

## BEAVER AT HIS PARENTS': EPISODE 1

### “Reasonable Foreseeability”

by Norman Crane

#### About the Author, i.e. me

I live in Canada. I write books. I'm also a historian, a wise guy and a cinephile. When I'm not writing, I'm probably reading or trying to cook. Philip Dick, Haruki Murakami and Graham Greene are some of my favourite authors. I enjoy fiction that makes me curious because curiosity makes me creative. I peer under mossy rocks, knock on hollow trees and believe in hidden passageways—not because I have proof of their existence, but because imagining them is itself the reward. I like non-fiction for the same reason. I also like computers, text editors and mechanical keyboards.

For more info and links to my writing, please visit my website: [normancrane.ca](http://normancrane.ca)

### “Reasonable Foreseeability”

The restaurant's windows face the street. Nobody passes outside. The falling snow scintillates like television static. Inside, the electric glow warms us in orange. I glance at the Christmas tree standing in the corner, whose lights fade in and out of white, then close my eyes. I hear forks striking plates, pasta being sucked into mouths, children laughing, every note of the synth-heavy Christmas instrumental playing on the radio.

“Are you all right?” Rosie asks. She always says all right as two words. She never says OK.

I open my eyes and smile. “Perfect.”

She wipes the corner of her mouth with a napkin, folds the napkin and puts it back on the table. I don't know how to fold napkins. I have to concentrate not to wipe myself with the back of my hand. Embarrassed, I look at my feet, which fit snugly into the first pair of elegant winter boots I've ever had: dark leather that shines because I've been polishing it every night before bed. Everything here shines, and Rosie most of all. She has beautiful skin, beautiful eyes and she's so well groomed the only creature I can think to compare her to is a horse, but even in my head that sounds ridiculous. No woman wants to be compared to a horse. A mermaid? I imagine Disney's Ariel but perhaps that's too nauseatingly romantic even considering the season. Perhaps it's also too childish. I'm not a child anymore. And mermaids probably smell like fish. Rosie smells like Jamaican rum and peaches.

“Did you enjoy dinner?”

“Yes,” I say. I don't don't remember what we had, but it was delicious.

She reaches over the table and puts her hand over mine. “Because you’re speaking in syllables again, and I know you well enough to know that a silent Charlie is a troubled Charlie.”

Genuine concern gazes at me through her pupils. And love?

*And love.*

“You feel like spring,” I blurt out.

“What?” She takes her hand away, and mine immediately freezes over as if I’d punched the window and stuck my fist into the snowstorm raging outside. “Charlie, my God.”

My cheeks burn. Apparently my weather’s all confused. I need a weatherman. A *weatherperson*. There’s a gorgeous one on the local news, but the last thing I need now is an erection. One radio song ends, another begins. This one sounds like the theme from Tetris. Blocks fall from the top of my mind. None of them fit. My screen fills up. Game over, I think. I think: I wish I could tell you the truth: I’m happy: happier than I’ve ever been. “I don’t want this evening to end.” I don’t want this life to end. I don’t want us to end. What I want for us is the sprawling backyard, the picket fence and the house full of kids. My God, anything but domestic fantasies. I’d rather fantasise about the *weatherperson* again. Men don’t have fantasies about weddings and interior design. I learned that in third grade with the force of a well placed punch to the liver and the trauma of being told I was a fag.

Now Rosie’s hand feels icy against my cheek. “That is utterly romantic.” Her lips pulling away from mine taste of wine. “I didn’t know you were a romantic, Charlie.”

I love the way she says my name.

“Neither did I.”

She says it the same way she stands in court and says the name of one of her deadbeat clients, imbuing it with dignity and respect, if only for a single second of one court appearance.

She’s not the first woman I’ve ever been in love with, but she is the first I’ve been in love with this much. I want to see her body clad in a wedding dress, her face behind a veil. I’m already wearing a suit. The veil fades in and out of existence in tune with the Christmas tree lights. I have to blink to make it go away.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” she asks.

I expect a punch to the liver.

But I gather my courage, pick up my glass of wine and down what remains in it only because I’ve seen that done in movies and it looks dramatic, and say, “I want to tell you...” (I love you.) There wasn’t nearly enough wine. There are too many people and what if they’re staring at me,

expecting a marriage proposal, waiting for the right moment to clap and offer their anonymous congratulations.

“Yes?”

I can't believe I've stood up in court rooms and told barefaced lies. I can't believe I passed my bar exams. I'm in third grade again. That's why everyone in the restaurant is staring. I've aged backwards in one swig of white wine. Of course, I know that's not true. I know nobody is actually staring, and Rosie is looking at me with the quizzical expression of a lawyer watching the other side's key witness implode on the witness stand. I'm to the point where I don't even need any helpful goading. I've already dug half of my own grave. I brace myself for an explosion of laughter. Or silence. For which, behind the wall of Tetris blocks in my mind, waits an army of crickets. “I want to tell you that I like being with you every day and I want to take our relationship to the next level.”

