

## Secretary

Marlene had been working as a high school secretary for ten years when the head guidance administrator, Mr. Schnell, arrived one morning in a flurry and slammed the door to his office. Just after the door slammed Marlene heard the loud click of his lock. Then the blinds dropped down over the door’s wire-mesh window and swayed for a few seconds before coming to a stop.

One student, sitting on a chair against the opposite wall, looked at Mr. Schnell’s office and then at Marlene, who treated him with a conspiratorial raise of her eyebrows. The boy blew air out of his mouth and rolled his eyes. Even though she had been working in a high school for many years and should have been used this kind of hurtful behavior, Marlene still found the experience jarring. She vowed that this was the last time she would do anything nice for this undeserving brat.

But it wouldn’t be the last time, and she knew it. Marlene couldn’t help being nice. She was nice to a fault, she thought, brushing off the top of a small photo of her niece. She stole a glance at the boy, who slouched in his chair with his sweatshirt hood up around his ears. Now she felt bad about writing him off so quickly: he probably had a difficult home life.

“Are you waiting for someone?” she asked, tilting her head in the way she knew people expected of secretaries.

He mumbled something about seeing Mr. Schnell.

“He’ll be right out to see you,” she said, finishing with a big smile.

“Doesn’t look like it.”

He blew air out of his mouth again and nodded towards Mr. Schnell’s door. They seemed to be on the same page once more. This fact was immensely reassuring to Marlene.

To avoid them simply staring at each other--and whatever horrors that might bring--Marlene began flipping aimlessly through her Rolodex as though she had an important call to make. In fact, she realized, she did have an important call to make. It was a personal call, which wasn't exactly allowed, but after stealing another glance at the boy she felt certain that her secret would be safe with him, if only because his preoccupation was not with adult necessities, but rather with the frivolities of the teenage years. How strange it was for her and this boy to have such different concerns in life! She was only thirty-one and remembered very clearly her high school days, but they were a world apart.

Marlene picked up the phone and dialed out. She turned her chair slightly to face away from the boy.

The woman on the other line was also a secretary, and Marlene thought it was funny for that to be the case. She wondered if she should let the other woman know, but before she could come a decision about it another call was coming in.

“Please hold,” she said and then cringed at her error as she answered the incoming call. “Mr. Schnell's office,” she said in her chipper voice.

“You tell that bastard to come back here this instant!” shouted a woman's voice on the line. She sounded hysterical.

“I'm sorry, ma'am, I--” But Marlene didn't know how to continue. She had never encountered anything like this before. Of course, hysterical parents were always calling, but Marlene was never the focus of their wrath. One thing that Marlene loved about being a secretary was not being expected to get involved. She liked to think of herself as an usher directing patrons into a performance. While she was crucial to the performance's success, no one would ever think to blame an usher for a bad one. It therefore didn't make sense to implicate a secretary in her boss' behavior--whatever he had done.

Fortunately Marlene didn't have to say anything at all because the woman just kept on talking.

“That son-of-a-bitch! Do you know what he did? Do you? He cheated on me! That lying sack of...ugh! For years probably. And do you know how I found out? He didn't even have the guts to tell me, that wuss! I found panties. Panties! Can you believe that? How cliché can you get? But you know Arthur, always doing things by the book! Even in his affairs, by the book, by the book. My God! And to think, I wasted my youth with this bastard! And now look at me. Look at me, Marlene!”

Hearing her name on the line was unnerving. Marlene felt party to this awful drama that clearly had no clean end in sight. She couldn't simply transfer Mrs. Schnell over to Mr. Schnell and be done with it. She was part of Mrs. Schnell's story now. In her retelling of this event, Mrs. Schnell would forever appeal to her listener with the refrain, “Marlene heard me, and she agreed!”

But now Mrs. Schnell was sobbing, and Marlene couldn't make out a single word of what she was saying. She felt she should say something--if only to not implicate herself further by accidentally agreeing to something she didn't understand--but she didn't know what. Thankfully, another call came in.

“I'm sorry,” Marlene said quickly, “but there's another call that I really have to take. Can you hold for a minute?” Before Mrs. Schnell could respond, Marlene switched over. “Mr. Schnell's office,” she said, still trying to sound chipper.

“Marlene.” The voice was hushed, but she recognized it immediately.

“Mr. Schnell?”

Marlene looked over to his office as though he might be standing in the window, but of course all she saw were the unmoving blinds.

“Is that my wife on the phone?”

“I think so.”

“Well, is it or isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Okay. Okay okay okay.” He paused for a moment. Marlene waited tensely. “I need you to hang up.”

