

Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man

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An ANN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

It was about 8:15 p.m. and I was standing near the register in a Sears in a sub-standard suburban mall the first time the fortyish man came in. There were forty-five more minutes to endure before the store would close and I could go home. The Muzak was playing and a Ronald McDonald display was waving at me cheerily from the children's department. I was thinking about how animals in traps chew their legs off. There was a time when I couldn't understand that type of survival mechanism. Now I could. I was wishing for longer, sharper teeth when the fortyish man came in.

For the last hour or so, salespeople had outnumbered customers in the store. A dead night. I was the only salesperson in Ladies' Fashions and Lingerie and I had spent the last two hours straightening dresses on hangers, zipping coats, putting T-shirts in order by size and color, clipping bras on hangers, and making sure all the jeans faced the same way on the racks. Now I was tidying up all the bags and papers under the register counter. Boredom, not dedication. Only boredom can drive someone to be that meticulous, especially for four dollars an hour. One part boredom to two parts despair.

So a customer, *any* kind of a customer, was a welcome distraction. Even a very ordinary fortyish man. He came straight up to my counter, threading his way through the racks without even a glance at the dresses or sweaters or jeans. He walked straight up to me and said, "I need a silk scarf."

Believe me, the last thing this man needed was a silk scarf. He was tall, at least six foot, and had reached that stage in his life where he buckled his belt under his belly. His dark hair was thinning, and the way he combed it did nothing to hide the fact. He wore fortyish-man clothing, and I won't describe it, because if I did you might think there was something about the way he dressed that made me notice him. There wasn't. He was ordinary in the most common sense of the word, and if it had been a busy night in the store, I'd never even have seen him. So ordinary he'd be invisible. The only remarkable thing about him was that he was a fortyish man in a Sears store on a night when we had stayed open longer than our customers had stayed awake. And that he'd said he needed a silk scarf. Men like him *never* buy silk scarves, not for any reason.

But he'd said he needed a silk scarf. And that was a double miracle of sorts, the customer knowing what he wanted, and I actually having it. So I put on my sales smile and asked, "Did you have any particular color in mind, sir?"

"Anything," he said, an edge of impatience in his voice. "As long as it's silk."

The scarf rack was right by the register, arranged with compulsive tidiness by me earlier in the shift. Long scarves on the bottom rack, short scarves on the top rack, silk to the left, acrylics to the right, solid colors together in a rainbow spectrum on that row, patterns rioting on that hook, all edges gracefully fluted. Scarves were impulse sales, second sales, "wouldn't you like a lovely blue scarf to go with that sweater, miss?" sales. No one marched into a Sears store at 8:15 at night and demanded a silk scarf. People who needed silk scarves at 8:15 at night went to boutiques for them, little shops that smelled like perfumes or spices and had no Hamburglars lurking in the aisles. But this fortyish man wouldn't know that.

So I leaned across the counter and snagged a handful, let my fingers find the silk ones and pull them gently from their hooks. Silk like woven moonlight in my hands, airy scarves in elusive colors. I spread them out like a rainbow on the counter. "One of these, perhaps?" I smiled persuasively.

“Any of them, it doesn’t matter, I just need a piece of silk.” He scarcely glanced at them.

And then I said one of those things I sometimes do, the words falling from my lips with sureness, coming from god knows where, meant to put the customer at ease but always getting me into trouble. “To wrap your Tarot cards, undoubtedly.”

Bingo, I’d hit it. He lifted his eyes and stared at me, as if suddenly seeing me as a person and not just a saleswoman in a Sears at night. He didn’t say anything, just looked at me. It was like having cross-hairs tattooed on my forehead. In exposing him, I had exposed myself. Something like that. I cleared my throat and decided to back off and get a little more formal.

“Cash or charge?” I asked, twitching a blue one from the slithering heap on the counter, and he handed me a ten, and dug for the odd change. I stuffed the scarf in a bag and clipped his receipt on it and that was it. He left, and I spent the rest of my shift making sure that all the coat hangers on the racks were exactly one finger space apart.

I had taken the job in November, hired on in preparation for the Christmas rush, suckered in by the hope that after the new year began I would become full time and get better wages. It was February, and I was still getting less than thirty hours a week and only four dollars an hour. Every time I thought about it, I could feel rodents gnawing at the bottom of my heart. There is a sick despair to needing money so desperately that you can’t quit the job that doesn’t pay you enough to live on, the job that gives you just enough irregular hours to make job hunting for something better next to impossible. Worst of all was the thought that I’d fashioned and devised this trap myself. I’d leaped into it, in the name of common sense and practicality.

Two years ago I’d quit a job very similar to this one, to live on my hoarded savings and dreams of being a free-lance writer. I’d become a full-time writer, and I loved it. And I’d almost made it. For two years I skimmed along, never much above poverty level, but writing and taking photographs, doing a little free-lance journalism to back up the fiction, writing a story here, a story there, and selling them almost often enough to make ends meet.

Almost.

How the hell long can anyone live on *almost*? Buying almost new clothes at the second-hand store, almost fresh bread at the thrift store, almost stylish shoes at the end-of-season sales. Keeping the apartment almost warm, the dripping, rumbling refrigerator keeping food almost cold, telling my friends I was almost there. Almost writing the one really good story that would establish me as a writer to be reckoned with. I still loved it, but I started to notice little things. How my friends always brought food when they came to visit, and my parents sent money on my birthday, and my sister gave me “hand-me-downs” that fit me perfectly, and, once, still had the tags on. This is fine, when you are twenty or so, and just striking out on your own. It is not so good when you are thirty-five and following your chosen career.

