

## Story 13 – Seeing Red

I can't believe my girlfriend Tania won't make breakfast. And what do you know, there's nothing in the fridge. She doesn't have a job and I do but somehow she can't go shopping. There's nothing in the kitchen but corn flakes, eggs, potatoes, Tillamook extra-sharp cheddar cheese, tropical crab salad, and cat food. And the cat won't eat the cat food—he wants the good stuff. Ah, tropical crab salad. What the fuck does that even mean? She said she wanted to make my lunches more exciting; a tropical crab salad with cheese, but not just any cheese, that fancy Tillamook stuff we can't afford. I told her it was a needless expense but all she did was get mad at me and go back to bed. All she does is sleep in bed all day.

She says she thinks she's depressed. She says maybe she wouldn't be if she had a baby. I say how could we have a baby when we can't even afford to take care of the cat? She'll turn away from me and continue her upset routine but can't argue with me since the cat was her plan, not mine. I didn't even want the cat. Don't get me wrong, I like animals. But I wasn't trying to have a cat. She said we should get a cat to get practice for when we have kids some day. I have no idea why she assumed we'd have kids. *I* never said anything about wanting kids. I just liked *her*. She used to be fun.

I met her when I was going out to the swing dances, dressing in my best black jeans and Hawaiian-style dressy shirts. She was a looker: some red-blond Russian, part Scottish from her mother's side, all little freckles and a great big smile. Now look at her—just a lump in the bed. She said she hates this apartment. I say we could afford a better one if she'd get her lazy butt off to a job. She says I should show more ambition at my job so I could get promoted. I say she has no clue how my job works. She's hardly ever worked in her whole life. She's in and out of her parents' house and gets daddy to buy her things.

All this baby talk started after I took her to see my family for Thanksgiving—like a time bomb in her, or an ambush. I was just taking her for good times, and because I know most of her family is back in Russia, and I thought she should see how we Americans do holidays. Then all of a sudden after dinner, as I'm trying to get some sleep in the rusty old bed my grandma Nadine laid out, she launched into this whole ambush about babies, human eggs with a shelf life in ovaries, and all this other nonsense. I had nightmares where shelves in her ovaries were falling on me! And I could hardly sleep anyway with all the noise in the next room, and all because my uncle Sea met some crazy woman.

Uncle Shay O'Shay was a staunch Christian his whole life. He founded the chess club and the book club at his high school and worked as an accountant for Fred Meyer's Grocers in Scappoose, easily the most boring place he could have found the most boring job. Then next thing I know he had to go for some kind of corporate training in Colorado

and he came back with this crazy woman. Kashmiria Chance, if that is her real name. Some freelance Astrologer, as if that's a job, who said she was a Gemini with a Sagittarius rising and a Cancer moon, whatever the fuck that's supposed to mean! She said she was "40-everything" with a fake little laugh, tried to read peoples' palms—as if soft flesh is the window to the soul—and she claimed to be a natural redhead, as if we couldn't all tell it was dyed. I thought she might be after his hard-earned savings and investments but there was no talking to him about it; he was crazy about her. He'd run off and married her in Las Vegas without even talking to his mom. And Vegas of all places?! A Place he'd always said was riddled with horrible sin! I couldn't say anything to Grandma about it either because although she really didn't like this "Kashmiria Chance" she was just thrilled that at 49 her son was finally married to someone—and to a *woman* someone!

After dinner they were up all night doing god or the devil only knows what the holy hell! It was like sleeping next to some kinky zoo for the shit I overheard. I had them on one side of the room barking and howling and Tania on the other side of me whining about eggs on shelves. I had my head shoved between two pillows, trying desperately to sleep, while thinking, "Great! Now even my uncle Shea has a better sex life than I do!"

And my stomach hurt after all the liter-fluid barbecue I had to eat off my uncle Bob to keep him happy, and all the beer and whisky I'd had to drink just to stand being in a houseful of small, screaming, out of control little brats all day—for Christ's sake, you'd think if all these crazy women were so nuts about having kids they'd actually take the time to raise them right once they had them! All they do is let them run around screaming and reward bad behavior by coddling kids when they cry to get their way. These women and their kids deserve a smack! I'll bet Tania's mom coddled her when she acted up to get her way. That's why she thinks I'll break. But no, oh no. She better get her ass up out of that bed. I am not giving in, damn it!

