

Chocolates

When he saw the email alert that Harlan was scheduling another Multisite Monday meeting, Dave's first thought was: somebody shoot me. Or somebody shoot him.

His second thought was: the meeting could easily evolve into his next encounter with Marica.

Multisite Mondays were a scheme Harlan had concocted and had attempted to schedule four times. Only the first had actually been on a Monday, and also only the first had actually taken place; Dave and sixteen other Managers at five different sites in three states had converged on Harlan's site, either physically or through Skype or Zoom or GoMeeting or BlueJeans or some distinctly more fly-by-night virtual meeting softwares, or simply by phone. This was the year before the pandemic, before everyone knew how to have a virtual meeting and there was still some novelty attached. Harlan was not actually of a rank to demand such a summit, but people had attended out of curiosity and a mild level of trust in Harlan's ambition "get us all talking the same language again." They had gathered the first time and Harlan had spoken for about an hour and ten minutes, mostly on the topic of his days in the field in Chile. Then others had taken their turn and talked past each other. Dave had said very little, fighting off a headache and the nausea induced by straining to listen to those with relatively spotty connections. Finally everyone had gone back to their own sites and done the same thing the same way as before. In the time-honored tradition.

None of this had to do with Marica. Marica was just the girl from Dave's neighborhood who had progressed on the outskirts of his life from babysitter through lifeguard to Diner waitress, escalating in nearly age-appropriate fashion through the jagged stages of overt flirtation. Now that Marica was legally an adult, she toyed with Dave whenever he came in for breakfast and confessed (or invented) that each time he had been at the community pool with his kids, she had wished he would seduce her. When the nearest customers were sufficiently distant, she would describe specific scenarios (she claimed she was writing a novel when not on duty at Zack's). This had advanced spontaneously where Dave (and presumably) Marica hoped once about six months ago, then a second time with more planning, and including a local motel that seemed a vestige from 1971 (not that Marica had been there in 1971, of course). Marica had stated after the motel, that she was looking forward to the next time, but motels were vile and she was happy to wait until some day that Ruth (who Marica had never called by her first name when the kids were small) was on a business trip or visiting her sister. So now Dave's recurring torture was that each time he came in, and Marica was on duty (and why would he go to

Zack's otherwise) she would ask if Ruth was visiting her sister, and smile fondly and patiently for his answer.

On the second occasion that Harlan scheduled a Multisite Monday, only half the attendees made any plans whatsoever to take part, which Harlan loudly attributed to their blind fealty to the "silo mentality." But in fact, people simply remembered that the activity had amounted to nothing. The official cancellation of the second Multisite Monday occurred while Dave was in the process of driving to the venue, with texts coming on his phone that the meeting couldn't take place because Portalus was down (Portalus being a virtual meeting software used by only one employee who had some sort of murky connection to its creators). The third Multisite Monday was aborted the night before because "Erin was sick", Erin being Harlan's septuagenarian assistant who was the only one he knew who could coordinate the meetings. For the fourth, Dave was again en route when he was alerted that the meeting was to be an all-virtual meeting because of a burst pipe at Harlan's site. Dave just went home, logged in, and waited twenty minutes before receiving the notification that the whole thing was off. The "burst pipe" turned out to be a cover story. The fuller story was that, during the course of her own commute, Erin had struck a construction vehicle while distracted by a slightly crimped cigarette that evaded being shaken out of the pack. No human was hurt but the ladder of the truck had crashed through a second-floor window and torn a water pipe out of the ceiling.

So, Dave reflected, he could accept the latest Monday meeting, leave his own site in a timely fashion with the other people on his floor thinking he was attending in person, but with Harlan expecting him to call in. The call itself he could make at home, and potentially have some time afterward when no one knew where he was, time to look up Marica. Or even more likely, the meeting would dissolve into entropy while he was driving, yet again, and then it would be nothing but free time until Ruth got home from work. Anyone who lived during the pandemic remembers the sheer blissful mad but brief joy of an hour or two during the day when no one knows where you are, or remembers wistfully wishing for those hours.

