

Woman, Running Late, in a Dress

by Dallas Woodburn

A woman is running late for her doctor's appointment. A voice asks her to hold the elevator, and she believes in karma, so she does. A man steps in. He presses the button for the third floor. "You're welcome," he says, then plunges a knife into her arm.

What color is the woman's dress?

Dr. Breen was telling the riddle. He never mentioned a dress. I'm certain he didn't. He only said "a woman" — he didn't describe what she was wearing.

Or maybe I'm remembering wrong. Maybe he did mention a dress, at the beginning? And I simply wasn't paying close enough attention? Perhaps the trick of the riddle is that people get so swept up in the glamour and surprise of the violence that they forget everything else.

The next few moments coalesced into a blur. Gasps and shouts, a hand on my arm, sequined gowns and expensive colognes parting before me. And then, there, Raymond's crumpled form on the hardwood floor of the foyer, like a sleeve torn from a jacket, the stitches frayed and useless.

I never found out the answer.

What color? What color is her dress?

Maybe she doesn't believe in karma. Maybe she's just a benevolent woman. The type of person who holds elevator doors open for other people because it's the right thing to do, not because she expects to be rewarded for it later by the cosmic justice of the universe.

Raymond is — was — a general surgeon in the E.R. The party that night was a benefit for the hospital. We argued about where to park.

“Why don't you turn — oh, now you've missed it. There was a perfect spot in that row.”

“Carol, I hate when you do this.”

“What? I'm just trying to help — ”

“I'm the one driving. I can make a decision myself.”

I folded my arms against my chest. The clasp on my clutch caught at the fabric of my dress. “I just thought it'd be best to park by the elevators.”

“Why does it matter?”

“You know I hate to walk in heels.”

“But those spots are too small for this car.”

“Well, then we could park valet. Why don't we park valet?”

“Carol,” Raymond sighed. “Why does everything have to be an argument?”

“We're not arguing, we're discussing.”

“Everything has to be so difficult.”

“I guess I just know what I like.”

“Well, dammit, Carol,” Raymond said. “It gets tiring.” His tone of voice like steel wool on bare skin.

We ended up parking half-way between the elevators and the far wall. I kept my arms crossed, teetering unsteadily in my high heels without taking Raymond's arm. At one time our bodies had drifted towards each other as if twin magnets were embedded beneath our skin. Now I have weak ankles and no magnetic energy. When Raymond held the vestibule door open for me, I nodded thanks but did not meet his eyes.

Later, at the seafood buffet, he started talking to Dr. Hagey's wife, so I struck up a conversation with Dr. Breen. I laughed at his jokes, touching his shoulder lightly with my fingers. I wanted Raymond to see. I thought I would wait until the dancing started to make amends. And then Dr. Breen turned to me and said, “Do you like riddles?”

Marie Vindraire is running late for her appointment. But when a voice says, "Hold the doors, will ya!" she sighs and presses the elevator's "Open Door" button.

A man steps in. "Thanks," he says with a smile. He presses the button for the third floor. Then he turns to face her, and, still smiling, says, "You're welcome, my dear," before plunging a knife into her left arm.

Her dress is stained with blood.

He must have said the answer straight out, and I wasn't paying attention. That's the kicker. He must have said it at the very beginning, right after he said, "Listen carefully." I nodded my head and smiled, but I didn't listen carefully.

"Listen to me, Carol," Raymond muttered once. I was halfway out of the room but his tone of voice was one I hadn't heard in a long time. Not quite desperate, but there was desperation mixed in. Fear, too. The same tone his voice had taken when he first told me he loved me, twenty-three years ago at a rest stop near the Pennsylvania border after our first weekend away together. We were sitting on a picnic bench eating cheese-and-tomato sandwiches. When he told me, I was so surprised I let go of my paper napkin and it blew away.

So I turned, when I heard his tone. Raymond sat on the edge of our bed, the dying sun slanting through the blinds, making him squint. "You never listen," he said. "I'm trying to tell you something."

Actually, that is not what happened. This is what happened:

"Listen to me, Carol," Raymond muttered. I was halfway out of the room, so I did not turn. Instead, I went into the kitchen and peeled potatoes for dinner. I imagine the sunlight shone weakly through the tilted blinds, casting soft stripes on his face. But I did not look back, so it is only imagining. Perhaps the blinds were shut entirely.

