

The Town Drunk

Presents

Answer Me This

Casey Fiesler

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As he had very little to his name when he died, the reading of Harvey Bannister's will was short work. In fact, the entire occasion was of such little interest that his nephew, Anthony, didn't bother to attend at all. He and everyone else in their small family assumed that the reading would be thus: "To my loving wife, Marla, I leave all of my worldly possessions."

This turned out to be a fair assessment, but as Anthony discovered in a frantic phone conversation with his mother, there was one last line in the will: "...except for the Sphinx, whom I leave to my interesting nephew, Anthony."

"He called you 'interesting,'" Anthony's mother said. "I don't think you're interesting. Why did he leave something for you and nothing for me?"

"But—but—" Anthony sputtered as he held the cell phone with one hand and gripped the steering wheel with the other. "But I don't want a Sphinx! What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Count yourself lucky, dear," his mother said. "Marla got stuck with the Pomeranian. The poor thing piddles all over the carpet on a regular basis."

"What happened to the Komodo Dragon?" asked Anthony. For as long as he could remember, his Uncle Harvey had a revolving collection of exotic animals. He picked them up like strays when he traveled for work. He was a novelties salesman. Specialized in rubber dog poo. There are some things that sell equally well all over the world, and rubber dog poo is one of them.

"Zoo," said Anthony's mother.

"Why didn't the zoo take the Sphinx?"

"Honestly, Anthony. Have you ever seen a Sphinx in a zoo? And before you ask, PETA has the dodo bird. Now get to the lawyer's office as soon as you can. It's being held for you."

Anthony had been on the way to pick up his girlfriend, but as soon as he called and told her that

his delay involved a will, she insisted he take care of it first. So he headed to the offices of Motley, Motley, and Grup, where the executive of his uncle's estate handed him a key to a storage compartment.

"Apparently Mrs. Bannister wanted it out of her basement as soon as possible," said Motley, Motley, or Grup. His bright orange tie made Anthony feel a bit dizzy. "I can't imagine why."

When Anthony arrived and unlocked the big padlock on the storage compartment, the Sphinx was sitting in the back, looking cross.

"Hi," Anthony said.

"I should eat you," replied the Sphinx.

"I don't think that would be a healthy start to our relationship," Anthony said, shifting on his feet. "Since I'm supposed to be taking care of you now and all."

"I don't need taking care of."

"Well, you're going to have to come with me anyway. My apartment is kind of small, but I guess we'll just have to cope."

The Sphinx grumbled and lifted herself up off of the ground. Her lion's paws had very sharp claws, but at least she had nice breasts. She yawned and stretched her wings out briefly before folding them at her sides. "Okay," she said. "I guess I won't eat you yet."

She was going to be a tight fit in his car. "You don't piddle on the carpet, do you?" he asked.

She growled and bared her teeth. He took that as a "no."

After a few days, the Sphinx was really starting to get on his nerves. She had taken to standing outside the bathroom and asking riddles.

"I really need to pee," Anthony said one more morning before work.

She ignored him. "Answer me this. What creature in the morning goes on four feet, at noon on two, and in the—"

"Good grief!" Anthony snapped. "Can't you get a new riddle? How many times have I answered this? It's a man, okay? A man! Crawling, walking, cane, blah blah blah. If you're going to be such a pain in the ass, can't you at least get a new riddle?"

She looked a little offended, but stepped aside. "You have answered my riddle correctly. You may pass."

“One of these days I’ll get it wrong on purpose,” he said, pushing past her. “Then you can eat me and I’ll be out of my misery.” Before closing the door, he poked his head back out and added, “When Oedipus got the answer right, didn’t you throw yourself off a cliff?”

“Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated,” she huffed.

He sighed and locked the door behind him.

That evening while cooking dinner, Anthony looked over and saw the Sphinx watching a rerun of *Xena, Warrior Princess* on TV. She was muttering under her breath about historical inaccuracies.

“Hey,” Anthony called as he chopped up an onion, “should I be feeding you something?”

“I do not require regular nourishment,” she said, not taking her eyes off the TV. “A meal once every couple of weeks is sufficient.”

“Well, what do you eat? I should probably get you something soon here, right?”

“Raw meat. A large goat would do. Or a sheep. Horses, of course. Or in a pinch, a nice juicy baby.”

“A baby what?” Anthony asked, even though he didn’t really want to know the answer.

She just leered.

The next morning, she was standing at the bathroom again. Not in the mood to argue with her, Anthony said, “It’s a man. May I pass, please?”

She smiled, looking smug. “I have a different riddle for you.”

“Oh?” He lifted an eyebrow, intrigued. “If I get it wrong, will you eat me?”

“Of course.”

“You know, this doesn’t seem all that fair, since this *is* my own bathroom.”

She blinked.

“Okay, fine, ask away.”

She cleared her throat, and the feathers on her wings ruffled. “What is black and white and red

all over?”

He covered his mouth and coughed to hide a snort of laughter. “A newspaper.”

