

# LAST REUNION

© Stephen L. Carter\*

By the time Jake Rodden got around to telling us about the murder, Doreen Shipley was half drunk and Walt Feinman was telling the same bad jokes that got him no laughs five years ago. Given the way things worked out, I would come to wonder whether Jake had planned the whole evening, or just allowed events to unfold according to their own course. Doreen told me later that she was pretty sure he had calculated the entire conversation, because he had that kind of mind. But she had always had a thing for Jake. Everybody knew that they had been an item back in law school, notwithstanding that he was a married man. Now, at our twentieth reunion dinner, she was gazing at him with the same doe-eyed tenderness that we all remembered from the days when he broke her heart.

“Maybe you heard the one about the man who walks into the hotel lobby with a little robot,” began Walt, and everybody turned away in order to tune him out. We were in the main campus banquet hall, fifty or sixty strong, seated beneath the disapproving gazes of the dead white males who had founded the university and built it into an Ivy League powerhouse, most of us preening desperately, for a reunion presents an opportunity to impress your classmates by pretending to be more successful than you really are. Because I teach at our alma mater, they all seem to think I am something special. Actually, my career has been rather ordinary, but college graduates tend to think like students, who secretly believe all their professors to be geniuses.

There were five of us at the table, Walt and Doreen and Jake and I, and a squirrely little man named McMasters, whom none of us quite remembered. He kept his head down and ate slowly, with the deliberation of the prisoner. Most of us were dressed in some variety of business casual, but McMasters wore a dark suit and white shirt and dark tie. He looked like an undertaker, or a Secret Service agent, or maybe just the friendless nerd he evidently wanted to be. The rest of us were laughing about shared history we secretly regretted, or cooing over photos of Jake’s new baby, but McMasters never said a word: or not until later.

Well, it was Doreen who cast a pall over the conversation by bringing up Cassie Carmichael.

The thing was artfully done. She waited until dessert, a soggy tiramisu, sequel to our choice of entrees—unappetizingly small chunks of underdone chicken or overdone beef, drowned in unsavory sauces—university dining at its finest. A chilly October rain strafed the windows.

“So, what’s going on with Cassie?” Doreen asked, touching Jake on the forearm. “Are there any breaks we should know about?”

You should understand that Doreen meant by this to zing her ex-boyfriend, putting him in a position where any answer would sound foolish. Cassie was another classmate, a partner in one of the big Washington firms. She had vanished three weeks ago, and the press was primed for a scandal: Cassie’s practice was white collar crime, and her clients were a who’s-who of fallen Wall

---

\* Copyright © April 16, 2010 Stephen L. Carter. William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law, Yale University. Professor Carter is the author of seven non-fiction books and four novels.

Street titans. Jake was the public prosecutor for the District of Columbia. The investigation fell within his ambit. We had all seen him on the evening news.

Doreen's zinger missed its target. Jake seemed more amused than annoyed. He was big and bluff and tawny-haired, with an eternal boyishness that had evolved over the years into a lazy charm. Jake was never a classroom star, but, by the end of first semester of law school, Jake was on breezy first-name terms with half of his professors. I had always found Jake fascinating, more as specimen, I suppose, than as friend. Doreen had probably loved him. Walt, nowadays a venture capitalist, had never warmed to him.

Now, here he was again: thanks to Doreen's question, the center of attention. Jake was, as I said, the public prosecutor of the city of Washington, D.C., and the fact that the office was elected created a certain awe in the rest of us. We might have fine resumes, but none of us had ever been elected to anything.

"We're pursuing fruitful lines of inquiry," Jake said, with his shy, camera-ready smile. "My people are working around the clock."

*My people:* I liked that. Last month, Jake had arranged for me to come down and talk to his people, the sort of boondoggle that those in public life can hand out while dumping on those in the private sector who do the same thing. All the hundreds of alumni in the Washington area had been invited. A dozen or so had even showed up.

"That's all you can tell us?" said Doreen. "The same thing you tell the press."

"We're your friends," Walt lied. Walt had also been one of three candidates, all among the most brilliant in the class, whom Jake had somehow defeated for editor-in-chief of the law review. Lawyers are small-minded: we don't forget things like that. "You can tell us the truth."

"We'll keep your secrets," Doreen added, with heavy innuendo.

