Fiction Attic Press

Rich Garners

by Milly Heller

Toni got home for winter break from Newcomb College and found a document centered on the desk of her childhood bedroom. It was a transfer application to the University of Minnesota. UMinn? Back in high school, Toni suggested applying to UMinn, and her mother scoffed. Toni still found that funny because her mother, who came over to St. Paul from Lithuania at the age of seven, had been lucky to get a scholarship to secretarial college. The UMinn application was for this fall, 1951, Toni's junior year. She leafed through it. Yes, UMinn cost less than Newcomb but her father had just said, on the drive home from the train station, that his insurance agency was going *great guns*. He said it with the delight he still felt, after over forty years in this country, at trotting out gee-whiz American expressions, no matter how dated.

Toni held the application by the tips of her fingers as she walked downstairs. Her parents were sitting at the dining room table, which meant formality, meant business. Toni dropped the application onto the table. Her father looked embarrassed, but her mother said, with some defiance, "We'd hoped for news by now." They explained if she didn't have a boyfriend at this

point, with only two years of Tulane's boys above her (Newcomb was Tulane's sister school), odds were diminishing she'd meet anyone. They didn't have to add they meant a Jewish boy. UMinn, they said, would give her a fresh start.

Toni said, "I can't leave Newcomb, not now." Last year she might've welcomed the chance to come home. The thick air and heavy seafood of New Orleans nauseated her. The other Jewish freshmen were from the South and already friends with each other, thanks to elaborate family connections. They thought St. Paul was a city in the state of Minneapolis. They asked Toni why she kept saying *you gize* instead of *y'all*. "Toni, we are not guys."

It took months, but she finally caught onto the mix of hilarity and seriousness that pervaded campus. She pledged *the* sorority for Ashkenazi Jews, AEPhi, and its president deemed the skits Toni wrote for convocation "sophisticated," a big word at Newcomb. Her French professor asked her to tutor freshmen who didn't have her "grasp of the passé compose." Toni reported those and other triumphs in letters home, imagining her parents basking in each achievement, but now she knew Phi Beta Kappa would disappoint them, unless the key came with a boyfriend.

"You'll have a *high old time*," her father said, "at UMinn." Her mother listed members of their congregation whose sons and daughters, "wouldn't want to be anyplace else." The way her parents nodded at each other at the end of their sentences, instead of climbing over each other's words as usual, told Toni they'd rehearsed their lines. Her father said they didn't want her to leave college when she got engaged, but to graduate wearing cap, gown, *and* ring. "No college dropouts in this family." His eyes misted. He'd left Vilnius at the age of eleven, alone and in poverty, and Toni knew his pride at sending her and her older brothers—she was the

youngest by six years—to college was vast and deep. *No college dropouts in this family.* He said it again. This time his voice rang among the crystal decanters on the sideboard, and he allowed, as if to illustrate the perils and prejudices he'd surmounted, his long-banished Lithuanian accent to emerge and roll the *r* in *dropout*.

Her parents didn't mention UMinn for the rest of the vacation. Toni knew they trusted in her history as a dutiful daughter. Her friends in St. Paul teased her about how many cardigans she wore beneath her wool coat and how constantly she shivered. They had one interest in New Orleans: Bourbon Street. She noted their Midwestern accents (*you gize, you gize*). At four every afternoon the sky darkened to midnight; snow puddled sadly on the sidewalk. To capture St. Paul in winter an artist would need only a stick of charcoal while Newcomb, even in December, burned like a fever dream. No palette could contain the range of tropical reds and purples... a painter would need to melt gems .... She set the image aside to work up as an ode and, if brave enough, submit to *The Arcade*, Newcomb's lit mag.

The campus when she returned didn't match her memory. A deep freeze had faded it brown and gray. The dorm's icy silence—by mistake she got back a day earlier than the other sophomores—matched its icy drafts. In the morning, she checked her mailbox and out fell a note from AEPhi's president. Could Toni write the sorority's contribution to *The Hullabaloo* for its *Capers on Campus* column? Could she! The president said a senior usually wrote the "item," but Toni's skit had shown "sparkle." Sparkle! The chill broke; the campus bloomed. Toni worked for an hour to compose a response, breezy yet sophisticated, which made her wonder how long it would take to write the actual item.

As she finished the note, Laura Levinson—talk about breezy, talk about sophisticated—waltzed in. Laura's parents had driven her down from Louisville and were spending a week at the Roosevelt; they wanted to take Laura and a few chums to the Blue Room for dinner. Could Toni join them? Could she! Why, last year to this very day Toni and her roommate sat listening to Laura, Susan, and Bitsy barge into each other's rooms, comb waves in each other's hair and ask, "How do I look?" Bitsy borrowed Toni's treasured pin of a gold vase with coral flowers. Toni thought, "At least my pin is going to the Blue Room." She and her roommate watched from their window as the girls piled into the Levinsons' Lincoln. Toni had since made friends with Bitsy and Susan, but Laura remained remote, the Queen Moon surrounded by starry fays... Toni in her elation almost forgot to sign the note.

