

# *Big Muddy*

*A Unique Collection of Issues, Events,  
& Images from the Great River Road*

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*Jo Van Arkel*

## **Door to Door**

The Fuller Brush Man comes twice a year. He knows which houses on the streets are filled with girls and women, so he visits those houses first. He carries a large, brown, salesman's suitcase. It smells of leather. His hair is slicked back and shiny, and he wears a plaid sport coat, a bow tie. His nose is long and narrow, and the girls can't decide whether they like him or not. But they like what he keeps in his suitcase.

The Fuller Brush Man rings the doorbell. The girls line up at the window and stare at him through the sheers. They are prepared to beg. They know that as soon as he lays open his suitcase on the kitchen table, greed will well up in them like fever. Their mother knows already, this is going to cost her. But she loves the things he has in his suitcase, too. So she opens the door and lets The Fuller Brush Man in.

The Fuller Brush Man comes in through the living room. The room nobody uses, the room with white couches and polished tables and breakable figurines.

Because it's the room nobody uses, it becomes the makeout room, the place where the girls one by one, from oldest to youngest, bring their boyfriends, each in her own time. First the oldest, with her long-haired boyfriend who never speaks. They hold hands and lean into one another on the couch. They French kiss, tonguing each other for hours, and don't speak. Then the second girl and her boyfriend. His feet turn outward at alarming angles. They kiss on the couch, and he caresses her breasts while the father sits and smokes in the next room. There is a father in the house, but the girls and the mother sometimes forget he is there.

The Fuller Brush Man, who makes his living selling brushes and sundries door to door, and has his own set of girls at home, is good at what he does. He comes through the living room and compliments the white couches and figurines, and tells the girls who follow him what beautiful hair they have, such long, soft curls. He doesn't compliment the mother, but he takes notice of her small waist and the

way her skirt gathers at her hips. He is careful, though, not to let what he is thinking show in his eyes for even the slightest moment. Well, maybe for a moment. Because he is good at what he does.

He will place his battered suitcase on the table. He will wait for a moment, so that the girls are in place, each holding her breath. The Fuller Brush Man knows what they want to see, but he makes them wait. He will show them everything else in his many-chambered case. He is the last of the traveling salesmen, the last one who is part magician.

Each girl touches her hair, draws her fingers through the brunette strands, waiting. The oldest has her mother iron her hair. They set up the ironing board and she sits in a chair, lays back with her hair draped over the board, and the mother flattens her hair with the heated iron. Her head will know revolution by way of her hair. She irons her hair. Someday she will roll it in orange juice cans, wrap it all in tissue paper and sleep with her head propped up on a pillow, but not sleep, only balance on the edge of sleep. Later still she will perm her hair. Dye it. Tie it up. Cut it. Grow it long. Wash and wrap it in a towel turban while she paints her toenails.

The others have their own hair history. One has hair that is silky and straight. The other has hair that is thick and curly. One braids hers; the other, the youngest, lets her hair hang loose in wild tangles. It grows so long she can sit on it. One day, years later, she will shave her head to comfort herself for her broken heart. At one time or another the mother has subjected them all to Lilt Home Permanents.

The Fuller Brush Man knows he was permitted to enter the house because of what he could offer them by way of hair industries. But he circumvents this and opens the side of the case, which contains the cleaning aids. First are the brushes. For the floors, for basins. Cylindrical bottle brushes with long handles. And liquids, blue-tinted, green and smelling of ammonia. Later the girls understand that cleaning the bathrooms with ammonia will cover the smell of the cigarettes they smoke in hiding. There are sideline products: dust cloths and polishing pastes. The girls wait through this part. Silent. The mother opens bottles and tubes, smells. She studies the offerings. The mother cares about cleanliness. She comes close to meeting the highest standards. (She has been known to wax her linoleum floors, then polish them with a powerful electric buffing

machine. Her daughters learn quickly to stay far away from her on days when she is buffing the floor. Both she and her buffing machine have been known to spin out of control.) She considers each product with serious attention, but she and The Fuller Brush Man knows this is only out of politeness, only for show.

The girls care about beauty. They care about hair and the body, and so without holding it off any longer, he switches to the other side of the case. He unbuckles the straps that secure the cover of this side, and the girls—even the mother—are breathless by now. They know it is their undoing . . . and then he lifts the covers back. There are a dozen or so brushes, probably ordinary enough, but because of the arrangement, the way each rests in its own compartment, the way each is labeled, they seem luminous, remarkable. There are bone-handled brushes with natural bristles, wood-handled brushes, brightly colored plastic ones, and combs of every size so that one can pin one's hair up or back.

The mother touches each, lingers over the bone-handled brush, which reminds her of her own early hair days. (She has not yet conceded her youth.) The Fuller Brush Man has his own salesman speech for each product, however small, and he practices it on them though he knows no one is listening. Even the father has come into the room now, standing in the doorway.

The girls and the mother make their modest picks. (The bone-handled brush will always cost a little too much.) A hairbrush for each, a few barrettes. Only a handful of dollars. The Fuller Brush Man is disappointed but not surprised. When he leaves, he hands the father a complimentary shoehorn. For the evening at least, the girls will brush each other's hair, and the magic will hold maybe even a week or beyond.

Over time, the brushes will scatter and eventually be discarded, the barrettes lost to the cracks in the floorboards. The mother will lose all her hair to radiation, will ultimately come to rest in a rented bed in the spare room downstairs, curled up into a ball from the slow effects of dying, even as the youngest (she barely has enough time to squeeze her romance in before the magic is gone altogether) leads her boyfriend into the makeout room and stretches out on the couch with him in the moonlight that shines through the window and spills onto the floor.

But that is years from now. For now they all still believe in all kinds of rituals, even the father, who tucks his shoehorn into his top dresser drawer with his pocketknives and other treasures.

Jo Van Arkel has been published in several literary magazines, including *Northwest Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Sou'wester*, and *Potato Eyes*.