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FOR RICHER, FOR STRANGER

I've never been certain it was death that parted us. I used the term as grounds in the divorce proceedings, and they thought I was crazy, because Rich attended. He didn't protest it, though, so maybe he knew he was dead too. My lawyer wanted me to go with my first choice, incompatibility, but I held out for death.

"I think you should change your mind, Penny," Rich said to me during recess. "You stick with this death line and we may never get asundered." He looked so dapper and kind; I had a secret desire to faint in his arms in hopes that he would carry me away. I think I had that desire the first time I saw him, when he was still Rich, but it faded when I got to know him. Today he was wearing a blue suit, gray shirt, and powder-blue tie; his dark hair curled nicely, and the suit made his eyes look more intensely blue.

He put some quarters in the vending machine and bought me a coffee with cream and sugar, just the way I liked it.

That's how I knew the man I roamed was dead. Rich never bought me anything just the way I liked it. He bought me things just the way he liked them, which inevitably meant coffee, black. I looked at this stranger in Rich's clothes -- in Rich's face and hands and feet -- and smiled at him, thinking maybe not getting asundered was just the way I liked it too, a thought I wouldn't have dared to entertain two weeks before. "Think I'll stick, Rich," I said, accepting the coffee.

He made that click sound between his tongue and the roof of his mouth that meant "this is inevitable, and I approve." He used to use it: for calling horses on our weekend walks in the country -- two or three quick clicks, and the nags would come to him. His whole vocabulary had changed since he died. "Okay, Pix," he said, to reinforce the click.

I took my coffee and went away, then, because nobody had called me Pix since my high school sweetheart, Alan, died -- two years before I met the first Rich and married him, and six years before I met the imposter Rich who had just bought me coffee.

How had he known? How did he know anything? The man I married wouldn't have been able to recognize me if I was with two other brunettes, and this man knew my secret childhood nickname. I went into the ladies room, threw out the coffee, and sat on a toilet (the only handy piece of furniture), clutching my stomach, which had shooting pains in it by that time.

Gretchen, my lawyer, found me there a few minutes later when she came in to sweep all the escaping strands of blonde-brown hair back into her chignon. I had

left the stall door open; she saw me in the mirror. She stooped in front of me, putting creases in her green satin skirt. "Penny, do you know what you want? You're surely not making this easy for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Changing grounds in the middle of the case. This death business. Are you sure you want to ditch the guy? I'm starting to suspect you don't."

"He's not the man I married," I said.

"You're divorcing the man you married," she said. "It would save steps if you stopped the divorce -- that is, if you're thinking of marrying the man he is now. God, I can't believe the level of metaphysics involved here."

"How can I want to marry him when I don't even know him?" I said. "I think I want to marry him."

"I'm going to go talk to his lawyer and see if we can't all throw in the towel now," she said, "unless you think Rich might be playing a little trick he figures you'll be sympathetic. Maybe he figures you'll figure he has a diminished earning capacity and shouldn't be soaked for a big alimony check every month. Is this new him manipulating your thoughts in any of those directions?"

"Don't be silly," I said. "The new Rich told the court about the Costa Mesa property. Honestly, Gretchen. I had no idea he owned that land, and that he had such a big monthly income from it. Four years and I've never heard of it. Now he wants to give it to me as a settlement. Did you see his lawyer jumping up and down during that part?"

"That was pretty amusing," she said. "If it was some sort of trick, Rich has a very devious mind. I'm going to ask you one more time. Do you want me to halt proceedings now?"

I clutched my stomach and frowned, with my eyes closed. I thought a moment. Then

I said, "I will if he will."

"I'll go check it out," said Gretchen.

The judge gave us a big scolding for wasting his time, and said we should have thought this thing through better, and if we were incapable of thinking about it, our lawyers should have been more responsible, and if he ever saw us in his court again he would divorce us immediately in revenge. I couldn't follow his logic. Rich was laughing, and that only seemed to infuriate him more.

