

Secretary's Day by Peggy Christie

"Ms. Phillips? We need to have a little talk."

Linda Phillips sighed, picked up her steno pad, and walked into Mr. Anderson's office. She closed the door behind her. Heaven forbid anyone should find out what 'having a little talk' was really all about. She sat down and looked up at him, waiting for the bomb to drop.

"Linda, it seems my report for the 1st quarter sales budget has been, uh, misplaced. Since you were the last one to work on it, you must have lost it. Fortunately, for all involved, I assured the Executive Director that you would retype the report and have it on my desk by 11:00am."

Linda looked at her watch and grimaced. It was 9:55am. She had exactly one hour and five minutes to retype the eight-page budget spreadsheet. Mr. Anderson cleared his throat nervously and played with his tie. Linda clenched her jaw and glared at him. Her jaw muscles bunched and unbunched as she reined in her anger.

It wouldn't help to get mad. It wouldn't make a difference if she pointed out that at five o'clock last night, she put the report directly in his hands. It didn't matter to him because he never made mistakes. She did. She always lost the report, spilled coffee on his keyboard, or erased the whole presentation ten minutes before a meeting.

That, of course, is not the truth. The truth is simply this: Gary Anderson is an asshole. He was born an asshole and he'll die an asshole. The man could not find his dick with a flashlight and a map. The only two things in this life that he ever did very well were taking the credit and placing the blame. It's because of *his* brilliance that the client accepted the proposal and earned the company an extra two billion dollars in revenue. It was because of someone else entirely that the proposal fell apart and went swirling down the toilet.

Linda remembered the days before Gary Anderson. Carl Wright was the Account Manager then and she was his Secretary. She didn't quibble over the title of Secretary or Assistant because she was happy. Mr. Wright always treated her well. *He* asked *her* if she wanted coffee when he was getting some for himself. If she was swamped with work, he was perfectly capable of making copies for himself, even the two-sided kind with staples. He remembered her birthday, her work anniversary, and especially, Secretary's Day.

Mr. Wright had worked for the company for 18 years. He was respected and well-liked by everyone. He had a great head for business and was a genius at putting people at ease. But, because of some botched pitch for new business, headed up by Gary Anderson coincidentally, Mr. Wright was fired and sent on his merry way. Linda cried the day he left, thinking things would never be the same around the office without him. The next day, when Mr. Anderson took over, she knew the good old days were gone forever.

Linda remembered Gary Anderson's first day as Account Manager as if it were yesterday. He came strutting into the office like a peacock rattling his feathers for a peahen's loving attentions. He called a department meeting that afternoon to spell out how "Gary's Team" would be structured and how things were going to be different from now on. They would all

work together. Everyone would have a say, a voice. No one was insignificant. He would take care of them and everyone would get the credit when a job was done well. "There's no 'I' in Team, is there?" That was one of Gary's favorite sayings. Of course, after the team got to know him a little better, they realized that there may not be an 'I' in team, but there definitely was a 'me' and that's all that Gary Anderson was interested in.

That was a little over a year ago. Since then, Linda had been ignored, denied vacation time, and pushed aside. Her ideas were always laughed at, her voice silenced on more than one occasion. Not by "the team" of course but by the leader himself. Gary Anderson looked at Linda as a necessary evil. He couldn't type a presentation or even make copies by himself without destroying something. Linda was his link to the finished product. Once the work was completed, when the presentation or budget report was polished to a high shine, Gary swooped in and stole all the glory - from everyone. As far as Gary was concerned, Linda was just a glorified coffee maker with exceptional typing skills.

After she finished retyping the budget report, and other documents that had mysteriously disappeared, Mr. Anderson poked his head out of his office. "Ms. Phillips? We need to have a little talk."

Glancing up from her computer screen, Linda nodded. She saved her work and walked into Mr. Anderson's office. Closing the door behind her, she prepared for the worst - again.

"Ms. Phillips, it seems someone has broken the copy machine because the original, and only, copy of the marketing presentation was destroyed in it this morning. Now, I know it wasn't your fault, because you were retyping the report you lost earlier. However, you will need to re-create the presentation before the end of the day tomorrow."

Linda frowned. "But, Mr. Anderson, don't you remember? I'm taking tomorrow off to go visit my sister."

"Well, I don't want you to miss out on that. I guess this will need to be done before you leave tonight."

"But Mr. Anderson...."

"Good. That's settled then. Now, you better get back to work. You've got a lot to finish up."

"Yes, sir." Linda muttered. She quietly closed his door and sat back in her cube. She leaned over and laid her head on the desk. After a few minutes, she began to thump her forehead in a quiet rhythm of frustration against the cool surface of her desk. Sitting up, she sighed and turned to her computer. The little clock in the corner noted 2:57pm. She grabbed the mouse and clicked. Nothing happened. She clicked it a few more times and just as she's was about to rip it out of the computer, a little message window popped up: "Systems Error. Retry? Reboot? Cancel?" She clicked on "Retry" and got the same message. Clicking on "Cancel", the message popped up again. "Of course," she groaned.

As she rebooted her computer, Linda looked up to see Mr. Anderson walking past in his coat and hat. "Good night, Linda. I'm all caught up on *my* work so I thought I'd cut out early. Enjoy your visit with your sister. See you on Monday morning." As he breezed out the front door to the elevators, Linda gave him the finger.

#####

After an exhausting and miserable weekend, Linda shuffled into work Monday morning. She'd had a huge fight with her sister on Saturday night about... well, what didn't they fight

about? It started with whether to have pizza or hamburgers for dinner and ended with her sister accusing her of not spending enough time with their mom at the nursing home. Linda stomped out of her sister's house and drove back home. Halfway there, while fuming over the whole ordeal, she almost fell victim to a crater-sized pothole, gaping in the middle of the road like the toothless maw of some asphalt beast. Of course when she swerved to avoid that, she scraped her car along the steel barrier to her right, causing sparks to fly through the air like confetti. At least it was still drivable, albeit scarred.