The other delicate aspect of the timing was when to bring Marica into the plan. The young woman had a life after all, and there was no guarantee that she would be available or interested on short notice. Likewise there was hazard in setting up a date with her before Dave was sure it could materialize. Through really no fault of his own, Marica had drawn some conclusions about Dave's work status and there might be some disillusionment if she was confronted with the fact that Dave was ordinary enough to be at the mercy of typical bourgeois bureaucratic requirements. But on the morning in question, portents remained good – Harlan's meeting remained on the calendar and there were no

countervailing signals. The only email of note as he headed to his car was an alert that some chocolates had arrived and were waiting on their front porch. These candies were the favorite of Ruth's sister, purchased online in anticipation of the sister's visit the next day.

It was the first really hot day of June and the parking lot was pitiless. The interior of Dave's car was airless and baked – the screen of his smart phone was steamed up for a moment as he plugged it in. Still nothing about Harlan's meeting. Dave had a featureless commute home – on a June Tuesday no one was heading to a long weekend and he and the semis and the gardeners, rusty rakes and shuddering ladders jostling in the highway breeze, had the roads to themselves. Dave arrived at his driveway with a comfy twenty minutes available to set up the call, and scooped up the box with the chocolates and moved it to the fridge. He commented to himself that Ruth's sister had better forego any comments about the candies – she was known to call the companies and demand refunds if there was any discoloration or, once, even some ambiguity as to which varieties were which in the packaging. He didn't know why Ruth insisted on buying her sister something that was going to trigger stupid complaints, and he didn't have time for it.

Harlan cancelled the meeting while Dave was plugging in his laptop.

Dave went into immediate action, changing the sheets in the spare room and adjusting the air conditioning, which was programmed to a level appropriate for an hour when no one was usually home. He calculated that, after some fun with Marica, he would have enough time to wash all the sheets, put the clean originals back on the spare bed, and the second set away, before Ruth's usual return time. He checked his condom supply which was two condoms, one in the front left pocket of his khakis and a spare in the back pocket, and reminded himself to put each wrapper back in the same pocket to focus subsequent cleanup. He decided against a candle but thought he could manage some roses on the way to Zack's. If Marica liked them and took them back with her afterward, it was a detail that settled itself, but really no problem if Marica left them because he would put them in a vase for Ruth, and tell her that he couldn't resist when he found out he had the extra time.

The next few stages went very well. He arrived at the Diner and ordered a coffee. Marica sauntered over a few minutes later and asked him if that was all he was having for lunch. Zack's did not do uniforms or pink aprons, and the T-shirt Marica had chosen for the day was gray and extremely tight. "I don't know if I have time for a full lunch," said Dave. "I'm home for hours because of a cancelled meeting and Ruth is still at work."

"Hmmm. Can I come over?"

Dave allowed as he would like that and she asked her supervisor if she could take her break. It was only 11 AM so she got an affirmative answer.

Dave had invested some time in plotting out the cars. To drive Marica from the diner and then take her back would delay the necessary cleanup, and tidying up while Marica was waiting for her ride would likely kill the afterglow. But this option seemed more gallant than suggesting that she drive, and also reduced the possibility of curious neighbors wondering about a strange car. The decisive factor was that, if using his own car, Dave could drive into the garage without exciting suspicion and Marica could leave the car while in the garage.

They arrived at Dave's house and parked as he had visualized. Ruth's side of the garage was the more convenient; it was marked with the stains from the air conditioning condensation from Ruth's car. He considered parking on Ruth's side to make it easier for Marica to get out of the car, but that seemed inadvisable. He put down the garage door while Marica made herself a drink – she had never been offered a drink in his house, but seemed to have a drinker's instinctive compass. Dave wondered if Marica would expect a lengthy seduction but she was half naked within five minutes and they were upstairs within ten.

Progress on the main project was brisk and Dave found himself mentally rehearsing the steps he planned to take when Marica was back at Zack's - and then mentally kicking himself for leaving the moment. So he got himself into the moment. But still he found he could simultaneously fret about his plan, so he decided it would only help his concentration to get through with the checklist. There was Marica's bra to deal with, as she had flung it off somewhere before he got upstairs, and she was not unlikely to leave it behind if not reminded, either carelessly or as a sort of accidentally on-purpose calling card. The condom wrapper was back in his jeans pocket and he already had plotted out how to dispose of the condom away from the house. The sheets were a calculated risk because he could not envision changing them with Marica in the house – she would consider that insulting. But unless Ruth came home from work early, a highly unlikely outcome on a Tuesday, he should have plenty of time after returning from dropping Marica off at the Diner.

