

# Dumb Luck

*by* Ann Bogle

## Radio

It is a long morning that begins with a hymn on the radio. She turns in her sleep, roused awake by the singer's training.

### **Her boss calls during lunch hour**



To a pedestrian crossing at 14th Street: "Am I facing uptown or downtown?" "Up," the pedestrian says stopping. Directions and hybrids blur in the mind while rotating. Apple stand, mint, wheat grass juice, rutabaga, tie-dyeds. Amish wagon to the curb. Sunshine breaks an egg over Phillips Ambulatory. Tall -- for walking -- espresso on ice. Lunch crowd milling. 9.8 per cent out of work. Telephone snapshot of flower stand.

Telephone rings: Señor Carlisle.

"Hello," Señorita Mill pretends not to know.

"Hell-o-ah," he mocks her.

"Stop," she says and corrects. "Hell-o."

"Where are you?"

"Union Square."

"Is it raining?"

"Sunny."

"Pick up a *Post* and a pair of green apples."

### **Miss widow**



Mill takes her assignment and heads with it toward Broadway to walk past the windows of discount shoes. She thinks Carlisle lives in the Shoe Box District, but she hasn't said it. She asked for leave to visit a club in the Meat Packing District, and Carlisle said he'd send her to the Diamond District if she wasn't careful. She imagined riding the subway alone to the Diamond District to size her engagement ring, but nothing came of it besides banter about the burden of money. "The Statue of Liberty is the color of money," he told her on a Saturday. Apples at the Farmers' Market are the color of dairy barns not *green*. Carlisle means "Granny Smiths" from New Zealand.

Mill picks the firmest green apples from the bin at Modern Gourmet. The deli is out of the *Post*, so she buys Raisin Bran as a joke at her expense. The shopkeepers are not fluent in the vocabulary of groceries: Motrin for margarine. All the service workers are fluent in the ways to pay. Currency is universal. The owner's wife takes her

dollars and returns her change. Mill puts the coins in her pocket to give to the man outside.

### **A new pair of glasses**

"Miss Mill," Umberto greets her when she gets to Carlisle's building.

She lifts the bag of groceries over the counter. "Good noon, Umberto. This is for Mr. Carlisle."

"You're not going up?"

"I have rounds," she says.

"What do I tell him?"

"That I have rounds."

Umberto stares at her hopefully.

"Errands," she says.

"Work for Mr. Carlisle?"

"Yes," she says.

"I'll tell him. Good afternoon, Miss Mill."

"Goodbye, Umberto."

Mill passes Il Cantinori on her way to University Place. Its french doors are open, and lunchers sit at tables half inside, half outside, sipping wine and eating dull bread.

At Devonshire Optical, the bell klingels as she opens the door. She fishes in her red wallet for her prescription. She wants green frames. She peers through the cases. There is one green pair. The clerk lets her try them on, but they do not suit her face. She sees a light brown pair.

"These," she says to the clerk. The clerk sits with her at a fitting table to take adjustments then writes her name and address and telephone number on an index card.

"We'll call when they're ready," the clerk says.

"I'll wear these until then," Mill says. Mill paid \$3 on Minnesota Care for the wire pair. In Minnesota, she wears them for driving and at the theater. In the city she wears them to see to the end of the block and discern faces on *Law & Order*. When Carlisle saw them, he told her to get new ones.

### **At the drugstore**

Mill puts the receipt for the glasses in her wallet and leaves the store, bell klingeling. She crosses the street to Whitney Chemists. The bell rings.

She fishes in her wallet for Carlisle's prescription.

"Ten minutes," the pharmacist tells her.

"I'll wait," Mill says and sits in the solitary chair.

She fishes in her satchel for a plain white envelope, a pen, and a roll of stamps. She writes Carlisle's address on the envelope and puts the receipt for her glasses in it: \$386.

"Here it is," the pharmacist tells her. "\$127."

"Do you have his insurance card?" Mill says.

"Viagra isn't covered. We called."

Mill gives the pharmacist her credit card, signs, then tucks the receipt in the mailer.

When she gets to Carlisle's building, she gives Umberto the packet from Whitney Chemists.

"Thanks, Umberto."

"You're welcome, Miss Mill. Still working?"

"Still working," she says.

Mill drops the envelope in the mailbox at Broadway then walks the three blocks home.

