

## A Real-Life Drama

"I can't believe she left me. I just can't."

Larry MacDurvey said this right after he'd drained the remnants of his fourth beer. The bartender shook his head sympathetically and moved to refill the empty glass. Larry continued in his best I'm-hurt-but-who-gives-a-damn voice. "For two years I give this broad Delores anything and everything she wants: flowers, clothes, expensive dinners, jewelry . . . and this is the thanks I get." He straightened his shoulders and sat erect on the barstool, tilting his head to get a profile shot out of the mirror behind the bar. "I mean, it's not like there aren't plenty of broads out there who'd love to go out with a guy like me."

The bartender set Larry's glass in front of him and turned away, discreetly rolling his eyes. For some reason he had the mental image of Larry sitting up late at night watching old Humphrey Bogart movies and taking notes. He shook his head wearily and looked first out over the empty bar and then at his watch.

"You know the reason she gave me? Huh?"

The bartender shook his head no, trying hard to look interested, though his face bore the detached expression of a man about to watch "Dr. Zhivago" for his twenty-third time on cable TV. Larry took another thick gulp of beer.

"She said she couldn't deal with my bald spot anymore," he managed at last. "Can you believe that?"

The bartender shook his head again and fished a glass out of the sink, barely suppressing a chuckle. He began to wipe at it furiously.

"I don't think it's that big," Larry said, tapping the back of his head with his forefinger. "Anyway, just between you and me, I don't think that's really it at all." He waited until he again had the bartender's undivided attention.

"You see, I have this funny thing. I don't know how to explain it. It's like this feeling I get sometimes . . . like . . . well . . . it's like I'm being watched." The corners of the bartender's mouth began to turn slightly upward as he listened. "Oh, I don't have it right now, talking to you, but it'll hit me again some time. It's really starting to bug me, you know?" Larry paused to take a swallow. "I tried to tell Delores about it once or twice, but she just told me I was being childish. I don't know." He gave the bartender an exaggerated shrug, and was silent for nearly a minute before going on.

"I think it was . . . affecting me . . . you know, . . . in bed. I was having . . . a little trouble . . . uh . . ." He paused and took another healthy swallow. "Well, anyway, I'm seeing this therapist now. Every Thursday. Maybe that'll make Delores happy. It's costing me a fortune."

The bartender let out a snicker, but he somehow managed to make it sound like he was clearing his throat.

"She's not exactly perfect herself, you know," Larry smirked, not noticing. He was cool again, like Bogart, his idol: in total control. He raised his glass to his lips, trying to do it causally, the way Bogie would have done it, but the movement came out a little more theatrical than he'd intended, and due to the combination of applied force, a slight miscalculation in the trajectory of the glass, and the relative position of his mouth, the remainder of his beer ended up on his shirt. He glanced up at the bartender, embarrassed, but he was facing the other way, pretending not to notice. Larry quickly grabbed a handful of cocktail napkins and began to dab at himself as he hurriedly went on: "I mean, most of the times I called her past nine o'clock she'd never answer her damned phone. She'd always tell me the next day that she was out bowling with the girls. Can you believe that?" He snorted derisively. "Why anyone would want to go bowling that much is beyond me." He thought for a moment and then sighed for effect. He knew he should have been an actor.

The bartender, when he'd regained his full composure, came over and informed Larry of the lateness of the hour and of his subsequent desire to close down for the night.

"That's okay, buddy. I gotta be hittin' the road anyway. Gotta get up tomorrow and sell that insurance!" He paused to belch reflectively. "Hey thanks, buddy, for . . . you know . . . listening to my troubles and everything." The bartender gave him the standard smile, accompanied with the standard, "Any time, pal."

Larry was going to slide gracefully off the barstool, turn, and leave, the way he knew Bogie would have done, but somehow he got his leg caught in the foot-rail and he ended up sprawled on the floor. He quickly jumped up and tried to nonchalantly brush the peanut shells off his back. "Leg must've fallen asleep," he muttered weakly. Then, sensing that he had quite possibly made a fool out of himself, he turned and stalked out of the bar, leaving the bartender to do whatever it is bartenders do when nobody's watching them.

He trudged slowly home beneath the streetlamps, passing through intervals of light and darkness, hands in pockets, whistling "As Time Goes By" with only his shadow to accompany him. And yet, strangely enough, he once again had the uncanny feeling that he was being watched by a person or persons unseen.