Rosie smiles but doesn't laugh. I cringe. The next level? “What I mean,” I add before she can say anything, “is that I'm thinking seriously about our relationship and I'd like you to do the same.” I highlight the last clause of that sentence and backspace it out of existence. What is said cannot unsaid, but it can be said over. “I *wish* you will do the same.”

“Is that your Christmas wish?” she asks.

“It's my Christmas wish.”

“And can you verify that with documentary evidence?” She flashes a smile again. “Say, with a letter to Santa?”

“An email.”

“Will the email prove admissible?”

“I believe the court may be persuaded to accept such documentary evidence under the business records exception.”

“I like you, Charlie,” she says and bends sideways to paw around in her handbag.

It's close to but not quite the word I wanted to hear—or to say myself. But it'll do. My heart begins its descent from my throat. “What's *your* Christmas wish?” I ask as an earnest form of misdirection.

She pulls out a key and holds it out to me. I take it. “I want you to live with me in my apartment,” she says.

This time I rise, lean over the table and give her a kiss, hoping that I'm doing it properly, with enough feeling and without dipping my tie into the leftovers on my plate like an uncultured slob. When we separate I discreetly slide my fingers over my tie checking for wet spots. I feel none.

I'm satisfied. Rosie looks satisfied too. I've never wanted to appear as professional as I do now. Rosie has such a professional approach to everything. "Has Winterson or one of the other partners spoken to you about a place at the firm after you finish your articling term?" she asks.

They have. "I haven't signed anything but I've been promised a place," I say.

"It's best to get it in writing."

And we both burst out laughing no less maniacally than the kids at the nearest table, who are watching YouTube videos on a smart phone.

Whenever she laughs, Rosie's face loses its smoothness and reveals the lines, creases and wrinkles around her eyes and on her neck. Her happiness reveals time, a revelation that is itself sad because it suggests all happiness—like all time—must pass. Rosie is almost a decade older than me. I am thinking about neither of these two things.

"Good," she says after we settle down.

Although she rarely allows herself such moments of unbridled enthusiasm, whenever she does she follows them up with an equally intense dose of seriousness. "So what's going to happen to Boris?"

Boris is the other articling student at the law firm Winterson & Partners. For the last nine months we've been competing for the same job. "I'm sure he'll find a place at one of the other firms. He's a smart guy and he'll be a smart lawyer," I say.

Rosie nods. "But he's not as smart as you."

Compliments from Rosie are rare, so I cherish every one—with an awkward silence, because getting a compliment is too much like getting a gift, which is nothing less than becoming a lab rat in an experiment run by people who sincerely care about you. Rosie watches me for any reactions. I try to have none. "Oh, I'm sure it was my vast arsenal of social skills that won it for me," I joke.

I pay for dinner because that's what men do and when we walk outside into the voluminously falling static I put my arm around Rosie's waist with as little hesitation as I can muster. Confidence is a sham, but projecting it is a skill and anyone who says there is no magic outside of books has a limited definition of illusion. Mine works, just as it works in the courtroom, over the phone and in examinations for discovery. Rosie snuggles against my shoulder. The snow piles up on our heads and shoulders. The Ontario cold snaps at my skin. I barely see where I'm going. I vaguely remember where I parked. I'm proud of myself for telling Rosie some of what I feel and thrilled she feels some of the same. Although I've always associated winter with cleanliness and death, tonight I learn to also associate it with love. Love by me and love for me. Even when it is only implied, love can be real. Much of what we value is inexplicit: God, innate human goodness, tomorrow. We enjoy belief. I enjoy believing Rosie loves me and I love her, as she snuggles tighter against my shoulder and I can feel her body shiver from the cold. It's my

role not to shiver. It's my role to be her unshivering warmth. It's irrational, then, that I take off my winter hat—green and woollen, one of the remnants of my unrefined life before law school and entry into the upper tier of society—and pull it onto Rosie's head, messing up her dark hair but vindicated by the happiness in her eyes. Real happiness, or reflected? I don't believe in illusion; I know it exists because I stand tall under the scrutiny of those eyes despite still being a teetering tower of Tetris blocks inside. Several times in my life I've had the realisation that this time I truly am an adult, shed of all the toys of childhood. Each realisation rendered the last one false. Tonight, finally catching sight of my car, I know something else: I know I've found my place.

