

## Tapioca Nightmare

“One taro milk tea and one tamarind black tea,” I shouted. Victoria and Timmy came to the counter and grabbed their drinks.

“Thanks again,” said Victoria as she and her husband left. She always ordered a milk tea and Timmy always got something fruity. I washed the dishes and then wiped up some powder I had spilled. Afterward, my boss, Valerie, came in from the kitchen.

“Looks like another slow one, boss lady,” I said.

“It does. I need to make a phone call. Shout if you need me.”

“Who are you calling?” I asked curiously.

“I’ll be outside.”

I was alone, again. When the boba shop opened a year ago, it was a hit. Most of our customers were students from the high school nearby. Me and my friends all applied for jobs, and to my surprise, we all got hired. I attribute the store’s early success to the fact that boba is very trendy these days, but the problem with trends is that everyone is eager to copy them. About three months ago, another boba place called Sweetea Pie opened up nearby. Not only nearby, but closer to the school that most of our customers came from. To make matters worse, it wasn’t just a boba shop, but a bakery too. Within days, our sales plummeted, and within weeks, all of my friends quit. I stayed, partly because I felt sorry for Valerie, and also because the job got easier. But now, the staff has been reduced to me, Valerie, and another guy I rarely see.

And it’s not like I can pass the time chatting with Valerie either. She’s nice enough, but has a very dry personality. My attempts at chit-chatting with her are disappointing at best. I’ve always wondered about her personal life. I don’t know her age, if she’s married, why she opened

the store, what her favorite drink is, nothing. And it's hard to just *ask* that stuff to someone who doesn't even give a pity laugh when you make jokes.

About a month ago, Sweetea Pie had to close up because it got destroyed in a fire. I was sure that our business would pick up afterwards, but it didn't. Valerie even restocked everything we had, probably thinking we'd get busier, too.

The day droned on, and around seven o'clock, Valerie came up to me.

"I need to leave early. Could you close up?" she asked.

"Sure thing, boss lady. Why are you leaving so early?"

"Focus on cleaning up. You left a puddle of peach syrup on the floor yesterday." She grabbed her sweater and left.

Since I was basically going to be alone for the next hour, I blasted some of my music on the speakers. We usually have it set to "Boba Shop Playlist," but the night was mine, so I played some jazz noir. I did the usual tasks of mopping, wiping, and restocking. I grabbed the leftover boba and went to the back to throw it out. As I did, I noticed some papers on Valerie's desk. Among those papers were some checks. I decided to take a peek and see if my next paycheck was there. There's just something exciting about seeing how much money you'll get. I flipped through and found my paycheck.

I put my check back where it was so Valerie wouldn't know I was rifling through her stuff, but as I did, I noticed some receipts. A week ago I told her that we needed more straws, so I thought it would be a good idea to check and see if she had ordered them. According to the most recent one, she did. Then, I looked at the receipt underneath it and noticed that it was pretty old—six weeks old to be exact. It listed some of our usual supplies like straws and powdered creamer, but at the very bottom, it also said flour.

I couldn't think of any reason why we would need flour. We don't bake anything, and we don't cook anything other than boba, jello, and pudding. Come to think of it, the only time I saw flour was a few days before Sweetea Pie burned down. Since they were also a bakery, I assumed we would start baking too, but we never did. The flour was in the back for two days and then disappeared the same day that the other store did. *The same day the other store did.*

I went home, gave it some thought and realized that it was ridiculous. There was no way that Valerie bought that flour to use as some sort of firestarter. Who sees flour and thinks "explosion"? No one. The only reason *I* thought it was because I had read a fun fact about it online, but it's crazy, and my boss lady isn't crazy. But even so, nothing explains why we had so much flour that day. I needed to think of what to do just in case Valerie really did blow up our rival store in a crime of passion, which she definitely didn't. It seemed that the most logical thing to do was to get a job elsewhere. Thankfully, there was no rush. Even if I was onto something, there was no way Valerie could know.

The next day, I went to school and then to work. Valerie seemed to be in a good mood, which was nice. A while later, my classmate, Atlas, walked in.

"Hey, Andy," he said.

"Hi. First time seeing you here."

"I came in once right after you guys opened, but that was it." He browsed our menu, somewhat unimpressed. "Do you guys have lavender matcha?"

"Sorry, no, but we do have matcha milk tea," I replied. Valerie came in and walked up behind me, waiting for Atlas to place his order.

"I guess I'll have that, then. Full sweetness and extra tapioca pearls," he said. Valerie started making the drink.

"Seven dollars," I said. He paid and I gave him his change.

