

I fell in love with jackal face

by Michael Seidel

The first thing he ever said to me was that I was as beautiful as a carrion flower, that plant that smells of rotting meat. I tend to be my own harshest critic. For so long I'd thought of myself as just the meat, but he saw the plant too, the raw vitiligo of it, its pedals drooping back as the torpedo in its gut readies itself to bust forth.

On his face he wore the expression of a jackal eating a grown man's throat. On his feet, neon orange slippers, and a turquoise crucifix around his neck. His clothes—pants, coat, a sweatshirt, two jackets—were all temporary, simple fitting room fodder. Each item either a size too big or a size too small. “How do I look?” asked me. I, a clerk on the second shift, when the dressing room light seemed sharper and yellower than fine cheddar, asked him to turn around. By my assessment, he looked like he'd need a belt no matter what he was wearing, but I said nothing. Instead I put my hands into his front pockets and dropped my head onto his shoulder.

As a child insomniac, my deepest wish to have a button installed on my skull. When I laid my head down, the button would depress and I'd fall immediately sleep. What I never considered was: a) If I moved my head a lot in my sleep, I'd be woken, then fall asleep again when I rolled back onto the button, and so on, leading to shitty, broken sleep, and b) If I slept solid and still, I'd never wake up, and I'd spend my life somewhere been a brief snooze, a coma, and death. I'd be the cat-napping undead, a new mythical being terrifying to no one.

As we stood there, my hair slung over his shoulder like uncooked pizza dough, I updated my wish. What I wanted now was a skull button that could keep me awake and forever frozen in this moment. We were looking in the mirror, each locking eyes with our own self, too nervous to connect with the other. My heart pierced the skin of

his back and collided with his heart like a pair of ferocious clapsticks.

Finally he picked his optical lock with a hairpin of daring movement...and...and...

His eyes met mine finally, with sad and hopeful affection, and he said, "The sign says these pants are off 30% off the lowest marked price, but does that mean that the lowest marked price includes the 30% off? And if not, how much is it?"

There are questions you rehearse your answer to your whole life. There are responses you make on a whim that are weighted down by murderous gravity. There are lumps in your throat like impassable mountain ranges.

And then there's me, and someone is calling my name over the loud speaker. They're telling me its time for my lunch break. I must comply or I'll get written up. Written up again. There's a bologna sandwich and the latest People Magazine waiting for me in the break room. I lift my head from his shoulder. My break last only 15 minutes after all, and I have no time to fall in love with someone who can't do simple math.