### **In for the night**



The telephone rings: Señor Carlisle.

"Hello," Señorita Mill pretends not to know.

"Where are you?" Carlisle says.

"At home," Mill tells him.

"What are you wearing?"

Mill is silent.

"What are you wearing?" Carlisle asks again.

"A skirt!" Mill says.

"The skirt I bought you?" Carlisle says.

"A skirt my mother gave me," Mill says. "And a lightweight cardigan."

"The brown skirt?" Carlisle says.

"It's beige," she says.

"What are your plans?"

"I have no plans," Mill says.

"You're in for the night?" Carlisle insists.

"I'm in for the night," she says.

"You're safe?" he asks.

"Perfectly," she says.

"This is New York City," he reminds her.

"I'm safe in my apartment," she says.

"Your door is locked?"

"Yes," she says.

"You have plenty of food? What are you having for dinner?"

"Sandwiches," she says.

"What kind of sandwich?"

"Grilled cheese with salad," she says.

"And you have shopped?"

"Yes," she says.

"Umberto said you came in twice this afternoon -- that you were 'working.' I said that unless you were in the room upstairs that you were bamboozling him. He didn't know the word 'bamboozle.' "

"I'll explain last weekend's overtime then," she says.

"Define bamboozle," Carlisle says.

"Gyp," Mill says.

"Look it up," Carlisle says. "Read it to me."

Mill goes to her computer. "1. cheat somebody: to trick or deceive somebody through misleading statements or falsehoods  
2. perplex somebody: to make somebody confused"

"I bamboozled Umberto," Carlisle proffers.

"Yes," she says.

### **He can read her thoughts**

Mill knits Carlisle a pullover evenings. The pullover is dark brown with a beige v- at the neck and stripe at the cuff. Carlisle does not deserve a pullover. Carlisle deserves a lump in the head for his incessant phone calls and demands. A man ought to buy his own newspaper, she thinks, ought to buy his aunt a birthday card. He ought to move his *chaise longue* and see to it when he needs towels. Carlisle hired her to keep books, yet the labor is indivisible. She feels indentured, not like a service worker. The service workers have position and pride. She has no pride. She has little pride. Carlisle's idea of service would shape a Founding Father. Smoke rises from her tender temple. She puts on water for tea.

"Miss Mill," Carlisle begins when she answers the phone.

"Yes," Mill says. She wraps the teapot in a crisp dishcloth.

"Your service is unimpeachable," he says.

"It's nothing," Mill says. He can read her thoughts after hours, when all the shops are closed. He can read her thoughts at a distance of city blocks. He can read her thoughts over the din of books on the bedside table. He can read thoughts she filters with J. S. Bach.

### **Cognates in *The Post***



In the morning Mill arrives at Carlisle's suite with *Post* in hand. The *Post* lies ravaged on the empty desk. Her chair is parked in the center of the room, wheels askew. (She leaves it neatly positioned under her desk with its wheels pointed toward the wall.) The spare chair is in its usual position tucked under the empty desk. She inclines it toward her desk then straightens the wheels of her chair by sliding it along the lines in the Persian rug and sits.

The telephone rings: Señor Carlisle.

"Hello," Señorita Mill pretends not to know.

"See page 7," he says.

Mill opens the clean copy of the *Post* to page 7. "Baseball topper," she reads, "tests plus for 'roids."

"'Zat one 'roid or two?" Carlisle says.

"The article doesn't go into it," Mill says.

"Spell hemorrhoid," Carlisle says.

"H-e-m-m," Mill says.

"Look it up," he says.

Mill wakes the computer. "H-e-m-o-r-r-h-o-i-d," she says.

"Baseball topper's 'hoids test-us," Carlisle proffers.

"Calumny," Mill says, flanking her hair.

Carlisle is silent.

"I hired you to follow stock reports," he says. "I keep you because you know the word 'calumny.' Read the definition."

Mill toggles the mouse, "1. defamation: the making of false statements about somebody with malicious intent  
2. defamatory statement: a slanderous statement or false accusation

"15th century. From Latin *calumnia* or false accusation (also the source of English *challenge*), from *calvi* 'to deceive.'"

### **Talk of the weather**



The rain changes the shapes of trees. It changes the buildings, though not, she thinks, *this* building. This building stays dry and firm. Mill takes out her magnifying glass and begins to harvest statistics.

