

Marie and Danny had been arguing a lot, lately. And for a while now, Danny had been lying—about all kinds of things, even inconsequential things; so, he was probably also lying when he said he wasn't sleeping around, again.

Over the years, Marie had tolerated and made excuses for Danny's behavior, but she finally reached her limit when, last night, he had come home drunk, again, and wanted to have sex, again, but she didn't.

So, *this* morning, Marie awoke bruised and depressed, and she said to herself, "That's it!" She dusted-off her determination, made-up her mind, and began planning her departure.

In the beginning, Danny had been so nice, just like other men. But just like *some* other men, *sometimes*, he put his hands on her when he was angry. However, this last time, he had been exceedingly cruel and violent, such that Marie's ability to bounce back irrevocably failed.

Danny was one of the founding partners of a high-tech start-up. His business had been going through a series of set-backs, so his increased drinking and recent bouts of anger were probably fallout from his business problems, not stemming from anything that was happening in his relationship with Marie. And although Marie was emotionally attached with Danny, she wasn't economically dependent upon him; she was lead chef at one of the most popular and highly praised restaurants in the city. She had studied hard, worked hard and had put up with a lot of crap from a lot of people, all in the process of becoming a highly skilled chef. Given the quality of her resumé, she could market her skills anywhere in the world; so, when she weighed her options, personal and professional, she concluded that her life would be better if she left him.

Marie and Danny had initially met at a party being given by one of her co-workers. Marie didn't know her co-worker very well, and her co-worker didn't know Danny *at all*, so there had been no one to introduce them to one another. He had come to the party with a friend-of-a-friend. Marie had come alone.

Marie occasionally spotted him among the partiers. Dark hair, pulled-back into a businessman's ponytail. Warm, deep-set brown eyes. Lean, clean-shaven face. A runner's body clothed in sweater, slacks, stylish shoes—casual, but well-groomed. In loose-fitting peasant blouse and long skirt, Marie felt plain and plainly dressed, by comparison.

She surmised that he didn't know anyone because he was never in one spot for long, and he barely sampled the food, which was varied and delicious.

The music was festive, and Marie noticed one man and two different women ask him to dance, but he had declined. He remained on the periphery, an observer, not joining-in, although he didn't appear to be uncomfortable or ill-at-ease.

His good looks, yet solitary mien, in the midst of a really good party might have served as a clue or a caution about... *something*, but Marie was in no position to make judgments about his behavior, especially because his so closely resembled her own. He, the solitary voyeur; she, observing the observer.

The party rocked-on; their orbits eventually intersected. Pleasant conversation ensued.

She was drawn to the soothing tone of his voice, the poetic cadence of his speech. He was charmed by the expressiveness of her hands, the way they traced delicate patterns in the air as she spoke, like she was using her own personal sign language.

A slow, sultry song came drifting through the speakers; a satin-voiced female was singing in Spanish. He asked her to dance. Their bodies pressed together. They continued to talk while their hips were swaying with the music, and their hands were making tentative explorations over the unfamiliar territory of a newly discovered body.

Shortly thereafter, their affair began, much like all affairs begin: high-flying romance and the always-ever-new. Both were swept-along, uplifted and soaring on their passion. Soon, they began cohabitating, either at his place or hers, but rarely apart.

When they initially moved-in together, they were both thirsty for a committed relationship, ready to embark upon a domestic adventure. Each harbored the belief that a stable domestic situation was the one missing element in the equation for personal happiness and professional success. And for a time, things went well, but a truly comfortable, rich harmony eluded them.

Here were two strong individuals, each assiduously and ambitiously pursuing a career. Thus, all too often, it was a struggle to find a balance between wanting to be together, finding time to be together, yet also wanting to maintain a bit of autonomy: "Once in a while, I just want go and hangout with *my* friends, not *our* friends." Or sometimes simply seeking an occasional modicum of solitude: "I want the whole house all to myself at least *once* in a while."

