

The Third and Fourth Dates of Jeff and Sara

by Jarrod, July '04

“No, really,” said Sara. “Tell me.”

“My deepest, darkest secret,” replied Jeff. “You’re not kidding?”

Sara tightened her lips and shook her head.

“Okay. I decide every morning if I’ll be good or wicked by flipping a coin,” he said, letting go of Sara’s hand (which he had heretofore been pleasantly holding) and leaning back away from the table.

Sara had expected him to get flustered, or at least be given pause. Men she dated, when pitched the what’s-your-deepest-darkest-secret question, tended to fumble. They would laugh, or blow off the question, or get embarrassed, or make some witty comment, or give some pat answer, or get confused. Sara wanted to see which type Jeff was. He did not, however, seem put off. Interesting.

“Good or wicked?” she asked.

“Well, I flip a coin, and when it’s heads, I get out of bed and have a day and do reasonably good things with my life. And if it’s ever tails, I’ll do something terrible.”

Sara pushed the potatoes around her plate. “Terrible like what?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t decided. Something really evil, like push an old woman in front of a bus or something.”

“What do you mean you haven’t decided? What do you do when it’s tails?”

“Well, it never is,” Jeff said, smiling.

Sara looked up to see how serious he was. He was smiling in a way she didn’t know how to interpret. They had met a week and a half earlier during lunch at a lunch-type-place downtown, when they had both reached for the last pre-wrapped-pastrami-on-rye-with-sauerkraut sandwich, and even though he admitted moments later that he had only reached for the sandwich in order to start a conversation with her, she accepted when he asked her for a date that Friday. (Or, she thought upon later reflection, perhaps she accepted *because* he admitted it.)

This was their third date in the last week. They had had sex after the second date, which Sara almost never did, at her apartment, where she never brought anyone. She was embarrassed by the décor, which was haphazard at best, and by the kitchen, the cabinets of which she had started painting eighteen months ago and never finished. But they had had an excellent dinner (garlic roasted halibut for him, flank steak and pommes frites for her, red wine for both) and had walked all the way from the restaurant in the Mission to her tiny flat in the

Haight, talking about cooking and literature, and she was just going to run up to lend him a book she thought he'd like, but they were both tired from the walk and they sat down on the couch, and one thing led to several others, and by the time her Brain had a chance to confer with her Emotional Board of Directors, it was four in the morning and he was snoring gently and she was brushing the hair off his forehead. Not that this was a bad thing. She liked him a lot, and they had common interests, and he seemed to understand things about her that she always had trouble explaining to other people. Or rather, he seemed content to not understand, which had always been a barrier in previous relationships, in which the men she saw never seemed content to leave well enough alone, in regards to her general inscrutability. Also, she had thing for blonde scruffy boys. So she definitely thought there should be a third date.

“What do you mean, it’s never tails?”

“It’s never tails,” he said. “Not since sophomore year in college.”

“You’re telling me you’ve gotten up every morning since sophomore year of college and flipped a coin, and it’s never been tails?”

“It’s never been tails.”

“Never once?”

“Never once.”

“But if it were ever tails, you’d go kill someone or something.”

“I suppose I’d have to.”

“You suppose you’d have to,” Sara repeated. She looked back down at the table. It was a round table, covered with polished copper and brushed in concentric circles. The little candle in the center flickered as she stared at it, making the pile of devoured ribs in front of her cast strange shadows onto her uneaten smashed potatoes, which had been too starchy and not creamy at all. The ribs, however, had been excellent, rubbed in eleven herbs and spices (or so the menu had claimed) and perfectly cooked. A generous portion, too. Jeff had eaten a grilled chicken Caesar salad, of which only three lonely croutons now remained.

“You asked what my deepest darkest secret was,” he pointed out, responding to her silence.

“I did ask.”

“Well, that’s it.”

“That one day you might wake up and feel obligated to kill someone.”

