

*Jan Maulhardt*

## WHAT PRICE ELECTROLYSIS

SHE'D been a kid, really. A child. Ninth grade was like childhood! Not that she'd thought so at the time. She'd been heavy into the boys even then.

And her high school—not exactly an ethnic melting pot. Eileen can remember this one black girl, Danita, who might have had a brother. And even though there were tons of Asians, called “Orientals” back then (How ignorant! Oriental, like a rug or something), the Asian kids had never seemed not white, partly because of their first names: Lila Huang and Mindy Hsu, Eileen's Tall Flags co-captains; Trent Sohn, her sophomore formal date. And those kids' English was better, practically: less slangy and accented than the white kids' stoner/mall rat/surfer talk.

Lately, Eileen's spent a lot of time thinking about these things, re-tracing the path that led up to it. Her decision. Her brain squints hardest on a Friday afternoon just before the first freshman dance, when she and her girlfriends stood around their puke-yellow lockers discussing outfits, post-parties, where they might shoulder tap for booze, Eileen thinking she ruled all for having been asked by a junior, T.J. Gooch (who was, himself, three-quarters Polynesian).

They'd made a big deal out of decorating their lockers' insides, taping up magazine pictures of skiers and surfers and makeup-boy bands (the music then fully New Ro'), lining the bottoms with colored carpet swatches they'd pestered a mom into taking them to buy. These carpets were what started it.

“Hey, Jamison, for your locker I understand,” Eileen said something like, whipping a hand across the backs of Mary's bare thighs. “But when do you plan on getting rid of *these* hairy carpets?”

Pretty weak, but it's true the girl still wasn't shaving all the way up. Body hair—they were way into it. With gym class and their butt cut cheer skirts, it was a topic.

Who said it isn't solid in Eileen's mind, she knows not Jamison, but either Lorrie Tractman or Jonell Bishop came back with, “Who's talking, Miss Eye-talian? When are *you* gonna get rid of that mustache?”

Eileen remembers the slap-slap of palms above her ear, the horse laughs, her feeling of complete *What?*, and that cemented it. Next morning at five after nine, she lay in a dentist-type chair while a woman wearing white angora and Obsession explained to her and her mom about follicle stimulation and re-growth, then used a disposable wire probe to give a couple dozen zaps to just above Eileen's top lip. It stung some, but then it was over and she made her first of four follow-up appointments and jetted to the department store Clinique counter for her makeover.

So four years later, four entire months after graduation day, and what about high school is she bugged by? Not facts like that she tongued T.J. Gooch for an hour at that freshman dance, even after watching him spew pink punch chunks on the side of the shop building; not that she had this *career* of swinging her stuck-out ass for gymnasiums full of doofs. But this. This weird thing she did, never looking around her and lightbulbing that 5'6", medium complected and dirty-blond with brown eyebrows meant you were pretty much the state mascot, that even had Jonell and Lorrie saying, when The Gooch hit the parking lot to smoke a roll with his friends, "You had what done? Migod, 'Leen, we were just shitting with you! Why'd you take us so serious?"

Now, Eileen tries to formulate some things, starting with her mom, who is herself Irish by way of Minnesota for like eighty generations. (Diluted blood. Basically, Eileen has diluted blood.)

"Steubenville," her mom says from the couch, where she folds dish and workout towels into lumps and pyramids them. Eileen's stretched out on the carpet with the atlas open to the index. "Or, wait, Steubendale? I know it's in Ohio, but like I said, if you want to know about that side of the family you'll have to call your father."

"Collect," says Bradley, Eileen's step, the wit.

"Dad's still in Singapore." Eileen locates Stubenville, Ohio, a black dot near the state's eastern border that makes her heart blip. She tries to imagine her ancestors, dressed in peasant browns with hats, landing in Ohio after their lives in lush, fertile Italy. How bummed.

"This I love," says her mom. "The adoptive Texan's now in Singapore." She waves a tube sock—Bradley's—making Eileen think that, for being Head Pro at a swank tennis club, he sure gets away with geek wardrobe touches.

