

Seven Stories Below

a short story by Lee Godden

[Note: This bittersweet 4000-word fiction piece was published in Lava Magazine's January 1995 issue. There was a minor bidding war between two competing magazines for this story, but Lava editor Michael McCullough was the most persuasive.]



One

Frankie considered the pigeon and almost laughed. Thrusting its little gray head forward with each step, searching for tiny morsels, the pigeon seemed quite unaware of Frankie, just two feet away. Together, six-inch bird and six-foot bum stood atop a rooftop guardrail that crowned a building seven stories high. Below on the sidewalk, people scurried about during their lunch hour. It was “prime time” and Frankie would usually be down there, panhandling for quarters. But not today. Never again. A gust of wind pushed Frankie sideways and he had to wave his arms to regain balance. He would jump when he was good and ready.

Carmine rolled slightly to her left, scratched her butt and yawned. A wayward sofa spring pressed into her back, but she was used to it. With a practiced eye Carmine scanned the room and quickly located the TV's remote control on top of a bean bag chair ten feet away. She cursed its remoteness and resigned herself to another half hour of Oprah.

Edna glided her tan, lithe body in front of the full length mirror and assumed a classic body-builder pose. She was quite pleased with her triceps. Edna reached into an ever-present can of black olives, popped one into her mouth and bit down hard. A loud crack accompanied a sharp pain in her molars. Her immediate thought: Pitted, my ass!

Chrissy told me that just one or two fleas can make for a night of little sleep. Or so she said. I don't think Chrissy would lie to me, but she's a tabby, so you never know. It was true, she needed a flea bath, but I didn't have the time. And cats have no conception of time.

Luis thought about starting a dental floss recycling business, but like 99% of all great ideas, it vanished after a few seconds. Luis' head was a train tunnel of ideas that sped out just as quickly as they entered. All he knew was, he wasn't a white-collar, eight hour-a-day kind of guy. And yet, for the last twelve years, here he'd been. Ten purchase requisitions sat patiently in his in-box. The phone's voice-mail-waiting light flashed insistently. Luis sighed unhappily.

Dean Martin and Howard Hughes shared an extinguished Flaming Mai Tai with two straws in a gloss red booth in a dimly-lit, funny-smelling strip joint in the bad part of Las Vegas in February of 1975. Dean, dressed to the nines and wearing shades, asked a two-part question of his rag-tag friend: “Is hermit a verb, and if so, will you show me how?” Howard sucked long and hard on his straw (the blue one) before replying: “Yes and no.”

Punrhajibina Tansalijhralira's first day in America was spent enthusiastically filling out applications at fast food restaurants. His name wouldn't fit in the spaces on the application form at Carl's Jr. Two white, 18 year-old shift managers conferred with each other then approached the young immigrant.

“Hey, Salami-man, your accent is way out-a-sight too strong. Why don’t you try 7-11? You’d fit in better there.” The two acne-faced managers placed a souvenir paper hat on his head and laughed as they escorted him out the door. Punrhabijina stood shivering in the cold, wondering if “711” was the address of a Carl’s Jr. in which Indian accents would be acceptable.

Two

Frankie’s Poppa taught him the meaning of life by encouraging four year-old Frankie to jump from the sofa into Poppa’s arms. Like Lucy pulling away the football before Charlie Brown can kick it, Poppa would always jump back, letting his brown-haired son fall hard onto the thin mobile home carpet. It would hurt, but they would laugh together, father drinking beer, son drinking Pepsi. Frankie now scratched his thin, dirt-encrusted beard and wondered what was so funny.

Carmine, during the commercials, felt a bulge in her pocket and pulled out a stained napkin from the StarLite Club, a telephone number scrawled across it. She grinned to herself, remembering dancing with a big, swarthy man wearing lots of gold jewelry last night. At closing time she had let him cop a quick tit feel in return for the expensive drinks he’d bought her. He suggested they go to his place for the night, but she had a rule: no sex until the second date. Hence, the napkin. Maybe, she thought, this guy was different from the last gazillion jerks she’d tried. She dialed the number from the napkin and he answered. Seven weeks later they were married.

