

The Virgin Mary

"I didn't know that you knew her," Tim said. He was speaking through the phone, the wafer-thin cell that was always in his palm.

"But I told you about her," George answered. He turned off the flame under a pot of boiling water and decided not to throw in the pasta just yet. He walked into the living room, cradling the receiver against his cheek.

Tim proceeded without registering the remark. He said, "We talked for two hours. It was a great conversation, very intimate. So we decided to exchange email addresses. She said, 'Oh, that's funny, my ex-boyfriend's brother has a friend named Tim with the same last name as you.'"

"Go figure," George interjected, settling onto a blue chair for the rest of the story, which was becoming predictable.

"I said, 'George?' She said, 'Oh dear.'"

"Oh dear," echoed George, waiting it out. He could hear the woman's words in his head, knew the exact tone of voice, recognized the old-fashioned mannerisms. He reached over to the coffee table and grabbed a pack of smokes. There was a moment of silence as he struck a match and a surprisingly large flame erupted. George singed his moustache lighting up.

"George?" Tim inquired. "Are you there?"

"I'm here," George confirmed, exhaling smoke.

Tim continued. A nervous laughter peppered his next words. "It was, ha ha, you won't believe this, ha ha, it was Mary." Ha ha.

"Really?" George feigned surprise.

"I mean the world is ridiculous," Tim assessed, "that I would meet this total stranger on-line and she would be one of the few people I really hit it off with. I mean we really hit it off." The glow of that connection lingered in Tim's voice, as if he were savoring it. It wiped away the nervous laughter.

"Well," George offered.

"And then she turns out to be Mary! We both paused for a second because it was such a surprise. We didn't know what to do with it." Mary was George's first girlfriend, whom he dated five years. Although that relationship was far in the past, it concluded with a marriage proposal from Mary, which George accepted for a month and then broke, bringing everything to an end. Ten years later George came across Mary's profile on an on-line dating service. That was a month ago. At that time he showed the profile to Tim, who subscribed to that service, among others. Tim was showing George pictures of all the women he was corresponding with. George looked at a dozen or so before remarking that Mary was on the site too.

"She's attractive," Tim noted.

George said, "Sure, there she is."

Tim asked did George ever think he would get back together with Mary and he replied, "Absolutely not." It was ten years ago, after all, and ended awkwardly. Nor was George interested in having things back.

"Well," George repeated. He dropped the spent cigarette into a jar by the window with an inch of brown water at the bottom.

"What do you think of that?" Tim asked.

George hesitated for a moment and then stated the obvious. "Tim, you know I showed you her profile a month ago?"

"You did?"

"Yes, we were sitting on your couch looking at women you were meeting and I said, 'Look, Mary's got a profile here too.'"

Tim didn't say anything. The sound of street traffic came through the receiver and George listened to horns. He said, "Then we bumped into her in the street two weeks ago starting her scooter and I introduced her to everyone, including you. You said, 'She's attractive,' and asked me, again, did I ever think about getting back together with her. At that time it sounded like you were expressing a nice wish for my happiness, but I think maybe you were feeling things out."

Tim asked George what he meant. George wondered that Tim would need the explanation. He leaned forward again and claimed a second cigarette from the coffee table, holding it sideways against his lips. "Okay," he said, "you've asked me three times in the last month do I ever think about getting

back together with Mary and each time I have said the same thing: 'Absolutely not.' I haven't hedged about it. Which made me wonder why you were asking me again." George hoped he didn't need to connect the last dot. The picture was clear enough, right?

"It's weird," said Tim, "that we traded emails and found out we knew each other already. What a, ha ha, coincidence."

"Tim," George said, "I showed you her profile a few weeks ago; I introduced you to her in the street only two weeks ago; you asked me about getting back together with her four times; you remarked more than once that she was attractive; and ten years ago, when Mary and I were still a couple, you hung out with us for dinner, maybe more than once. Do you really think everything's a coincidence?"

