

Hard man to surprise

A birthday treat.

David Marusek

On Wednesdays after work, Adam meets with Vera and Pete at a bar across the street from his office.

"My man," he says, sliding into the booth. "Where's Vera?"

"Running late," Pete says. "No, wait, here she is."

Vera exacts a kiss from each of them and squeezes in next to Pete. "What a day!" she exclaims. "First I'm late for a meeting, then I lock myself in the stairwell. I had to climb down 20 floors to find an exit!"

The men guffaw, and Adam says: "Kinda like that weekend we spent trapped on the Prudential roof, right?"

"Yes!" Vera shrieks. "Like that, only much shorter." She waves her hand to summon the waitress. "You know, I haven't thought of that in years."

Later, as they part company, Pete asks Adam about plans for his birthday, and Adam says he enjoyed the so-called surprise dinner they threw for him at Chili's last year.

Pete says, "Sounds like a plan. I'll make secret arrangements for three tables."

Vera winks. "I'll quietly handle the guest list."

That weekend Adam runs into Hector and Sylvester at Starbucks. He asks them if they're coming to Chili's on Friday.

"No doubt," Sylvester says, but Hector gives him a blank look.

"My birthday?" Adam prompts him. "My 'surprise' dinner?"

Hector pats his jacket pockets and hands Adam a blue card on which is printed:

Hello. It may seem strange that I don't recognize you, but I have recently undergone a memory extinction treatment to selectively erase a traumatic event from my mind. Quite possibly, you were also involved in that event, and the procedure has inadvertently wiped you as well. If this is the case, I apologize and wish you well.

Hector waits for Adam to finish reading. "All right then," he says and leaves the coffee shop.

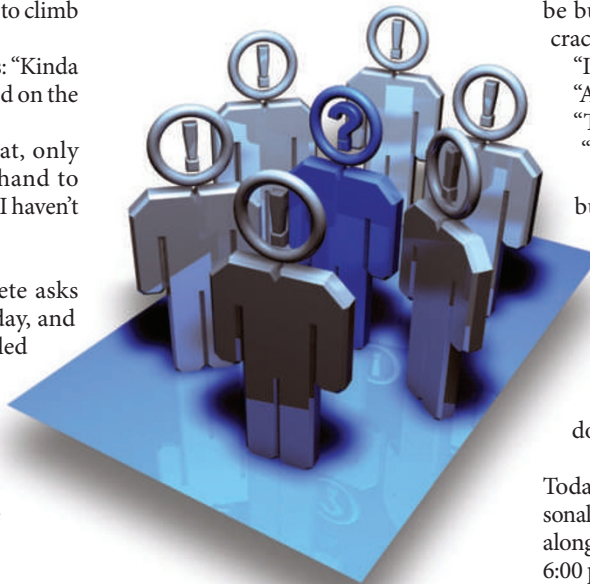
Adam is floored. "What the hell just happened?"

"I have no idea," Sylvester says. "I'll go find out."

Adam is left holding the blue card. He

flips it over and finds the logo of Clean Slate Salons.

The thing is, a few years back Adam handed out one of these cards himself. One night, on what must have been the world's worst first date, Adam and his date were mugged on their way back to his car after a show in the city. They were not physically hurt, but for weeks afterwards Adam's bowels would loosen each time a gun was shoved in his face, which was every time he closed his eyes, and all through the night.



So Adam went to Clean Slate where he drank a carton of Protatter and lay on a couch in a booth with his head resting on a microtrode-encrusted pillow. A certified facilitator in Mumbai talked him through a complete 'narrative' of his 'incident', prompting him for every traumatic detail. Adam scrubbed the entire humiliating evening from his memory and tossed his date out with the bathwater. Hence the eventual blue card.

On Wednesday, Adam is waiting in the usual booth, but Pete and Vera are no-shows, and their icons fail to pop up on any of his maps. When he calls them he gets voicemail.

While he waits for them to call him back, he calls Sylvester to ask about Hector. It has occurred to him that if something bad happened to Hector, why hasn't he heard about it? He gets Sylvester's voicemail. He calls Rosemary to see what's up with Sylvester and gets voicemail. He tries Frank, Claudia and Conor. Finally, a little ticked off, he twitters: WHERE THE BLEEP IS

EVERYONE? HELLO? Then he notices that no one is following him anymore. Followers: 0. He stares at the hollow digit in astonishment. How can such a number even be possible? He has a sinking feeling and calls Chili's to confirm his reservation for Friday and learns there is no such reservation. Or, rather, there was one, but it was cancelled.

Adam is standing outside Pete's building. He has pressed the bell and is waiting to be buzzed in, but instead the intercom crackles. "Yes?"

"It's Adam."

"Adam who?"

"That's not funny."

"Just a sec."

Adam waits for the heavy door to buzz, but a moment later Pete peers at him through the glass, opens the door a crack and says, "You Adam?"

"Stop that!"

Pete hands him something and shuts the door. It's a blue card. "What did I do?" Adam shouts at the door. "Just tell me what I did!"

Today is Adam's birthday. He takes a personal day from work, sleeps in, rides his bike along the river, catches a matinee. Around 6:00 p.m. he returns home with a couple of DVDs, a pizza and a six-pack of beer.

No sooner does Adam get through the door than all the lights come on and a crowd of people spring from the furniture shouting "Surprise!"

Vera is there, and Pete, Sylvester, Hector and Rosemary. Frank is there and Claudia, Conor and a dozen more, all in party hats. "Surprise!" they shout. Streamers and balloons deck the living room, and the countertop is stacked with gifts.

"Did we surprise you?" Vera asks. "You look surprised."

"Here, let me help with that," Pete says and takes the beer from Adam. "Sorry about punking you, but you're a hard man to surprise."

"It was a bet, actually," Hector says.

"So are you surprised?" Vera demands.

Adam peers around at the expectant faces. "Oh, I'm surprised all right," he says and reaches for something in his pocket. "I just hope I have enough of these." ■

Science-fiction author David Marusek lives in a constant state of mild surprise in Fairbanks, Alaska. Visit him at www.marusek.com.

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