

Viva Bush

When summer came, I wore my black YMCA day-camp hoodie almost every day. Most campers at the Stonestown Y did. Some wore the crewneck, but everyone knew those were the lame kids.

Our neighborhood was in the Outer Sunset, where the sun was rare and the chilly gray overcast from the Pacific smelled like eucalyptus trees. You drove east on Sloat from Ocean Beach, took a left on West Portal and went up that bustling mom-and-pop thoroughfare all the way to Ulloa until you saw an old storefront with a sign that read: The Submarine Center.

This place was so good it was stupid. The guys behind the counter wore blue aprons and had mustaches and hairy forearms. They'd start with your sourdough or your French roll, add meat and cheese and slide it in the oven. It came out on a flat metal spatula and smelled like another place. Somewhere with citrus trees and parsley and overripe aftershave and grass that looked like skinny people dancing under the moon. Next the lettuce and tomatoes and pepperoncini if you were into that. Last came a drizzle of Special Sauce before they sliced it in half with a crunch. Later I'd realize the Special Sauce was just Italian dressing.

Every year, this kid named Vadim was at camp. Monday through Friday, eight to five. Blue sweatpants, cross-trainers with two Velcro straps, and a white polo under his black Y-camp crewneck.

He was, well, you know. I'm older now and say developmentally disabled. Back then, and this was in the nineties, adults would say he's special. But kids, mean boys mostly, would call him a fucking retard, often to his face.

I avoided him every chance I got. His eyes would gleam when they caught mine like he wanted to tell me a secret joke, and I'd feel so uncomfortable I couldn't help but look away.

He was a nasty one. Would pick his nose, pull these pale boogers out—everyone on the blacktop horrified and fascinated—and roll them along his palm, tapering them into stringy dowel shapes. He'd crack a huge slobbery grin and wait for someone to sit down close by so he could sidle up and wipe it right on them.

Once, he got this girl so bad the booger clung to the peach fuzz on her cheek and she couldn't get it off. She was just shrieking, trying to flick it off while he laughed and laughed. We all laughed. It's weird, he had a really infectious laugh now that I remember it—bubbly and joyful and throaty. Vadim's hair was always perfectly combed. Thick, black, beautiful; he parted it cleanly at the side.

Vadim didn't skimp on talking smack either. Like if someone had a shitty lunch he'd say, "you have *so much bad* samwich." Maybe when everyone was playing kickball, you were the kid who couldn't get it out of the infield. Vadim would be there with, "you *so much bad* at ball."

It just stayed with me. *So Much Bad*. As I got older, fell instantly in love with every woman I met, perpetually obsessed and vexed at how I could, but never would, get properly laid, *So Much Bad* became a retrospective slogan. Like, generally speaking, I was always *So Much Bad* at getting girls. Maybe that's the problem though. Not the girls, but the switch. How do you move from the memory of a disabled boy named Vadim to a boring-ass about-a-girl story? You do it quick. Quick as a kid's fingers roll a booger into a dowel.

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"I like a tight fit," Nicolette said. Dishes clattered, a dozen voices blended into a drone. The deli had been a brick fish-hatchery back in the day. Now the walls were whitewashed and decorated with sleek aluminum light fixtures and vintage prints—S. Pellegrino, Martini & Rossi, Vermouth Bianco.

This is how my brain ran through hearing this: What? *What?* Is that a saying? Tight fit. Tight *fit*. Who the fuck *likes* tight fits? Trust me, the first thing I thought was the dirty thing but then I was like, no. Girls don't just tell you that. And by *you*, I mean *me*. Sure, girls will tell a tall skinny dude with tawny skin and a pokey Adam's apple or any guy named Giancarlo all about their opinions on fits and how tight or un-tight they like them. I was neither of those.

Of course, she didn't just tell me. Remember how I said I was *So Much Bad* at getting girls? So, we had just walked in and were giving our orders to this young guy at the counter with a black high-and-tight and a primped goatee. Nicolette was bending over to look at the cold case with all the cold salads and meats and cheeses and dude was just

zero-shame scoping her tits through the glass. I asked him for a milkshake and he wasn't much for the distraction.

"This is a deli," he muttered, still looking through the case.

"Can't you just blend milk and that gelato stuff?"

Then the guy did look at me, smushed his face up like he smelled something rank. He turned back to Nicolette to take her order.

