

Social Aid & Pleasure

novel scrap

by Laura Ellen Scott

Pebbles wanted to make music. Val wanted to be rich. What did I want that I did not yet have? Well I wanted to be thin, of course. And I was working on that. Working hard. ish. But that sort of desire wasn't relevant to Death Wishing. If Pebbles and Val succeeded, at least by conventional standards, they'd leave behind some legacy. Me? I would leave behind nothing. Nothing, except the heat and energy it takes to stop.

I called Brenda, my ex wife. She sounded bored by my question, as if its simplicity insulted her theoretical tendencies. "Of course I have a wish, Victor." Her tone made me feel like an intellectual slob.

"Well what is it?"

She answered with a prim little cough. One of her professor tricks that had devolved into a tic. "I wish that Val receive the entirety of my estate upon my death to dispose of as he pleases. And I documented this wish into a will. Isn't that ingenious?"

"Don't be such a bitch, Bren."

"I thought about setting aside a portion for you as well, but Rick would find that irritating, and besides, the likelihood of your succeeding me in death—"

"Oh do stop." Rick was her new husband, the Dean who had secured her academic position. "Why can't you ever take me seriously?"

Brenda said, "I might if it didn't seem like you were descending into

childish magical thinking. You know, Val can handle all that southern gothic crap, but you? You're getting soft in the head. Picking up some bizarre lisp and going around in capes?"

"I do not lisp."

She ignored me. "No wonder you're buying into all this mythology."

"I really appreciate you taking the time to inventory my decline."

She was quiet. After a moment she said, "Sorry." Nothing terse about it, which was nice.

"Brenda." And for some reason I catapulted back to a sex memory: Brenda on the butcher block table. Me thin. Val safely away somewhere—camp? My face went hot, a blush from embarrassment not arousal. Irrationally, I imagined that she could see into my mind. I said into the phone, "Help me think about this."

Another sound from her throat, this time more human than pedagogic. "I don't know where to begin, Vic. This isn't like you."

"I'm aware of that. But I seem to be changing. Recent circumstances and all that. Why don't you have a wish?"

"You mean aside from the existential crisis, the consuming narcissism, and the outright dizzying lunacy that attends wish design? I'm an atheist for Christ's sake—"

"Yes, yes. Cut to it, love."

Brenda sighed. "Victor. I have new wishes every God-damned day. Dozens of them. I lay awake at night trying to imagine the repercussions of even the most fractional change."

I imagined her in that sleepless state, lying next to man who was dead to the world and oblivious to or perhaps even tired of Brenda's neuroses. She needed to be held more. "Oh dear," I said.

"Exactly. I'm a wreck."

"And Rick? Is he as conflicted as you?"

"Oh no," she said. "He's had his wish for fucking ever. Something about honeybees. Very responsible. Very targeted. Very linguistically simple, so he can say it even under the most challenging circumstances, like in a car crash."

I liked the idea of Rick in a car crash. I also imagined a number of other challenging, drawn out scenarios featuring Rick gasping, groaning, coughing out his bee wish. "Well now see, you are being helpful. I might not have thought about the compromised speech aspect."

"So you're having trouble picking a wish?"

"I'm having trouble picking any wish. Email me your cast-offs, maybe I can use one of those."

"You're disgusting," she said.

"Perhaps I should wish for a stinkier cheese."

"You should wish for men to have babies."

"Or women to be less brittle." I regretted it as soon as the words left my mouth, but it was too late. She hung up. I don't know if she was furious, bored, hurt, worried, or driving out of cell service. That's new technology for you. No longer do we have the option of giving notice of our displeasure by slamming the phone into the cradle. A

hang up doesn't even come with a click anymore. Your person is there and then suddenly she's not. I have found myself on multiple occasions continuing a line of heated argument long after Brenda had ended the call. It's a problem because she's missed my best, most elegant rebuttals that way. And that in itself is a curiosity—why are my finest insights always preceded by the idiot behavior that made her hang up on me in the first place?

A cruelty crossed my mind. A Grinchy thought. I could wish for her to fall in love with me again.

