

A JAR OF PICKLES

My hand shakes as I lift my garden shears and snip the deadhead from my prized African daisy. I check my watch. 1:15—Reverend Johnson will be here in fifteen minutes. The man is punctual to a fault. Everything is ready: a pot of tea, his favorite cookies, and the desk in the study is cleared of clutter where the reverend and Jack prefer to work. Jack’s building skill comes in handy for the church. They might think about paying him. I shrug, that won’t happen.

I’ll keep gardening until the reverend arrives. Jack won’t mind. I sit in front of my flower bed in a lotus position, take in a deep breath and let it out to calm myself.

“You-hoo, Carrie.” My brief attempt at meditation is interrupted by Molly Mason. You should be so lucky to have Molly for a next door neighbor. I’d be glad to give her to you. Molly knows everything about everyone on the street, and I’m about to be bombarded with news of what poor Mr. Smith learned at the oncologist yesterday and what time Timmy Adkins snuck home last night. Molly will clutch her hands to her heart and murmur over the suffering of his poor wife.

I’m not in the mood for her right now, but it would be easier to halt a hurricane than stop Molly from unlatching the gate between our two houses and bustling into my garden. My next deep breath is shortened by the slam of that gate. I squeeze my hands together to halt the shaking, plaster what I hope is a smile not a grimace on my face, and turn to *The News Hour with Molly Mason*.

“What a beautiful day.” Molly always starts with the weather report. “It’s supposed to rain this afternoon.”

“The garden can use a good drenching.” I make the expected response.

The mundane over, Molly jumps right into the lead story. “They took Mr. Smith to the hospital last night. Did you hear the ambulance?”

Last night Jack and I were in an overheated discussion. I heard nothing except his rant and the buzzing in my head. When I don’t respond in three seconds, Molly continues her monologue, “I don’t think he’ll be returning from this one.” Molly has the strange ability to look grave and still convey the high excitement of imparting news.

“It might be a blessing. The poor man is suffering.” I borrow this line from another of Molly’s monologues. She won’t recognize it as her own, it’s too sappy.

I trim my daisies as Molly talks. She tells me that Timmy arrived earlier than usual last night, around ten, and he didn’t appear drunk. I’m happy for his wife. Then she launches into the breaking story of the day. “The Larson twins are still selling pot out of their garage. I’ve called the police five times, and they’ve done nothing. I’m going to the town council.”

“The mayor will appreciate your diligence.” My hand shakes a little as I raise my shears. I pray the eagle-eyed snoop doesn’t notice.

“Your garden is more perfect than last year.” Molly takes a moment to smell the roses. Then she gets down to the brass tacks of her visit. “I noticed you drove off three times this morning and returned with sacks from the IGA. Did you lose your shopping list?”

I lay my shears down, and press my hands together with my head bowed for a second. “I had a little trouble shopping this morning getting Jack the pickles he loves.” Why am I confessing this? I smile like I’m trying to laugh it off.

\*\*\*

That damn jar of pickles. Jack wanted a ham and cheese sandwich, potato chips, and sweet gherkins for lunch. I wrote out my shopping list and promised him I’d be back in a half hour. And as promised, a half hour later I made his sandwich the way he likes it. Toasted whole wheat spread with real mayonnaise. I added a crisp leaf of lettuce soaked it in ice water the way he wants. Next I placed his favorite deli ham on the bread, followed by sharp cheddar cheese. I sliced the sandwich diagonally. I once cut it straight, and he threw the plate at me. I rarely make the same mistake twice with Jack. Next I drained three sweet gherkins and placed them nestled together on his plate before adding two handfuls of chips.

Jack was sitting in the living room watching wrestling on cable. I placed his lunch on the table beside his recliner along with a twist-capped bottle of Bud. “Thanks,” he grunted, his eyes never leaving the TV. He took a bite of the pickle, spit it out, stood up, and threw the plate at the wall. “You ignorant bitch,” he shouted at me. “These are not Nancy’s Fancy Gherkins.”

