

LINDA CRUM WANTS TO TALK

Louis Wittig

Her Majesty Linda Crum, Grand Czarina of Human Resources and Most Holy Inquisitor of Peon Complaints, requests the honor of my presence? Tell her to get bent. I was at this desk when Linda Crum was *The Intern Who Got Her Hair Stuck in the Copier*. And the episode she so compassionately wishes to hear both sides of? There's nothing to talk about.

I didn't start it. Franklin started it. It was the first thing he ever did for me and the last thing he did on earth. Before that night, Franklin was just a kid in a big-and-tall suit he'd gotten from his mom for his first real job. I doubt I'd ever uttered a complete sentence to him before. But I stayed late that night—was it a Wednesday? That 55-degree monstrosity in the middle of January, whatever that was. I was just wasting time—what was there for me to do at home, or anywhere else?—but Franklin had actually been working late. Anyways, we were in the same elevator out. Somehow he knew my name and he says we should get a drink.

“Like a glass of water?” I asked.

And here—honestly—is what the kid said to me: “Doesn't matter. The roofies will dissolve in anything.”

Maybe you shouldn't laugh at stuff light that, but I did, and I thought, why not get a drink?

At the pub around the corner we slogged two-dollar Coronas and threw straws at a pack of redneck tourists sulking in a booth. Then Franklin declared that his five-year career plan was to ride Janice—Janice from the Microtel sales team—like a roly poly pony.

“Janice, Janice,” he repeated. “Janice who always brings umbrellas, even when it’s not raining.” I nodded along. I knew of Janice, but I’d never really thought of her that way.

Then Franklin went quiet. He leaned in, reached across the table, and pinched a wad of grey scruff from behind my ear. His palm was sweaty against my cheek. “You look like Doc,” he said, “from *Back to the Future*, but more homeless.” Then he scrawls on a bar napkin and throws it at me.

El Universal Barbershop / 31 Ave + Steinway. PEDRO!

The napkin was ripped up where he’d circled the name, PEDRO!

Franklin plowed his fingers back through his brick-red brush cut like he was combing the mighty Serengeti. He leaned in again and whispered, “Pedro changed my life.” Drinks were on Franklin that night. He closed out our tab before I could even reach for my wallet.

By the time we launched ourselves back out it was real winter again. A cold front, a wall of frozen air the size of the Eastern seaboard and as tall as the sky had crept in while we had haggled over the precise ending of an ancient *Seinfeld* episode. I beat it back to the burbs. He ended up on the downtown 59th Street platform when he needed to be on the uptown platform and—you saw the article in the *Post*, all 126 words—figured the quickest way home to bed was to cross the tracks. At the funeral I was sat next to Janice, who was texting throughout. Afterwards I hovered, ready with a tray of the tenderly half-baked comforts that only the last to see him could give—so full of life, right to the end, etc. etc. By the time I realized I was the only one who knew of that night I was also the only one left in the church lobby.

I swallowed a few hours of TV later that night, but eventually had to go for a walk. I pulled on my coat and the note appeared. Just grazing it underfinger in my pocket, I knew what it was. But I didn’t take it out, because you should never ever move the evidence. And this, I felt it, was evidence. Of what, I didn’t

know and couldn't get myself hung up on. I put the note into a Ziploc baggie and hid it in my study. I fully comprehend the lunacy, but these convictions are practiced deadbeat tenants that can wheedle and dodge their way through any eviction. It was his last known will and testament, and it was too clear to be ignored: I had to get a haircut from Pedro.

Not immediately. I took my time, to relish the "why" of the mystery. The explanation I settled on started with the reasonable assumption that Pedro must have been fresh off the boat from Colombia or DR and Franklin must have traded him English lessons for haircuts. They must have bonded. Pedro would be crushed to hear my news. But Mrs. Pedro would be pregnant. The Pedros would name their son Franklin. They'd make me the godparent. That just came. I ran with it. I'd be the Big Franklin that Little Franklin never had. I'd write him a killer recommendation, vault him into college, and he'd cure cancer or become the richest Hispanic in the Universe. They would raise statues to him all over the Latin world. Other scenarios that made the finals were similar in all the vital details.

