

The Night I Saw Marianne Faithfull

By Robert Diamante

Houston was swollen with black gold. If you'd have asked anybody what their father did for work back in the '80s, they'd have replied, "Daddy's in *earl*," the words oozing from their lips as unctuously as oil itself. Off Galveston you could see the monumental oil rigs looming gray and seeming prehistoric rising over the turbid, rainbow-slick water. My father manufactured carbide steel, an amalgamation of carbon and heavy metals used to make drill bits that could bore into that tender belly below the Gulf of Mexico. He took us down to Texas from New Jersey in '81, when I was halfway through my thirteenth year. Reagan was in office and Houston was burgeoning.

Down through Baytown, Pasadena, and League City the air was fetid—oil refineries. Up where we settled in north Houston the air was clean. Perhaps Reagan really was evaporating the middle class, but my surroundings spoke otherwise. In 1975 The Woodlands had been conceived and birthed to house a fledgling generation of oil company aristocrats, it was a nexus of man and ecology, a master-planned oasis for an oil gentry and a mobile middle-class. Acres were carved from the piney woods of East Texas then stitched back together with raked roadways and meandering pathways. Gold courses were molded in earnest as were wooded cul-de-sacs lined with earth-toned homes that blended into the environment. "A Real Hometown" was the tag line, which my father bought, lock, stock, and *earl barrel*.

Leslie reminds me of tough Jodie Foster in The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane. She came out to me one afternoon at Spuds-U-Like on Westheimer. Over a broccoli and cheddar potato she had announced,

"I'm having an affair with an older woman."

Leslie is a senior and I am a sophomore, and I am in awe.

“What if anyone finds out?” I whispered, and she just shrugged.

Now, from the back seat of her car I can see her blue eyes in the rear-view mirror. She’s frowning out at the traffic on I-45 like Jesus is caught in the wipers.

The Woodlands had the frightening ability to keep secrets. It was a fortress fashioned from leaves that revealed its contents slowly. Houses, office buildings, shopping centers, emerged then suddenly vanished behind veils of brush and tall pine. Signs along the roadsides would facilitate your journey through the maze of neighborhoods and golf courses. Signs proclaimed everything from *Country Club* and *Site for a Church* to the brilliant *Wildflower Area*. As if the shock of sudden discovery would cause the bluebonnets to blush.

Kelly’s mother won’t let her rat her hair, so she sneaks out with a can of Aquanet and teases it up in the car.

Most weekends Kelly and I hang downtown with a group of squatters from L.A—fucked up death punks with black hair and nasty attitudes. The first time we partied with them they made us throw up on Everclear. I know they hate us. Kelly and I get to slink back to suburbia way past our curfews while they sleep on torn mattresses in a gutted stucco tenement.

One night, Cathy Cowgirl tried to get under Kelly’s skin.

“Hey Madonna,” she said to Kelly, “Who does your hair?”

Kelly curled her lip and flipped Cathy Cowgirl the bird, “Beelzebub, you bitch.”

Now, the car is filled with hair spray fumes and Kelly’s hair is beginning to brush against the ceiling of Leslie’s Corolla.

A portion of The Woodlands was a natural swampland—gorgeous, verdant southern swamp replete with Spanish moss and alligators. One day a sign appeared: *Site for a Lake*.

Within a year the swamp had been drained then bulldozed. The wounded earth was filled with filthy water. Large houses began to grow along the banks like wildflowers. A team of

specialists had rearranged Earth's flesh and when the gauze was removed a rancid hole remained: Lake Woodlands. Residents were invited to sail, powerboat, and stroll along its manicured periphery, but swimming in Lake Woodlands was strictly forbidden. Then another sign was posted. *Don't Drink the Water.*

Matt is staring at me.

"How old are you?" he asks.

"Sixteen. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

Leslie is watching us in the rear-view mirror, like she's waiting for one of us to hop on top of the other.

"Sixteen," Matt repeats, as if that fact is amazing. But I can tell by the way he keeps staring at me that he doesn't care too much about my age.

"The Doves" was erected where The Woodlands Parkway intersects Grogan's Mill Road. The sculpture was about two tons of gold garland and three tons of twinkling white lights. It was approximately two stories high. This large-scale assemblage was in the shape of a swooping trio of doves. All three birds had a sweeping arc of garland flowing from the tip of each wing to imply a graceful plummet, then rise. Shortly after Thanksgiving, "The Doves" was lighted. Along with most of the residents, school bands and equally untalented church choirs met beneath the sculpture to herald in the holiday season. "The Doves" was meant to symbolize community, but I would close my eyes whenever I drove by those damned birds.

Leslie holds the Texas State title for high school defensive driving. On the way from The Woodlands into Houston she swerves between pickup trucks and Jaguars with the grace of a bird. Bowie is blasting from the speakers behind Matt and me and Kelly in the passenger seat is singing to "John, I'm Only Dancing."

