

Shadowgraph

Community Outreach

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INSIDERS

Nancy Bourne

THE INTENT FOR LOVE

She didn't like it, the way they laughed at him. The way they whistled "Simple Simon met a pie man" when they saw him coming. They were bruisers, most of them, heavy on their feet. Like the inmates they bullied. Of course they were also her pals, her co-workers. And they were harmless, really. Just beefy guys kidding around. But she didn't find it funny.

She knew what they meant, of course. His name was Simon and he did look a little like the illustration in the Mother Goose book. It was the hair. It angled out from a center part in a straight line on both sides of his head, rather like a haystack. But could he help it that his hair was so straight and fine and, really, lifeless that it wouldn't conform to his skull? He *could* do something about the bangs, which hung in wisps over his forehead. He could, but he didn't. And why should he? It's *his* hair. Live and let live.

Maybe the chemicals had something to do with it. They smelled pretty strong coming out of the dry cleaning shop. That's where he taught. She figured chemicals that smelled as foul as that could take all the life out of your hair, although she'd never noticed this phenomenon in dry cleaning establishments on the outside.

But it wasn't just his hair. It was his rimless glasses and the way he walked through the yard, chin in the air, arms swinging from the shoulders, smiling. He seemed oblivious of the inmates in their orange jumpsuits, some hand-cuffed, some squatting over outdoor toilets. (She hated that, always avoided looking in that direction.) He didn't seem to see any of it, but breezed along the ground on invisible skates, his mouth curved in a perpetual smile. The officers imitated him behind his back, sliding their feet along the ground, swinging their arms, grinning like jackasses. She felt sorry for him. And yet, why? He didn't seem unhappy. Just the opposite. And the men learning the dry cleaning trade, his inmate students, didn't complain.

He stopped now. "Well, hello," he said. His voice was pitched higher than most men's and went up at the end, like he was asking a question.

"Hello, Simon," she said. And then, "Well, have a good day." And she smiled.

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She seems interested, he told himself. Definitely interested. She always smiles and says hello. I need to strike while the iron is hot. But he had no idea how. What did the books say? *The Intent For Love*. *Tracking the Right Partner*. *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. *101 Ways to Find Love*. He'd have to do more research.

Her name was L. Winters; he knew that from her nametag. L. Louise? Laura? Linda? Lee? He liked all those names. And he liked her blond hair, which hung in a ponytail out the back of her officer's cap. She was a big woman; her arms packed the sleeves of her uniform; her thighs filled out the tops of her trousers. He didn't mind. She had a lovely smile. And she was interested. He was pretty sure of it.

Sailing across the ball field and ducking behind the machine shop, he pulled from his pocket a heavy chain of keys. The laundry, where he taught, was a beat up white frame building in bad need of a coat of paint. He signed in at the desk without acknowledging the scowling officer presiding there. The dry cleaning room was empty. He liked it here, in this room. Liked the order, the identical olive-green wool coats lined up in plastic bags, hanging from the metal rack, the large gray machines, silent for now, the steam pressers.

He was a good teacher, he was sure of it. And it was more interesting than running a dry cleaning business on the outside. He'd done that for ten years or more and made a decent living.

But he'd always dreamed of being a teacher, so when he'd seen the prison job advertised, he thought, well why not. He liked the idea of giving the inmates a way to earn a living when they paroled. So in most ways his life was ideal. He just hadn't met the right woman. But he knew she was out there. He just had to be patient and concentrate on his intent. The books all talked about that. A man finds love only when he intends to find it. He'd lacked that intention while he was so busy running his business. But now he was ready. Thirty years old and ready for love.

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She had this ticket. It was a birthday present from her brother, a ticket to a Giants game. Just one ticket. So typical. It's what he would want for his birthday, her brother, Dale. It never occurred to him to ask her what *she* wanted, or even if she liked baseball, which she didn't. Why didn't he know that? But, he had remembered her birthday. Give him credit for that.

Anyway, she wasn't going to ruin a Saturday afternoon sitting in the sun by herself watching a ballgame. On her way to the cafeteria, ticket in her pocket, she saw Simon walking toward her, chin in the air, whistling, swinging his arms. Not far behind him, Barney Knute, the knucklehead, was mimicking him, exaggerating the sway of his head, the bounce in his step. Simon walked on, oblivious.

