

The Elevator Trilogy

Short-Short Stories
For Casual Readers, 16 And Older
(The collection is named for the first story in it.)

By Les Cohen

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* * *

Life is short. Are you tired of not having anything good to read while you're eating out at the diner by yourself? Have you flipped through the magazines and catalogs you keep in your bathroom one too many times?

Now you'll have an answer for people who try to intimidate you, intellectually speaking, by asking, "So what have you read lately?" without your having put in all that much effort.

Just tell them the name of the last short-short story you read and my name. They'll think you read a whole book. ("Yeah, like that's ever going to happen.")

"Very impressive," they'll say to themselves. "You're reading, what, a book or two a week?"

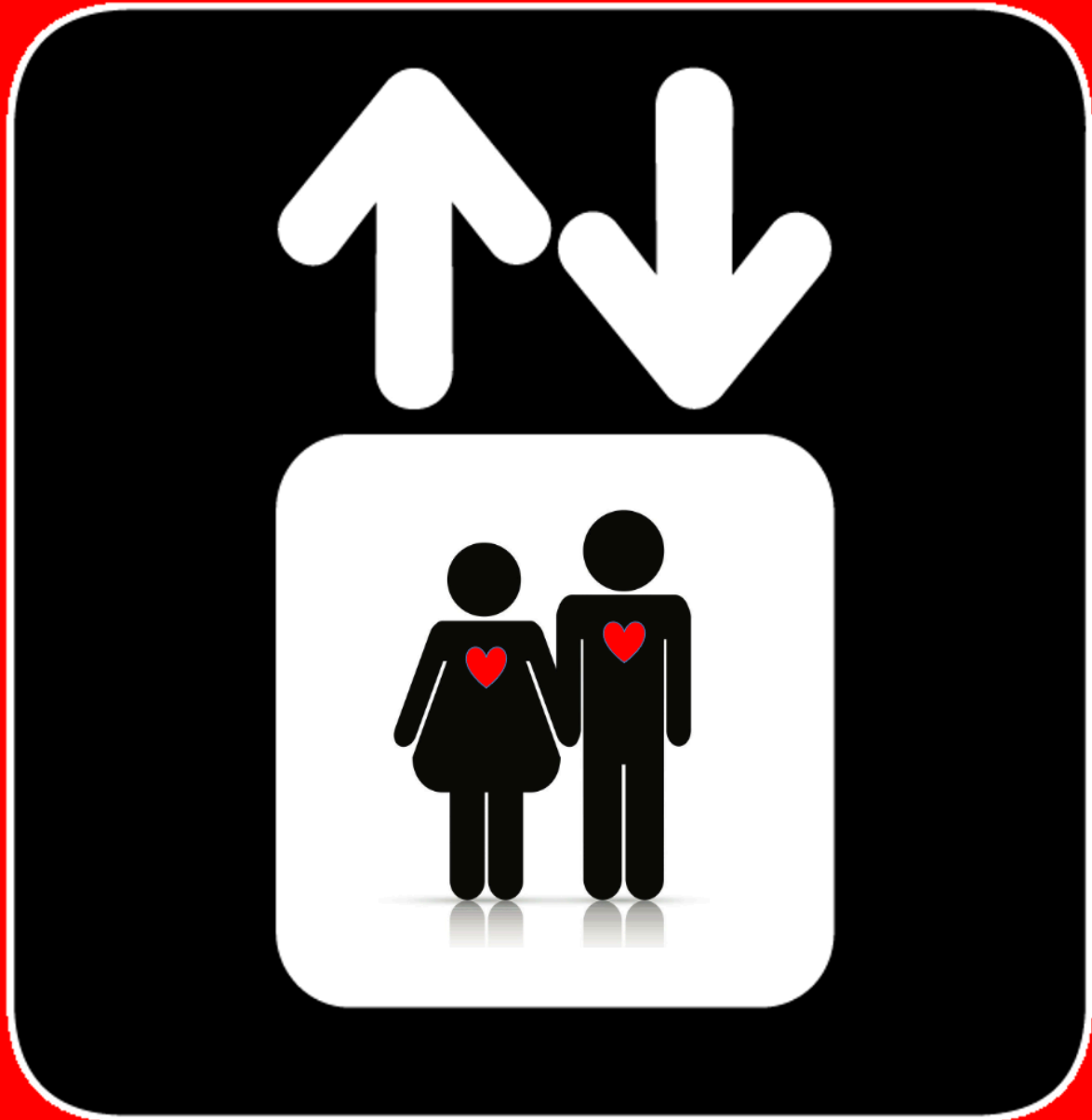
What do they know?

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The Elevator Trilogy

**A short-short story about
the ups and downs of falling in love.**



By Les Cohen

01. The Elevator Trilogy

Part 1: Going up.

Our story begins the morning after the night when the crew from Otis started renovating the other elevator. There were only two. True, the building was relatively short, a mere 28 stories tall, having been built in an era before downtown property values pushed buildings to the sky, but the elevators were sooooo slow, so crowded, stopping on virtually every floor. They were the prefect place, you guessed it, for love.

Of the twelve people waiting in the lobby, two of them, unbeknownst to each other, were about to meet. For the sake of discussion, we'll call them Bob and Jane, not because I'm trying to protect their identities, but because those were their names. Their names may have been ordinary but, trust me on this, they were not.

Jane was one of the first on and, being polite and given that she worked on the twenty-third floor, went to the back. Leaning up against the wall, a briefcase in one hand, large pocketbook over the other shoulder, that hand on the strap, her plan was to relax on the way up, preparing herself mentally for what promised to be a strenuous day.

Bob, on the other hand, had less control over his destiny. This morning, as it turned out, was his turn to get coffee for his team. Right now, he had his hands full, literally, trying to balance the ridiculously flexible cardboard box they gave him to hold eight cups, two of which were on top of two of the other six, his computer backpack slung over his right shoulder and the morning paper rolled under his left arm – all this while he kept wondering whether or not he'd remembered to zip up before he left his apartment. (He'd been running late and rushed out of his apartment without checking.) Focused as he was on keeping it all together, Bob was pushed into the elevator by the wave of people behind him. When it was all over, and the door was closing on the coat of the last person on board, Bob found himself facing the back of the elevator, smashed up against one person in particular – close enough to have children had the circumstances been different, if you get my drift.

Jane, all the while, was trying to ignore this unexpected moment of public intimacy by looking over Bob's shoulder, pretending to read the "Maximum Occupancy" notice above the buttons panel and then mentally counting the number of people who stood to die with her if the cable broke.

"Hi." Bob was the first to talk.

"Hi."

"Sorry about..."

"It's okay, as long as you promise to practice safe elevating." Jane smiled.

Bob was caught off guard, but recovered quickly. "I don't think you have anything to worry about."

“Sorry.” Jane was sincerely embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to flirt.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a special anonymity you have in crowded bars and elevators. Nobody’s paying attention, and it’s not like we’re ever going to see each other again.”

“Of course not,” Jane agreed with him, but then saw something in his eyes. “You look disappointed.”

“Oh, no.”

“You’re not disappointed that you won’t be seeing me again.”

“No. I’d love to see you again, of course, and I’ll be... heartbroken if I don’t.”

Jane smiled at him.

“It’s not disappointment, it’s just that liquid is beginning to bubble up onto the lid of this one cup and, if I’m not careful, it’s going to drip onto your white blouse, possibly staining it and you’ll have to walk around all day with a spot,” Bob nodded in the direction of Jane’s left breast, “there. ...Is that silk?”

“It’s fake silk, but thank you for noticing.” Looking at the lid in question, just a couple of inches above her mouth, everything suddenly went into adrenaline-induced slow motion. The elevator chime made a slow, deep tone announcing its arrival on a particular floor. People on the still-crowded elevator started to move, jostling Bob as they did. The tray shook, the two top cups even more so and there, teetering at the edge of the one lid, a single drop lost its hold.

“Zaappp!!” Instantly, and with perfect timing and position, Jane stuck out her tongue, way out, caught the drop and then held it out there for just a second before reeling it into her mouth.

“Geez.” Bob was impressed. “You could catch flies like that.”

“You saying I remind you of a frog.”

“Sort of. A very, uh, attractive frog?”

“I do look good in brown,” Jane was thinking out loud, and then smacked her lips.

“That’s not coffee.”

“You mean green.”

“What?”

“Toads are brown. Frogs are green,” Bob corrected her, shaking his head up and down slightly.

Jane gave Bob her trademark “Who cares?” look.

“No. Actually, it’s a ‘Pineapple, Mango, Coconut Paradise Smoothie.’ It’s healthier and I’m trying to avoid the whole coffee breath thing.”

Instinctively, Jane closed her mouth and rolled her lips inward, doing her best to avoid breathing on him.

“Oh, you don’t have coffee breath. Of course not.”

The elevator chimed again.

“This is my floor,” Jane announced, surprised by her own reluctance to move.

“Right,” was all he had to say, that and the fact that he didn’t move either.

“You need to move.”

“Of course,” and he carefully stepped aside to let her by.

“What floor are you getting off,” Jane asked as she brushed past him.