Over time, once-fascinating anecdotes became boring yarns told more than once too often. Over time, attentiveness attenuated into apathy.

To Marie, this state of affairs was not, in and of itself, a major tragedy or an insurmountable challenge. She had been through it before, with both men *and* restaurants. One day, you wake up and realize that the honeymoon is over. The rousing romantic adventure has faded and become... something else. You have unconsciously settled-into a mundane, day-to-day routine.

But, for Marie, something snapped with this most recent episode of unprovoked violence. So, it was fortunate and timely that, one night, not too long before, Marie and some of the staff were hanging around the restaurant after closing-time. They were

drinking and chatting, and a co-worker told the fascinating story of his long and tortuous journey as a refugee coming from Myanmar to America. A portion of his journey had involved securing a berth on a container ship, just like in old movies. However, his tale lacked the excitement and adventure that's depicted in old movies. He described his experience as, mostly, endless hours of monotony and being alone. This description, instead of repelling Marie, was appealing. She welcomed the prospect for a period of peace and solitude in-between her present situation and her destination.

Of course, she hadn't told Danny she was leaving. She packed and departed while he was at work. Her large black duffle bag and her hiking backpack were full, straining the zippers. These two shapeless bags contained all she considered essential: her clothes, her cookbooks, and her prized collection of chef's knives.

It was late afternoon when Marie boarded the container ship, *Schalren*. And in accordance with the ancient rhythm of the tides, in the early evening, the *Schalren* weighed anchor and slipped her lines. The vessel was fully laden, riding low in the water; two tugboats nudged her from her berth. Shortly thereafter, under her own power, the *Schalren* came about, cleared the harbor channel, and sailed-forth into the inky night.

On board, in dim cabinlight, Marie, the sole paying passenger peers from her porthole. Her puffy, heavy-lidded eyes woodenly stare at the passing shoreline, and much like her past, the land sloughs-away like a snake shedding its skin.

She reaches up and slowly closes the porthole. Closing-out the view. Closing-out the night. Closing-out the memories.

She sat on her bunk and reflected upon her life, and she faced the fact that there were, of course, other issues in her life that she needed to address, for there was more to her life than Danny; her life hadn't been *only* about him. And right then, she vowed to do whatever it takes to become a more and better-balanced person.

As a practical first step, she got down onto the cabin floor and began a series of yoga exercises that facilitate embracing change as a way of promoting positive personal growth.

At the conclusion of the yoga session, Marie closed her eyes and slowly exhaled; and in that razor-thin instant before her next in-breath, she suddenly became acutely aware of the sundry sounds of the ship. One-by-one, she recognized them, as if for the first time: The chugging drone of the diesel engines; The footsteps and voices of the ship's crew as they went about their tasks; The background rattle of anything and everything that wasn't tightly secured, vibrating in response to the churning rhythm of the crankshaft turning the ship's propellers.

Marie slept well that night.

The next day, however, rough seas provided Marie with her first experience of being seasick. She discovered that neither standing nor sitting gave her any relief. And lying down was out of the question! Down on-all-fours felt best. Head lolling.

The this-isn't-going-to-go-away feeling when being seasick reminded Marie of the only time she experienced a full-term pregnancy, delivering a daughter who was now living with Mama. The girl was better-off with Mama. Mama knew how to raise children. Mama *lived* for raising children. Mama was most alive when raising children.

Mama's need to be mothering was so strong that, as soon as all of her own children had left home, she had begun taking-in homeless children. Some of these children weren't very nice, but Mama cared for them anyway, always forgiving them because, to her mind, they were innocent victims of the abuse that had already been inflicted on them, which had damaged their capabilities for harmoniously relating to others. As far as Mama was concerned, anything was better than seeing these children suffer; anything was better than being alone. But some of them had stolen from her. One or two of the older ones had even hit her. When that had happened, Mama's own children intervened and kicked *all* of the children out. Mama had cried, even for the "bad" ones.

