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The Shirt

BY JOHN MANDERINO

"Are you going to wear that?" Jill asked, brushing her hair, looking at Bob in her dressing table mirror.

"I thought I might," he said by the closet, buttoning. "Why? You don't like it?"

"Didn't say that."

"I can wear something else."

"That's entirely up to you."

"Would you prefer I wore something else?"

"Do you like that shirt, Bob?"

"Yes, I do. I like it very much."

"Then you should wear it."

"But do you like it?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Tell me anyway, just for fun."

"All right. Just for fun? I don't like it. I think it's utterly dreadful."

"You're kidding."

"Why would I kid?"

He began unbuttoning it. "Then I'll wear something else."

"Please don't."

"You said it was dreadful."

"Utterly."

"All right, then." He continued unbuttoning it.

"Please don't change your shirt for me, Bob."

"Who should I change it for?"

"For yourself."

"But I like this shirt."

"Then there's nothing more to be said."

Bob hesitated, holding a button. "You're right." He began buttoning it up again.

Jill watched him in the mirror. "So you're going to wear it?"

"Yes, Jill, I am. I think it's a terrific-looking shirt."

"Then you should definitely wear it."

"I definitely intend to."

"I can see that."

"I'm sorry you don't like it."

"That doesn't matter, apparently."

Bob dropped his hands, one button to go. "Jill, that's not fair. Of course it matters. You know that."

"And yet..." She gestured in the mirror towards the shirt he was nevertheless wearing.

Bob stood there a moment. Then he began quickly unbuttoning. "This is ridiculous. I'll wear another shirt, for God sakes. I hate this shirt. It's a horrible, bitchy, impossible shirt and I want nothing more to do with it." He pulled it off and flung it to the carpet, then stood there in his T-shirt with his hands at his hips, breathing hard. "All right? Happy?"

She looked at him in the mirror, sadly. "See how you get?" She put an earring on.

He continued standing there, watching her put the other one on. Then he said quietly, "Jill, will you tell me something, please?"

"If I can."

"What...exactly...do you want from me?"

"You really want to know?"

"I really do."

"You're not going to like it," she warned, opening a tube of lipstick.

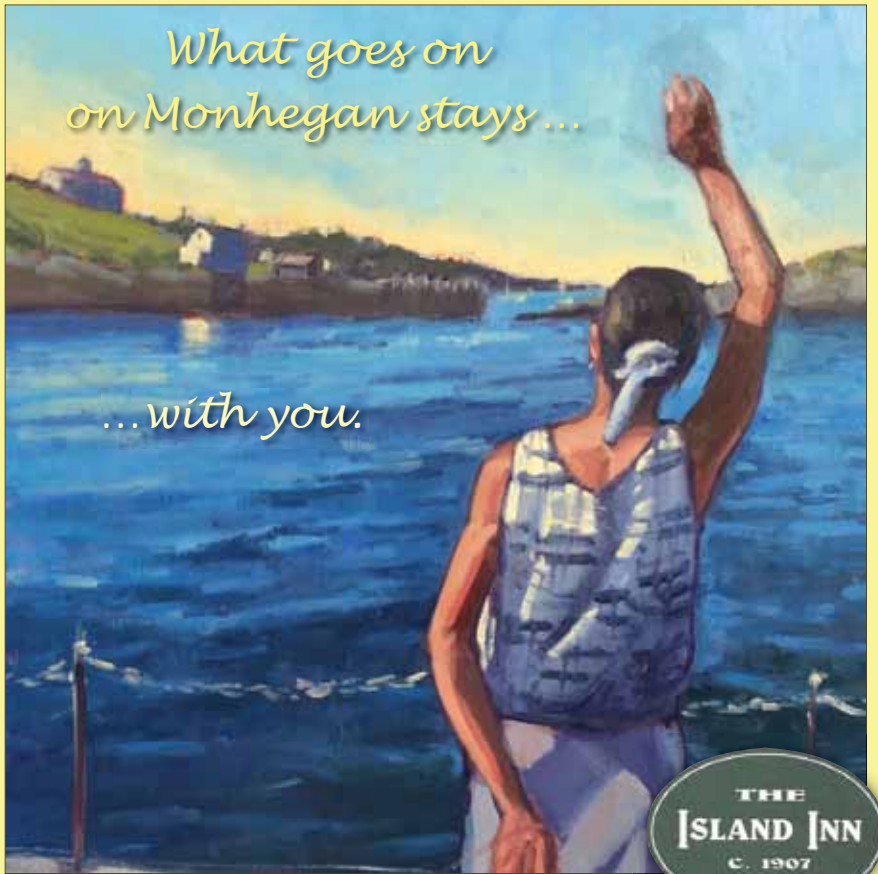
"Tell me anyway."

