

THUNDER ROAD A RIFF

© Perry Glasser



Thunder Road – A Riff

© Perry Glasser

Originally in the *GSU Review*, “Thunder Road – A Riff” is part of the collection, ***metamemoirs*** by Perry Glasser. Publisher and agent inquiries are invited.

Brenda had no illusions about who I was or what she was about. I’d never heard the phrase, *transition woman* until she used it. “You’re in the PDF,” she said. “That makes you fair game.” We were at a campus health bar. She explained. “Post-Divorce Fucking Frenzy,” she said as she wiped an orange mustache of carrot juice from her lip.

She was in my Honors class, a teaching assignment that was a gift to me from my graduate program director for my good work. I’d be leaving Tucson in a few weeks, my graduate degree finished. The class had twenty-five brilliant kids selected from an entering class of 2,500, and Brenda was among the best. Beauty, intelligence, an untrammelled sense of adventure, wealth. Her only liability was certain death at an early age.

She was eighteen when Brenda said to me, “Fifty-fifty I’ll be dead at thirty-two.” She said this as if she were reporting the average rainfall in Mozambique. Knowing she was doomed, Brenda’s conscious goal to pack as much experience as possible into as little time as she had. She lived fast and expected to die young from her infantile diabetes. Brenda had no illusions

about leaving a pretty corpse. She'd chosen me to be her "older man." She had no time for boys.

Brenda was the only student in my career to make her way to my bed while still in my class. Student-teacher affairs are always a mess; on the other hand, love is where you find it. But with Brenda there could be no question of power; I could hardly extort a student in a class so smart that A's were foregone certainties. Brenda was smarter than I, and as for our relative emotional maturity, she beat me flat.

She came from Camelback Mountain in Scottsdale, one of the richest ZIP codes in America. She and her three sisters were raised by a French maid; *Nana*, of course. Brenda at eighteen could savor Coquilles St. Jacques, sip a Chardonnay and simultaneously gush over Nana's scrumdilicious sugar-free desserts and a drop-dead cute stuffed animal she had seen in Goldwater's. She lived off campus in a townhouse condo Daddy bought on the certainty that at least two of his kids would occupy it while they attended university, so he took tax deductions where most people pay dorm fees, and eventually he sold at a profit. One smart Daddy.

In addition to economic and intellectual advantages, Brenda was physically breathtaking. She confessed to six feet, but she was obviously taller. She hated team sports and refused to play basketball or volleyball, a decision that left high school coaches distraught with anguish. Brenda simply had no time for such crap. She habitually wore a white t-shirt and blue jeans cut to her hips, Daisy Dukes, the fringe of loose threads drifting around her thighs. She wore no jewelry; she wore no belt; her shirt had no logo, message or print. Her skin was butter-colored. Often shoeless, she strode into class as though it were her living room. Her hair was parted in the center, so nearly white it seems improper to call it blonde, long enough to whirl about her arms, straight and thick over her shoulders and back. When she was fifteen, her face had adorned the cover of the Girl Scouts Calendar. Brenda was unapologetically wholesome.

Brenda seemed assembled of incorrectly matched parts—the long lines from hip to knee and from knee to ankle were disproportionate to the line from hip to chin—so she should have appeared awkward, ungainly, likely

to topple. Tall women frequently slouch; Brenda strode through the world like a super-model, a career she considered until she realized it meant living her life indoors.

My Girl-Scout-lover took me camping north of Payson in the pine forests on the Mogollon Rim, the high country of northern Arizona, far beyond civilization. We had to hike from her car. Her flat-footed walk cast one of those legs an incredible distance before her until her foot found the ground, her weight shifted as though her pelvis were a gymbal, and she boomed forward over the terrain. Her arms swung with it. She never wore a bra; her breasts were relatively small. Proud, shoulders back, she moved with neither arrogance nor apology. It was all I could do to keep up with her.

We spent two nights and two days in a tent pelted by rain, and when I saw her administer an injection, she explained diabetes to me, her doomed future in which lurked blindness, kidney failure, amputation, and death.

