

Patella

1 The bastard is about the last subscriber on my paper route, so the other morning I stopped my bicycle at her house to take a breather of cold foggy spring air and chat with her. Being the only female delivery boy, since being a relative of the publisher, I can afford taking some liberties with my time. She was standing on her porch in a long, unfashionable flannel nightie.

I went, “Hey, Claire,” throwing up the *Balona Courier* and the *Delta City Beacon* right exactly at her feet. Since she’s rich, she takes both papers. Then I went, “How’s things?” This is something you say in Balona, as a greeting. You’re not really interested in how things are. You’re not her bud or anything. You just say the saying.

“Yeah, how’s things, Patella?” she croaked with her low voice, saying the right response but sounding like the Queen of the Poisoned Apple, as usual. She’s super-smart, but she doesn’t know what I know about who’s going to be nominated for what exclusive Balona society club. And who’s probably not going to make the cut.

I went, “So, you about ready for graduation?”

Claire is a senior at Balona High, still pretty much of a child, though rich, and though she tries to talk like she’s a forty-year-old CEO and in charge of everything. Everybody admits she’s extra-smart in the brains.

“All set for graduation. Yep. Next week already.” She didn’t ask me about my own schooling, where I am a sophomore at Chaud County Community College, maybe a little not as smart as her,

but more maturer as a woman. She didn't ask me if I was going to continue on, going to C4.

I went anyway, "I'm gonna study more journalism." I dug a Snickers out of my near-empty bag and bit right in. Bike-riding takes a lot out of you, and a pre-breakfast candy bar gets you ready for the miseries of the day.

"Uh-huh. Journalism. That's useful." She started right away looking at the front page of the *Courier*. Not a social grace at all, which is the way she usually behaves.

I have a nice high voice so I made my farewell sound cheery: "Well, I'll probably see you at Tabernacle."

"Good. Good. I'll save you a place at our table for after Sunday service." She turned around and went in her house. Just like that. She is an actual bastard, of course, and that is what probably has made her such a snob. Everybody knows she's a bastard. Junior Trilbend says she *acts* like a bastard. Everybody laughs because it's true. Being rich like she is, she can get away with it. But nobody would ever say anything to her face. Used to be Pastor Preene would come after you if you did (I heard). Nowadays, Mark or Jack Ordway would probably beat you up, since Mark is Claire's mother's husband. Finally. It took Mark long enough to make up his mind.

I am not a bastard, of course, having an actual legitimate dad and a mom both, and not being a snob, either. Of course I am not rich, either, like Claire, who inherited all of old Oliver Kuhl's huge wealth. Maybe I have already mentioned that. You would think that being rich might make you a snob. But, no, in Claire's case, she was already a snob. Go figure. But who cares!

It's just that her attitude sort of gets under your skin. The way she stands, straight up, with her hands always folded in front of her crotch, like she's got some kind of fancy jewel behind there. The way she looks down from above you, like the Ice Queen. The way she dresses, in frilly *frocks* usually, hardly ever Levi's or even sweats. The way she talks, in her nose. Doesn't put on lipstick. (She goes, "My lips get pink just from playing the flute.") The way she

cuts her hair, straight, long and whitish-yellow, unfashionable.

Or, like, how she treats an older, more educated woman like some sort of inferior being from outer space. Even though we just happen to be actual blood second cousins, according to Pastor Nim Chaud, who likes heredity stuff and figured it out and went and told everybody about we being blood-related, in spite of she being an illegitimate. Pastor Nim says that since so many Balonans are blood-related, we need to be *vigilant* about who's a relative or we'll end up marrying our uncle or something and produce idiots.

He *talks* about sex stuff like that quite a bit but will never look at you the way men are supposed to.

But back to Claire's mom. Just because I don't much like Claire doesn't mean I couldn't like her mom. You've got to admit her mom is nice. Another bastard herself, but not a snob at all. My grampa who is publisher of the *Courier* says that Penny Preene, who is now Penny Ordway, is the one most beautiful woman in Chaud County. I don't know about that. I think Doctor Vickie Fardel who is a great teacher of English over at Chaud County Community College, is pretty nice looking, even if she's too thin and tall. And Ms Francesca Poone, a Balona resident but C4 teacher of Psychology and Your Sex Life, is dramatic looking with deep, sharp black eyes and makes quite a striking appearance that gives you the quivers.

