

MURDALAND ISSUE #2 PREVIEW PDF VISIT WWW.MURDALANDMAGAZINE.COM TO ORDER MURDALAND ONLINE

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Larry the Swollen and Manny the Art Gimp Rupert Wondolowski

Larry was a swollen man. Both physically by beer, meat and high blood pressure and spiritually by the big stories he wished to tell the world. He'd been a sailor once and traveled to many ports, drinking, sleeping with many different women and occasionally even being kept company by one of his fellow shipmates. They never considered this homosexual activity, but things that men do at sea far from the world.

Somehow he had washed ashore in a tiny neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland, peopled by humans as strange and diverse as the fading, stretched tattoos he bore on his flesh. At this point he owed money to most of them, so his world felt like it was shrinking. Money was a sick system of barter that bounced back and forth, amassed by those whose souls had died.

Larry had tapped into Manny the Art Gimp when Manny had come into some bucks – a family inheritance he'd been waiting on – but Manny had blown through it pretty quick, snorting coke and chatting up wine ladies and now Manny was hitting him up for payback. Larry felt he should be free from these sorts of economic reprisals since he was larger than life. In olden days folks would have come to his door requesting stories and advice, leaving his larder filled with goodies, but in these fallen times they expected him to man a register in a convenience store, a swollen red target for any cracked-up kid with a stolen firearm.

He no longer felt the call of the Sea, but the call to the stool of the bar was an urgent whistling wind. When he didn't heed the call, faces began to appear, phantoms of his past, hanging rubber apparitions that he sometimes slipped and addressed as if they were real. Once his shower drain had spoken to him in verse. The drain had the fuzzy canned sound of the old radio programs of his youth and Larry enjoyed poetry, but still it was disturbing.

"The way I see it, and it's a pretty clear vision, you owe me forty fucking dollars," Manny said, his shriveled greasy peanut head barely above the table. Cocaine use and time had reduced him to a little over five feet and among the oversized but minimal objects in Larry's home he had a tendency to disappear. The living room that they were in was dominated by a giant painted wooden sculpture of a toucan that the seller swore was once owned by James Michener. It added a cheery touch.

"Manny, I should be hearing from my publisher on that book about Fort McHenry any day now. They promised me a fat advance. At my age I'm not going to go out mowing lawns. How 'bout you buy me a drink?"

Manny was a victim of an anxiety that he often medicated with alcohol, which had a tendency to temporarily take his mind off his nerves, only to then cause a wild spiraling effect the next morning when the drinks had worn off. He also was a victim of rancid personality disorder, which meant that Larry was about the only human left who would medicate with him, so Manny agreed to put aside Larry's debt for the time being and take him out for a drink. Besides, the bartenders at the corner bar were usually either so drunk, hungover or strung-out that they often forgot to get your money for the drinks anyway.

The Warm Slide had only three customers in it when Larry and Manny showed up at three in the

afternoon. One was a regular – Oily Joe, called such for his frequent hospital entries and departures. Often Larry had come in for an afternoon bracer and seen Oily Joe being hauled out mid-seizure. It gave him pause but never knocked him completely off his game. The other two were an odd couple, a young artsy-looking girl made up to look like Bettie Page with some baby fat and a shaky, nervous-looking proto-beatnik-type guy who was obviously having a hard time corralling the Bettie Page girl.

“Christ, with the clientele this place is starting to get I’m going to start bringing my own drinking glasses,” Manny said for all to hear. The shaky beatnik darted him a look but said nothing. Manny slowly settled his boney haunches onto a stool, making all sorts of raspy and muffled moaning and groaning noises. His wheezes mingled with the rustling and whispering noises of his unwashed khaki pants, readjusting like the sound of a circus tent crumpling in a dawn mist, bowtied midgets scattering.

Now that Larry was in his favorite environment and only moments away from a comforting drink, he began to expand again. “Come on, Manny, take it easy on the kids. Remember your own pirate days? Dave Brubeck playing, you rubbing up against your boss’s daughter in Casmir’s jazz club, feeding her shot after shot of cognac provided free by drunk old Norris before he took the cultish pledge of sobriety. I remember when you had hair and your head was normal size. It takes years to reach the cultivation we’ve got. Punk kids probably haven’t even read Hemingway yet or seen the moon shine above a foreign port. I tell you I can feel big things coming to me in this town. This place has history. I’ll sell my Fort McHenry book and then finish my novel about my first sailing trip to Bermuda and then I’ll take off for parts unknown.”

The barmaid stood frozen and empty-eyed with long lanky seaweed hair in front of Manny and Larry, waiting for their transmissions, the TV behind her showing a commercial depicting Einstein being outwitted by a brainy little girl in curls whose face resembled a melted hemorrhoid cushion.

“I’ll take a Budweiser, young lady,” Larry chirped.

“We got no beer but Clipper City Ice. We’re having trouble with our distributor. You want that?”

“That will do me fine. I’m here for an afternoon beer and I’m happy about it.”

“What’s your pet monkey having?” the barmaid addressed Larry, her eyes momentarily sliding over Manny’s shellacked countenance.

“I’ll have whatever gin this hellhole still stocks,” Manny answered. “And hold your lizard tongue if you want a tip.”

Oily Joe chose this time to shout from the corner, “Faggots! Give me some change, faggots,” like a stray Greek chorus.

“I remember simpler times when people weren’t so goddamned crazy,” Larry said, his distended purplish lips coming off the bottle like insects disengaging from copulation. “Used to be people were happy with just some booze and sex. Now everybody’s smoking and shooting and robbing and booze is like the sideline healthy part, the kid stuff. I’d like to find a nice girl and go out to the country and live on my thoughts and writing.”

“Well, before you do, you better pay me back, Shakespeare. I can’t believe the way things are going for me. My gallery was well on its way to being one of the most respected venues in this city before those sons of bitches creditors started swooping down on me. There’s nothing but idiots out there now.”

As the late afternoon sun started to lower, it managed to send a wobbly egg-yolk ray into the bar. Oily Joe gathered himself up and walked into this yellowish emulsion, stirring up dust. He propelled himself to the end of the bar near the door and halted, staring at Bettie Page and the beatnik, who cast him sideways wary glances.

That's all of the story we can give you online.

To read Rupert Wondolowski's 'Larry the Swollen and Manny the Art Gimp' in full alongside an additional 176 pages of dark original fiction order the second issue of 'Murderland' online at www.murdalandmagazine.com.