Monday plugged along at its usual tortoise pace. At noon, Mr. Anderson announced he was taking a long lunch, to celebrate his glorious victory over signing up some new business this morning with his brilliant marketing proposal (never mind that he did none of the research, writing, or presenting of said proposal). Around two thirty, he stumbled back to work, slurred a greeting to Linda, and locked himself in his office.

At about three forty five, one of the other secretaries, Cathy, went home with the flu. Cathy's boss, the Creative Director, asked Linda if she could help type up a presentation that needed to be ready for an 8:00am meeting the following morning. Of course, she'd be happy to help. Yes, she understood that she wouldn't get out of here until later this evening. Fine. Great. No problem.

At 7:30, Linda was packing up her bag and getting ready to go home. She's seen neither hide nor hair of Mr. Anderson since 2:30 that afternoon. She knocked softly on his office door.

"Mr. Anderson?" She rapped a little louder this time. "Mr. Anderson, are you all right?"

She heard a grunt and groan, a snort, the sound of papers sliding off the desk, and a loud *whump*. After a few mumbled curses and some more banging, a disheveled Mr. Anderson opened his door. Clearing his throat, he looked bleary-eyed at Linda.

"Yes, Ms. Phillips. What is it?"

"I was just concerned about you, Mr. Anderson. You haven't been out of your office since early this afternoon. I just wanted to make sure...."

"What time is it?"

Linda looked down at her watch. "It's seven thirty, Mr. Anderson."

"Damn! I'm late for my dinner party with the client. I've got to get going!" He lurched sideways to grab his coat and briefcase. Pushing Linda out of the way, he stumbled down the hall. Shaking her head in disgust, Linda closed up his office and headed out the door behind him.

As Linda walked to the parking garage, Mr. Anderson had already made it up to the sixth level where he had parked his silver 1997 Cadillac Seville. With shaking hands he tried several times to fit the key in the door lock before he remembered he had a remote entry system on this car. He depressed the button and a soft "bleep" sounded as the alarm shut off and the doors unlocked. He yanked open the door and threw his coat and briefcase onto the passenger seat. He knocked his forehead on the roof as he plunged into his car.

He took a quick inventory of his appearance in the rearview mirror. He looked awful. His eyes were blood shot and droopy. A red welt rose on the skin where he just bumped his head. His suit was crumpled and smelled of cigarette smoke and whiskey. His hair was sticking up in back where he had fallen asleep in his chair. He spit on his fingers to wet his hair into submission, just like his mother did when he was five years old to make him presentable for church.

After getting his hair under reasonable control, he checked his breath. Grimacing at the smell of sour liquor and stale cigarettes, he dug around his glove compartment for anything to cover that stench. His fingers closed over a single piece of chewing gum. He didn't know what flavor and didn't care. He unwrapped it as quickly as his shaking hands could manage. He

crammed the stick into his mouth and bit down. The stale gum cracked and splintered into his mouth. As he worked on softening the gum, he smoothed his hands over his suit. ‘Well,’ he thought, ‘it’s not going to get any better than this.’

He took one last glimpse in the mirror, cringed, and started the car. He threw the car into reverse and pounded on the gas. With squealing brakes, he avoided crashing into a red Geo by mere inches. Taking a deep breath, and letting it out in a curse, he slammed the car into drive and ground his foot into the accelerator. Driving like a condemned man escaping the gallows, he tore around the first corner to approach level five. The parking garage was actually quite long so he had a couple hundred yards of straightaway before he needed to turn again to reach the next level. He fumbled for his seatbelt, muttering to himself about how this was all Peter’s fault.

Peter convinced him, no, made him drink those last three or four whiskey shots. Sure it was to celebrate his great work on some marketing proposal or whatever it was. Gary wasn’t interested in the particulars. It was Peter’s fault that he got so drunk he fell asleep in his office. And why hadn’t Linda checked on him sooner? She should have come in and woken him up. It was her fault that he was late now. He was just going to have to have a little talk with her.

The parking garage was built like most others in the downtown area. Two center lanes allowed two-way traffic to enter and exit the structure. The single, one-way lanes wound along the east and west sides of the garage and connected back to the center at each level. Elevator banks and the stairwells were located in enclosed partitions at the southwest and northeast corners of the building. Gary was speeding down the outside lane towards the elevator on Level Five.

Adjacent to the elevators, the lane ended in a putty-grey cement wall, which was the outer wall of the garage, forcing a driver to turn right to advance down to the next parking level. As Gary approached the turn, he was thinking of what to do with Linda. She was so irresponsible. How many times did she have to retype a presentation because of her thoughtlessness? Well, he was just going to have a little... Too late, he saw her step out from the partition in front of his speeding car. Gary Anderson was going to have more than a little talk with Linda Phillips. He was going to kill her.

#####

As Linda walked out of the elevator to Level Five, she was digging through her purse. She couldn’t seem to find her damned keys. It wasn’t really surprising. After a horrible weekend with her sister and extra hours at work today, nothing could make her feel worse. She also felt guilty about the fight with her sister. She had to think of something to make it up to her. They never could stay mad at each other for very long. Even when they were kids growing up on their parent’s farm in Petersburg, Illinois, they never stayed angry at each other past suppertime. After a hearty meal, with ice cream for dessert, they were giggling in each other’s arms, usually trying to determine who was the reigning champion of their nightly tickle torture session.

Linda smiled to herself at the memory. A little giggle escaped her lips, making her sound like that long-ago girl, romping around on the living room floor, trying to get her sister to scream “uncle”. Her hand finally closed around the cold metal of her key ring and she shook it in the air in triumph. “Ah-ha!” she shouted as she exited the elevator on her way to her car. A bright light flashed in her eyes and she turned to her right, staring down the headlights of a 1997 silver Cadillac.

Time seemed to come to a halt, as if she were moving through molasses while wearing lead boots. In mere seconds, like a cliché, her life flashed through her mind: the summers in Petersburg with her family, her first pet - an English Setter named Buster, her first kiss, the first time she'd made love, her father's funeral, watching her mother waste away from MS.