Claire's mom is not too tall and has got long red hair and brown eyes, and she doesn't seem to need any makeup. I myself don't primp up with makeup very often, since my horoscope when I was fourteen said I would never need to disguise my true self. So I don't, which is a real relief when you got other things to do and think about and spend your nickels on.

My own mom is okay and that's all. She's not a bud-bud type, except where she's tutoring math students where she will buddy with them after school, where she is a teacher at Balona High. She is a math whiz, which I am not. She is always after me to make my bed and clean up my room and around the house. And wipe up

after Flops. This is a tough thing to do if you are trying to make a career out of journalism and also doing part-time work at Kute Kurls & Nails and delivering papers and trying to establish a potential relationship. Therefore your creative person simply doesn't have time to do a lot of bed-making and closet straightening and cleaning-up work.

Where Claire's dad wasn't really her dad at all, my dad is my dad, only you'd probably never be able to figure it out by watching him, since he hardly seems alive. I guess I sort of love him, and I think probably he sort of loves me.

I used to be embarrassed about how he looks. But not any more, since we don't see him much. Where my mom goes off to buddy-buddy with her fave students, my dad goes off to work, clerking at Mr. D.H. Carp's Groceries & Sundries. People say he falls asleep on his stool there. I know he comes home and falls asleep in front of the TV, a six-pack of Valley Brew close at hand. I would like our relationship to be something more alive.

I would like someday to have an actual family relationship with *somebody*. So as a matter of fact, I'm sort of working on that. I spent most of my juiciest youth going after Joseph Kuhl as maybe a possible marriage partner for my old age. But I have found that Joey is sort of whacked. And his mom is crazy. Everybody knows that she wants him to marry the bastard—even though him and Claire are actual cousins—so Bapsie Chaud-Kuhl can get control of Claire's money. Fat chance.

Me and Joey are what is known as “kissing cousins,” being second-cousins-once-removed. So Joseph is known as your Marriageable Male, and I myself have made all kinds of great offers to him, like free rides over to C4 and free pizzas at Mello Fello. Stuff like that, and more. I've even hinted at offering my body as sort of a pre-marriage bonus prize. But he's dense as mud. So I have spent some time working on Zachary Taylor Burnross, sort of younger than me and also not a cousin, but maybe susceptible to my charms. That hasn't worked out, and the orb of the sun is still ticking my life away.

Everybody knows who I am, but nobody knows *me*. I figure I got to do something about that.

So I've got another pretty good iron in the fire. It's not what you'd call a blazing hot iron yet, since my target is an Already Married Balona Male with a kid. But his wife is a junky and his kid is a loser, and he likes me a lot, so he's maybe ripe for the plucking, if I work it right. He's also got a nice Front Street drugstore business that he lets the high school kids shoplift at, which means he's a tolerant guy. And he's got a nice car with dark windows and leather seats, the kind you can slide across on when you're offered a ride, not the kind of seat you get stuck down in and have to stay on your own side of the car. Francie June over at the bank mentioned that he's always depositing money, so he's probably got a nice account there. Francie June said it was against her ethics to tell me how much, though.

He keeps giving me a ride home whenever he sees me standing in front of his store, looking lonesome and unattached. A few times now we been out driving on the West Levee Road, just to see the evening wildfowls out there. Hanky's got some bad habits, though, like he won't look straight at a customer when he's talking about your prescription. And he's got the hairiest arms you ever saw. He could actually perm those nice soft hairs. Like having a beard on your arm. And he needs some dental work, I think, since he's always sucking on his teeth, kind of like Mr. D. H. Carp does over at his store. Drives you crazy. But who's perfect?