Edna, back from the dentist with a still-numb mouth, thought about pi, which she knew was 3.1415 ad infinitum. Edna walked into the bedroom, took off all of her clothes, and admired her muscular form in the closet mirror. She found a tape and measured her right calf muscle. The circumference was 14”. After calculating diameter as function of circumference divided by pi, Edna created a new column—“diameter”—next to the one labeled “circumference” in her well-worn workout logbook. The first entry was “4.46.”

Chrissy gave me The Look as she gnawed on the hard crust of a mostly-eaten submarine sandwich I had tossed into her dish. When you’re out of dry cat food you have to improvise. She wasn’t thrilled, as The Look plainly communicated. Yes, I replied, I would buy some real cat food tomorrow. Cats can be quite bossy at times. But, hey, let’s face it---she had a good point.

Luis saw the boss walking over and, like a gift from God, the telephone rang. “Composite Fabrication Purchasing, Luis speaking, may I help you?” he chimed. It was a wrong number, but Luis seized the opportunity and umm’d and uh-huh’d into the telephone even though the apologetic caller had hung up long before. The boss whispered “please see me” and left. A few seconds later Luis put down the phone and rubbed his eyes so hard that everything was blurry when he opened them. He hated his job but there seemed no way out.

Dean Martin was liked by Howard Hughes, but they could never be close friends, even though they talked for hours at a time. Dean couldn’t, or wouldn’t, grasp this simple truth. The elevator doors opened at the penthouse level and Howard stepped out. Dean stayed inside and asked, “See you at Fat Jacks again tomorrow?” Howard raised his bushy eyebrows and replied, “If you do, you do.” He walked past a waiting bodyguard into his massive apartment. On the way down, Dean smiled to himself. He’d be

there, all right.

Punrhabijina Tansalijhralira, on the advice of a young prostitute he'd befriended at a bus stop on Hollywood Boulevard, changed his name to Pune Tan. He found a \$2-an-hour job at a place whose name few can say three times really fast: Shoe Shine City. The tips were good and Pune quickly mastered the old-fashioned "Johnson" method. Then he began improving on it. Pune was working in the country he loved and it felt marvelous.

Three

Frankie's Poppa wasn't cruel, he just drank a lot. Frankie pondered this while looking down, past his mismatched shoes, to the bustling avenue. Cars moved in sluggish waves from red light to red light. He secretly wished they were all convertibles. With Poppa drunk on the sofa, ten year-old Frankie would use a pair of rusty pliers to bend and peel off the stamped steel roof from every toy Matchbox car he owned. That way he could see the detail inside. After Poppa shot himself, thirteen year-old Frankie became a street person, invisible to the State of California Child Welfare Agency. He would cruise the boulevards with a most prized collection of convertibles jangling in his pocket. Some of his kinder johns would occasionally surprise him with a new one.

Carmine liked the idea of being a housewife at first. But Middle Eastern men have strict rules regarding a wife's behavior. She didn't know exactly what he did during the day---something about exports or imports--- and she didn't know how much he made. The suburban house he owned was large and filled with fine ornaments from "Persia." But Carmine could find Persia on no map. He slapped her face the first and only time she asked him if he was Iranian. Carmine slipped into a depression, made worse by the forty pounds she had gained by stuffing herself on fine Persian chocolates.

Edna was reeling from the endorphin rush created by over two hours of heavy weight lifting. Mesmerized by her reflection in the gym mirror, she didn't notice the slender man standing next to her. He finally cleared his throat and asked if she was finished with the incline bench. "It's all yours," she replied, tossing a towel over her shoulder and strutting toward the locker room door marked with the international "woman" sign.

Chrissy licked her fur while I studied her. What do cats do for fun? I wondered aloud. What's fun? she replied. Fun is what we humans try to have when we feel bored, I answered. What's bored? she persisted. Bored is what we feel when we're not doing something meaningful. What's meaningful? Exasperated, I walked back into the house. Having a cat is like having a three-year old. They're so curious!

