

Scent of danger

by Mathew Paust

I knew the “oh shit” jolt in my intestines was too intense for a routine traffic stop, with the flashing blue lights, instead of accelerating around us in pursuit of something urgent up ahead, pulling in behind our SUV. We weren't speeding, for one, and, in any case, I wasn't driving. And most of the natural empathy I might have felt for Jamie had eked away fifteen or so minutes earlier back at the diner.

We hadn't argued or even had words. We'd played our roles—or rather she played hers, disguised in her “fat suit,” as she called it, with the siren lipstick and Orphan Annie wig—and I played along as anyone from a brother, friend, husband, client, John, or whatever anyone seeing us wanted to imagine. We instinctively knew not to talk about anything that might interest anyone who might overhear us, which meant we hardly talked at all. My appetite had returned soon after entering the place. Its enticing aromas tugged my attention to the offerings of a steaming buffet, and the dining area's warm, cheerful embrace with its welcoming red & white-clothed tables persuaded tensions I'd not been conscious of to relinquish their hold on me, and I felt good, really good, for the first time that day.

My alienation from Jamie arrived in wee, barely noticeable steps, more nuance than anything tangible I might have noted at the time, before their accumulation made itself known as the chill I felt now while the trooper sat in his or her cruiser parked behind us on the shoulder longer than I would have expected.

In retrospect I think the first sign was her mood. She seemed so carefree, even merry in a relaxed, lighthearted way as she piled items from the buffet onto her plate, and then chatting up a waitress who stopped at our table to ask if we needed anything.

“Everthin' jis' fahn, dahlin',” Jamie said, tossing me a wink to underscore the convincing country dialect I'd not heard her use before. I looked up at the waitress and nodded and stretched my lips

in a doofus grin, but returned to chewing on a piece of the baked chicken breast swathed in gravy I was preparing to wash down from a plastic tumbler of iced tea. Still nodding, I pointed my fork at the plate and added an affirmative grunt for emphasis, but let Jamie do the actual talking.

At first I thought she was attempting to cheer me up after scaring me nauseous with her driving stunt. And maybe that intention was part of what was going on with her. But I knew she didn't really care much about my state of mind, and, although my spirits did rise, in part from her quirky jollity, a subtle intuitive misgiving had come into being and was growing incrementally in the back of my mind that this oddly incongruent display was more than just an act. She'd told me before we started the trip she was "worried sick" about her father. I thought I knew her well enough to believe this wasn't merely a figure of speech, that it was genuine. Yet, here she was, flouncing around the diner, talking country to the waitress, going back for seconds and eating like the pig she resembled in her costume. Nor was it simply nervous energy. She was clearly enjoying herself. And her enthusiasm carried me along, lifting me as well, easing me away from the cloud of dread her father, my client, had wrought by bringing such dire circumstances upon himself.

Looking back now I see my discomfort was more than simple irritation at her aggressive merriment, but an uneasiness of the kind that causes one to whistle past a graveyard at midnight. Her situation—her father's situation—was so fraught with peril that whistling to mask its gravity would have been feeble at best, yet her apparent denial of its implications was so bold, at least in appearance, it not only denied the reality but danced upon it.

I'd learned enough in my aborted career as an actor to appreciate the quality of Jamie's performance. It was too good, the kind of good that can shield an actor from recognizing real, imminent danger. Sitting in the SUV awaiting the trooper behind us I felt a warning tingle. And when the second, unmarked police car pulled up and parked in front of us that warning started clanging like a fire alarm.

