

The Z Express

Mindy Friddle

Harriet 125 sat alone in the back booth of the diner, holding a red rose.

We called them all Harriet. Anna Nettles was her real name. Married, no children, retired realtor. I never met a Harriet without knowing her profession.

I made my way toward her, passing the nodding drunk at the counter, the two teenagers making out in the corner. She pretended to study the sugar packets as she watched me approach.

“Harriet?”

“Yes?” Jumpy, naturally. “Yes,” she said, then picked up steam. “That’s right. *Harriet*.”

“Hope you weren’t waiting long.” I slid into the booth beside her.

“I just got here.”

A polite lie. She’d arrived half an hour ago. I watched her from the parking lot. She took a menu but ordered nothing. The waitress refilled her water twice.

She still gripped the wilting rose. I took it from her, laid it on a napkin. Usually the Harriets brought fake roses—silk or plastic. This one was real, dethorned,

deleafed, a bud that would never blossom.

"I'm a little nervous," she said, with a mirthless chuckle. She was all business, even at this ungodly hour, clad in crisp cotton and a magenta blazer. A puff of silver hair surrounded her powdered, tired face.

"Yeah, I get that. No problem." Telling someone to chill is guaranteed to freak them out. Eventually, the Harriets let down their guard. *You have a face the Harriets can trust*, Emerson told me. Which meant I was good at lying. A spurred compliment. But I took any praise I could get from Emerson. The criticisms, too.

I leaned in, whispered, "You need to go to the ladies room."

"I'm sorry?" The astonishment on her face. Jesus. I almost laughed. "Follow me in three minutes."

"Oh," she said. Then, "Ohhhh."

The restroom was empty.

When Harriet came in, I checked her purse, patted her down.

My keychain monitor glowed green. No wires, no bugs, no guns. She looked embarrassed, but took it stoically. I told her I'd meet her back at the table.

"What if there are cameras out there?" she whispered. "What if we're being watched?"

There were. We were. But the key to avoiding scrutiny was to look bored, hopeless, tired; to look like most of the doomed humans these days.

"We're fine," I told her. And God help her, she believed me.

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When I joined her again in the booth, Harriet cleared her throat, on the cusp of—what? Begging? Bargaining?

The waitress interrupted us. She wore a black wrist brace, holding together an injury. *Eva*, her nametag

said. She was stout, gimpy, resilient—a career waitress who would hobble out her last days here. Every backwater truckstop diner’s mascot. I ordered eggs, though I wasn’t hungry, because two people taking up Eva’s table with nothing but coffee and water was a shitty thing to do. The Harriet seemed hesitant, studying the menu as if she hadn’t already scoured the thing.

“My treat,” I said, to speed things along. The waitress took our order and shuffled off.

“What should I call you?” Harriet was trying to size me up. An old habit, left over from her real estate days, when appearance indicated the size of a mortgage.

“Luke.”

“Luke.” Before meeting Harriets, I put on my costume, an ironed shirt and decent slacks, dabbed a little make-up on my arms—to hide the tats. I was safe. My Tennessee accent put them at ease. I was clean-shaven. I could quote Scripture if I needed to. Scrubbed, khaki-clad, pedestrian plain. I went *Tabula rasa*. Big ‘ol blank movie screen. What they saw in me—hope or fear—was up to them.

“Do you travel a lot, Luke?”

“I do,” I said. Taking Harriet’s lead. We’d talk shop when she was ready. *Give them the illusion of control.* Emerson said that.

“It must be hard on your family,” Harriet said. “Traveling.”

There was no family. There was no wife, no home, no dog, no kids. Maybe Harriet had figured that out, determined to flush out the facts. “I manage,” I said, veering away from disclosure.

“My husband...has always been healthy,” she said. “Until.” She took a sip of coffee, her distant look stamped with *Life is Unfair*.

"Your husband?" It wasn't like me to be surprised by a Harriet.

"He's dying."

So this wasn't for her. Unusual, not unprecedented. "Of what?"

"Lung cancer."

"Is he getting treatment?" It didn't matter, but the Harriets often clung to discussions of medical terminology, the story of decline.

