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Burning Bridges As We Go

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### **Euripides Left a Tip**

“Don’t you dare 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, not even an hour into his investigation of the dead body found behind the Prairie Fire Café, Detective Mahoney was in no mood to be sassied by some little upstart waitress. “You called his cellphone not even ten minutes 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 well today. That’s all, really!” Rachel cried. “A pretty good tip too considering the coffee and slice of Boston cream pie I served him 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 receipt 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 said he was out back. It’s not like I expected you to answer his cellphone. 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 explain how 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 Euripides!? He a friend or something?"

"No, sir. Euripides was one of the last classic Greek dramatists following in the tradition of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Charlie told me he was trying to write a Greek satire about modern society and was travelling Route 51 for inspiration. That's how he came to be at the Fireside Café. And I made the association between the two and suggested he try reading Medea."

"Medea? Where did she come from? What are you talking about? Are you trying to be smart?!" Detective Mahoney turned 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 deca.....uh, knew this Charlie."

"Sure, Bob, whatever you say," he mumbled walking away. "She's all yours! Fucking liberal arts. Fucking Euripides my 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 this 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 isn’t 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. Sort of like what you might imagine Ken Kesey would wear in his hippie days hanging 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, which he wasn’t afraid of sharing. Most regulars who come in here tend to be humble, God fearing folk who stick to the adage pride comes before a fall. Not so much Charlie.”

“Well, it sounds like you found 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 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 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 that? Bet he wasn’t impressed in the least?”

"No, he wasn't," Rachel laughed. "No, he just doubled down on douche-land. Complimented me on my ability to read cliff notes and patronized me about my job. Like he ever worked a day in his life, you know?"

"And you didn't like that."

"Course not. I matriculated to college once upon a time. I just didn't get to finish. And I get enough condescension from the city folk who pass through here. Who needs one more arrogant, narcissistic jerk who thinks he's smarter than everyone else adding trouble to your day, you know? I mean, if I didn't need the tips, I would've told him to shove it."

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

"Well, he asked how old I was about one too many times. Said he liked them young like Nabokov. Like 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 myself was being forced to work a menial waitress job. Especially when I could travel with him and experience 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 too 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 daughters myself. One of them waitresses at a place near her college. I imagine she 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 in 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.”

“Fair enough,” Detective Spiro replied. “But maybe Wade still took exception? Maybe he decided to have words with Charlie out back?”

Rachel felt bad. She obviously wouldn’t be telling this detective she’d poisoned Charlie’s Boston cream pie to exact revenge and rid the world of one more lecherous, arrogant prick. One less asshole with delusions of grandeur who liked to prey on younger girls. Now the detective wouldn’t be able to close his case because he’d never find out who did it. She knew cops hated that -- loose ends and unsolved cases and all. It wore on them. 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 --

mostly unidentified traveler's passing through. That sorta thing. And he worried over each and every case, agonizing with every detail, hoping the answer would just pop up and announce itself. And knowing one never would. Too many open cases over too many years definitely led to his high blood pressure. And probably even his fatal aneurysm. Rachel felt bad about that. She was responsible for one or two of her father's open cases. But still, if she never admitted to her own father about her extracurricular hobbies, why would she do so for this detective?

"No," Rachel explained, "Wade was cool. He keeps an eye out, sure, but he'd never jump in unless we gave him the word. He knows the score about tips and all."

"Do you think Wade could've still met Charlie out back? I know how protective some of these guys can be. And the way you describe Charlie, he sounds like he could piss off Mother Theresa."

"No, definitely not. Wade's protective, sure, but not stupid. Plus, he was the only cook working this morning after Jonesy didn't show up this morning. And it was a busy morning. Bank day for the local farmers and all. I don't think Wade even got a chance to leave the kitchen till after the lunch crowd broke. That's when he found Charlie out back behind the dumpster. He was taking out 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'd been the local pharmacist for the town back in the 1920's. When it was barely a one-horse town. She still had his inventory and notes though. And she once thought she might like to become a pharmacist herself – which is what she matriculated to college to be. But before the semester was out, she changed her major to liberal arts after a handsome professor took interest in her. Now

he'd been real charming. And she stayed a liberal arts major during her second semester, until the professor broke it off. Then she fell victim to the oldest cliché – she got drunk at a freshman mixer over at the jock fraternity and found herself upstairs with a popular All-American football player. She was barely nineteen. And could barely stand or speak. She was still able to say no though and didn't consent to sex, but he went ahead anyway. 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. Because it wasn't his problem. And no one would do anything about it since it was, according to the Dean, the campus police, and all of his friends, just her word versus his that it hadn't been consensual.

