

Jon Fried

**After
the
Party**

paperbytes

Other paperbytes

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After the Party

IN MY WORK, I am so orderly and attentive to detail that sometimes I like to ramble, jump around, rattle off lyrics I make up as I go:

Marcy wrote it on my skin.

Marcy wrote the words in pen.

Marcy sang the Marcy song.

And I'm loving loving Marcy.

No one where I work – and more importantly none of my neighbours, because I work mostly at home – likes music. Not like I do. I program to it, cook to it, shower to it, do it to it, as Marcy says, making fun of me and how crass she thinks I find her. I don't. And

besides, she found me. She worked for a client. I think she was intrigued by me, by my big, disheveled presence, by all the wrinkling thought crowding my eyes and I think she wanted me to chase her. She's younger, in fact, she's young, and one of the things this means is that at night alone now I try to get to sleep on time. It's just that there are too many things to do now before bed: my back exercises, my teeth, with all the tools, my shower. I am a night shower person. And the nightly routine wakes me, so I read; the reading lulls me, so I nod; the catnap revives me, so I read again, until at last I'm ready for bed. When Marcy's over, I skip it all, skip it all, let it go, don't want to miss a minute. Maybe we will marry. The point is, the point is ... sharp. That's what the point is.

Time to get to it, and stay with it.

At the party, the music is pumping, the popcorn is flying and there's a man on the loose. Or there's story of a man on the loose on the loose. Frank is telling it, Frank, my neighbour, who wants to sell the story. My 4-year-old son is around and I think I am not going to want him to hear

this story. And I am right. It's a serial killer/ slasher/mystery comedy noir. It's a spoof of *noir*, and it's *noir*. A depraved, retro-dressed psycho killer who goes after teenagers finds his inspiration in (and of course this is the part that made it for me) the songs of Olivia Newton-John. Not the Bee Gees. Not Elton John. Olivia Newton-John. The killer writes the names of her greatest hits in blood somewhere near the bodies.

"Let's Get Physical."

"I Honestly Love You."

"Have You Never Been Mellow."

I don't want my boy to hear it, but it doesn't matter because by the end the CD's on, and everyone's laughing, and dancing to O N-J, here in ol' NJ.

BUT LET'S JUMP back (once or twice). I should tell you how I became a father. I should tell you I am a programmer. In my gothic rock moments, I consider myself a person of the night. There are times

I can't get started until 11, and by one I'll need a break. I'll take a walk. I'll see the other people of the night, the dog-walkers, the joggers, the smokers. Police and Thieves. Sometimes we say hi. There aren't many of us. Sometimes I'll work till 8 A.M. and then I'll take my dinner at breakfast and my evening stroll at 10 A.M., so to me, broad daylight can be just like evening. The kids are in school, the parents at work, and the streets are quiet. They are mine then too, mine and the mail walkers. And the West Indian nannies pushing the double-wheeled strollers.

I take walks several times a day, slow amblings on the nearby blocks. To me, they're states of mind, ways of solving problems – the stately reasoning of a tree-shrouded lane with its '30s Dutch colonials and its moss covered cobblestones in the wide, old gutters. Or, the single line of basic fact, the simple string of code, that is three blocks away: a flat, bland, '50s-'60s, stubby, tree-lined stick of a road with sunlight blaring off cement sidewalks and aluminum siding.

Not far away, on a strange dead-end side street with heavy shrubs

hiding half the lawns, I heard a tapping on glass and a voice straining to be heard through it. It was Linda, the mother of my boy, and this was the day we met. A person of the night-turned-day-turned-night, much like myself, she was an agoraphobic whose mother's car had broken down on the third day of a household phone outage. She'd not always been housebound. She'd had a job, as an editor, and she'd had a husband, but in her late twenties the symptoms appeared: the sweats, the slowly building storms of anxiety, the sudden nightmare paralysis of the legs and the bronchia. The marriage lasted seven years after she got sick. Seven years without going to a restaurant. Renting 12-20 movies per week. Once he rented an X-rated movie to watch after she fell asleep. She woke in the middle and did not appreciate it. Lenny didn't appreciate her lack of appreciation.

She lived on disability and on help from her mother. Lenny gave her next to nothing; in fact, I think he asked her for money a couple of times and once, at least once that I know of, she gave it to him. He

was an independent contractor and sometime cabinetmaker. He still came back to fix things.

