

Aromatherapy

by Garrett Socol

News of the murder spread rapidly through the ordinarily peaceful town of Seven Springs, Minnesota. Mustard heiress Marie Poupon-Kennedy had stopped breathing in Room B of the Seven Springs Serenity Spa where she was enjoying a Gentle Oxygenating Facial. Phuong Pruitt, the considerate Vietnamese clinician, had applied an exfoliating almond honey mask to Marie's face along with a cucumber eye compress. Then she stepped out to allow the products to work their magic while Marie relaxed to Mahler's Symphony Number 6.

Phuong took a few sips of citrus-enhanced water and grabbed a bunch of the spa's ubiquitous grapes that nested in blue ceramic bowls throughout the hallways. She headed to the backyard and sat quietly on the wooden bench facing the aromatic rose garden. Two minutes of fresh air later, she returned to remove Marie's mask.

Estheticians were accustomed to the occasional client nodding off in the thick-cushioned reclining chair, so Phoung thought nothing of Marie Poupon-Kennedy's head leaning dramatically to the left. Upon closer inspection, however, she noticed that the neck glowed with a bright scarlet abrasion, as if the heiress had been strangled.

Phuong's frantic scream was so blood-curdling that nude and semi-nude clients bolted from their detox mud baths and scurried away from their salt glow body scrubs. Yvette, the veteran masseuse, flew to Phuong and pulled her into the hallway, as far from the severed neck of

the sixty-year-old Poupon-Kennedy as possible. In a few shocking seconds, the serenity of the Seven Springs Serenity Spa was replaced with pandemonium.

Irma Schifflet, the sultry owner of the facility, came running. "Quiet down, everyone!" she shouted, her voice sputtering like a car on its last drop of gasoline. "Pirkitta," she said to her statuesque Finnish masseuse, "would you call the paramedics please? And then the police?" Pirkitta hurried down the hall. "Everything is under control." Though Irma knew precisely what to say and how to say it, she felt like she was disintegrating, as if her organs were gradually falling from their designated spots.

Five minutes later, six Seven Springs police officers were inspecting the spa which had now been designated a crime scene. Officer Hugh Capers, dark-eyed and handsome, assigned each of his men to a different task. "Can we talk in private?" he asked Irma. She took his arm and led him into her cozy office, redolent of lilac.

Successfully disguising her state of quasi-hysteria, Irma looked the officer straight in the eye. "Before you ask a single question," she said, "you need to understand that it's quite common for an esthetician to leave the room for several minutes at a time." She conveyed this information with a confident authority that belied her delicate, feminine aura. The obvious suspect in the murder was Phuong Pruitt, and Irma knew that her faithful facialist was innocent.

"We haven't accused anybody of anything," Capers said.

"Of course you haven't, you just arrived. But chances are you'll want to pin this on someone, and I'll tell you right now: Phuong Pruitt didn't do it."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said with sincerity.

Comforted by the sight of a bottle of bourbon planted behind a cluster of colorful body lotions, Irma produced a gentle half-smile. Still, she knew it was out of the question to even *think* about taking a sip.

"Smells good in here," Capers said.

"Thank you kindly," Irma responded. "It's been proven that fragrance enters the brain and impacts our mood. You should try one of our aromatherapy sessions."

"Really?" he asked with genuine interest.

“Absolutely. I'd use all my essential oils on you: jasmine, lavender, sweet pea, rose. You'd recline in a heavenly, thick-cushioned chair as the air moistened, and you'd listen to soothing classical music: Mahler, Brahms, Debussy, Bach. Did you know that music decreases activity in brain structures associated with negative emotions?”

“I didn't know that,” he said.

“You'd feel like a million bucks,” she told him. “What I mean is, you'd be walking on a cloud.”

The officer grinned sheepishly before abruptly getting back to business. “Do you have any idea who might've wanted Marie Poupon-Kennedy to become a victim of ligature strangulation?”

“To be honest,” Irma calmly explained, “whoever came in contact with her entertained thoughts of ligature strangulation. The woman was willful, nasty, and bigoted beyond belief. But she was a client, so we treated her with tremendous care.”

The media descended upon the Seven Springs Serenity Spa like an avalanche. This wasn't unexpected; the victim was a local celebrity. Marie Poupon-Kennedy had recently acquired several stores in the downtown district of Seven Springs including Uncle Bert's Hardware, Dimpleby's Gourmet Cheese, the fried chicken franchise, and the International Children's Dance Academy. But her most startling purchase was the property on which City Hall stood. The million dollar transaction confirmed everyone's worst fear, that Marie Poupon-Kennedy was single-handedly taking over the town. In fact, the mustard heiress had just put in a bid to buy the Seven Springs Serenity Spa which she planned to re-name the Marie Poupon-Kennedy Serenity Center.

“We should speak to the swarming bees,” Irma reluctantly said to Capers.

