

Love On Wheels

a short story by

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This was Siggy's third day out on in-line skates. Siggy's lower legs still ached. Exercise was not really his bag. Flowers and women *were*.

He was successful with the former, not so fortunate with the latter. Still, this was a gorgeous day -- perfect for anything that a happy suburbanite might care to do in sunny Penrose Park, Pennsylvania.

Like Siggy's first two outings, this one was solo -- he didn't care for anybody to see him pitching and jerking his 230-pound frame. He had purposely chosen the quiet side street near his house, Mostly Avenue, as the proving grounds for Hippo on Wheels.

That's how he thought of himself -- a huge, ungainly, foolish-looking man. Someone who deserved a good month or more on a Fat Farm. Actually, his self-image belied reality. He wore his weight rather well, covering it up with loose-fitting stylish T-shirts.

And his face, though no doubt wider than that of your average hunk, still bore handsome lines. He was proud -- though he would never admit it even to himself -- of his straight nose, evenly stroked eyebrows and cheerful blue eyes.

All in all, he believed in his heart of hearts, a package that while needing work, still had some potential for the opposite sex. *Potential*, yes, that was the rub. If only he could turn that potential into action.

His in-line skating was part of the New Plan. Then what was the Old Plan? There hadn't been any. Just keep creating beauty out of pure acrylic paints, and hope that gallery openings and serendipity would some day bring on the girls.

It hadn't worked.

The fact is, at parties and in sociable business situations, Siggy felt more than a bit uneasy. What *was* simple and graceful was his regular life and work. He'd arise at 7 am, and have a spot of tea and a warm croissant in his lavishly cultivated flower garden. He'd read poetry or metaphysics to get his mood just right before setting brush to canvas.

In warm weather months, Siggy enjoyed the luxury of painting outdoors. His surrounding were exquisite. Tall spires of hollyhocks and dahlia's framed a little ten-foot wide semi-circular area where he set his easel.

Closer to his easel than those flowers were the cannas, followed by alternating salvations of salvia, geraniums, dusty miller, begonias, alyssum, and other blooms of great variety and color.

There he sat most days, peacefully daubing away. He kept his radio on some of the time, and listened to an enlivening array of musical styles. It was a blissful arrangement. His CD-changer, his radio, his tram, his flowers, and the aromas of blossoms -- together they helped frame the perfect life. Or so he thought.

After two years of painting the nation's most gorgeous and sought-after floral close-ups... the pleasure had dimmed. True, the money now flowed like a ferocious spigot. It seemed all the world wanted a "Siggy Miglatuch original floral acrylic." In some social circles, your home was simply incomplete without one. Each painting required but a week's work by Siggy, yet netted him \$20,000.

In the space of five or six weeks, he made enough to meet his small mortgage payments, and pay all of his regular bills for the year. All further earnings were for special pleasures or investments.

Not a bad life, he had often thought. Then he always added: "Scratch that -- a damn *good* life!" Now, after two years of success at this level, making an excellent living and spending time with his married and single friends -- he began to feel sandbagged by all of those airy petals, asphyxiated by their natural perfume, and drained by his own physical and emotional torpor.

Hence, The New Plan. It actually had specific goals:

1. Get trim
2. Force yourself to begin conversations and stay in them
3. Actually *listen* to other people
4. Meet enough women to have a decent chance of meeting *the* woman

As to getting trim, it wasn't easy. He'd eaten every type of salad and would gag if faced with another leaf of radicchio. Besides having an aversion to most salads, another dieting problem loomed -- his "good friend" Hank Allard was always tempting him. This morning, for instance, he'd called and invited Siggy to join him and his wife Sandy for a delicious dinner.

Normally, this was a welcomed respite from his solitude. He still wanted company -- without the food, if he could get it. However, in the presence of sinful treats he was eternally the starving, fallen soul. So naturally, he had eaten and expanded.

Though The New Plan showed no signs of working, Siggy refused to give up. This in-line skating thing was fun! He had even thanked Hank and Sandy for introducing him to it.

