

VANESSA FARNSWORTH  
**THE BEAVER**

“THERE’S A BEAVER in your pool.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“I could tell you countless things you don’t know, but first I’d like you to tell me where that beaver came from.”

“The woods. I think that’s where they live.”

“But there aren’t any woods around here.”

“Still, I don’t think it fell from the sky. How many olives do you want?”

Mary’s technique of harpooning olives with a toothpick worked well for the first five martinis, but it’s rapidly losing its effectiveness now that she’s missing the mouth of the jar fifty per cent of the time.

“Fuck it. The next round is olive-free. We’re inventing a new drink. I’m calling it The Edison.”

“The Edison?”

“Yes, we’re naming it after the guy who invented light bulbs.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re bright.”

“But I don’t want to be bright. And I don’t want an Edison. I want a drink with olives in it. Lots of them. Hell, I’ll drink pool water so long as at least one olive makes it into the glass.”

“My booze, my rules.”

Mary can no longer pull Angela into focus, so it’s no real surprise when she fails to notice her friend grabbing the olive jar and upending it on the patio by her feet.

Angela scoops up four olives and drops them one after the other into her glass.

Then she pumps her fist in triumph.

It’s a good thirty seconds before Mary gets wise to the rebellion and, when she does, Angela deflects the repercussions with a well-timed distraction.

“Does it bother you that a beaver is turning your swimming pool into a swamp?”

“Not when I need a new coat. I figure this is God’s way of giving it to me. I haven’t had an easy life, you know. It’s not like God was going to hand me a winning lottery ticket. No, he handed me a rodent and figured I had brains enough to know what to do with it. And I do. One blow from a cleaver and I’ll have myself a sleeve.”

Angela is not listening. She’s chasing an olive around the inside of her glass with her tongue. It takes three attempts to suck it into her mouth, where it gets a blissful closed-eyed savouring.

When she lifts her lids, Angela discovers Mary slumped forward in her chair, her forehead zeroing in on her knees. Typical. Mary is always the first to go.

“You’d think the chlorine would burn its eyes,” Angela says. “Or at least strip the yellow from its teeth. I’ll bet it’s got the worst breath imaginable considering that its diet is composed mostly of what? Bark? Bugs? Pork?”

Angela is struck silent by her own confusion.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what beavers eat.”

Mary jerks her head up and squints, but it’s not clear whether her eyes are capable of focusing on anything beyond the alcohol-fuelled haze hovering an inch or so out from her nose.

“Did you say something about pork?”

“Chlorine. I was talking about chlorine.”

“Nothing doing. I stopped with the chemicals weeks ago. I’m thinking of dumping in cream rinse. Maybe olive oil. That fur is looking a bit dull, don’t you think? Needs a little greasing. Speaking of which—”

Mary makes a swing for her Edison. The glass wobbles above her fingers then clinks against her teeth. Some of the cocktail makes it into her mouth; the rest dribbles down her chin. Angela tongue-snares another olive, the beaver never far from her mind.

“You’ve got to wonder why it’s building a dam in such an odd place. A sewer I can get, even a gutter, but your rinky-dink pool? Not a logical choice by any stretch. No offence, but I think your beaver may be a bit on the slow side.”

Silence.

Angela stops tapping her temple suggestively with her index finger and turns back to Mary, who is slumped to one side with her glass resting

against her chest. Gin is leaking onto her t-shirt, creating an ever-widening circle of damp. Angela frowns. She'll have no one to talk to if Mary passes out completely, and the thought makes her barfly lonely. She turns a hopeful eye to the beaver. It seems friendly enough. Something *is* terribly odd about its dam, though. Angela tilts her head and, much to her surprise, a thought tips into place.

"You know, your beaver has refined tastes. I'm sure that's a Himalayan birch sticking out of the top of the dam. And there, poking out the middle, isn't that a purple beech?"

Her voice has quietened, but it's sufficient to incite Mary to open her eyes. A smile lifts one corner of her mouth, though, strangely, not the other.

"No, it's the Japanese maple from next door. Remember? Carol was so proud of it that she composed a sonnet in its honour. I wonder what she'll spout now that it's nothing but a tattered stump?"

The contrast between the raised and unraised corners of Mary's mouth suggests a stroke-like wonkiness. Angela tries to neutralize this disturbing glimpse into the future with the sort of rational thought of which Mary is rarely capable.

"Maybe you should vamoose the beaver to a nature preserve somewhere. Carol is sure to put a magnifying glass to that stump and before you can say timber, animal control will be storming your yard with dart guns. Then where will your sleeve be?"

