

The Judge's Wife

by Daniel Harris

Margaux was a longtime regular at the gym. Her predictable costume was long gym pants, a long sleeved shirt, and Nike shoes. She was tall, slender and buff. She was not a voluptuary. Her intelligent eyes and her ready smile made her attractive. At the early hour she used the gym, it was filled with high-powered lawyers and politicians. She knew all of them. Those alpha types chatted her up whenever she was between machines.

It wasn't until Jack had been going to the gym for two years that he learned her name. Occasionally he'd nod hello, but he was a loner in the gym. He did his workouts and left without interacting with anyone other than the desk clerk or once a week with his physical therapist/trainee

At the Sarasota Sailing Squadron, Jack befriended one of the city's most powerful lawyers who told him the gym woman's name was Margaux. She was a Yankee WASP from Connecticut married to a formidable state Judge. She had two grown children, a boy, who was a member of the practice squad for the Chicago Bears and a girl who was a blogger for *The New Yorker*. Margaux and her husband owned a getaway home in Santa Fe, New Mexico

One morning during a thunderstorm, the lights in the gym went out. Margaux and Jack were on adjacent cardio machines.

—Well, I guess that ends my workout, said Margaux, pulling the combs from her hair, letting it fall to her shoulders.

—Yeah, no juice, no work.

They both made a perfunctory effort to wipe down the machines.

—So, I've seen you here for four years, what do you do? Margaux asked Jack.

He didn't know what to answer. He was a musician who had to retire after an automobile accident ended his career. He painted, sculpted, and wrote stories and novels, which he published and sold on various Internet sites.

—Well, I'm a retired musician.
—Retired musician? Don't musicians play music until they die?
—That was the plan, but a drunk ran head-on into my car. The accident broke half the bones in my body.
—That's awful.
—Well, I'm here to tell the tale, so I survived.
—What's your name?
—Jack. Jack Mahler.
—My name is Margaux. Margaux Howland is my married name. My maiden name is Bradford. I'm related to the Mayflower Bradford family.
—Is your husband the Judge?
—Why, yes. We've been married 33 years.
—Sounds comfortable.
—Be nice.
—Sorry, I've had to struggle most of my life.
—Since I've never heard of you, I guess so.
The lights came on, and they went their separate ways.

A week or so later, Jack was maxing-out on the Stair-Master when Margaux walked up to him.

—Jack, you didn't tell me you were the author of the *The SoHo Quartet*.

—You didn't ask.

—I read the second book in the quartet, *Francesco Martinelli*. I was in tears at the end.

—Yes, Francesco is a sympathetic character based on a close friend and famous painter.

—Did you have to kill him?

—He killed himself.

She walked away. She couldn't know that the author suffers as much as his characters when bad things happen to his creations. Authors don't dictate the outcome; they only write the story.

As Jack was walking out of the gym, she drove by in her car, a Honda CR-V. She stopped and lowered the driver's side window.

—Why are you so cruel, Jack? I loved that book. I fell in love with Francesco. I cried when he committed suicide. I cried for his sons and his beautiful wife, Oriana Morosini.

—I didn't sleep for two months after Francesco killed himself. But you know, when you write a novel, no matter how much you outline and plan, the characters and their personalities take over. You become a kind of scribe reporting the events.

—I've never heard that before.

—I'll buy you a coffee and explain it to you.

—I'm off to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Tell me more when I return.

Jack didn't see her again for several months. He'd heard she had suffered a leg injury and was undergoing rehab with his personal trainer. She was in a rehab session early one morning when Jack arrived at the gym

—Hey, man, what's happening? Jack asked Juan, his trainer

—Friday morning at 6, the trainer replied. You better get a good night's sleep. I intend to break you.

—Not possible, *amigo*.

—Go to bed early or you'll suffer.

—You can't break me, Jack replied, smiling broadly.

Margaux smiled at Jack. It was the sexiest smile he'd ever seen. His workout was a bust. All he could think of was, why would she give him such a seductive smile? Or was he imagining things?

