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Kenneth B. Platnick

A DREAM IS A DREAM IS

I thought it was going to rain soon, just by the way the clouds were, although I hadn't looked up at all the whole time. I just knew it was going to rain. Everything had a kind of gray cast to it; all the buildings seemed dull and dreary, all the people seemed dull and dreary—until I saw her, anyway, and I probably wouldn't have noticed her if it hadn't been so windy. She was swaying in the wind, and I could tell that her skirt was going to blow above her any minute. I said to myself, "Now there's a girl whose skirt is going to blow sky high," and I watched closely to see. People all around me were pushing and shoving along the sidewalk, some stepping into the street's gutter to pass by the rest of us. And one old man was shuffling forward alongside me, his eyes glued to the watch on his upraised arm. He kept looking at the watch as if it were a television set or a movie screen or something and moving along beside me. I had to push his elbow down a little, because it kept getting in my ear every now and then and it hurt. Most of the other people just walked and stumbled ahead with their faces raised up high. I thought maybe something was happening there atop the Time & Life Building that I, too, ought to see, but I didn't look up with them. Still, I knew it was going to rain, because it was very gray and windy out. It was so windy out that it caused her skirt to blow sky high. All of a sudden, it just lifted into the air, raising the hem above the top of her head, and left only her long legs and her nylon-coated rump to view. And I stood behind her watching closely and pushing aside the old man's elbow. And all the other people went along with their heads in the air and pretended not to notice—or else couldn't take the time to notice because they were already late for

work. She was probably late for work, too, but she stopped anyway and fought with the blue skirt and finally brought it down. She was crying. I thought, at first, it was only the wind in her eyes; but I saw her cover the side of her face with one hand, holding the loose garment still with the other, and wait for everyone to pass her by as she blinked away the tears. And then she walked across the sidewalk and sat down on the curb and put her head in her hands; and I could see her body vibrating spasmodically and decided to comfort her. She was glad I'd come. I sat down beside her and told her not to worry, that it happened to lots of girls, which caused her suddenly to burst into a furious fit of laughter.

She laughed and laughed so hard that the tears began to drip along her rouged cheek. "Martha," I said, "the waiter wants to take your order." But she wouldn't stop laughing—or couldn't—so I waved the waiter away and told him we'd order in a minute. He didn't seem too pleased and must have thought we were surely a little insane. And, still, Martha was laughing. "At least," I suggested, "tell me what it is that's so funny," but she only answered that I'd never underst . . . and broke into another fit. I asked her to excuse me while I went to the men's room, which only provoked further manifestations of amusement, and left the table to go downstairs. It was terribly embarrassing, her being such a close friend of my wife and all, and I wanted badly to escape any possible scene. I was glad for the least excuse. I was gladder still when on the stairs I chanced to meet an old friend from college whom I hadn't seen for a number of years. He was married now, he said, with three children to his credit; in fact, that was what he was doing at Penn Station in the first place, because his family had been away in the country for a few weeks and he had come down to meet them on their return. I told him I always had thought he was a nice, considerate guy, and he smiled back at me from under his crew-cut scalp. He thought I was a nice guy, too, and then his wife and kids arrived and there was a lot of hugging and kissing; and I was holding the baby, a cute little child with blue eyes and greenish hair. When, after a short while, I put the little girl down, I told Claire what a lovely baby she had and that I did wish she might have brought her along—anyway, wouldn't she like a drink? She said she'd love one, that it was such a wonderful party and parties were such drags without drinks. I agreed that it was a good party and went over to the piano player to ask for a couple of sloe gin fizzes and came back to Claire to say that Harry was out of town for the weekend but I'd be

happy to take a message. She said that he was her husband, after all, and that she'd prefer to speak to him on her own—and would, too, as soon as he'd got the kids back from camp. So we sat on the thickly carpeted floor together, and she pulled her dress back along her thighs, and we talked endlessly about what truly beautiful legs she had. Which was what, she informed me, everyone had always told her, that she had beautiful legs, and she was awfully proud of them and tried very hard to keep them in as good condition as possible just so everyone might continue to enjoy them. And I told her I thought she was a really admirable person.

But it made no difference to her. She continued to insist that I must sign a registration "roll" before she could deal with me further. Once more I explained that I wanted only to look at a single book, not even to borrow it or use it outside the reference room, and once more she explained to me the procedure the library had followed for sixty-seven years. First there was the registration "roll," to be signed in octuplicate twice; then the questionnaire designed to determine my mental qualifications for reading books and magazines and my emotional capacity to bear the challenge; then the physical-fitness examination, not to be taken on the same day as the mental-emotional testing of the questionnaire and to be arranged for at least one week in advance but never later than the twentieth of the month and never earlier than the fifteenth, except when a national holiday falls on either date; meanwhile, personal references would be checked out as to the essential integrity and honesty of the applicant; and, finally, the Board of Governors would meet to pass on my application on the basis of the aforementioned. Then, and only then, in the event that I proved card-worthy, would I be entitled to access to the library's shelves. (Of course, I would still not be allowed to borrow books until the end of my probationary year's membership.)

