

Miserable

by Ace Boggess

Calvin Flynn shouted into his desk phone as if he despised it, as if the plastic were unfaithful to him or the star button backed over his dog and pulled away with the body still twitching in the road. “I don’t have time for this! Why would you do it? Why would you call me with all this crap when you know I’m working?” He paused to grimace at Walter Hart’s prairie-dog head rising above the cubicle wall like a kilroy with glasses. “Don’t answer that. Jesus Christ! I have to go. I have to get back to work.”

Walter shook his head, the mop of oily brown hair bouncing over pasty skin. He mouthed “Carol” while making a question mark with his eyes as if he didn’t know the answer.

Calvin chewed his lower lip. Pain shot through him, and his face flushed. He held the receiver up and away from him. His wife’s voice could be heard through the earpiece, going full speed in a series of clicks like keys banging on an old-fashioned typewriter. Every few seconds, a word sounded clear: “birthday” for one, and “mother.” Leaning back into the receiver, Calvin spat, “Whatever you want. I don’t care anymore, and I don’t have time....”

The clicks and clacks on the other end cut him off.

Walter dangled an arm over the cubicle wall, his hand waving a fat stack of documents. He pointed at them with his scowl.

“I know, I know,” Calvin mouthed, holding his hand over the phone’s receiver as if he’d spoken the words aloud and didn’t want his wife to hear. He glanced at the clock on his computer screen. Almost one. Four more hours. “Listen, honey, that’s enough. I have to go. We’ll talk about this when we get home.” Did he actually call her *honey*? he thought. That wasn’t good. “Don’t tell me to go fuck myself. Fuck you. I’m hanging up now. Goodbye.” Pause. “Goodbye.” Pause. “Goodbye.”

He slammed the phone down so hard on its cradle that it sent an agonizing jolt racing up his arm. “That bitch,” he said. “Sorry you had to listen to that, Walter.” He started to give his colleague a rundown of the conversation, but decided against it. As it was, news of the argument would spread quickly through the Motion Team, and probably throughout the whole building before the end of the day. Instead, he forced a calmer tone and said, “What was it you wanted?”

Walter cleared his throat. “Barry needs these finished up before you leave today. MandaCorp earnings reports. They’re on the network in the Limbo file under M-C-E.”

“Christ,” said Calvin. “I still have the Devlin Mortuary account to work on.”

His colleague shrugged.

“I may never get out of here.”

Walter resisted the urge to chide Calvin about all the time he had wasted on the phone arguing with his wife. That couldn’t be helped. It was a part of life these days. “Just do it,” he said, as if *he* were the supervisor instead of Barry. He felt himself grin as he sank back down into his hole.

Carol slipped her cell phone into the mini-pocket on her brown sweater vest. Her hands, by instinct, smoothed down the front of her flowing beige skirt before rising to cup her eyes as if they might stop tears. Then, nervously, she removed them and brushed her auburn hair off her forehead.

“Carol,” Mrs. Kern chided from the other side of the perfume counter, “you know you’re not supposed to be talking on your phone while you’re working.” She feigned a smile as she spoke. Mrs. Kern was a short, round woman with a dome of white hair frozen in place on her head. Her scent like dead roses wafted everywhere, even piercing the lingering mists of different perfumes Carol had sprayed for customers that day.

“Yes, Mrs. Kern,” said Carol. Her thin, pale lips curved inward, and she looked as if she might break down at any moment.

“And so loud. Do you think our customers want to hear all that whining and complaining?”

You know they do, she wanted to say. As if to prove this, she glanced around to where two older women jostled blouses at a nearby rack. Their ears were pricked up, taking in details.

“No, Mrs. Kern,” said Carol. “I’m sorry.”

“All right, well, get back to work. Be sure to straighten up all the displays. Especially the *Passion*. We’re pushing *Passion* today.”

“Yes, Mrs. Kern. I’m sorry. I’ll...” Her floor manager walked away before she could finish. *Well*, Carol thought, *I guess that’s that*. Then she squatted down to open the nearest display case.