Speaking through the glass, she seemed utterly calm. “Really sorry,” she said, explaining quickly about the phone. Some voice-activated machine had replaced her TV, phone and PC, and nothing worked. “I’m sick and I can’t go out.” She shrugged away any hint of self-pity. She sounded like someone who’s had a flat. Just a bit nervous. Appreciative. She told me she needed “milk and cat litter, diet soda and Sprite,” just like that. I paused at the time not only because of the unusual circumstance of my being given a shopping list by a woman I’d never met standing inside a picture window in her living room, in her bathrobe, while I stood between two bushes just outside the house, but because I found myself hearing her words like lyrics I might strain to decipher, and proceed to analyze. In her shopping list she had 1) separated the drink items (milk, diet soda, Sprite) by inserting cat litter and 2) included a generic item (diet soda) in the same list as a specific brand (Sprite).

Were any of these true necessities?

When I got back from the store and carried in the bags, I discovered that she also needed bread, fruit, vegetables, meat, eggs and everything else.

She laughed quietly, “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

I refused to take her money.

I met her mother when she arrived unannounced one day.

“Oh! you’ve got visitors, I don’t mean to interrupt, but there was an open house – beautiful yard, ugly furniture – is this a neighbour? I’m so rude; Phyllis, Linda’s mother. And you – unemployed, right?” And she laughed and went right on. “Self employed” She was squinting at me, sizing me up.

“A computer programmer.”

“Ah,” she said, her intuition confirmed. “You need anything, dear?”

“No thanks, Mom,” said Linda.

“Bye,” said Phyllis, old New Jersey style, half way to “boy.” Twirling

her hand in the air, letting us know it was all right to proceed.

Linda let me talk, too. I talked out my programs, and she was the perfect audience, the ideal consultant, as she would listen to me describe functionality in layman's terms, the ultimate test of any software. A phrase like "You can make the image look any way you want." She'd say, gleam in her eye, "Any way? Can you blend the colours in the background? Can you overlay, say, stripes, in one piece of it?" Brilliant questions for my purposes.

When it was my turn to ask brilliant questions, I asked about her illness, and the progress of the treatments. The negligible progress. Weekly shrink visit, her one excursion, gripping her mother's arm. Meds. The acupuncturist and the dance therapist-healer came to her. She followed every regimen, and laughed at them all.

I almost never saw her angry. One night she said to me. "You know it's all an act. I got over this years ago. I can walk outside any time I want."

"And I'm a state disability inspector."

She put out her hands, together, for handcuffs.

She had a lot of time to watch TV between her editing assignments. Partly for this, I stopped reading the newspaper. Linda gave me a personal news summary. We had our stories: the Microsoft case, the Unabomber case. Pop music stars. From my day, like Bowie and Iggy. From any day.

Soon I was stopping by M, W, F. Still working nights, but trying to be asleep by 3. T was my in-office day, and R (Thursday in single character speak) was my shopping day. I offered to do hers, but she insisted her mother didn't mind, and her mother appeared after her W errands, which included the bank, hairdresser, stores of many kinds, real-estate calls. Selling real estate was the perfect job for Phyllis. What with the flexibility and all, and finding the right match, the perfect fit of home and family. It's like finishing a work of art, she'd say. It was even more than that. She'd grown up in the town, a few blocks away, a fact that was never far from any conversation with her.

It's an old suburb. Lived here all her life. She knows everyone, and everyone's house. For Phyllis, houses are everything. Her ex-husband is a house in Fort Lauderdale. Her sister, a ranch house with a view (and what a view) in Santa Fe. Houses are rich and poor, sweet and sour, all of them either too large, too small, too crowded, too spacious, too detailed, too plain, or just eh, at least in comparison to the ancestral home, a perfect Dutch colonial that was new back then, at 142 Chestnut St. The family sold it when Phyllis was 16. Ruined since then, we are told, absolutely ruined, although we never find out how beyond the atrocious carpeting.

Sometimes she cooked for us, and even stayed to clean up. Sometimes she stayed for the movie.

“What do you want to get?”

“Anything you kids like.”

“*Cyber-Chase?*”

“Ugh, anything but that.”

Linda was a pretty woman. She must've been sensationally so as a bride. A few extra pounds softened her face, soothed the wrinkles. I like girlish figures, and hers was not. But then neither is Marcy's. Linda was big boned, but she was also, well, she was all swells and curves. I once told her, at the peak of our passion, that I'd love to see her in a bathing suit. The moment after I'd said it I was terrified that I'd said something quite cruel. But she said nothing, and the next day, she obliged me. She'd opened some windows—no mean feat—and knocked off the AC, and she called me into the back room, also the computer room, the tea room, where I found her on the couch in her one piece, running one hand through her hair.

“Bring on the sun lamp,” she cooed at me. She'd brought out a bottle of suntan lotion as a prop. It must've been ten years old, with its '80s new wave *What I Like About You* stripes on the bottle. Yes, I offered to apply it. She smiled. “I used to like a mean sunburn.” But she was still demure, Linda. She made sure to slip upstairs and

change back into cutoffs and a T-shirt before we began to kiss.

