

Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 7
Issue 2 *Best of Gandy Dancer 2012-2018*

Article 20

5-1-2019

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Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Sarah (2019) "Galatea in Blue," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 20.
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol7/iss2/20>

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Galatea in Blue

Elsie, on the beach, in a plastic yellow raincoat, soaked in salt water. Arms spread out, face turned toward the pale sun. I can see myself writing it. Sitting with my computer in bed, at work, or in the coffee shop down the street. Her paper skin. Her inky blood. Her curling, adolescent blue hair, bluer than the dreary sky, bluer than the slate gray ocean before her.

"Elsie!" I call out to her. I'm leaning against the hood of my car, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. "We should get back—I can see lightning!"

And I can. When she turns around and looks at me, I can see it in the space behind her eyes. She kicks up wet sand around her.

"Well, I don't hear anything," she teases as her hair blows out in front of her, her wet ponytail tangling and whipping around in the salt breeze. The front of her white dress is soaked through and I can see her neon green bra, her soft stomach.

It is all a mistake, really. It is always a mistake to do what Elsie wants. Things like that get people like me in trouble. When I woke up to a text message from her begging me to pull her out of class, I should not have listened. After all, I had been Elsie-free for a month and change. I should not have called in sick to work. I should not have gone to pick her up at her high school, if only to see her run out the front doors looking almost like she's happy to see me. I should have deleted her name from my phone and rolled over and gone back to sleep and never thought of her again.

But I am too much of an idiot for that. And by 'that,' of course, I mean 'Elsie.'

"I should take you back to school," I say as we climb back in the car. Rain pounds down on the windshield like a drum. "Don't you have SATs to study for or something? They must be coming up for you."

Elsie pinches the front of her wet dress with both hands, looking down through it, and she shakes her head. "I think this violates the dress code. Come on, let's do something fun! You never want to do anything fun with me."

"I should just take you home," I admit, turning the key in the ignition. The engine stutters for a moment before the beat-up minivan comes back to life.

"My mom'll kill me if I come home early looking like this," Elsie whines, hugging her knees to her chest. "She'll scream her head off, David, doesn't that make you sad for me?"

In truth, I'm happy that she's putting up such a fight. I hate to be apart from Elsie, but I also hate having to initiate any interaction with her. It always seems wrong, like seeing a raccoon in the daytime. Fortunately, Elsie is the type who will often show up at one's doorstep unbidden. She's so bright-eyed and innocent. I shouldn't interrupt that.

"Well," I say, chewing my lip for a moment. I don't want to let her go. I have gotten into the habit of milking everything I can out of an Elsie day. "I guess we could just go get something to eat."

Her smile is twisty and young. Her teeth are crooked with a little gap up front, but white and charming. Her wet hair sticks to the back of her neck, brown roots growing long through the blue, down to her ears. The windows match the drapes. Her eyes are brown too. Her spindly fingers with their chipped black nail polish button up the front of her raincoat to conceal her wet dress.

I pull up to a diner and she tumbles out of the car before I can go to open the door for her. I hope the other patrons will think that I'm her older brother. Or, I don't know, her dad's friend or something. It's always hard to go out with Elsie, to feel so many eyes boring into the back of my neck.

"We should go to the mall later," she says over pickles and coleslaw. "Some of the guys want to meet you. And then maybe we can do something else after that. And I need you to buy me a new bowl."

"What happened to your old one?" I ask, wanting to know what had become of my previous investment.

She laughs and goes on to tell a story about some person named "Bones." I can't remember who Bones is, really, but I know he's a member of Elsie's ever-increasing cast of characters. She's behaving as though I know him. She's probably introduced me to him once, pulled poor Bones to the side of a party or a concert or a rave to meet her famous friend. He might be tall, with black hair and even blacker lipstick. Or he could be the one with the bike leathers and the crossed-out tattoo of his ex's face on his shoulder blade. They both seem like they could maybe be called "Bones."

"They love your book," Elsie says. A lot of people love my book. It doesn't mean they understand it.

"Who? Bones?"

She laughs and replies, "No, the guys we're meeting at the mall. Seth and Rainbow and Tyler and all them. They think you're like William fucking Burroughs or something. It's kind of hilarious."

I grin at my waffles and demur, saying, "Well, that's flattering. I'd rather be Jack fucking Kerouac though."

"Rainbow wants to get you to sign her arm. Then she's gonna tattoo it. She's got a collection. She's got all sorts of people."

"People?"

"Autographs."

"Oh."

Elsie laughs again, putting her tongue between her teeth. "She like, jizzed herself when I told her I knew you."

