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MISSING PIECES

By Michael Golvach

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Brain Spanking Vol IV: Wolf At The Door

MISSING PIECES

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
Inspiration I Will Never Forget.*

~

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Part I

◆ ◆ ◆

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 continued to pedal. 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 that one of her tormentors had managed to jam 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.

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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 screaming and beginning to cry, and some stomping on her backpack with their dirty shoes. They all rode away soon enough, but not before kicking a little more dirt into her face.

“How’s your ugly face, you sick, pasty freak?” yelled the last of them as he got on his bike, looking around to see if anyone had noticed what happened. Only worried about whether or not he’d get in trouble. “See ya. Wouldn’t wanna be ya,” 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 began to cry, wailing something unintelligible. Not even aware of the scrapes and cuts around her cheeks and right eye, though the warmth of the blood welling up 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 began to ride 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 children, having been exposed to such violence. Not that they’d had to actually suffer it. Cruelty by proxy. Mandi’s soul was crying, but her heart wasn’t bleeding.



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

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

Finally, the door swung open and her 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 demanded. Mandi looked up at her, the tears welling up in her eyes even though she fought them with everything she had inside her. “Do you? And what have you done to your hair? Disgraceful.”

Mandi began to open her mouth and her mother slapped 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—”

Her mother turned and stormed away. “The other kids aren’t due to be home at supper time in this household,” her mother said, without looking back. She called out to her father. “Go see to your little darling.”

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

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She began to run to the bathroom so she could look in the mirror.

“Hold it right there, missy,” her father called out and she stopped in her tracks, not turning around to face him. “Just where in the Hell do you think you’re heading? You know it’s supper time. You were supposed to come home directly from school. If it were up to your 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 replied, holding up her hands and showing the black dirt. Her voice was steady, but threatening to tremble, as she began to sob inaudibly.

“All right, then,” he said. “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 toward the sink and began washing the filth from her hands. Her vision began to double, treble, and then double again as she fought to keep her balance. Everything was starting to appear 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 was blurry, even 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 was floating in a small puddle of drying blood, the eyelid drooping down, puffing up and turning maroon.

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She touched at her right eye again and felt nothing. She covered it with one hand, looking straight forward and held out 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 more white than it naturally was as she dropped the brush back into the sink. With or without her right eye covered, she saw the same thing.

She began screaming at the top of her lungs.

Within seconds her parents were both banging at the door. “What in the 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. At least 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 she kept stealing glances into the mirror at what had once been described to her by her father as a beautiful face.

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

The door began to splinter 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,” her father yelled.

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

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The knob finally burst out and fell to the ground. Her father swung the door open, almost knocking it off its hinges as he stormed into the room. His face was red with frustration, 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 little 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 little 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." Her mother's face began to turn red with pure hatred.

"But, mommy," Mandi replied. "I'm only 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."

"Take care of you? Why, your father and I—"

"I'll handle this, sweetheart," her father interjected. Mother stepped back, a look of fear in her eyes now. 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

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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 onto her left wrist and dragged her out of the tub. Her stomach scratched against the clean white tile floor as her blouse began to tear 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,” her father said. His one hand moved to grasp both of her wrists inside of it and the other grabbed hold of her hair. She squealed and began kicking as he dragged her up the stairs to her bedroom.

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

“Please don’t do this, daddy,” she pleaded. “I didn’t do anything wrong. The other kids. They hurt me. They hurt me bad, daddy.” She was crying now, her hand moving away from her face, looking up with her one good eye at her father’s unwavering visage. She couldn’t feel, or see out of, the right one anymore.

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“They hurt me bad?” he said, looking 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.”

“Good God,” he exclaimed, finally taking a look at her. The wounds from her collision with the road, the pancake bruise from her mother’s smack and the dents and bumps from her ride up the stairs all showed perfectly now. And her top right eyelid was huge and purple, pus beginning to join its enlarged 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 was sobbing now, 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?”

Her father stood above her, looking down. His face was a mask of pain, anger and confusion. “Look at what they’ve done to my little girl,” he said. “Look at what those monsters have done.” He wasn’t the sort of man who would ever admit that 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 said, making his belt into a whip and giving



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her a good crack across her wrists as she held them up to defend her face. "What did you do?" She rolled over onto her stomach and tried to curl up as he grabbed her and laid her across his lap. "What did you do to make them treat you like this?" He began whipping 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 him for help. But no help was forthcoming. No help ever was.

