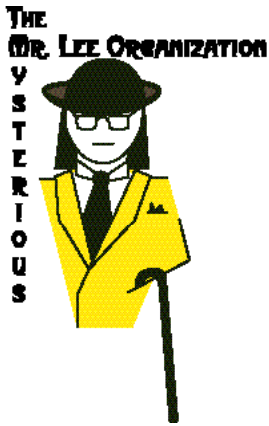


Guilt



Ashir wonders what Ella will think of the Stevensons. She seemed to truly like TV and Laticia—trusting them with Mary was definitely a vote of confidence, since Ella is so protective of her—but Mamma S is such a strong matriarch, so outspoken, so... well, Mamma S, that Ashir wonders if Ella will like her. He wonders if Mamma S will talk to him about his failure to do right by Keith. He can hear her voice now, as they cross the bridge to Oakland: “My Lord, Ashiragusha Celestrian Janes, *what do you think you’re doing?* You shouldn’t be bringing young women to meet your family when you haven’t done right by Keith. You owe him that much. You could have been calling around, finding him instead of talking to these people, paying good money to bring these people up here. Don’t you think that money could have found Keith? You should be looking after your own. Get your own house in order before you try to grow it.” Thank God she doesn’t know how much money he’s spending on Ella. Will

Mamma S resent Ella as taking the place of Betsy? He’s never been sure if Mamma S thought that he should marry Betsy or not. TV was all for it, but he wonders if Mamma S would have actually approved of him becoming part of the family in that way. Mamma S, his mother in so many ways, but still... she’s not exactly color-blind and she’s always disapproved of the way he’s dealt with Keith, at least since he became an adult—if he actually ever became one.

What is he thinking about this for? Ella’s sitting next to him, smiling. He can still feel the touch of her hand in his while they rode the elevator down from the meeting with Moiss. He can see Mary in the rear-view mirror, her head pushed up against the window, trying to get as good of a look at the bay as she can from the vantage of the bridge. He shifts into the outmost lane so she can see more. She points out a big freighter headed for the Oakland docks, amazed in her adorable fashion with the massiveness of the ship, so much larger than even the largest fleet tenders that dock in Seward. He smiles as Ella explains about the ships. He tells them about the summer he and TV decided being longshoremen would be a good way to earn money and hung out at the docks for a couple of weeks trying to get work, carefully adjusting his vocabulary for Mary. Ella smiles at him, the lines around her eyes showing in late-afternoon sun. Is she thinking about him as Mary’s father? Her husband? The desire to take her hand and gently squeeze it is so great, he has to drive with both hands on the steering wheel until they exit the bridge, just to keep from doing it.

What is a family, anyway? Something warm and loving like the three of them this moment? Something like the times he spent with the Stevensons, that knowledge that you’ll always be welcome? Or is it something more like the reality of his “family”—betrayal, hate, hurt, abandonment? Could he ever provide more than his family, rise beyond that? Maybe these are his tests, Ella and Mary and Keith. Do right by them all, now, and all of his evil past... gone.

He realizes he’s going to have to tell Ella about Keith tonight. Tell her everything and hope she still cares about him afterwards. He drives on, hoping they’ve been too distracted by the new sights to notice his moody withdrawal.

He forces a smile and digs a tale up from his mind about he and TV doing something stupid as teens, telling it as humorously as he can.



Momma S’s pecan pie has never been entered in a cook-off, but Ashir’s sure that had it been, it would have won not only the blue ribbon, but a special “best ever” award. The scant few crumbs on all of the plates at the table suggest that he is not alone in this opinion.

“That was so good, Mrs. Stevenson. I can’t imagine how much work it must have been.”

“Lord, it wasn’t much at all. This is just Sunday dinner, something you have after talking with the Good Lord on his day. Don’t your people do the same?”

"We don't go to church," Mary says. Ella looks mortified, while TV looks away to hide his grin. Ashir wonders if a big confrontation is coming, knowing Ella's passionate disbelief.

"My family wasn't much of a Church family, Mrs. Stevenson. My father believed in poker and gin more than God."

