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Lies and Other Alibis (an excerpt)

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Lies and Other Alibis
(an excerpt)

M. G. BETTRIDGE

I told you, no thank you, she said. So, no. Thank you.

Let me at least order you a beer, he said.

Please, she said. I hate beer, I hate the smell of it, and I wish you wouldn't drink it, at least not now, not in front of me.

I'm not drinking it, he said. See? I'm nursing it, as I worry about you.

That's what I need? You to worry about me? No. What I need is a cigarette. Please.

You can't smoke in here. For the third time.

Gimme, she said.

Sorry. 'Fraid not, he said.

Under the jungle canopy, who's going to notice? Hell, Rudy. We could be sitting in the middle of a rain forest. Which probably explains the service.

The waitress has been to our table twice now, he said.

Ah, take notice. He can also count waitresses.

Yeah. All the way up to 'one'.

Christ. Veggie sticks, mixed nuts and bongo rhythms. And why'd you choose this place, again? I forget.

Just ... tell me what you want to eat, and I'll order.

Nothing.

Can't order a negative, Catherine, he said.

Clever.

Really just trying to be helpful.

I bet, she said.

And that would be a good bet, he said.

I doubt I could keep anything down, and if I did want something, I'd order it myself.

Gotcha, he said.

Then, gimme, she said.

No. If you smoke, we will be asked to leave.

So, we leave, she said. We go someplace else. What difference does it make?

It makes a difference, he said. I like this place.

You a regular? Is that it?

Never been here before, he said.

I bet. The way you were sitting here when I walked in, like you owned the place....

Have it your way, Cat, but here's where we are, and here's where we need to stay and talk.

A cigarette, please.

Look....

Come on. Give.

All right, have it your way.... Hell. Didn't even know you smoked.

Which shows just how little you really do know, she said.

Fine, he said. Then fill me in, bring me up to speed.

Bring you up to speed? So, that's why we're here, is it?

Bring us both up to speed, then.... And the pack. Hand it back, please.

Your lighter, please.

You got it, he said.

Thank you. Very much.

No problem until it is, as they say.

And what's that supposed to mean?

Just what it says, for chrissake's.

Well, I've about had my fill of 'they say this' and 'they say that', if you don't mind. And in case you haven't noticed, there's no ashtray.

No kidding? Guess you got me there.

~ ~ ~

I doubt you're ready for what I have to tell you, she said.

What're you talking about? I've been ready for two days.

Rudy, I haven't slept for two days ...

I know....

... haven't eaten, and I feel like crap. And I really don't want to be here.

Okay, he said. Fine, then. Let's go. I'm done with this. We're done. Calling for the check. Waitress!

I couldn't believe it, she said. I thought you'd taken off.

Really? That's what this is all about? You really think I'd do that to you?

I don't know what you'd do, she said. I didn't know where you were. Where were you? Where have you been?

Come on, he said. I was worried sick, that's where I've been.

Don't go cute on me again, please.

I was. Worried sick. I'd no idea what was happening, let alone what I could do about it if I did. And that was the toughest part. Knowing there was nothing I could do. Knowing that I couldn't be with you. And you weren't about to slip away, were you? No. Impossible. ... Look. The last thing you needed was ... me around....

That's what you took from my phone call this morning? That I didn't need you with me?

That phone call was two mornings ago, he said. Your chronology's off. Understandably.

Understandably, my ass.

Understandably, your ass, then.... Look. You called, waking me, and word for word, you say: 'He's dead'. 'Who's dead?' I say. 'Who do you think?' you say. 'In his office. This morning. The police....' Then, that's it. Nothing. Nothing until, what? This ... get-together here?

It's now way past *this* anything. And it's way, *way* past two days ago or whatever the hell your chronology tells you, but I did, too, call, and call, and all I ever got was a 'I ain't in right now. Leave a goddamn message.'

A half-dozen messages, by your call count.

I left messages and mails, and you didn't answer a one, she said.

Would if you had, he said. Never got any.

You saying I didn't contact you?

I'm saying, maybe it's not what matters right now.

So you're the one who decides what matters? I'm dying here, is what matters, she said. Family people in and out, his company people, lawyers and police swarming all over the place. Undertakers collecting mourners, or whatever the hell it is they do. Everyone all *sad* smiles and condolences and offers of help, and thank you's *very much*. But you should see the looks these

people give me. I'm on my own out there. It's awful. It's terrifying, you want to know the truth. And you sit there telling me this doesn't mean anything? Doesn't mean anything to you, maybe. Typical.

Typical, what? Listen to me, he said. It couldn't mean more to me, what's happened. I am so sorry for you, I can't contain myself, and I swear to you, from this point on ... I'm here for you. Nothing else.

I needed you, and you were no-where in sight.