Her eyes lit up as she bared her teeth. “You are wrong! The correct answer is... a bleeding penguin!”

Anthony stared at her. “That’s ridiculous. Everyone knows that joke. ‘Red,’ like the color. ‘Read,’ like reading. It’s a pun.” He paused, then added incredulously, “And bleeding penguins? That’s disgusting!”

The Sphinx considered this for a moment before her face fell in disappointment. “Very well. You have answered my riddle correctly. You may pass.”

“Don’t look so sad. I’m sure you’ll get to eat me one of these days.”

She brightened up a little at that.

Anthony’s girlfriend, Trisha, really didn’t like the Sphinx.

“She’s been telling blonde jokes,” she complained when he had her over for dinner later that week.

“They’re not jokes!” the Sphinx yelled from the study. “They’re *riddles!*”

Trisha glared in that general direction and snapped at Anthony, “I can’t even use your bathroom for fear she’ll eat me.”

“She’ll only eat you if you get the answer wrong,” Anthony said. “What was it?”

“What was what?”

“The riddle.”

“You mean the blonde joke?” Trisha sniffed and flipped her very blonde hair over her shoulder. “Why was the blonde upset when she got her driver’s license?”

Andrew laughed. “Well, that’s easy. Because she got an ‘F’ in sex.”

Trisha scowled and pushed her chair out from the table. “That’s it. It’s her or me. Send that flea-ridden exhibitionist lion *thing* back to—to Egypt, or wherever it is she’s from, or I’m leaving you!”

“I’m from *Greece!*” the Sphinx yelled, scandalized.

Anthony's shoulders slumped. "But Trisha, my uncle expected me to take care of her. It was his dying wish..."

Trisha grabbed her purse and whirled toward the door. "I hope she eats you," she snarled before the door slammed shut behind her.

As the Sphinx walked into the dining room, Anthony winced at each clickity-click of her claws against the linoleum floor. "Don't worry," said the Sphinx, "I promise I won't eat you. You're really getting too old to be tasty, anyway."

Anthony's forehead hit the table with a painful thump.

After a few more days, the Sphinx had run out of blonde jokes and moved on to frog-in-a-blender jokes.

"You know..." Anthony checked the Internet to see if he could get a live goat delivered to his apartment, then turned to the Sphinx. "I've been thinking about what Trisha said. About you going home."

"I thought you said you decided you didn't like her that much anyway," the Sphinx replied from the futon.

"Well, it's not because I want Trisha back. I just thought you might be happier, you know, if you were in Thebes. Where you can ask riddles and maybe actually eat someone every once in a while."

The Sphinx looked thoughtful. "I do sort of miss my old rock. It was lovely for sunning, and I could see the travelers approaching from a mile away. Their fear was so pretty."

Anthony cleared his throat. "I have some money saved that I was going to spend on a vacation with Trisha. I could send you to Greece instead."

"You'd really do that? For me?"

Anthony shrugged. "I feel bad about all those years you spent in my uncle's basement."

"He did bring me horses sometimes."

"Well, do you want to go?"

She smiled, and he couldn't help but notice just how sharp her teeth really were. "That would be marvelous."

A couple of months after Anthony sent the Sphinx off in the cargo compartment of a large ship, he received a postcard in the mail. On the front was a picture of the entrance to Thebes and a curly greeting that read, "Wish You Were Here."

On the back was a note, and Anthony wondered how the Sphinx could have written it, with her lion's feet.

Dear Anthony,

Thank you again for your generosity in getting me home. I hadn't even realized how much I missed it. I once again inspire fear in the hearts of travelers, and it is all thanks to you. In fact, just yesterday, a Greek shipping heir and his American girlfriend came by and didn't know what was green and red and goes one thousand miles per hour. He reminded me of Oedipus. She reminded me of Trisha. They were delicious.

The Sphinx

P.S. If you're ever outside Thebes, I will let you in without eating you. But only the once. I have a reputation to maintain, you know.

Anthony smiled fondly at the postcard, though he did feel a pang of remorse for the poor couple. He called his mother.

"Hey Mom, what did Uncle Harvey actually die of?"

"Why, he was mauled to death by wild dogs in front of his own bathroom. Isn't that just terrible?"

"Um." Anthony suddenly remembered that his uncle had never seemed to like him all that much.

Still, when Marla Bannister died not long after, she left Anthony several cases of rubber dog poo and the Pomeranian. It piddled on the carpet, and Anthony kind of missed the Sphinx.

Casey Fiesler is currently a law student in Nashville, Tennessee, though she still calls Atlanta home. There she worked as a technical writer and studied psychology and computer science at Georgia Tech. She is a graduate of the Clarion East Writer's Workshop, and her poetry and short fiction has appeared in *Full Unit Hookup*, *Son and Foe*, and *Goblin Fruit*. Her work will be featured in several upcoming anthologies as well. To learn more, visit her website at <http://www.madgirl.org>. She has no comment on whether it's the law or the writing that's driving her mad.