One day I woke up and knew that the dream wasn’t going to come true. My Muse was a faithless slut who drank all my wine and gave me half a page a day. I demanded more from her. She refused. We quarreled. I begged, I pleaded, I showed her the mounting stacks of bills, but she refused to produce. I gave her an ultimatum, and she ignored me. Left me wordless, facing empty white pages and a stack of bills on the corner of my desk. One of two things happened to me then. I’ve never decided which it was. Some of my friends told me I’d lost faith. Others said I’d become more practical. I went job-hunting.

In November, I re-entered the wonderful world of retail merchandising, to work a regular nine-to-five job and make an ordinary living, with clockwork paychecks and accounts paid the first time they billed me. I’d leaped back into salesmanship with energy and enthusiasm, pushing for that second sale,

persuading women to buy outfits that looked dreadful on them, always asking if they wanted to apply for our charge card. I'd been a credit to the department. All management praised me. But no one gave me a raise, and full time hours were a mirage on the horizon. I limped along, making *almost* enough money to make ends meet. It felt very familiar. Except that I didn't love what I did. I was stuck with it. I wasn't any better off than I had been.

And I wasn't writing anymore, either.

My Muse had always been a fickle bitch, and the moment I pulled on panty-hose and clipped on an "I AM SEARS" tag, she moved out, lock, stock, and inspiration. If I had no faith in her power to feed me, then to hell with me, was the sentiment as she expressed it. All or nothing, that was her, like my refrigerator, either freezing it all or dripping the vegetable bin full of water. All or nothing, no half-way meetings. So it was nothing, and my days off were spent, not pounding the keys, but going to the laundromat, where one can choose between watching one's underwear cavort gaily in the dryer window, or watching gaunt women in mis-matched outfits abuse their children. ("That's *it*, Bobby! That's it, I absolutely mean it, you little shit! Now you go stand by that basket and you hold onto it with both hands, and don't you *move* until I tell you you can. You move one step away from that basket and I'm going to whack you. You hear me, Bobby? YOU (Whack!) GET YOUR (Whack!) HANDS ON THAT (Whack!) BASKET! Now shut up or I'll *really* give you something to cry about!") I usually watched my underwear cavorting through the fluff-dry cycle.

And so I worked at Sears, from nine to one, or from five to nine, occasionally getting an eight hour day, but seldom more than a twenty-four hour week, watching income not quite equal out-go, paying bills with a few dollars and many promises, spacing it out with plastic, and wondering, occasionally, what the hell I was going to do when it all caught up with me and fell apart.

Days passed. Not an elegant way to express it, but accurate. So there I was again, one weekday night, after eight, dusting the display fixtures and waiting for closing time, wondering why we stayed open when the rest of the mall closed at seven. And the fortyish man came in again. I remembered him right away. He didn't look any different from the first time, except that this time he was a little more real to me because I had seen him before. I stood by my counter, feather duster in hand, and watched him come on, wondering what he wanted this time.

He had a little plastic container of jasmine potpourri, from the bath and bedding department. He set it on the counter and asked, "Can I pay for this here?"

I was absolutely correct as a salesperson. "Certainly, sir. At Sears, we can ring up purchases from any department at any register. We do our best to make things convenient for our customers. Cash or charge?"

"Cash," he said, and as I asked, "Would you like to fill out an application for our Sears or Discover Charge Card? It makes shopping at Sears even more convenient, and in addition to charging, either card can be used as a check cashing card," he set three Liberty Walking silver dollars, circa 1923, on the plastic countertop between us. Then he stood and looked down at me, like I was a rat and he'd just dropped a pre-fab maze into place around me.

"Sure you want to use those?" I asked him, and he nodded without speaking.

So I rang up the jasmine potpourri and dropped the three silver dollars into the till, wishing I could keep them for myself, but we weren't allowed to have our purses or any personal cash out on the selling floor, so there was no way I could redeem them and take them home. I knew someone would nab them before they ever got to the bank, but it wasn't going to be me, and wasn't that just the way my whole life

had been going lately? The fortyish man took his jasmine potpourri in his plastic Sears bag with the receipt stapled on the outside of it and left. As he left, I said, "Have a nice evening, sir, and thank you for shopping at our Sears store." To which he replied solemnly, "Silver Lady, this job is going to kill you." Just like that, with the capital letters in the way he said it, and then he left.

Now I've been called a lot of things by a lot of men, but Silver Lady isn't one of them. Mud duck. More of a mud duck, that's me, protective coloring, not too much makeup, muted colors in my clothes, unobtrusive jewelry if any at all. Camouflage. Dress just enough like anyone else so that no one notices you, that's the safest way. In high school, I believed I was invisible. If anyone looked at me, I would pick my nose and examine it until they looked away. They hardly ever looked back. I'd outgrown those tricks a long time ago, of course, but *Silver Lady*? That was a ridiculous thing to call me, unless he was mocking me, and I didn't think he had been. But somehow it seemed *worse* that he had been serious, and it stung worse than an insult, because he had seemed to see in me something that I couldn't imagine in myself. Stung all the sharper because he was an ordinary fortyish man, run of the mill, staid and regular, pot-belly and thinning hair, and it wasn't *fair* that he could imagine more about me than I could about myself. I mean, hell, I'm the writer, the one with the wild imagination, the vivid dreams, the razor-edged visions, right?

