

# GRAY MATTER

by JEANETTE D. FARR

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## CHARACTERS:

MARGE: 66 years old. Well-dressed, middle-class, white woman.

RUSSELL: 21 years old. African-American male. Wears baggy clothes and a baseball cap.

SETTING: Small room in a police station. It somewhat resembles a doctor's office waiting room, but not as comfortable. There is a row of 6 chairs and a counter. On the counter is a clipboard with a pencil attached with string and a "front desk" bell. Behind the counter is a computer generated sign that reads: "PLEASE SIGN IN".

MARGE is sitting in a middle seat in the row of chairs. She is reading, doing a crossword puzzle, knitting - something to occupy her time. SHE has her purse on the seat next to her. RUSSELL enters, looks around notices sign, signs in, then moves to find a seat. MARGE, not looking up, moves her purse to the other side of her and tucks it close.

RUSSELL

I saw that.

MARGE

Excuse me?

RUSSELL

I caught you.

MARGE

I don't know you.

RUSSELL

When I walked in, you moved your bag.

MARGE

Please. I don't want any trouble.

RUSSELL

I'm not-

MARGE

Because if you're causing trouble, I can notify someone.

RUSSELL

I wasn't-

OK then. MARGE

(PAUSE)

Do I make you nervous? RUSSELL

I don't even know you. MARGE

Doesn't matter. I can still make you nervous. RUSSELL

Look, I was in the middle of something, if you don't mind. MARGE

Why did you move your bag? RUSSELL

I was getting some gum. MARGE

*(SHE searches for a piece of gum)*

Can I have a piece? RUSSELL

It's Juicy Fruit. MARGE

My favorite. RUSSELL

I only have a stick. MARGE

Can I have half? RUSSELL

You're bothering me. MARGE

Ok. So I don't make you nervous, but I bother you? RUSSELL

MARGE

I'm just not in the mood for... conversation.

RUSSELL

I think it's something else.

MARGE

If you say so.

(MARGE goes back to  
her "project")

RUSSELL

When I walked through that door you *thought*: Rapist, murderer,  
purse-stealer.

MARGE

I thought no such thing.

RUSSELL

But you moved your purse.

MARGE

I was just being polite by making more room. I would do that for  
anyone.

RUSSELL

I don't buy it.

MARGE

It doesn't really concern me if you buy it or not. That's the  
reason.

RUSSELL

There are five empty chairs I could sit in.

MARGE

All right. (*As if to satisfy him*) You caught me.

RUSSELL

Unless you wanted me to come sit next to you.

MARGE

You sit where you'd like.

(*RUSSELL sits in the chair  
farthest away from her.*)

RUSSELL  
This one's too hard.

*(HE moves to the third chair  
closest to her.)*

RUSSELL  
Nope. Not right either.

*(HE gets two chairs away.)*

RUSSELL  
Damn uncomfortable!

*(HE sits next to her.)*

RUSSELL  
Do you mind if I try yours? This one isn't right either.  
How 'bout you let me sit on your lap.

*(MARGE goes to counter and  
rings the bell.)*

RUSSELL  
Wait, wait, lady! I was only joking. Sit back down!

MARGE  
Will you leave me alone?

RUSSELL  
I'll be nice. I'll even sit over here if it'll make you happy.

*(MARGE sits far away from  
RUSSELL.)*

RUSSELL  
Why are you here?

MARGE  
Why are YOU here?

RUSSELL  
I came to see my parole officer.

MARGE  
Nice.

RUSSELL

Does that bother you?

MARGE

And you wondered why I moved my purse.

RUSSELL

But when I walked in you didn't know I was coming to see my parole officer. You just saw me and assumed I was a criminal.

MARGE

I followed my instincts. When the fight or flight kicks in you should listen to that. What you just said about you being a criminal was exactly what my gut was telling me.

RUSSELL

So you moved your purse.

MARGE

Right.

