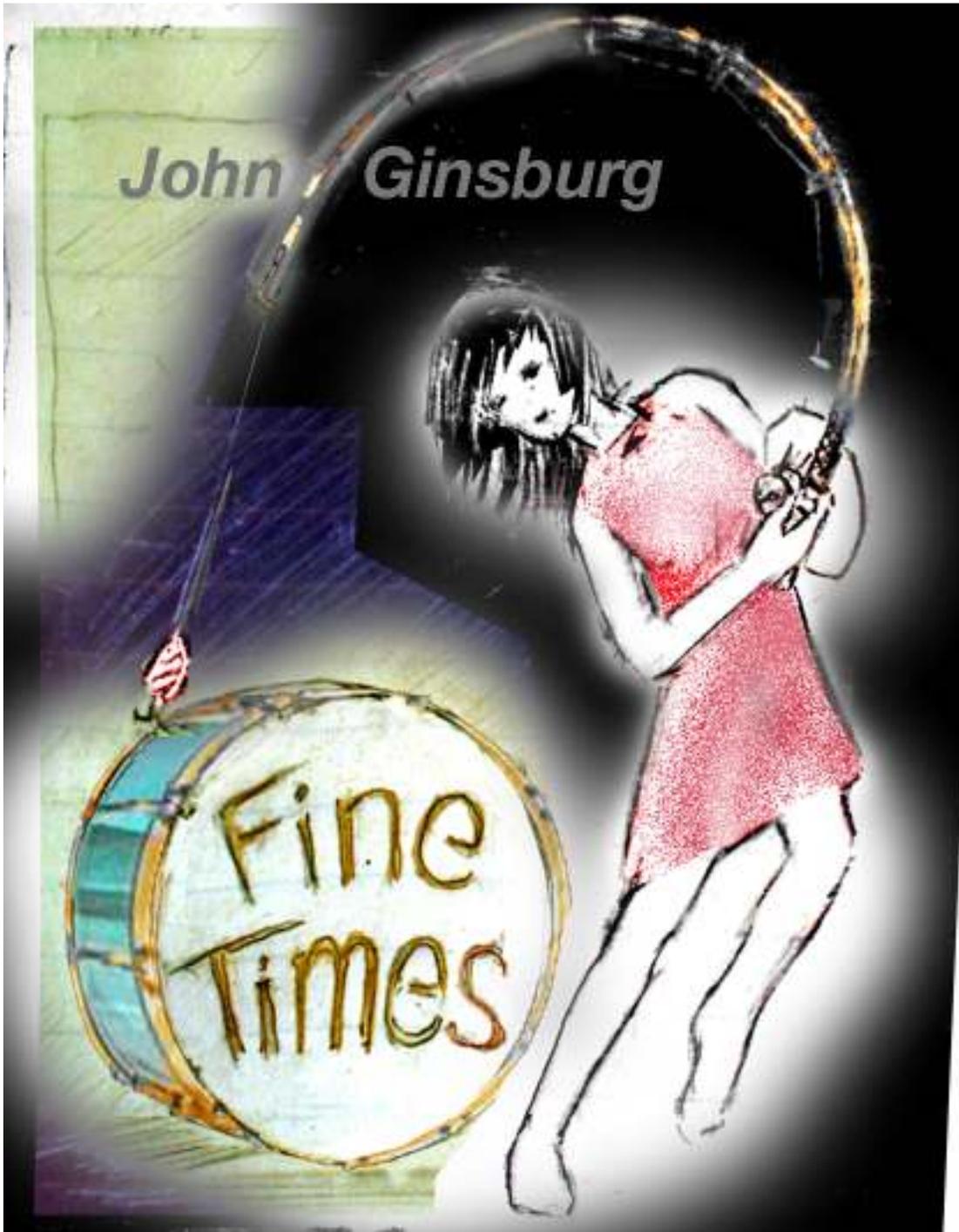


John Ginsburg





A screenplay set in Texas about a country girl who wears an eye-patch and idolizes Moshe Dayan. A romantic comedy in which the hero is a biophysicist who has found a connection between the structure of male genitalia and the earth's magnetic field. There's something that can be said about Jack Fine's writing, but let's not get started.

