

Don't Floss

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DeLeon DeMicoli

When Hugo arrived at the office, Farrah Mason looked appalled by arts and crafts supplies left out on the table like, “*What’s this junk?*”

Packs of tape, scissors, markers, spray paint cans, and glue sticks were placed on a table, alongside flyers printed on colored paper and posterboards with wooden stakes taped to the back.

“*Waste,*” Farrah thought, pinching a green flyer between her index finger and thumb like she was handling something contaminated. She then read an announcement for an upcoming protest to stop the separation of children from their families in immigration detention. It was printed on red, yellow, and blue colored paper.

“Yeah, right,” she thought, rolling her eyes.

The stylist called her hair color caramel and honey. She wore it wavy and at an angled bob to give it a beach wave texture. The contoured eye makeup, pink cheeks, and lip gloss were done in a way so that no one would recognize her driving through the seedy part of town.

“Is that some sort of disguise?” she asked Hugo when she found him standing next to the entrance.

Hugo wore a yellow button up short sleeve shirt that had palm trees and surf boards on it. It was a shirt he picked up on his honeymoon in Hawaii that didn't smell funky when he pulled it off the hanger and sniffed it this morning. Not a disguise.

He thought he stepped into the wrong shop by mistake (which wouldn't be a first). He stepped out and looked up, read the sign. Yup, this was his place of business.

His memory was delicate like a children's Etch-a-Sketch toy. One shake and boom! Everything goes blank.

“You with the census or something?” he asked, scratching his head. He didn't recognize Farrah and couldn't recall having any appointments. Also, he was certain he locked up before stepping out for a bowl of Vietnamese chicken pho soup from Pho Lee Hoa Phat.

“The door was left like that,” Farrah said, pointing at the open entrance.

Hugo was like, “Really? Open like that too?”

Farrah nodded.

Hugo sublet his office to protest organizers run by Frida (some might call what she did there a career). It was part of an agreement they had when they signed the divorce papers a couple months ago. Hugo wasn't happy with the arrangement, but it helped with rent.

His office was located in the Nickels Arcade, a three-story commercial building made of yellow bricks with terra cotta detailing. It was built in 1918 in the historic part of Soma Arbor Springs, a town just fifteen miles outside of Oakland, CA. Corporations abandoned the idea of renovating the building years ago when protesters, including Hugo's ex-wife, Frida, fought to preserve it as a historic landmark and won. It turned out the building was infested, big time.

Hugo caught a mouse race across the metal-framed skylight that spanned over three hundred feet, chasing a cockroach that scurried across the colored wire-glass mesh panels like a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon. A missing glass panel caused the cockroach to drop down and bounce off the doorknob to Hugo's office. The doorknob looked like an ornament, dangling off of a tree. The cockroach disappeared in a crack in the cement.

“It was like that when I arrived,” Farrah said of the broken doorknob.

Hugo figured an intern who helped Frida organize protests forgot their house keys on the table and muscled their way in.

"Probably left a note along with some cash some place," he thought, looking around for a beat.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, and swung the door shut behind him.

A loud THUD! When the door fell over.

"Timber!" went through Hugo's head, as the door slammed onto the ground. The feral cats, searching for scraps of Vietnamese food in the trash cans, jumped up and hissed, sprinting across the gallery floor like bolts of lightning.

"Yo, you need help putting that back on?" Moss Dillweed asked. He stepped out of his shop in jogging pants, white tee, white socks, and flipflops.

His shop was next to Hugo's office.

"I'll call my nephew," he said. "He knows about stuff—"

Was there more to say? Must've slipped his mind. He gave up after a beat. Plumes of smoke puffed out of his nostrils. He coughed out the rest, holding a lit roach that was attached to hemostats he sold at his shop—a marijuana dispensary called Dillweed's.

"Didn't Boblo become a board game champion or something like that while in prison?" Hugo asked. He noticed the finials were removed from the hinges on the door.

“He’s good with dice and locks,” Moss said, seizing an opportunity to help out family. He stood out in a tie-dye bandana that was wrapped around his forehead to keep his cinnamon dreadlocks from dangling in his face. The bandana had a patch of an eye sewed on it.

“Before I forget,” he recalled, digging in a leather satchel that hung over his shoulder. “Put this on!” he demanded.

It was a Nazar amulet necklace made of blue glass attached to hemp rope. Moss claimed that it came from Turkey, package said it was manufactured in New Jersey.

“This—this is your four-leaf clover. I’m sure of it!” like it was congratulations for something ain’t happened yet.

“What’s it supposed to do?” Hugo said as he examined it.

“Supposed to protect you against the evil eye.”

Hugo was hit with a string of bad luck that included divorce, money issues, and a failing business that lacked clients. Moss considered himself Hugo’s spiritual advisor. He needed help, how Moss saw it.

“You notice anything fishy while I’ve been away?” Hugo inquired. He traded a handful of crystals in his pockets Moss gave him last month for the amulet.

