

**Peculiar Type**  
**by S. Y. Affolee**

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Friday, June 28, 2002

Peculiar Type #1 - Seigfried and the Latte

The beige plastic cup with green speckles steamed, impatiently cooling off. *Drink me!* It screamed like an Alice wonder-size pill. He paid no attention to the huffy, self-important latte. He flipped through today's classifieds, unaware of the cheap ink staining his fingers.

Yard sales. Ah. He leaned forward slightly, dark brown bangs falling across his high forehead. Yard sales were fascinating. There might be a used lawnmower on sale (his wife was forever complaining about the rampant grass on the front yard) or an antique typewriter that made that characteristic *ping!* on cartridge returns. Two months ago, he found a handful of Victorian postcards for five cents and pair of dodecahedron speakers marked at ten bucks, which on Ebay collectively garnered at least a thousand.

A tiny wren hopped near his brown loafers searching for crumbs. He shifted his feet suddenly and the bird flew up, alarmed, and nearly upset the haughty coffee cup. The liquid sloshed up the sides and more steam rose into the air. *How dare you, you stupid bird!*

"Cheet cheet cheet!" the wren laughed and flew off to better hunting grounds.

The latte raged and for a moment, the wind favored its wrath, bringing the aroma to his nose. He flipped another page and his finger ran down a column, stopping at a category heading. Flea markets!

Ignored, the latte could only continue fuming.

Friday, July 05, 2002

Peculiar Type #2 - Snaggleteothed Frank

Susanna had left him.

It wasn't even the result of an explosive argument. No vases or heavy books were thrown about. Nothing. It had been calm, like the eye of a hurricane, except the winds surrounding it had been invisible. When he had arrived home, she already had her bags packed.

"I've realized that we don't suit," she said.

She had patted his face and left. He had been too stunned to do anything but gape at her and watch her car roll out of the driveway. The rest of the night became numb and gray, and when he slept, he dreamt of nothing.

But now, the next day, the numbness was replaced with fire. Anger. His stomping made harsh thumping sounds. His mouth curved downward. And most of the time, his hands curled into fists. How *dare* she?

His co-workers stayed out of his way as much as possible. Gigi hid in the breakroom talking on her cellphone in hushed tones. Pedro, naturally a cheery man, tweaked the ends of his moustache nervously as he glanced over at Frank's direction. He had taken over the bread counter--the furthest away from Frank's ice cream and juice bar.

*Why?* kept running through his head and as the day grew longer, this voice jabbered louder and faster until he couldn't think any more. He was so angry that he felt his face flushing even as he opened the fridge for ice.

Less than an hour before closing time, the customers slowed to a trickle. Pedro was now hiding out with Gigi and he was alone at the counter. A young woman entered and took out a ten dollar bill, already intent on ordering. She looked nothing like Susanna--she was short, dumpy, and casually dressed rather than having Susanna's slim and sleek style--but she had that hurried look as her hair escaped haphazardly from her ponytail. That painfully reminded him of Susanna, the hurry to get anywhere except to him.

"Could I get a chilled mocha?"

His simmering temper billowed into fierce steam. "Sssorry," he hissed. "We don't ssserve anything in the juice bar past 5 PM. Sssee? It ssays sso on the board." He grinned showing a handful of uncorrected teeth and jabbed a finger toward the chalkboard above his head.

She blinked. "Umm...." He could already see her silently wondering why coffee was considered part of the juice bar.

"We have some other drinks not in the juice bar," he added, not particularly caring.

"No thanks."

Pedro headed back out of the breakroom and noticed the woman stuffing the ten dollars back into her wallet. He gave Frank a dark look as he went back to organizing the cakes in the display counter.

*It's not my fault*, he fumed. Frank slammed a cupboard door harder than necessary.

Monday, July 22, 2002

Peculiar Type #3 - Seeing Things

There was a sign taped on the table.

*No studying allowed on weekends.*

With a satisfying thunk, Marty dropped his history textbook on the table covering up the words "on weekends". There was a perverse pleasure in looking like he was breaking the rules--even if he really wasn't. The local bookstore frowned upon students studying in the adjoining cafe. The rationale was that the students would take up space and drive away real customers, as if the students didn't already go there to buy sandwiches and drinks.

