

A PERMANENT SIGNAL

c. Sherry Kramer

skramer@bennington.edu
417-766-1627

CHARACTERS

NOREEN
and
BETTY

Sirens. Literally. These are Betty and Noreen, the mythical siren sisters. Part bird, part female. They are hugeish, opulent, like opera singers crossed with big bird dressed by Liberace to look like insane angels.

MARY

Painfully ordinary in every way. Probably a mousy blonde.
Wearing a white cotton nightgown that has seen better nights.

SETTING

Mary's bathroom. It may have some Italian tile work of good quality as well as other annunciation touches here and there.

Betty and Noreen fall to the floor with a thud.)

BETTY

Oh, dear. Fuck you is not exactly the response we had in mind, is it?

(They pick themselves up off the floor, preen their feathers.)

But maybe it's a design glitch. Maybe we accidentally dialed in a genetic over-reaction to this moment, and so, under the circumstances--

NOREEN

THE SINGLE SWEETEST INDIVIDUAL IN THE UNIVERSE DOES NOT SAY FUCK YOU UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES!

BETTY

Now you're the one over-reacting, Noreen! It's just one of their little figures of speech, a colloquial metaphor--

NOREEN

Well her filthy little metaphor is ruining this harvest!

BETTY

You are going to have to keep your metaphoric prejudices under control, Noreen.

NOREEN

Metaphor is vile! Metaphor is unwholesome! It always has been and it always will.

MARY

Uh...Is it okay if I say something?

BETTY

Yes, Mary?

MARY

Well, it's just that fuck you is not a metaphor. I mean, metaphor is the highest form of poetry.

NOREEN

Poetry? POETRY! You promised me there'd be no poetry!

BETTY

It's an unavoidable side effect of planting the sweetness, Noreen, you know that!

NOREEN

No, I don't know that. I don't know and I don't care. Poetry is--

MARY

Look, umm--it's late, I'm going back to bed.

BETTY

What?

MARY

This isn't happening at all the way I imagined it. Granted, I'm just giving you my right off the top of my head first impression of the event so far, but--

NOREEN

She wants to give us something off the top of her head?

BETTY

Noreen--

NOREEN

The sweetness, as any biped knows, is always located near the pancreas, which--

BETTY

Noreen--

NOREEN

Don't treat me like an idiot, Betty, I helped plant the sweetness too, I know where it is, and it's no where near the top of her head.

BETTY

Noreen IT'S A METAPHOR.

MARY

I don't mean to pry, but--have you two ever--ah--done this kind of thing before?

BETTY

No--of course we wanted to--but it wasn't ripe until now.

MARY

So you've never actually sucked the sweetness out of anybody?

NOREEN

Oh, no, I see where this interrogation is heading, Well, for your information, little missy, WE have degrees in this. WE have matriculated through full undergraduate and graduate courses in Class A Sweetness Sucking. Can you say you've prepared for this moment the way we have?

MARY

Well--in a way. I mean--I have been waiting thirty nine years for it.

BETTY

Thirty nine?

MARY

I've been praying for, and counting on, and dreaming of this moment since the day I was born, so it's been thirty nine years.

BETTY

Surely there's some mistake. You're supposed to be--
(Creates a little bit of singing that floats in the air.)

Thirty-three.

MARY

Well I'm not

NOREEN

Ruined!!! We're ruined! We wait 400 million years for this crop to mature, and now we're six years late!

BETTY

Noreen's just experiencing a bit of performance anxiety, Mary. I'm a little nervous myself. After all--you're our first.

MARY

Well, I'm very...flattered.

BETTY

You should be. After all, THIS--is the happiest day of your life.
(There is a musical flourish, featuring short bell tones.)

MARY

(Smiling weakly.)
Thank you.

BETTY

Not at all. Just doing our job. Now is there anything else the tradition demands at this point--

(Counts off on her fingers)

...made the announcement, told her how wonderful it was, engaged in a little conversation--well, it looks like that's about it, so if you're ready Noreen, we'll just get started here.

(Noreen and Betty take classic opera diva poses, clear their throats, tap their chests. Betty takes out a tuning fork, strikes it. The sound of the tuning fork affects Mary profoundly, she is immediately transported to ecstasy. Betty and Noreen sing to the same music we heard at the top of the show.)

MARY

No--no--
(Mary jams her fingers into her ears.)
--not yet--please--wait--wait a minute, please--

BETTY

(Betty and Noreen deflate a bit, but keep on singing.)
Keep on singing, Noreen--

MARY

YOU CAN'T DO IT LIKE THIS!!!
(Mary makes a desperate grab for the tuning fork, closing her hand over it to silence it.)

NOREEN

(Betty and Noreen stop singing the instant her hand touches the fork.)
Now you've gone and done it. How could you let her touch it like that!

BETTY

Me? ME? I let her touch it?

(Mary is electrified by the tuning fork--she can't let go, she's vibrating wildly, she's in trouble now, wailing away.)

You were the one in charge of dialing in their fear of tuning forks.