“I mean, yeah, in theory. I don’t think it’s ever going to happen.”

“Because it’s been heads for eight years, every time.”

“Well, yeah.”

She decided to change the subject. They talked about music (he liked folk-rock, she liked bad 80s music, they both liked girl punk bands) and childhood dreams. When he was in the third grade, he said, he had wanted to be a fire-fighter, but never told his mother, whom he loved and who had wanted him to be an architect. When he grew up he was neither. She had wanted to be a fairy or an elf, and now she entertained at children's birthday parties, which she supposed was close enough. When the bill came he paid it, and they again took the long walk back to her place. When they got there they sat on her darkened front stoop and kissed for a long time.

"The same coin every day?" she asked, abruptly pulling back for a moment.

"No," he responded, "whatever's nearby."

"Hm," she said, and spent another ten minutes kissing his face and walking her fingers through his blonde hair and debating whether to give him a hickey, before deciding that it was late and time to say good night.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said from the bottom of the stairs as she opened her door.

"I'll call *you*," she replied, and she blew him a kiss before shutting and locking the door.

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Jeff walked slowly down the street and thought about Sara. Specifically, he was wondering if she was watching him walk away from her second-story window, and if so, should he turn around to look? If she saw him look, would she think it was charming, or clingy? Jeff desperately wanted to seem charming. He liked Sara. A lot. Maybe. He thought briefly about her hair (the color of chocolate frosting, the kind that you eat with a wooden spoon straight out of the can), and about the way she seemed unable to look at him for more than fifteen seconds in a row. He thought about how she was very, very wrong about Peter Gabriel. He thought about how she kept asking these really pointed questions, and how he couldn't decide if she reminded him of a kitten wrestling and pouncing and playing, or of a lion wondering what would make a good side-dish for the gazelle she was stalking. It was, he had to admit, kind of fun being kept on his toes like this. On the other hand, it was also somewhat stressful. On the other other hand, what if she wasn't playing a game, what if she was really just loopy? Back to the first hand, though: she really was awfully attractive. He decided he wanted to look back and smile charmingly at her window.

Wait. What if she wasn't in the window? Then he would look foolish, trying to charm a set of draperies, wouldn't he? (thought the other hand). "Look foolish to who?!" cried the first

hand. “To *whom*,” corrected the other other hand, eliciting glares from the first two hands. “No, listen,” said Jeff with surprising reasonability, trumping all of his appendages. “I want to see if she’s watching, and if I look foolish, well, I’ll be the only one who sees, right?” His hands mumbled an agreement.

It was at this point that Jeff found he had turned the corner and was no longer on Sara’s street. I need to talk to someone reasonable, he thought. Well, someone more reasonable than I am, at least.

He walked home quickly, trying to keep the argument between the hands in his head from breaking into a fist-fight. He made it to his kitchen as the grandmother-clock on the mantle struck twelve (just in time—he almost turned into a pumpkin) and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Morning, mom. How’s Paris?”

“Jeffrey, how *are* you? What time is it there?”

“Are you having a good time?”

“Oh, it’s absolutely lovely,” she sighed. “I think I’m going to move here. I told you you should have come with me, you’d love it here.”

“I’d hate it there, mom,” he said, sitting down in his leather armchair and picking up the Rubik’s Cube from the coffee table. “How’s Steve?”

“Oh, we’re both having a wonderful time. Yesterday we went to that chapel, you know, the one with all the stained glass? ‘The Jewel Box,’ they call it. We ate crepes for lunch.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’re having a good time.”

“How are *you*, though?”

“I’m doing fine, mom. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Well, that’s very sweet of you. How are you? Any girls?”

Jeff made a strategic turn on the Rubik’s Cube and got one side all red. “Yes mom, we’re getting married and you’ll have grandkids in no time, I promise.”

“Oh Jeffrey, you always make fun. When are you going to find a girl to settle down with?”

“I don’t have to find a nice girl to settle down with until I’m thirty. It’s in my contract.”