He took out another textbook from his battered green bag and opened it up to pages 266 and 267 where he hid the latest copy of Batman. Studying in a no studying zone but actually reading comic books--what sneakiness! He chuckled to himself and turned a page, immediately drowning himself in ink, color, and Gotham City.

But as Batman was about to nab his latest victim, Marty became aware of something outside of the comic world making the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He raised his eyes a fraction above his textbook shield and locked gazes with an old man sitting at another table across from him. Watery and faded eyes glinted from the overhead lights. The old man smiled, open-mouthed, revealing red gums and a solitary tired tooth.

Looking back down, he no longer saw Batman. With a trembling hand, he flipped the comic closed and looked at the textbook. The old man's face stared back at him from an early twentieth century lithograph.

Saturday, January 18, 2003

Peculiar Type #4 - Crush

Joey hated his name. It was so bland and unoriginal and made one think of kangaroos pouncing around in zoo cages. If he shortened it to the more adult Joe, he would be the “average Joe,” but no he didn’t want that. He wanted to be Gomanyth or Sevedric or Lalebwyn or one of those other heroes he read in fantasy books who always got the girl and saved the day. Idly, he rubbed the bridge of his nose where an unsightly pimple had decided to pop up in the middle of the night. He was no hero, only a gangly teenager forced to work at the local bookstore in hopes of saving enough money for college.

When he first became a bookstore clerk, it was everything that he had imagined—boring. Sometimes he helped customers find a title (it was no harder than looking something up in the library), but most of the time he waited around checkout, thumbing through the latest fantasy or chatting with the other cashier who went through approximately three romances every two days.

It changed a couple weeks into his job when he noticed *her*. Her name was Meredith (he knew because he typed her name in the computer for her bookstore membership) and she was perfect. The first time he noticed her, she had been wearing a smart black beret above her long curls and a grey coat that accented her slim frame. And she bought an economics textbook for a class at the local college. He was in heaven when she paid for the book at *his* counter and graced him with a low throaty voice when she said hello. He paid a lot more attention in economics class after that.

Meredith came to the bookstore almost like clockwork on Wednesday afternoon to browse through the economics texts. So Wednesdays became sacred. Joey would arrive for work as if he would go to church. This must be what holy men meant by enlightenment, he often wondered. But aside from the occasional greeting and

comments on the weather, she gave no indication that she noticed him as more than just a bookstore clerk. He began contemplating on borrowing one of his co-worker's romances to find out what would sweep a woman off her feet as his own fantasy novels were completely impractical in instigating (swords and dragons were notoriously hard to come by).

"Hello Joey."

He snapped out of his daydream. "Um. Hello."

Meredith dumped her purchases on the counter, a birthday card, two pens, a copy of *Consumer Reports*, and something else, which had Joey looking twice. A magazine that said *Bride* in big, bold, pink lettering. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something sparkling on her fingers as she reached into her wallet for a ten-dollar bill.

"Someone getting married?" he asked in what he thought was a steady, casual voice.

"I am." She favored him with a bright smile, but he felt his blood run cold at the words.

"My boyfriend proposed a couple days ago."

"Congratulations." Joey felt all previous warmth seep through him as he numbly handed Meredith the change and watched her exit the store. His hand shook as he straightened the rack of bookmarks and the boxes of paper clips on the counter. And he wondered if he would ever find enlightenment ever again.

Saturday, March 01, 2003

Peculiar Type #5 - Office Prima Donna

He rubbed his eyes, uncertain as to whether the fuzzy blob he just noticed was a co-worker or a figment of last night's pizza.

"Morning, Roberto, what's up?" the blob said.

Putting his glasses to his face, the blob became clearer. It was his officemate, Carrie, who had transferred from the British branch of the company a week ago. "What's up?" he repeated. He looked up at the ceiling. "Well, there are the lights. And above that some pipes, I suppose and the roof. There's the sky, the atmosphere and beyond that the void. Gravity makes the moon spin above our heads and we spin around the sun..."

"Oh, love, you've been awake all night doing work again, haven't you?"

"Yeah, love is like gravity. Gravity brings two planets together just as love brings two people together..."

"Roberto!"

"What?"

"You're rambling again."

"I am?"

