

*Herb 'n' Lorna's  
Unsolicited Erotica*

Eric Kraft



*W*hile I was writing *Herb 'n' Lorna*, I surprised myself when I discovered that the cuddly grandparents of the novel's protagonist, Peter Leroy, shared a secret occupation: they were designers and fabricators of erotic jewelry.

*P*eter Leroy was as surprised as I was. Here's how he describes the shock of discovery in his preface to the book:

The discovery came—actually it was forced upon me by two informants—on the day of my grandmother's funeral, three years after my grandfather had died. That morning, May Castle, my grandparents' friend of longest standing, gave me a box, inscribed to me in my grandmother's hand. Inside the box were twenty-two pieces of erotic jewelry and erotic sculpture. With them was an account, just a few words, written by my grandmother, of my grandparents' involvement with erotic arts and crafts. I read it quickly, breathlessly, but I had many things to attend to that morning, and I didn't have much time to think about what it meant before I left for the Episcopal church, where the funeral service was to be held.

*H*is discovery sends Peter in search of the grandparents he never knew—the ones who were hiding behind the ones he thought he did know—and what he finds becomes the story that he tells in the book.

The erotic jewelry industry that Herb and Lorna were involved in was, I assumed, an invention of mine, purely a product of my imagination, and the part of it that I was particularly proud of having invented was the “animated” division—the branch that made erotic jewelry with moving parts—because that was where Herb and Lorna’s art reached its highest expression.

I could point to the source of inspiration. It was a tattered copy of *Life* magazine from 1938 that I had bought at a flea market in 1985. In it was a very brief article about a fad for charm bracelets. It included a photograph of charms with moving parts.

Later, I had Lorna come upon that page of charms, in the same issue of *Life*, but in 1938.



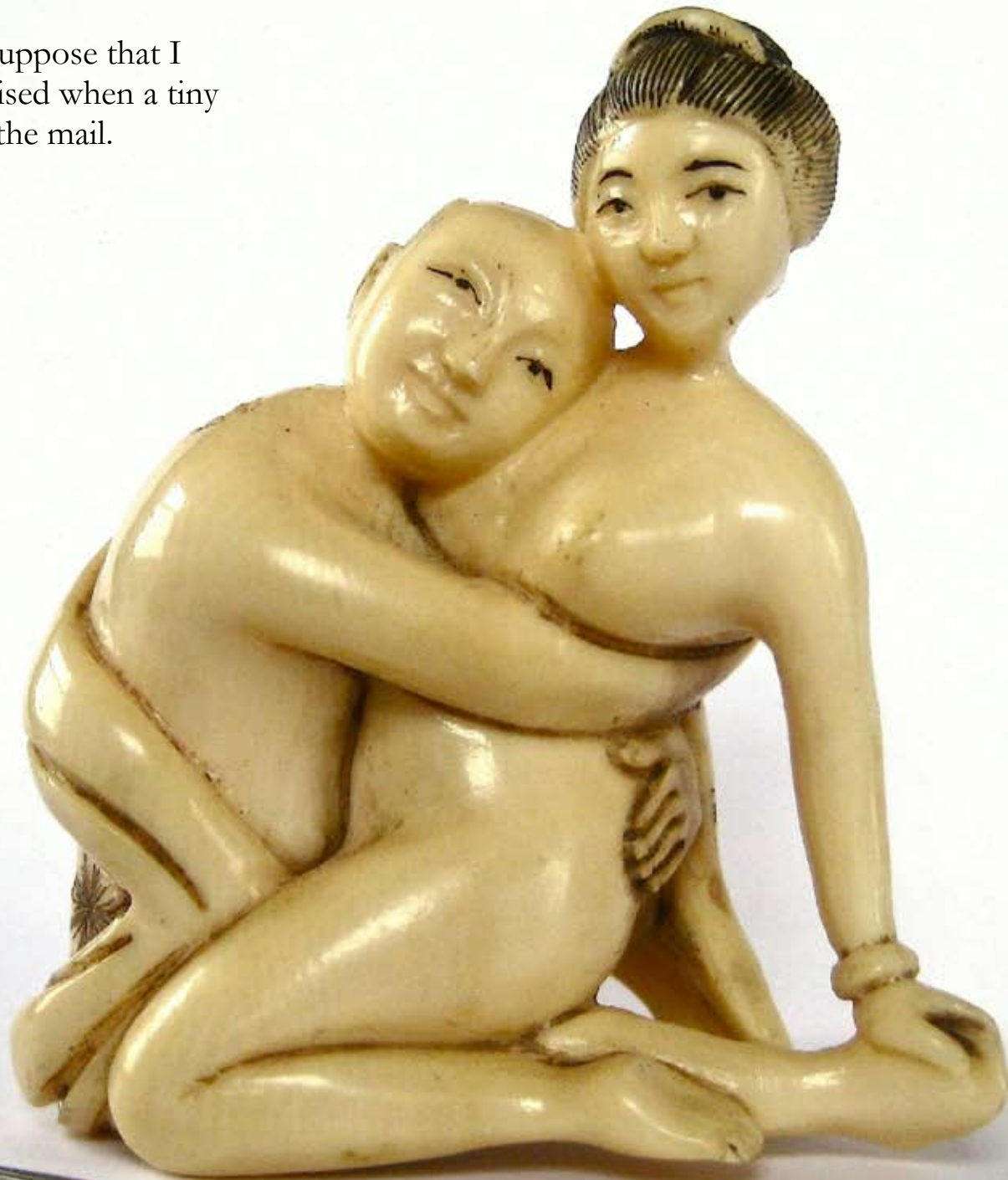
*I* was *sure* that the erotic jewelry industry didn't exist, that it was just something that I had made up . . . until things began arriving in the mail.



