

## *The Fedora*

Exactly two days after her twelfth birthday, Shawna Deardorf's exceedingly tall father hung himself in the guest bathroom of the family's two-story, five-bedroom house. Because of his height, it was perplexing to the police how he managed to accomplish this in such a small space. The conclusion was that he must've bent his legs or touched his chest with his knees as he inhaled his final breath.

The day before this tragic event, Terrence Deardorf spoke to his daughter as if she were an adult. "When you meet someone and fall in love, don't let him go, no matter what the circumstance." They were wandering through their New England neighborhood on a lazy August afternoon. The patriarch seemed content, *happy even*; he cherished the time he spent with his only child, and Shawna felt comfortable asking him questions that she wouldn't dare ask her draconian mother.

"What if the person I love is mean to me?" she inquired.

"That's a cue that you should stop loving him," her father advised.

"What if the person has to go away for a long time?" she inquired.

"If you really love him, you'll wait for him," her father said.

"If someone can't see, they're blind," Shawna stated. "If someone can't hear, they're deaf. What's the word when someone can't smell?" she inquired.

Her father fell silent.

When Shawna learned of the suicide, she felt as if a missile had crashed into her heart. Her mother Claire, red-haired, fair-skinned and freckled like Shawna, wasn't quite as distraught as her daughter. "Your father was very troubled," she said. "A troubled man. He had problems you didn't know about, and I'm not referring to his weak chin."

"Do you mean his moods?"

"That was part of it. Those gray periods grabbed him by the throat like the Boston Strangler on a rampage. I had a feeling it would end this way, though not in the guest bathroom."

"Where did you think it would end?" Shawna asked.

"The master bedroom," she replied matter-of-factly. "He loved that room with all those framed diplomas and art deco furniture. There was nothing he enjoyed more than lounging in bed with a good book and a bottle of Courvoisier. If he'd been able to, he would have stayed in that room all day. Instead, he died down the hall at dusk."

The afternoon of the funeral was an uncommonly cool and windy one for late summer. Mourners held onto scarves, sweaters and jackets with fear that their garments would fly away in a strong gust. Shawna recognized everyone in attendance except a slender woman in a black felt fedora. "Who's that lady in the man's hat?" Shawna whispered to her mother.

"I haven't the foggiest," Claire responded curtly. Shawna didn't believe her.

There was something hypnotic about this raven-haired stranger. Shawna was dying to ask her how she knew her father and why she was wearing that hat, but when the fedora flew off her head, she ran to retrieve it and then summarily disappeared.

Shawna wouldn't see the mystery lady again for a decade.

The day after the funeral, Claire began sorting through her late husband's clothing. "He's only been dead a few days and you're cleaning out his closet?" Shawna asked, aghast. "How can you be so cruel?"

"Charities need clothing," Claire explained, "and your father had excellent taste. He owned dozens of designer suits."

"I can't wait to see a homeless man in one of them," Shawna remarked with sarcasm.

"He'll be the toast of Skid Row," Claire offered.

The years passed and Shawna's life continued, but nothing was as joyful as it would've been if her father had been there to share it. On several occasions, Shawna thought she spotted the mysterious stranger in the fedora, but she was always mistaken. She continued to wonder what her father felt for this woman in the felt hat.

When Shawna was a sophomore in college, she met a junior named Jonathan Lamp and fell instantly in love. Like her father, he was extremely tall and lanky, but *unlike* her father, Jonathan Lamp had a strong chin and a zest for living. Shawna fell for his substantial intellect, dedication to learning and insatiable libido. With psychology his major, Jonathan was constantly analyzing situations, making judgments and drawing conclusions. With neuroscience *Shawna's* major, she looked at life from a scientific point of view. She relished the fact that she could understand the intensity of her feelings, that her profound bliss was a result of the dopamine bursting from her nucleus accumbens.

After four months of uninterrupted euphoria, an unwelcome interruption surfaced like a malignant lump. Jonathan suddenly seemed distant, preoccupied. A man with

a secret. In the middle of a mediocre Mexican dinner at Pappasito's Cantina (the chicken was rubbery and the chimichangas too cheesy), Jonathan worked up the courage to admit that a political science major named Tallulah Light had entered the picture. "She's Light and I'm Lamp," he explained. "It's destiny."

"Destiny?" Shawna shouted to the alarm of several diners sitting nearby. "You think a surname coincidence can be the basis of a relationship?"

"Please keep your voice down."

"I'll change my name to Bulb! Or Shade! Shawna Shade has a good ring to it, don't you think? Please Jonathan, reconsider this. We love each other."

