

The Curse of Man

A tennis ball sat on the sky-blue countertop. Veronica stared at it with a gaze so piercing that they could have stuck a pin through their eye and gone back in time.

Back to seventh grade when Elizabeth Hoffman whipped a tennis ball so hard at Veronica when they weren't looking that they got a crack to the right ear. It was like that moment in the movie Saving Private Ryan when the bombs go off on the beach. Their dad brought them to that one when they were young.

The ball on the counter was Goliath's. The slobbering bulldog was gnawing on the kitchen's table's left leg. Veronica grabbed the ball and threw it down at the big boy. He let it roll near his stomach. He gazed at it for a brief moment, like someone skimming over an article in the Times, and then went back to his table leg meal.

Veronica let it go. They went back to gorilla gluing their shoe together. They wore a pair of high heels from Ross Dress for Less. Something quick and cheap for a single night out. Of course they would break. But then Veronica also went back for a breather from the club. A disco song played on the small blue-tooth radio. A tall bottle of sake sat beside the radio.

Veronica stuck their tongue out of their mouth and licked the side of their lips as they dabbed the finishing touches of glue onto their broken heel.

It was five minutes after midnight. The bar was really starting to get rocking downstairs. The Midnight Marauders were just beginning to play their electronic prog-rock set.

Veronica took their pair of heels and carried them with two fingers. For a brief moment they imagined themselves masturbating while they stood in front of their kitchen window, the heels still attached to their fingers while they fingered themselves. The moment passed. They stared outside at the street below. The bar-goers were all out. Different kinds of people smoking cigarettes or vapes. Some had brown paper bags that they drank beer or whiskey out of.

Veronica pushed themselves up against the window so that their breasts could touch the glass. They closed their eyes and took a big breath. For a brief moment they imagined heaving so hard that they cracked through the glass, and fell down, and face-planted in front of all those people with their booze in brown bags. Their skull would crack against the concrete. Blood seeps out of their ear once again, like it did that time Elizabeth Hoffman hit her in gym-class with the tennis ball.

It was about a boy. Of course it was. Elizabeth Hoffman was a jealous bitch who had to have everything in life. And Veronica liked Anthony, the sports stud who was going to go to Northeastern for college. And he liked them, too. They kissed after his first football practice prior to the school year starting. They went on three dates. And they still saw each other after the incident with the tennis ball. It wasn't like Veronica forgot about it. They were always prepared for maximum vengeance plots in their life, even if they occurred fifteen years after the incident in question.

Look, that was the samurai way. That was how honor worked. They firmly believed as much. So, before they left their apartment to back down to the bar, they grabbed a shot glass from the kitchen cabinet. The cabinet had a loose screw, so it always dangled on one hinge. They grabbed the bottle of sake and filled it to the brim. They looked at Goliath, the big boy, who stopped chomping on the wood and was now asleep on his side, snoring loudly.

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The bar down below was called the Skulking Dwarf. It was one of those spots that got a new owner every couple of years, like a wart that just keeps coming back on your nose. This place was one of those bottom of the gutter places that people would go to because they knew they'd probably be getting free drinks.

The bartender in question tonight was a guy they'd never seen before. This Randy Quaid looking fucker who was drunk on the booze he was supposed to sell. He mixed up receipts and got drink orders wrong. He was currently doing shots with some old guys.

Veronica found their bunch. Not that they were ever with a bunch to begin with. Having to live above a bar had its advantages and disadvantages. They didn't want to make any friends because if they did then they would expect them to come all the time. And they did want to make friends so that they wouldn't be so lonely whenever they came to drink. It was an egg in a hard place.

“What's up, bitch! You get that heel fixed?”

Veronica was met by the lovely Elizabeth Hoffman. At thirtyone or something, she'd blossomed into an extravagant woman. She was taller, blonder, and prettier too. She had charisma and sex appeal. She also seemed so much nicer than when she was a kid. She was wearing a strawberry skirt and black top. Her blonde hair fell down her back, making her look like a dish of strawberry vanilla ice cream.

She put her arm around Veronica and kissed her on the cheek. She smelled like a cinnamon roll.

“How ya doing, baby? You good?”

She had some little plump hips to her, too. Something to grab while she got fucked from behind.

“Yeah, baby. I’m good.”

Or battered from behind. It would have been tough to get that ass into any trunk or suitcase though.

“Oh, V. It’s been so good to finally see you again. I mean, *we’ve both changed. Haven’t we?* I like to think so. You know, your type are all over these days! Your time is now! I like to think that we were all kinda trapped in bodies that weren’t quite ours, right?”