As the tears began to well up in her eyes, as the anger and disappointment at dying in this garage in this way was crushing her heart with despair, as she heard her inner voice screaming 'IT'S NOT FAIR!', she glanced down at her keys. A bittersweet smile curled her lips. 'I guess I won't be needing these after all,' she thought to herself. Then she took a trip where there were no more tears, no more regrets. Just darkness.

#####

Gary Anderson sat staring at the wall. It had all happened so fast. He shook his head and placed his hands over his eyes, like a small boy who is playing hide and seek and must count to 100 before he can seek for his hidden friends. He slowly spread his fingers apart, peering through them towards the garage wall. Maybe if he couldn't really see it, it wasn't really there. It never really happened at all.

But it had happened. He pulled his hands away from his eyes. A large wet blotch dripped down the wall in front of him. Anyone walking by would have thought someone threw a bucket of red paint on the wall. For what purpose that hypothetical someone could not determine. On closer inspection this person would have found small bits of brains and bone clinging to the wall within the red paint, only then realizing that it wasn't paint at all. It was blood. Linda Phillips' blood. Linda Phillips' brains and skull and blood splattered all over that damnable wall, for all to see.

He squeezed his eyes shut and clamped his hands over his head. He started talking to himself. "Okay, Gary. Get a grip. It's not your fault. It was just an accident. Just an accident all right? You never saw her coming. She just stepped right out in front of you. She should have been watching. She should have been paying attention. It was really her fault, don't you see?"

He did see. It wasn't his fault at all. He glanced up and studied Linda's body. Her broken figure was fully illuminated in his headlights. He tilted his head to the side, studying her, like a dog that sees its reflection in a mirror and can't quite figure out how that other dog has gotten into his house.

He replayed the accident in his mind. He had slammed on his brakes. Not to keep from hitting Linda. By the time he saw her it was too late. He had to stop the car from being crushed like a tin can against the garage wall. After choking down his gum, he watched Linda's body as it sailed into the air and hit the wall with a sickening thud that he could hear even over the screeching tires. She had hit the wall so hard she bounced off of it into a heap of twisted arms and legs a few feet from its base. Gary couldn't help thinking she looked like a paper cut-out doll that someone had crumpled up and thrown over their shoulder without a care.

But Gary cared. He cared big time. He cared about getting caught and going to jail. He pictured the trial, the judge, the jury. They wouldn't believe it was an accident. They'd think he did it on purpose. They'd think he was a callous, cold-hearted monster that mowed down this pretty young woman in the prime of her life. It'd be a death sentence for sure. Even if he was spared capital punishment, he still couldn't bear the thought of being locked up in jail with large hairy criminals who'd like nothing more than to have a 'crack' at breaking in the new guy.

He can't get caught. He just can't. Panic seized Gary by the throat and squeezed. His heart pounded at a marathon pace. He ran his hands through his sweat-dampened hair. While frantically chewing on his nails his eyes darted around garage to see if anyone was watching, waiting to point their fingers and start screaming bloody murder. An idea slowly blossomed in his mind. He gnawed on his right thumbnail a little longer as he tried to work out all the kinks and possible problems. It might work. It could work. It had to work.

Gary pulled into an empty space and cut the engine. Once he was out of his car, he picked up Linda's purse and looked for her keys. He couldn't find them. Damn! He scratched his head and looked around, thinking they may have been thrown from her bag, but he couldn't see them anywhere. As he stood up and thought about where they could possibly be, his jaw dropped slack and his eyes bulged in fear. Trembling, he glanced over his shoulder towards Linda's body. There, clutched in her right hand in a death grip, were Linda's keys.

With a grimace of fear contorting his features, Gary slowly stepped toward Linda's body. As he approached her limp form, Gary whimpered. He could see the blood pooling out from various wounds on her body but mostly from her skull. Her green eyes were wide and staring, as if she were at this moment seeing that tunnel of light that supposedly leads on to everlasting peace and happiness. Her legs, specifically her knees, were bent the wrong way. Gary thought it might be his imagination, but he could almost make out the markings of his Caddy's grill imprinted onto her legs.

Just as he was about to go insane with fear, he clamped his eyes shut and slapped his face several times - hard. He took a few deep breaths and slowly opened his eyes. It was almost as if a veil had been pulled down over his features. His eyes were blank and glazed and he looked impassively over at Linda's prone figure. He walked briskly up to her, bent down, and gripped the keys in her hand. When they didn't come loose right away, his features contorted with fear but only for a moment. Then the veil fell back into place and he grabbed her hand and wrenched the keys from her grip. He stepped back from the body and walked over to the only car still parked on this side of the structure. As he assumed, this was Linda's car and he slid the keys into the trunk lock and popped it open.

Luckily, the trunk was relatively empty. There was an ice scraper, windshield fluid, and a plastic shopping bag from some trendy store in the city that was filled with old sweaters and sweatshirts. He pushed it all toward the back, except for the bag of clothes, to make room for Linda. He took the bag out of the trunk and walked back over to her, leaving the keys in the trunk lock. Just as he was about to pick her up, her eyes blinked once.

He faltered, staring wide-eyed at her for a moment. Then he pinched his eyes shut, shook his head and bent down so he was face to face with her. He put his nose right up to hers and held it there for several minutes. When she didn't blink again, he figured he had imagined it. He leaned over, pushing his arms beneath her and gingerly scooped her up into his embrace. Anyone walking by might have thought he was helping a friend who had drunk too much at a party. Or perhaps they would be mistaken for lovers, sneaking away for a secret tryst at some local motel.

He moved quickly to the open trunk and gently laid the body down. Her skirt had pushed up over her knees and Gary modestly pulled it back into place. He walked back over to the bag of clothes and grabbed a couple of the bulky sweatshirts. He used them to mop up the blood on the wall. At first the blood just swirled around, the sweatshirts not doing a good job of absorbing the fluid. But then the splotch got smaller and smaller until there was just a slight pink tinge in the concrete. It wasn't completely gone but he didn't have time to do a more thorough job.

