

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.”