

The Candle in a Vaulted Cave

The mourners met at 143 Gravesend Circle to pay their respects to Warren Shaugnessy. The Tudor style home had eight large bedrooms and an extravagant main floor. The decor was Traditional English, complete with dark, wooden paneling and luxurious cherry coloured leather chairs. The dining room, where the mourners swelled, could seat eighteen people. At present, the chairs had been removed from the table and put against the walls so that the guests would have access to the food and beverage put on the table. Caterers came in waves to replace empty carafes of coffee and put out platters of fresh food. Whatever few morsels were left on any plate were taken to the kitchen and discarded.

Conversations droned, like a hive of bees hung from the chandelier. A woman, dressed in a full length, low cut, black dress, her brown hair arranged in a complicated bun, stepped from the dining room, across the entranceway to the spiral staircase. She cradled her glass of wine while trying to crane her neck around to get a look upstairs. On the other side of the staircase was a set of French doors that lead to Warren's den. She had put one open high heel shoed toe on the stairs when she heard sounds coming from the Warren's den. She stopped and tried to get a look at who might be in there. The autumn colours of the French doors fracture-style stained glass guarded the identity of the person in the den, making it all seem dashed with blood and guts. She shuddered at the thought of it and started to back away to return to the dining room. She dropped her wine when she heard the click of the lock and the fall of the tumblers.

"Come in," a voice said. "The caterers will see to the wine. Please. Come in."

Seated across the room, her back to the west end of the house, was a woman dressed in a black pant suit and pastel blouse. On the arm of her chair was her black pillbox cap with its veil draped down. She smoked a cigarette and looked through the bay window, watching the sun go down.

"Hello, Meredith," the guest said to the woman sitting down. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Lily," Meredith answered, still looking outside, and took a drag from her cigarette. "Just fine. Come and have a seat."

"Of course." Hands together, chin to her chest, Lily walked towards her friend. Lily saw that Meredith wasn't struggling ; in fact, she thought Meredith was taking it all rather well.

"I just wanted to tell you personally, alone, how deeply saddened I am by all of this," Lily began.

A beaming Meredith turned and took Lily's hands into one of hers. "Thank you so very much," she said. "We all were good friends, you, me and Warren, weren't we?"

Lily sat down on the divan next to Meredith, crossing her legs and smoothing the folds of her dress. "We are good friends, Meredith," she corrected. "Did you think that because of all of this that I would be too afraid to be your friend?"

Meredith had returned to staring out the window. "Yes, you are right. I need my friends. All of them. Everyone has just been so kind."

"Warren was a well known, popular man, Meredith."

Meredith nodded. "I had to rent a banquet hall and had to schedule two viewings. This here," she held her arms open and lifted her head, "is for close family and important friends."

"But you know, Meredith. You know. That's important. Warren had touched the lives of so many. His memory, who he helped, will be passed on. That is but a small measure of happiness, but happiness nonetheless."

Meredith nodded, stabbed out her cigarette in the pedestal style ashtray next to her chair. "A candle in a vaulted cave," she said.

"Pardon me?"

"A candle in a vaulted cave. You can find your way through, but never see what is above and around you. Warren described it to me like that once."

"That sounds like one of Warren's teachings."

"It may have been. I'm not too sure who was the first to hear it, but I recall it well. I don't remember in what context, but it comes to me now."

"Does it matter? If someone did hear it and took it to heart, and realized it mattered where they were going and not what was going on around them, it helped them. They would have ignored the tales and rattling of others that might have put them down," Lily leaned forward and put a hand on Meredith's shoulder. "That's why it sounds like one of Warren's teachings. It sounded like the way he lived his life."

"Really? I don't think so." Meredith reached forward to the squat, oak, oval coffee table for her cup and saucer to get a sip of tea. On the other side of the cup and saucer was a silver serving tray with an ornate tea pot arrangement flanked by a cup. The pot was suspended on a silver stand with a small candle beneath. The candle was lit, its heat radiating into the stand and warming the tea. "Would you like some tea? You dropped your wine. Are you thirsty at all?"

Lily nodded and Meredith got out of her chair to pour a cup. Lily took the cup, without the saucer, and held it with both her hands, enjoying the heat.

"I'm not sure I understand what you were saying before."

"Hmm?" Meredith asked. "Oh. Yes. Well, Warren always knew what was going on around him. He needed to be aware of it. If it weren't for his keen awareness and inspired intuition, he never would have made the incredible money that he did. The Shaughnessy Corporation would never have been, if Warren had not acquired his vast money to start it up and keep it going. The Corporation was a dream of his since he was a child. Did he ever tell you that?" Meredith asked.

"Those times I spoke to Warren the conversations almost never concerned business."

"Yes, I guess you're right. He saved those moments for me and his executives, I guess." Meredith put her cup and saucer back on the table so she could reach into her blouse for her silver cigarette case. Lily watched Meredith take out a cigarette, replace the case, tap the filter end to pack the tobacco, light it, and exhale a luxuriant plume of white smoke. It hung in the air for a moment, both women taking time to observe before Meredith dispelled it with a wave of her hand.

