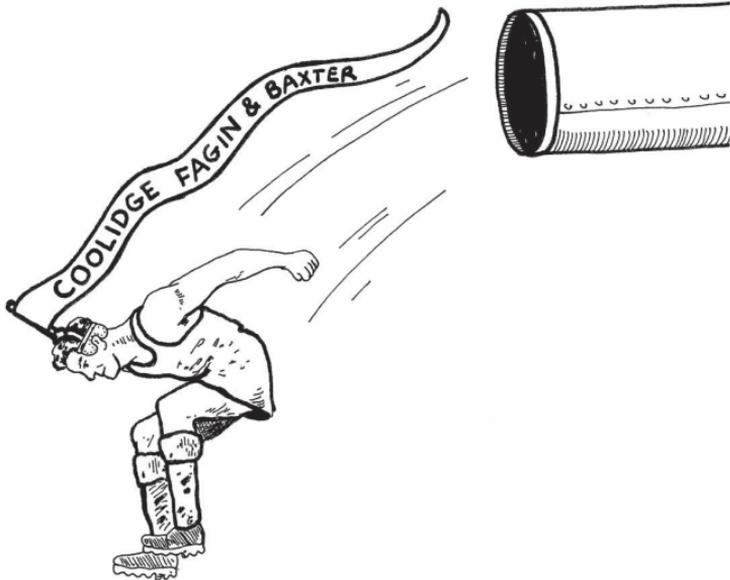


NOT-SO STORIES

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collaborations
by



edited by Miles Champion

SMOKE SPECS

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ISBN: 979-8-9861570-0-9

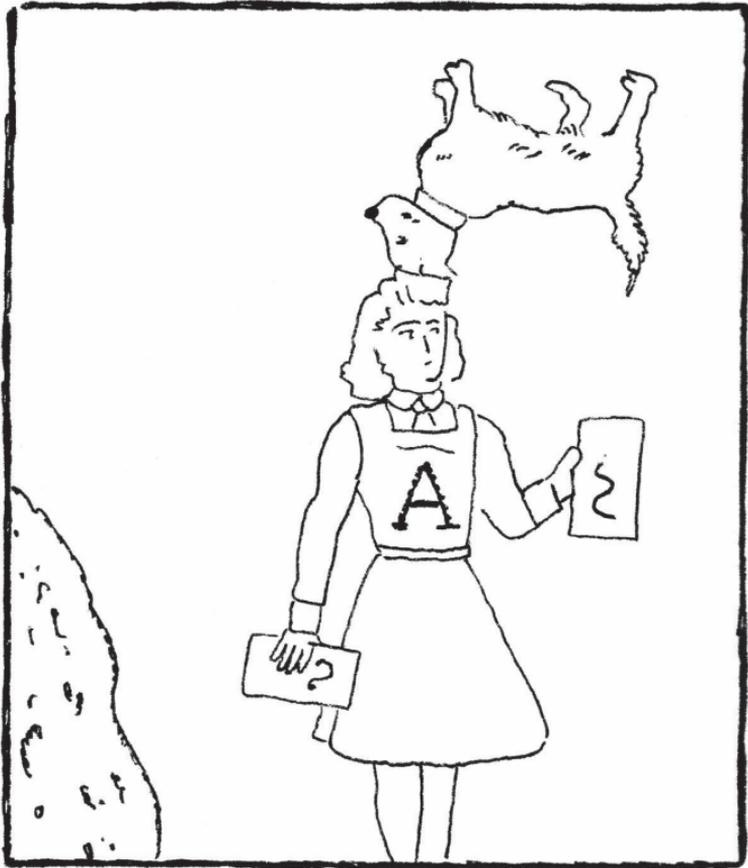
Distributed by:
Small Press Distribution
1341 Seventh Street
Berkeley, CA 94710-1409
Tel. (800) 869-7553
www.spdbooks.org

Published by:
Smoke Specs Press
www.smokespecs.com

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NOT-SO STORIES



WHAT EVER BECAME OF
AGNES MASON?

What Ever Became of Agnes Mason?

Exactly eighteen years ago today color towers emerged from the trees as bonelessly as two pipe cleaners.

•

Agnes had begun to live for these. Apparently none of her friends showed their legs off. There were problems. They would kill her if she changed her life. The funny thing had changed her life. She had walked into the theater a giggling bully. She hated this part of the track season. It was far more important to act out scenes with her pillow. Agnes had worked herself into the seat of the bus, cradling a box of school songs, and meditated on her shape, repeating very softly, "This body bucks the coach." She was one of the varsity. As wing in the hockey lock, the captain of the team, her balls ached, chasing the sentences. This was the bane of being a wing.

All the way to Southport High, its destination, the bus passed Fords.

"Leave her toothpaste in the cut trophy. Once that's done, see that you get back on the bus . . . Did you hear me, Mason?"

"Yes, ma'am," Agnes said softly.

"Is that agreeable, Mason?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She had spoken that as if off a backboard. As always, her small black eyes were riveted to the Fords, exposing the purple chilblains in her ribs. Agnes turned from friends. They would turn on her as winter sports began. She had long black stockings. All of a sudden Miss Ritchie squinted on her. Her classmates rallied around.

