

Thanking Harry

by Ted Laramie

At a candlelit table near the back of the restaurant, Jack and Lois greeted the waiter as he delivered their drinks, a diet coke for him, and for her, a vodka and cranberry. He apologized for the slow bar service and promised to return in a moment to take their orders.

"To our third date," said Jack, raising his glass.

"Lucky number three," said Lois.

As she touched her glass to his, she lowered her chin so that she looked up with round, intent eyes. Jack, anxious, tried to scoot his chair forward with a quick shift of his weight, but the sudden motion sloshed his drink. Soda ran down his hand and stained the table cloth. Grabbing her napkin, Lois took hold of his fingers tightly and cleaned each one with purposeful and thorough strokes. Not letting go, she narrowed her eyes at him and smiled.

"You know what they say about the third date, right?" she asked.

On the inside, Jack groaned. Of course he knew, it was an idiom older than he was, but he wasn't going to admit that he knew. She didn't seem to need any encouragement. She'd come at the third date like an angry bull charging a red drape. Her red hair was teased up and her lips blazed in a matching color. Her pale breasts stared out of the top of her blouse. When she got out of her car, the valet fumbled her keys. She had smiled at this, smitten with herself.

And yet, somehow she looked aged in caricature, like one of those horny older women on a strained sitcom. Her hair and lips and short skirt and breasts -- all of it together seemed to wave fervently, both arms flailing, as the rescue plane passed overhead, dragging a banner through the sky that read simply SEX. She wasn't old, though, mid-forties, and without all the make-up, she'd seemed much younger to him, much too young for them to be dating.

Play along, he told himself. She's a woman. You're a man. This is dating. Did you expect a lecture?

"No, what do they say?" he asked, grinning.

"You do know," she giggled.

Then, setting aside the napkin, she raised his hand, leaned forward, and drew his middle finger into her mouth, suckling the tip. Jack's buttocks clenched and his eyes darted around the room as though she'd just opened her purse and taken out a revolver. This was too much! It was downright lewd, embarrassing. But what was he going to do? Jerk his hand away? He didn't want to appear stodgy, so he held his hand in the fire of her mouth and even managed a half smile.

"You're a naughty one," he said.

She moaned quietly and sucked harder, but hearing his own ridiculous words made Jack wish it would just end.

Stay calm, he told himself. She's just flirting, having fun. Had he been out of the dating scene for so long that he had forgotten how it all worked? He had to lighten up. He shouldn't be so concerned.

He didn't even know these people, though there was a restaurant full and they all had to be looking. Oh God!

In the middle of this, the waiter returned. Lois turned her head slightly and looked up at the young man, her red mouth still wrapped around Jack's finger. She made a sound as though she'd just taken her first bite of double chocolate, peanut butter cheesecake. At that point, Jack tried to pull away, but she held him firmly by the wrist, not for long, a second or so, but long enough to sink the moment like an anchor. Finally, she popped up, and giggling like a middle aged school girl, dabbed the corners of her mouth.

Heat flooded Jack's face. He tried to breathe through it, but he managed only tight, shortened breaths that only deepened the crimson in his cheeks. Grabbing his menu, he buried his eyes into the entrée list. He couldn't read a word. What was wrong with her?

She hadn't acted this way before. On their first date, she'd been energetic and fun, pulling him through the carnival, begging him to

buy her a silly balloon, cheering him as he played the little games. She was witty, laughing and making jokes, surprisingly clever for her age. And the next date, she'd been reserved to the point he feared she wasn't having a good time at all. They'd walked the pier after dinner, and after a long silence, she asked him if he still believed in love, having been married so long and then suddenly divorced. The whole thing had been rather sweet and she'd even kissed him on the cheek as the sun set. At his age, he didn't feel so strongly about love or marriage, having known both for a very long time, but he did enjoy the kiss. It was almost childlike.

"You must be starving," said the waiter.

"I am," said Lois, shaking the ice in her empty glass.

"Another, miss?"

"Yes, vodka and cranberry. And I'll have the ahi tuna, the arugula and beet salad, and a side of broccoli. I am literally starving."

"And for you, sir?"

Jack's head moved back and forth as he made a searching sound. His eyes finally cleared and something legible appeared. He put his finger on the menu to mark its place, but seeing the red ring of her lipstick, he quickly withdrew it and hid his hand underneath the table. Embarrassment had devoured his appetite.