So, yes, her daughter was better off with Mama. Mama would see to it that she had everything that she needed to grow-up and be a proud, decent woman.

Marie sometimes felt guilty about not raising her own daughter, but she had also accepted and learned to live with the fact that she was neither born with, nor able to cultivate, the mothering instinct. From the very beginning, she was uncomfortable with and lacked patience for the rigors of motherhood: up all hours of the day and night breast-feeding, the constant crying, the constant drooling and spitting-up, the constant steam of dirty diapers, diaper rash, the colic. Each time she made the attempt to be a good-and-loving mother, it felt so awkward and unnatural that none of her attempts were either truly satisfying or even marginally successful.

And the same could be said about her record for successfully sustaining relationships with men: None of those attempts had turned-out to be truly satisfying or successful, despite the fact that she liked men, wanted to bond with them, care for them, and love them.

Marie recalled some of the men whom she had loved, and how they often reminded her of children—cute and needy, in an adorable way. She would take a-liking to them, and let them into her heart. She wondered if she had inherited this tendency from her mother; and if so, was she also, therefore, doomed to repeat her mother's mistakes?

But, even the cute and adorable ones can turn ugly and make themselves undesirable and unlovable by becoming abusive. It starts with the yelling, and the cursing, and the calling-of-names. And before you know it, he's standing in front of you;

then, he's looming *over* you; next, you're flinching in anticipation of that first strike, and when it happens, it penetrates you, all the way down to your very soul. It is an assault born of fear, anger, and confusion: It is the beginning of the end.

Marie slowly shook her head from side to side in the darkness. In her mind burned, "If men would only realize, all they have to do is talk, just talk. And sometimes listen, just listen. It's so simple. Why can't men see it, understand it, and want it, too?"

Everyone is simply pursuing the simple desire for one-to-one contact, trying not to feel so all alone. But achieving a true and lasting connection is usually and ultimately frustrated, mostly, because we are reluctant, if at all able, to face and accept who we *really* are, ourselves.

Each of us, as seen by the other, is a bundle of as-yet-undeciphered symbols, and as a result of our unique life-experiences, even when we speak the same language, we are all, essentially, speaking in tongues to each another; and since, when we speak, we expect both recognition and understanding in response, we become perplexed when our utterances are received with consternation and confusion, especially in those instances when we are in the process of sharing our innermost thoughts and deepest feelings with our allies, our confidantes, our loved ones!

As these thoughts receded, Marie's seasick feeling began diminish as well. She got up onto one knee. Then, while bracing herself with one hand against the bulkhead, she shakily stood, resembling an infant still learning to take its first steps. With her outstretched hand, she grabbed onto the edge of the bunk, pulled herself into a fully-vertical position, and worked her way over to the pull-down washing basin. She wet a towel with cool water and rubbed it over her face and across the back of her neck. She shuffled over to the bunk, sat, and then slowly unfolded into a prone position.

As she lay there, she wondered if, when the ship docked, would there be a "Mr. Right" out there, somewhere. Maybe, she had already met him, but hadn't recognized him!

But, isn't "Mr. Right" supposed to stand out from the crowd? Isn't he supposed to be easily distinguished from the mama's boys, the abusers, the users, the losers? Shouldn't "Mr. Right" stand out like a lighthouse, a beacon to keep you from crashing upon the rocks or running aground, instead, lighting the way leading to safe harbor, safe haven, and a damn good, satisfying roll in the hay?

But "Mr. Right" must be a myth, right? And since "Mr. Right" never seems to show up on time, if at all, it becomes way too easy to settle for "Mr. Almost-Right", or "Mr. He's Alright, But-He's-Going-to-Need-A-Little Work".

The *Schalren* had cruised-out into open water, and even someone who had never been out to sea would have noticed the difference. Marie certainly did; for, instead of

making her feel sick, the more powerful, steady rhythm of the open sea had a soothing effect.

Throughout the remainder of the voyage, Marie continued to heal while re-discovering and re-creating her self.