

Fruit

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Escape Artist

... I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only...

- T. S. Eliot, "What the Thunder Said," *The Waste Land*

Raff thought himself a handsome man. This was not a result of some vain self-infatuation. Neither was it because women told him so, breathing softly into his ear. It was a simple fact and he accepted it as such. He accepted it much like he accepted that the tulips old Ben, the campus custodian, laboriously planted last November, having now emerged after a miserable winter, would sway happily for a few weeks and then wither away into decay. His appeal to the opposite sex — he knew this well — lay in the deep brown of his irises, the way he flicked his cigarette and whispered tired poetry into pulsating necks, and how he smiled — quite genuinely, really — at soft fingers tracing his and the offhand comments about evening schedules.

That Saturday morning began like every other. Raff woke up and, rolling to his side, kissed the earlobe of his latest Friday night conquest, her hair tossed on the pillow. She moaned and pushed him aside gently, her fingers landing on his lips.

"Time to wake up, sweetheart," Raff said, propping himself on his right elbow, leading his left hand to her inner thigh, tracing slow abstract lines.

She exhaled and bit her lip. "You wake all your girls like this?"

"Mhm." He kissed her, parting her upper lips with his and placing his fingers on her now hot and moist lower ones. He let his tongue and his fingers roam her and she began to writhe, arching her back, letting the sheets slide onto the floor, exposing both of them to the sun that burst in through Raff's open bedroom window.

Having indulged each other, they ate breakfast, throwing blueberries around. Then, she left, asking him to call her later. Raff kissed her goodbye, promising he would, knowing that he wouldn't, and shut the door.

Now, half-an-hour later, he sat on the steps of a brick colonial, smoking. He came there to enjoy the empty college campus — its usually loud inhabitants abandoned it for spring break the day before. Remaining stragglers piled themselves into vans and SUVs, parked along the street, waving at him. He waved back as they left.

This campus was Raff's first place of employment, teaching poetic composition. It was also his first hope for tenure — his daydream sand castle that lay within the walls of the Liberal Arts building behind him. Raff was new to the business of teaching, having received his doctorate the year before, after spending all his waking life since the age of seven as a student in similar brick buildings. Regardless of his intimate familiarity with the academic environment, he struggled to accept his own authority in the classroom, feeling like an absolute fraud. It was something that the English Department Dean disregarded as first year jitters and said, "You'll get the hang of it."

That did not make him feel any more capable.

Raff puffed smoke and watched it mix with the clouds splattered in the sky — then, flicked the cigarette butt, in casual abandon.

"You're raping the Earth."

He tore away from the clouds above and stared at his accuser. "What?"

The vision before him — white t-shirt, blue jeans, sneakers, book in hand, beige sweater sliding off her hips — pointed at the cigarette butt on the concrete.

Raff rose and smiled at the escaping sweater. "I didn't know Ben's got himself such fine help

and the Earth — such an ardent protector.”

She flushed, opening her mouth in a small “oh,” then tucking her chin and — lips pursed, eyebrows furrowed — ran off in the direction of Red’s Diner, just outside campus, leaving behind her fugitive sweater in a heap.

Raff watched her disappear and picked up the escapee — soft and warm, smelling sweet, like apricot jam — from the concrete, then frowned. It was odd. In all his twenty-seven years, no one — especially, not a girl — ever ran from him, not like that, not like he said something offensive, not like he deserved it as punishment.

Clutching the sweater in his hands, he made his way toward the diner, hoping to find its owner there and apologize — he felt a deep need to apologize, but could not find the reason. Was he losing touch? Getting old? Was it something about this particular girl that drove him there — to the diner?

The knit thing in his hands patted him gently as he opened the door and pushed inside. Diner ceiling frolicked in static, playing a broken and distant “Be-Bop-A-Lula.” Below, air swirled in sweet caramel and burned oil, thick and crusty, settling on the worn linoleum floor. Sweater Girl sat in the diner’s far corner booth, alone.

“Hey, Raff, did you come in for anything special today?”

“What?” Raff said, looking at the girl in the booth, feeling warm fingertips slide around his neck, pulling him in the opposite direction, toward the aging blonde he recognized as the diner hostess, Kat — her face crossed with long black lines, cutting through fine grooves in the corners of her eyes.

Once, when he was much younger and more curious, Raff watched his mother plant a vegetable garden. She cut through dirt with a small spade, pushing and pulling, turning earth inside out in long shallow trenches.

“Why can’t you just dump the seeds on the ground and walk away?” Raff asked her as she stood, admiring her work.

“Same reason I didn’t dump you into the world and walk away, kiddo. There are nutrients and critters in the ground to help them sprout. These seeds are young and helpless. It’s our job, Raff, to help them find their way to things that help them grow.”

Looking at Kat’s crossed grooves and lines, Raff wondered what would sprout there, given the chance.

“You’re distracted today.” Kat pecked his cheek and squinted at him, one hand still on the nape of his neck, the other on her hip. Then, sighing and pointing at a table by the door, she said, “Sit there, sugar. I’ll get you some coffee.”

She got him coffee and called him “sugar” every time he came to the diner. Kat was great, in a motherly type of way — a woman Raff appreciated deeply, maybe even loved, for her warm, kind soul, feeling no need to engage with her in anything other than friendship.

He sat where told, facing the corner booth. She brought him a white ceramic cup and poured black brew inside. Its steam rose and smothered him in that unmistakable, familiar scent of cheap burnt coffee.

“Thanks, Kat,” he said, as she patted his shoulder and disappeared into the diner’s bowels, the mysterious place behind the counter that produced a cacophony of cooking sounds, garnished with curses, and an occasional charred burger.