Funny, how colors are associated with emotion. Green means envy. Blue means peace. When she was a girl, Marie Vindraire's mother painted her bedroom walls eggplant purple, because she said Marie was her princess, and purple means royalty. Marie loved her mother very much.

Maybe her dress is red. For love.

Or red for hate.

Or both.

Raymond and I met on a blind date set up by Penny Saramond, my sorority sister and the girlfriend of Raymond's friend Tom. We were to meet at a café downtown, and I was running late. I blamed the rain, and the traffic, but really it was because I changed outfits a dozen times. That was my year of profound anxiety. All my stockings had runs. My lipstick smudged easily. I had taken to triple-checking things: that the iron was off, that the door was locked, that I had both earrings on and necklace securely clasped. I finally left the house wearing a gray dress from my roommate's closet.

My eyes are a deep slate gray, almost blue.

When I arrived at the café, Raymond was sitting at a table by the window, gazing outside at the dripping, rain-glossed city. I thought it was him — he had dark hair and a pale complexion as Penny had described — and when he glanced up and saw me and smiled, I hoped it was him. We sat at the table by the window for three hours, as the sun gradually poked holes in the rainclouds.

"I remember the first time I saw you," Raymond told me years later. "You sparkled in that gray dress."

I wish I could remember what color Raymond was wearing that day, the day he and I began. But I can't.

The man says, "You're welcome" as he plunges the knife into her arm. Why? What does the woman have to thank him for?

"You're still dwelling on that riddle?" Sylvie asks. We're having lunch at the Arbor Café, sitting at the outside patio enclosed by

potted palms. They bend in the breeze, leaning in slightly towards us, and then away as if they've been caught eavesdropping.

"I've been thinking ..." I stir my chicken-and-rice soup and watch the steam escape from the surface, dissolving into the breeze. "Maybe there's something wrong with her arm."

"Whose arm?"

"Marie. The woman he stabs in the elevator. Or else why would he say 'You're welcome' before he stabs her?"

Sylvie takes a bite of her sandwich, wiping stray avocado from her mouth with a napkin. She looks off into the distance while she chews. I like Sylvie because she understands my life, but is also removed from it. She was married to a dermatologist for fifteen years — that's when I met her, and we became friends — but six years ago she divorced him to marry a newspaper editor. Sylvie's like that. She believes in blind, fierce, aching love.

Sylvie swallows. "I don't know," she says. "Maybe he's just a raving lunatic."

"Sylvie!"

"What? *He's* what's wrong with her arm. He stabs her, for godsake."

"I just hate ... not knowing."

She leans closer to me. "Honey, I worry about you. You're getting so hung up on this riddle ..." She reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "The longer you push real life away, the harder it's gonna be."

I look down into my soup. The grains of rice clump together. I stir them apart.

"Can people get tumors in their arms?" I ask.

Tumors. Cancer. Bone cancer, maybe. Or leukemia. The knife wound bleeds like crazy and Marie Vindraire faints and they find out she has leukemia. Doctors wouldn't have known about it, but they tend to her wound and do some tests and catch it early, before the typical symptoms present themselves. So they treat it early and she

survives, and it's all thanks to the man who stabbed her in the elevator.

When I am alone, late at night, and I cannot sleep, and the tree branches slap against the side of the house like a wild heartbeat, sometimes I think about it. I bargain retrospectively for time; I play What If. What If we go back and erase the argument in the car? What If I take his arm while we walk to the elevator? What If I never hear Dr. Breen's asinine riddle because I am talking to Raymond instead, am there beside him when he slumps to the ground, face drained of color?

Raymond was only fifty-six. I thought apologies could wait until the dancing started.

I wonder, if he had survived the heart attack that night, if maybe it would have brought us together again.

Perhaps the man is not really a man, but an angel. He says, "You're welcome" because he is saving Marie Vindraire. God told him to get in an elevator with a woman in a dress, a certain-colored dress, and plunge a knife into her left arm — just deep enough, but not too deep. But he needs to know what color the woman's dress is. What color is he looking for? This is crucial. Without the dress, everything collapses.