So. I worked out my shift, chewing on my tongue until closing time, and it wasn't until I had closed my till, stapled my receipts together, and chained off the dressing room that I noticed the little box on the corner of my counter. Little cardboard jewelry box, silver tone paper on the outside, no bag, no label, no nothing, just the silver stripes and Nordstrom in elegant lettering on the outside. A customer had forgotten it there, and I shoved it into my skirt pocket to turn it in at Customer Convenience on my way out.

I went home, climbed the stairs to my apartment, stepping in the neighbor's cat turd on the way up, got inside, cleaned off my shoe, washed my hands five or six times, and put the kettle on for a cup of tea. I dropped into a chair and got jabbed by the box in my pocket. And the "oh, shit, here's trouble come knocking" feeling washed over me in a deep brown wave.

I knew what would happen. Some customer would come looking for it, and no one would know anything about it, but security would have picked me up on their closed circuit camera inside their little plastic bubbles on the ceiling. This was going to be it, the end of my rotten, low-paying little job, and my rent was due in two weeks, and this time the landlord wanted all of it at once. So I sat, holding the little silver box, and cursing my fate.

I opened it. I mean, what the hell, when there's no place left but down, one might as well indulge one's curiosity, so I opened it. Inside were two large earrings, each as long as my thumb. Silver ladies. They wore long gowns and their hair and gowns were swept back from their bodies by an invisible wind that pressed the metallic fabric of their bodices close against their high breasts and whipped their hair into frothy silver curls. They didn't match, not quite, and they weren't intended to be identical. I knew I could go to Nordstrom's and search for a hundred years and I'd never find anything like them. Their faces were filled with serenity and invitation, and they weighed heavy in my hand. I didn't doubt they were real silver, and that someone had fashioned them, one at a time, to be the only ones of their kinds. And I *knew*, like *knowing* about the Tarot cards, that the fortyish man had made them and brought them and left them, and they were for me.

Only I don't have pierced ears.

So I put them back on the cotton in their little box and set them on my table, but I didn't put the lid back on. I looked at them, now and then, as I fixed myself a nutritious and totally adequate Western Family chicken pot pie for dinner and ate it out of the little aluminum pan and followed it with celery with peanut butter on it and raisins on top of the peanut butter.

That evening I did a number of useful and necessary things, like defrosting the refrigerator, washing out my panty-hose, spraying my shoes with Lysol spray, and dribbling bleach on the landing outside my apartment in the hopes it would keep the neighbor's cat away. I also put my bills in order by due date, and watered the stump of the houseplant I'd forgotten to water last week. And then, because I wasn't writing, and the evening can get very long when you're not writing, I did something I had once seen my sister and two of her girlfriends do when I was thirteen and they were seventeen and rather drunk. I took four ice cubes and a sewing needle and went into the bathroom and unwrapped a bar of soap. The idea is, you sandwich your earlobes between the ice cubes and hold them there until they're numb. Then you put the bar of soap behind your earlobe to hold it steady, and you push the sewing needle through. Your earlobes are numb, so it doesn't hurt, but it is weird because you hear the sound the needle makes going through your earlobe. On the first ear. On the second ear, it hurt like hell, and a big drop of blood welled out and dripped down the side of my neck, and I screamed "Oh, SHIT!" and banged my fist on the bathroom counter and broke a blood vessel in my hand, which hurt worse than my ears.

But it was done, and when my ears quit bleeding, I went and got the earrings and stood before the mirror and threaded their wires through my raw flesh. The wires were thin, and they pulled at the new holes in my ears, and it couldn't have hurt more if I'd hung a couple of anvils from my bleeding earlobes. But they looked beautiful. I stood looking at what they did to my neck and the angle of my jaw and the way they made the stray twining of my hair seem artful and deliberate. I smiled, serene and inviting, and almost I could see his Silver Lady in my own mirror.

But like I say, they hurt like hell, and tiny drips of my blood were sliding down the silver wires, and I couldn't imagine sleeping with those things swinging from my ears all night. So I lifted them out and put them back in their box and the wires tinged the cotton pink. Then I wiped my earlobes with hydrogen peroxide, shivering at the sting. And I went to bed wondering if my ears would get infected.

They didn't, they healed, and the holes didn't grow shut, even though I didn't keep anything in them to hold them open. A Friday came when there was a breath of spring in the air, and I put on a pale blue blouse that I hadn't worn in so long that it felt like new again. Just before I left my apartment, I went back, and got the box and went to the bathroom and hung the silver ladies from my ears. I went to work.

Felicia, my department head, complimented me on them, but said they didn't look, quite, well, professional, to wear to work. I agreed she was probably right, and when I nodded, I felt their pleasant weight swinging on my ears. I didn't take them off. I collected my cash bag and went to open up my till.