Luis walked slump-shouldered into his boss' office. The boss closed the door and sat down with a grimace. "Luis, your job performance is horrible. I've warned you that this could happen. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go today. I'd like you to box up your things and meet me in the lobby in twenty minutes. I'll have your final paycheck ready. Do you have anything to say?" A single tear coursed down Luis' cheek. He smiled and said, "Yes. Thank you."

Dean Martin's knuckles were red from knocking on Howard Hughes' door. Finally a Hulk Hogan look-alike opened the door a few inches. "Oh, it's you. Look Mr. Martin, Mr. Hughes isn't feeling very well

today. Can you come back in a few days?" The door closed without waiting for a reply. Dean heard the unmistakable sounds of someone retching. He shrugged and turned back to the polished brass elevator. His headliner show at Caesars Palace would begin in two hours.

Pune was rapidly promoted to Head Shiner within a few months. It was hard work but he was gaining a regular clientele. Pune made new friends easily. His favorite was a pretty girl with big blue eyes. He was truly happy, especially with his increasing mastery of slang phrases such as "Groovy, man." He wrote a letter to his parents in India every Sunday, describing his fortune and prosperity.

Four

Frankie had no fear. He simply stepped off the roof and felt his stomach tighten just as it did when Poppa would thrill eight year-old Frankie by stepping on the gas and "roller-coastering" his pickup truck down a steep hill. As he fell, Frankie noticed the little gnome figures carved into the stone facade of the building across the street. A very old building, he surmised. Frankie let the rushing air push his arms up to shoulder height. For the first time in his life he felt exhilarated and powerful.

Carmine's outlook improved somewhat during a brief role as the local Tupperware saleslady. Although she didn't need the money or the airtight cereal containers, Carmine loved spending time with other women. Their houses didn't have as many exotic knickknacks, bric-a-brac and whatnot as Carmine's, but they did have something that Carmine desperately wanted---children. She was pregnant seven weeks later.

Edna's Australian lover, Sheila, moaned sleepily as Edna slipped off the disheveled sheets and walked to the bathroom. Two pairs of panties rested on the toilet lid. The air was thick with the smell of stale perfume and sex. It was four in the morning. Edna leaned forward and examined her deeper-than-ever wrinkles in the mirror. She blew an insincere kiss to herself, peed, and returned to the bedroom. The sight of young Sheila's exposed breasts brought Edna to a state of renewed arousal.

Chrissy was noisily hunting around in the garbage cans outside. It didn't make sense, I thought. She had plenty of K-Mart Kitty Krispies in her bowl. Then I remembered the Domino's pizza crusts that I had thrown out after dinner. She was almost certainly going after them. Stop it, I commanded. The noise stopped. I smiled to myself. Chrissy was probably just bored, trying to have a little fun.

Luis stuffed his most prized possessions into the station wagon. Seven hours and two tankfuls of gas later, he stood at the side of the road to watch the desert sun set. It was beautiful, eliciting another tear to fall. He would stop here for the night. During the last minutes of daylight he wandered through the sagebrush and found a piece of cardboard. Luis was struck with a new idea. With a pen he wrote "IDEAS - \$1" and wedged the makeshift sign under the wiper blade of the car's rear window. There was no civilization in sight. He crawled into the back seat and curled up. Luis slept well that night.

Dean Martin looked at his filthy friend across the table. "My wife called last night." Howard Hughes continued eating his clam chowder. Dean went on: "I thought she'd given up on me. Maybe there's a chance we could, you know, work things out." Howard looked up, burped, and wiped a grimy hand across his crumb-filled moustache. "Dean, go. Just go. I don't know what you want from me. I don't

want to see you again. Go home to your family.” And Dean would never see Howard again.

Pune saved enough money to buy a used ‘71 Ford Pinto for \$650. He had perfected a unique pressure-swirl method of shining shoes that created an enduring luster in less than a minute. The owner of Shoe Shine City retired and left the business to Pune. Customers would line up outside, waiting for one of Pune’s employees to give them “that ol’ Pune shine.” Pune’s girlfriend worked the cash register. They shared a rare love.

