

FICTION



Johnny Shot, Jack Lovell, 2005

LAURA, LINDA, SWEETIE PIE

Daniel Wallace

She went crazy, briefly, in the fall, and tried to kill him. He wrote a story about it. In the story her name was Maureen, and instead of putting little pieces of gravel in the chocolate cake she was making for him, he had her put little pieces of gravel—and glass—in a strawberry tart. Nice touch, he thought, the glass. *Glinting in the bright kitchen light.*

She recovered just as the story was appearing in a magazine, and she read it, and sued him. He wrote about that, too, finishing a short piece before the trial itself was over. In that story he wasn't an author and she wasn't formerly crazy, but everything else was just about the same. In the writing he was somehow able to eke out a happy ending, with her actually dropping the suit and coming back to him. He had his lawyers send her a copy, and when she read it, against the advice of her own counsel, she was moved. She dropped the suit, and went back.

Her real name was Laura. In his stories, other than Maureen, it was Linda, Carol, Beth, Deirdre and Sweetie Pie. In one story she went nameless, and in the novel her name was Emma Fairchild. But whatever the name it was always, unmistakably, her. She was the star of just about everything he wrote, and when she wasn't the star she made a cameo appearance, he gave her tiny walk-on parts, as though he were one of those nepotistic movie directors, the kind who employs his mistress and members of his family in every film he makes. But he wasn't a director; he was only a writer. Still, you knew who "the golden-haired girl" was when the narrator spotted her, even briefly, in the supermarket, or when, out of the corner of his eye, he spied a girl "with hair the color of sunshine."

For a period of time—almost overnight—he became famous, but then just as quickly drifted off into a puzzling obscurity.

His mother often wondered why he never wrote about her, and one day came out and asked him. He told her he was sorry, and promptly wrote a story with his mother in it, although everybody could tell it wasn't his mother at all, but Laura dressed up to look like his mother. It was the best he could do.

As for the woman Laura, she loved him, she just thought he wrote too much. So he wrote about that. In this story he changed things around so that he was a salesman who was passionately devoted to his craft, but everything else was just about true to the facts, and it won a prize.

Then one day she got sick, and stayed that way for a long time. It was hard, but he wrote about it, indirectly: Laura was absent from his stories now, but all his other characters became ill with something. They coughed a lot, and took long naps. As she got sicker and sicker so did everybody else in his other world, until finally nobody in any of his stories ever got out of bed. They were a bed-ridden lot, and his stories were very dull.

Finally, of course, she died.

After the funeral, he sat down at his desk, picked up a pencil and wrote, *And then one day she died.*

He looked at what he had written, and he didn't like it. At all. *She died one day*, he wrote.

But he didn't like that either.

So he erased it all and, in a flurry of inspiration, wrote *She got real sick, but all of a sudden started feeling better.*

That was pretty good.

He had never seen her look so radiant.

Oh, yes!

And he lived, and she lived, and everybody lived happily ever after.

But that was a story.

The end.

LINDA CRUM WANTS TO TALK

Louis Wittig

Her Majesty Linda Crum, Grand Czarina of Human Resources and Most Holy Inquisitor of Peon Complaints, requests the honor of my presence? Tell her to get bent. I was at this desk when Linda Crum was *The Intern Who Got Her Hair Stuck in the Copier*. And the episode she so compassionately wishes to hear both sides of? There's nothing to talk about.

I didn't start it. Franklin started it. It was the first thing he ever did for me and the last thing he did on earth. Before that night, Franklin was just a kid in a big-and-tall suit he'd gotten from his mom for his first real job. I doubt I'd ever uttered a complete sentence to him before. But I stayed late that night—was it a Wednesday? That 55-degree monstrosity in the middle of January, whatever that was. I was just wasting time—what was there for me to do at home, or anywhere else?—but Franklin had actually been working late. Anyways, we were in the same elevator out. Somehow he knew my name and he says we should get a drink.

“Like a glass of water?” I asked.

And here—honestly—is what the kid said to me: “Doesn't matter. The roofies will dissolve in anything.”

Maybe you shouldn't laugh at stuff light that, but I did, and I thought, why not get a drink?

At the pub around the corner we slogged two-dollar Coronas and threw straws at a pack of redneck tourists sulking in a booth. Then Franklin declared that his five-year career plan was to ride Janice—Janice from the Microtel sales team—like a roly poly pony.

“Janice, Janice,” he repeated. “Janice who always brings umbrellas, even when it’s not raining.” I nodded along. I knew of Janice, but I’d never really thought of her that way.

Then Franklin went quiet. He leaned in, reached across the table, and pinched a wad of grey scruff from behind my ear. His palm was sweaty against my cheek. “You look like Doc,” he said, “from *Back to the Future*, but more homeless.” Then he scrawls on a bar napkin and throws it at me.

El Universal Barbershop / 31 Ave + Steinway. PEDRO!

The napkin was ripped up where he’d circled the name, PEDRO!

Franklin plowed his fingers back through his brick-red brush cut like he was combing the mighty Serengeti. He leaned in again and whispered, “Pedro changed my life.” Drinks were on Franklin that night. He closed out our tab before I could even reach for my wallet.

By the time we launched ourselves back out it was real winter again. A cold front, a wall of frozen air the size of the Eastern seaboard and as tall as the sky had crept in while we had haggled over the precise ending of an ancient *Seinfeld* episode. I beat it back to the burbs. He ended up on the downtown 59th Street platform when he needed to be on the uptown platform and—you saw the article in the *Post*, all 126 words—figured the quickest way home to bed was to cross the tracks. At the funeral I was sat next to Janice, who was texting throughout. Afterwards I hovered, ready with a tray of the tenderly half-baked comforts that only the last to see him could give—so full of life, right to the end, etc. etc. By the time I realized I was the only one who knew of that night I was also the only one left in the church lobby.

I swallowed a few hours of TV later that night, but eventually had to go for a walk. I pulled on my coat and the note appeared. Just grazing it underfinger in my pocket, I knew what it was. But I didn’t take it out, because you should never ever move the evidence. And this, I felt it, was evidence. Of what, I didn’t

know and couldn't get myself hung up on. I put the note into a Ziploc baggie and hid it in my study. I fully comprehend the lunacy, but these convictions are practiced deadbeat tenants that can wheedle and dodge their way through any eviction. It was his last known will and testament, and it was too clear to be ignored: I had to get a haircut from Pedro.

Not immediately. I took my time, to relish the "why" of the mystery. The explanation I settled on started with the reasonable assumption that Pedro must have been fresh off the boat from Colombia or DR and Franklin must have traded him English lessons for haircuts. They must have bonded. Pedro would be crushed to hear my news. But Mrs. Pedro would be pregnant. The Pedros would name their son Franklin. They'd make me the godparent. That just came. I ran with it. I'd be the Big Franklin that Little Franklin never had. I'd write him a killer recommendation, vault him into college, and he'd cure cancer or become the richest Hispanic in the Universe. They would raise statues to him all over the Latin world. Other scenarios that made the finals were similar in all the vital details.

I took a personal day for the event and El Universal was the perfect first-scene set: A sagging linoleum hallway burrowed into the side of a yellow-brick block of affordable housing, lit through a cloudy front window. As I strode through the door a burnt peanut of a man in a soiled barber's coat sprung out of a chair towards me.

"My friend my friend, what can I do today for you?" He yelped and threw his open hand to me. He must have been older than I was.

"Pedro?"

"Juan," he clasped my hand and pulled me to his chair.

"I'd prefer Pedro. Is Pedro here?"

"Pedro is good. I am better. Ha ha!"

"It's Pedro or nothing," I said.

His smile fractured and he ebbed to a corner where mute fútbol was playing on a microscopic TV set.

“Pedro in a minute,” he murmured.

Pedro looked much more like Pedro—a bony elf in a pompadour, shaving an adolescent head in the back of the room. I tripped into the chair when he finally waved me back and started spilling the beans before the bib was even on:

“You come highly recommended, Pedro. Actually, I’m sorry to tell you this—”

“How do you want?” The question came from Juan. Pedro stood dumb beside me.

“Short?”

“Corto” said Juan, and Pedro picked up the scissors.

I had no idea how long a haircut could last, or its potential philosophical depths. Shut behind my eyelids, I held on for any sound from Pedro. There was his clipper and only his clipper, over and over and around, grinding, sending shivers through my scalp and down my spine and, inscrutably, coming back and back again to a spot just over my right temple, buzzing in—I lost count of how many times—as if a single recalcitrant hair were blowing the whole thing. Forty-five minutes. Motes of clipped head flotsam lodged in my ears and nose and the receding echoes of my little fantasy irritated from the inside.

When I opened my eyes the joint was bright and ugly and I was a naked and panicked sheep. I slapped Pedro a \$10 tip on a \$12 bill to buy his attention, and then I tried to catch up with destiny by repeating “Franklin,” “fat guy,” and “here,” while pantomiming the accident with a finger-leg man and my fist as a Queens-bound N-train. Pedro wasn’t getting it and Juan, who’d seen the tip, glared me out of there on my ass before I could rev up my Spanglish.

And that was almost the entire sum of it. Nancy Boyles from shipping said my new do was special, as we waited for the coffee to finish brewing. I entertained the possibility that I’d had it backwards, that the haircut was supposed to be about

me, not Pedro. I waited for whatever monumental correction the haircut was going to precipitate, until I got impatient and switched to a build-it-and-they-will-come attitude. I flossed three times a week, offered of my own free will to reorganize the paper closet and waited some more. It was a sad little show, like watching a gambler bargain with a slot machine, but it was over soon enough.