“Why would you want to get out of that body, baby?” Veronica asked, not really certain if they smiled or not.

Elizabeth smiled, though, for sure. She stuck her finger out and pointed a long red nail in between Veronica’s eyes. “Let’s get fucked up, bitch. We’ve got some shit to talk about, but first, we get sloshed so that we forget it in the morning.”

Elizabeth was still talkative. She swooped around the bar and started conversations with anybody. She was in this corner one moment, in the alley the next, up at the bar another moment later. Always some chatting going on. Veronica tried to stay close but not too close. To outsiders, they were just another guest that Elizabeth was entertaining. They would never have known that they were the one who followed her last month as she went about her daily Tuesday routine.

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The scouting happened last week.

Elizabeth would go on a morning jog through Central Park to start. After that she stopped at a yogurt shop so she could get a vanilla cup with strawberries and crushed up pecans. She had a coffee at a different place. Café Soleil, on 27th street, near the FIT. She sat indoors with her coffee and stared out at the street. Just stared like some kind of psycho. After having a few sips, she took the rest to go and then walked back to her apartment on 35th. A block away from the Empire State Building. She didn't leave again until noon, when she took out her Pomeranians for a walk. She walked two blocks around and then back. After that she went out with her business suit on. A black blazer and long dark pants. She had a travel bag strapped around her chest. And she wore sunglasses. Her hair was a little messy at this stage. She hops in an Uber, and this is where Veronica almost loses her. They're able to follow the cab for a few blocks, which was the toughest part, and then onto the Brooklyn bridge. She goes across it on Tuesdays and then ends up in some gentrified part of town with a bunch of young guys who walk around with their headphones on like they're in their own virtual simulation. She goes to this one-floor apartment with a brick façade. It's across the street from a taco joint. She arrives at the front door and meets a guy there with a slim face, long legs, and a tight ass.

It was Anthony.

They hugged and kissed for a long time before she went into his apartment.

Later that night, she'd go out. She'd have dinner with Anthony. Maybe go on late night walks. Sometimes they'd go to the bars. One night in particular Veronica saw Elizabeth at a bar. It was called Echo, and it was near the bridge. It was a place renowned for it's high octane partying. The gays loved the spot because it was easy to find someone with blow who could give blow. It was a make and move spot. A one time, maybe, two-time

only type place, but one that always had business because there were people from all over the world that wanted to be there, so there was always a customer base.

Veronica went inside, hair dyed red this time. They did their make-up so that they couldn't be noticed. They always stayed away from Elizabeth, but it was hard, because they knew how Elizabeth would always move around the room. Constantly talking, chatting. Like some kind of fucking Fox News host.

Veronica stayed out of sight. They looked at Elizabeth as she made out with some gay guys for fun. They followed them to a door with caution tape plastered all over. They walked through the door and saw Veronica and the gays smoking cigarettes and doing blow. But that's not all they saw.

Two guys were up against the wall, one getting blown, the other smoking a cigarette above his head. Some ashes were falling onto the back of his neck. Another couple of guys were sucking each other off while they did blow. None of it appealed to Veronica. Elizabeth was the prize. And there she was at the end of the hallway, snorting cocaine.

There was the real Elizabeth. The attention grabber. The needy bitch. The self-fulfilling prophecy of cuntyness.

After that, it was a simple bump-into at Café Soleil. Veronica was in Manhattan on a day trip. It was wonderful to see her. Blah blah. She lived in Brooklyn. Yes, yes! Tonight? Sure! Oh, it's been so long. Yes, yes, we should. I haven't gone out in a while. Me too! We should do it big. Yes, we should.

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The music was getting witchy. Trance-like. The room was dark and yet full of light. Flashing strobes lit walls to wall like fire. And then there were the glow-lights, the neon paint that glowed on people's bodies. The room was almost like being out at Sea in a storm. There was a claustrophobic psychedelia to the place. And Veronica loved it. They loved it all. They played the part as well. A black vest showing off a belly ring. Long leather pants. Black heels with gorilla glue on the bottom. It was Veronica's movie and she was the director and writer, but not the star. The star was dressed as a strawberry.

A strawberry ice-cream sundae in a silver bowl. So special. Special enough for people to talk about afterwards. She was God in that vanilla. She would be put on display in a tiny museum somewhere west of Omaha ,Nebraska, and the people working the show would charge ten bucks a person to walk around a small room, probably with some kind of Christian idols on the walls around them depicting Jesus on the cross, or Mary holding Jesus, or other Biblical references, and in the middle of it all would be a glass case with a the strawberry ice-cream sundae in the middle, still frozen.

