

Marleena's Consolation Prize

a short story by uncomfortbaleshoes@troped.com

Gravity is definitely worse since the night before, she thinks, walking through a sparse, uninspired apartment, collecting her things. She leans on the door frame to adjust her heels, tugging a red leather strap with one hand, while she clutches a small, plastic vial with the other like it's the only thing in the world to hold on to. Standing still for a moment, she puts her hands on her hips and stares down way down at her feet. With a puff of air from between thick, pursed lips, she blows hair out of her eyes, and then laughs at herself disappointedly. Lifting her open bag from a small table by the door, she drops the bottle in with the professional demeanor of a bribed pharmacist, unflinching at the label the name of the drug and her own name in ridiculous proximity. Then reaching for the door, she lapses in resolve a moment to turn and look one last time over her shoulder to give him one more chance. She imagines him standing in the doorway to the bedroom not concerned or talking, just casually so one arm against the jamb awake and there for her to see. But he isn't there. Instead, an orange goldfish in a cheap Matisse print stares vacuously back. Frowning slightly, not even noticeably to herself, she leaves the apartment, slamming the door just loudly enough to be inconsiderate, but not sound angry. There's no reason for him to pursue, just so long as she makes him uncomfortable.

The morning California sun receives her like an unwelcome guest, too hot and bright to accommodate hangovers, as she stumbles down the

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concrete stairs, past stucco walls, past his anxiously clean beamer, toward a mostly empty strip a line of buildings that should be an empty dune. Two minutes of walking past convenience stores, gas stations, and leering strangers has her removing her shoes and strolling barefoot on the warm sidewalk. She reaches the corner bus stop encased in hot glass and seats herself, rubbing her temples. Fishing through her bag a bag she could live out of she rifles through belongings seeking out aspirin, a cigarette and a lighter. The aspirin goes down like gravel and the cigarette tastes like the sex from the night before. She puts it out on the bench after only two drags. Then, tossing her lighter in the bag, she removes a compact and hunches down over the mirror knowing that primping for a city bus is a bit absurd, but unable to stop herself. What if she sat down next to him? Suddenly anger rolls toward everyone who doesn't expect her to look like hell. She is trying hard and it makes her hate the men who thought she looked "sexy" the night before. But accidentally catching her own glance in the mirror, she just sighs and stares lazily into the weavings of her hazel irises. Forgetting where she is for a moment, she leans back on the bench, her knees sagged together, and speaks to herself in a low tone. "Marley," she says, "you are a prize," her voice somewhat scratchy from an early morning dryness.

Her lips always seem to frown at the corners, full and hanging so prominent on her otherwise chiseled face. Nonetheless, her lower lip drops slightly further in a second failed attempt that morning to frown. She fussily crosses and uncrosses her legs, sweat causing the underside of her stubbled thighs to itch furiously. She tosses the compact back in the bag and just looks at her tan feet, as she spins her toes into the rough concrete beneath the cool shadows of the bus stop awning. Fifteen hot minutes pass as she thinks about what is to be done on a Friday. Nothing much really. The weight of hundred things she wants to do seem to keep her from doing anything at all, and the heat feels like nothing but

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oppression, dry and callous. It keeps her from even wanting to go to the beach like she did on most Friday mornings. Fridays there was no one there. She could head down the long, high sides of Torrey Pines cliffs and lounge around on the sand of Black's Beach in solitude. Fridays were hers only because she had been working at Casius for three years straight. It was the younger girls who had to work the weekends. She got Monday through Thursday, plus tips, and that was it. Even then, she had been there long enough to come and go as she pleased a thought simultaneously freeing and depressing.

One bus comes and goes, dumping grey in its wake, its engine grinding belligerently not her bus. And after a few minutes, she ends up just trying to remember what he had looked like while she let him steal her. Strangely enough, she can't do that either. Already vanishing, she can only think that he was handsome handsome enough to go home with. But that wasn't what she wanted to remember. It was the particulars escaping her, spreading out across the landscape of her heat soaked mind, and hiding in the tumbleweeds. His could never be a face she would look on lovingly reach out just to touch, caressing his cheek with rough sun dried fingers. He had no face like that, she knew. The word "plastic" came to mind, and she snickers and leaves it at that as another bus pulls up, stirring the already warm air with the heat from its engine and brakes.

She has her pass ready to show the driver, and does so with a surprisingly brilliant smile, even though he doesn't look. She drops down into the first empty seat available, three rows back on the left side. As the bus jitters and shakes and pulls away from the stop, she watches as a man comes running to catch it with suit jacket in hand, her cheek just lightly touching the greasy cool window. Is it him? He just stops, dejected in the heat waves that swallow his shrinking figure.

With her shoes in her lap, she plays with the straps for a while, thinking about nothing in particular, except to look up every once in a

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while just to see where she is. She notices that the bus actually seems to go slower than the mental picture she has in her mind. She looks at her shoes, and thinks over the path of the bus and where it is going, what it is passing, and then she looks up, only to find that the bus is not where she thinks it should be. About like most things, really.

Eventually the bus reaches Torrey Pines, and three stops into the little burb, it glides into an easy stop in front of her apartment complex. She steps off and heads to her home up on the third floor. Walking across bristly grass, she makes her way to the stairs, lightly swinging her shoes like a school girl. It's on the second flight of stairs, between the stucco partitions, wooden decks and columns, that she spies, as usual, a young boy riding his ten speed through the filled parking lot. He rides around and around, and before she thinks of Mr. Damn I'm so Clever Beamer one more time, she stops to watch the boy ride his bike. Something in her stomach asks her to realize why he rides around and around and around. She has seen him many times before. She wants to walk back down the stairs and let words fall off her matronly lips to ask him if he is having a good day only because she knows he isn't. He is riding and riding and riding for the same reason she doesn't come home night after night after Casius. Even from the second story she can see the purple marks, long and brown grotesque across his legs. When she is too heavy to move, it is the last flight of stairs that are cool against the bottoms of her feet, having sat in shadows since sunrise. She walks carefully though, worried she might stub her toe.

"There's no place like home," she mumbles as the door's metallic lock clicks her entrance in welcome. The only thing greeting her as she passes into the darkened living room is a blinking red three. She walks back into the bedroom and turns the lamp on low, rather than pull the blinds up. She'd had just about enough of the sun, and the warm, yellow glow from the bedside light didn't hurt her eyes as much. She slides out

of her short spaghetti strap, orange dress, her slip and her underwear, gracefully leaving them in a pile on the floor and heads for the bathroom, glad to be naked and alone.