It was only a matter of time before everything started to go dull and the welts from the lash of the belt didn't even seem to exist anymore. She couldn't feel anything, and she could barely hear her father's voice as he continued to rage.

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

Her father continued to beat her, finishing up with a crack to the side of her cowering head as he stood up 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 even bothered to give her eye a good look. He was always too busy looking elsewhere.

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

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

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

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

“You straighten yourself out, missy,” he demanded, grabbing at her wrist 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 your 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 up 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

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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 your 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 was strangling her hard with one hand and muffling 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 really hard about what you did to deserve what you got. Do you understand me?” Mandi stared off into the distance. There were 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



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certain it's nothing that 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 that 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 your mother in the morning. Then, maybe, we'll buy you some proper pants."

He slammed the door behind him, and she began to cry. Silently. Her body shaking with horror and 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 outcome would be. Nobody loved her. Not really. Nobody cared. That was the truth of this world.

After an hour or so, she wet her bed to avoid having to leave her room to use the family bathroom. When she finished soiling her 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 of the fancy ornaments, books, toys and pictures she could ever want. Perhaps if her parents knew that she would trade all of 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.



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Looking out her window into the night sky, she caught a glimpse of her reflection. A freakish, ugly whore. Like they all 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 began to wiggle 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 that 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?

She lay back down on her bed and stripped naked, laying on her stomach. She wondered how her father would like to see this in the morning, as she dragged the jagged piece of glass from her right wrist up to her elbow on the inside. Would he be horrified that his little girl was dead, or would he feel cheated, having only mother to turn to if he wanted to satisfy his sexual urges? Maybe both. It wouldn't really matter to her, either way, very soon.

Still, she thanked her God for the small blessings in her life. The God whom she still believed loved her even though He'd seen fit to put her here. She thanked Him for the few

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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 began to pump out more urgently and she felt her life slipping away. Her left eye closed very 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.

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II

Wednesday, May 15th, 1985

Mike Skyler finished ringing up his last customer at the Piggles & Wiggles grocery store around three in the afternoon. It seemed like an eternity since he'd moved to this small town. Away from his parents. All 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 had thought for sure was the one. A girl who had given him every signal she could to let him know that the interest was mutual. A girl who had, instead, set him up with one of her friends, sabotaged that relationship and then begun dating his pot dealer almost immediately afterward.

Mike could never make sense of that situation. He was a smart, decent, good looking guy. Maybe he was too pretty for her, or the women he found himself naturally 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

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found it harder and harder to come up with reasons not to pack up and leave. To just go anywhere else.

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 up all the parking lots.

His only friends, Vinnie and Lissa, were waiting outside by the coin operated pony ride. “Spare a quarter?” Vinnie yelled out as Mike exited the building, giving him a jump.

“Why? Are you a cop?” he asked. “If you are, that’s entrapment.” Mike and Vinnie bumped fists, laughing.

Mike tousled Lissa’s hair and she blushed slightly at his touch. “Knock it off, Mikey,” she said, trying to get it so that the layers fell just right again.

“Yeah, watch your hands, pal,” Vinnie said, messing up Lissa’s hair even more.

“What are you even doing here, dude?” Mike asked. “Doesn’t the world usually just 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 of 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?”



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

They were definitely stoned.

Vinnie’s rough good looks were the polar opposite of Lissa’s naturally flawless skin and face. A face she covered with more and more makeup every day. Mike still remembered exactly what she’d felt like, how she’d 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 Mike 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 was trying to talk around past hurt, it was like she was digging it up and bringing it back to life.

Mike shrugged, laughing. “It’s all right, Lissa. We can mess around behind his back tomorrow.”



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“As if 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?” Mike asked, letting his hand drift, obviously, down toward Lissa’s ass as Vinnie smacked it away and grinned. “Oh, yeah. Brain cells. You ready to waste a few more?”

Vinnie grabbed Lissa’s hand, and they followed Mike around to the grocery store’s back lot to light up.

“You’ve gotta 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 began loading the weed into the bowl. “Then what do you think is gonna happen?”

Lissa punched Vinnie lightly on the arm. “Stop it. Come on.”