Carrie opened her mouth to reply when a loud moaning shriek reverberated down the hall. The frightening cry was followed by a sickening crunch as if a steamroller had

decided to eat one of the copying machines next door for lunch.

Roberto frowned. Maybe it *was* last night's pizza. "Did you just bark like a dog or am I hallucinating?"

"I did not bark like a dog!" said Carrie. "Something happened outside. Maybe we should go see what happened or call security."

Footsteps skidded to a halt right outside the door. A short girl with curly hair pulled up with barrettes and a pair of corduroy overalls one size too large barged in, the top couple of papers from the stack she was holding in her arms flying in the air only to land at Carrie's feet. Jane was one of the four or five co-op students that the company hired for the term. Usually she was cheerful and efficient, but it was unusual to see her rushing around as if gremlins were at her heels. She slammed the door closed just as they heard several other doors in their hallway also close.

The unearthly shriek was heard again, this time closer, and hard stomping footsteps accompanied the noise.

Jane slumped against the door when it was obvious whatever made the noise was gone.

"Did you just annoy the boss?" said Carrie disapprovingly.

The girl shook her head in the negative. "No. I was next door making copies and then I heard that noise. I coming out of the copier room when I saw Mr. Hemmler walking out of his office looking, well, mad. But that's not quite accurate. Furious, maybe."

"Jerry Hemmler?" Carrie was astonished. "Mild-mannered Jerry?"

"I'm not surprised. There have been strange stories about Jerry floating around for quite

awhile,” Roberto replied, his attention already back at his computer and briefly thinking about ordering Chinese take-out the next time he had to stay late.

“But Jerry was so nice when I met him the first day...”

“Trust me, it’s Mr. Hemmler,” Jane said as she knelt down to pick up the papers she had dropped. “You just haven’t been here long enough to see the worst of it.”

Monday, April 14, 2003

Peculiar Type #6 - Cards and Clues

Mrs. Weckman's House of Cards was tucked away in a small alcove of Hillard's Alley--a tiny street branching from the central circle, the center of town. One of the card shop's neighbors was a pawnshop with a large hand-painted sign of three gold balls thrust from the building, approximately five and a half feet up so that non-short visitors stood a chance of koshing their heads against it. On the other side was a specialty shop selling incense and lava lamps among other hippie items--its window was decorated in black velvet and silver stars and books about goddesses and earth mothers.

Ellen was in a hurry. She was short, so paid no attention to the pawnshop sign as she ran down the alley with her hand to her nose (apparently the specialty shop was having a musk and damask incense sale, a rather unholy combination) and her yellow raincoat flapping behind her. She was supposed to meet her cousin at the cafe three blocks away for lunch. And she needed to get a card for him even though he never explained why. Tom was funny about those kind of things.

Unlike the window at the specialty shop, Mrs. Weckman's House of Cards had spread out stuffed rabbits, streamers, and glittery whirly-gigs against a sky blue screen. On the green door was a discrete bronze sign that simply said 'House of Cards'--'Mrs. Weckman's' had rubbed off years ago. The door gave an electronic ping as she pushed it open.

"May I help you?"

White hair and eyes as blue as the front window screen peered at her from behind a rotating rack of colorful stickers. Ellen took a step back in surprise, for a moment, she had thought that the old woman had appeared from nowhere as the cashier's desk next

to the stickers had been vacant.

"Well." She shoved her hands into her raincoat pockets and thought of Tom and his vagueness. "Yes. My cousin needs a card."

"We have plenty of birthday cards at the first aisle."

She let out a breath. "I don't think he wants one of those. The problem is, he never said what kind he wanted, even when I asked him. He just told me that your shop would have what he needed."

"Do you mind if I ask what your cousin's name is?"

She supposed it would do no harm to give the old woman that small piece of harmless information. There must be hundreds of Toms in town. "Tom."

"Ah." She sounded as if Ellen had given her a revelation from God. The old woman thumped out from behind the sticker rack with surprising speed, her oak cane tapping along the carpet like a third leg. "Right this way."

Now confused, she trailed the proprietress down one of the aisles to the back of the store. The back wall was lined with shelves overflowing with stacks of envelopes, cards, folders, notebooks, and filler paper. The old woman plucked a card off one of the stacks.