"I don't know. I remember that all those things happened, but I didn't connect them when I first noticed Mary's profile."

"You didn't notice Mary's profile, Tim. I was at your house. We were sitting on the couch. You were showing me all the women you were writing to. I said, 'Look at this: Mary has a profile here too.'"

"Yes," Tim permitted, "but then I found her profile later and I thought, 'This woman is attractive,' and I sent her a note. I didn't know it was Mary. I just knew she was an attractive woman on-line."

"But the profiles have pictures," George remarked.

"Well, yes."

"I can understand that she didn't recognize you from yours," George conceded, "because other than seeing you for ten seconds in the street with four other friends of mine while she was starting her scooter, she hasn't seen you or thought about you in over ten years, and you weren't a major character in her life at that time anyway. Besides, she probably thought you still live on the other side of the country. She never expected to find you among local singles on-line. You, on the other hand, are well aware as my friend that she lives here, in the same neighborhood as us, and what's more," George repeated, amazed at the need to, "you not only saw her recently, but saw her profile and the exact pictures you later looked at when you found her." George stated these last two words as if they were wrapped in noteworthy scare quotes.

"It is strange," Tim admitted. There was a pause. "The two of us began to wonder if you would have a problem with us getting together. Oh, can you hold on a second? I have to pay for my cab." George listened to a background financial transaction and heard a car door shut. Tim got back on the line and narrated his progress through the front gate of his apartment, up the two flights of steps, and through the door into his foyer. George heard him drop his keys and belongings onto the long wooden table at which they had eaten dinner together countless times. He saw Tim's laptop computer in his mind in its leather satchel and business magazines spread everywhere with newspapers spread open onto unfinished crossword puzzles written in pen, here and there overwritten indecipherably.

"I don't know," George stated.

"Because if you did," Tim said deeply, "I wouldn't want to do anything that might jeopardize our friendship." Tim took a moment to reiterate how important the friendship was to him. It was certainly a long one, tightened by occasional crisis counseling in both directions, and a shared appreciation of formal creativity.

"You wouldn't want to hurt the friendship," George echoed, by now on his third or fourth cigarette, having lost count. It was difficult for him to put into words what the issues really were. It would take him some time, a bit longer than the phone call. There were resurrections to perform, undesirable ones. He would have to go into the past and remember who he was at that time, find the actual threads between that person and his current self, who dwelled actively in the present. It was not something he wanted to do, especially not in the unspoken context of a request to be gracious and see everything as, ha ha, an unusual coincidence.

Eventually George would understand the ha ha was the problem, not the prospect of Mary dating other men. Mary wasn't a virgin for god's sake. George didn't need her to live on in his memory as the girl who knew only him. On the contrary, their history and connection made him want her to thrive, to go on with her life in successful pursuit of whatever made her happy, including finding love. His decision that she wouldn't find it with him was not egocentric enough to suppose it therefore wasn't out there. Rather, that's exactly where it was.

But was it with Tim? And why would Tim play that odd bet, a long shot under even ideal conditions, which these circumstances certainly weren't. Tim had to see that. He was proving quite skillful at not seeing much, George perceived, but he persisted in the conviction that Tim had to understand when a spade is a spade. Putting it another way, if Tim was already asking, at so early a juncture, would his actions compromise his friendship with George, wasn't it easy enough to see that the question itself, if arising so early, was ample reason not to go further, that the question was a red flag and Mary a red herring? And Tim a red rover. Or worse, a red devil.

George wanted Tim to get it without having to spell it all out for him. That would be the most favorable outcome. The other ones were distasteful, especially assuming the role of prohibiting Tim. It was somehow prohibiting Tim that rankled George most, as if he were being nudged against his will into the role of Tim's father instead of his friend. He didn't want to play moral compass for him. He didn't want to say out loud that if the friendship does in fact mean as much to you as you say, Tim, you wouldn't do anything in the first place to beg the question are you risking it, and you certainly wouldn't continue on that path to the point of actually asking. No, decided George, a friend would silently let go of the pursuit precisely because the question mattered. Then, firmly in retrospect, the men could laugh enjoyably about the details. Instead, Tim wanted to know was it okay with George anyway. Ha ha.