NOREEN

I thought you said a fear of pitch forks.

BETTY

Oh, why. Why. Why do I have to do everything myself! Mary?

MARY

(She struggles to speak over the storm that rages inside her.)

Yyyyyyyyyyyyyyes?

BETTY

You have in your hand one of the universe's great primes. You are grappling, quite literally, with a small, harmonically tuned piece of the great mystery. Unless you put it down you will be swallowed up. Engulfed. Consumed. Understand?

(Mary nods, yes.)

On the count of three, Mary-- let go. One.

NOREEN

Oh, she'll never be able to let go.

BETTY

Two.

NOREEN

Never.

BETTY

THREE!

(But Mary is unable to let go.)

NOREEN

See? I told you so.

(Mary lets go. She falls to the floor, gasping.)

BETTY

Brava! Brava!

(She applauds.)

I didn't think you had it in you--it's an excellent sign! Most of your run of the mill species, they get a hold of the great mystery, they turn to jelly. Ready when you are, Noreen.

(She strikes the fork again. They begin singing.)

MARY

(Gasping, etc.)

But you can't--can't do it--like this--

(They sing and sing.)

You can't do it like this because--Because--because--

(Mary jams toilet paper into her ears to keep the music out, but it still affects her. She has to grab the tuning fork again. It has much the same effect on her as before, only less violent. Betty and Noreen stop singing.)

NOREEN

Here we go again.

BETTY

On the count of three. One. Two. Three.

(Mary pulls herself away from the fork, recovering quickly.)

MARY

You just can't waltz in here, announce to a girl you're going to suck all the sweetness out of her, and then do it, just like that.

BETTY

We can't?

MARY

No.

BETTY

Why not?

MARY

A girl likes--you know--dinner first. Dinner, and maybe a movie or a play.

NOREEN

THIS IS NOT A DATE!! IT IS AN EVENT OF UNIVERSAL PROPORTIONS. AND I DO MEAN UNIVERSAL. Dinner and a movie or a play are quite out of the question.

MARY

How do you know? You just admitted you've never done this kind of thing before.

NOREEN

And you've admitted you love metaphor and are 39. Betty, I'll take my cue from you.

MARY

(Betty again strikes the tuning fork, they begin singing. This time Mary grabs the tuning fork lightly, and it seems to have no effect on her at all. She just blows on her fingers, to cool them.)

Now I have a little list in the other room, of medium price range restaurants, and I've got today's paper, so we're all set on movie and theatre listings. Of course--

NOREEN

THAT'S IT! THAT'S THAT! I'VE HAD IT! NOT ANOTHER NANOSECOND!

BETTY

Noreen, please, just hang on --

NOREEN

The single sweetest thing in the universe would NEVER negotiate for dinner and a movie!

MARY

Well just because I'm sweet doesn't mean I'm stupid.

NOREEN

Sweet? You? You have not, in either word, deed, or aspect, manifested a shred of sweetness since we arrived here.

MARY

So? Maybe I'm hiding it.

NOREEN

Do you have any IDEA who you are dealing with young lady?

MARY

Yes. You're Noreen. And you're Betty. Betty and Noreen Siren. The Siren Sisters.

(From far away comes the music from the top of the show, with three unearthly women's voices.)

But aren't there supposed to be three of you--I'm sure there were three of you in the visions--yes, there was a third sister, and her name was--her name was--

(The trance music swells full and hypnotic and sweet.)

BETTY

She even remembers Charlene! Oh, if only there were Gods attached to this species, I'd get down on my knees and thank them.

MARY

There are.

BETTY

No there aren't.

MARY

Lots and lots of them.

BETTY

Noreen!

NOREEN

So I dialed in a few belief systems. There was all this extra space on their DNA, and--

BETTY

I'll deal with you later.

MARY

I don't think it's fair that there are only two of you. A girl gets a picture in her head of the way it's supposed to be, and then you ambush me in the bathroom, and what happened to Charlene?

BETTY

She got out of agriculture altogether. She does atmospheric special effects now, freelance, when her doctors feel she can take it on. They job her in, she takes care of rainbows, aurora borealis, eclipses, that sort of thing. It's a shame. She was really looking forward to being here tonight. At least for the first fifty million years or so.

MARY

I was really looking forward to it too. I dreamed about it every night. The dream went like this: I'm in my bedroom, looking out the window. The three of you appear, like a shower of silver. The room fills with divine grace. The music swells till it fills me up. Charlene touches my face, and the sweetness floods out of me and--

BETTY

No, no, no, Mary, the sweetness doesn't flood out of you, it's a solid mass, contained in a small node, near the pancreas, that--

MARY

How would you know? You drop off this seed of sweetness four hundred million years ago, like you were leaving a jacket at the cleaners--

NOREEN

She just won't stop, will she--

BETTY

That wasn't metaphor you know, Noreen. That was simile.

MARY

--and you expect it to be waiting for you, all clean and pressed and ready, for whenever you happen to decide to stop by and pick it up.

BETTY

We tried to keep the schedule, but--