“Oh, fine, don’t listen to me. But remember what I said, won’t you?”

“I’m trying, mom, really. I just wanted to say hi, I don’t want to keep you from breakfast.”

“Oh, you know, they barely eat breakfast here. Just a cup of coffee and the *tiniest* croissant. I’d pay a hundred dollars for a real breakfast, with eggs and bacon and pancakes, but they just won’t do it!”

“Love you, mom.”

“I love you too, sweetpea.”

Jeff, now feeling slightly less unreasonable, hung up the phone, and spent another forty minutes trying to fix the Rubik’s Cube, before deciding that he could just pretend blue and green were the same color and be done with it.

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Sara had a hard time sleeping. She had come inside and watched from her second story window as Jeff walked down the street away from her flat and wondered with mild (okay, moderate) curiosity what he thought of her. She took off her shoes and jeans and put on her comfy flannel pajama pants. She made a cup of mint tea and read the front section of that morning’s paper and gave Carol a belly rub. Carol purred loudly. She took a shower, and tried to ignore the unreasonable changes in water temperature as she masturbated to the thought of kissing Jeff. She put back on her pajama pants and a mis-matched pajama top and lay down under one sheet, kicking the other blankets onto the floor.

But she could not sleep.

The windows were open and light was coming in from the street, but she knew if she closed the drapes the room would be too warm by morning. She watched the languid shadows of tree branches on her ceiling, and listened to Carol perform her nightly triathlon in the hallway. She thought up a new juggling trick with drinking glasses she could try out at the birthday party she was doing on Sunday, and wondered if she would forget it if she didn’t get up and write it down. She wondered if they sold double-headed coins at the novelty shop where she bought balloons to make animals out of. She wondered why kids always asked her to make dogs and giraffes, and never anything interesting like a frog or an ostrich or a snake. She wondered what Jeff’s apartment looked like, and tried to imagine his furniture. A glass coffee table, she thought. A white love-seat. Granite kitchen counters, with a kitchen island. Did he cook? He probably cooked. What would be in his cupboards? Nice things to cook with. A spice rack, sherry, Thai peanut sauce. But very few fresh vegetables, or any food to eat other than a box of cookies in the bottom drawer. He liked Oreos.

Sara wondered if there was ice cream in Jeff’s freezer. That was a deal-breaker.

Carol eventually stopped her gallivanting, and went off to find some tiny space to sleep in. Sara lay awake for awhile longer.

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The next morning Jeff lay awake in bed for a full ten minutes, staring absently at the ceiling while his brain slowly booted up, until the alarm did its thing and he grudgingly got out of bed. He crossed the room to the pair of pants he had left hanging over the back of a chair the night before, found a quarter in the pocket and flipped it (heads), and shuffled naked down the hall to the bathroom. While brushing his teeth, he looked at himself in the mirror and decided he could get away with one more day without shaving. He flossed, artfully ruffled his hair, and returned to the bedroom, where he donned his blue striped button-down shirt (it set off his eyes) and left it untucked. Phrases like “scruffy,” “rakish,” and “devil-may-care” floated through his now-mostly-awake brain, and although he was not entirely sure he knew what “rakish” meant (indeed, come to think of it, he was not sure the word wasn’t “raffish”), he liked the image the words conjured up and hoped they described him.

In the kitchen he searched, as he did every day, for something resembling breakfast, and settled, as he did every day, for a banana and three Oreos, resolving, once again, to buy some eggs.

He closed and locked the door of his apartment behind him, and skillfully slid down the banister, hoping someone would see him and either be impressed or vocally disapprove, but the front hall was empty. He made it out to the street and hailed a cab and wondered what time he should call Sara.

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Sara stood in her living room, wearing socks and a bathrobe, staring at the phone. The phone sat on the table next to the couch, looking entirely too self-satisfied. Was it too early to call him? The wall clock with crayola crayons instead of hands said 11:45. Should she wait more? It’s too soon. She shouldn’t call yet. She won’t call yet.