He threw the ruined sweatshirts in the open trunk and grabbed some of the sweaters to sop up the blood on the floor. This was even more difficult to clean because there was an actual puddle of the stuff and it was quickly soaking into the concrete. He used all the remaining clothes in the bag to clean up the mess. There was a round dark stain left in the concrete but there was nothing else he could do, except hope that no one would notice it.

He packed all the blood soaked clothes back in the plastic shopping bag. He was about to close the trunk lid when he looked at his bloodied hands. He would leave fingerprints all over the place if he wasn't more careful. He leaned in and grabbed Linda's coat. He wiped his hands clean as best he could and studied them closely. It would have to do for now. Reaching up, he used the sides of his hands and then his elbows to close the trunk lid.

Sliding in behind the wheel of Linda's car he thought he heard a small 'thump' come from the trunk. Pausing, he leaned his head out the door and listened. Hearing nothing more he pulled the door closed and started the engine. He figured the noise was all in his head, just like the vision of Linda blinking her eyes right before he picked her up. Just a little stress-induced hallucination. That's all.

The part of Gary's brain that hadn't subsided into madness was screaming at him. Screaming to let him know that what he was doing was wrong, evil, and inhuman.

'Gary, think! Call the police. Turn yourself in and they'll be lenient. It was only an accident. Accidents happen every day. But if they find out what you're doing now, it'll only make things worse. Gary? *GARY!!*' But Gary couldn't hear that voice anymore. He started to hum a little tune he remembered from childhood, one his mother used to sing to get him to fall asleep. "Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop. When the wind blows the cradle will rock. When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall. And down will come baby, cradle and all." Inside, the sane Gary was still screaming.

#####

Gary exited the parking garage in Linda's car and headed south of the city. He recalled that there was a large man-made lake about five or ten miles out of town. If all went well, he could arrive at the lake, dump the car and Linda's corpse, sneak back to the garage to retrieve his own vehicle, and be home long before dawn. He might even be able to get in a few hours sleep before returning to work tomorrow morning. Gary reached over and flipped on the radio. A local rock station came blaring out at him and he winced. He quickly scanned through the channels until the sweet strains of country music poured into the car. He grinned like the Cheshire cat and started swaying back and forth to the music.

Within 15 minutes, a sign popped up on the right: GREENSIDE LAKE - NEXT EXIT. Gary turned off the radio to concentrate on his driving. He flipped on the turn signal (wouldn't do to be pulled over now for a minor traffic violation) and exited the highway. The ramp curved around to the right, then to the left, and ended at a T-section. Another sign told him that Greenside Lake was one mile due north so he'd best be turning right if he wanted to reach it. Technically it didn't say that but Gary liked his interpretation of brown and white sign with an arrow pointing north better than what the highway commission erected.

As he approached the lake he searched for a dark and secluded area for the deposit. Most of the houses built on Greenside Lake were over on the far west side, with a few dotting the north, leaving the east bank empty except for the lone wooden dock jutting out into the water.

Although the road curved around and headed toward the north and west banks, Gary stopped in the small parking area on the east side, where there were no lights and, more importantly, no people.

Shutting off the engine and lights, Gary sat behind the wheel for a few minutes, surveying the area. There were a few lights on in the houses across the way and the three major docks on that side were flooded with light. But since it was a Monday night, everyone was inside watching the news, eating dinner, or rounding up the kids to get their homework finished. That was good. He was hoping for no interference from anyone or anything. He can't have anyone find out about this...situation. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. His eyes darted back and forth. He licked his lips, which suddenly felt as dry as a dirt road in ninety-five degree heat. Seeing no one, he finally got out of the car.

Walking around to the trunk, he took one last glance about. The night was black and silent. He popped the trunk and stared at Linda's body. As he was about to pull her out, he leaned in for a closer look. He was planning on putting her body in the front seat and just rolling the car into the water. However, if her body was found before the water could bloat away any incriminating evidence, it would look like someone had hit her with their car and dumped her body. Granted, that is exactly what was happening but Gary didn't want anyone to know that. He wanted it to look like an attack, like a mugging or a rape. Gary grimaced as his gag reflex kicked in at the thought of having to make Linda's corpse look like a rape victim. Maybe a botched robbery attempt or a full-out robbery/murder would suffice. Yes, that would work nicely.

First, he had to go through her purse and coat to get all of her valuables. Rummaging through her purse, he discovered \$24 in cash and two credit cards in her wallet. He took it all. The only other objects he found were a half roll of breath mints, a tube of lipstick, and a hair brush. He popped one of the mints into his mouth as he looked through the pictures in her wallet.

She only had two. One was an old photo of a couple in their mid-fifties standing in front of the Empire State Building, smiling and waving. Gary assumed these were Linda's parents. He seemed to remember something about her father being dead. Or was it her mom? The other picture was of a young woman in her late twenties or early thirties. She had long wavy red hair and bright green eyes, like Linda. Actually, this woman and Linda could have been twins. This must be her sister. What was her name? Karen? Carol? Gary shrugged and tossed the wallet back into the purse.

He turned to Linda's body and searched the pockets. He found nothing there. Next, he surveyed Linda's injuries. Most of them looked like someone took a bat or other blunt instrument to her. That would go along with the mugging and attack idea. There wasn't much he could do about the Caddy's grill imprint on her legs. He just hoped the water would have enough time to erase those bruises. He tossed the purse on top of her body and nodded in satisfaction. Everything looked in order.

He slammed the trunk closed and opened the driver's door. He quickly wiped down the interior with a handkerchief before he stuck the keys in the ignition and turned it over just enough to put the car into Neutral. He got out and started to push. Grunting, he didn't realize how difficult it was to push several thousand pounds of metal and plastic and his face turned purple with the strain. Just as he began to think the car wasn't going to cooperate, it slowly rolled forward. He picked up his pace and jogged with the car. As it came within two feet of the waterline, he gave one last hard shove and jumped clear of the car.