I want to ask her if that was why she had called me this morning, after nearly a month and a half of silence. So that her friends could get my autograph. I don't say anything. I just tip the waitress a little less. It doesn't make me feel any better, but I suppose it was worth a try. Sometimes you have to communicate frustration. But other times, in my opinion, it is more helpful to simply punish the universe around you for the crime of being unhelpful. Unentertaining. Unfulfilling. Get the sunlight to bend toward you instead of having to twist yourself toward it.

The fat waitress waves us off as we head back to my car. Elsie gets in front of me, walking backwards over the cracked asphalt of the parking lot. She squints at my stormy expression.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

I skirt around her to unlock my door. "Your friends won't like me," I say. I know I'm falling back on my bad habit of self-pity, but I can't help myself. "I'm not who they think I am. I haven't written anything good since I was like, twenty. I'm a one-hit wonder." If I actually put out what was in my head, they wouldn't even understand it. My mind is a labyrinth, a puzzle box that not even I have the power to solve. No one could even imagine the complexity I possess.

"Oh my God, suck it up," she says, laughing at my expense. "You sound like such a pussy."

"I *am* a pussy," I reply, and I smile in spite of myself.

We don't talk much on the way to the mall. She puts her feet up on my dashboard, and I see that she has drawn all over her faded red sneakers with a ballpoint pen.

She's just a kid.

“What a gross day,” Elsie says. “It was so sunny this morning, too, that’s why I wanted to go down to the shore. Augh, look at the sky.”

I simply nod in response. I don’t look at the sky. I look at the road ahead. It’s getting congested—a mixture of bad weather and the prelude to rush hour. I wish I had stayed in bed for a moment, but Elsie’s presence beside me is comforting. Even though I could never reach across to hold her hand, the physical possibility of interaction with her is good enough.

Elsie’s friends are waiting for us in front of the mall’s movie theatre, right near where we first met each other. The memory makes me smile.

A movie theatre is a temple. It is where we all gather to hold hands and examine our place in the universe. And it is where I go to sleep. My whole life, I’ve never been able to sleep without the television on, and for a long time after they turned my magnum opus into some god-awful romantic comedy, I found myself falling asleep in the back of movie theatres as well. It was like being hypnotized out of hysteria, it was like crying on the subway, it was sleep-catharsis. To say the least, it was a bad habit.

And a gateway drug to Elsie.

I had fallen asleep during an anniversary screening of *Pretty Woman*. I remember her thin, pale hand reaching down to my shoulder and shaking me.

Hey, wake up.

I wondered why she was alone too. Why she was like me. Like a teenaged version of myself that was somehow not horribly depressing. Or horribly embarrassing. I stammered out an apology and she said I could repay her by giving her a ride home. Her father was a cop and he was dead and her mother was a bitch and she was still at work.

I decided to repay her off-putting honesty with a truth of my own. I told her who I was, and she wrote my number on her arm with a pen that she borrowed from me. I hate those numbers. I hate that pen. I love that arm.

One of Elsie’s friends—the short one—scratches his own arm and throws his cigarette to the ground. The girl with red hair grinds it under her toes. The tall one is holding an umbrella.

Elsie introduces us.

The tall one is Seth. The girl is Rainbow. The short one is Tyler. I am David Fallow.

Nice to meet me.

“I can’t believe this!” Rainbow says as we get inside. The mall, a relic from the eighties, is mostly empty of people, even though it’s a stormy day. It’s made of concrete and dirt and linoleum, and it smells like perfume and sweat. “I’ve wanted to meet you like my whole life. I thought you would be older, I don’t know why. Maybe ’cause you wrote a whole book.”

I am old. Too old, that is.

Rainbow is much fatter than I anticipated, not as alluring as the girl that my mind had conjured up: the rainbow spirit who was lithe-limbed and rosy, with a sleeve of names on her arm. The kind of girl I imagined hung out with Elsie.

"I'm, uh, twenty-seven. I wrote the book when I was just a little older than you, actually. That's probably why I've retained my, er, youthful glow."

Rainbow laughs. Elsie doesn't. She's heard this joke before. And she's never even read my book. I wouldn't want her to, anyway.

Elsie is someone to be written about, not someone who should read.

"So what are you working on right now?" Seth asks eagerly. "Is it another book?"

Yes and no. I tend to think of all my interactions with Elsie as "working on another book." But I haven't managed to get much on paper.

"I'm a staff writer for *Ace Crime Bot*. On NBC."

I can see the excitement fade from Rainbow's eyes. I'm not some Aspergian hipster god. I sold out. I'm just like all the rest of them. Fuck, I'm not even the show runner. I'm just a guy who sits with twelve other guys around a table, saying, "Maybe there should be more crimes."

"Do you work in the city?" Tyler asks.

"...Long Island City, actually."

It goes on that way for some hours, with them gradually becoming less and less interested in me until I fade into the background. At one point, Rainbow pulls up her sleeve to show off all the names written all over her arm like spider webs.

"Oh," I say, looking at an autograph on her fat upper arm, pink and bumpy like chicken skin. "I like Zach Braff."

