It’s not every night.”

This he ignored. “As for love, what do you know? It’s in the official record book that you kissed away a very lovely woman in the name of your scorecard.”

“Scorebook.”

“Oh, go to hell.”

At work, one of the secretaries in the law office, Sheila, had been pestering me about a friend of hers named Bellie.

“She’s great,” Sheila told me.

“I don’t go on blind dates, not with any bellies anyway. No tummies or heinies, either.”

“You’re not funny. It’s short for Isabella, and what’s wrong with a blind date?”

“It’s forcing the issue.”

“You mean it’s desperate?”

“I mean love comes by chance, not design.”

“Who’s talking about love? We’re talking about a date. You’ll have a good time.”

“People who go on blind dates are looking.”

“And you’re not looking?” Sheila raised an eyebrow in accusation. I liked Sheila, and I suspected she knew it. Sheila Coletti, Italian American, pretty, definitely sexy, with sass and a sense of humor. I suspected, too, that she liked me. There was something subliminal between us, call it a vibe. Unfortunately, she was *Mrs.* Sheila Coletti,

with Bruno the husband, a shop steward in the pipefitter's union, about whom there was nothing subliminal.

"I think there's a good chance you'll like her," she said.

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, she's beautiful."

I had learned long ago from my grandmother, who called any woman "beautiful" who happened to have a full set of teeth, that a woman's "beautiful" has nothing to do with a man's "beautiful."

"Who says she's beautiful?"

Sheila recognized what I was getting at.

"Men say," she said.

"Let them take her out then."

"Oh, come on."

"What's in it for you?"

"Nothing's in it for me. I think you'll like each other."

"Is she one of those gold diggers who thinks all lawyers are rich?"

"She knows you're a defense attorney."

"Bring in a picture."

In the meantime, I was working on the case of one self-proclaimed Banana Ice, a case which appeared to be going to trial for no other reason than that Banana Ice was a lunatic. The guy, along with his bleach-blond crew cut and rat's tail, had been arrested for injuring a man in a barroom brawl, though he refused to believe this was the true reason he was in jail. He even refused to meet the amount set for bail, though it was hardly exorbitant, claiming he would have "no truck with injustice." In his mind he was being persecuted for what he referred to as his "God-given obsession."

"The flames make me feel really good, Lawyer, like powerful," he told me, "like Vulcan, like fire, stoked up for Venus." He confessed to me all the buildings he had set ablaze, seemingly dozens across the borough of the Bronx, and when, out of curiosity, I had some of his anecdotes fact-checked by my investigator, sure enough, some of Banana Ice's details added up, though many did not. Every time I visited him in the courthouse pens, he waxed radiant about his

“fireworks,” how they heated him up in more ways than one, how afterwards he would cruise the streets of the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, weaving his K-car among the tractor trailers parked outside the massive wholesale market, engaging in “sex sprays,” as he called them, picking up woman after woman—“strictly professional relationships,” he said, as if his sexual liaisons were the moral equivalent of having his hair cut by a lady barber. As for the term “sex sprays,” I could never figure out if he meant *sprees* or if it was some kind of convoluted metaphor, streetwalkers hosing down Banana Ice like firefighters dousing the smoldering flames. Amazingly the man still held a nine-to-five as a janitor for the phone company, turning to his obsession, he said, only on Friday nights so that by Monday morning he would always be “fresh like a daisy” and ready for work. “Gotta take care of the family,” he assured me. (Yes, Ice was married with two kids.) A real Jeckyl-and-Hyde. A real wackjob.

Back in the office Sheila eventually did bring in a picture of her friend, and Bellie was indeed beautiful, like a model, blond hair, curvaceous, well-proportioned. Still, I felt as if the whole matter was the business of desperation. Call me a romantic, but with love I believed, or at least hoped, you cannot make it happen. It just happens on its own, of its own accord. Wasn't that what Cupid was all about?

I met Larry again for breakfast to talk over my ideas on love. And Isabellie.

“Chance my ass.”

“What do you mean? It was complete chance the way I met Mina,” I said.