Of course, he had had to cope with the usual skater's ailments: a bruised torso, and a mild case of road rash on a shin. But these were small prices to pay for the pleasures of the new distraction. Up until now, his jaunts had been limited to riding around the block, learning to stop, and teaching himself not to fear downhills. All enjoyed in the comfort and hidden peace of summer workday afternoons.

While most of the men and women of Penrose Park would be off at work, Siggy was out there on the streets, pumping and bailing. So he was spared the potential embarrassment of having them overhear his screams as he careened into curbs. And his cursing as he yelled at himself, and careened into curbs. The few people of the neighborhood who stayed at home, usually kept indoors with their central TV's and air conditioners humming mightily to seal out the world.

So the streets belonged to himself and to the squirrels, whom he was certain commented about him with lines like: "Way to go, Porky!"

Hank did his best to encourage his friend, saying things like: "Wow! To see a guy like you out there, zipping along, not worried about how he looks - it's inspiring, Siggy. It really is!"

But who needed such compliments from a sleek muscular dude like Hank? Such comments always reminded Siggy of his physical shortcomings, no matter how earnestly they might have been meant. Compliments bestowed by his wife Sandy, on the other hand, had *clout*.

"I like what you're doing with yourself," she had said in a sultry voice just the day before. Now being with Sandy was a treat in itself. She was a warm, lively woman who made a man feel good just being in her presence. He could gracefully accept a hundred positive comments from the likes of her.

* * *

On this particular Tuesday morning in August, Siggy decided to take the long, scenic route through Tookany Creek Park. The downhill was long and steep for a beginner, but he thought he'd try his luck.

Drivers behaved considerately that morning. There was little oncoming traffic, and so they gave him wide berth and drove over the yellow line that cut down the middle of the road.

Siggy huffed and puffed his way up a modest hill, as if he were ascending Mount Kilaminjaro. He wore a splendid Andy Warhol Tribute tie-dyed T-shirt, with concentric circles and emanating suns' rays in primary colors. Hearing a sound coming up behind him, he turned to see what caused it. What he saw almost made him lose his balance.

Coming up fast was a gorgeous woman with strikingly beautiful, flying, blonde hair. She was gaining on him with even arm strokes -- and she even gave him a bright smile!

He returned the smile without even thinking about it. But when his eyes came back to the road ahead, he had to simultaneously dodge a rut and a patch of gravel. He managed to keep his balance with some mincing, ungainly, and finally successful steps.

Still this vision of a woman, this exquisite creature -- strode up enthusiastically. Now she rode alongside him. He worked up some courage, till he nearly had a fever pitch, then spoke. His words coming out somehow suggested to him a mouse dropping out of the barrel of the Guns of Navarone.

"You skate much?!" he said. Since she clearly did not hear him, he repeated himself, this time fairly shouting at her.

"Yeah, I love it!" she replied. Even with that helmet in the way, he could see she was so darned pretty. She made his eyes ache with her beauty -- the way her dark eyelashes contrasted naturally with her splendid, long thick blonde hair. And the musical way she spoke!

It was unfair -- unkind to the male sex to be tweaked thusly, to be inspired and inflamed with no possibility of furtherance... no gratification or follow-up. Siggy felt all of this in the one instant in which he made eye contact with her.

She passed him. In that moment, he realized that he had to find out something about her that would enable him to have some chance of seeing her ever again. Even in a cozy neighborhood like Penrose Park, there were simply too many chances of not ever seeing someone met randomly again. That

possibility loomed like a giant hammer of miserable fate. He couldn't let it drop on him, shyness be damned!

"How will I ever see you again?" he said when she was ten feet ahead of him. He felt like a fool saying it, and yet could see no alternative.

She turned around and laughed, saying, "Probably won't!"

"Can't let that happen!" Siggy shouted as the woman of his dreams pulled yet farther away. Now this bald audacity was extraordinary for him. He *amazed* himself!

"What's going on with me?" he wondered, as he smiled. Once again, she returned the smile -- this time actually turning to do it. He took this as encouragement.

Now he simply could *not* allow her to roll out of his life. He decided to challenge the uphill. He stroked and pumped and shouted in as loud a voice as his seldom-used barrel chested diaphragm could produce:

"HEY, do you skate here often? What's your NAME?"

