

Blind Date

It takes a lot to drag me away from exploring the old Copper mine or backpacking the Green Mountains. Kevin's girlfriend can be a lot—when my backpacking buddy gets pulled off the trail, I tend to follow. The quicker we pacify Brenda, the quicker we get back to what we really love. I don't know why he hasn't dumped her already. Anyway, she has this foreign exchange student friend from Marlboro—Marlboro College, it's about a twenty-minute drive from Ravens Town—where we live. Brenda insists that I be drug along for a set-up—I mean blind date.

That's what I call it anyway. It's happened before. Brenda thinks that we are her man-dolls, and she is destined to be a great matchmaker. Fat chance of that. I go through the motions, but my heart is back out on the trail. This time is a little different—I forget about the mountains and Copper mine for a bit. After the movie, Kevin and Brenda have to split—yeah, you know the drill. So, I end up walking Lovisa—that's Brenda's friend—downtown to her apartment.

Though the fall evening has still not lost itself into the dark of night, we can already see the moon fading into existence in front of us above the Ravens Town United Methodist Church at the end of Main Street. The shadowed orb skewered on the steeple like a giant onion on the end of a shish kabob.

Lovisa is wearing jeans and a black tank top hinted at by a single strap visible under the slouching shoulders of her red sweater. Her tall leather boots mimic the shade of brown of her hair which she has pulled back into a pony-tail—a surprise, since the only thing Brenda had told me was that her friend was Swedish.

Our steps draw closer toward the end of Main Street; and I find my attention briefly drawn to a flier stapled to a light pole protruding through the concrete sidewalk:

Missing

Dalton Farmer

Age: 24

Height: 6' 0" Weight: 184lbs

Last seen wearing blue jeans, green shirt and denim jacket,

Carrying black Burton backpack.

“You know, I don’t ever remember seeing these missing signs when I was a kid, but this is the third one this month.”

“Yes, they telling us at university to be watching. People disappear. That why I don’t go much out places.”

She is walking very close to me as we draw nearer her apartment. I presume this is due to the fall chill that is growing as the sun continues its descent. Pretty soon the catfish will be biting. It will be a good night for a bon-fire and beers—you know, the original B&B. Wonder if they have catfish in Sweden?

“You know, tonight has been kind of fun.” Not sure if this sounds like a line; I’ve never made it this far. And you never know, she might like to fish and who doesn’t like bonfires and beer?

I hate to admit it, but I am getting hung up on her accent, “I know. Evening is well, it is not? I feel like— “

“Then, why does it have to stop?” Here we go, I’m finally going to land me a date to a bonfire. Kevin does get kind of boring after his third beer.

“*But*, I promise myself, it is slow this time. I always one of those, who you say, leaps before they look. Disaster always follows,” she is avoiding looking me in the eyes.

“You know, Lovisa,” I’m still not sure if I am pronouncing her name just right but she humors me without any correction. “We are big on traditions around here. We have the fall tradition of having bonfires...”

A light wind starts blowing the scattered leaves across the street as I continue to try to sell her on our B&B traditions. Most of the shops are closed, looking vacant with their dark windows. Main Street rolls its welcome mat up early in the fall.

“You said your apartment is above the bakery, right?” I quickly change the subject before making myself look too desperate—she’s obviously not buying this whole tradition angle—as we arrive at the storefront to Parson’s Bakery. There is mail spilling onto the sidewalk from the mailbox hanging beside the door and a growing stack of newspapers threatening to hitch a ride on the evening breeze.

Mr. Parson was one of the first downtown business to convert his second floor—that had been vacant since the fire of 1913 obliterated the raised boardwalks—into apartments. The other businesses quickly followed his lead hoping to capitalize on the need with the opening of Marlboro College in 1946.

“Yes, my how you say, home away from home while at university.” Lovisa’s blue eyes staring into mine this time. “The door is around corner.”

“Has Mr. Parson been sick? I’ve noticed the bakery hasn’t been open in a couple of weeks.”

I used to come here as a kid with my grandparents for pastries. I remember Mr. Parson prided himself on being open every day but Sundays when he was always at the United Methodist Church. That has to be about forty years with only one day off a week.

“I, uhh, do not remember well, but he say something about trip.” She seems startled by my question, but I guess she is still having trouble piecing the words together.

“Well, I guess after forty years, the man is due a vacation.”

