

MISSING
PIECES

By Michael Golvach

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BY
MICHAEL GOLVACH

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For Karen Sheila

~

*Watching You Practise Your Art Opened My Heart To Layers And
Depths Of The Expression Of Beauty And Truth I Never Knew
Existed. And Your Words Of Wisdom And Encouragement
(Edinburgh College, Performing Arts Studio Scotland) Were An
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~

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Part I
X
Traumata



I

Tuesday, September 24th, 1974

Mandi raced home from school on her bicycle furiously. The pack of six other children, on their newer, fancier bikes roared up on her tail, shouting abuse and hurling twigs and rocks.

“Freak. Where you running to, freak?” one of them called out and the others joined in unison. “Freak!”

Tears streamed from her eyes. She felt the muscles in her calves burn, tearing her up from the inside, her lower back throbbing with pain as she pedalled. The taunts and the screams of the other children came closer no matter how desperately she pushed.

Her back tyre shook as it tried to break a piece of branch one of her tormentors jammed between the spokes. As her bike skidded to a stop, her fingers fumbled and she grasped for the hand brakes. Accidentally pulling the wrong brake clasp down, her bicycle stopped on its front tyre, sending it in a forward flip. She flew from the seat, her hands still grasping for the handlebars. Her backpack came loose as she landed, face first, on the road’s dirty asphalt.

She looked up, her vision blurry and blocked by the chunks of dirt embedded in her face, and she could see them all. Some laughing, some crying, and some stomping

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on her backpack with their dirty shoes. They all rode away soon enough, but not before kicking a little more dirt in her direction.

“How’s your ugly face, you sick, pasty freak?” yelled the last of them as he got back on his bike, looking around to see if anyone else had noticed what happened. Only worried about whether he’d get in trouble. “See you. Wouldn’t want to be you,” he said over his shoulder as he rode away.

Mandi pawed at her face, brushing the black dirt from her eyes and spitting it out of her mouth as she cried, wailing something unintelligible. Unaware of the scrapes and cuts around her right cheek and eye, though the warmth of the blood welling in the lines of her face was beginning to feel like a miserably cruel bath.

She lay there for a few minutes, crying out for someone—anyone—to help her, but the street was empty. No one was coming. No one ever did.

Picking herself up and retrieving her backpack, she rode the rest of the way home. As she passed strangers, they looked at her in horror. Her bloody cuts were starting to clot and her bruises were beginning to darken. Children cried out as she passed and parents expressed vague concern—mostly for the mental well-being of their own little ones, having been exposed to such violence. Not that they’d had to suffer it. Cruelty by proxy. Mandi’s soul was crying, but her heart wasn’t bleeding.

She arrived home a half hour later, doing her best to freshen her face without ruining her blouse. She covered her right eye as well as she could with her loose orange hair, shook the dirt from her backpack and walked up the stairs to her front door, pensively ringing the doorbell.

She stood for a few minutes, looking behind her and around the neighbourhood, seeing if anyone was there. The

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street was empty. Everyone was home already. In their pleasant houses. Eating supper. On time.

She rang again. Nothing. She rang again. And then again.

The door swung open and mother stood in the doorway with a look of contempt on her gaunt, ugly, terrifying face. “Mandi Alyson Wexler. Do you know what time this family sits down for supper?” she asked. Mandi looked at her, the tears welling in her eyes though she fought them with everything she had. “Do you? And what have you done to your hair? Disgraceful.”

Mandi began to open her mouth and mother cracked her hard across the face. As the sting of the slap brought back the dulling pain of the harsh scrapes and bruises on her right cheek, she burst out crying. “Mommy. Mommy, please. I’m sorry. The other kids. They—”

Mother turned and stormed away. “The other kids aren’t due home at supper time in this household.” She called out to father. “Go see to your darling.”

Mandi stepped inside the house. Her vision worsening, her depth perception almost completely gone. She touched around her right eye. It felt dead.

She began walking to the bathroom to look in the mirror.

“Hold it right there, missy,” father called out and she stopped in her tracks, not turning around to face him. “Where in Hell do you think you’re heading? It’s supper time. You were to come home directly from school. If it were up to mother, you’d be getting no supper at all. Are you listening to me, missy?”

“I’m just going to the bathroom to wash up.” She held up her hands to show the black dirt. Her voice was steady—threatening to tremble—as she sobbed inaudibly.

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“All right, then, Just do it quickly and hustle your little bottom into the dining room. We don’t all have it as easy as you.”

Mandi ran to the bathroom and closed the door behind her, locking it with the key in the knob. She moved to the sink and washed the filth from her hands. Her vision doubled, trebled, and doubled again as she fought to keep her balance. Everything appeared as if it existed in two dimensions. One flat picture of the world.

As her heart skipped a beat in fear, she slowly craned her head up, brushing back her hair to look at herself in the mirror. Her reflection looked blurry, though the mirror was sparkling clean and clear as ever. Her face looked like it had been torn at by raccoons all up its right side, and her right eye floated in a small puddle of drying blood, the eyelid drooping, puffing up and turning maroon.

She touched at her right eye again and felt nothing. She covered it with one hand, looking straight forward, and grabbed a toothbrush with the other. Moving the brush closer to her face and then farther away. Then she removed her hand and exposed her eye, doing the same exercise with the brush.

Her face turned even whiter as she dropped the brush into the sink. With or without her right eye covered, she saw the same thing.

She screamed at the top of her lungs.

Within seconds her parents were banging at the door. “What in Hell is going on in there? You open this door, now. You open it right now, missy.”

But she wasn’t going to open it. Not now. She backed slowly away from the door as the people on the other side bashed it harder and harder. Moving toward the bath tub as

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she stole glances into the mirror at what father had once described as a beautiful face.

“Go away,” she screamed as she hopped into the tub and curled into a ball. “Leave me alone.”

The door splintered around the lock. “So help me. If I have to break down this door to get in there, I’m going to take it out of your hide,” father yelled.

The banging and the bashing continued as Mandi shielded her eye with her hair again, working frantically to cover the damage. She could hear father grunting as the splinter around the knob grew. The knob wobbled, as the bashing got louder and harder, and chunks of wood fell out from around it. “You are in a world of trouble, missy.”

The knob burst out and fell to the floor. Father swung the door open, almost knocking it off its hinges as he stormed into the room, his face red with exhaustion and rage.

Mother stood behind him, looking self-righteously indignant. “Well, what do you have to say for yourself?” she asked. “Now that you’ve ruined supper for everyone, what do you have to say for yourself, you filthy tramp?”

“Why do you call me things like that, mommy?” Mandi asked in a sheepish, distant voice as she cradled her head in her hands. Shivering, cowering in the tub. “Why do you say such mean, nasty things? Why does everyone call me names like that? I know what they mean. And I’m not a—”

“Don’t you talk back to me, you trollop. I see the looks you give the boys. I know what you’re up to, and I won’t have that in my house.” Mother’s face turned red with pure hatred.

“But, mommy,” Mandi replied. “I’m eleven years old. I don’t even know why I would do anything like what you say. I don’t even like boys. Why are you so mean to me? You’re supposed to love me. You’re supposed to take care of me.”

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“Take care of you? Why, father and I—”

“I’ll handle this, sweetheart,” father interjected. Mother stepped back, a look of fear in her eyes. The aggression, the hatred, the payback, was handed down from generation to generation and from strongest to weakest. No one ever broke the chain, not in this family. Not yet. Maybe not ever. “Now, you get your little behind out of that tub right this instant, missy. We’re going to take care of this problem right here, right now.” He motioned for mother to go back into the dining room as he undid his belt, pulled it off and wrapped it around his fist. She nodded and walked away, not looking back. “And we’re going to see that it never happens again. Never.”

“No.” Mandi screamed as he grabbed at her shoulders. “No. I’m not coming out. I’m not coming.”

She kicked and swung her arms as he grabbed on to her left wrist and dragged her out of the tub. Her stomach scratched against the clean white tile floor as her blouse tore at the waist. The button fly of her designer jeans made a horrible sound as it scraped along with it.

“You’re coming upstairs with me and we’re going to sort this nonsense out,” father said. His one hand grasped her wrists and the other grabbed hold of her hair. She squealed and fought as he dragged her up the stairs to her bedroom.

Father kicked open the door to her room, lifted her off the floor by her wrists and hair, and threw her onto the bed. She landed with a thud, feeling the wood board underneath the thin mattress, curling back into a ball and hiding her face in her hands again. He locked the door behind them.

“Please don’t do this, daddy,” she begged. “I didn’t do anything wrong. The other kids. They hurt me. They hurt me bad, daddy.” She cried hard, her hand moving away from her

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face, looking up with her one good eye at father's unwavering visage. She couldn't feel, or see out of, the right one anymore.

"They hurt me bad?" He looked at her with disgust. "Is that how they teach you to speak at school? Well, you're not at school anymore, and you'll speak properly when you're in this house. You'll speak like a lady."

"I'm sorry, daddy," she squeaked. "They really, really hurt me."

"Dear God," he said, taking a long look at her. The wounds from her collision with the road, the pancake bruise from mother's smack and the dents and bumps from her ride up the stairs all showed perfectly. And her top right eyelid was huge and purple, pus joining its bruised skin to the bottom.

"Daddy? Why did they do this to me? Why are you doing this to me? What did I do wrong?" She sobbed, almost incoherent. Confused. Scared. "Please tell me, daddy. It's not fair. I never did anything to anybody. I never hurt anybody. Why is this happening to me?"

Father stood above her, looking down. His face a mask of pain, anger and confusion. "Look at what they've done to my little girl. Look at what those monsters have done." He wasn't the sort of man who would ever admit he might be part of the problem. Not in any way. Not even to himself. "What must you have done to them, for them to treat you this way? What must you have done?"

"Daddy, no," she cried. "I didn't do anything. I didn't deserve this. I don't deserve this. They hurt me bad, daddy. I can't see right. I need a doctor. Daddy."

"What did I tell you about talking like that? Like common filth." He made his belt into a whip and gave her a good crack across the wrists as she held them up to defend her face. "What did you do?" She rolled over onto her stomach and

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tried to curl up as he sat down, grabbed her and laid her across his lap. “What did you do to make them treat you like this?” He whipped her across the bottom. “What did you do? You’ll answer me, missy, or there will be more.”

He continued to spank her with his belt, his demands for an answer growing louder and louder as she continued to protest, begging for help. But no help was forthcoming. No help ever was.

It was only a matter of time before everything went dull and the welts from the lash of the belt didn’t seem to exist anymore. She couldn’t feel anything, and she could barely hear father’s voice as he raged.

“I need to see a doctor, daddy. Please. My eye is hurt. My eye is hurt. My eye is hurt!”

Father continued to beat her, finishing with a crack to the side of her cowering head as he stood and wrapped the belt back around his opened hand.

“You’ve just got a black eye, missy. It will be fine once you stop crying about it. We’ll see how you feel in the morning. When you’ve had time to think about this. When you’ve had time to think about what you’ve done. When you’re ready, then we’ll see about that eye that’s hurt so bad.”

His tone was mocking. He hadn’t bothered to give her eye a good look. He was always too busy looking elsewhere.

There was a knock at the door. It was mother. “Are you done in there? Has she learnt her lesson yet?”

“Almost,” he replied. “She’s being a stubborn one today. I swear to you, by God, one day I will get through to her.”

“If you must...” Mother’s voice trailed off. “Not worth the grief I endured giving birth to her.”

Father raised his hand to smack Mandi again, and she assumed the foetal position once more.

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“You straighten yourself out, missy.” He grabbed at her wrists and ankles. “You’re going to take the punishment you deserve.”

“I don’t deserve this, daddy,” she screamed. “I never did anything to anybody. And they call me those horrible names, and you do and mommy does too. Why? I never did anything.”

“Oh, you do plenty,” he replied, a tone of ugly lasciviousness coating his every word. “I see the way you dress yourself. With that flimsy blouse and those loose jeans. What do you think the boys think when they see that? Almost showing them something, but not quite. Teasing them like that. Growing boys. They know what you’re doing. And the way you talk. Like white trash. They know what you are. That’s why they call you those names. That’s why mother does. She knows.”

“Daddy? Please. I could wear different clothes if you’d buy them for me. It’s not my fault.”

She looked to the ceiling, her good eye drifting, losing focus.

“The Hell it isn’t. You know what you’re doing. And I’ll be damned if you tell me otherwise.” He smacked her hard across the face as she struggled to defend herself. “Do you want me to teach you a lesson? Do you? A lesson you already know the answer to? That’s why they call you those names. That’s why mother does too. Because you are what you are. A filthy little whore. You ask for it and ask for it and then pretend it isn’t so.”

“No daddy. I don’t want it. I don’t deserve it. I never ask for any of it. Please.”

But it was too late. Her pants were torn off and his were around his ankles in what seemed like a second. And he

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strangled her hard with one hand and muffled her screams with the other as he forced himself on top of her and had his way.

It was over within a minute or two and he got up and pushed himself away from the bed, pulling back the sheets and throwing them over her exposed body.

“Now you know why they call you those names,” he said, breathing heavily, the blood draining from his face. “You think about what you did today. You think hard about what you did to deserve what you got. Do you understand me?” Mandi stared off into the distance. No more tears. “I said, do you understand?”

She startled as he cracked her across the face with his belt. “Yes, daddy.” She whimpered as she turned over on her side, facing the wall.

“Good.” He put his belt back on, buckled up and went to open the door. “We’ll continue this discussion in the morning. Then, if you still think it’s necessary, and you’re not just being a spoilt brat, we’ll take a look at that eye. In the meantime, I’m certain it’s nothing a good sleep won’t take care of. It’s just a nasty bruise.”

He looked around the room and out into the hallway, satisfied mother was nowhere in sight.

“You keep your mouth shut about this, and maybe next time it won’t be so bad. Think about what you’ve done, and be ready to apologise to mother in the morning. Then, maybe, we’ll buy you some proper pants.”

He slammed the door behind him and she cried. Silently. Her body shaking with horror, revulsion and pain. There was blood on the sheets from between her legs, and they’d blame her for that too. She knew that much. As often, and as loudly, as she protested her situation, she always knew what the

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outcome would be. Nobody loved her. Not really. Nobody cared. That was the truth of this world.

After an hour, she wet her bed to avoid having to use the family bathroom. When she finished soiling the mattress, she got up and walked over to the window, her thighs chapped and bruised, blood still trickling down them from inside her.

Her room was beautiful. Shiny hardwood floor. Expensive furniture. Fine linens. All the fancy ornaments, books, toys and pictures she could ever want. Perhaps if her parents knew she would trade all those things for one single day of being truly loved and cared for, perhaps then they wouldn't hate her as much as they did. Perhaps the beatings and the abuse would stop. But she'd dreamt that dream for far too long. And it was never coming true.

Looking out her window into the night sky, she caught a glimpse of her reflection. A freakish, ugly whore. Like they called her. Like she must be. Not because she was, but because they all said.

She opened the window slightly, its thin single-pane glass splintering as she wrestled it up. Reaching around the tiny frame, she grasped both sides of it and wiggled the glass at the fracture, splitting it even more and breaking off a small chunk that dug into her pinkie. She pulled it away fast, sucking the blood from her fingertip and retrieving the shard with her other hand.

She walked over to the door and checked to see if it was locked from the outside. It was. She was being punished, as she deserved. What was the point in fighting it?

What, in fact, was the point of anything? Was this all life had to offer? And was it ever going to get better? The cruelty and derision at school? The punishment at home when she disobeyed? The punishment when she did as she was told?

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She lay back on her bed and stripped naked. She wondered how father would like to see this in the morning, as her shaking hand dragged the jagged piece of glass from her right wrist to her elbow on the inside. Would he be horrified to find his little girl dead, or would he feel cheated, having only mother to turn to when he needed to satisfy his sexual urges? Perhaps both. It wouldn't matter to her soon.

