

The Accidental Spy by David Gardner

Excerpt

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both.”

Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”

Spy: “A person employed by a governmental agency to obtain secret information on a hostile country.”

The Philips Dictionary of Espionage

Accidental Spy: “Some poor jerk dragged into a world of trouble.”

Harvey Hudson

Chapter 1: Bunny Ears

Summer, 2019

Harvey Hudson released the steering wheel and swatted at the blue balloon (“Congrats! You Did It!”) that was banging against the back of his head.

What was the ‘It’ for? Someone earned a law degree? Pulled off a bank heist? Successfully underwent potty training? All three?

One day before turning fifty-six, and here he was, delivering balloons. How had he let this happen to him?

He chewed on the last of the Skittles he'd swiped from a bulky candy basket attached to a red balloon shaped like a birthday cake. Too many sweets for some spoiled kid. He was doing the pudgy brat a favor. The Snickers bar was tempting. Maybe later.

Harvey reached across the front seat, grabbed a handful of candy bars from the Skittle-less basket (\$149), and dropped them into its modest neighbor (\$39). He often shifted candy from larger baskets to lesser ones. He thought of himself as the Robin Hood of balloon-delivery individuals.

He'd had just \$87 in the bank a few weeks ago when he'd shambled past a help-wanted sign in the front window of the Rapid Rabbit Balloon Service. He paused and reread the sign. "Part-time Delivery Person Needed. Become a Rapid Rabbit!" Yeah, what the hell. He hurried inside before he came to his senses. He would have taken any gig—balloon-delivery specialist, male stripper, or get-away driver for a grizzled bank robber.

With his part-time job delivering balloons and his full-time work as a beginning technical writer, Harvey could just stay afloat. His ex-wife had cleaned him out.

He double-parked on a smart street of brick-front homes on Boston's Beacon Hill. Hesitating, he clamped the hated bunny ears over his head and attached the spongy red nose. Sighing, he grabbed the \$149 basket and, head down, ambled up the walkway and rang the bell. The balloon bobbed overhead, taunting him.

The woman who opened the door was a slim and pretty brunette in her fifties. She had a narrow face and large, dark eyes.

She was his boss at his day job.

Also his high school sweetheart.

Harvey wanted to disappear into the ground.

Margo took a step back. "Oh."

Harvey pulled off the bulbous red nose and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "Uh...this is where you live?"

Margo shook her head. "I'm here with my daughter for a birthday party."

Harvey shifted from one foot to the other. "I'm...um...delivering balloons just for tonight to help out a buddy who had two wisdom teeth pulled this morning, a professor who lost his job the same time I did."

Margo blinked twice.

“A sociologist,” Harvey added.

Margo gripped the edge of the door.

“Named Fred,” Harvey said.

Margo nodded.

“The guy took the job in desperation because he’s broke, recently divorced, and down on his luck,” Harvey said and realized he was describing himself.

He handed the basket to Margo.

Did she believe him? Probably not. Did the company have a rule against moonlighting? He’d soon find out.

Margo poked around inside the basket. “There’s too much candy in here.”

“At least there aren’t any Skittles.”

Margo selected a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup. “I’ve moved tomorrow’s team meeting up to 10:00 A.M. Did you get my email?”

Harvey nodded.

Was that her way of telling him that moonlighters don’t get fired? He hoped so. He was pathetically unqualified as a technical writer, and his job was in jeopardy.

Harvey hated meetings. Sometimes he thought the software engineers asked him questions he couldn’t answer just to see him squirm. Many were kids in their twenties, making double his salary.

And he hated lying to Margo. At least he could be honest about one small thing. “Actually, this is my night gig. I’ve had it for a few weeks.”

Margo unwrapped the Reese’s, nipped off a corner, chewed and said, “Is that why I caught you asleep at your desk yesterday?”

No, it’s because the job is so goddamn boring. He shook his head. “I wasn’t sleeping. I have the habit of relaxing and closing my eyes whenever I’m searching for the perfect way to convey a particularly difficult concept to our worthy customers.”

“And snoring?”

Margo was smiling now. That same cute smile from high school. He remembered it from the time they’d sneaked a first kiss in the back row of calculus class. The girl he’d loved and lost.

She set the basket down and pulled a twenty from the side pocket of her slacks. “Um...would you...uh...accept a tip?”

“No.”

She shoved the bill into his shirt pocket. “Yes, you will.”

Harvey shifted his weight to his left foot. A liar doesn’t deserve a \$20 tip. At most, a few dimes and nickels, couch-cushion change.

Margo finished the peanut butter cup in silence.

He didn’t quite know what to say now.