"This will be what he will be looking for."

Ellen glanced doubtfully at the card, the picture of a yellow lily drawn in front. When she paid for it, the old woman winked at her and said, "Send your cousin my regards."

Back out in the alley, she checked her watch. She could still make it to the café on time if

she walked. She took out the card from the white paper bag that the old woman had placed it in and opened it. Inside was a single line, handwritten.

*For anniversaries, forgotten.*

Wednesday, May 14, 2003

Peculiar Type #7 - The Ditz

Carrie stifled a yawn and glanced at the clock. Twelve fifty-seven. Perhaps she should not have had the second helping of pasta salad for lunch. She was feeling as doped up as a dog that had eaten half of the Christmas ham.

A sharp jab in her arm made her blink her eyes.

"The boss will have your hide if you fall asleep during the meeting," Roberto whispered.

"Not if he doesn't see me first."

He whipped out the pen from behind his ear. "Want some advice?"

"Why not? You're going to give it to me anyway regardless of whether I say no or yes."

"Take notes," he said, tapping the end of his pen to the pad sitting on the small arm desk attached to his chair. "Guaranteed to keep you awake."

"And a cup of coffee doesn't?"

Terrance, the skinny department director, coughed to get everyone's attention. At that moment, a figure--slim but top heavy--breezed in to take the empty seat beside Carrie. Alex, the analyst three doors down, was wearing (again) a one size too snug suit with a scandalous neckline and bright lipstick that Bozo the clown would be proud of. Carrie wondered briefly if the woman got a wedgie every time she sat down. Terrance rolled his eyes at Alex's entrance but clicked the control to begin his presentation.

Fifteen minutes into the meeting--while Terrance was droning about company statistics, Roberto was busy scribbling in his pad, and Carrie was on the verge of dozing off--Alex leaned over so that her upper body was sprawled on Carrie's desk. Carrie caught a whiff of her strong perfume and tried vainly not to hyperventilate. Roberto studiously concentrated on his notes, trying to ignore the cleavage dangling in his peripheral vision.

"Hey Enrique," she breathed in a little-girl voice. "Isn't Terrance talking about information relating to your project? Make sure to take a lot of good notes!"

"Uh huh," he mumbled.

When she settled back into her seat, Carrie and Roberto exchanged exasperated glances.

Friday, May 30, 2003

Peculiar Type #8 - Relationship Columnists Not Needed

The houses built in the early 1920s along Pine Street had been ruthlessly gutted and demolished within a span of three months. The Samson and Moynihan Company had considered it a success that they had outbid their rivals to build condominiums and a shopping center in this old, tired district, and the contractors were eager to put up the buildings as soon as possible to collect that final paycheck from the city.

Don was glad that Samson and Moynihan had outbid Smith, Smith, and Smith-Johnson because that meant that he had a job with regular hours for at least two years as the district was being renovated. It meant that he could use his hands instead of idling in front of the television and being nagged by the wife. It also meant that there would be fewer arguments about money, and that it was an excuse to avoid the in-laws and to pretend that there was nothing wrong with the kids.

During lunch break, Don would stake out a seat at the stone wall. Although the original houses were gone, the architect had decided to leave the stone wall that divided the subsequent hilly forest from the relatively flat district as a demarcation between human activity and one of the few remaining pockets of nature. Samson and Moynihan didn't understand the architect's rationale, but Don didn't care. It gave him a perch while he ate his customary salami sandwich.

Don's lunch companion was a pimply-faced kid in his early twenties. Marty was one of those happy kids with either a grin or a whistle on his lips. He was optimistic and talkative. Usually Don left him to chatter away while he munched on his sandwich, allowing him to talk away the gloomy thoughts that always lingered in the periphery. But today, Marty was silent.

The older man swallowed and glanced at the kid. Marty was a little pale and he was chewing mechanically as if lunch was a chore and not a respite. Don cleared his throat.

"Hey Marty, what's the matter?" He winced. His voice sounded gruff, unused, and maybe even a little accusatory.

"Nothin' Don."

"Aw, com'on, you can't fool me."

Marty sighed as if he was Atlas, carrying the world on his shoulders. "It's Sandy. She won't talk to me. And I can't think of anything that I might have done wrong."