Impossible then, he said. I'm at your service now.

You're impossible.

Then we're both impossible, and that's why we're sitting here together.

That isn't nice, she said.

Come on. ... Could be.

Stop that.

Stopping it.

Just to hear your voice, she said. Would've helped ... just to hear your voice.

And to hear yours, he said. In person. I wanted to see you, so bad. I was going crazy.

Crazy. You've no idea, she said.

Yeah, I do, he said. I know crazy. And you are a sweetheart. Such a sweetheart, it breaks my heart to see you like this. But, look. You were tied up with the cops, right? Goes without saying. And with the hospital, the lawyers, and the family...

Didn't I just make that point?

No, sweetheart, he said. Look. I'm making a different point. I couldn't just hang out, hunker down. I wasn't gonna sit around on my ass. So, I was in and out, but all the time thinking of you, and, yeah, a phone call or message or two may've slipped pass me in all the muddle you were going through, but to be honest, the other thing is, I was expecting a knock on the door at any minute, and personally didn't want to be sitting there like some dumbass when it came. Would give me a goddamn heart attack. I had to talk to you first, you know, get some understanding of what's been going on, which finally now I am doing. We're doing.

And who is it you expect to come knocking on your door? The police, you mean?

No, your mother, he said. Of course the police. Who else?

But that's silly, she said. What in the world would the police want with you?

Don't be naive. By now the cops've talked to probably everybody in his firm, and soon enough they'll get around to people he's done business with, even the small numbers.

Such as you, you mean?

Christ. Yeah, such as me, he said. They'll talk to people who knew you both, is what I mean, and I can promise you, without a doubt they are going to find out about us. Actually, that cat's prob'ly already scratched its way out of that bag. Excuse the pun.

Yes, well, I'd rate that as a pretty bad pun, and pretty unlikely, she said.

What's pretty unlikely?

How could anyone know about us? Just look at the kind of places we meet at, she said. The kind that caters to lost tourists. So you can stop worrying. No one knows the *we* of *you* and *me* even exists.

Come on, he said. Your husband, he has his contacts, has friends....

He doesn't, actually ... not the friends, anyway, not that I know of, unless by some odd chance he counted you as one.

Be nice, will you? I'm nobody's friend in this, but yours.

I certainly haven't told anyone about us. Wouldn't care to, she said.

Then that makes two of us, he said. We're watching out for each other. Okay? Okay. But just the same, I guarantee you that before another sun has risen, the cops'll be at my door, and then we'll see what the story is, and what it's gonna cost.

What it's going to cost? For what?

For what? For air conditioning. I don't know. Goddamn. The air in this place is dead.

It's faux-tropical humidity, Rudy. This is what you get in a rainforest hide-a-way.

So it seems, Catherine. So it seems.

~ ~ ~

All right, he said. Take it easy. It's been a rough couple'a days.

Going on three, maybe, I think, she said. Has it been three?

Two, three. What's it matter, now? Poor baby.

I can't get my head around anything, she said. I'm sorry, Rudy. I've been talking so badly to you.

It's all right, he said. I understand.

I know you do. But, still I'm sorry. You're so good to me, she said. I don't know why.

You do know why.

I'm just so tired, and *so* upset, she said. The only thing I know is, I don't deserve you.

Listen to you, he said.

I'd rather listen to you, she said.

If any two people ever deserved each other, it's you and me, he said.

But I feel so bad for you.

For what?

For dragging you into this, she said.

You don't see me kicking and screaming, do you? I'm here under my own power, ain't I?

I'm here for you, Cat.

But it's all such a mess, she said. Including me. Look at me.

What I see, I wouldn't call it a mess, he said.

Stop.

Stopping, he said. But you'll see. This'll play itself out, and once it does, we'll be fine.

You think so?

I know so.

I hope so.

Wait and see.

Rudy?

What?

It's 'you and I', Rudy.

What?

It's 'you and I', not 'you and me.' And I did, too, call you this morning.

~ ~ ~

This lighter won't light, she said.

Maybe there's a reason, he said. Maybe it's a sign. Let me see it.

What is that?

What is what?

That. On the seat beside you, she said. Under your ... baseball ... thingy.

My baseball *thingy*? You don't know a Dodgers baseball cap when you see one? Guess you don't know baseball. Something else we'll have to take care of once this's finished.

Thought your game of chance was the horses, she said.

Chance and romance, he said. Shouldn't surprise you, dear lady, that I have sundry sporting interests.

Ooh. 'Sundry.' Big word, she said. Don't hurt yourself.

I'm a big boy. I can handle the big words, the little words. Whatever comes my way.

What is it? I can see there's something under it, she said.

My cell phone. Look, he said. Surprise.

Why's it under your baseball *thingy*?

