

The Door in the Wall

by C. P. Boyko

“HERE, DUCK. Here, ducky duck.”

Laurel Peggery sat on the edge of a park bench, scattering hunks of bread in an appetizing arrangement across the gravel bank. The duck, however, was grooming himself and took no notice.

She was a tall, sturdy, stolid woman, dressed neatly in several layers of grey thrift-store sweaters, jackets, and scarves. Her posture was scrupulously correct. A permanently furrowed forehead and deep character lines, running from her nose to the corners of her wide mouth, made her look formidable; but her eyes were moist and beseeching.

A man came ambling along the path towards her. She stuffed the loaf into her purse and kicked aside the crumbs on the ground. She crossed her knees and folded her hands and stared resolutely at the trees across the pond.

The man took no more notice of her than the duck had, and so was startled when, at the last moment, she fixed her gaze on him and said firmly, as if reproaching herself for some weakness, “Good morning.” He was surprised to see that she was young and attractive. He was past her before he could return her greeting; and though he soon forgot all about the girl on the bench in the park, the rest of his day was haunted by a specter of disappointment and dissatisfaction with life.

Laurel watched him till he was out of sight, then shook herself and returned to her task.

“Here, ducky. Here, ducky duck duck duck.”

A battered seagull flapped to earth twenty feet away and began strutting back and forth, watching her from alternate eyes. She hissed at it and threw a pebble in its direction, but her aim was poor and the gull, unruffled, continued its surveillance.

Suddenly a squirrel dashed out from under her bench, seized a hunk of bread in its mouth, and bounded away in undulating leaps. She hissed and stamped her feet after it.

“Filthy vermin.” She glared pointedly at the seagull, who had taken advantage of the distraction to come a few steps closer.

The duck, meanwhile, had completed his washing-up and sat down at the edge of the pond with his back to her.

“Duckeeeee,” she whispered, holding out a golden, spongy crumb. The duck ruffled his feathers with luxurious contentment and settled more deeply into the bank.

Laurel held the crumb between her thumb and index finger before her eye, like a jeweler appraising a diamond, and, rocking her forearm, carefully took aim.

The first crumb landed in the pond, the second, somehow, in a shrub behind her, but the third landed an inch from the duck’s head.

He looked at it. She held her breath.

He prodded it with his beak.

Then he picked it up, and with a toss of his head, flung it into the pond. Laurel, the duck, and the seagull watched as it grew sodden and sank below the surface.

“Oh, to hell with you,” she said, and threw the rest of the loaf at the duck. Anger did not improve her aim. The bread rolled into a tuft of marsh grass, where it was promptly rescued by the seagull, who carried it across the pond and began tearing it apart and squawking. Soon the area was swarming with shrieking gulls.

Laurel kicked gravel at the duck, then got to her feet and strode home.

LIONEL PUGG MOVED to the city to get away from a girl who did not love him and promptly fell in love with a girl who would never love him. He did not know that at first; at first—indeed for four years—he didn’t even know her name.

Angel was his waitress at the first café he visited, his first day in the city. She dressed carelessly, like someone at the beach; she wore oversize flip-flops and shuffled penitentially from table to table, her head cocked to one side as if peering around some corner. She took orders standing heavily on one foot. She had a bluff, brash manner that terrified and beguiled him. She nearly gave him a heart attack when she called him “dear.”

“All right, what’s it going to be, dear.”

Though he was ravenous, he asked for a coffee, not wanting to put her to the trouble of fetching a menu.

“Is that it?” she asked irritably.

Lionel Pugg was a knobby, gangly, twitchy young man, with sunken eyes, a concave chest, and hunched shoulders. He had thin skin and more than the usual number of nerves, so he quivered like an overwhelmed antenna. Angel thought he looked like a creep.

“You can take up the table because it’s slow today,” she said, “but don’t expect me to swoop down every five minutes to refill you, if that’s all you’re having. Somehow I don’t peg you for a big tipper.”

Lionel agreed, by gesture, that he was an abominable tipper.