"Loved," he said. "Past tense. I'm sure you'll meet someone else. You're an awesome girl with all that red hair." Her thick mane was occasionally unmanageable, and Shawna wondered if that was the real reason for the breakup: hair upheaval. "What kind of hair does this Light girl have?"

"Dark," he said. "Shoulder length. It's also soft and silky like a dog's coat after a bath."

"I *love* a dog's coat after a bath," Shawna mumbled.

The words of her deceased father echoed in Shawna's head. *When you meet someone and fall in love, don't let him go, no matter what the circumstance.* "I can't let you go," Shawna shrieked. From her nervous system, a signal had been sent to her organs, causing the muscles in her small intestine to contract. This gave her the sensation of a knot in the pit of her stomach.

"Do you love *me* or the *idea* of me?" Jonathan asked. "I think you love the *idea* of me."

“No,” Shawna assured him. “I love the person, not the idea. If it were my idea, you’d be two inches shorter and less analytical.”

“Chin up,” he said. With that, he asked Pappasito for the check.

Spending the next two days sobbing, sniveling and sipping various concoctions made with cranberry juice, ice cream and Courvoisier, Shawna felt like her mind and body were disintegrating. She was certain she’d lost her sense of smell. She called her mother for support.

“I would tell you there are plenty of fish in the sea,” Claire said. “But there are *very few* finned creatures you can count on to swim home to you every night.”

“So you think I should try to win him back?”

“I don’t give advice on the subject. After all, my husband chose *death* over me.”

On the third day of her abandonment, Shawna seriously considered killing Tallulah Light in cold blood, but after exploring the idea scientifically, she doubted she could pull it off without being caught. Still, she was obsessed with getting Jonathan Lamp back into her life.

It was easy enough to locate the homewrecker; she was one of the most active students in the political science department. Shawna studied Tallulah Light from afar - her sea green eyes, tomato red lips, bronzed olive skin, sable brown hair that bounced like quivering jello. And she always dressed in blue - baby blue, cobalt blue, cornflower, royal, cerulean, steel, teal, midnight, Tiffany, turquoise, Yale.

Like a warrior heading into battle, Shawna marched to a nearby salon called Hair & Now. The stylish male stylist cut and colored her hair so that it matched Tallulah’s to a tee. Then she picked up a tomato red lipstick. Then she purchased a pair of

contact lenses that changed her eye color from light brown to shamrock green. After that, she headed to a tanning salon and bought ten sessions because compared to Tallulah, Shawna was so pale she appeared to lack pigment. She finished the day by shopping for a new wardrobe, all shades of blue.

Her startling new appearance stunned her friends and fellow students. All agreed Shawna had a more adult, sophisticated demeanor. Her striking new mien attracted the young men on campus, and several asked her out. She refused every single one of them except the exceedingly hot and dimpled Kevin Hecht.

She decided the right time to reveal herself to Jonathan was immediately after his Friday morning class in schizoaffective disorders. In her crisp cobalt blue outfit, she leaned against the beige wall in the hallway. When the class ended, the students dispersed and Jonathan quickly trotted down the hallway without noticing his ex. She scurried to catch up to him. “Jonathan,” she called out with enthusiasm.

“Hey Tallulah,” he responded.

“It’s Shawna.”

Jonathan stopped trotting. Dumbfounded, he stared at Shawna as if she were an apparition. “Wow,” he mumbled. “You look so different. Your clothes, your hair.”

“Do you like the new me?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “Very much.”

“Thanks,” she responded. Then she strolled away with confidence, feeling his eyes still on her as if they were glued.

It took Jonathan exactly 28 minutes to call and ask her out. Shawna had the distinct sensation Tallulah Light’s glow had dimmed to virtual darkness.

Over a tasty vegetarian lasagna at a place called Rebecca Romaine, Shawna and Jonathan fell in love all over again. They began to study together, read under the campus trees, and make Freudian love in her dorm room. (He convinced her, as Freud believed, that the sexual drive was the primary motivational force of the homosapien.) Once again, the serotonin was flowing as was the oxytocin, cascades of it, produced from the paraventricular nucleus of Shawna's hypothalamus and released by her posterior pituitary, filling her with jubilation and joy.

One evening at a trendy seafood restaurant called Fish Frolic, Shawna and Jonathan were enjoying classic Maryland crab cakes and discussing developmental psychology when Shawna froze, her fork in midair. In walked the woman in the black fedora. She was seated at a table for two even though she was alone.

"What's wrong?" Jonathan asked.

