

Mike's Fiction©



Scared Womanless

From his prone position on the burgundy leather couch, Doctor Thurmond's office looks pretty much what Casper expects: tasteful gray carpeting, a large mahogany roll-top desk, and brass wall sconces spilling soft puddles of light. What he didn't expect is a plastic contraption on the floor that looks like an abandoned colon with a white tuft of fur protruding from one of its tubes.

"Ah, I see you've spotted Sigmund," the doctor says, seated behind his desk. "He's a Snow Gerbil I rescued from a research lab in Reykjavik. They are indigenous to Iceland, and his species is nearly extinct. Do you have a pet, Mr. Helfin?"

"No," Casper replies, deciding not to mention Boots, a common alley cat, because she now belongs to his ex-wife.

"A pity," the doctor says, shaking his head as he opens a notebook. "To your problem, then. Tell me why is it that a man like you cannot communicate with the opposite sex?"

Casper is having difficulty hearing, because an overstuffed carnivorous pillow is doing its best to consume his head. He wrestles it from behind his head and tosses it on the floor. "For some reason, my brain goes into lockdown, Doctor."

"Are you lonely?"

"Sometimes." He doubts the doctor can relate to an empty apartment, a microwaved frozen dinner, and a TV that's always on to beat back than silence.

"Do you realize, Mr. Helfin, that at thirty-two you are in the prime of your sexual life? Like a stud bull, you should be exhausted from boinking cows all day." He looks Casper over and shrugs. "But then, I suppose you'd be more attractive if—"

Casper fingers the hump on his nose. "If what, doctor?"

He waves a hand. "It is of no consequence," he says, then scans a page in the notebook. "So, I see you have been to Toastmasters. Oh, and you were hypnotized." Flipping a page, the doctor chuckles. "And you actually tried standing behind a woman in order to communicate. A bit desperate, eh? Do you find the opposite sex unattractive, Mr. Helfin?"

"No. Of course not."

"In a gymnasium, have you ever checked out the equipment of another man? Say, in the showers?"

"Well—maybe once. It was impossible not to notice the size of this guy's—"

The doctor springs from his chair. "Perhaps you would like to compare wankers *now*, eh?"

As the doctor's hand threatens to pull at his zipper, Casper's homophobia sounds a klaxon alarm and he squeezes his eyes shut. A moment later, he hears clapping.

"Congratulations, Mr. Helfin, I think we can rule out latent homosexuality."

He opens one eye, then the other. "That's a relief, doctor."

"For now, that is," the doctor says, then sits down and opens his notebook again. "You were divorced at twenty-one years of age?"

"Uh, yes."

"And the divorce—was it your doing?"

"No. It was Diane's decision," he says, wincing, as if saying her name might invoke an evil spirit. "We were married eight months."

"A remarkably short time for a marriage to go to pot." He peers at Casper over his spectacles. "Exactly what kind of sexual problems were you experiencing, Mr. Helfin? Is your instrument too short—hence, your curiosity about other men's endowments—or does it fail to function at all?"

Casper hears the question, but doesn't pick up on the accusatory tone, because he is distracted by the pillow, which is wobbling away from the couch. He had no idea that Gerbils are so strong.

"Actually, sex was our strong point." He can almost hear Diane hissing in his head, *Yes, Yessss*.

The doctor leans closer. "And exactly how did you satisfy your wife?"

“Oh, just some—things that I did.”

“Did these *things*,” the doctor says, panting like a St. Bernard. “Did they disgust her? Did she beg for more, Mr. Helfin?”

The pillow inexplicably reverses course, sending Casper squirming to the back of the couch. “Do the details really matter?”

The doctor frowns, straightening in his chair. “Perhaps *you* would like to be the psychologist, eh? But never mind,” he says, and brushes imaginary lint from his necktie. “Were you able to carry on a lucid conversation with your wife?”

Casper, who’s about had it with the aimless questions, pushes himself to a sitting position, swinging his legs onto the floor. “Of course we talked. How could we not talk to each other?”

“Aha! Finally, we are getting somewhere. We have deduced that your problem started *after* your divorce.”

Casper nods. “Is that significant?”

The doctor stares at him. Finally, he says, “When did you first discover you were an unwanted child, Mr. Helfin?”

