

## Mr. Q: A Memoir

By Linda D. Brewer

The party was over but Mary was still there. I didn't mind. It was the first birthday party I'd ever had, and the cake was white and soft, not heavy and wholewheatish like most of my mom's baked goods. My mom tried calling Mary's parents but they didn't answer.

"They're probably killing chickens," my grandma said. "Toni at the store told me that Terri just bought a new axe. Chickens, or each other."

"You girls play outside for a while," my mom said. Mary and I had been having a tea party in the living room with my dolls. Mary's party dress had soaked up a cup of fruit punch and was sticking to her fat tummy. "Hold still. You've got icing in your hair," my mom said in an exasperated voice, dabbing at Mary's hair with a damp towel. She whispered, "born in a barn," and my grandma nodded. I was now five years old, and I had chosen to wear my cowboy boots and red cowboy hat along with my lacy party dress. I hadn't taken the hat off all day, not even when my grandma, with a significant look at Mary, offered to check our heads for lice.

It was July and sunny outside. I spied a crow sitting on a branch of the cedar tree behind the store. It rose and flew until it blended in with the trees on Panther Mountain. My front yard was nicer than Mary's, with thick green grass and pansies around the edges and a narrow side yard that went around to the back. The grass back there was wilder and higher. Trees and blackberry bushes grew like a jungle at the back, along the edge of Lake Creek. Mary lived down the road on a farm. Her front yard was just tough grass with a goat parked in the middle of it. I'd only been there once that I could remember. There was a funny smell in the air that made my parents laugh. The goat made me cry.

"Don't go out of the gate. Don't pick any flowers but dandelions," my mother told us.

"There aren't any dandelions," Mary said in a bewildered voice, and I said, "Ha ha, joke's on you," because I had come to realize that Mary wasn't much fun unless I made fun of her. I grabbed my stick horse from the porch and galloped across the yard.

“Let Mary ride your horse sometimes,” my mom called.

“She can be the princess,” I yelled back. “Princesses don’t get to ride.”

“I have a real horse at my house,” Mary said. She came down the steps and pretend-galloped after me.

It was probably the first time in my life I envied anyone. I said, “If a horse kicks you in the head you go around the bend.”

“My horse doesn’t kick me,” Mary said. She stopped to catch her breath. “She’s eighteen years old. Do you think she will die?”

I said, “Everybody has to die.” We stared at each other for a moment, digesting this idea. I said, “My horse can fly.” I tossed my stick horse up in the air. It landed on the grass, its plastic reins tangled, its big plastic eyes staring up at the sky.

“That’s not flying,” Mary said. She stuck her finger in her nose and looked at me as if she expected more.

I picked up the stick horse and stepped back to the edge of the flower bed. I faced the house and tossed my horse as hard as I could, using both hands. I was surprised when the horse flew over my head and landed behind me on the other side of the fence. It lay with its stick end at the edge of the ditch and its head on the road.

“It’s going to get runned over,” Mary said.

The toes of my cowboy boots fit in the spaces between the wires. The fence shook a little when I got to the top, but I got one leg and then the other over and started down the other side. Halfway down, my party dress caught on a piece of wire. I hung a moment and heard the sound of tearing cloth. When I looked down I saw that the skirt of my dress had ripped right down the middle. There were my flowery underpants, spotted with fruit punch and grass stains. Interesting, I thought, the way the two halves of my dress fluttered like lace curtains around my legs.

I scrambled up the side of the ditch and picked my horse off the road. One of its eyes had come off. I put it down the top of my right boot for later. I looked across the road to the Wide store, with its scratched green door and the two gas pumps out front and the shed at the end, where my dad said monsters lived. Mr. Q

stood in the doorway holding a push broom too big for the little patch of concrete around the gas pumps. Mr. Q gave me candy when I went to the store with my mom. "Let's get some candy," I yelled over my shoulder to Mary, who still stood in the yard looking through the wire fence like a plump little prisoner.