The telephone rings: Carlisle.

"Hello," Mill says.

"You want to know how bad it is?" he says.

"It doesn't look all bad," she says.

"It's a black cloud over a picnic before it rains. It's a jammed pistol. It's a dictionary with half the letters removed."

"It's a tornado that hits your barn not your house," Mill says as he hangs up.

### **Koan**

Mill pans the indices for gold. "One 'roid or two?" plays in her mind like a strain from a musical. *Couple of street paranoids*, it says. "'Zat one 'noid or two?" she rehearses. "When 'noids talk, money listens."

One male ape to another: "Is that a butt or a breastplate through the trees?"

The phone rings: Carlisle.

"What is O-I-D?" Mill says.

"Oxford Indiana Dictionary," he says.

"The suffix is from Greek," Mill says, "and means 'like, resembling, or related to' from *eidos*: form or shape."

"Original Issue Discount," he says, "or H-O-T."

"What's H-O-T?" she says.

"You," he says. "It's Hell on Taxes."

"A porn koan," she says.

"Hah!" he says.

The goose escapes the glass.

### **Time tells her**

Mill attended the University of Minnesota in the 1980s. She majored in English. One of her friends from childhood, Nancy O'Reilly, acted as if she had outgrown Mill by college. Mill saw Nancy O'Reilly days in Coffman Union reading psycholinguistics textbooks. Mill sat tables away reading Donne or Pope or Dryden or Swift but not the Romantics. Mill knew her own heart too little, the result of having a formal mother. If Nancy O'Reilly had stayed her friend, if their intellects had banded together, Mill might have realized she wanted a career in banking.

Had she realized she wanted a career in banking, she might have met her husband. Had she met her husband, she might have had children. Mill became an office worker with progressive responsibilities and static paycheck, and Nancy O'Reilly went on to earn a Ph.D. in linguistics. Mrs. Mill got a thank you note from Mrs. O'Reilly after Nancy O'Reilly had become Nancy O'Reilly-Kemp, though Nancy O'Reilly hadn't invited Mill to the wedding. Later Mrs. Mill learned from Mrs. O'Reilly at the grocery store the O'Reilly-Kemps had two children.

Mill wrote, "Bookkeeping is to the Romantics as Teheran is to Carter," and sent it to Carlisle's blind box ad.

## **Interview**

It was Mill's dumb luck that Carlisle's favorite president was Jimmy Carter. At least, that's what he said when he phoned her mother's house in Wayzata. That and his mother had grown up in St. Paul.

His mother's father had given him a dictionary that had belonged to Mark Twain. The dictionary was signed by Twain and lying in a safety deposit box in Connecticut. Carlisle had read it in its entirety the summer after boarding school.

Carlisle told her he was glad that a Minnesota gal had answered the

ad, and, "not just any farm-fed," he said, "but a gal with English and a little economics under her belt."

"We belong together," he said that first phone call, "as John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle."

"I read an article about their fire in *The New Yorker*," Mill acknowledged.

"*The New Yorker* delivers out in Wayzata?" Carlisle said.

"Their subscription center is in Red Oak, Iowa," Mill said.

"Boone," Carlisle corrected her.

As a child, another child had called Mill "Little Miss Know-It-All" and "nigger lips" on the same day. That child was a woman by then, a divorcing and foreclosed woman with two children and a married black lover.

### **He heralds newsworthy deaths**

Telephone rings: Carlisle.

"Hello," Mill pretends not to know.

"Are you sitting down?" Carlisle asks.

"I'm pacing," she says.

"Why do you pace so much?" he asks.

"It's exercise," she says.

"It's a lunatic asylum in there," he says. Mill's ancestors were more stable than Carlisle's.

"The market is down," he says, but that's not why he's calling. "Are you sitting down?" Then, as is his custom, Carlisle reads the *Times* obituaries page to her.

"It's curtains for Curtin," he summarizes before reading the text. "Scholar of the slave trade dead at 87."

"Bogle bit it," he says.

"Founder of Vanguard?" Mill asks.

"Bob of the Ventures," he says. "You're too young to remember *Hawaii Five-0*."

"I am not!" Mill protests foolishly, tired of hearing him say she is too young to remember things. "I washed dishes to it."