He finished his coffee as quickly as its temperature allowed, left a five hundred percent tip, and fled without risking further talk or eye contact. From that day forward, he ate his meals at the café whenever Angel was not working, and sat there quaking with dread that she would appear before he could finish, and left shuddering with disappointment when she did not.

He wrote her a novel. It took him three years to complete. It was about a waitress, brash and beautiful but otherwise rather without qualities, who fell in love with one of her customers who had also fallen in love with her. This mutual affection was happily discovered one day (on page ten) when the customer asked the waitress to marry him, and she agreed. Several chapters were dedicated to the technicalities of the wedding and the details of their blissful cohabitation, but this only brought the book to page fifty-seven—a rather paltry offering, he felt. He had shown that these two would be happy together (which had been his secret didactic purpose), but perhaps their happiness had been too easily achieved? So he decided to have the

waitress kidnapped; that got the ball rolling again. To make the kidnapping plausible, he had to supply the waitress with a garish back story, which reached as far back as her distant ancestors and as far forward as her decision to become a waitress. Then there was the question of the kidnappers' motives, inevitably informed by their own characters and back stories. Finally, out of fairness, Lionel felt obliged to provide the customer-protagonist with a history and pedigree too. By this point, the hero bore little resemblance to the author, and the heroine probably had as little in common with her original; but he reassured himself that the portraits were metaphorical and still recognizable. If he was not a burly secret agent in fact, he was, anyway, rather taciturn; and if Angel was not a dispossessed Balkan monarch in fact, she was, anyway, rather imperious.

Then came the action. His counterpart, the customer-protagonist, tracked the kidnappers first to their hideout in the Sierra Madre, then, from coded documents found there, to their headquarters in Washington, D.C., and from clues there, to their homes in Toronto, Phoenix, and Dublin, and from there to outposts in Brussels, Kuala Lumpur, and the moon. The waitress-heroine, meanwhile, was too beautiful and brash to remain idle. By the time her husband had hunted down and one by one killed off her kidnappers, she had successfully reverse-engineered their mind-control device and transmitted the blueprints to her Balkan accomplices. She had never been in any danger and was not grateful for the violent rescue. She divorced him, and on the last page threw her wedding ring at him and told him to get lost.

This was not as Lionel had planned. But it seemed the more he subjected his characters to situation and event, the more vivid they became, and the more vivid they became, the less control he exerted over them. Consequently his novels never ended the way he thought they should—that is, happily—but always with some vivid, attractive character telling the protagonist what his flaws were, throwing something at him, and stalking off the page. In this case, the ending rather undermined his secret didactic purpose; so he reassured himself that the heroine and hero were total fictions and had no relation whatsoever to the real waitress or himself, and that, at 458 typewritten pages, *Served Cold* was a respectable gift, a genuine love-novel.

He did not want to bother his beloved at work, so he carried the manuscript around with him for another year, hoping to run into her casually on the street. In fact, he saw Angel somewhere about town almost every other week, and on several occasions literally bumped into her. Finally, on one of these occasions she took him by the shoulders, held him upright to scrutinize his face, and demanded to know where she knew him from.

The memory of the pressure of her hands on his arms rendered him aphasic.

“I know I’ve seen you somewheres. Was it Lulu’s? Do you know the Donkey? It wasn’t the *restaurant*? Ah well: mysteries. What’s that you got there? It looks big enough to be a *book*.” She laughed at the outlandishness of her imagination. “Hey, I’ve got a date but come buy me a drink anyway in case I’m stood up. It’s just across the street.”

The mention of the date restored him to speech. “I couldn’t possibly intrude,” he said, and ran away.

At their next encounter, he did better: he thrust the manuscript into her hands, said, “I wrote this for you,” and then ran away.

He stayed away from the café for six weeks. When at last he mustered the courage to return, Angel showed no sign of recognizing him. She did, however, come around with the coffee pot and refill his cup several times. Finally she asked him what he was doing that night. “I’m thinking of going to a party and I might need a date, in case it stinks.”

Angel had not read the novel, but she had removed its elastic bands and identified it as a novel. She had no way of judging its worth—nor any inclination to, since it flattered her to suppose it a work of genius. Though she still thought Lionel was a creep, she began taking him around with her to parties and bars and introducing him to other more attractive men as her genius admirer. She found him useful, for she did not like to be alone.