“Excuse me?”

“An unwanted child.” The doctor shakes his head. “Regrettable, yet it happens. Did you not feel the sting of your parents’ rejection? Their indifference?”

“No. I mean—they love me,” Casper runs a hand through his hair. “They took me camping. They paid for college. They adopted me, for Christ’s sake. Why would they adopt me if I wasn’t wanted?”

The doctor rolls his eyes. “Has it not occurred to you that they may have simply invented your adoption as a cover-up?”

Casper is speechless.

Without waiting for an answer, the doctor shoves the open notebook at Casper. “Tell me what this says, Mr. Helfin.”

Casper has to squint, and gasps as he reads the word *REJECTION* printed in big block letters, under scored. He repeats it out-loud.

“Yes, fear of rejection is your problem,” the doctor says, pounding a finger on the page. “First, your parents. Then your wife. Consider yourself lucky you had no pets, Mr. Helfin.”

Casper gulps as he remembers how Boots would urinate in his briefcase. *Oh my God, there is a pattern. But wait!* “Doctor, my wife was an intimidating woman who made my life miserable—out of the bedroom, at least. I was relieved when she brought up the divorce.”

The doctor sits back and snaps his French cuffs. “Of course you were relieved, Mr. Helfin. Because you believe your *destiny* is to be rejected.”

Casper’s brain is spinning like a tilt-a-whirl as he imagines himself a baby, abandoned like Moses to float down the Nile, then Boots, grinning like the Cheshire cat as he empties his bladder on Casper’s master’s thesis. “Good God. What can I do?”

“Exactly what you are afraid of doing, Mr. Helfin. To regain your self respect, you must learn to expect more from a woman, re-learn how to mount the cow, so to speak.” The doctor crosses his legs. “And I have a little trick for you to use. When you talk to a woman, I want you to imagine she is a clown.”

“Like a circus clown?”

“Precisely. Because, Mr. Helfin, clowns make people happy. They are inclusive, and never reject anyone.”

Casper shudders as he envisions coming on to Clarabelle.

“Until next week, then, Mr. Helfin.”

Casper rises from the couch, hears a muffled squeal, and almost loses his balance, because he is standing on the pillow.

Seated at a small round table, one of several scattered about the hotel ballroom, with the number 37 pinned to his lapel, Casper feels like a steer marked for slaughter. He wants desperately to flee. But while he believes Doctor Thurmond’s diagnosis is wrong, and what he really suffers from is fear of *replication*—of someone like Diane again—he knows that he has to stick this out, that he cannot give up searching for the right woman, one who isn’t high-strung, one who doesn’t disagree with everything he says. And he owes the doctor at least this much for Sigmund’s unfortunate demise. He was quite the gentleman about it, and in between sobbing, even showed Casper a portrait of the little rascal.

Suddenly, sharp explosions, like gunshots, jerk him to attention. Up front, standing on a makeshift stage, he sees a man tapping a microphone.

“Evening, ladies and gents,” he says, flashing glowing white teeth. “It’s time to MEET-A-MATE!”

As the audience, which comprises one person per table, applauds, the announcer yanks the mike from the stand. Walking back and forth, he says, “In a few minutes, you will be rewarded with the same success that thousands of our customers have enjoyed.”

Casper joins in the second round of applause, his spirits buoyed by the announcer’s enthusiasm.

“Now, each of you received a packet in the mail,” continues the announcer. “And included in it were photos and three numbers representing members of the opposite sex with whom you will chat with this evening, the result of matches by our state-of-the-art software used to analyze the questionnaires you completed on our web site.”

He holds up his hand. “Now, pay attention males, because we are going to ask each of you to get up and move to the table where the female displaying your lowest matching number is seated.”

The announcer pauses and some of the men rise.

“Whoa there, gents,” he says. “Let’s wait for Joanne to strike the gong.” He gestures to his left where a chubby blond in a flowing white gown stands next to what looks like a suspended sewer cover. She has the handle of a ball-peen hammer in a chokehold.

Casper thinks she’s cute. But in a moment the distraction diminishes and his brain kindles a bonfire of anxiety inside him. Sweat beads on his forehead. His armpits turn slippery as ski slopes. A tiny horned imp hops onto his left shoulder, and whispers, “Leave now, Casper. You don’t really think you can just waltz up to a woman and carry on a conversation, do you? Remember how your brain goes out for a smoke?”

