

Surfaces

“Do you think these are even real lemons?,” I said, “They look more like clones.” I waved my hand across the grocery store display to indicate the specimens, their otherworldly, glassy hue.

“They look like the Lemonhead candy,” Lisa said, meeting my eyes above the bridge of her mask, and we both laughed.

I didn’t know then that her name was Lisa, but immediately I was drawn to her, and we joked and conversed more as we proceeded through our shopping lists. It was her eyes which drew me: the way they seemed to give onto a deeper, quieter world through the green of their iris, the subtle, mystical quality there. It was her hair, its auburn ringlets which delightfully individuated when she laughed or turned her head. It was her skin, a pale variety I had always loved ever since I first dated a white woman in college. Mostly, though, it was those eyes.

As we continued through the store and then into the parking lot, our joking about groceries slid into musing about how odd it was to meet someone during the pandemic, how neither of us knew what the other looked like and didn’t feel we could execute forward moves like patting the other on the arm. Still, I knew there was much I liked about Lisa: it was her sense of humor, the organic way in which she contributed to my joke about the lemons; it was the confidence with which she carried herself, how she seemed to be assessing all the time whether or not she wanted to invite me in and to what degree, even as she went about her own, unrelated business. By the end of our parking lot chat, I’d asked for her number.

Things for me since the pandemic had been even more isolating than usual, and so I felt instantly charmed and uplifted by my encounter with Lisa, hopeful in a rare way. My family was halfway across the country, sorting things out from their home in Georgia. As with so many previous times in my life, I found myself in a small, predominately white town which seemed very trustful of its right to a good life, deeply unaware of the privilege this indicated. I walked with a sense that I myself was lucky to be here, and yet an inner skepticism that prevented me from committing in a true way.

For Lisa's and my first several dates, we kept our masks on and stayed far from town, probably as much to keep good appearances with the other as because we were actually afraid of the virus. Walking alongside Lisa on local trails, I felt what it would be like to explore things with her for the long term, how enveloping her presence could be and what my life might look like if I were to submit to it. Pretty quickly, I could see the possibility of a life with her, a shared union through which we combatted loneliness and despair, dreamed things up, even got married and had kids. Although she was white, she seemed the kind of person who would be hip to it.

Sharing more about herself, Lisa told me that she hailed from a little-known northeastern suburb, but had moved out west once she realized the people here were more open, more adventurous. She had been bullied as a child for some undisclosed reason, but her parents were supportive, and starting in college and beyond she had developed a self-possession which grew increasingly sturdy. Over the past five years, she had found her way into the most serious relationship of her adult life, one through which she saw what it would be to grow into symbolic union with a man, to nurture each other through sadness, to build up resilience for the tough times. As much as she felt this man's love for her, within her a coldness had grown; by the fourth

year of their relationship, she felt that she could no longer authentically return that love, and she stayed for so long as she did only because she questioned herself: if not this man, then whom? Why could she not be satisfied with a partner as stable and kind-hearted as he? Once she made her decision, she realized that there was little else for her where they were living besides the relationship, and so she moved here.

For my part, I shared a lot on our walks, too. Things that I had never shared with another woman: I told Lisa about being adopted by white parents after my biological ones had had me as teens, how the resulting chasm between my external and internal environments had left me always longing for home, always feeling that something was missing. I told her that this dissatisfaction had made me feel guilty, had made me feel that no matter how forthcoming my adoptive parents were with their gifts and love, no matter how much praise they heaped upon me for my natural disposition, it was never enough. Going to college, then on to my first major job, this dynamic had continued: I had sauntered into whiter and whiter worlds, all the while feeling that there was something within me that had never been seen or known and had never been sated. Better put: perhaps I simply did not know how to sate that which lived within me.

It is hard to say why I felt so comfortable sharing these things with Lisa, when before I had been fairly closed in my romantic relationships, always keeping the woman's status contingent in my own heart and mind. Perhaps it was the masks? Behind my own cloth screen, making eyes with Lisa over and around the cloth that she wore, perhaps I felt safer, more protected than I would have had the entirety of our faces been bared? Either way, by the end of our second walk together Lisa and I had divulged not only where we came from and what our wounds were, but also what we hoped for the future, where we felt we had found our course in

our thirties and what we thought happiness might look like by age forty. For me, that equation was starting to include Lisa.

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It was during our third date and walk that Lisa suggested a kiss, something no doubt both of us had been fantasizing about during our first two outings. In addition to the spiritual hunger that always lived in my belly, during the pandemic I had developed a physical longing that I feared might never again be met: as soon as I encountered Lisa, as soon as I saw those eyes, I began to imagine not only what might lie beneath her mask, but also what she might look like naked, what it might feel like to sidle up along and press myself inside her.

I said that a kiss sounded like a nice idea, and we sat on a bench along our path and she removed her mask, and it was then that I saw the birthmark.

I think I managed to contain my reaction, in part because I had my own mask behind which to hide, a slap of cloth that made my jaw's descent indistinguishable from an inhale. Even so, I could feel my body manifest resistance as I pulled down my own mask and leaned in for the kiss, a sort of sharp, guttural kick that was my nervous system's version of a "no." When I pressed my mouth to Lisa's, her tongue darted over my teeth and in between my lips, searching for its soul mate; I consented to graze that tongue, but only ever so slightly, as though a child taking a sample of something about which I had some hesitation.