Light filters through the frosted glass of the bathroom window leaving the usually brilliant colors of the walls and towels pale and unassuming. The window faces the evening side of the world, and the ambient warmth of the light on the tile is delicate and soft. Leaving the lights off, she takes a shower immersed in the pale tile, thankful for the coolness of water, and stands awhile to feel the dirt and grime and other refuse from the previous night's excursion pass away down the drain. Watching the spinning of the clearness over the dull, steel drain, she wonders what she means when she says she wants to be "really" touched by someone. She is sure that it isn't the groping that happened most weekend nights, only firm like "oh yeah" and "oh baby" come ons. As if to prove her point, she's scrubs off the remnants of all those hands. It's never in the touch anyway. It is in the meaning of the touch, the essence of it whatever was just beyond the hand, the thigh, the chest, that no man could ever reach for all the scrambling. She might not be trying, she argues with herself. She could be numb or crass or rotten. She chides herself further: maybe there was no one capable of touching her there because of she kept moving it around. But she sniffs at this, in indignation, water cascading off her nose out below her head. Soft girls says things like that. She didn't have to open up to anyone, she just needed someone who'd dig. She wanted them to dig, wanted to be more than a dress, wanted to be surprising, and more than anything wanted to be surprising in a beautiful way that had everything to do with her face and her body.

The water beads on her skin as she leans against the wall beneath the shower head, her arms stretched out taut, her hands spread flat against the tile. She ducks her head beneath the water again and lets it run down her chin and through her thick amber hair, before stepping to the side and

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resting her cheek against the shower wall, realizing randomly that the phone bill is late. It had been due last Friday, and she makes a mental note to at least accomplish that one thing today. Granted, it might not go out until Monday, but it would at least be out of her hands. She thinks about it again and figures it will probably go out today and even travel a while tomorrow. Another fifteen minutes slowly ebbs against the rush of the thousands of tiny water drops falling down on her, as she stands and just feels them pierce that external shell she is so sure is not there. Reaching down for the knob, she makes the water cooler still. Maybe she'd go swimming after all, though not at the beach. It was always a shame, she thinks, that her complex had a pool, but she so rarely went. She sighs because she knows it comes down to the matter of the sun. She is not a sun girl not a soft girl she repeats in her head. She is a rain girl. A rain woman, she corrects herself. But then, she stands up straight and smiles to herself, a rain *girl*, she emphasizes, sure of her change of mind. A little sure anyway. Women were married. Women were respectable. Whenever she looked in the mirror she saw the experience that made her a woman: aware, familiar with the nature. But at the same time she knew inside that there was a dangerously curious energy that could not be squelched by any madam must be behavior. "Nice shoes. Wanna's fuck?" right? She was neither girl nor woman, and wonders what she is as the water chills her hot skin.

Respectable. The word made the scene at the bar surface, as she played it over in her head. What's his name, what's his face walking up to her, giving her what he thought was a coy smile, and asking if he could buy her a drink. She looked him up and down and showed him how to *really* smile how to leer and imply with a wolf's grin. *I know so much more than you*, she had thought to herself. "Nice shoes. Wanna' fuck?" She laughs to herself, laughs at him over the sound of the water. It's a better laugh than she's had in a while, though it could be better. And her laughter

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bounces back into her ears off the tile as she does a little dance; a silly, no good girl "I win" dance. After hooting for a minute, she turns the water off just as it's getting to cold, pulls the curtain aside and grabs for a thick towel to dry off with. She leaves the towel on the floor when she's done. About like most things, really.

Walking through the apartment, damp and naked in the low light of pulled shades, she approaches the answering machine in a casual state of indecision, unsure she wants to hear the messages. It could be someone she loves, someone she wants to hear from, like *him*, or like her father. But then, in her father's voice alone the potential for sadness resounds past the echo of her shower victory dance. His calm, reassuring, and somehow uncaring but caring voice would make her sad. She couldn't see him or hear him anymore and respect herself. And that voice always reminded her that she was a thousand miles away from his handholds and hugs. *Christ*, she thinks, *sex is so worthless when all you really need is a hug*. No, standing there, she doesn't entirely understand why talking to loved ones saddens her, as the number three blinks back at her like an omen.

At least, she concedes, it won't be Mr. Beamer Mr. Damn I think you're *crazy*. He was so blind. She wasn't crazy. Crazy people didn't say things like, "Nice shoes. Wanna' fuck?" Calculating people says shit like that. He really should have been paying more attention. If he had he wouldn't have gotten burned that is to say, *if* he was feeling burned. Winning was no fun when the idiot you play against doesn't know he lost. He'd never have her again at least just contemptuous glares for not being in that God damned doorway. Still, she could see him then, in her mind, lying in his bed even now lazy ass, looking up at the ceiling, a cigarette in his mouth, his arms cradling his head, listening to her leave, thinking "I'm the man." What an *asshole*, she thinks, toying with the play button on the answering machine. She lets a finger linger there for moment, just barely brushing the chance, and then leisurely walks away from the machine, back

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into the bedroom. Why couldn't he have seen what she really wanted? Was she really hiding it that well? Was she hiding anything at all? Maybe she should have called Eric's name out when she pretended to have an orgasm. *Oh Yeab*, she thinks, sarcasm ringing in her head, that would've helped him get off.

"I need a beer," she announces to the plush apartment furniture. Opening a drawer in her dresser, she fishes through it for a pair of ratty cut offs. Next drawer, comfortable cotton underwear. Next drawer, a nice, well fitting not tight fitting cotton tee shirt. It takes just a few minutes to throw it all on, and then she puts on her favorite ripped to shreds tennis shoes sans socks, grabs her keys and wallet from the Big Bag and heads out the front door towards something simpler. Just as she locks the door, she remembers the phone bill. *To hell with it*, she thinks, and walks away.

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The walk down to Garrett's Tide Pool Pub is an easy one undemanding of the use of her used and beat up jeep just up the hill and down the hill just enough of a walk to make the slightly guilty feel not so guilty at all. And Garrett's in the afternoon is the thing for a lonely, young woman who's not looking for a man: nobody's comfortable hitting on you when it's daylight, even if it's only daylight outside and especially because there's never anyone there. The mood is not suiting to romance, and besides, she was never drunk during the day. Topsy maybe, after three beers or so, but never drunk from alcohol or romance not during the day. It made the sun worse. And what was more, no one in the world would sound as funny, witty, or as pleasant as Eric during the day. She was a rain girl. He was a day guy; wide open like a book or a landscape, clear headed, and simple just like her father. They both had that simple way of being

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concerned about you without showing it; loving you always, but never fretting about it nervously, annoyingly sure of their feelings. He was solid not transparent, and he was always content to be on the way out the door when Marley wanted him to stay for one more drink. He made her ashamed and more courageous at the same time.

