

Jody Azzouni: I'd seen comicbooks before, but it wasn't until camp that I read one. This is true. Comicbooks weren't allowed in my house. One year I traded an ugly teeshirt for a copy of *The Hulk*. It was the first issue of *The Hulk*. The Hulk was brown, by the way. (I can still visualize his color.) I remember, a couple of years later, being confused by the existence of a Marvel comic that starred a *green* hulk. Is that the same Hulk? Or maybe there are two Hulks (with really similar beginnings)? I got even more confused when Marvel reprinted the first issue in an annual, but reprinted The Hulk green. I kept thinking: I must be wrong. The one I remember is brown. He *was* brown (of course). For some reason that I didn't get, they'd changed him to green. I think I know now why they did it. Now that I'm an adult. Like they were when they changed the Hulk's color.

Strange things happen that you don't get as a child. I open my luggage some hours after I return from camp, and there's no Hulk. Not anywhere. I never guessed how it disappeared. I thought I'd done something stupid. Forgot it somehow. Years later (many, many years later) my mother admits that she went through my luggage before I unpacked it, and threw it out. Apparently that's ethical in some circles. I coolly tell her about its (then current) value among comicbook collectors. It's a first, I point out. First things have a way of accruing value. Think of Adam and Eve, I tell her.

I read history books as a child. I read a lot about the Spanish Armada. In sixth grade, we're told by the teacher that Spain goes after England (sends the Armada) because England has knighted Sir Francis Drake. I raise my hand and start to explain about Protestants and Catholics murdering each other in the streets of England. That's nonsense, the teacher tells me, and shushes me.

Some months later I've giving a report on ancient Greek culture. I did research at the library, I really did. And I'd discovered something. This is really weird, I tell the class. Did you realize they were all *gay*? I didn't realize they were all gay. I didn't know *everyone* (in a country) could *all* be gay. The teacher asks me to stop talking *now*, sends me back to my seat.

In seventh grade, I'm explaining in my class report that there was no law against polygamy, that the United States first passed the law and then applied it to the Mormons *ex post facto*. That's outrageous, I'm explaining.

Teachers were always telling me to stop talking. *Lots* of adults were always telling me to stop talking. To shut up. *Now*. I never got it, I never understood why.

I wrote the story in the winter of 1996. *The Styles* accepted it for publication in 2003; but *The Styles* folded before the story could appear. Four years later still it was accepted by *Chicago Quarterly Review*, where it appeared in 2008.

Sirens

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I've seen comicbooks before, but it isn't until camp that I *read* one: Doctor Prow's son is an artist traveling abroad. One evening, among the ruins of a castle (in West Romania), he sees a beautiful woman, mist framing her becomingly, who agrees to pose for him. They marry. His father, a big man with a full gray beard, big gray eyebrows, thick glasses, and lots of wavy gray hair on his head, learns of these things from letters his son sends him regularly: on a yellow rectangle above the cartoon square is handwriting, "She is beautiful, Father. I have never met anyone like her," and inside the square is a picture: through a window: full moon light; on an easel: an unfinished painting of the beautiful woman, pale white face (stark against ravenlocks), slender frame; near the window: an unprepossessing blond man with a goatee and a mustache, kissing the same woman.

"We have set up housekeeping in a lovely castle that has been in Iona's family for countless generations. Her father is an elegant man (and there is indoor plumbing too). You will like him I am sure (you will have a lot to talk about). Although he is aristocracy (and so does not have a real job), he is nevertheless interested in the latest developments in science, especially those in medicine and psychology; I can hardly keep up (he has all the latest professional journals). There is even a dichroscope here; we spend hours checking crystals for dichroism; it is so much fun! You must come soon, visit us, meet Iona.

“The light is always lovely in the afternoon, and in the early evening; it is everything a painter could ask for: snowtopped mountains in the distance, wolves baying in nearby forests, a dusk to die for (it is all rather too picturesque, I admit; but a good start if I remember to embroider the result once I get enough of it on the canvas). By the way, Iona has a rare skin disease: she must avoid sunlight at all costs (as a result she is unusually white, even by our standards). Perhaps you have heard of this disease? perhaps you know of some useful medicaments?”