We sat at a small round metal table with our sandwiches. Metal table. Sandwiches. Right then those were the only two things in my mind. In the world. Couldn't think of anything to say. Felt like at least maybe nine minutes. I took a bite and remembered the Submarine Center. This place was no Submarine Center. Fumbling for whatever, I asked her where she was from.

"Wheatland."

"Oh yeah, up north. Hot right?"

That got a shrug.

The counter-guy sauntered over and shoved a ceramic coffee mug in my face. It was filled to the top with pink froth.

"Sorry man, I forgot your gelato-milk," he said, and smiled at Nicolette like, *who's this lame-o you're sitting with?* But he wasn't any kind of Giancarlo. She didn't smile back and he gave her a look before slinking away. This girl *never* smiled. Except for the one time I called her Nicky and she flashed her teeth and they looked like mismatched bones, white as fuck but a little feral. She told me if I ever called her Nicky again, she'd do some work on my anatomy to make Nicky an appropriate name for me.

I took a long, like pretty self-indulgent drink, wiped pink from my lips and went full So Much Bad. I said: "Mmmm, this milkshake is *mad yummy*." My whole skin cringed as I said it, as if it didn't want to be a part of our body anymore.

Nicolette's eyes had this look like a stray cat, wondering if I was prey, or one of those tomcats who knew where the goodies were, or just boring enough to take a nap next to. I wasn't even halfway done when she grabbed a to-go box and mashed her fries and club sandwich down in the Styrofoam. It sounded wet, like if you happened through a rainy parking lot in some running shoes before you went into Safeway, and it was a lot of

squish, squish, squish all up and down the aisles looking for aluminum foil and plastic straws, you know what I mean?

“Squishing it down tight, huh?” I asked. Nicolette slid the Styrofoam latch in before this sexy up-down-frown appraisal and then, almost like whatever, she goes, “I like a tight fit.”

Like I said, I thought naughty first. Dismissed it right away. Maybe it came from a TV show or a movie. Maybe she only wore her clothes fitted, cozy on the skin like easy, easy. Maybe close-knit friendships were everything to her.

Her eyes had this sideways tilt too, gray-blue like marbles you found buried by the creek. They expected something smooth, something clever. Something to turn it around on her but not be too overt about what kind of fit *I* could bring to the table. Her table, I guess.

But I was So Much Bad at coming up with sly lines about tight fits. The idea of a tight fit, its catchphrase sound—it was as if I’d dreamed up the brand name for a low-end luggage company years and years ago and forgotten and now there was this mystifying clue that didn’t remind me so much as confuse me. I thought of saying, “You know, tight fits can make you itchy.” Then I figured itchy wasn’t sexy. All I could manage was a half-hearted, “Really?”

Nicolette didn’t say anything as she took the to-go box and left the restaurant.

I sat with the check. \$19.97. Did she just ditch me? 1997. That was the year I’d first asked a girl out. Sixth grade. Told her to meet me on Super Bowl Sunday at the movie theater to see *Titanic*. *Titanic*. *Titanic*? Thought it would be romantic, how’s that weird? Girls loved Leonardo DiCaprio. They wondered if he was bisexual. That song on the radio. And when you went out, you went out to the movies. I mean, that’s what happened *in* movies.

That girl didn’t come, though. I watched the whole movie by myself, skateboard propped in the next seat over to save her place. It was pretty good, whatever. \$19.97. All I had was a twenty. And I needed money for the night ahead. What was I going to do, tip the waitress three cents? I stood up, played at finishing my water. Nobody was watching so I slipped out the door.

Outside, the baby-girl of my dreams waited, lobbing light and sex-visions into my heart. Nicolette—not Nicky ever don't even fucking think it—wore a washed-out sundress like a pin-up girl, tits a' plenty. The balmy valley wind flipped her hair over her head and around and under the faded spaghetti straps. Like grass flattened by the sun. Like grass that got swollen, ready to fuck under a half-ready moon.

“What happened to you?” the grass moon asked.

“Just paying,” I said.

We cut through slow cars. I rushed. She balanced the to-go box all lah-dee-dah about it. I looked back just as the door of the deli slammed open. The crew-cut-having, wanna-be Giancarlo who hated Gelato shakes spotted me right away.

“*Hey!* Hey fucker! Yes, *you*, you Gelato faggot. Get the fuck over here!”

This guy pointed at me and wiggled his finger. You have to give him credit for the sack this whole performance took. Either way, I was a runner not a fighter.

