

## Head Line

by Kenneth Lifshitz

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The old restoration house presided solemnly but somewhat awkwardly over the main street of the town. It was an anomaly amongst the other apologetic artifacts of architecture. It wore its' new coat of paint, proudly, like Sunday best, it didn't fit quite right. Everything seemed haphazard, even though it wasn't,-the raindrops spattered across the dry black asphalt with an emphatic displeasure, as if they were cast there by some Jackson Pollack devotee. Everyone wanted to add something somewhere. Benny stepped off the bus immediately into a group of raindrops. Unfortunately there weren't enough because the street was still dry enough so that the gust of wind blew some of the dust into his eyes, "Bastards!" he remarked to no one in particular. The new beech trees which had been planted on the promenade seemed to shake remonstratively at him as if they were from a nineteen forties musical,- only they weren't as sexy as a chorus line. 'Jeez, I'm horny' Benny thought to himself leaning as he was against the peeling front pillar of the restoration building which had yet to be painted because they had run out of paint. He dashed back into the glass cubicle which served as a bus stop there on the main street of town rubbing his eyes, but none of the old ladies there paid any attention to him. In fact, it seemed as if they were very involved in not noticing him at all. They registered awareness only with their shopping bags which they gathered closer to their knees so that if one didn't really know better you might think they were crowded. "Crap!" Benny muttered to no one in particular, but that was okay because no one in particular took any notice or offence. The old women began to nod now. They looked a little more crowded. Benny decided that he should remove himself from the glass cubicle even though he still couldn't see too well for good. He promptly banged into a glass divider. He turned and walked the other way out into the street. Into the now completely shiny street which was the main avenue. The cool dustless interior of the candy store was a relief. The black marble top of the counter winked at him as he sauntered in. 'Hah!' said the elderly hunchback man behind the counter.

Benny was in no laughing mood.

'Looks like you got some sand in your eyes. Nu?'

'Whaddya think,' growled Benny 'I put it there myself?'

'What do I know.' Shrugged the hunchback as he got down from his stool. It was a statement, not a question.

'Fact is, I did' said Benny, 'Just so I wouldn't have to look at your ugly face!'

The man rubbed two gnarled hands together.

Benny stared at the sign that said 'French Fries', alongside a picture that seemed to be a plate of spaghetti.

'Got any French Fries?' Benny asked sidling into a stool at the counter.

'No.'

Benny looked at the long mirror behind the counter. In it he could barely make out the line of gorillas perched on the counter in back. They were made of chenille and had eyeballs that rolled around inside the tiny plastic bubbles which were their eyes. 'How come you got a picture of spaghetti on the sign that says French Fries.' Benny asked.

'Am I an artist?' the man replied.

'Yes,' said Benny, 'You are an artist.'

The man sat back down on the stool and began humming to himself. Benny thought the song was 'Lazy Bones, sittin' in the sun.' Then Benny looked at the line of miniature gorilla and thought to himself, 'Who would be humming 'Lazy Bones, sittin' in the sun' when there was a bunch of miniature gorilla almost staring at you anyway?'

From the other part of town, Benny heard the sirens,--he heard them muffled, in any case, by the plate glass windows of the candy store. Benny stood up. He walked to the door and opened it. The old man waved at him. Benny was the only person that the old man would wave to. The old man had a number tattooed on his wrist. Benny wondered if he had always waved like that or if the old man was only making sure that he saw the tattoo. Then Benny thought that was a dumb question, just like 'had he always been a hunchback?' or 'why was there a picture of spaghetti on the French Fry sign?'

Another gust of wind brought the aroma of fresh baked pies towards Benny's waiting nostrils. He noticed that the same Beech trees now bent again towards him, still reproachful only this time the old ladies in the bus stop seemed to take it somewhat to heart. Benny was searching in the bilges of his pockets for coins. One of the old ladies began staring at him also in a somewhat reproachful manner. Benny's hand went limp as the combination was too much for him. In the corner of his eye, he spotted the aquamarine of the pick-up. It was a Chevrolet. A thought that Benny had been keeping hidden away, thrust into the dark recesses of wherever dark recesses were held burst into the forefront of his mind. Actually it was a question. Something that had been bothering him for a long time.

