

**ALL THE  
BETTER  
PART  
OF ME**

**MOLLY RINGLE**

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**ALL THE BETTER PART OF ME**

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*Dedicated to the Millennials and Generation Z,  
the sweet, brave love children of us kids of the '80s.*

O! how thy worth with manners may I sing,  
When thou art all the better part of me?  
What can mine own praise to mine own self bring?  
And what is't but mine own when I praise thee?  
Even for this, let us divided live,  
And our dear love lose name of single one,  
That by this separation I may give  
That due to thee which thou deserv'st alone.  
O absence! what a torment wouldst thou prove,  
Were it not thy sour leisure gave sweet leave,  
To entertain the time with thoughts of love,  
Which time and thoughts so sweetly doth deceive,  
And that thou teachest how to make one twain,  
By praising him here who doth hence remain.

Sonnet XXXIX  
William Shakespeare

## CHAPTER 1: NOCTURNAL ME

THE WOMAN IN THE RED JACKET WAS STARING AT ME.

Possibly, she'd been staring at me for several minutes, but it had taken me awhile to notice because I'd been busy, inwardly scowling while composing imaginary sarcastic emails to my parents. A dumb thing to waste energy on. Acting like an emo rebel might be forgivable in a sixteen-year-old, but was approaching pathetic in a twenty-five-year-old living on his own in another country.

Maybe I was outwardly scowling too, which could explain why the woman was staring at me. I relaxed my facial muscles, sent her a neutral smile, and turned to pull a pint for a man who had breezed up to the bar.

Summary of the day's emails that had incited this mindset:

*Granddad and Grandmom say they haven't seen a picture of you in a while. I'm not sure we have any recent good ones. Do you? Maybe something where you're dressed nicely for a stage part, if they've given you any respectable costumes lately. And do you have any in which you aren't wearing makeup? That would go over better.*

*Mom*

*I always wear makeup onstage, Mom. It's required. So are non-respectable costumes sometimes.*

*Sinter*

*I understand, but are there any photos where the makeup isn't quite so obvious? Also where your hair is cut normally.*

*Mom*

*Then no. No there are not.*

*Sinter*

In truth, I could have sent my latest professional headshot, in which I wore a plain black T-shirt, my face was clean of makeup, and my hair was tame, though still dyed black and almost shoulder length. But Mom had pissed me off and I didn't want to cooperate, and anyway, what the hell did my grandparents need photos of me for when they didn't like what I was doing with my life or how I looked? Just checking to see if I'd improved lately?

Deep breath.

What I should do, I realized, was forward the exchange to my best friend, Andy. He'd find it hilarious. Just imagining his laughter made me smile, and my shoulders eased a little. But contacting him would have to wait till after my shift.

I served drinks to the growing dinner crowd, picked up abandoned foam-smearing pint glasses and clinked them into the washtub, then navigated back to check on the woman in the red jacket and her blonde companion, parked at the end of the bar.

Red Jacket still stared at me, though not flirtatiously—no batting eyelashes or coy smiles. On the plus side, no hostility or derision either, which you sometimes got when you were a dude with dyed hair and eyeliner. Instead, she seemed to be contemplating me with fascination. Always another option with my look.

She appeared to be in her late twenties, with thick-rimmed glasses, light-brown skin, and dark hair cut in a messy bob. The red jacket was either leather or faux leather, and oversized like people used to wear in

the '80s. Appealingly geeky. Cute. I would be content with “not hostile” from her.

I tapped my fingers on the bar in front of them. “Another round?”

The blonde woman, likely in her thirties, was halfway through her martini and shook her head with a smile.

“Not yet, thanks,” Red Jacket said, lifting her partially full cider glass. Then, before I could step away, she raised her voice to counter the Arctic Monkeys song playing over the speakers. “I love your shirt.”

I glanced down to refresh my memory on what I was wearing: a vintage Echo and the Bunnymen T-shirt I'd owned since high school. “Thanks.”

She sat up and pulled open the sides of her jacket to display a Siouxsie and the Banshees T-shirt.

I grinned. “Right on.”

“Are you a new-wave fan?” she asked.

She and the other woman locked their gazes onto me as if truly invested in my answer.

“Yeah, I am,” I said. Wasn't everyone? Well, not my parents, but everyone who appreciated legendary, charismatic, trendsetting art.