## II

When Larry awoke the next morning in the sanctuary of his apartment the feeling was still there, inexplicable as always, and amplified, perhaps, by the headache gnawing at the inside of his skull. He groaned softly, turning over on his side, and he was promptly confronted with a picture of Delores leering at him from

atop the nightstand. He eyed it reproachfully before slowly working himself up out of bed. He wobbled slightly as bright red flares erupted inside his head. "Aspirin," he said, wincing.

He staggered through his small apartment, which was festooned with all manner of Bogart paraphernalia, on his way to the bathroom, tripping over his cat, Marlowe, as he did so. Marlowe firmly adhered to that seemingly stupid feline conviction that the best places to sleep are those areas through which people are most likely to walk. Marlowe was a rock, a pillar, a monument to nonambulatory grace that feared the feet of no mortal being. He was, Larry often remarked to his few friends, a fantastically lazy cat.

Luckily, Larry was close enough to the bathroom sink to grab it and thus maintain his balance. He briefly entertained the desire to punt the cat across the living room, but he was afraid of hitting the painted plaster statue of Sam Spade in the corner by the coffee table and chipping it. Besides, he knew that Marlowe would just wait until he was asleep to get even. He turned instead to the bathroom mirror, which was, for some reason, hanging slightly askew. He straightened it before extracting a bottle of aspirin from a drawer. He took four to play it safe. Then he gave his bald spot a cursory examination with his fingertips before getting in the shower.

Larry always took fast showers, some in world record times, because it was during these that the sensation of being watched was so strong it was almost unbearable. He invariably had this problem in public restrooms as well, and to compensate for his discomfort and embarrassment he would often whistle loudly and clear his throat, as if this would somehow draw attention away from himself.

A minute and a half later he was toweling himself off. This, too, he did so fast that a causal observer might assume that he was trying to start himself on fire. In truth, Larry just hated being exposed, even in the privacy of his own bathroom. Once he got himself reasonably dry, he wrapped the towel securely around his waist and stood in front of the sink, once again fondling his bald spot to see if the brutal spray had washed away any more of his hair.

He was halfway through brushing his teeth when he noticed that the mirror was again hanging somewhat crookedly. He stood there staring at it, foam dripping out of his mouth, as if it was deliberately hanging that way just to annoy him. Did Bogie tolerate his mirrors hanging in such a way? Larry doubted it. He reached out a hand and straightened it. It promptly slid back to its previous slant. He tried again, this time setting his toothbrush down by the edge of the sink and using bothhands to straighten the mirror and hold it firmly in place. It was then, much to his surprise, that the entire wall behind the sink fell away before his outstretched arms and shattered like glass into a million pieces.

right hand and a black leather riding crop was clenched in his left. He did not look especially pleased.

The man paused to give Larry a disappointed scowl before brushing past him. He walked over to the sink and swung it inward on hidden hinges and stepped through, taking a few giant strides toward the audience, his boots making hollow crunching sounds on the glasslike remains of Larry's bathroom wall. He raised the megaphone and said: "All right folks, I'm sorry, but the show's over. He found out." This was met with quite a few "awwws" from the audience, as well as a few emphatic "boos." The man took a deep breath and said, "Yes, yes . . . I know how you all feel, but there's really nothing I can do about it. It's like I said. He found out. That's it. The end. Thank you for your patronage." He punctuated this with a short diplomatic bow. The crowd began to rumble more unpleasantly as people got up and filed toward the exits, and a disembodied voice drifted over them from a PA system. "Please return your ticket stub to the box office to receive a full refund of the ticket price for today's performance. We are sorry for the inconvenience. Thank you." The man walked back over to Larry who was standing in mute shock.

"I guess I shouldn't really be angry," the man said. "It was inevitable that you would find out about it some day. It's just a shame that it had to end this way . . . damned see-through walls. That's the problem with one-way scenery. Looks real enough from the inside, but it gets broken too easily. It just couldn't be helped." He shook his head sadly and kicked a shard of broken wall across the bathroom tile. "And to think of all the advances we've made in theatrical equipment . . ."

"Wh-wh-who . . .," Larry stammered.

"Who am I? Well, I guess I should probably introduce myself. My name is Hephaestus Q. Jones. I am the director of this grand production." He raised his arms as he said this and gestured all around them.

"What? Director of what?" It was clear that Larry was finding all this extremely hard to deal with.

"This production," the director said simply. "You might say that it involves your life story. In fact, it *is* your life."

"My life?"

