

The Judge's Wife Part 6

by Daniel Harris

Sarasota Memorial Hospital

—Strip down to your shorts. Put on this gown, open to the rear, said the ER nurse, handing the judge a disposable paper gown.

—The problem is on my face! said the judge. I don't need to strip. Get a dermatologist in here ... now!

—You came to us because you have a problem, Mr. Howland. We can't help you if you don't cooperate. Please be calm. Illness can be stressful. Don't make the situation worse, by yelling.

—Well, excuse me, nurse. You must understand something: I'm an important man. Do you know who I am? I am Judge Leland Howland.

—Mr. Howland, said the nurse, we are an equal opportunity facility. All patients are afforded the same quality of service. No one receives special treatment here. The doctor will be with you as soon as you have disrobed and donned the examination gown.

The judge disrobed and sat in the paper gown on the examination table. How in hell did this happen, he thought. It had to be that raven. That was no ordinary crow, it was huge. What was a raven doing on the waterfront of Sarasota? He'd only seen ravens in New Mexico. The raven was so deliberate, like it was on a mission. Maybe it was sick? Do birds get rabies, after all, they are warm blooded. Jesus, what the hell is going on here?

There was a knock on the door and a handsome Indian doctor entered.

—Hello, I'm doctor Shanmugaratnam. You are — ah, yes, Mr. Howland, Judge Leland Howland, he said, consulting his clipboard. You have a rash?

—As you can see, there is this blue-green rash on my left cheek. It is hot to the touch, and there are suppurating pustules.

Dr. Shanmugaratnam looked at the left side of the judge's face as he pulled on examination gloves.

—Can you point the rash out to me? asked Shanmugaratnam.

—You mean you don't see it? It's as big as a post card.

—Maybe it's in remission. There are infections the can fluctuate between being highly visible and almost invisible. Here see for yourself in this mirror.

Shanmugaratnam handed Howland a magnifying hand mirror.

The judge could see the rash plain as day. It had grown bigger in the two hours since he first discovered it earlier this morning.

—Look, doctor, you can see it. It's right here. This whole area is infected, said the judge, becoming impatient with this foreign nincompoop.

Shanmugaratnam stood behind the judge and asked him to point out the reflection of the rash in the mirror. The judge confidently put his finger on the mirror at the site of the rash.

—This whole area I'm tracing with my finger is dark blue-green, he said. Can't you see it.

Shanmugaratnam donned magnifying glasses with strong lights. He touched the area with a pin.

—Ouch! That hurts, said the judge.

—Now we're getting somewhere.

—Did you think I was making this up?

—I'm afraid, Mr. Howland, the problem may be elsewhere.

—What does that mean? Do you think I'm nuts or something? Get another doctor in here. How can you not see it when I see it plain as day in this mirror? My intuition tells me your not fully qualified. My intuition says you're probably a fourth-year med student.

—I'm trying to help you, but your physical symptoms are not apparent. Your skin is in remarkable condition considering you live in Florida. By the way, I'm fully board certified in dermatology and tropical diseases.

—But I'm looking at it in this mirror, right now!

—I shall find another physician to confirm my observations. We may want to do a small biopsy.

—Oh for Chrissakes.

—I'll return with another colleague in a minute. Stay right here.

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Margaux looked at the caller I.D. on her phone. It was her son, Troy.

—Troy, what a surprise. Where are you? Chicago?

—No, I'm in Sarasota. The Bears play the Tampa Bay Buccaneers this Sunday. They've moved me up from the practice squad because there are so many defensive backs out with injuries.

—That's good news. What else? Have you seen your father?

—Actually, that's what I'm calling about.

—Is there a problem?

—Mom, there's a big problem. Dad's at Memorial Hospital restrained in bed. He thinks he has a rash on his face. When the doctors told him they didn't see a rash, he lost it and tried to cold-cock the two doctors. The hospital guards restrained him. They've sedated him, and he's in a straight jacket. When I asked why the straight jacket, the duty nurse said because he was clawing his face where he thought the rash was. I saw the scratch marks on his face, but there is no rash.

—Where is he now? asked Margaux, biting her lower lip.