He stood back and watched the car slowly but surely sink into the lake. He stood with a small smile on his face as the water churned and bubbled up over the hood, the windshield, and

the doors. Finally, when only the ass-end was sticking up, Gary had a crazy notion that the car would stop sinking and bob up and down for a while, just like in the movies. And then, as he would begin to panic, there would be a loud hissing and gurgling sound as the car finally sank into the depths of the water. In reality the car only bobbed for a few seconds before the lake sucked it down. He was almost disappointed.

He turned away from the water and looked back up toward the highway. He had a long walk ahead of him before this was really all over. He looked down at his watch. It was eight-thirty. He made a small surprised squeak in the back of his throat. It had only been one hour since this whole mess began. He figured it'd be a couple of hours of walking before he got back to his car, thirty minutes to get back home, and another half an hour on top of that to get the car cleaned up. Smiling, he calculated his arrival at home to be between midnight and 1:00am. That would give him plenty of time to get a decent night's sleep and be all refreshed for work Tuesday morning. Taking one last look over his shoulder, just to be sure the car hadn't popped back up to the surface, which it hadn't, he smiled to himself and started his long trek back home.

#####

His calculations were slightly off. He didn't get back to the parking garage until after midnight. It was almost as if the gods were purposely trying to impede his every move, as if they wanted him to get caught. Since he didn't want to be seen walking along the highway shoulder, he'd had to trudge through the weeds, tall grass, and garbage strewn along the service drive. Several times he had tripped over discarded tires hidden among the overgrowth. Once he got his foot caught in a greasy fast-food chicken bucket and had to sit down in order to pry it off with his hands. Of course, he sat right in the middle of a shallow but rancid sludge puddle and now reeked of oil, urine, and something akin to rotting meat.

As he was skulking along in the shadows, a police car came cruising down the service drive. Just as its headlights were about to wash over him, he dove into the tall grass on his right, smacking headfirst into the post of a speed limit sign. His vision swam for a moment and bright bursts of white light flashed before his eyes. Luckily, the police car turned down a side street and the officers did not see Gary before he lost consciousness.

Gary was dreaming about his high school sweetheart. It was the Junior Spring Dance and he and Mary Weathers were making out under the bleachers at the football field. Gary's hands were exploring Mary's firm young body eagerly even as she was exploring his. He plunged his hands into her long wavy red hair.... wait. Mary had short blonde hair. He frowned in his dream even as he embraced her. His hands touched something wet and sticky and he pulled back in horror as he stared at the blood covering his hands.

When he looked back up to Mary, the first thing he noticed was the rumpled trench coat. His eyes took in the torn pantyhose and the bloodied and broken knees bending the wrong way. Shaking with horror, he forced his gaze up to Mary's face. Only it wasn't Mary anymore. Linda Philips was staring back at him, her finger raised, pointing in accusation at her murderer. When she opened her mouth to speak, water and muck dribbled out and stained the front of her blouse. Suddenly, she was soaking wet from head to toe. Her body distorted until it was bloated and rotting, green with algae and death, as if she had been trapped in the lake for weeks instead of mere hours. She waddled toward him, holding her arms wide for an embrace. As she leaned in for a kiss, her blackened tongue searching for his, he awoke with a scream.

As he swatted and flailed his hands, Gary open his eyes and realized that he wasn't kissing the rotting corpse of Linda Philips. There was, however, a large St. Bernard lapping at his face and drooling all over his suit. He pushed the dog away in disgust, wiping his hands over his mouth. He then noticed a leash attached to the dog and followed it up to look into the face of a small wide-eyed boy, probably 10 or 11, judging by the gangly arms and legs.

"Gee, mister. Are you all right?"

Gary coughed. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You rammed yourself into that pole pretty good. You'll have a nice big goose egg on your forehead by tomorrow morning."

Gary growled in despair, rubbing his head. "Yep, probably. What time is it, do you know?"

"About 9:45pm. I saw you dive for cover when that cop car came up the drive."

Gary stopped cold. He slowly looked up at the boy.

"Then I heard the pole vibrating," the boy continued. "Even from where I was standing I could hear it. Like I said, you rammed it pretty good. Then Coop took off...that's my dog here, Coop. Coop took off and came running over to you. Why are you hiding from the police?"

Gary tried to stand but the world pulled a three-sixty on him and he collapsed back to the ground. His voice was a little weak. "I wasn't hiding from the police. I just couldn't see where I was going and I ran into the pole and knocked myself out, that's all. My car broke down and I was..."

But the boy was shaking his head. "No, you dove into that sign. I saw it." He started pulling on Coop and backing away, towards the side street and away from Gary. "I saw it. C'mon, Coop. Let's go get the police. Let's go, Coop."

The boy was yanking on the leash but Coop was determined to keep guard over Gary. He smiled and spoke sweetly to the dog, hoping to ease the boy's fears, and to keep him from running.

"Good dog, Coop. Good boy. You see, son? If I am such a bad guy, why is your dog being so nice to..." Coop's low growl hit Gary's ears and he froze in place.

"Ah-ha!" the boy yelled. "I knew it. My dog knows a crook when he sees one. C'mon, Coop!"

Finally the boy was able to pry his dog from guard duty and went running down the street, yelling at the top of his voice. "Help! Help! Somebody help!" Lights were snapping on all down the street as the boy ran, following him like they were attached to those gadgets that turned the lights on or off whenever you clapped. Instead of clapping, though, you turned them on by having an 11 year old boy scream bloody murder.

Gary lurched to his feet and stumbled away. After the ground finally stopped swaying beneath him, he was able to run in a straight line and make better progress. From only a few miles away he heard a siren wailing. Damn those cops! Why couldn't they have patrolled after he'd passed by? He wouldn't have knocked himself out and that whiney little brat wouldn't have seen him. And what the hell was that kid doing out this late with his dog anyway?