"The roasted bone in rib eye," he said.

"That sounds delicious!" said Lois. "I love when they leave the bone in. It makes it so juicy."

Holy Christ in Heaven.

"And sides, sir? You get two unless you want a premiere salad," said the waiter.

Did he not hear the words coming out of this woman's mouth?

"Whatever you think," said Jack.

"Well, we've got quite a few. There listed down the side, here."

"Just give me two sides. I don't care," said Jack.

"How about the creamed spinach and the potato gratin?"

He hated creamed spinach.

"That's fine," he said.

"And would you care for anything from the bar? Our drink special tonight is the apple martini with cinnamon whip cream."

"That sounds so good!" said Lois. "Will you get one so I can try it?"

Jack nodded to the waiter, though it was a pleading nod, as though he'd much rather have a hammer to the skull than a steak. Yet the waiter just smiled, scribbling on his little pad, probably making a personal note as to the ridiculousness of the too old man out with the fiery young redhead. Jack, feeling the fool, suddenly longed for the safety of his cat Maury and a dish of vanilla ice cream in front of the television set. What in the world had made him think that he could do this again? Helen had been right - he was boring, and old, and stuck in his ways. But didn't she miss that yet?

Probably not. The last he'd heard, she was on a cruise with Eldin Henderson, from the bridge club, who once threw his hat in the duck pond for no other reason than to throw it. They were all fools, all of them, and he was their new king.

The waiter left and Lois rubbed her barefoot on Jack's lower leg, startling him from his awkward funk.

"Oh my God," said Lois, "you just looked exactly like him."

"Who?" asked Jack.

Lois shook her head, "someone I knew a long time ago. I'm curious. What made you take the adult swim class, anyway?" asked Lois. "You seem like a fine swimmer."

Finally, something remotely normal. Jack grabbed hold of it like a preserver thrown from the sinking ship.

"It's something I've always been interested in. I swam in college, though I hadn't done anything with it since. I've always jogged, but it's been catching up to my knees."

"You've got a great body. You really keep yourself in shape. I bet you could run circles around me."

"Maybe a decade ago I would've had a chance. It's tough getting old."

"Old! What are you, like fifty? That's not old."

Jack sat up straight. It wasn't just that he was flattered. Lois had gotten her foot between his legs and her toes had found his bellwether. He tightened his thighs at first, but what was he to do, shove her foot out of his lap? He relaxed a bit and let her play. It did feel good, like a long neglected muscle in the hands of a trained masseuse. It then dawned on him exactly what it was that she was willing to do. With him! Could it be true? He'd been so wound up that he hadn't given himself the chance to consider the possibility, much less get excited about it, but now with her foot caressing him there, he felt the resurrection of a wonderful yet long forgotten idea. He might as well tell her, though, even if it blew it all to hell.

"Sixty-four," he said. "I'm sixty-four."

"Holy shit that's old!" said Lois.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew. I don't know why I thought you knew, but it's not like it's unapparent. Honestly, I was surprised when you asked me to dinner. I didn't mean to keep it a secret or anything. It just hasn't come up. But I understand if --"

"Oh stop!" said Lois.

She leaned across the table and took hold of his hands.

"You said you were married for thirty years. I knew you were older than I was, but knowing the number doesn't change anything. I'm attracted to you. Really attracted to you."

Her foot moved up and down. He wasn't hard yet, of course, but the messenger had arrived and the old king was waking, scratching his gray beard, considering battle again, though he hadn't donned his armor or drawn his sword in what felt like a lifetime or two. She really had quite the third hand. She could probably play a banjo with that thing, given lessons and appropriate practice time. Jack began to dream of what she could do with her other devices, though he still couldn't believe it true. He'd just started receiving his social security checks. Could the world really smell them, like his friend Bernard had said?

"I don't want to sound insecure," he said, "but I just have a hard time believing that."

“Look, this will probably sound weird, but when I was a little girl, my dad traveled all the time and my mom was on another planet. She worked as a real estate agent in big retirement village, showing houses and doing the paperwork and everything. Because she worked for the developer, we got a great deal on a house, but that meant there weren't any kids around but me. The old folks were nice, but having a hundred grandparents around, treating you like a little kid, it got old fast. But there was this one guy, Harry, he lived by himself up the street from us. He didn't treat me like a kid. He was different. Nobody seemed to like him and my mom said he was strange, but I thought he was the best. He was lonely. I was lonely. We leaned on each other. I went over at his house every chance I got. And whenever I was sad, he'd put me in his lap, give me a tickle, and tell me everything was fine, just fine. And it really was, as long as I had him.”

