

Mother says I'm a Numbers Girl

I waved at an old man standing on the doorstep of the house opposite our new double-story, but he didn't wave back. Unkempt white hair and droopy cheeks bracketing a downturned mouth, it was hard to tell if he couldn't see me or couldn't be bothered. Eager with the intentions a new start offers, I decided he must have poor glasses or cataracts and I was only a smudge in his elderly eyes. But before I could get closer, he turned rather quickly for someone his age and went inside. "Next time," I muttered reminding myself to be patient.

"Hi, I'm Lizzy. We just moved in," I called a while later as he came out of his front door. Again, nothing. Once we both reversed out of our driveways at the same time, almost connecting but still, no acknowledgment. There's no question he was ignoring me, but why would a lonely, possibly sick pensioner reject the attention of a twentysomething, friendly woman? After all, I might've offered to do some shopping or send a casserole; he stood to gain a lot out of the relationship.

It didn't take me long to see he lived a lonely existence – I won't deny I'm a keen observer, though others call it something else. No one visited and on the odd occasion he went out, he never returned with anything. What did he eat? What did he read? Didn't he ever have to buy bleach or new pants? Perhaps, he didn't care. Maybe some seniors don't worry about such things – figure they're going to die any minute so why bother making the effort.

I mentioned it to Mike one morning because I hadn't seen him come out of his house for days.

“Lizzy, who cares?” He was sitting at the kitchen table frowning at a credit card statement. “Stop obsessing. He probably goes shopping when you’re doing something else.”

I looked over his shoulder – I’d gone way over my allowance at the bookstore. “Just curious.”

“It’s becoming part of your life – that’s obsessing. Dolly Parton is interesting, but I don’t know where she buys her bras.”

“Well, we’re supposed to know what our neighbors are up to,” I said, “for safety. And besides, what if he ends up dying? At least someone will notice.”

He turned over the statement and skewed his eyes. “It’s not really your job to look out for the dead in the community. Anyway, you’re bordering on ageism. Careful.”

“Imagine if we end up getting a plague of rats because of his rotting corpse? It could pose a public health hazard.”

“Lizzy, this has nothing to do with concern for others. It’s about your own need to know.”

It’s true. No use passing myself off as some sort of goodwill ambassador. Mother says I’m many things and kind isn’t one of them. She often recounts the story of how, when we were children, I locked my older brother Vincent under the stairwell while she was out. Says I haven’t changed a jot since. I never told her it was because he set fire to my hamster to impress some friends – there wasn’t any point. He was her blue-eyed boy, a carbon copy of our father who passed away in a car accident I survived.

Mike picked up his bag. I always feel a tug in my middle when he leaves. Six-foot with clear blue eyes, he’s bright in a modest way – most clever people never get that right. I see how people look at him with interest and often, desire. We met at a university lecture on a theorem that’d earned

me a prestigious mathematics award. He asked questions and flirted; I tried to answer and not stare. We've been together ever since.

"I'm off," he said. "Don't forget to take your medicine."

The following Sunday, Mother came for lunch in memory of Vincent's birthday. He drowned when he was twelve and I was ten. She often says if I were stronger, I could've saved him. Unfortunately, skinny, and small, I wasn't able to drag him to the step of the pool after he'd hit his head.

Generally, when I have to see Mother, I'm more stressed than usual. I was making a roast beef and because she's so picky about rareness, I had to concentrate to get it right. I'd popped a Xanax to keep the edge off things, but the usual welcome haziness wasn't doing my cooking any good. I hadn't checked out the window since early morning because I had so much else to think about and it played on my mind that I hadn't. I like to keep a routine of things, but I wasn't good at multitasking.

When I greeted her at the door, Mother nodded and marched past me in a gust of perfume and chaffing pantyhose. In the kitchen, she peered into the pots on the stove, still holding her bag.

"You're overdoing the gravy," she said and picked up a spoon. "It's never been your strong point. You use too much flour."

I filled a jug with water. "I'll thin it out."

"Careful, you'll make it like dishwater."

She stood with her back to the counter, watching me. I tried not to shake but when I almost dropped the horseradish, she muttered something and picked up a book lying by the kettle.

"Four twenty pm, house quiet," she said.

It sounded familiar but the fug was heavy.

“Seven thirty, Mike still not home. The OM came out to check the post box.”

OM, OM, OM...Shit! The Old Man!

“Eight fifteen, OM switched on outside light...Elizabeth what is this?”

I reached out to grab the book, but she was quicker than me.

“Please, it’s just something I’m working on. Some...story writing.” It just came out. I don’t have the first clue how to write stories.

“Story writing? What nonsense. Numbers are your thing.”

She knew.

“I thought I might try my hand at keeping a journal so I can get some ideas down and –”

“You’re stalking someone. Who is it?”

