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THE BIG SHOT
By Loretta Giacometto

On a Friday evening in late June, Lester Best eased his customized SUV across the wooden slats of a swinging bridge spanning the Auglaize Creek in the heart of Missouri's Ozarks. He kicked up white gravel for another two miles before realizing he'd gone too far. Going too far best defined Les Best, that and an absurd name he regretted not having changed early in his career. Les turned around and retraced his powdery route until he found the campground entrance to the state park at Kaiser. He rattled along under the shade of canopied trees, dodging deep ruts and cruising past a hodgepodge of trailers and pop-up campers. After reaching the lakefront area jammed with more weekenders, he selected one of the few remaining primitive sites. No electricity, no water, and no flush toilet: the perfect retreat for a deadbeat fugitive nursing a matching set of splinted forefingers.

Les staked his tent as far away as possible from his nearest neighbors, two wannabe hill people who strolled over long enough for first-name introductions before returning to their beer and makeshift setup. Will, whose white beard overlapped his bib overalls, pressed a harmonica to his lips and played a haunting rendition of Ruby for his own Ruby. She wore yards of calico,

chain-smoked, and complained non-stop from an aluminum lawn chair straining under her massive weight. After thirty minutes of the audio assault, Les stifled his urge to suggest Will muzzle both Rubies, opting instead to utilize the earplugs he'd brought from his Lower East Side apartment.

Although Les Best lived and breathed New York, he'd grown up in Missouri, first in foster care and later on a boys' ranch designed for discards and the wayward. Les qualified as both, then and now. His temporary return to the Show Me State was not out of nostalgia but to avoid settling a debt of ninety thousand dollars he'd incurred through a series of risky ventures. Joey Plastic, the New York mobster who held the note, had arranged for the dislocation of Les's forefingers to induce an initial interest payment of five thousand bucks, but Les figured the bastard would never extend his pursuit into the fly-over boonies of mid-America. On that Les Best would've bet his mother's life, if he'd ever had a mother. Still, he must have, since his many enemies and few friends usually referred to him as 'that sonofabitch'.

That night Les conked out in the back of his SUV. The next morning found him on the pea gravel beach, pushing a rented johnboat into the Grand Glaize Arm of Lake of the Ozarks. Splints erect, he paddled from one cove to another until he located the ideal fishing spot, one deserted and edged with brush. By ten o'clock, water smooth as glass reflected the cocky blue of a clear sky and Les hadn't caught a single crappie. At noon he peeled off his sweat-drenched shirt, dropped his knit shorts, and mooned a parade of skiers and speedboats stirring up the wake. "You can all go to hell!" he yelled, before sending his pricey rod and reel to sleep with the fishes.

Back at camp two Generation Xers had squeezed in between his site and the wannabes, who were making honeymoon racket in their tent—a conjured image amusing enough to make Les forget the fishing gear he regretted sinking. To the X couple, he returned an obligatory wave and howdy that seasoned campers felt compelled to offer each other. Still, he kept his distance, watching the Xers struggle with the pegs and canvas of new equipment. At last they stood back, arm in arm, to admire their saggy abode. It burped once and collapsed into a heap. Male X pushed back his red-orange feather cut and appealed to Les.

“What do you say, mister. How ‘bout some help?”

What the hell, Missouri know-it-alls, even those partially disabled, were supposed to be accommodating. Les ambled over. He offered a few practical suggestions and within five minutes the tent was erect and operational. The sun-deprived stranger stuck out a soft hand accustomed to professional manicures.

“Much obliged. Sorry about those bum fingers,” X said with a grin of orthodontically enhanced teeth. “I’m Josh. Over there’s Betty Sue.”

Betty Sue, as in leggy and trim, nodded from a distance.

“No problem. Call me . . . Les.” Their encounter should’ve ended on the handshake but that’s when Les noticed Josh’s tattooed wrist: a pissing gargoyle with folded wings. As in the official logo for heavy metal’s Grotes and Gargs. As in Josh Nolan, lead drummer. The revelation prompted a closer look at Betty Sue, as in trying to fade into the background. No make-up, blonde pigtailed, tee shirt and khaki shorts: typical back-to-nature but this chick was no

typical camper. Les Best, master of deception, could spot a plain Jane disguise in the most unlikely of locales.

Les didn't linger with the Xers but Betty Sue hadn't fooled him. That face and that body belonged to none other than Ivy Sinclair, last year's nobody who shot up to become this year's hottest glitz and glamour TV diva. When it suited Ivy Sinclair, the twenty-something preened for tinsel town's red carpet. But when she wasn't hustling the public, she kept her private life way too private: another ploy to fuel the fires of her clamoring fans. And before this weekend Josh Nolan had been nothing more than an unconfirmed rumor. Now the oblivious, sexy twosome belonged to Les, exclusively.

Never in a million years could he have plotted a better scenario: Les Best, New York paparazzo of uncensored privacy, tenting in Missouri next to La-La Land's newest duo. Les had escaped from New York with his only cameras not in hock: the miniature spy and a Panasonic with 600mm zoom lens. From campsite to wooded area to man-made beach, he devoted every waking moment to cursing his splints and plying his craft. Ivy and Josh kissing, Ivy and Josh necking, Ivy and Josh rolling around—the usual predictable stuff. His best shot thus far: Ivy in a modest bikini, her trademark tattoo peeking out the underside. Nice, too nice: translation, boring.