In front of us Houston appears. Buildings grow up from the horizon, and Houston shifts against the fire-orange sky with its glass spires glinting and sparkling in the twilight. The highway bends. We twist around and descend into the midst of the clustered skyline. The city swallows us.

Boat shoes, Izods, cuffed 501s, tartan. The Preppy Handbook was passed among ribbon-haired cheerleaders as if it were an autographed Bible. Boys emulated Tom Cruise and sported tortoise-shell Ray Bans and cropped hair held in place with mousse. They called each other Missy or Skipper or Buff.

I dyed my hair orange, wore ripped jeans and a bicycle chain around my neck. But I was secretly in love with a football player. He was a tall and muscular with dimples. I would stare at him throughout English class. In my own version of Heart of Darkness, I imagined me as Kurtz and him as Marlowe, and together we discovered something primal and of our own up the Congo.

One day I looked up and he was staring at me. He smiled. That night, after the Texas heat had settled into the thickness of dusk, after the rains had ceased to sizzle on the asphalt, I wrote him a poem. *You will never read this...* the poem began.

“Who is Marianne Faithfull?”

“Mick Jagger’s girlfriend. Or she was.” Kelly looks over at Leslie, but Leslie just squints and shrugs.

Matt looks at me and smiles. “She’s a singer. A Chanteuse. Let me see that.” I hand Matt the driver’s license I swiped from my older brother’s nightstand.

“You don’t look eighteen. We need a backup plan,” Kelly yells back.

Leslie studies me in the rear-view mirror.

“He’ll get in.” Matt is staring at my brother’s face on the license. “No doubt about you two being brothers.”

"I'm getting in," I say. "Ya'll watch."

Matt pats my thigh. His grin is slick like oil.

Westheimer hacks its way from one end of Houston to the other, crossing Montrose in between. At that intersection lay Houston's gay ghetto in the '80s, a grid of trendy salons, cafes, nightclubs, "antique" clothing stores, galleries, and porn shops. The palm-shadowed side streets were lined with chic bungalows. I discovered "The Montrose" during my sophomore year in high school, and it was as if I had discovered a magical kingdom. One of my earliest memories from back then occurred while in a card shop called the Dragon and the Rat.

A drag queen held up a puppet doll in the shape of Reagan. She shook it at the man behind the counter.

"Hey, honey. What is this thing?"

The overweight proprietor poured his gaze over the rim of his specs then drawled out from behind the register: "A puppet, Honey. It's a goddammed puppet."

"Well, I'll be damned!" the drag queen squealed, "How does it work?"

The man rolled his eyeballs toward the overheads and threw his meaty palm skyward.

"Fist it, baby! Just fist it!"

It would be years before I knew what he meant.

Westheimer is bound up. Cowboys with fat hats and tall trucks throttle up and down Westheimer hollering at the fags.

"I wish they'd shoot each other," says Kelly.

"Fucking yokels," Matt mutters. Leslie whips onto a side street to avoid the mess.

Had it been a church and not a nightclub, Numbers on Westheimer during the 1980's would have been ecumenical: the Unitarian nightclubs. Everybody was there: gays, straights, Latinos, thrashing punks, artists, and everything in between.

I stepped up to the ticket booth that night and showed the doorman my brother's ID. The man assayed me and smiled at me doubtfully, but I winked at him. A few seconds later I passed through the door. I was sixteen, a virgin, and I had plunged into Numbers with the grace of a dove.

It is smoky and loud, and a mass of people are dancing around me. There is a chemical smell rising from the dance floor. Some guys are passing around a small vial. They hold it to their noses and breath. Then they spin like they are filled with the holy spirit.

Up in the loft I spot my art teacher and her husband. They are shocked to see me.

"How did you get in?" She yells over the music.

"I winked at the doorman and wiggled my ass," I shout back. I gyrate my hips to demonstrate.

Marianne Faithfull came onto the stage at some point that night. Red lights silhouetted her ashen profile, her elegiac, raspy voice blended with the thick smoke inside the nightclub. When she sang *As Tears Go By* everyone lit matches and cried. But the mood changed after the maudlin singer left the stage. Things began to rattle and the music changed: The Clash, The Talking Heads...

Yaz is playing.

We are all very quiet on the drive back to The Woodlands, but there is a sonic buzzing in my head, and my stomach feels like I've swallowed quicksand. Matt moves closer, his hand touches my thigh. It's way past three a.m. when Leslie drops us off.

"My parents think I'm sleeping at a friend's," I tell Matt.

Leslie smiles as she drives away, Kelly passed out beside her.

Matt sneaks me into his room and lights a candle. He clicks on the radio next to his bed and Prince is cooing softly, so I start to sing, When Doves Cry, but I am shaking. Matt throws

some pillows onto the floor then tells me to lay down. Undressed and silent, we slide beneath the blanket and he leans over me.

“Pucker your lips,” he instructs politely, “like this.”