Still, she thanked her God for the small blessings in her life. The God whom she still believed loved her, though He'd seen fit to put her here. She thanked Him for the few good moments she could remember and she thanked Him for welcoming her back to His kingdom.

She buried the glass in the inside of her elbow, where the vein bulged the biggest, as she finished her last cut. She let her wounded arm hang over the edge of the bed as the blood pumped out more urgently and she felt her life slipping away. Her left eye closed shortly thereafter.

Good night, world. Good night, mommy and daddy. You never wanted me, you never loved me and I'm not going to allow you to punish me ever again.

Good night and goodbye.



II

Wednesday, May 15th, 1985

Michael Skyler finished ringing up his last customer at the Piggles & Wiggles grocery store around three in the afternoon. It seemed an eternity since he'd moved to this small town. Away from his parents. On his own. In those two years, he'd only managed to build two lasting relationships. One with his drug dealer and the other with a girl he'd met when he first arrived. A girl he'd thought for sure was the one. A girl who'd given him every signal she could to let him know the interest was mutual. A girl who had, instead, set him up with one of her friends, sabotaged that relationship and begun dating his pot dealer immediately afterward.

He could never make sense of that situation. He was a smart, decent, good looking guy. Maybe he was too pretty for her, or the other women he found himself attracted to. Maybe he wasn't handsome enough. His current station in life wasn't helping his confidence at all and, for the time being, his personality wasn't cutting it either. As the days dragged on, he found it harder and harder to come up with reasons not to pack up and leave. To just go anywhere else.

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He turned in his smock and punched the clock, said a half-hearted goodbye to his fellow workers and walked to the sliding doors up front as fast as he could without looking like he was making a break for it.

It was a beautiful day out. Middle of the week. Farmers market. Lovely people from all over the county coming to town to shop for freshly grown produce and clog the parking lots.

His friends, Vinnie and Lissa, waited outside by the coin operated pony ride. "Spare a quarter?" Vinnie yelled as Michael exited the building, giving him a jump.

"Why? Are you a cop?" he asked. "If you are, that's entrapment." Michael and Vinnie bumped fists, laughing.

Michael tousled Lissa's hair and she blushed slightly at his touch. "Knock it off, Mikey," she said, trying to get it so the layers fell just right again.

"Yeah, watch your hands, pal," Vinnie said, mussing Lissa's hair even more.

"What are you even doing here, dude?" Michael asked. "Doesn't the world usually come to you?"

"This one," Vinnie said, pointing over at Lissa who just about had her hair back in order. "I tried to convince her to take a day off from making sure you don't trip and fall on your way back to my place, but she wouldn't hear a word of it. Then I started wondering what my woman's really up to. How's my woman making sure you're okay?"

"Your woman?" Lissa coughed and looked away as Vinnie grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to his side. For a moment, Michael stopped looking around and watched the two of them, fighting each other off like bad magnets and, finally, meshing together. He stood there, his eyes lost, as he watched them kiss. His dealer and the one that got away.

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They were definitely stoned.

Vinnie's rough good looks were the polar opposite of Lissa's flawless skin and face. A face she covered with more makeup every day. Michael still remembered exactly what she felt like—how she tasted—during that brief moment when she'd helped him ruin the only serious relationship he'd ever known in this town, though he'd never tell her that, not even now. If his transient life as an Army brat had taught him anything, it was that nothing was permanent. Everything, especially relationships, died or went away at some point.

"What's going on with you?" Vinnie asked as Michael snapped back to reality. "You better not be remembering this for later."

Lissa swatted him on the shoulder. "Sorry, Mike. He's too involved with himself to think about what he's saying." She was the kind of girl who looked you straight in the eye when she talked to you, even if she knew it wasn't a good idea. And when she talked around past hurt, it felt like she was digging it up and bringing it back to life.

Michael shrugged, laughing. "It's all right, Lissa. We can mess around behind his back tomorrow."

"Like I worry about you two." Vinnie chuckled as he patted them both on the shoulder. "I know my woman's good. You two already had your moment in the sun. Spent it under a magnifying glass, as I recall. Up in flames in five minutes. Both of you, too scared to take it past a fairy tale. As hot as all the hand holding would get me, I'm not going to waste any brain cells daydreaming about it."

"Why do I hang out with you, again?" Michael asked, letting his hand drift obviously toward Lissa's ass as Vinnie smacked it away and grinned. "Oh, yeah. Brain cells. You ready to waste a few more?"

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Vinnie grabbed Lissa's hand and they followed Michael around to the grocery store's back lot to light up.

"You've got to knock that shit off," Vinnie said, as they reached the empty lot. He pulled out his metal pipe. "One of these days I'm not going to stop your wandering hands." He pulled out a wrinkled baggie from his back jeans pocket and loaded the weed into the bowl. "Then what do you think is going to happen?"

Lissa punched Vinnie lightly on the arm. "Stop it. Come on."

He pushed the pipe over to Michael and he grabbed it, checking the surrounding area again, just to be sure. He was about to become paranoid, though garbage pick-up for the week had been taken care of early the previous morning. He took a huge drag and held it in for as long as he could before he started choking and coughing.

"Then," Michael said between hacks. "Then you're going to see what it looks like when your woman isn't faking it."

Lissa blushed and swatted them. "Both of you guys. What the fuck? I'm sitting right here."

Vinnie laughed, rubbing Lissa's back. "Yeah. There you are, buttercup." They passed the pipe back and forth between themselves. When they'd had enough, Vinnie snuffed out the pipe, scraped the screen, and hid the pipe and baggie back in his pants. "We should get the fuck out of here. Go back to my place."

"Why?" Lissa asked, looking around at the cigarette butts on the ground and the freshly emptied green industrial waste containers. "It's nice back here. Quiet."

Vinnie and Michael looked at each other, trying not to laugh. Lissa swatted them. "It is. It's peaceful. No one comes back here. We could just chill for a bit."

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“Christ, Lissa.” Vinnie coughed. “It smells like week-old ass back here. Seriously? There’s nothing but rotting garbage. This shit is supposed to heighten your sense of smell, not make it worse. Besides, there could be cops around.” He looked over at Michael. “And you’re not going to meet any women hiding out back here, dude. Unless the town hires a hot single garbage lady. I’m sure that’ll happen someday. This brooding bullshit is why your poor, lonely ass hasn’t gotten laid since Virginia left.”

Michael looked at Vinnie with disdain. “Man, don’t talk about Virginia. That’s still...”

Lissa ignored Vinnie’s remarks. She didn’t want to talk about that situation either. Not ever. “I can’t smell anything,” she said. “I mean, I can, but I can’t smell anything bad.” She stopped for a moment, looking around, confused. “I mean, I can smell bad things. I just can’t smell anything bad right now. I mean, I don’t want to... I mean, leave Mikey alone.” She snorted, giggling. “Fuck you guys.”

“Seriously, dude. You’ve got to get yourself something,” Vinnie said as he continued to look around. Like he really expected a bust to go down. “The mourning period is over, man. There’s more to life than pretending you’re me.”

Lissa shoved Vinnie lightly and he smacked her arm as she gave Michael’s hand a loving, affectionate stroke.

“The day I start pretending I’m you, Vinnie, promise you’ll kill me.” Michael gave Lissa’s shoulder a quick rub and she melted into it with a sigh.

“Yeah, yeah, Mikey. You’re hilarious. But seriously, dude. Maybe you and that bitch—whose name I’m apparently forbidden to speak—had a real thing, but it didn’t even last a month. And she dumped you. For good reason, I might add.”

Lissa cringed.

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“And you haven’t seen her since,” Vinnie continued. “She moved on long ago. You should too. You get attached to shit way too quickly.” Lissa bumped him with her shoulder, giving him a stern look. “But, seriously, you need to find someone else to fill that gap, man.” Vinnie rambled on. “You’re the only reason you’re still alone, and the ‘poor me’ act got stale a good while ago. I guarantee you, the minute you hook up with someone else, you’ll never think about her, or my woman, again. Except in the shower.” Lissa nudged him harder and he shoved her to the side.

“Yeah, okay. Where do you want to go, Vinnie?” Michael asked. “What do you want to do that’s going to help me move on? What will shut you up?” They walked back out front. “We should go check out the snack section.”

“At the grocery store?” Vinnie and Lissa replied in unison. “Where you work?”

“Dude,” Vinnie said. “You just got out of there, man. They know you. You’re totally fucking high. Not a good idea.”

“Fuck that. They can’t fire me when I’m not working. Can they?” They giggled. Like idiots. Their eyes bloodshot and their words slurring. “Where else are we going to go?”

“Farmers market, dude,” Lissa piped up, excited. “The food there is good for you. And it’s good for you, too.”

“I hear it’s also good for you,” Vinnie said, looking at Michael and smirking. “Plus, it’s supposed to be good for you.”

“Fuck you. We’re going.” Lissa smacked Vinnie on the shoulder and marched away, motioning for everyone to follow. Vinnie hopped to immediately. In his stoned daze, Michael stood like a statue for a moment that seemed like an hour, as he watched them walking away. Vinnie grabbing at Lissa’s ass and Lissa swatting at him while she threw back apologetic

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glances. When Michael first met her, she never looked at him, or touched him, with anything but an openness he mistook for attraction. She never cut off her stare—never apologised for being who she was or doing what she did. Those memories, and the onset of the high, were threatening to turn his walk into a limp.

They reached the farmers market in five minutes. By then, their eyes looked less glassy and the buzz had evened itself out. The food, all of it, still looked much more delicious than it probably was.

“Yummy.” Lissa quietly squealed and ran off with Vinnie. Michael looked around, feeling in his pockets for how much money he had on him. A few bucks in quarters. No bills. Getting stoned on other people’s stashes made him extremely frugal. Not only did he save on weed cost, he also constantly forgot to visit the bank and take out any of his directly-deposited cheque to spend on little things like food and drink. Circumstances had to get desperate before he’d remember to withdraw a dime.

He walked slowly around the market, lightly touching the fruits and vegetables. He could smell them with his fingers. And they talked to him, telling him how long they’d been waiting for him to show up and eat them. To suck all the juice out from within them. To just do that, please. It would make them oh so happy. He smiled like an imbecile as he made his rounds, and the individual vendors didn’t appreciate his fondling of their products as much as the produce did.

“Dude, the peaches are over here,” Vinnie called out from several tables away. He pointed at the fruit, but he also had a perverted look in his eyes as he glanced around at the ladies shopping. His eyebrows bobbed as he made a lewd gesture

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with his tongue. Lissa batted him on the head and he scowled as they disappeared farther into the mix.

“Fucking guy,” Michael mumbled to himself as he wandered over to the peach stand. On his way there, he noticed the women. Like Vinnie had primed him to not be able to avoid. Like he was so good at. Most of them were older women he’d never seen before and didn’t look forward to seeing again. The kind of women who’d, possibly, had a day a long, long time ago. Women who were long past their expiration date with regard to looks and personality. Possibly with regard to life itself. The odour of funeral home perfume was overwhelming.

As he sidled up to the peach stand, the smell got a little better. The fruits’ aroma filled the humid air and, for a moment, he lost himself in it. The scents were incredibly stimulating, and he felt the saliva pool in his mouth, which helped to remove the cotton.

“How much?” he asked the head of thinning grey hair with a bun attached to what he assumed was a woman.

“For each or for a dozen?” the old woman replied, looking him up and down with loathing.

“Just one,” he said. She told him the price and he pulled a quarter out from his pocket, flipping it to her as he took a bite. “Mmm, delicious,” he remarked, looking directly into her eyes. She turned away, disgusted at the implication. A giant, stoned smile broke out across his face. He couldn’t remember rejection feeling so good.

Turning around, he bumped into another, much younger, woman who was in the process of deciding what to put in her still-empty basket. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said, swallowing hard to get the words out and the peach down at the same time.

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“Me?” she asked, looking up at him hopefully. Puzzling over his expression for a second and looking back down.

In the moment she looked at him, He could see she wasn't much older than he was—certainly not a “ma'am”—and he felt foolish. Or maybe it was just the weed. She still stood in front of him, combing through the peaches, as he fought to come up with a suitable apology, but his mind had lost track.

She looked as though she had a decent figure, though the long sleeved sack-cloth dress she wore made it hard to tell anything more than she wasn't fat. She wore a babushka that covered her right eye and light orange hair fell out from inside it, spilling down the sides of her neck scarf. As he stared at her profile, he realised she was actually quite beautiful. Perhaps the most stunning woman he'd ever seen. Her lips were a natural soft pink that blended seamlessly into the white of her skin, and her exposed eye was wide, reflecting the sunlight like a mirror. Her nose wasn't too big or too small. And the freckles from the sun peppered her face in exquisite patterns. The more he looked, the more he became sure she was the most stunning woman in the world. Or maybe it was just the weed.

“My God, are you beautiful,” he said under his breath. And then he snapped out of it. “I'm sorry,” he blurted out. In the absence of anything clever that might have come to mind, were he not stoned out of his gourd, that would have to do. Anything was better than nothing if you were trying to get attention. She looked at him with her exposed eye and waited. She looked down again as he continued. “I didn't mean to imply that—What I mean is, I didn't mean I thought you were—”

“Yes? Which didn't you mean? That you find me attractive or elderly?” she asked, shooting him a sideways

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glance, the left side of her lip turning up slightly as her eye looked down.

“No,” he said, choking and stuttering again, blushing with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to—I mean, I didn’t say that...” How was it possible he was still single? Gosh, who knew?

“Look.” She rested her basket on the table, upsetting the peaches. Turning her eye to him and brushing her hair away from it, she smiled at him with pity. “I’m just here to shop. I don’t mean to be anti-social, but I’m out here on my own today.” She paused, considering her words. “Because I want to be out here on my own. I don’t mean to be rude. I believed, perhaps, you remembered me from yesterday. But how could you? That was foolish of me, I suppose. Though the compliment is appreciated and...” Her eye looked off to the side as her face soured with embarrassment. “Your apology is accepted, with my thanks.” She smiled at him gracefully, doing an unconscious bow and nodding her head in assumed agreement that their interaction was over.

His hand shook as she looked away, and he steadied it by jamming it into his pocket, making him look even more young and inexperienced than his act already had. He couldn’t remember seeing her before, much less yesterday.

She was definitely new in town.

“Look,” he said, and then paused, mortified that he had begun his first sentence by mimicking her. She didn’t seem to notice or take offence as she returned his gaze. The half-smile came back to her face as she waited for him to continue, but it began to wane. “I’m not very good at this. So—”

“Good at what?” she asked, batting her eyelashes. He hadn’t noticed those before. They were just as lovely as every other part of her, and it put him even more ill at ease.

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“This whole thing. Talking to someone I don’t know.”

“Then perhaps there’s a reason.” She began to look away.
“Strangers are strangers for a reason.”

“But we’ve shared so much time together. It’s been... minutes now. Doesn’t that disqualify me as a stranger?”

“No.” She had a bemused look on her face. Something he said had struck gold. Or had, at least, broken ground.

“Strangers are strangers because not everyone is necessarily meant to know everyone else,” the girl continued. “The fact that you don’t remember me. That has to mean something.”

“Yes, but—”

She held up a finger and pressed it to his lips, quickly withdrawing it. Her finger smelt of apricots and he could imagine it tasting like one too. “You’re a good looking boy. I’m certain you have plenty of young women to choose from. You seem nice enough. There’s no need to complicate your life with more variables.” She paused a moment. “Michael, was it?”

“Yes, Michael,” he quickly replied. “Michael Skyler. How do you know me? I mean, pleased to meet—”

“Because then things can get really strange, really fast,” the girl said, ignoring his question. “And you don’t need that, do you? You don’t want that, do you?”