I've told her, "We can't have a baby, we can't even afford to feed the damn cat!" I always go back to the cat because she wanted to get this cat as a test and I think she hasn't passed the test. I have. I'm here in the kitchen feeding the cat—tropical crab salad and Tillamook cheese sine he won't eat cat food and I won't eat whatever the fuck is in this salad. I'll go to Burgerville for lunch.

I've taken to strictly controlling the condoms. Most women can't be trusted with birth control; they could sabotage a condom with one little pinprick and destroy the whole fucking rest of your life. And give a kid a bad life—it's not as if we could give it a good life. We can't even make each other or ourselves happy for crying out loud here! They'd do it for revenge, do it to live off welfare and be on their lazy asses for life. What do most women know about having to work and earn money for a living? Nothing. There are some women. Women like my mom. She did double-shifts at the restaurant the whole time I was in school. When I wanted video games, new jeans, or some dumb shit like that I'd get a job and pay for it myself. What else would I do? Make her get a weekend job? No fuckin'

way. Most of the kids at school just took it all for granted, and their parents let them, but not mine. I leave the condoms in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, not the nightstand by the bed. What she doesn't know is that those are only the decoy condoms. The real condoms are hidden in the back of a bathroom cabinet, behind shaving cream and other men's crap she never looks at. I know better than to trust my whole life and future to some crazy nut job female.

Now that breakfast is over I think I'll leave my dishes in the sink. If her highness gets off her lazy ass today maybe she'll wash them. I shouldn't have to. I shouldn't have to feed the cat, but I do. I'm the one paying for everything around here; rent, electricity, water and sewer, food, two cell phones, and the goddamn cable TV with the Lifetime network—*television for idiots!*—that she watches and cries about. Jesus-fucking-Christ woman! I thought Russians were supposed to be tough! I used to work with a Russian—he hit his knees with a rubber mallet until they were bruised so he could sue the company for personal injury and negligence. He was tough, and damn smart too. No one else had seen him do it, and I wasn't going to report it. Fuck the company! Those bastards would pay us nothing if they could. I can't stand it in this apartment with the way she behaves. After breakfast I brush my teeth quickly then just get out of the apartment. I showered yesterday and I don't really need to be clean-shaven for my job. And it's not as if I need to look cleaned-up to go out dancing tonight. We haven't gone anywhere in months!

I leave the cat in her care, hoping it won't go the whole rest of the day without food or fresh water, but know it probably will. I walk outside, hop into my truck, and drive off to work through rundown suburbia. It's not really suburbia, which is a real, interesting city center's vomit. We live beyond suburbia, but not in farmlands, sort of in the vomit of the vomit. Otherwise known as Gresham, Oregon. I drive by a place called Holly View. When I was a kid it was full of pretty holly trees. I collected them for my mom for Christmas. Now it's all paved over.

I hate my job but love the distraction of work. Ah work with the guys; I look around and see Dan, Charlie, and... where's Julio, the new guy? He's not that new, actually, he was here before us, that's why he was in charge of us. But he was new to our group, and gave us all the chance to work together. There's some new guy in his trailer.

"Hey, who are you? Where's Julio?" I say, friendly enough.

"Management fired him. I'll be managing this place now."

"Uh... you look a bit clean to work in a place like this. Do you really know what you'll be doing here?" I say, less friendly.

"Yeah. I'll be managing while all of you do your jobs. I shouldn't have to get dirty if you all..."

Why has this asshole stopped talking? If I could just start a fight and get him to hit me I could sue the company. What the hell is he looking at? There's just a dad and two daughters coming in to drop off yard trimmings.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

"Work to do in my trailer!" he says and rushes off, slamming the door behind him. I park my truck next to the guys' and walk over to the little kiosk we call "the toll booth".

"Hey, Charlie, what's with the new guy? I was just trying to pick a bone with him about Julio and he acted afraid of that daddy and daughters coming in.

"Yeah, Kelly, it's 'cuz they had all those red trimmings."

"What?!"

"You know, red rhododendrons and roses. I've seen it every time a red truck or red trailer comes through here. The guy is afraid of the color red."

"Uh..." I start and we just laugh our asses off. "What a wimp-ass excuse for a fear!"

"Yeah, I know."

"Only some little bookkeeper wimp-ass like that guy would have such a weak little fear. And have you talked to him? Apparently he thinks we're just a bunch of minions at his disposal."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Hey, you know what?"

