

Husband and Wife

I stood across and looked down at him through my cool reflector sunglasses. I didn't like him and I'll tell you straight up, if I wasn't so hungry for a customer, I would have left without a bite.

I didn't know the guy. He had called me that morning. Said his name was Jenkins. Said he got my name out of the phone listings. I remember thinking at the time, at least he's honest. I didn't have any references to speak of. Instead of showing my dislike, I decided to hone my skills.

He was a spongy boy. You know what I mean. Mid-thirties, white as a summer cloud with fat ridges rising like the final stretch of a wave on a sandy beach. I don't mean to say he was fat fat. Just going to fat, like over his belt. He wore an off white linen sport coat over an orange golf shirt. The belt over his khakis was half hidden by his belly. He had little sausage fingers and a round face that would favor sagging in a few years. But he greeted me just fine. Called me Mr. Connor. Asked me to sit down at the café's sidewalk table. I noticed that he had already started on a second whiskey and water. He had a dead cousin to the side. I said thanks and sat.

After I sat, he stared at me. At first, I thought he expected me to say something but I noticed a vacancy in his eyes. Maybe that wasn't his second drink. A waiter came over and asked if we wanted anything. Just water for me. I was already perspiring under my sport coat. I kept my Cardinals baseball cap on. The umbrella over our table didn't shade the sun from me. Just for him. Jenkins had tiny beads of sweat forming on his forehead. He wasn't as hot as me. I could already feel trickles of sweat falling from my temples. He ordered a Seagram's and water. He hadn't taken more than a swallow from his current drink. Like a frog, he cleared his throat.

"Mr. Connor, I want you to find my wife. Tiffany."

Not my favorite work but I didn't say anything because I liked her name. Tiffany. It sounded rich.

Whether he was expecting an answer or not - he paused like he did - he continued, "She's been missing for three weeks now. Maybe more." The missing sounded a little bit like mishing. The evidence was piling up against the number of drinks.

"Maybe more?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Yeah," he twirled the drink in his glass, raised it to his lips and, by God, if he didn't drain it. It was only noon. "I was gone two weeks before that. On a business trip." He said

bishness and I thought damn if he isn't Humphrey Bogart. "She might have left sooner." Shoener.

"She have a cell?" I asked and he nodded. The waiter set down our drinks and took his empty glasses away. He didn't answer the implied question so I had to ask, "Did you try to call her?"

"Of course I did. She didn't answer. I must have called her a hundred times if I called her once." I didn't believe him.

"Call the police?" He shook his head and grimaced as if I had farted. I should have been insulted but, as I said, I was hungry. "Call her friends? Family?"

"No. They wouldn't talk to me anyway." I didn't ask why. I already knew the answer after only five minutes.

"Could you give me a list of her friends and family?"

"Sure," he said but he didn't move a muscle.

I was annoyed. I figured if I wanted someone to find someone for me, I'd bring whatever I already knew to the party. "When do you want me to start?"

"Now, of course!" He looked put out like I was a slacker.

I looked at his sandy red, well groomed hair. I wished I could have said no but I needed to build a reputation. I sucked my pride up like a gravy goober. "Ok, I guess I can start but I'll need that list. And a recent picture."

Jenkins patted his pockets like he was looking for matches. "Shit." Lucky for him most of his 's' words had a 'sh' sound to them. He pronounced that word perfectly. "Don't have one on me."

"Can I ask you a question?" He was working on his drink pretty quickly and I wanted to catch him before he drowned. "If she's been missing for, let's say, a month, why look for her now?"

He looked as if it hurt him to look at me. I didn't appreciate that so I squinted back at him. I was being childish. He couldn't see my squint through my cool sunglasses.

"I think she's stealing from me." Hell, it came out sheeling, without the slightest 't' sound in it. He wasn't scowling at me. He was drunk.

"She left you but she's stealing from you. How's that work?" He screwed up his face. I knew I was asking tough questions. Junior Jeopardy.

He didn't answer right away. He held up his hand and signaled for another drink from the waiter. I caught the waiter's eye and nodded for a water. "I can tell from my bank statement. I put a bunch of money in and every so often there's a thousand taken out."

"And you didn't take it?" I had to ask.

"And I didn't."

"So you think she's alive."

"I know she's alive. She can't take that kind of money from the ATM. She has to write checks for it. It's her signature. And always for cash." The way he pronounced signature needed some help from me but I figured it out.

"Why don't you close the account and start another?"

"Can't. Need both of us to close it."

"Hmmm, I wonder about that." I drawled my sentence while I thought.

