

## Doran Larson

### TANGO

**M**arilynne Troop plans children's parties. She's good at her job because Marilynne cannot be pleaded or cajoled, whined, or baby-talked into anything by anyone under the age of reason. Unruly guests can take a time-out in the hall or sob to a Hindu cabbie if they want to tear at colored paper or the first piece of cake. Behind her passing smile, Marilynne does not like children. They are whipping garden hoses of narcissistic desires, flailing among their Mommas' and Daddas' heartstrings. (Marilynne had a younger sister upon whom she'd doted until the day the baby died. But she pays good money to therapists who all eventually break down and concede that this had nothing to do with her career choice.) Discipline and focus: these are the things Marilynne Troop respects, and it is a rare child that exhibits either.

Seth Mackleby has contacted Marilynne to orchestrate a surprise party for his daughter Bea's thirteenth. Seth is a widower who makes great money working fourteen-hour days so that Bea can go to an excellent private school, practice riding and dance, and take expensive lunches with native speakers of French, Spanish, and German, and then go on to an excellent private college.

Bea Mackleby knows that her father loves her and means well. She does not blame him for being preoccupied. Seth tells her how much she is like her mother, of whom Bea enjoys no memories she can say are not drawn from home videos of an attractive young woman who seems barely able to tolerate Seth's enamored lens. Bea fully believes she is like her mother. It explains why she holds such power over her father, why he can deny her nothing, aside from his lucrative time. In truth, Bea often pities her mother. Not simply because she died young. She pities her for having been her father's wife. He's such a sad man, in ways she cannot believe are all the result of his wife's sudden passing. He works hard and asks for nothing except the occasional new suit, a woman to see that he eats and changes his underwear daily, and the chance to work even harder. Though trim and attractive, he is like a big sloppy retriever—so mournfully, abjectly anxious to please that one can hardly be blamed for wanting to kick him. And predictable? There is no exact word for it (and Bea has looked into the excellent thesaurus in her school's excellent library). Her birthday, for example. Normally Seth can talk about nothing else for a month. This year, he says nothing; ergo,

a surprise is in store. And since Seth is a man who believes in experts, with a quick foray through her father's desk drawers, Bea soon has the situation in hand. She calls Marilynne, who is frankly skeptical that she is talking to a mere soon-to-be-thirteen-year-old, but who is also thankful, for once, that she really has no child—properly so called—to please.

They negotiate:  
The guest list;  
The menu;  
The entertainment;  
Drinks for the attending adults;  
The adults who will be invited to attend;  
The music;  
Décor.

After she hangs up, Bea feels satisfied she is dealing with an adult who has treated her like an adult. She respects Marilynne Troop's readiness to take (Japanese wall hangings) after giving in (Jimi Hendrix). What a pleasure if Seth could find the time to meet such a woman. Bea sighs, then steps to her mirror and practices full-body expressions of surprise.

After she hangs up, Marilynne sets down her notes and takes up her wine. She sighs. It's been a busy week. (Why was there so much fucking going on in the second week of November, 1992, she wonders, then realizes.) Yet what a relief not to have to deal with Mackleby *père*. She hates surprise parties anyway, and just talking to the man, she hung up feeling licked all over. She watches her goldfish, Benito and Jaws, nipping at each other's tail fins. She finds herself admiring Bea Mackleby's ability to give (samosa and chutney starters) after taking (Chinese jugglers). Yet something doesn't feel right. She drinks. She thinks. In her second glass, it comes to her.

Bea Mackleby gave as much as she got. But somehow the pattern of the whole is hers. As though she knew what Marilynne would want; as though she had fit Marilynne's tastes into a plan she'd decided upon before picking up the phone.

