

The Hip Hipsters and the Search for the Spec-Wearing Spector

Chapter 1

We've seen it! We saw the spec-wearing specter!



The message appeared on Nifter Kent's handheld device. It was from his best friend since elementary school, Holly Balzer.

Sleuth emoji. Interesting, he thought.

Nifter sighed in spite of the promising message. His passion for the black brick cradled in his palm had long since turned to dust. He swore in front of his group of friends over many drinks several months back that he was going back to straight landline. Yet here he was, looking at cartoon words.

But progress had been made, he assured himself. So far, he'd deleted all his apps, given up all his corporate accounts, and permanently logged out of all social media. His texts were texts only, no pictures, no gifs, no links. He missed none of the promised great connections or so-called conveniences from it. But, he had yet to take the final plunge and cut himself off entirely. Something about needing something to hold made the task feel larger in scale.

Besides, he had yet to furnish sufficient evidence to his group of friends that giving up his right to be voluntarily surveilled made him a better person. It didn't. And that was a reality he was slowly coming to grips with. He had yet to admit that he was relevant enough to disappear from being online. Most can't afford to be comfortable enough in their own anonymity. And for now, that included him.

What made this particular message enticing was Holly, whose always changing hair color acted as a sort of mood ring, and gravelly voice was that of the town's crier. A wordsmith by birthright, she usually reserved emojis for bad-date dish or once-in-a-lifetime shoe finds. That, along with the occasional eggplant and splash for, well, you know. Otherwise, no shortcuts allowed for her edgy prose. Her snappy wit and writers' edge did two things for her: One, it led to innumerable potential relationships ending before she could find out whether he drank decaf. And two, her addict's itch to tell the real story combined with a knack for split infinitives-slash-lack of motivation to tread beyond the still waters of their medium-sized town landed her in the same place her father did career-wise, as owner/editor's Westport's independent weekly, The Gale.

Nifter worked there as her part-time columnist and full-time grounding mechanism. He considered all of this while mulling over whether to respond to the text. His attempt to take a leave of absence from his phone and the world attached to it annoyed Holly to the point where she led others to believe he did it to spite her.

He also began to feel the press of some kind of home invasion. People were coming for him this evening despite the recent digital restrictions he'd placed upon himself.

He only hoped they were friendly.

To prepare a little and numb himself a little, Nifter cracked a beer. Before he took a sip, he bit into a tangerine to peel. The waxy orb was a late supper for the boy-man in his early thirties. Beyond his technology purge, his thoughts shifted to a simpler subject: when might he retire his bro beanie and repurpose it as a coffee pot cozy? His signature man bun had been gone for months, head shaved on late-night impulse ...so the security blanket for his shorn locks was next on the chopping block.

Nifter stood like a crooner in the spotlight of the recessed can lighting of his cavernous, yawning space. He was illuminated among the reclaimed wood wall-accented kitchen. All arms, legs, and veins, he smiled in spite of himself as his device continued to light up his face from the bottom.

As the sinewy hipster gulped down the rest of the citrus and took a pull off his Pilsner (he swore off IPAs as they'd become too bro-basic), a follow-up message made its stamp on his screen. This one caused him think someone may have commandeered his best friend's handheld.

U round? 

The eggplant.

On second thought, she must be drunk.

And then, the clincher -- maybe it wasn't ...no this DEFINITELY was not Holly on her phone: That specter scared the pants off me. (I couldn't find the pants-off emoji. Is there 1?)

Is this Bobbi?! Nifter allowed himself another sip and grin as he texted back. Sup lady?!

Bobbi Marlin was Holly's sleeve-tatted polyamorous by definition (though she'd not yet had the opportunity to practice it as a lifestyle, because #smalltownlyfe) barista cousin who spoke in fragments and unintentional innuendo. Her free spirit let it all dangle, participles included. (<-- Holls' description of her.)