Because I placed my *thingy* over it? I guess.

Maybe my emails are still on it, she said. You might check.

The ones you think you sent? I promise later to take a careful look.

Then maybe you can put it away, she said. It makes me nervous.

My cell phone makes you nervous? Seriously?

Yes, she said. And please don't do that.

Don't do what?

The laugh.

It's just a laugh. It's just a cell phone.

Please, she said.

All right, he said.

Please.

Okay, I get it. Putting both ... away ... and, now, out with it. Talk to me. Tell me what's been going on.

Now I don't if I should tell you, she said.

Come on, he said. Talk. Here and now. Here I am. For you.

The questioning they put me through, she said. That whole experience. Was unbelievable.

Your interview with the cops? All right, he said. Let's start there.

It was just so awful, I don't even want to talk about it.

It's okay, baby, he said. But we have to talk. For you. You gotta talk. For me and you. So, come on. It was yesterday? Today? And it didn't go well?

It went well, it didn't go well, I don't know which way it went. All I know is, it was almost surreal. Swear to God. At times, it was almost like it wasn't even me sitting there answering,

she said. Like it was somebody else.... My first out-of-body experience, if there is such a thing. Is there, you think?

You got me there, Cat, he said.

I'd always wanted to have one, she said. And I felt *so* out of it, and I *so* did not want to be there in that room.

Naturally, he said. You hadn't slept. Hadn't eaten. Can't imagine how you handled it on your own.

I wasn't on my own, actually, she said. My lawyer was with me.

Is that right? Well, the lady brought her own lawyer.

As would any lady in my position.

Would be prudent, he said.

Prudent? Two sessions with the police? Over two days? One day only, was it? What they put you through, it's impossible without some kind of help.

Okay. Good move. Still, must've been tough. Incredible. ... Poor kid.

You can't imagine, she said.

Actually, give me a 'sec, probably I can, he said. But, go on. Tell me. How'd it go?

Part of it was absolutely bizarre, just *so* bizarre, she said. The cell phone *thingy*? Sorry. I know it's crazy to get upset about this, but almost every time one detective was asking me questions, the other would go to his cell phone. And then they'd switch. I swear that's how it went down. The one cell phone dick ...

Dick?

... this detective would get off the phone and start giving me the third degree ...

The third, already. Working fast....

... while the other dick, who'd been interrogating me, would go to his phone. They were like a cell-phone tag team, or some stupid thing.

All right. So, that's how they worked it. And that upset you. Okay. That's pretty crummy.

Crummy? It was totally weird. I felt *so* uncomfortable. So *used*. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what they were up to.

If they were up to anything at all, you mean.

No, that isn't what I mean, she said. What I mean is, this one detective, he would put a hand over his phone when he talked, you know, all *hush-hush*, like he's making a point of showing

me he won't let me listen in, like that's supposed to make me curious or feel bad or some stupid thing. And while he's doing this, he's glancing over at me, and at the same time he's giving whoever's on the other end of the line, if there even was anyone on the other end of the line, a play-by-play ... or whatever. Weird. And then the switch. It was like watching some amateur good-cop, bad-cop routine, you know, like you see in the movies. It was so *obvious* they were up to something, though not even those two seemed to have a clue....

Cat....

... And the one detective ... he had this high-pitched voice, the prick, a squeaky, playground voice, if you know what I mean, and it would *so* grate on my nerves. Well, this guy, he would use 'Mrs.', while the other, I swear, would use 'Ms.' Just so *unbelievable*. Now, you can't tell me that wasn't planned. ...

Wouldn't think of it.

... And though the one detective's voice was okay, kind of husky and sexy like yours, he was popping Sen-Sen into his mouth about every two minutes ... you know, those licorice breath mint things that only your grandfather ever used, and then he would get you in a stinky bear hug, but you loved him anyway ... and I thought it was *totally* impolite and *so* rude for him to be popping anything into his mouth while he was in my face and interrogating to me.

Sounds pretty tiresome, he said.

Tiresome? It was noxious. Are you listening?

Am listening intently, he said.

You've no idea how stupid and *rude* it was. And then, all the sudden, they started calling me by my first name, they didn't even ask, which I thought not only rude, but creepy. Really. Two men? They have no more sense than that? You don't call a woman you don't know by her first name, unless you ask, or she invites you to, she tells you it's okay.

People have no manners these days, not even cops, he said. Or these two were just trying to put you at your ease. So, wha'do you say we look at a menu?

Exactly, she said. No manners. So, you know what I did?

No, he said. What'd you do?

I told them to address me by my *last* name, I am married, after all, I said, and they looked at me like I was losing it, and then it was back and forth again with 'Ms. Mcallister, *this*' and 'Mrs. Mcallister, *that*'. Thought I was gonna die.

