

The Judge's Wife Part 5

by Daniel Harris

The next morning, Margaux's cell phone rang. She didn't recognize the number; maybe it was one of her children calling on a new phone.

—Hello?

—Do you know who this is?

—Jack! Jack! I can't believe it. How did you get my new number?

—Your daughter, Liz.

—Does Liz know about us?

—Liz knew from day one, or so she told me. I bought a prepaid phone so the judge could not trace the calls back to me on your bill. I'm in Georgia where I purchased a beautiful white alabaster stone. It's large enough so I can carve you full-size. They will deliver it next week. I can't wait to start. I finished the clay model for the statue the judge ordered. They will make the molds next week and cast it in two weeks. I think you'll like it.

—I know I will, but it sounds like you are working too hard, my love. Jack, I miss you terribly.

—Me, too. Update: My wife has moved in with her sister and is suing for divorce.

—So, what are you going to do?

—I don't have a lot of options. Her lawyer is a real feminist bulldog who has arranged to have the hearing in front of a militant feminist judge. That judge is a friend of your husband. I could lose everything. They've escalated the charges to include battery, assault, rape, and — get this — neglect, i.e. failure to provide. It's all a bunch of lies. How can the legal profession allow them to calumniate like that?

—Jack, stop showing off, what the hell does calumniate mean?

—To make false and malicious statements. It was today's

Dictionary.com word of the day.

—At least, you're honest. You could've said you've known the word since high school.

—Well, even in high school my vocabulary wasn't too shabby.

—What's with the assault, battery and rape accusations? Did you do all those things to your wife? Will you turn into a beast toward me after awhile?

—Of course not. My wife and I may not have gotten along, but I'm not violent. I've been told they add on all those things as bargaining chips to increase the settlement. You know, "we'll drop the rape accusation for another \$100,000." Grifters. A bunch of low life grifters. The whole lot of 'em.

Margaux knew what Jack was saying. The judge had mentioned these new feminist tactics in divorce proceedings. She was worried that Jack would become penniless. Or worse, jailed. Her situation was almost as desperate. Due to her husband's position as a judge, he had put all their assets in a blind trust. The terms of that trust severely penalized her in the event of a divorce initiated because of her infidelities. There was no hope that she would receive anything but the most penurious alimony.

—Jack, do you have a good lawyer?

—Abe Metzinger.

—He takes divorce cases?

—I painted a formal portrait of him a few years back. A homebrew varnish I used ruined the painting, so I returned the commission money. When he found out about my case, he called me and said he would take my case *pro bono*. The divorce specialist in his office, Sarah Epstein, will represent me. Abe said he'd been emptying the judge's purse at their weekly poker games. Abe said your husband was paying for my divorce with his losses.

—Abe's so clever. When is the court date?

—No date yet. There's all the phony marriage counselor reconciliation dreck that we have to go through by law.

—Will the divorce end the restraining order?

—I have no idea, said Jack. I would think so. I guess we'll find out. Listen, Margaux, I want to fly out to see you, but there are private dicks following me everywhere. I don't know who hired them, the judge or my wife's lawyer.

—There's a posse of sleaze balls watching me, too, said Margaux, looking through the front window of her Santa Fe home at the battered Ford Escape parked across the road. A Latino in a cowboy hat was looking at her through binoculars.

—What happens if you leave and we meet somewhere else?

—I assume they would follow us.

—Let me think this through. So, just exactly how much freedom do you have? Are you locked in your house?

—I am a virtual prisoner in my home. When I run in the morning, there's always someone following me. When I go to the grocery store, a gallery, a restaurant, there's someone on my trail. Jack, it's horrible. I complained to the police that strangers were stalking me, and they gave me the "how stupid are you?" looks.

—Jesus, that bastard has everyone in his pocket.

—Jack, I have to tell you about a strange thing that happened. Rabbits were eating the plants in my garden. I asked Carlos, my Peruvian gardener, how I could get rid of the rabbits, and he said with coyote urine. "So, where do you get coyote urine," I asked. He said he would ask a coyote. I laughed and said, "You're going to ask a coyote to pee in a jar?"

