

Curse of the Scalzo Baby

Marc Edward DiPaolo (May 26, 2008)



Ever wonder what happens to reporters who make mistakes in their news stories? They get cursed and haunted by deceased children.



They drank too hard, they smoked too hard, and they were far too cynical and hard-bitten to admit it in public, but the reporters harbored a secret fear that their newspaper was cursed.

They had all heard the story during their first weeks on the staff of The Staten Island Advance, and had initially dismissed it out of hand as a luridly entertaining piece of modern oral folklore. The principal teller of the tale was the prematurely gray environmental columnist Bonnie Redgrave, whose only pleasure working in the newsroom was unearthing every scandal or tragedy that had ever rocked the paper and laying each one bare in hushed, reverential tones to all the new interns and reporters. In fact, one was not considered a bona fide member of the staff until one had already been briefed by Bonnie about who had snorted which drugs, who had screwed who in the elevator, and who had fallen prey to the eternally present curse of the Scalzo baby.

The curse had its roots in tragedy that had taken place, appropriately enough for the mostly liberal staff of reporters, during the Nixon administration. Legend held that, on December 23, 1973, an old man had a heart attack while driving past Silver Lake Park and plowed through the front gate into a woman pushing a baby carriage. The young mother, Maria Scalzo, took the brunt of the hit trying to protect little Michael, but she was listed in stable condition while the baby had not been expected to live to see the morning. An Advance reporter named Morgan Levinson learned from the police that the child had died that night, and rapidly typed a story for the front-page of the Christmas Eve edition: Car plows through park, kills baby. Three hours after the paper began distribution the following day, Morgan received a furious phone call from the baby's father, who explained in a tear-strained voice that his child was still alive, but in critical condition. Mortified, Morgan informed the editors and they collectively decided to write a front-page retraction of the story for Christmas Day. Little did they expect that, by the time the new headline, Baby mowed down by car lives, hit the streets, the child would have finally succumbed to its injuries. The next day, the headline read: Car Accident Baby Dies After All.

Before the sun set the day that headline saw print, Antonio Scalzo strode into the newsroom, his face a gaunt, ruined mask of pain, and locked his hooded, bloodshot eyes on Morgan. "Curse you for what you have done," he said, his provincial Tuscan accent, which he had failed to shed after ten years in America, adding an eerie weight to his words. He then cast his eyes about the newsroom, taking in the hive of activity, and all the reporters who were too engrossed in their own activities to notice his presence. "And curse you all. May you all live to see your dreams die as horribly as mine have."

Before Morgan had the opportunity to apologize again, the anguished man turned his back on the reporter and hastily stalked out. Not widely renowned for his emotional stability, the thrice divorced, alcoholic Morgan suffered a complete nervous breakdown not long afterwards and was committed to the local mental institution by his reluctant son. Unlike cartoon maniacs who need to be dragged away by men in white coats, Morgan went placidly, proclaiming in a steady voice that he had committed an unforgivable sin in his carelessness and offered the vain hope that the walls of the institution might protect him from the visions of the dead baby that haunted his dreams.

Carmela Bellavita burst out laughing, making a feeble attempt to stifle the guffaw with her beautifully manicured hands after several nearby reporters cast annoyed glances in her direction. When she had recovered her composure, the novice journalist noticed that Bonnie Redgrave was scowling, looking as gaunt and disconsolate as the bereaved Mister Scalzo from her story. "It isn't funny. The baby died, you know."

Carmela sighed, all mirth exercised from her face. "I know. But that doesn't make your story about the curse any less silly. It's vintage and campfire nonsense. And why is the bad guy in these tales always an Italian who can't speak English pretty good?"



Bonnie glanced warily over her shoulder to make sure no one was in earshot and then leaned forward until her nose was almost touching Carmela's. "You don't know what you've gotten yourself into joining this newspaper. Whether or not the curse is literally true, this paper has an odd black-hole effect. It sucks people in and never lets them out. You should leave while you still can." She paused; still unaware of how theatrical she sounded, adding ominously. "Unless it's already too late."

I was there, too, standing just off to the side, not wanting to crowd the two women. I was interested enough to listen, but too shy to take active part in the conversation. I was also far enough away to observe the women from a more objective standpoint. At that moment, I suddenly found myself fixated by the lines and wrinkles on Bonnie's face, which seemed long and deep at this proximity. Although Bonnie was only thirty-two, terrible stress-lines had already branched out of the corners of her mouth, crow's feet and heavy bags surrounded her eyes, and trench-like wrinkles had dug a jagged path across her brow. Her eternal sneer and frazzled, colorless hair did little to undercut the misconception that she was racing past middle age into her golden years. And yet, underneath all these unnaturally early signs of aging, Bonnie looked remarkably like Carmela. They both had oval faces and olive complexions, shoulder-length hair, voluptuous figures and a penchant for wearing navy-blue pantsuits, only Carmela's countenance was freshly minted, while the stresses and disappointments of a career in journalism had already scarred Bonnie's once beautiful face.

"I've been here nine miserable years," Bonnie continued. "And I've been sending resumes out for most of those nine years, applying to publishing companies, schools, offices, public relations firms, and other newspapers. Haven't gotten a damn offer yet, so here I stay. And I thought this was going to be a stepping-stone to bigger and better opportunities – a job to take for a year or two before moving on to Times."

I chimed in. "Well, if you're that miserable, there's got to be something. There are jobs out there. I don't mean to sound flip, but worse comes to worse, there's always Pizza Hut."

"Pizza Hut." Her tone made me wish I'd stayed safely out of the conversation. "With a husband and three kids. Pizza Hut. You know, this may be a rat trap, but it's baited with great dental benefits and a 401K plan. You get comfortable here, and you get too scared to leave. That's why you've got to leave before your first year ends and you're eligible for the 401K plan."

Bonnie pointed over Carmela's shoulder at a fellow who looked even paler and gaunter than Bonnie. He was hunched over an antiquated computer, soullessly typesetting one of the borough president's blood drive press releases. "See that guy over there? Terry Bond. He actually managed to escape from here for a while, in search of becoming a Hollywood star, he soon found himself jobless and destitute, and had to come back to his original job, a broken man. Black hole." Then Bonnie went on to point out three other obviously depressed reporters, and regaled Carmela with their failed attempts to escape the journalist's equivalent of the Roach Motel.

Carmela looked incredulous. "You're saying the Scalzo curse did this?"

"Precisely. If I'd known of the curse beforehand, I'd have never taken this job."

As someone who has always secretly hopes that the world was overrun with ghosts and goblins, I was all ready to believe this. Carmela was clearly not. "Well, that's absurd. For one thing, there's Sylvia Knoblach. She's the famous, auburn-haired cable sports reporter, she worked here in the '80s, and she's ok."



For the first time, Bonnie looked briefly doubtful, wondering if she really was just using the curse as an excuse to justify her life's failings. Then she resumed her cryptic expression. "No. Something bad is going to happen to that woman. I can sense it."

"Who the hell is that?" a gravelly voice demanded, and Carmela turned to see a spindly woman in a baggy sweater staring down at her.

"This is Carmela Bellavita," Bonnie explained. "The paper's latest victim. Carmela, this is our health reporter, Judy Stammers."

Carmela offered to shake Judy's hand but Judy kept her arms folded where they were. "I see our illustrious publisher still hires new talent based on the size of their breasts."

Carmela froze.

"What?!" I cried, taken aback.

Before either Carmela or I could do or say more in protest, Judy stalked off to photocopy a recipe for leg of lamb.

"Nobody likes her much," Bonnie whispered to Carmela.

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