

# THE RETRIEVER

**Harvey Jacobs**

*Harvey Jacobs's new story collection, *My Rose and My Glove*, should be available for those who collect things, and even for those who don't. Mr. Jacobs's other books include the collection *The Egg of the Glak* and the novels *Beautiful Soup*, *American Goliath*, and *The Juror*. There was a list around here with his complete list of publications, but it seems to be missing. Perhaps Joe Luna can help...*

AURORA PLATZ WRIGGLED her bottom against a hard leather chair shaped like a baseball mitt. The glove's pocket made a seat, its spread fingers made a back. The chair swiveled on an iron post. Aurora moved her body sideways, pivoting along the perimeter of an invisible crescent, trying to get comfortable.

The whole office had a sports motif. Autographed footballs, basketballs, baseballs, and three hockey pucks rested on top of a long cabinet filled with file folders. There were pictures of thoroughbreds crashing toward finish lines, running backs smashing into end zones, soccer players making head contact with flying balls, masked goalies deflecting slap shots, a bowler goosing air with his thumb while a triangle of pins blew apart, many glossy photos of baseball greats diving at bases, fielding impossible drives, swinging blurred bats against blurred balls. There was a poster for a Louis-Schmelling fight and a frame holding a pair of unused ringside tickets for the historic bout between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston.

The pinched little man who sat behind a metal desk facing her, Joe Luna, wore a Yankee cap and a Rams T-shirt. He rubbed his right hand over what she recognized as a nicotine patch stuck to the bubblelike bicep of his left arm, then reached the hand into his mouth and pulled out a wet wad of Nicorette chewing gum. There was an empty pack of the nicotine gum sitting in an ashtray the size of a salad bowl filled with butts. Luna rolled the spent slug of Nicorette into a soggy ball and dropped it into the disgusting ashtray. Aurora had a sudden vision of a chef gone totally insane, preparing the last meal for a condemned serial killer. She also had the feeling that she knew this Mr. Luna from someplace else. "Have we

met before?" Aurora asked him.

"I doubt it. Besides, Joe Luna never forgets a blousefull."

"Pardon?"

"Cancel that remark."

Luna took a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes from a desk drawer, slid out one of the white cylinders, lit it with a lighter shaped like a woman's torso. When he flicked on its flame the torso's large breasts blinked red nipple lights. He tilted his head back, sucked in a long draught of smoke and let it out slowly.

"You ever try to quit smoking?" he asked her. "What a fucking wrestle. So, lady, what can I do for you?" Aurora noted that Luna's voice was a perfect match for his skimpy body and shrunken head, a high-pitched alto like the scream of a bird.

"A friend of mine, Sharon Durman, used your service. She gave me your card."

"Durman, Durman, Durman. It rings a bell. Oh, yes, Sharon Durman. Fat ass. Short hair. Eye twitch. What's she up to these days?"

"I think she moved to Florida," Aurora said. "I haven't heard from her in a while."

"Florida. Lucky bitch. Spring training," Luna said. "Excuse my language. It's the smoking thing."

Aurora rocked the glove-chair back and forth. She could feel Luna looking at her as if she was his cigarette lighter, waiting for her breasts to flash. She thought about getting up and walking out but reconsidered. The point of her visit was to get something done that needed doing, not to judge the doer. "I lost a pendant," she said. "Nothing expensive. A pewter cat on a silver chain. I would like it found if possible."

"Sentimental value, right?" Luna said. "Your husband gave it to you, right?"

"Actually, no, my husband didn't give it to me."

"I get the picture," Luna said. He made a sucking sound.

"What picture? There is no picture to get. It was a gift from a friend." Aurora wondered why she bothered to comment.

"Okay, if you say so. A missing pussycat on a chain. Put out an all-points bulletin. Call in the Secret Service. So tell me, where when and how?"

"I feel silly enough having come here ready to pay your ridiculous fee to find a worthless trinket," Aurora said. "I don't need you to trivialize...."

"You're absolutely right," Luna said, taking another drag. "Let's cut to the chase. Where do you think you lost your pussy, when did you realize she was unaccounted for, and how do you think she escaped?"