Silently cursing everyone and everything for getting him into this mess, he ran on. The siren grew louder. He looked back and could see the flashing red and blue lights across the tops of the trees and between the houses. The lights also illuminated Coop running at top speed toward him.

Coop's jowls were flapping in the breeze, slobber was flying all around his face, and his teeth flashed large and sharp. A frightened whimper escaped Gary's lips and just as he turned

forward again he ran into a chain link fence and was thrown to the ground. His breath whooshed out of him in one big ‘oof’ as he landed. Sparing no time to blame whomever built the damned thing, he scrambled up the fence and went ass over applecart across the top. Just as he landed on his backside, Coop launched himself at the fence, bowing it towards Gary’s face.

Coop snarled and barked, gnashing his teeth and spitting slobber all over Gary. He crab-walked backwards away from the hell hound and collapsed, panting and shaking. Knowing he had only minutes to spare to escape, Gary took a deep breath and rose to his feet. Almost as an afterthought, he turned back to Coop, lifted his suit coat and shook his fanny. This enraged the dog even further and he tried to jump up and over the fence. Luckily for Gary, the St. Bernard was much too large and the fence was too high. Giggling like a school boy, Gary ran off into the dark, leaving Coop to bark at the air.

After what seemed like an eternity, Gary finally reached the parking garage around twelve-thirty. Fortunately, no one was around at his hour. As he approached his car, he dug in his pants pocket for his keys. For one desperate moment, he thought he may have left them at the lake or dropped them after his wild run along the highway. He sighed with relief when he remembered they were in his suit coat. He dug them out, unlocked his car, and collapsed in the front seat. He thought he would never get here.

Ever since he had dumped Linda’s body, it was one problem after another. Things had gone so smoothly up until that point. It was almost as if, right before he had rolled Linda’s corpse into the lake, fate was still giving him a chance to turn back. To do the right thing and go to the police. But since he chose this path of darkness and cowardice instead, fate, karma, the gods, or whatever the hell was out there was doing everything in its power to fuck him up.

Before he started the engine, he got out and surveyed the car. There was a slight dent in the grill but nothing extraordinary. The immediate problem was the blood. He had to get his car cleaned up. And, as he looked down at his rumpled, mud-soaked, blood-stained suit, he needed a good washing as well. His overcoat was still in the front seat so he laid it down on the driver’s side before sitting down again. He got behind the wheel and started the car. Luckily he had a pass card to park in this garage so he didn’t need to talk to or see any of the attendants, if there even were any working at this hour.

He pulled out of the garage and headed home. There was a coin car wash a mile or so from his house. He thought it might look a little odd if he started washing his car in his driveway in the middle of the night. Even for the coin operated car washes it might look a little strange, but not completely unheard of, to have a late night customer from time to time.

Sal’s Car Wash came into view on his right. As he pulled into one of the empty slots, he noticed there was one other person here. He wasn’t as likely to be noticed if anyone, particularly a cop, drove by. He had taken the stall farthest away from the other patron. As he reached over into his briefcase to retrieve his wallet, the other customer walked past the front of his car. Gary froze, watching the man as he took a passing glance toward Gary’s vehicle. He audibly gulped, making that little clicking noise in the back of his throat that had suddenly gone very dry. The man kept on walking and Gary started to panic. After a few minutes, the man came back with a handful of quarters, counting through them to make sure he got the right amount of change. Gary breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently, the change machine was right next to the slot Gary chose.

Before Gary got out of his car to go get quarters for himself, he happened to glance down at his shirt. His jacket and shirt were soaked with blood. There was no way he could wash his car while he was covered in gore. He pulled his overcoat out from underneath him. It was dark blue, almost black. He pulled this on and buttoned it up to the collar. Looking down at himself, he

could see no traces of blood. Smiling, he got out of his car and went to the change machine. He was whistling “A Spoonful of Sugar” as he waited for the machine to spit out his \$5 in quarters.

By the time Gary pulled into his driveway, it was close to 2:00am. He parked his now clean and sparkling car into his garage and closed the door. Exhausted, he dragged himself through the side entrance, into a narrow hallway, and stripped off his bloody clothes. He had a small storage cabinet here and from there he grabbed a garbage bag and carefully bagged up his soiled clothes, being sure not to smudge blood on anything. He threw everything in the bag, tied it up, and left it on the basement stairs. Once he had showered and cleaned up, he would take his clothes downstairs to the old stove and burn them.

He had inherited this house, which was built in the late 1800s, from his grandparents. It had one of those old potbellied stoves in the basement that was still in working order. Gary’s grandparents would fire the old gal up when he was a kid because he loved the smell of the burning wood. He knew that if it wasn’t for him, they would have thrown the thing away years ago. He whispered a quick ‘thank you’ to his grandparents’ memory and went upstairs to shower.

Standing in front of the stove in the basement, Gary watched his clothes burn away into ash. Some of it was polyester and that just melted into a gooey black ooze that stuck to the interior of the stove. Since it matched the color of the of the stove, it was not that noticeable. The smell, however, was horrendous. But he couldn’t open the windows to air it out unless he wanted the whole neighborhood to reek. At the last minute he tossed in the garbage bag. Might as well burn it all, he thought. It can’t make any more of a mess than that polyester-blend suit.

He watched the fire burn for a little while longer as he ran over the evening’s events. From all that he could remember, even with the bump to the head, he had covered all his tracks. There weren’t any bloody clothes or prints anywhere, the garage and his car were clean and his clothes were (almost) gone. And, most importantly, there was no body. Granted, that kid had run for the police. But Gary wasn’t from that area and it was dark. The boy couldn’t have gotten too good a look at him. Good thing dogs can’t talk or Coop would have made sure his ass was in jail already. Gary mouth suddenly gaped with huge yawn. He rubbed his eyes and turned for the stairs. Glancing at a wall clock, he noticed it was three-fifteen. He could just get in about four hours of sleep before he had to get up for work. Not bad. Not bad at all.