Nicolette was already up the block. She kept the to-go box in one hand, up high like a waitress. Even as I sprinted I kept my eyes fixed on her. Maybe the old sundress would flip up enough to show the curve of purple or teal or pink or lacy-black panties.

We went left at the first intersection then crossed the street, cutting into an alley that split like a T at a row of rusting, abandoned cars. Nicolette stopped when she reached the shade of a drooping oak tree, and set the to-go box down on a patch of gravel. Her cheeks were blotchy. Her lungs wheezed as she caught her breath. But it was all graceful.

I looked back at the alley entrance. Fake-Giancarlo hadn't followed.

“Were we dining and dashing the whole time?” she asked.

“You didn't like the surprise?”

Still no smile.

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Now Vadim, well, the camp counselors protected him. They always sat with him on the bus and usually he would follow them around on the playground, or if we went to the zoo he'd hold hands or whatever. They were tall college kids on summer break getting paid and trying to get laid with each other, so there were times when they didn't pay attention. One time a couple older kids, probably fourteen, came around on Vadim when the counselors weren't looking.

So, I was just peeing. Nothing special. And the door banged open and they came in hauling Vadim between them like a criminal. One kid had a shaved head and the other was all white beanie about it. Both of them wore the black YMCA hoodies.

Vadim squealed, still had that slobbery grin on his face as he tried to wrestle away from them. Being picked on cracked him up a little, I guess. Behind those sharp black eyes there was some endpoint he knew about and it was all going to be fine. Or no, nothing was fine right then at all. Everything was fine no matter what happened because no one could ever really know what was in his head except him and the people he might clue in if they maybe talked to him and asked him how he was doing instead of asking him why he looked or talked that way or did he eat dogshit for breakfast.

The shaved-head kid held him in front of the door while the beanie kid went in the stall. I zipped up and tried to leave but the shaved-head kid looked at me like I was about to be next if I didn't just chill.

"Don't even think about leaving. And, if you tell anyone," he said. "I'll fuck you up."

I edged back toward the sink. White beanie was behind the stall. Compact forced farts were chirping out every minute or so and he'd groan after each one. The stall door slammed open and he leaned out to say, "Bring him in, bring him in!"

They hauled him into the stall and tried to force him to the toilet. I tell you what, Vadim just sat his thick butt down and kept his weight low and they couldn't move him. They each grabbed an arm and tried to pull but the kid was solid. Fucking dense. White beanie let go with a "Fuck!" and rebounded to kick him. Vadim laughed, tongue clacking. Shaved-head turned back to me.

"Come help us!"

I wasn't brave enough to try and stop them, but I figured if they couldn't make Vadim eat shit, they couldn't make me help them make him eat shit.

"Fuck you, I'm not doing that," I said, voice so weak the fuck sounded like a loose, nervous-anus sound.

"Get the fuck over here!" White beanie was obviously the leader, and I couldn't meet his eyes. But I just stayed at the sink.

White beanie disappeared, and I heard a plunging sound, and a splash. Another. Water splattered on the tile floor and a small brown shit, maybe like the size of your pointer finger, helicoptered in the air and hit Vadim right on his cheek. He flinched and it bounced off. Fucking crazy it just floated along the water on the floor, almost hydroplaning. It slowed between Vadim's Velcro-strap shoes. Vadim lost it. All I could hear were his laughs. I think shaved-head muttered "Fuck this" as he turned to leave. Mostly, I heard Vadim's manic chuckling bounce off every tile in the bathroom.

"Where are you going?" White beanie yelled after him.

But shaved-head was already gone.

Incensed, white beanie rushed out of the stall and gave me a quick *don't be talking* look before slamming the bathroom door open and disappearing.

I was frozen against the sink. Snot and blood hung out of Vadim's nose and he was soaked with toilet water. He looked at me, looked at the tiny poop, and the laughs got even mucus-ier. I pushed the bathroom door open just like the bullies and slunk away.

#

Nicolette lived in a cream-colored Victorian house with a wide shady porch. A dank tree stump made a mouth in the middle of the front yard. Blue and red signs with white letters stuck out of the yellowed grass. They all said the same thing: "Bush | Cheney '04." There were six of them.

Nicolette handed me the to-go box so she could dig a key out from between her breasts. I hadn't seen that before, except on TV. I mean, it was impressive. Not like I stashed anything under my sack (that's how dudes relate by the way). Another sign covered the inside of the front window. It was white with tall blue letters that read: "VIVA BUSH." I read it again to be sure.

