

Purchase Plan

by H. W. Moss

This would be their first dinner together, not exactly “a date,” Ben promised over the telephone when he called to ask her out. “But you never can tell.”

Marion accepted, although not too quickly. “Let me be sure ah haven’t a girl’s night out planned,” she said half joking, he hoped. She would give up the girls for him, wouldn’t she? “Kin ah have yer number and get rat back atya?” He was pleased when fifteen minutes later his cell phone rang. Her calendar was open.

They ordered from the menu and then their drinks arrived. Marion looked delighted as the waiter placed a full glass of red wine in front of her. “Why, thank you sir,” she said in over-polite solicitude. The waiter nodded in response, set Ben’s glass down, withdrew.

Ben sipped his scotch, placed the tumbler on the table cloth and said, “You know, I’m a sucker for a Southern accent. Where were you born, exactly?”

She was kittenish in her reply: “Atlanta. Which Northerners think is the deep south, but it’s just a shy mile from the north, y’know.” She pronounced it “nawth,” which he found both exotic and fascinating, but did not tell her that. He wanted to save it for when they were in bed, he confided to himself in anticipation of a post coital conversation involving her and a cigarette.

“Well, I think it’s cute. A soft Southern drawl. Where’d you go to school?” It surprised him to learn it was here in the City. “No kidding. Me too. Got my MBA at State, emphasis in marketing.”

Was that bragging, he thought, or was it subtle enough to sound like a fact of life he merely wanted to share with her? Got to be careful not to overplay his hand.

“You do have a nice car,” she said with what he took for sincerity. The Ford was left over from his failed marriage and spelled “family” in his mind.

“Too many miles on it,” he sipped his drink. “I intend to get a luxury car next time around.” Was he trying to impress her? “Not a Cadillac. Maybe a Lexus.”

She saluted this comment with her wine glass.

“Of course, I’ll have to refinance the house to do that, but what the hay. I have plenty of equity now that the divorce is final.”

This bit of information was pointedly meant to answer a question before she had a chance to ask. That settled the issue of his availability without making a fuss over it.

“How about you? You seeing anyone?” He saw the segue even if she did not.

“Not exactly,” she said as she let her lips hover at the edge of the wine glass before tilting up the stem. “I’m certainly single, as they say.” She batted her eyes to reinforce the statement.

He did not know if they said that or not, all he wanted was to move further into intimate personal information and was about to ask if she had any pets when she beat him to it with, “Where’s your house?” She asked this casually, as if almost disinterested in the response. But he wanted to impress her.

“On Rockledge in Squirrel Hill.”

The exact address could wait. Fact was, Squirrel Hill had become trendy even if Marion did not recognize the street name. He wondered exactly how old she was, knew better than to ask outright. Let her volunteer that. He did ask how long she had been working in retail (he had met her behind a counter at Macy’s while shopping for a new set of sheets, confused by thread counts and with no idea whether or not he had a queen

size or a full), but she demurred. Instead of stating the number of years she held up four fingers. By which he thought she meant four years and when he asked, she shook her head no.

“Four months.” She giggled. The wine could not have affected her so quickly, he thought. Just being playful which is a sign she likes me. The Grill and Drill was working, even if he had no clue where it was taking them. He reminded himself the evening was still young.

The food arrived and they ate not in silence, exactly, but neither were they conferees or intimates revealing innermost secrets. She picked at her fish sparingly, which he also recognized as a good sign: It meant she did not want him to think she was an over eater. He tried to go beyond small talk and she brightened whenever he broached a new topic for discussion.

He told her he liked spicy foods, that he could eat any chili with one exception. The homely habanera was the only hot pepper he avoided because, “The fire sticks to the inside of your mouth and nothing, I mean nothing washes it away.”

She asked if he had a favorite desert and he said pecan pie. And pecans, he liked pecans. And chocolate dipped pecans.

“As a matter of fact, anything pecan,” he said. “One day I ordered a five pound sack of ‘m roasted and salted over the Internet from some place in Louisiana called Priest Pecans. And they came right away. But you know what? They sold my name to musta been hundreds of mail order companies, to a mailing list and within a month I musta received a hundred damn catalogs on everything from fruitcake to lobster you could order

overnight. Caught in Chesapeake Bay today, on your plate in California tomorrow. I think you got two for seventy-five dollars.”

He saw he had her attention so he decided to confide in her. Ben explained how assiduous his refusal to receive unsolicited catalogs or junk mail. His typical response to unwanted mail was to drop it right back in the corner post box with several comments written on the outside. First, he scratched out his name and address, then discolored the bar code at the bottom which was the real means of postal delivery. He learned to do that the hard way when pamphlets kept returning to him even though his name and address were illegible. Using a wide black felt tip pen, he wrote along the top in the white space on the mailing label in big block letters: The Three R's -- REFUSED RETURN REMOVE.

The next phrase was his favorite, he told her. “I write ‘Obscene Material’ neatly spelled out. Then ‘Return to Sender’ and ‘Remove from List.’ As a final dig, I like to add ‘You Pay Postage Twice’ meaning when they send it out and when I send it back to them.”

If this failed to produce the desired result, namely that he never receive anything from them again, he explained how he had been reduced on several occasions to phoning toll free information.

“I learned long ago most large corporations have an eight hundred number. Once I locate that, I harangue them to remove me from their list immediately. All of them eventually agree to do so, but they invariably plead for my patience because it may take several months. But my name is usually removed.”

