

THE PUZZLE OF LIFE
By Ben Gillman

(Hardboiled Detective Zack MacArel is alone on stage. He stands center stage speaking to the audience.)

ZACK: Life had never been easy as a private dick. But my problems were piling up. It had gotten bad. It was a slow night. A slow week. A slow opening monologue. But then she walked in.

(The Femme Fatale - Lana O'Shaunaughessy - enters.)

ZACK: But her hips weren't just walking. She sauntered. She sashayed. She seized.

(Lana saunters. She sashays. She wobbles on over to Zack)

LANA: Detective Zack MacArel?

ZACK: That's me.

LANA: Just the man I've been looking for. I'm Lana O'Shaunaughessy.

ZACK: *(to audience)* I knew she was trouble right away. I'm not sure how I knew it, but...

LANA: Oh, Detective, I'm trouble. I admit it, I'm a whole bowl full of trouble.

ZACK: Somehow I just knew.

LANA: I need your help.

ZACK: I need a lot of things. A classy dame. A warm bed. A hot meal. Maybe a grilled cheese sandwich.

LANA: Be serious.

ZACK: I am serious. I can never figure out how to make one without burning the bread and melting all the cheese out of the sides.

LANA: Maybe I can help you with some of those things. Later. *(beat)* But first I'm in a terrible predicament. A jam. A pickle.

ZACK: Now I'm really hungry.

LANA: You make jokes. And I suppose I deserve that. But I need you desperately. I've heard that you're the man who can solve anything.

ZACK: I've been known to get myself into and out of a sticky situation from time to time.

LANA: So you'll help me?

ZACK: Let me guess, you're in deep with the mob. You probably owe them more than your whole life's savings. And now they're threatening to fit you and everyone you love with cement shoes if you don't pay up.

LANA: Oh, if it were only that simple. But it's so much worse.

ZACK: Tell me about it.

LANA: I'll show you.

(Lana pulls out the Rubik's Cube. Zack stares at it for a second then-)

ZACK: Wait... what?

LANA: I've been working on this damn thing for days. It's really frustrating. Geez...

ZACK: So, if you solve it, it opens up and what's inside? Rubies? Government secrets?

LANA: No. You just have to get all of the same colors on each side. It's really hard.

ZACK: *(beat)* Look, this isn't really the kind of case I take.

(Zack heads for the door.)

ZACK: I deal in life or death. So unless that little colored square involves someone dying-

(The door flies open and WYATT WINGER - a young hot head - stumbles in. He's covered in blood and gasping for breath.)

WYATT: Help me! I'm dying!

(Wyatt collapses to the floor)

LANA: Wyatt!

(Lana rushes over to help him)

ZACK: Who's this?

LANA: This is Wyatt Winger. My...

LANA / WYATT: *(at the same time)* Brother / Lover.

ZACK: I'd hate to be at your family reunion.

WYATT / LANA: (*at the same time*) We work together. / He does my laundry.

ZACK: Remind me never to touch your dirty laundry, lady. C'mon, kid, we've got to get you to a doctor.

WYATT: No, I have to warn you. Big Mama's on her way.

LANA: Big Mama!

WYATT: I just barely got away from her. You've got to solve that cube before you end up... like... me...

(*Wyatt collapses. Apparently dead. Zack turns to Lana.*)

ZACK: (*to Lana*) You need to explain what's really going on here.

LANA: Well, you see...

WYATT: (*gasping awake*) I'll tell you...

LANA: Um... Maybe you should just rest.

WYATT: No, you've got to know. I'll tell you everything.

ZACK: I'm sure she could fill me in.

LANA: He's right, Wyatt. I can tell him. You really don't look good.

WYATT: I can do this... Big Mama is the toughest gangster in all of Little Italy. And she's a genius. So she doesn't like it when anything makes her look stupid.

LANA: Seriously, just take it easy.

WYATT: That's when the damned cube came along.

(*Wyatt struggles to his feet for dramatic effect.*)

WYATT: Damn that damned cube!

ZACK: You really shouldn't be standing up.

WYATT: Big Mama couldn't solve it. So she started manipulating other people into doing it for her. And if they failed, then she killed them so that they wouldn't know her secret. She tricked Lana into agreeing to try and solve it. And when Lana couldn't do it, they swindled me into helping. *(beat)* Seriously, it's really hard to get all of those colors on the same side. It's, like, crazy.

(Wyatt collapses again suddenly.)

LANA: I never should have gotten him mixed up in this whole thing.

ZACK: It's okay. I'll get you guys out of this.

LANA: So you'll solve the cube? You'll do it?

ZACK: I'll try. I just need to concentrate.

(Zack takes the Rubik's Cube and examines it. He's about to work, but-)

WYATT: Please... do whatever it takes... to save Lana... Or... She... Won't....

(Every time Zack tries to concentrate, Wyatt interrupts him. It's really annoying.)

ZACK: He's not dying very fast is he.

