

Paper Airplane

Nora R. Hobbs



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The Gallery

After lunch, Susan took up her rather large soft leather purse and slung it over her shoulder. By the time she reached the sidewalk, the rain that had started just after breakfast had stopped, but water dripped from everything. The sun was peeking around the clouds the city used for privacy as it bathed in the rain. Susan drew in a breath of sweet-clean air. She stood on the sidewalk with her hand out until a cab pulled up and she drew her hand down the side of the vehicle and found the door handle. She gave the driver the address and settled back for the ride.

“Nice rain,” the driver commented.

“Yes, it was,” Susan returned.

The driver stopped the car and turned to her, “Two fifty,” he said.

Susan gave him three bills and told him to keep the change.

As she stepped out of the cab, she stood for a

moment. She loved the feel of the sun on her face. She took out her sunglasses from her purse and put them on with a smile, lifting her head to catch the soft wind that blew in her short hair. There is nothing like the smell of a city just washed by rain. Someone went by with a dog and it barked at her. A woman hurried by and she heard a baby whimper. She smiled and went on into the store in front of her.

This was Arnie's Gift and Curio Shop. She was a regular customer and loved to browse the new items when they came in. "Afternoon, Susan," Arnie called as she entered. "How is my favorite customer?" He was a Jewish man and she liked him very much. He was never too busy for a short conversation.

"I'm just fine," she smiled at his friendly tone. "Did you sell any of my paintings?"

"Not lately, little one," his words were tender.

"Anything new?"

"On the shelf to your right," he called to her. She busied herself looking at the new souvenir trinkets. There was a small replica of the space needle and a fuzzy little cat. The little bell on the door tinkled and she heard the footsteps of two men on the floor.

"We need to talk," one said to Arnie in a gruff voice.

"I told you I didn't want to do business with you," Arnie said, and his voice was uneasy. Then there was the shuffle of feet, Arnie grunted out a protest and his voice drifted away as the door behind the counter slammed close.

Susan squeezed her eyes close tightly and caught her breath. It was clear that he did not want this encounter and that made Susan nervous. There was nothing she could do about it, so she just went on examining the items on the shelf. She could hear the voices through the door, but she could not hear what was being said. The tone of the voices was angry and brutish. She started to leave, but if she did, they might hurt Arnie and she wouldn't be there to get him

some help.

She wanted them to know she was there and could identify them. She turned and went up to the counter with the sand dollar she was looking at and banged on the service bell sitting on the counter. Shortly the door opened and the three men came out. Arnie came to the counter and the two other men went on out.

“That will be three dollars and twelve cents,” he said and his voice showed stress.

“Are you all right, Mr. Haverchak?” she asked with concern.

“Yes, honey,” he said nervously. “I’m just fine. Did you hear what was said in there?”

“No, I just heard the anger in their voices. I was frightened for you.”

“Listen to me, girl. Forget what happened here. You didn’t hear anything, you understand. Nothing!”

She could hear fear in his voice and she nodded, “Yes, sir.” She had heard something that could bring her into danger and she knew that Arnie was trying to protect her. He gave her the change and squeezed her hand around it.

“Remember,” he cautioned. Again, she nodded and went out. She was glad to get outside the store for the atmosphere in there was charged and heavy. She was sure something bad had just happened and her friend was in the middle of it, but she was at a loss to know what to do. She had planned to go to the fashion shop just down the street, so she turned with a sigh and walked slowly. She was in no hurry. There were not many people on the street now, possibly because it was near lunchtime.

The person walking behind her stopped, when she stopped to enjoy the smell of the baked goods coming from a little bakery. She considered going in to get something to take home with her, but then thought better of it. She did not need the extra weight it would bring. She sighed, took

one last sniff of the air and then went on. The person following her began to follow again. That made her nervous, especially after what happened in Arnie's.

She stopped again in front of the clothing shop and the man behind her stopped, too. Was he deliberately following? She was at the shop, but now she was too upset to enjoy trying on different items. She sighed and decided to do it another day. She did not want to let the man know she knew he was there. She would feel very foolish if he was just going her way, but what about the fact that when she stopped, he stopped? She went on down the street just to see if the person really was following her. She could easily hear his footsteps on the sidewalk. He was a heavy walker, a big man, she was sure.

When she came to the end of the block, she turned the corner and went far enough to know that he was coming behind her. Fear rose up in her and clutched at her throat. She hurried over to the edge of the sidewalk and began to try and flag a cab. The person behind her had stopped again, too. She breathed a sigh of relief as a cab came to a stop for her. She was beginning to calm down by the time she paid her fare back to the hotel.

She welcomed the feel of the familiar lobby and allowed its warmth to engulf her. Just off the hotel lobby was a small alcove about ten feet deep and twenty feet long, and the walls lined with oil paintings.

In her room on the top floor, she fixed a cold glass of iced tea and drew comfort from the security of her environment. That man following her had disturbed her more than she knew, for she kept thinking about the men at Arnie's store, and then she remembered that one of them walked heavily, like the man who had followed her. They must think she heard what they said to Arnie.

Susan went to the computer and typed out a message.

