

Martian

Every time I spot a green van, I think, "They're here!" I know that sounds crazy, but a few people believed it when I was a teenager on Cornhill. I suppose I helped the story along, continually pointing out the Martian presence to my neighbors.

I told Mrs. Gambino about the vans, and tried to persuade her that the blue mail boxes on street corners were for us earthlings, while the green boxes were to be used only by our alien overlords. I'd spin these tales when I stopped by her house after school on one pretext or another. Often she fed me something from the meal she was making. She was kind of sexy for an older woman in her thirties. Practicing my baloney on an adult who had the good grace to act like she believed me was just what a teenage boy needed. Mrs. G was habitually incredulous, and her reactions were always delicious. She was a terrific audience. I loved to hear her roll out the first syllable of "Oo Fah!"

"You'll never hear it spoken of in public, Mrs. G," I said, "but the Martians keep constant track of us."
"How?" she asked, fear creeping into her voice.
"The paperboys." I said. "They're not human."
"Oh-h, Madone a mia. Don't tell me this."
"It's true. They're encased in a kind of body balloon that looks human. If you can get a look at the paperboy's belly button, you'll see a small green hose attached to it."
"Che brutta. No!"

I made this up while I stood looking out her kitchen window as George, the paperboy, came up the sidewalk to the back door of the house. Mrs. Gambino sat breaking up stale bread, making a pile of crumbs to go into what I called tomato sauce. She called it gravy. George and I were best friends. I hadn't gotten even with him for stealing a pair of undershorts from my dresser and placing them in Mary Margaret Bellamarino's homeroom desk at school, with a forged love note from me. Now he banged on the kitchen door and shouted, "Collecting!"

"My paperboy!" the woman gasped.
"I'm on their hit list, Mrs. G, I have to hide!" I said.
"Mama Mia, this is crazy. I wish Anthony was home!"
"If you can get hold of his hose and pull it off, he can't hurt you, Mrs. G."

Mrs. Gambino swept the bread crumbs from the table and stood up. She straightened her apron and walked resolutely to the door. Whipping it open, she lunged at George, pulling his T-Shirt right up to his nipples, then she grabbed for his belly button.

"Yow," yelled George, as he folded up and tumbled back out onto the porch. I suddenly noticed the knife gone from the table. Scared, I ran toward the two of them. George was down, but I didn't see any blood. Mrs. G was fuming.

"You're a Martian!" she screamed at him. "Where's your hose?"

"No, no," I said, "he's not a Martian. I was only kidding, Mrs. G."

She was laughing wildly now. She hadn't been fooled. "You're supposed to be a Mar-shun, Georgie," she sang.

"Where's your little hose-y?"

"If you find it, don't cut it off," I said.

She swung around toward me.

"And you're full of crap-ola, Mister. Why did you tell me you stopped here this afternoon?"

"Uh, I don't remember."

"Yes, you do. To sell me a renewal to the Penny Saver. You know they deliver it for free! You are a Very Bad Boy!"

"I needed the money to light candles at church," I said. Hey, it was only two dollars.

"I'll bet you're the kid who sold the priest a fake raffle ticket. For a trip to Las Vegas."

Oh c'mon, I thought, I was only testing the theory that a man's vice will always beat his common sense, even if he's a priest. Besides, I gave him his money back in confession.

I hurried George off the porch and away from Mrs. Gambino, before she unraveled my entire junior criminal rap sheet. Later, I explained the little green hose to him.

"I feel sort of awful," I said.

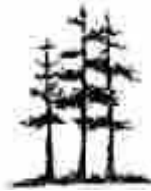
"No, you don't."

I laughed. "Damn!" for a minute, I thought she cut you with the knife."

"Nope," he said, "But she had really cold hands. And she was aiming lower than my belly button."

"I don't believe you!" I said.

"Then why do I have bread crumbs down the front of my shorts?"



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