#####

Gary strolled into work a little early on Tuesday morning as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “Just act innocent, and you’ll be innocent,” he murmured to himself. He breezed into his office, tossing his briefcase onto the chair opposite his desk. After hanging up his coat, he sat down at his desk and leaned back in his chair, kicking his feet up. After a minute or two of twiddling his thumbs, he was unsure of what to do next. He supposed coffee was in order to get the day going.

After sitting at his desk for another minute he realized that Linda got him coffee every morning. He frowned down at his desk blotter as if puzzling out how he could enjoy his morning coffee without actually having to get it himself. His black mug sat alone on the corner of his desk. He picked it up and studied it, peering inside as if the coffee might be hiding in there. “Well,” he said out loud to his office. “I guess I’ll have to get my own coffee today.”

He decided that it might look good for him if he pretended to look around for Linda, just in case someone was watching. He walked over to her cubicle and peeked in.

“Ms. Phillips?” he called out. Wiping his hand over his mouth to hide a tiny smile, he shrugged and spoke aloud. “Oh, well. Seems I’ll have to get my own coffee this morning.”

He walked out to the copier area, where there was not only a coffee machine, but also a water cooler and two vending machines, offering a variety of processed and additive filled foods to satisfy the most particular palate. The employees had dubbed it “The Gathering” after the popular role-playing game. As he was filling his coffee mug, Paul Kirtchner, the biggest suck-up of an employee next to Gary, walked up to him.

“Hey, Gar. Where were you last night? Mr. Carlson was looking all over for ya.”

Gary could see the hungry glint in Paul’s eyes. Paul had been gunning for Gary from the day they first met and was just waiting for something like this to gloat over. He also hated it when Paul called him ‘Gar’ and he knew it.

“Good morning, Paul. Yes, I’ve spoken with Mr. Carlson already. I came down with the flu late yesterday. I think Cathy must have given it to Linda and I caught it from her. As a matter of fact, Linda isn’t in this morning so she must be home sick. She really needs to take better care of... her...self....”

Paul’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Gar? You all right?”

Gary was staring off down the hall towards his office. Linda Phillips was standing outside her cubicle staring directly at Gary. She wasn’t pointing at him, as in his dream. She was just standing there, looking at him, a puddle of water gathering at her feet. Gary’s mouth dropped from a small ‘oh’ of surprise to a lengthened gape of fear. He took a few steps back and bumped into the coffee machine. Only when Paul finally snapped his fingers in front of Gary’s eyes did he turn from the vision of Linda’s soaking corpse. He blinked at Paul.

“Wha.....Did you say something, Paul?”

“Are you all right, Gar?”

“Oh, I’m fine. I just...” Gary turned to look down the hall again and Linda was gone. He shook his head. “I’m just feeling a little dizzy, that’s all. Thanks.”

He walked away, leaving Paul to stare after him with a puzzled look on his face. Before he locked himself inside his office, Gary realized that he told Paul he’d already spoken with Mr. Carlson about his absence from the client dinner last night. Gary sighed and walked down the hall before Paul had a chance to tell the old man he lied.

When he was just a few doors down from Carlson’s office, the door to the conference room on his right opened. Linda stepped right out in front of him and he bumped into her. But instead of the normal stumble and laughed apologies, Linda’s body went sailing towards the wall, bounced off of it and came crashing down with a loud thud. A dark red splotch, that looked similar to red paint, dripped down the wall outside Mr. Carlson’s office. Linda’s broken and battered body lay crumpled in front of Carlson’s door and when he walked out, Mr. Carlson stepped right over her as if she wasn’t there. As he handed his secretary something to type, Mr. Carlson glanced over at Gary.

“There you are, Mr. Anderson. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about last night.”

Gary just stood there staring at him in bug-eyed disbelief. He side-stepped to the right, blocking Linda’s body from his view with Mr. Carlson’s frowning face. He watched in horror as Mr. Carlson leaned on the wall, placing his left hand directly in the middle of the spatter of blood.

“Mr. Anderson, I’m concerned that you didn’t make the dinner last night....”

But Gary was hardly hearing him. He watched in morbid fascination as Mr. Carlson stepped away from the wall and ran his now bloodied hand through his hair. He rubbed his nose

and chin, spreading the blood all over his face and neck. As he made a pointing gesture, blood splattered in Gary's face and he flinched away. He could barely hear Mr. Carlson comment on how he was disappointed in him and how bad it looked for the company. All Gary could concentrate on was how Mr. Carlson was spreading the blood all over himself. He found it quite comical, in an over-the-edge-hysteria kind of way.

Just as he was started giggling, a hand peeked out and laid itself on Mr. Carlson's shoulder. With a lover's caress, the hand slid down and gripped his boss's upper arm. Slowly, Linda peered out from behind Mr. Carlson and glared at Gary. The giggle that was sitting in the back of his throat was crushed and swallowed. A bitter taste, like aspirin, slithered over his tongue and he grimaced. He shook his head back and forth and whimpered.

"Mr. Anderson?" Mr. Carlson stopped talking and frowned with concern instead of anger at Gary. "What's the matter?"

Gary stammered a reply. "I...I'm sorry about l-l-last night, Mr. Carlson. But I c-c-came down with the, uh, the flu last night and, uh..."

Linda wagged a finger at him and frowned, calling out his lie. Her arm shot out as she reached for him. Gary squeaked and lurched backwards, watching the spot over Mr. Carlson's shoulder. He shuddered.

"I'm, uh, I'm still not feeling very w-w-well. I'd like to go back to my office n-n-now."

Gary power-walked down the hall, glancing back over his shoulder every couple of steps. He tripped and sprawled to the floor. He scrambled up to his feet and continued walking. He stood outside his office door and looked back down the hall at Mr. Carlson. Linda was still wagging her finger at him. He whimpered in terror and slammed the door, locking it. Mr. Carlson frowned and looked over his shoulder. Seeing nothing, he glanced back down at Gary's office. He shook his head in confusion and disgust.