Without knowing what she was about to do, Laura came to an abrupt stop right in front of Simon.

"Would you like a ticket to the Giants' game on Saturday?" she blurted out.

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He never would have imagined it, never for a minute, but there she was, L. Winters, offering him a ticket to a baseball game.

"Do you have an extra one?" he had asked, not quite sure what she was offering, not at all interested in sporting events.

"I have *one*," she said. "Just one. Do you want it?"

And then he understood. Only one and she was giving it to him.

"Yes, yes," he stuttered. "Thank you."

"There's one condition."

"Of course." He smiled broadly.

"You have to tell me about it. You know, who won, whether there were any homeruns, that kind of thing."

He blushed. Not only a gift from the lovely L. Winters, but she wanted more. She wanted future contact.

"Oh, absolutely," he said. "I'll give you a full report." And to cover his confused delight, he took an envelope from his pocket and carefully stowed the ticket inside.

"Saturday," he said. "I'll be there. You're very kind." He wanted to say more, to ask her why she wasn't using the ticket herself, perhaps to ask her to have lunch with him. But she rushed off. Overcome by her own boldness, he thought.

He turned abruptly around, intending to follow her, and bumped headlong into Officer Knute.

"What she give you?" the officer asked.

"A ticket to the Giants game." He tried not to sound too pleased with himself.

"Well, I'll be god-damned."

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It hadn't been her intention to give Simon the ticket, it had just happened. But she felt good about it. She figured he didn't get out much. He certainly looked as if he didn't have a social life, with that god-awful haircut and the white cotton shirts buttoned to the collar. Do him good to sit in the sun with a bunch of regular folks and see some baseball.

It never occurred to her to wonder if he liked ball games. Men just did, at least the ones she knew. Her ex sure did! That's all he ever talked about. Buster Posey, Pablo Sandoval, homeruns and RBIs, then the silence at dinner, followed by an hour or so of shouting at the TV. She figured all men were like that. So she put up with it. Until that night she caught him with that waitress from Denny's. That was it. She was finished. Not forever, of course. She wanted a family, wanted children. But not yet. She was only twenty-seven. She had her dog. She had time.

The next Monday she dropped by his shop during his break to find out how it went. She wanted enough information to thank Dale properly. He jumped up from his desk when she walked in, his eyes practically closed from the sheer energy of his smile.

He does look like Simple Simon, she thought. Poor sucker.

"Thank you!" he beamed. "The game was . . . very lively."

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It had been deadly, of course, just as he'd expected. Sitting in the stands with all those noisy men, women too, yelling obscenities, jumping up and down, knocking into him, sloshing their beer onto his clean trousers. He kept jumping up and cheering at the wrong time, when the other team (which one was it?) hit the ball. He left before it was over.

But he had done it, braved the ordeal, because he knew this was his big chance. L. Winters had made the first move. It was his job to follow up, to grab the initiative. And he was primed.

Capture her interest with stimulating conversation. That's what the books said. *Begin with a subject you know something about, preferably something in which you excel.*

Gardening. That was the thing. Women love flowers, and he was an expert. But how to turn a ballgame into roses. He'd think of something.

But she was asking, "Who won?"

"The Giants, of course." He knew that much from all the shouting.

"Were there any homeruns?"

"I don't think so." He was already regretting his early departure.

"Don't you know?"

"I didn't see any."

"What was the score?"

"Let's see. I wrote it down, but I must have left it at home."

"Are you sure you went to the game?"

This wasn't going well. He had to change tactics quick or he'd lose the initiative. Suddenly he had it. "I kept notes," he said. "In my book. My gardening book."

"Gardening book?" she asked. "You're a gardener?"

It had worked.

"Yes. A passionate gardener." He blushed at the word passionate. "I'm partial to roses." His cheeks felt bright red.

"Really?"

"Would you like to see them?" He'd done it. He'd taken the leap.

"See what?"

"My roses."

"Maybe, sometime," she said, opening the shop door, inhaling the fresh air.

"How about this Sunday?"

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You'd need to smell roses after this place, she thought, glancing back into the room at the large machines. The sharp smell of cleaning fluid was giving her a headache. She needed air.