“Eighteen.”

“This is twenty-three.”

“I’ll get off on the way back down.”

And then she turned back just short of the door. “Maybe I’ll see you later?”

“Absolutely. ...Bob.”

“What?” Jane called back from the hallway, just as the doors were starting to close.

“I’m Bob.”

“Jane. And your fly’s d..,” but the doors cut her off.

Part 2: Going down.

Almost two weeks, several random and more than a few not so accidental elevator meetings and three gourmet truck lunches in the park down the street later, the chemistry between them was building. It was high time one of them asked the other out on a first date. Standing next to each other, at a right angle in the corner of the elevator, Bob had decided to take the initiative and pop the question.

“You know,” he started, “I’ve been thinking. ...Oh, hi Mrs. Caruthers.” They’d been meeting so often like this, regulars in the building had begun to recognize them.

“Hi, Bob. You too going out yet?”

“Not yet, Mrs. Caruthers,” Jane answered, “but thank you for asking.”

“Oh, you’re welcome.”

“Hm. As I was saying, I think she’s right. I think it’s time we went out on a date.”

“For an awkward dress-up dinner and a movie neither of us wants to see?”

“Yes. Exactly. A typical first date.”

“Or...”

“Or what?”

“Or we could count our time together, on the elevator, as a first date and go right to our second date.”

“What would that involve?”

“One of us would make a casual, sloppy clothes dinner for the other one at his or her apartment. And then, after dinner, even during dinner... Wait. Can you cook?”

“No. Not really. Breakfast. Things you can make in toaster. Grilled cheese sandwiches. Anything frozen or with ground meat in it. ...I thought *you* could cook.”

“Why would you think that? Oh, please, not because I’m a woman.”

“Of course not.” Bob suddenly felt the need to make an outdated political statement.

“The fact that you may or may not be a woman is irrelevant.”

“Really?”

“In an entirely asexual way. Yes, irrelevant. ...I thought you could cook because you’re always going grocery shopping after work – or are you just embarrassed that you have a second job as a cashier at Whole Foods?”

“No, no. I shop, my roommate cooks. That’s our deal. If it weren’t for her, I’d starve to death.”

They were quiet for a moment, watching past the people in front of them for the door to open on somebody else’s floor.

“I don’t have a roommate.”

“Okay, your place, carry out.”

“Deal.” Bob extended his hand to shake hers and Jane met him halfway. It felt good, the first time they’d touched, which is why they kept holding hands even though some people were looking. “Chinese, pizza, Italian?”

“Yes,” Jane answered, moving her hand slightly inside his.

“Yes? ...It was a multiple-choice question.”

“People are staring.”

“At what?” Bob was oblivious. Not just now, but generally.

“At us, holding hands like this,” Jane said, beginning to feel self-conscious. No one shakes hands for this long.”

“Hm. So, when do you want to do this? ...I was thinking Saturday night.”

“Sure. Saturday would b... No, wait. I have a date.”

“What?!” Bob snapped his hand back.

“You have a date?” a familiar looking stranger asked. He was a regular, had been eavesdropping and couldn’t help himself.

“Excuse me,” Jane raised her eyebrows and asserted herself. “We’re having a private conversation.”

“On an elevator?” the stranger asked.

“Sir,” Bob, still reeling from the realization that she was dating someone, came to her defense, “are you seriously unfamiliar with crowded public space etiquette?” It sounded silly, but Bob had a point.

“What?”

“Do you participate in conversations you overhear at restaurants, on a plane, on a cell phone in a restroom? ...I didn’t think so. Now, if you don’t mind...” Bob turned back to Jane who, honestly, was impressed that he used the word “etiquette” which she knew, of course, and could pronounce, but certainly couldn’t spell. “You have a date?!”

“Well, yeah.”

“With who?”

All the while, the elevator door had been opening and now closing. “Jane! ...Hey. All set for Saturday night?”

“With him.”

“Hi.” Whoever he was, he was as nice as he was... tall and good looking. “Rofls. Mark Rofls,” he said with confidence, extending his hand to Bob.

“Bob, James Bob,” Bob responded, shaking Mark’s hand, taking care to match the strength of his grip.

“Your name’s ‘James Bob’?”

“No, not really. I was just kidding. It’s Bob..” And then the elevator chime went off again.

“My floor. Nice meeting you?” Mark wasn’t entirely sure, sensing that Bob might have something going on with Jane. And then he looked at Jane. “...Four o’clock Saturday?”

“Right. Can’t wait.” Mark left and, as soon as the doors closed, Jane turned to Bob with an explanation.

“It’s not what you think.”

“You’re not going out with ‘Rolf’s, Mark Rolf’s’ on Saturday night? ...With a guy, albeit an apparently nice, very tall guy, who introduces himself with his last name first?”

Turning to face him, Jane pushed Bob against the sidewall and got up into his face.

“Listen to me, Mango Breath. I made that date with Mark weeks ago, before you and I met, when he got tickets to a concert. ...Now you want me to break the date?”

“No. That wouldn’t be right.”

“Good, because I’m not. ...Am I saving myself for you?”

“Wuh...”

“That was a rhetorical question. Besides, as technical point, that ship set sail my senior year.”

“In college?”

“High school. What difference does it make? ...My point is, I am. Saving myself for you, that is. Don’t ask me why, but I’m not really dating anyone, at least not until we’ve given it a shot.” She reached over, put her hands behind his neck, pulled Bob toward her and gave him a quick, but firm kiss.

“How ‘bout if...”

And the chime booped again.

“I’ve got to get back to work.” Jane, a bit flustered, hurriedly excused her way out, escaping into the hallway as soon as the door was open wide enough for her to squeeze through, and not looking back.

Part 3. Your floor or mine?

It would be early evening when they saw or talked to each other again, on the Thursday after the Saturday when Jane went out with Mark. Bob and Jane had managed to avoid each other on the elevator until then. Traffic on the elevator was light. Theirs was a mostly nine to five building.

“Hi.” Bob was the first to say hello.

“Hey.”

“So, uh, how was the concert?” He didn’t want to call it a date.

“Good. It was good.”

“Oh, hi guys.”

“Mrs. Caruthers. Working late this evening?”

“Obviously,” she answered, shaking her head, rolling her eyes. “No wonder you’re not having sex yet.”

“How do you know?” Jane was curious.

“Body language, or the lack of it. You better make your move, buster, or someone else will beat you to it.”

“She called you ‘buster,’” Jane turned to Bob. “How cute was that?”

“I was talking to you, Jane. ...Heck,” she smiled, looking up into Bob's eyes, “if there's anything cute in this elevator, it's him.”

“You know, Mrs. Caruthers,” Bob wanted to thank her for the comment, “if things don’t work out here, between the two of us...,” he wiggled his finger, pointing to Jane and himself, “is there a Mr. Caruthers?”

The older woman smiled back at him, “I wish.” Then the elevator chimed at the lobby floor. On her way out, she held door for them, the only two left. “Aren’t you getting off?”

Jane looked at Bob, then answered for the both of them. “No. We need to talk. We, the two us. We need to have intercourse.”

“‘Discourse.’ She means ‘discourse.’ ...You know, verbally.”

“Right, but just in case, I work in 815. Eighth floor. Room 815.”

“Got it, Mrs. Caruthers,” and he waved her goodbye, the door still closing while Bob pressed the “28” button.

They were quiet for a moment, but then Bob spoke up.

“So, what did you do after the concert? I’m just curious.”

“If you’re asking whether or not we had sex, the answer is no. We didn’t have to because we had sex during the concert.” Bob looked over at her, not entirely sure she was kidding. “In one of the disgusting stalls in the theater men’s room. Personally, I would have had more sex after the concert, but ‘Rolf’s, Mark Rolf’s’ said he needed time to recharge, you know, to reload as it were.”

Bob just stood there. “Thank you.”

“I, on the other hand, still have a very, very substantial level of pent-up sexual energy begging, I said ‘begging’ for release. For satisfaction.”

Bob was looking at her, but not speaking.

“That I’ve been saving for this one guy, ‘Elevator Guy’ my friends call him. Saving myself fo...”

And that’s when Bob, somewhere between the twelfth and fourteen floors, took two steps toward the door and pulled the stop button, setting off the alarm.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to be disturbed.”

“You’re kidding?”

Bob walked back to her, dropped his backpack which “thunked” to the floor without caring about the consequences for his laptop inside, and was clearly going for “it” when he stopped, just short of her face for some reason.

“Oh, come on! You can’t be...”

And then he kissed her. By kiss, I mean the kind that made the raucous alarm go quiet, the kind when two people occupy the same space. Legs between legs. Body parts melting against each other. Less of a kiss, per se, than a merger. Blouse and shirt becoming untucked. The kind of kiss after which a person can’t help but look disheveled and everyone can tell what you’ve been doing. On the fine line between foreplay and play. Well, you get the point. It was a big kiss alright, which turned out to be followed by the big you-know-what later that evening.

Done, but still slightly out of breath, Jane was the first to speak. “Wow. ...Whew. That was a real waste of time. I don’t know what I was expecting, but...”

