

## THE BEANIE BABY GIRL

by Gregory K. Carter

When Jeffrey Gullard saw her for the first time, he had just wasted five dollars and the better part of an afternoon in the Miracle Mall Arcade. Donkey Kong had turned his eyes into watery puffs of red, but he could still see her, right across from the stale cheese place. She stood among shelves of little furry things, motionless creatures with unblinking eyes, all lying atop themselves in what seemed a morgue for ferrets. And she looked just like that girl on *Friends*, the one with the dark hair and blue eyes, Rhoda or Betty Jo or Bobby Jo; Jeffrey could never keep their names straight.

*Or maybe I'm thinking of the wrong show*, he thought. *I've been kinda outta touch since my TV blew up*. Repairs would've cost exactly what he couldn't afford, so for anything more current than the final days of the Bush administration, Jeffrey had to rely on second-hand accounts or what quick glimpses he got of the tabloids while waiting to pay for his TV dinners at the Winn-Dixie. Still, he was certain *Friends* had a Rhoda, and any proper Rhoda would surely have dark hair and blue eyes.

"A Bountiful Bevy of Beautiful Beanie Babies," the banner above Rhoda read. Jeffrey slid behind a pay phone and watched her courteously engage a customer.

He could see no wedding ring, no hicky marks, no telltale signs of a boyfriend, fiancé or husband. Over the Muzak speakers he could hear the Beatles sing: "She was a girl in a million, my friend." Jeffrey smiled until he heard the chorus: "I'm a loser."

An omen if there ever was one, but he simply shrugged it off. *I'll just make my*

*opening line irresistible. That's what I'll do. A multitude of character flaws can be covered with a good opening line.* An engaging repartee about her fluffy zoo, perhaps?

For a half hour he stared at the floppy stuffed animals -- cats, dogs, lobsters, elephants, everything which creepeth upon the earth. Some lived in the maternity ward. Others at the zoo. Still more, set aside in a solarium of plexiglas, snored away in the retirement home. Somewhere, probably in the back, Jeffrey guessed, a Beanie Baby morgue kept Beanie Baby bodies on ice while awaiting the Beanie Baby cemetery. And certainly, his Baptist upbringing told him, a Beanie Baby Heaven or Hell lay beyond their veil of Beanie Baby tears.

Pondering all this, he at last found his opening line, simple and concise, as it had to be. "I'll walk up to her, smile and say, 'What the devil is a Beanie Baby?' And she'll say, 'Blah, blah, blah.' And I'll say, 'Oh, blah, blah, blah, blah.'"

Words should then unravel like string from a ball of twine, the inertia of two souls meant to become one propelling the conversation straight into romance novel schmaltz -- "Oh, my *darling*, how I've longed for your caress," and so on and so forth, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

He flooded his mouth with a Binaca ripoff and approached the counter.

Rhoda looked up.

Jeffrey's heart rate shot to one-seventy. "What the Beanie is a...No wait. Uh..." One-seventy-six. "What the baby is a devil --" One-eighty.

"What's a devil baby?" Rhoda leaned forward and held up a lobster. "Its eyes. It has its father's eyes. Oh, yeah. They're all possessed, the lot of 'em. You can get

curses outta these things twice as good as any voodoo doll or ouija board or Black Sabbath record played backwards."

*Excellent, Jeffrey thought. Good sense of humor. Quick wit. Funny. Intelligent. Touched on movie history, Satanic rock trivia and comparative theology all in one sweet snippet of dialogue. I'm in love.*

"Beanies ignite such passions, fire such obsessions," Rhoda explained, "that they can turn sweet old ladies into foaming-mouthed psychopaths. Rabid Beaniemaniacs have come to blows right here in the mall over our last Squealer the Pig. Threats have been hurled, insults lobbed. Homicides can't be far away."

Jeffrey heard little of this. Instead, he saw his whole life pass by in Rhoda's blue eyes. He saw their first date -- she had laughed so when he arrived at her doorstep with his clip-on tie dangling un-clipped from his dickey. He felt their first kiss -- there beside a Joe's Towing truck as his Yugo pumped black smoke into the night sky. He remembered his proposal, in the waiting room of Smitty's Used Tire and Retread World. She had so sweetly accepted, standing radiant beside a stack of pre-owned 185/70R13s. He remembered the birth of their firstborn in the middle of nowhere after the meltdown of the Yugo's radiator.

"Another bouffant-haired mother of three once threatened to rip out my larynx if I didn't fork over the Bucky the Beaver which she just knew I was hiding in the back," Rhoda said, but Jeffrey heard only the sound of their children ripping open Christmas presents. He saw their sand castles on the beach, their Crayola artwork on the wall. He saw little Jeffrey Jr. graduating from Harvard, marrying big, big money, his

supermodel wife giving birth to twin violin prodigies. Ah, when those darling six-year olds played the Bach *Concerto for Two Violins* at Carnegie Hall. So glad the President and First Lady were there to see.

"I heard where one woman sold her right kidney on the black market for a Peanut the Dark Blue Elephant, which, alas, turned out to be fake."