"The woman who just walked in," Shawna whispered nervously, "I know her."

"The one in the hat?"

"Right. At least I *think* it's her."

"Do you want to say hello?"

"I *have to*," Shawna said as she stood up.

The mysterious woman removed the hat from her head, allowing her wavy black hair to fall past her shoulders. It looked as soft and silky as a dog's coat after a bath.

With great trepidation, Shawna clumsily weaved her way through a collision course of tables, chairs, patrons heading to the loo and servers carrying enormous platters of food. "Excuse me," she politely said when she reached her destination, "I hate to be a bother, but I think I recognize you."

“Oh?”

“About ten years ago, did you attend the funeral of Terrence Deardorf? He was my father.”

The woman gazed into Shawna’s searching eyes. “Mon Dieu,” she said. “Take a seat.”

Eagerly, Shawna sat down across from the femme fatale. “So it *was* you.”

“Indeed. My name is Althea. Althea Iris Fawning.”

“What a pretty name,” Shawna said, extending her hand. “I’m Shawna Rochelle Deardorf.”

“Have you been looking for me all these years, Shawna Rochelle?”

“In a bizarre way I *have*, yes.”

“My goodness,” Althea remarked. “Please explain.”

“Well,” Shawna began, “I don’t think my parents loved each other very much, and I was convinced my father was involved with someone else. I always imagined clandestine liaisons in secluded cabins and lingering rendezvous in romantic hideaways. Then when I saw you at the funeral, I couldn’t help wondering, frankly, if you were the love of my father’s life.”

“The love of his life,” Althea repeated. She took a long, deep breath. “No, I wasn’t the love of your tall, tormented father’s life.”

Shawna nodded with disappointment. “Then how did you know him?”

“After my glory days of sailing the Caspian Sea, traversing the Sahara Desert, studying mime in Madrid and assimilating myself into Toyko’s metropolis, I decided to



settle down. So I settled and became a clinical psychologist,” Althea explained. “Your father was in session with me for several years.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“But there *was* another person, someone your father loved very deeply.”

“There was?” Shawna asked excitedly, inching her way to the edge of her chair.

“Who was she? Do you remember her name?”

Althea reached over and gently touched Shawna’s hand that was settled on the table, her fingers curled into a fist. When Althea’s hand met Shawna’s, the fist uncurled as if blooming into a rose, and Shawna felt a warm, pleasurable rush. “All I can recall about your papa’s lover is that he was a Hungarian who worked with oceanic animals and donated generously to the destitute.”

“He?” Shawna asked, stunned.

“He,” Althea replied. “A Hungarian humanitarian who worked underwater and died, sadly, from loss of blood after a shark attack off the coast of Nova Scotia.”

“Shark attack?” she inquired. “Nova Scotia?”

“A ghastly way to go, n’est-ce pas? After that traumatic occurrence, your daddy didn’t want to live. I, of course, *beseched* him, *implored* him to pursue an exciting, enthralling life - while avoiding coastal activities. Unfortunately I failed. And not just with your father. When the majority of my clients killed themselves, I gave up clinical psychology for sculpture.”

Shawna was at a loss for words. After a few awkward moments, she asked, “So you’re a sculptress now?”

Before Althea had a chance to respond, a fresh-faced waitress in taupe appeared at the table with a sweet smile and two menus. “My name is Fedora and I’ll be your server this evening.”

“Fedora?” Shawna asked with astonishment.

“Fedora Twine, and I’d like to tell you about tonight’s specials, may I?”

“Proceed, s’il vous plait.” Althea said, admiring Fedora’s aquiline nose and uncommonly long eyelashes.

“First we have a slow baked Faroe Island salmon,” she announced. “The Faroes are an archipelago of 18 small volcanic islands between Iceland and Norway in the North Atlantic Ocean. Because of its picturesque cliffs and valleys, it’s a destination for bird-watchers and nature lovers. Tourist season is July and August, but if you want to avoid the crowds, I’d suggest visiting in late May or early June. We also have an Ecuadorian cazuela de mariscos, a crustacean stew made with tomatoes, peppers, cumin, sage leaf and other enticing spices to satisfy the palate. Ecuador, of course, straddles the equator on the west coast of South America. When visiting, you’ll obviously want to explore the fierce and fabulous Amazon jungle, but please don’t forget the wildlife-rich Galapagos Islands, all right?”

“OK,” Shawna said - only because the waitress-cum-travel agent was looking directly into her shamrock green eyes.

“And finally, we offer a Nova Scotia deep-water shark steak. Almost completely surrounded by water, the province of Nova Scotia is a truly remarka...”

