

A Gentleman Caller

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The rain was starting to pool under the door. Chrissie sighed and looked away. 4am. She would clean it up at the end of her shift. Or maybe leave it for that bitch Henrietta, who would inevitably show up late. The diner's neon light buzzed gently; the only other sound was the crackle of a fly kamikazeing into the UV lamp.

She would get soaked walking home and her mother would roll her eyes and say "can't see why you don't get a normal job like other kids your age". The money was good. Few were tempted by a five night graveyard shift, but it suited Chrissie. She liked to live quietly.

Though she usually felt people before she saw them, the man had almost reached the counter before she glanced up and emitted an awkward sounding cry.

"Oh goodness, I *am* sorry; I didn't mean to frighten you".

He was well dressed. Early 50's maybe, though his face betrayed a worry that slightly aged him. She smiled weakly; glanced at the door to see if the bell had stuck. It hadn't.

"Guess, I'm a million miles away"

She moved closer to the counter.

"What can I get you?"

"Tea, please"

He wiped raindrops from his overcoat and sat on the counter swivel stool.

"Is it always this quiet in here?"

She glanced up from under the counter, holding an icy cold milk bottle.

"Quiet? Whadda ye mean? Business is up 100% tonight"

He chuckled cordially.

"Sugar?"

"No, thank you. As my daughter would say, I'm sweet enough"

She smiled quickly. Like she hadn't heard that a million times before.

"Do you always work late?"

"No, I'm an accountant. Very much 9-5 but I had some business this evening and it took a lot longer than anticipated. I should really be exhausted, but I find myself very much awake. Wide awake"

She was unsure of his tone.

"Yeah I get like that sometimes"

He smiled and sipped his tea. Grunted an appreciative “mmm”
He glanced around. Spotted the gaudy jukebox in the corner.
“My goodness, it’s been a while since I saw one of those. May I?”
“Sure, that’s what it’s there for”.

He strolled over, flipping through the CD selection.
“Any requests?”

Drink your tea and leave, she thought.

“Something old” she shrugged.

He nodded.

“The old ones are the best ones”

“My brother is a lot older than me so I grew up listening to them.

Guess they sorta stuck with me”

The man suddenly stiffened. Looked listlessly at her before pushing some coins into the slot.

“Indeed” he muttered.

The gentle lilt of Marvin Gaye filled the small corner of the diner.
Waned as he walked away. She nodded.

“Good choice”

He sat at the counter and cupped the steaming mug. As he leaned forward, his coat listed to one side. It was only later that Chrissie realised that she shouldn’t have made the double take so obvious.

She took a step back. Hands upon the cold grill. He glanced down and frowned.

“Oh. I’m sorry. You didn’t need to see that”

She gulped, willing herself to act composed.

“See what?”

He smirked.

“I may as well take it out now.”

Her mouth fell open. He waved a hand.

“Oh no, don’t be frightened. Please...” His eyes flicked over her name tag.

“Chrissie. That’s a nice name. Don’t let this scare you Chrissie. I’m an old man and I just keep it on me for protection.”

“We don’t have much money in the till but it’s yours”

He shook his head forcefully. Took the knife out of his coat and placed it on the counter.

“Here look, take it. Honestly, I’m not here to rob you.” His eyes pleaded with hers. She stole a look at the knife. Christ it was ugly. Not very long but

serated and sharp. Razor sharp. There was a dark brown sheen on it. The blood pounded in her temples, screaming at her. He held his hands up.

“Look, I’ll just leave, I’m sorry”

He backed the stool out and buttoned up his coat. She hesitated. Looked out at the pouring rain.

“It’s ok. Please. Finish your tea”

He didn’t move. Studied her face. She softened. Swept a hand over the stool.

“Please”

He sat back down. Blew the steam off the hot liquid. They sat in silence for a few minutes. She busied herself with unnecessary tasks. Stopped when she caught him looking at her. He blushed.

“I’m sorry to stare, it’s just...you have the very same colouring as my daughter”

He took out his wallet. Pulled a worn passport photo from the clear sleeve. She studied it closely.

“She does look like me”

“Did. Did look like you”

She looked up at him. The question burned on her lips. She wondered whether to ask it.

“In fact, the, eh, business I had tonight was to do with her death.”

She leaned forward, morbidly curious. “What happened?”

He simultaneously frowned and coughed a laugh. “It’s a strange story. You probably won’t believe it. I find it hard to believe myself, truth be told”

She down sat across from him.

“Try me”.

