

Q, Quentina Elizabeth Deveril, is the love of my life. At the time of my arrival, we are far along in the preparations for our wedding. All of the major preliminaries have been arranged – the reception hall, the choice of entrée, the entertainment. The vows have been written, compromises struck on how present God shall be and which God to choose. The honeymoon shall be in Barcelona with a side trip to Pamplona for the running. Only trifling matters remain such as coordinating the flowers for the centerpieces with the boutonnieres of the groomsmen and the music to be played at the reception.

The wedding is to be held in Lenox, Massachusetts. The Deverils are New Yorkers thru and thru – lifelong Manhattanites – but they have summered for the entirety of Q's existence at a home on the Stockbridge Bowl, in the heart of the Berkshires with the appropriate subscriptions to Tanglewood and Jacob's Pillow. We are to be married at the inn where John and Joan Deveril stayed on their first visit to the Berkshires more than twenty-five years ago. It is intimated at a celebration-of-the-engagement dinner that this is the inn in which Q was conceived. Lenox is neither Q's nor my first choice; all of our friends are New Yorkers and we would prefer, all things being equal, to have a city wedding. But John Deveril is a powerful and obstinate man. His construction company is the eighth largest in the country, responsible for two of the ten tallest buildings in Manhattan. More relevantly, Q is utterly devoted to John, and he is quite wed (pardon) to the idea of a Berkshires marriage. He thinks it will lend symmetry to his daughter's life. All things considered, it seems best to let him have his way. I joke to Q that we should arrange funeral plots for ourselves in Great Barrington. She finds this quite funny.

Mr. Deveril's mulishness is nowhere more evident than in the discussion of the music to be played at the wedding. A swing band will provide the bulk of the entertainment, but a DJ is retained to entertain during the band's rest breaks and to offer something for the younger set.

Mr. Deveril prepares an extensive array of directives for the disc jockey. These guidelines, seventeen pages in all, contain a small set of favored songs, including the Foundations' "Build Me Up Buttercup," the Mysterians' "Ninety-Six Tears" and anything by Jerry Lewis; a list of disfavored songs, which includes anything by anyone whose sexuality is ambiguous or otherwise in question – thus ruling out Elton John, David Bowie and Prince (despite my argument that the secondary premise is faulty), any music by any artist who has ever broadcast an anti-patriotic message – thereby excluding Bruce Springsteen, Neil Young, and (to my great dismay) Green Day, and any song written between the years 1980 and 1992; and a final list of songs, appended as "Attachment A" to the personal services contract between the DJ and the Deverils, the playing of any of which results in irrevocable termination of the agreement and triggers a legal claim for damages by the Deverils against the disc jockey, said damages liquidated in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars. For further emphasis, as if any were required, at the top of Appendix A, Mr. Deveril handwrites the following: "Play these songs and die." The list includes the Chicken Dance, the Electric Slide, and anything by Madonna and Fleetwood Mac.

I happen to like Fleetwood Mac. Mr. Deveril has nothing against Fleetwood Mac *per se*, but he recalls that Bill Clinton used "*Don't Stop (Thinking About*

Tomorrow)” as the theme song for his presidential campaigns. John Deveril hates many things including the Chicken Dance, the Electric Slide and Madonna, but he has a special, virulent loathing for our ex-President Bill Clinton.

I happen to also like Bill Clinton, but I raise no objection. Neither do I protest the venison that will be served at dinner, nor the ten thousand tulips that have been ordered for the reception hall despite my allergist’s strict instructions to the contrary, nor the (Republican) Presidential look-alikes who have been hired to mingle with the crowd and sit at the dinner tables corresponding to their numerical order in the presidency. It is objectionable enough to have people resembling Nixon and Ford and Bush (forty-one; John Deveril has no tolerance for forty-three) circulating among the crowd, but I wonder, as a purely practical matter, what the people seated at tables nineteen and thirty-four will have to talk about at dinner with doppelgangers of Chester Arthur and John Deveril’s favorite ex-President, Calvin Coolidge.

