

(Excerpt from a story that first appeared in *StoryQuarterly* and now resides in Philip's short fiction collection *Dreams of Her and Other Stories*)

## Robert and Erica

Life-as-it-was began when Diane became friends with Erica. They had met at church and hit it off. They were funny and fun together, their intelligence and sensibilities perfectly matched. On the merits of this emergent little friendship, the two couples, Stephen and Diane, Robert and Erica, would see each other now and again, and sometimes for a few weeks would see each other a lot. Stephen and Robert were different sorts, different from each other, but it was worth it to both of them that their wives had found a comfort and common ground for friendship.

Perhaps predictably, there was another convergence in the picture -- a flirtation between Stephen and Erica. Stephen was fascinated, had been since he first saw her, found himself watching her -- watching *for* her -- maneuvering to be around her when the couples might, for instance, be together in the park for an afternoon or walking along the river. It was subtle, only a matter of proximity and looking, nothing ever really noticed it seemed, nothing for certain ever said. Then one day, out of the blue, Stephen got a call from her. She caught him at school, on the run between classes.

"Listen, I'll let you go," she said, "but I wanted to tell you that Robert has been saying he'd like to go out for a beer some night. Just you two. He says he's been going to call you. It's interesting. He actually seems to want to be your friend all of a sudden." Apparently it was common knowledge that Stephen and Robert were only going through the motions. Stephen didn't have much time to think about it, but he was warmed by the voice of Erica on the phone no matter what she was calling about and this was just as good a ludicrous reason as any. "Sounds good. I guess."

"Sure it does. That's what I thought." She laughed. "And hurrah for your enthusiasm."

"Yeah, sorry. I like him fine, but, in the end, he's an insurance guy. If this turns out to be about insurance...."

"Please!" she laughed.

“Suddenly you get the pitch. They’re not even embarrassed.” He was feeling pressed for time but wanted to tell her -- “An old friend – from college -- called me a couple of months ago. I hadn’t seen him in 20 years, and I was really glad to hear from him. I had a hundred things I wanted to tell him and ask him – it was great....” Stephen noticed it was quiet on the line. “. . . are you there?”

“Yes, sweetie, I’m here. Don’t you have class right now?”

“And, anyway, I’m standing there in the kitchen basking in this long-lost connection when I notice he starts *coming around* to something, and I was thinking ‘oh no, no, no, not this,’ and finally, easy as you please, he begins to *offer me an opportunity* in some dumbshit pyramid scheme. I mean, nothing’s sacred.”

“Poor naive boy. Go to class.”

“Turns out it’s what the whole call was about.”

“Somebody calls you up after twenty years of nothing, and you think it’s for sacred friendship.”

“I was a name on a call-list of potential drones who might roll up their sleeves for his personal profit.”

“Well, *mutual* profit maybe.”

“Ha. *Now* who’s naive! Anyway. I know the insurance industry does this too, call up all your friends and see if they need to have you come over and talk to them -- God, it’s awful.”

“Dreadful, you poor boy.”

“So anyway. If this is that, tell Roberto to count me out on the beer.”

There was a sigh, clearly indignant. “Stephen, this is my husband trying to reach out to somebody, okay? That’s all. Don’t get all neurotic about it. He doesn’t have many male friends, and he needs a night out.”

“Okay.” In their very few actual discussions, Robert and Stephen had a recurring philosophical debate that signaled deep differences. Robert, so it seemed, saw Stephen as a weenie professor out at the college, public employee living off the sweat on the backs of the gainfully employed citizens of Illinois. Whenever these discussions erupted, and they were rare and brief, they exposed, to his great discomfort, Stephen’s soft unrealistic dream-state academic life and credit card orientation and Robert’s ostensibly opposite productive realistic self-reliant cash-on-the-barrel American life-style and job. When they engaged this argument, it was never pleasant. So why now did Robert want to go get a beer?

“Okay. I’ll do it.” He’d rather have gone with Erica, of course. Stephen was looking up the hall toward his classroom. “One question, then I gotta go.”

Erica waited on the other end of the buzzing line. Over the phone, Stephen could hear one of her kids off in the distance. She and Robert had two, one together and one of Erica’s from something previous.

“And the question is . . . .” He was watching students duck into his classroom thinking they were late. “Why are *you* calling to tell me *he’s* going to call?”

Her laugh was too quick. She seemed thwarted. Then suddenly she came up with a reason. “Well, I wanted to tell you to be sure to let me know what’s on his mind, if you do get a beer.”

He laughed.

“Not good enough?” she said, and he knew just what half-smiling, half-coy expression she had on her face as she said it.

“Want me to let him know you forewarned me?”

“No! God!” It was quiet on the other end for a few moments. Then came a shift in her voice, persona, and trajectory: “Did I just catch you in a bad mood or are you always like this?”

Stephen waited.

“C’mon, Steve. Be a safe place for me. A harmless call like this, it would hurt Robert *and* it would hurt Diane, you know that.” He could hear her breathe. “You know that, right?”

“Yes,” he said. “Okay.”

And with that small, tentative step, Stephen and Erica went underground together.