"I know about that." He looked irritated and I didn't think I gave him a reason. "And, besides, all my bills are auto paid."

My puzzled look vanished. I think I now knew the real reason he didn't close it. "You don't know how to re-do the auto-pay."

He tilted his whisky glass at me like a thumbs up. "She set it all up. I don't even know who we need to pay. Hell, I don't even know the password to the electronic account. I just fill the account with money and the wheels turn."

"Right." Well, at least he had money. The waiter set our drinks down. Jenkins drained the old one and pulled the fresh one nearer. He whispered something to the waiter. Damn if he didn't order another drink on the sly.

"You know what pisses me off."

A random thought flashed through me - "pisses rhyming with fishes?" - but I didn't say anything.

"She probably doesn't need my god-damned money. She has an inheritance out the gazoo, so why's she taking my money?" He flung his arms out. "I mean. She wants to leave? Fine. But don't steal my money to do it. You know what I mean?"

I shook my head. He took it wrong. He thought I was sympathizing with him but I was thinking that I wished I was working for her and I didn't even know what she looked like. She was smart enough to set up an auto-pay to herself.

"Oh well. You find her. See if she's taken up with some guy. She has, I know it."

That didn't mean much to me. "I'll need the list and the photo."

He closed his eyes like he had a headache. "Oh crap. Right." He slugged his drink. "Wait here." He got up and left the table.

He must have thought I was stupid. Mama didn't raise a stooge. I followed him. Our waiter did too. He waved the waiter off and told him that he'd be right back. He walked with a slight weave down the sidewalk and opened the door to a white 323 BMW convertible. The top was down. He reached under a seat

and pulled out a small satchel. "Got my address book right here. Let's go back. I'll write some names, addresses and numbers."

"You're pretty sure she's still in town," I said as a confirmation as he finished and then handed me his list. I glanced at it. His handwriting was pretty good. I could read it without a problem. He even remembered to write his own name and numbers. Home, cell, even business. I was impressed. If a drunk man can write like that maybe he did have talent for the business world.

"She's here. Everybody she knows is here." He tapped the back of the list from across the table. For some reason, I didn't like that. Felt like he was tapping me on my chest. He was a pain in the ass.

"Ok." I got up. "I go by the week and there could be expenses." I told him how much. It was twenty C's but I worked the weekends too.

He got up and pulled out his wallet. Apparently he was paying his bar bill and leaving with me. I hoped he wasn't driving. I was wrong. He stuck his thumb and finger in, separated several hundred dollar bills from his wallet and handed them to me as nonchalantly as buying a newspaper. Maybe I didn't dislike this guy as much as I thought.

"Damn. I got her picture here." He pulled it from his wallet and handed it to me. He sat back down. "I knew I had one."

A pretty, thirty something blonde smiled back at me from the photo. I realized that she was only a few years older than me. Her picture gave me incentive. "I'll be in touch."

"Or I will." He did that gunslinger kind of thing with his almost empty glass. Talk about annoying.

I just shrugged and left.

I drove past some of the addresses that he gave me. I took him at his word. He wanted me working so I worked.

It didn't take long to find her. I staked out her sister's place the next day. I took it easy on myself, had a late brunch and didn't begin to watch for her until early afternoon. I figured it was a Sunday and nobody is in a hurry on a Sunday. I got lucky. She pulled up to the curb in front of her sister's house in a sharp candy red SC400 convertible Lexus. I used to call a car like that 'titty' but that was before I found out I was sexist.

As she sat in the car, she raised the top. Then all five foot four, one hundred five pounds of her purred like a long haired cat out of her car. She even shook her blonde hair like a beach commercial and swayed her hips side to side as she walked up to her sister's home. All I said to myself was

'whew'. I had tunnel vision for the entire sway. I was a pig back then. Oink.

She stayed inside all day while I fidgeted with my cell and sipped my bottled water like an antelope at an alligator's pond. Startled from a nap, I heard some goodbyes and watched her pour herself into that peach of a car. I followed her to a side by side brick townhome in Clayton. With the sun in full retreat, she turned on the inside and outside lights. I snapped on a penlight and updated the list with her address. I waited for a while and nothing happened. No visitors. Once in a while I could see her as she passed a window. When it turned close to ten, she turned off some of the inside lights. When it hit eleven, all of the inside lights went dark. She could have had one on in her bedroom but I took the hint.

