

It was an invitation she desperately wanted. When the small taupe envelope arrived, the return address clearly shown, she inhaled a swift eager breath. Geraldine sent it, of course. The little envelope, with the off-beat color, and exotic handwriting, identified the sender immediately. Geraldine, by any measure of taste as determined by the exclusive circle to which Myrna yearned to be a part, was the epitome.

Myrna was a person of considerable reputation herself. Her last novel had been well received, as had her earlier works, two non-fiction. She was an avid reader of reviews, her own included, and was always disappointed to read phrases describing her work: 'a beautifully written book that pulls at one's heartstrings,' 'a book of exquisite word-play, yet replete with suspense, a book the reader just can't put down.' Myrna wouldn't want to read a book as described and would like to get out of what she thinks of as a writer's rut.

She wanted reviews like those Geraldine Krevach was increasingly getting: 'Krevach investigates the absurdity of modern existence.' 'She fills her work with questions that bring laughter and serious thought in the same paragraph.' 'Her books are a challenge to read. They are not simple, but rewarding as the reader's lights start charging.' But Myrna struggled and found her own personal keyboard following the same dull (in her mind) path.

The invitation was to a small afternoon get-together, from around two o'clock to whatever, on this coming Sunday. Oddly, the envelope had a much more formal appearance than the scrap of paper inside with the dashed off scribble. It confused Myrna. She didn't know Geraldine well, only by the occasional, but interesting, conversations she'd had at various affairs attended by a lot of writers and publishers. Agents always sniffing around.

What does Geraldine mean by small? And why was I included? She's probably familiar with my work. Authors tend to be fully aware of which books are selling. Am I being welcomed or tested in this circle? Maybe the new interesting writers won't be there. Or will they? Myrna now began the nervous days of wondering.

Myrna is forty-eight, probably close to Geraldine's age. Myrna's mother raised her to be a person who knows her place and shouldn't speak up unless spoken to. Her father kept taking her aside, telling her the exact opposite. 'Speak up, Myrna. You're as good as anybody else, man or woman. You're talented Myrna. Your teachers used to keep telling us that. Take the ball and run with it, kiddo.' All of this contradictory upbringing put Myrna's surging chest-thumping confidence at odds with her punishing doubt. Neither parent ever read a word she wrote.

Deciding what to wear on this occasion proved to be a dilemma for Myrna. *Is this going to be an arty crowd, dressy, or the Jon Lennon glasses types, the booky people. Will it be a party of fifty? Twenty?* She decided "To hell with it. I'm just going to be comfortable in jeans and my fancy top from that kooky little shop on Eighty-second street.

There was no RSVP requirement on the weird invitation so she decided to arrive at exactly two ten. Not too early...not too late. She slipped five twenties in her pocketbook; *you never know if things are going to wind up bar hopping or maybe out to some quirky place for dinner that doesn't take credit cards. A girl's got to be ready for anything.* Since parking around the

area is virtually non-existent she decided to take an Uber. The building is an old one on the west side and has all the signs of an old Deco masterpiece. The front door is a piece of art by itself.

After getting an okay from the doorman she entered the elevator and went up to the sixth floor. Geraldine was suite two, of two apartments on the floor. She rang the doorbell and could hear voices from inside. It sounded as if someone were saying 'Just stop it. Stop it.' A man about thirty-five with a short nicely trimmed beard answered and said, "I'm Randy, a family friend of Geraldine's. You must be Myrna Bloc. Geraldine was hoping you'd come."

"Yes, and I'm happy to be here. I'm a big fan of Geraldine's work."

He showed her down a long narrow hall. "Oh God," he said. "I hope we're not going to talk about our work. I get so sick of people constantly asking me, "What are you writing?"

"I'll try to control myself," Myrna said, with just enough playful sarcasm to let him know that she wasn't taking him seriously. *Maybe he doesn't like it because he's a painter, not a writer.*

They reached the room where the voices were coming from and Myrna was surprised at seeing only three people making conversation...loud conversation. Geraldine was lounging on a large overstuffed sofa and didn't get up when she entered the room; she sat up a little. "Myrna Bloc. You came." She said this, not with surprise or disdain, but with a kind of forced casualness. "I've always wanted to get to know you better. I really hadn't intended to write such a hurried note."

