

A close-up photograph of a lightbulb, showing its glass envelope and internal filament. The background is dark with numerous out-of-focus heart shapes in shades of red, orange, and yellow, creating a romantic and warm atmosphere. The lightbulb is positioned diagonally across the frame.

Cross My Heart . . .

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

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Short story

By Marina Gerrard

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What a charming man!

That had been her first thought when she met him some twenty-five years ago. She had applied for a vacancy as his secretary. He had just been promoted to manager of a prestigious department. Which came with a lease car, a private office and the opportunity of hiring a, equally private, secretary.

He was suave, he was good-looking, he was polite, always said 'good morning' to her when he came in and 'thank you' when she had done his letters. In other words, a true gent. On top of that he was good at his work. Hence the promotion, of course. He was confident in what he did and she could see others appreciated him. His colleagues, the directors, the trustees on the board.

He was devoted to the company. She knew that for a fact. For in a rare moment of confidentiality he had entrusted her with his feelings about the firm. It had been at the reception given in honour of him being promoted to director. He had stood beaming after the speech, glass of wine in hand, herself beside him, basking in his glory. He had leaned over to her and whispered in her ear.

'You know, I would never, ever, consider leaving this company for another. It's precious to me. Don't tell anyone.'

Precious. It had been a surprising choice of words but she had nodded and whispered back.

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

'I know,' he said and touched his glass to hers. 'I trust you. Even with my little secrets.'

This was some five years after she became his secretary.

Over the years that followed she watched his progress, proud like a mother hen. She defended him when he made mistakes. Which he did. Of course he did, who didn't.

She watched the door when it closed after him late after a day's work and opened again early in the morning the following day for him to go through the agenda with her. Before he disappeared into his office. The door of which was always closed, until she announced a visitor or when she brought in the coffees or teas. Which she always closed discreetly behind her, as there was no need to pry. She knew his business inside out. After all she read his mail and she typed out his letters after they had been dictated to her.

There were days when he was not there. Of course, there were. When he was travelling for the firm, as he had to do. Leaving her to hold the fort.

She watched him build the firm into a brand, nationally, then internationally.

She talked about him with pride.

‘If you stick a needle in him, he’d bleed the company logo,’ she was wont to say.

Others thought she was a bit lulu, over the top, when she said this but she knew it was true. The only thing she could not do was stick a needle in him to prove it.

She was there for him, as simple as that. That’s what a secretary does.

She was there when the firm went through a bad spell and he was blamed for the millions that were lost. She was there when he was suspended over a supposed fraud. She was there when he was cleared from blame in both cases and the culprit found. She was there when his marriage broke up over his long working hours. And when his children married but did not invite him to their wedding. She was there for the bitter tears he cried, holding out the box of tissues to him without saying a single word. She was there to keep the office running as best she could when his parents died in a car crash and he had to deal with the aftermath.

She was there, when he returned to the office. Lonely, bereft, clinging to his work. She was there when the first furrows of age appeared. She was there, always in the background but there.

Her heart was full when, at her tenth office anniversary, she was rewarded with the official title of PA. She nearly cried when he said that loyalty was the one word that summed her up. He raised his glass to her and others clapped. Her glory day. Never to be forgotten.

Personal Assistant. She revelled in the title. That night, in bed, she repeated the words over and over again, letting them reverberate in her brain. To her it meant she could be there for him in a more personal manner. It spurred her on to make some changes in his office.

First thing she did was bring in an old-fashioned floor lamp. She knew he liked antiques. She put it in his office behind the desk, plugged it in and turned it on. It instantly gave the room a warmer feeling. When he came in that morning she could see he was

pleasantly surprised. He did not say anything but when he gave her his coat and hat to hang up he smiled at her.

‘Would you like some coffee before you start the day, Mr Benning?’ was what she always said next. This time she added ‘I brought in some biscuits to go with it.’

‘Thank you, Miss Crawford,’ he said, as he always did but she thought she detected an extra warmth in his words.

