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Not All There

SHE HAD PRETTY BLUE EYES. And the fact that they were looking at him was the first good thing that had happened to him in a week.

“What do you do?” she asked.

Rudy sipped slowly from his warming beer. Electronic music thumped beneath a chirping chorus of voices.

Her question conjured a hundred memories at once: the panicked sun beating against his black cap and gown, the look on Professor Marinus’s face which made him certain that he was already forgotten—one more part packaged and shipped out of the factory—the smell of burger wrappers and motor oil, his parents’ house silent with sleep and regret on his return home, the calendar empty *in perpetuity* on his phone, the icing glaze smeared across the leaden donut of his future.

“I’m a superhero,” he said for the first time out loud. “I just graduated.”

“Christ,” she groaned with contempt.

Not the reaction he was expecting. True, it had been a state school and not a very good one. But getting into that particular program had been rigorous, and the education had been first-rate. Not that he had anything to compare it to.

“No, really,” he tried by way of elaborating.

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are, but my last boyfriend was a super and I’m never going near another one.”

“He was? Really? Wow! What’s his name?”

“Doug. His masked name’s The Artist.”

“No way—I know him!”

“You’re probably thinking of someone else.”

“He guest lectured in this graduate seminar I took. He’s amazing!”

“He’s a conniving douchewit. I supported the guy for three years in graduate school and all he did was lie around, smoke pot, and fuck undergraduates. Of course I didn’t know the last part at the time.”

“Still, he painted the floor with our best student while reciting *The Wasteland*.”

“Might have been him. Fucking show-off.”

“He was unbelievable.”

“I’ll bet he left with someone the night of the lecture, right?”

“Now that you mention it.”

“Fucker. What’d you major in? No, wait, let me guess. Flying?”

“Super speed.”

“Really? You don’t look the type. Doug was bulletproof.”

“The Artist?”

“Don’t call him that.”

“His seminar was on super strength.”

“Yeah,” she yawned. “He had that, too.”

He went to fetch another round for both of them. When those drinks were gone he got some more, but at some point that he couldn’t quite identify she had said, “Anyway, nice to meet you and all.”

He’d replied, “I don’t suppose I could call you sometime?” At least it sounded that way in his head before his mouth got around to saying it.

He was sure she said some polite variation of “No.”

A few more words were exchanged, harmless and anodyne, before the pretty blue eyes left to look on someone else.

It wasn’t much longer and not many more drinks before he heard “The Sound of Silence” playing from within, louder than both the thump and the chirps.

He was glad his head was spinning. It left him to think simple thoughts. Foam. Thump. Perspiration. Life was better when it was simple, and he wished that it could have stayed that way. But time passed and where she had been there now stood a man, or two. It was tough to say. The one he was sure of was standing too close. His breath was cloying.

“What?” Rudy asked again.

“Are you fucking with me?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I said, I heard you were a superhero.”

For a silly second Rudy thought he might be asking for an autograph.

“Yeah,” Rudy said. “I just graduated.”

“Get that? He just graduated.” Who was he talking to, Rudy wondered? It was a nice thought, like they were onstage.

“I’d like to see what you can do.”

“Why?” Rudy asked. “Are you hiring?”

The big guy laughed. It was an unpleasant sort of laugh. The kind of laugh a guy might have before he kicked a cat. “Come outside and I’ll show you.” He pressed a finger the size of a baton into Rudy’s sternum. It hurt.

From what Rudy pieced together, superheroes in general, and Rudy specifically, disturbed this man's sense of harmony, and from what Rudy could further make out, this enormous man wanted to rebalance it on the point of Rudy's chin.

And then the two of them, or was it three, were outside. It was May, a time of graduation and night flowers and the air smelled good even in this grotty corner of the city. Honeysuckle, or jasmine. Rudy imagined himself on the pavement with bruised ribs. Before it had happened he could taste blood in the back of his throat from where his nose had broken. It was a fitting end to the evening and an apt prelude to the rest of his meaningless existence.

Resigned to his fate, Rudy took off his glasses and slipped them into his pocket, where he found a matchbook. He sensed the fist coming and, numbed as he was, he was still able to sidestep it with ease. Professor Marinus would have been proud except that his momentum carried his head into a stop sign. It rattled with a goofy echo that made all three of them laugh. The matchbook looked familiar, and if they would just stop attacking him long enough, maybe he could piece it all together, the where and the why.

Rudy remembered that she'd had it in her hand.

He could see both men now. One had a lead pipe, the other was swinging a clenched fist.

Rudy looked at the number written on the matchbook, then back at his attackers. His head was suddenly clear.

A memory of the pretty blue eyes flickered before him. He smiled inwardly.

It was a beautiful night.