

Looper

by Kip Cassino

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The burning bush leaned over the bar, demanding another drink. Levi the bartender was not inclined to deny him. Yahweh's libation of choice tonight was vodka by the water glass, brand unimportant, ice optional.

Jose, sitting a few seats away, saw a different picture. In his mind, a heavily-feathered angel made the demand. To Ravi, sitting on the other side of the same bar, it looked like Shiva, rattling the empty glass in one of her six blue hands. Chen, who was closer than either of them, saw a revered ancestor request the additional round.

Before Levi could turn to act, whoever it was fell from his stool. As he did, a halo-like device dropped from his head. By the time he slumped to the tavern's floor, he became a short, stocky man in a stained, ill-fitting grey suit. The halo device remained on the bar. The man rolled over and began to snore.

All four men yelled the same curse—almost in unison, proving perhaps that we are all more alike than different.

Less than a minute later the tavern's door slammed open. A platoon of very large, determined men rushed in and blocked all exits. At their front, a slightly smaller man wearing a Groucho Marx mask reached into his jacket and produced an official-looking ID. "It's a good thing there's only four of them," he said over his shoulder.

"OK, everybody on your feet," the man continued, speaking now to Levi and the others. "Federal government. Official business. You're all going to come with me."

Hurrying to the bar, he gingerly retrieved the halo device and dropped it into a large briefcase he carried. "Take them out," he muttered to his team. The three patrons and their bartender were quickly hustled into waiting vehicles. Their former heavenly vision, still snoring loudly, was handcuffed and carried from the tavern as well.

Special agent Randy Thayer removed his glasses and nose-piece as he slid into the big black SUV. He called in his report as his convoy began its trip back to headquarters. "Looper and sixteen coming in," he said tersely. "Yes, we got the loop. No trouble. We'll be back in about twenty. Looper's name is Borissov. Todor Borissov—out of the Bulgarian Consulate."

Thayer watched the streets slide by as his car sped uptown. "Damn loopers," he thought to himself. "Nothing but trouble."

Early the next morning, Thayer had finished tucking Borissov (AKA Yahweh) into his cell. It was no good interrogating the looper—not until he'd slept off the worst of his stupor, anyhow. Thayer rubbed his tired eyes. The pick-up had been simple enough. Thank God the guy was already passed out. When loopers decided to resist, things could get very messy. No, the little guy in the shabby grey suit wasn't the problem. The fifteen people in the holding tank, scraped from the four bars he'd visited: they were the problem.

Six were as drunk as the looper. They'd be little trouble. Each would wake up and wobble home, sure he'd had a bad nightmare. Four were bartenders, sober and convinced they'd seen visions. That left five other patrons in various stages of inebriation, quite able to remember what they thought they had seen as well. Each of the nine would have to be drugged, hypnotized, and coaxed through suggestion to believe that their memories were wrong. The process was only partially successful at best. At some subconscious level, all of them would retain memory of what they had perceived.

Thayer sighed, finished a lukewarm cup of coffee, and started for the debriefing cells. It would be a long night. As he looked out his office window at the street below, he wondered what dark government lab had spawned the loop. Truth often beggars fiction. In fact, the loop was the product of a single, lonely man looking for love.

Everybody agreed that Arnie Lustiger was unattractive. Though small and thin of frame, he somehow managed to support a protuberant pot belly. In effect, he was shaped something like a bowling pin. To add insult to injury, his personal hygiene left much to be desired – from his thin, stringy hair to the often unwashed tips of his overly large feet. His complexion was unfortunate, his grey teeth were crooked, his fingernails chewed to the quick. He had few friends, and fewer admirers.

Even Arnie's worst detractors had to admit he was very, very smart. He graduated from high school at fourteen, and received his first Ph.D. before he was twenty. Molecular biology, chemical engineering, nuclear physics—by the time he was thirty he had advanced degrees in each of these, and more. His parents' bequest left him without need of income for the rest of his life. Their largesse aside, he collected enough consulting fees each year to make him wealthy in his own right. He ran a laboratory on the Hudson River staffed by more than fifty professionals and administrators. Business was brisk and continuous. Ugly and onerous though he was, it seemed Arnie Lustiger had carved a comfortable place for himself in society.