"Escaped? The cat didn't make a conscious decision to get lost. I think the clasp on the chain snapped. It was quite old and not very well made. I first noticed the pendant was missing two days ago. Since then I've checked at my office, at the restaurant where I had dinner that night, in the lobby and elevators of my building, everywhere I could think of including my apartment. I even went through clothes where it might have snagged on a sleeve."

"What about your purse? You'd be surprised how many times the missing object ends up in her bag."

"Of course I emptied my purse."

"No cigar, heh? Did you bring something like a sketch of the item in question? I need more to go by."

"Here," Aurora said, handing Luna her primitive drawing of the pendant.

"Nice. Excellent. It's not a Picasso but I get the idea. All right. The Retriever is on the case." Luna lifted the ashtray and dumped it into his wastebasket. A puff of ashes made a little cloud that drifted toward Aurora's shoes. She stood up quickly. "On your way out please stop at my secretary's desk," Luna said. "Old Ironsides handles the money stuff. You know there's a down payment, a charge for my time and talent and a small bonus if I come up with the prize."

"No problem. Should I call you in a few days?"

"Absolutely not," Luna said. "I'll call you. Unless there's something going on under the table. I'm saying, I know how to keep a confidence."

"Sorry. Nothing delicate. Nothing for the National Enquirer. On the other hand, call after six but before seven. My husband never gets home before seven. He already thinks I'm an idiot to care about a piece of cheap costume jewelry so he might as well not know that I'm paying a small fortune to hire a bloodhound."

"A bloodhound? That's good. I like it," Luna said. "I get the message. This is between you and yours truly. As for the small fortune, it's a big city out there, a big world, a humongous galaxy. You think this is an easy job? You're asking for a grand slam, a hole in one, the Heisman Trophy,

Olympic gold. Lady, you gets what you pays for."

"Well, I hope you find the silly pendant," Aurora said. "I'd planned to wear it next month for a special occasion."

"If it ain't been pulverized, atomized, or sodomized, consider it found," Luna said.

"What a disgusting man," Aurora said to herself after she wrote out a check and left The Retriever's office. "What an arrogant cockroach." She felt a strong urge to take a hot shower, to send any flecks of Joe Luna that might have stuck to her body swirling down the drain and into the sewer system. Aurora took a taxi home.

In the shower, she thought about the pendant's provenance. Chuck West had slipped it into her hand on the night of their high school prom while he groped at her in the back seat of his father's Chevrolet. Chuck was pleading for relief, begging for a chance to cross home plate. That's what they called it back then. No way, Chuckle.

Aurora dropped her bar of scented soap. Home plate. Maybe that's why Joe Luna's chair made her feel sweaty. She laughed with her face turned up toward the gush of water. Aurora remembered how she'd stopped Chuck cold between second and third but she did let him tongue her left breast.

Next week, at their twentieth class reunion, Aurora planned to wear that pathetic looking cat-on-a-chain and see if Chuck even remembered. It would be interesting to see what Shelly Greer looked like after all those years. Shelly was the girl he married a month after graduation. Aurora got that news while she was away at college in a letter from her mother. The night she got that letter she let Henry Platz spread her legs and enter her for the first time. "Lord," Aurora said out loud, "the things we do, the way things happen."

Two days later, in the early evening, Joe Luna rang the doorbell at Aurora Platz's apartment. She saw his face framed in the door's peephole, suspended like a Christmas ornament. "The doorman didn't announce you," she said, opening the door.

Luna shrugged. "So much for security," he said. "I tried to call but your phone was busy. So I took a chance you'd be home. Besides, I wanted to see your face when I handed you this." He opened a fist and there was her cat pendant.

"This is fantastic," Aurora said, reaching for the chain. "Unbelievable. Where in creation...?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," Luna said. "Well, that's that. Nice seeing you again, Mrs. Platz. And thanks for your business."

