



My name is Watson Sinclair and I am a pathetically heterosexual man. Not the kind who decides in elementary school that he likes girls but is too shy to do anything about it all the way through high school, learning what he can from teen romance books, pornography and playground rumors, although that, too. Compulsive ogling is the true symptom of my condition. Unsubtle rubbernecking is its unfortunate result. I have always lived in fear that I would see some particularly attractive woman while driving and be so distracted that I'd just drive my car up onto the sidewalk, probably uncorking a fire hydrant or something. This has never happened to me until now.

The particularly attractive woman who has so completely bamboozled my powers of concentration is radically under-dressed for the weather and is probably running across the street from her office or something. Tight black skirt, black tights and long spiky heels in the snow, but no coat. She has long dark hair, creamy skin flushed from the cold and a low-cut shirt with excellent cleavage. As I'm realizing that I

have run up into a sidewalk fruit stand, she's turning a corner and now there's a Korean guy yelling at me and waving a broom.

Forgetting that you're driving a car to stare at a woman who hasn't given you the slightest provocation is pretty sick. What is even sicker is that seeing all this fruit on the ground, I can't help thinking that her boobs are at least as big as these large navel oranges, maybe even the grapefruits. And speaking of headlights, I've got no time to sit around picking citrus out of my grill. I was only supposed to drive around the block a few times and come back and now this damn calamity.

I peel off a couple of twenties and drop them on top of the pile of fruit in the snow. I jump back in the front seat, slamming and then locking the door just as the broom hits home on the window. Thank God the front of the car was nose deep in wooden stalls or he'd have come at me straight instead of having to circle around the back. I give him a polite wave and smile even though his spittle is flecking my window as he shouts incoherently. And all this because I am a goggle-eyed tongue loller who can't look away from T&A. Normally I rely on my best friend and artistic partner, JC Dubois, to say "Eyes on the road, Watson," but he is currently a few blocks away, kidnapping the Editorial Director of the Royal Features Syndicate.

I honk my horn and pull back into traffic. Yes, I'm Canadian and a crazy driver: deal with it. It has to be the stress of driving in this metropolitan mayhem that short-circuited my brain into looking for some comforting eye candy.

Focus, Watson. I'm in Midtown near the park and I have to get back to the Royal Features building. I drove past the MOMA two blocks ago and I got stuck in traffic for a while, then I saw Carnegie Hall at one point. If I can make it there, I know I can get back to where I started. Damn these Manhattan one way streets. I can't stop to ask for directions, because I just know when I ask how to get to Carnegie Hall, some hilarious New Yorker will say "Practice."

Speaking of Big Apple clichés straight out of a Woody Allen film, there are yellow taxis just everywhere. I think they see the Ontario plates and jump all over me like a lion on a gazelle. I hate to think what their insurance rates must look like, because I have stomped on the binders more times in the last five minutes than I have since my renewal. If JC texts me right now, I'm in trouble.

Finally, there's an oldster asleep at the switch. Muscle the nose of the car into this small gap, cue honking, now flip him the bird while inching into the space I've created. There. I'm moving again and the old guy is back there miming the "storm on the heath" scene from King Lear. Man, he is *coming apart*. I guess you get used to this eventually.

Through a patch of daylight between buildings I can see the Rockefeller Center. Fifth Avenue is coming up. I'm on East 55th Street heading west, which sounds strange, but I know this will get me back to Seventh Avenue, which will get me down to Carnegie Hall. We went over these maps fifty times, and thank God we did. Traffic is actually moving along a bit, so I'm in good position. What is taking JC so long?

The last time either of us planned and executed a crime was when we were twelve. We ran a complicated distraction technique. JC asked the shopkeeper how much were the dusty boxes of 35mm film up on a high shelf and I swiftly pocketed two chocolate bars and exited the store. We felt guilty about it in the parking lot afterward because the guy who ran the store was really nice and that was the end of our career as criminals. Until now.

As I'm changing lanes to turn right onto Seventh Avenue, I hear a bicycle bell chiming at me urgently. This is it. I pick up my cell phone just to confirm he's ready for pickup.

The eagle has landed.

That JC. Always quick with a book reference. I didn't think my adrenal system could work any harder. My out-of-province health insurance would cover a heart attack, but it would really slow us down right now. I make the turn onto Seventh and hurry up and wait for the light. Come on green, I know you can do it. I can see the damn building. JC and his "patient" Ray are probably waiting for the elevator right now, which is all good. But if they make it to the ground floor and are standing around with no "ambulance" in sight, it will look pretty suspicious. The traffic begins to surge forward hesitantly with the changing of the light, inertia giving way to the perpetual motion of the city. I'm just focusing on the bumper in front of me. I am not my urgency.

It is outside of me like a weather system. I am only energy and drift, and this traffic is a pattern of slowly developing possibilities that ebb and flow with my breathing.