Sandy was Marty's equally young wife. Don had seen her once, a pretty, plump girl with long hair to match her name and a charming smile. Marty and Sandy reminded him of the first years of his marriage, when he had thought that he had been happy. And now, he felt hollow as if something had leaked out through the years. He wondered if his wife felt the same way.

"Have you told her that you love her?" he found himself saying.

"That I love her?" Marty was confused only for a moment. "Well, of course, that must be it! I don't recall telling her that this morning. You must be a genius, Don!"

And as the kid began jabbering about how he had read in this magazine once that husbands should pamper their wives to put them in a good humor and that maybe he should offer to cook dinner for Sandy, Don fell back into a silence that was now cloudy with questions of his own. Should he follow his own advice?

Saturday, July 05, 2003

Peculiar Type #9 - Alike

The cafe on Rue Boulevard was still a noisy place around two in the afternoon, but Steve was used to it. He tuned everything out as if it were so much static and all he saw or felt was his work. Mechanically, he sipped a glass of water and took a bite of his sandwich before typing in another sentence.

He worked this way, finishing a paragraph, before he became aware of something. The hair on his arms stood on end even though the room was at a pleasant temperature. He looked over his laptop screen and saw two bulging eyes staring at him.

The woman wasn't unattractive, but despite the long slim legs encased in a short skirt and curling brown hair draped over her shoulder, it was her eyes that provided the greatest unease. *If she didn't blink*, he thought, *they would pop out of her head*.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, is something wrong?"

"Don't I know you?"

Frowning, he wracked his brain for a faint memory, a flicker, for the identity of this woman. Nothing. "Should I know you?" he said instead. "I'm Steve."

"Oh." The woman appeared startled and blinked, but if anything, her eyes bulged more as if she were a surprised cartoon character. "I thought you were someone else, a colleague I worked with years ago."

He offered her a smile. "Well, no problem. I make the same mistake too sometimes."

She made some sort of apology and fled, leaving Steve with his work once more.

Friday, July 11, 2003

Based on accounts from neighbors and other onlookers.

Peculiar Type #10 - The Arsonist

There was only one gallon left. She poured the gasoline across the porch, splattering it in random patterns. When she was done, she tossed the jug into the house and shut the front door. The house soaked in the fluid like a sponge sitting on the kitchen counter--from the bottom up.

She struck a match and tossed it on the soaked porch. She struck another match and tossed it into the damp interior of the station wagon parked in front of the house, on the grass. She walked to the street and sat at the very edge of the lawn.

The flames started slowly at first--tiny sparks licking their way across the wood. But soon, the entire front of the house was in a halo of light and the flames feeding from seat upholstery began peeking out the car windows.

Smell and heat buried themselves in her lungs and skin and slowly but surely, she felt everything being drained from her. The fire was cleansing and purifying--eliminating everything. No more of him. Clothes, furniture, photos, nothing. Not even the poetry that she had spent countless hours penning and agonizing over. Or that sweater he had given her on their first date.

Nothing. Who was he again? Why was she doing this?

Her muscles felt limp and relaxed and her mouth naturally moved upward. The fire was beautiful, she mused as sirens in the distance wailed inching ever closer.

Saturday, August 16, 2003

Peculiar Type #11 - Queen of the Road

Marsha wasn't your ordinary middle-aged biker chick. Oh no, she was the *Queen of the Road* and she didn't let you forget it either. Her younger female rivals called her a bitch. And the men called her a tigress. Her cohorts called her Queenie and they always saluted her when they greeted her--half seriously, half in jest.

On an August afternoon, in the hot sun and sweltering heat, she and her gang saddled up on gleaming Harleys to head north. Chuck's BBQ Shack was hosting the annual motorcycle show, an event that she wouldn't miss for the world.

The highway was a long stretch of gray and freedom. Amidst the growling motors and the wind whipping through her hair, Marsha was an element of nature with the lightness and ferociousness of fire. She loved the humming of the Harley beneath her, better (she often mused) than riding astride her younger lover Jed or binging on chocolate. At that moment, she passed a green mini-van driven by a harried soccer mom shouting at the three kids in the back. *A pity*, she thought, and she gunned the gas, speeding up three car-lengths.