RUSSELL

Wow. You knew. I guess I can't go anywhere anymore. That must be why people cross the street when they see me comin'. It's just like B.O. Nobody ever tells you that you have B.O. until it's too late. Then you come home after realizing you forgot to put on deodorant and wonder why in the hell nobody has been talking to you. Thank you. Thank you for letting me know you can actually see or FEEL through your instinctual animal feelings that there is criminal written all over my face.

MARGE

I'm sure if you dressed a little better, that might help too.

RUSSELL

Maybe kick down a few bucks, get a nice suit or something....

MARGE

Clean yourself up a little.

RUSSELL

Sure. Thanks. You've really helped me uh... What's your name?

MARGE

Why do you want to know my name?

RUSSELL

Well, I can't tell all my "convict" friends that some nice lady helped me. I'd like to tie a name to a face.

MARGE

I don't think you need to know my name.

RUSSELL

Come on.

MARGE

If I tell you, you'll.... leave me alone?

RUSSELL

Cross my heart!

MARGE

Sheila.

RUSSELL

What?

MARGE

That's my name. Sheila.

RUSSELL

Ok. (PAUSE) It's a sin to lie.

MARGE

I know that.

RUSSELL

You feel ok being a liar.

MARGE

Who said I was lying?

RUSSELL

You don't look like a Sheila. Sheila is a young beautiful lady's name.

MARGE

Thank you.

RUSSELL

No, no, no - don't take this wrong. But you ain't a Sheila.

MARGE

You get a name at birth and you keep a name for life. Even beautiful young women named Sheila eventually grow older.

RUSSELL

Yeah, but they don't grow up to look like you.

MARGE

How can you tell what a person should be called or not.

RUSSELL

You said I looked like a criminal.

MARGE

I did not.

RUSSELL

Did you or did you not just admit to me that I looked like a criminal. That you had a gut instinct - and you were right, weren't you?

MARGE

Let's just let it go, ok?

RUSSELL

Sheila?

*(SHE doesn't respond.)*

RUSSELL

Hey, Sheila. That is your name isn't it?

MARGE

Yes.

RUSSELL

For a minute there, I thought you didn't know.

MARGE

What is it.

RUSSELL

I wasn't exactly truthful with you a minute ago.

MARGE

Really.



RUSSELL

I'm not here to see my parole officer.

MARGE

That's nice.

RUSSELL

I don't even have a police record.

MARGE

Fine.

RUSSELL

Yet I look like a criminal.

MARGE

Well, what else was I supposed to think-

RUSSELL

Why?

MARGE

Why what?

RUSSELL

Why did you assume that I was a criminal? Was it because of this?

*(HE points to the palm of his hand.)*

MARGE

Your hand?

RUSSELL

No. Closer. Look. Right here. See it?

*(MARGE moves closer to his hand, she is curious. Just as she gets close enough he forms his hand into a fist.)*

MARGE

I don't see anything.

RUSSELL

Simple as that. *(HE points to his fist)* Black. *(HE points to her face)* and white.

*(There is a long pause. Just as MARGE is about to speak, RUSSELL goes over to the counter, leans over, and looks around.)*

MARGE

I haven't seen anyone at that counter in a while. They told me to wait.

RUSSELL

Man. This is messed up. Always like the government. Keep you waiting as long as they want to. Unless of course you've done something wrong, then they're up your ass with a microscope. I can't be waiting all day. *(Ringing the bell)* Hey! Anyone there?

MARGE

The best thing is probably to just sit quietly and wait.

RUSSELL

I'm here on my lunch hour, man! *(To himself)* I can't come back to work late, they'll have my ass.

MARGE

Where do you work?

RUSSELL

Excuse me?

MARGE

Your job. Where do you have to go?

RUSSELL

I get it. *(Pause)* I have a job, so it's ok to talk to me, now.

MARGE

I just wondered how far you had to walk.

RUSSELL

I drove myself down here. Jesus, lady! We LIBERALS have cars too, you know. Maybe not nice ones like you folks but at least it gets me from point A to point B, and I bought it with hard earned workin' man's money.

MARGE

I didn't mean-

RUSSELL

You didn't mean. Don't tell me you didn't mean. I may be what at least 45 years younger than you but I'm not stupid! I know what you meant.