He put aside the checklist but apparently Marica was not a subject that stressed the capacity of the cognitive rational parts of his brain, which helpfully generated reasons why Ruth might leave work early. Some could be dismissed from his divided thoughts. Then those helpful brain parts came up with the chocolates – the notice of their arrival had come to a joint email account and Ruth would have seen it too. It would be ridiculous to leave work early to pick up candy but Dave had beheld other ridiculous things done to please the irritating sister.

Dave told the rational parts of his brain to shut the hell up and anyway, it just meant he'd better have a contingency plan for changing the sheets - hardly necessary because Ruth, if leaving work early to bring chocolates in from the front porch, would hardly inspect the guest room as one of her first activities.

But if Ruth is leaving work early, his calculating parts reminded him, that could mean anything, leaving half an hour or two hours early or leaving at lunchtime with a plan to return. She might walk in at any moment.

OK, so let's calculate rationally how early she could possibly be, he said in his mind. Then Marica slapped him on the temple, not hard but not playfully, and asked where he was.

Dave decided it would only help his contingency plans to concentrate fully on his main reason for being there with the girl, allowing total concentration on plans afterward. That seemed to work, at least for the first part.

Marica wanted a cigarette afterward, which Dave didn't have, and he wasn't interested in her initiating a lengthy searching through her discarded clothes. Ruth was highly sensitive to cigarette smoke and would detect it in seconds no matter when she got home. Marica seemed to take this setback well, though with a smirk. Dave again had the uneasy nagging feeling that Marica was not as motivated as she might ideally be toward their shared mission of avoiding all possible chance of discovery. And this reminded him that he had recently been nagged by another concern, and he remembered the chocolates.

The girl in the spare bed had started on a long anecdote about an irritating customer that, the next time Dave gave it a momentary spotlight of attention, had gently transitioned to a tale of an old boyfriend. Meanwhile, Dave was mentally bouncing between the pros and cons of trying to communicate to Ruth some message that would dissuade Ruth from coming home early to save the chocolates.

He noticed sweat breaking on his brow and then realized that he had literally made love to Marica without breaking a sweat. That gave him a wash of guilt and he struggled manfully to pay attention to Marica's ever-meandering story, but it was too boring and the hateful chocolates kept edging into his awareness. OK, he told himself, figure out the chocolates and get it over with and then pay the girl the attention she deserves, so that you aren't a dirty old user. He could call Ruth, tell her he is home and offer to save the chocolates. Marica would be annoyed that he was even thinking of his wife, but might accept that it was a reasonable tradeoff. But before he travelled that mental path, he saw a fork in the road as to whether he should call her work phone or her cell phone.

If he called the work phone and reached Ruth, he could be sure that he at least had the length of her commute before she could arrive. But he would also have to generate a reason why he was home, and Ruth might decide that if he was home she would come home also and they could get a late lunch, and if she didn't answer, her secretary would answer, and would expect to take a message, leaving him without even the first advantage of knowing Ruth's whereabouts. If he tried Ruth's cell phone there was no danger of reaching the secretary, but Ruth might answer even if she was already in the car headed home and Ruth was unlikely to turn around and go back to work. But if he didn't call at all, his wife would almost definitely come home to get the candies out of the heat, and he would have no way of knowing how soon she would leave. If he called after Marica was back at the Diner and things were cleaned up, he could claim that he was only home for a moment to retrieve something for work, that he had seen and rescued the chocolates, and was already on his way back. But that would be problematic if Ruth was a block away.

Dave settled on calling Ruth at work and then caught himself in a thicket of indecision on how to explain this to Marica. He told himself he was being ridiculous and had deliberated enough, and just told Marica that he had remembered something Ruth had asked and if he didn't contact her there was a danger she would come home early. Marica made no outward comment but gave him another look from her impressive collection of looks, this one something like the look a child might give an ant that was trying to carry a bagel.

