

## Milk Man

“Stand here for just a minute, I want to get your picture.” The doctor backed away.

“Before and after. You’re going to look gorgeous. Just gorgeous.”

Sheila picked at her nails, unsmiling; the furrows of her forehead soft but deep, the creases between her nose and chin angling down with her mouth.

“Open your eyes for Dr. Martin now, honey.”

“My eyes are open, Doctor.”

Sheila had a certain pride in her wrinkles, partly due to the money saved by delaying this process for so many years, and partly because she had never derived her greatest strength from her looks. Wrinkles were a sign of experience and maturity, but she was ready to let them go for Murray’s sake.

“Just a little further. That’s right. And one more.” Dr. Martin moved in and out, coming in for a close-up of the furrows over her lips. He grimaced and grunted.

“Do you really need to do that?” she asked. She meant snivel, but he misunderstood.

“Oh this will be your memento. You don’t want to lose the face entirely, do you, in case you ever want it back?”

He laughed, picked up a pen and scribbled into his notebook. Dr. Martin himself was about one-hundred and twenty years old. His face was designed to look exactly that of a young Eminem, which dated him. But he was bursting with pheromones, and Re-Newed sexual energy. His nurses and assistants doted on him, trotting in and out, delivering coffee, messages, tools, pinching each other’s buttocks on the way by.

“That’s enough,” he said, and set the camera down. He turned, jumped up and hung for a moment by his arms from the exercise bar clamped over the doorway. “All that extra skin,” he smiled, chatting as he performed a chin up and dropped back to the floor. “That skin is just going to melt off you.”

Sheila shook her practical head of gray hair. Her lipstick was streaking up the fissures under her nose. “This really seems so unnecessary,” she said, and looked at the tiles on the floor. The tiles were the same color and pattern as tiles in a restaurant where she had once waited tables. “I’ve gotten along all these years with this old thing.”

“But Mr. Webber is right, and you’re due for a change, don’t you think?” Dr. Martin lifted up an image. “And this is it. This is what we’re after. Isn’t it gorgeous? What a face.”

It was early Christina Aguilera, Jewel, and Hanson, a youth group of the late 1990’s, morphed into one face. Vamp, creativity and naughty athleticism. At the time, no one else had a face like it. Sheila felt her heart skip a beat. “I like it,” she whispered, “but don’t you think it’s too unusual?”

“Well, we’ve already got a few hundred thousand Cher’s walking around. I can give you a Courtney Love if you want!” he laughed. “But this is you,” he smiled. “You’re the first.”

Sheila sighed. It did seem like a necessity. And she tried to feel grateful. Anti-aging genetic therapy and photongraphy certainly weren’t available to everyone. And wasn’t it an advantage on the job market, to have eighty years experience in business!

Though of course, Sheila wouldn’t need to work, she could afford to retire. And in behalf of the aging, hungry and homeless workers, in honor of all those people who had given their eyes so she could have what she had, she was grateful. Anyway, she was doing this mostly for Murray. She thought, we might finally take a vacation and schedule in a baby. Until recently, they’d been so busy.

Already, Sheila was feeling the effects of the Re-Newal system, which she been taking for the past six months. She’d lost 45lbs and gained significant muscle. Her libido was increasing on the combination hormone/gene therapy: the only side effect was excess body hair, which wasn’t really a problem. She just had the hairs removed.

The doctor stood behind her, felt her arm, shoulder, brushed her cheek with one finger, and leaned against her side for balance as he examined the shape of her face. Women of

her class were almost frighteningly exciting to Dr. Martin. It was becoming more difficult to pick them out of a crowd. There was a hidden mystery, a real depth there.

“I find something about you fascinating,” he said and leaned closer. “Have you ever been to Europe?”

“How often will I need a touch-up?” she leaned away unsure if she was expected to respond to his prying.

