Spring 2001

We're Entertainment

Victoria Haggblom

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss55/13

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
**WE’RE ENTERTAINMENT**

HANNAH STANDS on the threshold looking in at *We’re Entertainment’s* office. Stacks of paper, empty candy wrappers, and cheap plastic toys surround the desk where her boss Diane sits, eating French fries in front of a dusty air conditioner. Muddy paw prints cover the carpet and it smells like a kennel in there, wet fur and dog piss.

“Come in,” Diane grunts.

For a moment, Hannah wants to turn around and walk straight back to her car.

“Are you deaf?” Diane shouts. “You’re letting out cold air! That’s dollar bills flying away. Come inside!”

Hannah closes the door behind her and tries to smile. “It’s too hot to think,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“Never too hot to work.” Diane hands her a folder. “Here are the directions. Robert is already here. He was on time.” She shoves some more fries in her mouth, scratches the flea bites on her leg, and leans back in her chair.

In the costume room, big animal heads grin at Hannah from shelves along the walls. There’s a cat head, a bird head with a blue beak, and a purple Barney. The costumes hanging on their racks are enormous fake furs in red and yellow. There are wizard cloaks and gaudy dresses, feathery shirts and Indian wigs. Most of the costumes have been mended many times or are just barely held together with safety pins.

Robert is over by the prop box, holding a dirty white glove between his long fingers. He’s tall and slender, with a smooth, light brown face. His glossy black hair is shaped in tiny, undulating waves. “Hey girl,” he says. He puts the glove in front of his nose, sniffs it, and throws it with the rest of his things on the floor. “We’re doing a Winnie the Pooh and Power Ranger party today and since I got here first, I get to be the Power Ranger.” He picks up his costume and walks out to the bathroom. “See you after my magical change.”
“Sure.” Hannah hauls down Winnie the Pooh’s heavy head from one of the shelves. She puts it with the furry suit and slippers in a black trash bag and carries it outside. Diane doesn’t look up as Hannah passes her. She’s sitting in her chair with her eyes closed, breathing heavily through her nose. She still has some white clown make-up at the base of her neck and Hannah shudders, thinking of what Diane looks like when she’s all fixed up. A two-hundred-pound clown with an orange tutu, striped stockings, a braided wig, and a painted grin under the round clown nose. Diane lives in the back of the house, but the border between office and private area is blurred. Sometimes a dirty bra shows up in the bathroom and occasionally, Hannah has to look for a wand or some talcum powder in Diane’s kitchen.

Hannah lets the screen door fall shut behind her as quietly as she can. The bag with the costume goes into the trunk of her old Volvo, and she crouches down in the shade next to the car and waits for Robert.

Perhaps it’s just the weather, she thinks. Perhaps it’s just the heat that makes everything here look so ugly. The banana trees with their fringed leaves hanging limp in the burning sunlight. The humid air which makes all clothes stick and itch against your skin. Even the houses seem to be leaning helplessly against each other; their railings tilted, the paint on the facades peeling off like sun-burnt skin.

Robert comes scrambling out on the porch dressed in a tight red Spandex suit. He wears a pair of boots several sizes too big and carries his bag and a Power Ranger helmet. There are two dark spots under his arms. He fans himself desperately with a silly Chinese paper fan. “Let’s get out of here,” he says and tugs at the locked car door. Hannah lets him in and then she climbs into the driver’s seat. Robert has sprayed on some kind of cologne with a strong, sweet smell and Hannah coughs. When she starts the engine, Diane opens the door and sticks out her head. “Never stand still!” she hollers to them. “Makes you look like a dead stuffed animal. Move around!”

“We know!” Robert screams back through the open window.

They drive out of New Orleans on the interstate east and pass one suburb after the other, malls and supermarkets that sell everything from bathtubs and computers to wedding cakes. A
smell of stale grease comes from the fast food places along the road.

"I hate that smell," Robert says. He digs through his bag for more cologne.

"Please, no more scents," Hannah says. "Do you mind if I turn on the radio?"

