

## Martin

"Where do you like to sit?"

"How about the back," said Mercedes, "that way we won't have any moron kicking the backs of our chairs."

"Okay," said Marin.

The theatre house lights were dimming along with the voice of the crowd.

'For once,' Martin thought, 'a blind date that has potential' Martin turned to look at his date. Mercedes wasn't fat, she seemed intelligent enough, and as a matter of fact, other than her ridiculous name, she seemed okay.

Mercedes glanced coyly his way and gave him a smile. She then turned and began to scream at the top of her lungs, "I want to feel your hot throbbing manhood between . . .,"

Martin clapped his hand over her mouth with lightning speed. She scratched his arm and squirmed from his grasp.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" she asked.

"What am I doing?"

"Are you one of those guys that has to pull a 'macho' trip to reassure himself of his virility?"

At this point most of the people in the theatre had turned to see where all the commotion was coming from.

"Please," Martin pleaded, "keep your voice down, everybody is staring at us. I'm sorry, I won't touch you again, I promise." He figured he had just better humor her.

Finally, the house lights went down, and the audience seemed content to give their attention to the show that they had paid to see.

"Mercedes, I hope you won't think I'm prying," he crossed his legs protecting his crotch, as there was obviously no predicting this woman, "but what made you scream like that?"

"Well, I don't believe in an afterlife. I think that this is the only existence and since we only get one time around, we

should make the most of it."

Martin nodded as though this were clearing things up considerably.

"I always had a desire to shout out something obscene in a crowded place, so I did."

"I see," Martin said, although he didn't say what he saw, which was that this girl was nothing short of foaming rabid. Mercedes turned to watch the picture.

Martin also turned towards the screen, although he thought this little drama was going to be hard to top.

'Why the hell am I sitting here?' he thought.

"Excuse me, Mercedes, I'm going to get something to eat, would you like anything?"

"No thanks, . . . well, actually I'd like some peanut butter cups, thanks."

'I bet you would,' he thought, and he pictured her making the most of them.

He walked out into the lobby which was lit up like a Nazi interrogation room. He scanned the candy counter's selection. There were Krackle bars and giant packages of Junior Mints and boxes of Cracker Jacks built for two, but no peanut butter cups.

Martin waited for the girl behind the counter to get off the phone. She was more than chubby, he thought, it looked as though someone had shoved an accordion into a sock. 'She really wore that orange and yellow uniform, yes indeedy.'

The girl finally fulfilled her obligation and cracked her gum in his direction.

"Do you have any peanut butter cups?"

"No."

"Need somthin?" she asked the two boys standing behind him.

Martin stood there staring into the display case. "Chocolate Almonds, Snocaps, Hersheys Kisses, Hot Tamales, Yo Ho's frozen bananas. That was it, he felt sure she would approve of the substitute. "One frozen banana please."

"One fifty."

He paid 'chubbs' and returned to his seat, only to find that Mercedes was gone. Something told him that this was his big

chance. He laid the banana down in the chair where Mercedes had been sitting, and started back out into the lobby. He walked past the candy counter and towards the front door, and after passing the threshold broke out into a trot. Somehow, he hoped the banana would compensate for his absence.

He unlocked the door of his Celica and plopped inside. He rolled down the window and stared across the parking lot. There was a group of teenagers huddled against the back of a building, they were laughing. Martin put his head down on the steering wheel and began to sob.

"Christ, I'm thirty-seven."

"Hey buddy, are you alright? Do you want me to call you a doctor or something?"

"What . . .?" He looked up to see a guy in an Adidas jogging outfit, the kind the non-athletes wear to look athletic. "No, no, I'm fine, really. Terrific. As a matter of fact, I was just crying tears of joy. Take a look at these, have you ever seen tears of joy up close?"

The guy in the jogging suit started to back away from the car.

"I'm so happy it's killing me."

Fear swept across the 'Adidas' mans face and he turned and started to jog away.

'Probably the first time that suit has broken wind,' Martin thought.

Martin took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure. He turned on the ignition and aimed his car home. Bed sounded pretty good, even though it would be just him and his right hand again. He really didn't like to sleep alone. It didn't bother him when he was younger, but after being married for eleven years, he really missed that other heartbeat. His wife had left him for their gardner, but not until after the guy, Sun Jin Jin Jun Jo, had relandscaped their front and back yard. 'Eight thousand dollars worth of azaleas.' His wife had insisted that it was a good deal, she said that it was worth it because Sun Jin Jin Jun Jo used his own special brand of fertilizer. 'Well, at least she was telling the truth about that.'

He awoke the next morning to the insistent ringing of the telephone. His arm groped for the receiver.

"Helloo."

"Hello, Martin. Are you awake? I can't believe what you did last night! If you think . . ."

He cracked open one eye, nine-twenty. "Oh shit, Judie, let me call you back."

"Call you back my ass, Martin. What the hell did you think you were doing last night? Why did you embarrass me like this? Couldn't you behave like an adult? No one said you had to marry the girl, but to leave her stranded, and as if that weren't bad enough, you put a melted ice cream on her chair."

