

BILLY WILDER'S GHOST

by Ellen Byron

COLD OPEN

There was a legend on the Paramount Studios lot that the ghost of Billy Wilder occasionally visited the building named in his honor. The man behind such hilarious film classics as *Some Like it Hot* would sprinkle his comedy magic on a troubled script, gifting a sitcom staff toiling on a rewrite with a much-needed joke.

The disastrous table read for “Bathroom Break,” episode ten of *On the John*, was proof Wilder’s ghost never showed up to help out the show’s beleaguered writers.

ACT ONE

No one said much on the death march from the stage back to the writers’ room in the Wilder Building. Showrunner Gary Hovac had stayed behind to get studio and network notes. He told his staff to start brainstorming ways to fix the script. Instead, each writer disappeared into their office, pulling the door shut behind them. Dee Stern, the sole woman on the writing staff, knew exactly what they were doing: calling their agents with desperate pleas to get them off *On the John* and onto a show without trainwreck vibes.

Dee didn’t have that option. During staffing season, every time she’d brought up a sitcom she’d heard was meeting with writers, she got the same response from her agent: “They have their woman.” Only *On the John*, a new mid-season show with a thirteen-episode order, hadn’t had their woman. At least, not until showrunner Hovac bowed to pressure from the network and hired Dee.

Dee's cell phone rang, alerting her to an incoming FaceTime. She answered, and Allie Gould, the show's costume designer, appeared on the screen. Hovac had tasked Dee with handling Wardrobe, assuming it was a good job for a woman and clueless to the fact that Dee's own wardrobe consisted of three pair of jeans and a rotating assortment of t-shirts.

"Hi, Allie," Dee said, knowing exactly what was coming.

"Please say you're not cursing me with an entirely new script. Or you're at least going to keep the scene in the flooded banquet bathroom. Do you know how hard it was to dig up multiple tuxes that fit John?" John Franco, the star of the eponymously named sitcom, was an ex-pro wrestler who still sported the bulky build of his former career.

"I have no idea what we're doing," Dee said. "Gary's not back from notes."

Allie released a frustrated grunt. "Do me a favor and fight for that scene. If you don't, the cast will be acting in their underwear for the rest of the order because my budget will be toast. Also, I've got a couple of wedding gown options for the bride who's stuck in the bathroom stall. Can you run down and take a look?"

"I can't. We have to start the rewrite as soon as Gary's back."

Allie let out another grunt. "We've got a block-and-shoot for the scene on Thursday, if it lives. I need to move fast on the gowns. I'll send Lucy up with sketches and fabric samples."

"Do you have to?" Dee couldn't help blurting this. Like a huge percentage of the staff, Lucy, Allie's perky twentysomething production assistant, was an aspiring writer. She was also a gossip, and time spent with her meant being peppered with pleas to read her latest spec script interspersed with dirt on the actors and crew. All TMI for Dee.

"Yes, I have to. Lucy will be up soon. Like it or not." Allie signed off, pre-empting a response.

Dee inhaled a calming breath, then opened a file on the ancient PC that came with her equally ancient office, furnished in lot warehouse hand-me-downs that had seen better days and better series. The pilot Dee had been crafting in her all-too-rare off hours popped up on the screen. Selling it would raise her profile in town. Getting it produced would give her a leap up the ladder from lowly story editor to vaunted showrunner. Having it picked up to series ... this was a dream Dee dared not dream. Still, stranger things had happened in Hollywood. Like a sitcom titled *On the John* starring a lunk of a wrestler getting a network order.

Dee lifted her hands and was about to place them on the keyboard when there was a knock on the door. “Gary’s back,” his assistant Sarah reported from the other side. “We’re gathering.”

“Be right there.” Dee sighed and closed the file, putting her own ticket off the show on hold.

She joined the other writers gathered around the writers’ room’s long wooden table, taking her designated seat farthest from the power center that was showrunner Hovac. Marc Wittenberg slipped into the seat next to her. Not even thirty years old, Marc was a rising star. His spec pilot—basically *Friends* on the space station—was the *Damn, why didn’t I think of that?* of the writer world. Marc was only on *John* because the job came with a multi-year, multi-million-dollar studio deal. He refused the title of co-executive producer, instead opting for consulting producer, which telegraphed to the town, “I’m only here because the studio made it part of my deal.” His choice of a seat next to Dee was a physical way of distancing himself from the show.

