



THE MAN IN THE STREET

Mabel Episode 3: The Man in the Street. In which rain continues to fall.

[INTRO:]

MABEL: Hi, you've reached Mabel Martin. I'm not here to take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep. Thanks!

[BEEP]

ANNA: There's a man out in the street. He's been there since I brought Sally down for her breakfast, maybe forty-five minutes ago – she's listening to the radio in the front room right now, and I'm supposed to be cleaning the kitchen, but instead I'm camped out behind the fridge, peeking out the little window beside the kitchen door.

It's not that he's done anything particularly sinister. He's just – leaning up against a lamppost, smoking and looking at his phone. He's not taking pictures of the house, or snooping in the windows with binoculars. There is nothing in his behavior or demeanour that would suggest – I don't know, intent to cause harm. But – there are no other houses up here, not for a quarter mile at least. There's Sally's house, and the lamppost, and my car, and a grey stone wall. Nothing else. No view to look at, not on this side of the hill, no bus stop, no interesting landmarks, barely even any cell reception. And he's just – standing.

I better go. How am I supposed to end a message to you, anyway? "Talk to you soon"? "Later, gator"? "Over and out"?

I like that, actually. Over and out, Mabel.

[BEEP]

So, last night.

Sally's okay, although I guess you must have figured that by now, otherwise you'd be getting a different kind of phone call. She fell out of bed trying to reach her glass of water on the bedside table. Nothing broken – we went to the local urgent care just in case. A few big bruises on her hip, that's it. She was scared, mostly, but a couple good hours waiting in triage helped with that. Now she's just exhausted.

I never did get to open that letter. I think – does it sound crazy if I say I think it's better that I didn't? No crazier than some of the other stuff I've told you, really. It's not that I regret my nosiness, though I probably should. It's more that –

– I don't know. Live inside yourself for long enough and you'll start seeing anything external, anything even remotely out of the ordinary, as a sign.

And it does feel like a sign, Sally falling in the middle of the night just as I was about to open one of maybe five hundred letters addressed to her. It feels like – the most obvious sign the world could possibly come up with. I'm superstitious, I always have been. I tip my hat at black cats and flush broken mirrors down the toilet if I'm nowhere near river water, and I throw salt over my left shoulder and I always say "rabbit, rabbit" on the first of every month. If there's something that doesn't want me reading those letters...

I will tell you one thing, though. There's a return address on them; or, part of a return address. A name and a town. Fairy Hill, it's called. I googled it, and there's a Fairy Hill in Saskatchewan, though it must be tiny, barely big enough for a Wikipedia page – plus the stamps on the envelope are all American. There's another Fairy Hill on an island off Alaska, I think. Maybe there's more, but the internet cut out before I had a chance to double check.

The name on the envelopes is Luna Thorne.

[BEEP]

He's still just standing there.

What does he –

[BEEP]

Do you remember that dream I was telling you about? The one with the abandoned shopping mall and the girl who kept telling me something? I wanted to –

[BEEP]

It's ten o'clock at night.

I'm not sure why I get the urge to tell you what time it is. You almost definitely hear it already, before every message I leave. First message, left at. Maybe it's the little kid in me, always looking for a way to frame things, to make them more understandable, more consumable. Maybe it's the grown-up equivalent of starting every message with dear diary. My aunt always used to say "little girls find themselves boyfriends when they start to realise their diaries can't kiss them back", but I always preferred writing in notebooks to boys. Even when I wasn't little anymore.

The man in the street knocked on the door at exactly twelve twenty-one. I know because I checked my phone right before I answered. It's a strange symmetry, isn't it? Palindromes used to creep me out when I was a kid. There's something uneasy about a word or a phrase that knows how to double back on itself and still come up with the same reflection.

But, whatever. I opened the door and he was standing there, smoking his cigarette, looking at his phone. I don't think he was smoking tobacco, but I don't know what it was. I think I would have been scared if he'd looked in any way threatening, but he looked – like someone's dad, having to wait around somewhere to pick them up when he'd rather be at home watching the History Channel. Tired, cold, bored. He said, "Hey, I'm really sorry about this, but I'm so lost. Could you give me directions to [CENSORED]?"