"No, but I brought a tape. I think you'll like it." He puts the cassette in the tape player and a nasal voice fills the car. "It's Erasure doing Abba," Robert says, and sings along with the lyrics: *Take a chance on me, honey I'm still free.*

Hannah glances at his shining eyes and bobbing head. He snaps his fingers and moves in his seat. Robert is five years older than she and still hasn't finished his theater degree. He wants to become a professional actor and goes to auditions all the time. So far, he's only been cast once, as a dancer in a crappy French Quarter production of *Le Cage Aux Folles.*

Hannah remembers with embarrassment how she dressed up for the interview when she applied for the job. She had thought *We're Entertainment* was a real agency with a receptionist, computers, and pictures of happy children that parents sent in to the company. She practiced answering questions about why she wanted to work with children and thought about how the job might help her become a teacher in the future. She curled her hair and put on her nice burgundy suit.

A barking mutt greeted her by the gate. Sitting in front of Diane for the first time, Hannah tried to ignore the scary clown posters on the walls, the sour smell of mold, and the exercise bike which Diane obviously wasn't using. Hannah stared at Diane, dressed as a Halloween witch with fake warts on her nose, and forced herself to smile. She needed the money. If she got the job, she told herself, it would just be for a little while.

The last suburb and the motels around it disappear behind Hannah and Robert. They pass meadows and marshes and a corral with a mule standing in the shade of a pecan tree. There are few cars on the road and the air above the asphalt is so hot that it vibrates and distorts Hannah's view. The cane fields seem to be bulging and swaying even though they are perfectly still. For miles and miles, endless rows of growing, dripping sugar cane line the narrow road.

"We could drive for days and never get out of this," Hannah
says to Robert, who sits slumped against the window. “Aren’t you supposed to read the map? I have no idea where we are.”

“Well, excuse me, where is it?”

“On the floor, by your feet.”

Robert bends down and picks up the papers. “If these people could just learn how to write a proper description. Look at this.”

Hannah takes a quick look at the map. It’s handmade, with the names of towns written in pencil. The roads look like thick snakes made with a red felt pen. “I think I saw a sign that said thirty miles to Houma,” she says.

“Thirty miles. So we’re not even halfway there yet. Great.”

The vegetation next to the road gets darker and thicker, an impenetrable wall of entangled roots, branches, and leaves. Vines crawl out from the swamp and the water in the bayou is covered with light green slime.

Hannah tries not to hit the potholes which dot the road as far as she can see, but sometimes she can’t avoid them and Robert sighs loudly as he bounces up and down in his seat. “I think you should have made a left back there,” he says.

“Back where? There was no road.”

“It’s probably a small road. Come on, turn around.”

Hannah drives back a mile and slows down while Robert looks for the road. “There it is,” he says, and points at a small dirt road leading in between the trees.

“Are you sure?”

“What do you mean? You think I’ve been here before?”

Robert squints and compares the address to the numbers on a mailbox almost buried by shrubs. “I think this is it.”

They follow the road into the woods. The house is a low gray building without a porch, hidden in the middle of the swamp. There are no curtains in the windows and the only sign of children living there is a wooden swing hanging motionless on its ropes. An old truck with a window missing sits in a ditch.

“Cozy,” Robert says.

Hannah laughs and backs up out of view of the house. Robert puts on his gloves. “What are you waiting for?” he says. “It’s already ten to three.”

Hannah steps out among the weeds. Milky clouds cover the sun but she starts to sweat before she has put her costume on. Robert helps her with the zipper on the back of the stained yel-
low fur and then he places Winnie the Pooh's head over hers. The mask stinks of sweat after having been used at hundreds of parties. Diane's way of cleaning things is by spraying them with Lysol every month. Through the small net openings in the head, Hannah watches Robert put on his helmet. He reaches out for her and hand in hand, like two giant, half-blind toys, they pad up the path toward the silent house.

"What's the birthday boy's name?" Hannah whispers as they walk up the stairs.

"I don't remember," Robert says, and raises his hand to knock on the door. A happy shout comes from inside the house and a small girl with an upturned nose appears in the door frame. She stares at them in astonishment.

"Hey there," Hannah mumbles in her deepest bear voice.

