

RC Review 2016

Bonus Web Content

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Touch of Grace

Ashley Bishel

Oh my God, it's so hot in there, isn't it? I'm going to be freezing my ass off out here in a couple minutes but it just smells so gross in there, just the beer and the weed and the sweat, I feel like I'm going to get a migraine or something...do you have a light? Ah, thanks. I really shouldn't smoke. I usually don't, I swear. My asshole ex-boyfriend who got me into it and I mostly quit when we broke up, but I just spent the last two hours in a smelly room with people from high school, so fuck it.

Are you from around here? ..huh, that's cool. No, I grew up on the other side of town, moved in high school, left for college a couple years ago and all that. But everyone's back for Christmas and Sammie knows the guy who lives here, I think. She invited me out of nowhere today, her other friend bailed and I think she didn't wanna come alone. So I figured you know, what the hell. I haven't seen most of these people in years, I'm kinda curious. We've all changed a lot. I don't even know Sammie that well anymore. We played soccer together in high school but... we kind drifted by the time we graduated. I don't even know where she went to college. I think it was one of those, like, tiny private schools where they have a massive cocaine problem.

It's so weird being here again. I never wanted to come back. This place, it like...creeps up on you. It's a lot smaller than it looks. I know almost everyone at this party, did I tell you? Yeah, there's like...a ton of history.

Someone's probably going to start crying or yelling in about an hour cause there's like, four different broken up couples here right now. I don't know why people come to these things. I don't think most of us even like each other, honestly. It's just so small here, we don't really know anyone else. That's why I had to get out, you know? It was so suffocating, I hated it so much.

So it's really weird to be back right now. I used to babysit for the Dominguez family and they lived like, three streets that way. I could walk over there in.... two minutes? Their daughter is named Grace and she's a sweetheart. She's seven or eight now, I guess. I wonder if she remembers me. I started working for them when she was three, and I kind of remember stuff when I was three? Not too much, though.

She was a creepy kid. No, no, not like, in a bad way, like that little kid from the Sixth Sense or whatever. She couldn't help it, I mean, she was three. But like... oh no, no, I'm fine, it's just cold out here. I should have brought my jacket.

...no, I mean, it wasn't horror movie stuff. It's just kind of like when...do you have a cat? Or a dog? Well, I have a cat, she's like five hundred years old and we've had her forever. Her name is Lucy, she's super fat. Anyway, sometimes she kind of just – stops and like, stares into space? And it's probably a spider or whatever, but you kind of have to wonder if it's something else? Grace was like that. I mean, she'd be totally cute and all that one second and then she'd blink a couple times and her face would get all serious. It was just - creepy.

Also, she couldn't quite talk yet. I mean, she could, I guess, but she didn't really like to. Some three year olds won't shut up but she was just really quiet, so whenever she said anything it just felt kinda important.

And...oh God, okay, here we go. I'm drunk enough for this. You said you're not from here, right? So you haven't heard this yet. Everyone else here has, and I don't ever talk about it anymore because, well...that didn't work out so well for me. But I'll tell you if you promise not to listen to the whole thing before you judge me. Okay? You promise? Okay. I think she could see the future.

I don't really know when I started noticing it, I guess? Like it took a couple months for sure, it was mostly really dumb stuff, really little stuff. Let me think... okay, so like I would take her out to the park and she'd say "ladybug" and, like, Okay Grace, ladybugs, cool. But then it would rain, and I'd get back and realize her raincoat had ladybugs on it.

But then...okay, I guess I really started thinking about it after this thing happened with my boyfriend. Same asshole who got me addicted to this crap. I'm going to be so pissed if I get lung cancer because of him. The only reason I kept dating him for so long was because he was a senior when I was a freshman and I was flattered he was into me. Dumb, right? But what freshman wonders what kind of loser tries to date someone almost four years younger than him? Not fucking me, that's who.

Anyway, I was still dating him and I was playing with Grace one night when she crawls up to me and frowns and like...pats my cheek, kind of? Like that, see? Really gently. And she looks like she's about to cry and so I'm like Grace, what's wrong? or whatever and she thinks about it for a couple seconds and then says "ouch" really seriously. Which is... kind of weird behavior, right? So I was thinking about that for a couple days.

Anyway, sometime later that week my ex hit me. I don't really remember why he did it, it was definitely

something small and stupid. In retrospect, I should've broke up with him on the spot, but I was just...in shock, I guess. Anyway, it fucking hurt so I put a pack of peas on it when I got home, and I remember looking in the mirror and I saw that it was right where Grace touched me.

I mean, I just thought it was a really freaky coincidence, not "Holy shit, this three year old can see the future". But I started paying more attention, and I noticed stuff like the ladybug when it rained, and whenever her parents were gonna get home late, she'd bring me the big book of fairytales to read her in bed and we'd have time to read the whole thing, and there was a whole week where she kept talking about "the purple" and right after that she got sick. Guess what color the cough syrup was. Yeah. I kept telling myself I didn't really believe it, maybe she was just like...really intuitive or whatever. It was like that for a year or so. I didn't say anything because, again, I didn't want to sound fucking crazy. And she was a really cute kid, and I liked babysitting her and I guess I didn't want, like, an X-Men situation. I didn't want a bunch of doctors running tests on her or something. I don't know. I was fifteen, okay?

I'm pretty sure her parents knew. How could they not? I remember Dr. Dominguez was getting ready to leave one night, and she picked up Grace to tell her goodbye. Grace touched her head and said "wet" and giggled. She didn't say anything then, but I saw her grab an umbrella before she left. And then it rained that night! It had been dry the whole week and then – boom. Downpour. I remember there were even flood warnings.

But the only time I tried to say something about it – it was really vague, something about how she was super intuitive? Her dad gave me this weird look, and said, "I have no idea what you're implying" in a really

cold voice and I chickened out. I mean, they had to know. But they wouldn't admit it, so I didn't say shit. You don't want adults to disapprove of you, especially when they're paying you money. So I shut up until the accident.

I didn't know there was gonna be an accident, but Grace definitely did. She was freaking out that day, crying and screaming, and she never did stuff like that. But this one day – I think it was a year later? I was still dating the asshole, but I could already drive, so I must've been about sixteen. Anyway, I had to bring her into her mom's clinic to get a flu shot. It wasn't like, going to get ice cream or something, I couldn't exactly tell Dr. Dominguez I missed her appointment because Grace threw a tantrum.

I didn't know what to do. She never acted like that with me before. She was screaming and crying and ...God, it wasn't like her at all. She wasn't really saying anything that made sense, she was just refusing to get in the car, and like, sobbing. I tried literally everything, I brought half her toys into the car for her and I promised her candy and everything and finally I just had to pick her up and put her in myself.

That was probably the freakiest part, cause she got quiet right away. It was like she had an off switch. It was so fucking bizarre, and I was like...super on-edge the entire time I was driving. I should have listened to her. I know I should have. Deep down, I knew I knew something really bad was gonna happen. But... you have to understand that at this point I was trying to talk myself out of the whole idea she was a psychic. Her parents clearly didn't approve of it, or at least talking about it, so I was in the process of convincing myself I had an overactive imagination. I thought they'd know best. It's really amazing how impressionable I used to be. I know I

fucked up, but...you get it, right? I just wanted to do what I was supposed to. I thought I was doing the right thing.

Well, what happened was a truck blew a red light when I was in middle of the intersection. It hit the passenger side of the car, and Grace was on my side, thank God, so it wasn't as bad as it could've been. But it was pretty fucking bad. The truck was going fast, like a good fifteen goddamn miles over the speed limit. And they kept going, those assholes. We flipped over, and they didn't even stop.

I don't remember any of that, though. I remember this huge, like, jolt, and being scared out of my mind that I was gonna die and then waking up in the ER. I had a pretty bad concussion, and bad cuts from all the glass. I needed stiches in like, five places. I've still got this scar, see? Grace was a little bruised up but she was mostly okay. Thank God. I mean... I don't know what I would've done if she wasn't, I felt guilty enough. But she was traumatized, she wouldn't get near a car for weeks. I didn't hear that from her parents, though. My mom talked to someone from their church, I think. I was afraid to talk to them myself, I felt so guilty. I felt like it was my fault even though I knew it was the asshole driving the mystery truck's fault, but no one could find them – that was a whole other big thing too, that they couldn't find it. This town isn't that big at all, like I said, so if they lived here we would've found them. It was on the news in the whole county and everything. But no one got a good look at the license plate because they were all trying to help us or call 911 so they fucking got away with it. We could have died.

I know it's super cliché to say this, but something about a near death experience changes you. I broke up with my boyfriend, for one thing. I tried to tell him what

happened, and he laughed. I went home that night and tried to think one good reason I hadn't already broken up with him and the only thing I could come up with was that I was scared to. Well, getting hit by a freaking truck was a hell of a lot scarier than some loser who couldn't find anyone his own age to date him. So that was one good thing that came out of it. Probably the only good thing.

And now I was absolutely convinced I was right about Grace. I tried to talk to my parents about it, though, and that was a bad idea. I told them the whole thing: the ladybugs, the purple cough syrup, when I got hit, the truck, all of it. The trouble is that my parents are the most painfully rational people that I've ever met in my life. I shouldn't have told them. But I guess I...I don't know. I freaked out a little ...well, it was a big mistake, because they threw me to the psychologists. Plural. I saw like four therapists that year, and in a town like this, it's scandalous to see one. There were rumors around me up til I left for college. That I was crazy, that I made it all up for attention, that there wasn't even a truck and that I just flipped over myself because I was that bad of a driver – which is stupid, because there were eyewitnesses, but people are stupid. That's two years of people looking at me strange out of the corner of their eyes and trying to pretend they weren't staring when I turned around. Not everyone, of course, but enough that I got the message. I shut up. Talk about more harm than good.

And I never got to babysit Grace again. I don't blame them. Well, I guess I do. I'm still angry. I loved her so much, and they wouldn't let me see her. But I guess it's understandable. I got into an accident and then went around raving about how their daughter had

superpowers and then had to go to therapy.

I wouldn't accept it at first. I tried calling them. No one would pick up for weeks and weeks. I left increasingly pathetic voicemails. I was almost crying on the last one, just begging to see her. In retrospect, it probably made me see even crazier. Later that week my mom sat me down and explained to me as gently as possible that it probably was best that I didn't ask to babysit her anymore. I needed time to rest, and heal, and all that. It broke my heart.

But I guess I was lucky. We're both alive, and she grew up into a perfectly happy girl, or at least that's what I heard. I moved away senior year – Dad got a job a few towns over, I was ready to be done with this place... too many bad memories. I stopped having so many nightmares, I went off to college, and I never ever talked about it. Not til now. It kinda feels good. Cathartic, and all that.

I've been thinking about trying to see Grace while I'm around. I'm not sure if they'd let me, or if I even want to. I just wanna tell her I'm sorry I didn't listen that day. And that she should be careful, cause people can be cruel when they don't understand what your deal is. But I – I don't want to bring up any bad memories for her. Maybe I've already done enough, you know? And I think – I feel like she's probably going to be okay. I mean, she can see the future. I still believe that, even after all that shit I went through for it. And the gift of foresight or whatever – that's one hell of a leg up, right? So she's gotta be doing okay. She's gotta be.

Letter to the Editor

Michael Flynn

New Message

To: Josh MacLeod

To whom it may concern:

You don't know me. Why would you? You've probably got way too much on your plate to keep track of a measly little human. But you should know something: I'm onto you.

Yes, you read that right. I'm onto you. I know you're up there. I'm not sure what you are – whether you're a single all-powerful God, or part of a coalition of multiple moderately powerful Gods that come together to fill each other's gaps. Maybe you're an advanced alien civilization, or on the other side of the coin, a gaggle of slack-jawed, inbreeding space rednecks.

Really, the possibilities are endless, and to list them all would be nothing more than a cheap way to fill space. So for simplicity's sake, I will just call you Dr. God, Esquire.