We step around the corner to find a large oak door with a brass plaque reading:

Parson’s Flats

917 Main Street

I step in front of her just quickly enough to grab the antique brass latch holding the door closed and pull the door open for her. There is a narrow hallway leading to a stairway climbing to the left just before a second door at the end. All of this is clearly lit by a single long fluorescent fixture hanging from the ceiling.

I follow her to the bottom of the stairway.

“Well, I guess this is it.” Yeah, a desperate line from someone who has reached the end of the line but isn’t ready to give up just yet.

“Is, it?” Lovisa handled the language well, but still struggles with what I feel are simple expressions.

“Where we say good-bye.”

“Good-bye, good-bye, yes. This is it. Where we say good-bye.”

“I’ll call you later sometime. Will that be okay?” Being polite and mannerly has never come easy. Not something I’ve been used to—I usually prefer to duck out of one of these setups when no one is looking.

“Call me? Yes, that will be fine.” Her tone this time lets me know that I have drawn this good-bye out far too long.

I turn and head back out the oak door into the alley beyond. A quick glimpse back shows Lovisa still standing on the first step watching my retreat. I close the door behind me, hearing the click of the latch as it slides back into place.

Alone in the alley between the bakery and Tweed's furniture store, I see a slender calico cat pacing the rim of the dumpster at the dead-end. I wonder if it is deciding between some leftovers from Mr. Tweed's lunch, some weeks-old bake goods, or possibly a rodent scavenging for leftovers in the dark depths of the pit of refuse. Whatever, its motives, I soon notice that its fur appears matted and clumped with something dark—though it is hard to tell under the light at the end of the alley. I don't really have an interest in getting a closer look. No matter how much time I waste in the alley, Lovisa is not coming back out.

I turn to exit the alley—bonfire bound. A clanging, sounding vaguely like metal being dropped on concrete, is muffled behind the oak door. I grasp the handle again and jerk the door open to check on Lovisa. The hallway is completely empty. She has obviously made her way up to her apartment; but the door at the end of the hallway leading into the bakery is ajar. More clanging leaks through the cracked door. If Mr. Parson is gone, then who is in the bakery?

The door opens into a small room adjacent the store counter. In the middle of a row of counters on the left is a swinging metal door leading into the kitchen. There is a small plastic window in the swinging door which has become so stained and scratched that it ceased to transmit light long ago. A very faint glow creeps through the crack beneath the door beckoning me deeper into the bakery kitchen.

The door swings silently under my gentle nudge. I ease through with careful steps trying to land my Salomon trail runners as quietly as possible. The clanging is mixed with a guttural slurping noise. It almost sounds like words, but they are quickly drowned by the sound of a motor whirring to life. The lights and sounds are carrying around the corner of a large walk-in refrigerator. I keep my back pressed against the walk-in as I inch closer to the corner. Small droplets of sweat bead up and drip from the edges of my forehead, splash to the concrete floor, and glisten in the light. Each one sounds like a bomb going off in my head. Grabbing my shirt tail, I pull it up to wipe away the gathering sortie of moisture. My legs quake like I'm trying to gain my balance on the deck of a boat in open water. It is that moment when I know, *it is a voice.*

It is a cross between screeching finger nails along a blackboard and the wet, rumbling sound of phlegm caught in the back of your throat, “Careless, how could so careless I am. Knew him they would miss, I did. Gone too long, he be. Careless . . .” There are more mumblings drowned out as the motor ramps up to a faster speed. At least, that is more recognizable now—a commercial mixer.

Alarms start going off in my brain. I know I should run, but I must, no I *need* to make sure Lovisa is safe. Images of the cat from the alley giving up his ninth life keep replaying in my head. When have I ever done the safe or smart thing? I ease around the corner; or at least I try to. My feet resist every command I give them to move. Glancing up, I see a row of stainless steel work counters, just beyond this row is a large hulking shape standing in front of a second stainless-steel table beside a large mixer stamped with the name HOBART on the front. Realizing my feet are frozen in time, I crouch down with my back against the wall trying to get control of my body.

What is that thing? From the quick glimpse, it looks several inches taller than me, making it six and a half to seven feet tall. There is something strangely feminine about it. But what? I must have another look; and feet, you’re going to have to cooperate. I lean over onto all fours and slowly crawl around the corner toward that first row of counters.

“Careless, but fixed can be,” the horrible voice continues talking to itself. “We fill shelves with eats and open business. All be normal. J’Asgarope fix all.”