The diner was empty — just Raff, his coffee, and Sweater Girl. He watched her from where he sat. She hunched over the book he saw her carry earlier — a thick compendium of something-or-other. He concluded it was likely a textbook. He also concluded that sitting like this, watching her, was

significantly out of character for him and bordered on sinister. Had it come to this? Did he devolve into an old man, stalking young girls? He felt quite vigorous earlier that morning. Yet, there he sat nonetheless, alone, in the diner, watching a girl he had just met, trying to find a way in.

Coffee was bitter and Raff abandoned it, deciding it wasn't worth sitting where he was. He rose and strolled toward Sweater Girl.

"Hey, you do know it's spring break —" he said, thinking he'd already tanked it. What kind of an opening line was that? He quickly added and immediately regretted doing so, "Right?"

"Yes?" She looked up, wide-eyed, index finger on an open page. "Oh," she said and stared at him inquisitively, letting the "oh" linger on her lips.

He stared back at her lingering "oh," feeling blood rushing, recognizing the rush — no, no, he had not yet devolved into an old man — and smiled, sitting in the booth, opposite her. "Did you know your sweater's quite the escape artist?"

He held the runaway in front of her. She reached for it and he pulled away.

"Ah, no, Sweater Girl. Let's trade."

She humphed. "This is ridiculous. Give it back."

"How about this? I buy you lunch and you get your sweater."

"That's a very odd trade offer."

He smiled. "Yes. Must be Spring."

Sweater Girl shrugged, then turned back to her book, this time placing her index finger on her lower lip. Raff bit his. He wanted her eyes on him again and her mouth back in the lingering "oh." He frowned at this sudden desire, looking down at the sweater still in his hands. It winked and cackled in the diner's florescent lights, singeing his fingers. Sweat dripped down his neck and he inhaled the

dense diner air, placing the knit devil on the table.

Mischievous garment out of his hands, Raff peered into Sweater Girl's book. She returned her finger to the page and began tracing it again and again. Having watched her finger realign itself on the same sentence for the fourth time, he pulled the compendium away from her and smacked it closed.

"What's this?" he said and set the book upright, turning it to face the girl.

"Macroeconomics?"

"Macroeconomics. Reading this junk during spring break is obscene."

She crossed her arms on her chest.

Raff's mouth was dry and he longed for the bitter brew he left behind. He turned the book in his hands, feeling its weight, while his own mass threw punches at the interior walls of his cranial box.

"Hey — I know him." Raff pointed at the author's name and the punches fell to the ropes. "Bald cap, ugly ties?"

Sweater Girl unfurled her arms and nodded.

"Dude's teaching his own book?"

She shrugged.

Raff regained himself and — his mass still heavy in his skull — said, "Well, he's one overcompensating bastard. My father was an overcompensating bastard — a fucking preacher. Named me Deacon and called me Dick all through my childhood — can you believe this shit?" He leaned in, his mass clawing inside. "Don't call me Dick, all right? I go by Raff." He handed the book back to her.

"Thanks," she said, taking it, "Dick." She smiled.

Raff's mass lost its grip and released him into unadulterated laughter, the kind he had forgotten, the kind he buried with his mother in wet October dirt a few years prior, with no hope of it ever

sprouting.

Before Raff was born, his mother thought the name Deacon ludicrous and insisted that her child be called Raphael.

“Like the great Italian master and the super-turtle!” she demanded.

His father, Reverend Thompson, was appalled by her sudden rebellious outcries, but allowed it, albeit conditionally: Deacon was to be his son’s first name.

Thus, they birthed Deacon Raphael Thompson — Dick to his father, Raff to his mother.

His mother loved him immensely and kept Raff laughing until her deathbed, when she squeezed his hand and said, “Kick it to them all, Raff, because you’re not your father’s Dick!”

“You know I will, sensei.”

She slipped after that and took all that pure laughter with her.

Sweater Girl buzzed and Raff stopped laughing. She pulled out a phone from source unknown, somewhere below her side of the table, and stared at the buzzing thing in her hands.

“I — sorry — I —” she said, rising, swooping and cradling *Macroeconomics*.

“Have to go?” Raff suggested.

She nodded, walking away.

Raff stared at the space she just left, feeling laughter slip back into dank, necrophiliac earth.

Her abandoned sweater caught his eye, slithering on the table. He grabbed it and jumped after her, grasping her wrist. “Hey.”

She turned and looked at him. He released her.

“What’s your name?”

“Julie,” she said.

“Come to the Atrium later, Jules,” he said. “I’ll be there until nine.”

She squinted at him, retrieved her sweater, and left without a response.

Raff returned to his table and sat, watching the now cold coffee motionlessly occupy its cup.

““And I knew nothing, looking into the heart of light...””¹

“Are you alright, sugar?” Kat sat opposite him, pushing the cold dark liquid aside.

“What?”

“You’re speaking poetic nonsense again.” Kat set her elbows on the table and cradled her chin in her hands, whispering, “Did you know you do that when something bothers you?”

He did not.

“It’s no nonsense. It’s Eliot, Kat.”

“Mhm. Was that a student of yours?” she asked.

Raff grabbed the cold coffee and gulped it in its entirety. He had forgotten that he was, indeed, a professor and Sweater Girl was, more likely than not, a student.

“Julie. Yes,” he heard himself say, feeling the coffee push its way up his esophagus. “No. Sorry, Kat.” He ran out the diner, leaving Kat behind.

Outside, April trapped him in bright, stabbing sunlight. Raff winced and pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds. He tapped one out, lit it, and took a deep drag. The sun let go and Raff scampered for his apartment.

¹ From “The Burial of the Dead,” *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot