

The Judge's Wife Part 8

by Daniel Harris

The rash on the judge's face had become an obsession. But why could only he see it? Or were those who saw it too embarrassed to tell him? It was plain as day to him. And now the despicable abomination infected the glorious bronze statue of his estranged wife, Margaux.

Determined to find a cure for the vile blue-green scourge, he asked and received a three-month paid leave of absence from his judicial duties. It wasn't only a disease, it had become a threat to his sanity and livelihood. His shrink thought he was delusional. Someone, somewhere had the key to solving this mysterious rash. But who? And where? Could there be some diabolical plot against him? Some dark phenomena afoot? Maybe a person he sentenced to a long prison term had paid a sorcerer to bedevil him.

The judge sat at his desk in the den pondering the catalog of explanations.

—Mr. Howland, said Katarzyna, his Polish maid, no work today?

—Hello, Katarzyna. No, I'm taking some time off.

Katarzyna brushed the statue of Margaux with her feather duster.

—Statue of Mrs. Howland. So beautiful. So real.

This judge looked at Katarzyna in disbelief.

—What? There's a big problem with the statue. Look, Katarzyna, there are blue-green spots. I think Jack Mahler ruined the statue with some home-brew coating. He ruined a perfectly good portrait of my friend Abe Metzinger with his experiments. Jack's not as smart as he thinks he is.

Katarzyna gave the judge a quizzical look. She didn't understand what Judge Howland was talking about. There were no blue-green spots on the statue. It was pristine. She touched the arm.

—Feel like skin. You work too hard, drink too much, she mumbled, shuffling off to the living room, her vacuum cleaner trailing behind her.

The judge watched her leave. Is she blind or am I nutso? He couldn't say anymore.

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—Leland, said Dr. Galprin the judge's psychiatrist, let's do a little experiment. Are you willing to engage in some empirical research?

—You're convinced I'm crazy. I'm convinced you're incompetent. What can an experiment accomplish?

—It might resolve that issue entirely.

—All right. I'm game. So what's the experiment?

—You're going to remove that silly bandage from your face, and we're going to walk up to Southside Deli. We'll get lunch. I want you to see if anyone notices anything unusual about your face.

—People here are too restrained, too uptight, too P.C. to say squat. Besides, it's too close to the hospital. People expect to see people around here with maladies and facial disfigurements.

—Indulge me, Leland.

Southside Deli was packed. The judge hoped no one would recognize him. Since most of the customers were medical workers from the hospital or nearby clinics, there were no lawyers or police officers among the diners.

As they were walking back to Galprin's office, they met a retired judge.

—Lee, what a pleasure. Why, I haven't seen you or Margaux in weeks, said the old colleague clapping his hand on the judge's shoulder.

—Well, Margaux is at our Santa Fe house. I've been busy and a little under the weather.

—You look fit as a fiddle, and you've gotten rid of that pesky rash you had on your cheek. Did they ever discover what it was?

—Some rare tropical thing. Had the docs stumped. Oh, this is Dr. Galprin. Dr. Galprin, meet Judge Marlowe. Judge Marlowe and I go way back. He mentored me in my early days.

—Pleased to meet you, said Galprin, shaking Marlowe's hand.

—Lee, we missed Margaux at the Siesta Key half-marathon. Thought for sure she would defend her title. She has won her age group six of the eight years we've held the race.

—She's supervising some renovations at our Santa Fe house at the moment.

—That doesn't sound like fun. Say, you must be proud of your son, Troy. He made a helluva play against Tampa Bay last week. Saved the game for the Bears.

—Yes, the head coach gave him the game ball.

—Well, good to see you both. I've got to keep moving. My granddaughter is about to deliver my first great-grandchild.

—Congratulations, boy or girl?

—I'll know by suppertime.

—So, said Galprin, after they returned to his office, there is no rash on your face. If you're convinced, now we can work on why you think there is one there.

—Are you going to psychoanalyze me?

—What do you mean psychoanalyze? If you're implying, try to discover what caused you to have this problem, then yes. Having delusional thoughts is a disease. Not particularly dangerous, but in a case such as yours, it is a borderline obsession, a fetish.

—You mean like I'm a head case?

—I would never say that to a patient. Can you come Friday, same time?

