

A Most Long and Complicated Number, in Two Pages

by Roger David Hardesty

Women don't get on a pedestal by clambering up there. For the most part, men use their imagination to hoist them into exalted place. Given the widow Croffe's allure, we men were not required to be very imaginative; the heavy lifting has been done. Julie was prepossessed before a talent scout elevated an Oregon teen to the elite world of international modeling. Her beauty and regal bearing made her slender ass a natural fit for throne or public adoration. Lo, these decades later, the flaxen-haired grandmother remained a 'stunner.' For attire, poise and eyes so dangerous a wise man knew he might drown in them.

Maybe twenty years ago, after her rock'n roller husband died, I'd tried slouching into bed with Julie. I'd found conditions frigid. While an honest-to-God ice storm crusted a blanket of snow on the lawn outside.

Her recent outreach came as a surprise. It followed discovery that we'd become neighbors. After dinner, and updating one another regarding intervening moves – like marriage-and-divorces – and as she was about to swing those long legs from the car – Julie suggested we consider becoming "friends with benefits."

"What?" I bleated like a sheep, into the perfume cloud left behind.

Looking back, I realize drunks and former-athlete suitors probably hear such solicitation, dismiss the driver, follow those legs to the door and – sweeping her into their arms – ferry that tender frame and designer outfit to her spa tub. That thought did not come to cerebral, sober me.

Society pages spotlight Julie's pose and thousand-watt smile. Social media platforms carry her about, often on arms of well-dressed men. I hadn't made a pass at her in decades, but I *was* determined to follow up on her proposition: I thought it would at least be enlightening to discover my proposed ranking. Would I enter the lists as, 'every-third-Sunday-guy, for when Married Guy #2 was out of town?'

I really had no idea what was on offer. I'm a Virgo. We can be thought to prefer 'significant' relationship. Not since college had I bounced around at the beck and call of a Federal Attorney and the furtive-but-red-hot-repressed town librarian. I began a campaign of calling Julie's attention to myself.

Or not.

You may notice I'm a writer. But I couldn't reach this woman ... in part because I had employed psychic imagining to elevate the public pixie onto a pedestal of my own making. In part because she wouldn't give me her email address.

Valentine's Day appeared on the horizon and I schemed to unleash my romanticism. She and I had shared quite a few text messages; Julie had yielded two, chaperoned trips to darkened theaters.

I made the mistake of thinking she could pick my writing voice out of her field of lovers.

I had achieved the rank of occasional 'drive-time companion' by Valentine's Eve. I was pretty certain new men in the rotation didn't get to start out as 'Valentine,' so I hadn't bothered to court rejection for that role. But I *had* been receiving occasional telephonic intimacies from the car, as Julie returned home to change into whatever would best cloak an evening excursion.

It was unique for me to be invited through her door ... *even if only on the telephone*. I achieved vicarious thrill as she juggled handheld device, purse and keys. I was off speaker phone and cradled in her beautifully sculpted neck. I alerted to observation she made to herself once inside: she thumbed through the day's mail laid aside for her and murmured, "Oh, look. A box."

In that box I assumed was a hand-painted gift card to a posh clothing retailer. I deduced such because I had assembled a wad of savings and arranged for said card to be shipped to her. With carefully worded and anonymous declaration of affection.

But I did not tell Julie of this. I did manage to blurt out "What's in the box?" when she'd turned most of our attention to a roommate's voice, who no doubt relayed communiques from others who'd sought attention

throughout the day. “Oh, I don’t know,” she answered me vaguely, asserting she’d left the package in the foyer and was now in her bedroom. I’ll admit it: I savored roundabout return to sleeping chamber. We ended that conversation without Julie ever hinting as to her upcoming Valentine plans.

‘Unknown’ appeared on my caller ID, perhaps an hour later. I was at first surprised to hear Julie, from a home number she’d heretofore declined to present to me. I expected breathy appreciation. Like that she’d offered a flautist, while flirting with him backstage ... following a performance I’d taken her to. From her cool, marble pedestal dropped a hot cascade, however. It was difficult to tease out what had happened, but I felt her energy: Julie had reached the most excitable state I was ever to share with her. And – to my surprise – I was at the root of her aggravation.

Julie’s cell phone was tied up ... by a series of United Parcel Service attendants. Apparently, my secret Valentine was not in the box in the foyer. *That* package, the contents of which were never disclosed to me, had been safely delivered by the United States Postal Service. Apparently, UPS had used an email account – off-limits to your writer – to alert Julie that another box had been left on her doorstep.

Julie had reported she’d received no package shipped by them. And been given a number. Perhaps a routing number to my token of affection. A very long and complicated number. She’d been required to repeat her long and complicated number each time she was transferred through the organization, her frustration rising. Poor Julie, in her lofty place: underlings kept asking what was in the missing package. She had no idea. She *had* no tracking number from a vendor. Admission she’d made to each lowly agent assigned to her inquiry. Then, asked who had sent the package for the third or fourth time, memory of my own question must have returned to her.

Feigning the voice of a dullard, Julie reminded me of Greta Garbo when mimicking my earlier inquiry. To all who were listening she moaned: “What’s in the box?” Into one ear, I confessed a made-up story. It’s what writers do. Into a tiny allotment of attention span, I thrust a tale of attentiveness which, to be truthful, impressed me. I reminded Julie she’d told me it had “been ages” since she had sought Shirodhara treatment in India. I confessed to finding the nearest ayurvedic healer with the highest recommendations, and arranged by gift certificate that they share intimacies in a women’s salon. Julie’s elevated serenity was my objective, I tried to convey.

She got the gist of my imaginative storyline. I ached to speak to the origins of secret love, my understanding of cupid’s role. But Julie had been attending to a shipping clerk supervisor with her other ear. I did not get “Thanks for thinking of me.” Exasperated, she extricated herself from the only conversation we ever shared on that private line.

Julie not long after sent word: on wings of Mercury arrived texted apology for being curt. She then shared with me a very long and complicated number. And a toll-free phone number to UPS. Text-string characters told me to “handle it.”

Frugal as I am, on a writer’s income, I immediately recognized personal advantage in reporting the card stolen. The posh retailer swiftly confirmed: their financial fulfillment house had voided the instrument. Full of apology, a kind woman offered to email an electronic ‘gift card’ to help restore a most rewarding Valentine’s Day to my recipient. I refused to admit I *had* no edress to the target of my affection.

Julie’s arrest was announced the following day. It might have gone unnoticed, but one of Los Angeles’ most prominent criminal attorneys no doubt alerted his publicity agent to circulate notice of daring interposition as charges were filed. Something about fraud. They *did* look like a handsome couple, as a man in a dinner suit dashed her from courthouse to waiting limousine in harsh, early morning light.

A mutual friend later explained that Julie had found ‘An Admirer’s’ Valentine box in another stack of mail, on another piece of furniture. She saw a gift card, not redeemable at an ayurvedic salon, but at a posh retailer. And assumed it must have been from yet another suitor. She was taken into custody at a street exit: accusations of shoplifting hovered behind charges of filing false report, use of a stolen financial document. While it would never again be *my* lot in life, I took collateral satisfaction that at least store security agents had gotten to feel her up.