I boiled up half a mind to drop a rock in that Ziploc bag and toss it from the Staten Island ferry. Instead I bolted home, up to my study, into my drawer and confronted it directly. It was a rousing give and take—mostly it took. I was smack in the middle of an involved point that could have been leading to what therapists call a breakthrough when the door accidentally creaked open and the wife backed away from it and tiptoed down the stairs. I didn't care what she heard, but I wasn't about to answer questions or "talk about it." So I mailed the enigmatic little bastard to Franklin's people.

I thought you should have this, I wrote on a sticky note, before starting over. If they should've had it then they would've had it from the beginning. But I was the one who did have it, so I was the one who should've had it. Maybe I was just the hand-off guy. But then why was I in the equation at all?

I wanted you to have it. A naked and vulgar lie.

Can't make heads or goddamn tails of it. Hope you can! Unacceptable for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was, I hoped they couldn't. I finalized the note by morning and dispatched it without signature or return address.

Subsequent days and weeks brushed passed me without acknowledgement, as if this whole episode had been a *faux pas* on my part that was proving harder than expected to forget. I wondered intermittently how my letter bomb had gone off. It could have broken his parents down. Or not. It could have sent them to the shelves, pulling off the photo albums they'd been eyeing since the funeral, rubbing each other's shoulders

and fogging themselves up over the snapshot of Frankie's first haircut. Or, it could have been buried unopened under a pile of coupons and credit card offers in an unheated foyer.

Linda Crum doesn't give a flying horse cracker about any of this, does she? Linda Crum wants to know about Friday night. I'll give her Friday night. Friday night: Rich Salmon, Soojin, a pair of marketing meatheads I've never seen before in my life and Janice—yes, Janice from the Microtel sales team—went out to some insipid velvet-couch lounge and I tagged along.

Yes, I drank: in near total darkness, huddled against a wall, strangers' conversations and shuffling elbows landing on me constantly, like spittle. No, I was not drunk. My Dos Equis were rungs on a diving board ladder and when I'd pulled myself to the top I cleared my throat.

"Hey, remember Franklin?" I asked. They pretended not to hear me.

"Did you know that I was the last person to see him alive?" Then they came around, Girl Scouts to a ghost story.

And I told it. I told it good. As I did I caught sight of my hand waving out in front of me, chopping along, dicing the details of that night into finer and tastier flakes. The story bowled down through me. I cast myself as the hermit and Franklin as the kindly neighbor. I plucked new particulars from the telling that very well could have been true. I said Franklin was going to try to get on the vaunted Murkusky account. I had him saying that he could see himself going places at our company. Poignant stuff. And the napkin I hung at the end, high and plain. Cut off when Franklin and I left the bar, it was the best story I've ever told.

After a respectful turn of silence they clinked their white wines to Franklin. They were all thinking it. Rich opened his mouth first, from a smirk.

"So you went to Pedro?"

"Sure," I said.

“And what?”

“What do you mean ‘and what’?”

“I mean, when you went to see Pedro, what happened?”

“I got a haircut, that’s what,” I said. I had hoped to get a laugh with that, in vain.

“And?”

“And it was a decent haircut.”

“Okay.”

“Christ, what is it with you? What else would happen?” I looked around. They weren’t buying that Rich was the bonehead here.

Rich searched his glass. “No. Nothing. A haircut is what would happen.”

“Damn right,” I said.

Soojin swiveled her head back and forth to each of them in a panic.

“I do not understand.” She made them sound like these were the first four English words she’d ever attempted. “What did he mean?” They didn’t answer her because they were putting down their drinks and looking for their coats.

The night outside was a singular relief. They scattered. I took my time hoofing around the dunes of sidewalk ice that had been melting and freezing and re-melting and refreezing, harder and darker each time, all winter. I glanced up after a few blocks and lo and behold, Janice on the curb, waiting for a cab to pass.

I should have crawled into a deep hole, but there were none on the block that I could see. She saw me, her face as full and forgiving as the moon in a children’s book. I went to her and as I got closer it just came out.

“There’s something I didn’t say back there,” I started from feet away. “About Franklin. That night. You were all he could talk about. He said he’d had a crush on you since his first day. He was going to ask you out. He told me that. Maybe I shouldn’t say. But, you know, just so you can know.”

Now, just so you and Linda can know—and Janice, I think she already knows, if she'd just stop to think about it for a minute—I had not one electron of sexual intent.

Janice's eyelids trembled. I could see she wanted me to say I was joking. Was it so horrible, this exaggeration? He had been zilch to her, and she couldn't dump her life and run after him now, even if she'd wanted to. It would be a minor thing, going forward: the sensation that something intended hadn't come. But she would feel it, no doubt, the same ways I had. And that's what made me ecstatic. Suddenly I felt like everything that had been pressing on me—about Franklin, Pedro, the whole goddamn mess—didn't weigh as much, because now Janice was helping to carry it.

And what's a perfectly innocent thing to do when you're happy? You hug the nearest person and plant one on her. And if you slip when you embrace her, one of you is going to end up on top of the other—that's just physics. Company policy can't prohibit employees from following the laws of physics, can it?

So tell that to Linda if you want. Tell her too that I'm not explaining it again without a subpoena. Maybe don't put it in those exact words, but tell her.

THE WEEK OF RAY AND MARILYN'S REUNION

Gerald Barton

Day One

“Is that you, Ray? Is that you? Where are you, Ray?”

Marilyn waits for a response. The line is silent. Marilyn looks beyond the glass door of the roadside phone booth. Her gaze falls on two crows that dance across the double yellow center stripe. The crows tug at a fresh specimen of roadkill porcupine. There's no traffic and no sound of traffic.

“I heard your voice, Ray. Are you still there? Ray? Jeez, Ray, where are you? I'm standing out here in the middle of nowhere with no one around.”

The crows peck and pull.

“Ray? It took me like twenty quarters to get this call through.”

The crows work their beaks and their feet. They strain their necks and yank at flesh.

“Ray!”

“I told you to bring quarters, didn't I, Marilyn? Didn't I tell you you'd need quarters? I said, ‘Make sure you bring several rolls of quarters.’ Didn't I say that, Marilyn?”

Marilyn huffs into the phone. **“Yes, Ray, yes. That's what you said. Very good, Ray. Very good advice.”**

“‘Several rolls.’ That's what I said, didn't I? So, my dear Marilyn, you had what you needed, correct?”

“The ever prescient Ray. So very, very smart is Ray. But now, as simply and directly as you possibly can, Ray, tell me: where are you and how do I get there?”

Ray gives Marilyn detailed directions. Inside the cramped space of the phone booth, Marilyn's ultra-fine pencil point makes tiny markings on a little scrap of paper.

“You should expect at least an hour of travel to get here. Perhaps substantially longer.”

“Dammit, Ray.”

“I do not know how long it will take you, Marilyn. Duration depends on multitudes of unknowns.”

Out on the roadway, one crow jerks free a long tendril of entrails. The second crow latches onto the opposite end and they play tug of war. They hop and pull. They flap and squawk. Suddenly, the first crow lets go and pounces on the second. It lunges for the neck. The second crow relents, takes flight. A bright trail of viscera dangles from its beak.

“Jeez, Ray. It’s already late afternoon.”

The second crow, as it flies away, is perfectly black. But as it curves and careens away from the road, the shining feathers of its underwing catch the sun and become luminously white.

“I’m leaving now, Ray. I’m flying out in your direction. But tell me this, Ray. Why can’t I get through to you on my cell? I’ve got everywhere coverage. I pay a premium so I can call everywhere. So where are you, Ray, that wherever you are is not part of everywhere?”

Ray hangs up. On the roadway, the first crow rips at the porcupine carcass.

Marilyn gets behind the wheel and follows the directions she’s scribbled down. The directions include things like “follow the second dirt track after the crooked tree.” As Marilyn drives down the road, she passes many trees. Some are twisted. Some are gnarled. Within a short time Marilyn suspects that she is passing the same trees and rocks and hills that she has passed only moments earlier. Does everything look the same out here where Ray resides? Or are some people up to their old tricks?

As the sun hovers above the western horizon, Marilyn becomes increasingly anxious about whether she will recognize “the crooked tree” when she comes to it. But as it turns out, the crooked tree is obvious. It stands alone, and it’s the only one

of its kind—a tree with a crazy jag in the trunk and branches that reverse themselves and knot with other branches. “The crooked tree” is easy. No one could miss the crooked tree. What Marilyn does not expect is the utter impossibility of discerning “the second dirt track.” There are hundreds of crisscrossing tracks: cattle tracks and game tracks; wagon tracks and tire tracks; equestrian tracks and dirtbike tracks. The terrain after the crooked tree is a dizzy maze of tracks.

Stopped amidst this swirl of tracks, Marilyn has no idea which way to turn, especially when the sun quickly sets and darkness descends.

Day Two

The next morning, Marilyn uses a half roll of quarters to get her call through. “Jeez, Ray, I spent the night out there. There were noises like nothing I ever heard in my life.”

“It must have been so difficult, Marilyn.”

“I swear, Ray, there was something tapping on the window. Not like something trying to break in. It was more like something knocking. Like it expected an invitation. Like it wanted me to allow it in.”

“My directions were unnecessarily confusing. I can’t express the depth of my regret.”

“I was completely freaked out.”