It had not been easy to make the first pass at her. One night I just found myself standing behind her chair, leaning toward the screen, snapping my fingers at the icons, urging her on, when I was simply taken by the desire to get for myself a better view of her face, which was very close to me, but partly obscured by a strand of long brown hair. So I very gently and carefully tucked the strand behind her ear. Before I was aware of what I had done, she started, and clicked the mouse, accidentally closing the application she was working in. I laughed and said I was sorry, and then she, whose eyes had not left the screen, whispered, “Apology not accepted.” I knelt by her chair. Never has a screen glowed more purely. She would not turn toward me. I had to stretch and lean and practically pull her ear for our first kiss.

That day we only kissed. And the next few times, too. In fact it was several weeks before we were lovers. It had been a couple of years for me, probably longer for her. Maybe a lot longer.

The first Saturday I woke in her bed I knew I couldn't stay. I went out for the paper, and the air was cutting, clear, singing into my lungs, with the wind gusting out of Canada somewhere. The Breeders on the radio in my head. *Spitting in a wishing well*. I looked toward my house, three blocks away. My block. A block of two minds: old '20s houses, full of solid, handsome logic on one side. And then '50s split level, quick-fix, short-cut ideas, on the other. Big trees, but several had come down. Old oak. Maybe Dutch Elm. I never stayed another night. I'd walk home around midnight, looking for hints of incandescence, or tv blue, from some room inside the houses, listening to the river-highway coursing round the clock in the distance.

She was never going to see the night colours. The sickly pale lavender or garish orange sky you see long after sunset. Black rain-soaked trees glinting metallic in the yellow-orange glare from the front of the grade school. Phone, power, cable lines bouncing greenish on a windy night under the street lamps. But the best are always from inside, the

soft golds, through all those blinds and shades.

Our best time together was in the day, our afternoon tequila parties. She'd actually go out on the back screen porch. I'd DJ, on the portable. We'd dance, terribly, but it was a miniature epiphany. You see, what she wanted was simple: to never go outside. What I wanted was also simple: to dance, however badly, to the music I loved at the moment. With somebody else.

Here's something I bet you knew: You don't need to go outside to get pregnant. I offered to help, to pay, to make a bedroom in my house, if she wanted to keep it. There wasn't a word about getting married. In fact, after she told me, we stopped making love, as if that would make up for the careless mistake we had made. No one said anything, we just stopped.

She was ready to give up the pregnancy, and I was going to pay for that too, but I surprised myself. I raised my voice at her for the first and only time. "You've given up so much of life don't give up this.

Blind women, deaf women, incessantly chattering women have been having babies for centuries. It's time to stop punishing yourself." She did not appreciate the words I chose.

Somehow, the pregnancy became a big deal for Lenny. He was calling almost everyday the last trimester. He even began staying for the movie – although we wouldn't ask his opinion – and a couple of nights we were a foursome: Linda, Phyllis, Lenny and me. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *Tootsie*. *Lifeboat*. At the end, Lenny would sigh, slap his knees, stretch and say, "Good one." Then he left. Then it was time for Phyllis' review. The acting, not so good. The story, all right. The music, well that was terrific. She always seemed to like the music.

Eventually the talk would come back to houses, and what people had done to those houses, and, implicitly, what that said about those people. After a while you wondered what she'd be saying to someone else about you and your house.

Lenny and Linda had never even thought about having children, or

so they each told me. Now, Lenny was occasionally dating a mother of three. So, this baby of mine and Linda's was maybe the closest he was going to get to a newborn of his own. He went with us to the hospital. Phyllis came, too. She drove. She had the nicest car. It's funny that no one thought of home birthing. No one considers options like that in a suburb like ours, not even people like us – people who, I guess you could say, don't typify our towns. This trip was something like a shrink visit with Phyllis, except for size of the escort and the periodic contractions, which caused us escorts to jump around in panic, and shout, and try to do something to help, but actually do little but distract ourselves.

I wasn't sure I wanted Lenny there, but it would not have been easy to level with him, and besides, somehow he belonged. Rubbing his big gut and thinking of ways he could help, he went out for food. He moved the car out of the over-priced hospital garage onto the street after six. He talked to Phyllis. He drove me home at 6 the next A.M., telling me how beautiful Linda had been. I didn't know if he meant during labour, or

when they were married.

Looking out my window that morning I saw the beginning of actual blue in the sky, but it was still night, and the streetlamp light made the lawns look as if they were covered by some fake, gleaming snow. It made me laugh. Beautiful and ridiculous like the idea that I might have a son.

