

Ideal Man

by Calvin Campbell

"Mirela," I said. "Mirela, Mirela, Mirela." I must have told him a hundred times, no exaggeration.

"What the hell kind of name is that?"

I ignored him, lit a smoke and watched a group of teenage girls as they laughed their way to the high school across the street. They wore identical uniforms with dark green blazers and tartan scarves. They even wore the same type of pea coat. One of them turned and gave me the finger. I couldn't figure out why and gave up trying. Dale approached me, wiping his hands on a filthy, half-frozen rag.

"So what's she like?"

"You mean is she hot? I don't know. I only talked to her for about ten minutes on the phone, but she sounded nice. Intelligent. Easy laugh. Albanian."

"What?"

"She's from Albania."

"What's that?"

"A country. It's near Italy. I looked it up on a map."

"She speak good English?"

"Good enough. Heavy accent."

Dale spat. "As long as she's not like that lazy limey we got stuck with last summer."

I tried to laugh, but the cold had frozen my face. "Billy? There will never be another Billy."

"Did you know we're still paying that jackass workman's comp?"

"I know. You keep telling me all the different ways you're going to kill him." I'd been working with Dale for nearly five years. I studied for a year at Nick Norris College, but I dropped out. Everything they say about that place is true.

I was just about to gag when Dale finally threw the damn rag into the back of the truck. Window cleaning is a disgusting job. All kinds of crap gets stuck in the creases of your hands and there's no way to scrub it off. You'd need to get in there with a chisel. It's like being

branded. One time I had to clean big blotches of puke off some windows down at the Nick Norris dorm. They really know how to party over there.

I lit another cigarette without realizing that I hadn't finished the first one. Dale and I were both on edge. We'd never hired a girl before, and there was no doubt that things would have to change. For instance, we'd probably have to cut down on our profanity. I looked down the street to see if Mirela was coming, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

"She's late," said Dale.

"She probably just got lost."

"You sure know how to pick 'em."

Dale started pacing irritably, which made me irritable, but instead of pacing I drove our sad old Dodge pickup out of the garage. It was about twenty years old, and looked like something you'd find abandoned in the middle of a Saskatchewan farmer's wheat field. Rust had settled into its every pore, giving it a tubercular appearance. "Summit Window Cleaners — Look on the Bright Side" was barely legible on the door panels. You couldn't ask for worse advertising. The garage itself was at least a hundred years old, and had been a horse stable once upon a time. Years after I quit window cleaning, I looked at a picture of the place and I swear I could still smell old horse manure. The walls inside had been plastered with Playboy centrefolds. Billy's work. Once we knew that a girl would be working for us, Dale and I had spent most of one day tearing them all down. Now they were crumpled up in a big garbage bag in the back. I pulled one out at random. Her name was Tricia Lange. I guess she was good looking. She was naked, anyway. I flipped it over and read. Her turn-ons were eye contact, smiles, intelligent minds, warm water, rock 'n' roll music, and fast cars. Her turn-offs were cigarette smoke, traffic, smog, and insensitive and insecure people. For some reason, I folded it and stuffed it into my coat pocket, grabbed my coffee off the dash and went back to stand beside Dale. The wind was really ripping now.

"She's late," said Dale. He suddenly turned and hurled his squeegee against the back wall of the garage. He threw tantrums like that pretty often, but they still made me jump. "Fuck this," he said. "Let's go to the 7-11."

"I'll leave her a note," I said. Dale handed me a pen. He always carried pens in a pocket protector, just like a real boss. I found an old coffee-stained invoice and wrote on the back of it: "Mirela. We're at the 7-11. Just go up Stayner. It's on the right hand side. Morris." I stuck the note under the wiper, secretly hoping that it would blow away. I was twenty-six, but I was wary of girls, and not just because I still had braces on my teeth and pretty bad acne scars on my face. It's like they all carried some secret knowledge in their hearts that they could use against you. Even the dopey ones.

We trudged up Stayner to the 7-11, not talking to each other. Stayner Avenue was in the seediest section of town. Not big city seedy, but it had plenty of drunks, hookers, and cheap and dirty rooming houses. It curved up toward an area near the new expressway, making the whole street seem to frown. You could tell by the old building facades, though, that it had once been a pretty up-scale business district. You could still make out the faded sign, "Ellie's Fashions for Women", painted on the brick wall on the side of Dickey's, a bar so seedy that it made me want to quit drinking every time I passed it.

The wind was cutting, and it started to snow. We burst through the doors of the 7-11 like whipped dogs. Larry, the guy who worked behind the counter, looked hungover. He exuded this fetid, yeasty odour. We got extra-large coffees and I cashed a ten for quarters. And then Dale said he was hungry. He examined an array of muffins under a plastic dome.

He pointed to one of them. "Are there carrots in that muffin?" he asked Larry.

"Yes, Dale," said Larry. "That's why it's called a carrot muffin." He pointed at a label. "Can you read the little sign?"

"Sure, but are there actual pieces of carrot in it?"

"Probably. How the hell would I know?"

"I don't want a crunchy muffin," said Dale. "It's okay if it's all blended and mashed in with the batter, but that carrot muffin looks different."

Larry sighed. "Do you want the muffin, Dale?"

"Order the fucking muffin," I said.

"Please don't swear in the store, Morris," said Larry. As a franchise owner, Larry wanted to keep the place respectable.