“Do you know, Brad,” her mom continues, “that when I met their father, the man’s big boast was that at age eighteen he’d never set foot outside southern California, except for one half-hour dash into Tijuana to score weed?”

The step grunts. “World traveler now.”

“Oh, absolutely.” Eileen’s mom leans forward at the waist to rub her chunky calves. (“This ex-cheerleader’s dancing days are too far gone,” she says whenever Eileen offers to get an aerobics guest pass.) “And yet with the frequent flier miles this man accrues, he can’t once in three years manage a trip back to southern California to see his children.”

“He’s had us out to Houston twice in seven months,” Eileen reminds, then regrets it. Sometimes it’s so obvious how much her mom misses the guy Eileen has to squeeze her eyes shut.

But her mom’s off and going on topics of Eileen’s Jeep payments and tuition and Dominick’s violin and won’t Mr. Lone Star even offer to kick in a few bucks, until finally Eileen can only make a circle with the fingers of one hand and do the wacking-off gesture that Scooby, her ex, used to do whenever she talked for too long about shopping.

There’s a screech; Eileen looks up to see Bradley flinch from his doze and send a foot flying through the towel pyramid. “Beelzebub!” he whines.

But her mom ignores him, points at Eileen. “You can cut *that* out, Missy.”

Eileen quits the gesture. “It’s just that you’re being hugely informational, Mom,” she says, and turns toward the bookshelves to hide her smile.

Old Scoob, she thinks. Cute as a whip, but basically waste product. He surfs. Has these yellow-blond dreadlocks which seemed sharp at first, but, Eileen doesn’t care, you *can* wash those, with a toothbrush or something. No job, and at age twenty-two he still lives at home with his parents, grandmother, and teenage twin sisters, all of whom seem to find this circumstance fine and not particularly unnormal so long as he carries three units of Cornrowing 101 at Golden West Community College.

“Golden Waste,” Eileen would call it whenever she was feeling contrary, when he’d panto-wacked one time too many. She thinks of an afternoon a couple months back, not long before they ended it, when

he took a break from shoving his face with a dozen white chocolate dips she'd boxed up for him at work, and said, "Man, I don't know how you stand it. Hawking brownies in the damn mall."

Hello? "Try I stand it because I'm financing a Bachelor's degree is how I stand it."

Mouth stuffed, he held his hands out, palms-down, and shook them. "Excuuuse me, Miss Cal-State-U.-at-Long-Beach, Miss Four-Year-Institutional—"

"Golden Waste!"

"—Miss I-Take-a-Jillion-Classes-at-C.S.U.L.B."

"That's right, Mr. U.B.L.F.S.," she countered, referring to Golden West's primo location off the 405 Freeway, behind the Levitz Furniture Showroom. She reached over and slapped at the cookie sticking out of his mouth.

Scooby sneered, brushed crumbs from his chest hair. "Oh, Long Beach is sooo much better. L.A. County, big-time gross. *Like* they would clean a beach there. Strictly homeless winos. Strictly oil slicks."

Well, that's how he is. A mama's boy, really, freaking at the slightest suggestion that he might wash his hair or get a car, a job, a real existence. Still, he isn't the worst she's dated. And what a set of glutes on him. Scoob.

Eileen flips to the atlas's Italy page, where her eyes go like a magnet to Ischia, the tiny, bug-cute island off the boot's west coast, off Naples, that she didn't get to see on her high school's combined Drill Team and Tall Flags and Rifles exhibitional tour three months ago.

She'd been lost in the center of Rome one night with Jonell and Mindy, all of them fairly lit after pounding grappas with some older Greek guys they'd met at a disco. ("Miss Cal-eee-forn-ya, I have Porschaaa," the slimy handsome one kept singing at her, touching a fingertip to the inside of her arm.) At ten minutes to curfew (Principal Autry actually put holds on twenty-two Spirit Squad seniors' diplomas, saying, "Read my lips, ladies: no international incidents"), they'd just unfolded Jonell's map when a bunch of brown hands yanked it down from the other side. The pack of laughing Italian boys, pro-flirts on a pre-military enlistment night out, insisted on guiding Eileen and company to their pensione.

