

In the Closet

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Things get weird in the closet and out.

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The phone rang as I was locking up for the night and I thought about leaving it ring. Then I thought about my bank account, went back around the desk, picked up, and said: "Conde."

An older man's voice came on the line, dry as a desert bone. "Ah yes, Mr. Benjamin Conde of the Conde Detective Agency I presume?"

"The same."

"Splendid, Mr. Conde. Splendid. Ah, yes, Mr. Conde, my name is Douglas P. Cahill III and the reason for my call is...well...I suppose it could best be described as a delicate issue."

The old man paused and his breath whistled through his nose for a while. I had nothing to add so he cleared his throat and went on.

"Right. Yes. Well, I suppose the direct approach is best in cases like these," he said. "Tear the bandage off straight away as it were."

"The direct approach is the best approach," I agreed. "That's been my experience anyway."

"Yes. Very good. Well then, Mr. Conde, to be direct I suspect my wife is behaving unfaithfully and I'd like for you to help me...sort it out."

"Sort it out?"

"Ah, yes, I'm in need of a professional to help me determine if my suspicion is rooted in fact or...well...how should I put this...the paranoid delusions of an old man?"

"I see," I said. "Look, Mr. Cahill, I hate to be the bearer of bad news here but chances are, if your gut

is telling you Mrs. Cahill is playing around, she probably is. Cases like these seldom end happily.”

“Indeed,” the old man said with a tired sigh. “Quite so. Still, we’ve been married for some time now and I feel compelled to give her the presumption of innocence until I have evidence to the contrary. Call me a hopeless loyalist but I imagine I owe her that much.” His nostrils whistled some more and he continued. “To secure the services of your agency, Mr. Conde, I’m willing to pay a \$250 retainer in advance. I would also cover any expense you may incur. Assuming of course,” he added, “that said expense is within reason.”

“Of course.”

“If that sounds agreeable to you and you aren’t currently immersed in another case, I’d like to get together with you as quickly as possible to go over pertinent details.”

A man of modest means, I’ve always subscribed to the philosophy that when someone wants to put \$250 in your hand it’s a good idea to let them do it as quickly as possible. You never know when something might come along to change his mind. I said: “I’m available now if that works.”

“Splendid! It does indeed. Perhaps someplace we can discuss things over drinks? Say Bishop’s in thirty minutes? I assume you know the place.”

I told him I did. He said that was splendid and we hung up. I pulled my hat and coat from the rack, shouldered open the door, and lit a smoke on my way down the stairs. I pushed outside, crossed the street, turned left, followed the sidewalk for half a block, turned right, and climbed the concrete steps into Bishop’s Pub.

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An hour later I was still standing at the bar, fresh out of faith in Douglas P. Cahill III. The jilting left me in a sour mood but it wasn’t overly surprising. If I had a nickel for every client who’s flaked on me, I’d need a wheelbarrow to move them around.

I drained my tumbler, cracked it to the bar a little harder than I needed to, and was headed for the door when a woman of twenty-something bounced into my path and stood smiling up at me. Her hair was shiny black and her vibrant green eyes matched her tight little dress. If I had a nickel for every time a beautiful woman like this one had come bounding up to me in some bar, I’d have exactly no nickels. Even drunk I knew something was off. I looked for the angle.

My first theory was that she picked pockets but I dismissed that notion as quickly as it came. Where

would she hide wallets in that skimpy outfit?

“You’re not leaving?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

“Afraid so,” I said and went to go around her but she stepped in front of me and brought the cleavage in close. I looked at it. I couldn’t help but look at it.

“It’s early!” she pouted.

“I have to get up early.”

My second guess was that she wanted to get me outside so a couple goons could work me over. Or perhaps she planned to drug me. If she took that route she wouldn’t need the goons, just get me back in a quiet booth, slump me up against the wall, and take whatever she wanted while I snoozed.

The pout went away and she dialed the smile up to one thousand watts. Placing her hands on my shoulders, she pulled herself in close, her body warm and firm against mine, her hair smelling of honey and flowers and the tears of broken angels. She gave me a teasing, naughty look and purred: “Just stay and have one drink with me. Please? What’s your name anyway?”

“Ben,” I said. “I’m sorry, I really-”

She climbed up on her tiptoes. “I’m Melissa,” she whispered. She nuzzled me, kissed my ear. “Nice to meet you, Ben.”

The next thing I knew she had my hand and was towing me over to a table. My resolve had proven as reliable as old Douglas P. Cahill III.

