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Poetry, fiction, reviews

The Agent

MARA WROTE at her glass-top desk. *Dear Mr. Ferrick: given the current state of the economy ...*

She shook her head, felt her chestnut-brown hair brush her neck. “No,” she told the empty den which also served as her office. “That’s no good. He’ll get really upset if I write that and I’ll never hear the end of it.” Mara considered what to write as she chewed on her pen.

Dear Jay. Yeah, that was better. The friendly, personal approach. As one of the longest represented writers of the Mara Literary Agency I find it difficult to Yeah, that would be received much better, she told herself, although the thought did not sit well with her.

Mara finished her letter to Jay Ferrick and sealed it in one of her light-blue *Mara Literary Services* engraved envelopes. She was not happy about having to write it. She never particularly enjoyed dumping her clients, but when the quality of their work continually diminished in an increasingly more competitive market, well, she simply couldn’t afford to spend any more of her time trying to sell it.

Business. It’s just business, Mara convinced herself.

Mara shrugged into her winter coat and boots, grabbed the letter and walked out into the cold December morning to put the envelope inside her mailbox. She lifted the thin metal lid, its frozen hinges squeaking in protest, and gently placed the envelope inside the box, where her hand lingered on the envelope as she briefly reconsidered her decision to drop Jay Ferrick from her stable of writers. She shook her head, confirming her decision, and closed the lid. It snapped shut with a finality that sealed Jay Ferrick’s fate. Mara watched her white breath float toward the winter sky. It was done and it was for the best. She smiled to herself, oddly comforted by the biting wind. This is what the weather should be like when you have to make tough decisions, the setting used to convey mood, she thought as she made her way back to the house.

After sweeping the dusting of snow off her front porch Mara went into the house, removed her heavy coat and clunky boots and headed to the kitchen to fix herself a pot of comforting, relaxing, lemon tea. She needed lemon tea today. Mara looked at the kitchen clock. It was 10:45. Her husband would be home shortly.

Forty minutes later Mara heard the Jeep pull into the driveway. She put down her pen and defensively picked up her rose-printed teacup. She listened to heavy footsteps crunching in the snow.

Any minute now and he would enter.

Sighing, Mara got up from her desk and went to her favourite chair, a lime-green stuffed and patched old relic dating back to the days when her parents had owned their farmhouse. She turned it so that she faced the door. Mara shivered as a gust of sub-zero wind rattled the windows. A man entered the house and quickly slammed the door behind him, intent on keeping the cold out. The loud noise made Mara jump in her chair.

Mara sipped her tea, relishing its warmth and the subtle lemon taste. She looked at the tall man with the red hat and matching red scarf as he stood on the rug, brushing

non-existent snowflakes from his shoulders. She smiled at him, her lips concealed behind the teacup. Some day, she thought, I'm going to write about this.

Her husband mumbled something about the cold. He looked up and smiled perfunctorily at Mara when he noticed her sitting in the chair. "Damn cold out there this morning," he repeated, shaking off his coat with a series of shoulder shrugs and arm contortions. He began to rifle through the mail he had picked up.

Mara sat, quietly sipping her tea, her fingers painfully tight around the tea cup.

"Damn bills. I sure wish that you could sell some of my work so that we could" His eyes flashed upon the envelope with his name freshly typed on it and he smiled. "What's this? A cheque?" he asked Mara, his eyebrows raised.

Mara smiled back a thin smile. Her eyes were fixed on her husband's puzzled eyes as he ripped open the envelope with cold, clumsy red fingers. She watched his face comically scrunch up as he read and tried to understand what she had written.

"What's this?" he repeated, still smiling uncertainly.

Mara remained silent.

"What is this?" he repeated again, his tone changing registers. He shook the letter at Mara.

"It's just what it says, Jay. I can't be your agent any more," Mara whispered.

Jay's smile faltered, struggling to stay on a face that was frowning more and more. "Are you serious? This is a joke, isn't it?" he continued to wave the ensnared letter at arm's length in Mara's direction. His legs were unwilling to take a step closer.

"Honey, look. I have other clients now and I can sell their work. You know ... I try just as hard, harder as a matter of fact, to sell yours, but frankly –"

"Frankly, what?"

"Well, frankly, it just isn't as good as what others are writing."

Jay was silent. He remained in the doorway, giving Mara the impression that he was suddenly afraid to step onto the wooden floor, as if realizing for the first time that maybe the solidity of his world was in fact just a sham, a *chimera*, Mara thought.

"What the hell are you saying, Mara?" Jay asked, the smile completely gone from his face.

"Just what the letter says, Jay. I'm letting you go, Honey. Try and get yourself another agent, if you think that someone will –"

"You bitch!" he shouted, the words coming out with such force that his red hat slid off to one side of his head. It remained anchored in place by a red ear.

"Jay, don't –"

"How *dare* you to do this to me! Do you know who I am?" he asked, his cheeks flushed red with humiliation or the cold morning air, Mara could not tell which.

"Don't be that way, Jay. This is just business, nothing personal. I just don't have the time anymore to peddle –"

"I was your first writer!" Jay spat out. "I started you on your *career* as an agent!" he screamed, firing the words out as if they were bullets. "You and your fucking B.A. in English Lit!" Mara said nothing, knowing there would be more words and insults. She felt as if she were reading someone's first play, predicting every bad line. She looked at her husband as he stood on the beige entrance rug, his red knitted scarf – Christmas '97 present – wrapped loosely around his neck. With his red hat still perched precariously on the side of his head, he made Mara think of a jester painted by Picasso in his pink period. Mara looked at her husband and she could not tell if she was going to laugh or cry. If he didn't remove the damn hat and scarf soon, she thought, she might do both.

