

## Ghosts In The Mind

### Part 1: The Lady In The Sweater

Good ole' dust, faintly flowered in splotches and strands all about the desk and shelves, seemingly spun from the spools no doubt slumbering atop the pine fan blades. It's hard to say if the floor has much, but the desk blushes silky as a virgin in the golden light of the sun setting through Greenery Park. Morty wrangles into his papa's alligator and cherrywood swivel chair. The leather isn't real alligator, but it's worn and relatively silent as Morty adjusts his ass to fit his father's mould. The chair should be thirteen years old now, or thereabouts. It smells of pipe smoke and duck sauce.

Morty pulls his pocketknife from his letterman jacket, and plays with the blade on its hinge. There are two drawers with locks on the desk: top-center junk drawer and bottom-right file drawer. Morty snaps his blade out and presses the tip to the junk drawer's lock. He doesn't push or finagle the blade—no point in scuffing it to the point where the key may no longer fit—he just lingers the blade on the outset of the lock and goes “bpu-kgh” [gun noise] with his mouth. Nothing happens.

Of course nothing happens, he knew damn well nothing would happen, he's just frustrated he doesn't have the key. Morty checks the unlocked available drawers. Top right has condoms and business cards. The business card on top is a plain white cheap stock with yellow type reading “This Way Moving.” It was unassuming, downright ugly in its unassumingness, and hard to read, but it really popped out from its frame of colorful condoms.

Top left drawer is for his father's pipe and tobacco. The bottom left drawer has an umbrella, two tumblers, and a bottle of whiskey. Surprisingly, it isn't Ole' Radiant Whiskey; it's some brand Morty has never heard of, called Egg Timer.

His father's tobacco is smelling a bit musty, so Morty takes out one of his cigarettes and sets a tumbler on the desk for an ashtray. Then, there's a rattled knock on the glass paned door.

“Come in,” Morty says with a cigarette in his mouth.

The door meekly cackles, and a woman gingerly shovels inside the office. Morty first notices her brown hair, its frizzles announced in the golden light, and the way the tips lap upon her beveled breasts, warmly clouded by an argyle sweater vest. A crinkled polo holds her body and long arms firmly. She seems dressed for horseback riding despite her jeans and bouncing hair, which flutters just above the eighth shelf of the wall of books behind her. This told Morty that she is clearly taller than him by at least half a shelf, and this is a big turn on for him. It always bothered him that his wife was his same height to the inch, and he loves it when she wears her hair up in a bun, despite finding the aesthetic of hair blowing and tossing about riveting and sexually inspiring.

The presence of a woman makes Morty dash his cigarette out in the tumbler. It smolders and perfumes in his left eye trapped behind his spectacles, watering it to a wince.

“You're not the movers.”

“No, I’m not,” she affirms, hands clasped in a V over her pelvis, “I’m Victoria Maddit.”

“Okay. Miss? Maddit. Can I help you?”

“Mrs! Victoria Maddit. And, yes, I hope so. May I sit down?”

“Please.” Morty gestures to the uncomfortable wood chair set before the desk.

“Smoke,” she asks? Morty lights her one, and takes a fresh one for himself as well.

“Just promise not to tell my wife.”

“Thank you. I thought you were divorced?”

“I believe you’re referring to my father.”

“That isn’t your name on the door?” Victoria points to the open door. The words, “Private Dick Detective Botch” are stamped upon the glass panel and reading backwards.

“My name, yes. But not my occupation nor office. My father’s. He’s dead now.”

“I won’t tell,” she says, letting her ash fall to the floor.

“About my father?”

“Your wife. That you smoke. Although, I doubt we will ever meet. It shouldn’t come to that.”

“Listen, whatever business you have with my dead father,” Morty takes a long drag, “...I can give you directions to his grave, but really I don’t think I’ll be of much help.”

“Actually,” Victoria hiccups a short drag of her cigarette and scorns at it, “—nasty habit. Actually, you’d be of a great help to me Mr. Botch. You’re perfect, much better than your father.”

Morty slides the tumbler across the desk to Victoria. “That’s an odd thing to say to a grieving son.”

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to offend...”

Morty waves her formality aside and tells her, “It’s fine. I actually liked hearing it. Just, call me Morty.”

“Morty.”

