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Clean-up on Aisle Five

The room was dark. The walls. The furniture. The blinds were shut. Outside, lit in the midst of a thin drizzle, a streetlight stood. Inside, wrapped in black flannel sheets, Mandy attempted sleep. One lamp in a corner gave off a pale white light. By it sat Rollie squinting at The Portable Nietzsche. Next door a phone was ringing. No one picked it up.

Mandy's stereo shook, music oozing all through the walls. Rollie remembered the song from a few nights, last week, sometime ago when Mandy had been murmuring her love for it, for him, for something—perhaps the way he was touching, caressing her, his tongue gliding down towards her navel—and then he was erasing something furiously that he had thought of and was quickly trying to scribble down, but the sound of her voice had interrupted his train of thought and he had ended up writing down gibberish.

Rollie hated the song. He stood. Beginning to pace, he began to read aloud:

“Whither is god,’ he cried, ‘I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea?”

Violent slamming on the wall—next door a phone still rang—neighbors on the opposite side began testing their stereo's capacity for loudness. Mandy silently rolled over and banged her fist against the wall. When the noise did not cease, she reached over and turned her stereo louder. Banging now—banging—came persistently—banging—came from next door and bang—from the wall.

“Shut up!!” Mandy's fist slammed the wall again. Outside, a strong rain began to fall. Rollie sat downstairs. Over the noise of the stereos, he could almost hear the rain hitting hard against the window pane. Silently, he continued to read . . .

“I'm going to the store. Need anything?” Mandy asked. She grabbed an umbrella and her purse. Rollie did not look up.

“Wait. I'm almost finished.” His eyes flashed over the page. Mandy opened the door. He held up a hand. “Wait, I'm almost done. I'll go with you.”

“I'll be in the car,” she said and left, shutting the door. Rollie closed his book and set it down on the floor. He hurried to the closet, brought out a hooded jacket and left, quickly locking the door behind

him. Upstairs, Mandy's stereo and the neighbor's stereo stayed on shaking the walls. Both had been playing the same song.

Mick's All-Nite Grocery was not crowded. Mandy and Rollie stood in the dairy aisle.

"I can't find my wallet," Rollie said. Rollie searched his pockets. Mandy pushed the cart.

"You lost it? Did you bring it when you left home?"

"I thought I did."

"I'll be paying for groceries again, I suppose." Mandy shuddered. She put a carton of milk in the cart, neatly placed it alongside a pile of frozen pizzas and rubbed the goosebumps on her arms.

"You were going to anyway," Rollie said. "Had I not come with you." Mandy pushed the cart, its wheels rattling. She pushed it past the snack foods aisle.

"Yes. I guess you're right," she said and grabbed a bag of potato chips off a passing rack and let it crunch on top of the pizzas.

"We need bread too," Rollie said.

"I know."

Rollie saw that ground beef was on sale as the meat counter loomed closer. He thought he heard calliope music. Mandy was about to turn the corner into the cereal aisle and wondered if any Lucky Charms sill lingered in the cupboard at home and—CLANGGSSHH!!!!!!!—the sound of colliding grocery carts . . .

"Excuse me. I'm sorry. I guess I wasn't watching where I was going." It was a deep, thick, radio announcer voice, belonging to a man standing behind a cart that contained five dozen eggs. The eggs had been stacked neatly at the very front of the cart. In the collision they had fallen and raw egg white was now dripping from the bottom of the man's cart onto the shining white grocery store floor. The floor had just been mopped.

"Oh yuck," Mandy said. Fragments of egg shells laid scattered at her feet. Rollie tore open a box of Kleenexes already in their cart and started wiping up the mess.

"Wait, you don't have to do that," the man said. "They pay people here to do that." An older woman with a blue hat and a noisy cart steered clear of the accident and headed towards the ground beef sale.

"No, it's O.K." Rollie persisted. Mandy watched as he took a fistful of Kleenex, smeared the egg white a bit and handed the man the gooey used ones.