*A*t one point in *Herb 'n' Lorna*, I quoted from *Terror and Tedium*, an important but neglected study of the psychology of war, a nonexistent book written by a fictional character, Major Edward Keefe:

The typical field hospital [in the First World War] was behind the lines but barely beyond the range of the shelling. The war was still so close, such a constant presence, that there was no emotional escape from it. Added to the whole catalog of feelings that the war inspired in these wounded men was an almost overwhelming sense of frustration, of impotence, of not being able to do anything about it, not being able to participate. (We see another example of the effect of this feeling of impotence, by the way, in the flourishing traffic within the hospitals in pornography of all sorts—photographs, drawings, literature, even pornographic jewelry and tiny netsuke-like carvings.)

*H*aving written that, I suppose that I shouldn't have been surprised when a tiny netsuke couple arrived in the mail.



*T*hey were intimately intertwined.





*I* suppose that I should have predicted  
what I would discover if I turned the  
little couple over — but I didn't.



*W*hen Herb and Lorna retire to Punta Cachazuda in Florida, they teach the other retirees the art and craft of erotic jewelry. Peter writes:

Since it is in the nature of humankind to diversify in matters of taste, it shouldn't be surprising that today's Punta Cachazudans work in a bewildering variety of media and styles. There are traditionalists who work in shell, amber, and a plastic substitute for ivory. . . . There are "charmners," who produce coy, vulgar, cheap cast-metal and plastic charms with elementary moving parts. Apparently enough people consider these trinkets amusing "gag gifts" with which to mark birthdays, engagements, and wedding anniversaries to make manufacturing the things a profitable business.



*A* tiny matchbox arrived one day.





*P*acked very carefully inside the box was something that might have been made by one of the “charmners” in Punta Cachazuda.





*It* was a vulgar, cheap, plastic charm,  
and yes . . .





. . . it had moving parts.

*M*any of the packages that arrived in the mail contained keychains.





*T*hese, too, had moving parts  
of a primitive kind.





So many of these arrived, that I think they have to be considered a genre.

