

MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE

By
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“This place is a hole. Paul, I really wish we could get out of here,” Valerie exclaimed.

She was a pear shaped girl, plain in most regards. Her skin was smooth and soft and her straight brown hair had a healthy sheen to it. She wore slacks and a blouse that were unremarkable and neat. Her actions were a bit jerky, but not awkward.

“Look, Valerie, just stay a little longer; there's something I need to talk to you about.”

Paul was hunched over the bar like a lion protecting its kill. His dirty blond hair was loosely pulled back. His shoulders were broad and the light flannel shirt stretched tightly over his frame accentuated the deep cleft formed by the muscles along either side of his spine. His eyes harbored a kind of intensity that was at once beguiling and unsettling.

“Paul, you're telling me it can't wait till we get back to the house? C'mon, I'm out of here!”

“No! We can't go back to the house! ... I mean, lets just stay here a bit longer.”

“God, you're acting totally wacked, it's really freaking me out. So why don't you tell me what's going on?”

Paul straightened up on his stool and leaned one elbow on the sloppy bar. He nudged his shot glass forward for another refill and got lost in the floral print of the bartender's Hawaiian shirt. Valerie had to smack his arm to get his attention.

“Paul, how many have you had?”

“Hmph?”

“Drinks Paul? I've seen you put down three since I got here.”

“Don't know, haven't really been counting.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Besides, they water 'em down.”

Valerie looked for her purse, like she forgot where it was or to make sure it wasn't in some sticky puddle.

Paul gripped the rail and looked the other way down the bar. The guy next to him kept laughing at these other people's conversation, a few stools past him some guy was reading a book.

“Why the hell would somebody come to a place like this to read?”

“Huh?”

He turned on her. “It’s really nuts Val, I feel like I’m going crazy. I can’t seem to figure any of this shit out. I’ve been digging myself into a hole and now it’s starting to fill up with water.”

“Uh, that’s kinda vague. What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I don’t know, nothing, never mind.”

“Look Paul, I’m no mind reader, why don’t you just say something that makes sense.”

His eyes squinted up a little bit and his throat tightened.

“You know,” she said finally, “you’re not the only one who works hard all week. You calling me up at work all the time doesn’t help anything either. Especially today.”

“Aww man. Valerie, I know, I’m sorry, but this is important.”

“So we had to come here? I can’t believe you actually used to hang out here. You know, there are better things I could be doing, I’ve got to go over that book if I expect to get that presentation done by Monday.”

“Valerie please, not tonight, just not right now, OK?”

“OK. So what?”

“OK, OK. Unh, I don’t know where to start.”

“Try the beginning.” Valerie blinked slowly.

“The beginning. OK. I guess that’d be South Carolina. That’s mostly what this has to do with. Remember how I told you about how I had to get out of there, like it was a really bad scene?”

“I guess. You really didn’t get into it.”

“Well, even though I wasn’t there that long I was there a lot longer than I should’ve been ... and a hell of a lot longer than I wanted to be, that’s for sure.”

“Paul, I guess I understand why you left Baltimore, but how’d you end up there? I mean, why didn’t you just come back after you crashed your bike?”

“I don’t know Val. I guess I just wanted to try to make a good go of it first.”

She sighed as she took a compact from her purse and checked her face.

Paul rambled on, “Well, anyway, I was working grave yard shift at a Seven Eleven.”

She hated to hear about the stupid jobs he’d had. They just didn’t add up to her somehow. Maybe she never was in a position where she just had to take what ever little she could get, or maybe she was just never stupid enough to be in that situation. No, that wasn’t it either; she just didn’t want to face how little difference there was between her mindless toils and his – just because his were menial.

She did nothing to hide the fact that she found no romance in his unskilled employment opportunities or in the way he proudly used her word “Prol,” (as in proletariat) to describe himself. Like that’s anything to be proud of.

She pushed her cuticle back with her thumb.

“Are you listening or what?”

She snapped the compact shut. “Oh yeah, of course.”

“So I’m working there one night, you know, and it’s kind of late, and this girl comes in. She’s kind of a red-neck-punk-rock-groupie or something and she has the ‘Cat in the Hat’ painted on the back of her leather jacket and stuff. But she’s pretty cute really.”

“OK ...”

“So she comes up to the counter and she’s going to buy a box a condoms. It’s fairly obvious she’s never bought them before, the way she asked me what kind she should get and stuff, and when she pays I say, ‘I hope you have a very romantic evening.’ just to give her a little shit, you know? and she says, ‘I fully intend to!’ and I’m thinking, ‘That’s cool, she’s playing it off legit.’ and she walks out of the store.”

“Uh huh.”