Except. Except that she didn’t want him to call first. What time would he probably call? She looked at the phone. The way it just *sat* there was a little unsettling. She should call now. Fine, okay, she’ll call now. Happy?

“Hello?” he said on the other end of the line.

“Take me out to sushi tonight,” said Sara.

“Um, *hi*,” he said.

“Hi. Take me out to sushi tonight.”

There was an entirely too brief pause on his end. “There’s a place at 16th and Valencia,” he said.

“I’ll see you there at eight,” she said.

“See you at eight,” he agreed.

She hung up the phone. Interesting. He was certainly a cool customer, she would give him that. She would have to see how much it would take to flummox him. Carol mewed pitifully.

“How many times do I have to tell you, dear?” Sara asked. “I can’t take you with me to sushi. The don’t like cats there.”

Carol mewed again.

“No, they don’t prefer dogs. They just prefer humans.”

Carol went into her most dramatic flop of disappointment. Sara laughed at her, and went to practice her handstands.

Fifteen minutes later the phone rang. He’s calling to cancel, she thought, and decided not to answer. Besides, she was only eight minutes into her thirty minute practice routine, and she wasn’t due to have her feet on the ground until the twenty-fourth minute. The caller did not leave a message. Instead, the caller hung up and called right back. Twice.

“Fine!” she grunted, righting herself. This had better not be him calling to cancel.

“This had better not be you calling to cancel,” she said into the phone.

“Hi Punky. This had better not be who canceling what?” said her father on the other end.

“Oh, hi Daddy.”

““Oh, hi Daddy”? What’s this bummer of an ‘oh, hi Daddy’? Once upon a time, you were excited when I called, you know. And who had better not cancel what?”

“I’ve got a date tonight. Carol says hi,” she replied, as the kitty in question nuzzled up to the phone.

“A date? What’s he like? Hi Carol.”

Punky sighed. “He’s nice, Daddy. What do you want to know?”

“What does he do?”

Sara paused, and crinkled her forehead. “I don’t really know.”

“Well, have you seen him before? And don’t crinkle your forehead, your skin will get wrinkly by the time you’re thirty-five.”

“We’ve had three dates already, and yes, it’s deplorable that I don’t know what he does when he’s not in my immediate presence, and I swear I’ll find out just for you.”

“I didn’t say anything of the sort, Pumpkin.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“Yes I was.”

“Thanks, Daddy. What’d you call for?”

“Oh, right! I’m up here in Vermont, and found a farm with absolutely top-notch beef. Can I ship you a side?”

Sara smiled. “Daddy, you know I don’t have anywhere to put it.”

“Oh, that’s right.” He sounded disappointed.

“I am running awfully low on sirloin...”

That perked him right up. “Great! Twenty pounds or so?”

Sara thought of her freezer, roughly the size of an English muffin. “That’d be wonderful.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll let you get back to your handstands. Make sure this fella with the mystery job treats you okay.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“Love you too, Punky.”

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Jeff left work early. He was having a hard time with rational thought, and felt that everyone involved would be a lot better off if he just called it a day, made himself scarce, and got out while the getting was, well, if not good, at least better than the getting would be if he tried to be productive for the rest of the day.

He wandered aimlessly around downtown, trying not to think too hard. He went into a used book shop and flipped through books of black and white photography. There was a chocolate shop next door, where he bought two truffles (one milk chocolate, one dark) to eat while he walked. He found a novelty shop, and spent a while perusing the thumb tips and Svengali decks and dribble glasses. The man behind the counter told him that if he promised to buy something he’d show him the best magic trick he’d ever seen. So Jeff bought a Chinese finger trap, and the man made the three of clubs burst into flames, and then reappear in Jeff’s pocket. Jeff was so impressed that he bought another Chinese finger trap.

