

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 1 | Issue 2

Article 7

October 2022

Adelphia

Ward Parker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Parker, Ward (2022) "Adelphia," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 7.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol1/iss2/7>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Adelpia
by Ward Parker

I peered at the peas remaining on my dinner plate, imagining that they were planets scattered across the Williams-Sonoma firmament. I figured the inhabitants of the pea planets would be peaceful beings, living on a pea and all, and I was wondering what it would be like to shrink myself to atom-size in order to visit them when my wife tore me from my thoughts.

"Martin, are you listening? I said, I took my temperature and I'm definitely ovulating."

I looked up at Adele who had already finished her meal. She had that raised-eyebrow smile she wore whenever she had sex on her mind, which was usually only on weekend nights. Now that we've been trying to have a baby, I might find her smiling on any odd night of the week. Even a Monday.

"I have an 8 o'clock meeting tomorrow, so I want to go to bed early," she announced.

Adele got up from the table and put her dishes into the dishwasher. Six months ago she had insisted we redo the kitchen with all new appliances, a long wrap-around counter and the antique oak table. We ate every meal at that table, except for the rare occasions when we had company. Then we would use the dining room, which normally remained dark and unvisited, as did the formal living room with Adele's prized antique furnishings. The family room was a misnomer. There was no family to lounge there, just Adele and I when we watched rented movies. In fact, most of our 4 bedroom, 2-1/2 bath house sat hushed and lifeless, like the model homes the real estate developer fills with bowls of plastic fruit, shelves of fake books, and other props of an imaginary family.

"I can't think of a worse night for sex, the night before a big meeting," Adele said, rinsing a pot in the sink, "but like Dr. Fenwick says,

we have to work with what nature gave us.”

She placed the pot in the dishwasher and put her arms around me from behind. Instead of hugging, she grabbed my roll of belly fat and jiggled it. It felt uncomfortable, her hands on my flab, as if she were touching an open sore.

“I’m so glad you went to see him,” she whispered in my ear. “You’re going to be a superman tonight.”

I broke away and perused the mail I had left on the counter. There was an account statement for our mutual funds that I didn’t even open, because I knew our savings were quite healthy. Adele was paid an embarrassingly high salary, with bonuses and all, a portion of which we studiously set aside for our retirement and the college funds of the children we hoped to have. The next envelope was a bill for my subscription to *Model Railroader*, which I slid into my pocket so Adele wouldn’t see.

She turned on the dishwasher. It hummed with the silence only attainable with a top-of-the-line Whirlpool.

“The Weakest Link is on,” she said, giving me that smile again. “I’m going to watch it upstairs.”

“I’ll join you in a little while. I want to do some work in the basement.”

“Martin, do you have to play with your train set tonight?”

“It’s not a train set. It’s a model railroad.”

“You spend all your days down there. Couldn’t you at least give me tonight?”

“I’ll see you upstairs, O.K.?”

She gave a theatrically loud sigh and walked away.

“Soon,” I called after her.

Then I opened the door to the basement, switched on the lights, and looked down upon the world I had created.

It was like the view from the window of a plane about to land. Craggy brown mountains sloped down to a lush valley where the buildings of a small city huddled together. Railroad tracks sprouted

Ward Parker

from the city like veins and capillaries, running into the mountains and to smaller towns, stretching along three walls of the basement until they disappeared under the stairs. It was a landscape in perfect miniature, all so convincingly real. A universe replicated in HO Scale, where a model of a 40-foot boxcar was only six inches long.

The grass in the lawns of the miniature houses was a vibrant green, and the trees that clung to the hills were thick and lush. The rivers and streams shimmered pristinely. People went about their work or grouped together on sidewalks to chat in a day that was perpetually sunny, forever summer, locked permanently in 1924. But it wasn't a tableau frozen in space; there was movement, there was life. Majestic 4-8-4 steam locomotives, double-teamed, pulled serpentine tails of boxcars and hoppers heavy with ore. And the streamlined 4-6-0 (with a realistic whistle sound effect) chugged with pistons flailing as it flew down the mainline. It headed the daily Blue Goose express train to Chicago, a long string of heavy Pullman cars in which elegantly dressed passengers gazed out the windows upon the land I had created.

I had thought of everything when I built my world, and I ran it with total efficiency. From my master control panel I operated the rail switches and could handle as many as three active trains at once. I turned on the miniature lampposts that pooled upon the street corners and bathed the station platforms at night. I controlled the overhead lighting that is the sun in this world. With a flick of a switch I began the day, and, when I decided to, I ended it as well.