The next day I call my mom and listen to her voice falter as I tell her I won't be visiting for Christmas. I lie about the reason but she knows as well as I do that I don't just mean this Christmas. I mean every Christmas. "Goodbye," I say before hanging up.

"Goodbye," she says.

Or I imagine her saying it, because by then I am no longer listening.

### Seven Months Later...

Having stated my case I sit down. The defence counsel, sitting beside me, rises to begin to state his. We're in the pre-trial room on the third floor of the old courthouse. The room, or perhaps the judge, smells like history: musty. There's an air conditioner in a window to my left that's been improperly installed and wobbles as it works. I let myself get lost for a few seconds in the sound of humming air coupled with the rhythmic banging of the unit against the window frame. It's not so different from the jargon-filled legalisms being spouted by the defence counsel. The goal of any pre-trial conference is to aid the process of settlement by forcing both parties to sit with a judge who will be barred from presiding over the eventual trial and hear his opinion about the outcome. It's in nobody's interest to go to trial. The justice system is overloaded and both sides will incur mounting legal costs—are already incurring them. My own client, Mrs. Johnson, is waiting on a bench on the main floor of the courthouse, paying Winterson & Partners \$350 for every hour I'm here. The conference was supposed to begin at 10:00 a.m. It's already 10:42 a.m. and I only spoke for five minutes. By the time the conference is over, Mrs. Johnson will owe my firm at least an extra thousand dollars: two hours of preparation and an hour of conference, most of which I will spend listening to the air conditioner and worrying about an unrelated settlement conference I have scheduled for the afternoon. This pre-trial is a waste of time. Potential damages are small and the chances of success are split. The settlement conference is high stakes. It's real. It's the most real case I've had so far, and I have a decent shot of ending it today. If the other side signs on the dotted line I will earn my firm a small windfall. When I said it's in nobody's interest to go to trial, I lied. It's in the lawyer's interest. But an early settlement can be lucrative too.

The settlement isn't the only thing on my mind. Today is also Rosie's birthday and the gift I ordered for her, a collection of Finnish bath soaps, has been giving me a headache with shipping. I've been assured it will arrive today at the address of Winterson & Partners, but I'm still nervous because I don't have a backup if it doesn't.

I notice the defence counsel has stopped talking.

He sits down.

“Thank you, counsel,” the judge says in an ancient voice in preparation for clearing his throat. He pans his attention from the defence counsel to me, and back to the defence counsel. Then he looks down at the thick, bound binders lying on the table in front of him: our respective materials: a few pages of facts—about which no one disagrees—followed by a few pages of basic arguments, followed by a few pages of expert opinions, followed by hundreds of pages detailing how qualified those expert opinions are.

A drop of sweat sprouts on the judge’s eyebrow, travels down his nose and lands on a binder.

*Splat.*

I want him to hurry up. I want to leave here as soon as possible. I even want to plan how to avoid meeting Mrs. Johnson downstairs, but even my weak and atrophying conscience knows that won’t happen.

“It appears to me thus...” the judge begins.

I focus on the air conditioner again. The defence counsel peers down at his tablet, where he’s stored all his notes. I know he’s actually reading his email. I have a tablet in front of me too. The judge has a yellow pad of paper and a pen. He also has a reputation for falling asleep during trials and of possessing a memory so bad he sometimes asks the same question three times in one day. He speaks slowly and with authority, saying nothing that the defence counsel nor I don’t already know. Despite being a fifty-fifty case, everything about it from a legal standpoint is simple. Mrs. Johnson went to the hospital with a pain in her breast. The doctor on call noticed a lump and conducted a biopsy. The wound resulting from the biopsy developed an infection. The complications from the infection caused Mrs. Johnson to lose her nipple by surgical amputation. I emphasise in both my written and oral argument that it was “the right nipple” for no reason other than that it makes a greater emotional impact to lose something that’s right. The defence counsel calls it merely “the nipple”. That, in a nutshell, is the heart of the matter and the practice of law.

The single issue in question is whether the hospital, through its employee the doctor, acted negligently to cause the infection. Because the three of us in the pre-trial room are trained in law, not medicine, and know less about biology than a typical high school student, we cannot resolve this issue. That’s why we’ve brought in experts. “Brought in” is a euphemism. We paid people with acceptable credentials in a particular field of medicine to give opinions supportive of our cases. I have two experts, for whose opinions Mrs. Johnson paid \$10,000, and the defence counsel has one. The defence counsel’s expert, however, has a more expansive C.V. It runs hundreds of pages. I don’t know how much the defence counsel paid for his opinion, but hospitals have deeper pockets than Mrs. Johnson.

At 11:12 a.m. the judge offers his take. "After perusing the submitted materials, I find the case of the defence more persuasive than the case of the plaintiff," he says.