Meredith stopped and put a hand softly to her chest. "I am so sorry. Would you like one?"

"On occasion, I have. Never a habit, really. A pleasure at times. Right now it would be a relief"

The case, after Lily took and lit a cigarette, was returned to Meredith's blouse.

"It's a relief for me too. It fools me into believing that with every breath of smoke, that much more of my troubles are blown away."

"I can't say I've ever thought of it that way." Lily shifted in her seat, crossing her legs and adjusting her dress to a respectable position. "Are you sure you are okay, Meredith?"

"Me? Oh, I'm fine, Lily, just fine. After all, it's just smoke."

Lily laughed a little and said, "It's just that, . . . Well, I'm not exactly sure how to put it."

Meredith raised her eyebrows, as if she just came to an astounding conclusion. "I don't seem remorseful? Is that what you are trying to say."

"I didn't want to be disrespectful."

Meredith patted Lily's knee. "Dear, you are a friend. You are concerned about me. It is true. I don't feel any remorse. I miss him. I will miss him dearly. But he is gone and I am here. We must take satisfaction in what we can." Meredith poured herself a second cup of tea and topped off Lily's.

"Meredith!" Lily stood up quickly and came close to spilling her tea.

"Careful, Lily."

"Your husband was murdered in cold blood!"

"Didn't even bother to take his wallet or his car keys," Meredith nodded. "The killer probably didn't want to be picked up driving the car of a dead man. Please sit down, dear. Relax. The police have interviewed everyone who was at the hotel that night and have not come up with anything. My husband had more money on him than any twenty people you could put together. The police thought it was a crime of passion. Questioned me for what seemed like days. I was here, surrounded by servants, waiting for him to come home, and they confirmed that. The only other thing they turned up were glowing descriptions of Warren's commitment to the community. The people he helped out with money were his drinking buddies. He bought them drinks and they listened to his dirty jokes with them for six hours every week. They always paid him back, like Warren needed the money more than they did. My Warren wasn't killed for money." Meredith tapped the long ash of her cigarette into the tray then took another drag.

"The hotel," Lily said.

"You're dripping ash on the floor, my dear."

"Warren was found dead at the hotel."

"I just said that didn't I?" Meredith pulled the pedestal ashtray around so it was between them.

"Thank you," Lily said. "I didn't know that. Which hotel?"

"Oh, the one he could always be found at. There was a bar on the second floor. What was the name of it? Something French, it sounded like."

"How would I know?" Lily answered, a little more sharply than intended. "It was Warren's watering hole, not mine."

"Of course, dear," Meredith said soothingly. "That is funny, though. I hadn't thought of it as such."

"Of what as such?" Lily asked.

"Watering hole," Meredith answered. "That's a term to describe the drinking establishment of a blue collar worker. White collars go to clubs, where they can convene with others who are like minded. The only difference between a 'watering hole' and a club is how they dress. In both you can find primarily males, toting beverages and talking dirty about the various women they have fucked - I mean, slept with."

Lily giggled. Meredith tilted her head to the side and asked, "And what is so funny about that?"

"Nothing."

"What makes you and I so important that a portion of the English dialect cannot be used by us? Fuck, fuck, fuck. There you go."

Lily had stopped laughing, but kept smiling. "Do you think that he talked about how you and he - y'know, 'did it'?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't think he talked about 'doing it' with me at all. Those were his times. I was the furthest thing from his mind."

"But you two were still. . ."

"Oh, yes, we most certainly were. We were working passionately hard at

having a child together. You know how much he loves the children he works with at those charity functions. And the kids, you've seen the kids. They flock to him. We both wanted them so bad. Tried everything we could. Warren saw no use in utilizing those fertility doctors. He saw them as being useless. If two people loved one another enough, that act they share together will come into something. Having a child was just a matter of time. He blamed it on his job, mostly. The stress, the long days, the fast food and coffee, the whole lifestyle associated with being on the go and having to be ready to act at a moment's notice. He tried to wind down, but he truly adored what he did in his life. Eventually, he established a steady medium, and was more happy than I had ever seen him. Well, he was as happy as I knew he could be. He was slowly turning into the dashing man I had met and married. I was sure that we would have a child soon. I was so positive." Meredith sniffled.

Lily saw the struggle in Meredith's cheeks and the muscles of her face and was glad to be there for her.

"I'm sorry. Maybe now . . . Have you tested?"

Meredith brushed the thought away. "Oh, I don't have to. I know I'm not."

"I'm sorry," Lily repeated.

"Oh, you needn't be sorry. Warren was sterile."

"What!?"

"He was sterile. Not just low sperm count but none. He was, as they say 'firing blanks'."

"How did you know? Didn't Warren know?"