She went to the phone and dialed her sister's number. When she answered, her voice was so soothing.

“Are you busy?” Susan said into the receiver.

“Honey, I’m never too busy for you.”

“Well, what I meant is do you have a showing this afternoon?”

Susan heard some pages turn and then her sister said, “Not until late this afternoon. You want to do lunch?”

“Yes, that would be wonderful. I’m feeling kind of lonely.”

“Want to go to Karlie’s?”

Karlie’s was her favorite restaurant. It had a nostalgic atmosphere and gave her a warm, homey feeling. “That sounds good to me. I’ll meet you in front of the hotel.”

“Great! I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

The lunch was scrumptious. Not only was the food good, but also she needed the good company of her older sister. By the time Susan returned to the hotel, she had put the incident of the morning behind her. She would like to have told her sister about it, but that would once again bring up the argument of her living alone at the hotel and she did not want to go there, not today.

Later in the evening, she came down into the lobby to view her paintings. Susan bumped the sign that stood on a metal stand as she entered the alcove. Someone had moved the sign. It read 'Oil Paintings by Susan Brimwood'. She moved the sign back in place in the center of a wide doorway giving entrance into this alcove room, and went to stand before a painting. She liked to do this periodically, mostly to listen to the comments of the people as they looked at the collection of twelve paintings. She was looking at the painting in front of her, side-stepped to go to the next one and bumped into someone.

“Excuse me,” she apologized still looking at the painting.

“That's okay,” a soft male voice answered. Susan could tell he was somewhat taller than she was, for the voice was coming down to her and it echoed with warmth,

but she did not look at him. She guessed from his voice that, maybe, he was near her age, in his late twenties or early thirties. She continued to look at the painting.

"These paintings are hauntingly beautiful," he volunteered and she caught the scent of his after-shave. Susan heard him move away and sidestepped again.

"Do you think?" She tilted her head.

"Yes," he returned.

"I like the one where the couple is walking in the sunset on the beach," Susan offered.

"I haven't seen that one, yet."

"It's on down a few."

"Do you come here often?" Susan was still looking at the painting. The sound of his voice changed some and she knew he was looking at her.

"Every so often," she returned and looked in his direction. "The paintings are for sale."

"I see that," he had turned back to look at the paintings. "Pretty reasonable prices, too."

"Well, the painter is contemporary and not well-known." She waited a few seconds and then said, "They replace the ones sold with new ones."

He did not reply and moved on. Susan followed and stood quietly beside him. "This one is nice," he offered.

"Uh-huh," she nodded.

When he moved, she stayed beside him, going from painting to painting. After a short time, he said. "Is this the sunset painting you were talking about?"

"Yes," Susan acknowledged.

"It's okay, but I like some of the others better. The couple seems obscured, kind of like they are there, but not really there. Ghostly!"

"That's what I like about it. It is, maybe, the past or the future, not the present like most paintings."

"Interesting," he returned and she knew he was looking at her again. She looked at him and smiled.

"I'm a little strange," she confessed with a shrug.

"Not really," he said. "A little romantic, I think." This brought some color to Susan's face and she turned back to the painting.

They exchanged comments as they progressed through the paintings room, a thing Susan loved, and when they were at the last one, he turned to her and said, "Would you care for a cup of coffee in the dining room?"

This was an older two star hotel. It was not a luxury hotel, but it was nice and just off the downtown area of Seattle, Washington. Living here was not that much more expensive than renting a flat and here, she had access to the dining room, swimming pool, and maid service. Although Trena, her older sister, kept insisting that she come live with her, her husband and two children, she liked the feeling of independence.

"Yes, I would like that," Susan nodded. He took her arm in his and led her to a table in the dining room and held the chair for her. Susan felt strange, having coffee with this man. She didn't even know his name.

When the waiter came to their table, he said with a slight bow, "Good evening, Susan." Then he turned to her escort, "...Sir."

"Good evening, Charles," she smiled at him. After they made their order and Charles went away, the man said, "Susan?"

"Yes," she smiled at him.

"Not Susan Brimwood, the artist?" Susan nodded and he let out an audible gasp.

"Wow, I can't believe I'm sitting across the table from Susan Brimwood."

Susan laughed, "It's no big deal. I'm not famous."

"I'm Troy Garrasen. I'm not famous, either," he laughed.

"Nice to meet you, Troy."

"I take it from the waiter's greeting that you frequent

here often.”

“I live here,” Susan replied, “on the top floor.”

“I live in my suitcase, but I'm here on business quite often.”

“What kind of business are you in?”

“I'm an insurance investigator,” he explained. “The company I work for has a lot of accounts here in Seattle. He leaned back in his chair. “It keeps me pretty busy and on the move.”

“I can imagine,” Susan raised her eyebrows.

“What do you do when you're not painting?”

“I'm a outsource executive,” she sighed. The title sounds impressive, but all she did was stuff envelopes for a retail outlet business. With that and her other check, she lived pretty well.

“There you are,” her sister's voice interrupted their small talk. She drew near and smiled at Troy.

“Troy, this is my sister, Trena Harmon. Tre this is Troy Garrasen.”