"The envelope made up for it." Myrna was never at a loss for a quick response. "Thank you for inviting me, Geraldine." She looked for a spot to drop her pocketbook and set it down behind one of the sofas.

"Meet Missy Hayden, my editor and dear friend, and Walter Gunn, her silver-haired squire, another dear old friend. And a publisher, I might add."

They all said the appropriate 'hellos and nice to meet you' and Geraldine suggested Randy ask Myrna what she'd like to drink. "Or better still Randy, show Myrna the bar and she can select what she wants." It was understandable why the offer didn't seem a tad rude, (mix your own kiddo) when Myrna saw the wide array of bottles and mixes. It was very impressive. "We all got a little head start on you. Another two will be joining us."

The room was large as is the case with so many of New York's older buildings; old, but charming. There were several sofas and comfortable chairs and on this occasion six places had been placed close to Geraldine surrounding an enormous coffee table suitable for resting drinks. It was a set-up that practically announced, 'and now the play begins.'

But two more guests were expected to arrive. It seemed appropriate, meanwhile, to keep the conversation light and touched on get-acquainted questions, such as, "Do you live close by Myrna? New York can be such a hassle traffic wise." It was Missy Hayden who asked. She was wearing plaid slacks and a tailored shirt, which reassured Myrna regarding clothes. The hostess was in some flowing casual at-home pajamas. Myrna was beginning to feel quite comfortable, at least in the clothing department.

"I also live on the west side, on Riverside, so it was very easy. I took an Uber, but I could just as easily have walked over." Myrna took a sip of her gin and tonic, with a lime twist, and settled into a generously padded chair. She was glad she had the opportunity to mix her own. She has been to parties where hosts served drinks deliberately heavy on the alcohol with the express purpose of livening things up; sometimes unfortunate consequences result. Of course, the

same thing can happen when people are too generous themselves when let loose at such bounty.

"I had it easy too. Walter picked me up," and Missy laughed. She had a pleasant easy laugh. "He lives across the park as well so he's the one that had the traffic worries. It can be a madhouse on a Sunday afternoon with the museums open and families unloading kids while daddy has to run around looking for a parking place. We were lucky and Walter found a spot rather quickly." She turned her head to glance at him, but he'd already stood up to head for a bar refill.

The talk continued with comments about the crowds: the benefits of having such easy access to some of the world's great treasures while having to endure the downside of congestion. This went on for some time when they were interrupted by the doorbell. Randy jumped up to answer it. One doesn't think of an artist to be someone's little helper. And this guest, although dressed in rather worn old jeans and a neat tee, showed no signs of a guy who might wear paint splattered overalls and have stained fingernails. *I guess I was wrong there.*

A glamorous woman strutted in followed by an average looking tall man. "Geraldine darling. I hate myself. I hate myself. And George hates himself too. Don't you darling." she said turning to look at George. "We had no intention of being so late. Geraldine, please forgive us. The traffic! The traffic! You wouldn't believe." She spoke as if on stage.

"Sit down, for heaven's sake Tricia. Of course you didn't intend to be late." Said Geraldine, in a patronizingly forgiving tone. "George, please get Tricia a drink, help yourself and join us. You know Missy and Walter. I want you to meet Myrna Bloc." They gave a quick 'Hi' to Missy and Walter and Tricia immediately turned to Myrna, while George headed for the bar for their drinks.

"Myrna Bloc! What a pleasant surprise. I adore your books." Tricia and George sat in the two remaining seats to make up the cozy circle of seven. Tricia continued, histrionic and effusive, yet genuine in a funny way, "I can't wait till the next one. Your books are so...so full of characters that you love; and just hate to have them go through what you have them go through. Once I start one of your books I just can't put it down. I can't tell you how often I've had a good cry after some tragic episode."

"Thank you." Myrna felt she was required to answer this way. "There seems to be a public that likes them."

"You see what I've been telling you Missy?" Geraldine is looking at her editor. "I am not reaching an audience. Sure, a little circle of intellectuals loves my obscure, strange take on the world, but why does that elude so many. Myrna manages both. I need more Myrna Bloc influence."

"Whoa. Whoa." This was Missy responding to an author unhappy with her editor. "Your writing is totally your own, as Myrna's is hers. You can't suddenly decide to be a story teller when your instinct steers you in another direction."

