

Our Costume Is a Kiss

by Robb Todd

I'm waiting in line for the only bathroom in this bar while my mother is dying somewhere. I don't know where. I have to piss really bad. An obese Cinderella is in front of me and a zombie with ample cleavage and a bloody throat is behind me. A man dressed as a hot dog in a bun comes out of the bathroom. No mustard, no sauerkraut. Cinderella takes the hot dog's place on the pot, the lock clicks behind her.

I'm next. I scraped my thumb on a sharp-toothed cheese grater this morning. There are a dozen tiny razor slices in every direction on my knuckle. Fat Cinderella is taking forever, and it's got to be past midnight. When she finally flushes, I wonder what I'm going to walk into. She comes out, gives me an embarrassed smile, and the bloody zombie chuckles. I step inside a filthy closet of ass fumes, lock the door.

I had no idea authentic sailor uniforms had so many fucking buttons. I've never seen pants like this. Four buttons run up each thigh to my waist, then eight run across the top, creating a flap that I have to undo to take a piss. I consider peeing in my pants rather than unfastening this ridiculous shit. How did we ever win a war? The buttons have little anchors on them, and there are two small pockets tucked behind. It's tight, but I dig into the right pocket for my iPhone. I rake my ragged knuckle pulling it out and pearls of blood rise on my thumb. I suck the blood. I set the iPhone on the back of the toilet and concentrate on the buttons. This is hard enough sober.

The front flap of my black wool pants finally falls down, and I'm holding my dick, waiting. Nothing's coming out, but my bladder is sending a different message. It hurts. It tells me it's about to burst, but that message is lost somewhere in the bladder-to-brain-to-toilet circuitry.

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I pick up my iPhone and check my e-mail. Nothing. Everyone is out, pretending to be someone or something they're not. Like they do most other days. This time with extra makeup or a wig or a fake nose. So many women dressed as sluts. Is that really a costume? They're probably not pretending.

The e-mail from my mom that fucked me up a few days ago is still near the top of my inbox, read several times but not replied to. I haven't told anyone about it. I read it again. It's short, to the point. She says she's dying of something I'd never heard of, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. She included a link to Wikipedia, which says it's rare and incurable. It's the only contact we've had in more than a decade, and she didn't mention where she lives. She doesn't know I live in New York City. I heard she left the country a few years ago for Europe, but who knows.

The last words she spoke to me were, "I wish I'd had an abortion." She was crying and screaming at me from the porch of the house I grew up in, her fourth husband behind her with his arms folded. His shotgun leaned against the wall behind him. I said a few unkind words, too, and he threatened to blow my brains out. Christmas in the South.

As soon as I set the phone down on the back of the toilet, it vibrates. It's a text: "Hey saaaaaailor! My mustache misses u!"

It's from Scotty. His entire costume is a stick-on mustache. That's it. He made his girlfriend wear one, too. It's big and bushy like the ones in sepia-toned pictures of guys wearing monocles and pocket watches, guys riding bicycles with giant front wheels and little bitty back wheels. He's wearing a derby, too, but that's not part of the costume. He's six-foot-six and wears the derby all the time; to work, wherever. He's been talking in a funny accent all night, raising one eyebrow and wiggling his mustache. Sometimes he sounds French,

sometimes Italian. A total performance. I can't stop laughing at him.

My girlfriend wore a vintage nurse's uniform, white stockings with a seam down the back, a Cuban heel. I didn't know what a Cuban heel was, didn't know what the big deal was, but I'm glad she got it. Very sexy. She looked everywhere for those stockings and finally found them on the Internet, the way my mom found me. FedExed overnight, just for the parade in Greenwich Village.

On the subway going to the parade someone asked if I was Popeye, and I said, No, we're the Times Square kiss. People know the photo, especially in New York, even if they're fuzzy on the circumstances. It was 1945. Japan had just surrendered a few days after mushroom clouds rose over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Makes the World Trade Center seem like a couple firecrackers. Those bombs seared human shadows onto the sides of whatever was left standing. Total annihilation. The world bowed down, and a sailor grabbed a sexy nurse in Times Square and kissed her with the passion that consumes you when you know the world won't be destroyed by fire and ash.

"Show them," my nurse said.

I tilted my round, white hat to the side, dipped her and kissed her. She kicked her leg back and let her arm hang like the nurse in the photo. The war is over. A woman dressed as Sarah Palin and another woman dressed as a geisha said in unison, "Oooohhh, that's so sweet!"

We walked in the parade, stopping every few blocks to recreate the kiss. Cameras flashed like paparazzi. I would hold her down for a long time, until her back cramped, because every time I brought her back up someone had just missed the shot, and would ask us to do it again.

Scotty would call from behind, in his accent, "Hey, saaaaaailor. Would you like to kizz my mustache?"

And now I'm in this bar's dirty bathroom, and I really have to piss, and my body isn't cooperating, and the sink is broken so I can't run the water to get my fluids flowing, and my mother is dying, and we don't speak, and we can't speak, won't speak, and my knuckle's throbbing, like my bladder, and nothing stops everything from hurting.