It is said that tragedy either pulls two people closer together or pushes them apart. When Raymond's brother died — suicide — we had been married only three years. At the time I thought the tragedy brought us closer. I held him when he cried. I sat beside him at the funeral, stiff-backed, our sweaty palms clasped together. He gripped my hand so tightly. I felt strong, impregnable, like I was the only thing keeping him upright. At the wake, I helped his mother in the kitchen, cutting cucumber sandwiches into triangles and pouring sweet tea into paper cups.

I was impregnable, and then I was pregnant. I took the test right there in the drugstore bathroom stall, two weeks to the

day after the funeral. The fragile blue line in that tiny plastic window both thrilled and terrified me in a way I have never felt before or since.

Raymond seemed surprised, but happy. He picked me up and kissed me; he danced me around the kitchen. He might have been putting it all on, a show of giddiness for my benefit alone, but I didn't see that at the time. I only saw his smile. I only heard the words he told me.

"This is wonderful, Carol," he said.

"I couldn't be more excited," he said.

"My beautiful wife," he said. "My beautiful pregnant wife. I'll feed you ice cream and pancakes. I'll buy you pastrami sandwiches at one in the morning. Just say what you need, anything you need, and your dashing husband will get it for you."

I laughed and kissed him. In that moment, I was happy.

Marie Vindraire wakes up in a hospital room with striped wallpaper and sterile medicine smells. Her daughter is holding her hand.

Marie is surprised, because they've been fighting lately. Her daughter moved out a few weeks ago, throwing phrases at Marie over her shoulder: I hate you, I hate you, you don't understand, I'm moving in with Sarah. Marie missed her daughter terribly. They hadn't talked in days. Now, her daughter smiles at Marie and squeezes her hand. There are tears in her eyes.

"I was worried, Mom," she says. "I'm so glad you're gonna be okay."

Marie is grateful to the man in the elevator, because he brought them together again.

We lost the baby at a routine appointment on a Wednesday afternoon. The ultrasound technician couldn't find a heartbeat. I went to the appointment by myself; Raymond was overwhelmed with paperwork that day, so I told him he didn't have to come. The technician called the doctor, and the doctor called Raymond's office.

I sat on the exam table waiting for them. My growing belly was smeared with ultrasound gel and the metal table was sharply cold against my bare thighs. When Raymond finally stepped into the room, his face drawn and his tie askew, I knew with weary certainty that the baby was a dead weight inside me. I lifted myself down from the table and reached for Raymond, but I stumbled and fell, and he was not quick enough to catch me.

I came home that evening with an empty cocoon and tender bruises on my eye, my forehead, my shoulder.

"It'll be okay," Raymond said, over and over again. "We'll be okay, Carol. I'm here." He gently kissed my bruises, but they lingered for days without fading.

Marie Vindraire wakes up in a hospital room with striped wallpaper and sterile medicine smells. Her husband is holding her hand.

She is surprised, because they've been fighting fiercely lately. He moved out a few weeks ago, throwing words at her over his shoulder: trial separation, divorce, growing apart, different people. She missed him terribly. They hadn't talked in days. Now, he smiles at her and kisses her forehead. There are tears in his eyes.

"I was worried," he says. "I'm so glad you're going to be okay."

Marie is grateful to the man in the elevator, because he brought them together again.

Nine months ago, a young schoolteacher hung himself and it was all over the local news. We had dinner with close friends the evening after. Raymond, claiming a headache, asked if we could reschedule, but we had already rescheduled once.

"We're all so busy, Ray," I said. "You know how it is — if we cancel now, it'll be months before we see them. And it would be rude on such short notice, don't you think?"

We were barely through the appetizers before routine small talk waned to the news, and the news digressed to the suicide.

“Supposedly everyone who knew him was surprised,” Margaret said. “His students — ninth graders, I think, wasn't it Jack? — well, anyway, they all simply adored him, it sounds like.”

“My brother committed suicide,” Raymond said softly. He stabbed a scallop with his fork. “It was the hardest thing I ever went through.”

He hadn't talked about his brother's death for years. I reached under the table for his hand, but I couldn't find it so I patted his knee instead. Jack groped awkwardly for words; Margaret murmured sympathy, but from the way she leaned forward in her chair I could tell she wanted to hear all the details. I wished we had stayed home.

