

MAN AT THE DOOR

His tinted glasses were smoky from the sun as Matheson sat by the window, sipping a Coke. He suddenly noticed his ex-girlfriend watching him from the other side of the street. She was pushing her son in a stroller and didn't seem surprised to see him, though she knew the places near his studio where he could usually be found at lunchtime. He finished off the turkey sub and wiped his moustache and chin whiskers, then put the waxed paper and cup into the garbage bin on his way out the door.

Miho stood with her long hair lashing in the wind, her head tilted, while she waited for him to cross the intersection. There was a slight smile on her lips as she leaned on the handle and shaded her eyes from the sun. Matheson walked up and kissed her, then stooped to give her boy a pat. "So, is this just a coincidence?"

"Well... maybe not. I thought it's so sad that Koji couldn't see you anymore, so maybe one last time, like by accident, before Barry comes home is okay." Under the buckles and soft white leather she was wearing a pink Sailor Moon T-shirt, which, for her early thirties, was irreverent *chichi* as seemingly ironic as her lilt and innocent expression. She crouched and spoke to her son. "Say hi to Cat." He twisted away. "*Ko-ji.*" Miho stood up. "I think maybe he's still tired. He wanted to sleep more."

They had agreed to take another break since her common law husband was returning from pipeline work and her son was learning to talk. A nickname had been devised so that the boy would only confuse people if he spoke about him, at least until he was able to describe such details as Matheson's soul patch goatee.

Miho had also ended things with a sometime actor and filmmaker who didn't know of her long-term dalliance with Matheson and wasn't accepting the break-up. He'd cried, tried to reason with her, given her space, begged her, and remained potential trouble: the number of times she'd run into him in her neighbourhood suggested that he'd taken to stalking her.

Matheson walked with them up Yonge Street past boutiques and video arcades, Internet cafes, restaurants, bargain stores and a movie theatre. He felt a little shabby beside her in his windbreaker and sweat pants. His black T-shirt was covered with yellow happy faces as if painted by Van Gogh, Picasso, Monet, Pollack and Warhol: bandaged, cubist, dabbed, splashed and reproduced like soup cans or electric chairs.

They ignored panhandlers and a hawker outside the Church Of Scientology who was handing out leaflets for free personality tests. In front of the doorway to Florida Jack's Boxing Club, Matheson straightened Koji's sun hat and kissed the boy's mother good-bye. She said she'd call him later.

He hadn't gone thirty feet when he glanced back and saw her talking to another man. It seemed that they were looking in his direction. Well, her flirtations weren't his problem anymore. As he continued walking he suddenly heard footsteps behind him. "Excuse me," someone said, "have you got the time?"

Matheson glanced at his watch, realizing in that instant that it was probably her spurned boyfriend, the actor/filmmaker, who might have been following her and saw them together. "One fifteen," he said.

Then the guy was beside him. "So, do you want to talk about Miho?"

Looking at him without breaking stride, he said, "Not particularly."

The man, also in his forties, had weathered good looks and a preppy fashion sense, but his hair was unruly and he seemed to have slept in his clothes. He was built more solidly than

Matheson, who was underweight and felt out of shape. Though the ex-boyfriend tried to come off as matter-of-fact, even pleasant, the affability was forced. "What's your name?"

"I'm not telling you my name," Matheson said. "I don't even know who you are."

"How do you know Miho?"

"None of your business."

The name was Starkweather or something. He walked beside Matheson in silence before changing tack. "Listen, I'm her boyfriend but I can't trust her. Maybe you don't know this, but she has someone named Barry who's been up in the Yukon, and he's coming back next week. She's going to live with *him* again." He paused for effect. "Did you know that? She refuses to break up with him! I don't know what she does when I'm not around. This guy Barry, he's--"

"I know who Barry is."

Starkweather studied him. "Come on, what's your *name*, man?"

"I said I'm not telling you."

"Wait! I know who you are. You're the ex-*boyfriend*, right? The artist."

Matheson stopped at the corner of his street and faced him. "Relax. Miho and I are old friends. You've got nothing to worry about."

