

The Valentines Day Massacre

by Gertrude Smodden

A week before Valentine's Day, a most unusual chocolatier set up shop in one of the many non-descript alleyways snaking through the bowels of the Financial District. Nestled between a shuttered pawn shop and a bar frequented by recently laid off day traders on Wall Street, there was little chance the store would catch the eye of a sweet-toothed brat or seduce a passing chocolate lover. Were someone to accidentally happen upon the place, the shop would have surely jumped out for its tasteful façade and jarring incongruity with the surroundings. On the store's freshly painted red door hung a placard of polished wood. Carved into the sign were elegant, sweeping letters that read, "Carmine's Confections." The next line informed potential customers of the shop's hours: "12:01 am to 12:30 am." Beside the door was a display window decorated minimally in a Valentine's Day theme with a scattering of red and gold confetti around a row of plum-sized chocolate hearts.

There had been no advertisement in the paper announcing a new candy store opening downtown and no online reviews previewed the shop's sweets for customers. Yet, the city's underground curiosities somehow always manage to reach the right ears. Before Carmine's even opened its doors that first night, the shadowy figures of a half-dozen men were already lined up outside the shop's red door, shifting nervously in the matte black night. Exactly at 12:01, the eagerly watched crimson door was thrown ajar by an entirely bald and slightly out of breath rotund man with puffs of white cotton candy hair coming out of his ears. With a proud satisfied air, he introduced himself as The Carmine of Carmine Confections.

Carmine looked the picture of a jolly candy shop owner, but exhibited none of the cherub-cheeked lovability one expects from such characters. Dressed elegantly in a crisp white shirt, grey vest and matching pants, he displayed the careful decorum of a banker. His darting eyes had the alertness of an illegal immigrant selling fake watches out of suitcase on Canal Street.

The shop owner thrust his lollipop head into the shadowy alleyway and counted his customers by the spasming neon light above the back door of the adjacent bar. With an impatient wave of his chubby hands, he ushered the half dozen men out of the February frost, down a tight, lightless hallway, and into an empty, square room with a roaring fireplace on one end. On the other end of the room, stood an old fashion pewter scale as tall as a human being. The air was saturated with the smell of melting chocolate, fresh mint, and roasted macadamia nuts, but there was no evidence of the sweet stuff. Light from the infernal maw of the fireplace illuminated the four walls of the empty room fitted from floor to ceiling with tiny cubicles containing glass vials filled with colored liquids.

The men, who prior to this night had never met, huddled unnaturally close to each other in the middle of the room. With a big, unnatural smile revealing a set of sharp, pointy teeth, Carmine cut the silence: "Who's going to place the first order?" The tone of his voice had the soothing quality one hears from a used car salesman who would never buy car from his own lot. The men looked blankly at each other. When no one spoke, Carmine urged again, "Someone's got to go first here."

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Stepping out of the huddle, a man in a blue baseball cap rasped, "How does this exactly work?" He was badly in need of a shave and one side of his shirt, which had not recently come in contact with an iron, had come untucked. He shuffled about as if the fatigue in his bones had broken him. Well after midnight, it was possible that he had just rolled out of bed and not bothered to scrub up. But his haggard look, like a frazzled bird caught in a thunderstorm, couldn't just be blamed on self-neglect. Someone or something had clearly been ruffling this bird's feathers.

Carmine shot his nervous customers a piteous smile and began regurgitating the company spiel that he had recited so many times before. "Carmine's Confections is a sweet shop that specializes in creating one-of-a-kind, customized chocolates for men of *refining* tastes, men who want to give the women in their lives an improving sweet morsel." He paused and waved his tootsie roll-shaped fingers in the air as if what he was about to say next was highly conceptual. "My motto is simple: If you're not happy with your woman, give her chocolate! Gentlemen, this is the one chocolate that won't go straight to your woman's hips, unless you want it to, of course."

"M-m-my wife can't cook," stammered a tall lanky man nervously from the back of the room. "Do you have a chocolate for that?"