When I looked around again Mr. Q was running across the road towards me. He picked me and my stick horse up and jumped into the ditch. The stick end of my horse hit him on the forehead and he said, "Ouch." A red car went past fast. Mr. Q stepped over the fence, squashing a pansy with his big shoe.

I said, "Be careful, you silly."

"Are you girls playing nice?" my mom called through the open door. She came out onto the porch and then she ran down the steps into the yard.

"What are you doing with her?" she said to Mr. Q. Her voice was sharp. "Put her down."

I said, "I want down now." I wiggled and he let me slip out of his arms.

"The child was in the road. A car was coming. Fortunately no harm done," Mr. Q said.

"I didn't hear a car," Dawn's mother said. "There aren't any cars." She looked up and down the empty road.

"Do you have any candy?" I asked. Mr. Q said, "I'm afraid not." He took his yellow pointy pencil from behind his ear and gave it to me.

"What are you giving her? What were you doing with my child?" my mom said. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away from him.

"Nothing. Nothing untoward. The point is, she was in the middle of the road. I brought her back," Mr. Q said. He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and patted his forehead, which had a purple lump in the middle of it.

"Did you open the gate?" my mom asked me.

I said, "No."

"Did Dawn open the gate, Mary?" my mom asked her.

Mary shook her head no.

My mom told Mr. Q to leave. He patted my head and my mom said, “Don’t touch her. Don’t speak to her. Don’t even look at her. Just leave her completely alone.” She took us inside and made us stand side by side while she asked us questions. “What happened to your dress? Did Mr. Q do anything to you?”

“He picked me up,” I said. I didn’t want to say the part about climbing the fence for fear of getting a spanking when my dad came home. If Mr. Q hadn’t picked me up, I now realized, the red car might have run over my horse. In the winter my dad had backed his pickup over my doll stroller with my Christmas doll Sally inside it. Remembering poor Sally made me want to cry, so I did, a little.

Mary said, “I have a real horse, not just a pretend stick horse,” so I kicked her and she cried.

My mom put her arm around me. “What did he do, honey? You can tell me.” In my mind’s eye I saw poor Sally’s squashed rubber head and sobbed. “I hate to think what he had in mind,” my mom whispered to my grandma.

“I wish you would call the deputy,” my grandma said.

“You know I can’t, Lorraine. I wonder if Toni saw anything.”

“Oh, she’ll stick up for Mr. Q no matter what,” my grandma said. “She’s his niece.”

“I’ve always wondered about that, too. He’s twenty-eight and she’s twenty-three. How can that be?”

“Big family? Sounds fishy to me.” My grandmother shrugged. She wore faded jeans and her favorite red sweatshirt and her hair was dark but turning gray because of all the trouble in the world.

When my dad came home he asked me if I wanted to hear Pink Floyd and I said I did. He pulled me onto his lap and let me listen with the headphones. I heard him say, “He’s either a perve or a doofus. I vote for doofus. He’s probably a virgin.” My mom said, “Manny. Enough.”

I didn’t go in the store for a long time, maybe three years. My mom waited at the edge of the gravel parking lot where the bus stopped, and waited for me there when the bus stopped after school. Then one day my mom handed my dad a shopping list and he said he was tired of not being able to come straight home after work. “Q’s not going to do anything. I’ll kill him if he does.” From then on I went to the store with my mom again, but Mr. Q didn’t speak to me or even look at me. I

seemed to remember that when I was little he had always given me a piece of candy when I came in the store, but now my mom had to buy candy in bags and my dad ended up eating most of it.