Other letters follow, and Doctor Prow writes his son back: the practice is overwhelming or he would visit this year: his assistant is in the grip of the gripe, and besides there are these new experiments with mesmerism which are going marvelously (“people standing on their heads for hours, and no backaches afterwards; just think of it!”). Only a few more weeks, he promises; my love to Iona and her elegant father. (“What did you say his name was?”)

In the yellow square on the next page: “There are no letters for several months, and then”:

December 17, 1878, Romania

Dear Doctor Andrew Prow,

I’m sorry to haf to vrite you under such circumstances but your son is very ill vith a strange fever ve don’t understand and has fallen into a coma. You must come immediately for although Romania is a lovely place (especially in vinter) our medicaments are somewhat primitive. Please come immediately for there is no time to lose.

Sincerely,

Iona, your daughter-in-law.

There are more pictures: Doctor Prow packing, Doctor Prow explaining to his young new assistant how to handle emergencies should any come up. Doctor Prow sitting in his big green easy chair, pipe in mouth, snow falling outside a window, a long shelf of books next to a desk (“The New Magnetism and The Modern Spiritualism,” “Electronics of Table-Rapping,” “Monopoles and the Unconscious”), puzzling over the letter: “Something is not right; something is very wrong.” “Maybe it’s the spelling,” the assistant looking over his shoulder, says, “don’t they know how to spell in Europe?”

And then another letter:

December 18, 1878, Romania

I’m sorry to haf to break this terrific news for you but your son has died. Incidentally, there is terrific epidemic here and so since it is very dangerous for all of us ve are going abroad, and vill no be any longer at our place of residence when you receive this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Count Dracula

(Iona’s father)

Doctor Prow, as a result, falls into a terrible depression: five frames of him sitting in his easy chair doing nothing; frame by frame: mail piling higher and higher up on the desk; the doorbell ringing (bearded men with top hats and canes, women in petticoats with small dogs and umbrellas, all looking quite desperate). The overwhelmed assistant begging for help; the neglected but steaming bowl of porridge on Doctor Prow's breakfast table while he sits staring into his pipe bowl; an attractive maidservant looking on, disapproving.

And then another letter:

April 21, 1879, Romania

Dearest Father,

Please come immediately (don't forget to use the enclosed map); I need you desperately; everything will be explained.

Mortimer

Picture of Doctor Prow on a ship, puzzling over the letter by lantern, rain falling ("It is certainly his handwriting, and the chemical analysis of the paper so kindly provided me by my dear colleague and close friend Doctor Cornwallis Davy proves it was written not earlier than the beginning of April."); picture of Doctor Prow riding in a carriage; picture of Doctor Prow making his way through the deserted and cluttered room where his son spent the summer

painting: the easel with the painting still on it (prominent cobwebs dangling everywhere; here and there large spiders): a picture of a slender woman, stark pale, black hair, fangs; full moon light: Doctor Prow, his face twisted into a grimace of horror, throwing the painting across the dusty room (rats, their faces twisted in grimaces of horror, scampering away from where the picture has landed; inscrutable bats wheeling into the air around him). Then villagers (wearing pantaloons, carrying long stakes, big oversize crosses dangling off their necks) warning him not to go to the Count's castle, suggesting that he at least eat a hardy meal of porridge laced with garlic cloves ("Yeech"); a carriage taking him to a preassigned meeting place among ruins. (When did this happen? I turn the pages back and forth for a while, and look for something missing.) Sounds of howling all around Doctor Prow in the firry forest that overlaps the small circle of dingy light he waits in (unaccountable streaks of red); full moon shining over jutting stone shapes: shadows twisted up in violation of optical laws (and conventions of perspective); and then another carriage rushing in, drawn by black horses, something masked in the driver's seat above (talons, extended from a frayed cloak, holding the reins tight), his son getting out from below ("You are alive!" "Not now Father, we'll talk later."); and then (after a race through brambles, baying wolves running alongside the speeding carriage, bats screeching above), in the livingroom of the castle, Igor offering strange chewables, a rapid introduction of the good doctor to Iona, her father (the Count), and the family dog. "My family, and I hope, your family now too," a noncommittal *um* from the somewhat alarmed Prow; a bit more chitchat (mostly about the weather that everyone agrees is unusually intrusive), and then: "Father, I am a vampire. We are all vampires": everyone smiling fangedly in chorus, "We are tired of hunting peasants for blood (after all, they're getting rare). You are a doctor: you can get us blood; and you must get us blood

