

# PARHELION

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## Milly Heller

### **Paddlewheels**

Celia has always felt sorry for the French Quarter tourists crammed onto the steamboats tooling up and down a small corridor of the Mississippi, and now, aboard one for the first time, she sees her pity wasn't wasted. She and William can't find a place to sit so they eat standing near the buffet. The jambalaya is dry, the French bread frozen in the middle, and the gumbo smells like it has, as her mother would say, "turned."

Celia's been smiling, a good sport; the party is an engagement party for a couple she likes, but the Dixieland band switches to zydeco and she says to William the only thing worse than the French Quarter is Mardi Gras; the only thing worse than Mardi Gras is Jazz Fest; and the only thing worse than Jazz Fest is the Zydeco Tent at Jazz Fest. He tells her she is un-fun. She says that under the right circumstances, she is extremely fun. He hisses the right circumstances seem to consist only of listening to Ella Fitzgerald and watching old movies. Celia knows it's not a good sign they moved in together just six weeks ago and already he's hissing at her.

She brings up a dinner party they threw last month that had been exactly what you want a dinner party to be, intrigue running down the table alongside brass candlesticks and heavy glass goblets of wine, lavish with food—she made her mother's famous shrimp mirliton and William a Mosca's salad that out-Mosca-d Mosca's—and the guests stayed past midnight. And what music played in the

background? Ella, well, not just Ella, but mostly. Celia gets out only a few words when she hears, beneath the whine of zydeco, her name and William's. She squints toward the sound. Jake and Sarah are waving them over to a table in a corner. This is good; they like Jake and Sarah.

The table is against a wall, and they have to squeeze in, which is hard for William, who in every elementary school play was cast as Paul Bunyan, or the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk, or in a dramatization of poems about Christopher Robin, as Buckingham Palace. He's not as hefty as he was as a child—Celia's seen photos—but he'd make a convincing tower. She finds him deeply handsome. He has the same profile as F. Scott Fitzgerald. She mentioned the resemblance the night they met—she was a little loaded—and he said, "I get that all the time." She said that's what she figured, and he said, "Are you nuts?"

Sarah says this is her and Jake's first time on a steamboat. She confesses she'd hoped for something more charming. "The outside of the boat is so evocative I thought we were stepping into the nineteenth century, but then, well, this," and she gestures around. The party is in Room 7, the Fleur de Lis room. The ceilings are low, the lights fluorescent, the food heaped in metal vats, the carpet brownish maroon.

Jake says they parked near the wharf. Whenever people get together in the Quarter they compare parking places, even before ordering drinks; Celia remembers her father and uncle competing over who found the cheapest space. Jake swears they parked where the opening scene of *Panic in the Streets* was shot. He asks if they've seen the movie, then mock-slaps his forehead. "Oh, Celia, you're the one who recommended it. We watched it the other night and now all I do is compare myself to Richard Widmark. He's four times the man I am." That's a line from the movie. He says if she has other old movies to recommend, don't hesitate.

Celia refrains from sending William a gloating look, but her small, pleased smile amounts to the same thing. He's not going to cut down old movies now; he admires Jake and Sarah too much. He's told her that when he flew here from Phoenix to interview for his job at Crescent Engineering, Jake was part of the team that interviewed him, and William thought any firm with an engineer as irreverent as Jake, as hippie-ish, was the place for him.

The table gets quiet. Jake seems distracted. He wraps and unwraps the do-rag, a party favor, black and gold, the Saints' colors, around his wrist. Jake is one of those people whose moods dominate a table. Celia has a couple of sisters like that—she's the youngest of five girls—and learned early that trying to placate or jolly them only added scorn, towards her, to their arsenal. The band, at least, has quit zydeco.

It plays “St. James Infirmary,” one of Celia’s favorites (“Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my forehead, so the boys’ll know I died standing pat,”). She expects another classic after that, maybe “Dr. Jazz,” but it launches into “Liza Jane.”

