

## **A MATTER OF PERCEPTION**

**By Richard Elman**

“That was a really strange friend you sent me.”

Robert Warrenow hoped his friend Ginny was smiling faintly, for he could not, of course, see her, over the phone.

“Strange?” he echoed her. He might have described Dena as crazy, or angry, not strange, if by that is meant uncommon. But he found Ginny no less so, that is to say crazy, or angry, than Dena, or himself, or the rest of his friends and old acquaintances.

Pressing the phone to his ear, Warrenow stared into space,

She said, “I really don’t think I was able to help her very much. But don’t you worry, Robert. She’ll do all right up there, I think...”

Ginny was from Montreal, only residing in New York, on a sort of permanent leave from her family, and Dena had exiled herself to Montreal, for a while, to get out of the way of certain unpleasant feelings she had developed toward her children who were both in boarding schools.

Robert Warrenow had known both of them, intimately, at times, and when the summer arrived as tiny green blots on the trees of the City and he learned that both women were resolving their quarrels with him by separately taking up summer residences in Canada, he had given Dena, whom he had known more recently, Ginny’s address. They would have a lot in common, he felt, both being so angry at him.

Robert was very afraid of Ginny. She could be quite enchanting, at times, witch-like, and cutting. He could not be certain if she had come back to town for revenge, or help, or, simply enough, an explanation. Why had he behaved so badly toward her? Because he was afraid, he might have told her, or crazy. It would be far better just to say he didn't love her.

But she had always told him she loved him. It was her reason, she insisted, for not having other friends, for keeping the few friends she had a secret from him, for all her rage, and her dependency. Also he had once borrowed money from her and could not yet afford to repay it.

He was better off these days, in a lot of ways, yet he was still very afraid of Ginny, and her demands.

That is why he made a date to meet her for lunch at his office at the University, on neutral ground, so to speak, not in his office at home, or at her own apartment. It would be easier for them to discuss the issues, he believed, though he was afraid they could be reduced, efficiently enough, to her anger versus his, and not much loving feeling left between them.

The day of their meeting he was all nerves.

Like a pane of window glass a moment before it shatters, she fell forward into the room in which he was going over a student's paper on the European novel. Ginny's usual smooth untroubled look troubled him more than her most severe reproaches. She walked through the light silvery dust of the air with a light step, in her short fall jacket, and came next to him and bent over and left her scent and breathed and saw his markings all across the paper and kissed him, once, lightly, on the cheek.

“You never used to be that tough with your students,” she observed. “What’s happened Robert?”

He smiled and told her to sit down next to him. “I guess,” he said, “I’m in love with my work.”

“Again?” She seemed incredulous. It was, he thought, as if she was saying, “O that again!” He had never been able to weather her contempt except by concentrating hard upon his own joy.

He looked down at the student paper again and puffed out ash through his smoldering cigarette.

“Be right with you.” Robert found the spot where he had been reading and then read on.

“General notions of futility are attractive...” The writer, a young man from Brooklyn, was trying to argue for the tradition of the living novel with its emphasis on action, impression, and character development, as opposed to mere subjectivity. At the word “ameliorative” Warrenow caught himself and glanced up at Ginny again, as if distracted by such an unexpected gravity of perception in one so young.

She’d not moved. She would not. Not yet. She was still, her glance as definite as an accusation, though never that specific, as if she truly had no comprehension of why she was being put off when she had come exactly on time and wanted, simply, guidance from him about the times they’d shared and wasted.

“Never mind the marks,” he said, at last. “This young man is a very fine writer...”

“You’re always saying that,” she told him. “You even told me that...”

“And you were,” he said, “once.”

But his voice cracked on him. He felt close to tears. It was the price he paid for being so distracted from his present joy. Warrenow was just about to move into new quarters with a friend, and he had, once again, today, neglected to call the movers to make the necessary arrangements.

“Give me another minute,” he said. “I have to make this call...”

Ginny seemed to understand. For once she was smiling, openly, if not quite softly.

He picked up the phone and started to dial.

She said, “I really can’t afford to wait too much longer...”

“I never said you would have to,” he told her.

“Go ahead,” she nodded. “Make your call.”

He dialed, and there was no answer. Probably they, too, were out to lunch. Every time he called the movers this seemed to happen to him.

As if flustered, he said, “I really should finish reading this paper...”

“Bullshit,” she told him, quickly, and that was that. The air around them had jelled so that he could not avoid her glance without disturbing something so tentative he would have to call it their feelings.

With tears crowding their eyes, they were staring at each other.

“Why are you avoiding me like this?” she demanded. “Why did you send me that...that person...?”

He lit another cigarette and breathed out the smoke. It was simply not always possible to respond to Ginny’s demands when they were put so angrily.

“Why?” The question had formed all over her face shaping her face so that it was her face again. The face he had once known so well. An angry face.

“I guess,” he said, then, “we won’t even be having our lunch today...”

“Never mind that...” She almost seemed to be pleading with him to make this contact sure and certain and that there would be no further reproaches.

Warrenow glanced down at his student’s paper. Academic brightness was all-too-apparent. Where did the young man hide his feelings?

He glanced back at Ginny, as if to cancel all that had just passed between them with a look of warning, but her own stare was the more persistent; it was really there, and, somehow, tender.

Warrenow allowed her to invade his face with it. He refused to wince. He could feel himself becoming himself. He could feel his death growing inside him and it was exhilarating. HE knew he would have to make one more try to reach Ginny with his feelings, even if that meant getting off the argument and the rage, the old mood of their encounters, to see each other again as new and alive and young in a world filled with hatred.

“Why?” she was demanding. “Why?”

He could feel his tears in his eyes.

He could feel the sticky new wooden desk breathing beneath his sweating palms.

He wanted somehow to touch her with a kindness of sorts, but he knew he did not feel that way, and all he could say was, “Because you hurt my feelings, you hurt me, don’t you know, with your contempt. That hurt...”

“I know that.” She breathed, and then again. “I think I do know that...”

“I know you do,” he said, gasping to keep from crying out loud, though he felt his face wet with tears and the sniffing up through his nostrils was like somebody suddenly pushing a window up with the flat of his palms to let in fresh air.

“Why did you call?” Warrenow asked. “Why did you come? What do you want from me?”

“I thought” she said, “Perhaps we could get to know each other now...”

But she must have known that sounded very silly, under the circumstances, for she had risen and was backing away from him toward the door.

She said, “Goodbye.”

He said, “Goodbye.”

The light changed darkly in the room and they were both, for a moment, in shadow.

“You should get to know Dena,” he told her, then. “You really should...”

“I already do Robert” she said, “thank you...”

She left him then. There was a sudden hole in the air. It was the only truth of their encounter, this sudden absence.

Blankly, he stared once more at his best student’s work. It stated that “the fiction writer has to exercise perception, and that his effects are the product of an uninterrupted series of impressions.”

“Their value is determined by the reader who,” Warrenow read, “following these impressions, in their order, finally considers the total impression that is left behind.”

He scribbled the word “fine” in the margin next to his paragraph and just then the light glowed yellow across his shoulders over his sticky old desk, and the air breathed through the open window onto the back of his neck, and his hair felt silky to his touch when he tried to rub away the sudden warmth.