She didn't want to go to this man's house any more than she wanted to go to a baseball game. Especially to see roses, which always smelled to her like too much perfume. So she was on the verge of saying no. Politely, of course; she wouldn't hurt his feelings. But before she could speak, she saw two of her comrades, bouncing along, swinging their arms, grinning like maniacs.

She'd always hated it when people made fun. She'd start feeling the hurt herself. And so she turned back to Simon and said, "OK. Thanks. But just for a minute, you know. To look at the roses."

"Make it 3:00 o'clock?"

She nodded, and without another word, she walked out into the blinding sunlight.

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I was right! he told himself as he bounded about the shop, turning on machines, turning them off, picking up papers, putting them down. She's interested. I knew it! All I had to do was take charge of the conversation. She was ready. He could hardly wait to get home that night and start preparing. This was big.

"The first time she comes to your home, you must be prepared," he read in *The Intent For Love*. "Your home should feel welcoming, gracious. And of course it must be clean. Nothing discourages love quite so completely as cobwebs and dust."

No problem there. Cleaning was his business. His house was spotless. He looked around the living room, his confidence growing. Welcoming? Gracious? If that's what it took, he was on the road to love. It was a small house, three bedrooms, two baths. Paid for with profits from his laundry business. But the living room was a happy place, full of color, reds and oranges and yellows on the curtains, the sofa, the pillows. There were books and house plants and a framed Cezanne print.

He tried to picture L. Winters in the red and yellow plaid armchair. He saw her blond ponytail. Sticking out the back of her officer's cap? No. She'd probably wear it down on weekends. And what would she be wearing? He tried to imagine her in anything other than the khaki uniform. A dress maybe, or more likely a nice blouse and sharply pressed pants. He could see her sitting there, her full-fleshed arms resting on his chair. In his living room.

He continued his research. "Too many would-be lovers pack their lives so full they leave no space for love," he read. "If you have the true intent for love, you must make room for the other person." Simon looked around his gracious, welcoming, dust free living room and panicked.

Too many things. Luckily he had time.

On Saturday, up early, he tackled the living room first. Standing on a stepladder, he pulled books by the handful from the shelves.

A French dictionary, three books on how to eat healthy food, five fat gardening books, a well thumbed copy of "How To Win Friends and Influence People," "Lady Chatterley's Lover" (what would L. Winters think of that trash?), five Asian cook books. When he had finished, each shelf of his bookcase was at least a quarter empty. He carefully bagged his discards and drove them to the local library.

"On to the bedroom."

Simon was a fastidious dresser, the result of a lifetime of handling and admiring the expensively tailored garments of stylish customers. But he never bothered to throw anything away. God forbid she should catch a glimpse of that closet on the way to the bathroom, he thought. He plunged into the clutter, tossing shirts, trousers, shoes, hats, jackets into piles on the floor and spent the rest of the afternoon carrying trunk loads of his cast-offs to Good Will.

"If you have the true intent for love, you must make room for the other person," he chanted as he flipped open his bedroom drawers and gazed into the half empty closet.

If not L. Winters, he said to himself, then surely someone. I've opened my space to love. I have the intent.

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Why on earth did I agree? she asked herself as she washed her face and pulled her hair into an untidy pony tail that Sunday afternoon. She had spent the morning with Tombo at the dog park. Still a puppy, he absolutely shook with excitement every time they got near the park. He chased the other dogs and yelped and ran after the ball she threw him. She'd always had dogs. But this black lab, Tombo, was the most satisfactory dog she'd ever owned.

When she returned from the park, she needed a shower. But it was already 2:30 in the afternoon, and the drive to Simon's place would take a half hour. Jeans and the gray sweatshirt would have to do.

Maybe he wasn't serious, she thought, though he had drawn a map. Maybe he was just being polite. And then I'll show up and he'll be embarrassed and he'll have to show me his garden. It sounded grim.

Maybe I should phone, she told herself. But she didn't want to, felt it would be awkward. He did invite me, she reminded herself. It's what comes from feeling sorry for somebody.

The house surprised her. What had she expected? A little white cottage with a picket fence, straight out of Mother Goose. It wasn't like that at all. Lavender bushes and a ground cover of periwinkle surrounded a small redwood house. And wasn't that a lemon tree in the front yard? It all smelled delicious.