—Bay Side Center for Behavioral Health. It's the mental health arm of Memorial Hospital.

—It's that serious? asked Margaux, trying to think what the ramifications of a hospitalized estranged husband meant.

—Liz was here with her boyfriend, Charles. They said something about a bird dropping a load on dad's face yesterday. She thought maybe that's what caused the problem. But, mom, dad's lost it. There is no rash or flesh-eating virus on his face. But he swears there is. He says he can see it. But, mom, no one else can. Pretty strange.

—What are they going to do?

—They're holding him for 72 hours for observation. According to Liz, dad was drinking more than usual last night. They want to detox his system and see if he comes around.

—Where's Liz?

—She went to lunch with Charles. I have to get back to Tampa. Liz said she would keep you updated.

—You know your father had a restraining order issued banning me from coming to Sarasota.

—Yeah, Liz told me. Is this Jack Mahler that much better than dad? Liz says he's creative and a neat guy. But come on mom, aren't you a little old to be having affairs, much less with a seventy-year-old bohemian artist?

—Slow down there, Troy. Your mother is speaking here. Look, Troy, believe it or not, people change. You know how estranged the judge has been from his family. Only Liz and I went to your college football games. I don't know how long my relationship with Jack will last, but before your father stepped in and sent me to Santa Fe, I felt twenty years younger.

—Sorry mom. I was talking out of turn, but I have to go. I've got a practice session in Tampa. I'll call you later. Love you, mom.

—Love you too, Troy.

* * *

It was Liz's third call of the day to Margaux. They had been on the phone for a half hour.

—Yes, Liz, said Margaux, but as you know, I can't come to Sarasota. Your father has exiled me with that court order.

—Mom, I can't stay here and baby-sit him. I have to get back to New York. Charles and I are leaving tomorrow morning on the Jetblue flight. I told you, he's still delusional about this rash. Whenever the shrinks talk to him, he gets violent.

He keeps saying it was the raven shit that did this.

—What do you mean, "raven shit"?

—We were sitting on his boat, and this big raven flew down. It landed on the rail, looked at dad and then flew at him and shit on his face. Charles swiped at him with his hat and the raven disappeared in a blue flash.

Margaux grinned. She was putting the pieces together. Could this be Carlos's work? If he could be a coyote, couldn't he also be a raven? But how would he get to Sarasota? It would take a raven weeks to fly there, and Carlos worked in my garden yesterday

afternoon. How would he know the judge or his boat? It made no sense.

—Sorry, Liz, I was daydreaming. Ravens don't live in Florida. Out here in New Mexico, but not Florida.

—Well, it was way too big to be a common crow like you see around the waterfront.

—So, just what are they going to do with your father?

—Ah, correction Mrs. Howland, He's my father, but he's your husband. You know, for better or for worse. All the docs can do is keep him sedated.

—I told you he banned me from Sarasota. If I show my face, I'll go directly to jail.

—What a pig fuck.

—Lizzy! Since you've been working in New York, your language has gotten atrocious and vulgar. Please. You're speaking with your mother. Keep a civil tongue in your mouth when you talk to me.

—Sorry, mom. I'll watch my language, but don't get prudish on me like dad.

—Do they have a diagnosis?

—His psychiatrist says he has a psychosomatic delusional disorder. They're giving him some drug to control his violent outbursts, but there is no specific drug for his illness. Typically delusional symptoms will go away, but they may return. It's an episodic disease.

—I'll call his brother and see if he can come down and care for him.

—Mom! Uncle Frank is a well-known transvestite actor in New York City. He won't come to Sarasota. There may be circus freaks in Sarasota, but there's no room for a transvestite actor. He starred in a three-month solo run of the *Vagina Monologues* for chrissake. Besides, dad's a judge. He can't be seen with Frank. It would ruin his career.

—If the press finds out about your father and his condition, his judgeship career is history, Liz, history. His enemies will have a field day.

—But what about you? How will you survive? You've got to hope the trust keeps paying the bills. You could be in big financial trouble, mom. I can't support you on my meager salary at *The New Yorker*. Bloggers aren't high paid writers at that prestigious institution. We're all earning our stripes. I'm not Dorothy Parker, yet.

