

The Get-Up

by Neil Serven

Nobody knew who he was supposed to be. Wait a minute, a couple of people said. The Pepperidge Farm guy, right? They pointed to the hat and glasses, but he told them that wasn't it.

Some of the guesses were so off the mark they didn't merit an answer. Amish farmer, someone said.

Annemarie had advised him to go with something a little more mainstream. Nobody watches those old movies you like.

But Ralph had already found the glasses at a little card shop in the village, and bought himself a suit at the thrift store for five dollars. It was as tight and uncomfortable as it looked. The hat was this straw souvenir thing he got from his uncle. He wore Hush Puppies, because who knows what kind of shoes Harold Lloyd wore? You never saw his feet.

They had hung strings of orange lights along the ceiling, and in the corner stood a black-lit skeleton that someone put a Mets hat on. The apartment was otherwise dark except for the kitchen, where the food and beer was. The orange haloed though a scratch in the lens over Ralph's left eye.

Smokers came in from the terrace, and while the sliding door was open he could hear the rain pounding the streets. Cars sloshing through. Too bad for the kids. He missed being a smoker, having excuses to leave the room.

Someone said, I think I know. Are you Bill Evans, the jazz composer? Ralph didn't know who that was.

Annemarie had dressed up as Little Orphan Annie, and some people based their guesses on that. Not Daddy Warbucks, he was bald. Wasn't there another guy, though? People closed their eyes, trying to finger it. Everyone admired Annemarie's costume, which she had made herself. Ralph didn't like the way she had made it a size too large on purpose to conceal her breasts and hips. It looked like a raincoat on her.

Something about this crowd let him down. There were people from the animal shelter where Annemarie worked, and a few from her quilting group. It turned out they were all vegetarians, which was why nobody except for Ralph was touching the prosciutto. There was talk about organizing a protest at the dog track.

His brother and his brother's wife were supposed to come down from Amherst, but the rain was hitting even harder up in New England. Keith phoned at four-thirty with their regrets. Seth, his co-worker from the garage, showed up with a date, neither of them wearing costumes. They didn't stick around long.

You would think they'd see the Chaplin poster over the sofa and make a connection. There was a children's lit theme running through the party. Aside from Annemarie's costume, there was a Harry Potter, a Pinocchio, and a Grinch.

Dean, their downstairs neighbor, broke from his conversation and approached the spread. He made a decent vampire; he already had the slick-black hair. Barbershop quartet, he said, pointing a nacho. Where's the rest of the troupe?

I'm Harold Lloyd, Ralph said. Dean paused for a moment, then shook his head.

Silent film actor.

Dean looked up, squinted, though you could tell he had no idea. Good hors d'oeuvres, he said.

Most people left before midnight, except for the Grinch, Jeff, and his wife, Hayley. Ralph tried to remember how Annemarie knew them. The animal hospital, he guessed, since all they could seem to talk about were their chocolate Labs.

Hayley, dressed in all pink, turned out to be Cindy Lou Who. Ralph had guessed she was a fish.

In the kitchen, when everyone had gone home, Annemarie said, you could have been a better host. She was rinsing out glasses in the sink, and had her back to Ralph. She had taken down her hair, normally blonde. The reddish-orange dye gave it the color of copper wire.

They bored me, he said. They were all your friends.

I'm sorry Keith and Jill had to bail, but you could have sucked it up. Not everyone can talk about books and art on a dime.

He was looking at the backs of her calves. He liked that she was still wearing the patent leather shoes. Her voice rose over the faucet.

You were rude to Hayley and Jeff. I mean what was the deal with changing the subject like that? I told you why they don't have kids.

They stayed too long. And then all they did was talk about their dogs.

They stuck around so they could sober up. They had a long drive ahead of them. My god.

Annemarie went into their bedroom to change. He heard the accordion doors to the closet shriek open.

He went out to the terrace, where cigarette stench still hovered. He was still in his full costume. The rain, for the most part, had stopped, but as he leaned at the rail water dripped off the awning and splashed onto his lenses. Down the street, traffic idled at the intersection. The pairs of taillights formed two chains of red in his vision, remaining there until the signal turned green.