Once inside, the door to the bar is nothing but a white rectangle, the outside glaring like an entrance into another world somewhere bright she isn't interested in returning to. And as the ceiling fan turns there in limbo and keeps the air at a pleasant seventy five degrees, Marleena feels like she might cry at last. She pouts her lips a little, bites her lower one even, and blinks a lot. But nothing happens. She takes a deep breath and lets it out through her nose, still waiting for a gasp, a gulp, maybe just a lump in her throat. Nothing. Just another tiresome flash of Mr. Hey call me sometime and the embarrassing beep of the answering machine that picks up instead of him.

She gets up to put a song on the juke box, while Garrett is busying himself in the back room, just to make some noise over the sound of cars passing by outside. Deciding on a tune by the Eagles a song about restlessness and traveling, lost loves and the desert she hopes it might set her at ease some. She cocks her head just a little. Maybe she should head out into the desert for a while, just spend a quiet night under the light of stars in the back of the jeep, instead of club strobes. She was just musing though, she knew it. Things would be the same tonight when it got to be about three or four beer eight o'clock, and she starts wondering about how the crowd is going to be, about losing herself in it and the body heat, closing her eyes and forgetting the world in the midst of its noisiest bellies.

Back to the bar she walks, as Garrett comes out of the back room, large and smart, with a clean shaven head.

"Just shave, Mr. Garrett?"

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"Oh it hurts me when you call me Mister, Marley."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't be silly, mate. I just hate for you to think of me as a man you can't have."

"Really?"

Garrett leans on the bar heavy and winks as he reaches down to pull a glass out up of the shelves, "Just like any other man that walks in her, Lucious."

"What?"

"in *here* I meant any man that walks in *here*."

"Whatever, Garrett," and rolls her eyes.

"Yeah, well, my wife'd have my head, wouldn't she?" he says, his smile drenching, like his non continental accent.

"And mine."

"True enough." Garrett wipes the glass down with a white rag slung across his shoulder. "So what'll ya' have... or should I hazard a guess?"

"Honestly, I know I shouldn't but I could still use a vodka and tonic."

"Bad night?"

"I guess. Bad only 'cause it was supposed to be fun."

"Sorry, Marley."

"Eh. What's new?"

Garrett sets a glass of ice down in front of Marleena and pours her excuse for whatever while she watches.

"How long have you owned this place, Garrett?"

Garrett looks to the ceiling for the answer. "Three years," he says and nods.

"Where'd you work before that?"

"The Lagoon," he says implying horror in his tone of voice.

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"No shit. You tended bar at the Lagoon."

"It didn't used to be as bad as it is."

"The Lagoon was always bad."

"Yeah. But not as bad as it is now."

"Fair enough."

"Judge not less ye be judged ye of the Casius faith."

Marley smiles impish out of the side of her face. "Yeah. Casius's not so great either I guess."

Garrett shrugs.

"God though. The *Lagoon*."

"It was a job."

"How long were you there?"

Again the ceiling holds answers. "'Bout five years."

"And before that?"

"You keep asking questions like this you'll find out how old I am and then I'll never forgive myself."

"C'mon, mysetery man."

"I was a minister before that."

"What!?"

"Yup."

Marley laughs, her voice still dry from her morning "outing" and there's a grate in the chuckle, but it's a good laugh. "A minister?"

"Yup."

"Well... " Marley starts.

"There ain't much difference," Garret finishes for her.

"I think that's wholly dependent on your clientele."

"No. Everyone walks in here looking for something: a good time, a good chat, a good drink " he eyes Marleena for a moment wondering how far to go, but says it anyway, "themselves, sometimes."

"Jesus. You were a minister," Marley says with some amount of

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shock.

"Watch it," Garrett teases.

"Oh yeah. All right. 'Crap' I guess or how's 'dang'?"

"Dang's good."

"I don't say dang enough anymore." She takes a sip of her drink, swallows and shoots off a "Dang!" her voice breaking at the end, still dry. She looks to the door as though expecting someone and then turns back to Garrett, her stool squeaking beneath her. "So, what was that like?"

"Being a minister?"

"Yeah."

"I enjoyed it."

"Were you married then?"

"No."

"Were you allowed to be married?"

"Oh yeah, sure. But meeting Caroline introduced a lot of.. contradictions."

"Is that why you stopped?"

"Among other things."

Marley stares at Garrett in the ocean cool afternoon, his eyes bright points in his pleasantly round face. Clean shaven, all the way around, Garrett glances out the door expectantly himself. Marley thinks for a moment that Garrett has everything in his face that makes a man willing to listen, but she suspiciously wonders how much he really cares. The ceiling fan turns and a car passes by outside, coasting down the hill toward the coves and the Pacific barely audible in the ambient noise.

"Seems like that's something you would've brought up at some point."

"Nah. That's done."

"Yeah. What's done is done."

Garrett peels himself off the bar and stands up straight, his rag

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still in hand. "You know, I don't think he's comin' in today."

"Who?" Marley asks incredulously.

Garrett just smiles and walks back to the back room.

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The Saturday night crowd was brutal. *Brutal*. Beneath the wah wah guitar sounds of imminent sleaze, Marley found herself back at Casius after four drinks with an acquaintance at Blue Brass. Alice was content to sit around and talk about how happy she was with everything, bracing every other collapsing sentence of the conversation with "Don't you think?" and "Aren't I?" and "That's okay, right?" It didn't take Marley long to get tired of persistently congratulating Alice on her complete and total normalcy. Alice made a catty remark about two women on the other side of the bar palming around with a couple of guys something along the lines of slut, but more polite. That wasn't so bad. It was when Alice had the audacity to pat Marley on the arm and say, "Oh. Not you. You're just a fuckin' tiger, Marley. That's the difference." Marleena contemplated smashing Alice's pretty little augmented nose down the back of her throat but let it go with a huff, figuring it couldn't be worth the effort. Alice suffered enough being the pretty little bitch that she was.

Marley watched with great satisfaction as two guys approached asking if either of them had a light and Alice practically threw herself on them, laughing obnoxiously at their jokes and chugging her drinks faster. Every comment made to Marleena was greeted with a disinterested "Oh." They hadn't asked permission and that always put Marley off. You know, *permission*. Look across the room, catch her glance and see if she looked back. Marley would give permission when asked not a "come hither" look, just a "Yeah, sure." She didn't like men that just walked up and started talking not good enough.

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So, she moved on to Casius, leaving Alice to hypocrisy. At Casius she sits down and lights a cigarette. Barry's working and walks over to Marleena, ignoring a couple of patrons throwing fistfuls of money up in the air. "What'll it be, stranger?" He hasn't seen Marleena in a couple of weeks, not that you could tell from his expression.

"Hey, Barry. How about a Jack and Coke?"

"Yep."