“But I have neither an M.D. nor a J.D.!” I imagine you whining. To which I reply: You are one lazy fucker. From the time of the universe's creation to now, you've had time to get every degree imaginable, and yet you've been sitting on your ass, watching hundreds of species putz around, trudging along towards their eventual,

inevitable extinction. You're like a 6-year-old watching a snail make a poop. Despicable.

But I digress.

I'm onto you, Dr. God, Esquire. I know you exist.

How do I know this?

Because a friend of yours recently paid a visit to a friend of mine.

I am speaking of course of Death.

No, it's not a metaphor. Death literally walked into my friend Josh's house and paid him a visit. He told me this while we were playing Call of Duty in his parents' house. I was on break from college and he was still living at home. When he told me, he looked positively shaken, as if he had looked Death straight in the eye (ha!).

“Hey man,” he said while sneaking up behind my character and stabbing him in the back. “Death came to my house last night.”

I glanced over at him. He had always liked to say weird shit to me, trying to freak me out. But usually I could tell that he was joking – he would sound smarmy and self-aware, like a news anchor. But when he spoke about Death, he talked in his natural, slow, Midwestern brogue, and his eyes would glaze over. That's when I knew he was serious – when he sounded like himself. Deep down I still thought he was full of shit, but out of respect for my friend (and some curiosity), I did not dismiss his claim out of hand.

“No kidding! Like, *Death* Death? What did he do?”

“He just kinda knocked on the door, said ‘Hi, I'm Death,’ and walked into my house. Grabbed some chips

from the pantry and sat down on the couch. Got crumbs everywhere.”

I glanced down at the couch we were sitting on. There were still splotches of Doritos residue on several of the cushions. I looked back up at Josh, and he was staring at a chair on the other side of the room. He turned to me and pointed at the chair. “There he is. He’s sitting right there.”

I looked at the chair. The chair was empty. I looked back at Josh. He was still staring, shaking slightly.

I see you shaking your head, Dr. God, Esquire. “Death’s only an acquaintance!” you’re saying. “He just kind of hangs around, and I’m too scared to tell him to leave—”

BULL. SHIT. Doesn’t matter whether you’re best friends or sworn enemies or you just kind of say “hi” sometimes. I know you two are in cahoots. You’re his accomplice. Or, more likely, he’s *your* accomplice.

Which was it, Dr. God, Esquire? Did Death visit my friend just ‘cause? Or did you send him? I’m sure he’d say you sent him. That seems like the kind of person he is, always trying to shoo the blame elsewhere. “Don’t blame me – that fucker was 87 years old, he was bound to go sometime! Don’t blame me – if he had used protection, he wouldn’t have gotten AIDS! Don’t blame me – he’s in a better place! *It’s God’s will.*”

It’s God’s will.

You take a lot of Death’s collections every day, so I won’t assume that you know who my friend is. I know it’s nothing personal – you’re just so swamped with not

curing Ebola or whatever. He went just the other day – we haven’t even had the funeral yet – so you two might not have even met. He’s probably still sitting in your waiting room right now, completely and utterly confused. I’ll admit, I light up a bit knowing that you two might meet. He was always so curious about life after death. I bet he has so many questions, whereas you’ll probably only have one: “Who the fuck are you, kid?”

More bullshit. You’ll know exactly who he is. You brought him there. But you’ll have to put up a façade. Make him think that you have no control over the matter. You sly, sociopathic fuck.

By the time this letter reaches you, I hope you two have met. If not, then you’ll know who to look for.

The phrase “heterosexual life partner” is thrown around very infrequently these days, because it encompasses an incredibly specific kind of bond. One where you and another human of your same gender connect on such a deep, personal level that, at times, it seems like a kind of love. It’s rare to get two boys feeling this way about one another – much more common in girls, it seems – but “heterosexual life partner” is definitely a phrase that could be used to describe the role Josh played in my early life.

We met in middle school, where our sleepy suburban town’s three elementary schools funneled their student populations into one mass of hormones, bad B.O. and embarrassing choices of underwear. I was painfully shy and hadn’t yet grown into my dashing man-body (in fact, I still haven’t, but I’ll just leave that in God’s hands. Ha!) Josh was pretty small at the time, but looked mature for his age. His face was set to a

permanent scowl, which made him look mean.

The first time he spoke to me, we were paired together for a group project in math class. He invited me to come to his house after school to work on the project, to which I agreed. We worked silently for about an hour, and once we finished the project, there was that awkward period of silence where you aren't sure whether to show yourself out or to stick around. Josh broke the silence with a joke:

"Have you ever had a really bad day, where nothing was going right for you, where everything just kind of sucked. And then you take a moment and think to yourself: 'Hey, at least it's not raining!' And then right after you have that thought...you get hit by a bus?"

I thought about it for a second, and then burst into a fit of raucous laughter so intense that I almost asphyxiated.

"Jesus, man," he said with concern. "It's not that funny."

Josh and I were friends right away. We would talk about girls, Call of Duty, and how much of a bitch we thought our English teacher Mrs. Riordan was. As we got over, our conversations got more sophisticated. Talking about girls was no longer simply comparing who had the best jugs in the school, but now detailed discussions about the dynamics of relationships and what makes a good partner. We talked about the vastness of the universe, about philosophy and religion. We shared our deepest feelings, which we had been told by certain rockhead jocks that only girls did, and this strengthened our bond. (I'll admit, I was occasionally weirded out by how open we were with one another. "Are we gay or

something?" I asked Josh one time. He just said, "Don't worry about it, man. It's no hetero.") He was my only truly close friend in high school, and I don't know if I would have made it through without him. He might have done alright without me, but I don't know. He'd probably say the same thing about me, just to make me feel better.

The main difference between the two of us was that Josh more socially competent, by a pretty huge margin. He would actually get invited to the parties I only heard about the following Monday. Unless he was taking a girl, he always invited me to come along. I always turned down the offer, not because I didn't want to go, but because I was pathologically afraid of getting in trouble with my parents for drinking. I was also afraid that I'd end up being that one guy who overestimated his limits, drank way too much at a party, and died.

I never knew exactly what went on at those parties, but I know that Josh began to use drugs shortly after he started going. After one of them, he called me, asking if he could come to my house. I said sure. I let him in, and he was holding a weird paper tube with smoke coming out of it.

"What's that?"

"A joint, man. You want some?"

"No thanks."

"Aight, man, it's all good." He finished the joint on the patio, and threw the remains onto the front lawn. Then he let himself into the bathroom, threw up, and went to the couch where he immediately fell asleep.

It escalated from there. His grades slipped. He showed up to class infrequently, and when he did, he was often asleep. A rumor went around that he drank so

much at one party, that he would have died if not for the insane amount of cocaine in his system. When I asked him about it, he just said, “Naw, man, that’s definitely exaggerated.” He chuckled after saying that, which made me doubt him. I never trusted him 100% after that.

I was frustrated, because I knew Josh wasn’t a dumb kid. He was incredibly smart, and when a subject interested him, he would do great things with it. The problem was that barely anything in school interested him, and when he started using drugs, he completely lost interest in even pretending to make an effort. That’s not to say that the drugs caused him to be uninterested in school – that’s just who he was. You could say the drugs made him even more himself in that way. But not every quality in a person should be amplified.

We went our separate ways after graduating from high school. I went to Michigan, and he got a job at Kroger. We kept in touch, but didn’t see each other until fall break. That’s when he told me about Death.

“Hey man. Death came to my house last night.”
“No kidding! Like, *Death* Death? What did he do?”

“He just kinda knocked on the door, said ‘Hi, I’m Death,’ and walked into my house. Grabbed some chips from the pantry and sat down on the couch. Got crumbs everywhere.”

I glanced down at the couch we were sitting on. There were still splotches of Doritos residue on several of the cushions. I looked back up at Josh, and he was staring at a chair on the other side of the room. He turned to me and pointed at the chair. “There he is.

He’s sitting right there.”

I looked at the chair. The chair was empty. I looked back at Josh. He was still staring, shaking slightly.

“Josh,” I said haltingly. “What are you on right now?”

“What?” he said nervously. He instinctively tugged on his sleeve, as if to conceal something on his arm. He looked at me. I looked at him. We said nothing for a few minutes.

“Wanna play another round?” he finally said.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’ve actually gotta head back.”

When I returned to Michigan from fall break, I began to notice that people started dying. People my age. Every couple of weeks, I would hear about a young kid from my hometown dying. There was one guy who drowned, one who committed suicide, and one who froze to death while sleeping in his car, but it was usually a drug overdose.

It was never anyone I knew. I knew people who knew the people who were dying – Josh might have known some of them – but I never knew the people who were dying, not personally. In a way, I felt proud. I was happy that the people I knew personally weren’t the kind of people who would die early. Part of it also stemmed from a belief that it would never be me. And why would it be me? I didn’t drink or do drugs. I was a good kid. And ok, sometimes accidents happened. But not to me, and not to my people.

But then I thought of what Josh had said about how he had seen Death. I thought of his drug use. I thought of how he had pulled on his sleeve, out of

instinct. Out of fear that I would see...something.

I thought of the pictures I had been seeing of Josh on his Facebook. He was beginning to look frail and pale.

When Josh tried to point out Death to me, I couldn't see him. Death had no interest in me.

Josh, on the other hand...

Holy shit.

Josh was right. Death was there. For him. Josh had gotten on some real bad shit, and Death was waiting for him to OD. Perhaps even *goad*ing him.

I can't even be mad at him. I mean, he was under orders, right? *Right?!*

When winter break finally arrived, the first thing I did (well, actually, the second thing I did, after I had said hello to my mom and dad) was storm over to Josh's house and bang on the door.

Josh came out. He looked ghastly. Pale. His hair was messy, and his eyes were dull.

"Hey, man!" he said, smiling. "What's going—"

"Shut up," I barked. I grabbed his arm and pulled up his sleeve. There were track marks all over his arm. *Heroin*. "Jesus CHRIST, Josh."

"Hey man, lay off," he slurred. "This is none of your business."

"Yes it fucking is! Josh, you know why you're seeing Death? You know why he's showing up in your house? You know why he's following you, and staring at you? It's because he fucking WANTS you, man! All this drug shit. He wants you to OD!"

"Don't worry, it's not gonna happen. It's just recreational—"

"Look, man. You've gotta get clean. You've got a chance to shake this guy. You can cheat Death! You can turn it around. But you've just got to—"

"I *told* you man, don't worry about it! It's gonna be fine. I know what I'm doing."

I don't know what it was – the fact that he didn't realize he had a problem, or just the tone of his voice as he spoke, seeming completely unfazed – but at that moment, I just snapped. I lunged at him and grabbed his shirt collar.

"It's gonna be fine?! You're gonna be FINE? You didn't seem so sure back when you saw Death in your chair, did you? Do you not CARE anymore? Do you WANT to die, you pathetic junkie fuckup piece of shit?"

At that moment, time slowed to a crawl. I immediately regretted saying that, but it was too late. I saw Josh's drugged out face morph to one of pure anger. Before I could do anything, he knocked me over and began punching me. I punched him back. We just wailed on each other for a solid minute. Looking back on it, it must have looked hilarious, because we were both pretty awful at fighting. It wasn't long before we ran out of steam and just lay there, covered in bruises.

"Get out of my house," wheezed Josh. I got up and left.

I shouldn't have called him a pathetic junkie fuckup piece of shit. But I wasn't thinking! I was afraid I was going to lose my friend to drugs! I was angry at him. I was scared for him.

I don't think college students are adequately prepared to deal with things like that.

That's a thing you get good at when you have a lot of friends who die.

We didn't talk for all of winter semester. When summer came around, I called Josh to see if he wanted to hang out. No answer. I tried his house phone.

"Hello?" a female voice answered. It was Josh's mom.

I asked if Josh was there.

