

Feels Like Home

By Jeffrey Miller

She tells me to meet her in the lobby of the Morrison House Hotel in Old Town Alexandria at nine, that she will be wearing a silk, lavender dress with a white rose attached, and that she'll be drunk when I get there. "Way ahead of you," I reply. It took three shots of whiskey just to call her. It will take a lot more to get me to the lobby of the Morrison House Hotel.

My wife, Jackie, is out of town this week. She's closing a deal in Denver. I suspect she's meeting someone in the lobby of her hotel too, though I have no hard evidence of this. Jackie travels often, and usually with men. If there is a glass ceiling, she hasn't just shattered it; she's pounded it back to sand. We started out even, but a couple years into the marriage, she started pulling ahead. Now twenty years later, I'm managing the Arlington branch of a commercial printing business while she's the Chief Financial Officer for a Fortune 500 company. It was bad enough when her salary had just one extra digit over mine; last year, it had two.

We live in a large Federal-style house that hides behind a thick, stone fence and a large, brass gate. You can't see the house from the road, and you can't see the road from the house . . . or from the pool, or even from the tennis courts. There's a bathroom on the third floor that no one has ever used. The maid still cleans it twice a week. I've been in the pool once. Neither of us plays tennis.

If it sounds like I resent my life, I've given you the wrong impression. Jackie is a wonderful, loving wife, and she's treated me as her equal in marriage, even though I'm not. And I love the house. There's a theater in the basement with a large screen, reclining seats, and a popcorn machine. I spend hours down there, watching movies and sports, or just flipping through the channels. And lately, I've taken up golf. I've got my handicap down to twelve, and that's after just a few months.

Life is good.

And yet I'm riding drunk in a cab to the Morrison House Hotel so I can meet a woman wearing a silk, lavender dress with a white rose attached. Her description of her attire wasn't necessary. I know what she looks like. Her name is Jennifer, and I found her on the internet. To be more precise, I found her on the internet about a year ago, and I've been following her ever since—checking her Myspace page, looking through the photographs on Flickr. She posts her most personal, anguished thoughts on her blog. I keep things bottled up, sometimes for as long as twenty-five years. It wears on the soul. Her way is better. When her mother died, I watched as Jennifer went through all five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. When my mother died, I stopped at anger. Maybe Jennifer loved her mother more than I loved mine.

Perhaps you're thinking that this is all manipulation, that I want you to think I'm planning something illicit at the Morrison House Hotel, and that the twist at the end of the story will be that Jennifer is actually my long-lost daughter or something. Well, you're right and wrong. Jennifer is my daughter, but that's not the twist at the end of this story. I'm still waiting to see what the twist is.

I'm telling you this now because I want you to trust me. I need all the support I can get.

“You’re late.”

“I know. There was traffic on the parkway.”

“You’re twenty-five years late.” She looks just like her mother. I couldn’t see that in the pictures online, but in person, it’s clear as day. The long, black hair; the round face; the way she crosses her arms and the way she frowns.

“I know.” She looks beautiful in the dress.

“Why now? Do you need a kidney, or just absolution? Am I one of your twelve steps?”

“Don’t we all need absolution?” I’m without a script. Some people plan what they’re going to say to a daughter they’ve never met. I’m the genius who decides to wing it.

“Goodbye.” She turns and walks away.

“Wait!”

She stops. I look around for answers. A bellhop is staring at us. So is a couple at the registration desk, and a man walking in from the bar. There’s nothing they can do to help. I look back at Jennifer. She looks beautiful in her dress. The white rose is clipped to the strap that goes up to her left shoulder, and a nametag is stuck to her chest. She must have come straight from some kind of reception or gala. I wonder if she left early to see me.

“It was complicated.”

She takes two steps towards me—aggressive steps, the kind that usually lead to a slap. “You abandoned your daughter. There’s nothing complicated about it.”

And I’ve got nothing to say to this because she’s right.

“Jennifer,” I whisper. I whimper. But she’s gone to her room.

I spend the rest of the night at the bar. When it closes, I’m too drunk to go home, so I take the last vacant room at the Morrison House Hotel.

It must have been the drunk-me that ordered the six a.m. wake-up call. The hung-over me is very angry at the drunk-me this morning. I crawl out of bed and jump in the shower. My head hurts and I feel weak. The only thing that’s carrying me is the hope that Jennifer’s still in the hotel, and that I’ll have a second chance.