It made her heart glow. She left the door slightly ajar this time so she could bring in the coffee and the little plate of biscuits.

‘Would you care to join me for a cuppa, Miss Crawford?’

It was so unexpected she nearly tripped over herself.

‘Join you? Well, ah, yes. Of course. That would be lovely. Thank you, Mr Benning.’

She returned with her coffee and they sat drinking it in companionable silence. When he offered her a biscuit from the plate she took it, overwhelmed with it all.

‘Best get down to business,’ he said when they had finished.

He instantly turned to the papers she had left on his desk, his head illuminated by the amber glow of the floor lamp. Then he looked up briefly.

‘And thank you for the coffee, Miss Crawford.’

‘You’re so very welcome, Mr Benning.’

She left and closed the door behind her, leaving him to his business.

They never got to call one another by their first names, hers Andrea and his Frederick, she mused, but that was okay. She smiled.

After the floor lamp she brought in other things. Little antique-looking knick-knacks, which she got from the second-hand shop and which she placed around his office. On top of the filing cabinet, the windowsill. A little rug for under his feet. Nothing obtrusive but there. A bit like herself.

Gradually she changed his office into a living room. A home from home. Every morning she switched on the floor lamp and at the end of every day they sat together in the twilight office, enjoying their cup of tea and biscuits in the always companionable silence.

Others noticed the intimate atmosphere in his office. Rumours started flying. The other office workers rarely intruded and never unannounced but they were on the alert for any sign of romance appearing. Which they never did, much to their chagrin. There was nothing to see.

He came in, she came in, he greeted her, she greeted him, she made his coffee and his tea, she looked after his appointments, typed out his letters, received his visitors, he left, she left. That was it. Not a twitch nor or even a look beyond that. And yet the changes in his office. They could not fathom it. An office romance would so, so liven up their dreary lives. The director and his PA, it was par for the course, wasn't it? But no. Nada. Zilch. Neither of them accommodated. It was highly annoying but there you had it.

Inside his office things did change but the office workers were never there to see, they came in and left at the regular office hours. They were all nine-to-fivers. Which Miss Crawford and Mr Benning were not. They came before and they left after. But always on their own. An outside watch had been set for a while but even that had come to nothing. There was never anything to see. Big sighs all over the shop and on to pastures new.

To the office workers she was friendly but in a stand-offish way, he invariably polite. Both addressed everyone by their first names but they were always Miss Crawford and Mr Benning to them. Them and Us, with an insurmountable gap between the two. There were office parties but neither of them attended unless there was a special occasion. Like an office anniversary. Her twentieth, for example. That's when he presented her with the office medal. A first. He must have had the medal made especially because there had not been one before.

'For twenty years of unstinting loyalty and devotion to duty,' he said as he raised his glass and everyone cheered.

She was so touched she could barely speak. She clasped the medal to her bosom with tears in her eyes.

'I'll treasure it,' she managed to croak.

'As I treasure you,' he said politely. 'We all do.'

Everyone clapped. She bowed her head, overcome with it all.

'Have a drink everyone,' he said.

Everyone rushed to the drink table and helped themselves to the snacks, leaving her to fend for herself. Which she did. She availed herself of a glass of the red and took a sip. When she turned around to ask Mr Benning if he wanted one too he had disappeared inside his office. She took her glass and returned to hers. She could see that no one would miss them if they did. Which was fine by her. She was never one for parties anyway. It would soon be twilight time, the highlight of her day. She always made the most of these intimate moments, when the office workers had gone home and they were there all alone. The silence now laden with her hopes and wishes and his comfort. She tucked the medal in her top drawer where she would see it first thing every day.

The week after her reception she brought in a radio with a cassette desk and some tapes. During the day they were in her desk, out of sight, but after five the radio came out and she played her tapes. Softly, never intrusive. Smooth, romantic, candlelight music. Which he would not hear until she opened the door for tea and something. One day she replaced the biscuits by a chocolate cake, which she knew he adored. Biscuits were good enough for coffee, when everyone else was watching but teatime was special.