“On your wife?”

“Yes, on my wife! Who else?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Just hang up and...” he was searching for thoughts or words or both. “...unplug the phone.”

“Unplug it?”

“Yes Marlene! Unplug the goddamn phone!”

“But Mr. Schnell, that doesn’t seem like the right thing to do. What if other people--parents--try to call?” She hid her mouth and whispered the word “parents” while glancing at the boy, who was still slouched deep in his chair.

Mr. Schnell laughed.

“Oh please, Marlene, this is a high school, not the Senate. They can go a few hours without whining about their dumb kids. Just unplug the phone.”

He hung up.

Marlene closed her eyes and took a few breaths. She looked at the boy. He was sleeping with his hood coming down over his eyes. Poor thing, she thought. She wondered vaguely why he wasn’t in class and whether she should tell Mr. Schnell he was waiting for him,

even though the boy wasn't on the schedule. Then she saw the flashing red light on the phone console and braced herself to hang up on Mr. Schnell's wife.

“Mrs. Schnell?”

It took a moment for Mrs. Schnell to respond, and when she did her voice came through as though she had been away from the phone.

“Marlene. Oh, such a doll you are.” Apart from a few sniffles, her voice was completely changed from the sobbing wreck it had been a few minutes before. Within that short amount of time, Mrs. Schnell seemed to have been reborn.

“Thank you, Mrs. Schnell.”

“You know, there's something just so...what's the word? Liberating! Yes, liberating. About starting fresh.” Mrs. Schnell's voice came in and out. She sounded distracted. “I should really see this whole thing as an opportunity, don't you think? Start my life over!” Something crashed in the background.

“Mrs. Schnell?”

“Yes?”

“May I ask you something?”

“Yes, dear?” Mrs. Schnell grunted and the phone crackled against her cheek.

“What are you doing?”

Mrs. Schnell cackled for quite some time and then spoke chillingly.

“Kicking Mr. Schnell to the curb! His things at least.” She emphasized “Mr. Schnell” as though a surname was far too respectful for the monster it hid.

“Oh.”

Marlene began to feel bad for Mrs. Schnell. She herself had never been married but was in a relationship of about five years. Marlene couldn't imagine what it might do to her if her

partner had done what Mr. Schnell had. No matter what a person was normally like, you just couldn't tell how they'd act when things were suddenly pulled out from under them. Marlene recalled the retirement party where she had been introduced to Mrs. Schnell. At the time she had been a nice, composed woman.

Once again the light on the phone console blinked red.

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Schnell, but I have another--”

“Don't mind me! I'm having a grand old time!”

Marlene switched over.

“Why are you still on the phone? I told you to unplug it!”

“I--um...”

“Are you still talking to my wife?”

Marlene was silent.

“Marlene!”

“Yes, Mr. Schnell.”

“Yes what, Marlene? Yes, yes. Or yes you are still talking to my wife?”

“Both?”

“Goddamn it Marlene!”

A second later the door to Mr. Schnell's office swung open, and Mr. Schnell came storming over to Marlene's desk. He grabbed the phone out of her hand. While he fumbled around for the connection to the console Marlene glanced at the boy, who perked up. Mr. Schnell finally ripped the cord from the console and shoved the fully detached phone back at Marlene. She clutched it to her chest as though it were a wounded bird. Mr. Schnell stormed back into his office and slammed the door. The blinds smacked violently against the window. A guidance counselor a few doors away peeked his head out.

The uneasiness in the air eventually settled down. The boy was slouched back in his chair but still alert, ready for the next explosion. Without her phone and with nothing on Mr. Schnell’s schedule for the next few hours, Marlene had nothing to do. She decided to confront the subject that had been bothering her all morning.

“Excuse me?” she said. It took a moment for the boy to realize he was being talked to.

“Yeah?” His voice cracked.

“Why are you here? Are you hoping to meet with Mr. Schnell?”

He shrugged.

Marlene was at a loss. She felt like she was dangling a string down a well that was just barely too short for the child at the bottom to grab.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

“Not really.”

Marlene stared at him head on, nodding like an idiot, trying desperately to think of something to say to this non-response. She was ready to give up when, suddenly, he continued.

“It’s just--my sister...she’s ten and...well, she was just taken from our foster home.” Marlene was dumbfounded by the seriousness of this boy’s circumstances, and it must have shown because he went on to clarify. “I just wanted to ask Mr. Schnell if he knows what to do.”

