

When I'm Famous

By Dara Carr

A gangly man about a foot taller than everyone else gestures toward a woman entering the party and announces, "She's a wallpaper artist."

After the self-appointed party herald speaks, every neck in Brooklyn seems to crane for a view. Behold commoners, the wallpaper artist has arrived.

I try to reconcile the hot-pink suede short shorts and the long black hair and the white go-go boots with wallpaper. It is a stretch. I am originally from Lorain, Ohio, just west of Cleveland, where wallpaper is not the stuff of artistry. It is the stuff of torture. I spent many a fine weekend during my wasted youth scraping hideous paper from plaster walls.

I don't blame my parents; I blame their drug use. One of the less commonly reported dangers of chronic marijuana use is buying decrepit old houses and thinking you can fix them up. Yet another risk with being a pothead is never ever leaving your hometown. On the bright side, I've avoided the wicked Mary Warner because of the fine example set by my hippie parents. As the ads say, the best drug prevention begins at home.

My make-believe boyfriend Marcus watches the wallpaper artist, now steering a dramatic course through the party—North Williamsburg royalty and she knows it, the straight men twitching like they've been tased, the female viewers emitting a soft electric hum, brains working hard, calculating the age they were when they could have last worn shorts that length in public, let alone to a party; beaches don't count.

Age seven would be my answer.

Marcus, brain frozen, lower half of his body fully activated as we say in Pilates, says, "Cool."

'Cool' will be one of the last words to go. When you've lost every other faculty and you're slumped over in a nursing home wheelchair, you'll still be able to dribble out "cool."

Marcus stares at the wallpaper artist.

He has no truck with wallpaper. I've seen his bedroom. He sleeps on a mattress on the floor, a rumpled light-blue sheet bunched around the edges where he's kicked it to the curb. That sheet might get washed once every month. It will make a nice fluid-rich souvenir someday, when Marcus is a pop star.

It started as a joke, him saying, "When I'm famous..." Like a lot of things that start as jokes, it has hardened into cement.

All six feet of Marcus strains upward as he tries to maintain a sightline of the wallpaper artist.

No matter that he sleeps on a mattress on the floor and her boots alone probably cost seven hundred dollars. No matter he is over thirty and has two roommates. He is going to be famous someday. He even has a crumbling barn somewhere in upstate New York where he goes to be alone and write songs. Someday everyone will be singing along to his songs all summer. He writes summertime hits. Cool summertime hits as opposed to the usual dreck that fills the air. So he says.

With Marcus otherwise occupied, I turn to the party herald and ask, "So she designs wallpaper?"

He peers at me through blue-rimmed glasses with yellow temples that appear to be made out of wood.

"Yes, but not residential," he says. "Wallpaper is her medium."

And Marcus is off. He pushes his way through the crowd for an audience with Her Highness.

I chat with the party herald, falling into a conversation I've had before with other people at other parties, hipster Brooklyn's equivalent of debating the prospects of Money May versus Alvarez: liquid nitrogen ice cream versus regular, maple bacon versus salted caramel, South Williamsburg versus North.

Conversational autopilot is the best I can manage, what with all my mental energies focusing on not watching Marcus bow down before the wallpaper artist and kiss

her boots of shiny leather. The party herald, Tom is his name, doesn't seem to notice. He might be conserving mental energy himself. When I tell him I am a freelance graphic designer, he says, "Cool."

I give him my card and he says he'll call and we'll meet for coffee. With winter coming and Marcus off to greener pastures, I figure Tom might come in handy. Unable to string any further thoughts together, I leave the party.

That evening, Marcus calls a bit after midnight and invites me over. I go, which is both my habit and my curse. I tell myself it won't last much longer. It won't. I know this from experience. And stretching before me looms a long dry spell. Because Marcus, bastard though he is, is spectacular in every superficial respect. Anyone else afterward, anyone I could actually date on an equal footing by the normal rules of the social universe, would send me into a deep dark funk. This dance I'm doing with Marcus is a trip fantastic, a small tear in the ordered fabric of the universe.

