

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

The road got narrower and rougher until it finally ended at a sparse oval of gravel that was losing the battle to weeds. Kyle's car, a sedan without all-wheel-drive, had bounced, growled, and bottomed-out on the way up. Now it shuddered and groaned like an abused beast before he cut off the engine. "I thought he was rich," I said. "I told you he's eccentric," Kyle replied, as if that answered everything. Eccentric. Outrageous. A real pain in the ass. That's what I'd been hearing about Kyle's father pretty much since I'd known Kyle. He didn't build him up, that's for sure. It made me wonder why he wanted me to meet him at all, and why we were here now to meet him. But I thought maybe I knew. And that worried me a bit.

We got out of the car and Kyle pointed to worn stone steps at the far end of the gravel plateau that ran up a steep hill for as far as I could see. "His house is up there," he said.

"Where?" I said. There was no end to the steps in sight. "Heaven? Mt. Olympus?"

He laughed. "Dad would particularly like that second one."

"So he has to walk up all these steps to get to his place?" I asked, as we started up.

"He comes in the back way."

"Why didn't we come in the back way?"

"You need four-wheel drive and tires from a monster truck pull to get in that way. My car got stuck once."

"The way we came wasn't exactly the autobahn."

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He stopped and looked back at me with that expression he got when he seemed to be in on some inner joke I'd never get. "Dad thinks anyone coming in that way but him is an act of effrontery."

"Even you?"

"Especially me."

Kyle had been in my office for several days a few months ago as part of a team working on our firm's annual audit. We'd met in the coffee room and I'd shown him where the mugs and spoons were. We'd been seeing each other for a while. As a thirty-something who hung out in my apartment with my cat, books, and music, and whose previous dating experience had been sporadic and disappointing, Kyle was a refreshing change. Could he be that break in the depressing pattern that had punctuated my loneliness with my calling up old high school friends to find out they were either married or even more boring than I remembered, or by forays into Internet dating sites to find guys whose descriptions of themselves seemed, upon experience, to have been drafted by press agents?

So far Kyle had shown himself to be a decent guy. A tad conformist and monochrome, perhaps, but what's wrong with that? Besides, his name was "Kyle." Do you have a list of favorite names? Well, I do. And right up there with Jason and Derek and Scott is Kyle. Lance is way off the list, and Garth, and absurd truncations of real names like Topher and Zan, and perversions like Dick from Richard. How do you get to Dick from a noble name like Richard anyway? Dick the Lionheart? I ask you. Rick is okay, but Dick? But Kyle is solid. So there, Jen, I thought when I first met Kyle—a good omen. Or not. Shit, why does there always have to be the "or not"?

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“Effrontery?” I said, trying to inject as much incredulity into the single word as I could. “To come in the back way? That seems bass-akwards.”

“He thinks a lot of things are effrontery. It’s one of his favorite words.”

Kyle’s mother Susan had died when he was six. Breast cancer. His dad had brought him up. Or, as Kyle put it, had stood by and watched him bring himself up with occasional bracing fights to keep things interesting. There had just been the two of them. Kyle had no siblings. And his dad had been working pretty hard in the litigation section of his law firm, then at the small software firm he’d founded. “Filing systems in law firms are the glue that holds everything together,” Kyle told me, “or can cause everything to fall apart. It’s easy for them to take up a lot of time that can’t be billed—the cardinal sin in a law firm—if they aren’t well designed. Dad came up with one that was easy to use, efficient, accurate, and didn’t take much time to administer. It took over the market and Dad quit the firm to run it as CEO, then, several years ago, sold it for a lot of money.” He didn’t say how much. He seemed almost embarrassed by it. “Since then,” he said, “he’s been the hermit on the hill doing whatever he wants: painting, writing, building bird houses and feeders, reading a lot, listening to music.” It sounded like the kinds of things I’d like to do. So I was looking forward to meeting him in spite of Kyle’s alarms about him.