'What exactly was Teflon?'

Benny didn't know. He suspected that it was actually pieces of the rim of another universe. That was why food wouldn't stick to it. He further suspected that those old ladies really knew. They knew a lot of stuff. He figured that if he acted like a Martian that maybe they would tell him about Teflon. No such luck. They all ignored him when he walked past,-or, they seemed to. As he started across the street towards the vacant lot where the trucks were, he located a quarter in his pants pocket. He gripped its edge in the tight coil of his forefinger. Benny, thought, 'I bet those old ladies thought I was scratching my crotch or playing pocket pool.' The thought of that got him slightly excited though he couldn't tell why. It was a fine day.

He glanced up at the sky. It was still dark but blue holes were beginning to appear in the threatening gray. 'Like holes in God's pockets Benny thought to himself. Benny

avoided looking back at the old lady by the skin of his teeth and as he reached the opposite sidewalk a grin began to creep its way across his bespectacled face, 'Get bent,' he thought to himself, 'like the French fries in the candy store', in fact, he continued thinking, they should have been called 'bent fries', even if they looked like spaghetti.

Corin blinked and then shivered a bit. The rain had left a slight chill in the air even though it wasn't really cold. She furrowed her now unblinking brow and bit the end of a pencil. She was sitting on the back of her pickup truck doing a crossword. She didn't really like to do crosswords, but she did like to sit on the tail of her pickup and furrow her brow and bite the end of a pencil. She was strange.

Arthur had told him weeks ago to stop taking drugs. Benny had said, 'well what should I do instead, because I have many problems which descend on me?' Arthur had recommended that Benny 'transcend himself'. He didn't know how to transcend himself, so he had lost weight instead. As he proceeded toward the stalls, he fingered his belt, running his forefinger over the one less hole outside the buckle. Losing weight sure beats imaginary activity Benny thought to himself. 'Get bent', Benny said softly to himself relishing the definitive parameters of the phrase. 'Apples?' the voice cried in his ear.

'Hah!' said Benny startled in a slightly derogatory manner.

'Hah?' said the man.

'If you think you can beat me to the punch, you're quite mistaken!' said Benny.

'You can't make punch from apples,' said the man 'you make cider.'

The sky was almost clear now and the few remaining wisps of cloud were aged to a musky gold by the fast departing sun, like good Muscat wine. By the time he turned around, Corin was gone. He shoved his hands deeper in his pocket now feeling the quarter still laying there. Benny felt only contempt for that quarter. As he turned around saying 'Okay I'll take an apple', he spotted her truck swinging back around the corner. He took off after the truck.

'Hey! Don't forget your apple!' the man yelled after him. Benny trudged back and took the apple which he had paid for. 'I know where she'll be, anyway,' he thought to himself. 'I think it's going to clear up.' he said to the man.

'Hah!' said the man. 'What makes you say that?'

'I took a survey' replied Benny, 'and seventy two percent of the people said they thought it would clear up.'

'Now that you mention it,' the man said, 'Weather is like acne,--it usually clears up sooner or later.'

Benny knew that Corin had probably decided to go to the Pleiades but instead of following her there he decided to go home.

The cards were stacked, but Corin wasn't. Benny knew that if he went to Pleiades he would have to play 'one-upmanship' with Tommy for her attention,--he didn't want

to. He would have lost because he was bored. It wasn't his fault. The whole town was bored. Every Tom Dick and Harry was bored.

When Benny got home there was a message sticking out from between the red storm door and the jamb. Benny picked it out nonchalantly. He wasn't too sure what 'nonchalant' meant but he was sure that it was better than a pile of used shoelaces. The note said,--'Your laundry is done,--pick it up any time'-- Francine!' Benny wasn't too sure who Francine was, but he was damn glad about his laundry.

Benny went into his house and didn't take any drugs. I don't need them he thought to himself,--now that I'm skinny. 'Edgar, get off the floor!' Benny remonstrated pointedly with the prostrate form.

'I am having a blinking contest with the ceiling,' Edgar said in a conspiratorial tone, 'so far, the fucking ceiling is winning!'

'You are very high' said Benny.