"Dad! Heather! It's Winnie the Pooh! "The girl takes Hannah's paw and pulls her into the house.

"Winnie the Pooh, I love you!"

A big man with thinning hair and a taller girl, perhaps eleven, in a dress with a flower pattern, join them in the dark hallway.

"Casey, shut up," the older girl says, and pinches her sister's arm.

The man smiles awkwardly. "I'm Jake Saunders," he says. "Please come inside."

"Thank you very much!" Robert stumbles forward and pretends to look for something. "We came to wish someone a happy birthday!"

"I'll show you, Avery's out here." Casey pushes Hannah and Robert into a room where the only furniture is a mustard-colored plush couch, a television on a stool, and a low, beat-up wooden table. A boy who looks about twelve sits on the couch with his knees pulled up against his chest. His bangs cover his face and he doesn't lift his head when Robert greets him with the Power Ranger salute.

"Look who's here, Avery," Casey says. She jumps around Hannah and laughs. "Avery, look!"

Jake sits down on the couch and maneuvers Avery up on his lap. The boy's arms and legs are thin and the way he sits perched in his father's arms makes him look like a scrawny baby bird. "Avery's fourteen today," Jake says. "A big boy."

"Happy birthday!" Hannah says.
“So, anyone for some games?” Robert asks cheerily.

“Me, me,” Casey says. Heather sits down on the edge of the table and starts picking her nose. Robert leads Casey in Simon Says and she imitates him and giggles as if she has known him forever.

Hannah shuffles back and forth in front of the couch trying to get Avery’s attention. She tells him about her friend Piglet, hums a tune, and pokes his arm, but the boy doesn’t seem to notice. Hannah kneels next to the couch. Under her mask, stinging drops of sweat stream down her forehead into her eyes and down her cheeks. She touches Avery’s hand and he doesn’t pull it away. The boy has a soft face and would be kind of pretty if it weren’t for his eyes, distant and bottomless. She squeezes his loose hand.

“He’s happy you’re here,” Jake says. He scratches his neck. “I know he is.”

Robert comes up to the couch. “Winnie the Pooh and I are going to sing some songs for you, Avery.” He pulls Hannah up against him and takes her arm. They prance around the room singing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” while Casey claps her hands. They have to sing loudly to be heard through the masks. Hannah’s voice breaks with exhaustion. Jake goes out to the kitchen and returns with an angel food cake covered with whipped cream. There are fourteen unlit candles on it. “I think it’s time we sing Happy Birthday!” he says. He puts the cake on the table and lifts up Avery in his arms. Everyone gathers around the table. This is the smallest party Hannah has ever done. Usually there are relatives, neighbors, friends.

Heather gets out a box of matches and lights the candles. They sing the birthday song, cheer, and then Jake bends down over the table holding his son close.

“Blow them out Avery!” Casey says.

“He can’t, dummy,” Heather says.


Casey leans over the cake. Her hair brushes the whipped cream. She takes a deep breath, blows out the candles, and stands up slowly. “I made a wish for Avery,” she says to Hannah. “But I can’t tell you what it is because then it won’t happen.”

“Happy birthday!” Robert says. “Winnie the Pooh and I had a great time!”
“Are you leaving already?” Casey jumps up into his arms. He hugs her and sets her down on the floor. “I’m afraid so,” he says.

Jake puts Avery down on the couch. He immediately curls up and puts his arms around his knees.

“Wait here,” Jake says. “I’ll be right back.” He walks out to the hallway.

Heather stands leaning against a wall, studying Hannah and Robert. She walks over to Avery and sits down next to him. She lifts up his hand and waves it to Hannah and Robert. “Say good bye to Pooh and the Power Ranger,” she says.

“Bye, happy birthday.” Hannah follows Robert, backing out of the room. Casey clings to her leg. Hannah sways against a wall, pictures herself kicking the child off.

“Casey, let go,” Jake says. He stands by the door with a bunch of money in his hand. “Pooh has to go back to his friends. Say goodbye and go to your sister.”

“I love you Winnie!” Casey says.

“I love you too,” Hannah says limply.

