ADVANCED EDUCATION

By Linda S. Buyer

Two welded-bumper giraffes and a nanny goat at three of the corners of one-block long Elaine Place gave character to the mostly nondescript three-story brick apartment buildings on Roscoe and Cornelia which Elaine Place connected. Susan lived on Roscoe, closer to busy Broadway than to sleepy Elaine Place. She smiled at the sculptures every time she passed.

Susan tried to park in the only available space on her block, struggling to fit the large, baby blue Bel Air she had inherited into a spot vacated by a Datsun. Finally deciding it wasn’t possible, she drove a several block radius three times before she finally saw a spot she could fit into by allowing the rear bumper to encroach on the crosswalk behind the car.

Last year’s pothole repairs had shiny black ooze at every seam. She stepped gingerly into the street, trying to avoid the melting tar. The paper-thin soles of her strappy sandals didn’t offer much protection. She caught a glimpse of herself in the window of the convenience store on the corner. Her favorite little black dress, scoop-necked with spaghetti straps. Colorful, perfectly matched stripes that met at the center seam and cascaded down over her narrow waist and wide hips. Smiling at her image, she knew it’d been hard for Charles to leave her for Columbus and fall teaching. Without a grant, he’d only been able to afford two weeks in Chicago this summer.

Last summer, grant-funded to research the book he was writing on Chicago skyscrapers, he’d sublet a U of C professor’s apartment for three months. Susan and Charles met, just days after he arrived, at the Chicago Historical Society; a side benefit of her willingness to take oddball freelance jobs.

Waiting for the librarian to deliver the books they’d requested, Susan and Charles started chatting, then continued over coffee in the café. Still talking when the café staff started setting up for dinner, they agreed to meet again the next day. The next day turned into every day. With only a few freelance jobs to occupy her, Susan happily joined Charles on almost daily architecture expeditions.

Susan shook her head at her reflection. This summer, she’d had to work five of the fourteen days he was in town. In fact, she’d turned down a job so she could drive him to O’Hare this afternoon.

Refocusing on the newspaper rack on the other side of the window, she saw that Reagan had appointed Sandra Day O’Connor to be the first female Supreme Court justice. *Was she a good choice? Could a woman be on the Supreme Court? Would she be too emotional? She’s a woman. She’ll protect Roe vs. Wade? Why are there so many magazine articles about how men respond to successful women? I wonder if she’s married?*

Shrugging, Susan walked east on Cornelia toward the giraffes and turned south. Reaching the goat at Elaine Place’s T-intersection with Roscoe, she turned east again.

Daydreaming about marrying Charles, she entered her third-floor apartment. He was really smart, and she was pretty sure he thought she was smart too. She was still blown away that it didn’t seem to make him angry; surprised men like that existed.

*Professor of Architectural History at OSU. Just published an article about Chicago skyscrapers. His book about twins And he likes* me?!”

She laid her small black shoulder bag on the chrome-legged, glass-topped coffee table and snuggled into the corner of the loveseat, crossing her ankles on the coffee table. *On top of it all, he was good looking with that sandy shock of hair, turned-up nose and gray eyes*. She’d always wanted to be either willowy or petite. His six foot four inches made her disappointingly average five four feel petite.

The fact that he could only afford to be in Chicago for the two weeks between teaching summer school and the beginning of the fall term, led her to decide professors couldn’t afford wives. *If he can barely support himself, he certainly can’t afford to support two people*. She’d always assumed she’d get married after college, have babies and stop working. For the first time, she wondered, *What if I have to work?*

*Maybe I shouldn’t expect to be a housewife like mom? I hate advertising; pretending I care about products. Advertising just isn’t me. Maybe I should do something else? Something I’d like?*

Susan wrapped her arms around her shoulders and rocked.

*When I finished my BA, I never wanted to set foot in a school again. Maybe school wasn’t so bad. People outside of academia are stupider than I thought. Like that art director on my first keyline/paste-up job who had never thought of marking the original image so the color separations could be aligned easily. How could he not think of that? If I could I figure it out, a monkey could!*

*Charles thinks I’m smart. I should do something smart to impress him. Make him want to marry me. I could go to graduate school. Study what? No point in going to grad school in English Literature. There aren’t any English Lit. jobs. That’s why I landed in advertising.*

*I like psychology. I’ve been subscribing to* Psychology Today *since I graduated from high school. Psychology and English Literature are basically the same: just different ways of explaining people.*

*That’s it! I’ll become a psychologist. Charles’ll be impressed. We’ll get married and have beautiful smart kids.*

*I’m going to have to continue freelancing to support myself. That means staying here. My GPA isn’t all that good. Will that matter? Even with my really bad high school GPA, colleges invited me to apply. How different can grad school be? Tomorrow, I’ll look up schools in Chicago.*

\* \* \*

Three tall windows in her living room, lower panes pushed up behind the top panes, gifted Susan with the green smell of the year’s first fresh-cut grass. Mature maples, each in its own little square plot of land bounded by sidewalks, were leafing out right at eye level. The yeasty, sweet smell of cinnamon buns from the bakery on the corner made her mouth water. Baroque cello from an apartment two buildings over calmed her enough to think about the letters she’d been avoiding since the last one arrived yesterday.