I worked until six that day, and I smiled at people and they smiled back, and I didn't really give a damn how much I sold, but I sold probably twice as much as I'd ever sold before, maybe because I didn't give a damn. At the end of my shift, I got my coat and purse and collected my week's paycheck and decided to walk out through the mall instead of through the back door. The mall was having 4-H week, and I got a kick out of seeing the kids with their animals, bored cats sitting in cages stuffed full of kitty toys, little signs that say things like, "Hi, my name is Peter Pan, and I'm a registered Lop Rabbit," an incubator full of peeping chicks, and, right in the middle of the mall, someone had spread black plastic and scattered straw on top of it, and a pudgy girl with dark pigtails was demonstrating how to groom a unicorn.

I looked again, and it was a white billy goat, and one that was none too happy about being groomed. I shook my head, and felt the silver ladies swing, and as I turned away, the fortyish man stepped out of the Herb and Tea Emporium with an armful of little brown bags. He swung into pace beside me, smelling like cinnamon, oranges and cloves, and said, "You've just got to see this chicken. It plays tic-tac-toe."

Sure enough, some enterprising 4-H'er had rigged up a board with red and blue lights for the x's and o's, and for a quarter donation, the chicken would play tic-tac-toe with you. It was the fattest old rooster I'd ever seen, its comb hanging rakishly over one eye, and it beat me three times running. Which was

about half my coffee money for the week, but what the hell, how often do you get the chance to play tic-tac-toe with a chicken?

The fortyish man played him and won, which brought the rooster up to the bars of the cage, flapping its wings and striking out, and I found myself dragging the fortyish man back out of beak range while the young owner of the rooster tried to calm his bird. We just laughed, and he took my elbow and guided me into a little Mexican restaurant that opens off the mall, and we found a table and sat down. The first thing I said was, “This is ridiculous. I don’t even know you, and here I find myself defending you from irate roosters and having dinner with you.”

And he said, “Permit me to introduce myself, then. I am Merlin.”

I nearly walked out right then.

It’s like this. I’m a skeptic. I have this one friend, a very nice woman. But she’s always saying things like, “I can tell by your aura that you are troubled today,” or talking about how I stunt my spiritual growth by ignoring my latent psychic powers. Once she phoned me up at eleven at night, long distance, *collect*, to tell me she’d just had a psychic experience. She was house-sitting for a friend in a big old house on Whidby Island. She was sitting watching television, when she clearly heard the sound of footsteps going up the stairs. Only from where she was sitting, she could (she says) see the stairs quite clearly and there was no one there. So she froze, and she heard footsteps going along the upstairs hallway and then she heard the bathroom door shut. Then, she said, she heard the unmistakable and noisy splashing of a man urinating. The toilet flushed, and then all was silence. When she got up the nerve to go check the upstairs bathroom, there was no one there. But—THE SEAT WAS UP! So she had phoned me right away to jar me from my skepticism. Every time she comes over, she always has to throw her rune chips for me, and for some reason, they always spell out death and disaster and horrendous bad fortune just around the bend for me. Which may actually prove that she’s truly psychic, because that fortune had never been far wrong for me. But it doesn’t keep me from kidding her about her ghostly urinator. She’s a friend, and she puts up with it, and I put up with psychic-magic-spiritualism jazz.

But the fortyish man I didn’t know at all—well, at least not much, and I wasn’t going to put up with it from him. That was pushing it too far. There he was, fortyish and balding and getting a gut, and expecting me to listen to him talk weird as well. I mean, okay, I’m thirty-five, but everyone says I look a lot younger, and while only *one* man had ever called me Silver Lady, the rest haven’t exactly called me Dog Meat. Maybe I’m not attractive in the standard, popular sense, but people who see me don’t shudder and look away. Mostly they just tend not to see me. But at any rate, I *did* know that I wasn’t so desperate that I had to latch onto a fortyish man with wing-nut ideas for company. Except that just then the waitress walked past on her way to the next table, laden with two combination plates, heavy white china loaded to the gunnels with enchiladas and tacos and burritos, garnished with dollops of white sour cream and pale green guacamole, with black olives frisking dangerously close to the lip of the plate, and I suddenly knew I could listen to anyone talk about anything a lot more easily than I could go home and face Banquet Fried Chicken, its flaking brown crust covered with thick hoarfrost from my faulty refrigerator. So I did.

We ordered and we ate and he talked and I listened. He told me things. He was not *the* Merlin, but he did know he was descended from him. Magic was not what it had been at one time, but he got by. One quote I remember exactly. “The only magic that’s left in the world right now is the magic that we make ourselves, deliberately. You’re not going to stumble over enchantment by chance. You have to be open to it, looking for it, and when you first think you might have glimpsed it, you have to *will* it into your life with every machination available to you.” He paused. He leaned forward to whisper, “But the magic is never quite what you expect it to be. Almost, but never exactly.” And then he leaned back and smiled at me, and I knew what he was going to say next.

He went on about the magic he sensed inside me, and how he could help me open myself up to it. He could feel that I was suppressing a talent. It was smooth, the way he did it. I think that if I had been ten or fifteen years younger, I could have relaxed and gone along with it, maybe even been flattered by it. Maybe if *he* had been five or ten years younger, I would have chosen to be gullible, just for the company. But dinner was drawing to a close, and I had a hunch what was going to come after dinner, so I just sort of shook my head and said that nothing in my life had ever made me anything but a skeptic about magic and ESP and psychic phenomena and all the rest of that stuff. And then he said what I knew he would, that if I'd care to come by his place he could show me a few things that would change my mind in a hurry. I said that I'd really enjoyed talking to him and dinner had been fun, but I didn't think I knew him well enough to go to his apartment. Besides, I was afraid I had to get home and wash my hair because I had the early shift again tomorrow morning. He shrugged and sat back in his chair and said he understood completely and I was wise to be cautious, that women weren't the only ones distressed by so-called "date-rapes." He said that in time I would learn that I could trust him, and someday we'd probably laugh about my first impression of him.