You don't think you're making a little too much out of this ... name ... thing ... business?

I was there, she said. It was happening to me, she said.

You're right. It was happening to you.

That, and all sorts of other crap, she said

Sorry to interrupt. Please, go on. ... Go on. Am listening.

So, it was 'Mrs. Mcallister, this', 'Ms. Mcallister, that'. And then all their stupid questions. 'Are you *sure* about this ... *sure* about that?', and 'What was Mr. Mcallister doing in the days prior his demise?' Demise. Two dicks with educated mouths.

'Two dicks with educated mouths'. That's good. Nice one.

Nice? Well, made you smile, at least.

It did, he said. You did. I like it. So, how'd you answer those educated dicks?

As if I'm supposed to know any better than anyone else what he was up to. 'Ask the board of directors,' is what I should've answered.

That's a good one, too. You are on a streak.

You think so? 'Ask the board of directors.'

You should be on the board of directors.

Well, I could be, someday, she said. We'll have to wait and see.

Can't wait, he said.

You think that's being too ambitious?

Not to me, he said. I like ambitious.

Then you must've liked my husband.

Your husband was a workaholic. And he was a son-of-a-bitch to work with. That's what I would've said to the cops. Will tell them. A son-of-a-bitch, up one side and down the other.

Actually, I think I may've used very similar language, she said.

Is that right? Well, that must've got the dicks' pens a-wagging, coming from the wife.

It sure did, she said.

I can just see their faces, you calling your deceased husband, God rest his soul, 'a son-of-a-bitch'.

Made their day, I bet, she said.

It probably did, he said. I bet.

And it made you smile again, she said.

If you wanna call this a smile.

You've been worried, she said. Too worried about me.

Am still very worried, he said.

You think I can't take care of myself?

No, I know you can. But I'm not supposed to worry, even though you can take care of yourself?

There's no reason for either of us to worry, she said. Not now that we're together.

Yeah, he said. Makes all the difference, doesn't it?

Listen to you, she said. You're the one who makes the difference. I don't deserve how sweet you are.

It's women like you bring out the best in a man like me.

I love you, she said.

Couldn't get any better than that, could it?

Could get a whole lot better, you want it to.

Right here, right now?

Pull them jungle vines closed....

~ ~ ~

They came at me with, 'What time was *that* again? ... was *this* again?' and, 'Was anyone *contentious* with your husband?' Contentious and demise, she said. The police, they really use words like that? Or was it just for my benefit? And, 'Did he have any enemies?' and, 'Who would be on the top of that list, do you think, Mrs. Mcallister?'

He was an enemy magnet, was the general feeling. It was his way or the stairway, straight down and out.

And watch that last step, she said.

And watch that last step, he said. You got it, lovely lady.

And this, she said. Get this: 'If you had one, Mrs. Mcallister, who would be your number one suspect?' As if suddenly we were role-playing Agatha Christie, or some stupid thing, and now it's all so *hush-hush* around the table. That kind of nonsense. It was stupid and manipulative from the beginning, and once I realized that I was being manipulated, I was *so* angry at myself, and then so *sad*, I wanted to cry, she said.

The bastards, he said. They made you cry?

No, of course they didn't. I would never have cried in front of them.

You are a trooper, he said.

Well, at times a trembling trooper, she said. Honestly. So upsetting. At times, I had no idea what I was going to say until it was out of my mouth.

Well, it's cooperation and information the police are looking for, he said. And you cooperated. Don't worry about it.

I did my honest best, she said. Gave them what they wanted, I think. When I could, I did. I had no choice, actually. He's my husband, after all. I mean, was. And now he isn't. ... How would it've looked, if I hadn't cooperated? I wanted to cooperate, for that matter.

Of course you did, he said. No reason not to.

Well, we'll see what good I did myself.

I am sure you did just fine, he said.

Anyway, and this was the most difficult part....

Take your time, he said. You got water. Take a sip. Go on. It's cool, it's clean, it's free.

Well, I realized at some point during the questioning, or sometime later, maybe, I don't remember exactly ... but it hit me suddenly, I barely knew the man, my own husband, which is too awful even to admit. I mean, he was a person that someone actually wanted dead. And what kind of person is that? What kind of person are you if someone would want you dead? I mean, what had I missed?

Not much, obviously, Catherine.

But the person who did this ... has to be a worse person ever than my husband was, right?

I'd go along with that, yeah, he said.

And has to be discovered, she said.

Uncovered, you mean?

And punished. And all that.... Oh, Rudy....

Take it easy. Watch your ... water. ... Here. Let me take that from you, before you drown us both....

I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm saying.

Say whatever you want, Cat. Talk it out. It's good for you. It's good for me. Helps me understand and appreciate.

