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It had better hurt, or else what's the point?

I wanted to turn around right there, dash back up the stairs, grab her in my arms and tell her everything: the world was a corpse and we were the last living cells; there was nothing left to say in any language; the only thing real in the universe was our mutual orgasms. But of course, I didn't. First of all, that's ridiculous; second of all, I didn't need to because she already knew. Third: I had just agreed to go out and get some beer. I kept going down the stairs. The elevator was out again, but I could have walked twenty flights rather than ten.

It hadn't even been that hard to suggest that we stop at my place later on to listen to some records. I'd mentioned it some other time before, and she never sounded against it, but now she actually wanted to go. And she was the one who said we should leave, get out of that place with the fake conversation and go do something—what did she say, more real? But it wasn't even real, us leaving; from the moment we started talking both of us had already left. She grabbed her leather jacket, grabbed my torn sleeve, and we were out into the night. I'm glad I didn't have to say anything, because I couldn't have. The hottest girl—well, forget that—the most amazing girl coming to my place to hang out. And that's where she is now, though I can hardly believe it, waiting for me why I go get beer, of all things. And not just to hang out, but talk, and sit next to each other, and she keeps looking into my eyes like she doesn't even know what it is that her eyes could do to me. And then she said that—'it had better...'—just so casually. My god, I want to spend the rest of my life with her, if only it could be this moment.

I sound like I'm a teenager: all flustered and nervous, imaging out lives together. We haven't even slept together yet. Haven't kissed either, I don't think we've even touched skin to skin. With someone like her it's the whole thing, the first kiss and the sex, right away, in the beginning, up front. That way it's got to be intense real quick, or it evaporates and may as well never happened. You know? She's way too cool for foreplay—not that she wouldn't be interested in... well, you know, all that good stuff about exploring a new body. I just mean that she doesn't fuck around—and by that I mean that the fucking is the foreplay—if the sex isn't good, you better believe that she's not going all the way.

I think she's going to.... She's going to give me the chance anyway. Kind of an audition. I'll show her a good time, I think. I know I'm not God's gift to women or anything, but I think I can give her a few pleasant surprises. She knows a good deal, I'm sure, I can tell she's got a number of tricks herself. But I could handle it, real cool, you know? Come on slow, and then surprise her. I know how to move a woman—I'm no amateur. But if she's not impressed... God, that would be such a disaster. I've only got one chance to screw it up with her. Am I nervous? Fuck, how old am I? Still, it feels kind of sweet though, like back in the old days. The mutual nervousness like

static in the room, the two of us leaning our heads close together, the glance in the eye and then the quick glance away, and then, before you know it... you're smelling her hair and she's biting your neck... I can feel it in my throat; that's where excitement happens to the body. Arousal, that's something else; excitement, that's the opposite of choking...

What kind of beer should I get? Did she say? No... no, I know what she drinks. Six pack? Case? A full case—it will get consumed anyway. Maybe she'll hang out all night and we can drink, mess around and go at it, and then drink more, and repeat—make a night of it, so to speak. A first date? Kind of, I guess. We don't even have to sleep together as long as she stays—as long as she likes my company. As long as she finds it worth letting me know that she likes my company. Who dates anymore? Only those with such steady, ritualistic steps that this kind of excitement must scare the shit out of 'em, just to think it. This is... better? Yeah, this is... well, to tell the truth, this is fucking awesome.

It had better hurt, or else what's the point?

Of course none of the prudes would find that line as damned attractive as I do. They would think it was scary? Pathological even? Risky, certainly.

I skipped down the front steps of the building, and across the crushed concrete gravel into the road. No traffic out at this time of night. Only a five blocks to the store; parking lot, deserted parking lot, crushed bus shelter, loading dock, apartment, office, store. A hot night, we were both sweating already sitting in my room. She approved of the room—I could tell by the way she made herself at home in front of my bookcase, sitting in the middle of my bed. It probably goes without saying, if she was going to enter the building at all—the building is filled with broken glass, rubble, the usual. Ten flights up, and there she is right now, sitting on my bed, looking at my stuff, judging me—and still there!

I half-wondered if maybe she'd go; if I'd get back to the room and she'd be gone. Like it was fantasy or dream—a stupid romance I have already thought up a few hundred times hanging out with her friends or her with mine. It was that juvenile kind of fantasy; if she knew, it wouldn't matter what kind of shit I talked; she wouldn't even speak to me, let alone hang out. Some things you just can't say out loud, otherwise, you might as well not even speak. That's the sort of stuttering you avoid with foreplay. This kind of foreplay, that is, the no-bullshit kind—it had better; or else—then there's nothing to say before hand. You can say anything you want while it's happening. Unless she had the same fantasy, maybe. Maybe that's why she's here. Maybe. Regardless, things are cool for now anyway; we're just going to drink beer. And maybe listen to records. Mostly just drink beer.

I can tell it will be good. The sex, I mean. Of course I don't want to get ahead of myself here—if it happens, then it will totally be good. I don't know that it will happen. But I know it will be good. The way she looks at me with those eyes, no fear in there. No desire to draw it out, no need to spread it out along the surface, fighting the meniscus as it tries to bead back up; there's plenty, and it's just as viscous as it is fluid. That human oil, you know—you can feel it. Coating the skin, welling up in the hollow places. Oily, coating, soaking into the grain. What the hell am I talking about?

I tripped over some of the slag in the road, and the rubble clattered against itself. A little too excited I guess, a little bit of beer already. I stopped and listened, all of sudden aware of my surroundings and nervous about real things. I heard nothing. The block was pretty deserted. There was just the hot night, pulsing its slow, steady strobe. Off on the other side of the river, I heard deep rumblings, but nowhere near. I kept going.