Lake Creek Lumber went out of business because the spotted owls had to be saved. On the eighth grade debate team I spoke for saving the innocent little spotted owls. “Wait until you have to pay the bills,” my dad said. My mom started making jam from the blackberries that grew along the bank of Lake Creek behind our house. She set up a display in a corner of Mr. Q’s store, with jars of jam in a basket, checked napkins artistically crumpled around them. She told my dad to try for a job in the hospitality industry, and he did get a job as a cook in a fish and chip café in old town Florence. He came home one afternoon, early, smelling of fish and grease and said he was free, free as a bird. He’d had to shave his beard and moustache to get the job and he looked young, like some goofy boy I might know in school.

“What happened?” my mom asked.

“There was a fly in the ointment,” he said. “A lady from Sacramento found it in her super cod basket.” He sat around the house moping until the day old man Tappendorf’s truck broke down in front of the store. My dad and I were there replenishing my mom’s jam display, and he volunteered to try to fix it. Mr. Q came out and watched him work on it awhile.

“You don’t happen to have an auto repair manual, do you?” my dad asked. “I could fix it if I had a manual.”

“In the library in Eugene,” Mr. Q said, and my dad said, “Aah, I don’t want to go all that way just for a book. I’ll think of something else. I’ve still got resources.”

Sometimes my mom ambushed me with embarrassing questions about Mr. Q. Did he look at me? No. Did I think he wanted to look at me? I didn’t know or care. How did he seem? Boring. Today my mom’s questions were all for my dad. While we had been at the store she had gone out to pick berries from the far back bushes, where Lake Creek ran under the bridge. In a little hidden plot under her favorite maple tree she had discovered four dozen marijuana plants, small but flourishing.

“Private consumption is one thing, but you’ve got enough planted to get everybody in Wide high as a kite,” she said to my dad in a choked voice. Her

hands were scratched, her dark hair had leaves in it. “Here I’m thinking I’ll make a little money off my jam to tide us over, like a simpleton, and you’re planning to become a drug kingpin.”

“You’re not a simpleton,” my dad said. “You’re beautiful.” He tried to put his arms around her.

“You know there are people around here who would just love to call the deputy over a thing like this.”

“They never called before.”

“That was only a couple of plants.” She looked at me. “You’d have found out sooner or later. Your dad and I believe marijuana should be legal.”

“We’re in the vanguard,” my dad said.

“But this is too much. We’re not going into business with it. It’s against my principles. I’m not going to speak to you until those plants are gone. And don’t use Dawn as a go-between. I want her to enjoy an unspoiled childhood.”

She didn’t speak, and she didn’t speak and my dad looked more and more hopeless. He was growing his beard again and it was coming in gray, so instead of looking like a goofy boy he looked like a goofy boy’s grandpa. I was fed up with both of them. One day when I got off the school bus I went into the store and found Mr. Q putting cans of corn and beans on the grocery shelf. Boring, I told my mother, but privately I thought he was pitiable, trapped here in this wide spot in the road. I said, “I know you’re not supposed to talk to me, but you can listen when I talk. My dad needs an auto repair manual so he can work on cars and keep out of trouble. I would go to Eugene and buy him one if I could, but I can’t.” I put ten dollars on the counter. “Please get him one if at all possible. Thank you.” He didn’t look at me the whole time I was speaking, but he nodded, with his eyes cast down. I wondered if adults in the rest of the world were as useless as they were in Wide, Oregon.

The next week the bookmobile came to Wide. I had heard of a bookmobile, but I had never seen one. My dad and I stood in line and Mr. Q came out of the store and stood in line behind us. He told my dad he liked adventure stories about good men fighting injustice. My dad said he just wanted to read an auto repair manual. Mary was there, hoping for a book on horse training. Her old horse had died and she had a new one now—newer. “She’s twelve, she’s really gentle but she doesn’t know how to do a lot of things,” she said. Mary was pretty now, in a

plump, smiley way. Everybody liked her and I had an uneasy feeling she'd gotten ahead of me where boys were concerned. "She's an easy kid to like," my mom said, and I felt the implication that I should be more like Mary. Mary liked books about horses and teen romance. I liked adventure stories in which a girl about my age nearly froze to death on a glaciated mountain while saving someone's life. There weren't many books about girls on glaciers, so I was writing one in my spare time. I couldn't tell Mr. Q this, of course. The victim on the glacier in my story was starting to look like him, when I remembered to put in description.

