

All's Fair

Jeff Barnes watched the hands on the wall clock with the nervous intensity of an explosives expert defusing a time bomb. Three minutes till five. She'd be walking out of her office across the way any time now. The window of opportunity would be open for only a few seconds, so he'd have to act fast. "Tonight", he said to himself, "I am *definitely* going to ask her out."

There! The jangle of the hanger on the hook behind her door; she was putting her coat on. There was an assortment of snapping and zipping noises while she packed things away in her purse and briefcase, and her office was thrown into deep shadow as she turned the lights out. She emerged, walking briskly toward the door leading from their suite into the hall. Jeff, sitting ramrod straight behind his desk, and wearing the aching smile he had been practicing for hours, mustered his courage, felt it break ranks and retreat in complete disorder, and yelled..."Good night!" She nodded at him and whisked into the hallway. Jeff heard her high heels clicking on the hard floor toward the elevators, and then, silence. Once again, the window of opportunity had slipped its catch and come crashing down on his fingers.

Jeff groaned, crossed his arms on his desk and put his head down. What was it about this girl that robbed him of confidence, glued his tongue to his palate, and made him feel like some wriggly thing in a bait shop? Susan Botts, for crying out loud! What kind of name was "Botts", anyway? It sounded like a tropical disease. And although she was a pretty young woman – tall, slender, with big brown eyes and long dark brown hair pulled back (rather severely, in Jeff's opinion) in a bun – you could see a dozen just like her on

the subway every morning. It must be propinquity that had led to his infatuation, he reasoned.

Jeff and Susan had started at the accounting firm of Smith, Lord & Wise on the same day, three years ago. Although he specialized in auditing international banks, and she was a corporate tax expert, they had worked together on several projects, and now that they had offices in the same suite, they ran into each other everyday. But it was as if they were fish in separate aquariums, occasionally observing one another through the glass of their respective tanks - if so inclined, and Susan didn't particularly appear to be.

"No guts, no glory, Mr. Barnes."

These words emanated, not from Jeff's troubled mind, but from the larynx of a stranger seated on the credenza behind him. Startled nearly out of his skin, Jeff leaped from his chair - or would have, had his legs not been parked beneath the desk. Brought sharply back to his seat, Jeff massaged his knees, waiting for the crescendo of pain to reach its coda and then fade away. He turned to look at the source of the comment, his eyes goggling in amazement. There, slouching leisurely, was a portly man of medium height who appeared to be about seventy years old. He was clad in a brown and beige plaid sports coat, khaki slacks, a white shirt and a red bow tie, and had bright blue eyes, a florid complexion, and a prominent nose; a few wisps of white hair poked out from under a dark green wool fedora.

"How...how...?"

The trespasser - or phantom, Jeff really wasn't sure - affected a dramatic pose, as he recited, in a rich baritone, "'How now brown cow, grazing on the green, green grass.' Is that the phrase you're looking for?"

“Who...who...?”

The man flashed a wide smile. “Well, Jeff, we proceed from elocution exercises to bird calls! You’re certainly a fellow of many talents. That sounds remarkably like the barn owl, or *Tyto alba*, although I think the first hoot is supposed to be more staccato.”

Before attempting speech again, Jeff tried to pinpoint the precise moment at which he had lost his mind. Even the excessive passion he had conceived for Susan didn’t seem sufficiently traumatic to have provoked a complete nervous breakdown, let alone a hallucinatory state. Oh, God! Was it a brain tumor?

The stranger shook his head slowly. “No, Jeff, you’re not seeing things. I’m genuine, all right. Permit me to introduce myself.” He bowed and doffed his hat. “I’m Cupid.”

Jeff failed to find this announcement reassuring. “Listen, mister, I don’t know how you got in here or what it is you want, but...what are you doing?”

The man was vigorously patting down his jacket. The slap of his hand on one of the side pockets produced the noise of crackling cellophane; he grinned and extracted a pack of cigarettes. Fishing a gasper from the pack, he stuck the cigarette in his mouth and asked, “Do you have a light?”