“Uh—” the man held the Kleenex at a distance. “I’ll just set the damaged ones over here and that’ll do.” He put the gooey used Kleenex in one of the open egg cartons, then walked over to the meat counter and set all the damaged cartons over on the nearby packages of ground beef.

The woman with the blue hat peered at the dripping egg cartons. She glanced at the man. He looked back and smiled, applying a wink.

“Hello,” he said. She took her ground beef and left, one of her cart’s wheels refusing to roll with the rest, whine-squeak—squeaking as she left. The man walked back to where Rollie was holding a bunch of gooey wet Kleenex. Due to Rollie’s efforts, the mess on the floor was now well spread out.

“If you need us to pay for the—” The man held out his hand. It was then that Rollie noticed that the man was only five feet tall, had a bushy salt and pepper, speckled beard, and looked remarkably like a professor he knew at the college.

“No. No. That’s all right. It was really my fault,” the man said, “I should have been watching where I was going.”

“Are you sure?” Rollie asked. Mandy shifted uncomfortably. She thought she heard calliope music.

“It’s all right,” the man repeated. He moved to speed away.

“Hey.” Rollie stopped him. “Uh, aren’t you Dr. Todd?”

“The man’s eyebrows took a trip towards his receding hairline. He looked surprised. “Yes. Yes, that’s right.”

“We’re having a kind of party this weekend, if you’d like to come you’re welcome to.”

“Oh.” The man stopped.

Mandy’s eyes grew wide. She looked furiously at Rollie. She opened her mouth to protest and—

“Well, it’s a friend of mine’s birthday. Actually he’s a student of yours—Sean Malone?”

Mandy bit her lip.

“Well—”

“Yeah. Well, the party’s in Complex 9, Apt. 2783—the apartments over on Pynchon Lane—do you know them?”

The professor seemed distracted. “That’s a kind offer. We’ll see. Apt. 2833 you say? I don’t have any plans, but—” the professor checked his watch, “but we’ll see.”

“Well, I mean, you don’t have to stay. . .long or. . .anything. . .” Dr. Todd was speeding away, one of his wheels squealing madly. Mandy

let her jaw drop and then snapped it shut as if about to say something as she watched Dr. Todd disappear down near Frozen Foods. She looked furiously at a box of Lucky Charms and snatched it off the shelf.

The grocery boy had a blue name tag that read "FUZZENBON" in small, white, capital letters. He watched Rollie and Mandy roll into his aisle, with an almost, but not quite, complete and total lack of anything resembling interest. The phone rang and he picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Has the fruit come in?" a voice asked.

"No, Mr. Kline. Call back tomorrow." He hung up.

A gray-haired man rolled his cart behind Rollie and Mandy. In his cart there was a single pack of cigarettes. Noticing Mandy, he pulled out a small sketch pad and started penciling gibberish. He scratched his head, glanced quickly around and felt his pockets as if looking for something.

"Well, you didn't say anything," Rollie said. He was speaking to Mandy who carefully put a cluster of very long bananas on the conveyor.

"I didn't say anything because I didn't want him to recognize me," Mandy said through gritted teeth. She pulled the milk out of the cart and set it down on the conveyor with a thud. "You know I skipped his lab today."

"So? I'm sure he recognized you anyway. He was just too polite to say anything."

Mandy took a Soap Opera Digest from the rack and dropped it on the pizzas that Rollie had just stacked. She took a deep breath. "You are so hideous sometimes," she said. She shook her head. "And I definitely don't want that man at my party. He has the most profound knack of anyone I know, except maybe for my father or possibly you, for making me furious."

"Yes. So?" Rollie picked up a bottle of Tylenol. "I mean, I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal." He looked at the Tylenol. "I guess I thought—I mean, I thought it might be nice if—never mind. I didn't think it was a big deal. Is there some reason that we're buying Tylenol?"

"Tylenol?" Mandy asked. "I thought we got the cheap stuff."

"There's Tylenol here." Rollie held up the bottle.