But, in that moment, he did. He wanted to tear the babushka from her head, drape her beautiful orange hair over her shoulders and kiss her until their bodies fossilised. “What’s your name?” was the only thing he could think to say as his eyes betrayed his waking dream state.

“Well, it’s not ma’am.” He looked down in shame and confusion. She tipped up his chin, smiling bashfully. “You may call me ‘miss’.”

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“Missy? Is that your name? What’s it short for? Melissa?” He was like a dog on a meaty bone. Had he ever felt this desperate before? Who was this girl? A random person he happened to bump into, or someone he’d met and then immediately forgotten? A customer from the grocery store? Maybe Vinnie was right. Maybe he needed to get his head back into the game. There were plenty of gorgeous, interesting women all over the world, and a good subsection of them resided right here in his home town.

She drew her finger away from him and pulled her babushka down tighter, covering her right eye and pushing back her hair. “No,” she said, her voice trembling. “That’s not my name. ‘You may call me miss’ was a joke. Not a good one, I suppose. But—” She stopped, trying to calm herself, and backed away. “Please, don’t ever call me that.” The look on her face went from mild amusement and politeness to shock and horror. “Please, leave me alone.” She turned to walk away.

He reached out to touch her shoulder. “Look, I don’t know what I said that upset you, but it was an honest mistake. I just wanted to get to know you.”

“Why?” she asked, her tone angry and hurt. “What do you want from me? Why are you playing games with me?” Her voice rose as she continued. “What did you believe would happen next? Did you believe we’d fall in love and get married and have kids and grow old together?”

“Jesus, no, I—” he said, trying to interrupt her. She wasn’t finished yet.

“What did you believe this would lead to? Love? Sex? Whatever you want from me, or from life, I’m not interested in providing it. I tried to be good. I tried to be polite, but you wouldn’t let me, would you? Now, please, leave me alone. I don’t have time for you or your games. And I don’t know who

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put you up to this, but it's not funny, so you can quit pretending you're stoned."

She threw a wad of bills on the market table, stuffed a handful of peaches into her basket and stormed off. He saw a tear well in her left eye. He wondered what her right eye was doing as he watched her march off into the distance. The look of disbelief on his face was comical.

"You still got it, kid," Vinnie said, punching Michael in the back of the shoulder. He shrugged it off as he watched her push her way through the crowd. Hoping against hope she would turn back around and look at him.

"Jesus, Vinnie, shut up." Lissa turned to Michael, snickering. "Sorry, buddy. Was she the one?"

Michael turned around, glaring at them. "Yeah, maybe. You don't know? I thought you two knew everything." Looking around, he could see his attempt at street pick-up had drawn an audience. "Let's get out of here."

He walked away, dropping his half-eaten peach to the ground.

"Seriously, what the fuck was that?" Vinnie asked. He and Lissa were amused and in awe of the sheer coldness with which the girl had publicly rejected him.

"Totally, man," Lissa said. "Forget about her. She seemed like a real bitch."

They walked away, Lissa and Vinnie rubbing at Michael's head in consolation. "Poor guy. Don't worry. There's more out there like her," Lissa said.

Michael smacked their hands away, looking embarrassed and disturbed. "You guys are my friends? She thought I remembered her. From yesterday. What did that mean?"

"Maybe you're misremembering a few moments ago, dude," Vinnie said. "Or you forgot about yesterday. She's

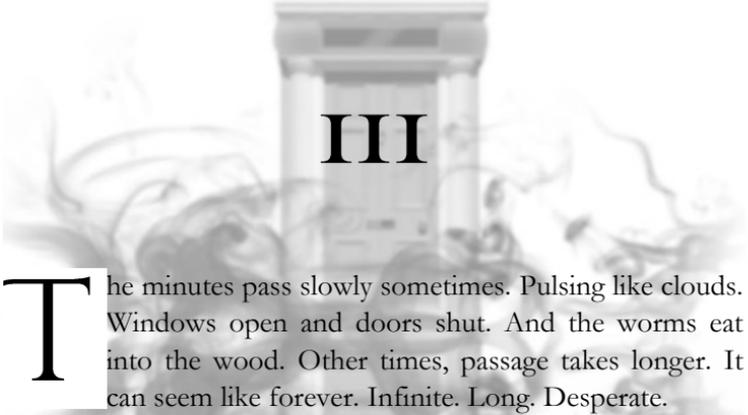
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probably a customer from the grocery store. How can you remember all of them?”

Michael chuckled. “I think I’d remember her. But you’re right. I should just let it go. Maybe she was a little too dramatic.”

“You think?” Vinnie and Lissa replied.

The three of them decided they should get back to the lot behind the grocery store as soon as humanly possible.



III

The minutes pass slowly sometimes. Pulsing like clouds. Windows open and doors shut. And the worms eat into the wood. Other times, passage takes longer. It can seem like forever. Infinite. Long. Desperate.

And sometimes you just need to let go. Relax. Inhale. Hold. Let the poison enter your system and rest in the bronchioles. Feel it make the pain go away. And release. Sit down. Rest. Close your eyes. Open them again. Start to remember what it feels like to be human and begin to form words. Turn those words into sentences. Hope that the nonsense coming out from your mouth makes sense to someone—anyone—except just you. And really speak.

“Dude.” Vinnie laughed, smacking Michael on the back of the head. “You okay? You’re talking gibberish.” Lissa sat behind Michael on the ground, massaging his shoulders. “I got my best girl on you. I mean, on your case. I mean, helping you out, buddy. You all right?”

Michael’s eyes opened slowly, his mouth hanging loose and his lower lip bobbing with every vigorous thrust of Lissa’s thumbs into his upper back. “Oh, shit. Yeah. What happened?”

Lissa rubbed him once more, rolled the sides of his neck between her hands, letting her touch linger, and pushed him forward. “You took one hit and you went down, Mikey.”

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“Damn,” he said, pulling at his lip, trying to feel the numbness. “Did I pass out?”

“I think you just tripped and fell. Maybe Lissa needs to hold your hand on your way back from work after all.” Vinnie took another hit and sat down, putting his arm around Lissa. “You wouldn’t stop bitching the whole way back from the market.”

“I think I got a bad peach.”

Lissa and Vinnie laughed. “Maybe two at the same time,” Vinnie said. “That bitch you hit on was fucking crazy, man.”

And Michael remembered the scene at the market. The beautiful girl dressed in bargain basement clothes, pale as ivory and her head half covered like the phantom of some opera. She really did have a beautiful face. But he had said something that made it turn ugly. Or maybe it had been ugly the whole time. He’d been pretty high when he met her. Sometimes the weed could take a singular feature of a face and extrapolate from there and, the next thing you knew, what you thought you saw was really more of what you wanted to see than what was actually there. Like looking through beer-goggles, but without the blur.

“I don’t know, man.” Michael scratched at his head, motioning for the pipe and taking a quick drag. “She was so cute. I think I fell in love with her, at least for a second. Or just with the idea of her. And then she went crazy on me. I thought she was going to rip my head off.”

“It’s all right, Mikey.” Lissa stroked his arm with her free hand. “There are plenty more out there. I’ve never seen her before, and I’ve lived here my whole entire life. Maybe she’s new. She didn’t look older than us.” Lissa’s gaze drifted. They were all floating on a high again. “That’s the problem with

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after high school. It's just over and everyone goes their own way. How are you supposed to keep track of everyone?"

"Maybe you're not supposed to," Vinnie said. "Maybe high school is just a place where they fuck with you until you're old enough to know better and then they set you free and you have to figure it all out for yourself. And the only help you get is Math and Science and shit."

"What?" Michael asked, giggling. "You're not making sense, dude."

"Think about it, man." Vinnie was resolute in his opinion, though his eyes were saying he wasn't even sure what he'd just said. "There's the whole world and there's that box they force you to live in until you're all grown up. And then they just kick you to the kerb and say 'All right, man. You're on your own. Good luck'. And you're like 'What?' and they don't even have to answer you anymore. It's fucked up."

"You're fucked up," Lissa chimed in.

"I'm just saying. It's a cheap trick." Vinnie took another hit. "They do it to us on purpose. That's the really fucked up part. Maybe they do it because it was what their parents did to them. That doesn't make it right, though. At some point the circle has to be broken. The chain has to break, man."

"I don't know," Michael said. He grabbed for the pipe, but Vinnie was still huffing on it. "Like I said, she turned me on like an animal." He paused, looking up. Questioning his words. "I mean, she turned on me like an animal."

"I think you meant both of those things, dude." Vinnie passed him the pipe. "She could probably tell. Chicks can sense that, man." He squeezed Lissa's shoulder as she threw him a disgruntled look. "They can see those rape-eyes and they know to run, instinctively."

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“Fuck you, man. What are you talking about? Rape-eyes? There’s no such thing.”

“You know what I mean, man. You were practically drooling all over her.”

“Dude, you weren’t even there until the end.”

“Guilty.” Vinnie held up his hands in mock-defeat. “But I could tell what happened before. You let me know if I’m wrong.”

“Vinnie, come on, baby,” Lissa pleaded.

Vinnie smacked her hand away from him. “No. Wait, Lissa. He needs to hear this, okay?” She gave up and looked away. “Here’s how it went down. You were high off your ass. You bumped into this girl. She was remotely nice to you, probably in the most sterile, polite way possible.” Lissa tugged at his arm again and he shrugged her off, threatening another slap. “Hold on. And then you went into your ‘I’m so shy’ routine and she bought it for a few seconds. Then you got brave and said something totally fucked up. Not because you’re fucked up, or you’re a bad guy, but because you thought you felt something. You know how you can always ‘feel’ shit? Like relationships are all mystical? Of course, she was straight as a line on the fucking highway and she totally didn’t get where you were coming from. And she ran as fast as she could the minute she realised all you wanted to do was take her back to your place, throw her on the bed and slam her. Home run. Tell me I didn’t nail that shit.”

“You didn’t nail that shit,” Michael and Lissa replied almost at the same time, cracking each other up.

“Yeah, but,” Vinnie interrupted, holding up both hands in protest. “I was pretty fucking close. You’ve got to admit. Am I right? You tell me how it went down and you’ll see. I’m closer than you think. I have the outsider’s perspective.”

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“Really?” Michael asked, looking over at Lissa and back at Vinnie.

“Tell the tale, my man.” Vinnie laid his head back in his hands, awaiting his glorious vindication.

“I bumped into this girl, and I was high off my ass.” Vinnie nudged Lissa, his eyes saying ‘see?’. “And she was very polite. I mean, extremely polite. And she seemed warm. I kind of fumbled over my words when I talked to her. I called her ‘ma’am’.” Vinnie and Lissa winced. “But she was cool about it. She already knew my name and she said I could call her ‘miss’. She never got around to giving me her real name. She was actually really humble and decent. She was witty, to a degree. Well, maybe not, but she was good at being interesting enough. She just wasn’t in the market. I mean, she was at the market, but not in the market. You know what I’m saying. Then I called her ‘miss’ and she went completely insane. That’s about the time you two showed.”

“She asked you to call her ‘miss’ and you called her ‘miss’? That’s it?” Lissa asked, staring off into space. “Really?”

“No shit,” Michael replied. “I don’t know what the problem was. Like I said, she told me to call her that. It was an inside joke between us, I thought.”

Vinnie moaned. “Shit, man,” he said, scratching his head and looking into the sky. “I was totally off the mark on that one. Sorry, dude.”

“Yeah. What are you going to do?” Michael grabbed the pipe. Taking a huge hit off it, he stared into the sky with his friends. “The clouds are really cool looking today.”

“Yeah,” Vinnie and Lissa replied.

“Maybe I’m overthinking the whole thing, anyway. I’ve never seen her before, that I can recall. She could be

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married. Who could say? I just thought we had a connexion there for a second.”

“Busted. You fucking asshole.” Vinnie still looked into the clouds. “I told you you were all up in your fucking head with that romance shit.”

“It’s not that, man. Just, sometimes you know. You know?” Neither Vinnie nor Lissa replied. They weren’t listening anymore. “I thought, maybe, she was the one. Or the next best thing. She felt that way. So real. So strong.”

Lissa groaned. “Jesus, Mikey. Just shut the fuck up about this girl. This person. You don’t remember her. We don’t know her. And, from what I could see, she wasn’t all that great looking. I could introduce you to plenty of girls that make her look like dog food, if you’re finally ready to get over what’s-her-face.”

“No, you didn’t see her up close,” Michael replied. His eyes remained focussed on the clouds.

“I saw enough. She’s no prize. And from what I could tell, listening to her embarrass you in public, she’s a real cunt.”

Vinnie’s head snapped back down. He quickly looked over at Michael and back at Lissa. His mouth was agape. “Oh my God. Lissa.” He giggled. “You sure you don’t know this girl?”

“Of course I don’t, asshole,” she replied, bumping him with her shoulder.

“Ooh,” Vinnie said. “She hates the C word.”

“Yeah, I do.” She grabbed the pipe and took a drag. “But fuck that bitch if she’s going to mess with my boys.” She looked over at Michael, smiling. “You can do better, Mikey. You deserve better than that... that thing. Whatever it was. She talks weird, anyway.”

“How so?” Michael asked.

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“I don’t know. She’s like a school-mom or something, you know?”

“You mean a schoolmarm?”

“Whatever. Fucking, like, she didn’t even swear when you did whatever you did to piss her off.”

“Yeah,” Vinnie added. “That is kind of fucked up.”

Michael looked at the ground. “I don’t know. Maybe we just swear too much.”

“Please,” Lissa said. “We talk normal. She talks like my fucking parents. Freaks out like them too. Probably thinks she’s better than us. Whatever. Anyway, she doesn’t fit. You can do better. Some girl doesn’t like you? Fuck that bitch. You don’t even know her.”

“I love you, baby,” Vinnie said with a giggle, giving Lissa a kiss on the cheek that made its way to her lips as she grudgingly reciprocated.

Michael looked back at the sky, both turned on and disgusted by their display of affection. Lissa. Always telling him he deserved better. Just not her. “Fuck it. You’re right. I do need to meet somebody new.” He looked over at Lissa, who ceased locking lips with Vinnie the moment she heard the words: “Introduce me to some of your friends.”

Vinnie rolled his eyes as Lissa’s face broke out into a gigantic smile. “My Mikey’s back!”



IV

Michael woke up the next morning in his bed. Alone. The phone was ringing, but it only made him want to sleep more. Looking at the clock on his nightstand, he noticed it was nine in the morning. His shift didn't start for another two hours. He let the call go to the answering machine.

His voice came on, tinny and weak. "This is Mike. I'm either not home, or I'm not by the phone. Leave your name and number and I'll probably get back to you."

"Hey, Mikey," Lissa's voice rang out, tinny and full of life. "Wakey, wakey. Are you still asleep or are you ignoring me? Vinnie said you were just high, but I think you meant what you said yesterday, so I talked to this girl we know. Her name's Justine. You met her a month ago at that one guy's party. You remember? Anyway, she's super smart and she's not all materialistic, so she won't be a drag about the fact you're working a cashier's job to save for school. I'm going to meet her later today, so, unless she's had a major attitude shift or her face got freakishly mutilated in some weird accident, if you don't answer the phone and tell me 'no', I'm putting in a good word for you. And, oh yeah, bonus. She's super-hot. Plus, she gets high so she'll fit in right away. As long as she's not a slut-bag and tries to hit on Vinnie. Anyway. This message is running long. Okay, Mikey. I'm giving you three. Two. One...

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Too late. You're meeting her tonight after work. I already know she's free. It's good to have the real you with us again, baby. Vinnie and I both love you. Kisses. Bye."

He rolled over onto his face and replayed the message as soon as the tape stopped recording. So this was what it felt like to move on. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe he should reserve that judgement for after he was fully awake. In any event, the words 'super' and 'hot', when used to describe any girl, by another girl, were extremely subjective. If this girl, Justine, whom he couldn't remember for the life of him, was good friends with Lissa, 'super-hot' could mean her eczema was only slightly noticeable and her breath could be worse. Then again, his sleep-fogged brain prodded him, it could also mean she was a knockout like Lissa. The really good looking ones did seem to hang out together, usually. Of course, they also kept a few girl friends around to make sure they were the best looking of the bunch.

