

SECRET LUNCH

"Excuse me, did you say a reservation for three?" asked Roberta.

"That's right. Mr. Hopkins, party of three for noon," replied the waiter. "You're the first one here."

Roberta frowned slightly as she seated herself. It didn't matter, really. But whenever they got together for lunch, it was always just the two of them. Maybe Rick had double-booked his Christmas schedule and forgotten to tell her. Or perhaps he had done it on purpose. That was the kind of surprise he would like.

While glancing through the menu, she wondered who the third person might be. As she reflected on the possibilities, she gradually began to look forward to meeting the mystery member of their trio. As Rick's one-time career counsellor, a strictly one-on-one type of relationship, she had never actually encountered any of his friends or business associates. Roberta had met Rick quite a few years before, after he had been down-sized from a dead-end government job. Acting in her professional capacity, she had inspired him to forsake his civil servitude and pursue a career in advertising. He had always been grateful for what he called her "life-saving advice", and they had stayed in touch ever since. But aside from the details of his working life, which he continued to confide in her, she knew very little else about him. She always found him charming and amusing in their discussions of his wandering career path, whenever he dropped by her office for a coffee. And he still valued her expert opinion enough to accept her suggestions. "You're the pro. And it's only my future. Just tell me and I'll do it!" was one of his favourite lines.

Over the course of time, they had formed a personal friendship, which bound them closer than their former business ties. And so they occasionally took the opportunity to enjoy each others' company and share a social lunch together, particularly at Christmas. But at their luncheons they usually talked about current events, or shows and concerts around town. Not about their families or people they knew. So Roberta decided she was glad Rick was bringing one of his friends along today. Lunch should be very interesting.

Roberta primped at the flash of silver in her buttoned-down brunette coiffure, and brushed a speck of imaginary lint from her dress-for-success sleeve. When she looked up from her unnecessary grooming, a tall, statuesque figure was standing over the table, a cellular phone in one hand, a palm notepad in the other, and a laptop computer slung over her shoulder.

"Who are you?" asked the newcomer. "And where the Hell is Rich?"

"My name's Roberta Johnston. And I believe we're all having lunch together, whenever Rick arrives. With a certain hesitation she added, "Pleased to meet you," and extended her hand.

The new arrival unloaded her equipment onto the table. "It's such a hassle lugging this crap around everywhere," she said amid the clatter. "But if I left it in the van it'd walk in a heartbeat. And I need it with me all the time anyway. These days, it's the only way to stay in the loop twenty-four-seven. By the way, my name's Margaret Mullins." She pumped Roberta's outstretched hand. "I'm Rich's financial adviser. What do you do?"

Roberta explained that she was Rick's former career counsellor and confidante. As the two women chatted and compared notes, they discovered that Rick had always arranged a Christmas lunch with each of them separately, so it seemed quite natural that this year he had decided to combine the tradition, and bring them both together.

"You'd think he would have mentioned something, though," said Margaret. "Here. I'll call him on his cell to find out where he is."

While Margaret was dialing, Roberta noticed the waiter leading a stubby little woman carrying several shopping bags in their direction, and overheard her confused protest. "But young man, I'm sure Mr. Hopkins reserved a table for two, not three. And I don't even know who those ladies are!"

"No answer," said Margaret, as the lady approached. "Just his voicemail."

"Excuse me," said the confused woman, who had squeezed her way through the crowd. "I'm here to have lunch with my cousin Rixter. The waiter... You don't know my cousin, do you?" Her hair was long and wavy and blonde, with grey-brown roots showing. She had a puffy face and she looked tired, like she'd spent a hectic morning Christmas shopping.

"As a matter of fact, I believe we're both friends of cousin Rixter," said Roberta. "And I think we all know him well enough to say that none of us will be having lunch with him today."

"Yeh, have a seat, sister," said Margaret. "I don't think it's worth waiting for him to show up. In my business time is money. Let's eat. I'm Margaret Mullins, in case that matters. Who are you, anyway?"