"Hey, do you guys have turmeric lattes?" he asked.

"No."

"How about chai cake?"

"No."

"Man, I used to go to that place, Sweetea Pie, *all* the time-" There was a loud metal clang and I jumped.

"Sorry. The shaker cup slipped from my hand," said Valerie. I turned my attention back to Atlas.

"Um, anyway," he continued, "I used to go there all the time and they had tons of cool stuff. They had lavender matcha, rose oolong lattes, turmeric energy drinks, and like ten types of boba. And that was just the drinks. They also had a bunch of desserts and even sandwiches."

"Your drink is ready," said Valerie. She placed the drink on the counter and left, slamming the door on her way out.

"What's her problem?" asked Atlas.

"Nothing, she's just like that."

"No wonder this place is dead. Thanks, see you later."

I walked over to the sink to wash the dishes. I lifted the plastic shaker cup and noticed a small crack. The cup didn't slip from her hand; she threw it.

About an hour later, Valerie came in.

"Andy, I need to buy milk. I'll be back later," she said.

“Sure thing, boss lady.”

After she left, I noticed that our boba was getting low and started cooking some more. As I was measuring the brown sugar, I got a phone call.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hi, is this Andy?” they asked.

“Yes.”

“This is Sam from Espresso Thoughts calling about your application for the barista position. Are you still interested in the role?”

“Yes!”

“I was hoping to set up an interview with you. Are you available this Saturday at three?”

“Yes, that’s perfect”

“Good. I look forward to meeting you.”

“Thank you!” I hung up the phone. I felt confident in my chances at landing the job, thanks to my time as a bobarista. It’s practically the same thing anyway.

I got rejected by the coffee shop. I applied to other jobs too and as it turns out, “entry-level position” doesn’t mean anything. I barely made any progress, even after three weeks. Regardless, I needed to leave the boba shop. The only problem was that I couldn’t leave without finding another job or else my parents would get on my case about it.

I was at work and once there was some downtime, I started looking up jobs on my phone. However, I couldn’t focus because the glare from the sun kept getting in my eye. I walked over to the window to close the blinds and I noticed that they were dirty. I started dusting them and paused when the duster bumped into the security camera.

*The security cameras.*

I had completely forgotten about the cameras. There were five of them, and they recorded everything. They must have caught me looking through her papers, and my interview with the other store. This was bad. I tried to calm myself down, and think calmly. Sure, the cameras must have caught me snooping around her desk, but the video quality couldn't have been good enough to catch what I was looking at, and for all I knew the cameras probably didn't even record sound, so if anything, they only caught me taking a phone call. And who even looks at their security footage 24-7?

But what if they *did* have sound? What if she *could* tell what papers I was looking at? What if she didn't trust me as much as I thought she did, and kept an eye on me when I was alone? If any of that were true...

"Andy!"

"Huh?!" I jumped and knocked a container over, breaking it.

"Andy, I said your name three times," said Valerie.

"Oh sorry, I was just lost in thought. What's up?" I said, as naturally as I could.

"I need you to help me unload some supplies from my car."

"Sure," I looked down at the floor and saw the ceramic tea container that I had broken.

"I'm so sorry about the container, it was an accident, I swear."

"Mistakes happen."

"I'll replace it!"

"No need. I'll just take it out of your next paycheck. It's not like you're going anywhere."

I decided to stop speculating and start researching. Sweetea Pie burned down on August 1st around 9 pm. The receipt I saw was from late July. According to one news article, the fire started in the kitchen and was caused by a gas stove that was left on, and it turned into a small explosion thanks to all the tea powders, powdered creamer, and flour that was in the store. I looked through my phone and saw that I was texting my friend that night, and was active on my Snapogram account, which meant that I must have been alone because I don't use my phone much when Valerie's around. The idea of it was crazy and all the evidence was circumstantial, but there was definitely a chance Valerie was somehow responsible for that fire.

I had hoped that researching would calm me down and prove me wrong, but instead, all it did was unsettle me. I went to work the next day and could not calm down for the life of me. I over-steeped the tea, knocked over a tray of Thai tea powder, and spilled oat milk all over my shoe. And to make matters worse, Valerie witnessed most of it. Around noon, she asked me to make more boba while she bought napkins. I thought it was too soon, but after everything I had done, I thought it was best to comply. An hour later a customer walked in, shouting her order before I even got to the register.

"I want a honeydew green tea, no ice, less sugar, with passion fruit popping pearls," she said.

"Sorry ma'am, we only have mango popping pearls," I said.