—Yes, I told you I took a leave of absence to get to the bottom of this.

—I don't want you to put any more bandages on your face. I want you to get out in public. Go to the beach, shopping, museums, restaurants, parks. You need to reinforce your psyche that you don't have this thing on your face.

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Jack Mahler was out of steam. He sat on his Adirondack chair and studied the alabaster statue of Margaux. The physical effort of working on such a large stone sculpture was enormous. He was pushing himself to exhaustion.

He finished all the chisel work and was now power-grinding and shaping with files and raffles. As Margaux emerged from the alabaster, he had to tell himself to slow down. Be careful. Study the stone. There could be a hidden fault. A crack. The wrong force or angle of a tool could be disastrous. It could ruin all his efforts. The head and upper torso were ready for the long, arduous polishing process. He still had to finish shaping her legs, feet, and the base, probably another forty hours of filing and grinding, and then endless polishing and waxing.

To see how the stone would look when finished, he took a damp cloth and wiped the face. The face glowed. The stone was magical. On a whim, he leaned forward and kissed the moistened lips of the statue.

Did he imagine something just now? The statue's lips were warm. He kissed the lips again. They *were* warm. The statue's lips seemed to cling to his. Exactly the way Margaux let her mouth linger after a soft kiss.

Jack shook his head. I must be so tired I'm hallucinating. He returned to the Adirondack chair. He was pleased with his work. It would be his masterpiece.

Jack's ringing cell phone interrupted his reverie. He hauled himself up from the chair and walked to his workbench. He blew the stone dust off of the cell phone.

—Hello.

—Jack?

—Margaux! Oh, so good to hear your voice. How are you?

—Miserable.

—Why?

—I miss you so much. I had a big quarrel with the Leland. I told him I want a divorce. He says he'll fight me all the way. He wants to come out to Santa Fe for Christmas and New Year's holidays. I told him he's not welcome. He said he wasn't welcome because I'd be entertaining you in Santa Fe. He's such an overbearing ass. I called Troy, and he has tickets for the Bear-Packers game. So how 'bout you meet me in Chicago, Friday afternoon?

—You don't have to ask twice.

—I was hoping you would say that. I've booked a room at The Waldorf.

—Great! You should see how beautiful you look in alabaster. The stone has an inner glow so like you. You are going to love it.

—I can't wait to see it. Bring photographs.

Margaux hesitated, unsure whether to tell Jack. She decided to tell.

—This is going to sound foolish, Jack, but I was sitting on the couch debating whether I should call you and I swear I could feel you kiss my lips. It made me so lonely for you, I said to myself, "To hell with the restraining order, I'm calling Jack."

—Sweetheart, I just kissed your stone lips, not five minutes before you called. Believe me. The statue is magical.

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Carlos parked his truck on a mesa north of Santa Fe. He sat on the tailgate in the setting sun. He wore a wool shirt, a worn fleece jacket, jeans, boots and a misshapen felt hat with three eagle feathers dangling from the hatband. His dark eyes were closed in meditation. He wasn't in danger, but his coyote spirit was telling him to act. He didn't know where or how to act. He needed to summon a vision. He raised his arms to the sun and began a full-throated chant. As the sun set behind the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, his song produced a vision. Satisfied, he got into his truck and drove home for dinner. He knew what to do. Raven and Coyote were his familiars.

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When the judge arrived home from his appointment with Dr. Galprin, he went into the bathroom and checked his face in the mirror. There, bold as ever, was the goddamn blue-green rash.

—Son of a bitch! I knew those medical people were goddamn lying to me. My intuition was correct.

The judge walked into the den. Everywhere he had touched the statue, he saw the blue-green rash.

—Goddamnit! I'm sick of this shit. It's time to get rip-roaring drunk.

After a few drinks and some cold pizza, the judge's resolve to keep his illicit desires in check weakened. He showered, put on a robe, refreshed his drink and walked into the den. He booted his computer. After entering three passwords, he gained access to the hidden partition on his hard drive. He opened his man-boy porn collection. He watched his favorite video. As he watched a man spank a boy's bum, he became aroused.

On his way to refill his drink, he stopped and regarded the besmirched statue of Margaux.