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The apartment is a corner unit, eastern windows yawning vertiginously upon the park. Fifteen child guests, six adults, jugglers due at seven. The "Surprise!" goes off credibly: Bea sinks to the floor from weak knees and stands up quietly weeping while Seth's shoulders do shrug lifts that pump his mouth up and down. After a swarming of kissy faces and chatter, "Purple Haze" announces that the party has started. Bea hardly eats (she's dieting)

for corralling her father in her arms at each new course. The adults—all women save for Seth’s racquet-ball buddy, Bobbie—chatter and coo and drink themselves into the same sloshy silliness that the girls manage on Diet Coke and hormones. The jugglers bounce a spinning aluminum plate—*TONG!*—off a window, but are otherwise flawless and fawningly polite (aside from the graybeard who fondles Cheri Broadbent’s ass, sending Cheri into Pinot Grigio giggles that end only with the *thup* of the elevator). With a few managerial directions and hyperbolic announcements of the cake, the jugglers, and an apartment-safe fizz of fireworks on the marble sideboard, Marilynne works her magic from among the caterers all bunkered in the kitchen (save for the charming servers, Dimitri and Raoul). In sum, it is an occasion straight from a musical, Fred and Ginger on Ritalin and Highballs, an evening on oil: the swoop of the last laugh and clap for the funky-dance contest segues into the announcement of cake; the final *shraaa!* of ripping metalized paper and Bea’s last appreciative sigh glide up like a lifted proscenium upon the jugglers’ entry under the faded muslin drape of an eight-legged horse. Throughout, Seth is laid low by blushing joy beside a giggling drunk Bobbie on the corner sofa.

When they are gone, though there is only Bea and Seth and Marilynne left sitting on the sofa, Bea does not let down. Playing it as anxious as a girl her age who has to pee, she pleads for Marilynne to stay for one little drink, “To make my day perfect!”

Seth is on his wobbly feet. Marilynne sees the spot Bea has put her in and sees Bea playing it. Seth is kneeling, as though he is a man whom it would be amusing to observe in abject submission. Above his bowed head (lip-suctioned to Marilynne’s hand), Bea sticks out her tongue. And when Marilynne laughs the laugh of a savvy, adult woman, Bea is lifted with her: five-figure teeth gleaming, tongue-undulous, the girl is chortling through hazy stars of tears for the chance, at last, to play with a grown-up woman.

“Will Seth get me a drink?” Marilynne asks his blondness.

He lifts his face, squinches his eyes tight, and nods. She scratches his head and he trots away on tiptoes into the kitchen.

Alone together for the first time, they take a long breath—the play a success, the cast to themselves—and exhale like life-long professional confidants.

“You were good,” Marilynne coos.

“And you, even better than expected.” Bea pulls her feet up beneath herself—a naiad, ready to spring. “And I’d expected quite a bit.”

Marilynne is cool: “Did you? I do hope—“

“Not for me. Not my birthday as such. Don’t you agree? Age is biology, not mathematics.”

Marilynne smiles: “I always think it merely histrionic: you’re as old as the number of people you make feel younger than yourself.”

Bea grins, crookedly: “And vice versa?”

A slow, 40-something blink: “And vice versa.”

A glass tumbles into the sink.

“So long as he’s happy,” Bea sighs sincerely. She plants an elbow on the sofa back, rests her cheek on her forearm: the exhausted birthday girl in case Seth pops his head in. (Crossed knees and a bitchy slouch, Marilynne reflects, would be more natural.) But the girl persists, her gaze wafting toward the door of the kitchen. The look and pose linger until Marilynne has to ask, “Don’t you get tired?”

Bea whips to attention. (Marilynne hears her neck pop.)

It was not really a question; it was a kind of anti-question, as though Marilynne Troop has wired-tapped thoughts Bea herself has only dimly entertained—thoughts that would have come on their own, perhaps when she turned fifteen. But the moment the words are in the air, Bea knows it is true: she is tired—of the act, tired of playing the younger, less-adult half of this high-priced household; she is tired of anticipating his moods, of making their dinner and lunch reservations and seeing that his socks match before he leaves the apartment; she is tired of exiting her room with an unconscious, curtain-up inhalation, of releasing it only when Seth, each night, presses her door quietly shut. She wishes suddenly, in a dishearteningly 13-year-old way that she and Marilynne were in fact alone. When Bea’s right eyelid quivers, Marilynne is satisfied. She has command again. Bea closes her eyes tight, imagining the kitchen silenced of the water running over Seth’s too-frequently washed hands. She opens them to find Marilynne gazing unwavering support and challenge, and Bea gazing back while Seth works the towel, as efficiently foreboding as a sail rapping loose in a hurricane.

“Order up!”