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Two hours later we fell through her front door, mashed against one another, tongues probing, hands crawling. She put her palms on my chest, pushed me away and, breathing heavily, she reached around me to close and lock the door. A playful smile lit her flushed face and she took my hand to drag me upstairs. On the second floor she led me into a bedroom where she released my hand and stood at the foot of a bed. The room was dark but she was close enough for me to see and for that I was grateful. She smiled, unzipped the back of her dress, and let it pool to her feet. She kicked off heels and undid her bra. The bra probably landed on the dress but I couldn’t say for sure. I was distracted by other things.

“You like me?” she asked, feigning shyness.

I did.

She giggled and jiggled and threw herself at me and we tumbled onto the bed.

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Sometime later, Melissa’s body tensed and I snapped awake. I watched the ceiling and listened to the clock tick and then I heard the sound of a key sliding into the door lock downstairs. There was a soft click as the key turned and she sat bolt upright, her emerald eyes round and white. “My husband!” she said. “He’s home!”

My temple throbbed. “Husband?” I asked. “Guess you forgot to mention him.”

She jumped up from the bed and threw open a closet door. “In here!” she hissed, pointing. “In here!”

I dug through the sheets for my underwear and reminded her that my clothes were all over the room. I found the boxers and pulled them on.

“Hurry!” she said scampering about, scooping up socks and pants, a shirt and jacket. Heavy footsteps had almost reached the top of the stairs when she wadded the ball of clothes into my chest and pushed me back into the closet, closing the door in my face.

“Hi Hon,” she called feebly and a couple seconds later I could see him through a gap between door and frame. Naturally, the gap increased the chances of his seeing me as well. I stood still as a snapshot.

He was nothing to worry about if you were someone who could handle a pro linebacker in your boxer shorts. The flannel shirt he had on was so big you could gift wrap a couch in it.

“You’re awake,” he grunted.

She ran across the room, threw her arms around his thick neck, and hung there. “I wanted to surprise you! Are you surprised?”

“I am!” he said and they stood grinning at each other like a toothpaste ad. Then his smile melted away and he screwed up his face. “How did you know I’d be early?”

"I didn't," she said. "But I dressed for the occasion just in case. She cupped her ample breasts in her hands and pushed them together. "Do the motorboat thingy."

He buried his face between them and made a racket while she squealed with delight and I wondered if there was some hidden passageway in this closet I could use to escape to Narnia. They smashed up against each other and she helped him out of his lumberjack clothes and then they were on the bed saying things that would embarrass a porno star. He lay on his back and she climbed aboard.

Carefully, so carefully, I lifted a foot and slipped a sock over it.

"You like that, Daddy?" Melissa asked the big man, breathless. "You like that?"

He moaned something unintelligible but I was able to glean that, indeed, he did like that.

What followed froze the blood in my veins. Straddling him, slapping around on top with her palms on his chest, she said: "We have a guest, Daddy. He's watching us."

I stopped dead on one leg like a flamingo in headlights, a sock dangling from my toes.

"Now?" her husband asked. "He's here?"

"In the closet," she moaned. "Oh, he's watching us!"

"Oh!" the big man said.

"Oh!" Melissa said and they carried on that way like dying cattle until finally coming to a grand crescendo that I was sure would demolish the bed entirely.

When the noise stopped I remembered to breathe. Then I hastily wrestled on pants, shirt, jacket. I fastened my belt and pushed out of the closet.

"You people are sickos," I said. "You know that?" They lay intertwined, heaving for air and I dismissed them with a disgusted wave. Shoes in hand, I made a beeline for the door.

"Wait!" Melissa said, hopping up to scurry after me. "Ben, wait a minute." She took my hand for the third time. This time her palm was sweaty. "Don't you want to join in?" she breathed, her face a shiny crimson.

I jerked my hand free. "Not my bag, Missy. Sorry to disappoint."

She shrugged. "Too bad." She padded back to the bed and lay down beside her husband.

"Hold up there, chief," the big man said. He sat up, twisted to adjust his pillow, and I half expected him to come back around with a revolver. Instead, he lay back down and, in a voice suddenly dry as a Dust Bowl tumbleweed, he said: "We need to discuss compensation, old sport. As I recall our agreement was a \$250 retainer as well as your hourly wage plus expenses. You've done an outstanding job. Truly splendid! There's no question whatsoever that my wife has been unfaithful. Kindly hand me my pants and I'll write you a check."

They lay there chuckling, two giddy hot dogs in the package.

I said: "I'll bill you," and went out.

"Jolly good," Douglas P. Cahill III called as I was descending the stairs. "A pleasure doing business with you!" Then, to Melissa he said: "Do be a dear and light me a cigarette, won't you love?"