

Distressed Damsel
By
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She was thinking maybe she should have thought this through a little better because now she was trapped in his car, on his turf; he was definitely and literally in the driver's seat. She attempted to recapture the excitement she had at the top of the evening when he picked her up for their first date and, while the lively conversation gave no indication of peril, the route itself was sketchy. He kept insisting they were going on an adventure. But now they were off an unfamiliar bypass onto a swampy road, then down a dirt and oyster-shelled driveway. There were no lights. It was beginning to rain. Before them was a single cement-block building that indicated no sign of life whatsoever. In his charismatic way, Mark joked that perhaps it wasn't open, he was going to check and this is when Tessa decided she'd made a horrible mistake - clearly, this was no restaurant and her life was probably going to end in this wooded swamp, at the hands of this man. Some adventure!

Two nights ago, Tessa's friend Candace and her were at a party when Candace decided she wanted to leave with a guy she did not arrive with so she deftly passed Bachelor Number One onto Tessa, who just that morning was complaining she hadn't had a lover in months, with a sly wink that suggested Candace had already kicked the tires in that department. Mark and Tessa spent the next hours in witty repartee and then, out on the balcony over cigarettes Mark confessed to her he'd recently been diagnosed as manic depressive. That should have scared her off, considering her past and the violent way her last relationship ended, but Mark was whip smart, funny and ridiculously handsome. Plus his Southern charm was courtly and solicitous and made Tessa feel like the only woman in the galaxy. Coursing with adrenaline now, she attempted to distract herself with humor but all she could think of were nicknames for him: Mark the Manic and Thrill 'Em Willem almost made her laugh. Almost.

Now what?

Tessa opened the glove box and found a pen to scribble 'Mark Willem is responsible' on a piece of paper which she then tucked into her bra so that the investigating homicide officer could easily apprehend her murderer. If he was going to kill her, he was going to have to face consequences, damnit. She immediately felt silly because she realized there was no guarantee that her bra would still be attached to her torso. "No, he's probably going to dismember me, then bury my parts in various shallow graves so they are both harder to identify and break down faster," she thought. "He's probably done this kind of thing before and gotten away with it, charming psycho-killer that he is. Why didn't I ask what prompted his recent psychiatric evaluation? And what's in that heavy-looking bag, his ritual tools with which to kill and dismember me? Why else would we be here? God, I'm such an idiot! And if I am going to die, what a terrible last thought to have!" She closed her eyes and screamed inside her head, "THINK"! such that she was so surprised when Mark tried the locked door that she jumped high enough in the car seat to hit her head on the ceiling.

"Fuck. Ow. He's back," she thought but actually said, "Yikes!"

He crouched a little and peered through the window. "Tessa, you okay? 'Cause we're in for a treat, they're open." She noticed his rectangular well-formed hands and recalled the line from Little Red Riding Hood's wolf, "the better to touch you with."

Wishing she'd never seen "Looking For Mr. GoodBar," she had seconds to ascertain if he was going to kill her, and still needed her to believe the charade of dinner in this dump, or not. Who in their right mind would eat here? That's just it: he's not in his right mind. And she didn't trust herself enough to distinguish between local eccentricity and straight-up mental illness. She looked into his wild clear blue eyes for any possible hidden meaning. God, his cheekbones - it simply wasn't fair. Just then their attention suddenly turned upon another car loudly crunching into the pot-holed lot. Great, witnesses - halle-fuckin'-leujiah! Her courage somewhat restored by this welcome public, she unlocked the door, he opened it and she got out of the car with, "Huh. Must've locked it somehow." It bothered her that she deferred to him in either some girlish, role-playing way or...what? Was she being submissive? Was it because he was seven years older than her? Or was she just plain ole' scared?

He grabbed the heavy bag from the backseat - crap! Not out of the woods yet! - and they proceeded toward this dark, ugly cinder-block building, the rain a fine mist now and the swaying Spanish moss putting the topping on the spooky, serial-killer atmosphere.

He opened the door for her and the loud crack of the slamming screen door behind them seemed to break a spell. Surprisingly, the structure had four sides and, Bowen's Island, as the place is known, was a Dump Extraordinaire with broken furniture piled up on one side of the room and a singular waiter/cook who was both unkempt and seemed annoyed, as though they were interrupting his otherwise elegant plans for the evening. There was not one bare portion of wood on chair, table or wall that was not scribbled or carved with someone's name or tag or graffiti. The gruff waiter was barely understandable due to either the thick Gulla accent or the chaw in his mouth, take your pick, and Tessa looked to Mark for translation as this ruffian covered the table with newspaper and banged down a nameless bottle of, presumably, catsup. They were the first customers of the night and, taking Mark's cue, Tessa ordered the oysters. Creepy waiter then set down two oyster openers and frayed rags. Stunningly, all were clean. Mark opened the bag he brought holding a cold six pack and Tessa was amused to note that five minutes earlier she wondered what instruments of her demise it perhaps contained. To say she had trust issues would be an understatement. She knew she was damaged goods and they both knew he had a brain chemistry problem, and as the night went on and more beers were consumed, she allowed herself to wonder if they might make a compatible duo. Or something like that. Steamed oysters were ceremoniously dumped onto the table by, not kidding, a shovel, interrupting her reverie. They were excellent.