I shrugged. Dale passed on the muffin and bought a bag of chips instead. We took turns playing Galaxian. When I was just starting to feel nice and warmed up, Dale sent me back to the garage to look for Mirela. No Mirela. My message hadn't blown away, but it was buried under an inch of snow. I wrote another note and stuck it to the inside of the windshield. Mirela. I liked her name. I liked that she was from another country—a country that most people couldn't find on a map. And not just Dale, either. It's a very small country in a strange location. You really have to look for it. And I liked that I had withheld some information from Dale, because at the end of our brief phone conversation, Mirela had said, "I'm really looking forward to meeting you." I had a secret.

I clambered into the cab of the truck, pulled the centrefold out of my pocket, and read more about Tricia Lange:

AMBITIONS: To accomplish what I set out to do. To make the most out of life.

IDEAL MAN: Sensitive, sincere, intelligent, stimulating, creative, successful and fun.

SECRET FANTASY: The power to turn fantasies into reality.

I wasn't interested in her ambitions, and everyone wants to turn their fantasies into reality, so I focused on the part about her IDEAL MAN. In my opinion, Tricia Lange was setting herself up for heartbreak. At least if she lived in Raymond. Just using rough figures based on observation and the people in my own social circle, there were maybe two who you might call intelligent. And if by "sensitive" Tricia meant "people who don't kick their dogs", then you might be looking at 65%. We had one creative guy in town — a painter — but he offed himself when I was just a kid. I could see

myself objectively, and I can tell you that I was no great catch, but I looked pretty good in comparison to the rest of the population. I read books and things of that nature.

When I got back to the store, I leaned against the game cabinet and watched Dale immersed in Galaxian. I studied his face. People in my town are uniformly homely. We have a muttish appearance. Dale was pretty representative. People in my town look half-baked. Like they've been taken out of the kiln too early.

Dale banged the side of the cabinet and something inside cracked.

"Hey!" yelled Larry. "Don't hit the fucking game!"

We stepped outside so I could have a smoke. "Maybe I should call her," I said. I rifled through my pants and coat pockets and checked my wallet. "Except I don't have her number with me."

A fresh gust blew away Dale's obscenity.

"I guess I could go home and get it," I said. I wanted to hear Mirela's voice again. I missed her voice, you see.

Dale acknowledged my comment with brief eye contact and a raised eyebrow. "Forget it. We can't work in this."

The snow kept falling; pointlessly at this time, because everything had already been buried.

The school bell rang, and pretty soon a small mob of teenage girls, cursing the cold in colourful terms, started streaming into the 7-11. One of them tried to bum a smoke off me. "No chance," I told her. "It's for your own good." That's what my dad always told me when I first started smoking—before he started bumming smokes from me.

"Thanks for the sermon, handsome." That was really a low blow. And then she followed it up by giving me the finger, which only made matters worse. She rejoined her little group, and this group turned to me. The schoolgirl squadron in full battle dress. There might have been five or six of them, but the blowing snow was making things opaque.

I tried to laugh like I was blowing her off, but it sounded fake, and I think she sensed it. "Maybe you think you're some kind of dream

girl now," I said. I was getting pretty heated up, so I took a few steps toward her. "Maybe you think—" Before I could tell her what else she might be thinking, she lunged at me and planted a wicked left right in my solar plexus. I kind of buckled and tipped over. Suddenly Larry was yelling something about calling the cops and that he wanted everybody off his property *now*.

But I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. Dale stood over me and offered me his hand, but I didn't take it. He nudged me with his foot.

"You just got floored by a girl," he said.

"It's been a bad day all around," I said, sort of gasping out the words.

"It was a sucker punch," said Dale, like this fact would allow me to keep my pride. He started to turn away, but took a step back. "Are you going to get up now?"

I shook my head.

He looked at me and bit his lip. "Well you can't just lay here in the middle of the parking lot."

"Is that where I am?" I really wasn't sure where I was. It didn't seem to matter. I was already finding interesting shapes in the clouds.

Larry came trotting over and the two of them stood looking at me like I was some really complicated chess problem.

Larry nudged me with his foot. "Stop being a dick, Morris. Get up."

I shook my head. "No can do."

Larry looked at Dale, and Dale shrugged and acted like he didn't know me. "Okay," said Larry. "Grab his legs, Dale." I didn't resist. Larry had me under the arms and the two of them carried me to the side of the store and flung me into a snowdrift. Then Larry got a broom and swept some of the snow off my coat and pants.

I thanked him. He shrugged. "It's the least I can do, Morris. You're a good customer." He glared at Dale as he spoke to me. "You don't bust my machines."

I lay there for a long time, listening to the mild bustle that surrounded me, such as honking cars and barking dogs and a crying baby and two drunks arguing about who stole the other's empties. A couple of people tossed spare change at me, which was very kind of them. One old guy in a wheelchair asked if I needed help. I took him up on the offer, and the look of charity sort of drained from his face. I gave him the Tricia Lange centrefold, which had gotten very soggy by now, and told him that I wanted him to put it somewhere for safekeeping. He transferred it to his coat pocket very discreetly, handed me a religious tract, and then wheeled his way up Stayner toward Dickey's. There followed a period of time in which nothing happened. It was like sleep, but I could only compare it to sleep because I became conscious again. For a few minutes I wondered if I had died. I felt very vague, like whoever made me forgot to add important details. I had a dream that somebody stole my wallet, but when I checked I discovered that someone actually *had* stolen my wallet.

The sun now was somewhere off to the right, tucked behind and nearly eclipsed by a very dark and monstrous cloud. The snow had stopped falling. A girl was looking down at me. Her hair was cut short and tousled. Her front teeth were prominent but well-aligned, and she smiled like you'd think Joan of Arc might have smiled.

"Are you Morris?" She laughed.

"Are you Mirela?"

She extended a red-mittened hand and brought me to my feet.

"Sure."