Even before the kiss itself was over, my mind was racing home, to my computer, to look up online what kind of birthmark this was and whether it might ever be removed. To say that it was large is an understatement: the birthmark encompassed the entire lower half of Lisa's face, almost a perfect fit for the mask which, until that moment, had covered it. As for its color, it was

a mixture of dark red and purple, as though God herself had dashed blueberry or raspberry juice across Lisa's face in a final, Pollockian urge. From what I discerned online, the gist was that this type of birthmark rarely, if ever, disappeared, even with surgery, and that in the end the decision most of its bearers reached was simply to live with it, to declare that this was how they looked and whoever truly loved them would not mind.

I think based on my reticence during our kiss and how little I had said for the rest of that walk, Lisa began to text me more than she had previously, hazarding asinine questions such as what my favorite movies were, my favorite foods, when I woke up and when I went to sleep. I responded, but all the while I was thinking about what it would feel like if I were to go public on my social media about a relationship with Lisa, what my peers and adoptive parents would think: I scanned through my feed, internalizing the images of people who looked fat and happy with new partners, spouses, even children; some of them were mixed race, some both white, some both people of color. All of them fully displayed their faces with unmistakable smiles, their eyes shining and their teeth smiling. What would they think of me if I and Lisa stared back at them through their own screens?

Too, I wondered why this thought bothered me so much, what the big deal was if my girlfriend's face didn't look the same as mine, didn't look like whatever our society considered normal. Was I really so superficial that I couldn't get past this, in my mind and body if not in my social media presentation? Might there be some middle ground? What if I posted a picture of me smiling with Lisa, but each of us still wearing our masks? Would that be enough?

As I grew more distant, Lisa started to catch on, noticing that it would take greater and greater lengths of time for me to respond to her questions, and that even when I did, I made little

to no effort to open the conversation to her, certainly not to plan another time for us to see each other. Eventually, she called me, and before I could realize what I was doing I picked up:

“Jared,” she said, “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m okay,” I said. I tapped my finger on the table. “Been busy.”

“I wanted to talk to you about my birthmark,” she said.

I thought about playing dumb, saying something like “oh” with a mark of surprise, but decided to leave it.

“You know you aren’t the first to disappear after seeing my face,” she continued. “You know that isn’t unique, and that I’ve been through it before.”

“Mhm,” I said.

“I used to obscure the birthmark with cover-up,” Lisa volunteered. “Then, I would give the other person advance notice before my reveal, and I would gradually phase out the cover-up to monitor their reaction. When the pandemic started, I decided that I wouldn’t do this anymore; I would just date men as though my face looked like everyone else’s, and let them decide whether or not they wanted to continue seeing me.”

I said “mhm” again. I was thinking about my adoptive father, how his hands had looked when he read his newspaper in the morning. The palms of his hands, the insides, were light pink like mine; the backs were a pink that mine would never hold.

“I want to give you the opportunity to let me know if the birthmark is too big a deal for you,” Lisa said, “if you can’t see me because of it. Whatever decision is okay; I won’t take it personally.”

I said nothing, still caught in my memory. All throughout my life, the undeniable hunger in me had grown. As I scrolled through my social media feed and took in those images of my friends and family, joined through their camera lenses and my screen, I felt it; I felt that it would not be sated by a photo of me and Lisa.

“Jared?” She prompted.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” I said. I gulped before continuing: “It’s not you; I’ve just decided since meeting you that I’m not ready for another romantic relationship.”

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I saw Lisa again a few weeks later in the grocery store, right around the spot where we had initially locked eyes and begun talking. This time, there was no joke about cloned lemons, no follow-up quip about the Lemonheads candy, just a quick, darted glance from her to appraise that I was there, then her moving on to continue with her shopping list, which this time differed from mine.

I considered following her for a bit, pretending that I needed to buy things I did not, manufacturing an encounter to get the closure I had denied us both through my lie. Instead I let her go, and with her the wondrous, sensuous quality in her eyes that had originally invited and beckoned me. I accepted that immersion in that quality was something I would never attain, at least not with Lisa; when I really stopped to think about it, I admired that she had been able to close off that substance within herself, manifesting instead the procedural glance we give to detect danger when traipsing through a dark neighborhood. To me, Lisa’s external guard showed her valuation of her insides.

For my part, I have started to focus more on what I buy in the grocery store and for what meals I am planning, trying to nourish myself in a more intentional way rather than seek love in the pandemic. Mine is a strange, superficial quest, but somehow I feel that it betrays something deep: my intention to find what it is that really feeds me, what kinds of fruits, what kinds of vegetables. Recently, I have found that some lemons retain a hard, porcelain sheen while others bear a sort of lumpy skin, even with space between that skin and the fruit; furthermore, I have found that some lemons of this type are wonderfully ripe, while others are rotten. Like people, lemons' surfaces disclose much about where they have been, where they are going, elemental truths visible only to the attuned eye and touch. Perhaps one day, these and other fruits will teach me the secret of how to find home.