Apparently, she did not share his enthusiasm for their casual meeting... and she soared ahead. She turned and gave him one frosty glance, then disappeared over the hilltop.

When Siggy reached the crest a few moments later, she was already a phantasm in purple Lycra Spandex and blondness, flying downhill and out of sight. He swore she wore a bewitching perfume, and that he could smell it.

Siggy was a man simultaneously intoxicated and miserable. What chance had he of meeting this vision yet again? If he *could* catch sight of her again, what chance had *he* of interesting her in him?

She -- a stunning beauty, in excellent physical condition -- probably intelligent to boot. And, he bet, with a mile-long string of eager young men following her every golden footstep.

He -- a paunchy, shy guy. He secretly gave himself credit for being handsome; that is, for a plump fellow. A woman had to see beyond that surface layer of fatty tissue, and she'd soon catch sight of his handsome, devilish grin. Linger a moment longer... and then she'd see the charm he could muster... when he wanted to.

But what chance in hell did he have of making a woman like that notice? Not much! he told himself.

Rolling down that hill, he knew his life was over. *Over!*

* * *

Hank was unsympathetic. Three days later, at their dinner party, Hank couldn't believe that his friend was depressed over a girl -- a nameless beauty he'd met for a meaningless bunch of split seconds.

"While *skating*, no less," he said, pausing to gulp from his Sam Adams beer. "I mean, that's the perfect metaphor for a casual meeting. The woman rolls by the window of your soul, and you catch one glimpse. Then you're smitten! Siggy, you're stupid."

"No, he's not," Sandy defended, offering Siggy an eggplant tempura hors d'oeuvre. "He's not stupid, he's romantic. There is a difference."

Siggy partook, adding: "Thank you, Sandy. Now tell me why I'm not stupid. I need to know."

"Because you allowed yourself to follow your fancy, even if only for a moment, sweetheart. That's what artists should do -- and you're an artist, aren't you?"

"I don't buy your logic. I agree with Hank, though I thank you. He's right -- I *am* stupid."

"I knew you'd come around," Hank said, tugging on his dark mustache. He introduced Siggy to a young, single woman at the party. She was obviously glad to meet Siggy. Yet, after hearing Siggy tell his story of passion for another woman, she too had to agree that he was stupid. She tried to lighten the insult by saying "stupid but romantic."

All of these words left Siggy feeling pretty sorry for himself.

People that night offered Siggy philosophy: Love is a dangerous proposition. Sudden infatuation was even more dangerous and thus to be avoided. Admirable thoughts, he figured, but definitely *not helpful*. When you're smitten, you've got it bad, and such calmly spoken words carried no power.

"Go for her," was another bit of advice he gathered that night, this from a cultured-looking gentleman in a tweed jacket, who also smoked a pipe. This remark made wonderful sense and spoke to his heart. It was the perfect anesthetic to his pain, except for one slight imperfection -- it was impossible to chase a woman whose name you do not know, whose residence you cannot divine, and whose desire to return the attention was doubtful at best.

But Siggy was not one to let mere impossibility interfere with his dreams, hopes, and fitful anxieties. No, these would take on a life of their own....

* * *

Some background on Siggy's love life heretofore: Rosa and he were an item for the better part of 1983, when he was just out of art school. Those Moore College of Art women were more than most men could handle. That was the going joke, and he could attest it was true!

They demanded experience, not just love and sex and laughs. Something that could be turned into grist for the artistic mill, and mature their inner beings to a new level of meta-reality.

Try making love to *that*. Siggy grinned ruefully at her memory. Rosa had been a challenge, and he had been up to it. They'd lived together, danced at clubs on South Street in Philadelphia. He'd cooked *quenelles* for her, and for the first time in his callow life, made himself a lover. But then Rosa went on to Fred.. and Dwayne.. and Bryan. Then he lost touch with her.

Though he still pined for Rosa sometimes, he knew that such a woman was not a long-term prospect. Other women came and went into his life with great irregularity for a number of years. A concert here, a bedding there, a friendship now and then.

His sole other major flame had been Nancy. But Nancy was attached, from the beginning, to Allan. Nancy was gorgeous and wonderful, though not to the extent that his new imaginary princess on inline skates was -- but she was definitely a stunner, and intelligent, and cute and fun.