“All the dwarfs are here,” Marc whispered to Dee, eyeing the rest of the writing staff.

“Doughy, Pasty, Chubby, Handsy, Brown-Nosy, Bossy,” she whispered back. “And we’re all Cranky.”

Marc stifled a laugh. “Truth.” He pushed his rolling office chair back to stretch his legs, revealing the worn cowboy boots he wore every day, as opposed to the Hoka-clad feet of the other writers. Another thing that set him apart, purposefully or not.

Gary ran a hand over his thinning medium-brown hair. “Network and studio notes were useless, as usual. Lip flap about John’s drive, what’s at stake, blah blah blah. All the crap the execs learned in the USC Cinematic Arts Department.” He mimed air quotes with disdain. “We’re on our own. So, phones down and metaphorical pencils up. Olivia, hup to.”

Olivia, the writer’s assistant on duty, took a seat at the computer. She pressed a button and the large screen above Gary’s head illuminated. He pushed back to see it. “Page one—”

One of the room’s two doors flew open, interrupting him. A giant sheet cake, its candles flickering, was pushed into the room on a rolling cart by Sarah. Various production assistants, along with Chris Tobert, the obsequious line producer, followed, crowding the doorway. “Happy birthday, my man,” Chris declared, addressing Gary with one of his patented hail-fellow-well-met smiles.

“Nothing sadder than a page one birthday cake,” Marc whispered to Dee.

She responded with a vigorous nod. “Same cake every time,” she said under her breath. “Now comes the birthday song, sung like a dirge.”

Right on cue, Chris led the group in a funereal version of the song. Gary rolled his eyes, but it was obvious he liked the attention. “Thanks, work wife,” he said to Sarah with a rare smile when the song mercifully ended. She blushed and returned the smile. Given that Gary spent about ninety-five percent of his life running *On the John*, his moniker for Sarah was more reality than joke.

Chris maneuvered Sarah out of the way to cut the cake. He was about to hand the first piece to Gary, but Dee piped up, “Not the yellow rose. We always save that for Lucy.”

“Lucy?” Gary appeared puzzled.

“Allie’s assistant in Wardrobe,” she said. Gary wasn’t the kind of showrunner who knew the names of anyone below the line on the call sheet. Dee had to remind him who Lucy was with every birthday cake. “When we had a cake for Marc’s birthday the first week of pre-production, she asked us save her the yellow rose because she’s from Texas, and we’ve been doing it ever since.”

“Being from Texas is nothing to brag about these days,” Marc said, earning a couple of nods and chuckles.

Sarah glared at Dee. “It’s a ridiculous custom. Gary’s the showrunner. If he wants the yellow rose, *he* gets it and not some dim bulb below-the-line assistant whose goal in life is to gossip and flirt.”

She grabbed the plate from Chris’s hand and held it out to Gary. He waved her off. “I don’t care who gets the yellow rose. We’re going to be here all night with this rewrite. Give cake to everyone on this floor and take the rest down to the stage.”

“You can leave Lucy’s piece in the kitchen,” Dee said. “She’s on her way up to show me sketches.”

The cake and all who’d shown up with it backed out of the room. Gary faced the screen again. “Say a prayer Wilder’s ghost shows up or we’re screwed. Page one ...”

Whether or not the credit could go to the Paramount poltergeist, the writers made faster progress than Dee expected. She even got a couple of fresh jokes into the script and managed to save the bathroom scene when Gary brought it up for debate. Feeling more confident than she

ever had on the show, Dee elbowed her way to the front of the lunch line when the production assistants delivered tins of El Pollo Loco. She loaded up her plate ... and then instantly dropped it when a piercing scream came from the hallway, startling her and everyone else in the room.

Rob—the writer Dee had secretly nicknamed Doughy—clutched his heart. The stent correcting an eighty-percent blockage in the thirty-nine-year-old’s widowmaker artery was only a few months old. “What the fuck?”

Gary stormed to the door and threw it open, almost colliding with Olivia, who was shaking with panic and fear.

“It’s Lucy.” Olivia’s teeth chattered as she said this. “I-I-I went to get a Le Croix in the kitchen and she’s on the floor. There’s ... there’s ... foam on her mouth. I think she’s dead.”