As he weaves back into the room, drunk enough to think he’s funny acting it, Bea is terrified. Exhaustion has washed over her like a baptism; she has stepped over a threshold into a world for which nothing in her past has not un-suited her. While a pink cocktail glides toward Marilynne’s hand, Bea feels she understands why the Saved weep, how an insect feels after shedding its protective carapace.

Seth Mackleby is here, and Bea Mackleby is not acting.

She weeps as she feels her legs unfold. In her heart, she cries for her Daddy, magically, to become an adult she can turn to, a man who could hold her in his wiser arms. And yet the healing over has already started. The scraping of twig and stone upon her tender exoskeleton is drifting to a numb distance. Her arm lowers across the top of the sofa; her knees cross, ankle wagging; and from her thin, concise lips, she hears herself beckon, “Here, Daddy”—patting the cushion between herself and Marilynne. “Come sit here.”

Seth laces his fingers and stuffs his hands between his knees for joy. He is seated between an attractive woman and his daughter. It is as though he feels Bea’s mother reincarnated: the man between his two beautiful women. Ready for a bath of weeping gratitude, he turns to Bea.

“Did you have fun, sweetie?”

Bea, unable to speak again quite yet, shoots a pleading glance at Marilynne.

“She had a great time,” Marilynne assures him. “And why shouldn’t she?”

Seth waits. Bea’s eyes are on him, in childish, pleading panic, to be saved from the next moment.

“After all, she arranged it.”

Seth nods and beams. Poor man, he is perfectly Wylie Coyote hanging unawares over emptiness. Bea reaches (but only one hand), clutching his leg before the abyss yawns beneath him.

“Huh?”

“No,” Bea whispers, without hope or conviction.

“But it’s time,” Marilynne tells her. “It’s better this way. You know that”—dramatic, yet also as flat as a soap-opera star, delivering lines while wondering if she put enough quarters into the meter.

A practitioner of desk-chair yoga, Seth’s posture measures his mood. As Marilynne recounts Bea’s phone call, their give and take over the arrangements—hinting strongly enough even for him to see that Bea has in fact been managing their social life for years—Seth’s chin falls in sudden stages, *kachunk, kachunk*, like a car pumped down from a hand-jack. His eyes burgeon. Bea leans her forehead into his arm, clutching his elbow, quietly sobbing. It never occurs to her to lash out at Marilynne. Marilynne is merely the messenger—the pathologist, or a cold-fingered lab tech, reading the bad news from a printout. When it is done, father and daughter are silent for a full minute. Seth is stunned. Bea is waking—horribly, wonderfully—into a brave new world.

“Beebee,” he murmurs.

“Daddy.”

“I thought...”

“I know.” Nails in his arm—“I *know*.”

Her head still pressed to his shoulder, he rests his cheek against her silky hair, weighing heavy upon her skull.

“Things will be better now,” Marilynne whispers with the sympathy of a kindly sex-worker.

“We should have talked,” Bea tells Marilynne without raising her head. “You should have asked me.”

“And what would you have said?”

Bea is silent before a last cry rises not quite high enough to escape her throat.

“You’re an extraordinary girl, Bea.”

Seth nods into Bea’s scalp, a high groan buzzing his sinus.

“Seth is an adult. He’s a broker for godssake. He knows the old win and lose.”

He raises his head to act the part. He nods firmly, until his face collapses into a mask of tragic putty and melts back atop his daughter’s. For a long while Marilynne holds still. She drinks her drink. (Father and daughter weep and paw each other’s faces; they murmur apologies and tender reassurance.) In the summer dusk, she watches sparrows harass a crow working the thermals from the streets below. Finally Bea settles silent, then begins to take bracing breaths. Then she is up, stiff and whipping away tears with the backs of her wrists.

Marilynne smiles, welcoming her back into the saddle, quietly rejoicing in the shards of jagged ice that are Bea’s eyes. She watches Bea stroke her father’s head—“There there”—gaining strength by the quarter-second, like a cyborg rebooting into backup power. Marilynne is mildly, pleasantly tipsy enough to wish Bea were her virtual age and they could slip off alone to some dark and tastefully butchy bar.

“You needn’t be brutal,” Bea admonishes.

Seth’s head jerks up, a frown aimed at Marilynne.

Marilynne blinks slow, nodding: “It’s better this way.”