That enemies list thing?

Yeah?

They almost threw me with that, she said. It was almost too cruel. I mean, really? ‘Who would be your number one suspect?’ It’s too awful even to consider at a time like that. They were asking me for a top ten killers list, Rudy. I don’t know any people like that. Who would?

Don’t look at me.

No? And why not? I can’t look at you, Mr. *So-Handsome* and ... *sexy* ... beyond words?

Be careful you don’t talk yourself out of breath, he said.

But it’s breathless business I intend, she said.

And what business would that be, dear lady?

The business of us, of course.

The business of us? Breathless you.

You. Me. Breathless.

Breathe. ... Breathe before you suffocate us both.

~ ~ ~

Have I told you what I said back to the detectives?

Not yet, no. So, tell me. What’s you say back to the detectives?

Paraphrasing, she said.

Paraphrase away, he said.

I said, ‘My husband’s enemies are my enemies, and whoever is responsible for his death, I will tear their *fucking* face off.’

Okay. Okay, he said. Bet that caught them up.

It got their attention, you can be sure, big guy.

Uh ... waitress?

~ ~ ~

Of course, it’s not on. No calls, no interruptions, and we’re doing fine. You’re doing fine.

Well, I’m doing fine, and then I’m not doing fine. Just look at me. I’m shaking again, and I am so upset ... with myself, especially ... and now I do feel like crying.

That’s all right. It’s okay. Cry away. No one’s going to hear you, not outside the jungle canopy.

Wasted tears, if I do.

Not wasted on me, Cat. I’m a veteran comforter. Here. Use mine.

Thank you. ... Is it clean?

Clean as a cupcake.

I'm not going to eat it, I don't think, she said.

Would make me cry if you did. It's my only handkerchief.

Your only handkerchief?

Only kidding, he said.

Oh. Another one of your 'only-kidding' sidebars. Anyway, I doubt men like you ever cry.

No, but we sometimes wet the bed on stormy nights.

What?

Nothing.

I thought you spent your stormy nights with me, she said.

Rainy days and stormy nights, spent only with you, Catherine.

I never noticed any bed wetting, though. If I had, I might've spanked you.

Sorry? You might've ... thanked me?

And I do carry my own handkerchief, by the way. And Kleenex.

You got a nightgown in that thing, maybe?

Women can live out of their handbags, she said. Truly.

As I have witnessed, he said.

You have witnessed too much, she said. I am so embarrassed for you to see me this way.

Here. Gimme. Let me help. Here. Look ... at ... me. No. Look at me. Yeah. ... Yeah.

Oh, my. Yes. And that, dear lady, is the most beautiful, most precious face....

Please, stop, or you'll have me crying again.

You go right ahead and cry, he said.

No. I want to be done crying, she said. Here. Your cupcake back.

You keep it, in case you get hungry, he said. If nothing else, it'll remind you of us every time you have to wipe your nose.

Now, there's a romantic pillow thought.

We do our best for our women in distress, he said.

You know, Rudy, you certainly don't talk like a real estate broker.

Could it be the influence of the well-heeled clientele I serve?

You think?

~ ~ ~

Catherine, my sincerest condolences for your loss. Truly. From the bottom of my heart.

You don't have a bottom to your heart, Rudy. You are the easiest man to love I have ever known.

And the last, hopefully, he said.

The last, most definitely, she said.

You do talk so sweetly when you want to, don't you? You really do.

Yeah. That's me, all right, she said. Sweet talking woman. Just ask anybody.

No need to ask, he said.

Then you'll take my word for it?

I'll take your heart for it, you let me.

~ ~ ~

Well, then maybe you should go to them, she said

Seriously? That's what you think?

Go to them before they come to you, if it makes you so uncomfortable.

Yeah, right. I can just see it, he said. Me introducing myself to the homicide detectives as the guy who's having the affair with the victim's wife. No, Cat, something tells me, that'd only complicate matters.

I don't see how it could get anymore complicated than it has, she said.

Oh, we probably ain't seen nothing yet, he said.

Thanks. I needed that.

My point is, you let the cops come to you when they're ready. Besides, what do I know? I mean, really know. I'd have next to nothing to tell. And you? After the cop sessions you've been through? I mean, with your lawyer at your side, I bet that about covered it. Lawyers. ... Excuse me, waitress? *Waitress*. ... Another one of these ,, please? ... *Waitress*? I don't think she hears too well. And so young, too.

Rudy?

Am right here by your lovely side, Catherine.

His family thinks I don't care, she said. You should see the way they act around me.

So, let them think and act anyway they want. What *do* you care? It's all just so much maneuvering, anyway.

But the police think so, too. That one with the playground voice ... that squeaky-swing voiced jerk ... he was almost screeching at me, he thought I was such a terrible, uncaring person.