Marley watches as Barry pours her drink mezmorizingly slow. Barry's attitude: they'll wait, and if they don't, they'll be replaced. Not at all like Garrett, Barry almost resents his job. And not surprisingly he was too smart for it. He is a physics student up the hill at University of California San Diego and *all* young aristocrat. Not like Eric and his easy come easy go style. Eric's studies and degress never made him pretentious. While Barry pours the drink, Marleena surveys the landscape and spots a handsome thing staring at her. He holds her glare for just an instant until he goes back to examining his shoe crossed up over one leg. The look was disinterested like looking at a curiosity and Marleena briefly wonders about the heavy amount of mascara she's wearing. She was having fun in the bathroom before going out, layering it on black. Her lipstick looks practically metallic and she looked invincible in the mirror, but he doesn't seem care. She hands Barry a five and takes her drink while never taking her eyes off the man in the comfortable chair.

She takes the drink in her right hand, swirls the straw, spins the ice and then takes it out and sets in the ashtray. His foot is apparently amazing, so she lights a cigarette and then turns on her stool to face him. She waits, listening to brief moments of conversation on either side of her at the bar. He looks up, right into her face, holds the glance for a moment again and then blinks slowly as if his looking were an accident and turns to make a comment to his friend about something out the front door of the bar. The man next to her at the bar turns and says, "Nice pants."

"Thanks." And she makes the genuiness of her thanks apparent turning back to her amazingly shod interest. The guy at the bar doesn't bother to say another word.

Fine, she thinks and turns back to the bar to relish Barry being there instead of herself. His speed is irritating though and Marleena finds she can't watch him or the irritated faces around the bar for long. She glances back to check on the young man in the chair, but he isn't there. His friend is still there, chatting it up with a couple of other guys. She looks around to see if he's gone to the bar for a drink, but nothing. Without warning, Barry comes down to where Marleena is sitting and shouts over the music, "Some buddies of mine and I are goin' to this big house party as soon as we close here." Barry checks his watch. "Another hour maybe."

"Where is it?"

Barry holds up a finger and grabs a cocktail napkin and the pen from behind his ear. He scribbles something on the napkin and passes it over to Marley with a pat on the bar.

"I might go ahead and go, if that's okay."

"Totally. I'll see you there."

Marley takes the napkin and stuffs it in the Big Bag. When she turns back to the bar, the young man is standing on her left. She watches him out of the corner of her eye as he stands with money in his hand, leaning on his elbow. She turns to her drink and then turns back to him. He glances at her and smiles, but she doesn't smile back just keeps staring as she finished her drink and sets it on the bar. He leans in a little, noting the empty glass with his head "You want a drink?"

Marley smiles. "Vodka and tonic."

He smiles back again, this time a little more relieved. "That's my favorite."

Marley sits up a little and takes the money right out of his hand,

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leaning in secretively toward him. "Let me get it. Barry's an asshole." She turns to the bar and says loudly, "Barry!" Barry glances and Marleena smiles seductively. He nods.

"Nice," the young man says.

"Working here has its benefits."

"Yeah. I thought I recognized you."

"You come here?"

"Not often once or twice. You look a little different."

"Got to when your on the other side of the bar."

"I'm Dave."

"Hi, Dave. I'm Marleena."

"That's nice."

Marleena looks questioningly.

"Nice name. I like that name."

Barry slumps down the bar back to Marleena, a little annoyed by being beckoning in front of the peasants. "Found a friend?" he sneers.

"Two gin and tonics please," Marley says pleasantly.

"Comin' right up."

"Friend of yours?" Dave asks.

"We're colleagues."

"Oh. *Colleagues*."

"Exactly."

They wait for Barry to bring back their drinks as Dave looks over Marleena's shoulder to check on his friends. One of them gives him a thumb's up and he beams back.

"I'm glad they approve," Marleena says not disguising her excellent peripheral vision or contempt.

"Sorry?" Dave asks, not quite hearing her.

"Nothing. Forget it."

Barry sets the drinks down. "Yours is on the house, Marley."

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Marley furrroughs her brow at Barry's strange sense of nobility and then smiles genuinely again. "Thank you, Barry."

Barry gives her a "we've got to stick together" look and then heads off to the starving masses again.

"Cheers," Marley says and clinks Dave's glass.

"Thanks. Cheers."

They both take a sip and Dave says hurriedly, "So what do you do?"

"Oh, Dave, we *do* have to work on your small talk."

"I'm sorry?"

Marley takes the quarter top of her gin and tonic down. "'Nice name', 'my favorite', 'what do you do'. Come on. Try harder."

Dave chuckles. "You're weird."

"That's good."

Running his hand through his hair, he relaxes a bit more and smiles again. "You're beautiful, too."

"That's *very* good," one eyebrow up.

"Hm." He is starting to get it.

Marley eggs him on with a big hazel eyed linger as she wraps her lips around her glass and moves her shoulders in time with the music..

"I'm just looking for the cameras."

"No cameras, Dave just you and me."

Dave smiles again and sips his drink. This was about as obvious as it got. He checks on his friends again, but this time contemplating whether they'll miss him.

"You wanna' go to a party?" Marleena asks.

"A party?"

"Big house party in the hills."

"Yeah sure. You mind if some of my friends come?"

"Yes."

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"All right then." He has to laugh a little this time. Dave thinks about this again and looks to his friends who are fired up and oblivious. "When do you wanna' go?"

Marleena finishes her gin and tonic with one last gulp and answers, "Now."

Unable to hold back a good laugh, Dave chugs the rest of the gin and tonic in symmetry and smiles back at Marley. "Let's go."

"You gonna' tell 'em?"

"I'll let 'em down easy." He doesn't though. After a moment of hesitation, Dave mutters something like "Whatever," and the two of them slip out of the bar heading toward his car, past drunken gaggles, calming couples, and the occasional loud street party. They get to his car and Dave unlocks Marleena's door but doesn't open it, citing some "women's lib" notion in his head. They get in the car and Dave asks for the address. Marley just digs through her purse and hands him the napkin. "Woah," Dave says. "You've got friends in high places."

Marley shrugs.

They drive with the streetlamps bending the interior of the car through bands of shadow and light. Marley doesn't look at Dave as he drives, but instead watches the stores and glass buildings pass as they get to palm lined streets and green. She's feeling the last drink now and things start to cloud a bit. She sees a couple walking down the street talking animatedly about something, holding hands and it makes her sad. Large driveways sneaking up in the hills through palm fronds confront her with shadows and the streetlamps become more sparse. She looks to Dave and he's fiddling with the stereo looking for something romantic? He stops on a station and smiles, sitting back into his seat. It's not that romantic.

