

## **You'll Have to Learn to Love Me the Way I Love You**

The 1-pound bulk bagged candies looked impeccable. They were color coordinated to have an alternating silver wrap, gold wrap, silver wrap pattern. All the red wrapped candies were placed on the end, closest to the checkout counter. Frank felt a tingle go up his leg.

The 1-pound bulk bagged candy display was a monument to perfect merchandising.

He took a notebook out of his jacket pocket and jotted some observations down-

*Attractive silver/gold pattern*

*Specialty colors (red) closest to register. This encourages impulse buying at checkout.*

*The potato chips are*

Frank narrowed his eyes at the chips. They were adjacent to the feminine hygiene aisle. This was an unfortunate move. He conducted numerous interviews with extremely well regarded merchandising managers over the past three years about the terrible idea of

merchandising junk food near the feminine hygiene products. It was just an unsavory practice. You don't do it. In fact, he wrote a respectable article only two months ago about the doubling of potato chip sales when they are merchandised adjacent to the magazines. As an additional tip for the article sidebar, he noted that if you put the video

game magazines closest to the potato chips there is an additional 2% increase in chip sales over the duration of a fiscal quarter.

*PharmRetail*, the Northeast's largest trade magazine for retail pharmacy stores, provided Frank with most of his freelance income since he graduated with a degree in communications from Monmouth University. The pay kept his electricity on and his live in girlfriend, Kathleen, from putting a pillow over his face while he slept. That last part he might have been paranoid about. But the thought occurred to him regularly.

He had an article due in two days- **The Aesthetic Pleasures of the M&M** – and that was why he was standing inside a CVS at 1 a.m. after thirteen inches of snow accumulated on the ground over the course of the previous day. He looked out past the sliding doors and noticed his Civic was one of only three cars in the lot. A nagging guilt began to creep between his ears.

The cashier was watching Frank the entire time.

“Can I help you with anything, sir?”

“No. I'm just looking around.”

“I know. But you've been here for an hour.”

Frank looked at his watch. He looked at his notebook. He looked at the cashier.

“Have you been held up before or something, kid?”

The seventeen year old behind the counter visibly trembled as he thought about Frank's question. The peach fuzz on his face began to gather sweat.

“Look, man. There's like a hundred bucks in here. That's it. I'll just give it you. I won't call the cops. All right? Be cool.”

“I’m not looking to rob you! I was just asking you a question because you seemed nervous. I’m a journalist. Have you ever read *PharmRetail?*”

The cashier’s eyes widened and his mouth hung open. The pupils weren’t focusing on Frank. In fact, they were rather dilated. He was positively blazed. He hadn’t thought anyone would actually be coming to shop tonight in the aftermath of one of the strongest blizzards to strike the Delaware Valley in some time.

Frank and the cashier stared at one another for thirty seconds stretched out to infinity. Without a word, he tucked his notebook away and stepped through the sliding doors. Straggling snow continued to lazily drift down.

Kathleen sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor; perfectly in the center of all the furniture she pushed against the walls. Her explanation for when she did this, which was often, was that when she was getting ready to paint she needed an open space. Since they lived in a sixth floor apartment not much larger than the dorm rooms they spent too many years in, open space meant five feet of carpet. The couch, the recliner that wouldn’t recline and the TV on wheels obstructed the act of artistic thoughts physically entering her mind from the atmosphere.

She also burned a hole in the beige carpet with a cigarette that afternoon near the kitchen wall that she did not want Frank to see. The couch covered it perfectly.

Watercolors hung all over every wall, some framed and some sloppily thumb tacked. They were all portraits of people she knew. More than one was of Frank. Her specialty was watercolor portraits that showed different anatomical layers of the face.

The left quarter was normal looking and as the portrait continued to the right, the face was skinned to be muscle, then nerves and finally bone.

Frank said it was creepy. But who was he to question the Muse?

Kathleen scrolled through her text messages, reading two in particular over and over again. She was doing this for an hour after Frank said he was running over to CVS. She had taken to absent mindedly twirling the cell phone on the floor when Frank walked through the door at 1:30. He looked at her. No, he looked past her.

She looked up directly at him and bit her lip.

“Did you burn something?”

The next morning Frank sat at the tiny hand-me-down kitchen table, poking at his bowl of MultiBran. Kathleen was lying on her belly on the carpet, the furniture still at the perimeter, looking at her laptop. The previous night was spent screaming and sleepless.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me,” said Frank.

