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The MacGuffin

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The  MacGuffin

Mort

At the age of seventy-seven, Mort decided that he could stop being defensive about finding women attractive. He didn't lust after them as much as he once had, but he was drawn to some women, to their vivacity, their shapes, and the way they moved and dressed. To notice them, he decided, even to notice them in ways that revealed his noticing, should be all right. Why not? He hadn't many years left, and noticing was nice.

He began attending more of the dinner and pre-dinner get-togethers he was regularly invited to. He needed more noticing opportunities, close up.

On a summer afternoon he accepted an invitation to a party where two interesting women—Angela and Maureen—would be present. Angela was the very attractive wife of the son of his good friends the Bichmanns. She was handsome, a new mother in her mid-thirties, full of the sensuality of her condition. No doubt she was attracted to young Gil Bichmann but he, poor fool, was a bit of a dolt. Good looking, but not very nimble in the mind, not nearly as nimble as his wife the young mother, Angela, her breasts bursting with milk.

"How's the baby?" he said.

"He's wonderful," Angela said. "Thinking about walking. Pulling himself up on tables and stepping a few wobbles forward and sideways. It's remarkable to watch. Too many feedings though."

"You breast-feed him?"

"Yes," Angela said. "I've even had to use one of those pumps to keep it flowing because he was so small when he was born. But it's working fine now." She glanced up at Mort. "And how are you, sir?"

"Sir?"

"Yes," Angela said. "I've always thought of you as a sort of knight. Not the shining armor kind but a knight who knows where he's going, a knight who tilts at things important."

Mort was warming well beyond the two glasses of Merlot he had permitted himself. "I'm still tilting," he said. "Though there's more windmills now, I think." He glanced briefly at Angela's rounded maternal shapes. "Motherhood becomes you," he said. "You look wonderful."

"Thanks," she said.

He was more direct with his hostess, his friend, Maureen. "Maureen my love," he said to her, "You look better than ever. I couldn't help

catching a glimpse of you from behind in those tan slacks as I came in. Very nice."

Maureen smiled. "I'm delighted you're still a dirty old man," she said. "You can look any time you like."

"Looking is most of the action at my age," he said.

"We have your favorite sharp cheddar with those bits of toast," Maureen said.

"Good," Mort said. "Sharp is good."

Mort chose the following day, a Friday, to have his "Saturday Lunch." For the last twenty-five years of his marriage to Mary Lou, Mort had set aside one day a week—usually Saturday—for a special lunch, which he prepared himself, for himself. He had taken care to maintain this ritual after Mary Lou died.

Since her death, Mort had lived alone and he could see no reason to change that. Living alone had some important advantages. He could always find the scissors when he needed them because they were exactly where they belonged. Resealable bottles of diet soda did not go flat from the tops being loose. The 2% milk in the half-gallon container went down at a predictable rate. He did miss the sex. And, yes, the companionship too.

While the day of the week sometimes shifted, the menu for his Saturday lunch was always the same. A six-ounce filet from the freezer (Omaha Steaks in Nebraska—they were very consistent with the weight of their filets); a medium-sized baked potato with chives, bacon bits and a small dab of sour cream; and a salad made from the cross-cut leaves of romaine lettuce taken from a point about three-quarters of the way down the stalk. This gave him lettuce portions that were crunchy enough to make a satisfying sound in his mouth. He covered the romaine with a mixture of low-fat Italian dressing and low-fat Ranch, a combination he found highly satisfying and reasonable as to calories. The centerpiece of the Saturday lunch was a half bottle of chilled Pinot Noir. And the result of it all, and an integral part of the lunch's success, was a brief nap, which he took, weather permitting, seated at the base of a huge sycamore tree in a postage-stamp park near his apartment. Skate-boarders and loud music were not allowed there.

