

Delusions of Grandeur
By Josh Belville

Lights up on a small independent comic book store. The interior is lightly stocked with various graphic novels and manga. In the rear of the store is a counter, on which sits an old outdated computer and cash register. The store has two employees: HENRIK and MARGARET, both in their mid-twenties. Henrik is tall, greasy and gaunt; long black strands of unwashed shoulder-length hair fall around his thick eyeglasses and thin, pockmarked face. He is the type of nerd who gets focused on something (primarily Star Wars) and forgets everything else exists.

Margaret, on the other hand, is short and round, with light curly hair that she constantly keeps in a bun on the back of her head. She is the type of nerd who likes to sit down, play World of Warcraft, and eat copious amounts of junk food for hours on end.

It's Friday afternoon, almost closing time. Henrik stands at the front window, staring intently outside, darting his head back and forth, waiting for something.

Margaret enters, carrying a very heavy box full of manga comics.

MARGARET

Henrik? Little help here?

HENRIK

(checks watch)

Just a minute.

Margaret awkwardly sets the box on the countertop, which is a little too high for her.

MARGARET

Ooof! Seriously dude, there's like ten more boxes of these things. Come help.

HENRIK

(testy)

Just a minute.

MARGARET

Just *one* minute?

HENRIK

(looks at watch)

Four minutes and thirty six seconds.

MARGARET

We've got a huge shipment here and you don't get paid to stand around, Henrik. Except when we don't have any customers. Which is most of the time. But not on Manga Day! So come help.

(he's not listening)

We got the new Clone Wars manga.

HENRIK

(glances back)

No.

MARGARET

Oh yeah.

HENRIK

Where is it?

MARGARET

In the stock room, come check it out.

HENRIK

(returning his gaze outside)

Margaret, your tricks will not work on a seasoned veteran like me. You can't just *dangle* the Clone Wars manga like a carrot in front of my face. I am strong in the Force.

(quieter)

The Force that pulls Her to me.

MARGARET

But it really is in the back--

HENRIK

I know! I ... you be quiet.

MARGARET

(sighs)

Fine, loser. But I'm not holding a copy for you.

HENRIK

You will hold a copy for me.

MARGARET

No, I won't.

HENRIK

(waves his fingers)

You *will* hold a copy for--

MARGARET

YOU DON'T HAVE FORCE POWERS!

HENRIK

Well you don't need to *shout* about it.

*Margaret storms off into the back room.
Henrik remains at the window.*

HENRIK

(to self)

I do have the Force, Margaret, and the Force is compelling her to me. Every day she walks closer and closer to the storefront. A month ago she was five feet away, then three and a half feet, and now she averages nearly two feet! She can sense me, and she knows--

*Margaret enters with another box, with
a pink box of doughnuts atop it.*

MARGARET

Stop talking to yourself!

HENRIK

Shut up, Margaret!

MARGARET

You can say your soliloquies while you're helping me unload this manga!

HENRIK

I refuse to let you ruin this moment.

MARGARET

There is no moment.

HENRIK

There will be in--

(checks watch)

Three minutes and eighteen seconds. I feel just like Jabba the Hutt must've felt while he waited for Luke to fall into the Rancor pit!

*Margaret has dropped the box off and is
eating a doughnut now.*

MARGARET

(mouth full)

Fat and slimy?

HENRIK

Exhilarated! Anxious. Determined. Excited to see my prey fall
... prey ... to my...

MARGARET

I get it.

HENRIK

You don't understand, Margaret. You've never pined for a
member of the opposite sex before.

(beat)

Or of the same sex...?

MARGARET

Henrik, please. My gender identification is not at question
here. I am a healthy cisgendered heterosexual she-human.
Also, I wouldn't call "waiting by a window every day for the
past two months for some woman you've never even met" pining.

(short beat)

Actually, I *would* call it pining. It's pretty much the
definition of pining.

HENRIK

Exactly.

MARGARET

Is there a such thing as "pitiful pining?" That would be more
accurate.

