

Three Second Rule

by Jennifer Donnell

The first time, he wore an eye patch over each of his eyes. He resembled a human fly as he stumbled into the coffee shop, bumped the round table near the door, and knocked over a black wooden chair. He eventually found me by smell. I gripped my disposable coffee cup and watched his mouth as he spoke. His lips looked dry. I decided against gifting him with my moist kiss.

“Jasmine?” he asked, leaning in for a whiff and running his fingers through his own curly hair. He seemed to think he was smelling my neck but instead inhaled the nonexistent odor of my right eyeball. “No, it’s Jen.” I replied and he laughed. Besides, I was wearing vanilla essence. Clearly his sense of smell wasn’t improved without sight.

I adjusted the plunging neckline on my red and white gingham shirt, then smoothed my baby blue skirt. I’d dressed as if he was going to see me and wondered if I should describe it for him.

“What are you wearing?” he asked without hesitation, as if pretending to be blind suddenly made him clairvoyant.

“Well,” I remembered the time he complimented a spandex dress I owned. It was spring and we were caught in an unexpected rainstorm, the material stuck to me like a wetsuit. “I’m wearing a pink, stretchy dress. It’s spandex, so it’s kind of tight and I keep having to pull it down.” I paused as if adjusting the hemline, but instead turned to watch the brown haired scruffy faced barista watch us, perhaps wondering about the eye patches.

“Can I feel it?” he reached his hands out immediately, expecting I’d say yes. I am the type to always say yes, right?

“Sure.” I confirmed, swallowing back my fear of his touch. He didn't seem himself, like this. I led his hands to my hips and let them trace up my back. His hands moved slowly against the cotton.

“It feels different with my eyes closed.” he admitted. He sounded disappointed.

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The next time, he'd relaxed enough to wear a bandana. It let through enough light at the bottom that he was able to narrowly miss the tall blonde exiting the cafe where we met. I found it ironic that his bandana was red and white gingham, but couldn't explain this to him. Concerned with the oddity of the bandana, the waiter offered to move us to a corner booth and I accepted on his behalf.

“My therapist doesn't want me looking at you.” he finally explained, as if well versed in the concept.

“For how long?” I stirred an extra heap of sugar into my tea and tried not to slurp as I sipped, in case he'd developed supersonic hearing.

“Ever.” he admitted with a shrug. “Or, not for longer than three seconds.”

A clatter of plates turned both of our heads, though he couldn't see the cause. “Sorry.” the waiter called out, scooping up a broken cheese plate from the floor.

“You mean, like, the three second rule?” my facial expressions were growing drab without him observing me, typically I would have widened my eyes or scrunched my brow.

“Yeah, kind of like that.” he confirmed and then asked what I was wearing.

Silently, I walked behind him and began to untie the bandana.

“Hey, what are you doing!?” he called out with concern, moving his hand over his eyes to hold the untied ends in place.

“You said three seconds.” I answered, wishing I'd worn a pink spandex summer dress.

“Okay.” he paused, then agreed. I sat down in front of him. His leg began to wobble as he fidgeted in anticipation.

He moved his knees to touch mine and lowered the bandana.

“One.” I mouthed without sound.

His lips curled upward then returned to neutral as he whispered, “Two.”

Three was silent. I stared into his eyes looking for whatever power he must be so afraid of, but only saw an ocean of unknown storms, capsized boats, and deserted islands I'd have to visit to see the real him.

I tied the bandana when we were done. I fed him cake by hand and realized I still hadn't seen him at all.