As a more recent precaution, he explained, whenever he was given a choice, he opted out of any information sharing. Although he could not prevent credit card companies from offering an ingenious variety of cheap, often tawdry gift ideas in their monthly billing, he could tell new accounts not to sell or give away his demographics and religiously offered incorrect information when asked over the phone or Internet for his name, address and telephone number. Usually he was Robert Ludlum who lived at 1313 Blue View Terrace in Oz and his phone number was that for long distance information.

She giggled at this last ploy. There was silence between them for a moment.

He asked and she told him what films she enjoyed, but admitted to taking guilty pleasure in horror movies. He mentally compared several titles on his own list and felt more in tune with her. Actually, his idea of what made a good movie experience was limited to the last one he attended while on another date. But when he told her he watched a lot of sports programs on television, weekends especially, she clapped her hands in glee.

“Me, too!”

The night was over before he realized it. No, she could not stay out for a night cap, “Because tomorrow’s a school day.” She would like to hear from him in the future and pecked him on the cheek when he dropped her off at her apartment building, the foyer door held open with her foot while she leaned forward and shook hands goodbye.

The first parcel arrived early, before he was finished with breakfast. He was seated at the island counter finishing his first cup of coffee dressed for work when the door bell rang.

“Hmmm,” he muttered at the uniformed delivery woman, “wasn’t expecting anything. Not Christmas. My birthday’s a while off.” She was not amused as he signed using the special plastic spatula she offered. Pulling the envelope tab as he walked back to the kitchen, he realized immediately it was a solicitation offer from the local Lexus dealership. Funny, he thought with a sardonic smile as he sat down, he had a real interest in the product, had talked about it last night. He was actually perusing the brochure and had just picked up a spoonful of cereal when the phone rang. The incoming was not a number he recognized. “Hello.”

“Howdy Hoss. This is Bubba Patel and ah jest wanted to take a minute to talk tah yew about our new low mortgage rates,” said a syrupy Southern voice.

Click.

Ben could not believe this. It was impossible that his cell phone had been invaded. How could they have his cell phone number? He paid to keep it unpublished. No one got his personal phone number without his express permission. As for his address, well, home ownership was public information. Nothing he could do about that. The city assessor gave out property tax information for free. All you had to do was go down to city hall and retrieve it.

As he lay the instrument down on the counter, it rang again. Again, a number unfamiliar to him. This time he listened in silence for several heartbeats before speaking which he hoped would throw the caller off guard. A female voice asked for Mr. Ben Webster.

“You have two seconds,” he at last said.

“Hah. Mah name is Jennifer Nilandrabora and ah have this wonderful luxury vehicle got two hunnert horses under the hood . . .” He did not allow her to finish the sentence.

Disgusted, he turned the phone off; he would pick up his calls later. He tilted the cereal bowl to his lips and drained the last of the milk before he grabbed his coat, straightened his tie and ran out the door to catch the N Judah.

That evening there were six separate failed delivery notices stuck on his front door. All had missed him, but he could call and have the packages brought back at a more convenient time. Somehow, he did not believe there would ever be a more convenient time for any of them.

When he opened his mail box it was stuffed to overflowing. There were catalogs describing hot sauces in varieties he had never imagined; fresh chilies that would be overnighted to him from the foreign climes where they were grown: Thailand, Mexico, India. Pecan pies were touted in page after glossy color page by a dozen different competing company brochures. If there were fifty ways to make pecan toffee, each was available. Overnight. Immediately. Complimentary tickets to local sporting events were offered if he would simply accept free offers to drive a BMW, Mercedes or fully loaded Honda. And there were so many different types of Scotch whisky on the market, every one represented by a letter marked urgent, it was entirely possible no other alcoholic beverage existed.

He was astounded by the sheer number of catalogs in the pile and searched for fifteen minutes before he realized the one piece of personal mail he received merely confirmed a dental appointment.

All of his careful elusiveness had changed somehow. He was buried in envelopes, certificates of authenticity and thick booklets, advertising brochures and sample packages. How could this have happened, practically over night?

Then it struck him. Marion. Obviously, she had been grilling him in order to submit information to the agency, the same agency to which he intended to offer up her name, address, personal history, her likes, dislikes, favorite foods, what brands of apparel she preferred and her entertainment habits.

He sat down at the familiar web site and began to fill out the submission form. He had her address and phone number, but he never did get her exact age. However, the ranges to choose from were wide enough for him to feel confidence with his selection. What was it she said was her favorite fashion wear? He looked over the list in search of a helpful reminder. Gucci! That was it. And she preferred red wine, but was it dry or sweet? Oh, yah, movies. Horror flicks.

Ben supplemented his income whenever possible by giving information to the agency. He received a small payment for completing the form, but his deal was bigger than that. Which was why he did not mind taking a young woman out for the evening, whether he scored or not. The agency gave him a percentage -- admittedly a small percentage but it all added up -- of whatever the girls bought from information he supplied.

Obviously Marion did the same. However, he did not believe she had been wily enough to cut as beneficial a deal for the products she had gleaned from him.

It was a shame he had not been more on his guard and perhaps lied about his likes and dislikes, his tony address and the foods he enjoyed. And he never should have ordered that scotch. He would simply have to be much more discreet in the future. In addition to blocking incoming phone calls, he could no longer give out his call back number.

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