"Human beings have told stories to each other since they learned how to communicate. Why are we suddenly deciding they're no longer necessary?" Geraldine sat up straight, no longer lounging. "But you're right Missy. Every time I sit down to outline a story I ask myself, what's the point? I want to get into my characters psyches, and I don't see why I have to wrap it all around a series of events. My readers buy my books, but they're also confused. Sometimes

they get mad at me...only on paper, of course. But nobody loves me like Myrna's readers love her."

"Do you want to be loved, Geraldine?" said Walter, the fox, as he rose to get another drink. "Maybe I can help you." Everyone laughed. He said it with a twinkle in his eye, a quality that made him infectiously likable.

"Oh, shut up Walter. She doesn't want *your* love." Missy was trying to be cute, but it was the drinks he was taking that caused her to look at him with a worrisome eye.

"I buy all Myrna Bloc's books," said Walter. "I'm a fan. I love them. To hell with anyone who doesn't want their words wrapped up in a story. Now Gerry. At the risk of sounding like a hypocrite, I love your books too. Your books take a little more work. That's what the story-hungry readers don't want to do. They don't want to work."

"I don't call it work," said George, obviously eager to join what sounded like an interesting debate. "I think it's more like a puzzle. If people don't enjoy puzzles, why on earth do people do them. They're so gratifying when you finally conquer them."

"It's certainly not my intention to supply people with a puzzle," said Geraldine. "I want to understand people, get close them, but with an insight into their place in the world. In that way, you're sort of right George...they are a puzzle."

"See Tricia. The renowned Geraldine Krevach has just paid your husband a sorta, kinda, bit of a compliment"

"Don't get too excited, George. I'm going to try to give you more compliments. You're obviously in dire need. And after reading one of Myrna's books I know I'll feel magnanimous. Her stories leave me with a glorious sense of satisfaction." Tricia looked at George with sincere affection, which her affected manner of speech belied.

Myrna said, "This is so weird. I thought I was digging into my characters with the express effect of dissecting them by putting them in situations where they were better understood. I wish I was perceived like Gerry, serious and thought-provoking."

"Don't you dare start changing! I love every word you've written. Sometimes I laugh. Sometimes I get teary. Myrna. It's a gift." Tricia was thinking of one of the books she had just read.

Randy had been contributing nothing to the conversation; but his intense concentration was apparent to Myrna. She had been noticing every subtle movement of each participant, in an effort to get to know people who seemed intimate with each other, but were strangers to Myrna.

Still ruminating, Randy finally said what was on his mind, "I don't think the commercial success of a book bears any relationship to it's intrinsic contribution to the understanding of the human condition."

Tricia spoke directly to Randy. "Randy darling, sometimes you play the role of superior student a shade too directly. I assume you were referring to my comments about Myrna's glorious books."

"I was referring to any books written to play on the sentimental proclivities of the average American. They offer nothing to enrich the percipience of our crazy world." Randy took pride in his way with words, especially in this erudite crowd.

“Walter, please, will you explain to us what this dear boy is talking about. What on earth does percipience mean? And use as much perspicacity as you can muster.” Tricia is making gentle, but pithy, fun of Randy.

“Randy has a point,” said Walter, causing Myrna to feel a pang of discomfort. “Any writer who deliberately sets out, solely, to take advantage of normal human sympathies is not a serious writer. It’s pretty easy to get tears if you put a mother sitting at the bedside of her dying young child. Or how about a young father distraught because he has accidently run over his son playing in the driveway. You can create fear in the same way. Who isn’t afraid of a snarling large dog or a madman with a gun? But you wind up knowing nothing about these people. What if the mother was glad to see her child finally about to give her relief from the burden of caring for a very sick child? Human beings are complicated. Myrna has probably watched herself; been on the alert to avoid getting empathy the easy way. I always leave her stories thinking about the lives of the people she has created.”

“I appreciate that Walter,” Myrna said. *Was he hinting at something?* “I do find myself getting wrapped up in individuals as opposed to issues that society as a whole is facing.”

Missy was eager to join in and especially to defend her author. “This is Geraldine’s great talent. She looks down at the planet earth and sees an endless march of hostile tribes and individuals appear to play a lesser role. She portrays all this with magical flights from realism that manage to let you see it all more vividly, if that makes sense. There are plenty of people, but their individual problems are emphasized less. Don’t get me wrong. They’re definitely there and they’re facing great problems and uncertainty, but it’s just a different take on how you try to understand the world.”