THE MAIL HAD arrived. Laurel tore open the mailbox, clutched the three letters to her chest without looking at them, hurried upstairs to her apart-

ment, locked and bolted the door behind her, then sat down at her desk to inspect her booty.

All three envelopes were identical: the same size, the same color, with the same stamp in the same place, and all three addressed in the same meticulous handwriting—her handwriting. Three more of her self-addressed stamped envelopes had found their way back to her. One of them felt a little heavier than the others. She saved it till last.

The first contained only a business card-sized piece of thin grey newsprint on which a single sentence had once, apparently long ago, been typed or photocopied. It read,

We thank you for your interest but regret that your novel does not seem right for our list at this time.

The Editors

Neither the envelope nor the piece of paper gave any clue as to the identity or affiliation of these “Editors.” Nevertheless Laurel put the rejection card aside, to be filed later in the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet, which was euphemistically labeled “Correspondence.”

The second envelope held a genuine slip, one full third of a regular sheet of paper. The paper too was heavier—possibly even twenty-four-pound—and hardly translucent at all. But the text on the slip, though longer, was no more encouraging.

Dear Author,

The editorial staff would like to thank you for the opportunity of reading your manuscript(s). Please excuse any delay(s) that may have occurred in awaiting this response.

The editors reviewed your work(s) with careful attention and real enjoyment. Unfortunately, however, given the quantity of submissions that they receive, sometimes even quality work must be declined. Ultimately, they did not feel passionately enough about your work(s) to be able to give it the support that it deserves.

They regret that the large number of manuscript(s) that they receive makes it impossible for them to respond to you in a more

personal manner or to comment in detail on your work(s). They wish you the best of luck in finding a home for it elsewhere.

There followed an invitation to buy some of the publisher's most popular novels at a discounted price.

Her gaze lingered for a while over the words "real enjoyment," but finally drifted contemptuously to the typo in the first paragraph ("occured"), the passive voice in the second, and the solecism in the last ("manuscript(s)"). These should perhaps have cheered her up, but did not: Although it is no dishonor to be criticized by the ignorant, it is depressing to be rejected by them.

The third envelope contained one full, uncut sheet of paper. Fastidiously she unfolded it and smoothed it flat upon the desktop. From her expression, it would have been difficult to pinpoint the moment at which she read the familiar words, "Although we read your manuscript thoroughly and with careful attention, we regret . . ." She stared at the page for a long time, her eyes roving across it seemingly at random. The text was identical in substance, and in places identical in phrasing, to countless other pieces of correspondence she had received over the years; long familiarity had rendered her snow-blind to this sort of letter. At length she focused on the signature, and discovered that this one was unique after all: it had been signed by hand, in real ink. The name itself was illegible, but the complimentary close read, "Thanks for thinking of us." Also the word "author" in the salutation had been crossed out, and her name (or one very much like it) had been written above.

She ran her fingertips over the handwritten words; she closed her eyes and felt the indentations the pen had made in the page.

Then she filed it away with the others.

She returned to her desk and withdrew from a drawer a notepad and a fat pen. She sat staring out the window for half an hour at the brownstone apartment block across the street. She sighed heavily; then she began to write.

She wrote hunched over her desk, her tongue clamped between her teeth; she wrote quickly and steadily, never pausing to find the right word or consider a character's motives; and she wrote for hours. It has been said that we read to forget ourselves, but that when we write, we have only ourselves to find. I think that Laurel Peggery wrote to forget herself.

She was interrupted that evening by the phone. It took her a moment to recognize the sound; then she lunged across the room—but drew up short, finally lifting the receiver with a shrug of indifference that was not entirely convincing.

“Yeah?”

It was her sister, Vivian. “Have you eaten?”

Laurel gasped irritably. “Is that all you called for?”

“As a matter of fact, Marcel and I were thinking about going to a party.”

Laurel said nothing.

“Well, do you want to come?”

Laurel sat down at her desk and stared out the window. After a moment she sighed and said, “I suppose this is just another way of asking if I've eaten?”