They glanced at each other in satisfaction. The blonde woman said, “The eyeliner, too. Tipped us off.” As if realizing it could sound scornful, she turned to me and added, “I love it, by the way.”

“I don't suppose you're an actor?” Red Jacket asked me.

“I am, as a matter of fact.” Score one for this woman, who evidently knew, unlike my parents and grandparents, that actors and makeup went hand in hand.

Then again, it was a safe bet that anyone working at a pub in London's West End was also an actor. Or aspired to be.

She exchanged another look with her friend. “It's fate. We spend the whole day sorting through headshots with no luck, then come here for a drink, and look what we find.”

The blonde woman conceded with a tilt of her martini glass toward Red Jacket.

At the mention of headshots, I snapped to attention. Before I could ask what they were casting for, the dark-haired woman asked me, “And you’re American?”

“Yes. Sorry.” I always apologized for that in the UK, just to be safe.

“No no, that’s perfect! The part’s American. The character, I mean. Oh dear, I’m making no sense.” She folded her fingers around her cider glass and let her shoulders droop with a laugh.

“It’s okay. Um, the part?”

At that moment, her friend jumped, plucked a phone out of her coat pocket, and read the message that had buzzed her. “Ah. There they are.” She slid off her bar stool. “Sorry. Must go meet my nanny and child. See you tomorrow, Fiona.” With a smile at me she added, “You as well, perhaps.” She walked out.

My boss emerged from the kitchen to help serve the burgeoning Friday-evening crowd. He frowned at me. I really ought to stop chatting and take some drink orders. But the woman had mentioned a character, a part, and acting was my *real* job. So I placated my boss with a lifted index finger to signal *Just a sec*, and turned back to the woman—Fiona, was that her name?

“Sorry, the part?” I asked. I settled my elbows on the sticky bar, leaning in to hear her better. I caught a hint of scent from her that reminded me of candle smoke and luxury cosmetics.

“I’m a writer and director for TV films. Chelsea’s my writing partner.” She flipped her thumb backward after the woman who had just left. “We’ve finished a script and begun casting for it. Then we came in here and happened to see you . . .” She raised her palms as if to sketch the whole of me. “It’s amazing. Bunnymen shirt and everything. I don’t suppose you’d audition? Say you will. I’m begging you.”

“Sure, yeah.” You always said yes at this phase. Actor command-



ment. *Yes, I can and will do anything.* “Um, what’s the part, the film?”

“It’s set in London in the early 1980s, post-punk, new-romantic era. Most would say ‘new wave.’ It’s a star-crossed lover setup, between this posh totty who’s slumming it, sneaking off to the clubs, and this poor American musician who’s outstaying his visa and trying to join a band. He’s who you’d read for.”

I couldn’t sing or play instruments, at least not with any real skill, but they’d find that out in due time if it was relevant. Alone in my room in my teen years, I had logged hundreds of hours lip-synching in the mirror, so I could fake it, in any case. I would *love* to fake it, if we were honest. “Yeah, that sounds great. When are auditions?”

“We’re running screen tests this week. When are you free? Are you acting in something?”

“I’m in a stage show, fringe theater. But it ends this weekend, so I can schedule a screen test whenever.”

*Give me a movie role. Please. Don’t make me work in food service my whole life to pay the rent.*

She beamed and whipped out her phone to open the schedule. We fixed a screen test for the next afternoon. She gave me her business card—*Fiona Saanvi Wyndham*—and using the number on it, I texted her my name and the agent representing me in London.

“Got it,” she said. “Sinter Blackwell—is that your name? I mean, with actors sometimes—”

“It’s my real name. Well, my name’s Joel, but no one except my parents calls me that. I go by my middle name.”

The absolute last thing my parents would have done was pick a goth-sounding middle name for their kid, but they had inadvertently done so by choosing the surname of a prolific pioneer ancestor of ours. “Sinter” had always put me in mind of “cinder” or “disintegrate” or some sort of industrial solder, so I had insisted on being called that from middle school onward.

“I’m so not a ‘Joel,’” I told Fiona, as if that explained everything.

“Fair enough.” She splayed both hands in front of her, still holding her phone. “Also, I’m required to tell you ahead of time, there’s some going topless in this film. As rock performers do. So if you feel up to it, we might have you strip off your shirt for the screen test.”

