

Larger Than Life

When Becky woke up, the first thing she saw was an angel playing a hand held harp. The second thing she saw was another angel playing another hand held harp. But there was no music.

Becky rolled over to face the stuffed sleeping bag beside her.

"Are you asleep?" she almost whispered. Twice more, at decreasing intervals and increasing volume, she finally grumbled, "I *know* you're not asleep!" this time loud enough to wake the dead, and using a fingered prod as an exclamation mark. A mop of blonde hair popped out. Hands popped out, separating the mop to reveal a face.

"How the heck can I be asleep with you yelling?"

"Sorry Jane," Becky said, offering a rascally smile.

"I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because you're such a plain Jane and you need me to brighten your life."

"Thanks." Jane stretched and began ruffling her hair.

"You know what?" Becky began.

"What?"

"This was a hell of a place to camp. We should've thought of it weeks ago. Soft grass . . . peace and quiet . . . and no weirdoes wandering around. We even had a couple of guardian angels watching over us."

Jane followed Becky's gaze to the two stony white faced angels with their hand held harps, and then perused the rest of the cemetery.

"It must be all the rotting corpses," Jane remarked, distantly.

"What must be?"

"That keeps the grass all soft."

"Look. There's even a tap."

Becky climbed from her sleeping bag and walked barefoot over the lush lawn to the tap, affixed to a twisted pipe that grew from the ground like the remains of a dead lead weed. She gave the tap a turn and water spurted out.

"It works! Shower time!" Becky chirped.

"Funny place for a tap."

Becky rifled through a pocket of her ruck sack, bringing out a plastic zip-lock bag containing a bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap. She pulled off her T-shirt and panties.

"I hope I don't give big boners to all the skeletons," she giggled.

"It must be so people can water the flowers on the graves," Jane said. Becky was already kneeling down, her head beneath the tap, the water splashing and sparkling in the sunlight. "It's cold," she gasped.

"Make room for me," Jane said, throwing her camisole to one side and kneeling beside her friend.

Becky and Jane dressed and began rolling away the sleeping bags.

"We should go get some breakfast in the town," Becky suggested, finally folding away the ground sheet.

"We've hardly any money left, you know."

"I know."

"We shouldn't have bought all that beer the other day."

"What's life if you can't gratify your desires?"

"What is it if you can?"

"We'll find a job some place."

They tossed on their ruck sacks and walked through the cemetery towards the main gate.

"Where the hell are we, anyway? Did we get to Alberta

yet?" Becky asked.

"It looks a long way into town," Jane said. They had reached the main road. "Let's get a ride to the next town and eat there."

They walked up to a lay-by, dropped down their gear and turned to face the promise of traffic.

"Can you believe this is the Trans-Canada? It's fuckin' dead," Becky swore at the two lanes of potholes and the silence.

"It's a dead road going through a dying country," Jane offered, sardonically.

"Is that you being profound again? You know it's bad for your health."

"And I'm all out of medicine."

"Look, there's a car coming." Becky and Jane put out their thumbs.

It was a big car. A big fat car. A big fat gaz guzzling car. A big fat gaz guzzling car that retched fumes. It stopped. The driver pushed a button and the passenger side window whirred effortlessly down.

"Where're you girls headin'?" the driver asked, eyeing away for all his life. Chubby and completely gormless looking, his hair sat uncomfortably on his head as if it should be a wig, but unfortunately was not. It was reminiscent of someone else's hair. Someone else famous and dead. "I can take yous as far as Enbridge."

"That's fine," Becky said, opening the front door.

"There's room for you both up front," the hair said, with a note of eternal hopelessness.

"That's all right," Jane said, climbing into the back. "It's a big car," she added tactfully, pulling the door closed.

"It's a Chrysler New Yorker. Say, you girls like music?"

"Sure," Becky answered.

"You must like the King then," he said, grabbing an eight-track cartridge from the dash board and pushing it into the machine's mouth.

"Who's the King?"

"You're pulling my leg."

There was a click and a whir and then the unmistakable voice of Elvis Presley oozed out, singing something about suede shoes and their blueness. It was just then that Becky recognised the driver's hair.