Rachel returned home broken and pregnant -- to a father who loved her and didn't judge her. He helped her, supported her and when her child was born, looked after him while she attended classes at the local community college. He even continued working even though he was well past retirement age. Even after the headaches his doctor warned him about kept popping up.

Rachel felt guilty about that. And betrayed when he died, leaving her with a child and only a small insurance payout to save the house. So she turned to waitressing, in the proudest tradition of the heartland, to put food on the table and pay the bills. But she still wondered – hell, resented -- what could've been. What she would've been had it not been for predatory men.

Funny thing was, most people didn't even remember there was such a thing as arsenic. And despite its toxicity, it had been a therapeutic agent for the treatment of multiple diseases in the 1920's -- before it was abandoned with the discovery of antibiotics in the 1940s. Modern police methods didn't even test for arsenic anymore – 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 Rachel was

concerned. The Boston cream pie, she 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. No one ever said no to her Boston Cream Pie, especially when they thought she and her cleavage would accompany it.

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

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

“Thank you for your time, Miss Tanner.”

“Thank you, Detective. Please, call me Rachel.”

“Thank you, Rachel. If it’s okay with you, I may stop by again to check in and see how things are going. If that’s okay with you? I mean, 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, recognizing that talking with Rachel had triggered sentiments similar to how he felt about his own daughter. And as such, 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. But there was something more there too. He just couldn’t put his finger on it. Something he had a hunch about, but couldn’t put his finger on it.

Detective Spiro walked back to his car with a mildly nagging feeling he couldn’t place. And met up with Detective Mahoney.

"So Bob, did you find anything out from Miss Waitress-Who-Knows-it-all?"

"No. Nothing out of the norm. The deceased, Charlie, sounded like a real creeper, but I didn't hear anything to suspect foul play. 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 cause he wasn't local. Other than to say, and I'm quoting here, 'We always get some asshole 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 all. 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 mentioned the Boston Cream, he said as far as he knew, the Prairie Fire didn't serve Boston cream pie. Never had. Just apple and lemon meringue. And pumpkin during the holidays."

"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 have the Coroner check the contents of the deceased's stomach to confirm what he last ate."

"What and piss the him off over a trivial issue? Especially if there's no evidence of foul play, which there isn't, and no other leads to run down. This case sounds like a dead fish, if you ask me. For all we know, this jack wad died from a heart attack as a result of indigestion. He'd be old enough. Who knows? Anyway, I say if it doesn't quack like a duck, then we don't call it a duck and take it swimming. Let's just bag it and move on to the next."

"We follow every case till we know. You know that."

"Whose saying we don't? But we do have a backload of cases right now that are a higher priority. Hell, I got a stabbing over on the east side with Hell's Angels written all over it and that SOB Hendriks prime for the fall. So I say, if this guy sounds like the out of town douche bag he is, and no one's complaining, 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, right? You can't put that back in the bottle no how."

"I don't know. My gut tells me this guy didn't die of natural causes. A fifty year old traveler in fairly good shape, with a convertible Porsche parked out front, walks around back of the café for no reason. Then lies down all peaceful like behind the dumpster and never wakes up?! I gotta call bullshit on that one."

“Hey, heart attacks happen all the time, my friend. Nothing unusual about that. Maybe he was feeling chest pain and got a little confused and just wandered back there. It could happen.”

“Right. Well, if the Lieutenant feels the same, and no one’s pressing us right now, I’ll wait for the Coroner’s report. But I’m not shelving it till I know for sure.”

“You’re headache is all I’m saying. I’m not missing Friday night Karaoke for that douchebag is all I’m saying.”

“Fine. But, if the Coroner comes back with anything other than heart attack, you agree to work it with me. No bitching about it either.”

“Deal. And when it comes back as cardiac arrest, you’re buying my drinks all night Friday. Now back to business. I skipped breakfast driving out here and now I’m hungry. And the fuck if I’m going to eat here. So you wanna head over to Minnie’s over in Farmington for me? We can call the Lieutenant on the way.”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

“Alright then. Let’s spin the tires and put this place in the rear view. You know, I’m all a sudden in the mood for pie.”

Detective Spiro laughed. “You’re a morbid man, Neil.”

The End.