Thank God for my yoga training! My heartbeat is under control and I'm back in front of the building where I dropped JC off. I park the car and put on the 4-ways. Pop the locks again just to make sure. The wheelchair door springs open and out roll the feet of my nemesis, pushed along by JC in a wheelchair marked "Patient Transfer."

Ray's head is slumped to the side and he's wearing a Mets hat with an oxygen mask strapped to his face. They come down the ramp to the side of the front steps. JC is decked out in hospital scrubs and actually looks the part. He's tall, so he has that look of unquestionable authority. Stationed behind the reference desk in the London Public Library, with his shoulder length brownish hair, steely blue eyes and nicely trimmed goatee, he is the go-to librarian for the tough Boolean searches or whatever. I get out and walk around to open the curbside door.

"Did the patient behave himself?" I say.

"Tolerably so," he says.

"He's smaller in person than I pictured."

"That's good. He's easier to lift."

JC takes the mask off Ray's face and grabs him under his shoulders. He also looks older than the picture we got off the Internet. He seems to be sleeping peacefully – he's actually unconscious and should be for another few hours. I grab him under his

knees and back up toward the back seat of my Honda Civic. I sit down and draw his lower half in with me, positioning him on the seat behind the passenger seat. We swivel him around so he's sitting upright. While I'm buckling Ray into his seat belt, JC folds up the wheelchair and puts away the mini oxygen tank apparatus. I clamber out of the back seat by the other door.

"Pop the trunk, Watson."

"Shit. Sorry," I say. I fumble with the doors and find the button. My hands are sweating despite the cold. I approach the trunk to see if I can make myself useful. "Did you get his laptop?"

He holds up the gym bag he had slung over his shoulder. "Check."

"BlackBerry?"

"Cell phone. Check."

"He has his wallet with him?"

"Check."

JC doesn't get impatient with me asking these questions, even though we've been over this. While he's packing everything away in the trunk and getting out the things we'll need for the trip, I take a look up and down the sidewalk. Search the faces for questioning looks or recognition. This is exactly the kind of nervous, suspicious behavior I had hoped to avoid. I am supposed to be looking confident and

unconcerned, as though I have every reason in the world to be here doing this. I get into the driver's seat to wait instead.

I twist around in my seat to get a good look at our prisoner as JC secures the plastic ties to his wrists and chains his waist to the seat post. Ray is paunchy, slack-jawed and balding. He has small, pinched features and closely set eyes that are slightly off kilter. Friday must be casual day. He is wearing navy Dockers and a blue pinstriped button down. His winter coat is a dark green mountain parka that JC has helpfully zipped up for him. The deck shoes aren't going to be great in the snow.

"Didn't he have any boots?" I say.

"None that I could find," says JC, getting in and closing his door. "Probably has underground parking and doesn't care about the snow."

"So, everything is good?"

"Yes. That was strangely easy. I got by the security desk with our development letter from Ray. I said I was there to meet with him and they told me which floor. I took his pass card out of his pocket, so I was okay on the way out. You were right, the elevator won't work without a pass card."

"Thought so."

"There was nobody in the office. The receptionist was just leaving when I got there with my janitor gear on and I cleaned out her garbage first."

"Fantastic. Was she hot?"

“Pretty much. But it was like I was part of the scenery. Nobody takes much notice of a janitor, I guess.”

“I had a little incident with secretarial hotness, too, but that’s a story for another day. Are we good to go?”

“Yeah. You want to get some Taco Bell or something?”

My stomach turns over at the thought. “I don’t think I could eat. Grab yourself a granola bar out of the glove compartment.”

I get turned around to head west on West 57th Street with rush hour in full swing. Luckily it’s a straight shot down West 57th to the West Side Highway and then not far to the Lincoln Tunnel and we’re out of here. Just have to be patient like Ray. We were patient with him all those weeks and months when he wasn’t returning our e-mails, phone calls and faxes. Now it’s his turn to be patient with us.

Just hearing from a syndicate at all was a dream come true for us. Having grown up on *Peanuts* collections, *Garfield*, *Tintin*, *Asterix & Obelix* and later switching to *Calvin and Hobbes*, *Bloom County* and *Doonesbury*, it seemed completely normal that JC’s great artwork and my love of word play should bring us together in the art form that we loved. Part of the fun was dreaming up some new concept every couple of years, writing and drawing about 24 or 36 strips and packaging them up with earnest letters to the syndicates, always hoping this one will be the one. Our big break. Albeit a break in a dying medium, as JC likes to remind me.

Everything we sent out garnered us form rejection letters and we moved on to the next idea. We were excited when an editor (a Real Editor!) would hand write a note on our form letter. So to actually get a positive response — and a syndication offer! It was unbelievable. “Pinch me” didn’t cover it. Hit me in the face with a shovel, knock me down, dance on my stomach in high heels, this can’t be real.