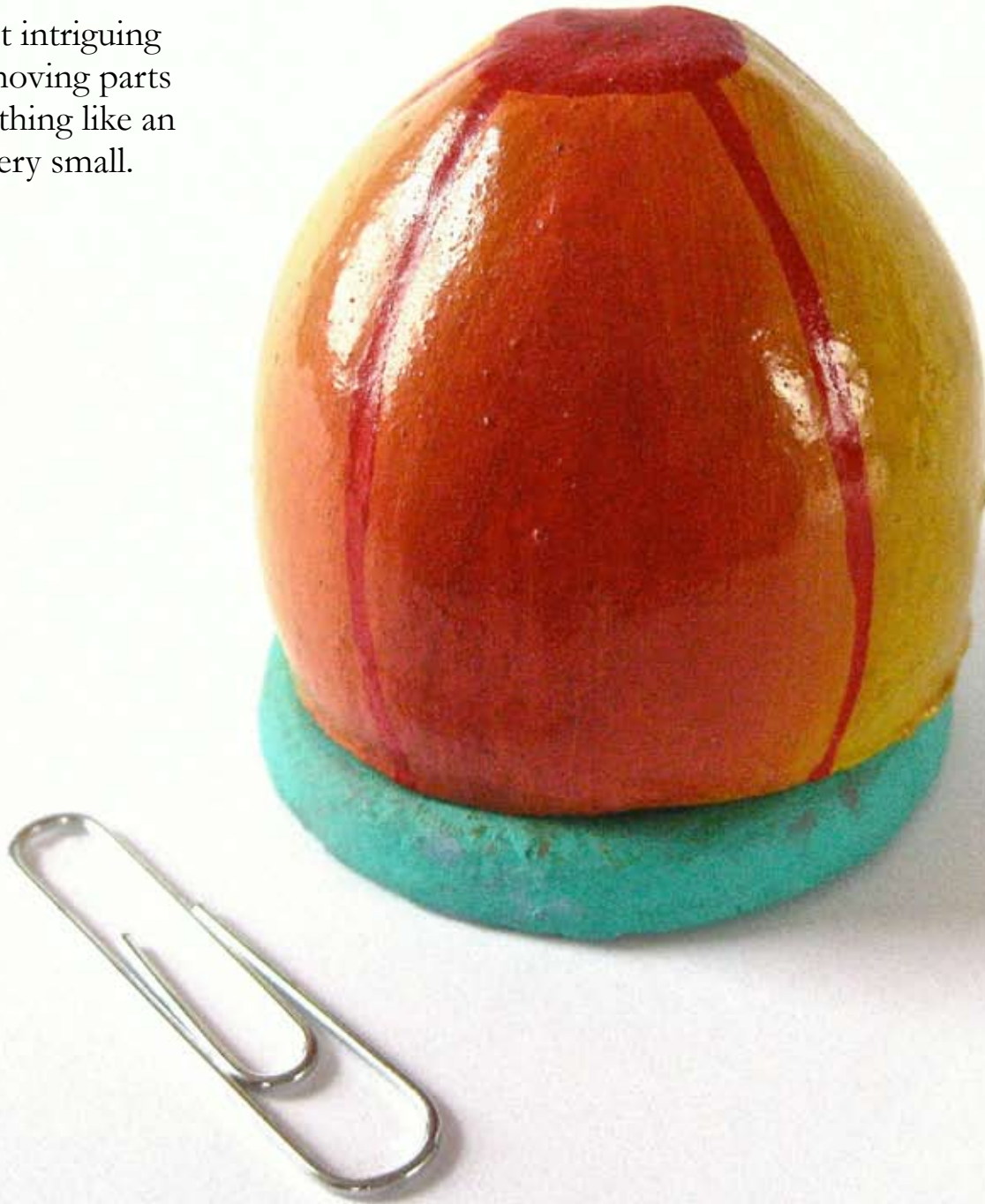


*N*ot everything that people sent had moving parts.





*O*ne of the most intriguing of those without moving parts was this one, something like an earthenware egg, very small.



*L*ift the lid, and there is an even tinier couple . . .

