

## **"ROY FLINT, CIRCA 1988"**

*Jen Conley*

Roy Flint had just pulled his car up to the store front and turned off the radio when he heard a scream. As he got out of his car and stood up, he could see a large guy pinning his girlfriend up against his van. His hand was on her neck. It was after nine at night and the only light came from some of the long fluorescent bulbs in the overhang of the strip mall. Roy walked towards the van, hearing the tense whimpers coming from the girlfriend. Suddenly, the guy pulled his arm back and swung it forward, whacking her in the face with his open hand. She cried out but he pulled her toward him and went to hit her again.

Roy jumped on his back and yanked at his arms. He felt the solid weight of thick limbs and a strong back as the guy arched and swung around to face his intruder. Roy was wiry, lean and quick, but no match for this hulking monster. Roy jumped back but then lunged at him again, only to be thrown against the van and punched in the face. Stunned, Roy slipped to the ground, dizziness and nausea overtaking him. Then the girlfriend kicked him. "Don't touch my boyfriend!" she screamed. Roy looked up and saw two and three visions of her angry face before she disappeared and the van raced away.

"Isn't that always the way," someone said, bending down. "You finally come to the aid of a damsel in distress, and what does the bitch do? She kicks you to the curb!"

Roy held his nose and felt wetness. "Shit!" he said.

"And now your nose is bleeding." It was Darren (Dandy-Darren is what they called him in school) who worked two doors down at the Hallmark card store, which he had just closed up for the night. Darren held out his hand. "Come on. Let me help you inside."

Inside Vinny's Pizza, where Roy worked, Vinny appeared from the back kitchen. He threw Roy a wet rag and told him to go to the bathroom. "You're lucky it's a slow fucking night," he said to Roy. "There's a lull in my delivery calls."

In the bathroom, Roy tilted his head back and held the wet rag on his nose. His older brother, Jesse, always told him to never get caught up in someone else's business. "It won't ever do you no good. Nobody's ever thankful."

When the bleeding stopped, Roy walked out of the bathroom and found Darren sitting in his usual seat—the middle red booth near the wall, right under the framed photo of The Leaning Tower of Pisa. He was eating a slice of pizza and drinking an orange soda. Roy grabbed a Coke out of the cooler, sat down in another red booth and

lit a cigarette.

Roy knew Darren was gay. It had been obvious for years, all the way back to the third grade when he just was a little too neat and a little too delicate. Over time, he turned into a great gossip and the girls loved him, giggling with him in the halls of the high school and running to him when something unbelievable happened. Darren was going to leave this dump of a New Jersey town and live in New York City, he told everyone. That's where it was all happening, up in New York. "Think about it—all the news, all the fashion, television, everything happens there. It's the center of the world." Roy thought that if Darren cared so much about gossip, then the center of the world was probably the best place for him. That's why seeing Darren in Vinny's Pizza night after night—a year after graduating high school—always seemed a bit on the strange side.

"How's the nose?" Darren asked, wiping his fingers with a napkin.

Roy shrugged. "Just peachy."

Darren nodded.

A few minutes later Roy's girlfriend, Camille, walked in with Michelle Mazzoitti and Darlene Mahoney. They were all dressed in colorful short tube skirts and oversized shirts with heavy padding in the shoulders. Their high heels clicked against the linoleum floor of the pizza parlor and the sweet smell of hairspray from their wildly teased hair spread through the air like a thick haze of an insect fogger.

"Hey sweetie!" Camille said. In a second she added: "Holy shit! What happened?"

Michelle and Darlene gasped and fluttered after Camille.

"Your boyfriend's on the crack pipe these days!" Vinny yelled from across the counter. "Stupid fucking jerk. I got a business to run. I can't have fights and bloody noses around my establishment."

Roy took a drag on his cigarette, squinting his eyes from the smoke.

Michelle looked at Darren. "Did you see this?"

Darren nodded. "I saw the whole thing. This huge beast of a male was beating on his girlfriend and Roy jumped in and tried to defend her honor."