“These steps are interminable,” I said, puffing a bit. I’m not out of shape but this stairway to heaven went on for as far as the eye could see and was incredibly steep with stones chinked into the earth at odd angles as if they’d been done by drunken Indians.

“Need help?” he said, extending his hand back toward me.

“No, no, I’m fine.”

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Sometimes he was just too damned solicitous. He didn't say anything more as we went on and on through the trees. The air was still and everything around us silent except for the occasional chirp or trill of a bird. One in particular had an inquisitive little uplift to his call, as if to ask what we were doing here. I was beginning to wonder. Finally we came to the end of the steps and to another plateau, this one seeming to finally be at the top of what I was increasingly thinking of as a mountain rather than a hill.

"There it is," he said, pointing to a rustic-looking house across a small clearing. I asked him if his father had built it. "No," he said. "Melville Tawes built it."

"The thriller writer?"

"Right. He had five wives, you know. Finally, when things were going south with the last one, he just disappeared. No one knows where he is or what happened to him. No books have appeared under his name since he disappeared, though there are rumors he's now writing under a pseudonym. Dad bought the place at auction. It was just what he was looking for, he said."

"He must not care much for people."

"He says he met enough assholes when he was working to hold him for a while."

Now the pressure was really on.

No one came to the door, even though Kyle knocked resoundingly more than once. While I stood there shifting my weight back and forth from one foot to another, I tried to reconstruct in my mind what had finally brought us here. I guess it was the fight. I say fight, although Kyle never seemed to get mad. Which made it galling to get mad at him. It wasn't a strategy, for which he could not be forgiven, but just who he was, for which he could not be fairly blamed. It was a little thing we quarreled about. What restaurant to go to. Kyle had a select list of a few places he liked to go to repeatedly; I liked to check

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out places we hadn't been to yet, especially new places that had just opened. Kyle was against that. "Let's wait for the reviews," he'd say. Then, sometimes, just when I'd gotten him around to trying one of these places, we'd find out it had gone out of business.

"Must not have been any good," he'd say. "We'll never know," I'd say. "Maybe there were just too many people like you who wouldn't try it." And so it had been before this trek that had brought us here to stand like abandoned children before Kyle's father's door. When I'd wrestled him into submission about the restaurant that was no more, he said, apropos of nothing, "Let's drop in on Dad." I wasn't sure what to say--he'd frequently said he wanted me to meet his father but then nothing came of it--so I said nothing.

"If he's doing something he'll get to a stopping point before he comes," Kyle said.

Finally the door opened revealing a wiry man in the late afternoon light. He wore a button-down oxford cloth shirt with blue and white stripes, faded jeans, and heavy boots with scuffed toes. The tightly drawn skin over his cheeks exhibited a sparse graying beard, his lip and chin a thicker version of the same. His hair, which was darker than his beard, was thick but clipped short. He looked quickly to Kyle, then to me, his eyes narrowing as if with skepticism, then moved back from the door. "Well, it's about time," he said. Kyle stepped in and I followed, closing the door.

We were in a large, sparsely furnished room with high ceilings and exposed beams. There was an old leather sofa and two over-stuffed chairs that looked well broken in. A couple of floor lamps were on though there was still light coming in through windows on three sides of the room. The shades of the lamps were covered with dust. If the rather modest house was far from ostentatious, its furnishings were plain to a degree that gave no indication of the wealth Kyle said his father had. Music was playing loudly

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from speakers in the far corners of the room. Mozart's "Prague" Symphony. "Dad," Kyle said, "I'd like you to meet Jen Erickson."

His father stared at me for moments without introducing himself or saying anything. Then he said, "That blond hair natural?" I don't know what I expected him to say, but that wasn't it, even after all of the warnings about him. I told him it was. "Of course it is. Erickson. Viking princess. Have to be blond." That rankled. My father had always called me his "princess" and I'd always hated it. This was not a good start. Even as I was thinking this, he was saying, "Now I know why you look familiar." If I'd thought he was staring at me before, his focused scrutiny had now acquired a new intensity. "Take off your glasses," he said. It was an odd request, but I did it. There was something about how he said things that made unreasonable requests sound reasonable. "Uncanny," he said several times, leaning toward me and away as if he were inspecting some mysterious artifact. Then, abruptly, he spun on his heel and left the room.