He sat in Union Square and watched the Christmas tree. It was maybe thirty feet tall, with shiny ornaments the size of small dogs. There was a man standing beneath the tree with a

chainsaw, cutting off the low branches so that no one could climb it. A tall man wearing a knit cap and wool socks with finger holes cut in them for gloves was walking around singing gospel songs and collecting change. Jeff gave him five dollars.

Throughout all of this, Jeff had two thoughts running through his mind, in turn. The first was, “This thing with Sara could be kind of serious.” The second was, “This thing with Sara isn’t that serious.” When he wasn’t thinking one or the other of those, he kept himself busy trying not to think at all. He wished that he were in a movie, so that the afternoon could go by quickly in a sort of walking-around-montage, and have a cool soundtrack. He was not, however, in a movie, so the walking around actually took as long as it took, and he was not at all successful in quickly killing the time between now and later. Contrariwise, the time passed rather slowly indeed, leaving Jeff plenty of time between now and then to ponder the potential lack of seriousness he wasn’t experiencing.

He tried very hard not to worry.

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Sara got to the sushi place and was about to go in when she saw Jeff through the window, sitting at a table with his back towards her (she recognized his messy hair, and imagined how the blue shirt would set off his eyes when she saw him from the front). She looked at her watch. 7:55. She had thought he would be late. She considered walking around the block a few times to let him get antsy, but then decided that she didn’t want to. Besides, he probably wouldn’t have been bothered anyway. She went in.

“Hi,” she said, coming up behind the empty chair at the table.

“Hi,” he said, looking up and smiling (she was right, his eyes did look extra blue with that shirt). “You look great.”

“Oh, no I don’t,” she said. She did, in fact, look great, and what’s more, she knew it. She had spent over forty-five minutes (compared to her usual forty-five seconds) choosing precisely the manner *in which* she would look great. Several wardrobe choices were trotted out, for the approval (or lack thereof) of Carol and herself, and a full eight minutes were spent staring at her hair in the mirror (not fixing, just staring). She finally decided that artful negligence was the best choice for both hair and clothing, selecting a denim jacket and simple black knee-length skirt, and pulling her hair back into a ponytail (which color tie to put in it?). No jewelry even. Okay, maybe that tiny silver locket, but that was all. “You’re just saying that,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows, and did not reply. She was unsettled by his failure to deny her allegation that she did not look great (she did, in fact, look great—didn't she?). Was he saying that she *didn't* look great, and he *was* just saying that? Or was he saying that she *did* look great, and he thought she was ridiculous for arguing and not just graciously accepting the compliment? Or did he, perhaps, not like her at all, and the comment had just been a formality, and he was merely here out of politeness, and in fact under duress from some unknown party who had a vested interest in him attending this date, perhaps an ex-boyfriend of hers who had heard about her dating Jeff, and had paid him off to come and date her and get her all interested and then break her heart, all the while playing with her mind like a toddler with a cardboard box about to get bored at any moment and simply toss it aside like a wad of over-chewed gum? She decided this was probably a futile line of thought, and sat down just as the waiter arrived with two bowls of hot miso soup.

“How did you know I like miso soup?” she asked.

“Who doesn't like miso soup?”

They both sipped their soup quietly for a few moments. It was excellent, not even too salty.

“So,” he began, “what's *your* deepest, darkest secret?”

“No,” she said, decisively taking back the upper hand. “You don't ask questions like that, I get to ask questions like that.”

“Well, that hardly seems fair, does it?”

“Life isn't fair, Jeff.”

Jeff frowned, and thought about that. “Duly noted,” he finally said.

“What was the coin this morning?” Sara asked.

“Um, a quarter, I think,” Jeff said.

Sara rolled her eyes, and tried not to let him know she actually found him amusing. “No, doofus, heads or tails?”

“Oh,” said Jeff. “Heads. I told you, it's always heads.”

“Just checking, to make sure you're not evil today.”

“Nope,” he said. “Not today.”

