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What Makes You Think That I Know Now?

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The wig she wore was reddish brown, a burnt sienna color, and for a long time Bruce Silverman didn't think of what her real hair must look like. Her complexion was fair. There was a creaminess to her skin and a softness to her voice that made you think of a model except that a model lives to make an impression and she seemed unaware of her effect on others.

Bruce could work at a furious clip and daydream at the same time. Even when he was cranking out client reports, tunes were dancing in his head, and from the moment he saw her, this woman was Ellington's Sophisticated Lady, Strayhorn's Lush Life. At times the musical ideas took hold of his fingers, which would trill over the computer keyboard as if its 104 keys were black and white ivories instead of F10, Qwerty, Alt and PgDn. Market research was how he earned his living but music filled his lungs the way the wind gave lift to the spinnaker on a racing cruiser.

Bruce's boss at Competitive Intelligence, Ron Fujimoto, had run through three bookkeepers before he found Shira. Beefy Marlene had quit after her husband abandoned her for a thinner woman. Then came Rita, a tough-talking stick of an Italian-American girl from Yonkers. In six weeks Rita was gone, joining her boyfriend as he set out across the country on his new Harley Davidson. In desperation they hired a 45-year-old ex-priest with an associate degree in accounting. He lasted two days and two hours.

Now there was Shira, 25, with her low voice and her skin the smooth of clear pine. After graduation she'd worked as a bookkeeper for one of the New York supermarket chains. Then she'd got married and for six months she hadn't worked. Had something transpired, some medical or emotional event? How's your health? Bruce asked when he interviewed her. A pause; excellent, she said. Why had she hesitated?

She'd gone to a religious high school in Queens. The bowler hat she wore to the interview was temporary, Shira said. When she started working she'd wear a wig. He didn't have to worry, it wouldn't attract any attention.

Bruce was vaguely annoyed at all the explanation. His 17-year old son, Jeffrey, now living with Bruce's ex-wife, had been Bar Mitzvah at Bet Shalom in Good Harbor. Bruce had grown up with Orthodox people in Forest Hills, he knew the rule: only a husband was allowed to see a wife's hair. What about Fridays, he asked Shira? What about the holidays?

"I have to leave two and a half hours before Shabbos begins," she said. "I won't take any lunch. I'll work whatever extra hours are needed." As for holidays—Sukkos, Passover, Shavuos—it would all come out of her two weeks' vacation.

The economy was booming, anyone with a pulse who wanted work had a job. Rita with the biker boyfriend had stayed six weeks; the ex-priest, two days. When can you start? Ron said to Shira. Her choice of lifestyle (lifestyle! as if she were gay or vegetarian or entered quilting contests), her religious convictions, needn't be his concern.

Ron, a wintry man, kept his distance from everyone in the office so the fact that Shira was from another planet spiritually did not bother him. Separate planets was Ron's notion of the ideal office environment, each worker spinning furiously in his own orbit, no gravitational pull from another body disturbing his mission.

Bruce, research chief and number two, was as tough on the staff as Ron but Bruce wanted to be friends with them whereas Ron didn't give a hoot. Jeez, Ron, Bruce would plead, just talk to them, a word of encouragement, a personal question; it makes it easier if they like you. I don't care if they like me, Ron said, all I care is if they do the job.

Not Bruce: after a weekend he was always running up to Alice, the kooky bleach blonde who did a lot of the report writing, or to Thurston, their solemn Chinese-American computer whiz, to ask if they'd heard the President's speech, or whether they had any flooding in their basement from the heavy rains. His eager laugh seemed to turn off single females who might otherwise have been attracted by his gentle, awe-inspiring competence.

Fujimoto had founded the company eight years ago in an older commercial building in New Providence, convenient to the train, just off the cloverleaf from I-95. He was Mister Outside, a gracious host at

lunch, peerless at wooing clients: spare, handsome, a hint of gray at the temples.

