

James J Antonio

Dot Mader

They were standing there staring at her with frozen, surprised faces. She coiled up again, like a snake about to strike, and shook her little fists at her side. “It's embarrassing, terribly so, asking me that all the time! What, crying to heaven, is wrong with you? Use some discretion!”

She stormed off up the aisle, between the displays of fine china and perfumed candles, her head bobbing loosely, and made her way to the greeting card section. Unconsciously, she began to do some 'busy' work. Crying to heaven, the nerve of those two! She turned, her eyes like glaring hot needles. They were still standing there gawking at her, with the same dumbstruck expressions. She closed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. She moved up and down the aisle rearranging them and replacing those that were sold out. Once in a while a customer came up and asked where such and such a card might be. She'd gesture in the direction and make a comment. “Terribly cold, isn't it?” or “Heavens, I wish spring would hurry along” “It looks just like snow, doesn't it?” Now and again, the girls cast snide sidelong glances.

Her thoughts centered around what the girls had asked. Oh, they had only intimated, but she knew alright. How often are New Year's resolutions successful? How could she? She had been doing the same thing for years. It was like uprooting a big old tree! She wore each pair of socks 2 or 3 weeks like she always had and too bad about them!

Shortly after 5:00 they emerged from the store. They prattled on the sidewalk. Dot crossed the street and stood behind a bench waiting for the bus. She eyed them defiantly. They were so bright and attractive, a couple of spring flowers! Melanie was a brunette with long wavy hair and a sweet flushed face. She wore the latest

apparel and spoke with a coy twang that Dot knew was just a put-on. How it enraged her to hear it in the store, especially in front of young men! Barbara was blond, with short hair framing her chubby, boyish face. She said whatever she wanted, when she wanted and, like Melanie, dressed in chic attire. “Aren't you going to make a New Year's resolution, Dot?”

She shook her fists at her side and averted her eyes. She rolled them up the length of the street in search of the bus. Crying to heaven, I'm sick to death of this! Waiting, waiting! So terribly long! Every night! The ambiance of the street did little to alleviate her frustration. It was the 27th of December, only 2 days after Christmas, and the sight of the candy canes and holly decking out the lamp posts reminded her glumly that the end had arrived. Everything had been cheery and festive. It was over, crash, boom! There were 2, long, dreary months to 'weather' before any sign of spring. She had nothing to look forward to. She glimpsed a few shoppers milling about with bags and parcels. Wrong sizes or defects. She gazed at the steely blue glow hovering in the west, where a clump of wine-colored clouds sneered, “Cold! Cold! The words shivered through her. She glanced across the road, they were gone. She had hardly paid attention to the man sitting on the bench. He turned around, his attention drawn to her by the chattering of her teeth.

“Nippy, isn't it?”

With a start, she looked at him. She didn't know whether to speak or not. He was soft-spoken and she placed him at 50 or so. He had no hat on and his wispy hair danced in the breeze. His face was kind-looking, he had a nice smile. She decided there could be no harm.

“Terribly, yes.”

“Are you waiting for the south bus?”

“Yes?”

“The same.”

He gazed at the street. She noticed what long, slender fingers he had and how gently they caressed the back of the bench. She found him appealing. “Why haven't I seen you before?”

“The firm I work for just opened a new office up here. Today was my first day.”

“What is it you do?”

“I'm an accountant.”

“...Oh, here it is!” She saw it coming.

He was ready to get up. His left hand had already found its way into the pocket of his coat.

A moment later, they were on their way. He had gone to the back and taken out a newspaper. From time to time, she glanced surreptitiously over her shoulder to see if perchance he was peeking out from behind a page. It seemed that hardly any time had passed before the bus drew up in front of a big dark house and he got out. As it pulled away, she watched, and saw that he lived in that very house. He was on the same street as her, even the same side!

She met Mrs. Fletcher, the landlady, sweeping out the small parlor inside the door. She was elderly, with untidy gray hair and a wizened face.

“Late today, eh?” Her head was tipped to the side, favoring an ear.

“Crying to heaven, ma'am, no....Same time every day.”