"The store on 31st has it."

"Well, this is a different store."

"Fine, just give me," she paused, "what is that smell?"

I turned around and sniffed. “The timer!” I yelled and ran to the back. I forgot to set the timer for the boba and left it cooking for too long. The entire kitchen reeked of burnt boba. I turned off the stove and ran back to the front, but the customer was gone.

“Why did that woman leave so angrily?” asked Valerie as she walked in.

“I’m so sorry, she wanted a topping we didn’t have and then I forgot the timer-”

“Never mind, it’s fine. I noticed you’ve been off your game lately.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

She started putting away the napkins.

“Hey, Valerie, I have an appointment next Saturday and won’t be able to come in,” I said.

She turned sharply and looked surprised. “What?” I asked nervously.

“That’s the first time you’ve called me by my name in months.”

“Oh, I guess it just slipped out.”

“Is everything okay, Andy?” She stepped closer to me.

“U-um,” I stuttered. Everything was not okay. I couldn’t shake off my doubts, and my questions were gnawing at me. I couldn’t take it anymore and blurted out, “Why did you buy flour a month ago?”

“You already asked me that back when I first bought it, and I gave you an answer. For personal use. Get back to work.” She started walking away but I wasn’t satisfied with her answer.

“Did you burn down Sweetea Pie?”

She paused, turned around and looked me straight in the eye. “You ought to be more careful about the questions you ask sometimes. And if you’re concerned about the owner of that place, don’t be. With the amount of money they made, I’m sure he had great insurance.”



Ever since our last conversation, being around Valerie has been unnerving. I've tried to read her for several days, but I never know what she's thinking. Come to think of it, I've never known what she's thinking.

It was Sunday evening and the day was winding down. I cleaned up and put everything away, and then went to the back to take out the trash when I noticed Valerie's laptop on her desk. I couldn't resist the urge and bent down to look at what was on the screen. It was the website of another boba shop in the city. This time it was Serenetea. That place was popular, maybe so popular that Valerie had her sights set on it. My mind started racing, maybe the same way that Valerie's mind was racing with ideas for how to destroy them. I needed to put a stop to it, but how? I needed to act fast before she thought of something. Or maybe she already thought of something and was just waiting for me to leave so that I wouldn't notice if she left early like last time.

"Why are you looking at my laptop?" It was Valerie.

I turned around quickly and faced her.

"Valerie, this is crazy!" I said.

"What is?"

"You! You're looking at this store because you're planning on doing something crazy again! You need to stop obsessing about other stores, I know you're passionate about our drinks and boba-"

"Not really."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"I care about this store, but I hate boba. Can't stand the texture. The only reason I decided to sell it was because it seemed like a profitable idea. As for my laptop, I was looking at that website for inspiration on ways to boost sales."

"Well, maybe it's time to stop. Face it, this place is dying, and maybe it's time to cut your losses. Yes, hard work and perseverance are great, but at this rate, you'll go bankrupt and then what? There *is* such a thing as knowing when to quit." I looked at her, unable to tell if my words were getting through. She glanced to the side and thought for a second.

"You make some good points. You can leave early today. I want some time alone."

I woke up the next day, unsure what to make of our previous conversation. I washed my face, got dressed and went to the kitchen.

"Andy, come here quick!" yelled my mom from the living room.

I went to the living room and looked at the TV screen, and the headline read, "Local Boba Store Destroyed in a Fire."

"Isn't that where you work?" asked my mom.

"Yeah, it-" my phone rang. It was Valerie. I answered.

"The store is gone. You'll get your last check in the mail," she said.

"What happened, did you-" She hung up.

As promised, my check came in the mail a few days later. With it, an extra hundred dollars and a note that read, "For your troubles. Now, we can both move on." I tried getting in touch with Valerie to no avail. I wanted to know what happened, but then again, did I really? After losing my job, I regained my peace of mind. Still, I was aching for answers. Did she burn

down our store? If she did, then why the fire? Why not just close it normally? What could she possibly get out of destroying it other than insurance money? *It was the insurance money.* It had to be. Unless it wasn't and I'm just delusional. Maybe I'm being crazy. Crazy like her.

I was eating lunch at school when I overheard a conversation.

"You know that cookie place by your house?"

"Yeah."

"I went there the other day and that lady who used to work at the boba place was there."

They must have been talking about Valerie. It was my chance to finally get some answers. I turned around, ready to ask for more details, but then I stopped. I thought about everything that happened after sticking my nose into her business. Did I really want to be proven right about this?

I turned back to my sandwich and for once, decided to let go of my questions.