

WEDDING INVITATION

Lea's mailbox was jammed with circulars and what looked like a torn up envelope in a clear sandwich bag. It was apparently from the postal officials directly. Though torn and ripped, Lea could tell by its style and thickness that it was a wedding invitation, probably RSVP. She didn't recognize the returned address. The envelope had traveled to several of her earlier addresses before arriving at her home today. The first postmark was over seven weeks ago. Separating the ripped pieces carefully, Lea was happy she was already sitting down when she read the name of the groom - Mike Kurtz. It appeared to be a typical "second marriage for both" style invitation with no mention of parents or church. The bride was Alice Cummings. Lea was sure she knew no one by that name. She must have been invited by Mike Kurtz though to see his name on a wedding invitation was earth-shaking to her. Lea had been hot and heavy with Mike several years ago when he was inconveniently married to another woman. Lea had broken it off with Mike after it became clear to her that he couldn't or wouldn't get a divorce. It hurt a lot to drop him but she couldn't live half a life. The last time she spoke to him she told him to call her if he ever got a divorce. Mike was always good for promises. He promised he would get a divorce once he had a job and that he would call her. This wedding invitation was the next time she heard from him.

Even though Lea had promptly moved on with her social life, dating and living with different guys, she never got Mike completely out of her system. Although he was definitely an acquired taste, wherever she was or whatever she was doing, she found herself looking at an empty chair or even a well-filled chair, expecting some totally original comment or fact to cut through the bullshit or the superficiality. Such never

materialized. Somehow he became a little ghost in her mind. She had steeled herself against ever communicating with him or returning his crazy messages, packages, subscriptions, etc. for fear he would rope her back into his world. But this wedding invitation, real or phony, was truly inspired. She was sure she hadn't received any communications from him for three years. Lea could still not bear to see him but she needed to know about his divorce, who filed, when, why, etc. And why in the world would he invite her to his wedding. Mike was not a cruel person, senseless yes, but not mean. On the other hand, his imagination was truly staggering. She needed to know what was going on even if it cost her some heartache. She called for a pizza delivery to have something real to eat while she started making some phone calls. She remembered she had not ordered pizza delivered since the last time Mike sat on her living room floor teaching her gecko, Frank, to roll over or play dead to get "Cricket Treats".

The first step was to call his old cell phone number. It was disconnected. The wedding was scheduled for a week from tomorrow. The return address on the invitation was a post office box in Towson, Maryland.. The wedding was going to be in Towson, too. Directory assistance had no listings for Alice Cummings or Mike Kurtz in any of the likely area codes. Lea knew where Mike and his first wife lived four or five years ago. She considered driving up there, introducing herself to Mike's ex-wife and questioning her about his present whereabouts and matrimonial intentions. Even though she was a lawyer, Lee didn't believe she had the gumption to do that at eight o'clock on a Friday night, especially in view of the possibility that her name may have figured in their divorce. Lea did not make much progress on an Internet search either. However, she did find one quite remarkable fact about Mike. He was re-admitted to the practice of law a

little over a year ago. His work address was the Public Defender Society downtown. Lea knew she could find him there on Monday, if she would just be patient. She couldn't be that patient. She needed to get answers soon or she would start to go crazy. This was the effect that Mike had on her. In thirty minutes she had gone from placid and relaxed to a hyper nervous wreck. She decided to drive by Mike's last marital residence early tomorrow morning. When Lea fell asleep she felt exhausted by the pull of many emotions. Unbeknownst to her however, Frank the Gecko was vigilant, somehow sensing possible opportunities to get "Cricket Treats" for simple tricks.