The trouble was, Nancy was taken. That was the inescapable truth, and in time, Siggy had adjusted to this adamant notion.

So there you have it: he had loved a schitzzy art student and a woman who belonged to another man. These were the perfect qualifications for pursuit of an unrealistic relationship, and he had them all!

Even Siggy recognized this. He lay abed the night after the dinner party and thought, "Why do I care so much about a woman I don't really know? Why am I such a raging adolescent about love, when I should be a sedate suitor of available women artists -- people like me whom I can actually meet, know and touch?"

But these kinds of thoughts, however rational, do little to calm the inflamed imagination. And inflamed he still was. Many options were closed to Siggy, but one remained open that would be firmly shut to you or me.

Siggy painted. One morning that same August, he put aside his flowerpot and his magnifying glass, and its armature that enabled him to visualize detail without squinting. In its place, in his fragrant garden, was no palpable subject to fill his blank canvas. Only a memory. And strangely, that was enough...

* * *

The *Jenkintown Chronicle* was the kind of local newspaper that printed all manner of trivia. Yet even people who called it trivial read it cover to cover. The paper covered stories about the school board, local interesting business people, midgets who had overcome shortness and were now operating golf courses, retiring cafeteria workers who had served 40 years of frozen pizza to junior high school students, and so on.

Into this unpromising medium went Sigmund Miglatuch's portrait of the vision. The picture showed her gaining on him, a smile and a flag of blondness, a brisk stroking of the legs behind and outwards to the side, and a purple-and-black stylishly molded helmet.

Printed below a photo of the painting, reproduced in surprisingly faithful color, was this caption:

IS THIS YOU? If the woman shown in this portrait is you, call 875-9146 now. News awaits you that will change your life! Callers who can successfully identify this woman will be rewarded. Thank you!

Proud of his boldness and determination, Siggy awaited a call. He painted a stunning violet orchid, detailing the pistil and stamen with brilliant traces of white and near-white, thinking with each

stroke: "I'm using my art

Strangely, that first day of publication brought only two phone calls, none fulfilling. One was from a woman who said she "looked something like the girl in the picture. But I've never been on blades... Would you like to get together anyway?"

Siggy politely declined. The second call was from a skate shop owner who wanted to use the painting in an advertisement. Annoyed, Siggy refused and hung up.

He slept poorly that night. It was odd -- he had *painted* well during the day, after all. Usually, that was his best indicator of a good night's sleep. Usually, to create was to mollify his devils and deliver an earned peace.

The next day, he broke off from painting at 10 am and went for a skate. He looked for her, and did not find her at every turn in the road, and at the top of every hill and crest. The feeling of being obsessed did not please him, being insufficiently romantic to welcome his new obsession.

The feeling actually *annoyed* him. Sleep was disrupted, and now work. What next? The feeling was right for a teenager, maybe. Not for a successful 35-year old bachelor.

After his skate, he quickly showered, called Sandy and asked if he could come over. Being two-houses-away neighbors with Hank and Sandy did not mean he could just pop in any old time, he'd learned on a few awkward occasions. She agreed to a visit.

Sandy poured coffee and Siggy talked.

"I feel stupid, and I don't like it. I don't know what to do."

"Do you want me to be honest?" Sandy asked. He looked into her pretty, understanding eyes, where he was so glad sympathy and wisdom lived.

"Why else would I come?"

"Just for someone to talk to. If that's what you want, I can also do that for you."

"No, tell me how not to be stupid.

"Okay. First of all, you've got to realize that falling in love with some beauty on wheels is a very divorced from reality thing to do.... Most men realize they have to meet real women, not just these, these unattainable beauties."

"I'm not like most men."

"That's your strength, *and* that's your weakness. It enables you to paint. But look at the way you live!"

She held his hand, seeing his pain around his mouth, where his lips shaped an uncharacteristic scowl.

"You've got to change!," she admonished him. "You've got to go where the women are, and open up! Look at you, holed up with your beard, and your T-shirts and your paints in your little Garden of Eden. Do you imagine that happiness is going to come banging on your door?"

