

# My Inflatable Friend

**The Confessions  
of Rollo Hemphill**

**A COMIC NOVEL BY**

**Gerald Everett Jones**



**LaPuerta**

Santa Monica, California

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La Puerta Productions  
2222 Sixth Street, Unit D  
Santa Monica, CA 90405-2486  
310.450.0887 • 310.581.3380 FAX  
inflatable@lapuerta.tv

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## CHAPTER 2

# Shot Down

**D**ANTE HAD HIS BEATRICE. FOR ME IT'S FELICIA. NOT ONLY IS the object of my desire heart-stoppingly beautiful herself, she can create beauty. As a qualified Sassoon graduate, she knows her scissor work and razor cuts, her lotions and mudpacks, her depilatories, dyes, and balms. Unfortunately for my span of attention on anything else but her, I see her every day at the Palms.

Ah! (Knuckle bite.)

She said we didn't, but we had a relationship to speak of—that is, we were on speaking terms. She'd rushed me out of her shop today, but usually she didn't seem to mind my stopping by on my break. She'd talk as she worked, sometimes even directly to me. (It sounded like singing, I thought.) I would listen and try to think of charming and witty rejoinders, but mostly I just stared in awe. She was genuine second-generation Italian, with that Capuccino-colored Mediterranean skin, jet-black hair worn in a passionate tease, red pouty lips that said "You don't own me" (but dared you to die trying), and that little bead of sweat on her upper lip when she got steamed—which happened whenever she expressed herself forcefully, as she often did with characteristic Sicilian zeal. Many were the times I fantasized that little string of sweat beads

breaking out in the hot throes of physical passion induced by my ardent thrusting.

Ah!

Undeterred and having rehearsed my speech before the mirror at home, I dropped 'round to her place as promised. I carried a chilled bottle of Dom (borrowed from a room-service tray—I don't make that kind of money). I sported a velour sweatsuit—a comfortable, package-flattering ensemble that could be shucked quickly, I pictured, for that long-awaited, hastily consummated romp in her bedroom.

The apartment door swung open graciously at my buzzing to reveal her, drop-dead gorgeous in a floor-length silk evening gown with pendant earrings. Although I'm sure I mentioned earlier that day I'd be paying a visit, I hadn't said anything about stepping out, especially in such style. So there we were—she dressed for the ballroom at the Ritz, me for pizza and TV, albeit with a respectable sparkling wine.

No matter. We'd both be undressed soon enough, hiccuping and giggling at the oddity and delight of lovers' first coupling.

A puzzled look passed over her face like a wispy cloud temporarily hiding the sun. "Rollo, that's right. You said you had something to ask me, but I didn't think you meant you'd be showing up, uh, here."

If not now, not ever. "I was just wondering whether you'd be interested in getting married. To me, I mean."

The little cloud became a thunderhead and shot a bolt into her brain. I thought she stumbled back, but maybe she just blinked.

"You'd better come in," she said numbly.

It was the first time I'd been to her place. The walls were filled with her paintings, the exclusive subject matter of which was puppies staring out with abnormally large, watery, affectionate eyes. Apparently, my love was the Keane of canine portraiture.

Ah, there was so much more about her I would learn, and eagerly!

She didn't invite me to sit, didn't offer a beverage or snack. In fact, she seemed disoriented in her own house. I stood frozen, holding the bottle of Dom behind my back.

*Will she guess I swiped it?*

She turned her head away (to wipe a tear?) and on turning back said, "I didn't see this coming, Rollo. People usually, I don't know, *date* first."

"I'm new at this," was all I could find to say, playing the Fool card of naivete, since worldliness obviously wasn't my strong suit.

From somewhere within herself she summoned fire, and I got a flash of my mother's nine-pound Pekingese Shotzi, who quickly bites male dogs of any size squarely on the nose as they approach. Neither of these gals need ever fear a Rottweiler in a dark alley.

As abruptly as I'd popped the question, she turned me down, and ignoring the implications on the duration of my visit or my life's entire future course, I dumbly asked for the reasons why.