Exhibit A: Tom, the party herald. Bad skin, eyes too close together, rude nose, weak chin. His glasses, though, rock. They also suggest disposable income even after paying for health insurance. He is my usual lot in life although, given the fabulous glasses, I'd probably be lucky to date even him.

So time is running short. Soon Marcus would be spending his nights with the wallpaper artist or a reasonable facsimile. That very night, he might have beckoned the wallpaper artist back to his place, not with the promise of viewing his etchings, but with the promise of his bare-naked walls. An expanse of sizzling white-hot space for her to work her medium.

When I first met Marcus, his walls weren't bare. He'd broken up with some woman and afterward she'd broken into his shared apartment and spray-painted insults in French across his bedroom wall. Her medium was black spray paint, and it was truly awesome, way more awesome than wallpaper. One of Marcus's roommates, who'd done a year abroad in France, told me she'd written the nastiest things you could write in the French language. The words being French they still sounded pretty: *Va te faire* something something *connard*. The ex also wrote something about Marcus's diseased bite.

I was so impressed I slept with him.

I still sleep with him pretty much anytime he calls, which is always late at night, probably after he's exhausted all the other more attractive options for entertainment. This works out to be once or twice a week. On a slightly less frequent basis, I talk to a therapist about my self-destructiveness, which appears to be my medium. My therapist wants to work with me to turn things around. I'm less ambitious; all I'm aiming for is other-destructiveness.

The morning after the party, Marcus and I go to JavaBoom for coffee. I drink an Americano. He sips green tea, an elixir of youth. He's got to stop time in a hurry because he's already thirty-two years old and that's old to be starting out as a pop star. He tells people he's twenty-six.

But I know otherwise. For starters he can't be bothered doing the basic math to support his age charade. Even though I'm a visual person, I can count. I knew it was unlikely he moved to New York City on his own when he was fifteen. One rough morning after a night of hurricanes I peeked in his wallet and discovered his real age. Over thirty! Just for the record, I'm thirty-one but totally ready to tell Marcus I'm twenty-four if he should ever ask.

At coffee, he says something shocking. He asks if he can move in with me for a while. I surprise myself and say no. Then it comes out his two roommates have asked him to leave. He is on the lease, so he doesn't have to move out. But maybe he should go, because they don't want him there any longer. I try to look sorry but I am pleased his roommates dislike him. If I had any sense, I also would dislike him and ask him to leave. I enjoy my Americano with a heaping spoonful of schadenfreude.

This does not last. If Marcus is disappointed by my refusal, he is over it in a nanosecond. Marcus brings up the wallpaper artist. Her name is Antonia Ridge. She is interesting he says. And he says that in a totally positive way.

Interesting? My gaze strays beyond Marcus toward the pastry case at JavaBoom. A caramel pear tart is tearing at the fabric of my universe. Pastries are my downfall, along with potato chips and vodka tonics. I do not add Marcus to this list because we will be finished soon. I accept this fact. My downfall will not be from a lack of realism.

But why does the wallpaper artist get to be interesting? Interesting is totally my word. I own interesting. If I can't be pretty I get interesting. That is the rule in my universe.

As we caffeinate, Marcus takes out a turquoise blue flip phone and taps at its number pad. This is not his phone. He is vain about his gadgets, and this is a cheap burner-type phone. I have a feeling, not a good one.

"Is that your phone?" I ask.

"No, it belongs to Antonia. I got it for her."

I've known this was coming. Still, I'm surprised at how quickly I've lost my appetite, even for a pastry.

"Oh."

"She's going through a bad divorce. She keeps two phones, an official one and a cheap burner her husband can't track. Her other junk phone broke so I told her I'd set her up on this one. I'm going to transfer her old number to it."

Marcus speaks without looking at me. I wear a lot of makeup, trying to redo what nature and too much pot in my parental DNA screwed up. It is painful to be a visual person and look like I do. I soldier on, knowing that interesting endures, not unlike wallpaper, perhaps, and has a much longer shelf life than kittenish or cute. I try to take the long view; the short view sucks.

"I didn't realize you had this skill set with phones," I say. I thought he was only good for two things.

He peers at the phone's screen, twisting his beautiful mouth. "I've got to choose a passcode."