It was a crapshoot either way. There was no way to know until he saw her. And if she passed that test, and was interesting enough to talk to for hours, he'd still have to make the grade from her perspective. Why did things have to be so damned complicated?

After a quick shower and unnecessary shave, he got dressed and headed out on his walk to work. He had an old Chevy sitting in his parking spot in the apartment's lot, but he never drove it these days. Virginia had insisted he buy it to drive her around, but there was no point wasting good money on gas when you lived a twenty minute walk from where you worked. He patted the car as he passed it and noticed one of Virginia's baubles lying on the front seat. He stopped, opened up the car and proceeded to search it for remnants of her existence. When he'd found them all, he walked them to the

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dumpster. No sense in letting the one woman in this world who definitely didn't want to have anything to do with him reach out from the past and ruin any future relationships he might get himself involved in. Lissa's sentiment, though misdirected, was right on the mark. Fuck that bitch.

He resumed his walk to work, cutting through another housing complex, nicer than his. It was essentially two long buildings, each made up of multiple condominiums, divided by gauche and gaudy blue rectangular wooden garden boxes filled with fake blue sand and plastic flowers. 'Mexican Chic' everyone who didn't live there called it. Not because there was anything wrong with Mexicans. Nobody in town would know one if they saw one. The general assumptions, drawn from endless hours of pointless Spanish language television watching, were that they had incredibly poor taste and the women were ravishing. Probably neither was true, but there's nothing more comforting than a good stereotype when you're too lazy to think for yourself.

As he strolled along the edge of the blue flower garden, he looked at the condos lining both sides of the walkway. The one thing they had done right was put in blue English doors. There was something calming about them. Something he loved. Something that made him feel at peace. Something he needed before the first customer of the day loudly reminded him that he couldn't bag a gallon of milk on top of a carton of eggs before he had the chance not to. They reminded him of a place he'd like to be on the inside too. Home. Wherever, or whatever, that was.

As he neared the last quarter of the complex, he noticed a woman approaching him from the opposite direction. She was dressed in a long sleeved light jacket that started at the neck and extended down to her ankles, and she wore a dark black

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babushka that covered the right side of her face. His own face went white as he walked, noticing the distinctly orange hair falling out from underneath the head scarf and hoping to God she didn't look up.

For a brief moment, he slipped off into his own world, as if that might make him less visible. In his mind's eye, she walked toward him and looked up. Recognising him, she undid her jacket, revealing a slender body in a sheer cotton dress, and removed the babushka from her head, showing her full face to him and smiling. She greeted him with her arms wrapped around his neck and gently brushed his lips with hers. Teasing at them with her tongue. The soft warmth of her apricot-scented breath moistening his lips as they kissed deeply and passionately. She tried to explain about the day before. He would hear nothing of it, but she said she was sorry anyway and could he ever forgive her? As she spoke those words, her mouth and tongue explored his neck, her hands opening his shirt and rubbing at his trousers. Then, to show him her true regret over their unfortunate meeting the previous day, in a way words never could, her mouth worked its way down his body.

He snapped out of it as he accidentally bumped into her again.

"I'm sorry. Excuse me," she said as she moved past him, not looking up or back.

"Totally my fault, ma'am," he replied without thinking, wincing immediately.

She stopped and turned on her heels. "What is it with this town and the 'ma'am' nonsense?" Her left eye opened wide as she recognised him. "Oh, my Lord." She groaned, cupping her mouth with her hands. "Look," she said, approaching him. "About yesterday. I owe you an apology."

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Remembering Vinnie's comment about rape-eyes, he fought to keep the fantasy that just left his mind from creeping back in.

"It's no big deal," he said. "I was out of line. You wanted to be left alone, and you were right. I don't know what I expected to happen if we got to know each other. I didn't mean to intrude." Then he lied through his teeth. For what reason, he couldn't understand, even as it was happening. "And I feel really bad I didn't remember you until after you left. No worries."

He turned around and walked away as she hurried to catch him. He felt her tug on his shirt and the daydream came flooding into his head again. Keep it in check, old boy, he told himself. Remember, she's no prize. One of your friends pointed that out to you not all that long ago. Just keep pretending you believe that's true.

"Wait," she begged, like a little girl. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. It was terrible of me. I lost control." He turned around to face her. She was still fully clothed. That part of the fantasy could safely be put to bed.

"Yeah, I guess you did," he replied with a warm, genuine laugh. "Are you sure it's not me that owes you the apology?"

"No," she replied with a smile. Her smile was beautiful. He hadn't been wrong about that. Her teeth were slightly yellow, but they still sparkled. She wasn't a beauty queen, but the truly alluring women in this life rarely were. "I was. When you called me that name, I just—It's my issue. I shouldn't have gotten so close to it with a stranger. One letter away."

"What do you mean?"

"Miss. I asked you to call me 'miss'. That was rude, to begin with. And asking you to call me that, with all the noise around us, and the people talking. It was. It was

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understandable you mistook what I said. My name isn't 'miss'. It's not that." She looked down with her eye, searching. "And you're Michael, yes?"

"Yes, I am." He smiled back at her. Time wasn't going anywhere soon. "It's a pleasure to formally meet you, anyway." He paused, considering, and then just said what came next. "You must have a beautiful name. It would suit you."

She blushed and her smile turned slightly pained. His face blanched. "You're spoken for, aren't you?" She didn't look back up to confirm or deny. "Oh, Jesus. I feel like an idiot. I'm totally. I would never. I had no idea. I just assumed you were single. For what reason, I couldn't tell you." He smiled again, trying his best to play it off as a light-hearted joke. "Maybe it was just hope. Springing eternal, as it does."

"No, it's not that," she replied, putting her left index finger up. "I'm not taken. It's just—" She lowered her head farther. "I'm not what you believe. You're very sweet to say that. You're not the first." She stopped then, to hold up her other hand. "I'm not bragging. I mean that in—I didn't mean to imply I believe I'm something special."

"Who's to say you aren't?" He reached out to touch the hair on the left side of her face and she startled.

"Please, don't?" she asked, a slight note of panic in her voice as she brushed his hand away. "I don't like being touched. Not by—"

"Sorry," he said, pulling back slightly. "That was presumptuous of me. I don't know what I was thinking. I just..." He held out his hands, trying to define that thing he couldn't capture with words. "I just felt like... When I saw you yesterday, I felt this connexion. And I know that sounds like a lot of baloney, and ninety-nine percent of the time you'd be one hundred percent right, but I know you've felt what I mean,

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too. Maybe not for me, but you know how sometimes, when you meet someone, it's like you already know them? You remember them, even though you've never met? I don't know how to put it correctly, but that's what I felt. That's what I feel when I look at you. I can't help it. I can stop myself from acting on it, but I can't help how I feel. Or how you make me feel. That's just the way I was made."

"You're a very sweet man," she replied. "And you remember me?" He didn't answer and she didn't look quite sure. "I doubt you could have, but you're so very kind, aren't you? You'd rather tell a lie than hurt a stranger's feelings. I don't understand it, but it's a beautiful quality."

"Just, if you take anything away from this encounter..." He moved in to frame her face with his hands. Keeping them at a safe distance. "Just remember there's someone out there who thinks you are something special. No matter what you say to him."

She laughed meekly. A smile crept over her face and he could see unfeigned joy in her exposed eye. "I remember when you paid me a similar compliment yesterday. You didn't mean to say it out loud, or for me to have heard it, and you were embarrassed when you realised I had. So, I do believe you mean it when you say—That's very sweet of you, and I would truly—"

The wind blew a little stronger, wafting pretentious blue sand out of its rectangular prison, and lifting her babushka up slightly.

In that briefest of moments, he saw the place where her right eye should have been. There was nothing there except a white patch surrounded by slightly bruised flesh. His face betrayed what he'd seen. A micro-expression of fright, invisible

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to most people's attention, but not to hers. She'd seen it too many times before.

"But perhaps not." She pouted, pulling the babushka tight. "You don't have to feel bad. I know you saw it. You don't have to pretend you didn't."

"But," he began, not knowing what to say next. What prepares you for something as unusual as that? "I didn't say anything."

"Exactly. You're a sweet young man. You are." She reached up with her left hand and pulled his face toward her, kissing him quickly on the cheek, turning around and walking away. "You're very kind. You may go now. You don't have to explain. It's all right, really."

"But I'm not..." He stuttered again, following after her. "I didn't mean anything. It just took me by surprise." She looked back at him as she continued on her way. A tear ran from her left eye. "It didn't change anything. I still want to get to know you."

"And then what?" she asked, stopping but not returning, as he slowly approached. "We'll be the best of friends? We'll lounge about and watch movies on cable television together?" She shook her head. "Look. Listen. I've been around me a lot longer than you have, so trust me when I tell you I know how this works out. And then trust me when I tell you I'm not mad at you, and I don't believe lesser of you."

"But you're—"

"I'm not normal." Her scream was hushed, but it carried the same power. The same force as if she'd yelled it from a mountain top. And it stopped him in his tracks. "And you don't know the half of it. If things did work out and you did enjoy my company when we were alone. If you could keep yourself from hating me for inviting you into a relationship

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where you feel lower than a bastard when you eventually want to leave me for some legitimate reason, you'd get sick and tired of having to explain me to your friends, and you'd feel guilty about everything. I'm doing you a favour by letting you go before I let you in. I can see in your eyes, already, you want out, but you're just too nice."

"Can I see you some time?" he asked, oblivious.

"Look, Michael. Trust me when I tell you it hurts me to do this, but I'll make this easy for you, because I truly believe you're a good person. I know from the way you didn't judge me, with your heart or your eyes, Tuesday, when you rang me up at your grocery." She walked away again, and looked over her shoulder. "Leave me alone. And stay out of my life."

"I know why you're doing this," he replied. "You don't have to do this."

"And you don't have to try so hard to make your life difficult. You just don't quit, do you? I'm trying to be a good girl. Please. Just run. While you still can. Stay away from me. Do yourself a favour."

"Yo, Mikey," Vinnie called out from the other side of the housing complex.

"Go to your friend." She whimpered, sniffing and wiping at the tear on her cheek. "You're a very nice person, but you don't know who I am, you don't know my past, and you don't want to have to live with it."

"But—"

Then she really let loose. For everyone's listening pleasure. "Go away."

"Oh, my God," Vinnie shouted as he moved toward them. "Is that the crazy bitch from yesterday?"

"You see," she said. "Already, I'm the crazy witch."

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“I never said that. He’s just a…” Michael stopped and held his arm out in Vinnie’s direction, waving him away. “He’s an insensitive jerk.”

“But he’s your friend. And he’s been your friend for a good while, yes?” He shrugged. “Then keep him. Don’t exchange your life for mine. You don’t want it. It’s a bad trade.” Her nose ran slightly and her face was streaked with tears and puffy. “Go, please? Leave me alone.”

“I just—”

“Please?” she begged. Her voice sounded strained, impassioned. Like a child calling out for her mommy. “Go.” She turned and ran back to the third blue English door from the beginning of the left side of the block. She yanked out her keys, fumbled with them for a moment, looked over at him shamefully, and entered her condo, slamming the door behind her. He noted the number: 794.

Vinnie came running up beside him as he watched the door close. “What the fuck are you doing, dude? Didn’t Lissa call you and give you the news? What are you doing trying to scam on this chick?”

Michael brushed him aside, picking up the pace. “I’ve got to get to work on time, man. Thanks for totally fucking that up for me.”

Vinnie followed after him, like a puppy. “Look, man, fuck that lady. If your original meeting didn’t slam the point home hard enough, please tell me you can see you don’t want to have anything to do with that chick, now.”

Michael’s insides boiled and his face showed it. He barely had time to make it to work and put on a happy face. So many things to think about. So many confusing signals. So much minutiae he didn’t want to have to deal with while ringing up customers and eating shit. “Look, I got the message, okay. I’ll

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be there. Just..." He looked back at Vinnie angrily as he crossed the street to the grocery store. "Fucking keep your mouth shut every once in a while. Not everything's your business."

"All right." Vinnie stepped up his pace. "I get it, dude. You're tired. You need to get stoned, and you've got to get to work." He looked around as Michael moved closer to the front entrance of the Piggles & Wiggles. "Forget about this girl, man. Seriously. You don't even know her and already you've had two major blow-out arguments. Think about how fucked up that is. Besides, do you really want to sit around and get high with Miss Manners?"

"When did it become a crime to speak properly and not fucking curse?" Michael asked. And he thought to himself, maybe, he would like to get high with Miss Manners. Or, maybe, getting high all the time wasn't solving his problems. And, maybe, he shouldn't be judging anyone by that yardstick. "She's got problems. She might have a fake eye." He motioned around his head, envisioning the babushka. "She's probably just had bad relationship issues in the past. I can relate. Kind of."

"All right, man," Vinnie said, calming down and pacing backward. "But remember tonight. Lissa's got you set up. And there are plenty of girls out there, dude, with two eyes who don't look like they came off a slab."

"Man, that's just a fucked up thing to say. Look, I'll be there, okay? I promise. And she doesn't look like a corpse. What the fuck is that even supposed to mean?"

"It means she's as white as death, man. No one should be that pale. It's unnatural. I mean, can you imagine us getting high together? Sure, she's around our age, but tell me that wouldn't start freaking you the fuck out after a while?"

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“Mike,” a voice boomed. “Time to get to work, son. Time to punch the clock.” His manager stood at the entrance with his hands at his sides, bunching his work smock in between folds of fat. “Time to get going. Come on. I’m not paying you to fuck around out here.”

“We’ll talk later.” Michael waved Vinnie off. “Tonight.”

“Cool,” Vinnie replied. “You go have fun fucking around at work.” He laughed. Stoned twenty-four hours a day, or just permanently fucked up from over-exposure.

Michael chuckled and walked through the sliding doors. “Sorry, sir,” he whispered in passing as he ran into the back room to grab his smock and punch the clock.



V

Behind the blue English door at 794 Holly Oak Drive, in the Holly Oak Condominium Association, a beautiful young woman, twenty-two years of age, slams the door shut behind her and unzips her long sleeved jacket to the sound of two boys outside arguing about something. About nothing. About her.

She presses her face against the door for a moment, imagining the cold painted wood is warm and soft and living and that it could hold her and run its fingers through her hair. Embrace her. Comfort her. Make her forget. Take her home. Paint a more beautiful future.

But it's just a door. A barricade to keep the rest of the world at bay.

She turns and presses her back against it as she slumps to the cold tiled floor, her jacket flopping open to reveal a light pastel pink blouse and blue ankle-length broomstick skirt beneath. She tucks the fabric of the skirt between her legs. False modesty. As if anyone were there to notice.

She begins to remove her babushka, looking to the left, at the mirror to the side of the door. Patting her fingers at it and pulling it down, she stops. Her hands trace over the place where a real, functioning eye once used to see a wonderful world. Perhaps, she thinks, she's the one person who wants to forget it isn't there most of all. More than anyone else. Perhaps

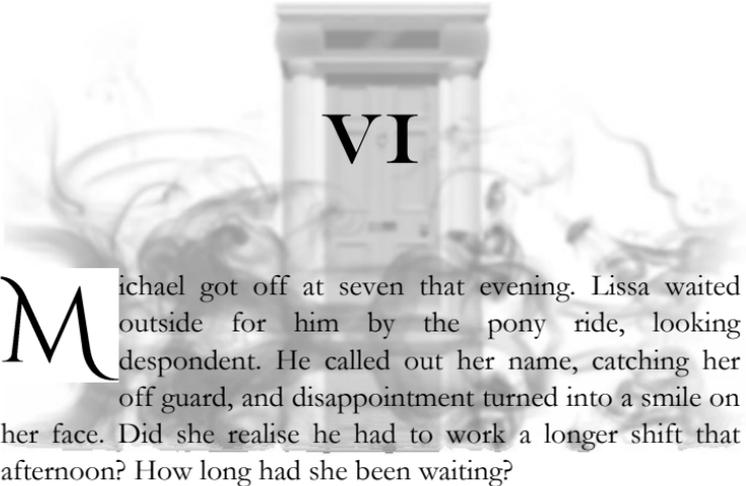
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she's the one person in the world who insists on it being a reason for her to remain unloved.