The neighborhood block of the party is already strewn with cars, some parked on the sidewalk, others only having managed to get one front wheel up. A few people are milling about by a flat concrete driveway and

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Marleena walks in that direction expecting Dave to follow. He can't hide a thing he is anticipating, a place he's never been. Marley recognizes the house, though. One of the local exotic car dealers in town who also owns a couple of bars has the place and throws parties every now and then. She pauses for a moment to realize that she's never known the street address before tonight. It's just that she's ended up here a couple of times never sober not that she was all that sober now, but close.

They walk up the drive past a pristine sea green lawn and up to a large deck. "Cool," Dave says admirably as they approach the house. At the door, they are greeted by a overweight man in his forties sporting gold chains and a hairy chest who welcomes them loudly. He beckons for them to follow him past the foyer to a large armoire filled with liquor bottles. "Pick yer poison," he says and gestures widely to the cabinet.

"Gin," Dave says politely with a cheesy wink to Marleena.

The fat man takes a bottle of Bombay Sapphire off the shelf and shoves it into Marley's breasts. "Here ya' go, sweetheart." Marley starts to be offended, but in two seconds the man is gone. She holds the bottle up triumphantly to Dave.

"Nice," Dave replies.

"Nice jerk," Marleena scoffs.

They head for the living room, a massive room that stretches the base of the three story house. The lights are turned out and bright lights and loud music are blaring from within. Marleena rolls her eyes and takes Dave by the hand, much to his surprise, walking him through the room and out the other side where there is a pleasant dining room leading to a massive white kitchen. Several people are in the kitchen cooking strange concoctions involving hot peppers and portebello mushrooms. Marley pushes Dave into a seat and leans in, setting the bottle of Gin on the kitchen table. "Stay here," she warns and then heads to the kitchen to get two glasses of ice half filled with tonic.

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On the way she spots a couple of acquaintances who smile and holler over the marble island counter in the kitchen. "Marley!" Marley dances and waves but keeps to the task at hand. She grabs a couple of glasses and fills them with ice while a girl she'd waitressed with at the White Grill comes over to say, "How're you, baby doll!"

"I'm here." Marley answers.

"Where you at now?"

"I'm doin' Casius right now."

"Aw. That sucks. I had to go over to Old Town. It *sucks* over there, Marley."

"I believe it," Marley answers, grabbing a yellow bottle of tonic off the top of the fridge.

"Buncha fuckin' tourists."

"Sorry."

"But we're havin' *fun* tonight, baby doll!"

"You know it."

The girl wanders off back toward the living room as Marley finishes with the tonic and takes the glasses back to David in the other room. She catches him taking a swig off the bottle and he grins sheepishly as she sees him. "Sorry," he says, "couldn't wait."

Much to his surprise, Marley leans over and runs a hand through his hair. She takes the bottle out of his hands and pours the rest of their drinks before handing him one.

"Damn," he says and jerks his head. "That's strong."

Marley just smiles at the chaos drifting through the hall.

"You know I don't what to say?"

"Yeah. But I like that."

"Okay."

Between heavy sips Dave says, "I always thought you were cool watching you there behind the bar."

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"I know," says Marley, heavily saturated now. She's never seen his face before tonight, sitting in that chair, watching his foot. "What the hell is so amazing about your foot?"

"What?"

"When I was s looking at you all you could do was stare at your foot."

"Oh. I was just... I was just... I don't know."

"You just weren't looking at me."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so."

Marley smiles.

"I'm gonna' kiss you, okay."

Marley smiles.

David leans over heavy and can't quite reach Marleena's smiling face. He sits up, sets his drink down on the table and pulls his chair closer to Marley waiting. Their knees are against one another when he reaches out to grasp the back of her slumping head and pull her in to him. She gets dizzy as her head comes up from her shoulders and her lips are mashed into his. She can't tell if the sensation is light or heavy, rough or smooth it is just lips against lips and she breathes a little as he turns his head to the right and pushes his chin into hers. Marleena closes her eyes in a kind of sigh and lets him kiss her more. She gives over to the no up no down feeling and relaxes her back almost falling into him, pressing her nose into his. They bend and press heavier until he finally pulls back, his eyes in the back of his head.

"I've wanted to do that for a *long* time."

Marley just leans with her elbows on her knees in a drunken stupor, content that she has been relieved of all control now. As if drunkenness were a catalyst, something in the world had been set in motion. She has made her loathed intention clear and it is now up to David to take complete advantage of it. She can hear the chastising in the back of her

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head so light and so pretty that the part of her in demand drowns out the chatty voice of conscience with a simple, *shut up, Marleena*. She stands up from her chair, takes another chug and steps over to David, straddling him. She sits roughly on his lap and kisses him the way she wants to be kissed, peeling his lips back with her tongue, matching every amount force with some amount of resistance, all of it calculated. She pushes and pulls against him like the ocean to a ship and he can't help but ooze into his drunkness with her, excepting every signal, every nuance, everything that she wants.

She pulls herself away and wraps her arms loosely around his shoulders and neck. "There's a bedroom up on the third floor that no one's stayin' in."

"Really?"

She wants to slap him for his coyness. "Do you want me?"

"What?"

"Do you want me now?"

He sits for a moment to contemplate... what? "I want you."

She stands up from him and takes him by the hand, her lightly whetted palms dragging him with her behind him as they walk up the back stairs by the kitchen past the second floor to the third. She giggles in the darkness and pulls him into her in the hallway, placing his left hand on the small of her back. They laugh mischevously in the darkness and kiss some more. She grabs the rough hair on the back of his neck and pulls him in close, again, rushing his gums with her tongue. He moans and leans, barely able to stand, and presses his waist against hers. She pushes him off and takes his hand again, this time wrapping each finger of hers around each finger of his. She puts a hand out in front of her and pulls him through the darkness like a piece of laughter until she finds a door. Stumbling behind her, David waits until she locates and mattress in a dark room and hurls him onto it, shutting the door behind them with the most obvious of laughs the final laugh. The door slams and she finds his knee and bites it lightly.