The little lady suddenly smiled, dropped her shopping bags and gave Margaret a huge hug. "Maggie Millions! The Goddess of e-Gadgets, and Financial Genius Extraordinaire! Rixter has told me all about you!" she exclaimed. "He admires you so very much. I'm just his cousin, the social worker. The one he calls Agony Anne. He tells me about everyone he meets."

"Well, that pretty well nails down my labels," said Maggie Millions with a shrug. "Over there, we've got Roberta Johnston, the career counsellor. What does Rich say about her?"

Agony Anne beamed once more, and repeated her hugging manoeuvre. "You're another one of his favourites," she said, settling in. "Rixter simply adores you. He calls you Bobbi Job-School. Or sometimes just Miss BJ."

The newly-proclaimed job-school mistress gave a wincing smile, and raised her menu. "Shall we start with a drink, ladies?"

During the main course, while Bobbi Job-School picked sparingly at her chicken salad and Maggie Millions chowed down on a steak sandwich, Agony Anne chatted her way through the Christmas turkey special, entertaining the others with stories of Rixter's love-life, of which she knew all the intimate details.

"He's been involved with some incredible women over the years, that's for sure," said Agony Anne, through a mouthful of stuffing. "But the weirdest affair of all had to have been when he was dating that pair of twins, both at the same time. Their names were Dora and Laura. He never admitted to either sister that he was seeing the other one, of course. But he couldn't tell them apart very well either. So he suspected that the two girls had told each other what was going on, and were playing him to their mutual advantage. It was all very complicated, and quite hilarious, while it lasted. Finally, it ended with a showdown at midnight in the twins' bunk beds. When it was over, he always referred to the episode as the "Horror of Dora and Laura"."

Agony Anne shook her head. "I used to hope that Rixter would find a nice girl and settle down,"

she sighed. "But now I just tell him to be careful, and try not to hurt anyone."

"I've noticed that Rick seems to be under a lot of stress, lately," said Bobbi Job-School. "Whether it's his career or personal life that's driving him to it, he's been drinking quite heavily at lunch. He told me last time we met that his job was hanging in the balance. I'm still not certain if his work crisis resulted from his drinking, or if it was the reason he drank."

"You've hit the rusty nail on the head," agreed Maggie Millions. "Rich always used to have a few beers with his fries. Now he has a few fries with his beers. And in the last year, he's cashed in enough of his investments to buy a brewery."

"You know, what Rixter really needs is a sensible lady like one of you two," said Agony Anne, eyeing the wedding bands on her companions' fingers. "Only someone who's single. It's too bad you're both already spoken for. I'd love to play matchmaker for him." She took a sip of coffee. "But you're right about my cousin and the bottle. He called me one night about six months ago, and his speech was so slurred and incoherent, I couldn't make out what he was saying. So I told him right then and there to go to Alcoholics Anonymous, to get straightened out. I tried to put it in his own words, to drive the message home. I said - 'I'm the pro. And it's only your future. Go to AA. I'm telling you. Just do it!' I hope he understood me. But I haven't heard much from him since. We've been corresponding mostly by e-mail. So I don't know if he ever went."

"I wonder why he didn't show up today," said Maggie Millions.

"I suspect he didn't want to restrict our conversation by being here," replied Miss BJ. "After all, we've just discussed his love affairs, his drinking problem, and his failing job and finances. We could never have covered that agenda if Rick were sitting here with us."

"Maybe he just wanted his three mentors to meet together at an all-girls lunch," suggested Agony Anne. "Introducing us to each other could be Rixter's Christmas present to us. And if he gets any feed-back from our discussion, well... that would be our Christmas gift to him, I suppose."

"I guess it makes sense to call this lunch a group therapy session for Rich, even if he isn't here," conceded Maggie Millions. "As we all know, we're the experts he relies on to manage his career, his finances and his love affairs. That's a tall order for three chicks like us. This guy must think we're pretty awesome." The Goddess of e-Gadgets unzipped a compartment of her computer case and reached in. "But speaking of Christmas presents, does anyone want the gift I brought for Rich? It's the video biography of that renegade nun who de-frocked herself, and then started up an e-business on the net, selling sexy underwear. I thought Rich might enjoy it, primarily for the cheesecake scenes. But I won't get a chance to give it to him now."