Pietro, a shorty with huge brown eyes magnified by a pair of nose erodes she'd never bother looking behind on a face at the mall or the

beach, got her to hang back with him, saying things like, “So, my country is fantastic, yes?” He didn’t ask about Los Angeles or Hollywood or Mickey Mouse, which gave her her first chance to tell a native, using her hands and her best moron vocab, about her small connection: father—no mother—*father* Italian; father family di island Ischia.

Pietro dimestopped and grabbed Eileen’s hands. “Che Bella, Ischia!” he crowed. She never forgot it, that or his wispy farewell kisses under each of her eyes. “Che Bella, la signorina di Ischia!” he called out just as the bathrobed assistant coach came stomping across the hotel lobby.

Eileen closes the atlas and rolls onto her back, does a few crunches. “Were both dad’s parents from Ischia? I mean, originally?”

Her mother sighs. “It used to be your dad didn’t know Florence, Italy from Fullerton. If that’s changed, a lot’s changed.” Something blue flies over and lands on Eileen’s knees—her smiling cookie-logo work polo. “Sorry ma’am,” her mom says, “but I can’t tell you thing one about your father’s heritage.”

Eileen thinks: *Okay, but can you tell me why you let me do it?* You, who grounded my eighth-grade ass for three weeks when I double-pierced one ear! Who used to grip my chin and jab a Q-Tip on your tongue, yelling at me to hold still while you swabbed off forty minutes worth of makeup, so that at that same freshman dance The Gooch had on more eyeliner than I did!

It’s Sunday; Eileen’s shift at Gadzooky Cookies is two to close. She’s worked there since age fourteen, when her dad would drop her off in the wood-paneled wag he traded in for a snow-white sedan a month after the divorce went through. (“It’s like riding in a big bar of soap,” her brother Dominick, stoned, whispered in her ear from the back seat the rainy night their dad first picked them up for a dinner.) Eileen’s been at Gadzooky so long her bosses, a Mormon couple named Bowen, like to joke that pretty soon they’ll owe her a gold watch.

Her job is breeze material, a yawn. She basically cracks whip over a bunch of fifteen-year-old horndogs, even going so far as to recommend zit cream to Herbie last week when the adolescent acne syndrome became a bit much. Harassment? She doubts it. Harassment is being sold an oily cookie by a kid with an even oilier mug.

“It’s something I warn each employee about, Herb,” she told him, in a voice that could have worn a lab coat. “These ovens, all this heat, it

takes its toll on the skin. Occupational hazard, you could say.” She handled it well enough, at least sparing the young pus farmer her real fear that one day he’d pull his grin up sharp at a passing thirteen-year-old piece of tail, and some customer’s brownie would end up with an extra squirt of white icing.

Herbie’s fine otherwise: quiet, no tattoos or attitude or bragging about his dick. (They do that, at fifteen. Unreal.) He’s split duty with Marcus when she arrives, and, Sunday afternoons being slow, she uses the time their shifts overlap to get the monthly evals done. It’s only about ten minutes before Marcus, one of the penis-proud, is set to go that things get iffy.

He’s playing Joe Retail for the benefit of some steroid test-case pals loitering at the counter, probably slipping them dozens, when she hears, “Even my boss lady, I swear. Hey, Eileen.”

She looks up.

His thumbs hook into his front belt loops, bunching up the apron that’s never supposed to go untied. “I was just telling these guys how you can probably barely stand to work with me, you want me so bad.”

Could her eyes roll any further back into her head? Generous, she gives him a smirk before returning to her reports.

“Yo, Eye?” he persists. “C’mon, you’re what, nineteen?” The muscleheads’ fists dig deeper into their bagged-out pockets; Herbie looks unsure whether to be entertained or drop to his knees and beg for his job. “You know,” Marcus says, all pearly whites, “for nineteen years old, your boobs aren’t exactly that huge.”

With his friends busting up and Herbie looking set to lose bowel control, Marcus skates across the floor to behind Eileen’s chair, where he puts his hands on her shoulders and presses his chin into her neck. The hug only brings on more counter crowd har-hars—isn’t their bud so nutsy and smooth.