George lit another cigarette and folded his legs beneath him in the chair. He shook his head and rolled his eyes, a bit stuck. He removed the receiver from beside his head and looked at it in his palm from a distance. There in his hand were the tiny collected perforations permitting his perspective out to the world from one end and the world's perspective into his home from another. The holes in the receiver for this enormous communicative dream were, by contrast, so terribly small. It was truly a wonder to George that after the yapping eruptions of bird song that add up to human dialogue people proceed with their lives as if they understood each other at all.

"George, I mean it, I wouldn't want to do anything that would jeopardize our friendship," Tim reiterated. He was now in the kitchen, putting away dishes, which clinked in George's ear as he lifted the phone again.

"Mary can date anyone she wants," George replied, "as can you." He did not add the comment that Tim should not want to date Mary if he meant what he was saying about friendship.

There was a delicate issue of accountability at stake, and Tim's persistence in the idea that the situation was completely coincidental made it impossible for George to talk about responsibility for it easily. The long and short of it was: be accountable. Own your self-interest. That way you don't have to trouble the people affected by it by asking them if you can pursue what you're after with impunity at their expense. These murky notions began swirling

in George's mind as a headache. He pinched his face between the fingers of his free hand and squeezed, sighing into his palm.

"So," Tim hazarded, "you're okay, ha ha, if Mary and I meet for dinner, ha ha, and see what it's like." Again he volunteered, as if somehow it helped, that their exchanges so far had been exceptionally deep. Then he added, "It's all, ha ha, so strange. Life is really ridiculous." The last sentence hung out there in the void as a veiled request for reassurance that yes, life was ridiculous, as if that would make everything okay, simplistic mutual recognition between old friends. Perhaps it would.

George drew in a deep breath. He said, "Tim, I showed you her profile on-line and introduced you to her two weeks ago in the street. You hung out with us when we were a couple. Yes, life is ridiculous."

"I know," Tim said, gratified, "it really is ridiculous! What a coincidence! I can't believe it." He then proceeded to tell the story all over again, laughing ha ha uncomfortably ha ha at the big surprise ending.

George studied a fresh cigarette absently. His focus shifted into the distance, taking notice of the kitchen. He could see the big pot on the stove with the unused hot water in it for pasta. He felt like one of the forgotten noodles, waiting counter-side for an imminent thermal transformation from brittle to pliant. In anticipation of the process, his body went limp in the blue chair, yearning for the metaphorical fork that would snare him in its tines and twirl him into a spiral.

"I need to eat," he told Tim.

Tim turned on a faucet and George heard water collecting in a pot. He felt the increasing weight of it in his imagination.

"I'm about to reheat a stew and make some rice," Tim mentioned. "It's top-end sirloin in a..."

George was no longer listening closely as Tim described a gourmet sauce with multiple exotic spices and reported where the recipe came from and how he had changed and improved it over many iterations. George took the receiver into the kitchen and stared at his hot water, which was not even steaming anymore. The pot was just big enough for dunking his head and going to sleep. He considered the old saying that a watched pot never boils, that now it was time to stop watching Tim, who also never boils, George thought. He noticed how his thoughts were beginning to lose their coherence, an image of olive oil popping into his head as proof. He relit the burner and heard Tim conclude with an invitation to come over for some stew.

"I'm a vegetarian," George reminded him. "Twelve years."

Tim replied quietly, "You could, ha ha, pick out the beef."

"Why don't you go ahead and do that for me?" George suggested. He removed the telephone from his ear, studied the device for a moment to assess its actual value, and dropped it casually into the pot.