His eyes lit up when he spotted the cake.

‘Is that a chocolate cake,’ he whispered.

‘Yes, it is,’ she said proudly. ‘I made it myself.’

‘Just like my mother used to make it,’ he sighed after the first couple of bites.

‘This is wonderful. Thank you, Miss Crawford.’

‘You’re so, so welcome, Mr Benning.’

The next five years went by much as the other twenty had, with one major exception.

The day after the introduction of the chocolate cake, during their usual twilit session, cup in hand, chocolate cake at the ready, he looked at her and coughed.

‘How long,’ he stumbled and coughed before starting again.

‘Who, ehm, when, ehm, how long, why,’ he stopped and looked down at his desk.

When he looked up she was surprised to see a teardrop in the corner of his eye and even more flabbergasted at what happened next.

‘Andrea. May I call you Andrea?’

‘Of course you may, Mr Benning.’

‘Frederick,’ he said. ‘Frederick.’

The surprise was so great she could only nod.

‘Andrea. Why, eh, why did you make this cake?’

‘Why, Mr Benning?’

‘Frederick, please.’

‘Why, Frederick?’

She blushed at the unfamiliarity of using his name.

‘I think you told me once it was your favourite.’

‘I did?’

She nodded.

‘And,’ she smiled, ‘and after the honour of giving me that medal, I thought -well- I thought it would be a nice gesture.’

‘But why yesterday of all days?’

‘Yesterday?’

Yes, yesterday. Why not the day before or the day after?’

She could not for the life of her fathom why he would ask.

‘Ehm, not before because I had to look for the recipe. Not after, because as soon as I had made it there would be no point in letting it sit there uneaten?’

‘Ah,’ he said, looking somewhat disappointed.

‘Not because it was my birthday then,’ he mumbled.

‘What?!’

She was not sure she had heard him correctly.

‘Your birthday? Yesterday?! I never knew. You never said. We don’t do birthdays in this office! Never did. No personal stuff, just business you always said. Office policy!’

‘I just thought you knew. That’s all. That’s why. Never mind, but thank you all the same. Now let’s finish our tea and cake and go home. It’s getting late.’

They finished in a silence that felt somewhat awkward this time. For the life of her she did not know what to say.

‘Happy belated birthday, Frederick,’ she said eventually as she collected the cups and plates.

‘Thank you so much for the cake, Andrea.’

‘Do you still want me to make this cake?’ she asked diffidently, ‘even if-?’

‘Of course I do. I love chocolate cake. You made it just like my mother always did. It’s lovely. It makes me feel home from home. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.’

‘My absolute pleasure, Frederick.’

She waited for him to put on his coat, lift his hat at her and leave before she turned off the floor lamp in his office. Then she put on her own coat and left the office, somewhat bemused, even though her heart was full to the brim. On the one hand, she felt as if a door had finally opened. In one fell swoop the word ‘personal’ had acquired a different, deeper meaning. All because of a simple chocolate cake. She had been so afraid that she might be overstepping the line this time. She knew that, with all the changes she had made to his office, she had step by step encroached on his private space. On the other hand, it seemed he was taking it all for granted. Enjoying it, obviously, but almost as if he felt he deserved it. Which she thought he did, of course, but still. It sent a teensy-weensy waft of cold air over her happiness. Gone before she realised it but still.

Without giving it any conscious thought she stopped making the cake for a while. Instead she brought chocolate chip cookies to go with the tea. She was really taken aback when she noticed he sulked, morosely. He actually sulked. In silence until one day he looked at his tea and the chocolate chip cookie in his hand, then at her.

‘What happened to the chocolate cake?’ he asked.

‘I ran out of flour and -’

‘You know how much store I set by chocolate cake,’ he grumbled without waiting for her to finish.

‘Of course I do but I didn’t have the -’

‘You should have,’ muttered.