He pushed the pipe over to Mike and he grabbed it, checking the surrounding area again, just to be sure. He was about to become paranoid, even 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,” Mike said between hacks. “Then you’re going to see what it looks like when your woman isn’t faking it.”



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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 all started passing the pipe back and forth between themselves. When they’d had enough, or thought they had, Vinnie snuffed out the pipe, scraped the screen, and hid the pipe and the 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 Mike looked at each other, trying not to laugh. Lissa swatted them. “It is. It’s peaceful. No one ever comes back here. We could just chill for a little bit.”

“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 Mike. “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 kind of brooding bullshit is why your poor, lonely ass hasn’t gotten laid since Virginia left.”

Mike gave Vinnie a disdainful look. “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



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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 started snorting, giggling. "Fuck you guys."

"Seriously, dude. You gotta get yourself something," Vinnie said as he continued to look around. Maybe he really was expecting 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 Mike's hand a loving, affectionate stroke.

"The day I start pretending I'm you, Vinnie, promise you'll kill me." Mike 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.

"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 maybe in the shower." Lissa nudged him harder and he started coughing and laughing again, shoving her to the side.



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“Yeah, okay. Where do you wanna go now, Vinnie? What do you wanna do that’s gonna help me move on? What will shut you up?” Mike asked as he started to walk 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 outta there, man. They know you in there. You’re totally fucking high right now. Not a good idea.”

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

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

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

“Fuck you. We’re going.” Lissa smacked Vinnie on the shoulder and began marching away, motioning for everyone to follow. Vinnie hopped to immediately. In his stoned daze, Mike 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 glances. When Mike had first met her, she never looked at him, or touched him, with anything but an openness that he had mistaken 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.



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They reached the farmers market in about five minutes. By then, their eyes were looking much less glassy and the buzz was starting to even 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. Mike looked around, feeling inside his pockets for how much money he had on him. It felt like 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, but 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. Things had to get desperate before he’d remember to withdraw a dime.

He walked slowly around the market, lightly touching all of 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 from within them. To just do that, please. It would make them oh so happy. He smiled like an idiot 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 was pointing at the fruit, but he also had a perverted look in his eyes as he glanced around at the ladies shopping. His eyebrows bobbed up and down as he started to make a lewd gesture with his tongue. Lissa batted him on the head and he scowled as they disappeared farther into the mix.



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“Fuckin’ guy,” Mike mumbled to himself as he wandered over to the peach stand. As he made his way there, he noticed the women. Like Vinnie had primed him to not be able to avoid. Like he’d gotten so good at. Most of them were older women that he’d never seen before and didn’t look forward to seeing again. The kind of women who had, maybe, had a day a long, long time ago. Women who were way 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 could feel the saliva beginning to pool up in his mouth, which helped to remove some of 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 disgust.

“Just one,” he said. She told him the price and he pulled a quarter out from his pocket and flipped 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 ever feeling so good.

Turning around, Mike 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 apologised,



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swallowing hard to get the words out and the peach down at the same time.

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

In the moment that she’d looked up at him, Mike could see that she wasn’t much older than he was, certainly not a “ma’am”, and he began to feel a bit foolish. Or maybe it was just the weed. She still stood in front of him, combing through the peaches, as he tried to come up with a suitable apology, but his mind started to lose track.

She looked as though she had a decent figure, although the long sleeved sack-cloth dress she wore made it hard to tell anything more than that 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 continued to stare at her profile, he realised that 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 and reflected the sunlight like a mirror. Her nose wasn’t too big or too small. And the freckles from the sun peppered her face in the most exquisite patterns. The more he looked, the more he became sure she was the most gorgeous 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



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attention. She looked up at him with her exposed eye and waited. She began looking down again as he continued. “I didn’t mean to imply that. What I mean is, I didn’t mean that I thought you were, um...”

“Yes? Which didn’t you mean? That you find me attractive or elderly?” she asked, shooting him a sideways glance, the left side of her lip turning up slightly while her eye looked down.

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

“Look,” she said, resting 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 just 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 thought, perhaps, you remembered me from yesterday. But, how could you? That was foolish of me, I suppose. Although, 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 a little unconscious bow and nodding her head in assumed agreement that their interaction was over.

Mike’s hand began to shake 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.