"I know,-and you are very skinny.'

When Benny did not reply to this Edgar rolled over and revealed the AM-FM radio that he had been lying on. 'Oh,--so that is why music was coming out of your stomach' said Benny.

'No,--that is not why' replied Edgar, 'and your laundry is done.'

'I'm going out.' announced Benny.

'Where?'

'To the Pleiades.'

'Suit yourself' said Edgar.

'I can't', said Benny, 'I keep losing weight.'

I move just like a cat through the tangled streets, Benny thought to himself, sinuous and sleek in a paltry way. I always land on my feet. Benny took a leap and landed on the curb just out of the way of the oncoming truck. 'Whew!' thought Benny, 'I had a close call there!'

He saw her splashed across the booth like bad news. She was wearing a loose knit top of coarse wool that showed just a little too much of her pink brassiere and had little things, threads running through it that you couldn't tell where they started and where they ended. Benny ignored her and walked up to the short man with the thin black moustache.

'You are a running dog of the capitalist lackeys.' Benny said, smiling.

'Change for cigarette?' said the man, proffering four quarters.

That was all the English he spoke. Benny took the quarters and dumped them in the pocket with his. He turned and then reached out slowly, deliberately stripping the sign from the mirror on the front of the cigarette machine. He read it quickly and let it slither to the floor of the cafe. 'Bastards' he said, addressing no one in particular. Corin sidled up close beside him, but not before reading the now soiled notice on the floor. "Spring Concert" it said. As if Benny didn't know. He stared at her in the

mirror of the now posterless cigarette machine. Above all those choices of hard pack or soft packs she looked incredibly sexy. Benny was having a hard time not keeping his hands off her. Then he noticed that the color of the cigarette machine was the same color as dog puke. Benny felt a little sick. Tommy walked up to them.

'You're right on time' said Benny, 'I was just starting to feel sick.'

'Sorry!' said Tommy.

'There is no sorrow or wrath in the Pleiades.' Elsa sang mindlessly, as if it were some little ditty. Benny thought that Elsa was a little ditty,

'but that it's all', she continued, 'sugared and creamed away, in a cup of coffee,--at the Pleiades cafe.'

Benny turned to look at her again in the mirror but the mirror was empty. She had sat down at the same booth.

The waitress brushed by him. 'Like something on the sweet side' this afternoon she asked, winking.

Benny caught a whiff of some fragrance he knew, back in the recesses of his mind,-it was her perfume,-the waitress.'.'Sure' said Benny 'bring me a piece of pie, --and a coffee and a light tea and an English. I'll be sitting with that lonely lady in the back.'

'Is that an apple in your pocket, or have you taken up knitting?' Elsa asked as he passed. By the time he got to the bar, it was crowded to overflowing. As he passed the bouncer he felt the man's ugly gaze linger a little too long on his left pocket. If this fellow wants to get uglier, Benny thought to himself, I can arrange it with my feet. Benny stopped to light a cigarette to see if the geological strata of his face made any shift.

As his eyes adjusted to the feeble light he noticed her sitting and sipping a drink. By her casual manner and prim gestures somehow she reminded him of a schoolteacher but no schoolteacher could have filled out the electric blue dress the way she was. In the few short hours since he'd seen her last, Corin had transformed herself into a beautiful, yet sultry woman.

Benny was an expert at the French art of kick boxing but Corin had a kick that wouldn't quit. I wonder where she got that camellia in her hair Benny wondered. Benny got one bottle of his favorite beer, which he had read on the wall was to be drunk with gusto. Benny wondered what gusto meant. Probably an Italian word he thought. He sauntered over to her table and placed the beer on the table with a little spin on it. Benny always spun the beer when he put it down on the table,--especially where women were concerned he felt it was important to let them know you could play spin the bottle. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tommy approaching in the nick of time.

'Mind if I sit down as I am a very continental person?' Benny asked.

'Mind if I stand up?' , she said.

Benny wasn't sure if she had answered his question or not. He decided that this was a little joke on her part so he sat down.

'We're safe here' he said.

'From what?' she asked without a hint of interest.

'From the creeping crud,--or at least I thought we were,--' he said and turned to look Tommy squarely in the jaw. 'But it looks as if not.'