She nursed the boy nine months or so, and soon it was time for the first sleep-over. I was looking forward to Charlie without his grandmother. I wouldn't say he cried most of the night, but, well, he did cry most of the night. Twice Linda called, the first time confessing her emotion, the second time releasing her emotion when she heard Charlie crying in the background. "Bring him back!" It was the first time I'd heard her cry. We all survived the night, and soon Charlie had two beds, two rooms, and two houses.

In the early months, when there wasn't much sleep to be had, I could see things almost get away from Linda. The bottles, her medicine, Charlie's medicine, the financials. Her mother. Linda unpacking the

groceries her mother bought was not a pretty sight. Phyllis bought Phyllis brands, and Phyllis flavours. Linda would sigh, groan, shift her weight from one foot to another, looking up at her kitchen ceiling, squeeze her lips together, and let her tired eyes burn. The worst she said was “Mom, did you read the list?” I don’t think Phyllis heard her.

Phyllis never forgave me for not marrying her daughter. Our initial mistake – getting pregnant – she could accept. With Linda, you could not expect the ordinary sequence of things. But that I should make Phyllis be forever the mother of a single mother was not forgivable, even if it was not solely my doing. My punishment was simply silence. Once or twice a week she would pick up Charlie, or drop him off, and I heard noises up to my door, but not after the door was opened, and only again once the door was shut. “My boy, did you miss your grandma? Grandma take you for ice cream? Don’t tell Mommy.”

Eventually she gave up and started coming in with home decorating advice.

When her milk dried up, Linda fell into an actual depression. Agoraphobia often brings on depression, but is not usually a cause of it or caused by it. So they say. She began undergoing treatment and I had more time with Charlie. I found, among other things, I was not very good at setting up a bedtime. I found it easier to DJ. I'd done it for myself for close to three decades, and now instead of two feet, there were four, two dancing and two swaying, swinging, or kicking. We finally agreed on a favorite: Sam Cooke. *Another Saturday Night. Let the Good Times Roll. Having a Party.* Other likes: Diana Ross, De La Soul. Dislikes, shockingly: Parliament, Billy Idol. For three months I danced him to sleep. Then I got him a little sound system and I'd put him in at 8:00 with a 90-minute tape on auto-reverse. I needed him to be a good sleeper because I could not pretend to be patient when awakened at 3:45 or interrupted at the computer at 1:15 in the morning by teething pains. And he was a good sleeper, thank god. Thank Charlie.

When Charlie was three his face took on an angular severity you rarely see in a child, a startling beauty, that told me a little about what Linda must have looked like before her chin grew heavy with the subjectivity of her confinement, and the medication she took. Charlie loved to walk – he was not a runner – and for a short time he begged her to go outside with him. Eventually she repeated the explanation enough times, so he stopped asking her. I heard her once or twice. It was not easy to listen to.

Linda almost never cried, maybe twice now. Charlie did not have that problem. He would scream himself into a state of wheezing respiratory confusion, and then kick his legs until his chest was settled enough for him to begin again. I devised a system to put order into his life, into all of our lives. It started with daycare. Five days, all day, even though Phyllis protested that she was certainly more motivated if not more qualified than any professional caregiver. This argument, of course, convinced me I was right. My innovation came in alternating

the days. My house Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and then all over again. I loved this. I thought I would hate it, as a person who loves the jumble of day and night hours. But I loved the superimposition of a biweekly schedule on a uni-weekly world. There was no Monday any more. There was Monday-Charlie and Monday-not. For work, there were no weekends. Every day was either Friday or Sunday, a day on before a day off, or a day off before a day on. From Charlie's point of view, the pattern was like this: Daddy/Daycare, Mommy/Daycare, Daddy/Daycare, Mommy/Daycare, Daddy/Daycare, Mommy/NO Daycare, Daddy/NO Daycare, Mommy/Daycare, Daddy/Daycare, Mommy/Daycare, Daddy/Daycare, Mommy/Daycare, Daddy/NO Daycare, Mommy/NO Daycare. And then it would start all over again. He learned it in six weeks, and this became the rhythm of his days, and it soothed him at two years like Sam Cooke had at 10 months.

It worked.

AND IT SUITED my courtship of Marcy perfectly. Life was calm enough to think about a lover again, and Marcy was looking. I sang the Marvin Gaye song *Mercy* with a little switch of the syllables. *Oh, Marcy, Marcy. Things ain't what they used to be.* I could make plans weeks in advance without a calendar in sight (evens/odds), and I was at once free and yet so mysteriously, intriguingly, unavailable. What about Tuesday? No. Next Tuesday? Yes.