He saw two silver-haired lovebirds raking autumn leaves beneath trees which hovered over them like their fifty years of memories, some sweet, a few bitter, all as golden as the leaves passing beneath their rakes.

Another customer interrupted and that was that -- wretched, insensitive thug, the little monster, even if she was a Girl Scout buying a get-well Beanie Baby for her dying grandmother. The impertinence! Jeffrey slipped away, through the mall, the parking lot and into his '86 Yugo.

"I must know more about these Beanie Babies," he whispered to the vinyl peeling like bananas throughout the interior. "They're my key to winning the heart of Rhoda. Or Bobby Jo or Betty Jo. One of those *Friends* girls. I really need to get my TV fixed so I can find out who it is I'm marrying."

In the days that followed, Jeffrey poured himself into Beanie Baby culture. He dove into books, magazines, newsletters, price guides. He fumbled through the internet, as best he could, that is, before the librarian kicked him out when something called "Busty Babes" popped up on his screen.

"An unfortunate *faux pas*," he wanted to say, but then he'd have to explain his

enchantment with little stuffed animals. He said nothing, picked up his spiral bound notebook and shuffled out the exit.

But evenings he would slap on the Aqua Velva and return to the Miracle Mall, the Beanies and Rhoda, where he would spill forth his Beanie knowledge as a bird chirps its mating songs. He learned more about her, too. She liked blueberry yogurt, the kind with the fruit at the bottom, and preferred Coke to Pepsi, Neehi Grape to either. "But," as she explained, "they never stock it in these vending machines." Jeffrey solemnly nodded, sighing at the blue-collar Philistines who withheld this simple joy from such an angel.

These conversations, Jeffrey knew, would soon reach critical mass. Sparks would fly, atoms would split, a "wanna-go-out-with-me?" asked and if physics and a vacuous love life had taught him anything, a mushroom cloud of unrequited love could once again bloom over his head. "I am become Death, the Destroyer of Losers." This chain reaction had to be controlled, Jeffrey realized, preparations made, the date carefully set, the question adeptly popped.

On November sixteenth, in the year of Our Lord nineteen-hundred and ninety-eight, Jeffrey Gullard would walk into the Miracle Mall, head past the AMC, past the stale cheese place, stop before an audience of fluffy little bean bags and cast his line and see if Rhoda bit -- he would purchase his first Beanie Baby. Pinchers the Lobster.

"A wise choice," Jeffrey was sure she would say. "But why Pinchers?"

"Because," Jeffrey would then reply, allowing his shyness to creak ever so slightly, ever so alluringly through his eyes. "Because, he was the first Beanie Baby you

showed me. I'm terribly sentimental that way."

She would smile warmly, then he'd add, "Life's simple pleasures should never go uncelebrated."

"True," she would agree and Jeffrey would then push the button, pull the trigger, take the plunge: "Would you care to join me in a fine diner for two?"

Then she would say...

What if she hesitated? What if she thought him too forward? Simple. Jeffrey would then whip out the trump cards inside his shirt pocket -- two coupons from Shoney's Big Boy. "Pity to waste 'em," he'd say and hope that she was in the mood for either the six-piece chicken crispies or the large spaghetti and meatball dinner.

And then she would say...

"You don't watch enough TV," probably. "Bobby Jo's the dark-haired one."

Jeffrey would ask anyway. He had to. "But why," he wistfully whispered to the calendar with the big red circle around the twenty, "why couldn't every day be Sadie Hawkins day?"

November 16, 1998. After two hours of showering and shaving and dressing himself and cleaning what remained of his Yugo's upholstery, Jeffrey drove to the Miracle Mall, parked, prayed like a sinner dangling above the fires of Perdition, then marched toward a Bountiful Bevy of Beautiful Beanie Babies. He could see Rhoda's smile all the way from the theatres showing, he couldn't help but notice, *Armageddon*.

A problem arose immediately. That demon-possessed girl from the *Exorcist* was talking to Rhoda. At least it looked like her, Linda Blair. She wasn't levitating or spitting

pea soup or anything, but Jeffrey could just hear her yammering away about all the geeks and losers that haunt the aisles of this mall. "And here comes one now," she was no doubt saying. "I can smell his Aqua Velva." He stopped, turned around and began chickening right out of his Reeboks.

But his coupons expired on this very night and it had been six days since his Yugo had last broken down -- he figured it had one, maybe two days left before the transmission would fall out again, or the battery explode, or the exhaust would pump toxic fumes through the holes in the floor. Such things mar the strongest of relationships, sour the sweetest of moments. Now had to be the time.

He made one final check, prying open his wallet. He had enough money to buy Pinchers. He had enough money for the two six-piece chicken crispies dinners, enough for two medium drinks and a fourteen-point-nine percent tip. He patted his pocket; both coupons were there with the expiration dates checked, the fine print all read and any caveats or exemptions cleared. Jeffrey sucked in two lungs worth of mall air; he approached the counter where Rhoda awaited.

"I wanna Pinchers," Jeffrey said, knowing immediately that something had gone dreadfully wrong.

"You wanna *what?*"

"I mean..." Jeffrey felt his face broil. "I mean, I wanna buy Pinchers. I'm starting my collection."

