

Waiting for Wanda

by Dean West

You couldn't tell by looking but Wanda was older than the Universe.

Through the years, she'd taken care of herself, eating a diet rich in leafy greens and washing her face with an aloe vera astringent each night. Anyone who walked up to her bullet-proof window at the Department of Motor Vehicles might guess that she was in her late thirties, maybe early forties but nowhere near fourteen billion years old.

A few steps away from Wanda's window, a short balding man in his seventies stood at the front door of the DMV arguing with the security guard. The little man mumbled something under his breath and then yelled out, "All of you are rabbits headed for the slaughter house." The guard rested his fingers on the butt of his revolver and sighed, bored with the tiny drama as the little man's eyes crisscrossed the room, searching for acknowledgement. But Wanda never looked up. She'd heard it all before. After the big bang, things settled down into some kind of predictability. Nothing surprised her.

If the little man believed anyone would help him then he was a fool, thought Arthur Schwartz, sitting silently in the back row waiting his turn with Wanda. And why rabbits? Rabbits never went to a slaughter house. Rabbits died in the road, run over by cars, shot by prepubescent boys or eaten by dogs but never slaughtered in mass. It didn't make any sense, thought Art and he wanted to ask the small man if he had meant sheep instead of rabbits. But the little man's shoulders sank with surrender and he turned and walked outside into the rain. One less vying for Wanda's attention, one less standing in the way, figured Art. The security guard relaxed as the glass door shut with a hiss.

Why rabbits and not sheep? Art frowned to himself and thought once more how crazy the world was, crazy as it was old. But Art himself had grown old waiting for Wanda. Inside his chest, his heart scarcely beat, a tiny contraction forcing a worn ventricle to slowly open; enough to keep his watery blood flowing, to cling to hope when all around him cuddled with despair. A casual passerby would not have seen his chest move or heard a murmur of breath. His eyes closed tight, he showed few signs of life until...until... until... out of the loud speaker in the ceiling, her ethereal voice announced,

“Number one-hundred ninety-eight. Next.”

Like a long dormant reptile frozen in primordial mud, Art's eyelids opened a fraction and he focused on the ticket clutched between his fingers.

It won't be long, now. He started to smile at this fact but stopped and remembered why he was here, in this horrible place seated on a hard molded plastic chair in an airless room surrounded by forced desperation.

“...two hundred and two. Next”

Art lurched, disturbing the Indian woman sitting beside him and rose to his feet, unsteady yet determined. His heart, sensing a turning point, beat faster and he sucked in a chest-full of air.

That's my number, he attempted to say but no sound came out. He swallowed the staleness and tried again. But before new words could form in his throat, the voice from the ceiling came down again like manna from heaven.

“For the last time, whoever has number two hundred and two, step up to the window.”

How he loved her voice - a choir of desire from high. Then he watched Wanda place a placard in her window with the words *Closed for lunch* and his heart followed suit.

She picked up a brown paper sack, covered her shoulders with a yellow plastic raincoat and slipped out the back of her cubicle. Strolling past the grinning security guard, she didn't acknowledge him and the door hissed behind her. Art hurried to catch up, his eyes locked to the floor to avoid the guard's attention. *Make no sign that you're alive or the policeman will notice you, tell you to stop, question your whole life, and ask for an explanation. Nazis, Brown Shirts, Cossacks, southern sheriffs, all the same - authority.*

But it didn't work. "Where you going, old man?" The guard held his arm out, blocking the way.

"I've remembered an important engagement...I'll return later."

"You'll lose your place in line, have to start over again. Is it worth that?"

Art broke down and spoke the truth for once. "I don't care anymore. I need to see Wanda," he cried.

"Don't we all," said the guard.

Art thought he saw a tear forming in the guard's eye but wasn't sure.

Outside, Wanda hurried to a rusty 1972 Pinto in the employee's parking lot where she sat silently eating a wheat sprout salad with yogurt dressing. Without considering the consequences, Art swung the passenger door open wide and sat down, slamming the tinny door behind him but never looking in her direction — he'd never

been able to look into the face of God. Wanda didn't offer to share her pickle but stared straight ahead at the rain running down the windshield.

After a long period of awkward silence, he turned toward her and asked, "Why rabbits to the slaughter?"

"Free will," said Wanda and Art shook uncontrollably.

He finally gathered himself and asked, "I thought there might be a plan, some meaning to all this?"

"There is a plan. You can be a rabbit or a sheep. The choice is yours."

"But, but, but...there's no difference between the two.

"Really? I always thought they had nothing in common."

Images of small furry animals bounced around inside Art's head like a lost tennis shoe in an empty dryer until he couldn't tolerate it in any longer. "Why are you so damn enigmatic?" he pleaded, burying his head between his knees to stem the rising nausea.

"Look mister, I'm a temp clerk at the DMV. I have good days and bad days and worse days like everyone. If you want to renew your license, I'm your girl but if you want the meaning of life, check with Ronda at the Social Security office."

