

Rubbernecking

Arthur had a habit of stroking the necks of his female co-workers. He was decades older than most of them, so some accepted his behavior as quaintly elderly and more or less harmless. Those who were offended didn't get much sympathy from the other women, but a few of the older women openly displayed their annoyance and disapproval. An unspoken controversy persisted for several years, during which a few younger and more attractive staff resigned in mute protest, and a very small number accepted his friendly strokes with enthusiasm that embarrassed most of the other employees, male and female.

Then, during the pandemic of 2020, the problem evaporated as everyone began working from home and convened only in Zoom video conferences. It was not until the early July "re-opening" of the company's New York offices, with all the staff once again physically present in the conference room, that Arthur stroked the slender neck of Janice Farfelli.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Janice shouted, pulling away and assuming an awkward martial arts stance, one knee raised, one arm back as if to strike, and the other outstretched, fingers poised to clutch or stab. She glared around the room and then said, loudly but less stridently, "You goddam pervert! Touch me like that again and I'll fucking kill you."

In the days following the Janice Outburst, Arthur curtailed his habitual neck squeezing, but he appeared to have a difficult time doing so. He would stand slightly behind a woman at the water cooler or the Xerox machine, his right hand trembling, gazing at the nearby neck. His left hand seemed to be poised to grab the other wrist if it should start to rise. He took this

stance consistently whenever the opportunity for a neck squeeze presented itself, and an office meme soon emerged: “Trying like Arthur.”

Some reported seeing him in a physical struggle with his own right arm, like Dr. Strangelove suppressing a Nazi salute, while others claimed he perspired visibly whenever he was within range of an accessible female neck. But the real problem occurred a few weeks later, when the Janice Outburst was largely forgotten.

At the water cooler most of the staff expressed surprise at Janice’s reaction. She was not known to be overly sensitive, and those nearby her cubicle insisted she was gentle and friendly, and even welcomed a hug now and then. Was it something *about* Arthur that had rubbed her the wrong way? Or had Arthur actually *rubbed* her the wrong way? Deedee Stanwich thought maybe Janice’s neck was especially sensitive, or that she had a rash. Perhaps, Randy Winn speculated, someone had tried to strangle her as a child. To which Sally Dorfstadtler asked, “Does Arthur maybe resemble her father?” Further gossip revealed that Arthur did not, and the consensus, though sketchy, was that her father had been a model of enlightened parenting.

When asked directly why she had made such a fuss, Janice would stare silently at the questioner, her face growing more and more stern, until her complexion became mottled and her jaw muscles stood out like walnuts saved for the winter. Then, through thin white lips, she would stiffly spit the words, “Fuck you and fuck that fucking Arthur Drummond.”

The mystery was not resolved, but several weeks after the incident, during which most employees had lost interest, the pandemic began to surge again, another lockdown was announced, and all staff were instructed to resume working from home. Janice was last seen laughing with her office neighbors, while carrying a flower-embroidered canvas handbag and heading up Lexington Avenue toward her apartment on 89th Street. Arthur had left earlier in the day, waving to everyone, but no-one waved back.

Everyone was present at the next day’s mandatory Zoom orientation meeting, although they all knew Zoom well enough from the previous lockdown. Everyone remembered to mute and un-mute, and the next few meetings went smoothly. The following Monday however, during the first weekly planning meeting, Arthur’s video thumbnail happened to appear

on screen next to Janice's, and the other attendees sent several private chat messages to one another commenting on how unlikely that would be if the meeting were in the flesh.

Part way through the meeting, Janice screamed, and turned to someone off-camera with a furious glaring grimace. At that moment, Arthur's video was frozen, and remained static for a full minute. When his thumbnail went live again, there was a strangely mischievous grin on his face.

"My PC glitched," he said. "Did I miss anything?"

The meeting host said, "No, but something happened to Janice ... Janice? You OK?"

Janice turned back to her webcam, visibly shaken. "Did you see that?" she demanded.

The matrix of co-worker thumbnails all shook their heads, and the layout resequenced itself as various un-muted members replied, "No," or "You really jumped," or "I didn't see anything."

Arthur said, "It wasn't me."

The host said, speaking much slower than usual, "What wasn't you, Mr. Drummond?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, looking down.

Janice leaned forward and peered into her webcam, a deep frown on her face which, in the yellowish lighting, looked paler and blotchier than normal. Then she straightened up and leaned back. She glanced quickly to either side and rubbed the back of her neck with one hand. Then she examined her hand for a moment, and looked back up at the webcam.

"Nothing," she said. "Forget it."