

## By the side of the road

*by Ivy Fleischer*

It's dark out. The street light above her is flickering. It doesn't matter. She'll sit there until at least 11 o'clock. You see, this is her life, or I should say living, as the lady who cuts my hair corrected me. She sells all kinds of flowers from her lime green plastic barrels. And she sits there, reading a book.

Sometimes, she has a customer. I guess, romance brings on the spontaneity in a person in love. I see a couple. They stop abruptly, almost missing the large gravel area that she sits in. It only happens at night, I swear. And the driver leaves his motor running, with the car lights on. Suddenly, as he gets out of the car, it looks as if his car is possessed and from outer space, and that it is about to take off without him, leaving him far away from his beautiful love. Smoke streams out of the tailpipe and forms different shapes in the light of the car. Before closing his car door, he leans over to kiss his love goodbye. He slams the door and runs to the girl who sits reading her book, as if no one is there. She ignores him. He calls out to her while his car engine seems to beckon his quick return. The engine whirs quickly then slowly; seeming to choke on the cold night air. He points to some roses. The girl puts down her book and stares in the direction of his finger. She moves slowly and with precision. Thin green paper wraps around the bunch of flowers. Tiny fingers grab for loose change, and soon the man is back in his car. The windows are steamed now. I can just barely make out another kiss from the woman he is with.

The girl returns to her chair. She shuffles her things around, and she picks up her book, seeming to remember with ease her exact place. She is mesmerized once again.

I drive by several times to watch this all happen. Sometimes, I will wait at the intersection across the four-lane road, pretending that I cannot turn for the traffic. I wonder if I make her nervous. Nobody really stops there. In fact, I can't understand why she sits there. She must like to read. The middle of nowhere, I hardly see why anyone would want to buy flowers there. But, she always comes back.

She always looks the same too. She has oriental eyes that slant to the sky. Her black hair is always tied up in one braid or two. In the winter, she wears a fat aqua blue coat that looks as if she has piled a million sweaters underneath. She wears blue jeans and old brown boots. She has a blanket that sits over her lap; I suppose it keeps her legs warm. I wonder if she has a gun. I'd carry a gun. I'd have one hand on my book, and one hand on my trigger. This is a big city; lunatics run rampant. They wait and watch you until they know your every move, and then they come in for the kill. I think I read about it in the newspaper. She must have a gun.

She has a soft face... a pale yellow complexion. She is a skinny girl; I don't think she was ever a tomboy. She sits there so placidly,

mesmerized by her book. I wonder if it's the same book. I can never make out the title. She never seems to notice me, or anyone else. Cars speed by her; in the rain they practically splash water on her. But she sits there, in her slicker, holding an umbrella, reading her book.

It must be a mystery. How else could it keep her so intrigued? I wonder if she likes Agatha Christie. And then there were none. I always liked that one. Who was it who did it? I have to read it again.

I don't have time for much reading. I'm not home enough to read. I work all day at a factory nearby and then I ride around. I like to go to Wendy's. I can have my hamburger "just the way I like," and a "Frosty . . . to go." I bring it back with me to the intersection where I can sit and watch her.

If I wait late enough at night, I can see her friends, or boss, or whoever it is pick her up. They come in a big semi with hundreds of those plastic green barrels that hold flowers. Other people stand in the back of this semi, holding on to the sides of the truck. I can see them because the truck has no back. They all look so serious. I can't make them out clearly, but I can tell. Only one person helps her with her flowers. She has not sold many in the night and the barrels must be heavy. Still, she must put down her book and carry her flowers to the truck — the chair too.

I feel sorry for the girl. She works all day, rain and shine, more than the mailmen, on holidays, by herself . . . it doesn't seem like a satisfying job. She would like what I do. I've thought about talking to her, but I've always been afraid. She has a gun, I'm sure. I'd have a gun. She might shoot me.

Once, I decided I'd stop right on her gravel-laden corner and pretend to use the phone in the phonebooth. The light is always on in that phone booth. She never looked up at me; her eyeballs didn't even flinch when I couldn't get the door open, and banged it until it was ajar. I closed the door to the phone booth and fished for a quarter all the time looking at her. Her face was so tender. I never could quite pick out all her features from across the street; she was a beautiful girl. If only she wasn't so stuck in her book.

I finally found a quarter and I stuffed it into the phone; I don't know why. I really didn't need to do anything. I could have just stared at her; she wouldn't notice. But I figured she probably had her gun; she might shoot me. I called the weatherman. Partly cloudy, huh, and six inches of snow expected tomorrow. He told me to open a bank account; "start saving today!" I just wanted him to tell me the temperature. Thirty-two degrees, and it was only 10:04.

I held the phone and moved my lips, so she wouldn't shoot at me if she looked up. I didn't talk; I didn't know what to say, and I was afraid that she'd hear me and realize I'm not really on the phone. She might shoot me for that too. I wonder if she could be like a sniper if someone really bugged her. I could. This city is full of weirdos, you know. Any one of them could bother her.

I wonder if she likes what she's doing. She didn't smile as she read her book. She just stared into it. Even her fingers didn't twitch in the

normal anticipation that a person feels when she or he reads a good book. Her hand just holds the book steady.

I contemplated buying a flower, but I was afraid she would recognize me from across the way. I knew she wouldn't recognize my face, but she had to have seen my car. Maybe not. A million other people drive by her and stare at her too. I bet she thinks that we carry books in our cars and read them just like she reads hers.

It was then, that I left. She had made me angry. I could tell, she didn't know me from a hole in the ground, so I slammed the phone booth door as best I could. I didn't break the glass, but I made a loud noise; she didn't even budge. Bitch.