"He has months," she swallowed a sob, collected herself. "Maybe weeks. I can pull up the medical files."

If we accepted her case.

"That's why I'm here. For him."

She heard her own desperation, recognized weakness. She collected herself, sat up straighter, met my eyes. "I'm sorry about...what I did. I meant no disrespect."

"I'll pass that on to my boss. But what's important now...is what you can offer information-wise. Tell me about how you decided to get Z. Step by step."

Or misstep by misstep.

"A few days after David's diagnosis, a nurse recommended Z but she said it was off the record. Confidential. She said it was what David...needed. But she was very careful. I guess she couldn't get caught recommending Z...so she had to use code."

"Code?"

"Millie—the nurse—oh!" She clapped her hand over her mouth. "No names. I forgot."

"Don't worry. I'll change it in my report."

"The nurse happened to have a Ouija board in her car. She said it was for her daughter's slumber party. She spelled it out for me on the Ouija Board. Get Z 4 him."

"That was the first time Z occurred to you?"

"Well. My husband knew about Z of course, it's in the news, but I never paid much attention to it."

Too many people ignored Z until they—or someone they loved—needed it. And then they clamored to hop on our secret railway, the Z Express.

"But now... I have to get Z." She dabbed at her shiny eyes with a napkin. "For David." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He's not a believer. He's a rationalist."

The atheists and the religious fundamentalists had that in common: distrust of Z. Hatred, even. The nonbelievers claimed Z was just another a rip-off opiate of the people. The fundos swore there was no short-cut to faith, you had to earn it, you had to suffer. Z enraged them.

"Has your husband asked for Z?"

"No." She gave a sad laugh. "Not at first. Not David. For a while, he wouldn't even consider it. But he changed his mind about Z when he read about the study by that neurologist? The one that said Z stimulates the brain in a new way—"

"The Omega Effect."

"Yes, that's the one."

I didn't have to push Z, it sold itself.

"David said the Omega Effect proved it was all biology, nothing airy-fairy about it. Simulating nirvana was pure chemistry, he told me. And that's when he decided he wanted Z."

The waitress put down our order. Beverly swirled syrup over her pancakes. I pushed my eggs aside.

"Just to be clear," I said. "Z doesn't simulate nirvana. It *is* nirvana."

Z was Grace. As in Amazing. To save wretch

after wretch. Not an acid trip, not shroomed-up bliss, not opiate ecstasy, not the neuroscientist's darling altered consciousness, not New Jerusalem from the cheap seats. Z was a crack of light under the door, a sneak preview, a soul guide for doubters. Z led deathbed sinners through the narrow gate, to see the far shore, glimpse the Eternal City.

"Z is sacred."

She nodded. Terrified again.

"So. Did the nurse tell you anything about how to acquire Z?" I asked. "Didn't she spell it out?" A little joke to leaven the darkness. It went right past her.

"No, I decided to buy some Z," she said. "On my own."

That decision was the reason we were sitting here.

"I panicked. I wanted Z right then. I knew I couldn't put it off, with David so weak. It was pure impulse."

Bullshit. What spooked her was the price.

She looked down at her coffee, stirred it too long.

"So I drove to the university. They say you can get anything there."

"Was there an address?"

"No, but I drew a map." She dug around in her purse, then handed over the route she'd sketched. She'd even drawn a compass rose in the corner.

"Good," I said. "This is good." She could draw a map. I was impressed. So many people didn't know how to read them anymore, not with GPS chattering in their heads.

"I drove David's old Volvo."

"You still *drive*?"

Most people were clueless behind the wheel now,

thanks to self-drivers. Another point for Harriet 125.

“I didn’t want a record of my trip. And our car is old. Nothing showy. I knew it was risky. Going there.”

It was. University campuses were battle zones.

“At the end of the street, here” —she pointed to her map—“I saw a group of people standing under a street light. I drove past, then stopped. A man walked over to my car. I rolled down the window. I was so scared, my hands were shaking.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘I find the Cartesian mind body problem vexing, don’t you?’”