The man's eyes were vibrating, but he held his smile. Come *on* - what's your name?" His expression became unsettled when Matheson said good-bye and turned to walk away. It seemed he didn't know whether or not to follow him.

Rather than going into his studio, Matheson continued past his building and glanced back to see Starkweather still standing there, before he turned down a laneway and walked south to St. Joseph Street. When he emerged from a market five minutes later there was no sign that he'd been followed.

For almost twenty years Matheson had worked on the third floor of a refurbished house, sharing a washroom on the

second story with the proprietors of a West Indian clothing shop. This had succeeded the office of a notary public, and before that a massage parlor. The hair salon on the ground level had been established after a used computer bookstore, dog grooming business, Learning Annex, and china shop.

Matheson opened the building's purple front door and walked down a narrow hallway smelling of hair treatments. Milo and another stylist were clipping and blow-drying inside their salon. As he climbed the staircase he almost pulled the loose railing from the smudged wall again. Unlocking the door at the end of the second floor corridor, he walked up another flight to his studio.

Magazines lay scattered on the scuffed floor. Under the sloping ceiling there was a rubber plant on the sill of a small window with a view facing north. At the opposite end of the room Venetian blinds partially concealed a deck overlooking the back alley. Bookcases were stocked with texts of anatomy, illustration and fine art, industry material and hardcover collections of the commercial artist directories *The Black Book*, *Creative Source*, *Illustration*, *American Showcase* and copies of *Illustrator* issues 17, 21, 32.

Matheson heated the kettle and sat at his drafting table, where he resumed painting layouts in watercolour for a cemetery's brochures. He was flanked by software packages, warranties, manuals, stacked CDs, a plastic human skeleton and model of a hawk, neither to scale, which were suspended above shelves of dusty barbells and art supplies. Layers of tracing paper overviews of the mausoleum and landscape were propped against the back of a nearby plank-and-cinder-block shelving unit.

He drank coffee as he applied brushstrokes within lines measured out by the compasses and T-squares now mounted on the wall by his dartboard. He was tempted to get high but no longer smoked on the job, as he found that while it heightened the play of colour it tended to complicate the trip from

A to B. Above him on a bulletin board sketches and miscellaneous notes were tacked around a computer-generated photo of the Ruby-Oswald shooting which had been doctored to give Jack a guitar and Lee Harvey a microphone.

Matheson was taking a break and checking e-mails on his computer when Miho phoned to let him know that her ex-boyfriend, whose name was Stedman, had caught up to her again after their encounter. He'd admitted following her and said that he'd been stunned by the sight of a stranger picking her up on the street, though he couldn't understand how Matheson had had the effrontery to kiss her and appeared to be familiar with her son. He reluctantly accepted the fact that she and the artist were now only friends. She asked Matheson if he'd like to come over later after Koji was asleep.

Miho Akimoto lived in a brownstone on Grosvenor close to the hospitals and government buildings in Queen's Park. The lobby was sedate, the halls quiet. Shortly after Matheson arrived, the telephone rang. She checked the display and saw that it was Stedman's home number, so she didn't answer it. There was another call as she was bringing cheese and crackers from the kitchen. Again it turned out to be the estranged boyfriend. The phone rang a third time in the middle of sex on the couch while Koji slept in the bedroom, but she didn't get up to look.

Miho checked the display afterwards. There was a small crease in her forehead as she looked down, holding her hair back. "Stedman again," she said. "The number's blocked, but I know it's him. When I don't answer he goes out and calls from his cell phone, and blocks it. He's getting more crazy."

Following her into the bathroom, Matheson rinsed himself off at the sink while she squatted in the tub among bath toys and washed. There was a small geometric tattoo under the lower ridges of her spine. "This person is so extreme," she said. "He cannot control anything he says. He wanted to tell Barry

that *he* was here now, that Barry can't come back here again. He says strange things to people, like- Last year, he was in hospital and had to go to court because of a fight with a security guard." Miho turned off the water and stood up. "He says in a parking garage there was a guard who had body odour, and he told him that he should have a bath. The man was so mad he put Stedman in handcuffs and beat him."