Jake toyed with his wineglass. He was enjoying himself. "Well, I suppose I could tell you about one break we've had."

"How big?" asked Doreen, now eager.

"We found her body."

Grim silence, as all of us took a moment to remember Cassie: her earnestness, her sweetness, her scholarly bent, the way nobody ever saw her without her stack of books under her arm, or with a man. None of us knew what to say. The pall of Cassie's mysterious disappearance already hung heavily over the reunion, but most people retained some hope that she might turn up. Now here was Jake, the prosecutor, announcing in his dulcet tones that her body had been found.

None of us knew what to say.

Walt, suddenly sober, was first to venture a question: "When?"

"Two days ago. We just made a positive identification this morning. We'll announce to the media tomorrow."

"How did she die?" asked Doreen.

"Murder," said Jake. One of his fists clenched. It was different, I supposed, investigating the violent death of someone you knew. "She was bludgeoned to death. We found her in Rock Creek Park."

“Bludgeoned,” I echoed, faintly, as my mind’s eye gathered images of blood spatter and smeary brains.

“But we were already making progress,” Jake continued. “We might even be on the verge of an arrest.”

“Who?” asked Doreen, always a gossip.

“How?” said Walt.

Jake waved a hand in a pretense of modesty. “You don’t need to hear the boring details of police procedure. You can read all about it in the papers in a day or two.”

“That soon?” Doreen persisted. She touched his arm. “Come on. Tell us who it is. Give us a hint, at least.”

\* \* \*

Jake had us in the palm of his hand now, and that was where he liked to keep his audiences: helpless in his grip. He kept pretending to a reluctance utterly feigned. It was plain by now that he intended to tell us the whole story. And so he did, an agonizingly detailed précis of exacting and extensive police work. Jake told wonderful stories. He had the gift. Every time we seemed to be losing interest, he would toss out a nugget of pure gold.

And then he told us about the big break.

“When we dumped Cassie’s cell phone records,” he said, “we came up with something a little bit weird.”

“What was that?” asked Doreen, fascinated in spite of herself.

Jake gave her a glance. “Turned out, Cassie had made seven calls in a week to a number at my office. A lawyer, pretty junior. A man named Sheehan. The last call was the day before the disappearance.” He sloshed his dessert around but never lifted the spoon to his mouth. “We couldn’t find a connection between them. Tony Sheehan went to law school here, but sixteen years after us. They didn’t have mutual friends. Sheehan was a married man, but we thought, maybe an affair. That would explain why Cassie never called him at home. The calls were all pretty short—I think the longest was about two minutes—so they could have been arranging to meet.”

“You must have interviewed Mr. Sheehan,” said Walt, desperate not to be left out.

“We tried. Only it turned out that Sheehan was on a cruise with his wife. Ship departed a few days before Cassie vanished. And here’s the interesting part. The calls kept coming after Sheehan left on vacation.” Jake sipped his drink. “Somebody else was answering that phone.”

Doreen’s look of interest had turned feral. I suspect she was thinking what I was thinking: this would be the perfect moment for the detective to disclose that he was the killer.

Alas, what Jake told us was more prosaic.

“Turned out that Cassie was talking to Sheehan’s assistant. Woman by the name of Ochoa. Not to Tony Sheehan at all.”

I ventured an objection: “Didn’t his assistant have her own line?”

“Sure. But at the prosecutor’s office we still do things the old-fashioned way. Believe it or not, secretaries still answer the phones for their bosses.”

Doreen again: “Okay. So why was Cassie talking to the assistant? Were they friends from school or something?”

Jake shook his head. “As far as we can tell, they’d never laid eyes on each other. Ochoa told us, until Cassie started calling the office, they’d never spoken to each other either. Never even heard of each other.”

That chilly dread returned. This was going to end badly. I could sense it. I wonder whether the others could.

Walt rose to the occasion. “Okay. Tell us why she was calling.”

Suddenly Jake smiled. Smiled like the man who held the winning hand, and was telling the best joke. The only trouble was, the smile fell several miles short of his eyes. He looked like a happy executioner.

“Because Sheehan and his assistant handle special events for our office. One of the burdens of being a junior lawyer.” He pointed across the table. “She was calling to find out when your talk was.”

I tapped my own chest. “My talk?”