Troy stood and nodded at Trena. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Want a cup of coffee,” Susan asked.

“No, I just came to see if you needed anything before I went home,” Trena addressed Susan.

Susan stood and looked at Troy, “Nice to have met you. I need to run now. Stay safe.”

“You, too,” Troy nodded and Susan and Trena left him to the remainder of his coffee.

“Sold any more paintings?” Trena asked as they went up in the elevator.

“Just the one last week,” Susan informed.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, you were the medicine I needed.”

Susan's sister was a tall slim woman with deep hazel eyes and rich lips that thinned into a smile. Her hair was short like Susan's, but it did not have the frosted highlights

that Susan's had. Both had almost black hair and their resemblance was striking. Susan was a little fleshier than Trena, with blue accents in her hazel eyes.

"Who was that nice man?" Trena asked and there was hope in her voice.

"I just met him in the painting gallery and he asked me to have a cup of coffee with him. He seems nice and his voice is sincere."

"He is handsome and wears expensive suits. I think it's wonderful."

"Don't get your hopes up. We both know that nothing will come of it."

Susan knew Trena was hoping that she would find a husband and have a normal life. She had little hope of that and it was hard for Trena to deal with, and at times even for Susan. Sometimes, she was so lonely that she cried herself to sleep. In her room, Trena set up Susan's workstation and put some more paint on her pallet.

"Come home with me, Susie, and have dinner with us," Trena begged. There was nothing Susan would like better, but the truth of the matter was that being around Brad and the kids just made the loneliness worse when she had to come home. Trena had everything Susan ever wanted, a happy married life with a loving husband and two wonderful kids, but for Susan, it only served to remind her of what she could not have. It was just too painful.

"Thanks, Sis, but I think I'll stick around here and..."

"And what?" Trena sighed. "Susie, I worry about you. Why do you isolate yourself from the people who love you?"

"I don't isolate myself. I just like being independent. Come on, Tre. Please, just give me that much freedom."

"Okay, honey," Trena gave her a warm hug. "You call me, if you need anything."

"I will," she promised and went to the door with Trena. "I know I'm a pain to you, but I love you."

“Oh, honey,” Trena said with emotion. “You’re not a pain, and I love you, too.”

Susan had a nice size room with a large living space. There were sliding glass doors that opened out onto a small balcony and this is where she went. Standing by the railing, the wind tugged at the soft curls around her face and below, the distant sound of traffic drifted up to her and blended with the sound of pigeons on the roof across the street. Her senses were bombarded with the smells that came from the streets, mingled with the smells that drifted from the surrounding rooms: perfume, food, alcohol and flowers. A huge wooden flowerpot sat on the balcony, sending out the aromas of the flowers blooming in it. The smell that came to her now was her most favorite smell. It was the smell of rain in the air. It would be raining in a short while.

Rain in Seattle was nearly always cold, even in the summer, but Susan loved to stand on the balcony and let it drench her. In her imagination, she let it carry her away into realms not seen. Into worlds she could only dream about, standing under a waterfall in a tropical paradise, being splashed by the water as she canoed down a fast moving river or standing under a shower with a handsome man, being held in his arms and kissed romantically. She had quite an imagination and she used it to bring some wonder and pleasure into her dark life. She sighed deeply, went back inside and went to her workstation, beginning to stuff envelopes and put them in boxes.

After a while, she went over to a canvas that sat on an easel and lightly ran her fingers over the picture, seeing in her mind what to add to it. However, she was not in the mood to paint. She went to the computer, instead, and typed out a message.

'I long to be held in a man's strong arms, to find someone out there as lonely as I am.'

'Lonely Girl'

She printed it out and meticulously folded it into a small paper airplane. Then she went out onto the balcony and tossed it into the air. The wind caught it and it sailed away into the heart of the city. She stood there for a long time and then went back to her work at the table that sat against the wall on the left side of the entrance door. A few feet into the room from it was a coffee table sitting in front of a sofa in the middle of the floor. At the end of the sofa, near the door, was an end table with a telephone on it and on the other end of the sofa, instead of an end table, there was a computer with a printer.

After a while, her attention was drawn to the sound of distant thunder. Just off the living space was a small dining area with a kitchenette where she prepared meals in the microwave and made coffee. This is where she went now and took a small package of meat out of the refrigerator to make a meatloaf. She peeled potatoes and carrots with a peeler, added that to the dish around the meatloaf and put it in the microwave.

The bedroom was large with a standard bed, chest of drawers and a dresser with a round mirror. To the right in here was a door into a bath that contained a shower/tub, plus the other necessities, and a small closet. Susan bathed, and put on soft pink pajamas. She stood before the mirror and fluffed her hair with a hair pick. It was just habit to stand before the mirror. It was the game she played with herself, growing up, to make herself feel more normal.

Later, after preparing the bed for the night, she went and sat down at the computer.

'I dreamed that I was with a handsome man and we were so in love. But it was only a dream. Do dreams come true?'

'Lonely Girl'

She printed out the page, folded it into a paper airplane and then went out on the balcony, casting it out on the wind.