When Marcus’s paws come off her, Eileen just smiles. She reaches for a nearby spatula and turns in her chair, presses the flat of the utensil against the crotch of his jeans. His arms drop to his sides; he stares down, stunned, while she pokes and prods.

Done, she tosses the spat back onto the counter. “You know, Marcus,” she says, “can’t say I feel that big a lump in your 501s, either.”

After Marcus slinks off shift, Herbie keeps to the absolute front of the work space, polishing what already shines.

Not wanting him terrified, and somewhat hyped after all the action, she tries for a conversation. “So, Herbie,” she says. “Where are you from, anyway?”

His face does everything from grateful to freaked, and the rag freezes mid-wipe. “Sunset Beach?”

She laughs. “No, what I mean is, I’m Italian. From Ischia, actually.” No reaction at this; she thumb-presses stray rainbow sprinkles and hops up to sit on the counter. “Any chance you’re Italian?”

Herbie’s lips mash; he rubs five fingers on the cash register keys until the drawer bings and pops out. “Uh, not me.” He shoves the drawer back in. “But my sister is.”

Eileen looks at him.

“We adopted her.”

“Ah.” This kid isn’t much to look at—turns sideways and he disappears—but the green eyes aren’t bad. And if he wouldn’t buzz off all his hair he might actually have hope.

“Herbie,” she says. “Short for Herbert.” He nods. “That’s, what, German? English?”

He looks pressured. “It was my grandfather’s name. I think German.”

Eileen’s considering that her name might have a foreign counterpart, the way in other countries Helen is Ilona or Lisa Liesel, when Herbie blurts, “My sister, she’s six? Well, my other grandfather, see, his name was Harold. And so what my parents did was, they named my sister Delora.”

“Delora,” Eileen repeats slowly.

He holds up an index finger, ticks off letters in the air. “D-apostrophe-l-o-r-a-h,” he says. “It’s Harold, spelled backwards.”

America, Eileen thinks. Sometimes you could just cry.

Herbie winds up his towel, gives the register a saucy whip. He’s on a roll. “My mom bought me Clearasil, like you said. The kind in a tube?” His fingertips jump to his chin. “Still, it’s only been two days.”

She lets him go twenty minutes early, poor thing, and does the floors herself. After taking the deposit and the unsold sugar-frees by the Bowens’ she hits the gym.

Eileen's not fat or anything ("No way you have the bod of a bakery employee," Scooby said the night they met), but working a place like Gadzooky keeps you in fear for the future. Not like bakeries in Italy, which are the culture themselves. From her trip she remembers, even better than the discos, the coffee bars, with their stacks of tiny white espresso cups, their bottles of colored syrups lining the mirrored counterbacks. Their last morning in Florence she convinced Mindy to skip the hotel's continental breakfast and their friends' same hungover faces, and they walked to a busy coffee bar near the Duomo to spend their lira on waffle iron-pressed sandwiches of thin-thin ham and tangy cheese on the chewiest bread, stand elbow to elbow with Italians in deadly-cool clothes, all of them daintily eating this perfect, civilized food in the morning's orange glow. You could spend your whole life.

At Eileen's gym there's a new hire, a wide-faced girl with the hugest cat eyes who adjusts her headset and says, "Welcome to Cardio-Funk, I'm Fritz."

How obsessed is Eileen? Fritz turns out to be one of these aerobots who tops off an hour of dance with fifteen minutes of killer ab work that usually breaks Eileen halfway, but at thirty seconds and counting her brain's still going, Fritz? Polish? Swedish? Short for...? Fritz's eyes and cheekbones, her heart-shaped face, say to you: this face absolutely descended from Somewhere.

Sweat-yucked but still feeling a kind of tired buzz, Eileen drives toward the beach. Thinking. The morning after she got back from Europe she woke up early; jet lagged and on prescription drugs for severe, travel-related water retention ("Ciao, Elephanto," Dominick had greeted her at the airport, making her bawl), she missed Italy terribly. So unfair, that on this same earth people lived that paradise, and all along she'd thought these dinky waves and grubby sand and big grocery stores every two blocks added up to having it all.