Siggy sighed. "I am what I am what I am."

"Then you'll be what you'll be, Popeye. So go back to your spinach," she said affectionately.

Siggy ate a solitary dinner that night, despite an invitation by Hank and Sandy to dine with them. He could see that talk would be of no further comfort. This was something he had to work out himself -- or not.

TV disappointed. Popcorn tasted like cardboard. He looked at himself in a mirror and was revolted at what he saw. He no longer gave himself credit for his better physical features, or for the alluring twinkle of the eyes he believed he could muster when he was in the mood.

The moment announced itself. He became a Creature of Will. He would be whatever he wanted. He had already willed success and friendship, and now by God, he would will himself a slim, trim body, and a woman to love.

Plan it, and *do* it. Yessirree! If he found the vision, fine. If not, he'd rid his soul of her and find someone who pleased him equally.

The next evening, while he was preparing a soggy tuna fish sandwich, the phone rang.

"Hello...."

"Yes?"

"Uh... Did you place that picture of me in the paper?"

"Yes... I did. Why did it take you so long to call?"

"....I don't *know* you. That's why."

"Well, would you like to change that?"

"I don't think so. What do you want?"

"I only want to get to know you."

"Why? I have a boyfriend."

"Lots of women have boyfriends.... Are you and he serious?"

"...Yes."

"Well, why not meet me anyway. You're not married, after all. What've you got to lose? See what life can bring. You might be surprised."

"If we do meet, there're no promises, all right?"

"Sure, walk away if you like."

"You know what the problem is?" she asked.

"No, what?"

"You're attracted to me because you think I'm cute, I bet."

"Yeah, is that horrible?"

"I don't want to sound conceited, but I get that all the time."

"I'm not surprised. Is that all?"

"No... the problem is I don't think *you're* cute. "

Siggy paused. Then he said: "Not *yet*."

He was going to say "I'm crushed" in a cavalier tone, but he realized that to do so would sound arrogant and would not help his chances. He wondered how he would manage the hunksiness, not the ultimate cuteness and attractiveness he'd surely need to get this woman to even be remotely interested in him. Do handstands? Smile enigmatically? Cook fabulous romantic dinners? Learn the art of civilized conversation? In-line skate? Her voice yanked him from his reflections:

"Why don't we meet on skates again," she suggested.

"Fine. Who am I meeting? I'm Siggy Miglatuch."

"Siggy what?"

"Miglatuch. I know, it's a weird name. Okay, it's two weird names."

Mister Miggletush, I'll tell you my name later, if I want to. I'll see you on Tookany Creek Parkway in about 20 minutes."

"Great, I'll be there. I'll be the one with the beard."

* * *

On Tookany, he skated slowly. He didn't want to be in a lather physically when he met her, already being in one emotionally. He had lost four pounds in five days and was feeling pretty good about himself -- until he caught sight of her.

Why am I chasing an angel? he thought. I'm out of my mind. Then he contradicted his own thoughts: Isn't it amazing that you've gotten this far, Siggy buddy? You never thought you would. Don't choke now.

Blonde hair wagged wildly in a dip in the road about 200 feet ahead. He slowly caught up with her. She turned around briefly and he saw her big green eyes. She cast him a smile.

"Hi."

"Hello... beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Yah. I love to get out and skate on days like these."

"Pardon my unorthodox way of getting to meet you."

"It must've taken you *days* to make that painting of me."

"It did."

"Did you take a snapshot of me or something?"

"No, I did it all from heart."

"Is that what you do for a living?"

"Yeah, but usually I paint flowers. You're just a different kind of flower."

She blushed, keeping her eyes straight ahead. Then she turned and looked straight at Siggy. He was waiting for that intense gaze, and caught it like a kiss.

"You did pretty well," she said.

"Thank you.... Why did you take so long to call?"

"Like I said, I don't know you. Lots of guys want to meet me, and I don't always want to meet them."

"So what turned you around?"

"Curiosity.... Can you handle tight turns?"

"Why?"

"Here's one comin' up."

The bike trail narrowed at the approaching corner. Siggy couldn't handle the turn. He reached out and grabbed wildly at the air, wobbling and saying, "Ya-a-aa!"