Then a figure perched on his right shoulder, which Casper imagines to be Sigmund, adjusts his gerbil-size halo, and says, “Don’t listen to that meatball. Sure, you’re clumsy. But worse, you are a lonely basket case. And you have to do something about it.” Peering down over Casper’s shoulder, he adds. “And for God’s, sake zip your fly.”

“And the best part,” the announcer continues. “Is that all that you and your new-found soul-mate have to do is simply chat—for three short minutes.” He holds up three fingers. “Then, you will hear Joanne strike the gong again.”

“Just three lousy minutes,” says Sigmund, massaging his shoulder. “Just a few laps on the wheel.”

“At that time,” says the announcer. “The men will move to the table with the *next* highest number of the female they have been assigned, and so forth, until you’ve met all three potential mates.” He wraps up with a bad imitation of Elmer Fudd. “Th—that’s all, f—folks.”

Casper tears his focus from his befuddled psyche long enough to check on Joanne. He sees that her eyes are riveted on the announcer and that she’s moving her lips. She looks confused and Casper feels sorry for her. He likes chubby women, and imagines them cuddling on his couch.

Then, like a call to prayer in a Tibetan monastery, a *bong* reverberates through the room, and the men rise to their feet.

“It’s down to *mano a womano* now,” Sigmund says, then hops off his shoulder, slapping Casper’s butt on the way down.

When he locates the table with someone wearing number seven—lucky seven, he hopes—Casper is confronted by a newspaper suspended where a face should be. As he sits down, the paper slowly descends, unveiling a cadaverous female face framed by iridescent purple bangs. A silver ring, big enough for a hitching post, dangles from her nose, and a cross is suspended from a thick chain around her neck. The cross rests on a black cloth coat that matches her ebony lipstick.

This creature is apparently alive, because a dark slash where her eyebrow should be slithers upward as she gives Casper the once-over. “You don’t look like someone who digs the *Banshees*,” she says. “I specifically put on the form that I wanted to meet other Goths.”

Goth, Moonie, or Nazi—it doesn’t really matter to Casper, because he is desperate to connect. He remembers what the doctor told him and closes his eyes to transform her ghoulish face into a female Bozo. And when he opens them, he’s surprised to see that red tufts of hair have sprung from her head, gaudy rouge adorns her ashen cheeks, and a glistening crimson ball has replaced her nose. In a burst of witty inspiration, Casper says, “I know Gothic.”

She shoves her cross at him, as if warding off a vampire.

“Architecture,” he says.

Her other Nike logo crawls up to meet the first.

“Cathedrals. Flying buttresses. And gargoyles.”

As her face begins to morph back to a corpse-like pallor, he panics, reaches out, and squeezes her bulbous red nose.

“Aaah,” she howls, turning the noisy ballroom silent as communion at Notre Dame. She glares at him and snaps open her newspaper.

While Casper waits for the three minutes to end, he twists his neck trying to read an article on acne.

Finally, the gong finally sounds and Casper gets up. He tries to fight off despair by imagining himself as Rocky Balbo, dragging his torn and bleeding body off the stool for the next round. Stealing a glance at Joanne, he’s surprised when she looks back, but before he can shout, “Adrian,” he is distracted—by a striking woman who appears in front of him like a goddess on a throne, and she’s wearing number seventeen. Silken chestnut hair flows like honey across her milky-white shoulders. Her pomegranate-red lips, swollen to the size of bicycle tires, put Angelina Jolie’s to shame. Beneath this extraordinary sensuality exudes an aura of pure innocence. This is a Madonna—a vulnerable one to boot.

As he makes the Sign of the Cross and sits down, Casper decides to ditch the clown trick. But without a gimmick his synapses spasm. He needs to be led.

“Name?” she asks.

“C-Casper.”

Her smile illuminates the ballroom as she checks off his name on a form. “Like the ghost, huh? My name is Margo.” She snaps her gum and jabs a pencil at him. “You got a job?”

Casper’s nods like a happy Cocker Spaniel.

She raises gossamer eyebrows. “And that would be?”