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He couldn't remember ever 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," Mike continued, "So..."

"Good at what?" she asked, batting her long 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.

"This whole thing," he continued. "Just 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 now. Something he'd said had finally 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..." he stammered.

She held up a finger and pressed it to his lips, quickly withdrawing it. Her finger smelt like apricots and he could almost imagine it tasting like them, 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



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complicate your life with any 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 down 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’.”

“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? Just some random person he happened to bump into, or someone he’d met and then just 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 up 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

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began backing away from him. “Please, don’t ever call me that.” The look on her face had gone from mild amusement and politeness to something close 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, but it was an honest mistake. I just wanted to get to know you.”

“Why?” she asked, her tone now angry and hurt. “What do you want from me? Why are you playing games with me?” Her voice began to rise. “What did you think was going to happen next? Did you think we’d fall in love and get married and have kids and grow old together?”

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

“What did you think this was going to 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. Playing with other people’s feelings isn’t humorous. And I don’t know who put you up to this, but it’s not funny, so you can quit pretending you’re stoned.”

She threw a wad of bills down on the market table, stuffed a handful of peaches into her basket and stormed off. He saw a tear start to well up 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 almost comical.

“You still got it, kid,” Vinnie said, punching him in the back of the shoulder. He shrugged it off as he continued to



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watch her push her way through the crowd. Hoping against hope that she would turn back around and look at him.

“Jesus, Vinnie, shut up,” Lissa said. She turned to Mike. “Sorry, buddy. Was she the one?” Lissa started to snicker.

Mike turned around, glaring at them both. “Yeah, maybe. You don’t know? I thought you two knew everything.” Looking around, he could see that his attempt at street pick-up had drawn quite an audience. “Let’s get out of here,” he whispered to Vinnie and Lissa.

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

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

“Totally, man,” Lissa agreed. “Forget about her. She seemed like a real bitch.”

They walked away, Lissa and Vinnie both rubbing at Mike’s head in consolation. “Poor guy. Don’t worry. There’s more out there like her,” Lissa said.

Mike smacked their hands away, looking embarrassed and disturbed. “You guys are my friends? She said she thought I remembered her. From yesterday. What did that mean?”

“Maybe you’re just misremembering a few moments ago, dude,” Vinnie said. “Or maybe you just forgot about yesterday. She’s probably a customer from the grocery store. How can you possibly remember all of them?”

Mike started to chuckle. “I think I’d remember her. But, yeah, you’re right. I should just let it go. Maybe she was a little too dramatic.”



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“You think?” Vinnie and Lissa replied.

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

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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 from your mouth makes sense to someone, anyone, except just you. And really speak.

“Dude,” Vinnie laughed, smacking Mike on the back of the head. “You okay? You’re talking gibberish.” Lissa sat behind Mike 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?”

Mike’s eyes slowly opened, 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?”

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

“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 said, taking another hit and sitting down, putting his arm around Lissa. “You wouldn’t stop bitching the whole way back from the market.”

“I think maybe I got a bad peach.”

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

And Mike 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 had 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 were seeing 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.” He 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. Maybe just with the



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idea of her. And then, yeah, she went crazy on me. I thought she was gonna rip my head off.”

“It’s all right, Mikey,” Lissa said, stroking 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 much older than us.” Lissa’s gaze started to drift. Everyone was starting to float on a high again. “That’s the problem with 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 pondered out loud. “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?” Mike asked, giggling. “You’re not making any sense, dude.”

“Think about it, man.” Vinnie was resolute in his opinion, even though his eyes were saying that he wasn’t even sure what he’d just said. “There’s the whole world and there’s that box that 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



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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," Mike said. He grabbed for the pipe, but Vinnie was still huffing on it. "Like I said, she just 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 gave Lissa's shoulder a squeeze as she threw him a disgruntled look. "They can see those rape-eyes and they know to run, instinctively."

"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 very 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 of your ass, right? 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 started going into your 'I'm so shy' routine and she probably bought it for a few seconds. Then you got brave and said something just totally



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fucked up. Not because you're fucked up, or because 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 fuckin' line on the highway and she totally didn't get where you were coming from, and she ran as fast as she could the minute she realised that all you wanted to do was take her home, throw her on the bed and slam her. Home run. Tell me I didn't nail that shit."