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Oh my god, Simon thought as he opened the door to a woman in a sweatshirt and slicked-back pony tail. He pasted a smile on his face.

"I should have changed," she blurted out.

"Welcome," he said. His voice went up a pitch at the end as usual.

"It's the dog," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?"

"I have this dog and I took him to the park and it was late and I didn't have chance to . . ." She stopped.

"I'm sorry."

"Won't you come in?" he said, looking past her, trying to pretend that this plump woman in gray drab was the L. Winters for whom he had so carefully prepared. He squared his shoulders and led her through the front door into a sunny inner courtyard. Roses everywhere, each bush different. The colors flowed in a circular pattern from dead white to pink to a creamy peach color to orange-red and finally to a red so dark it was almost black, then, abruptly, back to white. He breathed in the smell he loved so much. Not cloying or too sweet, more like fruit, like very fresh peaches.

"My god," she said. "I didn't . . . I never saw . . . You did all this yourself?"

There it was, just as he had hoped. L. Winters rendered speechless by the color and aroma he had created. He did his best to savour the moment. After all, why should clothes matter? But for all his trying, the moment felt flat.

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So this must be what he means by passion, Laura thought. When he had used the word at the prison, it had embarrassed her, but here in the middle of all these roses, it struck her as just right. And because it was just the right word, she found herself really looking at him, at Simon, as he stood there in his crisp white trousers and bright blue cotton shirt. (Why hadn't she taken the time to change?) He still had that dopey, expectant look in his eyes and his hair still angled out from his scalp, straight and thin. But something was different. She didn't feel sorry for him.

"Could I offer you a glass of cold lemonade?" he asked.

"If it's no trouble," she said and followed him into the house.

Inside, the house was as colourful as the garden. She'd never paid much attention to fixing up a house, even during her brief, dull marriage. When later she'd taken the prison job, she'd found an apartment nearby, in one of those wood frame complexes that clutter American suburbia. One place was as good as another in her mind. She'd made a couple of trips to Ikea to supplement her few furnishings, cheap and not too ugly. But there was no color. The wood was blond, the sofa and bedspread were brown. There were no curtains, just shades. This living room sort of glowed. It made you want to stay. And there were pictures on the wall. She had a few family photos on the kitchen shelves at her place, but the walls were bare.

"You've done a bang-up job here, Simon," she said, settling into the deep red and yellow chair, clutching the arms with her large hands, the folds of her sweatshirt drooping over the sides.

"Why, thank you," he replied, as he placed a plate of brownies on the glass-top coffee table in front of her. "Please have one."

They were good, the brownies, moist and buttery in the center and not too sweet, with lots of pecans, and powdered sugar on top.

"These may be the best brownies I ever ate," she said.

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But he wasn't thinking about brownies. He was staring at the dog hairs, drifting from Laura's sweatshirt onto the arms of the chair, down to the carpet.

"Yum," she said, scattering crumbs as she took a second brownie from the plate. "What's the brand?"

"Brand?"

"You know, on the box?"

"Oh, I see. No, they're from scratch."

"Oh." She looked around. "You're not married, are you?"

He blushed. Now we're getting to it, he thought. "No," he said. "The right woman hasn't come along." He blushed even deeper.

"Your mom, then?"

He frowned. "What about her?"

"She made the brownies?" She helped herself to a third one. Without thinking, Simon thrust the plate under her brownie to catch the crumbs.

"I made them."

"No kidding," she said. "A real gourmet. A man who can cook. Now that's a new one on me."

They sat in silence while she chewed.

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"You must be quite a reader," Laura finally said. She'd never been in a house with so many books, had never known anyone who spent much time reading. She bought magazines from time to time, but there were really no books in her apartment. "What's your favourite?"

She leaned forward, full of curiosity, watching his face. She wanted to know what kinds of books a man who taught dry cleaning in a prison liked to read. He was full of surprises.

He hesitated. "I like biography. You know, I like to read about famous people, heroes, people who've accomplished something with their lives."

"Like Lincoln?"

"Sure. Him. And others. People like Martin Luther King and heroes back in history, like Queen Elizabeth. The first one." As he talked, the pitch of his voice went higher. He sounded excited and she didn't know what to say.

"Martin Luther King?" she finally said. "That's awesome."

"Do you like to read?" he asked.

