

## You Replaced Ronnie

Flicked uncouthly from the leaf skimmer pole, the wasp flew off in a tiltrotor trajectory, legs dangling, as if delivering supplies to a refugee camp, or conducting a training exercise that hopefully wouldn't end in disaster like those marines in the desert. Carl stated casually that he'd never been stung. He wanted her to see in him a man unafraid of the animal kingdom's malefactors: the scorpion in the sleeping bag, the shark under the surfboard.

She said how fortunate, proving that she understood nothing in spite of her blue-rimmed glasses and shoulder-length blonde hair parted intellectually on the side. She looked too young to own a house with a swimming pool. It didn't look like she used it, either. She had the listless muscle tone of a narps and her skin was white. Blue eyes, faintly noticeable hairs on her upper lip. It didn't look too bad now, but wait till she hit menopause. After they got married, she'd have to get electrolysis.

"I guess," said Carl, standing with right-angled feet in his punished tennis shoes and a slightly bent knee. "Would you want to have lunch sometime, ekcetra?" He'd meant to lead up to this question with some talk of his dojo and his esteem for Sensei Prakash, but it just came out. He stared at the thick gray trunk of an orange tree. A few oranges lay on the ground, gnawed and moldy like his life.

She wasn't fazed by the abrupt question. "I don't think so," she said blandly, like a pleasant bureaucrat citing the pertinent section of the dating code.

"You must be pretty busy come to think of it," said Carl. Except she apparently didn't have a job. He continued to hold the leaf skimmer upright like a Swiss guardsman with his halberd. He felt like he was wearing that clown suit. "I bet you like jigsaw puzzles."

Not jigsaw puzzles—he meant crossword puzzles. The ones with little squares. He could see her sitting in a straight-backed chair with a newspaper folded on her lap, tapping her lower lip with a pencil, maybe once in a while trying to erase some moustache hairs. On a table beside her there would be a plate with a windmill or something painted on it and some weird crackers and olives.

“Not particularly.” At best half-amused but more like whatever. She wore no lipstick or nail polish. As far as Carl could tell, she hadn’t defiled her body with tattoos, but sometimes they put them where you can’t see. Leaving oranges on the ground is a surefire way to attract rats and other varmints. You’d think she’d know that. A Siamese cat appeared on the wooden fence or else had been there all along.

“That your cat? Better watch out for coyotes.” Two syllables. “They’ll tear it apart. One leg over here, another leg across the street.”

The woman nodded. “Nice talking with you,” she said. “I’m going back inside now.”

“Can’t blame you there,” said Carl. “Pretty hot today. Some folks offer the pool man a cold drink.”

She paused. “Can I get you some water?”

“Sure. I’ll just come in and drink it in the kitchen. Get out of the sun and whatnot.”

A course of events appeared like a black rainbow in the woman’s mind. Revulsion leading to a pot of trauma—assuming she wasn’t dead. She smiled apprehensively showing even, white teeth (if they bleach them you put an asterisk by it) and agreed it was too hot. “Why don’t you just call it a day?”

Carl was reminded of the time a wasp crawled inside his shirt and stung him in the armpit. He wasn’t making any headway with his future bride—his futuristic bride if she wore a space helmet at their wedding. “I didn’t mean anything,” he said. “You know me.”

Her mouth was like a sea anemone closing on his words. “You replaced Ronnie,” she said. “That’s all I know.”

That rankled. “Good old smoochable Ronnie!” Carl exclaimed. “To some folks, I’m just a piece of crap who can never measure up to his tan. He’s in a nursing home, you know. He got dementia and I’m the only one who visits him. I bring him gum and whatnot. He got away at Easter and they found him crawling in a ditch looking for colored eggs. His daughter won’t have anything to do with him. What did he ever do to her?”

He waited to see if his words were softening the woman’s resistance. Hard to say. Her face was like a tambourine, except not round.

“I don’t know,” he continued. “Maybe he did do something to her a long time ago. How would I know what a man does with his daughter when she’s five or twelve? I only bought the business. He could have told me a pack of lies. Pretty strange that she won’t have contact with her own dad.”

“This conversation’s over,” said the woman. She walked toward the house like someone imitating themselves.

“Wait,” said Carl. “I have your house key.” He shouldn’t have given away his secret, but too late now. He pointed at a stone sphinx on the patio. “From under that lion statue. I saw your neighbor get it one time. I’m not saying she was up to no good—maybe she was feeding your cat. I made a copy for emergencies.”

When the woman spoke, her voice sounded like it was wrapped in one of those robes people wear after they swim with their name stitched on it in cursive. “I’m calling the police.”

Beloved wigs out over spare key miscue, as a newspaper might express it. Carl shrugged miserably.

“They’ll just say change your locks and buy a gun. Like in Oregon.” Looking at her face was like looking at an airplane dial that’s spinning around when you’re about to crash. “Never mind,” he muttered. “By the time you read this letter, I’ll be gone.” Pinching his thumb and forefinger together, he scribbled something in the air and flung it at her.

Every road he’d followed toward romantic union with this divinity in sandals, this bespectacled houri with a labial fuzz veil, had been a dead end. Only one chance remained and that was to make her fall in love with him through pity. Carl jumped into the swimming pool and started floundering. “Help,” he cried. “I cain’t swim.” The reason he said “cain’t” was to make his appeal more authentic. That’s how rubes talk and most people who can’t swim are rubes.