

## Michael C. Kenyon / MR. GUEST ARRIVES IN KLEINBERG

### ESTELLE

Estelle's father, to all appearances a successful Toronto businessman, died in 1960, the year she and Owen were married. After settling his estate (to Estelle's surprise, he was considerably in debt), she returned to Kleinberg with a leather-bound photo album and a small package of books. On the album's inside cover was inscribed: *To Lottie with love*. Estelle's mother, who had died when Estelle was four, only appeared in two of the photos. The other black and white faces, in group and single portraits, were unfamiliar, and the album contained no clue to their identity. On the back cover, someone had written: 1922. The album lay around the house for a few years, a curiosity, then, dog-eared and coffee-ringed, was thrown out.

Twenty-one years later, on her return from the clinic, Estelle retrieves the books from the basement. Still in her rain coat, she sits at her desk under the study window. On page 573 of Plato's *Republic*, she finds some dark crumbs of tobacco. These are dry, nearly odourless.

The garden of her house has not been tended in her absence. The roses, untrimmed, run to briar; the bird feeder is empty: the finches and sparrows, even the pigeons (she had cursed the pigeons for eating the smaller birds' food) have left. She watches the March wind wave the unmown grass.

On page 573, underlined, she reads:

*Then the master passion runs wild and takes madness into its service; any decent opinions or desires and any feelings of shame still left are killed or thrown out, until all discipline is swept away, and madness usurps its place.*

On the kitchen table lies the flute Owen has left. The card, a bright floral motif, says he hopes she is well; he will not be home for supper; some business requires attention at the club.

She puts down Plato, leafs through the Multiple Listings she'd picked up at the office, remembers the appointment, made for her by the secretary, with a woman named Daphne, for ten the next morning.

Brushing the tobacco from the page, she reads a few more lines before closing the book:

*When a master passion has absolute control of a man's mind, I suppose life is a round of holidays and dinners and parties and girlfriends and so on.*

## JOSH AND LUKE

On Monday at six-thirty, after eating dinner with his three brothers and two cousins, Luke pedals quickly the six blocks to the Paradise Plaza. As on previous occasions, the shopping cart lies where he left it at noon: in the long grass behind the oak. He takes from his pocket a length of string and ties the cart handle to the rear mudguard of his bike.

It takes fifteen minutes to cycle to the lake, just over half an hour with the precautions Luke takes. He rides the alleys all the way, at each street makes sure the coast is clear before crossing to the next alley.

Tonight, walking home from work, Gerta sees the boy — a blue bike, a yellow cord, a silver cart — traverse Davenport and enter the alley beside Monty's Plumbing.

On the small dock by the lake, Luke watches the cart sink, without revolving, onto the platform created by two carts laid side-up; watches it slip, until its wheels mesh with the wheels of a fourth cart planted upside-down over the wheels of yet another cart, also upside-down. When the ripples cease, Luke peers into a complex geometry of intersecting lines through which, he imagines, shoals of minnows will pass.

Monday's the last such journey Luke makes. On Tuesday, he's discovered behind the oak, with the bicycle, the cart and the string, by the assistant manager.

On Wednesday, after dinner, his father whips him.

Thursday, a full moon, Luke takes Josh to see the submerged castle.

They share a cigarette on the dock, laughing like crazy at the word: *anorak*. It was my grandmother's, Luke's friend explains, she's dead. He pulls the hood over his head, blows smoke through his nostrils.

## ROBIN AND ISAAC

It's not that Gerta's just clumsy, I mean I can allow some lack of physical co-ordination. Isaac squints, closes one eye to align Robin's hip, the curve to the waist, with the system of ropes and pulleys which run from the bed-head to the window frame. He adjusts the hand-winch; the ratchet clicks. From her strained position, Robin smiles and manages a slight bob of the head. Encouragement.

Isaac continues: She's just got these ideas. Like yesterday I discover she's been serving all our sandwiches on *half and half*. Someone orders whole wheat or white and she says: We serve *half and half*, like it's our policy or something. She makes them up in advance, one slice of white and one of sixty-percent. I told her not to do it and you know what she said? Dark and light. Very pointedly. Dark and light.

Isaac backs away to survey the construction of his wife. He unties her right wrist from one cross bar, fastens it to the next higher: O.K.? Again the bob of the head. He cuts another slit in the already shredded satin dress. He removes one silver highheel, placing it at right-angles to the foot, forming a kind of visual support to the ankle/instep relationship.

And I can't find anything in the kitchen; she's rearranged my entire stock according to her own weird logic. The spices are no longer in the spice cupboard. She's got each spice with the food to which she thinks it belongs. I have to try to think like she thinks to find anything.