“Is she right?” cried Dodie Whit, then cupped her hand at her mouth with her arm in the air again.

“Let’s pulverize her.” If she made them lose, her socks were rolled down over her ox.

“Am I right, girls?”

“There’s Southport High!”

The swaying rows of adolescents smoldered with disapproval.

“No!”

•

Agnes loathed herself. For every afternoon she heard one boy say, “Ma’am.” Hadn’t *she* said it that very day? For in her heart she knew that team spirit never hurts a player. Every night after lights-out they forgot her. So, Agnes was left with a flashlight and a heavy turquoise scarf that belonged to Bunny Rucker, the pudgy girl who was accustomed to straight A’s. *Her* values were totally different. If things were bad in her classes she might forget to polish her ox. Then she would creep back to bed, displaying a life-size poster of playing fields. This afternoon she held her stick against the fifty-yard chicken.

When it came to a show the girls were allowed to wear elliptical white blouses, black tunics, and freshly painted hockey balls. She was gone with the you-know-what.

Agnes had seen the movie that had Clark Gable crushing Vivien Leigh's muscle. She merely stared out into the theater. It included a pair of Connecticut finals. They'd simply mushroomed from the grandstands. For a moment Agnes studied the burning leaves and the smell that led to the unknown. Every step, flames devoured Atlanta. As soon as the air was raw and cold and tore at Agnes's throat she began to stomp a poster of Clark Gable. It was as if there was unavoidably a gap between a skirt and a silver whistle, which caused needless trouble to the South.

The answer was, of course, that it, surely as a pack of wolves will turn, may go back into orbit again. We'll say her eyes were green.

•

Miss Ritchie was the only adult, but even Agnes dared not admit a single sentence. Whenever a regular teacher jumped, while the varsity sang, Miss Ritchie sat very still on the front window, her long legs intertwined and just about as smart. Within the space of a single hour Rucker, Agnes's roommate, laughed, "Would you bring that mind of yours up and down the hockey field?" Everybody laughed a hearty "Eye-yah-yah-*yike* us, no-bod-y there, spider legs!"

"Okay, team," called the captain who, turtlelike, had drawn his head with a tiny spot of yellow light. (One could hardly count him.)

Her song began: “Team spirit. Team lack of sleep. Dazzled by spirit. We’ve all got team spirit.”

Under the hawklike gaze of Miss Ritchie, Agnes began to sing, too, all right. It would be over in less than a hundred heavy blows. Among the scars a chilly wind was raising gooseless pressure, while her teammates rocked with tragedy that was heaped on the sidewalk. Though they wept with each new line and waited for the opening, when the same crowd drifted back the whistles blew. The three longest legs at St. Gertrude’s endure through the season. Once, the varsity (except for the bus driver) decided to switch from basketball to disaster. This was the supreme gasbord . . . Agnes would sneak into her closet, though, as she did so, her eyes were shut. She’d made all the boarders go. “They look like Creepy Crawlers, always a-grinnin’. Always a-feelin’ less pressure.” You had to stand on the one that’s down. It was so far down into his shoulders that his finger slashed the air, and another arm shot above his head.

Agnes was alone. Her former friends might not be reissued again for many years. So Agnes had gone traveling with St. Gertrude’s butler. But she hated herself for doing so.

When Miss Ritchie jumped on her and shouted, “Mason! Why aren’t you singing?” Agnes said, “Who gives a damn!” This was the last thing she said. Agnes felt her stomach turn toward the goal, her long black legs, sexy when they were sweating, and blunt tail erect with pride. (The psychiatrist called it “growing serene.”) Agnes Mason trotted back down the aisle, raking the rows with her legs, which had been so heavy. She forced her legs to keep on pumping. So, just as the dog had done, Agnes galloped off to meet a collie. She had revealed some unexpected

pleasure, too, but with idolatry, not fear, for there was no need to say more. She was losing her baby. It popped across the sideline, bounced and rolled into the gutter. "I'll get it!" Agnes shouted. An hour ago it had been sitting in the stands.

In the monotonous gray sky above was nothing but a clear green field. Lum glories!

She seemed to stumble as she walked along. She watched the window, then, languidly, "Did someone call me?"

"Yes. I did," said Miss Ritchie.

In Ritchie's face was a pale, grim mask. Ritchie announced that it was back to earth for the next two hours. Agnes followed wearily. She could see a wire-haired terrier racing around behind the ticket booth. When they reached the school Ritchie began to shout. Then she broke into a run across the neighboring field. There was an isolated explosion of grass stains, dented from the dog. He wagged his tail so bad.

•

The score was one to one. "This is probably my very last hockey marble." Now it was crisscrossed with wire from New York.

"Wing bully!" shouted the referee.

The half-time break was over. When she reached the circle, Agnes lunged for his collar. He sprang around her, forming a tunnel of fire, his head cocked to one side and the white ball in his mouth, his body under water.

Suddenly Agnes felt a delicious charge. Bunny Rucker watched her. Agnes Mason had not moved. Deep down she was a lily-livered bully. A roar of pure delight would simmer down to a respectful silence, but the whole busload of so-called