Driving away from the restaurant, it started to rain, and Raymond focused his attention on chasing raindrops from the windshield with the slow, squeaky wipers.

“If you want to talk about it, I'm here,” I said.

Raymond didn't answer. I thought perhaps he hadn't heard. Rain drummed on the roof, making me feel claustrophobic. Outside, colors blurred and smeared together.

“You didn't know him,” Raymond said.

“What?”

“You didn't know him. You only met him once.”

It was true. The first and last time I saw his brother was our wedding day. Tall, thin, with Raymond's dark hair and their mother's easy smile. He drank too much at the wedding reception, but he was so charming that nobody said anything. He asked me to dance to a Frank Sinatra song, I can't remember which one, but I do remember how close he held me, the way I could feel the rise and fall of his chest against my own. When the song finished, he kissed me wetly to the side of my mouth — he may have been aiming for my cheek, or he may have been aiming for my lips — and whispered, “Ray's the best guy I know. Take care of him, will you?” Then he turned and wandered away from me through the crowd of dancing bodies. And then he shot himself in his backyard on a blue-skied Sunday morning, under an apple tree just beginning to blossom.

Later, looking back, Marie will not be able to recall the man's height or weight, his eyes or nose or even his hair color, but she will remember his presence, the feeling of warm wholeness that overcame her even as the knife plunged into her arm with shocking, biting pain.

Does it matter what color her dress is?

I sit on the floor in our bedroom, my face pressed against the soft cotton T-shirt Raymond last slept in. The riddle loops through my mind on repeat.

A woman is running late for her doctor's appointment. A voice asks her to hold the elevator..

I close my eyes and imagine myself back at the party that night, talking to Dr. Breen. I can see his face clearly in my memory, his trim mustache and wire-rimmed glasses.

She believes in karma, so she does ...

I am holding a glass of Merlot, nearly empty. I touch Dr. Breen's shoulder with my right hand. I laugh, tilting my head back, but I glance around the room for Raymond. I want Raymond to be watching. I want Raymond to be jealous.

A man steps in...

Raymond is a few feet away, talking to Susanne Hagey. She is wearing a dark green evening gown, her hair coiled in an elaborate knot. She has never been friendly to me but has always been especially friendly to Raymond. I am upset he is talking to her. I look away. I touch Dr. Breen's arm again. I laugh so hard I gasp for breath.

He presses the button for the third floor..

Dr. Breen leans in. His breath is warm and smells of bourbon. According to Sylvie, he and his wife recently filed for divorce. "Do you like riddles?" he asks. "Yes, of course I do," I say. I smile. He smiles back, leaning even closer, his palm on my back. "Listen carefully ..."

"You're welcome," the man says, then plunges a knife into her arm ...

I nod. But I am distracted. I am looking around for Raymond, but he is nowhere to be seen. And neither is Susanne.

What color is the woman's dress?

And suddenly, sitting in the bedroom with Raymond's shirt in the gathering dark, I remember: "Listen carefully," Dr. Breen says. "Imagine you are this young woman. A woman running late for her doctor's appointment."

It's me. That's the riddle. I am the woman running late in a dress.

The dress I wore to the ball was made of shiny silken fabric the color of my eyes. Steel gray, almost blue. When I had slipped it over my head I had felt young again — like I was getting ready for the Prom, anticipating my first kiss. Filled with foolish, beautiful hopes.

That evening, I had stepped out into the hall, the dress swishing softly against my legs. Raymond was on the couch, reading the newspaper while he waited for me to finish getting ready. In that moment, he was a stranger to me again. I felt shy and nervous, watching him. His dark hair had turned gray, but it was as if I was standing again at the doorway of that downtown café on a rainy afternoon, yearning for a future I could grasp tightly with both hands. I had hesitated, watching him, wondering if he was the one I was supposed to meet.

He looked up and saw me. A wide smile spread across his face. And I walked towards him, knowing with foolish, beautiful certainty that he was.

"Carol," Raymond said, putting the newspaper down and lifting himself up from the couch. We stood there, facing each other. Nerves fluttered inside me. I felt like I was standing at a precipice, afraid to look over the edge, not knowing what lay below. Then Raymond reached for my hand.

"Carol," he said softly, "you sparkle in that gray dress."