Mr. Q told my dad there would be an auto repair manual in the bookmobile and indeed there was. The librarian wouldn't let my dad check it out, but she gave him a piece of paper and a pencil so he could read it and take notes. When he was finished she made him hand it over and she locked it in the reference book box before she drove on to Triangle Lake.

The next day my dad fixed Tappendorf's truck. Tappendorf gave him ten dollars and drove the truck a hundred yards down the road to his driveway and parked it.

"My wife collects ten dollar bills," my dad said to Mr. Q after Tappendorf left. "She'd rather collect hundreds."

"You need volume," Mr. Q said. "Fix two or three a day and you'd make out okay." It was Toni, Mr. Q's niece who stopped snapping her gum long enough to suggest my dad could use the shed at the far end of the store as a makeshift garage if he wanted. My father's eyes gleamed. "I'd pay you rent," he said. Mr. Q shook his head. "Just keep away the monsters," he said with a faint smile.

The shed's concrete floor was covered with a layer of leaves and cedar twigs. There was a trouble light with a cracked cord hanging from a nail. "I'd get a new one," my dad said. The windows were festooned with spiderwebs. At the back I found a football helmet and a stack of deteriorating cardboard boxes. The one on top was full of old Boy's Lives. I asked my dad if I could read them and he said I had to ask Mr. Q.

"He won't tell me yes or no," I said. "Not since mom cursed him like a witch."

"Your mom's a saint," my dad said. He went into the store with me and asked Mr. Q if I could read the magazines.

He said, "She can have them if she wants." He came over to the shed and talked to my dad about getting a fire extinguisher and some used equipment from a place in Eugene. My dad said he might be able to get some tools cheap from the Lake Creek Lumber auction. I dug into the box and began to read an article about how to make snowshoes out of willow wands.

My mom was boiling jam jars in her big kettle on the stove. It occurred to me that I should step in and help her with the jam business, but I didn't want to make jam, not until circumstances forced me to. I said, "Mom, dad has some news for you," and I went out and sat on the back steps with an armful of Boy's Lifes.

My dad said, "I'm opening a garage in the shed by the store. I'm calling it Spotted Owl Garage."

My mom didn't say anything.

"I was going to discuss it with you but you were incommunicado," my dad said. "Q's the one who encouraged me." He went on talking. She went on not talking. I walked through the tall grass until I came to an alder tree I'd carved my name on when I was younger. "Dawn" in a heart with a plus sign and nobody else's name under it. I stepped down the bank to the creek and watched the crawdads crawl around under water until I figured my parents were back to being friends again.

The next Saturday I was waiting in line for the bookmobile down at the store when I smelled a familiar smell. I had known that odor since I was little, the way some people know their mother's perfume. Old man Tappendorf in line ahead of me sniffed and said, "Brush fire." Mary said to him, "It smells like grass, you know, like Dawn's dad smokes." Mr. Q, in line behind me with an armload of adventure stories to exchange, grunted. I turned around and he was not looking at me but down the road, where, I thought, all real life came from and all life went away again.

All of a sudden a car full of teenage boys pulled in, but instead of stopping at the gas pumps they drove around them in a circle. They had all the car windows open and they were yelling and laughing, "Hey, is everybody here baked? Are you all stoned or what?" The car made another circle, swooping onto the road and then back around the bookmobile. It ended up at the gas pumps and the driver honked. Mr. Q set down his stack of books and went over to the car. On the way he grabbed



his long-handled squeegee from the bucket and held it as if he wanted to knock some heads with it.