I had met Mina because she was the Spanish translator in night court, a night I was dealing with arraignments, a night I was not even supposed to be in night court, but was, because another attorney from the Bronx Office of Public Defense, the one who was supposed to be there, decided at that point to sneak out on his wife of ten years and run away with one of his clients, a certain lady of the night whom, it was established, he had met in night court itself—the two never to be seen or heard from again. Being the rookie in the office, it was my

turn to pinch hit, and so I ended up in the same court with Mina, a circumstance that probably kept me in the relationship far too long, as I reveled in the fact that it partially lived up to my love-as-chance philosophy.

“Yeah, but it was not chance you were both looking for somebody,” Larry reminded me.

“But it was chance we were both in that courtroom.”

“So what? There was more to it. You hit it off, found each other attractive. You figured there might be a chance—”

I slapped his shoulder. “Chance! Exactly, my friend.”

Larry smiled. “Not that kind of chance, you idiot. You know what I mean. It was reasonable to think something might work out.”

“Still chance, and, unfortunately, the woman began to drive me crazy. She was too much about performance.”

“What do you mean ‘performance’?”

“You know, the high heels, the revealing clothes, the perfectionist make-up.”

“So? What the hell is wrong with a little femininity?”

“It got to be too much of an act. I mean do you really need to dress up like Jayne Mansfield just to sit in the grandstand at Yankee Stadium?”

“I’m not following. The woman was, and is, amazingly hot.”

Our omelets arrived, and we ate in silence, listening to a pair of old men in the next booth discussing the daily races.

“Too much role playing, and expectations for me to role play, too,” I said. “Holding doors. Ordering for her in a restaurant. The lady and the gentleman. Even in bed, which I won’t get into. And the demand-performance she really wanted was for me to get down on one knee and pop the question. Then we could change into the costumes of Mama and Papa bear. It became a farce, not a relationship.”

“Arthur, man, okay, maybe I get the picture, but you’re missing the point.”

“Which is?”

“Which is, you’ve got an opportunity here to meet this Isabella”—I

had not told him her diminutive nickname—“who apparently comes highly recommended and in your own opinion is quite attractive. You’re not going to meet someone like that with your current routine, locked up in your apartment, skulking around nose-bleed seats at sports arenas.”

“Who knows, maybe I’ll meet someone on the train.”

“Like who? Daisy Buchanan?”

“You mean Myrtle Wilson.”

Larry shot me a cold stare. “You’re a fool.”

Maybe Larry was right.

As for fools, in the pens Banana Ice refused to believe he was not in jail for arson, but in fact for cold-cocking a man in the head, a man who, it seemed to me, actually deserved what he got, as he was conducting his own sex spray—with Banana’s wife, on one of those Fridays when Banana was busy, out burning down the city. As his legal counsel, I did my best to explain to Banana that sometimes you have to control yourself, that violence is not the best method for conflict resolution, that he should have thought twice before hitting the guy. This was my advice to a man who may have been the most prolific arsonist in the history of the City of New York.

Yet this, I can assure you, is the fate of anyone who graduates from law school at the top of his class, Order of the Coif, having spent three years preparing to be a corporate lawyer, memorizing tort law, even publishing an article in a highly respected law journal, only to make the unexpected and noble (at least, in his mind) choice of becoming a public defender. Gone were the days of heady considerations with Larry on the relation between jurisprudence and our future status as millionaires, much less common sense, bound as I now was ethically, for better or for worse, by the attorney-client privilege to clients like Banana Ice.

Yet Banana Ice and his ilk were not exactly what I had in mind when I decided to cast my lot with the downtrodden, who in my naivety I decided were far less intolerable than the shameless, arrogant bastards at the large Manhattan law firm, which will remain unnamed,

where I had interned while in law school, bloodsuckers who seemed to believe the law, and human beings, existed for no other purpose than to increase the jingle of coin in their deep greedy pockets. Upon graduation, the know-it-all idealist I had become, it became nearly impossible for me *not* to reject the six-figure contract the chief partners had generously offered me, and when asked the reason for my surprising, if not insane, decision, I took enormous pleasure in telling them, and I quote, “I guess I’m feeling lucky.”

