

Look at Flower

A Novel by Robert Dunn

Look at Flower sitting on this grimy sidewalk half a block from Ashbury, my tin cup cool on the knees of my jeans where the embroidery wore off and my pale skin pops through, wearing a top with embroidery this chick on Page sewed on for free, Toto tucked in between the third and fourth buttons (counting from the bottom), his back paws scratching my belly; look at Flower with her yellow-star-painted fingernails waving the cup and chanting in what Harley calls my sawtooth accent, whatever that means—he’s got me a little self-conscious, though what don’t I have to be self-conscious about, if I give it a moment’s thought (which I don’t)—anyway, I’m chanting “Spare change, spare change,” and rattling my cup and letting Toto pop out of my tangerine-colored shirt, when this tall guy in a black collarless suit as out of place here in the Haight as a penguin stops in front of me and says, “Child, can I speak with you?”

You know, they run buses down Haight Street these days, tourists from Iowa and Kansas and Pennsylvania get on ’em in their limeade pants and plaid jackets, and their faces agog through the windows as they see all the heathen hippies doing our heathen hippie thing here in the Summer of Love, like *Life* magazine called it, and so sometimes I feel just like a baboon in the zoo, and that’s what I feel like now with this man looking down at me. Oh, yeah, I tell him no.

But of course he’s just like my Dad back in Bend, and he doesn’t take no for an answer; he squats down on his knees—they creak!—and looks straight at me and says, “You look like a darling angel, why are you here among these heathen?”

See, I told you! They actually use that word!

“It’s groovy, sir,” I say and plant a big winsome smile on my face—not only Toto’s got that move down—and flutter my spangled fingernails.

“Groovy?”

“Yeah, it’s groovy.” Big smile. They assume you’re dumb, you just play dumb. That’s what Harley says, though Harley *is* dumb, so who knows. He tells me his parents were so hip they named him after the motorcycle (though one night he let slip his dad was an orthodontist in Wichita—what’re the odds?). Still, Harley loves to drive his bike up and down Haight Street, popping wheelies.

“Daughter, can I reach out to you?” And out goes his big ol’ hand.

I shrink back, thinking he’s going to touch me.

“I don’t think so, sir.” I know I have some dirt smudges on my cheeks and elbows from crashing in the park last night.

“I can provide for you a warm meal and a safe, clean bed. I can—”

This dude’s buggin’ me! He’s got a high forehead and wispy sandy hair that falls flat over his eyes, and he’s constantly brushing it back. Must be twenty years older than me (I’m seventeen, telling everyone I’m twenty-one). His teeth aren’t pretty, either, sort of yellow and a little crooked. (I got great teeth!) And so I simply stand up and say, “I gotta bug, mister, but I thank you for your interest.”

And I’m up and walking away so fast he can hardly get off his broken knees.

You ask Flower what day it is, and I couldn’t tell you; but I know there’s a be-in going down in the Panhandle, couple blocks south and closer to the Park, ’cuz, well, there just always is. The Panhandle’s this narrow line of grass between two car-whizzing streets, with these tall, strange trees that shed long, curly pieces of bark like God’s pencil shavings. When I get there I find hundreds of true souls, barefoot, wearing long Indian scarves, banging tambourines, flying kites, tooting pennywhistles, blowing bubbles big as beach balls that float slow and shimmery over the whole crowd. I see a guy I know, Jeff, with a joint as big as a banana; he waves to me, but I keep on going. Sometimes I think I’m so naturally spaced I don’t need weed or acid. Maybe, like everyone says, dope can help me get where I got to get to—but maybe it won’t.

I push on close to the bandstand, which is pretty clever, it’s just a couple feet off the grass, so when a band’s playing, you can see them but they’re right there with you; we’re all tribes in this together.

Except today Flower’s gotta listen to this band she doesn’t really dig, the Grateful Dead; I mean, they look pretty good up there, like everyone else sprouting hair and wearing beads, but, you know, their music just goes on and on. Harley says if I were stoned, their groove would work better on me, but I still dig the Beatles best, remembering them on *Ed Sullivan* four years ago when I was thirteen and I had to sneak over to Lisa’s house to watch them, Mom saying she wasn’t going to let no long-haired bugs into *her* house; and there Lisa and I were, shrieking and hollering and pulling our hair out. Even now the Beatles are the coolest of them all, though they haven’t put out a record in almost a year, since *Revolver*. I’ve heard they know about the scene here in San Francisco and plan on checking the whole thing out. Now *that’s* a band I’d love to see here in the Panhandle.