“I’m so sorry, Marilyn. We’ve worked so hard toward this occasion to rebuild trust, maybe even begin again, and now I’ve caused this giant leap backward.”

“When it finally got to dawn, I just started driving. Driving and driving, and hoping I wouldn’t run out of gas before I finally got to somewhere. After a couple of hours, there was pavement, and then this little motel that I don’t even know where it is. Don’t ask me the route number.”

“Oh, Marilyn. You poor thing.”

“I’m standing at a phone box outside the motel. This place, Ray, there’s no phones in the rooms.”

“What’s the name of the place Marilyn? Tell me the name and I’ll send my neighbor out there to fetch you. My neighbor will pick you up and bring you here.”

Marilyn looks at the image on the sign above the doorway marked “Office.” There’s a bright rosy apple on the sign.

“I don’t know the name,” Marilyn says, “but there’s a red apple.”

“Did you say Red Apple?” asks Ray.

“Yeah, I guess,” Marilyn says, “because why else would they have a red apple?”

“Stay put, Marilyn. You stay right where you are. The Red Apple Motel. I’ll have my neighbor out there in no time flat.”

Day Three

Next day, when Marilyn calls Ray, the tables have turned.

“Where are you, Marilyn?”

“I’m at the motel. I’m waiting for your neighbor.”

“There is no Red Apple Motel, Marilyn. My neighbor and his people and the search and rescue squad have been hunting for you for twenty-four hours. They’ve been scouring the highways, the byways, the rest stops and the scenic overlooks. They’ve put in thousands of miles searching for you. They tore through campgrounds and picnic areas. And these people, Marilyn, are not traveling in small vehicles. They’re equipped for anything that might arise. Do you realize the price of gasoline, Marilyn?”

“I mistook the sign, Ray. The red apple had nothing to do with the motel. It turns out it was a sign for produce. Right now, today, there’s a farmers’ market.”

“We contacted the authorities. SWAT teams were deployed. Hostage negotiators at the ready. Translators, if necessary. We didn’t know what had happened to you. There were helicopters, Marilyn, with rescue baskets.”

“I was perfectly fine.”

“We didn’t know your situation. Certain people theorized your situation could be part of a wider reaching, far more dire event. Refrigerated trucks loaded with ice were dispatched from undisclosed sites.”

Marilyn notices that on the sign above the motel office, the red apple glows in the clear light of the bright day.

“This farmers’ market is quite lovely, Ray. All fresh. All organic. Large baskets of lettuce. Red. Green. Arugula. Radicchio.”

“I thought something had befallen you.”

“There’s produce in bunches tied with blue string. Bunches of beets, radishes, green onions, bound together with bow knots of blue string tied like children’s shoelaces.”

“Do you hear me, Marilyn? You caused a tumult.”

A little smile appears on Marilyn’s lips. “There are sweet potatoes, Ray...”

“Don’t try to sweet potato me, Marilyn.”

“And there’s squash, Ray. Butternut and acorn squashes, Ray. So fresh there’s still dirt on them. You can smell the earth in them, Ray.”

Marilyn notices that a large bite is missing from the bright red apple on the sign. If the apple were a clock, the bite would be missing from one o’clock until three.

“Do you realize, Marilyn, that there are expenses associated with these manhunt operations. Costs could be assessed. Especially for a false alarm. There could be penalties and sanctions.”

Marilyn notices that on the left side of the apple, the side opposite the missing bite, there are three bees, striped orange and brown, and a jar of golden honey.

“I could gather a few sweet potatoes and squashes. When I arrive at your place, I could bake them and mash them up. If you have flour and butter, I could roll out a crust. I’ll make us a squash and sweet potato pie.”

While Marilyn listens to the silence on the telephone, she notices that on the right side of the apple, the same side as the missing bite, there are a glass of foamy white milk and a black cow with thick eyelashes around big sky-blue eyes.

“Forget the costs, Ray. Let’s let bygones be gone by. Isn’t that what this is all about?”

“I always loved your squash pie.”

“Yes, Ray. Of course you do.”

“I was worried to death about you, Marilyn.”

“Yes, Ray. I know how much you care.”

“I want you to come soon, Marilyn.”

“I feel hopeful, Ray. Sure, we made mistakes, but maybe we can pick up right where we began in the first place. We can start fresh. It can be as if the whole middle never happened.”

“I can hardly stand not seeing you for another minute.”

“Just think of the squash pie, Ray.”

Marilyn notices that above the bees and the honey jar, and the red apple and the missing bite, and the blue-eyed black cow and the glass of milk, big green letters appear: F - R - E - S - H.

“I can taste it, Marilyn. I’ve missed you so! I’ve yearned for the taste of you.”

Two crows are perched atop the red apple sign. They scratch their beaks at their feet. They inch sideways along the sign, peck at each other, then quickly retreat.

“Just think of the pie, Ray.”

Day Four

In the afternoon, Ray’s telephone rings.

“Hello?”

A woman’s voice says, “May I speak with Mr. Ray, please?”

“Who is this?” says Ray.

“I’m calling on behalf of Emergency Medical Services.”

“I gave at work,” says Ray.

“This is not a solicitation, Mr. Ray. Your name appeared on business records in connection with a certain resident at a motel in this region. Your name appeared as the person to contact in the event of an emergency.”

“Emergency?”

“Emergency Medical Services was summoned, Mr. Ray, to a room at a motel.”

“You’re telling me I’ve been implicated in a medical emergency?”

“The caller said that someone was dying. When we arrived, there was a woman in a hospital bed. Her limbs were bound to the bed rails. There were IVs and nasal tubes. Respirators and suction devices. There was an iron lung, Mr. Ray.”

Ray listens attentively while gazing out the window at the glorious golden ribbon of autumn cottonwoods and ash trees that line the valley bottom.

“There was a forced feeding apparatus, Mr. Ray, with sanitized vacuum-sealed bagettes of pre-measured potions, solutions and supplementations.”

“Did the caller identify herself?”

“Identifying information cannot be disclosed, Mr. Ray.”

“Let me ask you this. Yes or no: did the caller use the name of Marilyn?”

“Confidentiality regulations, Mr. Ray, preclude disclosure.”

“Then kindly allow me this single follow-up question: while you attended this woman in her alleged death chamber, which was more prevalent: the odor of illness or the fragrance of perfume?”

While Ray awaits a response he watches birds flying near the river: a group of ducks, a few crows, two soaring hawks. Ray knows the weather-battered snag where the hawks built their nest. Ray has seen eagles cruise the river. An eagle can circle for hours with hardly a wing beat.

“The point, Mr. Ray, is not the prevalence of competing odors. The point is that there is reason to believe that Emergency Medical Services may have been the victim of a hoax.”

“A hoax!” Ray yells.

“When we arrived, the woman in the bed was quite healthy, Mr. Ray.”

“Just as I suspected,” says Ray. “The woman in the bed was a vibrant green-eyed redhead, correct?”

“No, Mr. Ray.”

“A hazel-eyed blonde?”

“No, Mr. Ray.”

“A raven-eyed brunette?”

“The woman in the bed, Mr. Ray, was in her 70’s with mild scarring of the cornea, two titanium hips, and marginally impaired pulmonary function. Otherwise, however, the woman was quite healthy. Nonetheless ...”

“It appears,” Ray interjects, “that your organization and I have been mutual victims of the same cruel hoax.”

“Our concern, Mr. Ray, is that despite the appearance of a hoax, there were certain other indicia of authenticity. Consider, Mr. Ray, that I personally observed the priest’s kit for administration of the last rites. On the table at the bedside, I saw the jars of anointed oils, the bottle of blessed water, the incense, the prayer book. I saw ...”

Ray interrupts. “I’m in complete agreement. A hoax so cruel as this must be the work of a most nefarious trickster.”

“I was hoping, Mr. Ray, that since your name was listed on the motel’s registration card, we might glean some information ...”

“I wish you well,” says Ray. “And I pray you’ll soon get to the rock bottom of this debacle.”

“Mr. Ray? ... Mr. Ray? ... Mr. Ray!”

Ray hangs up.

Day Five

Marilyn listens to the quarters clink into the phone box. She hears the ringing on the other end and then hears Ray's voice: "Hi. This is Ray. I'm not at home. Leave your name, number and a short message. Or talk as long as you like. And have a nice day."

Marilyn says, "Ray, are you there? Are you there, Ray! Pick up, Ray. Pick up, you bastard! Look, Ray, I was sick. For real. Okay, sure, the IVs and feeding tube and the last rites kit, all that stuff was just for fun. It was just a goof. It wasn't even me in the bed. It was the motel manager's mother-in-law. I thought you'd come in person. I thought you'd get a laugh. It was supposed to be a goof. But honest to God, Ray, I was so sick. And you know what? It was the squash. Remember we talked about the squash and the sweet potatoes, and me making us a pie?

"So just imagine, Ray: I'm sitting in the motel room. I'm waiting for you to show up. But when no one's arriving, I get to thinking: hey, why don't I cook up that stuff right now? So the motel manager takes me over to the mother-in-law's apartment where she's got a kitchen and a stove, and the manager tells me the mother-in-law will be happy for the company. So I go in, and while the squash and the sweet potatoes are in the oven, we get to talking, and she tells me about her dead husband and his year-long illness, and then she's showing me a whole room full of medical paraphernalia. So I get this bright idea, big funny idea, maybe not so funny, it seemed funny at the time.