"Come on," I said, "Let's go home."

He had been living in his own apartment for two months -- since I kicked him out of the one we had shared. He leaned forward and looked at me. "Really?"

I took his arm. His hesitation made me more sure than ever that he was someone new. "Come home," I said. Now or never. We could start with an early dinner, then see if the evening followed the old pattern or not. If he still ended lovemaking with hurt and humiliation, I knew the judge I wanted to see.

As we walked out of the building, Gretchen joined us. "Call me for lunch, Penny.
Don't call me for any more divorce work. I don't think my budget can take it."

"Don't worry," said Rich.

Gretchen gave him a pointed look. "On the other hand," she said.

He grinned at her. Couldn't be Rich; Rich had no sense of humor where my independence was concerned. He hated it if I had lunch with a girl friend almost more than he hated it when my advertising buddies and I went out to lunch.

He wrote Gretchen a check for a thousand dollars. "Just in case she needs you again, here's a provisional retainer," he said, handing it to her.

She swallowed. "What if she doesn't?"

"For services rendered," he said.

"Penny, you witnessed that, didn't you? Now I'm going to deposit this."

"Isn't there something fishy about your taking money from your client's adversary?"

"Not since you halted the proceedings." She blew us both a kiss and walked off.

"I don't know, Rich," I said. "I feel funny about you paying my lawyer for not doing anything."

"You want me to take the check back?"

"No," I said. If it came down to divorce again, I might invoke that check as a provisional retainer, after all. A drop in the ocean of lawyers' fees, but that drop meant a lot more to me than it did to Gretchen or Rich. It would make things easier.

"Your car or mine?" he asked as we went down the courthouse steps. The day was stormy. Dark clouds looked ready to spit, though there was no rain falling yet. I leaned closer to his warmth. He put his arm around me, with a little hug.

"Both, I think," I said. I looked up at his face and took a chance. "You know the way home?"

He could have run with that, one way or the other. He said, "Okay if I follow you?" so I still wasn't sure.

I said all right. We went to the underground city parking lot; I waited in my little blue-and-silver Honda CRX for his black sixties Mustang to pull up behind me, then I led the way back to the apartment we had lived in for four

good-to-worse years. He pulled into his old parking spot, but it was the one next to mine, so I wasn't sure if that was evidence or not.

"Mr. Zamoyoski," said Tomas, the doorman. He seemed surprised, but I couldn't tell if it was pleased or dismayed surprise. Rich smiled at him and waved. Did Rich recognize Tomas or not.?

He glanced around the lobby of the building. Pale streaky brown linoleum for the floor, lighter brown wallpaper, two ailing palm trees near the front window, ranks of tarnished brass-fronted mailboxes on the left wall, the door to the staircase and to the manager's apartment on the far wall, two elevators with a standing, sand-filled ashtray between them on the right wall. "Who picked this place, you or me?"

"You were bring here when we got married," I said carefully. "I moved in."

"And you got custody of the apartment when we split up?"

I punched the "up" button on the elevator summons panel. "I was mad," I said.

"Good for you."

The left-hand elevator door opened and we stepped into a gray-floored, brown-walled cube. I waited a moment to see if Rich would punch the fifth floor button. He glanced at me, at the buttons, at me, and shrugged. I reached past him and punched the correct button. The elevator started with its characteristic jerk. When I was alone, I waited for the right-hand elevator; I was always sure the left-hand one would stall. I had heard stories from our neighbors about people trapped overnight, trapped until they ran out of air, trapped forever in the left-hand elevator. Even if it ran all right, how could it help being haunted? Rich had heard all the same stories, and all he ever did was sneer at them.

We rode upward in silence. I peeked at him. Was he Rich? Was this all a charade?

