

None Of It Grace

by Mike Young

Adrian shut his phone. "There. How easy was that?"

"You promised whiskey?" I said. "We don't have any."

"We'll figure something out." He lit a cigarette over the stove.

"With the liquor stores closed."

"Let your night deliver, bud. I've declared it your night."

But our friends were asleep or stingy. Even so, we bundled up and drove off. Adrian's car has a red spoiler. Night turned to snow.

Spires, parkas, oaks. Our headlights auditioned it plenty.

"Empty handed is bad," I said.

"She'll still do it."

"You, maybe. She'll do you."

He laughed. "Crazy guy."

I made him stop at an AM-PM. We bought a bag of barbecue chips and a yellow rose. Those days, we were testing our keels, sloshing against whatever rose most wicked. On the way to Beth Anne's apartment, we passed a man on the shoulder heaving a couch back up to his truckbed. Alone with no gloves. Passed is right.

"Barbecue chips," Beth Anne said. "My least favorite." She filled a mason jar with water and dunked the rose. We'd bought a real one, right? Who could tell.

Adrian picked her up and twirled her a little. She scrunched her face, but a kind of smile anyway.

"Does that mean you hate them?" I asked.

"That's different," Adrian said.

"It does," Beth Anne said.

"What? Least favorite and hate are two very different things."

"No."

"I thought so," I said.

"Put me down," Beth Anne said. He did. Then he sighed, cracked his knuckles, found the couch. "Isn't there any music?" Off came the fur-necked overcoat, the cardigan, up and off the tanktop. Adrian's chest looks too small for its tattoo.

Beth Anne rolled her eyes and went into her bedroom. Adrian tapped a finger on his mouth and grinned. I followed her.

Purple blanket, ripped in a spot. And a sleeping bag on top of that. I guess she got cold. Plant labeled DON'T LET ME DIE and an antique Playboy, Farrah Fawcett on the cover. Beth Anne bent over a cardboard box in the corner--those days, we were perpetually fresh tenants, a new lease just autographed, knowing how to bend over but not how to unpack--and poked at CDs.

"Here I've known you for weeks," she said. "And I don't even know what kind of music you like."

"Weeks," I said.

"Did you like the music in the play?"

"It was great. It was funny."

She laughed and turned to me. "What, the deathbed croon?"

"We didn't really see the play. Adrian made that up."

"Look at this shock. All over my body." She balled her fists and faked a quivering.

"If you die," I said, "will you sing to me?"

She sang: "*Oh Lady Midnight, I fear that you grow cold.*"

"The stars eat your body," I said.

"It's all they ever think about, those stars."

"Fucking stars."

"Bang bang. There. Now they're dead too."

I smiled. "I like anything. You know."

"Let's pick something Adrian hates."

"No more Adrian," I said.

She scooped a mess of CDs and flung them up. Some landed on the bed. We looked at the bed.

"You don't have any whiskey," she said.

"Also his idea."

"Or any ideas, I guess."

That wasn't true.

"Can I open that window?" I said. She nodded. I crawled onto the bed, my knee crunching a jewel case. Beth Anne stepped over and lay her head on my shoulder. "Weeks," she whispered. Or weak?

What would that mean? Later, I would remember wanting to hear for sure, waiting on a polished whisper.

Instead, Adrian walked in. Him I heard. He pshawed and went behind Beth Anne, pushed her enough to push me and crumple us all bedward. My neck landed weirdly on a CD case, and Beth Anne's hair swirled over my chest. Adrian knelt on the bed and petted her hair.

"Asshole," Beth Anne said, her voice muffled in my sweater.

"There's so much music," Adrian said. "I think all of it's dance music."

"Adrian," I said, motioning to the door with my eyes.

"All this music, bud. Where's the dancing?"

Beth Anne twisted free and stood up on the bed. She tried to kick at Adrian's face, but when he seized her ankle, she let him. Like he was proposing, slipping the ring on a toe. For some reason, we thought those days were a grace period. Free trial. There was a lot of shit tried, yes, but none of it grace.

I bucked my shoulder into Adrian's jaw. That toppled Beth Anne, whose legs slid over my hair as she pitched sideways. She rapped her head on the nightstand lamp, knocking it down. Adrian--now on the floor with me--grabbed my hair and yanked. When I yelped he laughed. He scooted around, pulling me along. Then he pushed my head away and stood, tripped on a pair of black leggings and fell again. Somewhere in a puddle of light Beth Anne said "fuck fuck oh fuck."

Adrian wriggled across the carpet and touched Beth Anne's leg. His other hand fiddled at his belt. When I saw his head duck toward Beth Anne's waist, one arm reaching over her body to yank the lamp cord out of the wall, a blue hammer took care of my lungs.

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Another night, inside his car, Adrian said: "What if we were boring people?"

"Footstools," I said. "Green beans and American Idol."

"That won't ever happen. Never ever, baby."

One time he carried a girl to his car, barefoot. Your majesty style. They drove all night to Cape Cod and broke into the attic of an off-season motel--fucking, I guess, to the stir of that night's ocean. She still lives in town. Lunches on Ativan, a little cranberry juice. She looks like an Egyptian goddess and Adrian points her out when we see her. Sometimes I see the real God, in a wide-hemmed butcher's apron, wiping his hands and trembling. It's your cut, he says. Fry it, eat it raw. I don't care. My line is too long for these kinds of games. Look behind you. All of those people know what they want.