Bruce excelled inside, where he dispatched things at blur speed: a letter in 30 seconds, a questionnaire in 20 minutes. At 39 he was a trifle overweight and prematurely balding, with a concave pattern of black hair that he kept clipped short, like a putting green. His voice was an edgy tenor; in the days when his combo had been playing three nights a week Bruce had handled the vocal, leaning into the boom mike that hung out over the keyboard, his lyric coming at you like a left jab.

Competitive Intelligence, Inc., CII, did telephone surveys for clients in packaged goods, pharmaceuticals; now they were moving into audio equipment, Internet services, specialty retailing. Bruce had a knack: He'd look at a table of dull responses and pick out the quirk in the data, the abnormality in the normal. No client report went out without passing through Bruce's head; he'd close his door and transform 20 ho-hum pages into a sparkling picture of what made consumers' hearts beat faster.

Shira turned out to have a sense of humor. She succeeded in collecting \$7800 from a drug company in Kansas City whose payables people were forever misplacing invoices. Shira reached the controller, telling him, "I bet if that was the most important woman in your life, your wife or daughter or mother it wouldn't take you four days to return a simple phone call, would it?" She could be forceful while keeping a smile in her voice. There was a rhythm to how she did things, a lightness to the way she spoke and moved, that made Bruce hear Oscar Peterson or Ahmad Jamal.

Bruce found that he was aware first of Shira's comings and goings, then of the holidays she was celebrating. He snuck looks at the auburn wig, trying to figure out what was under it. Her complexion and blue eyes made him think she must be blond. He pictured silvery hair moving like a lace curtain in the evening breeze. In his empty Larchmont house, the hours between 7:30 p.m. and 7:30 a.m. were a desert stretching before him. He picked at reheated lasagna; his heart raced when he thought of her. Submerged in night, he bent over the keyboard, limbering up with Gershwin, Porter, Bassie before settling down to write tunes. Thursday evenings he played in a bistro in Hastings on Hudson; every month he sent his new compositions to his

agent. Over the years 14 had been published and recorded, a couple making it, briefly, onto the Billboard charts. The quarterly royalties trickled in; usually the check covered no more than a quality paperback, sometimes a Chinese meal out, once (paydirt!) a new VCR.

Bruce had come within half a standard deviation of a career as a pianist, before veering off into psychographics and stratified samples. His musician buddies still called late at night to give him the news. Frank, a clarinet player in East Orange, phoned when he got home from the pit of "Miss Saigon," where he'd been playing for years; it was a gig that wind players dream of, until they land it and are imprisoned in its mind-deadening sameness. Frank's wife had moved out two months ago. At midnight he pestered Bruce about recipes, home improvements, the stock market; anything to hear himself talk, to hear the answering murmur of a friend's voice. Bruce would smile wryly, knowing the subtext: you got through your divorce, now help me survive mine. In the four years since he and Andrea had split up there'd been a couple of lady friends but every time he thought of marriage he'd see Andrea's long brown hair, hanging in a willowy cascade and hear Sinatra's aching "I've Got You Under My Skin" and realize it was no go.

Five months after Shira started, Bruce took the second day of Rosh Ha-shana off, something he'd never done before. On a sun-dappled September morning he sat in synagogue as they read the Torah portion, the binding of Isaac. Bruce mused about how out of kilter, how strangely lopsided, could be the love between parent and child, how—like Abraham—the parent could hearken to an inner voice that put the child in harm's way.

His son, Jeffrey, had so much ability as a horn player that it brought tears to Bruce's eyes. Bruce tried to encourage him to pursue music, but the boy, headed for Dartmouth, would have none of it. "Music is for fun, for fooling around, but there's no money in it," he told his father. "I'm going to do computers, the Internet. I'm good at that and the world will pay me for it."

When Bruce thought of how he drove up to Hastings every Thursday and played his guts out for \$75, a plate of sliced steak and whipped potatoes and a glass of Pinot Noir, it seemed to him that Jeffrey was the parent and he was the kid. He remembered his own

father's dreams for him: the law, his father said urging law school on him, blind to Bruce's giant talent, the law is a wonderful profession.

At Yom Kippur Howard Gold had asked him to be one of three to chant Kol Nidre, with its plaintive plea to be absolved of promises unkept, of vows unfulfilled. The night before, he tried the tune on the piano, drawn to the mystery of its somber chords. At midnight he crawled into bed and when he woke up, Kol Nidre came easily to his lips, as if part of his innermost memory.