"No, he's not," she said.

My heart skipped a beat. It's *happened*, I thought. Part of me wanted to hang up right then, but the rest of me needed to know exactly what had happened. I took a deep breath and asked: "Where is he?"

"He's in rehab."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Great!" I said. "I was worried he died!"

I didn't see him until the following winter when I went on a trip to Kroger. He was still working there. We looked at each other for about a minute. He scowled at me. I couldn't tell whether he was angry with me or if I was just looking at his regular face. He looked much better though. He had cut his hair and gained some muscle.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said.

"How's it going?"

"Pretty good. You?"

"Pretty good."

There was an awkward pause. I was about to turn around and say goodbye when he spoke. "Hey, um, you wanna, like, get lunch or something?" I could totally tell that he was asking me as a formality, simply because

he felt it would be the right thing to do.

"Sure," I said, also because I felt it would be the right thing to do.

We sat at the table of Blimpy Burger in silence, occasionally glancing up at one another.

"So," I said, desperately trying to think of a way to feel the gap of silence. "Remember Mrs. Riordan, our English teacher from middle school?"

"Yeah," Josh said.

"Sure was a bitch, huh?"

"Naw, man. She just held us to ridiculously high standards."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

More silence.

"So, what are you studying at U of M?" Josh asked without real interest.

"Mechanical engineering," I said.

"Hmm."

I realized that the time for inane small-talk was over, so I cut right to the heart of the matter. "So, what's it like being sober for the first time in a long time?"

Josh looked up, and his eyes lit up. "It's great. I mean, it was hard at first, but I just have so much energy now. I've realized how much I can accomplish when I'm not thinking about dope all the time."

"That's great, man! What kind of stuff have you been doing?"

"I've been taking classes at Washtenaw. Been getting good grades – that's new. I like it. Planning on transferring to U of M myself."

"That's great! What would you like to do?"

"I'm thinking I'd like to be a substance abuse

counselor. Help people who had similar problems to mine.”

Something was different about him. He was still the fun guy I knew, but there was something extra. A drive that had been absent. I asked what caused him to become so motivated. “Is it fear of death?”

“Naw, man,” he said with a smile. “It’s the will to live.”

He looked past me and nodded at someone. I turned around. I couldn't see anyone, and then I realized that Death must have been sitting at that table. Josh had just nonverbally told Death to fuck off. When I looked back at Josh, I saw that there was no fear in his eyes.

Josh and I sat together in silence, but happy silence. The kind of silence you have when you feel like you're exactly where you need to be. I wasn't socially competent enough to be comfortable with it, though, so I filled the silence.

“How does it feel? Knowing that it could all end in a second?”

Josh laughed again. "It kind of sucks. But you know what? At least it's not raining!"

“That’s not that funny.”

“Shut up, man.”

It wasn't the happiest reunion. It was awkward between us. But we'd have time to regain our connection. We'd have time.

The next day, I woke up to the news that Josh had died. I thought it was an overdose, but he actually got hit by a bus.

Isn't that rich. I think I actually laughed out loud when I heard it. The irony was just too perfect. At age 11, when he told that dumb joke about the bad day and the raining and the bus, he had inadvertently PREDICTED HIS OWN DEATH.

I wish he had overdosed. I really do. That's a terrible thought, I know. But at least that would have made SENSE. Kid starts doing drugs, gets clean, starts using again, overestimates his tolerance, dies. The classic overdose story. They'd use him as a poster boy for some anti-drug campaign. They'd set up a little shrine in his honor at the school, which the school board would then vote to remove because they would claim it glorified drug use. The Westboro Baptist Church would picket his funeral. I would give the speech at his funeral. It would be a quarter funny and a quarter poignant, but mostly rip-shit pissed. GOD DAMMIT, JOSH!
*WHY DID YOU HAVE TO BE SUCH A DUMBASS?!?!?
WHY?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?*

But no. A bus.

A fucking bus.

Why did you take him, Dr. God, Esquire? Why did you hit him with that bus? Did you get mad when he got clean without your help? Did you figure you ought to teach that his destiny truly was not in his control? Josh had his whole life ahead of him. He was about to turn it all around. He could have changed the world, in his own small way. He was about to help people get clean, to shake their demons, to cheat Death. And now he never will, thanks to you. Maybe that's why you did it, huh? Didn't need him going around, fucking things up for your little friend, now, did you? Or maybe it was something

fucking stupid, like him nodding at Death in Blimpy Burger. What, Death can't take a fucking JOKE? Jesus Christ. Didn't take Death for the sensitive type.

You know, I can see him now. I can see Death now. Is that how it is? Those who are touched by death can see Death? So what happens now, Dr. God, Esquire? What's your next move? You gonna get me too? You gonna take me out – oh, I'm sorry. You gonna get your FRIEND to take me out because I see through your bullshit? I mean, it can happen to anyone, right? It can happen to a good kid. It can happen to a criminal. It can happen to Grandma and it can happen to a little baby. It could happen to somebody *my* age. Nobody is safe. It's all chance. But it isn't, is it? Life is rigged. Everyone gets fucked. *Fantastic*.

And you know the what the worst thing about this is, Dr. God, Esquire? You didn't just hurt him. You didn't just hurt my friend. You hurt his family. You hurt his friends. You hurt ME. You took away my closest friend. You took away a son. You took away someone who brought so much joy to so many people. You took away one of the only things in my life that was always there for me. You're a piece of shit you're a monster you're a scumbag God dammit I fucking hate you
sdghkHGLSDGJLKSHGOEhgoajgkasdhgLSHGLDHgd-
shogasodgjaklsghasdghOSDghoadshgodashgosdahgo-
sadhoghdsaogokdaskgoasdghdosaghodagoadshoghod-
godsahgodsahgosdhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Dr. God, Esquire, I am this close to accepting Satan as my lord and savior. If you want to lose a valuable customer, I suggest you follow my instructions exactly.

I have only one demand. It is simple, but I imagine it will bruise your ego severely. I'm fine with that.

My one demand is this:
You give me my friend back.

Love, if you fulfill my demand,
Cordially, if not,
Drake

P.S. Josh, I'm not going to your funeral. I can't. I'm not strong enough. I'm not strong enough to see you there, but *not* there. You've been there in my life for such a long time...I'm not ready to see you leave it. If you're angry, I understand. If you want nothing to do with me cause of this, I understand. I just can't do it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Drake pressed the Send button, sending the message that would never be read to an account for a person who would never be able to read it. With that, Drake closed his laptop, trudged over to his bed and buried his head in the pillow.

Ghosts in the Night

Shashank Rao

On the train from Konjee to Bangalore I dreamt of a goddess and a hag. A familiar dream, the only dream I'd had for many years. There under the vines of a banyan tree I would be on my knees, searching for anthills until I found myself at the feet of Parvathi, bathed in the scent of nectar, surrounded by butterflies. But when I looked up to catch a glimpse of her face, all would turn to stone and where the goddess once stood, a witch with skin the complexion of vomit cackled away in the booming darkness until I awoke, forehead dank with sweat, beams of sunlight blinding me upon arousal.

I was twenty years old in 1927, working for my father when I should have been at university. That day, I was returning from a particularly long business trip. I had been working as a guide and translator for our foreign beneficiaries on their visit to inspect the silk plantation we managed for them in Assam

I was the only Indian on that section of the train. My booth was well appointed: seat upholstered with red velvet, window bordered by a lavish gold frame, floor spotless—simply English, my grandmother would say. The rest of my kind was crammed in the hind cars filled to capacity. Some people chose to hang out of windows and doors, others electing to ride atop. But there in the front, it was the British who accompanied me, their skin white as clouds. They were pleasant, courteous people—

that and no more. No one would converse with me, unless it was a matter of business.

A knocking on my door stirred me from my thoughts.

“Chai, sir?” It was the chai wala, making his rounds serving tea.

“Yes please.” As he poured the steaming tea into a cut glass mug, I realized I did not know the time. I had lost my watch at the previous station.

“Excuse me,” I said, taking the glass from the vendor, “but do you happen to have the time?”

The chai wala glanced at his battered timepiece, a simple, inexpensive model. It served its purpose well.

“Twelve twenty-four in the afternoon, sir. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

I shook my head. Two more hours yet remained till Bangalore.

The chai was excellent: hot and refreshing with a hint of spice. Outside my window, hills and rock formations, rubicund and immortal, rolled by in the languorous summer heat. It was a sight I could not bear to miss. I set down my glass and made my way to the observation deck. It was empty. I leaned back against the railings, closed my eyes and gathered sunlight while warm easterly winds ruffled my hair the way my lover did when I made her laugh. I pictured her lips as they curled into a smile.

In Calcutta, she had loved me. In Calcutta, she mused on the night we spent entwined in a rice paddy. In Calcutta, she waited and waited and waited.

But to Bangalore I went like a coin spiraling into a drain.

I heard the door slide open, creaking and rattling as it went. I spun around to find a slight young British woman of no more than nineteen or twenty dressed entirely in white standing under the threshold. We locked eyes, a deep and hollow rumbling inhabiting the space between us. I realized I was still splayed out on the deck entirely unprofessionally. Panicked, I straightened myself out and began to make my way back inside, blood rushing to my cheeks to announce my embarrassment.

“No, no!”

I stopped cold, standing beneath the threshold as she once had been.

“Please don’t leave. It’s much too stuffy in there. I would hate to have been the cause of your enduring two more hours in that inferno. Please, join me. I could use the company.”

I faltered. The sound of the train chugging along filled my ears like rice in a pressure cooker.

“I won’t take no for an answer.” She motioned me to stand beside her, smiling the softest smile I had seen in ages. I was defeated.

She crossed her arms and leaned forward on the railings. We stood in silence for a while, taking in the sight of the rock hills.

“So, what should I call you?” asked the girl. I hesitated.

No one so far on this train had taken any particular interest in me; I doubt they even cared to remember my name. All along, they had only referred to me as ‘chap.’

“Hari.”

“Pleasure, Hari. Beverly Weston, at your service.”

I chuckled.

“The pleasure is mine.”

A shrill scream erupted into the sky and the hills rung as the engine let off its steam.

“So from where you coming Hari, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Beverly Weston was a talkative one, but something about her put me at ease and something in her eye, it glinted, hungry for a tale.

“I’m on a business trip. I began in Assam, stopped in Calcutta for three days, one day in Hyderabad, and then two more in Konjeevaram before we hopped on this train.”

“How exciting! You must have seen quite a bit.”

In Calcutta, with her skin the color of sand, the mark above her navel the shape of Ceylon. I had seen at all.

“I suppose I did.”

“As for myself, I hail from Madras. My father wants me to stay with my grandmother in Bangalore for a little while. Says the house needs a few repairs and thought it would be best if I left the house for once in my life. This is my first time anywhere outside of Madras. I must tell you I am eager, if not a little desperate, to be experiencing something other than the divertissements offered by a port city.”

“Well then I suppose our destinations are one and the same.”

“You live in Bangalore? How lovely! I would have thought you still had many a city to go.”

“As did I.” The words slipped out and were carried away with the winds yet I remained, engulfed in yearning.

The door rattled open once more and a client emerged. A Mr. Horace Danforth. He stopped abruptly upon seeing the two of us: a fragile English girl who had never gone a day without the sea in casual conversation with a dark-skinned Indian man dreaming of a northern city. I could not blame him. I, too, was taken aback by Miss Weston's gumption. Never had I been so blithely addressed by a Britisher, nor any woman for that matter. But the client refrained from commenting, only taking a cigarette out of his pocket and lighting it.

"The missus doesn't particularly enjoy me smoking in train booths," he said, more to Miss Weston than to me, "makes her feel like she's suffocating, she says." I couldn't help but feel terribly out of place.

So I returned my attention to the landscape speeding alongside us. A cloud passed over the sun and for a brief moment, the gruff hills softened, all was still, caught in a collective sigh. In that moment, I remembered the hazy drizzle over Calcutta and the way she kissed me under a temple's eaves.

