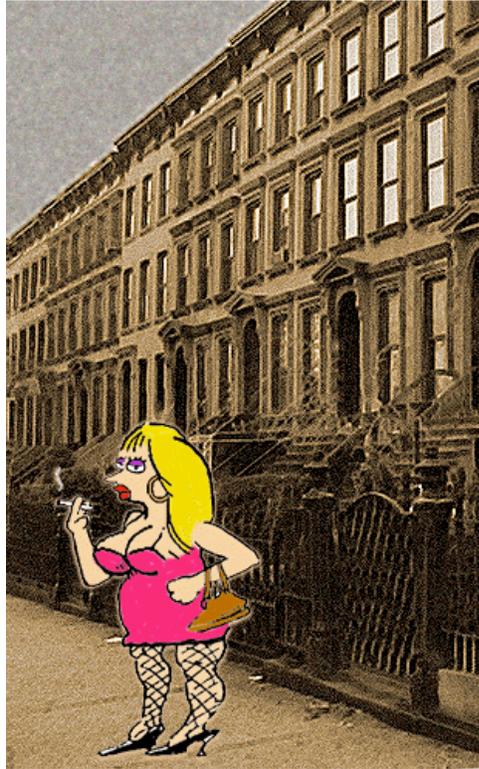


See You in the Funny Papers



by

Matt McHugh

Life would be so much easier if I were a cartoon character. Like the ones you find in those single-panel cartoons in men's sex magazines. You know the kind, where you see two people in bed and one says something funny like "Hey, where's the beef!" or "Well, OK, but I think your vase might break if I sit on it." Or there's two seedy-looking guys in trench coats watching a farmer's truck full of sheep drive down the road. One turns to the other and says, "I didn't know they delivered!" There's one where a guy on a street corner is staring at a car with this stunned expression. Inside, you can see a woman in heels and fishnet stockings, holding a

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wad of bills in her hand, with a guy in front and a guy behind. The woman calls out "It's not what it looks like, honey!" Things are funny there, in that cartoon sex world. Cheating husbands and nymphomaniac wives. Perverts and molesters. Mistresses and hookers. They're all funny when drawn inside a box on a page.

I like to laugh. I like finding the humor in things, but I'm not very good at it. That's why I think I've always liked the cartoons from those magazines. My brother had stacks of them hidden under his bed. He said they were my father's, which may be true. I can remember sneaking them out when he wasn't around and flipping through them. I guess I was about was about eleven or twelve. The pictures and articles didn't interest me, just the cartoons. I didn't really understand most of them at the time, but I still thought they were funny because of the drawings. The women were always outrageously big-boobed and beautiful--except for the ones that were very fat or old, but they were rare. Men were always fat or skinny, bald or too hairy. I remembering wondering why all the men who drew these--at least I've always figured they were all drawn by men--would mostly make women look good but show men so unflatteringly. I understand why better now. It's all about men's fantasies of what a woman should be, combined with a fear of what they themselves might be. Juxtaposition, Javier called it. Putting two things side by side to compare. A sexy fantasy and a pathetic reality. Juxtaposed, they are funny. At least in the cartoons.

I love Javier. He's Puerto Rican and smart and funny and so gay you almost can't believe it. He's like a cartoon of a muscle guy in stiletto heels and fishnet stockings lifting weights at the gym wearing a spaghetti-strap T-shirt that says "More man then you'll ever be... more woman than you'll ever get!" He's the only thing I have that I can call a friend. He's says he's HIV-negative. I'm not sure I believe him, but I'm not telling him that.

I have a client who wants to be my friend. He has me call him Rollo Tomassi. He tried telling me his real name once, but I said I didn't want to know. He says Rollo Tomassi is from a movie and once he even brought me a videotape of it to watch.

"It's my all-time favorite," he said. "You'll be blown away when you see what happens at the end."

I tried to tell him thanks but I wasn't interested. I like movies, but I just didn't want to have that much in common with him.