or we will turn you into a vampire or worse!” Doctor Prow’s horrified face; nearby, a contented Wolfman eating (something) out a doggiebowl.

There’s no backcover, and I’m sure other pages are missing too, because what happens? does the doctor agree? do the vampires eat him? (I’m worried.) It’s only later I realize the comicbook ended even though the story doesn’t.

The librarian towers over me, but she’s nice anyway. “Dracula,” I tell her, “I want Dracula.” She explains that it’s among the adult books and I’m not allowed to read those. I don’t understand: I read about Dracula in a *comicbook*. She explains that the library doesn’t have comicbooks (which misses the point, I think). The children’s section has low shelves (and lighter wood too), but somehow Dr. Seuss isn’t very inviting. I brought several comicbooks back with me from camp in my suitcase (traded some colorful teeshirts I told Mom I lost), but when I unpacked later, they were gone. And I have no money.

So when she goes back to her desk, I sneak over to the adult section (even though the library is only one room, it’s easy to hide in there because of the big shelves).

I can’t find what I want (“Seven Days That Shook The World,” “Valley Of The Dolls,” and the other books, look boring), so I go back to the children’s section, the librarian staring at me sharply all of a sudden; besides the inevitable Seuss, and the interminable Dick, Jane and Sally sagas, there are fairy tales, mythology, and folk tales; and that’s what I end up reading.

Here’s the surprise: Fairy tales are *better*. For one thing, they end with *endings*: “They lived happily ever after.” “They ate and ate all they wanted.” “The witch, the wicked witch, was dead.” “Jack got married to the really nice princess.”

But my favorite goes something like this: Once upon a time a goodlooking fisherman lives in a village near the sea. He takes care of his mother and older brother (who’s apparently

retarded in some way because he doesn't work). Lots of girls in the village like him, and meet him each evening when he comes back from a day of fishing (a big string of fish hung over his shoulder becomingly). He's nice to them, but hasn't fallen in love yet. One day, at the shore, he catches the most beautiful and biggest fish he's ever seen (purple and all). But, alas, it talks: "Oh nice Mr. Fisherman please don't kill me. I've got a family too just like yours (only bigger), and a lovely mother that depends on me, and if I don't bring them back my cache of worms they'll have to go to bed hungry. *Please please please* throw me back." The fisherman throws him back (after all, the fish talks), and when he returns home empty-handed, his mother and brother yell at him because they've got nothing but porridge to eat for dinner. The next day he's back at the seashore, and the most beautiful woman he's ever seen strolls down the beach towards him: she's wearing seaweed (becomingly). They fall in love (get married? it doesn't say), and she takes him back to her mansion under the sea (Dad is the fish he caught the other day, so they become fast friends); he stays with her, and her family, for many days, feasting and being with her. One day (a month or so later) he gets homesick. (This is the part I don't get.)

Anyway, she really doesn't want him to go back to the land (she's afraid for some reason), and when she finally agrees, she gives him a talking frog (she says the frog will give him three warnings that he has to return; if he doesn't heed it after the third warning, it will be too late).

When he climbs out of the sea (frog in pocket), the small town is different: it's lots bigger, and the dirt road is paved with stones now; there are carriages going back and forth. He walks to the town, bewildered (it's been what? a month at most? has he accidentally come out of the sea at the wrong place?) and sees familiar landmarks (an occasional barn, a piece of fence),

surrounded by unfamiliar landscape; the people too are dressed differently. They stare at him and point.