“Right, no problem.” I’d been shirtless onstage before. I was not what anyone would call ripped. I was more what they’d call slim and alarmingly pale. But possibly that would suit a rock musician role.

She clasped her phone between her hands. “Excellent. Then we’re all set. I’ll chat with your agent as soon as possible. Tonight, if he’ll answer his phone after hours.”

We shook hands, and she sailed out of the pub.

I jogged toward my harassed boss. “Sorry.” I held up the card. “She’s a director. I have an audition.”

“Congratulations.” He slapped a coaster on the bar. “Serve some bloody drinks, would you?”

After my shift ended, I ate dinner in the form of a toasted sandwich from the kitchen and set out for the theater a few streets away to prepare for the night’s performance.

As I walked, my breath clouding in the autumn air, I checked messages on my phone.

Fiona: So good to meet you! Got your cv from your agent so that’s all settled. Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow

Sinter: Excellent. This all sounds really cool, thanks so much

Fiona: Is this your first time in the UK btw?

Sinter: No it’s my fourth, all work abroad stints, but this is my first time getting acting work, so I’m liking it the best

Fiona: Four trips, wow you must love it here

Sinter: I really do. I keep hoping the UK will adopt me, ha

Fiona: Perhaps we will do :) We’ll talk soon!

Sinter: Great, cheers

Three of my four work-abroad trips, including this latest, had taken place not long after a breakup with a girlfriend. I had a habit of fleeing to the UK for comfort at such times. England had been my dream destination and go-to spot ever since my first year of college, when I had made the stunning realization that Shakespeare, Dickens, the Brontës, the Beatles, the Cure, the many '90s Britpop groups of my childhood, Sir Ian McKellen, and Dame Maggie Smith all came from the same place and that it therefore *had* to be superior to America.

I navigated to a different messaging app, one I used for keeping in touch with people back in the States, like my best friend Andy, since international texting was expensive. I'd forgotten to complain to him about my parents' latest instance of passive-aggression, but I decided to drop that. Much more fun to tell him I was about to get my first-ever movie screen test instead.

Then I stopped outside the theater's stage door, frowning at my phone. He had sent me a message about an hour earlier, which I had missed in the evening's madness.

Andy: Well shit

Sinter: Argh sorry just saw this. What's up?

I hauled open the backstage door and entered. Warm air replaced the outdoor chill, and I breathed in the smell of cut lumber, powdery cosmetics, electronics, and hairspray. My fellow actors milled around in various stages of undress and makeup. Some waved in greeting. I waved back and made my way to the clothing rack where my costume hung.

Andy: Relationship drama. Sigh. Super busy work morning but I'll fill you in at lunch

Sinter: Yeah let me know, hope everything's ok

**MOLLY RINGLE**

Vaguely worried on his behalf, while at the same time excited at the prospect of the screen test, I put my phone away and started stripping off my clothes to put on my costume, elbow to elbow with the other actors. Just another evening in theater.

## CHAPTER 2: PICTURES OF YOU

ANDRÉS ORTIZ AND I HAD LIVED TWO BLOCKS AWAY FROM EACH OTHER IN OUR SUBURB NEAR PORTLAND, Oregon, and had been best friends since sixth grade. I still considered him that, though I hadn't seen him much in person over the past seven years. We kept in touch online and met up in real life when we happened to be in the same city.

Andy had studied computer science at Stanford while I earned my theater arts degree at the University of Oregon, and was living in Seattle with his boyfriend, Mitchell. They'd been together about a year, and I'd only met Mitchell on a few brief occasions. He was older than us by four or five years and struck me as sort of reserved and fussy, but if Andy liked him, I gave him the stamp of approval.

Now they were suffering "relationship drama"? What did that mean?

During the long lull between getting into costume and my first appearance onstage, I lounged beside the back door and messaged him again. It would be lunch hour in Seattle, since it was half past eight in the evening in London.

Sinter: I just scheduled a screen test for tomorrow. Crazy. So what's up?

He answered within two minutes.

Andy: Oh that sounds cool, screen test for what?

Sinter: Movie set in the 80s. We'll see how it goes

Andy: Right on, sounds perfect for you

Sinter: So what's this relationship drama?

Andy: Yeah well . . . seems I'm single now

Alarm flared to life inside my chest.

Sinter: What???

Andy: Mitchell's moving out as we speak. He'll be gone by the time I get back

Sinter: Dude. And you're just letting me talk about movies?

