

Lynda Sexson

Wrecking Ball

“Got the demolition contract today. Old St. Mary’s goes down in April. Yeah, I remember the first time I was ever went inside that old hospital. High school.” Carlos felt his neck turn red as he remembered the girl’s green eyes.

“Yes, everyone remembers the girl who stole prom,” Jennifer snapped. “Easybelly.”

“No. She didn’t steal prom.” Carlos uncorked the wine, his arm prickled recalling the tiny hearts Esabella ballpointed on herself as he had gazed at her in Chemistry, searching for hearts. She missed a lot of school, so he got an A in Chemistry after all. “Her name was Esabella.” Was he admitting too much by saying her name?

Jennifer chopped celery, a pale green girl stretched out on the cutting board.

He meant to sound like a newscaster. “The police took her to St. Mary’s Hospital that night. Her English teacher stayed with her until her mom came.”

“Quite the historian.”

“I went up there that next day pretending to be her brother, but they wouldn’t let me in.”

Jennifer focused on the shirt button at his throat. “So the old hospital conjured her up. Instead of your dying dad. Interesting.” *Interesting* was Jennifer’s word for withering disapproval. She spoke into the simmering soup. “In the ninth grade, when you find out he had set off the fire alarm you decide you could love him.”

He put his arms around her.

She stopped him with a spoon like a knife. “Taste the soup.”

“Mmm, perfect.”

She ground more pepper into it. “Then you forget about him, you do, you forget about him when your scholarships separate you. You leave home, you take water samples in grad school, you come back one Christmas and marry your old high school...” she glanced at Carlos, “...lab partner.”

Carlos handed her a glass. "Here, sugar, a good cab."

Jennifer tossed her wine into the soup. "You are amused when he starts his wrecking ball business, though it never ceases to make you uneasy. You know about the iced animal crackers he secretly keeps in his pickup. A cookie package," she hissed, "labeled *Mother's*."

"So," Carlos coaxed, "Want to do the hospital photo shoot?" Sometimes they made love in his condemned buildings. No luck this time, he figured.

"I can't imagine I'd find St. Mary's as enthralling as you apparently do. Peeling green paint."

"Yep."

"Institutional porcelain."

"Yep. Wide doorway for the gurney. Nurses' station."

"Not exactly architecturally compelling. At least there won't be picketers turning out to delay the demolition. Who hasn't sat with death up there and will be glad to pulverize the old place?"

"Do my pictures. You're the best."

Jennifer cast a little smile. "I have nothing for Easybelly's ghost. You just want me to photograph a bloodstained baseboard in the psych wing."

"She didn't die. She got treatment and went to Cornell."

"You've kept in touch."

"No, that's all I know." Were all the girls from their class still furious with Esabella for capturing their prom so long ago? They just didn't get it. He could still see the girl's heart-shaped face, the little cleft in her chin as though her heart were cracking right in front of him.

"I made thousands of stupid pink flowers. I pounded thousands of nails into that stupid bridge. Designed the program, even scripted the light tech. I let Ross ask me to prom to make lots of people jealous. I set you up with Sherry. Mom took me to Minneapolis for my dress. It was my prom. So why didn't I realize the cops would be on duty?" Her voice rose to the pitch of a sixteen-year-old girl.

Carlos turned and walked out onto the patio. In the cool darkness he recalled that night of public scandal and his secret vision. He was sorry Jennifer remembered any of it; none of the girls had understood. Esabella had stepped onto the bridge among paper flowers assembled by Jennifer's minions. Dan had turned a blue

spotlight on her as Mitch softly played his sax. Esabella arched her back, unzipped her pale satin gown, stepped out of it, and held it against her pale satin skin. She turned her back and shrugged. Who had glued the diaphanous wings to her shoulder blades? Esabella turned back around to the crowd and let the dress slip to the floor. She began to sing *Some say love*, blue and naked, a modest sprite in a paper garden. *It is a river, that drowns the tender reed.* The razor blade had been tucked into paper flowers. *Some say love, it is a razor.* Chaperones shouted for the cops. *That leaves your soul to bleed.* The ambulance arrived before you could cry *Some say love* one more time, and Esabella was wrapped and sired to St. Mary's.

Jennifer came out on the patio. "Okay. I'll do the photos. Cafeteria equipment? Giant rusting can of peaches? Morgue? Slab? Drain? Mold? Radioactive hazard sign? Stray syringe?"

"All for you, sugar."

"I still regret talking her into it," Jennifer whispered.

"What?"

"If you ever tell I'll have to kill you. I superglued her wings because they kept falling off in rehearsal. Later I worried it would scar worse than her slit wrists. She was supposed to use the fake knife and the fake blood."

"What?"

"It was my prom. It had to be amazing," Jennifer sighed.

"What?"

"I sat with her up at St. Mary's, comforting the failed suicide with crumpled, semi-permanent wings. She's okay now. She has two kids and lives in Portland." Jennifer turned to go back inside. "I'll take great pictures. I have the memory of the place."

Carlos turned to follow, walking into the glass door.