"Yeah," she says, the timbre of her voice becoming bored and far away. All right. I guess she's bored with me. I'm bored with her too.

"So, uh, did you want me to sign it?" I ask, unsure of how she wanted to go about the situation.

She shrugs, which is not very flattering, and says, "Yeah, whatever. Probably later."

Elsie tries on a dress made of blue lace, like her hair. We all admire how it hugs to her slim, perfect body. The sheer sleeves, the gold zipper. One of her red tennis shoes turns in toward the other as she grins at her reflection in the mirror. I watch her soft white hands smooth down her front. She's probably imagining herself older, at a grown-up party, with a glass of wine in hand. She's being hugged to the side of someone smart and attractive. Laughing at his stories. Smiling and listening to what he has to say. Turning her head intimately toward his ear. Everyone else looking at him and envying the smartly-dressed young woman on his arm. Oh, this is Elsie Pierglass. Isn't she charming? Even more charming behind closed doors.

"It's too bad that it's so much money," Rainbow says. "This is why you can't try on shit that's over a hundred."

Elsie nods, saying, "I know," before biting her bottom lip and retreating back into the dressing room. I stand by a display of half-off tees and watch the gap between the door and the carpet. Her small socked feet slip out of her shoes and the dress slides down her body and then her legs before she has to bend and reach a slender, bare arm toward the ground to pick it up again. I set my teeth.

"Shit," I say as we are leaving the store a few minutes later. "I left my keys in there. You guys go ahead, I'll catch up with you in a second."

Elsie waves me off as Tyler and Seth collectively shrug. They don't even notice that I have another shopping bag with me when I catch up with them fifteen minutes later.

I go back and forth over when the best time to give her the dress would be, but I figure that I should do it when we are alone.

That's more special.

"All right," Elsie says, patting my arm and disturbing my train of thought. "Well, I'll see you around, David!"

"Wait, you're going off with them?" I say, and I take a half step toward her. I realize that I'm leaning over her slightly, but that's probably just because of our height difference. "You don't want me to give you a ride?"

Rainbow frowns. I realize that she has never actually asked me to sign her arm.

"I'm fine," Elsie says. She reaches forward to pat my arm, like she's calming down a wild animal. "Seth has a car. So I'm gonna go."

"I, uh, wanted to drive you home, that's all. I just... 'cause I have a surprise for you."

"Well, what is it?" Elsie asks, grinning.

Rainbow rolls her eyes and says "We'll just meet you in the car, Else." She and the two boys make a quick exit. Elsie turns to me, her eyebrows raised.

I hold the bag out to her and she takes the paper loops in both her hands, looking inside.

"...Oh," she says. I had expected her to pull out the dress and twirl around with it hugging the front of her body. Instead she closes the bag and looks up with the sort of sad smile that goes right through me. "Oh, David. You didn't have to...you really didn't have to do this. Um, *why* did you do this?"

"You just, I saw that you liked it so much, but you couldn't, um, afford it. So I bought it for you. It's not a big deal for me, or anything. It's yours. That dress belongs to you, it really does. I didn't want anyone else to, er, to have it."

"Oh, cool. That's...that's very nice of you. I'll, uh, see you around, Dave."

I say goodbye to the back of her head.

I leave the stinking, crowded mall and go to sit behind the wheel of my car. Her scent is sitting heavy in my sinuses. What was this day even supposed to mean, anyway? But then, I suppose it is foolish to look for meaning. We're all goldfish swimming around in circles, bumping our heads against the glass and forgetting what color our mothers' eyes were. My own muse is unruly and frustrating and sixteen years old. Perhaps that's why I haven't been getting any work done lately. It's all thanks to her.

My apartment is dull and dark when I get back. There are dishes in the sink of the kitchenette, and the old cathode-ray television is turned on to QVC, which casts a shaky half-light on my dusty plastic plants and sagging suede couch. There are books and papers carpeting the ground. Author's copies of international releases of my book form an ersatz coffee table. My cat gives an annoyed mewl from atop a pile of magazines. She's probably hungry. I don't love cats, but I like the idea of writers with cats well enough to own one.

"Sorry, Bagel," I mumble under my breath as I feed her before collapsing into bed. I hook my ears up to my laptop and watch *Law & Order* until I fall asleep.

I am awoken hours later by the electric marimba of my phone. I squint at the little rectangle of light and my brow furrows as I see who is calling me.

"Elsie?"

"Listen," she replies. I can hear her voice break, I can hear her sniffing.

I sit up. "What's wrong?"

"Listen, I'm at this party. But I'm...uh...I'm not doing so great. C-can you pick me up? Please? I don't want to be here anymore."

My heart twists as I hear the desperation in her voice. An electric rush goes through my limbs. She really *needs* me.