Mabel, this guy had been standing in front of Sally's house for two full hours by this point. But is he wants to say he's lost, whatever. That's fine, none of my business. I told him how to get back into town, and he said thanks, and walked away. Not – away away. Back to the lamppost.

It's weird how I want to tell you every little thing that happens around here. I mean, I'm lonely, but I could just as easily be calling my sister or my mom or my friend Nan or the relief carer Liza. There are real people who'd listen to me, is what I'm saying, real people who'd maybe talk back, even, say nice things like "I bet that was really creepy" or "I miss you, we should hang out soon." I guess it's – you feel safe. Or something. It's probably just easier never having to answer any questions.

The man came back at one thirty-one. I was in the middle of getting Sally's lunch, so it took me a minute to get to the door, but it was one thirty-one when he knocked. This time he looked at me. It was – it was weird, so weird that I realised he hadn't looked at me at all before, just down at his phone. He didn't seem tired and bored anymore, he seemed – alert. Hypervigilant. He was tense, so tense I could almost feel it, the way you can feel rain in the air before it falls. His left hand kept spasming. He looked at me and looked at me and said, "Hey, I'm really sorry about this, but I'm so lost. Could you give me directions to [CENSORED]?" And I –

[BEEP]

Sorry, my phone died. I have it plugged into a different socket now, it's charging this time. Have you ever noticed how electricity in this house is – whimsical? It comes and goes, it doesn't seem to have any fixed laws. A plug will kill all your devices one day and work fine the next. Or, lights will turn themselves on without you touching the switch, like they just want to remind you they're there. Sometimes the stair-lift doesn't work right away – Sally says it has to wake up, just like she does. Come on, Goliath, get the blood moving.

Anyway.

Sally has one of those fancy house alarms, so I put my finger right on the keypad where the man could see it, and I said, "if you don't leave right now, this thing is going to go off so loud the cops will be coming from three towns over." And he stared at me, oh my god, he – as if I'd broken his heart, as if I was – was his daughter he'd been trying for years to save and he just realised there was no saving me. But he didn't say anything, didn't even nod, just walked away. Back to the lamppost.

Listen. Can you hear that? It's starting to rain again.

Or –

I'm in the library, there's only one window in here. It's three floors down from the roof of the house. I can see the rain out the window, but – I shouldn't be able to *hear* it like that, should I? What – what is that sound?

The third time the man came back –

The third time he came back it was two forty-one pm, and it was raining out then, too, and his hair was wet in his eyes, his phone was waterlogged. "Hey," he said, "I'm really sorry about this," and I forgot everything, Mabel, I forgot I promised to call the cops on him, I forgot that Sally and I were alone up here, one short woman who doesn't like to fight and one elderly lady in a wheelchair, all I could think about was how sad he looked – worse than sad, tragic, something people write poems about, write plays about, and I opened the door to let him in and he stepped back, and he was – fuck, he was afraid, he was so afraid, he kept looking behind me at something – but I checked, there was nothing there, just the kitchen, the sink and the window looking out into the garden – and he said "I'm so lost," and I reached out to him and he pulled away. His eyes were flicking back and forth between me and the – whatever, whatever it was he saw behind me. Back and forth. Back and forth. He asked me again how he could get back to town, but this time – he mouthed something after. Not really words, just shapes his lips made. I think –

I think he was saying *get out*.

I started crying then. I couldn't help it. It's something I hate about myself – how easily I cry, anytime I'm frightened or hurt or anxious. I was scared, I started crying. The man shook his head and smiled at me, but it wasn't a reassuring smile.

He walked away. This time he kept walking. He didn't come back.

I should go to bed. Sounds like it's stopped raining.

[BEEP]

I knew there was something I forgot to tell you. That dream I had, the one with the girl whose mouth was all bloody or burned or something? I remembered the word she kept saying to me. It wasn't penumbra or autumnal or whatever else I thought. It was datura.

[BEEP]

[OUTRO:]

Mabel is written and produced by Becca De La Rosa. The voice of Mabel Martin is [CENSORED]. The voice of Anna Limon is Becca De La Rosa. The music in this episode was by Ars Sonor, Avoidant, LJ Cruzler, AlteredCarbon, Rebecca Foon, and (morse), and all of it is available to download on the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. For more information about Mabel, including a full tracklist for each episode, visit us online at mabelpodcast.com, or on Twitter, @podcastmabel.