She’d applied to psychology programs at the University of Chicago, Loyola, Northwestern, DePaul, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and Roosevelt. A brass letter opener lay next to the six envelopes piled at one end of the coffee table. At the other end, where she usually sat, tea leaves were waiting for hot water in the strainer basket of a black stone Chinese teapot. Next to the teapot was an oversized, porcelain thimble, open end up and a sliced mango on an antique dessert plate with delicate flowers painted around its white rim.

She turned toward the kitchen in response to the teakettle’s shriek.

Returning, she poured hot water over the lea leaves and inhaled the smoky, citrusy scent of the Lapsang Souchong she loved. She eyed the envelopes, three manila envelopes that seemed full and three regular business envelopes that were flat. She poured tea, picked up a slice of mango, and decided to read *Psychology Today* instead.

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Her back doorbell rang.

It was Kasmir, the building’s dark, lanky, thirty-something janitor. “You said you had a problem with your kitchen drain? I could look at it now.” He grinned. “I could look at you now. Got a date?”

“Only with those letters,” Susan gestured toward the cocktail table. “I’m afraid to open them. I applied to grad school. These are their answers. Magic thinking;” she smiled ruefully, “if I look good, I won’t get rejected. These forest green corduroy jeans fit perfectly; make my eyes look greener. The black muscle t-shirt and black Chinese ballet flats complete the Audrey Hepburn gamine look.”

“You look great!”

“Yeah, but I know it won’t change what’s in those envelopes. I chickened out and decided to read instead.”

Kasmir said “I’ll sit with you while you open them. You don’t need to do it alone.”

“You will?” She smiled. “Want some tea? Mango?” She held the plate toward him.

He shook his head.

“Okay.” She sighed. “Business envelopes first. Best for last.”

Her hand trembled over the letter from the University of Chicago, then she quickly handed it to Kasmir with the letter opener. “Here, you open it.”

“We regret to inform you…”

“Damn, okay I knew it. Loyola and Northwestern must be nos too. Here you open one and I’ll open the other.”

In turn, they used the letter opener, then read simultaneously “We regret to inform you…”

Susan laughed. “There must be an all-purpose form letter they use for rejections. Wonder if there’s one for acceptances? Okay, let’s see what’s in this fat one. From DePaul. Course schedule for fall, campus map, Financial Aid application. Where’s the…. Oh, here it is… “Congratulations, we are pleased to inform you …” She quickly scanned the whole letter. “Conditional admission; they want me to complete a whole bunch of undergraduate courses as prerequisites. That’s a bummer.”

Holding the penultimate envelope toward Kasmir, she said, “Here. You open this one. From Roosevelt. When I took the GRE, I met a girl who was just finishing her masters there. Said getting 500 on the psychology exam was a degree requirement.” She frowned. “My score was around 650, and the only psych class I’ve ever taken was Intro. The GRE score Roosevelt requires for graduation is lower than what the other places I applied require for admission.”

He looked into the envelope. “Catalog and other stuff. Letter says, “You have been admitted to the MA in Psychology program at Roosevelt University …” He scanned its brief two paragraphs. “Just a straight acceptance. You’re admitted. Registration Dates. Classes start, etc.”

“Well, that’s better.” She exhaled. “At least I wouldn’t have to do all the extra classes DePaul wants.”

She picked up the last envelope and took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.” Pulling out the cover letter, she read, “’Congratulations on your outstanding academic record. We are pleased accept you into the UICC Psychology program as a Developmental, Experimental student and to offer you a teaching assistantship for the 1982/83 Academic Year. Your advisor will be Professor Samuel Cohen, PhD …’ Hmm, sounds like a form letter to me. No one in their right mind would describe my academic record as outstanding, at least, not in a good way.” She half smiled. “I was expelled at the end of my Freshman year for flunking pretty much everything, After UICC readmitted me, it took four years, until my very last term, before I got my GPA up to the ‘C’ required for graduation.” She quickly scanned the rest of the letter. “No prerequisites. Being a teaching assistant means I get a tuition waiver. No tuition, and a paid job! UICC’s my choice for sure. I’ll call this Professor Cohen in the morning. Since my undergrad degree isn’t in psychology, maybe he can suggest some stuff I can do over the summer to prepare for the fall.

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“Professor Cohen, I got a letter that said you’re my advisor.”

“Yes?” His voice smiled. “Who’s this?”

“Susan David.”

“Miss Davit, I am delighted to hear from you! How’s the weather in Boston? Does this mean you’ve decided on UICC?”

“Yes, I was hoping we could meet and discuss what I could do to prepare for the fall.”

“You’re in town?! How long will you be in town for?”

“I live here.” She said drily, thinking she was just one of hundreds of incoming students and he didn’t know which one she was. “I can easily come to campus.”

“Are you free Tuesday at 10 AM?”

“Yes. I’m really looking forward to meeting you and getting started.”