TV laughs. "Your papa wouldn't have lasted day one in this house, not with Momma. She'd get him to church."

"Now Terrance, I don't see you sitting 'sides me none too often on Sundays. Don't you be talking bad."

"Ok, ok. Next Sunday, I promise."

Laticia gets up and starts picking up the plates. Ashir helps her, taking the plates back into the kitchen. They wash dishes while TV and Momma S tell Mary and Ella who all the people in the photos on the dining and living room walls are. The photos date back to the turn of the century, and include an amazing variety of people, ranging from groundbreaking (a man who broke the color barrier on the docks) to heartbreaking (a girl who was tortured to death at age twelve), all relatives or somehow connected to the family. Mr. Stevenson was an amateur historian and spent considerable time documenting his family's history. Momma S probably won't show Ella and Mary his portfolios and binders full of newspaper clippings, letters, and other documents, but he collected them all, too, and even wrote a family history—three thick notebooks of events and people.

"Momma S really loves having a child in the house again. Did you see how she looked at Mary during dinner. All of her sternness was gone. She must be in heaven, with Mary paying so much attention to the photos and her family. This is special for her, Ashir."

"Thanks. This is my family. I needed Ella to see that, to have Momma S meet her. Kind of strange, huh?"

She shakes her head. "No." She smiles and says quietly, "Do you have that feeling—'she's the one'?"

He puts down the dish. "I don't know. Hope, maybe. Something intense."

She laughs, taking off the gloves and leaning against the counter, grinning. "Ashir Janes, you are the funniest man I know. Don't you ever use complete sentences for important things?"

"She thinks that, too. I mean, that it's funny that I don't always complete my thoughts."



"This is kind of like Pittsburgh. I guess cities look more alike than unlike." Ashir and Ella stand under a basketball backboard with a metal chain net. She wraps her arms about herself, the sweatshirt she's wearing not quite warm enough for the evening chill.

"Maybe in certain parts. If you are just seeing the immediate surroundings, than Oakland looks like Seattle, looks like Chicago. But if we walked around a little more, it would be different. The hills are different, the businesses, the whole feeling for the place, don't you think?"

"I suppose so. I haven't spent much time in cities. Just Pittsburgh. Have you travelled much?"

"More than I've wanted to. I used to have to meet with people for business all over the country, even Tokyo. It probably sounds more exciting than it is. Mostly just hotels, not really cities."

"Still, it must have been wonderful to see them. I love reading about different cities and people. It's so exciting to think about people who living in a way that's completely alien to me, to realize that all of these other things are possibilities. That you could live in Rome, and walk to a different store for every part of your meal, getting everything fresh, and live amongst all of that amazing art and history or you could live in Tokyo and commute on a train where they literally have to shove everyone in to close the doors, and then go work and do exercises with hundreds of other people." She stands closer to him. "Not that I even want to live like that—the Italians and Japanese don't treat women well—but realizing that the way I live isn't the only way I could live, I think that's exciting."

"I never thought about it like that. Could I live in a differnt way than I do now? It feels like I have to live this way—like I'm here at this moment with you because this is where I had to be. I don't think I could have been a record store owner like TV, or rice farmer in China, or Water Buffalo Mozzarella producer in Italy. I'm Ashiragusha Janes, computer geek."

She looks in his eyes, and then sweeps down his body, focusing on his shoes or the ground.

“Ashiragusha... How did you get that name? It sounds Asian. Is it Japanese?”

“No, it’s drug-induced gibberish. My parents came to San Francisco for the Summer of Love. I’m not even sure if my Dad is really my dad.” Ella’s hands are slightly red.

“You look cold. Do you want to head back to my truck? There’s not much for me to show you here.”

“Ok.” She turns towards his truck and walks across the asphalt. He steps beside her, letting his hand hang near hers. Their arms brush against each others, their fingers touch, but don’t entwine.

“Do you have any siblings? Are they names things like Ashir?”

“One brother. His name is Keith. I think my parents sobered up for a couple of months after he was born.”

“Do you wish you had a normal name?” She slips her hand into his.