She went downstairs to the bar and rooted through the cupboards underneath until she found it. Cool and sticky with crust, its label faded, the Galliano still had total elegance. Just holding the tall, cinch-waisted bottle, tipping it to watch the yellow syrup's slow roll, Eileen could feel her whole history, her heritage, and her heart beat hard.

She kept the bottle out on the bartop beside some decanters where all day long—watching dumb TV under an afghan on the couch, plow-



ing through Dominick's peace offering pan of seven-layer dip while listening to his new Bach pieces—the sight of the sunny liqueur gave her a little lift. But at six, when Bradley came in from tennis he dropped his keys on the bar and picked up the bottle by its neck.

“Getting high off this corn syrup now?” His forehead scrunching beneath his white headband, he looked sadly at Dominick. “Is ‘alcoholic brat’ some kind of goal with you?” Eileen's brother shot out of the house, his skateboard ripping down the driveway before she could open her mouth to explain.

She turns her Jeep onto Main Street and heads toward the pier, and she's just letting a grandpa jay-jog past her bumper when she hears a shout: “What kind of a pink do you describe that car?”

She slows, spots him waving and making faces from the doorway of Taco Surf.

“Salmon-ass pink?” Scooby yells. “Pink-as-my-butt pink?”

Still jealous, Eileen parks a few storefronts up and finds him in the restaurant.

“I completely concede: your Schwinn Cruiser in beautiful poo brown is the ultimate babe magnet,” she says, glad to see his idiot grin. She slides into the booth opposite him and kicks her feet together, knocking wet sawdust clumps off the soles of her Avias. “Nice floor. I bet the food here is extra sanitary.”

Scooby shrugs. “Beer's a buck. Sip?”

She declines; he toasts her and drinks. “A freakin' month with no word, Ladylove,” he says. “Dish me da scoop.”

She looks around at plastic beer flags and faded fish piñatas, tells him how the old-old is the same-old: school, work, her brother and Bradley in World War III over a chipped pool cue.

“Wait,” Scooby interrupts, “you mean from back at that party I got Dom-o the keg for?”

Eileen thinks a minute, then nods.

“Man, tight,” Scooby says, scraping up a plop of refried beans with a chip and a pinkie finger. “You know, I always kinda figured Bad Brad for not much more than a cute butt in white tennis shorts.”

Eileen feels a prick of shame at having trotted out the household crap for Prince Domestic Bliss, and it's possible he guesses this because

next he says, “But hey, whoever floats your mom’s boat. I doubt I’ll be able to land prime heiney past my twenty-fifth birthday.”

The jukebox heads into “Vamos a la Playa” from “Tequila”; Scooby snaps along with beany fingers. Out of nowhere, Eileen blurts, “I think . . . I’m thinking I might just pack it in and go to Italy.”

Scooby’s jaw actually drops, a reaction which gives her a little thrill. “I didn’t know you ordered see-food,” she says.

He shuts his mouth, swallows. “Italy—bonus! Like for school, an exchange student deal? Whereabouts?”

Never having thought specifics, she’s dizzed by the questions. Still, she feels the flush of yeah, she *could* go. Why couldn’t she go?

She tells him about Ischia, her dad, her interest. “I didn’t make it there on the Tall Flags trip, but I want to. Going there is all I want, sort of. It’s weird how much.” Saying this, she feels the onset of a small, all-new loneliness, one she can tell will spread, like a pill she took. *She could go* means that nothing and no one roots her here.

“You never told me your family was all these Italians,” Scooby says. “That styles.”

“Tremendous memory, Scoob. You forget it got to where anything I said to you, your answer was, ‘How about bringing me some of the macaroons with caramel?’”

He tugs his sweatshirt strings, sheepish. “Man, those cookies. I miss grinding on those.”

Gorgeous, he really is, and suddenly Eileen’s got the heats. She lowers her voice. “I miss grinding on you.”

Scooby cocks a fist on his hip. “Eye-leen!”

“It’s true,” she says, giggling. “You don’t deserve the compliment, but you have the best butt. Your hair still sucks, though.”

