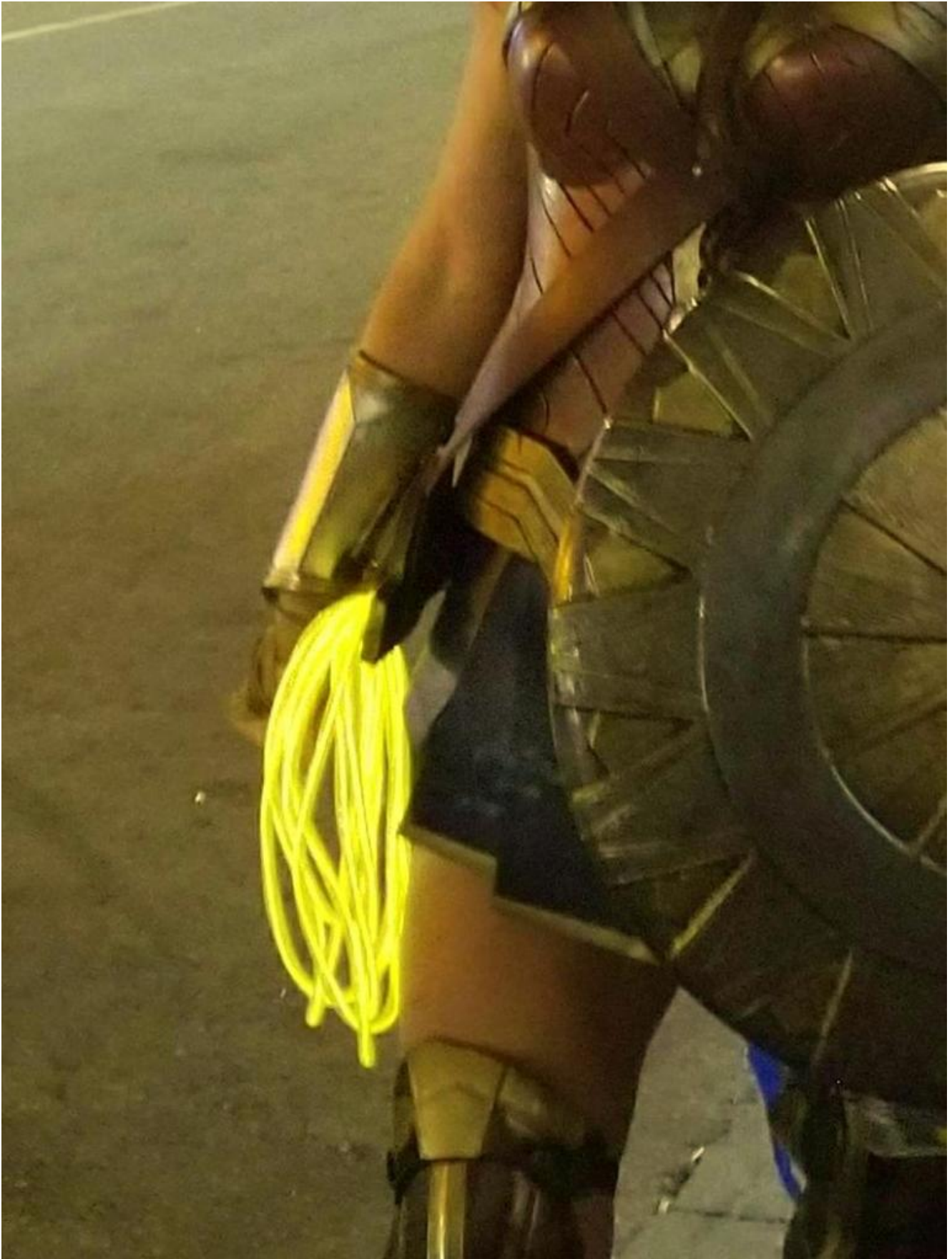


New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: "Wonder Woman"

In Atlanta at the Ritz Carlton we stopped at the bar by the lobby on our way upstairs. Fred saw Newt Gingrich who was dressed neat casual wearing loafers (I don't know what a loafer is but that's what he was wearing). His wife, Callista, was in the corner talking on a razor cell phone. Fred got up and introduced himself to Newt, and pulled me over. Newt said he hadn't been in the Army but that his dad served at Fort Benning.