"I ... I can't believe this!" Jay sputtered.

"Oh, come on, Jay! Get over it!" Mara said, lowering her teacup. "You've spent more time this year getting drunk than you have writing. And what you've written really isn't worth the paper that it's printed on. You remember that last story you wrote? About Stephen King getting caught in one of his own nightmarish stories? Christ! And to top it all off, ol' Stevie gets rescued by none other than Tom Wolfe! Jay! Come on!" Mara looked into her husband's grey eyes and knew that she should stop. Right now. She knew that the next words would hurt him even more, but they slipped past her lips before she could hold them back. "It's not even very *intelligent*, much less imaginative and well-written. Jay, it's not even Canadian literature!" It was unfortunate, but this was the only way that Jay, poor stupid old Jay, would ever understand.

"I see," he whispered, taking off his hat in defeat. It was a start, thought Mara. Now she might only cry.

"How long have you wanted to dump me?" he asked softly.

"Jay, just forget it. Don't do this to us. Don't do it to yourself. It doesn't have to end this way." Mara looked into her empty cup. She would soon have to leave the comfort and security of her chair to get herself a refill. Business first, though. She watched as her husband mechanically untied his boots and placed them neatly on the rug, one beside the other, off to the left corner, as he always did. He stuffed his red hat inside his coat sleeve and then hung the coat up on the brass coat rack by the door, all very deliberate acts that told Mara that her husband was taking the news badly.

"I was your first writer, Mara," he told his ex-agent matter-of-factly as he walked by her chair on his way into the

kitchen. Mara winced. Those words went deep, as Jay knew they would.

"Tea's made," she called out in a shaky voice. Jay did not reply, but Mara heard the cups rattle in the cupboard as he reached for one.

After a few moments Jay walked back into the bright sun-filled den and sat down at his cluttered desk, placing a chipped Quebec Nordiques ceramic cup on a stack of unfinished manuscripts. He swivelled his chair around to face Mara. His black hair had been flattened by both hat and sweat, and his appearance reminded Mara of the Three Stooges' Moe. She had to look away, the urge to laugh or cry welling up again.

"I'm sorry, Jay," Mara managed to say.

Jay looked at her and shook his head. "What about your legal obligations to represent me?"

"There *are* no obligations, Jay," she replied, with a shake of the head.

"What about my contract?"

"You never wanted one drawn up, remember? You said you didn't want to get tied up with me in case a *real* agent happened along."

"But ... there's still an unwritten contract, an agreement between a writer and his -"

"No, Jay," Mara interrupted. "I'm sorry. It's over," she added flatly.

Jay looked at his wife and suddenly realized that he had more at stake than losing a literary agent.

"What do you mean, *it's over*?" he asked. Jay stared at his wife and all he could see were her blond bangs above the cup.

Mara felt Jay staring at her, but she would not meet his eyes. Her teacup felt so smooth and cool in her hands. She looked at Jay. "I mean us, as a couple. We're through. Before you say anything, I've already contacted a lawyer."

Jay's cheeks, which had only now returned to their natural colour, turned beet-red again.

"So! This is what this is all about, then," he accused, pointing at the crumpled letter from *Mara Literary Services*, which he had flung onto his desk.

"No. But I don't think that I could still represent you fairly as my ex-husband, even if I wanted to. Which I don't."

Minutes passed in silence as Jay and Mara looked at each other, two angry dogs sizing up their strengths and weaknesses, each finding only indifference and fatigue reflected in the other's eyes.

"Is there someone else?" Jay suddenly asked.

"Yes, there is," Mara replied.

"I knew it! Who is he?"

"That's none of your business, really." Mara tried to tear her eyes away from Jay's. The pain in them was too much

for her to bear. No one should show that much of himself to the world. No one. Not even poor, stupid Jay.

Mara's soon to be ex-husband sipped at his tea and seemed to smile at the floor as he considered her reply. "No, no, no," Jay finally said, shaking his head. "It *is* my business, dammit!"

Mara weighed the consequences of her words. "You're right, Jay, it is your business."

"Well, then. Who is he?" he demanded again.

"It's Charlene. She's the new writer I was telling you about a couple of months ago?" Jay was silent. "We've been meeting on and off. We think that we have a future together."

Jay slumped in his chair, his chest sinking as if all the air were being slowly and painfully sucked out of him. "A *woman*?" he asked incredulously.

"A woman," Mara confirmed.

"But ... you're married! To a man! To me! I ... I never knew," Jay whined, trying to find the words that would express his confusion.

"I didn't know myself. Until I met Charlene."

"I never knew," Jay repeated as if he had not heard Mara. Silence.

"When are you moving out?" he asked, still in shock, but feeling the need to hear himself talk, to at least ask the question, however much it tore at him.

Mara clutched her cup tighter. She breathed in sharply as she prepared the next volley of words. "I'm not. You are," she said, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Jay thought about his wife's, his ex-wife's, answer and smiled. This absurd day would be one to remember. God, he needed a drink. He put his cup down without looking to see where or what the cup would stain, and he laughed bitterly. "Now, let me see if I've got this straight. First of all, I lose my agent. Then, I lose my wife, *to another woman*, mind you ... and now you're telling me that I'm losing my house, too. Right? Is this basically what's happened to me in the last half hour? Have I missed anything else?"

"No, you're right, basically," Mara said, wishing that Charlene was with her now.

Jay shook his head. "What can I say?" he asked. "What can I do?"

Mara studied Jay's face for a moment and then replied, "Get yourself a lawyer, Jay. Get yourself a good lawyer."

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