Before the first rainy night of Sukkos he noticed that Shira was pale, burdened with packages as she prepared to entertain 18 relatives in their new sukka. When Bruce asked how it had gone her face glowed as she named the family members who'd come: Haim's parents, her parents, her 73-year old bubbie, Haim's brother's kids. "We sang songs, we made noise, we got wet from the rain. It was beautiful." Haim and Shira Levin lived in a down-market corner of Riverdale, in the upstairs of a two-family house whose balcony overlooked the tiny lawn where the sukka stood.

Bruce didn't tell her that four days earlier he'd perched on a ladder at Bet Shalom in Good Harbor, gripping hammer and nails as he helped Howard, Ezra Sender and a few others frame the synagogue's sukka. He had powerful hands, his fingers strong as a woodchopper's from thousands of hours at the piano. The hammering and stretching as five of them worked together, kidding each other, was therapy, like Rachmaninoff's Third or Rhapsody in Blue.

Her husband called from time to time, he had a quick, nervous voice, the voice of someone looking over his shoulder. A teacher, Shira had said, but Bruce couldn't imagine this voice disciplining a roomful of boys. One Friday in August, Haim had showed up at the office. He was taller than Bruce had imagined, he wore an open collared-shirt and the cords in his neck, sinewy and taut, moved like the strings of a guitar.

"Haim this is Bruce Silverman, Bruce this is Haim."

Haim shook his hand, his fingers heavy, sweaty. He wore a fedora that looked as if it had rolled under the wheels of a pickup truck. His pants were black, his belt shiny. The tassels of his tzitzit could be seen waving outside his shirttails. Bruce pictured Haim among the

many black-coated men sauntering to and from synagogue three times a day. He had spent the week in the Catskills where his pupils studied all day in a stuffy, low-ceilinged building, heat clinging to the oak desks, a lone table fan pushing the air back and forth. When they took a break the pupils, ages nine through 12, would loll under leafy oaks or throw a baseball back and forth.

Bruce tried to imagine this world as Haim led Shira away. The outer door swung shut and the last glimpse Bruce had was of a slantwise sunbeam highlighting the auburn wig, and of the bob of her graceful body. He could see the motion of her shoulders, back and haunches, the way the loose-fitting black dress rode up ever so slightly over the curve of her ass.

When she spoke to Bruce she kept her eyes below his face, to a point on his chest; it wasn't avoidance so much as habit: fixing a line and staying to her side of it. She came to him with questions, curious to know how they priced the market research, why they billed one customer in installments but demanded upfront payments from another. Now and then he would stare at her own face, at those striking blue eyes and the soft fuzz on her cheek, until she had no choice but to look back. At first she would come to him once or twice a week; now almost every day she slipped through his open door to ask a question. She moved with grace, the slight dip of the shoulders, a push of the thighs as she strode toward him, as if she were bobbing through waist-high water in a still pool. Always she wore these loose-fitting outfits, long-sleeved blouses, skirts with billowing folds that covered her ankles. Under the wig he could glimpse her neck, long and curved, like the stalk of a daffodil.

In a way it was unremarkable, her bringing him questions, there were two dozen people at CII and all day long they streamed into his office to wave papers at him, to ask him to read letters, proposals, focus group narratives. Was it his imagination or did she linger a few seconds more than was absolutely necessary? She told him snatches of her life, which was ruled by the cycle of the week and the month and the season. It seemed so driven, all this dashing about, the early hours at work to get ready for Shabbos or a holiday. Her husband's job

brought in very little money, Bruce could see that from the inexpensive car they shared, from Shira's frugality: the leftovers for lunch, the brown paper bags she re-used.

