

DR. RALPH
by James R. Winter

“What's this?”

Ralph Culter stared at the drink in front of him.

“Laphroaig,” said Gordie, the torund bartender, “compliments of the lady over there.”

At the end of the bar sat a tall, lanky brunette, her miniskirt showing off her long, bare legs. She smiled at Ralph and gave him a little finger wave.

Ralph raised his glass to her and took a sip of the Scotch. “Ah. Single malt.”

“Is that good for your liver, Doc?” asked Gordie.

Ralph jumped off his stool and started his way down toward the brunette. “Best kind of medicine, Gordie.” When he reached the brunette, he said, “Hello.”

She put her white wine to her lips, leaving a bright red stain on the glass when she pulled it away. “Hi. I'm Trina.”

“I just wanted to say thanks for the drink.”

“Well, I just wanted to say, 'Hi.’” She reached out and fingered his tie. “I like your suit.”

“I like it, too.” His eyes followed the line for her blouse to where her cleavage began. She wore no bra. “But not as much as your outfit.”

She giggled. “You're the infamous Dr. Ralph, aren't you?”

“How did you...?”

“Lisa pointed you out,” she said, indicating the hostess.

“Oh. Well. I don't know about infamous, but yes, they do call me Dr. Ralph.”

“And is it true what they say about you, Dr. Ralph?” She put her hand on his knee.

Ralph looked around the room and saw no one he knew from the office or the hospital. “That depends. What do they say?”

She squeezed his knee, leaning in to give him a better view of her cleavage. “I'd love to tell you, if you have the time.”

He checked his watch, not a Rolex, but a damned fine fake. “Well, I only stopped in for a couple of drinks, but... Listen, would you mind having dinner with me? I know this great seafood place over on Inland Avenue.”

She stared back at him with those big, brown eyes, lips slightly parted.

“I don't mean to sound forward,” he said.

She traced a long, red fingernail up his thigh. “I'd love to.”

“Great. Let me go check on a patient. I'll be right back.”

“No, honey,” he said into the pay phone. “Mrs. Owens is still not stable. Dr. Faulkner thinks we might have to pull an all-nighter with her.” Ralph watched Trina from across the bar as she crossed and uncrossed her legs, her finger twirling a wavy lock of hair. “No, no. If he can get her stable, I should be home tonight. Right now? It's touch and go.” When Mrs. Cutler asked Ralph about why he wasn't calling from his cell phone, he said, “Oh. I forgot to charge it up again. It's plugged in on my desk.” Before she could berate him about draining his battery ((*again*)), he added, “Don't worry. I'll pick one up for the car.”

Trina waved to him.

“I have to go, honey,” said Ralph. “Don't wait up. Give my love to the kids.” He hung up.

Trina let Ralph ply her with white wine. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. She said she was a receptionist for some big law firm downtown, but she wanted to quit.

“Ever think of working in the suburbs?” he said.

“Oh, yes,” she cooed. “No parking hassles, no crime.” She smiled broadly, showing off her perfect white teeth. “Lots of shopping.”

“I think I might know of something at Mercy. How do you feel about medical work?”

“I'd love it. I originally wanted to be a nurse.”

“Come by my office tomorrow morning.” He handed her his card for his private practice.

“We'll have a nice, chat about your new position.”

He felt her foot go up his pantleg.

“Why not discuss it after dinner?” she said.

Ralph laughed. “I don't know...”

“We'll go back to my place. It's private.” She pushed her foot farther up his leg. “And

we can discuss whatever you like, however you like it.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Can I ask you something?” said Trina once the waiter had taken their plates.

Ralph put his fork down. Not another one, he thought. Not some lay person wanting him to dole out advice for free. “Trina, really. I don't give out that sort of...” He stopped when her foot slowly pushed its way between his thighs.

“It's not exactly for free, is it? I'm willing to return the favor.”

Ralph sighed. “Well, since we're getting to be such good friends...”

“More than friends, I hope.”

“What's your question?”

“What do you think of Luna-Flow?”

Now that was a helluva question for a romantic dinner. “Luna-Flow?”

“Yes.” her eyes shifted away from him. “It's kind of embarrassing, but I'm... um... not regular.” She pulled her foot back. “If your not comfortable with this, I'll drop it.”

“Oh, no,” said Ralph. “What does your regular doctor say?”

“She's skittish about meds. She won't even write me a prescription for chronic heartburn.”

“I'll write something up for you tomorrow when we're through. I'm a big believer in Luna-Flow.”

“Really?”

“Trina, I promise you it'll work. I even bought stock in the company.” He raised his glass. “Makes you feel like a woman again.”

“I love those ads.” Her foot went back up his pantleg again. “I'll bet you can make me feel like a woman.”

“I'll take good care of you.” He winked at her. “So, do you feel like dessert?”

“Doctor, I ((am)) dessert.”

Ralph started to signal for the check when she grabbed his wrist.

“But,” she said, “I’d love a slice of cheesecake.”

“Of course.”

“Why don’t you order while I freshen up?”

The cheesecake had arrived by the time Trina returned. She sat down, fanning herself.

