

Wimpy. Zing

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He grew little orchids which he sold at high school prom time, a tall, ambly whimsical floppy guy with round horn-rimmed glasses, who always looked sort of sloppy. We wore shirts and ties to school in those days, but he looked frumpy—the pointed ends of his collar always rolling up, the shirt coming out of his slacks. Part of it was his fat, but part was just his shambling, bumpy way of walking, gesturing, shrugging.

The growing part of his orchid business, he said, wasn't all that hard; it was the timing—they had to be ready to deliver right on prom Saturday. He packaged them nicely, so girls liked to get them, in a stiff clear celluloid box, mounted and with a big pin for putting right on your date's gown. Have you ever heard of anybody really making money from one of those schemes you would read about in magazine ads? I mean besides the guys quoted in the ads themselves—"B.J. from Philadelphia writes, 'I earned \$384.17 from one prom alone.'" Well, my friend Wimpy did. Wimpy sold flowers first his sophomore year in high school, to seniors and some juniors who went to the prom. It worked so well, the next year he sold them at three other high schools in nearby villages, and to four hundred-odd college students at the college in town.

His pop was a casual lean guy, bald on top, with a ring of dark hair below the dome. He seemed smart to us, though he didn't say a lot. We thought he had an interesting career—he worked at a little radio station on the island—but we understood that he wasn't very successful. He began helping Wimpy with the flower operation, part-time at first, then more and more. He loved radio and being an announcer, but the station wasn't a big operation, and he didn't have great prospects: his radio voice, to tell the truth, just wasn't very appealing. Now he cut back to part-time because the orchid-growing was developing into a family floral business. The Groginskis lived out towards East Meadow; their house was on a lane that ran near some potato farms, and zoning didn't get in the way of expansion. Pretty soon two greenhouses took the full efforts of the pop, a lot of work by Wimpy and his quiet mother, plus eventually the skilled help of a crochety hired hand who actually knew the business. Wimpy and his parents learned a lot from him, and from reading—there were all kinds of government agricultural booklets, and agents, too, available to them as they developed their trade, which was providing flowers for specialized purposes, not just orchids, and not just proms now, but weddings, meetings, bar mitzvahs, confirmations, conventions. They sold not to florists, usually, but through agents in the schools or through caterers, who were happy to get a commission for providing "Flowers by Zing." "Zing"

was an alternate nickname for Wimpy, a play on his last name. I know the play doesn't make sense. You have to know that some kids pronounced his name "Grozingsky"—a small school joke. When the business got pretty large they made a name-change for respectability—"Zing" became "Meadow Floral." The pop played with a slogan to keep the old name around—he wanted his son's enterprise remembered: "Flowers with Zing." But they finally dropped it. Zing or no Zing, they had a good thing.

That family was pretty unemotional in manner, a little hard to read, at least for me—questioning, cool, whimsical conversation is what I remember—but I think they really liked one another.

I don't know how Wimpy got the nickname we usually used. He didn't especially gobble hamburgers. In fact, the only thing I remember him hitting hard was coffee. None of the rest of us drank it regularly in high school except when the gang drove in one of our family cars to a diner somewhere and sat around late at night chatting about the cosmos or sex. Wimpy sloshed it down all the time.

He was sort of fat, but only oddly so. Herk said it was unhealthy fat, little rolls attached here and there to Wimpy's large frame. Herk wanted to be a doctor. He went out with Dr. Schwartz' daughter, and worked for the doctor. Dr. Schwartz let him read medical books. Herk knew a lot. "You ever touch him?" asked Herk. "It's squishy, light—disgusting stuff. Not dense like regular fat." Wimpy had a way of huffing a few high-pitched laughs, almost giggles—"Heh, heh, heh"—before he said anything funny, and it was true that the little bands of fat that bowed his shirt above his belt would kind of wave around loosely as he huffed. Since most of what he said was sort of funny, we got used to it, I guess.