"Martin," Adele called from the top of the stairs. "I'm going to bed now. Remember to turn off all the lights when you come up."

"I will."

"You're coming up soon, right?"

"I promise, hon," I said. "Please close the basement door, OK?"

There was a pause, and then the door finally closed.

The basement was originally meant to be the children's playroom.

18 Harpur

I had intended to build a simple plywood table upon which would lie the model train set I'd bought for my future kids. The problem was, no kid arrived, but I decided to set up the trains anyway. We already had a bedroom upstairs redecorated to suit a baby, so why not have the train set ready as well? And in honor of my wife, I named my future capital city, the hub of my railroad, Adelphia. Whether or not she was flattered, I never knew.

It took only a few books and magazines to show me how to build a railroad empire. The simple oval of track from the train set quickly evolved into a multi-level layout that filled much of the basement and cost several thousand dollars so far. In fact, just last week I racked up another charge on the Gold Card for more flatcars to service the sawmill I had spent two weeks painstakingly building from scratch. The sawmill, I admit, was merely an excuse to add another rail spur and purchase more rolling stock. But it made sense. After all, you can't have a city without a sawmill.

I was prepared to defend every expenditure if Adele protested, but she never did. She only made occasional jokes about a grown man buying toys, which at one time had made me smile sheepishly but now only irritated me. She was a broker on Wall Street, while I was a biologist for the New York City Department of Environmental Protection. I tested sewage levels in the water system. Needless to say, her income dwarfed mine to the extent that when I lost my job to budget cuts last year, our standard of living wasn't the slightest bit affected. I wouldn't even be surprised if my staying at home were advantageous from a tax standpoint.

"You're my kept man," she had said to me, one morning not long ago while she was dressing for work. She was awake at an obscenely early hour, which executives on the fast track all seemed to enjoy doing these days. I opened one eye and saw her looking at me with exasperation.

"Or, on second thought," she added, "maybe you're just my adopted child."

Ward Parker

"What is that supposed to mean?" I groaned. I was unshaven, with matted hair, and my stomach created a large hillock in the duvet. She was zippering the skirt of a Chanel suit.

I, of course, interpreted that remark to be three insults wrapped into one: 1) I was unemployed and supported by her; 2) I played with "toys;" 3) I had failed yet again the previous night to provide the service a kept man is supposed to provide the women who keeps him.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep, but try not to sleep all day. Have you made an appointment with Dr. Fenwick yet?"

"No."

"Martin, why are you procrastinating? He'll just ask you a few questions and then give you the prescription."

"That stupid pill is just a fad."

"It works. That's all that matters."

"It doesn't work for everyone."

"It can't hurt to try it. Will you do it, please, for me?"

I mumbled my assent, then rolled over and covered my head with a pillow.

"Oh, and there's a list in the kitchen of some errands I need you to do," Adele announced. "Please get everything done before you start playing with your trains."

"It's not playing," I mumbled from beneath the pillow.

"Whatever, sweetie."

Her berating tone reminded me remarkably of my father's when I was young. I'd be sleeping late during summer vacation, with dreams of trains and sword-fighting fantasy heroes (dreams of dreams), slivers of sunlight around the dark window shades, the window-mounted air conditioner whining like a jet engine. I'd be luxuriously relaxed—until my bedroom door would burst open and Dad stuck his Brill-Creamed crew-cutted bullet-shaped head inside to yell at me:

"You're two days late mowing the lawn."

or: "When are you going to get on the roof and clean the gutters?"

and always: "You'd better not spend the whole day inside playing

with your sissy trains. Go play ball with the other kids in the neighborhood.”

Yes, my love of trains began when I was an adolescent, to the intense dismay of my father. Ever since I was ten years old (the age, I believe, when my father first noticed that I existed) he'd pressured me to be an athlete. He had been, as he never failed to remind me, a star linebacker in college who was drafted and then cut by the Baltimore Colts. Since as early as I could remember, I was forced to play intramural sports, a different one for every season. And I was awful. I had absolutely no coordination. I was too timid for football, though my worst sport had to be baseball. I would doze in the outfield until a fly ball was hit to me and then I'd realize I was on the spot; everyone was looking at me expecting me to catch the damn thing. Of course I'd miss it. The same went when I was at bat: trying to concentrate while everyone stared at me, judging how I'd perform. I'd strike out as quickly as possible just to get the hell out of there. After the game, during the walk back to the car, I'd endure my father screaming at me in front of my teammates. I was the world's biggest choker.