She was joking of course, but Bob wasn’t taking any chances and laid into her again. A few moments later, they parted, just their faces at first, with Jane lightly tapping the fingers of her right hand on Bob’s lips. Otherwise, their bodies were still pretty much glued to each other, their clothes looking even more out and about. “Thanks,” Jane was sincere, “but I was just kidding.”

“I know,” Bob acknowledged bashfully. “I just wanted some more.”

“What do we do now?”

“Tell the fire department we didn’t mean to set off the alarm?” Bob was concerned that he could hear sirens, but wasn’t sure they were coming to their building.

“I mean I think we should go out.”

Bob thought about it for a nanosecond, nodded his head slightly and suggested, “Tonight would be good.”

And it was, good that is.

So, exactly how do I know all this? Well, because I'm Bob. That's my girlfriend, Jane, passed out on the couch. And that fur ball sitting on her chest, tush down, front legs fully extended, like he's paying attention? That's our cat, Otis.

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Last Picked

**A short-short story about
co-workers contemplating a first date.**



By Les Cohen

02. Last Picked

*Two co-workers contemplating a date.
Nothing but dialogue.*

“Hey.”

“Hey. ...I’m just finishing up. What can I...”

“Some of us are going out for burgers, the little Happy Hour kind. Why don’t you join us?”

“Well, for one thing, I don’t eat beef and I have absolutely no social graces.”

“Why don’t you eat beef? Is it a religious thing?”

“No. It’s a saturated fat thing.”

“What about forks? Do you eat with your fingers, or do you use forks?”

“Only when I order soup.”

“Great. What more can a girl ask? You’ll fit in perfectly.”

“I tend not to relate well to people.”

“How do you know if you never go out with them?”

“Twenty-four years of experience.”

“I thought you were twenty-three?”

“It started the moment I was conceived. I wouldn’t have thought it was possible, but I have a prenatal memory of my parents giggling through intercourse. I think they may have been drinking, at a minimum.”

“Intercourse?”

“When two people...”

“I know what you meant. It just seemed like an overly technical description of what they were doing. Maybe they just had funny sex. Maybe they actually liked each other. Sometimes people who like each other giggle during sex, you know, because they’re having a good time.”

“Are you saying that it’s normal for the girl to laugh?”

“It all depends?”

“On what?”

“On whether she’s laughing with you or... Come on. What’s the worst thing that can happen?”

“I’ll say something embarrassing. People I work with and who respect me will know for sure how socially awkward I am rather than just assuming it.”

“Don’t worry. No one you work with respects you.”

“Good point.”

“Okay, how ‘bout if I be your wingman, figuratively speaking? ‘Wing-woman,’ to be precise.”

“You’d cover for me?”

“Absolutely. I’ll tell them we’re going out for the evening, so we can’t stay long. We’ll leave before you make a fool out of yourself and you can take me out for a real dinner. How ‘bout that?”

“You’re beautiful and impeccably dressed in a casually fashionable way. I, on the other hand, am not. Shouldn’t I be the boy version of you for ‘us’ to be believable?”

“I don’t know. You have potential.”

“A diamond in the rough?”

“More like a cubic zirconium.”

“I’m not sure what that is, but I get the point. ...I don’t think they’ll buy that we’re dating, particularly since no one has ever seen us together at work.”

“You’re right but, if we play it right, we can make the shock value work for you. They’ll start imagining positive things about you that clearly aren’t true.”

“So, your aura will be rubbing off on me?”

“Figuratively speaking. There won’t be any actual rubbing involved.”

“I get it. ...What will we talk about?”

“It’s a sports bar. How about sports? What sport did you play in college?”

“Chess?”

“That’s not a sport.”

“You’ve never seen me play.”

“What about high school? Did you play any team sports?”

“Does the debate team count?”

“What about phys ed?”

“Are you asking what sports I played on the days when no one stuffed me in my locker?”

“Yes.”

“I was good at running.”

“Sprints? Hurdles? Cross-country?”

“It depended upon where I was when they started chasing me?”

“Were you beaten up often?”

“Not really. It never occurred to our high school thugs that I could pick the lock to the janitors’ supply closet. I had a flashlight and used the time to read my History assignments on a desk I made out of rolls of single-ply toilet paper.”

“How creative.”

“In retrospect, it was good preparation. My apartment is only slightly larger.”

“Word around the office is that you have a Murphy Bed.”

“Not exactly. I have a bed that folds into a couch. ‘Murphy’ is my cat.”

“You have a cat?”

“Not really.”

“But, let me guess, telling people you have one makes you seem more normal?”

“I left Murphy with my parents because my apartment is too small.”

“Sorry. Being normal is over-rated. ...Do you miss him?”

“Who?”

“Murphy?”

“Not so much. We FaceTime on the weekends. He has his own iPad.”

“That’s nice.”

“It could be worse. At least I have a place of my own.”

“I live with my parents.”

“And I would too, if they were *my* parents.”

“I’m kidding. I just wanted to see how you’d react under pressure.”

“How did I do?”

“If pathetic was what you were after, you nailed it.”

“...And you were what? A cheerleader? Homecoming Princess, maybe even the Queen? Student government President?”

“I liked softball, but didn’t get to play much, but I was on the school paper and the debate team.”

“You too? Hm. Hard to believe we have something in common. ...Brainy intellectual sex kitten, my favorite.”

“You’re not going to drool, are you?”

“No. ...It’s a chronic, weather-driven saliva disorder for which there’s no known cure. They really need to turn the air conditioning down...”

“Brainy intellectual, maybe, but these... These didn’t show up until my freshman year at college.”

“You didn’t date much in high school?”

“You could say that. No one asked me out to the prom, if that’s what you’re wondering. Well, that’s not strictly true. No one asked me that I wanted to go with.”

“I would have asked you?”

“My point exactly.”

“...So why me?”

“Wow. You really don’t get it, do you?”

“I’m just being realistic.”

“Okay, let’s see. You leer at me less than the other guys I know.”

“I avoid looking at you on purpose and it’s not easy. Even Morgan stares at you and he’s legally blind.”

“You write well. I’ve been reading your blog.”

“What blog?”

“’ImNotJustinTimerberlake.com’”

“Oh. That one.”

“You have sense of humor.”

“True, I’m good at sensing humor when I hear it. ...Is that it?”

“No. ...You have no pretense. I’ve lived in a world of pretense ever since I went to college.”

“Ever since you grew boobs?”

“You know, I think you may be onto something?”

“Can I write about your boobs on my blog? ...in the context of a strictly academic discussion of the impact of late developing body parts on self-image and personal relat..”

“No. ...But maybe we can talk about them later if you buy me a really, really nice dinner?”

“Okay, let’s go, but I still won’t eat any beef.”

“You just knocked the pencil cup off your desk. ...I can’t believe you use a blotter.”

“That happens sometimes when I stand up suddenly without pushing back my chair all the way.”

“How often do you do that?”

“I don’t know. Should I be keeping track?”

“Can you dance?”

“I vibrate. Is that okay?”

“By the way, I heard you’re being promoted to Project Manager. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I’ll be hiring and would consider allowing you to sleep your way to the top.”

“Wouldn’t that be harassment?”

“You’re right. How about if you sleep with me, but I don’t hire you?”

“That might be okay. We’ll see how dinner goes.”

“Uh, for the record...”

“What?”

“I’ve been working on getting up enough nerve to ask you out.”

“I know.”

“Really?”

“A girl can tell.”

“Well, thanks for taking the initiative and asking me out first.”

“I got tired of waiting.”

“...I mean it.”

“You’re welcome but, in case anybody asks, it was the other way around.”

“Of course. ...Maybe they’ll have veggie sliders.”

“Will you stop talking if we hold hands?”

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The Prophecy

**A short-short story about
a re-interpretation of ancient legend.**



By Les Cohen

03. The Prophecy

In retrospect, had there been anyone left to tell the story, it seemed to take forever for the glass to tumble from the edge of the desk to the floor, which was no longer where it used to be, losing its few leftover drops of last night's wine along the way to oblivion.

The sound was deafening and deep, everywhere, but from nowhere in particular, building to a crescendo no one who hadn't been there would ever fully appreciate – fodder for endless future speculation among both our ordinary and most sophisticated minds.

Twenty minutes earlier...

It was a postcard morning, as it had been every day since they arrived in Nassau to celebrate their fifth anniversary. The view from their eighth-floor ocean suite might as well have been painted on the air outside, it was that hard to believe. The door to the balcony had been open all night, the breezes that were everywhere on Paradise Island pulling the sheer curtain outward, like the flowing white dress of some unseen spirit that had come to watch over them. Below, on the beach by the cove for which the hotel was named, the morning sun reflected off the water and colored the white underfeathers of the sea birds with an iridescent turquoise that seemed unreal.

Well-rested, they were up early, anxious to get their place on the beach in the perfect position for a long day of reading, writing, talking about everything and nothing in particular. Now and then, when it was too hot, they would cool themselves with walks along the edge of the warm ocean water and with frozen banana daiquiris artfully prepared by one of the always-friendly locals at the nearest beach bar. Their first five years had blown by. This week at the Atlantis complex was just the long overdue break they needed.