"Kiss me," said the librarian, her stiff brown hair jiggling about like a sprung coil. And she began to laugh loudly. I looked around to see if anyone were watching us. There was only one other person standing, and she about four or five straps down, a woman in her mid-thirties and as unmarried-looking as they come. Her head was half-buried in a pocket-size novel with the picture of a naked girl sprinkled with blood on the cover. Everyone else was seated, and only a few looked up long enough to locate the source of the commotion, then went back to their chatting and sleeping. But the standing lady did

not look up. The librarian quit laughing. And the train pulled into the Junction Boulevard station. The doors opened and closed almost simultaneously, and we were on our way again. I looked out the window at all the dirty buildings, wondering how much longer it would take to reach Times Square. Then the thirties-year-old woman down the car threw back her head in quick alarm, holding her forearm out at me sideways and shrieking, "Get away from me!" It occurred to me that she perhaps read too many pocket-size novels with naked corpses on the covers. It also occurred to me that everyone nearby was glaring at me with open hostility and that two men were actually moving down the aisle toward me. Big men. I turned and ran through the next car and into the next, bumping into a uniformed policeman on the way.

"Let's see your papers," he said. I handed him my *Times* and *News* quickly. He threw them on the floor and began shouting.

"Okay, wise guy, now let's see your papers."

"What papers?"

"Don't be funny with me, buddy, or I'll. . . ."

I tried to explain to him that we didn't carry papers in this country, but he wouldn't understand and only accused me of trying to tell him his job. I apologized for my impertinence at the first realization of his grip on the shoulder of my jacket. Fortunately, he found me too stupid to be deserving of his time and went his way, flinging me first along the row of cushioned seats toward the middle of the car. I landed in an end seat and tried to catch my breath.

The wind was rushing through the open windows on either side of the taxicab, and the lady driver up front just laughed when I told her it was going to rain soon. I dusted off the lapels of my jacket and straightened the necktie that hung loosely between them and repeated my forecast indignantly. As we whizzed crosstown with the speedometer set at eighty miles an hour, I could see from behind her hands barely feeling her blouse. And when she turned around to me, all the buttons were well undone and the shirttail flapped loudly in the wind. "Oh, don't be silly," she told me. "It hasn't rained for years."

"Oh, don't be silly," she told me, but I knew I'd heard what I had heard. We went into the kitchen, she behind me, and there they stood waiting for us with their pistols in their hands. I tried to tell them that I didn't want any trouble, because it was my uncle's and aunt's

house and they were away and we were only living there for them for a short while. But they were uninterested in my concerns. "Where is it?" they asked me, and I asked them where was what. The leader pounded his hand on the table and ordered me to get it for him—on the double. By now, Martha and Harry had joined us in the kitchen, explaining both at once about how Claire had had to stay at home with the children; they were terribly sorry. I told the man that I had no idea what he was talking about, but he responded only by throwing Martha at me and telling me that he meant business. Then, he took the tablecloth in his arms and with a small corner began to polish the barrel of his revolver.

"Even cops don't use this kind any more," he informed me. "Makes too much of a mess." And I could feel my knees giving way. I promised him I'd get what he wanted—on the double—although I still had no idea at all what it was that I should get. I only wished my aunt and uncle would come home.

Then, it dawned on me. If only I could get a minute alone in the den, I could get the police for help. But how to get out there alone, that was the problem at hand. I worked on it, worked hard, and suddenly I was alone in the den. Everyone else was in the kitchen, and I was out there. A miracle, I thought, and became aware for the first time of the slipperiness of my perspiring hands as I pulled the receiver lightly off its hook.

The number. I didn't know the number. I put the phone down on the desk and ran quickly through the pages of the phone book, making the necessary notes as I went along. Dial 9 for an outside line, then 555-1212 to ascertain the proper code, then the code itself and finally the number—plus, of course, three more digits for the appropriate precinct headquarters and two more for the division whose assistance was required, whether homicide or burglary or what; I selected "General Crime Division."

Time was running out. They would be coming for me any minute. Hurriedly, I twirled the dial with my dampened forefinger. By the time I'd placed the call, I was almost sick to my stomach with fright. The number began to ring, and I knew that help was not far off. As scared as I was, I was trying to feel better.

Finally, the call was answered, and I gasped a prelude to my plea, but the voice on the other end spoke first. As it began, I saw the kitchen door opening, and I knew my time was near.

"This is a recording," the police department's operator announced in an overly articulate female voice. "You have dialed the wrong number." The leader's face was grinning at me from the doorway; he raised his shining gun slowly. "I repeat," said the operator, "you have dialed the wrong number. There is no crime on Staten Island."

Free-lance writer and editor KENNETH PLATNICK lives in New York. From 1961 to 1964, he wrote and edited for the *New York Times* and *Saturday Evening Post*—his fiction having appeared in the latter. His forthcoming travel book, *A Student Guide to New York City*, will be published this year by Monarch Press.