He shakes his head, looking in her eyes long enough that she gets shy. “Do you ever go,” he says, “what did we break up for? I mean, we get along sweet, if not two peas.” He dunks a tortilla chip in pico and hands it across the table. “Let’s say you don’t go traveling, or not right away. You hang here. Would you think maybe you—we—might try to ever . . . ?” She stares—this is pretty amazing, if ridiculous—until finally he jumps to his feet, reaches south and grabs his front. “I make-a you an offer you can’t-a refuse.”

He busses his tray, Eileen hooting along to his wiggle and grind show, the finale a Wash 'N Dry scarf dance complete with suggestive tongue action. Outside, she gets on the handlebars of his bike and they shoot off toward the pier.

“Eileenie,” he says into her sweat-damp hair. “I give you a goomba you won’t-a forget.”

Happy, she licks ocean air from her teeth, Scooby’s rocked legs making the storefronts fly by: T-shirt shop, cinnamon buns, psychic. Halfway down the pier he lets her hop off and starts showing off for a Vietnamese fisherman’s kids, riding wide figure eights that have the bike almost on its side. The kids point and squeal, but, sure that any second he’ll eat it, Eileen can’t watch. She goes to the north side of the pier and looks out.

That patch of beach, there. Dominick has the 8 x 10 in his room: their dad’s white 1969 VW Bug—top down, blue surfboard propped against the passenger door, the sunlight behind it split into strips by the pier supports.

“Not a single tire track or footprint, not even a lump,” their mom always points out. “Your dad and I spent the full hour before sunrise smoothing that sand—nice second date, I kept thinking! Then he pushes your grandfather’s camera at me—the old style I’m talking about, f-stop, focus, and I’d never even held a camera—and he says, ‘You take the picture, I’ll mess it up.’ And the funny thing is, in my life I never took such a perfect picture. Not of my kids, not of their father. Never.”

The original surf stud dad and pom-pom mom, complete with the convertible, drinking underage and dancing to beach music bands at the Golden Bear, and baby girl makes three just a few months after the wedding.

Eileen stares at the smooth carpet of water, a slate gray-blue. Fuck, she thinks, a tennis ball sob pushing up her windpipe. Fuck it. They were children.

She hears the bike chain tick-ticking behind her, forces her eyes wide for the breeze to dry up any wet. When she turns around, Scooby’s bent over, walking the Cruiser with one hand on a handlebar and the other pressed against the side of his left calf, which has blood running down it. “Yowch,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Stupid—I knew it!” she scolds. “You dumb, you big . . . stupidhead!”

He straightens up, looks at her with shock.

“Of course you fell off, what did you—” She stops herself when his expression melts into little boy hurt. She steps toward him, points at his leg. “Are you okay?” she says, more gently. “It’s just I thought you might fall.”

“Flesh wound’s all.” He keeps back, cuts his eyes to the handlebar grips and squeezes them. “Think we should go? I mean, I kind of need to. Gram’s cooking—my folks have a school thing with the twins so she promised me her killer stew and BBQ’d corn on the cob.” Eileen’s eyes gloss up again; she blinks rapidly, no more sun to blame it on. “Why not come eat with us?” Scooby says, re-peppered, friends again. “Smoke a greenboy, help me brown the dinner rolls?”

Eileen says thanks, but no. “I should get something going in my own kitchen. But tell your grandma hi from me.”

He rides off with a stiff wave; the last thing Eileen notices is his scummed-up leg, the blood having kept running down over his foot after she harshed at him. He probably thinks she’s schitzo, but shit, the dumbell.

It’s time she got going, too, but first she flattens her hands on the rough pier wood and gives the Pacific a final look. Actually, Scooby’s smart, she thinks. He’s home. He was smart enough to be born at home.

She walks back to her Jeep, gets in and heads up Main. Thicker traffic now, dinner crowds looking to park, and while waiting in an intersection line-up she twists the rearview mirror and looks at the face reflected there. She rubs at dried sweat on the corners of her mouth, then traces the area with a finger.

They had just lain there, subtle signposts of who she was. Like dark blades of forgotten grass from some ancient hills of Tuscany.