* * *

This is all quite different than the wedding I envision. In my vision, we are married by a Scientologist on the eighteenth hole of a miniature golf course. The minister reminds me that girls need “clothes and food and tender happiness and frills: a pan, a comb, perhaps a cat.” I am asked to provide them all. Q is told that “young men are free and may forget” their promises. Our guests look on in horror. Then the ruse is revealed. A simple civil service follows. We exchange vows that we have written ourselves. Glasses of Yoo-Hoo are poured, a toast is made, and the bottle of chocolate drink is broken with a cry of “Mazel tov!” Rickshaws take our friends to a nearby bowling alley where they are immediately outfitted with rental shoes and given the happy news that they can bowl as much as they like for free. Professional bowler Nelson Burton Jr. has been retained for the day to give lessons in bowling and the mambo. Q and I make a grand entrance as a Klezmer band plays the Outback Steakhouse theme song, my favorite. We have our first dance to John Parr’s *Naughty Naughty*. People bowl and shoot pool. They play darts and video games, and eat popcorn and miniature hot dogs. For a few hours, our friends forget that they are adults. They stay long into the night, drunk on *Miller Lite* and chocolate cake, and sit Indian-style on the lanes telling stories about me and Q, many of which we have never heard about each other before, including the surprising fact that Q had a poster of Brian Austin Green over her bed until the age of twenty-four. It is a magical evening.

* * *

I raise no objection to the wedding plans because I am on tenuous ground with John Deveril. Though he has never articulated this, I believe John Deveril believes that Q could do better. Q’s father distrusts teachers and writers, and I am both. He believes that teachers are generally liberals and that writers are generally communists. I could try to correct this, but he has a point, and more importantly, I

am happily, hopelessly and irrevocably in love with Q. So I suffer his judgment without protest.

* * *

We meet at the movies, a double feature at the Angelika: *Casablanca* and *Play It Again Sam*. It is ten o'clock on a Monday morning and so there are only three people in the theatre: Q, me, and a gentleman in the back who is rather noisily pleasuring himself. This would be disturbing but understandable if it were to Ingrid Bergman, but he does it during *Play It Again Sam* and mutters "Oh, Grover" as he abuses himself and as repulsed as I am, I am equally confused. Still, happily, it brings Q and me together. She looks back at the man several times and in so doing our eyes meet.

"What was that?" she asks me after the movie.

"I don't know," I say.

"Did he mean Grover from Sesame Street?"

"I don't know," I say again.

"What would the association be with Woody Allen?"

"I don't know. Are there even any other Grovers?"

"There's Grover Cleveland."

"And Grover Cleveland Alexander," I add. "He was named after the President."

"Were either of them attractive?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I don't think so."

"Was anybody in the 1890s attractive?"

"I don't think so," I say. "Maybe Teddy Roosevelt," I say. But that's about it."

"It serves me right for coming to a movie on a Monday morning," Q says reflectively. Then she thinks about the full implication of this and looks at me suspiciously. "What about you?" she asks. "Do you just hang out in movie theatres with jossers all day or do you have a job?"

"I have a job," I say. "I am a teacher and a writer. Usually I write in the mornings. It's just that I can never sleep on Sunday nights so I always end up being tired and blocked on Monday mornings. So sometimes I come here to kill some time."

Q explains that she cannot sleep on Sunday nights either.

This becomes the first of many, many things we learn that we have in common.

* * *

"I'm Q," she says, extending her hand, her long, angular, seductive hand.

"Your parents must have been quite parsimonious," I say.

She laughs. "I am formally Quentina Elizabeth Deveril," she says. "But everyone calls me Q."

"Then I shall call you Q."

"It should be easy for you to remember in your tired state."

“The funny thing is,” I explain, “this inability to sleep on Sunday nights is entirely vestigial. Back in graduate school, when I was trying to finish my dissertation and teach three classes, I never knew how I could get through a week. But now I set my own schedule. I write whenever I want, and I only have class on Thursdays. I have no pressure on me to speak of, but I still can’t sleep on Sunday nights.”

“Perhaps it is something universal about Mondays,” Q says, “because the same thing is true for me too. I love my job and I have Mondays off anyway.

“Maybe it’s just ingrained in us when we’re kids,” I say.

“Or maybe there are tiny tears in the fabric of the universe that rupture on Sunday evenings and the weight of time and existence press down on the head of every sleeping boy and girl. And then these benevolent creatures, which resemble tiny kangaroos, like the ones from that island off the coast of Australia, work diligently overnight to repair the ruptures, and in the morning everything is okay.”

“You mean like wallabies?”

“Like wallabies, only smaller and a million times better.”

I nod.

“You have quite an imagination. What do you do?”

“Mostly I dream,” she says, “but on the weekends,” she adds, with the faintest hint of mischief, “I work at the organic farm stand in Union Square.”

