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Before I Knew His Name

Tall.

No ice.

The way I always ask for it when I want to feel
something but not too fast.

The rim stuck for a second on my lipstick—
that soft kind of drag

like drying honey on skin

or a man's hand slipping from your waist

when it wasn't his will that made it slip.

I tilted the glass,

slow

watched the edge lift,

leaving just enough behind

to feel the smear warm at the corner of my mouth.

I turned it slightly, found the clean side.

Tom Collins, I'd marry you if I could.

The booth was navy leather,

sultry at the crease

but I liked it.

Made that soft vinyl sound, the vintage kind that squeals
when it rotates through.

There were couples laughing three tables down,
a man with a newspaper
tapping his foot
and checking the clock above the bar.

The music turned a corner,
slick as silk against a bare back.

Then I saw him.

Tucked into the lounge like
it was his mother's lap—
Elbow draped.
Glass untouched.

The kind of man who looked like he owned the lighting.
The kind of man you start undressing in pieces—
slow as a box of virgin cigarettes.

His gaze slid past—
simple, practiced;

but it lingered
when it found me twice.

I crossed my legs
like I was bored with the view:
the way you do
when someone's already
watching
and you want to give them
something to miss if they looked away again.

The saxophone was soft
but not uncurious.
It curved around the room like it knew where everyone
was sitting;
brushed skin faint enough to raise gooseflesh
without any one person strong enough to lift it from their
chest.

the whole thing swayed
just a second behind his shoulder.

He finally touched his drink.

Didn't sip it.

Just touched it—

like it might sparkle

because it knew who was holding it.

like it might blush

and spill a secret

right into his palm.

2/9/53

The light
trembled in my cupped hands—
wind like a boxer
quick
on
the
jaw.

Broadway signs blinked tired—
red
blue.

Steam rose from the grates
like nostrils;
silver sidewalk—
crushed pearls under worn
leather and patent heels.

She was leaning against a
lamppost,
white gloves,

coat too thin for February,

15mm I think.

Eyes

like cracked porcelain—

or church panes—

if you knew how to

look.

Her laugh caught us both off guard.

“I shouldn’t talk to men with lighter collections,”

I struck the

match anyway,

smoke whirling between

us.

For a moment

we were just grey lungs

and

strangers.

She was talking about

California—
how the
sun
there feels
staged,
how everything looks
golden
until you get up close.

I talked too much.
About engines,
about the sound of a well oiled
machine.
She listened
like an understudy
relearning her
face
between takes.

It was after the fifteenth block,
she pinched two fingers together

and held them in the air—
like a habit
she wasn't trying to
break.

We stopped near a deli that smelled like coffee and
The Times.

I bought her one.

Her lipstick left a
soft print on
the rim.

Cherry red. Not for attention.

Just for
herself.

It was quiet,
but it held—
like something stress-tested.

It sat between us

while
red yellow and green
played tag in
the empty intersection.

I asked her real name.

She gave me a stage one instead.

It fit too well to argue.

I already knew who she was—
and maybe she knew me too.

The rich mechanic
who never looked tired
enough.

When the butt hit pavement,
she leaned in—
not to stay,
just to make the cut look clean.

...

Great.

Now I'm out of matches

and I didn't even get her autograph.

Corner store's gonna love me.

Sugar

They powdered her like she'd melt
under the lights—
then asked her not to move.

She posed with a bottle of cola
like it was the key to world peace.

The fan kicked on,
and her dress lifted
like it had stage directions.

behind me,
a grip dropped his wrench.
I didn't blame him.

I've seen chrome shine less.
Hell, I've polished chrome
that didn't move like that.

A flashbulb burst.

She didn't blink.

Professional.

I counted how many people
were paid just to touch her hair.

Lost track at five—

good to know my net worth ranks below her bangs.

TICKET LED ME TO THEATER 6

The back row—
popcorn, sunglasses,
feet on the seat.
Of course.

“You’re late,” she says.
I hand her a pretzel.
“I brought snacks. That buys me two minutes.”

The lights go down.
She leans close.

“There’s a scene where I trip.”
“I’ll pretend it’s a metaphor.”

On screen,
she’s twenty feet tall—
larger than life.

“That smile’s doing things to my blood pressure.”

She licks the salt from her lips.

“Maybe skip the popcorn.”

I watch her

watch herself.

And think—

this version?

No camera ever gets it right.

...

House lights flicker on—

she leans into me like it's still dark

“You cried.”

“Please. My eyes were just sweating.”

She laughs.

God, I hope she never stops.

BISHOP, HAZEL

She moved like she'd done it
in a hundred cities
with a hundred names.

We were bricks
behind the Roxie.
Poster of Niagara
ripping loose above us—
America's Blonde peeling
like old paint.

Her hand slipped
under my collar—
nails like metal
scraping metal.

She pressed in
like a skipped heartbeat.

I kept one hand
at her waist,
the other
remembering how not to shake.

The street was empty

but loud.

A bus passed,

headlights welding

our outlines

to the wall.

She stepped away first.

Smoothed her dress like it had misbehaved.

Lit a cigarette

with my match—

the last one in the book,

I noticed.

