

Everest

By Linda D. Brewer

“Quick question,” Robert’s ex-wife Marlena said.

“I have a conference call in five minutes,” Robert said, although he didn’t. Marlena’s quick questions tended to run long and accusatory, as in, “Now, what I don’t understand is why you would want to fool around with a complete airhead when you know in the long run it’s going to undermine your relationship with your beautiful little daughter.”

“What’s up?” He minimized the spreadsheet and clicked on a picture of sunrise in the Himalayas.

“I’ll be quick. I called to say that I’d like to drop Taylor off early.” He didn’t reply. Marlena asked, “Are you there?”

Robert said, “You have a hot date, I assume.” He doodled the numeral one on his blotter and then added a hangman’s noose. He said, “Who is he, out of curiosity?”

Marlena, said, “It’s just a coffee date.”

Robert said, “How much do you want to bet you’re not going to like him?”

“He has very good credentials. He’s head of IT security for one of our clients—and he has an MBA.”

“You like his resume. That’s not the same thing as liking the person.”

She laughed, not happily. “Tell me something I don’t know, Robert. You looked good to me on paper.”

Robert said, “I bought a dog, for Taylor to play with when she comes over.”

Marlena’s voice became suspicious. “What kind? How old?” He knew she was imagining a pit bull with a torn ear and a tenacious jaw, and worse, no pedigree to brag about.

“It’s a sheep dog, a puppy. Her name’s Everest. I got her online.”

Marlena said, “Because she was there? Why didn’t you buy a polar bear and be done with it? Big hairy animals are so much fun to clean up after.”

“You won’t have to do the cleaning up,” he said.

“Interesting. So, eight-thirty?”

The timing was just doable. He said, “Okay. Don’t tell Taylor about the dog.”

Taylor, dark-haired and pixie-ish, was almost six. Her liveliness wearied him and her questions bored him. He wasn’t the kind of dad who derived pleasure from pretending to be what he wasn’t—a king or a mouse were two of her favorites. Taylor had the same toys and DVDs at his house that she had at his ex-wife’s and he suspected she was as bored by her visits as he was. He was sometimes driven to printing out empty spreadsheets for her to color in. Last weekend she’d handed the paper back to him and said, “Dude, I don’t really like this game.” A dog, he thought, would provide third-party entertainment, so they wouldn’t have to depend on each other every minute. Also, his girlfriend like animals. He scribbled, “T-8:30,” on a sticky note and put it in his shirt pocket.

He and Marlena both lived in Seattle, she on the north side of Green Lake, he on the south—he had a smaller house with a slightly bigger back yard. He imagined Taylor and Everest romping in the back yard tomorrow afternoon while he caught up on the work he would have to bring home. Tonight Nicky was coming over and making him dinner, but she would leave first thing in the morning. She never liked to stay when his daughter was coming, not since the time Marlena had come to pick up Taylor early and caught Nicky hiding in the shower stall.

That night Nicky made meatloaf, her mother’s recipe. “It’s handed down by all the women in our family,” she said.

Robert said he liked hand-me-down food. Nicky grinned. “I could get into cooking, now that I’m used to your stove. What’s your very favorite dessert?”

He said, “You,” which was invariably a satisfactory answer.

The next morning Nicky wanted to make French toast. Wearing his white terry-cloth bathrobe, she looked like a girl in a movie, he thought, as she took eggs and milk from the fridge. In a casual voice she said, “I found this note. Is it

important?” She pulled the sticky note off the fridge and handed it to him where he sat with his coffee at the breakfast bar. Robert thought, oops. He looked at the clock. Time had slipped away. It was eight twenty-five.

He said, “Change of plans, honey. The ex is probably driving up the street right now. I’m sorry.”

She shot him an ugly look, but she shifted gears at once and said, “Oh, honey, poor you.” She left the eggs and milk where they were and ran into the bedroom. He could hear her muttering while she threw on clothes and gathered her stuff into her gym bag. She ran through the kitchen and paused at the last minute to allow him to kiss her goodbye. Her movements were jerky with suppressed anger. She ran for the door, then swore and ran back for her car keys. She drove a red short-bed pickup—someday she wanted the two of them to live on a farm.

The phone rang. He grabbed it, thinking Marlena had chickened out on the coffee date, and he would have a chance to call Nicky back. His mother said, “Is this my only son?”

He said, “What are you drinking? Bloody Marys?”

“Mimosas. I’m enjoying the view from my balcony. I’d like to speak to Suzanne, if she’s willing to speak to me. Tell her I apologize for whatever it was I said last time. I have a recipe for her.” He heard the thick whomp as Nicky slammed the door of her pickup. He said, “Suzanne and I split up.”

“When did this happen? I deserve to know these things.”

“Six years ago. Just after Christmas. You were delighted.”

“Don’t think I’m senile, I just forgot. You married that girl named Marlena. The sales girl.”

“She’s in marketing. It’s different.” He heard the pickup take off with a roar and then he heard a yelp that segued into an aria of pain. “I have to go,” he said. The pickup sped down the street as if of its own volition. The dog cried after it, a song of pain and loneliness. The sound compelled him out the door—neighbors he didn’t even know would be looking through their windows trying to see who, what--but then it stopped and he thought maybe it wasn’t as bad as he feared. He hadn’t seen the dog for a while this morning. He’d fed it and let it out in the back

yard and then he'd gone back to bed. When he and Nicky got up again he hadn't thought about the dog. He hadn't had it long enough to miss it—its hairy, energetic presence had startled him every time he came home because he kept forgetting he'd bought it. He checked the side gate, which hung open, and ran out to the street, and there was Everest, a heap of white fur on the pavement and there was his ex-wife's car rolling to a stop at the curb, with Taylor staring out the window from the height of her car seat, staring and pointing.