The defence counsel and I thank the judge. He shakes our hands and wishes us luck with this case and with our budding careers. Then the defence counsel and I shake hands, turn off our tablets and pack them into our briefcases. His is nicer than mine. He's from Toronto. He offers to treat me to coffee, but I have my settlement conference to prepare for and therefore have too little time. I politely decline. His plane doesn't leave until the morning so I suggest ways for him to spend the evening, but he appears to know the area already. There's a glint of victory in his farewell smirk.

Mrs. Johnson spots me in the main floor hallway.

She asks how the pre-trial went. Like most of my clients, her body language betrays how out of place she feels in a courthouse. Her questions are inflected with uncertainty.

I tell her the judge leaned toward the hospital but that this judge won't be the one hearing a potential trial.

"Can we still *go* to trial?" she asks.

"We can," I say. "But the outcome of the pre-trial means the hospital is less likely to settle, and we'll also need to get at least one more expert witness if we want to win."

Mrs. Johnson already knows that doing anything means spending money. She remains silent and still. "Did you tell them that I lost my nipple?"

I nod. I explain that the judge wasn't unsympathetic to her troubles, just more inclined toward the medical opinion of the hospital's expert witness than ours, and that the effects of Mrs. Johnson's amputated nipple only come into play at the damages stage. The greater Mrs. Johnson's losses, the more money she'll get. That's an argument I've not yet started to construct.

"What's the chances we win at trial?"

I say they're about thirty percent. I've no way to know that but Winterson himself taught me to always communicate vague notions in concrete terms to give clients the impression of authoritative knowledge. I say nothing about how much a trial costs, how far into the future it would be or how much stress and disruption it would cause.

"And if we win, the hospital would still pay me one hundred thousand dollars?"

"That's just an estimate, but it's a reasonable one," I say.

I watch dollar signs plaster themselves across Mrs. Johnson's eyeballs. I'm used to them. Mrs. Johnson is sixty-one years old and makes about \$30,000 a year. Her husband, Jack, is unable to work because of a back injury he suffered seven years ago and spends his time at home. They

have two adult daughters who don't speak to them and an unemployed sister who mooches. "I don't have no more money, that's the trouble," Mrs. Johnson says. "Unless I mortgage the house."

When she looks at me this time I know she's searching for help. She wants me to tell her something impossible. I can't predict the whims of judges. Some go by the letter of the law, others bend the law to fit their personal sense of right and wrong. "Are you and Jack comfortable doing that?" I ask, mostly to buy time and remind her that she should go home and speak to her husband before making a decision.

"One hundred thousand is a lot of money," she muses.

I can't argue. I also can't violate the golden rule of being a lawyer: advise your clients but don't make decisions for them. Every day at the office I get calls from people who've been wronged and are desperate to find help. I listen to their stories and feel for them, but to most I say as gently as possible that if they're looking for help they should call someone else. I often suggest the police. They retaliate with the threat they'll call another lawyer. I know no other lawyer will listen past their first few sentences. It's my job to sue people, I want to tell them. I work for a business, not a counselling service or a church. I'm only interested in your pain if you have enough money to pay me to sue someone with even more money to pay the both of us. I'm more diplomatic in my actual choice of words. Winterson sometimes listens in to how his lawyers respond to cold calls. He's praised me more than once for knowing how to separate the gems from the dead wood without making the firm appear heartless. Legend has it that he once convinced a man who was afraid his wife's lover was plotting to murder him to come into the office and do up a will.

"What should I do?" Mrs. Johnson asks.

You should walk away and cut your losses, I think. "You should take time to think and talk to Jack," I say.

She pats me on the shoulder. "You're always so careful, Charlie. But I've already used up all my savings on this thing. It doesn't make no sense not to put the house on the line too. Am I right? I sure could use that hundred thousand to set me and Jack up for a while."

I don't say either way. I only conclude, not for the first time, that the trouble with flashing absurd amounts of money in front of people's eyes is that it's akin to leaving an alcoholic alone with an open bottle of vodka and repeating to yourself that the choice to drink is his. If Mrs. Johnson couldn't mortgage her house, we'd be parting ways because she'd have no means by which to pay our bills. Because she still has an asset, I need to abide by the golden rule and advise without interfering. "Just think about it."

Leaving the courthouse, I wave to her.

In the parking lot, I daydream about having a newer car as I turn the engine of my current one and wonder if that's greed or just realism.

I pull into traffic.

The going's sluggish. The heat is turning the asphalt of the city's streets to mush. I punch the clock on the car's dash to bring it back to life, and it informs me I still have half an hour to noon. So there's no rush yet. The legal profession runs in increments of about six minutes. Driving in the direction of the firm's office, I call Amanda, the firm's receptionist and unofficial office manager.

