

all the young fellas are linin' up

Chris Orcutt

P.F. and I had just returned from a beer run and parked the Mirada in the shady dirt under a wall of sumac behind his grandmother's house. P.F.'s grandmother, June, was kneeling on a pillow in her rose garden, picking out the weeds and aerating the soil with a hand-held Garden Weasel, one of those rolling things with spikes on the end that resembles a medieval torture device. She wore a giant straw hat on her head the size of a UFO, and it cast a long shadow across the lawn.

"Shit, it's June," I said.

"We'll have to leave the beer here until she's gone," P.F. said.

"It better not skunk."

"It won't," he said. "Come on, let's get it over with."

June was a tough old woman who'd survived the Great Depression, the death of two husbands, and lymphatic cancer. As a result, she had little patience for spineless slackers, which pretty much described me and P.F. at the time. Also, at 88 she knew she had limited time left and therefore spared no feelings when she spoke with you. In short, she didn't give a shit what anyone thought of her; she had nothing left to prove, and with no friends still alive, she wasn't worried about offending anyone.

We were halfway up the back steps to our apartment when she called to us from the garden. Pretending we couldn't hear her was an option; however, the difference between June and other old people was that she would remember the slight.

"Yeah, June?" P.F. said.

"Come on down here, boys," she said. "I want to see you."

"Here we go," I said.

P.F. led the way, his lanky body rolling down the stairs and loping across the lawn to her. He bent down and kissed her on the cheek, her hat brim scraping his head as he stood up.

"Hi, June," I said.

"You're gaining weight, Alex," she said. "Drinking too much

beer."

"It's good, though," P.F. said.

"Back in '28, I went with a boy who liked the brew," she said, digging the Garden Weasel into an untouched section of soil. "Got fatter than the Michelin Man. Died of cirrhosis in thirty-nine. A shame."

"Need us to do something for you, June?" P.F. asked.

"You could paint the porch, but you won't," she said. "Are you two working now or what?"

"Sort of," P.F. said.

"Well, are you or aren't you?"

"I am," I said, semi-proudly.

"Doing what?"

"Radio Shack. Selling computers."

"Can't pay much."

"It's okay," I said. "I'm writing a book, too."

"Got a publisher?"

"No."

"Then who the hell are you writing for? No one's going to read it."

"They might," I said. "Anyway, it's more for me than anyone else."

June's face tightened, smoothing the deep creases in her skin and hinting at the beauty she must have been sixty-five years earlier.

"What about you?" she said to her grandson, as if she'd never met him.

"Not working right now, June," he said. "I'm probably going back to school."

"School? You just got four years of that. To do what?"

"Zymurgy," P.F. said, and by the way he said it, I could tell he was hoping she'd think it was something responsible, like engineering or medicine.

"What the hell is that?"

"Well, it's a science," P.F. said. "It's brewing."

"Making beer?" she said. "You're going back to school to do

that? You can make beer right in the basement. Don't need another degree."

"I know," he said, "but I like it. It's what I really want to do."

June's head began to shake, but I couldn't tell if she was displeased with her grandson's life or if it was her mild case of Parkinson's acting up. Finished with her weeding, she latched onto my arm like it was a metal railing and hauled herself up. From her pocket she produced a pair of clippers and snipped off two American Beauties that were leaning into the yard. She put the roses in a basket with the pillow and her other tools and started toward the door with us.

"Your brother Billy's doing well," she said, taking P.F.'s arm. "Maybe he can get you a job with the shtate."

June meant "the state," but for some reason anytime she brought up the New York State Department of Transportation, she added the extra "sh" sound, as if any other way of referring to the illustrious bureaucracy denigrated it. As a product of F.D.R.'s New Deal, June, like most people her age, had a tendency to revere government agencies. A framed photo of a vigorous, pre-war F.D.R. hung above the vanity in her bedroom.

"Billy's married and everything, June," P.F. said in his defense. "He likes it. I don't."

"I drove by the office in Poughkeepsie yesterday," she said. "They're hiring a lot of people. All the young fellas are linin' up. You boys should go down there, put in an application."

"Maybe we will," P.F. said.

We helped June up the steps and opened the door for her. She tossed the dirty pillow on the porch, nodded at the old Frigidaire with the big handle.

"Apple pie in there for you two," she said. "Baked it yesterday."

"Thanks, June," I said.

"Yeah, thanks," P.F. said.

She slipped inside and closed the door. I heard her air conditioner switch on and knew she was going in for a nap. We retrieved the beer from the car – our hand-selected twelve-bottle fun packs – and felt the bottles. They were still cold, thank God. Upstairs, P.F. popped the tops off two of the Dock Street Bohemian Pilsners, put the rest in the refrigerator, and we

drank.

"June's all right, isn't she?" he said.

"Tough old lady."

"She just wants us to do better, right?"

"Yup."

We shambled into the living room and sprawled out on the futon. P.F. brought the idiot box to life. A bikini party was on MTV, and we settled back to watch the show.

"So, you going down to the 'shtate' tomorrow?" I asked. "Gonna line up with the fellas?" I took another long swig of the Pilsner.

P.F. matched my swig and belched, "Nope."

"Me neither," I said.