She brought her own music, her dance compilations, and she did not like it that I had my own dance music and that it was so varied. Fatboy Slim to Curtis Mayfield. I did not look like someone who would have his own dance music. She wanted to bring some free, new, hot-blooded groove into my life and she brought it on her portable CD player, a big one, shaped like her car, all rounded curves, and we took this to the beach in November, to the abandoned boardwalk, by the cold, grey water, with the sand cold under our feet, the rest of us wrapped in sweat shirts and blankets and kisses. So easy to

make a pass at Marcy. Marcy is a seeker of Excellent Moments. That's what she calls them, and that's what she's looking to conjure. She likes to dim the lights, choose the table in a restaurant, plan an entire weekend (which she could never do with me, at least not me alone), match the wine to the bread, the beer to the pizza, the CD to the colour of her shirt, the kiss to the end of the song. And when the moment comes, she revels in it, often loudly.

She thrust her hands over her head and grabbed at the gulls, and then turned slowly, and let the wind whip through her hair. "This is beautiful," she shouted, fast, hoarse, victorious. And then she ran at me, shoulder in my chest, arm around me, driving forward, toppling us to the sand, where she pinned me to the ground, riding me, her knees on my shoulders. I would have been happy just to gaze up at this face against that sky and slowly sip the drink of her thin almond eyes, and her big wide cheekbones, and her loud, pretty mouth, but I knew what she wanted. I grabbed her wrist and then twisted and

bucked until she let me escape. She followed, she sacked me again, and she would've pulled my hair if I'd had enough to pull.

I wondered why she wanted me and not someone wild like her, until later when we were walking in an antique shop filled with beach junk. She was riding an Excellent Moment of solitude, lost in the lighthouse statues, the sunglasses, the postcards. She was alone – she picked up a postcard of some young beach stud and studied it, unaware of me. Strolled on to the little boutique. She held up a skirt to her waist, not even a glance my way. And this was fine. I didn't always want to talk or wrestle, or listen to a song and bore her with my list of stylistic antecedents until she would try to shut me up and fail to shut me up and begin pounding on my chest in time to the music, "But do you *like* it? Do you *like* it? Do you *like* it?" Long silences at the dinner table did not mean there wouldn't be long minutes eye to eye and breath to breath later that night. And in the best of our unspoken games, or at least my favourite, we pretended I was the

more experienced lover, the one with the secret of rapture in my fingertips, and she the one so privileged to know my touch. We had fun when we tried to and fun when we didn't and so I wanted to marry her. I didn't want it to stop, and it showed no signs of stopping. When it came to our work lives, we said little, maybe because that's where we'd met. But we could talk about anything else. Or not say a word. Or make love as long as I could, which was, well, as long as I could.

She liked to write me notes on my skin. "It's only pen," she scoffed at me. "Call me at 3:45" and a phone number on my forearm. "Marcy luuuuvs Carl" in a fake tattoo. Smiley face with my nipple as a nose. Also on my hairy chest, a drawing of a girl and a caption: "Marcy hides in the forest." The forest is greying, but no one minds. An arrow below my navel, "for Marcy only." And in backward letters, so I'd read it before my shower, "hunk."

Loving Marcy, loving Marcy, loving loving Marcy.

When she first came to my house, she walked through the rooms

slowly, arms out a bit for balance, head tilting in the amazement of the city girl at the excesses of the average suburban home. It turned out she was no stranger to such homes, having grown up in a series of them somewhere in the Midwest. She would not say where, as if the moment she did, the town or the city would take her back and not let her leave again.

I'd seen her city box apartment – just across the river from the city, but a city box apartment all the same – and we didn't stay there much because the only way I fit on the alcove bed was diagonally. She liked my suburban discount palace, but she could not admit it, because she did not want to be a suburban discount queen, so what she said was this: my house was a house for parties. That's the only reason to have a den, an eat-in kitchen, a dining-living-fireplace area, and three rooms upstairs. To fill them all with people.

And where did she think we would find all these people?

“Look at all these houses. There's people in them, no?”

“Yes, but people in there doesn’t always mean people over here.”

“Doesn’t anybody talk to anybody around here?”

“Do you talk to any of your neighbours?”

That stopped her a minute. “Some,” she finally said.

I stood at the living-room window, searching my mind for the sound of one of my neighbour’s voices. Ted, gently stuttering Ted. Ted and Donna. He played music at his church. Used to play in a band in high school.

AND SO BEGAN the search. The search for the people who’d come to the party, the party to set the standard, the party to launch our life of parties.

We weren’t going to take anyone untested, either. We were going to take them home, and squeeze them for ripeness. People came over every weekend, in twos and threes. Some from work, some from the neighbourhood, a couple of old friends. Sunday barbecues. Friday

night, potluck, bring-your-own-microbrew sixpack parties. They weren't much, these little gatherings, but they told Marcy what she needed to know.