"Winterson and Partners. Amanda speaking," she says in a voice both cheerful and deceptively deep. In the flesh, Amanda is about five feet of skinny.

"It's Charlie," I say.

"Charlie!"

"I'm out of the pre-trial and on my way to lunch, and I'm wondering if there's a package waiting for me."

I stop at a red light behind a semi-trailer truck that should probably be on the highway. "Let me check, Charlie," Amanda says. When I first started articling at Winterson's I was put off by the way Amanda repeats the name of everyone she speaks to, but after about a month I realised she's usually involved in so many simultaneous conversations—spoken, written and from behind her desk—that repeating names serves to remind her which mental window she's kept open. "Sorry, Charlie. No package."

I curse silently and punch the clock the again. "Can you check an order status for me online?"

"Sure thing, Charlie. Carrier and tracking number please."

I tell her. I've checked the status so often in the preceding week I know it by heart.

Amanda's fingers hit keys. The light in front of me turns green and the semi-trailer truck and I accelerate slowly as cars on either side of us breeze by. I wonder what the truck is carrying. Finnish bath soap? "Looks like it's not going to be here until Monday, Charlie. Routing error," Amanda says.

So much for that. "Amanda," I say, borrowing her habit of direct address, "what's a gift that I could buy within the next few hours and that would make a woman happy?"

"Rosie?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Charlie, every woman loves flowers."

I think flowers are a terrible gift, overdone and inappropriate because no matter how well you care for them they die, but I think Amanda and consider myself out of options. Rosie doesn't like chocolate, and I don't know enough about wine to buy a bottle without making a fool of myself. I turn on the radio and listen to news and traffic to drown out my anger at my lack of carefully selected Finnish soaps. A sports segment teases me by playing an interview with Teemu Selanne.

After pulling into the small parking lot behind Gianfranco's Deli, I pick up my briefcase and head in through the glass front door that's been painted in the colours of the Italian flag. Although Gianfranco's is mostly a store, it does offer a few tables for select customers—those who can name a dozen members of the current Italian national football team. Because I'm an immigrant, that poses no problem for me. The air smells of delicious freshly baked bread. A few other patrons are already seated, eating pasta or drinking cappuccino with newspapers spread on their knees. Boris is among them. He's reading *The Globe & Mail*. Because he's also an immigrant, he also has no problem with the football requirement. "Andrea Pirlo!" he greets me on sight. "Mario Balotelli," I respond, taking the seat across from him.

"How was your pre-trial?" he asks.

Giancarlo brings me my usual sandwich, for which I thank him with a nod of the head. "Down but not out. Their expert saved Liberia from Ebola so he's more learned in infectious diseases than my university researchers."

"I saw his bio. Picking it up developed my biceps," Boris says. He's wearing a white shirt, navy suit and crimson tie, and he has perfectly rehearsed posture. He looks very much like a lawyer. "But I suppose the better question is: are you going to nail that Tabatha Holdings settlement? I hear Winterson actually cares about that one."

Boris works at Winterson's too. After ten months of competing against each other, the firm decided we were both too good to pass up. It fired a family lawyer who'd been there for eleven years, split his salary between us and put up a divider in the building's suddenly vacant corner office. We didn't complain. We never did stop competing.

I take a bite of my sandwich. The bun is still warm, the lettuce is light and crunchy. Plus, I'm a sucker for tomatoes. "I sure hope so. Otherwise it's going to be a bad fucking day."

Out of the corner of my eye I see the deli's front doors open and a man walk in. I recognise him as Frank Delaney, a former client. I only worked one Small Claims case for him, but I won it and Frank Delaney liked the way I handled myself against the self-represented greaseball on the other side. I grab my sandwich, excuse myself from the table and saunter to where he's leaning on the counter, picking out cookies.

"Mr. Delaney," I say.

He spins around. “Charlie! I’d shake your hand but I almost cut it off this morning on the table saw.” He holds his injured hand up. It’s bandaged. “Hurts like hell, and I can’t guarantee it won’t piss blood on you.”

Frank Delaney can be a son of a bitch when it comes to business, but in private he’s one of the most cheerful people I know. I’ve yet to encounter him in a bad mood. “Ouch,” I say. “I assume there was no negligence involved or I’d already have an email all about it. Unless, Mr. Delaney, you’re cheating on me with another lawyer...”

“Never, Charlie. Never,” he says with expressive actor’s eyes. He’s playing, but only his delivery is exaggerated. Frank takes the idea of loyalty seriously. He drops his wallet on the counter and with his good hand crosses his heart while presumably hoping to die. “Fidelity above all else, my dear. Till death do us part.” He grins. “So, tell me, what’s new in the exciting world of ambulance chasing?”