*

Wailing heralded the train's arrival. Somewhere in the recesses of the rear end, a child had suffocated to death. Its mother holding the corpse in one hand, beating her breast with the other was rushed out of the station, left to grieve alone in the world of the people of the hind cars.

Yet Cantonment Station bustled with people uninterrupted, smoke from the engines suffusing the air. Outside, monkeys leapt from treetop to treetop, the aromas of the red flowers of ubiquitous bougainvillea wafting with the wind. This was Bangalore, the Garden City; a quiet metropolis seated comfortably atop the

Deccan Plateau, thus experiencing favorable weather year-round, a haven from the flaming kiln of Southern Equatorial India. Hundreds of colonels, lords, and ladies, their pallid skin burning red under the endless estival sun, would flock here for respite every year to enjoy the monsoons and the gardens of Lal Bagh.

Perhaps the city was a novelty for a Britisher, but for me at the time, it was anything but. I itched to spend my days as I had for the past week, unmoored, free to roam as I saw fit. Yet here I was, disillusioned, stranded on this plateau once again. Powerful geological forces hemmed me in. When I managed to escape, even greater forces saw to it that I returned.

Thus I was absorbed in my querulous thoughts, so much so that Miss Weston's tapping me on the shoulder startled me.

"Pardon me. I don't mean to be bothering you again, but I could use some help finding my grandmother's house. It appears as though she forgot to send someone to fetch me. No shock though really. The old woman is already eighty-four."

She tittered before continuing.

"In any case, would you happen to know where Artillery Road might be? If you point it out on this map for me I will surely be able to get to her place on my own."

In any other case, I doubt I would have helped Miss Weston further than what she had asked me to do. I had already caught one too many unwanted eyes when she and I were conversing on the observation deck and I most certainly didn't want any lurking friends or relatives spying me and disseminating across their elaborate web of gossip that I was having some sort of dalliance with an English girl. But something inside me glimmered and

was born. A little god. Rebellion. Yes, a little rebellion was exactly what I needed, what this town needed.

"I can do much better than that. I'll take you there myself."

I hailed us a cycle rickshaw from one of many that hung around outside the station waiting to swoop in on any new and unsuspecting visitors.

"Where going, saar?" the driver inquired in broken English, hoping to coax a heftier tip out of Miss Weston and me.

"Artillery Road," I replied and, in Kannada, the native language of Bangalore, added sternly, "Ennu thamaashi maad beda. Don't try anything funny." The driver huffed and began pedaling.

I must confess that I was a little relieved to be speaking amongst my Kannadigans again. For all its versatility, the English language never managed to comfort me in the way Kannada did. Kannada is the sound of the earth, the gravel, the resonance of trees in the forests, the hard consonance of rock formations, the thrum of the tabla, keeping the rhythm of night and day. Kannada: the talam of South India.

"I cannot express in words how welcome this breeze is," said Miss Weston, "even the sea winds of Madras don't carry half as much freshness," then silently to herself, I overheard, "I can't remember the last time I felt so cool."

Sure enough, she asked to be let go as soon as the first signpost for Artillery Road came into view, insistent that she find her grandmother's house on her own.

"I'd better start getting familiar with this place," she said as she heaved herself out of the back seat of the rickshaw, "I don't want to be pestering you whenever I

need to find my way home."

"Are you sure you don't want me accompanying you a bit further?"

"I do wish you'd have a little faith in me," she said a bit crossly, "I am not a little girlie. I'm sure that I can get wherever I need to be. If you are any indication of the hospitality of the people of Bangalore, I will be at my grandmother's doorstep faster than it will take this poor man to start up his pedaling once again."

The driver looked up at Miss Weston expectantly at the mention of his name.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot. Thank you. How much is it for the ride?" she asked him.

"No, no," I interjected, "I'm going to need him to take me back home. I'll pay him there." In Kannada I asked him, "are you going to Banashankari?" The driver whipped his head around, visibly irritated.

"No. Who do you think I am? Hanumantha? No, I'll only take you half way. You'll have to find someone else from there." His Kannada was crude like hot tar.

"Fine, half way," and once again I leaned over and spoke into his ear, "don't try anything funny." And again the driver huffed and began pedaling.

He let me off, exactly half way, in front of Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens. The fare came out to thirty rupees and four paise, which the rickshaw driver used to buy three mangoes from a vendor outside the Gardens' gates.

*

"Never trust an Englishman," my grandmother would sing as she read the newspaper, "their skin is milky white and they move like ghosts in the night." My father would always chastise my grandmother when she began

the ditty, reminding her that the life he had built was due in large part to those untrustworthy Englishmen.

“Mother-in-law, please don’t be so irrational.”

C.L Ragavendhra Murthy had been raised in a British household under the care of Ms. Elizabeth Reaugh. I knew very little of their personal relationship, only that Ms. Reaugh paid for his university education and helped start up his business. For that, he was forever in her debt. However, I cannot say I shared the same rosy picture of Ms. Reaugh. Towards me, she was uncommonly vicious. She would complain about me to my father, sometimes for stealing her favorite watch, sometimes for ruining her favorite pair of shoes, and I would invariably be beaten black and blue. However, I am quite certain I never acted in any such manner. From the minute I was born, Ms. Reaugh had cast her evil eye on me. I felt it. I resented it. I feared it.

She died not long after I turned fifteen, but her presence lingered on in my father. His once jocular persona eroded, replaced by an unflappable steeliness. Her wrath had possessed him. When I was not up to par, when the wrong words slipped out at an inopportune time, he would hurl the same insults, lob the same abuses till I heard her voice rising above the mayhem. Yet never had I once broken my stoicism when confronted by him. When the storm clouds passed and my father retired to his study to pore over his logbooks, my grandmother would come over to where I rooted myself, look me sorrowfully in the eye and murmur “like mother, like son.” Even then I would hold my peace while typhoons and tidal waves battered the shores of my throat, the ghosts of drowned thoughts rising up from their bleached corpses, moaning for air and justice, but

I would simply stand my ground while all the force of the Indian Ocean roared in my skull.

“What can you do?”

My mother, my amma, was the only reliable source of generosity and warmth during the dark days of my childhood. I would run to her, weeping, screaming in pain after my father or Ms. Reaugh had finished punishing me, she would be there, at times sewing a patch in her petticoat, at times making chapathis, open-armed and smiling, and I would be healed by her embrace. But talk of her is forbidden in the household ever since she absconded with a Muslim man when I was thirteen. My grandmother cried for five days on end, my father not a drop.

“I always knew she was a tart,” said Ms. Reaugh to my father when she heard what had happened. “I warned you not to marry her, but you didn’t listen. No matter. This household is better off without her.”

When she saw me later that day, she dug her nails into my arm. “A mother who didn’t even care enough for her child. Poor thing, you are.” The nails pierced so deep they drew blood. My father, committing his last act of kindness, took me aside before I went to bed and bandaged the incisions. Five little scars now remain, running down my arm like tears.

*

There was to be a wedding. My cousin Chandramukhi had recently been arranged a marriage and the entire family was abuzz. Plans were being made, caterers were being scouted, gossip was being had, and no one was filled more with glee than my grandmother, ajji. “The day her granddaughter is married is one of the holiest days in a grandmother’s lifetime,” she said after receiving the

news then, turning to me, “the day her grandson marries ensures her moksha.”

Where amma had broken my heart, ajji had stayed to gather its shards and reassemble my splintered life. Her love was boundless. I could not begin to imagine a life without her.

“Putti!” The exclamation came from the verandah, my grandmother’s favorite place to sit in the evening.

“Hello ajji!”

“Did you eat well?” Regardless of the importance of any business or personal trip, whether or not I ate well was of utmost importance to my grandmother.

“Yes, ajji. I ate well.”

“Good. Did you buy the saris I asked for Chandramukhi’s wedding?”

“Yes, ajji,” I answered, pulling out the sari, neatly folded in a square, blood red with gold borders.

“Bring it here. Let me see it. Ah, how nice it is to feel a Konjeevaram saree. I remember how your grandfather would bring me ten new silk sarees whenever he visited his cousins in Tamil Nadu. By the time I was twenty-nine I was already drowning in five hundred saris and he was drowning in debt! Of course, it all stopped when the old man began to lose his mind and became too sick to walk from the bed to the toilet.”

Her sigh was infused with memory of earlier times.

“I haven’t felt a new one in thirty years. The world may praise China for its silk, but we Indians know that the best silk is from Konjee.” She chuckled and handed the sari back to me.

“Keep it safely. It invites evil if a bride wears a wrinkled saree on her wedding day.”

“Where is appa? Is he in the study?”

“No he is out with his friend—what’s his name—Ramanathan. It was good to see a familiar face today. Only Englishmen for the past five days, in and out, in and out. Like ghosts in the night.”

Concerning the eating habits of South Indians: it is important to note that our repasts are taken at no set time. When we eat is dictated by the movement of the sun, and dinner, to rich or poor, was to be served only when all trace of the sun had vanished, no matter how late it was.

Father returned home at around ten-thirty that night, teetering as he entered the dining hall, slowly lowering himself to his place on the ground opposite mine. It was a sight that had become more and more common. There were days when he fell subconscious at the compound wall and slept there. Mornings were often announced by his anger when passersby mistook for a beggar.

Like many Brahmin families, we ate on the floor off banana tree leaves. Mrs. Reaugh in her final days had tried to convince appa to purchase a sturdy oak dining table. Ajji fought him on that account until the idea was stamped entirely out of his mind. “Enough of all this table nonsense,” she had scolded him, “those wooden chairs are so hard that all the bones in my spine will break if I breath too deeply! Let this old lady have her banana leaves and family when she eats her dinners. Who knows how many she’s got left?” Lucky for her, Ms. Reaugh died before any more could be said.

“Hello, appa.”

“Hmm? Hello. Manjula, help amma bring the food!” Manjula was our maidservant, a wordless, but kind

presence, in my life since I was fifteen years old. Her beauty arrested the attention of all our guests. I would often make a show of her when I was an adolescent in a lousy attempt to impress my friends. It was a shameful thing for me to have done, but Manjula didn't mind. She laughed and went along with it, shielding me from months' worth of teasing. The burden of poverty kept her from doing much else aside from working for us, a pity. But what could be done?

"The silk fields are doing well. The clients were pleased." Father grunted.

"Here it comes," said ajji, carrying with her a large steel bowl of rice, Manjula in suit. With expert speed, they moved anti-clockwise as they doled out the food in an ancient culinary dance passed down from the very first cooks. It begins with a healthy mountain of rice at the center, the foundation of any Indian meal. From there, saaru, gojju, palya, and huli flower around it as the servers scuttle in and out of the kitchen, bringing with them a new steel bowl filled with food. The first round is complete when a dollop of ghee and a pinch of salt are placed in the upper left and right hand corners of the banana leaf. Only then are one's hands allowed to dive in—and what a lovely business it is to eat in that manner, to combine and concoct one's own dishes in the confines of one's platter. Living lives over which we seldom have control, there is a great satisfaction in the absolute authority one has over their food.

It wasn't until we were just about done that my father decided to speak again.

"It's time we found you a wife."

"Son-in-law, must we discuss this now?"

"Yes, amma. There is no better time. We must find him a

wife. Chandramukhi is getting married and she is three years younger than Hari. He is the eldest child of the family. We have put off his marriage long enough."

I did nothing but stare blankly in his direction.

"I will put out an advert tomorrow."

From where my courage to defy him came is one of the biggest mysteries of my life to date. Perhaps it was the spirit of that period in my life, the god of rebels and renegades who possessed my tongue, the same one who emboldened me to escort Miss Weston to her grandmother's house.. Or maybe it was the vigor of the chili curry that so inspired me. I would not put it past my grandmother to infuse the food she made with her own sardonicism.