We were e-mailing back and forth for weeks after we got the phone call. There were an endless number of plans and ideas to share: finding a lawyer, settling the contract, plotting our story arcs, designing our website. We had our heads in the clouds and we weren’t coming down.

From: "Watson Sinclair" <wsinclair@fullservicebrokers.ca>
To: "JC Dubois" <jcdubois76@yeehaw.ca>
Sent: Wednesday, May 09, 2008 7:06 PM
Subject: Royal Features, baby!

Can you believe this? How many people can say their dreams came true on a Wednesday afternoon with a phone call? This is just the beginning of a long road that will lead us to the Promised Land. All our hard work finally paid off. And can I just say that it is a pleasure to be doing this with my best friend. Thanks for agreeing to take this leap of faith and putting in all that work with no promise of a payoff. That's what got us here and that positive thinking and perseverance is going to help get us to the top.

Anyway, here is how I left it with Ray (I call him Ray, now, you know, Ray Bennett, Editorial Director of Royal Features Syndicate? He's my boy, now. We talk on the phone.) today: he's going to send each of us a package of information on what they do for comic feature launches. He likes our concept but wants to change it just slightly to make it something he can sell to newspaper editors. I know, it's going to feel like we're selling out a bit, but I wasn't married (no pun intended) to the idea of James's profession, anyway. He figures that yoga is huge right now and that making James a yoga instructor will be big with the 20-something

demographic that newspaper editors are always trying to target. Yes, I'm going to have to take a yoga class! Somebody tell me where to get my spandex, some crystals and the best patchouli incense on the market. Can you picture it? No, me neither. But I'm open to new experiences if it gets us syndicated!

So we have to think of a new name for the strip, pick a logo, think about reserving a web domain for ourselves and go over the contract once Ray gets it ready. Are you ready for some extra work? Maybe you should take a yoga class, too, just for some visual source material. Don't take any pictures, though. That kind of thing will get you booted out. :) I'll call you this weekend and we can go over all this stuff. But for now, just know that I will not rest until we're in 1000 papers and on our way to number 1 in the strip world. Get ready for *Then Comes Marriage 2.0*. All the best of what it was plus the new stuff we have to put in to make it to the show. Look out world, here we come.

Peace.

Watson

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JC has a whole file folder with our e-mails printed off in the back seat. I have no idea what he intends to do with them. Maybe he wants Ray to read them all to remind him of how we got here.

"So the chloroform worked well, eh?"

"Yeah. Took about a minute of him flailing around with me holding him from behind and him kind of slapping at my arms and head a bit. And grabbing for the phone and whatnot, but his chair was on wheels so I was able to steer him away from danger until he settled down and then went out."

"And then you changed into your hospital gear..."

"Yeah."

"Where did you store the wheelchair during all this?"

"I just left it by the elevator. Who's going to steal a wheelchair?"

"Good point."

"So I stowed all his stuff in the backpack and then went and got the wheelchair and put him in it. I didn't have room for the janitor uniform, so I put it in his garbage."

"Uh-huh."

"It should be okay."

"I guess. What are they going to do, call Canada and say, 'Got any bearded librarian kidnapper janitors up there who might be harboring a pasty-faced Editorial Director from a doomed artistic endeavor?'"

JC busts out a laugh at that one and it makes me feel better. Talk about pasty-faced, I feel like all the blood has left mine and traveled to my stomach to flush my nerves full of oxygenated anxiety.

There is nothing slower than rush hour traffic when you're trying to flee the country. I sneak a peak in the rear-view mirror at our prisoner just in case he might be struggling with his bonds or pulling a knife out of his loafers or something. Nope. His head is lolling towards the window and he's starting to snore. Please God, may the weather hold. I will never be able to sleep if we have to share a hotel room.

"Why is it," I ask JC. "Whenever you are in a hotel and the TV only gets 12 channels so you end up tuning in some show that you've only ever watched once... you

know what I'm saying? Why is it that the show will always be a rerun and it's the exact one you've seen before?"

JC looks over at me, but I keep my eyes on the road. "Is this a script idea?"

"Maybe."

"Can't we just talk about normal stuff?"

"No, this really happened. You know that show with the twin guys who are divorce lawyers and they're both married to ghost whisperers and they sue the estates of dead husbands for psychically harassing their ex-wives?"

"Shut up. That's not a real show."

My wife thinks we're in New York to attend a comic convention, a necessary lie that she readily believed. I feel bad lying to her because she's my best friend and the love of my life, but I don't think she'd support me in this. And good for her, although she's been wrapped up in it from the beginning.

The comic strip idea that started all this came in the most unlikely place: right in front of our noses. As newly married guys, we decided to do a strip about a married couple. Keep it simple, we said. So the great affection I have for my wife's foibles and idiosyncrasies turned into great, funny comic strip ideas. So in a way, it's because of her that I'm here today. Not that it's going to hold up in court or anything. We'll probably be better to go with an insanity plea, to be honest.