"You're from out east, eh? I can tell by the way you talk."

"New Brunswick."

"You girls students? New Brunswick students?"

"I was, but I dropped out," Becky said.

"Dropouts are you?"

"Just me. I was studying to be a nurse."

The hair seemed suddenly excited, as if his Chrysler New Yorker had rumbled past a sign from God.

"A nurse, eh? Now that's what you'd call a coincidence, 'cos I'm looking for to hire a nurse. Well, *like* a nurse. You need a job?"

"What do you need a nurse to do?" Becky glanced at Jane and offered a sagacious smile.

"It's my sister, see. She's what you might call an invalidid."

"What's wrong with her?"

"She can't get about. Both of you. I could give you both jobs. She needs the house taking care of as well. She has a big house. You could have a room each."

"How much?" Jane asked from the back seat.

"How much what?" the hair asked.

"The pay. How much?"

"Well how about, what if we say . . . say two hundred a week," the hair concluded, doing his best to sound as if the deal was his own and that two hundred dollars a week was not the amount his sister always offered.

"And we eat free?" Becky asked.

"Eat free?" The hair was worried: his sister never included food. "Well, see, that might not be a good idea. See—"

"Two hundred and we eat free. And a week's pay in advance," Becky insisted.

"See, it's not exactly *me* who does the hiring. My sister's the one who—"

"Forget it then," Becky said with a carefree shrug.

"No, no. I'll talk to her. Everything'll be fine," the hair said. "My name's Willie," he added, eagerly holding out a thick hand to shake.

"But what's wrong with her, exactly?" Jane asked.

"I told you, she can't exactly move about much."

They drove a few minutes to the sound of a warbling Elvis.

"He's the best. I've got all his songs, eh? I'd give anything to see him doing one of those concerts. Maybe I will, someday."

"How can you? He's dead," Becky said.

"Oh, well, yeah. You know, I've done some of what you call Elvis impersonations."

"That's nice," Becky offered, weakly.

"I was paid too. There's a bar in Enbridge where I did it. I stopped though. I think people thought it was funny. You shouldn't laugh at Elvis."

"No."

"We're almost there. Maybe someday I'll go to America and see him do a show for real."

The house was huge and two stories high with a hidden basement. All the wood was well white washed. The garden had been killed and covered in cement. A ramp covered the steps up to the door.

Inside, the furnishings were clean and old and unused and there was a vague odour of rotting food. On the hall wall a ticking cuckoo clock hung: a cuckoo clock whose cuckoo could no longer cuckoo and so never came out to play. It was that kind of house.

"Follow me," Willie said, leading them down the corridor. "She doesn't use upstairs, so you'll have it for yourselves."

"Where do you live?" Becky asked.

"Mostly, up the road. I've got a house up the road. But I stay to help here when there's nobody else."

Into the living room, with more clean old unused furniture.

"I'll just go see her," Willie said, walking towards a door and disappearing.

Becky and Jane dropped their bags down.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," Jane said.

"Think there's a sister?"

"There must be: listen."

They heard muffled voices from behind the door and then Willie reappeared.

"Come on in then." And as the girls walked towards the door, the smell of rotting food seemed to grow less vague.

Inside, an enormous oak bed stood against the back wall. But it was not the bed that devoured their attention: it was the fat woman on the bed. Her monstrousness offered the same fascination as a mangled corpse in a road accident, when all the traffic slows down to gape.

"This is my sister, Eileen."

"Hello," the girls mumbled.

Eileen was spread out all over the bed, her thick back propped up by a heap of crushed pillows. She was like a pile of white fat with white fat appendages that seemed incapable of animation. There were tiny beady black eyes, lost in folds of flab, that looked out coldly and distantly and glanced suddenly downwards, where a small wooden chest, like a misshapen miniature coffin, lay half hidden under the bed.

"Out, out. I'll see them out there," she said hurriedly, glancing quickly away from the chest in case the girls should follow her beady black eyed gaze. "Take them out and then come help me into my wheelchair. Go on, get on with it."