But I was good at academics and an excellent model craftsman. I built every scale model of every ship, car, plane and train that was sold. I had a good eye and a steady hand when I was alone working with miniature things. It's just when dealing with life-sized things that I had problems.

“Maybe you're spending too much time playing with your fucking dolls,” Dad said after a game once, at a volume audible to everyone. (He referred to my trains as dolls when he was feeling truly contemptuous.) “You've got to practice batting every single day until you get it right. Christ, I just don't understand. I've told you a hundred times you're not *trying*. Put some effort into it.”

We reached the parking lot where the coach was loading a duffel bag of bats into his pickup truck.

“What's wrong with you is you don't have enough pride,” my father said. “If you did, you'd try harder. For pride's sake.”

Ward Parker

To this day I think I just wasn't suited for this world. Maybe I should have been a Medieval monk, spending my days in peaceful silence, sitting atop a sun-splashed bench beside a fountain in a monastery courtyard, drawing intricate illuminated manuscripts. Losing myself to otherworldly concepts of beauty and perfection, and never worrying about being popular or athletic or successful. Totally protected from the grim competitiveness of the world.

♦ ♦ ♦

"Martin?"

Adele's voice was muffled and far away.

"Yeah?" I had to shout now that the basement door was closed.

"Are you finished yet? It's almost nine o'clock."

"I'll be up in a minute, honey," I called up, though I wanted to say I'd be up when I was good and ready.

When I first met Adele, in college, she actually seemed interested in my hobbies. I guess you could call her a tomboy, though not the athletic sort. She hung around with guys like me: the ones labeled nerds and geeks because we weren't ashamed to play chess instead of football, or to read science fiction while everyone else was out getting drunk and laid. Back then I never felt self-conscious with her like I did with other girls. She was just as interested in talking about Star Trek as her economics class. She simply wanted to learn about everything, and treated me with respect as an authority on my arcane interests.

Back then she was also achingly desirable. She had a small, upturned nose, straight black hair in bangs, and a way of sticking her head forward when she talked as if to give her words more impact. I was one of the few guys who noticed how nice her body was, hidden within her baggy boy's clothes.

We never actually dated in college. She went off to Wharton for her MBA, but I later came into contact with her again through mutual friends. We didn't date long before getting married. And once she

22 Harpur

had that taken care of, she seemed to change. She no longer read science fiction or cared about computer games. Now it was the world of making money that interested her, so she milked her fellow brokers for knowledge the same way she used to question me about my hobbies. Once she had money, her next course of study was the realm of status. To learn this in Manhattan was an enormous undertaking, but she plunged into it with her usual enthusiasm, each month spending close to my take-home pay on her wardrobe and hair alone. When we bought our brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, I believe she was glad at first that I retreated to the basement. I was beginning to be an embarrassment to her. I think she would have forgotten about me down here except for the fact that the moment she turned 40 last year, childbearing became her newest and—until now—her only unattainable obsession. As Dr. Fenwick had put it, her window of opportunity was rapidly closing.



One Saturday afternoon I was laying some new track (which I, a perfectionist, do by hand, actually spiking the rails onto miniature wooden crossties, instead of slapping down unrealistic pre-fab sections of track). Adele was supposed to be outside, weeding the small flower garden in front of our house, when I heard her voice up above in the kitchen, along with a man's and a woman's I didn't recognize. Suddenly three sets of footsteps pounded down the wooden stairs to the basement. The train on my branch line, which ran against the back of the staircase, shook until it almost derailed.

"The treadmill's over there in the corner," Adele said. "Fifty dollars is fair, isn't it? I had planned to set up a little gym down here, but I've been so busy. And I didn't plan on Martin's train set overrunning the place. Martin, you know the Vanderpools."

Mrs. Vanderpool was a small woman with a rodent-like face. Her husband was tall, muscular, square-jawed—you know, the ex-jock type.

Ward Parker

"Quite some setup you got here," the husband said, "I've never seen a train set this big." His eyes showed he couldn't figure me out.

"It's just a hobby," I replied, quickly removing my engineer's cap and placing it out of sight. "And it's not a train set. It's a model railroad."

"Our two boys would just love this," said the wife.

"They're welcome to come by and see it," I offered.

"They've been awfully busy with soccer," the husband said too quickly.

"I'm sure they can find the time to stop over," said the wife.

"Just not alone," the husband said under his breath, studying me.