The woman grabbed his arm, but Siggy was totally out of control. He tugged at her, and they went down together. "Whoa!" he yelled. "Umpf!" she said, as she fell onto his chest.

He hadn't planned it that way, but found the collision decidedly pleasant. Her beautiful, thick blonde hair enveloped him, and he felt intoxicated. He got close enough to smell her perfume, which further dazed him. And finally, he saw her lovely green eyes up close -- which did him final damage. Add to all of this the embarrassing situation he was in, and poor Siggy was all but catatonic.

"So-sorry," he said, grinning at her with obvious warmth.

"Yeah, I'll bet," she said with bemused disbelief.

"Well, you don't think I'd *plan* for you to fall on top of me, do you?"

"I don't know what to think," she said. "I don't *know* you -- remember?"

"That's what we're fixing right now."

She dusted herself off. "Do you want to skate, or what?!" she challenged him. "Yeah sure," he said, rolling along after her slowly. "I like it. But I love you."

"You love me? Ha! How can you love me, when you don't even know the first thing about me? That's' ridiculous."

"No, love's never ridiculous. Painful at times, but never ridiculous. And I'll tell you why I love you, miss I-don't-know-your-name."

"Nadine. Nadine Seraphim. Now let's hear it. I bet it makes no sense at all."

"Stop being so arrogant for half a second and listen, will ya?"

"I love you partly because you're gorgeous, and--"

"Because you *think* I'm gorgeous," she corrected.

"I *know* you're gorgeous, and I'll brook no counter-argument. Let's slow down at this curve."

They slowed, and this time, to his regret, he didn't go flying into Nadine's arms.

"Listen, you're pretty, and you know it. But that's not all I like about you. You're spunky, and I adore that. Plus, you're physically fit."

"Are you finished now?"

"For now," he granted, with a grin. "Expect more later."

"*You* should expect surprises later," she said abruptly. "Meet me at Barnes and Noble at six tonight. I've got to train for my race with my boyfriend, Karl. So I'm gonna take off now, if you don't mind."

"But Nadine, I--"

The woman of his dreams took off in a cloud of enchantment. Meanwhile, the pudgy bearded man huffed and puffed and wondered what the hell would happen that evening.

* * *

Siggy planted himself at the first table in the Cafe at the back of the store, at precisely 5:45 pm. He wore a sport jacket and a pink carnation boutonniere.

At 6:05, someone looking something like Nadine sat across from him at the table. She wore a derby hat and a man's suit. She was straight-faced and dignified as she sat down.

"Hi, Nadine."

"Hi. Well now you know, Siggy."

Okay, what am I supposed to know? Siggy wondered. Then he said the same words he had just thought: "What am I supposed to know?"

"That I'm a transvestite." He thought about this for a couple of seconds, wondering what she was driving at.

"You like to dress as a man?"

"I do."

"And you like to hang out at gay bars?"

"Could be."

"Is that all?"

"Well, is that the kind of woman you want in your life?"

"Probably. Are you gay?"

"Bi, at least."

"That's fine. Let's have dinner and go dancing."

"Is that all?" she asked, astonished.

"Big deal, you're still *you*, aren't you?" Siggy asked, standing. "Let's go."

This hadn't gone according to Nadine's plans. She stayed seated.

He was dying for her to lift her derby hat and let all the splendor hang down. He figured that might come later that evening, if he stayed lucky.

"Sit down," she commanded. Siggy decided not to be insulted at this command. He took it as a request, to which he complied. "You want to godancing with a transsexual bi person who wears men's clothes?"

"You haven't murdered anyone, have you?"

"Don't ridicule me!" she said, angrily.

"What are you telling me?" he leaned in. "That you're repulsive? That I should recognize that and leave? I'm not going to. Forget it! You've got me, Nadine. The question is, do *I* have you?"

Nadine stared into her hands rather than meet his eyes. Slowly, she began talking. One piece at a time, they got to know each other.

They dined that night, but they didn't go dancing. Later, in her apartment, she explained why she dressed the way she did.

"Like I said, I don't want to sound conceited, but so many men say they love me. I have to repel them, and choose among those who are still interested."