"So anyway, the mother in-law and me, we make the pie for us, for you and me. And there's enough leftover so we make another pie for her and the son-in-law and his wife. And then the mother-in-law says I should have a piece myself. So we share one slice together. One measly little slice, Ray. But it turns out these squash, Ray, these beautiful gorgeous butternuts, Ray, perfectly proportioned buttery golden, well it turns out—I

never knew this, Ray, I thought it was so safe—it turns out you can have produce that's so beautiful, so perfectly ripe, certified organic, Ray, you can talk face-to-face with the dirt-under-the-fingernails farmer who grew the thing, but it turns out it's still no guarantee against genetic modification. Goddam gen-mod, Ray.

“Now you know me, Ray. You, of all people, can understand. You know my system, Ray. I'm a very fragile person. Susceptible. So, Ray, what happens is a few spoonfuls of the squash pie throws me so completely out of whack, so far off balance, I never suspected, Ray, that when the stage is perfectly set—I've got the mother-in-law in the bed, she's hooked up to the feeding tube and the respirator, and I'm ready to pretend I'm the priest there to deliver the last sacrament, and we're just waiting for you to open the door, to spring this crazy scene on you, so for a big surprise you'll think I'm the one dying in bed—it turns out the joke's on me, because the gen-mod squash attack picks that very moment to hit me like a rocket, so then I'm in the bathroom heaving and passing out on the tile floor. And for real, Ray, I'm on the phone to 9-1-1, and I'm telling the operator, ‘Someone's dying out here.’ I had the chills, Ray, I was freezing and sweating at the same time, dripping sweat, I swear I needed an IV myself. So by the time I regained consciousness, the 9-1-1 people were long gone, and the mother-in-law was pissed off—poor woman, an hour, two hours, who knows how long it took those 9-1-1 people to arrive, the mother-in-law with the tubes up her nostrils and her arms strapped to the bed rails—which didn't sit too well with the manager's wife, so then I was sick as a dog and full of apologies for everything under the sun, so ...

“Ray? ...

“Ray? ...

“I think I heard a noise, Ray ...

“Are you there, Ray? ...

“I heard laughter ...

“I heard a chortle ...

“I distinctly heard a chortle, Ray ...

“Where are you, Ray? ...

“Are you listening to me, Ray? Are you laughing at me? ...

“Because look, Ray, I was really sick. I still am sick. And frankly, Ray, I don’t need your judgment, I don’t need the likes of you passing judgment on me, not at a time like this, not with this gen-mod poison in my system and pending charges of elder abuse looming over me, I don’t need you laughing at me and playing games like this, like pretending you’re not there, as if you expect me to think you maybe actually have some other place to go, so goddamit, Ray, pick up, Ray, pick up, because every minute I’m getting sicker, and sicker of you, and sicker of you making me sicker.

“So do me a favor, Ray: don’t pick up. Don’t. Don’t pick up, Ray, because I’m done. I’m through, Ray. *Fini*. Done. Don’t bother, Ray. And by the way, Ray, you are a loser. A complete loser. You, Ray, are the ultimate, complete loser. So don’t pick up, Ray the loser. Don’t pick up. Because it’s done. D - O - N - E. So bye. Do you hear me, Ray? Bye-bye, loser. Bye. Ray? Bye. Ray?”

Day Six

“Marilyn, please, listen to me...”

“I told you not to bother me, loser.”

“Marilyn, I pleaded with the phone company to tell me the location of the phone box. I begged the sheriff to go to the motel, to personally ask the manager to call me. I persuaded the manager to go to your room, to fetch you to the office. Please, Marilyn, I need to talk to you.”

Marilyn whispers, “I’m standing here in a motel office wearing nothing but my robe and slippers. The sheriff, his deputy, and the motel manager are leering at me. The manager’s wife and the mother-in-law are glaring. I told you, we’re done, Ray. D - O - N - E. Do you hear me, Ray? Done.”

“Look, Marilyn, I’m coming out there. Myself. I’m coming to get you.”

“No, Ray.”

“Marilyn, I’m coming.”

“Oh, Ray...Oh, Jeez.”

“Listen, Marilyn. You’re not well. You haven’t recovered from this bad squash episode. This is no time for rash decisions. I’m leaving right now. You need to regain your strength. I’m coming out there to get you.”

Marilyn pulls the robe tightly around herself. She sips at the coffee in a styrofoam cup that the sheriff’s deputy has placed on the desk next to the phone. She gazes out the window at her automobile, and then at the sheriff’s car which is still running. The exhaust pipe of the sheriff’s car emits a small trail of smoke.

“Marilyn,” says Ray. “Are you there, Marilyn?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“I want to come out there and get you. We’ve come too far. I’ll bring you back here where you can recuperate. I promise you, Marilyn, you’ll be yourself again in no time. Everything will be just as if this bad squash episode had never happened. You’ll see. I swear.”

Marilyn observes the fax machine in the corner of the motel office.

“Marilyn?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“We need to take the last step. We can’t leave this unfinished. We need to make the final effort. We need culmination.”

“Tell me, Ray, when you contacted the sheriff, he followed your instructions, right? And the motel manager too, right?”

“Absolutely,” says Ray.

“That was so cooperative of them.”

“Perfectly cooperative,” says Ray.

“The people here seem, well, like they actually want to be helpful.”

“Out here, Marilyn, people trust each other. Out here, it’s almost as if people aren’t devious.”

“This place, Ray, it sounds, well, like just a decent place to live.”

“It’s wonderful here, Marilyn.”

“It sounds like the kind of place where even two people like us, Ray, where maybe even you and me, Ray, where even we could make it work.”

“Oh, Marilyn, to hear you say that. To think you’d maybe have faith enough in us, faith in me, to try again.”

The motel manager signals Marilyn that she’s been too long on the telephone, so Marilyn smiles a little smile at the sheriff and turns her back on the manager.

“Look, Marilyn, stay right there. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Okay, Ray. Okay. I believe you. You’ll be here tomorrow.”

“We’ll be together, Marilyn. I’ll find my way to you and take you home.”

“Yes, Ray, tomorrow, finally, I’ll be at your place.”

Day Seven

Mid-afternoon, the telephone rings at Ray’s place. Ray stands outside the motel and listens to his own message: “Hi. This is Ray. I’m not at home ...”

Ray talks into his cell phone. “Pick up, Marilyn. Pick up.”

“Hello?” says Marilyn.

“Are you happy now, Marilyn?”

“Who’s calling, please?”

“Who do you think is calling, Marilyn?”

“Oh, Ray. How thoughtful of you to call.”

“Dammit, Marilyn.”

“It’s such a lovely place you’ve created here, Ray. The garden. The view of the valley. And it wasn’t at all difficult to locate—not with the detailed map that the sheriff’s people faxed to

the motel. And the sheriff's directions were so simple and coherent—no 'crooked tree,' Ray, no maze of tracks. The sheriff was so helpful after I told him he'd disclosed my whereabouts to a stalker maniac. I told him I knew I'd find safe harbor at my little auntie's place. I just gave the sheriff the phone number and he was so eager to direct me right to your door."

"Nicely done, Marilyn."

"Thank you, Ray. And let me commend you on how you've situated this little residence of yours. The river wears the autumn gold like a long flowing scarf."

"It's lovely now, Marilyn, but winter is coming."

"Not today, Ray. Not winter today."

"But soon, Marilyn. Soon, and very bitterly."

"As I showed myself around your place, I happened to notice the sturdy wood-burning stove. So securely sealed. So energy efficient."

"But perhaps, Marilyn, you haven't noticed there's no wood for the coming winter. Have you looked out back? Beneath the overhang? Have you noticed that there's no fuel for the stove?"

At that very moment, it so happens, Marilyn gazes in that very direction. Indeed, there is no wood. But two crows hop about where the wood should be stacked. The crows jump up and open their wings. They catch an easy breeze beneath their wings and hover in mid-air.

"There's time, Ray. Lots of time. There's not the slightest scent of winter on the air. Besides, Ray, when you come back, we can go out with your chainsaw and your trailer. In two days, we can load in enough to last us until next winter."

Ray gazes at the red apple sign above the motel office. He imagines the sign hidden beneath a towering swell of snow.

"No, Marilyn. You've got it backwards. I'm heading south. I'm leaving right now. Snowbirding down Arizona way. Sun block and poolside *cervezas* in January. You should join me, Marilyn. Maybe we'll go to Mexico. Imagine your toes in the

warm sand. Imagine a little cantina, an apple red sunset, a soft guitar, a steaming platter of fresh *camarones* with salsa and mango. C'mon, Marilyn. Fly south with me. My place will still be there come spring."

Marilyn pauses. Her gaze falls on the dark green rim of a black rock mesa. Her finger taps the map the sheriff's people had faxed to the motel.

"I think I like it here, Ray. I'm a warm-blooded creature, and if you're moving south, I think I'll like having the place to myself. I'll hibernate."

"Promise me this, Marilyn: you'll get a decent store of fuel in."

"I'm a strong girl, Ray. And I suspect people hereabouts are willing to share their bounty. In fact, there was a neighbor you spoke of ..." Marilyn sips at Ray's wine from Ray's wineglass. "It's too bad we missed each other again. It's a real shame."

"Actually, Marilyn, I expect I'll always remember this week as one of our more creative visits."

"You should reconsider, Ray. It could be good for us here. Two bears cuddled together through a cold dark winter."

Ray's phone beeps at him. "Low battery, Marilyn. And I want to put in a few hundred miles before nightfall."