“It’s no one, I –”

“You’re doing this again, Elizabeth. Do we need to call Dr Wolfe?”

I was put in a psychiatric institution when I was seventeen. I’d made friends with Shelley Tinker in my science class – she was struggling with chemistry. I helped her pass finals and one thing led to another and before I knew it, I ended up outside her house, naked, in the middle of the night, begging her to love me. The same thing happened with three people after that, except I tried to cut the lips off the last person with a pair of scissors, which landed me in more trouble than usual. The professionals decided I had a complex of dissociative and depersonalization disorders and after a long stint in hospital, I was released with a lot of medication. I’ve learned a lot since then. Marrying Mike has helped. His divorce threats keep me on the straight and narrow, though occasionally those straights feel too narrow, and I imagine things I shouldn’t. But mostly, I know to respect people’s boundaries. I mustn’t say everything I think and I’m not to hurt myself or others when things feel unreal or out of control. “No, Mother. I’ll stop. It was just something fun.”

“People like you don’t have fun, Elizabeth. You need to be kept on a short leash,” she said, holding the book with thumb and forefinger. “I’m going to discuss this with Michael and see where we are.”

Rage.

It came fast, thickening my blood. I tried to recall my five-point exit plan: Retract, reassess...what was next? Realign? Reengage?

Rage.

Roaring, gushing, furious.

The exit plan, the exit plan, the exit plan.

Pour boiling gravy on her head.

Plunge the meat thermometer in her eye.

Just to hurt her would be to breathe again.

I picked up a carving knife and gripped it tight.

The familiar shimmy and clack of keys echoed down the passage.

Mike.

I dropped the knife.

“Yes, Mother.” I smiled and carried the serving dish with the rare, bloody beef on it into the dining room. “Mike, darling, just in time. Lunch is ready.”

Despite Mother’s warnings, I didn’t stop watching the old man. Mike doesn’t mind what I do with my time as long as I make him dinner each day and don’t question him. He says he won’t be the binary information for my insatiable database of minutiae and the moment I treat him like a study, he

will leave. He thought my curiosity about the old man ridiculous but used to my compulsive tendencies, he didn't do anything unless my behavior worsened.

“Why did you leave that book lying around when she's coming over? Between that and the bookshop, Lizzy, I'm not pleased.”

I rolled onto my back, lifted my nightdress, and took off my panties. I raised my arms and waited while he tied the rope.

“Do I need to worry about the old man stuff?” he said, reaching across for the blindfold. “God, you're getting thin.”

I opened my legs. “No, it just notes for a story. Be a bit creative – good for my therapy.”

“Story?”

I could see he was already thinking about what he was about to do. I'd never liked it, but it made him happy.

“Yes. Something different,” I said.

He put a strip of tape over my mouth.

The next day, Mike left early. I was reading in bed when I heard a hoot and an engine with a loose, rattling idle speed. I looked outside – it was a delivery van. A courier was standing at the old man's door holding a large envelope. He knocked several times, but there was no answer. Had I missed him going out? He couldn't have, I would've heard his car. I leave my bedroom windows open, so I don't miss anything.

The courier walked around the side of his house calling, “Anyone home?” and then crossed the street. My doorbell rang.

“Hi, sorry to trouble you. Do you know if anyone lives there?” He stood with the envelope in his hand and pointed at the old man’s house.

“Yes. He doesn’t get out much.”

“Oh,” he said and looked at his watch. “I’ve got a delivery for him.”

“Give it to me. I’ll make sure he gets it.” I leaned in to grab the package and his eyes clouded.

“I don’t think –”

I glanced at the name on the label. “I wouldn’t be too worried about leaving it with me. I know old Dr. Fugard well. Could save you a trip.”

He scratched his chin.

“Well, I’ve got things to do,” and made as if to close the door.

He thrust the envelope at me. “Well, yes, if you wouldn’t mind. Save me being late for my daughter’s birthday.”

I signed for it then ran upstairs to get changed. I hardly recognized myself in the mirror. Was that my gaunt face? Were the circles under my grey eyes really so dark? It’d been over six days since I’d taken my pills. When I first go off them, my vision plays tricks on me, so I wasn’t sure if I looked like my reflection, though Mike had commented I’d lost weight.

Downstairs, I ripped open the envelope. It was the old man’s will. There were thirty-five clauses, and one caught my eye. It stated that upon his death, his wife, Maureen Fugard, with whom he lived, was to be placed in a specialized facility at the expense of the estate until her death.

He had a wife in that house.

I returned the document to a new envelope, copied the details on the front, and spent the rest of the day investigating him on the Internet. Several articles about Dr. Justice Fugard were accompanied by photographs of younger versions of the old man.