Without another word he pulled out a dossier and started reading.

That day the twilit session ended on a definite low. She collected the cups and the plate with the remaining cookies and returned to her own office space. Soon after he left without saying a word. When she checked his office it was in total darkness. He had already turned the floor lamp off, not waiting for her to do it.

To say she felt put-out was a moderate way of saying it. She felt . . . punished. Yes, punished.

It showed a side of him she had never seen. She was not sure she liked it but after sleeping on it she came to the conclusion that she understood. Of course she did. It was only natural wasn't it? He had felt bereft. As if he had lost his mother all over again. What a sad little puppy. That's what he had looked like. She felt for him. Like she did for all sad little puppies in the world. She instantly decided she would start making the cake again. She made sure she had all the ingredients. Just one more time the chocolate chip cookies would have to do. Tomorrow was another day.

Tomorrow came and the floor lamp was turned on nice and early. Around twilight time she made the tea, cut the cake and put it on a new colourful, festive plate. When she brought in the tray his office looked as comfortable and cosy as it had always done. With a quiet sigh of relief she handed him his teacup and pushed the plate with the freshly baked chocolate cake over towards him.

'There you are, Frederick. I did start baking again. I know how much you liked my cake.'

'Thank you, Miss Crawford, but that wasn't necessary. I already asked one of the other girls in the office to buy me a chocolate cake. But thank you. Most thoughtful.'

It was said with a polite smile her way.

She looked at him in disbelief.

'You asked -'

He nodded in a friendly manner and they sat sipping tea and munching cake in silence. As they used to do but not as it used to be. At least not for her. The room might look cosy but to her it had lost its aura of intimacy. It felt . . . cold.

When they had finished he put on his coat and wished her a good evening and left like he always did. She looked at the cups and the plate where more pieces of cake had been left than normal. He had only eaten the one piece whereas normally he would have at least

two. Sometimes the plate was even left empty with him rubbing his belly contentedly. It seemed those times were gone and she did not know where. All because she had not baked his cake for a week. She could not fathom it. And then he had gone and asked -

She gathered the cups and the plate, turned off the floor lamp and left his office with a bitter taste in her mouth.

She sat down at her desk and picked up the letter opener. She turned and twisted it between her fingers. A present from him. Which he had given her when they were sitting in his office, after the reception for her twentieth work anniversary. She had been so chuffed. Not only a medal but a personal gift at well. The medal had gone in the desk drawer but the letter opener had stayed on top where she could see it every day. The bitter taste in her mouth deepened. She could not for the life of her understand why things had gone so wrong.

When she finally went home her head was bent and her shoulders hunched. In her mind she could hear his voice saying 'Thank you, Miss Crawford'. Miss Crawford, not Andrea. It gave her a jolt of pain in a hitherto unknown place.

For a while things remained like that. He was polite but distant, then gradually she noticed a change. He seemed to thaw out. There was a spring in his step and a glint in his eye that had not been there before. He had gone back to calling her Andrea, tea time had lost its strain and the earlier atmosphere of intimacy had returned but still. Something was different. She could not put her finger on it. It made her feel uneasy.

Then one day he came in extra early. She had just come in herself and was making coffee. He threw his hat in the air, caught it, then threw it on a chair, followed by his coat.

'Morning, Andrea.'

Before she could return his greeting he had disappeared in his office. When she got to the door with coffee and biscuits at the ready it was ajar. What she saw made her stop in her tracks. He appeared to be practising some dance steps and she thought she could hear him humming.

'Ah, coffee and biscuits. How kind of you, Andrea. Just put it there will you.'

He sounded chipper and there was a smile on his face. He twirled around once before sitting down.

She coughed.

‘Ehm, you seem particularly happy today, Frederick. Another promotion perhaps?’

He burst out laughing.

‘Promo-, promo-, promotion,’ he sang.

She stood rooted. She wondered if he had lost his mind.