"I like a good murder mystery," she said.

Simon smiled politely. "Maybe you'd like to borrow something?" He pointed to the shelves.

"I don't know where I'd start," she laughed.

She looked over at him, expecting some response, but he was staring at the shelves and his smile had faded.

"How'd you end up in dry cleaning?" she asked.

He told her about the business he had inherited from his father.

"It was okay," he said. "It gave me a chance to meet the public, you know. I'd look at all those silk shirts and suits and dresses they brought in and I'd imagine them, out in the world, creating a good impression at business meetings, livening up cocktail parties."

"You don't say," she said, smiling up at him.

"A family from Vietnam now runs it, a man and his daughters. Hard workers. But I still own it. So I take the profits and get to do what I love. Teach." For the first time that afternoon, his face began to glow. He told her he loved to demonstrate to his students how to remove stubborn spots, how to operate the pant presser without scorching the fabric.

"People think I'm courageous and good-hearted. 'Aren't you the kind one,' they say, 'giving those men a second chance in life!'" He blushed. "I feel like it gives me a certain stature," he said, looking into her face for the first time all afternoon, "Do you know what I mean?"

Laura nodded even though she had no idea what he was talking about.

"People ask me if I'm afraid," he said. "I tell them there's nothing to be afraid of. The inmates are just men, like you and me."

"Maybe in the dry cleaning shop," she said. "But remember, there's the killers in that prison. You just don't see them. But I do. My mom and dad thought I was nuts applying to be a prison guard, said it was a man's job and dangerous. Which it is. Course when they learned about the benefits and the pay, I never heard another peep out of either of 'em."

Simon smiled politely and stared at his hands, which were folded in a pale lump in his lap.

"Well, I came to see the roses, Simon," Laura said, finally. "So maybe another look before I leave?"

He jumped up and led the way out to the garden. She followed behind, reading aloud from handsome hand-made signs the names of each variety.

"Crimson Glory, Sunset Jubilee, Irish Gold. They fit, don't they?" she said. "The names and the roses. I bet they're a world of trouble to grow."

Simon was too busy pulling off dead blossoms and inspecting for insects to respond.

"I wouldn't have the patience," she said. "I guess you have to have the passion, like you said."

"It makes a difference," Simon said, nodding.

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That night Laura couldn't sleep, which wasn't like her. Her mind wouldn't relax. It kept running off in different directions. Something had happened and she didn't understand it.

"One thing's sure," she said aloud in the darkness. "Simple Simon isn't simple."

She had accepted his invitation to be kind, because she was a kind person. But the house and the roses with the beautiful names and all those books had thrown her. He read books and he knew about all kinds of things, like art and fixing up a house and flowers, of course, and history. It should have made her feel small, stupid even. But she didn't. She felt wired. That was the best word she had for it. Too wired to sleep.

She told herself she'd drop by the dry cleaning shop tomorrow. She'd thank him for the afternoon. Maybe he'd suggest they go for coffee sometime. Or even dinner. The guys would laugh, of course. Well, let 'em. What did they know?

After she left, Simon sat motionless on the rust-colored sofa, frowning at the bookcase. All those empty spaces. What had he expected? That just any woman he happened to pick, someone like L. Winters, for instance, would be the right one, a woman who would fill his shelves with books, would fill his house, this treasured house, with new life, with love?

He roused himself grimly and began to attack the living room carpet and armchair with his vacuum cleaner. With a damp cloth, he scrubbed the arms of the chair for fingerprint smudges that didn't exist, trying to erase from his memory the gray sweatshirt, the dog named Tombo, the crushing defeat of his afternoon.

Exhausted, he reheated some leftover curried chicken in the microwave and ate it at the kitchen table, a new biography of Roosevelt propped up next to his plate. But he couldn't concentrate, and long after he had finished the chicken, he sat at the table, motionless, staring through rimless glasses into the courtyard, his shoulders drooping, his hands, small, manicured, defenseless, folded together in his lap.

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INSIDERS

INSIDERS – Spring 2015

Featuring the Arizona State Prison Complex

Welcome to the INSIDERS, featuring writing by inmates, essays and interviews with people who work in the prison system, and, in each issue, a piece by a professional writer on a prison theme. In this issue that author is:

Nancy Boume, with her story *The Intent for Love*.
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