

MAKE A WISH

It always happens with English muffins.

This one was hot out of the toaster, golden brown, fork split to give it valleys for trapping pools of margarine and peaks for holding the peanut butter. I had just set it on the table with orange juice when, with the familiar *hiss-pop!*, my next “client” appeared. Though I never offer, they invariably end up eating half the muffin. Sometimes I want to yell, “Make your own!” They can’t, of course. Why creamy style attracts the dearly departed better than chunky, heaven only knows.

This one sat in the chair across the table, which meant it wasn’t going to be the weepy kind. Weepers use the chair on the left so I can give them consoling hugs. He was pastel green and still new enough to have inflections in his voice. After a while they turn vaguely translucent and speak in monotones. The left side of his head was gaping.

“...and then the bimbo from the other car spins her head, yeah, *spins* it, and says, ‘Oh-my-gawd! Like, I am so bored!’ So I said, What did you think? Eternity was going to be a trip to the mall?” The specter laughed crookedly at his own wit.

I didn’t. The edge in his voice meant he was going to end up in the left chair after all, and

I was going to be late for work.

Our manager, Mister Horst, has an open door policy—which means he can see you come in late. Between the elevator and his office I pulled my head between my shoulders, put on my best scowl, and grumbled “Car trouble” like a curse word as I walked past to my cubicle. I own a ‘64 Rambler; people believe anything I say about it. This morning I kept my jacket on and hunched over my desk as if in a rush to make up for being tardy. Although the spot of green ectoplasm looked kind of dashing on my white shirt lapel, I did not care to explain it. With luck it dissipates after a couple of hours.

“Hey, Kevin.” It was Rob Wilson, from the next cubicle. He has two distinctions in our office: he is the only divorced guy with all his own hair, and he is tall enough to cross his forearms on the divider and look down at you. I suspect Mr. Horst put him next to the back wall so I am the sole person he can bother. I waved without looking up, hoping he would catch the hint and leave me alone. No such luck.

“Man, Ol’ Horst has been on a slow boil since he came in this morning. If I were you, I wouldn’t do anything to remind him this is your third time in a month.”

I snapped on the monitor. “Thanks for keeping track.” While Wilson rambled on I mumbled “um hmm” and pretended to be working. I swallowed the impulse to staple his lower lip to his forehead.

Just when I thought my sanity had all but drooled away, the flowery scent of Dolly Patterson passed through out vicinity and Rob was off like a shot. He didn’t return before lunch—which I had apparently agreed last Tuesday to spend in Marketing as part of a test group for their advertising campaign for irradiated Russian foods. Sort of Chernobyl TV dinners, I suspected.

There are rules about privacy for office cubes, but none of them seems to apply to Rob. I was coming back to my desk at exactly one p.m. when he popped up over the back wall of his and whispered with a hint of mock envy, “Hey, who’s the dish?”

I gave him a blank stare. The only dish I could think of at the moment was the plate of samples that were doing God-knows-what to my stomach lining.

Wilson cocked his head and his thin-lipped smile toward my cubicle. “I hope your missus doesn’t find out about this one.”

I pretend to myself that he is an idiot-savant. He is an engineering genius, no doubt about that; but he can’t remember the simplest personal details about co-workers. Such as, I have the distinction of being the only truly single man in our division, for reasons I think best not to divulge to anyone.

The “dish” in my chair instantly made me think of Henny Youngman. *Take my wife. Please.* Even from the back I knew who it was. She calls herself Brenda. Unlike my “clients,” I don’t think she is a specter at all. Perhaps she is their guide in the afterlife. The one time I asked about her role, she answered, “Brenda,” and laughed in a way that gave me the willies. So, I don’t want to know.

She was doodling on the monitor screen with one pointed red fingernail, making things appear that were probably scaring the bejeezus out of the hard drive. At least she was considerate enough to be normally colored and dressed. Otherwise Wilson might have altogether lost the savant part of his mental capacity.