I agreed, and we chuckled a little, and the waitress brought more coffee and he excused himself to use the men's room. I sat, stirring sugar and creamer into my coffee, and wondering if it wouldn't be wiser to skip out now, just leave a little note that I had discovered it was later than I thought and I had to hurry home but that I'd had a lovely time and thank-you. But that seemed like a pretty snakey thing to do to him. It wasn't like he was repulsive or anything, actually he was pretty nice and had very good eyes, dark brown, and a shy way of looking aside when he smiled and a wonderful voice that reminded me of cello strings. I suppose it was that he was fortyish and balding and had a pot-belly. If that makes me sound shallow, well, I'm sorry. If he'd been a little younger, I could probably have warmed up to him. If *I'd* been a little younger, too, maybe I would even have gone to his apartment to be de-skepticised. But he wasn't and I wasn't and I wouldn't. But I wasn't going to be rude to him, either. He didn't deserve that. So I sat, toughing it out.

He'd left his packages of tea on the table and I picked one up and read it. I had to smile. Magic Carpet Tea. It smelled like orange spice to me. Earl Grey tea had been re-named Misplaced Dreams Tea. The scent of the third was unfamiliar to me, maybe one of those pale green ones, but it was labeled Dragon's Breath Tea. The fortyish man was really into this psychic-magic thing, I could tell, and in a way I felt a little sorry for him. A grown man, on the slippery-slide down side of his fortieth birthday, clinging to fairy-tales and magic, still hoping something would *happen* in his life, some miracle more wondrous than financing a new car or finding out the leaky hot-water heater is still under warranty. It wasn't going to happen, not to him, not to me, and I felt a little more gentle toward him as I leaned back in my chair and waited for him to return.

He didn't. You found that out a lot faster than I did. I sat and waited and drank coffee, and it was only when the waitress re-filled my cup that I realized how long it had been. His coffee was cold by then, and so was my stomach. I knew he'd stuck me with the check and why. I could almost hear him telling one of his buddies, "Hey, if the chick's not going to come across, why waste the bread, man?" Body slammed by humiliation that I'd been so gullible, I wondered if the whole magic thing was something he just used as a lure for women. Probably. And here I'd been preening myself, just a little, all through dinner, thinking that he was still seeing in me the possibility of magic and enchantment, that for him I had some special fey glow.

Well, my credit cards were bottomed out, I had less than two bucks in cash, and my check book was at home. In the end, the restaurant manager reluctantly cashed my paycheck for me, probably only because he knew Sears wouldn't write a rubber check and I could show him my employee badge. Towards the end he was even sympathetic about the fortyish man treating me so badly, which was even worse, because he acted like my poor little heart was broken instead of me just being damn mad and

embarrassed. As I was leaving, finally, let me get *out* of here, the waitress handed me the three little paper bags of tea with such a condescending “poor baby” look that I wanted to spit at her. And I went home.

The strange part is that I actually cried after I got home, more out of frustration and anger than any hurt, though. I wished that I knew his real name, so I could call him up and let him know what I thought of such a cheap trick. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, looking at my red eyes and swollen runny nose, and I suddenly knew that the restaurant people had been seeing me more clearly than I or the fortyish man did. Not Silver Lady or even mud duck, but plain middle-aged woman in a blue-collar job with no prospects at all. For a moment it got to me, but then I stood up straight and glared at the mirror. I felt the silver ladies swinging from my ears, and as I looked at them, it occurred to me that they were probably worth a lot more than the meal I had just paid for, and that I had his tea, to boot. So, maybe he hadn’t come out of it any better than I had, these earrings hadn’t gotten him laid, and if he had skipped out without paying for the meal, he’d left his tea as well, and those specialty shop teas don’t come cheap. For the first time, it occurred to me that things didn’t add up, quite. But I put it out of my mind, fixed myself a cup of Misplaced Dreams Tea, read for a little while, and then went to bed.

I dreamed about him. Not surprising, considering what he’d put me through. I was in a garden, standing by a silver bench shaded by an arching trellis heavy with a dark green vine full of fragrant pink flowers. The fortyish man was standing before me, and I could see him, but I had the sense that he was disembodied, not really there at all. “I want to apologize,” he said, quite seriously. “I never would have left you that way voluntarily. I’m afraid I was magicked away by one of my archrivals. The same one who has created the evil spell that distresses you. He’s imprisoned me in a crystal, so I’m afraid I won’t be seeing you for a while.”

In this dream, I was clad in a gown made of peacock feathers, and I had silver rings on all my fingers. Little silver bells were on fine chains around my ankles. They tinkled as I stepped closer to him. “Isn’t there anything I can do to help you?” my dream-self asked.