Why the hell did I go through with this? he thought. I should have canceled the commission the minute I suspected Margaux was fucking that jerk. What a fool I was ... now look at me, awash in a blue-green miasma. I could kill that woman and her lover. Ah, if it were only Renaissance Italy!

He studied the small hand with arthritis in the pinky. It looked so familiar, yet he recalled a similar hand, a boy's hand. A boy's hand with a deformed little finger. The memory of that child's hand lay buried in the forbidden recesses of his subconscious. Fondling the statue's hand, he felt a stirring in his loins. Flashbacks of smarmy sexual encounters in dark alleys and parked cars flooded his mind.

As he slowly slid his engorged penis in and out of the statue's hand, he recalled his last trip to New York City. It was raining. He was in a rental car parked on Washington Street in Lower Manhattan. Now he felt the naked boy's small hand on his cock. He remembered the boy's glistening eyes as he teased the judge's rampant erection.

—Nooooooooooooo! shouted the judge as he came in a spasm that nearly knocked the statue off the table. The judge collapsed on the floor.

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Bleary-eyed and unsteady the judge awoke lying on the den floor. He stumbled to his feet and went to the bathroom. As he stood over

the bowl, he looked down and saw his penis covered with the cursed blue-green rash. He screamed.

In the shower, he washed his penis with soap. He used the hand brush. He scrubbed his penis nearly raw, but still the blue-green rash remained.

—God damn it, he yelled, throwing the scrub brush on the shower floor.

Wait, stop, and calm down, he told himself. There has to be a rational explanation for all this. Galprin tells me there is no blue-green rash on my face. There's probably none on my cock, but why the hell do I see it? Am I crazy, or the victim of some paranormal prank? What causes these visions, if that is what they are?

After toweling off, the judge walked into the den naked. Examining the statue he noticed that the blue-green rash on the left hand was now gone. He looked on the floor. There on a blue-green pool floated last night's ejaculation.

On a whim, he put his raw flaccid member in the statue's extended left hand. As it rested against the palm of the small hand, the rash on his penis disappeared. The judge threw his head back, unleashing a long drawn out howl.

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The judge awoke to hear the maid, Katarzyna, singing some silly ditty in Polish.

—Mr. Howland, you still in bed? Almost one in afternoon.

—There was a party last night.

In a panic, the judge wondered if he had shut down his computer. He threw on his robe and went into the den. The computer was off, but warm. Did Katarzyna turn it off? Did she see any of the pictures? His life was unraveling. How could he be so careless?

He looked to see if his jizz was still on the floor in the blue-green pool.

It was not there. Katarzyna must have cleaned it up. The judge stood holding his head. He was going crazy. He wasn't going crazy; he was already there. Something was controlling his mind.

—Katarzyna, do you believe in spirits?

—Sometimes. Before we left Warsaw, my sister foresaw the death of our brother. Mama, she dreamed papa was killed the night the Russians shot him.

—If I thought some spirit was interfering with my life, do you know anyone who can help me?

—My grandmamma. She a spirit person.

—What does that mean?

—She can detect good and evil spirits.

—Does she live here?

—She live Tampa.

—Can I meet her?

—I bring her here next time.

—No, tomorrow.

—Okay, you want? Tomorrow afternoon. Okay.

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—Judge Harland, this my grandmamma. She called Urszula, said Katarzyna.

Katarzyna's relative looked like a caricature of a fairy tale witch. She was short with a long nose, thin lips, pointy chin, and a few warts. A babushka covered her thinning gray hair. She had a widow's hump that forced her to walk staring at the ground in front of her feet. She used a cane and wore gold lamé slippers. She wore numerous colorful scarves. The judge assumed there was a shift or caftan under all the scarves.

—Pleased to meet you, Urszula, I'm Lee.

—We sit table?

—Let's go into the kitchen so we won't disturb Katarzyna.

The judge sat opposite Urszula. She took the judge's left hand in both her hands. Her hands were very warm, almost hot. The judge expected such an elderly woman to have cold hands.

—You sick, said the old woman.

The judge didn't know if that was a question or observation.

—Yes, I see a blue-green rash on my cheek, he said pointing to the spot. The doctors tell me there is no rash on my cheek. But I see it plain as day when I look in a mirror.

Straining her neck, the crone twisted her head to examine the judge's face.

—I see it. Come close.

