

THE UNIVERSE HAS IT IN FOR HARRY

Tony Rogers

Flash
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HARRY AND SHERYL PASSED EACH OTHER on the stairs in the bed and breakfast. “I felt like I had known you all my life,” she told him later.

“Like we had grown up together in a small town. What are the odds?”

“It happens to me all the time,” she said.

“Falling in love in a bed and breakfast?”

“Letting good things happen, not forcing things.”

Harry wished he had some of her nonchalance, her sangfroid. He believed that the universe had singled him out for humiliation and ridicule. Sheryl pointed this out soon after they met. “You plan your every move. You flinch at what-ifs,” she said.

“I head bad things off before they happen. What’s wrong with that?”

“It must be exhausting. The energy you expend. Things work out for me.”

Harry regarded her, her auburn-tinged bangs, her unflinching eyes. “I don’t have your luck. If I wait for good things to happen, they don’t. Ever. And, on a note of self-pity, I don’t understand why they do for you.”

Sheryl reared back as if to suck air for a deep dive, then leaned forward conspiratorially. “Confidence, Harry. Fate knows I trust in it, so it rewards me.”

He marveled at how simple that was. He suggested they move in together faster than he normally asked a woman for a date. When she said yes, he had second thoughts. “Do you want to, or are you passing the buck?”

“I want to. I’m making a choice. This is a good thing.”

They leased a newly renovated railroad flat on the cusp of the slums. He only brought his easy chair and ottoman with him. He liked how she used potted plants to bring order to the front room, and he liked internalizing her routine—how long it took her to brush her teeth, how long after she finished brushing her teeth he heard the toilet flush.



She laughed lightly.

*“Harry, you’re such a quiet man,
the universe doesn’t know you exist.”*

“You are incredibly steady,” she said after a month of living together. “Even when I derail, you are...” she searched for the words, “right there. You know what I mean? I need that.”

“You may be disappointed. What you interpret as steady is me concentrating on averting the next disaster.”

She laughed lightly. “Harry, you’re such a quiet man, the universe doesn’t know you exist.”

“I take some offense at that.” He propped himself against the headboard. “Isn’t it wishful thinking to believe things will always work out for you?”

“I detect an edge in your voice. Did I touch a nerve?”

He paced at the foot of the bed. Naked pacing is not recommended when trying to convey seriousness. Apparently, he took too long to answer because Sheryl climbed out of bed and slipped into some jeans. “I can see we’re heading for an argument. I’m going for a walk to let you calm down.”

“Good idea. Take your time.”

Harry stomped the apartment after she left. The skinny flat was long front to back, which made him feel like a caged tiger. He knew this would eventually happen. Had he not learned from experience that rugs were pulled out from under as soon as feet were firmly planted?

She had mocked his fundamental belief about his position in the universe. She obviously had no respect for him. He stopped in the middle of the front room, stopped although momentum was lurching him forward, stopped dead in his tracks. Wait a minute. Wait just a minute, you jerk, you idiot, all she said was you’re quiet, what’s wrong with that? Think. *Think.*

He dropped into his easy chair and stretched his feet out on the ottoman and ordered himself to unwind. Breathe in, breathe out. Relax the calves, now the thighs. Is it possible you’re asking too much of the universe? Is it possible you’re asking for something no one is entitled to, and when you don’t get it, consider yourself singled out for punishment?

*Had he not learned
from experience
that rugs were pulled
out from under
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were firmly planted?*

He let stray thoughts enter his head without fighting them off, for once he trusted fate to lead him to an answer, and after dark minutes of the kind of murkiness he dreaded, he saw with razor-edged clarity that he was his own executioner in a universe which does not believe in capital punishment. He couldn't wait to tell Sheryl she was right.

But wait. What if she doesn't come back? Bitter irony: what if he had come to her conclusion too late to save the first meaningful relationship he had ever had? He jumped up so fast he tripped over the ottoman, banging his knee so hard he limped. The universe does indeed exact revenge, raced through his mind as he tugged on his pants to go look for her.

He heard a key in the lock. The door opened and she stood in the doorway clutching a paper bag which she thrust out to him in a gesture he couldn't interpret. "Lasagna," she said in an even tone, as if they had not just had the argument to end all arguments. "I thought we'd eat in." ☹

TONY ROGERS



Tony Rogers has been a lawyer and a jazz musician and the head of a veterans hospital. A collection of his short stories, Bewildered, Harold Faced The Day, won the Writer's Voice Capricorn Prize. He was a semi-finalist in the 2007 Quarterly West novella contest. His fiction has appeared in Pleiades, North Dakota Quarterly, Painted Hills Review (honorable mention in their fiction contest), Thema, Outerbridge, Worcester Review, and many others. His non-fiction has appeared in the Boston Globe Magazine. He has attended the Breadloaf, Squaw Valley, and Stonecoast writers' conferences.

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