Dr. Martin clucked. “It all depends on gravity,” he said, “and your own personal taste, but probably every ten years, if you don’t mind the discomfort. Would you want a scalp replacement just now?” he asked. “I’m not saying you need to. Many people like gray hair.”

“Well you know the saying,” she whispered, “One tissue at a time.”

Privately, Sheila hoped the next tissues would belong to Murray, the sweaty ape. But he was such an iconoclast. He’d never found a face good enough to call his own, and he controlled enough money now that face hardly mattered. Murray was waiting for her in the reception area.

“You might have a hard time getting used to the new me,” she warned him.

“How different could you seem, Sheil?” he chuckled. “After all, it’s still you.” Murray patted her back, and glancing at framed antique “People” magazine covers Dr. Martin kept hanging on the walls in his office. Murray sucked at a carton of milk, forceps bulging. Sheila grimaced at thoughts of his sexual energy.

“What are you looking at?” he asked, catching her glance. “Growth hormones have never bothered me. Don’t you want to be healthy like me?” He scratched at her arm, grunting.

“Look at these nails. This stuff is great for skin, nails, hair, bones, anything like that.”

“Just because a little is good doesn’t mean a lot is better, Mur.”

“Don’t call me that, O.K. Sheila, sweetheart?”

The hormones, added to the milk after the Riots of ‘21, had recently priced milk out of reach of the average consumer. Many families -- and there was an article about this online-- were spending more than half their monthly salaries on milk. Milk, like paper,

had become a luxury, a status purchase, and Sheila had mixed feelings about drinking it in public.

Murray brushed her hand off his arm. “The doctor told me,” Sheila whispered, “Now that we’re taking DNA in the swish, we should avoid the dairy.” She looked at the carton.

“Nothing bothers me,” he said. He pawed her thigh with a fiddly, nervous hand, arched his thick white brow, and stared out the window. He turned back and looked again at Sheila’s leg, a critical twitch jingling on the corner of his cheek.

Sheila adjusted her skirt.

The nurse, a hunched black man with creases across his cheeks, came out. “Nurses aren’t paid as well as doctors,” Murray sighed with pity, “Poor guy,” and Sheila let the nurse lead her into a blue-gray treatment room.

“Put on this tunic and take a seat,” the nurse said, his wedding band flashing as he handed her a folded piece of cloth. “Dr. Rook will be right in.”

Sheila stopped him.

“Before you leave,” she let her curiosity get the better of her, “If you don’t mind my asking...you’re married?”

The old man looked at her and smiled.

“You bet your boots I am,” he said laughing, “Course she’s been dead about twenty years now, but I can’t help that. I’m still married.”

Sheila looked into his old brown eyes. “Yes,” she said, “thank you,” and he left.

She undressed, looking into the antique stainless steel paper-towel dispenser over the sink, smoothing her face back with her arm, trying to imagine how it would look. She put on the tunic, played with the ties. She might go back to school again, or become a teacher this time. Or a figure-skater. She wasn’t sure.

“Well, “Dr. Rook entered the room, enthusiastically chattering. “Aren’t you excited?” He had a long thing runner’s body, with a stylishly and permanently bashful forehead

suspending toothy grin from the outside edges of his eyebrows. Sheila smiled for him. Dr. Rook grabbed her hands, maybe passionately, or maybe it was only his look.

“We’ve got creams, we can treat these, too!” His voice was thin. “You’re not going to want to have old hands leaning against your new face!”

The nurse came back wearing a surgical facemask and holding a tray with two tiny caplets in a cup. “This is optional,” he said, “Take it or don’t,” he said. “It don’t matter to me.” She hesitated, and the old man turned his face side-to-side, annoyed to be repeating himself. “You think it won’t hurt to lose that face of yours?”

“That’s a good pill,” Dr. Rook said. “Now what do you think Sheila will do when she heals up, hmmm?” he asked and pinched her cheek. “Hmmm? hmmm? You are going to be gorgeous.”

Sheila took the pills and settled back in the adjustable chair. Tiles on the floor and walls had started to swim.