When Dave took his smart phone out of his jeans, all of these plans and strategic threads dissolved and he decided just to lie to Marica and say that he had gotten a text from Ruth. "She asked me to come home and take care of something. I'm going to respond but I don't know if she gave up on me getting the message and decided to come home herself."

"That's a shame," Marica said, making no move to dress in any way. "I would have liked if we had at least another hour."

He sat in a stupor for five minutes and Marica nakedly made herself another drink. He turned and looked at her face, searching for some sign that she was deliberately trying to trap him or waiting for some sort of dirty bribe, but the girl's face had the same bemused superior daring expression that it had if he ordered decaf or something from the low calorie menu. Feeling instinctively that there was a paralysis here to be broken by taking some kind of action, he returned to the top of his roster of actions and called the secretary.

"Ruth isn't here," said the secretary, who on the rare prior occasions that Dave had called seemed to vocally evince a dislike. When he asked if Ruth was coming back to the office, he was told, as

he anticipated he would be, that it was against company policy to answer that question. “But I can take a message.”

“OK, I think we have to leave,” he told Marica. “That stupid bitch at her office won’t tell me when she left or if she is coming home.”

“Maybe I should just take a Lyft so you aren’t put to the trouble of driving me to Zack’s.” This was said in a punitive way, not the way someone would say it if they were really concerned about the trouble they were potentially causing. Dave didn’t mind the tone but he had painful visions of waiting around endlessly for the Lyft to arrive.

“No, I want to drive you. You know, the next time, I will definitely find some place where we won’t have to worry about interruption and I’ll just take the whole afternoon off.”

Marica didn’t say, what makes you think there will be a next time, or that sounds nice, or I was saying that all along, or when are you going to divorce her, or when is that going to be, no rush. But she did get dressed, putting the gray T-shirt on before anything else and the brassiere on last, even after her shoes. He handed her the handbag when she made a move to the garage without it, and toyed with the idea of telling her he forgot something and running back in to quickly change the sheets. But Marica seemed to be watching his actions for signs of impatience almost as carefully as he was watching her for signs that she wanted to leave a calling card. So it made sense to take off as soon as possible, and he started the car with a distinct premonition that he had forgotten something or noticed something in his peripheral vision that was a bad sign.

Back at Zack’s, Marica showed the same reluctance to part though without saying or signaling anything the least bit playful or affectionate. She found a loose cigarette in her bag and he agreed when she asked to smoke it with the window cracked. He didn’t smoke so Dave couldn’t be sure, but she seemed to be slow-smoking, if that was a thing.

“Well, you probably have to get back to work,” he said when the cigarette was finally done.

“You don’t have to tell me when I have to get to work,” Marica retorted. “Zack’s isn’t my life. I thought it was all hellfire important for us to leave before Ruth got home. We left, so why are we still rushing?”

“Sorry, I meant that I have to get back to work. Everyone still thinks I’m at a meeting. I haven’t checked my emails once.”

She pursed her lips and gave him a good-bye kiss. It was a serious kiss, but he didn’t know if the kiss meant she was still attracted to him or she wanted to mark him with the scent of tobacco. He

realized that Marica was not the kind of person who probably ever had only one single reason for doing anything.

When he got back home, there were condensation puddles on Ruth's side of the garage from the A/C in her car.

After leaving his car and entering the mudroom, he called Ruth's name despite her car being gone. There wasn't any other indication that Ruth had been in the house. He opened the refrigerator door to check on the chocolates, and that was when the next permutation of the chocolate anxiety hit him. If Ruth arrived home to save the chocolates while he was at Zack's, she would know she made the trip for nothing when she saw that they were already refrigerated. He was going to be in big trouble for not letting her know that he had taken care of the candy.

While one part of his brain generated excuses he could offer for not calling her, another part tried to resolve whether it was better to call her right now or just assert that evening that it had completely never occurred to him, and a third part tried to calculate whether she had explored any other aspects of the house and if she had noticed the guest room was disturbed. And if there was a chance she had noticed the guest room, should he wash the sheets now or would that call attention to them and put the question in Ruth's mind that wouldn't be there otherwise?

And while he looked at the sheets for guidance, he began to think he had seen the water on the garage floor earlier that afternoon, when he left with Marica.