"Give me the address," I say, rummaging through my papers for a scrap to write it on. "I'll be right there. Don't worry. I'm coming for you." I feel like myself again as I tumble out of bed and out of my apartment, down the dark stairwell to the parking garage. Elsie's voice is ringing in my ears as I skid in my car down cracked suburban roads to stop in front of a little crooked colonial. Light and sound drift out from the windows. At first I think that I will have to go in myself to find Elsie, but then I see a little hunched form sitting on the steps.

She looks up at me as I get out of the car and cross the tangled lawn toward her. Her soft face is smeared with makeup and dried tears. To my surprise, she's wearing the dress—and one of the arms has been torn from shoulder to elbow. I feel heat rush to my face and my fists tense up. It's ruined.

"What happened?" I say, my voice catching in my throat.

"Can we just go?" she whispers, and she grabs my wrist to pull herself to a standing position. She smells like pot and beer and dangles her heels on the fingers of her left hand. "I just need to go. I don't feel good."

She breaks away from me and hobbles into the passenger seat of the car. When I get behind the wheel, I take a deep breath and shake my head.

"I know that something happened," I say, thinking the worst. "Who were you with?"

Elsie stares straight ahead for a moment, before she bends to scrub the heel of her hand across her eyes. "You're not my dad. I don't need to answer to you."

I close my eyes and the lights on the inside of my lids paint a picture of me, vaulting over the center console and crushing her soft pale neck in my hands, slamming her head against the back of the seat. She can be so frustrating sometimes. I breathe out.

"Why aren't we going yet?" Elsie asks. I open my eyes and see her face turned to me, her eyes glassy and questioning. She is the most beautiful thing I have seen in my entire life.

"Elsie..." I say.

She gives a painful sniff and says, "I got in a fight with Rainbow, I think because I was high. I don't know. I feel really sick, David—can we just go home?"

I knew Rainbow was a bitch. I should go in there, I think, put myself between her and my girl. My dear Else. Rip all of the names off of her fat arms.

"What happened?" I ask, my voice strained and distant.

Elsie shakes her head. She doesn't want to tell me. But I know what happened. Rainbow had been slandering me, saying that I was a loser and a creep, that Elsie was stupid to be hanging around me. Elsie must have stood up for me. For the both of us.

"When we first met...last year in that movie theatre, did you think it would turn out like this?" I ask.

"Like what?" she says, smiling slightly. "With you being friends with a crossfaded high schooler?" She thinks I'm joking around.

"You know what I mean," I say, and I watch as understanding fades from her eyes. She lowers her brow.

She should know what I mean. How our souls are connected, how I can feel her heart beating inside of mine. How I cannot close my eyes without seeing her face, how I cannot have a thought without hearing her voice. How she is the most frustrating and most exhilarating presence in my sad, strange world. She is my muse and I am her starving artist. Starving for attention. Starving for her.

I want to say these things to her, but instead, I reach across the divide between us and I touch her soft blue hair. Before she can become confused and draw away, I pull her toward me and I take what I have wanted for as long as I have known her. I kiss her, and for a moment everything is right.

“What the fuck?” she shouts, shattering our bliss and pushing away from me violently, with hands and feet and fingernails like claws. “What are you doing? What is this?”

“Elsie—” Maybe I can fix it. I lean toward her again and she raises one of her shoes, brandishing the heel at me.

“Back the *fuck* off! Stay away from me!” She slams her elbow behind her, opening the door and backing out. She holds one of her heels toward me, her hand shaking like it’s a gun. I am tempted to enact on my fantasy of pouncing on her.

I stumble out of the car myself and she is screaming at me to leave her alone. Lights are turning on in upstairs windows and I am shouting at her because she is making a scene, but all I am praying for is that she won’t turn away from me dear God. I need to remember her face. I need to remember her like this, shaking and afraid of me and thinking she knows who I am. Nobody knows who I am. If only she hadn’t made such a mess of the situation.

For a moment we are at an impasse, both staring at each other and moving our weight from one foot to the other. I ruin it by getting impatient and lunging at her, thinking I can hold her in my arms until she calms down and leans against me. But her arm is quick and her aim is good and she slams the spiked heel into my temple without mercy, like this all meant nothing to her. Like everything I ever did for her was just dust and polite conversation.

I figure there are two types of people in the world: those that are great and those who just leech off of greatness. The leeches are everywhere—dull and toothy and starving. Some are better at disguising themselves, better at seeming pretty and interesting and unique. Yet still, they take and take and take and never think of giving something in return. They don’t care about their victims, they don’t care about true greatness. Leeches are dangerous and real, and Elsie Pierglass is one of them.

So I lay here on the ground, blood trickling from my temple, and I watch her run away with everything I have ever tried to give her, a thought reverberating in my head.

That is my dress.

That is my dress.

That is my dress.