“Oh, I think not,” he replied. “I just didn’t want you to think badly of me.” Then he smiled. “Silver Lady, you are one of the few who would worry first about breaking the enchantment that binds me, rather than plotting how to break your own curse. I cannot help but believe that the forces that balance all magic will find a way to free us both.”

“May you be right, my friend,” I replied.

And that was the end of the dream, or the end of as much as I can remember. I awoke in the morning with vague memories of a cat batting at tinkling silver chimes swinging in a perfumed wind. I had a splitting headache. I got out of bed, got dressed, and went to work at Sears.

For a couple of days, I kept expecting him to turn up again, but he didn’t. I just kept going along. I told Felicia that I couldn’t live on the hours and pay I was getting, and she told me that she was very disappointed with the number of credit applications I was turning in, and that full-time people were only chosen from the most dedicated and enthusiastic part-timers. I said I’d have to start looking for work elsewhere, and she said she understood. We both knew there wasn’t much work of any kind to be had, and that I could be replaced with a bored house-wife or a desperate community college student at a moment’s notice. It was not reassuring.

In the next three weeks, I passed out twenty-seven copies of my resume to various bored people at desks. I interviewed for two jobs that were just as low-paying as the one I already had. I found a fantastic job that would have loved to hire me, but its funding called for it to be given to a displaced homemaker or a disadvantaged worker. Then I called on a telephone interviewing position ad in the paper. They liked my voice and asked me to come in. After a lot of pussyfooting, it turned out to be a

job where you answered toll calls from heavy breathers and conversed animatedly about their sexual fantasies. "Sort of an improvisational theater of the erotic," said my interviewer. She had some tapes of some sample calls, and I found myself listening to them and admitting, yes, it sounded easy. Best of all, the interviewer told me, I could work from my own home, doing the dishes or sorting laundry while telling some man how much I'd like to run a warm sponge over his body, slathering every nook and cranny of his flesh with soapsuds until he gleamed, and then, when he was hard and warm and wet, I'd take him and... for six to seven dollars an hour. They even had pamphlets that explained sexual practices I might not be familiar with and gave the correct jargon to use when chatting about them. Six to seven dollars an hour. I told the interviewer I'd have to think about it, and went home.

And got up the next day and defrosted the refrigerator again and swept the carpet in the living room because I was out of vacuum bags. Then I did all the mending that I had been putting off for weeks, scrubbed the landing outside my apartment door and sprayed it with Cat-B-Gon, and thought about talking on the telephone to men about sex, and how I could do it while I was ironing a shirt or arranging flowers in a vase or wiping cat-turds off my shoe. Then I took a shower and changed and went in to work at Sears for the five to nine evening shift. I told myself that the work wasn't dirty or difficult, that my co-workers were pleasant people and that there was no reason why this job should make me so depressed.

It didn't help.

The mall was having Craft Week, and to get to Sears I had to pass all the tables and people. I wondered why I didn't get busy and make things in the evenings and sell them on the weekends and make ends meet that way. I passed Barbie dolls whose pink crocheted skirts concealed spare rolls of toilet paper, and I saw wooden key-chains that spelled out names, and ceramic butterfly windchimes, and a booth of rubber-stamps, and a booth with clusters of little pewter and crystal sculptures displayed on tables made of old doors set across saw-horses. I slowed a little as I passed that one, for I've always had a weakness for pewter. There were the standard dragons and wizards, and some thunder-eggs cut in half with wizard figures standing inside them. There were birds, too, eagles and falcons and owls of pewter, and one really nice stag almost as big as my hand. For fifty-two dollars. I was looking at it when I heard a woman standing behind me say, "I'd like the crystal holding the wizard, please."

And the owner of the stall smiled at her and said, "You mean the wizard holding the crystal, right?" and the woman said, in this really snotty voice, "Quite."

So the owner wrapped up the little figurine of a wizard holding a crystal ball in several layers of tissue paper, and held it out to the woman and said, "Seventeen-seventy-eight, please," and the woman was digging in her purse and I swear, all I did was try to step out of their way.

I guess my coat caught on a corner of the door or something, for in the next instant everything was tilting and sliding. I tried to catch the edge of the door-table, but it landed on the woman's foot, really hard, as all the crystal and pewter crashed to the floor and scattered across the linoleum like a shattered whitecap. The woman screamed and threw up her hands and the little wrapped wizard went flying.

I'm not sure if I really saw this.

The crystal ball flew out of the package and landed separately on the floor. It didn't shatter or tinkle or crash. It went Poof! with a minute puff of smoke. And the crumple of tissue paper floated down empty.

"You stupid bitch!" the woman yelled at me, and the owner of the booth glared at me and said, "I hope to hell you have insurance, klutz!"

Which is a dumb thing to say, really, and I couldn't think of any answer. People were turning to stare,

and moving toward us to see what the excitement was, and the woman had sort of collapsed and was holding onto her foot, saying, “My god, it’s broken, it’s broken.”

I knew, quite abruptly and coldly, that she wasn’t talking about her foot.

Then the fortyish man grabbed me by the elbow and said, “We’ve got to get out of here!” I let him pull me away, and the funny thing is, no one tried to stop us or chase us or anything. The crowd closed up around the woman on the floor like an amoeba engulfing a tidbit.

Then we were in a pickup truck that smelled like a wet dog, and the floor was cluttered with muddy newspapers and styrofoam coffee cups and wrappers from Hostess Fruit Pies and paper boats from the textured vegetable protein burritos they sell in the Seven-Eleven stores.