That's why Veronica had to end it in the shadows. No chance of survival.

Veronica waited until all of the music had died down and Elizabeth was ready for another drink.

"Come on" Veronica grabbed her hand. "Let's get another."

Elizabeth smiled with drunken creases on her mouth. Her eyes lingered lazily on Veronica's face.

"You are so fucking pretty, do you know that?" she said as they waded through the bodies on the dancefloor.

Veronica pretended not to hear. She and Elizabeth leaned over the glass bar. The purple lights from above the liquor rack were misting down on the two of them. Randy Quaid was there to serve them. He slurred. "Yuu ladies cool?"

Veronica ordered two drinks.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait" Elizabeth interjected.

"Yes?" he smiled as he leaned over the bar. There were boogers in his nose.

"Isn't my friend fucking pretty *as fuck*?" she said.

The bar guy chuckled sheepishly.

"Come on"

"Yes. Your friend is pretty as fuck!" he had to raise his voice because the music was starting back up again.

Elizabeth smirked. “Then you should let her have that drink *for free*.”

The guy leaned back over the bar. He was the same drunk guy who was forgetting people’s bills and giving them extra shots of whiskey. Randy Quaid.

“You’re a bad girl then, *huh?*” he wagged a finger at her.

“Can we just.....*get the drinks?*” Veronica asked.

“She’s pretty and I’m bad. *Is that it?*” Elizabeth asked.

Now they were in another interaction. Elizabeth just couldn’t stop mingling with others. It was impossible to get her alone. One of her horrible qualities. Veronica couldn’t think about how disgusting Elizabeth was. She was like a Roomba with red lips.

“Hey, Elizabeth, how about we go?”

Elizabeth didn’t hear. She began to flirt with the bartender now. Her tongue was now visible around her lips. Veronica could have sworn she heard Elizabeth say something about cock. But maybe not. Could have been cork. Or crawfish.

“Liz!” Veronica grabbed her arm and pulled a bit too hard.

“Hey! Don’t pull me like that” Elizabeth turned at her aggressively. There was something in the look in her eyes that was fierce. The look that Elizabeth used all those years ago in high school. The eyes that put you down. The eyes that put you in the corner.

Made you feel alone. Subjugated you and isolated you. Turned others against you. Those were the eyes that Veronica had been looking for, but in this moment, she wished that they'd never summoned those eyes, because they were terrified. They brought back those days of Hell that never seemed to end. The days that made them question who they really were and if they should even exist at all.

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“Hey” Veronica felt a hand on their lower back. This was in fifth grade. It was the annual science fair. Banners about science and education were hung up around Mrs. Hall’s classroom.

Veronica looked behind them and saw Alex standing there. Hair as flawless as ever. As if she was already thirty-one years old and perfect. Every square inch of the girl was a miracle. Some kind of diamond chiseled out of million year old rock.

Sometimes when Veronica lies in bed and stares up at their solar system of stars that shined on the ceiling, they wondered, “Where did this girl come from?”

“You know I think you’re cute” she said.

Veronica didn’t think they was cute at all. They thought that they looked ugly. Too much hair on their body. Too heavy was the scent of B.O. that wafted underneath their male arm-pits. Zits were layered on their face like pepperonis on a Meatlover’s pizza. They had bad breathe. A big nose. Thick jaw-line. And the worst of it all was the Adam’s apple. The curse of man. Like a giant tumor in the mouth. It’s as if Adam swallowed THE Apple in the Garden of Eden and it got stuck there, forever to torture men for the rest of eternity. Veronica didn’t think they were cute when they looked in the mirror. They looked cursed.

“Oh, thanks” was all that could slip out of their mouth.

“So, what’s your project about?” she sat down next to their desk. Leg touching their leg. She wore one of the uniforms required by the Catholic Church. A bland checkered skirt, but hers’ was from last year and she still wore it. Intentional to show off her thighs. She never got in trouble for it, either, because her mom and Mrs. Hall were good friends who gushed over Johnny Depp movies.

“It’s about bones.”

“Wow. Really?” she took the magnifying glass off of Veronica’s desk and looked at the exhibit.

Veronica had a miniature copy of an archeological dig site. With small tools and hammers you could excavate the area. You had to be careful, though, because if you tore up the wrong places, you could damage the bones.

“So, what is it. Mummies or something?” she asked.