“Huh.”

“Then I remembered David’s bumper sticker on the rear window. Descartes before De Horse. It’s a reference to a man named Descartes.”

“The 17th Century French Rationalist?” I asked, taking too much pleasure from the surprise on her face.

“That’s right,” she said slowly. “David was a Cartesian scholar. I used to proofread his papers.” *And you?* She didn’t ask, but I heard the question.

Prison library. I smiled to swallow my answer.

“I thought maybe this man was some kind of scholar, you know, left over...from before.” Before the universities closed, she meant, before the campuses turned into violent fiefdoms. Like most cities, Atlanta never recovered from OG1. And in those ten months when we all went off the grid, most people emerged unwashed, frantic and traumatized. But a few came out of that first darkness, powerful and wicked.

“I told him I was lost.”

“What did he look like?”

“Your age. Early thirties. He was about six feet tall.”

“White guy? Black? Latino?”

“I don’t know. He had on long sleeves. It was hard to see his face. He wore a red baseball cap.”

I kept my face blank as a plate. “Any logo on the cap? Or writing?”

“A fish. One of those old-fashioned Jesus fishes. You’re probably too young to remember. They used to be everywhere.”

“I’m familiar. What did he say next?”

“He had a nice, quiet voice. He said, ‘Ma’am, you want me to tell you where to go?’ ”

A veiled insult. *I never get lost because everyone tells me where to go.* Now *that* was bumper sticker.

“And I said, ‘Yes please. Tell me. I am so lost. So very lost.’ And then I started crying, but I didn’t care. I said, ‘For my husband, it’s for my husband. He’s dying.’ And he told me he could help me.”

The Harriets were naïve. Other than parsimony, it was our biggest challenge.

“So I got out of the car and followed him across the quad.” She met my eyes. “I know. It sounds... foolish.”

“It was.”

“He walked with me, he took my elbow. He was...courteous. We crossed the muddy yard. There was no grass, just dirt and broken glass. We entered a filthy stairwell, dark and damp, like under a highway bridge.”

I glanced at her map. The old humanities building.

“The walls were covered with graffiti and it smelled like urine. Just awful. People were coming in and out. He led me down the hall. There were piles of clothes on the floor, a horrible mess. Empty food

wrappers scattered around. Then we went inside a large room, very clean and nearly empty. There was a fish tank with just one small fish swimming in it. I sat down on a metal lawn chair and waited.”

She trailed off. With the Harriets, you learned to sit in silence. That was just another part of the job. Hell, it was most of it.

“Did anyone call him by name?” I asked.

“I didn’t hear any names.”

She turned her attention to her food, dipping piece after piece of pancake in syrup. She ate as if she were ravenous. After a while she looked over at me, embarrassed. “It’s nerves. I eat to calm my nerves.”

“You paid this guy how much?”

“Five thousand.”

“How many pills did you get?”

The secret to interrogation was asking the same question different ways until you got the right answer.

She hesitated.

“You didn’t just get one, did you?”

“Two,” she said.

I let that go for now. “So he gives you the goods. What happened next?”

“He scooped out the fish into a bowl and told me to take it with me, that watching it would help...the Z work. I promised to take care of it, the fish. He escorted me out. He kept one hand on my shoulder, and the crowd parted for us. I wasn’t afraid. He was watching over me. I got into my car and I put the fishbowl on the floorboard. When I got home, I crushed the pill and mixed it up with strawberry yogurt and . . .”

“And?”

“I fed it to David.”

“And you took it, too.”

"I wanted to see it with David. When the Z worked for him, I wanted to witness it."

Ignorance and desperation, same old ugly pair.

"So you both took it. What happened?"

She looked down. "Nothing."

"You got zip out of it?"

"Well. We watched the fish swim in circles and I had strange...dreams. I thought how alone that little creature was. At the mercy of people, to feed it, or not, to change its water, or not. Its whole universe was that fishbowl and yet . . . it was so tranquil."

It wasn't hard to picture: the fantail fluttering like a silk scarf, Harriet fixated with the watery pace.