Today, he eased himself down at the bottom of the sycamore. It was a pleasant afternoon and Mort knew where the sun's angles would fall. He had brought his own small pillow and he put it in the niche of the tree trunk where his back fit, leaned back with the fullness of his Pinot Noir, romaine, and filet mignon and thought of neutral things. A pin-wheel seed-pod helicoptered down onto the front of his shirt and sat there moving up and down with his breathing.

"Are you okay?" he heard.

Mort opened an eye.

"Who wants to know?" he said.

A girl stood in front of him. Well, a woman really—probably in her twenties. She wore shorts and what appeared to be two tank tops. She had one foot on a skateboard and her hair was semi-spiky. On her left wrist was a tattoo of a wristwatch held by a large-link chain.

"Just checking," she said. "You were so quiet and the white hair..."

"White hair?"

"Hey Mr. Nap-man, no big deal, okay, I just I wanted to be sure you're all right."

"I'm all right," Mort said sitting up straight. "The more important question is are you all right?"

"Me? What are you talking about? I'm great!"

"Well," Mort said, "If you're great—and I doubt it—you're one of the few people in the world to have achieved that status."

"I like that," she said. "I'd like to be one of the few people in the world to have achieved that status."

"Well, ain't you somethin'?" Mort said. He decided to stand up. There was still some Pinot Noir in his veins, but with the help of the solid trunk behind him he managed it. The girl moved over to help him. "I'm great too," Mort said. "And skateboards aren't allowed in here."

"Sure," she said. "Sure you are."

"Of course," Mort said, "it's easier to be great when you can scoot off down the sidewalks of the world on roller bearings."

"I don't ride it in here," she said.

"Good," he said. "Good." She started to move away toward Green Street. "I think I'll sit on that bench," Mort said a little loudly. The girl glanced back.

"So sit," she said.

Mort sat. "You come here often?" he said.

The girl burst out laughing. "That's a pretty tired line, Mr. Nap-man." She continued laughing. Mort scowled.

"Well you'd better be careful," he said. "I've used that line with devastating effect on women who thought they were unassailable."

"How old are you?" she said.

"Seventy-seven," Mort said. "How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-eight," she said.

"Isn't that a little old for the tattoos...the nose thing..." Mort waved his hand.

"I only have two tattoos. And discreet nose jewelry is in now. Practically all women wear them in India." Her speech revealed no hint of the rebelliousness of her attire. Her accent suggested an education in the very best of schools.

Mort started to ask about the tattoo he couldn't see. Then he decided, not now.

"Well," she said, "Have a nice day."

"You too," Mort said. The girl nodded, picked up her skateboard,

tucked it under her arm and walked away, out of the park. Mort watched until she disappeared along the fence where the iron bars were angled so sharply to his line of vision that they made an opaque wall.

For the next three weeks Mort had his Saturday lunch on Friday, walked the half-block from his apartment to the park and napped against his sycamore. He kept an eye out before dozing off and immediately on waking up for the girl with the two tattoos. There was no sign of her.

The next week he waited until Saturday for his Saturday lunch. This time when he got to the park the girl was sitting on the bench where Mort had sat after she'd interrupted his nap. At twenty-eight, the girl would, of course, be a woman in today's approved terminology. But perhaps not. His niece had told him that some young females preferred 'girl.' "Hello again," he said.

She looked up. "Hi. You come here often?"

Mort smiled. "I do, in fact. I live nearby."

"You going to take a nap?"

"Maybe I'll skip the nap today. Join you on the bench?"

"Sure."

Mort sat. Leaned back against the slats of the bench, pushed to relax his muscles, felt the warm sun on the left side of his face. He closed his eyes against the sunlight. "What's your name?" he said without looking at her.

"Kim."

"Kim for Kimberly?"

"Yes," she said. "But I don't like Kimberly."

"Okay, Kim. No Kimberly." He took a moment to feel the sun again.

"You find Kimberly pretentious?"

"Yes," she said, "I do. Pretentious. Pretending to be upper-crust."

"But you are upper-crust, aren't you?" Mort asked.

