

Joseph Mark Brewer
Eaton Avenue Press
Austin, Texas

Margarita Mix

"Please?"

Vincent had never said that word to her until that moment.

"I don't ..."

"Julie, I'm leaving, I just said. Remember?"

He knew no one gave a damn about him except for Julie, a waitress at the burg's only decent cafe. Small and plump and pretty, red hair and rosy cheeks, and so much like an apple he longed to bite. Vincent could not sleep from the thought of her. She poured his coffee and cut extra-large pieces of pie for him. She let him pinch her ass and caress her breasts and kiss her that one time when she and he and Tim the dishwasher found her boss's bottle of Rebel Yell and took turns taking swigs of the foul fire until Tim passed out. Julie's soft whiskey lips became impossible to forget.

"Vincent, it's my only day off ..."

It was her long, slow sigh, that tipped him off to her waning patience. It filled the phone.

"Julie?"

"OK," she said.

"Just remember ..."

"I know."

"Vincent."

When he heard her say his name, he felt a beautiful bleat deep down in his soul.

Julie said yes to meeting at the lake at lunch the next day. She said yes despite her ‘real’ boyfriend, a bodybuilder, all muscles and teeth and golden hair like a halo.

Vincent hated him. But at least Julie said yes. That was the important thing.

Vincent was leaving that burg and that college and that life. Not that anyone would know he had been kicked out of college. Not for a couple of days, at least. Not that he cared. It's just that Vincent knew his draft status guaranteed him a ticket to hell.

Canada had always been his plan. And the only person Vincent ever spoke to about this was Father Roger, who said things like "You've got a good head on your shoulders, Vincent. Don't waste it." Father Roger, once movie-star handsome, now had a boozy Rudolph nose under baggy eyelids and recruited his prep school's smart youngsters for a vast, empty Catholic men's college any bishop would have closed decades ago. It was Father Roger who wrangled a freshman scholarship that saved Vincent from the draft board.

Vincent knew he could not say no to Father Roger.

But that was September. Now it was April. He never again said the word “Canada” to Father Roger after Thanksgiving.

But Canada had always been Vincent's plan.

He had no doubt leaving would be a better deal all around – leaving that parochial prison Father Roger insisted he try. Leaving the dorm and the sinister creeps and closet queens and daily Mass and the least Christian brothers he'd ever met. Leaving that upstate burg too small to be anything but miserable. He would bet no one would ever know if he was in his dorm room or

Toronto or Mars. He had no friends there. No one ever called. Or wrote. Not mom. Not Paulie, older by two years but dumber by ten.

Canada became his Oz.

Tim the dishwasher had said he would buy Vincent's Volkswagen Beetle "anytime." So that became part of Vincent's plan: "Talk to Julie, sell the VW," became his mantra. Julie, the Bug, a pocketful of money, Greyhound tickets north.

Money.

Dough. Greenbacks. Folding money, Vincent heard his dad call it. Folding money.

Dad.

"Vinnie, someday you'll be a man of the world," his dad said in December while Vincent home for winter break. It was the last week his dad was alive, that week before the new decade began. Vincent sat next to his dad's bed and wrote down what his dad said, like he was asked to do. Some of his dad's words seemed like so much nonsense. And Vincent sometimes could not hear what was said because of the old man's low emphysemic rumble. Sometimes the bedside radio played the old-time music his mom called "from the war years." Most times the black-and-white TV's sound was down low and dad never watched it but when his mom asked his dad "Francis, want me to turn that off?" his dad always said, "Just leave it."

"Vinnie," he said between gasps, "Join the Navy and see the world." He said things like that. And, "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog." And, "You never know a man until you've stood in his shoes and walked around in them." Vincent knew that was from that movie about the dad and the girl and her brother and the spooky house. Vincent's dad said he liked the dad in that movie. Not that he resembled him in any way, he had to admit. Even

before the cancer, Vincent's dad was no bigger than a jockey, what Uncle Moe called "a banty rooster." Moe was a giant, built like a mountain. Not dad. Moe was "black Irish," all curly hair and five o'clock shadow and fine blue eyes. Dad was all red hair and green eyes and a thin beak of a nose over a square chin. Vincent resembled his dad. It used to bother him.

Vincent's idea to meet Julie and sell her on his idea, the "Come Join Me" idea – well, offering her a cocktail to seal the deal had sort of been his dad's idea, too. Vincent remembered the cocktail from the day his dad had made sure he wrote down "Go to California."

"It's warm there," he said. "They have a drink there called a margarita. Salty. But damn good. Now don't forget, Vinnie," his dad had said between wheezes no oxygen tank could relieve.

"I won't, Dad," Vincent replied, avoiding his father's gasping gaze. He kept busy writing California Tequila Margarita Lime Califfornya Tekeela Margareeta Lym.

After seeing his dad laid out in a coffin and watching him drop into a grave on New Year's Day, Vincent returned to the burg and the college and the cold and the snow, wishing he was still sitting next to his dad. He brought the notebook with him. He clutched the notebook. It was the only thing he read. It was the only thing he learned that semester, those things his dad told him to write down.

•

No stretch of the imagination would ever allow Timmons Pond to be called a lake, but that's what some enterprising promoter called it in the burg's boom days before everything went bust. There was nothing left in the burg but the little college and the paper mill, but everyone still called

Timmons Pond "the lake."

The burg, too small to even be called a town, sent two men to trim the grass around the lake and tend to the maples and birches nearby. Volunteers cut back the wild azalea, and every March the Boy Scouts marched through, picking up the winter litter. That had been three weeks before. On this day, the day Vincent planned on saying goodbye to college and the burg, the cold morning gave way to the promise of April warmth. It was spring and warm and everything Vincent hoped for.