Unfortunately, Arnie had a self-image problem. He didn't belittle himself. On the contrary, Arnie saw himself as a very desirable man. He could not understand why women didn't swoon at his feet. Weekends found him trolling the bars and clubs of Manhattan, persistently attempting to forge conquests that were never consummated. When it was gently suggested that perhaps the generous application of money would alter his chances, Arnie reacted with shock

and disgust. “Are you saying I gotta pay for it?” he bellowed. Staff who mentioned such a solution were let go on the spot.

Eventually, Arnie had to admit to himself that the ladies were not very interested. He decided to use his knowledge to change his odds. After closeting himself in his lab for almost a month, he emerged wearing an apparatus that looked something like a scuba diver’s rig. He marched over to the desk of a pretty young receptionist—a young lady who had always been primly distant to him in the past. She looked at him and frowned, then looked away. Meanwhile, nozzles around the mask Arnie wore gurgled and puffed, and small lights winked on and off. Momentarily, she looked back ... and smiled.

“Kiss me,” Arnie said.

“You bet, lover,” the receptionist purred. Rising from her desk, she rushed to Arnie and planted a long, wet signal of affection on his parted lips. When she stopped to breathe, he pushed her away and tramped back into his lab.

“Too big and clumsy,” he muttered as he slammed the door.

A week later, Arnie emerged again. His bulky apparatus was now replaced by something the size of a top hat. As before, he marched to the receptionist’s desk.

The young lady who had been there before was gone. Word had it she eloped with her boyfriend the evening after Arnie’s initial experiment. She had been replaced by a doughty, middle-aged matron whose stern demeanor discouraged visitors.

As he stood before her, the apparatus on his head twinkled and hissed. The receptionist frowned, then blinked, then smiled broadly. “Oh, Clyde,” she gushed, “have I been waiting for you!”

She vaulted from her desk, swept Arnie from his feet, and began undressing them both on the reception area’s floor. Arnie managed to get back to his feet and scampered back into the lab. “Overdid it!” he bawled as he slammed and locked the door. The matron beat on the lab’s door with a chair until she was subdued and sedated by security staff. When revived, she quit on the spot and left—muttering her intention to book an immediate flight to Brazil.

Several days after that, on a Friday afternoon, the lab’s door opened once more. Arnie emerged. To his staff’s great relief, he wore no apparatus anybody could discern (there had been great difficulty getting anyone to man the receptionist’s desk). Instead, he carried a small overnight bag and called for his car. “Going into the city for the weekend,” he announced as the car came around. But when next Monday came, he was nowhere to be seen. Nor was he at work the following Monday, nor the Monday after that. When he finally appeared, a full month later, he brought his new wife with him.

His bride was Vivian Luck. Before Arnie she had been well on her way to a successful career on Broadway. While Vivian wasn't the best looking young woman in Manhattan, she got far more than her share of casting calls. She'd worked the chorus in a number of Broadway and off-Broadway shows. Vivian's mouth was too wide for her to be called beautiful, but it generally fell into a smile that was both open and warm. Like most dancers, she had a slim figure and dynamite legs. Tawny brown eyes and (real) red hair completed the picture. She had lots of men friends, but nobody special. Vivian kept her men at arm's length, for the most part. She liked her independence and wanted to keep it for a while. That said, she was mightily surprised to wake up in a strange hotel room one morning, with a large diamond ring on her finger and a snoring lump next to her on a rumpled king size bed.

Vivian's first thought was to wake the lump and see who he was. She immediately checked that impulse. She decided to try remembering the events that had led her to this situation first. Thinking hard, she could recall drinks at a Soho watering hole, and ... vaguely ... meeting a man she very much wanted to know better. Some kind of celebrity? She couldn't be sure. Then more drinks, more want, then this. But where this was, and who the man next to her was, eluded her recollections. Had there been a plane flight? The memories were disconnected and fuzzy. A headache that beat at her temples like a brass drum made concentration difficult.

She took another look at her bed partner, who was smothered in sheets. Only the top of his head was visible, but it wasn't a promising preview. The hair looked greasy and in need of a good shampoo. She became aware of a sour odor that came from the same source ... another sign of poor hygiene. Vivian decided to save her questions, let discretion rule valor, and leave. She'd gather her clothes and quietly sneak from the room as quickly as she could—and stay away from that bar in Soho for a good long time. If the man came looking for his ring, he could have it back no questions asked.

