

Jigsaw Magic

by Jesse Minkert

Bonnie envied all of those people who instantly forgot their horrible traumas: Jessica Lynch, the Central Park jogger. Their own brains rescued them. Bonnie's brain was not so generous. It fired memories at her on the most meaningless occasions: at the symphony, standing in the line for the Ladies' Room, or out searching for a birthday present for her niece, or halfway through a crosswalk, or looking out of her kitchen window at the unremarkable start of a partly cloudy day. She saw herself being cut in half, and time spun backward from the moment of pain to the moment that the pain started coming for her.

On the phone Danny had said, "You can't imagine who's in town."

"Your mother."

"No, no. Mark and Irene. I just talked to them."

"Terrific. Bring them over. I'll fix something."

"Mighty short notice."

"I insist."

Bonnie wanted to make something Irene, who could make anything, would never in her life be able to make. She thumbed through her cookbooks until she landed on a Moroccan dish, Chicken Tagine with prunes and honey. The sauce was sweet enough to guarantee lavish praise from Danny and Mark, and at the same time devastate Irene's diet. It was perfect. Bonnie inventoried her supplies. She needed a couple of chickens, turmeric, prunes, almonds, and sesame seeds. The store was three blocks away, but her time was tight so she took the car. The seat belt was a hassle; she skipped it. At the signal a sport utility vehicle raced through a red light and rammed straight into her driver's-side door. Pain like a saw blade cut through her abdomen.

The doctors gave her something, and they also took something away. Ridges of scars crossed her belly. She felt as if a magician had sawn through her to the backbone, hinged her open,

and scooped out the lower half. How much of a woman could she be with no uterus? She could hardly believe that she once had that thought. On the other hand, Bonnie fell in love with what the doctors gave her.

For instance, on April 15, she read the instructions on the envelope at the last minute and discovered that she had written the check to "Internal Revenue Service" instead of "United States Treasury." She had to tear open the envelope, and void the check, and write a new one, and cut the address label from the old envelope, and paste in on a new one. After she sealed the new envelope, she realized that she hadn't made a photocopy of the new check. She screamed and shouted obscenities in the empty apartment. Danny came home before she had a chance to go out, and he saw the strange-looking envelope, so she had to explain the whole disaster to him, and he laughed at her. "You're making it worse." she said.

The pills, those little white bus drivers, moved her to a different state, a warm, quiet state similar to New Mexico, with pretty sunsets, where the pile of torn envelopes on the floor couldn't find her. Danny couldn't reach her there, either. Bonnie tried to stay off the bus, but, soaking in the bathtub, or resetting the clocks to daylight savings time, she would see the shiny chrome grill of the SUV zooming up huge on her left, and her driver's-side door folding into a spear in her side, and the bus was the only ride away.

She stopped working, also bathing. Danny couldn't deal. He left. For a year the Oxycodone was all the company she had.

Bonnie found herself sitting in a circle of folding chairs occupied by a dozen other painkiller gourmets. They were fat, thin, neat, slovenly, thirteen to sixty-eight. Linoleum tile floors, acoustic tile ceilings, collapsed tables leaning against the wall: an inspirational environment.

Across from her, Abner's hair stuck up from his round head like the quills of a paranoid hedgehog. His shoulders crowded his neck as if he had pushed a couple of pot roasts up under his shirt. "I was a sculptor," he said. "I was doing this major piece; a big

deal, a breakthrough for me. The deadline was coming on fast. I cut corners. A cable snapped; my scaffold fell out from under me." He put his hands between his thighs and hunched down in his seat. "The first operation saved my life, but did other not-so-good things. The second fixed some of the damage from the first. Physical therapy got me walking with this fella." He patted a metal cane across his lap. "I've got a brace wrapped around me through here." His hands pressed against his middle, "and an unholy fondness for Percocet, which brings me here."

Bonnie did not at first realize that she had been waiting for him. The broken man, the jigsaw puzzle man with pieces of him hammered back into the wrong places, had come to meet the magician's used assistant, the half-woman. They had a landfill courtship between remnants of people.

Abner, by teaching in their art department, helped a university in Southern Oregon meet its quota of disability hires. He proposed, she accepted. They married and moved into a house within the means of entry-level faculty.

Halfway through his third quarter, the foundry professor hosted a Sunday barbecue. Professors, assistant professors, instructors and their wives, graduate students, undergrads and their dates drank and gobbled ribs, snorted lines in the bathroom, passed bombers in the living room, and broke into cliques according to media. The welders, the casters, the ceramists, the fabricators, the installers, the site specifists, the conceptualists, the videots, the computer interactivists, and the social commentators established territories throughout the house and across the lawn.

Abner sat in a webbed-nylon folding chair by the swing set, outside of all the groups, his mouth straight and thin. Bonnie wondered if his back had had enough. "Are you tired?" She patted his arm.

"I just figured out why I'm here. I'm a teaching aid. They can point to me and say, 'Make sure you don't end up like Abner. He's a civilian now. Don't get too close. You might catch it.'"

"Nobody said that."

"I used to be one of these guys. I know how they think. It's how I used to think." He reached out a hand to her. "I'm not going to be the poster boy for attrition." She stepped close. His arm went around her waist. He pushed himself up out of the chair.

In the car Abner folded his arms across his shoulder harness and stared out the side window. "Sorry about the tantrum."