“No, I don’t, and besides, this is a smoke-free building; but more to the point, you don’t seriously expect me to believe that you’re Cupid, do you? That’s just an ancient Roman myth, like Jupiter and Mercury and all those other gods.”

The man sighed. “Well, I’ll just have to do this the hard way.” He closed his eyes and furrowed his brow, his face turning from pink to mauve. A few seconds later, the end of his cigarette began to glow. He took a long draw, exhaled a cloud of smoke in the direction of the low ceiling, and then coughed violently. Recovering his breath, he

spluttered, “I really should give these things up.” Jeff simply gaped at him, feeling his sanity slipping away like a greased rope.

“Now, about the gods, my friend. We’re not myths. We were simply pensioned off a couple of thousand years ago. But me? I like to stay busy, keep a hand in.”

Against his better judgment, Jeff was lured by curiosity into conversing with this odd bird. “But Cupid has always been depicted as a kind of cherub; you know, a chubby infant with wings. You look more like...well...a used car salesman who’s retired to Ft. Lauderdale.”

For the first time, the man demonstrated something bordering on annoyance. “None of us are getting any younger, and that includes you. You’re 32 years old and haven’t had a ‘meaningful relationship’, to put it in the current parlance, since you got out of graduate school, and that didn’t last but six months because you got so tied up in your work that your girlfriend – Barbara, wasn’t that her name? - grew tired of being ignored and took up with a rock musician – a friend, or rather an ex-friend, of yours named Marvin Fineburg who now goes under the amusing, if bizarre, stage name of Johnny Freakhead.”

Astonished by the man’s possession of this bit of intelligence, Jeff practically shouted. “How did you know that?”

“I know a lot of things about you, Jeff, and about Susan Botts, too. I think I can help you. Here, take my hand in friendship. Maybe your tactile sense will prove to you that I’m real.”

Jeff rose from his chair – slowly, this time, mindful of his knees – and grasped his visitor’s outstretched hand. He felt something resembling an electrical charge run up his

arm. He pulled his hand free and glared at the man. “What was that? Some kind of spiritual energy?”

The man roared with laughter and exposed his palm, revealing a joy buzzer. “As you may recall, Cupid’s known for being a prankster, too.”

Jeff took a step toward the intruder with the firm idea in mind of grabbing him by his gaudy lapels and dragging him down to the security desk. The man backed up, and held his hands before him in an effort to placate his new acquaintance. “Now, now, Jeff. Take it easy. Why don’t we go for a walk? Really, you’ve got nothing to lose by simply listening to what I have to say. Even if I’m not who I claim to be, what could possibly go wrong?”

The silence of the office was broken by what sounded like the patter of rain; Jeff felt cold water running down his neck and face. “What could possibly go wrong? Well, for one thing, your cigarette smoke has set off the sprinkler system. Let’s get out of here!”

Five minutes of walking and talking along the busy sidewalks had at least convinced Jeff to give his sanity the benefit of the doubt (not so the many other pedestrians, who gave him a wide berth, as he appeared to be chatting in a very animated fashion with himself; unfortunately, Cupid had neglected to disclose that he was invisible to all but his new client).

“You see...er...Cupid...I’ve been working either with Susan, or in her general vicinity, for several years, now, so I couldn’t help but notice that she’s got a lot of good qualities. For example, she’s attractive...”

“Check”, said Cupid.

“She’s highly intelligent...”

“Check.”

“She’s extremely competent and efficient in her work...”

“Well, I suppose those qualities *would* be important to an accountant, even to one in love - so, check.”

“And I’m not such a bad catch; at least I don’t think so. I’m in good physical condition, I exercise regularly, eat right. I’m well-read, I like movies and music, I’ve got an excellent reputation as an accountant, and I’m told that I’m good looking. In fact,” he added sheepishly, “Barbara always said that it was my wavy black hair and blue eyes that first attracted her. But for some reason, I’m intimidated by Susan.”

