

STRANGE ENCOUNTER -- YET TODAY

Here's a sample from YET TODAY, releasing on May 5, 2020, Teacher Appreciation Day. It's the last day of school and Kaosky is heading for a faculty party to celebrate. Instead, he feels increasingly disoriented . . .



Outside, on the streets of the town, there was an odd calm, as if the panic he felt were truly an illusion. The rest of creation seemed to be awaiting the further development of nothing extraordinary. He stopped at a traffic light and checked the faces of the oncoming motorists. They seemed astonishingly ugly in their cheap, mirrored sunglasses, their cheesy grimaces protecting against the glaring noonday sun. Out on the ruined strip, with its line of closed, boarded up storefronts, was a Dollar Store and several ancient fast food restaurants. On the corner was the multilevel furniture outlet blaring deals in some ballooning white lettering from its glassed front. It had been there forever, surviving downturns and boom times with an equanimous allegiance to the balloon font, attracting shoppers from as far afield as Quebec and New York State with its specials on Chinese futons and designer mattresses. The yearning for a good night's sleep was apparently a constant through thick and thin. Next to it was a new vape shop with the logo of an aquamarine unicorn that already seemed tawdry and dated, as if that was part of the appeal. He parked in the lot next to the vape shop. The clientele here had moved beyond yearning for sleep to hankering after the deep six. It seemed to Kaosky a logical if somewhat depressing progression. Next down was the New Hampshire Liquor and Wine outlet. Out the door of the vape shop stepped a young woman with thin arms and an illegible tattoo sprawling across one shoulder, barely covered by a thin spaghetti strap. Her pelvic bones extended above her jeans. They avoided eye contact,

but her tilting step caught Kaosky by surprise, as he tried and failed to evade her.

“Excuse me,” he said.

“Jesus Lord. I’m sorry,” said the young woman in a raspy, high voice, like compressed air releasing from a leak.

“That’s okay,” said Kaosky.

“Wouldn’t have a fiver, would you?” she asked. Her head seemed to wobble for a second as if she was about to fall.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t carry cash.”

“That’s not great.”

“Sorry.”

“You already said that. You think I didn’t hear you?”

“No. You heard me fine, I’m sure.”

Kaosky stepped by her on the sidewalk and checked himself mentally. He turned to the girl. She glared at him, but despite her anger there was something in her look, a weakness that seemed almost pure in its acceptance of infirmity. She wasn’t hiding her desperation and lack of recourse to anything beyond her words and sharp anger.

“You want something to eat?”

“Uh. Why?”

“Well, I’d go into the Burger King there and get you something.”

“That’s across the street. Why didn’t you park there?” She was disgusted by him.

“I would go there if you were interested. I’m sorry.”

“Holy shit, you really are a creep. I’m looking for some cigarettes. I’m sure you don’t smoke.”

“I used to.”

“You quit or something. Right? Nothing worse than a quitter.”

“It’s been a long time. What do you smoke?”

“Kools.”

She must have been no more than eighteen or nineteen despite the lines around her eyes and the sunken cheeks.

Kaosky picked out a six-pack of something called Jackman’s Victory Ale, a local craft beer with an alcoholic content of seven percent. At the checkout he asked for a carton of mentholated cigarettes. He looked to the sliding front door. Two older men walked in, both wearing Patriots ball caps, plaid flannel shirts and olive green Dickies despite the weather. He thought he saw the girl, but he wasn’t sure. She could have gone already. But when he

walked out there she was, waiting around the corner, leaning against one of three yellow steel bollards installed in front of the parking lot, some subliminal iteration of state power.

“I got you these,” he said, holding up the pack of cigarettes.

“Sweet,” she said, but stayed leaning against the bollard. Her frailty had a stink to it.

“But I got a question for you.”

“Anything you want, mister. That’s real nice of you.”

“I want you to do something with these. Not just smoke ‘em.”

“What else you going to do with cigarettes?” she asked teasingly, her curiosity piqued.

“I don’t know. Go home and talk to your family.”

“I don’t have family. My mother’s dead and my father’s some shithead I don’t even know. Last I heard he was in the VA hospital with stage four pancreatic cancer or something. Good riddance.”

“You’ve got a family. Grandparents. Cousins. Somebody who will take you in somewhere.”

She opened the carton, used her teeth to rip the cellophane off a pack and knocked it against the flat of her hand to dislodge the first one.

“You want a smoke?” She held out the pack with the protruding white tip invitingly.

“No, thanks,” said Kaosky, disgusted, waving it away.

In the car, he started the ignition and fiddled with the radio dial. His hands were shaking with the pent up nerves of what he’d done. He watched his hands with a sense of distance, as if they weren’t really his hands. He’d been acting the part of the philanthropist, buying the girl the carton of cigarettes and then setting her up with the promise of grandiose things. It was all such an absurd act, reading of lines from some ideal prompter. He had no idea from where the impulse had come to him. Since the day in the woods watching the children and Sibyl behind the trees, he’d fallen into a spell, watching his life, observing instead of doing, as if he’d taken a turn into another reality and he was stuck now watching from the old space, doing and feeling in ways that were incompatible with his former self, not able to stop. He should have taken a cigarette; he felt like he needed one now.