Jake nodded. “Every day or two, she’d call. Just to confirm the time again. To make sure you hadn’t canceled. Ochoa said she sounded pretty neurotic—”

I tuned out for a moment, remembering now. Jake had issued the invitation for my visit but Tony Sheehan had made the arrangements. He had treated me with exaggerated deference, as if I were still his professor. And he had called just before he left on vacation, to tell me that I seemed to have a stalker, a woman who kept calling to make sure that the talk had not been canceled. He did not recall the name but said he would get it if I wanted it. I told him not to worry about it. Tony asked, joking, if I wasn’t afraid she would try to gun me down. I laughed, and told him I’m not a celebrity, just a law professor.

We let it go at that.

“But Cassie didn’t come to my talk,” I objected now. “Why would she call so many times if she wasn’t planning to attend?”

“That’s the point,” said Jake. “We think she was planning to attend.”

Once more, Doreen was ahead of the rest of us. “You’re saying she disappeared a night earlier than everybody thinks. Tuesday. Not Wednesday.”

Jake nodded. “We assumed Wednesday, because that was when the report came in. But your talk was Tuesday. She was seen on Monday morning. She called Sheehan’s office on Monday afternoon. Sometime between Monday afternoon and Tuesday evening, Cassie disappeared.”

Walt grinned savagely. At me. “Maybe *you* made her disappear”—a joke I did not consider particularly funny with a prosecutor sitting at the table.

Doreen laughed. So did squirrely McMasters. Jake did not. “We considered that angle.” Addressing me, not Walt. “We knew you’d been in the city since Sunday.”

“I came down for the Redskins game,” I said.

“Right. Stayed at the Marriott. You had meetings on Monday, but you were free on Tuesday. The two of you could have met up.”

“We didn’t.”

Jake nodded, but only in confirmation of his own logic. "Why did she keep calling? She seemed awfully anxious to see you. Maybe you were planning to have a drink after your talk. Go to your hotel, maybe."

I sat up very straight. "I'm a married man."

Jake shrugged. "If we were willing to suspect Cassie of an affair with Tony Sheehan, there's no reason we couldn't suspect her of an affair with you."

"But we weren't having an affair."

"The point is, the two of you could have met up on Tuesday."

The table went very still. For the first time all night, I had the full attention of my classmates. I cannot say that I liked it.

"On Tuesday," I said, carefully, "I went to the National Gallery of Art in the morning. I like to look at Monet's renderings of the cathedral at Rouen. I visited my sister in Bethesda in the afternoon. I had dinner with friends." I fought the urge to lick my lips. Here I was, at my own reunion, under interrogation by a man I considered a friend. "There wasn't really time for me to meet up with Cassie."

Four heads, including my own, swiveled back to look at Jake, waiting for the riposte we all knew was coming.

"The last reported sighting of Cassie was Tuesday morning," he said, tone now courtroom brisk. "A cab driver. We didn't release this detail to the media. The driver dropped her at the outdoor café a block from the National Gallery of Art. Where you just told us you spent Tuesday morning."

Again I was the center of attention. I felt as if breathing itself was a sin.

"At the gallery. Not the café."

"Video monitors have you entering the gallery at 9:42 and leaving at 10:05. Cassie was dropped off at ten sharp."

"That doesn't have anything to do with me."

"It fits together. You met Cassie at the café. You had an argument. Maybe you wouldn't leave your wife for her. Maybe she threatened to tell. Maybe she was doing the breaking up. Either way, you could have had a fight. You could have gone somewhere private, killed her, disposed of the body."

"That's absurd." I was trembling. I glanced around at the other faces. Plainly, they expected some stronger denial. "I drove from the National Gallery straight to my sister's."

"Where the doorman logged you in at 3:30. That's five hours after you left the museum. Plenty of time to do whatever you did."

Jake was on his feet. Somehow we all were. Clever of him to leave this moment until the room was deserted. Kind, too. He pointed at the squirrely man none of us quite remembered.

"Mr. McMasters here isn't a classmate. He's a detective on the Washington, D.C., force. The campus police are outside. You're going to have to come with us."

\* \* \*

The detective put a hand on my arm. I shook it off.

"Wait," I said. "I'm being set up."

“So was Oswald.”

I gestured at Doreen. “You’re my lawyer now. Represent me.”

Her eyes went wide. She covered her mouth, then uncovered it again. She shook her head. “I can’t. I’m sorry. I’m a securities lawyer, remember?”

