

The Waggoner's Lad

by Beth Benson

THE GIRL slowly filled in the "o's" of the rather worn menu with controlled, circular strokes. She paused a moment and then deliberately laid the ballpoint on the checkered tablecloth and sat looking at it. Back and forth along its length she ran her forefinger, feeling its smooth newness.

The form that bent over the pen was a young one, perhaps nineteen or twenty, with brown hair, rather delicate features, large black eyes that somehow always gave the impression she was a little surprised. Her garb was typical of the summer school student, a simple blouse and blue bermudas and old tennis shoes.

All about her the tiny pizza shop seemed to go round and round, almost fermenting, swirling in a hubub about her little refuge in the corner. It was hot, stiflingly hot, and there was only candlelight to supplement the growing twilight. By 8:00 people had packed ten to the table in the center of the narrow room, swaying and clapping and laughing all at once to the beat of the local folk music trio, standing under the green light bulb with their backs to the street window. When they were not playing their songs, the bearded one in the grimy, rubber thongs would stand, feet in a dramatic stance, and recite poetry to the ceiling with well-chosen gestures.

A few of the people were the genuinely "beat" of the college community, the men with unkempt beards and the girls in black knit sleeveless blouses with long, straight hair hanging between their shoulder blades, swinging from the crown as they swayed their supple bodies to the rhythms. On their feet were the typical summer school sandals, tan leather with

intricate cross-lacings of the rough leather ties, often winding far up the ankles.

The rest were much like her, she thought, just U. of M. summer school students bored with silent dormitories and seeking out the excitement of the different. The packing mass of people was at times unbearable and yet she kept coming back, for here was the one place that she could always be alone. The hot, sweaty smell of people blended with the greasy fragrance of cheese and garlic, and the chatter of their words rang in her ears until she did not hear them.

She leaned against the rickety wooden chair back, slumping comfortably, and stretched her feet out under the small table. No one sat with her in her back corner. She turned sideways in the chair and rested the back of her head against the wall, lighting a cigarette to further thicken the atmosphere. She wished at times, whimsically, that she were really of this world. It was sophistication, it was a sort of distorted reality, something in which to bury oneself. Some of it has become a part of me, she thought, but you can't simply discard what else you are. You can't; what you have been is always a part of what you are, and the question is one of integrating the two into something with which you can live. Ah, philosophy!

Musing on the self-conscious, all-absorbing seriousness of youth, she inhaled deeply and felt the slight hotness of the smoke in her throat. Through her mind skipped a trivial phrase: "If he's short, blow up; if he's tall, blow down." By force of habit, she blew the smoke gently downward. For he was tall, very tall.

Reeling, her mind shut off the sounds and the heat and the odorous air. It was last weekend again, on the bank above the Mississippi, about this time of night. Across the river was the bustling city, neon Minneapolis. The soft lapping of the water was the only sound. Together they sat, the two silhouettes, on a blanket, peering at their feet dangling over the edge of the high bank. They talked of many things. Mostly he talked and she let him, listening. He spoke of his family, what he wanted from school, from life. It seemed to rush forth in a stream. She sat watching his face, shining with youthful intensity in the reflected moonlight. He took him-

self so seriously . . . And don't we all, she thought. Trying to become something, what, we're not quite sure, but trying so hard to become.

She stretched back, hands under her head, and counted stars about the moon. He still spoke, of his weaknesses and his strengths, his desires. And then he, too, lay back, not touching her. They were silent together for several minutes, watching the sky. Water brushed the rocks below.

Then he propped himself up on one elbow and braced the other arm on the far side of her and just looked down at her in the dim light. His face, so pretty. . . An odd word for one so masculine, she thought, but it was the only one that seemed to fit. Too pretty, really. And she smiled quizzically up at him with unhurried wide eyes. Too pretty. A man could get completely through life on that face and never have to lift a finger.

Slowly but with an air of sureness he bent his head toward hers and touched her lips softly with his, as if tasting them. A moment, then she turned her head gently away. He raised himself a little. A whisper:

"I expected you to say no . . . the first time."

"And did I?"

"Mmm . . . yes, in a way."

And Mamma say, "'Thou shalt not, thou shalt not, must not. . . .'"