The thing I have over Claire is that her and me are both candidates for membership in the Daughters of the Delta. Only Claire doesn't know it yet. The DOD is an old organization, founded by some respectable ladies back when, at a time a lot of Balona ladies were not particularly respectable.

Claire could possibly get to be a member, even though she isn't from what you could call your very respectable background. It's obvious that rich people get advantages us poor people don't have. Poor people need witchcraft and omens.

Doctor Squill is the one told me about my nomination, said she

was the one nominated me, probably because of the prizes for my photography I was just almost awarded, which should be soon.

“You keep this under your hat for now, Patella,” she went. “And also don’t mention to Claire that I am nominating her, too.” Doctor Vesta Squill is a chiropractor. She is the boss of everything around her, to hear her talk. But she is also mean, so I wouldn’t tell if she said not to. I didn’t ask her how come she nominated Claire.

Doctor Squill also went, “You probably heard the rumor that the Daughters of the Delta are related to the Delta Doodle Dandies? Did you hear that rumor, Patella?”

I said I heard that rumor.

“Did you think it was true?”

“I don’t know. Is it?”

“Don’t sound snotty, Patella. And don’t roll your eyes like that. I’m trying to be informative here, but if you don’t want to know something real important, well, I’ll just go on about my binnis. My word, the youth of today have no respect for their elders at all. It used to be that young people were respectful, were helpful, were polite, were reasonable and worked hard at their lessons and were thoughtful of their elders. I know *I* always was. But nowadays? Maybe I am making a mistake here.”

Instead of snorting and going, “Who cares!” I figured it was maybe best to apologize and tell Doctor Squill that I could hardly wait to hear about the Delta Doodle Dandies, a group of Balona men who are famous mostly for drinking beer and falling off of the Balona water tower.

“Well, for your information,” Doctor Squill went, continuing her lecture, “there is no relationship *at all* between the Daughters of the Delta and the Delta Doodle Dandies. I thought you should have that information to keep under your bonnet before you make the final decision about accepting the obligations contingent upon membership in our society.”

“What society is that?”

“*We* do not drink beer, Patella. *We* do not climb the water tower. *We* don’t participate in chugs.” (A *chug* is a sort of artistic

beer-guzzling competition the Delta Doodle Dandies are also famous for.) “The ideal! We Daughters of the Delta do good things like taking food to sick old Balona folks and arranging flowers down at Jolly Times Rest Home, and seeing to it that the homeless get bus tickets out of town. And we oversee the painting of curb numbers at your gutter. Those of us who are professional women will occasionally donate our professional services to a deserving person. For free, you understand, and not even much of a tax deduction. Charitable things like that. So remember those facts next time you hear the rumor. Set it right, hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I went, “I didn’t know about the bus tickets. That’s pretty good!” With that, I got her off of my back.

Anyway, membership in the DOD is an honor where you get to wear a special pin and brag about your heritage, and I am going to join. I am going to wait and watch and see if Claire tries to join, too. Maybe somebody will black-ball her.

The black-ball is a famous thing certain DODs use to keep people out of the organization who don’t have a nice background to recommend them. What they do is, I have heard, they each have a handful of little white balls and little black balls, and when a name is proposed, everybody goes up to the box and drops a little ball into it. White ball or black ball. A candidate becomes toast with even one little black ball. Supposed to keep the membership pure and respectable. I can’t imagine anybody dropping a little black ball on me.

On Claire, maybe. We’ll see. Maybe the balls are actually black and white jellybeans, which you could eat after the ceremony.

About Mr. Henry Vibrissa. He barely gives me the eye at Tabernacle. That’s for public consumption. We actually have sort of a private relationship, but we agreed I shouldn’t mention it, so I won’t say any more, except to say he’s got hair on his back, too. The girls at Kute Kurls & Nails all speculated about Hanky’s hairiness a while ago. That’s the Front Street beauty parlor where I sweep up and get items for my *Courier* columns. The girls all agreed that Hanky’s sure to have lots of hair on his back, too, which turned

off some of them, they said.

Doesn't turn me off at all. Hair like that, softer than Flops's, is actually a sure sign of a pretty vigorous guy.