Marlena was wearing black pants and a silky pink blouse. "She's probably just stunned," she said before he had a chance to think up an explanation. She knelt beside the dog and he saw that she was wearing pink high heels. She looked in the dog's eyes and mouth and felt its chest. "Help me get her into the car," she said.

"It's dead," he said. Marlena said, "You always think you know everything. There might be a chance. Help me get her in the car."

"Leave Taylor with me," he said. He yanked opened the back door and pulled Taylor out of her car seat and deposited her in the house. "Wait here," he said.

The dog was heavier than he had expected. A little blood trickled from its mouth when he hoisted it off the street into the car. The next thing he knew Marlena was driving away with the carcass sprawled on the seat beside her. An hour, tops, and he knew she would be back.

"We're going to dig a big, big hole," he told Taylor. "We get ice cream when it's done." He went around to the shed at the back of the house and found a shovel for himself and a plastic trowel for Taylor.

When Marlena returned an hour-and-a-half later the hole was ready and Taylor had buried and unburied her doll a few times and was now eating ice cream on the patio. Marlena said, "You owe me for the vet. You can pay me later. Go get a sheet." When he came back outside with the bed sheet wadded in his arms she sniffed it before she spread it on the ground.

"That act was in poor taste," he said.

"Big of you to admit it," she said. They scowled at each other until he said, "Let's just do it."

They put the wrapped-up dog in a cardboard moving carton and tried to lower it into the hole. He'd been right about the width and length but not the depth, and they had to drag the box back out so he could make more room. "Let me." Marlena made a grab for the shovel but he held it out of her reach. Taylor ran over to them and held out the plastic trowel. "Here, Dude, you can use this." The morning had started out cool and cloudy but now the sun was out. Marlena's pink blouse was dark under the armpits and her black pants were stained with dirt. The handkerchief Robert had tied around his head was wet with sweat. His back and arms ached. His phone had rung once, but it was his mother and he didn't answer it. Taylor was running around the yard, singing and tossing her doll up and trying to catch it, missing half the time. She and the doll were both filthy. The constant motion got on his nerves, but he knew it was better than having her sit in the dirt and sob. Of course she didn't know who Everest was, so that was a good thing. When the carton had been shoved back into the hole and the dirt mounded over it, he untied his handkerchief and wiped his face. He wondered if he should say a few words, explain to Taylor that life ended so other life could begin. He might mention ants. She had a DVD about ants.

Marlena pushed her hair back from her sweaty forehead. In movies when the heroine got mud on her face she looked even cuter. Not so with his ex-wife. She said, "Damn. I need a drink."

Taylor ran up to them and yelled, "Blueberry can't get to the top of that big mountain. She just can't make it. She's too little." Her face was red and she seemed feverish or crazy in the way she often did. She clamped her doll under her arm and charged up the side of the mound. "Ha-ha, fooled you," she yelled. She pointed at Robert and he suddenly feared she was going to denounce him, but all she said was, "Can I have your hanky?" He handed it to her. She jumped up and down and waved it and yelled, "Hurray!"

"Look at you," he said in feigned admiration.

"Honey, we've got the hole taken care of and it's time to go now," Marlena said. "We need to go home and get cleaned up." To Robert she said, "I had to cancel the coffee date, obviously, thanks a lot."

"You wouldn't have liked him," he said. He remembered the bowl of eggs still on the counter, Nicky in his white bathrobe. He was ferociously hungry. Nicky

was probably on the phone right now to her best friend, or, God forbid, her mother, sobbing, blaming him for the worst tragedy of her life. He should call her and tell her she wasn't to blame. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve. Nicky taught a spinning class at twelve.

Marlena frowned. "Taylor's coming home with me. She's had enough stress for one day. You can call your sweetie and grovel or whatever it takes."

He said, "I think Taylor and I deserve to start the day over."

Taylor tossed her doll in the air and he caught it and held it up to his face. It had yellow yarn hair and blue eyes, like Taylor. He said, "Hey, babydoll, how would you like a blueberry smoothie?" Taylor loved blueberry smoothies. Her doll had come from the store with the given name of Amanda, but at the yogurt shop on the way home she had rechristened it.

Taylor jumped off the mound. "What kind of smoothie are you going to have?" He picked her up and nuzzled her neck. "Mocha." She screamed in his face, "I knew you were going to say that. That's the kind you always have." Over her shoulder he saw tears welling in Marlena's eyes. He put Taylor down and said, "Mommy's a little bit sad. Give Mommy a hug and she'll feel all better." Taylor hugged her mother. She said, "Here, you can have this," and gave Marlena the handkerchief.

They walked around to the front yard. "I'll have her back by five," he said in a cheery voice for the benefit of the neighbors.

Marlena said, "Okay, great. Sounds good." She hugged Taylor. "See you later, Dude."

They waved as she backed out of his driveway and drove away. She dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief as she turned the corner, displaying the white cloth like a flag of surrender. He felt a jolt in his gut like victory, but he knew that she wasn't giving up by a long shot. Every week, week after week, it was all still there between them.