Cupid nodded his head knowingly. “Jeff, I think the real reason you’re reluctant to ask Susan out is your fear of rejection. When Barbara walked out on you, the hurt settled down deep - possibly deeper than you realize. That’s why you’ve thrown yourself into your work for the last few years, avoiding any kind of emotional commitment. It might interest you to know that Susan’s more or less in the same boat.”

Jeff came to an abrupt halt and looked at Cupid earnestly. “Really? You mean somebody dumped her, too?”

“Yes, and for pretty much the same reasons. She was working hard to establish herself in her profession, and her fiancé became frustrated at having to make appointments in between audits to take her out to dinner or the movies, so they ultimately grew apart and wound up breaking off their engagement. It was all reasonably amicable on the surface, but I assure you, she cried herself to sleep more than once. Eventually her ex-boyfriend married someone else, and she’s had nothing but her work ever since. Let’s

continue walking, shall we?” Cupid took Jeff by the elbow and guided him across the street.

“It’s like this, Jeff: you and Susan are two box turtles. You plod along, going about your daily lives, but at the first sign of something out of the ordinary – particularly something as out of the ordinary as the possibility of love - you pull your heads into your shells. Now, a shell is a very tough and protective shelter – but there’s only room for one.”

The two walked along in silence for a few moments. Finally, Jeff said, “You do seem to know a lot about Susan and me.”

Cupid chuckled softly. “My boy, I should say that I do. You see, in the old days it was much different. People would actually call on me; thousands of them, constantly. I had so many requests that I didn’t have time to look into the specifics of each case. In fact, there were many people I spliced who had no business being in the same room with each other for five minutes, let alone under the same roof for a lifetime. But now that I’m semi-retired, I’ve got plenty of time to look things over carefully. And I’ve tried to modernize. With the advent of scientific disciplines such as psychology, biology, genetics, and so forth, I have far more in the way of research materials to draw upon. Ah! Here we are.”

Jeff, somewhat surprised to learn that their walk had an actual destination, was genuinely aware of his surroundings for the first time since he and Cupid had commenced their stroll. They were standing in front of O’Dougherty’s Pub.

“Why have we stopped here?”

Cupid laid a hand on Jeff's shoulder and grinned. "Because this is where we run our quarry to ground; Susan's inside."

Jeff and Cupid entered the restaurant and stood in the dim, spacious vestibule. O'Dougherty's followed the trend set by several popular chains of adopting a décor best described as American Marketing Panorama. The place was filled with old gas station signs, photos of vintage automobiles, movie posters from the golden age of Hollywood and colorful, stamped-tin advertisements for extinct brands of soda pop and cigars. Two-thirds of the public area was set aside for dining, with high-backed wooden booths and free-standing tables. The other third of the establishment consisted of a long mahogany bar, with a series of mirrors running the length of the wall. Jeff and Cupid were the only occupants of the entryway at the moment, and Jeff was craning his neck, trying to locate Susan.

He spotted her almost instantly. Susan was perched on a stool, chatting with Alice Malvern from their firm's human resources department. She was nursing a glass of white wine, delicately sliding the glass back and forth on the bar – a simple act, ordinarily of no earthly interest or consequence, yet one so far removed from Jeff's recollection of Susan in her office environment that he found it enchanting.

"Ok, how does this work? You don't really shoot her with an arrow, do you?"

Cupid winked at Jeff and said, "No, my boy! One must keep up with the times, after all." He proceeded to slip a semi-automatic pistol from under his jacket, pulled the slide back to chamber a round, and was taking aim when Jeff grabbed his wrist with both hands and turned the gun toward the ceiling.

"You *maniac* !", Jeff screamed.

There was a brief scuffle as Jeff and Cupid struggled over the pistol, Cupid trying vainly to explain his action.