"*Viva Bush?*" I asked.

I wasn't very political back then. Or ever. But, you know. You'd hear things. Reinstating the draft to fight the invisible terror. A menace with a beard. I was scared of being signed up, shipped out to the cradle of civilization and all its burning deserts, only to be fragged in my sleep with a sock full of soap bars.

“My roommates,” she explained, as she opened the door. “Or the guy who’s on the lease. He kind of acts like he owns it. The other one works the graveyard at Safeway. And there’s this German guy who lives in the side house.”

The living room was plain: speckled carpet, grass-colored couches with the arms worn white, nothing on the walls. The furniture circled around a flatscreen TV.

“All guys?”

“Yep, all guys,” she said. A treat in her eyes. Some memory of an idiot-smile.

She asked me if I wanted a beer, and I said sure. A grinning cardboard cutout stood in front of the kitchen counter like a Wal-Mart greeter. It was the President. He wore a black suit, a red tie, and a smile like he knew you, and knew where you masturbated, too. Had to be a joke. Had to. Nobody had non-tit life-sized cardboard cutouts, right? Nicolette pulled two cans from the fridge, popped both and handed one to me.

“The fuck is this?” I pointed, but didn’t need to.

“I told you, the lease guy.” She shook her head. “It’s funny though, he never talks to me about politics. Likes his signs, though.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Two months.”

“Do you miss Wheatland?”

“Nope. He’s actually *really* into signs.” She pointed to a piece of copy paper on the refrigerator door. The candy cane magnet that held it in place didn’t remind me much of Christmas.

“What is it?” I asked.

She took a gulp to answer. The list, well, it looked like an office dude typed it up the other day:

Since Spring 2003 Occupation of Iraq by American-Led Coalition Forces

45 schools rebuilt in capital city of Baghdad

600,000 liters of water provided weekly to Iraqi citizens

15 hospitals repaired, upgraded and modernized

Over 500 ambulances and emergency response vehicles repaired and deployed

15 sq. miles of electrical grid repaired, providing power for over 300,000 civilians

310 police vehicles repaired and deployed

130 buildings reconstructed

I didn't recognize the URL printed at the top of the paper.

"Guess the burny corpses and decapitated kids are on a different list?" I asked.

I was So Much Bad at dead-kid jokes. Nicolette pursed her lips and took another drink. Not even close to a smile.

#

Transformation was something I couldn't understand. Something I couldn't make happen. For myself, for anything I can remember. You'd like to go from lame to suave, from rough-elbow asshole to prim, smell-good man who wore slacks and a blazer just because. I couldn't dream up a store with a blazer, and suave was for the Giancarlos of the world.

Nicolette had transformation down to a glimmery silver tank top. Threw it on, tied her hair up in a bun, and I didn't have a thought except the curve of her pale neck; it slowed into the tops of her breasts, or my eyes did as I followed it, a sensuous shadow that drove me crazy. My goal was to keep my eyes up and play it off like whatever.

She called some friends. They came and went and came back. Some of mine came by too, and they glommed on for longer.

We drank most of the beers in the fridge, but someone brought backup with a couple liters of White Wolf. This kid grabbed a thickset white girl's ass and got popped in the nose, blood dribbling over lips and mad-cackle teeth. In another room, I found a couple with matching hi-top Converse, black pair, green pair, dogging it out over a television set like *whoa Billy* and it was slappy. They kept their t-shirts on.

Night snuck into everything. Nicolette's German roommate came home. A worn leather bag, greasy blonde hair in waves, Birkenstocks and hella toe nails—I was So Much Bad at not hating this dude instantly. He wasn't trying to be a Giancarlo at all. He waived off a beer I offered, poured vodka to the top of a coffee mug. Nicolette undid her bun, hair tumbling in tresses. She introduced him to me as Ely, and he asked me what I did.

"Get stupid," I said. The way I swung my can back was trying so hard to be a fuck you.

“Well, that’s worth the time at least.” His accent was mild. A rounded pronunciation to his r’s, a little extra saliva.

This chubby Hispanic dude—I thought he was actually a butch chick at first—climbed up on the counter, kneeled and rubbed his sweet potato junk all over the commander in chief’s face. Drunkies cheered. Ely raised his cup in salute.