"If you mean by birth and education, that sort of thing, yes, I am."

"But you don't like that. You're ashamed of that?"

"No. I'm neutral about it. I can't be blamed for my birth."

"But you could be blamed for hanging onto a dumb name."

"Yes."

"How upper-crust are you?"

"Very upper, very crust."

"Oh?" Mort tried to keep from raising his eyebrows.

"Lake Forest. Horseback riding. Onwentsia Country Club. Tennis. Mt. Holyoke. All of that."

"Ahhh," he said. "Those Chicago suburbs are hard to top. North, along the lake." He looked at her. "I once visited an estate on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. A huge old stone building with a wonderful view, acres and acres of yards and gardens—boxwood hedges, zinnias, marigolds, staked vines loaded with shiny peapods. There was a

circular gravel drive, a genuine solid stone mansion. Something from another world."

"That might have been my grandfather's estate," Kim said. "I grew up in a place exactly like that. It was called Windemere."

"Don't think that was it," Mort said. "My name is Mort, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you, Mort," she said.

"What do you do now?" he said.

"I write ad copy for porn flicks."

He skipped a quick beat. "Like what?" he said.

"You mean the words that I write?"

"Yes."

"Oh, 'Ron Jeremy slams his man-meat into Asia Carrera's creamy cooze.' That sort of thing."

She intended to shock him, he supposed. "'Man-meat' doesn't seem very original," he said.

"Well you can't always be original. There are only so many terms for the human genitals, and they've all been used."

"Maybe I could think of some new ones," Mort said.

She looked at him. "You're a funny guy, Mort. I mean, for an older person..."

"Older persons aren't supposed to have genitals. I realize that," Mort said. "But, amazingly, we do."

"I know... I've read that..."

He stopped again to feel the sun and to push back against the bench. He was feeling anchored, comfortable. "So you write copy for porn flicks as a way of denying your upbringing? Or is that too simple-minded?"

"It's too simple-minded. There was a lot in that high-class childhood to be grateful for. Some of it I loved. I can remember sitting on the edge of the pool at the Onwentsia Club hour after hour, listening to the thwack of tennis balls from the clay courts a few hundred yards away, voices drifting across the green lawns... 'Thirty-love'... 'Ad in'... 'Let ball.' I could listen to those sounds for a long time and then I'd go for a sweetened iced tea, my feet all puckered up from hanging in the cool water. It was pretty nice."

"So you're not ashamed of being rich? That's unusual. Except for those of us who earned our own wealth, of course."

"You're wealthy?"

"Moderately. By today's standards I'm probably just comfortable. But we Americans have been trained to be embarrassed about wealth, particularly old family wealth. Your kind."

"Oh yes. Old family. Absolutely. And it doesn't bother me a bit."

"Good for you," he said.

She looked at him. "I gotta go," she said. "Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye, yes," Mort said.

A week later Mort dropped by Maureen and Aaron's home for a drink.

"I've met an interesting girl, in the park," Mort said.

"Oh?" Maureen's eyebrows went up.

"Not like that," Mort said. "She's twenty-eight years old, a little young for me."

"Don't be too sure," Aaron said. "There have been many liaisons with greater disparities."

"Well, anyway," Mort said. "We've been just talking. In the park. She's a debutante type. Pretty rare these days. That is, she would be a debutante type if we still had debutantes. Does anyone 'come out' any more?"

"Only gays," Maureen said. "You don't read about debutantes even in the society pages. I suppose there may be a few die-hards somewhere who want to spend the money, but I think that era is mostly past."

"Well, if there were still coming-out parties, this girl would have had one," Mort said. "She grew up in Lake Forest with country clubs and golf and tennis and a view of Lake Michigan."

"What does she do now?" Maureen asked.

"She writes catalog copy for porn films."

"Good grief," Maureen laughed.