"Don't guilt yourself for my sake." Bonnie imagined that she could hear his internal voice talking him into quitting. Anxiety crested in her, washed over her breakwaters, and flooded her tidelands. If he quit, he would have no one to depend on but her, not just for help up from chairs, not just for bringing him food when moving to the table was more agony than he could endure, but for the rent and the groceries and the utilities and the insurance premiums and co-pays for checkups and medications. Her receptionist job wasn't going to cover even a tiny portion of that.

For a year she had been a good girl, a straight, sober, recovering oxycodrone. She went to her groups and talked about her fears and temptations and the days when nothing was worth the effort not to get on the bus, but she somehow got through those days and on to other days. She believed that she had the reserves to see to that responsibility and to that of living with a badly reassembled man, but now she saw her responsibilities expanding by powers of ten.

She got Abner out of the car, but he made his way inside the house without help. He landed like a hovercraft on his chair and thumbed the remote. The TV blurted out an image of a shiny car, a girl inside wiggling her arms to the music. Bonnie went to the photo drawer.

"What are you looking for?"

"Fresh roll of film."

"Taking some pictures?"

"Tomorrow is Libby's last day at work."

"New job?"

"Maternity leave."

He didn't seem to need any more of an answer. Beside the stack of envelopes bulging with 4X6 prints, five black plastic canisters with gray, snap-on tops stood in a row. She shook each one. Three were empty. One rattled with a cylinder of film. The last rattled in a different way, like a gourd with seeds inside. She dropped it into the big pocket in her pleated skirt and padded in her bare feet out onto the chilly boards of the back porch.

So she had kept a souvenir from the old days. They were probably as potent as vitamins now. She'd get more of a buzz from B12. She shook them out onto her palm: two dozen tiny white bus tickets. All she wanted was to stop worrying for a little while. A short vacation, some personal time. Who would it hurt? She dropped the pills into the canister and snapped on the snap-on lid. The canister slipped into her pocket. She stepped through the back door and strolled into the living room. Abner was watching a public television program about robots. She ran her fingers through his thick black hair and stretched out on the couch.

In the morning Abner actually bent down to pass Bonnie a couple of slide carousels before he got into the car without help. His class, a survey of sculpture since 1945, convened at 9:00. The university's image library was gappy and scratched, so Abner had drawn samples from his private collection. He sat in the passenger seat with the carousels on his lap. "Let's go out for dinner tonight."

"On a Monday? You're a wild man." Bonnie didn't expect his spurt of normalcy to last that long.

"Some place with lots of butter in the sauces and twelve-dollar glasses of wine."

"Okay." She was sure that Abner had made up his mind about quitting. He was planning to tell her over some gold-flecked chocolate dessert.

She watched him walk with the carousels in the crook of his arm toward the art building. As soon as he was through the door she opened her purse and lifted out the canister. She shook out four pills and swallowed them dry. She had twenty minutes before the effects came on, plenty of time to get home. She would be down in

five hours, ready to pick Abner up. She coasted the car into the garage just as her skin began to get that old itch. She called the office and complained of cramps.

Her stomach was whining like a hungry puppy so she stood up from the couch and went to the kitchen. The clock on the stove read 1:47. How had that happened? In the freezer she found the tub of pistachio ice cream with only a couple of scoops gone. She took a big spoon from a drawer and carried the tub to the back steps. The cold air made her nostrils ache. The ice cream sucked the warmth from every corner of her body. She trembled. A frigid drop of water touched her cheek. Dampness seeped up from the concrete step through the seat of her jeans and into her ass. It was all so delicious.

She could tell she was coming down when she started to think about coming down. She thought about picking Abner up, and about what to make for dinner. The SUV was still far away, but she could feel it catch her scent and turn its chrome-plated snout toward the house. She found the canister out in plain sight on the kitchen table. Only a dozen left. She must have been snacking on them all afternoon. She dumped them all out and swallowed them.

Later, the phone rang. It was an amusing sound. She thought she heard it again, as if it were ringing in the house next door. Talking to someone might be pleasant, but she wasn't in the mood to get up off the floor. Some hands lifted her up and straightened out her arms and legs on a gurney. Abner was there. She thought about touching his arm.

In the hospital, she was convinced that the doctors were planning to harvest her organs to give to dying rich people and to patch her up with the organs of mutated monkeys and pigs. The food made her stomach heave. All she could keep down was applesauce and tapioca. She concluded on the last day that her original organs, except of course for the uterus, remained in place. Abner sat at her side. She saw from the pinched skin around his eyes that his back was bad.

"I was upset," he said, "mostly because you almost killed yourself, and where the hell would I be without you, I'd very much like to know. But also a little bit because you had drugs and you didn't share. If I'd known they were in the house, they'd have gone down my throat instead of yours. I could be the one lying there, fussed over by pretty nurses, and you could be over here patting my hand. But mostly the first thing. Really."

They watched a soap and whispered ugly remarks about acting, jaw lines, nose and boob jobs. Here was her little vacation, but she didn't dare ask Abner how he intended to cover the cost of it. She was on his insurance plan, but did it include ODS? On or off the policy, she could stop worrying about Abner quitting. Did he resent her? Would he resent her later? She was his leash on a clothesline, and he would never again get out of the yard. So, a change in policy. She was going to be a refugee again. Her eyes moistened. She lay on her back imagining the impossible: sitting on his lap, her cheek cradled in the turn of his neck.