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"What the !?" David starts to call out in the dark. But the sound is all she needs to locate his face and silence him with another powerful kiss. He moans again and she pulls his shirt out from his pants, still laughing from the slamming of the door and the darkness in general the thumping of the bass of the party downstairs traveling up through the floors. Everything becomes a drawing of the curtains wrestle and David and Marleena pull at everything available to be tugged sheets, shirts, pants and belts a terror of grabbing hands now as Marleena still presses for his face. Straining her neck she looks for his nose his cheek, his eyes, but feels his face between her breasts breathing heavily, savagely tearing, and she knows the thing she has unleashed. She knows his face in every god damned see you next time get what I want morning. *No more sun* she briefly thinks before her neck is grabbed and tugged toward his face. They mash lips again and she tries to pull away demanding something more glistening, but he isn't listening. He holds a hand full of hair behind her head and rolls her over on the bed. She tries once to push him back, to be on top, but he presses his pelvis and chest down on top of her. He breathes heavily and pulls his shirt from his chest by himself only to come back down on her like a tidal wave. Marley moans, but this time as a matter of protest, as a matter of *slow down* as a matter of, *don't you want this?*

Before she can think in the luminous air, in the spinning of the bed, the balance of the floor and ceiling and a nauseousness in her stomach, he is inside her, thrashing terribly. She knows the act, knows the thing, and suddenly pushes back, pushes out. He is on top of her though. She grabs his shoulders as if to say *wait*, and he pushes her down harshly on the mattress. Her clothes are all half on and every dream of being totally naked washes out of her mind as he takes everything she has. There is no rhythm. There is no desire anymore and everything said before seems wrong she manages to briefly burst, as if gasping up from water, "Stop"

"We can't stop now."

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"No. Stop."

"Oh God. You know you want me," he whispers in the dark.

She is thrust against the mattress and suddenly spots the light of the street reflected of the green palms in the window. "Stop," she shudders.

"Don't stop, Marley. Oh God. You can't stop."

She pushes and tries to let go, but he only seems to become more and more and more shaken until finally he moans and weakens and falls on top of her like dirt in a grave. She whimpers.

He pulls himself out of her and rolls to her side. "My God that was great."

Marley just lays still and feels every inch of body and every ounce of what she does not want flowing out of her.

She waits in silence for long minutes until he is breathing heavy even kisses him twice to put him to sleep. Then, quietly, without malice, in total shame, she gathers what little she has and drags herself up from the bed drunk and searching for the door. She hits her knee once on something and winces before grappling with a doorknob and drags herself out to the light of the hallway. Barely aware of straightening herself, she manages what she can on the stairwell as she is looked at lewdly. Every pore prays to black out as she makes her way home dizzily, feet stepping clumsily on the concrete, looking for a taxi cab or even a kind stranger early in the morning the Pacific ocean pounding rocks like static noise.

The one thing she wants her jeep is further away than home. As Marley stumbles down block after block of sun bleached sidewalk, moon blue in the light of dawn. She is half walking, half dreaming in drunkenness. She wants the jeep to drive away in, not to drive home in. But the jeep is miles away in P.B., sitting like a ticket magnet in front of Blue Brass. The heels come off again, resentfully this time, blamed for another night of being used. They don't protest when they're hurled away into the

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morning light. They land up the street on their sides, shodding some invisible woman passed out on the ground. *Me*, Marleena thinks and stops for a moment to ponder lying down in the middle of the street where that woman should be, taking her place. She's tired tired beyond belief every step forward equal to a pound of exhaustion.

Marley feels like the morning she is swimming through, beautiful but irrelevant. Suddenly time is not a big parade marching past her. There is no second passing, no feeling measured. Time is just reduced to space an ocean she is forever crossing. She leaves the shoes where they are and moves forward with only the knowledge that forward is home and that she will not remember this eternal walk when she wakes up on the couch in the morning she already knows she won't make it to the bed. Step after step is taken and every time her feet touch the ground she hear one word: stop. "Stop," she says again to the morning almost wondering if she had been mute when she'd said it last. But her voice sounds out clear and is heard by no one but herself still. The idiot looked at his *shoes* when she first said with flashing glances that the dance was on. It was *her* game, *her* permission. The established rights of the god damned sovereignty of Marleena were immutable. *She* made up the rules and rule number one was this stops when I say it does. Period. "Stop," she says forcefully and sobering listening carefully to hear if there is any element of the word that could be misconstrued.

It doesn't matter. Every errant thought dances off to the thin edge of rationalization only to defiantly bounce an echo back like laughter off shower tiles. And every echo is a crack in the concrete that traps her foot and tugs her backward. Marleena doesn't even notice right away when it begins to rain. The sky cracks open veins of shame and proceeds to piss on her. Until she tastes salt on her lips, she doesn't notice either that she is crying, tears smashed by raindrops. There were no wracks or sobs, just the quiet sadness of an irreverent, irrelevant beautiful morning and the

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rain.

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Saturday afternoon is not unlike Friday morning, except for two things: Marley wakes on her couch, knowing why she's there, and this time the announcement to the furniture that she needs a beer is not nearly so grandiose this time it is a need for something to numb her brain. The walk up and down Torrey Pines is damp, misty, and smeared with David's face in every Eucalyptus, every puddle, and every car driving by as though he might be looking for her the way he was searching for her in the darkness of a small room. She cannot see him in his chair at Casius. She does not know what his face looked like as she ran her hands through his hair. It's a laugh that she lets out on her way down the hill to Garrett's bar, but it's a half choked sob.

She thumps a foot onto the hardwood floor of the Tidal Pool Pub and has no answer when she hears Garrett call from the back, "What do'ya know, Marleena?" He knows the sound of her shoes and she loves it, but is shamed of what it is that he knows she is. She had never been so pale, never been so apprehensive and now it was so easy to see what she had become and so easy to believe Alice's pat on the arm. "You're just a fuckin' tiger. That's the difference." *God damn it.*

She sits down heavily at the end of the bar, having to hold on to it, pain behind her eyes, and tells Garrett to get her a vodka tonic "And well, damn it."

Garrett peers around from the back room. "Well?" He looks at Marleena hanging on to the corner and nods.

"Normally you could say that was no good, Garrett... but today." Marley sits herself up straight on her stool, tosses her hair back tough, and laughs. "So what's it gonna' be, Reverend?"

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"Today, I ask no questions." Garrett winks but it's not the same. And Marley hates him for seeing through her.

"Drink the good stuff, Marley. It's on me."

"What the hell's the difference, Garrett?"

"The difference is an appreciation or a crutch. It's on me Marley, but stick with the good stuff. It's too expensive for you to rely on."

She looks at Garrett with every ounce of you don't know what I've been through, but it is no good. He'd seen it all and maybe even in front of his eyes. "Yeah," she replies.

"Rough night?" Garrett asks as he put down a glass of ice in front of her and pours good vodka and tonic into it in equal portions.

"Yeah. Rough night," she answers.

"You're here later than normal."

"Really?"

"Yup."

"When am I usually here?"

"On Saturdays? usually about four o'clock."

"Yeah?"

"Yup."

"What time is it now?" Marley hadn't even noticed when she rolled off the couch to the shower, the answering machine still desperately trying to tell her someone loved her.

"Five o'clock."

"Oh well,"

"Maybe it's daylight savings."

"Sure, something like that," she says as she instinctively looks to the doorway.

"He never gets here before six o'clock, silly."

"Who?"

