

THE JPEG OF COLUMBINE DEEVERS

He was the most beautiful man in London, everyone agreed. Wherever he went, heads turned, women swooned and men who had previously thought themselves ladies' men felt stirrings where previously they had not. His name was Columbine Deevers and he was, to all intents and purposes, twenty-four years of age. And it was on the morning of his twenty-fourth birthday that, reclining on a couch of purest blue, that Columbine Deevers said to his closest friend and boon companion, Lord Thomas Ardent, "Thomas, I am bored."

"Bored, Columbine?" responded his Lordship, paring one nail with another. "Why?"

"Because the world is at my feet, and I cannot be bothered even to trample on it," replied his friend. "Because life holds no surprises for me. Because I have travelled to the limits of both experience and imagination. And" – here Columbine sighed, "because nothing is more beautiful than I."

Lord Ardent got to his feet. They were remarkable feet, and had been known to start riots in Belgravia.

"You are wrong," he told his friend. "There is one more beautiful than you."

And he pointed at the gilt-framed mirror above the mantel.

Columbine raised his head enough to see his own reflection.

"Why, it is nothing but myself, inverted," he said, and sank down again.

"All right," replied his Lordship. "How about that?"

And again he pointed, this time at a portrait on the wall, a painting of Columbine Deevers by the finest artist of the day, which both exactly caught the essence of the sitter and added a lustre of its own.

"Seen it," said Deevers, and sank further back into the couch.

"Very well then," said Lord Ardent. "I had planned to save this for after breakfast but, seeing as it is your birthday - "

He made an imperceptible nod at an even more imperceptible manservant, who approached his Lordship with a flat items, wrapped in red crepe and the size and shape of a large package of smoked salmon.

"What is it?" asked Columbine, with the scarcest flicker of interest.

"Open it and find out," Lord Ardent replied.

"I cannot summon the energy."

"Then shall I."

And with these decisive word, his Lordship took the parcel and removed the wrapping. In his hands was a small black rectangle made from a shining substance. As Columbine sat up, half-interested despite himself, Lord Ardent pressed an indentation on the front of the rectangle. A shrill yet booming sound issued from the object, which immediately illuminated itself.

"What is it?" asked Columbine.

"I thought it would rouse you from your slumbers," said Ardent. "Here."

He gave it to Columbine. The flat surface of the rectangle was now filled with tiny images.

"It is called a tablet," Ardent explained. "A new invention from America."

"What does it do?"

"Everything," replied his Lordship. He drew his finger along the surface, which was made of glass, and the shapes moved with it. He pressed lightly on a shape and images and sounds appeared, both musical and moving.

"Do you like it?" asked Ardent.

"It is beautiful," Deevers replied, his voice husky. "Teach it to me."

Columbine Deevers, for whom science was a mystery and literature literally a closed book, mastered the tablet within days. Even Lord Ardent was unable to say what Deevers had learned, for the pupil progressed so rapidly that he soon outpaced the master. And one day Columbine came to Ardent and said:

“Look!”

On the screen, no larger than a postage stamp, was a tiny picture. It was exquisite and it was of Columbine.

“You have taken your own photograph,” said his Lordship.

“It is a jpeg,” corrected Columbine. “It has a high resolution but can still be sent in the body of an email or as an attachment. But see! I am in the computer now.”

And it seemed to Lord Ardent that there was indeed something of Columbine Deevers’ essence in the little portrait. It was immobile yet animated and its tiny smile, curling with delicious disdain for the human circus, was Columbine’s.

“You have captured your image perfectly,” agreed Lord Ardent.

“I shall send it to everyone at once,” cried Columbine.

That night, everyone who knew Columbine Deevers received a copy of the tiny jpeg. It was reproduced on social media, shared and downloaded, copied and re-upped, and was captioned, reworked, and converted into memes and gifs all around the civilised world.

And great was Columbine’s delight: but it appeared to Lord Ardent that his friend was somehow diminished by the deed. It was as if each time the image was transmitted, a small part of Columbine’s essence was removed. Ardent had heard of primitive peoples who believed that a photograph captured one’s soul: now, looking at his friend’s increasingly grey pallor in the face of his portrait’s fame, he wondered if those people might not be so primitive after all. Each day, as the image spread around the world and was resent and recopied again and again, Columbine Deevers became greyer and thinner and more silent.

Until one morning, Lord Ardent awoke to the sound of a banging on his door which was at once insistent and feeble, like someone urgently trying to attract his attention with some leaves. He answered the door himself. There was nobody there. He was about to close it again when a voice like mist said:

“Thomas! It is I!”

Lord Ardent turned and let out a gasp of horror. For there, half-transparent and nearly invisible, was his friend.

“Columbine!” he cried.

“Let me in before I vanish,” Deevers replied, weakly.

Once inside, Ardent sent for brandy.

“I cannot drink,” said Columbine.

“Food then?”

“Nor eat. I am almost incorporeal now.”

“What shall we do?” cried Ardent, wringing his hands in anguish.

“There is nothing,” said his once-beautiful friend. “My atoms are scattered inside – inside *there*” – he pointed to the tablet that lay on Ardent’s desk.

“Then we shall smash it!” Lord Ardent shouted.

“That would, I fear, be to no avail. For my essence is scattered to the winds. What was once flesh and blood in this world is now naught but bytes and data. I am discomposed in cyberspace.”

“There must be something we can do!”

Columbine smiled. He put his hand, his poor ghost of a hand, on Ardent’s, and Ardent felt nothing, not even a chill.

“I am too far gone,” he said. “Please remember me as I was, not as I am.”
And then he – *dispersed* is the only word – and was never seen again in this world.

Lord Ardent mourns his friend yet. Sometimes he takes up the thin black tablet where Deevers’ misfortunes began, holds it upright like the gravestone that it is, and he looks at Columbine’s image – the original picture, the first jpeg that remains still on the desktop. His Lordship likes to look at it, fancying that he can still feel the true essence of the man he loved. But he does so less and less often now, for sometimes when he looks at the jpeg of Columbine Deevers, he fancies that it looks back at him, and it laughs.

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