"You didn't nail that shit," Mike 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 fuckin' close. You gotta admit that. 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."

"Really?" Mike asked, looking over at Lissa and then 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 began nudging Lissa, his eyes saying 'see?'. "And she was very polite. I mean, extremely polite. And she seemed kind. I sort of fumbled over my words when I was talking to her. I called her 'ma'am'." Vinnie and Lissa both winced. "But she was cool about it. She already knew my name, for some reason, 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.

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You know what I'm saying. Then I called her 'miss', and she went completely insane. That's probably about the time you two showed up."

"She asked you to call her 'miss', and you called her 'miss'? That's it?" Lissa asked, staring off into space. "Really?"

"No shit," Mike replied. "I don't know what the problem was. Like I said, she told me to call her that. It was like an inside joke between us, I thought."

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

"Yeah. What are you gonna do, right?" Mike grabbed the pipe. Taking a huge hit off of it, he began to stare up into the sky with his friends. "The clouds are really cool looking today, man."

"Yeah," Vinnie and Lissa replied.

"Maybe I'm over-thinking the whole thing, anyway. I've never seen her before, that I can recall. She could be somebody's wife. Who could say? I just thought we had a connexion there for a second."

"Busted. You fucking asshole." Vinnie was still looking up into the clouds. "I told you you were all up in your fuckin' head with that romance shit."

"It's not that, man. Just, sometimes, you know. You know?" Neither Vinnie nor Lissa replied. Maybe they weren't even listening anymore. "I thought, maybe, she was the one," Mike continued. "Or the next best thing. She felt that way. So real. So strong. I think."



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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,” Mike slowly replied. His eyes remained focused on the clouds.

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

Vinnie’s head snapped back down. He quickly looked over at Mike and then back at Lissa. His mouth was agape. “Oh, my God. Lissa.” He started giggling. “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 said, grabbing the pipe and taking a drag. “But, fuck that bitch if she’s going to mess with my boys.” She looked over at Mike, smiling. “You can do better, Mikey. You deserve better than that... That thing. Whatever it was. She talks weird, anyway.”

“How so?” Mike asked.

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

“You mean a schoolmarm?”

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



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

“I don’t know,” Mike replied, looking at the ground. “Maybe we just swear too much.”

“Please,” Lissa said. “We talk normal. She talks like my fuckin’ parents. 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 as he gave her a kiss on the cheek that, somehow, made its way to her lips as she grudgingly reciprocated.

Mike looked back up 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. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I need to meet somebody new.” He looked over at Lissa, who had 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!”

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IV

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

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

"Hey, Mikey," Lissa's voice rang out. Tinny and full of life. "Wakey, wakey. Are you seriously still asleep or are you ignoring me? Vinnie said you were probably 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 that you're working a cashier's job to save up 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



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putting in a good word for you. And, oh yeah, bonus. She's super hot. Plus, she gets high, so she'd 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... Too late. You're meeting her tonight after work. I already know she's free. It's gonna be good to have the real you with us again, baby. Vinnie and I both love you. Kisses. Bye."

Mike 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 any other 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 that 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 she 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 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



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days. Virginia had insisted he buy it, so he could drive her around, but there was no point wasting good weed 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 laying on the front seat. He stopped, opened up the car and proceeded to search it for any remnants of her existence. When he'd found them all, he walked them to the 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, much nicer than his own. It was essentially two long buildings, each made up of multiple condominiums, divided by the most 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 an actual one if they saw one. The general assumptions, drawn from endless hours of pointless Spanish language television watching, were just that they had incredibly poor taste and that all of the women were insanely gorgeous. 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



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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. Maybe they reminded him of a place he'd like to be on the inside, too. Home. Whatever, or wherever, 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 babushka that covered the right side of her face. His own face went white as he continued to walk, 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. Noticing 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 pulled his face into hers, gently brushing his lips with her own. Teasing at them with her tongue. The soft warmth of her apricot-scented breath moistening his lips as they began to kiss deeply and passionately. She began 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 began exploring his neck, her hands opening his shirt and rubbing at his



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trousers. Then, to show him her true regret over their unfortunate meeting the previous day, in a way that words never could, her mouth began to work its way down his body.