"It wasn't an ice cream, it was a frozen banana. I wasn't thinking."

"Obviously."

"Judie, let me explain."

"Mercedes won't even talk to me. She's furious, and I can't say I blame her. You know, I really don't want to tell you this Martin, but I'm your friend and I feel it's my duty."

Martin could feel it coming.

"You're no prize Martin. You're in no position to be so damn critical. Mercedes is a very bright girl, she has a degree in . . ."

"Wait, don't tell me, animal husbandry."

"What? No, in psychology."

"That was my second guess."

"Listen," Judie said, "you're the one who asked me to get you a date."

"I guess I should have specified that she be born on this planet."

"Very funny, Martin. I'm rolling on the floor from your great wit, of the nit variety."

"Judie, somebody's knocking on my door."

"You owe me an apology Martin, I . . ."

"Judie, I have to go, . . ."

"Martin, don't give me that bullshit. I've seen you do this when you want to get your mother off the phone."

"Really Judie, there is someone at my door. Hold on for a minute." Martin got up, banged a couple of ashtrays together, and started to have a conversation with his reading lamp, "Hi Harry, How's it going? Just a second, I'll be right back, I'm on

the phone." He picked up the receiver and said, "Judie, I have to go, I'll call you later."

"Martin, I'm not falling for the ashtray routine . . . If you hang up on me, I'm going to be really pissed!"

"I'm not hanging up on you." He began to announce each word carefully, "Goodbye Judie, I'll call you later." He hung up the phone and said "pissed" the way a magician would say "poof" after making a tiger disappear.

He headed towards the kitchen for some coffee. The instant coffee jar was empty. 'Shit.' He boiled some water and poured it directly into the jar. A light yellow-brown liquid formed. He sat down at the kitchen table, which was about the only piece of furniture his wife had left him, and drank his "coffee essence." He would have to go to the market today. He forced himself to get dressed and drove to the Ralphs on the far side of town. He didn't want to chance running into any of his neighbors and their pitiful glances.

Once inside the market, Martin pulled a cart from the rack. 'Ah,' he thought, 'all the wheels work. Things are looking up.' He always started at the produce section. 'Head,' he thought, 'need some lettuce.' He picked up a head and threw it in his cart. He strolled past the parsnips, potatoes, broccoli, and turned left down the paper goods aisle, and alas, his first impasse. He could never figure out why people's I.Q. seemed to drop below subnormal when they went shopping. 'Perhaps it was the fluorescent lighting.'

There was a giant woman in a giant mu mu, disguised as a living monument to the flower of Hawaii, the hibiscus. She and her cart, which was loaded to the hilt, blocked the aisle in front of him, while she decided which toilet paper to buy. 'One can never be too hasty in such matters.'

There were two more shoppers closing in from behind. One of the ladies who was manning a cart behind him, had left her baby chew on a bread stick, which it had proceeded to smear all over it's face.

'Very attractive,' Martin thought.

Rush hour at the Whipple house finally subsided, and Martin continued around to the next aisle. His eyes screamed to a halt. She was in a skimpy tank top, no bra. (Martin

immediately regretted not having seen her in the frozen foods aisle.) 'And those legs!' She had on a pair of cut-offs, and just the slightest bit of her that shouldn't show, did.

'Oh God,' he thought, 'please let her want the one on the bottom shelf.'

It was as if He had heard the prayer. Martin nearly died and went to heaven when this 'madonna' bent over in those 'beaver pleasers' and pulled a bottle of Four Seasons off the bottom shelf.

'That hair, that hair is incredible. A blonde ocean.' It was undoubtedly the most beautiful blonde hair he had ever seen. She brushed it out of her eyes with such indifference. Martin would have done anything just to touch it.

She turned somewhat suddenly, as people sometimes do when they get a feeling someone is staring at them, and caught Martin digging his fingers into the head of lettuce. She looked at him and smiled. Martin saw God.

He forced his lips to move. "You are the most perfect creature I have ever seen. A poet's inspiration, a painter's dream, . . . I'm scum, but would you consider having a cup of coffee with me? My treat."

She laughed and pushed her cart forward away from Martin.

"I'm serious, I'll treat."

She turned around and said, "I don't even know you, you could be some kind of maniac or who knows what."

"What do you need to know? Look in my shopping cart. You can tell a lot about a person by what they buy. Lettuce, toilet paper, Lavoris . . . what kind of a maniac cares if he has bad breath?"

She laughed again.

"So really, would you consider it?"

"Okay, I'll consider it."

"Okay, I'll meet you by the checkstand, and whatever your decision is, I'll abide by it."

"Fair enough."

Martin abandoned his cart and waited at the checkstand area. He didn't know what he would do if she said no. He did his best to convince himself that she might say yes. He saw

her emerge from the meat counter, 'the best set of loins Ralphs has ever seen.' She was averting her eyes, she was going to say no, he could feel it coming.

"Maybe another time, okay?"