Michelle and Darlene smiled. "Ooooh. How sweet."

"She kicked me," Roy explained.

Vinny laughed. "Never get involved in a domestic. Cardinal rule."

Roy shook his head and then looked at Camille. She wasn't smiling. "Did you know her?" she asked.

Roy shrugged. "Never seen her before."

"You've never seen her but you care enough to jump in on her and her boyfriend?" Her arms were crossed along her chest and her fingers were ticking, long pink nails fluttering under the lights.

Roy sighed. "Don't start, Camille."

Michelle grabbed a cigarette from Roy's pack and lit it. "We're going down to Seaside. It's Ladies Night at the Bamboo. Wanna come?" Then she turned to Darren. "How about you?"

Darren shook his head and leaned back in the red booth. "No, but thanks."

Camille looked at Roy. "You're not coming anyhow. Your face looks like shit." Then she marched out of the pizza parlor. Darlene shook her head in bewilderment and then followed after her.

Michelle sighed. "It's probably menstrual," she explained to Roy before leaving, the glass door swinging shut behind her. Within a minute, the flash of headlights swung across the pizza parlor's windows and the screech of tires pierced through everyone's ears. The telephone rang. A moment later, a paper airplane landed right in front of Roy's can of Coke. Vinny laughed. "Yo, Rocky—delivery!"

It was almost ten-thirty when Roy got back from the delivery. Vinny was closing up for the night a little early because he was off to see his mistress, as he called her. "I gotta be careful," he was always saying to Roy. "Her husband's a state trooper."

"Doesn't that make you her mistress if she's married?" Roy would ask.

"No, it makes me her lover," Vinny would say.

Vinny handed Roy a pizza box. "One last one—over on Chestnut. You can—will—give me the cash tomorrow."

Roy nodded and took the box. "Give the woman a kiss for me."

Vinny grinned, simulating a gyrating act, before disappearing into the back kitchen.

In the car, Roy passed Darren walking towards the railroad tracks just as rain started to knock against his windshield. "Shit," he groaned. So he turned the car around and pulled up alongside Darren. "You need a ride home?" he yelled.

Darren shrugged. "I live far."

Roy shook his head. "It's raining. Don't matter."

Darren got into the car and rode with Roy to deliver the pizza before they headed out of town, driving along the road that ran parallel to the railroad tracks.

Darren lived in a neighborhood about two miles away from town. When Roy and Jesse were younger, before they had cars, they would use the railroad tracks to get to that neighborhood to visit and hang out with friends. They would walk along quietly, lobbing over the railroad ties, looking through the scrub pine trees as they went, searching for a red fox or a whitetail deer to spot. Most of the time, they just

saw some beady-eyed opossum waddling along the pine needles or a batch of dragonflies buzzing over the rails. Now and then one of the old trains carrying gravel and sand from the mines would rattle by, eight or ten quarry cars wobbling behind, slow enough to jump on and catch a ride.

"My brother, Josh, usually picks me up but lately he's been getting neglectful—seeing some girl lately. I don't know." Darren said.

Roy nodded and lit a cigarette, cracking the window a bit to let the smoke slide out of the car. Darren spoke for most of the ride, talking about his brother using a fake address to attend another high school, one with a winning football team. "My dad just couldn't handle the embarrassing losses from our high school's team. Josh's got a real chance at getting a scholarship to somewhere decent." Then Darren laughed. "But my dad didn't bet on Josh getting this girlfriend. She's a bit of a diversion."

Roy drew on his cigarette. All through high school, Jesse told him over and over again to get a job after school, not play football. "Get yourself started early," he advised. "That way, when you finish high school, you have a something all ready for you." But Roy didn't want to do roofing work like his brother. Roy wanted something better, anyway, something more steady, more predictable, something that could get him a mortgage on a house or at least a truck loan. He himself was waiting for a job in the phone company. One of his aunt's boyfriends worked there. Roy figured if he could get in the phone company he could buy himself a truck, save up for a house, and then marry Camille. It was a good plan, but he had to get into the phone company first.

