

messing with the message

I was shocked when he couldn't remember the nurse's name. He had a trick for names, which he taught me, and it was part of his preparation for charming women. He knew two stories about every person he remembered, a complimentary story and an uncomplimentary one. Sometimes the occasion gave him the stories. Sometimes he just made them up. More often than I realised at the time, since I was ten when he first told me his trick. The trick was that as soon as he learned someone's name, he would think of someone else with the same name and remember the two stories about that person. Then he would imagine the present person into a version of the story about the earlier person. Since I was ten I didn't know people with all the names I needed, and I certainly didn't have all these stories collected. "Make them up", he said "just quickly make the person be like some hero and some villain that you've just thought of."

So I did, and it sort of worked. I knew all the names of my classmates, and everyone on the soccer team and the choir, before any of them remembered mine from one week to the next. It was confusing, though. I would avoid Martha from the choir because I thought of Martha in my class, who I had linked to a story about a girl who stole cats to turn into dog food. And I stuck close to Gretel when we got lost on a field trip because I somehow imagined that she would have something like a trail of crumbs to lead us home. I felt sure that he would not have had those problems. But then I believed what he told me, then. He said that people working on the roofs of houses looked so big because they only allowed people to work on roofs if they could reach the gutters with their hands. He told me that traffic jams were due to men using electric razors in their cars at red lights. He explained once that the crackly sound of long-distance telephone happened because the birds sitting on the wires had to receive the words through their feet and pass them on to other birds who put them back into the line. I was half way into telling each of these as fact, years later, and suddenly saw the twinkle in my childhood father's eye.

The nurse was called Megan, and I knew he had once had a girlfriend called Megan. At least I thought she was his girlfriend, and I thought my mother thought so. He had told me his two stories about Megan. One concerned a witch that turned men into toys, and the other was about a kind old lady who forced kids to go to church, something about hiding their pants and sending them to Argentina. But I'm not

sure which was the complimentary story and which the uncomplimentary. "She's Megan" I said to him, sort of in a whisper. "Witch, Argentina." He looked at me blankly, and then when the nurse came back he turned to her and said "Excuse me, young lady, I think I met you in Denver once. You're Evita, and I remember that white streak in your hair." But he had never been in Denver, as far as I knew, and she was definitely not Evita.

"Yes, Denver" she said "and I have always had this streak, since I was a girl", humouring him and wheeling him away to the dining room. I was impressed with her patience.

I recognised the nurse at the reception desk, though after two weeks I had to struggle to remember her name. Witch, Argentina, Megan. "Hello, Megan, how's my father doing?" "It's Evita, actually; he's doing fine, just a moment." "I would have phoned", I said "but it's been a busy time." "A long way, too" she replied with utter seriousness "and you can't trust those birds not to mess around with the message."

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