

Protagonist Unbound

by George LaCas

Protag walked into the kitchen, and found his wife Gertrud piling cooking utensils into a brown paper bag.

“What are you doing?” Protag asked her.

“Isn't it obvious?” said Gertrud. “I'm packing. I'm leaving you.” Into the bag went a dusty pair of black plastic tongs, and a handful of rubber gripper-thingies of all different colors. Protag noted that Gertrud's brow was knotted with stress and rage, as if she'd been drinking too much coffee and reading the latest translation of Simone de Beauvoir.

“Well,” said Protag, “I would have thought you'd be packing a suitcase ... you know, pulling down hangers at random, emptying your dresser drawers.”

She looked at him, a gravy-stained spatula in her hand.

“But that would be cliché, wouldn't it,” she said. “I thought I'd spare you the embarrassment of having to witness it.”

“I hate your sarcasm,” he said.

“You used to love it,” she said.

“I used to love a lot of things.”

After she had filled the brown paper bag to the top with assorted kitchen utensils and the food processor, Gertrud stormed out of the kitchen, through the hallway, and out the door. Protag watched her climb into the back seat of a waiting taxi.

He recognized his wife's leaving him as the Inciting Incident that would spur him on to some inevitable conclusion, though he had not the foggiest idea what that might be. He watched the taxi back out of the driveway, and the last thing he saw before the cab disappeared past the azaleas was Gertrud sticking out her tongue at him, her face obscured by the thumb-smudged glass of her window.

He sat in his therapist's office. It was raining outside, and Protag watched through the window as the water gushed from the eaves and formed a muddy pool next to a holly bush.

"Now then, Mr. Protag," said his therapist, whose name was Jack B. Nimble. "I think it's important that we work through this thing, don't you? It's a traumatic experience when one's wife leaves him."

"Dr. Nimble, I think you have a drainage problem out there," observed Protag.

"A drainage problem?" echoed Dr. Nimble, who then laughed in his falsely-casual way that, Protag knew, was like a glob of water-based lubricant: clear, slick at first, does the job but pretty soon you need more. At least he wouldn't say that Dr. Nimble was oily.

"The puddle out there is getting bigger," said Protag. "But yes, Doctor. By all means, let's talk about Gertrud leaving ... before the trauma sets in."

"And please—call me Jack," said Dr. Nimble.

"Fine, Doctor ... Jack. And you can call me Dick," said Protag.

"Well then, Dick, in light of this new development in your domestic situation," said Dr. Nimble, crossing his legs and pretending to take notes on his laptop computer, but Protag could tell he was actually playing solitaire, or possibly Scrabble, "what goals would you say are now confronting you? Guiding your actions, as it were?"

"Goals?" said Protag. He didn't know he was supposed to have any goals.

"Yes, because after your wife left you," said Dr. Nimble, "a response is required of you, since you're the main character of your own story, as it were, and you don't want to be a cipher."

"I see, Jack," said Protag, although he didn't see anything. While he felt an inner resistance to the idea of a goal, and was about to close his mind and pretend to take part in the remainder of the

session and then leave, he suddenly realized that it was a good thing he had Dr. Nimble ... a good thing he had Jack.

"So, Dick, since we're on the subject—name your goal, right here and now."

"Hmm," began Protag. "How about this—I go out and get laid, even if I have to hire a call girl."

"I make no judgments," said Dr. Nimble. "A dubious goal is better than no goal at all."

"So that's it? I can have getting laid as my goal?" asked Protag. He thought that maybe Dr. Nimble had hit a lucky run of aces in his solitaire game and wasn't really paying attention.

"I don't see why not," said Dr. Nimble, typing and watching his laptop screen. "But there is a flipside to your goal, and that is your unconscious goal, which might well work at cross-purposes to your conscious goal."

"Now you've lost me, Jack," said Protag.

"For example, your unconscious goal might be, in this case, to sabotage your own efforts at getting laid." Dr. Nimble continued tapping keys and watching the screen, and then he said something under his breath that Protag thought sounded like *What do I have to do for a fucking Jack of Spades?*

"Excuse me, I missed that last part," said Protag.

"I said, you'd be avoiding getting laid in hopes that Gertrud might come back."

"Oh, I get it," said Protag. He decided he'd have to get another therapist, or maybe take the extreme step of not having one at all.

"Of course, you're not a character in literary fiction," said Dr. Nimble, looking up from his laptop, "so you can go ahead and begin your narrative arc with just the conscious goal of getting laid."

"Narrative arc? Is that like Noah's Ark?"

"It's not like you have a particularly complex character, as it were," said Dr. Nimble.

Protag stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, Jack, I have to go get ready for the singles bars."