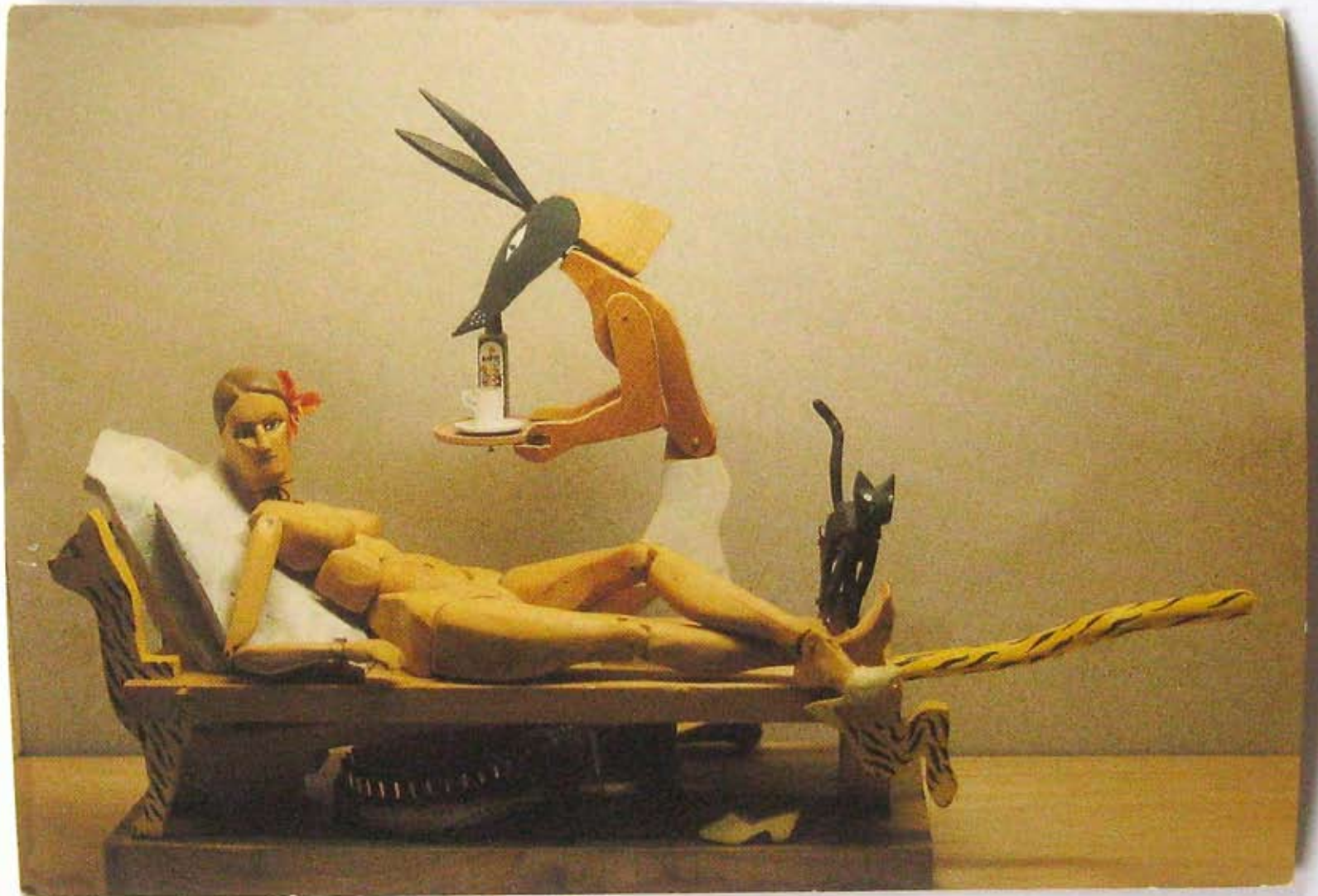




. . . engaged in an amorous tussle.



Perhaps the most fascinating of all was not an object but a postcard depicting an object. It shows an automaton inspired by Manet's *Olympia*, part of the collection of contemporary automata at the Cabaret Mechanical Theatre in Covent Garden, London. Notice the gears beneath the chaise. It's intriguing to speculate on the animation that they provide.



*H*owever, the type of erotic jewelry that made Herb and Lorna famous was the “Watchcase Wonder.” These appeared to be ordinary pocket watches, but when the owner pressed the stem the lid popped open to reveal a tiny ivory couple on a tiny ivory bed. Twist the stem, and the couple couples. Here’s how Lorna responded when she saw Herb’s first prototype:

*S*he twisted the wheel again, slowly, while she observed the little copulating couple from various angles. They enchanted her. In part, they won her over with their fluid agility and their cunning construction, but most of all, a small gesture won her: a gesture that Herb had supplied by shaping one tiny pulley with an eccentricity, the slightest little bump, like the lobe on a cam, so that at one point in the performance the man brushed his lips against the woman’s cheek. It was a tiny gesture, one that Lorna had to see several times before she could be sure that it wasn’t accidental, that it wasn’t caused by the way she held the figures or the way she turned the wheel. When she satisfied herself that it happened every time, with the precision of all the other gestures and exertions that composed the performance, when she was certain that it was intentional, that whoever had made the little couple perform had considered this sign of affection an essential part of the performance, she was charmed.

*N*o one sent me any jewelry or other objects with that eccentric gesture, that essential sign of affection, so I think it’s likely that I made that up. That part, at least, is mine.