"Sure, no problem." His insides caved in.

He walked out of the market a beaten man in every sense of the word. No woman. No groceries. No life. He sat down on the planter in front of the market and watched the parade.

She walked to her car and opened the rear hatch of her Gremlin. Martin stared at her rear hatch. Before he knew what he was doing, he was beside her again.

"I just thought I'd give you a chance to reconsider."

She turned around, obviously somewhat surprised to see him again. "I thought you said you'd abide by my decision."

"I've had a bad decade, and you could really cheer me up if you'd at least give me your phone number."

She looked as though she were considering it.

"Look!" he said, "I've been separated from my wife for seven months and I'm really just looking for some company. Really. What do you think? I never attack anybody on the first date, it's just not my style."

She laughed again. Martin knew he was gaining ground.

"Tell you what," she said, "I don't like giving out my phone number, why don't you give me yours?"

Martin saw the pitfalls in this arrangement, but he figured he had to compromise. "Seven six six, eight three two two."

"What's your name?"

"Martin. And what's yours?"

"Monique."

'This was getting too perfect, just too perfect,' he thought.

For the next three weeks, Martin never picked up the phone before it rang three times. Finally she called.

"Hello Martin? This is Monique. Remember me?"

"Monique who?"

She laughed. "I thought maybe you'd like to meet for some coffee somewhere."

"Sure, you name it." He was very excited.

"How about the corner of Third and Sylmar? I know a little place there. About seven o'clock?"

"Fine. See you then."

Martin held the receiver in his hand and stared at it in disbelief. He would have about two hours to give himself the most important tune-up of his life. He showered and shaved and spent ten minutes deciding which shaving lotion would be the most effective in subduing this magnificent creature. He stood in front of the mirror clenching his fists and holding in his slightly paunchy stomach, all to the tune of 'Nobody Does It Better.'

Finally, it was time. He took one last look at himself before leaving and decided he looked like the biggest putz he had ever seen.

He arrived at the appointed place, Third and Sylmar, but saw neither Monique nor any coffee shop. Did he misunderstand her? Did she say this corner? Tonight? Was this some sort of cruel joke? Was she laughing at him from someplace nearby with some of her friends?

She wore a white skirt, made out of a light cotton, and a sheer magenta blouse. Martin could see the outline of something lacy underneath. There was a slight breeze, and 'That hair, that hair.'

"Hi, how's it going?"

"Fantastic! Where are we going?"

"This way."

He followed her as though he were being led on an invisible leash. They walked around the corner and up a flight of stairs. They stopped when they reached Apt. #3.

"I thought we'd have coffee in, if you don't mind."

"No, not at all." This part of the fantasy didn't come until much later in his imagination.

She opened the door and Martin followed her inside. He said "Nice place," before he even looked around.

"Thanks. Sit down, I'll get us some coffee, unless you'd rather have something else?"

"No, no. Coffee, coffee, fine fine."

He watched as she went into what he assumed must be the kitchen. It was a small apartment, and every inch was filled with papers and books and plants and records. Not at all the way he had pictured her to live. 'Well,' he thought, 'they



could always hire someone to clean.'

She returned with a tray of coffee and some sort of pastries.

"Well," she said, "here we are."

"Yes, we are, aren't we."

"Have a danish, please," she said as she held the tray out in front of him.

"Thanks."

"Were you surprised that I called?"

"The truth? No, I know I'm irresistible,"

"That's true," she said, and looked him square in the eyes.

Martin melted. He swallowed a large hunk of cheese danish without chewing it enough and began to cough it up. She laughed.

They talked and as the evening went on Martin became more and more comfortable with this woman. He even noticed her chipped tooth. They talked and covered the typical subjects people cover when they are first getting to know each other. The conversation slowed and then finally stopped, but the silence was not uncomfortable.

It seemed perfectly natural for he and "Iques," as he had already given her a nickname, to be kissing. This progressed and an hour later Martin felt as though he had experienced his own personal renaissance.

"You were terrific, really."

"You're not too shabby yourself."

"I'm starving, do you want to get something to eat?" he asked.

"I can't. I have to get up early tomorrow."

Martin was a little disappointed, but accepted this.

"Well, I guess that's my cue to say goodnight . . ."

"Yes, it is."

"Hey, why don't you give me your phone number?"

"No, I'd really rather not."

"Very funny, come on."

She wasn't smiling. "Look, we had a nice time, can't we just leave it at that?"

"Nice time. Is that what we had? You can have a nice time visiting grandma."

"Please don't be like this."

Martin was silent.

"Don't be like this. Don't you see how stupid it is? You'd rather have no cake than a small piece? Why can't you accept a good experience as just that?"

"You're right," he said, "we both got what we wanted, we both got fucked."

"I think you had better go now."

Martin stared at her breasts, wishing he could touch them. He walked towards the front door and paused with his hand resting on the knob, hoping to be retained. He turned to say something, but she had already gone into the other room.

He walked down the staircase, and for some damn reason he started to whistle.

