

LITERARY NOVEL: HELIUM 3 BY MARILYN DELSON

Summary: If you were an alien, marooned on Earth, how would you fit in? By concealment, through heroism and service, mind control, or superior technology? What if you were falling in love with the very human who could best destroy you?

Ch.1: POLAR VORTEX

Was it cabin fever that gave me the bright idea to meet a complete stranger for afternoon coffee, or something else? After two months of hunkering down under the polar vortex, not only was my skin dry and pasty but I had a less-than-favorable view of the male race.

Suddenly, the anti-lock brakes engaged on a patch of black ice at the eighth curve on Cedarvale Road. The car started to skid into a ditch, which ran alongside a swiftly-flowing stream, now frozen. The icy corkscrew of blacktop, the road I fear the most but can't escape if I need to get anywhere, has exactly thirteen switchbacks. Lucky number thirteen. I was born on Friday the thirteenth. By local legend, the ghosts of its victims manifest on certain foggy nights.

I jolted into survival mode and turned the wheel to the left, slowly, and managed to get back on the road, which eventually straightened and leveled off. The zig-zagging wooded ravine it was built on, with its hulking evergreens leaning-in on both sides and darkening the sky, finally yielded to the uniform streets of suburbia. Idiot, I mumbled, realizing I've succumbed, yet again, to a few emails from some guy. But at least this time, I did the choosing, from his dating service video.

I arrived at my destination shaken, feeling entitled to a large cup of coffee. It was one of the better national chains, although I wasn't pleased when it drove our Mom-and-Pop version out

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of business. I did a quick appearance check in the rearview mirror and thought he'd probably like what he saw, despite the over-moisturized pasty skin. Men liked full red lips, large brown eyes, prominent cheekbones, and thick eyebrows framing a woman's face, or so I was told. I wore riding boots and a mannish Harris tweed jacket because I like to dress this way and have a theory that it puts men at ease when women dress like them. I ran my fingers through my longish, dirty-blonde hair, trying to pump up its defeated lack of bounce before heading into the lion's den. The winter air was sharp as I inhaled, like breathing in tiny shards of glass mixed with idling car exhaust.

The chain was full of weekenders: pert, blond cheerleaders and gawky basketball players in post-game celebration, and noisy families, glad to be sprung from the all-too-familiar walls of home in deep winter. The order line was long, but I needed that mug of joe. I spied a lone table in the back, dirty with dishes but unoccupied, and I sank into a chair with my coffee mug.

The first heavenly sip jolted my memory about our agreed-upon sign, and I searched for the silk rose in my tote bag. But before I could even place it on the table, he was standing next to me.

"Are you Jess?" he asked, eyeing me with an appreciative smile. His eyes were so blue, much more intense than in his video. I felt my cheeks flush, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Yes. Jessamyn Sandman." I extended my hand to shake his. "But people call me Jess. How did you know it was me, without the flower? I wasn't wrapped up in all this winter gear when I made the video."

"True. I just searched for the most interesting woman in the room and found you. I'm Eddie, by the way."

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After the ingratiating compliment, he looked me over in that universal male way, which caused me to blush again. Damn! **Helium-3 Fusion 3**

"How clever of you," I laughed. "And what a good liar you are. Have a seat."

"I will. Just want to get some coffee... yours smells delicious."

He scooped up the dirty dishes and trudged toward the front in his boots, which left a trail of melting snow. He was tall, handsome with a kind of European vibe, with thick, bluish-black hair, and eyes which seemed to take a reading of me as he spoke, kind of like an instant-read thermometer.

He returned with a tray holding a mug and two cherry-filled pastries. I accepted the offering without the usual protestations about my diet. I almost slid off the road today; this pastry could be my last.

"How was your drive here?" I asked, after the dishes were settled.

"I almost slid off the road a couple of times."

"Me too. We lucked out." Our eyes locked and I felt a jolt.

"Yes, living is preferable to dying. Especially when I know for a fact they don't serve pastries in Heaven," he said with a chuckle, causing those blue eyes to crinkle at the edges.

"What makes you think I'm ending up in Heaven?" I asked, blushing again.

"Pastries aside, which are plentiful in Hell by the way, I feel you are a good soul, without a shadow of a doubt. So when you shake off this mortal coil, off you'll go to paradise, but no cherry Danish." He actually winked at me.