I doubt that, he said. Besides, I know you do care. And I'll testify to that. In court, if it comes to that. For you. If you didn't care, you wouldn't be here talking to me.

I wish you'd been there, she said. For moral support. It worries me something terrible, she said. The whole thing. Just worries me.

You will be okay. It'll take time, but you will be fine. Just be strong.

I am strong.

You are.

I am, she said. You want to know how strong?

I think I already know.

Can I share with you one more of their questions?

The talking dicks?

The talking dicks, she said

Of course, he said. Told you, I am all yours.

But, now I don't know. Maybe I should stop while I'm still ahead, she said.

But now you gotta tell me, he said.

It's unsettling, she said.

I'm all right with unsettling.

I bet you're all right with lot of stuff that would unsettle most people.

We'll just have to see, he said. So, go on. What is it?

Well, they asked me, 'Did you love your husband?'

The cops asked you that? Did they really? That's a 'wow'.

They did, she said.

That's almost too much, isn't it? Poor kid.

It borders on harassment, she said. Very unsympathetic, anyway, and intrusive.

And unsettling, he said. It's a question that would have to be answered very carefully, that's for certain. Awkward. Tricky.

Yes, my thoughts exactly, she said. But for once, I didn't answer. My lawyer advised me to pass on it.

Good lawyer, he said. Give me his name. Who knows? Could need him someday soon.

My lawyer is a 'she'.

Better yet.

Rudy.

Catherine?

This isn't about you, she said. This is about me.

It is, he said. Just showing you that I am staying involved and concerned. Please. Continue.

People assume that just because you're a woman, you get the sympathy vote. It isn't true.

Hardly true at all, he said.

I found that out, she said. I sat there *by* myself ...

You mean, together with your lawyer.

... answering their questions, but after a time, you know what it felt like?

I've an idea, yeah. But tell me how it felt for you.

It felt like they were asking again for answers that I had already given. And I thought, there must be something wrong with my answers, and I would try again and again, and I started changing the answers I was giving them, little things here and there, adding information ... giving them what I thought were good answers, what I thought they wanted, and then I'd be done with it, they'd be convinced, and I would be free to go home.

But you were answering voluntarily, right?

I was, she said.

So, you could've left, gone home at anytime, right?

That's true, she said. In fact, even before questioning me, the detectives informed me that I wasn't required to provide any information I didn't feel comfortable providing. That's almost word for word, too.

You got the entire script in your head, he said. Under all that stress. Or because of. Either way, you truly are amazing.

You should sit in that seat sometime, she said. And I know it seems obvious, but I was there as the wife of the victim, and I felt I couldn't just get up and go home.

So you've said. And I can understand, he said. Would hate to hear you had acted in any other way.

But what I'm saying is, I wanted to answer their questions, and as truthfully as possible ...

Of course.

... but the detectives sometimes didn't like my truth, or they didn't like my way of telling it, and so, I would end up telling them more than I had intended, and then would find myself taking back bits and pieces of what I'd said. And, frankly, I made a mess of it.

Your lawyer was with you all this time, right?

Of course, she said. She was. Advising me, of course, but I felt obliged to answer, to try to answer any question I was asked, because I felt *so* terrible about what had happened ...

All right, but what happened....

... and I hadn't slept for twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours, whatever it's been ...

What happened wasn't your fault.

... and I wished they would just *stop*, would just *stop*, but they wouldn't, Rudy, and I felt like screaming at them, they were so *rude* ...

But you didn't, right? Scream at the cops.

... and my husband didn't deserve to die, no matter what kind of *shitty* person he was. Everyone sits in judgment of everyone else, everyone but themselves is guilty of being a horrible person, and sitting there, I wished I could just crawl away and die.

Come on. You didn't wish that, he said.

I wished that it was me lying there in the hospital, in the morgue, sleeping his terrible sleep for him. As a wife, that was the least I could do, and the only ending that would give me any real peace.

But what kind of peace is that? And what're you saying? Are you saying you loved him? Which is fine by me, but....

No, she said. Because I didn't love him, not enough, anyway, not as I should have. ... No, that isn't even true. But you see? You see, now? This is how it went with the police. This back and forth, and everything I say getting all tangled up.

In knots.

In the knottiest of knots, she said.

And what is it, exactly, that naughty you is trying to tell me?

That I didn't love my husband at all, she said. And that I am a selfish bitch. That I can admit. I married him, but I didn't marry him for love. I never loved him. I admit it. And I wish I were dead, I am so tired of me.

You can't wish a thing like that, he said.

Why can't I?

Because I won't let you, he said

You can't stop me from wishing something, she said.

