

Conversation Pieces
Volume 10

The Red Rose Rages (Bleeding)

A Short Novel

by

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Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

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ISBN: 978-1-933500-02-7

Book Design by Kathryn Wilham
Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Cover illustration: Detail from *Arciola a Carimini* by Lilly
Rosa



Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.

—Michel Foucault,
Discipline and Punish

I

Sunday, 16 January 19:09

Last night, the first time in my six months with Penco, I was the admitting officer for a Milk Train Special.

Clive Dorner summoned me to his office yesterday afternoon, to brief me on this extraordinary prisoner. (I mean *inmate*: have got to delete that word from my head. It's always slipping out at the worst times, getting me into deep shit with everyone who counts.) This inmate arrived on a stretcher under full restraint and heavy sedation, accompanied by three— count them— marshals. According to Clive, she's not a violent felon, but a political. She was originally placed in one of Penco's lighter security facilities, where she not only took advantage of the slack there to perpetrate the same crime as the one she'd been sentenced for, but somehow also organized the work-stoppage, hunger-strike, and general noncooperation of fully one-third of her fellow inmates. Obviously what we have here is egregious mismanagement by that facility's staff— of which I expect to hear they've all been bagged, or at the least that its General Manager has. Clive, of course, would say nothing on *that* score: Penco's General Managers hang tight.

Not surprisingly, the Feds threatened to yank this inmate (her name is Minnivitch) out of the Penco system entirely. Clive says Penco had to fight to keep her. Minnivitch has a substantial deficit, which needless to say Penco's not eager to eat. And of course they don't like the idea of that kind of blot on their record. Clive lectured me: "Penco Rehabilitative Systems, Inc., has a three point seven percent failure rate. That's not perfect,

but it's close. Every inmate is worth intense struggle. If we didn't believe that, the failure rate would be considerably higher." And then repeated that damned motto they make us chant at every staff meeting: "At Penco, we make every last inmate count."

At any rate, they managed to convince the Feds that All Was Not Lost, and so instead of shipping her off to a max Fed steam bubble, they got her reclassified as a felon, thus qualifying her for another level of treatment. Ergo, Minnivitch is to receive intensive individual management by a med officer. Who that officer will be won't be decided until after we've done our own evaluation.

When this inmate arrived at three-twelve a.m., as the most senior officer on duty I had to sign the manifest the marshals were carrying and input the admissions work. Since Dorner had ordered her to be started in white isolation and with negative privileges, I had an orderly shave her head and remove her clothing before putting her in the white cell reserved for her. Though I assigned the orderly to maintain constant observation, I spot-checked her myself through what remained of the night.

I didn't get a chance to more than glance through her chart. But there will be plenty of time tonight—which is the up-side of the graveyard shift. That and the fact that the damned time-budget prompts come at thirty-minute intervals.

Monday, 17 January 13:11

Last night when Faye and I were changing off she asked me to meet her for breakfast. Since I'd just be coming off shift, a breakfast meeting wouldn't be a big deal for me, but I had to wonder what would drag her out of bed that early. I know damned well she doesn't

go to sleep straight after coming off shift— god knows I've never been able to do that with any shift, even when I'm totally exhausted.

She was waiting, a little haggard in aspect, in the staff cafeteria for me when I changed off with Jim Caxton. She took only a granola bar— and expressed disappointment when I insisted on having multigrain cereal and synthjuice. I later realized it was because she'd wanted us to take our breakfast outdoors, so to eat while we walked and talked. (An idiotic idea, eating while wearing hats, coats, and sun veils, and conversing while wearing sun goggles.) But I didn't get it until after we'd left the selection counter, by which time it was too late.

In lieu of going outdoors, we tucked ourselves away in a deserted corner. I had no sooner raised my juice to my lips than Faye stretched her neck and shoulders halfway across the table. "I wanted to talk to you about the new— special— case," she said in a voice a mere decibel or two above a whisper.

"You mean Minnivitch?" I said, plunging my spoon into the mess I wasn't particularly in the mood to swallow.

"Sssh, not so loud!"

I raised my eyebrows at her, then casually panned my eyes over the nearest— empty— tables. "I don't see how anyone can hear us, unless Security has this place bugged, in which case whispering won't do a damned bit of good. Certainly there are no inmates around."

Faye bit her lip. "I still think we should be careful," she said, extravagantly raising her voice a couple more decibels.

God that woman irritates me. It's something in her voice, some little note that just mildly grates on my nerves. Not enough to make me dislike her, no, but enough to push me close to losing patience with her. "I'm all ears,"

I said. And stuck a spoonful of the glop into my mouth and forced it past my rightfully reluctant pharynx.