Bobbi wore a tiny stud in her nose, an angular bob and had one-size-too-big straight, white teeth. She carried herself with a demeanor an ex once described as, "Like being with the human equal of a Sunday morning, every day." Everyone was reminded of this often because it was etched on her forearm in some font that was supposed to resemble handwriting.

Bobbi, before most of her visible (and hidden) bits were decorated with sugar skulls and lotus flowers, was a beanpole tomboy. She attached herself to her cousin like a slinky sidecar from adolescence on when Holly's family moved from the city after purchasing the paper.

Though she was flighty in person, Bobbi had a keen aptitude for business. She owned The Coffeteria, a plate-glass cappuccino-and-catch-up joint three doors down from Nifter's converted machine shop home.

Her roaster once served as the town's carpet and upholstery shop, started by her great-grandfather Robert "the First".

Bobbi was also something of an almost-celebrity and forever-legend among the group in the town. Her one-time/former/and always band, The Bald Kegels, had a top-40 college radio hit some years back with the banger "I'm not you (am I?)" a kind of post-punk funky homage to The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

Nifter's cold and dramatic condo and The Coffeteria's serving as the epicenter of the old industrial district's revitalization was reflective of the changes the neighborhood and the town as a whole was going through. In its post-war heyday, the area just off the town's main drag was the place people ran errands and get things made. The TV repairman, the furniture outlet, the mechanic, the lumber yard, the pawn shop, the tailor, the locksmith, the barber and the cobbler along with the only place a worker could afford to eat out, The Leaning Tower, an Italian restaurant next door to a worn-out watering hole called the Trap Door that's still there and seems to have predated any actual human occupation of this swath of coastal land.

Storefronts in this once-ignored quadrant on the dark end of the town's main alleys were being gobbled up and turned into chalkboard menu and teardrop lighting talismans to ward off the evil spirits of the next inevitable recession.

Though most of the folks in the town saw this revitalized area with two-noun boutique and restaurant names (Bone and Brindle, Twig and Twine ...snot and spittle) as the new place to be, and often used the words "walkable", "mixed-use", and "trendy" to describe it, Nifter, Holly, Bobbi, and their group of Hipsters would often talk about the gentrification they helped create as something of a curse -- as if being in an up-and-coming hood was a signal that it was already time for them to move on.

Back in the loft apartment, Nifter could only focus on the ellipses of someone typing. The dots appeared and vanished like disappearing ink.

Then the tiniest of payouts when the word "Sup" appeared. What could she be writing and deleting?

Followed by: ...Yeah, it's me. I stole her phone. Mine's dead.

Then another set of ellipses and another pause, then: BTW, What's '?!' ...ARE YOU MAD?

Question mark. Exclamation point (!!!)

It's called a escalator mark or interrobang, Nifter now pecked furiously, as he ignored autocorrect which changed quesclamation to escalator.

...As in I'm going to interrogate you, then bang you? Exclamation point. Exclamation point.

Nifter heard a familiar chorus of laughter making its way up his converted-warehouse wall and through the open window above the too-big-to-function farm sink basin.

His home was about a half mile from the hum of College Row which was all bars, chain stores filled with one-time-use go-out clothing, and small plates restaurants where kids took their mom and dads to brunch during parent weekends, which, judging by the number of men wandering around downtown in pleated khakis, tucked in wicking fabric polos, and phones clipped on belt loops, seemed like every weekend. This night, a Thursday, Nifter felt the tribal thump thumps from the cafes morphing into mini-nightclubs where various fights would break out and assault-style atrocities would be committed, well up in his throat.

He shook the image of this and breathed a sigh of thanks that Bobbi and Holly were at his doorstep, now screaming for him to let them in. No more texting. As if on cue ...“Quit texting—you’re worse than a thirsty boy,” Holly called up. “Speaking of ...let us in. We have come to tell tall tales and drink your effing wine.”