There was no sign of Kim when he arrived at his sycamore tree at the usual time the following Saturday. It was hot. Eighty-five degrees in the shade but, as he adjusted his pillow and settled back, he could feel the beginnings of a cool breeze. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and shorts, his ankles sprayed with a 30% DEET solution against the mosquitoes, and if the breeze continued he was confident he'd be able to nap successfully. On a whim he had substituted a Kendall Jackson Chardonnay for his usual Pinot Noir. It had taken a bit more than half a bottle to satisfy him but now the fullness from the meal and the comfortable buzz from the alcohol had put him in a peaceful and satisfied state. He slept, and woke. Still no sign of her. Well. Perhaps she'd moved on, gone back to Lake Forest. Though that, he admitted, was unlikely.

As he was leaving the park, turning through the gate in the iron-bar fence, he practically ran into her. "Oh!" "Oh!" they both said, almost simultaneously.

"I was just leaving..."

"Hi..."

"But it's Saturday. Perhaps we could sit down for just a minute," Mort said.

They chatted first about a woman at Kim's office who had had a premature baby. Everyone had been worried but the baby was all right now and the mother was fine.

"Where did you grow up?" Kim asked.

"In Bangkok. And Bombay. Around the world."

"Did you make your money there?"

"No. My father retired from the foreign service. We settled in Boston. I got lucky on some land deals on the Vineyard. Wrote a couple of books on real estate."

"So," Kim said. "In America it's more virtuous to get lucky on a Martha's Vineyard land deal than to be lucky at birth."

"Not fair, I know. But that's the fact. I'm a self-made man. That's honorable. You were born rich. That's somehow a little sinful, like wasting water."

She laughed. "I never waste water! I'm as green as they come."

"I figured you would be," he said. Then, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Sometimes I have two."

"How can you have two? What does that mean?"

"I'm polyamorous," she said.

"Polyamorous?"

"Yes. We believe we can have close, intimate, loving relationships with more than one person at a time. It's a matter of love. I can love you, and I can love someone else. Exclusivity is not the most important thing. That's what I believe."

Exclusivity in a love relationship had always seemed like a pretty good idea to Mort. He was willing to consider that it might be possible for someone to have a close, loving, intimate relationship with more than one person at a time. But that idea was supposed to be anathema to women. They were the ones who wanted exclusivity! Now here was this debutante—or would-have-been debutante—from Lake Forest Illinois, raised on an estate overlooking the rolling whitecaps of Lake Michigan, playing tennis at the Onwentsia Club, sitting by the hour with her legs dangling in Onwentsia's cool blue swimming pool, this horseback-riding, golf-playing patrician telling him that exclusivity was no big deal. He would have to think about that.

As the days shortened through the fall, he returned on Saturdays and sometimes Fridays to the park. Most days he found her there.

Sometimes she didn't appear until he was napping against his sycamore tree and then she would wake him. This is what he hoped for and indeed, as he napped, often dreamt about.

He wondered about "polyamorous." The idea seemed quite preposterous. But it also meant unusual possibilities, didn't it?

On the first Saturday in November he asked her where her other tattoo was. She stood, turned around and pulled up the back of her jacket and shirt. A red and green Chinese dragon poked up along her spine, its head rising above the top of her pants and the body disappearing below her belt. "I can only see half of it."

"That's all you get to see," she said.

"Not fair," he said. "I'm entitled to see the dragon's tail."

"Not here," she said. She dropped her shirt, turned around and sat back down.

"I have a roof garden on my condo," he said. "There's some late-season squash—zucchini—even a few fall tomatoes. The squash have been ripening quickly with the colder weather."

"No etchings?" she said. Then, "I love zucchini."

"C'mon," he said. "I promise you two zucchinis and a vine-ripened tomato."

"Beats etchings any day."