Her boobs were showing. Not the nipple, but Veronica couldn’t look away. They were too close. They were close enough to hear a heartbeat.

They wore glasses at the time, and the glasses kept sliding off their face because their nose was so sweaty and slippery. They grabbed them and was quick to catch them.

“No, they’re dinosaurs.”

“Oh cool! Have you seen Jurassic Park?”

She put a hand down on Veronica’s thigh. Veronica closed their eyes. The blood rushed up their leg and up their spine. It pumped through their veins, passed the Adams Apple, and then shot straight down like a rollercoaster to where their penis was.

They felt it rise. It was getting harder and harder. Rising up like the undead thing that it was.

“No, no, no.”

Elizabeth kissed Veronica’s cheek and then lifted their desk. She shoved it over and the desk thudded to the floor.

Everything happened in slow-motion. Another scene from a war movie. Veronica was watching the film with her father in the theatre, while her dad ate the popcorn from the bucket. He turned to them and smiled. They smiled too, but then they looked worried after seeing what happened next.

“I feel so bad for him.”

The boy’s science project floated in the air for a moment. Next thing, it was smashed on the floor. Dirt and bones everywhere. And the boy’s desk was toppled. His chair was toppled as he got up. He tried to hide his boner with his hands, but it was too late. The entire class was pointing and laughing. Their faces red-hot. Mouth’s open wide.

And Elizabeth was there in the corner, with her hands turned up. She shrugged at the boy. And the boy couldn't handle what was happening.

Veronica turned to their father in the theatre.

“I hope that she dies.”

“I do too, sweetie.”

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“Hey” a hand rested on Veronicas bare lower back. The touch shocked Veronica. They squirmed in the seat a bit and turned to face her.

Elizabeth was smiling again. “Sorry.....but, I managed to get something that we can both share.....and we will talk! I promise, after this we will talk.”

She opened her hand and showed Veronica a baggie of cocaine.

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Travis brought them to the back in a not so big area that was packed high with stacks of boxes upon boxes. Inside of the boxes were a varying degree of papers, loose wood, and

random tools. Piles and piles of junk. Passed over from owner to owner. Themes for different bars. An alligator head for a New Orleans themed bar. A bunch of Irish stuff, because, you know, Irish bars. “Drink now or Forever hold Your Glass”.

There was a brown leather couch with tears and cigarette holes. One could only imagine what went on in this room.

“Evening mi ladies. Evening....” Travis was sitting on a giant mock throne that could have been used in a low-budget fantasy tv show.

“Oh wow, look at what we got here” said Elizabeth.

“Do thous’t not bow to the king?” he had beer on his face.

Elizabeth got down on her knees and bowed down. Veronica had to follow-suit if they wanted to keep up the charade.

“Alright, now, I give thee permission to unveil the party favors.”

There was a large glass table in between them. A table that was surely here since the eighties.

He poured the coke out on the table. He grabbed something from his pocket. A bar-knife. He cut the lines with the lime scented knife.

Veronica hoped Elizabeth wasn’t allergic to lime juice.

“Wait!” Travis held out a hand. “Not before your king.”

Elizabeth whacked him in the chest.

“Your throne’s over there, dumb-ass. It’s time for the Queen” she leaned over and used a metal straw to snort the coke.

“Shit! You’re fucking fun, huh?” Travis snorted his line. “Alright, now, Dark and Moody. Your turn.”

Veronica shook their head. “It’s okay. I never have.”

“Come on! It’s fun. You like coffee?”

“It’s a little different” said Elizabeth.

“She’s a little different.”

“Maybe one.”

Veronica made the decision to snort the coke. They would have preferred to have been sober tonight.

The rush came on quick. And suddenly, Veronica was very alert. Like a cop at a shoot-out. They held her head high, almost giving themselves away. Too much paranoia could be confused for an emergency. So, they needed to keep it steady and not get drained.

They needed to keep things moving. Not play at this fuck-head's pace. But how? What way? What would work? What would get them out of there?

“You want to see a human skull?”

Their jaws dropped. She could picture the jaws attached to their skulls. Pictured them with ease, without the skin covering what they truly were inside.

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They were now sitting in Veronica's apartment with Gary Holden's skull in their hands. Had this actually been happening? Were these two now witnesses to her confession of murder?

Gary's skull was the first one that Veronica kept.

Elizabeth stared at it with her mouth half-open, stupefied as Travis rotated the skull in his hands.

“Wow, this thing looks really fucking real” the idiot spouted.

