

A GOPHER IN THE NINTH WARD

By Trish Harnetiaux

A car is heard pulling up and a big fat white WOMAN and her husband (that never speaks, only stands there silently screaming) roll on stage. They are definitely from Texas and WOMAN sounds like it.

WOMAN holds an atrocious stuffed gopher, has a camera and wears a "Proud To Be American" T-shirt. She can barely manage all she carries.

Her husband, FRANK, has his back to the audience as he surveys the damage. We cannot see his face yet.

They each hold bags of junk food and eat throughout the scene.

WOMAN

My lord Jesus Christ Frank... It's amazing. Pictures do not do justice, not at all. No justice at all. Where do you think the best spot is?

Why look at that - that big ole barge just sitting in the middle of the street. Never seen a barge in the middle of a neighborhood before. I could set him up near the front so it looks *like he drove* the barge here.

Or there - I could put him right inside the window of that burnt out car there.

Frank, look how that car is just sitting on the roof of that house. Do you think I could climb up and set him on the hood? I could take the photo from below. That sounds so *artistic*, doesn't it Frank? Just look at that sky - that shade of blue, that brilliant shade of blue, isn't it a nice shade of blue? Reminds me of that little '67 Fiat that daddy bought me for as a wedding gift. Frank - you remember that little blue Fiat?

(WOMAN sees the AUDIENCE and is momentarily startled.)

Holy lord Jesus Christ! I did not see you there.

FRANK slowly turns towards WOMAN. We can see his face now. He has his mouth wide open, screaming but no sound comes out.

WOMAN

Or, look at that! Look how neatly those clothes are hanging in that closet. Never seen a closet just standing there all alone without a house around it before, have you? What if I put him right in there - like he's peaking out from between all the shirts?

I could frame the shot! That's how artists talk Frank, *they frame things*. I could frame the shot with the blue sky just bright as can be all around that closet just standing there.

It's magical. Frank I feel like a kid again.

(To AUDIENCE.)

You see this?

(FRANK is now eating food out of the giant bag. This has stopped him from silently screaming.)

Stole this off my boss' desk at work.

(Laughs.)

It's a Gopher, a genuine stuffed Gopher. Bet you never seen one of these before.

(At first mention of the Gopher, FRANK resumes screaming again.)

The other girls in the office took the gopher places too. There's a picture of him in New York City, there's another of him behind the window of a drive through hamburger place in Chattanooga - looks like he's handing the driver some fries. The new girl took him to the island of Hawaii on her honeymoon, perched him right near the edge of this steaming volcano - looked like he was going to jump for a second... That was a good one.

But I knew when I saw the pictures on the cable news that this would be *the place, the destination* for the perfect shot of this gopher here. Just look at him - he's nice and warm and cuddly and *has a sense of presence*. He photographs nice.

(Glancing at FRANK who has moved closer to her, still screaming.)

It's not as bad as it looks. One day Frank comes home from work and is just sitting in his recliner chair like he likes to do and lord knows has done everyday for the past 29 years of our blissful marriage.

He's sitting there - got his bags of potato chips, pretzels, frit-o-lays, all 7 of the remote controls, his big soda-sippy and some peanut M&Ms at his side - and he's watching the

six o'clock news cast waiting for the sports to come on, when he - quite suddenly and unexpectedly starts choking.

Now, I am all the way in the other room, but I hear this terrible noise like some animal dying and I run in, breathless. I hit Frank on the back, hit him with my hand, with this one -

(Holds up hand.)

- and the substance dislodged *immediately*.

And that's when it started. Frank starts screaming, screaming and he won't stop. So I call up Dr. Brown and he said to bring him over *immediately*. Turns out Frank has some sort of nameless faceless something that Dr. Brown can only describe as a "*touch of the humanity*."

Now, Dr. Brown is an *otolaryngologist* - it's a mouthful, but he knows his business. See, an *otolaryngologist* is a specialist of the ears, nose and throat. He is an expert in his field and he had never seen anything like Frank, did not know what to do. Frank puzzled an expert, didn't you Frank?