If it was, Gretchen was right; he was very devious. This didn't feel like our last ride in an elevator together, right after the breakup. The tension then had been so strong I felt like I was walking through a snow storm all the time, fighting wind and flying flakes. I had had problems sleeping -- my mind racing a million miles an hour, not settling anywhere. We had stood at opposite comers of the elevator, like fighters, as we rode down, his suitcases between us. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I had no right to ask him to leave, that I was imagining he was being mean to me when really he wasn't, that it was a big mistake to try to change anything this early -- why couldn't I try a little longer? Rich was always talking about compromise. Hadn't he given up all those evenings with the boys to stay home with me? And here I was objecting to his attentions. Didn't I love him?

I loved him, I loved him. I wasn't sure I loved him. How did anybody ever know?

"Do you like this building?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I got used to it."

"I don't think it suits you. You'd be better off in a place with more Colors."

"What have you been studying since you left? Underground drug culture? Rich, you're color-blind, remember? I had to safety-pin your ties to your suits so you wouldn't clash."

"Even I can tell this place is too dull," he said after a moment.

The elevator jerked and stopped. I looked at the buttons. Both the four and the five were flashing. "Oh, great," I said. "Finally this happens. Now we're stuck." I pressed the five button again. Nothing happened.

He pressed the stop button.

"What good will that do?" I said. "We're already stopped."

"Thought I'd try some reverse psychology." He pressed the emergency button. The elevator dropped an inch. I screamed and grabbed his arm. He frowned. "Aren't these things supposed to have phones in them?"

"I'll get someone's attention," I said, and screamed again, so loudly Rich covered his ears; his whole face squinted, as if he had just tasted a really sour lemon.

"Stop," he said, when I had to breathe. "You'll wake the dead."

We stared at each other, our eyes wide. I felt some situational tenseness coming on. I had never liked small closed spaces. And here I was, alone with, possibly, my husband, who had taken me closer to death than I cared for on several occasions.

I gripped his lapels. "You've got to tell me, and tell me now. Are you Rich? Are you really Rich?"

"I'm Richer."

I screamed again. "Make another pun and I'll burst your eardrums!" I yelled.

"It wasn't supposed to be a joke."

"What happened to you? Did you just grow up? Are you playing a trick on me? Or what?"

"Well, Pix," he said, "somebody realized you deserved better. So here I am." "What are you saying? That you're God's gift to women?"

"Only to. you, sweetheart," he said, and he looked as though he believed it.

"If you're better, why aren't you doing something about this elevator?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Fix it."

"Done." He banged the button panel twice and the elevator started upward again.

"Hey! Why didn't you do that to begin with?"

"Had to exhaust the other alternatives first."

The elevator stopped with a jerk and opened its door. We were the usual one foot below floor level. I was glad just to be alive, so I didn't gripe about the underhang. Rich took my elbow and helped me up and out, and I pulled him after me. "You deserve a better building" he said. "I don't know what I could have been thinking about, having you move into this dump."

"I think we were both thinking about money," I said.

"Why?"

"As far as I knew, we didn't have much. Having a doorman seemed like big-league stuff to me."

He stooped and spoke into my ear in a low voice. "I've checked out this Rich guy's assets. He has plenty."

"You're kidding! You mean, aside from that Costa Mesa property?"

"Municipal bonds, T-bills, a small stock portfolio -- all triple B's and up."

"And you, the perfect gentleman, you didn't bring this stuff up at the trial?"

"I was going to let them grill it out of me. Thought I'd sweat and protest and look guilty as hell. I don't think your lawyer knew about it, though."

"How could she when I didn't?"

"Homework."

I unlocked the door to fifth floor apartment D. Rich followed me in, staring about as though he'd never seen the place before, when actually the real Rich had selected all the furniture, drapes, and carpeting with the help of his previous girlfriend, Marcia, an interior decorator with sadistic tendencies.

The couch and chairs were shaped and colored something like elephant ears bent in the middle, with spiky black legs supporting them. Under this dingy-gray-brown furniture lurked a circular rug cream-colored with large orange and red spots eclipsing each other all over it. The room had made me gasp the first time I saw it. Rich had taken that as a sign of approval.