Wimpy even huffed a version of his own death: "I figure if there's another war, they'll cut me down from a tree. They would have tied me up in it and told me to get as many of the enemy as I could before they killed me." We had known Wimpy for two years before he came out with th

t one. The rest of us knew one another ev

n longer because we lived in the village; our high school served some surrounding places. Nowadays they're all built up, have their own schools. But kids from places like East Meadow came in by bus; we wouldn't have known 'em before high school. Anyway, two years is a long time to schoolkids. We had known him all that time and not known that he was a great marksman.

Rest of us didn't know anything about shooting, but it turned out that Wimpy did. Our school had a famous rifle team—famous except that we had hardly heard of it. It practiced in a terrible range in the basement, amid intervening pipes, where tall boys like Wimpy couldn't stand straight for the "standing" shooting. I think there was "standing," "kneeling," and "prone." Anyhow, they were really good, though hardly known in our school, as I

said—it was too minor a sport to attract attention. They won all their tournaments; they were so “deep” they could enter two the same day with separate squads and win both. Generally they placed first among all the high schools in the country at the nationals, and then would usually lose out to the same private military prep school where I guess the kids did nothing but shoot.

Well, puffy white fat or no, Wimpy was a great shot. His friends on the team, by the way, preferred the other nickname, Zing.

Wimpy did see war, and it was jungle war, though nobody strapped him in a tree. He, not Herk, had become a doctor, and then, of all things, he having been the oddest of our odd bunch, a psychiatrist. We had bought his orchids ourselves for our Senior Prom in 1950. In the car driving from the dance in the school gymnasium to the nightclub we heard the news of the outbreak of the Korean War. A “downer,” as kids of a later decade would say. Zing had visions of himself as a sniper in a tree, but he was never drafted. Our good Uncle Samuel waited until the late 60s, when Dr. Groginski was an established shrink looking more middle-aged than his 37 years. He was called up and shipped to Viet Nam.

He even wrote me once from Viet Nam, the only letter he ever sent me; he mailed it care of my parents, because everyone near our town knew their business location—a corner store in a small town is a landmark and meeting-place, and you don't have to remember an exact address. So the next time I got East I phoned Meadow Floral and found out how to reach him. He lived in Chicago, it turned out. More years went by before the next time I was there for a few days. I phoned the number. We didn't get together, but talked a good while on the phone.

“Nam was worse hell than whatever you have heard. I saw and did everything short of going on patrol with guys. Too much. I was even in combat once, accidentally; I'll tell you that—heh, heh, heh—story some day. But you know what? Heh, heh. Crazy and savage as every moment of my job was, I still say that high school was the most intense part of my life. So far, anyway. Heh, heh, heh. High school, Joel, is the chessboard of the id.”

Sometimes, though, there was a callousness—I don't know—in Wimpy that bothered the rest of us. I'll tell you a couple of stories; maybe you'll see.

Our bunch in high school was somehow having a party at a small house—I can't remember how we had the use of the house; it wasn't any of our families' place. Maybe one of the girls was baby-sitting there and the folks had said it was OK to have friends over, or maybe it was one of the dates' family home and her people were away or something. Anyway, it was fun; we were all together and talking and drinking a little and we had some junk to nibble on. My date was a girl named Louise I had never taken out before. She was the sister of a nice girl who played in my section in the school

orchestra, a girl a year or two ahead of me who had said one day as we were packing up our instruments after a long rehearsal, "You ought to take out my sister. She's a nice kid."

Well, nobody talked that straight about dating in school. It stuck in my mind. I waited a while—phoning a new girl for a date was agony for me—but finally, with this promising party looming, I did call her, and here she was.

Notice all the detail? I don't know exactly what Wimpy meant by "chessboard of the id," but maybe there's something in it. Do you think it would have crossed my mind to add all that detail about any other period of my life? I even have to tell you what she looked like: short, tight-pudgy, swarthy complexion—her pop was Greek, her mom, not. The musical sister was fair and looked like the mother. Louise had heavy-black curly hair she wore fairly long, and big, dark eyes.