Now I was lucky enough to be defending Banana Ice, whose own luck, if he was lucky about anything, was due to the extenuating circumstances that, after he smashed his wife’s paramour over the head, the poor slob had not dropped dead, but merely dropped to the ground and snapped his pate against the barroom floor, causing one of his upper vertebrae somehow to fracture, however slightly, which now relegated him to having to run around in one of those halo braces drilled into his skull and strapped to his shoulders to keep his neck straight.

As Banana Ice put it, “That shit’s dumb luck—not my fault. And that ain’t why they got me locked up, either, Lawyer.”

This is how my legal consultations usually played out with Mr. Ice, and every time I tried to reason with him to accept the plea-bargain offered by the assistant DA, a misdemeanor for simple assault, a really good deal in my mind, or anyone else’s mind except Banana’s, he refused, saying he wanted his trial and his fifteen minutes of fame.

“I’ll be taking the stand,” he promised, and I knew he meant it. I could already see the look on the face of the judge who had been assigned to the case, an old-time, no-nonsense closeted strict-constructionist known for his dislike of “whippersnappers just out of la-la school,” who would surely demand to know, as he rightly should, on what planet I thought it good counsel to advise a client to divulge, before the court and under oath, criminal behavior for which he had not been charged. He could have me disbarred.

“Look, Banana, first of all we are not going to trial. You’re risking too much. The plea means no further jail time, and the judge will

definitely not appreciate a misdemeanor traded up for a trial. He'll want you to face real jail time, and I mean a fistful of felonies. Two, the case is not about fires, it's about the assault of Mr. Harker. If you bring up the fires to the judge, you'll be asking for, and getting, even bigger problems."

"Lawyer," he said, "I'll take my chances."

Such was my luck.

So one Friday, after an afternoon of Banana Ice, in need of a little more company than my scorebook, I decided it was time to take some chances myself. Besides it was early April, springtime, a new season. So I called her up, Isabella that is. (Though first I called Larry, looking for moral support, whose response the minute I said hello was "No, I'm not interested in a game tonight.") Bellie herself balked at the idea of a Yankee game, too, saying it was not "romantic" enough, which I conceded, even for a blind date, so we agreed to meet the next night at a restaurant in Little Italy she had heard good things about, which, when I arrived for our rendezvous, turned out to be no bigger than a living room.

"So Sheila tells me you're a fashion designer."

Bellie rose from her seat in this crowded little restaurant, stepped back from the table, and spun herself around. I glanced uneasily to my sides, sensing the heat of all eyes upon us.

"A dancer?" I asked.

She laughed and sat back down. "No, silly. I designed this dress."

I did not appreciate being called "silly" by a person who had just spun a pirouette in a place meant for eating linguini.

"It's..." I had no idea what to say. "Pretty."

The dress was concocted of varied strips of fabric sewn together like a quilt. There were strips of yellow taffeta, red silk, green corduroy, blue denim, purple suede, you name it. Every third strip was sequined.

"Pretty? That all you can muster, Bravo?" she replied. "I've been told by more people than I know that this dress is incredible."

"I guess you could say that, too." At best the dress was incorrigible. And who were these people she didn't even know?

I searched around for the waiter, but he was at another table. I looked back at Bellie, whose dark brown eyes were waiting, fixed on me like a huntress.

“I love your eyes,” she said. “I’ve always wanted a baby with blue eyes.”

I swung my baby blues towards the safety of a droopy-eyed busboy, “Send the waiter, chief. Please.”

Bellie grabbed hold of my hand on the table. “You’re so aggressive,” she said.

“Just hungry.”

“And strong, too.” She stroked my forearm.

I tugged it away. “I lift weights.”

“I noticed,” she said. “If you play your cards right, maybe you’ll pump some iron tonight.” She winked at me.

I snatched a piece of bread from the plastic basket on the table and buttered it briskly.

“Arthur, can you order me a drink?”

