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Burning Bridges As We Go

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Euripides Left a Tip

“Don’t play dumb with me, young lady,” Detective Mahoney fired back, “or I’ll put you in cuffs right now and take you downtown! And don’t tell me you don’t know who I’m talking about either!”

Standing across the counter from Rachel, the morning shift waitress at the Prairie Fire Café, an hour after his too early morning drive from Tulsa, Detective Mahoney was in no mood to play games or be sassed by some little upstart waitress. “You called his cellphone not more than an hour after he died. For a guy you claim you didn’t know? I don’t think so!”

“He was the only customer who tipped me today. That’s all, really!” Rachel cried. “A pretty good tip too considering the coffee and slice of Boston cream pie I served him only came to \$4.25. Sure, I thought he was cute and all for an older guy, but *HE* was the one who wrote his phone number down on the receipt and left it for me to find. *HE* wanted me to call him. And *HE* was alive when he left here. Really. Look!”

Rachel showed Detective Mahoney and Detective Spiro the note. “*Thanks for the coffee and conversation,*” the note read, “*I enjoyed talking about Euripides. I hope we can have a deeper moment together soon. Call me when you get off shift. Charlie, #555-332-7722.*”

“See for yourself. I was holding the note when you came in and told me he was out back. It’s not like I was expecting you to answer. Why would I? In fact, the only reason

you knew I was a waitress working inside is cause you answered Charlie's cellphone and I told you who I was. So how is that suspicious in the least?"

"I'll get to that," Detective Mahoney grumbled looking down at his notepad, his pen hovering. "So you had a conversation with this guy about Europeans? Am I hearing that right?"

"No, sir. Euripides. I talked with him about Euripides."

"Euripides? Who the fuck is this Euripides, for fuck's sake!? He a friend or something?"

"No, sir. Euripides was one of the last classic Greek dramatists from Athens following in the tradition of Aeschylus and Sophocles. When Charlie told me he was a playwright who wanted to write a Greacen satire about modern society, and travelling Route 51 to gather stories, I made the association between the two and suggested he try reading Euripides' Medea."

"Medea? Where he fuck did that come from? What are you talking about?" Detective Mahoney asked before turning to his partner. "Bob, do you understand a single word this waitress is talking about?"

"Books, Neil. Plays. History and literature. A few things you learn in college when you major in liberal arts. Don't worry, I'll take the interview from here," Detective Spiro offered. "Why don't you go check in with the other diners and see if any of them knew the decea.....uh, knew this Charlie."

"Sure, Bob, whatever you say. She's all yours," he mumbled walking away. "Fucking liberal arts. Fucking Euripides my European Medean ass. Like I don't know books."

"Sorry about that, Miss. Don't let it bother you. Neil's a good detective. Real salt of the earth. But literature isn't his strong suit."

"No, sir, apparently not."

“Did you know Charlie before today? The man who left you the note? Or was this the first time you waited on him?”

“No, I didn’t know him before today. I still really don’t. Nor did he ever come in before that I noticed. And I’m here a lot. Honestly, he didn’t even look like the kind of person who would be from around here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, he wasn’t dressed like most folks for one. Too bohemian in affect. Sort of hippie-ish, like you might imagine Ken Kesey or one of his “Merry Pranksters” might’ve looked when they hung out in Santa Cruz back in the 1960’s. At least from the pictures I’ve seen. And he sure didn’t talk like anyone from around here either.”

“How so? Did he have an accent or something?”

“No, not an accent. He just spoke in a more Aristotelian manner. And he had some pretty inflated ideas about himself and wasn’t afraid of sharing them. Most regulars who come in tend to be humble, God fearing folk who stick to the adage pride comes before a fall. The weather, Poor Richard’s Almanac, and the crop reports tend to be big topics round here. Not how great you think you are.”

“Well, you sure were able to find something to talk with Charlie about. What were some of these inflated ideas he referenced? Were they enough to upset folks? Maybe piss off a few farmers and good ol’ boys you have running around here?”

“Possibly. I mean, most of what he was saying I took as him trying to impress, you know? Trying to charm the local girl into stepping out of her panties for him. That kind of stuff. That’s why I brought up Euripides. I wanted him to know some of us were smart. That we all weren’t just some ignorant, uneducated hicks living out in the farmlands of America.”

Detective Spiro laughed. He was really starting to like this girl. "And how did he take it? Was he impressed?"

"No, he doubled down. Complimented me on my ability to read cliff notes while patronizing me about my job. Like he ever worked a day, you know?"

"And you didn't like that."

"Course not. I get enough condescension from city folk who pass through here. I didn't need one more arrogant, narcissistic jerk who thinks he's smarter than everyone else adding trouble to my day. If I didn't need the tips, you know?"