Five

Frankie was falling fast now. He could feel the skin on his face vibrate as he cut through the air. He briefly tried assuming a head-first diving position, but Frankie seemed locked into a crucifixion-style “T.” Pictures and sounds danced across his head: Poppa’s face. Always laughing. The thunderous gunshot from the bedroom. Blood. Sirens. Sympathy in the eyes of strangers. The shame of living on the street. Tears ran upwards, from Frankie’s eyes to his brown hair. It was becoming harder to inhale.

Carmine’s husband wouldn’t shut up. He just went on and on, ranting and raving about A Girl. How could he face his friends with A Girl? How can A Girl carry on his father’s proud lineage? Carmine had named the baby Shehada, after her husband’s mother in Persia. But it didn’t matter. His ultimate message: Bear me A Boy, and do it quickly! He stormed out of the delivery room. The doctor, her hands still wet from the healthy, squirming baby’s sticky covering, tried to console Carmine. But Carmine shook her head and forced back the tears. This, she knew, would make her strong. And she would bear no more children for her husband.

Edna tried to move to Australia to be with her lover, but the Australian Consulate refused to issue a visa since lesbian couples were not officially recognized. The stress of months of dealing with bureaucracies took its toll, and the pair split up. Edna, for the first time in nine years, had given up regular weight training. She looked in the mirror and hated what she saw. She vowed to get back into shape.

Chrissy gave birth to four healthy kittens. She tirelessly licked and cleaned them until their fur shined. Then she slept as the little ones mewed. Chrissy had become A Mom. I sat on a stool, watching the life-giving process with awe, until Chrissy woke up. I told her how proud of her I was. It’s tough to tell if a cat can smile or not, but I’m pretty sure she did, if only for a moment. She said that I should just make sure there’s always fresh food and water in the dish from now on. I vigorously agreed.

Luis awoke to a tapping on the car window. He rubbed his eyes and focused on a young lady standing outside in the early dawn. He rolled down the window. “I’m fresh out of ideas,” she said with an impish grin. She was plain, brunette, yet glowing. A dilapidated, old Volkswagen bus was parked behind him on the side of the road. Luis sat up, smiled, and he began to share some of his ideas. Five minutes later he finished with, “That’ll be one dollar, please.” Her name was Felicity, and that evening, after a day of laughter, they began a lifelong friendship with each other.

Dean Martin and his wife divorced two years after he left Las Vegas. Howard’s death had been reported the year before. Although surrounded by his Hollywood “friends,” Dean didn’t allow himself get close to anyone. He drank heavily and alone. Howard was right, he would mumble into his hi-ball glass.

Howard was right.

Pune-Shine Corporation became one of the fastest-growing franchises in America. Pune became quite rich. He lived in a Toluca Lake mansion with his girlfriend-turned-wife and their dogs. He sent fourteen percent of his gross income to his elderly parents in India. Their hearts swelled with pride for their son. Pune enjoyed eating hamburgers, and whenever he ate at Carl's Jr., he would give a crisp five dollar bill to the hardest working employee he could see.

Six

Frankie had always hated talking to people. But he made an exception and yelled "Move!" when he saw people walking on the sidewalk directly below him. The pedestrians in Frankie's landing zone looked up and scattered. They would never forget the sight of Frankie, his ragged jacket flapping like a cape, hurtling downward at 120 miles per hour. It was, some thought, like seeing Superman falling.

Carmine began selling Mary Kay Cosmetics to her neighbors. She would bring little two year-old Shehada along every time. With so much make-up at her disposal, Carmine had no trouble hiding the bruises made by her husband's hand when he was "teaching her a lesson." He was always careful not to make her bleed. There was no love between them, yet, mysteriously, she was incapable of leaving.

Edna, with her Aussie love gone, decided to become a cowgirl. She moved to El Paso, Texas and did manual labor at a cattle ranch. At night she worked on her triceps by suspending and lowering herself 100 times between bales of hay in the barn. She would then do 30 pull-ups from a wooden crossbeam. Edna won enough money in arm wrestling contests with unsuspecting cowboys to buy a beautiful horse. She named him "Arnold."