Isaac watches Robin as he unzips his pants: draped in pink satin, half on, half off the bed, suspended and stretched behind the nylon cord, she resembles a sun star in a crab trap.

Isaac remembers the illustration from Gerta's *National Geographic*.

## MONTY AND JOAN

Monty watches Beth step into the Cadillac behind The Pit. Owen, holding the door open, grins at the bartender who's carrying empties into the small lot. Monty teeters down the alley to the front of the building in time to see Mox and Cynthia drive away.

At home, the plumber urinates against the *For Sale* sign, then goes inside. At three-thirty, he places a call to his wife's sister in Montreal. Joan answers the phone.

You're drunk, she says. Monty says, It's me, Monty, I want to tell you something. Just hang on.

While he's fumbling with the record player, he remembers the photographs of The Beautiful Children. Leaving the turntable revolving, he goes into the bedroom to find the portfolio. After ten minutes search, he remembers Joan and goes back to the phone.

She answers after eight rings: I hoped you'd passed out. Wait, he says, do you remember The Beautiful Children? I have them, she says. Oh. Well that's all right then. How's the dog? And how's little Sparky? The dog's fine, says Joan, the bird's fine.

You remember the kid in yellow rain gear? says Monty. He drags the phone over to the stereo, sets the needle on Kris Kristofferson, *The Silver-Tongued Devil*. He hums into the mouthpiece to the end of the song, then rejects the tone-arm. Joan?

He tries the number twice more, then falls asleep on the livingroom floor, in front of the tv. The late show that night is *They Got Me Covered*, with Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour. The late late show is *The Unholy Garden*, starring Ronald Coleman and Fay Wray.

## DAPHNE AND ESTELLE

Mick shambles along the alley, watches Daphne and Estelle wade through the high grass in Monty's back yard.

721 Pulver Close, Daphne murmurs, I could build my aviary here, against the garage. And put the breeding cages in the workroom.

Crossing three streets, walking Kraft Street for eight blocks, Mick reaches Hill Road. At Paradise Plaza, at the intersection of Hill and Lang, just before Hill becomes the highway north from Kleinberg, he begins his bottle routine.

I left my husband dozens of times, Daphne says, but always returned. I'd spend the night in a small town like Kleinberg, drive home the next morning. Once I overheard Rod joking with an associate about my one night stands. The same associate handled our divorce. As soon as I find a house, my cages will be forwarded, the birds handled with extreme care; Rod's firm will absorb all expenses. Estelle mentions the finches and sparrows she feeds, asks what kind of birds Daphne raises.

Proceeding from the peripheral garbage cans, to the ones within the parking lot, to the containers right beside the Mall doors.

Cockatiels, Daphne says, I've a young pair for sale now, if you're interested. But if you want to teach the bird to talk, if you'd like more of a companion, to have it ride on your shoulder and so on, I'd advise keeping just one, and clipping its wings. The two women stand in the small porch at the front of the house. Daphne has decided to buy; Estelle folds the interim agreement into her pocket, says: I'd like to see the birds, when they arrive. She locks the front door. How, she asks, do you select the birds for breeding? Plato has it, *We must mate the best of our men with the best of our women as often as possible, and the inferior men with the inferior women as seldom as possible, and keep only the offspring of the best.*

Mick trades his bottles at the Super Low-Cost. Mrs. Kreisler, with a cart full of groceries, lets him ahead of her. I hate it, she says, when I've got a few things only, and someone in front has a load and won't

let me through first. Mick nods, clears his throat, lines up the bottles for the cashier to count. Mrs. Kreisler steps closer: Mick steps away. Bending from the hip, she adds, Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands more.

## PIER

Pier is on night shift, attending PIMM (Plunger Injection Moulding Machine) number two. The screw rams the melt (the thermoplastic resin, polypropylene) into the cold bricklayers' hod mould. On the floor, fifty-six hods are being stacked by the stacker.

Urgent message to phone this number. Pier takes the piece of paper, follows the foreman into the first aid station. While Pier dials, the foreman sits on the bed, finishing his sandwich. He takes four bites before starting to chew. A Pakistani, wearing a hardhat over an orange turban, opens the door; Pier swivels to face the wall, presses the earpiece to his right ear and covers his left with the palm of his hand: No, I don't know where she is. Could you speak up? The Pakistani, at a wave from the foreman, takes the four pills from the desk top, puts two in his mouth and pockets the others. Shouldn't wind the turban so tight, says the foreman, as the man leaves.

On the wall in front of Pier, a graph shows the productivity increase against the number of injuries for the years 1976 to 1979. When Pier hangs up, the foreman says: I thought she had the baby last month. My trailer's burned to the ground, Pier says, they think Olga may have been inside.