"Thank you a dozen times over," Aurora said. She watched Luna retreat down the hall toward the elevator, wondering if she should at least invite him in for a cup of coffee. But the elevator was waiting when he got there. He turned, waved, and stepped quickly into the car.

A month later, Aurora decided to walk home after leaving her office in the Human Resources division of Wentor Industries. A lingering sunset, its pink and orange glow a gift of daylight-saving time, lit the winter-battered city. She could feel the coming of spring and better weather. Aurora mused fondly about her first and only infidelity. Was it really infidelity? What happened seemed more a matter of closure, natural as the change of seasons. She felt a twinge of guilt but only a twinge, vague as the vibration of the subway train rushing under the street. Nobody had been hurt; there were no scars. Aurora had been more than nice to her husband since it happened.

Chuck and Shelly West had been happy to see her at their high school reunion. Shelly showed pictures of two teenage children, a boy who looked like his father and a girl who looked like her mother. Central casting. Henry retaliated with a snapshot of Aurora on a beach in Cancun. They all got along. Later, Henry danced with Shelly while she danced with Chuck. He made a remark about her high school cheerleader's sweater. He said he was amazed that the sweater fit so perfectly, that Aurora had the figure of a teenager. She said she'd found it tucked away in a trunk and thought it would be a nice touch, considering, though she was worried about smelling like a mothball. Chuck said she smelled like cut grass. Then he commented on her pendant.

He remembered giving it to her. She saw his eyes well when the memory hit home. Then he asked if they could have lunch or a drink and talk about old times. Aurora said yes, that Henry would be away on a business trip next week so she'd have time on her hands.

The night they met, Aurora wore a skirt and blouse she found in the same trunk that held her old sweater. The skirt took some letting out but not much. She had her hair done in the style she'd worn at her prom. She wasn't planning to be seduced but she did wear a new bra and panties from Victoria's Secret. She and Chuck had their talk, drank a few gin martinis, and one thing led to another. He reached home plate in the back of his Lexus in a parking lot outside the school stadium. It was all very nice, very civilized, very sweet, very loving. Afterward, Chuck told her he was happy with Shelly and the kids and she told him she was happy with

Henry and their life together and that was the end of their brief encounter. It was enough. When Henry came home, Aurora wore the Victoria's Secret underwear, newly washed in Woolite, for him.

Aurora's walk was interrupted by Joe Luna who came up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, I'm sorry if I startled you," Luna said. This time he was smoking a huge cigar, inhaling Cuban fumes. "I thought I recognized you. That's some neat shape you carry around."

"Mr. Luna," Aurora said. "I'm still amazed about the pendant."

"Hey, it's why they pay me the big bucks," Luna said. "If I may say so, you look really terrific, Mrs. Platz. Just walking down the street you could be in a ballet."

"Compliment accepted," Aurora said. "It was nice seeing you, Mr. Luna."

"Call me Joe. Oh. One more thing. This is for you, on the house." Luna handed her a small package wrapped in brown paper and carton tape. Then he turned and walked away.

Puzzled, Aurora put the package into her carry bag. She couldn't begin to imagine what Joe Luna had given her and she was in no hurry to find out. Back in the apartment, she stripped off her clothes and took a quick bath. When Henry got home he found her naked, doing jumps, twirls and summersaults, the routine she'd learned way back when.

"Go team go," she said to him. Henry got out of his suit and had her on the living room carpet. "That was awesome," Aurora said. "Positively psychedelic."

They went out for Chinese food and after dinner he went to work at his computer checking on their stocks and bonds. While Henry pecked at the keyboard, Aurora found the package Joe Luna pressed into her hand. She used a scissor to cut through heavy tape, then unrolled the brown paper. Inside the wrap Aurora found one of Luna's cards pasted to a matchbox. On the back of the card he'd written, "Hi, cutie. Thought you might like to have this. Luv, Joe."

She slid open the matchbox. Inside, on a cotton blanket, she saw a tiny gold hoop earring. "My God," Aurora whispered. Her husband asked her if she'd said something to him and she told him no, that she was only muttering to herself.