"That's me," he said, placing an arm around her waist. "And Karl, too, I guess. But I'm not repelled. Something's gone terribly wrong..." He kissed her, and she him. "...with your plan."

* * *

The Jenkintown Road Rollers were sponsoring a 10K, and Nadine was entered, as was her boyfriend, Karl. Karl, Nadine, Jennifer, and a few other friends had an alliance going -- not a formal team. Karl knew it was his turn to win, and he looked forward to it. Jennifer didn't see it that way and let him know.

"You won last time," he told Jennifer. "Yeah, yeah," she replied. "But you won the time before that. Now it's Nadine's turn."

"That is such a load. You and Nadine are always whining," Karl said, as he focused intently on his hands working. He tightened his laces, and lubricated his wheels.

At the starting line, Siggy showed up, looking trimmer than Nadine had remembered him.

"What are you doing here?" Nadine asked, surprised, confused.

"Sounded like fun!" he said, which was only partially true. She grimaced. Clearly, having a Karl and a Siggy in the same location was not a pleasing prospect.

The race started, and the racers plowed ahead, several banging into each other. They raced down Old York Road, a busy thoroughfare blocked off for the occasion. The skaters whizzed by storefronts and past crowds of onlookers, many cheering.

The race consisted of two laps around a multi-block course. Siggy quickly fell behind. He had trained, but not well enough. His hope had been to finish first, thus succeeding in showing Nadine just the kind of fit hunk she might be teaming up with.

He was angry and depressed. Instead of achieving his aim, he'd shown himself to be a slightly improved, over-matched contender -- a misfit in the world of physical over-achievers. Unlike Karl, whose long brown hair had waved like a flag when the race started. His muscular calves had propelled him to the front ranks, along with Jennifer and Nadine.

Poking along now, his feet aching, and blisters becoming ever more painful, he felt defeated. The noise of the approaching finish line taunted him -- he had only completed one lap. The leading group would soon be completing their second lap.

The crowd yelled its excitement. Siggy turned and saw behind him the leaders fast approaching. Siggy boosted his speed. He didn't want to get lapped. That would be too embarrassing.

Suddenly, he found himself in the thick of it. If he could maintain speed with this group -- even if only for a minute or so -- that would be some kind of small victory. After all, he'd trained for weeks, and he'd been resting his legs for a few minutes now.

"Hey, Sig!" shouted Nadine, as she and the group came up fast. Karl flashed him an angry look and brushed him aside with an elbow as he tried to pass. Siggy caught up, barely trailing Karl and Nadine.

"I told you, this is *my* turn, Nadine!" Karl commanded. "No, it's *not!*" she said. He cut her off, and her leg caught his boot. She almost went flying, but caught herself and now trailed Siggy and Karl by about ten feet.

Siggy was on fire. He had rarely been so angry, or jealous. He raced neck and neck with Karl, who looked contemptuously at him and said, "Hey turkey, what are you doing here? Gobble, gobble."

Karl grinned and pumped his legs like a madman. He gained a few feet on Siggy. Aroused, Siggy made one more superhuman attempt to catch the leader. As he did, he knew he had to do it just so... not be too obvious as he shifted his hip into Karl's.

"Wobble, wobble," he said looking over his shoulders at Karl. The leader briefly lost his balance and waved his arms wildly. Meanwhile, Nadine caught up to both of them and soared ahead past the finish line. A loud cry and applause erupted from the crowd.

As Siggy found Nadine and held her hand, well-wishers came up and congratulated her. Best of all, as far as he was concerned, she pressed her hand to his.

"Thanks," she said to him. "But you didn't have to do that." She smelled of sweat and perfume now... a new combination, one he'd never experienced and which he found doubly intoxicating.

"Amazing what a guy'll do to help a transvestite in trouble, isn't it?" he said. She laughed.

In the months that followed, Siggy painted her many times... amidst flowers, in skating scenes, and in many other backdrops and situations.

They skated together, even holding hands when she wasn't training for a race. Nadine shared with him the joys and enthusiasms that marketing insurance held for her. He struggled to understand, but even the struggle was pleasant. Siggy was content. He'd found his subject.