"Sure, sure," Garrett smiles and walks back to the back room.

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"Now wait a god damned minute."

Garrett looks at her disapprovingly.

"Wait a god danged minute," Marley huffs, mustering patience.

"That's better."

"You pulled that shit yesterday. Cut it out."

"Fine. I will soon as you cut it out."

"Fine."

"Fine." and Garrett walked back into to the back room.

Marleena finishes her first vodka and tonic and then asks for another while she puts a Bod Dylan song on the jukebox just to listen to some kind of whispering about love and the drag of seeing anybody at all. Sitting back down to the bar, she stares at the pattern of the laquered wood. She tells herself to forget let the entire memory of the night just vanish, but finds herself just walking through it again and again. Of course there was everything with Alice she remembered Blue Brass quite clearly still wanted to attack the damn girl. She remembered Casius, guffaws a bit when she remembers coaching David on his small talk. *David*. Now she knew that no amount of drunkenness could take away the hand through hair, the pull in the hallway, the push to the bed and everything that came afterward although green palms in streetlamps leapt out for some reason a reason she could not remember. The fronds were so yellow green in a moment outside of all moments. At some point she had been standing on a deck overlooking waves of grass that washed like a tide. When had that been? She was tempted for a moment to dive. When?

Garrett stays at the other end of the bar reading a book, which Marley doesn't mind at all. She feels like being alone. But when she's through her second drink she hollers, "What do I have ta' do to get service around here!" Garrett and Marley share a smile for a moment before a shadow pierces the light of the door. A solid voice calls out,

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"Hey, Kitz!" And a safe warmth comes over Marley.

Garrett moves up to Marley's end of the bar, to the visitor and says, "What do you know, Eric?"

The newcomer walks up behind Marleena, and without a word, starts rubbing her shoulders a little. She doesn't want to smile, tries not to, but can't help it.

"Well, I'll tell you, Garrett, I shot a man today, and I'm not so sure what to do about it," Eric says with a grin, through his smooth, blonde goatee.

"I think you better get out of town then," Garrett says with a chuckle, handing Eric a nice, cold, amber.

Eric drops himself next to Marley with a huff, like he'd just climbed a monstrous hill. "What do ya' think, darlin'? You wanna' run away to Meh hee co?"

Marley puts her head down on her hand and leans on the bar, facing Eric as a semi circle of attention. "Fraid not. I still gotta' pay my phone bill."

Eric throws his hand up in mock frustration. "I tell ya', Garrett, you offer someone a world of freedom and a permanent vacation and what do they tell you?" He looks back to Marley with an expression of bemusement and sympathy. "Gotta' pay the phone bill." He scratches his chin for a moment, and then takes a swig from the beer Garrett's placed in front of him, never taking his eyes off Marley. This was their game. Who would be the first to look away?

"I'm not running off with a murderer and a cur," Marley says matter of factly, looking down at the bar. She doesn't mind losing today, doesn't mind if Eric knows.

"A cur?" Eric repeats pretentiously, "Look who's talkin' fancy."

"Shut up, you boob."

"Boob. That's more like it." Eric nods once sharply.

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Taking another swig, Eric gargles his beer obnoxiously and then asks Marley, "What have you got planned today, Mrs. I'm too busy to run away to Meh hee co?"

"None of your business," she says coolly, sipping from her refreshed vodka tonic.

Abruptly, he stands up and brushes his jeans off a little, feigning embarrassment or indignation. "Okay, fine. I can take a hint," he says, acting like he was trying not to seem hurt. "I know when I'm not wanted." And with that, he turns to leave, but Marley's arm almost instinctively shoots out, latching on to his sleeve. She knew that if she didn't stop him right there, he'd keep up the act, leaving the bar. Eventually, she would have to go out and find him sitting outside on the stoop. And she knew she didn't want to go outside not for that, or any other reason. Smiling, she reels him in, "Get back here, you."

Merrily sitting down to his stool, Eric crosses his arms on the bar. "You must have PMS."

Marley backhands his shoulder.

"See?" Eric points defiantly, "mood swings."

"I don't have PMS," she stresses.

"I know a mood swing when I see one."

"I don't have P M S," she repeats.

Suddenly, turning to her on his stool, Eric looks shocked. "Maybe you're dying! Maybe you have a brain tumor!"

Meant to be a joke, the comment digs straight to Marley's heart and burrows in. Her eyes softens just a little. She wishes she were dying that life might be that simple. "So?" she asks casually, quickly covering up the wound, wondering if Eric caught it.

"So, people with brain tumors suffer from drastic mood swings." Eric says it like Marley must be an idiot. Everybody knew that.

"Where'd you hear that?" she asks incredulously.

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Shrugging, Eric just says, "I don't know."

"Well, I don't have a brain tumor."

"It's not a too ma," Eric responds in his best Austrian accent. She giggles a little.

"All right," she relents, "I'll run away to Meh hee co with you. Maybe I can die in peace down there."

But Eric just put his head in his hands, smushing his cheeks. "I don't want to go anymore."

"Well, where then?"

"How 'bout the beach?"

"You can't run away to the beach, stupid," she replies, exasperated.

"Why not?"

Marley patiently explains, "The beach is down the street. You have to go where no one can know you if you want to run away." She knew that much from the broken record of Alice in her head, "You're just a fuckin' tiger."

Eric just bounces on his bar stool, "But what about TV?" he asks.

Rolling her eyes, Marley replies, "You could live without television, you know."

"I suppose," he says, casually regarding her for a moment. She stares back into his eyes, and they both daydream about making love with one another. "You're pretty entertaining."

Pushing her hair back over one ear, she says, "Thank you. My dream has always been to be your surrogate for television."

He closes one eye in concentration, "Not entertaining like 'ha ha' entertaining, but more like a patient to a psychotherapist entertaining."

She hits him again.

"Garrett! Marley's hitting me!"

A voice calls out through the door to the small back room behind the bar. "Don't make me come out there, you two!"

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The pair sit for a moment, smiling, drinking their drinks and Marley laughs at her seriousness. "Well, what are you doing today?"

Eric points at his beer.

"That's it?" she asks.

"That's it. I'm getting shit faced tonight."

"What's the occasion?"

"No occasion just feel like it."

She nods.

"I might go down to the cove when it gets dark."

"That sounds like a good idea," she says, finishing her gin and tonic.

"Well, you can't come," he says argumentatively.

"Why not?"

"You think running away to the beach is stupid," he says, sounding hurt. "You can't come."

"Fine. I didn't want to go anyway."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Hey, Garrett!" Eric calls, examining his mug, "I'm drowning out here!"

Reluctantly, Garrett comes out of the back room and pours a fresh beer a dark one and a vodka tonic. He hands them to Eric and Marley. "You're the only fish I've heard of that lives off of beer."

