

Untainted Tiffany

Every high school student absolutely despises Monday mornings. The concept of waking up at 6 o'clock in the morning to haul my ass to a classroom to get lectured at for seven hours straight must've been invented by a sadist. Especially after the joy and relaxation of the weekend.

It's about 7:05 when I pull into the school parking lot. Grabbing my bag, I make my way into the sterile halls of Northcrest High school. The broken A/C kept the freezing February air in the building, as if it was sucking away the small bits of joy you had left.

My feet start taking me towards Math class. On the way, I heard some chatter among the other students in the halls. I tuned out most of it, but a conversation between two girls threw me off:

"Did you hear about Sandra's murder? They found her body in the park with her hands chopped off." The first one said.

That was the third murder this school year. What's worse is that I saw her at the park last Friday after school.

"Wait, you think she tutored with Tiffany? She got her hands cut off like Darius and Daniel." The second girl tilts her head to the side.

"But I thought Moses got tutoring from her? And he came back just fine."

"That just makes it more confusing." She sighs. "God, I just wanna graduate and get out of this shithole! I don't need to worry about getting my hands cut off!"

"Oh my god, same. But hey, at least we get some days off again. I have a chem test today that I'm totally gonna bomb. Ms. Crowell better cancel it."

I finally get to math class. I take my seat at the back right and pull out a piece of notebook paper.

The room is filled with casual chatter about music, shows, and Sandra.

But all conversation stops for a moment when Tiffany Jones enters the classroom. Her brown eyes are empty, and she silently takes her seat in the front and center of the classroom. She shrinks into herself, as if she was trying to hide behind her long light brown curls.

Last summer, the Jones family moved into the neighborhood. I immediately came to one conclusion when they pulled up in their spotless, shining white minivan with chipper smiles and their flawless brown skin: they're untrustworthy.

They were perfect, *too* perfect. Every morning the mother and father would be in the front garden at 8 AM. Who the hell is that happy at 8 in the morning? The new girl, Tiffany was in my math class. She would joyfully answer every question with complete accuracy and understanding, even correcting the teacher sometimes. She would then survey around the classroom during independent work time before finding her victim of the day. Flashing a smile that was found a way to be both friendly and condescending before taking out her already finished assignment and going over the material with them. About a month into the school year, she started peer tutoring sessions with some kids after school. She says that she wants to uplift her peers and understand new people. I don't buy it, no teen is that selfless.

A beep fills the room as the morning announcements comes on.

"We regret to inform you that Sandra Coleman has passed away recently. I'm sure you are all saddened by the loss of yet another classmate. This is a reminder to cherish the friends and family that you have now. The school week will still operate as normal. Feel free to attend counseling at any time during the school week. Have a great day Vikings!"

People start groaning. We aren't getting another week off, that sucks. Maybe they think that we're used to the murders now?

Mr. DeSilva walks up to the front of the classroom. His shoulders are slouched, his eyes have heavy bags under them and his face is stuck in an exhausted scowl. His eyes focused on Tiffany for a second before they moved to look at the entire class.

He slaps his hands on a stack of papers on the desk next to him. “Here’s your tests, you guys did better than last time. Class average was 65%. That’s higher than last time, might not have to worry about getting fired after all. Tiffany, as usual, got a perfect score. “

The class remains silent.

He then points to another stack of papers. “This is a worksheet for our next unit. You can work on it, something from another class, or just do whatever, just don’t make too much noise. If you need to go to counseling, just come up to me and I’ll write you a pass.”

He then quickly walks back to his desk and starts doing something on his computer. Everyone in the class moves to collect the papers that are just going to rot away in their bag until the end of the quarter.

After moving back to my desk, I pull out my phone and earbuds and put on a lo-fi playlist. I scribbled notes on the piece of notebook paper on my desk. Murders are much more interesting than a function worksheet.

Darius Wilson was the type of kid to get into fights with teachers and students daily. Around the middle of October, he was found dead at the nearby lake, his severed arms were placed neatly beside his body as if they were silverware at a fancy dinner party.

The second victim Daniel Little, a nice but dumb guy. He was often deemed a “lost cause” by his teachers. He disappeared from the face of the Earth before being found across the street missing his fingers.

