

## Dick & Jane Go Renting

After Dick and Jane finished an expensive Caesar salad and eggplant crepe lunch that made them feel good, if not insecure, about the neighborhood, they walked three blocks to the California Street apartment, and awaited the showing. A half-hour early, they did not arrive first, but shared the outlying sidewalk with two women, who may or may not have been together. The first sat on the flight of six stairs, delivering monotonic financial instructions into a slim, cellular phone. As she spoke, a stray red curl slid like a windshield wiper across her bleached, white forehead. She clenched her knees, as if cold.

The second woman stood at the base of the stairs, chewing a long stalk of celery that still contained leaves. As she ate, the vegetable swayed in her mouth like a palm tree in a trade wind. It was this swaying motion that led Dick to believe the women counted as one unit. Deranged by his temporary homelessness, he sought parallels where perpendicularity was the byword. Here, a light San Francisco breeze and a tuna fish garnish somehow spelled lesbianism. Was it any wonder Jane asked to do most of the talking this time? She was tired of his lapses.

Yet Jane's interpersonal skills were cracking under a strain of their own. Was she pregnant or not? The night before, she had awakened to another of seven inexplicable menstrual gushes, rushing lightly to the bathroom for a cleaning of her undies, and a cry. What made this mystery worse, she told herself, was how it plagued her during a stay of indefinite length at the filthy apartment of five men she had met only three weeks ago. As Dick's former college roommates, these men were hardly the five gleaming points of a star granting Jane a treasured wish. Instead, they too easily and too frequently

convinced Dick to go out drinking, divorcing him from his savings at a furious pace.

"How will this man support a baby?" wondered Jane, distracted too much to care about celery or cellular phones, or the deafening roar of a motorcycle climbing the hill on Lyon Street. Then she indulged a motherly inner voice to chastise herself for assuming too much about the pregnancy, which was not a fact yet; too much about Dick, who was not her husband yet. Why did he have to be? Do two years make a marriage? What if that wasn't what she wanted? What if he wasn't? He was hardly able to support himself, let alone a baby! "How will this man support a baby?" Jane wondered, catching herself in the very thought she wanted to avoid. She attempted a different method, shaking her head violently, faking a sneeze as Dick noticed her. Strangely, his spoken blessing recalled for Jane a fake orgasm in their third week of romance. Then, too, she was doing too much of the mutual work.

As the crowd outside the apartment mounted, reaching an upper bound of thirteen prospective tenants, a rusted El Dorado chugged up the street, jerking to a halt slightly forward of the empty space for traffic to and from the tiny, sunken garage. The driver leaned over the passenger side, lowered the passenger window by hand, and barked an order to clear the lane. In his tone were the echoes of extended corps time. Two stragglers got the gist, and shifted sleepily to the side. Promptly, the driver swung a fast arc in reverse, then slowly descended the garage ramp. Pulling in, he scratched a long, chalky track along the passenger door and quarter panels, grazing the curb.

"You're all too early," he said, briskly walking from the garage to the front door without making eye contact with anyone or letting anyone in. He reminded everyone that the classified ad said three o'clock, and now as a lesson, he would keep his printed word, regardless of the possibility to be flexible.

"Guess eagerness won't help here," Dick said, checking his watch anxiously.

"What does that prove?" asked Jane.

"That I'd like to be in bed."

"Yeah. Me too." But the couple had learned that indulgences jeopardized success, as did their mutual lack of employment, local landlord references, and verifiable credit. Wistful, Jane shrugged. Dick laughed uneasily.

Beside them, a fight broke out over a flowering plant carried by the male half of a couple leaning against a teal blue BMW 320i with sun-tinted windows. The man wore maroon suspenders that called forward the dark, conservative diamonds on his tie; the woman wore a business suit with narrow lapels and waistline. Shouting accusations of impending bribery, a small, hairy fellow in fading blue Pro-Keds swiped at the plant between exasperated tugs of his own thinning hair. Eventually, he was consoled with a ten-dollar bill, missing the irony.

"That's beautiful," remarked Dick.

"I'll grow better," Jane sneered. If it ever came, the new apartment would have an herb garden, hanging plants, at least two Yucca trees, depending on the space. At one point, Jane invited Dick to join her in these plans, encouraging a cactus, if nothing else. She suspected Dick would forget about waterings and prefer something thorny. When he mentioned mushrooms, she withdrew her invitation, citing compost heaps and sterility. There would have been more, but she lost her train of thought. A long digression followed until, for reasons Jane could not recall or reinforce, she again said, "I love you, Dick."