“Guess so,” he replied, gazing into her soft green eyes. He'd already decided that he would ask her out for a steak and shrimp dinner on Saturday night.

Irma lifted herself off her ergonomic executive desk chair, realizing she was on a dark, dangerous amusement park ride that would never end. For twenty years, thirty tireless, devoted store owners and business people of Seven Springs had worked day and night to transform the grimy downtown area into the gorgeous, thriving oasis it finally became. They weren't going to allow some super-wealthy bitch march in and buy their land, tear down their shops and boutiques, and intimidate good people into selling their property. A foolproof plan was devised.

Marie Poupon-Kennedy wasn't strangled by one set of hands; there were thirty sets around that long, pale neck. If one person was arrested, all thirty would be arrested. That was the decision made one week before the mustard heiress arrived for her fatal facial, and the words of Randal Beuden reverberated in Irma's head: "Sometimes

extreme measures need to be taken to maintain social order."

"Not just social order," Carolyn Tibbles added. "To maintain our very lives and livelihoods. You'll be a hero, Irma. For the rest of your life you'll be the quiet, unsung hero who saved our community."

Irma didn't feel the least bit heroic; anguish consumed her like a fever. Still, she held her head high as she approached the freesia-scented foyer where the media had gathered, her pink suede stilettos clacking with authority. Irma's controlled, concerned expression fooled them all, and she prayed she wouldn't cave in, at least not then and there, as cameras from the two local television stations rolled.

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Saturday morning had given birth to dark skies, heavy winds and an invisible figure on the front lawn of Irma's small, one-story brick house. Irma saw everything perfectly and felt the figure's spirit profoundly. By late afternoon, the winds had died down and the threat of a major storm seemed distant, but an eerie

blue-gray mist continued to hover and eat its way into Irma's very being.

In a muddled daze, she poured herself a glass of grape juice mixed with Merlot. She sleepwalked into the living room and looked around as if seeing it for the first time. There was a splash of brightness in the abyss: the overstuffed white cushions of her sofa, and she descended upon them as if they might magically bring some relief.

The combination of fresh orange zinnias and pink Peruvian lilies sweetened the air but couldn't disguise the sour smell that had arrived with the mist. Irma reached to the left of the crystal vase on the coffee table and picked up one of two small containers. The label on the tranquilizer read: "Take two tablets by mouth as needed for anxiety." She grabbed a couple of the pills, tossed them in her mouth, and swallowed them with a gulp of her juice and wine concoction. The label for the sleeping aid read: "Take one tablet orally as needed for insomnia." She placed two on her tongue.

Flipping the channels of her flat-screen TV, a black and white documentary caught her attention. A majestic elephant was tearing through the terrain, running for its life, as a deep-voiced narrator spoke. "Because of the value of their ivory, especially in the Chinese market, poaching in Kenya is on the rise." Irma poured three small white beads into her hand, and swallowed them with a hearty sip, trying to dissolve the guilt that had begun to smother her lungs like pneumonia.

The narrator explained that more than one hundred thousand elephants had been killed in Kenya over a twenty year period. Without taking her eyes off the screen, Irma grabbed the vial containing the sleeping aid, counted six tablets, and tossed them in her mouth. Another swig of her drink pushed them down her throat. She picked up the

tranquilizer container and turned it to its side, allowing ten to fall into her palm. She licked her hand until the tiny white dots were stuck to her tongue, and then she felt them slide into her system with another sip.

A fusillade of bullets emerged from the guns of several poachers. The startling, booming sound caused Irma's body to jerk, as if being bombarded with a bolt of electricity. Once the defenseless animal had dramatically fallen to the ground, Irma tasted the salt of her tears that she hadn't even realized were on her face.

A large swig of purple liquid wasn't enough to push the remainder of the pills down her throat, so she took a more robust one. In a haze of anguish and hopelessness, she lifted her legs and stretched out, realizing that certain actions offered no second chances. Gazing at the screen, she listened to the commanding voice of the narrator: "The elephant is a particularly intelligent creature. When wandering through a camp

in which poaching has taken place, it ignores the bones of every slaughtered animal until it comes upon those of the elephant. With its trunk, the live animal inspects the remains. The elephant knows the massacre that's been performed on one of its own."

Irma shut her wet, weary eyes, shielding herself from the unmitigated horror. Her head fell back onto the large, comfortable pillow as if it were a cloud.

Two hours later, Officer Hugh Capers, appearing clean and crisp as if he'd just showered, shaved and taken time to choose his outfit, rang Irma's doorbell. In a dark blue blazer, cream-colored shirt and new khaki trousers, he held a dozen yellow gerbera daisies. Precisely on time to pick her up for their dinner date, the officer waited on Irma's weatherworn welcome mat, enjoying the potent scent of honeysuckle wafting from the shrubs surrounding the house.

When Irma didn't come to the door after twenty seconds, he rang the bell again.

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