

Uncle Walrus

by Michael Channing

"The thing about PEZ dispensers is the candy doesn't come out of their mouths. It comes out their necks." Pete tapped his Adam's apple. "That's not normal."

"So it would be normal if they spat the candy out of their mouths? Just—" Johnny stuck out his tongue and made a retching noise. "—vomited out a nice piece of cherry PEZ?"

"I'm not saying it would be normal. Just more realistic."

Three boys sat on beanbag chairs inside a clubhouse they built themselves. Warped plywood met at strange angles and dared adult physics to claim they couldn't remain standing. A stack of cinder blocks propped up one bowed wall and served as a display case for the boys' PEZ dispensers.

Johnny held up the dispenser he'd just bought that afternoon with the money they'd earned mowing lawns. "It's a freakin' clown head on a stick that gives you candy. Nothin's gonna make it more realistic."

"You don't get it. The mouth is a hole. There's no hole in the neck for candy to come out of. You rip off the clown's head and pull candy out its neck. It's just weird is all."

"You're the one that's weird."

"Hey, I'm not the one who buys the same stupid dispenser every time. Why do you always get the clown? What's wrong with Superman?"

"It's not the same one every time. There's different variations. And there's nothin' wrong with Superman. I just like Bozo."

"I told you, it's not Bozo."

"Yes it is."

"No it's not."

"Is."

"Not."

"Is infinity."

"Is not infinity plus one."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "Infinity plus one is infinity. Dummy."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is. I asked my dad. Infinity is everything. If you add one more to it, it's still everything."

"Yeah, well... it's still not Bozo, and you're still a weirdo for getting it."

Johnny cocked back his fist. Pete presented his shoulder, begging Johnny to strike. Because then he could counterstrike.

A whistle shrieked, and both boys put fingers in their ears. Kyle had blown the bright yellow whistle that topped his PEZ dispenser. "Red light," he said and held up his palm.

Pete and Johnny were too occupied trying to massage the ringing out of their ears to give him the pummeling he deserved.

"My uncle can blow smoke out his neck," Kyle announced.

"What? No way." Pete popped another Superman cherry PEZ into his mouth.

"Uh-huh. I've seen him do it. He takes a cigarette and smokes it, and he blows smoke rings out his neck."

"What, does he have like a hole in his neck?"

"Yep."

"That is so cool," Johnny said slowly, reverently.

"Can we see it?"

"He doesn't have a hole in his neck," Pete said, now reloading Superman with lemon candy.

"I'll show it to you," Kyle offered.

"No you won't. I'll bet you two dispensers you're lying through your teeth."

"All right."

"But not any of those whistles and trucks you always get. I'm not spending my money on that crap."

"Uh-huh. The bet is you buy me any two I want."

"And if you're wrong," Johnny said, "you have to buy him any two he wants."

"All right," Kyle said. "Is it a bet?"

Pete flicked Superman's head back and forth on its hinge, considering the terms.

"Go on, Pete," Johnny said. "Either he buys you two new ones, or you get to see a guy blow smoke out his neck."

"All right." Pete presented his hand, pinkie extended. Kyle hooked his pinkie into Pete's, and they bound the bet.

Pete and Johnny stood outside Kyle's uncle's trailer, waiting. A tired bloodhound looked blearily at the boys from the shade of a leaning pecan tree.

"What if he's telling the truth?" Johnny said.

"I promise you, the guy doesn't have a hole in his neck. He probably cut himself shaving, that's all."

"But what about the smoke rings? Kyle said he could blow smoke out the hole in his neck."

"Remember the first time I showed you guys that severed finger trick?" As a reminder, Pete performed the trick, seeming to remove the tip of his index finger, only to reveal that it was in fact his right thumb.

"Oh man, Kyle got so freaked out. He was gonna get you Band-Aids and ice. That was so freakin' funny."

"So his uncle musta done some stupid magic trick like that. My dad can make smoke come out his ear."

"Oh yeah. My dad does that, too, 'cept all he does is breathe into his fist then let it go next to his ear."

"There you go. But if Kyle saw that, he'd be like, 'Oh man, your dad's head is on fire. Call the doctor.'"