"Yes, we have no Pinchers."

"It's because he was the first...Beanie...you..." *Uh, oh.* Either Rhoda was

reading from the wrong script or Jeffrey's game plan was now mauled, leaving him dangling naked and delusional before the love of his life with one demon girl and a bountiful bevy of no lobsters looking on.

Linda coolly licked the yogurt off her spoon, its bowl upside down, the way girls do when amused at the antics of inadequate males. She awaited Jeffrey's next blunder from the corner of her eye.

"But...uh..." he stammered. "You're out of Pinchers?"

"Sorry. A Girl Scout bought the last one for her dying grandmother."

Jeffrey stared at the empty cubicle where the little red lobsters once thrived. He'd never buy Girl Scout cookies again, not even the chocolate mint ones. What a trouble maker that little brat had been. Jeffrey wanted to strangle her. He wanted to stomp all over her cookie inventory and rip all the badges off her uniform. A little harsh, perhaps, but it seemed chivalrous at the time.

Well, what *now*? No Pinchers, no backup plan, no exorcist present to cast this jinxing Mephistophelette into the outer darkness or at least out into the parking lot. No doubt before her union with Beelzebub, she was a Girl Scout, peddling expired thin mints and interrupting Cupid's fragile mood as she did.

But then Jeffrey got a wonderful idea. "Okay," he said to Rhoda. "Better yet, I'll let *you* pick my first Beanie Baby."

Linda snickered so hard she blew globules of boysenberry yogurt across the counter. But Rhoda calmly reached behind her and pulled Snip the Siamese Cat from her siblings. "How's this?"



Jeffrey, with a brisk, stealthy peek, checked the price tag. Same as Pinchers. *We're still go.* "Ah, she's perfect. I'll take her."

Rhoda wrapped the animal in a clear plastic bag. Jeffrey paid and received change. The parcel was so sweetly placed into his hands. "Thank you," Rhoda said.

Jeffrey opened his mouth. For the next twenty-two seconds nothing, not even the breath of life, came out. He stood silent, gripping his package until the plastic bag dug sweaty ridges into his hands.

"Anything else?" Rhoda offered.

"Life's...uh..." It was the perfect line if only he could remember it. "Pleasures, though simple...uh..." Jeffrey's mind crashed. Zen-master blank. Nothing but a mantra of *huh? what? and come again?*

Rhoda prodded with raised eyebrows.

"I'm hungry," gurgled from Jeffrey's mouth.

More boysenberry shot across the counter. Rhoda poked her thumb toward the Piccadilly. "Special on meat loaf today."

In a netherworld of desperation, now, Jeffrey breathed deep and pulled the two coupons from his pocket. He didn't notice as they dropped fluttering to the floor.

"These two coupons," he said, holding up his empty fingers, "are for Shoney's, uh...spaghetti crispies and chicken balls. Would you care to join me?"

Linda nearly swallowed her spoon whole.

Rhoda's mouth flopped open. "*Huh?*"

"I...uh...life's pleasures, simple enough...I mean." Jeffrey clutched Snip close to

his heart. "Look. Rhoda...I wanna...you know, go out with you. Like on a date. To Shoney's Big Boy."

"But..." Rhoda looked straight at Jeffrey and spoke the two words that fibrillated his heart and sent it trembling up his throat. "I'm *married*."

The disembodied thing now standing before Rhoda looked like Howdy Doody with its strings severed, stiff as a plank, a sorry-I'm-not-at-home-right-now-but-leave-your-message-at-the-beep grin across its wooden face.

"Gee, *Rhoda*," Linda laughed, "tonight you can go up to your husband and say, 'Honey, a grotesque little gnome asked me out to Shoney's Big Boy. I've never *been* to such a posh eatery before. Please, can I go? *Please!*'"

Rhoda stared at Jeffrey as though he had just asked how much her breast implants had cost. "And *Rhoda*? Where did you get *Rhoda*?"

Jeffrey wheezed. "Bobby Jo?"

"My name's not Rhoda. It's not Bobby Jo." She produced a name tag from who-knows-where and angled it into Jeffrey's face. "It's Monica."

The next thing he knew, Jeffrey found himself on an escalator going the wrong way. How he got there he couldn't remember. But he vaguely recalled mumbling something to Monica about how much he respected the institution of marriage, how much he admired her commitment, how much he wished for their success in this venture and lots of little Monicas. And how -- *oh, surely, God, please tell me I didn't say this* -- how he would duely step aside to preserve, not put asunder, this holy bond.

Somehow he got off the escalator without being sliced into thin strips of mortified

flesh. Somehow he managed to find his Yugo in a sea of parked cars; perhaps the thick aroma of rust led him on.

"Well," he said aloud as he sat before the steering wheel and shut the door, "I guess I can cross *her* off my list." He twisted the key and heard a click and nothing more from within the Yugo's three remaining cylinders. Every idiot light on the dashboard glowed, shouting with one voice: "Major malfunction. Disastrous anomalies. Abort mission."

Jeffrey dropped his head on the steering wheel. With his Beanie Baby looking on with curiously dispassionate eyes, Jeffrey Gullard laughed until he cried.