Pressing my head against the floor, I try to look under the counters to get a view of the other side. The gap is just too tight to see beyond. Hand over hand, I slowly crawl toward the end of the row. The drone of the mixer starts again, drowning out the mumblings of the creature. Every inch seems like an eternity, and the counter is getting longer with each crawling movement. My heart is pounding so loud, I know that thing can hear me if it wasn’t for that mixer.

The whirring stops.

I freeze just as my hand sinks into something wet and sticky. I resist the urge to jerk my hand back and slowly turn to get a look. A thick dark red liquid—*blood*—is puddling around my hand. Tracing the tributaries feeding the puddle reveals a pile of body parts on the floor at the end of the counter leaching any remaining blood onto the tile around it. Bile burns the back of my throat as it rises threatening to burst. Closing

my eyes tight, I am finally able to choke it back and still my nerves enough to continue toward the corner, closer to that horrific pile of death.

“They be liking my recipes,” the creature accentuates its comment with a loud slurping sound.

The voice jars me back to reality as my breath catches in my chest. I push onto the balls of my feet trying to stay crouched low enough to not be seen above the counter. Duckwalking the rest of the way, I cringe and stop with each splashing step fearing the creature can hear me.

An eternity passes, and I arrive at the corner of the counter, face to face with the pile of body parts. I’m close enough now to see the ligaments and tendons that have been ripped from around the joints of the individual bones. There is an arm with the hair covered skin ripped and mangled from the elbow while a ring still clings to one finger and a golden watch dangles around the wrist. A torn disarticulated ankle protrudes from behind the tongue of a blue and day-glow green Nike with blood-soaked laces. From the back of the flesh pile, I can see a calico colored tail matted with blood.

I feel the goose flesh pop on the back of my neck, that warning alarm that someone is watching you. The feeling extends to the top of my head. I know my hair is standing on end as if my hand was on a Van de Graaff generator. I freeze using every ounce of control not to make a sound as something reaches from the other side of the counter and grabs a dripping disarticulated leg from the pile. That something looks like an arm, but in place of a hand are three long tentacles extending at opposite angles. These tentacles coil around the detached limb like a snake wrapping around its prey before squeezing the life out of it. The arm recoils clutching its latest acquisition, I glance up at the muddled reflection of the creature in the stainless-steel of another walk-in cooler.

The distorted reflection gives me a fuller view, but only amplifies the confusion of what I am feet away from. The tentacled arm is attached to a tall slender creature. Both its arms and legs seem to be unnaturally long. More of the willowy appendages attached to its lower legs writhe in all directions. Even more feelers hang from its head like living dreadlocks. There are openings lined up and down the creature’s long neck which seem to open and close rhythmically. I hear pounding in my head as my pulse quickens and I know my breathing must be echoing around the kitchen as I try to regain control.

If I turn around now, I can ease back out the way I came and get help. . . Who am I kidding? No one is going to believe that there is a monster cooking body parts in the kitchen of Mr. Parson's bakery. My God, is that really what this thing is doing? Cooking body parts? . . . What about Lovisa? She is still in here somewhere. I must find her. I wish Kevin were here, he's always been the plan maker.

I hear a ripping and tearing noise which I can only guess is flesh being torn free from the limb. Now, the crunch of bone as it sounds like something is being pounded onto the counter top with reverberating booms echoing throughout the kitchen. Finally, the drone of the mixer begins again.

The wriggling limbs reach out again, grasping a thigh from the pile. This is getting too close for comfort. Turning, I inch toward the opposite end of the counter, putting as much distance between me and that thing's ingredients as possible.

So, I've got some kind of creature cooking up body parts in Mr. Parson's Bakery. I'll never convince anybody to help me. Lovisa is still in here somewhere. Somebody has to do something. Kevin's not here. Well, Nick ol' boy, looks like you just drew the short straw.

The pounding starts to grow in the back of my head and ears again. I stay in a crouch working my way around the counter and closer to this thing. Its tentacles move with the grace of a concert pianist's fingers as it rips flesh from the mangled bones tossing it into the churning mixer. The process is so thorough that the bones are completely clean before it pounds them into the countertop crushing them into small pieces that get scrapped into the mixing bowl as well. Trying to keep my supper safely contained in my stomach, I'm surprised at how mesmerizing it is to watch the hypnotizing movements of this creature. Not just the tentacles but the entire body twists and turns to a beat like the one pounding in my head.

Okay, new plan. I can't stop that thing by myself—not even if I had a weapon. I'll see if I can find Lovisa in her apartment. Then we'll go get help, or at least leave Ol' Dreadlocks behind and get the heck outta Dodge.