But there were few other cars on the road so she took to the center and eyed the road that thinned on the horizon to a dot as a dartboard target. The engine noise became nothing more than static and she concentrated on the feeling of the blacktop racing underneath the tires. She felt every bump, crack, and imperfection and for that time, she was not merely a queen of the road, but a goddess--flying, in control.

Monday, March 15, 2004

Peculiar Type #12 - Recently Divorced

On this particular brisk spring day, the sky was streaked white--clouds drawn out to the breaking point.

*It's the breaking point all right*, fumed Jonas as he hunched his shoulders inward and shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. His sixteen-year-old daughter had declared an emergency and requested, no *demand*ed, that he get some cotton swabs right away.

As he marched through the parking lot to the store, he passed a redhead in a white tube top and a tight black mini-skirt. His ex had been like that at the end, flashy and easy, and he should have known better than to think that she was trying to patch things up. In fact, he should have been seeing the red flags a mile away when she started bringing home fishnet stockings and studded collars and loud makeup. *And good riddance*, he huffed. No responsible mother would run off with a tattooed motorcycle freak ten years her junior.

The redhead gave him a narrow-eyed glare and he quickly turned his gaze elsewhere least she thought *him* a freak. *What's wrong with young women these days?* he thought as he pushed open a door and walked into a milieu of frumpy women with toddlers, moody teenagers in baggy clothes, and clerks with fake smiles. Why don't they dress in sensible styles that don't show so much skin? Or are they so mindless as to follow the fashion on TV and lousy role models like his ex? He hoped fervently that his daughter realized that the "in style" was not for her. Otherwise, he would have to barricade her in her room before she even thought about shopping for clothes.

Jonas stalked through the aisles, eventually winding up among rows of fresh smelling

lotions and feminine hygiene products. The cotton swabs were at the very end stacked above the cotton balls and cotton pads. He took one package, turned around, and nearly keeled over a shopping cart that hadn't been there a second before.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't realize..."

He eyed the lady in charge of the cart. Shoulder-length hair, wide eyes, laugh lines around her generous mouth. A looker all right, but he didn't buy her excuse. Women who ran people down with shopping carts were a threat to society. She should have been charged with reckless endangerment or whatever terminology the cops used for people who didn't drive between the lines. But with his luck, she'd only have to flutter her eyelashes and the cops would be at her feet rather than writing up a ticket.

"No problem," he found himself saying. And as she maneuvered the cart around him and he walked out of the aisle, he mentally kicked himself. *The things I do to keep society running smoothly.*

Thursday, January 27, 2005

Peculiar Type #13 - Wake

On a silver afternoon, Peter watched his grandfather's ashes whisk across the slate blue waters of Dunnaday Bay as a glimmering soul-cloud in the crisp air.

He stood for an hour on the water-worn dock listening to Reverend Matthews' solemn words and Uncle Gordon's elegy. He remembered when his grandfather first took him here and told him how he worked as a fisherman when he was younger, knotting rope, tending the boats, pulling in the catch. Seagulls had cried overhead and he could swear he could smell the fish and the brine and the sweat and could see his grandfather's eyes, hard and bright.

Uncle Gordon said that Peter's grandfather was a stubborn man who knew his mind. That line made Peter smile. His grandfather had always been proud to say that he smoked a cigar every week since he had been ten and a beer every day since that age as well. Aunt Rita, a retired surgeon, was always pestering the old man to give up his bad habits, but he had brushed her off saying that he was immune to such poisons.

Peter discretely sniffled as his family headed back toward solid land when the last of grandfather disappeared into the watery beyond. Grandfather would be pleased, he thought. After one last glance at the bay's choppy waves, he turned and nearly bumped into a glassy-eyed woman trying to pull her collar up to protect her neck from the cold wind. Peter frowned. It was Josephine, his cousin.

"Cold day. Can't wait to get inside," she said.

"Yes." He walked with her toward one of the large wood-planked sheds dotting the shore where a brief reception was to be held. He had intended to have a drink and linger for a

while commiserating with his family, but with Josephine around, he wasn't so sure. He hadn't known that she would come to the funeral. Of course, his grandfather was hers too, but a week before, everyone knew she was immersed in something Big and Important. But only Peter knew she was seeing a psychiatrist and taking meds.