He dug into his pocket to check his wallet. See how much he had left of the pay check he’d got that day.

“About a minute later she’s back inside, asking these two other chicks something. Then she comes up to the counter, wanting to get her money back. ‘Sure, no problem.’ I say, ‘What’s the matter?’ I ask, ‘Are they defective or something?’

“She’s clearly not amused. Then she starts off, ‘That bastard gave me five bucks to come in here to buy some rubbers and when I go back out there, he’s gone! He must of took off or something!’

“She just stood there fuming, I mean, can you imagine? Then she adds, ‘And I thought he was cool too!’ It was really kind of funny but you can’t laugh, you know?”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, I took the phone off the hook in case the manager called or something and closed up the store and gave her a ride home. I’d just bought the truck, I mean, it didn’t have any heat yet, and she wasn’t wearing hardly any clothes, but, you know. So she has me take her way out of town in the middle of nowhere to this motel that looks like it’s all closed down.

“Now I’m figuring that she can’t even be eighteen but she says she’s been staying here with these people and that I should give her a call. She goes, ‘We can hang out and party, or whatever it is you Seven Eleven dudes do. Just ask for room #5.’ she said her name was Kat.”

“Oh Paul, you didn’t call her did you?”

“Well, yeah. I sort of did.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t anyone else while you were away!”

“Look, Valerie, will you just wait a second ...”

“No!” she cut him off. “I can see where this is going and I’m not going to sit here and listen to you incriminate yourself.” She glared at him, but made no gesture to leave. He avoided eye contact. There was an awkward silence, he didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But I’m trying to tell you now.”

“Why are you doing this Paul? Are you trying to torture me? What makes you think I want to hear this? I want to go home!”

“Please Valerie, some really weird shit came down and I’ve got to tell some one about it.”

“Oh Paul. God Paul.”

“Please. I need you. I don’t know what to do.”

“Jesus, get me another screwdriver.”

It took a while for him to get the guy’s attention. Valerie and Paul sat in silence while the bartender washed dishes while trying to cradle the phone between his shoulder and cheek. Dunk, rinse, talk. Dunk, rinse, talk. Dunk, rinse, talk. Finally he grabbed a glass, scooped up some ice, poured in a generous portion of vodka, squirted O.J. from the dispenser and slid the drink forward.

“OK, so I give her a call a few days later. I ask for room #5 and this guy answers, he’s never heard of anyone called ‘Kat’. So I call back to make sure I got the right room – room #5, it’s the same guy. She’d said she’d been staying there about a month so I call back to

the desk and they say that the only people who've been there that long are in room #5. I call back the next day and get some other guy. He said that there isn't any one staying there named 'Kat,' so I describe her and he goes, 'Oh! You mean Janet. Yeah, she should be coming by in an hour or so. Yeah, she told us about you. You're the Seven Eleven guy.' It was kind of weird, you know?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Well, I finally got a hold of her. They came over and picked me up one day. We went to this big mall. It was really stupid. They knew a lot of people, kids and stuff, and after that she started hanging out at my place a lot. She was pretty much there all the time, like every night."

"So you slept with her."

"Yes Valerie, I did. But only once, I mean we did other things like, you know ..."

"Shut up, will you. Just exactly how old was she anyway."

"I don't know, like sixteen."

"Christ, that's illegal! This is totally ridiculous. I don't even know any more. I don't even give a sh..."

"Look Val, I've got to explain this."

"Why?"

"I want you to understand."

"You want me to understand huh? Yeah, well I don't."

"I need you to know what happened. It's important."

"Fine. What ever. Go ahead. Fine."

"Look, just calm down. Here, take another drink. OK?"

"OK."

"OK, well, this one night she takes me to some idiotic party, but I figure, hey, free beer. Well, the whole way back to my place she's acting all pissed off. I'm pretty fucked up, you know, and we pull up into the car port with the white gravel and the truck dies. We just sat there in silence for a few seconds, then finally I go 'What?' and like, hit the cigarette lighter. 'You were looking at her,' she says. 'At who?' I said. 'You were looking at her!' 'I wasn't looking at anybody.' 'You were!'

“I just lit my cigarette. ‘You mean that one with the white skirt?’

“She lit hers and as she blew the smoke through her nose she started really yelling, ‘See! You *were* looking at her! You fucking shit!’