Andy: Heh, well I knew I'd fill you in eventually

Sinter: What happened?

Andy: It's . . . blah. Can I call? Too much to type

Sinter: Sure, I have 20 mins before I have to be on

I slipped out the door into the alley so my conversation wouldn't earn *Be quiet* scowls from our stage manager. Cold evening air flowed around me, curry-scented from nearby restaurants. Traffic hummed at the ends of the block. A light buzzed above the door, illuminating a span of pavement and wall. I made sure the wedge of wood was where it should be, propping open the door a crack, then started pacing back and forth in front of it.

My phone rang half a minute later. I picked up. "Hey."

"Hey." He sighed. "So okay, here's the quick version."

My mouth pulled into a nostalgic smile at the sound of his voice, tired but familiar, awash in West Coast American vowels. "Hit me with it."

"Things hadn't been great between us for a while. But I'd thought they were getting better." He sounded jagged, broken, the way people tended to after a breakup. It had been a long time since I'd heard that tone from him, probably not since some instance of college-era heart-

break, and it swelled the knot of sympathy in my chest. “I mean, we’d leased the apartment together, right? That was a commitment, sort of.”

“For sure.”

“But apparently, I was wrong. Because there’s this coworker of his—older, like forty—who Mitchell’s been in love with for a long time but thought he couldn’t be with, because they work together, and because of relationship-baggage issues, and I don’t even know what all. This just came out the other night. It was complete news to me. Anyway. Now they’re together.”

My costume boot heels clicked on the pavement as I paced. “Wait, so he left *you*? For someone else?”

“Oh yes. I got dumped good and proper.”

“What the fuck? Just out of nowhere?”

“Pretty much. He’s moving in with *Jeff*, and that’s that. And you know, our apartment is expensive. It’s on Capitol Hill. It has a view. We could just about afford it when we split the rent, but now? I have to find a new roommate. I can’t live there alone. Not forever, anyway.”

“What an asshole. God.”

“Well . . .” Andy sighed. “He did pay his share for the next month, to give me time. Which is something, at least.”

“Still. He didn’t deserve you.”

“I don’t know. I must have failed somehow. I . . . wasn’t enough.”

“No. That’s not true. It was all his deal, man.”

“But if it was all him, then I was so deluded, thinking he wanted to be with me.” He sounded miserable. “How did I get that deluded?”

I suffered from emotional contagion, catching people’s moods, which was useful as an actor but hurt like a hundred paper cuts at moments like this. Andy was the person I cared about most in the world these days, given I was single too, which made the pain even sharper. I had friends in London, but no one here—in fact, no one anywhere—had ever known me as well as he did. I adjusted the phone against my

sweaty ear and attempted an ironic tone. “You’re talking to the king of delusions, so I’m not sure I should try to answer that.”

“Ha. Fair enough. So you said you had to be ‘on’ soon? Like on-stage?”

“Yeah, in a bit.”

“Wait, are you wearing some sort of costume right now?”

“I am dressed as the ghost of a medieval prince.” It was a weird play. Even after rehearsing and performing it for weeks, I still didn’t understand what it all meant, and neither did any of the reviewers.

“You’re . . . okay.” A dash of interest shored up his voice. “Then you know what, I’m switching to video.”

“God,” I complained, but when the video-call request pinged in, I tapped the button to allow it. You had to humor your recently dumped friends.

His face filled the screen. His skin looked a little more sallow than usual, and he had dark smudges below his eyes, though the shadow of his glasses could have been contributing to that. His brown hair glinted in the sunlight, short but edging into “needing a haircut” territory. He was evidently outside his work building, getting some midday sun, which was as much a rarity in late October in Seattle as it was in London. A green fleece coat was zipped up to his neck. I only had a second to register the marks of exhaustion in his features before he transformed, breaking into a grin and squinting at me in wonder.

“Oh my *God*,” he said. “Is that actually you?”

“Yep.” I held the phone at arm’s length to let the camera take in the costume.

“You look like you’re covered in powdered sugar.”

“This is spray paint.” I flicked the shoulder of my quilted jacket. “On my skin, it’s powder.”

“Is that a cape?”

I lifted the edge of the cape, draped over one shoulder. “Uh-huh.”



“And is your hair in a *ribbon*?”

“Yeah, I’m a prince, duh.”

