

Super Catch

“Fuck.”

She rests her forehead against the window. The heat from her skin fogs it. She draws two eyes and a nose. She hesitates on the mouth.

*

No one tells you that when The Man of Steel swoops under the girl, his arms slice right through her under the acceleration of her falling body. No one tells you that the Hulk, after zenning himself back down to Bruce Banner, is fined for indecent exposure because his transformation shredded his clothes.

*

It was Saturday night. This is what they did as friends. Their first conversation at the bar had to do with literature. It started because she saw a scraggly, pock-speckled boy with frameless glasses walk by with a book tucked into the back of his pants.

“Check it out,” she said. “He keeps his book in the same place other people hold their guns.”

He laughed. “What do you think he’s reading?”

“I don’t know. But he can Moby suck my Dick.”

He laughed again.

This segued into a game where for the next seventeen minutes, they verbally defecated on every writer this side of the English language.

“Fuck-leberrry Finn.”

“The Harlot Letter.”

“The Adventures of Sherl-cock Holmes.”

*

Bruce stood up. His first thought was never about the clothes. The breeze felt too good on his hot skin, coated in sweat and grease, on his muscles, pulsing, popping, tingling spasmodically. Blood surged, then subsided. The burning fuselage smoked at his feet. Holy shit, he thought, remembering, assessing. But the people were safe, he pulled them out in time, threw them into the Hudson. A police car sidled up, and a husky officer with yesterday morning’s Boston Creme on her face approached him.

“You know,” she said, glancing down, “For the Incredible Hulk, I’ve seen better.”

*

Their second conversation at the bar had to do with God. It started because he saw a seven-foot man with a mohawk and denim vest walk by, the gold cross around his neck jingling against three other chains and a set of dog tags.

He pointed at it. “Check it out. The equivalent would be people two-thousand years from now wearing gold electric chairs around their necks.”

“I never thought about it like that. Do you think God exists?”

He shrugged. “I think so.”

“Me too.”

“In some form.”

“Yeah.”

*

They had met three years ago after she hit his car. When he asked if she was all right, his eyes wandered to the passenger seat where the box of tampons she bought had fallen out of the plastic bag.

Afterwards, he nicknamed her Pearl.

“Real mature,” she told him.

*

Masks are put on, made from spider webs or bat ears. Masks are taken off, a pair of glasses and a fedora, suspenders and a press-pass over the emblem. Others are inborn, gamma-globs of green that tear through your skin when a car runs over your dog.

She had tried to bring it up once. “I like you,” she said.

“I like you too.”

“But we’re just friends?”

“Is that okay?”

She put the mask on. “Sure.”

*

Bruce walked through Central Park and remembered something a friend once said to him. Maybe it wasn’t even a friend, no, Bruce thought, it was that homeless man who happened to find Bruce’s shirt after an incident -- a Guns N’ Roses tee from a concert he’d been to as a teenager.

Bruce remembered opening his eyes, beneath him the fifty-seventh street halal cart, smashed in like a kicked-around can of peas. The homeless man, silent at first, watched as Bruce pulled himself out of the rubble. He held up Bruce's shirt, cleared his throat.

"Velvet Revolver. Good fucking tour."

He had a wrinkled face and the faded, green outline of a tattoo on his forearm. Bruce couldn't tell what it was and wondered for a moment if maybe the man had served in Vietnam, if this was the name of his regiment, the name of an old lover, his mother maybe. It was too smudged to tell.

The homeless man threw the shirt at him. The sudden heaviness in Bruce's chest stopped the tingling in his fingertips and toes. He could think clearly again. "Thanks."

"So why here? Why this city?"

Bruce noticed the man had all his teeth. "What do you mean?"

"Doesn't make sense is all. You can't get angry."

Bruce thought, looking down at the tee hanging limp in his hand, left sleeve ripped off, collar torn down the middle. He shrugged. "It feels good."

*

She sipped the whiskey, ignoring the burn in her throat. He ruffled her hair.

"Having fun?"