When he went to leave, he picked up his keys at the desk. There was a note attached to the keys: "Meet me at Cynthia's Café at 4 Friday afternoon, Margaux."

How could he say no, it was Thursday morning, and he had no way of contacting her. How did she know that Cynthia's Café was two blocks from his house? Why would a woman married to a powerful Judge want to meet with him? Did she pick up his

attraction to her? Was she attracted to him? Did she know his marriage was all but over? Her seductive smile was fresh on his mind.

Jack arrived at Cynthia's Café at quarter to four. Pascal, the co-owner, greeted him with open arms. He had given them a small loan when they first opened. It helped them through their first year.

—Give me a Leffe Blonde. I'm expecting a lady friend, so I'll pay for whatever she chooses to drink.

—You don't pay for drinks here.

—Hey, bro. Charge me now, but don't ask me for a loan later.

—My treat. You're a friend of the house.

—Thanks, bro.

—I like the ladies you bring here.

—Well, maybe it helps your business, and hopefully, I get some quality time with a witty, good-looking woman.

Jack took his beer and sat at a window table. He opened the Kindle app on his iPhone and continued reading Haruki Murakami's novel *1Q84*.

—Hi! said Margaux, holding a wine glass. May I join you?

—Of course, said Jack, standing and seating her across the small table.

—You know I work down the street. I hope this was not inconvenient for you.

—No, it's my neighborhood café.

—Cynthia says you are a generous and kind man.

—Who wouldn't love Cynthia? She's beautiful, speaks four languages, and is a wonderful chef. Her quiche is to die for.

—I thought real men didn't eat quiche.

—You're dating yourself, Margaux; those 60's guys never ate Cynthia's quiche.

Margaux was a youthful-looking woman in her mid-fifties. Being a life-long runner she was in remarkable shape. She had high

prominent cheekbones, and with her narrow chin those high bones gave her face a buoyant chipmunk expression. Double dimples dotted both sides of her generous full mouth when she smiled. She had darkened her eyelashes, but otherwise left her large brown eyes untouched. She kept her stylishly shoulder-length hair a natural stunning silver. Her nails, fingers and toes, were recently manicured and painted a dusky crimson. She was wearing a white short skirt that exposed most of her long, well-muscled legs. Her apple-sized breasts were fetterless, and the nipples nudged her sleeveless floral silk blouse. Outside of small diamond stud earrings, the only other jewelry was a thin gold band on her ring finger.

—Cynthia does make the most divine quiche, she said.

—Well, you know Cynthia is half Peruvian and half French, two countries with strong culinary traditions. Peru has world-famous food resources as well as a stellar culinary tradition; and we know the French have raised the culinary arts to the pinnacle.

—You sound like you've been to Peru.

—I was there for almost a year about forty years ago. Peru is much different now; the ethnic uniqueness has been co-opted by the media, but the poor are still the suffering poor.

—You said you were a musician. You must have traveled a lot.

—There were times when I was a full-time road warrior. Cobbling together a life, I've worn many hats. I was fortunate to grow up in a very creative household. From the time I was about twelve, I painted, composed, invented or build something new every day. It carries over to now. This morning I wrote a draft of a new short story and started a new sculpture. It's what I do and have done all my life. I survived on my creativity and my talents. I wouldn't have it any other way. Creative intensity at my level is foreign to most people.

This information froze Margaux's smile. She seemed incredulous that a person could live by their creative talents.

—Why haven't I heard of you before?

Jack took a sip of his beer. There was no easy answer.

—Well, I've always been on the front edge of art. The avant-garde or perhaps what is before the avant-garde. Not that I didn't study the masters. My training at the Eastman School of Music and Yale was very traditional. My training as a teenager at the Art Institute of Chicago was traditional. In fact, I won prizes at all three schools. But I had an irresistible urge to be my own person: a maverick, an outcast, an outlier. The seduction of the strange and difficult was in me. I made my living playing in symphony orchestras until I was forty, but then I said to myself, "If I don't start doing what I want to do, the life I want will pass me by." So I quit the orchestra and set out on my own. I made a living and had a good reputation among the a-list international group of jazz and new music musicians. It was an exciting though not particularly prosperous life, but I was never in poverty, without food, or comfortable housing.