“Excellent,” said Sara. She went after the little chunks of tofu in the bottom of her bowl with her chopsticks, and decided that he wasn't maliciously playing with her head (probably). Jeff watched her and thought that she handled the chopsticks with somewhat more enthusiasm than skill.

Sara finished the soup and put the bowl down on the table. “What do you do for a living?” she asked.

Jeff smiled. “Why, does it matter?”

“My dad wants to know,” she replied.

“You’ve mentioned me to your parents?”

The waiter conveniently showed up to take their soup bowls and deliver two bowls of salad (iceberg lettuce, slices of cucumber and a wedge of tomato with sesame seeds and miso dressing), and Sara had a moment to sternly reprimand her cheeks for blushing. “To my father, yes,” she said, after the waiter had left.

“Ah,” said Jeff. He deftly popped a piece of lettuce into his mouth. Sara ate her tomato with her fingers. “Does that mean you like me?” he asked.

“Still trying to decide,” she answered. This taking-the-upper-hand thing was not going nearly as well as she had planned. She reached across the table and took the tomato from his salad, and put it in her mouth. “I like you enough for a fourth date.”

“Fair enough,” he said.

Sara was about to say something else, when she stopped and crinkled her forehead (though she quickly uncrinkled it to appease the nagging voice of her father). “Did you order our whole meal?” she demanded.

“I did,” he replied, rather less chagrined than Sara thought he ought to be.

“How did you decide what I would want?”

“I guessed,” he shrugged.

Sara re-crinkled her forehead. “You’re dreadfully presumptuous,” she pronounced.

“You just put your fingers in my salad,” he answered.

He had a point. She looked down at the offending digits, and sucked the miso off her thumb. “You have a point,” she said.

Part of Jeff (roughly thirty to thirty-five percent of him) wanted to ask Sara if she was ready to dispense with the games and the pretense and the inscrutability and just trust him already. But the other part (a somewhat larger part, if his math skills were accurate) was aware that he did not actually know very much about Sara, and that the games and the pretense and the inscrutability were really quite entertaining, and they were, if truth be told, what attracted him to her in the first place. Thus, he let the matter drop. Not that she was even aware the matter had been picked up in the first place.

Sara, meanwhile, was distressed to find she was losing this conversation, and unless a conversational referee appeared soon, she would have to take matters into her own hands. “Let’s play a game,” she said. “The game is, I ask you questions, and you answer them.”

“Alright,” said Jeff cheerfully. “On the condition that I can choose not to answer a question if I don’t want to.”

“Fine,” said Sara. Damn it, now she had to think of some questions. She wasn’t sure she appreciated his tendency to make her think on her feet. On the other hand, it was certainly preferable to *not* having to think on her feet. So she guessed she appreciated it.

“Well?” queried Jeff, after an appreciable pause.

“I’m thinking,” said Sara.

“Ah,” said Jeff. “Carry on.”

“What,” began Sara, “is the most embarrassing article of clothing you own?”

“A pair of yellow boxer shorts, with the giant happy face licking its lips. Gift from my sister.”

“Do you like your sister?”

“Why do you think I kept the boxer shorts?”

“Mm hm,” said Sara, her tone of voice putting a mark in an invisible check-box. “What’s the worst physical pain you’ve ever been in?”

“I jumped over a bench when I was eight, and caught my toe, and knocked loose my front teeth. I thought I had a concussion, but I didn’t. I didn’t even really know what a concussion was, but had heard that a boy in the grade above me got one when he fell off the monkey bars. I felt like my head was going to explode.”

“How many cookies do you eat on a given day?”

Jeff paused, slightly embarrassed about his daily cookie consumption. Then again, maybe Sara liked cookies. “No fewer than three. Sometimes as many as a dozen.”

Sara raised her right eyebrow. “What size cookies are we talking here?”

“Um, let’s say sixty percent of the cookies are Oreos, and forty percent are Mrs. Fields. Or Mrs. Fields size-equivalent cookies. Does that answer your question?”