"Come on, you'll like it! And it'll give us something to, you know, talk about. "

I never watched it, but I said I did. It was easy enough to distract Rollo when he wanted to talk about it. Afterward, as he was going, he hesitated at the door, then turned back.

"It's a nice night outside. You want to go grab a bite or something?"

Rollo's not a bad guy. He's not married (I can tell) and always uses a rubber and doesn't get rough. But he's lonely. More and more, he asks if I want to eat with him. Sometimes he gets me gifts for holidays. When I was younger, I always got dinners and gifts from clients. Rollo's the only one who does now, and I don't want them from him because they mean something to him (I can tell). I remember one cartoon where you see a family at Thanksgiving dinner. There's a teenage kid with a big, glassy-eyed grin at the table. A woman in heels and fishnets sits smoking next to a him. A woman in an apron says to her, "So Johnny tells me you two met on his class trip to Wall Street?"

Rollo's my only regular now. The others petered out (hee-hee!) over the last few years. I look around at other women and I know I'm still sexier than most of them. But I can no longer

pass for under 40 and I bulge and sag in places that make that obvious. Fortunately, the escort ads and word-of-mouth do a pretty good job of keeping a steady flow for me, so I no longer--or very rarely--have to work the bars or tunnels. When I was younger and looked better, I could keep the slaps and grabs of the college boys at bay. I intimidated them. I had the power to make them wonder if they were good enough. I can't do that anymore, so as much as possible, I'm careful to stick to situations where I can still be in control. There's a cartoon where a bunch of guys in football uniforms are doing this woman in a big bed--she's taking them six ways at once, all hanging in stirrups and slings--and a sports announcer nearby says into a mic, "You can really see how the home field advantage comes into play here." The drawings of the guys in football outfits, helmets and all, but naked from the waist down, always cracked me up.

I sometimes wonder what my father thought of all those cartoons in those magazines--assuming, of course, they were his like my brother said. I was eight years old when he left. I can still see him, walking out the door, giving one last look back at my mother, drunk on the couch. My brother was in the bedroom with headphones on. He always did that. I always stayed and listened to the screaming, hiding just around the hallway corner or behind the big chair. I think I thought I would hear something important, but the arguments were always the same. She was a drunk fat whore. He was a sniveling little queer. Back and forth. Sometimes they cried and apologized to each other, though that actually bothered me more in some ways. When my father left, I often imagine him stepping through the door, pulling a broad-brimmed hat onto his head, then looking at me and saying "See you in the funny papers, kiddo." He used to say that sometimes when he left for work, or when I was little and he put me to bed with a kiss on my forehead. But he didn't say it that day. Didn't even glance in my direction. When I left home at sixteen (a different apartment by then, Social Services had moved us a couple times),

my mother was drunk at the kitchen table. I often imagine that I should have waved and said "See you in the funny papers, mom." But I didn't.

Over the years, I have been in many different apartments, alone and with lovers or roommates. I am alone now, in a third-floor walk-up in a battered old brownstone. From one window, I can just see the arm of the Statue of Liberty. From the other, the place where the World Trade Center used to be. There are cracks and stains on the wall, but it is basically clean and I have been here for (my God, really?) almost ten years. Everyone in the neighborhood knows me, though they mostly ignore me. Believe me, that's a big improvement from when I first arrived, and I'm perfectly happy with it that way. The first floor is Mrs. Alvarez, a 400-pound shut-in who sometimes stands in her doorway to smoke a cigar. The Carpetti boys, on the second floor, are both in junior high, I think. They've started staring at me when I go by. Sometimes they whistle. Mrs. Carpetti smacks them in the back of the head when they do. She apologized for them once.

"I'm so sorry. I'm trying to teach them to respect women, but it's so hard the way society is today, you know. So many bad influences."

There's a cartoon where a woman in fishnets and heels stands in front of a room full of boy scouts. One in the back leans over and whispers to another, "This is going to be the best merit badge ever!"