"We could build a toasty warm fire."

"Try to not burn the place to the ground, okay, Marilyn?"

"I'll miss you, Ray. Drive safe, hon."

Ray notices two crows pecking at images on the red apple sign. One crow snaps at the honey jar and the other at the glass of milk. Paint chips flake from the sign. With a whoosh and a rush of air, a speeding car blasts northward past Ray. Its tires silently bump over a dried lump of week-old roadkill. Ray knows it's time for him to head south.

"If you're freezing your buns off, Marilyn, you'll know where to find me."

"Right. Somewhere in Arizona, maybe, or down that way, somewhere, thereabouts, maybe."

“Or Mexico. Baja perhaps.”

“Oh, Ray. Your door’s always open. I think that’s why I love you.”

“And I love you too, Marilyn.”

“It’s amazing how it always works out for us. Wouldn’t you say so, Ray?”

“For you and me, Marilyn, it always works out.”

SECRETS

Donald Dewey

Some assumed Heyer's rigid routines grew from childhood influences. Either his father had been one of those abrasive Marine captains infatuated with his own sense of discipline, went this supposition, or his mother had been the kind who ironed socks after doing the laundry. In fact, the contrary was the case. Heyer's father had been an itinerant poker player who had confined his salutes to the full houses in his hand and his mother's idea of doing laundry had been to wait for the dryer to come to a stop and then to cry out for everybody to grab what there was for grabbing from the machine. Inevitably, those aware of this home atmosphere championed the reverse theory that Heyer's routines were a protest against his upbringing, as if to say human society consisted of so much of this quality and so much of its opposite and if one generation overindulged in one direction, its successor was preordained to restore a model balance. Heyer didn't believe this mechanistic gibberish. Outside of the likelihood that he would die some day because so many others before him had, the notion that one person's habits should predefine a second person's—in emulation, rebellion, or some blend of the two—dismayed him. No man was an island, as the sages were addicted to saying? He dismissed such a concept as unsurveyed topography. For himself he had no brief with the solitary. The thing was just getting on with it.

Over the years Heyer had gotten on with quite a few things. A lanky, dark man with deviously vigilant eyes and a sharp nose—a face that suggested a perturbed crow—he would have been the first to admit he hadn't been born to anything, as the expression had it. Before reaching his fortieth birthday, he had worked in six countries at six entirely different occupations. The only visible bridges between them were the transportation tickets he

kept neatly bundled in a rubber band in the top drawer of his latest desk. There was the freighter ticket that had taken him to Bergen, where he had worked in a fish canning factory; the train ticket to Frankfurt where he had sung in beer halls while flirting with being an entertainer; the highway toll and ferry tickets he had preserved from driving to Dublin where he had made change for the housewives playing arcade slot machines every afternoon; the air ticket to Milan where he had edited the Italian edition of *Playboy* magazine; the cruise ship ticket to Montreal where he had produced CD anthologies of European film scores; and the bus ticket to New York where he had bought a restaurant in Tribeca that gained an aura of exclusivity by serving only five tables an evening with a single deluxe entrée at an extraordinarily high fixed price. Those who didn't know Heyer might have concluded that by keeping evidence in his drawer of all his moving around, he had a sentimental streak, that he savored reminders of his travels. In truth, he was wholly absorbed with the neatness of his collection within the rubber band—how whatever adventures the tickets insinuated about his means of transportation, places of relocation, or career pursuits, they were ultimately reducible to the packet he was able to make of them next to his Swingline staple box, 5000 Standard, Staples No. S.F. - 1.

Heyer's personal relations also reflected the priority he gave to the neat and the compact. Because he had lost his virginity to an Anne and had had his first lengthy relationship with a Bryna, he had made sure not to toy with the clarity of his desires from that point forward, getting involved even for one-night stands only with women who kept him on track. (If his first lover had been named Josephine, would he have been so assiduous about it? Heyer didn't waste brain cells on that speculation. His first lover hadn't been a Josephine.) His biggest compromise came in Milan, where X was not part of the Italian alphabet. This he resolved (at least to his own thinking) by picking up a bass

guitarist named Emilia with the rock quintet Xanadu. If he was deluding himself with her (and maybe on more than one count since she left him after stealing his wallet for a cocaine score), he was nevertheless able to move on to Yvonne with a minimal sense of failure.

Day-to-day practicalities were equally ordered. One morning he used Crest to brush his teeth, the next Colgate. He had learned the hard way that to use either two days in a row left him vulnerable to cavities. For breakfast there was the three-day lineup of cherry, raspberry, and pineapple jams on his English muffin, allowing him to relish daily changes in pairings corresponding to his parallel rotation of Maxwell House and Folgers coffees. Given his aversion to suits, he created another surprise every morning when his ample roster of sports jackets, pants, shirts, and ties produced an unexpected combination. He didn't mind it when he arrived at the restaurant and the elated and stymied looks of the staff betrayed the outcome of the bet on how he would be attired for the day. He even took their attention to his clothing as a compliment (save for a passing worry that someone would lose so heavily on his choices as to be tempted to clean out the till).

An unforeseen product of Heyer's routines was that, while they kept him personally within rigorously defined paths, they simultaneously gave the impression to others that he was a man of incessant whim. Excluded from the internal dynamics of his systems, people not named Heyer acted as though he might say or do anything at all, as witness the staff bets on his clothes. Nothing could have been more untrue, of course. Their limitation was that they didn't share his limitation, not realizing that just so many elements were in play for his rituals. Heyer was intrigued by this oversight. Already tinkering with the idea of selling his restaurant and becoming a teacher of philosophical astronomy in Bolivia or some other country closer to the sky, he had the feeling he was on to something more significant than

the food business with that semblance of a contradiction. Was it too much to assert that the less variety there was in life, the more variety there appeared to be?

The question began to tease him through his drill at the restaurant, raising its head with increasing frequency while he checked to make sure that all the suppliers had completed their deliveries, that Antonio the chef had a creative gleam in his eye for preparing the meal of meals, that Isabel had given an extra coil twist to the napkins on the tables, that Sacha had received rum and tequila reinforcements for the bar. Day after day, it continued to nudge him as he greeted his five tables for the evening, once causing him to lose the thread to a conversation and to respond to an observation with what he knew was a dumb smile.

And his dumb smile was hardly the worst of it. The more Heyer gave in to his divagations about life's varieties, the more restless his reservation lists grew. Sitting in his small office next to the kitchen one evening, he had to acknowledge their glare out at him from his laptop. As one of the city's more exclusive restaurateurs, Heyer had been scrupulous about tempering the need for word-of-mouth publicity with care not to estrange his most satisfied customers for months at a time because of the restaurant's limited seating capacity. The challenge of negotiating the fine line between satisfying the wishes of repeat diners and catering to what might become a fatal few was exhausting. But now evidence that he had crossed that line was undeniable. Every single table for the next two weeks had been reserved for a return customer, the unfamiliar names confined to his futures list extending months into the summer. If he wanted to be optimistic, he could view the table guests of the returning hosts as prospects. But he had never had any reason to want to be optimistic. He knew from experience that most guests came only because they wouldn't have to pay; few had the income to play hosts themselves on a subsequent evening. The

reservation list confronting him on his screen was a formula for bankruptcy.

Heyer acted. As he had learned in Norway when the whitefish or salmon conveyor belt hit a snarl, his first move was to shut down all that could be shut down, to freeze the crisis in place. In Bergen that had meant shutting off the can dispenser and the sealing compressor; in his office it meant switching his telephone to the message machine before he was interrupted by more return customers making reservations. For the next few hours, trying to control his aggravation with his own short-sightedness, he moved back and forth on both booking lists until he had completed reasonable trades or at least had preserved the good will of the customers who couldn't immediately commit to alternative dates. He wondered what any of them would have said if they realized they didn't have infinity to play with, but only with the dates on the two lists. It struck him as another illustration of people deluding themselves about the varieties of human experience they had at their disposal. Fortunately, he didn't feel any obligation to enlighten them.



Miranda didn't know what chaos was any more than the ocean knew what wetness was: Observing it externally, even for a second, wouldn't have been Miranda. In gazing around her loft for her white sweat socks, she felt overwhelmed by the number of hiding places she could have wasted the next few minutes investigating. She knew the socks couldn't have gone far because she had tossed them from where she was now sitting on the bed, but they were nowhere in sight. Every piece of clothing and bag on the floor, every sneaker and shoe in front of her, seemed intent on hiding not just one but both of them. And should she find them? She knew already they would just lead her elsewhere, further than she wanted to go so early in the

day. She would rather go around the loft barefoot, risking the splinters on the floor, than have to deal with the secrets within secrets waiting for her.

Miranda's thirty-odd years could hardly reproach her misgivings. As a nine-year-old, she had wanted to see how much money her father kept in his shirt drawer; the answers were \$48 and, according to the document under the bills, he was her step-father, not her father. At 13, she had finally penetrated her mother's evasions to learn that her biological father had been a subway track worker killed by poisonous fumes trapped within a closed well years after an old CIA anti-terrorist experiment. At 17, she had wanted to see how deeply Larry Cohen's dick could penetrate her; the answer had been deeply enough to force them into the embarrassment of being separated in an emergency room. At 23, she had hoped to gain extra insight into her doctoral thesis on Real Appearances by becoming a teaching assistant, only to discover that the professor she had so admired and wanted to work with had been plagiarizing other academics for years. Followed one temp job and one casual affair after another, each of them contributing to the ultimate secret she had gained nothing by learning—that she didn't want to do anything or know anybody, that she functioned most easily when the money in her jeans pockets stayed merely a few dollars ahead of disaster and the people she came across wanted no more information about her than what she was willing to volunteer.