“Mm. Why do you like me?”

“You’re off-putting. And very attractive. And you make me laugh.”

“I haven’t seen you laugh very much at all.”

“Well, I laugh inside.”

Sara paused, and considered whether she was offended by this. Tentatively deciding she was not, she pushed onwards. “Beethoven or Mozart?” she asked.

“Bach,” he countered.

“Chunky peanut butter or smooth?”

“Chunky. Clearly.”

“How old were you when you had your first kiss?”

“Fifteen. How old were you?”

“I’m asking the questions,” she said firmly.

“We’re both asking questions,” he pointed out, pleasantly. “I’m just the only one answering any.”

The waiter arrived, bearing a wooden block laid out with a variety of sashimi, several cucumber rolls, and a salmon skin hand roll. Did he know I like salmon skin? she wondered.

“The first grade,” she said. “Jeremy Babcock. I have a tendency towards boys who start with J.”

“Your first *real* kiss,” said Jeff (he was not about to be baited by the J comment).

“It *was* real!” she exclaimed, sounding wounded. “We were in love and we were married for two and a half days.”

Jeff smiled, only half-mockingly. “I thought child-marriage was illegal in this country.”

“You shouldn’t make fun,” she said, and sullenly dipped a piece of unidentified fish into her dish of soy sauce. The anonymous fish, by its silence, concurred.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” he said. She did not look happy. “Where is Jeremy Babcock now?”

Sara finished chewing her salmon before she answered. “His family moved to Virginia when I was nine. I wrote him letters every day for three weeks, but never sent them. Last time I heard he was an art-history major at Duke, but that was a while ago.”

Jeff nodded. She seemed less upset. He decided to let himself be baited. “Boys with a J?”

“That’s right,” she said, looking up at him. “So don’t go thinking you’re special.”

It was Jeff’s turn to look down. He put a small dab of wasabi into his dish of soy sauce (significantly less than the largish chunk he noticed in Sara’s dish) and dipped a cucumber roll in it. It seemed like he had actually offended her. Fuck. That child-marriage joke hadn’t been that inappropriate, had it? “Well, you knew she was loopy,” muttered a voice in the back of his head. “No, be fair,” the front of Jeff’s head mentally rebutted. “I made fun of something that actually meant something to her, of course she’s upset.” “But,” said Jeff’s brainstem, joining the conversation, “how were you supposed to know? It’s not your fault!” “Just because it’s not my fault doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a right to be offended,” said the front of Jeff’s brain, which

was increasingly appearing to be the area of the brain where smarts were kept. “Jeffrey,” said the voice of his mother from somewhere in his temporal lobe, “I’ve told you before: when a woman is upset with you, it makes much more sense just to apologize than to worry about if you deserve it or not. It may not always be fair, but it will certainly save you a lot of trouble.” “I know,” said Jeff. “Besides,” added his mother, “most of the time you probably *do* deserve it.”

Sara, meanwhile, was guiltily enjoying watching Jeff’s chagrin, while she ate the salmon skin hand-roll. It was really excellent, with the perfect balance between chewy toughness and crispety crunchetude, nice salty tang but not too too fishy. She considered the 100-watt pouty face she had been making, and turned the rheostat down to a dim glow, in the hopes that Jeff would ask her how it was before she finished eating it so she could offer him a bite.

Having concluded both his mental caucus and his cucumber roll, Jeff looked up. “I’m sorry for what I said about you and Jeremy Babcock. I didn’t know it was so important to you.”

Sara looked at him. (Yup, his eyes were still blue.) “It’s okay. You didn’t know.” She took the second-to-last bite of the hand-roll. “Just watch it next time.”

Jeff nodded. “How’s your salmon skin?”

He gets points for timing. “It’s good. Want to try?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “It’s your last bite.”