—That's so far removed from my experience. I attended Vassar but dropped out in my senior year to marry my husband who is six years older. He graduated from Yale Law School and we were married the next day. Four years later our son was born. Our daughter arrived three years after that. I've been married for 33 years.

—Me, too, but it's my second marriage. The first one lasted less than three years.

It's hard to tell how she took that information. She swallowed the last of her wine.

—May I get you another wine?

—Maybe I should go.

—You just arrived.

She looked distressed.

—Did I offend you? asked Jack.

—I don't know what I thought, she said, but I liked your book. You write a good story.

—Well, thank you. Tell me about yourself. But, first, let me get you another wine.

—I think I should leave. My husband is out of town and will call home. He expects me to be home.

—Perhaps a coffee?

—No, I really must leave.

When she stood, Jack rose and pulled back her chair.

—I'm sorry. This was all a mistake, she said.

—No, I enjoyed your company, if only for fifteen minutes. Please don't think it was a mistake.

—I expected something different, but ... thank you for the wine.

She turned abruptly and walked out the door. Through the window, Jack could see her enter her car. She sat in the driver's seat with her face in her hands.

—Eh, you didn't score with her, said Pascal, raising an eyebrow. She looked ripe.

—I guess I'm not her type, my friend.

—She looked like she wanted to take you to her bed.

—I thought so, but it was not to be.

Jack saw her at the gym four days later. He was cooling down on an exercise bike.

—I read the first book in the *SoHo Quartet: Ben Clarone*. I didn't like the first part, but it grabbed me after he went to Europe. What a great movie it would make.

—I guess that's every writer's dream to have his stories made into a movie.

—Listen, I'm embarrassed by my behavior last Friday.

—Not a problem. Sorry you didn't stay around for conversation.

—You've seen me for four years looking my worst. How can you be interested?

—Well, I know the potential. Drop-dead beautiful women are afraid men will ruin their make-up or wrinkle their blouse. I know. I'm married to one. I can tell you have a big loving heart and are an upbeat person. You are probably a paragon of the loving wife and mother.

—Do you know what it's like being married to a Judge? I've been under the gavel for twenty years.

—Well, I spent eight hours yesterday with a mallet and chisel hammering marble, much grittier than a banging a Judge's gavel. Hammering rocks is considered hard labor in prison.

—There's nothing creative or exciting about sentencing the under classes to jail.

—Well, stop by my studio some afternoon. I'm there from two until eight. Then I make dinner. I write in the morning and don't take calls, e-mails or texts. Here's my card with the address.

Margaux visited Jack's studio with the Judge on a cold rainy late winter day. Since Jack was polishing a marble piece, he was dressed in full dust suit and respirator. Even with the vacuum on the sander, dust motes filled the air. When he saw Margaux and the Judge, he turned off the sander and removed his mask.

—Welcome to my studio. Excuse the dust, it comes with the territory. I'm Jack Mahler, said Jack, offering his hand to the Judge who ignored it.

—I think you know Margaux from the gym. I'm Judge Leland Howland.

—The gallery is right through this door.

—We came to see your artwork, said the Judge. Margaux is eager to see your work.

—This way to the gallery

As they walked to the gallery, Margaux tried to catch Jack's eye. He marveled at her gait, like a fine racehorse. There was nothing classically feminine about her, yet she had sex appeal. Jack wanted her. Her pheromones were working on him overtime.

—Is all this *your* artwork? asked the Judge.

—Absolutely! These are the most recent paintings and sculptures. Half the upstairs loft is filled with paintings and sketchbooks. I've always sketched and produced art since I was in grade school.

—You are nothing if not productive, said the Judge.

—I enjoy what I do, so I do a lot of it, said Jack.

—Where are your sculptures? asked Margaux. Juan, at the gym, said you make wonderfully whimsical pieces.

—I think Juan is talking about the porcelain pieces in the bookcase behind you. The larger sculptures are out back in my sculpture garden.