Marcy loved throwing parties, even little ones. She'd give Charlie little jobs. Carrying the paper plates to the coffee table, placing the olive in the centre of the onion dip, arranging the lemon wedges in a circle. She was best with him then. She wasn't much for playing kid games with him, and when he cried, all she wanted to do was put her arms around him and purse her lips, *boo hoo*. He'd have none of it and it made her stiffen with the rejection, which she never let on about, but I could see it. On party days, Marcy didn't have to remember – and try to enforce – the house rules about food. They were suspended for the night: what could be eaten in what rooms, how much candy within how many hours of dinner. At parties Charlie and Marcy were friends. That is probably why I always thought I'd propose to her just after the big one. Drunk and tired and happy, rounding up all the glasses. Although I

had no idea what I would actually say. Or how she'd react.

I met Marcy's gang early on. They came just once.

I heard her friend Roberta whispering loudly to Marcy in the kitchen, openly scornful, "What are you doing out here?"

Marcy didn't reply right away.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Things went on till after 2, and Marcy was thrilled, but after that her friends told her to come to the city. Party in the city, they said. Bring him if you want, but we're not going out here again.

It made Marcy furious.

She stood in the middle of my street pointing at the houses.

"That one."

"Ted and Donna."

"There."

"Gary and Gretchen." They were father and daughter. The mother was not in the picture.

“Next to them.”

“Don’t know.”

“There.”

“I think her name is Maria. A widow.”

“And over there. In the pink one.”

“Shhhh – I always forget their name.”

“Is there anybody else you do know on this block?”

“There. Bill and Anandi. They have a girl, Lydia.”

“There’s got to be somebody else.”

“There’s Jerry.” He tells me about his 28-year-old son moving back in with them. His parents come over from Italy, he works his way out of Brooklyn, and his son comes home and sits there. Just sits there. Marcy wasn’t much older than the boy.

A couple of evenings she walked, beer in hand, up to somebody’s door and rang. “Sorry to bother you, but hi, I’m Marcy, and we’ve been admiring that tree all week. It’s covered with such excellent flowers?”

She found Jack and Colleen that way, as well as Jim and Cindy. Found by me, I don't think they would've been party people, but Marcy had a way of turning people back into their prom-night selves, their freshman-dorm selves.

“We're having a party this fall, a big dance party. You still have your dancing shoes tucked away in your attic somewhere?”

She found Frank, my would-be novelist neighbour, jogging by on a summer night. “Excuse me, sir? Excuse me, Mr. Jogger, green sweats, yes, you, hi there. I know it's night, but isn't it too damn hot to be running around anyway?” He lived on the next block and he was happy to exchange his last eighth of a mile for a cold beer.

Did you talk to people like that in the city?

She shrugged.

Marcy loved to talk about the way other women looked. She rabbit punched me if I agreed that someone else was sexy, but she was always bringing it up. Donna was a good head taller than Ted. Marcy

said we'd have to get her into something other than sweat pants and gardening boots.

Marcy also noticed that Ted stopped stuttering once he had a couple of beers in him.

Jim and Cindy brought over a picture of their very clean-cut looking guru because Marcy had seen his book in their kitchen, and she'd asked them to bring it. They didn't seem much of the dancing types, but then they didn't seem much of the guru types. They were directly across the street, and the only way to be sure they wouldn't complain about the noise was to get them to make some of it.

It was not easy to finally achieve critical party mass. Marcy decided that we needed to keep the number of utter duds at about 20% or lower, so we only ended up with about a dozen on the invite list. We made our calls, and it came, the night of September 14. Everyone back from Labour Day, but still a bit of summer sweat in the air. Marcy's party, at last.

Frank, novelist Frank, was one of the first to arrive, and somehow the book came up and Barbara, whose boyfriend couldn't make it, cackled hysterically. Jim and Cindy wanted to know what was so funny, so they were told, and they didn't have Barbara's reaction, but when Ted and Donna walked in they wanted to hear it again. Somehow in each telling it got funnier and funnier, at least to me.

Frank finally began shouting at everyone that they had better find a lawyer as tough as his if they wanted to steal his idea. He just loved listing the names of the songs. "*Let Me Be There. Have You Never Been Mellow. Let's Get –*" When I found the CD, Marcy gave me the wild girl face, the banshee squint, the rock and roll squeal, mouth wide, nostrils flaring. When I put up the volume, the place erupted.