Atlantis was on Paradise Island, separated by Nassau Harbor from New Providence Island in the Bahamas, a billion-dollar resort with hotels, beaches, elaborate pools and water activities, all built around the theme of its namesake, the legend of Atlantis. It was a Hollywood-style re-creation of the ancient, mythical city that once disappeared beneath the sea. Andy and Carolyn were staying in the more exclusive, more adult, less theme-park section of the resort – the hotel with the two-story lobby with no walls, the Mesa Grill and cushioned islands in the middle of the pool through which waiters waded out to bring you drinks made from rum and fresh fruit. They planned to eat at the Grill tonight, either that or go out for conch fritters and shrimp at "Bad News Jack" in the city. They figured they were young and their colons could take it.

"Honey," Carolyn was too busy packing her beach bag to see what it was all about, "you've got an e-mail from Amanda," his younger sister.

"I was wondering why we hadn't heard from her." Missing a birthday or anniversary wasn't like Amanda. She was a professor of ancient history at Columbia and had

taken the summer off to do research in Athens on the work of some ancient scientists. Andy sat down, double clicked, and began reading to himself.

“What’s she have to say for herself?” Carolyn shouted past the open double doors to the bathroom, putting on the parts of the pricy bathing suit she had purposely purchased one size too large just for their vacation. “If not to have sex and eat, what’s the point of going on vacation?” she had told herself to justify the cost.

“I don’t know. She seems anxious. Doesn’t even mention our anniv... Wait a minute. What’s she talking about?” He was quiet for moment while he read the next few paragraphs. “Apparently, she was doing research on this one guy who was writing about another writer who he – the first one – claimed had originated the ancient legend of Atlantis.”

“That’s nice,” Carolyn was standing behind him now, her hands on his shoulders, his arms folded in front of her laptop along the edge of the desk near their bed. “Let’s get out of here. I know exactly where I want to sit.” There was this one lone palm tree right at the beach, maybe 20 feet from where the water and dry sand break even. Sitting under it was like having your own, personal oasis.

“Hold on for a second. She says, it turns out that the originator wasn’t claiming to be writing about something that had happened, but was making a prediction, a prophecy about something that would happen centuries in the future. ...Hm. Today, in fact, as far as she can tell. The guy was some kind of genius scientist who actually offered what she thinks might be a pretty good reason for when and why it was going to occur. She’s asked a friend of hers – some Greek geologist she’s been dating...”

“Oh, give me a break.”

“...to help with the translation. She wants us to...”

“Hey, come on,” she told him, leaning forward to kiss him on the back of his neck, just below his right ear, causing the usual instinctive crunch of his neck toward his shoulder. “You can finish reading and get back to her later.”

“I don’t know, she seems pretty worked up. I mean, look at this, she isn’t even taking the time to proof what she’s written. It’s not her...”

Carolyn moved her hands from his shoulders to around his neck, faking strangulation.

Andy didn’t need convincing. “Yeah, yeah,” he started to say as he rose up from his seat. “Head for the door. I’ll get my hat.”

Turning to her right to look out and over the balcony, she had an idea. “If you ask me, every room should have its own waterslide directly to the beach.”

Carolyn left for the door, pressing the button to ask housekeeping to make up their room while they were out. Andy, right behind her, just barely slipped into the hallway before the door chunked shut behind him, and they were off, pretending to race each other on their way to the elevators.

Minutes later, in their room, the sound of the ocean wafting through the open glass doors was interrupted by the “boop, boop” of the breaking news ticker across the bottom of Carolyn’s laptop screen. “USGS scientists are reporting widespread, significant seismic activity in the British West Indies,” the message began. In retrospect, they turned out to be pre-shocks for something much, much bigger.

A wine glass next to the computer, still showing the last few ruby drops left over from the night before, began to vibrate, the bottom of the stem tapping, first slowly, and now more rapidly, as it drifted across the glass surface of the desk. The screen on their laptop went dark, and all of Nassau sank beneath the warm, suddenly tumultuous waters of the Atlantic.

At least they were together when it happened.

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Finding Dana

**A short-short story about a forever-married
man and the love of his life.**



By Les Cohen

04. Finding Dana

October 4, 1966.

“Jeff?”

For a moment, lying there in the twilight of their bedroom, he thought he heard someone calling his name from whatever was playing on the TV that Dana insisted had to be on all night. He turned to look, thinking how surreal the flat screen seemed on the wall across from the bed, like a painting come to life. Slowly, he turned back to stare at her face, barely illuminated by the soft light coming from their lamppost through the blinds. It was the middle of the night, 3:48 AM to be precise, according to the glowing numbers on the radio, on the nightstand next to the side of the bed where he'd been sleeping.

He was up, but tired. He never did need much sleep, but lately, now in his early sixties, getting up in the middle of the night had become routine. Sometimes, he'd go downstairs to do the dishes leftover from a late dinner the night before, or write pieces, articles that no one would ever read. Writing was the passion that practical choices and the circumstances of life had denied him, but it wasn't that big of a deal. Finding Dana made whatever material things he hadn't accomplished seem unimportant.

He would stay downstairs until he was tired, so his restlessness wouldn't disturb her, and then go back to lay beside her, tucking his hand under her side to help him fall back to sleep.

Tonight, he got up, but stayed in the room to sit down on the edge of her side of the bed where he could watch her sleep. Her face, despite the years, seemed ever so slightly older, but then even more beautiful than the evening he'd first seen it. What he saw was as new as it was familiar if anything could be both at the same time. It was Dana. She was the girl, now woman he'd love to meet, and yet somehow had always known. Forty years together and he still couldn't take his eyes off her, but instead of love, what he felt was sadness and fear. The night seemed like such a waste, given how relatively little time they had left. What, maybe 20 more years if they were lucky, if he could live that long? A long time when you're twenty, when there's so much more after that, but no time at all when there isn't.

It was a ridiculous...

“Hey, Jeff?” He heard it again, now with the sound of other voices and music in the background.

Whatever it was, he'd ignore it.

It was a ridiculous question, the kind only an over-active mind would consider. On one hand, he wanted to go first, to never have to live without her. On the other... On the other hand, he loved her too much not to be there for her until the end.

His eyes starting to close, he let himself fall back to sleep, the hint of a smile just beginning to show at the thought of the girl he'd always loved even before he met her...

"Hey, buddy," his friend, Howie, was standing next to the booth Jeff had been holding for them, seeming unusually short. Behind him, an anxious waiter was holding a tray over her head while his friends blocked the narrow aisle. Pushing on Jeff's shoulder, Howie tried again, a little louder this time. *"Jeffrey?! I really need you to..."*

"Yeah? Hi. Hi! ..Sorry, I was just... Actually, I'm not sure what I was thinking about. More like," his voice started to fade, *"I was dreaming... actually."* Looking up, his eyes blew past his chubby friend, past "Bunny," the girl Howie had been dating, to her friend with the green eyes, short blond hair and instantly familiar smile.

He stood up carefully, worried he'd forget that the booths were one step up. He'd made a mental note not to make a fool of himself when he first got there and asked the girl at the door if he could hold the table for his friends. "The Pub," which was all the simple sign over the door said, was one of those places every college town has, right off campus, where bad cheeseburgers on Kaiser rolls and fat steak fries couldn't have tasted better.

"Hi," he smiled back at her, extending his hand to shake hers. It was too proper, close to being weird. He knew that but did it anyway. *"I'm Jeff,"* he told her, as if she didn't already know.

"Jeff," Howie decided he needed to make a formal introduction. *"This is Dana. Dana, this is Jeff."* For some reason, the exchange of names made her giggle.

He was still holding her hand, but finally let go on the way to inviting her to sit next to him on his side of the booth. Howie and Bunny squeezed in across from them. The table, he thought, was too wide, too far across for them to talk.

Turning to his left to face her, while Howie passed out The Pub's badly typed menus in plastic folders, Jeff said it again. *"Hi."*

"You already said that," she answered, leaving him to wonder if she punctuated every sentence with that same smile.

"Yeah, uhhh... We need to go out."

"We are out."

"I mean on a date."

"This isn't a date?"

"I meant, without Howie, Bunny or any other animals."

“Don’t you want to see how tonight goes?” she asked, knowing already how it was going to turn out.

“No, no. I already know we’re going out again.”

“You do?”

“I just wanted to dispense with the usual, awkward chit chat after I walk you back to the dorm... so I can spend more time kissing you goodnight.”

Suddenly, Howie and “The Rabbit,” as he sometimes referred to her in private, stopped over-talking each other and were staring across the table, their eyes moving from one of their friends to the other.

Pausing for a moment, Dana leaned forward, planting a gentle, perfectly long-lasting kiss on Jeff’s lips, a little bubble of saliva popping as she broke away. It felt like a week before he opened his eyes, but she waited before saying anything. *“There. Now that that’s out of the way, maybe you can buy me something to eat.”*

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Precocious

A short-short story about a kid whose imagination may be a tad out of control.



