

THE ASSISTANT

You don't expect someone to die at lunch, especially not when you're there for your first meeting with a big client. My boss, Kevin, insisted we arrive early to prepare.

The restaurant was almost empty, a large, dimly-lit space that left enough room between the tables to prevent eavesdropping.

'With Oxley, privacy is a must,' Kevin said. 'He fired his last PR guys because they'd discussed details over the phone. On a train.'

'Let me guess. There was a journalist.'

'Isn't there always one? You can't be too careful when you work with a business like Bert's.'

We ordered water. Kevin, who hadn't eaten any breakfast, cracked a breadstick between his fingers and devoured it.

'I've heard he has a new assistant,' I said.

Kevin lifted his index finger and took a long gulp of water. I waited for him to finish chewing.

'Keep her in the loop, Anna. Assistants are the first to know when things go wrong.'

I eyed the remaining breadstick but decided against eating it so as not to spoil my appetite. As Kevin reached for it, there was a rustle at the door. We turned towards a large man in a business

suit and a rather petite woman in long tweed pants and a silk blouse. She had a dark fringe and cat-eye glasses, the kind reserved for artists and people with strong opinions.

‘Here they come,’ said Kevin.

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. A moment later, a waiter presented us with menus. Unlike Janice, who studied the content with an intense focus, her boss flipped through the initial pages. It seemed as if the idea of having soup or a salad disgusted him.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Roast chicken.’

‘The best in town, according to the reviews,’ said Janice, without diverting her gaze away from the menu.

‘My wife keeps on nagging me to cut down on meat, but I keep on telling her that I can’t look as if I’m on a diet, not in my line of business,’ Bert said. Kevin let out a polite chuckle. The waiter took our orders and returned with the drinks – water for Janice and me, coke for Kevin and a quarter of red for Bert Oxley. He cradled his glass.

‘So, what are we doing about the leak?’ he said. ‘Those vultures can’t wait to eat us alive.’

‘We’ll start with a press release,’ I said, ‘to clarify the leak was an unfortunate coincidence and you’re investigating.’

‘The news will go stale in a few days. The world will move on,’ said Kevin.

‘They’ll run out of names to call me. What was the last one again, Jan? Satan or killer?’

‘I believe they referred to killing in general terms,’ Janice said.

Bert pulled out his phone and read out loud, as he scrolled down.

‘Just listen. *Dangerous* pesticides poison drinking water in Taiwan.’

He flung his hands into the air.

‘As if it’s my fault people don’t read the instructions.’

He scrolled further down.

‘Where’s the last one, Jan?’

The muscles around Janice's eyes tightened. Slowly, she pulled out her phone. 'How long before AgroChems stop killing people?' she said.

Bert clapped.

'That's it. That's what we have to work with.'

'No problem,' said Kevin. 'We can spin this around.'

'I take it your lawyers are informed?' I said.

Bert licked his wine-stained lips.

'They're on it, alright,' he said. 'Bleeding me dry.'

At the sight of the waiter bringing our appetisers, Bert's mouth curled to the side. Foie gras for Bert, beef carpaccio for Kevin, smoked salmon for me and carrot and ginger soup for Janice. Bert pushed the pieces of salad to the side. The creases on Janice's forehead deepened as he sliced the foie gras with his fork.

'The soup looks nice,' I said to Janice, in an attempt to engage her. She smiled at me and scooped a few pieces of fried ginger off the top.

'We need to put an end to this cancer talk,' said Bert, with his mouth full. 'The shareholders want this taken care of, so make it your priority.'

'Absolutely,' I said. 'We did just that with Infestex. From what I understood, you only had one case, right?'

Bert Oxley swatted the air. 'Ages ago! They couldn't prove more than that. Of course, others saw easy money and ...'

Janice coughed, as though trying to clear her throat, or perhaps, to cover up an awkward situation.

'Everything alright?' I asked.

She put one hand in front of her mouth.

'I'm fine,' she said.

Her eyes watered. She patted her chest with a deer-like gesture, elegant and on the watch.

'You sure?' Kevin said.

'She's a rock,' he said. 'Aren't you, Jan?'

Her face turned paler.

'I'll be fine,' she said, in a choked voice.

Bert pushed Janice's empty glass closer to her and I filled it with water. She emptied it in a few gulps and beamed at me with gratitude.

'Good,' said Bert. 'It's bloody impossible to find a good assistant these days.'

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but the colour returned to Janice's cheeks. Soon after, the waiter brought our mains. He presented Bert with his roast chicken and rosemary potatoes, Kevin with steak tartar and fries, Janice with pumpkin gnocchi and sage butter and me with a mushroom risotto. We waited for Bert to start eating.

I was grateful for a few moments of silence, to enjoy the rich, earthy flavour of creamy mushrooms in my mouth. Kevin delved straight into his meat then took a break to fill up on the fries. Janice cut her gnocchi into tiny pieces, then chewed each one with pursed lips. Bert moaned with pleasure. I avoided looking in his direction so as to gain some time to eat without having to talk.