"So what other ideas did Charlie have that upset you?"

"Well, he asked how old I was a few too many times. Said he liked them young like Nabokov. As though I couldn't possibly have read Lolita or know what he was referencing. He also wanted me to know he thought it a shame such a lovely young woman as I was forced to work a menial waitress job when I could come travel with him and experience his life. His words not mine."

"He sounds like a bit of a creep."

"He was a leech, for sure. Gave off a pretty licentious vibe. Wade noticed and got upset."

"Wade? Who's Wade?"

"The cook. He looks out for us waitresses if a customer gets inappropriate or out of hand. That sorta thing."

"So Wade heard him and didn't like what Charlie was saying?"

"Yeah, but he didn't do anything. I told him it was okay. I had it under control cause I was just working him, that's all."

“Working him?”

“You know, standard waitress flirting – leaning a little further over the counter so they see a bit more cleavage, laughing and playfully patting the back of their hand, giving the sultry eye contact. All the little tricks so they think they have a chance and leave a bigger tip.”

“I bet he ate that up.”

“You know he did.”

“Sorry you had to do that. I have a couple of daughters myself. One of them waitresses at a place near her college and has to put up with the same sort of stuff. I’m glad you have a Wade here. Did Wade step in at any point?”

Rachel was starting to like this detective. He didn’t patronize like the other and seemed truly interested about her wellbeing. “No, I never asked Wade to get involved. I told him it was fine because I was working the guy. Like I told you. And a good tip could benefit him too.”

“Fair enough,” Detective Spiro said. “But maybe Wade still took exception? Maybe he decided to have words with Charlie about it anyway?”

Rachel felt bad. She obviously wouldn’t be telling this detective she had poisoned Charlie’s Boston cream pie to exact revenge and rid the world of one more lecherous, arrogant prick. One more who had delusions of grandeur because they thought they were Jack Kerouac and liked to prey on younger girls. Now the detective wouldn’t be able to close his case. She knew cops, especially those who cared, hated that. Leaving loose ends open in unsolved cases. Her father’d been one of those detectives – an old school blood hound with the local police department who carried a lot of unsolved cases over the years involving traveler’s passing through. He worried, agonizing over

every detail, hoping the answer to each case would just pop out and knowing none ever would. Too many open cases, which definitely led to his high blood pressure and probably even his fatal aneurysm. Rachel felt bad about that. She was responsible for a few of the later open cases. But still, is she never admitted to her own father about her extracurricular hobbies, why would she do so for this detective?

“No,” Rachel added, “Wade was cool. He kept an eye out, sure, but he’d never jump unless we gave him the word. He knows the score about tips and all.”

“Do you think Wade could’ve still met him out back after Charlie left? I know how protective some guys can be. And the way you describe this Charlie, he sounds like he could piss off Mother Theresa.”

“No, definitely not. Wade’s protective, but not stupid. Plus, we were really busy. He didn’t even get a chance to leave the kitchen or take his first break for at least an hour after Charlie left. That’s when he found Charlie out back behind the dumpster. When he took the trash out and stopped for a smoke.”

“Got it. Did you see anyone else talking to Charlie? Inside or out? Or anyone else with him while he was here?”

“No, just me.” Rachel smiled, lightly caressing the bottle of arsenic in her apron pocket. It once belonged to her grandfather who had been a chemist and local pharmacist for the town back in the 1920’s. She still had his inventory and notes. And she once thought she might like to become a pharmacist – which is what she matriculated to college to be. But before the semester was out, she changed her major to liberal arts because a handsome professor took interest and told her she had real talent. She stayed a liberal arts major during her second semester, even after the professor broke it off because she did actually have talent. But then she fell victim to the oldest cliché – getting drunk at a freshman mixer resulting in a popular All-American football star taking her upstairs

into his bedroom when she could barely stand or walk. And once isolated in his room, making sure they had sex whether she agreed or not. Unprotected sex which, she learned two months later, had impregnated her. Which led to a confrontation and his ritual denial, along with suggestions she get an abortion.

Rachel returned home broken -- to a father who loved her and didn't judge her. He helped her heal, supported her and his new grandson, and continued to work for several more years even though he could've retired. But sadly, after he should've like his doctor advised, he didn't. He pressed on stressing over his increasing cold case files and ended up dying a few years later from a complete thoracic aortic aneurysm.

Leaving Rachel and her child to fend for themselves with only a small insurance payout to save the house. Waitressing, in the proudest tradition of the heartland, put food on the table, paid the bills, and kept a roof over their heads. But she still wondered – hell, resented -- what could've been. What she would've been.