"We woke up the next day. The Z didn't work."

"What you bought that night wasn't Z. It was Faux Z."

"What is Faux Z?"

"All kinds of things. Maybe sugar. Baking soda. Hallucinogens sometimes."

"Is it dangerous?" she asked, her chin quivering.

"Did I put David in danger?"

I shrugged. "It's a street drug."

Faux Z could scramble your memory and make any story unreliable. Harriet 125 had all the signs of a bad trip: her intellectual guardian angel, her spiritual kinship with a fish. She'd been a human lab rat. Her fears and fantasies had mangled her recall. God knows what happened that night. She sure didn't know. That was probably a good thing.

"Z won't work on you, anyway. Z only works on people who are terminal. Anyone else gets nothing out of it. Like my boss says, 'If Z works on you, you better get your estate in order.'"

I sat back in the booth, pinned her with a stare. “There’s only one trusted source for Z, and that’s the Z Express. We make it. We’re the only supplier for everyone on the planet, young and old, rich and poor. Z works on Baptists, Catholics, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Wiccans, Mormons, atheists. Anyone who is failing physically—he gets a glimpse of grace. Pops out of his dying body like a genie from a bottle. Z is...well, like I said. Sacred.”

“I see that now. I do.”

“We’re not cheap because running the Z Express is risky and expensive.” The alphabet stew—FDA, FBI, ATF, CIA—was gone now. A few death panel protestors were dangerous lone wolves. But the Faux Z gangs at home and abroad were growing bolder. And Big Pharm was a monster, desperate to find the Z formula. Everyone wanted to catch the Z express, or derail it. “We have a sliding scale. We don’t ask more than you can pay, but we don’t ask less, either.”

“The information I provided—is it good?”

I didn’t answer. It was good. Maybe not good enough. “You go the Faux Z route, you don’t usually get a second chance,” I said. Emerson was firm: The information had to be useful, it had to shut down a Faux Z source.

Her gaze skimmed across my hands, pausing at the barbed-wire tattoo around my left ring finger. I’d forgotten to slide on the gold band to cover it.

“When you’re married a long time,” she said, “you’re so connected, you suffer.”

Another reason to avoid it. Emerson’s voice in my head.

“David doesn’t fear dying. I’m the one who’s scared that he’ll die without...” she muffled a sob. “To

know he's saved....that will be a comfort. Even though I'll be alone."

"Alone doesn't mean lonely," I said, and wished I hadn't. I didn't often get drawn into the Harriets' stories. But this Harriet was a clot of soap circling the drain, feeling her own ending tug. She was already lonely.

I pulled out an antique from my jacket and handed it to her. "This flip phone is temporary. You may receive a call tomorrow about a meeting. It may involve significant travel. You remember how to use one of these?" Her face bloomed red, but she pulled herself together enough to nod. "You may *not* be called. Either way, you toss the phone in forty-eight hours."

The horny teens were leaving. They stopped to pay, then crossed the parking lot, arms entwined, a four-legged creature moving in a jagged path. The drunk at the counter watched them, too. I was glad they'd left. They made everyone else seem solitary, lonelier than a truck stop diner on a desolate interstate ever could.

I signaled to the waitress for the check.

"You're going to need your strength." It was the closest I could come to admitting I was on Harriet 125's side. "You should get some rest." Catch some Zs.

"Thank you for what you do," she said, no longer bothering to hide her desperation. "It's the Lord's work." Her voice went high. "I couldn't live with myself if I knew I'd deprived David of...of eternal life."

"I'll tell my boss," I said.

She nodded, then seized my hand in a death grip. "Pray with me?"

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I caught a cab, a self-driver that reeked of people— piss and perfume. Overhead, red-eyed drones zipped and hovered like dragonflies.

When I got back to the motel, I uploaded my report on Harriet 125, added my recommendation.

Emerson signaled me minutes later.

The report was nothing special. My heart pounded with the knowledge that tonight's report revealed nothing new. The hospice nurse contact was solid. I had even put in the detail about Millie using the Ouija board.

Emerson was calling me anyway.