As she lay in her queen size bed she could not turn off the pictures going through her brain like an old newsreel. It had to be the same Mike Kurtz. How many Mike Kurtz-Lea Newton emotional crashes could there have been in this metropolitan area in the last four years. She tried to consider how long it had been since she had seen him. A long time. And unlike the ordinary ex-boyfriend, Mike didn't just blow away like old leaves. He had kept up an endless written, phone, and email campaign trying to rekindle her interest. It was truly amazing. To hear him tell it, he valued her more than her own mother. He never intruded on her public life or embarrassed her at work or at the gym or restaurants. He just always reminded her, even after she was serious with another guy, that he thought she was great and he missed her. This went on for six or eight months, gradually dying. No, Lea recollected, for some reason, Mike's efforts didn't just peter out bit by bit. One day Lea to was looking through her mail and she realized she hadn't heard from him for several weeks. Laughably, she first wondered was whether he was OK. But she was glad he had given up because she knew their respective emotional problems were a prescription for disaster. When she heard from a girlfriend that Mike

was spotted on a date, Lea was happy for him, though the report that his date looked a lot like her was disquieting.

This whole situation would be easier to take if she were now dating someone with potential. But her last real date was over a year ago and he had moved across the country when she chatted him up about his future plans. She couldn't remember why she had been so negative about Mike. Of course, she recalled that Chuck, Mike's successor, had seemed a great improvement by comparison, especially because he was SINGLE!

Lea's office was just around the corner from the Public Defender's Office where Mike worked. It's amazing they didn't bang into each other weekly. Knowing how Mike did things at the last moment, Lea stopped at his office at 8:00, AM. She wasn't disappointed. Mike was working on a Motion with single-minded zeal. When Lea said, "Hello! Could I sit down?" He fixed her with his dispassionate light blue eyes making her uncomfortable with their searching stillness. "Yes, but I'm leaving for Court in a few minutes so I can't talk to you now. Great dress!" A friend had helped Lea pick out this dress when she bought it and again, last night, when she decided to wear it this morning. Lea knew she might have to ditch Mike again but she wanted to be certain he noticed and remembered her. After ten minutes of watching him edit and re-edit the Motion, Lea realized that she was no longer uncomfortable. Lea thought she could probably watch him all morning. The psychological energy that he was putting into his Motion was almost some kind of quiet lightning. Mike was not sitting, he was standing at a tall desk with a slanted top, the kind you might see in pictures of old law offices. A secretary came to his door and he said, "I know, I know", she left with his draft. She

was gone for about four or five minutes. Mike just looked at Lea, not in a hostile sense, not in a pleasant sense. It seemed like he was trying to remember who she was. Lea felt that he was taking possession of her one atom at time or by the millions or billions. When the secretary came back, Lea didn't feel like she was a separate person any more. She felt that she was now part of him. Lea couldn't wait to see what this guy could do in a courtroom. Lea had only known Mike when he was unemployed or misemployed and trying to get used to the cupfuls of medications prescribed for him. Without comment he took the papers from the secretary, pick up his briefcase, and strode out of the tiny office. Lea rushed to catch up. "If this is the difference between him being married and being single, we might just have to live together," thought Lea.

As they dropped quickly in the elevator, Lea said to herself this guy is marrying someone else in five days. She almost got sick. Her expectation was that the walk to the Courthouse would allow some conversation. This was a mistake. Mike's pace was too fast for Lea. Twenty feet out of his building and she was so winded she just hoped she didn't lose him in the crowd. Lea remembered him as someone who always strolled. What had happened to him. He seemed as serious as the color black. The traffic light by the Courthouse caught them both so she had a chance to talk to him. "No small talk," she thought, "I'm taking my shot." "What is Alice like?" she asked. With a machinegun-like response, Tom said "Thirty-seven, divorced three years, two teenage sons, nurse, drives a Corolla, speaks Italian, good health." "That didn't leave many holes," Lea thought. "How about you, Mike?" said Lea. "When did you get your license back?" asked Lea. "I got a big bequest about eighteen months ago which allowed me to square my debt with the state bar. Then I spent nine months as a supervised legal assistant, and now I'm a

forty year old junior attorney at the Public Defender's Office," said Mike. "But I love it." "How about you?" Mike asked Lea. Before Lea could make a peep, Mike continued, "Same field, corporate attorney for Weavers Bank? Have you gotten married yet?" asked Mike. "No, No." stuttered Lee. "What about Chuck, I thought he was a keeper?" said Mike. "We would have both had to change too much. I'm surprised you remember his name," said Lea. "Memory's a funny thing," said Mike. "You forget what you're not paying attention to but you remember what you're trying to forget." Lea stared at his profile as they walked. She considered pinching herself.