This funny and touching novel begins on the road. Jack Fine, a columnist, and his former lover Leeanne Jacobs, a photographer, are heading north to stay with friends in Jack's hometown. Jack's band will be playing as part of the town's centennial celebrations. Along the way, Leeanne coaxes Jack into telling her about his romantic misadventures. When they arrive, Jack falls for his friend's wife's sister - definitely not a great idea. But love and success may be just around the corner.

Fine Times

by

John Ginsburg

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Excerpts from *Fine Times*

From Chapter 3:

... A few kilometres south of Colburn Flats, the traffic got a little heavier and road signs started popping up advertising local businesses: Del's Chicken Shack, Searle Insurance and Financial Services, Colburn Auto... Lee was the first to make a crack about small-town Manitoba. It was the first of many to come. 'Wow! Look at these signs, Jack! They have all the amenities out here. Who knew!' In seconds, her camera was out and she was shooting pictures. 'Watch your words now, ma'am' Jack answered, in his version of a redneck, south-Texas drawl. 'We don't much like big-city folks walking in the door like they know everything...'

As they reached the town, Jack pulled his Honda Civic into the first gas station they saw. 'Let's get some coffee' he said. 'After Colburn, once we turn onto number 4, it's going to be a long haul to the next town.'

When Jack and Lee went in to pay for their gas and get some coffee, they had to wait in line behind three very fat, scary-looking people who were ordering burgers and fries from the attached restaurant. Fat people...always a red-light for Jack when he was with Lee. With almost anybody, no matter what the situation, Leeanne was calm, respectful and non-judgemental. But not with fat people. (She absolutely refused to use any other description. It was never large or heavy or big or obese, just fat.) Especially after a few drinks, as Jack had witnessed on more than one occasion. She would never fail to say something embarrassing. But it was still early in the day, so Jack wasn't all that worried. 'Manitoba's finest' said Lee scornfully, just loud enough for Jack to hear, indicating the three fat people ahead of them in line. 'Shush' said Jack, as quietly as he could. 'If they hear you, you're on your own.' But Lee couldn't resist. After the three big people had paid for their order, they had to turn and face Jack and Leeanne as they walked by. 'I bet the burgers here are really good' Lee said, addressing the first of the three, an enormous woman with greasy hair and black-rimmed glasses. Her tone was intended to be sarcastic, but it was hard to tell if any of the three realized it. In any event, none of them answered in any way, maybe thinking she'd aimed the comment at Jack. They flashed blank looks as they filed past into the sitting area to wait for their order. 'Fuck, Jack' said Lee, a little too loudly for Jack. 'Burgers at nine in the morning? Is that supposed to hold them till noon?' Fortunately, Lee left it at that and there was no further incident with the three fat people. But as Jack and Lee were leaving, it was Jack who couldn't resist making a crack. His words were directed to the cashier, a woman who was herself huge. 'Now you watch that noshing' he said, thinking the woman wasn't likely to understand much Yiddish. It was impossible to tell how she interpreted Jack's remark. With almost no expression, she turned to her co-worker and said 'Do I gnash my teeth?' The answer was unpredictable enough that neither Jack or Lee reacted in any way until they were outside, where they both had a good laugh.

'Noshing!' said Lee. 'That was brilliant, Jack. Brilliant.'

They pulled out of the gas station, back onto the highway, driving past a few stores, several rundown buildings and some grim looking farmsteads.

'Jeez. How do people live in these places' said Lee. 'What do they do? What do they do in the winter?'

'Come on, Lee' said Jack. 'Can't you appreciate the charm of rural life?'

After a few minutes, Lee picked up on their earlier conversation. 'Did you have any other girlfriends in high school, Jack?'

'In grade twelve' Jack answered. 'An actual girlfriend. I must have told you about her - Roxanne? We went out for a whole year. All of grade twelve. It was totally platonic. Probably a good thing, because we remained friends for years. We still keep in touch from time to time. She lives out in Calgary now. She's an artist and a yoga instructor.'

'Right. I think I do remember you telling me about her. She was into Eastern religion or something?' Lee vaguely remembered having heard a lot of what Jack was saying about Roxanne, but she just let him talk. Half-listening, not really engaged.