“Wow,” she said. “I must be turning into a lightweight.” She sat down and smiled at Ralph. “How’s the cheesecake?”

“It’s...” His cell phone vibrated. “Hold that thought. Hello?” He felt his face warm when he heard his wife’s voice. “Er... Hi. I’m...” He covered the phone with his hand. “Could you excuse me a moment,” he said, half-rising.

Trina took a bite of her cheesecake and slowly pulled the fork from her mouth. “Don’t be too long.” She licked her lips.

Ralph scurried back to the coat room. After five minutes, he managed to convince Mrs. Cutler his patient had, indeed, taken a turn for the worst, that he was right now prepping for surgery, and, most importantly, he’d managed to charge his cell phone. By the time he returned, Trina had almost finished her cheesecake.

“Darling,” she said, “you have to try this. It’s sinful.”

“We have to go,” said Ralph.

“Go? Why?” she whined. “Don’t you want that other dessert? I ordered us each one for the road. Laphroaig, like you always drink.”

Ralph spotted the shotglasses full of brown liquid. Looking her over, he noticed her blouse had opened one more button since he’d left the table. He felt hot. “Would you mind a quickie? Maybe at my office?”

She licked her lips again, slowly. “You promise we’ll meet again tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, we can take our time. And everyday afterward if you want.”

“Well...” She picked up a shot glass and raised it. “To us, then.”

Ralph grabbed the shotglass near his own untouched plate. “To us.” He swallowed the shot and enjoyed its smooth burn down his throat. “Single malt. Good stuff.”

Halfway back to the office, Ralph noticed a burn in his chest. Maybe it was the appetizers. They'd had something with jalapeno peppers, which always tore up his stomach. Or maybe it was all the Scotch he'd had that night. He ignored it, putting his hand on Trina's thigh.

"You're pretty forward," he said. "I like that."

She covered the hand with her own. "I know what I want." She nudged his hand further up, pressing it between her legs. "Do you know what you want, Ralph?"

He pulled his hand away as the burn became searing. "Man, what did I eat?"

"Heartburn?"

"Yeah. Really bad."

"Why don't you take Gasterol?" Her tone became sharp. "Guaranteed to stop heartburn for weeks."

Despite the pain, Ralph laughed. "I like those ads."

"I don't," said Trina. "That stuff gave my father-in-law bleeding ulcers."

He didn't really hear her. A film of sweat formed on his forehead, though he couldn't tell whether Trina or the heartburn caused it. "Father-in-law," he said absently.

Trina giggled. "You think you're the only married person in this car?"

He began to feel faint. The car drifted into the next lane. "Oh, God."

"Ralph, you don't look well. Why don't you pull over?"

Ralph guided the car to the side of the road. "Trina, I think I'm having a heart attack."

"It's okay, baby. You're with me, now. Trina's gonna take good care of you."

Ralph began gulping air, but he couldn't get enough. His shoulder and arm began to ache with a squeezing pain. He reached for his cell.

Only Trina snatched it away from him. "Looking for this?" She slipped it in her purse. "We won't be needing it."

He couldn't speak now. He could only mumble, "Why?"

"Why?" said Trina. "Well, first off, you're not having a heart attack. I slipped you a mickey."

Again, he mouthed why, his lungs feeling as though they'd burst.

“Oh, Ralphie, where do I begin? How about my sister? Her name was Maggie. Do you remember Maggie? Maggie Conner? Of course, you do. She was your patient. Until you killed her.”

By now, Ralph's ears roared. He could barely hear, but he clung to Trina's every word.

“Maggie trusted you,” said Trina. “Especially when she developed endometriosis. You know what that is, Ralphie, don't you? Of course. You're an MD.” She laughed. “You also own a lot of Marin Pharmaceutical stock, don't you?”

((Oh, God, please)), he thought, but could no longer say. *Just call an ambulance.* He felt his throat constrict.

“Yes, that's right. I knew you had money in Marin. I found out after Maggie died. Do you know what she died from, Ralphie?”

((I'm going to die of a heart attack, you bitch, if you don't call 911. Oh, Christ!)) He bladder released.

“Luna-Flow,” said Trina, “in rare cases, causes severe bleeding, even hemorrhaging, in patients with endometriosis. Still have confidence in Luna-Flow, Doc?” She smiled as Ralph spasmed twice.

Jesus, it felt like a watermelon had lodged in his chest. Silently, he pleaded with her to call 911. He grabbed his chest as fresh pain exploded at the center.

“Oh, that pain in your chest,” said Trina. “That's another great miracle drug from Marin. It's called Zanzaar. It's a heart medication.”

His eyes widened, though his vision had started to narrow.

“Oh, you've heard of it? Good. Then you know it's a foxglove derivative.” She winked at him. “Virtually undetectable during autopsy. That is, unless someone tells the coroner to look for it.” She opened the door. “Well, Ralphie, look at it this way. I just saved you from an expensive malpractice suit. Think about my sister bleeding to death with the time you have left. Bye, Ralphie. Sorry you won't get to have me for dessert.”

Ralph watched her go, watched her get into a waiting minivan. As he died, he realized she'd climbed into his wife's minivan.

The police found his body the next morning.

THE END