The sandwich fell apart against my spring-blue wall. A line of mayo traced the path of the bread as it fell to the floor. Chips flew around the room and settled on the carpet. I scurried about, picking up the mess while apologizing to my husband.

“I’m sorry, Jack.” I kept my head down, not meeting the fury in his eyes. “These IGA’s were on sale. I was trying to save you money. I’ll be back in a jiffy with the ones you want.”

“You damn well better be. I’m hungry and the reverend will be here any time now.” He settled back to watch his show. This entire reprimanding took place during a commercial break; he missed none of the excitement.

\*\*\*

I close my eyes, trying to forget this scene, trying to think of something to say to Molly, who is watching me for reactions. I shrug. “I had a little problem getting Jack's lunch right.”

It’s not that Molly doesn’t know about Jack. She has heard the shouting and caught me in a moment of weakness, crying in my garden. She knows my bruises aren’t from running into walls. Still, we keep up the pretense.

“You’re a saint, putting up with that man,” Molly says. I don’t know if she is genuinely kind or fishing for details for her next exclusive.

“It was nothing, my mistake,” I tell her and turn back to my daisies.

\*\*\*

Nothing? I think back at my morning. I can’t believe what I did next. I rushed back to the store, breaking the speed limit, and failing to come to a full and complete stop before turning into the IGA. I grabbed a jar of Nancy’s Fancy Gherkins and rushed back home. Once more, I toasted his bread, spread the Mayo extra thick, and added the ham and cheese. I place the pickles in an artistic display, and then I double checked the label.

I slammed my hand against my forehead. How could I have been so stupid? These are Nancy’s Fancy DILL Gherkins. My entire body trembled as I imagined Jack’s reaction. I lucked

out, he'd been so busy with that wrestling show, shouting encouragement at his favorite, and hollering obscenities at the referee, that he hasn't heard me come in. He had drained the bottle of Bud I gave him and helped himself to another one. I grabbed my car keys and slipped out the back door.

\*\*\*

I shiver remembering the incident. "You seem a little nervous this morning." Molly comments.

"Too much caffeine," I tell her. "My doctor is trying to get me to cut back." I don't know when I became such a quick and smooth liar. That's a lie. I know exactly when I told my first 'what happened to you' story. It was three months after I married Jack. Our honeymoon ended abruptly. I had forgotten to put gas in his car, and he was in a hurry to meet up with his hunting buddies. He poured a long angry burst of obscenities over me as my head repeatedly hit the wall. I could feel blood flowing through my hair as the room turned gray, and I fell to the floor, escaping his grasp.

I lay on that kitchen floor for hours as consciousness came and went. At times, I thought I heard ringing in my ears. I began to think I imagined Jack's tirade. Day turned to night. My mother found me; she'd been trying to call all afternoon. I don't remember her lugging me to her car and speeding to the emergency.

I woke up hours later in a bright white hospital room. I felt my head, swathed in bandages. A TV against the wall was blaring a wrestling show. Jack turned from the TV to see I was awake. He jumped up, grabbed a box of chocolates and a bouquet he had placed on the table

beside my bed. “Darling, what happened? I’m so sorry for leaving you alone. I love you so much.” He handed me daisies, my favorite blooms.

I stared at him. What happened? He knew what happened. And yet, he was at my bedside, declaring his love. The same Jack I had married. The man I promised to love and honor until death did us part. Even in a drug induced lethargy, I realized he wasn’t asking what happened. He was begging me to lie.

That was my new life. A life that would require hundreds of lies—many to myself. Some so outrageous that no one believed them and yet were all too willing to accept.

A few of my acquaintances tried to find the truth. My doctor would approach the subject of battered wives, I would stop her with a smart remark. “Lucky I’m not one of them.” She would sigh and put away the brochures she wanted me to study.

My mother begged me to leave Jack. She never came right out and accused him of beating me. She saw how scared I was of the subject. Jack became surlier around my parents until they quit visiting when he was home. I think my mother is afraid of him.

\*\*\*

I shake my head. Those pickles rattled me. Here I am reminiscing over my entire marriage while the sharp eyed Molly studies me. I had better be careful. I snap off another deadhead. “Anyway,” I tell her, “I managed to get him the pickles he loves. He’s in the house now, enjoying his lunch.”