"One, two, three, four is a classic," I say.

He smirks. "Be nice, Mindy."

He taps eight, five, four, seven with this thumb, a tidy box-like pattern. He must like Antonia a great deal.

We don't speak for a few minutes. Then, as I finish my coffee, he asks, "Do you know what it's called when a bull elephant goes into heat?"

I wonder if this is some sort of apology. I shake my head.

"'Musth.' Isn't that great?"

I know Marcus well enough to know he is no catch. A man in his thirties who sleeps on a mattress on the floor would be one hint.

He also steals. He'll need to be careful about that when he's famous.

At JavaBoom that morning, he shoplifts a bag of Nicaraguan shade grown coffee. I don't know how or when he did it. But we are out on the street saying goodbye and he pulls it out of a pocket. He says he shoplifts for fun. That would pretty much get him the death penalty in Lorain, Ohio. I'd never heard of stealing for fun until I moved to Brooklyn. And now, because I don't turn him in, I am an accessory to a shoplifter. Yet something else in my life not to write home about.

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The following Saturday, Marcus calls and invites me to meet him at Bar 50. He wants to meet at ten-thirty P.M., which is shockingly early for Marcus. Perhaps things aren't working out with Antonia, the fabulous wallpaper artist, despite all the technical assistance he provided with the secret phone. I wonder if this represents a meaningful shift in our relationship. I wonder if it is because I refused to let him move in with me.

When I arrive, I am surprised to find him sitting in a booth with Antonia. I give her a sweet smile and wait for her to say something stupid. She doesn't. She seems perfectly lovely. I am a rotten person.

She and Marcus talk about a French film director, Gérard Oury. They talk about a war comedy by this director called *La Grande Vadrouille*. Terry Thomas is brilliant in the film, they agree. Even more brilliant is the actor who plays the conductor. And how about that scene in the Turkish bath?

I love the idea of sitting in a bar in Brooklyn talking about French film. This is why I fled Ohio and moved to New York City. Unfortunately, being mildly dyslexic, I don't watch French films. Subtitles make my head spin.

I try to flag a server so I can order a vodka tonic. As I wait, I think about asking Marcus just how he has become so well versed in French cinema. My suspicion is the spray paint ex expanded his cultural horizons. I don't say anything, opting for the high road. But the high road is rough going so I get up and go to the bar and order my vodka tonic. After it comes, I linger at the bar, watching the TV, which is playing an episode of the old *Get Smart* show. I wonder why Marcus invited me to join them tonight.

I return to the booth. Their conversation, which moved at a healthy trot before, is galloping. They both adore, *The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*. Apparently they are still talking about that French director.

I zone out momentarily. When I return, they have leapt upon a new mutual passion. They love George Clinton! He's unreal, they agree.

As I start to leave, Antonia says she has to go to the restroom. I scoot out of the booth, giving her passage. She drags a large, clunking suede bag behind her.

Marcus signals to a server then smiles at me. "Isn't she great?"

"Unreal," I say, sitting back down in the booth.

It is time for me to leave. I turn to grab my purse and something shiny and turquoise catches my eye. A cell-phone is in the fold where the seat meets the back of the booth. Antonia's phone. I glance over at Marcus. He is engaged in a serious conversation with the server, deliberating between two overpriced Belgian beers.

I slip the phone into my purse.

I can't quite believe what I have done but before I can undo it I am standing up, saying goodnight to Marcus and then Antonia joins us, dewy from the bathroom. I tell them I don't feel well. Marcus squints at me and says my face is red. Antonia says she hopes I don't have that flu that is going around.

My vodka tonic is pretty much untouched. I am sick, no kidding.

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That night, about three hours later, Marcus calls and says he really wants to see me. Really. I tell myself *one last time* and head to the bathroom to prepare. Several minutes later, I am looking in the mirror, waiting for the second coat of mascara to dry, when I decide I'm not going. There was something in his voice I didn't like. Something genuine and yearning and raw in his tone.

Big fat turnoff.

I set down the mascara and call him. In the mirror, one eye is sultry and the other is half naked.

"Glad you called," Marcus says. "Could you bring over some vodka?"