"Martin's train set was featured in *Model Railroader* once," Adele chimed in.

I was getting very uncomfortable, as were the Vanderpools.

"So. Do you guys have any hobbies?" I asked.

"Golf," Mr. Vanderpool said. "Twice a week without fail."

"Why don't you join their group sometime?" his wife asked me.

"Sorry. I don't play."

"But he does have a little golf course on his train set somewhere," said Adele. "That's truly miniature golf!"

Adele giggled and Mrs. Vanderpool nervously did the same. Her husband looked at me with an expression of both suspicion and ridicule.

"I'll stop by next week to get the treadmill," he said, inching his way toward the stairs.

That night was the first time I couldn't do it. I don't know what went wrong. Everything seemed normal until Adele said something about hoping to get pregnant that very night, and I saw a flash of desperation in her eyes that was so uncharacteristic of her. I've never considered myself a great lover, of course. Adele was the only woman I've ever been with (not counting a misbegotten two-night fling in college with an unhappy Chem major), and I don't exactly have the Kama Sutra memorized; but I can do pretty well with the basics. Or so I

24 Harpur

thought. That night I felt as if the legacy of Adele's 41 years of stellar achievement was now depending entirely upon me to protect and uphold. She had sacrificed her most fertile years in order to provide for us, and now the least I could do is hold up my end of the bargain. It was all up to me to perform. All the people in the stands were watching me as the fly ball descended from the sky. We were only a few minutes into lovemaking when suddenly I couldn't go on.

"What's wrong," Adele had asked.

"Nothing. Just problems concentrating. I guess I have a lot on my mind, lately."

"Running a railroad full-time is pretty stressful I bet." I know she meant it as a joke but her sarcasm soured it and only made matters worse for me.

Adele did what she could to help me, but it only increased my anxiety.

"I guess tonight's just not good for me," I said finally.

"Unfortunately it's good for me. Are you sure you're trying?"

"It's not a question of *trying*. It's supposed to just happen."

"Well it's not happening. So please, try harder, honey."

At that point, my face thoroughly reddened, I got out of bed and hid in the bathroom for a while. When I came out, Adele was still waiting for me.

"Are you OK?" she asked. "Just relax for a while and we'll start over."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to fight her off. I just wanted to be alone, so I went into the guest bedroom, locked the door, and went to sleep. That was months ago, but it was a familiar scene by now. For me, every "Baby Night" brought with it the memories of all the failed ones before, a deep guilt that I had let Adele down, and a resentment that she was forcing me to try and fail again. Which, of course, made choking all the more likely.

Then they came out with the miracle drug, the famous Blue Pill. Ostensibly it would make me perform no matter how inadequate or

Ward Parker

depressed I felt. With a little help from Adele, the pill would make me hard whether I wanted it to or not. The chemical circuits would bypass my brain and the sex would be a matter solely between Adele and my erection, which would probably suit her just fine.



“Martin?” Adele called from the other side of the basement door, her voice now sounding hurt and needy. “You’re missing Ally McBeal.”

The Blue Goose was still making its run, and I wanted to dispatch a switcher engine to pick up the three flatcars loaded with lumber waiting on the siding beside my sawmill.

“I’m almost done,” I called.

I heard the door at the top of the basement stairs open and I instantly tensed. But she didn’t come down.

“Tonight is Baby Night,” she said. “Why are you making me wait?”

“For God’s sake, I’ll be up in a minute!”

She paused, and then the door closed. I gratefully returned to my railroad just as the Blue Goose coasted through Horseshoe Curve. I increased her speed to the point of recklessness and thrilled at the sight of the heavy, dark blue passenger cars hugging the rails of my expertly laid track. She had never derailed and never would, not on my railroad.

I knew, however, that Adele was back in bed waiting for me, wearing her negligee in the blue light of the television set. On the bedside table would be her tube of lubricant jelly. Beside her the sheets would be peeled back like an open envelope, into which I would slip my flabby naked body and roll with a grunt against her. I would go through the carefully choreographed steps of foreplay, finally removing her negligee. Soon, if the pill did its work, I would become a raging love tool, a stunt dick in a porno movie. I would perform as dependably as

26 Harpur

a robot. Then, afterwards, we would lie there in silence and I would feel completely alone as usual, inhabiting a world that had become so foreign to hers.



