

Lost

Short Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

Sunday, October 11, 2009

© Copyright 2009 Les Cohen (aka "WordFeeder")
Ellicott City, Maryland – All rights reserved.

The strong rap, rap of the knocker on Doctor Mazor's front door was still in his head when the doctor's wife pulled it open with her usual enthusiasm. "Hi, Alan," she smiled in a way that made perfect strangers feel welcome, "Com'on in. Charlie's in his study waiting for you."

"Hey, Arlene," he responded, barely raising the corners of his mouth. She didn't understand, of course, but it was the best he could manage. He tried looking at her, but couldn't hold it for more than a second. Avoiding the usual polite chit chat, he started down the hallway alone.

"You know the way," she reassured him, her voice trailing off to nothing, realizing their neighbor and long-time friend obviously wasn't in the mood to be sociable. This was a professional visit.

"Com'on in Alan." Charlie Mazor, 62 year old psychologist, planned to give up the downtown office he'd had since graduate school. Today's impromptu session with Alan would test his feelings about using their home for a retirement practice. "You sounded like crap when you called. ...Here, take a seat."

In a reversal of tradition, Doctor Mazor took to the couch, pointing toward the comfortable leather chair, half on and half off the small Persian rug that covered the wide plank hardwood floors between them. "There," he said, kicking off his shoes and making himself as comfortable as he felt appropriate under the circumstances. ("If he was a real patient," he thought to himself, "I'd probably have to take the chair, makes notes, pretend to be listening.") "What's going on, Alan? What about this beautiful fall, star-filled Saturday night that makes it so important that we talk?"

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice. ...and you've got to promise to charge me this time or, or I'm not coming back."

"Okay, already, I charge you. What they hell, I'll overcharge you. Feel better now?"

"Much better. Thanks."

"Maybe you want to take off your jacket?"

"Sure," and he did, quickly, impatient to keep talking, dropping it on the floor next to his chair.

"So what are you doing here? You know, I charge extra for curing writer's block. I figure 2% of the gross on your last three books..."

"...and you'd be able to take Arlene out to dinner, maybe."

“Stop faking it. No one sells as many books as you do without getting rich. Not to mention the movie deals.”

“Did you buy any?”

“Any what?”

“Any of my books?”

“Why should I? You keep giving me free copies.”

“Okay, so I’m rich. I’m not here to talk about money.”

“Is it writer’s block? I mean, because if it is, I was just kidding about charging...”

“No, anything but. I can’t *stop* writing. My ideas come out of nowhere, one right after the other.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? You’re at your creative peak. You’re...”

“Hey, guys. Sorry to interrupt,” Arlene came through the open door to the study with a tray in her hands, “but I thought some homemade lemonade and brownies with fudge on top would help.”

[Backspace to “Hey, guys.”]

“Hey, guys. Stop talking for a minute,” Arlene came through the open door to the study with a tray in her hands, singing the old Pillsbury jingle the best she could. “‘Nothin’ says lovin’ like somethin’ from the oven....’ “Well,” she paused, seeing the blank looks on both their faces, “anyway, I thought some homemade lemonade and my special recipe chocolate chip pecan cookies would help.”

“Honey, it’s October. Do really think lemonade...”

“Oh, who gives a rat’s ass.” Being married to a psychologist, Arlene had given up mincing words decades ago. “It’s great lemonade, and if my cookies don’t cure Alan, well then, he’s had it. ...There.” She put the tray down on the coffee table, pulling his journals out from under it and tossing them on the open end of the couch. “Enjoy.”

“Goodnight, Charlie!” It was their granddaughter popping into the doorway. She was visiting that weekend while their son and his wife were out of town. “Are we watching the game tomorrow?!”

“Wouldn’t miss it, sweetheart. You grill the hot dogs, I’ll get the beer.”

“Sure thing,” the 10 year old tried to act like he was serious. “Just don’t tell Grandma,” she pretend begged him in loud whisper, knowing full well Arlene was still in the room. “You know how upset she gets when we go bar hopping. I don’t want her to know I’ve started drinking again.” And then she giggled and ran for her life, Arlene right behind her.

“You’re a lucky man, Charlie,” he said with remorse.

“You could be, too. You’re what, 34, reasonably good looking, bucks deluxe. What’s not to love?”

“I don’t know. None of my relationships ever seem to last more than a couple of dates.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Can we talk about my writing, please?”

“If you insist,” Charlie seemed seriously perturbed, “but it can’t be as interesting as talking about the women I see you with.”

“Charlie! Focus, please.”

“Sure.”