“Sounds perfectly normal,” said Jack.

“No, it wasn't normal. But it wasn't bad either. And the weird thing is, when you came to the pool that first day, I actually thought you were Harry. Just for a second. I'm serious, you look exactly like him. I did a double take. And seeing you, seeing him again, I wanted to walk up and thank you. He passed away before I had a chance to tell him how I felt. And lately, things haven't been so going so great. I feel like it's kind of a message, or an opportunity maybe, to do now what I couldn't do for him then. I know how to say thank you now, the way a man needs to hear it, the way Harry should've heard it.”

The old king stopped lacing his boots, looked up at the messenger with weary eyes, and asked him in all seriousness, “Are you kidding me?”

“And here you go,” said the waiter, setting down the vodka diluted cranberry and the oversized martini glass heaped with whipped cream dotted with shaved cinnamon. “Again, I apologize for the slow bar service, but we've got one guy back there and he's getting slammed.”

“Yum!” said Lois. “Are you going to try it, Jack?”

He hadn't drank in forty years.

"No, you go ahead."

The waiter stood there, watching her with a slight smirk. Lois smiled at him and daintily tipped her shoulder to her chin. Then, with her eyes locked on Jack's face, she tilted her head down, opened her mouth wide, and wrapped her lips around the mountain of whipped cream, which disappeared entirely from tip to base. Her tongue slithered out and circled around it; then, popping up, she licked her lips and squished the cream in her mouth. Her eyes closed and she fell backward into the chair's back, lost for the moment in the sweet pleasure of the thick, white, sugar rich topping. With one gulp, she swallowed it down and her eyes opened again, intent on Jack.

"Good?" asked the waiter.

"Delicious," she said. "I can't believe I got the whole thing in my mouth."

The waiter, turning to Jack, said with deadpan solidarity, "that, was amazing."

He then took his leave, saying "your food should be right out."

"I just love cinnamon," said Lois. "I'd go over to Harry's house every morning in the summer. He'd make me toast, butter it up real good, and then sprinkle cinnamon and sugar on top. It was magical.

We'd sit at the table and I'd eat while he drank his coffee. He had this habit of staring into space as he stirred the cream in his coffee.

The spoon made these little tinkling sounds against the cup. He'd just stare and stare, lost in his own world. I'd have to go over and pull on his pajama pants to get him out of it. Do you do that too?"

"No," said Jack. "I'm not a big coffee drinker. One cup in the morning keeps me up all night."

Lois smiled and said, "maybe you better have a cup then."

With both hands, she picked up the monstrous martini glass and held it against her lips as she sipped the lime green concoction like a lazy hummingbird, all the while making her eyes at him. She'd gotten her other high heel off and now both of her bare feet probed his crotch. Jack felt nothing. It was as sexually stimulating as a

doctor's exam. He sat there, letting it happen to him like a fondling at gunpoint, with his elbows propped on the table. This woman was a hoax, a head case, an emotionally disabled. He'd seen a story on 20/20 about the head of a group home who sexually abused the retarded residents, drugging them at night and then, with them dull, he made audio recordings as he raped them. He'd then play back the assaults to them in the morning as he bathed them, unbeknownst to them that they were listening to themselves being violated. The thought of sex with her seemed just as heinous to Jack. He had to get the hell out of there, but the politeness of his nature held him back. He'd eat his dinner quickly, nod, smile, pay the check, and that'd be that. The senior center where he took t'ai chi was rife with old perverts who'd love this sort of thing. It wasn't him.

The waiter returned with their plates.

"Bone in rib eye for the gentleman and the ahi tuna for the lady," he said. "Can I get you anything else?"

Lois ordered another drink. Jack dug straight in, sawing at the meat like it was his last chore on a Friday night with the big dance in town. As he ate, Lois picked at her fish, sucked at her array of drinks, and told Jack everything that had gone wrong in her life in the last year. Her ex-husband, who rented the basement in her house, had stopped paying rent. Her daughter, from her first marriage, was well on her way at seventeen to setting the world abortion record. And her son, who'd been dishonorably discharged from the Air Force, was now under house arrest for stalking the girl who'd broken his heart and subsequently caused his drinking problem. Lois was sure he'd end up in jail because he kept getting drunk in the basement with his father, knowing full well that the police came by randomly to check on him. She'd leave them all if she could, but she still loved them, even her ex-husband who wouldn't be so over protective of her if he just stopped drinking so much.