“Oh, hello,” I said with a weakness I had not wanted to be audible.

Brenda twirled in the chair and gave me her characteristic dazzling smile. The monitor quivered like I had just saved it from a fatal error. “Now, there’s my favorite flesh!” she said, as

though it was a term of endearment.

“What brings you here?” It was not exactly how I wanted to put it either.

“Oh-h-h. I suppose I should be hurt,” she answered with a pout and a toss of her long, shiny, soft auburn hair. “It’s our anniversary.”

And only our third meeting. The first time was two years ago, September sixth. I was eating an English muffin and listening to Patrick Swayze’s ghost on the television belting out “I’m ‘Eney the eighth, I yam” to Whoopi Goldberg. I thought then how lost and pathetic it seemed, and said something to the effect of, “I wish I could help frightened souls like that.”

That was when Brenda appeared in the chair opposite mine. She was stunningly attractive, but a guy would like a little introduction first. I froze with surprise, undoubtedly ridiculous with a muffin in my mouth and peanut butter on my teeth. She plucked the other half off the plate, closed her eyes, and murmured “um-m” with a liquid sort of enjoyment. After a moment she looked at me with a twinkle in her pale gold eyes and announced, “Your wish has been granted.” She popped out again, taking the muffin with her.

Of course it had to be the following day I saw the bumper sticker. “Be careful what you wish for. You might get it.” I have that on my car now, to remind me.

The second time was exactly one year and one hundred twelve “clients” later. All ages (kids are the most touching, though usually happiest), both sexes, all walks of life—all newly dead and having some trouble accepting the fact.

By then the opposite chair/left chair practice was well established. That morning Brenda popped into the left chair, slumped at the shoulders, full lips held in a thoughtful pout. I can still feel the mix of pique and fear at thinking I should have to counsel and console the very being who got me into this mess. Her attention was focused on something across the kitchen and down

the hall. When I leaned forward and turned my head to see what was so interesting, she lifted the remaining half muffin off the plate and brought it unerringly to her mouth. I started to complain, but she said, "Wipe off your lips." I did.

When she had finished eating, Brenda gave me a look of appraisal and a smile of satisfaction, then vanished without so much as a proper *poof*. I dashed out of the apartment, in case she had something else planned.

Now, meeting number three. Had I forgotten what day this was? Or didn't I want to remember. Either way, it was two hundred twenty visits in between. "Are you even listening to me?" she said querulously.

Honestly I hadn't heard a word, but I was saved from a lie when Rob flopped his arms on the cubicle wall and gave Brenda the stupidest grin I had ever seen him use, on any woman. Her irritation turned to true anger as she spun the chair to face him. I saw her eyes actually flash, and she made a gesture one gives a dog. "Sit!" she commanded. Wilson disappeared instantly. From the sound of it, he did not make it to his chair. To her credit, though, I didn't see him the rest of the day.

Brenda came around on me again, leaned back and crossed one of those legs that go up to here, over the other. "Well? What do you think about it?" I was thinking I had better stammer something when she clucked her tongue. "You haven't heard a word."

I felt my ears go red and was intending to make that stammer into an apology.

"All right, I'll say it again. After all, I was praising you. You are my very best, and very favorite, outsource."

I wondered where she could learn a term like that on the other side.

"So, I have given you far more attention than any of my others."

Others? Who? Two appearances in two years, that's what she calls attention?

"You were sincere, a very good heart, well-meaning. But so-o naïve. Of course I send you only the easiest cases for counseling."

The easiest? Jeez-us! Some of them nearly suck me dry trying to keep themselves together using my energy.

She gave me that appraising look, as though my reactions were running around my face. "However, I feel you are ready to handle more difficult clients." She stood. "Beginning tomorrow I shall start grooming you by my own choices of whom you may receive."