In Calcutta, her eyes, the way they shimmered when she cried. The hag from my dreams stood cackling behind her.

"Appa, it will simply have to wait."

My father's eyes widened, their whites yellow against his dark, mustachioed face. A storm was coming. A great storm. Whatever had possessed me fled in fear, too cowardly to buttress me against the ire quivering on the tip of appa's tongue. I would have to weather the incursions on my own and pick up the debris with my hands flecked with rice, stained by curry.

*

The monsoon season has always been my favorite time of the year. I find them romantic, the way earth and sky come together reliably like two paramours locked in pluvial ardour. And it was during a particularly torrential monsoon that I ran into Miss Weston once again.

My father hadn't spoken to me a single word since my little revolution, not even to enlist my help in any matter whatsoever. It was ajji who, noticing we were out of mangoes, sent me to the bazaar that morning to replenish our stock.

"Make sure they don't swindle you," she reminded me, "I paid fifty rupees for a basket last time and they were all crawling with worms!"

"Don't worry ajji. I'll be sure to get the right ones."

There were very few people at the bazaar that morning. Those who had ventured out were glancing concernedly up at the sky as they went about their business, anxious to avoid the monsoon.

The whiplash of lightning, the growl of thunder, the pitter-patter of rain, and it began. Women and their children, beggars and their dogs swirled around and I, unperturbed, continued on, for there is no time more peaceful than the roaring still of a monsoon.

"Hallo!" Not far ahead, a hand waved excitedly at me, sticking up out of the frenzy.

"Miss Weston! How good it is to see you again!" Without the slightest regard for aggressive downpour, she made her way towards me.

"It most certainly is good to see you again," she said.

"I say, Miss Weston, aren't you at all bothered by the weather today?"

"Not at all! The monsoons in Madras are much more frightening. The ones you Bangaloreans have are quite tame in comparison. I would even venture to say that they are a bit disappointing."

"I cannot say I understand. I've never been to Madras. Bangalore monsoons are the only ones I know."

"Then I should take you back with me to experience

one. Once, the thunder rolled so forcefully my mother's favorite lapis lazuli elephant fell off her nightstand and shattered on the floor. She was distraught, but I can't say I wasn't slightly amused."

A bright red-orange mango caught my eye. I picked it up and inspected it for worms as ajji had told me to.

"Wasn't that a little mean-spirited?"

"Perhaps. But the way that elephant so ignominiously ended tickled my sense of irony. You see, that elephant was a gift from my great-grandmother. It had survived a war and a revolution but in the end, a little thunder was all it took to do it in."

Thunder and lightning, right on cue. Fruit stands wobbled slightly. A mango fell onto the ground, as if trying to replicate what happened to the doomed lapis lazuli elephant.

"So what brings you to the bazaar today, Hari?"

"I think the more pressing question is what you are doing at the bazaar today."

"Grandmother had a sudden hankering for mangoes and since the maid was busy with the laundry, she sent me out to buy some. I don't know why. I still don't know which way is up or down in this city."

"It seems we were assigned the same task, then."

"Oh, lovely! How is it that our paths always congregate so neatly? It's a good thing they crossed today, though. I'm afraid I going to have you help me back home again!"

"But if I recall correctly, Miss Weston, you professed that you were not, quote, 'a little girlie' and that you were perfectly capable of finding your way about on your own."

"You are forgetting that I was referring to finding my grandmother's house on a single street, not navigating a foreign city. Now might I suggest we hurry with these

mangoes if we should have two happy grannies on our hands?”

We chatted as we chose our mangoes. She started by telling me how she had adjusted before she moved on to weightier subjects. She spoke of her parents, how she knew they were lying to her when they sent her here. How they said they were having the bungalow redone when, in reality, it was their marriage in dire need of attention.

“He has a mistress, my father does. My mother has a lover, too. At first I thought she took up a lover out of spite, but now I’m quite positive she has no idea of my father’s infidelity. Isn’t it a funny thought? They’re pulling the wool over the other’s eyes and now neither of them can see. Quite foolish if you ask me. What do you think?”
“I cannot say I have much experience in these matters. But in the end, what can you do? Fools will be fools.”
But I did have experience. Mother had pulled the wool over all our eyes and left us sightless and numb.

“That seems a bit passive, does it not?”
Something within me spawned inside, dragging its jagged claws against my innards, a feeling which I can now classify as Regret.

*

We saw each other regularly after that day, designating the Century Club as our meeting spot, where we regaled each other with stories; I with stories of the trials of preparing for Chandramukhi’s fast-approaching wedding, Miss Weston with tales of the mistress and the lover.
“They are not bad people, no. On the contrary, I find them quite lovely.”
“You know them?” I asked, unable to comprehend the

notion.

“Quite well, really. The mistress is my ayah. She’s been with us since the time I was two, you know. Most girls no longer care for their ayah by the time they’re my age. My parents wanted to send her away and call in a proper English handmaid when I turned sixteen, but I couldn’t bear to see her leave. She had travelled all the way from Bombay just to be with me. Or at least that’s how I saw it. It seemed wholly unfair that she be sent away so arbitrarily. I begged my parents to let her stay; needless to say, my father offered his emphatic support. Ayah is not a bad woman, Hari, I’m telling you! She didn’t seduce him or anything!

“And my mother’s clandestine lover, he’s our laundry man. I’ve known him since birth and I’m very fond of him too. He always makes me handcrafted wooden birds. I have a shelf full of them at home. Mother even bought him some tools to help him along. He was very grateful. The way his face lit up when he received the toolset, I will never forget. I think that was the first day they slept together. I saw my mother scuttling towards his shed late that night. They have a secret little business now. He makes the wooden birds, my mother sells them to her friends, and they split the profit. No one is supposed to know about this, but I overheard them once when I was reading in the greenhouse.

“But what I hate about this whole game of affairs is that I can’t tell if my parents are in love with their lovers. I don’t know who had their affair first. For all I know, they could both be doing it out of spite, just working off suspicions. Ayah and the laundry man, they’re just caught in the middle. They think they’re in love with my parents. It’s a bloody mess. Everyone is

running around blind. Like moles at high noon.”

“The sun is loving us too much,” ajji would say of such curiously hot days. Perhaps it was so. The sun’s passion guarded its embrace of the city so jealously the monsoons dared not come anywhere near Bangalore. Not a single drop of rain had fallen in the past week. The dirt roads around my house had begun to dry and crack, looking more and more like desert terrain and the afternoons began to catch fire as the red-orange flowers of the gulmohar trees began to bloom.

A waiter, dressed in a suffocating silk white kurtha and turban brought us our tea.

“So tell me,” she said blowing the steam rising up from the cup, “what’s your tale of woe aside from the many tribulations preparing for an Indian wedding? I’d shudder to think that my misery is total.”

“There isn’t much to me Miss Weston. As I’ve told you, my domestic life is just that: domestic.”

“Oh boo! I’ve exposed my family’s darkest secret to you! I think I am not out of line when I say we share a certain closeness now, and yet I haven’t so much as to have heard a single mention of your ancestry. I cannot be the only one so terribly lost!”

There was a glint in her eye, a madness. Darkness trembled just beneath. I sensed it.

“Very well. My mother ran away with a Muslim man. My father has lost faith in goodness. And I feel as if I am trapped within this city forever.”

With no warning, I lost control of my own being and the story of my mother’s absconding and father’s fury spun out like a maelstrom, the sunken corpses of things left unsaid, of thoughts forgotten, of tears quivering unused, all dammed in by my own restraint flowed out with grace

and force in joyous abandon, all out to bare, all out to receive proper burial under the kindness of the sun, all awaiting the promise of release from the stagnant, toxic backwaters of my mind, all out, all out, all out for me to see as I never had seen them before and how ugly they had turned, twisted, translucent, burning in the daylight.

The flood had yet to cease. My stomach began to lurch and tumble and like the mythical *amrit* offered up to the gods after the great Churning of the Ocean, ancient wonders began to surface.

My mother’s warm gaze. My father’s hearty laugh. An old memory of the three of us racing down the rock gneiss that rose like a wave at the center of the Lal Bagh Gardens. My *amrit* came up a little orb, a golden bubble ascending the dusk and wonder of my tumultuous ocean. Amongst the waves and tides it burst and within me, a new sun yawned on the horizon.

Goddess Parvathi’s elusive face flashed for but an instant. The hag moaned and melted.

“Oh my goodness, you’re crying! I’m so terribly sorry! I shouldn’t have forced you to dredge up such things. I’m a selfish fool! Please find it in your heart to forgive me!” Miss Weston reached over the table and dabbed at my tear-lined face with her handkerchief. I must have sported a greatly bemused expression. I had only just been returned authority of my Self. Several other guests seemed to have turned our way to ogle the strange events transpiring at our table. Their faces blurred and for the first time, I could see how my grandmother

thought them ghosts.

*

“She can pull oil from rocks,” said ajji of the bridegroom’s mother, “she’s so stingy. Look at the rags she’s dressed her son in.”

Today was the day of Chandramukhi’s wedding. It was a formal affair, as South Indian weddings tend to be. Elaborate and with a deep sense of its own gravity. I knew little of the groom, only that his name was Lakshman and that he was some clerk for a government official in Mysore.

“At least he has a good job,” ajji had said when she saw his face, “the face can be excused and the love can be learned.”

No one had asked Chandramukhi for her approval in this matter. I found it quite a shame. I knew for a fact my cousin would have had a number of things to say if only an ear were lent. She addressed a letter to me not three days before the wedding. Chandramukhi’s normally beautiful Kannada script had lost its whimsy, its wondrous looping grace. The characters were sharp and angular, as if they had been written with a dagger’s blade.

“Dear Cousin,” it began, “As you know, I am soon to be wed to a man of whom I know next to nothing. I have only once seen his face and he mine. When I look to the future, I see nothing. Some people have assured me my prospects are bright and that not knowing what comes next in life adds a certain mystery and spontaneity, two qualities many people strive to incorporate in their lives. How lucky I am to be given them so easily, they say. But I cannot help but to be filled with dread. A sense of impending doom looms menacingly. I am not and have

never been one to march so blindly forward. I may be taking a step towards either an adventure or an abyss.

Perhaps I am being melodramatic. Perhaps all will be well in the end. But in this present moment, I do not foresee a happy future. It is too late for me now anyways. I write to you today to ease my mind and I apologize if I have burdened you with this in any way. You have always been a kind companion to me and at this time I find there is no one with whom I can speak candidly about my situation. I hope you, dear cousin, may never be in my position, sitting cross-legged in front of the holy fire watching the remnants of Hope turn into ash and go up in smoke.

Please visit me in Mysore whenever you have time. It will be a great comfort to see you after I have settled in.

Your cousin, Chandramukhi.”

She was a skilled writer. It was unfortunate she never was encouraged to capitalize on her talents.

The ceremony ended at around nine o’clock, just in time to coincide with the setting sun. Dinner was served at nine forty-five when it was completely dark. Chandramukhi and Lakshman made their way around the circles of sitting people eating *saaru* and *idli* off freshly washed banana leaves.

“How is the food, Auntie?” Lakshman asked ajji.

“It’s very good. I’m glad you took my advice and had Narasimhan do the catering. He catered my daughter’s wedding fifteen years ago and I still can’t forget the taste of his vadas and mint chutney.”

“I’m glad you like it, Auntie.” He moved on without acknowledging me. Chandramukhi followed, draped in

the red silk Konjeevaram sari I had bought for her at ajji's request. She passed by, a flame, a certain madness in her eye.

Ajji and I returned home late that evening, around midnight. Stray dogs and water buffalos wandered about like souls in the Fields of Asphodel, howling and baying at the moon. Ajji's favorite jasmine tree had burst into full bloom.