* * *

On the following Sunday I visit the farmer’s market in Union Square. It is one of those top-ten-days-of-the-year – no humidity, cloud-free, sunshine streaming – the sort that graces New York only in April and October. It seems as if the entire city is groggily waking at once from its hibernation and is gathering here, at the sprawling souk, to greet the spring. It takes some time to find Q.

I spot her stand, finally, nestled between the entrance to the Lexington Avenue Subway and a small merry-go-round. She is selling a loaf of banana bread (organic) to an old Jewish lady. Q makes me wait why the old woman pays her in coins.

She, Q, is in a playful mood.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Yes,” I say, clearing my throat to sound official. “I should like to purchase some pears. I understand that yours are the most succulent and delicious in the district.”

“Indeed they are, sir. What kind would you like?”

At this point I drop the façade, and in my normal street voice say, “I didn’t know there was more than one kind of pear.”

“Are you serious?”

“Please don’t make fun of me.”

I see that Q finds this uproariously funny. It is quite embarrassing, I admit. I know that there are many kinds of apples, but somehow it has not occurred to me that pears are similarly diversified. The only pears I have eaten were canned pears in syrup, which my Nana Be used to give me for dessert. So Q has every right to

laugh. She does not laugh, though. Instead she takes me by the hand and leads me closer to the fruit stand.

This is infinitely better.

"We have Bartlett, Anjou, Bosc, Bradfords, Asians, Chinese Whites and Siberians. What's your pleasure?"

"I'll take the Bosc," I say. "I have always admired their persistence against Spanish oppressors and the fierce individuality of their language and people."

"Those are the Basque," says Q. "These are the Bosc."

"Well then I'll take whatever is the juiciest and most succulent."

"That would be the Anjou."

"Then the Anjou I shall have."

"How many?"

"Three," I say.

Q puts the three pears in a bag, thanks me for my purchase, and turns to help the next customer. When I return home and open the bag, I see that in addition to the pears Q has included her telephone number.

* * *

On our first date we rent rowboats in Central Park.

It is mostly a blur.

We begin chatting and soon enough the afternoon melts into the evening and the evening to the morning.

We do not kiss or touch. It is all conversation.

We make lists. Greatest Game-Show Hosts of All-Time. She picks Alex Trebek, which is an estimable choice, but too safe for a hippie-girl. I advance the often-overlooked Burt Convy. We find common ground in Chuck Woolery.

Best Sit-Com Theme Songs. I propose *Mister Ed*, which she agrees is a worthy choice. She proposes *Maude*, which I agree is a worthy choice. I tell her the little-known fact that there were three theme songs to *Alice*, and she is impressed that I know the words to all three, as well as the completely biography of Vic Tabak.

We make eerie connections.

During the discussion of Top Frozen Dinners, I fear she will say Salisbury Steak or some other Swanson's TV Dinner, but no, she says Stouffer's Macaroni & Cheese and I say me too and exclaim that when my parents went out on Saturday nights, I would bake a tray in the toaster oven, brown bread crumbs on top, and enjoy it while watching a *Love Boat-Fantasy Island* doubleheader, hoping that Barbi Benton would appear as a special guest. We discover that we favor the same knish – the Gabilla, the same pizza – Patsy's, but only the original one up in East Harlem, which still fires its ovens with coal, the same Roald Dahl children's books – especially *James and the Giant Peach*. We both think the best place to watch the sun set over the City is from the bluffs of Fort Tryon Park, overlooking the Cloisters, both think H&H bagels are better than Tal's, both think that Times Square had more character with the prostitutes. One after the other: the same, the same, the same. We sing together a euphonic and euphoric chorus of agreement, our voices and

spirits rising, higher and higher, until, inevitably, we discuss the greatest Vice-President of all time, and exclaim in gleeful, climactic unison: "Al Gore! Al Gore!"

It is magical.

I escort Q home to her apartment on Allen and Rivington in the Lower East Side and happily accept a kiss on the cheek. I glide home, five miles, feet never touching the ground, dizzy. Already I am completely full of her.

* * *

For our second date I suggest miniature golf. Q agrees and proposes an overlooked course which sits on the shore of the Hudson River. The establishment has been troubled historically, transferred ownership four times in the last three years, and each time gone under. It has been redesigned yet again recently and is being operated on a not-for-profit basis by the Neo-Marxist society of Lower Manhattan, itself struggling. The membership rolls of the NMLM have been dwindling over the past twenty years. Q explains that the new board of directors thinks the miniature golf course can help refill the organization's depleted coffers and will be just the thing to make communism seem relevant to the youth of New York. They are also considering producing a rap album, tentatively titled, "Red and Not Dead."