Willie led Becky and Jane back into the living room.

"Sit down. I won't be long."

The arms of the wheelchair had been removed, allowing Eileen to spill out over the edges, and the whole thing squeaked in protest as its buckled wheels wobbled over the floor boards.

"You want work? Right, *I'll* give you work." Eileen was beaded with perspiration—it dribbled down her fat face—and was gasping for air. Moving from the bed onto the wheelchair, even with Willie's assistance, was almost as much strain as her bulk could endure. "You take care of me," she continued, pausing briefly to lick her Cool Melon

lips, "and the house. Two half days off a week. That's the way we always do it. Your evenings are free so long as one of you stays on call."

"That's what we call it," Willie added helpfully, "'on call.'"

"And the pay," Becky began. "Two hundred a week."

"That's right. And not a penny more."

"And we eat for free."

"What? Who said anything about that?" Eileen looked up at her brother, who lowered his head nervously and stared at his feet. "Who mentioned free food."

"I'm mentioning it," Becky said. "If the deal doesn't include food, it doesn't include us either."

Eileen glanced savagely at her brother and then bellyached: "All right. All right. Just this once. Now, Willie, take them upstairs and show them a room. Not one of the best, mind."

When they returned, Eileen handed them a list of their duties. It was a page long and seemed to have been touched many times by many hands. Willie pushed her into the kitchen—still silent, as if afraid to say a word—and the girls followed close behind.

In the kitchen, the girls stopped dead in their tracks. Jane's mouth dropped open in astonishment. Becky turned away and forced off a snigger. It was an utterly absurd sight that defied the seeing.

"You can start with doing those dishes and making lunch." Eileen handed another piece of paper to Becky. "That's what I want," she said. And then the suet woman lifted her suet arm, pushed her sausage fingers into a pocket on her dress and brought out a ring of jingling keys.

"The locks are numbered, and so are the keys," she said.

All the food cupboards, the pantry and even the fridge were padlocked. "Take out what you need and bring me back the keys.

"Willie, wheel me to my room."

"She's bananas," Becky said. "Look at all these fuckin' locks."

"She's obscene. She stinks like rotten food. Do you really want to stay?"

"Why don't we wait until they hand over the cash, and then take off?"

"All right. But let's try and get it today. She gives me the creeps."

"Just look at this," Becky said, gawking at the paper. "Listen to what she wants for lunch: 'Pea soup with eight slices of bread and butter, four pork chops, six sausages, a packet of bacon, ten boiled and mashed potatoes, half a cabbage, carrots, one packet of fried mushrooms, half a pint of gravy, a large apple pie—from the freezer, it says—and half a tub of ice cream.' I could live for a fuckin' week on that."

"It's a good thing she's rich. It must cost a fortune to stay her size."

Willie reappeared and said, "You'd better get the stuff out. She wants the keys back."

"We were supposed to get our pay in advance," Becky told him.

"You'll have to see Eileen about that. She's the one who pays you," Willie mumbled, ignominiously.

There was a call button beside Eileen's bed that rang bells in every room of the house. In the afternoon, it was pushed.

"What the hell's that?"

"She must want more food," Jane said. They were sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee.

"Yeah, it's at least an hour since she finished lunch."

"You go. I can't stand the sight of her."

Becky stood and walked towards the hall.

"And ask her about the money," Jane called.

Soon, Becky returned.

"You'll have to come and help me. It's not food she wants."

"What is it?"

"We have to get her into that god damned wheel chair. Elvis has cleared off."

"Can't you do it on your own?"

"Why should I?"

"I don't want to touch her."

"You think *I* do?"

"Where's she want to go, anyway?"

"I don't know. Come on."

When they arrived in the bedroom, Eileen greeted them with: "What took you so long? Come on, help me into the chair. Do you expect me to do everything for myself?"

She was all dead weight. It was like moving a sack of rotten potatoes.

"Careful! Watch what you're doing. All right, you can push me to the bathroom now." Becky and Jane exchanged glances and pushed the overloaded chair out into the corridor.