By Les Cohen

05. Precocious

“My name...” he stopped for a moment to think about it, “...is Jake. Just Jake. I’m an agricultural microbiologist for a consulting firm. The name of the company isn’t important. They had nothing to do with what I’m about to describe. Besides, by now whatever personal records I kept at the office have been removed or altered to fool any investigation. These people don’t erase any evidence of your existence. That’s way too hard, too suspicious. Better to leave you out there, stripped of your credibility. By now, my life has been tweaked, altered with finesse just enough to make anything I say here seem unbelievable, at best the ramblings of an over-active imagination.”

“They have taken from me the fraction of my life that made me special. It was hardly anything, but everything that made me unique. The technique was the proverbial telltale partial fingerprint proving their involvement. I have now become extraordinarily ordinary, of no particular interest to anyone. The records I have, but that they don’t know about, are quite probably the last surviving evidence that what I am about to tell you is true. I fear for my life. Even more, I fear that what I have done, however innocent and well meaning, will be left to prove, in horrible retrospect, that my story was authentic, and the danger all too real.”

“It’s late. If you care, I’m working in the dark, except for the glow of my screen, in the upstairs bedroom of one the kids of an acquaintance who’s on vacation. I overheard him leaving his house key with his secretary for her to take care of his plants and made a copy while she went out for lunch. He doesn’t know I’m here and I borrowed a friend’s car in case they were tracking mine. No one followed me. I should be okay for the next few hours – time enough to write this, get some sleep, and be up and out of here early before any of the neighbors notice. I’m afraid to use my cell phone. In fact, I’ve turned it off and taken out the SIM card just in case. And these people don’t have a landline. It sounds corny, I know, but I’ll give you instructions later for how you can reach me by running a personals ad online – maybe in the Post-Examiner. ...I’m talking too much. I’m so tired, but I’ve got to get this out.”

“My particular specialty is protecting agricultural products from exposure to environmental and biological elements which, when those agricultural products are consumed, would cause harm to the public.”

“I’m not much of a writer, but I’ll do my best to explain what’s happened, and then I’ve got to go. This will be an e-mail addressed to the Editors-in-Chief of the major television news networks and most prominent newspapers. Hopefully, one of you will take me seriously, investigate on the odd chance that I’m not a crackpot and do something about it. I can’t, and don’t think I’ll live long enough to do it myself, even if I could. At best, you’ll staff it out, if it even makes it to your desk. At most, you might do your duty and forward it to the local office of the FBI who will treat it as routine junk material until it’s too late. At worst, these notes will be one more inconspicuous item for the nice Hispanic lady who empties your trash after you’ve gone home for the day.

With luck, you'll never realize or feel guilty about how many lives you could have saved had you only paid attention."

"Some months ago, I was approached by someone who identified herself – verbally and with written credentials which I verified with her agency – as Rebecca Kloonz, a senior analyst with Homeland Security. Ms. Kloonz was an almost too attractive blonde, as stunning as she was friendly, the consummate professional you couldn't get out of your head no matter how hard you tried. What I did, to be honest, I did for my country, so I thought at the time, but pleasing her was certainly part of it."

"When I first met her, she was accompanied by a suit claiming to be a lawyer with the same agency. I'll attach scans of the business cards they gave me. Although I now know they are imposters, both of them checked out when we first met. I called Homeland Security, and there used to be a handful of citations on Google and a Facebook page, but they're gone now. Kloonz, the analyst, was to be my contact. The lawyer was supposedly there to explain the handful of forms and agreements I had to sign related to federal secrecy statutes."

"The gist of what they wanted was to hire me, outside of our company, to participate in what amounted to a game in the war against terrorism. My job was to devise and precisely document three to five means by which terrorists could infect the food supply so as to produce the most widespread, most frightening harm to our people, with devastating effects on the economy. One simple example that she gave me, far less sophisticated and effective than what she knew I could propose, was to introduce Mad Cow's Disease in multiple herds around the country, destroying the American beef industry and all the various related companies whose products derive from that core ingredient. But MCD was too obvious. What they wanted from me were techniques that would kill as many people as possible, quickly, before the root cause could be determined, and for which there would be no obvious or convenient solution."

"Other experts, as unknown to me as I would be to them, would then be tasked to devise means of protecting against these threats that I had proposed, and recovering from such an attack. In later games, our roles would be reversed. It was the patriotic thing for me to do. It's unbelievable, but I even met with Ms. Kloonz at her offices in the Homeland Security building in Washington. Why wouldn't I believe her? While I was there, some senior gentlemen stopped by to thank me for agreeing to work with them on behalf of the American people who, he explained, would never appreciate the value of my clandestine efforts and that of other scientists like me. Who knows what he thought I was there to do? Was he in on it, or not? God forgive me, but who wouldn't have thought this was real?"

"Attached to this e-mail are copies of the three suggestions I made, including detailed formulas, instructions for manufacturing and plans for distribution. Their insidious effectiveness never disgusted me. Their cleverness made me proud of what I could do for my country, but then they counted on that, didn't they, that I would be so highly motivated to do the right thing."

Of the three proposals I made to Ms. Kloonz, the one in which she seemed to be most interested wa... Hold on. I think there's a car pulling up in the driveway. A large black

SUV. Jesus, it's after 1 AM and Jack isn't due home until next week. Hold on... It's just one man. F**k, he's working the front door! He's coming in. I'm going to e-mail this now and send you the attachments later, as soon as I..."

"Hi, honey." His mother gave her smiling husband a quick kiss on the lips just as the front door was closing behind him – and then turned to shout upstairs to her favorite (and only) son. "Nelson! Come on. Daddy's home. I've got dinner ready to go. Get your sister and come on down. We've still got to pack so we can get an early start tomorrow morning." They'd put off going to the beach until almost the end of the summer.

"Nuts," Nelson thought to himself, interrupting his typing to press on the center of his frames, pushing his glasses up his nose that, sadly, would eventually be more than large enough to no longer need his assistance.

"He's not packed yet?" his father asked, putting down his briefcase on top of their cat that he hadn't noticed was sitting in his favorite family room chair. You'd have thought Jack, the cat, would have screamed, but then he was used to it, and looked forward to them leaving him home for a week of peace and quiet. "What's he been doing all day?"

"Writing. I don't know. I haven't packed either." And then she laughed, not wanting to make fun of their son, but unable to help herself. "He's been grumbling that he has less than three weeks before school starts to come up with a really cool nickname."

"It's summertime. Why isn't he busy with his dorky friends inventing something?"

"Hey, they're not that dorky," his older sister, Samantha, always protective of her younger brother, had just come around the corner into the kitchen. "He's just a kid – a really, really smart kid with an overly active imagination. He'll be okay as soon as he starts Middle School after we get back."

"Nelson!!!" His mother couldn't stand not serving dinner when it was ready.

The cringe was a reflex he couldn't suppress. Still upstairs, standing up from his desk, Nelson moved the mouse arrow to "Send/Receive" and pressed the left key below his synapse pad. "Maybe it'll make the news," he said out loud. "That would be cool."

"NELSON." This time it was his father calling him. "Sam, please go get your brother."

"Nelson Metcalf Goldstein. Jesus, what were they thinking?" he muttered under his breath, closing the lid of his laptop on his way to his bedroom door. "I'm never going to get a girl to go out with me. Never, ever."

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Dialogue

**A short-short story about a couple
having breakfast on a Sunday morning.**



By Les Cohen

06. Dialogue

“God, I love Sunday mornings. ...Richard?”

“What?”

“Could you at least not read the paper until we get there? You can’t walk and unfold the paper at the same time. You’re just smooshing it all up. You know I like it crisp, the way it was when we bought it.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll wait.”

“Come on. What’s not to enjoy? ...Watch it, that guy’s turning. Let’s wait for the light.”

“I’m waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For the light. You just asked me to wait for the light, didn’t you?”

“Could you get back on the curb?”

“But I like the idea of being married to a taller woman. ...Come on. We have 24 seconds to cross the street.”

“It’s perfect. We sleep late, throw on some clothes, pick up the paper and take as much time as we want reading it cover to cover over some fresh coffee and a toasted bagel with extra-saturated fat, mmmm, mmm delicious walnut honey cream cheese. ...Life is good.”

“Hm.”

“Richard, you promised.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll put it away, but you’re getting breakfast.”

“Deal. Now hold my hand and pretend like we actually enjoy hanging out together. It’s the one day we both have off. ...There, isn’t that better?”

“You just want to remind your friends that we’re the only marriage they know that isn’t on the rocks, and that’s just because, in four years, we’ve only spent one day a week together. What’s that, 108 days, roughly three months? No wonder we’re still happy.”

"208 days. Four times 52 is 208. Seven months."

"Whatever. Technically, we're still newlyweds. At this rate our marriage could last forever."

“But we have great sex, don’t we?”

“Confirming my theory that it’s best if only one of us is awake at a time. ...I need to write a paper on that.”

“Hey, any time you want to move to the suburbs, we can both stop working 12 hour days.”

“What, and not eat out every meal?”

“We could save some money. That would be... Brenda!”

“Jesus, stop waiving. She’ll want to join us.”