Q is enthusiastic about the proposed date and claims on our walk across Houston Street to be an accomplished miniature golfer. I am skeptical. We arrive at the course and I am saddened to see that though it is another beautiful spring Saturday in the city, the course is almost empty. I don't care one way or the other about the Marxist Society of Lower Manhattan, but I am a great friend of the game of miniature golf. Good for us, but a bad sign for business, Q and I are able to walk right up to the starter's booth, manned by an overstuffed man with a graying communist mustache, in the middle of reading a newspaper, wearing a t-shirt that has been machine washed to translucence and reads:

Che

Now More Than Ever

The sign above the starter's booth has been partially painted over, ineptly, so it is possible to see that it once said:

Green Fee:

\$10 per player

The second line has been whited-out and re-lettered so that the sign now says:

Green Fee:

Based on ability to pay.

I hand the starter twenty dollars and receive two putters and two red balls.

"Sorry," I say. "These balls are both red."

"They're all red," he says.

"How do you tell them apart?" I ask, but it is no use. He has already returned to his copy of *The Daily Leader*.

The first hole is a hammer and sickle, requiring an accurate stroke up the median of the mallet, and true to her word, Q is adept with the short stick. She finds the gap between two wooden blocks that threaten to divert errant shots into the cul-

de-sac territories of the sickle and makes herself an easy deuce. I match her with a competent, but uninspired, par.

The second hole is a Scylla and Charybdis-type design, a carryover from the original course, which has rather uncomfortably been squeezed into the Communist-motif. One route to the hole is through a narrow loop-de-loop, putatively in the shape of Stalin's tongue; the other requires a precise shot up and over a steep ramp – balls struck too meekly will be re-deposited at the feet of the player, balls struck too boldly will sail past the hole and land, subjecting the golfer to a one-stroke penalty, in a murky pond, macabrely labeled, "Lenin's Bladder." Undaunted, Q takes the daring route over the ramp and nearly holes her putt. On the sixth, the windmill hole, she times it perfectly, her ball rolling through at the precise moment Trotsky's legs spread akimbo, and finds the cup for an ace. Q squeals in glee.

Q's play inspires my own. On the tenth, I make my own hole-in-one, a double banker around Castro's beard, and the game is on. On the fourteenth, I draw even in the match, with an improbable hole out through a chute in the mouth of Eugene V. Debs. Q responds by nailing a birdie into Engels' left eye. We come to the seventeenth hole, a double-decker of Chinese Communists, dead even. The hole demands a precise tee shot between miniature statutes of Deng Xiaopeng and Lin Biao in order to find a direct chute to the lower deck. Fail to find this chute to the lower level and the golfer's ball falls down the side of a ramp and is deposited in a cul de sac, guarded by the brooding presence of Jiang Qing, whose relief stares accusatorily at the giant replica of Mao, which presides over all action at the penultimate hole. Q capably caroms her ball off of Deng, holes out on the lower deck for her two, and watches anxiously as I take my turn. I strike my putt slightly off center and for a moment it appears as if the ball will not reach Deng and Lin, but it does, and hangs tantalizingly on the edge of the cup. Q is breathless, as am I, until the ball falls finally and makes its clattering way to the lower level. But unlike Q's ball, it does not merely tumble onto the lower level in strategic position, it continues forward, and finally, climactically, drops into the cup for a magnificent ace and definitive control of the match. I walk down the Staircase of One Thousand Golfing Heroes, grinning all the while, and bend over to triumphantly collect my ball from the hole. Then I rise and hit my head squarely on Mao's bronzed groin.

This experience is painful (quite) and disappointing (we never get to play the 18th hole and thus miss our chance to win a free game by hitting the ball into Kropotkin's nose), but not without its charms: Q takes me home in a cab, tucks me into bed and kisses me on the head. This makes all of the pain miraculously disappear.

* * *

The next day, Q calls to check on me.

On the phone, Q tells me that date number three will be special. This is apparent when I collect her at the apartment. She answers the door wearing a simple sun dress with a flower, a white carnation, pinned into her shining blonde hair. She is a hippie-girl, but no hippie ever looked like this. She is radiant.

"I am going to take you to my favorite place in the city," she says, and takes me by the hand.

I am happy to be led.