The most recent victim, Sandra Coleman, was the bitchiest, bitch, to ever bitch. She woke up in the morning with the fervent desire to make your day worse. Last winter, she called my cool new jacket “A disgusting array of dead ferrets that I picked off the ground and slapped on my cancer patient looking body.” So, I’m not crying over the fact that she’s gone forever.

The main thread that connected the murders of Sandra, Daniel, and Darius was that they all participated in Tiffany’s little tutoring sessions. And about a week or so after those sessions, the tutored would end up dead somewhere. Usually with some part of their arms or hands cut off. I would applaud the consistent presentation if they weren’t grisly murders.

My eyes wander around the classroom. On the left side of the room, Moses Brown seems to be leading another prayer circle with about six other students.

I remember what I heard earlier this morning. We all thought that the murders would stop after Moses came back not mutilated. He was groveling at Tiffany’s feet after he failed the math test right before Thanksgiving break. The whole scene started rumors that Tiffany had a crush on the guy and that’s why she spared him. I could see it, they’re basically the same. Just replace Tiffany’s math knowledge with devout Christianity, add testosterone and you get Moses.

Closer to my side of the room, I notice Tiffany talking with Mr. DeSilva at his desk. Probably gushing over new worksheets. Mr. DeSilva’s eyes are focused on her. I try to listen in as best I can.

“Don’t worry about Sandra. You’re a successful and mature lady. It’s awful that she’s gone, but it wasn’t our problem.” He said, he put a hand her shoulder.

Tiffany shivers. “I just was trying to help her. I can’t understand why anyone would systematically murder high schoolers. What’s so offensive about me trying to help my peers?”

“Trying to help those below you is admirable, but you have to think about yourself. They lived separate lives than you. Sometimes, you have to cut your losses and focus on being better.”

People died and he’s still dickriding her, what a teacher’s pet. Though, it doesn’t seem like she killed anyone. My number one suspect was already being disproven.

Time flies while I brainstorm and soon enough, first period ends. Everyone rushes to get out of the oppressive white walls of Mr. DeSilva’s classroom and the unsettling sight of three permanently empty desks shoved into the back corner.

I move out into the hallway and make my way to my second period class, Marketing. It’s my favorite class this year, mostly because it’s easy and my teacher is cool. The worst thing about Marketing is that the classroom is on the other side of the school. So, I grab my bookbag and start the long trudge over there.

The atmosphere of Northcrest High School is low as usual. Some kids move like zombies, just wanting to autopilot through the day. The dilapidated gray walls, the century old unusable lockers, and the grimy, dusty floors didn’t do anything to help their mood. Others merrily chat away with their friends as if nothing happened. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few people were happy about Sandra being gone. The world keeps turning even after tragedy.

As expected, when I get to Marketing class, my teacher just gives us an assignment and the okay to work on whatever we want. I take out my notes on the murders and get back to work.

I have a small working list of suspects: Tiffany, Mr. DeSilva, and my English teacher Ms. Brown. I’m leaning towards Ms. Brown. After every murder, Tiffany’s eyes are always soulless, like zombie. A day later, she’s skipping around acting like she’s better than everyone, as usual. The main commonality between the murders is *her* tutoring sessions. But that conversation in

math is a little genuine. Ms. Brown is a little more out there. Sandra, Darius, and Daniel were all in my English class also, and Ms. Brown despised all three of them. And she would cut off someone's hands for the crime of preferring video games over *Antigone*. Mr. DeSilva's too depressed and lazy for murder. He'd hate cleaning up the aftermath.

Marketing ends and I head to Biology which I use as naptime until lunch. The worksheets are manageable, and my eyelids get too heavy for me at that time of day.

The sleep and food help me prepare for the last trial of the day: English.

Since 3rd grade, I had an all-consuming, visceral hatred for Mathematics. But this year, Ms. Brown is trying to change that. She was one of those teachers that talk about the good-ol-days where people had no mental illnesses and were consistently engaged in class. Instead of accepting that times change, Ms. Brown decided to constantly complain about how our brains are turning to vegetables due to our obsession with scrolling through salacious photos on Instagram and playing primitive games like Fortnite. This is usually followed by her crying over how our generation has forsaken the enlightening education literary fiction has to offer.