'Okay' said Jack. 'Let's make some time. We've got a hundred miles of nothing, followed by another three hundred miles of nothing. I want you to tell me your suggestions for chapter quizzes.'

Looking over at Leeanne, Jack knew that he still loved her and that he always would. He thought of all those years ago, when she'd been with Mark; how he'd fallen in love with her and wanted her. So many times he had raised his hopes, but said nothing. He remembered the time she knocked on his door, in the middle of the night, crying and wanting to be held. 'He just doesn't understand me' she'd said. 'He doesn't appreciate me. Why can't he be like you?'

Lee was everything Jack could want in a woman. There was just no other way to see it, no way of talking himself out of it. She was so beautiful. And smart. And funny. Maybe her best quality was how genuine she was, no matter what circumstances she found herself in. The way she reacted to situations, so patient and composed. Especially with all the jerks she worked with. It seemed like no matter how they treated her, no matter what they did, she just took it in stride. Jack admired so much about her.

For Jack, the greatest benefit of his friendship with Lee was the way she listened to him. It was something he appreciated more and more as the years went by. Something he never took for granted. No matter what he had to say, no matter how ridiculous it might be, she listened to him. Lee still meant more to Jack than anyone in the world. But there was something inside her that he couldn't reach, that could not be unlocked, and he had long ago stopped trying.

'How about jokes?' said Lee, in answer to Jack's second inquiry about the quizzes. 'Don't you have jokes in your book?'

'Not really' said Jack. 'Why? Do you have some good ones?'

'As a matter of fact, yes' said Lee, gloating. 'What's the proof that dogs in China are smarter than dogs in the USA?'

'I think I know this one, but tell me anyway.'

'Not only do they have to learn Chinese, but they have a very short time to do so.'

Jack groaned in acknowledgement. 'Very good, Lee. The best part is the way you told it. China and the U.S.... it sounds like it's going to be a communist-capitalist joke. I've got one for you too. Remember Rock Hudson, the actor? When people talk about him now, they speak as if everyone knew he was gay all along. I didn't. And neither did anyone

else I know. Women thought he was a real hunk in those old movies, making out with Doris Day and all those other babes. Anyway, back in the day, one of Rock's lovers, for a time, was the actor Raúl Julia. Remember him? He was in some fabulous films. They were both very musical, one playing piano and the other guitar. It's not well-known, but during their time together in the late fifties, they created a whole new genre of popular music.'

'They did?' asked Lee, taking the bait perfectly. 'What kind of music?'

'Rock and Raúl.' Jack delivered the punchline with great relish, a sure sign that it was a joke he'd invented himself.

Leeanne laughed. 'Good one, Jack. That has to be one of yours.'

'And you thought I had no talent! One day you'll realize I'm an absolute genius. Now, can you please tell me about your chapter quizzes?'

'Okay. I've got two.' Lee pulled a number of folded pages out of her bag. 'I'll read them out...'

.....

From Chapter 11:

...'Jack! We're taking off! I'll see you when you get back.' Caught between not wanting to wake Jack and wanting to say good-bye, Lee only half-shouted toward the guest cabin from the driveway. Karen's friend was right on time. Lee jumped into the car and off they set for the long drive back to the city.

At the sound of Lee's voice, Jack stirred, but he remained in bed in a half sleep for some time, before finally getting up. It was so wonderfully quiet. The lake was calm and beautiful in the morning sunshine.

Inside the house, there was no one about. Walking into the kitchen, Jack could hear the fractured and tortuous sounds of snoring, rising and falling. For once, he thought, he'd gotten up before Shirley. But before he could properly congratulate himself, he noticed the half-full pot of coffee with the light on and plates in the sink. Shirley had been up to see Lee off and had gone back to bed. Right beside the coffee-maker was the goldfish bowl, with an envelope underneath labelled 'Jack'.

Jack smiled. Brenda Marr's neon tetra had spent the last few days out of the way, on a small table, bathing in sunlight. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down to read Lee's note.

Jack: I'm so glad I came with you! Frank and Shirley are wonderful people. I just love Shirley - I made her promise to come down and stay with me before the end of summer. I had a great time. And I got some great pictures. I'll have them printed by the time you get back.