“Try smiling. She’s got a morning session with her trainer, and please don’t say anything. I already know what you’re thinking.”

“I am trying to smile. This is the best I can do.”

“Alright, kill the smile. You’re beginning to scare people.”

“There, the table on the end. The one by the Ficus with the squirrel pooping in the pot.”

“How do you know it’s a Ficus?”

“I don’t. It’s the only potted tree name I know. Besides, I like the way it sounds. ‘Ficus.’ If we ever have a kid, I want to name it ‘Ficus.’”

“It? ...Would you mind if we took this chair? ...Thanks.”

“Boy. Girl. Who cares? Ficus is one of those names, like ‘Dana,’ that works either way. Have you got money?”

“I do. It’s in my sock. ...Don’t ask.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m too young for a fanny pack.”

“Did you notice, I didn’t ask. Just make sure my croissant is perfect. And make sure, actually tell him not to slice it. I like tearing my croissants apart.”

“I’m going.”

“I mean it! Don’t take it if he... slices it. She can’t hear me. I’m just talking to myself.”

“Hey, Richard.”

“Oh, hey, Brenda. You don’t mind if I don’t get up, do you? Lisa insisted that we walk and I’m exhausted.”

“Richard, you only live eight minutes from here.”

“Well, it seemed like ten. Besides, if I stop reading, I’ll forget where I was and have to start over again.”

“Aren’t those the comics?”

“This one has more words than usual.”

“Your chair’s wobbling.”

“True, but it’s wobbling less than the other chairs. ...Lisa’s inside getting food.”

“No, I’m right here. There was no one in line. Serge actually seemed glad to see me. Hi, honey.”

“I thought I was ‘honey.’”

“No, you’re ‘sweet cheeks.’ I’ll make you name tag when I get back. Brenda and I need to chat for a second. I’ll be right back.”

“You really think my cheeks are sweet?”

“Read the paper.”

“I thought we were going to read the paper together. Apparently not.”

“You were right.”

“That was quick. Right about what?”

“About Jeffrey. Hand me the ‘Arts & Leisure’ section.”

“Who’s ‘Jeffrey’? ...Here.”

“Her trainer. I think he’s 12, but Brenda says he has the maturity of a 15-year-old. ...Oh my God! I can’t believe you dog-eared one of the pages. Have you learned nothing living with me??”

“Just read the review of Bob’s play. You can thank me later.”

“Richard, there’s a pigeon on the table.”

“None of my friends are pigeons. It must be one of yours.”

“Do I have poppy seeds in my teeth?”

“No.”

“Richard, put the paper down and tell me if I have poppy seeds in my teeth.”

“No poppy seeds, but your teeth seem unusually large today.”

“By the way, I meant to tell you...”

“Tell me what?”

“Hey, will you try not to dip the corner of the paper in my cream cheese the next time you turn the page. It has the perfect number of walnuts.”

“That’s what you wanted to tell me?”

“No. ...I’m expecting.”

“Hm.”

“I said, ‘I’m expecting...”

“Expecting what?”

“...a Ficus.”

“We’ll put it on the balcony. It’ll be fine. ...Did you take the ‘Finance’ section?”

“Richard?”

“Hm.”

“Richard?!!”

“What?!”

“We don’t have a balcony.”

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Creative Running

**A short-short story about a writer who
is at his creative best during an early-morning run
through his quiet suburban neighborhood.**



By Les Cohen

07. Creative Running

“Heh, heh, whooo. Heh, heh, whooo.” It was the cadence of his breathing, more prominent, in his head at least, than even the sound of his Nike’s hitting the pavement. As for the pattern, it was the letter “U” in Morse Code. He’d looked it up once. Beyond that, he didn’t know why he breathed like that when he ran and didn’t care – just one more idiosyncrasy among many he’d long ago given up trying to understand.

“It was unseasonably cold that morning, not yet 5 AM, running in the dark slowly up the hill to Grey Rock. He’d remembered to take his baseball cap, but not his gloves, and now the occasional rubbing of his hands together was breaking his stri...”

“Heh, heh, whooo.”

“Jesus, I’ve even started thinking like I’m writing. That’s got to be an early, maybe not so early sign of mental illness,” he thought to himself, which turned out to be the point of it all. He was a good twenty pounds overweight, but the shape he was in or out of had nothing to do with why he ran.

“It’s my time to think. Just me, daydreaming to the rhythm of my breathing and the sound of the street, enjoying the contrast between running by the occasional streetlight and then through the pitch-black tunnels under the leaves of the trees between them. I like it. I can’t sleep more than four or five hours at a time, anyway. Why not run? I get some of my best ideas when I’m running, especially in the early morning. It’s the nice thing about living in the suburbs. No cars, no pedestrians, not this early. Just me and the noise of some insects I don’t ever want to see, doing whatever they do in the bushes and trees between the houses.”

“Speaking of running, there goes my nose. There,” he paused for a moment to breathe in through it, “I’ll just suck it up. ...Gross. Thank goodness there’s no one else...”

“Good morning.”

“Hi. Hi, uh,” he stammered his response, surprised by the really attractive thirty-something blond who ran past him, not a foot away to his side, coming in the other direction out of the darkness ahead of him. “Crap. The one good-looking jogger in the entire neighborhood and she passes me when I’m snorting. Perfect. That’s what she’ll remember about me for the rest of her life. Every time anyone around her so much as sniffs, she’ll think about me, the guy with the runny nose and no Kleenex. Precisely the impression I’ve always wanted to make on hot women I meet. Who knows? Maybe she finds vulgar personal behavior strangely compelling. Not a bad trait for one of my characters, maybe a stunning, drop-dead beautiful woman with no apparent interest in personal hygiene.”

“Heh, heh, whooo. Heh, heh, whooo.”

“Hey!” A car turning off one of the side streets just missed him, cutting its turn too fast and too close to the curb as he approached the corner, somehow failing to see the lighted band he wore on his right wrist.

“Paperboy, my ass. Whatever happened to kids delivering the paper rolled up in the baskets on their slow moving Schwinn, meandering down the streets, trying their best to lead their customers’ paths and front porches just perfectly, too cute for anyone to complain when they didn’t. ...There, I’m doing it again. ‘Doctor, doctor, give me the news. I’ve got a bad case of...’”

“Bacon?! Wow, smell that bacon. Someone’s up early making breakfast,” he wondered, looking around for the source, as if he’d stop by for directions and maybe invite himself in. “God, I love the smell of bacon. I don’t see any lights. Must be a kitchen in the back of one of these houses with a vent running over the stove. Two eggs over easy. Four, maybe five hundred milligrams of cholesterol. Some chopped potatoes grilled in a fry pan. Just what I need.”

“Actually, what I need is to get back to work. Let’s see... Hey, what’s that? Hey! It’s uh... Yeah, it’s a naked woman running, running badly, more like flailing down the middle of the street! There!! Just ahead under the streetlamps at the corner. She’s crying so much I can’t make out what she’s screaming. I’ve got to help her. I’ll speed up. Oh, man, she’s fallen down...”

“No, no. Too sexual. Gratuitous nudity. Exciting, but no substitute for quality writing. On the other hand,” never wanting to forget a good gimmick, “the idea could come in handy one day.”

“Heh, heh, whooo. Heh, heh, whooo.” Unexpectedly, our runner looked up toward the sound of deep-throated exhaust coming fast down the middle of the street, the throbbing of its speakers confirming an SUV from somewhere else.

“Asshole!!” one of the young men from the SUV shouted out the window at him when it drove by, uncomfortably close to where he was running, just a couple of feet from the curb.”

Turning quickly for what he was certain would be an unheard act of defiance, “That’s ‘Mr. Asshole,’ you jerk!”

“Who gave them,” he muttered between breaths, feeling like they’d picked on him and gotten away with it, “the right to interrupt my personal time? ...Heh, heh, whooo. Heh, heh, whooo. Can’t they see I’m working?”

“Unfortunately, the next thing he heard was the squealing of tires doing a fast one-eighty behind him. They were coming back, this time with two of them hanging out the driver’s side windows closest to where he was running, driving on the wrong side, *his* side of the street.”

“Looking over his shoulder, he had a choice: Show them he wasn’t afraid, which would have been faking it, or run off the street between the houses, maybe look for some people who might be up to pound on their door. Figuring this was no time to

pretend to be cool, and without anyone around to impress, he picked up speed and headed for the curb, thinking he should turn off his wrist band. In case they stopped and chased after him, he'd be harder to find."

"Probably just some teenagers who've had a few too many beers," he said to himself, doing his best to rationalize away the fear he wasn't accustomed to feeling. "Nothing to worry about."

"Hey!" he heard someone shout from the car, "Eat this, 'Mr. Asshole.'!! ...POP. POP, POP!"

"It was the sound of something he'd never even written about, the sound of something he'd only heard in the movies and on TV, and not at all what he expected. For a second, he didn't even understand why he was falling to the sidewalk, ricocheting off a tree that was near the curb, thinking he had tripped, not feeling any pain or other sensation that would have told him the awful truth, that that popping sound might be the last he'd ever... hear."