"Yes. Uh, I think you'd better come over here and sit down for a while, Larry. You don't look so good." He took Larry by the arm and led him through the living room to the couch. By now, there were about a dozen men in white coveralls with the words "STAGE CREW" stenciled on their backs hard at work dismantling Larry's apartment. Larry didn't notice this right away, being far too absorbed in the act of freaking out. The director put a comforting hand on Larry's shoulder.

"This isn't going to be easy for you to hear, Larry, so I'm going to give it to you straight out. You see, you haven't been living the boring and ordinary

### III

The first thing Larry noticed, after the initial shock, was the people. There were hundreds of them sitting in the darkness thirty or so feet beyond the gaping hole in his bathroom wall in what appeared to be theatre seats. They were all gazing at him in rapt amazement, as if expecting him to tap-dance, or juggle bowling pins. He blinked his eyes several times, as if to make them all disappear. They didn't. Larry began to tremble slightly. He closed his eyes and silently counted up to twenty before opening them. The crowd remained, though something was different now. They were looking at him and at each other as if something had gone dreadfully wrong. He could hear them whispering and shifting uncomfortably in their seats. He finally decided to open his mouth and say something, but unfortunately it was still full of toothpaste foam which sprayed fountainlike out into the darkness and all he really managed to say was something like "moorfff!" At this, the crowd burst into laughter and began applauding wildly.

Larry could do nothing but stand there, his mouth hanging open and dripping with foam, his eyes wet and bright, like those of a rabbit trapped by rapidly approaching headlights, half crazed with fear and bewilderment. He wanted so badly to wake from this nightmare he felt sure he was having. He had never been able to cope with weirdness of any kind, and the idea that he was standing in his bathroom wearing only a towel in front of what appeared to be several hundred laughing people was simply too much for his mind to handle that early in the morning. He was used to an existence which was considerably more mundane: the occasional late nights down at the bar, or on the couch with Delores watching reruns of old movies and eating popcorn. He could recite every line from every Bogart movie by heart, and though he had often dreamt about becoming a famous actor, this was the first time he'd ever been on stage in front of actual people, and quite frankly, it scared him shitless.

After a while the crowd died down a little and Larry began to feel the strength returning to his legs. He was about to bolt for the safety and sanity of the rest of his apartment, perhaps his bedroom, when a voice rang out from the bathroom's linen closet behind him.

It was a deep voice, a magnificent voice, full of power and authority. Larry jumped at the sound of it and a hush fell over the crowd as the echo of one word bounded and rebounded through the empty air. "Cut," it said, or rather, yelled. A moment later the closet door opened and a man stepped out.

He was an extremely big man, Larry noted as he drew back, carefully holding his towel in place. He had flaming red hair and a pointed beard and his cheeks were fat and slightly flushed, as if he'd just run up a flight of stairs. His clothes were odd as well: baggy white trousers tucked into black riding boots and a bright red jacket, with a white silk scarf knotted loosely around his bulging neck, and a black beret adorning his massive head. A megaphone was dangling from his

life you thought you were. You were, in reality, performing it, since the day you were born, for the enjoyment and edification of others. Of course, we couldn't let you in on this because it might have ruined the integrity of your performance, that of an *ordinary real-life* insurance salesman and Humphrey Bogart fanatic." He paused to see how this was sinking in, but he couldn't tell from Larry's glazed expression. "Also . . . brace yourself, Larry . . . all the people you've ever known or met--your parents, your brother Al, your childhood friends and your college buddies, even your ex-girlfriend Delores--are actors. Even the people you passed on the street, or sat by in movies theatres. Actors. Extras. Nothing more.

"And all the experiences you've every had have been carefully staged, or at least guided by us from the very beginning. Even your little bald spot was in the script. Do you understand me so far?"

"Nooo . . .," Larry moaned. His face was bent down and covered by his hands. "I gotta be dreamin'. None of this is real!"

"Exactly," Hephaestus said. "And it never was. Not even when you went outside, or went on trips. That was all done with elaborate special effects, and I must say it was quite a pain in the ass, too. We had to build *everything*. See-through walls, sidewalks and streets with hidden treadmills, computerized projection systems, inflatable trees . . . the list goes endlessly on. We had a monstrous budget, Larry. You should be proud."

Larry looked up just in time to see one of the stagehands carrying Marlowe, still asleep, under one arm. The other men were busy taking down his collection of old movie posters, and two of them were carrying Sam Spade off the set. Most of the furniture was gone now, too. Larry couldn't believe this was happening. And then he saw her.