Getting up from the bed, Miranda stood still for a moment until her head caught up with the rest of her body. She hadn't smoked or drunk all that much before going to sleep, but she seemed to have a running tab with some of her neurons going back years. She gave it a couple of blinks, didn't feel dizzy, then looked down at the glass ashtray on the night table. She decided cleaning it out would be her first chore of the morning. She felt so much better to tie the first knot in her string that she immediately planned the second (making coffee) and third

(taking a shower). Or would it kill her to put off making the coffee until after she had taken her shower? Would she enjoy the coffee more if she were clean and in fresh clothes? Wouldn't her stomach bloat if she stepped into the shower immediately after her coffee? She didn't like being seized by that kind of doubt. It was just like doubts that had paralyzed her in the past, most recently last night when she had considered getting undressed to put on her nightgown, objected that she had to throw the clothes on her back into the laundry anyway, and ended up compromising by just taking off her socks and flinging them who-knows-where while she got under the covers in her green Mister Magoo T-shirt and black jeans. The only thing she hated more than getting into arguments with other people was getting into one with herself.

Miranda emptied her mind quiet, grabbed the ashtray, and walked it over to the garbage can under the sink. She had long steeled herself for the sight of a cockroach on the counter or in the sink in the morning, to the point that arming herself against the possibility had become practically the same as seeing one. This morning she didn't see any, but released a quiver of disgust anyway. When she had first moved into the loft, she had blamed the wildlife on the restaurant downstairs. Lately she hadn't been so sure. There were roaches in the poshest apartments on Fifth Avenue. They were a fact of New York life. And not to forget, the restaurant could have equally accused her of being the building's roach magnet, and with a lot more invested in its indignation than she had. She didn't want to be indignant, no matter how absurd the accusations against her. The only thing she hated more than spitting contests with herself was a spitting contest with somebody else.

She ran the water for her coffee maker with a thought for the owner of the restaurant, the birdman named Heyer. Whenever they had crossed paths on the street or in front of the restaurant, he had been painstakingly polite, never mentioned a word about

cockroaches, but had still made her uneasy with his stare. The gaze was peculiar, not the usual one from a moron wanting to grab her ass. It was as if Heyer were thinking of making an appointment for his lust with her, that it couldn't be right now but that he would try to fit her in eventually. She thought this creepy, but also in its own way...civilized. Only human beings in an advanced society had the capacity to schedule their pawing in advance. Would that make surrendering to it equally civilized? She had had grubbier hands on her than Heyer's. Maybe she would have felt like a respectable social institution sucking him off.

While she waited for the coffee to percolate, she went to her only street window to look down on the commuters going to the kind of jobs she didn't have. In this latest of her neighborhoods she assumed most of the jobs were media-related—video types, computer whizzes, fashionistas, hotshots starting up advertising firms—or the blue collars and service people that kept the first group going—carpenters constantly redoing storefronts, lumpy women with tape measures around their necks, waiters putting on and taking off penguin shirts and vests. She played her morning game with the parade hurrying along on the sidewalk, wondering how many of the marchers she might have been if she had taken a different turn at any point along the way. For her alternate universe sister she beamed in on a tall brunette in a rust suit and white pullover. She wouldn't have worn gray heels with the outfit, but then again she might have done even that in exchange for the brunette's straight shoulders, perfect boobs, and confident gait. So far away, she couldn't make out much detail about the woman's face, but she guessed the thinnest of makeup and lip gloss. The brunette knew who she was, knew where she was going. Where was that, exactly? To an executive's desk? To a receptionist's chair? Or was it to one of those art galleries on the side streets where she did both the decision making and the greeting? How could anyone be that versatile?

Miranda was glad she wasn't down in the street with the brunette. If she had been walking toward her and if the brunette had been accompanied by a boyfriend, she would have been oafish about sizing the woman up to explain to herself how she had attracted the man. In this case, she wouldn't have liked the answer, so she was relieved that she was up at her window and that the brunette didn't have a boyfriend. She scratched at her right shoulder blade. It had been itchy for a couple of days now. At her age was it better to have an allergic rash or a pimple?

In the shower she thought about masturbating, but felt no compelling urge for it. Her stomach felt as heavy after the coffee as she had feared, and she couldn't imagine herself being attractive to anyone. Humiliation might have been a theme, but she seemed to have already exhausted that with her study of the straight shoulders and the nonexistent boyfriend. She had always felt more humiliated by what she had narrowly avoided than by what had actually happened to her: It was debasement plus not having the wherewithal even for that. As she turned off the shower, she just felt like a schmuck, over and out, and there was nothing erotically inviting about that, even for a few seconds; the most she would have gotten out of coming was having some phantom notice that it was indeed a pimple on her shoulder.

She knew she had chosen wisely when she wrapped the big rose towel around her and stepped out of the shower stall and back into the main room. She was superior to the mess on the floor in front of her. It had stayed as it was while she had been renewing herself. She liked leaving her wet footprints around it. They attested to a mysterious presence in the jungle she hadn't noticed before.

Her satisfaction was gone by the time she had put on her clean underwear. The electronic beep-beep-beep from the truck backing up to the side door of the restaurant downstairs said Heyer was offloading a delivery. He had been coy about how

much he charged when she had joked about the subject with him, but she had to think it was somewhere near a thousand dollars for him to survive on merely five tables every night. But a thousand a table or a thousand a head? If by the table, the nightly income would have been \$5,000; if by the head, probably in the \$20,000 range. Either way, it was obscene, at least for her. She was already on Miracle Street having the money for her rent. But for a trendy restaurant in Manhattan? She had no idea how much somebody like Heyer had to take in to make a profit. She wondered if being curious about it made her less of a person.

Once she was dressed, Miranda bundled up anything that looked washable from the floor and the bed and stuffed it into a pillow case. One of the socks turned out to be at the foot of the bed, the other next to her plaid blouse. She was surprised she hadn't been able to see them from the bed, and could only conclude they hadn't been where she found them when she had been looking earlier. Not that she believed a fairy of some kind had slipped into the loft and moved them while she had been in the shower; more likely, her perception had blanked out on those two precise spots during her earlier scan so that they really hadn't existed for her. She had been fooled by that kind of reverse mirage before. If she ever stumbled across a magic lantern, she would make sure her first wish to the genie would be to truly erase from reality what had only seemed erased to her.

As soon as she had loaded up the pillow case and deposited it near the elevator door, she went to her desk to get some work done before committing herself to sitting around the laundromat. Too many of her leads were in Central and Pacific time zones so she had to focus on the few she had on the East Coast. She didn't know why they hadn't put their names on the telemarketing block list; she had done it with a minimum of fuss and had rarely been bothered by people like herself.

The first number had a Massachusetts prefix. It was a woman with a screaming tot in the background. She gave herself five seconds after the introduction before the receiver was slammed into her ear. “Mrs. Warneke?”

“Yes?”

“Hi. I’m Miranda and I’m calling from Certified Plus.”

“Not interested.”

“You don’t know what it is, Mrs. Warneke.”

“You just told me. Miranda from Certified Plus. ’Bye now.”

She had overestimated her abilities: four seconds, not five. Still, she had introduced herself to wherever in Massachusetts Mrs. Warneke lived. That alone vindicated using her name and not hiding behind some alias the way others doing her job apparently did. It wasn’t an Alice or a Katherine now flitting through the New England air, it was Miranda. She liked that. If others were ashamed of how they put a few dollars together, that was their problem, not hers. It hadn’t been easy explaining that to her section supervisor Billy when he had told her about the practice of using aliases. Was that even his name? On the one hand, he sounded as apologetic as any of his minions about pestering people for something else they didn’t need; on the other hand, he didn’t sound like someone who took his supervisor title lightly. Billy was definitely somebody who wanted credit for every sale by underlings, and that would have been harder if they knew him around the main office as Norman.

But she wasn’t Billy. It was Miranda who punched out a number in New Jersey. She could have really used a couple of hundred dollars. The phone bill had been collecting dust in the middle of the envelopes at her elbow and a double bill was due any day.

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Heyer’s relief at resolving the reservations crisis lasted only until a nightmare stirred him from his sleep a few hours later.

It was a particularly unpleasant waking, as if his dreams had expelled him as unworthy. His one consolation as he reoriented himself to his bedroom in the darkness was that he had held on to the culprit responsible; the suffocating dread from the nightmare hadn't escaped with consciousness. With all his shifting of customers back in his office, had he left one table open? In his sleep he had visualized the deleted names and the space on his laptop screen that hadn't been covered, and the picture remained frozen in his bedroom. He couldn't have made it up in both states of mind.

Heyer got up and stumbled over to his laptop. The screen confirmed his oversight: The fourth table for the next evening had been left unoccupied. Worse, he couldn't expect to fill it on such short notice, certainly not with the theater producer he had already switched off it to another date. One change required diplomacy, two shame, and he had never been good at shame.

Heyer felt outmaneuvered by himself. It wasn't the loss of income; he had more in the bank than he had ever had. It wasn't even the threat to his reputation that would build when the diners at the other four tables wondered about the unused table and started talk that maybe he wasn't doing as well as he had been. None of that mattered. But what did bother him was that he would be responsible for creating the core misunderstanding, the inevitable misinterpretation that he hadn't been able to find somebody for the fifth table. It had been so unnecessary to foment that gossip with his sloppiness. That kind of thing remained gratuitously indelible, no matter how persuasively it was explained away. It was bad enough not to control everyday practicalities, but to be at the mercy of personal inventions was twice as tormenting.