"Look around, sir, do you see any chocolate or even a scrap of sugar lying around? No! And that's because only you can decide the ingredients in your individualize chocolate," Carmine replied. "To set foot into Carmine's is to acknowledge that there is no such thing as the perfect woman. When placing your orders just remember, gentlemen, there isn't a woman in world without some irritating, nagging flaw. But what looks like a blemish to one man, can be a beauty mark in the eyes of another."

"Ok, then in my chocolate, I'd like the ingredient that will make my wife a good cook," the tall scrawny man said.

"Certainly," Carmine said scribbling something down on a strip of paper like a common restaurant waiter. "And what ingredient would you like in its place?"

"You mean if I want to do away with my wife's shortcomings in the kitchen, I'll have to accept some other trait in its place?" the skinny man asked.

"Yes, another trait, more specifically another flaw, must take its place," Carmine corrected. "And it can't be just any fault that you conjure out of thin air, either. You must swap your wife's inadequacy with another customer, another man who wishes to rid his woman of a particular failing. More importantly, when I weigh these two flaws, the scale must perfectly balance, in other words the weight of the two ingredients must be equal."

Carmine stepped to the side, so his customers could see the scale. The towering apparatus dwarfed the shop owner. Its polished pewter body glittered in places reflecting the sparks from smoldering fireplace. There was a heart-shaped crest at the base of the scale identical to the design of the chocolates in the display window outside.

"What could possibly equal a woman who can't cook?" the skinny man wondered out loud. "I am a man trapped in a perpetual state of hunger. I'm tired of pushing my food around in my plate, and sneaking it to the dog, who by way won't even come

near a plate of food cooked by my wife. I'm tired of making pleasant faces to hide my up-chuck reflex.

"My girlfriend hates my friends," retorted another guy barely old enough to have the four whiskers on his chin. "I take her shoe shopping; I watch romantic movies with her; I even bought her tampons once. But that's not enough! She has to monopolize all my time. How can I explain to her that sometimes a man just needs to hang out with the guys to feel like a man."

"She can have my manhood, for all I care," an elderly gentleman in a perfectly pressed white collared shirt said morosely. "That's the only thing I have left and I'd even give that up if I could save my home." The other men in the room grew quiet and listened intently to the sad old man.

"My wife's addiction to online shopping has driven us to bankruptcy. I took away her credit cards but those loan sharks gave her others she keeps hidden from me. I cancelled the internet in our home, but she went to the local library and bought a \$5,000 vacuum cleaner. We have a perfectly good vacuum cleaner already! Most of the stuff she orders just stays in boxes, she doesn't even open them. She just has to keep buying. I've taken out a third mortgage on our home, I work two jobs, but I'm still can't cover all the bills. Last week, the bank threatened to foreclose on our home. What's my manhood, without my home?"

When the elderly gentleman finished his story, some of the men had tears in their eyes, others showed support by patting him sharply across the back.

"Well, my wife won't let me watch sports," another customer called out, eliciting some laughs and lightening the mood a bit. "Every Monday night it's the same thing. At a critical moment in the game she'll come and stand right before the T.V. and demand I immediately take care of some lame chore. It would do no harm to anyone to wait until after the game, but if I don't do it right that second she'll start crying and throw fits! And I can't stand to see her cry. So, I do it; I sacrifice my Monday night football for her, because I love her. But last weekend, during the Superbowl, she made me go to her sister's wedding. That's when I cracked."

A woman's lack of understanding toward the sports-obsessed male is a common problem bordering on relationship cliché. Still, all the men in the room agreed that in this case the woman had taken it too far.

"No, that can't be as bad as a woman who is insatiable in bed," screeched a short businessman in an expensive looking suit.

"My secretary is a man-eater, a sexual cannibal, who will not stop until I'm totally spent. Two Viagras and eight hours later, the woman tells me, 'I'm not satisfied,'" the excitable business man cried. "With sexual harassment laws today, I can't very well fire her. At the same time, I can't bring myself to end it either. It would be like admitting I'm not a man at all!"

"It's just that when she goes at it, sometimes I fear for my life. But that doesn't concern this broad at all! I could fall asleep, I could die beneath her, and she'd still keep going!," the businessman said.