“Fillerup,” the driver said. They were all wearing black T-shirts, which made them look scary. The short, skinny boy in the driver’s seat, looked the meanest, sort of like a possum, with small, snaggly teeth. The librarian pulled the bus door shut and peered out the window. Mr. Q put the nozzle in the tank and let it run for a couple of minutes and then pulled it out again.

“Two gallons will get you home. You can fillerup there.”

“Shit, man,” the driver said. Toni, who must have been snoozing in front of her television set in the back of the store, appeared in the doorway holding her little dog against her shoulder like a baby. Both of them had their mouths open, panting.

Mr. Q raised his squeegee. “Get going. Get out of here.”

I remembered that I had my camera in my backpack. I grabbed it out and took a picture without worrying about focusing. “She’s taking pictures of you, Jase,” one of the boys said. I took another picture.

The driver stepped on the gas. As the car took off, one of the boys reached out his window and grabbed Mr. Q’s squeegee. Mr. Q ran alongside the car, trying to wrest it back. The driver floored it, the boy let go of the squeegee, and Mr. Q fell to the ground. I ran to help him and Mary joined me. “That’s Jason Kohler. He’s not really that bad. He wants me to be his girlfriend,” she said.

I wanted to think about what she had just said, but for the moment I said, “I’ll get some paper towels and water. You stay with the victim.”

He was sitting up when I got back. Mary was sitting beside him, gazing at him like a loyal pet. He was talking to her and I felt a twinge of jealousy. I squatted beside him and tore off a paper towel. He had a bloody scrape on his chin. I poured water on the paper towel and tried to wash the dirt out according to the first aid instructions I had read in Boy’s Life. Mary’s mother Terri came over and tried to help him stand up, but I wouldn’t let him until I looked into his eyes to see if his pupils were the same size. They were both small because it was a bright day. “Your hands are a mess,” Terri said to him. I could feel Terri and Mary starting to take over the first aid situation, so I grabbed Mr. Q’s arm and I knew how he would feel the next morning, limping stiff-legged around the store, thinking how he could

have handled it differently. His arm was muscular under his plaid shirt. I was surprised at how muscular it was and by how much I wanted to keep holding onto it to test its strength. He took a step and winced, but kept walking.

“He needs to wash his hands in soapy water and his knees, too, and put bandages on them with tape that won’t stick,” I told Toni. I played softball at school and had scraped a few knees myself. I knew how he would feel the next morning, limping stiff-legged around the store, thinking how he could have handled it differently.

The librarian opened the bookmobile door. I picked up my backpack and Mr. Q’s stack of books and climbed the steps. “Books to return?” the librarian asked. I gave her the books and then I realized that Mr. Q wouldn’t be able to check out any books. I chose the thickest book on the fiction shelf. It was called, “Don Quixote.” Mr. Q’s first name was Don. His last name was Quillon, not quite the same but close enough. The cover had a drawing of a knight on it, with a lance and shield. He was bound to like it.

“It might be heavy going for you,” the librarian said, which irked me.

“It’s for Mr. Q,” I said.

“If you think he’ll like it,” she said in a doubtful voice.

“He will, believe me,” I said, but I took it home with me so I could skim through it first, just in case it turned out to be terrible.

The marijuana plants were still smoldering, down under the maple tree. Our house stunk. My mother was sprawled in her favorite chair with her feet up on the hassock. Her hair had come loose from the elastic and it looked like a cloud of gnats was flying around her head. My dad was lying on the couch. They were both filthy and sunburned. I said, “I’ve had a hell of an afternoon. I hope there’s some ice cream.”

They looked at me and then at each other. My mom said, “Your father almost burned down my beautiful maple tree.”

My dad said, “Your mom almost drowned me with the hose.” He grinned, his teeth white in his dirty face. “What we’re trying to say is, we ate all the ice cream.”

“Among other things,” my mom said. They giggled, lying there like a couple of crazy kids. I stomped out of the room, listing in my mind all the things that were wrong with them. One thing was that they always had the most fun when I wasn’t there.