Part of me was saying that I was crazy to be driving off with this guy I hardly knew who had stuck me with the bill for dinner, and part of me was saying that I had better get back to Sears, maybe I could explain being this late for work. And part of me just didn’t give a shit anymore, it just wanted to flee. And that part felt better than it had in ages.

We pulled up outside a little white house and he turned to me gravely and said, “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“This is really dumb,” I said, and he said, “Maybe so, but it’s all we’ve got. I told you, magic isn’t what it used to be.”

So we went inside the little house and he put the tea kettle on. It was a beautiful kettle, shining copper with a white and blue ceramic handle, and the cups and saucers he took down matched it. I said, “You stuck me with the bill at the restaurant.”

He said, “My enemies fell upon me in the restroom and magicked me away. I told you. I never would have chosen to leave you that way, Silver Lady. But for your intervention today, I would still be in their powers.” Then he turned, holding a little tin cannister in each hand and asked, “Which will you have: Misplaced Dreams or Forgotten Sweetness?”

“Forgotten Sweetness,” I said, and he put down both cannisters of tea and took me in his arms and kissed me. And yes, I could feel his stomach sticking out a little against mine, and when I put my hand to the back of his head to hold his mouth against mine, I could tell his hair was thinning. But I also thought I could hear windchimes and scent an elusive perfume on a warm breeze. I don’t believe in magic. The idea of willing enchantment into my life is dumb. Dumb. But as the fortyish man had said, it was all we had. A dumb hope for a small slice of magic, no matter how thin. The fortyish man didn’t waste his energy carrying me to the bedroom.

I never met a man under twenty-five who was worth the powder to blow him to hell. They’re all stuck in third gear.

It takes a man until he’s thirty to understand what gentleness is about, and a few years past that to realize that a woman touches a man as she would like him to touch her.

By thirty-five, they start to grasp how a woman’s body is wired. They quit trying to kick-start us, and learn to make sure the battery is charged before turning the key. A few, I’ve heard, learn how to let a woman make love to them.

Fortyish men understand pacing. They know it doesn’t have to all happen at once, that separating each stimulus can intensify each touch. They know when pausing is more poignant than continuing, and they know when continuing is more important than a ceramic kettle whistling itself dry on an electric burner.

And afterwards I said to him, “Have you ever heard of ‘Lindholm’s Rule of Ten’?”

He frowned an instant. “Isn’t that the theory that the first ten times two people make love, one will do something that isn’t in sync with the other?”

“That’s the one,” I said.

“It’s been disproved,” he said solemnly. And he got up and went to the bathroom while I rescued the smoking kettle from the burner.

I stood in the kitchen, and after a while I started shivering, because the place wasn’t all that well heated. Putting my clothes back on didn’t seem polite somehow, so I called through the bathroom door, “Shall I put on more water for tea?”

He didn’t answer, and I didn’t want to yell through the door again, so I picked up my blouse and slung it around my shoulders and shivered for a while. I sort of paced through his kitchen and living room. I found myself reading the titles of his books, one of the best ways to politely spy on someone. *Theories of Thermodynamics* was right next to *The Silmarillion*. All the books by Carlos Castaneda were set apart on a shelf by themselves. His set of Kipling was bound in red leather. My ass was freezing, and I suspected I had a rug burn on my back. To hell with being polite. I went and got my underwear and skirt and stood in the kitchen, putting them on.

“Merlin?” I called questioningly as I picked up my pantyhose. They were shot, a huge laddered run up the back of one leg. I bunched them up and shoved them into my purse. I went and knocked on the bathroom door, saying, “I’m coming in, okay?” And when he didn’t answer, I opened the door.

There was no one in there. But I was sure that was where he had gone, and the only other exit from the bathroom was a small window with three pots of impatiens blooming on the sill. The only clue that he had been there was the used rubber floating pathetically in the toilet. There is nothing less romantic than a used rubber.

I went and opened the bedroom door and looked in there. He hadn’t made his bed this morning. I backed out.

I actually waited around for a while, pretending he would come back. I mean, his clothes were still in a heap on the floor. How he could have gotten re-dressed and left the house without my noticing it, I didn’t try to figure out. But after an hour or so, it didn’t matter how he had done anything. He was *gone*.

I didn’t cry. I had been too stupid to allow myself to cry. None of this made sense, but my behavior made the least sense of all. I finished getting dressed and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Great. Smearred makeup and nothing to repair it with, so I washed it all off. Let the lines at the corners of my mouth and the circles under my eyes show. Who cared. My hair had gone wild. My legs were white-fleshed and goosebumpy without the pantyhose. The cute little ankle-strap heels on my bare feet looked grotesque. All of me looked rumped and used. It matched how I felt, an outfit that perfectly complemented my mood, so I got my purse and left.

The old pickup was still outside. That didn’t make sense either, but I didn’t really give a damn.

I walked home. That sounds simpler than it was. The weather was raw, I was barelegged and in heels, it was getting dark and people stared at me. It took me about an hour, and by the time I got there I had rubbed a huge blister on the back of one of my feet, so I was limping as well. I went up the stairs, narrowly missing the moist brown pile the neighbor’s cat had left for me, unlocked my apartment door and went in.