For two hours Jack showed them his recent work. He didn't want to get into the works in the loft upstairs.

—Is this painting of the weeping woman and the statue of the same name related? asked the judge.

—The painting came first, the marble version later.

—I see.

As one would expect, the Judge was a difficult read. Jack couldn't tell if his reticence to speak was informed by an ignorance of the language of criticism, or he presupposed that Jack's work was some amateur retirement hobby. Margaux, on the other hand, was enthusiastic and positively upbeat about Jack's art.

—Who is the woman with the big hat in this portrait? Margaux asked.

—My estranged wife. I painted her from a sketch I made of her in Venice, Italy. I performed at the Venice Music Biennale in 2005. She accompanied me to Venice. As you can see, she has a classically beautiful face, perfectly framed by one of her favorite wide-brimmed hats.

—A beautiful woman, said the Judge, but then one would expect an artist to have a beautiful wife.

He spoke as if a Judge's wife was not required to have pulchritude. The scowl on Margaux's face confirmed Jack's thoughts.

—Thank you, said Jack. I'll pass on the compliment. She's a scholar and writer.

—Scholar? said Margaux. Sounds so Chaucerian. "Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote ..." she recited in charming Middle English.

Jack didn't expect Margaux to know Chaucer.

—Well, she has very strong academic credentials and a thirty-page publication list.

—About what? asked the Judge.

—Early women political writers in Britain and Ireland, but also art, medicine, and just about anything that touched women's lives in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, also essays on Rubens, Veronese, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde and other literary and art figures.

—Jack, who is this? asked Margaux, pointing to a gray tabby cat who had stuck his head through the balusters of the staircase leading to the loft.

—That's Kidd Stretch, my cat from Brooklyn. I rescued him from Prospect Park in Brooklyn. He talks, snores, and is a real soak for affection.

—Will he bite me? asked Margaux.

—No way. He might want to play fisticuffs. Never uses his claws, though.

—Stretch, say hello to these people, said Jack.

—Meow.

—He answered you, said the Judge in disbelief.

—Sure, Stretch is a big talker.

Stretch sauntered down the stairs and walked up to Margaux and meowed.

—He wants you to pick him up and praise him, said Jack.

Margaux picked up Stretch, who began to purr loudly.

—What a wonderful cat, said Margaux, scratching his ears. His fur is like silk. Leland doesn't like cats. Now that the kids are gone, we don't have a dog either.

—Stretch loves everyone.

—Not to change the subject, but what is the price of the marble *Weeping Woman*? asked the Judge.

—I'd have to think about that.

—I might want it for my chambers. As you can imagine, there are plenty of weeping women in my courtroom.

—I gave the nude statue of my first wife to her. A mistake in retrospect, but it was in lieu of alimony. She sold it to a Silicon Valley millionaire collector for \$40,000, or so she said.

The Judge looked at Margaux. She gave him the "don't you dare" look.

—My nephew's wife is the model, said Jack. I promised it to her. She's in veterinary school in Michigan. She'll probably sell it to pay her tuition bills.

Margaux looked relieved, the Judge scowled.

—I can sell you the painting for \$1000, said Jack.

—Could you make a statue of Margaux? asked the Judge.

—What size?

—About half life-size. Maybe three feet tall. Margaux's five-eleven.

—Bronze or marble? For inside or outside?

—How are they different?

—Marble is more expensive. I would not be carving marble from a live model but from sketches. If you want bronze, I would make a clay model from life and sketches. The final product would be cast. It could also be scaled up to life-size. Of course, that would cost serious money. For outside display life-size is the ticket.

—Margaux is a champion runner. I would want her caught in full stride.

—My neighbor has a treadmill I could borrow. Margaux could run on it while I sketched her.

—Or I could video her running, and you could make the sculpture from those stills.

—That might work, but I would still need to make studies of her face, head, torso, hands, feet: The whole woman in parts. I need time to think about it. It would be a large, time-consuming project and I'm in prepublication on my new flash fiction collection, *Too Long for Haiku*.

—You think about it.

—Let's talk in a month. My calendar should be open to a big project by then.

To be continued.