“That didn’t count.”

like it was policy.

“Good,” I said.

“Numbers were never my type.”

I pocketed the matchbook anyway.

Empty things still have weight.

What's In A Name?

The booth had a view of the jukebox
and the reflection of my
calves in the chrome.

I sat like someone might sketch me—
one leg crossed high,
heel slipping slow from the back
of my shoe.

The seam of my stockings
pulled tight across the curve of my thigh.

I leaned into the vinyl
just enough to leave a shape,
wrist resting soft against my knee,
fingers curled like they'd been kissed
and hadn't quite recovered.

He wasn't here.

But I was still sitting like I had company.

I had a pen.

A napkin.

And nothing better to do
than see how his name looked in my handwriting.

I gave the *y* a little curl.

Then crossed it out.

Started again—neater this time,
like something you'd stitch on a silk robe
or emboss on the side of a
blood-red bomber.

Tried it in all caps.

Then soft, slanted, like the loop in a lowercase *g*
when you're trying to be good.

I wrote it eight times.

Twice with a flourish.

Once with a heart,
even though there isn't an *i*.

Then I kissed the corner—
once, soft,
like I meant it to stay.
The mark came out perfect.
No smudge.
No lipstick on my teeth.

I didn't fold it.
Just left it there,
warm from my hand.

Sundae

It slipped out
right after he redesigned the dessert menu in theory
and informed the waiter
that cream soda could hold a float together longer.

It wasn't rehearsed.
Didn't knit itself
on a silk scarf of intention.

Just—
“Do you own a tux?”

He paused,
smiled down at his spoon:
“Darling, my tux tips better than most men.”

I told him about the gala—
sequins, speeches,
a chandelier shaped like a swan
that's allegedly French.

Lots of people
with smiles and dreams
tall enough to teeter,
truths thin enough to snap.

His knuckles went
white against the glass
before he
caught himself. He watched the fizz die off—the bubbles
collapse. Like he knew the kind of
nights that glitter going in and bleed coming out.

I laughed too fast.
Said it was fine
if he was busy
or allergic to spotlights.
(Or me. I didn't say that part.)

He didn't say yes.
Not exactly.
Just wiped his mouth,

nodded at the sundae,
and said,
“You’re lucky I’m bad at saying no.”

Whatever that means.

Maybe it’s nice...
just to be asked.

Afterparty

The heel snapped
somewhere between the
second martini
and her sudden, passionate defense of gravity.

Now it sat—
like a wounded thing—
on the coffee table between them.

He picked it up, turned it over,
thumb brushing the worn leather
where something soft pressed hard.

"Tell me—you fall for everyone like this, or just the
furniture?"

She sat cross-legged on the couch,
barefoot,
her dress puddled around her

like moonlight poured out and left
to dry.

“I don’t know,” she said,

twirling a yellow strand of hair,

biting her lip like the words

tasted bad coming up.

He found a screwdriver—

of course he had a screwdriver—

and worked at the whiny screws:

threads grinding

soft against

each turn,

scoring metal.

Her eyes drifted to his hands.

Veins,
tendons white under the skin
like cables d r a w n tight.

“You’re good at that,” she said.

“Fixing things?”

“Touching them like they aren’t broken.”

REDLINE

Light came in low and sharp,
cutting in and across the floor like
protractile claws.

I should've been working.
The sketches
in front of me said motion, said speed—
but my hand hovered.
The lines kept coming out softer than I
meant them to.

The couch still held her shape:
Leg tucked under, shoulder sunk in.
Neck arched along a
baby blue Swedish throw pillow
I forgot I had.

I tilted my wrist,
The pencil bucked,

dragged a line across the hood.

I didn't curse.

Just sank my thumb in
and watched the lead bloom.

She'd left maybe ten minutes ago.

The thermostat blinked 72.

Same as yesterday.

Progress, if you're a thermostat.

My blueprints indulged themselves in the opposite
sentiment however.

The axle was crooked.

My tie, worse.

At least one of us handled curves well.

Plastic, Please

The lock caught,
like it always does.

I leaned into it,
bag slipping

down

my

wrist.

The lights were yellow,
dusty.

Shoes by the wall,
not a pair.

My coat slouched over a hook like a man at a
gentleman's club.

I glanced at the machine
then stared:

One red eye, steady—

I didn't move.

I looked like a magazine ad
for a mannequin they forgot to undress.

Playback: one message.

I hit play.

***“Hey. Not a marriage proposal,
sorry to disappoint.
Just thought I'd say—
if Delman throws another tantrum,
I've got time.
And a wrench.”***

End of message.

A smile
curled
under my collarbone
like the start of a song.

Whiting & Davis clutched the floor
better than I clutched anything.

Played it again.

Then again.

Then three more times
just to hear how he said “tantrum.”

He didn't say
my name,
As if he were being shy.
Which is adorable,
if you ignore the
smirk.

I held the phone.
Said his words like they were
a password—

Twirled and stretched the cord around my fingers until I
thought it'd peel from the wallpaper.

Thumb hovered:

just once.

Just long enough to imagine his face

if I actually did it.