"On a rack drying in the sun. But we're still a long way from skinning the furry bugger. God had more than a coat in mind when he sent it here. You see, I have a score to settle and that rodent won't be vamoosing anywhere until I do."

Angela frowns and tightens her fingers around the stem of her glass.

"This is the first I'm hearing about any score. You might've mentioned that earlier. I don't want to be sitting here smashed out of my gourd when the shit hits the fan. Carol's going to flip when she finds out. Damn it, Mary, I don't really need to be present for all of your life's disasters."

Angela anxiously toes the empty olive jar. It rolls under the table and hits one of its legs with a clink.

It's Mary's turn to frown.

"Stop with the clinking already. And this has nothing to do with Carol. She was just a test run. Remember Crystal Rogers? Two doors down? The one

who called the cops when I wandered down the street naked? She's about to be working through some karma."

"With a beaver?"

"That's the beauty of it. I'm going to hack down her redbud tree and stack it on top of the dam. I'll get my revenge, the beaver will get the blame, and my coat will get a sleeve. Two, three more Edisons and you'll marvel at the synchronicity."

An olive escapes from Angela's drink and rolls off the table. She scoops it up and plops it back into her glass along with several others that she finds on the ground. Then she hoovers the whole lot into her mouth.

Angela is in mid-swallow when her next thought occurs.

"Do you think it's a good idea to exact revenge on a neighbour by murdering her tree and pinning it on a rodent? I mean, talk about karma. You could end up coming back as a virus in your next life. Or maybe a thunder clap."

Mary waves off the criticism.

"No worries. If karma tries to take me on I'll come after it with my fangs bared."

Mary bares her teeth in an effort to show Angela just what's in store for karma. And it's scary, although not necessarily in the way Mary intends.

"Christ, you're drunk."

"Don't I know it. But that doesn't mean I've forgotten how to operate an axe."

Raising the imaginary tool in front of her, Mary gives the air a few sturdy whacks then promptly forgets what she's doing. She studies her outstretched arms for a few seconds before deciding that she must have been conducting an invisible orchestra.

Angela ducks as imaginary notes fly past her head.

"I can't imagine how the police will word that in their report. And I don't want to either. What do you say we call it a day before one of us staggers into the pool and drowns?"

Mary's hands are swooping and stabbing with no sense of rhythm, but with an enthusiasm that suggests her invisible orchestra may be composed entirely of Mexican jumping beans.

"You first. I'm committed to downing the entire pitcher before sundown. Then I'm figuring on passing out on the back lawn. You can join me if you're not going to get too holy about it."

Angela remembers the olive jar and retrieves it from under the table. She plunks it down in front of Mary, then steadies it with both hands.

“Join you? In passing out? I hoped that’s where this was heading.”

Mary looks at the olive jar, the mostly empty pitcher, the completely empty glasses, and Angela. She narrows her lips. Then she narrows her eyes.

“In downing the booze. I said no olives. I heard myself say it loud enough to frighten a monkey, so how can the jar be empty unless one of us was not on the Edison bandwagon? Answer me that.”

Angela gives an animated shrug.

Mary blows a gasket.

“Traitor! No more booze for you. And you can pass out on your own lawn. You overstayed your welcome hours ago. I should’ve said something sooner, but I was distracted by the damn beaver. I think it’s time for you to piss off. Take what’s left of the olives with you.”

Mary tosses her ghostly batons skywards then lowers her thumb and forefinger into a shallow puddle of gin on the table. She flicks a lone olive at Angela and smiles mischievously, her batons forgotten.

Angela deflects the olive.

“Traitor my ass.”

Angela plucks the remaining olives from the patio, flinging them at Mary without bothering to take aim. Next to fly are the glasses, followed by the pitcher, the chairs, and a squishy toy Mary had hoped would attract the beaver’s attention.

When all is said and done, three olives and a flip-flop are floating in the pool, Mary is collapsed on the patio, and Angela is lying face-down on the grass, trying to remember what she sees in Mary.

Nothing is coming to mind.

Then the beaver comes to mind and Angela raises her head.

She stares at the beaver.

The beaver stares at her.

Then the beaver lets out a sound the likes of which Angela didn’t know a beaver could make. Angela nods her approval and vows to sneak back in the middle of the night to abscond with the rodent before Mary can implicate it in any more crimes or turn it into a sleeve. It’s the least Angela can do now that she and it have stared themselves into a psychic bond.

Mary will just have think up another way to exact her revenge. And Angela has no doubt she will do precisely that the next time the gin kicks in,

assuming, of course, that the next time the gin kicks in is after Mary gets out of her upcoming court-ordered stint in rehab, which is what the two of them had been celebrating when things got out of hand.

By then, Angela and the beaver will be long gone.