“So, Mrs. Maddit. How am I perfect?”

“Oh, because you look just like your father, only younger, closer to my husband’s age.”

“Had you met my father before?”

“Not in person, but we had an unresolved case together.”

“Well, like I said, I’m not a detective.”

“But you look just like him,” Victoria huffed.

“Perhaps if you had met him, you wouldn’t think so. Trust me, I’ve met him a lot.”

“Please, let me finish. ...My husband! You look just like my husband. It’s why I hired your father, and why we could never meet. My heart couldn’t bear the sight of those tweeded eyebrows, those eyes—his eyes, and that butt chin,” Victoria says trembling like a lovesick high

school sweetheart. Morty rubs his chin, damning him having shaved this morning in attempt to make today the day he got his life back in order.

“The reason I’m here now,” Victoria continues, “is that I have to ignore how I feel. There are pressing matters. You have to come and dance with me. I will pay you of course. Double your father’s monthly fee should cover it. It’s only for one night after all”

“Dance with you? I don’t understand. Are you trying to make your husband jealous or something?”

“My husband is gone.”

“Missing?”

“—or dead. He’s been gone for almost two years now. I had hired your father to find him. But there isn’t time for that anymore. I need him here now, which means, I need you.”

“I don’t know what to say. I didn’t know your husband. I hardly knew my father. I’m here to pack his things for my mother. Bring them to her condo so she can tell me what she wants to keep and what should be junked. To be honest, this isn’t a very good day for me.”

“I see.”

Victoria gets up and walks to the door. She teases the brass knob with her finger. Morty notices her fingernails have scraps of lime green paint, and her thumbnail is split at the center. It’s odd, rich girl like her should afford a manicure. Then Morty realizes that he doesn’t actually know if she’s rich or not, he just assumed it because she’s tall, she smokes, and she’s in distress—three things that really shouldn’t make him think she’s rich.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help,” Morty says in relief that the situation was now resolving without him even having to get out of his chair.

Victoria washes her hand over the knob, and the door smoothly clicks shut before her.

“It’s just, I know that you’re not a detective, but you’re the only one for this case. And I understand that you may have had a rocky relationship with your father, but he was helping me, and now that he’s gone, God rest his soul, you’re the only one who can do it.”

“Mrs. Maddit,” Morty says sympathetically.

“Mr. Botch!”

“Morty.”

“Mr. Botch! You can help me. You’re the only one who can do it.”

“Do what?” (Curiosity kills the Morty-cat.)

“Impersonate my husband. My poor lost husband.”

“Impersonate him?”

“For only one night.”

“I don’t know him! You want me to impersonate him!”

Victoria walks to the desk and lays all her weight through her white pillar arms onto it, pressing her boobs together and tearing up.

“No one knew him. Not like me. He was a very private man. We were very private people, together. And now his father is throwing a party, and if I do not show with my Frederick, a Frederick, I just don’t know what.”

“Don’t,” Morty stammers, “I...Would you like some water?”

Morty shuffles through his pockets for water where there is obviously no water, but really looking for anything to stop the train wreck in front of him. The only liquid in the office he can surmise to be around is the whiskey, a glass of which he would very much like to enjoy but decides he wouldn’t want to share because he’s down a tumbler, plus who knows what will set Victoria off now. There is also the matter of the strange label. It might not even really be whiskey. He thinks he remembers his father telling him he was off the sauce or had slowed down a few years ago. It is unopened for sure, and probably best for it to remain so for the time being, at least until the dust settles again.

“Cigarette,” Victoria peeps between snuffles.

“Of course.” Morty returns to his letter man jacket for his pack, thumbing past his pocketknife.

“If you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” Morty again lights her cigarette with the oversized pewter table lighter, the only thing in the office he had already decided to keep and that would not be making it to his mother’s condo for his evening presentation of *craptiques*.

“I’m sorry about that,” Victoria says, hoarsely clearing her throat and regaining her composure, “I didn’t mean to put you through that, you just look so much like him, you know.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“I guess I felt a little vulnerable. Do you have anything to drink? Something stronger than water, I mean.”

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t. I don’t even think there is water. This office is as dry as its dust covering.”

Victoria glances at the tumbler suspiciously, then ashes her cigarette in it and comments that it is indeed a dusty office. The two laugh and Victoria hiccups from her cigarette again.