She flipped her hair so the part was back on the left again, then punched him in the arm.

"Yes."

He motioned to the pack of cigarettes in his pocket.

"Yes."

*

It had only happened once. A few months ago. They talked about sandwiches in the cab.

Panel one, five speech bubbles.

“I always have one for breakfast,” he said. “Eggs and two slices of bacon.”

“Ketchup?”

“Of course.”

“Sliced bread?”

“A roll.”

Panel two, he paid the 11.85, plus two dollars in tip. Panel three, she led him through the front door, told him to make himself at home, one speech bubble. Split panel, she ran to the bathroom to gag on spearmint mouthwash while he sat on the couch tugging at a loose thread on his shirt. Panel five, her silhouette in the doorway. He signaled her to take a seat next to him. Panel six, she complied. Panels seven through eight o’clock the next morning, she’d got him, her lips and hands got him, her body, no speech bubbles.

*

The Graphic Designer paused over the third panel. In the foreground, he sketched Superman, his muscles bulging around the shoulders like coconuts, flexed against the blue-green sky. When the GD shaded in Superman’s hair, he smiled at the curlicue that always stayed in place regardless of flight speed. It’s because Superman, he liked to imagine, can afford super hairspray. In panel four, the GD drew a figure plummeting down the side of a building, her arms, legs, and hair turned up like a radish stem. He decided against giving her a speech bubble since screams of terror were self-explanatory. Plus his wrist was starting to hurt. Panel five,

Superman held the girl close against his chest. Despite the fall, she retained both her shoes and the pink headband in her hair.

The GD cracked his knuckles over his work, then massaged his right wrist. He grabbed the soda can and took a sip. It was piss-warm and metallic, bubbling its way down his throat. He waited a few seconds, then burped. Stale hotdog. The GD's eyes panned over the panels a final time. Superman never missed the falling girl. Even if he did. Even if her guts were already splattered over the pavement, Superman would simply fly around the world backwards until he reversed time, then catch the falling radish, keeping her juice intact.

Then again, maybe Superman should miss the girl. Just once. Just to show that the world is imperfect, that the people of Metropolis should still be careful. Just for fun, the GD drew a burning building, eight stories tall. People stood in the windows, black against a hot, orange backdrop. Panel four, the third firetruck rolled in. Panel five, the chief, with his sooty face and bushy, black mustache, ordered his team to aim water at the seventh story where the ceiling's just collapsed. Goddamn it, Superman, he thought. The GD smirked, knowing what the chief doesn't, that Superman was seven drinks in, forty blocks away. He was about to get lucky with a girl named Sasha who claimed she's part Mayan but was actually from Detroit. Eight people died in the fire.

*

Outside her ears buzzed with music, mingling with the passing cars and buses on wet pavement. He smacked the pack against his palm a few times, then gave her one.

“You look nice tonight.”

“Thanks.” She watched as he cupped his hands over his mouth. The light flickered over his face, the stubble on his cheeks and chin, over the eyebrows she wanted to trace with her finger down to his lips.

“I have the overwhelming need for some coleslaw,” she said.

He tapped the end of the cigarette. “I need something heartier. Sausage and sauerkraut come to mind.”

“You’re not even German.”

“That’s like saying you have to be Italian to enjoy pizza.”

“True.”

She exhaled, then threw her cigarette into the street. The breeze felt good on her hot skin, coated in lotion and sweat, in her lungs, pulsing, popping, tingling with the nicotine. The burning cigarette smoked at her feet. Holy shit, she thought, remembering, assessing. But they were safe, he pulled out in time.

He ashed the cigarette.

“Hey,” she said. “I got another one. *“The Importance of Being Bratwurst.”*”

He laughed. “Shut the fuck up.”

*

Bruce walked down West Fourth, past the rows of shops advertising mesh underwear, when it started to rain. He pulled up the collar on his jacket and stepped under the nearest awning. A mannequin wearing green fishnets stared at him through the dirty glass. He felt the blood surge, but it was different.