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

“I’m sorry. Excuse me,” she said quickly 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?” Then her left eye opened wide as she recognised him. “Oh, my Lord,” she groaned, cupping her mouth with her hands. “Look,” she said, starting to approach him. “About yesterday. I owe you an apology.”

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

“Seriously,” he said. “It’s no big deal. 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 that I didn’t remember you until after you’d left. No worries.”

He turned around and began walking away as she hurried up 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

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pointed that out to you not all that long ago. Just keep pretending you believe that's true.

"Wait," she begged, almost like a little girl. "I just 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. Only 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 understandable that you mistook what I said. My name isn't even close to '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 felt like it wasn't going anywhere soon. "It's nice 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. Mike's 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



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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 further. "I'm not what you think. 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 sound like I think 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 away his hand. "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 just 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, 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."



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“You’re really a very sweet man,” she replied. “And you remember me?” He didn’t answer and she didn’t look quite sure. “I don’t think 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 began moving in to frame her face with his hands. Keeping them at a safe distance. “Just remember that 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 that 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. But there was nothing there except what looked like a white patch surrounded by slightly bruised flesh. His face betrayed what he’d seen. A micro-expression of fright, invisible to most people’s attention, but not to hers. She’d seen it too many times before.

“But, maybe 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 like you didn’t.”



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

“Exactly,” she answered. “You’re a sweet young man. You really are.” She reached up with her left hand and pulled his face down toward her, kissing him quickly on the cheek. “You’re very kind. You may go now. You don’t have to explain. It’s all right, really.”

“But, I’m not...” He was stuttering again. Beginning to follow 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 had started running from her left eye. “It didn’t change anything. I still want to get to know you.”

“And then what?” she asked, stopping suddenly, but not returning, as he continued to slowly approach. “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 believe me when I tell you that I’m really not mad at you, and I don’t think any less 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. Even if things did work out and you did like me when we were alone. If you could keep yourself from hating me for getting you into a relationship where you feel like a bastard when you want to leave me for some

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legitimate reason, you'd get sick and tired of having to explain me to your friends, and you'd feel guilty about everything. Believe me, I'm doing you a favour by letting you go before I let you in. I can see in your eyes, already, that 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 that 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, not even with your eyes, Tuesday, when you rang me up at your grocery." She began walking 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 harder. 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, sniffling 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 screamed. For everyone's listening pleasure. "Go away."



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“Oh, my God,” Vinnie shouted out as he began moving toward them. “Is that the crazy bitch from yesterday?”

“You see,” she said. “Already, I’m the crazy witch.”

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

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

“I just...”

“Please?” she begged. Her voice sounded strained, impassioned. Like a little 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?”

Mike brushed him aside, picking up the pace. “I gotta 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



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hard enough, please tell me you can see that you don't want to have anything to do with that chick, now."

Mike's insides were boiling. His face was starting to show it. He only had a little 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 be there. Just..." He looked back at Vinnie angrily as he started to cross the street to the grocery store. "Just fucking keep your mouth shut every once in a while. Not everything's your business."

"All right," Vinnie replied, stepping up his pace. "I get it, dude. You're tired. You need to get stoned, and you gotta get to work." He looked around and began to shout as Mike moved closer to the front entrance of the Piggles & Wiggles. "Just 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?" Mike asked. They stood outside the sliding front doors of the grocery store. And Mike thought to himself that, maybe, he would like to get high with Miss Manners. Or, maybe, getting high all the time wasn't solving any of his problems. And, maybe, he shouldn't be judging anyone, especially by that yardstick. "She's got some problems. I think she might have a fake eye." He motioned around his head,

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envisioning the babushka. “She’s probably just had some 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 other 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 all getting high together? Sure, maybe she’s around our age, but tell me that wouldn’t start freaking you the fuck out after a while?”

“Michael,” a voice boomed from inside the grocery store. “Time to get to work, son. Time to punch the clock.” His manager stood with his hands at his side, 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,” Mike said, waving Vinnie off. “Tonight.”

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

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

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V

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

She presses her face against the door for a moment, imagining that 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 down 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 someone were there to notice.

Then 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 starting to pull it down, she stops. Her hands trace over

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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 that it isn't there, most of all. More than anyone else. Perhaps she's the one person in the world that 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 that life was fair, and that her God still loved her.

She leaves the babushka on and tears begin streaming 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.



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