Children love a groove, but they also love blandness, glorious butter on plain yellow noodles: Olivia Newton-John. And so it was that Charlie could stand in the middle of it all in utter astonishment and serenity, excited yet calm, as a dozen adults danced and skittered

around him like rabbits, squirrels, skunks and raccoons and all the other animals knocking around our trash cans at night. Except we were louder. And we were acting out murder to the greatest hits of Olivia Newton-John, complete with Psycho bird noises and invisible knives ##### by the ear and thrust between the shoulder blades. Finger guns held two-fisted and BLAM point blank with a guttural throat shot. And falling, falling over clutching our hearts, screaming on the downbeat, falling in a heap. Charlie couldn't believe it, couldn't believe it, a roomful of adults screaming, falling and above all laughing, laughing like Charlie laughs. Marcy wanted to dance, to scowl the rock and roll disco scowl, and drop to her knees and shimmy from the waist, bending all the way back till her shoulders are shimmying on the carpet, and bodies are dropping and groaning in fake pain and jumping up for more. Marcy opens her eyes on me drinking in the sight of her in motion, and says, "Finally. Finally!" Finally a little abandon. Whatever it takes. Even if half the people are actually just sitting

there watching. Ted is strangling Gary, and Gary's tongue is hanging out of his mouth like he's got cartoon Xs for eyes, until he starts laughing his head off. Now that's a way to die, I'm thinking. I'm also thinking, *Do I want my son in the middle of this?* As I stop to figure it out, little Gretchen walks in. Little blond Gretchen. She's Gary's daughter. She begins to pound on his leg, and yells at him, "Stop dancing!" And she means it. "He's just being goofy," Donna shouts over the music. Gretchen runs away, back to the basement where Marcy spread out some toys, and pads, and little bags of crayons.

Charlie gets it. There's been no party like this in his life (or in mine), but he gets it. He runs full speed, fists up by his temples, and crashes into anyone he likes. And everyone loves it. These aren't some high-pitched adults with a pat on the head and an idiotic question about his age, these guys are uttering tomahawk cries and doubling over. And now we're all waiting for Charlie to kill us, and all my life I'd wanted an excuse to use the pun *cereal killers* and I've got it, right

now. Charlie killed Gary, Ted, Donna, and Marcy, who stopped dancing and declared herself a cat ready to lose a few lives. And then Jack and Colleen, and Barbara, and Bill and Jerry and Jim but not Cindy, she wasn't one for that, and Charlie is screaming as he runs off to his next victim. I'm dead on the floor, watching my son out of one half-closed eye and somehow I don't see Marcy until her mouth is on mine, and her kiss is too sudden, too full, too swirling and wild but she's off of me and screaming and running away from Charlie and I get up to follow because now the same kiss was too slow and quiet and not enough. And then Donna shouts, "Oh my God."

IN A VOICE that is not painful or upset, but simply so serious that it cut through the music and the spree, Donna ends it all. Like that. Done.

She goes right to the couch. Ted goes right to the volume slider.

Charlie chugs into the room and stops: oh, no, that face, the what-happened face. Don't tell me they're grown-ups again.

Frank had just confessed to Donna, and then instantly it spread: his screenplay was based on a true story. One by one the faces fell. The arms fell limp. It happened in Wilmington. Delaware. It took the FBI six months to find the creep. Among his victims were two boys and a girl. They found a bloody fingerprint on the black vinyl record. There was even a book about it. *Disco Mayhem*. Briefly a best seller.

The volume soon went from low to off. Marcy's face read maximum disgust, and she broke the silence, right at Frank. "Why did you do this, why did you tell us, why did you use that horrible story?"

Somebody tried to laugh, but it was swallowed in the sound of ten people gasping for air, ten people who have just discovered the fake blood they're covered in is real. Charlie began running back and forth, hoping to rekindle the flame. Everyone ignored him. A baby in a removable car seat in the other room had slept through the noise,

but was woken by the silence, and started to cry.

Finally, Frank said, “One was Gretchen’s age.”

“Who was my age?” She’d been behind the naugahyde chair.

“Come on,” Gary said, taking her by the hand and walking her out of the house.

Jack picked up the CD, stared at those big, round, sex kitten eyes of years ago and then shuddered and looked away.

Ted walked in from the kitchen with a just-opened beer, sat down on the couch, held the bottle on his knee and couldn’t take a sip.

It was then I noticed Phyllis in the doorway. The bell must’ve rung when the music was on. Someone by the door must’ve let her in. She must have been there several minutes before I saw her. It was true, this was pick-up time, on Saturday-not.

“I told Linda I’d bring him after the party.” I had no idea if I had said that or not, but I was not happy to see Phyllis.

Phyllis just looked around the silent room, and soon enough

everyone in the room was looking at her.

“I’ll bring him over. OK?” I said, but nobody was listening to me.