—Pretty funny, said Jack.

—Don't laugh. At that instant, for a split second, his face turned into a coyote's. I swear it, Jack. I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it. I was terrified. I screamed, and then later that night, I heard a coyote howling in my garden. When I went out to check, I didn't see a coyote in the garden, and the neighborhood dogs were silent. But get this: there have been no rabbits in my garden since.

—Margaux, you haven't been putting peyote buttons on your salad, have you?

—No way! Carlos, my gardener, is supposed to be a Brujo, a type of spirit person, like an Indian medicine man.

—Well, maybe he is a Brujo. I'm sure you read your Carlos Castaneda books back in the day.

—I grew up a strict New England Calvinist — I couldn't believe that flaky stuff.

—Well, when you take hallucinogens, everything is possible. The whole universe opens up to you. From my experience dropping acid in the 60's, I can tell you that some of those trips were pretty wild.

Margaux was silent. I wondered if she thought less of me for confessing to using LSD.

—Margaux, sweetheart I miss you and love you dearly. But I better hang up before someone hacks into your phone. You never know these days.

—I love you, Jack. I miss you terribly. Please call me again soon.

—Big hugs, sweetheart.

—Kiss, kiss.

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Later that afternoon, Carlos drove up with some trellises for Margaux's garden.

—Mrs. Howland, why are you so unhappy?

—Carlos, you can address me as Margaux.

—Yes, Mrs. Howland. You wear a veil of sadness. I see this.

Margaux wondered what prompted Carlos's question. After the coyote vision, she was wary of Carlos's powers. Could Carlos read her thoughts?

Carlos watched her with heavy-lidded eyes, hearing her thoughts as clearly as if she spoke them aloud.

—I will not hurt you, Mrs. Howland, Carlos said. I know you love a man who is not your husband. I know men are watching you. This faraway man loves you. He is a creative man. He works day and night making a copy of you. Each day he toils to make the copy perfect.

—Carlos, please do not talk about this to me. It is too painful.

—When you are ready, I can help you. Do not forget.

Carlos walked to his pick-up truck and drove away. On her dusty road, Carlos's truck didn't kick up any dust.

* * *

Two Weeks Later

The judge sat in the fighting chair of his 42' sport fisherman docked at Marina Jack in Sarasota. He was on his third Scotch. It was close to sunset. His daughter, Liz, and her boyfriend, Charles, sat across from him in folding deck chairs.

—Tell me, Charles, said the judge to the boyfriend, what are your intentions toward my daughter?

The boyfriend squirmed and thought the judge a boor for asking such a question, especially in that Jane Austen language.

—Well, sir, we have discussed the future but have decided to wait until we're more established in our careers. Liz has a good position at *The New Yorker*, and I'm working my way up the Morgan Stanley ladder.

—Yes, Liz says you make good money and are a gunner.

—Yeah, but I'm still junior, even though I'm their best econometrics technician.

—You're an MIT man, right?

—Yes, sir, all my degrees: bachelors, two masters, and a Ph.D. The second master's is in computer science.

—Well, you might do better in a different setting. Morgan's a wealth management firm.

—Morgan Stanley's a full-service company.

—I have contacts at the Federal Reserve who might be able to help your career. With the knowledge you'll gain at the Fed, you will be able to name your price at any big multi-national firm. Big companies want to know what the Fed is thinking.

—I'm not sure I want to work for the Fed. I received a \$50,000 bonus from Morgan Stanley this year. That's not exactly chump change.

—Charles, in the culture of big money, that *is* chump change.

Just then a large raven landed on the taffrail of the judge's boat.

—Caw! Caw! said the raven, casting a cold eye on the judge.

—That's bold, said Liz, shying away from the bird. I've never seen a bird land that close before.

—Get going, yelled the judge, waving his hands at the bird.