“Huh?”

“Or asking in your sly way if I need any help paying the rent? Or whether I ever think about moving into a nicer, larger, sunnier apartment? Or—”

“Where's all this coming from?”

“You're worried about me: that I'm not getting enough social interaction—is that it?”

“I—we—I merely thought that you might like to meet some new people.”

Laurel stood up. “Well, let me tell you something.” She spoke with quiet ferocity. “I don't need any help meeting people. In fact, I—” She cast a wild glance around the apartment, then extended her free arm in a gesture of exasperation or resolve. “I just don't need any help meeting people. I'm not a charity case.”

“Okay okay. If you don’t want to come, you don’t want to come. Sheesh.”

After a pause, Laurel said, “I certainly do not.”

“All right all right. But hey listen: if you don’t want to come to the party—will you come over and babysit?”

Laurel took a step backwards. “I suppose that’s the real reason you called!”

Vivian tried for several minutes to convince her otherwise, but Laurel was intransigent.

“You didn’t want me to come at all! You knew I’d say no!”

“To be honest, I thought you might. But I always hope you won’t.”

“Well, Vivian, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I have changed my mind. You’ll just have to find another babysitter.”

“Huh? You’re coming to the party now?”

“Certainly I am coming.”

“That’s great,” said her sister wearily. Then, plucking up her enthusiasm, she said, “We’ll pick you up at nine.”

“I shall expect you at ten.”

ANGEL SWEEPED THROUGH the party like a breeze stirring piles of leaves. She tried on people’s hats and eyeglasses. She asked one man what he was drinking, and without waiting for a reply dipped her finger in his glass and tasted her finger. “Delicious.” She elbowed her way into conversations, which she listened to for five seconds, then summed up in one provocatively naive phrase: “But you can’t fit all that money in one bank,” or “University is for saps,” or “Jewish boys are yummy.” Her proclamations were as unanswerable as insults, and satisfied by the silence they left in their wake, she flounced on to her next group of victims. Within two minutes of her arrival, every man at the party was keenly aware of her presence, and every woman was keenly aware of their awareness.

Lionel, too embarrassed to break uninvited into other people’s discussions, yet terrified of being left alone, followed Angel around the apartment

at a distance of six feet, his eyes fixed on the back of her head. He tried to look absorbed and contented so that no one would talk to him; but his discomfort was as manifest as a bad smell, and he wriggled and grimaced and clenched his fists like someone suppressing murderous urges. So no one talked to him.

"I'm sick of you gibing my heels," Angel told him at last. "Go, meet some nice boys and girls." She made shooing gestures, which Lionel fended off like blows.

"I don't want to leave you." He took a deep breath and let it out in a quavering moan. "I—*love* you."

"Can it with that crap." She looked around to make sure no one had heard him, then gave him a light, almost affectionate slap on the mouth. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"I can't help it," he said, his head, shoulders, and spine drooping under the weight of his shame. "I wish I could but I can't. That's just the way it is."

"So what do you got to keep telling me it for? Look," she said. She grasped him by the arms and twisted him around by the torso, his feet remaining sunk in the carpet as if in mud.

"Where," he said, without looking up.

"Over there. That chickie-poo's been standing all by her lonesome since we got here. Go cheer her up."

Lionel shuddered at the idea. And indeed Laurel Peggery looked intimidating, standing at full height against the far wall, arms crossed, eyebrows raised in sarcastic expectation.

"I can't," he said. "She wouldn't want to talk to me. I'm not interesting. I wouldn't have anything to say."

"Lioney," said Angel in her saccharine, self-pitying voice. "You do like me a little, don't you?"

Lionel simpered like jelly.

"Then give me a kiss," she said, giving him one, hard, on the lips, "and go say hello to that stuck-up bitch." Then she shoved him clear across the

room. He collided with Laurel at a gallop, his forehead and her chin coming together with an audible crack.

“I’m so sorry,” he cried. “I must have tripped. Are you all right?”

Laurel, after recovering some of her poise, said, “Certainly I am all right.”

“I’m really just so, so, so, so, so, so, so, SO, SO sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure your chin isn’t hurt? My head is *throbbing*.” And indeed there were tears in his eyes.