“That’s because it is.....could you please?” Veronica held out their hands for the skull back.

“You’re serious?” Travis took the skull and held it like Hamlet.

“As a heart attack” said Veronica.

“Ouch. Is that how homeboy died?”

Veronica slanted their eyes at the man. His teeth were crooked. He had pimples all over his face. His breath smelled like raw chicken left in a trash-can. The smell of death was far better than this guy’s breathe, even though the dead chicken was a smell, but that was something left behind. The fresh scent of death was preferable.

“Can I get you something to drink? Wine?” Veronica got up and stretched their arms over their head, feeling more comfortable now than they had at the bar.

“Wine will be great! Yes, V. Now you’re talking” Elizabeth puckered up.

They didn’t ask Travis if he wanted anything.

Veronica left the living room. They walked into the attached kitchen. They opened a drawer and grabbed one of the knives. She stared at their reflection in the knife and then put it back down. They went to the cabinets and grabbed a bottle of whatever red. The label had a cat on it. They put it on the table and then grabbed two wine glasses. They clinked. They stopped, took in a breath, and felt something wet on their ankle.

Goliath was below her, lying down on his side, eyes closed, licking their foot. They bent down with the wine glasses and stared at Goliath. They smiled and then stood back up. They walked into the living room. The skull was gone.

“Where’d you put it?”

“What?” Travis had his feet up on the coffee table. He had an arm around Elizabeth.

“Stop messing with me.”

He had this fat, annoying, expression on his face.

“What are you talking about?” he said in a mocking tone. A smirk on his face. His eyes hiding something. Elizabeth was in on it, too. She shook her head and giggled.

“I’ll take some wine” she said, snorting.

“Shut up” Travis pushed her knee playfully.

“Give me his FUCKING SKULL!”

The two of them were stunned, but continued to laugh. Suddenly, more kids came into the classroom. They were all faded and green. There was Jordy Marx, Steve Clifton, Mellissa Coveny, Debbie Jones, Nia Perkins, Lucinda Donovan, Pedro Esquivel, Maria Banks, and Gary Holden. The lot of them. They all began to laugh. They snorted and laughed and leaned over because the laughter was so hard to keep inside.

None of them mattered. And none of what they said mattered. They continued to chant as Veronica continued to scream. Gary was sitting in the corner, head missing, blood dripping down his body. Flies making space on his neck. Maggots eating away at the empty space on his neck where his head should have been. It was the too-dead dead stink filling the classroom. The school bell rang and then Veronica closed their eyes.

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When they opened them again, the noises stopped. The kids were gone. The apartment was a wreck. The glass entertainment center was shattered on the floor. The TV face-down. All of the glassware destroyed. Every piece of art that they collected was either cracked or shattered. The hummingbird that they bought at a truck-stop going south to Mexico one year. The dinner plates from Japan. The collection of animal figurines bought here and there at various thrift stores around the country.

Veronica picked one up. A chicken in an egg. At least that was still in tact.

Veronica looked into the hallway and saw Goliath licking someone else's body. It was Travis face-down in the hallway. Blood pooling beneath him. Goliath licked the man's face. His eyes were missing. The cabinet in the kitchen, the one that was loose, was broken and blood and hair were stuck to the corner edge like gum on the bottom of a desk.

The bottle of wine was smashed in half. They leaned over and picked up the bottle-neck with one hand. The shards on the bottle would have been sharp enough to act as a lethal weapon.

Veronica walked to the window in the living room. The curtains were gone. A cold breeze blew into the room. Rain began to trickle into the apartment. Veronica's skin pricked

up. They looked down. They heard a car alarm going off. A loud and annoying whine. The sound of something mourning.

Down at the bottom was Elizabeth dressed in her strawberry skirt, wrapped in purple curtains. She looked like she was sleeping on top of the car. A skull was held in both her hands. Her neck was snapped and her eyes were open. She might have had a grin on her face. No, she did. She absolutely did.

Suddenly Veronica's right ear began to hurt. There was a ringing in their head, and it grew louder. So loud that it was all they were able to hear. Like the biggest bomb went off in one of those war movies they watched with their dad.

"It's okay if it's war, right dad?" they asked.

Their father leaned over, a bunch of popcorn filled one hand. He smiled and gave Veronica a noogie. He filled his mouth with the popcorn and chewed.

Veronica turned in their seat and saw a bunch of skeletons sitting in the theatre with them. They turned back to the screen and kept their eyes peeled to the bright light that shined in the dark room.

End

7/31/23