Bobbi produced a restaurant-grade corkscrew from her handbag and held it up like a child would a trophy. “We came to screw you,” she hiccuped, then flushed. “I mean your wine. I mean, unscrew. ...Your wine. Youknowwhatimean.”

Amused at the brandishing of a clearly recently stolen artifact, Nifter buzzed the buzzed pair in. As the freight elevator door rolled up, the girls’ legs, sprinkled with the drizzle, shone in the spotlight of the elevator’s LED lights. The appearance of them in their full regalia was enough to bring gaping admiration to his face.

It took their collective effort to slide up the metal jaws as the lift came to a rest a foot above the apartment’s floor, their athletic haunches strained as they bent at the knee to push open the two-ton cage. Evening wear and seal-like skin revealed an inch at a time. He felt a little like a voyeur looking through a camera with the shutter on its slowest setting, these physical specimens entering into his adult cave. Thank goodness they were all such good friends.

As the inseparable duo stepped in, they tested their too-tall going-out heels on the slick polished concrete floor like kids tiptoeing onto a pond after winter first freeze.

Nifter’s loft was torn straight from the pages of a contemporary living magazine, the kind recycled pulp dreamed of becoming. His decor sparse, yet carefully curated like a movie set apartment of a young urbanite who’s got an amorphous job but unlimited resources. His

trappings included the predictable: framed posters from small-venue rock shows of big bands before anyone heard of them, Nepalese flags hanging above his “chill space”, a grown-human-sized Sasquatch with a mermaid tail metal sculpture that Nifter welded during a recent learn-a-trade phase, along with several single-speed Italian-frame bikes which hung from the ceiling like sleeping bats.

The home’s best accessory, however, was Hogan, Nifter’s heterochromia-afflicted Australian shepherd who was, until he heard the elevator door open, jerking and flinching as active dogs do when they are sleeping hard.

With one brown eye and one gray, decorated with a pleasant amount of black spots on his merle coat, Hogan boasted the signature single floppy ear of a shelter dog. Always at the ready, he popped up from his doggie futon propelled by the furious shake of his docked tail and bounded toward Holly and Bobbi. In exchange for the warm greeting, the girls obliged with a piece of peanut butter cookie produced, like the wine opener, from the inexplicably far recesses of Bobbi’s small clutch.

Holly stroked Hogan as he gobbled up the morsel.

Noticing his fur mottled from the day’s run, she frowned. “You need to wash him, Nifty darling,” she said. “His coat is so ...hirsute.”

Holly squealed, “Ha,” and pointed at Bobbi. “Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaassssssss.”

The word-of-the-evening bet was one of the girls’ ongoing games to break up the monotony of their not-quite-ready-for-primetime lives in Westport. Prior to going out, one would pick a random word from the dictionary and the first to use it in context, yet “not in a forced way,” would pocket a five-dollar (or one drink if they were at a bar) bounty.

Hirsute /'hərsoot/ adjective: Covered with coarse stiff hairs.

Holly balled her hand into a fist and pumped her arm in time to Bobbi’s eye roll. “Five big ones girl.”

“Fine, but I’m only gonna give it to you in the morning,” she said. “Unless you want me to go down...” Bobbi took a bite of peanut butter cookie and shot Holly and Nifter a quizzical expression as she chewed thoughtfully. “...To the bank. I don’t have cash ...Sorry.”

Nifter and Holly both let a chortle bubble up at her stumbling. “Geez,” Bobbi continued to dig, “you gotta let a girl finish.”

Holly gave in to a full cackle, but then quickly gathered herself. Sometimes it seemed like Bobbi’s timing was almost too awkward to be true and Holly didn’t like the fact it was becoming a sort of act.

“I,” Bobbi said. “Have a topic tonight.”

“Can we do this at the bar?” Holly was suddenly impatient as she filed through several reds on Nifter’s counter.