Heyer wished he could wake up someone for sharing his problem. He had found that another person's opinion sometimes cleared his head, if only because he didn't have to do all the talking. But the most logical candidate—Leticia—he had

recently broken up with, and not on the friendliest of terms. She would be the last one to appreciate a call at four in the morning to discuss what she had been given to calling his “manic lists.”

Since he was too wound up to return to sleep, Heyer went to the refrigerator for the half-grapefruit he hadn't eaten before going to bed. He saw no reason not to count it as part of the new day, as an early breakfast, rather than an extension of the evening. He hadn't eaten at such an hour since his days at the recording studio in Montreal, and he didn't know if he felt adventurous or nostalgic. But he did take the grapefruit as a sign: with one routine broken, what was to prevent him from breaking others? And one that occurred to him right away was his spotless record in charging for every meal consumed at the restaurant. Not once, not for a holiday or for a staff member's birthday or for some old acquaintance who had come to town, had he served a meal on the house. He didn't think of himself as cheap, simply not in need of creating occasions that couldn't create themselves. But now the grapefruit was so pink and sweet it seemed to encourage him to a baronial generosity. It was almost mocking him: If it could taste so unusually satisfying, why couldn't he do something equally unique? Would there ever be a more convenient time to invite somebody?

Heyer was baffled by his sudden urge. He had learned long ago that the most innocent of generousities on the surface concealed serious feelings of debt below that surface. But what debt? As far as he could tabulate, he didn't owe anybody anything.



Miranda hoped the restaurant was called the 5X5 for some better reason than the five tables inside. The question didn't keep her up at night, in fact she didn't think about the name at all when she wasn't entering or leaving her building, but it popped into her head every time she saw her reflection in the

5X5's green-tint street window. The birdman Heyer hadn't struck her as so banal. Better would have been if his birthday was May 5, or if the restaurant had had an earlier incarnation at Fifth Avenue and Fifth Street, or if he had always stumbled over the five times table in school. She liked guessing what the source of the name was because she really didn't care what it was and she only had to entertain her speculation when she saw herself in the window. As soon as she moved off from the glass, her curiosity did, too.

Most of the time. But today she continued conjecturing all the way down to the Spin-Fast Laundromat and while she loaded her favorite machine at the far end of the third row. She thought it interesting, for instance, that a slim, raven figure like Heyer would give his enterprise a name with the ultimate in squat connotations. It was the reverse of what she would have never had the nerve to do: calling a restaurant of hers *The Giraffe*. As she slid her bills into the washing machine and it grumbled into motion, she wondered if Heyer had a fat man inside him crying to be liberated. She liked thinking people like that existed somewhere.

"Go ahead. I do it all the time."

Miranda needed a second to take it in that the skinny redhead with the hipbones protruding from her jeans like six-shooters was addressing her. Then she remembered her right hand, the one that was still holding the liquid soap she had forgotten to add to the wash.

"They always act like you'll break it or something if you don't do things in the right order," the redhead said. "What's the machine going to do if you put the soap in after—block the vent?"

Miranda realized that yes, somewhere in the back of her mind, she had assumed just the danger the redhead was now ridiculing. She didn't like feeling stupid about things she had been stupid enough to believe. "They used to clean things with just water and rocks on the frontier," she said, trying to smile her way through, "so I guess I'll do that today."

“Oh, go ahead. Nothing ’ll happen. Really.”

Before Miranda could react, the redhead yanked the soap container from her hand, screwed off the cap, and poured the blue liquid into a practiced dose. Miranda wanted to stop her, clung to the thought that just her disapproval should have stopped her, but couldn’t move. She flinched as the redhead raised one of the lids on the machine and emptied the soap through the hole there. “There you go,” the woman said, sounding thrilled with herself. “And look! The machine’s still running!”

Miranda had little choice but to smile again as she took back the soap container extended to her. She loathed so many things about the redhead—her assertiveness, her slim body and peek-a-boo belly button, her shrewd blue eyes. But most of all she hated being shown up by the machine’s instructions. If they were so worthless, why bother printing them? She didn’t care what it cost her in clothes, but she prayed for the machine to break down.

But it didn’t. Instead, the window glass was quickly smeared with the soap. She felt as though she were the one smeared.

“The Stepford Wives didn’t just happen in Stepford,” the redhead winked, taking an old magazine off the table and camping down on one of the plastic seats. “We’re the Stepford wives! Right?”

Miranda made a point of not winking back. The woman’s presumption in knowing something about her, in including her in some fictional world of robots, was beyond galling. “Whatever that means.”

Miranda hoped she sounded bitchy enough, and the redhead didn’t look particularly happy as she flipped open her magazine, but she didn’t trust it. With almost a half-hour to kill before the machine stopped, she couldn’t help but remain within conversational distance of the woman if she did her waiting in the laundromat. Before she had the vaguest idea where exactly,

she headed back out into the street for a walk. She felt better instantly to be moving nowhere in particular. The weather was warm enough for her windbreaker, but not so warm that she didn't have to button it up over her Mae West T-shirt. The people passing had no weather: They looked like they were late for work and thinking only of excuses.

She stopped in front of a junk shop that called itself an antique store. It was big on Mr. Potato Heads inside bell jars and covered with rhinestones and chains. She had made cuter things from clay as a little girl, but minus the pasty glitz that probably justified a ludicrous price. To the people she never wanted to meet she added whoever threw away money on such idiocies and considered it some kind of kitschy art. She liked not being able to think of someone like that.

“How are you this morning?”

Miranda groaned for thinking she could walk down the street without being hit on. She was already giving the Mr. Potato Heads the stiff nod she did to ward off pains in the ass when she recognized Heyer in the window. She was mortified to bumble out a “fine” when she knew he really wasn't interested in how she was, then made it worse by asking him how he was.

The birdman smiled as if he didn't know, but recovered with the aplomb of somebody who owned a restaurant and dealt with the public every day. “I was just thinking of you,” he said, making it sound like the truth. “We keep running into each other on the street and just saying hello. How about I raise the ante and invite you down to the 5X5 this evening?”

Miranda hated not knowing what to say because she didn't know what to think. “That would cost me a month's rent,” she managed.

“No, no. As my guest, of course. Neighbors should be neighborly. And god knows I've probably cost you a headache here and there with all the deliveries and the coming and going.”

Miranda waited for mention of the cockroaches, but Heyer

was too busy staring at her in his weird way. He had said all he had intended saying, and it was her turn again. “I couldn’t let you do that,” she said. “And you really don’t owe it to me.”

“Oh, c’mon. Bring a friend. Bring two friends. Guaranteed you’ll like it. Any allergies? Shellfish? Chocolate?”

The question rattled her; it was as if he had been in the shower with her and noticed the pimple on her shoulder blade. “That’s what you’re serving tonight—shellfish and chocolate?”

“No,” he laughed. “That’s just one of the things I ask when people call for a reservation. You’d be amazed how many food allergies are out there. Most places can deal with them. They have big menus. But if I get somebody in and they’re allergic to peanuts and we’re serving peanut butter that night, well, you can imagine how that might ruin the evening for everybody!”

She smiled, and he was pleased. He had very even teeth for such a raptor. “Somehow I can’t see the 5X5 serving peanut butter.”

“Not this evening. Promise. So what about it?”

“I really...”

“It’ll save you coming down some day to borrow a cup of sugar.”

Once upon a time, when confronted with appointments she didn’t want to make, Miranda made up stories about other commitments. But now she didn’t want to do that. Not only would it have rung hollow even to herself, but she suddenly didn’t want to disappoint the birdman. He gave the appearance of having invested a lot of will power in his invitation. “Do I ask what’s actually on the menu or would that be gauche?”

“Gauche away. I’ve heard a rumor the cook has ordered a lot of veal.”

“Like breaded cutlets?”

“That part of it is a secret.”

“I don’t like secrets.”

It was out before she realized she was saying it—her secret, the one she never shared with anyone. But instead of being miffed by her tone, he laughed again in his weird, distant way. “Not breaded cutlets. How about we leave the secret at that—half and half?”

There was no way she couldn't leave it at that, not without being completely boorish. Heyer went off up the block toward the restaurant with his half of the secret and she had the rest of the day to dispose of her half the way she wanted. Thoughts of the black dress hanging unworn in her closet for months made her feel outfoxed.



Heyer tried not showing his surprise when Miranda walked into the restaurant alone. She had had the whole day to find an escort, and he couldn't imagine her without boyfriends. But alone she was, and in the kind of plain black dress and sling heels that she might have just stepped into on the way to her loft elevator down to the restaurant. The only effort at all she seemed to have made was around her eyes—the liner thicker than he had seen it when they had run into one another in front of the junk shop. He thought she had exaggerated: She already looked too much like a small ball of a woodland creature to risk further comparison with a raccoon. If he hadn't still thought it was a good idea to invite her as his guest for the unoccupied fourth table, he would have thought of it as a bad idea.

He felt the eyes of the other diners on them as he held her chair for her to sit down. Since he had already steeled himself for some blowzy eruption that would give away what he was up to, he was pleased by her demure smile and impersonal thanks. The unpretentious silver chain bracelet on her wrist might have also been a happy omen if his eyes didn't follow it to her pudgy hand and to where she had been chewing on her nails. “You

decide,” she said deferentially in the middle of his reading of the wine list. “Your reputation is well known, Mr. Heyer. Anything dry white.”