The boys broke down laughing.

The front door of the trailer squeaked open, and Kyle motioned to them from the dusty shadows.

"He wants us to come in," Johnny said. "What if it's real? Oh man."

"Either he's bluffing, or he's stupid." Pete strode toward to the front door and mounted the cinder block steps. Johnny followed slowly, hand at his throat, wondering.

"He's asleep," Kyle whispered. "Do you still wanna

see?"

The other two nodded.

"Then you gotta go quiet. Definite yellow light conditions."

The shag carpet crunched underfoot, and each step clouded up enough dust to fill an urn. This pathway of mummy shreddings drove drunkenly through piles of empty beer cans and crushed cigarette butts toward a Barcalounger island inhabited by a man wearing gray sweatpants and a stained Florida Gators t-shirt. Kyle's uncle. A man the others had seen once at a pig-picking Kyle's dad gave years ago. Back then, the man who now lay snoring talked loud and told jokes that had all the grownups laughing but didn't make any sense to the kids. He was fat then, but now if he fell asleep at the beach, someone was sure to try rolling him back into the ocean. A plastic tube poked out through a hole in his throat, just below the jut of his Adam's apple.

"Oh man," Johnny whispered. "That's the coolest thing I ever saw."

"Does food come out when he eats?" Pete said.

Kyle shook his head. "No. But sometimes spit does."

They bent over the sleeping man, eyes on the stump of plastic growing out of his gullet. Silence as the dust

they'd kicked up settled and the moment turned into another. Then the slow recognition of sound, a steady rhythmic whistling with the rise and fall of each labored breath.

Johnny leaned an ear over the pipe. "Oh my god. He's breathing from it."

Kyle nodded. "Yep. And he can blow smoke rings out it too. I told you, Pete. Now you owe me."

Pete shushed him. "It's like a snorkel." He pinched the man's nostrils shut, and the other boys flinched.

The whistling continued. Kyle and Johnny eased, now that the walrus wasn't going to flop awake and roll over.

"Get a mirror," Pete said.

"Why?" Johnny's voice grew even quieter.

"So we can hold it over the tube and watch it fog up. Like in Sherlock Holmes."

"Are you stupid?"

"No. Are you retarded? Get me a mirror."

Kyle and Johnny waded through the sea of garbage on the impossible quest for a mirror, the guy man behind them on the moldering Barcalounger not being up on his grooming, but they did find a most wonderful artifact. On the floor, half obscured by a crumpled Frito bag, was a magazine. And on the cover of that magazine: skin. Lovely tanned and

toned, oiled and naked, female skin. Johnny knelt, delicately pinched the cover with forefinger and thumb, and opened the magazine. Both boys had already had their thirteenth birthdays, but it wasn't till this instant that they became teenagers for real. A familiar yet alien urging rose from below the belt line. They hadn't yet figured what that particular tool was for, but this amazing piece of literature was giving them ideas.

"Pete," Johnny said, "this is cooler than a hole in the neck. This is even cooler than Bozo."

Kyle nodded. "You gotta see this, Pete. You gotta."

They turned to wave Pete over to see their find, just in time to witness him reaching out to the neck snorkel with a chalk-yellow PEZ between his fingers.

"Red light!" Kyle hissed. "Red light!" But Pete didn't stop. The candy block fit snugly into the tube. The flow of breathing took over and sucked it further down. And there it stopped.

Suspended in the clear tube, plugged it closed, unreachable, unmovable. The whistling breath was gone, replaced by the war drum rhythm of three fast and frightened hearts.

"Why did you do that?" Kyle's voice was high and squeaky.

"I don't know. I just did it."

"Is he gonna die?" Johnny said.

Pete looked at Kyle. Kyle looked at Johnny. They passed that terrified stare back and forth till it landed on the man in the chair. They listened for any sign of life, strained to hear deep through the layers of fat to the greasy heart within. A tight second of nothing. And another.

Pete pinched the breathing tube, which only sent the PEZ deeper.

"Oh man, oh man. You killed him." Johnny's face was white and slick with sweat.