She was stunningly beautiful, with long dark hair cascading down over her shoulders and brilliant emerald eyes. She was dressed in a sheath-like sequined evening gown, and she was walking toward them, hips swinging from side to side, crossing the stage with an easy seductive grace. He was just beginning to think there was something familiar about her when his mouth fell open and he recognized her. It was Delores.

"Hello, Larry," she said, smiling pleasantly. Larry just sat there staring dumbly in lieu of a civilized reply. He couldn't get over how different she looked.

Hephaestus must have picked up on this because he said, "Different from what you're use to, eh? We had a superb make-up artist. We had to tone down her appearance, you understand, in the interests of realism."

"I suppose we're all out of work now," Delores said, giving Larry a pitiful look. He cringed under it.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, my dear. Not to worry, though. I have another project in the works."

"Delores . . . ," Larry said.

Delores laughed. "Actually, my name is Eve," she said.

Hephaestus looked at Larry nervously, noticing how badly he was taking all of this. He turned to Eve. "Um, I think it would be a good idea if you left, my dear. Larry's having a little difficulty coping at the moment. We wouldn't want him going into shock, would we?"

"No, we wouldn't," she said. "I understand how difficult this must be for him. Actually, I'm just waiting for Nick. I told him to pick me up here."

"Nick?" Larry asked, but no one was listening to him.

"Nick!" Eve suddenly called out and Larry followed her gaze across the stage. He recognized the man immediately. It was the bartender. He was dressed in a black tux, and when he saw them, he waved and came over, zig-zagging gracefully through the stagehands as they carried more of Larry's belongings off the stage. He gave Eve a peck on the cheek and stood smiling down at Larry, who was once again becoming aware that he was wearing a mere towel.

"Larry, babe. Loved our scene last night. It was all I could do to keep from laughing. And that pratfall at the end . . ." Nick chuckled a little at the memory of this. "It was totally convincing, dude. I'd like to work with you again some time."

"We should be going, Nick," Eve said, hooking her arm through his. The look on Larry's face was making her quite nervous.

"Sure, babe. Um, I'll talk to you later about the money, Heph. Later, Larry." He extended a hand, and then withdrew it when Larry failed to shake it. He nodded instead, and he and Eve turned and walked away, whispering to each other and laughing.

Larry watched them go, shaking with rage and embarrassment. He was beginning to suspect that maybe this wasn't a dream after all. He turned to the director.

"I don't get it. So what's so great about my life that people would want to see it . . . I mean, if what you're sayin' is true?"

Hephaestus just laughed. "That's just it, Larry. There was nothing particularly great about it at all. This was a real-life drama . . . so real you didn't even know you were in it. The critics loved you. The ones who stayed awake said you were great! And best of all, people could come and witness a day in your life, and by the time they left, they'd feel a lot better about their own lives. You see?"

"Oh," Larry said. He was beginning to feel used.

"Don't get me wrong, Larry," Hephaestus said, smiling broadly. "Your life has been the longest-running theatrical production in the history of modern realistic drama. For a great many years I made a career out of it. Now I have more money than I know what to do with. Perhaps it's just as well that you found out about it. I'd like to move on to something else. Something different. And bigger . . . before I retire."

Larry thought for a moment, unconsciously rubbing the tips of his fingers against the back of his head. "I was wondering . . . what gave you guys the right to play around with my life like this, anyway?"

"Oh, that's easy," the director said, standing up. "You agreed to it in a previous life. Signed a contract and everything." It's . . . uh . . . filed away safely . . . somewhere."

Larry's mouth worked silently as he mulled this over. He didn't know what to say. He finally shrugged his shoulders in submission. It made sense, somehow. At least he hoped so. He got up so the stagehands could take the couch.

The director smiled and extended a fat hand. "Well, I guess that's it. I want to thank you for all you've done for me. It's been a pleasure working on . . . with you. I wish you the best of luck for the future, my boy." He turned to leave.

"Wait a minute! What am I going to do with myself from now on? I take it I'm not selling insurance anymore." Larry took a few steps toward Hephaestus and his towel slipped off. Before he could do anything, a rather large woman with a tag on her shirt that said "WARDROBE" took it and walked away. Larry ran and hid behind some curtains as a couple of passing stagehands hooted their approval.

"You're famous, Larry. I wouldn't worry about it too much, if I were you," Hephaestus grinned. He walked off the stage, which was now huge and empty, completely devoid of anything even remotely resembling Larry's home. He did not look back, nor did he hear Larry's imprecations against him for leaving him stranded without so much as a stitch of clothing. Larry was, of course, a modest man, and all the fame in the world wasn't going to change that.

— J. R. Wiese