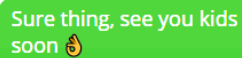


Honestly at this point she could just say “we’re at the rec” and I would know the drill. But she always garnishes things, from her scrapbooks to her outfits. Nothing was complete without cute animal stickers and some orange-gemmed jewelry. But that’s one of the things I love about her.



Sure thing, see you kids soon 🔥

Seeing her and her kid niece will be a nice break from homework. I messed around too much and ended up having to take summer classes to graduate at the same time as my friends, but at least I still have enough free time to spend time with her. Naturally, with a kid who’s under ten you never know when exactly they’ll get tired of something. Even worse, you can’t expect them to be patient, so I leave a little early just to keep everyone happy; I can just goof around on the phone while I wait. But I guess playing bubble shooter while reclined in the driver’s seat is a crime because that seemed to provoke some guy. I was just minding my own business when a he emerges from an adjacent car in the parking lot and knocks on my window. I roll it down.

“You got a problem, bud?” I look around, trying to figure out what might have put him off.

“Can’t say that I do,” I reply, hoping things wouldn’t escalate.

“Smooth guy, huh? Why don’t you step out here where we can talk like men.”

The smart thing to do here would be to roll the window up, but I play along—I'm curious what his problem is. I open the door and step out cautiously and slowly to keep things docile. Then he pats my shoulder in an endearing way.

"Heh, good man. Rising in the face of uncertainty. That's good shit. Tells me a lot about your character. Most people would have locked the doors."

"Heh, yeah," I reply, unsure of what else to say. I was honestly expecting to get decked, but I've never been punched before so I was curious what it was like. That may seem stupid, but this was a well supervised area and I could have easily gotten some legal compensation. Plus, then I'd get some smooches and back-scratches from Kayla out of sympathy. I've taken Intro to Economics: the marginal benefit outweighed the marginal cost here. That's what the economists call *rational*.

"You smoke?" he asked.

"Depends on what's burning."

"Anything that does, your choice."

"What kind of herb you got?"

"*Rocky Mountain Dew, Cali Skater Skunk, Freddy Mercury's Double Dutch Silver Haze...*" He goes on naming strands. I only asked to feign interest and gain a moment to mull over exactly what was happening, so I'll just repeat the first one he said. Don't get me wrong, I'm no stranger to a good high, I'm just not a citizen of the culture. Was this guy just looking for a smoking buddy? Pretty odd way to make friends if you ask me. Getting a better look at him only raised more questions: skinny, holed-up jeans, an over-sized, tattered black hoody, a buzz cut do, and a short, unkempt neckbeard. I guess he would satisfy what you might expect a stereotypical stoner to look like if it were the 90's. Oh, it looks like he's done listing his inventory.

"The 'Dew' one sounds good. Got a piece?"

"*Do I have a piece?* Get a load of this guy. Course I got a fuckin' piece."

“Just asking.”

“Good man, I respect a guy who’s prepared. M’kay, follow me. I know a spot where we won’t get spotted.”

Naturally I’m a little hesitant, but I estimate they won’t be done swimming for around another twenty minutes or so, and this shouldn’t take much longer than ten. I follow him behind one of the storage sheds near the edge of the property which was still mostly wooded. Once we’re sufficiently out of sight, he starts sifting through his overfilled hoody pocket.

“Heh, I forgot. We don’t even need a piece,” he remarks, holding up a handful of joints. Not sure how you forget something like that, so I guess this must be some pretty good stuff. He was kind enough to offer one of them just for me so we didn’t have to share. We took a few puffs and let the atmosphere settle in. It was cloudy like it’d probably rain later, but it was still pretty warm and kind of peaceful out by the woods. He hadn’t talked for a while so I figured I’d use the opportunity for an interview.

“So, is this how you meet people?”

“Nah...I mean, it’s not how I want to anyway. I just seen some shit.”

“Like what?”

“It’s hard to describe, dude. Like, I just see the same people over and over.”

“...What? I hate to break it to you, but that’s kind of how relationships work.” He laughed like he knew I wouldn’t get it, and stretched. His lanky arms are angled contortedly as if they were displaying the time.

“No you don’t get it. Like, I see these people again and again. Everywhere I go. Different towns, different businesses, it’s the same people. Same faces, same haircuts, just different clothes, doing different jobs. It’s fucking weird. Anyway, I just started seeing *you* around, but you’re the first one that’s been, like, *new*. Like, the first person who I haven’t *always* seen. I mean, I still see *other* people that I

never see again, but there's just these coupla people I see *everywhere*. You're the first doppelganger of you that I've seen, so I wanted to talk to you and see if it'd stop you from popping up everywhere."

*What the fuck?* Literally, what is this guy smoking? This *must* be some good shit. I decide not to take any more hits. This is interesting.

"Where did you see the first copy of me?"

"I was just at the liquor store in the next town over about an hour ago to get some stuff for me and my buddy. I'm waiting for him to get off lifeguard duty. I saw you with some chick and a little girl. We managed to have the same kind of talk then while you watched the kid and let the girl pick out drinks inside. Course, at the time, I didn't think you were one of them. I knew *you* were a copy cuz you're wearing different clothes and there's no way you coulda left after I did and beat me here with traffic how it was."

Man, *what!?* That's not something you could make up. That's too much to be a coincidence.

I pried a little more, "What did the chick look like?"

"Shortish black hair, skinny jeans, some emo-band t-shirt."

"And the little girl?"

"Blonde I think? Didn't really pay that close attention man, I just thought you were randos."

That sounds pretty accurate. What the hell? I haven't been to a liquor store in months. I haven't even been with those two today. He kept taking hits nonchalantly.