The piles of cans and pizza boxes and Twinkies wrappers and God knew what other jetsam seemed to rise and curl over, ready to topple and and bury them in filth. The room was hot and full of dust, stinging their eyes, drying their tongues. The sunlight that managed to filter through the grubby windows seemed to slow and drop sluggishly to the floor, unable or unwilling to illuminate the entire space. Heavy shadows gathered on the boys' faces, giving them each the visage of a maniac.

And it was perhaps this mania that drove Johnny to do what he did.

He took a good, strong grip on the fat man's head,

feeling sweaty hair and unknown days worth of beard stubble, and tilted the chin back and up.

The man's eyelids rolled open. He heaved, and his massive chest lunged upward. The piece of candy shot out, thunked against the television tube, and skittered out of sight among the refuse.

Kyle's uncle sat up and jiggled like a thumped Jell-O mold. Frantic snake whisperings issued from the hole in his neck as his mouth formed soundless expressions of rage. Then a chubby finger closed over the open plastic tube. "— you doing? Get the hell out of my—" The rest was lost in a puff of air as he used both hands to hoist his bulk out of the chair.

The boys fled. Feet stumbled on crushed cans and pizza boxes and sent piles of rubbish sliding into the slough of matted carpet, fluffing up a dark and stinking fog of smoke, and erasing the path behind them. They ran into the bright outside and down the street past kids who peddled bikes and jumped sprinklers and didn't have a care in the world because they hadn't just nearly killed someone. They ran till pain sizzled in their stomachs. Panting, they collapsed in their clubhouse and waited for one of their fathers to find them. Then all their fathers would bring out belts they'd kept hanging for years in

closets, the leather oiled, buckles lovingly polished, and line the boys up against a wall and test the flex and flick of every strap.

But as time ticked by and their hearts settled back into comfortable nests, Kyle and Johnny resurfaced the experience of the magazine.

"It was like a comic book," Johnny said. "With naked girls in it."

"With like talk balloons and stuff?" Pete asked.

"Naw," said Kyle. "They weren't thinkin' nothin'."

"Then what were they doing?"

The other two smiled, and a faraway look came into their eyes.

A soft rap at the door. It was Johnny's mother. Pete thought of her secretly as Mrs. Half-and-half. Her body was nicely curved and packed into tight jeans and shirt, but her face was crevassed and red as an Indian burn, darkened here and there by splotches of sun poisoning. "Boys?" she said in a voice like tires over gravel, "Kyle's uncle told everybody what you did."

Three digestive systems prepared to evacuate, unsure which exit to take.

"You're heroes!" She gathered them all into a bouncy hug. "He told everybody how he was choking in his sleep,

and you guys came and saved him. I'm so proud of you."

She pinched Johnny's cheek hard enough to leave a mark red as those on her own face. "He wanted me to tell you he's sorry for yelling at you when he did. He didn't realize until he calmed down what you did for him." Another group hug. Pete was at once excited by the swell of her breasts and disgusted by the stench of dead cigarettes. "He really wants to thank you guys, so he's gonna take you out tomorrow and buy you guys whatever you want. Oh I'm so proud." One more gross and interesting hug, then she left.

"Oh man," Johnny said, "you really think he's gonna buy us anything we want?"

"Why not?" said Pete. "We saved his life."

Johnny was too lost in possibilities to question the validity of Pete's assertion. "Oh man, we could get new bikes. And skateboards. And fishing poles."

"Guys, red light. My uncle doesn't have that much money."

"Oh yeah." Whatever else might be hiding under those stacks of trash, it sure wasn't gold bars.

"What about PEZ?" Pete was looking at all the empty cubbies in the cinder block shelf.

"Even better," said Johnny, "we could get some of those magazines."

"Where there really naked girls in it?"

"Uh-huh. But I don't know if you should look at 'em. You might go crazy. I saw you touch my mom's boob when she hugged us."

"I did not."

"You did, too."

"Not."

"Did."

"Hey, guys," Kyle said. "My sister's best friend'll show us her boobs for five dollars."

"Really?" said Pete.

"Really?" said Johnny.

"Uh-huh."

"Maybe," Pete said slowly, "your uncle can just give us cash."