The sister was right; Louise was a nice kid. She caught on to the odd humor of our bunch right away, and she was smart. She had ideas and a funny way of connecting things; because of her, the evening's conversation began to have running jokes. She was very pleased to see the liquor—I still remember her cry of pleasure: "Oh, lookit the good booze!"—and she drank it quite a lot faster than the rest of us.

Well, there came the time when we had records on and the lights down and were dancing and necking, looking for corners where we could nuzzle with a bit of privacy. My bunch was in favor of sex, and we talked about it all the time, though we were all still disgustingly virginal. At least we were accomplished neckers and touchers and rubbers. This information I think you actually need to understand the anecdote involving old Wimpy. Louise and I danced our way out of the living-room—it wasn't a large room, and there was a sort of arched opening with some curtains which led to the small dining-room. She danced close, and to my pleasure and surprise didn't have to be urged to make the turn by the drapes into the dark dining-room. I tried a kiss—my gosh, you got so excited at that age—and she was breathing hard immediately. I hadn't encountered this kind of abandon before. She kissed hard, she rubbed, she twisted, she was as grabby as I wanted to be. Then she noticed the bathroom door and started dancing again. Sort of dancing—mainly smacking her whole body against me while at the same time "leading" to tug me towards the john. We danced in and closed the door. I pressed her up against the sink and she started bucking as though we were really making love. She even put her legs around me. She got gloriously sweaty and rumped; that wonderful sex-smell young girls make filled the air of the little black-and-white tiled room. I was a little worried about what to do next, but suddenly she stopped, dropped forward, looked up at me seriously and said,

"Think maybe we should stop now." Not a question; not a reproach, either. Just a decision, and not one that seemed to come from a girl who was drunk.

We straightened up; helping tuck in one another's clothes was an amazingly intimate thing to me, like being old marrieds. She gave my hand a warm squeeze and we went back in, dancing our way into the living room. We sat on the couch between Wimpy and Herk's date, Pauline. I don't remember the name of the girl Wimpy was with that night, but she and Herk were sitting on the floor near the door to the kitchen talking. Geez! Now I've got it. It wasn't a date at all—it was old Sally. Sally was our buddy, one of our bunch, though none of us dated her. She and Wimpy were just there, not as a couple. Amazing what pockets of memory you have—I even remember what Sally and Herk were talking about—astronomy. It was a hobby of hers, and Herk, who was very serious about all things scientific, had read a lot about stars and had the use of Dr. Schwartz' pretty good backyard telescope.

Anyhow, back on the couch, Wimpy sized up Louise's mood and condition and started grabbing at her. As though she were some sort of communal slut. And she went along with it! After a while they even got up and walked out of the room, she with her arm around him, her hand holding onto one of those folds of loose fat. They came back in a couple of minutes, rumped and lipstick. Louise sat down on the couch next to me; Wimpy said "Heh, heh, heh" and wiped the back of his hand across her mouth as though to clean her up before returning her to me.

I'll continue to insist that she was a very nice girl. Wimpy's behavior, though—that's the point. Is callousness the right word? Why would a guy do that?

Second anecdote. Herk, Wimpy and I are seated in a booth in a diner late at night bullshitting in our customary manner. The topic on the table is sex, how we want it to be for our first "real" experience. In a hotel somewhere, on a honeymoon, with a nice wife as eager and inexperienced as you? In any place private with a nice date who is hot to trot, and a condom handy? And discussion of specific girls, and which ones might really want to, and which ones have actually done or said something which might have been construed to—here Herk had the best story, because he sometimes went out with Maggie Home, and she had a couple of times said to him, "You know what I want...."

And so on. But Wimpy opted for none of the above, heh, heh, heh. No, and he had obviously thought this through: "No; I'll set up with a really experienced whore, a prostitute who knows her business and can give me a fine time that will feel great right off. No awkwardness, no tension, no worrying about making somebody's nice daughter or sister pregnant, no worry about ruining it for the girl because maybe it's her first time, too, and it will hurt her. Especially if you don't know what the fuck you're doing."