“I’m not doing this to you. This is happening to both of us. I need you to believe I’m feeling incredible pain as well.”

“No. Absolutely not. You are not going to convince me our levels of pain are equal. You told me you’re moving out. Last night. Hours ago. And you already have someone else.”

Kathleen chewed mindlessly on invisible gum in her mouth as she looked over the article she pulled up.

“I think I have Histrionic Personality Disorder,” she said.

“I’m not letting you do this. Don’t change the subject. And don’t you dare try and blame this on some psychobabble crap you diagnosed yourself with from the Internet.”

“I have all of these characteristics. Just look. My parents didn’t give me enough positive reinforcement as a child. See? Mixed messages are a major catalyst.”

Frank got up and emptied the cereal into the sink.

“Last week, you were positive you were neurotic. I could live with that. Generalities are easy to work around.”

“That’s too broad. I needed to pinpoint what was really wrong with me and now I truly believe I have.”

Frank flipped the switch over the sink and let the disposal run. The cereal disintegrated immediately, but he let it continue. He let it run and allowed himself to get lost in the humming. The mechanical whirl filled his ears, his mind and all the crevices of his being not preoccupied with Kathleen and her anonymous lover.

“What’s his name?” he asked.

Kathleen logged off and turned to Frank.

“What? I can’t hear anything over the garbage disposal.”

Frank turned it off and slowly closed his eyes. The humming remained.

“What is his name?”

“Duane.”

He gripped the sink as hard as he could till his fingertips went white.

“Duane?”

“Yes. Duane.”

“You’re leaving me for a guy named Duane. What did I ever do to you to make you want to hurt me this badly?”

“You’re being ridiculous! Frank, a major part of our lives is changing and you’re ripping your hair out over a man’s name.”

“I have pride.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“What does Duane do? Is he an accountant? Is he partially balding? Yes, I’m sure he is. I’m sure he’s partially balding with a gut. He’s a mayonnaise looking accountant that you’re too attractive for. But oh, he’s so sweet. So kind. And funny! Jesus Christ, is Duane funny. Probably a great self-deprecating kind of humor.”

“You...you’re awful.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“Duane’s actually a stock broker.”

Frank backed away from the sink, his hands going up like it just pulled a gun on him. He dramatically threw himself back into his chair at the table and rested his chin on his palm. Kathleen calmly closed her laptop and sat up, folding her arms around her

knees and bringing them up to her face. Her dyed red hair drooped over her features aged beyond their years. She managed to fold her tiny frame into something even smaller.

“I can’t understand this,” Frank said. “It’s just so sudden. You’ve given no indication. Can you sympathize at all? Like, how this must all sound to me?”

“This has been brewing for awhile. You’ve known about it.”

“I knew you had a friend. And he happened to be a man. And you met for drinks sometimes. But, I’m not going to tell you who you can or can’t hang out with. You’re an equal.”

Kathleen crawled over to the TV set and rummaged through the shelf in the wheeled table underneath.

“I appreciate you being the modern, sensitive man. But, can’t you see how unfulfilling that is? To have a partner who just accepts whatever you do? Never puts up a fight? I feel like you’re so unaffected by everything, you wouldn’t even care if I left. Get angry once in awhile.”

She produced an envelope from all the clutter and thumbed through the photographs inside. Frank’s hand was making its way from his chin, over his mouth, pulling his nose into his eyes and finally tugging at his hair.

“I’m sorry, Frank. The signs have been obvious. We haven’t had sex in months. You go to sleep and I’m not home yet. I can’t make you see.”

“But we’ve both been working so hard. You have your painting and I…”

“You don’t have much. Where’s the novel? The big novel? The one you were working on when I met you seven years ago? You were the most popular writer on campus. You were supposed to be huge!”

“These things take time. It’s my magnum opus. The research alone has taken years.”

“I’m done waiting, Frank. I’m done being with somebody who isn’t going anywhere.”

Kathleen got up off the floor and sat across from Frank at the table. He looked past her head, taking in the watercolors, the ugly modernist trinkets and the peeling paint on the walls. The TV was too old. The kitchen tiles looked dirty. Everything screamed “First- apartment- you- probably- shouldn’t- have- rented- with- your- crazy- girlfriend – when- you’re- broke.” He liked this phrase, and made a mental note of it.

She took the pictures out of the envelope and made a line out of them across the table.

“These are from your first holiday party at Shop Rite,” Frank said.

“Yes. But do you notice anything about the one I’m pointing at?”