He asks for instructions home, but no one seems to know what he's talking about:

“Where Lars Laagardenstaad lives? why Lars, if it's really *Lars*, really *Lars Laagardenstaad* you're looking for, well he disappeared one day these eighty years ago. Never came back (broke his poor old mother's heart he did). The house was torn down to make way for the new school since that good-for-nothing other son Hoite never made anything of himself.” Just then the frog croaks “time to go,” the innkeeper turning around in surprise, “*excuse me?*”

Lars can't make anything of it (he's not too swift, I gather); he wanders past the new schoolhouse built where his shack used to be (the frog piping up again, “time to go”), and meets a girl. She's kind of pudgy (not like the mermaid); she takes his arm, squeezing it (“aren't *you* handsome”). The frog doesn't get to warn him a third time (the girl presses against him and accidentally squishes it).

Later (after they stop by a barn for some reason) he remembers his mermaid, rushes back to the angry dark sea (yellow lightning, big waves like at Jones Beach), and sees a giant fishtail sinking into a wave (????). And then suddenly (this part is weird too) he's an old man, gasping and dying on the shore. Like most of the fairy tales, it's kind of unfair: the frog never warned him a third time, and that wasn't his fault. But Lars is just a big jerk anyway: I wouldn't have left. And he had just what I want (more than anything): a mermaid.

I *know* the facts of life (Mom's told me), but like everything else, they don't make sense. “Look,” I explain to my brother (who's comatose, pretty much, as usual), “this much we know: the man and the woman go to bed together. And then the sperm comes out of the man's penis, and goes into the woman's vagina. But this is really problematical.” (“This is really what?” my

brother pipes up for once; I just keep going.) “The sperm have to cross over the sheets to get to the vagina, right? Suppose the sheets are really wrinkled (after all the sperm are really small, so wrinkles are mountains to them): won’t it take them so long to crawl across the sheets that it’ll be morning? and then everyone will have to get up?” (My brother: “I guess.”) “Or suppose the man rolls on top of them while he’s sleeping (and crushes them). Or worse: *suppose he sleeps on his stomach to begin with*. How are they supposed to get out from under there?” As usual, my brother has nothing useful to contribute: “It works, I guess,” he says.

Mom has misled the therapist: There’s all this old stuff about how I’m an “underachiever,” of course (they have to get into that even though I’ve already skipped second grade). But she’s also claimed that I tried to drown myself at Riis Park by swimming out past where I was supposed to (the lifeguard “saved” me); she’s claimed that I’m always swimming out to the deep part of the pool, and then sinking down under; she’s claimed I waded out into a lake upstate, and that Ernie (of erstwhile boyfriend status) had to “save” me. Although none of this is evidence of a desire to drown, they think visiting a therapist will help; I never tell them what I’m really up to. *Mom* has also told the therapist that I don’t like to be touched; she says it this way: “And, you know, he doesn’t like to be,” whispers, “t-o-u-c-h-e-d.”

Among the things they don’t know: I’m practicing (I hold my breath as long as I can); I’m preparing for something big.

The therapist says to me, “Do you sometimes not get along with your mother?” Therapists are so naïve (advice she’s given me in the past: “don’t read so much”). I never answer her questions; I always talk about other things (I *evade*; I use simple language; I *condescend*). I tell her about what I’ve been reading (*Mom* sits in the other room so that it looks as if our conversation is a private one); I say something like this: I hate it how older brothers are always

turned into frogs or rocks or worms by witches, how they're always mean to the younger brothers (who have to live in fireplaces for some reason), how they're always stupid or lazy or fat, how they're always getting blessed ("Blessed?" she asks, and I have to explain, but carefully), how the loaf of bread they get is something they're too cheap to share with homeless people. And think of this: the old people, the adults (I'm trying to get her on my side) are always trying to eat the kids.