The Meathook, the first singles bar on his list, only had a few cars in the parking lot, but Protag felt lucky. Maybe they all belonged to women, and maybe one or two might belong to women with whom he might achieve an erection. He hitched up his pants and went in.

Having gone through the first doorway (the poorly-lit bar doorway perhaps symbolizing the metaphorical doorway marked "End of Marriage"), Protag felt light in spirit. He sat at the bar between two women and he ordered a gin and tonic. The bartender sneered at him and gave him a drink with a yellow-brown lime wedge in it.

Protag turned to the blonde on his right. "Hi, my name is Dick," he said, smiling.

She turned to him wearily. "And when Sartre said that hell is other people," she said, "he was talking about fuckheads like you, so leave me alone."

Protag turned away and stared into his drink, where the dead juice-pods that had detached from his sorry lime wedge floated in the cloudy liquid. Like brine shrimp, they coursed slowly around the single ice cube. His drink smelled bad. Nevertheless, he turned to the redhead on his left.

"Hi there," he said, with less friendly volume to his voice than he had used with the tired-looking blonde. "May I buy you a drink, Miss?"

The redhead, who had a gold hoop in her eyebrow and a scar on her cheek that Protag thought might have been done with an actual meat-hook, turned to him and smiled.

"Sure, Dick, I'd love another," she said in a sultry voice, dark and cigarette-rough. His heart jumped, pumped, and he got a hard-on faster than he had at 18. He drew the surly bartender's attention and pointed to her beer.

"I think the lady is ready for another, and one more here," he said. The bartender gave him a murderous look, slid the redhead a bottle of Schlitz, and began to make another gin and tonic. The redhead sucked the foam from the bottle-neck.

“Thanks,” she said huskily.

“My pleasure,” he said dreamily.

45 minutes later, in a cheap motel that Gertrud wouldn't have been caught dead in, Protag lay back on the bed while the redhead stood and undressed. He admired her shapely, narrow-hipped rear end, which she kept turned to him. The TV was on, although Protag couldn't remember who had turned it on. A commercial for something with Oxy-action played loudly. Protag noted that the redhead wore stockings and a garter belt, and the black stockings had those lines that run up the back. He penis stood straight up out of the fly of his boxers, which had at some point during the drive over here come unsnapped.

“Are you naked yet, Lover Boy?” husked the redhead, wagging her hips and arching her back. Quickly, Protag removed his boxers and undershirt. He left his blue socks on because they were his favorites (Gertrud had been with him the day he'd bought them, had picked them out) and because his feet were cold.

“Now I am,” said Protag.

The redhead, still facing away from him, shucked off her thong, and in aching slow-motion she turned to him with a grin. He could see her blinding white teeth in the half-dark.

“So who goes first, stud?” she asked him, and at that moment he looked from her Cheshire grin to her fantastic breasts to her flat belly to her landing-strip ... to her penis, which was not yet erect but which jumped and pulsed with the motions of her hips, as if it was inviting him to make it so.

“Um ... um ... listen,” said Protag, but the redhead kept smiling that winning smile and coming closer. Pretty soon she slipped into a thick bar of shadow, and he could only tell where she was by touching her.

“Ssh, it's okay, sweetie,” said the redhead. “The first time is always a little confusing.”

It occurred to Protag that he had met his goal, and that Dr. Nimble (Jack) would be proud of him. After a few minutes he realized too that he'd forgotten to ask the redhead's name.

He stood in his kitchen drinking a cup of cold coffee. Gertrud was unpacking the brown paper bag of kitchen utensils.

"In the end, I decided I loved you," she said, "and that as much as I also despise you for ... for a whole list of things, I wanted to come back home."

"I'm glad, Gertrud, I'm really glad." Protag wasn't sure this was the happy ending he wanted. There had been a different kind of happy ending the night before, several in fact. He watched Gertrud's skinny ass in her faded jeans. There was once a time when he'd stayed up late dreaming about marrying her. He could still taste the redhead's flavor in his mouth. There had been climax upon climax, he thought, but where was the resolution?

"Did you at least learn anything from this experience?" she asked him. The bag was empty, and she folded it and placed it carefully on the second shelf of the rolling butcher-block cart. He imagined leaning his head down on the scarred wood surface while Gertrud raised her good Japanese cleaver over his neck.

"Yes, darling, I did," he said, and he went to her then and embraced her. "I learned that, even in this day and age, you've got to be careful about who you get on a first-name basis with." She did not hug him back. Pretty soon she disengaged herself from his arms and left the kitchen. He stood in the doorway and watched her. She went to her computer, and turned it on. Protag felt himself fade into invisibility, as the glow of her screen filled the room.