*Margaret starts unpacking books from
the boxes.*

HENRIK

It would only be pitiful if it were unrequited. But I know
she likes me back.

MARGARET

Oh yeah? How's that?

HENRIK

She looked at me.

MARGARET

She *looked* at you?

HENRIK

Yes.

MARGARET

That's quite a leap in logic.

HENRIK

It's not a leap--

MARGARET

I mean, lots of people look at you every day--

HENRIK

This is different!

MARGARET

It's kind of hard *not* to look at you, really.

HENRIK

This is diff -- wait, what do you mean by that?

MARGARET

I mean ... look at you.

HENRIK

Look ... at ... me?

A beat as Henrik is forced to become self-aware of his own appearance. He stares off into space. Margaret has to tow him back to reality.

MARGARET

Hello? Ground Control to Major Dork.

HENRIK

What? What happened?

MARGARET

I think you just Skynetted there for a second.

HENRIK

I feel weird.

MARGARET

So when did this lady look at you?

HENRIK

(snapping back)

One week, five days, and two hours ago.

MARGARET

That's specific.

HENRIK

My love for her is specific.

MARGARET

Wait, was that the day you bailed on our Ruins of Ahn'Qiraj raid because you peed your pants?

HENRIK

I did not "pee my pants." I am not five years old.

MARGARET

Well she walked by and then you said you had to "change your pants." You didn't poop in them, did you?

HENRIK

I never excrete anything outside of my own bathroom.
(darkly)
 Except that day.

MARGARET

What are you talking about--?
(beat; she gets it)
 Ew. Gross.

HENRIK

It was unavoidable! My love walked by the window as I was cleaning it, and we exchanged glances. And then...

MARGARET

Ew.

HENRIK

She smiled.

MARGARET

She smiled? That could mean anything.

HENRIK

It *means* she likes me.

MARGARET

She's courteous.

HENRIK

No.

MARGARET

Or your leering frame in the window scared the crap out of her and she smiled as a defensive response.

HENRIK

Her eyes smiled.

MARGARET

Just her eyes?

HENRIK

Her mouth ... curled upward. I saw teeth.

MARGARET

Was it a grimace?

HENRIK

No! It was not a grimace.

MARGARET

I can't believe you ... did a thing in your pants just because some girl looked at you. That's disgusting.

HENRIK

The male reproductive system is quite a mystery, Margaret.

MARGARET

No it's not. You see a girl and your wiener gets big. You put your wiener in a hole, move it around a bunch and suddenly white gunk comes out, and then the guy collapses next to you in the backseat of your Honda Civic and starts crying. It's weird and disgusting.

HENRIK

Well ... it's not ... ideal. But you are trivializing an extremely important human process!

MARGARET

I'm probably not the only woman who thought your wiener was trivial.

(she giggles loudly to herself)

Alright, loverboy, this conversation is going down a path I never wanted to go down with you, ever. Come help me unload this. Where should we put all this *Naruto*? There's so much of it. I can't believe people like this crap...

HENRIK

(checks watch)

Less than a minute!

MARGARET

HENRIK!

HENRIK

What?!

MARGARET

The store is closing in five minutes and I've got a date with a Night Elf Warlock named Killbutt the Nasty and a frozen pizza named after a German fighter pilot, so--

HENRIK

Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen.

MARGARET

... What?

HENRIK

The ... Red Baron.

MARGARET

You have to help me with this. Plus, need I remind you that *Manga Day is tomorrow!*

HENRIK

Just give me a few more seconds!

MARGARET

I've given you a thousand seconds!

HENRIK

Impossible, that's sixteen and a half minutes.

MARGARET

HENRIK! STOP BEING SO FRUSTRATING!

HENRIK

It's not intentional!

MARGARET

We still have signs to put up, and banners, and--

HENRIK

Seconds!

MARGARET

I'm burning the Clone Wars manga!

HENRIK

You wouldn't!

MARGARET

I am lighting them right now with a Boba Fett lighter.