*

Each sip replayed a moment. Friends, she reminded herself, and made a joke about the rifle-shaped tequila bottle behind the counter.

She pointed. “Gives the word ‘shot’ a whole new meaning.”

“Say hello to my little friend,” he replied.

“It’s not a Tommy gun, dumb-ass.”

He ran to the bathroom, she ran a hand through her hair. She tried to focus on the glass in front of her and the soggy napkin it sat on. She pulled at it, rolling pieces between her thumb and forefinger into little balls, then scattering them onto the counter. She noticed the bartender was missing a button on his flannel. She noticed there was an odd number of ice cubes in her drink, noticed that the Christmas lights strung above the bar contained no yellows. She noticed that some of the stools were higher than others and that the candles on the tables were fake. The girl three seats down had purple hair. She giggled, then planted a kiss on the boy next to her. The lighting was too dim to tell if his hair was blonde or brown.

*

“Listen,” she said after he got back. “Not to freak you out or anything. But I think I’m magical.”

He threw his head back, draining the last of the whiskey. “Magical as in, you can make shit disappear?”

“No. Okay, so last Monday. I had an hour before I had to leave for work and I was, you know, going at it.”

“Okay.”

“Right, and I was thinking about you. But then as soon as I do, I hear my fucking phone go off, and lo and behold, you texted me.”

He straightened himself on the stool. “That’s not that weird.”

“Friday night.”

“That’s sad.”

“Friday night, it wasn’t even a quick thing, you know? It was probably going on twenty minutes or something.”

“Also sad.”

“My point is, I thought of you, maybe three percent of that time. My phone went off again.”

“Maybe this just means whenever anyone texts you, there’s a good chance you’re busy.”

“Maybe.” She ran a finger along the edge of the coaster. “Jesus, I’m drunk.”

“I can tell.”

She paused. “I think God exists.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And I think He wants us to be happy.”

“And what do we want?”

She shrugged. “What feels good, I guess.”

“Maybe. So what do you think? One more?”

She swirled the rusty liquid around in her glass. “Sure.”

He signaled the bartender, brushing his hand against her thigh. “There you go. Make it disappear.”

She pulled the mask off. “I love you.”

*

Bruce waited for his coffee and wondered about love. It was morning.

The Indian woman at the counter hailed him over. She had dark skin, light eyes, and thin, careful eyebrows. “Large and black,” he told her. “No sugar.”

“Anything else?”

Bruce shook his head. She said the order back to him, and Bruce appreciated the fact that he could understand her. Most of the time he would have to repeat the whole order, never entirely sure which part the cashier hadn’t understood.

Maybe love was easier than people thought, Bruce thought. Maybe this was love. Maybe he was in love with this girl who smelled like hot eggs and toasted bread, the girl who knew how he took his coffee.

Bruce grabbed the cup from her and brought it to his lips. The lid wasn’t on properly, and the large, black coffee spilled onto his shirt, burning from the outside in. Bruce burned from the inside out, smashed the counter, and wondered if love wasn’t enough.

*

He held her outside on the curb, but she knew it was because he was drunk. She took in the smell of the cigarette on his shirt, knowing she’d fallen too hard, too fast. His arms right now, they hurt, sliced right through her.

“You’re killing me.”

He didn’t say anything. She knew if he let go, she’d stumble onto the street.

*

Bruce surveyed his bedroom, staring at the clothes piled on the carpet. It was night.

Some were dirty or stained, most were ripped. He didn't know why he salvaged them, always after the fact, after the police were done with their questions, after the reporters slinked off to edit his green ass in time for the six o'clock news. Bruce needed to sift through the clothes, figure out which ones to throw out, when he thought about the mannequin, its plastic breasts and slender legs. He thought about the coffee.

Bruce picked up one of the tattered shirts, pulled his shorts off, and sat.

*

He walks her to the cab. Goodnight Pearl, he says, then closes the door. "Fuck." She rests her forehead against the window. The heat from her skin fogs it. She draws two eyes and a nose and a down-turned mouth, wonders if love wasn't enough.