The raven tilted its head, eyed the judge, and flew at the judge's head, defecating on his face. The raven returned to its perch on the taffrail.

—I think the bastard did that intentionally, said the judge, losing his reserve. He took the napkin from under his scotch and wiped his face.

—Sure seemed deliberate, Mr. Howland, said Charles, who rose and swiped at the raven with his cap.

In a flash of blue light, the raven evaporated.

—Jesus, what was that blue light? said Liz.

—Beats the shit out of me, said Charles. But it was pretty cool, whatever it was.

—Please don't use that language in my presence, said the judge.

—Jeez, dad, don't be so square, said Liz. When have you ever seen a bird disappear like that?

The judge scowled at his daughter.

—Let's go to the restaurant and eat, said the judge.

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Later That Evening: Jack's Studio

Jack saw his cat Stretch sniffing around the entrance of the studio. There was something on the other side of the studio door that had the cat's full attention.

—What's wrong, kitty-cat? Jack asked, scratching the cat's back.

—Meooooow, said Stretch, who then took off running up the stairs, only to saunter back to the first floor where he took up his station by the outside door

—Okay, let's see what's outside, Mr. Stretch.

Jack opened the door, and there on the stoop was a raven. It looked like its left wing was broken. He gently scooped up the injured bird and brought it into the studio.

—I'll bet he's hungry, Jack said to Stretch. He seems weak.

Jack found a cardboard box and gently placed the raven in it. He put the box on a shelf out of Stretch's reach and went to the house.

Jack returned with corn, unshelled peanuts and dried berries for the bird. He also set a small bowl of water in the box.

—There's something strange about this bird, Stretch. He's not afraid of you or me.

Jack decided to look at the bird more carefully. He reached into the box. The raven hopped onto his outstretched hand but instantly turned and delivered a vicious peck to his left hand. He dropped the bird like a hot rock.

—I guess I spoke too soon, said Jack, sucking the blood from the wound.

Suddenly, Stretch puffed up in full fighting mode, hissing and growling.

—Stretch, it's okay boy. I must have hurt his broken wing.

Jack looked in the box. The raven's unblinking eyes locked onto his. The raven's eyes began changing colors: red, green, blue, yellow, orange, and a vivid magenta. Suddenly the raven morphed into a coyote-like apparition and vanished.

—Jesus! Jack yelled, jumping away from the box. Trembling from shock and fear, he lowered himself onto his Adirondack chair. Was he hallucinating? Did he just have an acid flashback?

Stretch, now his usual loving self, sensing Jack's panic, jumped up on his lap. Stretch purred loudly as Jack petted him. Stretch's presence calmed Jack's heart and nerves.

—No wonder you were afraid, Stretch. Pet cats are coyotes' favorite meal.

* * *

The next morning the judge awoke at 6 a.m. He was sleeping on his yacht. He'd let Liz and her boyfriend stay at the house. He didn't care to overhear his daughter in a full animal rut with a math nerd.

What woke the judge was buzzing in his left ear. It reminded him of a long ago New Jersey June when the 17-year locusts hatched. The raspy whine of millions of those cicadas filled the sultry Princeton air. Oddly, the buzz was only in his left ear. His right ear was fine. He plugged his left ear with his left forefinger. The buzzing did not stop. In fact, it took on an echoic hollow sound. Listening

with his ear plugged, the buzzing sounded like the supplicating cries of distressed human voices.

Confused and annoyed, the judge rose from his bunk and walked into the head. He looked at his face in the mirror over the sink.

—Christ! he yelled. There on the left side of his face was a large blue-green spot.

Instinctively, he tried to wipe it off with his hand. The stain was hot. He took a towel and tried to wash it off. That only made the stain darker and larger. He could see the flesh beneath the stain begin to pustulate.

—God Almighty! I must have a flesh-eating virus. I've contracted a goddamn flesh-eating disease. It's got to be from the shit of that demon raven. I must get to a doctor, now! What the hell did I do to deserve this? Son ...of... a ...*bitch!*

To be continued.