“I’m a market research specialist. I research markets. But not grocery markets or —“

“Uh-huh,” Margo says, making another mark in her notebook. “And that pays what?”

“Pays?”

“Like a. \$25,000 to \$35,000, b. \$36,000 to \$48,000, etcetera, etcetera.”

“Salary?” An uncharacteristically brilliant idea pops into his head. “Well, actually, I happen to have a copy of my tax return with me.”

She smiles. “Hey, that would save a lot of time.”

Casper opens his folder, pulls out last year’s Form 1040 he’s been meaning to file, and hands it to her.

She slaps on a pair of glasses and dives into the document like a CPA. Some time passes before her head pops back up. “Let’s see. No dependents. Salary is—b.” She jots a note. “A few stocks and bonds by the looks of schedules A, B, and D.” She taps her pencil on radiant white teeth. “Would you say, Casper, that you have management potential?”

Margo’s business-like demeanor has lulled him into the rhythm of an interview, and Casper really wants to work for this woman. “Oh yes. Chief Marketing Officer, at least. Or even CEO, I bet.”

Margo consults her file. “Do you believe in pre-nups?”

“Yes. We should definitely see a priest.”

Unexpectedly, the gong sounds, and Casper is aghast that their time is up so soon.

“Mind if I keep this?” Margo asks, holding up his tax return.

Still stunned, he nods.

“Good.” She gets up and offers her hand. “As soon as I plug everyone’s information in a spreadsheet, I’ll be getting back to you. Three to six weeks—by mail. Ordinarily, I require an S.A.S.E., but I’ll waive it this time.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says, and stands to shake her hand. “I know I can do the job.”

Still confused, Casper begins to search for the last table. When his brain re-engages, his spirits tumble off the toilet seat and into the bowl as it dawns on him that he just provided a manipulative stranger with a document that makes identity theft mere child’s play. And just when things can’t get any worse, he spots his last match who resembles a Chia Pet, with tiny nubs of white hair clinging to her scalp like lichen. Before he can complete a pirouette, a siren wails and water cascades from the ceiling. A booming voice instructs everyone to evacuate.

In between buffeting and flying elbows as the crowd surges for the exits, Casper catches a glimpse of Joanne wrestling with the gong. An overwhelming sense of protectiveness washes over him, and following his instincts, he fights his way up to the stage and climbs up. From deep in the comic book section of his brain, he borrows muscles from the Incredible Hulk and tucks the heavy metal disk under one arm, while encircling Joanne’s ample waist with the other. Hip to hip, they waddle to an exit.

By the time they make it outside the hotel, Casper is exhausted, and leans the gong against a curb, where he and Joanne collapse.

“Are you all right?” he asks. As she nods, he is struck by her plump loveliness, which reminds him of an Emperor Penguin. But why are her eyes so sad?

Joanne opens her purse, removes a petite notepad and pen and writes something. With moisture shimmering in her eyes, she hands it to Casper.

Oh, she’s written me a poem. He reads her note, which informs him the gong is rented and belongs back in the hotel storeroom.

“Just give me a minute or two,” he says. “And in the meantime, we haven’t been introduced properly. My name is Casper.” He holds out his hand and she accepts it. With a jolt, he realizes how easy it is to talk to this woman. But he doesn’t have the slightest idea why.

Casper hears someone working his way through the burgeoning crowd, telling people in an Irish brogue not to worry, because the fire has been contained to the kitchen and a just few wings of bedrooms. An old leprechaun of a bellman emerges in front of them and tips his cap to Joanne. “Thank the saints in heaven you’re all right, Miss Schmetze. Worried sick, I was, what with your condition and all.”

Joanne returns his smile, and leans her head on Casper’s shoulder.

As the bellman sticks out a hand, Casper stands to shake it, leaving Joanne to topple sideways. “Is she pregnant?” he whispers.

“Oh, don’t you know, sir? Miss Schmetze possesses neither hearing nor speech. We give her work here and there. She’s a bang-up lip reader, that one,” he says, and twists around to wink at Joanne.

Casper turns in wonder to his corpulent and mute Mona Lisa, then back to the bellman, all the while his mouth agape like a sprung hangar door. Finally, he smiles and, and like Tiger Woods, thrusts a fist in the air. *Yes. Oh, yes.*