ACT TWO

“I’ve never seen a dead body before.”

This came from Brandon, also known as Brown-Nosy to Dee and Marc. The small, slight supervising producer looked ill as he hovered by the entrance to the kitchen with the rest of the writing and production staff.

Dee had never seen a dead body before, either. She stared at Lucy, gray and lifeless, blonde hair splayed out on the floor, yellow frosting crusted in the foam around her lips. Unnerved, Dee glanced away. She heard the unpleasant sound of someone retching in the women’s room next to the kitchen and looked around. Of the female staffers who worked on the floor, only Sarah was missing.

“Everyone, back where you were,” Chris said. “The police are on their way.” He began herding the staff away from the kitchen, his line producer skills coming in handy for protecting

what looked like a crime scene to Dee. At least the crime scenes staged on her favorite guilty pleasure viewing, *Law & Order* reruns.

The writers trooped back to the writers' room and dropped into their seats. An awkward silence permeated the air, which was scented with chicken and fermenting salsa. "Poor Lucy," Dee finally said, desperate to break the silence and acknowledge the young woman in some way. Not sure what else to say, she lamely repeated, "Poor, poor Lucy."

"What do you think happened?" Rob asked. He nervously massaged the area around his heart, a tick he'd developed post-stent.

"It sure looks like—" Marc began.

Gary held up a hand. "I don't think we should talk about this. The police will want to interview all of us. We don't want to give them the impression we colluded on our stories." The way Gary put this made Dee wonder if she wasn't the only one in the room who unwound with *Law & Order*.

"What are we supposed to do, park our asses in these seats and keep our traps shut for hours?" Pauly Kapp—Chubby, to Dee and Marc—barked this at Gary. Pauly was "the joke guy," a comedian who came in for the table read and network run-through solely to pitch one-liners. In his sixties, he was almost a couple of decades older than the oldest writers in the room. The Borscht Belt, long gone from the Catskills, lived on in Pauly's personality and occasionally his pitches. Pauly was the first to get antsy during a long rewrite, and Dee usually appreciated his attempts to speed up the process. But not today. Not when a coworker lay moldering on the production staff kitchen floor, her death a chilling mystery.

"We don't have to 'keep our traps shut,'" Gary shot back at Paul. "We can keep going with the rewrite."

Dee's jaw dropped. She snapped it shut but saw with relief that she wasn't alone in her reaction. All the other writers were exchanging looks of dismay. "I don't think that's a good idea," Marc said, his response measured but more serious than Dee had ever heard him sound. "For one thing, I don't think Olivia is any shape to type."

"Of course not," Gary said. Dee thought he was backtracking, but then he added, "I can do it."

"The point is for us to be funny, right?" Pauly looked around the room to the other writers. "I gotta say, I'm not feeling it right now. Not with a corpse lying in the next room."

"Please don't call Lucy a corpse." Dee felt a surge of emotion well up and batted it back. She'd sworn to herself on her first show that no matter how miserable the circumstances, she'd never be reduced to tears in the room. And while she couldn't imagine more miserable circumstances than these, she refused to break the promise. She swallowed and said, "Just... don't."

"Sorry," Pauly said. Dee appreciated that he looked genuinely chastened.

Chris stuck his head in the room. "The police are here."

"Praise Jesus," Marc muttered, his roots from whatever southern state he hailed from showing. Dee was too rattled by the current circumstances to remember which one.

A tall, attractive woman stepped into the room, followed by her equivalent in male form. Both wore jeans and blazers, his navy, hers black with a tiny plaid of charcoal and lighter gray woven in. She wore her black hair pulled back in a tight bun. His hair was also black but threaded with silver. Dee briefly wondered if they were actors filming on the lot who'd wandered into the wrong building. The delusion was dispelled by brief greetings, followed by introductions.

“I’m Detective Jennifer Rick.” The detective motioned to the man standing a foot behind her. “And this is my partner, Detective Jim Gutierrez.”

“Detectives, huh? So she was murdered, wasn’t she?” Pauly asked the question on everyone’s minds.

“It’s too soon to determine how the decedent passed,” the detective responded. “This is standard procedure for any death that falls under the category of unusual circumstances.”

“For ‘unusual circumstances,’ read ‘murder,’” Brandon said.