Laurel stopped rubbing her chin, which was glowing red. “My chin is fine, thank you.”

There was a long pause, in which Lionel opened and closed his mouth like a fish and Laurel examined the backs of her hands.

“It’s a good thing you’re so tall,” Lionel finally blurted, “or I might have broken your nose.”

Laurel drew herself up to her full stature as if she had been insulted. “I am not so extraordinarily tall. In fact I’m hardly above average for my body type.”

Lionel blushed and began blinking rapidly at this allusion to her body, which he found majestic and awe-inspiring in its dimensions.

“I, I, I,” he said in three different intonations, then cleared his throat and tried again: “That is, I meant to say, I, I, I—I’m the one who’s so short.”

Laurel never met with agreement without feeling placated, so she argued reflexively, “You’re not exactly tiny.”

Lionel would have liked to escape this conversation. Normally he was adept at escaping conversations: the slightest distraction, or lapse in the other person’s attention, provided him with all the excuse he needed to unburden the other of his tiresome presence. Even when in the dentist’s chair or splayed on an operating table, the moment the talk deviated from his particular case he would offer to come back at a better time. But Laurel’s beseeching gaze never left him, and pinned him to the spot, writhing like an in-

sufficiently etherized insect. Since he could not escape, he sought desperately some justification for standing there, taking up her time.

After many syllables that did not contribute intelligibly to his meaning, he said at last, "I saw you standing over here by yourself and I thought, gee, there's someone who's not having much fun either."

"Certainly I am having fun," said Laurel devoutly.

Lionel wilted and said, "Oh."

After another minute of anguished, ringing silence, Laurel said airily, "I would hate to think you came over here to talk to me just because you felt sorry for me."

"Oh, no! No no! It's just that you were by yourself, and . . ."

"I came with my sister and her husband, but they have wandered off somewhere."

"Oh!" cried Lionel, clutching at this chance. "We should go find them!"

Laurel shook her head. "They'll wander back." Then she prepared herself for a disclosure by adjusting her posture. "To be honest, I get quite enough of them as it is. And since I didn't relish the prospect of following them around like a child or a dog, or of being thrust upon their casual acquaintances like a visiting yokel cousin, I remained behind, here. After all," she said, and looked challengingly at Lionel, "I'm quite capable of introducing myself."

He did not however take the cue and invite her to do so. His thoughts were following a different path. "Then you did not come with—your boyfriend?"

"I most certainly did not. I do not have a boyfriend."

Now he understood. His face flushed with sentiment and he sighed, "Then you're shy too!"

Laurel balked. "Certainly I am not shy!"

Lionel dissolved into an upright puddle of despair. "I'm so sorry. When you're shy, like I am, you start to imagine that everyone else must be shy too. I am very sorry."

The abjectness of his apology nearly made Laurel smile. “It’s not so horrible as all that. It’s nothing to apologize for. I mean, being shy isn’t so bad. It doesn’t hurt anyone—no one but yourself, anyway. It’s like riding a bicycle in traffic.”

“Oh, but you *can* hurt others cycling in traffic! Cars swerve to avoid you and crash into telephone poles. Or they run you over and damage their undercarriage. Or they send you to the hospital and feel terrible all week.”

“Are we still talking about shyness?”

“No,” Lionel admitted—then reconsidered. “Well, yes! There’s nothing more dangerous, more disastrous, than a shy person let loose in a room full of people. Your awkwardness makes others feel awkward. Your embarrassment makes everyone embarrassed for you. The sight of your self-consciousness, as raw as an open wound, makes everybody handle you self-consciously. No one can be honest, no one dares be blunt. That’s the worst part: your uneasiness gets in the way of your words, your behavior, your personality, so that on top of everything else you feel like a liar. Shyness is a toxic spill, spreading uneasiness and dishonesty, contaminating everything it comes in contact with. Oh, it’s vile!”

While Lionel trembled with humiliation at his outburst, Laurel considered the truth of it. At length she asked, almost shyly, “What made you think *I* was shy?”