#####

After a restless sleep, Gary returned to the office on Wednesday morning feeling frazzled and disjointed. His dreams were filled with images of green bloated corpses, lakes of blood, and his own death by various methods. One dream had him strapped onto the front bumper of his car while Linda drove it at a hundred miles per hour and rammed it into a cement wall. The next was of him trapped, shin-deep in lake muck, being sucked and pulled down into the earth. As he flailed his arms and tried to stop from being pulled under, Linda stood over him and laughed.

As he slumped into his chair, exhausted, he realized he was suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress that was causing the bad dreams and the hallucinations. He wasn't sure he could keep up this charade. The flu excuse would only fly so far. He decided that he would try to avoid as many people as he could for today but after that, he better get back into the game. Yes, tomorrow he'd be better. As a matter of fact, he hadn't seen Linda yet today and that was a good sign. Maybe all those bad dreams helped work some of the stress out of his system.

Just then he looked up and saw Linda standing in his open door. He gulped and squeezed his eyes shut. He muttered a "She's Not Real" mantra over and over for a minute or two. When he opened them again, she was still standing there but she was more of a vague outline, a ghostly apparition. He mustered up his courage and walked over to her. As her eyes looked up into his and her eyebrows knitted together in a slight frown, he slammed the door in her face.

For the rest of the day, he only saw Linda twice. Once she was sitting at her desk, typing away, as a puddle of lake water pooled around her chair. He didn't get a look at her face,

thankfully, just her ragged and cracked nails tapping away and smudging the keyboard with sediment. The second time was in the men's room. As he stood at the sink washing his hands, he saw her reflection in the mirror. She was standing behind him in front of the stall he'd just vacated. She was no longer wet or even bloody. She was dressed and ready as if it was the end of the working day and she was ready to go home, but wanted to check in with him one last time before leaving. He refused to look at her for more than a few seconds. When he turned around, she was gone. "I'm going to make it," he whispered to himself. "I'm going to make it." She didn't appear again for the rest of the day.

Thursday was relatively uneventful. He was no longer phased by Linda's sudden appearances all over the office and his home. He got back into his old routine. He even voiced his concerns about Linda's whereabouts to Mr. Carlson and volunteered to find out where she was. After all, she'd been gone for three days with no word and there was no answer at her home. Mr. Carlson just shook his head and said he'd have personnel look into it. "Linda sure is lucky to have such a caring supervisor like you, Gary." Gary half smiled as if embarrassed by the compliment. His stomach rolled over in a greasy flop and he shrugged to cover his guilt.

#####

By Friday, the personnel department had been unable to locate Linda at her home and the Director of Human Resources, Susan Altman, had contacted Linda's sister, Carol. Carol had no idea where Linda was and hadn't heard from her since the previous weekend. She thanked Ms. Altman for her call and informed her that she would contact the police immediately. Gary found out all this over lunch with Susan on Friday afternoon. Susan had heard how concerned he was for Linda's well-being and wanted to keep him abreast of the latest happenings. Gary played his best 'aw-shucks' routine with all the relish he could muster. By the look on Susan's face, he had secured his innocence with her and therefore, the entire company, since Susan was the biggest gossip he'd ever encountered.

The weekend passed without incident. He had stopped seeing visions of Linda by Saturday morning. He was able to get through a dinner with friends on Saturday night without any panic attacks or gruesome hallucinations. He had done it. He beat her. He won.

Monday morning arrived and Gary practically floated into work. He'd tried not to look too complacent. After all, Linda *was* still missing. But he had a soft smile and wink for the ladies and a hearty 'good morning' to all the gentleman. He stepped into his office and hung up his coat and hat. He grabbed his mug and headed for the coffee machine. There was a slight spring in his step as he sauntered up through the hallway and approached "The Gathering" area.

As he reached for the coffee pot, he noticed muddy fingerprints all over the counter. The plastic storage bin of individual packets of coffee, the filter bags, the pot, and the machine itself were covered in wet and dried muck. It looked as if someone had plunged their hands into a child's mud pie and then handled all the coffee equipment. A cold spike of fear lodged itself in his heart and his breath caught in his lungs. He looked down at the floor and saw muddy footprints leading away from the coffee machine back towards the offices. He shut his eyes and counted to ten. He opened his left eye, then his right. The prints were still there. He knew they definitely belonged to a woman as Gary noted dots of mud, signifying a woman's standard high heel, and the small dainty outline of a bare foot.

His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, gasping for breath. His hands fell numbly to his sides and his coffee mug went crashing to the floor, shattering into a hundred

fragments. With his head down, he followed the trail of prints back down the hall, like an obedient slave, his mouth still gaping, his vocal chords working to find his voice. The footprints made a direct line to his office and disappeared behind the closed door. He reached for the handle, wetting his hand on the grime left there. He slowly pushed the door open.

Standing there, behind his behemoth maple desk, was Linda Phillips. She was soaking wet from head to toe. Her once shining red hair was hanging in ropes of muck and mud. The green in her irises had clouded over to a murky teal color and the whites were red from burst blood vessels. She was standing on legs that bent the wrong way, with the jagged ends of her tibias poking out through the skin of where her knees used to be. Her skin was mottled with blue-green blotches and sloughing off of her face and hands.

Her bony fingers were grasping his coffee mug, intact and empty. As she leaned over to place it on his desk, she opened her mouth. Brown water spewed out and into his mug, filling it to the brim. Looking up at him, a thin line of black sludge dribbled down her chin. She bared her brown-stained teeth at him in a smile and her blackened tongue licked her cracked and split lips. When she spoke, her voice croaked out from the shadows of a nightmare.

“Mr. Anderson, we need to have a little talk.”

Gary was shaking his head back and forth, lost in a spiral of denial of his senses and acceptance of what was to come. This was no hallucination. This was no ghost. For the first time in his life, he was going to have to take responsibility for his mistakes. As his office door slowly creaked to a close behind him, Gary Anderson finally found his voice. And screamed.

THE END

“Secretary’s Day” by Peggy Christie © 2006