You had to admit there was logic in what Wimpy said, but for the rest of us, the idea of using a prostitute was so—repellent? Cheaty? Unsexy—that, for sure. Herk wanted to know, “But who would want—I mean want—to screw a whore?” I couldn’t see it, either. Not only not sexy: so, somehow, so sad. A sadness I guess I associated with a big girl who had been in my grade-school class. We had been friends, because she and I both liked to read, and we would recommend books to one another. And then, from about seventh grade on, she started going out with older guys, and that suddenly made her distant to the rest of us kids. In high school she got to be known, along with one or two other girls, as the school whore. Mr. Gumpster, the assistant principal and a straight-shooter we all respected, caught her and a creep of a boyfriend humping away hot and heavy one morning in a car in the school parking-lot. Her career made her life and sex itself seem sad. To me, anyhow.

Whether “callousness” is the right word or not, you see a connection between the two anecdotes, don’t you? Oh—there’s another odd detail about the story about Louise. When Wimpy wiped off her lips and passed her back to me....Louise plainly didn’t mind it. She was tickled. Tickled and excited. Amused, while at the same time sexually excited.

Which reminds me of one other unexpected thing, similar, too, that Wimpy did. So you get two anecdotes—NO, THREE—like the old Monty Python routine about the Spanish Inquisition. Number three—maybe I should write it, “No. 3,” because that’s the kind of dumb punning our bunch loved in school—anyway, it took place the only time I saw Wimpy during his years in college or his long medical and psychiatric training. I was in Chicago to see a lady I later married. We had five or six days together before I had to return to the conservatory, and I thought it would be interesting to look up Wimpy. I warned my lady about his grabby ways, but he behaved himself that evening. He lived in pretty grubby digs, a single square room, bed, desk, piles of books and piles of clothes and litter, almost like a student dorm-room, and he seemed pretty much unchanged: still talked with a lot of shrugging, still seemed hulking, still had fat on his body which, because it wasn’t packed anywhere, failed to make him tubby. There was some photo equipment around—an enlarger and some trays, yellow Kodak boxes, bottles and things. I had done a lot of photography in high school, so I asked to see some of his work. I reached for a pile of prints I saw sticking out from under some books on a shelf near me. “Uh-uh—no,” said Wimpy, raising a hand to stop me. “You can’t see those.”

“Oh—OK,” I said. “Doity pitchers, huh?”

“Please,” said my lady, striking an affected, artificial pose, eyes shut, head back, one wrist behind an ear, the other arm extended upward at an angle, its hand bent back and fingers spread tensely, “Not doity pitchers. Artistic studies of the anatomy.”

"Oh, hell," said Wimpy, "why don't you go ahead and look at 'em." He reached over and pulled them out, and handed about half to each of us.

Doity pitchers is about what they were, some of a skinny dark girl with small droopy breasts, posing in various erotic attitudes, and some of the same girl and Wimpy screwing or handling one another. The setting for all of them was the messy little room we were in.

They were strong stuff; neither my girl nor I knew exactly what to say. It's hard to know what to make of his sharing these with us, but you see the common thread, don't you?

One night in the 90s he told me the Viet Nam story. We had not stayed in touch; I had not seen him since the early 70s. He still lived in Chicago; my wife and I had raised our kids in Seattle. When I retired, I tracked him down and phoned; on a driving trip east my wife and I stopped in Chicago and got together with him. I warned Sandy—not the same lady who had met Wimpy years ago—she, poor kid, had sort of gone off the deep end years before, but that's not germane here—I warned Sandy, who was tickled at the idea that Wimpy might make a grab at her. "Maybe pulpy fat will be sexy. You never know."

The cases Wimpy treated in Viet Nam were awful, and so different from what he dealt with in his practice in Chicago that he seemed, he said, to be working in a different profession. He said that sometimes he just made up whole paradigms out of his head to provide structure for treatment—and sometimes, though there was never enough time available, his improvisations seemed to work. "You win a few," he said. "Though I imagine over the long haul that some of my busted-head bastards lost the band-aids I was putting on them and came all apart after they got home to Kaskaskia. Actually, I know that, because once I was contacted by a lawyer. Wanted me to give testimony. Insanity plea situation. Trial for a crime you'll sleep better for not knowing about."