"Nahhh. Way too dramatic. ...Heh, heh, whooo. Heh, heh, whooo."

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Mind Over Maury

A short-short story about a couple using a little tech to tweak the perfect marriage.



That's Maury on the right and his best friend George watching their alma mater coming from behind.

By Les Cohen

08. Mind Over Maury

How I learned to stop complaining and love ESPN.

“Hey, Sue.” It was Saturday morning, around 11. Maury was just coming back from Home Depot – which is *“how doers get more done”* according to their corporate slogan – with a half a dozen or so plastic bags filled with what he needed for the weekend’s projects around the house.

Sue had been friends with his wife, Doris, since college, a bridesmaid at their wedding 22 years ago. She had walked the few blocks from her house in their suburb to visit. The weather was perfect this early fall morning, cool, but not so much that they couldn’t have their coffee around the small table on the porch that wrapped around the front of Maury’s house. He was a little overweight, but still the same pleasantly good-looking guy Doris had married, quick to smile, slow to get angry, devoted and attentive to his wife and children, especially lately.

“Hi, Maury,” Sue smiled back at him, sitting sideways, one leg tucked under the other on the cushion on one of their wicker chairs, warming her hands around the fresh cup of coffee Doris had been pouring for her when Maury walked up the path from their driveway.

“Hi, honey,” Doris put the coffee pot back on the table, and was slouching back into her chair, crossing her feet on their way back to the ottoman in front of her. “What have you got there?”

“Everything I need to clear up the last few items on your list,” he responded without the slightest trace of sarcasm. “Am I the perfect husband or what?” The truth is, he was, at least recently, including in the bed department to Doris’ pleasant surprise, and in every other respect.

“...or what,” she responded warmly, kidding him with her smile. “You need help?” Doris started to get up, watching Maury struggle to hold the screen door open with his left foot while opening the front door with his right hand, the bags he was holding now dangling from his wrist.

“No, no. I’m fine.” And so she stayed where she was, waiting until she heard their door chunk shut before resuming her conversation with Sue.

“Wow,” Sue couldn’t help but notice, “what’s happened to him? I didn’t think Maury did stuff around the house, or anywhere for that matter...”

“...particularly,” Doris finished Sue’s sentence for her, “since he got that widescreen and added all those ESPN hi-def channels to our cable service.”

“So, what did you do,” Sue asked her, pretending to suggest with her twice-raised eyebrows that it might have been something sexual, “to get his ass off the couch in your family room? ...Something maybe I can do for Bob?”

Laughing as she sipped on her favorite, oversized cup, Doris couldn't wait to share her secret. “No, nothing like that, sad to say. It was, uh... Well, actually, I was going to the bathroom a few weeks ago, hiding out from the kids, fuming at Maury for ignoring them and me to watch some college game he couldn't care less about.” Doris stopped for a moment, sat up and leaned forward toward Sue to talk to her more quietly, face to face. “So, I'm sitting there fumbling through the stack of magazines in the basket, and I come across one of Maury's Popular Sciences from a few months ago. I figure, what the hell, I'm tired of reading catalogs anyway...”

“I know, there's nothing in any of them worth buying, and the models are beginning to look like children. Just pisses me off.”

“My point exactly, so I pick it up and start thumbing through the pages. It's sort of interesting, but I was just killing time until I get to the back where they have all these little classified ads, everything from Viagra to kits for making personal helicopters, stuff like that, and then this one little ad catches my eye.” She paused for dramatic effect, playing with her friend, taking a moment's break for a gulp of coffee.

“Come on, already,” Sue demanded, having fun being excited, “What was it?”

“It was this little ad for something called ‘Mindset,’ you know like a TV set gadget for your head. ‘Changing the way people think.’ was all it said, and a website. ...I don't know. It stuck in my head for the rest of the afternoon so, what the hell, I went there.”

“So, what's it do?”

“It's what they call a ‘smart card,’ like a credit card, but it's programmable, that goes into a slot on the back of your cable box. Take a look. I didn't even know there was one.”

“One what?”

“A slot, for the card, in the back of your cable box.”

“And what's any of this have to do with Maury?”

“Listen, it's simple.” Doris paused as if to give Sue time to write down what she was about to say. “...You put the smart card in your laptop and run the software that lets you program one or more messages, just a few words, that the card will play every once and a while, every so many frames. It happens so fast, the person watching doesn't have a conscious memory of having read it – and you can program it to run on only certain channels...”

“Like ESPN!” they sat back and said simultaneously, nodding their heads slightly up and down.

"It's what they call," Sue recognized the process from some book on marketing and psychology she'd read once, "subliminal advertising, isn't it?"

Doris smiled back at her in agreement.

"... 'subliminal' because it affects the subconscious without the person watching knowing it. They tried an experiment once in movie theaters to see if they could get people to buy more Coke and popcorn. Apparently, it worked so well, they made it illegal. ...Isn't it illegal?"

"Well, yes and no," Doris was hedging. "The manual that came with it said it was illegal to use on other people without their knowing it, but..."

"Honey..." It was Maury, surprising them at the front door to ask a quick question. "Where did you put the shade you bought for our bathroom window?"

"It's around the corner, in the bag leaning up against the coat stand."

"Great. Sorry to interrupt." And he was gone, the front door chunking behind him again.

"...According to the manual, it's meant for personal use, you know, for people who want to stop smoking or suppress their appetite for snacking while they watch TV. ...But I figured, why not give it shot."

"And you programmed it to tell Maury what?"

"A couple of things. That I was amazing, and that he should do whatever I asked him to do, and love doing it." She stopped to chug the last few drops in her cup. "...It took a week or so, but then it started to work, and just keeps getting better."

"Unbelievable," and then Sue laughed, almost squealing with excitement, "and I want one!!"

"Come on. Let's get out of here," Doris checked her watch and stood up. I'll get my pocketbook and keys. They're right inside on the hook." Pushing open the front door, she reached to her right to get what she needed, "Maury!" she shouted to him. "Sue and I are going to get some lunch and catch the 2 o'clock show. See you later."

"Have a good time," he shouted back to her. "I'll be done with all this before you get back." And she turned, pulling the heavy wooden door behind her, leaving it for the screen door to take care of itself.

An hour or so later, Maury's buddy, George, rapped on the sliding glass door to their walkout basement. Peering over his shoulder from where he was sitting on the couch in front of the widescreen TV, Maury waved to his friend to come inside. On the wall, huge, almost life-size football players were running across the screen. "Grab a beer, this is getting good," which George did, plopping himself down in the overstuffed chair where he always sat, reaching over the arm of the couch to grab a handful of popcorn, dropping only a few kernels on the way to his mouth.

“Where’s Doris?” George asked without looking at his friend, his eyes fixed on the action in front of him.

“Out for the afternoon with Sue.”

“Does she know?”

“No. Never should have asked me to clean up the basement. Wouldn’t have found it if I hadn’t been vacuuming behind the cable box.”

“Can’t blame her.” George understood from his own wife’s constant complaining.

“Nah.”

“So, you’ve reprogrammed it?”

Smiling, Maury took a rare moment to turn away from the screen. “Let just say I wouldn’t watch Oprah down here if I were you ...and the sex has never been better.”

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Dream a Little Dream of Me

**A short-short story about a young woman
finding her way back to reality.**



By Les Cohen

09. "Dream a little dream of me."

The title is from the lyrics by Gus Kahn.

"Bobby?" As tiny as their apartment was, there were times when they couldn't see each other. "Bobby, where are you?!" She shouted, struggling with one hand to dump their bedroom trashcan into the big garbage bag she was holding in her other, and do it in the less than 18" they had between that one side of their bed and the wall with the window to the fire escape.

"Hi, Dorothy." It was the shrill, instant headache, unforgivingly cheerful voice of her neighbor, the older lady that lived on her same floor, but in the building that backed up against theirs.

"Hi, Mrs. Donnelly," she answered reluctantly, pausing a second to look over rather than feeling bad the rest of the night for having ignored her. "How," she thought to herself, "could someone that nice be so...?" "It's cold out," Dorothy said out loud this time, "shouldn't you close your window?"

"You've got yours open." She was annoying alright, but not stupid.

"You're right, Mrs. Donnelly. What was I thinking? ...Good night now," and Dorothy reached up to pull the lower half of the window down, turning the lock and waving goodbye with a quick back and forth motion of her hand. " ... Bobby!"

"What?!" came the muffled, frustrated voice of her husband from behind the pocket door at the end of their kitchen, "I'm in the bathroom. Give me a break."

"I'm taking the trash out."

"Fine, fine, fine," he responded with almost complete disinterest, followed by the sounds of his turning the page and then refolding the front section of the morning's Times that he was just getting around to reading.

"Ummmh." She was strong for being only five foot three, but the old metal door to their apartment, made heavier by more than a hundred years of sloppy paint, always took her best effort. Somehow the grunt seemed to help. "I'll be right back," she mumbled, not caring to make herself heard over the banging shut of the door behind her. Instinctively, she patted the right front pocket of her jeans to make sure she had her key, the garbage bag she was carrying brushing up against the plaster wall of their narrow hallway.