"Why didn't you call me after you got divorced, you promised that you would," asked Lea. "I didn't get divorced," Mike said. Instantly, Lea was on guard. How could that be, she thought, he's getting married in a week. "My wife died in a plane crash about three years ago. She was scheduled on an airline that shut down service one night because of bad weather. Another lawyer offered her a ride in his private plane and when it went down, all aboard were lost," said Mike. "The crash occurred about the time I stopped spitballing you." "I'm so sorry for your loss, Mike, and for not being there for you somehow," said Lea. "I was too guilt-ridden to benefit from her death in any way," said Mike, "to do anything emotional for a long time."

"Why did you invite me to the wedding?" asked Lea. "I didn't," said Mike. "Alice has a big family and they were all going to be at the hotel wedding," said Mike. She felt we should invite as many people as possible from my side since I have so few relatives and friends," said Mike. "Alice just copied down names from my address book. She just thought you were an attorney I knew from work."

There were several sidelong glances each of the other while they marched to

Courthouse, all of indeterminate intent. As they approached the Courthouse, Lea realized that this was the perspective of the Philadelphia City Hall birdhouse Mike had made for her years ago. For some reason birds loved that grey hulk, it was the first one claimed each Spring. Without meaning to, Lea started to step off the curb into the path of a large bus. Mike pulled her back saying he didn't want to lose her to SEPTA. After security checks, they rode up to the fourth floor, with no further conversation, Mike handed his Motion to a court official and told Lea she was welcome to stay for the trial. Then he ignored her. She learned that the case was held over from Friday. Mike's client was a dangerous looking young man who was accused of killing his girlfriend for being unfaithful. Lea silently noted the irony.

The Mike that Lea remembered was no where to be seen in the courtroom. The new Mike was sarcastic, belittling, intimidating, narrow, pompous, arrogant, in short, a perfect defense attorney. She was astonished at the transformation. She would not have believed it to be possible if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. By the time the Judge called for a fifteen minute recess, Lea understood the reasons and the emotions which had dictated that Mike not try to re-ignite their affair, despite their genuine affection for each other. Their eyes met for only an instant as she rose to leave the courtroom and Mike leaned across the defense table. In that moment, Lea knew that she wouldn't attend the wedding, that she would never date Mike again and that this was the worst possible outcome for the best possible reasons. Twenty feet down the corridor, Lea turned to wait to talk to Mike, substantively, to make sure that "no tern was unstoned", as he used to say. A bulky deputy barred her way at the door. "You can't go back once you leave," he said. The set of his jaw brooked no exceptions. Lea said, "Is

this a new security rule?”. “No,” he said, “it’s always been the rule.”

Lea left the Courthouse to go to the coffee shop across the street. As she got to the curb she realized that she had left her pocketbook in the courtroom, with all of her money and identification. She felt really aggravated. She spun on her heel to go back to the Courthouse. She lost her balance and fell off the curb and into the path of a bike messenger going full tilt to beat the traffic light. He couldn’t stop and he hit her solidly. Lea was thrown to the ground. She hit her head on the curb. She was knocked unconscious. Fortunately, several EMTs were just emerging from the coffee shop and they responded immediately. They had Lea stabilized and at the nearest hospital ER in less than six minutes. Because she had no ID and was unconscious, Lea was listed as Jane Doe 2. In addition to being unconscious, she apparently had a broken left ankle plus several cuts and bruises, and a serious puncture of her abdomen from a handlebar. She had a lawyer’s card (Mike’s) clenched in her right hand. Several of the hospital staff thought that this was humorous, admiring the lawyer’s prescience. The nurse who bagged Lea’s personal effects noted that the jewelry was expensive. Another nurse said it was a shame to cut Lea’s beautiful light blue dress.