The Blue Goose pulled into the station in the hamlet of Larksburg, and left exactly at 10:02, a scaled-down three minutes later. She was right on schedule and would reach Adelphia in an hour. The hum of her motor and the clicking of the passenger cars' wheels soothed me in a way I hadn't felt since I ran my first model trains as a kid. I imagined my son sitting on the stool beside me, breathless with the sight of the sinuous turns the Blue Goose made as she wound through the pine-covered foothills. I could feel his cheek resting against my arm as I nudged the throttle up a notch. If I had a son I would let him take over the controls and lead this majestic train through the tunnels, over the trestles and into the intricate wood and plastic city that I had built for him.

The basement door opened and I caught my breath. I was surprised to see it was already 10:45.

"Martin?"

"I'm just finishing up."

Just then the Blue Goose approached a grade crossing, and through force of habit I did what I always did, what railroad regulations said I had to do. I blew the locomotive's whistle.

I heard a muffled curse at the top of the stairs and the slapping of Adele's slippers coming down. She turned the corner and swept toward me in her white terry cloth bathrobe. Her face was boxcar red.

"Martin, you've been down here all day long. I don't ask much of you, but tonight's Baby Night."

"I wasn't here all day. I sent out some resumes."

I saw Adele's eyes grow sad as if she finally understood something.

"You're not attracted to me anymore," she said.

"Of course I am."

Ward Parker

“You think I’m fat, don’t you?”

“Adele, please.”

“Then why are you avoiding me? I’m not stupid, you know. You can’t make me believe your train set is more important than our marriage.”

I stood up and towered over her, but felt ridiculous wearing my engineer’s cap. I flung it to the floor.

“Adele, stop pressuring me. Do you hear me? You’re just making it worse. I’m sorry I’ve let you down. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“You can’t give up now. I know you can do it,” she said in a deepened voice. She moved closer. “I know you can. You’re just depressed, that’s all. Did you take your—”

I stepped away from her.

“I’m not using the goddamn pill, do you hear me? I’ve got to have some. . . pride. I should be able to do it on my own, without pills. I’m sick and tired of you treating me like a child—assigning me chores, telling me when to sleep, when to have an erection. . .”

I turned away and looked out over Adelphia, the mountain, the river valley stretching to the lakeshore. A kingdom without an heir to inherit it.

“Not tonight,” I said. “Maybe tomorrow. We’ll try tomorrow night.”

“Fuck you,” Adele said in a frighteningly flat voice. “Fuck you and your goddamn toy trains.”

She flung out her arm in disgust and there was a horrible crunching sound as my sawmill shattered and a flatcar loaded with lumber danced across the epoxy river. Three walls were flattened, and the roof was crushed. Scores of miniature planks littered the wreckage. I felt as if I had been slapped in the face. Tears welled in my eyes.

Her expression was pure brattiness. Her eyes flashed with the pleasure of revenge. She raised her hand again, and I saw she was going for Adelphia’s main passenger terminal building, a grandiose Victorian-era structure covered with gingerbread detail. It was one of the center-

28 Harpur

pieces of the city I had named for her and her hand was swinging toward it with the inevitable force of a tennis forehand.

I don't know how I moved so quickly. I caught her wrist with my left hand just before it smashed into the station. She looked at me surprised, then angrily, before making an attempt with her left arm. I reached across her breasts and grabbed at her forearm, less successfully this time, and she was able to snap off a couple of telephone poles. By now I was more furious than I had ever been at anyone before. Adele lunged again and I had to use all my weight to push her backwards, away from the mainline. Somehow our feet tangled and we ended up on the floor, rolling about savagely. It was like wrestling a cheetah, except this particular one was calling me a coward and a wimp and a faggot and a lot of other words that haven't been hurled at me since my father was alive.

"Respect me," I shouted back, "respect me you goddamn bitch!"

Finally I got all of my considerable weight on top of her and held her arms, keeping her lower body pinned with my hips. There was still anger in her eyes, but she was panting from the effort to break free. Loose strands of hair covered her glistening face and I felt her breasts beneath my chest pressing against me with each breath we took. Her eyes softened and she smiled.

"It's not a joke," I said.

"I know."

I held her down. She was completely docile now. And somehow it happened there on the floor, beneath my model railroad layout, in a place that no one besides me had ever been—among the sturdy wooden legs and intricate patterns of braces that supported my world, the nests of wiring and bundles of cables that made it live. Somehow we began clawing at each other's clothing, grunting with impatience. And then, as an athlete would say, I performed in the clutch. I didn't choke, nor did I even once consider the possibility. And through it all, the wheels of the Blue Goose clicked and hummed as she made endless loops around my railroad above.

HP