By Sunday evening the primitive weekenders had packed up and returned to their mundane, air-conditioned lives. Only the wannabes, the celebs, and Les remained, bunched up like yesterday's pioneers anticipating an Indian raid. Will's musical switch from the melancholy Ruby to the melancholy Moon River again confirmed he hadn't succumbed to the evils of pop culture. More Moon River prompted Les to throw out a scrap of unctuous chum to the celebs. "If

you folks want to spread out closer to the water's edge, I'll help you break camp."

"Nah, that's OK," Josh said. "We're planning to move on day after tomorrow."

Damn! Thirty-six hours didn't leave Les much time. He needed a big shot, the shot to end all shots.

Monday morning brought a stir of gentle lake breezes that rustled the leaves in stately red oaks that dominated every clump of trees. While a pot of coffee brewed over his pit fire, Les cracked four eggs into four pats of butter sizzling in the cast iron skillet. He added a can of corned beef hash, leaned back, and waited for it all to make sense. Licking his lips, he sucked in the artery-clogging, woodsy aromas and closed his eyes to savor the moment. Then Josh coughed. Photo op! Les grabbed his Panasonic. Snap, snap: Josh crawling from his tent. Snap, snap: Josh stumbling to the john. Les gambled with the next few minutes. He hurried to the celebs' tent; the flap was open and Ivy, asleep. Damn, in an oversized T-shirt and on her back. He considered using a long stick to lift her shirt but didn't want to blow his chance for something better. Instead he located her in his viewfinder and got off two shots before his ears detected a distant rattle from the men's latrine. By the time Josh came shuffling back, Les was hunched over his fire, scraping burnt glob from the skillet.

He poured a cup of muddy coffee and waited with eyes never straying far from the neighboring tent. Finally, his lovely prey emerged from her shelter, still wearing the baggy tee.

Behold Ivy in the morning, an Ozark wood nymph splashing her face with Evian. Les snapped his mini. She stretched her toned arms overhead. Snap, snap. She jumped Josh, played kissy-face, and wrapped her legs around his lean body to reveal the trail of ivy from her bikini.

Snap, snap. Ivy and Josh spun around, fell to the ground, and seeing Les, they giggled like love-struck teenagers. He acknowledged them with a lift of his coffee mug.

“Hey, Les, any idea where we can arrange for some horses?” Josh called out.

Les clenched his teeth. Didn't these people ever think for themselves? In their showbiz realm agents and managers provided the brainpower. Out here the celebs had latched onto him. He forced a smile. “Check out the info packet you got at the welcome station.”

“Damn, now why didn't I think of that,” Josh said, shaking dust from his hair. “Thanks, good buddy.”

While Josh and Ivy mulled over the park information with the intensity of first-timers planning a European adventure (snap, snap), Les formulated his own plan. After the celebs pulled away in their Navigator, he drove into Osage Beach, parked at a strip mall, and speed-dialed Emanuel Gold on his cell phone. “Manny, baby. What's up?”

“Don't what's up me, you sonofabitch,” yelled the editor of *MORE*.

Manny being Manny. Les could almost feel the bastard's spit blasting through the receiver.

“Where the hell you been?” Manny demanded.

“Something came up. I had to leave in a hurry.”

“You left me with garbage too tame for Mother Teresa's newsletter.”

“Yeah, yeah, *mea culpa*. But I'll make it up to you—a thousand times over. For the right price, that is.”

“You get nothing 'til I see some skin.”

“How about some of Ivy Sinclair’s?”

“No way, you crazy sonofabitch!”

“Remember her in the February issue of *SWEET*: beach volleyball in a mini bikini, ivy wandering over those oh-so-firm cheeks. Well, I’m sleeping next to that same tattoo in the same location.”

“Ivy Sinclair dumped her latest squeeze for a sonofabitch like you?”

“Let’s just say the three of us are tighter than a virgin’s ass, if you get my drift. They’re splitting tomorrow but not before I get a piece of her.”

“Just make sure you get the real Ivy and not some pathetic knock-off. By the way, big shot, two scum bags have been inquiring as to your whereabouts, which leads me the obvious question.”

No way, Manny. Les hung up and went shopping for supplies. When he got back to camp, no one was around except a uniformed park employee. The dead ringer for the prison matron in *Chicago* was leaning against a tree, checking her clipboard. “How do,” he said in his resurrected Missouri twang. “Is there a problem, ma’am?”

“Just making my rounds,” she replied without looking up. “Dogging after the outsourcers hired to sanitize and equip our facilities.”

“As in odor-eaters and toilet paper?”

“You got it.”

“How often you empty them suckers?”

“End of the season, unless they fill up sooner.”

As soon as the latrine queen zipped away in her truck, Les opened up the back of his SUV. He removed a telescopic ladder folded to the size of a small suitcase and covered it with brush in the wooded area. The remainder of the day he spent reading entertainment rags and contemplating a triumphant return to New York, after he squared his debts.