“What would you like?”

“Sex on the Beach.” She nodded and twirled her hair with her finger. “It goes down nicely.”

I gulped down my water.

The waiter appeared, and I lobbed out the name of the drink. I ordered a whiskey for myself.

“So how do you know Sheila anyway?” I asked. Sheila had some serious explaining to do.

“College.”

“Really?” I knew Sheila graduated from a two-year secretarial school in midtown.

“But after a year I transferred to the Fashion Institute.”

She was probably kicked out of the secretarial school.

“What interested you in fashion design?” I asked.

“Honestly?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I wondered what new minefield I had wandered into.

“I’ve always been fascinated with the clothed body, knowing it’s naked underneath.”

The waiter arrived with our drinks, Sex on the Beach and my shot of whiskey. Given the pornographic name of the drink, I probably should have expected something in the vein of Bellie’s subsequent performance. But how could I have? In any case, Bellie proceeded to demonstrate an oral acumen which I suppose she thought would leave a grand impression on me, as she teased her drink with her tongue, audibly sipping, all the while peering up, eyelashes batting, seemingly trying to feign demureness in the course of seducing her stir-straw. When she had finished, she said, “This is so good.”

I didn’t know if I should laugh or run. Instead I asked, “Do you travel much with your job?”

I had the sinking feeling I’d become the victim of some kind of cruel office joke.

“Arthur?” Bellie tugged a strand of her long blond hair in front of her face like a little girl, blond hair which in person I could now see was deeply rooted in black. Then she blew the strand away. “Can I tell you something personal?”

If she had not worn the quilt, or spun pirouettes, or fellated cocktails, or been fascinated with clothed bodies—or naked bodies, I wasn’t sure which—or if she had not ogled and pawed at me like a feline, I might have had some desire to know something personal about Bellie. I scratched my nose. She giggled.

“It’s nothing bad,” she said.

So I knew it had to be. I could feel embarrassment blush across my face, and I wished I was at the Yankee game, upstairs in the grandstand, alone with my scorebook and pencil.

“If you’re liking me as much as I like you, I want you to know,” she said, “I’m ovulating. In case you’re interested.”

I drained the whiskey and, when the opportunity presented itself, excused myself to the men’s room, slapping a twenty into the waiter’s hand as I traipsed through the kitchen and out the back door into some kind of a labyrinth of a hallway that led me into the kitchen precincts

of another restaurant. A wizened old cook was holding court with a cleaver in his hand, screaming in an Italian accent to no one I could discernibly see about how you make the pesto with the locatelli, not with the stupid parmesan. He seemed to take no notice of the stupid me as I scuttled past him into the dining room, where I shot a beeline out the front door and onto the street (though to this day I have not forgotten his recipe for pesto). It was an overcast night, but a full moon hovered in the sky, shining through the veil of clouds like a phantom. I took to my heels and skedaddled, sprinting for blocks, not caring where I was headed, straight out of Little Italy onto the Bowery and on up to Houston Street where I spotted a payphone.

I called Larry, thinking maybe we could meet somewhere since he lived reasonably nearby, over in the West Village. I needed someone to commiserate.

“What happened with Isabella?” was the first thing he said, not even a *hello*.

“The woman was a circus.”

“A circus?”

“A clown anyway.” I described the dress.

“How did she like you?”

“How? She wanted me to impregnate her right there in the restaurant.” I explained to him about Bellie’s fertility cycle.

“At least you went out,” was Larry’s response.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said. “The woman’s got all the makings of a stalker.”

Larry laughed. “I’m sure she’s dangerous,” he said.

“Listen, man, it’s not funny.”

“So get yourself a drink.”

“I’m not the type to drink alone.” Which I wasn’t.

“You’re a big boy.”

“What are you doing tonight?” I asked him, as if I didn’t know.

“I’m over here with Ashley.”

“Want to meet?”

“I can’t just leave.”

“Why not? You’re with her every night.”

There was silence on his end of the phone.

“Look, man, I’d love to,” he said.

“But?”

“But I can’t.”

