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## **Death of a Lunch Lady**

*A fictional account of a fictional account of a true story*

No one in the Mon Valley was surprised when the Valley Independent reported the arrest of Cody Wickerham. On January 4, 2013, at twenty-one years of age, he was charged with identity theft, receiving stolen property, forgery, and conspiracy. During the previous five months he had been wracking up debt under the name Beatrice Russell. “Beatty” Russell, a seventy-six year-old wizened widow who hadn’t missed a Thursday Night Bingo in ten years, had run into Cody in the parking lot of the local Walmart. Under the guise of a campaign volunteer doing voter registration, he collected her name, address, signature, and social security number. Beatty—knowing next to nothing about civics—filled out the fraudulent form having been impressed with Cody’s political prowess.

“Now how in the hell is this country gonna fix a damned thing with this commy monkey in office?” Nothing else needed said. She wanted to be part of the solution, not the problem. A *Vote Romney* bumper sticker and the Samaritan gesture of carrying her bags sealed the deal. This was a temporary victory for Cody, establishing three credit cards online within four hours of the scam. Furtively awaiting the postman from a side street, he pilfered the necessary envelopes from her mailbox. This was August. It wasn’t until December that the invisible connection between the two of them became apparent when Judge Charles Christner signed a warrant for the local PD to obtain the location of a particular IP address. Cody was not as tech-savvy as he was cunning, misunderstanding the anonymity of the Internet.

*Scheming Little Bastard* was the title he received from Beatty once police identified him as the culprit. This wasn’t too bad given Cody’s track record: *A Dead Mother Fucker* by a guy he still owed eighty dollars for Percocets, *The Kid Who Had a Rat Tail Until Eighth Grade* by a former classmate, *A Cheating Scumbag* by his ex-girlfriend, and *The Thing You Clean Toilets With* by a stranger who caught a whiff of

him on a bus one Sunday morning after he had passed out, drunk in an alley the night prior. The most poignant description came the day his arrest appeared in the newspaper – *An Unfortunate Existence, All Things Considered* by his former neighbor, Fred Shaw.

Fred had his own obscure link to Cody's life that he reflected on once every year or so. A single thread weaving together a swath of social fabric in the neighborhood where they grew up had tangled into a fibrous web Fred couldn't help but feel trapped in. Once cloth begins to fray, it's common to cut the loose end, but Fred was one of those people that pulls the dangling string of nylon until his shirt is ruined. Sometimes taking things apart is the only way to appreciate the whole. Cody's situation was one of those types of things.



At twenty-three degrees, the wind was sharp on the morning of February 4, 2005. Cody laid in bed hoping his parents would forget to come and get him for school. Concentric circles of soda stains surrounded an unwound N64 controller whose cord drew a line between the foot of his bed and an RCA television. Two mostly-empty dressers surrounded a window through which the sun was concentrating on Cody's face. A dark-brown mullet was splayed out on the pillow underneath him. His tawny skin reflected an oily shine as he rolled his face away from the stream of light.

"Cody! You better be gettin' your ass outta bed," shouted his mom—Katherine—passing by in the hallway. His mom being a lunch lady at a neighboring elementary school meant that he got dropped off thirty-five minutes before the homeroom bell each day. She didn't let him ride the bus because she didn't trust her husband to make sure Cody caught it. With three older siblings, Cody had been handed the misfortune of callous parents.

He got out of bed and searched the piles of clothes clumped in front of the dressers. Grabbing the first pair of jeans and sweater he could find, Cody hurried to the bathroom.

Two steps from his destination, Cody was interdicted by his mom who was standing at the end of the hallway with her neck kinked to the side.

“How ‘bout you brush your teeth and get your backpack without fooling around this morning,” Kathy said, putting on her earrings. She was wearing a white button-up with rounded lapels and had a hairnet clenched between her arm and breast. She was a bulky woman with a tan, pockmarked face and thick brown hair that was often matted from being in a net. When she was out at the bar or casino—or, really any non-domestic environment—you could catch a glimpse of her diaphanous, uneven smile between puffs of Winston Light 100s. Her parents hadn’t been the type to spend money on a dentist.

“I want to get a shower,” Cody said.

“Well you should’ve gotten up earlier,” she chided.

“You suck. Why can’t I just take the bus like every other kid?”

“You keep talking to me that way and I’ll shove a bar of soap in your mouth. You’ll be grateful one day I force you to go to school like this. You won’t end up a bum like your father.” She grabbed him by the arm and twirled him toward the bathroom door. “Be at the front door with shoes on in five minutes,” she said walking away.