I turned on my ear bud, stretched across the bed. "Standard Faux Z," I said, trying to keep the joy out of my voice. "Harriet 125 went rogue, got duped."

"Please tell me this one coughed up some fresh intel?"

"Guppy again. Left his calling cards. A goldfish this time. The Jesus-fish hat."

"Brazen bastard."

"This Harriet, she drove herself. She sketched a map. Guppy was holed up in the Humanities building by the quad."

"Probably in Mexico by now."

"This Harriet wants to score Z for her husband. I figure we should let this slide."

"You figure, huh?" Emerson said, in a bitter tease.

Harriet 125— conventional, debt-ridden, retired, a spendthrift who tried to cut corners with Faux Z— was the type of Harriet Emerson hated the most. *Like they're entitled.*

"I love your bleeding heart, Luke, I really do. But charity cases are pouring in." I knew she was eyeing my report. "She blew it."

Emerson was Robin Hood at her best, Stalin at her worst. She was the kindest cruel woman I've ever known.

"I figure twenty-five up front for the husband," I said, "Another twenty-five on delivery." Harriet's credit history had told the story. Buying Z for her husband's last days was a luxury she couldn't afford. Fifty grand was a fair price. She'd have to downsize, but she'd get some relief from her husband's life insurance.

"We can't keep overlooking this kind of thing," Emerson said.

It did set a bad precedent, selling Z to a Harriet. You went for Faux Z, you were barred from Z—word had to get out. The Harriets had to get the message. That was how you cut off a supplier like Guppy.

But once in a while, it felt good to save someone.

"Take it out of my commission," I said.

The tinny shrieks of children rose in the background, a man's voice called out. Emerson's husband. Then it was all snuffed out when she put me on mute. A wave of sadness hit me. I missed her, wherever she was—halfway around the world, probably, on the white beaches of a turquoise sea. With her portable lab.

"Still there?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You all right?"

Emerson's cheery tone alarmed me. I was blue. I was alone. I heard her pity.

"I was thinking. Might be time for me to wind things down."

“Hey, hey. You’re my star, Luke. Who else is going to run the southern territory?”

“You wouldn’t have trouble finding someone,” I said. Pure sulk.

“Replace you? Can’t be done. You kidding?”

“I’ve got to see to my own tribe.”

She laughed, throaty and delicious. “Tribe. I love how you say that word, Sweet Luke. Without irony.”

And here was the part where we danced around the great divide. Her world of cold silicon gleam, cyborg-guarded estates in New Zealand with the other zillionaires, fortified flotillas in tropical seas. My world was analog and earth, my compound in the holler of a Tennessee mountain, where the women who raised me—my aunt, my sisters— my tribe—would live through what was coming, the only way you could. Stripped down back to the soil, the way we sinners all began, the way the Creator intended. I had stockpiled food and solar panels, motorcycles and ammunition, vinyl records, books and books—a fucking library. What I didn’t have was Emerson.

When the next OG came, it would be the last.

Emerson promised to warn me. She’d know before. Sometimes she promised to come back with me. To join my tribe.

Every time I pictured Emerson’s husband trying to protect her, I laughed.

“I’ll be visiting the southern territory soon,” she murmured.

“When?”

“Soon.”

“Turn on the lens.”

“No cameras. You know that.”

I was dying to see her face. Her topaz gaze.

“Hey, tomorrow? Important. Harriet 126 could be a donor to the cause. I need you to work your magic.”

That’s why she called. A come-to-Jesus meeting with another Harriet who had deep pockets. Emerson hadn’t missed me. Not really.

I even wanted to believe that. Sometimes. It would make it all easier. A relief. I could quit this gig. Leave for home. Protect my tribe—

But Emerson *did* miss me. I knew it.

In the end, I would save her, body and soul. I knew that, too.

“So you up for this Harriet?” she asked. “Red rose, etc., etc.?”

There was a crackling of static, then quiet.

“Yeah.”

“Hey. Good night?”

“Night,” I said and closed my eyes.

A sigh. I thought I heard her sigh. But I was wrong. It was the surf. The goddamn surf.