Wimpy smiled and looked up. We were in a lake-front high-rise; the furniture was bright, low and comfortable, and there wasn't any clutter about, except near one corner, where Wimpy had a small littered desk and some books stacked on the floor nearby. He shrugged, shook himself the same old way. Fat sure enough jiggled. "Heh, heh, heh. Poor rutabagas, turnips, cabbages. Poor fruitcakes. All over the country now, guys pushing fifty, still bleeding and dopey because of that fucking war."

Sandy cleared her throat and said the sweet obvious thing I'm not good at saying: "That must have been hard on you, too."

"What was hardest on me was something that took just a fraction of a second." He paused, then waggled his head, side to side. Deciding, I guess. Then he shrugged and called, "Shirley!" He called into the kitchen, where his

professional-photographer wife—this was the girl of the dirty photos; I'm sure of it, even though she had been an ex-girlfriend back then, and though he had been married in-between—was doing something in the kitchen. Or kitchen-area—it shared a large stretch of the lakefront glass wall with the living-room, separated from it only by bright drapes. I liked that place, would have liked it even without the view.

"Come here, honey. I want you to hear something, I think."

Shirley, long and dark and thin, came carrying a tray of booze, mix and ice to put next to the hors d'oeuvres.

"You think?"

"Well, I told you someday I would tell you what got me in Viet Nam. Now is probably the time. Seeing Joel makes me want to spill it."

They—Wimpy's unit—were working at some safe base way away from the fighting. The standard-issue rifle of the early part of that war was the M 14. "Pretty good weapon, really. People used to say that any Army rifle was a joke to a real shooter, but that's not true of an M 14. It's a 30 caliber gun with an accurate range—I mean, so you could drop a standing man—of around 500 yards. At target distance, they're very sharp. Really uniform—that's what shooters look for. And they come with excellent sights.

"I found a soldier who had shot competitively. He and I fixed up a range and did some shooting together. Nice kid. I got an M 14 too, but mine was away—there were always such things going on in the Army—away with a guy in Saigon who had set up a gun-shop. He was re-tooling it for me: if you worked on a heavier barrel, you could make M 14s even better. But I would have had no trouble with the unmodified ones—been happy to shoot one in a meet.

"Anyhow, one hot, rainy day—no warning—all of a sudden our base wasn't safe anymore. We didn't know if we were cut off, or surrounded, or just being raided, but guys were screaming in pain, and shots were coming from all over, mortar rounds went off right next to the building where I was working—jeez! Surgeon friend of mine was killed in the first minute—shot down while he was cutting.

"After a time the shooting slowed. I think our kids had gotten organized and chased them away from the base proper, but there were still people potting at us from the scrubby fields off beyond the compound. The patient I had been treating had jumped for the door at the start. I saw that he had made it to a ditch, so I ran out, too, and jumped in to join him. "Ah, aaah, ah, aaah," he kept crying. "Ah, aaah, ah, aaah!" with his arms up over his head, writhing, a baby terrified and begging for his mommy to fix the world."

"Wimpy," said his wife. Her cool, unemotional manner, I now saw, reminded me of Mrs. Groginski. I mean his mom, since Shirley was "Mrs.

Groginski," too. Even now her voice was toneless. But she said, "Wimpy. No wonder it bothers you."

"It doesn't. I can talk about it—I could even write about it—without feeling much. Without feeling too much—I mean, intellectually I know what it was, but I can handle it. Maybe handle it even too coolly—that's a danger in doctoring."

Another set of shrugs and shakes. "Heh, heh. Then—next—we heard a lot of very intense shooting—I guess a firefight as our bunch got its act together. Then it tapered off. But my patient and I—somebody was after us personally. Single shots from somewhere, snicking into mud and weeds by our ditch. I don't know how long we lay there. The rain stopped and it got steamy-sunny. Snick. Bing. The sniper knew just where we were. Finally, a vehicle roared by on the road in front of the ditch, and I took off, figuring the sniper would shoot at it, not me. I got to cover behind a storage building and felt safer.