Roy's nose wasn't broken. It stayed a little swollen for a day or two, but by the end of the week, you'd never know he had been punched. Camille apologized for getting so upset. She said that sometimes she just got jealous and all. It was a girl thing. Roy brushed it off and told her not to worry about it. Then he took her down to his basement room—the one he had taken from Jesse when he had moved into an old rented house with his new girlfriend Lori—and they made up on his bed. When they finished, she got up to watch t.v. in the small den outside his room. Roy put his hands behind his head and sighed. Ten minutes later, Camille was back, standing over him and pushing his arm. "I'm not hanging around here all day. Why does it smell like cat pee down here?"

Roy sat up. "It's dog pee. Jesse got a puppy before he moved out."

Camille rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "It's damp down here. Can't we go somewhere else?"

So Roy took her to the mall.

A week later, Roy saw Darren walking down the road toward the railroad tracks again. So he picked him up and drove him home. Darren talked some more about his brother's girlfriend and the fight his brother and his dad had because his brother was late coming home the other night—he had a game the next day. "He's such an idiot, my brother."

The next time Roy saw Darren, it was in the pizza parlor. "If your brother don't show up, I'll take you home." And so it went for the rest of football season.

One night, Roy asked Darren when he was moving to New York City. "That's what you were always saying in school."

Darren nodded and stared out the car window, looking as they drove by endless acres of scrub pine trees. "I'm saving up for my move." He was quiet for another moment before adding: "Because once I'm gone, I can't come back, you know. To all of this." Then he gestured in the air as a deer darted across the dark road. Roy swerved and then caught the car so it righted again. It was a quick move.

When they got to his house, Darren thanked Roy and got out of the car. Someone opened the front door—his mom, Roy guessed. Roy waved to her but she didn't wave back. He didn't think anything of it and drove away.

At home, he found Jesse sitting in his room, fooling around with his puppy—now almost a full grown Labrador. The dog yelped and rolled on the floor as Jesse played with him. There was an open cardboard box on the chair and it was overflowing with two deer racks, some tape cassettes, a couple of rolled up posters, and a framed picture of their mother. She had died years earlier, when Roy was eleven and Jesse was thirteen.

"I'm getting married to Lori," he said, standing up and pushing his dark hair out of his eyes.

Roy leaned on the dresser. He felt the room whirl a bit as he absorbed Jesse's announcement. Finally he asked: "When?"

"Not for another year. But it will be a real wedding with a church and reception—you can be the best man."

Roy thought about this for a moment. The two of them had been living with their grandmother and aunts ever since their mother had died of breast cancer. They hadn't seen their father in years. "You haven't even been seeing Lori that long. You sure about this?"

Jesse shrugged, pulling a tin of Skoal out of his back jeans pocket.

"It's what I want."

Roy lit a cigarette and nodded, trying to pretend the news didn't bother him one way or another. But the truth was that he felt let down, hurt. Roy had always been sure the thing with Lori wouldn't last long, never mind marriage. He even thought that maybe Jesse would move back into their grandmother's house and they could hang out for a couple of more years. Roy remembered when their mother died, it was Jesse who bawled and punched the walls. Roy sat on the chair and watched him until Jesse's knuckles were raw and cut up, and then Jesse sat down next to Roy and told him it was okay if he wanted to cry. "Guys aren't supposed to cry but if your mother dies, nobody's gonna give you any shit about it." Roy didn't cry then, but two days later, at the funeral, tears fell and fell from his eyes and it was Jesse who put his arm around him and held him up.

Later, before he left, Jesse warned Roy about driving Darren home. "The boy is gay as a three dollar bill."