I took a personal day for the event and El Universal was the perfect first-scene set: A sagging linoleum hallway burrowed into the side of a yellow-brick block of affordable housing, lit through a cloudy front window. As I strode through the door a burnt peanut of a man in a soiled barber's coat sprung out of a chair towards me.

"My friend my friend, what can I do today for you?" He yelped and threw his open hand to me. He must have been older than I was.

"Pedro?"

"Juan," he clasped my hand and pulled me to his chair.

"I'd prefer Pedro. Is Pedro here?"

"Pedro is good. I am better. Ha ha!"

"It's Pedro or nothing," I said.

His smile fractured and he ebbed to a corner where mute fútbol was playing on a microscopic TV set.

“Pedro in a minute,” he murmured.

Pedro looked much more like Pedro—a bony elf in a pompadour, shaving an adolescent head in the back of the room. I tripped into the chair when he finally waved me back and started spilling the beans before the bib was even on:

“You come highly recommended, Pedro. Actually, I’m sorry to tell you this—”

“How do you want?” The question came from Juan. Pedro stood dumb beside me.

“Short?”

“Corto” said Juan, and Pedro picked up the scissors.

I had no idea how long a haircut could last, or its potential philosophical depths. Shut behind my eyelids, I held on for any sound from Pedro. There was his clipper and only his clipper, over and over and around, grinding, sending shivers through my scalp and down my spine and, inscrutably, coming back and back again to a spot just over my right temple, buzzing in—I lost count of how many times—as if a single recalcitrant hair were blowing the whole thing. Forty-five minutes. Motes of clipped head flotsam lodged in my ears and nose and the receding echoes of my little fantasy irritated from the inside.

When I opened my eyes the joint was bright and ugly and I was a naked and panicked sheep. I slapped Pedro a \$10 tip on a \$12 bill to buy his attention, and then I tried to catch up with destiny by repeating “Franklin,” “fat guy,” and “here,” while pantomiming the accident with a finger-leg man and my fist as a Queens-bound N-train. Pedro wasn’t getting it and Juan, who’d seen the tip, glared me out of there on my ass before I could rev up my Spanglish.

And that was almost the entire sum of it. Nancy Boyles from shipping said my new do was special, as we waited for the coffee to finish brewing. I entertained the possibility that I’d had it backwards, that the haircut was supposed to be about

me, not Pedro. I waited for whatever monumental correction the haircut was going to precipitate, until I got impatient and switched to a build-it-and-they-will-come attitude. I flossed three times a week, offered of my own free will to reorganize the paper closet and waited some more. It was a sad little show, like watching a gambler bargain with a slot machine, but it was over soon enough.

I boiled up half a mind to drop a rock in that Ziploc bag and toss it from the Staten Island ferry. Instead I bolted home, up to my study, into my drawer and confronted it directly. It was a rousing give and take—mostly it took. I was smack in the middle of an involved point that could have been leading to what therapists call a breakthrough when the door accidentally creaked open and the wife backed away from it and tiptoed down the stairs. I didn't care what she heard, but I wasn't about to answer questions or "talk about it." So I mailed the enigmatic little bastard to Franklin's people.

I thought you should have this, I wrote on a sticky note, before starting over. If they should've had it then they would've had it from the beginning. But I was the one who did have it, so I was the one who should've had it. Maybe I was just the hand-off guy. But then why was I in the equation at all?

I wanted you to have it. A naked and vulgar lie.

Can't make heads or goddamn tails of it. Hope you can! Unacceptable for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was, I hoped they couldn't. I finalized the note by morning and dispatched it without signature or return address.

Subsequent days and weeks brushed passed me without acknowledgement, as if this whole episode had been a *faux pas* on my part that was proving harder than expected to forget. I wondered intermittently how my letter bomb had gone off. It could have broken his parents down. Or not. It could have sent them to the shelves, pulling off the photo albums they'd been eyeing since the funeral, rubbing each other's shoulders

and fogging themselves up over the snapshot of Frankie's first haircut. Or, it could have been buried unopened under a pile of coupons and credit card offers in an unheated foyer.