He looked down at it. There he was. And there was Kathleen. Her manager was to Frank’s left. On Kathleen’s right side was Mike DeSisto, a cashier that he sort of knew. Kathleen often worked with him. Mike DeSisto’s arm disappeared behind Kathleen and his hand was very obviously on her ass. Frank focused on the invisible hand and then picked his eyes up to look at Kathleen who nodded at him. He looked back down at the picture.

“Come on. Now do you see what I’m saying?” said Kathleen.

Frank pushed the chair away from the table and looked at her in exasperation.

“I didn’t know he was doing that at the time. Sure, it’s very clear in this picture.

But how could I have seen it then?”

“Frank, you knew. You knew Mike was flirty with me. You knew we were pals at work. And at the end of the party, when we were all hammered, he kissed me good night on the neck. In front of you. And you did nothing.”

“Because I respect you. You always had the freedom to do whatever.”

“I wanted you to get jealous over me. For once.”

Frank got up and walked into the bedroom. Her bags were already packed. They were sitting there, waiting. Like children at a bus stop, they looked up at him stupidly as if to say, “What do you want us to tell you, man?” He kicked a suitcase over. Kathleen walked up to the doorway.

“Duane’s going to be here in a half hour. He’s coming up to help me out. He said he doesn’t want you getting violent or trying to stop me.”

Frank laughed a silly laugh directed at himself. Getting violent did not correlate with all the damning evidence she just heaved on him.

“You can stay you know. You don’t have to do this,” he said.

“What?”

“I loved you. Maybe not right now, but I think I could learn to again. I just didn’t love you the way you wanted me to. And you wanted crazed passion, so you chose the bookworm. What a genius you are.”

“Your mind was charming enough for a long time. It loses its charm when the person in possession of it doesn’t care where you disappear off to and can barely make rent.”

Frank slammed the door shut in her face and locked himself inside with her bags. He sat on the bed and thought about lashing out at her. He wanted to ask her how many portraits, exactly, had she sold? And how was being a shift manager at Shop Rite so prestigious that she could judge his accomplishments? But that familiar feeling of guilt began to seep into him again. Angry thoughts subsided, giving way to a nervous surrender that was reached just to make the anxiety go away. Easy living.

Kathleen pounded on the door, yelling about her bags and how Duane would be there any minute. Frank felt around under the bed, feeling for what he knew would set him free. A minute later, there it was. His hands wrapped around slender aluminum. He held the bat he bought to protect the place up to his chest.

The door buzzer screamed.

He heard Kathleen’s footsteps disappear farther off. She was descending the steps to meet Duane at the front door of the building. Frank gripped the bat tighter. He heard two pairs of feet getting closer now. Duane’s voice filled the small living room.

“Kathleen, really. This is exactly what I wanted to avoid. Get him to open that door.”

“Frank, please. Let me get my bags. Just let me go.”

Frank rose from the bed and held the bat in his right arm-his swinging arm. With a deep breath, he unlocked the door and pulled it open. Duane was blocking out the light.

His hair was a bit darker than Frank imagined, but otherwise his mental sketch was pretty good. He gripped the bat in both hands and positioned himself for momentum.

At that moment, Frank's mind split itself and retreated into fantasy while his eyes watched Duane walk right past him and pick up Kathleen's bags.

*He never got past the door. As soon as I opened it, I swung my arms back and slugged the ugly bastard in the face. His teeth sprayed out of his mouth like someone just opened a fire hydrant. Kathleen screamed as Duane went stumbling back into the living room, absolutely shocked.*

Kathleen threw her arms around Frank and whispered something in his ear that he didn't process. She tearfully picked up a small bag that Duane missed and followed him to the door.

*Duane threw up an arm to protect himself, but it was useless. I brought the bat down right onto the top of his head and watched him crumple. Kathleen was screaming for me to stop, but I wouldn't listen. I kept wailing on him. I think I saw his brain. A puddle of blood began to form around his head.*

Duane was already out the door. Kathleen turned to look at Frank one last time. She took all of him in, closed her eyes and shut the door behind her. Frank remained in the bedroom motionless, staring into the living room.

*I gave him one more shot for good measure. Kathleen stopped screaming and began to mutter something.*

*"I'll stay," she said.*

*I took a deep breath and looked at her, cool and calm.*

*“What?” I said.*

*She whimpered sheepishly. I noticed brightness in her eyes as she reached for my face with spectral fingers.*

*“I’ll stay. I’ll stay. I’ll stay.”*