I laugh. "I'm not room service."

He groans. "It's me, remember? I'm always buying you drinks."

"Not tonight you didn't."

He sighs. "OK. Don't bring vodka. Just bring yourself. I want to see you. Now."

"I've decided not to go out tonight."

"Come on," he says. "Don't be like this—"

"No."

"I'll come to your place. I've never even seen it."

"What is it about 'no' you don't understand?"

He takes the hint. I remove my makeup, grab the chip bag, and get back into bed. I snarf down some chips and think about how, in the morning, I will have to call Antonia and tell her I accidentally picked up her phone.

I am not a thief. I am not crazy. But I will have to plead temporary insanity. Her phone is a turquoise blue flip phone; there is no way on earth I could have mistaken it as my phone. I am a visual person, after all.

I pour myself a vodka tonic in a juice glass, which I gulp down. Diet be damned, I drink a second one. But I stick to the small juice glass, trying to maintain some standards amidst the insanity. Despite all the fabulous carb distillates coursing through my system, I don't sleep.

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In the morning I decide I need to have coffee at the Chat 'n Chew before I can even think about calling Antonia. Then, after I get home from coffee and an apple strudel, I am distracted.

Someone named Bear has written Antonia a text: "You are my favorite food."

I can't help it; I write back. "What about nuts, berries, insects, honey?"

"How about your moist pink salmon?"

Ahem. It is not even 11:00 AM. No wonder she keeps a secret second phone. I take flight, leaving the flat world behind.

I write back: "Aren't you supposed to be hibernating?"

"I'm very hungry. Need to fatten up before I hit the den."

I smile. "Could stand to lose some weight on my hips."

"Promise not to bite."

"What a shame."

"Meet me in forty-five minutes."

"Stay hungry," I write.

I set Antonia's phone down. Several minutes later, I am curled up on my couch, face smothered in a down-filled pillow. What have I done? I am not Antonia. Not! Me Mindy. Not Antonia. Mindy! A lack of realism will not be my downfall.

A half-hour later, I convince myself Antonia will understand. I will tell her I took her phone for a little joy ride. She, of all people, will understand that.

Someone else writes Antonia and says why aren't you answering my calls. I'm going to try your other cell.

Not too long after, I get another text from Bear: "Where RU? BEAR is hungry."

I do not reply. I am rudely interrupted by a call on my iPhone. It is Tom, the party herald, contacting me a cool week after we first met at the party.

"You're not going to believe this," he says.

"What?"

"Remember the wallpaper artist?"

Remember?

"Vaguely," I say. "The one with long dark hair?"

"Her," he says. "She was killed last night."

I think: a horrible accident involving a Porsche.

"No way."

"A friend of mine was jogging early this morning and found her body in the alley behind Steam Factory."

I can't speak. Body in alley? I start teaching myself to breathe again.

"Are you still there?" he asks.

No. Not really.

The Steam Factory is a club a few blocks from Bar 50, where we met for drinks the night before.

Eventually, I find some words. "What happened?"

"My friend said she looked pretty beat up."

"I've got to go," I say. "I'm really sorry."

I pour myself a vodka tonic in a regular-sized tumbler.

Stay calm, I tell myself. Luckily, growing up with pothead parents and a never-ending number of unpaid bills have given me practice in putting up ye olde calm front. I am the responsible one in the family. But I can't help but ask myself: WTF am I doing with a dead woman's phone? Why did I have to choose last night, of all nights, to lapse from my dull, responsible self?

Responsible me soon kicks in with a passion. I go to the police station and speak with the detectives handling Antonia's death. I tell them absolutely everything except the part about the phone. When I get back home, I drink another vodka tonic, chasing it down with chips.

Later that day, Marcus calls. He wants to know if I have talked to the police. I tell him yes.

"That was fast," he says, sounding annoyed. "What did you say?"

"I said I left you two at the bar around eleven P.M. because I wasn't feeling well."

"What?" he asks, with a lot of reverb. "What?"

"I told the truth."

"Why didn't you call me before you talked to them?"

"Why would I have done that?"

"I called you to come over last night. Did you tell them that?"