Bobbi Job-School's eyes opened wide, and her jaw dropped in astonishment. "Did you bring him 'Sister Victoria's Secret e-Mission' too?" she exclaimed. "I thought the movie was perfect for Rick, especially how Sister Victoria made a sudden career change, and totally changed her life."

"Well that makes three of us," laughed Agony Anne, waving a gift-wrapped package from one of her shopping bags. "Somehow, Sister Victoria's romantic encounters as an under-the-covers nun reminded me of those wild escapades Rixter's been telling me about all these years. So I had to get it for him."

"I didn't watch the video myself," said Maggie Millions. "But from all the buzz she's received in the media, I'd say that Sister Victoria made a quick deal with the devil to escape the convent, but her

plans went downhill from there.” She raised her beer bottle for a swig. “While she had the opportunity to leave behind her poverty, obedience and chastity, she ended up trading them for business debts, a pressure-cooker job, and the tribulations of several divorces. Which amount to exactly the same frustrations as before, only under different names. So I'm not convinced Sister Victoria wound up any further ahead. Anyway,” she continued, “I didn't get the video for its moral pronouncements. It just happened to be a bargain. Actually, it was free with an order for a hundred bucks of merchandise from Sister Victoria's Top Secret e-Catalogue.”

Bobbi Job-School neatly refolded her used napkin, and looked off into space, while Agony Anne re-drained her empty coffee cup.

"Really? I... never would have known," murmured Miss BJ.

"Mmmm... Yes," said Agony Anne. "Should we ask about the check?"

When summoned to their table, the waiter was pleased to tell the women that the luncheon bill had been taken care of, compliments of Mr. Hopkins.

"Gosh, I wish I'd eaten dessert," said Bobbi Job-School.

"We could still have a liqueur!" nudged Agony Anne.

"Make mine a double Drambuie, straight up" said Maggie Millions. "But somehow I smell a rat. There's no such thing as a free lunch, even at Christmas time. And certainly not where Rich is concerned. I've been his financial adviser long enough to know that. And c'mon girls!" She looked them both in the eye. "Are we three smart cookies going to let him get away with this stunt? Inviting us to lunch, and not showing up himself. The little weasel. For standing us up, he deserves to have his nose tweaked, somehow. He probably expects it."

"As you mentioned before," said Bobbi Job-School, "The three of us combined have the power to control every aspect of Rick's life. So we could do practically anything we please to get even. You hold the keys to his bank vault. I know where he works."

"And I know all his personal secrets," chimed in Agony Anne.

"Gosh," said Miss BJ, "It's just struck me. Rick has taken advantage of our capable shoulders to unload all of his worries. In particular, he's delegated those difficult responsibilities that nuns like Sister Victoria take vows for, and everyone else just copes with. For instance," she pointed at Maggie Millions, "you're the guardian of his state of wealth. Or poverty, to be more precise. As Bobbi Job-School, I function as his designated conscience, advocating obedience to structure and authority. And Agony Anne, you're his cousin confessor and angel of temperance. Which is as close to chastity as our Rick will ever get." Miss BJ cocked her head and pursed her lips. "My goodness! I wonder if we've made life too easy for him!"

"I'm sure Rixter didn't plan it that way," said Agony Anne. "With him, things just happen, for better or for worse."

"But when the deal is done, he's given us all the winning cards to use against him," grinned Maggie Millions. "So we're in an ideal position to create all sorts of mischief for Rich, if we play our hand right." The Goddess of e-Gadgets switched on her laptop computer. "And with this sucker hooked to the world-wide-web, we can stir up trouble anywhere on the planet!"

"Why don't we just do something simple?" suggested Agony Anne. "Like, order a copy of 'Sister Victoria's Secret e-Mission' through the Internet, and have it sent to Rixter - at his office." She began to giggle.

"But to get the video, we'd have to buy a hundred dollars' worth of ladies' lingerie from the Top Secret catalogue, and have it sent there too," fretted Bobbi Job-School. "We couldn't -"

"So Honey, what's your point?" cut in Maggie Millions. "It's not our money. Look, I've got Sister Victoria's web-site up here on the screen. Let's check out the catalogue."