“We know about Nova Scotia,” Shawna interrupted. “A Nova Scotia shark killed the love of my father’s life.”

Fedora was taken aback. "I'm sure it's not the same one," she quietly remarked.

Althea gazed at her young server. "You are an enchanting creature of the sea," she told her.

"What a fascinating thing to say," Fedora replied. "I always believed we as a species originated from the depths of the earth's oceans."

"I should return to where *I* originated," Shawna declared. "A table in the rear of the restaurant. I just felt compelled to say hello."

"Take my card," Althea suggested, reaching into her large, faux leather tote. "You may have questions later, beaucoup de questions."

"Thank you," Shawna said, clutching the card.

"The man might have been Black," Althea suddenly recalled. "Or White. A color for a surname. Perhaps Monsieur Green. Or Monsieur Indigo."

"Monsieur Indigo?" Shawna muttered.

"Possibly. By the way, how did you recognize me? Les yeux? Most people remember my mesmerizing violet eyes."

"Actually it was the fedora."

"Ah, le chapeau. Believe it or not, this very fedora sitting sur la table was a gift from your father. I admired it on his head, and he insisted I have it."

"This was Daddy's fedora?"

"Mais oui. Do you know how much I'd like you to have it?"

"Very much?"

"Very much indeed."

"Oh thank you, Althea," Shawna gushed, reaching for the hat.

“But I can’t part with it, I’m sorry. Now scurry back to where you belong, mon ange.”

Rattled, Shawna stood up, quizzically glanced at Fedora, then ambled back to Jonathan.

“Was she who you thought she was?” Jonathan asked.

“She was the woman I recognized, but she wasn’t the woman I thought she was,” Shawna said softly. “Maybe I’m not the woman I thought *I* was,” she added even more softly and much more mysteriously. Sometime between her crab cake entrée and pecan-crusted key lime pie dessert, Shawna decided to let her hair grow back to its natural russet color, lose the green tinted contact lenses, and return to her original wardrobe that had little to do with blue. Then she swiped her palm across her mouth, permanently erasing the tomato red from her lips.

Jonathan held Shawna’s arm as they walked eleven blocks to the car under a luminous full moon. Neither spoke very much until Jonathan stopped in his tracks, reached into his jacket pocket and took out a small jewelry box. He presented it to Shawna who immediately opened it to find a one-carat diamond engagement ring. “Will you be my bride?” Jonathan asked as he bent down on one knee. Shawna could hardly believe what she was witnessing.

“Please stand up,” she said. “And tuck your shirt in.” Her wannabe groom followed instructions. “This is a psychogenic shock,” Shawna said. “My blood vessels might be dilating and it’s possible I’ll pass out.”

“I had a feeling you’d be surprised.”

“I’m beyond surprised,” she admitted. “This is so out of the blue that it’s not even a color.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about settling down, and I don’t want to do it with anyone except you.”

“Settling down isn’t always a great idea,” Shawna said, recalling what occurred when *Althea* settled down. “Unexpected things can happen.”

“That’s expected,” Jonathan said.

“Well, I’d love to give you an answer right now, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Parce que je regrette de vous informer que je might be more interested in les femmes than I am in les hommes.”

“Could you translate please?” Jonathan asked.

“Because I’m sorry to inform you that I might be more interested in women than I am in men.”

Jonathan looked slightly stupefied. “Uh...did I hear that right?”

Shawna nodded, smiling with sincerity and a touch of sympathy.

Before climbing into bed that night, Shawna carefully placed the business card of *Althea Fawning* on her night table, detecting a subtle floral scent coming from the card. She was thrilled that her sense of smell had returned.

As she tried to fall asleep, she focused on the failed psychologist who peppered her speech with odd phrases in French. Shawna’s body, head to toe, was warmed by the woman’s image as if a pilot light had been turned on deep inside her.

The beguiling, bewitching Althea, with her innumerable eccentricities, intrigued Shawna like no one ever had, not even the tall, intellectual Jonathan Lamp. She felt like she'd encountered someone from the tribe she'd been born into, and the experience brought her a sense of belonging. At the same time, Althea seemed remarkably bold and cultivated, entirely capable of exploring exhilarating new horizons with Shawna at her side.

The hypothalamic region of Shawna's brain was fully activated. She felt electric. Alive. Pulse racing, heart grinding with desire. Still, she managed to drift off to an exceptionally pleasurable sleep, dreaming of clandestine liaisons in secluded cabins and lingering rendezvous in romantic hideaways.

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