“I’ll throw my shoes at your head,” Cody said snappily from inside the bathroom.

“You little brat!” Kathy whipped back around to see the door slamming shut. *Click.*

Downstairs Tom Wickerham was watching TV with the blinds shut. A small cooler at his feet and a wooden tray table holding a plate of eggs accompanied him in watching a rerun of *Bewitched*. The cooler held his lunch and a six-pack of Iron City. A member of the Iron Workers Union, Tom’s thirty-one years as a welder had left him with an untreated herniated disc and several large scars on his arms. Labor’s insatiable hunger had consumed him internally and externally. Perpetuating a life in need of numbing, Tom prepared for work most mornings by cracking open a cold one.

"I thought you'd be gone by now," Kathy's voice echoed down the stairwell, her feet emerging from the ceiling. Tom slid his cooler toward the wall with his foot. Kathy, now on the ground floor, cocked her arm at her hip and analyzed her husband. The room was cast in blue from the glow of the television with a bright stream of flashes directed toward Tom's recliner.

"Didn't I tell ya'? Job's close for a few weeks. Weldin' on the docks down Donora. I can make it there in damn near fifteen minutes," a sheepish grin formed under his moustache.

"And look what you do with your extra time? Instead of gettin' your son out of bed, you're watching TV." She pointed at the television aimed diagonally across the room from Tom.

"Dj'you want me to help? I fig-erd I'd mess up a routine or somethin'. Where's he at? I'll take him to school." Tom pushed his tray forward slightly, his voice pitched high with hope.

"Like hell you're takin' him. You're probably two drinks deep sittin' down here watchin' ...what is this?" She squinted at the screen.

"*Bewitched*, we watched this when we were young," he tried to remind her of a commonality. Tossed out a rope to see if she'd hold on for a moment.

"First off, your drinkin', so no riding Cody. Second, this isn't *Bewitched*, I know Mike York, and that ain't him," shooting her arm at the TV set. In fact, it was *Bewitched*, but, this episode being in the sixth season, the role of the father—Darrin Stephens—had been filled by Dick Sargent. Making the episode even less noticeable was the Stephens' single-season babysitter Esmeralda—played by Alice Ghostley—who was on screen with Sargent.

Tom and Kathy each paused a moment to discern if the second statement was true.

"Who's that?" Kathy asked - her eyes fixed on a scene of Esmeralda and Samantha trying to get the Stephens' tiny, blonde daughter, Tabitha, to eat. Darrin, unable to offer any magical tactics, stood watching.

"That's the mother. What's her face?"

“That’s not Endora – I watched *Bewitched*. That’s Alice Ghostly. You too drunk to recognize her, Tom?”

“I don’t even know who the fuck that is Kat. We gonna start shit now, huh?” Tom’s dim memory was unable to make the right connection. He did know who Alice Ghostly was. On most weeknights during the early nineties, Tom and Kathy watched primetime television together. Being nostalgic for his years playing tight end and a huge Burt Reynolds fan, Tom had forced them to watch every episode of *Evening Shade*. Alice Ghostly had guest starred several times, each time provoking Kathy to utter some iteration of, “*Is that Alice Ghostly? She’s always a riot.*”

“You know exactly who that is, she’s been on practically everything,” Kathy prodded further.

“It don’t even matter who that is. Now there you go, there’s Elizabeth Montgomery. I know what’s on my own fucking television.”

“Your *own* television,” she walked over to the TV and changed the channel.

“What the hell is your problem?” Tom stood up.

“*Beloved actor Ossie Davis was found dead today in his hotel room in Miami, Florida,*” the television said.

“You, in the kitchen, taking *my* eggs, eating *my* food, drinking beer at seven o-fucking-clock in the morning.” Kathy began a tirade.

“Oh fuck you and *your* eggs.” A mist sprayed through his teeth.

“*Known for his role in Spike Lee’s ‘Do the Right Thing’ and as the narrator of ‘Evening Shade,’ Davis’ voice was one of the most well known in Hollywood,*” the television tried reminding them of something lost.

“I should fucking turn you in. Let you become some AA piece-of-shit. Don’t you ever say *your* TV, as far as *you’re* concerned, you own fucking nothing here! You don’t deserve a lick of it,” she snarled and tapped the power button, shutting up the TV.

Without them noticing, Cody had made it downstairs on time, and stood waiting with his black-marker-covered red backpack near the front door. Seeing nothing new in the family room, he put on his shoes, keeping his presence hidden

beneath the shouts. Now fully ready, he looked at them, tensing up his brow to avoid tears from forming.