“Shut up,” Gary snapped. Dee noticed the showrunner had broken out in a sweat. Beads of perspiration dripped from his forehead, making the journey down his face to his pale blue button-down shirt, where stains had sprouted under his arms.

“We have officers talking to the deceased’s coworkers down on the stage.” Detective Rick tucked a strand of hair that had come loose behind her ear. “But since the death occurred in this building and on this floor, we’d like to talk to each of you to get an idea of what happened. No pressure. Just to get a timeline of events.”

Despite the detective’s easy tone and disclaimer about the cause of death, Dee couldn’t shake the feeling they were all suspects. She stole a surreptitious look at her fellow writers. Since most of them were perspiring as profusely as Gary, Dee assumed she wasn’t alone in sensing this.

“Is there a contact list we can work from?” Detective Gutierrez asked.

“I’d have my assistant get you one,” Gary said, “but I texted her a while ago to bring a couple of aspirin and she still hasn’t gotten back to me.” He winced and rubbed his forehead.

“I think there’s a printout on the table somewhere,” Dee said. She hunted through a pile of papers in the table’s center, ignoring the stray M&Ms and other errant snack food remnants rolling off the stack. She located the crew sheet and handed it to Gutierrez. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” He snapped a photo of the front page where the writers and a few others like line producer Chris were listed, then handed the printout to his partner. “We’ll need two offices.”

“You can use Dee’s across the hall,” Gary said without asking the office’s occupant if it was okay with her, “and the empty one next to it.” Dee panicked, worried she’d left her pilot open on her computer for all to see. Then she remembered the screen was set to sleep after five minutes and relaxed.

Detective Rick tapped one of her fingernails on the printout. “Okay then. We’ll start at the top and work our way down.”

Story of my career, Dee thought to herself ruefully as she settled in for the long wait to the bottom of the writer list.

The afternoon dragged on into evening. Pasta and pizza replaced the lunch spread, the pizza ice cold before it hit the table. The detectives forbade texting and placing calls but allowed use of phones for other purposes, which is how Dee learned Lucy’s death was the lead story on the entertainment site Deadline.com but nowhere else ... yet. She knew that would change if Lucy’s death was classified as a homicide. She chafed at not being able to return any of the texts popping up on her phone from people who’d seen the story, especially the one from her agent Lexi Chase, who texted a terse *Call me*. Finally ... blessedly ... Detective Rick appeared in the doorway and motioned for Dee to join her in Dee’s own office.

The detective took the office chair, leaving Dee to claim the couch. She sank into its lumpy cushions and heard a spring *boing* from its innards.

Rick crossed one leg over the other. She removed a small notebook from her jacket's inside pocket. "One of my colleagues talked to Ms. Gould, the costume designer. Help me create a timeline of Lucy Neubling's movements, starting with your conversation about the wedding gown sketches."

"I wish I had something useful to tell you," Dee said. "But I have no idea where Lucy was when I talked to Allie or where she was afterwards. Allie said Lucy would come up to the production offices to show me the sketches. The next thing I knew, she was lying on the floor ... deceased."

"Uh huh." Rick scribbled something in her pad. Dee found the use of pen and paper disarmingly old-timey. The detective looked up from her notes. "Ms. Gould said you didn't like Ms. Neubling."

"Did she now?" Pissed off, Dee considered reversing course on the bathroom scene, recommending Gary cut it purely to get back at blabbermouth Allie. "I didn't like or dislike Lucy. I barely knew her. I did find it annoying when she badgered me about reading her latest spec script or bent my ear with gossip. I don't have time for either. Being a writer on a TV show is incredibly demanding."

"I bet. But regarding show gossip, what do you think about Gary and Lucy's affair?"

Dee stared at her. "Affair? *What?! Where did you hear that?*"

"Does it matter?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Dee shook her head emphatically. "Sorry, but I don't believe it for a minute. Gary's a snob. I don't see him commingling with anyone below the line. I had to constantly remind him who Lucy even was."

"He could have been acting that way to throw people off."

Dee scoffed at the notion. “Please. Gary? He likes to fill in for guest stars who can’t make it to the table read, and he’s *terrible*.”

Detective Rick opened her mouth to pose another question and Dee tensed. Suddenly, footsteps pounded down the hall in a run. Detective Gutierrez threw open the door. “We got someone on the roof,” he said, out of breath.