“But we *are* the customer.”

A shrug. “True.”

Then their eyes wrestle: pushing and shoving—cool, respectful of each other’s strengths—across an invisible line until Bea announces, “You reveal more than you think.”

Something in her lowered brow, her voice as hard and terrible as a child possessed—Marilynne is so taken aback she is not certain whether it shows. Her mouth opens. But she merely moves her jaw as though she were only gracelessly stretching.

Bea sits straight, eyes veiled but intent, head kiltered as though negotiating a tricky twist in a fiber-optic scope of Marilynne's unconscious. Marilynne has never felt so suddenly naked, not even at Bea's age, under the molesting eyes of men. (Seth's head remains bowed like some pothead's piece of mood sculpture.)

"Daddy?"

He looks up, earnest through tears.

"We'll talk more later," Bea assures him.

He smiles, he nods, he moans.

"But don't you have work to do?"

A Downs-innocent grin opens his face. He pecks her brow as he pops onto his feet to hurry into his study. His computer perpetually up, he is barely out of the room before they hear keys tapping and the screen's answering *bings* and *zips* and *boings* that announce his continuing pursuit of great gobs of money. Bea turns back to Marilynne. Marilynne takes a breath, holding it tight as though to absorb x-rays.

Bea: "You've had trouble in your past."

(Breathe.) "You do fortunes too?"

"Evasive."

The word hangs in the air: a goad? a diagnosis? Then the girl's hand has slithered across the back of the sofa; it is on Marilynne's upper arm, uncannily strong, subtly articulating the biceps from the supinator longus and pronator radii teres: "Tell me."

What is happening? What *has* happened? What is the combination of age, the day in her cycle, this day's mild fatigue, vodka and grenadine, and the girl's absorbent strength that is dropping Marilynne Troop's face, her neck as geometrically curved as a penitent in Russian iconography? Then, as though her throat were an upended goose-neck in a triumphant plumber's grip, scummy things simply fall out: her drunken mother, her father missing for weeks on end, her only harbor between herself and her sister Natalie, and Natalie dashing beyond Marilynne's unfocused and undisciplined screaming into the street after her kitten; her resulting lifelong battle with red—walking blind past fire hydrants; leaning her face in her hand in bars, curtaining any glimpse of maraschinos.

Throughout, Bea is professionally silent. Silent herself at last, Marilynne seems to awaken, jerking, then surrenders again as she realizes that Bea has enveloped her: a leg dug between the cushions behind her hips, her other leg is over Marilynne's thighs; her arms surround her chest as Marilynne tilts her head down onto Bea's shoulder.

For a moment, they sit quietly, gently rocking, until Marilynne starts.

In his socks, Seth has returned; he is sitting on his ankles on the floor, resting his head on Marilynne's knees.

The older and younger woman spring apart. Marilynne's right knee jerks, malleting into Seth's temple. He sits up—"I just thought, we could all..."—rubbing the spot as Marilynne swings her watch to her face.

"Shit. I'm late."

Bea: "To..."

Marilynne's freeze-dried eyes: "Tango."

"Tango?"

"Tango."

"Tango."

"Tango," Seth rubs, blunting the echo.

But Marilynne does not move. She is looking into Bea's face; they are wondering at the wonder and pain that have brought them to a *here* where Marilynne knows she cannot stay, though the two women also cannot separate.

Then Bea lowers her brow, bulling into the demand: "Teach me!"

Marilynne is on her feet so suddenly, Seth twists and throws a hand to catch his weight. He watches their two slim silhouettes vanish into the kitchen.

At her second step onto Italianate marble, Marilynne turns and stops in dance-frame: Left arm up, her right around her invisible partner like some cultish turn signal. Bea stands clueless. A breath catches in her chest before Marilynne whispers, "Come," and the girl is fitting herself inside her arms as though into a personal jet-pack.

Marilynne's eyes hold Bea's in an iron grip: "The shoulders. Follow my shoulders with yours. I turn right"—she does—"and you turn right"—she *had*. "Your feet will follow. I will lead only the step I know you're free to take. Beyond that, it's simply walking."