I looked at Kyle. He shrugged. As Mozart was really getting into the finale, Kyle's father returned with a canvas and propped up in front of him on the floor with the wood frame and bare back facing us. "You're not going to believe this," he said, turning the canvas about to reveal a painting of a woman. She was blond and, although I wouldn't have said she was, as he insisted, "a dead ringer" for me, there was marked resemblance. She was pictured against a verdant backdrop of flowering vegetation, somewhat in the manner of Henri Rousseau. She was looking directly at you with, clearly, sheer effrontery. She was also completely naked.

Viking princesses blush rather spectacularly and I was aware of the fact that I was doing it. Kyle's father just kept muttering, "Amazing. Amazing. To be visited by such a sheer semblance of the imagination. Right here in my house. In the flesh. Amazing."

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“Dad, for God’s sake,” Kyle said.

“Oh, I don’t think he had anything to do with it. Coincidence, serendipity, something in the random universe rolling two of a kind, but not Nobodaddy.”

“You’re embarrassing Jen, Dad. Can’t you see how inappropriate this is?”

“What’s inappropriate about it?”

“It’s demeaning, Mr. Morrison,” I said.

“Oh, stuff that Mr. Morrison crap. George. Call me George. It’s a pretty piss-poor name, but ‘tis mine own. And what’s demeaning about it? It’s not you. I’d never met you when I painted it. It’s an ideal. A woman I created from the raw materials of fantasy. I had no model. Then you come along and look just like her. I’d say that’s not demeaning but flattering. And pretty damned amazing.”

“It’s demeaning because it objectifies women,” I insisted.

“Nonsense. Why do people always say that? It doesn’t objectify them. It idealizes them, glorifies them. Why would I, why would any painter, paint something that wasn’t beautiful. Beauty is truth, and truth beauty. That’s all you know and all you need to know. The poet told us.”

“Well, it objectifies me.”

“How could it? I’d not even met you when I painted it.”

I couldn’t quite figure out how to respond to that so I asked him why he couldn’t have painted her with her clothes on.

“I could have. But why would I have wanted to?” He paused, seemed to think about it. “Maybe I will. Goya did.”

“Don’t you see? You thought about it when you saw me and then you brought it out and confronted me with it. It’s . . . it’s embarrassing.”

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“I didn’t confront you with anything. I saw in you a resemblance to a beautiful woman I’d imagined and painted and pointed out the resemblance. It was a serendipity, not an affront. Or at least that was my intent.”

The symphony came to a conclusion, then started over. He must have had it on repeat. “Dad,” Kyle said, “can you turn that off?”

“It’s Mozart.”

“Well, at least turn it down.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that either. This recording has great dynamic range. You’d lose the nuance.” He turned to me. “You know, I like you, Jen Erickson. You’ve got spunk. Used to be everybody was looking for a girl with spunk. Don’t hear much about spunk anymore. Spunk has fallen on hard times. Lou Grant hated spunk but I long for the days when spunkhood was in flower. For my money, a girl’s got to have spunk. And you’ve got it.”

“I’m not a girl. I’m a woman.”

“There you go. Spunk.” I smiled in spite of myself. Bastard! “Do you drink, Jen Erickson?” Without waiting for me to reply, he left the room muttering, “I think we need a drink.” In a moment returned with a bottle in one hand and three glasses held by their edges between his fingers in the other. “Twenty-one-year-old single malt,” he said. “I don’t bring it out for just anyone.” He arrayed the glasses on a table beside one of the chairs and poured. He watched with special interest as I drank mine. “You didn’t ask for ice. Good for you. That would have been a desecration.” He turned to Kyle. “You’re staying for dinner, of course.”