Roy did wonder about Darren and his three dollar bill weirdness. Not that Roy had any interest in Darren romantically—in fact, when he thought about it, he became repulsed, which made him feel a lot better. “I can’t be gay then,” he said to himself out loud. But despite that weirdness, Roy didn’t mind driving Darren home. He liked the guy. He liked the way Darren chattered and the way he seemed to appreciate the ride. He liked the way he talked about the apartment he was going to get in Greenwich Village. “I might have to share with someone. But who cares, it’s New York, right?” And then he would go on about some stores or clubs he read about—places where celebrities went and where he was going to go. Roy never had anything to add to the conversations but it was something different to listen to, something he wasn’t really familiar with, having only seen New York City from the Statue of Liberty (a Boy Scout trip when he was twelve) and on the eleven o’clock channel four news his grandmother fell asleep to on the couch every night.

Once, Darren asked Vinny about Greenwich Village. Vinny, who still had family up in Staten Island, had a lot of strong opinions on AIDS and homosexuals. “I get uncomfortable in that area of Manhattan,” he explained. “So it’s not a place I gravitate to, you see, and therefore, this makes me unfamiliar with its landmarks.” Later, in the back, Vinny nudged Roy. “You and him got a thing going on?”

“Fuck you,” Roy snapped. Later, he told Darren he was sick and said he’d have to get another ride home. Darren smirked. “No problem. I’ll call a taxi.”

Of course, Darren walked home. There were no taxi cab companies within a fifteen mile radius.

It was also the last week in November and it had gotten cold.

One night, after returning from a delivery, Roy found Camille’s white car sitting outside Vinny’s Pizza. When he looked through the glass windows, he saw Darren sitting in his usual spot, eating his slice and flipping through a magazine. He saw Camille walking out of the back kitchen, her head down. She wiped her mouth and went into the bathroom. A moment later, Vinny flounced out from the back, fidgeting with the tie of his white pants. Roy backed away from the door and waited off to the side, staring up at the long, white florescent bulbs in the overhang. They made buzzing noises that seemed to grow louder in volume. His stomach tightened and rage overwhelmed him. He wanted to go in there and go off on her, but then he started to think maybe he had it wrong. Maybe it was a misunderstanding. If he accused her of anything then he’d have to back it up—he’d have to confront Vinny and that would be the end of his job. Roy knew

there weren't many opportunities around town for someone like him—McDonald's or Burger King, maybe. His grandmother needed the rent money from Roy or she'd have to take on more cleaning jobs, which wouldn't be fair. And until the phone company came through, he couldn't misread a situation and then get all crazy-mad about it. What if he was wrong? Camille wouldn't do that to him. He'd taken care of her. He'd given her money to fix her car. He bought her three gold necklaces and a bracelet. This was all a misunderstanding, he told himself again. *Nothing happened, nothing happened.* Roy counted slowly to thirty and then took a deep breath before he opened the glass door.

Now Vinny was in the front, pulling a pie out of the oven and Camille was sitting, sipping at a soda. She jumped up when she saw Roy. "Hey babe! Darlene's having a party."

Roy half-smiled at her and walked up to the counter. He dumped some money in front of Vinny. "Any more to go out?"

Vinny shrugged and gestured to the pie he was boxing up. "Just this one. And I'm closing early, so I'll take it over. It's a friend of mine." He winked at Roy and then nodded his head to Camille. "Take your lady to the party. She's all dressed up."

Roy looked at his girlfriend. Indeed she was. Tight red pants, white sweater, red heels, lipstick just applied, some of it stuck on her teeth.

"Let me go home first and take a shower," Roy said to her. "So you go ahead. I'll meet you there."

Camille folded her arms and sighed. "I always have to wait for you."

This irritated Roy. "What?" he snapped. "I want a shower. I don't want to stink like shitty pizza."

Vinny yelled at him. "Hey! Watch it, fuckface!"

Suddenly, Roy wanted to jump over the counter and tackle Vinny to the floor. He saw himself doing it, Vinny taken by surprise.

But he did nothing except stare at his girlfriend for a long moment. "What?" she finally said.

He shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Do me a favor—give Darren a ride home." Darren lived a few blocks from Darlene.