On both sides of the toilet were cold stainless steel rails that extended out from the wall behind the bowl. The two girls helped Eileen from the wheelchair and she supported herself on the rails.

"Pull down my panties," she said, a glob of spit dribbling from her Smooth Peach lips.

"What?" Jane asked.

"You heard me. I thought you were training to be a nurse?" she panted, straining from the effort of standing. "Now hurry up and pull them down."

"I was training to be a nurse," Becky said. "I'll do it."

Eileen's black beady eyes flashed. "I told *this* one," she groused, looking from Becky back to Jane.

Jane stepped reluctantly forwards, lifted up Eileen's dress to reveal two ghastly rolls of roly-poly rotundity, mottled with varicose veins, the flab marked with permanent ripples like jelly left to set on a roller coaster. But it was the girth that was most revolting: the sheer bulk seemed like a perversion of nature.

And there was something else too. Becky noticed Eileen was becoming flustered: sweat bubbled from her face; her chin turned into a dozen folds of flesh as she peered down at Jane; her tongue flashed across her Smooth Peach lips.

"Come on, come on. Pull those panties down."

Jane closed her eyes as she pulled at the elastic and, once the panties were below the knee, stood and backed away. Eileen plonked herself down as the girls retired to the hall.

Willie had given them a room with a double bed. That night, with a few reckless moon beams streaming through the net curtains as they waved in the slight wind, Becky and Jane lay looking across at each other.

"There's something weird about her," Becky said.

"*Everything's* weird about *her*. Did you see that chest hidden under her bed?"

"Never mind the chest. What about in the bathroom, this afternoon."

"What?"

"When you were pulling her panties down. There was something about the way she watched you."

"Maybe—" Jane began, unconsciously ruffling her hair.

"And why did she make *you* do it?"

"God knows. I just want to get paid and get away from here. I thought you were going to ask for the money?"

"Tomorrow," Becky said.

"Are you scared of her?"

"Scared? Me?—A bit," she added with a wry smile.

"I wonder what's in it?"

"In what?"

"The chest under her bed."

The next morning—after Eileen supervised the unlocking and relocking of the food cupboards and the pantry and the fridge; and mountains of food sizzling in lakes of grease were dished out; and Eileen's bed was made and Eileen spread back on top, like butter on thick spongy white bread; and her giant screen television was turned on; and the pile of dishes had been washed and put away—Becky decided there should be no more delays and ventured back to knock on Eileen's door.

"Come in," the cold voice bellowed.

"I've come about our pay," Becky said, trying not to glance at the chest under the bed.

Eileen, who was stuffing three chocolates into her mouth from a large box on the bedside table, said, "What about it?"

"Well, we were supposed to get one week in advance."

"Ha," she noised sarcastically, a piece of nougat-looking like a boil ready to burst—stuck ludicrously to her Sweet Strawberry lips.

"We're broke, you see."

"When you do *work* in advance I'll give you *money* in advance. There'll be no advance from *me*. And if you're thinking of crying to Willie for money, you can save your breath. The only money *he* has is what *I* give. Now don't you have something to do?"

It was several days before Willie called again.

"I brought you both a present," he said, holding out a parcel.

"What is it?" Jane took the parcel from him and unwrapped it. "Records," she said, trying to sound satisfied.

"Not just *any* records. The King doesn't just make *any* records."

"They're great, but we don't have a record player," Becky said.

"Don't have a record player? I'll see to that. You girls let me see to that, eh?"

"Fuckin' Elvis," Becky said, as Willie disappeared down into the basement.

"Don't be mean. He was trying to be nice."

Moments later, Willie reappeared carrying an old monophonic record player that looked like a sewing machine. "Here you are. This'll do the trick. I'll take it and put it in your room. Don't play the King too loud though." Willie gave a furtive glance towards the hall and, in a half whisper, concluded: "Eileen doesn't like music."

With the record player on the bed side table, Willie sat for a moment on Becky and Jane's bed. The covers were

unmade and he could see the depressions and ruffles their bodies had made. He touched the two depressions gently and sighed a famished sigh.