"Those are your fish," I said, pointing to a tankful of fancy goldfish, an integral part of the living room design.

"Fish?" He made a pained face halfway to the sour-lemon face he had made while I was screaming earlier.

"Fish. The only thing you ever really loved."

"Fish. Apparently I was a man of strange passions."

"I wanted to flush them all down the toilet for a while, but then I thought, it's not their fault some reprehensible character bought them. I always wondered why you didn't take them with you when you moved out, though."

"I probably didn't really care about them. I probably just used them to make you jealous. Before we go straight to the bedroom so I can show you all the neat things the aliens taught me when they took over my body, how about some coffee and a cheese plate?"

I gulped. "I thought dinner," I said.

"That would be nice." He took off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair, then loosened his tie and unbuttoned his top button -- exactly what Rich always did when he came home, kind of a claiming ceremony, I always thought -- this is my home ground and now I can relax. "What have you got in the kitchen?"

Feeling a little sick after seeing Rich reclaiming ground I had wrested away from him, I put my hands to my stomach and shrugged. I had invited him back. Why had I ever taken such a stupid risk?

He glanced around the apartment. A hallway led off to the left, a dining alcove opened up beyond the living room, and a door was set in the right wall, almost hidden beside the entertainment center and its accompanying book, record, and video cassette shelves. He scratched his head. Then he skirted the living room furniture, ducking away from the huge arrangement of dead pampas grass fronds and peacock feathers set on a pedestal against the left wall, and headed for the dining alcove. It opened onto the kitchen.

I took his coat and my own and hung them in the closet, behind the door in the right wall. Hell to pay now. The man I married hated for me to step out of line, and I had walked off the graph paper altogether, what with the divorce proceedings and changing the apartment locks and getting the two strongest guys from the advertising agency to stay with me while Rich packed his things and left; I had even had them take turns sleeping on my couch for a couple weeks, except they ended up on the floor, since the couch was less comfortable than the rug. I had planned my escape so well. And now I just walked back into the cage.

I could take my purse and a few things and head out the door. I could find refuge with several people -- Gretchen, even. Although I hadn't told her everything about my relationship with Rich. I hadn't told anybody the full extent. I tried not to know it myself. I hated victim statistics.

"Penny?" Rich peered out of the kitchen. He had his shin sleeves rolled up. "Where are the spices?"

I let go of my stomach, sighed, and wandered over to join him in the kitchen.

He had spread thin frozen fillets of fish on the broiling pan, and cut uneven slices of bread off a round of sourdough. He was also mixing something in one of the glass mixing bowls; a fork lay beside the bowl, dripping light yellow batter. Rich had never cooked while he lived with me, but he could have learned something from two months of neo-bachelor life -- or maybe he knew it before we got married and just concealed his ability? "Lemon pepper, I thought," he said.

A long teasing appetizer before we got to his idea of entree, I thought. He's going to be nice to me until I really believe this fiction of a new him, and then the real him will come back and savage me. I should leave now.

"Are you okay, Pix?" he asked.

I went to the slender cabinet recessed into the sidewall and opened it to reveal our well-stocked spice shelves. I picked the lemon pepper from its spot in the center of the alphabet and handed it to him. He liked things organized in easily understandable order, even things he never used.

He gripped my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Would you leave now, please?"

He blinked. "What, you don't like fish?"

"I like fish all right. I'm just wondering if you'd leave."

"Okay, if it means that much to you. Can we have lunch tomorrow, then? Maybe in a public place?"

"No."

He looked at me with an injured innocent expression I knew well. He washed his hands in the kitchen sink, then cocked his head at the fish. He frowned and glanced at me. He dried his hands on the towel threaded through the refrigerator handle, then looked at me and smiled. "Maybe next life," he said, and went to the living room, with me following.