When I turned around, Sam was talking with a tall, statuesque woman in a red-white-and-blue bikini. Wonder Woman.

She was not the kind of woman you could ignore, equal parts power and beauty. But Sam, I could tell, wasn't interested.



"I'm gonna put my lasso around you, figure out what you're about,"
Wonder Woman was saying, leaning in towards Sam.

“We uh need to go upstairs to the room, now, right? Sorry Newt Gingrich, my friends and I need to stow our stuff. Yeah, totally we’ll see you later,” Sam said to Wonder Woman. “Definitely.”

Frank said we ought to wear our Class-A’s for cocktails. But when he walked in the business lounge in uniform he was the only one.

“What the fuck, guys,” he said. Sam and I were wearing khaki slacks and polo shirts. “Way to blue falcon me, now I look like an asshole.”

An older man wearing a white cowboy hat and a bolo tie thanked him for his service as Sam grabbed a round of Heinekens. I noticed three women sitting in the corner, looking over at Frank. They were about our age, maybe a little older. We gallantly introduced ourselves. After some pleasant bantered and flirtation, I started to make moves.

“We’re married,” said the tall brunette.

“All three of you?”

“Well, what happens in Atlanta, stays in Atlanta,” Sam said. The blond laughed and exchanged some kind of glance with the third woman. They were housewives. I guessed in the South at that moment, it was still possible. To be a housewife and still get to go out on one’s own in the city, talk with strange young men. Fred excused himself to change out of his uniform.

Somehow or other we didn’t end up meeting back up with the three married women after all. The one I liked had been pregnant, anyway.

Instead we crossed the street and found an upscale steak joint. Fred, who got lost the night before at Fort Benning during training and had to retake his "land navigation" test, almost faceplanted into his mashed potatoes he was so beat. He prepared to excuse himself when a party of Atlanta Hawks cheerleaders sat down across from us at a table for six.

"Could've used your class-A's for this one, buddy," Sam hissed.

Fred tried to rally. I gave him my Red Bull and ordered him a coffee.

"Go outside and smoke a cigarette."

But I knew that look on his face, Fred wasn't coming back. He waved goodbye to us from the door. The cheerleaders laughed and chatted with each other while tables like ours stared. One aging woman at the next table said to another, "they comin' or what?"

"They paid for us, they'll be here," her friend said. She gave me a sardonic smile. "What are you looking at, sugar?"

I was noticing that Wonder Woman had just entered the restaurant. She seemed to be looking for someone.

"Sam, buddy," I said.

"What, you see Newt Gingrich again?"

"No. We gotta leave."

When I got a text from Fred it was nearly 1130pm. I called him back, which I knew he hated, but not as badly as he needed a

boost. "Come out, dude," I yelled over the club's music. Sam was getting drinks, some kind of Irish beer he liked. Sam was Scottish or part Scottish. Irish beer somehow factored into that identity. He'd visited Ireland in college. Maybe he was part Irish, too. But then, he wore a kilt and played the bagpipes. That night he kept craning his long neck, trying to chat up different girls. Whatever energy we had with the married women had fizzled out, all the conversations ran dry. So we lied and told Fred it was worth it. "It's great here," I yelled into the phone.

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A few years later Fred and Sam came to my wedding. It was Texas hill country, in the middle of summer. The water in the river behind my wife's parents' house was low. The heat was dry but intense. Fred brought this Italian girl I liked, and Sam was with a special needs teacher he'd met near his base. We were all sitting on top of a hill drinking wine, and Sam said "remember our last trip to Atlanta?"

"How could I forget," Fred said. He was getting out of the Army by then, and he'd stopped smoking cigarettes. "The gay pride parade. The cheerleaders. The accident."

"That was the same trip?" I couldn't believe it.

"Don't forget about that other thing," Sam said. The group fell silent just before my fiancée retrieved me for some rehearsal task. None of us wanted to say it. Wonder Woman, the X factor, the uncertain variable.