Throwing himself on her mercy, Art confessed. "I don't drive and I had a bad experience with Social Security,"

"Then why are you wasting my time...care for a kosher pickle? They're way too salty for me and you know what salt does to your arteries."

Art accepted the half eaten pickle and nibbled the end, enjoying the tartness of garlic and vinegar on his tongue. Outside, on the rain soaked sidewalk, the little man appeared once again and began to disrobe, throwing first his shirt, then his pants, and finally his underwear into the gutter until he stood naked before all God's creatures. Art noticed the dynamite taped to the little man's chest but didn't say anything to Wanda, waiting for her to explain what it meant.

Wanda used the Pinto's lighter to light an un-filtered Camel, picked a shred of tobacco off her lip before rolling down her window and yelling out at the man.

"You think it's that easy? If all it took was blowing up the place, we'd all have dynamite strapped to our chest."

The little man ignored Wanda's criticism, trying his best to light the fuse but the rain extinguished one match after the other.

Wanda turned to Art and asked, "...how's the Kosher?"

"Salty...but very good."

The security guard finally noticed the naked man, hurried out to the sidewalk, drew his revolver and leveled the gun with both hands.

Art peaked over the dashboard and asked Wanda, "Will he shoot him?"

"Hush! Don't say a word, just watch."

"You're not going to do anything?"

“What would be the point of that?” Wanda answered. Art curled into the shape of five-week old fetus and waited for the explosion.

Suddenly thirsty from the salt, he raised his head from the cigarette butt covered floor and asked Wanda a question. “What if I bought a car, learned to drive and came to see you about a license?”

“What kind of a car would you buy?”

Oh, I don't know, maybe a Volkswagen. Something economical. I'm on a fixed income,”

“Do you really want to drive a car or is this just an excuse to get inside my pants?”

It was then that Art had the revelation. But like all great revelations, he immediately forgot it at the sharp crack of the shot, the splatter of glass and warm blood across his face as a bullet entered Wanda's forehead.

He screamed like a rabbit as Wanda's head fell back, the smoke from her Camel still curling toward the ceiling.

Seeing the results of his hasty aim, the security guard placed the barrel of his revolver between his teeth and pulled the trigger. Art Schwartz screamed again, making the little suicide bomber jump and drop his water soaked matches.

When Art woke that morning, he had no idea his life would take this turn - divinity dead, authority's brains splattered all over the sidewalk and a little naked man tapping on his side window. As was his habit each morning, Art had place two eggs in his microwave egg cooker, carefully puncturing the yokes with a fork and setting the timer for one minute and thirty seconds. Usually, this gave him just

enough time to relax at the kitchen table and ponder the meaning of his existence while the eggs poached. Or usually did, but this morning, when the timer rang, he pulled the eggs out of the microwave and they were raw, uncooked, perfect spheres of yellow cradled in a clear liquid like tiny galaxies. That's why he sought out Wanda.

"Go away, little man," Art whispered, trying his best to ignore the insistent tapping on the Pinto's window.

Outside in the rain, the little man pantomimed a match lighting a fuse. Art sadly shook his head. "I don't smoke... I don't have any matches." The little man then pantomimed lowering the window by cranking his hand. Art followed the instructions but maintained his reserve, lowering the window only half an inch. With salvation in sight, the little man pushed the end of the fuse through the crack and smiled.

"I told you once, I don't smoke and even if I did, why would I light your fuse? I'm not going to help you blow yourself up."

The little man frowned and almost cried.

"Does it mean that much to you?" asked Art.

The little man nodded and Art pushed in the cigarette lighter.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you..."

"What?" Art jerked when Wanda spoke, juggling the red hot lighter from one hand to the next.

"...I wouldn't buy a Volkswagen," Wanda said.

I thought you were dead!"

"Nothing dies forever but what I mean is... it's up to you. It's your money, your free will but Adolph Hitler designed the Volkswagen and you know how he treated sheep."

"Jesus Christ! It's not fair. Micro-waved eggs should cook the same every morning."

"Cholesterol blocks the arteries."

Art grabbed the end of the fuse, held the red hot lighter close to the tip, and looked into Wanda's eyes. "I'm tired of this. I want answers and answers now. Don't give me any of your mystical bullshit or I'll blow us all to hell."

Wanda picked another Camel from the pack on the dashboard. "Then buy a new microwave," she said as she leaned over, cradling Art's hands to steady the shaking while she lit the cigarette. Calmness overwhelmed him as he smelled the fragrance of incense drifting from her hair - strange, wonderful, and out of this world.

Wanda leaned back in her seat and blew a perfect smoke ring that lingered, slowly spinning in space.

"So...you never answered my question," Wanda said.

"What question?"

"Your motivation for buying a car...is it just to get into my pants or are you really interested in finding the truth?"

"Maybe."

To be continued...