As she came forward my feet automatically shuffled the rest of me out of the way. She stroked my cheek with one hand and pushed out her bottom lip. "After all, I wouldn't want you working hard tonight. Not on our anniversary." As she stepped from my cubicle, Brenda vanished. I wished she had taken my lunch with her.

I leaned over the keyboard, head in hand to steady myself. I had to do something, and pronto. Otherwise I was going to end up like Whoopi Goldberg's character but with nothing to kiss except my job good-bye. After work I raced home to my small second-story apartment and headed straight to the back of the water heater closet, where I rooted around until I found it. "*Psychic Times*, November, 2000," I read aloud with satisfaction, and carried it to the couch.

The magazine fell open to page seventy-one, the same pop personality test I had taken before; the original pencil marks were still visible. I had scored as an FDL-blue, a polite way of saying: Basically a nice person; a sucker for everyone else's schemes. Tonight I was going to take it again, this time with a red pen. And I intended to hang on to my resolve to give my current self a fair hearing. Twenty minutes later I had scored FDC-green. I felt like a sprout pushing its head above the soil.

After a restless night I got up early, showered, shaved, and dressed (no jacket) then set my trap. Sure enough, as soon as I slathered on the peanut butter and set the plate on the table. It appeared. In the left chair.

It was a big man, or what was left of him; and what parts remained were losing color and coherence. The eyes could still melt your heart, though. The sense of a frightened little boy filled the room and began nibbling at my energy. He went for the muffin.

I stepped back from the table and did what I had rehearsed in the shower. “No!” I said, louder than I intended. My empty stomach flipped, but it felt good. He stopped, and I sensed his need reaching out, plucking at my emotions. So, I stepped back once more and said, “No! I don’t care what Brenda promised you. No.” The needy feeling was replaced by hurt and confusion. I mentally nailed my feet to the floor.

“Go tell Brenda I want to see her, now.” He did not stir. “Now,” I repeated more softly. After all, they do not deserve to be hurt. He blinked; I stared; he disappeared.

When my visitor returned to the chair a moment later, Brenda stood behind him, dressed in a form-fitting red jumper and looking very annoyed. I had prepared for that. She was holding a bright yellow clipboard full of pale blue papers in one hand. “What is this? I am quite busy.” She tried to sound gruff and superior. “What is the matter now?”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look into those wide, engaging eyes. “Do I have to spell it out for you?” I felt so harsh and selfish, but the sprout had opened its first leaf.

Brenda tapped the visitor on the shoulder and jerked her thumb. He popped out, leaving behind a tendril of relief. She took the left chair and folded her hands on the table. There was genuine dismay in her eyes. “You were given what you wished for,” she said softly. “And you have no idea how good you are at it.”

I thanked her for the compliment and resisted the impulse to be drawn any nearer. “Yes, I did have that wish. And now I have another.”

“We can grant you anything, merely say the word.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, this wish I can only give to myself. Otherwise it has no meaning.”

Brenda gave a small “oh,” expecting the worst.

“I wish to continue working with you,” I said, “to continue helping, giving of myself.” Her brow wrinkled in confusion. “But on my terms, not yours or anyone else’s.”

“You can’t choose who comes, you know.” It was merely a statement of fact. “What you are attracts the ones who need what you have to offer.”

I nodded and took a breath to prop up my resolve. “But I can choose when to help and how much of myself I am willing to offer. I finally realized that is not selfish, it’s really about who I am.”

She nodded slowly. “How will we know?”

I pointed to the plate. “When I ‘m ready, there will be a muffin on the table.”

“With peanut butter?” she ventured.

“Yes, Brenda.”

She laughed and tossed her auburn waves. “The name is Rose.”

I did not want to know about that, either.

She put on a devastating smile and added a wink. “See you next September,” she said gaily and disappeared. The plate was empty.

I slipped on my jacket and took my car keys from the peg by the door. I was going to miss English muffins. Today, I had a few choice words to lay on Rob Wilson, too.