She unlocked the door to her apartment and slipped inside. Terrible, nosy thing! Terrible, indiscreet thing! For a brief time, she stood there with her back to the door, gazing into the dimness. There was light enough from the street to silhouette most of the furniture. Her life was terribly humdrum. She recalled the accountant. For a moment, her spirits lifted, a flicker of hope. Buoyed by the notion of a possible romance. Goodness, yes, wouldn't that show the two of them! Reality returned. What had she to offer? What charms compared to the beauties?

She switched on the light. The living-room was large, with a high ceiling and a green carpet. Only 2 or 3 pieces of furniture were ever used. The rest were just placed out of the way. Colors clashed: orange sofa; blue, brown, and red armchairs; and gold, green, and white ottomans. Almost every piece a different style. Most of it had been there when she moved in. “Crying to heaven, I wouldn't have it any other way!” A curious thing, there were no books or magazines, the only sign of media intrusion an old TV in front of the inoperable fireplace.

She went to the kitchen. There was a chair beside the fridge, pretty, with a motif of orchids and, as she laid her coat down, she reminisced about her mother's garden out in the country. It was a year since she had left home and the wide open spaces to come and live in the city. A whole year! All she had for companionship was her repertoire of recipes. She made beef stew, 'a la grand-maman'. No matter, she reasoned, I have to eat. Crying to heaven, it might just as well be good food. Setting her jaw, she went to work. When it was all together and

bubbling in a pot, she headed into the bedroom to peruse an old volume on quilt making.

She had left school after grade 11, when she was 18, stayed around the farm for 2 years and, mostly driven by things she had seen on TV, moved to the city. Work was certainly not hard to find, she had gotten the job shortly after arriving. The manager of the stationery store had told her with a chuckle there was always room for an “industrious little country girl.” She was, in fact, little, only about 5 feet tall. Even in her most pleasant moods, there was a protective aura. She had short black hair, brushed back, full black brows, and long lashes. Her eyes were big, bulging like 2 blue bubbles ready to pop. “Just try it!”

Next morning, she felt quite alive and refreshed. She pulled aside the curtain and, sitting up in bed, gazed outside. It was snowing lightly and big flakes were floating down. Oh well, she mused, better than a lot of bluster and wind. She got out of bed and made her way to the washroom, resolved to look the best she could.

She emerged from the house with the look of a real lady about town. Underneath her coat, with its epaulets and brass buckles, she wore her finest suit, a brown wool affair made up of a skirt and tapered jacket. She seemed noticeably taller, her hair was puffed-up with mousse. Seldom, almost never, did she use makeup; today was different, but a tawdry result. When the bus jangled up, she climbed in carefully, paid her fare, and took the first vacant seat. She checked to see if he was on board. Her face registered disappointment. She would just have to wait until later. Anyhow, she tried convincing herself, the dress-up is for the girls. She sat back and watched the giant snowflakes race by. She assumed he began work at a different time.

She dippy-doodled to the store. They were already there, waiting for the manager to come and open up.

“Well, what have we here, a movie star?”

“It looks like it!” Melanie chimed in.

They gloated over her. She didn't want to let them know. She fought back her emotions. “I thought I'd dress up good for a change. Crying to heaven, a girl bores of wearing the same old thing all the time....I met a man yesterday.”

“I don't believe it!” Barbara giggled. “Did he ask you out?”

“Well...kind of.”

“Kind of? What kind of date is that!?”

“Ooooh, I think I know.”

“Thing is,” she glanced from one to the other, “I really never did get to know him at all too well.” She wagged her head. “Bus ride is so terrible short!”

They smirked at each other, nodding with that 'I've-heard-that-before' expression.

“I want to make a New Year's resolution....It sure is time, crying to heaven.”

“What...”

The word had hardly escaped Barbara's mouth when Mr. Gwigwam arrived. He was a gangly man with white hair and a bland look. “Mornin’,” and went to unlock the door.

It was past 11:00 before they got to find out what her New Year's resolution was. She was spraying a shelf with window cleaner when Barbara came up from behind and tapped her shoulder.

“Oh!” She spun around. “Didn't hear you.”

“Listen, I've only got a minute. Old Gwigwam's up the street at the post office. What were you going to tell us?”

She beamed boldly. “I'm going to look like a lady from now on. Crying to heaven, it's time! And for my New Year's resolution, clean socks...It must have been terrible, the smell 'n all.”

“You're not kidding!”

“No matter! It won't be too often I'll be wearing socks. I like the feel of these.” She raised a leg, flaunting pantyhose.