He had definitely seen something that was out of place, but was it water in Ruth's spot? Dave tried valiantly to visualize her side of the garage but what he visualized was seeing it just now. He tried to visualize Marica walking into the garage and whether there had been water then, but he hadn't been paying attention. So when did Ruth come home?

He walked slowly through the house, room by room, disturbing nothing, not sure what he was looking for, and knowing all the while that what he should be doing was looking carefully at the floor of the garage. Dave told himself that denial and avoidance wasn't helping anything, and that he was subconsciously hoping the puddles would evaporate so he could pretend Ruth hadn't been home. When he finally forced himself to return to the garage, the spots were still wet. They had shrunken somewhat, which wasn't surprising given the ambient temperature, and the heat was nicely concentrated in the garage. He could see the traces below the standing water spots of the previous ones, but were those traces from an hour ago, or this morning, or yesterday? He got a little dizzy thinking about the number of times Ruth had parked that same car with the cooling system that dripped in that particular way, nearly but never exactly the same way as the time before. He stared at the spots

until they didn't look like water spots on a concrete floor but like eyespots on a peacock's tail, or knotholes, or shadows, or galaxies, and then it seemed like they were moving.

Dave snapped out of it and it occurred to him that he was supposed to be at work. He could answer some emails from home and he could make a few calls. He reached for the button to put down the garage door and then hesitated – would leaving it up signal that he was only home for a short time and that to him it was a normal day? One possibility is that Ruth had seen something when she got home but it was ambiguous, or maybe all she saw was the chocolates, and she would be on the lookout for him to act suspicious, and what could be more suspicious than waiting for her and looking to see if she suspected anything? Dave recognized himself getting into another mental circle and went inside, and booted up his computer.

He answered some junk emails, and one that was substantial, and then the next that he knew how to answer. There were a couple of calls he needed to return so he found his notes for the first one and tried the number. The other party answered and they started to make some headway but after five minutes Dave found it impossible to concentrate and told his colleague that he was sick. After hanging up, he decided that calling in sick for the rest of the afternoon was probably the most prudent plan altogether. But to legitimately call in sick he would need to have been in – it would be awkward to concoct some good reason why he was already home when he started to feel sick. He stared at the phone and the laptop for quite a while trying to decide whether to phone in or email the excuse, and eventually the screen saver came on.

When it was five PM, he concluded that Ruth had just gone right back to work when she saw whatever it was she saw, and that she would probably just return at her normal commute time. Again he fought off the fruitless urge to call her secretary, and the pointless hope that perhaps she had never been home. When it was six, he guessed that Ruth had been home, seen something (with mercy, just the chocolates) and decided to work late out of petulance. When it was seven, he wondered if she had decided not to come home, and stay at a hotel, or stay with a relative. To stay with the sister would be ridiculous, since the sister was coming the next day. Equally ridiculous would be if Ruth never came home at all and Dave was left to entertain the sister.

From eight to ten, he wrestled with whether to call her. He concocted all kinds of innocent activities she may have been involved in that he had forgotten and which would unleash waves of relief when he remembered why she wasn't home. She might have mentioned a reunion, or a fundraiser, or an open house, or a movie with a friend. She would come up and wonder why the hell he had never gotten himself any dinner. Of course, when Ruth was away for normal prosaic reasons, what he usually

did was go to Zack's, so that was out. Ruth may have had car trouble and be angry that he never called her to see where she was. Or she might be staying away deliberately, and as long as he held out and didn't call, she would eventually feel foolish and come home, pretending she'd never had a reason.

He called at ten, but there was no answer.

By midnight, he continued to sit at the kitchen table, thinking he should make some coffee but again wondering how abnormal this would look if Ruth strolled in and there was some completely innocuous reason she had been late. At that point, he realized he had never turned on the kitchen lights and was sitting in the dark. When he turned on the lights, there was the low whine that one of the overhead lights would make when it was about to burn out. While that sound was very unpleasant, bobbing as it were at the edge of his hearing, he recognized it made it harder to hear the crickets out back, which he realized had, for hours, been busy with a constant robot rhythm, an implacable soulless buzz like the indifferent saw of a contractor who has just commenced on a very long job.