My dad was in the Spotted Owl Garage working on Mr. Tuttle’s work pickup, an old red Chevy that had racked up a hundred thousand miles before the odometer stopped working. It was about eleven o’clock in the morning on a Friday and I had skipped school because the rhododendrons beside the store were blooming and I decided I needed to photograph them. I was trying for an arty close-up of a blossom when I heard a buzzing like two huge bees harmonizing.

I went around to the front. Two black motorcycles glided off the road and pulled up to the gas pumps. A tall man in black leather got off his motorcycle and removed his helmet. The other motorcyclist took off hers. They both had long hair, but hers fell past her shoulders, a gleaming pale curtain. They were the two most beautiful people I had ever seen, both tall and slender, but strong-looking. The leather clothes made them look as if they’d just jumped down off a poster for Living the Dream. Mr. Q came out of the store, and my dad looked up from the car he was working on and stared.

They were from Germany, they said. They were traveling across the United States on motorcycles because they wanted to and they could. Mr. Q admired their motorcycles and asked all kinds of questions about their route and provisions. My father ambled over and got into the mix. I wanted to get closer, but it felt gauche to me to subject them to the stares of the hick inhabitants of Wide, short for Widespot, Oregon. The woman went into the store and I got up the nerve to go in after her. She looked at everything, which made me look, too. There were the canned goods and rubber boots and the tub of night crawlers and the cooler of beer. Honey in bottles shaped like bears and home haircutting sets. Cigarettes, coloring books, hair dye in three colors, and fishing tackle. Bags of dog food, frying pans, and four tubes of ruby-colored lipstick.

I said, “It’s rather eclectic, I’m afraid.”

“It’s charming,” she said in her charming accent. “It reminds me of a little place in Germany where I used to go with my family for fishing.”

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Angelika. My boyfriend’s name is Rainer.” She asked me my name and I felt how bland and overused it was.

When they finally put their helmets back on and mounted their motorcycles and drove away I remembered my camera just in time to get a view of the road with two sleek black shapes disappearing down it. I was supposed to leave for college in September. I made a mental note to study German.

Mr. Q left Wide two weeks later on a second-hand Kawasaki my dad had tuned up for him. “He packed some sandwiches and told me to watch the store and just left,” Toni said.

“He’s hoping he’ll find a beautiful girl to ride behind him on his bike,” my dad said to my mom when he came home for lunch.

“Fat chance,” my mom said.

“There’s always a chance. Some girl hitchhiking.

“He’d better not stop. She’s bound to have a knife.”

“No,” my dad said, shocked.

“Manny. I’d have a knife if I were a girl hitchhiking.”

Three days later Mr. Q came back. The motorcycle had gone off the road with him on it, was all he said. It was hard to know what had happened because he was banged up and bruised and also, I thought, very embarrassed. I could see the words in my head: “And thus our adventurer set off. And thus he returned,” with nothing to brag about in between except eating sandwiches and slapping at mosquitoes.

“I think he’ll stay home now he’s got it out of his system,” Toni told my mom.

“Why did he go in the first place?” my mom asked.

Toni said, “He read some book about a knight going forth. He said it touched a chord in him.” She laughed the way she usually did when she talked about Mr. Q, and my mom laughed the way she had started laughing once she decided he didn’t have it in him to be a child molester or a lawbreaker of any kind. It made me angry. I had skimmed “Don Quixote.” I had decided it was suitable and I’d given it to Mr. Q to read. I’d skipped over a lot of the repetitious adventures

and gone to the end, which had made me cry. I went into the store where Mr. Q was sitting on a folding chair behind the counter. He had a blue bruise on his cheekbone and a patch of road rash on his upper arm. I said, "We have to talk."

He looked me in the eye. "Wonderful. I have so many things I want to tell you."

He said he would buy me a leather jacket the minute we came to civilization.

I left a note for my mom. "Don't worry. I have a knife."