"At least you can sleep," the disheveled man in the blue baseball cap snorted sarcastically. "I've been married 22 years to a woman who snores like an ox. From our wedding night onward, her wretched snoring has kept me from getting a decent night's sleep. We've tried everything – from making her sleep on her side to putting her in a different room, Eastern medicine and Western medicine, gizmos and gadgets – she can still bring the house down with her racket.

"I could have left her, of course, but it seems wrong to leave a woman for something she does while asleep. Do away with her snoring, and she's a model wife," the man admitted.

"And that's exactly the sentiment I want you all to realize!" Carmine said, slapping his thigh. "By coming here, you are admitting that you, more or less, all love your wives and lovers. You are pretty much happy in your relationships, except for a few kinks here and there.

"With the divorce rate being what it is today, husbands and wives need no good reason at all to call it quits. The kids are dating on the internet and avoiding the messiness of real life dating altogether!" He threw up his hands in desperation. "There are scores of couples out there who will go through relationships never arguing over a raised toilet seat.

"But you are not one of those men. Despite your problems, you are sticking by your woman, and what's more, you're helping her find her better self!" Carmine said emphatically. "Isn't that what being in a relationship is all about? Inspiring each other to be better? But sometimes, as you have all discovered, you need some help. Some see a relationship therapist, others turn to religion, but you came to Carmine's. So let's figure out what kind of chocolate will bring out the *better* in your better half."

The whole time, his customers had been discussing their women trouble, Carmine had been scribbling furiously on strips of white paper as thin as ticker tape. At this point, he walked over to the massive scale that seemed a relic from Gulliver's adventures in Brobdingnag, and thrust his short arms in the air. In either hand, a strip of paper with illegible scrawls fluttered like a tiny white flag of surrender. When he released the scraps, the pieces spiraled silently on to their respective weighing plates. The men watched intently as the heavy metal pointer screeched into action. It jeered to the right and then tumbled to the left, and then settled clearly past the middle mark indicating the heft of the right sheet of paper.

Carmine shook his head, and repeated the ceremony with a different combination of scraps. After a few tries, success! The dial settled right on the "0." Carmine took the pieces of paper, went over to his wall of potions, plucked out two vials and disappeared down the dark corridor for some time. When he came back, he was holding two chocolate hearts. He handed one to the disheveled man in the blue cap and the other to the tall skinny man. And, so, it was assumed the man with the snoring wife would sleep after 22 years and the skinny man would finally get a decent meal.

All of the men had success that night. According to the scale, the guy who's girlfriend didn't like his friends got to swap with the man who's wife wouldn't let him watch sports; and the elderly gentleman happily accepted a sexually ravenous woman in order to save foreclosure on his home.

As the nameless alley in front of Carmine's emerged from behind the magical veil of night into a blue-orange tinged dawn, the old man exited the chocolate shop with a small brown package under his arm and for the first time since his marriage smiled contentedly at the thought of his own mortality. "When I die," he thought to himself, "there is no better way to go than in my own home, lying in my bed, while screwing my wife." The businessman, who was formerly the husband of the woman who couldn't get enough in bed, also stepped out of Carmine's with a brown parcel and a pep in his step. As he called his accountant and told him to cancel his wife's credit cards and take her name off the joint accounts, he could already start to feel his manhood piecing itself together.

In the days leading up to Valentine's Day, rumors of Carmine's Confections and its "improving" chocolate hearts created a frenzy among the men in the city. The buzz about Carmine's, like the fantastic claims often heard about wonder drugs or cure-all magic potions, had overstated the potency and power of the chocolate hearts. Receiving faulty information, most men ended up in some other shop in the city selling Valentine's Day gifts, and when they whispered at the counter for "those little chocolate hearts that'll fix my marriage" or "for those sweets that'll transform my girlfriend into a person I can tolerate," they usually walked out with a box of fat free chocolates and a set of elastic panties that claimed to simultaneously lift a woman's buttocks and suck in her tummy.

