

As she sat waiting and sweating, thinking about the career-ending act of fraud she was about to commit, Shelly tried to distract herself by deciphering the young receptionist. The right side of her head was shaven almost up to the top, but then a giant shank of dark black hair flipped over to the opposite side, completely hiding her left eye, and ending in tips splotted with pink. She had a nose ring, a lip ring, globs of black eyeliner and mascara, and fire alarm red lipstick.

“You can go in now,” she said. She had a stretch top with horizontal red and black stripes, a giant black leather belt and a blood red very miniskirt. With black tights. And black elevator heels. With silver studs.

“Mrs Griffin?” said Johnny, slouched and balding, with a paunch and a ponytail, shuffling towards her with his hand outstretched and a warm smile.

“Ms. Miss. Shelly.”

“Hi Shelly, pleased to meet you. What exactly is this document I need to sign? Gee, leasing that property must have been, what, 15 years ago?”

She stood uncomfortably, facing him. “Well, Mr. Walker, I have to confess that—”

“Johnny, please,” he said warmly.

“Johnny,” she said nervously. She hadn’t actually met many celebrities before. Any, actually.

“I’m here under false pretenses.”

He looked at her over his reading glasses.

“I do work for the Charles Griffin law firm, but there is no document for you to sign, I used it as an excuse to—“

“Brandi!” he called to the secretary, his smile fading.

“The firm is dealing with the dissolution of an old family brewery, Bauer’s, down in Creston, they make Creston Gold beer, and it’s a heartbreaking story—“

“Brandi, would you please show this woman out.”

“—and I heard the tribute you did for Barnaby, and I—“

He signaled to Brandi in black to wait for a moment.

The patter she had rehearsed had evaporated, she could feel her face quickly approaching scarlet, but the words kept flowing out in a tumble. “I think it’s unfair that a family business, that’s been in northeastern Ohio for over a hundred years, that’s a symbol of local pride, with one woman trying to keep it afloat against all kinds of odds and market trends, with a really tragic personal story, that this kind of business, with 25 employees, should just tank without anyone even noticing—“

“Creston Gold?”

She nodded as she pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at the corner of her eye. “And I think this lady, and this family brewery, and all the people who work there, and all the people who have been drinking Creston Gold for so many years, they at least deserve to be noticed before they all just disappear.”

She stopped to breathe. He was listening.

“And I heard what a beautiful tribute you gave Barnaby, and how much he meant to all of us who grew up on his show. And I think you should talk about this lady and her brewery on the radio. And tell Cleveland, and all of northeastern Ohio, that this local symbol is about to be closed down. And we should all at least pause for a minute and be sad.”

Remarkably, he was still listening. The secretary cracked her gum.

“Because people listen to you. A lot of people. You have the power to do the right thing, to give this lady a respectful good-bye and thank you for all the pride her family has given us. Because she deserves that.”

She sniffled.

“And I tried to get through to you by phone and stuff but I couldn’t, so I wrote that fake letter. I apologize. It’s very unprofessional.”

She sniffled again and dabbed her eyes. She didn’t even see Johnny’s annoyed scowl becoming a smile of sympathetic amusement.

“That’s all.”

Johnny gestured to Brandi that she wasn’t needed, but she ignored him.

“Come over here, have a seat,” he said, leading her to two low chairs in the corner of the room.

“Shelly?”

She nodded.

“Creston Gold, you said?”

She nodded again. Her cheeks were no longer on fire, but her heart was still thumping.

“I used to drink Creston Gold in college,” he smiled nostalgically. “Everyone did. Oberlin, class of ’59. I spent four years doing little other than drinking Creston Gold.”

“That’s exactly the point,” she said emphatically. “Same for me. OU, Class of ’92. Same for everyone. And now it’s closing down.”

“Why is that?”

She recounted for him the economics of the beer industry as she had come to understand it over the previous few days, how the giant national breweries had swallowed up most of the smaller breweries, and the trendy craft breweries had crippled the few that were left. She told him about the Bauers and about Allie. She confessed to him that her father’s firm made its living from the dubious task of closing down businesses.

“I was born in Warren,” she said. “Did you know that in my lifetime the population there has dropped from 60,000 to 40,000? That’s my home town. And I don’t need to tell you what’s going on around here economically. It’s not pretty.”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed.

“It seems to me,” said Shelly, looking Johnny directly in the eye, “that northeastern Ohio doesn’t have a very good self-image. There’s not much around here that people are proud of. But you, people listen to you. Creston Gold has been a symbol. For generations. The brewery shouldn’t just go gentle into that good night.”

Johnny looked at her steadily, and stood up, and gathered her into a wide, warm hug. She had no idea what was happening, but his gray ponytail brushed her nose, and his paunch was substantial.

Finally, he broke the embrace, and at arm’s length looked her in the eye. “Shelly, I think that’s a wonderful, wonderful idea.”

“Oh!” she said with a bounce. “The song!”

“What song?”

“I found a song on YouTube—“

“The YouTube is part of the internet, right?” asked Johnny, looking at Brandi.

“Well, yes,” said Shelly.

“I’m not much of a computer person,” he explained.

“That’s okay, lots of our clients aren’t. We have an, ah, *mature* clientele,” she smiled. “Can I show you?”

“Use my computer,” said Brandi with the raccoon eyes.

“Search for Creston Gold,” Shelly instructed her over one shoulder, Johnny peering over the other.

“My father used to drink that,” said Brandi, typing. “I never see it around anymore.”

Shelly and Johnny exchanged looks.

“See?” said Shelly, reading from the screen, “Creston Gold – Decapede, uploaded by WhoDeMan, 31 views, 4 months ago.”

“Who is this Decapede?” asked Johnny, as Brandi clicked on the picture of the band.

“That’s exactly the point,” said Shelly. They waited while the little sand timer loaded the file. “I have no idea. No one knows. There’s no other mention of them on the internet. Thirty-one views. Almost all of them are mine.”

“What does that mean?” asked Johnny.

“That no one’s ever seen this,” Brandi answered him, with just a hint of condescension.

The song began to play.

“Turn it up a little,” Johnny told Brandi.

“The world out there don’t look so kind/But I don’t care, ‘cause love is blind/You’re the one thing on my mind/Pass me another Creston Gold.”

“That’s a *good* song,” said Johnny, staring at the screen.

Shelly felt her heart leap.

Brandi cracked her gum and pressed Replay.

“So what I thought—” said Shelly, and hesitated. Johnny and Brandi looked at her in anticipation.

“What I thought was that maybe you could do some kind of search or competition or something, on your show, to try to find out where this song came from. Who this band was. Because obviously they’re local, ‘Creston Gold’. And if that really is a picture of this Decapede, they’re pretty old. To ask if anyone recognizes the name or the song. Somebody might remember. And that would be like a way to talk about the brewery and—”

Johnny straightened up, and again enwrapped Shelly in his bear hug. Over his shoulder Shelly saw Brandi rolling her eyes, telling her she was accustomed to this aging hippie exuberance of his.

In the elevator going down, Shelly looked at the woman in the mirror. “What just happened?” she asked her, but the woman had no idea.