“Boy, Randy. You sure know how to throw in a provocative thought. Did you do that on purpose, you naughty boy?” Geraldine looked at her nephew affectionately. He smiled.

This conversation continued for some time. The group became cautiously guarded, aware that writers can be overly sensitive to comments hitting close to home. They did not want to offend a new friend.

Randy went to the kitchen and brought out a large tray of luscious finger foods and set it on the coffee table with napkins and little plates. Everyone dug in and the talk went on uninterrupted. They tackled a myriad of subjects, sometimes politics, sometimes old times and memories, recent plays or movies, a potpourri of subjects. Myrna found herself liking these people, with just a hint of reservation. It was a joy to see friends disagreeing, laughing and enjoying a good time. She was genuinely glad that she had been invited and hoped it meant that she would be included another time.

Finally, Missy got up and said, “Gerry, this has been wonderful. Thank you so much. It was great to meet Myrna.” She smiled at Myrna and turned to give Walter a hand to help him out of the chair. “Well, Walter, I guess I’m going to have to drive. You have to learn to stop. I’ll drop you off and park the car in my building. You can walk over and pick it up tomorrow.”

“I can drive,” said Walter. “But I’ll let you since you’re so eager.” They all chuckled.

Everyone loves Walter but Missy is right. She’s said she won’t go back to him until he sobers up. They’ve been married for years, but she decided to separate to see if that would make a difference. But with old friends like today, it didn’t work. He let himself go.

Tricia said her goodbyes, thanked ‘Geraldine darling’ and told Randy they could drop him off if he was ready to leave. He’d been putting the food away.

"Yes, I'd like that. Thanks Tricia." Randy was pleased to get the offer.

And Tricia looked at Myrna and said, "Don't you dare change Myrna darling."

"Out the door everyone. I'll hold the elevator. Do you need a ride Myrna?"

"No thanks, George. Go ahead. I want to say thanks to Geraldine. It's a lovely evening. I'm going to walk."

When they were all out the door Myrna told Geraldine how much she appreciated the invitation. "You have a very interesting, fun group of friends. I must say Randy seemed a bit quiet at first. Maybe we didn't let him get in. Everyone was talking so much. Then he came out with a bang."

Gerry laughed, "Oh. He's not a writer or an artist...at least not one with a gallery. He piddles around. He's my nephew studying Fine Arts at Columbia. Students are always so poor. I give him a little cash to help me out and he makes a wonderful co-host. He looks older than his age so he fits in; a couple of gray hairs have appeared in his beard. He's twenty-eight, took time off for a few years to roam the world."

"I was surprised when he said he hoped people would not be talking about their work."

"He actually loves to hear writers talk, but tries to sound blasé. He doesn't want to admit he likes, what he calls, highfalutin talk. Although Randy believes much of it relates to his studies."

Myrna, pleased to know how serious college people can be, said, "Well, thank you again Gerry. I'm a big admirer of yours. I really mean it when I say I wish I knew how to write more like you. My books are tales with engaging characters. I need puzzles or something like George was talking about."

You know Myrna, I want to let you in on a little secret. I was nervous about inviting you over. That's why all the fuss with the invitation. I didn't know whether to be fancy formal or...I don't know what, so I got mad at myself for worrying about it and just scribbled that note in a hurry. I also found myself liking you more and more as the evening wore on. You were so easy to talk to and friendly, no airs like a popular writer might have." Geraldine said this with a shy smile and played with her hands in the large pockets of her pajamas. "At the risk of sounding like a mutual admiration society, I also love your books. I don't want to lose whatever I've been told I have, but I don't want to be difficult to read; it sounds like an effort to feel superior."

"Let's do this again. We have much to talk about." Myrna paused. Things were getting a bit awkward. "Now will you help me find my pocketbook. I thought I put it behind this sofa."

Myrna began to look around. "Oops. Here it is. I found it. Well, off I go." And they had a brief hug.

Myrna enjoyed the walk on this pleasant evening. *I wonder if anyone besides Tricia really likes my books. Was Walter, obviously a practiced diplomat, making an effort to be genial? What do they really think? Of course Geraldine's writing is very good, but it's not exactly Proust.*

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