She quickly rose from the bed. Her clothes lay where they had been dropped, marking a clear path to the large room's door. As she silently retrieved them, she noted his clothes in the same places. She sighed. This had been a mutual thing, after all. Soon, she'd found almost everything she remembered wearing, except for a single shoe. As she bent to look under a chair, Vivian heard stirring from the bed behind her. "Ohhh," whined a reedy voice, "my poor head."

The owner of the voice sat up, head in hands. He wasn't much to look at, for sure. Vivian was astounded. Had this little creep put something in her drink?

"I'm leaving now, you pervert," she said loudly. "You're lucky I don't call the police. Don't try and stop me, or I will." She still hadn't found the damn shoe. She decided to leave without it. She could buy some flip-flops at the hotel store.

"Wait," the man shouted as she pulled at the room's door. "Please wait." By now he'd gotten up, wrapped himself in a sheet, and stumbled toward her.

“Come another step closer, and I’ll scream my head off.”

“Please, calm down,” the man said. “Don’t leave. We need to talk.”

Vivian refused to be consoled. “Look,” she spat, “I don’t know what you did to get me here, but it’s all over. I’m taking the elevator, walking out of this hotel and getting a cab home. If you try to stop me, if you try to follow, I’m calling the cops! Understand?”

The man nodded his head up and down so rapidly that he looked like a life-sized bobble-head. “I won’t come closer, but you should sit down,” he said. “First of all, it will be a big cab fare.”

“What do you mean? Where are we?”

“We’re in Vegas, at the Golden Nugget. By the way ... we’re married.” The man felt the top of his head with one hand, almost dropping the sheet he clutched. “Oh,” he muttered, as if surprised. “The loop! Where’d it get to?” He turned and walked quickly back to the bed. There, he began groping beneath the covers, looking for something.

This was all too much for Vivian Luck. She sank to the nearest chair. “Vegas?” she wailed. “Married? Have I been kidnapped? What is going on? Why can’t I remember? Who are you, you ugly little man?”

By now, the man was struggling into his clothes. “Stop!” cried Vivian. “Whoever you are, go take a shower before you talk to me anymore. You stink! And use some shampoo too!”

“Yes ... dear,” said the little man, and padded off to the bathroom. While he was gone, Vivian took time to look around. It was a big, well-appointed hotel room. The logo on the desk stationery and the phone book in the drawer said the man hadn’t been lying. They were in Vegas. The ring on her finger (my God, it must be three karats) said he might not be lying about the marriage, either.

Vivian walked over to the bed, idly seeking a missing earring. Instead, under her pillow, she found a curious gadget. It was shaped like a ring or halo, and covered with what seemed to be small LEDs. As she picked it up, a hidden valve expelled odorless smoke. She frowned as she turned it over in her hands.

She looked up as a door closed. The little man, now dressed, walked toward her. “Ah,” he said smiling, “You found it.” He reached out to take the object from her hands.

Vivian slapped his hand away and stepped back. “Not on your life, buster,” she growled. “Here is what is going to happen. You are going to order breakfast from room service, with plenty of coffee. We are going to sit on opposite sides of a big table and eat that breakfast, while you tell me what has happened and how we got here. If ... and it’s a big if ... you convince me that you’re not a kidnapper and a pervert, I may return this gadget to you. Or, I may just keep it. I

haven't decided yet. You have caused me a lot of trouble. Now, order the breakfast, while I use the bathroom myself." With that, Vivian dropped the object into her purse and strode (as steadily as she could) to the bathroom. She entered, slammed, and locked the door.

An hour later, after breakfast arrived, Vivian sat across a large table from her roommate, trying to calmly sip her coffee. The shower had helped, but she still felt disoriented, out of control. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

She stared across the table. "Start talking," she said.

"My name is Arnie Lustiger," the little man replied, interrupting a vicious assault on his breakfast. "I'm a scientist—an inventor. I invented this device, the one you have in your purse. There's only one like it in the world. If you give it back, I'll show you how it works."

Vivian's eyebrows arched. She smiled. "Tell me, Arnie," she said sweetly, "Did this device have something to do with why I'm here?"

"Well, yes ... sort of ... it's complicated."

"Well then, Arnie, why in the world would I ever give it back? The next time I wake up, I might be at the north pole."

"No, no, nothing like that, Vivian. I really do love you. I wanted to marry you from the moment we met ... and you wanted it too! If you just give me back the loop, you'll see!"