'Getting your kicks?' asked Tommy.

'No, but you may be.' replied Benny, starting to get angry.

'Having fun boys?' She asked in an off-the-cuff tone.

Benny wasn't sure if he was having fun or not. One thing was for sure, -he wasn't losing any weight here.

'Well are you going to sit down or not?' she asked. That was what was so funny about talking to women thought Benny, they could always make you feel ambiguous. Benny was at a loss. He was stunned at her similarity to,--'you know who'. He finally got himself to say the name out loud 'Corin.' Her manner, her attitude, her everything reminded him of her,--he almost couldn't bear it,--he felt his eyes go tight and he knew there was no place to kick off from,--there she was, as if she had been cloned from her in every way, except Corin was, always had been, a better dresser. The waitress thought he was trying to catch her attention and sauntered over,--he couldn't help it, there was her name written all over her lips, 'Corin.'

'No,-- mashed potatoes.' said the waitress.

'What about mashed potatoes?' asked Benny absently.

'We don't have any corn,-- only mashed potatoes today.'

She continued 'Ya wan' 'em?' She inquired,-- arching her frankfurter-like eyebrow, standing there poised with the two teas, milk and an English muffin cradled in her Brooklyn accent.

'I'd really like that picture of Tolstoi' replied Benny gesturing to where Shemyon still stood dispensing change.' Thirty six years working in Russia,' she said with a conspiratorial

cluck and that all he's got to show for it. A piece of genuinely sentimental photography. That is communism for you.' She put down the food onto the table with a professional dip of her hips, Benny thought it was a little too professional but refrained from commenting in view of the fact that he was there seated with a lady in his diminishing opinion.

'I am hungry', he said.

Benny caught the look right away. Some things you didn't have to be quick to find out about fast.

'So you're working for him?' he said, feeling the reassuring flatness against his right shoulder. Benny turned to Tommy with instant dislike on his mind. Just then a form stumbled in the door dripping like an oily remark just barely standing by the look of him. Benny recognized Edgar right away. He had apparently finished his staring contest with the ceiling and from the looks of it, he had lost. Benny looked furtively around and noticed the waitress standing in the doorway of the kitchen staring, as she took the gum out of her mouth, cocking a dubious eyebrow. This barely standing man had been Benny's upstairs neighbor until his wife had taken his matter in her own hands and threw him downstairs and out. That is how Edgar had recently come

to reside with Benny. He had taken a bad bounce at the bottom of the stairs and now showed it.

Edgar's wife had been a chubby black haired woman who wheeled around an invisible kid in her stroller. At least nobody ever saw the kid. Benny thought that perhaps the kid was very ugly and that was why nobody ever got to see it. Sometimes he had suspected that instead of a kid that she was wheeling around day-old newspapers. In fact, Edgar's wife reminded him of a newspaper article, with her pale complexion and black hair and her penchant for saying now let's stick to the facts. She always stuck to the facts. In fact, nobody stuck to the facts better than she. She was like Teflon in reverse. Once Benny had seen her and the perambulator in the hall of the apartment. He peeked in the carriage but as usual could see not even a trace of a baby. He had asked her,

'Mrs. Edgar?'

'Jeanette, --'

'Jeanette. Has there been any mail today?'

To which she replied, she supposed that there might have been but it seemed neither of them had gotten any, to which Benny had replied, 'Fine day.'

'Let's stick to the facts' she said and wheeled her newspaper out into the street with a groan.

The perambulator was in desperate need of oiling. Before she could extricate herself from him and the table, Tommy said 'Benny,--its been a long time.' He looked him up and down nodding his frank approval of both of them as Benny raised his beer to his lips about to take a sip. Corin took a last sip from her martini and left it with its uneaten olive staring at him like a big question mark from over the rim of the glass. 'Call off the gorilla.' Benny said softly.

'What?' said Tommy.

'You heard me,--call him off or he dies with a few fingers inside his lapel.',

'Benny old buddy,--'

'Now!'

Tommy stared at the bulge in Benny's waistband and signaled with his drink as Benny had requested.

'Okay,--now I think we have some business to discuss,--you turkey,' Benny said.