"How do you know I'm a good soul? I can be bad sometimes." I gave him a simpering smile. Why was I turning into a besotted female? This was getting scary.

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We continued to talk back-and-forth, in a flirty-silly way for a couple of hours. I can't account for how the time slipped away, except to say that his trenchant observations about life were so similar to mine, I decided I'd found a kindred spirit. Eddie suggested we go someplace quieter for an early dinner. By then, the manager was giving us a why don't they leave already look, surveying the never-ending line for tables.

"Good idea. Tables are in short supply here today and I think we've overstayed our welcome," I said, pointing to the manager. But I was adamant about following him to the restaurant in my own car. Just in case.

"I have a fusion Brazilian-Japanese place in mind," he said.

Was he joking? It sounded way too sophisticated for Polar Vortex Central and wondered why I hadn't heard of it before.

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Brasil-Asia Grill was starkly modern, with an expanse of rosewood fronting the room-length bar. Tables for two or four were placed discretely among large potted palm trees. Every table was taken, except for a two-seater, placed behind an intricately-carved Oriental screen.

As soon as we were seated, a burly, older man with thick, black hair and matching moustache welcomed us with a smile and very white teeth. He had the same intense blue eyes that Eddie had. Senhor Edward got a bear hug, like family. A tall, slender woman with slightly Asian features ran out from the back and greeted Eddie in similar fashion. She was wearing a full-length white apron.

"Jess, meet Miya and Gustavo, my friends."

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"Estimado Senhorita. We welcome you and will prepare a dinner we hope you will love," Gustavo said. They returned to the kitchen.

Eddie must have picked up on my fears concerning exotic food.

"Don't worry Jess. They'll bring us grilled steak and sushi, which will be the best you've ever tasted. Will you join me for a cocktail - a Sakeirinha? It's a Caipirinha made with sake."

I couldn't refuse such a cool invitation, although I wasn't sure about the sushi.

"What's the story with Miya and Gustavo? Married?"

"Happily so, for several years now."

"How did you meet them?" I asked. Hunger pangs clutched at my stomach in response to the audible sizzle of a thick steak hitting a hot grill. I could imagine the charring and juice flowing, from the sound and smell alone. Molecules of smoky goodness hung in the air.

"We met at work."

"Are you also a chef?"

"No. I'm a miner."

"You and Gustavo are miners?" The only mining operation in this area is for salt. "Are you at the Cayuga mine in Lansing?"

"No, not there. Helium-3," he said. Then, nothing.

"What's that? Oh wait ... don't they fill party balloons with helium?"

"Yes, but helium-3 is different."

"How so?"

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"Right. It's found in the Earth's crust and mantle. It got trapped there when the Earth was formed. You know ... the Big Bang. It's also found in the atmosphere and in natural gas."

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"But, what's it for?"

"Ah well, ... helium-3 power plants can generate electricity and stop the clock on global warming. That's because helium-3 is clean, compared to fossil fuels. And we'd no longer have to worry about nuclear accidents or radioactive waste disposal. Also, the power plants would be more efficient, and have lower operating costs than anything we use now."

"So, where's the mine - in the Southern Tier?" Gustavo was coming with our plates.

"Not exactly. Ah, here's Gustavo, and Marcus is bringing our drinks. We can talk about this later," he said, with more than a hint of determination. Our drinks tasted of sugar, lime and herbs, with a kick. The steaks were uniformly rare and perfectly charred on the outside.

I did pick up on him wanting to change the subject. Eddie's hesitation threw up a red flag; well maybe just a pink flag. Investigative reporters don't get mayors to quit after uncovering their fondness for kiddie porn sites by playing nice. Fortunate for me, his scorned wife was the snitch. Nor did I cut any slack with two of our (former) city councilmen over their voter-registration scheme. On the other hand, maybe I was just being my suspicious self, fed-up with being lied to by politicians and officials in my daily work. I decided to cut him some slack, for now. Besides, not giving any slack is how I lost most of my (former) boyfriends. So, we engaged in harmless chit-chat. He even hugged me goodbye, chastely, after walking me to my car. His odd but pleasant scent, like citrus and air full of ozone after a rain, lingered on my coat collar as I drove home.