Linda Crum doesn't give a flying horse cracker about any of this, does she? Linda Crum wants to know about Friday night. I'll give her Friday night. Friday night: Rich Salmon, Soojin, a pair of marketing meatheads I've never seen before in my life and Janice—yes, Janice from the Microtel sales team—went out to some insipid velvet-couch lounge and I tagged along.

Yes, I drank: in near total darkness, huddled against a wall, strangers' conversations and shuffling elbows landing on me constantly, like spittle. No, I was not drunk. My Dos Equis were rungs on a diving board ladder and when I'd pulled myself to the top I cleared my throat.

"Hey, remember Franklin?" I asked. They pretended not to hear me.

"Did you know that I was the last person to see him alive?" Then they came around, Girl Scouts to a ghost story.

And I told it. I told it good. As I did I caught sight of my hand waving out in front of me, chopping along, dicing the details of that night into finer and tastier flakes. The story bowled down through me. I cast myself as the hermit and Franklin as the kindly neighbor. I plucked new particulars from the telling that very well could have been true. I said Franklin was going to try to get on the vaunted Murkusky account. I had him saying that he could see himself going places at our company. Poignant stuff. And the napkin I hung at the end, high and plain. Cut off when Franklin and I left the bar, it was the best story I've ever told.

After a respectful turn of silence they clinked their white wines to Franklin. They were all thinking it. Rich opened his mouth first, from a smirk.

"So you went to Pedro?"

"Sure," I said.

“And what?”

“What do you mean ‘and what’?”

“I mean, when you went to see Pedro, what happened?”

“I got a haircut, that’s what,” I said. I had hoped to get a laugh with that, in vain.

“And?”

“And it was a decent haircut.”

“Okay.”

“Christ, what is it with you? What else would happen?” I looked around. They weren’t buying that Rich was the bonehead here.

Rich searched his glass. “No. Nothing. A haircut is what would happen.”

“Damn right,” I said.

Soojin swiveled her head back and forth to each of them in a panic.

“I do not understand.” She made them sound like these were the first four English words she’d ever attempted. “What did he mean?” They didn’t answer her because they were putting down their drinks and looking for their coats.

The night outside was a singular relief. They scattered. I took my time hoofing around the dunes of sidewalk ice that had been melting and freezing and re-melting and refreezing, harder and darker each time, all winter. I glanced up after a few blocks and lo and behold, Janice on the curb, waiting for a cab to pass.

I should have crawled into a deep hole, but there were none on the block that I could see. She saw me, her face as full and forgiving as the moon in a children’s book. I went to her and as I got closer it just came out.

“There’s something I didn’t say back there,” I started from feet away. “About Franklin. That night. You were all he could talk about. He said he’d had a crush on you since his first day. He was going to ask you out. He told me that. Maybe I shouldn’t say. But, you know, just so you can know.”

Now, just so you and Linda can know—and Janice, I think she already knows, if she'd just stop to think about it for a minute—I had not one electron of sexual intent.

Janice's eyelids trembled. I could see she wanted me to say I was joking. Was it so horrible, this exaggeration? He had been zilch to her, and she couldn't dump her life and run after him now, even if she'd wanted to. It would be a minor thing, going forward: the sensation that something intended hadn't come. But she would feel it, no doubt, the same ways I had. And that's what made me ecstatic. Suddenly I felt like everything that had been pressing on me—about Franklin, Pedro, the whole goddamn mess—didn't weigh as much, because now Janice was helping to carry it.

And what's a perfectly innocent thing to do when you're happy? You hug the nearest person and plant one on her. And if you slip when you embrace her, one of you is going to end up on top of the other—that's just physics. Company policy can't prohibit employees from following the laws of physics, can it?

So tell that to Linda if you want. Tell her too that I'm not explaining it again without a subpoena. Maybe don't put it in those exact words, but tell her.