To all this, Jack nodded and responded with concerned noises, but all the while, he kept one hand sawing the meat from the long

bone while the other hand shoved the severed pieces into his mouth as quickly as he could chew them without dislodging his lower dentures. In record time, he was done. The rib was white and clean save a few wet red scraps of sinew that clung to its sides. He'd even choked down the creamed spinach, which Helen never would've believed.

"Lois," he said, wiping his mouth, "I've got to be honest with you. You're a great gal and all, but -"

"Wait," said Lois. "I've freaked you out, haven't I?"

She pulled her hands together and shriveled at the shoulders, like a frightened mouse caught in the pantry light. She seemed to realize what was coming and her eyes searched Jack and the table for some last straw for which to grab, some saving rung to which she could cling and save the date, fulfill her intentions. Jack sighed and shook his head. The poor girl was a wreck, she needed help, but much more than just an old man's friendly ear, but rather real and serious help from a medical professional. He hated to leave her like this, but he had the feeling that she was always like this.

"I'm sorry, but I'm just not really comfortable with all of this. You're out of my league, so young and beautiful and full of life. At this point in my life, I just want to walk along the lake and look at the ducks. I don't have the energy left for all that you bring to the table. You deserve someone younger, more able."

"I'm sorry I dumped all that stuff on you. It's just that Harry used to sit and listen to me and then he'd tell me everything was going to be all right. You don't have to worry about any of that stuff. That's my stuff. We can walk. We can look at the ducks. You've been so kind to me and I want to thank you. I mean, really thank you. And after that, if you don't want to, you don't have to see me anymore."

Lois reached across the table and grabbed the nine inch rib bone from Jack's plate.

"Watch," she said. "I just love to suck the bone."

She took the first few inches of the rib bone into her mouth and sucked at the clinging bits of sinew. Red juice ran down her chin. Jack tried to protest, but she held up her index finger and then

tilted her head back. Her eyes stared at the ceiling, fixed in concentration, as she slowly lowered the length of the bone deeper into her throat. It nearly disappeared. Then suddenly her chest lurched, her hand jerked free the bone, and a great wash of vomit launched straight up and over the table. Bits of fish, awash with cranberry and whipped cream, rained down on the table and Jack's face. Lois gagged again and produced another pile in her lap. Jack, his mouth open and lips dripping, stared at her as though she'd just blown her brains out, right there in the restaurant, for everyone to see.

"That's never happened before, honest," she said, starting to cry.

"Jesus Christ, it stinks!" someone shouted.

"She was deep throating that bone and just hurled!" someone else said.

"I'm gonna be sick!" cried a woman as she ran for the restroom.

Jack took his napkin from his lap, wiped the vomit from his face, gently folded the fabric square, and placed it on his plate. Then, with great calm, he took a fifty dollar bill from his wallet and placed it in a dry spot on the table. He'd had enough. He stood up, pushed in his chair, and began the long walk toward the door through the corridor of eyeballs and open mouths.

"Harry! Jack, wait!" cried Lois.

She caught up to him in the parking lot and grabbed him by back of the arm.

"I'm sorry! I just got choked. It won't happen again. I promise!"

"Listen to me," said Jack. "I don't know who you think you are. I don't know who you think I am. But I can tell you this much, I am not interested in any of these antics. You're disgusting and I don't ever want to see you again."

Lois's face soured.

"I was wrong about you," she said. "You're not Harry. You're nothing like him. He wouldn't walk out on me. He loved me. You're just a stupid old man who can't get a hard-on. I never want to see you again!"

A piece of wet fish fell off her chin.

Harry walked to his car, got in, and drove home with his window down. He took a shower. Then, with a bowl of vanilla ice cream, he laid back in his recliner. Maury the cat jumped into his lap and settled into his familiar spot. Jack turned on the television. Chuck Woolery was just returning from a commercial break. Jack, kicking the foot rest up, began to laugh. He laughed and laughed until the cat jumped out of his lap.