I am so glad to have you in my life, Jack.

IMPORTANT: Jack, I've seen the way you look at Karen. Fuck, Jack, everybody noticed. Especially at dinner. Now Jack, I want you to listen to me. First and foremost, she is Shirley's sister. You have some fantastic friends here; don't mess it up. And she's still involved with some guy. Or at least he thinks so. Shirley told me all about it. The guy she split up with wants her back and he's

been going kind of postal about it. And Jack, she is way too young for you. She's twenty-six. You're forty-two.

Don't start something.

Are you listening to me?

DON'T START SOMETHING.

Just keep that Jewish charm of yours in your pants for another day or two.

PS: By the way, I slipped a little something into the goldfish bowl. It takes a few hours to work.

Lee

Jack was more than a little annoyed by the advice. Everybody's life is complicated, he thought. So what? No matter what woman you meet, she's always going to have some kind of mess trailing along behind her. And who should be giving advice to who here, anyway? Lee was closed-off and inaccessible, not even interested in getting involved with anyone. And how much experience had she really had with relationships? He re-read the letter, smiled at the postscript and folded it away.

-----later in Chapter 11-----

...By the time Jack and Ringer and Shirley arrived, the party was going strong. Close to two hundred people were clustered around the house on Banning Drive, drinks in hand.

Bev and Donny Flett had a large, ranch-style house overlooking the lake. The grounds were immaculate, with lush lawns front and back, and the house was surrounded by flowers, with beds of peonies and rose bushes at the front and lilies along the sides. A large vegetable garden extended along the very back of the property.

Off to one side of the front lawn, where the party was set up, Donny had assembled a small covered stage for the band. Walkways were lined with solar reflectors and a number of lights and lanterns had been mounted around the yard. Toward the back of the house, a long, narrow area was covered by sheets of tarp in case of rain. Since the sky had remained clear, Donny and Bev had decided to use the area as the bar. And there was certainly no danger of running out of booze. In addition to the dozens of bottles of rye, rum and vodka, the four-litre jugs of red wine and white wine and the kegs of beer that Donny and Bev had set up, everybody that came to the party brought alcohol.

When Ringer, Shirley and Jack arrived, the band was just starting to set up. Ringer introduced Jack to their hosts.

'Donny! Happy birthday!' said Ringer. 'This is my good friend Jack Fine. Jack: Donny and Bev.'

'Nice to meet you, Jack' said Donny. 'I'm glad you could make it. Ringer told me a few stories about you at work.'

'They're all lies, Donny' said Jack with a smile.

Standing side by side, in the middle of their front yard, tumblers of rye and coke in hand, Donny Flett and Bev Flett made quite a couple. Donny was a big man: six feet four, with a huge gut pushing out of his white golf shirt. He was almost completely bald and

had a puffy red face, with a sliver of a moustache and a wide space between his two front teeth. A heavy smoker since his teenage years, whenever Donny laughed hard he would fall into a long spasm of coughing.

Bev was short and fat, with frizzy red hair and no eyebrows. She was wearing a tight orange blouse and matching orange Capri pants. Her eyes darted from side to side as she spoke. A heavy smoker like her husband, she could easily out-cough him.

Anyone who met Donny and Bev would tell you the same thing: they were two of the friendliest and happiest people you could ever meet.

'It looks like a great party, Donny' said Ringer. 'There's a lot of people here.'

'I even know some of them' laughed Donny, with the hint of a cough in his husky voice.

'So how does it feel to be fifty, Donny?' Ringer asked him.

Bev answered in her husband's stead. Even though she lowered her voice, it was sharp and high-pitched. 'You know, Ringer' she said, 'people look at Donny and think he's getting old. They probably think he can't even get it up anymore. Well, I can tell you Donny has no trouble in that department at all.' She chuckled and looked at Donny. Just as Ringer, Shirley and Jack joined in with a polite laugh, Donny picked up his wife's cue:

'Yah, I got no trouble getting it up, I just can't get it in!'

Donny's joke broke everybody up, especially Bev and Donny himself. The two of them peeled off into an apoplectic fit of laughing and coughing that shook the ground.