“I don’t think I’m going to go out,” Nifter took a little pull and waited for a reaction. This night he wasn’t fishing for them to beg him to go, he really did feel like hunkering down. It was getting late and it was a school night even though the paper had gone to bed that afternoon. The pair in front of him was already on their way. He felt like he’d already missed out on the fun and didn’t want to play catch-up at the Trap Door, because the only thing that would net him was a hangover.

“Oh Nifty, are you in a mood?” Holly tousled his hair and considered the stubble for a moment. “I can’t believe you cut it.”

“You told me for two years to cut it.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you actually would.”

Typical.

“Nifter,” Bobbi sidled up to him. She flirted with all things, it was her way. But more recently, well, even as long as Nifter had known her, when she got into his space -- even if it was a roomful of people -- it seemed like something.

“Tonight’s topic,” Bobbi did an abbreviated drumroll, “crushes.”

Bobbi wrote a love advice column and off deadline she’d pitch her next week’s topic.

“Crushes?” Holly repeated back. “Boo. Yuck. Didn’t you do that last spring?”

“No, I did scams -- you know, hookups.”

“There’s a difference?” Nifter loved to hate getting sucked into these games. He twisted a cap off another Pilsner.

“Of course there’s a difference. A crush is something where you’re in someone’s, you know, overall orbit -- but nothing may happen. But you still are in that stage of anticipating seeing them, like, maybe you’re willing something to happen.”

“And it usually doesn’t,” Holly added.

“And it usually doesn’t,” Bobbi shook her head.

"So, you're saying ...like a crush is like stalking someone," Nifter started to catch a little buzz perhaps coming of this pair.

"Depends," Holly took a big gulp of wine that she'd taken the liberty of uncorking and pouring herself.

"On what?"

"Whether you're a stalker."

The women both tilted their heads back and laughed like nothing else. Bobbi was the first to compose herself.

"That's not funny, Holls."

"I know, I know. It's terrible."

"The thing is with crushes," Bobbi continued, "is that like, just when someone invades your 'space' like that, it's hard to shake. And sometimes, there's people you kind of crushed on, saw what happened, and let it go to its natural conclusion and that's that. But they don't count. That's relationships. Like the actual product never held a candle to those days/weeks/months of anticipation. That's why you should never act on a crush."

"Never," Holly nodded.

"Exactly," Bobbi picked up a glass of wine Holly had poured her and downed it in two gulps. Holly, on it, was already pouring her another.

"So, the letter..." Nifter checked on his dog, who had already returned to his bed and was shook with puppy dreams. Sleep did sound lovely.

"Oh, the letter, thanks," Bobbi unfolded the piece of paper. "This is a great one."

Bobbi cleared her throat. "Dear Bobbi Pin, I have to say, I'm dealing with a kind of stay-at-home Dadding mini crisis -- I think I can lump midlife crisis in there too. My son had swimming lessons this summer and the pool at the college and it was lovely. They just gave it a \$20 million facelift and everyone there pretended they were at the Four Seasons, sans drinks. The lifeguards and teachers were appropriately bronzed. and too-young, and white-teethed, equal numbers boys and girls in their early twenties. The moms were out there splashing around showcasing their sun-faded bad tattoos, a lot of stars on feet and birds on shoulder blades. The dads were in surf-brand trucker hats and were mostly skinny but pot bellied, showing off their tribals. It was glorious. The last session, this woman, mother of two boys in my son's group sat next to me for several days before I said anything. We got to talking and took up the fifty-minute session every

day for the next week and a half. We parked next to each other. We exchanged recipes, she was a vegetarian, I am like vegetarian unless you put a pulled pork sando..."

"Sando?"

"Shh," Bobbi shot Holly a look and kept going, "...or BLT in front of me. We exchanged library books -- which if that's not an invite to get it on in the back of the mini van, I don't know what is. Bobbi, this interaction was the hottest of the hotness, like WAAAY better than last summer when this actress, who I won't name but everyone knows about her, was in town and did toddler's swim and everyone pretended not to know who she was."

"Boring," Holly called out.

"Wait," Bobbi shot her friend a second, more stern, glare.

