

Turn Of The Screwdriver

It was a Wednesday. Or a Thursday maybe. No. Wait. Definitely a Wednesday. But anyway, I had already managed to spill hot coffee down my front. What a waste. The fourth day of Heatwave Marlene was poking its riotous head out over the Eastern hills. I liked to call it that. Marlene was this bitch I used to know in High School. You get where I'm going with this, right? And, anyway, why should only hurricanes get names? But, I digress again. Where was I? Oh yes ... the heat. The heat was maddening. To most people. Not Pricilla though. She liked the heat. That probably should have been my first clue.

At about 10, the air conditioning started blasting on me and I sighed. It was like a long lost friend come to visit with gateau and champagne for no particular reason.

"It's so cold!" Pricilla whined. She pulled that hideous orange cardigan from the back of her chair and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Ah," the man beside her replied. "Just right, if you ask me." Michael bobbed his head, like an ostrich at a rock concert, agreeing with himself.

Pricilla hurrumphed and I hoped the conversation was over. I hoped she would remain quiet.

But sadly. "Have you seen this?" Pricilla called, after what seemed like only five seconds worth of silence. "William Walters is dead."

My heart sank, death had always been her favourite topic of discussion.

Michael drew in that breath, the one that meant he was getting ready to answer. And I had no headphones to drown it out.

"Yeah, suicide right?" Michael faux asked.

"So they say," Pricilla replied. "And he's got those two children. What a shame. I feel sorry for them, is what." She preached sympathy, but I could hear the ghoulish smile peppering her false words. The joy at being the centre of attention. I tried to concentrate, but Pricilla's shrill voice punctuated every sentence as I typed it.

When the discussion subsided, I let the silence wash over me. But I had a problem. Something on my screen didn't make sense, and I knew I would have to talk to her. I'd have to ask her why my facts contradicted. Why my information lied. And then, instead of answering in any helpful fashion, she'd ask me a personal question. How's Jonathon, she'd ask. And, against my better judgment, I'd reply: he's fine. Yes, we have. June 4th. Yes, Winter wedding. I know. Fiji. Yes, should be nice. Not for a while yet. I know, no rush. I'm still young. And then she would tell me all about her own life, because I would feel compelled to ask.

So I got up from my chair and walked the four steps between our desks. "Pricilla?" She held up a hand: she's busy. And by busy, I mean not as busy as she thinks she is. Not as busy as she pretends to be. Just busy enough to look busy while she surfs the net, but not busy enough that she can't talk to Louise from Billing for 45 minutes about the state of the floors in the bathroom. And just noisy enough that when there are extra resources to be had, she gets them without further question. Just noisy enough that people don't notice when the rest of us are busy, because we are not noisy at all. Frustrated, me? No. What makes you think that?

Pricilla finally put her hand down after a few seconds, and gave me her full attention. I would have been happy with just 20%. I asked her the question I needed to ask and, as predicted, she asked me ten that she didn't.

"And how are you?" I asked, teeth clenched.

She cleared her throat, guttural and violent. "Yeah, I'm alright." That guttural sound again, like something in there was trying to get out. "I had an Italian for dinner last night. In a lovely red wine sauce." She licked her lips.

"What kind of Italian?" I asked, and I admit I was only half listening. You forgive me, right?

“Ah,” she said, rolling her bloodshot eyes back into her head. “One that’s been out of the sun, you know. Fed only on truffles and cannoli for three weeks. Very rich and succulent.” She kissed the tips of her fingers, mmmwaah, like a French chef, and smiled. I nodded. She was making no sense, but I didn’t so much care as not care at all. I hate to admit it, but sometimes her voice sounded like a weird buzzing noise and I forgot to pay attention. She continued regardless. Her children were well: Alice was top of her class now at Medical School, Lewis was earning over a hundred grand a year, and Cal? Well, Cal was off again on another overseas adventure. He’s single, you know? She often forgets, that I am not.

Three hours, two more uncomfortable conversations, and a potty break later, I was out pacing the lobby, waiting for a courier that was already late. Urgent, they had said. Need those revisions today, they had said. So I waited, and paced, and tried not to simply refuse to do the work out of spite. Pricilla sidled up beside me and looked around.

“What are we waiting for?” she asked.

“Carters want their contracts redrafted,” I replied. “I’m waiting for the courier.”

“Oh,” she said, rubbing her stomach. “I’ll keep you company.” So she did. And I noticed, as she stood close enough that spittle landed on me when she spoke, how stringy and dull her hair had become. How the whites of her eyes had started to bleed and darken, like the hazel was attempting a daring escape. She placed a hand on my arm and gripped it. Her claw-like fingers dug into my flesh and refused to let go. When the courier arrived, Pricilla made an ever-so-slight hiccup of surprise and then grinned at the tall Asian girl.