"What?"

"We need to treat this guy to a special welcome."

"What you gettin' at?"

"Meet me at my truck for lunch."

"Your truck? That heap a junk? We'll take my truck."

"Okay..." I say and we spend the day processing yard debris; cement with cement, gravel with gravel, wood with wood, loose yard debris like leaves with... well, I know it doesn't sound complicated, but somehow all these idiots that come in here can't figure it out.

At lunch we drive to the nearest Burgerville. They have burgers with local Oregon beef and seasonal blackberry shakes sourced by local farmers—you gotta' love it. Then we go to Ace Hardware in the dingy Powell Villa strip mall. Charlie still doesn't know what we're doing. When we walk in I say to the grizzled female clerk, "Give me all the cans of red paint you've got," and he just starts laughing hysterically. We pick up three brushes as well.

When we get back to work we take advantage of the fact it's a slow day and the little bookkeeper asshole stays in the trailer with all the windows and blinds closed. Between jobs the three of us work in unison painting the whole white trailer red. Our work is sloppy, the paint laid on in globs, and we rush as fast as we can. A couple of times one

of us has to run off to tend to a customer but then we run right back to this all-important job.

Once we're done we rush to hide all the cans of red paint and the brushes in the shopping bags then hide them in the back of my truck, since it is the worst for wear. Then we run to the hose and wash off all the red. We look each other's clothes up and down and we've managed to keep all the paint off us. We've spent summers painting together before, to pay for high school, so we knew what we were at. Then we return to work. Later Dan finds some tar in one of the loads and adds a note in black to the trailer, using non-descript hand-printing rather than handwriting. He writes, "Julio has a wife and kid a—holes," and we all quietly applaud. He doesn't write the 'a word' out since sometimes dads take their kids in here, and some people still have a little decency.

The little wimp-ass doesn't leave his trailer until five minutes after closing. We're all waiting in our trucks, ready to leave. When he comes out he looks around at how tidy the place looks and smiles, then slowly he starts to turn around and there it is—*he screams!* Fuckin' little wimp-ass. He actually screams. In horror! And we all just sit in our trucks laughing our asses off, smiling and waving at him as, one by one, we honk our horns and leave. And it's perfect because he can't do anything. If only one of us did it they'd just fire him, but we all did it. They can't fire their whole workforce. They'd have to hire and train three new guys who all have two years' experience. No way would management do that. They're idiots but they're not morons.

The guys and I stop at the first light and all laugh our guts out. We miss a green light on purpose to make sure we wait until we're safe to drive. Without a word we all know where we're going—to Julio's to pick him up and take him out for a drink.

When we reach his house by the train tracks the street walkers are already out and they are nothing like what you see in movies. They wear denim shorts, tops that make them look like middle-aged moms stealing their trampy-looking teenage daughters' clothes, and their hair is fried and ragged to go with their overall haggardness. The guys and I all look at each other and cringe as we cross the street and go banging on Julio's door.

He says he can't go; he's got his little baby girl in his arms and his wife is at work. They've flipped her to the night shift at the grocery store again. They flip her schedule every two weeks or so. She says it's a mind-control tactic and a way of keeping her from ever being able to look for another job, go back to beauty school, have steady arrangements with a babysitter, or anything else. He says they've had no choice but to let her crack-addict sister watch the baby sometimes.

We know what we have to do—we make a beer run to the nearest liquor store and bring the party back to Julio. We stay up drinking and talking about the good times, mostly back in high school. Like the time we hopped a train to Washington. We had to wait hours in the rain before it moved but Jenna kept insisting. She had such wanderlust—she

wanted to go everywhere. She said we should have sex before I said it. She loved adventure. I'm not afraid to say I loved every day with her. She grew up in the next county over, hunting and fishing with her dad. Always the tomboy, the only girl that ever made it into our group, but our world just wasn't big enough for her. She had joined the Navy last I heard.

A few hours later we're all good and drunk. We forget how bad we feel and throw beer bottles at the train tracks and laugh as they shatter. Then we realize we're too drunk to drive home so we take our places on the thrift store living room furniture.