His fingers raced across the keyboard. Calvin typed with steadiness and precision as if he were writing poetry—the words, numbers and symbols he chose equally as impenetrable to the unskilled reader. On page after page, he filled in the necessary information, made calculations, fudged a few responses, then corrected them by slamming the Backspace key and saying “Shit!” in a grating yawp loud enough to be heard three or four cubicles away.

Carol really knew how to get under his skin, he thought. It was best if he didn’t think about her, but just now he couldn’t help it. He saw her at the wedding three years ago in her off-white dress, sleek and silky as if the tailor had started out making lingerie and forgotten to stop. How he burned for her that day—even now the image in his mind brought an unwelcome bulge to his khaki slacks.

“Shit,” he cried, slamming the Backspace key again. He hit it five more times before saving the document and resuming his steady typing.

He thought about their trip to Virginia Beach a few months before the wedding. It was their first vacation together, and he remembered how she looked in her reddish-orange bikini. She had small breasts, but firm, and her waist was so slender he could almost surround her with one arm. When no one was looking, she flashed him in the hotel swimming pool, then splashed his face while his eyes were wide and hungry. Together, they ate filet mignon in a classy

restaurant, listened to a jazz band play notes on fire at a small club, then went back to the hotel and made love for hours.

The ache in Calvin's groin grew too intense as if he were looking at porn on the internet rather than analyzing data and filling in all those reports. He cursed again, a bit louder, repeated himself, and slammed the keyboard several times with a full, flat hand.

As expected, Walter's head levitated above the cubicle wall. "You all right, Calvin?" he said. "Having a little trouble?"

Calvin quickly fingered Control-Alt-Delete, resetting his machine. "Fucking thing locked up on me," he said. "It's been going berserk all day. Now it's just dead."

"Jeez, buddy. I hope you saved it. How much did you lose?"

"I don't know," said Calvin, which wasn't strictly true. "Find out when I restart it, I guess."

"Crying shame," Walter said. "Hope it's not too bad, or you might be stuck here forever."

Calvin shrugged and listened to the hard drive whir. *Wouldn't that suck?* he thought. He waited until Walter sat back down, then returned to his vision of Carol in the pool.

In the break room, Carol sat sipping burnt coffee across from Julie Melton who worked the jewelry counter. A tiny-framed woman, Julie stood about four-eleven, barely shorter resting in a chair. She wore her gray-streaked hair long and straight, covering the shoulders of her navy silk blouse. She always seemed jittery, more so today as her hands fiddled with her Styrofoam cup.

“What about a divorce?” she asked. Divorce to Julie was the perfect solution, having just gone through one herself.

“I’ve thought about it,” said Carol. “We’ve even talked about it.”

“And?”

“We’re not ready to go that far.”

Julie responded, “So you just keep suffering. I was like that, too, until my shrink explained to me nothing feels bad enough until it is. She said to me that most of us have to hit bottom before we pick ourselves up. But let me ask you, is it worth it?”

Carol said nothing, staring down at the reflection of her eyes in the thick, black coffee.

“Well, let me ask you this. Is he having an affair?”

“I don’t think so.” She didn’t. “It’s not like him.” It wasn’t. “He’s....”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Busy, I guess.”

“You’re fighting because he’s always busy?” Julie’s hand twitched, and her cup almost tipped over.

“Well....”

“There has to be more to it than that.”

“You see, it’s my mother’s birthday this weekend. She lives up in Hartford.”

“And you want to go?”

Carol nodded.

“And he won’t take you?”

Carol kept quiet.

“He hates your mother?”

Carol said, “She’s not the easiest person to get along with.”

Julie groaned and shook her head in long, slow swings. “That’s what he says, I bet.”

“Uh....”

“Listen, I’m not one to put pressure on you, but maybe you should go by yourself. Get some time away from him. It’ll give you a chance to figure out whether you like things better that way.”

Again, Carol kept to herself. She didn’t need time for that. She already knew how she felt when Calvin wasn’t there.