It was a few moments afterwards that I became aware of a peculiar silence. When I glanced back up, Bert was glaring at me. His eyes were wide open and stood out from his round face. Perhaps some risotto had escaped the spoon and landed on me? I examined my shirt for food waste but found none. Bert's face was flushed.

'Too spicy?' I said.

Only then did Janice turn to Bert. The sight of him unsettled her.

'Don't worry, Mr Oxley,' she said. 'I'll get your pills.'

She reached into his jacket pocket.

'What kind of pills?' I asked.

'For his heart.'

Bert's eyes glistened with tears. He struggled to say something but couldn't. With remarkable calm, Janice searched through his pockets.

'Maybe he forgot them?' I said.

'I put them in myself,' Janice said and tapped over his pockets. 'Mr Oxley, where is your nitroglycerin?'

Bert again tried to say something but still couldn't. He clutched his heart and staggered to one side like a drunk, before falling down. I rushed to his side and frantically searched through his pockets.

'Call an ambulance!' Kevin shouted.

Janice leaned closer to Bert. His mouth opened and closed, as his eyes darted from Kevin to me and back to Janice. All he managed to get out was a strangled 'Ssssh ...' His eyes were shot with blood.

Saliva gathered at the corner of Bert's mouth and started to ooze. His eyes bulged. Everyone in the restaurant was looking at us, paralysed by the shock. The waiter informed us the ambulance was on the way.

Janice tapped Bert gently on the cheek. 'Mr Oxley? Blink if you hear me,' she said. Bert continued to stare at the ceiling.

When the ambulance took Bert and Kevin away, I stayed behind with Janice.

'I don't get it,' she said. 'The pills were in his pocket.'

'Maybe he lost them?'

She shook her head.

'I checked before we left. His wife insists he has to carry a spare, but he ...'

'Did he change his jacket just before he left? Kevin sometimes does this,' I said.

'Maybe.'

Janice's face was pale. Her hands were still trembling when the waiter brought us some brandy. I downed mine and ordered another. Janice sat on the stool and stared blankly at her glass without touching it.

'I remember putting them there, before we left.'

'He'll be alright,' I said, but when my phone rang a few minutes later, restlessness nestled into the pit of my stomach.

Kevin was calling to tell me Bert Oxley had died of a heart attack. Janice understood what had happened before I told her.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘Will you be alright?’

She nodded, her eyes hollow, as though she was retreating into a blank space behind them.

‘I haven’t worked for him for that long.’

‘Still, I’m sure he ...’

They say not to speak ill of the dead, but I struggled to think of something positive to say about Bert. I signalled to the waiter for the bill.

‘Janice, would you like to share a cab?’

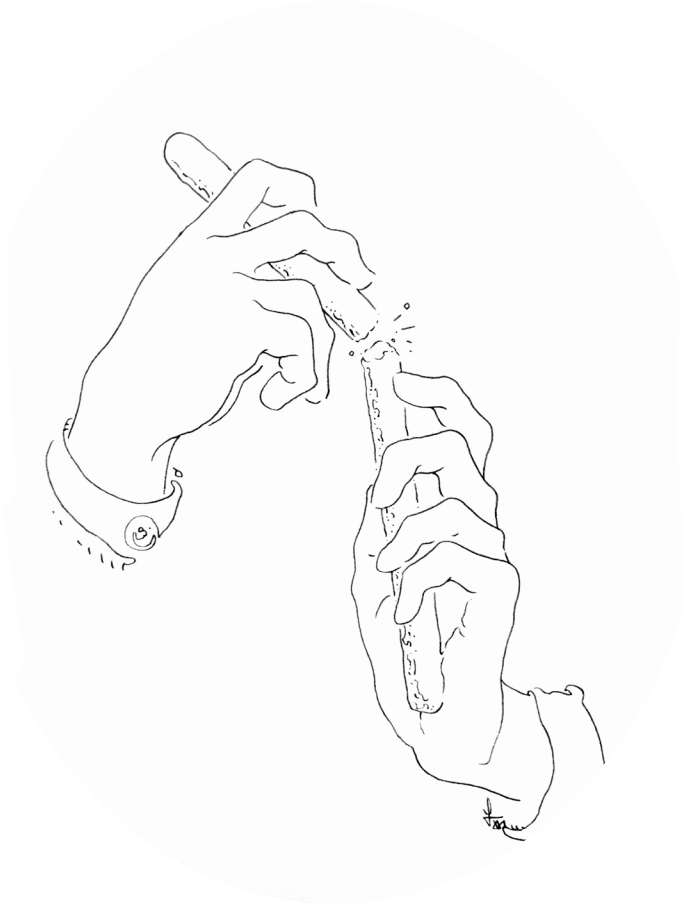
‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I’ll be alright.’