Soon the three women were cackling over the computer, like wired witches casting a cyber-spell.

"I can't imagine myself wearing something like that," blushed Miss BJ. "We'd better buy it so I can experience the real thing."

"Do you think one of those would fit me?" asked Agony Anne. "Maybe I should take two."

When their order was complete, Maggie Millions entered Rich's credit information, so the charge would be forwarded to his account, and Bobbi Job-School provided his business address for delivery. Fortunately, Sister Victoria guaranteed that all items ordered by midnight that day would arrive by courier before Christmas.

"I threw in a whip and a wimple, in case Rich needs some on-the-job obedience training," winked Maggie Millions. "One size fits all."

"I'd like to propose a toast," Bobbi Job-School raised her shot of Grand Marnier. "Merry Christmas to the three of us."

"And to the Secret Horror of Sister Victoria!" cried Agony Anne. The ladies clinked their glasses.

"And Merry e-Christmas to Rich! Thanks for a great lunch, big guy!"

"To Rixter !"

"To Rick!"

Maggie Millions looked at her watch. "Holy Christ!...mas. I've got an appointment uptown in ten minutes! It's been a slice-and-a-half ladies. Gotta run."

In a frenzied exchange of business cards, the three women promised to keep in touch by e-mail, and to follow up when Sister Victoria's shipment arrived. Then with hurried hugs and Merry Christmases, they departed to their specialized corners of the world.

To: Rixter @hotmail.com / From: e-lizwiz@yahoo.com / Sent: 12/21 3:02 pm

Richard, Richard, Richard,

You sly little weasel, as Maggie Millions would say. I'm not sure whether to love you or hate you, for what you did this afternoon. But I suppose I sort of asked for it, by wishing that I could meet

some of your friends. And today's lunch was about the only way it could happen for now, I guess. It certainly was quite the scheme you put together. And I never suspected a thing. Although I should know you better than that by now.

But curse me for a silly Christmas goose. Because there I was, like sweet-sixteen Liesl from the Sound of Music, waiting with stars in my eyes for you to show up for lunch, and believing that you actually would. When at the table next to me these two women appeared, and started talking about someone named Rick. Or Rich, who hadn't arrived yet. One of them had perfect hair. A first class act. And the other one was the Mother of All Motherboards. A real down-to-e-business broad. Then your cousin the Matchmaker wandered in. I recognized her from a picture you'd shown me. That was when I knew something funky was going down for sure. Agony Anne seems like a real darling. I can see why everyone confides in her. One day we'll have to let her know that if it hadn't been for her advice, you and I would never have met. She'll be thrilled to find that out. Anyway, she greeted her new buddies Maggie Millions and Bobbi Job-School like they were long-lost girlfriends. It was quite a sight. I even wanted to give her a big hug myself. But of course, I couldn't.

By then I knew I was on my own for lunch. And so were they.

During the meal, I was so absorbed in what was being said, the minutes and hours seemed to fly by. All the time they were talking, I tried to maintain a low profile and pretend to be eating, without making it obvious that I was watching them like a hawk, and listening to every word. Over and over, I kept saying to myself, "If only I could have a drink. Just one!" But naturally, that was out of the question. However, I did have a huge piece of pumpkin pie, and about six refills of coffee, to appear pseudo-occupied for the duration, so no one would get suspicious.

Because you weren't around, the conversation flowed quite freely, as you can imagine. I have to admit, it took guts for you to set the stage from behind the scenes, and then turn your appointed actors loose to improvise their lines. Especially when you and your antics were the primary source material for their script. But as you probably anticipated, everyone stayed in character throughout, and performed their roles admirably. Almost as if you were directing from the wings. So it was quite the show. Along the way, your three leading ladies did drag you through some fairly down-and-dirty dialogue. But in the end, no one offered any unearned criticism, and they didn't even mention anything I hadn't already heard. Although Agony Anne's version of the 'Horror of Dora and Laura' was slightly out of sync from your own. Bunk beds!... You rascal, you!