“Nasty habit.”

“Do you like smoking?”

“It was more of my husband’s thing, but I would join him on the veranda most evenings after dinner. It was the only time we were ever completely silent next to each other. He would cough or grunt every time I hiccuped; it was his little way of saying it was okay, that everything was going to be okay.”

Morty notices she said veranda and thinks he might have been right about her being rich. A veranda seems like one of those many luxuries of the rich, even saying the word carries the temperament of aristocracy.

“It sounds like you two had it all,” Morty says.

“My husband may be gone Morty, but I still have his love, and he mine. What I don’t have is my stepfather’s love. And if I show up to this party without Frederick, it will ultimately result in me not having my stepfather’s money anymore as well.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s the way it works. It is Frederick’s father’s job to make money, and it was Frederick and I’s job to spend money. Not on ourselves, of course. We have always lived by our means. The money from Frederick’s father funnels through us to different charities. That’s what Frederick’s job was and what my job is now, PR work for Old Man Maddit’s different companies.”

“Oh, okay. I think I get it. What sort of companies?”

“Different kinds of business companies whose business is to make business, or something. I honestly don’t really understand it. What I do understand is that the press often makes them out to be the bad guys, and probably rightfully so, but all that means for me is a big fat check to be divided among charities.”

“You choose the charities?”

“Of course. If my stepfather chose the charities, he’d only go after the big names. Frederick and I always took the time to search for the ones where we could truly make a difference. Many are small, but it turns out that giving a little to many small charities can be better PR work than giving a lot to a few, so long as you can spin the press in the right directions. Frederick was a master at that. Never making a public appearance, of course; that was always left to me or someone from our team.”

“Your team?”

“Madd Free PR. Everyone from the office will be at the party, too. They will be the hardest to dupe. Frederick’s father will be the easiest. He’s an alcoholic, you see, and never got along well with his son. I think it’s been six years now since they’ve seen each other. At the wedding.”

“The Wedding?”

“My stepsister Mitsy’s wedding. She won’t be at the party though, so don’t worry about her.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Morty remarks, becoming amused.

“What size waist are you?”

“What size bra are you?”

“Very funny. I’m asking for your measurements, for your tuxedo.”

“It’s that kind of a party, huh?”

“Oh yes. Very much so, it is that kind of a party.”

“Listen, I haven’t agreed to anything. In fact, I’m feeling a little bit played right now.”

“You’re saying this doesn’t sound like your kind of bag: impersonating a wealthy man and accompanying his beautiful wife to a lavish party all in an effort to bamboozle the rich stepfather—like some James Bond-esque super spy.”

“You make it sound so quaint.”

“And there is of course your pay. \$12,000.”

Both of their cigarettes are burnt to the butt. Morty drops his into the tumbler.

“Now I know I’m being played.”

“The money is real. So long as we don’t get found out. It’s a small price to pay if it means the rest can be spent on those who truly need it. Although I would be remiss if I didn’t encourage you to try out the charitable spirit with at least a part of your earnings.”

“Forgive me for getting hung up on the ‘as long as we don’t get found out’ part.”

“That’s funny,” Victoria says, dropping her butt in the tumbler, “You sounded like your father just then. The party is next Saturday, the 18th. I’ll be in a bar called Tuliper’s, out late tonight. Meet me there if you want to help. It really can only be you, so I hope you come.”

Victoria vigorously wipes her hands on her jeans and then shakes Morty’s hand.

“Thank you for your time, Morty. Enjoy your evening with you mother. Your father made a comment about her once; she must be a beautiful woman, and quite the firecracker.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Maddit. She is, and she is. Have a good night yourself.”

“Please, Morty. Just Victoria.”

“Alright, well good night Victoria. Get home safe.”

As Victoria opens the door, she turns to say, “And if you do decide to come, and I do oh so hope that you do, don’t forget to bring your measurements. We still need to get you that tux,” and then leaves, as gingerly as she came.