“A sniper?” Rick responded, confused by the new development.

“No. A jumper.”

ACT THREE

Dee stood with the other writers, watching in horror as Sarah paced the edge of the Wilder Building roof. The police had cordoned off the street. The lights on a phalanx of patrol cars cast an ominous red glow as they blinked on and off. An ambulance stood waiting in case law enforcement failed to coax Sarah down. Judging by the woman’s distraught state, Dee gave them a fifty-fifty chance.

“So this is what a psychotic break looks like,” Brandon said, transfixed. “I should take notes for my therapist.”

Sarah pointed an accusing finger at Gary from her rooftop perch. “You were going to leave me for her!” she screamed.

Gary pulled on what was left of his hair with both hands. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!” he yelled back.

Sarah released a guttural moan that turned Dee’s stomach.

“I can’t watch this,” Dee said. “It’s cruel. I’m going inside.”

Dee hurried away. She yanked open the building door and took the stairs up to her office two at a time. Once inside she collapsed onto her chair. Her heart hammered so hard she feared she might be the one loaded into the ambulance instead of Sarah. She closed her eyes and fought to calm herself. Once her heart returned to a close-to-normal beat, she opened them. Unsure what to do, Dee sat facing the wall in front of her, waiting for an update.

She was still in this frozen position when Pauly came into her office a half hour later.

“It’s over,” he said, somber. Seeing the expression on Dee’s face, he hastened to add, “Sarah is okay. Detective Rick literally talked her off the ledge.”

Dee released a long exhale. “Phew. Huge relief.”

“You know it. Crazy shit, huh?” Pauly parked himself on the arm of Dee’s couch. “Is it too soon for me to say Hot Lady Detective can slam me against a wall and frisk me any time she wants?”

Dee laughed, a release of tension as much as anything else. “Not too soon. I needed that.”

Pauly looked at her with concern. “You okay?”

This simple touch of humanity, more than she’d known in the months she’d been on the show, almost broke Dee. *Never let them see you cry, never let them see you cry.* She nodded and cleared her throat. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Gary went to the police station where they took Sarah and Brown-Nosy went with him, and yes, I know you call him that, just like I know you call me Chubby.” He patted his stomach. “The others all went back to their offices, probably to call their agents and see if they can force majeure themselves the hell out of here. You can bet Marc jumped right on that. The kid is a born operator.”

“So ... I guess we go home?” Dee hoped so. She was emotionally and physically drained.

“Until we hear otherwise.”

“They’ll probably cancel the rest of the order.”

“Because a low-level assistant was offed by another low-level assistant? You wish. Our meatball of a star John Franco is hot right now. Believe it or not, there’s buzz on the show.”

Pauly stood up. “I’m gonna go home and drink. You need anything, call me.”

“Thanks, Pauly. Will do.”

Shortly after he left, Dee did the same. As she made the drive from the studio to her San Fernando Valley apartment, something about the conversation with the comic nagged at her, but Dee couldn’t land on exactly what. She forced herself to focus, but the connection proved elusive, flitting in and out over the next week of a forced hiatus. Dee finally gave up, instead devoting the break to working on her pilot while she waited for updates on when to report back to *John*. Her own agent made it clear there were no other jobs available. All the shows currently in production had their woman.

It took a six a.m. notification from Deadline.com announcing the new showrunner for *On the John* to trigger the memory spurred by Dee’s conversation with Pauly.

She met Marc at the Starbucks near her apartment. “Coffee’s on me,” she said, handing him a grande black, his drink of choice when PA’s made coffee runs for the writers. “To congratulate you on the new gig.”

“Thanks.” Marc took the coffee. He smiled a self-deprecating smile. “I guess no one else in town wanted the job.”

“Being a showrunner is a big deal. I knew you’d eventually be one, but I never thought it’d be at *On the John*.”

“Neither did I. But like my grandfather used to say, ya dance with the one who brung ya.”

“Sounds like something they’d say in Texas.” Dee took a sip of her tea. She hated coffee, another thing that made her an outlier in writers’ rooms. “You *are* from Texas, right? I didn’t remember until they mentioned it in the Deadline post.”

“Yeah, from outside Dallas.” The self-deprecating smile disappeared, replaced by a wary expression.