“Terrific!...Listen, Melanie and I are having a New Year's Eve party. Would you like to come?”

“Yes, really I would!”

“And bring your new beau!”

“I will.”

“Time's not definite yet. We'll talk about it at lunch, okay?”

“Yes, wonderful!”

At 5:00, she left them and dashed across the street to talk to him. She felt as happy as she'd ever been. There was nothing like this new acceptance. Now, if only *he* would co-operate! “Hi.”

“Oh, hello.” He turned his gaze from the theater marquee.

“Well, how do you like this side of town?” She had to take the chance.

“It's fine.”

“Mind if I sit? My legs are aching terrible.”

“Of course not.”

“I'm on my feet a terrible lot, and by the end of the day, crying to heaven, my legs ache so.”

“Where do you work?”

“There.”

“The stationery?”

“Yes.” She saw he wore no wedding band. She realized it wasn't quite significant: some men did not wear wedding rings.

“A dash interesting, I suppose.”

“It is, yes. Terribly so.”

Her eyes roamed the street, she saw the words 'New Year's' on the marquee. 'Super New Year's Eve Triple-Header'.

“Have you ever seen 3 movies one after the other?”

“No. Why?”

“Look there.”

When he saw what she was pointing at, he said, “I don't suppose I'd want to. Much less on New Year's Eve!”

“New Year's Eve.” she echoed.

He laid his arm on the back of the bench. “I stay home and watch TV with my cat, glean the financials....Much safer, you know.”

She felt special having his arm almost around her, behind anyway. She imagined his long fingers gently tickling the wood. He must be a bachelor. The word hit home. Up close, he looked younger, maybe 35. His hair was not thin, his face smooth, but pallid. His eyes were small and curious, his nose, short and straight. A mouth so fine that she doubted a harsh word ever came out.

“Crying to heaven, I spend New Year's Eve alone too! No need for 2 of us to be feeling terrible and low! Would you come to a party with me?” Her heart beat fast. Her little fists were clenched tight at her side. The

bus came into view down the street and he got up with no answer at all. She remained where she was, glued to the bench, feeling all that had been built was crumbling like a sand castle.

He turned to her. "Come along. We'll discuss it on the way....I suppose I wouldn't mind a good party for a change."

New Year's Eve, she waited for him in the parlor. It would be her first time out with a man since coming to the city. Her looks were okay, she knew that. Why, she'd gone and spent 2 hours at the beauty parlor and her hair shone like black satin. There was a splash of silver tint as well, for a touch of class. And how could anything be wrong with her dress, black, ankle-length that had cost the better part of 2 weeks pay! Should she act classy and knowledgeable or just be herself? She felt a bit of perspiration on her forehead, he was already late. Crying to heaven, hope he gets here before the old bat's up and about. She went to the window and looked out. The street was cold and desolate, very black. There was no one. She sat down again, thoughts racing. She imagined the worst. Her heart skipped beats, or seemed to. She was queasy. She heard Mrs. Fletcher's door unlock and watched her waddle into the parlor.

The old woman's eyes locked on. "Where you goin' tonight?" She cocked an ear.

She scowled, fists clenched at her side. "Out with a friend."

"Eh?"

"Out with a friend!" She didn't mean to sound rude, it was the only way she ever heard anything.

She drew closer and smiled impishly, her teeth stained. "I know, I know."

It seemed like a long time before there were words. The old woman just stood there and gawked at her. Dot wondered why on earth Charles had to be late on their first date. She was hot all over. "Crying to heaven, Mrs. Fletcher, what are you staring at me for?"

"Eh?"

"Oh...shut up!" She wanted to cry, go and rip everything off, and curl up in bed.

"Good Lord, you're upset. I'll leave you then. Night. Night." She shuffled off.

It was some time before a car pulled up. She rose to her feet and opened the door. When she saw it was only a taxi, she was letdown. Then, it dawned on her: he takes the bus, he probably doesn't own a car! She waited with bated breath, watching, not knowing what to expect. The driver emerged from the car and started

down the walk. She was going to close the door.

“Hey! You! Miss Mader?”

She looked at him oddly. All of a sudden, she felt very cold. Something's terrible wrong. “I am.”

“Charles sent me, told me to tell you he was a little late. Said you two'd save time if I picked you up first.”