Those who were lucky enough to find Carmine's non-descript locale lined up for hours in advance just to have a shot at entering the odd little shop. Since Carmine's only opened its doors 29 minutes each day, only a handful of men got to place their orders, and even fewer got to walk out with a brown parcel after consulting the scale. But the word was out that all over the city men were feeding their women these chocolate hearts and seeing results.

A man whose wife hated his mother suddenly became desperate to have a baby and began bonding with her mother-in-law over child rearing. Across town a woman, who after a fourth miscarriage, was still doggedly determined to have a child, gave up the idea entirely one morning and realized her husband's mother was a real bitch.

Men had heard of a slender young woman in Brooklyn who, after she ate one of Carmine's concoctions, threw away all her mini skirts, gave up all sweets, and joined a gym. Meanwhile, somewhere in Long Island, a body-conscious curvaceous woman allowed herself a small bite of a chocolate heart on account of the fact that it was a present from her boyfriend on Valentine's Day, and to the delight of her man, demanded he take her on a shopping spree for backless shirts with plunging necklines.

Business was good at Carmine's. By the time Valentine's Day came around, the wonders of Carmine's chocolate hearts was on the lips of man in every office, bar, and strip club in the city and the surrounding boroughs. At 12:29 a.m. on Valentine's Day, Carmine was touting his proud record of success while handing out chocolate hearts to the last two customers of the night – a guy who wanted his fiancé to stop lying and another gentleman who wanted his lover, a compulsive blogger, to stop

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revealing unflattering details of their sex life on the internet – when a young man stumbled into the store and fell to his knees before the massive scale.

“You have got to help me,” the guy begged. “I can’t lose her, I can’t.”

Carmine helped the distraught man to his feet and asked him what the trouble was. The young man was dressed casually in an old pair of jeans and a baggy t-shirt. He had a desperation in his voice and love struck look in his eyes.

After he had caught his breath, the young man laid out his case more calmly. “Not too long ago, my girlfriend gave me an ultimatum – propose by Valentine’s Day or it’s over, she said. I had every intention of getting down on one knee and asking her to be my wife today. I even bought her the ring she had her heart set on. But a month ago, I lost my job, and I had to pawn the ring. She doesn’t know and I can’t tell her, but I can’t afford to get married either. Do you see the position I’m in?”

“Certainly, but...” Before Carmine even finished, the young man began to panic again.

“Please, don’t turn me away. I’m desperate. I can’t lose her. You have to help me.”

Carmine reached out to the young man, quivering with anxiety, and patted his back in sympathy. “I realize this is disturbing to you, but my hands are tied,” Carmine said gently, trying to subdue the impatience in his voice. “I don’t accept any customers after 12:30 a.m., and even if I made an exception this once, there is no guarantee that we would happen up on a man willing to swap something equaling your troubles.”

“Oh, but there must be something you can do,” the man cried pathetically.

“Actually, no, there isn’t,” Carmine replied coldly. “Ultimately, it is not in my hands, sir. It is up to the scale.”

“Perhaps I can be of some assistance.” Carmine and the young man jumped at the startling voice of a third gentleman, who had been surreptitiously listening to their conversation from the dark hallway just outside the room.

“We are closed!” Carmine informed with obvious indignation. “Did you not see the sign on the door?”

“My sincere apologies,” the man said upon entering the room. The light from the fireplace spotlighted a strikingly handsome man, impeccably dressed in a sharp black overcoat of the finest quality Italian wool. “But I do think you both need to hear me out.”

Something in this gentleman’s voice commanded the attention of both Carmine and the young man. He turned to the young man and said, “We are the same, you and I. We are both fools in love. But our women couldn’t be more different and our situations are exactly opposite. On your hands you have a woman eager to get married but you have no money. And I, I have all the money in the world, and the object of my affections won’t even see me.

"My love is a career-minded woman. In her field of work, she is what they call a 'shark,' ruthless in her tactics and remorseless of the devastation she causes in her wake. I know her nature all too well because she happens to be my lawyer and my business has flourished because of her cutthroat practices.