Funny thing was, most people didn't even remember arsenic, despite its toxicity, once being a therapeutic agent for the treatment of multiple diseases before it was abandoned with the discovery of antibiotics in the 1940s. And modern police methods didn't even test for arsenic – it'd been out of circulation for that long. Which made it a perfect tool to deal with collegiately insufferable blowhards who liked to take advantage of young girls, as far as she was concerned. The Boston cream pie, Rachel discovered through trial and error, was the best way to hide the bitter taste. Which she liked to bake herself and bring to the restaurant – serving it only when a customer truly deserved it and when she wanted to use the arsenic.

“Hey Bob,” Detective Mahoney returned and interrupted, “I just heard the lab geeks are done out back and the Deputy Coroner wants a quick debrief. We got a call to make.”

“Okay, I'll be there in a second,” Detective Spiro replied before turning back to Rachel.

“Thank you for your time, Miss Tanner.”

“Thank you, Detective. You can call me Rachel.”

“Thank you, Rachel. If it’s okay with you, I’ll stop by every now and then to check in and see how things are going. We may have more questions.”

“Sure thing, Detective. That would be nice. I’d appreciate that.”

“Okay then, bye Miss.”

“Bye.”

Detective Spiro left with a warm feeling. He recognized Rachel triggered his safeguarding sentiments due to her similarity to his daughter. And as such, he knew he felt a fatherly protectiveness toward her now. So much, he decided to stop by every now and then for breakfast just to check in on her. Make sure she was doing okay, that her tips were decent, and Wade was still looking out for her.

Detective Spiro walked back to the car and met up with Detective Mahoney.

“So Neil, you find anything out from Mrs. Professor-Waitress-Know-it-all?”

“No. Nothing out of the norm. The deceased, Charlie, didn’t sound like he was anything decent, but I didn’t hear anything to suspect foul play either. How did your interviews with the customers go?”

“Most of the customers weren’t there when the deceased had been. And those few who were, the regulars, didn’t really care since he wasn’t local. Other than to say, and I’m quoting here, ‘We always get some weirdo or other from the big city coming through here acting all high and mighty. Don’t mean we kill ‘em. Other than with kindness.’”

“That does sound like country folk. My granddad would’ve said something similar for sure.”

“And the cook,” Neil continued glancing at his notes, “uh, Wade Beeman. He talked about the guy being a creep and hitting on one of the waitresses, but she told him it was fine, so he let it go. Didn’t think about it again till he found the deceased out back behind the dumpster. Funny thing though, when I asked him what he cooked for the guy, he said nothing. He said the waitress handled the order. She got him some coffee and pie. Only thing was he said it was lemon meringue pie. And when I corrected him, he said the Prairie Fire don’t serve Boston cream pie. Never have. Just apple and lemon meringue.”

“So?”

“Well, I don’t usually make mistakes when I write notes, you know that.”

“Sure.”

“And I swear that waitress said she served him Boston cream pie. Or at least that’s what I thought she said. I’m not so sure now with all that Euripides Madean stuff. Do you remember what the waitress said she served him?” Neil asked.

“No. I don’t. I heard her say coffee and pie, but I don’t remember what particular kind. You think it’s an issue? If you think it’s an issue, we can ask the Coroner to identify the contents of the deceased’s stomach and confirm what he last ate.”

“What and piss him off even more asking for unnecessary tests and extra work? Especially if there’s no evidence of foul play to support ordering those tests. For all we know, this jack wad died from a heart attack as a result of indigestion. Who knows? I say, if it doesn’t quack like a duck, then we don’t call it a duck and leave it alone.”

“We follow every case to their natural conclusion, you know that.”

“Not with the backload of cases we have still to clear. And more coming in every day. Hell, I say, if this guy sounds like the douche bag he probably is, and no one complains,

and he's not even from our jurisdiction, and the Coroner doesn't ring the bell and call it outright murder, we close the case as *Inconclusive and Irreconcilable* and move on with our day. No sense agonizing over spilt milk when no one cares – you can't put it back in the bottle no how."

"I don't know. My gut tells me this guy died unnaturally, but I don't have anything to back it up with. Maybe you're right though. We don't really have the time and no one's pressing us right now. And we're still on the clock and getting close to solving the Harbinger murder."

"That's what I'm saying."

"Well, if the coroner's report comes back inconclusive, I'll agree to shelve it. Providing no other red flags pop up and the Lt signs off."

"Alright! Good man. Now back to business. I had to skip breakfast just to drive all the way out here when dispatch called. Now I'm hungry. You want to head over to Minnie's on Farmington after we finish talking with the Coroner?"

"Sure. Sounds good."

"Alright then. Let's spin the tires and put this place in the rear view. I'm all a sudden in the mood for pie."

Detective Spiro laughed. "You're a morbid man, Neil."

The End.