Camille was annoyed. She looked at Darren. "Do you want to come to the party?"

Darren smiled. "Sounds like a gas."

Roy went home and took a shower. Then he sat down on the couch and watched the eleven o'clock news from New York with his grandmother.

A few days later, Roy found Jesse in the backyard shed, looking for some tools to fix his car. "Lori and me ran into your gay buddy Darren

the other day," he said.

Roy pulled out a cigarette but Jesse chased him outside. "Grandma's got a gas can in here for the lawn mower. What the hell are you trying to do, blow me up?"

Roy stepped outside and sat under a crooked pine tree—it leaned towards the shed as if it were going to crash against it. Dead, copper-colored pine needles littered the ground.

When Jesse emerged from the shed holding a metal tool box, he continued. "So, as I was saying, Lori and me ran into your buddy."

"Gay buddy," Roy said, lighting up his cigarette.

"Yeah," Jesse nodded, putting the tool box on the ground and then bending down to open it. He rummaged through it, the silver tools clanging and clinging against each other and against the metal box. "Listen," Jesse finally looked over at Roy, pulling a wrench out. "When I saw Darren, I thought to myself, he just ain't fitting in around here. Not that you always gotta fit in with all the backwards idiots around here, but Darren just sticks out, you know?" Jesse twirled the wrench in his hand. "And then I thought, it can't be easy for my brother to have a buddy that just don't fit in."

Roy flicked a lit cigarette ash on the ground. It landed on a pine needle, igniting it. Roy watched as the needle swelled red and then fizzled to black. A touch of gray smoke twisted up from the ground. Jesse shook his head.

"And what did your future bride say?" Roy asked. "What were her observations?"

Jesse sighed and then chuckled. "Lori? Well, she just thinks he's gonna try something on you. Catch you off guard—put you in an uncomfortable situation."

Roy nodded and then took a drag of his cigarette, leaning his head back against the tree. The sky was heavy and thick with overcast, brooding clouds. "He's just a friend I drive home because he doesn't have a car."

Jesse closed the tool box and stood up. "Fair enough."

"Besides, one of these days soon," Roy said, "Darren's gonna move to New York City."

Jesse nodded and pointed the wrench at Roy. "Now that's a good future plan for that boy."

It was a week before Christmas when Darren got out of Roy's car to find two cardboard boxes of his things on the small concrete step in front of his house. Roy had driven him home, small bits of ice falling from the sky and hitting the car as they went along the slippery roads.

Roy was just about to pull away when he noticed that Darren had

stopped in front of the boxes. So he put the car in park and got out, ice nicking his face, hissing as it fell on tree branches.

He walked up to the house and saw that the boxes were filled with what looked like clothes and books, but it was dark and the Christmas lights had been turned out. Roy bent down and grabbed one of the boxes and told Darren to get the other one. On the ride back to Roy's house, Darren revealed that his mother had caught him kissing some guy he had met at Darlene's party. "I brought him back to my house and we snuck into the garage because it was cold."

The ice came down harder and Roy said nothing. He gripped the steering wheel and focused on his driving. One slip and they could be in the woods, stuck for hours.

"Anyhow, she's been at me for a couple of weeks and earlier today I finally told her I'm not changing. Church, God, counseling will not fix this problem of mine."

At his house, Roy showed Darren to his basement room, leaving the wet boxes in the car.

Darren sighed. "Can you take me to Metropark tomorrow? I have some money saved up and all. I just need to go to the bank and then I need a ride to the train station. Maybe, if you have some old duffle bags, I can put my stuff in them. I can't carry two boxes on a train, and I definitely can't wander around New York with them."

Roy went upstairs and woke his grandmother, who was asleep on the couch. She nodded and went off to bed. Roy watched the end of the news and noticed there was a note on the coffee table. It was from his aunt's boyfriend. There was a phone number on it. Underneath the number was a sentence: "Call about an interview for the phone company."