The next day I wake up early as usual then wake up the guys. We know Julio's wife Maretta won't like it if we're here during breakfast. She doesn't mind if we visit but meal time is family time. We don't mind Maretta, she works hard. And after the one baby Julio said she said no more. She got some female birth control, an implant or something. And that was that. No more babies. This didn't leave her sterile. They could have more later if they had the money. But she won't let her kids grow up in poverty like she and Julio did, in families raising eight and 10 Catholic babies on little food and no hope of education or a better life. I know they went to an abortion clinic before but they just couldn't do it. We all respect Maretta, she's a strong and practical woman. So what she says goes in her household, and what she says doesn't go doesn't.

In the wee hours, the pre-dawn, before the traffic gets heavy we make our way back to our trucks and drive home. When I get back home the bed is empty. Tania's gone. I check the closet. Her stuff is gone. I check the dresser by the bed, the dresser across the room, the dresser in the hall, and the bathroom. *All* of her stuff is gone. "Oh thank god!" I say out loud. I'm thrilled all her crap is gone. I can't help but remember Jenna and how little she owned. And she kept it all packed in suitcases, ever since she was a small child. "So I'm ready to go as soon as I get the chance!" she'd say. She wanted to travel more than anything. To experience everything, she'd say. I can't blame her. I couldn't have given her much of a life.

The cat is still here. Tania always called him No Dot. She named the kittens in his litter for the white dots against their black fur: One Dot, Two Dot, Half Dot, No Dot, and I named Ocelot, because he looked like some kind of pygmy ocelot. I always hated those other damn names. What kind of stupid names are those, even for pets?!

"Hmmm... what kind of pet do you look like? Not a Spot. Spot's are dogs, except for Data's cat in *Star Trek: TNG*," I say and pick him up. "Hmm, you could be a... I don't know. Jester. Why not?" I say. "You're always funny about how you sneak food from everyone and everywhere." He doesn't object. I shrug my shoulders and go to the kitchen. The dishes are still in the sink. "Fuckin' lazy selfish bitch," I mutter under my breath but the cat seems to sense I'm in a bad mood. I stop myself. I don't want the cat to grow afraid.

I remember how our dog would cower when I was a kid. How my dad would kick him. Just an innocent little dog. How I'd push him aside so he couldn't get hit, and how my

mom would stand in front of me and take the punches. It went on like that for years, until the day I just ran off. I got a gun Jenna's dad kept in his garage, behind three toolboxes and under a small leather tarp. The leather was always clean and lightly oiled. They said it kept the dust out of the gun. I ran back home through the back gate and shot the bastard. There he was standing over my mom, her nose bloody, her lip torn, her skirt in shreds as she pulled it down to cover herself. He was so damn smug. I really let him have it. Every shot till the gun was empty. Jenna came running and only then did she find out the truth—what my family was really like. Why I didn't have a baby brother anymore. She stood there shocked, but only for a moment. She was always too smart for us regular working class folk. She grabbed the rifle and hid it under my mom's jacket as she grabbed it from a kitchen chair. She said, "Tell them someone broke in and did this, and scrub your hands—they'll have powder on them," then she ran out of sight. We told the police the story she'd made up for us on the spot. They were a little suspicious but couldn't prove anything, and I doubt they wanted to.

Later I met up with her in the 70-foot Doug fir in her backyard and we whispered about it. She said her dad knew but not her mom or her siblings. They'd driven back out to Clackamas County and hidden the gun in some swamp somewhere. "No one will ever find it where I hid it," she said and smiled. She said she and her dad had come back with fish. No one would ever know. She kissed me then climbed off to the tree house. She opened the treasure chest where we used to hide comic books, or *Playboys* and *Playgirls*, and pulled out some condoms. I became a man that week, twice. But I wonder about me, being built into manhood off a shaky foundation. My mom did her best. But she was always working, shell-shocked, smoking all the time to calm her nerves. I guess that's why she got cancer. Some people smoke all their lives and it never hits them. I guess some people are just susceptible. Stress. Nobody needs it. We could all do without stress.

None of this has anything to do with surviving today though. So I make some coffee, fry some eggs, wash the damn dishes in the sink so I can use them, and put some tropical crab salad in the bowl for Jester. I feel my face and think about how badly I need a shave. I didn't bother shaving yesterday. I'd just wanted so badly to get out of the apartment and away from Little Miss Swirling Vortex of Totally Self-Centered Negativity. As if she were the only person in the entire world suffering. It's so funny how the people who have it the easiest whine the most.

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