Henrik turns to Margaret. She has no lighter or book. She flips him off.

HENRIK

(turning back)

Damn and blast, woman! You are stealing my focus!

The door to the shop, located on the opposite side of the window, opens, and JADE, an impossibly gorgeous woman, dressed as though she were going out to a fancy dinner, enters. Margaret's eyes widen when she sees her. Henrik is still looking out the window and hasn't noticed her at all.

HENRIK

(as she enters)

I know you like to think of my perusals of love as rudimentary and awkward, but I assure you that what you see is not the true action, the *subtext*, so to speak. My stoic and some would say *aloof* stance betrays the romantic nature of my heart, and the quick wit of my mind.

As he speaks, Jade begins to peruse the comic books. Margaret, already socially awkward and shy, finds it hard to speak to or even look at this woman. She hides behind the box of manga that she is unloading.

HENRIK

(checking watch)

Oh, less than thirty seconds, Margaret. Less than thirty seconds and then she will walk by and our eyes will meet and she will fall in love with me.

Jade walks up to Margaret, who has now disappeared behind the counter.

JADE

Excuse me?

HENRIK

I said -- she will fall deeply, madly in love with me.

JADE

(to Margaret)

Do you work here?

Henrik turns around.

HENRIK

Do I work here? What kind of question is -- YOU! What are you ... how ... you are in ... how are you in my store?!

JADE

I walked in?

HENRIK

(trying to compose himself)

I'm sorry. Please, welcome. Have a seat -- ohh we don't have any chairs. You, stand. Or lean against a thing? A wall?

(gestures to counter)

The ... that thing? I--

(deep breath)

Can I help you with anything?

JADE

I'm looking for some comics.

HENRIK

What kind of comics? DC? Marvel? Dark Horse? Vertigo? Image?

JADE

I don't know. I'm looking for manga.

HENRIK
Oh, really? Are you a purveyor of fine manga?

JADE
Purveyor?

HENRIK
Yes.

JADE
I don't think that word means what you think it means.

HENRIK
(reflexively)
"My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die."

JADE
What?

HENRIK
The Princess Bride! Don't you...

Jade just stares at him.

JADE
You have a sign outside that says it's Manga Day tomorrow?

HENRIK
Correct.

JADE
Perfect. That's my brother's birthday. He loves this shit.

HENRIK
Well, that's ... a most incredible coincidence!

JADE
So what do you carry?

HENRIK
(pats stomach)
Oh, about twenty pounds of love handles.

Henrik laughs. Awkward beat.

HENRIK
We carry everything.
(beat)
Margaret! What do we carry?

Margaret appears from behind the counter.

MARGARET

Everything.

HENRIK

(to Jade)

We're currently unloading boxes and boxes of stuff for tomorrow. Exhausting work, really. But I've yet to manage a sweat! I'm used to it, I'm ... a tenth level barbarian in a D&D campaign--

JADE

Do you mind if I take a look?

HENRIK

Of course not! I mean of course I don't *mind*, not that you're not allowed to take a look -- oh the fickle English language. We have much more in the stock room. Margaret, would you get the rest of the manga, please?

MARGARET

Me? You get it!

HENRIK

Margaret, please, we have an appreciative customer in our midst, the first one all day--

MARGARET

And I've been lugging boxes all day! You do it!

HENRIK

(hushed)

Margaret *get out of here.*

Henrik shoos her off.

MARGARET

(as she exits)

You ... you are a terrible person.

Margaret exits in a huff.

HENRIK

So what sort of manga does your brother enjoy?

JADE

I don't know.

HENRIK

Do ... *you* enjoy manga?

JADE

No.

HENRIK

Oh. Well, that's alright, it's a very niche market, full of weird girls with strange hair colors and Hello Kitty backpacks, who sit in the manga aisle of Barnes & Noble and read every book in the *Naruto* series in one sitting, giggling to themselves and looking very awkward.

JADE

... What?

HENRIK

How old is your brother?