"Ah, I've been waiting. Tomorrow, I'm going to pick them for my morning prayers," she said, caressing the white flowers, inhaling their lustrous scent before heading inside. I gazed up at the night sky full of stars pregnant with children's wishes. They say that midnight is the witching hour, when old hags emerge from their dungeons to cast powerful and ghastly spells in the moonlight. When ghosts coalesced their shattered fragments and sauntered down streets alongside other nighttime beasts. Jasmines in full bloom. Witches in the moon. Ghosts in the night.

The sound of a motorcar revving to a stop. A hollow tapping reverberating not far from the house. The unholy beings that had come out to play fled back to their dismal lairs. The tapping drew nearer and nearer to our gate and I could not help but be a little bit unnerved. "Who's there?" I called out. The gate creaked open in response. A figure, flowing in white appeared before me. Skin, robe, hair clasped the rays of moonlight and the figure floated towards me with otherworldly grace. "It's me." Miss Weston's auburn hair tumbled down to her shoulders loose and untied. Her dress billowed about, caught in a sudden breeze, a shooting star darted behind her like a silver bullet. "What are you doing here?" I inquired, breathless. Soft,

slender fingers enveloped my face and drew me to soft, slender lips. In that moment, our traumas embraced under the midnight moon, dancing a mad dance in the company of specters and nocturnal demons. Whispered scars upon our hearts sung in unison from their dark caverns in dolorous chorus. In that moment, we buried ourselves in the madnesses of the other.

"I love you."

A monsoon cloud rumbled somewhere in the distance.

"I don't know what to say."

"Do you love me?"

I remembered the dream I had on the train the day I met Miss Weston. It presented itself to me in harsh clarity. Butterflies fluttering, banyan vines swaying, me searching, Goddess Parvathi's feet resting. This time, when I looked up, all did not turn to stone. No witch to cast a spell. Her eyes gazed upon me with terrifying kindness. I fell deep into them, where dazzling planets orbited like jewels on a fisherwoman's neck, galaxies roared like dragons as they revolved around their cores, and stars meditated quietly on primordial sounds. She blinked gently. I looked into her eyes again and saw my life, my universe, unfolding. Storms, turmoil, creatures with jagged claws that scrape against one's innards, all reflected in Her eyes. They threatened to consume me.

In Calcutta, my lover on the balcony, smiling. Miles away I heard her whisper: "*left or right, Hari?*"

"I don't know."

The monsoon clouds covered the moon and the rain began. To this day, I remember it as the most beautiful monsoon I have ever witnessed.

Miss Weston's nightgown grew limp as it soaked up the weight of the downpour. I scoured her face for signs of disappointment, sadness, anger, or frustration. Nothing. Even the madness in her eye had disappeared.

"Very well," she said. The figure, once flowing in white, robes aflutter, turned and headed back out the gates. Before leaving, she turned around and posed me one last question.

"Is there someone else? That you love, I mean."

Yes. There was. But I never said it. Beverly Weston threw me one last knowing glance and disappeared. The motorcar hummed to life and sped away.

"So that is why you have been so happy these past few months?" Ajji's voice cut through the sound of the drizzle. I, immobilized, could do nothing but nod.

"Come here, I need to tell you something." She sat down on the verandah swing and patted the place next to her.

"Your father and I have been lying to you about something for many years now. Your mother, Vaishnavi, did not run away for the reasons you think. There wasn't a lover. She only loved you and your father. But my daughter was a passionate girl and held strong beliefs." "I don't understand."

"Once she married, she kept that feisty part of herself tucked away where no one could see. There was always a firestorm brewing inside her. That's why we all called her *Pattaaki*, the Firecracker."

Ajji stared off into the darkness. Had the witches and ghosts returned? It was hard to say.

"She was happy with her family life, but I could tell she was having a hard time suppressing herself. If there

was one thing she ever hated, it was the Raj. Your grandfather used to work as a clerk in a Colonel's office. Every day she saw how late he came home, how he held his sore back. Sometimes when she went to work with him, she saw how they smiled at him. You know how a Britisher smiles? A hollow smile, see. Like this. She hated it. She would come home and tell me how she heard them talk about us Indians. 'They think we're dogs, Amma!' she would complain to me. I would never truly understand what she was saying, though. After Vaishnavi came back from the University of Calcutta her head was bursting with even more ideas. My sister would always ask me 'Why is she so angry all the time? She'll get ulcers if she doesn't learn to calm down.' Your mother wanted to be a writer, you know. A revolutionary writer. I didn't know how to calm her down. That fire inside her was eternal."

She paused to listen to the coquettish cry of the koel bird roosting in our jasmine tree.

"She met your father at the University, too. They had a love marriage, believe it or not. His parents cut off all connection with him. But your grandfather and I were happy for them. We were lucky he was a Brahmin, too. If it were anyone outside of our caste this all would have been a very different story. But that's beside the point. They were happy together, they were happier when you came into the world, but Vaishnavi's fire kept burning. I can't imagine what she found out your father worked for the British. She kept up appearances, though it broke every bone in her body. Ms. Reaugh was awful to her, awful for no reason. Little things she would say to her, I would hear them. Little things to fracture her. I don't

know why I didn't say anything. I don't know why your father never said anything. This was his wife whom he loved, for whom he had gone against his parents' word! We lived too much in fear, Hari. Too much in fear.

"One day, she couldn't take it anymore. There was to be a protest in Jallianwallah Bagh in Amritsar and she wanted to participate. Vaishnavi knew she couldn't tell Ragavendhra. He wouldn't have let her go. Instead, she wrote me a letter which she hid inside a pot of rice." Dread, a monstrous god that voids one of feeling. "And." It was a statement, a bridge to an already known end.

"We all know well what happened next. General Dyer took out his Gatling gun and massacred almost everyone there. Like the mongrels they said we were. Your mother was among the slain. I cried for days, but for some reason I couldn't have been prouder." With that, she returned inside.

I closed my eyes and leaned back on the steps. The whistle of the train, the hum of the wheels, the sigh of the westerly winds, the door creaking and rattling open. Only this time no one emerged. I was alone. No Miss Weston chattering away. No client lighting his cigar. Time, a train, moving backwards, backwards, back to Calcutta, where she kissed me under a temple's eaves. Butterflies, banyans, and the face of a goddess moving in reverse till the dream ceased to exist. Ajji's words: "like mother, like son" rung high-pitched in my ears. Like mother, like son. One dead, the other barely living.

It was then I decided I would return to her, my lover.

Deranged Radical Feminist Brutally Attacks Well-Wisher

Winner of the 2016 Roy W. Cowper Fellowship

Skyler Tarnas

Interrogation Room One was small, square, and gloomy. A dim lightbulb hung despondently from the ceiling above the sole wooden table, flickering at random intervals. It wasn't one of the officer's favorite rooms, but it tended to be effective. Only for serious cases, usually. And apparently this woman, sitting confidently on one side of the table, was a serious case.

"State your name, please."

"Jennifer Page."

"Do you know why you're here, Miss Page?"

Jennifer's mouth twisted unpleasantly. She was six feet tall and athletic, her wiry black hair pulled into a disconcertingly tight ponytail. Her stiff, aggressive features (not unattractive to the officer, but certainly not attractive enough to sway his sympathies) were accentuated by her posture; she sat in the hard-backed chair as though she was the one giving the interview.

"Because I beat somebody up?" she offered.

"'Assault' is the preferred term, Miss Page."

"All right, then; because I assaulted somebody. Is he okay?"

"Do you care?"

"Sure," said Jennifer. "I'd rather not have killed

anybody.”

“This is serious, Miss Page.” The officer leaned forward across the table. “I’m not sure you realize how serious it is.”

“Sure. What more can I tell you?”

“You can walk me through the day, Miss Page. Explain. I’m here to help.”

“Sure. I love people who are here to help.”

~~~~~

The officer watched with crinkled nose as Bradley Valentine scratched at his bandages. The room in the hospital was bright white and clinically clean, stark contrast to the mess of a man lying under freshly changed sheets. The officer took note of the bruises, the purpled face, and the limbs tugged in separate directions by elevated casts. All this damage by one woman.

“Do I really have to answer questions right now?”

“It’s just a formality, Mr. Valentine.” The officer took a seat by the bed. “We want you to walk us through the day, if you feel up to it.”

“I guess.” Bradley Valentine was blonde with wide blue eyes, which made him look even younger than his twenty-four years. The officer’s sympathy swelled, much like Mr. Valentine’s right eye. “I just want it clear that I didn’t do anything wrong,” Bradley continued. “I’m a nice guy. I don’t get it at all.”

“I don’t doubt you.”

“I think she must be crazy,” he said. “That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

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“Name, please?”

“Steel. Henry Steel.”

“Cooperate, Mr. Steel, and this will go easily. We don’t want to cause any more undue stress.”

“It’s a little late for that.” Henry Steel was a thick man with a sheen of sweat over his balding head. His bushy mustache was ungroomed and contained more food than could usually be found in facial hair. In Interrogation Room Two, only slightly better lit than Jennifer’s, he would have looked more at home as a suspect than a witness. “I’ll probably get fired for this, you know. Doesn’t look good on me. As if it was my fault.”

“If you’re blameless, you’re blameless. We just need a witness’s account.”

“Whatever. I’m a nice guy, I wanna be helpful.” Steel’s hunched posture and folded arms said otherwise. “But you should be talking to that kid Randall.”

~~~~~

“Randall.”

“Randall what?”

“Randall Trotsky.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Age?”

“Nineteen.”

Randall Trotsky was not prepossessing to the officer. The kid was squat and slightly greasy, with beady, nervous eyes above a bulbous nose and a gray beanie over black, slick hair. His jeans and sweatshirt were factory-torn. One of those young people, the officer thought uncharitably, who spent too much money trying to look like they didn’t have any.

“This isn’t about the alcohol you had with you-though we will have to confiscate that.”

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Randall Trotsky. He slid petulantly down in the stiff chair of Interrogation Room Three.

"You saw the assault."

"I saw the lady go berserk, yeah. But I didn't do anything."

"You didn't provoke her?"

"Hey, listen, I'm a nice guy. I'll tell you what happened. She went totally fucking nuts. I'm surprised the TV lady didn't tell you."

~~~~~

"Bennett. Shirley Bennett. I'm eager to help, officer. Doubtless you've heard of me?" She offered a manicured hand across the dingy table of Interrogation Room Four.

"Can't say I have."

"You *must* have seen my books in stores! And I'm sure you've seen me on television. You must culturally educate yourself, officer!"

"If it's all the same to you, Mrs. Bennett, I'd like to get your statement and move on. We have a lot of witnesses to go through."

"My dear officer!" Shirley Bennett was blonde and heavily made up- definitely out of place in the cobwebby space. The officer guessed she was a good ten years older than she looked. Her accentuated lips had a habit of puckering in outrage. "I am a *published author*! And a pundit! My opinion is invaluable, and I should hope you would know that! I will send you one of my books, you must have at least seen the advertisements- '*Feminism? More Like Lesbianism, Am I Right, Ladies?*' I'm aiming for the Pulitzer."

~~~~~

"There was construction outside my building," said Jennifer Page tonelessly, twisting one long strand of hair around her finger. "That's why I woke up so early. They're doing renovations on a restaurant, but for some goddamn reason they always start the drilling at 5:30 in the morning. I tried to complain, but the manager just laughed. The workers are the worst."

~~~~~

"I don't control when we start the drilling," said Henry Steel. "I just follow orders. What is this, a civil suit? I can't help it the little lady got upset about our schedule."

~~~~~

"You have to understand, it's been going on for weeks," said Jennifer.

"And I keep calling, and nothing. Even on the weekends, when I'm supposed to be sleeping! I mean, it was 5:30; I wasn't exactly thinking straight- I took the elevator down and went right up to guy in charge and begged him to stop."

~~~~~

"Coming up to me in her pajamas, I knew she was crazy," said Henry Steel. "Screaming about her work schedule and how she needed to sleep a few more hours- What about *my* work schedule? Totally inconsiderate."

"What did you say to her?"

"I was polite but firm. I told her she had to get out of our way."