"That's none of their business."

"This is not a joke. This is my life."

He sounds worried. Since he doesn't mention Antonia's secret phone, I don't either.

I ask, "Do the police think you killed her?"

"They might, thanks to you."

"You're welcome," says the vodka.

"Not funny, Mindy," he says. "The police need someone to blame for her death. You just gave me to them. I'll be their number-one draft pick."

"Not a chance," I reply, thinking he's so vain, even about being a murder suspect.

"The chief suspect is her soon-to-be ex husband."

"He was in Scotland for a wedding this past weekend."

"He could have hired someone," I say. "You're being paranoid. There's no evidence you had anything to do with her death."

He sighs long and hard. "The cops make shit up all the time. Guess you didn't learn that in Ohio did you?"

I end the call.

I put on some yellow kitchen gloves and turn off Antonia's secret phone. Then I put it in the back of my linen closet, behind a stack of toilet paper. Sipping ice water, I try to make plans. The best I come up with is dousing the phone in antibacterial gel then putting it in a paper bag and dropping it at the door of the police station. After, I make an anonymous call and tell the police the phone is there, wrapped in paper swaddling.

This is not a good plan.

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The next morning I realize I am not going to give the police Antonia's phone. I put the phone in my backpack along with yellow kitchen gloves. Five blocks later, I walk into McDonald's and buy some coffee. After, I go into the bathroom and put on the kitchen gloves. My plan is to toss the phone in the garbage.

I take a last look at the messages. Someone named Rafa has texted.

"I know this is crazy writing to your phone. I love you. I never told you that before. And now it's too late. I'm so sorry."

I stare at the message until the words make no sense. This doesn't take long given my dyslexia. I don't toss the phone.

Back at home, I collapse on my couch. Marcus calls, but I don't pick up. I am angry with him for a lot of reasons; at that moment, it is because he isn't more like Rafa. I try to do something more productive, so I page through my book of Richard Kalvar photos. These always cheer me up. Marcus calls again. I still don't pick up.

Marcus. A woman dies and all he cares about is being blamed for her murder. This gets me thinking.

He called the night of the murder, practically begging me to come over. Maybe it wasn't because he wanted to see me. Maybe he needed an alibi. I close the book of photos. No, I think. No way. And then I think: he is a thief, a liar, and profoundly self-centered.

He has never been violent toward me. I get off the couch and stand on a stool in my kitchen, grabbing the chip bag from the top cabinet. A handful of chips later, I am back on my couch. Maybe I don't fit his profile. I've watched enough TV to know serial killers often look for certain qualities in their victims. This gets me thinking that if Marcus did kill Antonia, she probably wouldn't have been his first. This gets me thinking about the ex-girlfriend who spray-painted his bedroom wall.

Ten minutes later I am at the Coffee Klatch, where one of Marcus's roommates works. Lenin Gonzalez. He's also from Ohio. We knew each other in college. He gives me a chin nod as I walk into the cafe. I smile. He tilts his head expectantly.

I ask him if he remembers the name of the woman who spray-painted Marcus's wall.

He blinks. This was not the coffee order he expected. "Why?"

"I need to ask her something."

"Catelyn," he says. "I can't remember her last name."

I order an Americano. He turns to the espresso machine to prepare my drink.

As he works, he says, "Why don't you ask Marcus her name?"

"We're finished."

"Then why do you need to speak with Catelyn?"

"This isn't about him."

He laughs. "Right."

A minute later, he hands me my drink in a paper cup. I give him five dollars.

As he puts the cash into the register, he says, "Bannecker. That's Catelyn's last name. But I haven't seen her forever."

"Do you know any of her friends?"

He gives me some change, which I deposit in a white tip mug.

"There was a woman named Greta. Blond. She works at Gallery B."

As I add half-and-half to my coffee, he leans over the counter and peers at me.

"Mindy?" He is half-smiling.

I gaze at him.

"I really hope you're done with Marcus. You're smart. You're, you're—"

"Beautiful," I say.

We both laugh.

"You're beautiful," he repeats. "You're too good for him."

"I know."