Margaux's head was spinning. She could not, would not, and wasn't allowed to return to Sarasota until the restraining order was lifted. Not even the judge in a lucid moment could undo the order. It needed the consent of Madame Mahler's attorney, and that attorney was not about to negotiate.

—Well, Liz. My hands are tied. Your father put me in this corner, and now he will suffer the consequences.

—Well, the judge will have to make his way as best he can. I'm not quitting my job to care for him. Besides, I couldn't handle him if he got violent.

—Liz, he's going to have to stew in his own miserable juices. He made this problem, and now he has to live with it.

—But, mom, what do you mean he made this problem? Tell me how he made the problem? You're the adulterer here.

—By withdrawing his affection from his children and me. When's the last time he kissed or hugged you? When's the last time you saw him kiss or hug me? When I conceived you was one of the last times he made love to me. You're twenty-four. Think about it.

Liz took the phone away from her head. She cried, a shoulder-shaking cry, muffled by her forearm over her mouth.

—Liz are you there? Are you crying?

—Yes. I didn't know mom, I truly didn't know. I can't talk anymore. I'll call you later. Love you, mom.

Margaux sat at the kitchen counter and waited for the phone to disconnect. A profound melancholy descended upon her.

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—You Jack Mahler? asked a short, heavysset man standing at Jack's studio door.

—I'm your man, replied Jack.

—I've got a big chunk of white alabaster on the back of my truck for you.

—Great! Do you think you can back your truck into my driveway?

—Shouldn't be a problem. You know you have to pay for the delivery in cash.

—Yes, sir. I've got the cash, \$736.22.

—That's the number, he said, consulting his paperwork.

Jack had spent the previous week making a carving platform that would hold a six-foot tall five-ton chunk of translucent white alabaster. It was a labor of love. All during the process of fitting the heavy timbers together, he visualized how he would carve the stone. It would require a lighter touch, since the alabaster was much softer than marble. He had bought and assembled some special tools for the project.

When the driver backed the truck into Jack's driveway, Jack saw the stone in all its beauty. It was absolutely magnificent. As fine a product of the earth as a man could want. It was exciting and slightly erotic to see it coyly swathed in clear plastic in its custom crate.

—You all alone? Jack asked the driver.

—Yip.

—You don't have a helper? How are we going to get that five-ton white beauty into my studio?

—Watch me.

It took the man an hour to accomplish the task, but there it stood on the platform, a gleaming white potential of feminine pulchritude. A goddess couldn't ask for a more beautiful stone to enshrine her hallowed self. Margaux would be his Aphrodite. He would carve her face with that seductive smile, head erect, chest out, legs slightly bent with her knees almost touching. The same way she stood nude before me the first time.

Jack couldn't help himself. He telephoned Margaux.

—Yes, who is this? asked Margaux.

—A loving friend.

—Jack! Oh, do I need this call.

—Me, too. Guess what?

—What?

—The alabaster stone arrived today. It's in my studio. I'm going to make you famous. It is so beautiful. It fairly glows. When I'm finished, you will be so life-like that people will expect you to kiss them.

—Jack, that's wonderful. I'm so happy for you.

—What's the matter? You sound ... distant.

Margaux hesitated. She walked to the sofa in the living room and sat down before answering.

—Jack, the judge is in the mental health ward at Sarasota Memorial Hospital.

—What? The judge? Why?

—He's been diagnosed with a psychosomatic delusional disorder. He thinks there's a rash on his face, but there isn't one. He could lose his judgeship. I could be homeless.

—Sweetheart, you will never be homeless while I'm alive. I've always been a good provider, not rich like the judge, but more than enough to live very comfortably. If we have to, we'll move to Europe.

—Jack, you are always so confident. That's what I love about you. You're a real man.

—Well, let me carve this astounding stone into your beautiful likeness. Then, if we have to, we'll move abroad. You know if the judge is diagnosed as a loony, then there's no reason why another judge can't rescind the restraining order.

—Your wife's lawyer will object.

—Fuck her and the horse she rode in on.

—Jack! Don't be vulgar, though that is pretty funny. Can you see that fat lesbian lawyer astride a pony? Absolutely comical.

To be continued.