~~~~~

"He hooted at me," said Jennifer, a flush creeping into her cheeks. "All of the workers did. That's when I

realized I was still in my pajamas, and I ran back inside. I mean, they always yell at me on my way to work, the typical stuff, telling me to smile and less pleasant things.”

“What’s so bad about asking you to smile?”

Jennifer stare became suddenly withering. The officer nearly recoiled, but caught himself.

“If you don’t mind, officer,” Jennifer said coldly, “I’m not going to answer that question. I went back up to my room and covered my head with a pillow for an hour before I had to get ready for work.”

“And where do you work?”

“Mullen Advertising. It’s a few blocks from my apartment. I’ve worked my way up from a secretarial position to art director.”

“And you live in the same building as Bradley Valentine, your co- worker?”

“I guess I do. Did? Whatever.”

“You were acquainted with him?”

“I guess,” said Jennifer. “He’s another art director. We, like, we knew each other. I didn’t dislike him or anything. I thought he was kind of dumb, but that’s all.”

~~~~~

“I woke up to construction,” said Bradley Valentine, his blue eyes widening even further. “Terrible. And it was the third morning in a row. I mean, I’m usually an early riser, but it was ridiculous. I took the elevator down to talk to the foreman.”

“And what did he say?”

“He told me very politely that he couldn’t stop just because I said so. I wasn’t too happy about that, so I went back inside and phoned my dad- he’s a lawyer- and then he phoned them, and presto, the noise stopped!”

Bradley seemed like he wanted to clap childishly, but the casts prevented him. He and the officer both grimaced.

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“You had to halt construction?”

“Yeah,” Henry Steel scowled, absentmindedly picking crumbs out of his mustache. “I guess the little lady called in a lawyer. Daddy’s little princess flexed her credit card and-”

“According to Bradley Valentine, it was his father who called your boss.”

“Oh.” Henry Steel considered this. “The blonde guy, right? Well, I guess I can’t blame him. I might do the same.”

~~~~~

“Well,” said Jennifer Page, “Eventually the noise stopped and I could actually concentrate on things. Get some work done.”

“Some work done,” the officer repeated. He shuffled his papers. “Your ‘blog,’ for instance.”

Jennifer looked amused. “You’ve been on my internet search history already? Joke’s on you, officer, I’m an amateur writer. I can explain away *anything*.”

“You do keep a blog?”

“Run a blog, yeah, I do. On sexism in advertising. But you must already know that, so why even ask?”

The officer ignored her. “I’ve been reading your… rants. You have a lot of rage at the world, Miss Page.”

Jennifer snorted violently. “Oh, *please*. That’s the angle you’re going for? Crazy blogger attacks man? Single blogger seeks good victim? Of course I have a lot of rage at the world, you-” For a second it seemed like she was going to swear, but she caught herself. “-officer. I used to have a fitness blog, you know. Harmless.

Exercise tips. And I was nearly driven off the internet by people who had nothing better to do than hurl insults at my body. But I wasn't driven off. I figured, screw it. I work in advertising and I've seen the very worst, so I figured why not make it a full-on blog about sexism? And those anonymous commenters *love* that, I can tell you. Rape threats and death threats on the daily."

"Hence your fiery rants."

"Well, I've got good fuel."

The officer grunted and shuffled his papers some more, though he already knew what he would find. "Ah, yes. You have reported a couple of threats in the past few years."

"Sure did. None of you people took them seriously, though."

"Internet threats don't come to anything. It's usually just bored middle schoolers."

"Great, officer," snarled Jennifer. "I'm so glad you feel that way. It really bodes well for the future."

~~~~~

"I don't remember exactly what I did before leaving for work," said Bradley, brow furrowed under his bandages. "I think I wrote a little on my blog. Are details relevant?"

"A blog? You have one of those, too?" The officer flipped through his stack of papers on Bradley Valentine (a much thinner stack than Jennifer's). "Have you ever received rape threats or death threats?"

"Jesus, of course not. Why would I?"

"Just asking."

~~~~~

"Rape threats and death threats!" Shirley Bennett waved an airy hand.

"You know what I find, officer, is that young women today are too *sensitive*! If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen, or rather, in this case, get back in the kitchen! I won't win any awards for saying that, but it's true! I'm a public figure, officer, and I get my share of threats! It's simply part of public life, and these thin-skinned young 'social justice warriors' ought to stop saying silly things if they want to stop receiving threats! You can read about it in my best-selling book, *'Bros Before Hoes and Husbands Before College Degrees!'*"

~~~~~

"Oh, she runs the sexist advertising thing?"

Randall Trotsky laughed.

"Yeah, I've seen it. Those feminist websites are so fucking stupid. Maybe I've sent her a message. I don't remember. Hey, I mean, if you're gonna say dumb shit you have to be able to take criticism."

~~~~~

"So when I was walking to work, I was still fuming from all the death threats," continued Jennifer Page. "After my apartment building, it's this long chain of restaurants and warehouses; seems like they're all eternally in repair. I always pass by the construction guys, and today they were taking a break- at the time I didn't know why. At least when they're working, they're too busy to talk to me. But no, I had to deal with walking by those assholes- there were like twenty of them- and hearing the usual."

"What's the usual?"

"'Hey, baby, looking for a thrill?' 'Yeah, I like to watch you walk.' 'Gimme a piece of that.' 'I'll have what he's having.' Whistling. Kissy noises. Moans. One guy took photographs once."

“Did you tell them to knock it off?”

“I can’t say anything to them. It wouldn’t make any difference, and they’d call me even more names. I mean, it’s scary, officer, don’t you understand that? To have people call out at you? And who knows which of them is going to drag you into a dark alley or into a car or-”

“Oh, come on, Miss Page, let’s not get overdramatic.”

“I’m not being overdramatic. When I was sixteen, a guy tried to pull me into a bush! When I told my mother, she asked why I was out so late! So shut the hell up about overdramatic!” She half-rose from her chair, and the officer flinched despite himself.

“Miss Page, I’m going to need you to calm down.”

“Oh, I’m calm,” said Jennifer, lowering herself with visible effort. “Very calm. Please, let’s continue.”

~~~~~

“Miss Page says you catcalled at her.”

Henry Steel wiped his forehead. “What, is that illegal now? I’ve got ten guys sitting there bored, what do you expect? She’s walking through our territory. Some girls have to learn to take a compliment.”

~~~~~

“A *compliment*!” Shirley Bennett snapped her fingers. “Precisely! That’s how I handle it! Personally, I get upset if I *don’t* get catcalled! These girls are too sensitive; feminism has warped their minds so that they refuse to be kind and nice and, well, feminine! When I was a girl, if a young man took the time to look at you and rate your appearance, you had pretty much found yourself a husband! I’ve dedicated a good thirty percent of my life’s work to un- brainwashing our girls! You can

read about it in my latest book...”

~~~~~

“After I got past the construction assholes,” continued Jennifer, “I had about five blocks to my work building. Detroit’s not always the best city for walking to work, but I can’t afford a bus every morning. Usually I feel fine as soon as I’m off my own street. But as soon as the construction was out of sight, I realized I was being stalked.”

“Stalked?” The officer looked up. “That’s a very serious thing to say, Miss Page.”

“I’m so glad you feel that way, officer. Of course, online stalking is fine but physical stalking warrants a ‘serious!’ Anyways, yes. Stalked.”

~~~~~

“Oh, it was Randall,” said Henry Steel, mopping his brow some more.

“Randall Trotsky?”

“Yeah. His parents own one of the restaurants in the neighborhood. He and his friends like to hang out across the street from where we work. They smoke and drink a little without their parents knowing. Harmless. Did the same thing when I was a kid, and I turned out fine.”

“But Randall wasn’t with his friends today?” The officer made to review his notes.

“N-no, he wasn’t.” Steel frowned. “And I guess he got bored, and decided to follow the lady. But he’s just a stupid kid, there’s no harm in him. Don’t let her drag him through the mud, he’s not even twenty.”

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“I wasn’t *stalking* her,” said Randall Trotsky, folding his thick forearms.



"Tell her not to flatter herself. I was walking behind her. Jesus Christ. You can't even walk around in this city."

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"He followed me for four blocks," said Jennifer. She looked particularly agitated now for the first time, her chiseled face twitching. "It took a little while for me to realize it, but it wasn't subtle. He stayed pretty close to me, and he was hissing at me, disgusting things. I'd- I'd rather not repeat them. I tried to lose him several times- I nearly got lost myself- weaving through alleys I didn't know, crossing streets, hearing his footsteps behind me- My heart was racing. I didn't know what was going to happen. And then I thought, oh god, I've made things even easier for this guy by going into an abandoned alley. He could do god-knows-what to me. I thought about maybe calling a friend- you know, sometimes it's better to be on the phone; makes the attacker think twice. Then I realized I'd forgotten my phone- of course."

"Oh, come on," the officer said, before he could stop himself. Her shift in attitude was unnerving him. "It was a nineteen-year-old kid. You've got muscles. You're telling me you couldn't have taken him?"

Jennifer went practically rigid. "How was I supposed to know he was a nineteen-year-old kid? And how could I know it was just him? Maybe he had a friend who would pull up in a van and grab me! Maybe someone would open a door and pull me in! Maybe he had a knife or a gun! I may be athletic, officer, but I can't punch a bullet!"

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"I didn't have a friend with a van or a knife or a gun," said Randall Trotsky sulkily. "You searched me. What, is it a crime to walk behind someone now?"

"Stalking is a crime. And you could be charged as an adult." The officer felt a vague pleasure in watching Randall's pasty face go even whiter. Now, if Jennifer had taken it upon herself to put this kid in the hospital, his job would be much easier. Why on Earth had she done it to Valentine instead?

"That's not fair!" Randall's moan interrupted the officer's fantasy. "Who's going to believe her anyways? She's crazy! I've gotta call my parents!"

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"If she's gonna say he stalked her, she's gonna have to answer to me," snapped Henry Steel. "She just wants to drag somebody down with her, is what she wants. He's harmless. And did you see what she was wearing? Any healthy boy would be out of his mind!"

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"What she was *wearing*, yes!" Shirley Bennett slammed a manicured fist on the table. The officer had been trying to head her off for some time, but she was only gathering steam. "Well, when I saw her I noticed that her pants were rather tight, and she was showing some forearm- and what do you expect from men when forearm is exposed? They're basically children, and we must make allowances! And to bring charges against a boy so young is- well, it would be criminal! It would ruin his future, and I would write a book about it, officer, just you say that I won't!"

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"I had such a nice shower that day, I was a little late to work," said Bradley Valentine. "It was a very nice walk. I think I smiled at the construction men. Pretty uneventful."

Bradley Valentine's life, it seemed to the officer,

could easily be set to the Bambi soundtrack.

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“So I wasn’t *running* from the guy at this point,” said Jennifer. “I figured that might just excite him. I was walking pretty fast, though, and wondering whether my mace worked or not (sometimes it doesn’t, you know), and it seemed like I was basically going to run into a corner and then I’d have to either fight him or just give him my purse or something and hope he went away...”

“But that wasn’t necessary,” said the officer, eager to get over these theatrics.

“No, it wasn’t, in the end,” admitted Jennifer. “I rounded a corner and, miraculously, I found myself right next to my work building. You’ve probably passed it before; it’s big and glass and looks fancier than it actually is. As soon as I saw the building, I full-out sprinted. I think it took the guy by surprise; I’m a pretty fast runner and he looked hefty, I doubt he could have caught me even if he’d had warning. I wrenched open one of those giant glass doors and slammed it behind me just as he walked up, all casual-like. And just kind of smirked at me. Like, ‘that was fun, let’s do it again sometime.’ And passed by. I could have killed him.”

“But you didn’t. It seems that sometimes, you can exhibit self-control.”