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A blond woman is sitting behind a desk sorting through mail when I arrive at Gallery B. Apparently working at an art gallery isn't all wine-and-cheese openings. But she has mastered the art-gallery employee attitude, the dismissive glance and empty offer of assistance. I approach the desk and see her business card. She is Greta.

One thing that endears me to Greta right away, despite her art-gallery attitude, is that she looks like me, only blond. Not that we look like we're related or anything, but we're a similar genre of female. She even wears too much makeup. I tell her I need her help. She rouses herself from the mail.

"Do you happen to know where Catelyn Bannecker might be? Someone told me you're a good friend of hers."

"What do you want with Catelyn?"

The answer is that I want to see if Catelyn is still alive. But I don't say that.

I say, "We have someone we dislike in common. I just want—"

"To bond over your mutual dislike?"

"Something like that."

"Who is it?"

"Marcus Hayes."

She gazes at the mail. "Catelyn moved upstate. I'm not sure where."

"I guess you're not friends anymore."

"I guess not."

I hand her my business card. "If you think of anything else."

She puts my card on the desk, a finger flick from the edge and the trash can below.

On impulse, I ask, "Did you know Antonia Ridge?"

She looks me in the eye. She is probably wondering why I am still there. I am a fruit fly who won't buzz off.

She shakes her head.

"She was found dead yesterday. In an alley. Beaten up." Greta's expression doesn't change. Stupidly, I keep talking. "Marcus and I had drinks with her the night before."

Greta stares. Why did I say this to her? My face heats up.

I try to explain. "It's such a shock."

She nods, and her eyes drift away.

I go home and have a vodka tonic in a tumbler. Fortified, I retrieve Antonia's phone from its hiding place. There is another text from Rafa.

"I love you. There I said it twice. I'm playing at Great Plains tonight. I know you'll be listening from somewhere."

The first band playing at Great Plains that night is Psychic Vandal. It is an early show, starting at 7:30, because two other bands are playing later. Rafa is Rafael Gorlick, the drummer for Psychic Vandal. After two small vodka tonics, I decide to see him play. The club is in a scary part of South Williamsburg. I sit on a stool against the back wall and nurse a vodka tonic. At 7:45 pm, I am early for the 7:30 show.

As I wait, my phone rings. It is a number I don't recognize. I pick up. It is Greta from the art gallery.

"You asked me about Catelyn," she says.

"Yes." There is silence. I fill it. "I really just wanted to see if she is okay."

"We're not friends any longer," says Greta, her voice catching slightly.

I thought we had established that earlier at the gallery. Still, I say, "I'm sorry."

"I slept with Marcus, and Catelyn found out. She got in a huge fight with him. I tried to call her a million times afterward. We'd been friends since high school."

"She didn't call you back?"

"Never," she says. "Marcus later told me Catelyn had moved upstate."

I don't quite know what to say. And then an idea pops into my head.

"Could you send me a picture of her?"

Several minutes later, I stare at a picture of a woman with long dark hair. She could have been Antonia Ridge's sister.

At that moment, I think that Marcus killed Antonia and Catelyn. Antonia's husband was out of the country. If he'd hired someone to do this, I doubt that person

would have beaten her up. He'd have shot her. That would be quicker, neater, more professional.

Plus, Marcus never mentioned the burner phone to me. Technically, Antonia should have had it with her the night she died. The police could have linked the phone to him. But he didn't seem worried about it. Maybe because he knows that she didn't have it on her when she died.

No. Yes. What have I done?

"Mindy?"

I look up. Marcus is walking toward me. He is saying, "I didn't know you liked Psychic Vandal."

I leap from the stool and run out the door. When I reach the sidewalk, I realize this is a mistake. It is probably exactly what he wants me to do. Outside, it is Brooklyn's great plains of poverty and crime.

He is behind me, calling my name and laughing. I run around to the side of the bar, plunging through another door to get back inside. Panting, I run to the bar. There stands the bartender, a hulking bearded guy with snake tattoos on his trunk-like arms. My savior, heaven help me.

Seconds later, Marcus is next to me. "Mindy," he says in a singsong voice.