Chrissy's kittens were pampered and nursed past three months of age. Personally, I thought that Chrissy was carrying the Mom-thing too far. But in the interests of proper protocol I never brought it up. One day a jogger stopped in front of our house as Chrissy and I were debating abortion. He smiled and said, "You're talking to your cat?" "No," I replied. "I'm talking with my cat."

Luis and Felicity decided to see America, the long way. They mapped a route that would take them through parts of all 48 contiguous states. Felicity, herself a dropout from the public relations profession, began arranging media talk show interviews and newspaper stories about "The Bohemian Idea Man." Never staying in any place longer than a week, Luis would mesmerize listeners and readers with discourses on the need for mail-order priesthood kits, marijuana bagels, and a party game in which players listen to audio recordings of celebrities having sex and try to guess who they are. Money trickled—then poured—in.

Dean Martin was reclining in his favorite Lazy Boy sipping on a Vodka Gimlet when the phone rang. As usual he didn't answer it. Dean played his silly game of guessing the number of rings before the caller tired and hung up. But this time the caller persisted. After twenty-one rings Dean shook his head in disbelief and picked it up. "Hello?" A voice, far away, said, "Just thought I'd say 'thanks' for being a friend." Then the line went dead. Dean began to shake and sob. "Howard?" he cried into the phone. "Is that you?!"

Pune was listed by Forbes as the 68th richest person in the world. In a deal that stunned the financial markets, he purchased Carl Karcher Enterprises, the parent company of Carl's Jr. Not one to be known as a "do-nothing Chairman of the Board," Pune called a special meeting to find out why India was not a target market for his delicious Carl's Jr. hamburgers. An uncomfortable silence fell about the room. The Senior VP of Sales cleared his throat and meekly replied, "I believe they don't care much for cow products, sir." Pune scratched his chin and nodded. "Oh, yes. Quite right, quite right."

Seven

Frankie's eyes were closed but he could see Poppa's face clearly. In the instant before Frankie's dumpster-found Nikes met the sidewalk, he saw Poppa smiling. It was the genuine kind of smile that involves a lot of face wrinkling. And that was the Poppa that Frankie loved.

Carmine finally left her husband and moved into a battered women's shelter with her young daughter. In time she became well. Before long she took a full-time position helping others like her. Several years later Carmine's estranged husband found her working at a shelter. She told him to leave. He screamed a Muslim curse then produced a small handgun and shot her. Thinking her dead he turned the gun toward himself, but was unable to pull the trigger. He spent the rest of his life in prison. Carmine's wounds healed, as they had done so many times before. She later ran for, and was elected to, a seat on the State Assembly.

Edna grew tired of ranching and moved back to The Big City. A talent scout approached her as she finished a set of quadriceps thrusts at Gold's Gym. After some conversation she agreed to a try-out as a regular on the American Gladiators TV show. She got the job. The show's producer asked her what she'd like as her "tough" stage name. She thought for a minute, and then replied, "Boomerang."

Chrissy lived to a grand old fourteen years of age. She had only one litter of kittens in her life. But that, she once told me, was quite enough, thank you. She now lies buried next to the old avocado tree in my backyard. I miss her.

Luis, with Felicity's constant love and support, became a counterculture hero for a year or two. But heroes come and go and Luis' popularity faded just as he was ready to settle down anyway. They moved into a nudist community outside of Eureka, California, and Luis paid the rent with a syndicated weekly talk show carried on several radio stations. For centuries to come, Luis' voice will be carried out past Uranus to the stars, embedded within a narrow electromagnetic frequency. Beware of E.T.s with strange ideas.

Dean Martin will live forever on celluloid.

Pune soon discovered that the young manager who had refused him a job over twenty years earlier was now a Carl's Jr. regional vice president in the mid-west. Pune summoned him to Los Angeles. The next day Pune eyed the man who was sitting across from him, visibly wondering why the company's new chairman had flown him to headquarters in a Lear Jet. "Do you remember me from many years ago?" asked Pune. "No, sir," came the reply. Pune reached across the desk. "No problem. You're doing a fine job. Here's five dollars. Keep up the good work. That will be all."