\*\*\*

I had rushed to the store one more time. Peter Simpson, Coopersville's one traffic cop, stopped me. "Where's the fire, Carrie?" He asked.

Peter is not the most imaginative cop in the world. "Sorry, I'm late getting Jack's lunch."

He nodded; he knows about Jack, understood why I was wringing my hands. "Just be careful." He let me go with that brief warning.

I returned home. I had read the label three times. Nancy's Fancy SWEET Gherkins. Once more I made his sandwich and arranged the pickles on his plate. I counted the empty bottles of Bud—four—as I carried his lunch to the living room.

"It's about fucking time." He glared at me.

I sat his plate on the table. Checked his open bottle. "Would you like another?"

"You're damn right, I want another. You should have brought it with you."

"Useless cow." I heard him muttering to himself as I rushed back to the kitchen for another Bud.

I served him his drink, walked back to the kitchen and cleaned up. I washed down the counter and the island and then took out the trash. Satisfied that he would have no complaints, I came out to the garden to rest, calm my nerves, and work among my flowers.

That's when Molly found me.

\*\*\*

Molly should leave now that she has imparted the news and doesn't seem to be getting another story. But today she lingers, studying me as I snip yet another deadhead from my daisies. Her news sense is on alert.

The air is filled with that pre-rain expectancy, hot and silent. The small breeze that had blown against us this morning stopped as if collecting itself for the wind to come. I have conquered my nerves, my hands lie in my lap as I, like the air, gather myself for a storm.

Even in the back garden, I can hear the ring of my doorbell. "It's the reverend. He's working with Jack this afternoon, planning that new expansion for the Church." I stand up and walk to the front of the house. Uninvited, Molly follows me.

"Hi," I welcome our minister. "Come on in. Jack's in the living room."

"Jack," I call, "you have company."

He doesn't respond, the wrestlers on the TV are still slamming each other to the mat. "Go on in," I urge the reverend, "I'll just get your tea."

Molly follows the reverend. First Molly and then the reverend gasp. I stop midway to the kitchen. "Is there a problem?" I call to them.

Molly has backed out of the living room and is standing in the hall, staring at me. Her hands cover her mouth. Her eyes are wider than I've ever seen. She can't speak. A tragic condition for a gossip.

The reverend follows Molly into the hall. "Carrie, I'm so sorry." He's using his low, calm, funeral voice.

“What?” I ask. I barge past them, into the living room. Jack is lying on the floor where he has fallen. His plate next to him. Once again my carpet is littered with chips, bread, ham and cheese, mayo, and a dead husband. One tiny piece of Gherkin is lodged in the hand that is clutching his heart.

“Oh, my God.” I sink to the floor beside Jack. His skin is still pink, not the dull gray it will turn in a few hours. He can’t have been dead for more than a few minutes. There is a grimace of pain on his face. I take the gherkin from him and slip it in my pocket.

Molly comes over to comfort me, and to study the scene for the detailed description she will broadcast about the neighborhood. The reverend is calling the police. “Charlie will come for the body,” he tells me. “Would you like me to sit with you?”

Molly nods, forgetting the question isn’t aimed at her. I settle down on the couch facing Jack.

The reverend clears his throat. “Perhaps you’d be more comfortable in the study.”

Of course. There’s a dead body in my living room, not the most comforting scene. We all walk to the study, Molly somewhat reluctant to leave the scene of Jack’s untimely death.

“He was a kind man.” I choke on the sentiment. What widow wouldn’t?

“Yes,” Molly joins me in the lie, but her sharp eyes are studying me. “At least he enjoyed his favorite meal before... well... you know...”

“Yes,” I agree. “That must have comforted him.”

“It was probably a heart attack. I think he went quickly with little pain.” The reverend tries to comfort me.

Molly brightens, “And he had his favorite pickles for his last meal.”

“Yes,” I nod at her as I try for a weak little smile.

And it’s a damn good thing I got the right jar of pickles. I was running out of cyanide.