Yes, he did know. He should tell her the truth.

He’d outsourced his job to India.

Was that illegal? Probably not. But highly unethical. Would she protect him after he’d confessed? Unlikely, which meant he would lose his job. But living a lie was exhausting and just plain wrong. She’d hired him and trusted him. She deserved better. He cleared his throat, once, twice, a third time. “Margo, there’s something I have to tell you. It seems I—“

“Is that the balloon guy?” a young woman called from inside the house.

“That’s my daughter,” Margo said and picked up the basket. A blue balloon bobbed on a string attached to the handle. “I’ll be right back.”

Harvey stood at the open door, trying to think of some way to soften his upcoming confession. Or maybe just blurt it out and get it over with?

“Happy birthday, Dad!”

The daughter’s voice again from inside.

“Candy and a kid’s balloon again this year! Are you trying to tell me something?”

The daughter laughed.

Harvey recognized the man’s voice.

Tucker Aldrich was the CEO of the company where Harvey worked. He was also Margo’s ex-husband and a first-class dickhead.

So, it meant the balloon and candy basket were for Tucker and not some child. Harvey was sorry he’d passed on the Snickers bar.

The hell with telling the truth.

Margo came back out, holding a glass of white wine. She leaned against the door frame. “What were you going to say earlier?”

“Uh...that you’re an over-tipper.”

“Only when the delivery person is a cute, curly-haired guy with a spongy red nose,” she said and sipped her wine. “Did I mention that the meeting’s moved to 10:00?”

“Yes.”

Silence, then Margo said, “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She closed the door behind her.

Harvey stared at the bronze horsehead knocker. He wanted to rip it off. The door too. He in fact wanted to tear the whole damn building down on Tucker’s head.

Margo hadn’t forgotten that she’d told him about the meeting. Margo was incapable of forgetting. She was warning him to show up.

Team meetings were a nightmare. The scruffy programmers spoke computerese, argued over stuff Harvey didn’t understand, and gleefully pointed out errors in his documentation.

But way off in New Delhi, lovely Amaya understood, and with luck she might save his job.

Tomorrow’s meeting would make or break him.

Harvey shuffled down the walkway, his head lowered, his bunny ears slipping down his forehead. He’d been so shocked to see Margo that he’d forgotten to take them off. One of life’s bad moments.

Still, she had called him cute.

Yeah, sure. He was just hours from turning fifty-six, had found additional gray hairs while shaving that morning, and was thickening around the waist from too many Skittles and Snickers.

Harvey climbed into his car and slumped in the driver’s seat. He was angry with Tucker for stealing Margo and angry at Margo for not offering him a glass of wine. But most of all, Harvey was angry with himself for letting her see him in bunny ears.

When he’d first started making deliveries a few weeks earlier, he’d refused to wear them, then thought, what the hell? Doesn’t everyone at some time want to play the fool? There was no pressure to succeed, to show off, to one-up a colleague.

What if everyone from a prisoner sitting out a life term to the President of the United States had to set aside one day a year and play the fool, to go out in public wearing a spongy red nose and bunny ears?

What-Ifs and Whys had obsessed Harvey as a child, who from morning to night had trailed behind his father and mother and pestered them with questions. (What if there was a ladder to the Moon? What if everyone had four arms? Why is cousin Alice getting those bumps on her chest?)

Later, he would turn his pestering curiosity into a profession. He thought of himself as a 'speculative historian.' (What if the Allies had lost the Second World War? What if Caesar hadn't crossed the Rubicon? What if no one had invented the computer?)

Harvey started the engine, reached over to tap the next address into the GPS, then leaned back.

Why humiliate himself like this? His ex-wife had always insisted he was punishing himself in guilt over his younger brother. Harvey denied this, but he knew she was right.

Enough. He had reached his lifetime quota of humiliation.

Here's another What-If: What if he quit this goddamn job?

Harvey shut off the engine, climbed out of the car, went around back, and popped the trunk.

A dozen balloons bobbed on basket handles, aching to go free.

Harvey tied the spongy red nose to a balloon that read "Get Well Soon!" He cut it loose. Next, he liberated a black balloon picturing a racecar ("Turning Ten!"). Finally, he tied his rabbit ears to a cluster of white orbs trailing a banner that read, "Congrats, New Parents!" and set the bunch free.

He watched until the last of the balloons caught the breeze and disappeared into the night sky.

He slammed the trunk closed, climbed into his car, and right away started to fret. What if a balloon floated to the harbor for some sea creature to swallow (Headline: "Reckless Ex-Professor Kills Orca!").

Just one more reason to be angry with himself.