“So she gets out and slams the door and we take it inside the trailer. She’s going nuts. She’s trying to shove all the cushions from my couch out those little aluminum wind out windows and she starts throwing plastic Big Gulp cups and sardine cans at me. Then I get mustard sauce in my eye. I’m so pissed off. So I take her and slam her up against the wall and my tapestry, you know the one, with the dogs playing pool, well it falls on our heads, and we start laughing and making out and stuff and groping. We fall back on the half open ‘hide-a-bed’ and we’re fumbling with our ‘Fruit of the Looms’ while the bar’s jamming in my back and she knocked over my ash tray, the one that looks like the *Raft of the Medusa*. She got ashes and butts all over the place. I mean, it was pretty bad, like, the sex I mean. It was really quick and sloppy and I just passed out from all the Wild Turkey right afterwards.”

“How romantic. Are you quite finished yet?” Valerie inquired, forcing herself to be as polite as possible so as not to throttle or stab her soon to be *ex-boyfriend*.

“No, I’m not done. After that, she just disappeared. Then a few days later, I get a subpoena. Apparently her parents are like suing me for corrupting a minor or whatever! Can you believe it?”

“I can’t say as I blame them. Maybe I could testify as a character witness.”

“Yeah? Really? Would ya?”

“Sure. I’d love to testify ... on behalf of the prosecution.”

“What? You don’t mean that! Wait, which side is the prosecution?”

“Oh shut up. Look, what the hell do you want me to do?”

“Well that’s just it. Now she’s found me. I don’t know how but she found me. She knows where we live and she’s in town now.”

“Oh my God Paul, I can’t believe this. This is out of hand.”

“Yeah I know. She called me up when I got back to the Roto Rooter office today... so I told her to meet me here.”

“You what?! How could you? That does it! That is the straw that broke the camel’s back!”

“Please Val. You’ve got to stay.”

“No way... Shit. What the hell got all over my coat?”

“Val. Don’t go.”

“Forget it Paul. I’m not going to hang around to see you with that little slut! I’ve got packing to do!”

“No Val. You don’t understand. I need you here to help me show her that I don’t want to have anything to do with her ... Oh hell! There she is. Here she comes.”

“Whoa.”

Valerie slumped back on her stool without taking her coat off.

“Oh Paul!” Janet rushed over in her ripped up stockings and tried to hug him.

“Hey Kat, I uh, I want you to meet Valerie. I told you about her, remember?”

The two girls faced off mutely.

“Maybe we should get a table, eh?” Paul proposed.

“Buy me a beer Paul?” Janet entreated.

“Uh, yeah. I could use one myself.”

“Hope they don’t ask to see her I.D.” Valerie interjected caustically.

Paul didn’t hear, he was busy trying to get the bartenders attention again.

“So. You’re Janet. Paul’s told me *so* much about you.”

“Well, actually, my friends call me Kat.”

“Kat huh?” Valerie sneered.

Paul inserted himself between the two women.

“Uh, I hate to interrupt. Here you go Kat. Bud light, just the way you like it. Valerie, honey, I got you another screwdriver.”

“Oh thank you, *honey!*” Valerie was venomous.

Paul ushered them away from the bar.

“How about this one?” Kat interjected. The three slid into the booth.

“Kat. What are you doing here? How did you find me.”

“Oh, it wasn’t very hard. I kept a copy of the phone bill with you’re folk’s number on it.”

She lit a cigarette and took a long drag. She had a way of rolling the smoke in her mouth before inhaling.

“OK, so what is it you want?”

“What if I said I was here to tell you how much I love you and that my loins burst into flames whenever I think about you?”

“Umm, well.”

“Don’t worry Paul. I won’t.” She smiled now but differently as she surveyed the lay of the land. Paul watched her and felt Valerie watching him.

“I just thought you might want to know that I’m ... Ungh!”

Janet buckled over in the booth.

“What is it Kat?” Paul exclaimed desperately.

“Girl! Are you going to get sick?” Valerie asked. Not so much out of sympathy but to know if she should get out of the way.

“No! Ungh ... Paul. Where’s the bathroom?” Janet gasped and started running for the back, clutching herself.

“Do you love that girl Paul?”

“No! Of course I don’t love her.”

“But you desire her.”

“What? No I don’t”

“Christ Paul. You wanted me here to help you all right. To help you to keep yourself from trying to shag that little tramp. You wanted me here because somewhere in that dense skull of yours there’s a glimmer of intelligence and you know better.”

“Val, don’t be ridiculous.”

“And the color of her hair is atrocious!”

“Not so loud, she could hear you! Here she comes.”

“Hey, you don’t look so good.”

“Paul, I’ve got to go to the hospital.”

“What?”

“I ... I think I’m having a miscarriage.”

“Well!” Valerie beamed, “This calls for a celebration!”

Janet swept out of the joint in a flutter. Paul wavered a moment then followed after her. Valerie stood near the take out counter and fished around in her purse for her car keys.

“Bartender! A six-pack of your finest Bush to go!”