Mill learns more about life from Carlisle's daily slog through the obituaries than she likes to admit. She pretends to an estranged discomfort at the thought or mention of death -- shudders on cue at it -- but she is in fact glad that people die: and not only people but all living things. Mortality is the universal sign that democracy exists outside its documents, that it has a natural basis, she thinks.

**A motto for love**



Before Mill moved to New York to work for Carlisle, she lived with her mother to spare expenses. One night Mill asked idly over supper what love is, not believing her mother would know.

Her mother said, "Many people live without it."

Mrs. Mill did not seem to wonder about love after Mr. Mill had died nor during forty years of practical marriage. Yet Mrs. Mill knew enough, perhaps all there was to know about love.

Mill set her heart on living with it.

### **Under the hood**

Mill lives graciously without love in the 00s. A student of modernism, the 80s were her 20s, the 90s her 30s, the aunts her 40s.

Her lifetime is an odometer reset to zero. She is a car parked at auction, an antique or classic, not a roadster. She is a beauty restored to a season, not a hot virgin or spinster, but an old maid with a lesbian's timing. Bidders ignore her or come in low.

There was an ice storm not a hurricane when she lived in Texas.

Men gently used her to make love without commitment in her 20s. In her 30s, the men were more vigorous, and she once called the

police, believing police were the bureau to care; the policemen stood at her apartment door with sheepish blue eyes and bulges at the hip. She hoped no one would fire a gun. One of the officers said, "Let sleeping dogs lie," while the man most presumed innocent by the jury said, "Don't lie to the officers." Mill thanked them; the next day she resigned her job and packed suitcases and boxes for Minnesota. The men were all cowards, Mrs. Mill said, and, "Justice has been served."

### ***La discrimination positive***



Mill sits down when Carlisle calls to ask why she isn't married.

"Rig-a-marole," she says.

"It's heating up," Carlisle says. "Look it up."

"It's an alternate spelling," Mill says, feeling apologetic for her one-more syllable, as when she says real-a-tor and Viag-a-ra. "I saw Niagara when I was three," she says.

"Three is too young," Carlisle says.

"I was in high school when the Equal Rights Amendment didn't pass -- the Supreme Court said then that women are 'people' under the Constitution -- a lot of people were listening," Mill says. "I thought it meant I would become an 'adult person' not a 'woman.' All we got



was 'privacy' amid street protests and religious cantilevering over abortion."

"We are all people of color," Carlisle says.

"Some people are slower of color than others," Mill says.

## **Wildlife**

She speaks to her mother on Tuesdays, but today her mother is in Eau Claire with her garden journey group.

Her mother knows that Mill has met Carlisle in person, but certain others in Minnesota suspect that she has never even seen him. They quiz her during return trips on his appearance: Is he tall, broad, handsome, good-natured, good-looking, older, younger, available?

"He's my boss," she says, or "he is he," when cornered.

Carlisle asks for discretion in relating details of her position to anyone except her mother, whom he has judged (without meeting) to be of the older generation, from the set who survived the Great Depression and World Wars, who preserves homegrown tomatoes, who is old school. Mrs. Mill is all that, and she is also a *modern*.

Mill misses the wildlife of her home in Wayzata: the rabbits at the birdfeeder, the deer in the woods, the gardens and wild leeks. She misses the moths and butterflies, the frogs that climb and toads that crawl. She misses Tilly Artaud, an American toad who sat at Mill's glass door every midnight for a summer, as if she had swallowed a Timex watch battery. She misses her cat, The Doctor: his bushy gray tail and Roman nose, his pacing the hallways at night as if carrying transcripts of her speeches to Congress.

Carlisle has urged her to get a dog to walk in the morning. If she gets a dog, his name will be "Johannes." If she doesn't get one, she'll consider a bird.

### **Truck**

Mill rolls her chair under the desk and turns out the light.

The phone rings: Carlisle.

Mill answers in the dusk.

"I talked to your mother," Carlisle says.

"She's in Eau Claire," Mill says, not bothering to turn on the light.

"She's back," Carlisle says. "I asked her why you left Texas, and she said, 'Truck.'"

"She's flirting with you," Mill says. "I told you she is a modern."

"What is 'truck' in her lexicon?" Carlisle says.

Mill turns on the light and nudges the mouse. "'Keep on trucking'," Mill says, "'to carry on with work or life in a cheerful and relaxed way, in spite of problems (informal)'."