It was 2:15, PM, before a hospital social worker reached Mike’s cell phone to tell him what had happened to Lea and to ask who she was. Lea was still unconscious. All Mike really knew were her name, employer, and an old address. He also remembered her blood type from a long ago conversation. His case was still in recess waiting for an incarcerated witness to be brought up. By 3:00, PM, it was clear that this witness was not coming, either because of food-poisoning or lead-poisoning, so the Judge continued the case until the next day. As Mike was leaving, the bailiff gave Lea’s pocketbook to him,

saying “This belongs to your girlfriend”. He also mentioned that she was teary-eyed when she left. Tom wondered whether Lea had identified herself as his girlfriend, whether the bailiff had just misunderstood or perhaps understood better.

As he hurried to the hospital Mike recalled that Lea didn’t have much family, only a brother who was on a long term research project in New Guinea. He called Lea’s bank to learn if anyone there knew who her emergency contact was. Lea’s secretary, Belle, called him back quickly. She said several names were crossed out but that the last one was “Mike Kurtz”. Mike was astonished. Why would she name him and when had she done it? Belle couldn’t say.

Lea was still unconscious in the ER when Mike arrived. The medical resident assumed that Mike was Lea’s husband and launched into a convoluted discussion of her symptoms and short term prognosis. Mike couldn’t easily understand the doctor because he was ESL. But Mike understood that her condition was serious and that action would be taken as soon as the test results returned or sooner if the indicators went south. As he stared at her lying so peacefully in the bed, he remembered the only night he had slept over at her apartment. That next morning he had just watched her while she slept, amazed at how innocent and girlish she looked. Now, Lea still looked that way, though pale as well.

An older nurse came by Lea’s bed to check some equipment and she remarked how lucky Lea was. “How do you mean,” said Mike. “You know, the handlebar injury revealing her cancerous ovary, “ said the nurse. Mike was stunned. Here, Lea had walked back into his life as if out of a dream and now a nightmare arose between them. Mike searched the floor for the ER doctor to learn what could be done and when. He

saw the doctor among several other medical people headed for Lea's bed. "Mr. Newton, your wife needs immediate surgery to remove her cancerous left ovary and exploratory surgery to learn if the cancer has spread," the doctor said. "What else," said Mike. "If we caught it, she'll be free and clear, if not radiation and chemotherapy might protect her," said the doctor. At that moment Lea began to regain consciousness. The orderlies were moving to wheel Lea away and Mike asked them for a minute to talk to her. Mike compressed the facts into a nutshell and held Lea's hands tightly while she absorbed the import. "I'll wait for you. In your room," Mike said.

"What about Alice," asked Lea. "We broke off the engagement a month ago. She needs to move upstate for her kids' sake. I felt it wouldn't work for us there," said Mike. "We notified all of the wedding guests by phone or email. I didn't even know you were on the guest list until after we cancelled the wedding. I was supposed to call you but I never had the strength to do it," said Mike.

Mike sat in the surgical waiting room thinking about what had happened to Lea. He couldn't help comparing Lea and his late wife. While it was true his wife had died in a plane crash in Arizona, that wasn't the whole story. Shortly after he had returned to their home from taking her to the airport, Mike listened to a new message on their answering machine. It was from a Dr. Mayhall of Oncologic Associates. Though he listened to this message five times, he had it to memory after the first. "Mrs. Kurtz, it is absolutely essential that you begin chemotherapy at once if there is to be any chance for you to survive even six months. Please, contact my office immediately so you can begin these treatments," said Dr. Mayhall. She had told Mike she was visiting her father in Arizona to encourage him with his medical treatments. Mike didn't call her in Arizona,

more for his feelings than hers. He decided to wait until he drove her back from the airport to talk about her medical condition and treatment. They never spoke again.

“I got another chance,” thought Mike. “I can be there for Lea. I can make up for...”. Mike imagined how he would guard Lea’s health and, despite his generally pessimistic outlook, how he would propose to her at the first opportunity. And, if she wanted, he’d volunteer to help her use her remaining ovary. Seeing the doctor walking toward him, Mike braced himself for news of Lea. He stood to receive the verdict.

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