He talked to Nicolette. I half-listened and poured myself vodka. Every few seconds I took a sip that made my nostrils flare. He mentioned teaching, gave an exhausted sigh. Touched her arm lightly, said he felt like a beam of light, too fast, impossibly fast, but hopeless with a solid obstacle in front of him. Raised his cup again, this time to Isaac Babel.

“Who’s that?” I asked, hoping for some kind of intellectual sneer—*you don’t know of zhe great Isaac Babel, he of enormous mind and pen and cock?*—so I could get into it with him.

“He is my obsession! You should read him.” Ely grinned. “Really, really, you should, *mein zechbruder*. His prose is like a rusty dirk, his humor paints a picture of a fresh corpse.” He clapped my shoulder. “I’ll let you borrow something.”

I couldn’t help but grin back. This dude was a like a pseudo-Giancarlo who was actually an anti-Giancarlo without even trying to be anything *like* a Giancarlo. I mean, I guess he was an example of a future antidote to the So Much Bad blues, but right then? Only useless.

Nicolette’s eyes had light on them, in them maybe, but still no smile. Ely hefted the plastic bottle with the howling wolf on it, poured more vodka into my cup, into his. Nicolette held her beer can out, and he topped her off. We toasted.

“To *mein zechbruder*, and Mr. Babel the immortal, and the beloved President Bush—”

“Viva *fuckin’* Bush!” Vodka or floor cleaner or pure nightwater sloshed over my hand.

“And,” Ely held his cup up again. “To the beautiful Nicky most of all!”

My senses were about more than they should have been. More people came. Some were strangers, some maybe were friends or friends of roommates. Even more people left, and Nicolette’s—I guess you could call her Nicky if you were already in—

house got quieter, dimmer in the darkened, earliest morning. I took a drink, only a sip, felt my face fall into my palms. My eyes closed.

“Let’s go,” she told me. Tells me still, even now. She guided me to her room, plopped me down on the silky sheets of her double bed and sat next to me. The night felt hotter than the day ever could. Heat and darkness are clues to a riddle no one knows exists.

“Bluhhh,” she groaned. “My stomach feels throwupy.”

I nestled my arm around her waist. No move when I tilted my head in. No mouth open and welcoming saying yes it’s been you all along, what took you so long?

“You’re not feeling it?” I asked.

“I’m feeling like some fresh air. You should pass out.”

Alone in her bed I fell asleep. Hands down my pants because I thought she’d come back for me. Why else throw a dude in your bed?

My eyes opened to the same thick dark. Throat had shavings in it. Nicolette was still gone. Everyone else too. The only light was a dim, mustard-colored bulb above the kitchen sink. I rinsed a red plastic cup out, filled it and drank. Again. I filled it a third time for the night ahead.

Inside the refrigerator I found the to-go box. I opened it right there and took a bite of her club sandwich. It didn’t seem like too tight of a fit. Mushy though. Like the opposite of the crunchy Submarine Center with Special Sauce that was actually Italian dressing. I left it on the counter next to a thousand red plastic cups.

Another light was on. A pale glow shone around the blue and white sign on the front porch, SHUB AVIV a nonsensical silhouette.

I eased past the President. Someone had chiefed Bush’s face, drawn his nose into a penis that hung down like an elephant’s trunk. The gentlestartle sound of murmuring voices. A quiet laugh. I kneeled on the couch, peeked through the sliver of glass between the sign and the window frame.

Her hair swung over a hoodie now, and the light held the outline. She smiled wide, perfect pink gums, teeth immaculate. I miss things about people and move fast enough in the other direction of judgment that I imagine more than their whole lives,

everything that should have been about them. “About them” is how I say, “the pretend them.”

Nicolette laughed then. It was sudden but soft. A teabag sliding into what you thought was boiling water, cooled to room temp because you never drank tea really. A man’s thumb pressed above her clavicle, a fingertip somewhere on her face beyond my sight. Maybe. I went back to her bedroom, full of So Much Bad, and fell asleep.

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Her voice woke me. The last fluids of the night smeared heavy in my head. I thought maybe I was in another, farther place. She walked past with a faded, blue-flowered towel on her head. Nicolette.

I rolled out of her bed, kneeled on the floor, grabbing at something throb-all-envyloved in my stomach I couldn’t reach. Not sure I’ve ever heaved like that, some kind of clack in my throat, the taste of yellow-brown. I made myself stand and followed her into the kitchen.