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When she woke, her face was raw, oozing pink, stripped of pigment. She looked skinned, slightly swollen and unnatural, like a cartoon character. Dilbert.

An old black wrinkled worker covered her face with ointment and layers of gauze.

“Don’t smile, honey, you’ll loosen the seal,” he said, and he held her hand for a minute. “I’ll go get Mr. Webber.”

Over the next several days, scabs formed and peeled in grotesque yellow-orange swaths. She sat in the rocking chair, next to Murray who was drinking vitamin fortified beer and watching “Oh My God” reruns.

“Ha!” he laughed. “It’s classic!”

Her face was over-exposed, like a tooth that lost a filling, and the air hurt. She tried and failed to eat genetically engineered mock-tuna, worrying that the new face might be lifting off the old one. Her face itched.

“They didn’t say it would itch.”

Murray also had a mock-tuna sandwich, with a glass of milk, hardly even chewing, one skeptical eyebrow hooked high moving up and only slightly down on his forehead.

“You know, I just wonder who the hell Dr. Watzizname thinks we are?” he asked. Sheila practiced isometric exercises in her chair. “It’s not what I expected,” he said. He frowned. “It’s not you.”

Sheila still felt hungry. “Who is it?”

“Sheila,” he said. “Is that a real question, or is that the face?”

“Dr. Webber says we’re not supposed to be eating so much of this stuff,” she said.

“Oh, c’mon Sheil,” he said, laughing. “Food is food, for Christ’s sake. What’s it gonna do? Turn you into a....?”

“An animal?” she asked. This was listed as a rarely documented side effect.

Murray’s his hairy knuckles collected crumbs as he rolled soggy tuna salad around in his mouth.

“And all I’m saying, in all honesty,” he paused to swallow, “is that once the swelling goes down and scabs are gone, under all that, you’re you.” Murray slugged down the last of his milk. “You’re just don’t look like you. And how long do you think before that forehead gets creased again? Like that. Do you have to do that?” he asked. “That expression is what got you into trouble in the first place.”

The guest on the Holy Mary guest podcast was an eighty year-old man having an affair with his wife’s twenty-year-old adopted daughter. Murray held out the empty glass to Sheila.

“You don’t care what happens, Murray,” she said. “I’m telling you I need vegetables. This is too much protein, Murray.”

“Go to the store, then.”

“I don’t want to go to the grocery store. I feel weird,” she said. She took the glass, re-filled it, and emptied it into her mouth. She wanted something, but wasn’t quite sure what. She poured herself another glass, and she couldn’t remember if she’d drunk a glass or just imagined it? She didn’t feel full.

“And I’m not sure, to tell you the truth, Sheila,” Murray’s voice was raspy. “Not that I don’t love you, I do. But look at me.” Their eyes met, briefly. They both needed to visit a hair salon. They had an unusual amount of hair between them.

“I’m not like you,” he said, looking away. “Not counting the gut, which I could get rid of if I wanted to, but I’ve matured, moved on to new interests. Maybe we have a biological difference.”

Murray’s cheeks dipped down (sincere apology) as his eyes corkscrewed up (something funny) at the corners. “I have to admit, I thought you’d seem like a whole new woman. But you don’t. You are exactly the same as you have ever been.”

She put down her milk.

“My face itches,” she said.

“It looks like it must,” he said. “God.”

Sheila slept for three days while Murray was deciding, out loud, on a vacation. . He was retired, these were golden years, and he was taking them. She could take her time healing and he would do whatever. Or not.

Murray pattered around, packing camera bag, camping gear, cigarette roller, hair drying fluid, bottle suction, cologne, collar shirts, laxatives, supplements. She woke up and watched as he packed his tennis gear. He tried on a swim suit. “Not bad for my age, huh, Sheila?”