Aurora went to her bedroom and searched out a plastic bag where she stored all kinds of meaningful junk. She spilled the bag's contents onto her bedspread. There were medals for gymnastics, a pin that dangled a pair of

miniature ice skates, old credit cards, several dead pens, cigarette lighters, colored perfume bottles, berets, lipstick tubes, coins she'd brought back from her honeymoon in Europe, a variety of memorabilia, some items so ancient that their memories had detached. She sifted through the pile and, sure enough, there was the mate for the earring Joe Luna returned.

Aurora held the reunited gold circles in a cupped hand. She sat on the bed and closed her eyes. Her mother gave her those earrings on her 15th birthday. The day before, when her father found out that she'd had her ears pierced without parental sanction, the shit hit the fan. She remembered him howling at her from a crimson face then slapping her hard on the cheek when she yelled back. Her mother also threw a fit, yelling about rushing the clock, then went upstairs with a migraine.

By the next morning tempers cooled. That afternoon, when Aurora got home from school, her mother handed her a white porcelain music box decorated with pansies. The box played "Strawberry Fields" with its lid lifted. Inside, she found the gold hoops cradled in tissue. Her mother made it clear that the gift was their little secret. It took six weeks before she could wear the earrings. One of her pierced ear-holes infected so badly she had to go to a doctor. Her father seemed vindicated by the oozing wound and resigned himself to having a child with pitted lobes.

How one of those coy earrings managed to lose itself Aurora had no idea. It just did. She never mentioned that disaster to her mother and nothing was ever said about it. Now, more than twice the age she was when she got them, Aurora sat on her bed and cried over the loss. The weeping puzzled Aurora since what was lost had been found. Her husband came into the bedroom and found her sniffing. He patted her hair to comfort her and told his wife he'd noticed that she seemed to be losing weight, that she should go for her annual checkup. "That's silly, dear," Aurora said. "I'm not depressed, I feel fine. In fact, I feel better than I have in years." Then a flood of tears erupted from nowhere and Henry insisted she call Dr. Fineberg for an appointment.

The doctor confirmed that Aurora shed fourteen pounds but saw no cause for alarm since her vital signs were perfect. The one thing that bothered Dr. Fineberg was that, when he measured her, she came up nearly two inches shorter than his records indicated.

He said there was the possibility of osteoporosis, prescribed calcium pills, and suggested a bone scan in the near future, adding that there was no reason for alarm. Aurora wanted to ask him about her breasts. They seemed smaller to her but could easily be ascribed to the reduction of body fat. The whole subject was embarrassing so Aurora let it pass,

agreeing to come in for a checkup in six months or sooner if her scale gave cause for concern.

When she left Dr. Fineberg's office, Aurora stopped at her favorite icecream parlor and ordered a hot fudge sundae with nuts and whipped cream. After that, she went shopping at a local mall until she found a paisley tie she thought Joe Luna might like. When she mailed it, along with a Thank You note for retrieving her treasured earring, she realized the tie was probably too conservative for him, that Luna would probably prefer a design showing something like a torrent of golf balls dangling under his excuse for a chin.

In the same store where she'd bought the tie Aurora got herself a LOVE ME TENDER Elvis poster that she hung over her bed. Henry got home after midnight too tired to notice the poster or anything else. He said he'd been trapped in a gut-grinding meeting with a vicious new client. He got into bed yawning and reached out for Aurora but she pulled away, rolled over on her stomach and whispered, "Not tonight."

Henry was asleep before she got the words out. Aurora drifted off thinking that Henry might or might not like the poster but if her father could come to terms with pierced ears her husband could learn to live with Elvis. Henry, her husband? Her husband, Henry? Aurora Platz? She giggled into the pillow while she slipped her hand down between her legs thinking about Elvis's smooth fingers flying like the wind over the frets of his guitar.

The next Friday, Aurora lost her job at Wentor Industries for sassing back at her boss.

Mr. Dubman had called her on the carpet for writing an evaluation of a potential employee that described the young man as a hunk and used the word cute three times in one paragraph. Dubman took the opportunity to comment on her clothing. He said she was violating Wentor's "dress code" which Aurora never knew officially existed. He pointed out her torn jeans with rolled bottoms and the Staying Alive T-shirt with John Travolta's picture. He said Wentor Industries was not a disco.