“Are you April Donohue?” the girl asked. “Can you sign for this?” She chewed gum with her mouth open. I could smell it, sugary and sweet, and it made my mouth water.

Pricilla stepped forward as I took my parcel. “I have a request.” She released my arm and took the girl’s instead. The girl frowned at her, but let herself be led into the next room anyway.

After a few minutes standing and waiting for whatever to happen next, the contracts started to grow warm and heavy in my hands. I turned to hurry back to my desk but a short-lived scream stopped me mid-stride. I was transfixed by the crunching sounds, like the cracking of a thousand restless knuckles, creeping from beneath the closed door, and my legs refused to move, even though my brain was screaming at them. And when Pricilla suddenly threw the door open and stepped out, I tried to duck for cover. I tried to hide behind a plant, which didn’t hide even 10% of me. Pricilla merely smiled as she sauntered past. Her pearly whites splattered with red. Her shiny blonde hair bouncing. And her bright green eyes met mine in defiance. I waited, hugging the contracts to my chest like a shield, my breath caught painfully in my throat, for the tall Asian girl to re-emerge. Now, I’m not nosey. I don’t generally gossip. But this was different. I tip-toed towards the meeting room door. And I don’t know what I expected to see, or why I had such a bad feeling, but it seemed my feet were determined that I would look. I placed my sweaty hand on the door and pushed. It creaked, like it was talking to me. *Don’t look* it said. I ignored it. It caught on something halfway open and I peered around. A small lump of gum was on the conference table, and there was a sneaker blocking the door. But nothing else. Nothing but the pungent smell of Pricilla’s perfume. And something else underneath. Coppery and thick.

I went back to my desk. I didn’t know what else there was to do. I had started thinking I was losing my grip on what was real and what was not. I gulped down the luke-warm mug of tea on my desk in an effort to feel normal.

“I had an Asian for lunch,” Pricilla announced to nobody in particular.

“Oh yeah?” Michael replied. “I never liked the Asians myself. A bit salty.”

I looked up and I could see the big boss, Nathan, in his office, hunched over his desk. I wondered what I would say: there’s something odd about Pricilla. Yes, odd. I think she *ate* someone. The courier was gone when I looked. And I think Pricilla did something to her. And I knew what Nathan would reply: you’re crazy.

I watched Nathan for 45 minutes, while Pricilla and Michael discussed the many virtues of foreign food. And finally, when all I could hear behind me was the occasional tap of a fingernail on a keyboard, and Pricilla sucking her teeth, I got up and walked slowly to his door.

The handle felt slick in my hand. Slick like it was oiled. And you might wonder what I thought I was doing. Well, to be honest, I had no idea either. There was nothing going through my head. Other than a recurring lament: I am not crazy I am not crazy I am not crazy. I pulled my hand back, and took a step away from the door. It swung open like it knew I was hesitating.

"Hello, April," Nathan said, a forced smile frozen on his face. "What can I do for you?"

I tried to form my words, but all I could manage was a squeak and an indecipherable mewling sound. Nathan frowned and glanced out through the glass wall of his office. He made me sit. The chairs were comfortable, like sitting in a cloud. Was he trying to distract me?

"What can I do for you?" he asked again. He stared at me and said no more. Just stared. I could feel heat rising in my cheeks under the scrutiny.

"I..." And there's where I started to tremble. He was still staring, waiting, and I couldn't make the words come out of my mouth. "There's something odd about Pricilla," I spluttered, the words finally tumbling from me like an avalanche. At that, Nathan's eyes turned to slits. I explained what I had seen. He started tapping his pen on the desk blotter. I tried to be succinct and lucid. I tried to make so much sense that nobody could possibly think that I was crazy. Despite the fact that every word that came out of my mouth made me sound certifiable. Nathan got up and locked his door. And I know what you're thinking: just unlock it. Right? Well, Nathan was a big man. His shoulders spanned the doorway. He crossed his arms over his chest, and sighed.

"April, April, April," he said. "You know too much." He opened his mouth wide, and the teeth he flashed me all of a sudden looked razor sharp. That's when instinct took over. I stood and backed up. But I hit the edge of Nathan's desk. He took two strides and was there in front of me. His eyes, usually so blue, looked all pupil. I could see my reflection staring back at me from the black circles. He grinned. The dimples in his cheeks pretended he was innocent. I wasn't fooled. When he reached up for me I tried to jerk my face away, but there was nowhere to go. I had no recourse. His fingernails dug into my cheeks, and I tried desperately not to blink. Afraid of what might happen in that split second. As his face edged closer, and my eyes begged to be dampened, I smelled sulphur and wet gravel. I choked on it. Then I tasted ash. And then nothing.

So, that's it. That's all I have to say. And if you don't believe me, I don't care. The fourth floor of the Parker Building is empty now. Look for yourself. Don't ask me where everyone went, because I don't know. But I do have a strange craving for Italian tonight. Maybe in a lovely red wine sauce.