

And Her Eyes Said Something I Did Not Understand

by Robb Todd

A herd of garbage trucks groaned down dark streets filling their black hydraulic hearts with rotten trashcans and glass, and a smile ate her whole face. I showed her a text from a friend: "T-minus 10 seconds till meltdown."

She laughed and I wrote back.

A small, well-dressed man stopped next to us on the sidewalk and said, "What's with all the garbage trucks?" I shrugged. He sniffed the air, looked at my shoes and said, "Isn't it weird how some people have foot fetishes? That's so disgusting." We nodded. What else could we do? Then we started walking and looked at each other like what-the-hell and laughed when we felt far enough away. We were going to a party. I did not want to go to the party.

I told her about the park that day, about walking into the chill of a tunnel and a tiny girl moving her feet in quick steps, yelling to her dad: "I'm running away!" The father laughed, smiled at me, shook his head and called out: "But you're not even a teenager!" I shot impromptu hoops with a corn-rowed dude in a wife-beater and designer jeans. A lit cigarette stuck to his lip the whole time and he talked endless shit. The rim was the rarest of city goals: it had a net.

We walked past an eye-bright laundromat. I noticed the foot-fetish man following us. He said, "Hey!" I do not know why we stopped. He caught up and said, "Look, let's just go in there —" he pointed at the laundromat — and let me smell your feet." I said, "No thanks," but

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he did not leave. My phone vibrated. We walked away and I read the text: "Despite repeated warnings that we can't fit all this shit in the car, we can't fit all this shit in the car." I wrote back and she sniffed my sleeve and said, "Maybe we should let that guy pay for washing this stinking shirt of yours — and your socks after he worships them." I told her how I liked the way it felt when my basketball sweat cooled on my skin in the air conditioning of the train.

The man was still following us, but I was more amused than threatened. I told her that all I could smell on the train were peanuts because a woman held a candy bar wrapper next to my face and she folded the wrapper into squares and unfolded it and folded it again and again until her stop, and a guy got on and struck up a conversation with a man carrying a lute. The shit got deep real quick. I heard the word "baroque" and questions about the number of strings and what is technically a lute, and this pretty girl sat between me and this other dude, who took two stops to work up the nerve to say to her, "Look, I'll just start by introducing myself. Where you live?" The train-pickup is the hardest maneuver in the game and this girl just looked away, plugged her earbuds into the holes in her head and turned up her music. It was hard to watch out of the corner of my eye but I noticed she had a tat on the top of her foot, a bunch of cursive words I could not read, but it did not matter because she was wearing pink leopard print shoes and that is fucking crazy.

"Dude is better off," I said.

"Yeah, he is," she said. "It's all a confidence-and-numbers game." I thought she was talking about poker for a second, but she was not.

The man caught up to us again and interrupted: "Have you been wearing those socks all your life?"

"Look," I said. But before I could finish, he said, "I'll give you ten

dollars for them."

She tugged on my elbow, but I was not sure if that meant she thought I should sell them or if we should run.

"Twenty," he said, face serious.

I had worn them for days. They were worth way more than twenty.

"Sorry, my man. I need my socks." He stared at me for a moment and his face turned sad and he walked away.

Another text: "Wish I could, bro, but we have shelves to put up! ... Right after secretly premeditated makeup shopping." The garbage trucks feasted.

I said to her: "Everything is great right now, and all I can think about is the day, soon, that you'll have to forgive me. I am here to test your capacity for that."



Her hair was the most beautiful dirty-water mop that nobody else appreciated, and she told me she hated the people behind the glass at the post office for not speaking English. My phone vibrated in my pocket and I did not answer it, and that is when I knew, that moment right then.

I reached across the table for her hand and examined her fingers. The one with the ring on it was longer than the others. My phone kept vibrating.

"Where's that lady with my coffee?" she said. "We're going to be late for the party." I did not want to go to the party. She looked over her shoulder and frowned. "Listen, I have something important to tell —"

I pinched the tip of her ring finger, wiggled it and said, "That means you're a vampire."

My phone stopped vibrating.

She rolled her eyes. "Vampires are as played out as zombies. Can I be a ladybug instead? No, one of those blue things that live in mushrooms and get chased around by that bald wizard weirdo and his stupid cat."

"Sorry, I don't make the rules. But I abide by them," I said.
"Although you'd be stunning with blue skin. More stunning, I mean. You're already stunning."

My phone vibrated again.

"Are you going to listen to what I have to tell you?" she said. "And if I don't get coffee right now, this very instant, things could go terribly wrong tonight."

I examined her thumbs. The part with the nail was a stump, like it had been chopped in half. Half-thumbs, like I imagined a dwarf uses to hitchhike, but the rest was longer than normal, like a finger. It made the insides of my ribs swell. She snatched her hands away from me, tucked them between her legs.