Dubman was so acerbic and obnoxious Aurora screamed that he was a sexist pig. She got two weeks vacation pay and two weeks severance after signing a paper that absolved the company of any wrongdoing, packed her personal belongings and left the office behind. The day got worse. When Aurora reached home she couldn't find her collection of LPs. She called Henry who was in the middle of a conference. He said they'd agreed to give the stack of vinyl to the Salvation Army years ago, then disconnected



her call.

Insulted by her boss and infuriated by Henry Platz, Aurora went to comfort herself with an ice-cream soda. On the way she thought she saw Chuck West who was usually at football practice weekday afternoons. When she got closer she realized the person who looked like Chuck was old enough to be his father.

Aurora was making sucking noises with her straw, finishing the dregs of her black-and-white soda when Joe Luna sat himself down on the adjoining counter stool. "I see you're wearing those earrings," Luna said. "They look great, kiddo. Scintillating."

"Thanks, Uncle Joey," Aurora said, surprising herself. "You don't mind if I call you Uncle Joey?"

"Call me anything except shmuck," Luna said. "So tell me, what's happening in your exciting life?"

"Don't get me started," Aurora said.

"So let's change the subject. Did you read the paper today? There's this article about scientists discovering a mini-planet circling between Uranus and Saturn. What an age we live in. What will they come up with next?"

"I'm bored of outer space," Aurora said. "Yawn yawn."

"I understand your feelings," Luna said. "Are you bored of this?" He reached into a brown bag and came up with a battered Kermit wearing a torn blue ribbon around its green neck.

"Froggie," Aurora said, grabbing the frog and kissing its matted fur. "I thought he went away forever. That's what they told me. Where did you find him, Uncle Joey?"

"Seek and ye shall find," Luna said.

"He's my best and dearest friend," Aurora said. "But how can I pay you? I lost my job this morning. If you let me keep Kermit I could pay you after, when I get a job. Promise."

"Don't bother yourself about paying me," Luna said. "There's no hurry."

"Look at this poor thing. He's all scruffy and dirty. What happened to you, Froggie? Did a bad person kidnap you? I'm so sorry you got lost."

"Your slimy friend didn't get lost," Luna said. "He got discarded. Tossed out. By your ever loving mom."

"And all this time I punished myself," Aurora said. "But why would she do that? She's like Henry. So cruel. People just throw your things away."

"So they do," Luna said. "They throw things away without asking. Well, I've got places to go and I'm late already. Take care of yourself, pumpkin pie."

"Who told you about my Kermit?" Aurora asked but Joe Luna was already out the door. When Aurora reached up to pay for her soda the cashier smiled and said it was all taken care of compliments of a friend.

A week later, Aurora sat playing a game of Chinese Checkers with her husband. Her frog, with a new blue ribbon tied around its tufted neck, rested in her lap. Henry waited for his wife to fall into the trap he'd set, then made a winning move, sweeping up six of her marbles. She swatted at the board and dumped it on the carpet of their bedroom. The glass marbles skittered to the farthest comers, rolling under the bed, two bureaus, the armoire. "Sore loser," Henry said. "That kind of tantrum cost you a perfectly good job."

"I don't care," Aurora said, tossing back her hair. "Anyway, you cheated and I'm sick of checkers. Now I want to play cruise." She got up and rifled through a pile of magazines until she found Travel & Leisure. "We must be sailing to Paris."

"I don't think you can sail to Paris. You take a train. You take a bus. You drive a car."

"Well we're sailing. You be Captain Henry. Make believe I'm a stowaway you find hiding in a lifeboat. We go up on the top deck to play shuffleboard."

"If I'm the captain I'm not playing shuffleboard with a stowaway," Henry said. "I'm on the bridge holding the wheel."

"No you're not. You're not," Aurora yelled.

"All right. I'm on deck playing shuffleboard."