As for the rest of what happened, my lips are sealed, though you'll probably find out sooner than later. However, once the holidays are over, Richard dearest, you and I need to have a serious discussion about poverty, obedience and chastity! But for now, everything's a Secret among us girls. And I'm not going to tell on my buddies!

So thanks for lunch. Honestly. It was one of the nicest Christmas presents you could have given me. Your lady friends are wonderful people, and I could see they all love you very much. And I can't wait to have lunch with them next time, when they'll actually know I'm there. (You can come along too.) Catch ya later,

Love you forever!

Elizabeth

To: Rixter @hotmail.com / From: rjohnston@career.com / Sent: 12/21 3.26 pm

Dear, Rick

Thank you for lunch today. It was a real surprise, and I was delighted to have the chance to meet your friends, although we all missed you. Your cousin Anne is just a doll, and I was amazed at Margaret's magic with her electronic gadgets. And I expect you'll soon be amazed too!

Hope your job is still interesting, but not too interesting. Have a Merry Christmas, and we'll be in touch soon.

Best wishes

Roberta (a.k.a. Bobbi Job-School)

P.S. In case you ever need to know, my favourite colour is day-glow green.

To: Rixter@hotmail.com / From: aanne@socialworld.com / Sent: 12/21 3:58 pm

Rixter - you Trixter

Lunch today was fabulous. I haven't enjoyed myself that much in ages. Bobbi Job-School was so pleasant. Just like you'd described her. And Maggie Millions was even tougher than I expected. But with a heart of gold!

Drop around the house some time during the holidays. We can catch up on the latest gossip. And I want to make sure you're staying sober.

So what do you want for Christmas? I've asked Santa for something in Spandex, myself. (Almost kidding). Do you think he'll deliver?

Luv ya,

..... Agony Anne

To: Rixter @hotmail.com / From: mmullins@mmoney.com / Sent: 12/21 4:18 pm

Hey Rich baby,

I still don't believe that was a free lunch. But I haven't figured out the catch yet. So for now, I'll just say thanks for the grub, and for sending along those two cool friends of yours.

The nicknames were cute. Maggie Millions. Goddess of e-Gadgets. Financial Genius Extraordinaire. I've been called worse. Are there any others I don't know about?

But I've got to warn you. Even if you were just fulfilling a whimsical Christmas wish, by bringing us girls together over lunch, remember - be careful what you wish for. Because what goes around comes around. And you could still get caught in the back-lash, you little whipper-snapper!

So stuff yourself with Christmas turkey. But go easy on the sauce!

And have yourself a Happy New Year, Kid-do.

M.M.

To: Rixter @hotmail.com / From: / e-lizwiz@yahoo.com / Sent: 12/21 4:45 pm

Richard

I just wanted to let you know that I've got a few last-minute Christmas errands to finish, so I'll be a little late for the AA meeting tonight. But I will show up! And you'd better show up too!

I know we did the right thing, when we promised to take a year to dry out, and prove our commitment to each other before we face the rest of the world together. And as I've told you before, Richard, I couldn't handle the stress of going cold turkey without you. Especially at Christmas time. But I'll be so happy next summer, when our twelve months of secrecy and our twelve-step-plan are accomplished, and we can start acting like a normal couple. I can hardly wait. There are so many people I want you to meet. And so many of your friends I want to get to know.

But damn it, life sure is ironic. If we weren't both struggling alcoholics, with promises to fulfill to ourselves first, we wouldn't have to keep our friends in the dark about our relationship. But on the other hand, if we hadn't been boozers and gone to those AA meetings for help, we never would have met at all. Crazy, huh?

But just get this straight, Tricky Dick. When we do start meeting each others' friends, if you ever, EVER, introduce me to anyone as "Betty Booze", the wedding's off! And I'll keep all the presents. That's guaranteed!

And don't forget, there are only a few more shopping days left. Lunch today was fun, but I want a gift I can open for Christmas too.

But it's time to giddy-up. How about lunch tomorrow? Same place as today. Twelve noon? My treat. Be there! If you dare...

Love you forever!

Elizabeth

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