“We hadn’t discussed it.” Actually, we had. Kyle had said his father was a great cook but there was no way of predicting whether he would ask us to stay for dinner. If

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not, he said, we could have another go at selecting a restaurant. That was Kyle's idea of humor. Anyway, I guess it was technically correct to say we hadn't discussed whether we'd stay if asked.

"Freshly baked sourdough bread—just out of the oven before you got here—bigos, salad, a nice cabernet. If you'd brought some second-rater here I'd show you the door and tackle all that myself. But you've brought my dream girl." He looked at me and grinned. "Woman."

Kyle asked him what bigos was.

"Hunter's stew," I said. "You'd know if you were more adventurous about going to restaurants."

Kyle looked a bit embarrassed and his father guffawed. "My boy was never an adventurous eater," he said.

Kyle asked me if I wanted to stay. "Sure," I said. How much more outrageous could things get? I was sure I'd had dinner with men who'd looked at me and saw me without my clothes on, but never with one who'd painted me that way before he'd even met me.

It wasn't too far into the dinner that the Prague Symphony began its third iteration. I looked across the table at Kyle's father and said, "You know, I like the Prague Symphony but maybe we could hear something else."

He laughed.

"So there's this story about Frank Lloyd Wright. He called his family into a room and put on a record of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. They all sat dutifully and listened. When it was over, he said what a great piece it was, how amazing, how much he loved it. Then he said it was so great, he thought he would play it again. Again the family

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sat there and listened and when it was over, he again commented on how sublime the music was, and said he was going to play it again. After he'd played it two or three times, and was threatening yet another playing, finally his daughter jumped up and protested about how, certainly, they weren't going to be required to listen to the symphony yet again. Wright laughed and said, 'See, you can't change anything if you don't say something.'"

"So it was a provocation."

"Everything with Wright was a provocation."

"No, I mean the Prague Symphony."

He paused with a bite of bigos poised on his fork.

"Well, now, more of a test really. And you passed with flying colors. You even knew the music."

Kyle had that look again. I still didn't know what the joke was but I was beginning to suspect that there wasn't any joke. It was just the expression that came from having been being raised by George Morrison.

"What would you like to hear next?"

Kyle and I had very different musical tastes. I listened to classical and jazz, he liked classic rock. So inspired by Kyle's tastes, as well as by our lengthy ascent to get here, I said, "How about 'Stairway to Heaven'?"

Kyle laughed. "Excellent." His father's eyes widened. "A bold choice, Jen Erickson. I'll bet you thought old George didn't have any Led Zeppelin. But somewhere in my vaults I have some old LPs from back then in the '70s. Just you hang on."

He came back to the sounds of:

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*There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven*

“One good provocation deserves another,” he said, grinning across the table at me. With that he began to regale us with the tale of Melville Tawes. “That wasn’t his name, you know. A pen name. His real name was Joshua Stripling. Youngest of ten kids of a pig farmer in Iowa. Made millions writing books with titles like *The Edge of Fear* and *Cold Blood*. Can you imagine picking a book off the rack with the title *The Edge of Fear* if the author was Joshua Stripling? Now, Melville Tawes—that’s different.”

“Kyle tells me he had five wives.”

“Yes he did. Objectified them, I believe.” I thought that a bit of banter based on our previous conversation, but he gave me a very serious look. “Not like *moi*. I put them on a pedestal. I always did Susie.” He grew silent for a moment and I saw that he still missed his wife after all the years that had passed since her death and was touched. When we had all finished our meals he announced that he had made the greatest of all deserts, that which so exceeded all others that it was scarcely necessary to consider them. Kyle filled in the blank before I could be put on the spot. “Cheesecake.”

“Correct.”

“What about peach pie or cobbler when the peaches are perfectly ripe?” I asked.

“There is an argument to be made on behalf of that,” he said, as Kyle was removing our dinner plates. “But the problem is finding the perfectly ripe peach. They’re as rare as . . . well, the perfect woman.”

“Or the perfect man.”