Dick was remembering this exchange when the front door opened, and the El Dorado's driver appeared, wearing the warm facial expression of a

delighted host. Surrounding his smile, a sparse goatee curved into the shape of a stirrup.

"Two fifty-eight," he said, resting a limp, chubby finger on the face of his watch. "But do come in." He stepped back from the door, and admitted his guests one by one.

The apartment manager's name was Yulooz, pronounced like the verdict at the end of an impossible game. He stood six foot four, but offset the imposingness of his height by carrying a middling amount of extra weight. In this manner, he cut a chubby figure that neither loomed nor amused. Passing him, Jane stared for one brief, indelicate moment at the slight breasts beneath his t-shirt, which strained around his sopping armpits. She shifted her eyes to Dick, as if to warn him against deeper offenses.

Entering the hallway, Dick received a friendly handshake from Yulooz, and learned his name. Prompted by skin color, Dick asked if the name was originally African.

"It's unusual," Dick remarked.

Yulooz smiled majestically. He sunk momentarily into eternal meditation. When he returned, he remarked that his name was not so unusual, after all. It was the name of his great-grandfather, whom he could contact in heaven by simply refraining from blinking. Any time Yulooz dried his exposed eyes against the atmosphere, visions of his departed namesake appeared.

"Would you like a demonstration?" he asked.

"Yes," Dick responded, wondering what visions were forming in the straining, worried eyes of Jane.

"I warn you that Yulooz can be moody," said Yulooz, adopting a reverential tone. "Often when Yulooz guides me, he says one thing, but means another. Now Yulooz says you are trustworthy."

"I am trustworthy."

"So says Yulooz. But how would he know? Have I not just explained his delirium?"

"Is he delirious?"

"He is in heaven," Yulooz explained categorically. He breathed deeply, crossing his arms over his midriff. Dick watched a tear run down his cheek.

"Are lesbians allowed?" Dick asked. Immediately, Yulooz blinked. Gravity reinhabited his bones. Reluctantly at first, he gave up his divine reverie, pulling his gaze from his deceased relative, as if pulling a lone hair. That action accomplished, he smiled for Dick.

Yulooz did not answer Dick, but indicated his wish to have Dick move further into the hallway. Dick obliged, greeting Jane with a roll of the eyes. The couple indulged a forced session of speechless conversation. Jane grabbed Dick's belt buckle, yanking it upward. On tiptoes, Dick took firm hold of Jane's neck, cupping her lower jaw and ears. He twisted her head twice from side to side until she grimaced. However, she also kneed Dick in the thigh, distracting him. As Dick attended his sudden pain, Jane slipped her chin forward, and bit deeply into his wrist. Dick pulled his arm away, but exposed his ribcage, which received a smart uppercut, adorned with sizeable semi-precious stones. He put his hand over Jane's face, and pushed.

"Then you want the place," he surmised.

"Very much," Jane said hopefully. "Look at this hallway. It's beautiful. And apartment thirteen is the one with the big bay window; it must be. You shouldn't hit me," she whispered. Dick remembered it differently.

"You hit me."

"What's the difference?" Jane hissed, hushing him. At these conversational junctures, she preferred, but seldom received, simple words of

love from Dick, who stammered. Here was an instant when his two years with Jane offered slight insight for Dick. Biting his tongue, he said he loved her deeply, and apologized.

Yulooz was noticeably moved by this gesture, the tail end of which he witnessed while approaching the locked door of the empty apartment. Inspired, he lifted the shining, golden key to eye-level with himself, like a hypnotist's pocket-watch, and sermonized about life's true key, which was love. His poetic punning had contrary results. One woman in a baby doll dress tilted her head sideways and theatrically sighed; the short, hairy fellow muttered violent gibberish about Jesus, and left on plodding feet. Abruptly, the man carrying the plant strapped his free arm around his girlfriend, who gasped. Dick and Jane became self-conscious, remarking to each other about the brightness of the hallway's lighting and red carpeting, which also covered the stairs.

"Of course, we *love* the effect," Dick concluded.

"Yes," said Jane, "there's so much energy here."

"Energy is the password to life," Yulooz preached. "Let these two be an example for us all. Through energy, we attain to the highest summit. Our downward gaze learns compassion and love for all humanity below." He slid the key into the lock and opened the door, revealing a wide interior hallway leading left and right. At the left end, the kitchen basked in bright sunlight. At the right, a dim, oblong living room swelled outward, like a tear. The large bay window stared down upon the slow traffic of California Street, where additional couples and individuals milled on the sidewalk, awaiting the showing. Entering this room, Jane gazed through the pristine glass at a large purple hat, beneath the broad brim of which no head or torso was discernible. A sudden chill ran down her spine, numbing her legs.