The grass crunches as he runs across the field, past the neon-lit company sign, a twenty foot copy of the 1938 *Wurlitzer* in phenolic resin, *POLY-PLASTICS LTD. KLEINBERG*, sporting a yellow scroll-design of carbon/hydrogen atoms forming molecular chains.

On the Drive-In screen, a well-dressed man drinks in a seedy bar, shows the contents of his briefcase to a famous actress. She looks embarrassed, then leans back in the chair to wave to someone she recognizes. Pier can't see any smoke or flames. If this is a joke, he mumbles.



## GERTA

March seventeenth, St. Patrick's day, Isaac begins work at four in the morning. He makes three cream pies, using food colouring (which he finds at the back of a cupboard, behind two large bags of miniature marshmallows) to get the desired effect. His morning special, *Isaac's Individual Irish Omelette*, made in a small shamrock-shaped bowl, contains gorgonzola cheese, green peppers, spinach, and will be served topped with several sprigs of parsley.

Gerta arrives at six; she refuses to wear the green tam. I'll wear the smock, but I won't put that on my head. Isaac asks: What's wrong with it? Gerta looks at him steadily, for a minute.

The omelette is a great success, as are Isaac's black leprechaun jokes. (There's these three black leprechauns, see, one from Detroit, one from Chicago, one from Kleinberg . . .) Gerta refuses to serve the green butter.

At ten, when Daphne and Estelle open the cafe door, Gerta is very pale; one of her rollers has come unclipped, and Isaac sings *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, very loud, from the kitchen.

What's that? Daphne points suspiciously at the green wedge rapidly fragmenting, under the fork of the Indian boy at the next table, then disappearing past the lips, swallowed, with no jaw movement. Gerta replies, Boston Green Pie. The two women order bacon and tomato sandwiches, Daphne's on white, Estelle's on whole wheat, and two coffees.

What a new idea, says Daphne, when Gerta brings the sandwiches. Estelle says nothing. Half and half, responds Gerta, dark and light. The sandwiches have been quartered to form triangles. Two triangles of each sandwich have been turned, the opposites are of the same colour: whole wheat, whole wheat; white, white. Gerta points out that each borders on its opposite colour: whole wheat borders on white bread, the white on the second whole wheat, which shares borders

with the second white, which borders on the original whole wheat. Beneath the butter, bacon, tomato, mayonnaise and butter (the order of these components reversed in the triangles where white is the topmost bread), the same system of borders and opposites is maintained. Gerta looks pleased as she heads back to the kitchen; Daphne winks at Estelle, who adds cream to her coffee. Simultaneously, the two women lift their cups. Dark and light, says Estelle.

## CHARLIE AND HIS WIFE

Charlie takes a beer from the fridge, stands by the kitchen window for a moment, opens the bottle, pours the beer, turns: Old Bert's in court next Friday. In my opinion, says his wife, he deserves all he gets. The usual smoke surrounds her. Did you hear, she says, about those kids' trailer that burnt down? Poor dears. Charlie sits across from the tv: Probably smoking what they shouldn't: according to Bert, Kid Kreisler puffs and chokes at the stuff all the time. Oh, I don't think so, Charlie, they're nice kids, she's real nice, I met her in the Paradise, buying plastic forks, poor mite, her little one sleeping baby-quiet in a little papoose thing, like a kangaroo pouch, hanging in front.

Charlie asks, You got the *TV Guide*, hon? You took it in the kitchen, Charlie, you're getting absent minded. She puts a large peppermint in her mouth and chews: We leave for Reno next week. She sighs. Charlie returns from the kitchen, Can't find it. You know, she continues, I think it'd be a real nice gesture to offer those kids the use of our house while we're gone. I can't find the damn thing. It'd give them a month to get organized, what d'you thing, Charlie? I think you're sitting on it. She shuffles to one side of the armchair, I don't know why you bother, you know the programs backwards anyway. She hands him the guide, It'd make me feel good to have someone in the house while we're away. Charlie says, Channel 7, 1:30. I'll think about it.



## MONTY AND MOX

Monty drives beside the lake at three in the afternoon to the Blue Mist Apartments. The completion date for the sale of his house is next week.

He parks the van in the lot in time to help Cynthia with the heavy lid of the trash container. Monty holds the lid open; Cynthia deposits the garbage. Fantastic! Monty says, I've seen you dance, you're the best Owen has. Cynthia tells him how to find the manager. I live in town, she points to the third floor, I'm taking flute lessons with Mox.

On the lake, five or six geese land; Monty follows Cynthia into the building, into the elevator. Monty's Plumbing and Heating, he says, there are times when the home plumbing system does not perform as it should. The elevator smells stale; its carpet is threadbare.

Mox is listening to Herbie Mann, *Muscle Shoals Nitty Gritty*: Cynthia dances the empty garbage can around the room, sings, I just met, a plumber, who loves, my act.