Five flights down and around the marble steps of the converted tenement where they lived, past the building mailbox, and she was almost at the door to the side alley. Outside there was a platform and two steps down to where the trash cans and, yes, an occasional rat would be waiting. But these were good, West Village rats, bohemian and more friendly than most in the city, so she liked to think, that fortunately she had only the occasional pleasure of meeting.

She took out the garbage every night after dinner, but tonight would be different. Tonight, coming around the corner past the mailboxes, in the dim light from the high ceiling above her, on the small dirty white tiles just ahead of where she was walking, there was something dark on the floor. Slowly letting down the bag of garbage she was holding, she bent over, not wanting to kneel down. Leaning forward, it was... it was.. "Blood?" she whispered calmly, at first, until the almost academic nature of her investigation was interrupted by the "chunk" of the door to the alley a few feet in front of her.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered nervously. "There must have been someone there," she thought to herself. And then something else caught her attention. To her right, she extended her own hand to touch the red whatever smeared as if someone had pressed his, maybe her hand against the wall on the way down to the floor. "Someone's been hurt," she said softly. And then turning her hand slowly to see her palm, a wave of fear unlike anything she had ever imagined finally hit her.

"BOBBEEEE!!!!" Dorothy turned to run up the five flights back to her apartment. "BOBBEEEE!!" she kept shouting, running as fast as she could, holding her blood-stained hand away from her and off the railing.

"What?! What's wrong," he rolled and sat up on his side of their bed. "What is it?" But then he knew, seeing her sitting up, staring at the palm of her right hand, her face contorted with fear, her chest heaving as it fought to catch the breath she didn't really need to take. "Come on," he said, reaching around and pulling her toward him. "It's just a dream, the same dream you keep having. ...It's not real. It's not real, honey."

It took what seemed to be forever, but she finally calmed down and fell back to sleep, lying there, her head against his chest, his arms still around her.

"Mr. Cooper? ...Mr. Cooper?"

"Yes, Doctor. Sorry, I..."

"It's okay. You've been here with her for two days now. I'm sorry I had wake you, but I'm getting out of here for the night and didn't want to leave without giving you an update."

"So how's she doing, Doctor?" Bobby asked, getting up from the chair by the window where he had finally fallen asleep, exhausted to the point of shaking when he talked.

"Why isn't she conscious yet? Shouldn't she..."

"Hold on. I think she's going to be okay. Actually, physically, she appears to be recovering well from the surgery."

"Then why isn't she..."

“Listen to me,” he responded, doing his best to calm Bobby down. “Think about it... She goes down to take out the trash, like she does every night, but this time she interrupts some spaced out druggie who’d apparently come in through the side door, the police aren’t sure why. Maybe to break into one of the apartments. He panics and... and he shoots her. That kind of trauma does things to your head. If one of your neighbors hadn’t heard the shot, she could have died, could have bled to death, but she didn’t. ...Listen to me. She’s going to be okay. This tossing you see, this squinting and anxiety you see in her face... She’s fighting on one hand to wake up, but on the other to stay under, to dream it away... to deny the reality of what’s happened to her.”

“When do you...”

“I don’t know, Bobby. You sit by the bed like you’ve been doing. Hold her hand. Talk to her. Most of all, let her hear your voice. ...Reassure her that you’re both going to be alright.”

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The Fly and the Blonde

**A short-short story about a young man
on the verge of discovery.**



By Les Cohen

10. Business Management 213

"The Fly And The Blonde"

"Mis-ter Conner?" It was the always skeptical, deliberate voice of Professor Weinberg, looking up from the class chart – with pictures, no less – that he kept as the blotter on his lectern. If you were late for his Tuesday 8 AM class or, heaven forbid, missing, he knew it. If you were the least bit unprepared, he would sense it and pounce. Unlike many of the other faculty in the Business Management program, Jacob Weinberg was no career academic, having built and made a fortune in his own business before retiring to write and teach. His students both respected and feared him, wanting to be in his class just slightly more than they didn't. It was always a gut-wrenching, but nonetheless intellectually stimulating experience.

Eighteen rows up, just left of center from Weinberg's point of view, Bobby Conner rolled his pen repeatedly through and over the fingers of his right hand. It was something he did automatically when he was fighting the prospect of a losing battle with the attention and focus a Socratic method lecturer like Weinberg demanded. It wasn't a lack of interest, but a lack of sleep that was the problem.

Sitting next to him, on his right, was Shelly, the girl from Bobby's dorm he seldom noticed, or so it seemed to her. No makeup, because she didn't need any and wouldn't have troubled to put it on if she did. Two different color t-shirts – one short- and the under-one long-sleeve – and jeans so comfortable she may have slept in them. Her light blonde shoulder length hair going this way and that, held recklessly behind her with an oversized hair clip she grabbed on the way out to class, rushing to get to class on time. Glancing at the door next to hers on her way out of the dorm, she considered knocking, which would have been the friendly thing to do, but shied away, deciding instead to look forward to seeing him in class.

She was gorgeous, in a completely unpretentious way, if only Bobby would pay attention. But his mind, more often than not, was somewhere else.

Dressed in a perfectly cut business suit and just the right tie – so he was thinking at daydream speed that moment – a small, soft leather portfolio under his arm, Bobby's alter ego of the future careened around the floor-to-ceiling marble to the bank of elevators just off the lobby of the building where he worked. Mr. Conner was on his way up, physically and otherwise, to the senior executive conference room where he was about to make a company- and career-making presentation.

It was crowded, but not so much that he missed seeing the knockout blonde from "Acquisitions" in the navy-blue silk blouse that wouldn't quit. She was the company babe that every male, and some of the women, in the office wanted, but who was somehow saving herself for him. A couple of "Excuse me." polite smiles and he was standing in front of her, she with her back to the corner of the polished mahogany-

paneled elevator, he facing her, his back to the door and everyone else. They had flirted around the idea of going out, but had never actually done it.

“Big meeting?” she asked him, so close he could feel her breath on his face.

“Huge,” he responded without the least hint of nervousness.

“Yeah,” she said softly, taking a step, if that was possible, even closer toward him to whisper in his ear, “well your fly’s down.”

“No it’s not.” He was surprised, but didn’t look down, unwilling and unable to stop staring at her face for even a moment, not the least bit shaken by what she said. “How was it possible,” he thought to himself, “that every luminescent hair landed just right no matter how quickly or slowly she turned her head? Could lipstick be any more red? A mouth any more inviting?”

“Wanna bet?” Smiling, her eyes glued to his, she reached down, one hand on and around his belt, the other reaching for the metal tag which was now at the bottom of his zipper, pulling it up way too slowly for any normal, soon-to-be-promoted Vice President to handle.

Her business done, it took all the concentration he had to say, “Thanks. ...Maybe I can return the favor,” when his daydream was abruptly interrupted.

“Bobby!” It was Shelly.

Turning his head slowly toward her, he was struck by how familiar she looked. “A little makeup, different clothes maybe...,” he thought to himself. “She’d have to do something with her hair...”

“Bobby!,” she rubbed his arm gently, whispering his name again, this time as loud as she could get away with.

“Mis-ter Conner?!”

“What? ...Yes, Sir.” Bobby was startled, but quickly got himself under control, the drowsiness in his eyes and demeanor pushed instantly aside by the intensity of his mind bringing itself on-line.

“Mr. Conner, do you or do you not have an opinion about the case study we’re currently discussing?”

Instinctively, Bobby began to rise to his feet. It wasn’t the college rule, but Professor Weinberg insisted on it, very “old school” and proud of it, even while Shelly was pulling on his shirt as if to hold him down.

Still whispering, she did her best to warn him, “Your fly’ssssss down.” Too late. He was up, and it was obvious.

Unfazed, Bobby, his voice confident and unshaken, said, “Pardon me,” reaching down, casually, to pull up his zipper as if it was absolutely no big deal. “Sorry. I was up late

last night reviewing this study and two others that were similar, and obviously dressed a bit too quickly rather than risk being late.”

“Ahhh, bullshit!” one of his friends fake-sneezed from the back of the lecture hall.

Bobby then spent the next two minutes going right to the heart of the case study with impressive detail and insight.

“Sur-pris-ing-ly astute, Mr. Conner,” Professor Weinberg congratulated him reluctantly. “Try to get dressed more carefully next time, *before* you get to class.”

“Yes, sir,” Bobby responded almost inaudibly as he sat back down.

Shelly looked up at him, mostly with her eyes, with wonder at what he’d just managed to pull off. Moving her left hand in front of her mouth, she waited a few seconds to talk until another student was busy raising some obscure and irrelevant point. “Nice save.” She couldn’t help but smile. “You guys didn’t finish playing poker last night until after midnight. ...You do know I live next door, don’t you?”

“Right next door?” he whispered back, playing with her. There are, he was just beginning to realize, some people you get to meet for the first time more than once. And then to explain how he’d managed to be so well-prepared, “I checked out some stuff over the weekend.” Turning her way, about to follow up with some smart, maybe snide remark, he changed his mind – something about her eyes he hadn’t noticed before, feeling the touch of her breath on his face.

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