I slammed down the phone, though I did grunt “goodbye” as I did so.

I was in alphabet city, a neighborhood I did not particularly like. It was a mishmash of a population, new immigrant families, Eastern Europeans, old timers, mostly Irish, who had been living in the area for decades, and artist types, and scores of runaways from the suburbs who tried to obliterate their respectable upbringings with tattoos, dyed hair, and piercings—for all practical purposes it was like a freak show down there. I wandered around for a while, dropping a buck at a liquor store for a miniature of Irish whiskey (I’ve never been a big drinker), before noticing a tavern with the Yankee game glowing through the window from a television propped on the wall inside. Spinners it was called, and it was a neighborhood bar, not one of the funhouses catering to all the misfits. It seemed like a good place to watch the game and drink some beer without spending a fortune.

I went inside and took a seat, cushioning my airspace with several vacant barstools on either side of me, and ordered a pint of stout, my favorite. The bar was long, stretching back, it seemed, half a mile straight into the shadows of the rear of the establishment where a gang of blue-collar types was shambling around a pool table, bluish smoke billowing beneath a bare dangling light bulb. Other than a few nodding old-timers stooled around the bar, the place was fairly empty. I focused on the Yankee game on the television.

After a while I ordered a second pint. On the television set, the Yanks scored on a real fluke, and the replay was shown over and over again. With a man on third and two gone Mattingly struck out, but the pitch was in the dirt and skirted past the catcher, and according to that arcane rule about uncaught third strikes Donnie Baseball ran to first base as the run from third scored.

“What luck,” I said to no one in particular.

The bartender heard me. “Must be the full moon,” he said.

After another pint I decided to visit the men’s room. I gathered up my change and left a three-dollar tip for the bartender, but when I stood up from my stool, I was a bit surprised that I needed to steady myself to keep my balance.

“Where’s the head?” I called out.

“In the back,” the bartender said.

I navigated myself towards the bathroom but my path was blocked. A guy close to me in age, his hair slicked back, sporting a wife beater and a cigarette propped behind his ear was bent over the pool table, his stance so wide as he drew back his stick that I could not pass. He poked his shot, but the ball caromed wide of the pocket. Instead of standing up to let me pass, however, he remained in his sharpshooter position, prolonging his stance, staring at the table as if stunned by his miscue.

“Excuse me, chief,” I said.

He turned his head slowly and glowered at me. “Yeah?”

“I’d like to get by.”

“I’d like to have made that shot.” A few of his buddies laughed, and he straightened up, but in such a way that I had to turn sideways and practically squeeze past him.

A payphone hung on the wall next to the men’s room, so after visiting the head, I called my answering machine to see if there were any messages, and after pressing in the code—M-I-N-A (I was too lazy to change it)—I said to myself, who am I going to hear from? Banana Ice? So I banged down the receiver, figuring it was time to head home. Besides, it would be late enough now to pick up a Sunday *Times* at the newsstands.

The path was clear past the pool table this time, although Sureshot glared at me as I walked by, puffing now on his cigarette. Maybe he thought I had something to do with his bad aim. I was crossing in front of the bar, headed towards the door, when the bartender belted out, “Hey, you got a round coming to you, Big Timer.” He pointed to the place where I had been pitched out, and there waiting on the bar was a

full pint of stout, poured just right, topped with a nice creamy head. I glanced from the beer to the bartender.

“Go ahead, it’s on the house,” he said.

I liked that he knew the unwritten rule in New York bars, old-school ones anyway, that the fourth drink was on the house. I resumed my position at the bar, and a few stools away a woman was now seated, her legs crossed, sporting a miniskirt and pumps, a glass of red wine placed on the bar before her, seemingly watching the Yankee game, her foot wriggling.

The Yankees scored again on a Mattingly homerun that hit the foul pole. As if no one had seen it right the first time, over and over again the slow-motion replay captured the exact moment when the white baseball collided with the yellow foul pole.

“Lucky night he’s having,” I said aloud. I drank from my pint as if it were water.

“Is such a thing unusual?” She spoke with an accent.