"It may seem unnatural, I know, but the woman drives me wild," the man in the expensive coat went on. "But, do not take me lightly when I say, there has never been a woman so cold and unfeeling. It is no exaggeration to say that she loathes not just me, but all men and is hostile to the very idea of love. Any suggestion of romance and she snaps, turns violent. She has sent men who have asked her out on dates to the hospital. I once made the mistake of asking her out for coffee. She took out a gun from her purse and nearly shot me."

"I am a very rich man and there is nothing I've not been able to buy and no woman I haven't been able to woo," the man said. "And just because I can't have her, just because I can't even ask her to have coffee at the risk of my own life, it drives me wild with longing. She makes me want to risk it all and marry her. I can pay you whatever you ask, but I need you to consult that scale. Hell, if it works, I'll even pay for this poor guy's chocolate."

Before the man in the fancy coat walked into his store that day, Carmine thought he had heard of the most bizarre and ugliest when it came to female flaws. Hearing the gentleman's generous offer, Carmine's eyes lit up and his annoyance instantly melted into a sugary, conciliatory tone. He took out two strips of paper from his pocket and scribbled his illegible hieroglyphics. Then, without another word or his usual ceremony, he approached the scale and casually dropped each strip onto a weighing tray. All eyes were locked on the dial as it screeched into motion and wavered from left to right undecidedly toying with the fates of men. For a moment it seemed one man's troubles were heavier than the other's by a hair, and all the air seemed sucked out of the room. But then the dial slowly settled on "0." As the men hugged each other in the empty room by the light of the fireplace, Carmine disappeared into the recesses of his store with his potions and scraps, and returned momentarily with two brown parcels.

The morning after Valentine's Day the top story in the local tabloid screamed of an unthinkable tragedy. "Valentine's Day Massacre! Lunatic Woman Guns Down Lovers In Romantic Restaurant; 15 Dead, 30 Wounded," the headline screamed.

Couples squirmed at breakfast tables across the city as they pored over the gory details of the crime in their morning papers. The night before a woman walked into one of the city's most romantic restaurants and systematically went from table to table shooting couples at point blank range, until the police took her down in a blaze of bullets. The "lunatic" was an otherwise well-liked Harlem woman named Juniper Jones, who worked as a music teacher and had no prior record of violence.

Minutes before the shooting spree, Ms. Jones was seen in a café across the street, where she met her longtime boyfriend, David Harvey, a recently laid-off architect. According to witnesses, the two looked very much in love. The waitress who served the couple had seen Mr. Harvey present Ms. Jones with a box wrapped in brownish paper. The waitress remembered this, because she thought it showed little effort on the man's part to wrap a Valentine's Day gift in such unceremonious wrapping paper.

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Strangely, the waitress did not see what was in the brown parcel. In fact, there is no evidence that Ms. Jones even opened the alleged gift. However, whatever transpired in the next few minutes is the key to cracking the mystery behind the Valentine's Day massacre, say stumped authorities.

Something happened in the moments before Ms. Jones stormed out of the café in a violent rage and when she entered the restaurant across the street to ensue her murderous rampage.

A sinister mood of distrust gripped the city the day after Valentine's Day, as the victims were identified and families claimed their loved ones. Two of the victims were millionaire businessman John Dorian of Dorian Cosmetics and his stunning lawyer Jennifer Dupry. When they rifled Mr. Dorian's pockets for ID, on account of his mangled face, they found a velvet box with a 10 carat diamond ring, most likely meant for Ms. Dupry.

There were many unanswered questions in this act of pure hatred. Most imminent on everyone's mind was, how did a nice woman like Ms. Jones come in possession of a Beretta Tomcat revolver? Although clearly the killer had snapped, the coroner examining Ms. Jones' body ruled out physical trauma and drug use as a cause.

A coroner's job depends on meticulous inspection of the corpse and attention to details that go unnoticed by most. And, so, while inspecting the Valentine's Day killer's body the coroner casually jotted down, without thinking and just for the sake of thoroughness that her breath smelled of chocolate, mint and macadamia nuts.