“So was Lucy. Did you know she had a website?”

“No. Why would I?”

“She was an aspiring novelist as well as a TV writer, so she set one up for herself,” Dee continued. “I did an online search and found it. In her bio, Lucy name-dropped taking a writing workshop with you in Dallas. You taught them before you moved here. The two of you obviously knew each other but pretended you didn’t, which made me remember something else. At the block-and-shoot for the ‘In the Toilet’ episode a few weeks ago, you ruined a shot because the director heard you yelling at someone. You came out of the hallway behind the sets, really angry. Lucy came out a few minutes later, but I didn’t connect the two of you until yesterday.” Dee took another sip of tea, adopting a casual attitude she didn’t feel. “Was she blackmailing you or something?”

Marc looked down at his coffee. Then he looked up, sat back in his chair, and smirked. “Busted. Lucy’s gone so I guess it doesn’t matter anymore. I didn’t write *Spaced Out*. That’s not completely true. I did rewrite it, but the manuscript came from one of my students, an old guy who was a retired high school English teacher. He was in the early stages of dementia, so I

offered to buy the script from him, and he agreed. He knew he could never follow through on it. Lucy was my key student in that particular workshop. She helped me organize it and communicate with the students in exchange for free attendance.”

“So she knew about the deal.”

“She was the only one who did. *Spaced Out* was the perfect pilot to get the town’s attention. It was ‘noisy,’ in exec speak. ‘Noisy.’ Puhleeze.” Marc released a derisive snort. “I bet some executive gave himself a boner coming up with that bullshit description. Anyway, to keep Lucy quiet, I helped her get a job on *John* without ever revealing to Gary we knew each other. But she always wanted more. ‘Read my script’ became ‘read my script or else,’ which became ‘get me a writing job or else.’”

“I get it,” Dee said nodding. “What I don’t understand is how you dragged Sarah into it.”

“She and Gary have been having an affair for years. You didn’t know?”

“No,” Dee said, embarrassed. She’d been so in her own world she’d missed the obvious signs.

“I could see Gary was losing interest, which was freaking out Sarah. Her whole life was about him. And she was getting up there in age.”

“We had a cake for her a month ago,” Dee said, appalled. “She just turned thirty-six.”

“I know, right?” the twenty-eight-year-old said, clueless. “I encouraged Lucy to flirt with Gary as a way of getting him to hire her as a staff writer. When we had a couple of those sad birthdays, I joked to Sarah you could hide cyanide in frosting and kill off anyone who was bugging you because they’d just think the frosting tasted like it was made with almond flavor. I figured eventually Sarah would lose it, Gary would be fired for sexual misconduct, and I’d be in line to run the show.”

“Wow, you really are an operator.”

Marc chuckled. “You’ve been talking to Pauly. Jealous, jealous Pauly.”

“The thing is, I thought you weren’t interested in running the show.”

Marc’s cocky façade faded. “I need the credit,” he admitted. “I’m realistic about my own work. My show scripts are decent. My pilots are fine but not stand-out. No one is ever going to make *Spaced Out*. It works as a spec, but people stuck together on the space station? Where’s the ongoing series? There are only a few *John* episodes left to shoot. I just have to power through those, and I’ll always be a showrunner.” The smirk returned. “I came up with the perfect plot. I got everything I wanted without getting my own hands dirty.”

“To bad you can’t come with a plot that good for one of your own pilots.”

Dee regretted the retort the minute it came out of her mouth, but Marc responded with a wry, “Truth.” He lifted his shoulders in an *Oh well, what can you do?* shrug, then leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. “Anyway, now that I’ve agreed to run *John*, I could use a strong co-EP. We’re friends. We work well together. I can promise you a bump from story editor to co-executive producer. Nobody makes that leap. And how many co-EPs are women? You’ll be a star, Dee.”

“Wow. Co-EP. We’re talking about a...” Dee counted in her head. “... five credit bump. That is a *lot*.”

“I know.” Marc flashed a conspiratorial smile. “It’s a good offer. Think about it.”

Dee rested her back against the coffee shop’s hard metal chair, evaluating her options. Allie wasn’t wrong when she told Detective Rick that Dee disliked Lucy. And Marc’s offer was more than good. A five-credit bump was epic. Dee imagined herself skipping past the other

writers on staff, working side-by-side with Marc as his second, blowing through the last few episodes of *On the John*.

