

WILD MAN'S SERENADE

I was awakened from a sound sleep by an urgent thumping at the door. Nickey and I looked at each other. Who could be calling at this ungodly hour? It wasn't even noon yet. Was something wrong? My mind started racing. Nickey quickly walked over to the door, but before opening it he called out, "Who is it?"

A sweet little voice began to sing: "*My name is Larry, my name is Larry...*"

Over the past few weeks, Nickey and I had befriended Larry "Wild Man" Fischer. He started coming over to our apartment at the Canterbury almost every day. Larry was like a little kid trapped in a full-grown man's body. He had wild, frizzy hair that stuck out from both sides of his head. He nearly always came into a room with a big smile on his face, often singing one of his old songs or an improvised new one. Nickey had his own knack for making up fun, silly songs, and I joined in once in a while, too, but mostly it was Nickey and Wild Man taking turns with songs like "No, No, No — Don't Want No Jello," or "Merry-Go-Round."

He didn't usually come over this early. Nickey cracked open the door with a slightly irritated, "It's still early, Larry." But Wild Man was excited, and he ignored Nickey's comment. He burst into the room, talking about how he'd met some people on Hollywood Boulevard who recognized him and had paid him to serenade them. Larry couldn't hold down a regular job, so singing on the street was his sole means of earning a living. Strangers would toss spare change his way in exchange for a song or two, but the people he'd met this morning had known who he was. They had heard the album that he'd recorded with Frank Zappa, and now he was giddy with the rush of his newfound celebrity status. They had given him a few dollars instead of the spare change he was used to getting, and suddenly Larry was feeling flush with cash and he wanted to share his good luck with us.

Larry had a long list of songs into which he would insert people's names. He might ask you your name and what you did and then he'd take his songs and add details about you to the lyrics, so a song like "My Name Is Larry" could turn into "*My name is Larry, My name is Larry, I have a friend, Her name is Alice...*" It didn't take Larry long to figure out that the more details about his listeners he put into his songs, the more they liked the song. The practice became a social passport for him and pretty soon he was singing the details of

any given activity, narrating it as he performed the activity and including as many details about the people around him as possible.

Larry held out a crumpled brown paper bag; there were some pieces of bread and crumbs in the bag. "I bought this for us!" he chirped, offering me the bag.

"I'm not hungry, but thank you," I replied after looking in the rumpled bag. I excused myself, then grabbed some clothes and locked myself in the bathroom while Nickey fixed breakfast and chatted with Wild Man. Even though we were now living together, Nickey still wouldn't let me cook, clean or do any of the laundry. He was a bit of a control freak in that sense, but I didn't have any problem with allowing him the privilege of performing the domestic chores.

When I was sufficiently dolled up, I joined them in the kitchen, where Nickey had our breakfast ready. We hung out for a while, just talking, but the newly earned money must have been burning a hole in Wild Man's pocket, and he wanted to go somewhere. "Let's go to a movie!" he suggested. Nickey and Wild Man went out for a newspaper, and when they came back we chose a movie called THX 1138, an early George Lucas science-fiction film. As we were leaving the Canterbury, we picked up a few other neighbors who were hanging out the window of Shannon Wilhelm's first-floor apartment, which faced the center courtyard. Shannon often kept the window open, so when punks came and went, they often checked in with her along the way, kind of like a reception desk. Connie Clarksville, Shannon, Nickey, me, Larry and someone else I've sadly forgotten all squeezed into my old Ford Falcon.

In the car, Larry sang incessantly, making up songs about people we passed on the street and about each of us. We laughed the whole way to the theater. When we got out of the car, my girlfriends and I walked in front while Wild Man and Nickey followed behind, singing about us.

Once inside, we found seats near the front and side of the theater; not my favorite places to sit, but it was a special day for Larry, so we let him pick. Instead of sitting way off to one side, Shannon and I sat up front and the others sat behind us. During the previews, Wild Man kept talking, but we figured he'd pipe down once the movie started. We figured wrong. He kept trying to engage Nickey in conversation during the credits and Nickey finally turned to him and said "Larry, I'm not going to talk to you anymore now that the movie's started."

"I'm sorry Nickey, I'll be good," Wild Man promised. And he was good, for about 10 minutes. Then, during a quiet scene in the movie, we heard a

teeny-tiny mouse voice begin to squeak in the dark: “*My name is Laaaa-rry, my name is Laa-rry...*” We couldn’t contain ourselves. We all burst out laughing, provoking shushes and dirty looks from the rest of the audience.

“Larry, be quiet!” I scolded, but I could see his face beaming and smiling at me, even in the darkness of the theater. A couple of minutes later, the little voice started up again, this time even quieter: “*My name is Laa-rry, my name is Laa-rry...*” Again, we burst out laughing and the more we tried to control ourselves, the harder it was to stop. This went on for perhaps another 15 minutes, until we decided we’d have to leave out of courtesy to the other people in the theater.

Nobody was mad at Larry — how could we be? Larry’s childlike qualities were endearing. His unbridled enthusiasm, innocent desire to please and outspoken honesty made him lovable.

One day Larry came over while Nickey was out. He looked thrown off by the fact that Nickey wasn’t there, so I let him come in to wait. The whole time, Wild Man looked concerned, but he wouldn’t talk to me about it. After some time had passed, Nickey walked in and he and Wild Man went for a walk. When he got back, Larry wasn’t with him.

“Is everything okay with Wild Man?” I asked Nickey.

“You know, Alice — you probably shouldn’t let him in when I’m not here,” Nickey replied. He didn’t tell me what he and Larry had talked about, but I could see that he was trying to protect me. “Larry is a mental patient, Alice.”

I didn’t know the half of it, but I promised Nickey I’d tell Wild Man to come back if he ever came by while I was alone. Our friendship with the Wild Man needed to have limits, but he was now dropping by unexpectedly at all hours, and Nickey stepped into an almost fatherly role. He told Larry when he could and couldn’t come over. At first, Larry looked a little hurt that he couldn’t stop by anytime he wished, but after a few days he seemed all right.

Larry seemed to be going through a change. His youthful exuberance was gone and he seemed sullen and pensive now. Eventually his visits became less and less frequent and we fell out of touch, but I still remember Larry “Wild Man” Fischer as one of the sweetest, most creative and unique people I met at the Canterbury.