Lionel turned his head away from his mistake like a baby turning away from an unpalatable food. “Oh, who knows? A beautiful woman—standing alone—no boyfriend—”

Laurel’s face became very still and very grave. She had never in her waking life been called beautiful. Was he flirting with her? Was he teasing? She glared at him, intimating the consequences of toying with her emotions.

Lionel sensed that he had made another error, and apologized. “I’m a fool. I don’t know what I’m saying. Pay no attention to me.”

“You speak very—cavalierly,” said Laurel.

“I know,” he moaned. “I never think before I speak. I’m so nervous I just blurt out whatever idiocy comes into my head. It’s awful. I’m awful.”

“Yes—I suppose that was just a piece of ‘idiocy.’”

“Oh, definitely!”

Laurel’s mouth moved speechlessly for a moment. “‘Definitely!’”

Lionel was completely bewildered. “Well, sure it was. It was just a mistake.”

“Then you did not mean it at all when you said that I was . . . that I was —”

“Shy? No!” He moved the sweat around on his face with a sweaty sleeve. “Heck no. It was a mistake.”

“I wasn’t talking about that.”

“You weren’t?”

“No.”

He peered at her timorously. “What were you talking about?”

“I was talking about something else.”

“You were?”

“Something else you said.”

“Something *I* said?”

Laurel snorted. “I suppose you don’t even remember.”

“I don’t,” he confessed. “I don’t remember. Sometimes I don’t even remember what I’ve said. Sometimes I don’t even hear myself. I don’t hear myself and I don’t hear the other person, either. I don’t hear anything and I sure don’t know what I’m saying half the time.”

“That’s what I figured. You spoke carelessly.”

“Boy, you could say that!”

“In that case, I will not hold you to it.”

“Gee,” he said, “I appreciate that.” His posture was that of a man who had just been chased for a mile by wolves. His exhaustion briefly overwhelmed his fear of offending, and he looked around with candid desperation for Angel.

“I see that I am keeping you from your—friend,” said Laurel.

“No, not really.” He had spotted Angel across the room, draped over a giggling young man whose ears she was cleaning with her tongue.

Lionel’s despondence and wistfulness were too much for Laurel’s pride. “I hear my sister calling. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” he said softly, long after she had left the room.

WHEN LAUREL WAS a girl, she had been ashamed to show her feelings. When it came time for her friends or cousins to go home after a visit, she would go behind the house and scrape her knee on the stucco so that she could cry openly and without embarrassment. That night, after she arrived home, she went into the bathroom and stubbed her toe repeatedly on the corner of the washstand till the toenail split. She sat on the edge of her bed and wept silently for ten minutes. Then she pulled herself upright, bandaged her toe, washed her face with cold water, and sat down at her desk, where she wrote late into the night.

Lionel left the party shortly after Laurel. He wandered the empty streets in aimless dejection. Soon he was lost. He was glad to be lost; he deserved to be lost; he began positively to wallow in his lostness, and turned down obscure streets and narrow, unmarked alleys. Finally he came to a dead end, where a brick wall sealed off the passage. He sighed profoundly, almost sensually, pleased to have this final confirmation of the universe’s utter disdain for him. He was about to turn and go when his eye detected the shape of a door in the shadow of the wall. He stepped nearer.

There was indeed a door here, where there could be no need of one. Why should someone wall up an alley only to install a door in the wall? The door was incongruous in its appearance too. It was made of a heavy, lacquered wood, and its surface had been elaborately carved. It was the door to the inner chambers of a judge or to the library in an old mansion, not the sort of door that connected one dirty alleyway to another. The knob was warm to the touch. He turned it.

When Lionel was a boy, he had had an imaginary fairy friend who told him that he was a changeling. However, when Lionel tried to return to Fairyland with him, his friend had informed him that he was not wanted. “Away with ye, ye blethering gobhawk,” he had shouted, and thrown stones. The stones, though imaginary, hurt. Lionel had never seen his friend again.

The door was locked. He jiggled the knob, then slowly retraced his

steps. He tried to imagine what he might have found on the other side of the door—and for a while forgot that he was not wanted by the universe. He too, when he arrived home, wrote late into the night.