"I want you to be a man, Bob." She began coloring her lips.

He stood there nodding, hands at his

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hips. Then he drew a long breath, calmly picked up the shirt, and began putting it on again, speaking warmly. "I remember the day I bought this shirt. It was raining, hard. I was passing a men's store on my way to the train and saw it in the window. I stopped right there in the rain and said to myself, 'Now, that is one hell of a good-looking shirt. I want it and I'm gonna have it.' Then I marched straight in and told the man, 'I want that shirt, the one in the window. Get it for me. Now.' And you know what he said to me, Jill? I'll never forget."

"Get it yourself?"

Bob nodded, smiling. "Very good. Very funny."

"I'm sorry." She was applying eyeliner now. "What did the man say, Bob?"

"Never mind."

"All right." She drew a line just beneath her eye.

"I'll tell you what he said. And I quote: 'I can see you're the kind of man who knows exactly what he wants.'"

"Those were his words, Bob? His actual words?"

"Words to that effect. The point is, I love this shirt. That's the point I'm trying to make here." He finished buttoning it. "I love it and I'm going to wear it."

"Please don't?" she said quietly.

He looked at her imploring face in the mirror.

"Bob, please?" she said to him.

"Oh, honey." He held out his arms.

"Come here. Come here."

She got up and went to him and wept against the shirt. "I hate it, Bob. I hate it so much."

He held her. "I know... I know..."

"Tell me you won't ever wear it."

"I'll burn it in the yard, Jill. We'll dance around the flames."

"Just promise you'll never wear it."

"I promise."

"Thank you." Sniffling, she began unbuttoning it for him. "By the way. That story you told about buying it?"

"Yeah?"

"You made that up, didn't you."

"Some of it."

"All of it. I bought the shirt, Bob." She finished unbuttoning it and returned to her dressing table. "I bought it for you last Christmas."

He said quietly, "Oh, yeah."

"I saw it at Marshall Field's." She plucked out a Kleenex from the box and began wiping off her runny eyeliner. "I remember thinking to myself, 'Wow. Bob would look really good in that. Really...different.'"

He was about to remove the shirt but stopped. "From what, Jill? Different from what? From Bob?" He stepped up behind her. "Is that what you thought? Different from Bob?"

She was reapplying her eyeliner. "But I don't look different, do I. I look just the same, the same old Bob." He spread his arms, displaying the shirt. "A little different packaging, that's all." He dropped his arms. "That's the reason you hate this shirt so much, isn't it?"

She put her eyeliner pencil away.

"Isn't it, Jill."

"Are we going to dinner or not?"

"No. I don't believe we are."

"We have reservations, Bob."

"I don't care." He placed his hands around her neck.

"What're you going to do, strangle me now?"

He took his hands back. "Sorry."

"Tell you what. How about this," she offered. "You go ahead and wear the shirt. I sit across from it the entire meal. By the time we reach dessert, the shirt is fine. I'm fine. You're fine. We have an after-dinner drink, maybe two or three. Get a little tipsy. Come home. Have sex. Fall asleep. Get up the next morning and go on."

"With what."

She sighed. "With us."

They stared at one another in the mirror for a long time.

"Strangle me, Bob."

He looked at his watch. "If we're going, Jill, we should go."

"What's the time?"

"Quarter till."

She grabbed her purse and got up, then stood there looking at him.

"What," he said.

"Are you going to at least button the thing?"

He did so, as they left together. ■

John Manderino's latest fiction collection is *But You Scared Me the Most* (Chicago Review Press, \$14.99). He is currently finishing a novel titled *Bopper's Progress*. He lives in Scarborough and can be found at johnmanderino.com.



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