Tommy's jaw tightened as his hand inched its way toward his drink.

'Don't try it,--or you and the bozo will be wearing toetags in a refrigerator.'

Tommy's gaze again was riveted to the hint of metal peeking through the fringes of Benny's scarf. Suddenly he was all business.

'You win for now,' he said withdrawing his hand slowly from the glass and his jaw,--loosened.

'I think we better go into my office,' he said with a tersely loosened jaw.

'Fine,--just so you keep you arms swingin' in the breeze. Make like a birdie an flap 'em.'

There was the slightly fuzzy picture of the High School football team on the wall of the office. Benny allowed himself the luxury of glancing at it briefly.

'Benny, old buddy,-it really has been a long time. The way people can change in a few years, it's amazing. I almost didn't recognize you.'

'Cute picture,--' Benny said, taking out a cigarette with his free hand and lighting it.

'Ohh you mean with Byron getting that loving cup of beer poured all over his head.'

Well that's football.' Tommy continued in a conversational tone but keeping an eye on the gun. 'Somebody always trying to pour something over your head.'

'Yeah, or Stick something up your nose', replied Benny.

'What is that?,- How did you get Byron's old jersey. That is his number isn't it? Number fifty-two? What is it doing on your wall?'

'Byron gave it to me,--as a present.'

'Why?'

'Said he didn't need it.'

'He didn't need it alright,--because of you he became a big zero.'

Beads of sweat appeared on Tommy's forehead. 'So what do you want from me?' Tommy said smiling. 'So Byron got into the sharks for a few grand,' he continued unctuously. 'Is that my fault? So they broke his knees for him.' He shrugged.

'You helped him alot!'

Tommy shrugged again. 'It's a tough world.'

'You were his pusher!'

'A junkie is a junkie, -there is no sense in making a hero out of a junkie.'

The .22 caliber slug lodged in the bookcase behind Tommy's right ear after passing entirely through 'Dining out on the Riviera', guide. Benny figured it was alright because Tommy wasn't going to have much use for that particular book in the near future.

'Let me have all the stuff you have.' Benny said grimly.

'Do you want them to kill me?!' asked Tommy.

'That is not my particular problem,' replied Benny.

Tommy moved to the liquor sideboard and slipped the catch on a hidden drawer. Gingerly he lifted out a bag of white powder. He tossed it over to Benny who caught it deftly in his free hand.

'Finders keepers,' said Benny.

'You are a dead man once you walk outside the door.' Tommy said.

'I didn't know you were so concerned with my welfare.' said Benny, his voice edged with sarcasm.

'Now give me the rest of it.'

'The rest of,--'

Benny cut him off with a wave of the gun. Tommy inserted two fingers inside his belt buckle and came out with another bag, much smaller than the first of the white stuff.

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'They'll kill me!' Tommy whined.

'If you take this it is like throwing me to the sharks.'

'You should have thought of that before.' said Benny. Benny took the small package and put it inside his now empty cigarette pack. 'Losers weepers,' he said to Tommy.

He knew he had to ask the question. The more he knew he dreaded hearing the answer the more he knew he had to ask it. 'What about Corin?' as he asked, his eyes narrowed a fraction of an inch. A small motion, but not small enough to escape Tommy's notice.

'Nothing--I swear it' Tommy said regaining his composure.

'She only came to work for me because she needed money to buy a new water heater. I swear it. She played a few numbers on the piano and that's all.'

'A few Numbers eh?' said Benny wondering if Tommy had somehow sensed that there was something behind his probing.

'That's all! I swear!'

'Alright give me your closet key.'

'I don't have a closet.' said Tommy.

'What do you call that,' said Benny motioning to the liquor cabinet, 'a pork barrel?'

Tommy squeezed into the cabinet next to the sterling silver soda water dispenser.

'No extra charge.' said Benny as he walked out locking the cabinet.

Corin stood near the piano, taking off her gloves inch by finger.

'Ready to go?' he said sidling up to her.

'No,-- she ain't ready to go.' the hairy hand on his shoulder said. 'She's workin' here.'

'Oh yeah,' said Benny with measured tones,

'well, as of now she's on sick leave,--and so are you.'