“Eat it!” she said severely, holding it in front of his face. It was a voice with which one would not be wise to argue. He took the tiny cone of seaweed and fish skin and put it in his mouth. “Never refuse food when offered,” she said.

“My grandmother used to say that,” Jeff agreed.

“Well, she was a smart lady. How is it?”

“Really good,” said Jeff, nodding. “Crispy, but not too much so.”

Sara registered her approval. He was a smart cookie. “You said,” she began, “that you reserved the right to not answer any of my questions. But you didn’t not answer any.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, what could I have asked that you wouldn’t have answered?”

Jeff laughed. “That’s a very presumptuous question.”

“Well, I did put my fingers in your salad,” she pointed out.

Jeff thought for a minute. Sara liked how he made one of those scrunchy little-kid faces when he was thinking hard. “I don’t know,” he finally answered. “I can’t think of anything.”

“Then why did you bother to reserve the option?”

“I don’t know. Just in case.”

Sara looked skeptical.

“And I didn’t want to seem like too much of a pushover,” he continued.

“Ah,” said Sara. “*Are* you too much of a pushover?”

“Yes,” sighed Jeff, looking pained. “It’s terrible. I have no backbone whatsoever.”

Now Sara laughed. “Well, now that you mention it, I’ve always had a thing for invertebrates.”

“Really?” asked Jeff hopefully.

“Oh yes,” replied Sara. “Mollusks in particular hold a certain fascination for me.”

“So, the puppy-dog eyes thing...”

“Nope, doesn’t so much do it for me. Now, if you could manage octopus eyes, maybe we could talk.”

Jeff paused. “I *have* been working on my giant squid impression,” he admitted.

Sara raised her eyebrows. “Well, this I’ve got to see.”

“You have to promise not to laugh.”

“If you don’t want me to laugh, why are you offering to do a giant squid impression?”

“Good point,” said Jeff. “Forget I said anything.”

“Jeff!” she cried. “You have to! You’ve made me all curious. Besides, the future of our relationship may hinge upon your resemblance to a mollusk!”

“Well, when you put it that way...” Jeff pushed back a bit from the table. He stuck his arms straight down at his sides with his fingers spread out. He cocked his head to one side and sucked in his cheeks. He did his very best to make his eyes as big as dinner plates. Sara did her very best not to let the green tea she was drinking come out her nose. (Neither one, it may be noted, succeeded entirely.)

* * * * *

That night, while Jeff and Sara slept in her slightly-too-small bed, a dog three houses down set the new San Francisco record by barking for five hours and fifteen minutes without stopping. Downtown, a homeless man who had earlier in the day been mistakenly handed a fifty dollar bill bought himself the best meal he had had in several years. In Vermont, the Ben & Jerry’s factory prepared to spend sixteen hours the following day manufacturing a month’s supply of Chunky Monkey for the entire nation. The planet Jupiter traveled 376,145 kilometers around the sun. Sara rolled over twice, and when Jeff’s arm fell away she pulled it back around her. Jeff didn’t wake up at all, and he smiled all night.

Epilogue

The next morning, Jeff woke up before Sara. He lay there for ten minutes watching her sleep, and spent another five minutes smelling her hair. Breakfast, he thought, would be appropriate. He got up quietly (narrowly avoiding stepping on Carol, who was snoring quietly on the floor at the foot of the bed) and put on his clothes. He absently reached in his pocket and pulled out a nickel. He flipped it in the air and caught it, but before opening his hand, he looked back at Sara. He mentally shrugged, tossed the coin on the bed spread, and made his way to the kitchen.

Sara, who had been awake since Jeff started smelling her hair, watched all this with interest through mostly-closed eyes. When she could hear Jeff in the kitchen (was he cooking?) she sat up and retrieved the coin from the folds of the bedspread. Heads, she noted without surprise. She pulled on a t-shirt and her flannel pajama pants, stepped over Carol (who was dreaming of a mousey breakfast), and went to join Jeff in the kitchen, from whence she could already smell bacon.