At the Blue Room, the waiter served lime sorbet between the courses. "Not dessert already?" Bitsy asked Toni.

Toni, for once glad her mother had dragged her and her brothers to fancy restaurants for interminable anniversary celebrations, said, "Intermezzo, to refresh the palate." She said it in an exaggerated European accent, so Bitsy wouldn't think she was showing off, but no worry. Bitsy said, "Now I remember. We had it last year, didn't we?" Toni didn't correct her, but imagined last year's dinner, vaporous as flashbacks in movies, expand to include Toni wearing her best

dress from freshman year, a sky-blue boucle with matching bolero jacket, and her gold vase pin.

"Girls, look," said Mrs. Levinson, nodding toward the table closest to the band, where men in tuxedos and women in strapless gowns were drinking champagne. "Zsa Zsa Gabor."

Laura said, "Or a hooker with all the options."

"Laura, honey, you're impossible."

Toni couldn't imagine saying hooker in front of her parents, but Laura and her parents had a friendly, joking relationship. They teased her about the boy she'd just started dating, Clayton Fritsch, the first Jew to play football for Tulane. They were to meet him tomorrow, and Mr. Levinson said he hoped it wasn't serious, that if he'd known Laura would date a New Orleans boy—Clayton had grown up a streetcar ride from Tulane—he'd have kept her in Louisville. Her mother said, "Laura, we are no hurry to lose you." Toni envied Laura her parents' relaxed attitude and wondered if it came from a sense of security: Laura was at least fourth generation.

The President of AEPhi called Toni's Caper *entrancing* and the editor of *The Hullabaloo* asked her to report on the modern dance festival and interview French exchange students, all of whom said the French Quarter wasn't very French. Toni rushed about dropping

phrases about deadlines and ledes; Laura took to calling her Brenda Starr; the rustling crepe myrtles and pecan trees whispered, "You belong." New Orleans shone glorious and green. Toni's Transcendentalist Lit. professor held his classes in Audubon Park, and Toni pretended the lagoon was Walden Pond.

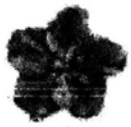
The application to UMinn lay in her trunk at the foot of her bed. Toni had been afraid if she left the application at home her mother would fill it out. Toni had slid it under the nylon lining of the trunk, and at night it pulsed through the fabric and hard outer shell, almost chanting *I'll get you, I'll get you, I'll get you soon.* She responded silently, half-asleep, *But I'll meet someone, meet someone, meet someone new*. She'd gone on a few dates with Chip Heuer, a chatty, easy-to-be-with member of Sammy, but Chip, the type her sorority sisters called "safe," wasn't strong enough armor to protect her from UMinn.

After a seminar on Thoreau, Toni sat down to write her twice-a-week letter home. Before winter break, she'd written four long letters each week, priding herself on her clever turns of phrase. Now she jotted rather than wrote the letters. Her parents didn't seem to notice the difference in quantity or quality. Though it was only two-thirty in the afternoon, the application started its refrain. Toni felt stronger in day than night. She opened the trunk and tried to tear apart the glossy application. That didn't work, so she went down the hall to the bathroom, ran the pages under the sink, and threw the soggy remains into the bathroom trash can.

She settled down again. The voice hissed beneath her door, *I've got you, I've got you, I've got you now.* The hisses filled her room which, being a sophomore single, was tiny. Toni opened the window. The February air breezed in, bringing with it the cries of ducks from the

lagoon. Thoreau said to aim above morality. Her parents thought the purpose of college was to nab a husband. Surely independence from such antediluvian (another big word at Newcomb) notions was above morality? She wrote her parents that she'd met someone, met someone, met someone new. She named him Rich Garners. Rich was pre-med. He had dark wavy hair and a Southern accent. She pledged him to ZBT, the ultimate Ashkenazi fraternity. She lifted his name from her favorite Keats poem, where the poet fears he'll die before writing books that, "in charact'ry, hold like *rich garners* the full-ripen'd grain." The poem made the name sacred to her; she'd speak it with the reverence of a girl in love. Also, she wouldn't mistakenly refer to him as Steve Garners.

Rich played tennis. For his hometown, she chose Little Rock. Her parents knew no one in the state of Arkansas. She had to throw away her first draft, the one that said he went to Tulane because if her parents visited, they would expect to meet him. She enrolled him in Emory and said she'd met him at an Intercollegiate Southern Jewish mixer. There were no such mixers. She marveled at how easy it was to lie once you started.



Rich Garners worked too well. Her parents wrote back, spellbound, their letters crawling with questions. Toni made mistakes. She wrote he was interested in rheumatology (*his mother has crippling arthritis*). Her parents wrote back, surprised, because she'd written earlier that his

mother was *an avid club player* and Rich gave her *pointers on her serve*. Toni started writing Rich's bio in the back pages of her notebook for her Robert Frost/Amy Lowell course. He ended up taking more space than *Nature as Consolation/Nature as Torment*.