“Naw, man.” Moss shook his head. Then, paused thinking on it for a beat. “Naw, man,” he reiterated.

“Can I hit that chiba or what?” Wyatt Sato asked Moss, passing through the arcade on his way to work in a chic purple beret, green silk blouse, terry cloth robe, and red parachute pants.

Wyatt's parents owned a laundromat down the street from the arcade. They immigrated from Korea over thirty years ago, still don't speak a lick of English. Recently, they made headlines when they started posing on Wyatt's social media in a mix-mash of outfits customers left behind and never bothered to pick up.

Moss traded the lit roach for a pair of petite yellow leather gloves Wyatt handed over that he didn't want to stink up.

Wyatt choked from too much smoke going in all at once when he hit the jay.

“I'm in desperate need of a belt,” Moss said, lifting his shirt to show an elastic band around his waist missing the draw string. “You have one you can spare at the mat?”

“Boxing, wrestling, or western?”

The dope hit Wyatt right away.

“Like contemporary, I guess,” Moss said, shrugging.

“Can I take another toke?” Wyatt asked.

Moss nodded.

“Follow me.” Wyatt jerked his head towards the direction of the laundromat.

“Watch my shop,” Moss directed to Hugo, following Wyatt. “I’ll call my nephew.”

“I’m with a client,” Hugo argued.

“Five minutes,” Moss yelled from the end of the block.

The storefront to Moss’s shop had a similar-looking eye painted on the window as the patch on Moss’s bandana. He called it his brand logo and had stickers. He got a good deal when he ordered a couple thousand of them. The stickers appeared on mason jars. Beautiful-looking buds of OG Kush and Purple People Eater, most of it grown in Humboldt County, filled the mason jars that were displayed on shelves along the wall.

“Cheaper than hiring security,” was how Moss explained it to Hugo when recent burglaries were reported in the area a couple months ago. “Exercising your brain to not freak out from paranoia with all them eyeballs staring at you—AIN’T NO JOKE!” he said wide-eyed, and lit a joint, nervous about having to go back in at some point and lock up for the night.

Hugo returned to his office.

Farrah wore a stylish tight-fitting black track suit that had white stripes down each thigh and arm. Inside each white stripe was an Italian name Hugo said in his head, weary he pronounced it correctly.

“My husband went missing,” Farrah said. “Can you help me find him, Mr. Picoli?”

Farrah handed Hugo a photograph. In it, Jolly was tall, barrel-chested, and bow-legged. He had the type of face that didn't look right without a black beard attached to it. A black sailor fiddler cap sat on a full head of black curls. Jolly smiled like he was hungry to eat something he killed with his own hands, licking his perfect white teeth.

"Souvenir?" Hugo asked about the photo Farrah brought with her.

She nodded. A long tear slid down her cheek. She balled up her hand into a fist, placing it underneath her nose, waiting—it seemed—for Hugo to react. Eventually, arms went up like, "*Are you for real?*"

"Where's your manners?" she said, shaking her head. "I'm crying here," she said, like it was supposed to mean something to Hugo, who appeared clueless. She balled up the tissue in her hand and threw it at him.

"God forbid he pay attention to me longer than two seconds!" Frida said at the divorce hearing in front of the lawyers, reacting just like Farrah had.

He shoved the photo in his back pocket and reached for the only handy thing he had lying around the office.

"Thanks, I guess," Farrah said, sounding disappointed as he handed her a half-roll of toilet paper he grabbed from the john in the back.

She tore off a square to pat under her nose.

"The drama started when my husband, a prominent dentist in town, received a pertinent

phone call at work regarding his mother, Lady Mason,” Farrah said, bringing Hugo up to speed.

This happened yesterday.

“I’m sorry to inform you. Your mother was involved in an accident,” the voice said on the other end.

“Is she alright?” Jolly sounded worried.

“Paramedics took her to Kaiser,” the voice said. “Hold, please.” There was a pause for a beat.

Jolly heard two beeps; the line was secure. The person on the other end provided Jolly with the details involving Lady, reading it like it came off a police report.

Jolly took notes on a notepad that included his insignia—a tooth with a crown hung over the root. He slipped his phone into his pocket when the line dropped.

Video footage from inside the building captured Jolly, clearing his schedule with Burma, the front desk receptionist, and then he left.

His black Escalade was spotted on Bonnie Street that was inside a gated community. Jolly used a clicker to enter. Rows of governor mansions lined the streets, two-stories tall with columns and wrap-around porches. Flags of family crests hung over well-maintained front lawns enclosed inside picket fences.

The construction developer, who did most of the building in the neighborhood, handed out non-monetary bonuses when the work was complete. Each construction worker on the job was

allowed to dedicate names of the streets after loved ones, friends, or relatives instead of receiving a cash bonus.

Construction workers, who were bitter over the matter, protested by submitting names of infidelities instead of loved ones, it was later discovered when a reporter conducted an investigation for the local newspaper.

It was discovered from interviews that Bonnie was the mistress of a welder.