Leave it to Phyllis. She said in a quiet voice that played perfectly to that room, “What happened to the dancing. You have a contest and everybody lost?” Somebody chuckled a little. “You know,” she said, “I think ’70s retro went out about five years ago.” Somebody laughed.

“I’ll bring him over,” I said again, and barely get the words out when I felt a hand under my shirt, slipping around my waist, and nestling in under my waistband. “Marcy! This is Charlie’s grandmother, Phyllis. Phyllis, Marcy.”

“She’s drunk, dear,” Phyllis says to me. “You’re drunk, dearie,” she says to Marcy.

“Thank you,” says Marcy.

I’m thinking cat fight, for sure, and why not?

But no. Phyllis began to sway. She began to hum, and dance to the tune in her head. She took Marcy’s hands and tried to get her swaying.

Marcy was stunned, and let her arms get carried back and forth. “You know,” she said, “I grew up right here. Cross Cedar. Right on Linden. Three blocks, and then a right on Chestnut. Half a block up on the right. That was my house. That’s where I was born.” Her voice, usually so shrill, almost floated away, but no one missed it when she said *born*. And finally I got it. This was hers, all hers. This town. Or the idea of this town. She’d gotten here first and it was hers. Never to be new again.

At that moment, Phyllis tried to take a little turn, wobbled on her heel, and fell in a heap to the carpet. Rather than be pulled down, Marcy let go.

Several of us rushed to help her up. She shook us off, and stood still, transparent. She looked waxy and ancient. She looked sad, thin and sad, like someone who’s been up in the Wee Small Hours thinking about a party to which she hadn’t been invited. She was, in fact, standing at such a party.

And then the moment was over, and whatever it is that makes Phyllis Phyllis was there once again. “Uggh!” she shook her head. “I have an appointment,” her voice coming back, scraping gloriously at my ears, “All right, you bring the baby. Charlie, bye-bye, honey! Grandma’s going!”

And she left us. I’m ready for everyone to go home. I want Marcy. I’m picturing us later. Her sway back. I’m still clinging on. I don’t get it yet.

I got my wish, the first part anyway, about everyone going home. People muttered their goodbyes. *See ya Monday. Great party. Nice try.* Cindy said, “Now I’ll never get those goddamn songs out of my head.” They were all gone in minutes.

I went looking for Marcy. Cleaning up, looking beat. I had thought this might be the Night, the Big Night. It wasn’t. There was a ring in my pocket.

BUT NEITHER WAS the night over, not even close. There was a knock, and yes – you may have guessed it, but I had not. This time it was Linda. What can I say? It was Linda. The last surprise. Linda in sweats and sneakers, Linda covered in sweat, pale and visibly trembling, with a smile on faintly quivering lips. To me came the word wan, largely replaced in my brain until now by the word WAN, for wide area network, computers linked across the world. I held open the door and stepped back, and Linda walked into my house. She peered up and around as if the living room was huge, and then quickly sat in nearest chair, at the edge of the seat, once again master of her breath. She was inside again.

She'd walked, alone. She'd walked past dozens of houses, scores of windows, past trees, driveways, curbs, across perhaps 200 squares of poured concrete sidewalk, each one a map of pebble towns and river cracks, each one a mile, a history, a population, every one a land of terror.

“Ma!” shouted the boy. The most generic name our brains have ever devised belongs to the person about whom we perhaps gather

the greatest amount of specific information. Charlie ran over to her and jumped in her lap. She tried to move back in the chair to make room for him. She still needed to remain as still as she could. But she held on to him as long as he held on to her, which wasn't long. He could feel it, her altered state, and besides, there had been so much in the past hour. Soon he was under the chair, curled on his side, eye at windshield level as he and his truck made slow, tiny circles.

Marcy left somewhere in there. I don't remember if she kissed me goodbye.

I brought Linda a glass of water, and she mouthed the words *thank you*. It took us both a while to believe she had made it.

And then came into the room a waltz ... no, no music at all. Just the sound of the cars on this 30-mile-an-hour street, and the sound of the little truck going around and around and the boy making the sound of its engine. I felt for the ring in my pocket.

Oh, what a night.

About the Author



JON FRIED's published work includes prose pieces in *3rd Bed*, *BeeHive*, *Pierogi Press*, *Eclectica*, *Pindledyboz.com*, and *Lamination Colony* and songs he has written and co-written for his band, the Cucumbers (which recently released its fifth album). *Greetings* published an excerpt of a graphic novel he created with artist Erik Wrobel. He has written a play called *Speech Patterns of the Bland*. He lives in New Jersey with his wife and collaborator Deena Shoshkes and their two children. He is currently working on a novel based on the lives of some of his colourful ancestors.