Over the summer her parents chatted endlessly about Rich. Toni soon sickened of him and the entire Garner family, all that cheer and tennis and rallying around the arthritic mother. Every day she dashed outside to intercept the mail. Three times a week she came back inside clutching an envelope supposedly containing a letter from him. She held the envelopes close to her chest so her parents wouldn't see the uncancelled stamp. She didn't worry they'd recognize her handwriting; she wrote the address with her left hand in a confident masculine scrawl. Happily, her parents thought hunching over letters and rushing upstairs to read them was natural for a girl so smitten, along with locking the letters in a keepsake box. She would've dropped him, or more realistically, because her parents clearly believed she was the lucky one, let him break her heart, but she had to string him out until she got back for her junior year. UMinn had rolling admissions.

In October, back at Newcomb, Toni came up with a solution: she would let Rich drop her, but not for another nice Jewish girl. He'd fall for a shiksa. That lifted any blame from her, as she couldn't be expected to compete with a gentile, and it painted Rich as a traitor. Rich, though, never met the shiksa. While Toni was deciding on a name for the girl, who was a nursing student, Rich met a peaceful death. Ned Rensler killed him, not that Ned ever knew it.

Ned Rensler radiated an interest in Toni. She met him at AEPhi's mixer with the Jewish fraternity at Tulane Law School. His gaze from behind his thick horn-rimmed glasses was keen, focused. He shot her with questions and when she answered he tilted his head as if listening for intriguing, unexpected strands. Toni tried to modulate her giddy party voice. Ned was thin, but with broad cheekbones and full lips, and so dark his teeth blazed white as a movie star's. He had grown up in New Orleans but dressed like he was from New England, in baggy tweeds and a skinny tie. His voice was rapid, whether from nerves or confidence, she couldn't tell. He told her she was wise to take so many poetry classes, the old poets stood the test of time. He had majored in English, surprising for such an alert guy. He scoffed when she listed Isabelle Deschene as her favorite novelist, and in defending Deschene, Toni finally heard herself speak with gravitas. Ned looked impressed, said he'd try Deschene again.

Toni asked him about his favorite professors, thinking they'd overlap with hers. It turned out he'd gone to Harvard for college and law school. He was at Tulane Law for a post-grad year, taking the course in the Napoleonic Code required of all law students before practicing in Louisiana. Toni did not let on how much Harvard impressed her, but really, it was as if she'd invented Ned, not Rich.

Ned said, "Let's get out of here," meaning the mixer. Toni had never been asked to ditch a party; it was dizzying, like she was one of the faster, worldlier girls, but worrisome: she was in

charge of food for the mixer. He said, "We'll go the Quarter, eat oysters. You like oysters, don't you?" She certainly did now. She hurriedly laid out the desserts, though it was too early, and instructed one of the pledges to refill the trays when they got low. Ned helped her on with her coat, his hands light, swift. He said, "Acme or Felix's?" She confessed she'd never been to either. He said, "Acme tonight, Felix's this weekend." So, already he thought they had a future. She would've found this presumptuous, or stomach-churning, but Ned's grin was so conspiratorial she smiled back, exulted. They hurried down the porch steps as if to the rest of their lives, her skirt fluttering, his tweed jacket slung over his shoulder, his hand on her back, propelling her along.

Over twenty years later, what's excruciating to Toni isn't that she married Ned less than a year after meeting him, or her invention of a fake boyfriend, but that every time one of her daughters phones or comes home from college, she hopes to hear something about a boyfriend, preferably Jewish, because Jewish—the right kind of Jewish—means brains, wit, ambition, and usually voting Democrat. This is in the mid-1970s. Toni and Ned have four children, all girls. Toni thinks of herself as evolved; she subscribes to *MS Magazine* and pushed for her chapters of Council and Hadassah to support the Equal Rights Amendment, yet whenever one of her friends announces that *her* daughter is bringing home a boyfriend, Toni

wonders what she did wrong. Has she built up her daughters' self-esteem so much they believe they don't need men? She admits she over-praises them, but surely Ned's exacting standards balance her easy enthusiasm.

She comforts herself that at least she hadn't driven to Baton Rouge and picked up an application to LSU. Anyway, her hopes don't seem to her outlandish. She has no desire for her daughters to graduate wearing cap, gown, *and* ring: nowadays everyone knows college is too young to get engaged. Her daughters express shock she married at twenty. "Different times," Toni says, not wanting to vilify her parents, who are long gone.

Today at lunch, the first day all four girls are home for the summer, as they sit in the patio and crack open boiled crabs and dip the claws in tartar sauce, her third daughter, Jenny, begins making fun of sorority girls. Jenny is the only one at a large university. "Ring by spring or die!" she says in a ludicrous Southern accent, gazing at her hand like an actress in an overwrought drama. Her sisters collapse in laughter. *Ring by spring or die.* The expression takes Toni back to her parents' living room. Instead of the dark green tropical plants lining her patio she gazes at a frozen lawn. Her father's voice replaces Jenny's. He rolls the *r*'s in *ring* and *spring*, but his words fade and are soon lost in the chatter of her daughters.

Milly Heller's work has appeared in The RavensPerch, Parhelion, The Tiny Journal, Tangled Locks, and elsewhere.