“You’re the only private practitioner in the room. The only one who’s sober, anyway. Please, Doreen.”

She bit her lip, said nothing, nodded reluctantly. “Are you arresting my client?” she asked the floor.

“Yes,” said Jake.

“On what charge?”

“The murder of Cassandra Carmichael.” This time I was unable to shake off the detective’s hand, maybe because of the other cops in the room, helpfully cuffing my wrists behind me. The handful of classmates still in the room gave us a wide berth.

“Wait,” I said again, surprised to find tears welling. I had always imagined this moment, the humiliation, even the fury, but I had never considered the tears. “This is a mistake.”

Jake ignored me. He was talking shop with my lawyer. They would take me to the city jail, he said, and have me before a judge in the morning for extradition to Washington. I would be arraigned the day after tomorrow.

Doreen shook her head. “No,” she said. “He won’t.”

Jake’s eyebrows lifted. “I’m sorry?”

“You won’t be taking my client to jail, or back to Washington. As a matter of fact, you’ll be releasing him. Right now.”

“Why would I do that?”

“A moment,” she said, and drew Jake over to a corner. All of us tried to listen in, but they were old pros. They kept their backs turned, and their voices low. As Doreen spoke, Jake’s straight back began to bend, first a little, then a lot, the sign of a man in terrible pain. Doreen put a hand on his shoulder, whispered reassuringly. Jake shook his head. She kept on whispering. Jake finally nodded. He turned, made some kind of sign to McMasters.

The cuffs came off.

Jake gave me a look that said this wasn’t over. Doreen crossed her arms and glared at him. A moment later, the prosecutor and the cops were gone.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“Later,” she said, taking my arm firmly, leading me down the stairs and out onto the campus. For a few minutes, we passed silently through the chilly Gothic shadows. A freezing mist obscured the details.

“This is going to make the papers,” Doreen said. “I always try to make sure my clients know that. You weren’t arrested, they backed off and changed their mind, but people will talk. The reporters will have the story by tomorrow, your colleagues and students will read it on the Web, your family—”

“Just tell me what happened in there.”

“You dodged a bullet.”

“I know.” In the frigid dark, each streetlamp was its own yellow island of safety. We moved from one to the next, into the brightness then out again. “I want to know how.”

Doreen seemed to smile. Not happily. “Cassie and I were friends. Back in law school, we both had trouble with Jake. You didn’t know that, did you?” She did not wait for my answer, because we both knew she was telling secrets. “I was pretty blatant. Everybody knew about me and Jake. But nobody knew about Jake and Cassie. They were discreet.”

“All this while Jake was married.”

“Yes. But he was obsessed with Cassie. Here she was, a serious student, managing editor of the law review, trying to stay away from guys because they can wreck your career, but Jake chased her. Secretly, yes, but—well, let’s say, ardently.”

“I had no idea.”

“Nobody did.” She laughed, the sound tiny and bitter in the fog. “They had a fling. That was how we got to be friends. Cassie and I. Jake dumped me, I followed him, I saw them together, and, like silly girls everywhere, I blamed her and not him. But Cassie dumped him, and we got to be friends.” A pause. “Lifelong friends.”

Doreen lapsed into silence. Probably she was crying. For once I showed the wit not to interrupt.

“Cassie called me the night before she disappeared,” said Doreen. “She said she was going to meet her lover in the morning. To break up with him.” A beat. “Her married lover.”

I slowed down. “You told the police.”

“Of course I did. That’s what got them on to you. They figured she met her lover, they broke up, he killed her. When they saw the tapes from the Gallery—well, you see the rest.”

And I did: right down to why Doreen seemed unhappy about representing me, even briefly.

“I love my wife,” I said. “I wasn’t having an affair with Cassie.”

“Maybe you were. Maybe you weren’t. It had to be either you or Jake.”

I asked what had to be asked.

“Did Cassie ever tell you which of us it was?”

For the first time that night, Doreen looked me in the eyes. Her dark, handsome face was wet, from tears or the cold or both.

“We were friends,” said Doreen. “Of course she told me.”

She kissed my cheek, and vanished in the fog.

THE END

*[Author’s Note: This story was written in honor of Scott Turow. I should add for the benefit of readers that the Office of Public Prosecutor of Washington, D.C., does not exist. Crimes in the city are prosecuted by the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia.]*