And her face. Her face is at once plain and enchanting. White as a sheet, as if completely drained of blood. Her skin cold and toxic looking. But what she can see of her face is presentable. Perhaps even attractive. She remembers a time when she used to think it was pretty. When people she loved told her so. When she felt like she still had a soul, and life was fair, and her God still loved her.

She leaves the babushka on and tears stream down her cheeks as she cries pathetically. And alone. The noise in her head becomes deafening as she lets her skirt come free and presses her hands up to shield her ears.

From somewhere deeper inside her home there comes a dulled thump, and a low groan of excruciating pain.



VI

Michael got off at seven that evening. Lissa waited outside for him by the pony ride, looking despondent. He called out her name, catching her off guard, and disappointment turned into a smile on her face. Did she realise he had to work a longer shift that afternoon? How long had she been waiting?

“Hey Mikey,” she called out, running to him and tugging at his left hand. “Are you ready?” She practically jumped in place. What women got out of matching people up, he would never understand. Not even if they explained it to him or gave him a manual. And what Lissa got out of matching him up, he could only imagine.

“Hi, Lissa.” He waved with his free hand. “How are you? Are we excited?” He talked down to her, like she was a child, but she was too baked to care.

“Of course we are.” Her eyebrows bounced up and down, up and down. This girl she so desperately wanted him to meet was going to look hideous no matter how attractive she was if Lissa didn’t quit the hard sell soon. “Believe me, you are going to love Justine. She’s so cool, and she’s into the same stuff we are. And...” She paused for a moment, looking around, as if anyone else cared about whether Mr. Michael Skyler would be getting laid any time soon. “I heard about what happened this morning. Vinnie told me.” She put both

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hands around his left, holding it and petting it. “I can’t believe that girl came after you again. I don’t understand some people. Really, I don’t. It wasn’t enough she humiliated you at the market, now she’s showing up to attack you on your way to work? Fucking crazy, man.”

“No. It wasn’t like that. And where is he? Not worried about us holding hands anymore?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, a look of concern coming over her face. Whether it was about his well-being or the well-being of her plans for him that evening, he couldn’t tell. “I mean Vinnie was just being a fucker yesterday. Who knows? What do you mean about that crazy girl?”

“It’s just...” He stretched his arms out as they walked to Vinnie’s apartment. He lived fairly close to the Holly Oak Condos. “I happened to bump into her on my way to work. She lives in Holly Oak. I saw her and, no shit, I accidentally bumped into her again, literally.”

“Oh, my Mikey. You’ve got the touch.” She giggled and looked forward, fumbling around in her jeans pockets. “You want a hit?”

“Yeah,” he replied as she passed him her glass pipe and a lighter. He took in a good couple lungfuls and blew them out. “And this is the thing. She was totally cool. I thought she was just being polite because no one else was around, but... when I told her ‘don’t worry about it’ and walked away, she, literally, begged me to stop and insisted on telling me how bad she felt about how she’d reacted. How it wasn’t my fault she was having an off day, and how totally awful she felt about it. She, literally, started to open up to me.”

“I don’t know, Mike.” She looked into the sky, kind of smiling, kind of wincing. “Are you sure that’s what happened?”

“What?” He shook his head.

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“I mean, are you ‘literally’ sure?” She laughed. Coughing up trapped smoke.

“Shut up.” He patted her on the back as she coughed. Hacking so violently her face looked horribly twisted and ugly. But no one on this earth is completely without flaws. No one is anywhere close. “She, literally, was—Fuck. She was, seriously, being the sweetest girl. A whole different person. I really liked her. She was, seriously, kind and self-deprecating and so real.”

“Seriously?” Lissa tried to smile, but the hacks still had their fangs in her.

“Yeah. I don’t know. Give me another hit.” She passed him back the pipe and he took a big drag on it as they passed the condominiums. “She lives right down there. 794.”

“Christ, Mikey.” She gasped, catching the end of her coughing fit. “What is it with this girl? You must miss Virginia. She used to treat you like shit too. Come here.” She grabbed him by the neck and pulled his head into her shoulder as they walked, stroking her fingers through his hair, looking over at the blue sand and plastic flowers and peering at the condos. “You deserve better, buddy. We miss you. And, Vinnie will never tell you this because he’s a guy and you guys are just... fucking guys. But we love you too.” Her petting became softer, more nurturing. “Don’t go back to the same thing you just shook off. It’s normal, I guess, to want to get things back to the way they were, but the way things were wasn’t good. And things can get better. They do. Okay?”

She kissed him on the top of the head and they kept walking. He, too, looked at the blue sand and the plastic flowers and at the condominium three in from the end on the left. The lights were on and they radiated through the small window above the transom. They were dimmed, and he

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wondered if she was inside. Alone. Watching TV and eating ice cream like the depressed girls did in the movies.

“Vinnie took it too far,” he added, still looking off into the distance and wondering. “He asked if she was the same crazy bitch from the market—his words—at top volume when he saw who she was. She heard that, and things went south. I can’t really blame her.”

She sighed. “Oh, Vinnie. He’s no good at keeping it in. He just worries about you too.”

“Whatever you say. And then he said some shit when we split by my work that fucking pissed me off. I spent half the day trying not to beat some biddy to death with my cash drawer.” He grunted, reaching out for the pipe. “I mean, I know she has really white skin, but so do a lot of people, and she wears that thing over her face because she’s got a fake eye. I saw it. You don’t make fun of shit like that. It’s not cool. I mean, would you be all right with someone dismissing you just because of the way you naturally look?”

“Fuck, no. That’s totally uncool. But, dude, look.” She stopped. She put one hand on each of his shoulders to square up and look him in the eye. “I’ve been seeing Vinnie for a long while, and he can be a dick sometimes. I know. But he didn’t mean that. He’s just being your friend. He loves you, man. He’ll say anything to keep you from feeling bad.” Her right hand drifted to his chin and stroked it. “He just wants you to be okay.”

“You know that’s bullshit, but I guess,” he replied, looking into her eyes. They were wide and soft. Bloodshot and sad. “He needs to be cool. I mean, can you imagine if you lost an eye and then, not only did you have to deal with that, but, I mean—Isn’t that bad enough? What does whether she’s a ‘babe’ have to do with anything? So maybe she wouldn’t be on

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any magazine covers even if she did have both peepers. Why should that matter about anybody? It was a nasty thing to say. And completely unnecessary.” He looked off and back again. “Maybe she’s the way she is because she’s had to put up with shit like that from people like him her whole life.”

“Hey.” She smacked him lightly on the cheek, turning him back around. “I told you, Vinnie isn’t like that. Don’t go saying things like that about him. He’s just looking out for you.”

“Like he looks out for you?” he asked. His face was dour. “What’s going to happen to you and Vinnie when something happens to you? What’s going to happen to you and Vinnie when things get worse?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Her hands were back on the pipe, taking a long slow hit.

“Nothing,” he said, letting out a measured breath. “Let’s just go. Maybe Justice—”

“Justine.”

“Justine will make me forget about all of it.” They walked as he grabbed for the pipe.

She held it away from him. “Not until you tell me what you meant.” She wasn’t angry. Her tone was playful, but their conversation was going down a bad road, like maybe they were, or the world was.

“I’m not going to say anything else on the subject. I’m much too in love with the idea of Jasmine—”

“Justine.”

“Justine to ruin this with my fucking mouth. Let’s go. And give me a hit, Barbie.”

She handed over the pipe and latched on to his free hand. He popped it into his mouth and lit it, while his lips kept it in place. “Your mouth isn’t going to ruin anything, you silly shit.

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And why are you calling me Barbie? I thought you stopped doing that when Virginia brought the hammer down.”

“You’re the one who wants me to forget,” he replied, holding in the hit. “So, Barbie, I’m forgetting.” She slapped him on the shoulder and took back the pipe as he exhaled. “And, since I can’t ruin anything with my mouth, this Darlene—”

“Justine. Fucker.”

“Justine better be really good looking and fun, because you’ve set the bar high, Lissa. You should have had Vinnie talk her up. Then she’d seem amazing no matter what.”

“You two are complete assholes, both of you. I can’t believe you complain about him and then say shit like that.”

“Just love me, Lissa.” He groaned, coughing. “That’s all I ask. Just love me and everything will be all right.”

“Tell that to your new girlfriend,” she said, giggling. “It won’t make anything all right.” Her tone turned sober. “It didn’t make anything better between you and Virginia.” She stopped in her tracks, looking back down the row of blue sand rectangles. “And it proves what a good friend Vinnie is. He trusts me. And he trusts you. He trusts us. Knowing what he knows. Think about that and tell me he doesn’t have your best interests at heart.”

He stopped too, looking back toward the condos. His new girlfriend. Was she referring to Justine or the girl with one eye? What was her name, again? He still hadn’t gotten it from her. “I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like he’s punishing me.” His gaze drifted back to her. “Maybe he’s punishing you too. Or maybe he just doesn’t give a shit.”

She looked at him, into his glazed eyes. “Why?” Her voice trembled as she asked the only question both of them knew the answer to already. Her left hand drifted to his face and stroked his cheek. “He’s not mean. Not like that.”

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“Maybe he’s not. But he doesn’t have Alzheimer’s either.” He stopped her hand—holding her knuckles up to his lips—and gave them a quick kiss. Her body shivered and he felt his pulse quicken. They’d better be going soon. This had turned into an awful long walk over an awful short distance. Point in fact, this had just turned awful.

She pulled his hand down with hers and kissed the top of it in return. Except she kissed it slower. Softer. Letting her lips linger and tasting his skin with her tongue.

“This,” he said, as he placed his hand around the back of her neck. “This is a mistake.” Her eyes closed and he could see them rolling around in ecstasy behind their lids. “We’re really stoned and this might seem like it’s good, but it’s not. It’s not a good idea.”

“You’re right,” she replied, letting go of his hand. “We should stick to sobriety.” She laughed, trying to forget the warmth she felt between her legs. Filling her head with pictures of Vinnie and telling herself it was all for him.

“Let’s go.” He moved closer to her. “Before some even less pleasant history repeats itself.”

“Okay.” She breathed the words out and he felt them brush against his face. “We should come.”

“Go.”

“We should go. What I said.” She stammered, looking at the ground. “Christ, am I horny. Take me home.” He grimaced as she told him to take her there. It was almost inhumane.

“You don’t want that. You may think you do, but you don’t. That’s been proven.” She looked over at him, shame painted across her face. “I’m sorry,” he added. “That wasn’t fair.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she replied. “I understand. Just... Just pretend for a second.” He looked back at her, confused.

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“Pretend I’m a girl with one eye you met at the market.” Her mouth was on his neck, kissing it and licking it, moving its way to his. Her breath heavy, wet and warm. Maybe she was just really horny. She knew exactly how to make him feel like he mattered, and remind him, in the harshest way possible, that he was still somewhere in her thoughts. Vinnie obviously wasn’t taking care of that end of the business. “Pretend I’ve got all the peaches and you really need one to get rid of the cottonmouth.” She moved at him, eyes closed, mouth open, as he turned his cheek. She pulled away slightly, a look of embarrassment in her eyes. “Oh, shit.”

“We smoked too much. And we’ve got to get to Vinnie’s place before he comes looking for us,” he said, trying to dispel the awkwardness. “And you need to direct that energy his way.”

“Yeah, because he’s so warm and cosy. Oh, my God.” She stopped, squeezing her eyes shut and opening them again, rubbing around the edges. She licked her thumb and cleaned the lipstick from Michael’s neck and cheek. She straightened out her clothes, though they weren’t compromised, and did the same for him. “That should do it. We’re good to go.” She looked around again. “Fuck.” She pulled on the pipe. “I’m so sorry, man. I don’t even know what just happened.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Are you doing this because I’m finally meeting someone else?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking down. She’d been a frightened little girl when he’d first met her, and she hadn’t changed much since. “I don’t know. I want you to be happy. Maybe it scares me. I really don’t know.”

“Me neither. Let’s just get going so it doesn’t happen again.” He grabbed the pipe and took a hefty drag. “Fuck that, let’s just promise, no matter what, it never will.”

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“Pinkie swear?” she asked, holding hers out.

“Pinkie swear,” he said, wrapping his around hers.

They repeated together, a little too loudly, “Never a-fucking-gain.” They looked into each other’s eyes, sealing the oath, and spontaneously broke into laughter. Fake as the blue sand at Holly Oak, but real enough to drive away any actual feelings.

“Yo,” a voice called from afar, and they turned to look. They were an appropriate distance away from each other now, but hadn’t they just been far too close? And how long ago was that? Damn you, marijuana.

“Hey,” Michael called out into the darkness as a figure emerged. “Vinnie?”

“Yeah, bro, what the fuck?” Michael thanked God for the poor lighting near the lot. His face froze, as did Lissa’s. This was going to be rough. “We’ve been waiting forever and here you two are hogging the spliff.” Then again, maybe they’d dodged a bullet.

“We were just talking,” Lissa said, still giggling. “About stuff.” She coughed. “And things.”

“Just as long as you weren’t talking about things and stuff,” Vinnie said, coming into focus. “You two are dangerous together.”

Lissa looked at the ground, while Michael searched for something to say. “Dude, this is totally, just—Nothing, man. We’re—”

Vinnie laughed like a schoolboy. “Jesus, you two are easy. Christ, how many decades ago did you two ‘hook up’ for five minutes? Don’t worry about me getting jealous. I’ll kill you both first.” His face went from joy to murder in a split second, and that was as long as he could hold it. “You should see the looks on your faces.”

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“Fuck you, Vinnie, that’s not funny.” Lissa laughed again, right in the middle of voicing her offence.

“Guys, it’s been forever. It’s water under the sink. Come on. Give me that fucking pipe.” Vinnie grabbed it and took a huge hacking hit. His cough was loud and immediate. “You fuckers left me an empty bowl?” he asked, sounding upset.

“Dude.” Michael coughed. “We didn’t know it was you, man. We dumped the fucking thing the minute you called us out.” He looked into Lissa’s eyes as Vinnie hacked away, pounding his knees and spitting on the ground. She looked back at him and shook her head. This had never happened. Just like nothing had ever happened between them before. And so was history erased again.

“Well, shit.” Vinnie still fought off the cough. “Let’s get back to a safe place and do this up right. I swear, Mike, you’re like a fucking woman when you talk about your feelings.”

“Why do you say that?” Lissa asked, a little too eagerly, but Vinnie wasn’t paying them any strict attention. He hadn’t seen anything, and he didn’t suspect anything.

“Look at where you’re standing, man.” Vinnie pointed toward the condos, in the direction of the home of that girl with beautiful white skin whose name Michael still didn’t know. The girl with one eye. “I’m betting you told her about this afternoon and you two have been arguing about whether I’m an asshole while this sweet little thing, Joline—”

“Justine,” Lissa and Michael said in unison.

“Justine is still at my place waiting for you two, and you’re out here like a bunch of giggly little kids, smoking all the fucking weed and—Oh, wait. What did you guys decide?”

“Sorry?” Michael asked. “What did we what?”

“Am I an asshole or not?”

