

## Eye of the Tornado

By Laura H Grevel

It was May, 1985, the verdant spring my finance professor said, “You’re all in this for the money, aren’t you?” Mimicking the class response, I raised my arms, hooted and stomped my feet – because I had just graduated from business school and been offered a job in stocks and bonds at the Premier City National Bank. Smirking at my compounding fortune, I did a little shimmy and kicked my salesgirl pumps high into the air. Never again would I have to sell those danged Cutco Knives door-to-door. Or badger deadbeat customers to pay up. Giddily I whooped, “Get goin’, girl!”

I grabbed my party list of 105 close friends and danced to the phone in the kitchen. I knew I could call them all within one hour and 25 minutes, if I mostly intercepted answering machines. I looked at the list and nodded knowingly at the first name, Mary Snake. Her real name was Melissa Rattle, but I liked to use the old high school nicknames. They gave me a delicious feeling of immoral power. I dialled Melissa’s number, wiggled my bare toes, and gazed out the window where the sun twinkled through the leaves of the big pecan tree down onto my newly planted garden – my own little paradise!

At only four rings, Melissa answered and I zipped through my pre-rehearsed, gotta-be-quick spiel. Of course, she said she’d love to come to one of my World Famous Sunday Brunch Extravaganzas.

I should have signed off quickly, but I heard a catch in her voice and asked how she was.

A sigh. “Not good. You know my dad was in prison?”

I bit my lip and glanced at my wristwatch.

“I guess I’m just a Pollyanna – that’s what my family says – Mom, my brother, Aunt Delores, Uncle Matt. I thought, Dad will get out of prison and everything will be all right. He and Mom will be together again and happy.”

Holding the phone in the crook of my neck, I put my party list down on the fruit bowl and said, “Weeell . . .,” to buy time. Quietly, I detached the spring that held the screen door taut, stepped out, pulled the long phone cord around, and sat down on the stoop. The sun was marching upward, the breeze dying. My little paradise suddenly looked tense; the pepper and tomato plants stood bolt upright.

“Uh, maybe you are a Pollyanna, Melissa.”

“That’s what they say. What I thought would happen, didn’t. Dad was released last Thursday, and – I hope you’re sitting down – he went straight to Waco and killed his cellmate’s parents.”

“He what . . . ?”

“You see, the cellmate had asked him to do it, they’d planned it. Dad knew where to go and what to do.”

I shook my head. The sun’s glare burned, and the garden and I hunkered down. “I’m sorry, Melissa.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, too. I feel so sorry for those people he killed. I can’t believe he did that.”

“It is hard to believe.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

“It’s true.”

“Well, that’s right. After all, Dad had never murdered anyone before. Did you hear why he went to prison?”

I squirmed, put my forehead in my hand. “Was it robbery?”

“Yes. Dad must’ve been desperate. His business wasn’t going well, Mom’s wasn’t either. He went through this period where he was acting strange and wouldn’t talk to anyone. Sure enough, he’d started robbing banks. I wish he’d talked to us. Even if he’d had to declare bankruptcy – that would’ve been better.”

“Bankruptcy does carry a lighter sentence.” I bit my tongue, felt the air growing heavy in the sun’s determined rays. My eyes searched the garden for my baby lettuce plants. The day before, they had been bright green, tender, innocent. They had disappeared.

“I don’t understand. A sentence . . . for bankruptcy?”

“It was a bad joke, Melissa. I didn’t know what to say.”

“Oh. Sorry all this is so shocking.”

“No, no, it’s okay.”

“It gets worse,” she whispered.

“Worse than murder?” I whispered back. While she went on about the failure of her parents’ businesses, I flapped my elbows to allow air to get to my sticky underarms. The tomato blossoms winked their wicked yellow eyes at me.

Behind me, a housemate entered the kitchen, said, “Hey...” I turned and she pointed at the phone and then herself. I shook my head, grimaced, and put a cautioning finger to my lips. She backed off.

Melissa asked, “Do you have to go?”

“Only 104 people still to invite. No, I have more time.”

“Oh, thank you! I just need to talk to somebody. You can’t imagine how I feel.”

“You said it gets *worse*?”

She sighed again. “I just spoke to my mom. Right now their house is surrounded by a SWAT team and a helicopter. My dad arrived late last night – snuck in – the police have been on his trail since the bodies were found.”

I pictured her parents’ modest house: rectangular, one-story, white, built in the 40’s and nothing added on since; in the yard a few small trees and some bushes, a lawn, a driveway, a one-car garage. The street lined with similar houses. All of it boring. But today, the street full of police cars, cops in combat gear. A helicopter chopping the space above. A loudspeaker: *Come out with your hands up!*

The mosquitoes had arrived. I batted a hand around my naked shanks. “Gee, Melissa. What are you . . . going . . . to do?”

“I don’t know. They’re going to catch him. They’ll give him the death penalty.”

The mosquitoes were nipping, the tomatoes and peppers were writhing like snakes, my eyes blurring in the humid air. “Most likely.”

“Uuuuhh,” she murmured.

“Don’t see a way out.” I slapped at a mosquito. “Ouch!”

“What was that?”

“Mosquitos!”

“Oh, gosh. I better let you go. And you still have to call people.”

“104,” I whispered.

“Woooow! Well, your brunches are really great. I appreciate your talking to me.”

“No problem, Mary.” I froze. “I mean, Melissa.”

“Mary!” Melissa repeated. “Mary Snake! That was the nickname you gave me back then.”

“Sorry!”

“No, no, those were happier days. Thanks for reminding me.”

After she hung up, I stomped out and confronted the conspiring tomatoes and peppers. I faced the upsetting blank space where the lettuce had been, examined the few remaining bitten down stems, and watched a pill bug crawl along and stop at the first of a row of marigolds standing stiff sentinels in front of the tomatoes. Sweat trickled down my sides.

Then, loudly, I heard the weary earth's cry, a crow's hoarse scold, the infernal roar of the nearby interstate. I saw clearly the scene at the eye of the hurricane: the helicopter circling, the SWAT team prowling close to a small house in which a father sat frozen by despair, a mother sat confounded. She was the very customer who had not paid me the \$39.26 for two Cutco Knives, who had avoided my repeated phone calls, who finally just the week before, answered brazenly with, "Mrs. Rattle is not here. May I take a message?" I had known the voice. Today, I identified the tone--of a wife, a mother, a woman. Surrounded.

That steamy moment, my calculating heart promised to forgive just that one petty debt.

Then, quickly, I dialled the next number.

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