

Georgie Steps Out

All George had to do was pick up the phone. But he only stared at the leaking kitchen faucet—about a drop every twelve or fourteen seconds, he surmised—then at the receiver hanging on the wall, and instead of simply lifting it and punching the number he hurried out the back door, crept tentatively toward the valve, and shut off water to the whole house, just to keep the drip at bay.

Whom to call?

In the Yellow Pages plumbers abound. George knew this. But which? Some boasted specialties in drains, but *this* was no clog. And what of those who knew not only water but heat? Was there some secret advantage?

Of course.

Call Jeri.

“Hello-o?” Jeri answered, making a double syllable of the O. George loved the sound of her greeting, loved most everything about her—that she *understood* the mechanical world, the mysteries of harnessing water and heat and air; the way she looked, her cropped bleached cut, soccer-player body, unshaven pits; the sound of her barroom voice.

“It’s me. George?”

“Hey, George. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Really...”

“*George?*”

“I mean. It’s just—”

“Come on.”

“It’s not a big problem.”

“You need help changing your oil again?”

Oh, no, he thought: so complex. So complex...

That was how they’d become acquainted, a conversation about automotive maintenance that had dropped from the sky so fortuitously that George did not believe it could be happening. It was the day they would fire him from the job at the construction company where he’d worked in the office, answering the phone, filing prints and mailing out proposals. But he’d found himself compelled to accomplish these tasks simultaneously, and could neither justify neglecting one for another nor figure what to do with the receiver in his right hand and a permit application in his left.

The challenge had plagued George his entire life, when he recalled sitting in the kindergarten yard, hiding inside the hollow well of a large play structure, the other children in a circle on the grass rolling a large inflated ball randomly back and forth; rolling the ball had not confounded George, but when he tried it previously had felt daunted by the simple decision of to whom he should roll.

Teachers voiced concerns to school counselors, who spoke to George's parents, who seemed not the least bit perturbed; George, had always been George, and Mom and Dad treated him and his proclivities with uncommon ease. But they relented, allowing various scholastic and psychological professionals to evaluate their son, all to unequivocally explain his behavior. Surely, the experts believed, he was beset by Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, perhaps Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, was possibly borderline Autistic; of course they'd assumed to discover at *least* a low IQ. But to their chagrin the experts found that any of these conclusions proved mostly unfounded. Yes, George exhibited obsessive traits—preferring his pens and pencils on opposite sides of his desk—but not much more than the average person. George did not display the impulsivity or inattention of AD/HD; in fact, they characterized his behavior as *hyper*-attentive. George was certainly shy, but failed to display the debilitating lack of social skills and poor language development of an autistic child. And, as if in a final stroke of unwitting triumph, George scored an IQ of 163: technically, genius.

What they did finally understand about George was that, given a singular task and the quiet concentration needed to accomplish it, he would solve the problem, thoroughly and correctly. When he progressed in school, his teachers discovered that he possessed an aptitude in mathematics—appeared to enjoy the discipline—and solved single equations with alacrity. But administered a test with multiple equations, George could not, no matter how explicit the directions, decide which problem to solve first, their numbered succession completely irrelevant.

These drawbacks weren't why they fired him from the construction company, though; he was well-liked by the entire staff. When he stared at a ringing phone and back at the file in his hands, over and over, it had become almost endearing to the crew, whose sun-hewn faces and burly demeanors could not have contrasted more widely with George's soft, slight, hesitant self; they only grinned and shook their heads, took the overflow calls. He would have remained the company's odd, flawed administrator, if he could only have found a way to arrive at work on time, some days at all.

On that brutal August afternoon with the air conditioning down and all the HVAC techs on job sites, he watched out the window as Jeri abandoned the down unit and returned to the shop interior.

"Get a couple fans going, George. This is gonna take a while."

She leaned over a set of schematics, arms straight and hands planted flat and firm on the table, and George watched a rivulet of sweat seep from her underarm, lace down an auburn tendril to disappear beneath her tank top. Not much excited George, but when he watched her there the quick vision of those straight, tawny arms coaxed a sensation that made him jump and rise, hurrying to the water cooler for a cup.