She returned his smile.

The next morning, Deadline shared breaking news that the studio had fired Marc Wittenberg after discovering he'd plagiarized the pilot that landed him his fat deal. There was no mention of the devious machinations that led to Lucy's death, Sarah's arrest, and the breakup of Gary's marriage when the affair with his assistant went public. The fact that LAPD was looking at the now ex-rising writing star as an accessory to murder also went unreported ... at least until Marc was officially charged with the crime.

On the John was on its third showrunner in two weeks. This time the honor went to brown noser Brandon.

That same morning, Dee sat outside the office of Ashley Woods, the studio's VP of Current Programming on the show. Ashley's assistant opened the door and gestured to Dee. "Ashley's ready for you."

"Great."

Dee stood up. A large black-and-white photograph of Billy Wilder held a place of honor on the wall next to the door, and Dee touched it for good luck, a tradition handed down through decades of writers passing through the portals to executive meetings. As she pulled her hand away, Dee did a double take. She could have sworn the famed writer-director winked at her. Then she realized it was a trick of light caused by the sun briefly going behind a cloud.

The assistant led Dee into Ashley's office. To her surprise, Julie Epstein, the network's Current Programming executive on the show, was there as well. Both women stood up and took turns hugging her.

Ashley motioned for Dee to take a seat across from where they were parked on the room's sleek new sofa. "Julie and I wanted to thank you together for what you did. It was incredibly brave of you to out Marc as a horrible human being. Wow."

"Can you imagine if all this came out *after* we hired him?" Julie said. She mimed wiping sweat from her pristine brow. "We really dodged a bullet."

"Julie and I agreed we had to find just the right way to acknowledge your actions," Ashley said. "And I think we have."

Dee sat up straighter. Her heartbeat picked up speed. Maybe it wouldn't take a deal with the devil that was Marc to make a credit leap—if not the stratospheric bump from story editor to co-executive producer than at least to co-producer or even producer.

Ashley bent down and picked up a large box at her feet. She handed it to Dee. Perplexed, Dee opened the box. She pulled out a large, fluffy lap blanket decorated with the show's logo—a grinning toilet bowl.

"It's the Christmas gift we gave to supervising producers and above," Ashley said. "Something to snuggle up under when you're sneaking a nap during a late rewrite."

"You're the only lower-level writer who has one," Julie added.

Dee ran her hand over the blanket. "It's very soft."

"Top of the line," Ashley declared with pride.

"I can tell."

Dee carefully refolded the blanket and placed it back in the box. She handed the box back to Ashley.

"I quit."

TAG

Dee woke up on her office couch where she'd collapsed after packing up her belongings. Feeling foggy, she wondered if she'd dreamt the whole thing: Lucy's murder, Sarah's confession, Marc's cocky explanation of how he set her up. The inane lap blanket. Then she saw the black plastic bags stuffed with her stuff that confirmed the last forty-eight hours had been all too real.

She noticed her phone lying on the floor by the couch and reached for it. The screen lit up with a string of interrobangs and profanity, her agent Lexi's response to Dee's text announcing she'd quit the show. *Time for a new agent*, Dee thought to herself. She sighed, knowing it would be a tough search thanks to the cascade of *On the John* scandals. There was also a text from newly-minted showrunner Brandon pleading with her not to quit: *I need you*. She texted back *Good luck! I know u can do it*. This was a lie.

She rose and shook off the dust from the decrepit old couch, then plodded over to her computer. She pressed Enter and her work-in-progress came into view.

"Nice job on the pilot," came a male voice with a slight German accent.

Dee started. She turned to see an elderly man with a round face and round glasses sitting on the couch. She rubbed her eyes. *I'm hallucinating*.

"A couple of places needed more jokes," he said. "But I think you're good now."

Dee bent down and saw the words "Fade Out" on the last page of her script. "Whaaaaa ..."

She started at the beginning of the document and scrolled down. Places she'd marked "punch up" were punched up. Places where she'd written "joke to come" had jokes. At long last, the script—her ticket to moving on—was done.

"Oh my God," Dee murmured. "Thank you so, so ..."

She turned around.

Billy Wilder was gone.

THE END