"Loop? What are you talking about?"

"The device: the Lustiger optical-olfactory pheromone emitter. Loop for short." Arnie smiled proudly.

"And what does this loop do, Arnie? I won't let you touch it until I know."

Arnie frowned. "It's complicated," he said.

"Make it simple."

"It scans your eyes, and uses the information it gets from them to generate pheromones, odors. While that's happening, the LEDs trigger a semi-hypnotic state in any nearby person looking at the array. It's all a positive feedback loop."

"Sounds as exciting as mud."

"Oh, but it's very exciting! All the feedback takes is a couple of seconds. Then the person believes I'm whoever they'd most like to see. Give it to me—just for a second—and I'll show you."

Vivian laughed wildly. “Do you think I’m insane?” she replied. “Trust me, Arnie. You will never use your loop on me again. Who did I think you were when you used it on me anyhow?”

Arnie blushed. “I think ... maybe ... George Clooney?” he said in a small quavering voice.

George Clooney. Vivian remembered watching his old movies on video as a kid. **The Perfect Storm, Syriana, The American** ... it had seemed to her he was the most romantic man ever conceived—an impossible dream no one in her life could ever approach. No wonder she married him! And all the while it was Arnie Lustiger. She sighed. “Am I really your wife?” she asked. “Are we really married?”

He nodded. “Last night, at the Elvis Presley Chapel,” he said. “You were beautiful. I have pictures ...”

“OK, then, shut up while I think,” Vivian interrupted. A number of thoughts had come together for her. Her mind was suddenly clear.

“From now on your loop will have another ‘L’,” she said. “It’s now the Luck-Lustiger optical hoosy-whatsis, and I own half. Pack your stuff, hubby. Honeymoon’s over. You’re going to take me home, then go back to your lab and make a hundred more of these things. Then we are going to go see some folks at the Pentagon!”

Within months, the Luck-Lustiger loop became vital equipment for every U.S. embassy on the planet. Diplomatic coups of all types and sizes began to pervade the nation’s foreign policy. Agreements never dared before were formalized in days. Dictators gave up their sinecures to democracy, and old enemies laid bare their deepest secrets. The rest of the world watched in wonder.

Unfortunately, a CIA mole turned a stolen loop over to his Chinese handler two years later. A grim balance settled over the planet, as Chinese statecraft matched U.S. efforts in both audacity and success. The balm of diplomacy slowly retreated to its old, mediocre level as nation after nation discovered and employed the loop.

At one summit, every attendee was loop-equipped. The results were both bizarre and embarrassing. In the days that followed, senior diplomats tacitly agreed to stop using the loop in sensitive negotiations with their peers. Even so, U.S. State Department staffers were fitted with special glasses, nose filters, and other equipment to make sure loop use would be ineffective (the combined package looked something like a Groucho Marx mask). Meetings were held in rooms with large fans running to hinder pheromone exchange.

Even after their ban from diplomatic circles, loops enjoyed continued success on less lofty planes. They became equipment of choice for intelligence operatives. Pocket-carried

remote controls allowed users to dial loop effects from low (vague feelings of friendship), through mid-range (immediate attraction, visions of a loved or desired companion), to high (visions of parents, saints, or the Almighty Himself). Loop-equipped agents could easily defeat human surveillance, and the higher settings were perfect for interrogation.

All of which explains why, four years later, Todor Borissov, a mid-level functionary at Bulgaria's New York Consulate, was loop equipped when he entered an east-side bar looking for free alcohol. Having just completed a successful session with an entranced securities analyst, Todor saw no reason why he couldn't use his equipment for personal entertainment. So, he turned the setting to high and set out to drink Soho out of vodka.

Borissov, sans loop, was delivered to his consulate the following day. His career as an agent was over. However, just as Thayer had surmised, his spree had redeeming value to those sitting near him in the four bars he had visited. Many became regular church attendees, several swore off liquor altogether, and three joined seminaries.

Various government agencies around the world continue to use loops. Demand grows every year. Authorities have found them very useful in the discovery of fraud, misuse of funds, and other kinds of white collar crime.

Arnie and Vivian remain quietly married. Arnie continues his experiments, while Vivian manages the lab, raises their three children, and keeps him scrubbed in the bargain. Not much is known about their private lives, but it's said she still gets regular visits from a Hollywood legend.

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