And I still didn’t cry. I kicked off my shoes and got into my old baggy sweatsuit and went to the

kitchen. I made myself hot chocolate in a little china pot with forget-me-nots on it, and opened the eight ounce canned genuine all-the-way-from-England Cross and Blackwell plum pudding that my sister had given me last Christmas and I had saved in case of disasters like this. I cut the whole thing up and arranged it on a bone china plate on a little tray with my pot of hot chocolate and a cup and saucer. I set it on a little table by my battered easy chair, put a quilt on the chair and got down my old leather copy of Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*. Then I headed for the bathroom, intending to take a quick hot shower and dab on some rose oil before settling down for the evening. It was my way of apologizing to myself for hurting myself this badly.

I opened the bathroom door, and a stenchful cloud of sulphurous green smoke wafted out. Choking and gasping, I peered in, and there was the fortyish man, clad only in a towel, smiling at me apologetically. He looked apprehensive. He had a big raw scrape on one knee, and a swollen lump on his forehead. He said, "Silver Lady, I never would have left you like that, but..."

"You were teleported away by your arch rival," I finished.

He said, "No, not teleported, exactly, this involved a spell requiring a monkey's paw and a dozen nightshade berries. But they were *last year's* berries, and not potent enough to hold me. I had a spell of my own up my sleeve and..."

"You blasted him to kingdom come," I guessed.

"No." He looked a little abashed. "Actually, it was the Incessant Rectal Itch' spell, a little crude, but always effective and simple to use. I doubt that he'll be bothering us again soon." He paused, then added, "As I've told you, magic isn't what it used to be." Then he sniffed a few times and said, "Actually, I've found that Pinesol is the best stuff for getting rid of spell residues..."

So we cleaned up the bathroom. I poured hydrogen peroxide over his scraped knee and he made gasping noises and cursed in a language I'd never heard before. I left him doing that and went into the kitchen and began re-heating the hot chocolate. A few moments later he came out dressed in a sort of sarong he'd made from one of my bed sheets. It looked strangely elegant on him, and the funny thing was, neither of us seemed to feel awkward as we sat down and drank the hot chocolate and shared the plum pudding. The last piece of plum pudding he took, and borrowing some cream cheese from my refrigerator, he buttered a cabalistic sign onto it. Then he went to the door and called, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

The neighbor's cat came at once, and the ratty old thing let the fortyish man scoop him up and bring him into my living room, where he removed two ticks from behind its ears and then fed it the plum pudding in small bites. When he had done that, he picked it up and stared long into its yellowish eyes before he intoned, "By bread and cream I bind you. Nevermore shalt thou shit upon the threshold of this abode." Then he put the cat gently out the door, observing aloud, "Well, that takes care of the curse you were under."

I stared at him. "I thought my curse had something to do with me working at Sears."

"No. That was just a viciously cruel thing you were doing to yourself, for reasons I will never understand." He must have seen the look on my face, because after a while he said, "I told you, the magic is never quite what you think it to be."

Then he came to sit on the floor beside my easy chair. He put his elbow on my knee and leaned his chin in his hand. "What if I were to tell you, Silver Lady, that I myself have no real magic at all? That, actually, I climbed out my bathroom window and sneaked through the streets in my towel to meet you here? Because I wanted you to see me as special."

I didn't say anything.

“What if I told you I really work for Boeing, in Personnel?”

I just looked at him, and he lifted his elbow from my knee and turned aside a little. He glanced at his own bare feet, and then over at my machine. He licked his lips and spoke softly. “I could get you a job there. As a word processor, at about eleven dollars an hour.”

“Merlin,” I said warningly.

“Well, maybe not eleven dollars an hour to start...”

I reached out and brushed what hair he had back from his receding hairline. He looked up at me and then smiled the smile where he always looked aside from me. We didn't say anything at all. I took his hand and led him to my room, where we once more disproved Lindholm's Rule of Ten. I fell asleep curled around him, my hand resting comfortably on the curve of his belly. He was incredibly warm, and smelled of oranges, cloves, and cinnamon. Misplaced Dreams Tea, that's what he smelled like. And that night I dreamed I wore a peacock feather gown and strolled through a misty garden. I had found something I had lost, and I carried it in my hand, but every time I tried to look at it to see what it was, the mist swirled up and hid my hand from me.

In the morning when I woke up, the fortyish man was gone.

It didn't really bother me. I knew that either he would be back, or he wouldn't, but either way no one could take from me what I already had, and what I already had was a lot more magic than most people get in their lives. I put on my ratty old bathrobe and my silver ladies and went out into the livingroom. His sarong sheet was folded up on the easy chair in the livingroom, and the neighbor's cat was asleep on it, his paws tucked under his chin.

And my Muse was there, too, perched on the corner of my desk, one knee under her chin as she painted her toenails. She looked up when I came in and said, “If you're quite finished having a temper tantrum, we'll get on with your career now.” So I sat down at my machine and flicked the switch on and put my fingers on the home row.

Funny thing. The keys weren't even dusty.

Notes and proofing history

AK #14

Scanned with preliminary proofing by A/NN\A

October 23th, 2007—v1.0

from *Asimov's* January, 1989

Nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novelette, 1989. It was also chosen for inclusion in *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Seventh Annual Collection*, Jun 1990, Gardner Dozois, editor.