Mox, at the table, writes: *KEYS*. Cynthia hugs him from behind, reads: . . . *the touch-piece, the shank, the cover plate. This last is faced with a pad which, when in contact with its corresponding hole, forms an airtight seal.* She says, I told him I'm studying the flute. Her fingers reach down, across his belly: I think I need another lesson.

*Some keys open and some close their associated holes. Each key is named for the note sounded when pressed. In the case of a key which at rest is open, the key takes its name from the note given by the next lower open hole. In the case of a key which at rest is closed, this is named for the hole it actually covers.*

Cynthia lies on her belly, watching the lake; she finds the water peaceful. Mox has been practising far less than usual.

## THE PIT

In The Pit upstairs lounge, Frank draws Owen's attention to Cynthia's breasts as he orders a rum and coke. Owen shrugs and admits that he's slept with most of his strippers: But not with the customers, he continues, keep it in the family, that's my motto. Frank disagrees: That route leads to trouble. Owen gestures toward the door, Not when there's an exception to the rule. Frank turns in his chair.

Beth joins the men. She has on a white satin dress, cut very low. A fat man — a stranger, with a burnished nose, and a tattoo of a bug-hulled ship named *\$ALLY* on his right forearm — says: Whore, from the next table. He's ignored. Then: Whore, in a louder voice, his eyes on the dip of Beth's gown. Frank looks at Owen.

Carl, drinking alone in a corner, lunges across the stage, lands two punches, one into the fat man's neck, the other into the sponge belly. The table falls over; Beth screams. Owen signals to the bartender who, to the sound of splintering glass, propels the stranger from the room. At the door the man whispers, This place is a real brothel. The bartender replies, You can get a drink downstairs, tell the waiter you're Owen's guest.

Carl staggers into the washroom to be sick; Frank and Beth laugh uproariously; Frank takes note that her breasts compare favourably, at least in size, to Cynthia's. Owen looks tired as Mox begins the last set of the night. The bar becomes still; the dancer emerges, stealthily, from right stage.

Two blocks up Bargeld (he has decided against another drink), the stranger meets Mick, with whom he walks (after introducing himself as Owen's guest) for fifteen minutes, in silence. At Lisa's window, they stand together, watching. The window remains dark. When the stranger has left, Mick regards the garbage can, on which the fat man has been sitting, and says, quite distinctly, quite forlornly: Mr. Guest.

## WHORLS

Estelle takes her morning coffee to the desk, opens *The Republic* to Part Eleven, *THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL AND THE REWARDS OF GOODNESS*. The doorbell rings.

The man, dressed in green coveralls, smoking a small curved pipe, is about five feet tall. His face is worn, by weather or by skin disorder, to resemble a last year's rosehip.

G'morning, he says, I'm the Weed Inspector. It's my thankless job to check- Estelle interrupts, Oh, we have some quite interesting ones this year. I'm not, the inspector goes on, so much interested in your weeds, per se, as I am in some bloody long grass. He points to the back of the house where the grass, waist-high, sways.

It's a bylaw, the grass must be tended to. The weeds, you know, can spread. His hands make gentle dispersing motions, from his chest to the extent of his arms. When the weather gets drier, there's the danger of fire. He lights his pipe, shrugs, You'll have to cut it down. A lawnmower won't touch it; try a scythe, or a gas weed-eater. I'll be along next week to check up.

Slightly disturbed by the interruption, Estelle returns to her desk to read about *The Spindle of Necessity* which causes all the planets to orbit. According to Socrates, shaft and hook are of adamant, the whorl a mixture of adamant and other matter.

... a large whorl hollowed out, with a second fitting exactly into it, the second being hollowed out to hold a third, the third a fourth, and so on up to a total of eight, like a nest of bowls. . . . The first and outermost whorl had the broadest rim; next broadest was the sixth, next the fourth, next the eighth, next the seventh, next the fifth, next the third and last of all the second. And the rim of the largest and outermost was many-coloured, that of the

*seventh was the brightest, the eighth was illuminated by the seventh, from which it takes its colour, the second and fifth were similar to each other and yellower than the others, the third was the whitest, the fourth reddish and the sixth second in whiteness. The whole spindle revolved with a single motion, but within the movement of the whole the seven inner circles revolved slowly in the opposite direction to that of the whole, and of them the eighth moved fastest, and next fastest the seventh, sixth and fifth, which moved at the same speed; third in speed was the fourth, moving as it appeared to them with a counter-revolution; fourth was the third, and fifth the second. And the whole spindle turns in the lap of Necessity.*

In the newspaper, Estelle finds a small ad: LAWNMOWER NEEDS WORK. CUT ANY LENGTH GRASS. CALL LUKE -4274.