JADE

Thirteen tomorrow.

HENRIK

A teenager! Is he having a bar mitzvah?

JADE

We're not Jewish.

HENRIK

Oh. I'm not Jewish either, but I've always wanted to have a bar mitzvah.

JADE

That's weird.

HENRIK

I hate feeling like I'm being left out of something.

(beat)

Margaret, where are you?

(to Jade)

Is there anything he'd prefer in terms of genre?

Margaret returns with another box, which she plops on the floor behind Jade. She begins opening the box.

JADE

I don't care, really. Something with action, I guess.

HENRIK

Oh, we have plenty of those.

MARGARET

Here.

(she hands Jade a manga)

He'll love this.

Jade opens the book, while Henrik surreptitiously tries to sneak a peek at what she's reading.

JADE

(as she's turning pages)

I don't get this storyline...

HENRIK

Oh, you have to turn the pages the other way, like this.

Henrik sidles over to Jade, who flinches away slightly. He gets obnoxiously close to her and starts to flip the pages the opposite way, as is the way with manga. The whole event is clumsy.

HENRIK

The Japanese read right to left.

JADE

Why?

HENRIK

I have no idea.

JADE

Is that a tentacle?

HENRIK

What?

JADE

What is it doing to that man's asshole?

HENRIK

What do you--?

(glancing at the manga)

Oh god! Margaret!

MARGARET

Your little brother's gonna love that one.

HENRIK

Margaret, please!

(he hands the manga to her)

This is not a joke!

(to Jade)

Miss ... uh, what is your name?

JADE

Jade.

HENRIK

Oh. A ... stunningly beautiful name.

JADE

Okay.

HENRIK

Miss Jade, I assure you that this ... hentai is not a regular part of our collection of premium manga comics. We had it shipped here for the more ... carnal customers of Manga Day. After tomorrow it will all be burned.

MARGARET

We're gonna have to burn the whole "hentai" aisle then--

HENRIK

Margaret!

Jade takes her iPhone out of her purse and checks the time.

JADE

So, do you have anything?

HENRIK

Yes, of course, we have all kinds of manga, right Margaret?

Margaret stands, goes to the first box she placed on the counter, and grabs a manga. She hands it to Jade.

MARGARET

Here, this is the latest Clone Wars manga. Your brother will love it, I'm sure.

JADE

Clone Wars?

HENRIK

Yes, the main throughline behind the second three Star Wars movies. A woefully inept trilogy of movies, I must admit.

JADE

Ugh, Star Wars.

She hands it back to Margaret.

HENRIK

... Ugh?

JADE

I hate Star Wars. I'm so sick of seeing it all over the place.

You can almost see Henrik's heart breaking.

HENRIK

Well, I ... I'm sure there's ... something about it you like.

JADE

No, it sucks.

(to Margaret)

Just give me the one with the tentacle up the guy's ass. Eddie's gonna be thirteen anyway. Time to grow up.

MARGARET

Coming right up!

HENRIK

Wait! Wouldn't you rather have a manga with ... *cleaner* subject material?

JADE

(checking iPhone)

I'm late for my date tonight, I was just going to come by and grab whatever looked good. Didn't expect it to take *forever*.

HENRIK

Date? You have a date tonight?

JADE

Uh, yes.

HENRIK

With whom?

JADE

With my *boyfriend*.

HENRIK

Oh. Yes.

JADE

You're really weirding me out.

As they speak, Margaret rings Jade up and she pays for the manga.

JADE

Thanks.

Jade starts to leave.

HENRIK

Wait! Jade!

JADE

(turns around)

What?

HENRIK

(unsure of what to say)

I ... I find it *detestable* that you hate Star Wars.

JADE

Sorry?

Jade exits.

HENRIK

Jade, you were like the surface of the ice planet Hoth: you froze my heart.

(short beat)

And then I had to put my heart inside a tauntaun's guts.

(short beat)

To warm it back up.

MARGARET

Oh for Christ's sake, just help me hang the banner.

THE END