



GEMMA

by Aimee Parkison

THE first time Gemma tells me my mother is a criminal, I only stare. Standing eyelevel to Gemma's chest, I keep thanking my lucky stars. Gemma doesn't like to wear clothes, since we have no air conditioning and aren't allowed to open windows, even in summer. Most of us hiding in the painted lady would do anything to squeeze her perfectly shaped areolas the size of salad plates. They're so big and pink, strikingly, earth goddess in their magnetism, drawing us toward her like planets in gravitational pull. Whenever she wants to control me and the boys and Mother's renters, who sleep in stacked bunkbeds honeycombed with strangers, she removes her blouse and bra. She skates topless while blowing bubble gum. No one can

take their eyes off Gemma, the skating goddess. I've seen boys tremble in her presence, as if they have seen the face of god in this, the year of Atari, 1978.

Gemma is the best babysitter I've ever had. She's better than the boys who live on Haight Street and whisper about the old elevator. I'm the elevator repairman. I'm fourteen years old, and no one understands forgotten elevators like I do. They are tunnels and death traps. They are history and architecture. The one in our painted lady is an intimate part of her, long abandoned. I know its pulls, its wires and mechanisms, the ropes of its cage. I know primitive mechanized anatomy and can take it apart and put it back together, though I have some trouble understanding how to relate to kids my age. I'm just beginning to understand what I am and how I feel about Gemma. She calls me a boy, but mother says I'm a girl. I prove to them I'm a man by fixing the broken elevator.

I do everything Gemma tells me to do, including repairing the elevator in the locked closet of her room. At first, it's just a game. No one even knew the elevator was there, until I found it by jimmying the lock. Mother tells us to leave the elevator alone, that it's broken and dangerous, that it will never run again.

I obey Gemma's every command. When she orders me to repair the elevator, this keeps me entertained. My mother is too busy evicting bad renters to pay attention to me. Now that Father has gone away, Mother is so busy, trying to keep us clothed and fed. I get bored easy, unless I'm with Gemma. I love Gemma, but she doesn't love me.

She's eighteen, a queen, roller skating topless in the giant house's twisted little rooms. I'm only useful and interesting to her when I get the elevator running.



Architecture holds mysteries. Old elevators are often forgotten like dreams. Perhaps only squatters and architects understand houses have lives and can be kidnapped and abused by tyrants. Buildings have memories and personalities. Painted ladies, the grand dames of San Francisco, have had so many lovers that this house on Haight Street has been bought and sold, stolen and repossessed, more than anyone knows.

I want to go back to find Gemma. That's why I keep telling this story.

I long to go back to 1978 to be with her.

Inside the painted lady, Gemma balances on a mountain of crocheted psychedelic pill-shaped pillows on her bed-shaped throne while playing Simon in the nude. Following the pattern of lights and sounds, she wins by losing herself in the game of electric lights, dancing blue, yellow, red, and green rapidly over her large pale pear-shaped breasts. Simon's tones, always harmonic, no matter the sequence, consist of an A major triad in second inversion, resembling a trumpet fanfare:

E-note (blue, lower right);

C # -note (yellow, lower left);

A-note (red, upper right);

E-note (green, upper left, an octave lower than blue, the sound of my child voice when I start to whimper, wanting Gemma's attention).

Like all the rooms in Mother's house, Gemma's room narrows to odd angles. The windows don't look out onto the outside world but onto other rooms and brick walls. It's as if someone has built a little house inside a big house. How could a house look so grand and large on the outside but feel so small and cramped on the inside? How could the windows on the outside not be here on the inside? I'm always wondering, trying to gaze through the windows at slivers where angled walls tamper. Glimpsing

through darkness, I wonder if bats are sleeping inside a cavern within the old house, between walls.

Gemma catches me gazing out the windows and says, “Don’t do that.”



I hold my breath and turn off all the lights to sit in darkness, until I force myself to remember Gemma likes *The Muppet Show*, *Rockford Files*, and *Three’s Company*. A crooked picture of Jimmy Carter hangs over the mantel in the den. My favorite game is Hungry, Hungry Hippos, but the game breaks soon after I take it from the box. I start to play other games, dangerous games, not like Hippos, but games like Slave and Elevator, games we make up in the house on Haight Street in the year of Atari when a dozen eggs costs 48 cents. Everyone has just started to play Space Invaders. Women are wearing smocked dresses with wedge boots or ballerina flats, and children don puppet mittens on chilly mornings. Gemma has braces and cocaine. Even though she’s just a girl, she’s the only person I know who inspires boys to stop playing Space Invaders. Gemma

keeps secrets. One day, she says, she will be the reason Jimmy Buffet stops drinking margaritas. I believe her.

Gemma says outrageous things like Marlon Brando and Richard Pryor are lovers and Michael Jackson steals his dances and his songs.

Gemma gives me vague warnings about the elevator but won't tell me why.



I close my eyes. She's eighteen. That's why she's in charge of me, since I'm only fourteen, but I don't know why she's in charge of other boys, some of them older than she.

Mother doesn't know.

Mother has enough problems without worrying about us.

In Mother's house, Gemma pays rent by caring for me. Her bedroom walls are painted the color of Pepto-Bismol. Her blankets and curtains are the green of oak leaves in summer. Gemma adores pickles and sunflower seeds and boys with long hair. In spite of her mammoth breasts, she's slender with long legs and delicate toenails painted the color of the sky.