Every hair on my body prickles. I turn to the bartender and say the first thing that comes into my head. "He killed Antonia Ridge."

The bartender laughs. "You want me to make a citizen's arrest?"

"Yes."

"What has gotten into you?" Marcus asks.

The bartender grins. "Shall I venture a guess? This fair maiden has imbibed one too many adult beverages."

I shake my head. "You killed her. You were the last one with Antonia the night before she was killed."

Marcus barks out a laugh. "Far from it. That woman didn't sleep. She had a boyfriend you know. More than one."

The bartender sets a glass of water in front of me. He turns to Marcus and says, "You have got a way with the ladies."

Marcus ignores the bartender. "You think I killed Antonia? I called you on Saturday night. I invited you over."

"You called me at two A.M. You needed an *alibi*."

The bartender clears his throat. "Or some booty."

Marcus shoots the bartender a look.

The bartender flips his palms in the air. "Sorry, bro. But fair is fair. Two in the morning is not a gentlemanly time of evening to call upon a lady."

Marcus shakes his head. "I wanted to hang out with you. You think I wanted an *alibi*? An *alibi*?"

The bartender grins at me. "I may not look like much of a character witness, but I've known this guy six years. He's a no-good, low-down cheat for sure. But the *alibi* thing? He's really not that clever. He's not a planner."

I don't look at Marcus. I drink some water. This isn't going well. I've watched *Poirot* on TV with my parents. The brilliant detective is supposed to present a case, which is met with vehement denials by the guilty party. But the detective persists, presenting the steel-trap evidence with authority and Belgian elegance. The criminal caves and confesses all.

I take another tack. "What about Catelyn? No one has heard from her."

"You off another chick?" the bartender asks.

Marcus waves his hands in the air. "She's not dead. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia. She's in an institution near Utica."

I swallow. Perhaps I have been mistaken. Perhaps I need another drink.

The bartender winks at me. "He likes them crazy."

"Crazy and alive." Marcus rubs his forehead. "You've been thinking I'm a murderer. That's why you haven't returned my calls."

The bartender shrugs. "Can you blame her?"

"I thought we had something," Marcus says.

The bartender throws his head back and laughs. His laughter sounds like it comes from the bottom of an oil drum.

"Something? That's the best you can manage? Weak, bro, that is weak. How about I thought we had a relationship based on mutual respect and trust?"

I am beginning to warm to this bartender.

"We had something special," Marcus says.

The bartender smiles. "That's going to pluck at her heartstrings. We had some very special booty calls. Way more special than my other booty calls. I'm tearing up. Seriously, bro, you gotta stop. You're killing me with these deep feelings."

I call a rideshare service and go home.

* * *

Two weeks later, the party herald calls to tell me the police have taken Antonia's boyfriend into custody for questioning. The expectation is that the boyfriend will be charged with murder.

Rafa's messages to Antonia are less frequent. His last message, dating back a few days, says, "I can't say goodbye. Wherever you are, send me a sign."

I decide to give him a sign. It's the least I can do; I know heartbreak. His band is playing that night about twenty minutes' walk from my apartment. After two vodka tonics, both in juice glasses, I set off for the club. Antonia's phone is safely stowed in a padded envelope. I have put a note inside for Rafa saying I want him to have her phone.

At the bar, I hand the envelope with Rafa's name on it to one of the stage crew, then hustle out of the place. Breathing in the cool fall evening air, I finally feel relief. I am at least twenty pounds lighter.

To celebrate, I go into a liquor store and buy a tankard of Finlandia. As I float home, I smile at a stranger and coo at someone's Portuguese water dog. I am deep in thought, trying to decide if I need to stop for a lime, when footsteps slap behind me.

It is Rafa, holding up the envelope. "What the hell?"

I shake my head. He smells like bourbon.

"You've had this all along?"

I sigh. My heart starts beating outside my chest.

He gives me a lopsided smile. "I thought the cops had it all this time."

"Sorry," I say.

"Did you read all my messages?"

I shake my head, no. No! But I say, "Yes."

Thanks for that, vodka.

He steps closer to me. The bourbon smell is unpleasant. "What's your game? You want me locked away?"