My phone kept vibrating.

"Stop it," she said. "I feel like I'm at the doctor's office. Want to take my temperature anally, too?"

I raised an eyebrow. Maybe I should have sold that guy my socks.

"Gah. Never mind," she said. "Let me see your hands."

I slapped them on the table, fingers spread. She flipped both over, palms up, and slammed them down. The spoons rattled. She examined the lines, offering a hmmm and squinting her eyes as if she deduced something mysterious and important. She shook her head, sighed and flipped them over, palms down. The forks jumped.

"What?" I said.

"Shhh. I'm concentrating extra hard," she said, "which is quite difficult while jonesing for caffeine."

The backs of my hands were all hair, veins and scars. My phone vibrated, or maybe I imagined it did, while she played with the thickest vein, pressing her finger into it as if she was kinking a hose, over and over until she giggled.

I think the phone kept vibrating maybe. The waitress set coffee next to our hands. A little spilled over the side into the saucer. "Your knuckles look like knots in trees," she said, and I felt fresh from the womb.



I slammed the door on my way out of the party, and not long afterward heard heels click toward me, the quick steps of legs hindered by a tight skirt. I stormed toward the subway in long strides.

"Please wait!" she said.

I walked faster.

"Wait, motherfucker!"

My phone vibrated maybe. My feet slowed. The clicks got faster and

nearer and a hand touched my shoulder.

"What happened back there?" she said. "Why did you leave like that?"

"Look, I didn't want to come to this fucking party to begin with, but if you're going to drag me all the way out here, the least you could do is not suck some other guy's dick in front of me."

Her mouth opened. She dropped her purse and pounded my chest with her fists and I laughed. My phone stopped vibrating maybe or maybe it started vibrating. She was short, even in heels, and her head did not reach my shoulders.

"How dare you say that to me!" she said.

"You think I'm stupid?"

"No, I think you're an asshole!"

"Right in front of me?"

"We were just talking!"

"Oh, exactly," I said. "And you must think I'm deaf. I heard what that motherfucker said to you. Wasn't much of a whisper. And you sure didn't seem to mind, so I figured I might as well jet and let you two commence fucking."

"So you were just going to leave me out here?"

"I figured you had at least one place to sleep, cunt."

She screamed, grabbed her purse and clicked down the steps to the subway and I scanned the street for I do not know what. I went

underground and found her on the platform, alone, arms folded across her chest. Her lips were a tight line and her eyebrows were angry. I kept my distance until I heard her crying. I walked up to her, put my hand on her shoulder and she shrugged it off and turned away.

Her phone beeped, a text. She did not answer it.

"Who could that be?" I said. I stepped in front of her and she would not look at me. She just stood there, staring into a dark tunnel.

"You better answer that phone," I said. It was a threat.

She looked up at me. "Fuck. You."

"You have a foul mouth." I snatched her purse and grabbed the phone. She lunged for it, but I held it in the air well out of her reach and read the text as she jumped and pulled on my arm, heels clicking.

"So how did this prick get your number?" I said. "Care to tell me that? Very interesting what he has to say here, you fucking liar!"

"I hate you!" she said. She kept jumping and never came close to reaching the phone.

A train rumbled deep in the tunnel and we were near the edge of the platform. I smashed her phone on the ground, dumped her purse out, and tossed the bag in her face. She screamed and bent over to gather everything.

"Fucking shit!" she said as her nails clawed against the concrete.

The train echoed closer. She shoved her keys and pieces of her phone and everything back in her purse, and I lifted her from behind

with a bear hug, swung her back and forth like I was going to toss her on the tracks. I counted with the swings and she screamed louder each time. "One!" I saw the light of the train. "Two!" The train shot into the tunnel. "Three!" I heaved like it was the end of her but held on at the last instant. Her heels flew onto the tracks and her purse slipped from her fingers and followed her shoes, sailing across the rails just before the train screeched past.

I set her down, shoeless and weeping, no keys, no communication, no money. She trembled and her face was streaked with wet black trails. Her eyes were foreign words. The train doors slid open and I stepped on. The doors slid shut. She convulsed in sobs on the empty platform. I beat on the door with a fist, got her attention, pressed my middle finger against the glass and mouthed: "No. Fuck. You."

The train moved. I watched her watch me shrink into the tunnel, and when I was gone I looked around. I did not want to be alone. I walked between the cars until I found another person. I sat next to him. He was asleep, snoring and drooling, and smelled strong like socks, like a midnight garbage truck making the cold streets correct. I had to close my eyes to speak a sentence I thought was true: "The way we fit into each other feels clean and fresh and good."

