

Alliterative at best

by Indie R. Adler

Jeff was unlucky.

His first wife had been killed by his stalker a few years ago. When he first explained it to me, I had felt incredulous. Then I felt somewhat guilty for wondering who on earth would have been inspired to stalk him. The dead wife thing made me feel even worse.

I think being brought up Roman Catholic means guilt is a natural default position for me. I wanted to feel like a nice person, so I invited him out with my friends.

The whirlwind romance with my friend, Jennifer, surprised me.

“We're soulmates,” Jeff said, with his trademark grin. “Jeff and Jennifer even sounds poetic.”

Alliterative at best, I thought.

He based their compatibility on random things like having well-matched star signs, and because they both loved the colour green. If Jennifer said her favourite ice cream flavour was salted caramel, then, of course, it was Jeff's favourite flavour.

Jennifer was enamoured. She used up her savings on lavish holidays for him. I would have said for them, but places like Vegas had never been her thing. Jeff was the gambler. We argued, but on my part, it was to no avail. Money had become like water to Jennifer, and she was happy to let it slip through her fingers.

I missed my friend. I got rare glimpses of her in the company of Jeff, and always she seemed a little more diminished. Jennifer's spark had

all but died out; then one compliment from him and her face would light up, as though he were the sun.

I hated him. I felt guilty about that.

After months of not hearing from them - and me trying to alert Jennifer that I thought he was wrong for her - Jeff invited me to their anniversary.

"I thought that was next month?" I asked.

"That's the wedding anniversary," he said.

Not our, but the wedding anniversary; cold bastard. I thought. Jeff's probably just logical not as emotional as you are; it doesn't mean he's terrible. Stop being so judgemental.

"And this anniversary is...?" I asked.

"The day you introduced us," he said. "I'm really thankful for that, Angelica."

Yes, you're going to hell thinking nasty thoughts about people. I thought; toying with the gold cross on my necklace.

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As I stepped into the house, I suddenly became a little disoriented. At the door, Jeff stared into my eyes for a disconcertingly long time.

"Am..." I shook my head. "That's odd, I had a sort of dizzy spell for a sec. Erm. what was I saying."

"Seemed to be a question," Jeff said. "You started with am."

"Ah, yes." I nodded, stupidly. "Am I the first here?"

"Yes," he said.

I nodded and unzipped my jacket.

"We're having a bonfire. Jennifer's tending it." Jeff said. "You might as well keep your coat on."

I nodded and zipped the jacket up, preparing to leave the lovely warm house for the chilly backyard.

"Oddest thing," he said, as he filled a glass with red wine for me. "Jennifer, had someone send her a magazine article. Was it you, Angelica?"

Without meaning to, I spoke. "Yes, about gaslighting and how sociopaths use it to control people."

Panic rose within me. Why had I just said that!

Jeff flashed his usual grin, and I felt myself smile back too; the panic receded.

He handed me my glass and opened the sliding doors that led to their back garden. In the distance, at the edge of the apple orchard, I saw the flickering of yellow flames.

As we walked to the bonfire, Jeff explained to me that he understood why I had sent Jennifer the article.

"You wrongly thought I was a sociopath," he said, calmly. "To be honest, I'm a little offended that you thought that."

We were nearer the fire now, and I almost fell over a charred log. Jeff steadied me.

Dully, I wondered if this was going to be a BBQ party. A smell of bacon wafted on the breeze. I looked at the log, over which I'd just stumbled. I wondered at the green shoe - which sat solitary and slightly scorched at one end of it.

"I'm more special than that, Angelica," he whispered into my ear. "It's quite poetic, really."

To silent music he twirled me around and around and around, and softly said:

"How many can claim...
to be able to maim...
to lie, cheat and steal so well...
as the ultimate ar-tist...
the one...
and likely only...
psychopathic hypno-tist"

It didn't seem like poetry, but it stays with me always. I can't speak it out loud. Couldn't say it when the silent music became the sound of sirens. I couldn't speak it when so-called poetry became interrogation. Hate became love and love became hate.

"I hated Jennifer...no, I hated Jennifer...no, no! I didn't love Jennifer, I loved Jeff."

Innocent became guilty. No matter how loud I shouted it.

"I am GUILTY!!!"

* * *

There's so little distance between the words psychopathic and psychotic; it's just a matter of three letters. In my case, the first seems like a catalyst to sounding like...or becoming the last. Poetic. Psychotic. Psychopathic. Alliteration is pretty.