Despite my attempts to pick up the check, Janice insisted on paying for the brandy. She unzipped her purple purse, made of fake leather. As she pulled out her wallet, something rolled over inside her bag. I pretended to brush a piece of dirt off my pants so I could take a closer look.

There it was. A tiny bottle of pills with Oxley’s name and thick black letters spelling ‘nitroglycerin’. Janice caught my gaze and held it for a few moments. There wasn’t even a hint of surprise on her face.

‘You know what,’ she said. ‘I’d love to share that cab after all.’

This story has been highly commended on the Michael Terence Publishing Summer 2020 Short Story Competition and is published in ‘All Those Things That You Never Thought Mattered’, an anthology from Michael Terence Publishing.



JANICE'S PUMPKIN GNOCCHI

Most people have had at least one job where they had to work for a horrible boss like Bert Oxley. I hope some were able to face it with Janice's grace and tenacity, minus the murder, of course. When I tried to question Janice about her preferred foods, she was very evasive. So, I did what any self-respecting writer would do and followed her around until she got hungry and sat down to eat. The one thing I can tell you about Janice is that I've never seen her eat a piece of meat.

She does like a bit of variety in food, that's why this pumpkin gnocchi recipe comes with three different sauce options. The gnocchi themselves are my variation on existing recipes, many of which I liked, yet thought could be further improved. Roasting the pumpkin instead of boiling it, for example, reduces the moisture and intensifies the taste.

This recipe is for two good eaters or three normal eaters. The gnocchi also freeze very well and make for a delicious surprise when your fridge is empty and you're about to use the corkscrew to open a can of expired vegetables you found in the pantry.

Time needed: about 2 hours to make the gnocchi and another 15 minutes for the sauce

Pumpkin gnocchi ingredients for 6:

300g roasted pumpkin

150g roasted sweet potato (about 1)

620g plain flour, plus some for dusting

100g full-fat ricotta

30g grated parmesan cheese

1 egg

½ tsp salt

a good grind of pepper

olive oil

Warm the oven to 220 °C.

Scoop the seeds out of the pumpkin and cut it into slices as wide as your palm. There's no need to peel it, as you'll be scooping out the flesh once it's baked. Cut the sweet potato in half, add to the tray and drizzle the vegetables with olive oil. Roast for about 45-50 minutes, until they begin to brown.

Once the vegetables are done, scoop out the flesh and put it into a big bowl. Allow it to cool down before you mash it into a pulp with a hand mixer. Add salt, pepper, ricotta, parmesan and egg and mix. Gradually add flour until the dough comes together. The final amount of flour will depend on how moist your pumpkin mash is. Use a stand mixer with a dough hook on a low speed or do it by hand. If the pumpkin is on the moist side, you might need to add more flour. Eventually you'll get a dough that is soft but mouldable. When done, the dough might still be a bit sticky but if you dust it in more flour, it will be of a similar consistency to bread dough. If you don't make bread, then squeeze your earlobe – the dough should feel roughly the same.

Take a handful of dough and put it on a dusted surface. With your fingers, mould the dough into a roll, starting at the middle and expanding towards the edges. Once you get a roll about the

size of a hotdog, slice it into gnocchi-sized pieces. Press the back of a fork against each piece to create creases for the sauce to stick onto.

Boil the gnocchi in water – they are done after a few minutes or when they rise to the surface. Drain the gnocchi before adding them to a sauce of your choice. All three sauces are established recipes that I love making but can't take any credit for.

If you end up with some leftover pumpkin puree, spice it with some salt, pepper and a pinch of nutmeg, and eat as a side dish.



Sage Butter Sauce for 2

Time needed: 10 minutes

Ingredients:

25 sage leaves

50g butter

salt, pepper to taste

Melt the butter over a low flame and add cooked and drained gnocchi and sage leaves. Fry them until they start to brown, add salt and pepper to taste and serve while still hot.



Sorrentina Sauce for 2

Time needed: 15 minutes

Ingredients:

1 tbsp canola oil

1 brown onion (100 g), chopped

60g mozzarella, cut into pieces

300ml tomato puree
1 tbsp fresh oregano (or 1 tsp dried)
a few leaves of fresh basil
salt, pepper to taste

Fry the onion in oil and add salt and oregano. When the onion becomes transparent, add tomato puree and mozzarella. Allow the cheese to start melting, then turn off the heat. Add fresh pepper, pour the sauce over the gnocchi and decorate with fresh basil leaves.



Feta and Tomato Sauce for 2

Time needed: 15 minutes

Ingredients:

1 tbsp canola oil
2 cloves of garlic, finely sliced
150g feta, cubed
300g cherry tomatoes, halved
salt, pepper to taste

Fry the garlic in oil. Add cherry tomatoes. Allow the tomatoes to start falling apart, then add feta. After the cheese melts, take off heat and serve with the gnocchi.