Bea wants to speak, to ask what they or she will do first, why she feels that her whole short life has been leading inexorably to this moment. But Marilynne begins rocking a sexy rockabye; her breast rises and she steps forward two steps, and Bea steps—back right, back left—as though her

legs are magnetized to Marilynne's left and right. They rock again before Marilynne takes two steps backwards. And again, and again, forward and back, back and forward, and Bea feels reassured—it is only this, this simple, this floating *hin und her* in the arms of a beautiful woman. Then Marilynne stops. Somehow Bea knows to remain still as Seth comes and stands hurt in the door behind her, as Marilynne twists and steps left, twist and right, in a figure eight, “*Ocho*,” stops again, and then, while remaining motionless, rudders Bea through the step like her reflection in a time-delay mirror. Then they are twisting, turning together, their shoulders moving in a parallel as fixed and smooth and inevitable as the arms of a toffee-pulling machine. Step and step and turn and step around then across the pale-pink checkerboard of tiles, as Marilynne whispers, “*Gouchos*—cowboys, alone on the Argentine *pampas*—they invented it.”

They continue without pause, though Bea's head is bent, quietly weeping on Marilynne's shoulder.

“Imagine: around a fire, drunken men. Men who loved women but had no women to love, imagining the women they would love if they could love women—taking out their desire on each other.”

The words pull like a thin steel chain. It runs over Bea's orphan tongue, down her throat, into her stomach to drag up emotions as distinct as twisted bits of brass: anger and hurt, longing and loneliness and self-pity. She sobs and moans and quietly screams; she drools and weeps; her nose runs onto Marilynne's stiff collar.

“They believed in leading. They were men. But between men—those men—leading was a struggle, a match, an open-handed fistfight. They call it back-leading. The woman draws the man. She decides where she will be led.”

They continue, locked breast to breast, each feeling the other's breath on her neck until the words have settled into meaningful order in Bea's disordered heart. But once they do, her head rises. She whips her eyes, her nose, and her mouth across her own shoulder.

She is thirteen. Despite the near-grace of youthful movement, more beautiful than the smoothness of training, there are awkward seconds as the gravity of initiative shifts from Marilynne, hangs ambiguous between them, then comes to rest in the throbbing core of Bea's torso. But once complete, it is as complete as the transfer of soul from man to B-Horror monster. This girl, this natural horsewoman appears to grow taller; her shoulders widen as her eyes narrow and she is forcing Marilynne back, around the morning table that overlooks children and dogs and wafting wafers of Frisbees across

the felt of the park. Across the tile, stopping short to command Marilynne through a tight fast *cho*, then spinning and Bea is drawing her back through the door (Seth falling away like a blown silk curtain) into the living room, around the sofa and chairs, angling down the two steps to the door where Marilynne kicks *voleo*—the flicking tongue of a whip—adorning time while Bea turns the knob. Then they are in the hall, amazing Mrs. Gathwit, who kicks Muffin into yelps as she stumbles back into her apartment. Marilynne pushes for the elevator as they kick and spar. Inside, they are alone—almost; for the first time they take their eyes from each other, to meet each other in the mirror.

They are pleased. They are gorgeous. They are youth and early middle age. They are brash femininity in its promise and fulfillment. Time falls into the holes of their eyes until the mouth of the world opens behind them, upon stone and glass and steel. Across the lobby, Marilynne's shoulders open the first door, Bea's the second, and then they are in the street, passing by halted passersby.

"Where are we going?" Marilynne asks, amused, excited.

"La Guardia."

"La Guardia?"—halting to redirect around phone booths. Then they are at the curb and Bea is pulling Marilynne into blaring red. Yet she does not slow; she does not hesitate. Brakes and tires and horns cry out. Yellow steel lines up to scream a chorus awaiting Bea's answer. Midway across the street, a cab or two could pass. But they stay; backing up flank upon flank, they stay to scream and curse in Hindi and Haitian and Serbo-Croatian, to fan hot fingers at the bitches dancing red defiance. Then a gentle voice calls out. From the curb behind them, a man in socks by the sound of it, less words than pleading yips.

In motion again, Bea rises, expanding until her words are lips and breath at Marilynne's ear. Men shout and curse and whimper. But the girl's are the words of the oracle, the whisper of a longing giant at the mouth of Marilynne's cave.

"*Mi coqueta. Mi vida. Buenos Aires.*" ☰