Wish for something else, then. It wasn't anything you did, wasn't anything you and me did, Catherine, that caused his death. You know that.

Yeah? Then why was it that during all that horrible questioning, I wished that you and I had never met?

~ ~ ~

Still no ashtray, Rudy. What's up with our waitress?

Nothing that an ashtray couldn't fix, pro'bly.

What ever happened to the customer always comes first?

Went the way of Scooby-Doo? I don't know, he said. You tell me.

Well, *Scooby-Doo*, or not, I do have a bit of developing news to share with you.

Ah, Ms. TV Anchor Person makes her appearance.

I could do that job, she said. I could be one of them.

You could. No doubt about it, he said. You got prime-time rolling off every word you speak. Seriously sexy.

And sexy good news to boot, she said. Potentially very good news.

All right, then. I could use some potentially good news. We both could. But, first, just a minor detour, if you don't mind. You know what'd be the bestest news to hear?

No, she said. What would be the bestest news to hear?

About the enemies list thing, he said. Only asking, but if you tried real hard, who would you see at the top of that list? ... But, hey, I'm just the guy who loves you. You don't have to answer, you don't want to.

Actually, there is a tie-in, she said. Hold on. ... Well, well. Ms. Moonshine. Here she comes ... around the mountain, here she comes. Perfect timing in every step.

Be nice, Catherine. She's a waitress. She's minimum wage.

Got it, big guy realtor.

~ ~ ~

I swear, if she says to us one more time in her phony little southern-fried accent, 'hot 'nough fo' you folks ta'day?', I am going to scream. Hot enough. Couldn't be any hotter.

She was talking about the weather, Catherine.

So am I, Rudy.

And I don't think the accent is phony. Give it a break, will you?

The Ms. Tennessee drawl is definitely phony.

Whatever you say. Whatever you say. But tell me, will you?

Tell you what?

Tell me you didn't act this way with the cops.

Act which way?

Belligerent.

You mean, belligerent-ly?

Yeah, and so I figured.

Well, you figured wrong, she said. By the end of the interrogations ...

Interviews.

... I had them eating out of my hands.

Right out'ta your hands, was it?

You bet.

For what it got 'em, huh?

For what it gets you and me, hopefully.

~ ~ ~

I am just dumbfounded, he said.

Dumbfounded? You've been reading too much cheap literature, Rudy.

Drinking too much cheap wine, maybe. Thunderbird-struck, then. Truly. *Jeezus*. Out of the blue.

Remind me to help you sometime with upgrading your idiomatic lexicon. But, for now, yes, the police have a suspect, and I couldn't be happier.

The police have a suspect? And you're sure about this?

I've said so three times, now, she said. And for your information, you're doing exactly what the police did. Making me repeat myself.

Yeah, but what were you waiting for? Just the right time to tell me?

Rudy, I haven't been able to put together two coherent thoughts for days now, she said.

So you couldn't keep one together long enough to have mentioned this before now? I've been out of my mind, worrying about you.

Well, you can stop *worrying*, already, she said. For the fourth time ... You are keeping a count, right? That's what you're good at, after all. ... Well, there is a suspect. And I do apologize. It's all my fault, of course, we haven't communicated lately.

Jesus.

Jesus you, she said.

And Jesus you back, he said. And I raise you a Christ.

You raise me 'a Christ'? What? ... Sorry. You've lost me.

I doubt that, he said. Just, go on.

I didn't purposefully not tell you. All that has happened, none of it is ... prioritized, if that makes any sense, in my head. But maybe I was wrong to tell you anything.

Yeah, maybe you were, he said

You're being mean, she said.

No, I am not, he said. I am being *meaningful*.

Try being *understanding*.

Just try keeping me up to date, will you?

My husband is the victim of a homicide, and I'm swamped, but my priority should be to keep you filled in?

Okay, okay. I get it, already. It doesn't matter when you did or did not tell me. Finally, you told me. That's all that matters. Right? I got it.

I did intend to tell you sooner, she said. Rudy. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful. But now, at least, I know you don't like surprises.

The only kind of surprise I like is the one I have time to prepare for.

Then it wouldn't be a surprise, she said.

Then I guess I don't like surprises, he said.

My timing was bad. I apologize.

Forget it. It's all right, he said.

I'm sorry, she said.

And I'm sorry. ... And why am I getting so upset over good news? Best news, actually.

Hoping it becomes even better news soon, she said. But for now, it's a beginning.
It is. Excellent, he said. So. I'm happy for you.
Then I'm happy for us, she said. You're still with me on this?
Of course, I am. You need to ask?
I couldn't do this without you.
Except you probably could, he said. You are amazing.
No, I couldn't, not without you, she said. Please. I'd be lost. Lost. I have no one else. All I
have is you. All I want is you.