"You okay, Georgie?"

"Fine." The water ached ice-cold on his teeth.

Jeri returned to the schematics and George finished his cup, peered through the slits in the Venetian blinds at the molten parking lot. Then Dave, the owner, poked his head through the open office door and asked if George could please, just for a few minutes, come on in.

Doom-ridden thoughts of being fired had often danced in his mind, and he'd imagined languishing in tatters on the street, sore from sitting on the cold concrete, begging change from the knees of passersby. But when it happened Dave simply sighed from across the desk, even looked a little sad, said it just wasn't working out, and he'd be happy to provide a reference when George needed one. Then Dave stood and handed George an envelope, squeezed his shoulder like a friend, and said good luck.

"Whatcha got there, George?" Jeri spoke absently, one eye on the drawings. "That for me?"

"No."

George walked to the exit door, one step from the blanketing heat.

"It's for me."

It took some time, but Jeri finally convinced him to wait for her at the tavern down the block until 3:30—quitting time. George sat in the unfamiliar confines, hunched over the dark, padded edge of the bar drinking Diet Coke and gorging from a bowl of Chex Mix. He didn't remember the last time he'd eaten, not that he couldn't have made something, just that it was always such a daunting process, full of conflicting choices, avoided until he could no longer stand the acid churning in his stomach.

"I'll have a draft, Hank," Jeri belted in a burnished alto. George looked up and saw her in the back-bar mirror striding nearer, their contrasted images more than palpable to him, and as he gazed upon her reflection, rendered in such extreme proximity to his own, he felt behind his eyes the pressure and sting of pent up tears.

When he turned to his left, she was actually there.

“I talked to Dave, but... I’m sorry, George.”

“It’s all right.”

“How come you were late so many times?”

“My car.”

“What’s up?”

“It needs... I have to...”

“What?”

“Oil.”

“Oil?”

“Yes.”

“What about it?”

“It’s spent. Probably burned. You explained to me once—you were very emphatic about the issues, though I fecklessly ignored them—about how viscosity breaks down, and that valves can potentially—”

“George. Are you telling me you need an oil change?”

George nodded.

“Jiffy-Lube! Twenty minutes.”

“Oh, *no*.”

“How you been getting to work?”

“I walk.”

“Where from?”

“West Central.”

“By the Greyhound station?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“That must be five miles!”

“Six.”

“Oh, Georgie...”

He watched Jeri down her beer, plant the empty mug on the bar with a resolute *clunk*, then turn toward him.

“Come on.” She tugged his arm.

“Where?”

“To change your oil.”

He’d allowed himself fantasies, of course, followed by stern self-admonishment; she was a co-worker, after all, and was now even offering the supportive assistance that could solidify friendship.

“Wow, that’s an original, Georgie.” Jeri leaned out the window of her pickup and gazed at the ‘74 Dart.

“My dad’s.”

“I believe it. So, where’s your parents?”

“Gone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, George.”

“No! I mean, gone, as in bought a new car. Packed and left for Palm Springs. Better for their health.”

“Arthritis?”

“Etcetera.”

“And they left you the Dart *and* the house? Sweet!”

George watched Jeri jump from the cab of her pickup and hoist a tool belt over her shoulder, then lean into the bed and with both hands extract a frame-like device made of wooden two-by-eights.

“First thing’s you got to make sure to center her on the ramp. Always easier to do with a buddy.”

Buddy. George smiled.

Jeri directed George, who stood in front of the car and gave hand-signal adjustments while focusing on the rails of the homemade ramp. This process took far longer than it should have because if George determined that the wheels were off center by a fraction he’d direct Jeri to back up and begin the entire approach all over again.

From under the belly of the car Jeri instructed George on the proper procedure, and while he acknowledged the sturdy sounds of “oil pan” and “drainage bolt” and “filter wrench” with exuberant if feigned engagement, all he could see, all his consciousness could absorb, were the ropes of Jeri’s arms—the glint of her sweat-veiled muscles—bare from the shoulders down.