“Fuck this,” he murmured to himself and grabbed the doorknob.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kathy abruptly stopped and turned her attention to the outline of Cody, who was submerged in light from the open doorway.

“I’m catching the bus,” he slammed the door.

“You see what you cause,” she curtly finished the argument, wincing at her husband.



On the street parallel to Cody’s, Fred woke up and ate a bowl of Frosted Flakes before brushing his teeth. His mother, Elaine, had already left for her shift at the hospital. As a nurse, she was usually out of the house before dawn broke. She left a check on the kitchen table for \$25.50 paper-clipped with a five-dollar bill and a note: *Fred, Could you pay the paperboy before heading to work tonight? Give him the extra five dollars as a tip. Thank you sweetie! See you tomorrow. Love, Mom.* Elaine was heading to her boyfriend’s house after work.

It was 7:35 AM and Fred was running late. It didn’t matter much because, to his privilege, he was never expected in homeroom. He only had to make it to the main office in time to do the morning announcements. A nervous tick kept him glancing at the clock as he waited for his next-door neighbor to arrive. Halfway through a text to his girlfriend, the doorbell rang prompting him to open the garage. Phil, the dilatory neighbor, knew the drill and now stood in the driveway waiting to hop into the passenger seat.

On their way out of the neighborhood they saw the paperboy walking up to the bus stop near where the main road met the entrance to their housing circle. A beige Toyota Camry was following him slowly.

“Nicole sent me the most bullshit text message this morning.” Fred was too busy venting his frustration about his girlfriend to do anything but continue robotically toward school.



Cody stared out the car window at the gaps between the naked trees. February’s dead landscape unveiled the contours of the town’s hillsides. Cody searched for paths in the woods he could walk. He knew his brothers used to get around before they had driver’s licenses, but they never showed him the trails.

“Why would you want to stand at the bus stop when it’s cold out?” Kathy had given her son enough silence after coaxing him into the car.

Cody flickered his eyes up at the translucent reflection of his mom on the window.

“Don’t act like I’m not talking to you,” she warned. Cody squinted his eyes together and started to open his lips, but refrained and turned back to the outside world. Kathy felt a warm tension in her chest. She suddenly thought of her sisters. Remembered how none of them called her. How the two older ones took the first \$50 she ever earned to get gas for the car. Then how they wouldn’t drive her to the movies to meet the boy she liked.

“Sweetie, you know your mom really loves you, right? No matter what.” In a passing moment of supreme loneliness, Kathy’s life was limpid. Cody was the last strand of love towing her onward through her days - her light at the end of the tunnel.

“Then why do you yell at everyone all the time? Everything is always how you want it,” Cody finally spoke up.

“Very little is how I want it,” Kathy corrected him. She opened the lid of the center console and blindly felt for a pack of cigarettes. There were four left.



The middle school and high school were separated by a shallow slope of grass about three hundred yards long, cut through by a curving road. Fred put his backpack down in the office three minutes earlier than needed. Cody sat in the cafeteria waiting for homeroom to start. Fred passed a cartoon to a blonde girl he used to like while sitting in history class. Cody watched two friends quickly copy answers off each other's homework in math class while he handed in a nearly-blank worksheet. Fred's friends held a place for him in the lunch line because his calculus class was on the other side of the building. Cody and his two friends were first to lunch because the remedial English room was closest to the cafeteria. Fred flirted with a coy sophomore girl in the hallway after lunch. Cody was sent to the principal's office for flicking off two flippant sixth-grade girls who were giggling and pointing at his mullet. Both Cody and Fred felt insecure when forced to talk about their parents: Fred because his friend, whose parents were together, joked about his mom fucking her new boyfriend and Cody when the principal asked how his parents would feel if they knew about his behavior. They each suffered a hollow draw from their throats to their stomachs, trying to swallow the lapse of vulnerability. Fred drove home from school with Phil and got ready for his four-to-eight shift at the gas station. Cody rode the bus home and brought in a pile of Valley Independent newspapers off the doorstep when he arrived.



Cody's paper route earned him \$50 per week and gave him the freedom of buying new video games without mentioning the word 'money' to either of his parents. He was prompt, starting his loop around the block no later than 3:45 most days. But today was better than most, today was collection day. On the first Friday of each month, he had to collect dues. Most of the neighbors avoided the interaction and left checks in their mailboxes, but the few that still hand-delivered the payment, usually gave him a small tip.