William says, “Celia, they’re playing your song.”

He knows she hates it. “Liza Jane,” the musical equivalent of all those booze-drenched, spray-tanned bachelorette parties knocking around the Quarter. They’ve infiltrated uptown. They take over restaurants, commandeer tables of thirteen, fourteen, twenty. When locals see waiters setting up those tables they say, “Checks, please,” and “We’ll skip dessert, thank you.” Celia says something derogatory about “Liza Jane.” Jake says he didn’t realize he was supposed to hate the song. He says to Sarah, “Did you know we’re supposed to hate Li’l Liza Jane?”

Celia says her taste in music is infamously weird. William begins to say *he* has a soft spot for “Liza Jane,” but Jake is grinning his conspiratorial, crooked-teeth grin. He’s gained enough vitality to dominate the whole boat. He’s practically snapping his fingers. He says, “This’ll be great. Everyone has to name a song they like but are embarrassed to admit they like.” He holds up his hand. “No, a *band or musician* they like but are embarrassed, humiliated, to like.” He motions as if tamping down applause. “Take some time, think on it. We’ll wait until the boat is heading back.”

Sarah doesn’t look altogether pleased. “Jake, you have to promise: no judgment.”

He looks shocked. “Not one syllable, not one letter—be it vowel or consonant—of judgment will escape these lips. My mantra will be love. Love and acceptance.” He says the bands or singers must be familiar to everyone at the table. “Celia, you’re slumming with us. No Jellyroll, no Eubie, no Fats.”

She bows. “Signed, sealed, delivered, I’m yours.”

Sarah says, “Would you listen to her.”

Celia doesn’t worry about what band she’ll pick. She figures one will come to her at the last minute. The sun sends stripes across her plate of untouched food. The windows are high and frame the lacy balconies of the boat, and notched through the railings is the river, gunmetal gray, lined by the levee. Celia’s heart lifts as it always does at the levee. Every evening when she drives home from work—Celia’s in the marketing department at a medical center out by the airport—she crests the Causeway above Airline Highway and that’s when she gets her first glimpse of the levee. Peace washes over her; soon she’ll be back in her New Orleans. She turns onto River Road, where the levee runs greenly beside her,

escorting her to the ragtag beginnings of Carrollton Avenue, and oak trees usher her home. The band wraps up “Liza Jane,” and glides into “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” one of Celia’s favorites. The swath of sky above the levee shifts from silver to the shade her mother calls Alice blue. Celia leans against William. She sighs, “You know what, this is pretty nice.” He says, “It’s the new you?” She says, “Yes, as of three minutes ago.” It’s one of their jokes.

The boat’s air-conditioning, which started out strong, falters. It can’t compete with the sun slamming the decks. Celia palms the French bread and rubs her cheeks with its icy surface, but the boat begins to turn with such a swoop she drops the bread, and as if by unspoken agreement she and William and Sarah and Jake lean way to the right, exaggerating the centrifugal force, like kids in a teacup ride at an amusement park.

“That was a rough swing to starboard,” William says. “Or port. What do I know, I grew up in the desert.”

Celia hopes William isn’t going to take the music thing too seriously. When William started at Crescent a month after his interview, Jake pretty much ignored him. The rest of the interview team took him to lunch on his first day of work, but Jake said he was swamped. Over the next year William ran into him in places like the Bywater Book Mart, St. Roch’s Record Exchange, and the no-name Vietnamese sandwich counter on St. Claude Avenue, places you’d never find another Crescent engineer, yet Jake merely tilted his chin in recognition while focusing on his paperback, bin of albums, or *banh mi*.