Her face felt tight around her eyes. The weather was getting hotter. She tossed her bra onto the couch, her sweater onto the back of the kitchen chair, her stockings on the floor. She crouched, smoothing down the hair on her arms and legs. She crawled across the floor, crept up between Murray’s legs.

“It’s all those hormones,” he said, and pushed her away. “Sorry, Sheil, I didn’t mean to be so rough. I need to cut my nails.” Sheila wasn’t hurt.

She went to the mirror, playing a little game with her cleavage.

“Are you O.K., Sheila?” he said. “You’re not blinking. You really ought to blink.”

Sheila watched out the window as birds pecked in the feeder. “You go on, Murray,” she said. “It’s alright.”

“Listen,” Murray looked around for another glass of milk. “You might as well take advantage of this time to rest while I explore what’s up with me.” Sheila’s thinning gray hair felt unusually soft, and she pinned it up, standing in front of their picture window. She could see a neighbor from across the street mowing his lawn.

“You know what I mean, Sheila, when I say I love you. I just need some time alone.”

Murray waited for her to argue. But she didn’t. “No,” he said anyway. “That’s it. Final.”

Sheila went into the kitchen, kicking a pencil along the floor. She opened a can of tuna.

“And ah, ha, Sheila, what’s that supposed to mean, huh?” Murray slammed a door or two as he finished packing, loading the car. Sheila followed him in and out like a shadow.

“Make up your damn mind, will you?” he finally shouted. “Are you in or out?” She stepped back into the house and closed the door.

“Bye, Sheila.” Murray’s hormones were already dropping, and he directed the aero-car West, toward Vegas. Low on milk. He drank too much milk anyway.

“Bye-bye, Murray,” she waved out the window.

Sheila spent the next five days on the couch, napping on and off, snacking, playing with the magnets on the refrigerator, watching the gold fish.

The doorbell rang. She opened it.

“Mrs. Webber? Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Webber?”

“Yes, Wilbur.” It was her neighbor. He was a farmer who raised apples, and who hadn’t been married yet though he looked nearly thirty. Most likely, she thought, he couldn’t afford it.



“I was, just, thinking you might have a cup of milk I could borrow. I’m in the middle of making an apple pie, and realized. I’m out of milk.” He had a sweet smile. “If you have a cup you might spare,” he said.

“You put milk in apple pie?” she asked with a giggle and he blushed.

“Well just on the crust, to make it crispy, you know? But I guess I don’t really need it that bad.” He looked at her feet and then up to her hair. Wilbur had big old farmer’s eyes, long thin arms, a warm innocent fragrance.

“That’s all right,” purred Sheila. She laughed. “Oh my, look at me, you’ve caught me!” Her nighty barely covered the generous swoop of her bosom. “But I’m comfortable, and we’re old friends, aren’t we Wilbur? So don’t you mind me slopping around the house.” She invited him in. “Tea?”

Wilbur parked himself awkwardly at the kitchen table. Sheila, making the tea, brushed against him accidentally -- catching, stretching the fabric, releasing herself -- as she moved back and forth from the refrigerator, stove, sink, counter. She circled the table, batted at salt and pepper shakers, jumped when the kettle whistled, forgot the tea, and poured three cups of milk.

She leaned down to lick at one of them and smiled her shiny new face at him. “I’ve always been such a lazy bones.” She licked at her milk mustache. “If you’re not in a great big hurry,” she said, “we could transfer ourselves to the couch, and have a nice visit?”

Murray got back fourteen days later smelling like cigarettes, beer, and cheese crackers, but Sheila was gone, her nighty rumpled on the couch, empty cans of tuna fish littering the counter, all the glasses in the house in the sink with a dried scum of milk on the bottoms. Murray looked for a note. He made phone calls. He stood out in the yard, calling, “Sheila!”

A cat wrapped around his legs, and Murray scootched down to scratch it between the ears. He stared out across the green of his neighbor’s lawn. “Damn,” said Murray. He had forgotten the milk. He wrinkled his forehead, straightened up and called her name again.