But these Dead guys just noodle around on their guitars (and I swear they’re way out of tune) and don’t play anything like a song. I get a little bored, which is the problem with not being high; but then I pull Toto out of my shirt and bring his wet nose to my mouth and just give him a great big kiss.

What's this? The guitarist with these busy muttonchops is beckoning to me, wants me to come up and dance with the band, I guess. Or maybe he wants Toto. He's pointing at me and waving, then reaching down, and I take his hand—his fingers are really rough and calloused—and pulls me up on the stage. He's got this thick nest of brown hair and these amazing brown eyes.

“Sugar,” he says, “get into it.”

And Flower does. I love to dance, let my hands wave above me, feel the beat in my *loins*—preacherman got me using words like that?—swaying and bobbing, glowing and gyring, slipping and dipping with Toto in my arms, feeling the light just glow off my skin like some gorgeous Ginger Rogers, and just spacing, spacing, spacing....

What does Flower want? To be free. Cloud free, sunshine free, floating-leaf free. Out of this world free. And ... I get there. At least today. At least for this one shining moment. I'm ... just ... gone....

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Look at Flower curled up like a cat on her mat in the corner of the Dead house, wearing her patched jeans and embroidered shirt. Yeah, I still don't like their music any better, but I danced and pranced for *hours* on the stage, and all the guys in the band kept grinning at me; and then I simply went up to the muttonchopped guitar guy and said, “Hey, I need a place to crash tonight, can I come home with you?” and, “Yeah, sugar,” he said, “sure.”

The guitarist is Jerry, and the bass player Phil, and they and a few other band dudes are rattling around somewhere. They all live in this great old house on Ashbury, right up from Haight. We headed over there after the show, and they said I could crash anywhere I wanted in this huge living room full of weird old things, like stuffed animals and mummies and cigar shop Indians—it's wild. I dropped my bag in a corner and Jerry said it'd be safe there.

“What're you guys doing?” I said.

“Oh, we got a gig tonight at the Dog, we'll be out late.”

“So should I—”

“No, sugar, just make yourself at home. We got a lot of people crashing here. Front door's always open, though it's a pretty heavy door.” He smiled his crooked smile. “You gotta *leeeeeaaannnnnn* into it—” And he play-pushed his shoulder against something rigid and unyielding. “But you push hard enough, sugar—and utter the magic words—it'll always open right up.”

I laughed. “And the magic words are?”

“Well, they change every day.” Jerry winked. “Tell you what, you just say the first thing that pops into your head—you’ll be close enough.”

So I hung around a bit, listening to some acoustic music drifting down from upstairs—hey, I heard the band singing along to the Beatles’ *Help!*—and then the house cleared out, and I took Toto out for a walk, and we spare-changed down Haight a little, and I got enough bread to buy a can of dog food as well as my favorite dinner from this Russian market, a pierogi, with meat and gravy bursting out of this sweet golden crust, and then Toto and I sat in the park for a while till the sun set, just mellowing down; and then we went back to the Dead house.

The magic password? How about: *Sunflower*? Like that the door flew open. None of the band were there, but some chicks were making an angel-food cake in the kitchen; when they were done, they gave me a light, airy piece. Then I went out and walked Toto, and we came back and settled in a corner of the living room right underneath a naked mannequin from a department store, and I wrapped a corner of a fluffy rug around me as a blanket and used my own bag as my pillow. Toto squirmed a little, then curled up warm against my chest. He started snoring in his cute way, then I nodded out, too, and there we were, both fast asleep.

Look at Flower waking up. There’s a shimmery lemon yellow sun glowing through these white café curtains, and the room I’m in is lit up and sparkling. It’s May! I love May. (I left home in rainy-Oregon February, been down here two and a half bright and sunny months now.)

I’m up at 6 a.m., still an early riser (all those cows growing up), and needless to say nobody else in this huge house is stirring. I slept like a rock, but I still dreamed (was it dreaming?) that people were coming in all night. I pull my extra-large T-shirt down to my knees and head into the kitchen, flouncing my wild blonde bed-head hair. I love this: There are boxes of cereals all lined up along a counter, must be twenty of them. All my favorites. I spy a box of Kellogg’s Rice Krispies with the Krispie elves boogieing on the cover, pull it down, take out a bottle of milk from the fridge, and make myself a nice bowl of cereal.