I summarise a few of my recent triumphs, my pre-trial and my upcoming settlement conference.

“Then what the fuck are you doing standing here talking to me for? Prepare. Win.”

I hold up my sandwich.

“Yes, eat too.”

Back at the table, Boris finishes reading a page of the financial section, flips to the next and looks at me over the top of the newspaper like a spy. Giancarlo comes around in an apron covered with flour and asks if I’d like a coffee or a cappuccino. I take a coffee, finish my sandwich and ask Boris about his plans for this afternoon. He shrugs. “I’m still working on the dodge ball case.”

My tablet alarm goes off in my briefcase. I reach in and turn it off. I know what it means without checking. The clock has struck noon. I have an hour left before I try to settle Tabatha Holdings.

I down my coffee in one gulp, burning my throat, and make to leave. “Hey,” I say, “if you were going to buy flowers for someone, what kind would you buy?”

“I say dodge ball and you think flowers?”

“Yes.”

“Well, is the context romantic, amicable or funerary?”

“Romantic.”

“Roses,” Boris says.

I try to leave money on the table for Giancarlo, but Boris waves it away. “I got it.” Does he owe me something? “Oh, and by the way,” he says. “Ollie’s hosting a little soiree this Sunday. No special reason, but there’s a big pool in the yard and they’re calling for a thousand degrees for the weekend again. So if you’re free and willing, come on by. You know Ollie’s address.”

I do know it. I also kind of know Oliver. He’s a young criminal lawyer who studied law in Wales, which means he couldn’t get into a school here but had parents wealthy enough to send him overseas. Not that I judge. Based on what I’ve heard Oliver is a good guy, and Rosie says he’s a hardworking and competent lawyer. He works at Stephenson Ashford, the firm Rosie wants to work for one day. His father is a nationally renowned surgeon. “Thanks, I might just take you guys up on it,” I say.

Seated safely in my car, I take deep breaths and open the navigation app on my tablet to double check the location of the hotel where the settlement conference will take place. The route seems simple enough, and I have at least four six-minute increments to spare. Exhaling, I put the key in the ignition. The engine gives me a fright but starts on the second try. Wanting a new car is definitely realism, not greed, I assure myself.

Traffic moves more smoothly than before.

The local university radio station plays one of my favourite songs and I drum along to the beat on the steering wheel.

I hit an empty patch of street, lower the the driver’s side window and accelerate to ten over the speed limit just to hear the wind rush into the car and feel it flow through my hair. It’s not going to be a bad day. The sun is shining. The weekend beckons.

A flower shop appears.

I’m feeling just pumped enough that I hit the breaks, change lanes and roll into a spot directly in front of the shop. I have ample time to get in, order flowers and get out. I slam the car door behind me, flatten my tie against my chest—I may not always feel lawyerly in the company of other lawyers, but amidst the general public I feel like Atticus Finch—and walk in to the tune of twinkling bells. A guy watering flowers puts down his watering can and takes his place beside the cash register. “I’m here to buy flowers,” I say.

“No shit,” he says.

I remain pleasant in the presence of the wise ass. “They’re for a woman.”

“And I ain’t here to ask, man.”

“Two dozen roses,” I say because that seems like the standard size of bouquet to order according to my boyhood education in romance.

The guy slides a pink form toward me. “Fill her out and scribble down your personalised message.”

I follow his instructions, choosing a simple white card adorned with a golden heart and the following message: “Dear Rosie, I’m still mad about you. Love, Charlie.”

The guy takes the form.

My phone rings.

I accept the connection, put the phone to my ear and hear “Beaver?”

It’s my mom.

The guy reads the form and scoffs. He shakes his head.

“Hello, mom,” I say.

“Beaver, I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time. I can hear people... I think. I can call later.” Perhaps like most loving mothers, mine has never fallen out of the routine of calling me by the pet name I answered to as a child. Because English is her second language she is unaware of the connotations of that particular animal. She does, however, take pride in it being a particularly Canadian creature. She takes pride in being Canadian.

“I’m on my way to an important meeting but I’m not busy at the moment so go ahead.”

“Oh... it’s not—I’m just calling to remind you that it’s your dad’s birthday in two weeks and I thought it would be nice if you could maybe visit next weekend...”

I feel like I’m drowning in birthdays. “Sure,” I say. Ever since I stayed away on Christmas, my parents have been conspiring to reel me in for any other occasion. I’ve already agreed once before and had to cancel at the last minute. I’ve no intention of keeping my word this time, either. It’s tough love. They have to learn that the break was permanent, that unless they have another child their nest will remain empty.