When I come downstairs, she’s sitting alone in the hotel’s restaurant, The Grille, sipping a cup of coffee and flipping through spreadsheets. I’m standing in the doorway, watching her. She’s in town for business. Maybe she’s here to make a presentation, or to land a contract. Or for a job interview. I don’t know why my daughter is in town, and that makes me sad.

A waiter brings her breakfast and for a second I can see her face. He sets her meal in front of her—granola, yogurt, and fruit—and she smiles. She’s pretty when she smiles. I would have gone for the Malted Waffle or the Lemon Brioche French Toast. She’s more disciplined than I am.

Fourteen steps and I could be at her table, sitting down with her, telling the things I didn’t tell her last night. But she’s back into the spreadsheets, sliding her finger across

each row, analyzing data or dollars or something. Whatever she's in town for is more important than me. I walk away.

There's an iMac in one of the drawing rooms of the hotel. I check Drudge and then surf to Jennifer's blog to see if she's posted anything since yesterday afternoon. There's a new entry from early this morning. She mentions her flight into Reagan, and that the hotel is really nice, and that's she's nervous because she left some of the supporting data for her meeting in Austin and now she's going to have to "wing it." She also writes about a little stray cat she saw in the alley near the hotel, and about a pair of shoes that someone was wearing on the Metro. I'm a little annoyed. A denunciation would have been better than no mention at all.

Part of it is thrilling. I feel a little like James Bond or that guy Matt Damon plays. I'm one car behind Jennifer on the Blue Line, trying to watch her without her seeing me. It's rush hour so the Metro train is packed, and I'm having a hard time keeping her in my line of sight. The woman in front of me is traveling with three suitcases and one of them keeps falling into my knee. The man next to her is wearing a three-piece suit and smells like bologna. When he opens his newspaper, he blocks my view of the front window. I lean to the side to look around it, but Jennifer is gone.

Panicked, I climb over the woman's suitcases and push through the crowd to the front of the car. A few people aren't too happy with my manners, but I don't care. When I reach the window at the front of the car, I'm relieved. She's sitting down now, rifling through her papers. It must be a pretty important meeting.

She stands when we reach the McPherson Square stop and heads for the door. I push my way back to the center of the car and exit the train. Jennifer turns towards me when she steps off the train and I feel her staring right at me. But she doesn't seem to recognize me, and a few seconds later, she walks right by, brushing against my arm. I guess I'm not surprised she didn't recognize me. She's seen me for less than one minute. It's easy to forget just how much of a stranger I am to her.

We take the escalator to the street and then head south. I'm careful to stay forty feet behind. She's carrying a briefcase in her right hand, and I can tell by her posture that it's heavy. If she would let me carry it for her, I'd be the happiest man in town. I'm not looking for absolution. I'd just like to be able to do something for her, even if it's just carrying her bag a few blocks.

After a couple of blocks, Jennifer heads west, towards the White House. I figure that she's early for her meeting and wants to see the sights. She walks up to the fence in front of the White House and sticks her face between the bars, shielding her eyes with her left hand. I do the same thing whenever I walk by. There are some reporters on the lawn on the west side of the White House, and big, white umbrellas to make sure they're lit well. A group of tourists on Segways roll by, looking silly in their safety helmets. A skinny, shirtless kid with long hair is running back and forth, waving a sign about the "9/11 Conspiracy." A policeman on a horse rides over and asks him to move further away, but he refuses, yelling something about the Constitution. Jennifer seems oblivious to all of this. She's just staring through those bars, looking at the White House, probably awed by the majesty of it, wondering what goes on inside, thinking about the powerful people who gain entry through its doors.

Jennifer finally breaks free from the fence and starts walking west. I expect her to keep going past the Executive Office Building, but she doesn't get that far. Instead, she stops at the White House security gate, digs her wallet out of her purse, and hands something to the guard. He picks up his phone and four minutes later, she's escorted onto the White House grounds. I walk over to the fence and stick my head between the bars, shielding my eyes from the sun with my left hand so I can watch my daughter walk into the side entrance of the White House.

It's now late in the evening, and I've been sitting on the ground in front of the White House for eleven hours, staring at that side door, waiting for it to open. Waiting to see my daughter. Hoping that she'll be smiling—that she got whatever she wanted from that meeting. But she probably left through another door, maybe hours ago. For all I know, she's on a plane back to Austin. I should be on my way back home, but instead I tell the cabbie to take me back to the Morrison House Hotel. I'm not sure why.