I flick open her e-mail again, read it. I know what a son's response is supposed to be. I know what kind of emotions this is supposed to evoke. None of that is how I feel. No, that's not true. All of that is how I feel. But I can't go through it again, like she and I have so many times before. I want to write something back but I don't. My only response is no response. I want to cry, but I can't. I can't get a drop of any fucking fluid out of my fucking body.

I think about crying, and pissing, and I think about when I was a kid, the last time she held me and it felt like I was her son, before the booze, drugs, and beatings. Before the revolving door of men. I was seven, we were sitting on the beach, and it was cold. She wrapped me in her jacket and we watched huge waves explode on the shore. She held me, kissed my forehead, and I was safe. I never felt that way again in my life.

Finally, a hot stream gushes into the toilet. Cinderella left skid marks on the sides of the bowl and I try to spray them off. Someone knocks on the door. "Just a minute!" I yell. I still have to button this maze of buttons before I walk out of the bathroom. I decide to button just the corners. I bloody my knuckle again in the process. I suck the blood.

I step out of the beer-shit bathroom, past the bloody zombie, past some guy with his face painted like The Joker from "The Dark

Knight." He gives me a shitty look, but maybe that's just the unoriginal bastard's costume. I've seen two dozen Jokers tonight. I bump into a wizard who waves his wand at me, then past an ABA afro-wearing basketball player with shorts that hug his nuts. I say excuse me as I step between a pink rabbit with floppy ears and a fat Buddha. They're arguing.

I stop by the jukebox. The speakers blast my favorite White Stripes song. My nurse put it on thirty minutes ago as a joke about my costume, and it's finally playing. The pages in the jukebox are open to an Iggy Pop album. He's still ripped. He's older than my mother, and looks like he might live forever.

I read her e-mail as Jack White wails the chorus again and again:
The hardest button to button!

I hit reply. I type on the tiny keyboard, the auto-correct helping my thick fingers the whole way: "If there is something I ..."

I want to finish the thought, but I stop. I delete it and start over.

"How can I ..." I delete it. "I'm sorry to ..."

Delete, delete, delete, defuckinglete.

I slide the phone back into the tight, tiny pocket, take a breath. *The hardest button to button, uh oh!*

I walk to the booth, sit down, put my arm around my nurse. She's wearing Scotty's girlfriend's mustache and I kiss her. An old black man with skin like supple dark leather appears in front of our table with an old Polaroid camera, all metal with a lens extending in accordion folds. Five bucks for a photo, and even though we already have dozens of digital shots, we want the film. The four of us lean our heads into the frame. The old man holds up the huge contraption

and waves a bony hand frantically. It makes us all laugh as he tries to take the shot but there's no flash.

"Shit!" the old man says. He fumbles with his equipment, jiggles a few things, then has us pose again. "One, two ..." He waves a hand in the air. "Three!" Nothing happens. "Fuck!" the old man says. He sets the camera on our table, and gives it a closer examination.

"I can fix anything," he says, flashing a full, white set of fake teeth. When he's done, we lean in again, he waves his hand, the flash goes off, and I'm temporarily blinded. I rub my eyes. He pulls the film out and sets it on the table to develop.

"I was there, you know," he says to me.

"Huh?" I say. I rub my eyes.

"I was there. Times Square."

It takes me another second for me to get what he's saying. "Oh, wow. You're the first person tonight who got what our costume is without us doing the pose."

"Eisenstaedt was a buddy of mine." He waits for me to say something, then winks and laughs. "I'm just fucking with you, son. I ain't that old. Shit. But you got some great costumes. Haven't seen that all night. How about one more picture with you two in the pose. On the house."

"Yeah, absolutely," I say.

I put my hand out to my nurse. She takes it and stands up. I pull her mustache off, dip her, and kiss her like I haven't kissed her all night. She goes limp in my arms. A few flashes light the room. I close my eyes and imagine we're in Times Square. The war has just ended.

"There you go, son!" the old man yells. "Show her how much you love her."

I hold my nurse in my arms. I wonder where my mother is, if she's in pain. More flashes go off. A woman says, "Aaahhhhh. That's love." I kiss my nurse like I haven't kissed her all night, and my mom is somewhere dying, and I'm finally crying.

"Saaaaailor!" Scotty says. "Oh, Saaaaailor!"

Tears stream down my cheeks. I keep kissing my nurse, but open a wet eye. More flashes. Scotty stands up in the booth, doffs his derby and shoots his arm in the air, one eyebrow raised. The blade of a ceiling fan swats the hat across the room.

"Aaaaaiieeee!" Scotty yells. He jerks his hand down and counts his fingers. They're all there. He smiles, wipes his forehead, and points toward the whirring fan. "I know you love her, sailor, but I must inzist you stop zis smooching immediately! You are making my mustache jealous!"

He arches an eyebrow and wiggles his mustache.