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Back in Atlanta, Fred had arrived at the club, and wouldn't you know it, a short blond woman struck up conversation with him almost immediately. She was cute, so Sam and I tried to do

what we could to break them up. Fred wasn't there more than a half hour before she pulled him away and drove off with him in a Mustang GT. He looked so sleepy, holding a whisky in his hand and swaying to the music, like he never fully woke up from his nap. How could any single lady resist.

The next morning when I woke Fred was in bed, too. Sam slept like a rock, and I didn't remember Fred coming in. He'd stripped down to his boxers, a plaid pattern. There was barely enough room in bed for the three of us so I rolled out and showered.

When I finished, Fred was already up pacing back and forth impatiently.

"I'm meeting back up with Penelope," he said.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah I need to take a quick shower. We're grabbing brunch."

Sam rolled over to take up the whole bed, now that it was vacant.

"Will you two shut up already. My head's killing me."

I waved Fred into the bathroom. "I'm done, knock yourself out. Just remember, we need to check out by 1pm."

"Yeah I'll be back by then," Fred said, hurrying into the steam.

Sam and I made our way back up to the business lounge having packed our bags. It was empty, so the two of us took seats with bloody mary's and looked out over the city.

I unfolded a copy of the *Journal-Constitution* and reclined.

“Is that a parade?” Sam said. Sure enough, there was a massive line of and people snaking down a main boulevard several streets to the east of the hotel.

“Gay pride parade,” I said, pointing to the front page story in the newspaper.

“Well, now we know where Fred hurried off to,” Sam said.

“Yeah, why did he bother making up a name, ‘Penelope,’ as though he needed to lie to us.”

Sam laughed and took a drink. The sun was hidden behind a cloud and a shadow fell across the room. It occurred to me that these moments of ours were being measured out as though by a spoon—that one day, we’d all go our separate ways to build families and careers, but here, at this moment, we were all happily engaged in the pursuits that suited us, freed by friendship to enjoy ourselves unconstrained by want or need.

Twenty minutes passed in this manner. Clouds hurried across the sky, and we passed through their shadows below. I read about the baseball season’s progress and what novel scheme the Bush administration had to immiserate us. The World Cup was in full swing, Italy was a contender to win. Sam called his sister and was speaking softly. I couldn’t hear about what.

The door burst open. It was Fred.

"Time to leave, guys."

"What's the rush," I said, looking up.

"Wonder Woman. I saw her in the lobby. She's waiting for us and
now her outfit's purple and gold."

Sam said "I have to go," then hung up. "What do you mean? Also,
were you just at the gay pride parade?"

Fred shook his head impatiently, he didn't have time for crude jokes, and motioned to us to make haste. His backpack was slung over one burly shoulder, which lent his urgency an air of credibility.

"All right," I said, "all right, we're coming."

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A half hour later we were congratulating ourselves on having escaped Atlanta without further incident. Racing down the highway south toward Fort Benning, what had been a beautiful summer day turned gray, ominous. Before long it was raining.

"Man, this Georgia weather's ridiculous," Sam said. "Can't wait to
get out of here. I'm never coming back."

Fred didn't think it was supposed to rain much. Just enough to make the coming week's training uncomfortable.

I was driving. "The paper said it'd be showers, nothing too bad."

Just then the rain picked up. It was like God turned up the dial
from a one to a ten. It was coming down in buckets.

"What the hell," Fred said in the back seat. "Holy shit! What

the
hell?"

"Look out," Sam said.

The car in front of me had slammed on its brakes. I swerved around it into the fast lane, slowing abruptly as the antilock brakes pumped and my truck fishtailed crazily. Off to the left, a minivan, one of the older models, a Chrysler, had been following too closely and lurched off into the grass median. It skidded to a stop.

We nearly hit the car in front of us but it accelerated just in time, and I avoided the crash.

"Oh my God," Fred said. "Guys."

Behind us, cars smashed into one another. One car flipped into the air, spinning, and I could see the driver turning the wheel as though to influence his vehicle's flight.

"Drive, man, drive," Fred said. Glancing in the rear view mirror I watched as a tractor-trailer fell to its side and slid toward the pile behind us. Then, through the heavy rain, I saw a figure leaping over the wreckage—Wonder Woman!—had she been involved, somehow? Her golden lasso shining, a beacon through the chaos, she caught the car and set it down gently as we drove further into the storm.