"It's not really like that," I say, as simply as I can. "I'm the older brother, and it's not like that at all."

"You don't get along with your brother?" she asks. He's ok, I tell her. Really. He just doesn't do anything; he's always hiding.

"Hiding?" she says.

"Yeah, like in closets or under the covers or even in corners with his eyes shut."

"You play hide and seek a lot?" she asks.

"No," I tell her (and I'm telling her the truth), "he plays by himself."

She wants to hear about my dreams, and I don't mind telling her those (she thinks they're really interesting, but she's wrong), how I feel guilty about something (who remembers what), and get spanked by a lightning bolt. But before I go to sleep I actually think about women (I don't tell her this). I think about five or six women wearing Maidenform bras coming into my house and kidnapping me; they're laughing and carrying me out: each one's got a limb of mine, and one or two more are holding me up by the middle (tickling me through my pajamas). I like thinking about this before I got to sleep; I'd dream about it if I could.

Here's something else I don't tell her: Once upon a time, Grandma says (apropos of nothing), "Why do they flinch when you brush their hair?" Mom says, "That's not flinching.

Who told you that was flinching?” Grandma says, “I don’t know. It looks like flinching to me.” When Uncle Ben arrives, he gives me a picture: “That’s a mermaid,” he explains. (That can’t be right: she’s ugly and she’s got a fishtail.) “That’s why they’re called mermaids,” he says, “*L’Asoth des philosophes*,” he says. I start to cry while Grandma says, “What? what did he say? I never can understand what he’s talking about.” I’m telling them that it’s a lie, that I’ve read about mermaids in books, that they do have legs, that they’re really pretty.

I learned about Narnia some time ago, but like everywhere else interesting I don’t know how to get there. Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy get there through a closet (that won’t work in my house). I walk around the neighborhood looking for secret routes to magic places: holes in walls, overgrown and deserted paths that look like they might lead somewhere else. But nothing ever does.

Mom is always stating facts: “It’s a fact,” she’ll say, “there is no Santa Claus.” “It’s a fact,” she said once, “you don’t have any uncles. There is no Uncle Ben. He’s just some guy that moves tubs for a living and wants to marry Grandma.” Mom’s going to say, “there’s no mermaids,” she’s said it before; that’s why I run out of the room crying (before she has a chance to say it again). “What a weird kid,” Mom says. “Science books are good,” Uncle Ben adds in that smooth voice of his, “maybe I should get him something about the solar system.”

Some water is magical and some isn’t. I saw a pond once (in a book) with mermaids splashing around, fauns at the shore, a unicorn dipping its nose in: that’s a magical pond. Lakes, lagoons, rivulets, brooks, streams, rivers, lochs, sounds, creeks and cricks can all be magical too. A tributary can’t (I think) unless it’s got a bridge with a troll underneath it. Canals are *never* magical, and although moats sometimes are, it’s the wrong way: there are dragons.

Brooklyn is not awash in magic (there's only a canal), and you can tell no mermaid will come out of Riis Park (consider the color of the foam). Water that comes out of the faucets isn't magical either. I check out puddles regularly, but they're always too small; rain is nice, but it doesn't lead anywhere.

Here's a fact: you never know. Uncle Ben takes us to a swimming pool (*in secret*: Mom thinks we're at Coney Island on *rides*). I doubt anything magical can happen here: although the women are in bikinis, there are no mermaids. I check out the sides of the pool (at the deep end, and near the bottom) for magical routes elsewhere: I find a special place (but need to come up for air). I wave to Uncle Ben and my brother at the other end of the pool (to allay suspicion), and then sink away again: if I'm lucky, this is it. The special place is sucking in water (that's a good sign), and it looks like it might be large enough for me to fit through. (It's hard to tell because the chlorine hurts my eyes when I open them.) I stick my hand in, and the opening pulls my arm so hard that my shoulder slams against the side of the pool (I was wrong about the size, I guess). I'm surprised by its desire for me: gasp out my air, gulp in the water.