Camera footage inside Jolly and Farrah's beautifully designed home captured Jolly heading to the staircase. His walking caused picture frames that were hung on the wall to shake.

"Everything okay?" Farrah asked off-camera.

She told Hugo that she was watching television. A popular program was called *Survive with Beef*. Each week, a production crew filmed Beef Miller, who was a retired professional tight end for the NFL. Back when he was in his prime, he had drinking and drug problems well-documented in the tabloids. His new show had him participate in adventures in extreme environments with only a handful of supplies to survive.

Today, he was overweight, bald, and had no tactical survival skills or training whatsoever. He had a saying at the start of each episode: "We're winging it in—" then he'd say where he was, like in swamp land, a desert, or the wilderness, someplace across the globe.

“You think that’s him?” Hugo was skeptical after reading a few reports online.

Conspiracy theorists believed the real Beef Miller got eaten by alligators, during the filming of the Florida Everglades episode last season. Instead of cancelling the show, producers used actors as decoys, was the speculation.

“Who cares,” were Farrah’s thoughts on the matter.

During a commercial break, Jolly’s large shadow hovered over Farrah, who was seated on the couch. He was holding a gun he kept loaded in the closet.

“Shit! He saw my credit card statement,” Farrah assumed.

“A couple weeks ago,” Farrah recollected, “I watched one of those investigative reports about a husband offing his wife for insurance money when he found out about her out-of-control spending habits.”

Farrah was scared for her life.

“I was like, this is it. He’s gonna freakin’ kill me,” she exclaimed. “He’s gonna wrap me up in some blanket and dump me along the interstate. Great!” she said, and protested by slapping her hands on her thighs.

On the couch, she screamed like they do in horror movies with sheer terror on her face like her life was over.

“Jolly turned and walked away,” she said, shrugging like the drama was for nothing.

Later, his SUV was spotted heading South.

Sunny Acres, a mobile home park stretched on a service drive along the interstate. It was written on Jolly's note along with a name, Mill Moffett.

The eighteen-year-old kid looked like a skinny punk rock singer with a bad haircut and a tribal tattoo along the side of his face. He was crossing an intersection with a couple of friends when he noticed Lady, in a Rolls Royce, stopped at the traffic light.

"Check out the beehive on grandma, yo!" he said, egging his friends to join him.

Mill took his pants down and spread his butt cheeks on the driver's side window.

Lady appeared aghast and threw up her hands like, "*Cheese and crackers!*"

In a panic, she pressed on the gas. The car sped across the intersection and crashed into a pole, crushing the front end. Smoke came from the engine, horn blaring.

Mill and his friends took off on their skateboards when they heard sirens approaching.

"Last time anyone's seen my husband was when he dragged that Mill kid outta his trailer, stuffed him in the trunk, and sped off to who-knows-where," Farrah said, throwing her arms up like it was a surprise.

"Why not wait for the cops to find him?" Hugo asked. "I assume a man with his stature has pull with dignitaries in town that can help."

Jolly was the lead forensic odontologist, exceeding the state prosecutor's expectations in securing convictions. He was also the dentist for most of the city officials in town. Yup, he had clout where it mattered.

"I don't care about what cops think. I mean, c'mon, look at the kid, he was bound to end up in prison at some point," Farrah said and shrugged like it was inevitable. "My husband will get a slap on the wrist when he comes out of this, trust me. I just want to make sure the big Bluto is alright."

"Cops don't need to know anything about this," she said about the job.

"You want me to pull a spotlight on him before he goes and blows Mill's head off," Hugo said, putting on his investigator hat.

"If he hasn't already," Farrah exclaimed and shot Hugo a look of concern. "If that turns out to be the case, I hope you can remain discreet and tell me where he's hiding," she said.

Farah was looking to get some cash to Jolly in case he felt he needed to stay holed up longer than expected.

"This is for you."

She handed Hugo ten thousand dollars in cash like a brand-new paperback book that just came off the press; seemed like the bank did that sort of thing for special clients who had a level of wealth teetering on obscene.

"How did you hear about me?" Hugo inquired, fanning the stack of cash directly in his

face. It smelled like musky chemicals. He stuck it into his shirt pocket. The fashion industry called it peacocking.

“Blaire, who used to be Hare now goes by her maiden name Chechen, referred you,” she said.

“Oh, right on,” Hugo said, nodding. He pretended like he knew them. When he finally recalled, he nodded harder up until he remembered all of it, and then he made a face.

Hugo spent two weeks following Mr. Stipe Hare’s comings and goings, snapping photos that eventually landed on infidelity with his physical trainer.

Blaire was suspicious when her husband didn’t appear in any better shape even with sessions five days a week.

Hugo made a face like he was about to puke any time he caught Stipe and his female trainer doing it in the locker room.

“Where should I start to look?” he asked, changing the subject, ready to get started.

“Crowns Social Club,” Farrah said and handed him an address on a piece of paper that included her husband’s insignia.