They sat in Mort's canvas chairs, on his roof. The view was mostly self-contained, the sides of the roof garden so high you could barely see over them. But the little garden was floored with finished plank decking; there were plants and trees everywhere, in pots and planters. It was a comfortable space, an oasis of green, now turning yellow and even faintly orange, inside the city's steel and concrete hard corners. Mort attended to his zucchini vines in the longest of the planters. "Here," he said. "This one looks good. Here's another." He broke off the squash and handed them to her.

"Thanks," she said as they sat down.

"Now, the dragon's tail."

"You're serious, I guess," she said.

"I love dragon's tails," he said, a little quickly. She stood, turned away from him, fiddled with her chain-link belt and some fastenings, pushed her pants down four or five inches to where the dragon's tail disappeared between her buttocks. Mort stared. "Can I push up your shirt? I want to see the whole dragon."

"Of course." He pushed up her shirt with his left hand and studied the dragon's head, its nostrils, and especially his tail disappearing so enticingly into the dark crevasse between the pale rounded buttocks of his guest.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

At the age of seventy-seven, Mort was no longer consumed by the primordial urge to impregnate every woman in the world, or go through the motions for it. He felt the stirring, he certainly felt it as he stared at the upper portions of this delightful woman's ass, felt the synapses closing on the old urges. But he was, at last—at long last—under control.

Kim hitched up her pants, refastened her link belt, turned around and said, "So?"

"So, that's very nice. Might be even nicer without the dragon, but the dragon's nice too."

"Thank you."

The next week she was there. And the next. But, as the leaves fell

from the trees, as winter settled in, she no longer appeared. Mort walked down to the park, each Saturday, whether he'd had his Saturday lunch or not, and sat for a while until it got too cold or windy. With the first snowfall of the winter he sat for a long time watching the snow against the light from the street lamps filtering silently down, the patterns of white and dark quite lovely. As he watched and listened, the briefly accumulating snow silenced the sound of tires and feet on the streets and sidewalks, everything quieter, everything hushed.

On December 17th he found a note stuck into the little grating in his condo mailbox. The mailboxes were inside the locked door, but someone had put the note there. It said, *See you in April! Much love, K.* His heart leapt. He would have a pleasant winter.

On the first Saturday in April, Mort had his Saturday lunch. Six-ounce filet. Baked potato with bacon bits and chives and one tablespoon of sour cream. Romaine lettuce salad, cut from the lower portions of the stalk.

He returned to the park. The day was windy but fair. He wore a jacket, and he had brought his pillow. He looked around, then sat and settled back, adjusting the pillow, and tried to sleep. But his eyes fluttered open every few minutes, his attention darting around the park. No sign of her.

The second Saturday of April produced the same result. He decided he'd better check on Fridays too and perhaps even Sundays, though they had never met on a Sunday before. So he came the next Friday and the Saturday and the Friday after.

By the end of the month and the passage of his seventy-eighth birthday, he was sure she was gone. He had seen someone just her size and shape once, then a woman with the same way of moving, then someone with the same quirky clothes. Each time his pulse briefly quickened, then faded in disappointment. Had she changed? Would he even recognize her?

He napped. The shadows were long, even in the early afternoon. A breeze stirred the freshly budding bushes along the park's iron fence.

"Are you okay?" he heard.

Mort opened one eye.

"Who wants to know?" He looked up.

"I do," she said.

"You came back," he said.

"Yes," she said. "I came back."

I'll stand up now, Mort thought. And he did.

B. J. Best

the weather in paris

is nothing like the weather here.
when it rains, it somehow does so

in french, smelling of boulangeries
and fancy cigarettes. here, the rain

is familiar as the yellow umbrella
we bought together. maybe i'm changing

my opinions about god. maybe
you never thought it would be so easy

to orbit a body, a lake,
a globe. in a month, there will be flurries,

those old crystalline questions.
you're in paris, and i'm where

i want to say this: i love the nation
we have built, and want to sew you a flag: ~

dirty dishes, hummingbird, the first few notes
of debussy's "rêverie," a dot

representing either des moines or
our eyes, all on a background

of our bed's summer-green sheets.