The entire neighborhood knew the Wickerhams, or at least rumors of them. There was a story of Tommy, the oldest brother, climbing into the woods to get high



along the train tracks. Supposedly this was the birth of the spray-painted pig whose giant penis decorated the trestle bridge that split their neighborhood from the shopping plazas over the hill. Sarah, the only daughter, was purported to climb out of her window on summer nights, when neighbors would see her sneaking off in the backs of trucks full of rowdy boys. Jayson, the next youngest, once drew in several cop cars for lighting a mass of fireworks in the middle of October off of the baseball field that sat at the bottom of the cul-de-sac. He was also the usual suspect at any sighting of TP'ed houses each Halloween. Stories of Cody's troublemaking began passing the lips of some residents before he even had the pleasure of doing reckless deeds.

Waiting for the youngest Wickerham, Fred stood at the living room window in his red, Exxon polo. His cellphone was moist on his ear. Arguing with his girlfriend had become a redundancy, and today's heated battle was on the topic of fidelity.

"Are you kidding me? I seriously never flirt. Ask any of my friends," Fred lied to his girlfriend, hoping to secure a strand of withering trust. Through the window, he could see Cody pulling up to their mailbox on his bike.

"I have to go. Do you even want me to call you after work?" Fred fished for some security of his own.

"Love you too," he exhaled and pressed END.

Fred opened the door, and holding the check up over his head yelled to Cody, who was at the top of the driveway looking into a notebook, "Yo, Cody, I got the check here!" Cody glided down the steep driveway oscillating his brakes on and off. At the door, he could smell the wafting fragrance of the potpourri Fred's mom tactfully placed just inside.

"Hey Fred, your mom only owes for January so twenty-five fifty. You about to go to work?" The combination of his mother's nicotine addiction and Exxon being the closest place to buy cigarettes made Cody a regular at the station.

"Yeah man, work and a girlfriend, never ends. There's an extra five in there, that's for you," Fred said handing Cody the check and cash. Cody smirked stuffing

the bill in his pocket. He lingered for a moment, wondering why Fred's mom was never at the door anymore.



Cody was proud of himself. \$23 in tips made him rich enough to buy two new Nintendo 64 controllers and a game. He rarely saved his money, but he was hoping to invite his friends from school over to hang out soon and wanted to have four controllers for them. He bounced on his bed, looking at his TV. He imagined the four of them lying on their stomachs, immersed in a virtual world of armed secret agents. One of them would yell, "Ahh! Cody, sniped me again," then, turning to him, "I wanna be on your team next time." Relishing in his future popularity, he ran downstairs to ask for a ride to Walmart.

"N'you fuckin' took my paycheck again, didn't you?" Tom accused Kathy, incandescent with the courage of six beers. "Stay the fuck away from my place of work, and keep away from my money!"

"Look at you, drunk as a skunk, acting like a child. I'll stop pickin' up your paycheck when you stop spending it on booze."

"You can thank yourself for the goddamn booze. You wonder why your sisters don't talk to you, you wonder why half our kids don't talk to you. It's you. You selfish cunt," Tom nodded slowly, staring at Kathy with glassy eyes. Kathy felt a streak of numbness through her face. The few buoys of compassion keeping her afloat sank. She turned away from her husband, her vision blurring from tears forming. She saw Cody standing at the bottom of the stairs, money in hand.

"C'mon Cody, let's go. I only have one cigarette left," she picked her coat up off the recliner and grabbed his arm.

"But mom, look, I saved my money," Cody looked back at his dad, hoping for a sign that he was proud. His dad's hands were over his face.



Cody sat in the passenger seat of his mom's car, tearing open his brand new copy of *Perfect Dark*. His parents' fighting had become perfunctory. The fresh distraction of new toys supplanted any lingering uneasiness. They pulled up to the curb of the gas station.

"I'm going in to pick up my cigarettes. Sit tight," still seething Kathy got out of the car without looking at her son. Inside the shop, Fred was behind the counter taking lottery numbers from a saggy, hunchbacked lady. Kathy injected a request, "Fred, can I get a pack'a Winston Light One-huners."

"Yeah, one second." Fred was anxious to read the text message he could feel buzzing in his pocket.

"Alright Michelle, see you soon, I'm sure," Fred shooed off his least favorite patron after she paid for her tickets. He looked at the Winston rack. The light 100's were empty.

"Hold on Mrs. Wickerham, I'm going to have to go in the back." Kathy clenched with impatience. She was usually good for five or six chained cigarettes after an argument with Tom. Fred went into the stock room and immediately looked at his phone: *Don't bother even coming over tonight, you're being a dick*. Fred's heart pounded. He feared that a breakup was coming. He glanced around quickly for a carton of requested cigarettes. Not seeing any on the shelves, he stepped right over the cardboard boxes containing the new shipment waiting to be stocked. His foot almost grazed the box full of Winstons.