Then, one Sunday afternoon Celia and her mother were in line for a revival of *The Lady Eve* at The Prytania, talking about how many old movies have Eve in the title: *The Lady Eve*, *All About Eve*, *The Three Faces of Eve*. Celia kept saying they were forgetting one, what was it, and her mother said, in her W.C. Fields imitation, “*Never Give a Sucker an Eve-ven Break.*” A voice behind them said, “*Touch of Evil.*” It was Sarah. Celia barely knew her, had met her once at the firm’s crawfish boil, but they chatted away in line, the three of them, and Sarah, who was alone, asked if she could sit with them in the movie. They’d gone for coffee afterward, and it turned out Sarah’s seal of approval was all Jake needed. They became friends as couples, though Jake still sometimes cold-shoulders William at work.

Jake announces it’s time for the game, says, “I’ll fall on my sword and go first.” His pick is Glenn Campbell. He looks around, expectant. No one says anything. “I see I haven’t floored you. Let me admit, I’m not talking classics like ‘Wichita Lineman.’ I’m talking splashy songs. I’m talking ‘Rhinestone Cowboy.’”

“But that *is* a good song,” says Sarah. She seems irritated, which for Sarah is a big deal. She’s a speech therapist for elderly stroke victims and must be great at her job, her calm so different from the perkiness of such therapists. She treats old people like they understand sly jokes and layered meanings, and she listens with respectful silence, a silence they must want to fill with sounds they didn’t know they could make again, words they didn’t think they could pronounce again. Celia’s mother has said, “When I have my stroke, I want Sarah to be my speech therapist.”

Sarah moves her plate to the side. They’ve all been looking around the room, wondering if they’re supposed to bus their table or if waiters will appear. “Glenn Campbell isn’t embarrassing enough. You said *humiliating*.”

“He’s plenty humiliating.”

“Plenty humiliating would be, I don’t know, Gino Vannelli.”

“Because Gino Vannelli is worthless.”

“He’s my pick.”

“You’re just saying that. Who’s your real pick?”

“Gino Vannelli. I see how I might’ve confused you. But he was in the pipeline, so to speak.”

“Name three of his songs.”

Sarah sits straight as a schoolmarm and ticks off songs on her fingers, “Number one, ‘Living Inside Myself.’ Number two, ‘I Just Want to Stop—and Tell You What I Think About You.’ Number three... number three....” She strikes her fingers harder, as if building a rhythm that’ll summon a tune. “Wait, it’ll come to me.” Her eyes get desperate. Celia tries to think of a Gino Vannelli song to hum, or blink in Morse code, not that she knows Morse code, but she remembers only one Gino Vannelli song, and Sarah’s listed it.

“You can’t name three: your answer is invalid. Celia, your turn.”

“O ho, mister, nice try.” Sarah is laughing but serious. She has the looks of a crafts counselor, long light brown hair with bangs that skim her eyebrows, though she dresses better than any crafts counselor. Today she’s got on a charcoal linen shift and lightweight sky-blue cardigan; the boat’s heat doesn’t

seem to bother her. “Gino and I have a history. I was fifteen years old, changing into my gym suit in the locker room, the most vulnerable place for a chubby girl. My best friends came up to me. They stood there, silent, then handed me back the turquoise bracelets I’d given them for their birthdays. I said, ‘What are you doing?’ They said they felt guilty wearing them, since we weren’t friends anymore. I said, ‘What are you talking about? We’re still friends!’ They backed away, slowly, the better to watch me cry.”

Jake has heard this before, it’s clear. His expression is sad, but it’s a dutiful sadness. William, though, appears stricken. His sorrow makes him pale. You’d expect someone as blonde as William to be fair, but normally he has high color. In fact, he has too many red blood cells and goes to Touro Infirmary every six months to get some extracted. He calls it his leeching.

Sarah says, “What I’d forgotten until just now? That night, as I lay in bed, with my clock radio on so my parents wouldn’t hear me sob, the DJ gave out Gino Vannelli’s phone number, well, supposedly his phone number. You could call for a special message. I called, and Gino wished me sweet slumbers. He told me to have faith in my beautiful self. Every night I’d get into my prettiest nightgown and put on lip gloss, even though I was about to fall asleep, and call him.” She looks around the table impressively. “It wasn’t the same message every night, either. It varied.”