He laid his blanket between the lake's pebbly beach, shiny from the morning rain, and the row of black wrought-iron benches. He turned his face to the sun creeping towards its zenith. A thermos lay on his lap, warm against his frayed jeans, his fingers still smelling of tequila and lime.

Now he was ready for Julie.

Like a community theater newbie with just the one line, he repeated his plea in as many different ways as he could think of: the oratorical "Come with me, Julie. Let's just go. You and me!" The lover's "Come with me, Julie. Let's just go. You and me!" The beggar's "Come with me, Julie. Let's just go. You and me!"

He wondered if she would take the margarita when he offered it.

Vincent stared at the sky and listened for the low hum of the Ford Pinto Julie was forced to drive. She once said she could not just say no to her parent's charity. She hated the car and Vincent knew she considered his Bug better than her Pinto. Vincent thought about that and the other things she hated about her life that he discovered while dating her. He knew it would be easy to talk her into ditching the Ford and running off with him.

"I'll ask. She'll say yes. We'll seal the deal with a drink. Then we're out of here."

The backfire of a showroom-new Pontiac 442 turned Vincent's head. Red, black trim, scoop, spoiler, mags.

Vincent winced.

"The bodybuilder. Damn."

Vincent stared at the muscle car. He watched Julie's head swing to and fro. He realized she was trying to spot any witnesses, as if hoping no one was watching. He watched her slip out the barely opened passenger door like a hesitant lawbreaker. Her short quick gate brought her long hair and sweater and jeans and boots and vanilla fragrance and pale white lusciousness to a spot six feet in front of him, her arms folded across her breasts as if naked.

"I'm here. What do you want?"

Vincent watched her eyes fall onto the thermos in his hand. He saw it meant nothing, that it did not even warrant a quizzical look, a "Why did you bring your coffee?" reaction.

"Well?"

Vincent wanted to shout, "Why is he here? Why can't you do just one thing I ask you to without you doing whatever the hell you want?" He wanted to scream, "You were the only thing about this shit town that was any good and I want you to run away with me and you bring that jackass?"

But nothing came out. Julie's eyes were fixed on the ground. Vincent then knew she'd never willingly look up at him again.

She whispered, "Well?"

The quiet of the question stilled his rage. Vincent looked down at the thermos and up at Julie's hair hanging from her bowed head.

"I just wanted to say 'fuck you.'"

Vincent didn't see the shock, the stare, the gaping mouth, the twitching lip, the swift turn and the run back to the boyfriend, and the indignant shout and the sudden tears and the rage.

Vincent had marched off to his Beetle. He did hear the Pontiac's engine rev and the tires squeal and

he smelled rubber on asphalt. But he was in his Beetle, safe and secure and deftly backing his round tin mound of metal into the path of the boyfriend's shiny new 442's gleaming grill. To save the car from the collision the bodybuilder slammed his foot on the brakes and Julie smacked her forehead onto the dashboard, but Vincent never noticed. He had already pushed the stick shift into first gear and was puttering away, his arm out the window, a one-finger salute proudly pointed toward the sky.

•

Tim the dishwasher was true to his word. Money and title changed hands and after a handshake and a "See ya 'round" Vincent walked to the bus depot.

His plan had been simple. A bus to Canada would keep him out of the draft. Julie would be by his side. He could face anything with her. He had been so sure.

In the middle of the depot lobby, among the wooden benches and dingy tile and gum wrappers and cigarette butts, Vincent held his knapsack in one hand, the thermos with his send-off booze in the other, and his eyes scanned the walls for any semblance of a bus schedule. All he wanted to see was Buffalo/Niagara Falls.

But the first words his eyes found and his mind comprehended was San Francisco, California. Vincent stepped closer to the sign. Under the San Francisco were all the stops: Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Kansas City, Denver, Salt Lake City, Reno, Sacramento, San Francisco.

California. San Francisco. St. Francis. Francis.

Dad.

"Go to California," his dad had told him. "It's warm there," he had said in the days before he died. "They have a drink there, called a margarita. Salty. But damn good. Now don't forget, Vinnie."

Instinct told Vincent to turn his head to the right. He spotted a ticket agent, old and bored and smoking a Pall Mall and staring at nothing.

"Ticket?" Vincent said as he stepped to the counter.

"Where to?"

"How much to San Francisco?"

The old man raised a thin yellowed finger and aimed it at a sign behind him, up and to the left.

Vincent's gut clenched.

"You wanna ticket?" The man seemed to say it without moving.

"Yep. San Francisco."

"Leaves in an hour, right over there."

Vincent turned his head again. This time he saw two dirty green metal doors with filthy Plexiglas windows, side by side, under a sign that said "Departures."

"Thanks," Vincent said. He meant it. He pulled out of his jeans pocket his brand new stash of folding money and paid the agent, picked up his tickets, and stared at them for a long moment before slipping them into his jacket pocket.

Vincent pushed open one of the dirty departure doors and saw two concrete driveways and dividers under an awning.

His eyes fell on the trees across the street. Ash. Poplar. Maple. Most were winter naked in the advancing April twilight and begging for new buds, standing there behind a row of rusted, slush-coated cars.

The day's warmth gave way to an early spring chill. But it was dry outside and the wind was still and Vincent's leather jacket was warm enough. Besides, there was margarita mix in his thermos.

Vincent parked himself on a bench at the foot of the bus station driveway, placed his

knapsack at his feet, and opened the thermos. The aromatic tequila salt lime made him salivate. He poured the concoction into the red thermos cup but before he tasted it, Vincent raised the cup to the sky.

"California, here we come. Ain't that right, Francis?"

• • •

© 2017 Joseph Mark Brewer

Eaton Avenue Press

All Rights Reserved