“So wonderful,” she says. “Your dad will be so happy.”

I feel a twinge of guilt.

“That’s it. That’s all I wanted to say. You don’t have to bring anything. You don’t have to call ahead. Just come.”

“I look forward to it,” I say.

“Beaver—” My finger freezes over the end call button. The flower shop guy waves the form I filled out. I assume he’s getting impatient so I fish out my wallet and reveal my credit card. “How’s your work?” my mom asks.

“Great,” I say, “but I have to go now if I don’t want to be late, mom.”

She says goodbye.

“Roses?” the guy asks with raised eyebrows.

“That is correct,” I say.

“You’re buying roses for Rosie?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not for me, but unless your girl likes guys with zero imagination it might be for you. Use your head for a minute, man. Do you know how many times Rosie’s gotten roses? You don’t need to answer that. It’s rhetorical. And do you know when she started getting sick of them? Stay mum here too. I’ll handle it for you. After the first, fucking time. So go ahead and do yourself a favour. Get her tulips.”

Roses, tulips. “Whatever, just be quick. I’m kind of in a hurry.”

I’m also starting to feel bad: because I wanted to buy roses for Rosie, because I’m lying to my own mother, because maybe I’m not as prepared for this settlement conference as I thought I was. My heart hurts like a muscle, pumping my lungs, which start the spin cycle on my guts.

“Man, you OK?” the flower shop guy asks as he passes me a beautiful bouquet of tulips.

I answer by giving him my credit card. He runs it through the machine, prints off a receipt and hands it to me. It gets shoved into my pocket along with my hand, which I’m forming into a fist.

I stomp out of the shop feeling like I just ate playdough for lunch. For whatever reason, I believe if I can make it to my car everything will be OK. OK is the superior word to alright, which in turn is superior to all right because that’s two words. Language is malleable and justice is expressed in language. Love is expressed in language. And one of the three is now constructing buildings inside my body: sickeningly unnatural architecture...

I don’t make it to my car. Two dozen steps before, I keel over and empty my stomach of its bilious contents, managing to get it all over my shoes and to stain the bottoms of my pant legs.

I try not to think how much they cost.

I think about soaking them in hot water and rubbing soap into them with a brush.

The smell of the puke is horrible, but the worst thing is the people in the street—staring. Normal people, people not wearing suits. Old people, unemployed people, kids. They probably think I'm a businessman who couldn't take the stress. Or else that I'm junkie executive whose expensive habit just caught up with him. A more pathetic Patrick Bateman. I hear something honk behind me and I realise I'm blocking the way of a teen riding a Segway. She's flanked by stacked boxes. She looks like a delivery driver. I crawl forward to pick up my scattered tulips, get to my feet when I have them and lurch toward my car. The people are still staring but fuck them, they don't even read books or watch intellectually stimulating movies, I tell myself. They're just a bunch of Mrs. Johnsons. Then I think of Frank Delaney with his cut up hand and his goofy smile and joyful theatricality. That calms me down, helps me get my mind somewhat under control. If Frank Delaney can do it, I can do it because: I'm not worse than Frank Delaney. I can't fathom being worse than anyone. But that the throngs of people beyond the walls of my Fortress Honda with its dying engine and stupid, fucking clock—I bang on it.—are inferior to me, now that's a thought that comes easily. I earned a law degree, for God's sake!

The clock on the dash flashes 12:23 p.m. in my face.

“Fuck,” I yell.

For a second, I seriously consider rolling up my pant legs and walking into the settlement conference room, but when that becomes apparently ridiculous I remember the spare suit in my office at Winterson's. That's closer than Rosie's apartment where all my other clothes are. So with twenty-four tulips on the seat beside me, I drive.

The world around me blears.

I mix and match lanes like a madman.

But only for a while. After that I start to feel progressively better, my control over everything seeping back. I loosen my grip on the steering wheel and ease up on the accelerator. I haven't had an episode like this since high school. I hate losing control.

I park with one wheel over the curb and race past Amanda's surprised face and up the stairs leading to my shared office with Boris on the second floor of the Winterson's building.

I pass Winterson himself—

He stops me with a firm grip of my shoulder, circles until he's directly in front of me, scans me up and down and says, “Jesus, Charlie.”

“Nerves,” I say.

His firm grip turns into a fatherly one. “Been there myself.”

He glances at his watch, which I interpret as my cue to leave, so I do, and burst into my own shared office glad to have escaped the attentions of everyone else. I lean my back against the

door after closing it. That Boris is here, reclining in the ergonomic office chair behind his desk, doesn't especially shock me. Giancarlo's is just down the street. But he immediately stops talking, and it's the person on the other side of the conversation whose presence knocks my compass needle askew. "Hello, Charlie," Rosie says. She's wearing her favourite grey skirt and white blouse. She looks hot. "I didn't expect seeing you here."