A prime role in George's ultimate choice of whom to call for plumbing help: another plumber would have charged actual money, and George had none to speak of since what little he earned went bills, the occasional Quick-Stop meal (the durable consistency of corn dogs comforted him) and the continued indulgence in a preoccupation greater perhaps to the one he held for Jeri.

"Always remember," Jeri began, "if you're gonna use channel-locks on chrome, wrap a rag around the fitting so you don't scratch the finish."

George nodded, fully aware that he would never use such a device on anything, the luster of its finish notwithstanding. After watching Jeri replace the O-ring and re-tighten the aerator—and with great trepidation wait while she opened the main water valve—George stared at the kitchen faucet.

"Go ahead, George. It's okay now."

And with the assurance he opened the cold-water side, then the hot, then both simultaneously, shut each respectively and acknowledged from the dry result that it was, indeed, okay. At least for a few savored seconds, for when he finished relishing the efficacy of Jeri's repair George turned and realized that she still stood in the middle of his kitchen and he hadn't the slightest inkling on earth what to do.

Not that he hadn't imagined her there, she in his home, he in her life: holding the flashlight while she searched the panel for a tripped breaker; securing the ladder with both hands when she reached the high rungs; bringing her something cold to drink on a hot day in the yard.

But he was so elated when she'd agreed to help with the leaky faucet, more so when she'd actually shown up, that George had simply neglected to think things through this far.

After a few awkward moments—George leaning wide-eyed against the counter watching Jeri smile at him—he realized two things: 1) it *was* a hot day, and, 2) despite that they were not *in* the yard, nor had Jeri been *doing* yard work, and though it was possible that she did *not* indulge in such things, George determined it acceptable to offer a refreshment.

“Diet Coke?”

“Sure.” Jeri smiled even wider, then added, motioning toward the chair next to the kitchen table, “May I?”

“Oh!” George exclaimed, “Of course! How could I have—”

“George?”

“Yes?”

“It's okay. But that Coke sure would taste good.”

He'd succeeded in fetching the sodas, glasses filled with thick, square ice cubes (George could not abide the random shapes of bagged ice), even opened Jeri's and poured her a glass; he smiled at this particular triumph.

“What're those?” Jeri pointed at a half dozen of what appeared to be some sort of carrying cases lined next to one another at the base of the kitchen wall. George's mind raced; he'd not envisioned this, but reasoned that if by some act of grace Jeri should want to share future Diet Cokes, George would sooner or later have to reveal the cases' contents. So he

retrieved one and unzipped the lid, reached inside and extracted a small intricate and colorful object, placing it on the table in front of Jeri.

She squinted at the tiny figure. “Who painted him?”

“I, um... I...” George said, paused, then continued: “I.”

He pulled more figures from the case and set them in particular order on the table.

“You painted these yourself? You’re shittin’ me.”

“Uh...no.”

“George, these are *amazing!*”

“Well... They’re miniatures.”

“So, how long does it take to paint ‘em?”

“That one? Forty-six... No, wait.” He ciphered a computation in the air with his finger.

“Fifty-two.”

“Fifty-two?”

“Hours.”

George displayed for Jeri the majority of his collection, kept in a catacomb of tiny plastic enclosures fit snugly into the pliant yet sturdy nylon carriers that looked more befitting the gear of a Special Forces commando.

“There must be dozens,” Jeri said.

“Hundreds.”

One by one George extracted the tiny figurines, all of a warlike ilk, though either so ancient-looking or so extra-terrestrial that their appearances nearly obscured their purpose. Some

stood in perpetual attention, awaiting the scrutiny of a commanding officer; others flew in eternal frozen attack, mouths forever agape, arms, legs and weapons molded in mid-motion that would never progress.

“So, you just paint ‘em and put ‘em away?”

“No! They’re for the *game*.”

“What game?”