He walked up beside her on the platform. Both stared straight ahead, not speaking at first as the crowd around them buzzed. There were so many things they wanted to say to each other, so many things they kept to themselves for now. A minute passed, and then another.

Carol spoke first. “I thought you were going to be late,” she said.

“So did I,” said Calvin.

Both felt the tension rising. It was like that moment each remembered from high school biology class when the frog lay pinned on its back in a box, right before the scalpel in a quivering hand drew near. Not wanting to make that cut just yet, both stood still, neither pushing boundaries, each wanting the other to strike first.

When the train arrived, Carol and Calvin stepped forward at the same time, their feet moving in rhythm as if those of two clarinetists in a marching band. Calvin paused at the entrance and allowed his wife to climb aboard first. He followed, watching her sit on the far

side. He chose to stand, looking away from her at first, not knowing how it would begin. There'd be a wound to start it off, but one of them had to choose the dagger.

The car filled around them with men in gray suits, women in blouses and skirts or slacks of muted tones. Calvin felt their eyes on him. He recognized a lot of the same people with the same bleak hearts who rode the subway at this time every day. They waited for what would come, urging it on with their instigating stares and mysterious cooing or clucking of their lips. Calvin tried not to disappoint them. He thought about the war ahead, considering his options for attack. But nothing came to him. He felt too exhausted, so he kept quiet, listening for vibrations as the train began to move.

That left Carol to fire the first shot. In a voice louder than seemed reasonable, she spat, "Are you having an affair?" She'd thought about Julie's question all afternoon, and it struck Carol as the perfect place to begin.

"What did you say?" said Calvin, turning to face her. The question caught him unprepared—a flawless Sun Tzu strike against the flank.

"I said, are you having an affair?"

As the words wormed their way into his psyche, finding themselves a home, Calvin's expression changed. His lips twirled into a freakish snarl of fear and anger. His eyebrows arched until they looked like devil horns on his forehead. His face burned the red of an October leaf.

"Are you?" Carol demanded.

He replied, "Christ on a crutch, Carol! What's the matter with you? You ask me that *here*? Now? Out of the blue and in front of all these people?"

She kept her calm, but her voice resounded with the ripping viciousness of a table saw.

“That’s not an answer,” she said. “I want an answer.”

All eyes around them turned toward the spectacle. There were many upstanding people on this train. All of them knew what to expect, and they were eager for it.

She went into the building first. He followed fifteen feet behind as though he were chasing but just too tired to catch her. Carol took the elevator, while Calvin walked up the three flights of stairs, preferring exercise to build up his energy for what he knew came next.

When Calvin reached the apartment, he found the door open, Carol already inside. As he entered, he thought about slamming the door behind him, but decided it wasn’t necessary. There had been enough noise already. So, he eased it shut, listening for the soft click of the lock, then turned the deadbolt.

Carol stood across the room with her back to him. She bent slightly over a tall, marble-topped table where she sorted through the day’s mail. Bills and circulars. No good news.

Slowly, Calvin approached as if a matador in the arena, careful of the bull should it lunge. He stepped up right behind her, sniffing the cocktail of perfumes swirling off her. The air around her smelled like the middle of a greenhouse filled with a hundred different blossoming flowers. How he loved her confused scent. He inhaled, smiling.

Carol heard the intake of his breath. She didn’t move, staring down at the electric bill in her hands.

“What was it today?” he said.

“*Passion*,” she answered.

Calvin wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling himself in close, the groove of her back fitting against his slightly extended belly. He sniffed at her neck.

“Mmmm,” she sighed.

He squeezed tighter. “How did it go today?”

“The usual,” she said. “You?”

“An outstanding performance. A couple slip-ups, but minor. I don’t think anyone noticed.”

She rubbed her shoulder blades against his chest. “Do you think it worked?”

“Yes,” he told her. “As long as they think we’re miserable, they’ll probably leave us alone.” He dropped his hands to her thighs, grabbed her skirt and inched it up as if he were still typing on his keyboard. When he reached the hem, he slid his fingers onto her bare skin. “You’re not wearing any hose.”

Carol answered, “Only for you, darling. I know it’s what you like.”

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