Without turning around he plunged a fist, hurling at the sternum's junction with the gut,-the man crumpled like a tootsie-roll wrapper in a high wind. 'I'm impressed.' said Corin putting on her light jacket.

'Don't be,' said Benny grimly. 'He practically was begging for this occurrence.'

Edgar stood a foot away from where the sign saying 'Spring Concert' lay on the wooden floor. He weaved above it as if the words held some earth shattering meaning to him alone. 'Wednesday October 23rd,' the sign announced. Whether it was the sign or not, Edgar seemed intensely preoccupied with something or other. It was a private preoccupation. Private to Edgar and Edgar alone.

'Gimme change.' Edgar said to Semyon without altering the direction of the hollow eyed stare which was the finest look he could master.

'Things are looking up.' he said, pivoting to face the cigarette machine. Benny looked away from this scene of stealth and ignominy. He heard the somehow gregarious mechanics of the cigarette machine operate and then a loud thump. The force of contact with the Salem button had sent Edgar sprawling to the floor. The package of Salems lay in the tray of the machine which until now had harbored them in its bosom, its bosom which was divided into neat vertical compartments.

'That is a poor excuse to give up smoking.' thought Benny.

Shemyon took a step towards Benny and began waving his picture of Tolstoi almost in Benny's face.

'War and Peace.' said Benny.

'Dead.' said the agitated Russian man with the moustache.

'Same!' he said pointing to his moustache.

Benny looked at the moustache on Shemyon's face to which the Russian was pointing excitedly and at the one which adorned Edgar's immobile features. Edgar's was fuller and had a straight bristle. Benny had kidded Edgar and said that he should be in the Fuller Brush commercial, since what he had on his face was closest to what Benny thought a Fuller Brush might be. Benny had no conception that there might be many different kinds of Fuller Brushes. Benny stood up. The waitress murmured to no one in particular,-

'Bastard!' Benny nodded his agreement. Benny walked over to the prostrate figure, kneeled and began to shake him by the shoulders. 'Slap him,' said Corin suddenly appearing at his shoulder.

'I cannot slap him' said Benny.

'It is appropriate under the circumstances.' Elsa said.

Benny slapped him. 'Should I call his wife?' she continued.

'No,' said Benny 'She is too aesthetic,--this situation will result in an outpouring of banality. Mark my words.' Benny wasn't too sure what marking his words might mean or who would want to do such a thing, nevertheless, he felt it was the strongest expression he could use under the circumstances. He didn't like to swear in mixed company, especially if there were Russian nationals around. Shemyon stood near them wearing a worried expression on his face.

'I can't find his pulse' said Benny through clenched fingers.

'What's the matter?' Corin asked with concern in her voice.

'I do not know. All I know is that when I saw him before, he already was very high.'

'Some combination of booze and drugs I'll bet' she said.

'I'll call an ambulance.' She stood up and headed toward the phone.

'Need change?' queried Shemyon.

Benny was wondering what he would tell the police if they arrived or the ambulance men. Stick to the facts, he could hear Jeanette say to him, stick to the facts. What fact should he stick to, he wondered, on the rim of his own Teflon universe. Probably the old ladies knew he thought. Edgar opened his eyes.

'Tommy's za dope.' he said.

'What?' said Benny, but Edgar had already lost consciousness again. 'Why is Tommy a dope' wondered Benny. Benny then realized that Edgar had an Italian accent and that what he had actually said was 'Tommy's dope', and not 'Tommy is a dope,' Benny also realized then that if Jeanette was really wheeling a newspaper around, there was a nine out of ten chance that it was an Italian language daily. At that moment, for reasons which were hard to understand even to himself, Benny felt a deep unspoken bond with all the

proofreaders in the world. Without knowing why, Benny reached into the pocket of the frayed coat which Edgar wore. Sure enough, his fingers bumped up against the smooth barrel of the metal object. Benny knew right away what he had to do. With a glance toward Elsa who was still on the phone, he reassured himself-that she was not looking and removed it from Edgar's pocket and hid it in his pants. Then he

reached over to the cigarette machine and picked up the package of Salems. 'Need more change?' asked Semyon.

'No,' said Benny, 'things have changed enough already'.