

Juxtaposition

Oliver

Oliver rose from his desk and stretched his arms up into the air. The office was nearly dark, save for the light by his desk, and a light all the way on the other side of the room. His brow furrowed; who else would be here, at this time of night? He stepped out from behind his desk and crossed to the light.

The light came from the desk lamp of Miss Grace- the office secretary.

“Grace?” he asked, forgetting the “Miss” and himself. “What are you doing here?”

The woman jumped. She looked up and placed a hand on her chest, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Oliver!” she laughed. “You scared me!”

“I’m sorry.” he offered sincerely. She smiled, a small, delicate smile, which matched her small, delicate features. In appearance, she reminded Oliver of a china doll. In temperament, that was less so.

“What are you doing here?” he asked again.

“Just, um, just finishing some paperwork.” she said, half lifting a folder in demonstration. Oliver nodded.

Oliver turned away, leaning against Grace’s desk in a sort of half-sitting position. He pulled a package of cigarettes from his pocket and silently offered one to her.

“No, thank you,” she said shaking her head gently, “I don’t smoke.” He shrugged, took a cigarette from the pack, placed it in between his teeth, then slid the package back into his pocket. He took out a lighter, cupped his hands around the cigarette, and lit it. He leaned back slightly as he took a drag. Grace moved to sit beside him.

“I’m going to run this place someday,” he said staring out over the office before them.

Grace exhaled through her nose. It sounded like a laugh. Oliver chose to believe it wasn’t.

Oliver looked over at her. Her gentle finger waves cascaded down the side of her face, her makeup was lighter than most of the other women in the office’s, and he liked it. He thought, briefly, about placing his hand over hers. But he didn’t.

They were quiet for a long while.

“Grace?” he asked finally.

She lifted her head in response.

“Would you like to go get a drink, with me?”

“Oh,” she said softly, “I don’t think I should...sir.”

“Right,” Oliver said, shaking his head, every sense of propriety coming back to him at once. “I don’t- I don’t know what I was thinking. Forgive me.”

Grace nodded sincerely, "Of course."

Oliver stood and stamped his cigarette out on the floor.

"It's late," he remarked. "We ought to be going home." Grace nodded in agreement, moving back behind her desk to gather her coat and hat.

"Goodnight, Miss Grace." Oliver said.

Grace smiled her same delicate smile and echoed the sentiment, "Goodnight, sir."

Grace

Grace was bunkered at her desk, pouring over a stack of sales reports. She wondered how late it was. Her vision blurred, and she blinked a few times to get it to return to normal.

"Grace?" someone asked. "What are you still doing here?"

Grace jumped, her heart racing. In front of her stood Oliver, one of the men who worked for the oil company.

"Oliver," she laughed slightly, placing a hand on her chest and breathing a sigh of relief, "You scared me."

"I'm sorry," he offered. His face displayed genuine worry, and his hand was half outstretched as if he meant to reach for her. She didn't think he'd noticed that.

Oliver was a broad man, tall and powerful. He was older than her by a good decade, but he didn't show it. His eyes were kind- a constant, even when he was upset, or angry, or yelling at someone over the phone. If she didn't know better, she would have been attracted to him.

But she knew better.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Grace held up a folder half heartedly in an attempt at explanation, "I'm just, um, finishing some paperwork." She didn't say that she was only doing so because he was working late, and thus she felt she should work late, to ensure he didn't stay the whole night through.

Oliver nodded in understanding, then leaned against her desk. He offered a cigarette but she declined. She'd tried them once in college, but found they made her voice scratchy in a way that didn't befit her person or position.

She rose and moved to lean beside him.

"I'm going to run this place one day." he said. Grace smiled, imaging the whole idea. She liked it so much she couldn't help but laugh slightly through her nose. She hoped he wouldn't take that as an insult.

The two of them were quiet for a long time. She worried that she'd offended him, but before she could apologize, Oliver said, "Grace?"

She looked at him expectantly.

“Would you like to get a drink, with me?”

Yes, she thought. *Yes, I would like that very much.* But she didn't say so. He was, in a way, her superior, and it would be bad for both of them to fraternize outside of work- but for her especially.

“Oh,” she said finally, her voice smaller than she would have liked it to be, “I don't think I should...sir.”

Oliver's face flushed, and he looked away quickly.

“Right.” He said. “I don't know what I was thinking. Forgive me.”

“Of course.” Grace said. He could do no wrong in her eyes.

Oliver stood abruptly, making some comment about the time and how they ought to get home.

“Goodnight, Miss Grace.” he said as she moved to get her coat.

“Goodnight, sir.”