

The Courteous Man

Once upon a time there was a man, a courteous man, nay! *the* Courteous Man. This is his fairy tale.

There was a time in his youth where he had worked at a newspaper agency which had a lovely coffee station which he often visited for the hope of catching a glimpse of a particular coworker with whom which he had become smitten. She was a lovely girl of Scandinavian origin, with a Scandinavian accent but dark features that drove the Courteous Man to such insanities as to inconvenience the entire staff by taking up inordinate amounts of time pretending to fiddle with the perfectly functioning spout of the coffee dispenser. Naturally the lovely girl took notice, and, having taken a fancy to the refreshingly courteous man many weeks prior, was eagerly awaiting the day he'd pluck up the courage to approach her. Her desk was not far from the coffee station, and for discreet conversations advantageously located in a corner of the building as well. After a time she realized she had to act. But on the day she decided *she'd* approach *him*, *he* decided to *stop* going to the coffee machine, for the magnitude of the discourtesy he had been inflicting on his coworkers had become unbearable. The lovely girl, overcome with a sudden flood of grief and other strong emotions, quit her job to become a barista. Incidentally, *her* name was the Patient Girl, and she has a fairy tale too. It has a sad ending.

In his adult years the Courteous Man became the concierge at a famous hotel where his talents were put to use fabulously, as one might expect. Of course his true passion lay in waiting tables, but experience had taught him that a little too much courtesy in a waiter tends to draw hostility and rowdiness out of a disproportionate number of dinner guests, and hostility and rowdiness were the two things the Courteous Man wanted desperately to avoid. On a very normal morning he found himself waiting at the usual bus stop at the usual time, engaged in a delightful conversation with a fellow commuter, which he did every morning with a different commuter, out of communal courtesy for all of them. This particular lady was a wealthy business owner whom he had noticed many times before to be constantly on her phone. This morning she appeared to have some free time. It should also be mentioned that the Courteous Man had taken a fancy to this woman not just because she was pleasing to look upon or because she was well-to-do, smart and powerful, but also because he had noticed her uncanny ability to be courteous *even* while constantly on the phone. He had always presumed that courtesy required the full attention and a complete set of hands, but she seemed to be the counterexample. So on this morning he deigns to approach her and says, ever so politely and after a very courteous conversation about weather, sports, and common political opinion, "Dear Lisa, I would like to take you to court." To which she replied, aghast, "On what charges?" Her oversuspicious misinterpretation of his phrasing stemmed from the fact that she was secretly engaged in several borderline racketeering schemes, not to mention fighting the threat of an espionage charge from a rival company. So paranoid was she that the Courteous Man was onto her illicit activities that she hurriedly drew out her phone, stepped away from the man a few paces, and dialed a number. As her conversation, which turned out to be taking place in some strange language unknown to the Courteous Man, began, the man couldn't help but realize that she'd stepped into the area at the edge of the curve where the large side-view mirrors of the bus would sweep past when the bus drew up. It was 6:29. When the bus came into view a minute later, the woman was still deep in conversation, and the man could not work up the courage to interrupt her, nor could he work up the courage to push her out of the way of the

swinging mirrors and the bus made its approach. The woman was struck in the side of the head by a 3 foot bus side-view mirror at a due to the erratic deceleration of the bus unknown speed between 10 and 13 miles per hour, a blow from which she never fully recovered. Incidentally, *her* name was the Ambitious Woman, and she has a fairy tale too. You know what kind of ending it has.

In his later years as an old wizened patriarch who was every now and then permitted to help with odd-jobs about the hotel, the Courteous man decided that he had finally found a lifestyle which beat to a suitable rhythm. Because of his old age, no one seemed to want to press him beyond the emptiness of a little courteous conversation. It was an emptiness that he cherished; a deep loneliness in which there were no other souls over whom he needed on courtesy's behalf watch, nor any prying eyes about which he needed on courtesy's behalf worry. He lived in one of the suites with three bedrooms on the upper floor. Two bedrooms were occupied by his personal attendants and caretakers of which he had many, for the hotel staff had found that this old man had such exorbitant demands regarding the behavior and etiquette of his care-taking that it was far too much for any 1 or even 2 or 3 or 4 maids to handle alone. Now in his bedroom was a bookshelf, a large thing made of oak which had been an heirloom from his paternal grandmother. It carried a single book from which he read every night. It was an original copy of the Canterbury Tales and the only way that I can express the magnitude of his love for it is to say that he had once shouted *full* volume at a *stranger* in the street who had once bumped into him and caused him to come *very* close to dropping the book. On this particular night the Courteous Man found himself dosing off at an unusually early hour, though still late into the night, while the better to read his book reclined at the top of his bed. He decided to call it a night and rose to return the thing to the bookshelf before signing off. In his grogginess he misjudged the distance to the shelf and only put half of the book onto the ledge. It tumbled down and landed at his feet in a spray of dust and old parchment. He looked down blankly for a few moments, then in a fit of emotion he gave the shelf an angry shove. Immediately regretted the uncouth outburst he bent down slowly to recover the book. The shelf teetered back precariously from the force of the push. The man bent lower. The shelf stopped teetering back and began to teeter back to vertical. The man grasped the book. The shelf teetered forward, straight on past vertical. The man began to rise with the book in his arms. The shelf fell. It hit his still hunched over back and snapped it in two. He fell to the floor with a grunt, pinned under the shelf. It was late. He dared not call out and wake the maids. That would be most impolite, and by god had he just shamed himself with that angry outburst. The last thing he could do was suffer to commit another discourtesy to the world. He figured the maids would find him in the morning anyway.

They did. He was dead.