The next morning Tessa awoke naked on a mattress on the floor of a light-filled apartment and Mark's eyes jolted awake as she gazed at his eyelids, deep in REM a millisecond before, as though he knew someone was observing him and he wanted to catch them in the act. "Tessa," he breathed, "I'm so happy you are here." He suddenly seized her, kissing and rolling onto her, then pushing back to see her reaction, almost daring her to say she had someplace she'd rather be. He worked his way down her neck, biting her shoulder,

marveling at her innu and then plunging headlong into her pubis. She chided herself for not having already left to escape Mark's intensity: Why didn't I tell him I had an early class this morning? This guy is just too much, too overwhelming, - oh, did I mention he is clinically insane? - and it was too easy to lose herself in his hyper-spinning orbit. I've got to get out of here, maybe I can still make my 8:30 a.m. class, whoa! - that was fast - and Mark pulled up the sheet to wipe her sauce from his cleft chin and then let his manhood slide into home base while she was still enthused. He ravished her as every other thought vanished.

Without warning, another man's voice came from the apartment entrance and with that, she realized that said mattress was on the floor of the living room in this apartment, with absolutely no door except the one from the outside hallway. Who hell comes into someone else's apartment uninvited and without knocking? She pulled the sheet over her head while Mark and this stranger, identified only as Grady's landlord, had the following discussion: "Grady's not here. He's got a job on Kiawah Island he's off at," Mark offered. "Grady owes me rent, are you his room mate?" "No sir," Mark lied, "we're visiting from out of town."

Tessa could not believe that a landlord could intrude like this and was appalled. Didn't he know they were both naked and he was being rude and trespassing? He persisted, "Kindly tell Grady I'll be expecting the rest of the rent by Friday." "Yes sir. I'll make sure he knows."

And the asshole finally left. No 'sorry for the intrusion' or 'didn't mean to disturb you' or anything like that.

Fuck. Now she'd never make her 8:30 English class - why did she sign up for such early classes? What actual evidence was there to support the idea that she is, was or ever has been a 'morning person'? Fucking Bursar's office only had availability these ridiculous times, is what. "Oh why did I give them a check already?" she thought. "This college thing is *so* not working out." It was the top of the fall semester at College of Charleston, SC, 1979. "Tessa," Mark said as he got up, "first of all, let me apologize for that rude intrusion while I lock the door. Like closing the goddam barn door after all the cows have wandered off, is what, heh-heh. You see, Tessa, I thought Grady was coming in last night and I have his only key. It was my fault; I left it unlocked in case he came back. I'm sorry. Did I tell you I met him in Kiawah Island? Kiawah Island is owned by the Saudis, all A-rabs." Tessa was quiet, trying to process what just happened.

"You know all I have to do to graduate from the Citadel is get a quarter credit? Well, I just couldn't at the time; it's only a French exam, actually, and of course, see the resident shrink on campus 'cause I ain't right in the head, and I'm out. Bingo! Heh-heh. But I need a little break, work out on a resort, see how the other half lives - the half *not* in a military academy." He lit a roach, inhaling and exhaling over "I'm not fit to be involved in the Army, no sir-ee. Don't won't never gonna do that. Heh-heh. No guns for you! BAM! Eurell's gonna be dis-a-fucking-pointed, too. He was counting on my being an Army lifer, take me off his hands.

"Can't do the family business, either. Sorry, Dad. Tessa, I'm just not cut out to stand around funeral homes all day, looking at all those dead people, saying how sorry I am. Excuse me, how fucking sorry I am. Heh-heh. Then saying, 'oh, doesn't she look great!'

People talking 'bout me all day saying 'he ain't wrapped tight,' 'he's out to lunch without a sammich,' you know, heh-heh, and 'his refrigerator door's open but the light ain't on,' 'y'all *know* that elevator don't go to the top floor,' heh-heh, and 'last time, he walked around muttering to himself like he was out where the buses don't run!'"

She still had not had a moment to process what was happening when Mark passed her the roach. Oh what the hell.

"Shithead landlord thinks 'cause Grady's Black that gives him the right to come into the man's house, his house!" Mark's bulbous blue eyes were bugging out. "Maybe Grady needs to move to those other houses Mr. Asshole's got, those others down by Church's Fried Chicken where the other Negroes live and almost pay rent." Pause as he sucks down the rest of the joint, burning his fingers. "Ow! Tessa, we barely awoke when ole' what's-his-name appeared when we were, like, mid-fanny, right? Heh, heh." He shook his head, looking down. "Yep. And they call me crazy." Heh-heh.

She got up and grabbed her clothes, heading for the bathroom, aware of how totally naked she was exactly one second after he did. "Tessa, would you like some O.J.? Some coffee? Eggs? More reefer?" He came toward her, "I don't know, perhaps we should hire a boat and go to the Bermuda Fucking Triangle, do some deep sea fishing. Did I ever tell you..."

Tessa put two fingers over his mouth, "Mark. I'll be right back." And turned and went into the bathroom, closing the door and just standing there with her back leaning against it, breathing, sensing him staring at the door like a faithful dog whose master, after having just tossed him a biscuit, vanished behind.

She barely heard him over the running water say, "Tessa, I just found this piece of paper that says 'Mark Willem is responsible.' What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

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