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“Yeah.” Lissa kissed him on the cheek. “You’re an asshole.” Vinnie gave her a funny look. “Don’t get all weepy. I’m just saying you should be nicer to other people. You don’t know the girl who lives there and my Mikey likes her for some reason, so, you know, cut her some slack.”

“Okay.” Vinnie grinned. “Our boy, Mikey.” He grabbed them both around the shoulders and turned them away from the condos. “Let’s get you two back home before you do anything else stupid, like smoke the rest of the shit.” They looked at each other behind Vinnie’s back. If he only knew. And thank God he didn’t. Lissa’s makeup bill would end up breaking her bank. “You’re going to need some of that shit anyway, man.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lissa lightly punched Vinnie in the chest.

“You know, you ask that a lot,” Vinnie replied. “I just meant, you know, to make things go easier. I mean, to make things go more smoothly. To make ‘things’ easier.”

“What was that?” Michael asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Fuck you, man.” He looked at Lissa and back at Michael. A grin broke out on his face. “You guys are fucking with me, again. Come on. Let’s make this shit happen. The party is on.”

“Let’s do it,” Michael shouted in reply.

“Let’s go get fucked,” Lissa chimed in at an appropriately loud volume. She paused, then added, “Up, I mean.” They laughed again. She definitely wasn’t lying about being horny.

“And fuck that one-eyed bleached-out gimp,” Vinnie said under his breath as Lissa swatted him and gave him a stern look. “You’ll forget about that horrific looking shit soon enough.”

They moved forward, arms interlocked, when Lissa’s shoulder bumped into a man who might as well have been a

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tree. He stood over six feet tall, and his face looked like it had been hit by a bus. Repeatedly. He'd taken a beating or two, and probably dished out more, in his lifetime.

"Sorry, missy," he grunted, stopping and steadying the three of them. "You okay?"

"Yes, mister," she replied, putting on her best pretty happy face, though Michael and Vinnie could see she was just as creeped out as they were by the dark ominous figure. "We're fine. Thank you, though."

"Not at all," he said, looking at Lissa. "God damn. You're a whole lot of something sweet, if I do say so myself." The words fought to come out of his mouth, as if something even more powerful than him had stuffed a rag down his throat. Lissa smiled weakly, not knowing how to respond as the man looked her up and down, slowly. Michael looked directly at him. Trying to memorise what he could see of his face. Vinnie's expression was blank. Stunned with fear. "Hey, can I ask you three a question?"

"Sure, man. Shoot," Vinnie said. He did a terrible impersonation of someone who was totally casual with the situation. He was never casual without any dope in him.

"Can you point me to 794 Holly Oak?" The man's head came into full view as a car passing by on the street at the end of the lot illuminated him with its headlights. His face was pock-marked and scarred. He was the eponymous guy you didn't want to meet in a dark alley. That was almost surely his actual name.

Michael felt a chill run through his thighs, climbing up his spine. Was this the part of the girl with one eye's past she was so sure he didn't want to have to live with? "Yeah, sure," he stuttered. "I'm sorry. We're on the way to a party. We're just—"

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“Yeah, me too,” the man replied, looking at the sky. “Going to have some fun tonight.” A cloth sack hung from his left hand. It looked like it was filled with oranges.

“...uh, so,” Michael said. “It’s on the left side. You said 794?” The stranger nodded. “That’s an even number, so on your left. It should be two or three units in from the end.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” The stranger tipped his imaginary hat and walked away. “You kids stay safe. Lots of crazies out tonight.” He looked back and gave them a grin that was at once disarming and utterly terrifying. His gaze started at Lissa, skipped Vinnie and went directly to Michael. Did he know what they’d done? How long had he been hanging around?

Lissa waved goodbye and wished him well. Michael and Vinnie did the same as they moved toward Vinnie’s apartment at a more brisk pace.

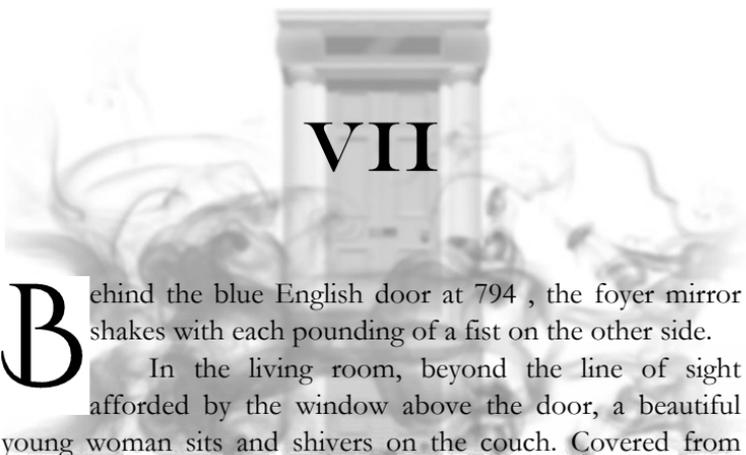
“Holy shit,” Michael said when they got far enough away.

“What the fuck, Mikey?” Lissa asked. Vinnie was interested too.

“That’s her address, man.” They kept walking. “The girl I met at the market. You know, the one you like to pick on?” Vinnie looked back at Michael with indifference. Then he looked over at Lissa and rolled his eyes. “That’s her address.”

“Lucky thing you kept it in your pants, then,” Vinnie said. “Or that she didn’t let you anywhere near her.” He looked back. The figure was at her front door. Tall enough to look in through the transom window without strain. “If that’s her boyfriend, then call me an asshole all day and all night. I just saved your fucking life.”

They looked at one another as they walked on. Curiosity, confusion and a mass of nervous energy passed between them. All for different reasons. None of them good.



VII

Behind the blue English door at 794 , the foyer mirror shakes with each pounding of a fist on the other side.

In the living room, beyond the line of sight afforded by the window above the door, a beautiful young woman sits and shivers on the couch. Covered from head to toe in layers of clothing. Rags of various drab and pale colours, none of which can match the pallor of her skin.

The knocking grows louder and she hears the door unlock. It opens slightly as she squeezes the bridge of her nose between her fingers. She pulls her right sleeve up and rubs the inside of her forearm with her fingers and thumb. The scars are still prominent after more than a decade. She rubs at them incessantly, as if doing so might make them go away. But they never will. She knows this. Only the really good things go away. Innocence and love. Trust and forgiveness. Beauty and understanding.

The longing for something gone missing, emotional and physical, never leaves. It just takes different forms. Leaves more emptiness, more holes, more missing pieces. And never an answer to the question: When will this suffering finally be over?

Pulling her sleeve back down to her palm, she looks toward the front entryway.

“Can I come back in?” a gravelly voice asks.

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“Yes,” she answers, shaking harder. “I’m ready.”

“And you’ll get what you deserve, you insolent little bitch,” the voice replies. “Little girls who treat men rudely in public don’t get off easy, missy. Not in the slightest.”



VIII

The party at Vinnie's apartment was awkward, to say the least. Four people in total. Everyone knew why Justine and Michael were invited. To call it a party was a massive overstatement. It was, essentially, another night getting high with friends, plus one stranger. And when you deal with strangers, a one-eyed girl Michael couldn't stop thinking about once told him, things can get really strange really fast. At least that's what he thought he remembered. As the night dragged on, the exact statement became muddled in his memory.

Justine was a nice enough girl. She was certainly good looking. Tan skin and brunette hair, with a bubbly personality and a gorgeous body. To die for. But every time he looked at her, Michael would compare her to the girl with one eye and pale skin, whose friend, or whatever he was, looked like a nightmare he'd once had as a child. And when he did, Justine didn't look, or feel, attractive at all. She was boring, generic. And the more he thought about the girl with one eye, the less he wanted to be anywhere but with her. Wherever that had to be. Even if it meant still having to suffer whatever horrors Vinnie and Lissa had planned for the evening.

"So, what do we want to do?" Vinnie asked after introductions were made and small talk had been done to death. "Bowls?" He brought out his favourite cherry red bong

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and Lissa's eyes lit up, matching Vinnie's expression. Justine also looked excited, and she stared over at Michael. He shrugged with as much enthusiasm as he could muster and it was decided.

They each took turns huffing away. Michael's drags were insanely huge. He was making up for a lack of something. But not nerves, like everyone assumed.

"Whoa, take it easy there, buddy." Lissa patted him on the shoulder. "You're going to have to watch out for this one," she said to Justine, who smiled and matched his pull with an equally impressive hit.

"I'm good," Justine said, snickering while holding in the smoke. She was good. At that, anyway. "You guys want to play a game?" she asked.

Lissa and Vinnie were up for it, but they still looked to Michael for approval. This was his night, after all.

He grinned. "Yeah, let's do it." What were they up to now? And why had he agreed to this? Being set up is like being set up to fail. Is there even a difference? And I wonder what this girl is thinking, being laid out like a piece of meat. Maybe she doesn't look at it that way. I hope I'm not saying this shit out loud.

"Dude." Vinnie snapped his fingers in front of Michael's face. "Try to stay with us, man."

"Yeah, come on, Mikey," Justine said, locking her right arm with his left. "Let's play a game. What are we playing? Spin the bottle?"

Lissa and Vinnie laughed, looking over at the new couple they were in the process of creating. Making a monster.

Michael's face blushed pink and Justine rescinded the offer. Not enough people. "Truth or dare, then?" Everyone

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kept looking at Michael for approval. Fuck if he didn't need this shit right now.

“Okay. You don't need my permission.” He looked around the room nervously. “Knock it off. You guys are making me paranoid. Quit staring.” He opened his eyes wide and glared at each of them in turn, making them laugh at his over-the-top impression of their prying eyes. “Truth or dare. Let's do it.”

“Mike,” Lissa said, grabbing the bong and sucking down another hit. “You start us off, buddy. Okay?”

He looked around. Vinnie leered at him like a dirty old man. This was going to be a long night.

“Okay,” Michael said before he could stop himself. Vinnie and Lissa motioned to Justine and his mind, being the stone-wasted clay it was, did what they wanted. “Justine. Truth or dare?” He turned to her, unlocking their arms, and held her hands in his, looking deep into her eyes. “Be careful what you choose.”

She giggled as he moved her hands left and right, like swings at a playground. “Um...” She hesitated, looking around for approval. Everyone just stared. That thousand yard, ‘I'm so fucked up I don't even care what I look like’ stare. “Truth?” she said.

“What's it like to be so far from the Valley?” Michael asked immediately.

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking around, confused.

“Close enough,” Michael replied. “Who's next?” Vinnie and Lissa looked at him like he was from outer space as he passed the figurative baton. Vinnie's eyes begged him not to fuck up a sure thing, while Lissa's eyes seemed certain he was definitely going to.

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“I’ll go,” Lissa said. “Mikey. Truth or dare?” She had a devilish grin on her face and Vinnie liked wherever he thought she was going with this.

“Wait,” Justine said. “How do we go from person to person in this game?” Technically, she should be next after Michael asked her and she answered, and she knew that. Lissa’s eyes widened briefly as she remembered the rules, looking embarrassed.

“Sorry, Justine,” she said. “I’m totally fucked up. I got into it, and—You should be next.” Justine smiled back at her and looked over at Michael. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Lissa’s smile turning into a frown. His mind started spinning. Was she upset because the girl she set him up with was claiming him, though she still wanted him—mostly his fantasy—or did she just not like being slighted, no matter how superficially nicely?

Justine smiled. “Okay, Mikey. It’s you again.” She really did have a cute face. Like a button. Michael couldn’t remember the last time he wanted to kiss a button. “Truth,” she said quietly, “...or dare?” She punctuated her last words with clumsy allure. She wanted him to pick the dare. She dared him to.

“Truth,” he replied. She hid her disappointment well. Either that, or he’d misread all her signals. Neither would surprise him.

“Okay,” she said. “Truth, then.” She looked him straight in the eyes, mocking his method. “Do you like me?” She took in a deep breath, glancing over at Lissa and Vinnie. Vinnie waited with bated breath, begging for his boy to get this one right. Lissa still smiled, but she was visibly irritated with the way Justine flaunted her desire for Michael. It was like she

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knew about their past. Even the most recent part of it. Or maybe it was just the weed.

“Sure, you seem like a nice girl,” Michael replied with all the warmth and compassion of a school bus driver. “I mean, I guess so. I just met you.”

Her smile widened. Like, if she tried harder, Michael would too. Things didn’t work that way in his world, but she didn’t know that. She didn’t even know he didn’t remember meeting her before. “Fair enough,” she replied, trying not to look too dismayed. Of course, she could also have been stifling a sigh of relief. Michael was, and he tried hard not to show it.

“It’s my turn now?” Michael asked, looking around like he wasn’t sure. He winked at Lissa as their eyes met. He knew she was getting tired of this girl as fast as he was. Vinnie held up his hands like a school kid. Truth or Dare Ancillary Rule Number One: The person whose turn it is may abdicate that turn and let someone else, of his or her choosing, take it. “Take it, Vinnie.”

Vinnie hopped up, bobbing slightly with crossed legs. “Sweet.” Lissa looked over at him, cringing. Jesus, how is he going to fuck this up? Her eyes begged him: Please, don’t ruin this, okay? He gave her a reassuring smile. Kind of. “All right, Justine, truth or dare.”

She looked around sheepishly, knowing the favour she wanted. Hoping that was what Vinnie was doing for her. “Truth,” she stated with purpose, looking directly at Michael.

“Yes,” Vinnie said. “Okay, Justine. Truth.” He stopped, scanning them. Assessing the situation. Things weren’t working out well, that was for sure. No reason not to enjoy it. Lissa pinched him hard, but he had already moved on. “How would you feel if I told you Mikey here has a thing for

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wounded birds?” Everyone but Justine knew what he was getting at.

“That’s so sweet,” she gushed, not getting Vinnie’s harsh inside joke. “Aww.” She reached out to touch Michael’s cheek.

“Wait,” Vinnie said. “This is a two-parter.” Justine looked back at him, still with a pleasantly muted smile on her face. She had no idea who Vinnie was. Not any of them, really.

“Okay, crazy man.” A sly grin spread over her face. She clearly thought that, finally, someone was going to ask a sexually charged question. Wasn’t that what this game was all about? “Make me confess my deepest darkest desires.”

“All right.” Vinnie smiled, rubbing his palms together. Lissa buried her head in her hands. Here we go. “Justine, if you could, would you fuck Mikey if he only had one eye?”

Justine’s face turned red, or at least a darker shade of tan. Her eyes drooped and she turned to look at Vinnie, not knowing what to say or if she was being made fun of. “What?”

“Listen closely,” Vinnie said, speaking slowly to her, like she was an infant. “Would. You. Fuck. Mikey. If—”

“Okay, stop it, Vinnie. It’s not funny,” Lissa said under her breath, slapping his wrist. It didn’t help.

“—He. Only. Had. One. Eye.” Vinnie waited as Justine kept staring at him like a paralysed animal. “Jesus, Justine. Would you let Mikey throw you a bone if his face was all fucked up?”

“Not cool,” Michael replied softly. He looked, apologetically, at Justine for a moment and directed his gaze at Vinnie. “What the fuck are you trying to do, man?”

“Truth or dare, Mikey,” Vinnie said. Michael looked back at Justine and shrugged, though he was pretty sure he wasn’t keeping the anger from showing anymore. “Truth or dare, bitch. Come on.”

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“Truth.” Michael looked directly at Justine as he answered. His stare was magnetic, but it was filled with hate.

Justine squirmed. “What the fuck is this shit, man?” She was getting the creeps. The ‘I’m way too high for this nonsense’ freak-out. “What are you doing? This isn’t funny, guys.” Still, she tried, desperately, to be cool.

Vinnie stared right at her as he spoke to Michael. “Truth, Mikey. If you could lay pipe in that half-dead looking, one-eyed freak-show of a girl who moved in down the block. If you could nail that orange mop, guaranteed, would you even give Justine the time of day? Truth, Mikey.”