But it's in the way that she sits—the way she sat on my bed, casually looking through records, as if it was both the most and least important thing in the world. No, not just that. It was the way that her feet tapped back and forth in her shoes: worn shoes that looked like her feet hurt constantly, yet tapping. No, it was in those hips. I'm a sucker for that, for a woman's hips. Mainly for hers: amazing, among these amazing women. Hers were divine; the muscles and bone were the angelic batteries of the body, a sexual manifold engineered by the muses of corporeal existence, élan fluxed transcendent through its smooth couplings. When she walked, they spun and whirred, the most efficient transmission, and when they whirred, they... oh god, how I've thought about that for days and nights...

Beer was bought from the man who peeked out at me from the shattered, shuttered store, regardless of the fact that I've lived there and bought from him for over a year. Maybe it was the different brand of beer that startled him. Or maybe it was just that this was the way that it was.

No, what she said, said it best, and in how she said it. It had better hurt. Or what's the point? She's not a masochist, not a fatalist. Just that *it had better*. Seriously. She was in my room while I was getting beer, and yet we—she—could so easily discuss sex with such a flippant regard to the typical morals and current tastes. And she brought it up; with those eyes, she brought up not only the words, but the idea. I mean, of course we both knew that we were both down for it—and not just *it*; not your typical, drunken mashing of bodies, but something with a little bit more creativity, and a little more care. I was getting beer and she was in my room—it wasn't about the possibility of sex so much as the potential. We were not only going to do this thing but we were going to really rock it, reinvent it, and ruin it for everyone else afterward. Whatever they did, we would have already done it better. We were going to destroy the possibility of sensuality for all time. We were going to come down that mountain and declare sex dead. Pain and pleasure were going to become meaningless when we were through with it.

And the truth was, it certainly had better hurt, shouldn't it? Otherwise, what the fuck else was there? A little bit of tenderness? Tenderness is such a small wound. You flick at it gently, uncontrolled, unconscious—but it wasn't anything that would grab your attention. It was there, and then it past; then it was just another as it was before. But real, acute pain—and soreness—*throbbing, swelling*, the flow of blood into the purple hemorrhage of a bruise—this was something that divided days. It concentrated, it focused, it gathered and redistributed. So it had better hurt, if we were going to do it. That was what she thought; it was what she said. She didn't have to say that it was going to be us; we were the only one's there. She and I had already generalized the situation. So yeah, any sex, ever, anywhere, anyone: it had better hurt or there was no point.

And it would, I knew it would. And afterwards, we'd lay there exhausted and in pain. Our bodies twisted out of joint, harsh red and blue patches and scratches rubbed into our flesh, smells penetrated and saturated wet with all kinds, throbbing swollenness begging now and needing more, and *blood*, just a bit in drops—delicious thick liquid heated with beating hearts and the watery,

homebrewed beer, folds of muscle coiled around itself and others, nails in hair and teeth on skin. And afterwards, after this pain, perhaps there would be enough left to make us find each other again, in a week or two. Or maybe only a day. Enough time to ache and let bruises come to the surface, browning yellow for each other's touch again... a feeling real enough to repeat.

I thought about it, just like this, as I wound through the shadows around the bus shelter, now only two blocks away from the stairs to the room. I was so lost in my sexual thoughts that I didn't hear the rotor blades, muffled thuds as they were in the thick humid air. I was imagining what would be the best part—the first time, or the second. Would it be downhill, or uphill? Was there a way to compare? Why was I thinking about this so much rather than paying attention? What was the point?

It came in low, with its lights off. Whether it was just passing, or whether this was a specific target, no one would ever say. I did what came naturally, a second nature to those of us who still manage to live here. I crouched low behind a crushed barrier in the shadows, the horrible sick cloud of fear washing over, stifling my hope that maybe they wouldn't see me. I was small and dark, and they were fast and above; but that, after all, was all the difference. Either they would just pass, or the world would end... it would all be obvious soon. I stopped thinking about her for only ten seconds, but it was enough.

I looked up through my arms covering my head, and the punching, throbbing machine swooped lower in its arc, heading parallel to the street. The blades swung so fast you couldn't see them in the dark; only the spinning transmission axle was visible: a throbbing manifold that allowed the beast to soar above the rubble around it. There hadn't been any aerial activity around here for a month, and I had almost forgotten what it was really like. I could barely see them, the pilots, through their clear windshield. They weren't looking at me. I could plainly see their insignia, stenciled on the black metal. Then I saw it: small and round and black, reflecting a bit in the few lights that still shown up from the block. The helicopter released, and it fell. They moved in the same direction for a second, and then the machine pulled up and away to the side fast, while it continued to fall. It dropped fast, like a bird, heading right for its nest. When it hit, the explosion blasted out from the rear of the apartment building—the side that held my bathroom window. The entire roof was thrown up into the air, disintegrated, and the mass was exchanged for flame. The walls, those steps, the familiar slag I had walked through too many times to count blew up, pulverized. I could feel the crushed dust on my face: little stinging pieces, sharp enough to bring tears reflexively. The smoke went up and out in two twin horns to either side—the bricks and steel falling in upon itself as it collapsed. I didn't even remember getting knocked backward; I just watched from the ground, on my back, looking between my feet at the rubble, as the flames rose up in front of me, smoke spreading over the entire block and broken glass raining.

Two thin drips of blood ran down my neck, spurting gently from either ear.