When Willie arrived back downstairs, Eileen was supervising the unlocking of the food cupboards and the pantry and the fridge.

"Good morning, Eileen," Willie said.

"You're here, are you?"

"Yeah, I am. I'm here. I just stopped in."

"Good. I need to speak with you."

"But I just stopped in," Willie blurted, revealing a note of nervousness. "I have to go."

"It will only take a moment," she said, glancing at Jane who was still unlocking locks. "Wheel me to my room."

When Eileen returned, she looked suspiciously at the girls and at the locks and snatched the keys from Jane.

"You have the list. Get on with lunch," she said. "And you," she gave a laboured nod at Becky, "push me back to my room."

Out in the corridor, Becky announced, "We'll be taking our half day off this afternoon."

"Together?"

"Yes. Both of us."

"That's not what we agreed. One of you has to stay in."

"No one mentioned that."

"That's the agreement. That's always the agreement," Eileen pronounced.

"There's no point arguing with her," Becky said, pulling on a clean T-shirt.

"I know," Jane answered from the bed. "I'll take tomorrow afternoon off instead. In any case, I want to write some

letters home."

"You and your letters home."

When the door downstairs slammed shut, a dead silence seemed to descend upon the house. The only sound was the push of pen on paper and the occasional creak of the old desk.

And then, ages of pages later, there was something else. Jane put down the pen and listened. There was the sound of something else. She opened the bedroom door, slowly to stop the squeak, listened to the something else and sneaked down the passage. On the landing the something else had changed into something else. It was voices. Down the steps she stepped, slowly, wondering if she should turn back.

The voices came from the bathroom. Jane tried to understand the words, but they seemed like a foreign language. She passed Eileen's door, saw it open, the bed empty, the chest under the bed. Now, Jane walked as if upon broken glass, slowly, step by agonised step, involuntarily drawn by the voices that grew increasingly clear; trying, without knowing she was trying, to unhear the words. And then Jane stopped. She could see inside the bathroom.

Eileen stood, propping herself up on the railings, naked. The blubbery body was fully revealed, each curve a blasphemy of a curve: breasts dangling like monstrous church bells hanging in hell; limbs rotund and elephantine and almost inert; the stratified stomach like corrugated suet.

"Come on Elvis. Come on dirty Elvis," she moaned, licking her Deep Raspberry lips. Her stock legs were spread and Willie lay on the floor between them. Willie was naked too. He looked up at his sister and pulled his penis. "Come on, Piggy Elvis."

Willie's face was covered in powdered sugar that revealed traces of lick marks and gave him the appearance of a masturbating corpse.

"I'm coming," he gasped.

Eileen began to urinate. The yellow shower splashed endlessly onto Elvis; puddles began to form on the floor; the white powder dissolved and dribbled down Elvis' face in acidic streams; the sperm squirted and splashed into a pool of poisoned urine.

And then the black beady eyes turned and attached themselves to Jane.

"Do you think he likes it, or she just makes him do it?" Becky was back from her afternoon in the local bar and seemed more intrigued than repulsed by Jane's story.

"Probably both. But that's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The point is, she's perverted. Everything about her's perverted. She probably *makes* everything perverted. The point is I want to leave."

"Right now? Just because of that?"

"Just?"

"In two days we'll 'ave been here a week. That means pay day. We should stay until then."

"How do you know she'll even pay?" Jane protested. "And in any case—"

"And in any case," Becky stole her words, "this stuff is what memories are made of."

"Some memories aren't worth having."

"Tell me that when your ninety."

"You're as mad as they are."

"Just think of the money then. We need the money. If we

go now, all this will have been for nothing."

Jane looked silently towards the window.

"Well?" Becky asked.

"All right. We'll stay until pay day."

Early the next afternoon the bells began incessantly to knell.

"What the hell's she up to? It's your turn." Becky and Jane were upstairs in their room.

"It's always *my* turn," Jane complained over the noise of the ringing. As she opened the door a scream slipped in.

"Both of you! Both of you get down here," the scream screamed as the toll of the bells finally ceased.