They woke early and ate pancakes his grandmother made. Darren chattered with her about New York and told her these were the best pancakes ever. She swiped him on the shoulder and said they were Bisquick. "Nothing to them," she smiled.

Roy gave Darren two duffle bags to shove his stuff in, but most of it had been ruined from the ice. Only some clothes and two books were salvageable. They drove over to Vinny's Pizza and dropped the rest of it in the back dumpster. Then Roy took him to the bank and soon they headed up the Parkway—an hour's drive to Metropark.

Darren told Roy it was his mother who had the problem, that it was his mother who made him leave. "She says I'm not her son. My dad and my brother—big he-men football lovers that they are—they were okay with it. Well, not okay, but they didn't think I should be dis-owned." Darren looked out the window. "Aaah, she'll come around

one day, right?"

Roy nodded. He thought about his own mother and how much he missed her. He especially missed the sounds of her—the way the brush grazed through her long hair, the way silver bangles on her wrists clinked and jingled, the way her clogs dragged along the worn wooden floors of their old apartment. But mostly he missed the way she talked. She had one of those gravelly voices—it sounded like the crackle of dead leaves when you crushed them in your hand. He missed how she would chatter on the telephone, gossiping with her sisters, using her raspy voice. Roy wondered if his mother would have put his stuff in two boxes on the front porch if he were caught kissing a guy in the garage, even though Roy knew he would never kiss any guy. But the question still bothered him. Of course it was disgusting and sick of Darren to be into men. Roy agreed with Darren's mother. But Roy was still disturbed by her actions. It just didn't seem right.

Roy left the car in the concrete parking garage and walked Darren to the ticket office. He stood outside and smoked as Darren went inside and bought his ticket. When he emerged, he held up his ticket and grinned. "One way to Penn Station, New York."

"How long is the ride?"

Darren told him it was only a little over a half an hour. Roy nodded and thought how weird it was to be so close to this famous city.

They walked up several flights of stairs until they reached the platform, where they walked until they found an empty bench.

Darren started to talk. "Roy, you should know that I really appreciate all you have done."

Uncomfortable, Roy looked across the tracks, to the southbound platform. Darren continued. "I have to tell you this, though."

Roy lit another cigarette and Darren sighed. "Here goes. I am going to put this as delicately as possible." He took a deep breath. "You're a good guy and you deserve a good girlfriend."

Roy stared across the tracks, smoking, and waiting for more but there was none. Darren just stopped.

Within a couple of minutes, there was a whistle. A slick gray train quickly appeared from the southwest, racing alongside the platform, slowing and then stopping. Darren grabbed his bag. He shook Roy's hand, strong and solid, like a father might instruct his son to do. Then he stepped on the train, the gray doors sliding closed, the train moving forward, zipping out of sight within seconds.

Roy stood on the platform, a cold wind whipping across the tracks, most of the people gone, on the train heading for New York. He watched a squirrel hop over the rails and the ties, its head twitching as it looked to the northeast and then down again as it hopped away.

Roy got his job at the phone company, he bought a truck, and he *moved in* with—not *married*—Camille.

And then he found out that she had been sleeping with one of the managers from the local McDonald's. She wanted to work things out, go to a couple's counselor, see a therapist.

Roy shook his head because he finally decided he deserved a hell of a lot better.

"Well, I never could get close to you—that's why I cheated." She was standing in the kitchen of their rented apartment, crying. Roy ignored her. So she turned vicious. "I know you're just dying to get back to Darren. You two did gay things together, huh? Maybe that's why I turned to other men."

Immediate and primal rage took over. Roy grabbed Camille and pushed her up against the refrigerator, grasping her neck with his hand, his other prepared to strike. Her eyes went wide and scared. He clenched his teeth and took short, wild breaths, his nostrils flaring like a bear. He held her for half a minute before letting go and walking away. "We're DONE!" he shouted.

So he left her and Camille moved away and Roy took up with a nicer girl, one who didn't screw men in charge of food.