By ten o'clock that night the temperature hovered around seventy degrees, and a star-filled sky and quarter moon provided the primitive area's only light source. The wannabes finally stopped pitching beer cans, a precursor to ending Ruby's steady harping and Will's harmonica Ruby. But after he quieted down, she reverted to soft wailing. Any other night Les would've sailed his skillet in their direction, but not this night. Tonight he wanted no disruptions. The celebs were snuggled on a log near their low fire (snap, snap) and discussing some stellar configuration, probably basking in the glory of their own shining stars. For Les, the best was yet to come. After extinguishing his campfire with a pail of water and some dirt, he called out through a yawn, "G'night, folks."

Inside his tent, Les stripped naked. He climbed into chest waders, donned a plastic rain jacket, and slipped a painter's mask around his neck. Next came the construction hard hat, equipped with an attached light that Les couldn't risk turning on too soon. As he crept into the dark woods, sweat beaded his skin and clung to his eyelashes. He retrieved his ladder and headed to the women's pit latrine where a swarm of buzzing flies greeted him when he opened the door. The almost tolerable odor evoked his whispered, "Thank you, latrine queen."

Les flipped on his light, secured his mask. He twisted the toilet off its base, extended his ladder down the concrete container, and started his descent along the four-foot width. Five feet down, he stopped to slide the toilet back into the lip of the base. Six inches later he stepped into

waste. At eight feet he bottomed out. Whoa! He reeled from the stench. Damn the latrine queen for only going so far with her chemicals. Unlike Les, she didn't exceed certain limitations.

During his teenage years on the ranch when trucks hauled in cattle, Les usually got stuck with the grunt job of prodding reluctant animals from the trailers. He'd worked in ankle-deep shit then and vowed never again, but Les wasn't one to keep his word, not even to himself. The greenbacks from these shots would get Joey Plastic off his back, his other cameras out of hock. Maybe garner him some insider celeb tips, a ringside table at some classy watering hole. Most of all, he'd gain the respect of every jerk who ever flipped him off.

Les took pride in catering to an insatiable public who demanded a piece of their adored celebs. Or untouchable royals, even the Queen of England had been fair game. For years the toilet seat she used in one of Chicago's leading hotels had been displayed on its archive wall of notables. Small potatoes now compared to the recorded affairs of younger royals and the videotaped sex of entertainers and athletes. After tonight Les Best would rank with the best, the most innovative.

Ten minutes passed. Les heard the light crunch of twigs: Ivy, right on schedule. He killed his light, leaned into the splattered wall, and muffled a gag. The door opened, latched closed, and a low, pitiful moan filled the enclosure.

"Heads or tails, who's goin' first," Ruby said in a voice bordering on baritone. "OK, lips, you win."

Ruby's eyes were squeezed tight as she centered her moon face overhead. That's when Les directed his face to the wall. After five minutes of gasping and heaving, she turned and plopped her dimpled buns over the toilet, creating a suction that cut off the air supply below.

Between her choked-up sobs and torrents of diarrhea, Ruby prayed. She groaned. She shuddered. She went silent.

Down below, Les had prayed too, for the first time in years. His head was spinning; his splints got tangled. He lost his grip and fell back into the waste. Still, he managed to hold his camera high. Ruby didn't even stir when he sloshed to the ladder. Fighting for each breath, he struggled up the rungs. When he topped out, Les poked one splint into Ruby's sealed posterior. He poked again, this time harder. Finally, Ruby shifted. She wiggled off the seat, allowing Les to fill his lungs before she left.

Les was ready to relinquish his dream for the big shot when he heard footsteps again. This time there was no mistaking Ivy. Her flashlight beam sought out despicable insects and a tidy toilet seat. She planted her sweet tush on the throne. Ever so gently Les switched on his light. The ivy trailing Ivy's cheeks wiggled as she made a few adjustments. Les held his breath and snapped away, the camera shutter so quiet even he couldn't hear it as he recorded such delightful anatomical shots: Les Best's unique contribution to the science of exploitation. Toilet paper fluttered down.

As soon as Ivy got up, Les killed his light. But instead of the darkness he expected, another flash came from above. The bitch had stolen his image with her own camera.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Lester Best."

"You knew me before this weekend?"

"Let's just say your reputation preceded you."

"Could you turn off that flashlight, Ivy? I can't see a thing."

"Not before I get your camera. Just put it in the bucket I'm sending down by rope."

Damn, she was smarter than he thought. Les had no choice but to part with his Panasonic.

“The film too.” She lowered the bucket again and he gave it up.

“We can make a deal,” he said. “Just you and me and the big shot. I’m not shitting you when I say Les Best has the absolute best connections.”

“Unfortunately, not as good as mine. In fact, my connection made me the star I am today. That’s why he asked me, and only me, to deliver an important message to you.”

Les could see her now, all too clearly —leaning over the opening, a flashlight in one hand and a revolver in the other. He opened his mouth to speak but the last words he would ever hear came from Ivy.

“For Les Best, Joey Plastic sends only his best.”