She invites boys in through the elevator, one by one, and presents them to me as if they are exotic pets or works of art. Kiss him, she says, and I do. One after another after another after another. The boys must do as she says in her room, where they can't make a sound.

When the first boy arrives by elevator, she tells him to stand beside the closet. And he does. When he talks, she tells him to shut up, and he does. This silent boy stares at her, waiting.

“Shut up,” she says. “Shut up.”

He's a sweet boy with a round face soft like dough. His light blue eyes sparkle, and we laugh because he's obeying Gemma's every command so well like Simon Says but Gemma Says. On his third visit, he goes off script and starts talking about The Man. “The Man,” the boy says, “is angry. The Man is waiting in the garage.”

“Where?” asks Gemma.

“At the bottom of the elevator.”

“What?” Gemma asks, looking at me, as if I've betrayed our secret. While it's true that I'm the one who found the elevator and learned how to use it, I never told anyone but Gemma, Mother, and Gemma's boys. The

old elevator leads to the garage, full of junk and locked from the outside. Boys enter through a broken window but never men.

I pry open the old doors and bait the switch, the latch, the chain, and the buttons. The elevator groans down, down, down to the dank little garage crammed with junk, in back of the building, where Mother and her tenants enter the painted lady.

Gemma and I wait in her room with the first boy, laughing, as the elevator chimes. The elevator ascends, creaking, rising slowly toward us. The doors shutter open onto a man older than Mother. Wearing a tailored suit, he impresses me with his shiny black shoes and well-groomed reddish mustache, a shade darker than his short, white hair, combed into ducktails shadowing generous sideburns.

“Who are you?” asks Gemma.

“I’m Mr. Manchild. I own this property.”

“What?” I ask. “This is my mother’s house.”

“No. You all aren’t supposed to be here.”

“What?” I ask.

Mr. Manchild winks as he says to the boy, “Get back inside that elevator.”

The boy gazes softly into my eyes as the elevator doors close on him.

“What do you call this place?” Mr. Manchild asks, stroking his upper lip.

“Home,” I say.

Gemma starts laughing with him.

That’s when certain things start to make sense—why we never use the front door, why we have no mailbox, why Mother says for us not to be seen going in and out of the house. I always believed her, when she said it was ours. Now, I know better.

“It’s not my fault,” Gemma says.

It’s already too late. Mr. Manchild is inspecting all the little halls and rooms. “A warren,” he says. “I never even knew this part of the house existed. Your mother is quite the clever architect.” He smiles at Gemma. “Of course, I won’t be pressing charges, since Gemma has enjoyed your little game.”

I wonder how long Gemma has known that Mother and I aren’t supposed to be here. Was she just playing more games?

Mother is asleep now in her bed on the storage room’s hardwood floor.

When Mother wakes in her makeshift bed of nesting blankets, she seems terrified to see Mr. Manchild. “All right, all right,” she says. “The police won’t be necessary. Just give us a chance to get our things?”

“Five minutes,” Mr. Manchild says.

“Honey,” Mother turns to me, “hurry. Get all your school clothes and little things—as many as you can carry, all in bags. Hurry!”

Mr. Manchild places his hand on his hip, inside his coat, and I notice a gun holstered. Gemma is smiling too much. Her stupid silly grin is the last I’ll ever see of her face.

It’s the last thing I remember of 1978.

One minute it’s 1978, and I’m repairing and then dismantling the old elevator in Gemma’s room in the house on Haight Street.

One minute it’s 1978, and suddenly everything is changing. In the year of Atari, the last year we will live in the house on Haight Street, we are being evicted by a man with a gun.

Days later, after we have been forced out and are still terrified of invasion, Mother and I discover Mr. Manchild isn’t the real owner of the painted lady. We confront the real owners at the front door. The elderly

couple, rather well-to-do, assure us they have no idea who Mr. Manchild is and have never heard of him or Gemma.

I remember Gemma that night Mother and I were forced out, so cruelly.

I recall it as a dual event like the tarot teaches, a death card bringing life as the painted lady is about to give birth to us.

Mother and I have gone out of the painted lady and into the world, far away, her children, slowly becoming strangers to each other as we grow stranger in time. Time changes us into people our old selves might hardly recognize. Time evicts us from our old lives.

Although Mother and I eventually move on to a cheaper city called Tulsa, Gemma appears only in missing posters that slowly fade away and disintegrate in rain. Gemma's never found.

I have no idea what really happened to Gemma. If anyone asks my opinion, I say Gemma never left the house that night. She's still there, somewhere inside a part of the house no one has access to anymore, a part of the house where it's still 1978.

In my mind, she's still skating, and she's in charge of me and so many others.

Seems strange. Sure. One girl. A teenage girl controlling so many people, even for a short time. One girl who has braces, refuses to wear bras but roller skates nude through a house where she doesn't belong. Over time, I've come to understand her power. The more vulnerable she makes herself, the less control anyone has over her.

At least that's what I think every time I remember. In my mind's eye, she's still safe and skating.

I loved her.

I love her still.

I'm not ashamed to admit it now.

I was in 1978.

Now I'm in 2019, inside the walls in these long narrow hallways, where I hear a sound like skates rolling over hardwoods.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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