

The Finger of LazerUs

by David P. Gontar (January 2015)

There was something she was trying to remember, but what? Laura caught herself gazing out the bay window at the dense Queue, which pointed down Fifth Avenue like a gnarled finger. What was it? Oh, yes, it was her appointment Saturday, of course. She smiled, closing her eyes, and tried to imagine how astonished everyone would be. Or would they? After all, the Queue ran directly in front of her flat and had done so for the past three years. There was a kind of social undertow, then, was there not? It seemed in a preposterous way to sweep so many along in its inexorable flow towards finality, a journey which on the average took two days, two days to trek a mere 3.7 miles to the Transformer at Washington Square. Well, she mused, I guess they won't be so surprised. In fact, I'll probably bump into a lot of them in the Queue. Won't that be a laugh?

Outside a light rain was scattering, more of a white mist than anything else. She raised the sash and thrust out her hand, bringing moistened fingers to her lips to savor the sweetness, as though it had oozed from a Shangri-La in the clouds. A few pilgrims in the line spotted her and waved merrily. It sounded like they were singing. It made her shiver. She felt an urge to run about, straighten up, put everything in its proper place, to say farewell to the clutter of domestic figures which had been her faithful companions for so long, especially those darling twin cushions nestling at either end of the chaise lounge. Each featured a cute emerald-hued pachyderm in silver bangles and gold bridles. She sat down and stroked them distractedly. They were the only pets she allowed herself. She and Steve had picked them up in Madras last year on a holiday. Laura had expected love to be a dreadful imposition, but it turned out to be rather engaging, an effervescent fling. He hadn't minded the frenzied shopping, and took a positive delight in all her silly acquisitions in the grubby backwater stalls of southern India. She felt now that life had been unusually kind to her, the way Aunt Bell had treated her when she escorted Laura and her sister Sheila to the Cloisters and bought them lemon ices: maternal. Laura loved moments like those, when the nagging Question that always beat at the dim shore of her brain was nearly still. It had started calling when she was five, a mute messenger she could never hope to satisfy as it never put itself into words.

Last night she realized that Steve was struggling to propose. She knew he pondered it, though he never said anything. There was a way he had of clenching his jaw, his brows furrowing ever so slightly, and she knew. She knew what he was ruminating.

He was cradling a teacup and saucer on his knees when she told him.

"Oh, Steve, I forgot to mention. I'll be hiking down the avenue Saturday to the Transformer."

"What?" Flinching slightly, he jested awkwardly, "Not trolling for Hermes, I take it." But she could see his brown eyes shifting from side to side as they did when he was caught off guard.

"No, honey. Not Hermes this trip. You're not upset, are you?"

"Upset? Me? Oh, no, why should I be upset? This is just great."

"Steve, please."

"Well, I didn't know, that's all."

"Oh, Steve."

"I'm ok. Here, you can take the tea. I don't want to bust your china."

"I'm so sorry Steve, really. But I have to tell you how happy I am. I've done everything I wanted, truly everything. I even went sky-diving, remember? I've never had a sick day in my life. And Steve, you've been super, the very best, you understand? You are a fantastic guy."

"You're happy?"

"Of course, honey. We're all happy. It's wonderful. Just look outside. Don't you see them? They're even singing. All the fear is gone."

"But what about the others, Laura? Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters . . . guys like me. What about us, Laura?"

"I know, Steve. It seems cruel, but then you folks have unfinished business, isn't that right? There are things you need to take care of here, your job, your career, that book you've always wanted to write. Me, I hardly open the newspaper."

"Maybe. But don't you know I cared about you? That I am losing something precious?"

"Yes, certainly I am aware of that." She took his hand. "I attended the LazerUs seminars. All of them. They told me to be as reassuring as possible. You and I loved each other, as fully and completely as any couple. What would the rest be if not downhill?"

"Is that how you see it?"

"All the studies say the same thing."

"Studies?" He jumped to his feet, jostling the cup and saucer to the floor, shattering them to smithereens. "Well, now that you ask, there is something I need to attend to."

"Sure, hon, what is it?"

"Me and my buddies are flyin' up to Saskatchewan to catch some trout, goddammit," he spat out through gritted teeth.

"Oh, Steve."

And before she could think of anything else to add, he was gone, not even having the presence of mind to slam the door behind him.

Late that evening, Laura eagerly switched on the '20-20 Brochure' of LazerUs, Ltd. and reviewed her Saturday itinerary. She had opted for "Hawaiian Spa." The preview was so exotic yet so so real. Palm trees hanging low on an azure-ceilinged morning in Oahu, the infinity pool teeming with trillions of tropical fish that glowed and sparkled like gems. No need for a swimsuit, she would unwind *au naturel* under the warm eye of Phoebus, as lazy as a schoolgirl in July. It would be paradise, and she would be its shining angel. Sure, that silly Question would persist, it always did, pestering her, worming into her heart like a parasite. But then, at last, in a single burst of time so brief that it would not be time at all, it would be over, totally and forever, and she and her Question would hurtle off into the ineffable Silence together.

David P. Gontar's latest book is