

CARBON COPIES

by

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When the copy machine in the break room jammed, Mr. Tevers noticed the sign: IF SOMETHING ISN'T WORKING, STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING AND ASK FOR HELP IMMEDIATELY. He blinked a tear onto his cheek and, though he wiped it away, he felt it there still.

The more he fiddled with the copier, the more he sensed it. This took him aback. Life had an incomprehensible logic; he'd never seen the point in crying about it. He accounted for this uncustomary display by the fact his routine had been altered, the staff at half-mast in anticipation of the holidays, his secretary off. To spare her any discomfort, the previous day he'd lied to her about his lack of weekend plans. People seemed to find it odd he was so often alone.

It was only when he was smudged with toner, tripping over paper trays, that he considered the sign's admonishment. He stopped.

He was reloading the copier when Miss Pearson appeared, a sheaf of papers clutched to her chest. Though she often looked perplexed, the young woman cut a voluptuous figure in a purple dress which, however attractive, Mr. Tevers considered too revealing for the workplace.

He didn't like asking for help, but he could manage a statement of fact. "Printer's on the fritz."

"Well, let's see."

He stood aside and, when she stooped to attend to the machine, he reprimanded himself when his eyes darted to the cleft between her breasts.

She extracted a metal wire from the rollers. "Someone's dropped a paper clip inside."

Mr. Tevers struck his palm on his forehead and shrugged his shoulders as if protesting a thousand tribulations. “Why would anyone do that?”

“There are unhappy people everywhere, Mr. Tevers, gumming up the works.” Miss Pearson closed the copy machine doors, smoothed the front of her dress. “You working again this weekend?”

“A real shame.” He tried to sound put-upon at having to cancel so many engagements. “You? Big plans?”

“Oh, yes. I think I’ll go somewhere and then come back.”

Mr. Tevers thought she might be poking fun.

“I suppose that sounds crazy. It’s just...I don’t have a clue where I might go. You know the feeling?”

Mr. Tevers found it forward of her to ask. Thinking to conceal his embarrassment, he said jauntily, “Sometimes I think Paris, sometimes Rome or the south of France. It changes daily.”

“Trust your subconscious, I read in *Cosmopolitan*. I don’t look for truths in women’s magazines, but this one stuck out.”

She laid a paper on the platen. The green light scanned back and forth under the lid. Suddenly, Mr. Tevers was desperate to engage her in conversation. “You have a large family?”

Her face clouded in the strobing light. “What made you ask that?”

“I just assumed.”

“Well, yes. Sort of.” Her features softened. “And you?”

He was preparing another lie when the persistent tear checked him. He felt also that she might be the exception. It wasn’t just that she was pretty; there was something sad and tired

around her eyes that drew him. Her cheerfulness appeared to come at a cost. “No family here, unfortunately.”

She glanced at the clock, as if indicating she had someplace to go. “There’s another shame.”

“Look at the time.” He cleared his throat, gathered the documents he had meant to copy from the break room table.

Miss Pearson pinched the collar of her dress. “Wait here. I want to show you something. A little secret.” She returned with a tentative smile and a photo album with a canvas cover.

“Shall we sit a moment?” Mr. Tevers’ heartbeat raced suddenly. What might this little secret be? Might she be attracted to an older man?

Miss Pearson sat in the chair he offered, lifted the album’s cover. Affixed to black paper with old-fashioned square corners were faded photographs, underneath each in gold handwriting, a line of names. Flappers in beaded dresses. Formally attired old men. Ladies in high lace collars. A smiling couple amid a crowd, under a banner that read JOHN F. KENNEDY INAUGURATION. A barbershop quartet, their sleeves gartered. Photos with straight or scalloped edges. Vintage postcards, some with prices on them; others, Mr. Tevers assumed, with scribbled greetings on the back.

“I’m going to have a family one day, but until then I have these. It makes me feel better. I’m not ashamed to say, I lost my parents when I was three. I got tossed around foster care after that. Never adopted.”

“How’s that possible, a pretty girl such as yourself?”

“I fear it had something to do with me. My temperament, perhaps.” Miss Pearson’s gaze flitted into his. “You must think this silly.”

The sensation of the tear was supplanted by a prickly heat. The moment had become too personal; she seemed desperate. Around them, staff filtered out of the office for the long weekend. “No, not in the slightest.” The way her face soured and she clutched her hands in front of her on the table, he knew his words had not convinced her.

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Saturday, Mr. Tevers allowed himself to arrive at the office late. He didn't really need to come in at all, but had volunteered because he required something to do. At lunch he sat at the bar at Richmond's. He drank a martini, a thing he'd never done. He left early, informing an eager young woman he had an important errand to attend to. At the subway, he marched in the door where the sign read NO ADMITTANCE, telling himself in bold deeds something abides.

At home, he stripped to his boxers soon as he was through the door. None of his usual diversions seemed of merit, not the history of Cleopatra he was close to finishing, not the early period Miles Davis CDs, the Stravinsky string quartets. Not cable news. He was saddled with the suddenly difficult question: What happens next?

Sunday, he didn't bother letting the office know he wasn't coming in as planned. On the way to the golf course, the pennants waving wildly at an antique store caught his eye.

He allowed a group of young hotshots to play through on the difficult hole by the water trap. He wondered at the number of balls wasted under its shimmering surface and decided he hated secrets.

At the 19th Hole, a martini sounded good and soon Mr. Tevers had another. The hotshots noisily burst through the door, their hair slicked from showering. One of them split from the group and took a stool next to him at the bar. The young man ordered four beers and one of whatever Mr. Tevers was drinking, turning to say it was awesome of Mr. Tevers to let his group

play through. At a table behind them, the young man's friends didn't so much speak as sing, their voices modulating up and down the scales, notes punctuated by laughter. They recounted recent successes—grad school acceptances, friends' marriages, summer vacations.

Beer bottles laced between his fingers, the young man rose to join his friends. A woman approached. Their long embrace became a lascivious kiss. The hotshots' whistling and catcalls unlatched the couple, and Mr. Tevers thought he heard the young woman say, "I was afraid we weren't going to work out. You must think this silly."

At this, he saw in his mind Miss Pearson clasp her hands. His agitation built and so he called for another martini. After the fifth, the bartender ordered Mr. Tevers to leave, saying he'd need to bring his conduct up with management, who'd probably refer it to the membership committee. A series of events—the faucet at the bar screaming like a little girl; the hotshots' preening; the heat through the windows reminding him of sand on his skin, of summer family vacations; the maudlin predictability of his remembering—had caused Mr. Tevers to swing at the young man and scream **YOU ENTITLED BRAT!**

On the way home, Mr. Tevers ordered the cabdriver to pull into the antique store parking lot. Inside, he hastily ruffled through trays of vintage postcards, snatched five with people smiling from their covers. In the backseat of the cab with a pen the driver lent him, Mr. Tevers jerkily wrote from his dead mother: *Every day, son, you say you're going to be good and then you're not.*

On another he scribbled from his sister: *Instead of my usual blah blah blah, I just want to say, one day I will forgive you.* Two he assigned to strangers: *Wish you were here, having a lovely time.* When, on a whim, he addressed the last from Miss Pearson, he felt again that tear on

his cheek from the office. He tried to brush it away, but it was permanent now, like a mole, like a birthmark.