

The Town Drunk

Presents

SUFFICIENT CAUSE

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The Prillyball Playoffs had reached the final game, the last match between retiring champion Frank DuManatees and hot young challenger Lee Tingling. Howie Solcom leaned forward in his old pea-green plasticliner, his fingers gripping the peeling arms.

“Fifteen,” screamed the announcer. “Fifteen and here we go it’s outta here gonna be a real schragriffic day and only two minutes to go and...”

Now was the perfect moment.

Now, if ever.

Howie turned the volume up by two units. He leveraged himself out of the permanently reclined chair and onto his slippers. When had he last gotten up? Yesterday morning, perhaps, or possibly the day before. The government-issue plasticliner took care of that.

Across the corrugated plastic floor he shuffled, to the section of the tiny double apartunit nominally designated as the kitchen. The announcer said shrilly, “look at him go, only one minute left this is it thisisit thisisit...”

Howie reached his destination: a flat screen embedded in the pissu, a speaker grille at one end. This was it. This was it.

“Menu,” Howie said as quietly as possible. His palms were already damp with sweat; he rubbed them on his styrolon pants. The screen changed, but Howie did not need to look. “Food. Desserts.” His mouth watered. This was it. “Chocochip cookies.”

“Acceptable, please sign,” flashed the screen, and the announcer screamed in the background, “we havva WINNER!” Howie thought he could feel his heart beating through his beloved old cotton cardigan. He signed his name with the attached pen, pressed “OK,” and watched with moist eyes as the screen spelled out “Delivered” in animated letters carried by little storks. With trembling fingers, he opened the hatch of the pissu and there—*there* were the Chocochip cookies, exactly as he remembered them from his bachelor days. He had not had them in... how

many years? He reached out a tremulous hand, closed his fingers greedily around the plastic, and—

“Howard!”

Howie fumbled the Chocochip cookies. They slid across the kitchen floor. Agnes snatched them up in one clawed fist.

“What is this, Howard? Tell me what this is.”

“I thought I might have a—”

“Yes?”

“A snack?”

“Junk, Howard. You know that junk is not good for you. Don’t you know that?”

Howie nodded.

“Aren’t you ashamed? To go sneaking around like a rat burglar? Aren’t you?”

He swallowed. And nodded again.

“I do my best to put wholesome meals in front of us. To keep us healthy. Are you trying to subvert that?”

He couldn’t help it. “Don’t you mean ‘subvert’?”

Agnes’ white-blue eyes narrowed. She swung out her arm and dropped the Chocochip package down the incinerator chute on the wall opposite the pissu. Howie almost thought he could hear the package sliding down the chute to be sliced and fried in the building’s lowest basement.

“Now, Howard. If you have any requests for the Personal Shopper Unit, you may make them through me. I will decide what is best for us. Tell me what you would like.”

“Chocochip cookies?”

“Not healthy, Howard.”

“It has to be healthy, or the pissu wouldn’t give it to me,” pointed out Howie. “It only gives out approved substances.”

“Many things are approved by the government that *we* do not find appropriate. If you do not know what *we* consider acceptable purchases, you may ask me. Now. I will order anything appropriate for us, only don’t call it a—that name is vulgar, Howard. Call it a Personal Shopping

Unit, please.”

“Then, a banana,” said Howie. “With chocolate.”

“No, Howard.”

“A plain banana. And—a rice cake. And a beer?”

“No.”

“A soyshake. Chocolate.”

“I will approve strawberry. You see how reasonable I can be?”

“And eight packages of Mepholephodroline.”

Agnes paused and turned from the screen. “Goodness, whatever for?”

“I feel a cold coming on.”

“You may have three. And some tofurky noodle soup.” Agnes patted his receding hairline. “You have to take care of yourself, you know.”

An unexpected surge of affection made Howie’s spine tremble. “You’d miss me if I were gone?”

“Of course, silly.” Agnes turned back to the screen and lifted the plastic pen to sign for the order. “Without you, I’d have to move back into a single apartunit.”

Reigning champion Lee Tingling was crushing upstart Mickey Brattle in a heated second half. “It’s Tingling smashing Brattle boy is he gettin’ a pounding shoulda known not to challenge the experts and...”

“Howard? Howard. Look at me.” Agnes stepped between Howie and the screen. She found the TV control behind her back and instinctively turned the volume down to one unit below the range of acceptable hearing. “I just signed for your bottles of window washing fluid, Howard. But I don’t know why you think we need ten bottles, so I only ordered you two. How could you have used up the last two bottles already? I couldn’t find them, and our windows are very dirty. Also your tacky glue—you wanted a case?”

“To fix the recliner,” mumbled Howie. “Where it’s peeling.”

“I got you one bottle; we can’t possibly need more than that. I have it tucked away. You can have it after you do a couple chores for me. Your jalapeño sauce was approved. But no

Chocosicles, Howard, I don't know why you even try."

"Hope springs eternal?"

A muffled pounding on the plastic apartment door forestalled Agnes' reply. "Who is that?"

Howie shrugged and sank deeper into his armchair. He fumbled for the remote and turned the volume back up. "Another point for Tingling yes it's crushing..."

"It better not be something big you ordered," she said. She strode to the door and opened it wide.

"Mrs. Solcom?" It was a very large man in a very white uniform. Agnes stood her ground. "Yes?"

"I have a warrant for your arrest." Two more uniformed men, holding teflon bags, stepped up to flank the first.

"I don't believe you!"

"See for yourself. Boys?"

The two underlings melted through the doorway and began rummaging through every drawer and corner of the four-room double apartment.

"We demand an explanation," Agnes said.

The very large man tapped his paper. "Mrs. Howard Solcom, ordered by pissu, two bottles of window washing fluid every month for the past year. Seven bottles of glue, spaced at 21-day intervals. The list just goes on. Boys, what did you find?"

"Jalapeño sauce hidden in a shoe box. Window washing fluid above the ceiling tiles."

"Athletes' Foot Cream rolled in pantyhose."

Agnes set her jaw. "There's no law against using the Personal Shopper Unit. Everything it delivers is approved."

"Even approved substances can be deadly when they are combined in the right way. You've been slowly gathering the supplies needed to make a lythrax biobomb."

"What? No—it's my husband's doing. Those are all his orders."

The man shook his head. "Nice try, lady. He obviously hasn't been off that chair for a week. Doesn't even have the energy to order a Chocobar, let alone make a biobomb. You signed for them, they're yours."

“...amazing just amazing Tingling’s at the top his game never seen him play this good...”

“But that was for him—I was holding it there for him—”

“Right. Come along quietly now, or we’ll have to—oof! That’s not very nice, ma’am. Jerry, the Citizen Stun, please. Lady, what will the neighbors think?”

There was hollering from Agnes, a shriek of “Stop biting!” from one of the men, and then a thunk. A lone bottle of jalapeño sauce rolled across the corrugated floor in front of the TV.

“What a day. Terry, grab those bags. Lock the door behind us...”

“An it’s over! Whatta game! Folks we’ll be right back aftta this...”

Howie clicked the remote once, and there was complete and utter silence in the little double apartunit. He stretched his arms luxuriously over his head, contemplating.

Then he rose and headed towards the pissu, a gentle spring in his step.

Tina Connolly is a face painter in Portland, Oregon, where she lives with a husband and a cat. Her credits include *Son and Foe* and *Ideomancer*, and she has work forthcoming in *Escape Pod* and *Strange Horizons*. She is also a graduate of Clarion West 2006. Visit her website at <http://www.tinaconnolly.com>.