“Point taken. Here’s a story for you. Back when I was practicing law I had this case in front of this senior federal judge. I was defending a public university and the

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plaintiff was a faculty member who claimed he'd been denied due process in the promotion process. The due process rights he claimed he'd been denied were not of constitutional magnitude and I was arguing that old chestnut that there no such thing as a perfect administrative process any more than there is any such thing as a perfect trial. When the judge heard that last part he looked down from the bench and said, 'Oh, I don't know, I've had a few.'"

"Surely he was kidding."

"Yeah, he was. I knew him pretty well. Won the case." The record was over by then and he asked, "What would you like to hear with your cheesecake? Iron Butterfly?"

"How about some Chopin Nocturnes?"

"You know, Jen Erickson, you are a continuing delight. Rubinstein? Arrau? Pires?"

"You choose."

As we were cleaning up the dinner dishes a violent storm suddenly erupted blowing sheets of rain against the windows. "You'd better stay over," he said. "Those stone steps get slick as glass in the rain. If you fell you'd roll for two or three days before you got to the bottom of the hill. I've got a second bedroom. No world leaders, or international diplomats, or captains of industry have ever slept there. But I'd be honored to say Jen Erickson did."

What to make of such a man!

He took us to the room and turned on the light. Of course he didn't ask if there was any question about our sleeping arrangements. "There are extra blankets in the cedar chest at the foot of the bed and there's a full bath through that door there on the other side of the room. Make yourself at home here or anywhere else in the house and let me know

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if you need anything.” After this bit of pedestrian domesticity, he turned to Kyle and said, “Kyle, if you don’t marry this girl you’re a damned fool.”

He departed to the sound of Kyle’s exasperated protestations. “God, he was even worse than I was afraid he’d be.”

“He’s just complicated,” I said, finding myself unexpectedly defending him.

“That’s for sure.” He closed the door. “You know when we have our disagreements, like that one today about where to go for dinner, I try so hard not to get mad. When I was growing up Dad and I fought like cats and dogs. I’ve tried to convince myself that I’ve left that behind. But, you know, they say all guys eventually become their fathers. So I decided it was just time, you know, for you to meet him.”

I saw where this was going and was getting nervous.

“Jen, listen, you know I love you, don’t you?” I told him I did. “And I want to marry you. But I didn’t want to ask you until you’d met him. I don’t think I’m like him, or ever would be like he is now, but who knows? I just wanted you to meet him and realize he’s my dad and he raised me and his influence and the genes and everything may make me more like him than I know. And, after he’s gone, there’s nowhere for his money to go but to me. And that might give me the leisure to be just like him without even realizing it.”

I found it endearing that he was actually worried about inheriting a lot of money.

“Jen?”

“Yes.”

“Will you marry me?”

So there it was, the question I’d been dreading. Not because I didn’t really like Kyle. Maybe I even loved him. But was I ready? I was an intensely private person. How

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would I adjust to a lifetime companion? But, on the other hand, those times when loneliness intruded were pretty dismal. And wouldn't they get more frequent as I got older? But was Kyle the one? Even though he was kind and considerate, and had many admirable qualities, and had a good job, secretly I feared that he was just wasn't very interesting. There it was! I'd not really admitted it to myself, but it was true. There were much worse things than being married to a quietly competent, fundamentally decent striver, but what if, like me, you were easily bored?

"I mean," he continued nervously, "any time you want. There would be no rush. We could be engaged for as long as you want."

"Kyle, I'm not prepared to give you an answer quite yet. But I promise you I will very soon."

The look on his face made me feel I'd been horribly cruel. Honesty can be like that.

That night I lay awake facing the wall that directly abutted my side of the bed. I reached out and touched it. It was cold like the loneliness that sometimes invaded my privacy. On the other side of me Kyle stirred slightly in his sleep, the rhythm of his breathing steady and reassuring. He was probably afraid that my hesitancy in giving him an answer was because of concerns that he would become like his father. But, beyond the fact of my general fears of commitment, I was gradually coming to realize that my concern was really quite different. I was afraid that he wouldn't become like his father enough.