“What did they do to your face? It’s freaking me out.”

I brought the phone in closer to display the white-and-brown blend of special-effects makeup. “Supposed to help me look ghostly under the stage lights. Do I look dead?”

“Yes. It’s creepy.” He grimaced. “Send me a selfie when you’ve washed all that off. I need to make sure you still look like you.”

“If you insist.”

He twisted his mouth. “I miss you. Why aren’t we on the same continent?”

“We will be. Someday. I mean, I probably can’t stay here forever.”

“And I’d love to come visit, but apparently I have to save all my money for *double the fucking rent*.”

I heard the whispered shuffle of a scene change from backstage and glanced in. “Oops. Got to go. We’ll talk soon.”

“Thanks for humoring me. And listening to me whine.”

“After all the times you’ve listened to *me* whine, I think I owe you.”



After the show, I caught my train and hopped off at the Mile End stop. The stairwell in my building smelled perpetually of fried chicken from the ground-floor shop, along with worse scents I didn’t want to contemplate. Holding my breath, I took the steps two at a time and locked myself into my studio flat.

I stayed up until two a.m. researching screen tests. Since its inception in high school, my acting career so far had been entirely in the theater, unless you counted roles in friends’ movies recorded on iPhones, so I needed to learn what I was getting into.

The main tips I took away from the internet were to get a feel for whether I had rapport with the director, and to remember that film was

about intimacy and nuance, and therefore I should tone down the projecting and gesticulating I might bring to a stage audition.

I also googled Fiona Saanvi Wyndham. She was twenty-nine years old, had been born and educated in London, and so far had writing, casting, and/or assistant-director credits on four films made for the Hart Channel on satellite TV.

Clicking through, I also learned Fiona's mum, Leela Sharma, worked in HR for the BBC, and Fiona's dad, Alec Wyndham, was the chairman of Islands Broadcasting, the company that owned Hart Channel and several others.

I glanced around my pocket-size flat with its crusty carpet worn bare in spots, its crack in the kitchen wall from which cockroaches sometimes emerged, and its thin window glass that did basically nothing to mask the Mile End traffic noise. She wanted *me* for this part? She wouldn't, not once she realized what a nobody I was.

I shut my laptop. No point stressing out. Without a script to study, I couldn't do anything further except get some sleep.

Remembering my promise to Andy, I snapped a selfie after showering and drying off: wet hair, bare shoulders, and face making a Grumpy Cat expression. I sent it to him and put on sweats for bed.

He answered in a few minutes.

Andy: Wow shirtless even. Aren't I lucky

Sinter: It's not everyone who gets my sexiest pics

Andy: Haha much obliged. Thank you

Sinter: I'm about to go to bed. You doing ok?

Andy: I guess. As ok as I could hope

Which surely wasn't very. The first few days after getting dumped sucked worse than anything. I remembered the pain too well from the time the gorgeous, bewitching Jo at U of O had thrown me over for an-

other guy. And it was only six months since my relationship had ended with my latest girlfriend, Vicki—a mutual decision, but it had still depressed me for a couple of weeks. It was easy to feel like an unlovable failure at those times. *I wasn't enough*, as Andy had said. *How did I get that deluded?*

Sprawling on my bed, I chewed the inside of my lip and finally responded.

Sinter: Message me as much as you like. Whine all you want. I'm cool with it

Sinter: And if there's anything you want from London let me know. I'll send it

Andy: Really, you'd ship over Tom Hiddleston? That's sweet

Sinter: Haha

Andy: Nah your selfies are the most important thing I could want from London right now. Thanks man

I smiled, every bit as charmed as when a woman complimented me. Weird.

Sinter: Cheers mate. As they say here

Andy: Cheers. Goodnight

Sinter: Goodnight

I set the phone to “do not disturb,” switched off the lamp, and lay back. The never-ending street traffic whooshed like the ocean and sent white and red lights careening across my ceiling.

Something disturbed me about all this. Not just that he'd been grievously hurt and I wanted to punch any bastard who did that to my best friend. I was also disturbed because I felt a little bit relieved. Victorious. Like, *Good, now that Mitchell's out of the way, I get top spot in Andy's affec-*

*tions again.* I didn't want to be petty like that.

But best friends sometimes did harbor a touch of jealousy concerning their "mate." That must have been all it was. After all, I wasn't gay.

Yeah.

But.