Whatever you say, Mamma.

Again he leaned toward her resisting form.

She giggled inside in the midst of the clatter, at herself mostly. Such an odd mood. She wrapped it about her as a protective coat and luxuriated in it, leaning against the wall with arms folded. It hurt a little, but sometimes . . . sometimes she wanted to hurt. She stretched her neck back, inhaled some smoke and held her breath for a long moment, then found herself gently swaying in her chair. "Oh, hard is the fortune of all womankind," sang the bearded one in throaty hushed tones, and her whole body leaned from the hips ever so slightly to the left, and still she clutched her imaginary coat about her until her knuckles grew white. Blowing out the smoke through barely parted lips, she swayed back like a pendulum in slow motion, several beats of the

song to each motion. She flattened her hair against the wall. The pendulum swung to the right, the left, back and forth, slowly, steadily, right, left. "Oh, I'm just a poor girl, my fortune is sad." Back and forth, right-left. "'I've always been courted by the waggoner's lad . . .'" And then the trio launched into a refrain in the tune of "Sweet Betsy From Pike," all about the bonds that held women in the eighteenth century. "Controlled by her parents until she's a wife, A slave to her husband the rest of her life." And then the tall one went on to tell, as he slowly plucked guitar strings, of the freedom that people have nowadays and the glorious things they can do with it. "For the New Generation need no longer be bound by conventions. They can say, 'be gone' to the traditional fetters of the body and of the mind and refuse to be limited by them."

And she felt pity for him, for his naivete that had once been hers. Her cigarette burned down to the filter and she reached out her arm to put it out, not moving her body from the wall, still gently swaying. "Heat is the embodiment of energy," said the bearded one, removing a crumpled dull green ascot from the neck of his shirt and mopping his forehead with it. And then he lit a cigarette. All about were cigarettes glowing in the growing summer darkness, tiny lights in the thickness. She pulled her legs up tight in front of her and rested her chin on one knee, looking at the package of cigarettes on the table with whimsically raised eyebrows. Her head reeled a bit and eyes stung with the smoky air. "Ah, little cigarettes," she whispered in fuzzy, confidential tones. "Do you know what you are? Do you *really*?" A purring sound came from deep inside her chest and then she laughed, a harsh quick laugh. People turned to look but she did not choose to see them. "Ah, my poor cigarettes. Yes you are, you're just tools to be used by people to dupe themselves. Mamma say, 'Thou shalt not smoke,' and so they smoke. Pastor say, 'Thou *must* not drink' and so they feel compelled to drink. Daddy say, 'Oh! Don't *say* that nasty word' and so they scream it at the top of their lungs to the surrounding hills at dawn. And they think they're free . . . they think they're free." Clinging to her brown legs, she rocked herself as if a child.

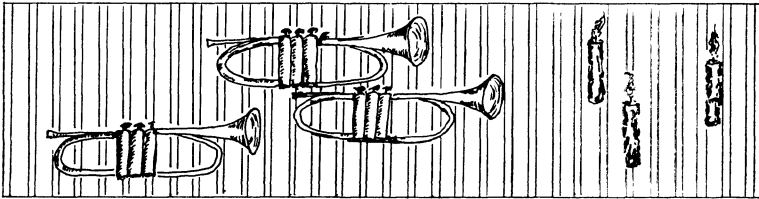
"And sometimes they are, sometimes. For a little

while. . . like here. Sometimes. Until they must remember again that the Outside World is inside too, internalized in childhood, and do what they may, they cannot entirely get rid of it.”

“For what you have been is always a part of what you are. . .”

Her breath grew short as the smoke and noise closed in again, closer and closer, bearing down, swirling around, beating away at her, batting her back and forth in a strong wind. The crescendo grew, deafening. Laughter became rough and loud and vulgar. Still the room was leaning to the beat, but this time violently. It seemed as if the whole room swayed, a tilted, unsteady reality.

And when she could bear it no longer, she choked back a dry sob and ran, picking her way between tables, to the door and then down the deserted street.



Why Love

by Neil Howard

Why love on a hillside,
Plush with green grass and small
White flowers that tickle the breeze?
Why, then, love at all?