“No. Keith has a normal name but he’s retarded, probably because of all the drugs my parents were taking before he was born. I was lucky to just get a strange name.” He bites his lip, waiting for her response. She squeezes his hand gently and looks at him, not smiling, but with a gentle look of sympathy.

“I’m sorry. Are you two close?”

They have arrived at his truck. He opens the passenger door silently, reluctantly letting go of her hand as she enters.

When he shuts his door, she asks, “Is Mrs. Stevenson going to mind if we don’t go back right away? I’d like to talk some more.”

He smiles and takes her hands in his, twisting his torso to face her. A car drives by, shooting light through the windows, lighting her face, her eyes. He wants to kiss her so much, but he has to tell her about Keith first, even though to do so will probably mean never kissing her.

“I haven’t seen Keith since I moved to Eliot Cove. When I moved, my Grandmother placed into a managed care home without consulting me. I didn’t call him much or write, and now he’s left and I don’t know where he is.” He looks away, down at the edge of the seat, where the shadows dominate the landscape. “I....”

She sits silently, with her hands still in Ashir’s. He can’t look at her face.

“I didn’t want to tell you about him, I was afraid what you would think.”

She pulls a hand from his and runs it through his hair, gently over his cheek. “Why didn’t you call?” Her voice is soft.

“I don’t know....” How can he tell her the real truth, but to lie to her? He turns back toward the console and puts the key in the ignition, avoiding looking at her face.

She puts her hand on his and says “Don’t, please.” She guides his fingers off the key into her hand, holding it tightly, gently. She pulls it to her lips and kisses his palm. He feels the softness of her lips, the suppleness of her cheeks. He feels her eyelashes against his fingers as she closes them. The moistness of her mouth as she kisses his palm again.

She guides his hand to her cheek, holding there. “Do you miss him?”

“Horribly. I feel so I can’t tell you, can’t put it to words.” His fingers slip into her hair, the soft curls embracing him.

“Tell me about him.” She puts her feet into his footwell, facing him, as close as the bucket seats allow. He glides his hand from her ear to her lips and she kisses it again, pressing her lips into his flesh.

She holds his hands in front of her as his life with Keith breaks the surface and flows out into the air. Story after story, his love, his anger. His hatred for himself, for his Grandmother, his parents. His love and anger and nameless feelings. TV, Momma S, Mr. Stevenson. Every emotion he’s felt, out of the places he hid them, buried them, while she holds his hand, strokes his hair.

He kisses her cheek, his hands holding her head, his fingers in her hair. He kisses her eyes, her ears. He tastes his tears—her tears?—on her cheeks, on her lips. Her breath, hot and moist against his neck, his ears. His lips press against her neck. His teeth brush against her collarbone.

She pulls his face to hers, her eyes closed, rapturous. He rotates in his seat, pulling his feet free, falling into the divide between the chairs, his hands running up the length of her jeans, her sweater, grabbing the

handle behind her to pull himself up towards her face. He smells her arousal, feels his penis aching in his pants. He kisses her hands, her hands on his back, his sides, his hands on her cheeks, her lips, kissing her neck, eyes, lips, pulling her sweatshirt aside to kiss her shoulder. She kisses his ears, touches his abdomen, his back, he kisses her neck, shoulder, the hint of cleavage revealed by the displaced sweatshirt. She pulls his face towards hers and kisses him deeply.

“Oh, Ashir, God. We shouldn’t be doing this.” His stomach tightens.

He opens his mouth, a perfect “O,” ready to say something, but unable to muster words.

“I want to, oh I want to, but...” She closes her eyes as tears well up in the corners.

“I can’t, not this fast, there’s Mary to think about, I don’t know if she’s ready for me to have a new man so soon. I’m so sorry, Ashir. I want you so badly right now. I . . . I have to think about this. I’m so sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have. I’m so bad at thinking of other people. I should have thought first.”

She kisses his forehead. “Please, don’t do this, don’t blame yourself. We did this, it wasn’t you. Let’s just sit here for a while.”

They sit silently, Ashir kneeling between the seats, his head in her lap, with her body draped over him.

Send your comments to us at TheMrLee@hotmail.com.