Marlene felt horrible. It had never occurred to her that this boy might have real problems, not simply those that adults brush off as the inconsequential distresses of youth. This was an emergency! And he had just been sitting there this whole time like everything was normal. To think that earlier she was making a personal call to book a hair appointment, all the while he had been suffering the loss of his sister! And Mr. Schnell--he and his personal affairs getting in the way of this boy’s well-being--it was simply unacceptable!

The boy watched as Marlene smacked both of her hands on her desk and walked with great purpose over to Mr. Schnell’s door, on which she knocked several times in rapid succession. When there was no answer she called out.

“Mr. Schnell?”

There was no response. She twisted the knob and nudged the door open.

Mr. Schnell was on the phone, speaking in a hushed voice. It was clear he was talking with the woman who had helped cause Mrs. Schnell’s heartbreak.

“Mr. Schnell.” Marlene stood there with her arms crossed and fingers tapping her forearm.

“One second,” Mr. Schnell said into the receiver, covering it with his hand. “What is it now, Marlene?”

“Mr. Schnell, there’s a boy outside who’s been waiting to see you for some time, and I think it’s important.”

“Oh, you think it’s important, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, how about you do your job and I do mine. And mine is determining what is and what is not important, okay?”

He uncupped his hand from the receiver and made a shooing motion at Marlene.

“Mr. Schnell!” She took a step towards him, thrusting her fists to her side. “This boy needs your help.”

“Oh, screw that boy! He’s a waste of life!” Mr. Schnell shouted loud enough for the whole office to hear. Marlene peered behind her and saw that the boy was watching them. The moment she caught his eyes he cut his face down and sank into his chair.

Marlene left Mr. Schnell’s office, slamming the door on the way out. She went to her desk and rummaged through her drawers. After a few seconds she found it: an extra phone cord. With shaking hands she plugged it into the phone and the console and dialed a number.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Schnell?”

“Marlene?”

“It was me, Mrs. Schnell! I did it! I had sex with your husband!” She slammed the phone down.

Marlene was shocked at the words that had come out of her mouth. As the blood rushed back to her head, so too did her awareness of her surroundings. The boy was staring straight at her. He had a slight, almost congratulatory smile on his lips. She smiled back at him.

As Marlene turned her head she made eye contact with Mr. Schnell standing outside his office. His face was pale. His lips moved, but words weren’t coming out. Marlene looked around and realized that the other guidance counselors had come out of their offices. They were all watching. The room was completely silent. Finally, Mr. Schnell found his voice.

“GET OUT!” he screamed.

He stormed over to her desk and began packing up her things, including those that weren’t hers, like the stapler and Rolodex and pencil jar. He was shoving them into her bag, and when he was done he threw the bag into the hallway.

The room watched as Marlene stood, adjusted her skirt, and circled around her desk. Almost at the door, she stopped and turned to the boy, who stared at her with gaping mouth and eyes that expressed a certain degree of admiration. She ripped off a Post-it from the stack on her desk and scribbled down her number. She then bent towards the boy and handed him the note.

“Call me if you have any trouble. I’m good at dealing with difficult people,” she said, giving him a small wink.

She picked up her bag in the hallway, walked out of the high school for what was surely the last time, and drove home.

Walking up the driveway to the one-story house she and her boyfriend shared, Marlene was still riding high on what she had done. But coming out of the house was her boyfriend, and he was rolling a suitcase behind him. Marlene ran up to him, but he nearly stiff armed her and kept walking to his car.

“Jake?” She tugged at his shoulder, but he shook her off. He was opening the trunk of his car and shoving his suitcase inside. “Jake, what are you doing?”

He slammed the trunk and looked at her with pained, glassy eyes.

“I’m going to a motel,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“What do you mean, why? You’re cheating on me with that--that guidance counselor!”

“Jake, wait.” She tugged at his sleeve. He shook her off again and got into the driver’s seat. “Let me explain! I didn’t--it’s not what...” But she didn’t know what to say. The situation didn’t make sense. None of it made any sense.

Jake backed out of the driveway, hit the opposite curb, and sped away down the street.

Marlene stood on her front lawn, trying to understand what had just taken place. Of course, he would be back. Tomorrow, certainly, but maybe even tonight, and then she could explain everything to him.

A few minutes later she heard the distant sound of the house phone ringing. She ran inside and answered it.

“Jake!”

But the line was silent. Then, after a few seconds, a tentative voice came on. It was the voice of a child.

“Ms. Bradley?”

“Yes?”

“It’s Alex--from the guidance office today. You gave me your number and told me to call you if I needed help.”

“Oh, yes, Alex! I’m so glad you called.”

And she was.