MARGE

Please. Don't be so sensitive, I-

RUSSELL

What. Am I wrong? Did I jump to conclusions about what you just said? Am I misunderstanding you?

MARGE

Yes!

RUSSELL

*(Calm, direct, and to the point)* Now you know how it feels.

MARGE

I don't know what you are trying to prove here.

RUSSELL

I assumed things about you just like you assumed things about me when I walked through that door. I'm not trying to change the way you think, I'm just telling you how it goes. You can't tell me that if an elderly white woman was sitting next to you instead of me that you wouldn't be exchanging recipes and complaining about your arthritis or whatever the hell you all do. You certainly wouldn't have jumped out of your skin like you did when I walked in here.

MARGE

Would it make you happy if I gave you my recipe for pot roast?

RUSSELL

Aw, man!

MARGE

I won't give anyone that recipe you know. Not even my sister. The key is the marinade.

RUSSELL

Forget it.

MARGE

You say "that's what we do" so I'm following through with it.

RUSSELL

I'm just saying you wouldn't be so uptight if I was someone different.

MARGE

Uptight! The reason I'm uptight has nothing to do with who you are.

RUSSELL

Don't bother apologizing for who YOU are. You don't have to talk to me or trust that I'm not going to take something of yours. If that's what you believe - then - way it goes.

MARGE

I don't trust anyone at the moment! *(Pause, having trouble getting this out)* Somewhere between here and thirteenth street I've misplaced my wallet. The sad thing about it is it had a lot of money in it not to mention my driver's license and pictures of my grandchildren. I don't even care about the money, but the fact that someone out there knows my identity isn't too comforting to me. I came down here to file a report in hopes that someone would be honest enough to... What was I thinking? I've wasted half my day in here just for one chance that there is one honest person left in this world.

RUSSELL

I'm sorry. I'm sure someone will find it.

MARGE

Oh, I'm sure someone has found it by now and had a fine time maxing my gold card. I don't know why I'm wasting my time.

*(MARGE gets up to leave.)*

RUSSELL

Hey, Sheila. Why don't you wait a few more minutes. I'm sure if we make enough noise, someone will come out to help us.

*(MARGE stops.)*

MARGE

May I tell you something?

RUSSELL

Sure. *(Pause)* What is it?

MARGE

You did catch me.

RUSSELL

No sweat... I mean, I didn't know.

MARGE

My name... it isn't Sheila.

RUSSELL

Well whadaya know? Really? 'Cause I was convinced that...

MARGE

Don't be funny. Actually it's...

RUSSELL

Marge.

MARGE

What - How?

RUSSELL

You just LOOK like a Marge to me.

MARGE

*(Amazed)* You're good at that.

RUSSELL

And...It says it on your license.

*(HE reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ladies' wallet.)*

RUSSELL

Here.

MARGE

You - Where?

RUSSELL

I tried phoning, but there was no answer.

*(MARGE opens up her wallet.)*

RUSSELL

You can count it if you want. I didn't take nothin'.

MARGE

Come here.

RUSSELL

Aw, lady. I didn't take any of it! I just found it like that-

*(MARGE takes out a photo  
and shows it to RUSSELL)*

MARGE

This is my granddaughter. THIS is Sheila.

RUSSELL

*(Smiling.)* She's pretty. I can see the resemblance.

MARGE

*(A beat - SHE stands)* Well, no use staying around here if I don't have to and YOU need to get yourself back to work. You'd better cross your name off that list. Don't want some government employee working too hard calling your name.

RUSSELL

They have to do something.

*(MARGE exits without her purse  
which she left on the chair.  
RUSSELL goes over to clipboard  
and crosses out his name. HE  
turns around, runs over to the  
purse and picks it up.)*

RUSSELL

Hey, Marge, you forgot your-

MARGE

I forgot my-

RUSSELL & MARGE

*(Simultaneously)* Purse.

MARGE

*(Taking her bag.)* Thank you.

LIGHTS FADE - END OF PLAY