"Your mother is a contemporary of Jerry Garcia, Robert Hunter, and The Grateful Dead," Carlisle says.

"Truck that hauls or carries," Mill says.

"I get the idea you didn't 'fall off the turnip truck,'" Carlisle says.

"Or the 'Swedish carrot' truck to be German about it," he adds, referring to last week's discussion of "rutabaga."

"'Truck' is archaic for barter," Mill says. "That is probably the sense

she means."

"What sort of truck was it in Texas?" Carlisle says.

"Small as truck goes," Mill says. "Smaller than a full-size pick-up."

"If full-size pick-up means you killed someone?" Carlisle says.

"No, if eighteen-wheeler means someone else did," Mill says. "It wasn't my truck."

"Whose truck was it?"

"Dean's," Mill says.

"Go on," Carlisle says.

"Dean is my former boyfriend," Mill says.

"Dean is his last name?" Carlisle says.

"Dean is his middle name," Mill says.

"Did he hurt you?" Carlisle asks.

"If by hurt, you mean dismayed, disappointed, or chagrined, yes," Mill says.

"I mean 'hit,'" Carlisle says. "Did he hit you?"

"He hit the wall next to my bed," Mill says.

"Are you still in love with him?" Carlisle says.

"It was last century," Mill says. "I'm in love with The Doctor as I told

you."

"Whose doctor?" Carlisle says. "Your doctor?"

"*The Doctor*," Mill says, "my cat."

### **Dual citizens**

The phone rings: Carlisle.

"Good evening," Mill says.

"Where are you?" he says.

"At home," she says.

"Are you in for the night?" he says.

"Yes," she says.

"Have you thought about the upcoming year twenty-ten?" Carlisle says.

"Is twenty-ten what it will be called?" Mill says.

"Your voice sounds sexy when you're sleepy," he says. "Look it up."

"It isn't in the dictionary," she says after a pause. "It was a science fiction novel and film. The census is next year and the winter Olympics in Vancouver."

"Twenty-ten will be a good year," he says.

"Everyone is hoping," she says. "People say this was a bad decade due to the War."

"Obama won," Carlisle says.

"Yes," she says, "Obama will be President in twenty-ten."

"Miss Mill will be Mrs. Carlisle," he says.

"You borrow trouble," she says.

"I eschew borrowing," he says. "It's a fair topic."

"We're not equals," she says.

"Look it up," he says.

"Es-choo," she says, "sounds like a sneeze. I prefer es-skew, but it isn't listed. It comes from old German meaning shy."

"We are equal under the law," he says.

"Equal in legal contexts," she says. "Otherwise it means identical."

"You're sure?" he says.

"That is what it says right here," she says.

"I thought I would call my lawyer," he says. "You call your lawyer, and we'll sit down and hash it out and come up with a prudent agreement."

"I never wanted a big church wedding," Mill says. "I lost my belief in God early. It was like losing my virginity by falling off a bike or horse; I lost connection with God when I hit the ground. I got back on the bike or horse and rode away, but I was godless."

"Religion is the source of true fiction," he says.

"I feel like a mail-order bride from Canada," she says.

### **Denouement**



She imagines Carlisle in a wheelchair. Her neighbor in Minnesota said, "Is he in a wheelchair? Is that why you aren't talking? Is he old and in a wheel chair?"

Mill imagines him in a wheelchair; she imagines him standing miraculously to touch her hair. She imagines him old and miraculously turning fifty. She imagines the denouement.

"Come up and see me sometime," she drawls. "Is that a pistol in your pants or are you just happy to see me?"

When the doorman rings, Mill remembers Carlisle can read her thoughts. "Let him up," Mill says. She is wearing an African kaftan and briefs and a bra under it. She is glad her legs are waxed, her hair and nails are fresh. She slips on flat sandals and pulls a brush through her hair. She douses herself with Dior, leaves the door ajar, and waits.

Carlisle steps in to the apartment as if he were there to build it, mysteriously raising his foot as if clearing a stone fence. He is wearing a black suit and hat.

Mill blushes as if she has nothing to hide.

"Come here," Carlisle says. He locks his fingers behind her neck and pulls her to his mouth. They fall into a bookshelf. "You're not getting out of this."

"I quit my job," she mumbles.

"You quit your job in twenty-ten," he tells her.