Once inside, Peter slipped away from his cousin and headed toward the refreshment table for a glass of merlot. He didn't bother taking off his coat. He smiled again as he swirled the wine and took a sip. If his grandfather was there, he would be scowling. "Wine?" he'd roar. "Your friends have corrupted you, Peter." And then the old man would forcibly take the glass out of his hand and replace it with a beer can. But it would have all been in good fun. His grandfather would drink the wine as he had developed a taste for it himself.

He spotted Uncle Gordon talking to the reverend at one corner and turned to walk toward the two men, but he froze as out of the corner of his eye, he saw Josephine talking to his younger brother Bobby, Bobby's girlfriend Eliza, and one of his other cousins. "So," Josephine said loudly to Eliza, "How many other guys have you dated before seeing Bobby?"

Bobby's mouth dropped. Eliza blinked, shocked. Peter took a deep swallow. *Please let that be an isolated incident.* Even when they were little, Josephine always talked before thinking. And even after she talked, she never thought what she said was ever wrong. The woman never had any tact, no filter to screen out whatever was churning in that brain of hers. Peter had hoped the meds were doing *something*.

Peter made his way toward his uncle and the reverend. Greetings were exchanged and he chatted with the older men, feeling a little comforted. After a few moments, he was about to excuse himself to get some water when footsteps sounded behind him. It was Josephine.

"I must be leaving soon," his cousin announced. "It's getting so dark at this time of year."

Reverend Matthews agreed as his uncle nodded. Peter said nothing.

"It was nice seeing you Reverend. Peter, don't drink too much. And Uncle Gordon, you look absolutely *terrible*. Take care of yourself, now, you hear?"

Josephine emphasized the word *terrible* like an overblown stage actress and then patted Uncle Gordon's coat lapel with a disapproving *tsk*. As his uncle's body jerked at her words, startled, the reverend tried to cover-up a scandalized gasp with a hand. And as a headache brewed behind Peter's temple, his cousin whisked herself off.

*Those meds definitely aren't working.* "I am so sorry," Peter found himself saying. "She's just not herself with everything going on." But that was all that he was going to say. He was the only one who knew about Josephine's psychiatrist--she had entrusted that part of her to him. If it ever got out to the rest of the family, well, he knew for certain that Aunt Rita would be having a field day.

Uncle Gordon was silent for a second, gazing at the door that Josephine had breezed through. Something flickered briefly across his eyes before he glanced back at his nephew. "Don't worry, Peter. I know she's been like that for quite a while."

Wednesday, July 11, 2007

[Peculiar Type](#) #14 - Run Away

Ah, an opportunity to finally get out of the house.

Madeline jogged down an oak-lined avenue in an anonymous subdivision on a mild summer day. She had taken care to wear her striped workout shorts and matching tank. She had the water bottle, the fanny pack, the hip running shoes, the iPod. She wore a black baseball cap with a curved brim to shield her eyes from the casual onlooker. She looked like an annoying fitness fanatic. Everyone was supposed to ignore her.

"That's her!"

"Wait up!"

She did not turn around. She kept her pace. But that did not keep her heart from pounding or the sweat from trickling down her temples. Oh, if only her water bottle had pepper spray. Soles pounded on the sidewalk behind her. At least they were not following her in a van. Madeline turned on the next corner, saw an open doorway, and made a split-second decision.

Air-conditioning enveloped her like a chilly blanket. She wiped the sides of her face with her arms and sucked in a breath. Outside, she could hear the hurrying footsteps pass the doorway. In another moment, her fingers would start trembling, but she took the time to peer at the shop she had ducked into.

Computers and monitors sat on a display counter close to the front window. The rest of the floor was taken up by racks of cables and extension cords, batteries and printer cartridges. Shelves of packaged electronic hardware, software, accessories lined the

walls. At the cashier's counter, a man with dark, spiky hair and horn-rimmed glasses worked on the innards of a desktop computer without its casing. He removed a part, put it on the counter, and then finally looked up at her.

"May I help you?"

A variety of responses ran through her head. Could she use his phone to call 9-1-1? Did he have a closet where she could hide in? Or a costume that she could don? She just shook her head.