

Early One Morning at Denny's

by Jerry Ratch

Throughout breakfast Quebec kept watching this investor fellow, John Lytle. She tried remembering something about him, about when they'd first met. Her first impressions were very nearly always correct. But all she could bring to memory now was that it hadn't been favorable — not at all. Still Herb had persisted, beating down every objection with that fanatic goal-oriented determination of his to bring home the prize, to make a deal, close a sale. It was Herb's great gift — he was a closer by nature — he was born to sell. Quebec knew him like an open and shut book. Herb had an unwavering, almost naive belief in himself. And she loved him for it, always had, from the very moment he grabbed hold of her naked ankle at the swinger party in Los Angeles where they'd first met.

John Lytle. Who was this guy? What did she really know about him. Only what Herb wanted her to know, which was that he had put money, serious money, into the Robinson Development Company just before they started going down the final road toward bankruptcy.

The man had a tick in his face. A bushy black and silver mustache hid his upper lip, and his forehead shined with oil, though it might have been the overly bright lights at the restaurant, which was really just a truck stop. Big semi-tractor trailers pulled up regularly in the parking lot outside the large plate glass windows that were steamed up nearly to the top. The trucks sat with their motors running. They never seemed to shut those things off. It was unnerving to hear them running and running like that without cessation. Quebec had to wonder what must it be like to work at a place like this.

Just as long as she didn't have to, thank God, that's all she knew. She took a sip off the top of her steaming coffee, put the cup carefully back down on its saucer, and continued stirring more cream into the coffee. Her spoon made a clinking sound against the inside of her cup.

She kept watching John Lytle. At the same time she tried to still a voice that kept rising to the surface inside her, something that told her to run. Run, she wanted to shout to Herb, for some reason. For God's sake: *Run!*

But she also tried her damndest to keep cool. Herb would want her to.

The nervous twitch in John Lytle's face seemed to be pulling his neck to one side. It was an abrupt motion, but he would force himself to look forward each time it happened, to keep himself under control. Still, his eyes bulged outward and had the habit of sliding to the side. What was it? Everything seemed to keep going to the side with him. The man gripped his own cup of coffee tightly with both hands. That was when Quebec noticed something that looked like dirt on the sides of his palms.

This was odd, she thought. Very odd. She had never known John Lytle to be anything other than fanatically clean. The kind of man who would pull out a pocketknife at a moment's notice and pare his fingernails at the dinner table. Or pick incessantly at his teeth after a meal.

She tried calling up again the very first impression she had of him when Herb had begun wooing him after Bernie, their financial advisor, had introduced him as a possible investor. Wasn't there something — Quebec tried to remember — something this man had said about himself in some offhand way? Something peculiar? Maybe a hobby he had mentioned?

Quebec simply couldn't retrieve it, but it kept nagging at the back of her mind as she poked at her short stack of pancakes. She poured more syrup over the stack and watched the pancakes absorb the amber liquid.

"So, what kind of consulting job do you have in mind, John?" asked Herb.

"Special," replied John Lytle. "Very special." Then came a smile that opened up like a flower, slowly, and began spreading into a broad grin revealing two gold caps on the man's lower teeth. The rest of his teeth were extraordinarily crooked, on the verge of being rotted.

Quebec began comparing the hair of the two men. John Lytle's was going quite gray already around the fringes of his balding dome, while Herb used one of those color combs on his. He'd been doing this for some time already. It made him appear to be much younger than his fifty-five years, until you got close. That's when you could see the gray roots underneath, which were nearly impossible to hide with a color comb. The gray showed out from underneath the dark color like a slip showing at the hem of a dress. It almost made Herb look somehow foolish. He could be at once sophisticated, and yet so naive. There it was, she thought: her sophisticated, naive man. Her husband, she realized with a start. Now at last she could say it — *her husband!*

At one point during breakfast, Herb raised his coffee cup in a toast, saying, "Here's to those nights when I'm in Florida. I'm going to miss this little woman."

He clinked Quebec's cup with his a little too hard, spilling some coffee.

"Herb got a new job in Tallahassee," Quebec told John. She began mopping up the spill with a paper napkin, but Herb reached out and stopped her.

"Yes. He told me that, yes," John Lytle said. "That's why we had to rush to get this little piece of business out of the way. Before he was gone for Florida."

"Okay, John," Herb said, "so, let's talk about how and when I get paid."

"I pay everything right here and now, one hundred percent in advance," the man said. When he said this, he peered out at Quebec as though he were looking out of a dark tunnel.

Something about this man scared her. Something big leaped inside Quebec's stomach. The whole world flipped over inside. She wondered suddenly if she were on the verge of coming down with the flu.

"I write you a check for the whole amount," John Lytle said, "how is that? I give it right now to your wife. She can take to the bank. If that's okay. Is that okay with Mrs. Robinson?"

"That's—"

"That's perfect," Herb cut in. "Make it out to our names personally, not to the company. This has nothing to do with the company. This is a side business. Just so we understand one another."

"Everything is understood."

"Okay then, that's one thousand dollars, payable to Herb or Quebec Robinson. Put an "or" right there, between the two names. Same last name. Robinson."

"You are married now," the man said. His lip lifted slightly, grinning. His eyes locked on Quebec. "Congratulations on you landing this one. Must be very happy. Must be a good catch, no . . . Mrs. Robinson?"

"Very happy," Quebec acknowledged. She wrapped both hands around her husband's arm, pulling him close. She ran her fingers through the colored hair at the side of his head, realizing when she did this that he needed to get a haircut again. "He's a good man."

"I'm sure," John Lytle said. "I'm sure. That's why I hire him today. Here's your check. Now, I'm afraid we have to run on our way."

"So, how's your wife, John?" Quebec asked. "I haven't seen her in such a long time."

"My wife? . . . My wife?" the man repeated. John Lytle looked sick suddenly. "Why are you asking now about this? We're in business meeting here." He turned part way in his seat, then looked at Quebec. "My wife, she's . . . she is sleeping at home. I couldn't wake her . . . she's been sick, you know."

"Too early?" Quebec said. "I can understand that for sure."

"No," said Herb, frowning at Quebec. "It's about the money. You know."

"Yes, yes, the money," said John Lytle. "She's been sick with worrying about our money."

"She developed ulcers," Herb explained, "when the money issue happened."

Suddenly John Lytle's eyes slid sideways, locking again on Quebec. An exceptionally fierce glare came into his eyes, and when he checked the watch on his wrist, Quebec noticed what looked like a huge brownish stain on the cuff of his white shirt. She shuddered. Her heart stopped beating. . . .

How did Quebec remember her husband? Herb getting into the passenger seat of John Lytle's Buick sedan, centering his briefcase on his lap. The car door closing with a click. That was how she would remember Herb Robinson. Him looking straight ahead — neither to the right, nor to the left. Looking straight ahead like a good businessman. A salesman with an appointment to keep. Nothing more.