"Sorry, we're all out. Soon as we get the new order, we'll have 'em," Fred announced, returning into the shop from the back room.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me. Nothing? I come here every day and you can't keep my cigarettes in stock?"

"You're not the only one who buys them," Fred looked at her while rounding the counter.

"Just give me the fucking Marlboro's, same style." Kathy pulled out some wadded singles.

"They're a dollar more, so you know," Fred warned.

“I don’t give a fuck, just give me the cigarettes.” Fred rung her up being sure to add, “What a bitch,” the moment she walked out the door.



Cody left his mom in the driveway smoking cigarettes. Before he could rush up the stairs, Tom spoke up from his chair.

“You get yourself something?”

“Yeah, I saved up for some new video game stuff,” Cody replied, one foot on the stairs.

“Good son, good.” Cody rushed up the stairs and into his room. Tom was shaking, grinding his teeth while an episode of *Seinfeld* entertained itself. He remembered Kathy when she’d still ask him to go out with her. When he’d stay sober enough to drive her home. When they’d have sex and laugh at the blankets on the floor afterwards. That had to be twenty-five years ago. Now he was an abused pet, scared for its master to come home. Pissing with joy when his owner was happy, then beaten for staining the carpet. At 53 years old, he had no dignity. He fumed at his coworkers calling him out today, “Hey Tom, hear your wife stopped by the office and stole your paycheck again. You keep lettin’ her do that shit. You pussy whipped son of a bitch.” At his job, everyone laughed at each other’s demise.

“Keeping up the good work, I see.” Caught in reverie, Tom hadn’t noticed Kathy come in the door behind him. He had high hopes of her not coming home at all. She eyed him up from the middle of the room with him looking right past her at the TV. Letting out a condescending laugh she shook her head, turned toward the kitchen, zapping off the TV as she walked past.

“That’s fucking *enough*,” Tom got out of his recliner and went upstairs. Through the walls, Cody heard the echo of his dad shouting at himself. He peeked his head out of his bedroom. His dad emerged from the bedroom carrying a Ruger SP-101. Tom bought the five-shot revolver years ago in order to, “protect my wife and family,” as he told a fellow welder. Cody’s legs got unstable at the sight of his father.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“Stay upstairs,” his dad never broke his entranced stare toward the stairwell. Cody breathed rapidly and ran into his parents’ bedroom where there was a phone. Downstairs, Tom caught Kathy in their usual spot in front of the television.

“I can’t live like this. I can’t,” he raised the revolver.

“Oh my god, Tom, put that down,” Kathy went pale and turned quickly toward the kitchen.

“You better fucking stop and talk to me,” Tom threatened. Kathy’s jaw shook. She spun around slowly, wimpering breaths and half-words.

“Why’d you have to ruin me? Huh?! Why is everything I do the bane of your fucking existence?” His lips dribbled spit while he talked. Rage had taken over reason and the outside world grew silent for Tom.

“Tom...I don’t know...fuck...Tom,” Kathy muttered scared phrases, and then saw her saving grace. Behind Tom, Cody was rushing down the stairs. She lunged forward, hoping if Tom would notice Cody.

*Click. Crack!*

Tom shot Kathy in the upper left quadrant of her chest, right below her collarbone. Cody was only a few feet behind his father. He could taste stomach acid in his mouth. He backed into the corner by the door. Tom’s vision began to clear and he trembled holding the gun. Kathy shrieked and cried. Her heart was relieving itself into her shirt and onto the floor. A smooth flow drained the burdens of existence into a circular stain on the carpet. Her eyes rolling, she looked for a light, but saw the television behind her.



Fred came home from work to see strokes of blue and red lights painting the houses. Neighbors were milling around whispering stories they hadn’t heard yet. Fred rolled down his window to ask the nearest spectator what was going on. “Tom Wickerham shot his wife in front of the boy,” a dark face said. He rolled away slowly toward his house. In his living room he flicked the TV, hoping for a distraction.

*Entertainment Tonight* was mourning the loss of Ossie Davis as they transitioned to a clip of *Do The Right Thing*. Ossie's character, Da Mayor, held Sister Mother in his arms after trying to settle the crowd that was forming into a race riot. Fred looked through the television, lost in a mental image of him stocking packs of Winston Light 100's an hour earlier.

Fred wished his mother was home, but she wasn't. He wished his girlfriend would answer his call, but she didn't. He didn't know it right then, but he was really lucky.