

Strangers in Peoria

By Donal Mahoney

I met a proper woman in a proper pub on a Monday in Peoria. It was noon, time for lunch, and we were sitting stool to stool over very large burgers at a long mahogany bar. It curved in and out as if wind-swept and featured high stools with padded seats and backrests, all in a rich faux maroon that complemented the authentic mahogany. The waiter had put us at the bar together, on the last two empty stools, thinking we had arrived there as a couple. Apologizing with his head bowed, he said no tables were available.

The place was awash in men who had obviously spent a lot of time in the sun. They were talking agri-business very loud. Plaid shirts and John Deere caps were everywhere. Apparently, the price of pork that day had hit new highs and that event seemed to delight the majority of diners. It was obvious these men knew their pork and probably their corn as well. The odd thing was, not one of them seemed to notice the lady sitting next to me. The price of pork notwithstanding, she deserved a second glance if not a whole lot more. She was certainly no farmer's daughter. Probably never baked an apple pie.

It was easy to see why the waiter thought we were a couple. I was in a Brooks Brothers suit, button-down shirt and a serious rep tie, and the lady was attired in the feminine business equivalent, a conservative suit, albeit in tasteful lavender, and a string of pearls. An hour earlier, we had both landed in Peoria on different planes and found our separate ways to the same restaurant. I was taken by how much she looked like Jackie Kennedy after Dallas but without the pillbox hat.

Eventually she spoke. It turned out she was from New York and I was from Chicago and that we were in Peoria for final interviews for jobs we thought we'd get. But living in Peoria, we thought, might not be a fit. We didn't doubt that Peoria was a nice city, a good place to raise a family even though neither of us was married. But we agreed that adjusting to Peoria might be difficult for urbanites like us, especially at the start, since we wouldn't be taken with the price of pork, whether it went up or down.

The lady was a surgeon recruited by a hospital. It took a little prompting but finally she said: "I repair pelvic floors in women."

Not too worry, I thought. She is still a very nice looking woman.

She paused to see if I'd react to her announcement of her vocation and when I didn't, she continued.

"If a bladder drops, or a rectum tumbles or if a womb is full of fibroids, I'm the surgeon that lady needs to see. These are ailments most men wouldn't understand unless they've had a wife who's had them."

I told her I did not have a wife, nor any candidates lined up in Chicago waiting for my hand.

She took a dainty bite of her burger that was still too big, despite being cut in quarters. She sipped her Coke and then informed me, "When I get done, the lady's free of all protrusions. She can urinate, defecate and have sex again, all without discomfort."

I had met my share of women but I had never met a woman, drunk or sober, who had ever said anything as startling as that even when in the throes of breaking up. I had no idea what to say and so I sat and listened as she continued with my education.

"Actually, my patients have a choice," she said. "They can let me do the surgery or they can buy a pessary, a device few women know anything about until I pull a sample from the cabinet and explain its ins and outs. The pessary makes surgery seem simple. All we have to do then is pick a day for me to tuck the lady's organs back where they belong."

I said a procedure like that sounded painful, even allowing for an anesthetic. It sounded much worse, I said, than a colonoscopy, a procedure I'd become acquainted with early in life due to family history.

She nodded slightly and continued, "Now, if the lady's womb is full of fibroids, I'll suggest we take the uterus out as well. I'll tell her we'll remove the crib and leave her playpen intact. Often that's the best solution."

She sipped her Coke again and said, "Somewhere in Peoria, as we speak, a bladder's dropping, a rectum's quivering and a fibroid's growing. Believe me, if the salary is right, I'll take this job because a fibroid in Peoria is no different than a fibroid in New York."

Then she looked me in the eye and said, "Well, that's my story. Now tell me, what do you do for a living?"

I finally had the floor and so I took a breath and said: "I repair sentences in documents written by intelligent people expert in arcane fields. Some of them can't spell or punctuate. Or if they can, they dangle participles, split infinitives or run their sentences together like mountain rams in rutting season."

I knew I could not trump her pessary, but I added, "I put muscle in their verbs, amputate their adjectives, assassinate their adverbs. I give my clients final

copy they can claim is theirs. The reader never knows that a ferret like me has crept between their lines, nibbling at this and chomping on that."

At the end, I added a remark I hoped might prompt a get-together later, perhaps for dinner and drinks, another chat, a little laughter, and who knows what else. If our spirits meshed, a coupling was something we could accomplish before we'd have to take different planes back home.

"I believe our professions are similar," I told her, sipping the last of my Coke. "I too put things back where they belong and I cut away anything protruding."

About an hour later, we had paid our tabs, said long good-byes, shaken hands with considerable warmth and headed off in different directions for our interviews.

By day's end, we'd both be flying home to different cities. And although we'd still be strangers, we'd be strangers who had had an interesting conversation.

Not interesting enough, however, for either of us to ask the other for a name or number.

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