The judge rose from his chair and squatted next to the woman. She put her lips exactly where the judge knew the rash was. Suddenly the old crone's head snapped back. It was as if she had received a powerful electric shock.

—What was that? asked the judge, steadying the old woman on her chair.

The woman didn't answer. When the judge looked at her face, the pupils of the woman's eyes were rolled out of sight. Her lips were swollen. Her fluttering tongue was dripping blue-green foam. A blue-green froth floated in front of her chest.

—What the hell! Urszula, are you okay? Are you sick? Speak to me.

The woman sat shaking in the chair. After a few moments, the color returned to her face, the swelling subsided and the blue-green cloud disappeared.

—What was that? asked the judge.

—Strong hex.

The judge looked at the old crone. Should he believe this hokum? He had just witnessed the old woman's involuntary reaction to the rash. There must be something on his face that shocked the old woman. Or was it a ruse? Was he being conned? His intuition told him what he witnessed was real.

—Sit, said the old hag, pointing to the chair across the table from her.

She took his left hand in both her hands.

—I see man. He makes people and animals. His spirit here.

The woman released the judge's hand.

—That's it?

—Done, said the old woman, giving the judge a wan smile.

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Dr. Galprin looked at the judge. This was not the vain, fastidious man he knew. The judge's face was unshaven, his clothes disheveled,

his hair uncombed, his eyes red-rimmed. An astounding transformation from the man he had seen on Tuesday.

—Tell me, do you still see the rash? Galprin asked the judge.

—Of course, but you tell me it's not there, so I didn't bandage my face.

—You look distressed.

—I couldn't sleep last night. When I finally dozed off, I slept through my alarm. I didn't have time to shower. I barely made our appointment. You have to believe me. I see the rash. It's real. It's *contagious*.

—*Contagious*? asked Galprin, folding his hands on his desk and wondering how far afield his patient's mind had gone. Explain this to me.

—I commissioned a bronze statue of my wife from Jack Mahler, the author, painter, and sculptor. He delivered it earlier this week. That night I was admiring it. It is quite a remarkable work. Mahler apparently has some secret process because the surface of the bronze feels like actual skin. The next morning I looked at the statue. Everywhere I touched the statue the night before was covered in a blue-green rash. I know it sounds crazy, and it is crazy. Believe me, as a judge, I've heard more than my share of outrageous stories. But I swear, this is true.

—Has anyone else seen the statue? Your wife or your children?

—My wife is at our Santa Fe house. My son's in Chicago and my daughter's in New York City. My maid saw it but didn't mention the blue-green rash. But then, her English is limited.

The doctor looked up from his yellow note pad. He noticed that the judge hadn't mentioned any of his family members by name.

—Did you ask the maid if she saw the blue-green rash?

—I don't recall, said the judge, hoping the doctor wouldn't catch the prevarication.

—Too bad, that would have been valuable information.

—What are you implying, Dr. Galprin? If she didn't see the green rash, it would prove that I'm delusional or hallucinating?

Galprin didn't answer.

—Well? asked the judge.

—Look, Lee, I'm going to prescribe group therapy.

The judge stood and began pacing the small cramped office.

—Me? Do you know who I am? I can't go to group therapy. I'm a state judge. If it gets out that I'm in therapy for a mental disorder, I'll be relieved of my judgeship.

The judge wondered if he should tell Galprin about the old crone. If Galprin discovered that he was consulting some Polish witch, it would confirm that he was losing his marbles.

—Lee, relax. The group is non-judgmental. We can make sure no one in the group knows your identity. No one will know you're a judge. It will help you. The group will consist of people with similar disorders. It will be a small group of four or five.

—Come on, doc. I'm not hearing voices. I don't want to be thrown in with a bunch of schizoids.

—Well, you think about it. I believe it is the best course of treatment. Lee, you've got to pull yourself together. You're letting yourself slide. That doesn't bode well for your future. We find being in the company of people with similar problems is beneficial in maintaining one's self-esteem.

—I have plenty of self-esteem, Dr. Galprin. You know that. My intuition tells me you are setting me up for failure.

—Frequently, even a well-educated individual is not qualified to judge his or her problems. The group finds the chinks in the personality and helps heal the fissure. I've witnessed it time and time again. It's in your best interest.

To be continued