“Jeff! It’s not what you’re thinking! I’m not going to hurt her! Let go! Let...*GO!*”

Cupid finally succeeded in wrenching his gun from Jeff’s grasp, and stayed him with a hand against his chest. Gasping, he attempted to calm the young man down. “Do you mean to tell me...that after all we’ve had to say to each other... you actually believe I would hurt the woman you love? These are not the kind of bullets...that you obviously seem to think they are. This device...is just an updated version of the old love darts...far greater accuracy...and much easier on the arm. Have *you* ever had to reach over your shoulder...and pull arrows out of a quiver for countless hours? Let me tell you a few hard facts...about repetitive motion syndrome...”

“Sit down a minute”, Jeff said, pointing to a bench. “You look like you’re having a stroke. And put that gun away, will you?”

Cupid shrugged, sat down, pulled his jacket open, and replaced the pistol in a brown leather shoulder holster. Jeff glimpsed the holster long enough to see that it was stamped with a design: two intertwined hearts. He rolled his eyes, ran his hand through his hair and sat down next to Cupid.

“Look, I still don’t know whether I’m crazy or not, but one thing I *do* know, crazy or sane: I want Susan to love me because of the kind of guy I am, not because she’s been helped along with an assist from you and your arsenal. No offense.”

Cupid had gotten his wind back, and now spoke with quiet intensity. “Jeff, that’s a commendable attitude, but all I’m doing is helping you to cut a few corners, especially since you’re having trouble getting out of the starting gate. Based on my detailed study of

your respective psychological make-ups, and my thorough knowledge of your backgrounds, the statistical likelihood of you and Susan being happy together – if and when you two have an opportunity to hit it off in the first place, mind you - is something like 99.7%. Here, I've got the calculations in my pocket, somewhere..."

Jeff placed a hand on Cupid's arm. "Skip it. I believe you truly mean well, and this might not make much sense to you, but I want to experience the whole messy process – corners and all."

Cupid stood up, put his hands in his pockets and stared into the restaurant. A moment later, a bemused expression stole over his face. "Well, you've got a sharp corner to turn right now, seems to me. Look."

Jeff joined his companion and watched an ominous scene unfolding. A tall, powerfully-built man in an expensive suit – he might have been a professional football player – had moved from the far end of the bar and taken the stool on Susan's left. He was trying to horn in on the conversation, and after a quick glance at him, Susan turned her back on the interloper and leaned closer toward Alice. The man-mountain, miffed at being ignored, began pawing Susan's arm.

Up to this point, Jeff's feet had felt as if they'd been inserted into deep sea diving boots. They now shed their weight and took wing (perhaps not unlike those of Cupid's old colleague, Mercury), as Jeff sprinted toward the bar, Cupid shambling along behind him.

"Hello, Susan, Alice!" he said, in as cheerful a voice as he could summon up. "Are you two girls ready for dinner?"

Susan spun around, and although there was surprise in her face, there was an expression of relief, as well. The bear in the business suit, whose hooded eyes gave evidence of his having downed one too many, scowled and said, “Just a minute, Junior. I was here first.”

Jeff crossed his arms and glared at him. “The ladies are with me, Shorty. Now, why don’t you go back to the wallflower section of the bar where you belong before I put your lights out?”

Cupid tugged violently at Jeff’s sleeve. “Jeff! Go easy on the *film noir* dialogue, will you?”

The man rose from his bar stool; he looked like a revival tent going up. “Put my lights out, eh? Not if I flick your switch, first, buddy.”

Suddenly, Jeff began fantasizing about being a baseball that had been pitched down the middle of the strike zone, colliding with the sweet spot of a bat swung by a league-leading home run hitter. Now he was soaring in a tremendous arc toward the left field stands. The outfielders below were running at top speed toward the wall, but they gradually slowed to a trot and finally stopped altogether, shielding their eyes from the sun and watching his flight. The crowd was cheering, but their voices were growing fainter as he rose into the clouds.