"Why *would* I marry you is a much shorter list," she explained carefully. "Let's keep this positive.

"You're cute and sweet," she continued, "and you have a nice sense of humor when you let yourself relax." This girl didn't have any trouble expressing herself, a trait I really admired, even as I was stung by the sharp truth of her list, not to mention its conciseness. I waited for her to go on, but she didn't.

"But why *don't* you...?" I couldn't help it coming out as a whine.

Her glance flitted from her watch to a wall clock, and I was impressed that she would bother to synchronize them, especially at this moment.

She became impatient and apparently decided to break her own rule about avoiding criticism. "For one thing, you're unfocused."

"I turned a corner in my life today," I protested. "I decided you're my future."

“And you’re *mine*?” she asked incredulously, as if it were an undeserved condemnation. “Did you apply for a job at Charles Schwab? Win a Rhodes scholarship? Lose a rich uncle?”

“Hey, one step at a time.”

“Okay, Rollo. For example. Where’s the ring?”

It was a very good question. I had already told her I was new at this, so that excuse wouldn’t work again. “I thought we’d pick it out, you know, together.”

“So I could co-sign for the time payments? A ring is supposed to be two months salary, Rollo. Now, I’m not saying I’d insist on that, but I’m giving you some perspective here.” She paused for emphasis. “You can’t afford the prize in a Happy Meal.”

“Babe, I got plans.”

“Yeah, two rubbers in your pocket,” she smoldered. I marveled at her X-ray vision (she was even looking at the right pocket). “My name’s not Babe.” Was her upper lip breaking into a dew? “And you’re clumsy. If we had a baby, you might drop it.”

*Where does this come from?*

I searched my memory for some inexcusable gaffe I’d committed in front of her, but I was at a loss. It was such a silly reason, I began to see her objections as nothing more than anxious denial—a reluctance to confront the intensity of her true feelings for me!

I started toward her, an approach that I meant to end in a comforting embrace. As I said, “Everybody worries, but that never happens,” I raised my arms in supplication, swinging the ice-cold bottle of Dom. Its slick, clammy surface defied my grasp. The bottle slipped from my hand and thudded to the floor, connecting with toe of my right Reebok and inducing a sharp pain and what would eventually become an ugly multicolored bruise.

“Owwwwwww.” Desperate for any affection at this point, I would gratefully accept sympathy. Although the embarrassment hurt more than my foot did, I went for an agonized wince and gave a little hop.

I thought I detected genuine concern. But just then, the doorbell rang and her expression changed to panic.

“You can’t stay,” she said, indicating that menace lurked on the other side of the door.

“But we—”

She was conflicted now about whether to answer the door or tend my foot. “Did you think I dressed for you?”

A sense of my own winning charm returned, perhaps because I was in free fall, with no hope of pulling out. “Well now,” I said, “I didn’t think you were taking the dog for a walk.”

She didn’t have a dog, which suddenly struck me as odd, given the recurring theme of her artwork. It would certainly give us something to talk about next time. I’d invite her dinner some night, try to find a way to suggest casual dress and modest fare.

She primed before a mirror, straightening a wisp of hair and delicately wiping the delicious sweat from her lip, finishing in a sexy pucker.

“His name is Stan,” she said emphatically. “We’re going to the opera.”

What a droll sense of humor, I thought. It was her deft way of easing my pain without resorting to physical touching, not the choice I would have preferred. “You can’t take a dog to the opera,” I laughed, appreciating her joke.

I knew a good exit line when I had one, and as she moved toward the door, I grasped the knob and opened it wide.

There stood Stan, the human equivalent of a deep-chested Rotty, with a neck as thick as my waist, draped in an Armani suit that probably cost what I make in a year, shooting an immaculate cuff to expose a glitter on the wrist that was sure to be nothing less than a Patek Phillippe.

I smiled winningly at him, hoping to come across as the innocuous boy next door who had just popped in for a cup of sugar or advice on a gay relationship. “She met you at the gym, right?”