We descend into the bowels of New York, catch the four train, change for the six, and disembark at Wall Street. It is early on a Wednesday morning; the streets are a-bustle with men and women in suits and ties and over-the-knee skirts hurrying to their office jobs. I, on the other hand, am unencumbered. I feel playful.

"We going to the Stock Exchange?" I ask. "You work in an organic market on weekends, but you're a broker during the week, right? You're going to take me on a tour of the trading floor. What do you trade – stocks, futures, commodities? I bet you're in metals. I bet you trade copper and tin contracts on the commodities exchange. Oh, happy day!" I button-hole a gentleman passer-by, freshly outfitted at the Barney's seasonal sale. "The woman I am seeing trades copper futures. Can you believe my good fortune? She is *that* beautiful *and* a commodities trader!"

Q smiles and puts a finger to her lips, but I can see that she is amused.

As the man I accosted recedes into our wake, Q pulls me closer, entwines her arm with my own, and leads me up Church Street.

* * *

I am flummoxed. This is the kingdom of Corporate America, heart of the realm of the modern faceless feudal overlords who drive the economic engine of the ship of state, their domain guarded by giant sentries, skyscrapers, colossuses of steel and concrete dwarfing the peons below.

It is no place for a hippie-girl.

But here we are, passing the worldwide headquarters of Credit Suisse First Boston, and now the rebuilt Seven World Trade Center, and now the gaping hole that was One and Two, and now the Century 21 Department Store, which is just across the street, and where I have had great success with t-shirts and underwear, which can be difficult to find and often quite dear. Somehow, the Century 21 has withstood not one terrorist attack but two, as if to say to the Fundamentalist Muslims, you have thrown your very best at us, twice, and still we are here, defiantly outfitting your mortal enemies, the Sons of Capitalism, with Hanes and Fruit-of-the-Loom at a surprisingly reasonable price: God Bless America! And now the Marriot, and now the hot dog stand on the corner of Liberty, of which I have partaken once, during a tenth grade field trip to the Stock Exchange with Mr. Henderson, and became so violently ill that the doctors suspected I may have contracted botulism, and now passing an old lady selling Shetland wool sweaters off a blanket, and now turning left on Thames, and now entering, behind an old building that vaguely resembles the Woolworth, a dark alley that smells of what can only be wino-urine.

And now I am completely confused.

"What?" I say, but Q puts her hand over my mouth.

"Wait," she says, and like a puppy I am led down the dank passageway, trusting. We pass some sacks of garbage, a one-eyed alley cat lapping at some sour milk, and arrive, finally, at a tall iron gate, the sort that guards cemeteries in all the slasher flicks.

“This is creepy,” I say.

“Wait,” she says again and opens the gate, which plays its role to perfection and creaks in protests. Q takes my hand and leads me inside. I look around.

“Can I cook?” she says, “or can I cook?”

* * *

It is a garden – that is the word for it – but what a garden. The gate is covered on the inside by a thick, reaching ivy, as is the entirety of the fence surrounding the conservatory. This vine keeps the heat and moisture from escaping. The atmosphere feels different. It is slightly humid, faintly reminiscent of a rain forest, and at least ten degrees warmer than the ambient temperature on the streets of the city. When Q closes the door behind us, the current of clammy alley-air is sealed behind us, and it as if we have entered another world, an – I don’t dare say it, it will sound cliché, but it is the only word on my mind – Eden.

Here are apple trees, pullulate with swollen fruit. Q nods in approval and I administer to the tree the gentlest of taps. A compliant apple falls into my greedy hands. I bite in. The fruit is succulent, ambrosial. Here is a vegetable garden – orderly rows of broccoli, squash, yams, three kinds of onions, carrots, asparagus, parsnips, and what I think is okra. Here is an herb garden – redolent with rosemary and thyme, basil and sage, mint and rue, borage in full flower. I have the sudden urge to make a salad. Here are apricots. Here plums. Here, somehow, avocados.

Dirt pathways, well manicured, wend their way through the garden. One path leads to a pepper farm. Q tells me that ninety-seven varieties are in the ground. Another path leads to a dwarf Japanese holly that has been mounted on stone. Yet another path ends at a Zen waterfall.

I have endless questions for Q. With skyscrapers encroaching on every side, how does enough light get in to sustain the garden? Who built it? When? Who owns it now? How could its existence have been kept a secret? Why isn’t it overrun by city idiots, ruined like everything else? How is this miracle possible?

Q answers in the best way possible. She sits me down at the base of a pear tree – a pear tree in the middle of Manhattan! – kisses me passionately, and, oh God oh God, am I in love.