Jorje is the super. He lives in basement utility room, with a little black-and-white TV with a coat-hanger antenna. He's so old and frail sometimes I have to help him maneuver the trash cans through the alley gate. And, of course, there's Javier upstairs and the parade of guys he brings home. They're all cartoon characters, though they don't seem to know it. They all live

their lives as seriously as if it mattered, and never seem to notice that people watching them think they're funny. I guess that applies to me too. You can never know what somebody is thinking, or knows, or think they know about you. A guy at a party is talking to a woman and says, "I've heard a lot about you. My best friend is your gynecologist." I used to go to a gynecologist, but I stopped when he referred me to another doctor. First time I went to the new one, as he looked at a file and made notes before the exam, he calmly asked me if I was still an active prostitute. Haven't been to one since.

On New Year's Eve, Javier and I went out to Rocco's. It's a dive where they serve beer in cans, but usually nobody bothers us. The old men just sit and drink and mutter. The young ones play pool and horse around. It was there that Javier told me he was going to Miami.

"Honey, I'm going to shake the dust of this place off my boots and run barefoot in the sand!" he said.

After a while longer, he told me that he had a lot of friends who'd already gone down there.

"Miami is like the secret gay elephant graveyard, you know? It's where they all go to die, know what I mean?"

Elephants. There was a cartoon with two elephants, who had obviously just made it. A little TV announcer guy is holding up the elephant's schlong. There's a wristwatch around it and the announcer says, "And it still works!"

I confided to Javier that I had over twenty-three-thousand dollars saved up in the bank.

"Oh, shut up, girl! You rich! Damn. You know how much AZT I could buy for that."

At midnight, we were laughing and toasting each other. A guy at the bar yelled out.

"And Happy New Year to the whore and the fag in the corner!"

Javier started before I could stop him.

"Excuse me! What did you say? I didn't quite hear that, sir. Who were you talking to?"

The place went quiet. The guy spoke up.

"I said, Happy New Year to the whore and the fag in the corner. I was talking to you. It's sad you don't even know what you are."

I dragged Javier out before anything else could happen.

One cartoon showed a blind black guy on a street corner, holding up a begging cup and a sign that said, "Please help. I am blind, and I think I might be black." Sometimes it's funny when you don't know what you are.

Javier is gone, off to Miami. I have thought about what to do with the twenty-three-thousand dollars. It's not enough to buy a house or even an apartment. I might be able to make a down payment, but I'd still have to earn money for the mortgage. And, of course, there's the credit check. The guy at the bank told me I could invest it and retire in fifteen or twenty years. I thought about buying a really hot car that I would just drive and drive until it falls apart. But twenty-three-thousand doesn't buy much of a car. And I'd still have to earn money for food. I had another job once, when I was sixteen, as a waitress in a diner. But I met some girls who taught me how to make more money, and now, twenty-three-thousand dollars later, I find it's not enough to do anything with. Anything that matters.

I keep remembering one cartoon that shows an old lady in heels and fishnets. Her boobs hang like torpedoes down to her waist. She says to a group of guys in business suits walking by, "Hey, honey. I can take my teeth out!"

I bought a car. It cost me three-thousand-eight-hundred and forty-six dollars--with taxes, title, and tags... whatever they are. It's old and kind of beat up, but it runs OK and has a CD player. The salesman said it would definitely make the trip to Miami, no problem. After that, it can fall to pieces for all I care. With first month, last month, and security I can get a beachfront apartment for a year for twenty-thousand, with enough left over for food. Maybe even some AZT. After that... well, there must be diners in Miami somewhere.

I give Jorje my key. I leave a note for Rollo by my buzzer. Everything I have fits into two suitcases and three boxes. Mrs. Carpetti has her boys help me carry them down to my car. I make one last walk through the apartment to check if I've left anything. I haven't--except for one cartoon I tore out of a magazine years ago taped up to the mirror. It shows a sexy, big-boobed woman in heels and fishnets inside of a box hanging on a wall. The sign says "In case of emergency, break glass." I leave it taped to the mirror.

I turn out the light and stand in the doorway. As I close the door, I say it. There is no one to hear, but I finally get to say it just the same:

"See you in the funny papers."

END