

## **Act II: Walpurgisnacht**

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In 1996, I was a film student at San Francisco State University. As a cultural exchange between the two departments, Cinema majors had to take a few Theater classes. It looks like a natural fit, but in truth, they're different worlds. In addition to being more straight, and conservative and self-consciously "ironic" than I'd expected, I discovered Cinema majors are basically English students who couldn't make it through *The Grapes of Wrath*. On the other hand, Theater majors were generally would-be Psych students who hope they can figure out why they're screwed up by performing Chekhov instead of reading Freud.

I chose Beginning Acting. I figured it would be helpful when directing actors, since my mother was certain I was going to be a director. Besides, it looked like fun. I'd always harbored a secret desire to perform, in spite of the fact though I didn't like to be looked at. Half a decade would pass before I resolved that paradox.

Josie was tough and sexy, and I found myself drawn to her. I'd always felt more comfortable around girls than boys, so this was typical. It was made worse by the fact that within the previous year, after my unfortunate time spent with The Other, I'd come to the conclusion that I really wasn't transgendered. Never mind what I felt deep down--it simply wasn't to be. I would never be a girl. I'd just have to settle for being close to them.

I developed a crush on Josie. It happened a lot back then. Some say it still happens now.

The big project of the semester was a two-person scene from a play. I asked Josie if she'd team up with me, and much to my surprise, she agreed. We decided on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which allowed for plenty of yelling

and screaming and general scenery-chewing, if we so desired. Josie was Martha, and, being the boy, I was George.

It wasn't until after we'd started working together that I discovered she was an exotic dancer. She'd made a passing reference to working at a strip club called the Chez Paree. If I'd known that about her before, I would have kept my distance. I mean, she was a *stripper*. Clearly, she was out of my league.

Our scene was from the second act, right after George has psychologically tortured the young woman. In the movie, it's set in the parking lot of the roadhouse. Without altering the dialogue in any way, I added one stage direction which I'll bet has never been done before or since. The way we played it, it made perfect dramatic sense. Honest. Josie wouldn't have agreed to do it otherwise. It certainly brought a new subtext to the scene.

Martha is making one last attempt to connect with her husband, in an attempt to salvage their marriage.

MARTHA: You make all sorts of excuses to yourself...YOU know...this is life...the hell with it...maybe tomorrow he'll be dead...maybe tomorrow YOU'LL be dead...all sorts of excuses. But then, one day, one night, something happens...and SNAP! It breaks. And you just don't give a damn anymore. I've tried with you, baby...really, I've tried.

And then, the clever bit: she kisses George. He goes along with it for a few seconds, then pulls away.

GEORGE: Come off it, Martha.

They tear into each other for a few more lines, and then Martha says something very important:

MARTHA: Look, I'm not going to try to get through to you anymore...I'm not going to try. There was a second back there, maybe, there was a second, just a second, when I could have gotten through to you, when maybe we could have cut through all this crap. But that's past, and now I'm not going to try.

I mean, how perfect is that? That “second back there” when she could have gotten through to him? She’s referring to the kiss! Clearly, it was meant to be.

In addition to signaling the arrival of bold new voice in the theater world, it meant I got to kiss Josie a few times each week, making her the third girl I'd kissed in my twenty-three years. Though our mouths were closed, they were real kisses, since that was the only way to really sell the scene. Fortunately, simulated passion was what she did for a living, and I couldn't tell simulated from the real thing.

We got rave reviews from rest of the class, and the professor praised the verisimilitude of my performance. I never did tell my girlfriend about the kiss. She wouldn't have understood. Or maybe she would have, and that would have been worse.

After the semester ended, Josie invited us to come to see her at Chez Paree. My girlfriend had met Josie a couple times and didn't care for her, but had never been to a strip club before and was intrigued. In fact, she even offered to buy me a lap dance. I very much wanted one with Josie, who declined politely but firmly. It was a clear signal which I did not catch.

As we were leaving the club, Josie suggested having lunch sometime soon. Thus encouraged—it was *her* idea, so I wasn't being stalker-y or anything, right?—I left her one voicemail per month in an attempt to set something up.

Six voicemails later, I scored passes to a preview of David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. Since my girlfriend had to work that night, I asked my friend Louise. She was otherwise engaged as well. (Whether I was actively courting her or just being friendly is for history to decide.) So, in my monthly voicemail, I invited Josie.

One of my most vivid memories from my three years at San Francisco State University is that cold day in late '96, standing at the pay phone on the second floor of the Cinema building, listening to the only message Josie ever left. She said that while she appreciated the offer, she just didn't have time to be friends with me. So sorry.

She wasn't acting.



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