William says the phone ritual is worth thirty songs, and Sarah is allowed Gino Vannelli. Jake ties the do-rag around his wrist. Celia wonders if it’s to remind himself not to say anything harsh, like the rubber bands people snap to ward off negative thoughts.

It’s Celia’s turn. She says her guilty pleasure is Supertramp. William says, “A *hair band*?” He’s incredulous and Jake is smirking. Celia is fine with that. She’d kept her mind empty, waiting for songs to fill it, and “Take the Long Way Home,” and “Goodbye, Stranger,” flowed right in.

She’d spent most of the week in a dialysis center. Her boss had called her into his office on Monday and said, “Drop everything. We’re rebranding kidney failure.” She had to write web copy and a brochure about the dialysis center’s expansion. A few days later, driving home from the center, she stopped at Winn-Dixie to pick up groceries for dinner. She trudged through the store, leaning against the cart like it was a walker, and projected the waxy faces of dialysis patients onto the other shoppers. She looked for cans of black beans with no salt because the nephrologists had scared her so much, and as she stood hunched, doom lurking in sodium contents, suddenly over the sound system came, *I will go on shining, shining like brand new*, pulling her up so straight she almost levitated. The aisles ricocheted with possibility, with vivacity and hallucinatory color. She stared out the store’s huge glass

wall. This was the Winn-Dixie on Tchoupitoulas, slung beside the train yard and port, where cargo ships extend loading pulleys higher than bridges. The sky there is hulking, and across its vastness Supertramp's music shot arcs of frosted citrus, icy pink, shimmering red, the shades of, well, the daiquiris the steamboat's bar is serving.

William says his guilty pleasure is Dolly Parton. Celia suspects he chose her because she's parallel to Glen Campbell.

There's a commotion in the middle of the room: the Dixieland band has formed a second line, and the engaged couple doesn't want to join it. The young woman is a junior engineer at Crescent and her fiancé teaches science in a charter middle school. They are both quiet, studious; she started a book club at Crescent. The junior engineer's parents are throwing the party. They're from the Midwest and each have on about twelve pairs of Mardi Gras beads, though Mardi Gras was months ago. They've been swaying to the music and singing as they make their way from their table to the bar. Now they stand behind the band, twirling parasols, second-lining in place.

Celia stands up to get another glass of water. She's been guzzling water, thanks to learning about kidney failure, but Jake says not so fast, it's the final round of the game. They need to name bands they *don't* like but know they *should* like. "It's a lightning round," he says warningly, for William took a long time to get to Dolly Parton.

Celia volunteers to go first. She's got someone tucked away, and she imagines him floating about her purse alongside her lipstick, someone she might be curmudgeonly to dislike, *un-fun*, but she's proud of her honesty about Supertramp and won't retreat now. "Bruce Springsteen." William goggles at her. It's as if she said she beheads puppies. "You never told me you don't like Bruce." She says, lightly, "Now you know."

Sarah says that if Celia ever saw Bruce in concert, she'd change her mind.

Jake says, "Yeah, we're lucky. We've seen him, what, five times?" Sarah says six, if you count when he popped up on stage for a set with Johnny Bayne at Fizzwater's.

Jake gets misty-eyed, born-again. He says, "And to think we almost didn't go. That was our 'huddle at home' year."

They smile privately at some memory, and Jake runs his fingers through Sarah's hair. William says he's seen Bruce only three times, but one of those times, and he is shy with pride, was at Stone Pony. Jake

says, “No,” and William says, “Yes.” He was visiting cousins in Red Bank, and their neighbor’s sister’s boyfriend, or something like that, tended bar at Stone Pony, and dropped a few hints. Bruce was there all right, with a couple of members of the E Street Band. They performed a cover of “Riders on the Storm.”

“Outstanding,” says Jake, and William says it was, it was outstanding.