“You know how it is with me. I write, but I don’t know where it’s coming from. My fingers move on the keyboard, the words show up on the screen, the characters take on a life of their own and seem to... to write their own dialog, interacting with each other at will. I..., I don’t have any conscious process, no outline, nothing. They even suggest the changes I make. This one thinks one of the others could be more friendly, that one complains the other is superfluous. I can’t...”

“Okay. Okay, already. I get it, but isn’t this the same creative process you’ve always talked to me about, about how your stories seem to come alive while you’re writing them?”

“It’s different now. Unrelated storylines are beginning to overlap and intertwine in ways I can’t seem to control. And I’m having trouble separating myself from what I write.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Charlie,” Alan moved forward to the edge of his seat, his elbows resting on his knees, as if being physically closer would make what he had to say any easier to understand, “listen to me. ...I’ve actually become a character in my own stories, a figment of my own imagination. I’m more comfortable, sometimes, more at ease with the characters I create than with the people in my life. The fiction I create feels real to me, while reality,” Alan shook his head, wincing in disgust, “like the crap I used to write in high school, ...trite, boring and fake. ...Charlie,” Alan could see the expression on his friend’s face changing for the worse, “I’m not only losing my ability to tell which is which, what’s fiction, what’s real, I’m not sure I care anymore to make that distinction.”

“Alan!” his wife, Verna, was screaming from their kitchen, “dinner’s ready.”

No response from Alan, his fingers flying over the keyboard of his notebook on the flea market table he’d refinished and used as a desk in the small study they had in their apartment.

“Alan.” She was standing in the open archway now, curved – the way it was in older buildings – with heavy molding. “Com’on, Alan. Give it rest. The words will still be there after we have something to eat.”

No response.

“Alan, please,” she pleaded with him. “...It’s been, I don’t know, a week, what with my schedule at the hospital, since we’ve both been home for dinner. ...I’ve made penne pasta with my own tomato sauce that you like, and fresh bread from that new bakery. ...Please, Alan?”

“Hey, sorry I’m late.” Jerry was one of the two attendants that were working the nightshift that evening at the “spa,” as they liked to call it, where people – people who could afford it – went to detox or just clear their heads, under careful supervision, and without the press and paparazzi. Here’s a tip: It helps to like arugula and goat cheese, the curative powers of which are legendary, if yet to be scientifically verified.

“Don’t worry about it,” Frank reassured him. “...It’s been quiet.”

“Who’s this guy,” Jerry asked, referring to the “guest” they could see through the interior window to his room, the one sitting on the floor, his back up against the corner, his computer on carpet between his legs... [No. Backspace to “..sitting”] ... in his bed, typing on his computer. There were blinds if the guest needed privacy, but this particular guest couldn’t have cared less.

“‘Alan.’ No last name. Never married. No family. He’s a writer. One of Dr. Mazor’s people.”

“Who’s ‘Mazor’?” They were talking to each other, but continued to stare through the window to Alan’s studio apartment, fascinated by his intensity.

“I don’t know. Never heard of him. He was the physician’s reference our guest gave when he checked himself in.”

(How pretentious. The word “patient” was strictly forbidden. Everyone was a “guest,” as if the place were some five star hotel. Alan was supposedly free to come and go at will – just not without the referring physician’s or psychologist’s permission.)

“Writes constantly whenever he’s awake.” He was reading the notes from the previous shift’s attendant. “Seldom looks up from his screen except to go to the bathroom and sleep – even then, with a pad next to his bed to make notes during the night. Eats at his desk. No interaction with any of the other guests.”

“What’s his problem?”

“He’s, uh, ‘confused,’ it says here. That’s all I know.”

It seemed that Alan heard them talking, although it wasn’t likely. Whatever the reason, he looked up through the window where they were standing, at each of them, one at a time, thought for a moment, turned back to his computer, scrolled up a couple of pages and resumed typing.

“Say, what happened to Marianne,” Jerry couldn’t find her when he punched in that evening. “you know, the new receptionist, the one with red hair, ...and the perfect rack.” He laughed to himself and turned, sensing that his cohort, Frank, had stepped away.

“Jerry,” the voice was feminine and came from behind him, “*I’m* Mariane, you know, the babe with the nice rack. ... Alan wrote Frank out of the story so that...” She was shy and more than a bit embarrassed. “I think we’re going to hook up in one of the empty apartments, while Alan leaves without our noticing. I mean, I find you attractive. You obviously like me. It’s not like there’s anything we can do about.”

Jerry wasn’t sure what to say. “Didn’t your hair used to be red?”

-wf