"Well, go get the other stuff. Hurry up," Mandy said. Rollie disappeared down the soda aisle.

Fuzzenbon kept sliding down the groceries. The old man behind Mandy looked intently at her, squinted, and held up a thumb, closing

one eye. He flipped his sketch pad and began writing on a clean white sheet.

Mandy noticed this. "Excuse me—what the hell do you think you're doing?"

The man smiled. "Pardon me ma'am. You see, I am an artist, a painter." He made a magnanimous gesture. "I want to paint you. Here's a sketch I have done in just these few moments."

"Oh really?" She took the sketch pad.

"I am in search of a subject and you would be perfect."

"Oh would I?" She looked at the page. On it was written: 'cooperate and i will not hurt you.' The words were thin and scratchy.

"Oh yes," the man said, "your form is exquisite, magnificent. I would like very much to paint your body." He looked around nervously. "Then, perhaps later, I would paint a picture of your body as well." He laughed. There was an unsettling gleam in his eye.

Mandy looked down the aisle where Rollie had disappeared. Both diet Pepsi and Coke were on sale for the same price. Fuzzenbon fiddled with a bag of M&M's, as if searching for a price tag. Mandy looked around nervously. No one around.

"I don't think so," Mandy told the painter. She began putting the last of the groceries onto the conveyor. She felt goosebumps creep over her flesh. Her hands trembled. She picked up a can of Ragu traditional style. She was about to put it on the conveyor when it slipped and crashed to the floor, smashing in front of the painter's feet. Tomato sauce poured out from the broken glass. Fuzzenbon looked up and picked up the phone.

"Clean-up on aisle five," he said and his voice carried over the PA, replacing the calliope music for a moment.

The painter put away his sketch pad and put the pack of cigarettes on the conveyor. Mandy noticed that the old man was missing his left index finger. Suddenly, she felt his other other hand on her waist. She suppressed a scream.

"Why don't you let me take you home with me," the painter half-whispered near her ear. "That boy of yours cannot satisfy a woman like I can." The painter grinned a toothless grin. Mandy looked up and looked over a tabloid headline that read "LOSE 50 POUNDS IN ONLY TWO WEEKS."

"You're really sick," Mandy said. She looked deeply into the painter's strange dark eyes, her bottom lip trembling. "If you were twenty-five years younger I might consider it." With no farther

comment she dashed the old man's crotch with a sharp knee blow that sent him doubled-up falling backwards into his cart, sliding on the spilt Ragu sauce. His cart rolled and hit a stack of toilet paper, toppling them over, leaving the painter groaning on his back. A very rotund gentleman with a blue name tag that read "LEROY" in small, white letters walked up with a mop.

"Yup. This is some mess alright," he said and proceeded to mop the floor.

Rollie knelt in front of a gumball machine. In his hand, he carried a little bag containing a bottle of generic acetaminophen. He had gone through the express lane. He turned the handle on the gumball machine for the third time and still no gumball. He turned it again and then began shaking it. He tried sticking his fingers up the metal chute, but it was useless.

Mandy stood in front of the automatic doors, which kept opening and closing as she rolled her filled-up cart back and forth absent-mindedly. She was watching Rollie.

Rollie forced the handle again in the opposite direction. There was a strange grinding, clicking sound, a sudden pop, and then a loud crack. Rollie yelled and held his hands over his head as the bubblegum machine exploded, sending a hail of green and yellow and red and pink and white gumballs all over the floor. He looked up.

"Oh, Hi Mandy." He grinned. "What took you so long? I got your Tylenol-stuff." He held up the bag and began gathering as many gumballs as he could off the floor, putting them in the bag.

"I'll tell you later. Could we just go now please." She waited for him to stand up and put the bag in the cart.

"I found my wallet," he said. She looked at him. He smiled. "I left it in the car. I forgot I put it in the glove compartment."

"Good. I'm glad." She held out her hand and smiled a faint smile. He took her hand, and together they left the grocery store, the automatic doors shutting behind them.

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