I look around, searching for help. Someone. Somewhere.

"Everyone's got a game," he says.

A second later, he is dragging me by the hair into a small parking lot. I scream. He sends a fist into my jaw, and my vision goes wobbly.

"Shut up," he says. "You bitch. How could you? Tell me."

He throws me against the trunk of a car. His right hand is balled into a fist. He winds it back then stumbles slightly, a drunk's lurch. Run! In that moment, I am going to run. Run! He steadies himself. I am not running. My right arm is back, my hand is clutching the neck of the vodka bottle. He is coming closer. Run! He is a blur. My arm swings around hard. The bottle hits the side of his head. He groans and falls down.

I try to scream but can't. I am running. No sound is coming from Rafa.

At the street, I wave my arms and scream. A driver slows and stares. I point at him. He stops his car and leans over. His front side window rolls down. Call the police. He looks confused. Call the police. He squints at me. What? Call. Police. Yes you. You!

* * *

The vodka bottle is good for a concussion. The police tell me a cleaner blow to the temple could have killed Rafa. Antonia's secret phone is good for a world of trouble. Until this point, I've always had a very good relationship with authority. But thousands of lawyer-dollars later, I get one hundred hours of community service.

Before the love texts, Rafa sent Antonia sexually sadistic messages. He has a history of violence. One ex-girlfriend had a restraining order against him. After Antonia died, he thought the police had Antonia's phone. He decided to cover his tracks by sending her posthumous love notes.

My arrest generates press. Marcus even calls, joking that I've become famous before he has. I say infamous doesn't count. He says, "Same dif."

Some time after that, Tom the party herald calls. I am not potential dating material for him; mostly, I am a node in his network. He tells me Marcus has moved to Los

Angeles, stiffing his roommates on rent. He enquires politely about my community-service stint.

Community service isn't bad. I teach web design to a group of at-risk youth in a scary South Williamsburg community center. Although I've lost all my Brooklyn friends and clients over the phone brouhaha, I have found some fans among the troubled-teen set. Not because they give a rat's ass about web design. They may be among the few Americans who think it is admirable to withhold evidence from a homicide investigation.

They try to rally behind me when I tell them that after two years in Brooklyn I'm moving back to Ohio. They say things like: Get some wind and don't fall back down again. You don't have to take this shit. You know what I'm saying?

Thanks, kids.

I lie to my students. My plan is to go to Los Angeles. The police, you see, have the wrong man for Antonia's murder. Rafa is a sick puppy, but I don't think he killed Antonia.

Rafa thought I killed Antonia. He couldn't see how else I could have gotten her phone. He thought I was trying to set him up for her murder by giving him the phone.

No one believes him except me.

My suspicions about Marcus percolate until I get a text. It comes at 6:47PM on a Tuesday in January. The text says: "That night at the bar? You were right. LILA (Laughing in LA)."

The police aren't excited about my theories. Why would they be? I am the creepy woman who stole Antonia's phone.

I try to strengthen my case. It turns out Catelyn is not in a mental hospital upstate. She's a missing person. I try to determine where Marcus went upstate to write songs. No one knows. Maybe he didn't even go upstate. Maybe he went to New Jersey, where everyone else goes to dump bodies.

The story could end here, an innocent man arrested and a guilty one free. But I am from Lorain, Ohio, where wrong is wrong. As it turns out, I am also my parent's daughter, with a quixotic streak a mile long and a newly discovered well of hippie idealism. I'm going to find Marcus in Los Angeles. He'll be sniffing around the local music scene. Other women will turn up missing in his wake.

I will get the goods on him. He is sloppy. He is not a planner. He lacks basic math skills.

Even if I can't get the police to do anything, I'll write a book about him. Funny, right? A dyslexic thinking she can write a book about a serial killer. But I have written this short story. It is a start.

He will be famous one way or the other.

And if the pen doesn't prove mighty enough, there is always the vodka bottle. All it takes is a direct blow to the temple. But don't quote me on that. I don't need any more trouble with the authorities.

END

An earlier version of "When I'm Famous" appeared in the June 2014 issue of [*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*](#). For more information about new work, visit www.daracarr.com.