"Most people don't buy it," he continued, coughing a few times, "you're the first one to take me kinda seriously." He laughed while inhaling to keep in the smoke, resulting in eerie, guttural yelps.

"I mean, I'm here waiting for my girlfriend and her niece. Your description sounds like them. There's no way you could know what they look like, and we haven't even seen each other today. And I definitely wouldn't bring a kid to a liquor store."

“See? Dude, fuckin’ ay. I’ve just gotten used to it. It’s just a weird thing that happens to me, nothing particularly bad or whatever, just like ghosts of people or something I see everywhere. Like some *Sixth Sense* shit almost.”

No, no, that’s not good enough. You can’t just be used to that.

“Am I the first copy you’ve tried interacting with?”

“Well, not exactly. A lotta the time they’re employees at places so I have to talk to them. Sometimes I’ll be like ‘Yo, *do we know each other?*’ just to see what they say, but they always deny everything.”

By now I had discreetly dropped the joint to the dirt.

“Does this only happen when you’re baked?”

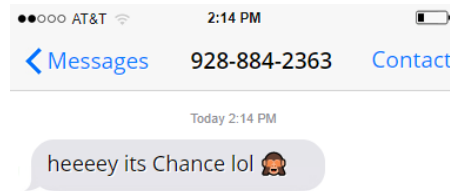
“Heh, nah man. I mean, if we’re being real then I’m usually not sober. But I know for sure it happens regardless what I’m rolling. It’s just a fact of life for me, dude. Like blue sky and green grass, I just see copies of people. It’s no biggie.”

“Well, this is weirding me out. Look, let me give you my number. The next time you see a copy of me, ask for his and send it to me so I can try to meet him. Maybe that will dispel whatever weird voodoo shit you’ve got going on, or maybe I’ll just figure out there’s some statistical anomaly.”

He laughed, “Yeah maybe man. Sure thing, sec.” He fishes into the sack on his stomach and pulls out his phone after excess fumbling, and looking up to indicate he’s ready for a transmission.

“Seven two oh, five nine three, eight eight six two.”

“Alrighty, just sent a text to make sure I got it right.” I felt a buzz in my pocket, so I checked to make sure it wasn’t Kayla wondering where I was.



“Yeah I got it.” I realized I never asked his name, but now I don’t need to.

“Nice, sometimes I have hearing troubles.” I’m sure that’s not the only sensory deficiency he suffers. He shoots me a big smile. It wasn’t pretty, but it wasn’t as gross as I was expecting.

I reply, “Heh, yeah, happens.”

“You think this will work?”

“‘Work?’ I don’t even know what you’re on. I’m sure you’re just seeing shit.”

“Well yeah, that’s what I’ve been saying!”

“No, dumbass, I mean you *think* you’re seeing shit.”

He starts to casually pace around a small radius.

“Yeah, I really wanna believe that man. But if you can’t trust your own eyes, your own ears, nose, tongue, what the fuck can you? It’s scary, dude. How am I supposed to operate if I can’t even judge what’s real? What if I’m seeing some real fucked up shit and I ignore it ‘cuz I think it’s just my mind? What if it *is* just my mind and I try to do something and end up just acting crazy? It’s scary man. It’s like I’m walking a tightrope between reality and a dream.”

I didn’t think I’d be able to sympathize with this guy. I thought he was just fucking with me, but the sincerity in his dopey voice whined some genuine concern. But, if he was really that worried wouldn’t he sober up? Well, I guess if it still happens when he’s sober then it doesn’t make a difference whether he quits or not. I don’t know what other shit this guy does, though. Is he some kind of junkie? He looks at least averagely healthy, so I guess if he is it isn’t bad. Fuck, and I just gave him my number. That’s probably gonna come back to bite me.

"So this has been happening your entire life?" I asked.

"Yeah, more or less. I first caught on when I was in middle school, and it's pretty much been happening ever since."

"Have you noticed anything affecting how frequent you see them?"

He leaned against the wall of the shed since this chat was dragging on longer than either of us had probably planned, "I don't know man, I don't pay that close attention. I just accept it. I'm not some kinda scientist or mathicist. I just do as I please. We all got weird shit that we can't really talk about that we just deal with in life, right? I didn't mean to spook you or anything, I was just experimentin'." He chuckled.

"You only accept it because you think you can't do anything about it. I mean, the fact we're even talking about this implies you don't just accept it."

"Dude, you can accept something and still want to know how it works or why it is."

"You haven't found any patterns?"

"Nah. It's just like, the same twenty or thirty people. They don't even keep the same name, but man I *swear* they are the same people. When they have friends or family with them *they're* always the same too. I don't really get it. Maybe the Fed is fucking with me, maybe it's how God gets his sick kicks. I try not to let it faze me too much."

"Well I can tell you I'm not knowingly apart of any sort of conspiracy."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. Maybe you're all getting kidnapped by aliens and getting your memories replaced, who the hell knows man. It's no biggie, I just deal with it. That's all anyone can really do when facing some supernatural shit."

"I guess that's true. I've had a paranormal experience, but nothing like this. Still can't come up with a practical explanation for it, and sometimes I wonder if it actually even happened or not."

“Well, imagine if you’re whole life was like that, dude. That’s me. Is it real, or a dream? What’s even real? Drugs already make you wonder this shit, but it’s even worse for me.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine.”

“...Well, thanks for smoking with me man. We should probably get back.”

“No problem, thanks for sharing.”

We both start back towards the parking lot. He had an oddly brisk pace and put a lot of distance between us. My phone buzzed a moment afterward, and I reached into my pocket to check it.