Eric looks at his pint pitifully. "What're you givin' me this for? You know I can't afford this stuff."

Garrett shrugs. "Enjoy it. It's on me."

Marley smiles, "You're in a good mood. Thanks, Garrett."

"What can I tell ya?" Garrett says. "Ya'll are better than most TV shows. Figure I'll pay ya' for it."

Eric puts his beer down with a look of disgust. "No way."

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MARLEENA'S CONSOLATION PRIZE

Entertaining you is too much like work. I got one job. I don't want your pity beer."

"Did you hear what Marley said?" Garrett asks, eyeing Eric closely.

"No."

"She said, 'Thank you, Garrett'. That's called gratitude, dimwit."

"So? Marley's weird."

"Drink it," Garrett says, looming near Eric like a threat.

Pouting, Eric sips his beer. "It is good," he admits unhappily.

Marley, all this time, is staring out the door of the bar, staring at the moody, grey light seeping in. As she turns back to face Eric, she sees a purple outline of the door traced over his face. She smiles.

"What?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "Nothing. It's just... the weather."

"Yeah," Eric says, settling into his stool. "I can't get anything done on a day like this."

"That's why I came here," Marley admits with a shrug.

"That's why I figured you were here, fellow pea," he replies, smiling in that knowing way.

Marleena stretches back, throws her arms out, feeling a release of the tendrils of the gravity leftover from yesterday morning. Maybe it's the vodka, she thinks. She stands up, searching through her pocket for another quarter for the jukebox, feeling a light, cool draft from one of the ceiling fans. "I've always liked the rain better though," she says whimsically.

"All weathers' got it's effect," Eric replies thoughtfully.

Holding her quarter in her fist, Marleena saunters over to the front door and peers out at the world, looking at it glistening. Watching the wet strangers and trickling water in the streets, she quietly turns and shut the door, knowing only that she wants no part of it anymore.

MARLEENA'S CONSOLATION PRIZE

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Marley laughs outright when Eric gives her a shove. She holds her own for a moment on the slippery rock, but just enough vodka is running through her that she gracefully twists to one side and sits down, plopping her butt down into the cold water. Now Eric is the one laughing. He tries to keep it in when he sees in the moonlight that Marley is not at all happy with soaking herself, but he can't help it. After a minute being bent over with his hands on his knees, he wades forward a little and offers a hand out to Marleena. She crosses her arms. "Jerk."

"Oh c'mon." Eric holds his out out patiently still even though he knows he's not offering help but revenge.

Predictably, Marley grabs his wrist with both hands and pulls hard. Eric goes down into the water, laughing all the way.

They splash for a minute, insuring that they are both completely soaked from head to toe.

"Shit." Eric says after a minute.

"What?"

"I forgot about my wallet."

"It'll dry."

"Ah. I hate that."

"You started it, dumbass."

"You started it, dumbass," Eric mocks in a high pitch.

Marley just splashes him again and tries to stand. As she comes out of the water, the sea air hits her. "Christ this water is cold!" She sits back down.

"Just the kind of thing you need to sober up and get back to drinkin'."

"You're not done?"

"Hell no."

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"You're done."

"I told you I was getting shit faced."

"You're shit faced."

"No I'm not."

"You're sitting in a freezing puddle, fully clothed."

"Yeah. If I was shit faced, I wouldn't have my clothes on."

"Well, *I'm* done."

"Why do say that as if it's supposed change my mind?"

Eric's tone is suddenly serious and Marley rolls her eyes. She didn't mean to get serious, doesn't want to. "Sorry. Nevermind. Go drink you're head off."

"What's with you lately?"

"I said nevermind."

"Fine. I'm going back to the Tide Pool."

Marley giggles. "Go back? You're in it."

Eric chuckles too. He looks around at the sky. Wisps of clouds drift by, leftover from the storm. The waves crash randomly against the rock around them, splashing up and falling down no congruence. They crash persistantly, but never the same way.

"I'm not supposed to be like this," Marley says dryly, suddenly, splash the little pool in disappointment.

"What?"

"I'm not supposed to *be* like this."

Eric shifts to face her more stoically. "I don't understand."

"You couldn't. You're gonna' get your Ph. D. You've got a life. You're gonna' be fine."

"None of what you just said makes me fine. I've got problems just like you, just like anybody."

"I'm a god damned waitress, Eric."

"You're a bartender."

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"Whatever. I'm twenty eight and I'm a god damned bartender."

"You've got a job, a roof over your head. Hell, you can afford a jeep. I can't. I've got loans to pay off for the rest of my life for this great degree. It's not like people get rich being marine biologists."

Marley sighs. "This just wasn't what I planned on."

"Yeah well, if I'd planned it, I wouldn't've soaked my wallet, but that's not how things work." Eric brings his hand out of the water to rub the bridge of his nose. He knows what he is about to say is not what he should say, but the cold, or maybe the rain, or maybe the beer latches onto the sentence until it eventually fall out of his mouth anyway. "You're just looking for an excuse."

"Fuck you." Marleena stands up and walks out of the tidal pool.

"Fuck *me*? Try everybody *else*."

Marley turns, fumbling. There are no words.

"What do you want me to say? I listen to your damn stories every week!" He stands up to and takes two quick steps toward Marleena, slipping a little. She can't move back, can't move away from him. "What's it gonna take to make you realize every single one of your so called 'victories' isn't that at all, huh? you're just losing. What's it gonna take?"

She looks up at him, the moon behind his head, defeated. Her eyes just linger on his face, the question, she turns her head away, sniffs in sharply and does everything to hold in the tears. She can't. She winces again. *David*. She knows what it's going to take. He's not going to disappear this time, into the desert. She will never be able to forget his face and never forget what he did, what she let him do. She's just a rain girl, just water, and at that moment, she just wants a bottle to pour into, to get away from everything. She reaches out for Eric and pulls into him, crying at last. His shoulder is wet and cold but still forgiving. She pulls her arms tight around his middle, squeezing. He squeezes back and even

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lifts up lightly relieving her of gravity if only for a moment. She sniffs as the sobs work themselves out and turns her head into his neck. She's not sure why but she says, "I love you, Eric."

Not that the moon gets what goes on down there, helplessly watching every storm tear across the Earth, but Eric figures he'll find out sooner or later. Not that it's the point, not the way things work. "I love you, too, Marley." He breathes in her tears and sighs. "I just wish you'd love yourself."

Marleena cuddles in closer, safe, licks the ocean saltwater and the salt of tears from her lips. "I will." She nods to herself, her cheek rubbing against Eric's shoulder, and smiles, her hazel eyes bright, at the clarity. The clouds really are gone. "You'll see. I will."