The law of gravity eventually reasserted itself, and he felt himself begin a rapid descent. The clouds were now dissipating, replaced by a red-rimmed darkness, and the clamor of the fans in the bleachers became the semi-hushed babble of well-meaning strangers at an accident scene. “Give him air! Get some ice! Should we call an ambulance?” He blinked a couple of times, and as his vision cleared he saw Susan’s face.

She was cradling him in her lap and patting the bloody corner of his mouth with a wet napkin. Memory came flooding back, and he lurched to a sitting position. Cupid was squatting at the other end of his prostrate form, rotating his hat in his hands, his face a mask of worry. Jeff extended his arm, leveled an accusatory finger and growled, “This is your doing!” Susan and Alice exchanged nervous glances, wondering why Jeff was scolding a 1950’s cardboard cutout of the Texaco Man.

“Jeff! Thank goodness you’re alive! Oh, and by the way, my boy, I think I may have neglected to tell you that no one else can see or hear me but you, so you might want to hold off on expressing any editorial opinions.” He beamed at Jeff. “You did well. I hate to sound melodramatic, but I believe I can say that my work here is done. Over to you, Jeff!”

Susan’s arms gently restored Jeff to a reclining position. “You’d better lie quiet for awhile; I think you still may be a little dizzy.”

The shame of being floored by one punch made it hard for Jeff to meet her gaze. “I’m sorry for making such a spectacle of myself, Susan. I was just trying to stop that guy from annoying you.”

“How? By breaking his knuckles with your face?”

Jeff’s ears burned at that remark, but when he looked up at her, he noticed that Susan’s eyes were misty and her chin was trembling. He smiled at her with the half of his face that still felt intact. “What happened to the bruise? I guess it must have taken a couple of pretty big bouncers to throw him out?”

Alice, who was kneeling next to Susan and keeping her supplied with ice cubes, pushed aside the strands of long blond hair that were constantly falling over her eyes and

spoke up: “Well, it took a couple of big guys to *carry* him out. After I let him have it, that is.”

Perplexed, Jeff asked, “What did you do? Were you carrying a sawed-off shotgun under your trench coat?”

“No, I’ve been taking a women’s defense course at the community college, and I gave him a roundhouse kick to the chin. But since he was so tall, my foot couldn’t reach that far, so it kind of met his face half way, if you know what I mean.”

Jeff started to laugh, but that triggered a spasm of pain, and he grimaced.

Susan was smoothing his hair with long, cool fingers. “Jeff, we ought to get you some medical attention.”

Faced with the prospect of being separated from Susan, even for a little while, at what he took to be a critical juncture of their relationship, he climbed to his feet, ignoring her protests. He swayed slightly, and worked his chin with his hand. “No loose teeth, and my jaw doesn’t seem to be broken. How about we have dinner?”

Susan asked, “Do you think you’ll be able to eat?”

“Well, they might have to put my steak in a blender, but, yeah, I’ll be ok. Alice, will you join us?”

Alice gave the two a speculative look and smiled slyly. “No, I guess I’ll be running along; I need to practice my footwork. See you tomorrow.”

Susan offered Jeff a steadying arm, and they started to walk toward the hostess’ station to get a table, when Jeff paused and looked around in confusion.

“Where is...?”

Susan was still worried that Jeff had not altogether collected his wits, and asked in a low voice, “Where is what, Jeff?”

“I don’t know. That’s funny. For a minute, there, I thought I had lost something...or someone.”

Three months later, Susan and Jeff were married. At the reception, they poked around among the gifts and found one present that baffled them completely, and would continue to be a lifelong mystery. A white box, which lacked a card or any other means of identifying the giver, was decorated with cupids and hearts, and turned out to contain an enormous antique silver cigarette lighter, on which was engraved the following:

Amor vincit Omnia

(Or Omnia vincit Amor; I always forget which way it goes)

May your love never depreciate

And Jeff – Keep your left up

Best wishes,

C.