Matheson lifted the seat, and spoke over his shoulder. "He got beaten while he was handcuffed?"

"Yes, I think with a club." She reached for a towel and said, "He is so used to being assertive because he has to. His brother was in a motorcycle gang in Quebec. In his job he has to apply for grants and raise money for movies, and talk to everybody in show business. He is so aggressive. He showed me his guns."

"What do you mean, 'guns'?"

"Like pistol. I think for movies."

"Props, then."

"Props?"

"Fake guns: not real."

"He said they're real. He has three."

Matheson flushed the toilet. "So he's an armed stalker. Nice to know."

As they were getting dressed, he told her how a New York newspaper had commissioned some watercolour portraits but now wanted him to sign a statement acknowledging that they were buying all rights. He'd dealt with them enough that he no longer bothered sending them a contract, and had already started the job for the usual amount covering First Rights For One-Time Use. He'd stopped to work on something else, and wasn't going to make the deadline if he had to hassle with their legal department. As he was explaining that he was probably going to finish the job and take a chance on getting paid, the phone rang again.

"I don't like it when Stedman calls from his cell, because it means that he could be anywhere," Miho said. She went over

in her panties and T-shirt for a look, then frowned and sighed. "I don't *like* this! It makes me *sick*."

"Do you mean you think he might be coming here?"

"I don't know."

"Where does he live?"

"He is on Eglinton not far from where you are."

They were watching the television at low volume when Miho suddenly gripped his arm and looked at him, alarmed. "Shhh! I think I heard-" She stood up and crept to the door in her bare feet, and peered through the peephole. As she tiptoed back, her eyes were wider. "He is out there, in the *hall*."

"What?"

"Go look."

Matheson was suddenly apprehensive as he walked over in his socks, and flinched when the telephone rang. She jumped up and ran over for another look at the display while he moved closer to the peephole. As he tried to see through it without blocking the light, he could make out the shape of someone standing a few feet away in the corridor.

Miho met him by the coffee table and gripped his arm. "He's been phoning from outside the door!" she whispered. "You have to stay here!"

Matheson didn't know what to do. Lowering his voice, he said, "Well, I just can't stay here-"

"You *have* to. Stedman could be dangerous."

He took her by the elbow. "If you're in bed with Koji, I won't be able to sleep on the couch with a lunatic standing outside the door."

"He could have a gun. You don't know him. He's getting crazy."

Matheson looked at his watch. He reached for the remote and turned up the TV. "I'll wait and see what he does, but in half an hour I've got to go. Where's your whiskey?"

"What?"

"We might as well relax while we're waiting."

She went into the kitchen. He was tense, waiting for a knock on the door. There were only the sounds of her cupboard opening, the splash of liquor. Miho opened the freezer and could be heard breaking ice from a tray. She came out with two glasses and handed him one. While they were drinking, the phone rang. She went over and checked the display, then sat down again. "He didn't block it this time. It's his cell number."

Matheson felt like getting drunk. He leaned closer and said, "I have to know something. Did you really break up with him, or just discourage him? From what he said this afternoon he seems to be under the impression that he's still your boyfriend."

She toyed with her hair, pulling it across her high cheekbone. "We broke."

"I have to understand his mindset. If he really thinks he's being cheated on, or if he more or less realizes that he's got no claim on you. It's a matter of honour. Either he knows he's in the wrong, or thinks we are."

"I told him we broke."

Matheson drank, trying to think. "He's not sure we know he's out there. Why don't you phone him and say you saw his number, and you're calling him back. Just tell him you've got company so you can't really talk."

"What company should I say?"

"Me, I suppose."

Miho went over and picked up the phone. She dialed, and tucked her hand under her elbow as she listened to it ring, then hung up. "He doesn't answer. I got his voice mail."

Matheson finished his drink as she went back to check the door, and got up for another one. Miho came into the kitchen after him and said, "Stedman's still there."