"Oh, he knew all right. I knew too. Neither one of us talked about it, but we went on with our charade." Meredith shrugged. "The trade-off was good. We had excellent sex."

"Couldn't you have done anything? Gone to a specialist? Done

something?"

"No, because you see, Warren's sterility was not something his lifestyle contributed to. Well, maybe it did when you think about the big picture. Who knows? Anyway, Warren was sterile because he had a vasectomy done before we were married. Twelve years ago."

"And you never knew?"

Meredith drank the last of her tea and returned it to the table as effortlessly as she did before. "He didn't tell me. How could I have known?"

"My God. He was lying to you the whole time."

Meredith nodded, facing the setting sun. The sounds of the guests were closer now. They had left the dining room and were convening in the entranceway, preparing to fly home. With them they carried a drone of conversation that faded and splintered as they went to their cars. The caterers accepted condolences on behalf of Mrs. Shaugnessy and saw the guests on their way. The two ladies in the living room did not speak a word as the mourners left. They did not move from their seats or budge so much as an inch. Lily cast a brief glance in the direction of the French doors before she got to her feet. All she could see were the distorted and distended images of the servants cleaning up the remains of the party. Their speed and the stained glass made them all seem like fiendish monsters, attending to mortal business of questionable ends.

"You know what? I told Warren that I would kill him."

Lily whirled around and looked at Meredith. Her mouth was agape but no sound came out.

"Oh, dear, please calm down. Who have you not told that you would kill if they did or did not do something? 'I'll kill you if you don't get this done on time', 'If you tickle me one more time I'll kill you'. Men have said to it men and women and women have said it to women and men. It's

commonplace. We just never realize how damning the words are until someone actual dies, by whatever means. Think about it. As a child, did you not recite, on the way home from school or going to the corner 'Step-on-a-crack, break-your-mother's-back'? Of course you did. And you still avoided the cracks. Because there was that lingering fear in the back of your child's mind that you might return home to a crippled mother and it would be all your fault. It's pure superstition, plain and simple, but try and explain it to the one girl that it has happened to."

"Did it have to do with his operation?"

"No, of course not. I told you, he thought I didn't know and I didn't want to tell him that I knew. It was just something I said to him once while we were watching television.

"It had something to do with a husband sleeping around on his wife. He loved both of them, but the wife had no idea and the woman was entirely content to be his mistress. After all, the character in the television show was affluent. He could afford to support a wife and a mistress and still have enough money to take over the world. And you know Warren. He had enough money to buy and furnish a house for every day of the year and still have money left over to take over a corporation. So when we saw that he started to laugh. I turned to him and said 'If you ever do that to me, I'll kill you.' " ' Oh no you won't, honey,' he had said. 'You love me too much. I'm sure you'd forgive me'. He said it with that smile of his. I whacked him playfully with a pillow and he let me wrestle him to the ground.

" As I straddled his chest, I put my hands to his throat. 'I'd kill you and her and then I'd kill myself.'" Meredith stood up and lit another cigarette. She walked towards Lily as she spoke. "Afterwards we had sex. Good sex, as I recall. Lying there in the bed, he turned to me and asked if I really would kill him if I found out he was having an affair. He was happy to

hear I was serious. He felt that meant that I really loved him. Then he asked 'How would you do it? Would you do it like they did on tv?'"

" 'Oh, of course not, dear. That's television. There isn't a cop like the ones on tv on any force in the whole damned world. They would try hard to solve it,' I told Warren, ' but they would never be able to. Besides, even if they did, I'd make sure they wouldn't solve it until after I was dead.'"

"Wasn't he angry at you? Wasn't he afraid?"

"Oh, no, dear. It was a great big joke. Well, it was a joke to him, anyway."

Meredith had passed Lily and looked through the stained glass of the French doors. She braced one arm beneath her breasts, holding her side with her hand, held her cigarette between two fingers of her other hand. The servants on the other side of the glass were fewer in number as their chores were coming to an end. Lily, uncomfortable with the silence, went over and poured herself another cup of tea. Her mouth was dry from the talking and the cigarettes.

"Ms. Shaugnassy?" A voice beckoned from behind the door.

"Yes?" Meredith raised her voice unnecessarily. It was as if she was consulting some hearing impaired oracle, looking to the ceiling, envisioning it floating above her.

"We've cleaned up all of our stuff. Is there anything else you'd like us to do for you while we're here? Vacuum the upstairs or something?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you very much, dear. You've done me a great service. Your tip is in the top drawer of the desk just inside the entrance."

The opening of a drawer could be heard, accompanied by the sound of rustling paper.

"Thank you," the voice called out. "Thank you so very much. Is there anything more we can do."

"Be sure your staff knows the excellent job you've done, Hazel. Be sure to tell them. And drive safe. The roads can be a dangerous place."

"Are you sure, Ms. Shaugnessy? Nothing at all we can do?"

"No need," Meredith said, smiling. "I'm almost done in here."

<END>