The Springsteen memories have created such coziness, made their table so comfy, that Celia decides to let them think she’s never attended a Springsteen concert. It’s not a big lie, just an omission, and will preserve this peace. It’s like they’re in a pinewood cabin, with a log fire crackling merrily away. Jake asks William about The Stone Pony; and when William says Bruce sat at their table for about fifteen minutes, he and Sarah grow reverent, their faces lit by the imaginary hearth fire. William says Bruce didn’t talk much about himself. Jake and Sarah nod, of course he didn’t. William fishes around for a memory; he asked Bruce what music he should listen to, and Bruce said he couldn’t go wrong with the Ronettes. Jake and Sarah hum “Be My Baby.” Jake’s arm is around Sarah’s shoulders; their heads are touching; his fingers still thread her hair.

The steamboat whistle screams. It is abrupt, shocking; Celia’s forgotten they’re on water. The whistle shrills again and again. William tilts his head, says, “Supertramp?” He leans forward, sings falsetto, *Goodbye stranger, it’s been nice, hope you find your paradise*, and on the last syllable of “paradise” the whistle hits its highest squeal, then cuts off.

Sarah says, “Would you listen to him.”

Jake says, “Well-played.”

Celia says, “I have seen Springsteen live. In college. I thought I’d never seen anything so forced, so canned.”

Jake lets go of Sarah’s hair.

“When Clarence Clemons came out in his Santa suit, and he and Springsteen backed up to each other, it was so hokey I got up and walked around the stadium until the concert ended.”

Sarah mouths, “Clarence? Hokey?”

Jake says, “So when Clarence died a few years ago, I bet you were happy.”

“I bet he was the happy one. He’d never have to play Bruce’s minstrel show again.” Celia doesn’t know why she’s being ugly. She stands up, says she’s going to the bar for water.

She doesn’t go to the bar. She walks into the lobby and out to a balcony. It’s June, and the air has trapped the smell of the river. It smells like catfish, not the freshest catfish, and there’s a mineral smell, acrid. Celia doesn’t mind the odor or the humidity. Her father’s family has been in New Orleans for eons, and maybe over the generations their lungs adapted to this stew-like air, became dependent upon it.

William comes out. He’s framed by the steamboat. He should be wearing a white suit and broad-brimmed hat. He says, “You’re missing the world’s very best not-so-bad bread pudding.” She doesn’t respond. He says, “Sorry if we were hard on you in there.”

“I can take it.” A breeze sends her hair, fine as tinsel, into her eyes.

“Dolly Parton wasn’t my first choice.”

“Duh.”

He stands behind her and wraps his arms around her. He does this sometimes while she’s cooking and lifts her off her feet. Celia is not tall—her sisters used to say that by the time she came along their parents’ genes had run out of height, weight, and personality—and when he embraces her there’s plenty of William left over.

He says, “I told Jake and Sarah my real first choice. For the singer I’m embarrassed to like. Kenny Rogers. Jake almost blew a gasket.”

“I can imagine.” A tugboat passes them, pushing barges lashed together. The tugboat, jaunty, old-fashioned, a wooden toy with painted trim, seems too small to handle the barges. Herons fly low, gleaming white against cypresses on the West Bank. If Celia ignores the telephone wires and radio towers, if she ignores her fellow passengers in their baseball caps, tee-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops—it’s a lot of ignoring—this could be Mark Twain’s Mississippi.

William says, “We’re good?”

She says, “It’s the new you?”

She doesn't listen to him finish the joke. She's thinking that William doesn't like Kenny Rogers, that in a misguided fit of gallantry he overcompensated, but she doesn't care. She's in her car cresting the overpass. She's shout-singing to Ella, Dinah, Billie, Supertramp, and the sky billows like a flag, a flag swathed in colors gauzy one moment, brilliant the next, with the levee its lowest, brightest stripe.

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Milly Heller lives in New Orleans. Her short fiction has appeared in *Tiny Journal*, *Wordstock*, and The Faulkner Society's *Double Dealer Redux*.

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