It took Heyer a moment to accept the flattery for what it was. At worst there was a wink-wink in it, no true sarcasm. He was only sorry he waited to let his appreciation show in front of Sacha. The bartender eyed him suspiciously; clearly, Isabel had already spread the word not to expect much of a tip from the fourth table. “Number Three,” he said, affecting no reaction to Sacha’s look. “Everything okay here?”

The bartender had never been happier, so Heyer returned for another tour of the tables. The pâté was about gone at One and Three, only halfway through at Two and Five. He was tempted to skip it altogether for his upstairs neighbor, but then scolded himself for considering it. Full service for her was far more important than keeping the courses at all the tables simultaneous. When he took that decision into the kitchen with some of the dirty pate plates, Antonio was waiting for him with a beatific smile. “You’re not telling us something, Heyer,” the chef said in the tone of an uncle who had learned of his nephew’s naughty doings.

“What are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about!” The two assistants on for the evening sniggled. “I wonder what that could be!”

Heyer let them wonder. He was diverted anyway by Antonio’s latest concoction—sweetly aromatic veal betraying both its mint and sage without either winning the upper hand. He thought it typical of a chef whose genius lay not in a meal as such, but in the articulated measure he gave to all the ingredients that went into it. A pinch more or less of what he used would hardly have polluted his creation, but nor would it have equaled the satisfaction of tasting the absence of that more or less. Heyer always tasted that absence. In the kingdom of Absence, he had thought more than once, Antonio sat on the throne.

Miranda could have used a book. The room was too dark to actually read in, and she would have probably come off to the diners at the other tables as a lonely nerd, but she wouldn't have minded some smart novel about preppies committing mass suicide in Aruba as a prop. As it was, she felt exposed to have nothing between her and the two near tables but the glass of wine the bartender had brought. How could she look straight ahead without seeming to be snooping on those at the two tables? The bald-headed man at the table to the left had already smiled at her—one of those awkward smiles that wanted to say hello and I-know-you're-looking-at-me and I-wish-you-would-stop-staring-at-me all at once. At least he was more practiced in deflecting idle eyes than his Botox blonde, who had to keep catching herself from returning the stare and making up endlessly banal conversation for her Sugar Daddy so she would know where to direct her look. Miranda decided that the two of them hadn't made it with Baldie on top in years and that Blondie had long given up complaining about it.

The Twenty-Somethings at the right table were more grating because they were even more obviously fragile in their chitchat. All four of them kept buoying one another into laughter over their Wall Street office tales. The two overfed frat boys looked like they had been fitted out in their blue suits with their MBAs and hadn't bothered going back to their tailor since for a tune-up. The women kept laughing a half-second too late, as if still feeling their way toward all the right moves. She took them for assistants picking up pointers before climbing over the frat boys up the office ladder. She couldn't imagine any other reason for them to be paired off or quadrupled off or whatever they were. Fully dressed, they were the setup scene for a porn movie.

Miranda took a sip of wine, reminding herself to behave.

She owed it to the birdman for giving her something different to do for the evening. Why he had given it to her didn't seem as important as being able to eat something besides her own cooking, and gratis at that. If all he was after was getting laid, she could deal with that one way or the other when the time came. Her serious doubt was in her thought that she might find out if he usually charged by the table or by the customer. She didn't want to know which it was; it was part of the secrets of his business, and finding out which it was would lead only to trouble. But beyond coming alone, so that the table price and the customer price had to be the same, she didn't know how else to head him off from volunteering the information. Even kissing people to shut them up was no guarantee of what would be said as soon as the kissing stopped.

She hadn't made up her mind about the vampire-looking waitress named Isabel who brought her pate. Either Heyer and Isabel went prowling on the same piers for the same necks after closing the restaurant or they bit and scratched each other to a bloody mess once they were alone together. Miranda had never understood the attraction of Isabels to men. They had bodies like pencils and minds like erasers that had nothing interesting to erase. Whatever her mirror said, she was developing stretch marks sexier than that. Where was the fascination for somebody like the birdman? She might ask him just that because his answer was unlikely to involve any secret; she was sure he didn't have the slightest idea why Vampyra turned him on. Plus, it would get him talking about something besides his tables.

The bartender was refilling her glass before she had swallowed her first piece of pâté. She had an impish urge to ask him if the wine was supposed to cover up the pâté or the pâté the wine, but again felt stifled by whatever contract she had willy-nilly entered into with Heyer. She hadn't asked him for his generosity, but now it was weighing on her. Didn't that make it less than generosity? Real things always appeared more real than they were.

Normally, Heyer would have ranked the evening in his Top Ten. There had been nothing forced in the compliments from the four tables. Antonio had scored again—with the pâté, with the veal, with the sautéed vegetables, even with the coffee mousse that Heyer himself thought leaned a centimeter too close to the thick. Sacha and Isabel had been impressed with their tips, Table Three had insisted Antonio come out of the kitchen for a bow. But Heyer's triumph was not total, due to his own condescension. It had lasted mere seconds and Heyer hadn't shared it with anyone, but he hadn't missed his smugness: His mark of a successful service had been the enthusiasm from his four paying tables; only their reactions counted. He had all but tut-tutted Miranda's opinion because, whatever her announced delight with everything, she hadn't been a routine customer. He didn't like himself for that.

When he invited her to stay behind the other diners to have a sambuca with him, she replied with a wince of a smile that said she had expected him to make the offer. Isabel had thrown him the same knowing look on her way out the door, and, though he couldn't make it out, he was sure the tune Sacha was muttering behind the bar as he cleaned up had double-entendre lyrics aimed at him and his designs on Miranda. For Heyer, it was another vivid example of how the narrowest of purposes—in this case, apology—could be misconstrued as adventure. Yes, he hadn't seen Leticia in almost a month, yes, he was due to move on to an M, and yes, he felt his pulse beating more rapidly at the thought of going upstairs with Miranda and slowly stripping her of her black dress and the black bra he had glimpsed under it. But there was still the meal in the middle, and it made him feel more like a host than a lover. How could he give or take anything when he was still asking if everything had been satisfactory? As

they sat and sipped their sambucas, he needed more than her turgid lead for clarity.

“So this is what you do down here every night!” she seemed to say for the third or fourth time.

“Five nights. You must’ve noticed we’re closed weekends.”

The five tables for explaining the restaurant’s name would have been banality. Throwing in the five nights for the other 5 on the awning struck her as banality stoned. “Isn’t that supposed to be the best time for a restaurant?”

“For those that depend on the calendar. We depend on the menu.” The woodland creature she most reminded him of was a chipmunk. She didn’t have buck teeth, but her prominent upper lip put them there in their absence. As with Antonio’s measurement of ingredients, the secret was in what wasn’t there. “You haven’t shown much curiosity about why I invited you this evening.”

She feigned innocence. “I haven’t?”

“No.”

She pretended to think about it. “You told me this morning. You wanted to be more neighborly.”

“True. But there was also another reason.”

She scrunched her nose and leaned more heavily on her elbows to raise her glass to her lips. “Don’t spoil it.”

He was sorry; he had counted on telling her about the reservation list, on being candid with her. But the more he seemed to lean toward her, the further she receded from him. “Something else, then.”

“Something else what?”

“That I can tell you and will sweep you off your feet.”

He grinned before she had to study how serious he was. But it hadn’t been necessary. She was suddenly all seriousness as she asked: “Tell me something that won’t cost either of us.”

He thought he knew what she meant, then realized he didn’t. She wasn’t talking about the amnesias of one-night stands, but

about a much more final insignificance. "I'd have to know you better to know what that is," he heard himself reply.

She thought about it, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose so."

"You can't know what's absent unless you know what's present. So tell me something about yourself. Anything. Then I'll have a better idea of what might cost you."

"Everything costs everybody."

"We're talking only about you."

"I really don't like talking about me."

"Make an exception."

"Why?"

Heyer knew that answer. "Because as soon as you finish that sambuca, you'll get up and go upstairs and I won't matter to you anymore. Your secret will be safe."

Her skepticism said she had heard that one before, and not with the promised results. But she didn't flee from the idea, either. "I could say anything. I could lie to you."

"But you wouldn't. Because you know you're just one of the many women I invite down here so I can go to bed with them afterward, and no one of them is more important to me than the next one. You count on that and I count on it, too."



Miranda admired the way he kept a straight face. She couldn't recall the last time such an appearance had felt so real to her. "We've gotten a little mixed up, haven't we? I thought you were the one who was supposed to say something to knock me off my feet. But now it's suddenly on me."

His birdman stare didn't falter. "I'll make it up to you."

She didn't know if he would or not, but she wanted to believe he would. "Okay," she decided. "Some secret that won't cost either of us?"

"Right."

She had never said it before, but she had never had such an ideal opportunity for saying it, either. Not only would they go upstairs and screw or not go upstairs and screw, but he owned a restaurant, and restaurants went out of business every week. She wouldn't even have to go upstairs to make him less important; he might be forced to evacuate the building without any help from her. "My real name isn't Miranda," she said, feeling hot at her ears just saying it. "I took that from Shakespeare because it sounded romantic. My real name is Alice Katherine."

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Heyer thought instantly of the rocker Emilia in Milan. Had Xanadu really counted?