Being there's no cure for it - this "*touch of the humanity*" - we had to decide then and there to just remove Frank's vocal cords and you're glad we did 'cause back in high school Frank was a *cross country runner* and those lungs of his could swallow up the entire Louisiana Purchase with all the noise they make.

(Holding the gopher up to the AUDIENCE.)

Do you want to hold him?

(Awkward pause.)

Frank doesn't like to touch him either. Which I think is strange because he's real fond of dogs and such, aren't you Frank?

(Pause.)

I said aren't you Frank?

(She laughs.)

Little joke we play, it passes the time. Doesn't it Frank? I swear, I'm no *otolaryngologist*, but he's been a handful. Haven't let him out of my sight since...

(Pause. To AUDIENCE.)

Now, you look like you know this area, this neighborhood - I can sense that about you.

In my entire life I have never, ever, won anything... So, what I'm asking, what I'm wondering, what I'm dying to know is - where is the best place to photograph my gopher?

See, I came all the way down 'cause no one has ever, dare say never, brought a stuffed gopher to an area such as this. It was like *a calling*, you know? It's *practically guaranteed* that I'm the winner. Do you know what an *Office Pool* is? Best picture of

this gopher gets Frank and me an all expense dinner at Red Lobster. You *have* the Red Lobster here?

Every time I looked over at Frank in the car I could tell by the look on his face he was dreaming of getting his hands on some drawn butter and a pile of seafood. You were thinking that, weren't you Frank?

(She laughs. The sound of a distant music is heard. It is beautiful.)

WOMAN

Wait, shhh, do you hear that? Why - what is that? It's beautiful. It's like a symphony. I've never heard a symphony - not really.

(The music grows increasingly louder.)

I've read about these people that have *feelings*. They just have *feelings* about things. They learn to "*trust their gut*." I think I'm having one. A feeling that it is not just a coincidence that I'm standing right here, right now, with you all and in the middle of all of this and I hear my first symphony. No sir. There's a little bit of a hand guiding me right now and I think the hand is telling me that if I follow that sound I will win my Office Pool.

That there will be some *nice framing* there.

(A doorway appears.)

WOMAN

Look at that! That doorway there. Just a door *frame* really, isn't it. Why Frank, really look at this, I think it was *a chapel*. Do you see, just at the top of the frame, how there's that piece of wood, that partial piece of wood with a part of *an arm* or something nailed to it. I think that was the *crucifix Frank*.

And listen - that music is coming from there, the symphony. This is what they would call a *threshold*.

It is all making sense, I'm getting that feeling again. First a barge in the middle *of a street*, then a closet with *no house around it*, now a door frame that is a *threshold*.

My picture is in there, isn't it.

It's like I was meant to find you, as if you were leading me here. Something in your face, your eyes... *Don't they have nice eyes Frank?*

You mind if I leave Frank with you? Don't want him to wonder off...

Do you want me to tie Frank to a post or something? Don't want him to be in your way at all. Frank's not too good with personal space sometimes, you know personal space?

(She pulls a rope and blind fold out.)

I have this blindfold here, sometimes if I tie it around his head, and make sure he can't see anything around him, he stops making that, that thing he does with his face.

(She puts the blind fold on.)

Back in the day, Frank was *promise-ful*. Watched the sports all the time and we thought he'd make it to the Olympics, represent his country.

(She has his hands behind his back.)

Seoul Korea. Do you remember Seoul Korea? Frank was headed straight there. Straight to Seoul Korea.

(She has got him to the floor.)

It's real peaceful when all you can hear is Frank breathing... There's a real nice pattern to his breathing.

(She has tied his hands and feet, he is on the ground, she is resting her hand on his stomach.)

Sometimes, late, when it's just Frank and me and we're just sitting somewhere - anywhere - a porch, a stool, Frank sometimes like to sit underneath the tree out front, makes himself real small like, has his legs all curled up to his chest, it's times like those when you can hear it best. It's real nice, like this:

(She calmly exhales twice.)

I'll just leave my bag right here. If he starts sweating too much or something there's some sunscreen right there in the pocket and you can just put it on his face.

(We can hear FRANK breathing.)

That's it - that pattern there, his breathing sounds, that's what soothes me.

Be good Frank.

(WOMAN exits. FRANK is breathing heavier. Blackout.)