I stood there like I had

dinner plans

with someone better

looking.

Like I hadn't replayed that voice

enough to memorize the

pauses

and let it settle behind my ribs.

I set the rotary romance down

like it might wake up again.

Walked to the kitchen

heels

echoing

like they couldn't believe I made it to the next room
without lipstick on the receiver.

3/21/53

Finger pointed
at a stuffed giraffe—
the kind with eyes too big
for its own soul—
said
“win me that.”

I missed.
on purpose.
Twice.
The third time I just handed the guy
a fifty.

She got her giraffe,
a duck wearing sunglasses,
and a silver horse.
Told me I could carry them
since I lacked
moral fiber

and hand-eye coordination.

Her taste in prizes?

Questionable.

Her taste in desserts?

Better.

Funnel cake appeared.

So did my wallet.

She walked off like it was choreographed.

I followed the script.

A block later

We were next for

the Cyclone.

The wood creaked.

She looked

thrilled.

I was doing the math on survival.

She raised her hands
before we even dropped.
I kept mine on the bar—
someone
had to be the adult.

There was salt on her lips—
pretzel, ocean, sweat.

We drifted past the food stands,
air thick with fry oil,
sunlight bouncing off her
earrings—

a rhinestoned smirk grabbed her wrist,
Said she'd fall
for a guy with big ideas
and no off switch—
like a jukebox stuck on swing.

"She grinned,

flicked her lighter once
and said,
“Well, that narrows it down.”

Was that your version of a compliment?
Might want to pace yourself—
I get prettier the longer you stare.

SILVER

radio played—
a trumpet sighing like smoke curling from red lips.

The garage smelled like
rain and
rust;
like oil flecks in your cuticle.

Tony's voice caught—
the way men's voices do
when they believe too much in something to say it plain.

The car shimmered,
gaunt and sleep-tousled,
dreaming of roads she hadn't touched
yet.

"She's made to drive herself," he whispered.

For a long breath,
I wasn't sure which of us
he meant.

He held out his hand—
not an order,
not a command,
but a question
folded into a boy's grin.

I set my fingers in his palm,
let him spin me once, twice,
under the
lazy eye of a flickering bulb.

Her headlights watched us
as if she knew—
there's a kind of magic
in staying still.

His forehead brushed mine once —

an accident he didn't bother to
apologize for.

We floated,
an iron man and a silver girl
spinning slow.

I stayed quiet.
Some things are too
beautiful
to break into smaller pieces.

The light slipped once,
throwing our shadows across the
concrete.

His hand settled at the
small of my back,
guiding me with the kind of care
men usually saved for
the glass.

Not Making Yours

She licked dough from her finger,
made a face:
puckered-bright
nose half-wrinkled, half-citrus
“Too much lime?”

I shook my head.
“Not enough sugar.”

She smiled
then dumped half the bag in.

½ cup granulated sugar.

Zest of 1 lime, finely grated.

1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary.

The counter was a mess.
Flour everywhere.
The measuring spoons vanished

somewhere between vanilla and

“wait, we need eggs?”

1 large egg.

1 teaspoon vanilla extract.

½ cup unsalted butter, softened.

She leaned close—

flour smudged at her temple, lashes still, the way
dancers pinch their waist before moving:

“What color was your kitchen, growing up?”

I didn’t answer.

Because her face was three inches from mine
and she smelled like lime and rosemary and white
chocolate.

She turned back to the bowl.

I exhaled.

½ teaspoon baking soda.

¼ teaspoon salt.

1 cup all-purpose flour.

½ cup white chocolate chips.

Chill dough for 10 minutes.

The powdered sugar spilled.

She tapped it into little clouds

across the table,

like she wanted to trap winter in a glass.

I tried to catch some with the edge of my sleeve.

Tried.

She laughed like a screwball heroine in soft focus—

the kind you fall for when you're 17

and blame every girl after for not being.

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Line baking sheet with parchment paper.

Scoop dough into 1-inch balls, space

2 inches apart.

She asked how long cookies take.

I said eight minutes.

She cranked the dial left,

said, “Well, we’re not making *yours*, sweetheart.”

THE SOUND ITALIAN LEATHER MAKES

when it's warm and cooling fast
is nothing short of what I imagine love
would sound like it if it could.

She stepped out of the A6,
door swinging wide on its leather hinge
then closing soft,
like she didn't want to startle
the still-sunken Berlinetta body she left behind.
She didn't glance back,
just coaxed the wings shut
with the kind of touch
that says,
I could slam this—
but I won't.

Just the slow pull of her walk shrinking in the mirror, all
ankle and intent, like gravity took its cues from her
instead of Newton, the back of her slip catching wind

and then changing its mind, her shoulder blades shifting
like they were spelling something I wasn't fluent in, one
shoe skimming the curb like it forgot the rest of her had
left:

her hand lifted—

knuckles grazing just high enough to peel fabric from
her skirt,

just enough to make me wonder

if she was saying goodbye,

or tucking her hair behind that rice-colored ear.

The taillights flickered against the curb

like they were waiting on me

to drag them down the road.

I granted their wish.

Shifted into drive

and let the scarlet glow spill forward.