Meanwhile, Dick chose the middle path between right and left, arriving to the central room, which was the bedroom. To his surprise, the last tenant's had abandoned their bed, which was the only remaining furniture in the apartment. Stretching forward from the far wall, it supported a bare, mottled mattress that looked like a sickly tongue extended for a house-calling, perhaps tardy, doctor. Dick felt it with his palm.

In the far corners of the room were twin windows, covered by blue, satin curtains. Although Dick was alone, he asked out loud if the apartment included these sparse items.

"There is a garden," said Yulooz, appearing in the doorway. "But I will show you when everyone leaves." The word "leaves" hung in the air, like another pun.

Dick and Jane reunited in the kitchen, where they mutually confessed to an intuitive dose of the creeps.

"My nerves are shot," reasoned Jane, lifting the window onto a view of a lifeless courtyard. Dick took a peak, mentioning space for mountain bikes, and their cat.

"Poor Buddha," said Jane.

"Buddha?" asked Yulooz, appearing in the doorway. "Are you religious?"

"Yes," said Dick.

"Stay for the garden," Yulooz said. Dick and Jane exchanged a secret smile, glowing. When Yulooz left the kitchen, they discussed their luck that he liked them for no reason they could name. The process of hunting for an apartment was a mystery too convoluted to decipher. Every showing reinforced this same central truth, after which there could be no surprises. Holding hands, Dick and Jane were not even surprised to overhear Yulooz in the building's

hallway, turning later folks away because he had already made his decision; the apartment was rented.

"That's how stupid it is," Dick concluded, referring to the illogical object of the last three frantic weeks. Jane was too excited to speak. Quietly, she twirled in the kitchen, extending the wide arms of an owner. For the next three-quarters of an hour, Yulooz kindly dispatched people, explaining repeatedly that the apartment was off the market. On occasion, he found Dick and Jane in the living room or bedroom to tell them they could see the garden as soon as the official showing time had passed. On each occasion, they emphasized their patience.

At four o'clock, Yulooz found them in the kitchen again, and dangled a silver key before their eyes. Entranced, they followed him, like sheep, to the garden.

The garden's location was a surprise insofar as a downward trip was required through a locked hallway door that may just as well have been another apartment, or maintenance closet. Instead, it opened onto a musty staircase that curved out of sight like a catacomb. At the end, a speckled gate swung inward against the lowest step, forcing the passerby to back up after pulling it. In this way, enough room could be cleared for passage if the initiate also expelled all the air from his or her chest cavity, as Yulooz demonstrated upon crossing. Following his lead, Dick performed the same action, then Jane. On the other side, the three shared a happy return to easy breathing.

"This is it," Yulooz said, displaying his palm. But no garden was visible beyond the narrow vestibule.

"What grows here?" said Jane, squinting.

"The soul," Yulooz said. "You can hear it getting larger if you listen very carefully. Actually, the best method is breathing. If you breathe deeply and regularly, the world will transform itself before your ears."

"Can you see the garden?" Dick asked.

"Yes, I can."

"Will I see it also?"

"Yes, you will."

"Is Jane going to see it?"

"Why not ask Jane?"

"It's amazing," she said, studying the vestibule.

"Tell Dick," bid Yulooz.

Jane brushed some debris across the floor with her foot. She did not know where to begin. There were times when life flowered where the eyes never knew. That seemed to be the meaning of the messages written in blood in her underpants: life leaked from every orifice and pore at precisely those times when it least received welcome. The garden thrived first within. Otherwise, the world was so many rusting pipes and inconsequential trappings. But how to communicate this sudden insight? How to face Dick with enough courage to ride the strange enlightenments of her electrified thought? Would Yulooz prove a strong enough vehicle to support this surge of emotion after unleashing it?

"Dick has to see for himself," Jane decided.

"I think the garden is lovely," he said.

"Good. I wanted you to see it," said Yulooz, "before I gave you the news. Last night I prayed to Allah for assistance, and he sent me a Muslim woman."

"Is she here?" Dick asked.

"She will move in on Wednesday. Thanks for your interest. I really do like you two. You're upstanding people. If another apartment opens, I'll consider you first. Stay as long as you like. I need to get ready for work." He squeezed himself through the gate and ascended the stairs.

"I think I'm pregnant," said Jane.

Dick stood silently, maintaining a long eye contact with her. He chewed his lower lip. Soon his eyes dropped to Jane's stomach, soaking it in. He put his hand over her naval.

"How much is the rent in there?" he asked.