WYATT: I'm done for... It's over for me...

ZACK: Do you think you could do it a little quieter?

WYATT: You'll never hear from me again.... Ahhhh.....

(Wyatt sighs out his last breath. Zack tries to work. But Wyatt keeps sighing and dying. It's really really annoying.)

ZACK: You know, maybe we should all just get out of here before Big Mama can...

(The door bursts open again and Big Mama enters. She got a gun raised and aimed right at them.)

BIG MAMA: Not so fast.

LANA: Big Mama!

BIG MAMA: So this is where the party's at, huh?

WYATT: Get out of here! I'll distract her!

(Wyatt gets to his feet. And immediately collapses. Big Mama ignores him.)

BIG MAMA: So the Cube has roped in another stooge. Mr. MacArel, you've got a reputation as someone who's supposed to be pretty bright. I'm surprised you let yourself get mixed up in all of this.

ZACK: I'm surprised that you're so mixed up in a little toy.

BIG MAMA: It's not just a toy. It's a game of wits. An enigma of champions. A conundrum of deception. A--

ZACK: Get on with it.

BIG MAMA: It's really hard. But you don't get to where I am by letting things like this beat you. I can't let anyone know that there's anything I can't do. It creates all sorts of problems for someone in my business.

ZACK: That's none of my business.

BIG MAMA: Oh, it is now. Because I went through the best and brightest to try and get all the red squares on one side. I even used this charming lady who's supposed to be so clever. And so deadly. I guess she failed the cube. But she didn't fail to bring in another sap.

LANA: I'm sorry, Zack.

ZACK: It's starting to feel awfully chilly in here.

BIG MAMA: So now her fate is on you, Zack MacArel. And if you fail then I'll make you eat lead. Push up daisies. Feed the worms. Take the big snooze.

ZACK: I see.

BIG MAMA: Dead!

LANA: People... Can't we all just calm down for a second? Big Mama, if anyone can solve this it's Detective MacArel. Give him a chance.

BIG MAMA: Alright I'll give him a shot. But if he can't solve it. Then I'll give him a real shot.

LANA: Zack. Mr. MacArel. You can do it. I know you can. We're all depending on you.

(Zack sits down in a chair center stage. Everyone is watching him)

ZACK: *(to the audience)* There was a method to this. A pattern. A way of life. If I could just see past the chaos of jumbled colors and squares. And then it all made sense. And I knew I could do this...

EVERYONE: Ooooh...

(A few more twists)

EVERYONE: Aaaahh...

(More twists)

LANA: He's doing it.

BIG MAMA: I don't believe it.

WYATT: I can barely see straight.

(Zack twists the cube a few more times, and everyone is shocked and surprised until-)

ZACK: Yeah, I have no idea how to do this.

BIG MAMA: I'm disappointed in you, Mr. MacArel. Truly I am. But now you know my secret. So I'm gonna have to rub you out. Pump you full of lead. Make you sleep with the fishes.

LANA: We get it.

BIG MAMA: I'm gonna kill you.

ZACK: Alright. But, first, I suppose you want your little toy back.

BIG MAMA: Don't mind if I do. That little toy will help me destroy more lives. It's amazingly hard. Give it here.

(Zack moves over and holds out the Rubik's Cube.

Big Mama reaches for it.

Suddenly Zack pulls a fast one and grabs Big Mama's gun)

ZACK: The jig's up, Big Mama. Scram. Skedaddle. Hit the bricks.

BIG MAMA: I get it.

ZACK: Get out of here. And if I hear about you pulling that cube on any other unsuspecting mooks, I'll call the press and let them all know your little secret.

BIG MAMA: Alright. I'm sure I can solve this myself anyway. Gosh, it's so hard! Every time I get a couple of colors together, the other sides are all messed up...

(Big Mama exits while fiddling with the Rubik's Cube)

LANA: Oh, thank you, Zack! You did it! How can I ever repay you?

ZACK: I can think of a couple of ways.

*(Zack and Lana are getting a little close.
Wyatt gets to his feet.)*

WYATT: Well, I'm glad that's resolved. I can finally breathe a sigh of relief.

(Wyatt sighs a deep breath and-)

WYATT: Yup. I'm bleeding again. I should go to the hospital.

(He stumbles toward the door. Maybe he does some pratfalls and stuff.)

WYATT: I got this... I can do it... I'm okay...

(But he finally turns to them.)

WYATT: I could really use a ride to the hospital.

LANA: Good-bye, Detective. I'll never forget how you helped me.

ZACK: *(to the audience)* Some how I knew, I'd never see her again.

LANA: *(from the door)* I'll probably never see you again.

(And Lana and Wyatt exit)

ZACK: I'm not sure how I knew. But at least I had realized that life wasn't so bad. There were plenty of people who were plenty more mixed up than I was. But, boy, did I wish I could figure out how to make that grilled cheese sandwich!

THE END