"Wait what? The guy said he was going through a midlife crisis. Just like, let it be.:

Bobbi finished her wine and held out her glass for another. This time, with a skeptical eye, Holly gave her a slightly less generous pour.

Bobbi continued: "The last day, I wanted to ask for her number or something to 'get the boys together'..."

Bobbi did air quotes.

Holly: "Gross, is he like writing in air quotes. Gross. I don't want to get old."

"Probably not gonna have to worry about that," Nifter said with his bottle held up to his mouth. Holly tore off a piece of cookie and threw it at him. She missed badly. Hogan woke up, padded over, licked it off the floor and was back to sleep seconds later.

"A-hem," Bobbi cleared her throat, again. "I thought it was cute, the air quotes. Old people are sweet."

"He's probably like forty."

"Like I said," Bobbi adjusted her readers. "Anyway, anyway, let's see. OK air quotes, the last day he wanted to get the boys together. Blah blah blah, thank gawd he didn't actually say that..."

"He says he didn't say it," Holly, again, interrupting. It was clear to Nifter he would never get to bed.

"Let her finish."

“What?”

“Bobbi, please. Is this almost done?”

“Yes, duh. Guys,” she rolled her eyes at the incessant interruptions and for emphasis took a more measured sip of her red. She tried to locate her place once more. “Just listen. ...OK, so he didn’t do the line about the kids and he’s like, ‘I but backed off it. We shook hands yadda yadda. And then he’s like, we did a half hug. My heart! It was very, very awkward, and sweet, and sad, and a little sweaty -- the good kind. And then I got to thinking and it’s all so heartbreaking and wonderful I don’t know what to do with it or myself -- so, I’m writing you.”

Bobbi paused for reaction. Crickets.

“That’s it?” Holly balled up her fist. “I swear girl.”

“What? It’s cute. He’s cute.”

“Some old, stalker’y single dad?”

“How do you know he’s single?” Nifter put empty beer number two on the counter next to the other wounded soldiers and reluctantly cracked another. In it for the long haul now.

“Good point Nifty,” Holly snatched the paper. “We need to screen these better. This guy’s a perv and maybe a home wrecker.”

“I’m just wondering,” Bobbi snatched the paper back, glanced over it and paused to take another sip, then didn’t. She put the glass down and her arms went in a flourish, “What is a crush? That’s all. That’s what my response is gonna be.”

“A crush,” Holly straightened herself up and repositioned her boobs, “is when you like someone more than they like you and you will them into someplace near your stratosphere. But that’s why it doesn’t work out long-term. You can’t do that with people. Free will and all that.”

“I disagree,” Nifter said. “I think what he’s trying to say is, maybe he thought that this time is so disastrous, that it’s dire. Like we’re in this dying planet...”

“Dying species,” Holly corrected.

“We’re in a time of dying so demoralizing that maybe love or lust or attraction is a luxury he can’t afford. I used to think like this, but I’m kind of changing my mind -- I think love and sincerity and just, you know, having a crush is now... the only thing. How bout that for, uhhhh ...cheesy?”

Holly and Bobbi exchanged a raw glance and then immediately started cracking up.

“Awww, he’s growing up,” now Bobbi tousled Nifter’s hair.

“Really, sincerity is your new thing?” Holly leaned back on the counter, very sultry. She batted her eyes.

“I mean....”

“Nifty, baby, please. Maybe you shouldn’t have cut your hair. All your brains came out with it.”

“I’m just tired OK,” he was tired. “Long week. Deadlines. All that.”

“OK, we’ll leave you alone then,” Holly turned to Bobbi. “Trap Door?”

Flushed from wine, Bobbi balled up the letter and put it back in her clutch. Holly began to do an expert about face on one heel and the pair set their glasses down at the same time with an echo’y clink and turned toward the door.

“Wait,” Nifter called after them. “Didn’t you come here to tell me you’d seen a ghost?”