Faye's eyes narrowed. Her face is such an open book I sometimes wonder how they've kept her on here for as many years as they have. The inmates are sharp enough even with inscrutable faces like mine. I scooped up another spoonful and shoved it into my mouth. The talk had been her idea, not mine. If after all the buildup she decided I couldn't be trusted, so be it. It's best, anyway, to be wary with one's colleagues. Penco is no spa, and its better pay and benefits no free ride.

"Have you talked to Dorner about her since her arrival?" Faye finally said.

"Why? Has he talked to you? Or to Jim? Or Donna?"

Her face went into fascinating enough contortions, but when her fingers began crumbling her granola bar all over the table, I couldn't take my eyes off the mess she was making.

"He's talked to me, certainly. And probably to Jim, I imagine, since he's working days. If he hasn't talked to you, I doubt he's talked to Donna. Yet."

Donna's on her five-day. Not even Clive Dorner would interrupt his senior staff's five-days unless it were an emergency. Our insurance premiums would skyrocket, which Central definitely would not like. Besides, it always looks bad when General Managers have to call on staff during their five-days. And since Clive has this thing about his super-competence...

Having reduced the granola bar to its discrete component parts, Faye now pressed and molded it into repulsive little pats that looked more like human waste just coming out of a dehydrator than I cared to see. Calmly I counseled myself to patience. "Well all right, Faye, I'll bite," I said to encourage her. "What did Clive say?"

And what does my dear esteemed colleague do but shrug— as though getting ready at any second to disavow interest in the subject. Then her chin comes up, and staring me straight in the eyes, she says: “He’s decided we’ve got to push her to cold turkey right off. Because of her history at C23.”

“You mean the damage she did while she was there,” I said, wanting some clarification.

I’m sick and tired of colleagues’ vagueness under the guise of talking in shorthand when there’s been no groundwork laid for establishing common understanding on a given subject. At first, of course, they patronizingly assumed my calling them on their perpetual vagueness was due only to my being new here and thus “out of the flow.” Surely they’ll someday get the message it’s not lack of knowledge but a respect for precision that compels me to make them speak in specifics?

Faye’s eyebrows drew close, and her teeth worried her lower lip. “It’s amazing, isn’t it, what her chart says she did. I still haven’t figured out how she was able to interrupt that cable station’s programming. Don’t you need sophisticated communications equipment and special access to do a thing like that?”

That part of it wasn’t what disturbs me. (Except for the implication that she had staff complicity or even assistance to do it.) What bothers me is that the staff of a C-series facility allowed her to disrupt the social order of one-third of its inmates. (I’m waiting to hear about heads rolling at C23.) I ignored Faye’s digression and got down to brass tacks: “So the upshot is that on the basis of her known record, Clive’s already recommending the first phase of her therapy here, before we complete our assessment and evaluation?”

She nodded— “Yes. That’s exactly right.”— and shot me a hard, speculative look. “You may not realize this, Eve, but we’ve never started an inmate off like this in the nine years I’ve been here. Nor has Dorner ever bypassed the medical screening process.

So what was she talking about here: a turf war, in which our professional prerogatives were being eroded, or something else, something to do with the apparent unusualness of an inmate’s being put on cold-turkey status from Go?

Faye herded all her granola pats into a space she made with her palms and pressed and shaped them into one coarse, messy ball. She flicked a quick look at me, then concentrated on getting the ball perfectly round. “You realize she doesn’t even know she’s been moved,” she said without looking up.

“Only in a manner of speaking,” I said. “There is no white isolation in C-series facilities. I know, I looked it up in the C-series reference manual last night.” Everything is different in C-series facilities, even their calibration of “negative privileges”— as was demonstrated by Minnivitch’s arriving clothed.

“Charging in when we have no notion of her mental condition is dangerous,” Faye flatly stated. Her eyes met mine— flashing me something too perilously close to defiance to be appropriate in a colleague. “We haven’t even done a brain chemistry, Eve. So we don’t know where we’re starting from. You must know that white isolation is tricky. If botched, she could be left permanently damaged.”

“It’s a risk, I grant you. But in her current state the woman’s a threat to the entire inmate population,” I said coolly.

Faye glared at me. “You might at least realize that if we botch it she could end up costing Penco dearly. If you’re not interested in the consequences to the inmate, perhaps you might think of how that degree of failure would be a blot on all our records!”

My mind, all too capricious after a long night’s work, chose that moment to conjure up the picture of the two white-gowned, white-masked, mirror-shaded orderlies tube-feeding Minnivitch forty-five minutes before the end of my shift. The near-blinding monochrome, even over a monitor, had scraped at the pit of my stomach, calling up from memory that two-hour session I spent in white iso during my Penco training.