“You’re an asshole.” Michael’s speech had lost all affect. Cold as brick. He looked over at Lissa, who turned her head, not able to keep his gaze while she hit Vinnie on the shoulder.

“I said Truth. Come on, Mikey. Truth.” Vinnie punched Lissa back, and she rubbed at her shoulder, her face looking pained.

Michael looked over at Justine. “He’s an asshole. That’s the truth.” He let his head loosen and droop toward the floor. “And you don’t deserve this. Whatever the fuck this is.”

“Truth. Truth. Truth.” Vinnie chanted as Lissa tried her best to cover his mouth with her hand.

“She’s a nice girl,” Michael said. “And very attractive, if you’d take the time to look. You never even gave her a chance. You never give anyone a chance, though, do you? It’s never enough that you’re happy. Unless everyone else isn’t.”

Justine grabbed Michael’s hand and placed it in between her full bronzed breasts, looking at him like he was her saviour. She had no idea he wasn’t referring to her at all. The only thing he was thinking about at that moment was that the one-eyed girl he’d met and almost connected with, earlier, was with

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another man. And that she had smaller breasts that weren't artificially tanned and probably tasted like strawberries.

"Walk?" Michael asked Justine, getting up from his seat. He could see the misconception in her eyes. This had gone on long enough.

He took her hand and they left the apartment. Michael looked back at Vinnie and Lissa long and hard as he began to shut the door. Vinnie gave him a big thumbs up, beaming from ear to ear. "Hit that shit, man," he whispered.

When the door closed, Lissa smacked Vinnie on the head. "You fucking asshole." She got up. Her face contorted, ugly with rage. "I can't believe you did that."

"What?" he asked, feeling irritable himself. "I totally hooked Mike up. Didn't you see?"

"You totally fucked him up, you mean." She paced. "And what's this fascination you have with him liking some other girl? Are you into her too?"

"Don't turn back into a snotty little shit," he replied. "She's a fucking ghoul, baby. I don't know what he sees in that 'thing', but he's doing better now, and he'll forget about that pasty malnourished freak with missing parts soon enough. I did what had to be done to get his head out of his ass."

"You know..." she said, her voice trailing off momentarily. "Sometimes I feel like I don't know you." He looked at her, disappointment in his eyes. Only because he felt misunderstood. "And I don't think you know Mike all that well, either. And he's your best friend. And me? Jesus, maybe you don't know me either."

"Come on, now," he said. He got up and tried to hug her, but she batted his arms away. "Look. I was just trying to help him out. He's addicted to bad women, bad situations. Fucking

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bad in general, honey. Damn. Sometimes, if you want to help people like him, you've got to hurt them a little."

She allowed him to hug her and they held each other, in silence, for a good while. "I don't think you know him as well as you think you do, Vinnie. I really don't."

"You'll see." He smirked, imagining what his buddy and that sweet new piece must be up to.

"No." She shook her head. "We'll never see. We'll never see her again. I guarantee that. If those two had a shot, you fucked it up by putting him on the spot. I know Mike too. Not as well as you think you do, but—I swear you fucking guys have no clue how things work."

"Just wait, baby." He stroked her hair, kissing the top of her head. "He'll be a new man tomorrow morning. They're at his place right now, if they didn't jump each other on the way." He delighted at the thought of his friend fucking someone new. And someone he considered attractive. That part was more important to him.

"He's out there, breaking her heart," she replied, not returning his kisses.

"Oh, the fucking drama. Just wait until tomorrow. You'll see."

"I don't need to wait. I know what's happening right now. He wasn't talking about Justine when he said those things about her being a nice girl, about you never giving her a chance. He wasn't talking about Justine. He was talking about the other girl. And he's telling her that. Bet on it."

"Fuck, no." He pulled her head back by the hair, looking into her eyes. "You're way off. You're kidding."

"No, Vinnie," she replied, emotionless. "I'm not. And let me ask you a question. Truth. If you could 'lay pipe' in that,

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what was it? That half-dead looking, one-eyed freak-show of a girl, guaranteed, would you even give me the time of day?"

His face puckered in revulsion. "God, no. I wouldn't touch that shit with someone else's ten foot pole."

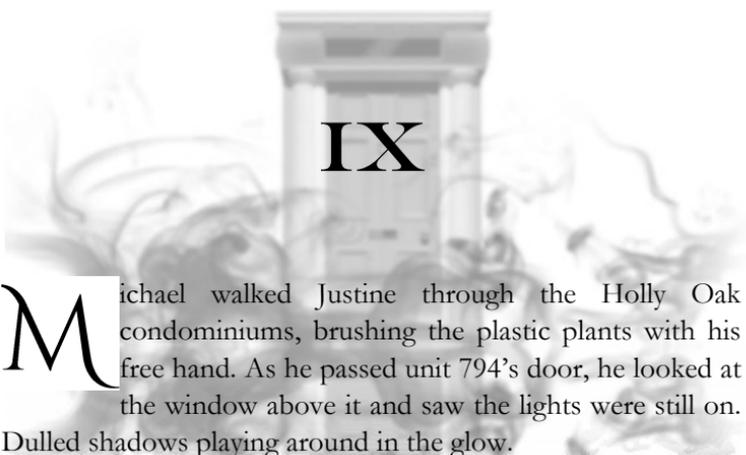
"He's right, you know. We don't even know her. Why are you being such a dick about it? And what if I got hurt? Lost an eye? Would that be it for us, you shallow fuck?"

"Lissa?" he asked, truly confused as she moved to the door and began walking out.

"Think about that tonight, Vinnie," she barked. "Don't tell me you love me and then so much as tell me my looks are all that really matter to you while you shit all over your friend."

"You know what?" he replied. "Get the fuck out of my sight. You're pissing me off with all your bullshit."

"And we know where that leads, don't we?" Lissa slammed the door closed behind her and Vinnie sat. Stupefied.



IX

Michael walked Justine through the Holly Oak condominiums, brushing the plastic plants with his free hand. As he passed unit 794's door, he looked at the window above it and saw the lights were still on. Dulled shadows playing around in the glow.

He held her hand loosely as they walked.

"Mike," she said. "You haven't spoken a word since we left. What's the matter? I thought we hit it off back there." She looked intently at him as they strolled, trying to get a good read on his emotions.

"No, it's not that," he replied, pulling her along. "Things just got too crazy. Vinnie was being an asshole and—"

"And that's why I'm still here," she interrupted. "The things you said, in defence of me, were—Well, they weren't much. You don't really know me. But you stood up for me. For what you thought I might be. And most guys won't do that. Or they just don't. I thought it was sweet. I like that about you."

"It's not that, Justine. I just—"

"Just what?" Her voice rose in pitch and volume as they exited the condominium complex. At least the girl he was actually interested in wouldn't have to hear him argue with another girl about her. "Did I do something, in between the moment we got up to leave and the moment we stepped out

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the door, to make you mad? The way you're acting doesn't make sense. One second, you're defending me and the next, it's like you don't want to have anything to do with me."

"Look," he said as they neared his apartment. "Do you need a ride home?"

"No." She stopped, crossing her arms and tapping her left foot. "I live pretty close by. I can walk. Why?"

"Just—Here's the thing. I wasn't talking about you when I said that stuff. I didn't defend your honour. I was defending the girl Vinnie was picking on. There's a girl who lives in the condos we just passed. She just moved in and she's physically—"

"She really doesn't have an eye? That's terrible." Justine gasped, grabbing his wrist. He looked at her and nodded. Maybe she could understand. "And she's really that pale? Like a ghost, pale?" Then again, maybe, like Vinnie, she never would. "Oh my God. I would hate to be her. That's got to be terrible, having to live with that. Looking like that. Jesus. I can't even imagine."

He looked at her sideways. "I'm serious. She's a nice person. I like her. She may or may not like me, but that's beside the point. She's a human being, and worthy of respect, as such. Her physical condition shouldn't be an issue. Or a topic of discussion. Or debate."

She gasped again. "You 'do' have a thing for her, don't you?" It had gotten old. Fake people. Fake emotions. "Vinnie was right. You want her. Why? Does that kind of thing turn you on? Is it a fetish? Because..." She looked around quickly. "...we could pretend. I could wear an eye patch or something, if that's what you need."

"Holy shit, where the fuck do they grow you people? You. Vinnie. You just don't get it." But, as he tore into her,

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he thought, for a moment, maybe she did get it. Maybe the damage did excite him. As fucked up as that thought was, he couldn't discount it entirely. Maybe the girl with one eye turned him on because she was disfigured. And he felt like she needed protection from the Vinnies and Justines of the world. He wondered what it would feel like to lick around her eye socket while he worked her into a sexual frenzy, then he snapped back to reality. "She's a human being. And if you look past the fact that she's lost an eye and has pale skin—which are problems for reasons I'll never understand—you'd see she's just as worthy of love and affection as anyone else. You. Me. Anyone."

"Keep telling yourself that," she replied, looking at him like he was a schoolyard pervert. "I'm sure you want to do her because she's so nice."

"She's pretty too. If you can get past the one thing 'wrong' with her, you'd see that. Watch." He covered one eye with his hand. "Am I uglier now?"

"No better or worse than before..." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes?" The air between them had grown stale. There wasn't even awkward lust left anymore.

"Freak." She turned around and began walking away. "Why don't you just go fuck yourself. From what Lissa tells me about your love life lately, you're probably pretty good at that. You're not getting any of this. Not ever, weirdo."

He laughed, pityingly. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not all that wonderful. You think you're pretty with your big fat tits—yes, I know what you're doing with the under-wire in the bra—and your soft skin, just waiting to become cellulite, and your fake tan and however many pounds of makeup you threw on before you dared to show your face in public. But you're empty inside. You're nothing. The packaging is all you have to

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offer. You're an item with a use-before date that's just about come up."

"I don't ever want to see you again," she screamed. "You're an asshole. And your friend, Vinnie? I thought he was an asshole. He still is an asshole. But, you, you're twice—no, ten times—the asshole he could ever be. And that fucking cunt, Lissa? Setting me up with your pathetic, loser fucking ass. I was doing her a favour. You're no catch yourself. Twenty years old, working at a grocery store. No money. No ambition except getting fucking high. And, while we're on the subject of self-flattery, just remember you can't even score a cripple. You talk down to me? Fuck you."

"At least I'm not a vapid, empty, soulless bitch like you. Not having you in my life was a pleasure before, but it's going to be so much sweeter now that I've finally met you." She had already begun moving away, not liking the direction things were going. She had no idea how to manipulate a man if his dick wasn't trying to figure its way into her. "You and Vinnie are a fucking pair. I'll give you that. You two should hook up. Then you could grow old together picking on all the people smaller than you and pretend you weren't just picking on yourselves the whole time."

"Fuck you." She whimpered, stepped up the pace and made her exit into the dark of night. "You're a total asshole."

"Love you too, cupcake." He kissed the tip of his middle finger and saluted her departure.

As he watched her disappear and let his hand drop back to his side, he heard a door close in the distance behind him. Turning around, he saw the chiselled, brutal features of the monster from the parking lot. He was leaving number 794. Michael couldn't tell for sure, but there appeared to be blood staining the man's knuckles and on the forearms of his shirt.

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“Fucking women. What are you going to do?” the beast asked in a throaty voice.

“Fucking A, my friend,” Michael replied, not knowing what else to say. Not knowing if what he saw was real or a trick of the light, and worrying about his girl with one eye.

The tree trunk of a man waved to Michael and headed off in the opposite direction. Michael stopped for a moment, looking at the blue English door. Seeing the man slow his pace, he turned quickly and began heading toward his apartment. Fucking coward, he berated himself as he walked away. On the other hand, his survival instinct lauded him: Good job not getting yourself killed over some monstrosity of a man’s domestic problems.

As he entered his apartment, his eyes kept drifting back toward the condos. He hadn’t felt this concerned about anyone but himself in so long, he couldn’t remember. And he still didn’t know why that girl with one eye, that someone he just happened to bump into, pulled at him so hard. They were, for all intents and purposes, complete strangers. Yet he swore he felt her pain when he saw, or maybe just imagined, the blood on those fists.

The uncanny thing was, the pain felt dulled and muted. Strangely normal. As if he’d known it all his life. As if he was used to it.



X

Behind the blue English door at 794, a beautiful young woman, grasping a bucket of dirtied water in one hand and a scrubbing brush in the other, throws her weight against it. Its lock snaps into place as she breathes a heavy sigh of relief and slumps to the floor.

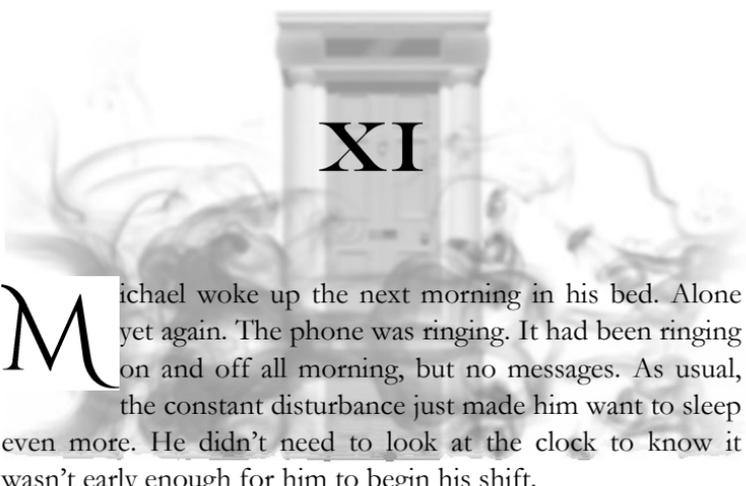
She drops the cleaning supplies, rolls forward onto all fours and crawls away from the door, down the main hall. Moving slowly, moaning with every contraction of her trim abdomen.

She stops as she nears the corner at the end of the foyer. Looking back over her shoulder to make sure no one is there, she turns her face to the floor, lying down, and lets it relax there, in a puddle of muddied saliva and cold sweat.

Her body is covered in a thin, blue, long sleeved nightdress, patchy with perspiration and her thin, frail body heaves with every breath.

She sobs as she rolls over onto her side, massaging her stomach with her hands. A thin stream of diluted blood trickles from her mouth and drips onto the tile below.

Her eye, wet with tears, squeezes closed tight and then opens wide. It glazes over and her features betray a deep and restful peace as she drifts out of consciousness.



XI

Michael woke up the next morning in his bed. Alone yet again. The phone was ringing. It had been ringing on and off all morning, but no messages. As usual, the constant disturbance just made him want to sleep even more. He didn't need to look at the clock to know it wasn't early enough for him to begin his shift.

The phone rang again, seconds after it stopped for what he hoped would be the last time. Fucking telemarketers, he thought as he rubbed his forehead, but this time he was wrong. This call went to the answering machine.

He cringed at the sound of his voice. "This is Mike. I'm either not home, or I'm not by the phone. Leave your name and number and I'll probably get back to you." He had to change that soon. Maybe today. Today, for sure, but later.

It was Lissa. She sounded upset, like she'd been crying. Perhaps her night with Vinnie had been as fun as his with Justine. He hoped their night hadn't been that bad. As pissed as he still was at Vinnie, he could understand how his mind convinced him he was helping a friend out when he totally sand-bagged him. Bringing up all that embarrassment and hurt at what was supposed to be a friendly party specifically designed to get him laid for the first time in a long while. Had he not belaboured the point, Vinnie's plan would have worked.