You want, you have.

Do I?

You know you do, Catherine.

Do I, really?

I haven't been there for you, have I?

I need you, Rudy, and I just hope to God you need me back just as much.

I am here, there, and everywhere for you, Cat.

That's all I ask. Be there for me, and when the time comes....

When the time comes.... But for now, about the suspect.... A 'he', a 'she'?

~ ~ ~

The suspect is a *he*, she said.

Okay. The suspect is a *he*. ... And? ... So?

So....

Therefore ... this 'he' is in custody?

No, she said.

No. An arrest warrant's been issued?

Not that I know of, no, she said. Not to my knowledge.

Okay, he said. So, he's a person of interest, maybe?

Yes.

And that would be to who?

To 'whom'.

To the grammar police, it sounds like.

Well, you might confirm that once you have met with them, Rudy. But right now, all I know is, he's just an ordinary murder suspect.

Just an ordinary murder suspect. Okay. That works.

Obviously it doesn't, though. You're still angry I didn't mention this sooner.

I'm past that, he said. I'm not angry. Just a little ... confused.

He's the suspect in my husband's death. What's to be confused about?

No warrant's been issued, you say. And the guy isn't in custody, he isn't locked up. Fine. But he is definitely a person of interest. Right?

Right.

All right, then. Then tell me something, if you can.

If I can, she said, of course I will.

You don't mind if I ask questions?

Of course not, she said. Please. Ask away.

Well, then. Just off the top of my head ... just came to me ... but considering what I've heard so far, I have to wonder, is this guy even aware that he's a suspect?

I really wouldn't know.

Right, he said. You wouldn't. But, you know, I can't help but thinking myself, this celebration of yours might be a wee bit premature.

Who's celebrating? And why are you being so negative?

Who's being negative? You said it was okay to ask questions. If it's not, get your lawyer in here. I'll ask her.

Oh, *no, you won't*, she said. And you're being mean again, and I have no idea why. And stop that. The laugh. Stop it.

Okay, the laugh stops here. But, let's back up. Catherine, in your words...

Don't talk to me like that.

Don't talk to you like what?

Stop it, please.

I'm not.... Look.... All right. The suspect ... he's not in custody, and apparently doesn't even know yet that he is a suspect. Other than that ... I don't even know what's okay to ask. ... So, who is he? At least that much you can answer, right?

I can, she said

And?

He's part of the crew that cleans the building.

Cleaning crew?

He's a custodian.

This guy's a janitor in your husband's building?

Yes, she said. And you do surprise so *very* easily, don't you?

Doesn't surprise me, necessarily. A building's gotta have custodians. ... Wait a minute.
Let's back up.

What is it with you and all this 'let's back up' stuff? How about, let's go forward and wrap this up?

We, you and me, aren't going to wrap anything up, he said. But, a verification, if you please. The police have questioned the custodian, right? Please tell me they have.

Of course they have, she said. They are the police. They do know what they're doing ... I presume.

You can safely presume that, yes.

At the station, the morning of ... late morning? ... they questioned him, after which, he was allowed to go.

He was allowed to go, despite being their suspect?

Go figure, Mr. Sarcasm, she said.

Go figure, Ms. Marple, your interest in this guy.

My interest? My only interest is in the police finding....

Got it.

No, I don't think you do, she said.

But you think you do? Okay. So, tell me what you think they got on this guy. Wha'do you know? Or think you know.

More than you ever will, she said. And that's that. That's it. I am leaving.

Oh, come on. Relax....

Your hand. Remove.

My hand. In yours....

Please.

Removing the heavy hand, he said.

I have told you everything I am going to tell you. Excuse me....

You haven't told me anything.

Your hand.

My hand ... now ... is asking you to stay. Remember? I'm the only one you got.

I have a lawyer, she said. A good one.

But she doesn't love you, he said. And I do. Talk to me.

No one can talk to the great Rudy DiAngelo, not and make himself easily understood, anyway.

Try me one more time, then, he said. Please. I'm all ears. I'm all yours.

Cute.

So, stay, he said. Come on. Stay. *Stay* ... seated. We haven't even ordered yet.

I'm not hungry.

So you've said. And so you say. Sit down, will you? Let's take care of this. You and me. There you go. Have a seat, beautiful. I swear, at a time like this, us here together, what more could we ask for?

~ ~ ~

.....

The story opens with the excerpt above. That story and its characters, save for one, are the fruit of imagination. The exception, the apparent murder suspect, the custodian, is based on a long ago acquaintance, a real-life bookie who kept stacks of cash and a shotgun in the trunk of his automobile. Still, to an at-that-time less than worldly me, despite his trade, he seemed no more than a Baby Huey. I couldn't imagine him hurting even so much as a housefly. MB