He leaned back and rubbed his hands on his trousers.

“Well. I suppose it all began a year ago, when my sister in law came to stay with us for a few days. She’s a lawyer in Vermont and well, I don’t think I’m wrong in saying that she liked to live extravagantly. My wife, Eedy, wouldn’t have much interest in clothes and what not, but her sister took her out a couple of times and bought her some real fine things. Things that we couldn’t have afforded in a month of Sundays”

Chrissie nodded, urging him on.

“Well anyhow, once her sister left, Eedy suddenly started to go out more. To be honest, I didn’t even notice her little trips and wouldn’t have paid any heed if it wasn’t for my friend Allan calling from the bank. He’s the assistant manager. Swell guy. Known him for years. So he calls me up and asks, friendly like, if I’ve come into some money recently. I gotta tell you, it

threw me a little. I told him that no, much as I would have welcomed a few pennies from heaven, I most certainly had not.

So he ummed and aawed and eventually I got out of him that my wife had been spending money like it was going out of fashion”

He snorted.

“Which is funny considering it was going *into* fashion. In one month she had almost ruined us. We had been married 16 years and it was a shock, you know”

Chrissie nodded fiercely, hooked on his words.

“So we had it out and she swore she would stop and then I cried and then she cried and I really thought that was the end of it.”

He lowered his eyes.

“Course when you have an addiction, you might as well whistle Dixie then stand there, hand on heart and swear it will never happen again. Knowing that there wasn’t much in our kitty, she decided to seek funding elsewhere. In hindsight, I shoulda known. Shoulda noticed the new things or seen the secret in her eyes. But I’ll just blame that on my gender for now. So she worked herself up a nice big loan, close to \$14,000. And when payday came and went, her financiers decided to pay her a little visit. They came during the day, when I was at work.”

His voice became weak. He cleared his throat.

“They brought my 14 yr old daughter into the living room and made my wife watch as they raped her over the course of 3 hours”

Chrissie’s hand flew to her mouth. He ran a hand through his hair, still looking at the floor.

“They told her to have the money in a week. When I came home from work, I asked why Lana was so quiet”

A cry gushed from his mouth. He bit his knuckle quickly leaving visible teethmarks. Chrissie put a hand out to steady him.

“Sorry. She never told. She loved her mother so much. Too much, in the end”

He looked up at Chrissie, his eyes empty and forlorn.

“Yesterday the loan shark walked into my house and slit my daughter’s throat. Then he carved his initials into...into her beautiful face”

He touched his own cheek. Tracing the letters. His face darkened slowly, the rage rising quietly.

“And just for kicks, he raped her again.”

He looked at the knife.

“With this”

Chrissie sat back slowly. Tears burned.

“Jesus Christ”

“So once my wife had stopped screaming and I found out where this guy lived, I went straight there. I don’t own a fire arm or any kind of weapon really, so I just took that. It was me but it wasn’t really me. Like I was watching someone else. I found his house and I didn’t wait, I just barged right in there. He was alone, which I suppose is lucky really. When he saw the knife, he knew who I was. He seemed very afraid, which I found strange at the time as I’ve never thought of myself as menacing looking, though to be honest, I imagine I appeared quite hysterical. At first I wanted to stick it right through his heart, then a sort of calm came over me. Both terrible and glorious. I sat down. And then I spent a very long time making that man suffer things that no human or animal should endure.

Chrissie’s eyes widened. He waved a hand

“Oh I won’t upset you with details. I have a small hope that any memory of this evening’s events shall fade, but I’m a realist, Chrissie, and I’m fairly certain that what remained of his face will stay in my head for a very long time.

He sipped his tea.

“Oh. It’s cold. Never mind. I’m nearly finished here anyway. I did a very bad thing tonight, but you do realise that I had no choice. You can see why I did it can’t you?”

Her body tensed.

“Well, eh sure. Sure”

He nodded. Then shook his head.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Chrissie, but I’m afraid that my task is not yet completed.”

She regarded him curiously. He sighed.

“You see, just before I killed your brother, I swore to him that I would kill his entire family. Granted, it took me a good ten minutes of slicing and dicing before he gave up your location, I was a little disappointed that he caved so easily. But then that’s the way with selfish people. They only want what’s best for themselves.”

Chrissie stood pinned against the fridge. Large tears streamed down her face, blotting her heavy mascara.

He sighed and picked up the knife.

“I’m so very sorry. I’ll be as quick as I can. It’s just, well, I made a promise, Chrissie.

And I’ve always been a man who kept his promises.”