It was then that I started noticing how she hands flowers to the romantics who come to her on the spur of the moment. She doesn't even look at them in the eye. She grabs the money from their hands. I bet she doesn't want to even give them back their change. She moves so slowly: I bet she hopes she doesn't even have to give away her flowers.

I began to think that it wasn't just me who noticed how standoffish she was. None of her friends ever helped her with her flowers. I bet she used her gun against them once and had threatened them to leave her alone or else. I'd seen people do that in the movies. Oh, I bet she wasn't above threatening her friends.

Since that night in early January, I've been thinking about her a lot. She's got some nerve. Just reading. Not noticing. Even the people who watch out for her. I have to talk to her tonight.

I get to my intersection and I stare at her. It's a chilly early April evening. It's dusk. I sit in my car, and I eat some fried chicken. My hands are greasy and the car begins to smell like fast food. It's okay. I drive a Catalina; it's old and it always smells like fast food on a musty day. I turn on the radio; I only get one station.

"Yes, it's only a paper moon, shining over a cardboard sea."

Steam rises from my chicken. The food is so hot that I have to breathe real hard when I put it in my mouth. I have some of the orange soda, but it doesn't help.

I can still see her sitting there with her book.

"Oh, it wouldn't be make believe, if you believed in me."

I finish my chicken, licking the bones and crunching on them to suck in all the juices. The best part of the chicken is the juice. I want to take my time eating to collect my thoughts and figure out what I will say.

I lick my fingers instead of using a napkin. Napkins are no good with chicken. They only stick to you. They used to have those Wet and Dri's, but then the chicken place became a chain. Now the place doesn't care about anybody but the status quo and the IRS.

Finished with my dinner, I try to think of something I can say. "Listen chick, I watch you every night, and you don't even care. What are you, anyway?" No, that won't work. Maybe if I pretend like I know her boss. No. Maybe if I . . . I sit for hours. I watch the three or four couples that stop to buy flowers. Two men come by to use the phone. One speaks to her; I wonder if he couldn't reach the weatherman and

is asking the time. It seems like only moments before I look at my watch. 10:47. I must talk to her now.

I decide to start my engine and then drive around awhile and come back. I only drive for five minutes, then I drive up to her gravelled area. She's all alone. Her face is soft and her eyes, glazed and staring at her book. I turn off my engine and I walk to the phone booth. I again pretend to make a call. Partly sunny and little chance of rain tomorrow. Windy! Tune in to the local radio station. He tells me to get a credit card; I don't need one. Wendy's doesn't accept Visa. 51 degrees. It's 10:49. My watch is off. I hold onto the phone and I look at her. I try to see if she has a gun. Finally, I open the booth and I walk toward her.

She doesn't look up. I stand there watching her. Surely she must sense that I am there. But she keeps reading. I can see her eyeballs following the words on the pages. I watch her turn a page.

"Excuse me, but I wondered what kind of flowers you have here. Do you have any gardenias?"

The young woman continues to look into her book, but eventually raises her head. She stares at me. "I'm sorry. No gardenia." Her voice surprises me. She speaks quickly and high-pitched. She has trouble disguising her oriental accent. "We have daisy, and, uh, carnation . . . plenty roses — different colors. What you like?"

"You don't have any gardenias, huh? I was, uh . . . really set on gardenias, or irises. Huh." I pause. I don't know what to say, and suddenly I can't remember why I wanted to talk to her. She keeps looking at me. "Well, uh, what's your best-selling flower?"

"What?"

"I said, what flower do you sell the most of?"

"Oh, I like the roses. They very pretty. These red ones, every young lady like these red ones. You take these home for your wife, then?"

"No . . . I don't have . . . she wouldn't like those. She's allergic to roses." I begin to fidget. I don't want to buy any flowers. I notice that she has put down her book on the ground although she still sits in her chair in a posture-perfect, yet lethargic manner. She's been taught to sell, sell, just as I would have guessed. She's going to try and swindle my money, I know. "What are those daisies like?"

"Oh, they not too bad, should I wrap them up?" She puts her hands on her knees as if about to put all her effort into rising. I notice her book. The title is in small print and very worn. It is some kind of bible. It's not like an Old or New Testament. It's something else.

"Uh, no, not yet. What book are you reading there?"

"Oh, this ees jus a book my father gave me; he gave it to all children."

A semi pulls into the gravel. The engine is loud, and suddenly the young woman is closing up her chair and rushing it into the truck. "I'm sorry, I closed. No flowers now."

She picks up her green barrels and I can see her bony arms struggling with their heavy weight. I offer to help, but she doesn't understand. I begin to pick up a green barrel. She has just put some flowers in the truck. Her friends in the truck scream in Chinese. She

turns around and begins to scream too. I have frightened her. She must think I am trying to take her flowers. Oh God, please don't let her shoot me. I begin to cry as I continue to hold the green bin of flowers. I can't seem to put them down for fear that she will shoot me in the gut like they did on Mannix last night. I can't hear myself, but I know I am talking. She keeps walking toward me. I close my eyes to feel her pulling at the green bin. Water splashes us, and I fall as she grabs it from me. She races to the truck and jumps in. I sit on the ground as I watch them drive away screaming something I can't understand.

I am no longer crying, but I feel very tired. I walk to my car and I get inside. I don't want to go home. No one is there. I just want to drive around.

The next morning I wake up and go to work. I am quieter than usual, I am sure. No one seems to notice. I tell my supervisor I don't feel well, and I leave after lunch. I go to 38th Street to see her. My Catalina can't go fast enough, but I get there. I come from behind and I close my eyes as I park my car at the corner across the way. I open my eyes, but nobody is there.