George handed Jeri an inch-thick hardcover volume with dark glossy veneer. The cover boasted clashing minions akin to George’s figurines. Jeri opened the book in the middle and scanned wide-eyed at the columns of tight paragraphs, words of too-small font, complex rules and indecipherable tables of numbers and arcane terms.

Though it may seem a contradiction, George’s eccentricities and subsequent inabilities had never kept him from poring over the game’s guidebooks, page after grim page, over and over, until he could recall at will every guideline of combat, every nuance of magic, all the inner workings of the dangerous fantasy world that framed the game; he’d been reading and re-reading the guide books for over two decades.

“So, this is like the rule book? Looks real hard.”

George smiled a close-lipped smile and swept an open, upturned palm toward the bookshelf behind him; he watched Jeri follow his hand and gaze at the dozens of books, differing only by ascending volume numbers emblazoned on successive spines from the tome Jeri held in hand.

“You’re telling me you need to know all those, too?”

George felt the warm satisfaction that only manifested in his being when he'd completely transcended the verbal.

"I think I'll stick to looking at 'em," Jeri said.

"My latest." George reached into one of the cavernous cases and extracted an inch-high captain of the guard, stance wide and firm and holding a purple-plumed helmet in one hand and in the other a brutal halberd butted into the ground. A crimson sash wrapped his tiny armored body and the white of his pinpoint eyes beamed a savage intensity.

"So, who do you play with?"

"Players at the game store. Some possess very advanced skills."

"That's cool, George. I never knew you had friends."

"Not friends." George punctuated the distinction: "*Opponents.*"

"Oh."

"How is your Diet Coke?"

"Good."

"Would you like more ice? I prefer the cubes as they tend to maintain symmetry and stem the problem of melting."

"George, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes?" George smiled, watched Jeri avert her eyes, then return her gaze toward his own.

"Do you have any friends?"

George sat still, his expression unchanged. He watched the wrinkles on Jeri's face transform from a look of uneasy concern to a smooth flush of exuberance.

“Listen, I’m having a barbecue next Saturday. You’ll know people. From the crew at work. And they’d love to see you. They ask about you all the time.”

George’s face contorted. “They fired me! They think I’m a fool!”

“No, George, no one thinks that. Dave just asked about you the other day, if you were working yet and stuff.”

George envisioned the confusion of the crowd, the daunting task of interaction. How would he know what to say? Whom to speak to? When? About what? He saw himself where he always ended in a crowd: a forgotten corner, staring like a hidden observer, someone others passed as if he weren’t there at all. But he saw another image: Jeri, speaking to him, smiling at him, allowing her arm to brush his.

“Well,” George determined, “I *will* have to check my schedule.”

All week George thought of nothing but the barbecue. He’d asked what he could bring, thought that beer would be appropriate even though he preferred Diet Coke, but Jeri had told him that an entire keg of beer would be present, and George thought this fascinating and curious since he’d never been around a keg of anything, and he wondered if it were possible to obtain a keg of Diet Coke.

He barely ate, hardly slept, slipping between the elation of spending time with Jeri and the anxiety of interacting with a band of strangers. Friday night he went to the game store, intent on slaughter. And slaughter he did, using every tactic and evasion, luring his opponent into a final ambush that lay waste to his every minion; afterward, the teenaged kid looked at George

and said, “Dude, that’s fucked up,” but George felt no remorse, secure in the knowledge that his adversary would spend the next week poring over strategy to plot revenge.

Exhausted from battle, George slept till dawn.

Saturday morning.

The Day of the Barbecue.

He rose and showered, dressed in his best shirt and pants, then re-thought the wardrobe decision since he assumed people who went to barbecues wore shorts, maybe even sandals. But George owned neither. So, he compromised with a gaming tee shirt, but when he looked in the mirror at the blood-spattered warriors and decapitated troll he deferred to the dress shirt, rolled up the sleeves and left the collar open. He took a cold twelve-pack of Diet Coke from the fridge and grabbed his keys. The problem being that it was now six-thirty in the morning. The barbecue would not commence for another seven and one-half hours.

