

FROM

The Miracle Girl

BY ANDREW ROE



They still there?” Mavis Morris asks her husband, Marcus, who for the past hour has been periodically checking the window, pinching the miniblinds open and closed with a well-honed disapproval like the nosey neighbor that he is. He’s been spying (across the street and over one house, to the left) in growing disbelief—the spectacle continues. He doesn’t even bother answering his wife’s question this time, you’re married this long and all it takes is a look, a significant enough arching of the eyebrows. The dopes, standing in the sun and in front of the white-turned-gray house and on down the block who knows how far, trying to convince themselves that they’ll find whatever it is they think they’re looking for in the room of that comatose little girl who he remembers sitting by herself on the sidewalk and who should just be left alone, is Marcus’s take, not that anyone besides his wife is asking. It’s getting ridiculous. But what can you do once people start believing something? Marcus returns to the couch—sacred site of naps and meals, late-afternoon periodical reading, and of course TV viewing—where Mavis finishes chewing a forkful of pasty mashed potatoes. Instant. What do you expect?

“All those people,” she starts in again. “I’m trying to understand.”

“I don’t understand anything anymore,” says Marcus, his final verdict, hoping that will be that, but probably not.

The TV going, a game show, a new one that’s actually a remake of an old one. Laughter, applause. People with nametags and bad haircuts are winning cash and prizes and pretty respectable parting gifts, none of that Turtlewax bullshit but cruises and decent-looking jewelry and gift certificates to stores

where you'd really consider buying something. They made it look so easy, the contestants. How your life can change. With the spin of a wheel. With answering a question about Greek drama. Game shows are a kind of religious devotion in the Morris household, and they're dedicated parishioners. They plan out their meals and errands and doctor appointments according to the various time slots of their favorites. And not only that: they buy their lottery tickets every Sunday, send in contest entries whenever they arrive in the mail, have the phone numbers of local radio stations on speed dial. Their name and address grace countless mailing lists and computer databases. Luck: it has to come your way eventually.

"I mean tragedy strikes, that's gonna affect you," Mavis needing to get this off her chest, apparently. "And then what, she never leaves the house, we never see a thing, there's all this whisper-talk about what's going on in there and is the poor girl dead, like the mother's some kind of reprobate. And maybe she is, I'm not saying one way or the other. That's not my place. And now this. CNN across the street."

No comment from Marcus. Instead he takes his own reluctant bite of mashed potatoes, the cheap taste, the cardboard blandness once again filling his mouth. Now they've got people camping out. Sleeping right there on the sidewalk, in the front yard. He gets up in the morning, walks out to get the paper, the sun already carving out its space in the sky for the day, and they're there, rubbing dreams from their eyes and sharing boxes of donuts and tuning their portable radios. Crazies. He thinks of things: Spraying them with the goddamned hose, for instance. Telling them to get a life. Delivering a speech they'll never forget and that will cause them to rethink everything. If you want to believe in something, believe in yourself. Believe in the randomness of the universe and how you are a speck. Deal.

"How long can it last? That's what I want to know. How long do these things last?"

If Marcus knows, he isn't saying. He concentrates on his food. Switches over to the pork chops, slightly burnt, just the right amount, just enough to give a little extra crisp and crunch as you bite, the way he likes it. He's very particular about his food, how his clothes are washed, the way his sheets

are tucked. He's a picky motherfucker and he knows it. His mother used to say he was too fussy—fussy like a girl. Which probably didn't help matters, psychologically. But we've all got our quirks and preferences. Take his wife. She doesn't seem to care much for the new version of *Hollywood Squares*. But he does. And yet they still get along just the same. They watch *Hollywood Squares* and then he puts up with her PBS nature crap. Compromise being the key to any successful relationship. As a connoisseur of daytime television ever since his early retirement last year, he knows that much. And seventeen years you have to consider a success, though, sure, it could always be a little better. There's always room for improvement. This he knows from daytime TV as well.

"Why is it always white folks with this kind of stuff? White folks and Latins. Why is it you never hear about black folks seeing Jesus in their shower curtains?"

Good point, Marcus concedes, cutting into his second pork chop, which invariably never tastes as good as the first. Good, satisfying. But not as good, as satisfying. You lose that first bloom of flavor, the way it takes over your mouth, trickles underneath your tongue. The first pleasures are the purest.

"I don't know, Marcus. I know it's strange. I know in some ways it probably isn't right. But maybe we should pay us a visit. You know, to be neighborly, sure, but to check it out, see what all the fussing is. I don't think we even officially met the woman all these years. Or the husband. And maybe she, the little girl, could help. Could help us with our . . . problem. We could just visit and see."

Marcus stops in mid-chew. On the TV there's a man jumping up and down, not getting much air, mostly knee flexes actually. The superiorly dressed host is maneuvering to shake his hand and offer mostly congratulations but the man remains too transfixed by the exaltation of his win. A crazed white man from Florida who is something called a crisis management consultant and just won ten grand for a half hour's work. Marcus loves his game shows, but he has to admit: every time he sees someone win big like this, especially white people from Florida, a little part of him dies, too.

He'd like to be a contestant himself one day—who wouldn't? He'd like to be hopeful and on TV and electric with suddenly realized potential, like you were maybe a different person—greater, vaster—from what you'd thought all these years.

“Now why would we want to go and do a damn fool thing like that?”

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