I know there's something off: about the situation, about her tone. But I don't have time—

"Did you vomit on yourself?"

Comedy is my eternal shield and sometime tool of self-delusion. "I'll have to ask Giancarlo about what he puts in those sandwiches."

The joke falls flat. No matter. I reach for the clean suit hanging on the divider between mine and Boris' half of the office and start to strip out of my current one. "I hope you don't mind the show."

"Leave it on your chair and I'll drop it off to get dry cleaned," Rosie says.

"Why are you here?" I ask back.

"One of my clients thinks he has a case against the city."

"He slipped on the stairs leading up to the police station last December and we may have proof that the company hired by the city to care for the property in the winter failed to do its job up to a reasonable standard," Boris says.

Rosie smiles sweetly. "I wasn't going behind your back, Charlie. If that's what you're thinking. You and Boris can split the case if there's anything to it."

I'm fully in my new suit now and therefore feeling less grimy, more traditionally polite. "Thanks for the dry cleaning offer," I say to Rosie.

"That's what relationships are for. Sometimes you make a mess and sometimes you clean a mess up."

It's a pragmatic view, I suppose. Rosie has always been a pragmatic person. I hope even pragmatic women enjoy receiving two dozen slightly damaged tulips for their birthdays. "Fill me in on Monday?" I ask Boris.

"I can fill you in tonight," Rosie says.

She sounds seductive but the clock in the office keeps ticking and I have to bolt.

Boris tosses me a travel bottle of mouth wash. "You're welcome."

“Thanks,” I say.

“You’ll still make it. Don’t speed. Don’t sweat. Listen to smooth jazz, do your box breathing and then walk in, set down your briefcase and convince them they’ve no choice but to sign on your terms and your time frame.”

“Thanks, honey,” I say.

And all the way down the stairs I worry that was either too possessive or too unprofessional.

“I’m off,” I tell Amanda on my way out the door.

I pray that my car starts and when it does I thank my grandparents for sending me a special Catholic prayer card to keep in the glove compartment. Maybe someone up there is looking out for me. Pope John Paul II observes me from the prayer card. Being Polish-Canadian might have its advantages after all.

Driving, I keep one eye on the road and the other on the clock. The car’s tires seem to scrape the red illuminated minutes away. Whenever I get nervous, I take Rosie’s advice and slow my breathing, all the while remaining vigilantly positive: I won’t be late, I’ll make a good impression, I’ll get the signature I need that nets Winterson’s a vault of money. I’m aware that getting this done will make me valuable to the firm, but more than that I just want to win. Everything else is secondary. I pass a minivan from whose back window kids make faces at me. I want kids of my own even though all other kids annoy me. I inhale, hold for two seconds and exhale. I’m positive my kids will be quiet and tactful by virtue of genetics. The minivan becomes the past. As I feather the brake pedal, the light ahead of me turns from red to green and I glide through an intersection. Because my emotions are under my control now, time is also under my control. I will myself to be on time. Even at 12:55 p.m. I will it, and because some people are born to rule a world which others serve, I see the looming shape of my destination and know it could be no other way. Pulling into the parking lot is like fitting into a new suit: expected. I gargle with the mouth wash Boris gave me, step out of the car and spit. The few people in front of the hotel entrance—travellers, tourists, businessmen—are looking at me, but this time I’m not puking and they’re not staring. As I meet each of their gazes, they turn theirs down and away. They are frightened of me. They are in awe. I cross the asphalt to the tune of my clicking heels and pass under the roof that protects the hotel doors from rain, sleet and snow. The air is cooler here. I am cool. With my briefcase held firmly in my hand, I enter the building. One signature, I repeat silently to myself, is all I need. At the reception desk I ask for Conference Room C and the woman receptionist kindly points the way. Your colleagues are already waiting, she says. They’re not my colleagues. I’m readying myself, giving myself the pre-game speech I imagine the best coaches give the best hockey teams. I am Manifest Destiny, I scream at myself—quietly. There are only a few steps left separating me from my ambition. If Mrs. Johnson popped out from behind a corner, I wouldn’t recognise her. She is inconsequential. I reach Conference Room C’s double doors. They’re closed but from behind them I whiff the smell of money and make out the machine gun sound of self-absorbed laughter. I push the doors open, both of them because that’s the entrance I want to make. And as I instantly assess the geography of a room I’ve never seen, the faces turning toward me and falling quiet are familiar. They’re the weathered faces of

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