Maybe it feels like home right now.

It's a short ride to the hotel and a short walk to the hotel bar. I order a beer. Someone's playing the piano and a crowd has gathered. I don't recognize the song, but it's a melancholy tune, and it feels just about right. Another beer and another song, and I'm humming along under my breath. Two beers later, I've got my arms around some businessmen from Detroit, and we're swaying back and forth, singing an Irish folksong. I'm mumbling the words because I don't know them. When the song's done, we pile around a table and talk about sports. The tall one is a lobbyist for GM or Ford, and he's got a booming voice. He hands me shot and I toss it down. When he asks me where I'm from, I tell him Arlington. "Texas?"

"No. Virginia.

He laughs. "Then why are you staying here?" It's a reasonable question. "Wife toss you out?"

"Something like that," I answer, even though it's nothing like that.

When the bill comes, I tear it out of the tall guy's hands and pull out my wallet. He insists that he can expense it, but I want it to be my treat. They all thank me and give me their cards, insisting that I look them up if I ever visit Detroit. I tell them I will, but I know I'm never going to Detroit.

As I leave the bar, I see Jennifer walking through the hall. I guess she's still in town. I duck down so she doesn't see me, then sneak back to my room. The staff has left some chocolate covered walnuts in a bowl on the nightstand next to the four-poster bed. For a moment, I'm happy. I eat them too quickly. One walnut catches in my throat and I can't breathe. I wonder what Jackie will think when she learns her husband died in a room at the Morrison House Hotel. I figure she'll assume that I was up to no good. Maybe she'd be right.

It takes a few tries, but I cough up the walnut. It looks like I'll live after all.

I'm not hung-over this morning—just tired. You know how some hotels have themes? I stayed at an inn in Vermont that had a cowboy theme once. All of the chairs were made from saddles and the concierge wielded a lasso. Well, the theme of the Morrison House Hotel is Literature, and there's a nice library with lots of books. I wasn't able to sleep, so I picked one up and brought it back to my room, but I couldn't get through two paragraphs without thinking about Jennifer. The pages of the book just started to blur into a mess of words. "Words!" I thought, and it was a revelation. I dropped the book and ran over to the desk, pulled out a piece of stationary, and began to write. Soon, I had filled the page, and then another, and then seven in all, front and back.

I wrote about the big-firm lawyers her mother's family had hired, and how I dropped out of school to take a job to pay my own lawyer. About how her grandparents tried to buy me off, and how I refused. I wrote about the depositions and the hearings and the allegations, all unfounded. I wrote about losing my job because I was spending all my time with the lawyers, trying to defend myself against untruths and lies. I wrote about the night it all started, when I found her mother with a man who used to be a friend of mine. Someone more palatable to her parents, and apparently, to her as well. And I wrote about the day it all ended, when I finally gave up—when tired and weary and broke and broken, I signed the papers and gave up all rights to my daughter. And then, about the day Jennifer was born, when a police officer stood at the hospital door with my picture in his hand. I tried to enter, and he turned me away. When I tried to enter again, he pushed me to the ground. I wrote that I'm ashamed that I didn't try a third and fourth time.

I put these pages in an envelope and wait for Jennifer in the lobby, by the front door. I know she'll have to come down eventually. I imagine her face as she reads what I've written, when she learns the truth about her grandparents, and the man that raised her as her father, and especially about her mother and her lies and duplicity. I picture Jennifer giving me a hug, crying . . . asking me to be part of her life. I imagine her being my daughter.

And then she walks into the lobby.

She's wearing a white, sleeveless blouse and a black skirt, and she's dangling her suit jacket over her shoulder. A bellhop is carrying her bags, and she's smiling like she's on top of the world. I guess the meeting went well. Wow, I think. What a beautiful, wonderful, accomplished woman. I wonder whether I could have raised her this well.

When she notices me, she doesn't even frown or turn the other way. Instead, she walks up to me and nods. I'm not sure what this means. Then she says, "You are absolved."

I've got the letter in my hand, but I stuff it in my pants pocket. There's so much I could say, but I just say, "Thank you." She walks out the door and I know I'll never see her again. In a flash, I feel a range of emotions—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance. I might not have gotten exactly what I wanted when I came to the Morrison House Hotel, but I feel like her father for the first time in my life and it feels good.