Sukkos and Chanukkah came and went; she'd been there eight months. Bruce and Shira shared stories, laughs. She had a sense of the fragility of life; she cherished the droop of a pink orchid, the majesty of the sun dipping below the treetops. At her core he sensed a melancholy that troubled and aroused him. Now and then she brought him a piece of rugulach that she'd baked. Knowing she wouldn't eat from his kitchen, he'd present her with a choice apple or pear from the Korean grocer's. Bruce hated it when she went home at 5 o'clock; it was as if Con Ed had shut down the power. He'd always had this strong melodic drive in his music; now he was writing a suite of love songs with a haunting echo of what might have been.

One icy January morning her computer crashed as Shira was getting everything ready for the accountants. Nothing they did would bring the hard drive back to life, so in mid-afternoon she restored from her backup disks to another computer and set to work re-entering a couple of weeks worth of data. At 6 she was still there, at 7 she was still there. Bruce was finishing a client report and at 7:45 he came out and found her, triumphant; the general journal was printing out.

"We did it," she told him.

"No," he said, "you did it. Great job, Shira. You called home to let your husband know?"

"Yes, for sure."

He said goodnight and went down to the washroom and then back into his office to collect his briefcase and there she was at the door in her black woolen overcoat, stamping her feet, they were twinkling with bits of ice and snow from the glaze on the sidewalk.

"It's gone," she said.

No, he said, thinking she was talking about the data.

"My car. It's gone from the parking lot. Someone broke in and drove it away. There's broken glass at the edge of the parking space, they broke the window with a tool and then must have jump-started it."

He could hear the wind roaring against the windows like a marauder. Her cheeks were pink, stinging from the cold. She'd walked

round and round the lot, vainly seeking her two-door Toyota Celica. She told Bruce this ruefully, as if ashamed to confess the misfortune. It was 8:15 now, the lights inside were casting dull shadows on the office furniture. It was strange to be here at this hour with Shira. The computers, the desks were like objects in a forest, with their familiar aspect during the day and a fantastical one at night. Now, with the phones stilled, the dark closed in around them like a thick curtain of leaves, this young woman with the auburn wig seemed a druid who dwells among the shadows of the thick tree trunks.

Bruce knew it was their only car. "Of course I'll drive you home."

"But it's late for you, you must be hungry, you should go home."

"There's nothing at home but a piano and that'll wait." She knew about the music. For weeks he'd carried around his CD, the one that Blue Note Records had released seven years ago to critical acclaim and popular indifference, keeping it in his black briefcase, desperate to present it to her but embarrassed to do so. Finally he'd tied it up in a manila inter-office envelope and slipped it onto her desk after she'd gone for the day, leaving a note that read, "From another life, as if in a dream." The next day he'd come in to find a sealed note propped up against his monitor; in her sweet rounded hand she'd written: "Dreaming, waking, living: such a mystery. It's beautiful, thank you." Now he went on to explain that his 17-year old son lived with his ex-wife, in Chappaqua.

"We've been divorced for four years."

"Do you see him?"

"On weekends. I'll go up on Friday night and get him and bring him back with me."

"So you leave early on Friday, too," she said with a smile. "It must be nice to spend Shabbos with your son."

"Look," he said, "It's too late to catch a bus, if they're even running. And too cold. I'm going to take you home."

They reported the theft to the police and climbed into his Acura for the ride to Riverdale. It was the coldest night of the year and he slipped on his leather gloves to come around to open the passenger door.

The front of the car felt very small to him, like a seat in the theater between two overfed ladies from Indianapolis. He began to talk about work, about a new client they'd landed. She murmured responses, her face in the shadows, the auburn wig outlined like the black edge of a milky cloud moving across the night sky. He was on the verge of telling Shira about the suite of love songs, three of them, each more poignant than the previous; then he stopped, swallowing the rest of his sentence as he gasped for breath.

When he reached the Cross County parkway the sound of the car wheels against the roadway was thundering in his ears. He felt that Shira's lips were moving before he heard the words come out. What kind of a boy was his son, she was asking. A wonderful kid, Bruce said. So bright. So empathetic.

"Your wife. Was it...was it difficult when you divorced? Was it acrimonious?"

"Acrimonious?" He remembered how smitten he'd been with her, then how things changed. Andrea wanted evenings out, dinner parties; he was yo-yo-ing between the office and the piano and the gigs for his combo. Give it up, she said, give the evenings up, you have a wife and child. He tried, but if he went a week or two without writing and making music he'd sit bolt upright at 3 in the morning, afraid that death would come for him before he'd emptied his head of all the melodies that were living there.