‘Are you feeling all right, Frederick? You seem . . . different?’

Then he winked at her. Winked. And he beckoned her over. She rounded the desk until she stood beside him. He beckoned again to make her come even closer. She bent over so her face nearly touched his. Her heart skipped a beat and then again.

‘Can you keep a secret?’ he whispered.

‘You know I can.’

‘I think I’m in love.’

She froze in position.

He leaned back, leaving her still bent to a face that was no longer there.

She straightened up, awkwardly.

‘In love?!’

‘Yes, with the most beautiful girl. Woman,’ he corrected himself.

‘That’s, that’s wonderful, Frederick. Dare I -’

‘No, you may not. I will tell you -her- in my own time.’

He grabbed his coffee mug and raised it to her before taking a sip.

‘Lovely coffee. Thank you, Andrea.’

He winked at her again. Winked!

She left his office thoroughly confused. Her heart was hammering.

Could it? Really? After all these years? Would he?

Her face burned. She hardly knew how to compose herself. She was totally distracted by an overwhelming sense of possibilities hitherto unconsidered. Well, to be brutally honest, pushed under the carpet of her own disciplined heart.

‘You look somewhat flustered, Miss Crawford.’

She had not heard him coming out of his office. He was wearing his coat and his hat sat jovially slanted on his head. He looked rakishly at her from under it.

Her heart skipped a double beat.

‘Flustered, Mr Benning?’

‘I hope it’s not because of our little secret?’

She shook her head mutely.

‘Mum’s the word, eh? Mum’s the word.’

‘Cross my heart and hope to die,’ she managed say, miming the cross as she spoke.

She pointed at the coat and hat, knowing full well that the agenda for that morning was empty of appointments.

‘Where are you -?’

He zipped two fingers across his lips and winked at her.

‘Mums the -’

‘word,’ she finished, somewhat put out about all the secrecy. So unnecessary.

A little furrow crossed her brow. Winking! At her! Again. So unlike him. Same as being ‘in love’. She’d never have believed it, not in a million years! And now out on an errand, in office time! Was he going to? No. She dared not think any further. She heard his voice, out in the front office, chatting. Another first. When everything went quiet, she dared poke her head around the door. All heads went down to the typewriters. It was obvious there had been gossip. Gossip that she was never privy to, since they all knew it was against the rules. She let her eyes roam over the bent heads. All fingers were busy typing.

‘Everything all right here?’

‘Yes, Miss Crawford,’ they sang in chorus.

Like a lot of bloody schoolgirls, she thought, feeling unaccountably left out. She returned to her office, leaving the door slightly ajar. But no, it remained silent. She could imagine the fingers pointing to the door and laid across their devious lips in silent warning.

She was shocked by how upset she felt. It had been a shock, what he had said, she had to admit. So totally unexpected, so, so incredibly hoped for in the secret chamber of her dreams.

Her heart was still pounding. It took her a long time to get back to normal, then office work took over and she shoved the experience under the carpet of discipline.

Twilight time was as it used to be. The light of the floor lamp warm and cosy, the tea giving off strong scents and the chocolate cake sitting sweetly and prettily on its plate. They were sipping and munching in comfortable silence when he coughed. A flush of colour spread across his face and he coughed.

‘I’m sure you know by now that I have great difficulty expressing myself.’

Did she? Did he? She wondered where this was going but she nodded.

‘There is something I want to say. Something which I don’t dare put in words except on paper. Will you help me, Andrea?’

‘Of course, Frederick. You know me. You only have to ask.’

‘You,’ he said huskily. ‘You,’ he tried again.

He scraped his throat.

‘You are a gem. I don’t know what I would do without you.’

He pulled a sheet of paper and a pencil from his desk drawer.

‘Would you write this down for me?’

‘Don’t I always?’

He started dictating.

‘My dearest, dear one.’

Her pencil drew a line across the paper but he continued, looking down, his hands clasped before him.

‘You and I have known one another for a long time.’