He returned the twelve-pack to the fridge, then decided to *have* a Diet Coke, opened the door, plucked a can and pushed open the tab. The soda exploded like a chilled grenade, spraying George’s shirt. He panicked and dropped the can, and it spun like a Chinese firework, soaking his pants.

He put on sweats and a tee shirt and drove to the Laundromat, saw that it did not open until ten, returned home and resolved to hand-wash. He poured detergent into the kitchen sink and ran water until the sink held a head of suds, then submerged his soiled garments and let them soak, rubbing them furiously together before rinsing. The rinsing took a very long time since

he'd used far too much detergent. And then there was the problem of drying. He hung his pants and shirt over the shower curtain rod: three hours later, still soaked.

He tried the railing of his back porch, hoping that the sun and wind would do the trick, but the breeze swept both pants and shirt into an alleyway puddle. George noticed his clothes gone after another two hours, sufficient time for automobile tires to have made their marks. Dejected, he tried another soak-and-scrub, but knew he had no time to air-dry. He turned the oven on and hung pants and shirt over the open door, returning to the kitchen table where he could both monitor the drying clothes and continue to paint.

The smoke alarm's shriek caused George to throw paintbrush and figure into the air. He leapt toward the oven, grabbed the smoking garments and threw them into the sink, running cold water full bore. And after he'd aired out the house and shut off the faucet, George realized two things: 1) that it was now two o'clock—the time that the barbecue was to begin—and, 2) the drip from the kitchen faucet had returned. He concluded that it had worsened, estimating a drop every seven to nine seconds, then shook his head, wondering how he could have ruined Jeri's work.

I'll wear a GenCon tee shirt instead. It's older, but no blood...

By two-forty-five George had finished ironing the tee shirt. In a stroke of ingenuity he'd cut the singed, damp pant legs from his khakis and fashioned a not unacceptable pair of shorts. But while doing so he envisioned the already crowded barbecue, the throng of strangers and former co-workers, others vying for Jeri's attention. He put the shirt on and sat back at the kitchen table, deciding to fix the marred paint on the figurine and simply let the day fade as his

days always did; soon it would be six, nine, midnight, and George would still be lost in his painting, safe in his solitude.

The phone rang.

“Yes?”

“You’re not gonna stand me up, are you?”

“Oh, no! I was just...running late.”

“Okay, well folks are asking for you, so come on over.”

“I will.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“See you soon.”

George replaced the receiver on its base and smiled a close-lipped but genuine smile. He hurried to the bathroom mirror to check his appearance, returned to the fridge, extracted the twelve-pack, picked up his keys. When he opened the front door a thought occurred that could have trapped him inside for hours: *the oven*.

When he checked he found it still radiating heat. Though he turned the oven off, there was the matter of the drip, and George decided again to shut off the main valve and wait. But when he reached for the knob to the back door the phone rang again.

“Yes?”

“George, if you don’t leave right now I’m gonna come get you.”

“I left the oven on.”

“You baking?”

“No. Washing. And then the drip returned. And...and...”

George paused, because he had no idea how to explain, the myriad thoughts crashing through his mind making complete sense to him, but unable to form them into words. How could Jeri understand him? Why would she even want to? How on earth could someone so dynamic have the slightest inkling of attraction for someone like—

“George? Listen.” Jeri spoke slowly, seriously. “I want you to come to my barbecue. And so does everyone else. But, especially me.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So come on.”

Again he hung up and smiled. And checked the oven once more, and the kitchen, bathroom and living room windows, and made sure the iron was off, and unplugged his electric toothbrush’s base, and turned off all the light switches except for the porch light because that was for safety. When he’d slid his key into the front door lock the way he always did to guarantee he didn’t forget to secure the door but also make certain he didn’t leave his keys inside, he paused, stepped back into the house and re-checked everything he’d checked already, trying not to think of the crowd, the strangers...

Jeri.

Then George grabbed his twelve-pack of Diet Coke, and stepped out.