

JERRY OLTION

ABRIDGED EDITION

QUINOA WASN'T IN THE dictionary. Owen checked twice, but the listings went straight from quinine to quinoid.

Thinking he must have misspelled it, he looked back to the box of Bengal Spice tea where he'd read quinoa among the list of ingredients, but now he couldn't locate it there, either. He'd have sworn he'd seen it after nutmeg and cloves, but now cloves was the last ingredient.

Nor could he find anything he could have misread to produce the word. That was odd. Must be the stress, he thought. Seeing words that weren't there wouldn't be the first strange thing he'd done since losing both Richard and his job.

He set the dictionary down on the countertop separating the kitchen from the living room. The walls above the love seat and the stereo didn't look so bare anymore -- he had stapled up Van Gogh poster prints where Richard's paintings had been -- but the bookshelves and the CD rack were still full of gaps. Those would take a while to refill.

The tea's spicy aroma filled the kitchen. Owen lifted the cup, blew across the top, and took a sip. Something about it did suggest India, or Arabia. Foreign, anyway. It tasted fine even without quinoa.

He took both cup and dictionary down the hallway into his study. Spreading the morning newspaper out on his drafting table, he pulled aside the curtain on the street-facing window to give him more light and began the morning ritual of looking through the want ads. He found the usual glut of accounting and auto body jobs, but once again no draftsmen. Plenty of restaurant jobs and sales positions, but no openings for surveyors, either. If this kept up, he was going to run out of unemployment compensation before he found anything.

Another ad caught his attention: Stevedore. There was no job description, just a number to call. Owen tried to remember what a stevedore did, but if he'd ever known, he'd forgotten it. Well, no problem; he had the dictionary right there. He flipped it open and paged through the S's.

No stevedore. The listing went from stethoscope to stew. Hmm, he thought. Wasn't much of a dictionary, was it? He shook his head sadly. The dictionary -- like the tea -- had belonged to his housemate, until Richard had left for Calcutta three months ago to join an eastern religion Owen couldn't even pronounce. Owen had sneaked it out of a packing box so he'd have something of Richard's to remember him by, but until lately he hadn't felt the need to actually use it. Good thing; even now the disappointment was intense, like being rejected all over again.

That was silly. It was just a dictionary, and not a very good one at that. He was trying hard not to be vengeful about it, but even so, a dictionary without "stevedore" was missing something.

He flipped to the F's, remembering how as a kid he used to look up dirty words for fun, but "fuck" wasn't there. Nor was "fornicate." Well, that was somehow appropriate. Since Richard had left, Owen hadn't had so much as a date. Not that he hadn't tried, but one of the people he'd attempted to strike up a relationship with had turned out to be his boss's nephew, and now he was out of a job.

He closed the dictionary and looked back to the paper. Maybe he would just call the number and ask what a stevedore was. But when he looked for the ad, he couldn't find that, either.

What the heck? He traced the columns of jobs. They were alphabetized; he saw sales, screen printers, steelworkers, then summer jobs. No stevedore. But it had been there just a minute ago. He wouldn't have made up a whole job listing, not for something as unlikely as "stevedore."

There was another explanation, of course. An easily testable one, too, save that it was completely crazy to imagine it could be true.

Owen didn't mind. Right now he felt as if he were at least halfway insane anyway. So he picked another ad from the paper -- taxi driver --and flipped through the dictionary to the T's. No listing for taxi.

He'd kept his finger on the ad for taxi drivers, but when he looked back down, it now pointed to "teachers."

Owen stared at the newspaper for a long while, not really seeing anything printed there. He shifted his gaze to the dictionary. It looked like a standard collegiate, hardbound in red cloth, but instead of Webster's, the name read, "Drake's Deleting Dictionary."

Where had Richard gotten it? Owen had no idea. He looked for a publisher's mark on the copyright page, but there was no copyright page. Good grief, did it contain anything it was supposed to?

Of course it did. It was full of definitions. Owen opened it at random--the pages parted to the same F's he'd been at before -- and read the first entry he saw: fundamentalist, noun: an adherent of fundamentalism. He closed the dictionary, wondering why it would have fundamentalist but not stevedore, then a sudden suspicion made him open it to the F's again. No fundamentalist. There was fundament, and fundus, but no fundamentalist. Or fundamentalism either, for that matter. Evidently whatever he intentionally looked up disappeared.