I was at my post by seven the next morning and followed her to a café in the Italian section of the city called The Hill. She hip-hopped her way into the restaurant and was shown to a table outside in a garden area. I needed another break so I went in, did my thing and returned to my car. I looked across the street at a sandwich shop. I wished I could have gotten their sub with beef and pepperoncinis but I was working. I could hardly order curb service and still be incognito. That's a buzz word between us detectives. Out on the patio, she opened a dark green menu and spoke to a waiter. He brought a red wine and an appetizer. From where I sat, I thought it was toasted ravioli. I didn't know how she kept her figure. But she kept it. She wore a tight black skirt and a plunging black silk shirt. If I remember right, I even licked my lips. I noticed the men around her sneak a peek - which wasn't unusual. But the women eyed her too and that was a clincher. She was the red rose in a garden of dandelions.

I lifted my Nikon camera with a built-in long range lens. About fifteen minutes later, a man, carrying a satchel, joined her. He was well built. Sleek was the word that popped into my head. Not really muscular but he was handsome. She smiled when he approached. He bent toward her and obscured my view. I couldn't tell if he kissed her. But he did take a lover's seat next to her. Not across from her. I snapped some pictures.

They shared a meal, a couple of glasses of wine and, when they pushed the plates away, he pulled some papers and set them before her. I used my camera to look a little closer. Some of the papers were actually pictures but I couldn't tell much else. The angle was poor - they were either flat on the table or she held them up and all I could see was the blank back. I snapped a few more pictures. She smiled and the man smiled. Whatever they were, they were agreeable.

She laid some money on the table. I would have thought the other way around but she was rich. Besides, it was the beginning of a new century. The man stood up and then he bent down almost to her face, again obstructing my view, and then helped her up. He stepped behind her and they left the garden together. They must have paused in the restaurant somewhere, to kiss maybe, hell I would have kissed her and good, and then they walked through the front door. After another round of goodbyes and, yes, my view was blocked, a possible peck goodbye, they went their separate ways. He to the right. She to the left, towards me.

What part of her I didn't watch as she walked my way, I couldn't say. I think she melted into her car and drove away. I had just enough sense to follow her.

And follow her I did. Shopping in Brentwood, Clayton, Frontenac. Even shopping at West County Center. I stayed in the car until the mall. Until the last stop, it had been standalone jewelry stores and dress shops. West County was busy and it was tough to find a parking spot near her but I managed. I hoofed it through the mall with her. Well, a little in back of her. She was something to look at from behind. I wished I could have been holding her arm but that would have spoiled the view.

After the mall, I drove her home. Hell, I wish I did. I followed her home and put her to bed. Again, I wish I did. I just followed her home. When the night deepened, she turned off her lights one by one. When she turned them all off, I drove away.

That night, I pulled on a bottle of Jack and thought about my case. I had the nagging feeling that I probably should have followed the guy and not her. But. But what? She was better looking. Why follow the stiff? Besides something about him bothered me. Was he a boy toy? She may have kissed him but she wasn't all over him. And he wasn't all over her like I would have been. Was he gay? I considered that for a while. I hit the bottle pretty hard and sometime around one I decided to sleep in on Tuesday. It wasn't the alcohol that made me sleep. No. No way. You wouldn't think it but tailing a beauty queen can wear a guy out.

I woke up with a headache and my phone ringing. I rolled over, put the pillow over my ears and ignored the ring. Whoever it was, I didn't have a ring tone set for him. A telemarketer? Screw 'em. I wrapped my arm over my pillow and wished I had left my cell on the kitchen counter. Whoever it was, they were insistent.

"Hello?" I finally answered.

"Connor?" The voice was vaguely familiar.

"Yes. Connor."

"Any news?"

What? News? I turned the phone to my eyes. Oh god damn. Jenkins. As suave as royalty, I tried to buy some time. "Just a minute."

"Connor. Do you have anything?" He spoke with a plea in his voice. "I can't stand it. She hit me again for another thousand dollars. She's rubbing my face in it."

Ahhh, now I understood. I didn't feel sorry for him but I grunted and he took that as encouragement.

"You've got something? What have you got?" The man whined.

When I think about it, I kick myself even now. Even though it was one of my first cases, I can't believe I gave in so quickly, but I did. I think I did because I didn't want to hear him cry.

"Hold on Jenkins. No worries. I found her."

"You found her?"

"Sure I did. You think I'm stupid?" I shouldn't have thrown in that part. I've learned not to ask my clients that question before they pay me. I continued. "She's got a place in Clayton."

"Hot damn. Can I talk to her?"

"I don't know. Can you?" I was sick of him.

"Do you think she'd talk with me?"