Brenda traveled regularly with a prince, an Arab. His father, the sheik, sent him to the University of Arizona to study desert agriculture. His smarter, oldest brother studied oil engineering at Stanford. Brenda's sort-of-boyfriend supplied the prince with drugs and companions. "I'm just for show," Brenda said, glommed fruit, and I believed her. She had big hands and ate five or six grapes at a gulp.

The boyfriend had the use of the prince's blue Ferrari, a vehicle in which Brenda did not look half-bad when the top was down. Brenda also looked pretty good climbing the gangway of the prince's Lear jet. They snow-skied in Aspen on Saturday; water-skied in San Diego on Sunday; returned to Tucson and classes on Monday. Freshman English was at 10 o'clock; she never missed my class.

I was thirty-four, and wholly amazed that this statuesque beauty with ash white hair, blue eyes and a 38" inseam, a jet-setter in the true sense of that tiresome phrase, believed she needed a fling with a man fresh off a failed marriage who delivered his daughter to the Three Bears Day-School via a yellow Chevette that needed a muffler and used a twisted coat hanger jammed into the broken socket as its radio antenna. The Ferrari, she told me, had a three-spigot bar built into the dash—vodka, gin and scotch.

I know people who'd take Brenda's deal in a New-York-minute. Hell, I know people who would accept the deal for a ride in that Ferrari, leave alone the Lear jet, or the weekends in Aspen or Vail.



Brenda's acceptance of her doom put my petty troubles in perspective. By the time Brenda would be my age, she expected to be in the ground.

I saw how my divorce was not the end of anything, and I was stupid for thinking so.

The day we became an item, I had been babbling about mammals and fur. Teachers get into the damndest discussions, and vanity had me looking into hair transplants for my receding hairline. I asked how it was that eyebrow hair knew to grow to a certain length and quit, but the follicles on our heads would sprout hair even after we were dead. More puzzling to me was that body hair plugged into a bald man's scalp learned to grow again.

Ordinarily when I go off in this way, a class will cover their smiles and take it as certain evidence that their teacher is only slightly dotty, but two hours after class, Brenda showed up in my office; she'd razored an explanatory article out of an obscure science journal. I did not understand a word of it. She explained the biology and organic chemistry required. We enjoyed the role reversal—she became my teacher. We talked. We went to dinner.

It was like that.

All this is to tell you that I completely fell forever in love with Brenda the specific morning after the first night we slept together. This is the reverse of the preferred order, true enough. We'd gone to Scordato's, an Italian restaurant in the western foothills where we sat on a tiled patio overlooking the city. Without recourse to the menu, I ordered Corvo Blanco, a label I knew

as a New Yorker, a gesture that made her laugh when the waiter rolled his eyes with approval. Brenda, I later learned, often timed her insulin to maximize the effects of wine. We wound up at my place. I paid the babysitter. It was my first time in years with a woman not my wife.

In the morning, my daughter, Jessica, came into the bedroom. Her six-year-old eyes clouded puzzlement at the sight of the naked stranger in my bed. Brenda lifted the corner of the blanket and patted the place between us. “Come on in,” she said, which Jessica did and immediately fell asleep. Mind you, this gesture that saved my daughter’s psychological life and made my future as a single parent possible came from a woman who was all of eighteen.

Sure, she was gorgeous, yeah, she was smart, yes, she was rich and sophisticated, but this was a different order of things. She could have giggled. She could have stammered. Who’d have blamed her if she’d clutched the sheet to her chest and beaten a hasty retreat to the bathroom? But no—she not only let my kid think Daddy and she were engaged in wholly acceptable behavior, but that it was a behavior that did not encroach upon or threaten Jessica’s relationship with me.

I bless Brenda still.

That afternoon I fastened a hook-and-eye lock into the door molding. Seventy-nine cents worth of discretion is a bargain available at any hardware store.