A neurosurgeon practicing in the 1980s, Fugard attempted to bring back the trans-orbital “ice pick” lobotomy, a method made popular by Dr. Walter Freeman in the fifties and sixties. Though quick and uncomplicated – a matter of slipping a steel rod behind the eye into the brain – results were erratic. Few were successful and Fugard was eventually sued for malpractice.

At five-thirty, the old man emerged and peered into his post box. He’d been in the house all along. Why hadn’t he answered the door?

Mike called to say he would be late.

I picked up the envelope and left.

I tapped the door and waited. The curtains across the dirty windows hung in limp swathes, giving it an uninhabited look. I tried the handle. It opened so I walked in.

I went down the hall into the gloomy end room. No one was there. It smelt like the old age home my grandmother had died in, sour with leaky mouths and fluids that wouldn’t stay inside. The constant nausea I’d had for the last few days bucked and I swallowed it down. I had to focus. Sepia pictures in warped frames scattered the walls and there was a bookcase with sixty-nine books on its shelves, many of them about neurosurgery. My thoughts jumbled so I thought of a prime number sequence until my breath returned.

There was a creak overhead, so I headed up the stairs toward it. At the top, I discovered a room with its door ajar. I went in. A creased, grey-faced woman sat in a chair, completely still, her eyes fixed middle distance.

“Hello.”

No reply.

“I’m Lizzy. From number twenty opposite. I brought a delivery.”

Her gaze didn’t move but she started humming.

“Are you ok?” My breath was quick now, my sight tunnelling in and out. The same bar of the same tune, over and over, like an itch. It was a lullaby I’d heard as a child, but I couldn’t place it.

“What are you doing here?” The old man was in the doorway wearing mud-splashed boots. He was taller than he’d seemed at a distance and his arms were tanned and strong.

“I thought you weren’t in. There’s an envelope for you.”

“I’ve been in the vegetable garden.” The old man followed my gaze. “Maureen lost her mind a long time ago.”

It was a stood-on snail shell of a voice, cracked, phlegmy. I laughed in my head. Or maybe out loud. It was like watching a dream in a dream. “How did she lose it?”

“A childhood trauma; a condition left too long. Lots of things.”

I bent down to the woman. Her eyes stayed level, two brown orbs, uncomprehending. “Have you tried to help her?”

“I’ve used various techniques.” He came closer. “Nothing’s worked.”

My vision blurred. “Sometimes all you need is love.”

“You don’t look well. Come lay down a moment. Catch your breath.”

“No...I’m expected.” My hands and feet tingled, the goose bumps on my arms hurt.

He smiled, teeth yellow and gappy. “He doesn’t get back until much later.”

What time *did* Michael get back? How did *he* know?

“Just lay a while.” The clear patches between the oily smears on his glasses glinted. “I know what you are. And who you are, Dr. Elizabeth Rose.”

I should've run. Instead, I sat on the bed and the old man pushed me down. The mattress was hard, the sheets cold against the backs of my legs. I realized I was still holding the envelope only because he took it out of my hands.

There were.

There were thirty-six nail heads going across the edge of the ceiling board above me. At dimensions of ten-by-five at even intervals of a meter across to each side, there would be one hundred and eighty nails in the ceiling.

Including depth.

Including depth of six meters, at the same space intervals, if the room were a box, a box nailed shut, there would be one thousand two hundred and twenty-four nail heads visible to an organism with 360° vision.

The average human.

The average human being has approximately 180° horizontal vision and 135° vertical vision, so with the strap holding my head in place, the assumption must shift to a 180° by 90° field of vision which means that in this box.

In this box.

I wouldn't see five hundred and twenty-four of the nails that closed me in.

“I can help,” said the old man.

Soft humming, louder now.

Shelley Tinker had said there was a monster inside me, hiding like a dragon in a cave. Vincent's eyes were open as he lay on the bottom of the pool, his arms floating out from him like a starfish.

There were eighteen transactions on Mike's credit card bill, seven of them my bookstore, three hotels, two florists, five restaurants; somewhere called The Velvet Room.

Vincent hadn't expected me to push him. I hadn't meant to hurt him – I just wanted to get him back for urinating in his bed and telling Mother it was me. She'd punished me for weeks: no books, no bedding, and no bathroom access – only a deep silver bowl she came to change once a day.

I hadn't left the house in twelve days and thirteen hours. Mike hadn't bought me flowers since we'd been married.

I've never been to a hotel.

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A thud – heavy human weight. As I blacked out, I saw the old man heaped on the floor, his legs out in front of him like a stringless puppet. He was reaching for a thin, metal rod coming out of his back with panicked grasps that faded to slow, listless swipes. Bony, moth-wing hands stroked my head, the humming close to my ear. I tried to place the tune, the same bar of the same song over and over. Rainbows and blue skies, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Some things were like that for me. Completely out of reach.