Shifting my weight onto the balls of my feet, I turn to retrace my steps back to the hallway. . .
CLANG.

The sound of metal reverberates through the room even over the drone of the mixer. I turn to see a ten-inch serrated knife lying on the floor knocked from its resting place as my body brushes against a counter.

Too late for knives now. In a split second, my head spins back to Dready-boy just in time to see its tentacles whirring in a circle as it turns to face me. The pounding in my head stops. All I can see is the bumpy, scaly skin all over the top of the creature's face where its eyes should be. It doesn't have any eyes.

The next thing to register should have been the most obvious. A writhing appendage—err... arm—was reaching out for me. Spinning, I launch past the countertops and tables. There is a doorway on the left at the end of the kitchen. Not daring to look back, my legs keep pumping. Ducking through the opening, I catch a glimpse of a sign on the wall. NOT AN EXIT. This night just keeps getting better.

From all the stacked boxes and supplies, it appears I've stumbled into the storage room. My grandmother would call it a pantry. My grandmother also warned me about dating college girls—especially college girls from out of town.

Too late now. There are large bags of flour stacked near the back corner of the room on pallets. Ducking behind them, I try to quiet my breathing.

Hours seem to tick by, but I know it has only been a couple of minutes. That thing has had plenty of time to chase me in here. Maybe it didn't really see me. I mean it doesn't have any eyes. It could have been just reaching out with those feelers to find what the noise was.

“Nick.”

My breath catches in my chest. It couldn't be.

“Nick, you are here?” the Swedish voice whispers again.

“Lovisa, is that you?” I can't believe I have found her—or she's found me. I can't believe she is trapped in here with me.

“Yes, Nick. That thing, what is thing?” She walks further into the room as I pop up from my hiding place.

“I don't know Lovisa. But we have to get out of here.” A strange feeling of comfort comes over me as I wrap my arm around her. The synapses keep firing, struggling to remember a way out of this place.

“But Nick, this no out,” her reply is so innocently obvious, it almost sounds condescending.

“Yeah, I figured that one out. I was kind of running for my life,” the words coming a bit harsher than intended. The sting in her eyes advocating the sincerity of her comment.

“There is out, I take us there.” She takes my hand and leads me out of the storage room.

“Did you see it? Slow down, it might be right outside the doorway,” trying to disguise the fear in my voice, we stop to peer around the corner.

No creature in sight. But where could it have gone?

“Come Nick. We be there soon.” Lovisa starts through the doorway walking straight into the kitchen, heading toward the Hobart mixer.

“What are you doing? That’s where that thing was.” I try to pull away, but her grip is surprisingly strong.

A quick glance at our hands reveals three long tentacles gripping my hand tightly and coiling around my forearm like snakes.

This can’t be.

I look up into Lovisa’s beautiful face. Into her eyes. Eyes that I found myself lost in just hours ago. Eyes that now appear hollow and dark. Eyes that begin to disappear. Eyes replaced by bumpy, scaly skin framed by writhing dreadlocks.

She . . . It raises another tentacled arm and my eyes fix on the word HOBART stamped to the mixer.

The sun rises in a clear New England sky with the crisp bite of fall in the air. Its rays glisten off the silver hair of a petite woman walking up Main Street. Suddenly, an almost child-like energy fills her eyes and her pace quickens. There is an OPEN sign hanging in the window of Parson’s Bakery.

“He must finally be back. This is so exciting, we have missed having that fresh bread at home.” Her voice only hints of the frailty of her age, but her tone reflects the energy of her walk.

A small brass bell attached to the top of the door rings as she steps into the bakery and is taken back almost twenty years. She remembers the days when she and her husband would bring their grandson here for a confectionary treat. He was so young then, just a small boy. Maybe, I’ll pick him a pastry—he never refuses one.

Just as then, the cases are filled with not only breads of all shapes and sizes but sweet and flakey delights certain to break even the strongest dietary devotion.

“It will never cease to amaze me how Mr. Parson can make so many items by himself,” she continues to look up and down the cases in longing amazement—unaware she is talking to herself.

“Pardon, miss? Help you I can?” A young Swedish girl has appeared behind the counter so quickly that the silver-haired customer is suddenly startled out of her trance.

“Oh, my heavens. You gave me a start.”

“Apologies. I help if you need.” The broken English mixing with the accent of her homeland.

“I was just expecting Mr. Parson,” the elderly patron continues to pat her chest as she regains control of her breathing. “I haven’t seen you before. Are you new to the area? Do you go to the college?”

“Yes. My name Lovisa.”