Jennifer’s face darkened. “Right. Well, I’m getting to that.”

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“I didn’t stalk her and that whole story is bullshit,” insisted Randall Trotsky. “We just started going in different directions! Come on, how are you supposed to prove I was even there? Crazy bitch wants the attention. I was just hanging out.”

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“It was actually a day at work I’d been looking forward to,” said Jennifer, clasping her hands on the tabletop. “Our boss let it be known about a week ago that our department head was leaving, and that one of the artistic directors would be receiving a promotion. I’ve been at the company longer than anybody else, so I admit I was expecting it.”

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“I started working at Mullen Advertising a few months ago,” said Bradley Valentine. “My dad gave me the recommendation. I like it, I guess. Management’s a little strict. But there’s enough people on every project that you can slack off a little and somebody will fill in for you.”

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“I’m the person who fills in for everyone else,” said Jennifer. “So when Mr. Wilson called me into his office, my heart started racing even faster. I mean, I’d just arrived, so I was already red and panting and freaked out from that guy following me and tired from being woken up by the construction and moving on to death threats-”

“Yes, yes,” said the officer impatiently.

“Well, basically, I was a mess. And I walked right in and Mr. Wilson said that Bradley Valentine had been promoted to creative head and that I would need to pick up the slack while we looked for a new artistic director.”

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“It was a really nice surprise,” said Bradley Valentine blandly. “I guess the pay will be better. I just hope the hours don’t get much longer.”

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“I was furious, I admit it,” said Jennifer. “I’m still furious. I’m so much more qualified. And now I get an increase of work with no increase in pay? I had to clamp my mouth shut. As a reward, Mr. Wilson put me in charge of advertising for Shirley Bennett’s newest book. She’s that ridiculous author who’s always on the news talking about family values. Even the publishing companies don’t want to be connected with her more than they have to, apparently.”

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“It’s called *‘The Case for Gay Conversion Therapy and Other Things Your Liberal Teacher Won’t Tell You,’* and it’s going to break sales records,” Shirley Bennett said placidly. “We expect big numbers. I’ll have to switch my advertising agency now, obviously, now that I know that lunatic was working for them. Can’t have any negative attention on my book.”

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“Well, reading that garbage really improved my day, let me tell you,” said Jennifer. “And I had to figure out advertising for it. Then...” She broke off and frowned. “Things, uh, got a little weird. As it seems they often do with Shirley Bennett. We called her- Mrs. Bennett, I mean- to get her to come to the office since she was in town, and she spent two hours over the phone ranting about directions in the city and rap music.”

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“Shirley Bennett didn’t seem very nice over the phone,” said Bradley Valentine, “But when she met me she told me I was a perfect Aryan specimen, so, you know, you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

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“She *eventually* arrived,” said Jennifer. “Pulled up in a

taxi and refused to pay the driver because she didn’t think he understood English. Eventually I was able to pay the poor man and get her inside. My stress level was so high, I felt like I was going to erupt. This woman had to criticize every painting on the wall, every secretary’s hairstyle, every innocent comment she overheard. It must be exhausting, being her.

“Finally, I got her to my office and got my ideas out. We’d do a book tour, bring her to all the major universities. Some would probably refuse to host her, and she could cry ‘free speech’ like she always does... Drum up some controversy... Get a nice, bold, sexy cover... Really, all my ideas were terrible- definitely things I’d rant about on my blog, if you’re interested- but how else was I supposed to sell it? In the end, it didn’t matter. Mrs. Bennett loved them. She sat there and said, directly to my face, ‘I don’t see why you aren’t running this company, dear.’”

“Shirley Bennett said that?”

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“I certainly did not!” snapped Shirley Bennett, flushing a bit under her copious amounts of blush. “That woman is lying to your face!”

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“She did,” said Jennifer. “It was a surprise. I didn’t even know how to react. Like, of course I appreciated hearing that, but I wasn’t at all sure I wanted to hear it from someone Shirley Bennett. So I did the bitter thing. I told her that I appreciated it, and wished that Mr. Wilson shared her views. Of course, she asked what I meant, and I explained the whole promotion situation to her. She was- sympathetic.”

The officer was shuffling his papers wildly, though

he had nothing to hunt for. He was simply trying to picture Jennifer Page pouring out her heart to Shirley Bennett, scourge of the liberal media.

“And you know what she said to me?” Jennifer asked. “She said, ‘Dear, you’re constantly going to be trampled by the men in your life. And there’s nothing you can do about that. I’m really very sorry.’”

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“No, no, no, no, no, no!” shouted Shirley Bennett. She practically snatched Jennifer’s statement from the officer’s hand. “No! This conversation never took place! I never would have spoken like that to a deranged radical feminist! I demand that this be struck from the record!”

“There’s no record.”

“Make a record,” thundered Shirley Bennett, “and strike this conversation from it! I will not have my name dragged through the mud!”

Yes, the officer mused, watching her brandish the piece of paper like it was an unholy relic. That would be the exact sort of publicity Shirley Bennett wouldn’t want. Offering sympathy to another woman. Revolting.

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“Let’s disregard whatever Mrs. Bennett may or may not have said to you,” the officer said to Jennifer. “Were you with her for the rest of your work day?”

“No, as a matter of fact,” said Jennifer. “I was- I was pretty disturbed by what she’d said to me. Not that I hadn’t heard variations of it before, but hearing it from someone like her was... different. I hoisted her off on one of my colleagues and worked on a different project until it was time to go home. Then I bought her a cab and sent her off. Should probably have been more careful about

the cab; apparently I, in my frazzled state, gave the guy my address.”

“Which is why Shirley Bennett was on the scene for your attack.” “Yes. I’m getting there.”

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“When the work day was over, what did you do?”

“Oh! Yes!” Bradley scratched his head, earning a reprimand from a passing nurse. “Me and that woman- Jennifer?- ended up walking home together. Turns out we live in the same building! Don’t know how I never noticed before. I guess I hadn’t really noticed *her* before? Anyways, I’d just gotten a promotion, so I was feeling pretty good. Spring in my step and that sort of thing.”

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“I was only just managing to keep it together,” said Jennifer.

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“It’s not that far of a walk from work to our building,” said Bradley. “And things were a little awkward between us; I’m not even sure why. Like, I would make conversation and she would just nod. I hate people like that.”

The officer nodded.

“She was dressed weirdly, too,” Bradley said.

“Like, I’m not saying women have to wear dresses all the time- like, go feminism, or whatever- but at least make an effort. That’s what my mom would say.”

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“I wasn’t listening to a single word,” said Jennifer. “Which was probably better for him. Longest walk of my life. We finally got back to our building and passed the construction assholes, who were back at work.”

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“I was arguing with a cab driver at the time,”
Shirley Bennett sniffed.

“English was clearly not his first language and
he had just dumped me in the middle of nowhere- but
it turned out to be a blessing in disguise, didn’t it?
Because I had front-row seats to the shocking event!
That rather lumpy boy was lounging against a wall across
the street, too, smoking a cigarette.”

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“I saw everything,” said Randall Trotsky, “So I can  
tell you that she shouldn’t be accusing me of nothing.  
She’s crazy. You know. There are other witnesses.”

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“It came right out of nowhere,” said Henry Steel.

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“We were passing the construction workers,  
right?” Bradley Valentine looked bewildered. “And she  
made some comment about them making so much  
noise in the morning. I agreed with her, pretty politely, I  
thought, and I mentioned that I’d gotten them to stop.  
She stiffened up, for some reason. She got a really ugly  
look on her face, and I just kind of pleasantly said to her,  
‘You should smile more.’”

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“He said, ‘You’d be pretty if you smiled more,’”
said Henry Steel.

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“He said, ‘You’d be prettier if you smiled,’” said  
Randall Trotsky.

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“I don’t know nor care what he said,” said Shirley
Bennett. “I was busy explaining to some Guatemalan taxi

driver why I was about to have him deported.”

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“She just went berserk,” said Randall Trotsky.

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“Punched him right across his face, as I recall,”
said Shirley Bennett. “These athletic women are so
heartbreakingly masculine...”

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“She hit me hard in the nose,” said Bradley  
Valentine, wincing. “That’s honestly all I remember.”

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“It got worse,” said Randall Trotsky. His dull eyes
widened with the memory. “Jeez, I mean- She just pulled
a weapon out of nowhere.”

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“She grabbed the hammer right out of my hand,”  
said Henry Steel. Despite his best efforts, a waterfall of  
sweat was raining from his forehead onto the table. “She  
laid into the poor guy. It was like she was possessed or  
something.”

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“I’m sure she broke some of his ribs, probably
some limbs.” Shirley Bennett had an almost wistful
look on her face, probably deciding how best to word
her memories in book form. “There was blood. It was
unpleasant.”

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“Brutal,” said Randall Trotsky. “I was freaking out.  
If those construction  
guys didn’t hold her back, she would have killed him.”

“You didn’t think of getting involved yourself?”

“Are you crazy? I’m not risking my life for  
someone I don’t know! God, when I just think about how

I was following her earlier, she could have done that to me at any time... I think I'm the real victim here, to be honest!"

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"Me and some of the guys pulled her off," Henry Steel sighed. "I'm sure it'll be on the news that I manhandled an innocent woman, but this lady was clawing at everything she could touch. I've never seen anyone lose control like that... And I just don't get it. Now, if she had clocked the kid Randall, I might have understood. But that nice young guy... Not fair at all. And not fair to me, because the weapon was mine, and you can bet I'll be blamed for that. The company doesn't like bad publicity. I mean, what could I do? Was I supposed to throw it away the minute I saw her coming? Is there anything you can do, officer? I mean, I'm a victim here!"

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"I'm going to be in here for at least three weeks, they say," moaned Bradley Valentine. "And I don't get it. I'm a nice guy. I was nice to her. So that's why I say I think she must have gone crazy."

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"It's a free speech issue, is what it is," mused Shirley Bennett, "This whole catcalling idea. A good subject for a book. You can bet I'll talk about it next time I'm on television, I can tell you that."

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Jennifer Page sat quietly in the interrogation room, looking with vague interest at the two-way mirror. Her hands were calm on her lap. She yawned slightly.

"I just don't get it," said her interrogating officer finally. "I get that you had a bad day, what with the construction and the threats and the comments and the

stalking and the favoritism- That all sucks, I won't deny it. But a bad day isn't even a flimsy justification for brutally attacking an innocent man."

"I'm not trying to justify myself," said Jennifer. "But you need to understand this: it's not just one bad day. This has been every day for as long as I care to remember; waking up to death threats because I dare to type out my thoughts, being ignored and passed over, then being there for random men to jerk off onto. Today, something just... snapped."

"Enough with the dramatics. I still say you don't even come close. Oh, if you attacked one of the construction workers or the creeper kid, sure, my sympathy would be with you, but to assault a man who hardly did anything to you-"

"It's not right, no," said Jennifer, but her voice was frosty. "I need you to understand, I wasn't only attacking him right then."

"You were physically. I don't know whether you're banking on an insanity plea."

"Maybe he's a perfectly nice guy," said Jennifer Page. "But he didn't have any of the fear that I have. The fear I carry with me at all times. Now he's got a little of it. It's cruel, but I find that kind of satisfying."

"The Angel of Justice act is nice. But you two also competed for a promotion. So I'm not sure I buy it. Simple revenge is a pretty common motive."

"Well, maybe it was revenge in a way," said Jennifer. "And maybe it was simple. But not in the way you think. Shirley Bennett told me I'd always be trampled on.... Well, for once, I got to do the trampling..."

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"She's fired for sure," said Bradley Valentine. "I mean,

crazy like that, I gotta wonder who she slept with to get as far as she did.”

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The headline in the next day’s Daily News, written by guest columnist Shirley Bennett, read:

**DERANGED RADICAL FEMINIST  
BRUTALLY ATTACKS WELL- WISHER.  
NICE GUYS, BEWARE!**