She smiled gently and patted his hands.

‘There is no need to be so circumspectious about it.’

‘-spect- he said absentmindedly, ‘circumspect.’

It was one of the very few things that irked him about her. Terribly. Her lack of precision in using the English language. It did not happen very often but still.

‘These are modern times, aren’t they?’ she continued.

He looked at her earnestly, still red in the face.

‘I know. But not everyone is as broad-minded as you think. You know how they talk around here.’

Gossip was always flying around like wildfire. It had not escaped his notice either that the looks and the atmosphere in the office had changed recently.

‘I’m sure we can cope,’ she said, pencil raised. ‘There is nothing like honesty. Winner takes all, as they say. He who dares and all that. No time like the present etc.’

There. That was another thing that bugged him about her. The use of these old-fashioned dictums. Trite, superficial, superfluous to the business of what they were at.

‘Shall we continue?’ he said somewhat tersely. ‘Let’s get it over and done with.’

‘Of course.’ She put pencil to paper again.

‘I want you, I would like to, if only you. Bugger. Scrap all that and let’s cut to the chase.’

I’m totally head over heels in love. With you. Would you do me the honour of joining me for dinner? Yours faithfully, no make that ‘lovingly’, Frederick. There. That’s it.’

He looked at her. She sat flabbergasted, pencil stuck to the paper.

‘Could you type that out for me, Andrea?’

‘But surely there’s no need for that, Frederick?!’

‘Please, Andrea. I’d like to do this properly.’

‘Of course, Frederick. Consider it done.’

When she was done with the typing he came out of his office and signed the letter.

‘Would you get me an envelope and put the letter in there for me?’

‘Certainly. I need an address, though. Who would you want me to send it to?’ she whispered coyly, happily playing the game to the end. She put a hand on his and patted it. He grabbed it with both his.

‘Don’t you know? Do you seriously not know?!’

‘How could I? You never say a word and I . . .’

‘Well, that’s a relief. If even you don’t know I must have been able to keep my feelings well hidden. It’s to Miss Sandra Griffon.’

His voice choked on emotion. ‘There’s no need for a stamp.’

The pencil broke with a brittle sound as hopes and expectations broke into a million pieces around her together with her heart.

‘Of course not, Frederick. I know where her desk is.’

She pointed a shaking finger towards the typist pool.

‘Right there.’

He looked at her gratefully, paying no heed to the sudden frost.

‘Would you? Really? I don’t want to put it through the office mail. You know how tongues wag. I never trusted the post room with my private mail. I’m sure they’re inclined to snoop. I don’t think Elsie’s above steaming open letters if she’s got a suspicion of something worth gossiping about.’

‘Can’t have gossip,’ she said brightly.

Absentmindedly she picked up the letter opener. The one he had bought for her and given it to her with a beautiful ribbon around it.

‘You know what they say: cross my heart, and hope to die.’

Then suddenly rage struck her and her voice rose up the scale.

‘Well, Fre-de-rick,’ she spat out his name. ‘You did. You just crossed my heart and this is your reward.’

She stabbed him, right between the ribs where she hoped his devious heart sat.

‘I hope you die.’

His mouth opened on a soundless scream, his blood spouting everywhere.

She got out the requested envelope and slapped it into his face.

‘My resignation. She’s all yours, your precious Miss Sandra Griffon.’

With that she high-tailed it out of the office, never to set foot in it again.

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Marina Gerrard

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About the author

Marina Gerrard graduated to writing novels after finishing a creative writing course and producing a few prize winning short stories. She is the author of Journeys into the Heartland, a mini series of three psychological thrillers that delve deeply into the world of relived traumatic experiences. After finishing this trilogy she decided it was time for something less intense. She then embarked on writing a series of light-hearted novels that can be best classed as 'dreamscapes'. After that she became intrigued by the theme of memory. Which led to another novel. In between she took to writing short stories. Her books and short stories are available in e book format, the short stories also in PDF.

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