Morty leans back in the pleather alligator chair and fantasizes himself in a tux. His wife is in an equally black dress with her hair in a bun and is wrapped in his left arm where the armpit doesn’t ever smell nearly as bad as his right’s, his spectacles in his pocket in place of a handkerchief, Victoria is wrapped in his right arm, and there is a cigarette dangling between his right hand’s fingers and thumb that Victoria occasionally sucks on. He wonders if his wife would ever go for a threesome. They’ve been married eight years, that’s long enough where she might consider it. Then he opens his father’s condom drawer, flips aside the pissy “This Way Moving” card, and sure enough, a heavy white card with red lettering that reads “Madd Free PR” is there, and there is handwritten instructions on the back for a specific payphone and a number to dial.

Morty pockets the business card, and starts packing away his father’s office belongings in cardboard boxes. He slides everything off the desk into a W.B. Mason box—bankers lamp, Japanese tidal wave stationery, pewter julep cup full of pens and pencils, walnut lion clock—everything except for the ash stricken tumbler and the oversized lighter. He also takes a photo album off the shelf and his father’s old pipe and musty tobacco, and places them into the same box. He empties the shelves into two brown cardboard boxes, seals them with masking tape, and labels them “BOOKS” with a magic marker. He takes the reptile cage with the dead newt in it down the hall, flushes the newt, dampens a rag while he’s there, and returns to the office

whose gold was fading to tope with the setting sun, stacking the cage atop the coffee machine with the fogged carafe, set for the trash.

Flicking the room's only switch releases the fan and its battalion of gorilla fighter dust-bunnies, but no light, which Morty should have already deduced before flicking it since there are no light fixtures hanging from the ceiling. There are, however, three empty lightbulb sockets attached to the fan, which may have been what he was hopelessly relying on when he absentmindedly flicked the switch.

Morty scowls for being stupid, moves the uncomfortable chair Victoria was sitting in moments ago underneath the fan, cleans the propellers with his wet rag, and returns to the bathroom to clean the rag now looking like a fuzzy pastry, slamming the office door as he does so.

"Shut The Fuck Up!" yells an adjoining office.

Morty ignores it, actually feeling a little of his tension release from the outburst. He returns to the office with a clean but wet rag and some paper towels. Wipes down and dries the desk. Takes the coffee maker under his left arm. Takes the newt cage and the W.B. Mason box under his right. One of the movers helping his mom into her new condo was supposed to show, but the guy never came, so the boxes of BOOKS stay where they are in front of the door, waiting to trip any clumsy intruders.

On his way out, the Shut The Fuck Up man pops his head through his door and says, "Hey man."

"Evening."

"You a friend of that Dick guy?"

"I'm that Dick guy's son, actually."

"Let me tell you something. Me and your pops have shared offices next to each other for nine years. We've never seen each other, never got in each other's way. My hours are 10am to 8pm Tuesday through Thursday, and I don't know what his hours are, but we've never had a problem. Then today comes, and you make all this fucking noise while I'm on the phone."

"I'm sorry. It won't be happening again. I'm just moving my father's things out actually."

"Retirement?"

"No, he died actually."

"Sorry to hear that. At least it's better than retirement."

Morty smiles, blushing a little, and plays back something the silver screen always told him to say, "Ain't that the truth."

"I tell ya what I'm going to do when I get out, I'll just," Shut The Fuck Up man shakes two fists and squeezes his face as if he's trying to have a poop his body just isn't ready to give away yet.

Morty chuckles and says, "Well, have a good night, sir," and turns to walk away.

"Hey, that's a nice coffee maker."

"I was just going to throw it out."

"Don't just throw it in the trash. I'll take it."

“I’m not sure if it works,” Morty could see the eagerness in the man’s eyes, “but if you really want it, then, it’s yours I guess.”

Morty props his left side toward the man and he cradles both arms under it like it was a fat baby, saying, “Lay that puppy over here.”

“Glad it’ll get some use.”

“Oh sure, thank you, it will. And, uh, what about that fine cage? You weren’t going to throw that in the trash as well by chance?”

“All yours,” Morty says, stacking the newt cage on top of the coffee machine for the second time today.

“Great. Great. And what do you have in the box? More trash, perhaps?”

“This is mine.”

“Okay. Well, thank you. And sorry about before, important phone call you understand.”

“Have a goodnight.”

“You too. Oh, and sorry about your dad. He was a good man from what I can tell,” the trash-loving Shut The Fuck Up man says, panting over his new gifts.

Morty, already walking away, gives him a motionless wave with the back of his hand.

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