I turned towards her, her face unusually white, with sharp features, a cameo against jet-black hair.

“I haven’t seen it happen in years,” I said. “The most famous was during the ’75 World Series.”

She smiled at me, a thin smile, her ruby lips not parted. We returned to watching the game.

Soon I finished off my pint, and when I barked out to the bartender, “Hey, chieffer, let me get another,” I knew I was drunk. I tilted towards the woman. “Excuse me, would you like another, too?”

She peered at me and then back up at the television. I noticed her foot had stopped wriggling. She spoke without facing me, “Yes, why not?”

“Another glass of wine, too,” I shouted. “Red.”

After the bartender brought our drinks, I lifted my pint for a toast. “To good luck,” I said.

She nodded in agreement and raised her glass. Together we drank.

“I had a date tonight, but it didn’t work out.”

“That is too bad.” Her voice was smoky, and when she spoke her

lips parted very slightly, primly. I wanted to kiss her.

“It’s funny how these things happen,” I said.

She twirled her finger around the edge of her wine glass. I drank from my pint.

“Why is it funny?” she asked, again without facing me.

“I don’t know. You expect one thing and something else happens.”

She looked at me directly for the first time. Her eyes were like emeralds. Then she glanced away, back to the television. “So your date was not nice,” she said. “What is it, this something else?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. Then I sipped my beer, conjuring the possibilities. “My name’s Arthur by the way.”

I stretched forth my hand to shake hers, which she offered hesitantly. Her nails were long and painted red. She shook with her forefinger and thumb.

“A pleasure,” she said.

“And you?”

“Lucy.”

“As in *I Love Lucy*?” I smiled, but she did not return a smile herself, so I realized I needed to clarify. “You know, Lucille Ball.”

She knit her brow quizzically with no sign of recognition.

“You’re not from the U.S.”

She shook her head “no.”

“Eastern Europe?”

She nodded. “Very good. Romania.”

At this I smiled, and Lucy smiled, too, a full smile now, not a thin smile, but a smile that was wide enough for me to notice that Lucy not only had a face like a cameo, eyes like emeralds, long red fingernails, jet-black hair, and an Eastern European accent—Lucy had fangs. Fangs. Honest to God. And I’m not talking about those plastic doodads kids clip on for Halloween. These appeared to be genuine, Bram Stoker-style, ivory white little pointy fangs, though I’ll admit they were tiny.

I downed my beer and eyeballed the Yankee game. I had no idea what to say to Lucy, and I was blatantly about to ask her why she had fangs, which in a way, I don’t think would have been at all out of line,

considering the fact that I had never seen a human being with fangs before, when Sureshot from the pool table slapped me on the shoulder.

“Hey, Big Boy, you got yourself a pretty woman.” He shot me a wide toothy grin. “My boys and me couldn’t help but notice her sweet little thighs.”

Apparently they had yet to notice her sweet little canines. Sureshot then stretched his paws towards Lucy. I don’t know what then got into me, whether it was all the alcohol I had drunk, or the shock of Lucy’s pointy smile, or my dislike for Sureshot, or the disastrous date with Bellie, or the full moon, or maybe all the above, but whatever it was, it was something, because, I assure you, I usually do not go around smashing things over people’s heads. But when Sureshot pressed his paws towards Lucy, that’s what happened. The pint glass shattered against his skull, the moment of collision as clear as the slow-motion replay of Mattingly’s home run. Then everything jumped into fast-forward.

Sureshot dropped to the floor, Lucy screamed, the bartender yanked out a baseball bat, all of Sureshot’s cohorts charged from the back with their pool sticks rampant; I grabbed Lucy’s hand, we bolted out the door, Lucy informed me that she lived around the corner in a basement flat; we hurtled around garbage cans, beggars, and booksellers, leaped down her steps, unlocked her door, fell inside her living room, bolted shut the lock, and toppled on her couch, panting like asthmatics.

That’s when I figured out what to say to Lucy.

“I never kissed a woman with fangs before.”

She looked bemused, but in the dark light of her room that’s exactly what I did.