"There was a leg sticking around a corner of the building. "You OK?" I crawled over and touched it. It was a wounded soldier. Guy I knew by sight. I pulled him back behind the building. Throat wound. I yelled for help and began doing doctor things, the few things you can do without any equipment: you keep the airway open—crank the head backward, huh, to keep it open. You apply a little pressure to control bleeding. Know what? It was a buddy of my shooter friend.

"Help came! You impressed? I mean, this was a supply and medical facility, not in a fight zone, and we were hit by a sneak attack in some force, and somehow our guys were responding, improvising, whatever. And here came two guys with a stretcher. When they started off in a squatting trot towards the hospital, they had to pass across the field where the ditch was. I yelled to them not to. So they tried some other directions. They drew fire and stumbled back. The wounded kid was pretty bad, I couldn't fix him—yeah, I'm a M.D., remember, I cut and sew in a pinch—so the stretcher-bearers—don't ever believe our guys in "Nam were too scared or too stoned to be brave—so they took off across the bad field, fast.

"They hurt the kid, but he lived, you'll be glad to know."

"His M 14 was lying there. I fished it from around the corner of the storage building. Remember, I knew all about M 14s. Snick. Bing. Snick. Bing. The sniper was still shooting at my patient crying in the ditch, and I wasn't there to be Mommy anymore. Wasn't going to, either—it meant crawling across that goddam field.

"The building I was hiding behind stored harmless stuff—no explosives. A mortar round had moved part of its roof over where I was; that made a patch of shade, and I moved into the shadow. Hot, always hot there, and

steaming-humid. It was late afternoon; the wall itself was beginning to make some shade. I raised up and looked in through a jagged hole in the wall. There wasn't much building inside. "S funny—I had had a sense of security and solid protection behind a flimsy wall to a building that wasn't there any more. Must have been more than one round hit that sucker.

"Anyhow, I was in deep shade and could see the rough growth way out beyond the compound. I wondered whether I could see the sniper next time he shot at my patient. I hoped the wall and my being in shadow would keep him from noticing me.

"You see how different this was from what my patients had been telling me about combat, about sustained terror on patrols, then a few seconds of wild shooting, screaming, getting hit, spraying fast fire. Blinding fear. Reflex battle. Oogh! I heard men go incoherent trying to tell me what some specific locale had been like where they had been ambushed, or had made contact, or had tripped a trap. Oogh!

"But here I was doing the gimlet-eye thing, scanning back and forth. Then some of our guys all of a sudden jumped out from somewhere into the field, I think to set up a weapon of some sort. I yelled, "Watch out! There's a sniper~" I don't think they heard me. BONK! Bing. He hit some metal frame they were putting in place. They scattered. Bing. I spotted him. I took aim through the hole in the wall and shot. I saw him fall; he had been braced behind a half-cut tree, one of those whatchamacallits—they're like swamp trees.

"No. I don't feel like a drink. I just feel sick."

We were quiet for a while. Wimpy went on.

"So that's the thing that bothers me. Some guy, a tree, a good shooter, doing that awful job. My old job, you know?" Wimpy looked at me. "And I potted him. Heh, heh, heh." Shake, shrug, another shrug, jiggle, jiggle. "I mean, a target is a target, but I put a bullet into flesh. To help my patient, huh? Shit. I never—really never—had visualized using a rifle for that. Some poor guy who felt—who knows what he felt—what he thought he was doing.

"So-oo-oo. So. So, that's," shake, shudder, shrug, grin, jiggle, "Heh, heh. So that's all it is. Shirley, now you know."

Shirley sat upright, impassive.

"Had you been thinking it was some beautiful oriental babe I couldn't forget? Honey?"

Bony Shirley was as expressionless as ever, but after a bit her eyes began to leak big slow tears. She leaned over to the sandwich tray and fiddled with the end of one of the lox-in-pumpnickel hors d'oeuvres, bending it open and closing it. It made me think—associations are so nutty—of that awful photo Wimpy showed us thirty-odd years ago, of skinny Shirley, spraddle-legged, obscenely spreading her snatch.