“How you feeling?” she asked.

“Rough,” I said.

“Here,” she filled a cup of water and handed it to me. “How’s about we make breakfast?”

I shrugged for yes. So Much Bad and not enough brain to make it different. She started washing russet potatoes.

“Can you get the eyes out?”

“Sure.” I assumed she meant the little ovals with dirt in them. I took a spoon, started digging out the shallow grooves.

“Jesus,” she said. “You’re gouging half the potato out, dude.”

I kept at it, honing, and remembered the night. I stopped scooping and looked to the cardboard cutout. Just brown cardboard from the back.

“*Viva Bush?*” I asked.

#

Must have been the next weekend. I couldn’t go to the Italian deli anymore for fear of the wannabe-Giancarlo. But I was hungry, and didn’t want to eat a dry Top Ramen bag with the seasoning sprinkled in and ice-water.

Quizno's was like the wannabe-Giancarlo for the old Submarine Center with the mustached, blue-aproned men. Yeah, this new chain baked your shit but come on. Have you ever had anything so bland and stomach-mumbly that was so meticulously toasted?

I ordered the white people special, turkey and avocado and bacon, and filled a fountain drink while I waited. A short man with thick black hair parted expertly at the side was taking trays and emptying them in the garbage. His apron was black, just like his shirt and pants and hat with a colorful weirdo Q in the middle of it. Black like the hooded sweatshirts I wore at the YMCA day camp in Stonestown, like the crew-necks he wore over white polos and blue sweatpants and cross-trainers with the two Velcro straps.

I walked around a few tables to get a better look, but it was him. Dark black eyes, mouth curled up in a vague grin. Vadim. I saw it on his nametag too. He looked a little different. A little taller, a little pudgier, and the curled-up grin didn't look so happy as it did when we were kids. When he'd just laughed at a skinny poop in the face.

They called my order. I ate at a far table, watching him clean. Before I could finish the first half of my sandwich, he had swept the floors, taken out the trash, and removed his apron before clocking out. Stuffing the last bite in my mouth, I wrapped the second half in a hurry and downed my Sprite.

Vadim leaned on a metal bench right outside the Quizno's. He kept flipping a bottle of Minute Maid lemonade into the air and catching it right before it hit the ground. Instead of saying *hey, hey what up, remember me? I watched those old kids try to put you in a toilet and make you eat shit. And just stood there like a bitch. Remember?* I lit a cigarette and went over to post by the trashcan.

It took two cigarettes and half of a third, but eventually a burgundy Lexus with tinted windows pulled up. A short, round-bodied lady in black slacks and jacket combo got out of the car. She had short, trim hair, almost like an Eastern European Hillary Clinton. Every line on her face—eyebrows, lips, cheeks, forehead wrinkles—curled up like a tiny smile that was only a part of a 1500-piece puzzle of a smile. You'd think it was the first time she'd ever seen him.

Vadim's face cracked so wide his lips stretched over his teeth and made it look like he smiled with his tongue. I could hear them, just barely, but made sure to turn the other way and keep smoking so it wasn't obvious I was eavesdropping.

“You are ready, Vadim?”

“Yes, Mammet.”

“How was work?”

“Eh. Ok.”

“Just okay?”

“You know how people is here. I get tired. Just want a read at home.”

“I know. I know. Do you want dinner? Or did you eat a sandwich?”

“No. They samwich is bad. Not a good samwich. I don’t eat it anymore.”

“I’ll make you kasha at home. Come on.”

I peered at the Lexus as they got in. Vadim sat in the front. He buckled his seatbelt and flipped the front windshield blind down to look at himself in the mirror. He picked at his teeth. Smoothed his hair. Cleaned up the side part at the front with fingernails so long I could see the gray of them through the window. The Lexus barely made a sound as they drove away.

The cigarette made me gag. As I started to throw it away, I looked at the half-sandwich in my hand. Those really crunchy, savory things you remembered loving, way back, way before dreamtime and the sundress girls who weren’t girls at all—they were make-believe, made of grass—were they memories? A memory about love spun into your head so deep it made you feel like you could make a whole new person out of the telling of the story; tell yourself yes, this is the me I’ll show all the people I meet from now on. No matter who they are or what they do.

The half-sandwich got tossed as well. Vadim was right. Maybe it wasn’t So Much Bad, but it wasn’t good enough to take home for later.

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