We spent a few weekends on Mexican beaches. Driving through the Organ Pipe Monument at 100 miles per hour, a cactus forest, she set the driver’s seat of my Chevette back as far as it could go, placed one bare leg out the window, and steered with her other knee while with two hands twisted the key to open a tin of pâté. Her favorite white wine was Vouvray, and she kept it chilled in the thermos. It was my honor and duty to hand her the thermos when she asked for it, which she did after smearing huge gobs of the pâté from her Swiss Army knife onto French soda crackers. Brenda did not use the cup, but drank from the thermos directly. Each time she swallowed more wine, we sped a little faster and her toes wiggled a bit more in the hot, dry wind rushing over the Chevette’s side-view mirror.

Since my car's radio was unacceptably unreliable, Brenda had thrown a portable tape deck into the shallow back seat. She played Thunder Road again and again, so loud that the desiccated Mexican cows took notice. Each time the band got to the saxophone solo, she'd shout encouragement, "Blow Clarence, blow!" and on the line, *Show a little faith, there's magic in the night*, she leaned across the narrow car and wetly kissed me, a kiss that tasted of



wine. I don't doubt that Clarence Clemmons, the Big Man, heard her shout his name.

I learned to have a little faith.

How it is we did not roll the car is a mystery. Our bones should be bleached white in the Sonora Desert. The Chevette bounded across the land, raising a plume of dust that could be seen in Chicago, or at least in St. Louis. When we crossed the border on Via Ocho, we pushed on to Puerto Velasco, Rocky Point, a fishing village on the Gulf of California.

We had to port our own water from the US. In that town, before it became developed, all there was to eat that could be trusted were bread, milk, cheese and shrimp. In the early morning after watching the seals waddle back into the sea, we'd leave the beach and walk uphill on the sidewalk made of concrete and broken seashells. At the bakery, the rolls were so hot they were painful to hold. When we broke the rolls, they emitted steam and we burned our fingers. The woman at the bakery sliced butter off a soft block and

it quickly melted on the steaming bread where she placed it. “*Lechè*,” she said, and as if we were children who knew nothing gestured toward a cooler.

The milk was heavy and rich with cream, and while we sat on the bakery’s stone steps, we drank it from glass bottles while the sun climbed the hazy sky and warmed us. Brenda and I spent days swimming in the sea and running on the crescent beach. In the evenings, we bought shrimp sold live on the dock. At night, there was also beer. In Mexico, there is always beer. The beer was so cold, the bottles contained slivers of ice. We cooked the shrimp in garlic and butter in a black iron skillet over a fire we set in a pit we dug on the beach. We watched the moon float above the Gulf of California. We slept in a tent on the sand. In the morning, we awoke to the barking seals and so the day began again.

In my final spring in Tucson, the air was fragrant with jacaranda and orange blossoms. Brenda taught me to run in the arroyos of the desert. She ritualized stretching, bending, leaning into it. Jogging with her, I had to take three steps to every two of hers.

I was a troll in a footrace with a Valkyrie.

One time we ran two or three miles through the desert on the eastern edge of town near her condo. Back in her air-conditioned living room, we sprawled onto her blue shag carpet. We were sweaty. We were giddy. We were in love. One thing led to another. Brenda developed two oval burn marks on her back. Friction with the rug left my knees raw.

Two days later, I flew to Des Moines where I would interview for the job I was later to get at Drake University, but before the plane departed I had time to meet my Honors class in the morning. Near the end of the semester, from time to time I lectured. I was trim, fit, tan, wearing khaki chinos and a blue blazer with patch pockets, my interview outfit, and I was holding forth at the front of the room on some idiocy when one of the women in the class pointed at my knees. Blood like stigmata oozed through the cloth. My students all knew I was bound for a job interview. “Club soda.” “Cold water.” “No, warm water, but blot, don’t smear.” They were helpful with the advice their mothers had given them.

I said something about stumbling when I played tennis and looked up. At the back of the room where she always sat because of her height, Brenda had one long, bare, awe-inspiring leg resting on an empty chair before her. Her pencil played near her lip. Her pink cotton top was sleeveless and skintight. Our eyes met. Almost casually, she touched her back where I knew she ached from her own wounds.

No words can ever describe that wicked, wicked smile.

The collection *metememoirs* by Perry Glasser contains sixteen riffs. Publisher queries are invited.