I pointed to the closet. He went and fetched his coat. "It was something about the coat, wasn't it? What?" He put it on, stared at a red spot on the rug, then glanced up at me. "Let's see. I came in," he said, going to the front door and walking through his own actions. "Came in, took off coat." He draped it across the chair. "Loosened tie, unbuttoned shirt. I get it. You want me to cook in my coat?" He put the coat back on. "Sleeves in the egg batter?"

I felt a smile surface before I could stifle it.

"How am I supposed to know what you want unless you tell me? You want me to take

these goldfish away? Kill them? Get out of your kitchen? What?"

"Just leave," I said.

"Pix."

I said nothing. He smiled, shrugged, and walked out the door. I ran across the room and locked the door and chained it. I leaned against the door.

"I love you," he said through the door. "I love you, Penny." Then I heard his footsteps receding down the hall.

With my back to the door I looked around at the apartment. An awful place. Why was I defending it? I hated everything about it, though I hated the Marcia touches more than the Rich touches. We were always too poor to redecorate. I had asked him how he could afford this furniture in the first place, and he had said lucky stock speculations before he met me, all dried up now.

I turned and unlocked the door. "Rich?" I said.

He was waiting by the elevators, the "down" summons button glowing red. He turned and looked at me.

"Can we go to a hotel?" I asked.

He smiled.

He came back while I packed some things in an overnight bag. "The fish is just going to waste. Too late to refreeze it. Why don't I go ahead and get it in the oven? We could eat here and then go out," he said. "This time I'll keep my coat on. What do you think?"

"No," I said. "Let's eat out. Pretend it's a date or something. Nothing permanent. Okay?"

"All right."

This solicitude and compliance was alien. Devious, I thought. There ought to be some test a person could do to figure out -- "Where did you go to high school, Rich?" I asked as I folded my lavender nightgown.

"Not that one. How about the red one?"

"What red one?"

He reached into the drawer and pulled out my red nightgown. It was cut in the same pattern as three others.

"You like that one?"

"Yes," he said. He handed it to me.

He had never known what Marcia was doing with that ugly rug in the living room.

He had thought it was just neutral overlapping circles. He had never

understood
why I thought the living room so uncomfortable, because he couldn't
distinguish
shades of color.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Why'd you call me Pix?"

He frowned. "You look like a Pix."

"Are you going to run back into the real Rich?" "I don't know. I hope not."

"If there's a chance, then there's no future for us, you understand? Not if
you
might suddenly be him. I have to -- I have to take care of myself. I have to
protect myself."

He sat on the edge of the waterbed, his elbows on his knees, hands dangling.
Even his clothes looked defeated.

"Look," I said, "for a while I didn't understand what was happening. It
started
out seeming like such a great fairytale marriage. Then things changed. You
started getting weirder and meaner in bed and around the house. It happened so
slowly I didn't really notice, until one morning I woke up and thought, where
was I four years ago? I wouldn't have let any of these things be done to me.
If
someone used me the way you did, I would have drugged his wine and beaten him
up, then left him in the middle of a park without any clothes on. When did I
stop being that person who was strong enough to take care of herself?" I let
the
nightgown slip from my fingers to the floor. "You kept saying if I loved you,
I'd give you another chance. If I loved you, I'd be understanding about a few
personal quirks that only happened sometimes. If I was really a good woman . .
. .
if I really knew what love meant . . . if you could only beat some sense into
my
head"

He sat on the edge of the waterbed and looked up at me. "All those ifs?"

"Always ifs."

"If I promise to try not to if at you anymore, will you let me take you out to
dinner?"

"No strings?"

He sat up. He grinned at me. "Dinner. That's all."

He was perfect at dinner. He's been perfect for the week since. I am terrified
that I will learn to trust him. The only thing I've found worth trusting in
this
life is that nobody is trustworthy. Every time I forget that, I get hurt.

But he's so good now. If he is worth trusting I would hate to miss the
opportunity.

Sometimes I wish I could turn off my head.