"She's flipped," Becky said, standing and joining Jane.

Eileen was in the kitchen. Willie was with her and all the cupboards and pantry and fridge were open and she clutched the ring of keys and waved them madly as if using them to call forth hungry demons.

"So you're a couple of god damn thieves, are you? You bite the hand that feeds you." Eileen waved the keys some more and spit dribbled from her Dark Cherry lips.

"Are you off your nut?" Becky chimed.

"I bring you in off the streets, treat you well, treat you like *family*, and you scoff do you. You scoff."

"You're crackers. We haven't stolen a thing, so you might as well stop screaming your half baked accusations."

"No? No? So you're liars as well as thieves."

"It's best to tell the truth," Willie advised, weakly.

"What the fuck's your beef, then? Come on, spit it out. What exactly is it we've stolen?"

"What do you call this?" Eileen wailed, throwing the keys on the table and picking up a packet of cookies. "This is

your thieving, that's what this is." Spit flew. "I left you both with the keys yesterday. This packet was full yesterday. Now look at it. Half the top row's gone. And this," she threw the cookies down and picked up a large bottle of diet Coke. "This was unopened. Now look. Is that what you call not stealing? You lying little bitches." Spit flew. Eileen's face paled and the sweat seemed putrescent. She began to choke on her words, "You lying thieving little bitches. God knows what else you've been taking." She choked and gasped and turned paler.

"I'll take you to your room," Willie said.

"The . . . the . . ." she gasped, trying to raise a podgy finger to point, " . . . the keys. Lock up . . . "

Shortly after, Willie came into the kitchen with the list of food Eileen wanted.

"She's feeling better, she says."

"Well we're not. She's as nutty as a fuckin' fruit cake. This is the last straw. We want our pay and we're off," Becky said.

"Why? She was angry, is all. You girls know how she is. She doesn't really mean anything."

"She means plenty. We want our money."

"Tomorrow. I'll get it tomorrow. You can wait 'till tomorrow?"

Becky looked at Jane who offered a reluctant nod.

"Tomorrow. Morning."

"Good. That's good. So you can make this?" Willie handed over a list twice as long as usual. Becky took the paper and shook her head in amazement.

"She always eats a lot when she gets upset," Willie explained.

The next morning, Becky and Jane stayed in bed and talked about Vancouver and what they would do there.

"Thank God this lot's over with."

"We didn't get our money yet," Jane said, ruffling her hair.

"We will. It's funny she didn't ring. It's past breakfast time."

The girls showered leisurely, dressed, packed their bags, and still the bell refused to ring.

Downstairs there was silence.

"Her door's still closed," Jane said. "Maybe we should call Willie. Where's his number?"

"To hell with Willie," Becky said, marching down the corridor and barging into the room.

"Hey, wake up," Jane heard. Entering the room herself, she saw Becky shaking Eileen.

"I think she's dead," Becky turned to her friend.

"Oh my God."

"And look at this lot." There were chocolate wrappers and cake packets and sweet papers all over the bed. "I think she's eaten herself to death."

"We should give her the kiss of life!" Jane said, hurriedly.

"The *what?* Kiss *that?* You do it then."

"I'll call an ambulance," Jane said.

The ambulance had been and gone.

"It's funny I don't feel more . . . upset," Jane puzzled, joining Becky back in the Eileen's bedroom.

"If you say so."

"I suppose we should call Willie."

"It's a small town. He'll know soon enough."

"In any case, I don't want to see his face when he finds out."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid he might smile."

"Well, I've got something that might make *you* smile. Look what I found in the dressing table." Becky held up a wad of notes. "I think we should take what we deserve, what we need, and go."

"All right."

"I suppose we need the lot?"

"I suppose."

As they walked towards the door, Jane stopped in her tracks.

"Just a minute," she said, "there's something I want to see." Jane returned to the bed, knelt down, pulled out the chest from its hiding place and lifted open the lid. Jane peered inside. Becky peered inside.

"Lipstick." Jane said. "It's full of lipstick."

"Why the fuck would a fat slob of a monster wear lipstick?"