Robert has already gone outside when the father hands Hannah the money. It’s eighty dollars in crumpled bills. “You were great,” he says. “Thanks for coming.”

Hannah almost falls down the stairs on her way out and Robert has to lead her to the car, where she tears off Winnie the Pooh’s head. The light hurts her eyes. Her face is hot and her hair feels pasted to her head.

Robert takes off his helmet, peels down the upper part of his suit, and stands there half naked and glistening from sweat. “Girl, you look terrible,” he frowns.

“Thanks, you look like a movie star. Help me out of this thing.”

He unzips her and she lets the fur fall to the ground. She squats down holding her folded arms on her knees to rest her head. Mosquitoes are buzzing in her ears and spiders as big as her clenched fists sit in shimmering webs between the tree branches. Hannah opens her hand and looks at the money. “I have some water in the car,” she says.

Robert tosses their things into the back seat, gets out the bottle, and takes a sip before he gives it to her.

The water is warm, as if it’s already been in someone’s
mouth, but she drinks it and pours some of it over her head.

"Those people," Robert says. "And you jumping around in front of that vegetable."

"Shut up. You think you're so smart, always coming early to grab the best costume. You know what? I'm sick of it."

Robert widens his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Last weekend it was ninety five degrees in Metairie and I was the Lion King." He slaps a mosquito on his leg. "Listen, I think we did pretty good."

Hannah closes her eyes. "I guess," she says and thinks of Avery's eyes.

"Do you want me to drive back?" Robert asks.

Hannah nods. She digs out the car keys from her pocket and throws them at Robert as hard as she can. He catches them easily.

As the car bounces down the dirt road, Robert turns on the radio to a soft soul station. Hannah looks at the cloudy sky above them. "I forgot something," she says as they reach the main road.

"You're kidding me. Where?"

"Where we parked the car, I think."

Robert winces and shakes his head when Hannah gets out. He keeps the engine running so he can stay cool inside.

Hannah walks up the road. The heat embraces her now. It pushes her forward, makes her move faster. She feels giddy. She turns around to make sure Robert can't see her, goes up to the mailbox, and puts the eighty dollars deep inside it.

"That was fast," Robert says when she gets in. He pushes the gas pedal hard, and the car swerves out on the empty road.

Hannah adjusts the vent. Cool air hits her face and she leans back in her seat.

Robert speeds through the woods, only slowing down as they go across a river on a long, low bridge. "I can't believe she sent us out here," he says.

"I know." Hannah looks out at the brown river water that surrounds them. She has shared some fun moments with Robert; she likes the fact that he can't resist dancing to a hip-hop tune even when he's dressed up as Spiderman. Once, some parents in Algiers gave them a bottle of strawberry wine after a
Pocahontas party. They drank it out of the bottle, together with a bag of Cheetos, by the side of the road.

Hannah reaches behind her seat and grabs Winnie the Pooh’s head. On the inside of it is a big strip of duct tape covering a crack in the plastic. The tape is loose and sticky.

Robert glances at her. “What are you doing?”

“Pulling tape.”

“Diane won’t like it.”

They reach the end of the bridge and Robert presses the brake. “I need to take a leak,” he says. He gets out and struggles into the bushes. His red suit flashes between the trees.

Hannah steps out with Winnie the Pooh’s head in her arms. She walks out on the old bridge and balances the mask on the molding railing. The mangrove trees around her grow out of the water and moss hangs from their branches like torn gray veils. There’s a faint breeze from the river but it’s warm, like a breath.

She holds up the mask and looks at its worn fabric, the snout falling off, its big, empty eyes.

“What are you doing?” Robert says behind her.

Hannah feels Winnie the Pooh’s head slide through her fingers as if it is pulling away from her. It falls into the water but doesn’t sink. Instead, it bobs up and down with the hole gaping toward them.

Robert leans forward but the water is too far away and the head has already started to drift.

“I dropped it,” Hannah says.

“No kidding.” Robert shakes his head. “Good luck explaining that to Diane.”

“I’m not going back.”

Robert ignores her. “Let’s get out of here,” he says, but then he doesn’t move. Instead, they stand there, quiet, and watch the mask float away with the current until they can’t see it anymore.