Too bad I couldn't get rid of the real thing that easily, he thought. The fundies and their anti-gay attitudes had been a thorn in his side ever since .

. ever since when? Come to think of it, they'd never really amounted to much after their "no special rights" ballot measure had died at the polls. Owen

hadn't heard much about them for over a year.

Or had he? There was a fuzziness to his thoughts that bothered him. Hadn't he just read in today's paper that they were planning to introduce another bill in the state senate? He dug out the front page and scanned the headlines. Nothing about it. Just an article on the chronic public transportation problems, another about a mysterious crop failure in the Peruvian Andes, and another about a new automated cargo-handling system for unloading ships.

The hair was beginning to stand up on the back of his neck. Had he somehow wiped out the entire concept of fundamentalism just by looking it up in Richard's dictionary? It seemed impossible, but so did want ads vanishing, and ingredients from his tea.

He needed something he could test. Something physical that he knew was there, like the teacup. Good enough: Teacup. He opened the dictionary to the T's and ran his finger down the column past "teacher."

He heard a wet sploosh beside him, and hot tea flooded the drafting table. It ran off the edge onto his lap, and he leaped up, howling in pain and fear. Jesus, the cup had just vanished. He ran for the kitchen and pulled a handful of paper towels off the roll beneath the cupboard, then ran back and sopped up what hadn't already soaked into the newspaper or dripped to the floor.

The dictionary had been splashed, too. Owen wiped off the wet pages and fluttered them until they were dry, then threw away the towels and the soggy newspaper and sat back down at the table.

Richard's dictionary could make things disappear. Why hadn't he used it? Owen wondered, then he thought, Maybe he had. Who could say what the world had been like before Richard started tinkering with it? Unless Owen had been involved directly, he probably wouldn't have remembered the changes.

Whatever Richard might have done, there was still plenty left for Owen to do. The possibilities were endless. He quickly looked up "prejudice" and "bigotry." Neither one was listed, and presumably neither concept existed now, either. He shuffled through the papers on his drafting table and found the envelope his last paycheck had come in, but the pink slip was still there. Too subtle, maybe? He tried "unemployment," and that time he got results.

The pink slip had disappeared, but so had his paycheck. And something had changed down by his feet. Owen looked down and found a chain connecting his left ankle to his drafting table. What the --?

A loud crack came from outside, and someone screamed. Owen scooted over to the window -- he had to stretch out his leg to reach it -- and looked out. A line of convicts shuffled past on the sidewalk, chained together at the ankles just like he was chained to his desk, and a burly guard paced along beside them, flicking

a whip to lash the back of anyone who stumbled.

"Holy shit," Owen whispered. "Those aren't convicts; they're slaves." And so was he. He'd eliminated unemployment, all right.

Frantically, he looked up "slavery," and sighed in relief when the chain vanished from his ankle. He looked out the window again and was reassured to see just the normal pedestrian traffic. Well, not necessarily "normal"; everyone seemed to be striding along with much more determination than usual, as if they had places to go and no time to waste. Better than dragging chains, though.

Owen looked back to his drafting table. He didn't recognize the half-finished and now tea-stained topographic map taped there . . . but the longer he looked at it, the more familiar it became. A freelance job? Yes, that was it. He dug through the papers until he found the job order, complete with a check for half the work in advance.

All right. He'd squeaked through on that one. Maybe it was time to put the dictionary away before he got into worse trouble. But he still had one problem . . .

He considered looking up "abandonment," but he wasn't so sure he wanted Richard back. What he wanted was a new companion, someone who wouldn't leave him for an eastern religion. What he wanted was not to be lonely anymore.

Yes, of course! He eagerly flipped through the L's, looking -- for the last time in his life -- for "loneliness."

It wasn't there, of course.

He heard a soft noise from the other side of the house. A sigh? Good God, had the mysterious dictionary actually created a companion for him already? Without his even having to go out? He stood up from his drafting table and walked hesitantly down the hallway into the living room, at once hopeful and afraid of what he might find, but his trepidation melted away when he saw the soft, fuzzy golden labrador puppy.

Hmm. Not exactly what he'd been expecting but when the puppy tilted its head sideways and blinked at him with its big round eyes, he couldn't help smiling. He hefted the dictionary in his hand, then laid it down on the coffee table. Plenty of time for fine-tuning later.

But by the time the puppy had messed on the carpet and chewed up his shoes, it had already eaten the dictionary.