In a few words he told Shira how Andrea's coldness grew into a wall of ice between them. The divorce was a relief but he was a long way from being over her.

Shira sat there in the dark, mulling his story. The heater had come on, she'd taken off her gloves and he could see the faint outline of her fingers moving, like ghostly fish swimming in the shallows. He imagined that she was turning over his words in her strong, delicate hands.

"How did you meet your husband?" Bruce asked.

"We're from the same neighborhood. We were at camp together."

Bruce waited. She went on, "Our fathers were childhood friends: two Orthodox men who walked to synagogue and davened together. From the time we were six or seven they used to joke about

marrying us to each other. Not that they ever insisted, but it was always there, a hope, perhaps an expectation.” She paused. “It’s not that there’s no love,” she said, “but in the end it’s having the same values, it’s coming from families that love and support you and want you to carry on the tradition, those are the things that are important in a marriage.”

“And having children,” Bruce said, as he turned off the Saw Mill at the 254th street exit in Riverdale. “Which way?” he asked. “Right?”

He was stunned to see tears dotting her cheeks like tiny pearls. “Yes,” she said, struggling to speak. “Right, then left at the light.”

The car was a sealed carriage carrying them to destiny. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“We’ve been trying to have children. Like Sarah in the Bible I’ve been praying to God to open my womb.”

He thought back to Rosh Ha-shana: on the first day they read about the birth of Isaac, the redemption of God’s promise of fertility to a 100-year old woman.

“Look,” Bruce said, “there are doctors, there are fertility clinics.”

“I know all about it.”

They were in front of the two-family house, with its dark trim and muddy stucco. Bruce could see steam rising from the chimney.

Shira told him how for the last 14 months she and Haim had been going to a fertility clinic, around the corner from Einstein. Twice her own eggs had been implanted; twice she had miscarried. The doctors advised against trying a third time. Haim wouldn’t listen. He wanted a son, someone to come with him to shul.

Something about the way she told this story awakened in him such a rush of sympathy that he had to fight the impulse to cup her shoulder with his right hand. His fingers tensed with the effort to avoid squeezing that rounded knob of bone and flesh, whose outline he could dimly see through the fabric of her blouse. His pupils had widened to admit whatever swirls of light filtered through the windshield from the street lamp half a block away. Here in the front seat everything was grainy. Her face seemed to be made up of pixels, not flesh; still, he was

surprised at how familiar was the outline of her face, how appealing the graceful curve of her upper lip and her fine white teeth, upright as toy soldiers.

For long seconds neither of them spoke. “Thank you so much for the ride,” she said, but still she made no move to get out of the car.

“Your hair. I mean, your real hair. What color is it?”

Why was she not surprised at the question? Why had he imagined her smiling in pleasure, instead of, as was the case, turning so red that her cheeks seemed to glow in the front seat like the lit end of a cigarette?

“Light brown, I guess. Or dirty blond—that’s what it was when I was younger, especially in summer, when I’d be out in the sun all day long.”

“When you were at camp together, did you talk, the way kids will, about getting married someday? When you didn’t know what grown-up life was all about?”

“What makes you think that I know now?” she said, the words dropping softly, distinctly, like the first piano notes of the Archduke.

He looked sideways at Shira, expecting to see her brave smile. Instead her face was contorted with the effort to master an emotion he could only guess at: was it joy or dread that caused her to bite her lip? His chest thumped. To touch was forbidden; not to touch seemed unthinkable. Just the nearness of her brought him to the wire edge.

She reached up with her hands, he thought to fasten the top button of her coat, but she lifted them higher until she was pulling at something. The wig came free. She turned toward him, bowing her head slightly so he could see the profusion of lustrous hair, soft and sweet as new grass, trimmed closely about her scalp. In the darkness it could be any color he cared to imagine, maple or wheat or honey. Then she was tugging the wig back into place. The car door opened and closed and Bruce was alone with the music of his heart.

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