Due to her dissatisfaction with the literary education of the youth, Ms. Brown stalks around the classroom like a predator hunting for the slightest spark of engagement. Her eyes would scour the classroom in search of someone who is looking in the same general direction as her and bombards them with questions, then wallow in melodramatic misery when they don't answer like someone with a doctorate.

"Cassius, what do you think is the significance of Grenouille's lack of scent?"

Ms. Brown's cold, dead, wrinkly eyes are set on me, fuck.

I desperately try to think of something smart to say. *Perfume* sounds interesting on paper, it's apparently about some weird French dude that's so obsessed with smells and perfumes that he murders women for it. But after reading through the first few chapters, I stuck to my good buddy SparkNotes.

"Uh. People think he's unusual since he doesn't have a smell like normal people?" I said.

Ms. Brown frowns and scoffs. "Yes, that is a... rudimentary way of looking at it. But as we discussed last class, Grenouille's lack of scent represents his lack of a human essence. Him murdering young women for their scents is him trying to grasp the core of our humanity and what makes us appealing to others." She lets out a sigh. "I know you all are shaken by the death of Sandra, but the world must go on. Unlike your other teachers, I am not letting you sit on your phones all day taking advantage of a young girl's death to skip out on school."

That hits a little harder than I expected.

The class remains silent. Some people exchange guilty or awkward glances at each other.

Ms. Brown presses on the clicker and the her powerpoint moves to detailing a group assignment.

"Since you kids need more time talking to each other face to face, I prepared a small project that's to be completed in pairs. You and your partner are to provide a short explanation of one of *Perfume's* themes. You will need a general definition of the theme, two examples of it in the novel, and either a real-life example or an example from a proper literary creation."

People immediately start making eye contact with each other.

"Your partners will be selected at random."

The classroom erupts into complaints and groaning.

Ms. Brown moves to her computer and the projector soon displays a random group generator. She clicks the button and the pairs are assigned.

My eyes scan around to find my name. When I find out who's my partner is, I want to gouge out my eyes. I'm working with Tiffany out all people. I wanted to do the project half-assedly in peace.

The groans and moans in the class show that I'm not the only one unhappy. I get up and drag my backpack over to the desk next to her.

Tiffany flashes a fake full toothed smile when I sit down. Her desk is covered in a myriad of perfectly organized and detailed notes.

"Hey Cassius!" Tiffany chipperly waves at me. It's like the girl who was hiding behind her hair this morning never existed.

I nod my head in response.

"Do you have any notes or annotations?" She asks, tilting her head innocently.

I slap my notes on the desk. Tiffany glances at them and then makes a face.

"Hey, I got notes. Just because they're not as pretty or perfect as yours--"

I look at the sheet of paper on the desk and realize that it was the paper with my notes about the murders on them.

"Ignore that! I was just screwin around in Math. Heh-heh."

Great, even though I'm 75% she that she isn't a murderer, I don't want her to talking to me any longer than necessary.

I switch my murder notes for my noticeably less detailed notes on *Perfume* which consists of:

- *Bro's born from fish guts, ew.*
- *Dude somehow got no smell. No soul?*
- *Bro survived a shit ton of diseases, he ain't human.*
- *Grenouille's weird. No wonder he became a murderer.*

An uncertain look blooms on Tiffany's face. She closes her eyes and takes a breath.

"Do you drive or take the bus?" She asked.

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Can we talk after school?"

"About?"

Her eyes dart around the room. She gets closer to me.

"The murders." She whispers.

I really hope that Tiffany's not the killer. Granted even if I didn't talk to her after class she'd probably just jump me if she was. Getting smashed to paste by a cute girl would be a nice way to go though.

"Ok. But I'm not going to really be focused learning on the Grotesque or whatever."

Tiffany rolls her eyes. "I'm not doing all the work. Even if it'd turn out better if I did."

I snort “I don’t really care about my grade as long as it’s not an F. You actually know what you’re talking about anyways.”

Tiffany smiles “I have an idea of who the murderer is, if you don’t put in any effort here, then your sleuthing would take much longer.”

“So will whatever you’re doing.”

Tiffany looks at me like she wants to snap my neck regardless of if she was the murderer or not. “Jesus christ you’re irritating, I’ll give you some stuff to put on a slide. I’m sure you can handle typing.”