He poured some Canadian Club. "Was he fucked up when you met him, or is this what you turned him into?"

"He was always intense."

Matheson topped up her glass as well. When they returned to the sofa, he looked around at the *Ukeyo* prints of waves and kimono-clad figures that coexisted on her walls with Western art. A picture of a rainy downtown street at dusk from his pastel period was the only vestige of their relationship still in evidence. Glass cherries, flowers, slippers and other crystal she'd picked up at cost from the shop she managed in Yorkville were on display with plates and porcelain figurines in a wood cabinet. A large mirror opposite the window created the illusion of space. The Oriental rug in the center of the floor was partially covered with stuffed animals, a chalkboard, colouring book and scattered crayons.

On his third drink, Matheson stood by the curtains and looked down Grosvenor Street at the YMCA and fire station, and saw a male prostitute in the dusk leaning against a wall, who had apparently wandered off the meat track near Women's College Hospital. The threat of the stalker outside her door had diminished in importance. The longer Stedman hung around without making his presence known, the more he seemed pathetic. Still, Matheson wasn't looking forward to going outside.

He sat down beside Miho and said softly, "Five minutes left."

"Stay. Don't go."

"Can you do me a favour and go into the kitchen, and bring me the biggest knife you have?"

Her hand went to her mouth. "No," she whispered. "Don't be crazy."

"You told me he's got guns. I don't know what I'm walking into out there."

"If he sees a knife—"

"He won't; it'll be in my back pocket. I'm going to suddenly swing the door wide open with this plate in my hand and say, 'Excuse me - would you like a cracker?'"

"What?"

“I’ll have the element of surprise; he won’t know what to do.”

Miho looked at him skeptically with a half-smile. “But not with a *knife*.”

“Just for backup. If your windows opened I’d tie some sheets together and go out that way, but they don’t.”

She got up reluctantly and went into the kitchen. He listened to her pull out a drawer and rummage through her cutlery. When she reappeared with a cleaver he took it and tried to fit the blade into his rear pocket, then worked it into the back of his pants so that the handle cleared his shirt. Miho looked at him, intrigued. “Wait,” she whispered. “Let me look again.” She tiptoed to the door and peeked out, standing there for a few seconds before turning around. “He’s gone. He’s not there anymore.”

Matheson walked over and peered through the peephole. He didn’t see anyone, but knew Stedman could be standing where he wasn’t in plain view. He picked up his glass to finish what remained. Miho watched him take the plate of cheese and crackers to the door. Giving her a wink, he quietly slid the bolt, turned the handle, and swung it wide open. He looked both ways as stepped out into the corridor. It was empty.

When Matheson sat back down in her living room, the phone rang. Miho looked at the display. From the glance she gave him before she picked up, it was clear who it was. He continued watching TV, half his attention on her agitated conversation.

When she replaced the receiver she looked apologetic. “He’s down in his car. He said he was standing outside the door before, and heard everything. He said he heard us having... *sex*. I don’t think so. He said he heard Koji cough in the background, but he’s imagining. He couldn’t hear Koji in the bedroom. I told him he didn’t hear anything like that, but he doesn’t believe me.”

“So what does he want?”

“I don’t know,” she said, sitting down. “He’s still there, waiting outside. You should stay. He could still have a gun.”

“Are you worried about him yourself? Do you want me here for protection?”

“No, I know what to say to calm him, but he might be different with you.”

Matheson looked at his watch. “Maybe I’ll call a cab. The driver would be a witness.”

“Yes! Call a taxi.”

When the cab arrived, Miho tried to go downstairs with him to intercede in case Stedman was there, but Matheson pushed her back inside her apartment. He gave her a wave before he stepped into the elevator. There was no one in the lobby, and he didn’t see anybody outside on his way to the taxi.

About twenty minutes after he arrived home, Miho phoned to say that Stedman had just called her from his own place. If he lived that close to him, it was clear to Matheson that the man had tailed his taxi from her building to find out where he lived. Well, they’d broken up anyway, and the other one was coming back from out west, so maybe it didn’t really matter.