The Krispies are chattering away when a girl I haven’t met before comes into the kitchen. She looks about my age, well, my fake age, and, look, she’s wearing a nightgown with a big sunflower on her chest.

“Hey,” she says, “you’re up early.” She peers at me through pale blue eyes. “I don’t know you, do I?”

“I’m Flower,” I say. I’m up on my tiptoes, bobbing before her, letting her take in my own misty

blue eyes, my hand out. She has a very smooth hand, shaking mine.

“I’m Loretta.” She gives me a smile. “You just crashing here?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I was dancing in the park yesterday, and Jerry said I could come stay here.”

Her finely-plucked eyebrows go up at the name Jerry. She’s pretty, too. Light brown hair, skin smooth as cream, those cool blue eyes. “So how long you staying?”

I shake my head. “I don’t really have plans, you know.” I lift my arms. “I’m like a—” I twirl about, arms out “—you know, I just sort of float around.”

“Cool,” she says. Then: “Hey, you want to hang with me today?”

“Sure. Yeah, that’d be righteous.” I hear myself. I’ve been using that word *righteous* a lot more lately. Not sure where I picked it up from. I remember that preacher guy from the day before, wonder if he found any young chicks to save. Am I saved? I gotta tell you, from where I came from to get here, in my own way I’m feeling pretty fuckin’ saved.

Just look at Flower, yeah, she’s sitting in a sunny kitchen eating her favorite cereal and having a sweet conversation with a brand-new friend, and I think back to last winter, still at home, the gray dawn pounding down, Dad in his overalls, our big, sad dog Rufus padding about, Mom walking around silent and eternally reproachful; and there’s that underlying tension that’s been all I’ve known there since I was thirteen, four years back; it’s something upstairs (they have me sleeping in a room off the back), and it’s secret—sad and secret. Something between Mom and Dad that keeps her going to the Pentecostal a lot and leaving Dad out on his tractor. That keeps her upstairs on Saturday night while he plays solitaire on a cardtable with cards so worn only he can make out the number and suit. That on Sunday, after she’s forced Dad and me and Kevin and Doree to go with her to church, to sit there staring deep into space while Reverend Overbridge speaks his words, makes afternoon family supper last for even more of an eternity. That makes the whole farm this stifling, uptight place that keeps Flower bummed and morbid when she should be lifting her arms to the sun...

“So finish up your cereal,” Loretta says, “and let’s head on out.”

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Look at Flower blowing bubbles. Look at Flower jangling the beads around her neck. Look at Flower dancing, fingers catching in her long, wind-blown blonde hair, stepping and grooving with her new friend Loretta.

Loretta takes me to her secret spot. It’s about fifteen minutes into Golden Gate Park, down a short

path, inside a copse of pines. Toto rushes in ahead of us. There's a circle of stones there, for fires, Loretta says, surrounded by rocks tall enough to sit on. I take one, Loretta the next. Toto settles at my feet.

"Some nights," she says, "the tribes gather here. We build a fire. Make music." She winks at me. "Ball."

"Really, outside?"

"Oh, that's nothing." She leans in close. I can smell her breath, fragrant with the strawberry gum she chews. "Sometimes we have sacrifices."

"Of what?" I say, alarmed. Then I think of my history class and say, "Virgins?" I remember the Aztecs. "Any of them around?"

She looks at me curiously then. It's a little spooky. "You are, aren't you?"

I bring a hand to my mouth. I say, "How do you know?" before I can even think to not say it.

"Special powers," Loretta says with her own laugh. "I can just tell these things. But no, we don't sacrifice virgins. Or cats ... or dogs. Or anything like that. Mostly just things from our old lives."

"Like—"

Loretta shrugs. "Like clothes, letters, phone messages from our parents—"

"Where do you come from?" I ask.

"Um, I like to say Elizabethan England, but truth is Petaluma."

I shake my head.

"It's this chicken town north of here. And you?"

"Bend." Like anyone would know.

"That's in Oregon, right?"

I nod brightly, then say, "Cows."

Loretta laughs. "I thought I smelled something...."

"That's what I'd sacrifice," I told her. "That damn smell from home."

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So here's Flower, the virgin of the Summer of Love. Not that I want to be, really—well, maybe I guess I do, 'cuz if I wanted to ball someone, I could just head down to Haight and wait for Harley to drive by on his bike. I bet he'd do it in a minute. But I'm only seventeen! So what it's the Summer of Love! I'm here to be free. Truly truly free. My own kind of free....