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“Hey, Mikey,” Lissa’s voice began, tinny and bereft of life. “Dude, are you still asleep? Man, we need to talk. About last night. Me and Vinnie. We got in a big fight and I ended up leaving because... I don’t know. Sometimes it’s like there’s no talking to him. Fuck, does my head hurt. Way too much weed yesterday. Not enough yet today...” Her voice trailed off as she held the phone, breathing into the receiver. Trying to think of what to say next. “I was just making sure you were okay. I think the whole town could hear you and Justine tearing each other new ones, so I guess that’s one point for the bad guys.” She sighed, taking her time. “Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you were all right. I saw that girl you were talking about on my way home. I didn’t stop to say hi, or go anywhere near her. And, before you get all upset, it’s not the same as what Vinnie said. He was being a dick. It was just fucking trippy. She was out there, with the front lights on, scrubbing the porch and sidewalk in front of her condo. Really busting some ass. It was weird. Like, what was she cleaning up that late at night? And she looked sick, but maybe that’s just because she’s so skinny. And white. I don’t know. Probably just me being paranoid. Too much weed. Too much. Call me back, Mikey. Sorry about last night.”

He was on the side of the bed, listening intently to her every word. Had he really seen blood on the knuckles of the man leaving his one-eyed girl’s condo? Was that what she was so busy cleaning up? He rubbed at his lips and startled, slightly, as she continued the message. “I know it sounds weird, but... I love you. I do. Not like, you know... I just want you to be okay. I want you to be safe. I’m back at Vinnie’s. Call me.”

The line went dead.

Nothing about the message registered except for Lissa mentioning she’d seen his girl with one eye. He’d heard her tell

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him “I love you” before. Those three words didn’t mean all that much coming from her. Not in the long run. She just really loved those words.

More than anything else, his insides ached to see his girl with one eye. Hoping she was okay. Wondering if that was normal, thinking maybe what everyone said was true and he should just stay away and distract himself with one of the multitude of reasonably decent looking women who lived in the area. Women who might actually like him for who he was, and whom he wouldn’t have to fight to get to talk to him. Maybe that was all it was: the rejection. But he wasn’t that easy, was he? He wasn’t that simple. Something else was drawing him closer to that one-eyed girl every day since he met her. There had to be something more spiritual, more real. A centre, or a similarity, they shared. Something Vinnie would laugh at and tell him was a total fucking joke. That would be the one thing that made sense to him.

It was a bleak Friday morning. The sky looked like rain, or like it might rain eventually, but his head was somewhere else. He’d ended up drifting off after Lissa’s message and didn’t wake up again until twenty past ten. He’d done a half-assed job of getting dressed and ready for work, and was about to skip out the door when he stopped to look back at the phone.

It was a quick walk to work, and his mind was torn between calling Lissa back or waiting until later, but he stopped and picked up the phone, dialling Vinnie’s number. It rang three times before she answered.

“Hello? That you, Mikey?” she slurred.

“Yeah. Hey, Lissa,” he replied. His breath came fast and sharp. “Just heading out the door. Got to get to work. Got your message, fell asleep again, and now I’m going to be late.”

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“Dude, chill,” she said with a laugh as he imagined her looking back at Vinnie and swirling her index finger around her temple. Cuckoo. “You can sprint to the Piggles & Wiggles in, like, five minutes.” More noise in the background. “Oh, yeah. Vinnie says sorry about last night. He was just trying to help you, he says. I don’t know. Anyway, what’s the rush?”

“Nothing. I’ve just got to go. It’s Friday. Friday’s are bad days for, um...” He stood there, realising he was stone cold sober and he couldn’t string a sentence together.

“A bad day for...?” she asked. “Don’t tell me you’re going to visit that girl.” He couldn’t answer. He didn’t want to lie, and he couldn’t think of a good story to tell her if he did. “Dude. Did you listen to my message? Did you pay attention? She was—Seriously man—She was outside scrubbing the fucking sidewalk in the middle of the night. I mean on her knees with a brush, like a maid. It was weird. She was super into it. Like she was trying to erase the ground. I don’t know how to explain it. Just leave it. Leave her alone. I don’t exactly agree with Vinnie’s methods”—He heard Vinnie scream in pain and mock-complain in the background as she swatted him—“but he’s on the right track with this girl, I think. She’s trouble. Something’s not right.”

He looked at the clock. Thirty more minutes before he had to punch in. “Yeah. No, I hear you.”

“Dude,” she screamed. “I’m serious. You saw that fucking psycho killer she’s dating. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s not worth it. There’s more girls out there like Justine. I’ll get you set up with one who deserves you, I swear, okay? Just don’t go doing anything stupid. Anything that could get you hurt, I mean.”

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“You know, she called you the C word last night.” He moved to hang up the phone. “Justine wasn’t as good a friend of yours as you think. I don’t want to meet more girls like her.”

“Well...” she trailed off. He could hear the betrayal in her voice. “She’s just one girl. I don’t know her ‘that’ well. We were friends in high school and she always seemed okay, so—”

“No, she wasn’t doing you a favour. She was just trying to get laid, same as me. She used you as a means to an end. And she was a bitch. Every inch of her. I couldn’t find a redeeming quality in her if I tried.” Lissa’s end of the phone was silent. Not even Vinnie made any remarks. He could probably see her reaction to the news and thought better of it, for once. “I appreciate that you tried, I do. But we shouldn’t let our friendship go there. I don’t want our relationship to hinge on whether I get along with anyone you know. I just want it to depend on whether I like you.”

“Don’t you?” she asked, her voice weakening. “I know other girls. They’re not all like her. I didn’t mean to do anything bad. I was just trying to help you.” He didn’t answer. It was getting later and later, and the conversation had become pointless. Maybe even cruel. “Mikey?”

“Of course I do, Lissa,” he replied. “Look, this is too heavy to deal with right now. I’ve got to get to work. And we need to talk, soon, but we can’t do this now. I’ve got to go.”

“All right, sweetie,” she sheepishly agreed. “Vinnie says hi and sorry, again. Let’s all get together tonight? Meet you after work? As usual? By the pony?” There was an expectancy and a sad desire in her voice he’d never heard before. She sounded like her feelings were being trampled on. Looking to him for emotional comfort when Vinnie was being a cold, self-centred prick and, for the first time in however long she could remember, not getting it.

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“Definitely,” he answered, putting a smile in his voice. “Yeah, we’ll hang out tonight. Stay cool, okay? Everything’s all right. I still love you, Lissa. Nothing’s changed. We’re still best friends. Okay?”

“All right,” she replied, sniffing. “Just go straight to work and stay away from that girl. Did you get her name?”

“No, I don’t know what it is yet. She’s good at misdirection. Really good.”

“You see what I’m saying? Sketchy. Okay, we’ll see you tonight. No pale girl, though. No—Shit. What do I call her that doesn’t sound mean?”

“How about just ‘no new girl?’”

“No new girl, then. Promise? Straight to work.”

He pulled the receiver from his ear and gave it a funny look. “Sure thing, mom. Relax. No new girl.”

She laughed. “Fuck you, Mikey. You’re being a jerk. At least you’re being one in a good way. You’re so adorable. I wish she was the one. That would be sweet.” She’d gotten away from herself, and she realised it. “But she’s not. No new girl.”

“No new girl.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah.”

“Say you promise,” she insisted.

“I promise. Goodbye, Lissa. I’ll see you tonight.”

He hung up the phone to the sound of Lissa’s voice booming out of the speaker. “Say you promise no new—”



XII

Michael cut through the Holly Oak Condominiums as he headed for work at a slow jog. A light mist fell and, as he entered the pathway between the two buildings, he looked off into the distance. Vinnie's place was in direct sight and he looked at it carefully, just in case Lissa had taken it upon herself to do surveillance work on him to make sure he kept his word.

As he walked up the sidewalk, he noticed small bubbles of soap forming in front of the blue English door at 794. Lissa hadn't been seeing things, as he assumed. The sidewalk and front steps had been cleaned overnight. Odd, perhaps, or there was a perfectly good reason. He wondered what that reason might be as he stopped and looked at the bubbles growing and popping on the front stoop.

The door opened, almost without a sound, and there she stood. His girl with one eye. Dressed up and ready to go out. Probably wondering why the hell he was standing at her doorstep like a sculpture.

"Oh, Jesus. Hi," he said, lost again. Every time he looked at her, it felt like he was seeing her for the first time. Not the minor deformity, or the strangeness of it all, but the fascination. His heart fluttered in his chest. It was as if she was the first girl he ever felt anything for. Just like he'd felt for old what's-her-name back whenever that was.

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“Yes?” she replied, flinching as he raised his hand to wave. Her gaze was full of fear, her hands on the door. She wore another, more brightly coloured, babushka. He wondered how many of them she had. Her hair looked like it was done up in a pony-tail that spilt over her left shoulder, hugging the neck of her long sleeved blouse. And her dress covered her to her ankles. She never let anyone see anything.

“I’m on my way to work,” he said, “and I noticed these bubbles. I wasn’t going to knock. This is pure coincidence, I swear.” The words escaped him again. Why was this so difficult? Why was it, whenever he felt he really wanted something, he could never find an actual reason? “I was wondering—”

“Wondering what?” She looked back down her front hallway, nervously twitching. “Didn’t we complete our business last time we met?” She lowered her voice as her skin flushed pink and she caught herself letting it rise. Her next words came in a whisper. “I let you off the hook, remember? You may go away now. You may leave me alone.”

“Completed our business? Let me off the hook?” His face registered disbelief, but somehow this all made sense. His head was the only thing getting in the way of him understanding. “No, I get it. You don’t want to have anything to do with me. Don’t worry, I’m not here to bother you. I didn’t expect to see you. You’re perfectly safe.” He stopped, feeling her words hit him. “You don’t have to be condescending about it, though. I apologise for breathing the same air as you. I’m sorry you live on my way to work. I’m sorry I ever met you, okay? Those are all bald-faced lies, but hopefully they’ll give you some peace.”

“Look, I didn’t mean...” Her eye was punching him, piercing him. Looking into and through him. “I’m sorry.” She looked exasperated—and terrified.

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“No, it’s nothing,” he replied, looking back at the bubbles, trying to hide the weak look on his face. “I got your point. You’re not interested. Duly noted. Maybe you have to be as harsh as you are with people. I don’t know you. I don’t know your situation. You’re right. I just wanted to talk to you. I never got to the point where I considered your side of the whole interaction. So don’t fret, I’ll be on my way.” He looked back up and waved goodbye as her hands grabbed on to the door more tightly.

She looked out from behind the door, watching him turn away as she swung it back and forth. “Why?” Her eye became softer, more inviting, but her expression looked sad—and still terribly frightened. “Why do you want to talk to me?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, matching her hushed tone. “I don’t even know you. I just—I feel like I want to get to know you and, after that... I don’t know.” She looked back again, grinding her teeth. She’d initiated the conversation this time. She could hardly blame him. If she’d have kept her mouth shut, he’d be a memory already. “I just feel like we have something in common. I don’t know why. There’s no way to make sense of it. It’s just a feeling. A gut reaction. I, honestly, wouldn’t still be here talking to you if I didn’t feel like there was something important about you. You’ve already rejected me twice, but it seemed like, both times, it was the world, and not you, that pushed me away. This time I guess there’s no doubt.”

“No.” She rubbed at her left eye. It looked tired. Worn out. “I’m sorry. It’s just—I have hunches as well. And my gut is telling me, yes, perhaps I feel strongly for you also. Perhaps I don’t understand why, either, and perhaps I care for you enough to let you go away and never come back.”

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From somewhere within the condo a noise rang out, like a giant bag of sand slamming into the floor. Then there came a growl.

He tried to peek around her, but she tracked his movement and blocked him at every turn. “Are you okay?” he whispered. “Do you need help?”

“No.” She whimpered. “Just—You’re not supposed to be here. Please? Why don’t you believe me? What in the world is it that keeps you from believing me when I tell you I’m doing you a favour by letting you leave? Why can’t you see you’re better off leaving me—leaving this—alone?”

“Leaving what alone?”

“Leaving my life. Leaving it alone.” She quickly turned to look behind her, then faced him again. “Why can’t you take me at my word? If you believe we have something special between us, don’t you believe, perhaps, we would work out no matter what? I mean, if we were meant to be? Wouldn’t that stand to reason?”

“I guess,” he replied, shuffling his feet. “That’s perfectly logical. It makes sense. But here’s the thing.” Her eye rolled as he continued. She could barely contain the need to voice her objection immediately, but she could still feel fists pummelling her. Punishing her for her most recent display of poor manners in public. “I conceded the argument. You won. I was walking away, leaving it alone, like you say you want. Why did you stop me?”

“It’s not easy to explain, Michael.” She reached out to touch his face, but withdrew her hand. “You’re really a very sweet person and a good looking young man. I wasn’t lying when I told you that. I meant it. And you were very kind to me on Tuesday, when we first met at your grocery.” His face went soft as he tried to recall ringing her up at the Piggles &

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Wiggles. “You’re the first person I’ve met in a long time who’s treated me well—as if I were a human being—from the first and didn’t judge me. And perhaps that’s confusing for me, but there’s nothing for you here. Nothing you want and certainly nothing you need.” She backed up from the door. “And, whatever you’re feeling, it’s a lie that thing between your legs is telling you.” Her gaze drifted to his crotch as he became conscious of his slightly aroused state. “Perhaps it’s not your gut that’s been reacting.”

He watched her eyes as he crammed his hands into his pockets to offset the bulge. She giggled lightly. “That’s not what I meant when I said I thought there was something important about you. I’m sorry about that. I, um—”

“It happens,” she said, blushing. “But not usually because of me. Now I really can’t say I’m not flattered. You weren’t just having fun with the freak when you told me I made you feel something. God, this must be embarrassing for you. I’m sorry.” She kept looking down.

“I’m—Look,” he said, his mind running on empty. He pulled his hands from his pockets, trying to find the words.

“Just leave. Please,” she begged, looking back up. “I know I—The way I am doesn’t make an ounce of sense to you but let’s not turn this into another confrontation. Please?”

“I was gone,” he said, holding on to the left side of the door’s frame with his right hand as she immediately stepped back. “I told you as much the moment I saw you today. And you pulled me back. Every time I meet you, there’s been confusion. And—”

“And this time,” she interrupted, “this time there’s no mistake about it. No ambiguity. No reason for you to wonder anymore.” Her voice turned cold and her face was a ghostly

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pale once more. “As wonderful as it makes me feel to know you want me in that way, I don’t believe this is a good idea.”

“But that was just—”

“I know. The boys can’t help themselves, can they?” She looked him straight in the eye, confusion turning into anger again. “Just, for once and for all, leave me alone. Listen to your friends.” The anger in her eye turned to sadness. “I can’t do this. I’m not normal. I told you. And I am truly sorry. I tried to be good. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She slammed the door in his face.

He dropped to the ground as the door closed, cutting off the pinkie finger he’d left resting inside the frame.

He screamed as blood slowly pulsed out from the stump.

His vision blurred as a small crowd formed around him. The last thing he remembered seeing, as he felt himself drifting away, was the blue English door opening back up.



XIII

Behind the blue English door at 794, a beautiful young woman falls to the floor as she hears the sound of a young man, screaming in pain, on the other side.

She presses her face against the door, looking at the detached finger lying on the tiled floor and her lips tremble.

She turns around quickly, pressing her back against the door as she hears the screaming subside. And her breathing begins to match the rhythm of the soft moans of agony.

She pulls at the babushka on her head, tracing the fingers of her right hand over the eye patch beneath it, as her left hand drifts, massaging her stomach. As the sounds of hurt—of pain—slow, she looks again at the finger on the floor and her left hand rubs against the waist of her dress, fumbling to find a point of entry.

Her eye closes as her left hand fights its way underneath her dress and she softly moans in unison with the unfortunate amputee outside. Her breathing grows laboured and the look on her face betrays a lust she doesn't understand. She only knows it feels good. The expectation. The anticipation. As she reaches out with her right hand and touches the detached finger, her stomach contracts sharply and her left hand digs deeper still.

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Her hips begin quivering as she hears other voices outside the door. Her face goes pink with embarrassment as the noise outside grows louder and she stands up on weakened knees.