"Don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. She had lunch with some guy on The Hill." That was mean and I shouldn't have said it but what was I, a marriage counselor?

"I knew it. The bitch!"

His reply was a total one eighty. He went from a meek and mild Clark Kent to an aggressive super green Superman. "I wouldn't go that far." I tried to console him. "You do realize that it could be something else?"

He cut me short. "What the hell do you mean? What something else? She pumped him. You trying to hide something? Did you take pictures?"

I was too new to deflect him. "I'm not holding anything back. Yeah, I took pictures. I saw them at lunch yesterday and that's all I've got." I was rankled at his attitude. I didn't like the fact that I was sitting on the edge of my bed in my underwear and talking to a lunatic.

"I want to see the pictures. Meet me at the café. Same place as the other day." I could tell he was spitting into the phone. "In fact, we're all going to meet. Noon. Ok?"

He hung up before I could answer. I wished I could have said no. An hour and a half later, I had recharged with a jog and a shower. Connecting my Nikon to the computer, I printed

off a set of pictures. I didn't use photo paper but they were clear enough.

Thirty minutes later, I crossed the street to the cafe. Jenkins was seated alone at a larger table.

"Mr. Jenkins."

"Connor. Great. Sit."

I remembered trying to train a dog. Funny how that thought came to mind.

"Let me see them."

I obliged.

"Not much here. Are they kissing?" He pointed to one of the shots.

"I couldn't tell. There are others."

"Probably." He had made up his mind and checked his watch.

I remember thinking it was a Rolex. I could tell you now but I wasn't as skilled back then.

"She'll be here any minute."

I raised my eyebrows. The last I heard, she wasn't answering his calls.

"Surprised, huh? I left her a message. Told her I had some pictures and told her to call me back." He looked eager. "She called within five minutes. Guilty bitch. Ah, here she is now."

Even under the scorching sun, Mrs. Jenkins floated across the street like a Christmas angel. She wore a white Cantina halter dress that fluttered, white sandals, a sun hat, a pair of large sunglasses and a straw beach bag.

"Tiffany." He said as she stopped at our table. He didn't move from his chair. I stood up. He didn't seem pleased to see her although I was.

"Harold." She returned the feeling to him. "You wanted to see me? Show me something?"

"Yes." After she sat, Harold pulled my pictures out of the folder and spread them before her. "Perhaps you can explain these?"

It was difficult to see her eyes but the corner of her mouth lifted. She giggled.

I liked her.

She pushed them back. "I suppose *he* took them," she said disdainfully as her head nodded toward me.

I was crushed.

"Yesterday, no doubt." She finished me off with a glance.

"So you don't deny it." Harold assumed an attorney's tone. I didn't know what he did for a living but I hadn't figured he was a lawyer. Maybe he just played one. "How long have you known this man?" Harold tapped a picture with one of his sausage fingers.

She smiled. "Him? Let me think." She had a wicked little smile. I could tell she was stringing him along but I didn't see the humor in it. "Maybe six weeks."

"Six weeks! Why you bitch! Is that why you left me?" A few heads turned.

"Yeah. That's why." She turned cold.

Again, I was surprised by her ability to shift gears.

"God damn you!" Harold spat. "You can just sit here and admit it. Like it was nothing."

"Oh, it's not nothing, Harold." She reached for her beach bag and stuck her hand in it. "It was everything." She breathed the word like it had been a climactic event. She got what she wanted. He was pissed. She pulled out a folder. "In fact, when I was with him I thought of no one else but you."

"That's disgusting."

"Yes, that's what I thought. Especially when he handed these to me."

On the top photo, I saw Harold, naked as a jaybird, with a topless woman. Harold was no prize so I kept my eyes on the girl. Mrs. Jenkins had photos and a typed report. I realized then why Harold had been tapped for a thousand every few days. She used Harold's money to bag him.

Harold's mouth fell open.

"See? I found myself a real detective before your last 'business trip'".

I don't know what Harold was feeling but I wished I was the invisible man. A real detective. I caught the nuance. I shriveled into a prune and felt as cheap as a plug nickel.

She scooped the papers and put them in her bag. She stood up. "I'll be seeing you in court. Ta-ta." She wriggled her fingers.

I found out first hand that a woman scorned was like dancing on a volcano. From that day forward, I made it a policy not to scorn a woman. Men, yes. Women? Hell no. I stood up too - as a sign of respect.

Harold sat on his ass and still had his mouth open as he watched her walk away. I was glad I insisted that he pay me by the week. I still get paid by the week. Up front.

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