We start on the project. Through some of my research I learned about a story where some guy turns into a giant insect overnight. That’s funny. Tiffany also gave me a mini lecture on how the grotesque is more about crossing boundaries and bringing the unfamiliar to light instead of what I called it: weird shit.

After what felt like forever, the final bell rang and we all poured into the halls to go home. Or in my case, discuss murder with a teacher’s pet.

We sit at an outside table.

“Ok, can I see your notes again?” Tiffany asked.

I pull out my murder notes. Tiffany takes and scrutinizes them for a while. Sighs, and hands them back to me.

“It seems like we’re at similar places.”

“Woah, woah, woah. I thought you knew who the killer was?”

“I lied a little bit to get you to come out here.” She looks away bashfully.

I let out a small chuckle.

“What’s so funny?!”

“I didn’t know you were capable of lying, respect.”

Tiffany groans. “You’re insufferable.”

She takes out her school issued laptop and pulls up her own notes. As said, her notes draw to similar conclusions. But they have a lot more information about the victims themselves. Apparently, Darius had some home troubles with a drunkard mother, Daniel wanted to be a historian, and Sandra had some body issues. Moses’ name is written below followed by three question marks. It also includes, questions about the grim M.O of cutting off people’s arms, hand, or fingers. Which she assumes is more for sending a message. She has Mr. DeSilva’s name underlined.

“What’s with the stuff on Mr. DeSilva?” I asked.

Tiffany’s eyes go downcast “He never really liked the idea of my tutoring sessions. He always said that I should just focus on myself and not get distracted with helping others.”

That tracks with what I heard this morning. But there’s something that I don’t understand.

“They were problem kids getting help from his favorite perfect student, wouldn’t a teacher love that? Class average gets higher, he doesn’t have to worry about losing his job because of some dumb kids. There’s no point in killing them unless he hated the noise or something.” I said.

Tiffany raises an eyebrow “Do you think that’s why Moses was spared? He seems to be more well-liked among people here.”

Moses is well-liked in the community. People would likely care about his death and the police would take it more seriously. The other three were considered either disruptive or lost causes.

“Ok then, but what about the cut off body parts? What kind of message would that be sending?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I just-“ Tiffany clutches her head. “I just want this to end.” She said, her voice was wavering.

Small tears run down her smooth face. Her perfect brown curls are frazzled and her lip is quivering. I got quiet for a bit. I never seen someone on the verge of a breakdown like this. Let alone this suddenly.

“Uh, you can vent to me if you want.” I blurt out.

“I-like you’d care.” She sniffles.

“You uh, don’t seem to have anyone else. I don’t really have any room to judge you.”

She holds her arms close to her chest. She looks hesitant for a second until she decided to say something.

“It sucks. My first year at a traditional school has been fucking awful. Everyone thinks I’m some teacher’s pet, everybody’s miserable! Nobody here cares that three people died! Not even the police! Hell, you’re probably doing this to get out of doing homework I try to stay

positive and help people but nope! They either call me a prissy bitch or get killed! I can't even enjoy learning anymore! I can't." She puts her head down on the table and bursts into tears.

Guilt rolls over me. I can't even act blameless in making her feel like this. We all forgot that she was human too. I try to find words to comfort her but not a lot comes up.

"I'm... sorry if I made you feel like shit." I tap her head lightly. "Maybe we should just go home now. Deal with this another day. You need rest."

Tiffany huffs.

I pull out my phone and open up my contacts.

"Take a break from school. At least tomorrow. If you want to talk about anything, solving the case or otherwise, I can skip tomorrow. Got some absences saved up, nothing for you to worry about."

She thinks for a second before typing her number in my phone.

"Just, be careful on your way home." She said quietly. She then reaches into her bag and pulls out a tracking device. "Take this, just in case."

"Uh, you just, have those on deck?"

"My parents bought them when I was younger. Put a few in my bag and gave one to Moses before I tutored him. They just stayed there and I didn't think to give one to Sandra and-" She takes a deep breath and reaches out her arm. "Just, take it."

I wordlessly take the device and put it inside the back pocket of my jeans. I give Tiffany I thumbs up and head to my car.