"Look, there's a giant wave coming toward us," Aurora said. "Over there. The whole ship might turn over. We might end up on a deserted island. Maybe cannibals live there."

"How can cannibals live on a deserted island?"

"They just do. You'd better blow the boat whistle before that wave hits."

"Blahhh," Henry said. "Blahhh."

"Look at the dolphins jumping," Aurora said. "They're pushing us away from hungry sharks." The doorman rang up before Henry could look at the sharks and dolphins. He went to the intercom.

"Send him up," Henry said.

"Who is it?" Aurora asked, pouting.

"The one you told me about. Your marvelous Uncle Joey."

"You hear that, Kermit? Uncle Joey came to see us," Aurora said. She smoothed her dress and rushed to the door. Henry picked up the Chinese Checker board and bagged a few of the scattered marbles. He heard Joe Luna's voice say, "How's my princess?"

When Henry came into the living room he saw Luna fumbling in his coat pocket while Aurora jumped up and down in anticipation. "You must be Henry," Luna said. "A pleasure to finally meet you. So, how goes it?"

"Just great," Henry said. "My wife's gotten to be something of a pain in the ass. I had to buy her all new toys. Not to mention clothes and shoes."

"But she's a doll," Luna said. "You got to admit, she's adorable."

"True," Henry said. "I suppose she is. What did you find this time? How much is this going to cost us?"

"Discuss that with my secretary," Luna said. He handed Aurora a cellophane bag.

"What's in it?" she said.

"Open and see, honeybunch."

Aurora crinkled the cellophane wrap. "Rip open the damn thing," her husband said. She undid the crinkling folds, purposely complicating the unveiling.

"Boo," Aurora said when she saw what was inside. "I want to vomit. This isn't even mine. I hate it."

"It's yours," Luna said. "And you once loved it."

"I don't even know what it is."

"It's a teething ring," Henry said. "There's a silver angel with an ivory circle attached to its harp. And those are your initials engraved on the ivory. It must be yours."

"Take a chew," Luna said. "Give it a try. It's a post-wean high, better than a cigarette and no second-hand smoke."

Aurora put her tongue through the ring and pulled it into her mouth. The ivory had no taste but it felt good against her gums. "Agh," she said.

"There you go," Luna said. "Yum, yum. Does it all come back to you? Nasty little girl tossing the nice gift from grammy out of your carriage."

"Look at my wife," Henry said. "There's hardly anything left of her."

"Well, I think the little bundle is about the right size now," Luna said. "So if you don't mind, I'm in a bit of a hurry. I've got amazing seats for the game tonight." He scooped up Aurora and bounced her in his palm. "This is some baby. A genuine poster child. She could advertise mashed apricots for Gerber." He folded the squirming Aurora and dropped her into his pocket. "I love them at this age. They fit like a glove. Hey, quiet down, squirt. When we get back to my office you'll get a nice long drink of warm milk before sleepy time."

"Hold it," Henry said. "Answer one question. How did you come up with that dumb stuff?"

"Her droppings? When she came knocking at my door I was ready to offer my humble services. You all leave a trail, mark tree trunks, scatter pebbles. You make my job easy. Uncle Joey does his homework. He just follows those Hansel and Gretel crumbs along the forest floor. It's like instant replay."

"Before Aurora found you she was a fully functional woman, vibrant, attractive, a helpmate in every sense of the word."

"Tell me about it. Add juicy and jaunty. I was plenty surprised to see her. Not my usual client."

"Aurora thought you were the second coming finding those things," Henry said. "But if you ask me it was all a scam because I think you already knew exactly where to look. Some Retriever you are. Don't expect any recommendations from me."

Joe Luna patted the pocket where Aurora made tiny wailing sounds. "I'll leave my card anyhow," he said. "Because you never know."

When Luna left, Henry Platz tidied up the apartment and went looking for the rest of the missing marbles.

—«»—«»—«»—

*Administrivia:*

*Original HTML to EDG by Monica*

*Style Sheet by the E-Book Design Group*

*From "Fantasy and Science Fiction" (May, 2003)*

*2003.07.04*