“Now look, Faye,” I said roughly, tired of humoring her nonsense. “I’m not so sure she shouldn’t have been sent back to the Feds. Consider how she demolished discipline at C23. In just six months’ time— a record, surely, for any inmate at any Penco facility— she won herself not only a prefect’s bracelet but also assignment to the Chief Medical Officer and— if I’m reading correctly between the lines of her chart— a privileged status with the General Manager himself. The med officer who made the final report on her mentions Minnivitch having had *tea* for godsake with the General Manager every afternoon he was on the premises! She had the entire administration and staff hoodwinked and the other inmates hanging on her every word. And so, having achieved the pinnacle of privilege and rank available to the well-behaved inmate, she foments general rebellion among two of the other three prefects and half the captains and monitors and a third of the subcaptains and squad mothers? You *know* the entire system relies upon regard for rank and privilege to enforce discipline! *Minnivitch clearly understands that.* And I give Clive credit for

realizing that she does. Letting her start over here, to play the game only to spoil it later— that’s what would happen if we followed the standard procedure and assigned her an entry-level position with negative privileges the way we usually do with transferred troublemakers.”

Faye knew I was right. “Maybe there was something fishy there,” she said into the silence of my irrefutability. “Maybe she was sleeping with the General Manager, and so everyone turned a blind eye to what she was up to.”

Even Faye had to see that her theory didn’t address the basic problem posed by the abruptness of Minivitch’s switch from good girl to troublemaker. “Of *course* it’s possible she was sleeping with him, hell, she might have been sleeping with the entire senior staff for all I know,” I said. “But whether she was or not is irrelevant. The point is that she could do the same thing here— be a good little inmate, convince everyone she’s learned her lesson and is rehabilitated, and then spring disorderliness on us like a plague. The one thing we can’t afford to do is play by the rules with her.”

Another sigh from Faye made me itchy to leave. “Then what are we going to do with her?” This came out as a whine. “We’ve never had any politicals here. The only kind that are assigned to A-series facilities are the ones that set bombs or perpetrate other violent felonies, and the Feds hang onto most of those. And she’s not in that class. I don’t see how we’re ever going to rehabilitate her. Which is why she should have been sent to another C-series facility to serve out her time instead of to us.”

It was at this point that I started getting wind of what was really on Faye’s mind and decided to flush her out into the open. First, though, I ate the last bite of my cereal and washed it down with synthjuice so that I could make a fast getaway if I had to. No doubt this lagtime

in my response increased the pressure on Faye, for even as I was swallowing the last of my juice I could see her testing out various sentences in her head.

“I think you’re fishing for a distinction not everyone would make,” I said with the nicest of smiles. “You think that because her *motive* was political and her crime white-collar that rehabilitating her would constitute a violation of her constitutional rights. Correct, Faye?”

Faye frowned at the flat pancake she was using the heel of her hand to press ever thinner. “I’m just not sure, Eve.” She lifted her eyes to meet mine, typically brave in her enunciation of uncertainty. (I just *know* someone once told her that only the strongest and bravest people can admit to not knowing a thing for certain.) “I haven’t thought it all the way through yet. But there’s something inappropriate about the way Dorner is handling her introduction into the community.”

“You mean you don’t like his *not* introducing her into the community,” I said drily. “But you *know* she’s demonstrated a total lack of respect for law. Let her keep her opinions of cable ads and the subjects of her satire, let her hold whatever political opinions she has. You *know* we don’t interfere with people’s politics here, Faye. But let her also learn to respect others’ rights and above all the law.” It occurred to me even as I was speaking that since as convicted felons they’ve lost their voting rights anyway, it doesn’t matter what their politics are— not, of course, that we’d consider it our place to indoctrinate inmates with any particular political attitudes. In fact the Penco line is to extirpate any talk of politics at all on the premise that such talk can only generate acrimony among inmates.

“I hear what you’re saying,” Faye said. “But there’s still something about this that bothers me.”

When Faye made no further attempt to speak, I excused myself and carried my bowl and glass to the service hatch. Leaving her, I sincerely hope, stewing in her own juices.

It'd be wonderful if Faye disqualified herself straight off. Given his general dullness, I doubt Jim Caxton's in the running for assignment to this case (even if he does have seniority over me). But there's Donna. No doubt Clive is holding off on making the case assignment until she's back from her five-day. And knowing Donna, the minute she hears about Minnivitch she'll snatch her away from the rest of us. (She *always* gets the most interesting and challenging cases.) Which means I've got three days to come up with a plan Clive won't be able to resist— and so to present Donna with a *fait accompli* on her return.

This is the kind of case out of which people get treatments named after them. Imagine: the Minnivitch Syndrome, cured by the Escher Treatment, devised and developed by the brilliant, internationally renowned specialist in Rehabilitative Medicine, Dr. Eve Escher, MD, PhD.

Megalomania? Harmless in small doses. And in a hole like this, almost necessary to keep one going.