As I walk back, I realize how tired I was today. In the last seven hours, I saw another dead body, tried to piece together the mystery of murders, dealt with Ms. Brown, became somewhat friends with Tiffany Jones of all people, and attached a tracking device to my pants.

Going back home to an empty house and a simple lunch thrown together by mom seems kind of like whiplash. At least it's quiet, I need sleep to be fresh and relaxed for tomorrow.

I finally reach the student parking lot. But before I can reach the handle, a rag is shoved over my mouth from behind. The rag smells like shit. I start trying to pull the arm off but to no avail. After a few minutes, I black out.

I wake up to find myself in some dark basement tied to a chair. The only source of light is a small lantern sitting in the middle of the room. I can hear heavy breathing. Pictures of Tiffany adorn the walls, some were pretty basic like headshots you'd take on picture day or for IDs, but among the photos were just of her doing whatever in public. Walking on the sidewalk, shopping, working an assignment in the park, eating ice cream. Right behind the lantern was Mr. DeSilva who was staring at a shrine of Tiffany, mostly consisting of beach and pool photos. After a bit he jerked around a bit before relaxing.

Holy shit, I'm sitting in a room with a murderer and a pedophile.

He finally turns around. His tired eyes scan me.

"Didn't think that you'd care about all this. Wish you put this effort into my assignments, Cassius." He said.

What do you say to a murderer? I can't move, I don't even think I could move anywhere if I could. My heart's beating like it wants to break through my ribcage. My eyes dart around trying to find something that isn't the man right in front of me.

Mr. DeSilva pulls out a gun and puts the muzzle up to my chin and slides it down my neck. His eyes follow the muzzle with the same disinterest as this morning.

"Eh, I don't need to cut off your hands. I just need to shut you up." He smiles and chuckles to himself. "Well, maybe I could attach a piece of paper that says *do your homework* to your corpse and throw it at the McDonalds across the street. It'd be a nice scare for the skippers." He repositions the gun to my chest. "If you have any questions might as well ask them now."

"Why? They didn't do anything."

"Mr. DeSilva scoffs. "Tiffany is like a goddess, here to bless this shithole with potential. Quiet, attentive, intelligent, neat, mature, delicate, sweet, and innocent. The perfect student is dragged here only for you parasites to lay you filthy hands on her and waste her time."

"Parasites?"

Mr. DeSilva rolls his eyes. "Yes parasites, who the hell wants to deal with you guys for seven hours a day? Giving out assignments and knowledge only for you to not do anything with it and start petty drama instead? Getting rid of chaff like Darius, Daniel, and Sandra is like working on a beautification project. "

"Tiffany's just trying to help them. Why are you killing them for getting tutoring?"

"Did you not hear me? Tiffany doesn't need to waste her time on those leeches. Hell, the class average is improving after getting rid of them. You wanna know the first test average was

after getting rid of Darius? Went from an average of 53% to 55%. Daniel? 55% to 60%. Those two alone dragged down the class average. It's best to weed them out early. And Tiffany doesn't need to concern her pretty little self with men like that. It's best that I protect her and preserve her sweetness, I can't allow people like you to taint her with your mediocrity."

. "Well, you're making your little perfect baby feel like shit! So get off your high horse and turn your--"

The loud sound of a bullet firing hurts my eardrums. A few seconds later I feel a searing pain in my chest. I feel like I'm drowning and getting stabbed by a dull knife at the same time.

Mr. DeSilva looks at me unemotionally. The gun in his hand emitting a thin smoke wave. He looks me in the eye.

"Let me tell you something Cassius, you're only marginally better than those three. You're just not irritating or a shit-starter. Other than that, you're the same. Nobody's going to look for you, nobody's going to care, whatever family you have left is going to rejoice knowing that they don't have to deal with you again. You never had any future worth working for."

As his tirade ends, the faint sound of police sirens and footsteps could be heard.

"What the fuck?! Why do they care about you, of all people?"

Mr. DeSilva's face is scrunched up in the ugliest most pissed off scowl you could imagine. I could barely speak, so I gave him my best shit eating grin. Tiffany's tracker did come in handy after all. Maybe in my next life I should be more like her. Less of a teacher's pet, but someone who cares.

I start to frown. Now she has to see another one of her classmate's dead bodies. At least it's over.